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KNOWING THE BIBLICAL AUTHOR'S INTENTION:
The Problem of Distanciation

Yoilah K. Yilpet.

The Bible is at the heart of everything a Christian does, whether it is evangelising, teaching in the local church or developing a theological response to contemporary issues. One's view of Scripture is therefore of fundamental importance. Not only have liberals tried to undermine the authority of Scripture through erroneous views of inspiration, they now seek to dilute and alter the teaching of Scripture through faulty hermeneutics. In fact, the new hermeneutics is the new battleground for evangelicals seeking to maintain biblical authority

In this erudite article Rev. Dr. Yoilah Yilpet examines various approaches to the hermeneutical problem of interpreting an ancient text. The Bible, like all ancient documents, was written in a different culture and under different historical circumstances from anything we know today. How can we who live in the 21st century ever know the intention of the author who wrote in the distant past? In fact, do we need to know his intention? Abandoning the despair of liberal theologians, Yilpet demonstrates that today one can and should seek to interpret the biblical text by determining the author's intention. Anything less will result in total subjectivity and loss of the Christian gospel taught by the Christian church for the past two thousand years.

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INTRODUCTION

The question that is often asked is, 'How can one get to the author's intention or meaning in a passage from an ancient text like the Bible?' And, 'Is it possible to get to the author's intentions?' And, if it is possible, 'How do we get back and find out or recover what the meaning of the text is, especially considering the historical distance between the text and the interpreter/reader?' This is obviously the problem that distanciation (i.e. the historical distance between the text and reader) poses for us as we try to understand and interpret an ancient text like the Bible or any ancient document for that matter. The author is no longer available to us to communicate with us in person and clarify some issues in his text. And the language he spoke and wrote in is a dead language to us with which we do not speak and communicate today.

For some people the historical distance has become a chasm we cannot cross. They even raise the question of whether an ancient text can be intelligible.[1] James Barr rightly puts the intelligibility of an ancient text into proportion when he exclaims, "The fact that a writing is old does not in itself constitute a major difficulty in its comprehension. Of the great of the world, the main part is 'old'".[2] There is communication between the ancient and modern contexts that takes place through the ancient text, because it is written in human language.

The new hermeneutic of some existentialist theologians focused on the problem of transcending the historical particularity and the message of the Scripture by stressing the words *now* and *today* and the need to recapitulate scriptural stories in the interpreter's present existence.[3] Most interpreters, including those in the New

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[1]   See, D.E. Nineham, 'The Use of the Bible in Modern Theology', *B.J.R.L.* 52 (1969), 181, 191-92.

[2]   James Barr, *The Bible in the Modern World* (London: SCM, 1973), 140.

[3]   J.M. Robinson, 'Hermeneutic Since Barth', in *New Frontiers in Theology II: The New Hermeneutic*, eds. J.M. Robinson and J.B. Cobb; 'Hermeneutic', In *New Testament Interpretation*, edited by I.H. Marshall

Hermeneutic School have concluded. as E.D. Hirsch correctly analyses. that 'all knowledge is relative'[4] and a return to the author's own meaning is considered both unnecessary and wrong. Instead. meaning has often become a personal. subjective. and a changing thing. 'What speaks to me', 'what turns me on', 'what I get out of a text' are the significant concerns, not what an author intended by his use of words.

In this article. my purpose is to describe the problem caused by distanciation. then briefly point out some solutions given on how to handle this problem in interpretation. and finally. we would argue for the goal of interpretation to be the author's intention in interpreting a text.

