

Meaning: Is There a Single, Literal Meaning of a Biblical Text That the Interpreter Can Discover?

Viktor KIRYANOV, *Odessa, Ukraine*

© V. Kiryanov, 2003



Viktor Kiryanov was born in 1973 in Rivne (Western Ukraine) to a family of unbelievers. He was baptized in 1991 while a first-year student at the Institute of Water Management Engineers, from which he graduated in 1995 as a mechanical engineer. He graduated from Odessa Theological Seminary in 1999 as a Bachelor of Theology. Presently he lives in Odessa and works at Church Ministry Institute as a teacher, interpreter, and member of the administrative body. He is also studying in the Master's Program at International Baptist Theological Seminary in Prague. His theological interests are in the area of New Testament studies.

The goal of Bible study is to understand God's revelation. But since the earliest times there has always been a philosophical question – is there a meaning of the text in general? If so, how is it found? God left very important information for people in the Bible. Nevertheless, any passage can be understood in various ways. The goal of the interpreter is to understand which is most probably the meaning of the passage that the writer wanted his readers to understand. «Any type of oral or written communication involves three expressions of meaning: 1. What the speaker or writer meant by what he said; 2. What the recipient actually understood by the statement; 3. What meaning is actually encoded in the text»¹. One of the most important questions of hermeneutics is whether there is only one correct meaning for the text. Is it possible to find it? Are there one or several meanings? Are there any criteria to determine whether a given meaning is correct? People try to understand the Bible by working with the text because they do not have anything else except the text. People's worldview determines their approach. Usually one of three starting points is offered: text, writer (author), reader.

Reader-Oriented Approach

Hirsch, in his work², critically analyzed the philosophical approach to the text that came into existence

¹ William W. Klein, *Introduction to Biblical Interpretation*, (Dallas: Word, 1993), 8.

² E.D. Hirsch, *Validity in Interpretation*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1967), 1-24.

in the twentieth century. According to this approach, the meaning of the text is based on what the text means to the reader. An ideal text should be independent of the author. It should exist by itself. The text is written for the reader, therefore the reader is the basis for textual understanding.

Let us look at some scholars who support the idea that meaning is a product of the reader's activity³. Barthes (post-structuralism) states: «As an institution the author is dead: his civil status, his biographical person have disappeared; once disposed of, they no longer exercise over his work the formidable paternity whose account literary history, teaching and public opinion had the responsibility of establishing and renewing»⁴. The key to this approach is the autonomy of the text. As soon as the text is written, it becomes independent and cannot be restricted by the original author. The meaning does not exist before the reader starts to look for it. He looks at the text as at a work of art, since a work of art has a life of its own after it is completed⁵.

Barthes reacted against the structuralist's assumption that linguistic codes provide a direct line to the meaning of a language or a text. Fish (reader-response criticism) not only agrees with the idea that the text is independent of the author, but adds that there is an ontological union between the text and the reader⁶. The text supplies only potential meanings, which then are actualised by the reader who selects those meanings that support his interpretative strategies. The goal is not to discover what the text says, but to experience what it says and then to persuade others regarding the validity of one's perspective on the text. The act of reading alone may be called interpretation. Neither the text nor the interpreter is autonomous, but they fuse at the moment of reading and cannot exist apart from each other⁷.

Goldingay accepts all three approaches, and as a defence of the reader-oriented approach says that there are ambiguities in the Bible, blanks that are impossible to fill in just by using and searching the text. It appears that the author left space for the reader to fill in those blanks. The text has potential for the reader. Thus,

³ Kevin J. Vanhoozer, in *Is There a Meaning in this Text?* (Leicester, England: Apollos, 1998), 24; 26; 149, critically analysed some of the scholars presented in this article.

⁴ Roland Barthes, «From Work to Text,» in *Textual Strategies: Perspectives in Poststructuralist Criticism*, ed. Josue V. Harrari (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1979), 73-81.

⁵ Grant R. Osborne, *The Hermeneutical Spiral, A Comprehensive Introduction to Biblical Interpretation*, (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1991), 377.

