

DIVINE MEANING AND AUTHORIAL INTENTION:

SENSUS PLENIOR - A BLESSING OR CURSE FOR EVANGELICAL HERMENEUTICS?

Darren Middleton, Teaching Elder, Caringbah Presbyterian Church.

SYNOPSIS

Is it possible that a New Testament writer can discover meaning in an Old Testament verse that the original author? Is it possible that God has a different meaning, more fuller meaning than the person he actually spoke through? Moo, Bloomberg, Klein, Lasor, Poytress, Hubbard, among others all say yes with varying degrees of zeal. Walter Kaiser, Hirsch, Stein and Krabbandam all argue for only one meaning, Authorial intention. It is my opinion an appreciation of the authorial intention both in the meaning and its significance is sufficient to deal with the challenges of how the New uses the Old.

Divine Meaning and Authorial Intention

In recent times with the popularisation of biblical theology and debate concerning the relationship between the testaments this issue has become increasingly contentious in evangelical circles. The question now asked by evangelicals is can the biblical text have more than one meaning? It can of course have more than one implication or even significance, but is it possible that a New Testament author can find a different meaning other than what the Old Testament author intended? Moreover, since there are at least 224 direct citations of the Old Testament in the New Testament (and more than 600 allusions) this remains an important hermeneutical question.¹

In an attempt to answer this question Kaiser among others argues that the whole doctrine of Scripture is endangered if we accept that it is permissible to have any other meaning than that which the original human author intended. Like a bulwark for those who are committed to the idea that language is univocal, Walter Kaiser has been as vociferous as any scholar in his defence of meaning as a function of authorial intention. Kaiser argues that writers must understand the meaning of what God is saying through them even though they may not understand the full significance of that meaning in salvation history. For Kaiser the original authors always have an adequate understanding of the meaning but may not have a comprehensive understanding of the meaning and certainly not the implication.

Darrel Bock commenting on Kaiser's (at the time) unpublished work says, *"Thus the Old Testament prophets are portrayed (by Kaiser) as having a fairly comprehensive understanding of what it is they are declaring about the ultimate consummation of God's promise. So Kaiser rejects sensus plenior, dual sense, double fulfilment, or double meaning. He rejects any bifurcation between the divine author's intended meaning and the human author's intended meaning, though he recognizes that God has a better recognition of the fuller significance of a promise."*²

Consequently, as Moo notes *"Kaiser does allow that a New Testament author may draw out some of the implications or applications of the Old Testament text, but this involves significance, not meaning. Hermeneutically, Kaiser endorses an 'intentionality' theory of*

¹ R Nicole, *The New Testament use of the Old Testament* in C.F Henry (Ed) *Revelation and Inspiration of the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Baker 1958) pg 137-151. W.C. Kaiser Jr, *The Uses of the Old Testament in the New* (Chicago: Moody, 1985) pg 2.

² D.L Bock, *Evangelicals and the use of the Old Testament in the New, Part 1* (Bibliotheca Sacra 142, July Oct 1985, 209-23) pg 211.

meaning, according to which the meaning of any text is tied to what the author of that text intended to say.”³ As a consequence of authorial intention Kaiser argues that no New Testament writer ever finds more, or a different meaning in the Old Testament than was originally meant by that author.⁴ However, we should note Poythress’ warning that we must do more with the text than listen to the one author, we must take in the wider witness of Scripture lest we simply settle for “overhearing a human voice from long ago.”⁵ Kaiser however, is happy to draw upon all the salvation history up to that point to ensure we hear all the voices we need.

