

*Oh! So That's What That Means? Or Is It?:
A Response to David M. Howard, Jr.*

Ola Farmer Lenaz Lectureship
December 16, 1999
New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary

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To Be or Not to Be (Philosophical)?

“What indeed has Athens to do with Jerusalem?”¹ Tertullian’s oft-quoted rhetorical question has become synonymous in the minds of many with the relationship of faith and reason or that which exists between theology as expressed through preaching and philosophy. One should note, however, that in context this famous outburst is immediately preceded by Tertullian’s description of several heresies and the pagan philosophical systems that he sees as inspiring them. Among the heretical systems are Platonism, Gnosticism, Stoicism, and Epicureanism. Among the philosophers he names are Plato, Zeno, Heraclitus, and Aristotle, along with the alleged Christians Marcion and Valentinus. He even demonstrates a familiarity with esoteric Gnostic terminology. One is compelled to conclude that Tertullian himself had at least a reasonable knowledge of philosophy—and made use of it when necessary. James Barr insists that Tertullian is not so much arguing against philosophy as he is arguing for using Judeo-Christian categories rather than Classical categories. His famous question is thus not so much a call to abandon philosophy or reason, as it is evidence of a clash of philosophies.² Barr goes on to write that there is no safety in avoiding philosophical questions in interpretation; rather the greater danger lies in failing to consider secular philosophy as a vehicle for understanding the Scriptures.³

But Tertullian’s question, (mis)understood in the usual way, must be taken seriously. What exactly is the relationship between philosophy and theology, or more pointedly, what does philosophical hermeneutics have to do with biblical interpretation and Christian proclamation? The answer is “more than most people think!” There is no interpretation that is objectively neutral or free of philosophical presuppositions. The Cartesian subject-object distinction, with its idea of an objective subject (the knower), and a passive object (the thing known), is an enlightenment myth. No reader has a transcendent God’s-eye view from which to interpret a text. This means that the surest way to see to it that improper philosophical assumptions *do* distort one’s understanding of a text is to avoid asking philosophical questions in interpretation. The simple truth is that we are all philosophers and interpreters of some sort. Some have specialized training in biblical languages, archeology, logic, philosophy of language, history, or other disciplines relevant to the task, but anyone who reads any text must answer the question: “What does this mean?” If one is unwilling to answer that question, then one properly ought either simply to read the text again, or take Wittgenstein’s early suggestion to heart and say nothing.

Both philosophy and theology play an important role in biblical interpretation. To some degree they play a role in determining what questions are asked of a text. This is both

¹Tertullian *On Prescription Against Heretics* 7.1.

²James Barr, *Old and New in Interpretation: A Study of Two Testaments* (New York: Harper and Row, 1966), 41.

³*Ibid.*, 173.

bane and blessing. Positively the task of theology is to speak the Gospel once delivered to the saints anew to each generation. The theologian is given the task of translating the good news into the language of the day. Not to do so inevitably leads to unintelligibility, or worse, the Gospel is perceived to be irrelevant. On the other hand, too much emphasis upon philosophy may cause one to be overly concerned with the prevailing *Zeitgeist*, and thus lead one to ask questions of the biblical text that are not only foreign to its nature but also insignificant in the long run. (One might refer to this as Seinfeld theology— theology about nothing.) Once the culture is allowed to set the agenda in theology, one does not have to go far to reach the point where the Bible is absolutely irrelevant to theology. Paul Tillich comes to mind at this point. At the end of his three-volume *Systematic Theology* one finds that the Bible has been used so little that there is no need for a scripture index. But liberals are not the only ones affected by this malady. Conservatives can also fall into the trap of ignoring vital timeless truths in the rush to answer immediate questions. Thomas Oden maintains that the five fundamentals of fundamentalism, all of which he affirms (as do I), were chosen over equally fundamental Christian truths.

