

THE BENEFITS OF AN AUTHOR-ORIENTED APPROACH TO HERMENEUTICS

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I. INTRODUCTION

In all communication three distinct components must be present. If any one of these components is missing, communication is not possible. These components are: the author, the text, and the reader. Linguists tend to use the terms: the encoder, the code, and the decoder. Still another set of terms that can be used is: the sender, the message, and the receiver. Having been born and raised in New Jersey where we like to use alliteration, we can refer to the three components as: the writer, the writing, and the “weader.”

During the twentieth century we have witnessed amazingly diverse views as to which of these three components is the determiner of meaning. Who or what determines the meaning of a text, code, message, writing? At the beginning of the twentieth century the general assumption was that the author was the determiner of a text’s meaning. The text meant what the author of the text consciously willed to convey by the words he or she had written. Texts were understood as a form of communication, and in communication we seek to understand what the author of that communication seeks to convey. Thus, if in a Bible study we were engaged in a study of Paul’s letter to the Romans, and by some miracle the apostle Paul entered the room and explained what he meant by the passage under consideration, this would settle the issue. Our goal was to understand what the author, that is, Paul, meant by this passage, and we now know what he meant. Hopefully, we would proceed to discuss some of the implications of that passage for us today, but the issue of what the text “meant” would be settled. This is the common sense approach to hermeneutics that most people use quite unconsciously. This is why, for example, in trying to understand Romans we seek help from Galatians rather than Ernest Hemingway’s *For Whom the Bell Tolls* or Margaret Mitchell’s *Gone with the Wind*. The reason for this is that the author of Galatians thinks more like the author of Romans than Hemingway or Mitchell, and we desire to understand what the author of Romans meant.

In the 1930s, however, a movement arose called the New Criticism. This movement became the dominant approach toward literature in the universities until the 1970s. This approach no longer sought meaning in what the

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author intended to convey, but in the text itself as an independent entity. Texts were interpreted as independent units in total isolation from their authors and the historical situation in which they were written. In fact, if, using the example given above, Paul entered into our presence and explained to us what he meant by what he wrote, this view would respond, "That is interesting but quite irrelevant, for after you wrote your text, you lost control of it. It is no longer a form of communication but a form of art. It has become 'literature,' and as a result it possesses semantic autonomy and has its own meaning or meanings." According to this view, in handing the text over to the reader, the author lost his or her authority over the text and its meaning. It should be pointed out that this view is very different from that of Billy Graham when he says, "The Bible says" or "Our text tells us," for Billy Graham means by this, "The author of our Biblical text is telling us." The New Criticism totally disconnects the text from the original author. It is as if texts magically appeared on the scene without father, mother, or author.

More recently we have witnessed a hermeneutic that seeks meaning, not from what the author consciously willed to say or from what the text means in isolation, but from the reader. This reader-oriented criticism argues that it is the reader who gives meaning to a text. The "written text in itself . . . is dead or in hibernation. The text only comes to life through the reader. He revives the text, he gives meaning to it."¹ A text is in effect an open reality that stimulates us to give meaning to it. This is very different from and should not be confused with the view that the reader learns, deciphers, discovers, or ascertains the meaning that the author sought to convey or with the view that a text possesses in itself a meaning totally independent of both author and reader. In this approach the reader is the creator of the text's meaning. Kevin J. Vanhoozer comments concerning this new hermeneutical approach:

Recently . . . the reader has come to the forefront in discussion of literary theory and biblical interpretation alike. Indeed, some critics speak of a reader's liberation movement. What is it that readers have hitherto not been free to do? The answer of an increasing number of literary theorists is: "make meaning." Reading is not merely a matter of perception but also of production; the reader does not discover so much as create meaning.²

This approach is witnessed to by such expressions as "a Marxist reading of the text," or "a feminist reading of the text," or "a liberation theology reading of the text," etc. John Ziesler describes this approach as follows:

To put it crudely, there is the question whether the text, any text, is a window or a mirror. Does it [the text] in some way facilitate our own illumination [as in the reader-response approach] or does it give us access to another world [as in the author-oriented approach]? . . . It is far more fruitful to accept their mirror-like nature and concentrate on how we read them. "The texts are a language through which we generate meaning."³

¹ Walter Vogels, "Inspiration in a Linguistic Mode," *BTB* 15 (1985) 87.

² Kevin J. Vanhoozer, "The Reader in New Testament Interpretation," in *Hearing the New Testament* (ed. Joel B. Green; Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1995) 301.

³ John Ziesler, "Historical Criticism and a Rational Faith," *ExpTim* 105 (1994) 273.

This analogy of whether a text functions primarily as a mirror or as a window is a very useful one.