⁶ Stanley Fish, «Interpreting the Variorum,» in *Reader-Response Criticism*, ed. Jane P. Thompkin, (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1980), 177.

⁷ Fish, *Is There a Text in This Class? The Authority of Interpretative Communities*, (London and Cambridge: Harvard University Press), 1980, cited by Osborne, 379.

⁸ John Goldingay, *Models for Interpretation of Scripture* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1995), 39-41.

⁹ Osborne, *Spiral*, 381-383.

different readers may understand the same story differently⁸. Textual study becomes the discovery of what the text says to a certain interpreter.

Derrida (deconstruction) says that there is no actual presence of meaning in a text because the symbols can no longer be identified with their original meaning. Written language takes priority over spoken language, as there is a speaker present behind the text. Language has a metaphorical nature. Many meanings come into existence; each one is correct and has the same authority as all the others. The text itself does not have its own concrete meaning. The interpreter should deconstruct the meaning of the text and the way the text has been understood throughout its history. Only then the reader can construct his own meaning⁹.

James W. Voelz writes about the understanding of the text in the community. A given community creates a certain interpretation of the text, shows its approval or disapproval of the interpretation, and indicates how a certain text is to be read. People do not read the text in a vacuum. They have some kind of pre-understanding dependant on their cultural, social, or religious surroundings¹⁰. Interpretation depends on how people live and what their thoughts are before they start to interpret the text¹¹. Thiselton calls this «horizons,» therefore meaning is the product of interaction between the text and the reader¹². The meaning of the text depends on the reader, and so each reader's interpretation is correct, and anyone can defend any action. This is the way racists, slaveholders, and feminists have interpreted the Bible¹³.

Let us look at some arguments that have been used against this approach. Vanhoozer says that when people insist that there is one meaning, «it provides a wonderful excuse for damning those with whom they disagree as either 'fools,' or 'heretics'»¹⁴. In fact, adherents of this approach use the text to reach their goals, to support their beliefs¹⁵.

Caird argues against this approach, and, applying it to speech, states that in any case the hearer's meaning is part of the meaning of what is spoken or written. The purpose of any written or oral message is com-

¹⁰ James W. Voelz, «Multiple Signs, Levels of Meaning and Self as Text: Intertextuality and the Bible,» *Semeia*, v. 69-70 (1995): 160.

¹¹ Fish takes a similar approach in *Is There...*, cited by Osborne, 379.

¹² Anthony C. Thiselton, *The Two Horizons: New Testament Hermeneutics and Philosophical Description* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1980), 12-17.

¹³ Goldingay, *Models*, 43.

¹⁴ Vanhoozer, *Meaning*, 21.

¹⁵ Hirsch expressed the same idea, *Validity*, 3.

munication. Communication means that there was a thought that the writer or author wanted to transmit to a reader or listener. A reader or a listener has to understand it. And if the meaning that the reader (listener) discovered is different from the one intended by the author, there has been a break in communication¹⁶. Meaning must be stable or there is no sense in discovering it. What would be the sense of trying to transmit information if the reader understands it differently than the author intended? That is why meaning exists in the text before people attempt to discover it¹⁷. And the meaning in the text, as hermeneutical realism teaches, is absolutely independent of our understanding or interpretation of the text¹⁸. This approach shifts from the text as a product to the text as a process¹⁹.

Osborne argues against Derrida's approach and says that «written precedes spoken language because it expresses the true sign-system behind speech and language.» Furthermore, there is no literal meaning signified together with the coded language²⁰. Thiselton adds to this, saying that in all societies written language follows oral speech; this is especially obvious from seeing a child's development²¹. As a response to Fish's approach, he says that if textual meaning is a product of the reader's activity, then the text cannot transform the reader «from the outside»²². The traditional approach was good for centuries. Why has it become incorrect now? If the text is a work of art, we can go further and apply abstractionism, an existing art form, to the text. We can start writing words and letters in an abstract way. People will still find meaning in it the same way they find meaning in abstract pictures.

