
WHY STUDY BACKGROUNDS? AN APOLOGY FOR HISTORICAL RESEARCH

Exegesis must never be swallowed up in application, but must always precede it. The exegetical questions must be answered before questions of application may be legitimately asked. In light of this, one of the cardinal rules of exegesis is that the interpreter must always approach and analyze a **text** in part or in whole within contexts: historical, cultural, geographical, ecclesiastical, ideological, and literary. **Exegesis** is the spadework for **interpretation**. Exegesis without interpretation is similar to discovering a cure for the common cold and then not publicizing it. Exegesis alone has no power to produce change—the goal of interpretation. It is a heart without a beat. Interpretation that is uninformed by exegesis, however, has no foundation, like the house built upon the sand. In his discussion of the relationship between the text and the world behind the text, Clarence Walhout rightly observes that this relationship “forbids us to conceive of texts as linguistic objects cut loose from their mooring in an actual world and allowed to drift in some detached sea of aesthetic autonomy.”¹

The goal of this chapter is singular: to demonstrate that the pursuit of **background studies** (i.e., exegesis) is an indispensable prerequisite for the explication of plausible **textual meaning**; that is, historical, cultural, generic, grammatical, ideological, and even geographical studies are prerequisites for a successful interpretation of a text. While it is true that texts exist and are valued independently of their originating circumstances, a knowledge of those originating circumstances will inevitably increase the appreciation of a text. In the past few years, interpretive methodologies have focused on the text and the reader rather than on the author. This swing of the pendulum has produced some

¹Clarence Walhout, “Texts and Actions,” in Roger Lundin, Anthony Thiselton, and Clarence Walhout, *The Responsibility of Hermeneutics* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985), 56.

very healthy results, not least of which has been a renewed interest in the biblical texts and the role that the responses of readers play in the creation of meaning. However, this refocusing of attention has tempted some scholars to push the world within the text so far into the background that it becomes relatively unimportant in determining the meaning of a text. For example, Roland Barthes claims that “writing is not the communication of a message which starts from the author and proceeds to the reader; it is specifically the voice of reading itself; *in the text, only the reader speaks.*”² While Donald Keesey rejects the idea of *the* meaning of a text, his is a less radical view than that of Barthes:

While we may agree that there is no complete, definitive, and absolutely correct interpretation of a poem, it does not necessarily follow that there are no better or worse interpretations, interpretations more or less complete, more or less accurate, more or less approximating a “best” reading.³

It is our contention that the most plausible interpretation or reading of a text cannot be realized apart from a consideration of the world that gave birth to the text. If we recognize that a text is a historical phenomenon in the sense that it originates at a specific time and place, under certain cultural, linguistic, political, and religious conditions, the validity of the above statement becomes more obvious. Literary works may communicate or at least address universal concepts, but they do so within cultural limits and by cultural conventions. A familiarity with these limits and conventions can be helpful in ascertaining from the text that which is universally applicable. Texts reflect their culture, and to read them apart from that culture is to invite a basic level of misunderstanding.

The reader may have noticed that I have consistently made reference to “the meaning of the text” and not to “the meaning of the author.” This reference calls for some explanation, an explanation that will prevent an interpretive error. Most scholars today distinguish between authorial and textual meaning. Is the meaning of a literary work of art identical to what its creator meant in composing it? Without question an author purposes or intends to convey some message. Terry Eagleton observes that “every literary text is built out of a sense of its potential audience, includes an image of whom it is written *for*: every

²Roland Barthes, *S/Z* (trans. Richard Miller; New York: Hill & Wang, 1974).

³Donald Keesey, “General Introduction,” in *Contexts for Criticism* (4th ed.; ed. Donald Keesey; Boston: McGraw Hill, 2003), 7.

work encodes within itself what Iser calls an 'implied reader,' intimates in its every gesture the kind of 'addressee' it anticipates."⁴ Does the author successfully incarnate this intention within the text and communicate it to the audience? The answer to this question is rather complex.

