Biblical scholars differ on the use of such fundamental critical terms as *authorial intention*, *meaning*, *sense*, and *significance*. As a result, their critical approaches are often incompatible with each other. Apart from these differences in terminology and usage, there are interpretive communities which, in order to establish the sense of biblical passages, use such factors as interpretive tradition or the ecclesiastical hierarchy.

A case in point is what David Jasper says about literary approaches in exegesis, which brought about ‘the change in focus of interest from the intention of the author and the original context of the writing, to the response of the reader in determining the meaning and significance of the text’. ¹ Jasper suggests that, as far as modern literary approaches are concerned, the onus is on the reader to establish meaning and significance, and that both of them result from the reader’s response to the text.

To give an example belonging to an ecclesiastical context, the Biblical Commission’s document *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church* speaks of a certain tension between ancient exegesis, which ‘attributed to every text of Scripture several levels of meaning’, and modern historical exegesis usually associated with ‘the thesis of the one single meaning’. ² The authors of the document suggest that we should speak about the literal, spiritual, and fuller senses of Scripture, by which they understand, respectively, the meaning intended by the human and the divine authors, the meaning of the text ‘when read, under the influence of the Holy Spirit, in the context of the paschal mystery of Christ and of the new life which flows from it’³, and ‘a deeper meaning of the text, intended by God but not clearly expressed by the human author’. ⁴ When readers discover in the biblical text fresh meanings applicable to the contemporary context, this process is called by the authors of the document ‘actualization’. ⁵

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³ *The Biblical Commission* 127, supra, n. 2.
⁴ *The Biblical Commission* 130, supra, n. 2.
⁵ *The Biblical Commission* 170-76, supra, n. 2.
Even a brief look at the above distinctions shows a plurality of approaches to the problem of meaning. Jasper’s and the Biblical Commission’s intellectual frameworks differ greatly from each other. While Jasper seems to situate meaning and significance in the reader’s corner of the narrative communication model (author → text → reader), the Commission speaks about four kinds of meaning, which are established in many different ways, and with the aid of factors which do not belong to the communication model, such as interpretive tradition and the ecclesiastical hierarchy.

In view of that, it seems that we need a theory of biblical sense which meets two basic criteria. First, it should not be overly elaborate. Biblical sense is usually part of more complex hermeneutical or theological models, so its definition ought not to be unnecessarily complicated in order to avoid the theoretical proliferation of concepts. Secondly, our theory of biblical sense should be applicable to different secular and religious contexts. Hence such a theory should be based upon the above narrative communication model, and it ought not to increase external interpretive factors. If a particular context demands a further level of the validation of meaning, as is the case in most religious communities, then the chosen theory of sense should be flexible enough to add such a level.

In this paper, I shall, first, introduce Eric D. Hirsch’s distinction between meaning and significance. I will point to the main problem which his theory creates in biblical exegesis, and suggest its refinement in the light of Umberto Eco’s concept of intentio operis. Then, and very briefly, I would like to look at the meaning and significance of the biblical passage which I have chosen to exemplify my theoretical discussion, and which is Gen. 21.1-7. Since the topic of our discussion revolves around the concept of the literal sense, I will suggest its tentative definition, but, at the same time, I will raise some objections to that concept.

Eric D. Hirsch expounded the distinction between meaning and significance in two of his books: Validity in Interpretation and The Aims of Interpretation. Hirsch defends the possibility of achieving hermeneutical knowledge, as well as the stability and determinacy of meaning. The tool with the aid of which he makes his defence is the just-mentioned distinction. Hirsch is right in saying that ‘if criticism is to be objective in any significant sense, it must be founded on a self-critical construction of textual meaning, which is to say, on objective interpretation’. He thus rightly claims that a failure to achieve an objective interpretation of a given text leads ineluctably to the fiasco of our critical efforts. Hirsch distinguishes between interpretation and criticism, and calls the object of interpretation the

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meaning of the text, whereas the proper object of criticism is the text’s significance. He defines meaning and significance in the following way:

*Meaning* is that which is represented by a text; it is what the author meant by his use of a particular sign sequence; it is what the signs represent. *Significance*, on the other hand, names a relationship between that meaning and a person, or a conception, or a situation, or indeed anything imaginable... Significance always implies a relationship, and one constant, unchanging pole of that relationship is what the text means.