Here it is important to note the work of E.D Hirsch Jnr in an influential article where he made a very helpful distinction between meaning and significance.⁶ Kaiser was indebted on this point saying “we must draw that crucial distinction between ‘meaning’ and significance’: ‘meaning’ is that which is represented by a text, its grammar, and the author’s truth intentions as indicated by his use of words, while ‘significance’ merely denotes a relationship between (note well, it must be linked) the meaning and another person, time, situation or idea. Meaning according to Hirsch (and this writer also) is unchanging once the Biblical writer commits himself to words whilst ‘significance’ of course, does and must change..”⁷

Since then Robert Stein has offered further developments of Hirsch and Kaiser’s author oriented approach by suggesting that properly understood there is the meaning, the implication, the significance and the subject matter.⁸ Stein argues that the *meaning* is controlled by the author, the *implications* (what Hirsch had called significance) flow from that paradigm (of meaning) and then *significance* (cognitive response of the reader) is controlled by the reader depending on how he/she responds. Lastly, Stein suggests a fourth heading called subject

³ D. Moo, *The Problems of Sensus Plenior* in D.A Carson and J. Woodbridge (Eds), *Hermeneutics, Authority and Cannon* (Leicester: Inter Varsity Press, 1986) pg 198.

⁴ D.L Bock, *Evangelicals and the use of the Old Testament in the New, Part I* (Bibliotheca Sacra 142, July Oct 1985, 209-23) pg 21-22 points out that “Kaiser happily acknowledges the legitimate use of typology which he sees as having four necessary elements: historical correspondence, escalation, divine intent, and prefigurement. However, for Kaiser, typology is not related to meaning (of which there is only ever one) nor prophesy (this is important) but significance. The consequence of this should not be missed since Kaiser argues typology is never related to prophesy. Indeed, Kaiser contends for what he calls the generic prediction (not typology) which he understands to be a prophesy that has only one meaning but will unfold in various stages, all of which the author is by in large cognisant. However, he accepts that the author would probably be unaware of details of fulfilment by way of timing.”

⁵ V.S Poythress, *Divine Meaning of Scripture* (Westminster Theological Journal, 48, 1986) pg 245.

⁶ E.D Hirsch Jnr, *Validity in Interpretation* (New haven: Yale University Press, 1967) pg 8,38,57-62.

⁷ W.C Kaiser Jnr, *Toward An Old Testaments Theology* (Grand Rapids, Baker Books House, 1993) pg 32.

⁸ R.H Stein, *The Benefits Of the Author-Orientated Approach To Hermeneutics* (JETS 44/3 Sept 20001) pg 451-66.

matter (the stuff talked about in the text).⁹ As interesting as Stein's proposal is, it is unhelpful that he has inverted significance and implications. However, his fourth category of subject matter could well be a welcome addition.

Having said that, very few scholars have adopted Stein's proposals and it seems at this stage that the Hirsch/Kaiser approach is still most helpful. Hendrik Krabbendam writes that according to Kaiser and Hirsch the first thesis is this: That the biblical text (and its author) has only one meaning to its specific audience. Moreover, the second thesis is this: That the biblical text (and its author) can have manifold significance through appropriate (based on the single meaning) principles and deductions to any successive audiences.¹⁰

What is Sensus Plenior?

Hirsch/Kaiser authorial intent if accepted precludes all other meanings, including the Roman Catholic hermeneutic of *sensus plenior*. *Sensus plenior* is the idea that certain biblical passages may have meanings not intended by the author but meanings intended by God. The evidence for this idea is a deduction from the way New Testament authors interpret Old Testament texts. Proponents of *sensus plenior* believe there is sufficient evidence that New Testament authors attribute meanings to Old Testament text that clearly transcend the original meaning. Raymond Brown continues *"Let us apply the term sensus plenior [fuller sense] to that meaning of his [the author's] text which by the normal rules of exegesis would not have been within his clear awareness or intention but which by other criteria we can determine as having been intended by God."*¹¹ That is, God had a double meaning in mind but only revealed the other sense to a later author.

