

# Hermeneutics

## Week 6 – The Source of and Limits to Meaning

**Introduction:** We briefly covered this idea in the first week, but we must come to terms with the fact that the fight for meaning is one of the most important aspects of life. So, especially when it comes to the Bible, what you determine to be the source and limits of meaning will greatly affect your understanding of and reliance on Scripture.

### I. The importance of meaning

1. Obviously, meaning is something we take rather seriously.
  - A. As we look at different facets, we assume meaning into everything. Sometimes we assume it too far.
  - B. As people, we assume meaning into life. (Granted, our lives do have meaning, but even atheists will assume they have a purpose)
  - C. We often assume a motive behind the actions of our loved ones or those we don't like and let that color what was actually done.
  - D. That said, there is an automatic assumption that words have meanings and even particular meanings so that we can functionally understand such things logically. (That also is the basis for claiming someone told a lie, that words mean something.)
2. Over the last several weeks, we have talked about the different aspects and pieces we can focus on in order to rightly understand a text's meaning.
  - A. **Step 1:** Grasp the text in their town. What did the text mean to the original audience?
  - B. **Step 2:** Measure the width of the river to cross. What are the differences between the biblical audience and us?
  - C. **Step 3:** Cross the principizing bridge. What is the theological principle in this text?
  - D. **Step 4:** Consult the biblical map. How does this theological principle fit with the rest of the Bible?
  - E. **Step 5:** Grasp the text in our town. How should individual Christians today live out the theological principles?<sup>1</sup>
3. Where does meaning come from? Consensus, feelings, personal belief, or a creator.

### II. Reader Response

1. This approach prioritizes the role of hearers and readers as active participants, standing in contrast to earlier interpretive models that treated texts as containers of stable, unchanging information.<sup>2</sup>
2. The approach divides into two distinct camps. The moderate version holds that readers complete a text's meaning by filling in narrative gaps and imagining unstated details, though the text itself constrains this creative work. By contrast, radical reader-

<sup>1</sup> J. Scott Duvall and J. Daniel Hays, *Grasping God's Word: A Hands-On Approach to Reading, Interpreting, and Applying the Bible*, Fourth Edition (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Academic, 2020), 199.

<sup>2</sup> Vern S. Poythress, *God Centered Biblical Interpretation* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 1999), 190.

response critics resist any notion of determinate or absolute meaning, claiming readers possess full control to generate a text's significance.<sup>3</sup>

3. This form of analysis might reconstruct the experience of encountering a passage for the first time, preventing later information from influencing earlier understanding.<sup>4</sup>
4. However, critics raise substantial concerns. Without authorial authority to correct misreadings, human communication breaks down; there must be ways to distinguish more appropriate interpretations from less appropriate ones in any communicative exchange.<sup>4</sup> Reader-response theory struggles to explain interpretive conversions—instances where readers fundamentally change their understanding through encountering texts that challenge their inherited interpretive communities<sup>5</sup>
5. The question at the heart of Reader Response is: *What does this mean to me?*
6. Your book gave the example of you finding a random love letter where you don't know the author or recipient, so you make the words mean what you claim them to mean. You make us the backstory and change the definitions of the words.
7. The better comparison might be to an avant-garde painting.



<sup>3</sup> David Seal, "Reader-Response Theory," in *The Lexham Bible Dictionary*, ed. John D. Barry et al. (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2016).

<sup>4</sup> William W. Klein, Craig L. Blomberg, and Robert L. Hubbard Jr., *Introduction to Biblical Interpretation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2017), 129.

<sup>5</sup> Craig L. Blomberg, *The Historical Reliability of the Gospels* (Downers Grove, IL; Nottingham, England: IVP Academic: An Imprint of InterVarsity Press; Apollos, 2007), 94–95.