Hirsch discusses in detail different aspects of the distinction between meaning and significance, but the core of his argument always remains the same. The meaning of the text results from its semantic value, but it cannot be discovered without recourse to its author. In turn, the text’s significance is always a function of its meaning. It seems that Hirsch’s categories provide us with a relatively safe tool for interpretation. After all, he is well aware of the limitations of his own theory when he states: ‘For most of my notions I disclaim any originality... If I display any argumentative intent, it is not, therefore, against the analytical movement, which I approve, but only against certain modern theories which hamper the establishment of normative principles in interpretation...’

Nevertheless, the main problem concerning Hirsch’s theory is that the above definition of meaning is based upon the notion of the author (‘it is what the author meant’). Not only is the concept of the author hardly applicable to many biblical texts, but we also have non-authored texts, or, strictly speaking, collections, such as legal codices, proverbs, and sayings. Hirsch is aware of this limitation, and says that, in order to achieve interpretive accuracy, we are obliged to date anonymous texts as precisely as possible, and to recreate ‘the cultural and personal attitudes the author might be expected to bring to bear in specifying his verbal meanings’. As John Barton reminds us, the historical-critical method is an indispensable tool for doing that. Historical-critical scholarship is preoccupied with the original meaning of biblical passages, places them in their original contexts, and helps us

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7 Hirsch, *Validity* 211, supra, n. 6.
8 Hirsch, *Validity* 8, supra, n. 6.
determine what their authors might have meant. As a result, the meaning of a biblical text can be determined by applying the tools of the historical-critical method to that text. However, as I will show later, the historical method actually does a bit more. It helps discover the text’s meaning, but it also throws light on some aspects of that text’s significance. Yet ‘neither inclusion in a literary canon, nor inclusion in the biblical canon, actually changes the meaning of a text’, writes Barton; ‘what it does is to declare that the text, in its original meaning, is a classic, which still has power to speak now, and always will have’. This ‘power to speak now’ is the text’s significance. In consequence, the meaning of a biblical passage, studied in isolation from any broader context, is usually different from its significance, which the passage acquires through relating it to any context different from the original one.

Having said this, we see that the original meaning of biblical texts still remains closely linked to the authorial intention: instead of claiming adamantly that we know what the author meant, we now talk cautiously about the ‘attitudes the author might be expected to bring’, and what the author might have meant. Is this cautious approach safe enough to prevent us from falling into the trap of the intentional fallacy, which is ‘the error of criticizing and judging a work of literature by attempting to assess what the writer’s intention was and whether or not he has fulfilled it rather than concentrating on the work itself’? I believe that it is not, and we should seek a further refinement of Hirsch’s categories.

Since, in the case of the Bible, we often deal with anonymous texts, and, as a result, their authors and redactors evade our critical eyes, it appears that the definition of meaning

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16 Paul Ricoeur gives a clear reason for this in Essays on Biblical Interpretation (Philadelphia: Fortress P, 1980) 99: ‘We underestimate the phenomenon of writing if we reduce it to the simple material fixation of living speech. Writing stands in a specific relation to what is said. It produces a form of discourse that is immediately autonomous with regard to its author’s intention’. To put it another way, the author, who is a user of linguistic signs, and a creator of textual reality, discovers in the end that as soon as signs become fixated in a written form, they begin an existence which is, to a great extent, independent of their creator.
should be based upon the notion of the text. What is more, the distinction between meaning, which relates to the text’s original context, and significance, which reflects its subsequent reception, should be safeguarded in order to preserve the distance between the original and the modern reception of the text.

