

AUTHORIAL INTENT

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INTRODUCTION

In the second letter to Timothy Paul exhorts him to be an approved, unashamed worker (2:15). Timothy will become this kind of worker by "rightly dividing the word of truth." The word translated "rightly dividing"¹ means literally "cut straight" or "cut right".² The sense of the word in this passage seems to be on the idea of correctness.³ Paul wants Timothy to correctly handle the word. He wants him to provide a responsible interpretation of the word of truth because of the presence of false teaching.⁴

Later in this same letter to Timothy, Paul charges Timothy to preach the word (4:1-2). Not only does Paul command him to correctly interpret the Word, but he also commands Timothy to preach the word continually. The sequence is important: interpret, and then preach. Correct interpretation is not enough; he must also communicate the truth of the Word. However, interpretation comes before proclamation.

We have that same responsibility today. We must preach and teach the Word of God to our contemporaries in our cultural context. However, we need to interpret correctly before we preach or teach so that what we communicate to our hearers is accurate. Consequently, we also must correctly handle or interpret the Word of God.

To interpret means "to explain the meaning of." An interpretation, therefore, is the explanation of something. For us it is the explanation of the meaning of the Scriptures. It involves understanding what they mean so that we can convey their meaning to others. In other words, we need to discover the meaning of the Word, whether of the entire book or of a single passage. But what is the meaning of a book or passage of Scripture, and how do we find it? The purpose of this article is to suggest that the meaning of the book or passage of Scripture is the author's intended meaning and that we discover that meaning by studying the text in which he expressed that meaning.

¹The Greek word is ὀρθοτομοῦντα, which is a present active participle. It describes the way by which Timothy can become an unashamed worker.

²George W. Knight III, *Commentary on the Pastoral Epistles*, NIGTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), 411.

³Gordon D. Fee, *1 and 2 Timothy, Titus*, NIBC (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1988), 255. For a discussion or speculations as to the possible meanings of the metaphor "to cut straight," see J. N. D. Kelly, *The Pastoral Epistles*, HNTC (New York: Harper, 1963), 183.

⁴Philip H. Towner, *1-2 Timothy & Titus*, IVPNTCS (Downers Grove: InterVarsity P, 1994), 182.

PRESUPPOSITIONS

This article presupposes the inspiration of Scripture. The Bible itself indicates both the procedure for and product of inspiration. The human authors wrote as they were *moved*⁵ by the Holy Spirit (2 Pet 1:21). As a result of this procedure all Scripture is inspired (2 Tim 3:16). God guided and guarded the writers so that their product is a Bible which is inspired by God. Both God and men were involved in the writing of the Bible.

God, the ultimate source of Scripture, spoke through human authors.⁶ God is the ultimate author of Scripture, and it is his intention alone that exhaustively determines its meaning.⁷

This article also presupposes the authority of Scripture. Since the Bible is inspired by God, it comes with His authority. The authority of Scripture is the divine authority of God Himself speaking.⁸ It is His revealed will. Revelation results in authority. Therefore, the Bible has the right to tell men what to believe and how to behave. Because of the Bible's authority for our lives, we need to discover God's will for us as he revealed it through the human authors.

This article assumes the sufficiency of Scripture. This means that the Bible contains everything we need God to tell us for receiving salvation, for trusting him perfectly, and for obeying him perfectly.⁹ The Scriptures are able to make the man of God and others complete¹⁰ by equipping them for every good work.¹¹

The word "complete" literally means "well equipped"¹² or "able to meet all demands."¹³ The Bible provides all that is necessary for Christians to live godly and righteously. Scripture was written to enable believers to be equipped for every good work. We need not look to any other source for information and instructions concerning salvation or sanctification. Therefore, it is quite important that we discover the author's intended meaning when we study the Bible.

