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Introduction

WRITING A COMMENTARY on a book of the Old Testament, particularly in a series geared toward application, is not a straightforward enterprise. It is hard to imagine anyone working on a commentary such as this who would not feel pressed to work out deliberately an approach to Old Testament interpretation that leads to application.

Toward that end, the question that has been my constant companion over the past three years or so since I began this commentary has been a simple one to ask, but exceedingly difficult to answer: How should a Christian interpret the Old Testament? Answers to this question will vary among Christians, and I certainly respect the diverse thinking among those who confess the name of Christ. Indeed, even in the process of writing this commentary there have been some extremely fruitful discussions among several of the authors and editors regarding the best way to answer this question. Input from a variety of sources greatly enriches the insights that any one person would have if left to himself or herself, and so I have benefited from this interaction.

The approach taken in this commentary is one that, like the question it answers, seems straightforward at first but is in fact difficult to address: A Christian should interpret the Old Testament from the point of view of Christ as the final word in the story of redemption. That final word is displayed for all the world to see in the cross, the empty tomb, and the existence of the church by God's Spirit.

Such an approach to Old Testament interpretation is not a personal idiosyncrasy. Although the specific comments on Exodus that follow are certainly my own (unless cited otherwise, of course), reading the Old Testament in light of the person and work of Christ is one with a long and honored history—going back to the New Testament authors themselves. Moreover, several of the commentaries in this series share a similar perspective.

Hence, in view of this overarching principle, it seems wise at the outset to offer some words of explanation for how I handle the three categories that form the structure of every commentary in this series: Original Meaning, Bridging Contexts, and Contemporary Significance.

What Is "Original Meaning"?

WHAT IS IMPLIED by "original meaning" is the meaning as it was intended by the writer to be understood by his audience. In one sense, such a quest is a

welcome corrective to many unfortunate trends in modern biblical interpretation (and literature in general) that are prone to flights of fancy and absurdity. Most will quickly acknowledge the benefits of having our interpretations "anchored" somehow in what the writer himself wanted to say. No effective communication can occur when an author's intention is simply brushed aside.

The Question of Authorship

THE PROBLEM, HOWEVER, is that arriving at a text's original meaning is not a simple task. For one thing, a good number of biblical books are essentially anonymous, so the quest for uncovering an *author's* intention takes on a dimension of difficulty. Exodus seems to fit into this category.

As is well known, the authorship of Exodus (and the Pentateuch) has been a disputed point, not only over the past three hundred years of Old Testament scholarship, but earlier as well. A number of theories to account for the present state of the Pentateuch have without doubt overreached the biblical evidence. In my view, the well-known Documentary Hypothesis, popularized by the German scholar Julius Wellhausen in the latter half of the nineteenth century, is certainly guilty of this. Recent dissatisfaction with this theory among scholars of various stripes is a welcome countertrend.¹ The criticisms of this hypothesis offered by conservative scholars over the past 150 years (e.g., W. H. Green, U. Cassuto, O. T. Allis, E. J. Young) have largely been vindicated. The thoughtful exegetical works of these and other scholars, therefore, deserve renewed and careful attention, not simply by conservative scholars but by the academic community as a whole.

It is equally clear, however, that data in the Pentateuch and the book of Exodus complicate the matter of identifying an author with any certainty. In a manner of speaking, it is the Pentateuch itself that raises the question of authorship. For instance, nowhere in the Pentateuch is Moses described as the writer of the whole work. To be sure, he is said to write—the first instance being the episode with the Amalekites (see Ex. 17:14). Elsewhere in the Pentateuch where Moses is said to write, the reference is to the law (24:4; 34:1, 27, 28; Deut. 31:9, 24), the only exception being Deuteronomy 31:19, 22, which tells us that Moses wrote down the words of a song (Deut. 32:1–43). The Pentateuch has no more to say on the subject. To say more is to go beyond the pentateuchal evidence.

