

Dr. David Mathewson, Hermeneutics, Session 12, Text Centered Approaches Resources from NotebookLM

1) Abstract, 2) Audio podcast, 3) Briefing Document, 4) Study Guide, and 5) FAQs

1. Abstract of Mathewson, Hermeneutics, Session 12, Text Centered Approaches, Biblicalelearning.org, BeL

This lecture excerpt from Dr. Mathewson's hermeneutics course examines the role of authorial intent in biblical interpretation. It contrasts the view that understanding the author's intended meaning is paramount with objections arguing its impossibility or irrelevance. The lecture then proposes a nuanced approach, emphasizing the text's inherent meaning while acknowledging the interpreter's active role and the limitations of perfectly recovering the author's intent. Finally, it introduces text-centered approaches to interpretation, which shift focus from the author's intentions to the text's inherent structure and literary features. These methods are presented as alternatives or complements to the author-focused approach.

2. 21 - minute Audio Podcast Created on the basis of Dr. Mathewson, Hermeneutics, Session 12 – Double click icon to play in Windows media player or go to the Biblicalelearning.org [BeL] Site and click the audio podcast link there (Introduction & Languages → Introductory Series → Hermeneutics).



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3. Briefing Document

Okay, here's a detailed briefing document summarizing the key themes and ideas from the provided lecture excerpts:

Briefing Document: Text-Centered Hermeneutics

Introduction:

This document summarizes key concepts discussed in Dr. Mathewson's lecture on hermeneutics, focusing on the shift from author-centered to text-centered approaches to biblical interpretation. The lecture examines the historical development of hermeneutical theory, particularly regarding the role of the author's intention, and explores the rationale and characteristics of text-centered methodologies, such as literary criticism and formalism.

I. Author's Intention: A Historical Approach

- **The Importance of Authorial Intent:** The lecture begins by acknowledging the historical significance of interpreting scripture through the lens of the author's intended meaning. Figures like Friedrich Schleiermacher and E.D. Hirsch are mentioned as influential proponents of this approach.
- **Meaning vs. Significance:** Hirsch's distinction between "meaning" (what the author intended to communicate) and "significance" (the application of that meaning to modern contexts) is emphasized.
- **Quote:** "Hirsch said meaning was that which the author intended to communicate as inscribed in the text itself...the significance of the text and that it was the relationship of that meaning to virtually anything else."
- **Challenges to Authorial Intent:** Despite the importance of authorial intent, the lecture outlines several reasons why some reject it as the primary goal of interpretation. These objections are not intended to be exhaustive but to illustrate the complexities and limitations of author-centered methods.
- **The Intentional Fallacy:** The impossibility of accessing the author's mind and thought process, especially with deceased authors, is the first cited concern.
- **Quote:** "Some have rejected the author's intention because it is impossible to get in the mind of an author and determine what that author intends to communicate."

- **Inadequate Communication:** Authors may not always communicate their intentions clearly, or may even mislead readers, thus undermining the authority of their intent.
- **Authors Communicating Better Than They Know:** Authors sometimes agree with interpretations they did not initially intend, suggesting that meaning can extend beyond the author's conscious intention.
- **Autonomous Texts:** Some believe that once a text is written, it gains a life of its own, independent of the author's intent. The author then loses the authority to determine the meaning of the text.
- **Quote:** "Texts are seen as free-floating, that have a life of their own. Once the author writes a text, it now is cut off from the life of the author, and it has a life of its own."
- **Multiple Interpretations:** The presence of different and conflicting interpretations of the same texts undermines the idea that there is one recoverable "authorial intent."
- **New Meanings in Scripture:** New Testament authors sometimes find new meanings in Old Testament texts that were not necessarily apparent in their original contexts. This creates a challenge for recovering a singular, original authorial intent across the Testaments.

II. Defending Author's Intent: A Necessary Goal

- **Divine Inspiration:** The lecture argues that the divine inspiration of the Bible supports the idea that there is a stable meaning that God intended to communicate to His people through the human authors. This does not mean the text will be perfectly understood, but it does suggest there is an important meaning to be found.
- **Quote:** "If God stands behind his word, there must be some stable meaning that one can get at."
- **Focus on Textual Meaning, Not Psychology:** The goal is not to enter into the author's psychological state but to discern the meaning the author encoded in the text itself through a study of its grammar and structure.
- **Quote:** "The goal is not to uncover the author's thought process or psychological state or the intention of the mind, but the only access we have to the author is the product, the text that the author has written."