As a response to the reader-oriented approach, Osborne says that all these systems produced arguments or interpretations that satisfy their adherents. But in reality, they only prove the existence of reading strategies, and not the existence of objective or intended meaning. The result of this approach is the creation of multiple meanings²³.

If people see ambiguity in the text, it is possible that the problem is not in the text, nor in the writer or

¹⁶ G.B. Caird, *The Language and Imagery of the Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1997), 40.

¹⁷ Hirsch supported this idea and said that interpretation only makes sense if one holds the idea that meaning is determinate, definite, and unchanging. *Validity*, 230.

¹⁸ Vanhoozer, *Meaning*, 48.
¹⁹ Edgar V. McKnight, «Reader-Response Criticism» in *To Each Its Own Meaning*, ed. Steven McKenzie, (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1993), 214.

²⁰ Osborne, *Spiral*, 383.

²¹ Anthony C. Thiselton, *New Horizons in Hermeneutics* (Glasgow: Harper Collins Publishers, 1992), 104

²² *Ibid.*, 549.

²³ Osborne, *Spiral*, 395-396.

author, but in people's inability to understand. Logically this approach can be applied to any text. Thus, if my interpretation of a civil or criminal law is different from the way others understand it (and according to this approach that is a normal state of affairs) does it mean that I will not be judged if I do not act according to other's understanding of the law, but according to mine? Certainly not! If we offer our interpretation to the author, and the meaning we found is different from the one he put in the text, will he agree with our interpretation? The discussion of who is right, Calvinists or Arminians makes no sense. Both groups are right. If we go further we can defend homosexuality, murder, and abortions.

When the Pharisees blamed Jesus for breaking the law, they were right, because for them one of the meanings of the law was to fulfill each letter. When Jesus blamed the Pharisees, He was right too, because the law meant something different for Him. So all of them were right according to this approach. But from the context of the Bible we can see that this is not true. Jesus was right and the Pharisees were wrong. Their mistake was that they, as a group, tried to define what the law meant for them instead of trying to find what the law meant for the Author.

When Fish says that meaning is a product of the reader's activity, he is partially right. However, the reader's activity is not in creating the meaning, but in finding it. During the study of the text, the interpreter has to define as accurately as possible what the writer meant in a given passage, and not what the passage means for the reader.

AUTHOR-TEXT-RESPONSE APPROACH

Author-centered approach

Recoeur says that because there is a distance or disconnection between the author's intention and the text, between the historical text and the present reader, we cannot look at the text as being author-centered. «The author's intention and the meaning of the text

cease to coincide»²⁴. One of Croatto's arguments is that the author's intention may seem to limit the meaning of a story: «In practice authors may well have been unconscious of some of the implications inherent in what they say. Sacred texts are usually anonymous»; what they say is more important than who says it. The less we know the author, the greater the depth of meaning²⁵.

Even if the writer was not aware of all the implications, he was living at the time, or almost at the time, when the events he described took place, and had more access to the information than the modern reader. The reader living 2000 years or more after the writer can hardly understand the text better than the writer. Vanhoozer notes that Scripture has been the only source for establishing doctrine for centuries. Goldingay's statement above²⁶ implies the imperfection of Scripture. If the Bible is not the perfect source for establishing our faith, what other source can we use?²⁷

One of the main arguments that Hirsch uses in defense is that when the author is removed as a determiner of the text's meaning, then no adequate principle exists for judging the validity of an interpretation. In that case the interpreter takes the author's place. There is no sense in trying to discover what the text says because the text can say different things to different readers²⁸. Hirsch defines meaning as the message that the author intended to convey via the text. Everything depends on the objectivity and stability of the author's intention. We have to investigate different interpretations and find the most probable meaning²⁹.

Osborne raises the concern that Hirsch did not develop a methodology for validating the interpretation, for choosing one particular possible meaning over others. «It is not clear how one goes about finding the elusive author's meanings.» Hirsch never quite solves the problem of how to overcome the reader's pre-understanding or the influence of his strategy. Hirsch can lead us to a possible meaning, but it is difficult to ascertain whether his method produces even a probable meaning³⁰.