1. Two prominent examples of this countertrend are R. Rendtorff, *The Problem of the Process of the Transmission of the Pentateuch*, trans. J. J. Scullion (JSOTSup 89; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1990), and R. N. Whybray, *The Making of the Pentateuch: A Methodological Study* (JSOTSup 53; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1989). For helpful overviews of the history of the debate see R. N. Whybray, *Introduction to the Pentateuch* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 12–28, and G. Wenham, "Pentateuchal Studies Today," *Themelios* 22/1 (1996): 3–13.

Furthermore, it seems difficult to maintain that Moses wrote the account of his own death (Deut. 34) or that he referred to himself as "more humble than anyone else on the face of the earth" (Num. 12:3).² Few would dispute this. However, despite the glaring inadequacies of the Documentary Hypothesis, strongly dismissing this theory does not in and of itself settle the question of authorship. An attitude of reverential open-mindedness seems most consistent with the evidence.

A similar situation involves the identification of the original audience. The precise identity of the audiences of biblical books is often difficult to determine. To be sure, some general observations can be made with a fair degree of certainty. For example, many, if not most, books may safely be labeled "postexilic," or "monarchic," or "premonarchic," and so forth. These designations are helpful for interpretation and in many cases virtually certain (no one would label Ezra or Nehemiah "preexilic").³ But such designations do not actually identify the original *audience* but the general *time period* in which that audience might have lived.

The result of this relative lack of firm evidence, however, is not interpretive chaos. To acknowledge that the author and the audience cannot be precisely identified is not to say that we can freely mold the text to any shape we desire. Even though we do not have access to the mind of an author, we most certainly have the words he has produced, and it is to these *words* that we are bound. Our starting point for interpreting the text, therefore, is not a private notion of what an author intended. It is the other way around: A correct handling of the words on the page—the only "objective" data we have—allows us in due time to offer some suggestions as to what the author's intention might have been. In other words, understanding an author's intention comes at the end of the interpretive process, not the beginning.

One important factor to keep in mind in interpreting the Bible is that the question of biblical authorship is more than simply identifying the *person* who did the writing. All Christians who confess some notion of inspiration believe that the Bible is "authored" by God in some sense. Theories of how inspiration works vary, though we cannot get into a discussion on that issue here. The point to be made is that simply the question of authorship

2. These are two of a number of "standard" difficulties with Mosaic authorship raised by the Pentateuch itself. It should be made clear, however, that these non-Mosaic elements have no bearing whatsoever on whether Moses is responsible for some writing. In fact, the passages listed in the previous paragraph demonstrate that Moses did write. I might also add that many of these standard difficulties have been routinely pointed out by conservative scholars, so I am offering nothing new here.

3. On the other hand, determining the dates of many psalms is still uncertain, since historical markers in the psalms are for the most part conspicuously absent.

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of any biblical book—precisely because it is God's Word—*must* go beyond merely the question of human authorship, his historical setting, and the setting of his audience. Scripture ultimately reaches beyond its own time and place, for it is a book that ultimately comes from God. The fact that all Scripture has not only a human author but a divine author is vital to any investigation of a text's meaning.

These authors, the human and the divine, do not compete with each other, nor do they contradict each other. But to say that the divine author inspires the human author does not mean that a human author at any one time knows fully the grand scheme of God's revelation. The divine author is perfectly cognizant of the "big picture" at every moment. The human author is not privy to the same total grasp of the sweep of history. In other words, the intention of the divine author, the Holy Spirit, is ultimate. I often wonder what advantage there is in limiting meaning to what the human author intended. If there is anything we *do* know about Scripture, it is "God-breathed" (2 Tim. 3:16). This is something Scripture itself makes plain. The Bible is God's book, and it seems wise to allow this fact to enter into the equation. I have often mused that the reason why the Bible itself is so relatively mute and even ambiguous on the question of human authorship is to remind us of who the ultimate author is.

