THE FALLACY OF EQUATING MEANING WITH THE HUMAN AUTHOR'S INTENTION

Philip B. Payne*

I. THE IMPORTANCE OF INTENTION

A fundamental question behind most Biblical exegesis is and ought to be: "What was the intention of the human author?" Most of the meaning of the Biblical text is identical with the human author's intention. The importance of his intention is highlighted when one considers that social context is an essential part of meaning. Often underlying the question of an author's intention, however, is a misunderstanding of the word "intention" and of its proper significance for exegesis. Some of the various ways in which the word "intention" is used and the complexity of this idea will be considered below. It will be seen how difficult it can be to demonstrate what the original intention of a Biblical author was centuries ago.

But beyond specifying the problems related to the word "intention," the thesis of this paper is that in spite of the crucial role the human author's intention has for the meaning of a text his conscious intention does not necessarily *exhaust* the meaning of his statements, especially in more poetic and predictive writings. Ultimately God is the author of Scripture, and it is his intention alone that exhaustively determines its meaning. Therefore the exegete should not necessarily restrict the meaning of the text to what he feels can be demonstrated to be the intention of the human author.

Nonetheless, interpretation of any text should not obviate the intention of the human author. He does have the right to say that certain interpretations of his words are wrong. It should be remembered, though, that God can reveal more through the words of a writer of Scripture than he fully understood. An exegete can know that God has done this only when further revelation shows that he did.

Intention should guide exegesis only tentatively and as the text opens it up. Ultimately the *text* is the source from which the exegete draws meaning. In order to draw out this meaning, the text must be considered in the light of its total context, literary and historical. The literary context of a passage includes first and foremost its immediate literary setting, then the whole book, other books by the same author, the illumination given by the rest of Scripture, and all other documents that elucidate the meaning of the text. The historical context involves primarily the immediate configuration of the author (including his intention), his audience, and their situation, which may be elucidated by other social, cultural and historical factors.

*Philip Payne is an Evangelical Free Church missionary to Japan.

II. THE SOCIAL CONTEXT OF MEANING

Meaning does not exist in any text apart from someone's understanding of it, whether that be the author, his audience, or even God. If there is to be a meaning at all it must have a personal point of reference. Many philosophers and linguists have shown that language is a social phenomenon and must be understood in terms of its use.[1]

The meaning of a saying depends frequently on who said it, to whom, and on what occasion. Its context helps to specify its meaning. When something is said to a particular audience, the author's intention usually concerns that audience. He chooses terms appropriate to them, and so the saying reflects the character of the audience.

> For some years we have been realizing more and more clearly that the occasion of an utterance matters seriously, and that the words used are to some extent to be "explained" by the context in which they are designed to be or have actually been spoken in a linguistic interchange.[2]

Thus meaning is related to the author's intention and may be elucidated by an understanding of his hearers and their situation. Investigation of the probable understanding of the audience can often be done more objectively than investigation of the author's intention, which depends on probing his consciousness to find his purpose behind writing.

Various aspects of the social context of meaning have at times been used selectively to the exclusion of others. Two fallacies concerning the identification of meaning have become widely recognized within literary circles: the "intentional fallacy," [3] and the "affective fallacy." The former makes complete identification of a text's meaning with the author's intention, the latter with its understanding by or its effect on its hearers. At an opposite pole to these two fallacies is a third fallacy, namely that of divorcing meaning from the author, his original audience and the occasion of utterance. Such thinking has typified the approach of the newer criticism, which characteristically treats the text as autonomous from its original situation.

III. THE DIFFICULTY OF DEMONSTRATING INTENTION

The Bible authors' intentions are an elusive matter for many reasons. We will consider only four reasons here: (1) "Intention" can be understood at many levels; (2) an author may have more than one reason for making a statement—his intention, in other words, may be complex; (3) intention is a complex category involving mental states that are in a constant flux; intention may suggest subconscious as well as conscious factors; and (4) it is difficult to demonstrate what the

[1]Cf. L. Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* (trans. G. E. M. Anscombe; Oxford: Blackwell, 1968); J. L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1962); K. L. Pike, *Language in Relation to a Unified Theory of the Structure of Human Behavior* (The Hague: Mouton, 1967) 25-36.