- **Substantial, Not Exhaustive, Understanding:** It's not necessary to perfectly and completely uncover the author's meaning, but to do so substantially and adequately.
- **Quote:** "The goal of author's intention is not to suggest that somehow we can exhaustively or perfectly understand the author's intended meaning, but that we can do so substantially and adequately in our interpretation."
- **Hermeneutics of Respect:** A hermeneutics of suspicion should be replaced with one of respect for the text, its author, and historical context.
- **Logical Self-Defeat:** Arguments against the author's intention are themselves attempts to communicate, implying that authors write to be understood, which lends credence to the importance of authorial intent.
- **Grounding Interpretations in the Text:** Even in disagreements, interpretations should seek to be grounded in the text and the probable intention of the author, rather than being subjective "free-for-alls."
- **A Definition of Meaning:** The meaning of the text is what the text reveals about the probable intent of the author and the probable understanding of the original readers, as discerned from the wording, grammatical structure, and historical circumstances of the text.
- **Quote:** "The meaning of the text is that which the words and the grammatical structures of that text disclose about the probable intention of the author-editor and the probable understanding of that text by its intended readers."
- **Probable Intention, Not Certainty:** Interpretation seeks to arrive at the "probable intention" of the author, acknowledging that absolute certainty is unattainable.
- **Justification From the Text:** A valid interpretation can be justified from the text itself, the author, the context, and the intended readers.

III. Text-Centered Approaches: A Shift in Focus

- **Transition:** The lecture now shifts from author-centered methods to text-centered approaches. The lecture proposes that hermeneutics has moved from historical/author-oriented approaches towards text-oriented approaches because of the shortcomings of the former.

- **Literary Criticism:** This approach finds meaning centered in the text itself, often based on some of the shortcomings of the author-centered approaches. The lecture highlights its prevalence in literary studies and now in biblical studies.
- **Rejection of Authorial Intent:** Literary approaches often reject the author as the center of interpretation, seeing the text as having its own life.
- **Text as Sole Guide:** The text itself is considered the sole guide to meaning.
- **Quote:** "the text alone then is the sole guide of meaning and the sole guide for understanding."
- **Focus on Formal Features:** Attention is given to the formal features and structure of the text, particularly the final form.
- **Bible as Literature:** The Bible is treated as literature, with the same questions and methods applied as in literary criticism.
- **Bracketing Historical Questions:** Historical questions are often set aside, with the world of the text being the focus, not the world outside of the text to which it may refer.
- **Formalism/New Criticism:** This is a key example of literary criticism which holds that the text is sufficient for producing meaning.
- **Text Sufficiency:** The text is self-sufficient and autonomous, disconnected from the author.
- **Historical Bracketing:** Historical context is not seen as essential for understanding the text.
- **Aesthetic Interest:** Formalism gives attention to the aesthetic qualities and literary artistry of the text.
- **Examples of Text-Centered Analysis:** The lecture provides examples of how a text-centered approach would treat the Old and New Testaments:
- **Old Testament: Genesis 1 & 2:** Instead of seeking the sources behind the two accounts of creation, a literary approach would emphasize the literary unity of the text and themes such as water, land, seed, cursing, and blessing.
- **Book of Ruth:** Focus is placed on the plot, character development, and aesthetic effect, rather than the historical accuracy of the story.

- **New Testament:Parables:** Literary criticism examines the structure, aesthetics, and function of the parables, categorizing them (e.g., monadic, dyadic, triadic, comic, or tragic).

IV. Interpretation as Active Engagement

- **Active Reader:** The lecture argues that the interpreter is not a passive observer, but an active, creative participant in discovering meaning.
- **Methods of Interpretation:** The reader must skillfully apply methods of interpretation and engage with the text in order to understand it.
- **Dialogue with the Text:** The interpreter must enter into a dialogue with the text and allow it to challenge and change them.
- **Context and Validation:** Interpretation should consider the text in its context, considering the author, audience, historical setting, cultural background, the meaning of words, and grammatical structure. Valid interpretations fit these criteria.
- **Not an Anything-Goes Approach:** Despite rejecting "pure objectivity," text-centered approaches should still have boundaries, ensuring the text isn't interpreted in completely arbitrary ways.

V. Future Directions

- **Narrative Criticism:** The next session will explore narrative criticism as a subset of literary criticism, and how it can be used in both the Old and New Testament.

Conclusion:

The lecture offers a balanced overview of the shift from author-centered to text-centered hermeneutical methods. While affirming the importance of authorial intent, it explores the value of a literary approach that analyzes texts as self-contained units of meaning, while still urging an approach grounded in the text itself. This approach recognizes both the limitations of our ability to recover the author's intent, and that meaning can arise from the structure of the text itself. This move to text-centered approaches helps create a richer, more nuanced understanding of interpretation.