²⁴ Paul Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory Discourse and the Surplus of Meaning* (Fort Worth: Texas University Press, 1976), 29-30.

²⁵ Severino Croatto, *Biblical Hermeneutics: Toward a Theory of Reading As the Production of Meaning*, (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1987), 34.

²⁶ p. 2 of this essay.

²⁷ Vanhoozer, *Meaning*, 29.

²⁸ Hirsch, *Validity*, 3-5; 10-11.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 210-216, also Vanhoozer, *Meaning*, 74-75.

³⁰ Osborne, *Spiral*, 393-394.

³¹ Quoted from *ibid.*, 394, Vanhoozer says that this is a standard view on textual meaning, *Meaning*, 43.

We cannot remove the author, says Juhl, or the text will be opened to multiple interpretations. «The author anchors the text in history and makes interpretation of its original meaning possible»³¹. Thus, in order to understand what meaning God put in the text through a human writer, it is necessary to understand the text, the grammatical structure, and the author. The interpretation can only be accepted as correct if we can recover those thoughts that the author put in the text.

For Schleiermacher a text is understood when we recover the author's consciousness, thus equating meaning with psychology. There are two major factors, the grammatical and psychological, that correspond to linguistic codes and consciousness. Language and literature express thought; grammar gives us access to psychology. Therefore the interpreter must align himself with the mind of the author and re-create the whole thought of the text as part of the author's life and the author's process of creating the thought³². The text does not have meaning in itself, because the text came into existence as a result of somebody's work. «One way to conceive the author-text relationship is to think in terms of cause and effect. The author is the historical cause of a textual effect; his intention is the cause of the text being the way it is... the author is...a sufficient explanation of the text. The text serves as a kind of surrogate presence, expression, and extension of the author»³³. We can find the author's distinctive features, his personal participation. Each writer has his own style, his own vocabulary. This is most obvious in Paul's epistles, for example, 1Co 1:14-16; Php1:6; 2Co 8:10, where Paul used personal pronouns.

³² Vanhoozer, *Meaning*, 25; Osborne, *Spiral*, 368.

³³ Vanhoozer, *Meaning*, 44.

But Paul also wrote that the source of his wisdom is God (1Co 2:10-16). Kaiser points out that this passage is the most significant in the whole inspiration-hermeneutical debate. Looking for the meaning of the text, we are looking for God's written revelation. The words Paul wrote were not merely the result of his own human intelligence, but the result of «the words taught by the Spirit.» There is an organic unity between the words of the writer and the work of the Holy Spirit. So there was a living assimilation of God's intended truth

into the verbalization of the writers of Scripture»³⁴. Thus, the meaning of the text is simply the meaning of the author.

Sometimes God initiated the text, for example, Dt 27:3; Eze 37:16; Eze 12:37; Rev 1-2, and therefore we have only the text to work with. Sometimes a human was the initiator of the text, as in Lk 1:3; Jn 21:24; then we can understand the meaning of the text by understanding the human author. To deliver information to the reader, God used two tools – language (text), and a human writer – but not a reader. So we have a case of dual authorship. God and humans worked together to write the Bible. But other questions remain: Which meaning did the author intend? Which meaning did God intend? Do these meanings coincide, or they are different?

A human being was God's tool to write the text, which was written in unity between God and man. They accomplished it side by side. «Each points to the other and affirms the presence and operation of the other»³⁵.

Text-oriented approach³⁶

Denying the possibility of finding the author's intention, Ricoeur stresses the importance of the written text. Language forms the core of being, therefore the text is the center of interpretation. Stressing the distance between the text and the author, Ricoeur emphasises an absence of distance between the reader and the text. Text must control the hermeneutical process of interpretation³⁷.

