Historical Critical Approach

We've been discussing author's intention as one of the facets of a historical approach to interpreting Scripture, that is, looking at the author's intended meaning is the primary goal of the interpretation. A couple of the historical persons, one in particular that you need to know related author’s intent we talked a little bit about the Friederick Schleiermacher as one of the important figures in the quest for author’s intention as the primary goal of interpretation.

Hirsch: Meaning and Significance

Outside of biblical studies completely, but interestingly, an individual that has played an important role in biblical scholars exposition of their understanding of the author's intention is an individual E. D. Hirsch. E. D. Hirsch in an early book called *Validity in Interpretation* suggested that one needs to distinguish between meaning and significance. Hirsch said that meaning was that which the author intend to communicate as inscribed in the text itself, that is, the meaning that was placed there by the author, the meaning that the author intended communicate by the language symbols, the structure of the text which reveal what the author was intending to communicate. So the original meaning of the text was tied with the author’s intention as a distinguished from what Hirsch said was the significance of the text, that was the relationship of that meaning to virtually anything else and which most biblical theologians and scholars would label “applications.” They would say meaning is what the author originally intended to communicate while significance was the application of a meaning to the modern-day context. So for Hirsch there is an important role in establishing the importance of author’s intention especially as revealed in the text. The author’s intended meaning that the author willed to communicate in the text is to be distinguished from the relationship of that meaning has to anything else and other situations which Hirsch labeled “significance.” You will often see that distinction between meaning and significance
picked up especially by the biblical interpreters to distinguish between the meaning in
the text and its ongoing relevance and application of the modern-day reader.

**Objections to an Author’s Intent Approach**

So we said that although there are many reasons that have been used to argue for
author’s intent as a worthy and necessary goal in interpretation the other hand, some
have rejected the author's intention for a variety of reasons as a valid or even a necessary
or possible goal of interpretation. Before we look at that it is important to realize that
most who would hold to the author’s intention do not necessarily think it is easy,
automatic, or straightforward or that one can capture the author's intention exhaustively
or perfectly, although they still think it is possible and necessary. But there are some
who reject author’s intention as a possible or a necessary goal of interpretation. So why
have some rejected author’s intent as a goal of interpretation? Why are some convinced
that it is not a valid or even possible objective of interpretation. Again my list is not
meant to be exhaustive but simply to capture some of the possible objections.

First of all, some have rejected the author’s intention because it is impossible to
get in the mind of an author and determine what that author intended to communicate.
Especially with authors that are no longer alive, it is impossible to consult with them to
determine exactly what they meant.

Some early responses to author’s intent formulated what is called “the intentional
fallacy” that is, trying to reproduce or recover the author’s thought process or the
author’s mind, the author’s intention. The author’s thinking is seen as inaccessible. I
remember one time I was talking to a well-known New Testament scholar over in
England and I was talking to him about his book, a book he had written and I quoted a
section of a sentence and after I quoted it he said “I wonder what I meant by that.” That
got me thinking if even living authors sometimes don't know or forget what they meant,
how much more authors who are no longer alive especially when a text was written two
thousand years or more before the time of modern day interpreters. So for those kind of
reasons some say because is impossible to get inside the mind of the author because it is
impossible to understand what the author was thinking and intending especially authors
that are no longer alive to tell us. So the recovery of the author’s intention is impossible. Again, this is often known as the intentional fallacy.

A second reason is that an author might fail to communicate adequately. That is, some authors might be incompetent, some authors may communicate poorly, may communicate something they didn't intend to say, they might not express clearly or adequately what they are trying to get across and what they want say. They may even mislead readers at times even unintentionally. So therefore the author’s intent is unrecoverable or impossible or unnecessary.

