

RELEVANCE AND SCRIPTURE¹

Relevance Theory is an explanatory theory of human communication from an essentially naturalistic perspective. As such it attempts to account for the communication of meaning between humans in terms of human cognitive processes. But in this study I am seeking to apply it to a text which, by any standard of judgement, is no “ordinary” text. Whether or not the scholar chooses to regard it as “inspired”, or to have in any sense a “divine” origin, it is undoubtedly *intended* to be so read and so heard, indeed much more explicitly so than many other parts of the New Testament. This raises two questions for the application of RT, one relatively trivial and the other much more profound. Both have implications for each of the two dimensions of communication to which I have referred, the synchronic and the diachronic, relating respectively to the original hearers and to subsequent readers and students. First, what are the implications of the *claim* to inspiration or divine origin, for the search for relevance? And secondly, is it possible for RT to accommodate the real possibility of divine communication? Or to put it more bluntly, can God be, and does God have to be, relevant?

The first question is trivial because in allowing for the claim to inspiration we are still treating the text as an example of natural language communication, suspending judgment on whether or not the communication has *in fact* any other source than the mind of John. Sperber and Wilson have already allowed for this kind of communication:

When communication is non-reciprocal, there are various possible situations... The communicator may be in a position of such authority over her audience that success of her informative intention is mutually manifest in advance. Journalists, professors, religious or political leaders assume, alas often on good grounds, that what they communicate automatically becomes mutually manifest.²

One of the features of Revelation, as with other Apocalyptic literature, is its explicit self-authentication.³ From the perspective of the first readers/hearers, this claim to be authentic prophecy and Spirit-inspired vision will have been evaluated not only on the basis of the content and claims of the text itself, but also on the life-context and relationship of the recipients and author. If the claim was accepted (and the preservation of the text suggests it was), then a high degree of relevance will have been assumed for it.⁴ The hermeneutic task would have been to identify correctly the contexts which optimize relevance, and this task would not have been abandoned lightly. It is also likely that even if no significant immediate contextual effects were found for a particular part of the text, it would still have been preserved on the assumption of its relevance, in the expectation that at some future time, or with some further help, it would yield its results. Extended diachronically on the level of the ordinary reader, this factor may also help to explain the continuing place in the canon of Scripture of a much-neglected and mis-understood book.⁵ From the perspective of the

¹ From S.W.Pattemore, *Souls under the Altar: Relevance Theory and the Discourse Structure of Revelation*, UBS Monograph Series, 9. New York: UBS, 2003. Pp. 38-45

² Sperber and Wilson, *Relevance*, p. 61.

³ See David Aunes’ definition, in “The Problem of Genre”, pp. 86-87; and other articles in *Semeia* 36 (1986) and *Semeia* 14 (1979).

⁴ On the reception of the Apocalypse in the early church see p. 1, n. 1, above.

⁵ In fact few generations of the church have been without those who have confidently claimed to have discovered the key to the relevance of the Apocalypse. See eg. Swete, *Apocalypse*, pp. ccvii-ccxix; Beckwith, *Apocalypse*, pp. 318-36; Cohn, *Pursuit of the Millennium*; Petersen, *Preaching in the Last Days*.

scholar studying the first century communication event, the presumption of authenticity and inspiration must be clearly identified as a significant component of the mutual cognitive environment. If we are to discover how it was the first recipients understood the text, we must do this against the background of their reception of it as an inspired document. And it is against the same background that we must understand Revelation's sub-text of intertextual allusion. The hermeneutic task then is to identify contexts for the first hearers of the book which include their understanding of its origins and status, and hence to identify the contextual effects which result.

But can RT cope with the reality of a God who speaks? For there are no *a priori* grounds which require us to exclude this possibility, or indeed to exclude it from the field of scholarly debate.⁶ The very fact that I am interested in the study of John's Apocalypse is because I belong to a community which has consistently affirmed for millennia that God does speak, and that he has spoken through this particular text. Does God, if God speaks, communicate by optimizing relevance? And how should this affect the way in which we read and study Revelation in the 21st century? To answer these questions fully would require a long detour into the realms of theology and epistemology. My remarks will, by contrast, be brief and will focus on two ideas—the implications of divine speech for understanding the nature and stance of biblical text; and the responsibility this lays on the person who reads the Bible as Scripture, as divine speech.