Of course, to speak of God's intention is not to say that we can get into God's head and see what he intended! But just as a human author's intention can only be discerned by working backward from his final product (the words he has produced), so, too, can God's intention be discerned. And the final literary product that God has produced is the Bible as a whole. To speak of God's intention, therefore, is not to look at the bits and pieces of Scripture to ask what his intention was here or there. Rather, it is to take a step *back* from the details and look at the sweep of Scripture as a whole.

This is where the gospel comes into play. To look at God's intention is ultimately to look to the *end of the story and work backward*. We know how the story winds up; not every detail, but the bold contours of the story are clear—we are living in the still, fresh blast of light from the empty tomb. Like the mystery buff who sneaks a peek at the final chapter, we know the conclusion, and that knowledge forms the proper setting within which Christian interpretation of the Old Testament takes place.

If I can put this another way, for a Christian it seems that the "meaning" of an Old Testament text cannot simply be equated with what was intended by its human author and what it meant to its original audience. It means more. Ultimately, the question turns to the connection between the meaning of a text in its original setting and the effect the resurrection of Christ has on our understanding of that meaning. (We are getting a bit ahead of ourselves here, so we will come back to this below.)

None of this is to imply that discerning the meaning of the text, once you know the conclusion, is an easy thing to do and that every Christian will agree. People have been engaging in biblical interpretation in some sense for well over three thousand years, and the end is nowhere in sight. There have been points of agreement and disagreement throughout this great span of time. Even reasonably like-minded Christians who live in a similar social setting and in the same time period will both agree and disagree over certain matters. This is because the quest for meaning in the Bible is an arduous, ongoing process, which no one can claim to have mastered. Quite to the contrary, we are mastered by it.

This is to say that biblical interpretation is a spiritual matter, taken up by spiritual people, whose object is ultimately the deeper understanding of who God is and what he has done (1 Cor. 2:14–16). When we interpret Scripture, we are involved in a spiritual exercise. It is therefore not simply a matter of applying some “neutral” tools and methods to the text. It is both an adventure and a journey. Hence, to say a text means such and such may not always be the end of the matter but actually the beginning. All of us engaged in biblical interpretation, whether professionally or privately, enter into a long and honored stream of faithful people of God who have done likewise. Knowing that we are surrounded by this “great cloud of witnesses,” it is best to keep an open mind, which is what I have tried to do in this commentary. Toward that end, I will not hesitate to offer explanations when I feel it is justified. Neither will I hesitate to confess ignorance where needed.

The Question of History

THERE IS AN IMPORTANT MATTER related to original meaning that should be touched on briefly here, especially since it comes up so frequently in discussions over Exodus. This is the perennial, thorny question of historicity. The historical veracity of the Old Testament has been rigorously attacked in modern biblical scholarship, and this fact has no doubt contributed toward the conservative tendency to spend much effort in defending the Bible as a reliable historical document. Such defense is often needed and has paid off important dividends, especially in recent years.⁴ The point to be raised here,

4. A well-known example in recent years is the discovery of an inscription in Tel Dan that makes reference to the “House of David,” thus lending extrabiblical support for the historicity of David’s reign. The discovery and interpretation of this inscription has sparked a great deal of controversy. See A. Biran, “‘David’ Found at Dan,” *BAR* 20 (March-April 1994): 26–39; W. Schiedewind, “Tel Dan Stela: New Light on Aramaic and Jehu’s Revolt,” *BASOR* 302 (1996): 75–90. With respect to the historicity of Exodus specifically I suggest the recent study by J. K. Hoffmeier, *Israel in Egypt: The Evidence for the Authenticity of the Exodus Tradition* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1997).

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however, is the relevance of history for ascertaining original meaning. The matter will come up now and then in the commentary itself, so it is appropriate to outline the issue here.

It is often simply stated that if what the Bible says happened did *not* happen, then the truth claims of the Bible are rendered suspect and we have little reason to trust it. Defense of the Bible's historicity is, of course, important, but it is not the *goal of biblical interpretation*. To use an obviously relevant example, you have not *understood* the book of Exodus when you have successfully defended the historicity of the event of the Exodus. There is more to interpreting the book than demonstrating that this or that happened.