Another objection is that at times authors might communicate better than they know. That is, an author might say something and you might go to that author and say “Did you mean this?” The author’s response might be something like this and you may have heard this, “No, I did not intend that but that certainly makes sense and I would accept that as a valid reading or interpretation of what I said.” A number of authors have written books, one in particular I'm thinking of, that record examples of students reading their texts and reading their work and coming up with interpretations that the author never intended to mean, but still considered a valid understanding and insight into that text. Again, maybe you have experienced that when you said something someone has interpreted and asked you: “Did you mean this?” You may have responded “No, I did not intend that but that is a valid understanding of what I said. I would accept that as a true understanding of what was said.”

So because sometimes authors communicate better than they know and readers sometimes find things in texts that the authors don't intend but nevertheless would agree is a valid interpretation and meaning in the text. How much more is this true with dead authors, authors that are not here to tell us whether they intended this meaning or not or even if they did not that this meaning is still valid. So, because authors often communicate even today communicate sometimes better than they knew some suggested, therefore, author’s intention is impossible to recover or at least unnecessary.

Another reason, and again not all of these are related although some of them are, but another reason that primarily owes its origin to more literary studies is: texts are
seen as free-floating. They have a life of their own. Once the author writes a text it now is cut off from the life of the author and it has a life of its own. That is, the author no longer has a say in determining its exact meaning the text now has a life of its own and readers then perhaps are allowed to make sense of the text and to find different meanings. So again, because texts are autonomous, are free floating entities with a life of their own, the author's intention, then is unrecoverable or least it is not valid to restrict ourselves to the author’s intention. Some would think that the author’s intention is still a valid goal but might suggest that we can't limit meaning only to the author's intention.

A fifth objection could be that interpreters often come up with different meanings and different interpretations of the same text. If the author’s intention was truly the primary goal and truly a valid goal and a recoverable goal, then why is it that interpreters come up with different interpretations of the same texts. So why does someone read Genesis 1 and 2 and they are convinced and in a seven literal twenty-four hour day creation period. Why do others read the same texts and see it as referring to something that takes place over a much longer period of time? Why do some readers read Revelation 20, the millennial passage, and are convinced it is teaching pre-millennialism while other readers reading the same text and also going after the author's intention are convinced of amillennialism? Or why do some readers read Hebrews 6 the well-known warning in Hebrews 6 and are convinced that it fits an Arminian perspective and others read the same text and are convinced that it supports Calvinism. Why is it some read the well-known gender passages in 1 Corinthians 11 and 1 Timothy 2 and are convinced that it permits women to participate in any form of ministry including ordination or functioning as senior pastors, while others read those same texts going after the author’s intention, and see it as limiting the roles that women should play in ministry.

So because interpreters come up with different meanings and interpretations of a text some would suggest that those readers who are seeking the author's intention, treating the Bible as the word of God, yet they come up with different interpretations.
They would object to the author’s intention as a legitimate goal of interpretation. Who has found the author’s intent? Some would conclude the author’s intent is unrecoverable.

A final one, again there could be other examples that we can point to, but New Testament authors themselves often seem to find new meanings in Old Testament texts. For example, in 1 Corinthians 10:1-5 where Paul addresses one of the many problems he addresses in the Corinthian church, he compares his readers to the Old Testament generation of God's people as they came out of Egypt and went through the wilderness. Here's what Paul says, “For I do not want you to be ignorant of the fact, brothers, that our forefathers were all under the cloud and that they all passed the sea. They were all baptized into Moses in the cloud and the sea. They all ate of the same spiritual food” — do you remember when God feeds the Israelites with manna and when God would cause water to come out of the rock. Now listen to this: “and they drank the same spiritual drink. They drink from the spiritual rock that accompanied them and rock was Christ.” I would challenge you to go back and read through the original narrative and find a clear reference to Jesus Christ as the Israelites wandered through the wilderness. So some would say because of examples like that the author’s intention is unknowable.

