

The Challenge of Meaning

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I have observed recently that whenever I read a theological book, I get drowsy. Is it the author whose writing style I may not fancy, and who assumes a referent that I am woefully unfamiliar? There are some authors that make me fall asleep and others that awake me. Is it the text that is filled with verbosity and laden with words that I am unaware? Or is it me, the reader, who prefers one author over another, or who is just sleepy because of the weather?

It is in this conundrum that makes meaning seem indefinable, while posing a challenge to capture it in definitive ways. In what follows, I attempt to do so, showing that meaning is gained by the reader's grasping of authorial intent through the mediate agency of the text, while the reader gets alongside the world of the text. I explore the characteristics of meaning while interacting with the major critics of this hermeneutical challenge who forever changed the course of hermeneutics beginning in the last century. I then present a case for the priority of authorial meaning and propose a concurrence among its participants.

Characteristics of Meaning

Meaning can be understood according to aspect, including such characteristics as sense, reference, and authorial intent.¹ Sense is an attribute of meaning that refers to what the text is saying about a subject or object. Sense in a word, sentence, or paragraph refers to what is being described. It can also refer to how the word, sentence, or paragraph is used in the context of the discourse.² In speech act theory, the sense of the text is further delineated by the *locutionary* act, the assertion of the proposition, as J. L. Austin posits, or what Kevin J. Vanhoozer describes as the propositional content of the text; and its *illocutionary* force or what the text intends to accomplish in its context. Sense in a sentence is the relationship of words to each other; while sense in a paragraph is the relationship of the propositions in that paragraph, so Peter Cotterell and Max Turner explain.³

In Scripture, the sense must take into account not only the sense of the passage, but also the sense of the whole book within the canonical context. For example, the history of Jesus of Nazareth in his suffering, death, and resurrection that the two disciples talked about on the road to Emmaus is not the real sense of Luke. The sense is that Jesus of Nazareth was the prophesied Messiah, whose death the disciples were bothered about, fulfilled in exact detail the OT prophecies (Luke 24:17-27).

If the sense is what the text says about an object, the referent refers to the object of the sense. In other words, the referent of the text is the object to which the sense is referring to. It can be the person, the place, or the process to which the sense is discussed.⁴ In the parables of Jesus, the referents are usually identified. But what if there are multiple referents, such as the well-known parable of the prodigal son (Luke 15:11-32)? The apparent referent is the prodigal son at the beginning of the story. Yet the next half of the story no longer talks about him, but of

¹ Walter C. Kaiser, Jr. and Moises Silva, *An Introduction to Biblical Hermeneutics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 34-37. Kaiser follows the conceptual definition of G. B. Caird, *The Language and Imagery of the Bible* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1980), 37-61.

² Kaiser and Silva, *Biblical Hermeneutics*, 36.

³ Grant R. Osborne, *The Hermeneutical Spiral: A Comprehensive Introduction to Biblical Interpretation* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1991), 398-400.

⁴ Kaiser and Silva, *Introduction*, 34-35.

the Father and the brother. Since Luke relates the parable against the context of the complaint against Jesus that He goes and eats with sinners and the related parable of the joy of God over one sinner who repents, I would assert that the parable of the prodigal son is really the parable of the gracious Father—the main referent—who demonstrated His grand generosity to his prodigal son, which climaxed with the protests of the ungracious brother.

Another facet of meaning is authorial intent. By this I mean the intent of the author as he used and expressed his words in the text. It is possible to get the sense of authorial intent in the sense of the text itself. In the next section, I further expand in detail the core propositions of this view, while exploring the critical views of probably the most influential voices of meaning in philosophical hermeneutics with regard to the author, text, and reader.