⁵The Greek form is $\phi\epsilon\rho\delta\acute{\mu}\epsilon\nu\omicron\iota$ which is the present passive participle form of $\phi\epsilon\rho\omega$. Since this verb is used of a ship carried along by the wind (Acts 27:15, 17), some suggest that the writers of Scripture were carried by the Holy Spirit in a similar manner (Michael Green, *2 Peter and Jude* rev. ed., TNTC [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987], 102.) Another suggestion is that the authors wrote as they were *impelled* by the Holy Spirit (Richard J. Bauckham, *Jude, 2 Peter*, WBC [Waco: Word, 1983], 233.) It may be best to understand that the writers wrote under the influence of the Holy Spirit (J. N. D. Kelly, *The Epistles of Peter and of Jude*, HNTC [New York: Harper, 1969], 325.)

⁶This relationship between God as the source and the human authors as the instruments is brought out clearly in Matthew 1:22. Matthew writes that Jesus' birth fulfilled that which was spoken by God *through* Isaiah. The preposition "by" is $\upsilon\pi\omega$ which here indicates *direct* agency. God is the one who is directly speaking. "Through" is $\delta\iota\acute{\alpha}$ which in this verse indicates *intermediate* or *secondary* agency. God is speaking through the prophet Isaiah.

⁷Sidney Greidanus, *The Modern Preacher and the Ancient Text* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 111.

⁸J. I. Packer, *God Has Spoken* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1979), 103.

⁹Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 127.

¹⁰For the view that the application here is for believers in general see I. Howard Marshall, *The Pastoral Epistles*, ICC (Edinburg: T&T Clark, 1999), 796.

¹¹This translation takes the adverbial participle $\epsilon\zeta\eta\rho\tau\iota\omega\acute{\epsilon}\nu\omicron\varsigma$ to indicate the means by which the man of God is made complete. It might be causal indicating the cause for his completeness. It would then be translated, "that the man of God might be complete *because* he is equipped for every good work.

¹²Ceslas Spicq, *Theological Lexicon of the New Testament* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1994), 2:18.

¹³*BAGD*, 110.

THE PRIORITY OF INTERPRETATION

The priority or goal of interpretation is simply to know the meaning of the Bible. But how do we know the meaning of the Bible? This paper suggests that, in order to know the meaning of the Bible, we must know the author's meaning. More specifically, then, the goal of interpretation is to know the author's intended meaning as expressed in the text.¹⁴ To put it another way, the goal is to discover what the text meant in the mind of its original author for his intended audience.¹⁵

The goal is not to experience or reduplicate the author's mental and emotional experiences when he wrote. It is to understand what he consciously sought to communicate to his readers. The role of the author is crucial. The biblical author is the determiner of the text's meaning.¹⁶ The meaning of a text is what the author consciously intended to say by his text.¹⁷

The author was a thinking person who consciously willed to write a text for the purpose of conveying something to his readers. The author had an intended meaning. His intention led to reason and thought. His reason and thought caused him to choose words which controlled the meaning of the text. To interpret, we must in every case reproduce the sense the Scriptural writer intended for his own words.¹⁸ Correct understanding of the meaning of the text must begin with the meanings the writer gave to his own words.

The Term *Intended*

The first word in our statement of the goal of interpretation is "intended." It is a key word. It indicates that the writers were conscious of what they were writing. They consciously intended to convey meaning to their readers through their texts. The authors put together the individual words, phrases, and sentences in such a way as to form meaning. They chose genres which their readers understood to form and communicate their intended meaning. To have meaning, there must be intention.¹⁹ The author's intention is the norm of meaning. Intention affects meaning in three ways.²⁰

First, words have the sense the writer intends them to have. His intention determines whether his words are to be understood literally or figuratively. Second, the writer's intention determines the type of language he uses. His language determines the significance of his message. Third, a word has the referent the writer intends it to have. His grammar determines who is the subject or object of his statement or question. The writer's intention caused him to create the literary context²¹ surrounding his text.

¹⁴Elliott E. Johnson, *Expository Hermeneutics: An Introduction* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990), 23.

¹⁵I. Howard Marshall, ed., *New Testament Interpretation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977), 15.

¹⁶This view rejects the reader as the determiner of meaning. For a brief discussion of these two views see Robert H. Stein, *A Basic Guide to Interpreting the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994), 18-20.

¹⁷*Ibid.*, 20.