[2]Austin, *Things*, p. 100.

[3]The first detailed study of this seems to be W. K. Wimsatt, Jr., and M. C. Beardsley, "The Intentional Fallacy," *The Verbal Icon: Studies in the Meaning of Poetry* (ed. W. K. Wimsatt, Jr., and M. C. Beardsley; London: Methuen, 1970) 4-18.

intentions of the Biblical authors were, since we are separated from them by many centuries and their thoughts are known to us only through their writings.

"Intention" can be understood at many levels. These include the intention of an author in writing a book, a chapter, a paragraph, a sentence, a phrase, or even a particular word. It is important to recognize the particular levels of intention under consideration and not to confuse them. Occasionally someone says that the Chronicler or an Evangelist did not intend to convey historical information but that in writing his book(s) he was concerned only with spiritual truths. It may be true that the Chronicler's *primary* intention in writing the books of 1 and 2 Chronicles was to convey spiritual truths, such as God's involvement with his people. But this does not exclude—indeed, it may even demand—*his intention through particular narratives* (chapters, paragraphs, sentences) to convey historical information that demonstrates God's involvement with his people, acting in history.

Often there are many reasons for, or intentions behind, a work. Why did Luke write Luke and Acts? Was it as an evangelistic work, or to encourage Christians, or to propound a particular theological viewpoint, or to vindicate Paul, or out of interest in the early history of the Church? No single answer would exhaust Luke's reasons for writing. Perhaps if we could ask Luke for all the reasons why he wrote, he would list several and then admit that there were probably more reasons but that he had never consciously set out to specify all of them. If he could look over what he had written, the text would probably suggest further reasons to him.

The complexity of intention applies on other levels as well as on that of books. Frequently the author has more than one reason for writing a chapter, paragraph, sentence or word. Therefore to limit meaning to "*the* intention of the author" as if he had *only one* intention may truncate the meaning he intended to convey. This is not to deny the importance of an author's having a specific purpose in mind, one that gives his writing coherence. Nor is it to deny that it is crucial for exegetes to recognize what is primary in any given text.

Few if any writers or speakers could describe all the complex factors that contribute to the development of their work, such as why they chose the imagery they did and all they wanted their work to accomplish. Behind, and in some sense "causing," every piece of literature is a reservoir of sensory and mental experiences. The mental process, of which intention is a part, is constantly developing as a work progresses. But this progression can never be known fully, nor need it be identified in order to understand and evaluate a given work.

The elusiveness of changing intentions is further complicated by the possibility of subconscious intentions being expressed or of intentions being expressed accidentally. It is impossible to know for sure how much of an author's intention was subconscious or how his choice of words and forms was shaped by unconscious desires and patterns. In the case of the Biblical writers and Jesus, the only access we have to their intentions is in the texts that survive from their time.

When we are considering men whose minds were immersed in the Hebrew Scriptures, it is difficult to distinguish conscious from unconscious allusions to the OT and both of these from coincidental similarities in expression. Probably these Biblical authors themselves were not aware of every allusion they made to Scripture.

This elusiveness of intention, which develops and is modified as a work unfolds, is reflected in the quest undertaken by Hardy's rustic constable, who said, "He's the man we were in search of, that's true, and yet he's not the man we were in search of. For the man we were in search of was not the man we wanted." [4]

Even if it were possible for an author to specify his intention(s) exhaustively and with precision, should a hearer ask him for further clarification, still in the case of Biblical exegesis centuries separate us from those authors. Their thoughts are accessible to us only through their writings. Hence it is difficult if not impossible to prove exactly what the intentions of an author were. To equate "intention" with "purposes that can be demonstrated" will tend to truncate the author's original intent.

The various levels at which intention can be understood, its frequent complexity, its elusiveness, and the time gap separating us from the Biblical authors all add to the difficulty of demonstrating what the intentions of the Biblical authors were.

This difficulty is further complicated since the phrase "the intention of the author" is commonly understood in three different ways: (1) the author's primary intention; (2) the totality of the author's *conscious* understanding of the import of his words at the time he originally spoke them; and (3) all those factors, subconscious as well as conscious, that guided him in his choice of words and total expression. We will argue next that given any one of these three understandings of "intention," particularly of the first two, it is fallacious to assume that meaning *always* ought to be equated with the author's intention.