Sensus Plenior then is in direct contrast to Hirsch and Kaiser's first thesis that the biblical text (and its author) has only one meaning to its specific audience. *Sensus Plenior* challenges this thesis head on, since it argues that the human author's awareness of the deeper meaning could range from absolute ignorance to near clarity. According to Bock the idea here *"is that prophetic passages all draw on the human author's words but that the human author did not always fully intend or comprehend the prophetic reference, while God did intend the full*

⁹ R.H Stein, *The Benefits Of the Author-Orientated Approach To Hermeneutics* (JETS 44/3 Sept 2001) pg 460-61.

¹⁰ H Krabbendam, *Hermeneutics and Preaching* in S.T Logan Jnr, *The Preacher and Preaching* (New Jersey: P&R Publishing, 1986) pg 213.

¹¹ R.E Brown, *The Sensus Plenior in the last ten years* (Catholic Biblical Quarterly 25, 1963) pg 320-49.

reference.¹² However as Moo acknowledges Sensus Plenior has almost become short hand for an explanation of a text that cannot be explained (satisfactorily) by the grammatical-historical method.¹³

Having said that, appropriate application of sensus plenior must include a relationship between the literal sense of the human author and the fuller sense intended by God (even if the author did not intend it). According to Moo this control is absolutely vital otherwise there would be nothing stopping advocates abusing the concept through inappropriate meanings or allegories alleged.¹⁴ Moreover proponents carefully distinguish the fuller sense from typology which they argue relates to things (not words). For Kaiser Typology is not prophetic nor does it deal with issues of meaning; rather it is implicational.¹⁵

Testing The Theories

The big question then is do they work? Since, if we can establish authorial intent on the most difficult passage with a fair degree of credibility then the need to embrace the concept of sensus plenior diminishes (at least for protestants). I will discuss the text “*Out of Egypt*” that advocates of sensus plenior suggest is proof of multiple meanings and attempt to argue that the Hirsch/Kaiser thesis can in a credible manner explain the significance of the New Testament interpretation in accordance with the original meaning (authorial intent).

1. Out of Egypt (Hosea and Matthew 2:15)

The Case for Sensus Plenior:

Here Lasor argues Hosea 11:1-2 “*clearly deals with the deliverance of Israel from Egypt at the time of the exodus, and the word from verse two cannot be applied to Jesus. Hosea is contrasting the redeeming love of the Lord and the stubborn sinfulness of Israel to get across his lesson.*”¹⁶ This it seems evident that Hosea identifies the Son called out from Egypt as the

¹² D.L Bock, *Evangelicals and the use of the Old Testament in the New, Part 1* (Bibliotheca Sacra 142, July Oct 1985, 209-23) pg 212.

¹³ D. Moo, *The Problems of Sensus Plenior* in D.A Carson and J. Woodbridge (Eds), *Hermeneutics, Authority and Cannon* (Leicester: Inter Varsity Press, 1986) pg 201.

¹⁴ D. Moo, *The Problems of Sensus Plenior* in D.A Carson and J. Woodbridge (Eds), *Hermeneutics, Authority and Cannon* (Leicester: Inter Varsity Press, 1986) pg 201.

¹⁵ D.L Bock, *Evangelicals and the use of the Old Testament in the New, Part 1* (Bibliotheca Sacra 142, July Oct 1985, 209-23) pg 212.

¹⁶ W.S Lasor, *The Sensus Plenior and Biblical Interpretation* in W.Ward and W.S Lasor (Ed) *Scripture, Tradition, and Interpretation: Essays Presented to Everett F Harrison by His Students and Colleagues in Honour of His Seventy-fifth Birthday* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978) pg 260-77.

nation Israel, yet Matthew argues that it is in Jesus that this is fulfilled. Here then is a clear example of where the original meaning (of Hosea) takes on a fuller and in this case different meaning in Matthew 2:15.