Hence the remark made by Eco about modern literature applies to our case: ‘The private life of the empirical authors is in a certain respect more unfathomable than their texts. Between the mysterious history of a textual production and the uncontrollable drift of its future readings, the text qua text still represents a comfortable presence, the point to which we can stick’. Eco underlines that a quest for the authorial intention is very difficult and often irrelevant to the interpretive process, and, instead, he introduces the concept of *intentio operis* (*intention of the text*), which is related to and contrasted with *intentio auctoris* and *intentio lectoris*.18

Eco introduces his theory in two clear steps. First, he states that *intentio operis* is not given directly, but the reader must always infer it from textual data: ‘since the intention of the text is basically to produce a model reader able to make conjectures about it, the initiative of the model reader consists in figuring out a model author that is not the empirical one and that, in the end, coincides with the intention of the text’. For Eco, the model reader is a ‘sort of ideal type whom the text not only foresees as a collaborator but also tries to create’. In turn, the model author is a voice ‘manifested as a narrative strategy, as a set of instructions which is given to us step by step and which we have to follow when we decide to act as the model reader’. As we can see, in such a case, we hardly need to take the real author’s intention into consideration.22

18 Eco, *Interpretation* 25, supra, n. 17. These three concepts explain the ‘dialectics between the rights of texts and the rights of their interpreters’. Eco adds in *The Limits of Interpretation* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1990) 6 that ‘in the course of the last few decades, the rights of the interpreters have been overstressed’.
19 Eco, *Interpretation* 64, supra, n. 17.
Yet, secondly and importantly, there are cases when the real author plays a certain role in the interpretive process. Taking one of William Wordsworth’s poems as an example, Eco stresses that ‘to interpret Wordsworth’s text I must respect his cultural and linguistic background’. Only in this way can we properly understand Wordsworth’s famous poem about golden daffodils which he saw beside a lake:

The waves beside them danced; but they
Out-did the sparkling waves in glee:
A poet could not but be gay,
In such a jocund company

Since we know very well in which way certain words were used at the beginning of the 19th century, we rightly guess that Wordsworth could not speak in this poem about his sexual preferences. What is important, however, is that, even in this case, Eco refrains from talking about the authorial intention, but focuses on the author’s cultural and linguistic background, and, in the case of anonymous works, we may actually speak about the linguistic and cultural background of a particular literary work.

How should we then understand the meaning of biblical texts in the light of the above discussion? As I see it, the meaning of a text is its intention, which is discovered by the reader in the conjectural and circular process of interaction between a model reader and a model author, and which respects the linguistic and cultural background of its creation.

Within that linguistic and cultural background there are two factors of paramount importance. First, we must understand the meaning of words and phrases in their original setting.

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23 Eco, Interpretation 69, supra, n. 17.
26 Eco’s theory is not devoid of philosophical problems, as, indeed, is any theory of meaning. In her review of The Limits of Interpretation, Mieke Bal criticizes Eco for a ‘casual use of key concepts’, and says that the ‘intention operis’ is not an intention at all, but an interpretation, personified in an image of subjective agency that is projected, ultimately and inevitably, upon the author (‘The Predicament of Semiotics,’ in Poetics Today 13.3 (1992) 543-52, here 547). Bal is right in saying that only a person can have a ‘real’ intention, and so intention operis cannot be called intention in the proper sense of the word. However, I believe that Eco’s approach to the problem, despite its deficiencies, remains a successful attempt to free the meaning of the text from the authorial intention, and, for this reason, I can accept it here.
Secondly, we must correctly identify the literary genre of the text we analyse.\footnote{27} When that original background is removed and replaced by a different context, i.e. ‘another mind, another era, a wider subject matter, an alien system of values, and so on’\footnote{28}, we arrive at the text’s significance. What is important, however, is that both meaning and significance are closely related to \textit{intentio operis}. If we put the emphasis in our critical praxis on \textit{intentio lectoris}, we no longer, according to Eco, interpret the text but we use it.\footnote{29}

Certainly, this is not as easy as it sounds. The process of discovering the meaning of the text is not always straightforward. At times we may arrive at a number of possible meanings, and we have to choose which of them best applies to the text. Paul Ricoeur believes that this can be achieved through the procedure of validation. He states:

As concerns the procedures of validation by which we test our guesses, I agree with Hirsch that they are closer to a logic of probability than to a logic of empirical verification. To show that an interpretation is more probable in the light of what is known is something other than showing that a conclusion is true. In this sense, validation is not verification. Validation is an argumentative discipline comparable to the juridical procedures of legal interpretation.\footnote{30}