Why are these five concerns more “fundamental” than others, such as divine providence, justification by faith through grace, or the triune God? What is the ordering principle of selection? Where is the church? The Holy Spirit? Sanctification? Sin? The principle of selection of these five fundamentals makes good sense only if we see it in the context of the nineteenth-century reliance on historical and scientific objectivity, which was influential at that time but is now waning amid the collapse of modernity.⁴

Oden concludes that “modern fundamentalism is more akin to liberalism than either would be willing to admit.”⁵ This is not necessarily bad. But it does highlight the fact that there is necessarily a close relationship between philosophy, theology, and interpretation. Each one may inform the others. Each one is necessary. But balance is difficult to maintain in this regard. Every reader makes certain assumptions based in large part upon certain presuppositions. There is great danger in unexplored presuppositions. But how can one explore one’s presuppositions apart from philosophical reflection and critique? Therefore one who avoids using a certain amount of philosophy in biblical interpretation does so at his or her own risk.

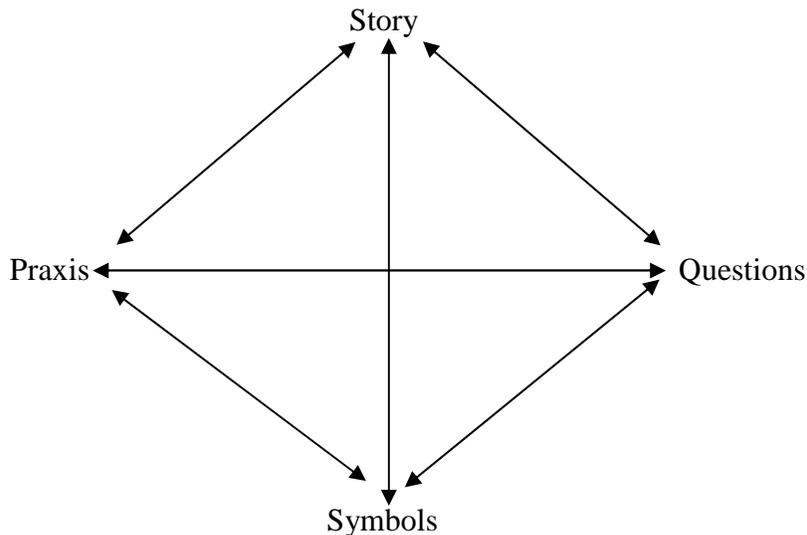
I intend in this paper to discuss a hermeneutical model that applies methods from more philosophically oriented approaches to hermeneutics. This model may be used profitably *along with* grammatical-historical exegesis. I intend to apply it to David’s exegesis of Joshua 10:6-15 in an effort to see if it yields additional insights into, and a fuller explanation of, the passage.

⁴Thomas C. Oden, “On Not Whoring After the Spirit of the Age,” in *No God but God: Breaking with the Idols of Our Age*, ed. Os Guinness and John Seel (Chicago: Moody Press, 1992), 197.

⁵Oden, 197.

The Story Is the Thing

The first component in my proposed hermeneutic is worldview analysis along the lines of the model proposed by N. T. Wright, which is an embellishment of the work done by J. Richard Middleton and Brian J. Walsh.⁶ Worldviews are by nature pre-cognitive.⁷ They are not reasoned to, but reasoned from. Worldviews address deep issues for human life, they are the lenses through which an individual or a society interprets reality and daily life. Worldviews typically do four things: (1) They provide *stories* through which those maintaining that worldview view reality. (2) They answer *four ultimate questions* about human existence that every person asks: “Who am I? Where am I? What’s wrong? What’s the solution?”⁸ (3) They express the story in *symbols*. (4) They proclaim a characteristic *praxis*—a way of being in this world. In each of these worldview indicators one may glimpse the worldview in its entirety. Each of these worldview indicators relates to and impacts, and is related to and impacted by, all of the others. This interaction is illustrated below:



⁶N. T. Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God*, vol. 1, *Christian Origins and the Question of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992), 122-26; J. Richard Middleton and Brian J. Walsh, *Truth Is Stranger Than It Used to Be: Biblical Faith in a Postmodern Age* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1995).

⁷One may see this by noting that the *Anschuaang* of *Weltanschuaang* (worldview) is often translated “intuition.”

⁸It is interesting to note that these questions are quite similar to the questions that Vatican II suggested were common to all humans. See *Vatican Council II: The Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents*, ed. Austin Flannery (Dublin: Dominican Publications, 1975), 738.