4. Mathewson, Hermeneutics, Session 12, Text Centered Approaches

Text-Centered Hermeneutics Study Guide

Quiz

Instructions: Answer the following questions in 2-3 sentences each.

1. What is the difference between "meaning" and "significance," according to E.D. Hirsch?
2. What is the "intentional fallacy," and why do some use this to reject authorial intent?
3. How can an author "communicate better than they know?"
4. Explain the concept of texts as "free-floating" entities, and how that impacts interpretation.
5. Why does the variation in interpretations of scripture lead some to question the recoverability of authorial intent?
6. What are two reasons why author's intention is still considered a valid and necessary goal of interpretation?
7. What does it mean to say that the goal of authorial intent is not to recover the author's psychological state, but the meaning encoded in the text?
8. Why is it important to move away from a hermeneutics of suspicion and toward a hermeneutics of respect when interpreting texts?
9. How does a text-centered approach to interpretation differ from an author-centered approach?
10. What are some characteristics of literary approaches, particularly when applied to biblical texts?

Quiz Answer Key

1. According to Hirsch, "meaning" is what the author intended to communicate as inscribed in the text itself, while "significance" is the relationship of that meaning to other things, particularly modern applications. Meaning is tied to the author's intent, while significance is the ongoing relevance.

2. The "intentional fallacy" is the idea that trying to reproduce or recover the author's thought process is impossible because the author's thinking is inaccessible. It posits that the author's mind is unreachable, making the search for authorial intent an invalid goal.
3. An author can communicate better than they know when readers find valid interpretations or insights in the text that the author did not consciously intend but would agree with. This suggests that meaning can be more than the conscious intent of the author.
4. The concept of texts as "free-floating" entities means that once a text is written, it has a life of its own separate from the author. The author no longer has control over its meaning, and readers are then free to make their own sense of it.
5. The fact that interpreters arrive at diverse meanings despite seeking authorial intent leads some to question whether the author's intent can be recovered accurately. This is often due to the influence of the interpreter's presuppositions and context.
6. First, the inspiration of Scripture implies a stable meaning placed by God that we are able to understand, and God expects us to obey His Word. Second, the only access we have to the author is through the text itself, so that is where we must look for meaning.
7. This means that interpreters should focus on what the text reveals about the author's communicative intention, using textual and historical evidence, rather than attempting to access the author's inaccessible mental processes. The text becomes the key to their intent.
8. A hermeneutics of respect acknowledges the importance of the original author, text, and historical context, while a hermeneutics of suspicion begins by doubting the text's ability to transmit the author's meaning. Respect prioritizes the initial context and communication.
9. An author-centered approach seeks to understand the author's intention, while a text-centered approach focuses on the text itself as the sole guide to meaning. The text-centered approach often brackets historical context and authorship.
10. Literary approaches reject the author as the sole center of interpretation, consider the text alone as the guide to meaning, emphasize the text's formal features and structures, treat the Bible as literature, and often bracket historical questions.

Essay Questions

Instructions: Please answer the following questions in a well-developed essay format (2-3 paragraphs each).

1. Discuss the role of the author's intention in biblical interpretation. What arguments support the pursuit of authorial intent? What are the main objections?
2. Explore the tension between the "meaning" and "significance" of a text. How should interpreters balance these two concepts?
3. Compare and contrast author-centered and text-centered approaches to interpretation. What are the strengths and weaknesses of each?
4. How does the concept of "hermeneutics of suspicion" contrast with the idea of "hermeneutics of respect?" How do these approaches influence one's reading of the biblical text?
5. Describe the characteristics of a literary approach to biblical interpretation, and illustrate it using a specific example from the provided material (e.g., Genesis 1-2, parables of Jesus).

Glossary of Key Terms

- **Author's Intention:** The meaning that the author sought to communicate through a text at the time of its writing.
- **Meaning (Hirsch):** What the author intended to communicate, as inscribed in the text itself; the original message.
- **Significance (Hirsch):** The relationship of the text's meaning to other contexts, including modern-day application; how it matters today.
- **Intentional Fallacy:** The mistaken idea that one can or should attempt to recover an author's thought processes as a means of understanding their work.
- **Hermeneutics of Suspicion:** An approach that questions the validity and recoverability of the author's intention; it approaches the text skeptically.
- **Hermeneutics of Respect:** An approach that prioritizes the author's intention and the historical context of the text; it values and respects the text.

