

# What is Exegesis, Authorial Intent, and Meaning?

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In a consideration of proper exegetical method, there are certain key foundational topics that should be considered from the outset. This paper will attempt to present the author's position regarding what is exegesis exactly, what is authorial intent, and how many meanings a text of Scripture may have.

The present author understands exegesis as the implementation of the grammatical-historical hermeneutical method to find and discover the author's intended meaning of a passage of Scripture.<sup>1</sup> This stands as a relatively simple definition, especially compared to various other definitions.<sup>2</sup> I would point out some of these definitions include application in the definition of exegesis.<sup>3</sup> It is true that from the perspective of the Bible student's goals exegesis should always be with the aim of application. However, the present author does not see application as pertinent to the determining of the author's meaning, but rather as part of exposition or systematic theology. Exegesis is simply the implementation of valid hermeneutics to discover the author's original intended meaning of a passage of Scripture.

This definition leads into a question about the meaning of authorial intent. The present author understands authorial intent to refer to the meaning intended by the author of a passage of Scripture as expressed by that author in the text itself.<sup>4</sup> This concept of authorial intent is commonly affirmed in evangelical textbooks on exegetical method,<sup>5</sup> but it is sometimes qualified by suggesting that we are to look for the author's unstated purpose in writing the text to find the meaning.<sup>6</sup> I do not understand this to be a valid approach, for reason that we cannot have access to an author's intention unless it was expressed.<sup>7</sup> Meaning should be kept distinct from purpose, and so authorial intent is referring to the meaning which the author intended to communicate through his expressed words.

A final area that has pertinence to these matters is the number of meanings a given passage of Scripture may have. Many Christians may appeal to the existence of some kind of multiple meanings in a passage of Scripture. However, this understanding confuses exegesis with Biblical and Systematic Theology. There is a single meaning of a passage of Scripture<sup>8</sup>, though there may be multiple

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<sup>1</sup> c.f. Robert L. Thomas, *Evangelical Hermeneutics: The New Versus the Old* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2002), loc. 197. Kindle.

<sup>2</sup> See full discussion of various definitions of exegesis and related terms in *Ibid.*, loc. 124-197.

<sup>3</sup> e.g. Darrell L. Bock, "Opening Questions: *Definition and Philosophy of Exegesis*," in *Interpreting the New Testament Text: Introduction to the Art and Science of Exegesis*, ed. Darrell L. Bock and Buist M. Fanning (Wheaton: Crossway, 2006), 24.

<sup>4</sup> Norman L. Geisler, "Is an Objective Interpretation of the Biblical Text Possible?" in *The Theory and Practice of Biblical Hermeneutics: Essays in Honor of Elliott E. Johnson*, ed. H. Wayne House and Forrest S. Weiland (Silverton, OR: Lampion Press), 60.

<sup>5</sup> Bock, 25.

<sup>6</sup> Geisler, 60.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 61.

<sup>8</sup> Thomas, loc. 1347-1593.

applications of that single meaning.<sup>9</sup> One author cites the dual authorship of Scripture<sup>10</sup> as the basis for one meaning that includes related submeaning. This type of position is based on the position that God intended additional meanings as demonstrated in later texts. However, the processes of Biblical Theology and Systematic Theology<sup>11</sup> are the basis for additional “meanings”, though “significance” is probably the better term. God may have a bigger picture than the human author, because He knows all things, but in the end the Divine Author’s meaning is identical with the human author’s meaning, as we have no access to the Divine meaning except through the human author’s expressed meaning.<sup>12</sup> There is indeed a single meaning of Scripture but multiple applications and significances.

In conclusion, the exegete may arrive at the single meaning of a passage of Scripture by implementing valid grammatical-historical principles in understanding so that he may discover the author’s intended meaning as expressed in the text he authored under Divine inspiration. The results of this exegesis may then be correlated and systematized with all Scripture and applied to the Christian’s life.

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<sup>9</sup> Geisler, 65-66.

<sup>10</sup> Elliott E. Johnson, “Dual Authorship and the Single Intended Meaning of Scripture,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 143 (July 1986):221-223, accessed January 18, 2016, in the *Theological Journal Database*.

<sup>11</sup> See Mike Stallard, “Some Notes on the Definition of Systematic Theology”, *Our Hope*, accessed January 18, 2016, <http://our-hope.org/blog/wp-content/uploads/2009/09/SysTheoNotes2.pdf>.

<sup>12</sup> Geisler, 63n24.