Wolterstorff has argued on the basis of Speech Act Theory that it is meaningful to claim that God speaks, and therefore to consider the implications for divine authorial responsibility.⁷ Different modes of discourse offer useful analogies for divine discourse—not only “double agency” discourse or deputized discourse, which is appropriate to prophecy, but also “appropriated discourse” which may be more appropriate for other forms of Scripture.⁸ If God can be thought to intervene, as Wolterstorff argues, either to deputize someone to speak on God's behalf, or to appropriate someone's speech as God's, then God also has the rights and obligations of an author/speaker.⁹ Against Ricoeur, Wolterstorff affirms that we can read texts not just to discover their “sense”, in relation to a text-created world, but to understand the authorial discourse.¹⁰ Either way, in the biblical text, human discourse has become an instrument of divine discourse. Scripture can thus be considered divine discourse but it is never unmediated, it is always *incarnated* divine discourse. The divine author, both by delegating and by appropriating, accepts the conditions of *human* communication, with its rights and responsibilities. These include the responsibilities to be relevant and to respect the audience's context, and the rights to be heard and understood.

Any model of Scripture as divine discourse incarnate in human language must do justice to both halves of the formula. Thus first we must affirm the validity of searching for the meaning of Scripture by optimizing relevance. God has chosen to speak in human language.

⁶ John Webster, in a recent lecture, has questioned the division, since Kant, between theology as a discipline governed by hermeneutic rules of “general theory”, and reading the Bible as Scripture. He calls for a reprioritising of the “local interpretation” by reading Scripture to hear the voice of God. See J. Webster, “Texts: Scripture, Reading, and the Rhetoric of Theology”, *Stimulus* 6 (1998), pp. 10-16.

⁷ N. Wolterstorff, *Divine Discourse* (Cambridge: CUP, 1995). For Speech-Act Theory see ch. 2, p. 49, n. 137.

⁸ Wolterstorff, *Divine Discourse*, pp. 37-57.

⁹ Wolterstorff, *Divine Discourse*, pp. 95-129.

¹⁰ Wolterstorff, *Divine Discourse*, pp. 130-52. See Ricoeur, *Hermeneutics*, pp. 131-44; Ricoeur, ‘Toward a Hermeneutic of the Idea of Revelation’ in P. Ricoeur, *Essays on Biblical Interpretation* (London: SPCK, 1981), pp. 99-100; cf. Vanhoozer, *Ricoeur*, p. 109 n7.

God's eternal and effective word has undergone a *kenosis*, and therefore the normal rules of communication can be applied. Both the original audience and the later readers and students are obliged to maximise relevance within mutual cognitive environments. As Hays has suggested for Paul's letters, so for any Scripture, we must first read it as not-Scripture, as ordinary human communication embedded in a relevance-creating context, and in particular, attend to its use of its own prior Scripture. Only then will we be able to hear it as the voice of God.¹¹

Yet if we are content with the human dimension of Scripture's text, the search for relevance remains an academic exercise, the text itself inert marks on paper, powerless to reach, let alone move us. We have accounted only for the responsibility of the divine author to be relevant and our corresponding right to use a human hermeneutic. The complementary dimensions are equally, or even more, important: the divine right to be heard, and our responsibility to optimize the cognitive effects of the divine message. Webster suggests that we should be less concerned about how God communicates, and more about who it is that speaks to us, that we should locate our understanding of the nature of Scripture firstly in the doctrine of God as trinity - because of the work of the Father in the freedom of his communication, because of the Son who is the Word, because of the Spirit who makes real God's self-utterance.¹² Such an understanding of Scripture echoes harmonically through the whole intertextual space of the church's historical existence. Further, it re-vitalises the ostensive dimension of Scripture's communication for subsequent generations, including our own. Where Ricoeur denies to any text the power to refer ostensively, Vanhoozer has rightly pointed out that Ricoeur's "hermeneutical philosophy lacks an adequate approximation for the Christian teaching about the Holy Spirit."¹³ The God who "spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways by the prophets", who has "spoken to us by a Son", who deputed men and women to speak and appropriated their words, this God, I would argue, continues to speak to us by the present activity of the Holy Spirit who again appropriates the words of an ancient text and uses them to deliberately and ostensively communicate to us.¹⁴ Hargreaves comments helpfully:

The Bible's referential potential lies in its themes. It is supported by the Holy Spirit who works in the area of thematic resonance. He brings about a recognition of the thematic relevance of Scripture. This is the common Christian experience of Scripture addressing a contemporary situation.¹⁵

The work of the Holy Spirit provides a continuity between the origins of Scripture among the ancient people of God and the understanding of Scripture in the contemporary Church. And this continuity of Church/Spirit community provides a means by which Scripture can refer to the past and transform the present. The Holy Spirit is an ostensive, relevance-creating communicator, the bridge between the author's intentionality and the modern reader's life. That this is no new insight is evident from Scripture itself: "For what

¹¹ Hays, *Echoes*, p. 5, says: "If we approach Paul's letters a priori as Scripture in their own right, we run the risk of distortion through a hieratic reading that loses sight of their historical contingency and hermeneutical innovation. Paradoxically, we learn how rightly to read Paul's letters as Scripture only by first reading them as not-Scripture and attending to how he read the Scripture he knew."

