Chapter 1
Introduction

Communication has become a buzz word in recent years. Lack of communication is said to be the cause of so many of our present day ills, from the breakdown of relationships to arrogant politicians, and poor service on every level. Humans seem to be passionate about knowing the latest information, while retaining the right to keep to themselves personal material. How we *interpret* communication is seldom considered. If we think about it at all, we might assume that words have meanings and we all understand these meanings – rather like a code which can be mechanically deciphered.

In fact, human communication is considerably more complex than this, and yet at the same time more transparent. Although words do convey meaning, we use context and encyclopaedic knowledge to make inferences from these words, and enrich the communication. In the physical world, humans begin to infer as soon as they see another human, before verbal communication has even begun. Indeed, humans seem to be incapable of desisting from inferencing. This description of how we communicate will be examined in detail in Chapter Two, but first of all we must accept that a new approach to the way in which we view language is worth the effort, particularly for biblical scholars.

Although many of the examples given in these chapters may appear to be concerned with oral communication only, I will show that the way of communication being explained relates well to literary texts, too, and in particular to biblical texts. Different genres of text are included and I invite you to consider the proposition that literalness in a text is not privileged. It is not the default option!

The approach I am taking has been compared with the fairly recent concern about the deconstruction of texts. This has sometimes given the impression that there are *no* meanings in a text. It would be more accurate to say that we cannot limit the meanings of a text. Even a committed deconstructionist such as Derrida wrote and published a considerable number of books, which would not have been the case if he did not believe that there would be readers who would derive some meaning from his writings. I do not undervalue the contribution that a deconstructionist approach brings to interpretation, but the early responses seemed to display deep pessimism about the whole interpretive exercise.

> Deconstruction reveals above all that no reading, whether of the author, the original reader or later interpreter, has the right to a final word about a text's meaning.[1]

I would suggest then that the very fact of creating a text for public view implies that the writer has an interest in making something manifest to someone other than himself.[2] He is indicating his intention to communicate. This may seem trite, but it is a necessary presupposition to any attempt to interpret an utterance.[3] If a writer has the intention to communicate, then the effort of interpretation is not a futile one. It may not be successful, but it is certainly worth the effort. Authorial intention has been regarded as an irrecoverable notion in recent scholarship, but given the communicator's 'intention to inform' it is a legitimate exercise to attempt to find clues to such intention in the speech or text, even if there is no certainty. The approach I explain in these chapters, in contrast to a deconstructionist approach, has more explanatory power to interpret not only how we communicate, but also how such communication may fail.

Alison Jack comments usefully on this lack of certainty in interpretation:

1. Jack, A. (1999) *Texts Reading Texts, Sacred and Secular.* JSNT 179. Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, p. 207.
2. The speaker or writer will be referred to as 'he', and the hearer or reader as 'she'.
3. Clark, B. (2013) *Relevance Theory.* Cambridge: CUP, p. 117. 'Any piece of writing makes mutually manifest that the communicator has an intention to inform.'

> Before the rise of 'historical anxiety' (p. 283) in the eighteenth century, reading of the Bible was characterized by a flexibility of interpretation which shares features both with midrash and deconstruction.[1]

Earlier readers of biblical texts were more innovative in their interpretive methods and less concerned with 'authorial intent'. The biblical text has been read and commented on for more than 2,000 years, and so it is important to have a sense of perspective in our interpretation, particularly in the context of our modern assumptions concerning accuracy. In relation to midrash, the former Chief Rabbi Jonathan Sacks regularly points out that Jewish exegesis involves Scripture dialoguing with Scripture, and also with life. As new situations arise, and a larger canvas is displayed, Jews are compelled to go back to Torah and seek new insights.