IV. THE FALLACY OF EQUATING MEANING WITH THE HUMAN AUTHOR'S INTENTION

Error comes when we define "intention" as the author's *primary* intention, if we then proceed to exclude on principle any other meaning from the text. This is fallacious because the author may originally have intended to convey more than his primary intention. It is also fallacious because he might originally have intended subconsciously to convey more than his primary intention. This would be confirmed if the author himself were later to recognize that originally, even though he had not verbally or consciously formulated the secondary import that is in question, he had in fact desired to convey such an import through his words.

Error also comes when we define intention as the author's *conscious* understanding of the import of his words at the time when he originally

[4] Wimsatt and Beardsley, "Intentional," pp. 4-6, 9.

spoke them, if we then proceed to exclude on principle any other meaning from the text. This is fallacious because an author may say something that carries a meaning he might subsequently acknowledge and approve, even though this meaning had been subconscious when it first came to expression in his words. It is not uncommon for someone to be surprised by the degree of insight that appears in something one has said or written. The expression of the subconscious is so characteristic of human language that to say that the prophets could not speak better than they knew would be to consider them in this respect unhuman, unless "knew" were taken to include all their subconscious thought and perception.

The inadequacy of intention exhaustively to define meaning is compounded in the case of poetry. Poetic writings usually have a more complex meaning and are more pictorial than prose. Their depth of meaning does not lend itself easily to fitting into precise intentions, since it often grows out of emotion or intuition. The literary critic Stephen Ullmann has correctly observed that "the intention behind an image is often very difficult to determine, and one must also allow for the presence of two or three intentions in the same image." [5] The extensive poetic and parabolic material in the Scriptures should be interpreted with particular caution lest the conjectured intention of the author be used to truncate its meaning. But on the other hand one must not ignore the necessary quest for the author's intention, nor must he give an interpretation that would obviate the author's intention. Such expressions of unintended but still desired meanings are not restricted to poetic language. One common example in all sorts of writing is what is called the principle of entailment. Speakers are frequently unconscious of meanings which are *entailed* in their utterances. There is such a complexity involved in certain types of utterances that they entail things other than their primary assertions. For instance, in an ethical challenge, there may be entailed some description of the situation, an evaluation of it, a declaration of the possibility of action in the situation, and advice concerning the right course of action to take. But the person presenting the challenge is usually not conscious that he is performing all of these functions.

We may illustrate this with Nathan's parable of the ewe lamb, which urged David to repent. In this challenge to David, Nathan, at least in part, described David's situation, assessed it, declared David's situation to be open for repentance, and advised David to repent. We do not know if Nathan consciously intended to convey each of these separate yet entailed aspects of his challenge. But to deny that any one of these factors is entailed in Nathan's challenge would be to undercut the basis of its effective performance as a challenge.

Many sorts of utterances entail more than the conscious intention of their speaker: commands, calls to action, urgings, challenges, expressions of attitudes, warnings, advice, judgments, and statements of in-

[5] S. Ullmann, *Style in the French Novel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1957) 216.

tention.[6] I. A. Richards and Christine Gibson affirm that most sentences are "at least attempting to do" these sorts of work: selecting, describing, realizing, valuing, influencing, ordering, and proposing.[7] Whether or not these critics are correct in saying that most sentences attempt to do *each* of these functions, it seems to be beyond question that many of our statements perform functions of which we are unconscious at the time of utterance. From this basic insight into the nature of entailment, which characterizes so much of language, it should be evident that meaning should not be confined to the author's *conscious* intention.

Even if we were to define "intention" to include the subconscious factors at work in molding the author's expression, in the case of the Biblical authors we would still be in error if we were to equate, on principle, meaning with the author's intention. This is because of the further influence of the Holy Spirit inspiring their words.

The Scriptural text seems to teach that at least in certain instances the Biblical writer was not aware of the *full import* of his own words. This recognition does not necessitate, as Walter Kaiser assumed in his 1970 article, "The Eschatological Hermeneutics of 'Epangelicalism': Promise Theology," that the meaning would then be "totally unknown to the human writer." [8] But the Biblical text does seem to teach that there were certain things the Biblical writers conveyed that they themselves did not *fully* understand.