### III. Authorial Meaning

1. Meaning comes from the creator of something the author of a writing.

A. To read the Bible, wanting to know and follow what the author says (and meant), is in itself an act of faith.

i. You assume they wrote for a reason.

ii. You assume they effectively communicated it.

iii. You assume that knowing and following it will bring blessings.

iv. Disobedience or refusing to accept what was stated shows pride and misplaced worship.

1) Look at this example in Jeremiah.

† **Jeremiah 42:1-6** – *Then all the captains of the forces, and Johanan the son of Kareah, and Jezaniah the son of Hoshaiiah, and all the people from the least even unto the greatest, came near,<sup>2</sup> And said unto Jeremiah the prophet, Let, we beseech thee, our supplication be accepted before thee, and pray for us unto the Lord thy God, even for all this remnant; (for we are left but a few of many, as thine eyes do behold us:)<sup>3</sup> That the Lord thy God may shew us the way wherein we may walk, and the thing that we may do.<sup>4</sup> Then Jeremiah the prophet said unto them, I have heard you; behold, I will pray unto the Lord your God according to your words; and it shall come to pass, that whatsoever thing the Lord shall answer you, I will declare it unto you; I will keep nothing back from you.<sup>5</sup> Then they said to Jeremiah, The Lord be a true and faithful witness between us, if we do not even according to all things for the which the Lord thy God shall send thee to us.<sup>6</sup> Whether it be good, or whether it be evil, we will obey the voice of the Lord our God, to whom we send thee; that it may be well with us, when we obey the voice of the Lord our God.*

† **Jeremiah 43:1-3** – *And it came to pass, that when Jeremiah had made an end of speaking unto all the people all the words of the Lord their God, for which the Lord their God had sent him to them, even all these words,<sup>2</sup> Then spake Azariah the son of Hoshaiiah, and Johanan the son of Kareah, and all the proud men, saying unto Jeremiah, Thou speakest falsely: the Lord our God hath not sent thee to say, Go not into Egypt to sojourn there:<sup>3</sup> But Baruch the son of Neriah setteth thee on against us, for to deliver us into the hand of the Chaldeans, that they might put us to death, and carry us away captives into Babylon.*

2) The Words of the Solomon

† **Proverbs 3:5-7** – *Trust in the LORD with all thine heart; and lean not unto thine own understanding.<sup>6</sup> In all thy ways acknowledge him, and he shall direct thy paths.<sup>7</sup> Be not wise in thine own eyes: fear the LORD, and depart from evil.*

- B. “The *authorial-intention* approach, because you are viewing the text as *communication* between the author and yourself”<sup>6</sup>
- i. “If, however, you believe that the Bible is God’s revelatory word to you and that the Scriptures function as communication from God to you, you should interpret the Bible by looking for the meaning that God, the author, intended.
  - ii. Your interpretive question should be: *What is the meaning God intended in this text?*”<sup>7</sup>
- C. Two other options also exist.<sup>8</sup>
- i. Sensus Plenior – meaning fuller sense - this is an early 20<sup>th</sup> century catholic view of scripture claiming an expansion of meaning within the Bible in a way where passages have a meaning meant by the human writer, but a greater, deeper meaning meant by God. Often, the Catholic Church has used this to claim a deeper meaning, expanding theological understandings. This is an acorn-to-oak kind of theology. Thus, the church hierarchy has been used to expand meanings over time according to the magisterium. Creating a Roman Catholic reader-response kind of view.
  - ii. References Plenior - Single meaning with related implications but used in different scenarios with a couple of potential referents. For example, Psalm 78:2 is appropriated by Jesus in Matthew 13:35.
2. Who is the author?
- A. This is an inevitable question when studying the Bible as someone who does not believe the scripture often will say that it is just the word of man.
- B. Yet about you saw it mention the Bible as the word of God, so is it the word of God or man or both, which comes into the conversation of inspiration.
- i. So, how do we understand inspiration?
  - ii. 5 views have been put forth.
    - 1) “**The intuition theory** makes inspiration largely a high degree of insight. Some within left-wing liberalism hold such a view. Inspiration is the functioning of a high gift, perhaps almost like an artistic ability, but nonetheless a natural endowment, a permanent possession. The Scripture writers were religious geniuses. The Hebrew people had a particular gift for the religious, just as some groups seem to have special aptitude for mathematics or languages. On this basis, inspiration of the Scripture writers was essentially no different from that of other great religious and philosophical thinkers, such as Plato and Buddha. The Bible then is great religious literature reflecting the Hebrew people’s spiritual experiences.

