

AUTHORIAL INTENTION AND THE BOOK OF REVELATION

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It is a great honor to have one's work scrutinized by a scholar of Jon Paulien's standing, and I am most grateful for the opportunity to write a brief response.¹ I happily agree with many of his judgments and find his final paragraph a stirring vision for research. I believe he is correct in linking the discussion with the great epistemological debates of the past, notably between Hirsch and Derrida. I am in substantial agreement with his description of NT authors' discernment of the "word of God" for their own age rather than an archaic pursuit of what Isaiah or Ezekiel might have meant prior to the advent of Christ. And his insight that Beale and I are using the term "authorial intention" differently is helpful. In this response, I would like to be more pragmatic and ask whether "authorial intention" is really as helpful in interpreting the book of Revelation as is so often claimed.

As Paulien points out, the importance of authorial intention to scholars such as Beale is to safeguard interpretation. Meaning is not created by readers but is embedded in the text by an author. The task of interpretation is to discern what the original author intended and to use this as a criterion for judging later interpretations. It undoubtedly works best for the Pauline epistles, where Paul seeks to resolve specific congregational problems. We can reasonably ask what he was hoping to achieve and see if there are implications for today's church. But I would suggest that it is less useful for the rest of the Bible. For example, what is the "authorial intention" behind collections such as the Proverbs and Psalms? Perhaps one could attempt a general summary such as "to enhance the wisdom/worship life of Israel," but that is hardly going to adjudicate between competing interpretations of a particular psalm. What are the authorial intentions behind composite books such as Genesis or Isaiah? Is it the intention of the original stories/oracles or the final editor(s)? What is the authorial intention behind the Gospels that is supposed to act as a criterion for correct interpretation? Is it what Jesus had in mind when he told a particular parable or what Mark had in mind when he included a Greek form of it in his Gospel?

If authorial intention is so vital for interpretation, then I would suggest that we are in a perilous state, particularly for the book of Revelation. After

¹Jon Paulien, "Dreading the Whirlwind: Intertextuality and the Use of the Old Testament in Revelation," *AUSS* 39 (2001): 5-22.

centuries of intense study, scholars cannot agree whether John wrote to comfort the persecuted or challenge the complacent. Genre is said to be vital for interpretation, but scholars debate whether Revelation is best seen as an apocalypse, a prophecy, or a circular letter. Most now conclude that it shares features of all three. If these basic questions of "intention" cannot be settled, how is "authorial intention" going to arbitrate between the subtleties of pre-, post-, and a-millennialism? How does it help us decide whether Revelation offers new meaning to old texts (Moyise) or simply gives old texts new significance (Beale)?

The reason I used intertextuality in my analysis of John's use of the OT was not because I decided beforehand to apply a radical literary theory to a NT text. It was because I felt the complexity of the book of Revelation, with OT allusions in nearly every verse, required it. Traditional categories such as "exegesis," "midrash," and "typology" seemed inadequate to describe the complex texture of the book of Revelation. No wonder some scholars have concluded that it is shaped around Daniel, while others that it is modeled on Ezekiel. The complexity permits a number of interpretations. If we were able to ask the author which of these he intended, I suspect he would look puzzled and reply: "I was in the Spirit on the Lord's day" (Rev 1:10).

Paulien follows Beale's observation that although I argue for multiple interpretations of a text, I am keen that my own work be correctly understood and hence do show an interest in "authorial intention" after all. This is quite correct but I have a counter point. In my "reply" to Beale's book, I specifically stated that my position is not that readers can make texts mean whatever they like. But in his "rejoinder," he suggests that what I have written implies that I do believe this, so he disregards my explicit statement of intention for his own construction. Similarly, Beale insists that there is no change of meaning when OT texts are used in Revelation, but I argue that this is not borne out by his own list of the seven different ways that Scripture is used by John. In other words, our debate not only shows that both of us have a deep concern to be correctly understood. It also shows that both of us analyze the dynamics of each other's work and *construct* the central thrust that makes most sense to us. And since each of us has come to conclusions that differ from the other's stated purpose, I think it is justified to substitute the word *create* for *construct* in the above sentence.

Of course, this does not mean creation *ex nihilo*. Both of us are trying to do justice to each other's work, just as we are each trying to do justice to the book of Revelation. The difference, of course, is that the author of Revelation is unable to answer back. Each of us *constructs* an

interpretation of the book that we think does most justice to it. We do not possess anything called "authorial intention" that will adjudicate between our interpretations. We simply offer it to the world and see if it convinces anyone. If it convinces a lot of people, it might even become a consensus, and perhaps we will conclude that here, in the year 2001, the truth has finally been unveiled. But scholars made similar claims in 1901 and 1801 and 1701. I have tried to describe the complex interactions between texts and images in Revelation in a way that shows what sort of book Revelation is. Beale offers a different understanding. Readers and scholars will have to decide which is the more illuminating. To use Paulien's example, appeal to "authorial intention" can declare the "aquatic animal" interpretation unlikely. But this is not because we *know* that John had no such interest (it might have been a hobby of his). It is because it does not make sense of the major themes of Revelation *for the majority of people*. As I see it, the difference between Beale and myself is not that I pursue "my construction of Revelation" while he pursues "John's intention." It is that he chooses to identify his construction of Revelation with "John's intention."

