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LITERAL INTERPRETATION

The maxim of literal interpretation has a noble heritage reaching back to the Reformation, even though it has fallen into disuse among contemporary scholars. Part of the problem is its negative associations. It seems archaic and passé because its concerns are no longer the primary concerns of a contemporary culture. In addition, few can agree on the meaning of "literal."

In this essay, I agree in part with the criticism of the use of "literal." But I also believe that correctly understood it specifies a primary concern for biblical interpretation.

First, I agree that in biblical interpretation, we do not begin with a modern or postmodern worldview. Rather, we begin with a worldview expressed by Augustine: we believe to know. As Christians we believe the Gospel to know ourselves and to come to know God. When we turn to Scripture, we believe what the Scripture claims to be true of itself: God speaks and what He says is truth (John 17:17). Of course, interpretation is necessary to know the meaning of that truth.

Within this pre-modern worldview, there are two qualifications. First, textual criticism is essential to know what God has written. In addition, where historical-critical problems remain unresolved, these problems need to be addressed. Yet the claim of Scripture to be true remains a viable premise in textual interpretation.

Second, the term "Literal" is used in at least two valid senses. Kevin Vanhoozer speaks of "literal truth."[1] This is what John Walvoord called literal-reference. When the Bible refers to history and to reality, what it means corresponds to what is.[2]

However, when the term speaks of "literal sense," this use is vague. Charles Ryrie says that the principle might also be called "*normal* interpretation since the literal meaning of words is the normal approach to *their* understanding in all languages."[3] Others have argued as he does that the meaning of each word in determined by *grammatical* and *historical* considerations. While these considerations are necessary, they are not sufficient.

While Ryrie in his most recent writings has acknowledged the developments in linguistics and in a literary approach, he does not add these developments to his approach. E. D.

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[1] Kevin Vanhoozer, "Augustinian Inerrancy: Literary Meaning, Literal Truth and Literate Interpretation in the Economy of Biblical Discourse," in *Five Views on Biblical Inerrancy* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2013), 199-218.

[2] Ibid., 208, 210. This corresponds fairly closely to Aristotle's oft-quoted definition of truth: "To say of what is that it is not, or of what is not that it is, is false, while to say of what is that it is, and of what is not that it is not, is true" (*Metaphysics* 1011b25).

[3] Charles C. Ryrie, *Dispensationalism*, rev. ed. (Chicago: Moody, 1995), 80.

Hirsch introduced what I am calling a "normal language use" in his classic work *Validity in Interpretation*,[4] yet he did not discuss nor develop his view of language.

Normal Use of Language

What is involved in normal use of language?

E. D. Hirsch presented two primary considerations: First, it is the author who *authors* the use of language.[5] Thus, interpretation begins asking the question: **what** is the author's intended meaning based on his language composition in the text.

Second, language composition expresses verbal meaning as a "willed type meaning."[6] Hirsch develops *type* considering the logical consequences that flow from public interpretation. At the same time he sets aside consideration of "the ethics of language."[7] This correct use of language is what I calle *the normal use of language*. Others refer to normal in the fact that "languages are properly individuated as <u>sets</u> of <u>types</u> . . . *classes* of *expressions*."[8] As the *Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy* explains: "an expression is a linguistic *type* and can be used over and over (many manuscripts can be classified, an *essay*, the *type*), whereas a *token* of a *type* can be produced only once (a single token manuscript) though it may be reproduced. (copies of the token)."[9]

Since a language includes a body of words and methods of combining them, these can be individuated in both formal sets and semantic sets. Thus in this theory of "normal language use":

- Language is used *to conceive of meanings* in *type*-categories.

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[4] E.D. Hirsch, *Validity in Interpretation* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1967). While his work is dated, his view of verbal meaning continues to be considered and no none has improved upon his strategy on validation.

[5] Robert Stein makes a similar argument. He states, "A written text is simply a collection of letters or symbols. Those symbols can vary. They can be English or Greek letters, Japanese symbols, or Egyptian hieroglyphics. They may proceed right to left, left to right, up or down. They can be written on papyrus, animal skins, stone, or metal. Yet both the letters and the material they are written are inanimate objects. Meaning, on the other hand, is a product of reasoning and thought. It is something only people can do. Whereas a text can convey meaning, it cannot produce meaning, because it cannot think! Only authors and readers of texts can think. Thus, whereas a text can convey meaning, the production of meaning can only come from either the author or the reader" (*A Basic Guide to Interpreting the Bible* [Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994], 19-20).

