Exegesis, Authorial Intention, and Typology

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[0:00] Welcome back. Today I'm continuing my answers to questions. The one that we're going to be discussing today is one that was left for me on Curious Cat. Is the task of exegesis limited to discovering the author's original intention, or can meaning somehow overflow intention? If so, in what way?

What guardrails are in place that would enable us to recognise certain readings as off-limits? A common text referenced in these discussions is Matthew 2.15's use of Hosea 11.1, so I'd be interested to hear your take on that as well.

At the outset I'll read that passage from Matthew 2, and then briefly the verse from Hosea. Matthew 2, starting at verse 13, and I'll read to 23.

Now when they had departed, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream, saying, Arise, take the young child and his mother, flee to Egypt, and stay there until I bring you word, for Herod will seek the young child to destroy him.

When he arose, he took the young child and his mother by night and departed for Egypt, and was there until the death of Herod, that it might be fulfilled, which was spoken by the Lord through the prophet, saying, Out of Egypt I called my son.

[1:12] Then Herod, when he saw that he was deceived by the wise man, was exceedingly angry, and he sent forth and put to death all the male children who were in Bethlehem and in all its districts, from two years old and under, according to the time which he had determined from the wise man.

Then was fulfilled what was spoken by Jeremiah the prophet, saying, A voice was heard in Ramah, lamentation, weeping, and great mourning, Rachel weeping for her children, refusing to be comforted, because they were no more.

But when Herod was dead, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt, saying, Arise, take the young child and his mother, and go to the land of Israel, for those who sought the young child's life are dead.

Then he arose, took the young child and his mother, and came into the land of Israel. But when he heard that Archelaus was reigning over Judea instead of his father Herod, he was afraid to go there.

And being warned by God in a dream, he turned aside into the region of Galilee. And he came and dwelt in a city called Nazareth, that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by the prophets. He shall be called a Nazarene.

[2:15] And the passage in Hosea. When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son. Now, we'll get to that passage later on, but at the outset, I think it's important to notice that even within regular speech, we notice ways in which speech and its meaning can overflow in tension.

So, for instance, if we're talking about irony, when someone says something that's ironic, it's because there's a meaning to what they've said that exceeds what they intend.

And that meaning is something that stands in juxtaposition to what they intended. In the same way we have something like Freudian slips, things like that.

These are all ways in which meaning can overflow in tension. And we see those statements as genuinely, genuinely meaningful on some level. That someone's ironic statement has a meaning, and at that level of irony, even though it's something that exceeds their intention.

When we're dealing with scripture, it's a bit more complicated than that still. When we're talking about something like prophecy, in cases such as Caiaphas the high priest, in the plot to kill Jesus, who says it's more expedient that one man should die for the people rather than the whole nation perish.

[3:41] And John tells us that being high priest that year, he prophesied that Christ would die for the nation and not just for the nation only. But that statement is one that...

What is the meaning of that statement? Is it the author's intention? Or is it the ironic greater meaning that it held? Well, John suggests that it is the ironic greater meaning that it held.

It has a meaning at the level of author's intention, and those who are present directly hearing that would have interpreted it at that level. But at the level of irony, at the level of prophetic meaning, it carries a different meaning, something in contrast to the author's intention, in ironic contrast with it.

And so, even within our regular speech, we recognise ways in which meaning can overflow intention. Beyond this, it's worth thinking about the ways in which, when we conceptualise meaning, we tend to conceptualise meaning in very spatialised terms.

So, it's as if a whole text is present, and we have part of that text, and the meaning of that is found within the context of the wider text, or within the wider world within which that text exists.

[5:01] But yet, texts seldom are that self-contained and enclosed. They tend to be open, and they tend to be open in a temporal manner. So, when I'm speaking like this, the meaning of my statements are fairly settled, but they're always, to some extent, dependent upon what I will say in the minutes to follow.

The meaning of these sentences and statements is, to some degree, suspended. And that's more so in certain sorts of texts. If you're listening to a piece of poetry, for instance, which is a very carefully structured text delivered over a period of time, it can have a twist in the tale at the end.

It can have something that subverts a lot of what has gone before. A surprising meaning that sheds light upon what everything else before that meant. Now, when we're dealing with scripture, we have a lot of self, relatively self-contained literary entities.

Something like the Book of Ecclesiastes or the Book of Ruth. They're relatively self-contained on one level. We can think about them in terms of their literary patterns and their structures and whether they have a chiastic shape, whatever it is.

And we can understand their meaning on that level. And that level is one in which authorial intention is very much the structure within which we will understand meaning.

[6:33] The meaning is primarily what the author intended. But yet, those texts, and others even more so, are texts that find the place within an ongoing revelation of God's truth over history as a temporal movement of meaning.