Lastly, Paulien raises the question of faith perspective. The suggestion is that those who approach the Scriptures "in faith" see things differently than those who do not. Thus Beale cites four presuppositions (Christ corporately represents Israel; history is a unified plan; the end-time has been inaugurated by Christ; Christ is the key to the OT) which he believes governed John's approach to Scripture. He then suggests that interpreters who agree with these presuppositions will conclude that John respects the original context of his allusions, while those who do not (by implication, me) must conclude that John's interpretations are alien to it. But to my mind, this simply confirms the postmodern insight that what one sees depends on where one stands. Interpretation is not *independent* of readers. What one brings to the text, in this case, a particular faith perspective, has a significant affect on what one finds there. I would simply wish to add that this is true of other attributes as well. For example, consider the use of Scripture in Rev 3:20: "But I have this against you; you tolerate that woman Jezebel, who calls herself a prophet and is teaching and beguiling my servants to practice fornication and to eat food sacrificed to idols."

How is one to evaluate this use of Scripture? Male commentators generally assume that John's opponent was actually called Jezebel, in which case they assert that her name was particularly apt; or they argue that the abominations practiced by this woman *justify* John's linking her with the OT "Jezebel." Feminist scholars, however, see it differently. They claim that this

is not a contextually sensitive use of the OT. It is an attempt to demonize an opponent by using a typical male form of abuse—the whore deserves what's coming! Far from being a clever or sophisticated use of Scripture, it is cheap and exploitative.

Who is best equipped to determine John's "authorial intention" in this verse, men or women? Some would argue that gender has nothing to do with it. After all, John is an author of Scripture, a holy man who would surely not possess such chauvinistic attitudes. But feminist scholars can point to other verses. For example, when John wishes to describe the purity of the 144,000, he says that it is those "who have not defiled themselves with women" (Rev 14:4). When he wishes to portray the destruction of evil, it is in the image of a whore: "they will make her desolate and naked; they will devour her flesh and burn her up with fire" (Rev 17:16). My point is that this language inevitably affects men and women differently. So who is best equipped to deduce from it John's "intention"? Does Beale really think that his gender has no influence on how he evaluates this type of discourse? Would it not be more honest to state that it is open to a number of interpretations, depending on one's presuppositions, and leave it at that?

This raises another point about "authorial intention." What if we could interrogate John on this matter and he told us that he certainly did not *intend* to cause offense by using this type of language. Would that be the end of the matter? Would we not wish to challenge him by saying that the evidence suggests otherwise? In other words, is "authorial intention" only to be equated with the conscious thoughts of the author? Or might it go deeper than that? Like most people, John was probably unaware of how deep-seated are the prejudices between the sexes. An analysis of his book would surely want to consider what he *actually* produced as well as what he thought he was producing.

In an article about to be published in ANVIL ("The Use of Analogy in Biblical Studies"), I suggest that scholars have frequently confused two tasks in the study of the OT in the NT. One is to determine how it might have looked to the original author. The other is to determine how it looks to us. For example, Matthew claims that Jesus' sojourn in Egypt was a fulfillment of Hos 11:1 ("Out of Egypt I have called my son"). From a modern perspective, the link appears tenuous. Hosea 11:1 is not a prophecy (no future tenses) and the subject is clearly the Exodus. It is not about Jesus, as the following verse makes clear ("The more I called them, the more they went from me"). Thus some scholars have said that Matthew's use of Scripture is arbitrary, *ad hoc* and atomistic. But it is unlikely that Matthew would have seen it that way. For him, the

connection between Israel and Jesus, the mention of “son” and the reference to “Egypt” would probably have made the connection seem obvious. But that is not to say that it is obvious to us.

Let me give an illustration. If we were to dig up an artifact of the first century, we might try to explain it in terms of the science of the day. Or we might use the very latest scientific equipment to determine what it is and what it does. Both might yield useful results. When Beale describes John as respecting the OT context and offering interpretations that are in continuity with them, he is probably correct in assuming that this is how it looked to John. But that is not necessarily how it looks to us. My work on intertextuality is directed toward an understanding of the book from our perspective. John has juxtaposed and combined a host of OT texts and images with aspects of Christian tradition. Intertextuality is a modern way of analyzing this. I am not suggesting that this is how John would have explained it. It is a modern attempt to analyze the artifact known as Revelation.

Lastly, let me say something about my own “faith perspective.” It seems to me that Scripture (and Christianity) can support two quite different perspectives. One stresses confidence to know the truth (John 16:13). The Bible is God’s Word. It is not merely “human opinion” but God’s revealed truth (Mark 7:8). Furthermore, God desires us to know this truth. He has become incarnate in Jesus in order to make himself known and gives his Holy Spirit to those who genuinely seek the truth. The interpreter can, therefore, be confident that the truth is out there, that God wants him or her to find it, and it is attainable.

On the other hand, other traditions stress the chasm that separates the finite creature from the infinite Creator. In Rom 9-11, Paul attempts to give a rationale for the unbelief of the Jews, but ends with the doxology: “O the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways!” (Rom 11:33). In Mark’s Gospel, Jesus confesses ignorance about the “day or hour” (13:32) and ends his life with a question: “My God, my God, why?” (15:34). Paul says in 1 Cor 13:12: “For now we see in a mirror dimly.”

I once belonged to the former, confident that the Bible gave me the truth while the masses were in darkness. Experience and scholarship has since convinced me that I was wrong. Life is more complicated than that and so are people. I am not what Vanhoozer (1998) calls a nonrealist. I do believe in a God who makes meaning possible. But the implication of that for me is not confidence that I possess it but humility that I only “see in a mirror dimly.” Much remains hidden. I do not know what John was trying to achieve when he wrote the book of Revelation. Some options

("the aquatic interpretation") can be ruled out for not doing justice to the book *for anyone*. Others can be virtually ruled out for being convincing only to a *minority interest group*. But there remain a number of important theories, all of which have something to be said for them. They illuminate different aspects of the book, just as the four Gospels illuminate different aspects of Jesus. I am suspicious of those who would dispense with the Gospels in favor of their own "Jesus of history," and I am suspicious of those who claim that there is but one correct way of reading Revelation. Unsurprisingly, that one way is of course their own!