Originalism and the Kingdom[1]

Are the principles of Bible interpretation (1) something to be *discovered in the Bible itself* and *constructed inductively from what I find there*? Or are they (2) something to be *settled before I can even start reading the Bible*? The latter option is of necessity true. The laws of language are received by divine grant and are *a priori, transcendental* axioms necessary to the coherent, intelligible reading of anything: they must be assumed before they can be demonstrated. Apart from this axiomatic premise, coherent communication would fail us and linguistic anarchy would prevail. In fact, in order for someone to disagree with this position he would have to assume the position in order to express his disagreement with it, which is why it is a *transcendental* argument.

But how can we know what the principles are that we use to interpret the Bible and, anything else?

How Do We Know There are Universal Laws of Language?"

Dr. Snoeberger's (slightly modified) answer is helpful:

> The truth is we *cannot* prove the existence of universal laws of language. That's the nature of a transcendental—it can't be proven, only assumed. But what we *can* do is to demonstrate that people universally observe certain laws when they use the medium of human language; in fact, they cannot cogently do otherwise.
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> In order for mankind to receive God's truth, there must be some universal medium whereby that truth may be transmitted and received: the received laws of language and logic often headed by the label *Hermeneutics*.
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> Universal hermeneutical principles exist as shared transcendentals, rendering the Bible a "normal" book accessible to all without distinction via the received laws of language. This results in the ***originalist*** method.
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> So who determines these rules and how? For many, the answer is that *exegetes* learn these rules *discursively*: we learn how language works by the analogy of subsequent Scripture or by the hermeneutical example of Christ himself. In other words, the treatment of *earlier* Scriptures by *later* Scripture-writers (with priority sometimes accorded to Christ's own use of earlier Scriptures) divulges the hermeneutical paradigms by which we read Scripture as a whole.
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> In many senses, this approach is quite reasonable—surely God in Christ or God via inspiration will not violate his own laws of language! But in another sense, this approach leaves serious holes: Among these is the fact that God communicated to humans quite successfully long before they had the NT Scriptures ostensibly necessary to discovering the laws of language. In short, *since the creation of the world, everyone everywhere knows and needs these laws*. They need no "proof" of these laws beyond this demonstration.

[1] Summary of notes from Dr. Mark Snoeberger, Professor of Systematic Theology at Detroit Baptist Theological Seminary.

What are the "Received Laws of Language?"

These are the laws of language that we as humans unconsciously use every day as we engage in ordinary communication with one another.

The first of the hermeneutical rules is the **Univocal Nature of Language**. By *univocal* is simply meant "one voice." By saying that the Bible speaks univocally we mean that its statements can have only one signification in any given context. In necessary qualification of this premise we must concede that (1) many words have wide semantic ranges, but would insist that they bring but one meaning *to any single propositional context*; further, (2) while we must admit that some people occasionally use double entendre or puns to deliberately connote two things at once, we would argue that such figures only "work" when hearers successfully incise the play on words: a communicator who uses puns that no one "gets" is a failure. To summarize, no system of language/thought can survive solely or principally on such clever ambiguities. They are incidental exceptions that prove the rule.

As a transcendental rule, this seminal principle of language is axiomatic—it must be assumed true in order to be disproved. To assert otherwise would require words that follow this rule, or else the argument would fall apart into meaninglessness.

Applied to Bible study methods, this principle means that the Bible, since it is written in a "normal" manner with respect to grammar, syntax, genres, figures, etc., contains no additional, hidden meanings that were "missed" by the original writers/readers using standard grammatical and syntactical hermeneutical methods. A statement made in the OT had precisely the same meaning to its immediate readers that it has to its modern readers. True, later revelation often clarifies or expands what was known by earlier revelation, but it never divulges hidden messages *unknown* to the original communicators, much less those that *resignify* the text.

To affirm otherwise is to introduce uncertainty to the whole of Scripture. In Milton Terry's words, "The moment we admit the principle that portions of Scripture contain an occult (hidden) or double sense we introduce an element of uncertainty in the sacred volume, and unsettle all scientific interpretation." Who knows? Perhaps the plain meaning of the precious New Testament promises of eternal life, heaven, and eternal reward will one day yield to some new meaning that rises to replace it! We surely cannot countenance this scenario, and so it follows that we cannot countenance any scenario that does this to *any* text of Scripture. To use transcendental terms, the Christian system cannot survive the implications of a Scripture that allows for the possibility of evolving, surrogate, or alien meanings *anywhere* within its leaves.