The Old Testament is not a journalistic, dispassionate, objective account of events. Its purpose is not just to tell us "what happened" so that we can "look objectively at the data" and arrive at the proper conclusions. The Old Testament is *theological history*. It has been written to teach lessons. The primary lesson I would argue is to teach us what God is like and what it means for his people to live with that knowledge.

If I can put it another way, the Bible is an *argument* to God's people that God is worthy of our worship. It is not designed merely to set out "objective data." It is a deeply spiritual book that has deeply personal implications. It is not a book to be held at a distance, but a book that the interpreter is required to enter into, because it is God's book and we are his people. That the Bible has such a purpose should rightly affect the types of questions we bring to that reading, which in turn affects our interpretation of the text. We must be careful to expect from the Bible only those things it is prepared to yield. And it is not a science textbook or owner's manual. It is a book about God and his creation. It is about who he is, who we are, and how the former determines the standing of the latter.

To push this one slight step further, to say that the Bible is theological history, history with a driving theological purpose, is not to concede that it is somehow "less objective" than what we might see in history textbooks or newspapers. The fact of the matter is that there is no objective history in the commonly understood sense of the word. There is no account of events that is free from one's bias, one's perspective. All one has to do is watch the major news networks report on the same "objective" event, or read high school American history textbooks written in the wake of the Second World War, or read differing evaluations of the Civil War from northern or southern observers. What reporters choose to include in their accounts, how they report it, and the conclusions they draw differ from station to station and between books of different eras. Who we are *always* determines what we see and how we interpret it.

In this sense, what the Bible gives us is the *divine* perspective on events, that is, what God wants us to see and understand. I am not suggesting that

God's perspective is in any way faulty or merely one among many. Rather, simply put—what the Bible contains is what God wants to present. This is why I hesitate in this commentary to introduce prolonged discussions on historicity. It is not because history is unimportant. *These things really happened!* But what we have is the text in front of us, which is a gift from God. It is the text that is the focus of our attention, not what might lie behind it. To be sure, the Bible has a referential subject matter, but when the topic turns to *biblical interpretation*, there is no "behind it." The "it" is the object of study. Some concrete examples will be explored in the commentary.

One final matter concerning history is the fact that a good many historical issues remain hopelessly unresolved. In what century the Exodus took place will remain a point of debate for some time, even among evangelicals. We still do not know who the pharaoh of the Exodus was. Curiously enough, we are not told (see Ex. 1:8). To this day we do not know what route the Israelites took, what specific body of water they crossed,⁵ or where Mount Sinai is. These events form the very basic historical contours of Exodus and yet they continue to elude us. Can proper interpretation of the book proceed only after these basic questions are answered? No. In fact, the church has been deriving spiritual benefit from Exodus for a long time without such firm knowledge.

The Text in Front of Us

WHAT, THEN, ARE WE to make of original meaning? It is, as mentioned above, located in the text. I realize, as does anyone familiar with the debate, that this does not settle every matter. My focus, nevertheless, will be on the *words in front of me*—ultimately the Hebrew text—and how those words form impressions in my mind as to how an ancient Israelite audience might have understood those words.

This means that the goal of the Original Meaning sections will be to draw out the *theology* of the text. We must remember that the original purpose of Exodus was theological, to teach God's people about himself and their relationship to him. It was not to have its readers enter into discussions of who the pharaoh was or some other piece of historical trivia. Exodus was written as a theological treatise, and hence any original meaning we might discern from the text will have to proceed firmly from that basis. Such an approach does not claim a basis in an objective point of departure outside of the text. It claims rather to immerse itself in the text and to come up with some informed and defensible (but not necessarily final) answers that will hopefully contribute to the church's understanding of Exodus.

5. On the lack of the precise identification of the location of the Red Sea, see Hoffmeier, *Israel in Egypt*, 215.