[6] Hirsch, *Validity in Interpretation*, 51.

[7] Ibid., 62.

[8] Sylvain Bromberg, "On What We Know: What We Don't Know," in *Explanation, Theory, Linguistics and How Questions Shape Them* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 175.

[9] Kent Bach, "Type-token distinction," in *The Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy*, ed. Robert Audi, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 936-37.

	types of language forms	***types of meanings***
text ⎡	– words	– identifiers of meaning
	– grammatical constructions	– ways of combining meanings
whole ⎡	– literary conventions	– patterns in the composition of meanings
text ⎣	– a whole text	– type of message

The individuated sets of types also recognize levels of forms and meanings: text level and whole text level.

- Language is used *to express* meanings in texts, in literary *tokens*.

- Language is used *to refer* to *types* of reality, in reference to historical *tokens*.

This type/token view can be applied to both the use of language (as E. D. Hirsch and Nicholas Wolterstorf [10] do) and to the world of reality about which language speaks (as philosophy does).

This normal use of language appears in Genesis 1:1–2:3. God said, "Let there be *light* and there was *light*"… "Let the earth produce *vegetation*… The earth produced *vegetation*." There is a correspondence between the *type* of word expressed and the *token* that came into existence. "God speaks and the words he uses are not part of some alien, celestial language, but words that operate *normally* within our very human linguistic structures that are themselves the gift of God to us."[11]

How do we communicate using language in a normal fashion?

In the philosophy of language, three questions probe the use of language to communicate: a theory of meaning, a theory of reference, a theory of truth. Each theory will be considered according to a type/token view of normal language.

A Theory of Meaning

Hirsch would begin asking a narrower question: *What is verbal meaning*? The answer is that verbal meaning is a willed type meaning. It is *willed* because an author chose to communicate a meaning by writing a manuscript. It is a *type* to portray the essence of the meaning expressed. A *type* meaning has two essential characteristics: the type or meaning is *sharable* and *determinate*. That makes communication possible.

To begin with, the author and the reader *share* preunderstood language—types and literary-types. Based on those *shared* preunderstandings, the author composes a fresh expression of meaning in the text. "*Determinacy*, on the other hand, is a quality of meaning required in order

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[10] Nicholas Wolterstorf, *Divine Discourse: Philosophical Reflections on the Claim that God Speaks* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

[11] Mark D. Thompson, *A Clear and Present Word*, ed. D.A. Carson (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2006), 70-80.

that there *be* something to reproduce. Determinacy is a necessary attribute of any sharable meaning, since indeterminacy can't be shared: if a meaning were indeterminate, it would have no boundaries, no self-identity, and therefore could have no identity with a meaning entertained by someone else."[12] This identity may be imprecise or ambiguous. It need not be definite or precise. It merely has a self-identity and boundary commonly answering **what** the author intended to say.

The next question is: *how is an expressed type of meaning comprehended*? Commonly, comprehending begins with reading the text. As one starts to read, Adler and Van Doren[13] recommend gaining some sense of the meaning of the whole text. From the title, one learns about the subject matter. From the table of contents, one begins to see the overall development and perhaps literary genre. While the Bible does not have these conventional markers, yet gaining such a sense of the whole is necessary. If nothing else, a quick read can provide a sense of the whole.

Then as one reads with greater care, comprehension emerges from *matching* the textually expressed meanings with the expected sense of the whole. That match involves an inference drawn from reading the text. Does the inferred sense of the text match with what was expected? The inferred sense of the whole frequently must be *re-made* when *matched* with the text. The *making* and *matching* process of reading and of inferring follows the hermeneutical spiral.[14] Communication has been reached when the meaning comprehended corresponds to the meaning expressed.

One final question remains: *does the meaning reside in the text*? Hirsch concludes that "meaning is an affair of consciousness not of words"[15] Webster summarizes it this way: meaning is "Something that one wishes to convey, especially by language, or something that is interpreted to be the goal, intent or end."[16] Thus *meaning* is expressed through a text but first resides in the author and then is comprehended by the interpreter. Thus *meaning* does not reside in the literal or normal sense of a word or a construction in the text. Rather the *meaning* is constructed from the text to formulate **what** the author intended to say based on what is expressed in the text. As it is clear, we have no other access to the meaning the author had in mind than the text.