And that, I think, adds a bit more complexity than our theories are often adept at dealing with. That meaning is something that arrives over time.

And that meaning is not something that is doing violence to authorial intention. It's not that it just wrenches these texts away from their authors and gives them meanings defined elsewhere.

But rather, it's a recognition that these texts are part of a broader unfolding of God's meaning in history. And these writers and these prophets and speakers and scribes had some sense of what they were dealing with.

But that meaning had yet to unfold to a greater degree. It's one of the things that is particularly pronounced when we're dealing with things like typology. If you're reading an Old Testament narrative, for instance, if you're reading the narrative of David and his fleeing from Absalom, he crosses the Brook Kidron.

[7:51] He goes and climbs up the Mount of Olives, meets Zebra at the top, who ministers to him, has Shimei stones throw off, throwing stones at him and cursing him.

And is it Abishai who wants to kill Shimei? And all these different things. And when we read that story as Christians, we recognize that these things foreshadow things that happened to Christ in the run-up to his crucifixion.

His leaving Jerusalem, his crossing the Brook Kidron, his climbing the Mount of Olives, his struggling, his weeping as he is in the garden, and then the ministering to him by the angels and then the assault of others and then having to resist his right-hand man taking vengeance.

Now, did the author of 2 Samuel intend that meaning? Well, I'm not sure he did. Did he not in its full sense?

Did he intend it in any sense? Yes, I think he probably did. What he was dealing with was the story of David. And David is not just a story of David taken by himself, but David has a character who has figural weight and significance.

[9:17] And so when talking about David, he's talking not just about David, but about that deeper and greater figural significance, something that exceeds David the individual and which points towards a greater David to come.

Likewise, when we're dealing with something like the story of the Exodus, the story of the Exodus is not just about events that occurred in Egypt, but it's about a structure of expectation and hope for a greater Exodus to come.

And when we think about this, we can see that there are ways in which Old Testament writers could talk about Christ even when they did not see the full meaning of what they were talking about, that that meaning had yet to fully arrive.

So in some ways, it can be like the experience of hearing someone coming down the hall, their footsteps approaching, and you can recognize that and you can write about it or speak about it.

But when you know who that person is, that adds a greater level of meaning. You can say, I heard John approaching, for instance. Likewise, with the Old Testament, they are speaking in figures and they are speaking in shadows of something and someone who will be revealed more fully in the future.

[10:38] And so the meaning is something that is to be unfolded, but it's not something that is in conflict with the original text.

Rather, it's an unfolding of that text over history. As greater events, as events succeed upon that text, and that text finds its place within a larger picture, and then we can read that text again and it makes sense on a different level.

We see that that text was not just about Abraham, for instance, but it's about the church or it's about the story of Israel. And so these patterns that we have within scripture are not arbitrary.

They're patterns of unfolding meaning over time, in the same way as we would have a poem recited over a period of time and the meanings are developed as the poem develops and as certain meanings are picked up and moved along and others are subverted or a piece of music can have similar patterns.

When we're dealing with scripture, we're dealing with something similar because God's intention is something that exceeds the authorial intention of the original writers. And it's something that their intention is caught up in.

[11:58] They are perceiving part of it, but the meaning that is taking place is greater than what they intend. Now what does this mean for the way that we handle scripture responsibly?

Well, I think what it means, above all, is we must return to the text. When we're dealing with these meanings that unfold over time, we're not dealing with meanings that can just be applied at will or imposed upon past texts.

Rather, they're things that emerge from those texts over time and as they are brought into relationship with greater historical events and other texts that succeed upon them in God's providence.

And that's a key thing, in God's providence, that this is not just an accidental process of history or that we can associate any books however much, however we like.

Rather, the meaning is something that arises from God's providential revelation over history. So if we're dealing with a passage like Galatians 4, when Paul talks about the allegory of Sarai and Hagar and their children, the bondwoman and the free woman, how do we deal with that?

[13:13] Is that just an allegorical imposition upon the text of the Old Testament? I don't think it is. Go back to the Old Testament and read the story of Ishmael and Isaac carefully.

What you will notice is that these two characters are held in very close proximity to each other. They're paralleled with each other. And so the events that befall Ishmael are paralleled with the events that befall Isaac.

If you read Genesis 21 particularly and then immediately Genesis 21 8 following as Ishmael departs with Hagar and then you read Genesis 22 with Abraham taking Isaac to be sacrificed, you'll see that they are closely paralleled accounts.

These two characters are being held alongside each other and we're supposed to recognise parallels between them and ways in which they can be juxtaposed. And what Paul is doing is he's showing the way in the light of Christ these things, the relationship between Christ and the church and Israel are paralleled within this Old Testament narrative.