To put it another way, Ricoeur invites us to an intelligent debate over the various cognitive levels which we can distinguish in the text.\footnote{31} What should the reader do when the debate over the text’s diverse meanings does not bring positive results? According to Ricoeur, the reader must make a \textit{wager}.\footnote{32} Loretta Dornisch explains: ‘When interpretations are in conflict even

\begin{itemize}
\item \footnote{27} It is my intention to dissociate the definition of meaning from the concepts of the original author and original audience. In the case of the Hebrew Bible, the concept of the original author is highly elusive, and an attempt to identify the original audience is also hypothetical. I must add that the above definition of meaning draws upon Barton’s discussion of the plain sense in \textit{The Nature of Biblical Criticism} 101-116, supra, n. 14.
\item \footnote{28} Hirsch, \textit{The Aims} 2-3, supra, n. 9.
\item \footnote{29} Eco, \textit{The Limits} 57-58, supra, n. 18.
\item \footnote{31} Ricoeur strongly believes that some readings are better than others. Eco supports the same approach to the interpretation of texts, and calls it a ‘moderate standpoint’: ‘I shall claim that a theory of interpretation – even when it assumes that texts are open to multiple readings – must also assume that it is possible to reach an agreement, if not about the meanings that a text encourages, at least about those that a text discourages’ (in \textit{The Limits} 45, supra, n. 18).
\item \footnote{32} Robert Detweiler and Vernon K. Robbins (‘From New Criticism to Poststructuralism: Twentieth-Century Hermeneutics,’ in \textit{Reading the Text: Biblical Criticism and Literary Theory} (ed. S. Prickett; Oxford: Blackwell, 1991) 225-80, here 270) state:
\end{itemize}
after the application of the norms of truth, one must then make a commitment, wager that one interpretation will give more meaning than another; one must profess a faith’ (15-16).  

What is then, in brief, the meaning of our narrative Gen. 21.1-7? When we read this text, we act as the model reader, and we encounter a ‘textual voice’ which speaks to us, and leads us while we read. We pay attention to the meaning of the words in their original setting, and, in this sense, our critical enterprise has a historical character.  

First and foremost, the narrative contains the fulfilment of the promise of a child given to Abraham and Sarah by

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_The Symbolism of Evil_ concludes with Ricoeur’s widely circulated essay, ‘The Symbol Gives Rise to Thought’, in which he argues the possibility of overcoming the impasse of the hermeneutical cycle (one must believe in order to understand but understand in order to believe) by his famous wager of faith. Rather than attempting objective analysis, one needs to recognize one’s implication in the interpretive process, take a position and work it through in the expectation that it will produce ‘goodness’ (270).

As Mark I. Wallace rightly observes, readers cannot have ‘empirical and rational certitude’ about what they discover through the mediation of biblical texts. The only attitude which they can assume in such circumstances is taking risks and hoping that the wager they are making make will win the eternal prize (see Mark I. Wallace, ‘Can God Be Named without Being Known? The Problem of Revelation in Thiemann, Ogden, and Ricoeur,’ in _Journal of the American Academy of Religion_ 59.2 (1991) 281-308, here 301-02). Wallace also comments: ‘A person’s religious wager becomes her destiny as a moral subject: by taking the risk of becoming assimilated into the worlds of the biblical texts, one verifies the claim that a scripturally refigured self is the crown of a life well lived in relation to self and others’ (Mark I. Wallace, ‘From Phenomenology to Scripture? Paul Ricoeur’s Hermeneutical Philosophy of Religion,’ in _Modern Theology_ 16.3 (2000) 301-13, here 302).