Osborne points out that the author produced the text and gave it a certain meaning that must be understood by the reader. After that, the text guides the reader, producing certain access points to the particular language key needed to interpret this particular idiomatic action. The reader thereby enters into the textual world and sense of the contents, thus arriving at an understanding of the intended meaning of the text³⁸. «The fact that God chose to be revealed through human language, as written by human beings, shows that

³⁴ Walter C. Kaiser, «The Single Intent of Scripture» in *Evangelical Roots: A Tribute to Wilbur Smith*, ed. K.S. Kantzer (Nashville: Nelson, 1978), 137-138.

³⁵ Vern Sheridan Poythress, «Divine Meaning of Scripture,» *Westminster Theological Journal* 48 (1986): 241-279.

³⁶ Some of the arguments against this approach are presented above. Vanhoozer summarised them this way: «We believe in using texts for our own purposes, not in discovering their true nature. Meaning is not contained in a text like a nut in its shell; meaning is whatever it is that interests us about a text. Methods of interpretation are simply ways of dignifying and developing our interests.» *Meaning*, 103.

³⁷ Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory*, 25-44.

³⁸ Osborne, *Spiral*, 411.

³⁹ Perry B. Yoder, *Toward Understanding the Bible* (Newton, Kansas: Faith and Life Press, 1978) 9.

⁴⁰ Thomas W. Gillespie, «Biblical Authority and Interpretation: The Current Debate on Hermeneutics» in *A Guide to Contemporary Hermeneutics*, ed. Donald K. McKim, (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1986), 203.

⁴¹ Ricoeur, *Interpretation*, 7.

⁴² James A. Sanders cited by Osborne, *Spiral*, 390. http://www.religion-online.org/cgi-bin/relsearch.dll/showarticle?item_id=1715

⁴³ Cited by Osborne, *Spiral*, 394.

⁴⁴ Thiselton, *Two Horizons*, 232.

God saw human language as an adequate mode for His revelation.» God gave us language as a means of communication with other people and with Himself. We must use this ability to understand the text³⁹.

Gillespie noted that the scope of meanings is determined; the relationship of meaning to language is intrinsic and indisputable. Meaning is expressed in language and understood through language⁴⁰. In a certain sense, the text is the only source from which to draw meaning. One word can have several meanings, but in one passage, in a certain context, the word can have only one meaning. The final goal is not to understand the meanings of words or sentences, inasmuch as words do not have meanings in and of themselves, but are used to express meanings. If the meanings were enclosed in words, we would not be able to understand the biblical text without ancient Hebrew or Greek. That is why there is always a difference between what is written and what it means. «The sentence is not a larger or more complex word, it is a new entity...it is made up of words, but it is not a derivative function of its words,» says Ricoeur⁴¹. James Sanders says that we cannot look at the text separately from the context of the Bible because the text is a part of the Bible. They are closely connected⁴². In order to understand the writer, his intention, the meaning that he put in the text, and how the original listeners understood it, it is necessary to understand the text in its context.

Conclusion: P.D.Juhl disagrees with Hirsch, who separates the author from the text. He says, «There is a logical connection between statements about the meaning of a literary work and statements about the author's intention...We know the author only to the extent that the text reveals him to us. We do not know John behind his Gospel»⁴³. Thus, if a person determines the meaning of the text, he discovers the author's intended meaning.

The same is true with Schleiermacher, who avoids giving absolute privilege either to the text or the author. Meaning arises from the single unity of author and text⁴⁴.

ONE OR MULTIPLE MEANINGS

Let us look at the opinion of some scholars who support the idea that a text can have more than one meaning. For Fish, understanding the text is possible only within a literary community. People in the same community use the same words with different meanings, and this means there cannot be one literal meaning, but many, which are validated in the process of reading⁴⁵. Meaning becomes multiple, says Voelz, because meaning is not a password, but a matrix that generates further meaning according to its capacity⁴⁶. Gerald Shepperd says that no single meaning exists because terms and history change the meaning, just as the community of faith and its needs change. Thus, pluralism in ancient books inevitably leads to a plurality of reading in our day⁴⁷. Caird, as an example, gives the parable of the lost sheep. In Lk15:3-7 the parable is used as a defence against the accusation that Christ kept bad company, but in Mt 18:12-14 it is used as a setting in the life of the church. Thus, it has at least two meanings⁴⁸. Caird states that sometimes the meaning of the event for a person in the Bible is different from the meaning intended by God. For example, the meaning that Jonah put into his sermon was different from what God intended it to be⁴⁹. Sometimes in conversation a person means more than he says. Because God knows our future, He is aware of more applications of the text than the human writer, and He put something extraordinary into it, something that a human could not do, assert those who support multiple meanings⁵⁰.

