Form Criticism Methodology

In the last session we were discussing Form Criticism in both the Old and New Testament and we ended by discussing Form Criticism in the New Testament and especially its development in Gospels studies. We said that Form Criticism’s emerging Gospel studies focused on had three facts. Number one: identifying and labeling the form such as pronouncement word or saying or something like that. Second is isolating or analyzing these settings in life or the *sitz im leben*, to use the German term for the “setting in life” used in the early church that may have given rise to the form. For example, some think that miracle stories may have been given or have arisen in the early church in the setting or context where it was necessary to defend the faith or in an apologetic context. But isolating or recovering this setting in life, or this setting in the early church gave rise to the form. Finally, examine the oral transmission of the form before the period of its actual inclusion in the biblical text. To look at another example of the form within the Gospels themselves and in one area that has in some respects has been rather fruitful when it comes to Form Criticism and there is a lot we can say about this but I will just boil it down to just a couple of points.

**Parables**

The parables of Jesus seem to be a fruitful area of study when it comes to form criticism. Especially focusing, as we said, that probably is the most fruitful aspect of critical form is in the New Testament. The first aspect is identifying the form itself in the text and labeling that form. But parables I think are a fruitful example of how Form Criticism can work and especially how it affects the way we interpret it. In the past Form Criticism the parables have been dominated by an approach that says that we should focus on or look for the one main point that the parable teaches. The parables are seen as a simile or as a metaphor sometimes or labeled as a story that only communicates one single point. So the goal of the
interpreter is to figure out at what point Jesus was going to get across when he taught in parables. What is intriguing about that approach is that it generally goes back to a German scholar Adolf Julicher who was responding to the ways parables were treated up until the nineteenth and twentieth centuries before that time parables were frequently allegorized. We read an extreme example from a few sessions ago from Saint Augustine’s treatment of the parable of the Good Samaritan. Where he found an allegorical meaning behind virtually anything in the parable, in reaction to that kind of interpretation Adolf Julicher the German scholar who’s work unfortunately has not yet been translated into English, but he argued that parables only communicate one main point.

So in a lot of books on biblical interpretation or books on biblical hermeneutics that treat parables with follow this advice and will suggest that the goal of the interpreter is based on the historical context and based on Jesus teaching is to figure out what is the one main point that the parable is trying to teach. However, recently not so much as a result of classical form criticism that we have been discussing but recently the form the parables has been revisited and many have suggested that the parables could be classified actually as limited allegories, that is, the parables are allegories in the sense that only the main features or the main characters get a second level of meaning or an allegorical meaning, not everything. For example, most of the details are there just to make the story work. But at the same time it seems that the main characters in the story get a second level of meaning or an allegorical meaning and in many respects this is the way that Jesus treated the parables when he interpreted them.

For example, I think of the parable of the Sower where Jesus tells the parable and then he goes on and explains it for his disciples. He explains the sower is the one who sows the seed of the word of God. The seed is the word of God, the Gospel of the kingdom is the different grounds that the seeds fall on are different responses to the word. So it even seems that, that is how Jesus treated the parables. Although not everything is treated allegorically it seems that the
main points and the main characters of the parable are meant to have a deeper level of meaning, an allegorical meaning. But again it is one that is consistent with the context and with the teaching of Jesus not necessarily one that reflects later New Testament teaching etc. But meanings that are suitable for the stage of salvation history in which Jesus arrives and brings about the kingdom of God.

**Types of Parables**

So, for example, one way of analyzing has been to see, that it will return to this later on, but to see parables according to three main types. One kind of parable is known as a “monadic parable” that is a parable that does have only one main point. For example, there is the well-known parable of the mustard seed. The main feature of that parable is the mustard seed, that is what is communicating the point and that’s the feature that gets the allegorical level of meaning. Everything else in the parables is just there to make the story work.