The most important indicator of all is that of *story*. The four ultimate questions are simply drawing out the dimensions of the story. Consider:

1. Who am I? Characterization
2. Where am I? Setting
3. What's wrong? Plot Conflict
4. What's the solution? Plot Resolution

The symbols capture in a glance, the most significant points of the story. Consider for a moment the two most important symbols of Christianity: the Lord's Supper and Baptism. The Lord's Supper pictures the substitutionary, atoning death of the Lord.

This is my body, which is for you; do this in remembrance of Me. . . This cup is the new covenant in my blood; do this as often as you drink it in remembrance of Me (1 Cor. 11:24-25).

Baptism pictures his resurrection, which insures that of the believer (Romans 8:10; 10:9-10; 1 Cor. 15:19-49).⁹

Every worldview story demands a unique praxis, a way of being in the world. Praxis is a way of making the Christian story one's own. (Note that the story that is *practiced*, not simply the story that is *professed*, is the story that is operative in the life of an individual.)¹⁰ One thus sees the influence of story in each of the worldview indicators.

Stories are the perfect vehicles for worldviews because they are the ultimate vehicles in which to convey messages that subvert opposing worldviews. This is seen in the preaching of Jesus. Over and over Jesus reverses the expectations of his hearers. Consider the parable of the *good Samaritan* (an oxymoron to first-century Jewish ears if ever there was one!). The hero is the last person Jesus' audience expected. Likewise Jesus' parable of the prodigal son could not but stun the Pharisees who were listening (Jesus tells this story in response to their complaint that he received sinners and ate with them). The son who left home and cleaned the pigsty was accepted back, and given his own banquet. Abruptly the story ends with the son who stayed home and obeyed being left outside the banquet. They could not fail to recognize which son in the story referred to them.

⁹I do not wish to suggest that this is all that is pictured in either Baptism or the Lord's Supper. The important thing to note is that both ordinances "picture" the heart of the Christian Gospel.

¹⁰Some from all different worldviews live according to a different praxis. Most postmodernists still want a banker who believes that the signifiers he is working with are referential in nature. Even Jean Paul Sartre's novels are self-contradictory. If Sartre followed his philosophy to its logical conclusion in his novels they would be quite chaotic. See Ben F. Meyer, "The Philosophical Crusher," *First Things: A Monthly Journal of Religion and Public Life* 12 (April: 1991): 9-11.

All of this demonstrates that worldviews are often in conflict with one another. They often tell competing stories that cannot be resolved. One or the other must go—they cannot both be maintained. Every worldview calls for allegiance. Even the one that does not (pluralism) is itself a worldview, a worldview in fact that demands that others accept it. Those who refuse to embrace it are accused of being hegemonic, patriarchal, antiquated, or simplistic.

Finally worldviews are by nature theological. Any statement about ultimate reality is theological in some sense. Even the atheist's assertion that there is no God is a theological statement of great significance. Likewise the agnostic's assertion either that one cannot know if there is a God, or that if there is a God, he cannot be known, is also a profoundly theological statement. The pluralist position that all religious positions are equally valid is not only absurd (God exists, or does not exist, is nowhere, or is everywhere, or is one, or is many, or is personal, or is impersonal, or is female, or is male, and so on . . .), but also theological, and then some!

The book of Joshua is all about a clash of worldviews. It is not only a matter of geography, of Israel possessing the land. It is about whose God is the greatest. It is about the supremacy of Israel's God.

Because story is the most important worldview indicator, I will use a variation of A. J. Greimas's narrative analysis, or as it is often called, actant analysis, to understand how individual stories work. Greimas drew upon Vladimir Propp's analysis of the formal grammar or "morphology" of Russian folk stories,¹¹ and Ferdinand de Saussure's distinction between *langue* and *parole*.¹² Like Propp's morphology Saussure's *langue* focused not on the *content* of texts, but on the *function* of texts. Greimas maintains that there are six basic actors or characters in any story, the sender, the receiver, the object, the agent, the opponent, and the helper. Actant analysis in its simplest form has three phases: (1) the *initial* sequence, where the goal is stated; (2) the *topical* sequence, where plot tension is achieved as the goal is initially thwarted, but ultimately made possible; and (3) the *final* sequence, where the original goal is achieved.¹³

- a. initial sequence: The Agent is given some Object by the Sender to deliver to the Receiver, but is prevented by the Opponent from doing so;
- b. topical sequence: The Agent in the initial sequence becomes the Receiver in the topical sequence, a new Agent or Helper is introduced;

¹¹Propp analyzed Russian folk stories according to their *function*, and concluded that certain functions within Russian folk stories are invariant elements in the tale.

