

BIBLICAL HERMENEUTICS—SINGLE MEANING AND ITS EFFECTS

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In our initial presentation, we emphasized the effects when inserting preunderstanding into the exegetical process at Level 1. Today we need to proceed to a particular principle of literal interpretation, the distortion of which has brought tremendous changes to the way evangelicals interpret the Scriptures. Let's talk about the principle of single meaning.

First, let's see what Bernard Ramm and Milton Terry say about the principle.

Many years ago Milton S. Terry laid down a basic hermeneutical principle that contemporary evangelicals have difficulty observing. That is the principle of single meaning:

A fundamental principle in grammatico-historical exposition is that the words and sentences can have but one significance in one and the same connection. The moment we neglect this principle we drift out upon a sea of uncertainty and conjecture.¹

Not quite as many years ago, Bernard Ramm advocated the same principle in different words: "But here we must remember the old adage: 'Interpretation is one, application is many.' This means that there is only one meaning to a passage of Scripture which is determined by careful study."² Summit II of the International Council on Biblical Inerrancy concurred with this principle: "We affirm that the meaning expressed in each biblical text is single, definite and fixed. We deny that the recognition of this single meaning eliminates the variety of its applications."³ This is a principle that has found its way into Statements of Faith of a number of evangelical institutions, including my own.

Recent Violations of the Single-meaning Principle

Example #1. Yet violations of the principle are commonplace in contemporary evangelicalism. A recent classic example of such violations came in 2007 with Zondervan's release of the volume *Three Views on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament*. A parallel session at the 2008 Evangelical Theological Society Meeting in Rhode Island that was by far the best attended of any session as people wanted to hear the views of Walter Kaiser, Darrell Bock, and Peter Enns on this important subject. Interestingly, each view presented related to singleness: "Single Meaning, Unified Referents," "Single Meaning, Multiple Contexts and

¹Milton S. Terry, *Biblical Hermeneutics*, 2nd ed. (Reprint; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, n.d.) 205.

²Bernard Ramm, *Protestant Biblical Interpretation: A Textbook on Hermeneutics*, 3rd rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1970) 113.

³Article VII, "Articles of Affirmation and Denial," adopted by the International Council on Biblical Inerrancy, November 10-13, 1982.

Referents,” and “Fuller Meaning, Single Goal.” Each participant found a way of “dancing around” the principle of single meaning.

Kaiser in presenting his view affirms his support of the follow quotation from Bishop R. C. Ryle:

I hold it to be a most dangerous mode of interpreting Scripture, to regard everything which its words may be tortured into meaning as a lawful interpretation of the words. I hold undoubtedly that there is a mighty depth in all Scripture, and that in this respect it stands alone. But I also hold that the words of Scripture were intended to have one definite sense, and that our first object should be to discover that sense, and adhere rigidly to it. I believe that, as a general rule, the words of Scripture are intended to have, like all other language, one plain definite meaning, and that to say words *do* mean a thing, merely because they *can* be tortured into meaning it is a most dishonourable and dangerous way of handling Scripture.⁴

Ryle’s statement is an unqualified endorsement of the principle of single meaning. Kaiser supports it, but to do so, he finds meanings in OT texts that go beyond the meanings reached through a grammatical-historical approach. He evidences his proclivity in other writings as well.⁵ He also allows for promises to be generic and to have a series of fulfillments, this producing the “referential” meanings,⁶ contrary to the single-meaning principle

In this work, the other two writers, Bock and Enns, abuse the single-meaning principle more severely than Kaiser.

Example #2. Kevin Vanhoozer writes, “The interpretive monist contends that there is one single correct interpretation of a text that readers everywhere, regardless of their context or method, should acknowledge as valid and true. It may appear that the present work advocates interpretive monism, and in a sense this is true. However, much depends on the way one defines monism.”⁷ In other words, he professes to subscribe to the traditional grammatical-historical

⁴Bishop J. C. Ryle, *Expository Thoughts on the Gospels* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1953) 2:383, cited in Walter C. Kaiser Jr., “Single Mean, Unified Referents,” *Three Views on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament*, ed Kenneth Berding and Jonathan Lunde (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007) 46.