The other type of parable then would be what could be called a “dyadic parable.” That is a parable that has two main points that corresponds to two main persons of characters or features within the parable such as the parable that Jesus tells us about a woman and she goes to a judge. Basically, she bothers the judge until the judge responds to her and gives her what she asks for. Those are the two main things features of the parable, the two main characters will receive an allegorical treatment. The meaning and everything else that is in the parable is just there for a color to make the parable work.

And then finally, to move up the scale parable could be labeled a triadic parable. As this label applies to these parables would have three main points. A classic example would be where you would have a master with a good and a bad servant under that master. The master will interact with both of them. So sometimes the good or the bad servant so there could be more than one and you could have several good servants with one bad servant or something like that. But in this case again, you will have three main points corresponding with three main allegorical meanings corresponding to the three main characters in the parable.
Again everything else is there just for color just to make the parable and the story work.

**Prodigal Son Parable: Triadic**

Let me give you an example from a parable that we have already referred to a couple of times and that is, the parable of the prodigal son. You know the story well. A son goes to his father and asks for his share of the inheritance. The father gives him his inheritance and the son goes off and squanders it in all kinds of loose living. And when he runs out of money he comes to his senses, then he comes back to his father hoping that he will at least be receiving as a servant or as if not a son, but we said that the father sees the son a long way off and runs off to greet him and hugs him and brings him back. He then throws this elaborate party for his son.

The parable interestingly ends though with one future character that is the older son who responds and questions what the father is doing. He responds in jealously because the father is treating the son in a way he does not deserve and then the parable ends there!

This is a classic example of the parable of the Prodigal Son in Luke 15. This is an example of how this is a triadic parable, that is, there are three main characters in this parable: the so called prodigal son, the father, and then the older son. So with this method of looking at the parables there will be an allegorical meaning associated with each of the three main characters in the parable again a meaning that Jesus intended and is consistent with the history in the context of Jesus’ teaching and Jesus’ life.

First of all then the father in the parable obviously stands for God who forgives those who come to him in repentance. We talked a little bit about the historical references in the parable in an earlier session. Also it is possible that the point is that God humiliates himself when he is willing to risk his dignity when he stoops so low to accept a sinner back who has offended him. Second, the so called prodigal son would then stand for the sinner who comes to God in repentance and
receives God’s gracious acceptance. Finally, the older son probably stands for the Pharisees who are jealous because God extends his forgiveness to people who don’t deserve it.

One of the key features is to again, put this parable in its context, if you go back to the beginning of chapter 15 Jesus is responding to the Pharisees who are accusing Jesus for associating with tax collectors and sinners. So now this parable is told in response to that, so that the older son who is jealous after the younger son is treated by the father in the way he hasn’t gone off and blown his inheritance on all kinds of wild living. The older son cannot understand why the father would treat him and accept him the way he is. The older son then clearly represents the Pharisee who is jealous because now God extends his forgiveness to those who do not deserve it. Indeed, the older son probably represents anyone who responds in jealousy or anyone that does not respond in joy and praise whenever God extends his grace to anyone that does not deserve it.

It is kind of interesting, just as an aside, to look at this in a little more detail. It is intriguing that the parable never tells us exactly what the older son did. The parable leaves you hanging with a third character where the father ends by inviting the older son to join in the celebration and to join in the party. Though again we are never told what the older son did. Did he come in, or did he go back in the fields and reject and ignore his father’s provision, perhaps his father’s innovation? Perhaps the parable is open ended intentionally and that Jesus is continually calling his readers to examine to deal with the Pharisee in them and to respond in rejoicing when God extends his grace and forgiveness to someone that does not deserve it. Everything else in the parable the fattened calf, the ring, the purple robe, the pigs, and the food, the young son fed the pigs when he came to the end of himself, that he was in such a desperate situation that he wanted to eat the food that the pigs were eating, the inheritance, the wild living, most of that is simply there to make the story work. Those are not to be given an allegorical level of meaning.
But it seems to me that form criticism might help us to interpret the parables of by understanding what kind of literature we are dealing with especially if the parables are limited allegories. That is where the main persons, the main characters in the story receive allegorical meaning. That is because that is the way Jesus intended it in that case and that is we should based on the context and the historical connotation and the life teaching of Jesus and the attempt to understand what the meaning of the parable might be or what meanings might be associated with the three main characters, or the one main character or the two main characters depending on what kind of parable it is.