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<sup>6</sup> Duvall and Hays, *Grasping God’s Word*, 195.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 197.

<sup>8</sup> Roy B. Zuck, *Basic Bible Interpretation: A Practical Guide to Discovering Biblical Truth*, ed. Craig Bubeck Sr. (Colorado Springs, CO: David C. Cook, 1991), 273.

- 2) **The *illumination theory*** maintains that there is an influence of the Holy Spirit upon the authors of Scripture, but involving only a heightening of their normal powers. There is no special communication of truth or guidance in what is written, but merely an increased sensitivity and perceptivity with regard to spiritual matters. It is not unlike the effect of stimulants students sometimes take to heighten their awareness or amplify the mental processes. Thus, the work of inspiration is different only in degree, not in kind, from the Spirit's work with all believers. The result of this type of inspiration is increased ability to discover truth.
- 3) **The *dynamic theory*** emphasizes the combination of divine and human elements in the process of inspiration and the writing of the Bible. The Spirit of God works by directing the writer to the thoughts or concepts, and allowing the writer's own distinctive personality to come into play in the choice of words and expressions. Thus, the writer will give expression to the divinely directed thoughts in a way uniquely characteristic of that person.
- 4) **The *verbal theory*** insists that the Holy Spirit's influence extends beyond the direction of thoughts to the selection of words used to convey the message. The work of the Holy Spirit is so intense that each word is the exact word God wants used at that point to express the message. Ordinarily, great care is taken to insist that this is not dictation, however.
- 5) **The *dictation theory*** is the teaching that God actually dictated the Bible to the writers."<sup>9</sup>

C. Our Church and most conservative churches generally land in the verbal theory of inspiration that there is a joint authorship of both the Spirit of God using the personality of the Human authors to communicate exactly what god wanted to communicate. (Dictation theory is very close but it essentially turns the human authors into literal trance ridden vessels with no thought or personality.)

† **1 Peter 1:20-21** – *Knowing this first, that no prophecy of the scripture is of any private interpretation.<sup>21</sup> For the prophecy came not in old time by the will of man: but holy men of God spake as they were moved by the Holy Ghost.*

D. "*Meaning* is something we can validate. It is tied to the text and the intent of the author, not to the reader. Therefore, the *meaning* of the text is the same for all Christians. It is not subjective and does not change from reader to reader. *Application*, on the other hand, reflects the impact of the text on the reader's life. It is much more subjective, and it reflects the specific life situation of the reader. The *application* of the meaning will vary from Christian to Christian, but it will still have some boundaries influenced by the author's meaning"<sup>10</sup>

#### IV. Levels of Meaning

##### 1. Normal Interpretation

<sup>9</sup> Millard J. Erickson, [Christian Theology](#), 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2013), 174–175.

<sup>10</sup> Duvall and Hays, [Grasping God's Word](#), 198–199.