Even if the text has but one meaning, is it possible to say that it has a higher, hidden meaning? This problem is called *sensus plenior*. LaSor says that NT writers sometimes used OT passages in a way that seems to support the concept of *sensus plenior*⁵¹. The meaning was intended by God, but was not clear to the human writer⁵².

Now let us look at some arguments against this approach. If people try to find some higher, hidden sense, they can end up by making the same mistake that

⁴⁵ Fish, «Is There a Text ...?» 356-376; also cited by Osborne, *Spiral*, 379.

⁴⁶ Voelz, *Signs*, 162.

⁴⁷ Osborne, *Spiral*, 390.

⁴⁸ Caird, *Imagery*, 59.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 60.

⁵⁰ Poythress, *Divine Meaning*, 241-279.

⁵¹ William Sanford LaSor, «The *Sensus Plenior* and Biblical Interpretation,» in *A Guide to Contemporary Hermeneutics*, ed. Donald K. McKim (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1986): 59.

⁵² See also the definition given by Raymond Brown in *The Sensus Plenior of Sacred Scripture*, (Baltimore: St. Mary's University Press, 1995), 92.

the Jewish rabbis did, trying to find hidden sense in each letter of the OT. This mistake was repeated over and over in the history of the church. People were convinced that a given passage had both a literal and an allegorical meaning.

In spite of the fact that the parable of the lost sheep was used in a different context, its meaning is still the same. The meaning of this parable is the search for lost souls. In the case of Jonah, God's intention and Jonah's could be different, but the meaning was the same. For the human, the meaning of the event or the message was different from the meaning intended by God. But this does not mean that the text can have two meanings. It is likely that at the beginning the human writer did not understand God's intentions. Later God revealed His intention and a human wrote it down⁵³. But is there *sensus plenior* in prophetic books? How much did biblical writers understand of what they prophesied? Even if they did not totally understand what they prophesied, we can not say that the meaning they put into the text was different from what God intended.

Any passage that appears to have a higher meaning than the meaning intended by the writer must be interpreted that way, only if God says it should⁵⁴. Klein mentions that only one meaning is to be connected to any passage of Scripture unless the writer of Scripture gives a literary clue that he has several aims in view for this exceptional passage⁵⁵.

The author had only one meaning in the text for the people to whom he wrote. The main criteria can be Jesus' use of the OT. When Jesus was talking about OT events, He did not look for an allegory. He did not try to find hidden meanings in Scripture, but He regarded the events it describes as historical facts. Jesus and the NT writers understood Scripture the same way as its first recipients⁵⁶.

When the writer was writing down his visions or hearing God's words, probably he did not want to transmit any kind of meaning. He was simply writing down what he heard or saw. It was God who put meaning into the words or vision.

⁵³ Or how can we learn from the same writer that God meant something different?

⁵⁴ Henry Vercler, *Hermeneutics* (Russian Edition), (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1995), 16; James Barr, «The Literal, Allegorical, and Modern Biblical Scholarship,» *JSOT* 44 (1989): 16, uses the same idea and adds «only when God proclaims it through subsequent revelations.»

⁵⁵ Klein, *Introduction*, 137.

⁵⁶ Cf. *Ibid.*, 35-39, the use of the OT by early Christians.

Some people think that hidden meanings are present in prophecy, and because of later revelation, or the fulfillment of prophecies, those meanings become accessible to us. «The OT, as a whole, had a forward-looking dimension to it, sometimes unknown to the writer. Because God was at work in Israel and in the lives of His people, their writings reflected what He was doing. The subsequent writers of the NT saw these divine patterns and made the typological connection»⁵⁷.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 131.