THE PROBLEM OF DISTANCIATION

Distanciation is a major problem to the author's intended meaning of a text. The historical distance produces a broad gulf in time and world-view that exists between the ancient text and us (the interpreters/readers). The interpreter who sets out to understand and interpret the text must be aware of this historical distance. With this awareness of the historical distances comes the question, 'how does one get back to the perspective and message of an ancient text?' As Grant Osborne rightly observes. 'the problem is difficult enough when we try to interpret one another. for each of us has a slightly different perspective. and we use the same terms but with different content'.[5] When we consider the biblical text, the problem is greatER because of the historical distance between us and the time the text was written. We have a tendency to read modern issues back into the text. and a purely 'objective' approach which recreates the original meaning/situation without going back to modern pre-understanding is very difficult, and indeed others

(Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977), 308-333. Thiselton provides a good evaluation and critique of the 'New Hermeneutic' and its practioners.

[4]   E.D. Hirsch, Jr., *The Aims of Interpretation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976), 4.

[5]   Grant Osborne, *Class Notes on Hermeutics*, Fall Quarter, 1991, 3.

have argued, impossible.[6] Objective neutrality is the ideal, but in such a stance the interpreter is not free and cannot see how to overcome the historical distance and determine the text's message. Such emphasis on detached observation of the text is impossible.

Mary Ann Tolbert, in acknowledging the problem of distanciation, claims that "it is clear that more than one 'consistent interpretation' of the 'Gospel in all its parts' is possible" and concludes that "multiple interpretations arise... from the necessary historical conditionedness of both texts and readers".[7] She expands further on the problem to support her view of multiple interpretations of an ancient text.

> The historical, cultural, and intellectual distance between current readers and the production of an ancient text like Mark encourages the growth of multiple interpretations. Neither the author of a text nor its readers stand outside the movement of history. The conventions guiding reading and writing, cultural, social and intellectual values, and the very definition of truth itself along with the institutions that erect that definition shift from age to age, from culture to culture, from generation to generation .... From both a theoretical and a practical standpoint, then, multiple interpretations of text are not only legitimate but inevitable.[8]

Tolbert works from the assumption of the real problem of distanciation and then accepts the reader-response argument for multiple interpretations/meanings of a text. Thus, for her the author's intended meaning is not the goal of interpretation. She is skeptical that the modern reader will be able to understand a text, such as Mark, like that of 'the earliest readers and hearers of the Gospel'. We can say that for Tolbert, she allows for the polyvalence or multiple meanings of a text.

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[6]   See Jose Bleicher, *Contemporary Hermeneutic* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1980), 117-127.

[7]   Mary Ann Tolbert, *Sowing the Gospel* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1989), 7.

[8]   *Ibid.*, 8.

What we are faced with is this conclusion reached by Tolbert, that multiple meanings are necessary and inevitable because of the historical distance between the interpreter and ancient text. She has given up on consensus regarding the author's intention of a text. But the question is: Is this the best way we should deal with this problem of distanciation? And is this approach legitimate as she claims? How can we bridge the historical one of the ancient text and still recover the truth-intention of the text? Or, should we become completely skeptical as in reader-response criticism which claims that meaning is produced by the reader rather than the text?[9] I would argue that this should not be the case. Instead, we should seek to recover the author's single intended meaning in the text. This is the ethical decision and legitimate interpretation of the text.

SOME PROPOSED SOLUTIONS TO
THE PROBLEM OF DISTANCIATION

Hans-George Gadamer

German Philosopher Hans-George Gadamer in his *Truth and Method*, develops a philosophical hermeneutic which shares some of Martin Heidegger's perspectives and focuses on the types of experiences in which truth is communicated. He develops a theory of historical distance and the fusion of horizons. Gadamer offered a way to bring the ancient text over into the modern world through a *"Fusion of the Horizons"* between the world of the original text and the modern interpreter.[10] For him, historical consciousness and the historical distance it entails pose no problem for hermenutics; they simply clarify the situation and bring to the fore that element in the hermeneutical process which is the essential link between text and interpreter.[11] All interpreters perform their task from a position

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[9]   Stanley E. Fish, *Is There a Text in This Class? The Authority of Interpretative Communities* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1980.), 177.

[10]   Hans-George Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (New York: Seabury Press, 1975), 272.