I shall seek to argue in this paper that the determiner of meaning in the communicative process is the author. (Please note the use of the singular "meaning.") Let me state from the beginning my deep debt to E. D. Hirsch, Jr. and his book *Validity in Interpretation*.⁴ Permit me, however, to make some general comments about the other two approaches. I have always been troubled by the New Criticism's assumption that meaning is a property of the text as an autonomous entity. "Meaning," as I understand it, involves a construction of thought. It is a property of thinking persons. On the other hand, a text is an inanimate object. It is a collection of symbols on papyrus, vellum, paper, stone, metal, etc. A text consists of unthinking, lifeless material. Being lifeless and inanimate, it does not have the ability to think. It cannot construct a thought or an idea. Thus a text cannot "mean" anything, because it cannot intend or purpose anything. Whereas a text can convey the meaning of a thinking, willing person, it cannot possess meaning in and of itself, because it cannot think. To ask "What does this text mean?" is to ask of an inanimate object what it cannot do, that is, to construct a thought or idea. Authors and readers can think but not paper and ink, stone and groves, or papyrus and symbols. Thus I find it impossible to conceive of a text "meaning" anything. Usually what people are saying when they speak of the meaning of a text is "the meaning of the author that the text conveys."⁵

With respect to the present reader-response emphasis it should be noted that this view is indeed a product of our time. It is interesting to note that in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, when the miraculous nature of various Biblical accounts was no longer accepted, scholars desperately sought to find meaning somewhere other than in what the author consciously willed to convey. Since critical scholarship did not believe in the historicity of narrative accounts containing miracles, it could not accept what the author consciously willed to convey by those accounts. In other words, it could not accept the author's willed meaning. Nevertheless, critical scholars still believed that these accounts taught something that possessed a "meaningful" dimension to it. The question was where this "meaningful" quality was to be found. Having rejected the traditional view of author-willed meaning, scholars sought for meaning in other places. One such place was in the "event" referred to in the text.

Rationalism sought to reconstruct the event of the text to find out "what really happened." In so doing, scholars hoped to discover in the "actual" event something that would prove "meaningful." If the feeding of the five

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

⁵ Note how the NT refers to the OT writers: Moses—" . . . offer for your cleansing what Moses commanded" (Mark 1:44; cf. also 7:10; 10:3-4; 12:19, 26; Luke 16:29, 31; John 1:45; 5:46; Acts 3:22; Rom 10:19; Heb 9:19); Isaiah—"Well did Isaiah prophesy of your hypocrites . . ." (Mark 7:6; cf. also Matt 3:3; 4:14; 8:17; 12:17; 13:14; John 1:23; 12:38-41; Acts 28:25; Rom 9:27, 29; 10:16, 20-21; 15:12); David—"David himself, inspired by the Holy Spirit, declared . . ." (Mark 12:36; cf. Acts 1:16; 2:25; 4:25; Rom 4:6; 11:9; Heb 4:7). Note also references to Jeremiah (Matt 2:17; 27:9); Daniel (Matt 24:15); and Joel (Acts 2:16).

thousand (or four thousand) was essentially a sharing of food initiated by a little boy's willingness to share his lunch with others, we then have a meaning—"If we share what God has blessed us with, there will be more than enough to go around." Such an approach, however, ultimately proved quite unprofitable, for it is exceedingly difficult to reconstruct what supposedly happened and then to find a moral lesson from these normal, misunderstood, natural events. Others sought to associate meaning in some way with the author.

One group sought it in the author's accommodation to his readers' mythological world view. According to this view, the author consciously sought to teach his readers moral truths through mythical traditions that his readers would believe but that he personally knew were untrue. This option encountered minimal success because it was obvious upon reflection that the Biblical authors truly believed what they were writing was true. An additional problem in the accommodationist's view was how such blatant liars could have produced the greatest moral teachings that the world has even known. The second group that sought to associate meaning with the author, but not with his consciously willed meaning, was the mythophiles. The mythophiles or "myth lovers" believed that meaning could be found in the subconsciousness that gave birth to these myths. Thus they sought to "demythologize" the miracle accounts to find out what the subconsciousness of the author was seeking to teach by these accounts.⁶

It should be noted that eighteenth and nineteenth-century attempts to find "meaning" in the miracle accounts sought for such meaning in either the author's conscious deception (the accommodationists) or their subconsciousness (the mythophiles) or they sought it in the event referred to in the text (the rationalists). No one apparently thought to seek meaning in the response of the reader. It was not until the 1960s and 70s that the reader-response approach came into prominence. Whereas once the sun, as portrayed by Ptolemy, was thought to revolve around the earth and the earth was thought to be the center of the universe, later under Copernicus the earth was seen as rotating around the sun. Now this new revolution understood all of the universe and reality as rotating around the individual. The reader was no longer seen as part of the universe and seeking its meaning but as the center of the universe and imparting meaning to it.

II. THE ARGUMENT FOR AUTHOR-DETERMINED MEANING

The question of where the meaning of a text is to be found is, I believe, the major issue that faces Biblical scholarship today. This hermeneutical issue, however, affects far more than just Biblical scholarship. There is great debate today as to whether the constitution of the United States means what the original authors of the constitution meant or what the judges of the Supreme Court make it mean. If the latter is the case, then what do

⁶ For a helpful survey of these attempts, see Hans Frei, *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative: A Study in Eighteenth and Nineteenth-Century Hermeneutics* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1974) esp. 245-66.

judges of the Supreme Court swear to uphold? Is it the meaning they would give to the constitution or the meaning that the founders who voted for the constitution gave to it? The recent renovation of the Sistine Chapel has brought a great deal of debate and discussion, for the restored paintings are much brighter and warmer in color than before the renovation. Were the darker and more somber colors due to the soot of four centuries of burning candles and the aging of the original frescos, so that the renovation has simply restored the original colors? Or has the restoration changed the tone and coloring of the original work, so that the paintings no longer represent the original colors and hues of Michelangelo? And does it matter?