Klein states, «...the fuller sense cannot be detected or understood by the traditional historical, grammatical and critical methods of exegeses...such methods can only distinguish the meaning of the text, not some secret embedded in the text, that even its author did not intend»⁵⁸. There are no criteria to determine the correct way to find a hidden meaning. Do all texts have *sensus plenior*? Is it possible to define what kind of texts they are?

⁵⁸ Ibid., 125.

Therefore, we must say that there is one meaning, but there can be multiple applications, or multiple significance. Hirsch gives a definition of these terms to support the position that the text has one stable meaning⁵⁹. Meaning is what the human author expressed by the use of a particular sign sequence. Significance is the relationship between the meaning and the readers, or a situation. Application involves the exploration of the significance for us of that one meaning, and our action in accordance with it.

⁵⁹ Hirsch, *Validity*, 8-9; 157; also cf. definition given by Vanhoozer, *Meaning*, 261.

Often the problem of multiple meanings, or reader-response approach, occurs because people confuse meaning and significance⁶⁰. The same text can be applied to different situations, but that does not mean the text has many meanings. Hirsch says that sometimes even the same author may use the same text with a different meaning, but that does not mean that the meaning has changed; rather, it means that the author is viewing his work in a different context. The author did not change the meaning, but rather his relationship to this meaning⁶¹.

⁶⁰ Cf. Yoder, *Understanding*, 27. Kaiser wrote, «to confuse meaning and significance is to reduce all hermeneutics to shambles» *Intent*, 136.

⁶¹ Hirsch, *Validity*, 8.

When Jesus used parables, He had one meaning and this meaning remained the same all the time, although the parable could have multiple significance or appli-

cations. The author attempted to express his ideas, giving meaning to the text. Can we recognize that God planned to use this passage with a different meaning in the future? God could intend more than one meaning for the same biblical text, but that does not mean the text has a hidden meaning that God opened later. The text had only one meaning for the people for whom it was written. Later God used the same text, the same words, the same sentences, but in a different context with different meaning for a different group of people. The same text (words, sentence structure) can have different meanings in different contexts.

Therefore, we cannot find the meaning of the text by trying to find the meanings of the words. Very often words have several meanings, but if we use them with certain words in certain contexts, multiple meanings disappear. The only meaning that remains is the meaning that gives sense to the passage. Osborne noted that words do not have meaning in themselves. Words get their meaning only in sentences, and sentences, in turn, receive their meaning from the text. The same sentence can have a different meaning in a different context⁶². Most often the reason for multiple meanings of the text is neglect of the context⁶³. The reader must find the meaning and significance of a given text for its situation. Hirsch says that meaning stays constant for centuries, while significance can change every week; and along with significance, application will change also. Without a stable determinacy of meaning there can be no knowledge of interpretation⁶⁴.

Thiselton disagrees with Hirsch that it is not meaning that changes, but significance. The text transforms the reader, and the reader can transform the text. Thiselton based his arguments on the idea that God spoke differently at different times⁶⁵. The meaning of Scripture does not change, but the meaning of its meaning for us changes. «The idea of the canon underlines a core truth ...that the meaning of its biblical material is determinate and constant... To proclaim something as a standard is to claim that it is something which in some sense does not change»⁶⁶. While the meaning of

⁶² See Hirsch's example, *Validity*, 4.

⁶³ Osborne, *Spiral*, 409.

⁶⁴ Hirsch, *The Aim of Interpretation*, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1976), 1.

⁶⁵ Thiselton, *New Horizons*, 35-37.

⁶⁶ Yoder, *Understanding*, 69.

the text depends on the writer and the context, the significance of a passage depends on our situation. The meaning of the text can be found because it is stable.