Form Criticism outside the Gospels

Outside of the Gospels form criticism has been applied not quite as much as it has been in the Gospel literature itself. Form Criticism has been effectively applied to other sections of the New Testament. For example, in much of Paul one of the main things you often find happening in Paul’s letters and you find this in some of the other New Testament epistles as well is that in the exhortation or hortatory sections of the letters you will often find a list of virtues. Paul will say something such as he does in Colossians chapter three: “Therefore the dearly beloved is chosen by God put on” and he will list a series of goods, or put off and avoid sexual morality et cetera. and he will give a list of things to be avoided. A classic example is Galatians chapter 5 the works of the flesh and the works of the spirit. Here Paul simply gives a list, and running list of vices to be avoided. “The works of the flesh are these” and he lists a number. “But the fruit of the spirit are these, love, joy, and peace et cetera. He lists them and again you find a similar thing in Ephesians and Colossians. A couple of places elsewhere, most likely Paul is drawing on a common form that is found sometimes elsewhere in Greek and Roman literature there are what are known as a vice and virtue lists. These simply catalogue vices to be avoided because of their destructive behavior especially to those in the community and to virtues to be embraced. Paul obviously tailors those for his own purposes but he maybe relying on a very early form.
Another interesting form that one finds is in 1 Peter, but one finds it also in Ephesians chapter 5 and Colossians chapter 4 where Paul addresses the relationships between husbands and wives, children, and parents and then slaves and masters. In both of these sections in Ephesians and Colossians and you find something similar in 1 Peter as well. But most likely this and Paul’s instructions may reflect a form what is a well-known form in the first century that some have labeled the household codes. That is, this could be an early form found in Greek or Roman literature that stipulated the proper relationships between primary persons within the typical Greek or Roman household because the household was seen to be the core unit within the Greek or Roman society that brought stability to society. So this form addressed reciprocally the relationship between the three main units of a typical household: husbands and wives, children, and parents and then slaves and masters.

Paul then may pick up on this form that we call the household code in order to instruct Christians. Obviously, the language Paul used of the form and the basis for the behavior would be very different than in the Greek or Roman world. But there have been suggestions that perhaps Paul is using this form for missionary purposes or Paul is only using this form just to instruct the Christian household or is it possible he is using this form because he wants to demonstrate that Christianity is not subversive it does not destroy the relationships the Greek or Roman society deemed valuable. Instead, Christianity offers that again, although Paul’s basis for and his instructions are in some respects very unique and very different from the use of that form the way those relationships would have worked out in Greek or Roman literature. For example, the fact that Paul tells husbands to love her wives in Ephesians 5, would have been rather unique in the Greek or Roman world.

So Form Criticism, I think is a valuable historical approach and provides hermeneutical or interpretive insight if we avoid the more speculative conclusions and sometimes the even more destructive conclusions of form criticism. Second,
when we focus on the classification and the structure and the function of the various forms in the Old and New Testament, when we do that I think form criticism can still be of very valuable tool in biblical interpretation.

**Redaction Criticism Introduction**

What I want to do now and again is move to the historically and logically sort of the next criticism in this triad that all fall under the broader umbrella of Historical Criticism, and that would be Redaction Criticism. Redaction Criticism builds on both form and source criticism that we just looked at. Form and Source Criticisms as we said tends to go behind the texts, the written texts, to uncover the oral forms or the written sources that are now merged in the written texts. So primarily, form and source criticism behind the texts and attempted to reconstruct the prior forms and the sources.

Now Redaction Criticism goes further, although it is based on source and form criticism. It actually assumes Form and Source Criticism. Redaction Criticism assumes there were sources used and there were individual forms that the Old Testament authors or the New Testament authors utilized but it goes further and it asks how have these sources and forms now been combined and brought together by an author into the finished texts and what does this say about he author’s intention, and the author’s theological intention.