The greatest argument in favor of understanding the author as the determiner of a text's meaning is that it is the common sense approach to all communication. One cannot have a meaningful conversation or even a serious debate about this issue without assuming this. During the present reading of this article, you, the reader, have been seeking to understand what I, the author, meant by the words I have written. Probably it has not even entered into your mind that the words I have written should be treated independently of my intention or that you should give your own meaning to these words. Communication between two people can only take place if both parties seek to understand what the other person means by their words. Should a person's last will and testament be read according to the deceased's consciously willed meaning? What would you think of an executor of a will who began by saying, "I am not interested in what the deceased meant by the words of this will? Here is the meaning that I choose to give to this will." For an executor to do so would, at least at the present time, be a criminal act.

It has been argued, however, that we should distinguish and treat communication differently than literature. When originally written, the letters of Paul were a form of communication, and their meaning was determined by what he meant by them. Now, however, it is argued, these letters are literature and should be interpreted as "art." Yet who determines if something is literature? Any definition of "literature" is ultimately quite fuzzy. Is it simply a matter of age and usage that determines if something is literature? What then should we do with the classification "twentieth-century literature"? And who determines how to interpret a work of art? Is it simply the viewer? But why did the artist place a title on his or her work?

Much of the interpretative process that people perform almost unconsciously is based on the hermeneutical principle that the goal of interpretation is to arrive at what the author of a text meant. For example, in the attempt to understand the meaning of a particular word in a text such as Galatians, to what primary sources do we turn? Why does common sense say, "Look up where it is used elsewhere in Galatians. Then look up how it is used in Romans and the Corinthian correspondence"? Why do we look for help in Galatians, Romans, 1 and 2 Corinthians rather than in the writings of Plato or Julius Caesar? Why do we go to Luke in order to understand Acts rather than to Josephus? The answer is because we want to understand what the Biblical author (Paul or Luke) meant, and the writer of Romans and 1 and 2 Corinthians thinks more like Paul than Plato or Julius

Caesar, and the writer of Luke thinks more like the writer of Acts than Josephus. Why do we try to find help in understanding Calvin's works in his other writings rather than in the Dead Sea Scrolls or the Koran?

Not only is the author-oriented approach to meaning the common sense approach to interpreting the Bible, I believe it is also the one that best fits an evangelical view of the Bible's inspiration. If we believe that the "meaning" of the Bible is inspired, where is this meaning to be found? Surely it is not found in the ink and paper used to convey that meaning. As stated earlier, these inanimate materials cannot think and therefore cannot will a meaning. If we, on the other hand, give to the reader the authority to determine or create the meaning (note we are not saying "to ascertain or learn" but "to determine or create" the meaning), what do we do with diverse and contradictory "meanings" that readers find in the Scriptures? Are they all inspired? How do we distinguish a good translation of the Bible from a poor one? Is it that a poor one elicits fewer reader-responses than a good one? Is not the test of whether a translation is good or bad dependent on whether it translates accurately and well what the Biblical author consciously meant by the words he used?

A popular expression often used to argue against the view that the author is the determiner of meaning is the "intentional fallacy." In some circles this has become a shibboleth, and simply saying that someone is guilty of the intentional fallacy is considered a refutation of their view. This expression was made popular by William K. Wimsatt, Jr. and Monroe Beardsley.⁷ They argued that it is impossible for a person to climb into the mind of an author and experience what he was going through when he wrote. This is, of course, true. One cannot relive an author's "mental acts" while writing.⁸ Unless the authors stated them, they are inaccessible to us. We shall define shortly the "meaning" of a text not as the process that an author went through in writing a text, but rather what the author consciously willed to convey by the words he or she has given us. We possess those words, and because the author wanted to be understood and wrote using the norms of language in his day, we can understand what the author intended by these words.

Another objection sometimes associated with the intentional fallacy is the idea that an author may have been inadequate or incompetent in ex-

⁷ See W. K. Wimsatt and Monroe Beardsley, "The Intentional Fallacy," in *The Verbal Icon: Studies in the Meaning of Poetry* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1954) 3–18. Jack Stillerling, *Multiple Authorship and the Myth of Solitary Genius* (Oxford: University Press, 1991) 189, points out that Wimsatt and Beardsley are inconsistent in their use of the term "intentional." "In their opening statement, 'intention' signifies *aim, plan, purpose, goal*, whereas 'criticism' signifies *evaluation*. But very shortly . . . 'intention' starts to signify *meaning*, and by the end of the essay 'criticism' has come to signify something like *understanding or interpretation*. Thus Wimsatt and Beardsley's fairly innocuous beginning—to the effect that an author's aim has no place in the evaluation of a work—has been transformed into the quite different and much more radical statement that an author's intended meaning has no place in the interpretation of a work [author's italics]."

⁸ The impossibility of reconstructing the experiences and influences that an author had in writing is clearly shown in C. S. Lewis, "Fern-seed and Elephants" in *Fern-seed and Elephants and Other Essays on Christianity* (Glasgow: William Collins Sons, 1975) 114–15. This article, and especially the pages mentioned, should be required reading for all Biblical students.

pressing what he sought to convey. What teacher has not had a student say, "Well, what I meant to say in my paper was . . ."? There is no need to deny that an author may be incompetent in expressing his meaning, so that the reader cannot understand it. Yet is this true in most instances? It is surprising how seldom those who point out this problem of incompetence think that they may be incompetent in their writing about this problem! Why bother writing about it, if this problem is insurmountable? Furthermore, as an evangelical Christian, a factor comes into play that eliminates this objection for the most part. If divine inspiration means anything, it means that God gave to the Biblical authors a competency to write down adequately what they were led to write. As a result, I think that a correct understanding of an author-oriented hermeneutic is not guilty of the intentional fallacy. The reason is that it is not interested in ascertaining the mental acts of the author that led to the text but rather what the author meant by the words found in the text. In addition authors, especially divinely inspired authors, are generally quite competent in expressing their willed meaning.

