Ecos of Meaning: Umberto Eco's Semiotic Theory for Theological Hermeneutics

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Abstract: This essay seeks to address the question of "meaning" in theological hermeneutics. Theologians and philosophers from across the spectrum disagree on how the term "meaning" ought to be understood. Some have suggested that "meaning" should be identified solely as the intention(s) of the original author of a text. Others have suggested that "meaning" is solely what the reading community imports into the text. While there is some truth in both sides of this argument, neither side seems to offer adequate understandings of "meaning." This essay will seek to locate an understanding of "meaning" between the aforementioned theories that will take seriously the intentions of the author as well as the role of the reading community by drawing from the semiotic theory of Umberto Eco. I will provide a case study showing that Paul read Scripture in a way that would not conform to either a strict authorial-intent focused hermeneutic or to a radical reader-response hermeneutic. I show how Eco's understanding of meaning provides a better explanation of Paul's hermeneutic approach to Scripture than the aforementioned theories, and that Eco's theory can provide the Church with a satisfactory way forward in how it reads Scripture theologically.

INTRODUCTION

What is meaning? How does one define "meaning"? Is it identical to the intent of an author? Is it what the reader constructs? Do words have meaning? Do signs have meaning in the same way texts do? What is the relationship of signs to texts? These are some of the questions this essay will seek to address. More specifically, it will seek a clearer definition of "meaning" and how this might prove useful to a theological interpretation of Scripture.

One of the academic fields that shares some overlap with hermeneutics is that of semiotics. Broadly defined, semiotics is the study of signs. One of the major semioticians of the

twentieth century is the late Umberto Eco.[1] His works have covered multiple topics in the field of semiotics. In these works, Eco provides his own theory of semiotics as well as his understanding of how semiotics relates to literary theory, philosophy of language, and hermeneutics. He is the choice interlocutor of this essay due to his significant contributions to the field of semiotics and their implications for hermeneutics and the question of meaning.

This essay is divided into three sections. The first section provides a brief introduction to the problem of defining "meaning." The second section presents an exposition of how Eco's semiotic theory can help locate an adequate definition of meaning. The third section offers a case study that demonstrates that New Testament authors interpret Old Testament texts in such a way that is consistent with this definition of "meaning."

THE PROBLEM: DEFINING MEANING

Before this essay is completely underway, some preliminary definitions of terms are in order. These terms include *sign*, *text*, *authorial intent*, and *reader significance*. Daniel Chandler defines a *sign* as "a meaningful unit which is interpreted as 'standing for' something other than itself. Signs are found in the physical form of words, images, sounds, acts or objects (this physical form is sometimes known as the sign vehicle). Signs have no *intrinsic* meaning and become signs only when users invest them with meaning with reference to a recognized code."[2]

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[1]Umberto Eco was born in Alessandria, Piedmont, Italy on January 5, 1932. He attended the University of Turin, where he studied medieval philosophy and literature, earning his BA. He wrote his thesis on Thomas Aquinas. He later lectured at the University of Turin (1956-1964). He has written widely on the topics of semiotics and literary theory, and he authored a number of novels, most notably *The Name of the Rose*. His academic works include *A Theory of Semiotics*, *The Role of the Rader: Explorations in the Semiotics of Texts*, *Semiotics and the Philosophy of Language*, and *The Limits of Interpretation*. He died February 19, 2016.

[2]Daniel Chandler, *Semiotics: The Basics*, second ed. (New York: Routledge, 2007), 260.

Paul Ricoeur defines a *text* as "any discourse fixed by writing."[3] From a semiotics standpoint, a *text* can also be understood as an aggregate of sign systems.[4] One should note that these are complementary definitions of *text* and should not be understood as opposing each other. By *authorial intent*, I mean what an author intends to communicate through the discourse he or she fixes in writing.[5] By *reader significance*, I mean the implications and indications that texts hold for their readers.

When one talks about the meaning of a text, what does she have in mind? One theory suggests that the meaning of a text is identical with what the author intends to communicate or do; the implications, or significance, of a text do not contribute to its meaning, nor are they part of its meaning.[6] In other words, this theory distinguishes between the "meaning" of a text and the "significance" of a text. According to this theory, texts are instances of discourse in writing. In other words, texts are communicative acts or speech-acts. There is no disagreement here with understanding texts as speech-acts. Authors generate texts with a purpose in mind, that is, they intend to do something with them. Contrary to many post-structural reader-response critics, the meaning of a text cannot be separated from what the author originally intended. Speech-act theory proves helpful here, especially in its understanding of illocutionary intent.