Critics of Meaning

In asserting the meaning of the *author*, E. D. Hirsch Jr. affirms both the intentionality of the author and objectivity of interpretation. “Meaning,” Hirsch asserts, is “an affair of consciousness, not of words.”⁵ It is the author, not words, who wills something as an act of consciousness. There is the distinction between the act of consciousness and the object of consciousness. The act of consciousness is intention about something. The object of consciousness is something to which the act of consciousness aims. It is not so much about the author trying to do something (psychological intention), but the author intending to convey it by a sequence of words or linguistic signs (authorial intention). Authorial intention, then, becomes the basis of meaning, which while remaining constant over time, can be gained by knowing the object of the intention. Words do not mean anything until the author consciously wants to express something by the words. Better said, meaning is the fixed sense intended by the author in the text. The goal of interpretation therefore is for the reader to share the meaning of the author—“to ‘think’ the same ‘object’ as the author.”⁶

Contra, Hans-Georg Gadamer, who thinks that it is impossible to ascertain the author’s meaning, because every reader has his own “prejudice” or pre-understanding of the text, which he carries with him into the text. There is value in prejudice however, because they move the interpreter to pursue the task of understanding.⁷ These pre-understandings are connected to the cultural horizon of the reader. The subject matter of the text determines the meaning, not the author. The author is out of the picture, but only the *text*.

Now the text is also a horizon, for it is linked to the cultural pre-understanding of the past. It must be noted that the horizon of the text is also the intention of the text. But the horizon of the text, being based on the past, cannot be reproduced by the horizon of the present. Since the horizon of the text cannot be understood by the horizon of the reader, then there must be a “fusion of horizons” in order to produce understanding, which in turn becomes the third horizon.⁸ In this paradigm, the meaning of the text is produced by the participation of both the text and the reader.

Thus, in what appears to be an existential understanding of the text, meaning is not in the text per se, but possible only in the act of reading it.⁹ The result is not one interpretation, but many, out of many prejudices that the readers bring into the text. Nonetheless, though there are

⁵ E. D. Hirsch, *Validity in Interpretation* (New Haven: Yale University, 1967), 4.

⁶ Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning in This Text?* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998), 74-76.

⁷ Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (trans. Garret Barden and John Cumming; New York: Continuum, 1975), 235-258.

⁸ Gadamer, *Truth*, 258; Kaiser and Silva, *Introduction*, 29.

⁹ Vanhoozer, *Is There*, 107.

many interpretations out of many fusions, the reader should be guided by the intention of the text, and apply it accordingly, for as Gadamer argues, “it is still the same text presenting itself to us in different ways.”¹⁰

Similarly, though in new conceptual terms in promoting text-centered meaning, Paul Ricoeur agrees with Gadamer and Karl Barth about the primacy of the subject matter of the text in interpretation.¹¹ He also avers that the text is disconnected from authorial intent. “With written discourse,” writes Ricoeur, “the author’s intention and the meaning of the text cease to coincide . . . What the text means now matters more than what the author meant when he wrote it.”¹² Once the text is formed, the author’s discussion, intent, and historical context become ordered and bound in the text. Since it is all now structured in the text, the author no longer owns the text, so to speak, and the text then becomes the property of the reader, and subject to his interpretations. Thus, on the level of script, the text is free from the original authorial intent, its original readers, and its original referent. Since it is free from the author, the text now has a semantic structure of its own. Being free from the original context, the text now has its own referent.¹³ Through its formal features, the text has a reference of its own. It has a sense that transcends its original situation. The sense is the “interpreter’s response to the text.” The reference is “the objective content of the text.”¹⁴ Since the text has its own referent, there is now the *world* of the text.¹⁵ This world transcends the original world of the intent and historical-cultural context of the author. Meaning therefore is to be found, not in the original authorial intent, or to the sum of the linguistic parts of the text, but to the reference of the text—the world, thing, issue, or subject matter of the text. “The world of the text,” Ricoeur explains, “designates the reference of the work of discourse, not what is said, but about what it is said. Hence the issue of the text is the object of hermeneutics. And the issue of the text is the world the text unfolds before itself.”¹⁶

Thus, rather than seek meaning *behind* the text, the reader should now stand in *front* of the text, uncover the central ideas of the text, and let the “world in front” of the text control his interpretation, not the “world behind” the text, as with the historical-critical method.¹⁷ The history of the text and the history of the reader can now come together in a fusion. After this fusion of horizon, the task of the reader then is to see the sense of the text and its referent.¹⁸ Thus far is the gist of the text-centered meaning of Ricoeur.