> The *interpretation* of this text (Torah) has been the subject of an ongoing conversation for as long as Jews have studied the divine word, a conversation that began with Sinai thirty-three centuries ago and has not ceased since. Every age has added its commentaries, and so must ours.[2]

The Church Fathers also display a more innovative approach to their interaction with Scripture, and while we may not agree with their interpretation, we do need to exercise some humility in our perceived hermeneutical superiority. In attempting to interpret written text – and of course oral communication – we have to acknowledge that thoughts are private and only language is public. Comments such as 'I say what I think' or 'thinking out loud' may suggest that such thoughts are recoverable from the sounds uttered, but what we recover is a resemblance to or representation of such thoughts. An author's text is therefore a resemblance to his thoughts, although in terms of biblical text many see the two as identical.

Memory also plays an important role in the representation of thoughts or utterances. The modern academic assumption and expectation of accurate representation would not only have been unknown to the ancients, but is in fact far removed from what is presented and represented in actual life situations, both orally and in print, as even a cursory glance at a newspaper will show.

1. Jack (1999) p. 86.
2. Sacks, J. (2009) *Covenant and Conversation: Genesis*, p. 3.

In spoken or written communication the main principle that creates successful communication is the principle of relevance. The speaker assumes that a hearer listens to what he has to say because she is interested in it: it has relevance for her.[1] That may seem to be overstating the position of the hearer, but in fact we do not merely throw words at one another; those words do relate to situations, contexts in which both speaker and hearer share a common body of knowledge.[2] Humans do not make remarks, or even signs, without an assumption that the hearer will increase her knowledge by listening, or will be able to reassess some information previously held. We listen because we expect relevance, even though we might not articulate it as such. This does not necessarily, or even usually, involve a conscious process, but even a superficial consideration of why we communicate with one another involves the belief that the listener will have some interest in what we have to say. This might not be the perspective of the hearer, or necessarily be of benefit to the hearer, but it will be relevant to her. Even those situations in which a speaker wants to obtain information may give some relevance to a hearer. On many occasions fear makes us unwilling to ask a question, or to ask for help, because of the inferences which the hearer will draw from such a request.[3] The hearer may not want to hear what a speaker has to say but that does not thereby deny its relevance.

Although this may seem to be situationally distinct from the interpretation of biblical text, it does demonstrate the strong role that inference plays in interpreting human behaviour as well as human speech, and, in addition, can be seen to be a factor in certain narrative contexts in these biblical texts.[4] If 'relevance' is the guiding principle in human communication, then we have to take this into account in our understanding of the way in which the authors/text of the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament expected their readers/hearers to make sense of what they were

1. As noted in footnote 2 of p. 2, the speaker or writer will be referred to as 'he', and the hearer or reader as 'she'.
2. If this condition is not fulfilled, then communication *may* fail, but the principle of relevance will lead a hearer to persevere until she 'makes sense' of the utterance.
3. Consider John 4:27; 21:12 and the author's presentation of the disciples as reluctant to ask a question.
4. See Mark 3:1-2; John 4:27; 11:31; Acts 21:27-29 for inferencing which began from viewing actions, or even potential actions.

attempting to communicate. An important part of this approach is the assertion that human communication is *ostensive*; there is an assumption that the communicator intends his utterances to be relevant and understood.

Recent discussion in hermeneutics has focused on whether or not it is possible to have *any* meaning or perhaps any certainty of meaning in a text or utterance. While the debate rages on, the most satisfying account of how humans communicate with one another comes from the field of relevance theory. From this basis we can perhaps draw some hints to progress in the hermeneutical process. Our approach should enable us to examine dialogue and the interaction of the characters presented from a different perspective.

> What relevance theory aims to do is not to produce better interpretations than actual hearers or readers do, but to explain how they arrive at the interpretations they do construct, whether successfully or unsuccessfully.[1]

I will attempt to suggest areas of interpretation for which relevance theory can make a real contribution. I do not attempt to reject earlier scholarship or blaze a trail for a new understanding but rather to give theoretical support for interpretations which might be seen as intuitive rather than evidence based. Relevance theory is concerned with the way in which humans communicate with one another, rather than presenting prescriptive rules for interpretation. The theory claims that hearers make inferences which may not have been intended by the communicator but which seem relevant to them. By examining these I hope to suggest plausible reasons as to why this happens and whether or not this is a feature of canonical texts in particular. The areas I will discuss include the following:

- representation of words or thoughts of others leading on to
- a new perspective on metaphor and
- a new definition of irony;
- particles as guides to interpretation rather than having a fixed lexical meaning;
- logical relations in conditional clauses;
- determining time and aspect.