So, putting that all together, basically Redaction Criticism can be described as this: Redaction criticism is a study of the author’s theological intention by examining the way he has arranged and edited his sources, or arranged and edited his material especially in comparison with others who have written on the same topic. So by examining an author, especially in comparison with others who have written on the same topic or by examining the way the author has arranged his material and has edited and utilized his sources then Redaction Criticism asks, what does that say about the theological intention of the author?

Again, but more broadly one could again simply utilize Redaction Criticism as I said by simply comparing it to what others to have written on the same topic.
to see how they differ and how they treat that topic. For example, many of us probably use a really basic kind of crude saying of Redaction Criticism. Whenever we look at the Christmas story, for example, in Luke and Matthew and we ask why they are different? Why does Matthew include the account of the Magi coming to visit Jesus and why does Luke instead include the shepherds? When we start asking those types of questions we are kind of asking the initial questions of Redaction Criticism. Redaction Criticism asks the question as to how has the author arranged and edited his material that he has available to him in the final text and what does that reveal about the author’s actual intention in writing the text? So, Redaction Criticism assumes two things, first of all it assumes that there is an author who as produced this text. But, second, it assumes the existence of sources and forms that the author has taken up and now arranged and edited in his final document.

**Old Testament Examples of Redaction Criticism: 2 Sam 7/1 Chron 17**

Once again, I will give a couple of examples from the Old and New Testament and as I have already said a number of times. My examples are weighted a little more to the New Testament, but to give an example from the Old Testament. One we just mentioned again my purpose is not to give a thorough exposition of this. But just to show what kinds of questions Redaction Criticism might ask. We got to an example of how 1 Chronicles 17 and the account of God speaking through the prophet Nathan to David in the establishment of the Davidic covenant where God promises he will build a house for David. He makes the covenant with David that God will be his father, that David will be his son and that there will always be someone to sit on David’s throne. A covenant formula that became very important later on in the Old Testament and into the New Testament as well.

But we also saw that 2 Samuel 7 includes the same covenant formula almost in identical wording and in the same account in the words of the prophet of Nathan and David. So, because we have two authors recording similar language
we can ask the question of how do they differ from each other or how have the authors utilized that account and how does that function with their theological intentions? So by comparing the way that the author of 2 Samuel has recorded the account of Nathan’s prophecy to David and the Davidic covenant with the way that the author of 1 Chronicles 17 has recorded those same words by looking at how they do that and how they have incorporated that, edited that, and included that in their own composition; one might be able to discern the theological intention of the author.

One of the interesting points has to do with, in 2 Samuel 7 in the author of 2 Samuel 7’s account of the Davidic covenant we find this interesting phrase and God is speaking about the King, the King who would sit on David’s throne. He says, “when he does wrong I will punish him” is one of the interesting phrases found in 2 Samuel 7 but it is missing in 1 Chronicles 17. So Redaction Criticism asks what might be the theological intention of this change for the author? Why might the author of 1 Chronicles 17, if we assume 1 Chronicles 17 or if we assume that second Samuel is a source for first chronicles 17. One might ask, why might the author have dropped this, or what does this change suggest about the theological intent of the author of 1 Chronicle 17?

Some have suggested that this is because the author of 1 Chronicles is addressing a specific situation is trying to portray the Davidic monarchy in the most positive light possible to demonstrate that the hay-day of Israel’s existence, the Golden day of Israel’s existence, was under the Davidic monarchy. So this phrase was intentionally left out, according to some, for that reason. But the main point is to look at those texts and to ask how the authors have adapted those stories and what that might suggest about the theological intention of the author.

**New Testament Redaction Criticism**

Again in the New Testament the Gospels have dominated the redaction critical scene. The Gospels have become a fruitful field for Redaction Criticism because there is a literal relationship between the three. So one can specifically
ask them when you compare Matthew, Mark, and Luke, how have they edited their sources? The way they have told the story and how it differs from each other, what might that reveal about their theological intentions?