Or Matthew 1:23 where Matthew quotes from Isaiah 7 the promise of a virgin who will conceive and give birth to a son, Matthew quotes that as being fulfilled in the person of Jesus Christ. Yet if you go back to the original context in Isaiah at least at first glance it doesn't seem to be a Christological text or a prediction of the coming Messiah. So some would look at examples like that and others would say even New Testament authors did not seem interested in recovering the author’s intended meaning from the Old Testament.

So the conclusion is from this is that some would say that the author’s intention is unnecessary, or impossible to recover, or invalid, or, at the very least, we can't restrict interpretation and meaning only to the author's intention.
Support for the Author’s Intension as a Worthy Goal

So given these two perspectives, what should we say or what should we do with the author’s intention? What should we say about it? Is the author's intention still a valid and necessary goal? Let me make several observations about the author’s intention that would suggest, I think, that the author's intention still is a worthy, necessary, and valid goal.

First of all, even if we don't do it or pursue it in the same way that Schleiermacher did or in a way that it has been sometimes been treated in the past, but the first observation I would make is it seems to me that if the Bible is the God inspired word, if the text we have is nothing less than a human product but a divine product as well, that suggests to me that the author's intention is still a valid and necessary goal. If God stands behind his word, there must be some stable meaning that one can get at. That is, there must be a meaning that God has placed there that he intends to communicate to his people. He must have created us so that we can understand it.

Furthermore, when you read through the text of Scripture God clearly expects his people to obey and to respond to his word, so that complete skepticism about meaning and author’s intention or agnosticism about recovering meaning seems to be incompatible with the inspiration of Scripture as God's word. As we’re going to see that doesn't mean that it's easy, and that there is never any disagreement. It doesn't mean that meaning can be exhaustively or perfectly recovered, but certainly it still stands as a valid goal given the nature of God's word as Scripture, which God intends his people to obey. It suggests that there must be meaning he has placed within it that he wants his people to understand.

Second, I think when we understand the author's intention we need to understand that is not the goal to recover the author’s psychological thought process and more recent explanations and expositions of author’s intention have been careful to avoid that. The goal is not to uncover the author’s thought process or psychological state or the intention of the mind as the only access we have to the author is the text that the author has written and that he or she has produced. So when we think of the author’s intention I
think we need to be a little bit more nuanced. It is the meaning of that the author has encoded in the text. The text is the only evidence that we have of what the author was trying to do and what the author was trying to communicate. The assumption is that the author was attempting to communicate something at a certain place and at a certain time. The text is a record of a historical communicative act on the part of an author to a reader. So we can uncover that act, we can explore, explain, study, and uncover what it was that the author was trying to do by considering the text that the author has produced. We can uncover what the author most likely intended to mean as revealed in the grammar of the text and as revealed in the structure of the text. In other words, like other historical documents or like other historical events, the text is an account of an author’s intention to do something, to communicate something, an account of an author’s intentional communicative act. So the goal is to understand that act as much as possible, not to get in the mind of the author necessarily or to empathize with the author, but to understand what the text reveals about the author’s intention to communicate something.

A third observation regarding author's intention is the goal is not to be exhaustive or be perfect in our understanding, that is, the goal of recovering the author’s intention is not to suggest that we can exhaustively or perfectly understand the author's intended meaning. But we can do so substantially and adequately in our interpretation. So we need to be aware of confusing, making an exhaustive explanation of the author's meaning with being able to do so substantially. Just because we can't perfectly and exhaustively uncover the author’s meaning does not mean we can't do so to some degree. So once again we need to be more nuanced in our understanding of author’s intention.