⁵E.g., W. C. Kaiser Jr., *The Uses of the Old Testament in the New* (Chicago, Moody, 1985) 67-68.

⁶Ibid.

⁷Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *Is There Meaning in This Text: The Bible, the Reader, and the Morality of Literary Knowledge* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998) 416. “Monism” is a viewpoint or theory that reduces all phenomena to one principle.

principle of single meaning.⁸

Yet he attempts to wiggle out of his professed acceptance of monism. He does it in several ways. He wants to distinguish his position from postmodernism or deconstructionism—which utterly demolish the principle of single meaning—by writing,

As we will see in due course, my version of monism, like the realism that begets it, leads not to a totalizing oneness but to a critical and multifaceted unity. A naive monism that too quickly identifies one particular interpretation with the single correct interpretation (a regulative ideal) falsifies the complexity of texts. . . . First, there is a plurality of authorial intentions. No one denies that there are a number of possibilities for what a given author might have intended in a particular text. Indeed, the monist sees his or her task as reducing the number of possibilities to the most likely one. As we have seen, however, literary acts are complex and can be described as ‘doing’ things on various levels. With regard to Scripture, however, the case is even more complicated. Aquinas acknowledges God as the author of the literal sense, but he adds that God can use the referents to mean something too. Hence ‘what it means’ is as much a matter of providence as propositions. God can say any number of things through ‘what the text says.’ Even those for whom the author’s intention is an interpretive norm, then, must continue to reckon with plurality.⁹

Then he attempts to distinguish between plurality and pluralism:

One should not confuse evidence of plurality with evidence for pluralism. Plurality describes the complexity of the interpretive situation; pluralism prescribes a certain attitude towards it. Pluralism is an ideology that sees mutually inconsistent interpretations as a good thing. I believe, on the contrary, that pluralism is, as an ideology, a bad thing.¹⁰

His definition of pluralism apparently associates with the system of deconstructionism. One gets the impression that by inventing antonyms he is trying to create a distinction between his position and postmodernism.

Miscellaneous examples. Examples of violations of the principle of single meaning could be multiplied easily. Our evangelical culture has begun drinking the tonic of postmodernism. Perhaps an early example of this was *The Amplified New Testament*, produced by Frances Siewert for the Lockman Foundation in the 1950s. That version flirted freely with divergent meanings of single words and grammatical constructions. The version was received with excitement by consumers because it allowed them to choose their favorite interpretation of

⁸See my discussion of “The Principle of Single Meaning,” in *Evangelical Hermeneutics: The New Versus the Old* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2002), 141-64.

⁹Ibid., 417.

¹⁰Ibid., 418.

numbers of biblical passages.

In the present era that practice is called deconstructionism. According to deconstructionism, your interpretation of a given Scripture may be the direct opposite of mine and both of us can be right. To contend that only one of us is right goes against the grain of some evangelicals. A person who teaches or preaches dogmatically that a certain text has just one meaning opens him up to the accusation of hermeneutical pride. In the view of some evangelicals, only by a tolerance for conflicting meanings can one show hermeneutical humility. Perhaps we will develop this point a bit further in tomorrow's message.

Applying the Single-meaning Principle

By a strict application of the principle of single meaning, I have come to certain conclusions which have not been too popular, though they do not differ in principle with some isolated applications of the principle by others. My conclusions are that NT writers at times apply OT passages in a way that differentiates their meaning from the OT passage in its context. Let me illustrate how two men who hold differing views of the NT use of the OT agree my my approach in isolated instances.

Isolated examples of a strict application of the principle. Roy Zuck discusses Psalms 8, 16, and 22, noting that David wrote them about his own experiences, but that the NT applies them to Christ in a sense significantly different from how David used them.¹¹ His conclusions about these psalms and the NT use of them is accurate, but the psalms themselves cannot have more than one referent, hermeneutically speaking. Such would assign them more than one meaning. Neither the human author David nor the original readers of the psalms could have used the principles of grammar and the facts of history to come up with the additional referents or meanings that the NT assigns to the psalms. The source and authority for that additional meaning is the NT, not the OT.

Zuck chooses the principle of single meaning, but treads on dangerous ground when, in following Elliott Johnson, he adds related implications or "related submeanings."¹² To speak of a single meaning on one hand and of related submeanings on the other is contradictory. A passage either has one meaning or it has more than one. No middle ground exists between those two options.