[11]   *Ibid.*, 264.

within history. He views interpretation as an historical act. a 'placing of oneself within a process of tradition in which past and present are constantly fused'.[12]   This 'tradition' forms our pre-understanding, for it is the present ideals which our experiences and culture have shaped. The 'temporal distance' which is due to human confinement within the boundary of time is not necessarily negative. It helps one to acknowledge that he is historically separated from the text and confined in time. Knowing that time has passed, in consequence, one becomes aware of having pre-understanding (or prejudices) governing his understanding of the text. Therefore, the 'temporal distance' between ourselves and the text becomes a means of sifting our pre-understanding so as to select only those aspects which will prove meaningful in interpreting the text, thus avoiding pure subjectivity. As Gadamer puts it.

> It is only this temporal distance that can solve the really critical question of hermeneutics, namely of distinguishing the true prejudices by which we understand, from the false ones by which we misunderstand.[13]

'Temporal distance' entails the necessity of historical consciousness in the process of understanding of a text. and gradually shows the true historical significance of the text in relation to present context. In this way Gadamer merges the 'horizon of the text' with 'horizon of the interpreter', i.e. merging past with present.[14] This means that the gap between ancient and modern contexts is already bridged. It is filled with the continuity of custom and tradition, which determine the patterns of thought and language of the contemporary culture. In fact, the ancient text — in this case, the Scripture — is a part of that tradition.

Fundamental to Gadamer's hermeneutics is his rejection of the instrumental functions of language. For him, language is the

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[12]   *Ibid.*, 258.

[13]   *Ibid.*, 266.

[14]   *Ibid.*, 269-278.

medium of hermeneutical experience.[15] Over against the platonic emphasis on form and sign character of language, Gadamer points to the nature of the non-instrumental language. It is important to realise that for him, language and text are autonomous entities with a life of their own, and hence they speak to the interpreter as he speaks to the text. As Gadamer puts it,

> Now we are not starting from the object and enquiring into the nature of the word as a means. We are asking what and how it communicates to the person who uses it. It is in the nature of the sign that it has its being solely in its applied function, in the fact that it points to something else. Thus, it must be distinguished in this function from the context in which it is encountered and takes as sign, in order for its own being as an object to be annulled and for it to disappear in its meaning. It is the abstraction of pointing itself.[16]

Gadamer's understanding of language seems to be consistent with a phenomenological analysis of language. For him, man did not make a word (e.g., 'white') and endow it with meaning. He asserts,

> A word is not a sign from which one reached, nor is it a sign that one makes or gives to another, it is not an existent thing which one takes up and to which one accords the ideality of meaning in order to make something count. Rather, the ideality of the meaning lies in the word itself. It is meaningful already.[17]

Thus, since language is reality and grounded in our very Being and not merely in our thought-life, the two horizons of text and interpreter continually interact, both in tension and in fusion.[18] The end result of Gadamer's hermeneutical model is the fusing of the horizon of the ancient text with that of the contemporary

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[15] *Ibid.*, 345.

[16] *Ibid.*, 373.

[17] *Ibid.*, 377.

[18] See, A.C. Thiselton, *The Two Horizons: New Testament Hermeneutics and Philosopical Description* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Pub. Co., 1980).

interpreter. And if, text and interpreter fuse in a blend of horizons, and the text is autonomous from the moment of its inception, then I believe it is logical to say that the text will have polyvalence or multiple meanings as different interpreters read it.[19]

For Gadamer, the main purpose of hermeneutics is not an attempt to historically reconstruct the author's intention, but rather to historically penetrate into what the text itself says.[20] The meaning of a text is never identical with what the original writer intended to say to the original audience. He asserts that, 'Not occasionally only, but always, the meaning of a text goes beyond its author'.[21] The interpreter's horizon, internally his pre-understanding, and externally the ancient text's current position in the tradition – has a decisive role. Gadamer claims that,

> Texts do not ask to be understood as a living expression of the subjectivity of their writers .... What is fixed in writing has detached itself from the contingency of its origin and its author and made itself free for new relationships.[22]