III. VOCABULARY FOR AUTHOR-DETERMINED MEANING

A great deal of the confusion involved in hermeneutical discussion is due to the lack of a clear and precise vocabulary. At this point I would like to offer a brief conceptual framework of terms for our discussion. This framework will be limited to four terms, for the sake of brevity. These terms are: meaning; implications; significance; and subject matter.⁹

1. *Meaning.* I define meaning as: "The paradigm or principle that the author consciously willed to convey by the sharable symbols he or she used." In this definition we should note that meaning is associated with the words of the author. It is not concerned with the thought processes or mental acts an author experienced while writing the text. In this respect, the pursuit of meaning avoids that aspect of the intentional fallacy which argues that one cannot relive the experiences of an author in their writing of the text. Meaning is not concerned with reliving the author's writing experiences but with understanding what the author consciously meant to convey by the words or symbols found in his or her text.¹⁰ The "shareable" nature of these symbols indicates that the author consciously encoded his or her meaning using the norms of language with which their readers were familiar.

It should be noted that the term "consciously" is used to describe the meaning that the author wished to convey. This is to distinguish our definition from those views that seek to demythologize the myth that the author

⁹ For further definitions of the terms "understanding," "interpretation," "mental acts," "norms of language," "norms of the utterance," "literary genre," and "context," see Robert H. Stein, *A Basic Guide to Interpreting the Bible: Playing by the Rules* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994) 48–58.

¹⁰ In the present work "the author's writing experiences" are referred to as "mental acts" and "what the author consciously meant to convey by the words or symbols found in his or her text" as "meaning." Other terminology sometimes used to distinguish "mental acts" and "meaning" is "authorial motives" and "authorial communicative intentions." See Stephen E. Fowl, "The Role of Authorial Intention in the Theological Interpretation of Scripture" in *Between Two Horizons: Spanning New Testament Studies & Systematic Theology* (ed. Joel B. Green and Max Turner; Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2000) 71–87.

has written and to find out the subconscious meaning of the author that lies behind the myth. It also distinguishes our definition from such views that reject the surface-level meaning and seek to discover the substructural meaning of a text. Meaning as it is defined here is what the author consciously wanted to communicate to the readers by the words he or she chose.

Understanding this meaning is possible because the Biblical author possessed competence and in seeking to communicate his meaning intentionally inscribed this meaning following the norms of the language of the readers. Thus we can understand the meaning of the author by understanding the norms of the language of the text's original readers.¹¹

Because the author willed this meaning at a particular time and place in history, this meaning can never change. It is a part of history, and because history cannot change, the author's meaning cannot change. Even if an author no longer agrees with the meaning willed in the past, that meaning cannot change. The author may recant that particular meaning, write a revision in which he explains that he no longer believes what he wrote earlier, but he cannot change the willed meaning of the shareable symbols contained in the first work. The reason for this is that one cannot change the past. Thus the meaning willed in the past remains. The meaning of the author, however, involves a paradigm or principle that goes beyond the specific meaning that was consciously willed. Thus there are implications that are part of this paradigm of which the author may not be aware but which are nevertheless contained in the paradigm. This brings us to our second definition.

2. Implication. Implications refer to "Those submeanings of a text that legitimately fall within the paradigm or principle willed by the author, whether he or she was aware of them or not." Since meaning involves a paradigm or principle, the author may not be, and probably never is, aware of all the implications of that paradigm. I frequently use as an illustration of this Paul's command in Eph 5:18, "And do not get drunk with wine." Now the specific meaning Paul had in mind for the Ephesian Christians was not to become intoxicated with that mixture of water and what we call wine that was called "wine" in his day.¹² Yet, let us imagine for a moment that

¹¹ At times the goal of interpretation is stated as ". . . to hear the message of the Bible as the original audiences would have heard it or as the first readers would have understood it." So William M. Klein, Craig L. Blomberg, and Robert L. Hubbard, Jr., *Introduction to Biblical Interpretation* (Dallas: Word, 1993) 11. The problem with this is that at times the original readers *misunderstood* the intended meaning (see the letters to the Corinthians and Thessalonians). Perhaps we should reword this by saying that our goal is to hear the message of the Bible as the original audiences *should* have heard it or as the first readers *should* have understood it. The value of seeking how the original audience *should* have understood the author's texts is because we believe: (1) the author was competent in expressing his meaning; (2) he consciously wrote that message using the norms of language with which his audience was familiar; and (3) we can understand those norms and therefore, like the original readers, understand the meaning that the author intended.

¹² See Robert H. Stein, "Wine-Drinking in New Testament Times," *Christianity Today* 19 (June 20, 1975) 9–11.

Paul later visited the church in Ephesus and found drunkenness in the church. How would he have responded if he asked, "Did you not read in my letter not to become drunk with wine?" and someone responded, "But Paul, ever since we read your letter, we have switched from wine to beer"? Would Paul have said, "Well, that's OK. So long as you are not drunk with wine"? Would he not rather have said, "You know, I meant beer also"? Within the paradigm that Paul uttered, beer is included as well as wine, even though beer is not mentioned.