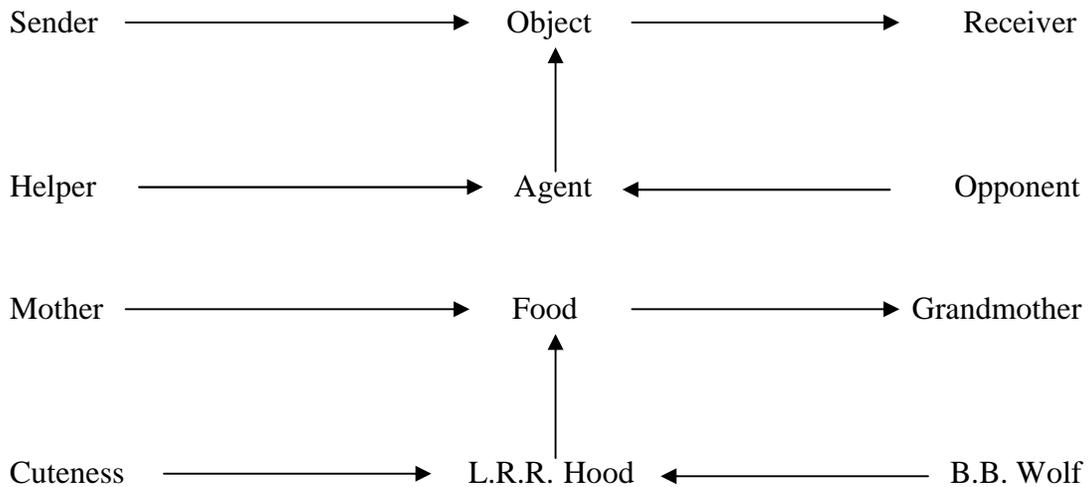
¹²Saussure distinguished between concrete acts of speech (*parole*) and language-systems (*langue*).

¹³In practice there are often multiple levels within a sequence. For the sake of simplicity, I have limited each sequence to only one level.

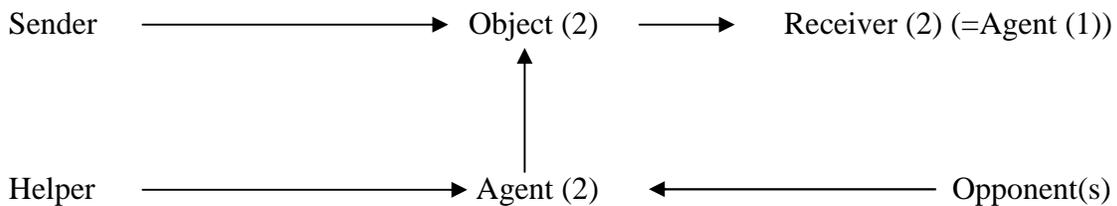
- c. final sequence: The Agent is thus able to deliver the Object to the Receiver after all.¹⁴

Actant theorists chart out how the characters interact to each other at the individual levels or within each sequence. I have charted out below how the theory works abstractly and also in practice, using the simple story of Little Red Riding Hood, as presented by Wright.¹⁵

A. Initial Sequence.



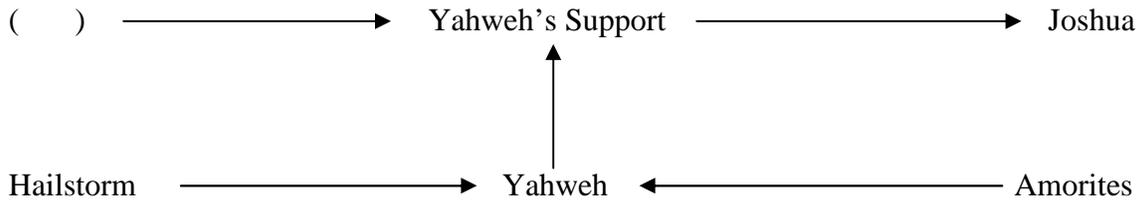
B. Topical Sequence:



¹⁴Cf. Wright, 71.