Number four, a hermeneutics of suspicion must be replaced, I think, by a hermeneutics of respect. That is, instead of approaching the text with suspicion that we cannot find the author’s intention or outright rejecting it, that suspicion needs to be replaced by a hermeneutics of respect. Respect for the ancient authors, respect for the ancient texts, respect for the ancient context requires that we give it some priority in our
interpretation. So there is merit, I think, to the meaning-significant distinction that we talked about in relationship to Hirsh. Meaning is letting the text speak, realizing that this text was produced by an author in a certain historical context for a certain purpose and that somehow we can substantially and adequately, though not perfectly and exhaustively recover that. That can be distinguished from its significance and how that has an ongoing relationship to different contexts and different readers and different situations. Again Hirsch’s significance is what evangelicals often called “application.” So a hermeneutics of suspicion should be replaced by a hermeneutics of respect. Respect for the text, the author that produced it, the historical circumstances and context in which the text was produced.

Five, there is probably some merit in the arguments that the author’s intention is invalid to argue such is logically self-defeating since again most people who communicate thoughts such as those, do argue a way that they expect to be understood and they argue in a way to communicate. In short, we write to be understood. Reading a biblical text and interpreting a biblical text should at least allow the author to attempt to speak and understand what the author was attempting to do with his text.

A final one, even when disagreement does take place, whether it’s over the issue of the millennium or over the issue of women in ministry or over the issue of whether charismatic gifts such as whether speaking in tongues, prophecy and miracles are still valid today are not, even those that argue and disagree over those issues still attempt to ground their interpretation in the text and in what they think the author was intending as opposed to simply seeing the text and interpretation as a free-for-all and anything goes.

So the author’s intention as the goal of interpretation is as one hermeneutics textbook explains it in a helpful way by asking what is the goal of interpretation, how do we understand the author’s intention? One text answers like this: “The author’s intention is the goal interpretation, that is, to arrive at the meaning of the text. The meaning of the text is that which the words and grammatical structures of that text disclose about the probable intention of the author/editor and the probable understanding of that text by its intended readers.” I’ll read that again: “The meaning of the text is that which the words
and grammatical structures of that text disclose about the probable intention of the author/editor and the probable understanding of that text by the intended readers.”

Let me just make a couple comments on this definition or description. First of all, notice that it is grounded in the text itself. Notice the goal is not to recover the author’s intention as far as his thought process or what was in the mind of the author. The goal here is to determine what the text discloses about the author’s intention, that is, through the wording of the text, the grammatical constructions of the text, and I would also add what we can know about the historical circumstances of surrounding text. All of that discloses something about the intention of the author.

But furthermore, notice the language of probability. This definition avoids the language of exhaustiveness or somehow perfectly or with absolute certainty or that somehow we uncover the author’s intention and we’re done, since we can be certain that we've arrived at it. I like the language of probability. The goal is to uncover the probable intention of the author or editor as sometimes texts may have been brought together by an editor. But understanding the probable intention is tied to the text itself by looking at the grammatical structure of the text, the wording, and again the historical circumstances, and even what the original readers to whom the author was writing what they probably would've understood in light of what the author wrote within the horizons of the reader. From that one can arrive at the probable intention of the author. Again, that is not with absolute certainty as that escapes us without having the author here to tell us exactly what he meant and as the example I gave with my conversation with a well-known New Testament scholar just a bit ago. The example I gave reveals that sometimes even living authors are not quite sure what they meant or exactly and what they intended. This avoids the language of absolute certainty in realizing that because we’re separated the two millennia or more from the text, because of some of the distances between us and the original contexts, and because the authors no longer here, all we have is the text itself. Therefore, by considering the text we can arrive at a high degree of probability that our interpretation corresponds to what the author was intending.
How I like to put it is, I would say, any interpretation is valid if it answers the question: What can be justified from the text itself and what we do know about the original author, his context and his readers. Again, by text itself it would include the structure of the text, the grammar, but placing it in its context, everything we can draw out the author’s historical situation and context, the readers’ context, the grammar, the structure of the text, and the context. What can be justified based on that data?

So it is a call to respect, to give priority to the original act of communication in its original context. Whatever else we might do with the text. However, we might apply it, however else we might use it, it seems to me it is a valid and necessary goal to begin by asking: what most likely was the author intending to communicate through the text?