From a phenomenological perspective, an author perceives an **object of consciousness** (the mental formulation of the text). This object is not synonymous with the text. The text is the concrete literary product of the author's object of consciousness. For example, I have a perception of what the book you are reading should be. The perception is not the book; the perception is the intellectual or conscious origin of the book. For every literary text there must be an originating moment when the author conceives of the literary object and perceives it to be a certain way. On the one hand, since perception takes place through time (diachronically), the object of consciousness undergoes a perpetual redefinition from moment to moment. On the other hand, this object of consciousness (regardless of the author's literary purpose) receives concrete expression at a particular time (synchronically) in the form of an inscription (i.e., the text). There is absolutely no way to guarantee a one-to-one correspondence between the ever-changing, **diachronic** object of consciousness and the permanent, **synchronic** linguistic representation of it. Indeed, it is probably futile to argue for a one-to-one correspondence between the original intentional object and the text, because there is no way to objectively demonstrate the truth for such a relationship. How is it possible to enter into the consciousness of another, especially when that consciousness is unavailable for questioning? Complete **authorial meaning** is unobtainable, since it is the product of the author's individual consciousness; textual meaning is the cultural specificity of the author's original object of consciousness. There is no way to determine definitively just how accurately the text represents the object of intention.

The **hermeneut** might argue, then, that the text exists as an autonomous object in no way dependent upon the authorial consciousness that gave birth to the text. But intentionality in this sense is not the same as what is usually referred to as authorial intent or purpose. The general reason for writing is to communicate. A logical assumption, consequently, might be that communication resides within the text itself. Nonetheless, we might reasonably inquire whether or to what extent the author was successful in communicating the intended message. Two disparate

⁴Terry Eagleton, *Literary Theory: An Introduction* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983), 84.

assumptions are possible here: (1) the author was not entirely successful in communicating intent but did communicate a message; or (2) the author was successful. In either case, it is presupposed that the author communicated *some* message to an audience through the medium of the written text. Since an author employs verbal symbols in communication, and since verbal symbols carry a wide semantic range of meaning, an author quite possibly (actually quite probably) communicates much more meaning than was consciously purposed. This possibility exists especially for writers who have unconsciously internalized symbols and concepts carrying unspoken, metaphorical usages that consequently have a tacit multivalence. By no stretch of the imagination may we classify this unconscious communication as authorially intended, but *it is in the text*. Therefore, a text does communicate; the author (consciously or unconsciously) communicates through the text, and the way readers actualize this communication is the primary concern of interpretation.

The above remarks bring us to the heart of the matter in this chapter: If the author's consciousness is private and ultimately inaccessible, wherein lies the need for historical research? Why should the hermeneut be concerned with the world behind the text? The answer is twofold.

First, an author perceives the object of consciousness (e.g., in literature, the object of consciousness is the text; in music, the symphony) within the **context** of a particular historical moment. This perception has its basis in all the various points of the author's culture and the author's unique assimilation of that culture; i.e., the original object of consciousness is at the same time grasped by the individual within a particular culture at a particular historical moment within that culture *and* filtered through an individual psychology.

Second, the literary representation of the object of consciousness has historical grounding. How can authors express themselves concretely apart from their contemporary matrix and their understanding of it? Even Dadaism found significance within a preestablished system of perception and reality. On a generic level, a literary text has meaning only upon the recognition that the author and reader share a body of literary conventions. If the author seeks to transform or modify these conventions, written discourse is possible only as far as the author and reader share the knowledge of conventional norms. Regardless of how much the author subverts conventional norms, understanding is possible solely against the backdrop of the accepted norm. Subversion is subversion only to the degree that the norms are transformed. The world within the text is in the real world while being outside of it. We

define the world within the text exclusively in terms of the real world. Political satire, for instance, has no meaning apart from its contemporary political origin. Literature which makes a social statement loses its point if it is not interpreted within the light of those social issues being addressed. Therefore, we must approach the textual world in light of the real world in which it has its grounding. Without a sense of what the real world is like, it is impossible to imagine new ones. The same is also true for readers, even when the worlds presented to us are fictional ones. Clarence Walhout states this quite clearly:

They [texts] become meaningful to us because we are able to compare their fictional worlds with the world that is already familiar to us. . . . We compare Huck Finn and Tom Sawyer to boys that we have known in actual life even though we have no doubt whatsoever which of the boys are fictional and which are actual.⁵

We can imagine new possibilities only against the backdrop of what we already know, of what in the real world is familiar to us. Outside of this relationship, communication is utterly impossible. The same can be said of an author. A text may be autonomous in relationship to the original intentional object, but the concretization of that object (the text) is conditioned by the real world of the author. How else does an individual communicate except through contemporary social, cultural, or literary conventions? For us to think that authors are not at least unconsciously marked in their thoughts and characters by their experiences in the real world is simply untenable. Behind every literary text, there lies a view of life, a view which has been conditioned by the author's real world. While an author may imagine a literary world with all sorts of new possibilities, the expression of such an imaginative world is impossible apart from the author's real world. An author can imagine a world and express it textually only through the real historical, cultural, literary, and ideological setting. For this reason, historical considerations are at once validated as an important adjunct to **hermeneutics**.