The real meaning of the text is determined by the language of the text as presently constituted and by the historical situation of the interpreter and consequently by 'the totality of the objective course of history'.[23]

There are several problems with Gadamer's hermeneutic theory. In the *first* place, are unfruitful pre-judgements/pre-understanding necessarily discarded in the act of interpretation without one consciously doing so? *Secondly*, is tradition, as it were, always right? As Osborne says, 'tradition is given an uncritical role in the act of coming-to-understanding'.[24] *Thirdly*, Gadamer claims that the meaning of a text always goes beyond its author. But, does this

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[19] Gadamer, 354-55.

[20] *Ibid.,* 353.

[21] *Ibid.,* 264.

[22] *Ibid.,* 356-7.

[23] *Ibid.,* 263.

[24] Osborne, 10.

not open the door, as Hirsch claims, to be merely subjective understanding of the text?[25] It is not clear how he avoids the danger of subjective interpretation. And there is no developed methodology in his theory to distinguish between true and false interpretations of a text. Finally, Gadamer's view of language as reality or Being itself is problematic.[26] This view of language cannot provide for information or objective data.

However, Scripture provides objective data about God. Language has both a univocal and analogical function. Univocally, it helps us to know God as He is (e.g. 'God is faithful'); analogically, it pictures God in finite terms. The nature of language as a whole is analogical, but the core of meaning behind it, e.g. 'God is faithful', is univocal. Therefore, the Bible contains both language event and dogmatic content. Gadamer has elevated one side and negated the other. I believe this is unnecessary. His preoccupation with encounter or interaction becomes subjective and without an absolute referent. Original meaning then becomes relative. The original intent of the author must become the control whereby the interpreter is confronted with an absolute truth outside his own horizon.

Paul Ricoeur

Paul Ricoeur, a French phenomenologist, has developed a hermeneutical bridge which centres in philosophy of language, especially metaphorical language. He takes metaphor as mimesis and applies both phenomenological and semiotic categories to redefine the dialectic between metaphor and text. For him, metaphor takes place on the level of statement rather than word.[27]

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[25] Hirsch, *Validity in Interpretation* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1967), 245-264.

[26] See, Thiselton, 'Semantics and New Testament Interpretation' in *New Testament Interpretation*, ed. I.H. Marshall (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977), 75-104. He has a proper blend of linguistic and historical concerns.

[27] Paul Ricoeur, 'Biblical Hermeneutics: The Metaphorical Process', *Semeia* 4 (1975), 75-78 (cf. pp. 29-148); 'The Hermeneutical Function of Distanciation', *Philosophy Today* 17 (Summer 1973), 129-41.

Metaphor is not naming, but is predication. We cannot have a metaphorical word. Metaphors occur only in utterance. Thus, he reworks the classical distinction between "sense" as the objective content of the text and 'reference' as the interpreter's response to the text. Since, metaphor deals with the whole statement rather than the individual term, for Ricoeur it bridges the gap between 'sense' and 'reference' by becoming a living entity, a 'semantic event'.[28] Metaphor breaks through the interpreter's reality to force a new world of meaning upon the interpreter/reader. According to Ricoeur, metaphoric, poetic discourse fictionally redescribes reality.[29] Its basic referent is human experience in all its wholeness. The indirect communication of meaning is characteristic of parable and metaphor. Such language applies a familiar label to a new object which at first resists and then surrenders to the application. 'It is an eclipsing of the objective manipulable world, an illumining of the life-world, of non-manipulable being-in-the-world, which seems to me to be the fundamental ontological import of poetic language'.[30] Because human experience is its basic referent and its mode of expression is indirect, metaphoric/poetic language opens up many possible worlds which can be appropriated by the interpreter, who can then cross the hermeneutical bridge and continue to find meaning in the text.