As such, a literalist resists hermeneutical models specializing in "mystery"—models that boast hidden meanings, whether they be twofold (the Apostolic Fathers), threefold (Origen), fourfold (Cassian), or the more domesticated typological/Christological school popular today. Instead, he refuses to rest until he discovers an exegetically plausible and "normal" explanation for each difficult text of Scripture, viz., one that preserves the univocal nature of language.

A second received law of language that may be deduced from common usage is **the Jurisdiction of Authorial Intent.** We have seen that a text can have but one signification in any given context; this second principle says that the sole arbiter of that signification is its *author*. This seminal axiom of language is mnemonically captured in Fee and Stuart's statement, "A text cannot mean what it never meant." The meaning of a given text is always found in the author's original intention: it can never be changed after the fact by a reader, some alien force, or even (after further reflection) by the author himself. Denotative meaning is static and perpetual.

Of course, the meaning of Scripture is not uniformly clear, and it is impossible to interview an author or to enter his mind for clarification. Meaning can, at times, be elusive. But since the author is using the established grammatical, syntactical, and lexical norms of a given historical context, we can with patience reduce the options considerably. This is what is meant by grammatical-historical interpretation. And since the purpose of Scripture is *revelation*, we should expect that God would not be in the habit of obfuscating that meaning.

Due to the uniqueness of Scripture as an inerrant unity, we also have another interpretive tool at our disposal, viz., the analogy of faith (sometimes called the *analogia scriptura* or the analogy of Scripture). By this we mean that the interpretive options for a given text can be categorized as likely, possible, unlikely, or impossible not only in view of *linguistic* factors, but also in view of *theological* factors. So, for instance, when Paul says that "a man is justified by faith apart from the works of the law" (Rom 3:28) and James that "a man is justified by works and not by faith alone" (Jas 2:24), we know that certain *linguistically* possible interpretations of this pair of texts are not *theologically* possible.

But while we must admit the propriety of appeals to the *analogy of faith*, we must also be keenly aware of the susceptibility of this principle to abuse. Specifically, while the *analogy of faith* can help to reduce the number of linguistic options during the course of exegesis, it cannot create new linguistic options that the author demonstrably never intended. So, for instance, after God clarifies at length and with unequivocal specificity that Abram's *biological* seed would be *eternally plentiful* (Gen 15:2–5) it is not possible for a modern interpreter to allow this explicit denotation to fall away in favor of a "greater seed" and a "greater Israel" that Abram did not have in mind on this particular historical occasion. Similarly, after God invites Abram to pace through the land of promise to establish its precise length, breadth, and contours (Gen 13:17), it is not possible for this explicit denotation to fall away in favor of a "greater land" that Abram did not have in mind on this particular historical occasion. Likewise, when the prophets dedicate dozens of chapters to exultations about millennial blessings that are geological, zoological, meteorological, agricultural, medical, political, sociological, etc., it is not possible for the modern reader to resignify these as merely spiritual blessings.

To interpret Scripture in such a way is to resignify an author's words without his permission, and thus to banish that author from his own words. And this simply cannot occur in any sustainable theory of knowledge.

Having established two axiomatic principles of language that govern the intelligible use of words (the **Univocal Nature of Language** and the **Jurisdiction of Authorial Intent**), we need to pause for an important qualification—not so much a third axiom of language, but an answer to a common observation that is often raised at this point, viz., that the Scriptures have *two authors*, divine and human. As such, some maintain, God is able to use linguistic structures with a broad semantic/syntactical range to secretly but accurately communicate meanings additional to what the human author intended. This being the case, they reason, it is possible to affirm the two principles above but still find a loophole, unique to the Christian Scriptures, that allows two disparate streams of intentionality in a single text: the divine author intended more than or other than what the human author intended, and that's OK in view of the inscrutable mystery of inspiration.

