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THE EXTENT OF INTENT: A RESPONSE TO DR. S. NGEWA'S "THE VALIDITY OF MEANING AND AFRICAN CHRISTIAN THEOLOGY"

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Dr. Ngewa has done African Theology a service in drawing attention to the hermeneutical problem and demonstrating the danger of adopting (albeit unconsciously) a faulty interpretive methodology. [1] He outlines clearly the shortcomings of structuralism which focuses on the text as an autonomous artifact existing independently of author intentionality and the inadequacy of existentialism which simply encourages the subjective question, "what does this mean to me?" without regard to the objective teaching of the literary work. He seeks to remind us that the primary locus of meaning is to be found neither in reader response nor in the isolated text but in the intention of the author. In other words, all contextualized theology must emerge from sound, scholarly exegesis and the application of the grammatico–historical method of hermeneutics which seeks to determine what the original author meant to communicate to the original reader. [2] Dr. Ngewa is right to stress that we should be concerned about truth and accuracy in exegesis and not be content with interpretations which are merely "plausible", "reasonable", "defensible" or just "not impossible". [3]

Having dismissed structuralism and existentialism while admitting their healthy regard for the form of the written work and its challenge to one's own life, Dr. Ngewa procedes to advocate a third option which might be termed "intentionalism". This is the view that every text has only one meaning but limitless significance and application, [4]and the significance can only be safely determined once one has acquired a firm grasp of the meaning. Or, to put it another way, contextualization must emerge out of sound Biblical Theology. There is no short cut. Dr. Ngewa contends that this textual meaning is objective and changeless and is in fact identical with the author's intention when composing the text. Hirsch is quoted with approval: "Verbal meaning is whatever someone has willed to convey by a particular sequence of linguistic signs." [5] The exegetes task, therefore, is simply to determine what exactly was in the mind of the human author.

Now while acknowledging a general sympathy with intentionalism, I nevertheless feel that it has its own limitations and inadequacies. Here are some of them:

1) **A text may communicate less than the author intended** simply because he is an

imperfect communicator. It has long been acknowledged by literary critics that one must beware of the "intentional fallacy", [6] namely the assumption that the work is inevitably expressing what the author claims he was intending to say. At best the author's professed intention may be taken as *evidence* in determining the actual statement of the book. After all he may have failed to achieve his literary goal. If he is misunderstood it is not necessarily his reader's fault.

"But surely", the response is heard, "this objection to intentionalism is not applicable to Scripture where the human authors always achieved their goal." But how can we be sure? Take Paul for example. We know for certain that his contemporaries misunderstood his admonitions (e.g. 1 Cor 5:9ff) and his teachings were found obscure (II Pet. 3:15f). Do we have any grounds for assuming that his complex and nuanced attitude to, say, the status of women was any clearer to his original readers? I think not.

"Well then,"the intentionalist may argue, "if there is a discrepancy between intention and expression, primacy should be given to the former. Meaning resides in what was in the author's mind, not in what he inadvertantly wrote." But this is all reminiscent of the disgruntled student who returns with his graded exam complaining that one marked what he wrote rather than what he meant to write. In any case this questionable principle cannot be applied to Scripture which clearly affirms that inspiration (God's meaning) resides in the *writings* rather than the human author (*pasa graphe theopneustos* – II Tim. 3:16).

2) **A text may communicate more than the author intended** and this for two reasons.

(a) **The influence of the unconscious**

Psychology has discovered that there can be dimensions of meaning in someone's words which, being generated by the unconscious, are unrealized by the conscious mind of that person. The so – called "Freudian slip" is a good example. If a woman inadvertantly refers to her father as her husband and then quickly corrects herself, a psychiatrist may discern that there is more to it than a slip of the tongue; she may have latent incestuous desires. To the discerning ear we may say more than we mean to say! This is also true of the discerning eye. It is not uncommon that a literary critic draws out an interpretation of a passage which the author had not previously realized yet acknowledges as a valid reading which helps him understand his own poem or play better.

Contrary to Freud's notion of the unconscious as only the repository of infantile instincts and base urges, a more balanced view emerges from the work of the Swiss psychiatrist Carl Jung who views the unconscious as not only the receptacle of mental debris, but also the region from which emerges the deep wisdom of humanity and even divinity. This is as much the arena of God's activity as the conscious mind. It seems to me not unreasonable to suppose that the Biblical authors sometimes wrote more than they consciously meant because of the shaping influence of their unconscious minds. This is probably especially true of poetic works like Canticles and the Apocalypse.

(b) **The influence of the Holy Spirit**

Although the concept of *sensus plenior* goes back to patristic and medieval times, it is still a subject of interest and debate. Inspite of modern detractors [7] it must still be acknowledged that Scripture can carry a deeper meaning than the literal sense and that God's Spirit may imbue a text with meaning beyond the intention of the author. This seems to be the case, for instance, in Psalm 22 where David describes his destitution in hyperbolic terms, it surely being anachronistic to suggest that he consciously described the crucifixion of the Messiah when such a form of execution had not yet been invented. And yet this psalm is certainly a Messianic prophecy.

At best we can conclude, then, that a text means *at least* what the author intended to say, assuming his communication skills are adequate. Knowledge of the author's intention is therefore a necessary but not sufficient determinant for correctly discerning the meaning of a text.