Hosea could not have meant this to refer to Christ and as such it serves as a good example of a dual meaning. *“When Matthew suggests that, Out of Egypt I have called my son, was fulfilled by Christ’s flight to and return from Egypt he means something quite different than Hosea meant. God had Hosea chose these words because Christ was going to fulfil them one day. No one could have anticipated this without Matthew’s prophetic insight.”* This is one of the strongest cases for *sensus plenior*.

The Case for Authorial Intent:

Moo commends Kaiser for cajoling us to take sufficient account of the *“theological context, and the New Testament context is simply revealed in all its theological richness, apparent discrepancies between the meaning of an Old Testament text and the meaning given that text in the New Testament disappear.”*¹⁷ Previously Moo had noted approvingly how Kaiser had dealt with the text of 1Cor 9:9 concerning the muzzling of the Ox. Kaiser argues persuasively (according to Moo) that the authorial meaning *“which in its context is intended to inculcate in masters and owners a concern for their labourers (whether animal or human). What Paul does is draw out in a legitimate way the significance of the law (it’s authorial intention) for the situation of the churches and their workers..”*¹⁸ Here then, Kaiser shows the importance of his second thesis that the biblical text (and its author) can have manifold significance through appropriate principles and deductions (based on the single meaning) to any successive audiences.

However, as impressed as Moo is with Kaiser’s exegesis when it comes to his exegesis of Out of Egypt (Hosea and Matthew 2:15) Moo is not convinced, and in my opinion for good reason. Kaiser seeks to show that the meaning of Hosea 11:1 is the same as the meaning in Matt 2:15 predicated upon Hosea understanding the technical nature of *“my son”* along with its implications for corporate solidarity. Moo is not convinced and asks where the evidence is that

¹⁷ D. Moo, *The Problems of Sensus Plenior* in D.A Carson and J. Woodbridge (Eds), *Hermeneutics, Authority and Cannon* (Leicester: Inter Varsity Press, 1986) pg 199.

¹⁸ D. Moo, *The Problems of Sensus Plenior* in D.A Carson and J. Woodbridge (Eds), *Hermeneutics, Authority and Cannon* (Leicester: Inter Varsity Press, 1986) pg 189.

“son” is used either in a theological or corporate sense in the Old Testament.¹⁹ Consequently, Moo suggests that perhaps this text might best be explained through the *sensus plenior* idea.²⁰

However, though in my opinion Kaiser’s thesis concerning authorial intent are correct, I believe he was mistaken in seeking to identify the meaning of the implications (significance of the meaning), let me explain. The case for *sensus plenior* rests heavily upon the idea that to fulfil (*pleroo*) is to bring to the fulfilment an earlier prediction. That is, Hosea must have predicted (somehow) Christ in his Prophecy.

However, a careful reading of the New Testament teaches us otherwise. In James 2:21-23 the word “fulfil” isn’t the fulfilment of an earlier meaning but its implication or application. Krabbendam explains, “*James declares with the word fulfil that Abraham’s obedience, as evidenced in his willingness to sacrifice Isaac as reported in Genesis 22, was a necessary implication of the faith that, according to Genesis 15, was counted to him as righteousness. Similarly, Matthew conveys with the term fulfil that God’s calling of Christ out of Egypt was a further application of the phrase coined by Hosea. In this application Matthew capitalises on the analogy between Israel and Christ....that Jesus is the real Israel of God.*”²¹ So we may conclude that the intended meaning of Hosea 11:1 is the identification of the son (Israel) and a valid application of the significance of the meaning is that Jesus is now identified as the Son.

We now can recall that our first thesis is that the biblical text (and its author) has only one meaning to its specific audience. However, the second thesis is that the biblical text (and its author) can have manifold significance through appropriate (based on the single meaning) principles and deductions to any successive audiences.²² Now, In Moo’s article “*The Problem of Sensus Plenior*” proposes that Romans 10:13 use of Joel 2:32 is another example of the authorial intention (Joel’s meaning) never meaning Jesus. Again, he takes up a similar concern with psalm 2:7 and 2 Sam 7:14. However, if our exegesis of Matt 2:15 was correct and that the meaning of Hosea 11:1 was the identification of the son (Israel) and a valid application of the

¹⁹ D. Moo, *The Problems of Sensus Plenior* in D.A Carson and J. Woodbridge (Eds), *Hermeneutics, Authority and Cannon* (Leicester: Inter Varsity Press, 1986) pg 200.