Where Zuck goes astray is in using Ps 78:2 to illustrate related implications or related submeanings. The psalmist Asaph writes, "I will open my mouth in a parable." Zuck limits the passage to one meaning, but says the passage has two referents, Asaph and Jesus who applied the words to Himself in Matt 13:35.¹³ Instead of saying the psalm has two referents, which in essence assigns two meanings to it, to say that the psalm's lone referent is Asaph, thereby limiting the psalm to one meaning, would follow the single-meaning principle. Either Ps 78:2

¹¹Roy B. Zuck, *Basic Bible Interpretation* (Wheaton, Ill.: Victor, 1991) 274.

¹²Ibid.; cf. Elliott E. Johnson, *Expository Hermeneutics: An Introduction* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990) 34.

¹³Ibid.

refers to Asaph or it refers to Jesus. It cannot refer to both. It is proper to say that Ps 78:2 refers to Asaph, and Matthew 13:35 refers to Jesus. By itself, Ps 78:2 cannot carry the weight of the latter referent.

Another illustration of a contemporary scholar who on isolated occasions applies the principle of single meaning is Robert Saucy. Saucy sometimes takes NT uses of the OT not as fulfillments, but as new applications of the OT. He summarizes an extended discussion of how Hebrews uses the OT in these words: “In this connection it is important to recognize that the purpose of the writer to the Hebrews is not to give us an interpretation of Old Testament prophecy. The book is rather ‘a word of exhortation’ (13:22). . . .”¹⁴ He also notes,

. . . The Scriptures frequently reveal different applications of similar language without implying a change in identity. The fact that the same phrase about God’s son being called out of Egypt applies to both Israel and Christ does not make these objects identical (cf. Hos 11:1 and Mt 2:15).¹⁵

This principle of seeing the NT use of the OT as applications rather than interpretations is more in accord with grammatical-historical practices. The fact that the added meanings supplied in the NT did not become discernible until provided by inspired NT writings means that the authority for such interpretations derives from the NT citation, not from the OT passages themselves. This being the case, the support for the PD system vanishes when evaluated by grammatical and historical criteria. Of course, God knew from eternity past that fuller meanings would eventually emerge, but so far as human beings were concerned, such meanings were nonexistent until the time that NT apostles and prophets disclosed them.¹⁶

Strict application of the principle and the ISPA of the OT in the NT. When it comes to applying the single-meaning principle to the NT use of the OT, the terminology that I have come up with is the Inspired *Sensus Plenior* Application of the OT passages in the NT. Some of my students have taken issue with that terminology because to them *sensus plenior* has other implications when applied to the OT, but as of now, no one has suggested better terminology.

In surveying various uses of the OT in the NT—and there are many, of course—I have concluded that NT writers cited OT passages in two different ways. The single-meaning principle dictates that every OT passage must receive its own grammatical-historical interpretation, regardless of how a NT writer use it. The OT must not receive multiple meanings by being read through the eyes of the NT. When this principle is applied—i.e., when each OT passage is limited to its single grammatical-historical meaning—the results are enlightening. When this is done, one finds two kinds of uses of the OT by NT writers: one in which the NT

¹⁴Robert L. Saucy, *The Case for Progressive Dispensationalism: The Interface Between Dispensational & Non-Dispensational Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1993) 56.

¹⁵Ibid., 206.

¹⁶See Chapter 9 of my *Hermeneutics: The New Versus the Old* for more discussion of this point.

writer abides by and applies the grammatical-historical sense of the OT passage and another use in which the NT writer goes beyond the grammatical-historical sense of the OT passage to assign the passage an additional meaning in connection with its NT context. In the former instance, a NT writer uses the OT in its literal sense. The latter instance is a nonliteral use of the OT. We may call this an “inspired *sensus plenior* application” (hereafter usually ISPA) of the OT passage to a new situation. It is “inspired,” because along with all Scripture, the NT passage is inspired by God. It is “*sensus plenior*” in that it gives an additional or fuller sense than the passage had in its OT setting. It is an “application” because it does not eradicate the literal meaning of the OT passage, but simply applies the OT wording to a new setting. By virtue of its application, the NT adds an additional implied meaning to the OT passage, but the authority behind that new meaning is not the OT. The authority comes from the NT usage.