And this Old Testament narrative is not something that's just snatched and wrenched from its context and its original meaning. Rather Paul is exploring and unfolding the original meaning showing that within this text itself you can see what he's talking about.

[14:44] If you look back at the text you should see what prompted Paul to use that allegory. Likewise, when we're dealing with a passage like Matthew 2.15 and Matthew 2 more generally what is Matthew doing?

Matthew is eliciting this scriptural world. He's doing so by alluding to these various texts and referencing these various texts along the way and presenting Christ as the fulfilment of them.

Now Hosea, when you read his treatment in Hosea 11.1 of that verse that Matthew uses it's very clear that Hosea is referring to the original Exodus and it would seem to be an act of violence that Matthew is performing upon this text.

that he's wrenching it out of its original context and twisting it to serve his own purposes as an evangelist. Is that really what's taking place?

Well if you read the story of Jesus within that context what you'll notice is that at each point Matthew's trying to show us that the story of Jesus is not just the story of this individual Jesus.

[15:56] It's a story that is redolent with all these stirring memories of Israel's history that Christ is Israel the son in Hosea 11.1 is not Jesus it's Israel but what Matthew is telling us is that the true son is Christ and that Christ is Israel Christ is the one in whom the destiny of Israel is fulfilled and he tells us that in many different ways so if you read Matthew 1 and 2 what you'll see is this retelling of the story of Israel from Abraham to David from David and to the exile and from the exile on that there's this story of Israel that Christ comes into and Christ comes into that story as the one who fulfills it so Christ comes into the story as one who is born of the dreamer Joseph and the dreamer Joseph takes them into Egypt there's a king who tries to kill the baby boys there's a message to Joseph to return to the land because the people who sought the child's life are dead and all of these recall the story of the Exodus they're supposed to make us think of that story to make us recognise who Christ is that Christ is the one in whom

Israel's destiny reaches its fulfilment Christ is the one who will go in cross the water of the Jordan as it were and go into the wilderness and be tested for a period of 40 days and be tempted now this is the story of Israel led up by the spirit into the wilderness and so Matthew is taking scripture and using that scripture to show that Christ is the one who fulfills these patterns now Hosea was talking about the original events of the first Exodus but the original events of that first Exodus were never self-contained and complete in and of themselves and without any reference to anything beyond that what we see within the prophets repeatedly is the use of those original events as a means of framing God's deliverance in the future they're a cause of anticipation and hope and expectation they charge the future it's one of the reasons why they constantly celebrated the Passover the Passover is instituted as a continuing memorial of the original Exodus but not just a memorial as something that is designed to project the Exodus as the pattern of future redemption and so when Christ comes when Christ is brought out of Egypt

Christ is being brought out of Egypt as the one who fulfills the meaning of the first Exodus he fulfills the meaning of what Hosea was talking about and what Matthew does by alluding to that particular chapter of that particular passage in Hosea he shows us that Christ is the true son as well Christ is the true son that Hosea was talking about Christ is Israel and so he's the son of David he's the son of Israel he's the son of man in the sense of Ezekiel he's the son of God as well he's related to Adam all these themes of sonship that are brought to the surface and then he goes on when he deals with Jesus and the threatening of the baby boys he refers to a verse from Jeremiah 31 a voice was heard in Ramah lamentation weeping in great mourning Rachel weeping for her children refusing to be comforted because they were no more now again is Matthew taking this verse out of context no what he's doing is he wants you to he wants to evoke the context for his readers he wants his readers to think about the context of that verse and to think about what it might teach them so if we go back to Jeremiah 31 thus says the Lord a voice was heard in Ramah lamentation and bitter weeping

Rachel weeping for her children refusing to be comforted for her children because they are no more thus says the Lord refrain your voice from weeping and your eyes from tears for your work shall be rewarded says the Lord and they shall come back from the land of the enemy there is hope in your future says the Lord that your children shall come back to their own border and so when Matthew recalls this scriptural memory he is presenting the story of exile now the story of exile is an important thing at the beginning of Matthew it's one of the things that helps to structure his genealogy and there are themes of continuing exile that may be present as well and so when Christ is in Egypt that is seen as a sort of exile and Rachel is mourning for her children that have been killed by Herod but then there is this hint of the promise that succeeds that prophecy the hint of the children being restored to the land and then immediately after that