Now let us imagine asking Paul the question, "Paul, did you mean that we should not become drunk with whiskey or vodka?" How would he reply? Now it is evident that, whereas Paul knew about beer, he did not know about whiskey or vodka. I believe, however, that he would have responded as follows. He would first have asked what whiskey and vodka are. Upon having this explained, he might have answered something like this, "In my day, we could not distill alcoholic beverages and concentrate their alcoholic content. In fact, we always diluted what you call wine with water. But, yes, I meant, 'Be not drunk with whiskey and vodka.' In fact, the paradigm that I meant by Eph 5:18 was something like, 'Do not take into your bodies substances, like wine, that cause you to lose control of what you are doing.'" Since the meaning of Paul's command in Eph 5:18 involves a paradigm that goes beyond his specific meaning, his meaning has implications. He may not have been aware of all of them but they nevertheless stem out of the paradigm he willed.

Let me give another example. Johnny received a Christmas gift from grandma and grandpa of fifty dollars. He knows exactly what he wants to do with the fifty dollars. He wants to go down to Target and purchase two toys that together, with tax, cost \$49.95. As his father, you, however, tell Johnny, "Now I don't want you to go down to Target and buy those two toys with the money grandma and grandpa gave you. They don't want you to spend it on toys at Target." Later, when you come home, you find Johnny playing with the two toys. In frustration you respond, "Didn't I tell you not to buy those toys at Target?" How would you respond if Johnny replied, "Well, dad, I didn't buy them at Target. I went to Wal-Mart and bought them for only \$44.50." Would you say, "Oh, that's OK. As long as it wasn't Target"? Wouldn't you say, "Johnny, you knew I meant you shouldn't buy those toys at Target, Wal-Mart, or any other place?" What you meant by, "Now I don't want you to go down to Target and buy those two toys with the money grandma and grandpa gave you. They don't want you to spend it on toys at Target" involves a paradigm which, even though unstated, goes beyond Target.¹³ Meaning involves numerous implications that we may not be aware of at the time but that are nevertheless present and logically flow out of the paradigm given.

Implications flow out of the paradigm of the author's meaning. As a result, we as readers do not create them but discover them. A great deal

¹³ In the example just given it is assumed that Johnny's father referred to "Target" in the generic sense of a "store" and that he was not urging a boycott of Target products.

of confusion can be avoided if we recognize that these implications are not new “meanings” independent of the author’s meaning. Rather, they are “sub-meanings” that flow out of the paradigm the author has given. If we think of meaning as a tree, implications then correspond to the various branches and parts of the tree that make up the entire tree. Implications are sub-meanings that in their totality make up the entire meaning. To refer to these branches as independent “trees” or “meanings” is both incorrect and confusing. It is much better to refer to the submeanings that flow out of a paradigm willed by the author as implications than to refer to them as different “meanings.” This permits us to acknowledge the single meaning of an author’s text and nevertheless acknowledge that there are implications flowing out of that meaning of which the author was unaware. Only God in his omniscience knows all the implications of a text’s meaning. The author, however, still controls these submeanings because they stem from his or her willed paradigm. A miner does not create the gold he finds in a mountain. He discovers it. Similarly, the interpreter of Scripture does not create the implications he or she finds in the text. If they are legitimate implications, they are merely discovered by the interpreter, for ultimately they stem from the paradigm willed by the author.¹⁴

3. *Significance.* Significance, as I understand it, refers to “How the reader responds to the willed meaning of the author.” Significance involves the reader and his or her reaction to the author’s meaning. Whereas the author is master of the meaning of the text, as well as the implications flowing out of its paradigm, with respect to significance the reader is master. In its simplest form, significance is the reader’s “yes” or “no” to the author’s meaning.

Perhaps an illustration may be useful at this point. The meaning of Acts 1:8 is that the followers of Jesus are to witness to his work and words throughout the world.¹⁵ Some general implications flowing out of this paradigm may involve such things as witnessing to one’s neighbor, modeling the Christian life at work and sharing the good news with one’s fellow workers, entering the Christian ministry, etc. Specific implication(s) flowing out of that paradigm may involve accepting the pastorate of a specific church, being a missionary under a particular mission board in a particular place, teaching a Sunday School class in church, etc. These general and specific implications are all subsumed under the category of “implications” and are controlled by the paradigm derived from the author’s willed meaning. Significance, however, is the response of the reader to the meaning of the text and its implications. It involves not the mind’s attempt to understand the meaning of the

¹⁴ If we think of the willed paradigm that Paul gives in Eph 5:18 as a geometric figure, then every submeaning or implication of this text lies within that figure. The totality of all the legitimate implications, along with the author’s specific willed meaning which functions in the paradigm as a submeaning, defines the extent and shape of the figure.

¹⁵ Whereas this command in Acts 1:8 is addressed specifically to the apostles, others are also seen as being witnesses of Jesus. (Cf. Acts 22:15 and 20 where Paul and Stephen are referred to as witnesses.) The present writer believes that Luke has recorded this command not simply to tell his readers that the apostles were called to be witnesses but that this is by implication a responsibility for each follower of Jesus.

text and its implications but the response of the will to that understanding. Thus significance involves not a cognitive activity but a volitional one.