**Palm Sunday**

One very interesting example, when you compare Matthew 21 and Mark 11 and Luke 19 all three of these texts record the events around Palm Sunday; that is, the arrival of Jesus in Jerusalem. All three of these record that event. But it is interesting when you compare them, Matthew has two significant changes although, again, they are recording the same event and it occurs in the same order in the narrative and the same actors and participants. There is very similar wording, yet there is some significant differences when you compare the three accounts. When you look at them Matthew has the most interesting differences and I might not talk about some of the differences Mark and Luke have and what that might say about their intention. I want to focus on Matthew.

Matthew has two things the interesting features that you do not find in Mark or Luke. First of all Matthew mentions and again this is the story of Jesus riding in on a colt on the so called Palm Sunday that we celebrate into Jerusalem. But Mathew unlike Mark and Luke, Matthew mentions both a donkey and a colt. Where as Mark and Luke only mention a colt, Jesus riding on a colt. Matthew mentions both the donkey and the colt.

Second, along with that, Matthew also quotes and Old Testament prophecy from Zechariah 9:9 which also does not occur in the Luke or Marks accounts. So in Matthew 21:4-5 Matthew says, “This took place to fulfill what was spoken through the prophet.” Now he quotes Zechariah 9:9 “say to the daughter of Zion, see your king comes to you, gentle and riding on a donkey on a colt the foal of a donkey.” Notice Zechariah 9:9 seems to suggest the occurrence of two animals; a donkey and its colt. So what Matthew seems to have done is Matthew mentions both the donkey and the colt? Unlike Luke and Mark, it is not that Luke and Mark didn’t know if there was a donkey or didn’t know or think there was one, or that
Matthew is making this up; it is simply that Matthew is emphasizing the donkey and the colt to demonstrate and to make this account consistent with the Old Testament prophecy. One of Matthews major themes, although Matthew and Mark and Luke are interested in fulfillment of the Old Testament as well, Matthew more than the others demonstrates the key features going all the way back to chapters one and two where over and over again at key movements in the life of Jesus of his early childhood starting with his birth were seen as fulfilling Old Testament texts.

Now Matthew does that over and over again. In here where Mark and Luke do not include a quotation, Matthew wants to make clear that this event was a fulfillment of Old Testament prophetic texts as he has done throughout his gospel. For that reason Matthew includes both the colt and the donkey in the story because he is trying to make clear that this event is the fulfillment of an Old Testament prophecy.

So by comparing Mark, Matthew, and Luke’s account of similar story and by looking at this difference in the way Matthew has edited it and how he has arranged it and utilized it in his own narrative one can begin to see Matthews theological intent that even more than Luke and Mark wanting to stress the Old Testament prophetic fulfillment of this event including the colt and the donkey. Shows that this narrative aligns with and is a fulfillment of the Zechariah 9:9 text.

**Birth Narratives and Redaction Criticism**

One other example that we have already referred to, although it is not clear that Matthew or Luke necessarily depend on each other, but they may be depended on a common story that lies behind this especially since neither of them would have been present I don’t think during these events, is Matthew and Luke’s record of the Christmas story. This account, as we have said, does not occur anywhere in Mark. Mark jumps right into the emergence of John the Baptist and the life and early ministry of Jesus.
Matthew and Luke both include the account of Jesus birth a well-known account of the Christmas story. As we have already mentioned it is interesting when you compare these stories to note the differences. A couple of key differences: first, one of the things you find in Matthew that you don’t as much in Luke although in the earlier chapters especially Luke 1 you do find a specific illusions to and references to the Old Testament, but Matthew as we have already seen in chapters one and two wants to make clear that Jesus’s birth and early childhood, the events and movements surrounding that are all seen as fulfillments of Old Testament texts. A second difference is that Matthew records the visit of the Magi to Jesus probably a year or almost two years after his birth. By the time the so called Wiseman or Magi come to visit Jesus he is clearly not in the stable anymore. Now Jesus is actually called a boy in Matthew and the Magi find him in this house. He is no longer in the stable so the events of Matthew 2 probably happened a year or two after the birth of the events of Luke 2. It is interesting Matthew has the Magi coming to visit Jesus while Luke has the shepherds coming to visit Jesus. Matthew seems to know nothing about or say anything about the shepherds coming to see Jesus and Luke says nothing about any Magi coming to see Jesus.