Since the text is historical in origin, having its birth within a complex of social, literary, linguistic, and ideological systems, certain limits are automatically placed upon the reader of the text. While these systems do not constitute meaning, they do serve as controls upon authorial literary expression. How does the author use or adapt available sources? What are the levels of tradition recognizable within the writings? Who is the author and under what circumstances did he or she write? What

⁵Walhout, "Texts and Actions," 59–60.

occasioned the writing and when? Because a text is historically conditioned, especially in its linguistic expression, these questions will continue to be appropriate. Consequently, any reading must be partially measured by the extent to which the reader shares the same worldview as the author. Louise Rosenblatt offers a similar view:

I am even ready to say that in most readings we seek the belief that a process of communication is going on, that one is participating in something that reflects the author's intention. And especially if our experience has been vivid or stirring, we may wish to ascertain what manner of temperament, life-situation, social or intellectual or philosophic environment, gave rise to this work. Especially if it is a text of the past, we may wish to discover to what degree our experience differs from that of the author's contemporaries. All of the approaches of the literary historian become potentially relevant—textual study, semantic history, literary, biographical, and other types of history. All these may aid the reader to limit himself to the horizon of the author and his time.⁶

Biblical prophecy is an example. Frequently “historical” details are ripped from their linguistic contexts and then applied to some contemporary situation or event in the reader's age. We may read of a commentator's claims that “the north” and “the east” in the prophecy of Ezekiel refer to the Soviet Union and China respectively. Observations of this kind are independent of any interest in or consideration of the original historical significance of such references. Regardless of the hermeneut's religious tradition, interpretive methodology, or theological aims, there must be sufficient focus on the author's historical frame of reference. Attention to the author's historical circumstances supplies a valuable safeguard against arbitrary interpretations like the one above.

I am not suggesting that we substitute information *about* authors or their times for meaning. Meaning comes only through engaging the text. Historical knowledge of authors and their age enables readers to engage texts and to organize more plausibly the resulting experiences. Any non-aesthetic information (biographical, cultural, literary, religious, etc.) should be valued since it enhances the engagement experience. These areas of information about the originating world behind the text are heuristic adjuncts to the literary experience. In other words, understanding ancient texts requires a certain amount of historical spade-work. McKnight rightly observes:

⁶Louise Rosenblatt, “The Quest for ‘The Poem Itself,’ ” in *Contexts for Criticism* (3d ed.; ed. Donald Keese; Mountain View, Calif.: Mayfield, 1987), 144.

There is no need for denial of the fact that certain states of affairs or developments operated in some sense as sources for biblical writings and that biblical writings now reflect those enabling conditions. But attention is to be paid to the realities behind the text (as far as they can be ascertained or imaged) in order to understand the text as a pattern of meaning that continues to have an effect on readers.⁷

While it is true that readers usually value a literary text independently of its originating contexts, a fundamental knowledge of these contexts will certainly increase one's appreciation and understanding of the text. The grounding of a text in its historical dimension is an important aspect of hermeneutics, because biblical texts (any text for that matter) reflect the enabling sources and originating conditions and circumstances. Consequently, the modern hermeneut should not shun the great bulk of information which those craftsmen of the **historical-critical method** have supplied. Speaking of the New Testament writings, Luke Johnson makes a similar observation:

The NT came to birth among social structures and symbols different from our own. The writings are conditioned linguistically by that historical setting. Their linguistic code is not only alien but also only partially available to us. Precisely the "things that go without saying" are not available to us. Every responsible reading therefore demands historical adjustment. The writings are very much conditioned by the times and places of their origin, by the settings and intentions of their authors. The more we can reconstruct those settings and intentions, the better readers we are.⁸

For example, an understanding of the debate concerning ritual cleanness between the two prominent Jewish rabbinic schools of Jesus' day, the schools of Hillel and Shammai, is nothing less than essential to a plausible understanding of Matt 15:10–12. The historical reference places certain restrictions on the possibilities of interpretation.