1. Wilson, D. (2011) 'Relevance and the interpretation of literary works', p. 72 in UCL Working Papers 2011.01 pp. 69-80.

The chapters are arranged to give first of all the theoretical underpinning, followed by particular areas in which relevance theory can be illuminating for biblical studies. Chapter Two then lays out the theoretical basis for the approach to communication known as relevance theory, using biblical texts as examples of these principles. This is set out as a guide for non-linguists with the broad outline of the principles explained and exemplified. This is followed in Chapter Three by an examination of the way in which we re-present the words and thoughts of others, and it considers the question of intertextuality and the role of contextual and encyclopaedic knowledge in communication. Recent scholarly attention to the use of the Old Testament in the New is examined together with the presuppositions that different scholars bring to the topic.

Chapter Four examines the speaker or writer's attitude to re-presentation as seen in echoic utterance or in verbal irony. A new definition of verbal irony is presented and, consequently, an invitation to view certain 'difficult' texts in this light. Some of these include Malachi 1:3, Mark 7:27, and 1 Corinthians 11:19. Furthermore, the misinterpretation that may result if such an attitude is not accurately discerned is clearly laid out. Echoic utterance is examined in the light of recent suggestions for 'difficult' verses in the first Corinthian letter.

Chapter Five examines the way in which particles guide interpretation and relevance, blocking possible wrong inferences and signalling the author's belief concerning, or his desire for, a particular state of affairs. It charts a course in which the instructions a particle gives guide a reader with procedural information, rather than giving a lexical entry for one of these small words. Again, an interpreter's presuppositions may be seen to have greater influence on the text than the function of such particles.

In Chapter Six, the relevance of conditional sentences is examined. The suggestion is that the general or traditional understanding of the syntax of different types of condition as indicating 'true' or 'untrue' situations should be laid aside in exchange for a focus on the principal logical relationship between the two clauses of the conditional sentence. This may make exegesis clearer, and render the preoccupation with 'real' versus 'unreal' and 'true' versus 'untrue' irrelevant, or at least of secondary importance.

A final summary of this new approach and its benefits is laid out in Chapter Seven, together with a brief discussion on the way in which we interpret tense forms and verbal aspect. This has been a hot topic for over twenty-five years and is only touched upon here in conclusion. It is pragmatic inferencing that gives the answer, not a focus on the particular time or aspect.

From Chapter Two onwards, readers should be able not only to view the biblical text with new eyes, but also to reassess their own communication as humans and the way in which this is shaped by 'relevance', even though they may not have considered such a thought before.

I have given my own translations of any Greek, presented so that there should be relevance for all, though the contextual effects for those who can negotiate their way round Koine will be greater.

I have used examples from the *Discourses* of Epictetus to support my argument at several points. Epictetus was the son of a slave woman, and a slave himself, who in later life became a teacher of Stoic philosophy, displaying a severely ascetic life style and a passion for freedom above all else. His dates are uncertain but 50-120CE are the outside limits. His *Discourses* have been recorded by Arrian, who was one of his students, and undertook to note the comments and teaching of his master in the classroom. It does seem as if he made a real attempt to record his teacher's words accurately, our evidence for this view being the Koine grammar in which the teachings are written. Arrian himself wrote in Attic Greek, notwithstanding his centuries of distance from the golden age of Attic writers. I have used Epictetus because there are so many features of his style that resonate with the letters of Paul, particularly his use of diatribe.

Xenophon comes at the end of the classical period, but he also displays features which are found in the New Testament. His work is narrative, and comparable with many other examples in the book.

The translations given from the Greek New Testament text are my own, as are those from Epictetus and Xenophon unless otherwise stated.