

# The Goal of Interpretation

## (or, The Responsibility of the Interpreter)

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Communication by definition is the transference of an idea or group of ideas from one party to another. The manner in which this occurs is negotiable; it may be written, oral, or even kinetic. Presumably, the originator of an idea seeks to convey his meaning with clarity and precision, so that, by means of the particular type of message chosen, the thought that was created in his mind might reemerge intact in the thoughts of his target audience. The goal of the interpreter, then, is rudimentary: reconstruct the original intent of the author in order that his meaning may remain intact.

Without the sender's intended meaning as the conscious goal of interpretation, the message (or meaning thereof) itself becomes arbitrary. Meaning in turn descends into a quagmire of relativism; confusion and discord or—at the least—disagreement are the inevitable results of a subjective approach to interpretation. Stated another way, if there does not exist an ultimate authority to govern a text (biblical or otherwise), then its meaning is simply anyone's guess.

According to Klein, Blomberg, and Hubbard, an interpreter who reads his own meaning into a biblical text

greatly relativizes the Bible's teachings. Since ... the Bible's teachings are the product of a series of ancient cultures and their primitive or precritical world-views, then they can have no necessarily abiding authority for modern people. ... [T]he reader's perception of the text, *not the text itself*, is the ultimate basis of authority for the meaning of the text.

In 490 B.C., the Greek general Miltiades enjoyed victory over the Persians in the Battle of Marathon. A messenger was sent to run twenty-five miles to bring word of the victory to Athens. The sender, of course, entrusted the runner with an important message. He expected the Athenians to receive the news literally, as fact, interpreting it as an actual event that happened. If the sender's meaning was negligible, then why would he have ordered the messenger to undertake such an urgent and perilous task?

Even a jester or a deceiver expects the recipients of his message to trust that it is true. In 1937, Orson Welles' Mercury Theatre broadcast a radio adaptation of H. G. Wells' *The War of the Worlds*. This radio drama masqueraded as an actual news broadcast reporting events of an extraterrestrial invasion of Earth. It cleverly mixed in music programs with fictitious "breaking updates" of the Martian devastation. Many in America accepted the drama as truth and panicked accordingly. It had a tremendous impact upon the listening audience primarily because of the assumption that the news reporter said what he meant, fantastic

though it may have seemed. The radio listener was not expected to assign his own meaning to the broadcast. If he did this, then the dramatic effect that Mr. Welles had intended to produce would have been void.

A final illustration is more relevant to today. Consider the universally understood language of traffic stoplights. Suppose that a single driver determined that, to him, red meant roll down the windows, yellow meant put the car in reverse, and green meant get out of one's car and do a cartwheel. This driver easily could cause an accident. If a multitude of drivers were each to adopt their own meanings for the colors, then certainly chaos would ensue.

As one can conclude from the preceding illustrations, the receiver-based method of interpretation can be a disastrous—if not dangerous—position. Our behavior and actions are informed by the information we accept as being true. By appropriating "relative truth," the individual interpreter's understanding, rather than the Bible itself, becomes the springboard from which worldviews are forged and crucial, life-altering decisions are made.

When one's subject is as important as the word of God, one must diligently seek to discover the intended meaning of the author, who is ultimately the Lord himself. As Fee and Stuart warn, "Otherwise biblical texts can be made to mean whatever they mean to any given reader. But such hermeneutics becomes pure subjectivity, and who then is to say that one person's interpretation is right, and another's is wrong? Anything goes." The goal of the interpreter, then, is to reconstruct to the best of his ability the message that the original writer meant to convey by what he had written. One is forbidden to interpret the Bible according to his own fancy; unfortunately, a reader-based method of interpretation does precisely this, thereby replacing the word of God with the whim of man.

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## Bibliography

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