This could also even account for saying that we looked for the possible response where an author might say when confronted with an interpretation, although again we don't have the biblical authors consult, but certainly the case could be the same with biblical authors, there may be the instances where an author might say, “I did not intend that, but, now that I see it, it does make sense of the text. I would accept that as a valid interpretation of my reading.” But even then a reading would still have to be consistent with the text, the grammar, the wording, the structure of the text, what we can know about the author, what we can know about the readers and the historical circumstances in which it was produced.

**Concluding Remarks on Author’s Intention**

Let me make just a handful of concluding observations about author’s intention as it relates to hermeneutics or as it relates to biblical interpretation. So first of all, as far as additional reflections, the author’s intention then means that not just anything goes when it comes to interpretation but even where there is disagreement one still is seeking to uncover, as much as possible, the probable intention of the author.

So, for example, to interpret Jesus’ parable of the Unjust Steward in Luke 16 as about elephants, giraffes or something like that is clearly outside of bounds of what could have been intended by the author given the background text. That’s very extreme and silly example but just to show that there are boundaries. Even some would say the
The author’s intention is not necessary or valid would still want to find boundaries that
Luke's parables are not about elephants, giraffes or something like that but is to be
understood more consistently with what one finds in the text.

Number two, it is important to realize that author’s intention is not to revert to the
idea going back to the romantic ideal of the blank text or the enlightened ideal of pure
induction and the ability to arrive at meaning based on simply a rational inductive
method, that is not the goal of author’s intent. But it is also to realize starting with Kant
and others that we do approach texts with presuppositions and predispositions. None of
us come to the text with a blank mind. None of us comes with as a blank slate simply
waiting to be inscribed upon. None of us are dry sponges simply waiting to objectively
soak up data so that our interpretation corresponds in a one-to-one and perfect manner
with the meaning of the text itself. Most, I think, would realize that that goal is probably
unachievable and probably illegitimate. However, that does not mean that we are
therefore relegated to an interpretive free-for-all or anything goes, but instead, our
presuppositions, our theological beliefs, our faith, our cultural background can all be
subject to the text and challenged by the text which makes it impossible may be
exhaustively or perfectly to recover being meaning of the text but we can still uncover
the author’s intention substantially and adequately.

Number three, the person that says I just sit down and read the text objectively is
probably in the worst position to understand text and is probably in more danger of
distorting text because by saying something like that they come unaware of how their
own prior beliefs, experiences and predispositions might influence the text. The person
that begins with and brings their presuppositions in their baggage and all they are to the
text is probably in a better position to deal with them as opposed to the person thinks
that somehow they can come the text completely objectively and is therefore unaware of
how their presuppositions and beliefs are influencing the way they read and interpret the
text.

Then fourth, interpretation, especially in light of the author’s intention, is not to
conceive of the interpreter as merely a passive observer of the text. But instead, the
reader, the interpreter is active and creative in discovering meaning. The interpreter is active in skillfully applying methods of interpretation to the text. The reader does have to interpret the text, and read it, and make sense of it. We are not just sponges waiting to soak up data. But instead, we must read the text and apply the methods of interpretation creatively and think about the text and in order to arrive at the probable understanding of the author’s intention. We enter into a dialogue with a text in allowing it to challenge us and change us and reveal its meaning to us.

So what might this look like just quickly, by way of summary, considering the author’s intention, our means of examining the text and its ancient context. We talked of about this in connection with the historical critical method. It means learning everything we can about the author, his circumstances and background. It means learning what we can about the readers, their circumstances and background. It means learning about their environment—the historical, cultural and political environment—out of which the text grew. It means looking at the words in light of what they would have meant during the time of the writing of the text. It means looking at the grammar of the text. It means looking at the way the text is structured. We must look at all this, for an interpretation to be valid. It must fit these criteria. For an interpretation to be valid it must make sense of what is known about the author. It must make sense of what is known about the readers. It must make sense of the historical background circumstances out of which the text was produced. It must make sense of the grammar of the text, the wording and structure of the text and the way it is put together. Any interpretation that is to be plausible must fit these criteria. So what can be justified from the text itself and what can be known about the author, readers and their circumstances is the question that is necessary to ask in order to validate our interpretation.

