

E. D. HIRSCH AND LITERAL INTERPRETATION

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Recently a student commented on the seemingly strange interpretation that Jesus and Paul reached about what Moses had revealed. Jesus said Moses spoke of him as Messiah (Luke 24:22; John 5:39, 46). Paul commented on the *gospel* preached beforehand to Abraham (Gal. 3:8).

Yet none of the terms, Messiah, salvation, gospel or even eternal life were ever used in the Pentateuch. In what way did Moses write about Messiah and the gospel of eternal life through Jesus Christ? Does a literal, grammatical, historical hermeneutics yield a natural interpretation of Moses that reconciles with either claim?

Literal Method

A literal interpretation of a text does include lexical considerations, grammatical forms used in the historical context. Certainly literal interpretation includes these considerations. But Hirsch cautions that to speak of literal interpretation need not imply that this follows a literal method of interpretation. Such a method assumes that consideration of words, grammatical constructions, and conventions of composition are sufficient to recognize verbal meaning. This assumption is made because there is a necessary correlation between language forms and meanings. But is this necessary correlation sufficient to consider and to comprehend verbal meaning?

In literary criticism, a method based on this assumption that it is sufficient Hirsch called *linguistic determinism*.¹ Hirsch describes this method as based on a necessary correlation between 'form' and 'content' which correlation can be fully worked out. Then the content is known by combining the linguistic forms and the conventions governing language usage with the situational constraints. If the interpreter correctly controls these features of language and language function, one could read and reach an objective interpretation of the verbal meaning.

In legal interpretation, particularly in Britain, it has been called *positivism*. "If the rule and canons of constructions are made precise, if the tools of linguistic analysis are sharpened and refined, the problem of interpretation will be resolved into operational procedures."²

Both of these approaches are right to insist that there must be a correlation between linguistic form and textual meaning. The question is whether a mastery of procedures is

¹ E. D. Hirsch, *The Aims of Interpretation* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1976) 53.

² *Ibid.*, 22.

sufficient? Do we know enough about the correlation between form and meaning to discover operational procedures which are capable of specifying particular meanings? To demonstrate that the mastery is not possible and thus sufficient, Hirsch explores synonymity and speech-act theory. Synonymity explores the occasional substitution of different forms which are synonymous?³

In Hebrew poetry, synonymous parallelism illustrates Hirsch's point. In Psalm 22:8, Messiah's accusers will rail at him:

"He relies on the LORD
 Let Him rescue him
 Let the LORD deliver him,
 Since he takes pleasure in him."

The parallel lines are distinct in form, yet the two lines essentially say the same thing. Thus, different textual forms express the same meaning, distinct only in emphasis.

Speech-act theory explores how the same words used with different intent, express different meanings. The theory of verbal communication begins recognizing a distinction between the *locution* (language forms) and *illocution* (the intended active force of the locution). So a locution "pass the salt" may have the force of a *request* or a *command*. The difference in meaning of the same form involves more than a mere change in emphasis.

As a *request*, the responding action depends on the responder's good will to meet the request. As a *command*, the responding action now depends on the speaker's authority and power to enforce a response. What is demonstrated is that the language forms are not sufficient in themselves to specify particular meanings of an utterance. Yet that reality does not diminish the correlation involved in literal interpretation.

Normal Approach

As indicated in both synonymity and speech acts, more is involved in understanding meaning than simply considering the language forms. Two lines are synonymous if the author intends that relationship. The speech act is the act the author intends to express. Rather, a literal method which only considers the textual forms and conventional functions is not sufficient. The double-sidedness of communication must be considered. It is an author intending to communicate a message and a reader working with the text to understand. Neither considered alone controls the communication.

³ Ibid., 50-73.

Charles Ryrie never hesitated to claim that literal interpretation is one of the *sine qua non* of a dispensational theology. Yet he does concede that the term *literal* alone is insufficient to consider all that's happening. He added that interpreted meaning must be *normal* and *plain*. These three terms are synonymous in the sense that they posit something about interpretation based on the language of the text as expressed in the historical context. But the emphasis on *normal* refers to the way interpretation commonly occurs⁴ and on *plain* refers to a clearly understood meaning. So the question may be asked, "What is the *normal approach* in verbal communication?"

The word approach is used rather than method because we don't have a method consisting of a sequence of steps that lead to a necessary conclusion. Rather the approach involves a paradox. The approach contains the apparent contradiction that a text as a whole must be understood before it can be understood. This is what the hermeneutical spiral states. Thus the first understanding, if held as a guess, that secondly must be validated in its capacity to explain what is understood.

E. D. Hirsch describes such a normal approach in the interpretation of texts which are seen to communicate verbal meaning.⁵ Such a description posits a goal stating the meaning to be understood, since that goal is not a given. Second, the description includes what normally occurs in reading comprehension. Still care must be given to acknowledge that the Bible is not the same in all respects as other books. Nevertheless, the description consists of answers to two questions:

What *goal* ought be chosen?