3) **A text may have a degree of autonomy.**

Dr. Ngewa's thesis best suits propositional statements which clearly have a cognitive meaning and only one meaning at that. Such passages would include historical narratives like Chronicles and didactic books like Leviticus. But not all literature is of this nature. Many of the psalms, for example, were not penned to teach doctrines or facts but to communicate and engender, say, joy (Ps. 150), or depression (Ps. 88), or faith (Ps. 121). They are emotive rather than cognitive utterances. What they propositionally mean, what information they communicate, has no clear answer. In fact, many an artist, be she poet or painter (surrealist or abstract perhaps) or musical composer, would be profoundly puzzled if asked what her work "meant". She might argue that the question makes as much sense as to ask what Mondays or Mount Kenya means. One poet wrote "A poem should not mean but be." If its meaning could be adequately expressed propositionally in prose there would be no point writing the poem in the first place! In fact, to return to Mount Kenya, it might be argued that, if anything, the "meaning" of that mountain *alters* from the home of God for the traditional Kikuyu to the symbol of challenge and endurance for the tourist mountaineer. Or rather, using Dr. Ngewa's distinction, should we say these connotations are examples of the significance of the mountain rather than its meaning? If so, the interesting question poses itself as to whether something can have a significance but no meaning.

Some of the greatest art is a puzzle which ever confronts its creator with the enigma of itself in its autonomy and strangeness. Listen, for instance, to the testimony of a modern novelist who finds his characters surprising him in their willful behaviour:

> No novelist who has created a credible personage can ever be quite sure what the personage will do. Create your

> characters, give them a time and place to exist in, and leave the plot to them; the imposing of action on them is very difficult since action must spring out of the temperament with which you have endowed them. At best there will be a compromise between the narrative line you have dreamed up and the course of action preferred by the characters. [8]

In a very real sense great literature acquires a life of its own independent of the author. The source of the ideas and imagery is often a profound mystery. The artist feels more like a medium than a maker. If all this sounds like quasi-mysticism it is only because the creation process is not susceptible to rational analysis. To be in God's image not only means that we have a degree of freedom and autonomy but that the artifacts we produce do too. We are the demi-creators of creation. I would not be surprised to learn that John was startled by some of the symbols that flowed from his pen as he wrote the Apocalypse or that the author of Job was amazed by the finished product. In short I am suggesting that structuralism has something to teach us with its focus on the independence of the work of literature.

Finally, let us return to Dr. Ngewa's trichotomous division of the communication process (author-book-reader) and the concomitant hermeneutical schools (intentionalism - structuralism - existentialism). My suggestion is that error enters when advocates of these three schools see their own particular approach as exclusively true, or even as alternatives to one another. In fact the existential question "what does this mean to me?" is valid and important but belongs in the area of application rather than meaning, and the existential answer is contingent upon the answer to the structuralist question "what are the internal dynamics of this work?" [9] which, in turn, can only be answered safely once one has already answered the intentionalist question "what was the author intending to say?". The prime danger is when this order of enquiry is reversed or ignored.

Conclusion

As in so many areas of theology, an unfortunate polarization has occured in hermeneutics between the left wing of Schleiermacher through Bultmann and the New Hermeneutic, and the evangelical right wing which finds its roots in seventeenth century protestant rationalism. The former wing stresses revelation as elusive and irrational, to be apprehended intuitively and the latter views revelation as propositional to be grasped rationally. [10] But in this area also, truth is two-eyed. There is certainly no substitute for the intelligent examination of the text of Scripture using the tools of the linguist and the historian. Indeed the analysis of antique prose is a science. But if it is just a rational and logical process, a computer could be programmed to do it successfully and one wonders where room remains for another basic evangelical belief, namely the indispensability of the illumination of the Holy Spirit in the task of understanding Scripture. However, hermeneutics is also an art as one approaches the ancient book in all its strangeness. In fact the more poetic a statement it is, the more its secrets can

only be unlocked by an intuition that is patiently listening with an attentive regard and trusting receptivity. This requires the sensitizing of the whole personality which can only be achieved by the Holy Spirit himself for "the man without the spirit does not accept the things that come from the spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually discerned" (I Cor. 2:14).

Notes

[1]This paper is a response to Ngewa's article published in *EAJET* Vol. 6, No. 1, 1987.

[2]J. I. Packer helpfully enlarges on this crucial insight, "...the criterion whereby to test our own theological theories must be this: would the New Testament writers, were they here today, recognize these constructions as being in line with what they themselves said?". In *Is Christianity Credible?* by Peter Baelz et al. (Epworth Press, London, 1981) p. 71.

[3]Ngewa provides two examples of such exegetical abuses from the works of S. Nomenyo and Kofi Appiah–Kubi. The interested reader will find still more salutory examples by such eminent theologians as J. Moltmann in '"Incidentalism" in theology – or a theology for thirty year olds?' by D. F. Wright, *Themelios*, April 1986.

[4]This maxim now seems part of evangelical orthodoxy. It is unequivocally affirmed, for example, in Article VII of the Chicago Statement on Biblical Hermeneutics (*JETS*, Dec. 1982), p. 398.

[5]Ngewa. p. 19. He is quoting from *Validity in Interpretation* by E. D. Hirsch Jr. (Yale Univ. Press, 1967) p. 31.

[6]This notion can be traced back to *The Verbal Icon* (1954) by W. K. Wimsatt and Monroe C. Beardsley.

[7]For a negative assessment see "A critical analysis of Sensus Plenior" by J. Muthengi (*EAJET*, Vol. 3, No. 2).

[8]*99 Novels: the Best of English since 1939* by A. Burgess (Summit Books, New York, 1984) p. 16. For an example of the characters rebelling against the author see the novel *The French Lieutenant's Woman (1969)*by J. Fowles.

[9]A fruitful development in this area as applied to narrative literature is "story analysis". For a useful introduction see "Story in the Old Testament" by R. W. L. Moberly in *Themelios*, April, 1986.

[10]The one–sided stress on the propositional in Article VI and the strong suggestion that hermeneutics is a science rather than an art in Article IX of the Chicago Statement on Biblical Hermeneutics (*op cit*) exemplifies this right wing tendency.