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33 Interestingly, T. S. Eliot’s views about literary criticism seem important in this context. Eliot emphasizes that ‘literary criticism . . . is an instinctive activity of the civilized mind’ (T. S. Eliot, ‘To Criticize the Critic,’ in _To Criticize the Critic: And Other Writings_ (London: Faber and Faber, 1988) 11-26, here 19. As a result, our critical practice should be far removed from those schools of literary criticism which demand that criticism should be performed in a manner similar to science (such as certain types of structuralism, to give an example). We must remember that a good analysis cannot consist in a mechanical application of any system or classification, but in a thorough and sensitive search of the most significant literary dimensions and features of a work. Thus the instinctive, or intuitive, approach to literary work is not subjective, informal, or imperfect; on the contrary, it is fully legitimate and highly commendable. What is more, every critic, and so every biblical critic, is invited to make a double effort: first, he or she should ensure that the process of critical evaluation is carried out according to the highest possible standards of objectivity; and, secondly, criticism is not to be practised in isolation, because the presence and work of other critics create an adequate environment for the exchange of ideas and searching for truth (see T. S. Eliot, ‘The Function of Criticism,’ in _Selected Essays_ (London: Faber and Faber, 1999) 23-34, here 25).

God. The first verse introduces this theme: ‘The Lord visited Sarah according to what he had said, and he did to Sarah as he had promised’. Thus the message conveyed by the narrative is about God’s faithfulness aiming at the preservation of Abraham’s line. God’s action is miraculous: Sarah becomes a mother ‘in her husband’s old age’ (v 2). However, it should be noted that even though, at first glance, Abraham and Sarah are the main characters of the story, its meaning points, first of all, to God. God is mentioned in half of the verses of the narrative (1, 2, 4, and 6: once as yhwh, three times as elohim), and he is the real main character, whereas Abraham and Sarah are only the beneficiaries of his graciousness.

The interpretation which emphasizes the role played by God in the story is reinforced when we take into consideration the genre of Gen. 21.1-7. Claus Westermann claims that we should call the narratives in Gen. 12-36 ‘patriarchal stories’ or ‘narratives about Israel’s ancestors’. However, if we agree with Westermann’s claim that ‘the question whether the event narrated is historical or not is not pertinent to the understanding of reality in these narratives, because they are told among people for whom this alternative did not yet exist’ (46), we see that the emphasis put on the person of God in the story is not without justification.

Now, one might think that it all sounds very simple, and establishing the meaning of a text is child’s play. In fact, it is a relatively uncomplicated task in the case of our model passage. When we move to chapter 22 of Genesis, or to the prophetic oracles of Isaiah, we see that the interpretive task is far from being easy. What makes it difficult are precisely the two

35 All quotations from Genesis are my own translation.
36 Claus Westermann, Genesis 12-36: A Continental Commentary (Minneapolis: Fortress P, 1995) 50. According to Westermann, in all probability, the characters of the patriarchal stories were real people, and some of the most important events which shaped their lives, and which are recorded in Gen. 12-36, really happened; but to say more than that would be to give free rein to imagination.
37 Westermann, Genesis 46, supra, n. 36. This view is supported by Prickett and Barnes: ‘Most critics would now accept that our categories of history, myth, and fiction are all constructs by which we attempt to make sense of our past. But to describe the Bible in any of these terms is highly misleading. It belongs, as we have seen, to a period when such essentially modern distinctions did not and could not yet exist; and in attempting to apply such models to it, we should always be conscious of what we lose in our reading of the original’ (Stephen Prickett and Robert Barnes, The Bible (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1991) 107). See also James Barr’s distinction between story and history (James Barr, The Scope and Authority of the Bible (London: SCM Press, 2002) 1-17).
38 John J. Collins rightly observes: ‘The authors and compilers of Genesis may have had various intentions; it is not apparent that providing an accurate record of the past ranked high among them’ (John J. Collins, The Bible after Babel: Historical Criticism in a Postmodern Age (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2005) 38).
factors mentioned before. We sometimes have difficulty establishing the original meaning of words, and we may mistake the text’s genre for something else.

I have said before that the historical method helps us discover the meaning of biblical texts, but it actually does much more. It opens before our critical eyes the text’s original significance. This kind of significance depends, of course, on the particular historical context in which we place our text. In our case, the passage contains the theme of the promise of posterity, and it appears that David J. A. Clines rightly situates that in its historical exilic (or early post-exilic) context: ‘To the Jewish exiles, as descendants of Abraham, the divine promises are spoken no less directly than to their forefather’.\(^{39}\) Hence the fulfilment of the promise given to Abraham in Gen. 21.1-7, may have been interpreted by the exiles as the confirmation of their future successful restoration of the ancient traditions destroyed by the fall of Jerusalem. We hear about it in Deutero-Isaiah: ‘Hearken to me, you who pursue deliverance, you who seek the LORD; look to the rock from which you were hewn, and to the quarry from which you were digged. Look to Abraham your father and to Sarah who bore you; for when he was but one I called him, and I blessed him and made him many’ (51.1-2, RSV translation).\(^{40}\)