What *describes* a normal approach to verbal communication?

First, the Goal

There are three possible goals from which to choose:

- What meaning does the text express;
- What meaning does the interpreter construe;
- What meaning does the author intend to communicate through what has been written?

Hirsch's choice of an ultimate goal is to *validate* the interpretation that is most adequately defended by evidence found in the text. That goal is compatible with a biblical

⁴ In biblical exegesis, normal has been incorrectly applied to authors' most frequent usage found in lexicons and grammars. But this is not the way books are commonly interpreted.

⁵ E. D. Hirsch, *Validity in Interpretation* (New Haven and London, Yale University Press, 1967) 1-126.

hermeneutic. In addition, we agree with his argument that this ultimate goal is based upon an immediate goal of seeking to understand the Author's/author's intended meaning expressed in the text. This immediate goal is normative for reading text after text. Further, in Biblical hermeneutics, this enables communication with the divine Author who bore along the human author (Matt. 1:22, 23; 2 Peter 1:21). This devotional reading of Scripture is appropriate for a Christian's handling of the Biblical texts. In addition, in biblical hermeneutics, the ultimate goal is the validation of the most probably correct interpretation which then facilitates the pursuit of understanding the truth expressed in Scripture.

Second, the Normal Approach

Hirsch's description of the approach begins with an acknowledgment of the *double-sidedness* of verbal communication. Communication "is not simply the expression of meaning but also the interpretation, each pole existing through and for the other, and each completely pointless without the other."⁶ Thus, in beginning with *meaning*, the author's will determines what type of meaning is expressed. Or in beginning with *interpretation*, the reader focuses on the sequence of linguistic signs within the literary genre. This two-sidedness creates a problem for describing a literal interpretation.

"The great and *paradoxical* problem . . . is that the norms of language are elastic and variable (the readers side), while the norms that obtain for a particular utterance must be definitive and determinate (the author's side) if the . . . meaning of the utterance is to be communicated."⁷ Thus, if an exegesis merely lists possible interpretive options, the exegete is not focusing on what an author is communicating. On the other hand, if, the exegesis proposes a single unified message expressed by the author, then the exegete must also consider the validity of the proposed message. So in view of the paradoxical problem, how can the two sidedness of communication be resolved?

Hirsch cites two theorists to address the problem. Saussure pointedly distinguished between the possibility of various meanings in language and grammar forms (*lingua*) and the actuality of meaning in an author's usage (*parole*).⁸ That distinction clarified the existence of a paradox. The resolution must discover "the norms that do control and define the utterance, not the vast uncertain array that could do so."⁹

⁶ Ibid.. 68.

⁷ Ibid.. 69

⁸ Ferdinand de Saussure, *Course in General Language* eds. C. Bally and A. Sechehaue, trans. W. Baskin (New York, 1959) 14, 19.

⁹ Hirsch, *Validity*. . .70.

Wittgenstein's¹⁰ seminal meditation on language usage proposed a resolution of the paradox. To explain the resolution he posited an analogy between playing a game and understanding a text. The paradox is that you need to know the game before you know the moves to play in the context set by the game. Likewise, you need to understand an utterance before you can understand the parts of the utterance as the author intended.

In a game, the game exists as it is provided in the package. But a game also exists as it is played against an opponent. Before you play the game you have to know the game; its rules, its strategies and its component pieces. But to know about the game is not the know how to play the game. And each time you play an opponent, the game moves may be different. Both senses the game bears "family resemblances" in common.

In a similar fashion, the language exists as the author composes the text using that language. Both must be understood. First one needs to understand the language in which the text is written, the grammatical and syntactical strategies in usage and the possible literary genre in composition. These meanings are multiple. Second, one still doesn't understand what the author means in a given composition. That meaning is particular and determined. And in this second sense, one must understand the author's composition before one can understand the author's development of his meaning. This is a second paradox commonly characterized as a hermeneutical spiral.

The focus of literal interpretation is on finding the correspondence between the text and the meaning, which addresses a feature of the paradox in the hermeneutical spiral. The apparent contraction is that the meaning of the text must be understood before the text can be understood in full. The initial understanding of an author's text involves reading the text as a whole. The verbal meaning of this utterance must be recognized as belonging to a type of composition with "family resemblances."¹¹ The epistemological status of this initial understanding is as a stated guess.¹² The recognition dawns on the reader as certain questions are raised and answered. First, what is the subject of the composition? In narrative genre, the subject consists of what happened in history? For hymnic genre, it features what experience is praised or lamented? Second concerns the complement: what does the author have to say (predicate) about the subject? In the biblical text, the complement makes the distinctive contribution since it's content features divine revelation.

¹⁰ Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* trans. G. E. M Anscombe (New York, 1953) 26ff.

¹¹ Hirsch, *Validity*. . . , 71.

¹² It consists in a statement of meaning that is without adequate defense. The validity rests on the reading comprehension brought to the task but with unstated support.