Thus, Ricoeur redefines the hermeneutical circle. He believes he has found in metaphor a way to bridge Lessing's ditch.[31] The hermeneutical circle is not a subjective interpenetration of author and reader but rather is an ontological 'dialectic between disclosing a world and understanding one's self in front of this world'.[32] Ricoeur adds the semantic function of language to the semiological

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[28]   For this understanding and assessment of Ricoeur, I am indebted to Grant Osborne, *Class Notes*, 39-41.

[29]   Ricoeur, 'Biblical Hermeneutics', 34, 127-28.

[30]   *Ibid.*, .87.

[31]   *Ibid.*, 145.

[32]   Paul Ricoeur, 'Metaphor and the Main Problem of Hermeneutics' in *New Literary History* 6 (1974): 107-108 (cf. pp. 103-110).

and argues for the creative element of language as existential encounter. This post-semiotic perspective goes beyond the view of language as a closed system of signs (which deals with "dead" metaphors) to a phenomenologically dynamic semantics.

For Ricoeur a 'text' is 'any discourse fixed by writing'.[33] and hermeneutics is 'the art of discerning the discourse in the work'.[34] Text interpretation for him, consists of two parts: 'To understand a text is to follow its movement from sense to reference: from what it says, to what it talks about'.[35] Interpretation is not over when the work is merely explained. For Ricoeur, 'reading is like execution of a musical score; it marks the realisation, the enactment, of the semantic possibilities of the text'.[36] These semantic possibilities must not only be uncovered but must be seriously considered by the reader, for only when the message is received can we say that something has been communicated,

We can, as readers, remain in the suspense of the text, treating it as a worldless and authorless object; in this case, we explain the text in terms of its internal relations, its structure. On the other hand, we can lift the suspense and fulfill the text in speech, restoring it to living communication; in this case, we interpret the text.[37]

In his discussion of 'distanciation', Ricoeur argues that writing as discourse becomes an 'event' and a 'work' which immediately becomes distanced from the author.[38] Writing entails a veritable upheaval of the language-world relations, which results in what he terms the 'threefold semantic autonomy'[39] of the text. This means,

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[33]   Paul Ricoeur, *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences*, Translated by J.B. Thompson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 145.

[34]   *Ibid.*, 138.

[35]   Paul Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory: Discourse and the Surplus of Meaning* (Fort Worth: Texas Christian University Press, 1976), 87-88.

[36]   Ricoeur, *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences*, p. 159.

[37]   *Ibid.*, 152.

[38]   Ricoeur, 'Hermeneutical Function of Distanciation', 129-130.

[39]   Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory*, 30.

first, that the meaning of the text is no longer equated with the author's intention. Because the author is no longer there to clarify his intentions, the text's career escapes the finite horizon lived by its author.[40] Second, the text is also cut off from its original context and its original audience. Free from it original *Sitz im leben*, the text is open to an unlimited series of reading by other audiences. Third, the autonomy of the text from its original situation means it is no longer able to refer ostensively. What the text and the reader share is not a situation, but what Ricoeur calls a 'world'. Since a text is 'open to an unlimited series of readings', it 'decontextualizes' itself in new situations; in this 'distanciation' from the author is inherent both in the text as written and as interpreted. 'Distanciation' (i.e. the distance between the historical text and the present interpreter) is only a barrier between the interpreter and author, but in the text the worlds or horizons come together. Interpretation is text and not author-centred. For Ricoeur too, 'distanciation' is also the 'fundamental characteristic in the historicity of human experience', and is actually what makes human communication possible. His 'primordial instance' of 'distanciation' is the 'dialect of event and meaning'.[41]

Thus, for Ricoeur the role of hermeneutics is to discover the new world of meaning that is established by metaphor, then experience it, and thereby unite objective meaning with existential relevance by pointing toward the world of the text and the world of the self at the same time.[42] In his concept of discourse as 'work', a text is to link together series of partial ideas of meanings interwoven into a whole. The hermeneutical circle established involves the constant intrusion of the interpreter's own perspective as well as the autonomous nature of the text itself. His theory of 'distanciation' is grounded in the ontological nature of language itself. Language is no longer a closed system of signs but an existential encounter, which allows the interpreter to read into the text.