²⁰ D. Moo, *The Problems of Sensus Plenior* in D.A Carson and J. Woodbridge (Eds), *Hermeneutics, Authority and Cannon* (Leicester: Inter Varsity Press, 1986) pg 202.

²¹ H. Krabbendam, *Hermeneutics and Preaching* in S.T Logan Jnr, *The Preacher and Preaching* (New Jersey: P&R Publishing, 1986) pg 216.

²² H. Krabbendam, *Hermeneutics and Preaching* in S.T Logan Jnr, *The Preacher and Preaching* (New Jersey: P&R Publishing, 1986) pg 213.

significance of that meaning is that Jesus is now identified as the Son, then I propose that the same understanding should be applied to Joel 2:32; Psalm 2:7 and 2 Sam 7.²³

Let me illustrate this. Moo says he can accept that in I Cor 9:9 the significance of the meaning is applied in the New Testament as opposed to the meaning alone.²⁴ Consequently, if you can substitute an Ox for a Minister (on the basis of significance) then consistency should allow you to see that if the meaning of Joel 2:32 is that in the day of judgement salvation will only be found in Yahweh, I can not see how the significance of the meaning can not be applied to Christ, since it is the same meaning with just a different audience. Moreover, the meaning of Joel 2:32 is not to identify who the Lord is, but to identify where salvation is found. Consequently, I would argue that Paul's application (significance) of Joel 2:32 in Romans 10:13 is rightly applied according to the authorial intent.

Sensus Plenior: Blessing or Curse for Evangelical Hermeneutics?

William Lasor concludes his article on *sensus plenior* saying, "*something like a fuller meaning, a sensus plenior, is required by many portions of Scripture, possibly by all of scripture.*"²⁵ Moo is not quite as enthusiastic, but notes, "*there remain some that actually do give to Old Testament texts meanings that do not correspond to the 'grammatical historical' meaning of the text, even when the 'informing theology' is fully taken into account.*"²⁶ Moo wants the historical-grammatical method to succeed, but seems a little agnostic concerning the eventual outcome. Yet at the same time he also makes the point that *sensus plenior* is not always the answer even when there seems added meaning. Regarding Psalm 16 and its usage in Acts 2:31 Moo notes, "*it was David, as we noted earlier, 'who foresaw and spoke of the resurrection of the Christ' in Psalm 16 (Acts 2:31). In this case, however, Brown's sensus plenior solution fares no better, since the meaning is directly ascribed to the human, not the divine, author.... Further*

²³ D. Moo, *The Problems of Sensus Plenior* in D.A Carson and J. Woodbridge (Eds), *Hermeneutics, Authority and Cannon* (Leicester: Inter Varsity Press, 1986) pg 200.

²⁴ D. Moo, *The Problems of Sensus Plenior* in D.A Carson and J. Woodbridge (Eds), *Hermeneutics, Authority and Cannon* (Leicester: Inter Varsity Press, 1986) pg 189.

²⁵ W.S Lasor, *The Sensus Plenior and Biblical Interpretation* in W.Ward and W.S Lasor (Ed) *Scripture, Tradition, and Interpretation: Essays Presented to Everett F Harrison by His Students and Colleagues in Honour of His Seventy-fifth Birthday* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978) pg 277.

²⁶ D. Moo, *The Problems of Sensus Plenior* in D.A Carson and J. Woodbridge (Eds), *Hermeneutics, Authority and Cannon* (Leicester: Inter Varsity Press, 1986) pg 202.