One suggestion is that perhaps Matthew invented the story of the magi to replace the shepherds. It is it possible though that both events did occur, but Matthew and Luke are simply being selective in what they record and how they record the event to be in line with their main theological intention. So, for example, Matthew is very interested in emphasizing Jesus as the Christ the Messiah, emphasizing the royal status of Jesus which he does in the first chapter with that long genealogy linking Jesus back to both Abraham and David. So Matthew is interested particularly in the Jesus royal status as the messiah, the king of the Jews, and so he portrays Jesus as having a very royal reception although the royalty in Jerusalem, King Herod does not bother to go out his back door to see Jesus. You have other wealthy dignitaries coming from quite a long ways to visit
Jesus and to bring him rather expensive gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh; typical gifts that one would give important people such as royalty. So Matthew has crafted his story to emphasize the royal reception of Jesus as King and as messiah.

Furthermore, Matthew seems to be interested more than any of the other Gospels in the Gentile reception of the Gospel. We will return to this later, but actually by having the magi come and visit Jesus, Matthew is emphasizing that the Gospel is not just for Jews, but for Gentiles. Remember Matthew 1:1 begins by saying, “this is the genealogy of Jesus, the son of Abraham and the son of David.” But by calling Jesus “the son of Abraham,” it was through Abraham in Genesis 12 that God would eventually bless all the nations of the earth. Now as the son of Abraham Jesus now is received at the very beginning of the narrative by Gentiles so Matthew has crafted his story and there are some other things Matthew is doing. We will return to this text later on when we talk about the use of the Old Testament in the New, there are some other things going on in the story, but Matthew is crafting his story radically to emphasis the Gentile reception of Jesus, but also the royal reception that Jesus received as the King of the Jews and as the Messiah.

Luke has more of a humble being, Luke has Jesus being born and raised in a very humiliating and very humble environment. So, it’s fitting for Luke when you read the rest of the Gospel this is an important feature of Redaction Criticism to examine when I look at how an author uses a source to look at patterns throughout the entire book. One of the patterns you see in Luke is that Jesus ends up being the savor and often goes out to the outcasts of society. He is caught hanging around with the people like tax collectors that although very wealthy. Most people were hostile to them. You have for various reasons, Jesus associating with disgusting Samaritans. You have Jesus touching and healing people like lepers with a disease like leprosy. You have Jesus associating with all kinds of people in all parts of the margins that were disgusting to that society. Luke’s version of the Christmas story fits this perfectly. By having Jesus born in a
disgusting stable which would have or could have been like a lean-to on a house. That is where you would have kept animals, but also other things like feed troughs and a manger, by having Jesus born in that kind of environment and by having shepherds coming to visit Jesus probably one of the lowest social economic totem pole Luke is trying to portray Jesus with the rest of his story as coming to those who are of a very humble origin, who are the outcasts of society. So Matthew and Luke have clearly structured their Gospels, but also the Christmas story they have edited and arranged and recorded it in a way that clearly gets across their theological intent. So by examining these two gospels that refer to the same story and give an account of the same story it is instructive to see the changes they make and how that might differ and what that might say about the theological intent of the two authors. It is possible though that both events did occur, but Matthew and Luke are simply being selective in what they record and how they record the event to be in line with their main theological intention.

So in both the Old and New Testament when an author does rely on demonstrable sources or forms that he has taken up into his own work or when two authors write on the same topic its constructive to ask how they differ from each other and how they have arranged and utilized there material and what that might say about the theological intention of the authors. Again, at the end of the day, that must be a Redaction Criticism tested by looking at the entire Gospel to make sure that the conclusions one draws with how the author may be editing certain sections is concerned with what seems to be going on in the entire Gospel.