So given some of these qualifications, and given this discussion, I will proceed with the assumption that it is valid to start with and to seek the author’s intended meaning. Again not that we’re reading the author’s mind or trying to uncover the author’s thought process, we realize there are difficulties because of historical distances and because of possibilities of not communicating as clearly as one wants or the
possibility of readers misunderstanding. We must recognize that we don't have the
original author to consult, but even given all that, and realizing that we cannot recover
the author’s intention perfectly or exhaustively, does not mean we cannot do so
substantially and adequately. Given those qualifications the author’s intention is indeed
a worthy and, I think, necessary goal in our interpretation.

Text Centered Approaches

Now, what I want to do this is move on to make a larger jump through our
journey, through the process and methods of interpretation and hermeneutics. We've
been focusing on the last few sessions on historical oriented approaches. We have
focused on historical criticism and within historical criticism some of the other
criticisms that developed: source, form, and redaction criticism. We have looked at the
author’s intention, those are usually seen as attempts to locate meaning or to locate the
activity of interpretation behind the text, looking at the historical production of the text.

Now I want to focus our attention on looking at the text itself as the focus of
meaning or looking within the text, that is, text centered approaches to interpretation. So
we looked at historically oriented approaches or author centered approaches, now we
want to look at text centered approaches to interpretation. In doing so we’ll look at a
variety of methods. One or two of them have not completely cut their ties with authors
and history but in that they still focus mainly on the text as a finished product I will
include those as well. But I wanted to examine a number of approaches that seem to be
interested exclusively in looking at the text itself as the object of interpretation and the
center of meaning.

Now due to some of the shortcomings of author oriented approaches or author’s
intention some that we mentioned just a little bit ago in our discussion of author's
intention, because of some of the shortcomings or objections to author centered
approaches to interpretation again historically and logically you can see how
hermeneutics has generally moved from historical and author oriented approaches to
text oriented approaches and then the next stage will be reader oriented approaches.
Historically and logically that's often how hermeneutics has moved both in literary studies and literary disciplines outside of biblical studies, but also in biblical studies.

As kind of another aside, one thing you’ll see is biblical studies tends to lag behind literary studies. So what is often done in developing literary studies or even reader approaches, biblical studies usually catches up sooner or later and starts to implement some of those approaches.

So I want to get at some text centered approaches to hermeneutics or biblical interpretation that are approaches that find meaning centered in the text itself. Usually, again, based on some of the shortcomings of author centered approaches attention has now turned to the text itself. This is again especially found in literary approaches or in literary criticism. If you have ever taken a course in a university setting in literary criticism, those similar types of approaches have now been applied to biblical studies.

**Observations on Text or Literary Centered Approaches**

Just a handful of observations related to literary approaches or text centered approaches. Again my point isn't to spend a lot of time developing a literary approach and defining exactly what it was is, but more to introduce you to some characteristics of literary approaches to the Old and New Testament and biblical literature. First of all, literary approaches, especially as text centered approaches developed, often rejected the author as the center of interpretation. This is related to the second observation in that the text alone then is the sole guide of meaning and the sole guide for understanding. It has been cut off from its author and now text has a life of its own. So some interpreters are only interested in the structure of the text itself. Irrespective of the author who produced or the history that produced it, they consider the text as it stands. So, historical approaches more looked at the historical production of the text as the author and the historical circumstances that produced the text, where literary studies see the authority in the text itself as the guide to understanding. So the text alone is the sole guide to meaning. It has been cut off from the author to become a free-floating entity, an autonomous text.
A third characteristic of literary and text centered approaches is that they pay attention to the formal features and structures of the text. They often focus on the final form of the text. They are frequently uninterested in any sources or forms that proceed as they usually focus on the final form of the text as it stands. They are not interested in isolating forms or uncovering sources behind the text.