¹⁸Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., "Legitimate Hermeneutics," *Inerrancy*, ed. Norman L. Geisler (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1979), 118.

¹⁹Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning in This Text?* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998), 73.

²⁰The material in this paragraph comes from G. B. Caird, *The Language and Imagery of the Bible* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1980), 56-57. See also Walter C. Kaiser and Moises Silva, *An Introduction to Biblical Hermeneutics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 38-40.

²¹The literary context refers to the words, sentences, paragraphs, and chapters surrounding the text. It could be called the "linguistic environment" (John F. A. Sawyer, *Semantics in Biblical Research: New Methods of Defining Words for Salvation* [London: SCM, 1972], 10-28.) It includes the overall arrangement of the book in which a text occurs. Stein suggests that it refers to the meaning which the author gives to the surrounding context; *Interpretation*, 57.

The literary context is the most basic factor in interpretation.²² The literary context gives meaning to the words in the text. The textual context in which a construction is used is a primary factor in determining its intended meaning.²³ Intention makes a distinction between what *is* meant from what *could possibly be* meant based upon the text and context which the author created. It eliminates any other meanings which the reader may claim to discover in the text. What the author means must be understood from the words of the text in its context.

The Term *Meaning*

The next term in our goal of interpretation statement is "meaning." The term refers to that which is intended to be understood. It is that which the author expressed and wished his readers to comprehend. It is the message that the author intends to convey through the text.

Meaning is the product of reasoning and thought. It is expressed in words and relations between words. A word does not usually carry a single meaning by itself; it has a range of meanings.²⁴ Words are arbitrary symbols that have meaning only as they are related to other words. Meaning is not a function of words, but of the complex of words and context.²⁵

The meaning of a word depends on its relation to other words and to other sentences which form its context.²⁶ Consequently, words alone are not the basic units of meaning, but rather the literary constructions in which they appear give them meaning.

There are various aspects of meaning.²⁷ First is meaning as referent. The referent is the object or event to which a word or a whole expression is directed.²⁸ Meaning is affected by whom or what the author is speaking about. Second is meaning as sense. The sense of a word depends on its referent.²⁹ Third is meaning as intention. The author put together the individual words, phrases, clauses, and sentences in a literary piece so as to form his intended meaning. He consciously sought to communicate something to his readers, and he arranged his writing so as to convey it to them.

The Phrase As *Expressed In The Text*

²²Grant R. Osborne, *The Hermeneutical Spiral* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1991), 21. Osborne uses the term *logical context* when referring to the literary context. He defines it as the thought development of a book.

²³Johnson, *Hermeneutics*, 29.

²⁴ Osborne, *Spiral*, 75-76 and William W. Kleins, Craig L. Blonberg, and Robert L. Hubbard, Jr., *Introduction to Biblical Interpretation* (Waco: Word, 1993), 183-184.

²⁵Dan McCartney and Charles Clayton, *Let the Reader Understand* (Wheaton: Bridgepoint, 1994), 141.

²⁶Anthony C. Thiselton, "Semantics and New Testament Interpretation," *New Testament Interpretation*, ed. I. Howard Marshall (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977), 78-79. This theory of meaning can be illustrated by the use of *πειρασμος* in James 1:2 and 12-13. In 1:2 and 1:12 it means "trial" which is defined as a "test of faith." However, in 1:13 the term means "temptation." This change of meaning is necessitated by the context.

²⁷This material comes from Kaiser and Silva, *Hermeneutics*, 34-41.

²⁸An example would be the referents for "what is restraining" and "he who now restrains" in 2 Thessalonians 2:6 and 7.

²⁹This is illustrated in Mark 8:29. When Peter confessed that Jesus was the Christ, the sense of "Christ" is that of the Jewish expectation of the Messiah.

The final part of our goal statement is the phrase "as expressed in the text." "Text" relates to the communication of an event.³⁰ It is communicative action fixed by writing.³¹ It refers to the words, phrases, clauses, sentences which the author wrote in order to communicate. It consists of a collection of verbal symbols which his readers understand. Because of the shareability of verbal symbols, the author is able to communicate his meaning.