For instance, Dan 8:27 states: "And I, Daniel, was overcome and lay sick for some days; then I rose and went about the king's business; but I was appalled by the vision and did not understand it." Here Daniel makes it clear that he did not understand the vision of a ram, a he-goat and a horn. Even the interpretation left him baffled. Likewise in Dan 12:8-9 we read: "I heard, but I did not understand. Then I said, 'O my lord, what shall be the issue of these things?' He said, 'Go your way, Daniel, for the words are shut up and sealed until the time of the end.' " Daniel again admits he did not understand and asks, "What shall be the issue (or as the *NASB* has it, "the outcome") of these things?" His question is not merely "When," as Kaiser says,[9] but "*What* will be the outcome of these events?" In context, "these events" are those of which he had been prophesying. Again, Daniel was not fully aware of the import of his prophecy.

When Abraham said to Isaac, "God will provide himself the lamb for a burnt offering, my son" (Gen 22:8), he seems to have been anticipating the sacrifice of Isaac. But he spoke better than he knew, as could also be said of Caiaphas in his statement, "It is expedient for you that one man should die for the people, and that the whole nation

[6]Cf. the development of the principle of entailment by Austin, *Things*, pp. 142-160.

[7]*Techniques in Language Control* (Rowley, Massachusetts: Newbury, 1974) 137-138.

[8]*JETS* 13 (1970) 94.

[9]Ibid., p. 95.

should not perish" (John 11:51).[10]

Likewise, it would be difficult to defend that every prophecy identified in the NT as being fulfilled by Jesus Christ, such as Psalm 16, 22 or 110, was understood in just that sense by its author or that each was on his part intended as a messianic prediction. 1 Pet. 1:10-12 seems to indicate that this was a fairly common phenomenon:

> The prophets, who spoke of the grace that was to come to you, searched intently and with the greatest care, trying to find out the time and circumstances to which the Spirit of Christ in them was pointing when he predicted the sufferings of Christ and the glories that would follow. It was revealed to them that they were not serving themselves but you, when they spoke of the things that have now been told you by those who have preached the gospel to you by the Holy Spirit sent from heaven. Even the angels long to look into these things (*NIV*).

The prophets' quest concerned that "to which the Spirit of Christ in them was pointing." The text teaches that the object of their intent searching was that which the Spirit was revealing through them. All the passage clearly states that the prophets did understand is that "they were not serving themselves but you." [11]

In the light of these texts and the previous observations on the character of language, we cannot agree with the conclusion of Kaiser that the Scriptures have "one truth-intention, whose meaning is to be found in the intention of the human writer." [12] The "intention of the human writer" is *not* necessarily identical with "the sense conveyed by his words." [13]

If we were to be correct in limiting meaning to the author's intention, we would have to define "intention" to include *all* those factors, unconscious and subconscious as well as conscious, that guided him in his choice of words and total expression. In the case of the Scriptures, this would include the influence of the Holy Spirit.

But is it appropriate to include the work of the Holy Spirit as part of the unconscious "intention" of a Biblical author? In English usage "intention" generally refers to "what one has in mind to do or bring about." Hence, it is typically associated with a conscious plan. Even if we understand the term so as to include subconscious factors, it still seems to be an odd use of language to include the influence of the Holy Spirit as part of an author's "intention." In the examples mentioned above, the prophets seem not to have understood consciously

[10]Cf. further defense of this thesis from Scripture with bibliographical references in J. B. Payne, *Encyclopedia of Biblical Prophecy* (New York: Harper, 1973) 4-5.

[11]Kaiser goes beyond the clear assertion of the text when he states that "the prophets knew they were predicting four things according to I Peter 1:10-12: (1) the sufferings of Christ, (2) the glories of Christ, (3) the order of these two events, i.e., 'the glory that should follow,' and (4) that they were ministering unto us in the N.T. era"; *JETS* 13 (1970) 95.

[12]Ibid., p. 94.

[13]*Contra* ibid.; cf. "The Present State of Old Testament Studies," *JETS* 18 (1975) 71-72.

or subconsciously the total import of their prophetic words. Since the influence of the Holy Spirit was not something arising from the mental framework of the speaker, we should not necessarily include his influence as part of the author's "intention." Therefore, at least in cases of prophecy in which the prophet was not fully cognizant of the import of his words, it would be fallacious to *equate* the meaning of the prophecy with the author's intention.