¹² Webster, "Texts", p. 12. The second location he suggests is in the doctrine of the church (p. 13).

¹³ Vanhoozer, *Ricoeur*, p. 278; cf. Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory*, p. 30; *Hermeneutics*, p. 145.

¹⁴ Heb. 1:1.

¹⁵ M. Hargreaves, "Telling Stories: the Concept of Narrative and Biblical Authority", *Anvil* 13 (1996), p. 134.

was written in former days was written for our instruction, so that by steadfastness and by the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope.”¹⁶

The recognition of this “divine right” of speech by the student of Scripture entails corresponding responsibilities. It requires an accountability in our hermeneutical practice, not only, as Daniel Patte has helpfully suggested, to the academy and to ordinary readers of Scripture, but also towards the authors of Scripture and the divine, relevance-creating Author.¹⁷ Their ostensive communication carries the force of their intentionality. This accountability in turn entails a commitment not to readily abandon the search for relevance (either to the original audience, or to ourselves), but to search for cognitive environments within which positive cognitive effects are maximised (and negative ones minimised). It entails the renunciation of any attempt to manipulate, control or colonize the text for our own ideological purposes.

What does all this imply for my use of RT in the present study of John’s Apocalypse? An understanding of Scripture as divine discourse incarnate in human communication implies that the study of the Apocalypse as the text of a human communication event, governed by the optimization of relevance, is a *necessary*, but not *sufficient*, condition for understanding it. It is necessary because of the incarnational nature of divine discourse, and it will involve incorporating the presumption of divine origin as a part of the ordinary *human* context within which it was sent and received. It is not sufficient because of the divine origin of the incarnate discourse. The book of Revelation could be seen to participate in both of Wolterstorff’s categories of deputized and appropriated discourse. And within it the reader/hearer is explicitly addressed, either “directly” or “indirectly”, by God (Rev. 1:8, 21:5-8), by the exalted Christ (Rev. 1:11, 2:1 - 3:22; 22:7, 12f, 16, 20) and by the Spirit (Rev. 2:7, 11, 17, 29; 3:6, 13, 22).¹⁸ Any approach based on the assumption that “unbiased reason” is the only tool needed for understanding, cannot hope to detect more than one dimension of the text. To ignore the function of the Apocalypse as Scripture is to limit the contexts in which relevance can be found, to attempt to shut out the voice of the Spirit. My position, then, is that of one who affirms the role of the Spirit, who wants to be addressed by God through the text. Here, too, relevance plays a major role in my reading. When I come to the text I read to hear the voice of the God whom, in some measure, I have come to know, and that (partial and probably flawed) knowledge is also part of my cognitive environment. Thus I will search for contexts which optimize God’s relevance (remembering that relevance is not the same as confirming my existing beliefs) and I will at times prefer open agnosticism to radical cynicism.

The majority of my work in this study focusses on the first dimension, that of understanding the text as a document of human communication, governed by the normal constraints of relevance. But it is done from within the stance outlined above, which, so far from blurring the vision, provides motivation for the serious search for relevance.

To return to the point from which I began this section, it may be helpful to consider an analogy between Relevance Theory and the Theory of Evolution. In fact the analogy is by no

¹⁶ Rom. 15:4, cf. 1 Cor. 9:10, 10:11.

¹⁷ cf. D. Patte, *Ethics of Biblical Interpretation: A Reevaluation* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1995), p. 107 and *passim*.

¹⁸ The terms “directly” and “indirectly” are both relative to the narrative context. Of course all the communication is really indirect in the sense that it is through John. And equally obvious is the fact that the whole book is implicitly a communication from God through Jesus and John (Rev. 1:1).

means an arbitrary one.¹⁹ As evolution is a principle that may be employed on the basis of atheistic presuppositions, but which in itself does not exclude God as the active agent, so relevance may be used to exclude the divine voice, but it may equally be used with an acknowledgment of the relevance-creating power of an eloquent God. God's works and God's words—both find expression in processes open to human investigation and both are sufficiently self-effacing that the divine hand voice may not be heard nor the divine hand seen.²⁰

“Let anyone who has an ear listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches.”

¹⁹ See ch. 2, p. 40, nn. 100-101 above.

²⁰ This possibility is reflected in the statement of Jesus, quoting Isaiah, that some will “indeed listen but never understand...indeed look but never perceive”. (Mt. 13:14, cf Isa. 6:8-9.)