Until this point, we have had four Th.M. theses dealing with OT-NT pairs of passages, in which the writers have thoroughly researched OT and NT contexts of the passages involved. Three of the four have arrived at conclusions related to the ISPA approach and the fourth reached the conclusion that the NT passage was a grammatical-historical usage of the OT passage.

In *Evangelical Hermeneutics: The New Versus the Old*, I have cited what appear to be illustrations of both types of NT usage of the OT, but thoroughgoing exegetical analyses of all these passages remains an unfinished task. As for analyses that have been done, we have learned that in Rom 3:10-18 Paul uses an ISPA of the OT passages. With one possible exception, the OT passages speak of abuses of the righteous by the wicked, but Paul uses the passages to prove the universal sinfulness of mankind. We have also learned that Paul’s use of three passages from Isaiah in Romans 9–11 are all ISPA of the Isaiah texts cited. In addition, careful exegetical study of Hab 2:4 and Paul’s use of it in Rom 1:17 and Gal 3:11 has demonstrated that follows the ISPA pattern. In Habbakuk the words refer to God’s dealings with Babylonian oppressors, but Paul uses them to speak of how believers are justified. On the other hand, when Peter (i.e., Luke) uses Ps 110:1 in his message at Pentecost (Acts 2:34-35), he follows grammatical-historical patterns in applying the verse. Detailed exegetical study of passages in both testaments confirms this.

One passage where the need for ISPA is probably as obvious as anywhere is Matt 2:15 which cites the “completion” of Hos 11:1. The Greek verb *plērō* is usually render “fulfilled” in Matt 2:15, how can a historical statement such as Hos 11:1 be fulfilled? In some sense, the exit of Jesus’ family from Egypt served as a completion of Hosea’s word about Israel’s past departure from Egypt. I cite this pair of passages because of a recent discussion with one of our deeper-thinking thesis writers who raised a question for me to deal with. The question was this: “If NT writers applied an OT passage based on a meaning entirely different from literal meaning of the OT passage, how was their authority enhanced through use of OT citations?” Stated another way, “Why did they cite the OT?” Still another way, “In the eyes of those with a high respect for the OT, was not the authority of the apostles and prophets based on their correct understanding of the OT?”

That question deserves two responses. First, the apostles and prophets, who under the inspiration of the Spirit wrote the books of the NT, used the OT in a literal sense enough times to enhance their respect from people with a high view of the OT. Second, authority of the apostles was not based primarily on how they used the OT. It was based on the miracles, signs, and

wonders that God enabled them to perform. The same was true of Jesus who in His teaching freely used Inspired *Sensus Plenior* Applications of the OT. In this connection, note such passages as Acts 2:22; Rom 15:15-19; 2 Cor 12:12. Both Jesus and the apostles received this kind of authentication. They were recipients of direct revelation with the responsibility to communicating that to others (cf. 1 Cor 2:6-13). Thus, their authority did not rest alone upon their accuracy in using the OT.

In their use of ISPA of OT texts, NT writers therefore cannot be exemplary for contemporary students of Scripture in their hermeneutical practices. They followed patterns of inspired subjectivity, as Walton has put it.¹⁷ Without inspiration, we must limit ourselves to hermeneutical objectivity.¹⁸ Though Matthew's use of Hos 11:1 was similar in that both spoke of a departure from Egypt, his citation could in no way represent an application of the verse's literal meaning. The characters involved were different. The circumstances that placed the characters in Egypt were different. In Matthew's use it was a single individual, but Hosea referred to huge numbers of Israelites. And, as indicated before, one was a historical statement and the other was the completion of a process.

More examples from pp. 247-51 of *Evangelical Hermeneutics*.

Some have used type-antitype terminology to refer to the phenomena I refer to as ISPA. My aversion for that terminology comes from excesses committed in the typological vocabulary. Besides this, typology means different things to different people. The terminology seems to have undergone changes through recent years and can best be avoided in a search for better words.

The NT writers engaged in conveying new revelations appropriate to the new set of conditions that existed after Jesus' first advent, death, resurrection, and ascension. That body of truth conveyed through them needs no additions, corrections, or subtractions.