V. THE SUPPOSED AUTONOMY OF LITERATURE

Many modern literary critics speak of literary works of art as autonomous in the sense of being independent of their original setting in life. For instance, there is a tendency in treating the parables of Jesus as literature to divorce them from their setting in history and to subordinate their original meaning to some contemporary or timeless meaning. Dan O. Via, R. W. Funk, and J. D. Crossan deny that a parable's meaning depends on its context in Jesus' life.[14] Via claims that reapplication rather than the original reference of parables is the true goal of interpretation and that the parable itself apart from its context carries meaning.[15] He states, "I have no interest at all in even the Persona of the historical Jesus." [16]

The key reason for this lack of historical concern has been exposed by one who should know, the literary critic Northrop Frye: "The commenting critic is often prejudiced against whatever restricts his freedom." [17] Such a divorce of meaning from the context of the parables in Jesus' life detracts from the interdependence of factors in the original speech event which contributed to their meaning. Our concern as exegetes should be restricted to the *original meaning* that God intended, not the contemporary impressions that the text can evoke.

When Via and others treat the parables as independent of their original setting in Jesus' life, they are not really treating them as autonomous. They merely substitute a new setting, that of their own world. It is not possible to set a piece of literature free, as "autonomous" might suggest. One can only perceive it from new vantage points, always providing it with a new setting. This can be an interesting

[14]D. O. Via, "A Response to Crossan, Funk and Petersen," *Semeia* 1 (1974) 222; "Parable and Example Story: A Literary-Structuralist Approach," *Semeia* 1 (1974) 119-120; *The Parables: Their Literary and Existential Dimension* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1967) 39; R. W. Funk, "Critical Note," *Semeia* 1 (1974) 189; J. D. Crossan, "The Seed Parables of Jesus," *JBL* 92 (1973), p. 261 n. 62; "Structuralist Analysis and the Parables of Jesus," *Semeia* 1 (1974) 206, where Crossan rejects his earlier qualification of "the necessity of having some established idea of Jesus' 'non-parabolic' teaching so that the reader of the parables can move from the literal to the metaphorical level intended by Jesus himself," quoted from "Parable and Example in the Teaching of Jesus," *Semeia* 1 (1974) 86.

[15]Cf. E. C. Blackman, "New Methods of Parable Interpretation," *CJT* 15 (1969) 7-8; N. Perrin, "The Modern Interpretation of the Parables of Jesus and the Problem of Hermeneutics," *Int* 25 (1971) 143; N. M. Wilson, *Interpretation of the Parables in Mark* (Ph. D. dissertation, Drew University, 1968) 10-11.

[16]Via, "Response," p. 222, indicating a shift from his earlier position in *Parables* where, although affirming the autonomy of the parables, he aimed not to distort "the original intention," pp. 23-24.

[17]*Anatomy of Criticism* (Princeton: University Press, 1957) 90.

venture as Via's existentialist interpretations demonstrate, but it is not exegesis. It is *eisegesis* of existential philosophy into the parables. When parables are used as springboards for contemporary reflection divorced from their setting in Jesus' life, they lose their peculiar power and authority as parables of *Jesus.*

VI. IMPLICATIONS FOR THE EXEGETE'S TASK

The task of the exegete, as is suggested by the term "exegesis," is to "lead" the meaning "out" of the text. Foundational in any investigation of the meaning of Scripture must be the Scriptural *text.* It is the written text, the *graphē*, which the Scriptures claim to be God-breathed (2 Tim 3:16). Throughout the teaching of Jesus there is recognition of the divine origin and authority of the written Scriptures,[18] but he never cites as authority the human author's intention.