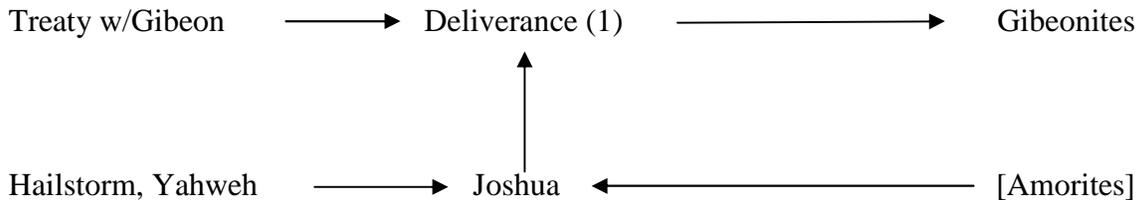
¹⁵Ibid, 71-72.

B. Topical Sequence:



The Lord becomes the helper. He assures Joshua that He will give him an overwhelming victory (10:8). Secure in the knowledge that whatever the circumstances Yahweh will give him the victory, Joshua acts immediately, and marches his men all night in order to attack the enemy as soon as possible (10:9). Upon arriving on the scene, the Lord fights for Israel and an overwhelming victory is won.

C. Final Sequence



The Gibeonites are delivered. Few, if any, of the Israelites perishes in the battle. The Israelites return to camp satisfied, and probably greatly relieved.

A Worldview Proposal

In this section I shall propose an interpretation of the passage that addresses both the overall worldview issue in the book of Joshua (Israel taking the promised land) and the immediate issue at hand (Joshua's leadership).

Clearly a battle of deities is in order when Israel enters Canaan. The land wasn't big enough for two worldviews. The differences between the God of Israel and the gods of the Amorites are great. Israel has only one God. The Amorites have a number of deities. The God of Israel is consistent in his holiness and his love, and faithful to keep his word. The gods of the Amorites, on the other hand, are arbitrary, often battling with one another, and not to be trusted. Most significantly for the purpose of this paper, the most prominent Amorite god is Baal, the storm God, who has a consort, 'Anath.

From a worldview perspective it is not inconsequential that the God of Israel works miraculously to insure victory for his people over the people of Baal *through a storm*. The message is clear: "Our God is so mighty that he can order your god to do his work for him and to destroy you."

It is not immediately clear what the sun and the moon have to do with hail falling from heaven. But might it be (this is admittedly speculative) that because Baal and 'Anath were regularly seen as romantically linked that the sun and the moon represent them. If so, there would be an even greater poetic intensity. Both gods of the Amorites are commanded to stop and thus interrupted in their routines, and then directed to destroy their own followers. Regardless of whether or not the sun and moon represent Baal and 'Anath, the use of a hailstorm to destroy the enemies of Israel makes for a compelling worldview proclamation of the superiority of Yahweh over all the Amorite gods.

One immediate issue that Israel is facing at the moment is the leadership of Joshua. Israel is fighting on behalf of these pagan people because Joshua entered into a treaty with the Gibeonites *without seeking the counsel of the Lord* (9:14). Joshua's credentials as a leader are at stake. Therefore, if Joshua is the one who speaks to the sun and moon, rather than the Lord, it would certainly serve to cement his role as leader. If it is the Lord who speaks to the sun and the moon, then Joshua is still affirmed, but not as dramatically.

I Come Not to Bury David But to Praise Him

The application of actant analysis to this passage has highlighted several of the points that David has made in his exegesis of the passage.