The term “application” does not appear in our set of definitions. The reason is that this term does not consist of a single element in the conceptual framework of hermeneutics. It involves instead a compound of two elements. Just as water is a compound of the elements of hydrogen and oxygen, so “application” is a compound of the “elements” implication and significance. To be even more precise, it is a compound of a specific implication that concerns the individual, which is cognitive in nature, and the value response given to that implication, which is volitional in nature. Thus the term “application” can be confusing, because it refers to two different components in the communicative process. Implications, even those that apply uniquely to an individual, are controlled by the author and flow out of the paradigm determined by his or her willed meaning. The reader, on the other hand, controls significance.¹⁶

4. *Subject matter.* The term “subject matter” refers to “The content or ‘stuff’ talked about in the text.” The distinction between subject matter and meaning is reasonably clear in the non-narrative portions of Scripture.¹⁷ For example, the “stuff” discussed in Romans 1–8 involves how a person can find acceptance before God. The meaning of Romans 1–8 is what Paul teaches on this subject. The “stuff” of a genealogy involves the relationships between the people listed. The meaning of a genealogy involves what the Biblical author is seeking to teach by this listing of relationships.

In historical narrative, however, there is a great deal of confusion as to what the meaning of such a narrative is. Most commentaries and preaching assume that the meaning of a gospel narrative involves the event being discussed, that is, what happened. Commentators will spend a great deal of time and effort explaining the historical situation in the life of Jesus in which the event being discussed occurred, what preceded and led up to this event, the response of Jesus’ audience, how this may have led to his crucifixion, etc. Yet this has nothing to do with the “meaning” of the text. This involves rather the “subject matter” of what is being discussed in the text. Meaning is something different. This can be shown by the following example. Assuming that the passage under consideration is the story of Jesus’ cleansing of the temple in Mark 11:15–19, how would you complete the following sentence? “I, Mark, have told you about Jesus’ cleansing of the temple in Mark 11:15–19 because. . .” Completing that sentence requires us to distinguish the event or subject matter from what Mark is

¹⁶ I believe that E. D. Hirsch, Jr. loses sight of this compound nature of the term “application,” and this has led to confusion. Whereas implications are aspects of meaning that the author may or may not have been aware of, application is not simply an aspect of meaning but a combination of this aspect of meaning plus the significance given to it by the reader. In his “Meaning and Significance Reinterpreted” in *Critical Inquiry* 11 (1984) 20 Hirsch seems to confuse “application,” “meaning,” and “significance.” As a result he states, “. . . certain present applications of a text may belong to its meaning rather than to its significance.” The reason for this confusion is that application is a combination of implication (and thus “meaning”) and significance.

¹⁷ The terms “text” and “event” or “sense” and “referent” often express the distinction between “meaning” and “subject matter”.

seeking to teach his readers by this subject matter. In other words, the meaning of a historical narrative¹⁸ involves what the Biblical writer meant or willed to teach his readers through this subject matter. The distinction between text and event, meaning and subject matter can be clearly seen if we ask, "What did the author seek to teach his readers through this event?" In my hermeneutics class I have two assignments that deal with historical narrative. The first sentence of each assignment must begin, "I [the Biblical author's name then follows] have told you [the Biblical passage then follows] because. . ." Although some students still try to discuss what happened, that is, the event or subject matter, most see the difference between this and the meaning that the author seeks to teach by his use of this subject matter.

IV. THE ADVANTAGES OF AUTHOR-DETERMINED MEANING

We have already mentioned some general advantages of a single, author-determined meaning. These include: (1) it is the common sense approach to all communication; (2) any special hermeneutic suggested for works of "literature" have the difficulty of defining what "literature" is and defending why literature should be treated differently than other forms of communication; and (3) the main argument against author-determined meaning, the "intentional fallacy," confuses the willed meaning of an author with the process or "mental acts" which produced the work. At this point we shall now look at two other advantages that a single, author-determined meaning provides.

In his famous article "Is Exegesis without Presuppositions Possible?"¹⁹ Rudolf Bultmann argues that when Paul quotes Deut 5:4 ("You shall not muzzle an ox when it treads out the grain") in 1 Cor 9:9 as proof that those who preach the gospel should live off the gospel, this is an illegitimate, allegorical interpretation.²⁰ I would suggest, however, that, properly understood, the Deuteronomist's willed meaning is in fact accurately interpreted by the apostle. If the Deuteronomist willed a paradigm by his words, then the specific statement, "You shall not muzzle an ox when it treads out the grain" is a paradigm that has implications going far beyond a simple application to oxen. Surely, no one would have any problem saying that what is true of oxen treading out the grain would also be true of donkeys. Even though donkeys are not specifically mentioned, the paradigm's implications include them as well. If this is true, would such a paradigm not also include

¹⁸ It should be noted that such expressions as "the meaning of Romans 1-8," "the meaning of a genealogy," "the meaning of a Gospel narrative," "the meaning of the text," and "the meaning of an historical narrative" found in this and the preceding paragraph are shorthand expressions for "the meaning of Paul contained in Romans 1-8," etc. The present author has earlier argued that a text cannot possess a meaning in and of itself, because it is inanimate and thus cannot will a meaning. It can, however, convey the meaning that the author willed by these words. It is in this sense that these shorthand expressions should be understood.

¹⁹ This is found in Rudolf Bultmann, *Existence and Faith* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1961) 289-96.