God calls or tells Joseph to return to the land because those who sought the child's life have died and now we have the bursting forth of that new hope that was prophesied so how do we do this well I think what we need to do is constantly return to the text pay attention to the text Matthew is not misusing this text rather he's showing that this text is transfigured by Christ he is showing that this text always had this meaning the exodus was always pointing towards something greater a greater exodus to come and the Old Testament saints knew this they knew that the exodus was not just a past deliverance but it was a reality filled promise of a future deliverance to come in the same way they knew that these figures like David the figures like Abraham these figures like Moses they were shadows of figures that were to come a prophet like Moses the greater son of David the true heir of Abraham all of these figures were figured forth in these characters in the Old Testament figured forth in certain events figured forth in certain institutions like the tabernacle and so we have the prophecy of the Old Testament is truly speaking about Christ but speaking about Christ in some sense incognito that it's not yet clear who this person is these voice these footsteps approaching down the hall of history we can hear their resonance in the chambers of that we find ourselves in these darkened chambers of the Old Testament and yet we do not know who that will be that comes through the door we have a good son we have good indications of who it is though we have figures and foreshadowing of who this person is but we do not yet truly know now when Christ comes there is a sense of recognition this is one of the striking things that we see within the New Testament that there is a recognition that this is the one that the prophets spoke of this is the one that was figured throughout the whole Old Testament this is not some figure who is truly unknown this is the figure that has always been the one that we have expected this is the one who has always been at work in Israel's history but now we know personally who this person is and that is a change that requires an attention both to the original meaning of the authors that this they always intended to speak of this one this greater meaning this excess of the original history that they were recording recognising that history was charged with expectation but on the other hand that there is a meaning that arrives over history and that fulfils the original history that is being recorded and so I believe that the author's intention is not something that is a prison within which the meaning is restricted rather it's the structure within which that meaning is manifest so when we look at scripture the meaning of a text like Hosea 11.1 is something that is it's a reference to the original exodus but it's also a reference to the original exodus that is charged with promise within its context and elsewhere that event is seen as pointing towards

[25:01] God's relationship with Israel more generally and it's charged with a greater meaning already now when we see it in Matthew 2 Matthew is just delivering on that greater meaning he's revealing unfolding what was already latent within that text within Hosea 11 and we see the same thing in the case of Galatians 4 what Paul is doing is showing something that was latent within the text in Genesis this juxtaposition of Ishmael and Isaac is there in Genesis it's not something that you have to impose upon the text and if you read Paul carefully it will draw you back to read the text of Genesis more carefully to recognise what he saw because he was looking in the text of Genesis not just imposing a fanciful reading upon it so as Christians we need to be aware that Christ is providential that God is providentially active over history that meaning is not just a matter of discrete texts that come at a particular point in time but at the same time we need to recognise that the authorial intention of the text of scripture are genuinely referring to Christ they are genuinely referring to that greater reality not just restricted by their immediate reference in history now the grounding of all of these things happens as we study scripture carefully not as we fancifully project things back into the text if you want to read typology in scripture you have to read the original text carefully the typology has to emerge from the text and that meaning can be elicited by the light of the New Testament but as the text grow up towards that light but yet it must be found it must be rooted within the text it can't just be an imposition upon it so I believe that there are guardrails that preserve us here the authorial intention is something that is part of that guardrail the authorial intention provides as it were a sort of guardrail within which the meaning can emerge now that meaning can exceed the original intention but it's not something that is radically opposed to that original intention and here I think it's important to distinguish between the sort of prophetic irony that we see in the case of Caiaphas and what we see in the case of the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy if you're dealing with Hosea and Matthew for instance

I think Hosea would read the story of Christ hear the story of Christ and think this is a true application or a true unfolding of the meaning of the original Exodus event and he would have a sense of recognition of that meaning that that meaning is not something foreign to him this is the thing that the prophets had been seeking out what the spirit of God was indicating as he prophesied through them that these dark visions and words that they had they always were projecting into some greater future that they only had a limited apprehension of but they had a genuine apprehension nonetheless though limited so wrapping things up I think that there are limits I don't think that scripture is something that is radically subverted and subversive of original authorial intent but nor do I think that authorial intent is something that is limited that limits the meaning of a text to something that can be explicitly foreseen by the original author but yet while not explicitly foreseen there are certain meanings that can be appropriate to see within a text that arise over history as time fulfills

God's providential self-revelation over the period of time and so as we read something like Hosea we can see Christ within that text and we're seeing Christ truly within that text not just as an imposition upon it but yet Christ within that text is not unrelated to Hosea's originally intended referent the son is Israel the son is Christ who is the king of Israel the one who sums up Israel in himself and so that movement from the referent of Israel to the referent of Christ is not an unnatural one to make and as the prophet refers to one there is a recognition that even within that referent he's referring to something greater still to come this is one of the things that makes typology important that typology needs to recognise this greater meaning that grows up as God's revelation develops over history while still recognising that this must always be rooted within the text this can't be something that's just an allegorising in a fanciful fashion seeking neat parallels with our concepts that do not actually arise from scripture or belong in scripture rather this is something that arises from the biblical text and out of the history of redemption composition composition