A second reason why the meaning does not reside in the text is that a given text, under the normal conventions of language use, can be taken to mean more than one thing. That is not to say that the author intended more than one meaning but that normal language use can be taken in more than one way. A genitive case or an aorist tense by normal conventions can be taken to have more than one meaning. This variety is not determinate.

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[12] Hirsch, *Validity in Interpretattion*, 44.
[13] Mortimer J. Adler and Charles Van Doren, *How to Read a Book* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1940).
[14] See Grant R. Osborne, *The Hermeneutical Spiral: A Comprehensive Introduction to Biblical Interpretation* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1991).
[15] Hirsch, *Validity in Interpretation*, 4.
[16] *Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary* (Springfield, MA: G and C. Merriam Co., 1959), 775.

Based on this consideration of meaning and verbal meaning, another confirmation of the theory exists at each level of communication, resources have been developed to interpret textual meanings. Dictionaries, lexicons, grammars have been developed around types of words and types of syntax to consider the range of conventional uses. While the traditional view of grammar provides some evidence, the linguistic structure viewing the grammatical systems of forms and the semantic system of forms matched a type/token model clearly.[17] In addition, at the literary level one sees different types of meaning in speech-act theory[18] and in studies of poetics and patterns of literary composition.[19]

This theory of meaning will be illustrated with Habakkuk 2:4.

An Example of Normal Language Use in Habakkuk 2:4

The problem introduce in normal sense may be illustrated in the term *emunah* in Habakkuk 2:4. In every other use of the term in Hebrew Bible it is translated "faithfulness" in reference to the character or conduct of God or man. Yet in Habakkuk 2:4, it is traditionally translated "faith." This would be contrary to the "normal sense" of the term when viewed as though the meaning that resides in the text.

Does Hirsch's theory of meaning support the traditional translation? It does, because that translation fits in the context of the author's intended meaning as expressed in the text.

The question that Habakkuk originally raised concerned God's adjudication of Israel's guilt under the law (1:2-4). His charge was that God's inaction meant that God was unjust under his expectations based on the covenant partnership. However, the LORD responded that he had already raised the Chaldeans to bring judgment against Israel (1:5-11). This created a more serious issue for Habakkuk because God was using a more wicked people to judge a less wicked people. And God agreed that this is what he was doing. For Habakkuk this challenged the LORD'S holiness (1:12-17). As Habakkuk *expected* from Deuteronomy 27:1-28:68, God adjudicated a person's guilt based on what they did. And that would seem to lead to judgment against Chaldea before Israel.

Yet this *expectation* of what God would say (2:1), would be shattered when the LORD revealed his principle of adjudication (2:4, 5). When the words of the LORD'S pronounced principle were *matched* with his expectation, either the words were mistaken or his *expectation* was ill conceived

The pronouncement may be translated: (2:4, 5); "As for the *proud*, his desires are *not right* within him, **but** the *righteous* will *live* (before the judge) by his *faith*. Indeed wine will

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[17] Eugene Vanness Goetchus, *The Language of the New Testament* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1965).

[18] G. B. Caird, *The Language and Imagery of the Bible* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1980), 7-36.

[19] Adele Berlin, *Poetics and Interpretation of Biblical Narration* (Sheffield: Almond, 1983), Leland Ryken, *Words of Delight: A Literary Introduction to the Bible* Grand Rapids: Baker, 1987).

betray the *proud* restless man! His appetite is as big as Sheol, like death, he is never satisfied. He grabs all the nations; he seizes all the peoples"

The principle of adjudication would resolve the crisis for Habakkuk is based on the individuals attitude rather that their works. The translation is based on the correlation of the two lines in Habakkuk 2:4, with *pride* being contrasted to *emunah*. The importance of *pride* being an issue is repeated and developed in 2:5 and then reinforced in the series of **woe** pronouncement against the acts of the proud in 2:6-19. At issue is the attitude which gives rise to actions described in 2:5 and reinforced in the **woe** judgments.