Hirsch calls this stated understanding the intrinsic genre. I call it the message. The justification rests in the broadest sense of biblical, literary genre. Adler and Van Doren¹³ propose that literary genre either has expository or imaginary intent. Intrinsic to the intent of expository genre is knowledge while of imaginary is experience. While biblical literature commonly combines both intentions, the dominant intent in revelation is knowledge. This warrants the point in interpretation to be the recognition of the message the author intended to communicate.

So the normal approach begins on the side of fashioning the author's intended message. And as this corresponds to what the author wrote in the text, this is literal interpretation.

On the other side, the interpreted side, this message needs to be tested to see whether it is adequate to explain naturally the terms and constructions in the composition and to trace the argument as the message that is developed in the whole text.

These two sides of the approach consist in the hermeneutical spiral. Hirsch later describes this as a corrigible schemata. "A schema (message statement) sets up a range of predictions or expectations, which if fulfilled (providing natural explanations) confirms the schema, but if not fulfilled causes us to revise it. That this making-matching, constructive-corrective process inheres in the reception of speech,¹⁴ the descriptive approach is not a method.

This is the *normal approach* to clarify an argument, developed in the exposition of a message. Thus the meanings expressed in the textual particulars are unfolded in plain terms based on the message. So literal interpretation is derived from a *normal approach* in reading the text. This results in a plain understanding of the text.

Gospel in the Writings of Moses

How then does this *normal approach* apply to the problems raised at the outset of the paper? Does Moses record the Gospel revealed by God? The answer features the Gospel as one "family of meanings," as one generic or one type of utterance.

Paul quotes Moses' statement of God's promise first addressed to Abram, "in you all nations shall be blessed" (Gal. 3:8 quoting Gen. 12:3, 18:18; 22:18; 26:4; 28:14). In Galatians 3:8, Paul used the word προεηγγελιτο (proēuēggelizō) translated gospel.

¹³ Adler, Mortimer J and Van Doren, Charles *How to Read a Book* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1972). A distinction is made between expository books which try to convey knowledge and imaginative books which try to communicate an experience itself. It is assumed that all biblical books have an expository force revealing knowledge about God even if, like the psalms or Song of Songs, they are also imaginative.

¹⁴ Hirsch, *Aims*. . .32.

Strangely, then in 1 Corinthians 15:3-5, Paul makes known the Gospel” (ευαγγελιζην, euaggelizō) with a seemingly different content; “Christ died for our sins according to scriptures, and that he was buried, and that he was raised on the third day according to the scriptures.” So we might ask, which is the Gospel?

Paul uses two different statements and says they both express the Gospel. In Hirsch’s terms, this is the case because both utterances share one “family of resemblances,” one type of meaning, one generic message. As one Gospel, each utterance expresses one type of meaning, one set of family traits. And I would propose three common traits in one type of meaning; Gospel.

1. God’s promise of blessing

Genesis 12:3 announces the blessing but does not specify what that blessing might be. However, the blessing Abram later received is the blessing Abram is promised for all nations (12:3). That blessing is specified in Gen. 15:6. When Abram came to believe that he would be given an offspring from his own body to be his heir (Gen. 15:1-5), then God declared that his faith would be accounted to him as righteousness (15:6). Justification by faith was the initial promised blessing. 1 Corinthians 15:2-4 declared that the Corinthians “are saved by” the Gospel, since “Christ died *for our sins*.” Salvation is the promised blessing.

2. God’s promised agent

Genesis 12:3 sounds like the “in you” refers to Abram alone as agent but the repeated promise clarifies that it is “by your offspring” (26:14; 28:14).

1 Corinthians 15:3 specifies that the agent is Christ. When Abram believed (15:6), God had specified that he would father a physical heir (15:4) to be the agent through whom the promises would be fulfilled. In particular, he would be the one “through whom all nations would be blessed” (12:3b).

3. Promise for all nations

Genesis 18:18 recorded the promise when Abraham made a plea to save Sodom. Gen. 22:18 recorded the promise *because* Abraham obeyed God’s command and sacrificed Isaac. So God blessed *Isaac* in the provision of a sacrifice through the initial agency of Abraham.

1 Corinthians 15:1 specifies that Paul proclaimed the Gospel to you, the *Corinthians*. They are included in all nations.

Thus, the Gospel is God’s promise of blessing through the promised agent for all nations to be accepted by faith.

Conclusion

The normal approach is not a literal method even though it features the necessary correspondence between textual forms and meaning. As a result, the normal approach results in a literal interpretation. The normal approach is not based solely on lexical or grammatical considerations, as though the most common use of a form by the author is the meaning intended. Rather the normal approach seeks to discern the author's intended contextual use recognized both as the willed type-meaning as a whole and exegeted as component traits of that type-meaning expressed in the text.

So the Gospel promises God's blessing provided through the anointed Agent for all nations.