*revelation enables us to understand for the first time the ultimate significance of David's words.*²⁷

Consequently, I believe it is far too early to be embracing *sensus plenior* in the hope of solving some difficult passages. I believe this is unwise on several fronts. First, we need to do more work in the area of hermeneutics refining further what we understand by the meaning and in particular the significance of the text. Having acknowledged the need for more work in this area of hermeneutics as they relate to the relationship of the testaments, I remain steadfast in the belief that authorial intention is the bedrock of evangelical hermeneutics.

Second, Krabbendam rejoices *"it will never be necessary to be dependent for the meaning of the text upon a criterion outside or beyond the text whether a revelation added to it (Jewish mystery sense or protestant deeper sense) a conceptual scheme imposed upon it (medieval fourfold sense) or ecclesiastical authority over it (Roman catholic sensus plenior).*²⁸

Third, we must be careful that in vociferously promoting authorial intent *"that we do not require the interpreter to search the hidden recesses of the author's mind. That would condemn him to an unverifiable leap into the unknown.."*²⁹ Authorial intent is the commitment to the historical grammatical method trusting it can with careful exegesis and appropriate sensitivities to salvation history can come to the proper conclusion concerning the author's intent (meaning).

Moreover, this method has a long history of sound usage. Beginning with the Antiochian school who contended that the spiritual and the literal sense were one and the same. Whereas the Alexandrians held to allegory and several meaning for every text, Antiochians were committed to only one meaning. Likewise we note that at the Reformation there was a return to one meaning and a literal reading of the text, taking into account the various genres. To give up authorial intent is to accept a hermeneutic that hither to has not be accepted in evangelical circles.

²⁷ D. Moo, *The Problems of Sensus Plenior* in D.A Carson and J. Woodbridge (Eds), *Hermeneutics, Authority and Cannon* (Leicester: Inter Varsity Press, 1986) pg 209.

²⁸ H. Krabbendam, *Hermeneutics and Preaching* in S.T Logan Jnr, *The Preacher and Preaching* (New Jersey: P&R Publishing, 1986) pg 216.

²⁹ H. Krabbendam, *Hermeneutics and Preaching* in S.T Logan Jnr, *The Preacher and Preaching* (New Jersey: P&R Publishing, 1986) pg 217.

Fourth, the question immediately arises—if we do accept *sensus plenior* where are the brakes on this thing? If we look to the Roman Catholic Church and her usage we can see the evidence of a hermeneutical runaway train. The Roman Catholic Church has the magisterium, tradition, and the Church in general to fall back on, but what about Protestants? Who will save us from the arbitrariness of a fulfilment that distinguishes between what God knows and what the human author does not know. Indeed, what safe guards do we have that will ensure that interpretations are reasonable?

Fifth, to accept *sensus plenior* is to accept the potential that we might end up embracing the same hermeneutical nihilism that plagues much of the modern literary criticism.³⁰ Kaiser argues that the “theory of *sensus Plenior* or ‘fuller sense’ that go beyond the consciousness of the original author. This theory of *sensus plenior* would make the inspired writer a secondary element in the process and even a nuisance at times while God, the principal author, is viewed as supplying directly to interpreters many additional meanings that exceed those originally intended by the human authors.”³¹

Consequently then, *Sensus plenior* becomes a curse. Obviously in the short term it may appear to alleviate some textual problems, but rather than being a blessing it will become a curse, like a run away train without brakes, never sure when it will stop and where it will end up. In my opinion *sensus plenior* though attractive to many will quickly turn into a curse, a curse that evangelical hermeneutics could well do without.

³⁰ D. Moo, *The Problems of Sensus Plenior* in D.A Carson and J. Woodbridge (Eds), *Hermeneutics, Authority and Cannon* (Leicester: Inter Varsity Press, 1986) pg 209.

³¹ W.C Kaiser, Jr *Toward An Exegetical Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1993) pg 109.