Of course it is true that God always knows comprehensively the details and implications of any of his statements, and thus **knew** quantitatively more and qualitatively better than the human authors did when they wrote (so, e.g., Dan 12:6–9; 1 Pet 1:10–12). But this is not the same as saying that God **meant** more than the human authors did when they wrote. To put things succinctly, acceptance of the analogical view of truth in one's epistemology does not legitimate the possibility of equivocation in one's view of language. Note the following:

• The gift of language and miracle of inspiration seem precisely intended to ascertain that the thoughts of God were perfectly communicated in human words (1 Cor 2:13) and to prevent the possibility of alien meanings unknown to the human authors (2 Pet 1:19–21). They are God's words breathed out (1 Tim 3:16) through human vehicles, not bypassing their respective styles and vocabulary, but ensuring that *His Word* and *their words* enjoyed a perfect confluence.

• The idea that God used human authors to write something grammatically/technically accurate while at the same time intending something other than what they intended is very difficult to harmonize with the doctrine of inerrancy. At best, it would seem, God is perpetuating deception.

• Finally, if God is able, at any time, to mean more than or other than the human author, it would seem that whole of Scripture is placed in serious jeopardy and its meaning potentially lost to all that might seek it. The miracle of inspiration is emasculated and the Scriptures themselves are rendered superfluous.

Scripture is, in one sense, a unique book. Unlike all other books, it boasts an inerrant unity that partakes of inspiration. But it does not follow that this uniqueness is such that the Bible must be read with a correspondingly unique hermeneutic. The univocal nature of language and the jurisdiction of (unitary) authorial intent cannot be set aside in view of the "dual authorship" of Scripture. Two transmitters are used in the communication of Scripture, to be sure, but they share perfect denotative confluence.

Having discussed two seminal axioms of language that seem to qualify as "received laws of language" (the **Univocal Nature of Language** and the **Jurisdiction of Authorial Intent**) and offering a qualification concerning the dual authorship of Scripture often raised by those who deny them, a third and final principle is: **A Textually Based Locus of Meaning.**

This is the capstone of ordinary linguistics. The whole meaning of a text is exhausted in its own words. Any meaning assigned to a text after the fact that cannot be derived from the author's own words simply isn't there. To allow any text an afterlife is to remove meaning from the text and grant it to something alien to the text, sending meaning into an inevitably downward spiral of ambiguity and relativism.

Naturally, we must concede that *implications* of an ancient text can unfold over time and *details* emerge in the course of progressive revelation. But new *meanings* can never be assigned or discovered after the fact and apart from the author's express permission. Specifically, the meaning of a text cannot be moved from the text to:

• *Holy Spirit "Leading."* Yes, the Holy Spirit is active in causing the believer to *welcome* a text's meaning and in helping the believer to *discern the implications* of a text's meaning for his own situation (1 Cor 2:14), but the Spirit does not *disclose a text's meaning* to the believer. Were this the case, (1) meaning would be wrested from the words and the words rendered, to that degree, unnecessary, (2) the divine purpose for language would be thwarted, and (3) the idea of a sufficient canon would be irrevocably lost.

• *An Existential Encounter "Above the Text."* Closely related to the previous (and perhaps identical to it) is the idea that language is an inadequate vehicle for revealing truth, and at best serves as a pointer to it. To apprehend God, one must look not in the text but above it to an experiential "Christ encounter"—a *personal* disclosure that communicates ineffably what cannot be expressed in *words*. The same criticisms leveled above are appropriate to this understanding.

• *Later Revelation.* More acceptable in much of today's evangelical academia is the idea that there is "additional, deeper meaning, intended by God, but not clearly intended by the human author, which is seen to exist in the words of a biblical text when they are studied in the light of further revelation" (Brown, *The Sensus Plenior of Sacred Scripture*, p. 92), such that "the text's intention becomes deeper and clearer as the parameters of the canon are expanded" (Waltke, *Tradition & Testament*, p. 7). This option provides an advance on the previous two options, but either (1) requires a suspiciously equivocating hermeneutic that applies a grammatical-historical approach to the *latter* portions of Scripture but not to the *earlier* ones or else, more ominously, (2) suggests that the promises of God are "never an announcement of what God has irrevocably determined to do, but only of what he will do in certain circumstances … If this makes prophecy seem very uncertain, I am very sorry, but I cannot help it, for it is the way that it is" (Pieters, *The Seed of Abraham*, 142).

Thankfully, that's **not** the way it is. There is a better way to protect the meaning of Scripture and that is to insist that the locus of meaning is in the text itself. It is to insist upon *originalism.*