1. Actant analysis highlights the fact that it is clearly God and God alone who is responsible for the victory. God is the effective helper (Agent 2). It is thus God alone who is to be praised.
2. The narrative structure that one applies when using actant analysis works in favor of David's proposal that verses 12-14 are the author's reflection, not another event happening in sequence. The story has reached its climax by the end of verse 11. What follows is epilogue.
3. The fact that David is not arguing for a literal stoppage of the sun and the moon will be seen as a problem by some. But from the perspective of actant analysis, the issue is not *how* the helper helps the initial agent but the fact *that* the helper helps the agent achieve his goal. Furthermore, this passage has often been one foci in the supernaturalism vs.: naturalism debate. To accuse David of rejecting supernaturalism is grossly to misread him. Not only does David not argue for naturalism over supernaturalism, he explicitly

argues that this passage is supernatural in character—God actually does supernaturally come to the aid of his people.¹⁶

Questions

It appears to me that the two most problematic proposals that David makes are: (1) that it is the Lord, not Joshua that speaks in 12b; and (2) that 13b is not a quotation from the Book of Jashar, but a continuation of the poetry in 13a. I shall address both of them.

(1) If Joshua did not speak to sun and the moon, then what did Joshua say and what command of Joshua's did the Lord obey? David grants that Joshua spoke to the Lord and asked for his assistance (10:12a) but denies that Joshua spoke to the sun and the moon—God did that. I have some questions concerning this suggestion. (1) The force of the conclusion in verse 14 is greatly diminished if the text does not tell the reader what Joshua said. Why would something so astounding be left out of the text? (2) What does it mean for the Lord to *speak* to the sun and the moon “in the sight of Israel?” We know what it means for a human to say something in the sight of others, but apart from an audible voice (?), what does it mean for God to do this? (3) Given that what Joshua said is not in the text, how can anyone know that God obeyed? (4) But if Joshua did speak out loud in plain view and there was a dramatic result, whatever it was, does that not serve to solidify his position as leader all the more? Thus *the story may require that it be Joshua speaking, not the Lord*. (5) Finally the conclusion (10:14) stresses the unique nature of that day. But David's proposal simply has Joshua petitioning God and God responding. How does this qualify as God “obeying?” It seems more like God answering a prayer, not God obeying a human command. In which case, what is so remarkable about God answering prayer? God does that regularly, doesn't he?

(2) The importance of 13b being a continuation of the poetic reflection of God's victory is obvious for David's proposal. If it is a new prose section (a quotation from the Book of Jashar?), it cannot be a poetic section, and then David's proposal has tremendous difficulties. Still I see no reason to disagree with David on this point. Yet even if one grants that the language of 12b-13 is poetic and thus metaphorical, how is it that such sun and moon language refers to a hailstorm? Granted that poetry is metaphorical in nature, nevertheless good metaphors resemble those things that they represent. I understand that the sun and the moon are in the sky, and that hail falls from the sky, but even in poetry why should a hailstorm be described by talking about the sun and the moon? I see two possible answers to this question. (1) God terrified the Amorites through some sort of astrological omen or unusual astronomical phenomenon (not a literal stopping of the sun

¹⁶This is a necessary ingredient for actant analysis. If there is no opponent or no helper, there is no story (unless one considers “a little girl took lunch to her grandmother” a story). If the helper doesn't actually help, the plot line is reduced to absurdity, not to mention boredom, given that there is no conflict to resolve. (There might be a moral lesson [mother's should not send their little girls into the woods alone] but that is all.) cf. Wright, 73.

and the moon, but one consistent with the clash of deities called for by worldview analysis). Following this sign, the Lord attacked the Amorites with hailstones, which verified the sign. In this case, this passage is understood as more akin to Exodus 15, a poetic hymnic reflection on the deliverance of the Israelites (and the destruction of the Egyptians) in Exodus 14. Like the language in Exodus 15 (horses cast into the sea, riders sinking like stones, the waters rising up like a heap, etc.), which is reminiscent of actual events in Exodus 14, the poetic language in verses 12-13 refers to an actual event (whatever it was) that terrified the Amorites. (2) A second solution that makes sense of the sun and moon language is that the hailstorm alone was the miracle, but that in reflecting upon it the author, under the inspiration of the Spirit, framed it in the cosmic language of gods at war. Either one seems possible to me. But I prefer the former!

Conclusion

David's treatment of this passage clarifies much. His methodology is foundational for biblical interpretation. Worldview and actant analysis can be used effectively with grammatical-historical exegesis to emphasize certain aspects of a text, but they do not replace it. Attention at both the macro-level of the story (actant and worldview analysis) and at the micro-level (grammatical-historical exegesis) insures a balanced interpretation. And a fuller, more balanced interpretation is the point, after all, is it not?