A fourth characteristic especially related to biblical studies is they tend to treat the Bible as literature, that is, they’re asking the same questions that they would of any other literary text, the same kind of questions often asked in courses on literary criticism of a text that one might find a university literature course setting, for example.

The fifth and final characteristic is that historical questions are often bracketed. Again the text is seen as a self-contained unit and the only world that is important is the world that is contained in the text the world that is found in the text. It's not as concerned with the world outside of the text. Literary texts are often seen as self-referential in the world created by the text itself and the world that it refers to outside of the text. So you often see literary studies uninterested in whether a certain character in a narrative was historical or not, or whether a certain event actually happened. They are not interested in that. They're simply interested in the narrative structure itself and the structure of the world found in the text, not some world outside of the text that the text might refer to. So often then historical questions are bracketed and the text is seen is a self-referring, self-contained unit.

**Literary Approaches**

But within this there are a wide variety of approaches. I want just to give you an example of a handful of approaches that I'm going to place very broadly under literary approaches or more broadly under text centered approaches. Usually literary approaches to the Old and New Testaments are seen to emerge in with what is known as formalism, or the new criticism that actually emerged in the 1920’s. Again, as I’ve said often biblical studies plays the role of catching up to what is done in other disciplines. But formalism or the new criticism is often what most people think when they think of literary criticism whether it is of any other text or a biblical text. Again, the
characteristic features of formalism were that the text is sufficient for producing meaning. The text is self-sufficient. It is autonomous. It is disconnected from the author. So it does not ask questions about the author and why the author wrote and the historical circumstances that produced it. The text is sufficient itself for producing meaning.

Second, historical matters are usually bracketed. Again, we mentioned this before because again the world of the text is self-referential. It is contained within the text. They are not interested in the world outside of the text to which the text might refer. Formalism also gives attention to aesthetic and literary artistry. In other words, it means for biblical studies treating text in the same way that any other text would be treated.

So, for example, one might treat a biblical narrative such as the text of Job, one might read the book of Job and not be concerned about issues of authorship as far as who wrote the book or issues of date or place of writing. One would not be interested in the question of whether Job was a real historical person or not, or whether the events of the book records were events that actually occurred or whether the friends that counsel him are real or not. One would not be concerned with whether they were real speakers but rather one would only be concerned with the literary artistry and literary structure of the text itself and the effect that has on the reader and how characters are portrayed within the text itself and how they relate to each other, the plot of the story, the main point of view, and questions such as that. They are the same kind of questions one would ask of any work of literature.

For obvious reasons this approach did catch on in narrative and also poetic texts in the Old Testament particularly poetic texts. Narrative texts in the New Testament Gospels and narrative forms such as parables were the logical place this would catch on. Perhaps one subset or one type of formalism or literary criticism is what is known as narrative criticism. We’ll talk a little bit about that as well in relationship to the Old and New Testaments. Just to give a couple of examples very, very briefly, again I’ll give a little more attention to the New Testament for reasons that I have stated before.
Old Testament Example

Within the Old Testament, for example, Genesis one and two, and I’ll use a couple examples to compare how a treatment of them in a literary approach might compare or contrast with how they might been treated under more historically oriented approaches, for example. So with the Old Testament we talked briefly about Genesis 1-2 and the juxtaposing of two accounts of the creation narrative because of differences in style, vocabulary and perspective. An older historically oriented approach would ask the question of what sources lie behind those two creation stories. It may even go further and ask about the date and the setting of those two stories. But the attempt would have been to reconstruct the sources that lie behind the two accounts of the creation in Genesis 1-2 and assigning them to the right sources, the J source or the E source or whatever, that lie behind the story of creation in Genesis 1-2.