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[40]   *Ibid.*

[41]   Ricoeur, 'Hermeneutical Function of Distanciation', 129-130.

[42]   I am indebted to Grant Osborne for this understanding. *Class Notes*, 40-41.

Ricoeur's hermeneutical model has some problems. First of all, I doubt whether he has avoided the charge of subjectivism. His preoccupation with linguistic encounter becomes subjective, and without an absolute referent, interpretation becomes relative. The same criticism of Gadamer above, applies to Ricoeur's view of language. I agree with Tolbert who takes issue with the view that all language is metaphorical, arguing that language thereby will become 'unrecognizable and meaningless'.[43] There are both 'dead' (static) and 'live' (dynamic) metaphors in the linguistic endeavour. Secondly, Ricoeur's hermeneutics replaces the 'intention' of the text with 'polyvalence' or 'multiple meanings'. The original meaning of the text disappears from the hermeneutical horizon. Interpretation is not nearly as open-ended as he makes it to be. His refusal to distinguish meaning from significance and equating the individual's interaction (or 'existential encounter") with the text's meaning is exceedingly dangerous. One may ask, "Is it possible to isolate the 'literal meaning' of the text or are we caught in Ricoeur's hermeneutical circle which makes objective interpretation impossible?"

James Barr

We shall consider one more approach in dealing with the problem of distanciation in interpretation. There are those who think that the author's intention is an inaccessible goal and, therefore, a useless object of interpretation. Indeed, the two approaches we have considered thus far have the same attitude. But the solution for dealing with the problem is what James Barr calls 'cultural relativism'. He claims our perspective is limited by our own cultural experience, and so we cannot fully understand the author's perspective. Barr has summarised the effect of cultural relativism.

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[43]   Mary Ann Tolbert, 'Polyvalence and the Parables: A Consideration of J.D. Crossan Cliffs of Gall', *Seminar Papers SBL* 1980, 63-7.

> The Bible, like all other literature, is *dependent* on the cultural milieu (in fact, a plurality of cultural milieus) in which it was written. Our modern culture is different, and it is *not possible* that the same work, the Bible, can have the same meaning as it had in its own cultural milieu. Any work or text composed in an ancient time and an ancient culture has its meaning in that time and that culture, and in our time or culture may have a different meaning or indeed may have no meaning at all.[44]

Thus, Barr would allow for multiple meanings in the text as a way of bridging the historical distance. For him, since the biblical writers are understood to have been conditioned by their cultures and since ancient assumptions are different from ours, perception and interpretation will also be different.

There are three arguments against this position and approach of cultural relativism. *First*, cultural perspective ultimately implies that verbal meaning exists *only* by virtue of the perspective that gives it existence.[45] It follows that it is impossible to distort a meaning that cannot exist in the modem world. *Second*, from the viewpoint of biblical revelation, the authors and interpreters, despite cultural differences, have in common what is necessary to communicate. They are, by means of creation, made in the image of God. One aspect of God's image is the ability to communicate. Communication is by definition a sharing of meaning that occurs through public signs of language that have relationship to this meaning. It is impossible to recover an author's private meaning and cultural experiences, because they involve emotions, reactions about him, and his consciousness at the time of writing. But, meaning can be reproduced from the text, even if the cultural experience is inaccessible. *Third*, ancient cultural writings represent a special case of communication with another person through writing. It is necessary to share facts of the language and assumptions in the culture so as not to miss allusions or mistake the contemporary sense of words, but these are preliminary tasks that remain squarely in the public domain. It is to recover the author's

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[44]   Barr, *The Bible in the Modern World*, 39 (italics added).

[45]   Hirsch, *The Aims of Interpretation*, 48.

intended meaning in the text due to the linguistic signs for communication and the universality of language.