²⁰ *Ibid.* 289-90.

humans? Is it only dumb animals that should reap some benefit from their labor? Paul is probably saying in 1 Cor 9:9, "If it is true that an ox should receive benefit from its labor, how much more then does this imply that a preacher of the gospel should receive benefit from his labor." Surely the Deuteronomist would not say, "Only dumb animals should receive benefit from their labors. Humans, who are created in the image of God, should not be given similar treatment."²¹

Another advantage of a single, author-oriented meaning is that it avoids the need of seeking a different and separate divine meaning in difficult texts. I am thinking here in particular of reference to a *sensus plenior*. The *sensus plenior* is the idea that some Scriptures, especially prophecy, contain two separate meanings. One is the meaning of the Biblical author; the other is the meaning of God. I want to make two preliminary remarks about the *sensus plenior* before I deal specifically with this issue. First of all, I want to state that I do not believe that one's basic hermeneutical approach to the interpretation of Scripture should be developed based on the predictive prophecies of Scripture. The vast majority of Scripture involves other genres (narrative, teaching, proverbs, poetry, laws, parables, etc.). Even in the prophetic books predictive prophecy makes up only a portion of the contents of these books. We should derive a hermeneutical system based upon the most frequently used genres and then see how predictive prophecy fits the system of hermeneutics that has been developed. All too often the hermeneutic developed to interpret difficult predictive prophecies becomes the means by which the simpler and less difficult passages of Scriptures are interpreted. I would prefer developing a hermeneutical system based on the interpretation of the simpler and more common passages of Scripture and seek to apply that system to the predictive prophecies.

Second, the only way that we can understand what an author means is by his or her use of language. We can understand a Biblical writer such as Luke by noting that he wrote to someone in the first century using the Greek of his day and that he wanted to be understood. Therefore, if we seek to understand how someone like Theophilus should²² have interpreted the words found in Luke-Acts (and we know enough of the Greek of Luke's day to do this), then we can understand the meaning Luke willed by his words. We can compare how the words under consideration are used in the rest of Luke-Acts, how Luke used the same prepositional phrases elsewhere in Luke-Acts, how he used the same tense and participles elsewhere, etc. On the other hand, we have no such access to God's use of language. Why should we assume that words, prepositions, participles, etc., in one part of Luke-Acts should be interpreted in a similar manner as elsewhere in Luke-Acts? The answer is that the same author is responsible for these words,

²¹ This is the only law found in Deuteronomy 25 that does not refer to humans. Surrounding this command are laws concerning disputes among people (25:1-3), levirate marriage (25:5-10), fighting (25:11-12), and dishonest business transactions (25:13-17). It would be difficult to conceive of the command in 25:4 not being seen as containing implications with respect to humans. Clearly the rabbinical interpreters of this passage saw it as having various human implications. Cf. *B. Mes.* 88b; *Git.* 62a; *Mak.* 13b, 23a; *Yeb.* 4a.

²² See footnote eleven.

prepositions, participles, etc.²³ But if we are seeking God's meaning in distinction from that of Luke's, why not interpret the words, prepositions, and participles in Luke according to how they are used in Romans, or Mark, or Revelation?²⁴ We have no way of understanding what God means except through what his apostles and prophets wrote in Scripture, and in seeking to understand God's apostles and prophets, we want to know what these human, inspired authors meant by their words. We simply have no access to a separate divine meaning.²⁵

With respect to prophecy, let me say that a single, author-determined meaning causes me to interpret certain terminology figuratively and metaphorically that I was taught to interpret literalistically.²⁶ For example, the language of Acts 2:16–21 is frequently interpreted as an example of a *sensus plenior* because of the imagery in vv. 19–20: "And I will show wonders in the heavens above and signs on the earth beneath, blood, and fire, and vapor of smoke; the sun shall be turned into darkness and the moon into blood, before the day of the Lord comes, the great and manifest day." Since this imagery was not literalistically fulfilled at Pentecost, it is assumed that these words possess a *sensus plenior*. However, Luke quotes Peter as saying in v. 16, "But this is what was spoken by the prophet Joel." A single, author-determined meaning indicates that Luke believed that all of Joel's prophecy found in these verses was fulfilled in the events of Pen-

²³ This does not mean that those words, prepositions, participles, etc., always mean the same thing throughout an author's work. It is the immediate context provided by the author that ultimately determines the meaning of words, prepositions, participles, etc. Generally, however, authors tend to use words in a fairly consistent manner.

²⁴ Such a hermeneutic can be disastrous. Compare what would happen if we seek to understand what "God" means by "faith" and "works" in Jas 2:14–26 by the way "God" uses these terms in Romans and Galatians! In Jas 2:19 "faith" refers to the acknowledgement of a simple fact—"God is one." Thus James can state that, "Even the demons believe [this]." "Works," on the other hand, refer to acts of loving compassion, such as clothing the naked and feeding the hungry. In Paul, however, "works" are meritorious works that seek to place God in one's debt. They involve such "works" as circumcision, keeping "the works of the law," etc. Ultimately both Paul and James agree that the faith that saves is a faith that works through love (Gal 5:6). Nevertheless, the "faith" and "works" James describes in 2:14–26 are very different from what Paul means by "faith" and "works" in Romans and Galatians.

²⁵ Imagine someone in the Corinthian church telling the apostle Paul, "I am really not interested in what you meant by the letters you wrote to us. I am interested in what God means." How would Paul have replied? Would he not have said, "God means what I mean! And if you disobey what I mean, you are disobeying God"? Cf. 1 Cor 14:37 and 2 Thess 3:14. G. B. Caird, *The Language an Imagery of the Bible* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1980) 61, correctly points out, "We have no access to the mind of Jeremiah or Paul except through their recorded words. A fortiori, we have no access to the word of God in the Bible except through the words and the minds of those who claim to speak in his name. We may disbelieve them, that is our right; but if we try, without evidence, to penetrate to a meaning more ultimate than the one the writers intended, that is our meaning, not theirs or God's."