For John D. Watts, this Isaian passage is set in Jerusalem, shortly before the Temple was rebuilt, and it encourages the Judaeans to trust the promise given to Abraham.\(^{41}\) The blessing bestowed on Abraham will be now poured upon Abraham’s progeny. The official Temple cult will be reinstated, and God in his providential care will provide everything which is needed for its restoration. The strangers who inhabit Jerusalem, called by Ezra ‘the adversaries of Judah and Benjamin’ (4.1, RSV), and who prevent the Jews from finishing the work, should be removed from power. This is an important sense of our passage, which is reconstructed with the aid of the historical method, but which must be called properly its \textit{original significance}. We can see that this sense of the text cannot be easily discovered by a reader whose knowledge of the post-exilic Persian period is limited. Neither can it become apparent without recourse to the broader literary context of our passage. We must read Gen. 21.1-7 in the light of Isa. 51.1-2 and other biblical text to understand the significance of the passage for its first readers or listeners.

\(^{39}\) David J. A. Clines, \textit{The Theme of the Pentateuch} (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic P, 2001) 105.

\(^{40}\) Van Seters points to a ‘very close relationship’ between the Yahwist and Deutero-Isaiah (John Van Seters, \textit{Abraham in History and Tradition} (New Haven: Yale UP, 1975) 311).

The above interpretation is only conjectural, and we might suggest other exilic and post-exilic contexts which would provide a setting for Gen. 21.1-7. Nevertheless, in any chosen period of the exilic and post-exilic history of Israel, the passage under discussion could provide encouragement for the Jews who lost the Temple and were struggling to rebuild their religious and national identity. A narrative about the faithful and caring God, who, in the remote patriarchal period, had chosen Abraham and Isaac, and blessed them, and who had also extended his kindness to other peoples, was destined to arouse faith and enthusiasm for the new work that was to be done.

Certainly, we can speak of many different levels of the text’s significance resulting from relating its meaning to different contexts. First, as I said before, the text acquires its significance as a part of the biblical canon, and canonical criticism can be helpful in establishing new levels of significance of biblical texts. Apart from the canonical context, the narrative’s significance has been changing through the centuries depending on its readers, and on various cultural circumstances. The ages of patristic and mediaeval exegesis provide us with numerous examples. To give only one example, Chrysostom interprets ‘Sarah’s giving birth in her old age . . . as a figure of the Church’, and points out that Abraham’s ‘remarkable obedience and gratitude along with God’s ineffable care and considerateness provide material for moral reflection’. Among the Jewish mediaeval exegetes, Rashi quotes a Midrashic interpretation (Gen. Rab. 53:8), and comments on v 6: ‘Many barren women were remembered together with her, many sick were healed in that day, many prayers were answered with hers and there was great rejoicing in the world’.

Other levels of significance are, of course, established by modern readers of our model passage. By way of illustration, Paul Ricoeur’s concept of the refiguration of monumental time through a different temporal orientation introduced in his *Time and Narrative* provides

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42 Even if, to some extent, the canonical approach broadens a theological perspective offered by other approaches, it is difficult to regard its own contribution as really significant and irreplaceable. Barr correctly states: ‘In some books only thin results emerge from the canonical reading: in the important book of Genesis, for instance, really rather little’ (James Barr, ‘Childs’ *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture*, *JSOT* 16 (1980) 12-23, here 17). However, a great value of canonical criticism, which undoubtedly remains despite the above criticism, and which should be seriously taken into consideration, is its call to interpret every biblical passage in the light of the whole of Scripture.