The text is the vehicle through which the author expresses his intended meaning. He had no other way to communicate his message.

The author consciously willed to write a text in order to communicate something meaningful to his readers. A text does not have a meaning of its own, nor can it produce meaning. Texts do not bring themselves into existence. The meaning of the text is the meaning of the author. It is what he consciously intended to write. What a text meant when the author wrote it, it will always mean. Conversely, a text cannot mean what it never meant.³² The author's intended meaning is embedded in history.

Consequently, the author's intended meaning must be understood from the words and constructions of the text.

PROCEDURE

If the author *determines* the meaning, how does he determine the meaning? The obvious answer is that he does it through the text of the passage since that is where he expresses his message. This is true. However, the text does not occur alone, but is placed in a context by the author. He determines the meaning of the text by giving meaning to the context in which he places it. The author places the passage in a context and connects it to the context. There are two contexts which the author uses to communicate his intended meaning: the historical context and the literary or logical context.

"Context" means that which is "woven together." It is that which precedes and follows the passage being considered. The author connects it to the passage.³³ However, it is more than just the material which surrounds a passage. The author gives meaning to it. Context is the author's willed meaning of the passages surrounding the text of the of the passage.³⁴ Consequently, it is the various factors one has to take into consideration together with the text in order to understand the author's intention.³⁵

Historical Context

Historical context refers to the historical situation surrounding the author and his readers. It has to do with the *time* and *culture* of both, as well as the *occasion* which prompted the author to write. The author's response to the occasion is rooted in his time and culture. He uses language and refers to cultural events which his readers share with him. He uses historical terms³⁶ and cultural happenings³⁷ to communicate his intended meaning.

³⁰Peter Cotterell and Max Turner, *Linguistics and Biblical Interpretation* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1989), 231.

³¹Vanhoozer, *Meaning*, 229.

³²Gordon D. Fee and Douglas Stuart, *How to Read the Bible For All Its Worth*, 2d ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1993), 26.

³³For this reason the context is also called the *connection*.

³⁴Stein, *Guide*, 203.

³⁵Vanhoozer, *Meaning*, 250.

³⁶For example, Matthew writes that Mary was betrothed to Joseph in Matthew 1:18. In order to understand the significance of this relationship, we must know what "betrothed" meant in first century Israel.

³⁷This is illustrated in 1 Corinthians 8. When Paul wanted to teach the Corinthians about concern for other believers' spiritual growth, he referred to eating meat that had been offered to idols, which was part of their culture.

Because the author wrote out of a historical milieu, its meanings come out of a historical and cultural context. Consequently, to understand an author and to interpret his words correctly, he must be seen against his historical background.³⁸

Literary Context

The literary (logical) context deals with the thought development of a book.³⁹ The author arranges his book in order to communicate his intended meaning. This influences what he says and when he says it. The author provides context which gives meaning to an individual passage.

He gives meaning to words by placing them in sentences, and he gives meaning to sentences by relating them to preceding and succeeding sentences.⁴⁰ He composes sentences, paragraphs, and chapters. Each of these units influences the meaning of the text.

The author's immediate context⁴¹ is the final indicator for the meaning of a term or concept.⁴² His use of a word in a specific context constitutes the single most crucial criterion for the meaning of a word.⁴³ The author creates literary constructions to communicate his intended meaning and creates the context in order to give meaning to his literary constructions.

Entire Book

An important part of the literary context of a passage is the entire book in which a passage occurs. The author's intended meaning is expressed in the meaning of the whole book. A book is a literary unit in which he joins all his thoughts together. This connection gives the entire book meaning. This meaning is sometimes called the essential summary⁴⁴ of the book. This summary gives the interpreter the "big picture" of what the book is all about. It provides the framework for the meaning of the particulars.⁴⁵ A meaning for a particular which does not fit the meaning of the whole is not correct. We can state it this way,

³⁸Louis Berkhof, *Principles of Biblical Interpretation* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1962), 114.

³⁹Osborne, *Spiral*, 19.

⁴⁰Fee and Stuart, *Read*, 23.

⁴¹The immediate context is that which immediately precedes or follows a given word or sentence.

