

Authorial Intent and its Relation to Interpretation

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Introduction

The debate over authorial intent is a major issue today in biblical hermeneutics. Biblical hermeneutics seeks through established principles to discover the meaning of a given text of Scripture. The question at hand is whether a passage of Scripture can have a meaning other than what the author intended in the text. This is a very important question to answer because if a text can have a meaning other than what the author intended, then another standard or set of principles is needed to determine that meaning. In other words, if meaning does not resign with what the author intended, then who?

The evangelical community is being influenced today by secular views of hermeneutics. While premodernity and modernity both shared the same goal in interpretation of recovering the meaning that the author intended, postmodernity has rejected this completely. It believes that the author is “dead.” In other words, what he purposed to communicate in the text is no longer significant or recoverable. The views of men like Hans-Georg Gadamer have resulted in a view that the author’s intent is inaccessible to the interpreter. The only way to determine meaning is thought to be a fusion of two horizons; the world of the text and the world of the reader. Interpretation is derived by the reader’s response to the text. Such influence had been a challenge to the church to refine its view as to where meaning is found.

While most conservative scholars argue for the belief that meaning is found in the intention of the author as expressed in the text (e.g. Kaiser, Geisler), the problem for many is how New Testament authors use Old Testament passages. Though this issue is reserved for another paper, it does come into play regarding how scholars understand the issue. Specifically, can the intended meaning of the author have more than one meaning? Kaiser and others argue that it cannot. Other such as S. Lewis Johnson, Elliott Johnson, William LaSor and others hold that the meaning that the authors had in mind may have a more fuller meaning in the grand scheme of God. This paper will address the issue of what is meant by authorial intent.

A Definition

Evangelical scholars who argue for the importance of authorial intent in determining meaning have been heavily influenced by E. D. Hirsch and his work, *Validity in Interpretation*. Hirsch argued that meaning resides in what the author intended by the passage, as opposed to what later readers might take it to mean.

Simply stated, authorial intent means the intention of the author as expressed in the text. The emphasis is on what the author “expressed in the text.” Authorial intent does not mean what the author “planned” in his mind, what he “purposed” to write, or what he “thought in his mind.” We cannot know these matters. It is the writings that are inspired, not the thoughts in the author’s mind (Geisler, p.230). Authorial intent can only be

determined from the text itself. This is really at the heart of hermeneutical discussion today.

Authorial intent assumes that the writers were conscious of what they wrote. In other words, they understood the meaning of what they were saying. This must be true, since if they did not, then one cannot expect their readers to have understood them. They were determined to communicate what their intended meaning and they did so by using words in relation to other words that would carry out their intention.

The Importance of Authorial Intent in Interpretation

The significance of meaning being what the author intended by what he wrote in the text is critical for doing accurate interpretation. If meaning can be other than the author's intent, then the meaning of a given text can be whatever one wants it to be. This is what is happening today in personal devotions as well as in the pulpits of churches. We are seeing significance before we see meaning. The relativism of the age has reduced meaning to personal, subjective decisions of the mind.

The importance of hermeneutics being grounded in the intended meaning of the author has no greater defender than Kaiser, who is heavily influenced by E. D. Hirsch. Hirsch stressed that meaning is that which is rooted in the text and significance is the relationship between that meaning and a person, conception or situation. Kaiser is calling the church to a hermeneutical reformation; a return to the original view of the church which stressed that meaning is expressed in the text.

Kaiser defends this understanding of meaning and significance and states,

“Only by maintaining these definitions and distinctions will Scripture be delivered from the hands of its enemies – and its friends. All our own notions of truth and principle must be set aside in favor of those the sacred writers taught if we are to be valid interpreters. In fact, the basic teaching of all of sacred theology is inseparably connected with the results of our hermeneutics; for what is theology except what Scripture teaches? And the way to ascertain what Scripture teaches is to apply the rules and principles of interpretation” (“Legitimate Hermeneutics” in *Inerrancy*, p. 119).

Authorial intent is the starting point of good hermeneutics. The authors of Scripture desired to communicate a message to the people of God and did so through the common everyday language of the day. Hermeneutics desires to recover that message intended by the author as expressed in the text.

The Relation of Authorial Intent to Exegesis and Interpretation

The goal of our interpretation is to know the meaning of the written text and to know this meaning we must know the meaning of the author as expressed in the text. Therefore we want to lead out (exegesis) the meaning of the text that the author intended. This process begins with the words that the author employed, more specifically, the relationship of the

words he used to each other. Words have no meaning in and of themselves. Words have meaning in a context, or in other words, in relationship to other words.

While the Bible is like no other book in the world, its meaning is not dependent upon a special hermeneutic. True, the author is different, the content is unique, but the words used to communicate the message were from everyday life. The original readers of the sacred text read (or heard) the words and understood them in a normal plain manner. This would have been true if reading or listening to Isaiah, Jonah, or Romans. The Lord Jesus is truly the Great Communicator, yet his words and images are from daily life. His meaning is simple; it is the significance that at times is hard to apply!

This context takes place in both an historical setting as well as a literary context. The authors of Scripture did not write in a vacuum. In regards to an historical setting, Kaiser notes,

“The meaning of words is determined, in the first place, by custom and general usage current in the times when the author wrote them. No intelligent writer deliberately departs from this *usus loquendi*, that is, the current usage that is prevalent in a particular age, without having good reason for doing so and without furnishing some explicit textual clue that he has done so” (*Toward an Exegetical Theology*, p. 106).

The thrust of determining the meaning of his words would emphasize a synchronic study of word usage.

In regards to a literary context, an author arranges his words in relationship to other words in a passage or book to communicate his intended meaning. These words are part of phrases, clauses, sentences, and paragraphs. Each of these literary units has an effect on the meaning of the text.

Therefore by a careful examination of context, both historical and literary, one begins to lead out the meaning of the text as intended by the author.

As noted above, a question that arises then is whether an author intended a more fuller meaning (*sensus plenior*) to any given passage. This will be examined more in the next paper on authorial intent and the use of the Old Testament in the New.