²⁶ The terms "literalistic" and "literalistically" are used to distinguish this hermeneutical procedure from the "literal" interpretation of Scripture. When the Reformers referred to the "literal" interpretation of Scripture, they meant that the Bible should be interpreted in accordance with what the Biblical authors meant by the words they used. Thus metaphors, poetry, figures of speech, etc., were not to be interpreted as ends in themselves, but in accordance with what the Biblical authors meant by them. "Literalistic" interpretation, like allegorical interpretation, rejects an author-determined meaning and treats the text as an independent entity.

tecost. Rather than forcing Luke and Joel to fit within a literalistic interpretation of language, we need to understand how they interpreted such imagery. It is evident that the sun being darkened, the moon turning to blood, the stars falling from heaven, etc., are all part of the imagery that the prophets frequently used to describe divinely ordained events that are now past.²⁷

In Isa 13:1–22 this imagery is used to describe the fall of Babylon, as 13:1a and 19 specifically state and the reference to the Medes in 13:7 demands. In Jer 4:23–28 this imagery is used to describe the destruction of Jerusalem in 587 BC, as 4:3, 5, 14 and the whole context of the book indicates. In Ezek 32:2–19 this imagery is used to describe the destruction of Pharaoh Necho of Egypt and his army. In Amos 8:9 it refers to the destruction of Israel in the eighth century BC. Frequently those scholars who seek to interpret prophecy more literalistically argue that these passages must be interpreted as possessing a *sensus plenior*, so that there is both an author-related meaning and a separate divine meaning. Yet, once we accept that these prophecies were understood by the prophets as referring to events in their own time, the need for a *sensus plenior* disappears. Once we acknowledge that the Biblical authors understood this imagery metaphorically and figuratively, we have no need for a *sensus plenior*. I would argue that a single, author-determined meaning allows us to interpret prophecy literally, that is, in the way that the Reformers used this term—according to their author's meaning, and not literalistically, that is, in a literalistic manner contrary to the way the Biblical authors understood this imagery.²⁸

I shall not seek to provide any all-inclusive method of how to interpret the fulfillment prophecies in the NT, but I would like to suggest how a single, author-determined meaning might seek to resolve some of these difficult texts. In Matt 2:15 the Evangelist sees the return of Joseph, Mary, and Jesus from Egypt as being the fulfillment of Hos 11:1, "Out of Egypt have I called my son." Now it seems clear in reading Hos 11:1 and its immediate context that Hosea had in mind the exodus under Moses. In particular, he seems in this text to be alluding to Exod 4:22 where Moses is commanded to

²⁷ Cf. Richard D. Patterson, "Wonders in the Heavens and on the Earth: Apocalyptic Imagery in the Old Testament," *JETS* 43 (2000) 403, who states, "The persistence of these images strongly suggests that they had become a body of stylized vocabulary that the prophets had at their disposal to express God's judgment and saving activities. The freedom and variety with which they were utilized suggests further that although they had become a conventional part of eschatological predictions, they are not to be viewed as a blueprint of concrete details relative to end-time events. . . . Therefore, they should not be interpreted in a slavishly literalistic manner."

²⁸ Another example of how Biblical writers understood such terminology figuratively is found in Luke 3:4–6. It is evident that the coming of John the Baptist and Jesus Christ did not bring about geographical and geological changes either in Israel or anywhere else on this planet. The term used for "brought low" in 3:5, however, is used in Luke 14:11 and 18:14 with respect to those who exalt themselves being "humbled" or "brought low." In Luke 4:18 Jesus' bringing "release" to the captives should be interpreted in light of how the term here interpreted "release" is interpreted everywhere else in Luke-Acts, that is, as "forgiveness." The "recovering of sight" to the blind in Luke 4:18 is also probably best understood in light of such passages as 1:79 ("to give light to those who sit in darkness") and Acts 26:18 ("to open their eyes, that they may turn from darkness to light and from the power of Satan to God").

tell Pharaoh, "Thus says the Lord, 'Israel is my first-born son.'" Do we need to resort to a *sensus plenior* in order to make sense of Matthew's seeing the return of the holy family from Egypt as fulfilling this passage? I would suggest that we should seek first to apply our single, author-determined meaning to this passage. Is it possible that what we have is the following: (1) Hosea clearly referred to the exodus under Moses. (2) Matthew, however, understood Hosea's statement as involving a paradigm. This paradigm included the following: God had promised to Abraham and his seed that they would live in the land he had promised. As a result he would not leave Israel in bondage in Egypt, but he would deliver his "son" from Egypt into the promised land. Matthew realized that, if this were true with respect to the people of Israel, that is, God's "son," how much more would it be true for his Only "Son." (3) Thus Hosea's reference to God's fulfillment of his promise which led to the exodus had as an implication God's bringing the holy family back from Egypt as well.

V. CONCLUSION

The purpose of this paper has been to explore some of the advantages of an author-oriented model of hermeneutics. I make no claim that the model of a single, author-determined meaning resolves all the hermeneutical issues involved in Biblical interpretation. What I would suggest, however, is that such a hermeneutic is holistic, that it agrees with the rules of all communication, that it can be applied to all literature and all genres, and that it has less difficulties associated with it than any other alternative.