- **Text-Centered Approach:** An interpretive method that prioritizes the text itself as the guide to meaning, often bracketing historical context and authorial intent.
- **Author-Centered Approach:** An interpretive method that seeks to understand a text by understanding the author's intentions.
- **Literary Criticism:** An approach to interpretation that focuses on the formal features and structures of a text, treating it as a piece of literature, rather than being as concerned with historical context.
- **Formalism/New Criticism:** An early form of literary criticism focused on the text itself as autonomous and self-sufficient, disregarding historical context.
- **Narrative Criticism:** A subset of literary criticism that focuses on the narrative elements of a text such as plot, character, setting, and point of view.
- **Free-Floating Text:** The idea that once written, a text is detached from its author and has an autonomous life of its own, with meaning determined by readers instead of the author.
- **Presuppositions:** The prior beliefs, experiences, and biases that individuals bring to the interpretation of texts, affecting how they understand and engage with the material.

5. FAQs on Mathewson, Hermeneutics, Session 12, Text Centered Approaches, Biblicalelearning.org (BeL)

Okay, here's an 8-question FAQ based on the provided source, formatted with markdown:

Frequently Asked Questions about Biblical Interpretation and Authorial Intent:

1. **What is the difference between "meaning" and "significance" in the context of interpreting a text?**
 - According to E.D. Hirsch, *meaning* refers to what the author intended to communicate through the text's language, structure, and symbols. It is tied to the author's original purpose. *Significance*, on the other hand, relates the meaning to something else, such as applications for modern readers or other contexts, and is how the meaning is applied. Essentially, meaning is what the author *meant*, while significance is what it *means* for us.
1. **Why do some scholars reject the idea that the author's intention should be the primary goal of interpretation?**
 - Several reasons are given. One is the "intentional fallacy," which posits that it's impossible to truly know an author's thought process, especially if they are no longer living. Also, authors may fail to communicate clearly, may communicate better than they know, or texts can have a "life of their own" independent from the author after being written. Finally, different interpreters can arrive at different interpretations even when trying to discern the author's intention, which some view as evidence against its validity.
1. **What is the "intentional fallacy" and how does it relate to the concept of author's intent?**
 - The "intentional fallacy" refers to the idea that it is impossible to accurately reconstruct an author's thought process or intention behind a text. Critics argue that the author's mind is inaccessible, making attempts to recover their exact intentions futile, especially for authors who are no longer alive. This is why some see authorial intent as an invalid or impossible goal for interpretation.

1. If an author can unintentionally communicate things, does that invalidate the idea of seeking authorial intent?

- Not necessarily. It's acknowledged that sometimes authors may communicate more than they were consciously aware of, and readers may find valid interpretations the author hadn't originally considered. However, the argument is that a valid interpretation must still be consistent with the text's structure, grammar, wording, the author's historical context, and what could be understood by the original intended readers.

1. What is a "hermeneutics of suspicion," and why does the lecture argue it should be replaced with a "hermeneutics of respect"?

- A "hermeneutics of suspicion" is an approach where interpreters assume they cannot find the author's intention, or simply reject the possibility. This is in contrast to a "hermeneutics of respect," which argues interpreters should approach a text recognizing it was written by an author in a historical context with a purpose. The lecture suggests respecting the text, author, and historical context is necessary to arrive at a valid interpretation.

1. How does a focus on author's intention relate to the nature of the Bible as God's inspired word?

- If the Bible is indeed God's inspired word, as the lecture argues, then there must be a stable meaning that God intends to communicate, which can be accessed through the text. If God expects people to obey his word, then it suggests God created us in a way to understand what He intends, although it may not be perfect or exhaustive.

1. What does it mean to understand an author's intention, and how is it different from trying to get inside their mind?

- Understanding the author's intention, as described in the lecture, is *not* about trying to understand their psychological thought process or state of mind. Rather, it focuses on the meaning that the author encoded into the text itself, using the text (including its grammar, structure, and wording) as the evidence of what the author was trying to communicate. This is an attempt to understand the historical communicative act of the author, not their interior thoughts.

1. What are the key principles for a valid interpretation based on author's intention, and what role do readers' presuppositions play?

- A valid interpretation, based on author's intent, should be justifiable from the text itself, including its wording, grammar, and structure. It should also consider what is known about the author, the original readers, and the historical context. Readers must recognize that they bring presuppositions and biases, but these should be challenged by the text instead of dictating the meaning. The interpretation should strive to uncover the *probable* intention of the author, acknowledging the limitations that distance from the original context creates. It should not be based on personal ideas but grounded in the text and the historical situation.