44 *Pentateuch with Targum Onkelos, Haphtaroth and Rashi’s Commentary* (eds. M. Rosenbaum and A. M. Silbermann; *Genesis*, vol. 1; Jerusalem: The Silberman Family, 1929) 88.
us with another way of understanding the narrative. In Gen. 21.1-7, the intimidating reality of monumental time faced by all human beings is tamed by a different temporal orientation. The refiguration begins in vv 1-2, when Sarah conceives and gives birth to a son, and the monumental time perceived by the characters is transformed by God’s initiative and action. God makes human perception of time meaningful. Abraham’s and Sarah’s time is ‘humanized’ because the long-awaited promise is finally fulfilled.

In view of that, we can see that the meaning of the pericope is subsequently complemented by many layers of significance. We would not say that, on the most basic level, Gen. 21.1-7 portrays Sarah’s giving birth as a figure of the Church, or that the narrative deals with the tension between monumental time and human time. However, when we relate the meaning of the passage to a broader context, either historical or modern, we arrive at various dimensions of its significance, which are all potentially present in the text, but need a particular context to be actualized.

How is this whole discussion related to our main topic which is the literal sense? I would like to argue that the concept of the literal sense as understood in the document of the PBC invites us to ask at least three questions.

First, it is not clear to what extent the definition of the literal sense extricates itself from the trap of intentionalism. The document reads: ‘The literal sense of Scripture is that which has been expressed directly by the inspired human authors’. Joseph A. Fitzmyer, in his commentary on the Commission’s document, explains that this particular wording was carefully chosen: ‘The Commission does not state that the literal sense is that which has been intended by the inspired human author; it is rather that which has been expressed by him’. However, in the next paragraph, the document continues speaking about the intention of the human author. I believe that the definition of meaning based upon the work of Hirsch and Eco avoids intentionalism to a much greater extent.

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46 We may say, after Ricoeur, that the whole Bible is a story about God’s continuous action aiming at the refiguration of meaningless monumental time through a different temporal orientation leading towards the horizon of eternity.
47 *The Biblical Commission* 120, supra, n. 2.
48 *The Biblical Commission* 120, supra, n. 2.
49 *The Biblical Commission* 121-22, supra, n. 2.
Secondly, when the document points to the fact that certain texts refer to ‘more than one level of reality’, and to the ‘dynamic aspect’ of texts, it seems that the literal sense may sometimes include a number of more basic senses. While this is often the case, would it not be more correct to discuss each of those senses separately, and use the distinction between one basic meaning and the various levels of significance? In the same way, the sense which the document describes as the spiritual can be understood as another important level of significance.

Thirdly, the document states clearly that the literal sense is already a spiritual sense regularly in the case of the New Testament, and occasionally in the case of the Old. When we take this convergence of senses into account, we can legitimately ask whether we should maintain the distinction between the literal and the spiritual sense in the case of the majority of New Testament texts. I believe that it would be more practical to speak of the basic meaning of New Testament texts (which has already a ‘spiritual’ dimension) and the spiritual significance of Old Testament texts which complement their basic meaning. In this way, in the case of the New Testament texts, we would avoid talking about a level which, in reality, does not exist.

Should we then forget about the literal sense once and for all? Not necessarily. This concept has made a long and successful career in biblical interpretation. What it needs, however, is a certain refinement. The more it is understood in terms of what I have called in this paper ‘meaning’, the better for its practical application to exegesis.

Hence I believe that the literal sense of a biblical text may be redefined as its *intentio operis*, which is discovered by the reader in the conjectural and circular process of interaction between a model reader and a model author, and which respects the linguistic and cultural background of its creation. It is established through recourse to the original meaning of its vocabulary and phraseology, and it always takes into account its literary genre. It is often discovered through the procedure of validation, and, at times, it requires making a wager when the debate over the text’s diverse meanings does not bring positive results.

When we have defined the literal sense of biblical texts in this way, we may then add to it other senses, or, as I call them, levels of significance. However, this hermeneutical operation of multiplying senses rests on the foundation of meaning, which, I believe, is a relatively stable and determinate concept. As Hirsch rightly points out, the starting point and

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50 *The Biblical Commission* 122, supra, n. 2.

51 *The Biblical Commission* 127-28, supra, n. 2.
the proper object of interpretation is always *meaning*. When we fix our attention on it, we stand a good chance of reaching a safe haven at the end of our long voyage across the sea of interpretation.