A narrative approach or a literary approach to this text would point out unity of the text. Interestingly, the same data that source critics will use to dissect the document might be used by literary critics to demonstrate the unity of it and the inner workings of the text. So a literary approach would emphasize the literary unity of the text. It might seize upon the themes of water, creator and the land and sea and cursing and blessing, and the role they play in Genesis 1-2 as well as in the rest of the book. It will do that instead of asking questions about what this text might say regarding the actual creation. Did God create the world in seven literal days or was this longer, a day age or a gap theory? What does this say ontologically about the actual process of creation historically? A literary critic might examine these themes and how they function and again examine the literary artistry of the text instead of asking questions about the author putting together sources or whether this corresponds to the actual creation of the universe a literary approach would look at the text as a literary unity and looking at the structure and the inner workings of the text itself.

Another example to use a shorter example is the book of Ruth. One might examine the book of Ruth by reading it simply as a story not asking questions again of the historicity of the characters and asking questions of any sources that may have been
utilized or asking questions of how this text functioned historically. Instead they might ask questions about the plot of the story, the development of the characters, and read the story for its aesthetic effect on the reader. Again those are often the traditional kinds of questions now asked within the context of literary criticism.

So I could multiply examples in the Old Testament especially in the narrative texts that are examined through the eyes of literary criticism or formalism. Again, they simply look at the text as a piece of literature, asking questions about its structure, its development, looking at it as a self-contained, world in the text, not so much the world outside of the text, bracketing questions of history etc. just looking at it as a piece of literature.

**New Testament Literary Approaches**

It in the New Testament literary criticism also caught on primarily in the Gospels, though literary criticism has ranged outside of the narrative literature and the Gospels. I want to look a little bit at the Gospels later on when we talk about narrative criticism. But let me mention one example of literary criticism in the New Testament. One that we already have referred to is the parables of Jesus. We suggested that the parables of Jesus could be seen as limited allegories, that is, as stories that have one, two or three main meanings according to the main characters within the story. Parables seem to have been a fruitful field of study for literary criticism because parables do seem to be fictional stories, that is, although they are often realistic. Jesus never claims that he's telling stories that actually happened historically, but seems to be drawing on common stories to communicate truths about his teaching, his ministry and the kingdom of God.

Literary criticism though pays careful attention to things like the structure and the aesthetics of the parables. For example, we have already seen that the parables can be examined according to whether they are monadic, that is, with one main character, dyadic with two main or a pair of characters, or triadic, with three main characters. Sometimes even when you have three main characters another question literary critics ask is whether the characters all play identical roles, or whether you have a mediating figure with two other characters on the same level of authority, or whether the structures
are more vertical where you have an authority figure and other figures under that person such as a master with servants. So they ask questions about the structure of the parable; how the characters function and how they are put together.

Some ask questions about the aesthetic nature of the parables. It is interesting that many of the parables include unrealistic elements in them. We’ve already seen it in the parable of the Prodigal Son. It’s unrealistic that a father of the nature of the father in the first century would've run out to greet his son. So sometimes the parables are seen to have a punch line and to have aesthetic effect and appeal as the parable is read. Sometimes the parable is labeled as to whether they are tragic or comic, that is, whether the plot of the parable rises and the falls where that would be a tragic with the main character meeting a tragic end; or whether the parable dips down to have a seemingly sad element to it, but then it rises to have a positive ending for the hero of the story. So parables are often categorized as to whether they are more comic or tragic. So literary criticism at least with parables can often help us see where the main points lie, to see how the story is structured, and how it works and creates an effect on the readers as well.

What I want to do in the next session is look at one more example in New Testament of literary criticism, but also move on to a more specific feature of literary criticism known as narrative criticism and examine what that is and what that does, how it has been used and how it can help interpreting narrative literature in the Old Testament and the New Testament.

Transcribed by Ted Hildebrandt
Rough edited by Ted Hildebrandt