Separating applications from interpretation

Another serious threat to the single-meaning principle comes from reckoning the step of application (i.e., significance) as a part of the step of interpretation (i.e., meaning), in effect defining hermeneutics as application rather than principles of interpretation. In yesterday's message we called attention to varied definitions of hermeneutics, among which was one definition that defined hermeneutics as an application of the resulting interpretation to contemporary situations. That indeed plays havoc with single meaning.

Application must, of course, be controlled by the meaning obtained through use of valid hermeneutical principles, but it also must be strictly separated from interpretation.¹⁹ But this is not the case in current evangelical practice, as Shealy notes: "[A]n investigation of recent works

¹⁷See John H. Walton, "Inspired Subjectivity and Hermeneutical Objectivity," *The Master's Seminary Journal* 13/1 (Spring 2002) 65-77.

¹⁸Ibid.

¹⁹Brian A. Shealy, "Redrawing the Line Between Hermeneutics and Application," in *Evangelical Hermeneutics: The New Versus the Old*, ed. Robert L. Thomas (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2002) 166.

on hermeneutics, which would expectedly clarify the distinction even more, discloses an increased blurring of distinctions. Therefore, since hermeneutics is the basis of exegetical practice, the whole field of biblical interpretation is in jeopardy.”²⁰ He continues,

Fee and Stuart see hermeneutics as the interpreter’s second task, following exegesis. They fallaciously concede that “hermeneutics” normally includes the whole field of interpretation, including exegesis, and then choose to confine it to a “narrower sense of seeking the contemporary relevance of ancient texts.” They put application *after* exegesis in sequence, and define exegesis as “the careful, systematic study of the Scripture to discover the original, intended meaning.” Consequently, “hermeneutics” for Fee and Stuart is simply present-day application of the biblical text, a definition quite different from traditional parlance.

In this vein they follow Nida and Reyburn who define hermeneutics as “pointing out parallels between the biblical message and present-day events and determining the extent of relevance and the appropriate response for the believer.” That differs radically from Terry’s words about application cited above.

Though Klein, Blomberg, and Hubbard (hereafter KBH) do not use hermeneutics synonymously with application, they still confuse the picture further by including application as a part of hermeneutics and making it the goal of hermeneutics: “We would be misguided if we limited hermeneutics to the factors and issues that concern our understanding of the ancient text” without detecting “how the Scriptures can impact readers today.” Clearly, they view hermeneutics as more than simply the principles for discovering the original meaning of a text through historical-grammatical methods. In fact, proving the inadequacy of the grammatical-historical method for producing a thorough understanding of the Bible’s message is precisely their intention.

Osborne is another writer who includes application as a hermeneutical step. He says that hermeneutics includes what the text meant and what it means, and uses the term “contextualizing” to refer to contemporary application. Silva continues this trend by speaking of “hermeneutic” (note the singular) as the meaning of Scripture for our day. Kaiser agrees by calling application an integral part of the hermeneutical task.

Another study, this one by McCartney and Clayton, says that hermeneutics “is concerned with ascertaining not just the once-for-all meaning of Scripture, but also the way to apply that once-for-all meaning in one’s own life.” Erickson joins the parade by writing, “A fairly common hermeneutical device in many evangelical circles is to take the biblical teaching and apply it directly to the situation today.”

Can hermeneutics be synonymous with application, include application, and have application as its goal? Can application be a hermeneutical device? Such a lack of clarity robs application of its constraints and, for some, makes it the controlling factor in biblical interpretation.²¹

²⁰Ibid., 171.

²¹Shealy, *Redrawing the Line* 172-73.

Needless to say, when one incorporates application into the interpretive process as a controlling factor, that process becomes a conglomeration of conflicting considerations that render it impossible to determine the text's single meaning. It amounts to turning the exegetical process upside down and is a source of hopeless confusion. A strict recognition that interpretation is entirely independent of any contemporary application that one may make will eradicate this type of confusion.

The Value of Single Meaning

The value of following the principle of single meaning is beyond estimation. It eliminates all sorts of hindrances to letting the text speak for itself, which is, of course, the goal in Bible interpretation.