THE GOAL OF INTERPRETATION IS THE AUTHOR'S INTENDED MEANING

First of all, we must acknowledge the existence of an author when reading a text. Somebody has to create a text. We must also acknowledge that most texts reflect an author's desire to communicate. A text represents an author's will to communicate. We have an obligation to honour a human being's desire to communicate. By denying the importance of the author, we betray the lack of concern to hearing the author's viewpoint. I would dare to say that denying the importance of the author is verging on intellectual arrogance, not wanting to know anything about that person's cultural milieu. As Hirsch maintains that literary theories and emphases in interpretation reflect 'ethical choices'.[46] We must decide what should be the 'goals of interpretation' and in making the decision 'we have to enter the realm of ethics'.[47] Interpretation is never innocent of ethical motives and goals. For Hirsch the issue is clear: those who choose to ignore authorial intention are guilty of a vicious type of intellectual domination.

> To treat an author's words merely as grist for one's mill is ethically analogous to using another man merely for one's own purposes.[48]

When we engage a text 'solipsistically', we in effect manipulate and abuse the intentions of another person.

Thus, the first issue to be considered is the question of the goal of interpretation. The task of hermeneutics should be to delineate the proper goal of interpretation. Following Hirsch's ethical argument above, I believe the goal of interpretation must be the author's intended meaning in the text. We must seek to understand what the

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[46]   *Ibid.*, 77.

[47]   *Ibid.*, 85.

[48]   *Ibid.*, 91.

biblical text meant to a person living in that historical and cultural context. The priority should be for determining the original author's intended meaning which is the true core of biblical interpretation. First, we seek the cognitive knowledge and then apply that knowledge to life. The key hermeneutical question is, 'What was the original author's meaning when he wrote a particular text?'

Dr. Walter Kaiser also feels that the issue of the goal of interpretation is the point of crisis in hermeneutics.

> The issue must be put bluntly: Is the meaning of a text to be defined solely in terms of the verbal meaning of that text as those words were said by the Scriptural author? Or should the meaning of a text be partly understood in terms of what it now means to me, the reader and interpreter? There hangs one of the great dilemmas of our age. And there also hangs the fortunes of the authority of scripture.[49]

For him, the single meaning of a text is the author's intended meaning.

Hirsch also argues forcefully, using a pragmatic foundation for this goal in interpretation. He says,

> To banish the original author as the determiner of meaning was to reject the only compelling normative principle that could lend validity to an interpretation.[50]

Thus, the goal of the author's intention is not simply a pragmatic goal but a necessary goal. It is necessary because of the very nature of verbal communication. Verbal communication is the expression of a message by an author to an audience.

Now that we have established the goal of interpretation as the author's intended meaning, one must, however, ask whether this 'intended meaning' can be discovered at all, due to the problem of distanciation. First of all, we would adopt the distinction of Hirsch between meaning and significance,

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[49]   Walter C. Kaiser, Jr. *Toward an Exegetical Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1981), 24.

[50]   E.D. Hirsch, *Validity of Interpretation*.

> *Meaning* is that which is represented by a text; it is what the author meant by his use of a particular sign sequence; it is what the signs represent. *Significance* on the other hand, names a relationship between the meaning and a person or a conception of a situation.[51]

Thus, he separates 'meaning', the act of comprehending the intended message of a text, from 'significance', the act of inserting that meaning into a present context or structure; for instance, one's own value-system.

Hirsch also distinguishes between 'private meaning' and 'intended meaning'. The relativists (he calls them 'cognitive atheists') deny any such distinction between 'private meaning' and 'intended meaning' or between 'meaning' and 'significance'.[52] To subvert the goal of interpretation (which is objective knowledge) is to reduce all knowledge to the horizon of one's own prejudices and personal predilections. It is doubtful if one can learn anything by usurping the author's meaning in a text and inserting one's own. To do this is to replace the 'intention' of the text with 'polyvalence' or 'multiple meanings'.