- A. Allows for understanding of things according to their context Historical Cultural Context
    - i. This keeps an allowance to understand an original author and audience.
    - ii. It keeps in mind meaning can be better understood by knowing what happened and what was believed by those in that time.
  - B. It also allows for hearing things according to their literary form.
    - i. Including interior Literary Genres.
    - ii. It allows for the use of literary Devices.
    - iii. This includes reading in immediate and larger contexts.
  - C. Your book actually even calls this “term *literary meaning*. *Literary meaning* refers to the meaning the authors have placed in the text”<sup>11</sup>
2. Spiritualizing
- A. This is to say that what is written is really some different spiritual meaning.
  - B. “meaning a reader dreams up and projects onto the text. This reader-based “spiritualizing” is the danger. Such “spiritualizing” occurs when we “discover” deep, secret meanings that the authors never intended. This kind of “spiritualizing” is not based on this specific text or the Spirit of God; it is a product of our imaginations or a retrojection of other biblical truth back into this passage. That is, inaccurate, “spiritualized” meanings can be true, but they are true because of other biblical texts.”<sup>12</sup>
  - C. “The question is not whether we will seek literal meaning or spiritual meaning; the question is whether we will seek the literary meaning intended by the authors and inspired by the Spirit or the meaning created in our own fanciful imaginations.”<sup>13</sup>
3. Allegorizing
- A. “An allegory is a story that uses an extensive amount of symbolism. It is similar to a parable but generally has a greater degree of correspondence—that is, most or many of the details in the story represent something or carry some specific nuance of meaning. Greidanus defines it as “an extended metaphor—that is, a number of elements in a story make up a string of metaphors which have a deeper unified meaning.”<sup>14</sup>
  - B. This is something that should not be assumed into the scripture, but recognize that the Bible does use it on occasion. However, when God intentionally uses an allegory, he explains what he means. We saw this previously with Paul; now see it in Isaiah 5.
    - † **Isaiah 5:1-7** – *I will sing for the one I love a song about his vineyard: My loved one had a vineyard on a fertile hillside. <sup>2</sup>He dug it up and cleared it of stones and planted it with the choicest vines. He built a watchtower in it and cut out a*

<sup>11</sup> Duvall and Hays, [Grasping God's Word](#), 211.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 212.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 213.

winepress as well. Then he looked for a crop of good grapes, but it yielded only bad fruit. <sup>3</sup>“Now you dwellers in Jerusalem and people of Judah, judge between me and my vineyard. <sup>4</sup>What more could have been done for my vineyard than I have done for it? When I looked for good grapes, why did it yield only bad? <sup>5</sup>Now I will tell you what I am going to do to my vineyard: I will take away its hedge, and it will be destroyed; I will break down its wall, and it will be trampled. <sup>6</sup>I will make it a wasteland, neither pruned nor cultivated, and briars and thorns will grow there. I will command the clouds not to rain on it.” <sup>7</sup>The vineyard of the lord Almighty is the nation of Israel, and the people of Judah are the vines he delighted in. And he looked for justice, but saw bloodshed; for righteousness, but heard cries of distress.

#### 4. Typology

##### A. Prefigure

- i. Things that line up well with others, namely being a consistent theme or a repetition of particular details through different stories, pointing to some important truth.
- ii. Numerous passages in the Old Testament describe things that *point to* or *foreshadow* what Christ ultimately fulfills<sup>15</sup>
- iii. Prefiguration is more common than typologies. Because typologies have been given a strict definition.

##### B. Typology

- i. “*Typology generally requires a correspondence of the New Testament fulfillment that is closer to the Old Testament representation than foreshadowing suggests. A type can be defined as “a biblical event, person, or institution which serves as an example or pattern for other events, persons, or institutions.”*<sup>16</sup>
- ii. *Typology* is part of the promise-fulfillment scheme that connects the two testaments.
- iii. Thus, we view *typology* as being prophetic—a historical event or person in the Old Testament that serves as a prophetic pattern or example of a New Testament event or person<sup>17</sup>

- C. A safeguard for these things is to compare it honestly across scripture and to recognize we have a tendency to read into things. Be careful not to hold as doctrine anything not taught clearly. Be careful with superlatives, leave information vague, which is given vaguely, unless the Bible itself expresses it clearly.

**Conclusion:** Friends, as we move through the concepts of meaning and look to what limits meaning can be seen or stretched, our goal must be to know, love, and obey him more. Any other reason will likely turn us into a delinquent or a Pharisee.

<sup>15</sup> Duvall and Hays, *Grasping God's Word*, 221.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 222.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

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