Nevertheless, this is not to argue that meaning is the domain of historical studies, because meaning is a function of the textual world. But this does insist that knowledge (as far as it is possible) of the world behind the text illuminates the world within the text. For any single author, we may have little or no information about educational background, literary sources, or even personal religious convictions;

⁷Edgar V. McKnight, *Postmodern Use of the Bible: The Emergence of Reader-Oriented Criticism* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1988), 175.

⁸Luke T. Johnson, *The Writings of the New Testament: An Interpretation* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1986), 6.

through historical research, however, we may discover a considerable amount of information about the educational systems of the author's time, the literary conventions in use, the political institutions under which the author lived, and the nature of orthodox and unorthodox religious views.

Summary

A text is the product of an author, and the author is a product of an age. Arguing for such a background study, Joel Rosenberg observes that because of an undercurrent of commentary by Shakespeare on contemporary political life and institutions, some Shakespearean scholars are sent to

the English constitutional histories of Maitland and Elton as a way into *Henry IV*, or *Richard III* or even *Coriolanus* and *Julius Caesar*. This is not to suggest that a Tudor or Stuart audience needed to read such histories in order to understand their poet, only that some members of those audiences possessed the political and institutional sophistication required to make full sense of Shakespeare's political themes, and that such understanding was a principal ingredient of the literary delight they certainly experienced.⁹

This knowledge would have been readily available to many of the contemporary readers, but such is not the case for the modern one. The same is true for readers of the biblical texts. The author could assume a certain body of knowledge on the part of at least some of the contemporary readers, and much of this knowledge is accessible to modern readers only through historical research. Therefore, we should welcome any available background knowledge if it increases our ability to organize into a meaningful whole the various levels of materials that we encounter in the text. Hermeneutics should ideally result in the articulation of the most plausible meaning. But there can be no hermeneutical ideal without some measurably competent reading of the text. If background studies enhance our chances of attaining to the hermeneutical ideal, we should welcome such studies with open arms. These non-aesthetic studies should never become substitutes for the aesthetic experience of the text itself. They are precursors, not ends.

⁹Rosenberg, *King and Kin*, 108.

Background studies may be divided into two areas—**semantics** and **pragmatics**. Semantics is the study of the language of a text, while pragmatics is the study of the circumstances surrounding the individual linguistic expressions. Exegesis must give equal weight to both areas. Peter Cotterell and Max Turner suggest that semantics and pragmatics should be divided more conveniently into the categories of text, **co-text**, and context.¹⁰ *Text* refers to the study of the actual words of the text; *co-text* is concerned with the relationships between words in sentences, paragraphs, and chapters; and *context* focuses on the historical and sociological setting of the text. The first two areas are the concern of semantics, while the latter is the domain of pragmatics. This observation by Cotterell and Turner is based upon their distinction between a sentence and an utterance. A sentence may occur repeatedly, while an utterance (which is the sentence within a particular *context*) can never occur more than once. Therefore, exegesis must be concerned with the explication of utterances, not sentences. This means that *pragmatics* must be an integral part of exegesis. When we begin to explore any text, we confront utterances instead of contextless sentences. When Paul wrote to the church at Corinth, he wrote within a particular context, a reconstruction of which yields a more informed reading of the text. In the remainder of unit I, I discuss the grammatical background (*text* and *co-text*) in ch. 2, and the *context* in ch. 3.

REVIEW & STUDY

Key Terms and Concepts

authorial meaning	historical-critical method
background studies	interpretation
context	object of consciousness
co-text	pragmatics
diachronic	semantics
exegesis	synchronic
hermeneut	text
hermeneutics	textual meaning

¹⁰Peter Cotterell and Max Turner, *Linguistics and Biblical Interpretation* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1989), 15–19.

Study Questions

1. If an author's work unconsciously reflects his or her world, in what ways might a familiarity with that world assist in the interpretation of a text?
2. Which do you feel is the final source of meaning, the author or the text? Why?
3. What advantage does oral discourse have over written discourse?
4. How does the distinction between "sentence" and "utterance" suggest the need for exegesis?
5. In what way might background studies inform interpretation even when the author of a text is anonymous?
6. What is the difference between authorial intention and textual meaning?
7. In what way do background studies offer a "check" on interpretation?

Suggestions for Further Reading

- Braaten, Carl. *History and Hermeneutics*. Philadelphia: Fortress, 1966.
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