

Are All Interpretations Equally Valid?

Discussion Questions:

1. What's the story of *The Wizard of Oz*?

2. What's the meaning or general point of the story?

Recapping: Is there a Meaning in this Text?

Yes, the author's intended meaning. Authorial intent serves as a guiding principle for what we consider proper interpretation. This principle is based upon these doctrines:

1. Revelation - God has revealed truth to us
2. Inspiration – God revealed that truth through human authors
3. Inerrancy – That truth was accurately conveyed through the words

Name of the Doctrine	Meaning of Doctrine	Implication of Doctrine
Revelation	Bible is truth revealed by God	Bible is authoritative (as far as we take God as authoritative)
Inspiration	God revealed truth through human agents	We understand the message as we understand the human situations
Inerrancy	The Bible is accurate	Bible is trustworthy. This is a logical corollary based upon the other doctrines.

If God has revealed this truth to us, then we glean to principles. First, that truth is authoritative for our lives insofar as God is God and over all. Second, that truth should be drawn from the words God gave us. Thus, we are looking for the human author's intended meaning to understand the divine author's message.

Last time we focused on the simple idea that if we're seeking the divine author's message, we need to know the *genre* of the passage we're studying...

Our example last week was the passage in Proverbs 22:6 –

*Train a child in the way he should go,
And when he is old he will not turn from it.*

How definite or absolute does this statement sound, as it's written? Seems pretty absolute: if a you train a child in the way, he'll not turn from it when he is old. But then we learned that this is a proverb, which is not an absolute statement but a general truth, such as "An apple a day keeps the doctor away." It's not a binding promise, but a useful statement of truth put in a memorable way.

But who determines the genre? Is it me, the reader? Is it my community? Or is it the author? Just by determining the genre, we have already begun the process of interpretation. Take the following phrase stated by my son, "Dad, you're beating me!" How would you interpret this? What's the genre? If it the genre is a police report, then it probably means a physical beating. But if the genre is conversation while playing Mario Kart Wii, then it's probably referring to my winning at a video game.

The Need to Interpret

*The need to interpret is also to be found by noting what goes on around us all the time. A simple look at the contemporary church, for example, makes it abundantly clear that not all "plain meanings" are equally plain to all. It is of more than passing interest that most of those in today's church who argue that women should keep silent in church on the basis of 1 Corinthians 14:34-35 at the same time deny the validity of speaking in tongues and prophecy, the very context in which the "silence" passage occurs. And those who affirm on the basis of 1 Corinthians 11:2-16 that women as well as men should pray and prophesy usually deny that women must do so with their heads covered. (Fee and Stuart, *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth*, 19-20)*

Who Controls the Meaning, the Reader or the Author?

J. Scott Duvall describes the role of authorial intent vs. reader response with the movie *The Wizard of Oz*.

To Danny's young children this delightful tale was about a young girl named Dorothy and her cute dog, Toto, who overcame the odds and defeated the powerful and scary "bad guys" (the wicked witches) with some help from Dorothy's nice new friends...

If we observe the story closely, however, and if we start to poke around into the historical background of the time Baum wrote the book, a different meaning surfaces. One of the hottest political debates going on in America when Baum wrote this story was over the issue of whether America should continue to use the gold standard as the basis for the U.S. dollar or whether she should switch to silver. This historical context suggests that the main line of the book ("Follow the yellow brick road!") may be a reference to the central political issue of the day. Remember that although the yellow brick road led to the great wizard of Oz, once Dorothy arrived there, she discovered he was a fraud. Dorothy's real hope lay in her shoes. In Baum's book the shoes are silver. Hollywood changed them to ruby so they would show up better in color for the movie. So, perhaps the book falls into the classification of political satire.

According to this line of interpretation, the characters in the story then probably represent the different segments of American society. The Scarecrow represents the farmers (supposedly, no brains). Who would the Tin Woodsman represent? The factory workers (no heart). And the cowardly lion perhaps represents the political leadership of the country. We also meet the wicked witch of the west (the West Coast establishment?). And who is the heroine? Middle America—Dorothy from Kansas.

*So, who is right? Are Danny's kids wrong to interpret the story as a simple tale of good triumphing over evil?... And who determines the meaning? (Duvall and Hays, *Grasping God's Word*, pp.175-6)*

Authorial Intention- Meaning is determined by the intention of the author.

A Basic Case for Authorial Intent-

So should we interpret based upon authorial intent or reader response? Well, let's consider two of the most common types of writings in the Bible: historical narrative and letter writing.

1. Communication relies upon authorial intent
 - a. How do you usually read letters from people: authorial intent or reader response?
 - b. How do you usually read historical books: authorial intent or reader response?
 - c. Consider the opening lines of the gospel according to Luke

Many have undertaken to draw up an account of the things that have been fulfilled among us, just as they were handed down to us by those who from the first were eyewitnesses and servants of the word. Therefore, since I myself have carefully investigated everything from the beginning, it seemed good also to me to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, so that you may know the certainty of the things you have been taught. (Luke 1:1-4, NIV)
 - d. Consider the closing lines of the gospel according to John.

This is the disciple who testifies to these things and who wrote them down. We know that his testimony is true. Jesus did many other things as well. If every one of them were written down, I suppose that even the whole world would not have room for the books that would be written. (John 21:24-25, NIV)
2. The doctrines of God's *revelation, inspiration, and inerrancy* point towards authorial intent.

Getting at Authorial Intent

1. Grasp the context in the passage.
2. Grasp the context in that historical culture.
3. Grasp the meaning of the words, sentences, and paragraph.

For these exercises, we'll use the following questions:

1. At first look, what does the passage appear to say?
2. Who is "speaker"?
3. Who is the recipient?
4. What is the situation?
5. How might the context affect the interpretation of the passage?

Case Studies for Authorial Intent

The following passages are famous quotes used for evangelism and edifying Christians. Consider each of them. Answer the first question by just reading the verse on this handout. Then, get a Bible and try to answer the other questions.

1 John 1:9 – If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness. (NIV)

2 Chronicles 7:14 – If my people, who are called by my name, will humble themselves and pray and

seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then will I hear from heaven and will forgive their sin and will heal their land. (NIV)

Jeremiah 29:11 – “For I know the plans I have for you,” declares the LORD, “plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future. Then you will call upon me and come and pray to me, and I will listen to you.” (NIV)

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