⁴²Osborne, *Spiral*, 21. A good example would be the use of ἀφίημι, "I leave," in John 14:27 and 16:28. In 14:27 Jesus says, "Peace I leave with you," in 16:28 He says, "Again I leave the world." He uses the same verb with two different meanings.

⁴³William W. Klein, Craig L. Blomberg, and Robert L. Hubbard, Jr., *Introduction to Biblical Interpretation* (Dallas: Word, 1993), 199.

⁴⁴See Johnson, *Hermeneutics*, 83-85.

⁴⁵Galatians 5:9 provides an example. The Epistle to the Galatians points out the dangers which the Judaizers pose to the believers. In this verse Paul writes that the Judaizing tendency, though small in itself, could permeate the whole Christian community in Galatia, and make self-offering to God both impossible and unacceptable; R. Alan Cole, *Galatians*, rev. ed. (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1989), 197.

If we would understand the parts, our wisest course is to get to know the whole or at any rate, those parts of the whole which tell us in plain prose the writer's central ideas. These give us the keys to all his work. Once we can see the main outlines of his thought and have grasped his general point of view, we are able to see the meaning of everything else. . . , and how the puzzling passages fit in.⁴⁶

Purpose

This essential summary comes from the author's purpose and plan for the book. The purpose refers to what the author had in mind when he wrote a book. Something caused the author to write, and that occasion gives rise to his purpose for writing.

The occasional nature means that a book arose out of and was intended for a specific occasion. The author's intended response to that occasion causes his book to have a purpose. His purpose then determines what he wants to say and how he will say it. His purpose influences every passage in the book.⁴⁷ It determines what he writes. The meaning which the author gives to every passage in the book conforms to his purpose for the book as a whole.⁴⁸

Plan

The author's purpose leads to his plan. The plan of a book is intimately related to its purpose.⁴⁹ The plan of a book is the arrangement of its several parts; the order of thought which the writer pursues.⁵⁰ The writer had a reason and the writing has arrangement. The author chooses various sequences or relationships to communicate his meaning. He does not communicate isolated thoughts; all thoughts are connected to adjoining thoughts. The author links words and sentences together into organized units⁵¹ related to each other which communicate his message to his readers.

Genre

The author also determines the meaning which he is communicating by the genre he chooses and uses. "Genre" means a literary type. It is a species of literature.⁵² It also refers to the rules governing that form. The genre or literary form which the writer chooses governs the meaning of sentences.⁵³

⁴⁶J. I. Packer, "Biblical Authority, Hermeneutics and Inerrancy," in *Jerusalem and Athens*, ed. E. R. Geehan (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1971), 144-45.

⁴⁷John's Gospel illustrates this point. John regards certain of the miracles which Jesus did in order that people might believe that Jesus is the Christ and in order that they might have life by believing. We should, then, understand each miracle pericope in his Gospel to be somehow showing that Jesus is the Messiah. We should interpret them in light of John's entire narrative and as individual episodes (John 20:30-31).

⁴⁸J. Robertson McQuilkin, *Understanding and Applying the Bible* (Chicago: Moody, 1983), 127.

⁴⁹Luke demonstrates this in the Book of Acts. His purpose is to show the progress of the Church from Jerusalem to Rome (Acts 1:8). This purpose leads to six "progress reports" (6:7, 9:31, 12:24, 16:5, 19:20, 28:30) which summarize the Church's progress.

⁵⁰Milton S. Terry, *Biblical Hermeneutics*, 2d ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1968), 210.

⁵¹The linking together of these words and sentences into units is called *coherence*; Perry Yoder, *From Word to Life* (Scottsdale: Herald, 1982), 56.

⁵²Vanhoozer, *Meaning*, 336.

⁵³Bernard Ramm, *Protestant Biblical Interpretation* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1970), 138-39.

The biblical writers used different literary forms which would communicate that message adequately and accurately. They used literary and linguistic convention in order to communicate with their readers.⁵⁴

That meaning comes from the author's intention is clearly seen in the literary context, in the purpose and plan of a whole book, and in the various genres found in the Bible. The author chose and designed each of these factors. He determined the meaning of each passage by surrounding it with a context which gave it meaning. He also connected his purpose to his plan in order to influence its meaning. Finally, the author chose certain genres which enable him to communicate his message effectively.