The crucial issue that distanciation causes is the possibility of moving behind one's own pre-understanding to the text. There are differences in culture, social and world-view that make up the interpreter's pre-understanding. And also, if the text is totally autonomous from the author, and the reader/interpreter cannot move from significance to meaning, then the intention of the author can never be determined. But, as Osborne has shown through his study of 'Genre Criticism', it is impossible to have a complete autonomy of the text. He demonstrated convincingly how genre of the text can provide the viability of identifying the author's intended meaning. Genre as a dynamic tool makes it possible to discover the 'literal sense' of a passage. It also provides the linguistic framework for the semantic verification which the interpreter attempts in the hermeneutical process. It plays a positive role as a hermeneutical tool for determining the intended meaning of the

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[51]   Hirsch, *Validity in Interpretation*, 8.

[52]   Hirsch, *Aims of Interpretation*, 2, 36, 49.

text. As Osborne puts it, 'genre is more than a means of classifying literary types; it is an epistemological tool for unlocking meaning in individual texts'.[53]

Returning to the issue of pre-understanding, the very 'historical distance' which is part of the hermeneutical circle, demands that the interpreter becomes aware of his pre-understanding and allows the text to challenge his own world. It is with this in mind that we would place our study of 'meaning' as a crucial preliminary step in hermeneutics. So, while we agree that purely objective or scientific understanding is impossible and that a shared understanding between the interpreter and text are necessary, 'distanciation' itself has a positive purpose in making the interpreter aware of his own pre-understanding so that the text may challenge his own world of reality. I agree with Thiselton who argues correctly that it is one thing to 'understand the text ... more *deeply* and more *creatively* and another to understand it *correctly*' (italics his).[54]

The fact that an author is no longer present to explain the meaning of the text once it is written, does not mean that the text is 'autonomous' from the author. Even though the difficulties of objective interpretation are great, this does not mean that texts could not be objectively understood and that they should be read anew in each situation and given new meanings. But the simple fact is that we read a text on the basis of our own background, pre-understanding and traditions. Pre-understanding and traditions can be positive in helping us understand the text and determine its meaning. In fact, as Osborne puts it, 'It is not only impossible but dangerous to put our knowledge and theological tradition aside as we study a biblical text'.[55]   That very knowledge provides categories for understanding the text itself. At the same time, we should be conscious of the fact that 'these traditions have potential for controlling the text and determining its meaning'.[56]

[53]   *Ibid.*, 182.

[54]   Thiselton, *The New Hermeneutic*, 323.

[55]   Osborne, *Class Notes*, 2.

[56]   *Ibid.*

CONCLUSION

There are indeed two definite horizons: that of the text (e.g. the Bible) and the interpreter. In the Bible, there is a clear statement of authorial intent in passage after passage regarding the normativeness of the propositional truth content. The Bible was written within the vortex of a series of special cultures and times. No interpreter has the right to make that text say whatever he or she wants it to say. The text must be allowed to say what it wants to say, but respect must be had for the particular setting and culture in which it was written.

Through the grammatico-historical exegesis we must try to recover the author's intended meaning from the text. In our exegesis of a text, genuine exegetical problems and differences might arise from our interpretation of the text, but the goal of our interpretation is one – namely, the author's intended meaning. Interpreters might take different options of meanings suggested by the syntactical relationships of the structure in the text itself. But, at least there is textual control over the meanings/interpretations they hold, and not their subjective views. Then, hopefully they would be humble enough to allow the other person's interpretation to challenge theirs and to make them go back to the text to reexamine the evidence. Interpreters should try to reach a consensus if they all believe that the text has one single author's intended meaning.

I believe that genuine exegetical issues are quite different from the issue of 'polyvalence' or 'multiple meanings' in the text. The exegetical problems are few compared to the bulk of material in the Bible. Again, genre is one among many tools in the grammatico-historical interpretation that can contribute to the unlocking of the rules of the proper language game in order to trace the text back to its original, intended meaning. Thus, I believe that recovering the author's intended meaning is a viable possibility and that we should not be skeptical. We can approach the certainty of the text meaning far more than we realise.

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