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[3]Paul Ricoeur, "What is a Text? Explanation and Understanding," in *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences* ed. and trans. by John B. Thompson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 145.

[4]Chandler, *Semiotics*, 263.

[5]E. D. Hirsch Jr., *Validity in Interpretation* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1967), 27-31.

[6]For examples of this theory, see Hirsch, *Validity in Interpretation*; Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning in this Text?: The Bible, the Reader, and the Morality of Literary Knowledge* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998).

There are, however, some shortcomings of identifying the meaning of a text *solely* with the author's intent. Specifically, this definition of meaning is too narrow in some instances and is simply not the case in other instances. For example, there are times when a text, whether spoken or written, does not mean what an author intends for it to mean. Suppose an author pens the following statement: "Sarah began to feel as if she were suffocating from the pressure of all the *stairs* on her." In this instance, the author intends to describe the state of severe anxiety that Sarah feels from everyone in the room looking at her. This is not what her statement *means* regardless of what she intended. The meaning of this author's statement means that Sarah felt suffocated as a result of *stairs* being on her. Perhaps a staircase has collapsed on her and she is suffocating. Though this is not what the author intended, or *meant*, this *is* what the sentence means.

Though authors do have intentions in what they say and write, the meaning of what they say is not always synonymous with what they intend. Authors must submit to the cultural units ascribed to signs and grammar if they wish to communicate meaningfully. If I ask my friend Lou, "Lou, would you please bring me a cup of coffee when you come into work," but I *intended* for him to bring me a cup of tea, does my above request *mean* "please bring me a cup of tea" or does it mean "please bring me a cup of coffee" regardless of what I intended? The latter seems to be the case. The meaning is found in what is *said*, not in what is *intended*. In other words, illocutionary intent depends on the locutionary content. If one's locution is at odds with her illocution, then so will be the perlocution.

There are other instances where an author's text can mean *more* than what the author intended while still being in continuity with said intentions. Suppose two friends are sitting by a bonfire, and friend *A* says to friend *B,* "The fire is scorching hot tonight!" In this example, friend

A intends to comment on the elevated temperature of the flames and that is it. Friend *B,* however, interprets this to mean that the fire would burn her, friend *B*'s, hand were she to place it in the flames. Friend *A* does not *intend* to warn friend *B* of the consequences of sticking her hand in the fire; rather, she *intends* merely to comment on the high temperature of the flames. Regardless of the intent, friend *A*'s above expression still *means* that one would burn herself should she put her hand into the fire.

While some authorial intent focused interpreters identify meaning as solely identical with the author's intent, there is another school of thought that swings the hermeneutical pendulum too far in the other direction: radical reader-response criticism. According to this theory, readers are the agents that provide texts with their meaning.[7] According to Stanley Fish, meaning is not inscripted in texts; rather, meaning is imported into texts from the reader.[8] Dale Martin states, "Texts don't mean; people mean with texts."[9] In line with this theory, once an author writes a text, she loses all control over it and its interpretation. When a person reads a text, she imports what her culture has taught her the signs that comprise the text mean into said signs. The implication of this theory is that the meaning of a text is not static but ever changing. This is not to say that texts mean whatever a reader wants to make them mean. What this means is that

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[7]For examples of this theory, see Stanley Fish, *Is There a Text in This Class?: The Authority of Interpretive Communities* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1980); Dale B. Martin, *Pedagogy of the Bible: An Analysis and Proposal* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008).

[8]Stanley Fish, "Is There a Text in This Class?" in *Is There a Text in This Class?: The Authority of Interpretative Communities* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1980), 303-21; idem "What Makes an Interpretation Acceptable?" in *Is There a Text in This Class?: The Authority of Interpretative Communities* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1980), 338-55.

[9]Martin, *Pedagogy*, 31.

different cultures determine what the meaning of a text is for their culture, and cultures are beyond the limits of criticism.