Thus in this type of principle of adjudication, the LORD declared righteous the one who believed him. It seems evident that Habakkuk understood the principle this way as it matches his prayer in 3:1-19. After confessing God's holiness at Mt. Paran (3:3), he announces that he "must quietly wait for the day of distress" (3:16). Then he confesses that he "will rejoice in the God of his salvation" (3:18). Habakkuk takes *emunah* to mean faith which he now expresses in prayer, in contrast to the attitude he had earlier expressed in the questions (1:2-4, 12-17). Thus there is a match between *emunah* seen in the context immediately considered (2:4, 5) and the genre sections of the whole book.

A Theory of Reference

A second consideration in communication concerns to what and to whom does the text refer. Verbal texts communicate at a *type* level, so references at least correspond at a type level. This is also illustrated in the way Habakkuk 2:4 is applied in the New Testament. In Habakkuk, it refers to a historical judgment (token). In Galatians 3:11 it refers to final judgment (justification by faith) (token). The tokens are different but at the level of type it applies to both. This is also illustrated in the type of literature with which the reader is dealing. Informative and cognitive types of language refer directly to the world about which it speaks. Performative types of statements commit the author to act in the future. So the author makes reference to himself in the present and to the promised action at some time in the future. Another type of performative statement calls the reader to act in the future and warns of future consequences as Deuteronomy 27–28: says. In either case, the references are to the future but are contingent upon the response of the ones addressed. Such a legal literary genre has references to an unknown future response of the citizens which also may be contingent on the mercy of the law giver. Thus the theory of reference assumes a corresponding intent but is nuanced by the type of literary genre.

Theory of Truth

Is the message of the text true? While we adhere to a correspondence theory of truth, we also recognize that how that truth is represented in the text is effected by the literary genre used by the author. In the most general terms, it is assumed that all biblical literature is expository in that it intends to communicate knowledge and that knowledge corresponds to reality and is true. So, even hymnic literature is not solely imaginary nor is the creation account

only imaginary. Concerning the latter, it speaks about the realities of God's creation in truth, but does not speak about these realities in scientific terms. The creation account is true because "God speaks. Better: God is a communicative agent who employs human language and literature as means of communicative action."[20] Therefore, truth claims ultimately reside with the speaker who employs a literary form to express what he intends to affirm.

Validation of Interpretations

Having examined how meaning is communicated through a normal use of language, we still face challenges in interpretation. No method of interpretation results in certain or universally agreed upon results. This is where the work of E. D. Hirsch proves most helpful. While there is no method of interpretation that assures agreement, there is a method of adjudication that results in validation. This method of adjudication is based on probability theory.

There are two reasons why methods of interpretation cannot guarantee certainty or universal agreement.

First, the interpretation of the willed type message is the result of a popular inference rather then being the result of a formal logical inference.[21] It is essentially an intuitive answer to the interpretive question. And that answer arises from reading broad sections of text. While reading broad sections of text help the interpretive process by providing a context for understanding individual sections of text, it also means that there are more opportunities to misunderstand, misinterpret, or misinfer.

Second, there are challenges related to language itself. As Hirsch has noted, "almost any word sequence can, under the conventions of language, legitimately represent more than one complex of meaning… One proof that conventions of language can sponsor different meanings from the same sequence of words resides in the fact that interpreters can and do disagree."[22]

How can these challenges be resolved or at least be addressed?

One begins with the consideration of assorted interpretive proposals. Those that are merely different, but not disparate, may be combined to achieve a more complete and robust understanding of the text and its message. Indeed, the differences may prove helpful in providing additional insight or nuance.

But if there is real disparity or even contradiction between some of the interpretations these must be adjudicated. Thus in our example; "the righteous shall live by his *faithfulness*" is disparate from "shall live by his *faith*." On the other hand, the translation "shall live by Gods'

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[20] Vanhoozer, "Augustinian Inerrancy," 214.
[21] In this way, interpretation is both science and art.
[22] Hirsch, *Validity in Interpretation*, 4.

faithfulness" is merely different but its support by the text is doubtful. This process of adjudication involves finding and identifying the textual support for each option and weighing the comparative weight of each interpretation in light of that support. The result of this process is to determine the most probable interpretive option.[23] At least that is the goal, but there may remain a hung jury of scholars. The commentary tradition informally reflects such a process of adjudication.

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[23] Elliott E. Johnson, *Expository Hermeneutics: An Introduction* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1980), 267-306.