From the meaning of the author, we swing to the far end of the pendulum—the meaning of the *reader*. In this reader-oriented view, meaning is not in the text, but in the reader who creates it. According to Edgar V. McKnight, it “views literature in terms of readers and their values, attitudes, and responses. This supplements and relativizes views of literature in terms of

¹⁰ Gadamer, *Truth*, 359.

¹¹ Mark I. Wallace, “The World of the Text: Theological Hermeneutics in the Thought of Karl Barth and Paul Ricoeur,” *USQR* 41/1 (1986). Cited August 12, 2009. Online: <http://search.atlaonline.com/pls/eli/ec.pdfapp.showpdf?myaid=ATLA0000967346>.

¹² Paul Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory: Discourse and the Surplus of Meaning* (Fort Worth: Texas Christian University, 1976), 29-30.

¹³ Vanhoozer, *Is There*, 107.

¹⁴ Osborne, *Hermeneutical*, 387.

¹⁵ Kaiser and Silva, *Introduction*, 83.

¹⁶ Paul Ricoeur, “Toward a Hermeneutic of the Idea of Revelation,” *Essays on Biblical Interpretation* (ed. Lewis S. Mudge; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1980), 100.

¹⁷ Ricoeur, *Interpretation*, 71-95.

¹⁸ Vanhoozer, *Is There*, 108.

the universe imitated in the work, the author, the audience, and the work itself.”¹⁹ Probably the leading view is that of Stanley E. Fish, who proffers that the reading strategies or what he calls, “interpretive strategies,” are “the shape of reading and because they are the shape of reading, they give texts their shape, making them rather than, as is usually assumed, arising from them.”²⁰ However, not all reader-response critics totally discount the role of the author or text. In what may sound like an inconsistent swing at worst or a paradox at best from the purely reader-oriented reading, McKnight argues that a literary approach to the Bible requires “a view of the text as both an ancient document with original meaning and a living message with contemporary significance.”²¹

At one level, the reader utilizes codes to the text to make sense of it, thereby making the reader the subject and the text the *object*. To make the reader the object, one way is to deny “the enabling conditions of biblical texts” such as historical sources of the biblical text, as the causes and explanations of those texts, but as “devises” that give patterns of meaning to the reader. Another strategy is for the reader to stand in front of the text and “reconceptualize” and “relativize” the historical and sociological conditions behind the text as “effects” rather than the causes. Thus, “the meanings behind the text and in front of the text coalesce.”²² The goal then is for the reader to create “worlds of the text,” though not as Ricoeur would have envisioned it, for his concern is to stand in front of the issue or subject matter of the text, not to recreate it. Since texts only represent characters and events, it is indeterminate, McKnight argues. The reader may then make the represented characters and events less indeterminate “by viewing the objects and their relationships from different perspectives and by supplying details omitted by the text.”²³

As McKnight concludes, readers make sense of the Bible “in the light of their world by means of methods supplied and validated by that world.” When the code of the natural language, other literary codes, the historical-sociological conditions of the text, the understanding of Bible’s function, and “the symbolic competence of the reader” fit together, then meaning takes place.²⁴

Conserving Authorial Meaning

W. K. Wimsatt and Monroe Beardsley object to the view that authorial intent can be present in the text. How the author used the words matter more than what the author intended with those words. For them, “meaning could be established only by seeing how the words were actually used—not by discovering what the author would have liked the words to mean.”²⁵ Moises Silva would agree, saying that the text “has a life of its own. . . . subject to being understood in ways different from those intended by the author.”²⁶ However, he stresses that while verifying authorial intent is not the *only* legitimate way, “such a task is *always* legitimate and indeed must continue to function as an essential goal.”²⁷ I might add that as the goal of every

¹⁹ Edgar V. McKnight, *Post-Modern Use of the Bible: The Emergence of Reader-Oriented Criticism* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1988), 15.

²⁰ Stanley E. Fish, “Interpreting the Variorum,” *Reader-Response Criticism* (ed. Jane P. Thompkins; Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University, 1980), 13.

²¹ McKnight, *Post-Modern*, 107.