Ultimately all argument about meaning or the author's intention must be rooted in the text if it is to be objective. Many today build on another foundation, i.e. the intention of the author. But as "intention" refers to the purpose in the mind of the author, it is inevitably subjective. Roman Catholic advocates of a *sensus plenior* typically argue from Church tradition, designated as divine intention, to substantiate their peculiar views, which find no obvious support from the Biblical text. Such subjective interpretation is rightly criticized by Kaiser, and we need a hermeneutic that can effectively challenge it. If we are to be objective, the foundation must be the Biblical text itself.[19]

To say that the text is foundational for meaning does not mean that we simply look at the text, and meaning issues forth. The text develops *ideas* and *arguments.* Not everything in the text is of equal importance. It is imperative for the exegete to ask what ideas and arguments are developed by the text. A question that must always be considered concerns what is most important in any text. What receives emphasis? How much emphasis does it receive? The observations of an exegete may be correct, but if he misses the overall development of thought in the passage or fails to emphasize its major point his exegesis has failed. This is applicable at each level at which a work might be considered: as a total book, a chapter, a paragraph, or a sentence.

[18]"It is written": Mark 7:6; 9:12, 13; 10:17; 14:21, 27; Luke 4:4, 8, 12; 7:27; 10:25; 18:31; 19:46; 20:17; 21:22; 22:37; 24:46; John 6:45; 8:17; 10:34; "the Scriptures": Matt 22:29; 21:42; 26:54, 56; Mark 12:10; 12:24; 14:49; Luke 4:21; 22:37; John 5:39; 7:38; 10:35; 13:18; 17:12; "God's word": Matt 15:6; 4:4; 22:31-32; Mark 7:13; Luke 8:21; 11:28; John 10:35; "God commanded": Matt 15:3, 4; Mark 7:8-9.

[19]The exegete who limits his discussion of the meaning of a passage to what he is convinced was the intention of the author will produce a different kind of exegesis than the exegete who lets the text within its total context determine the meaning. The danger of the exegete's attention being diverted from the text can be evident in the terms he uses to describe a work. Critics who focus on intention tend to speak of "sincerity," "fidelity," "spontaneity," "authenticity" and "genuineness." These terms focus on the author's feelings and intentions and only indirectly on his composition. The meaning of a text is explored through such categories as "integrity," "unity," "function," "maturity," and "subtlety." These categories are more capable of delineation through textual study than the categories of intention; cf. Wimsatt and Beardsley, "Intentional," p. 9.

The process by which meaning is specified is basically the scientific process. Observation leads to hypotheses which are subsequently tested and refined. The text read in its total context leads the exegete to a tentative understanding of the primary (divine) author's intention. This tentative understanding is tested through closer scrutiny of the text and adjusted to take into account any new understanding of the structure, content and context of the text. Various meanings may be conjectured to see which best explains the text and the ideas and arguments it develops.

The exegete must be cautious lest he argue from a conjectured intention to dismiss elements of the text as insignificant. The danger is that of circular argumentation: positing an aim and dismissing as insignificant those elements that do not reinforce that aim. Concerning the parable of the sower, for example, those who interpret "the point of comparison" as the eschatological harvest tend to dismiss the parable's other details as though they were not intended to have particular significance. But until it has been established that this is indeed the major point of the parable, any deductions one might make must be done tentatively.

The correct understanding of the meaning of the text is that which accounts for all of the text, puts it together as a coherent development of ideas and arguments, and takes into account its total context.

Unhappily, some of those who wish to preserve objectivity and to place a limitation on uncontrolled allegorical exegesis have based their hermeneutical system on the intention of the secondary (human) author. But it is precisely the conjectured intention of this author which has been used at times to justify an interpretation the text itself cannot bear. While it is true that a proper investigation of the intention of the human author can put a check on uncontrolled exegesis, this is more effectively accomplished when the foundational role of the text is recognized and argument proceeds from the text in its total context, including any elucidation given by the rest of Scripure.

The classical hermeneutical principle of *analogia Scripturae* states that we must interpret each passage in the light of, and in harmony with, other Scriptures. As the *Westminster Confession of Faith* I, 9 puts it:

> The infallible rule of interpretation of Scripture is the Scripture itself; and therefore, when there is a question about the true and full sense of any Scripture (which is not manifold, but one), it may be searched and known by other places that speak more clearly.

If we were to limit meaning to the human author's intention we would have no basis for using the analogy of Scripture to check present-day interpretations that conflict with other teachings of Scripture. This principle of *analogia Scripturae* assumes correctly that our primary task is to understand God's intention, not fundamentally the human author's. After all, the Bible is *God's* Word.