CONCLUSION

God's Word tells us what to believe and how to believe, and therefore it is necessary to understand Scripture and the meaning of different texts correctly. There is only one single meaning in the text, and that meaning is the meaning intended by the author. The meaning in the text and the meaning that the author (human or God) intended to transmit to us are not different from one another. We cannot remove the author, or else the text will be opened to multiple interpretations. It is the author who makes the interpretation of the text's original meaning possible. We can discover the author's intention from the text. Meaning is expressed in language and understood through language. The text must control the hermeneutical process of interpretation. If people see ambiguity in the text, possibly the problem is neither in the text nor the writer, but in people's inability to understand them. The meaning of the text is stable, unchangeable. There is one meaning, but there can be multiple implications, multiple significance. Any passage of the Bible must be read in the context of the whole book and in the context of the whole of Scripture, because the same text (words, sentence structure) can have different meanings in different contexts.

The goal of the interpreter is to study the text and discover the meaning that is in the text, but not to create meaning. Without these conditions there would be no sense in the Bible being written to transmit its truth to future generations.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Barr, James. "The Literal, Allegorical, and Modern Biblical Scholarship." *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 44 (1989): 3-17.
- Barthes, Roland. "From Work to Text." In *Textual Strategies: Perspectives in Poststructuralist Criticism*, ed. Josue V. Harrari, 73-81. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1979.
- Brown, Raymond. *The Sensus Plenior of Sacred Scripture*. Baltimore: St. Mary's University Press, 1995.
- Caird, G.B. *The Language and Imagery of the Bible*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997.
- Cotterell, Peter and Max Turner. *Linguistics and Biblical Interpretation*. London: SPCK, 1989.
- Croatto, Severino. *Biblical Hermeneutics: Toward a Theory of Reading as the Production of Meaning*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1987.
- Fish, Stanley. "Interpreting the Variorum." In *Reader-Response Criticism*, ed. Jane P. Thompkin, 164-184. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1980.
- _____. *Is There a Text in This Class? The Authority of Interpretative Communities*. London and Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1980.
- Gillespie, Thomas W. "Biblical Authority and Interpretation: The Current Debate on Hermeneutics." In *A Guide to Contemporary Hermeneutics*, ed. Donald K. McKin. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986.
- Goldingay, John. *Models for Interpretation of Scripture*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995.
- Hirsch, E.D. *Validity in Interpretation*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1967.
- _____. *The Aim of Interpretation*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1976.
- Kaiser, Walter C. "The Single Intent of Scripture." In *Evangelical Roots: A Tribute to Wilbur Smith*, ed. K.S. Kantzer, 55-69. Nashville: Nelson, 1978.
- Klein, William W. *Introduction to Biblical Interpretation*. Dallas: Word, 1993.
- LaSor, W.S. "The Sensus Plenior and Biblical Interpretation." In *A Guide to Contemporary Hermeneutics*, ed. Donald K. McKim. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1986.
- McKnight, Edgar V. "Reader-Response Criticism." In *To Each Its Own Meaning*, ed. Steven McKenzie. Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1993.
- Osborne, Grant R. *The Hermeneutical Spiral, A Comprehensive Introduction to Biblical Interpretation*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1997.
- Poythress, Vern Sheridan. "Divine Meaning of Scripture." *Westminster Theological Journal*, 48 (1986).
- Recoeur, Paul. *Interpretation Theory Discourse and the Surplus of Meaning*. Fort Worth: The Texas University Press, 1976.
- Thiselton, Anthony C. *The Two Horizons: New Testament Hermeneutics and Philosophical Description*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980.
- _____. *New Horizons in Hermeneutics*. Glasgow: Harper Collins, 1992.
- Vanhoozer, Kevin J. *Is There A Meaning In This Text?* Leicester, England: Apollos, 1998.
- Vercler, Henry. *Hermeneutics* (Russian Edition). Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1995.
- Voelz, James W. "Multiple Signs, Levels of Meaning and Self as Text: Intratextuality and the Bible." *Semeia* 69-70 (1995).
- Yoder, Perry B. *Toward Understanding the Bible*. Newton, KS: Faith and Life Press, 1978.