²² McKnight, *Post-Modern*, 174-176.

²³ McKnight, *Post-Modern*, 258.

²⁴ McKnight, *Post-Modern*, 263.

²⁵ Vanhoozer, *Is There*, 82.

²⁶ Kaiser and Silva, *Biblical*, 239.

²⁷ Kaiser and Silva, *Biblical*, 246.

reader, discerning authorial intent is the starting point of finding meaning in the text. For when the author of the text wrote the words, what he was doing in and with those words conveyed his intent with it, or what Vanhoozer describes as intention “enacted and embodied in the text.”²⁸ The words in the text are the result of such intentional action of the author. The author wrote the text at a cultural-historical point; thus, we are to read it according to its cultural-historical context. That it is written in historical stone, as it were, makes it possible to interpret the text on that stone. Thus, to know the meaning of the text and to make our reading of it a valid one, we need to go to the text and find out how the author transmits his will in the words he chose in the text; for it is in the text that the author acted out his intent.

What if it produces a myriad of interpretations? We could verify how each interpretation jibes with the data of the text; for we can know authorial intent only as far as the text can tell us about it, as P. D. Juhl argues. In a plethora of interpretations, then, we are to compare them with internal and external data and test them on the basis of adequacy, coherence, and comprehensiveness, and select the one that presents the meaning according to a syntactical-theological study of the text and according to its rules of language and history.²⁹

What if the author is absent physically? In the absence of the author, we must search for the clues in the context of the text, as Kaiser asserts, for the context provides it.³⁰ “The context,” Silva points out, “does not merely help us understand meaning; it virtually *makes* meaning.”³¹

This is not to say that the reader has no role whatsoever in the interpretive process, which role I explain in the next section. Yet I submit that to begin with the author, though not end with him alone, is to begin with the source of the text, and therefore, to engage with the intent of that author which is to be found in the text first of all. I join Hirsch in saying: “To banish the original author as the determiner of meaning” is “to reject the only compelling normative principle that could lend validity to an interpretation.”³²

Concurrence of Meaning

The unanswered question remains as to how we can resolve my problem of sleepiness during the reading process. Admittedly, my personal experience is but a poor analogy of whether meaning can be found in the author, the text, or the reader. Actually, meaning is to be found, not in only one party, but in the triad of participants. I join Osborne in calling for what he calls a “trialogue” that should happen between the three participants of meaning—the author, text, and reader.³³ The text is first of all the invention of the author. The author has written it with the intended reader in mind, using words as signs loaded with sense, reference, and intention, and meant for it to be grasped by the reader. A case in point is Paul, who, realizing that the Corinthians may have misunderstood his previous letter, clarified his message once again (1 Cor. 5:9-10). Indirectly is Christ, who explained to the two disciples on the way to Emmaus, the meaning of all the OT prophecies concerning Him, which they somehow failed to grasp. This much is certain—authorial intent weighs heavily on the text.

The text now “speaks” to the reader, guiding him or her, giving insights into the world of its language, and providing clues in its context. Even in the absence of the author, in areas where clarity is foggy, there is still the lighthouse of intention that he has left in the context of the text.

²⁸ Vanhoozer, *Is There*, 262.

²⁹ Osborne, *Hermeneutical*, 394-395, 415.

³⁰ Kaiser and Silva, *Biblical*, 38

³¹ Moises Silva, *Biblical Words and Their Meaning: An Introduction to Lexical Semantics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1983), 130.

³² Hirsch, *Validity*, 4-5.

³³ Osborne, *Hermeneutical*, 411.

It is now left to the reader to be committed to the text, esp. the biblical text, because he values it. Because he is committed to the text, coming to it with his pre-understandings is expected and welcomed. Yet in the interest of letting the text speak for itself, the reader may suspend his prejudice meanwhile, although in reality that might be unrealistic. Perhaps an effective way of identifying the reader's pre-understanding is distinguishing what the text meant from what it means today. The reader should then interact with the text, wrestling with its language, locating the historical-cultural indications, and finally aligning herself or himself with the propositional content of the text in his or her own context, in order to discern its significance to his or her historical moment.

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