**Evaluating Redaction Criticism**

What is intriguing because of that Redaction Criticism is actually giving way to another criticism that I am not going to spend a lot of time on. But known as Composition Criticism which looks at the entirety of the Gospels and how they were put together. For example, Redaction Criticism can be a valuable tool in helping us uncover the author’s theological intention by looking at the way the author has adapted and arranged his material and edited his material to
communicate his theological point. So again Redaction Criticism is another method of criticism that when shown of its negative presuppositional assumptions earlier some practitioners of Redaction Criticism said any time that the author was introducing to his sources or trying to communicate theologically the author or must have not been interested in history. But when divorce from those negative assumptions, Redaction Criticism can help us come to grips with theological meaning and intention of the texts.

Now, in Redaction Criticism the author seems to play a more primary role, than he did with Form and Source Criticism. Here we are not so much interested in going behind the Old and New Testament texts and recovering the sources and forms, but we are assuming an author has taken those forms and sources and arranged them in a text. Redaction Criticism begins to focus more on the author. So it raises the question of the author’s intention.

**Author’s Intention**

I want next to move then still under the broader umbrella for historical Criticism examine the issue of the author’s intention and look at the author centered approaches to interpretation. So part of historical Criticism is the author who produced the text, the author who wrote the text. So author’s intention is an attempt to uncover what most likely was the intention of the author in producing and writing these texts as found in the study of the document itself.

One of the main persons that kind of sparked interest in intention that we already spend a little time discussing, but we will reintroduce him briefly is. Friedrich Schleiermacher, who as sort of a product of the enlightenment, but reacting to that. He reacted to the mere rationalistic approach to interpretation and emphasized the power of reason and scientific discovery. Schleiermacher emphasized empathy with the author in interpreting the biblical text, that is, according to Schleiermacher the goal of interpretation was to recover the actual past of the author and to actually put one’s self in the mind of the author. One could actually empathize with and identify the author and to recover his true
intention. So, according to Schleiermacher authors intended was primarily understood in psychological terms. Something or sometimes we hear something similar today when we are told in course textbooks on biblical interpretation that the interpreter should attempt to put him or herself in the shoes of the author or try to put yourself in the place of the reader and understand what they were attempting to communicate.

Though most today would perhaps distance themselves from Schleiermacher’s approach especially his more psychologizing approach to uncover the author’s intent, most would still see the author’s intention as an important step in interpretation. Indeed, for some time it was seen as the primary goal of interpretation in most hermeneutical and in most biblical interpretation like textbooks state that the goal is ultimately to recover the meaning that the author intended. The correct meaning of the text is the meaning that the author intended to communicate.

**Quotes highlighting Authorial Intent**

So, for example, these are just a series of quotes from a hand full of hermeneutics or biblical interpretation textbooks, I won’t mention the author of the textbook. But I just surveyed a number of them to give you a flavor and most of these are fairly recent. These are not ancient works most of these have been written since or at least have been revised since the year 2000. So, for example, one textbook says: “The author or editor intended to communicate a message to a specific audience to accomplish some purpose. Our goal is to discover that meaning of the text in those terms. That is, in terms of what the author is trying to communicate to a readership in a certain historical context.” Here is another one: “Exegesis is the attempt to hear the work as the original recipients were to have heard it, to find out what was the original intent of the words of the Bible.” It’s interesting this explanation doesn’t mention the author, but again, it assumes that there is an intended meaning in the text that the author was trying to communicate and that is what we are to go after and to recover. Here is another one, the last one
I will give is: “the meaning of the text is what the author consciously intended it to say.” And again this is just representative of what a number of biblical interpretation or hermeneutic texts book suggest.