There are some problems with this theory as well. If Paul writes, "Jesus has been risen from the dead," many will not doubt that he means or intends something by it. This theory of meaning held by radical reader-response critics seems to deny that a text is discourse fixed in writing, which would imply that a written text is not a communicative act. If two persons are engaged in conversation and a speaker states a proposition, the hearer is not the one who determines the meaning of the proposition. For example, if Paul says to a person, "Jesus has been resurrected from the dead," and means this proposition to be concerning a historical event and said person interprets this proposition to be concerning an internalized emotion rather than a historical event and then proceeds to speak this interpretation back to Paul, then Paul would respond with a corrective to what he intended to communicate.

Granted, when reading a text, one does not always have the luxury of asking the author what she might have meant by a certain word or statement. Yet this does not change the fact that a text is still discourse fixed in writing. Authors do intend things with texts, though they are not always in control of how readers interpret those texts. This is not to say that the author of a text is the sole determiner of a text's meaning. The author does provide one aspect of meaning in a text, but readers also play a part as well. More will be said on this below when discussing Eco's semiotic theory.

As one can see, there are issues with both theories of meaning provided in the above analysis. Meaning cannot be solely determined by authors, nor can it be solely determined by readers. This seems to be the case especially for those who desire to practice a theological interpretation of Scripture. Even proponents of TIS (Theological Interpretation of Scripture),

such as Daniel Trier, note that for this approach to Scripture, texts have multiple meanings.[10]

Granted, this does not necessarily imply that these multiple meanings arise from those other than

the author, but it does not limit them to this either. Did Paul *intend* to communicate Nicene

Christology when discussing the divinity of Jesus? A historical-critical exegesis that would seek

to recover the immediate intentions of Paul would most likely conclude in the negative. Paul,

rather, seems to understand Jesus' divinity based on his relationship to the Church.[11] Some

practicing a TIS, however, would hold that Nicene Christology is meant by the biblical texts,

even though Paul might not have *intended* to communicate this. As such a proponent, I would

note that how Paul understands Jesus' divinity is not in discontinuity with Nicene Christology. I

would even go on to say that Nicene Christology is an *implication* of Paul's divine Christology.

If one seeks to practice a TIS, can she do so with a hermeneutic that limits the meaning of texts

in such a way?

As shown above, both authors and reading communities seem to have some part to play

in the meaning of a text. Rather than an either/or approach to meaning, the semiotic works of

Umberto Eco seem to provide a way that accounts for both the roles of the author and the reader

in determining the meaning of a text. This arises primarily from his definition of meaning as "a

cultural unit." Attention will now turn to Eco's works.

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[10]Daniel Treier, *Introducing Theological Interpretation of Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2008), 200.

[11]This view is advocated in Chris Tilling's book *Paul's Divine Christology*. According to Tilling, Paul understood Jesus' divinity in light of his relationship to the Church, namely that it mirrors YHWH's relationship to Israel in the Old Testament. Tilling sets his view against that of Gordon Fee, who grounded Paul's Christology in his, Paul's, understanding of pre-existence, and against that of Larry Hurtado who focused on the early Christian devotion to Jesus. For more on this Christ-Church relationship view, see Chris Tilling, *Paul's Divine Christology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012), 105-187.

UMBERTO ECO'S SEMIOTIC THEORY

As has been noted above, theories of meaning that over-emphasize authorial intention or reader-significance are not suitable for a theological interpretation of Scripture. A theory of meaning that is adequate for theological hermeneutics must take into consideration issues of authorial intention *and* reader significance. Umberto Eco's theory of meaning that he presents in his work *A Theory of Semiotics* offers a possible solution to this problem.[12]

In *A Theory of Semiotics*, Eco discusses multiple issues concerning a general theory of signs. According to him, a theory of general semiotics must take into account "(a) a *theory of codes* and (b) a *theory of sign production*."[13] A theory of codes deals specifically with a semiotics of signification while a theory of sign production deals with a semiotics of communication.[14] These two types of semiotics entail the other. Eco states, "Semiotics studies all cultural processes as *processes of communication*. Therefore each of these processes would seem to be permitted by an underlying *system of significations*. . . . it is absolutely true that there are some important differences between a semiotics of communication and a semiotics of signification; this distinction does not, however, set two mutually exclusive approaches in opposition."[15] He defines a process of communication as "the passage of a signal (not necessarily

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[12]For a brief survey of Eco's work in semiotics and some implications for hermeneutics, see Anthony C. Thiselton, *New Horizons in Hermeneutics: The Theory and Practice of Transforming Biblical Reading* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992), 524-29.