PROBLEM

This paper has suggested that the meaning of any passage of Scripture is the author's intended meaning as expressed in the text. In addition, this paper also suggests that, since God inspired the human authors as they wrote the Bible, the human author's meaning is God's meaning also. This dual authorship of Scripture presents a problem related to "authorial intent." It deals with the "single intent" of the human author's intended meaning. It is related to God's purpose in the writing of a book. Can God's ultimate purpose be much broader than the immediate purpose of the human author?

This problem surfaces especially in the New Testament's use of the Old Testament. The NT writers seem to understand OT passages differently than the OT writers intended them to be understood.⁵⁵

This use by the NT writers has produced the following questions. Could God see or intend a sense in a particular passage *separate* and *different* from that conceived and intended by the human author? Did the human author *always* intend *all* the sense which emerges from the passage? Did he *always* understand *all* the referents in the passage? Is it possible that a prophecy may have a deeper meaning⁵⁶ or "fuller" sense than the prophet envisioned?

The responses to these questions have been quite different. At one end of the spectrum is the view that the meaning which God has assigned to any passage of Scripture can only be ascertained by studying the verbal meanings of the human writer. There is only one verbal meaning to a passage of Scripture unless the author indicates that he has more than one aim in view.⁵⁷

⁵⁴It is interesting to note that John uses three genres; epistle, prophecy, and apocalypse to communicate the message of the book of Revelation.

⁵⁵An example is Matthew 2:15 and Hosea 11:1 and the referent for the word "Son." Hosea refers to Israel when he writes, "Out of Egypt I called my *son*." However, Matthew uses *son* to refer to Jesus when he quotes from Hosea. Did Hosea understand Matthew's use and referent when he wrote about God calling his *son* out of Egypt? For an excellent survey of approaches to Matthew's use of Hosea 11:1 see T. L. Howard, "The Use of Hosea 11:1 in Matthew 2:15: An Alternative Solution," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 143 (1986): 314-328.

⁵⁶This deeper or fuller meaning is called *sensus plenior*. The *sensus plenior* is that additional, deeper meaning, intended by God but not clearly intended by the human author, which is seen to exist in the words of a Biblical text (or group of texts, or even a whole book) when studied in the light of further revelation or development in the understanding of revelation (Raymond E. Brown, *The Sensus Plenior of Sacred Scripture* [S.T.D. dissertation; Baltimore: St. Mary's University, 1955], 92.)

⁵⁷Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., "The Single Intent of Scripture," in *Evangelical Roots: A Tribute to Wilbur Smith*, ed. Kenneth S. Kantzer (Nashville: Nelson, 1978), 138.

At the other end is the position that the New Testament writers were rarely concerned with what happened or what the Old Testament text originally meant.⁵⁸ While it is not the purpose of this article to discuss the various views concerning the NT writers' use of the OT,⁵⁹ it is to inform the readers of the problem which comes out of authorial intent position.

CONCLUSION

Not only is God's Word inspired, but it comes to us with authority. It has the right to tell us what to believe and how to behave. It has this authority in our own lives and in the lives of those to whom we minister. For this reason it is necessary for us to understand the Scriptures correctly and then teach them correctly. This requires interpretation. This means that we need to understand the meaning of the Scriptures as correctly as possible. In order to understand the meaning of Scripture as correctly as possible, we must attempt to discover the author's intended meaning as expressed in the text.

⁵⁸Craig A. Evans, "The Function of the Old Testament in the New," in *Introducing New Testament Interpretation*, ed. Scot McKnight (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1989), 193.

⁵⁹For a helpful discussion of the various views see Darrell L. Bock, "Evangelicals and the Use of the Old Testament in the New," Part 1 and Part 2, in *Rightly Divided*, ed. Roy B. Zuck (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1996), 206-227. See also Millard J. Erickson, *Evangelical Interpretation* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1993), 11-32.