So a correct meaning of a text whether an Old Testament text or a New Testament text is the meaning that the human author would have intended to communicate and would convey to the original readers. So the goal of interpretation is to try and uncover this through an analysis study of the texts. One tries to determine what the author was trying to do in producing the texts. What was the author trying to communicate so the goal is not then so much to recover what the contemporary reader makes of this text, but historically what did the historical author try to communicate and in most of these hermeneutical text books by sound methods or rules of application. By the application of sound rules and methods and interpretation one can arrive at the intended meaning and that the meaning of the author is or what the author was trying or intending to communicate.

Reasons Authorial Intent is Important

One question, I want to arise a bunch of questions, but one of them is why is the author’s intent is deemed necessary? Why does it seem to be such an important goal to achieve in interpretation? One question, what are some of the objections to the author’s intent as the main goal of interpretation? Then, finally, I will try and put things together and draw conclusions. Is the author’s intention still a valid goal in interpretation? How do we think about that?

So, first of all, why is the author’s intention been seen as such an important goal? Why is there such an emphasis on the author’s intention? I have simply listed a number of reasons. First of all it is simply the fact that texts are created by authors and even today authors write to communicate. Authors write to communicate something and they write to be understood. So the assumption is that the biblical authors and the Old and New Testaments as we have them are the product of authors attempting to communicate something that can understood by
readers. Therefore it is a worthy, valid and necessary goal to uncover the authors intention. So texts do not just appear and they don’t just emerge and usually authors do not write to confuse or to miscommunicate, although they might to so accidently, or sometimes you might have some authors intentionally write to confuse and miscommunicate, but authors generally communicate to be understood. Therefore the goal of interpretation is what meaning was intent by the author.

A second reason why some deem hermeneutic of the author’s intention is considered to be so important in coming to a biblical interpretation is that the authors intention is what arbitrates between conflicting interpretations. So the correct interpretation of the text is that which the author intends to communicate. So when out of all the proposed meanings there is a short list of conflicting meanings to interpretations, the one that fits the author’s intention is the interpretation to be preferred.

Number three, the author’s intention grounds meeting, that is, meaning is not open ended meaning is not a free-for-all. But it’s the author’s intention that keeps interpretation from running amuck, from becoming a free-for-all where everything is up for grabs. Interpretation is limited to what the author could have intended. It is grounded in the author’s intention. So when I read the book of Ezekiel about the battle of Gog and Magog and how we understand that battle. Those terms we must be grounded in how the author was trying to communicate.

A fourth one is the author’s intention then, and this kind of relates to interpretation more broadly, and the author’s intention in interpretation is seen as a good foundation for theology. The correct interpretation of the text is grounded in the author’s intention and that is foundational for theological reflection and formulation. In other words, theology depends of good exegesis which depends on the stable meaning of the texts grounded in the author’s intention.

A fifth fact is the fact that we are dealing with inspired Scripture. If the Old and New Testament texts as we have them are the inspired word of God, then it’s
necessary to uncover the meaning that the author’s intended, both the human author and the divine author. If this is God’s communication to humanity and if this is the inspired word of God there must be some meaning and some intention in the text that I can get at and I can recover. So the fact that these scriptures are inspired seems to suggest the validity of author’s intention as the goal. The fact is that the human author’s intention is the only way we have access to God’s intention to communicate to us.

Then, finally, related to the first one, finally, arguments to the contrary are self-sustaining, meaning that those who would argue that one cannot know an author’s intention or that the author’s intention is unnecessary or irrelevant intend for their articles and books to be understood. So to try and argue one can’t understand an author’s intention assumes that others who read my article will understand my intention to communicate that.

So based of that the conclusion the goal of interpretation then is to recover the author’s intended meaning. What was the author trying to communicate? And usually through the application of sound principles of interpretation looking at the historical background, the broader context, the meaning of the words et cetera in that period of time, all of what we could know about the author and his readers, all of this will help to arrive at the reasonable reconstruction of the author’s intention.

But having said this, the next question to ask is…Why have some rejected the author’s intention? And is the author’s intention still a valid goal of the interpretation? We will look at those questions in the next session.

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