[13]Umberto Eco, *A Theory of Semiotics* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1976), 3.

[14]Ibid., 4. See also Umberto Eco, *Semiotics and the Philosophy of Language* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984).

[15]Eco, *Theory*, 8.

a sign) from a source (through a transmitter, along a channel) to a destination."[16] Eco defines a code as "a system of signification, insofar as it couples present entities with absent units.

When – on the basis of an underlying rule – something actually presented to the perception of the addressee *stands for* something else, there is *signification*."[17] Eco then goes on to define a signification system: "A signification system is an autonomous semiotic construct that has an abstract mode of existence independent of any possible communicative act it makes possible. On the contrary (except for stimulation processes) *every act of communication to or between human beings* – or any other intelligent biological or mechanical apparatus – *presupposes a signification system as its necessary condition*."[18] The rest of *A Theory of Semiotics* is spent fleshing out the implications of these definitions spending ample space on developing both a theory of codes and a theory of sign production.

Eco provides his understanding of meaning in his chapter where he develops his theory of codes. Before defining the term "meaning," he discusses a concept concerning sign function that proves helpful for this essay: the concept(s) of denotation and connotation. Eco uses the example of a water-gate system to show his understanding of denotation and connotation. This example uses an engineer as the destination apparatus. In this example, the engineer receives information about a given state of affairs concerning the water level, which according to pre-existing conditions determines how he responds "in a given way."[19] Eco states, "In this sense the behavioral response is not elicited by a signal-stimulus: it is *signified* (or imperatively

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[16]Ibid.

[17]Ibid.

[18]Ibid., 9.

[19]Ibid., 55.

communicated) by the fact that a given state of water has been signified."[20] He then provides a

table with different signs and the content for which the signs stand. Here he draws from what

Louis Hjelmslev calls a connotative semiotics. Eco states, "There is a connotative semiotics

when there is a semiotics whose expression plane is another semiotics."[21] Connotations occur

when "the content of the former signification becomes the expression of a further content."[22]

Getting back to the water-gate example, when the water reaches the danger level, the engineer

receives the expression AB. As a sign, AB stands for the water having reached the danger level.

This is the denotation of AB. A denotation is the immediate content of an expression. The

appropriate response for the engineer to have after receiving the expression AB would be to

evacuate water. This is what Eco calls the connotation of AB. He describes the difference

between denotation and connotation thusly:

> The difference between denotation and connotation is not (as many authors maintain) the
> difference between 'univocal' and 'vague' signification, or between 'referential' and
> 'emotional' communication, and so on. What constitutes a connotation as such is the
> connotative code which establishes it; the characteristic of a connotative code is the fact
> that the further signification conventionally relies on a primary one (the engineer knows
> he must evacuate the water because he knows that the water has reached the danger
> level).[23]

One could say that connotations build off of, or develop out of, the denotations of an expression.

Eco notes that, theoretically, someone could have instructed the engineer to evacuate water when

he received the expression AB, thereby making the water evacuation the denotation of the code.

Eco then notes that the primary distinction between denotation and connotation "is only due to a

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[20]Ibid.

[21]Ibid.

[22]Ibid.

[23]Ibid., 55-56.

coding convention, irrespective of the fact that connotations are frequently less stable than denotations: the stability concerns the force and the duration of the coding convention, but once the convention has been established, the connotation is the stable functive of a sign-function of which the underlying functive is another sign-function."[24] In this sense, a connotative code can also be referred to as a *subcode*.

Eco's distinction between the denotations and connotations of an expression can provide a great tool for how the Church reads Scripture for meaning. But before this can be discussed, one must first understand how Eco himself defines meaning. Eco defines meaning as follows: "What, then, is the meaning of a term? From a semiotic point of view it can only be a *cultural unit*. In every culture 'a unit. . . is simply anything that is culturally defined and distinguished as an entity. It may be a person, place, thing, feeling, state of affairs, sense of foreboding, fantasy, hallucination, hope or idea."[25] In other words, the meaning of a term is what a culture assigns to it. Eco then states, "A unit of this type might also be recognized as an intercultural unit which remains invariable despite the linguistic symbol with which it is signified: /dog/ denotes not a physical object but a cultural unit which remains constant or invariable even if I translate /dog/ by /*cane*/ or /*chien*/ or /*Hund*/."[26]

Eco goes on to say, "Recognition of the presence of these cultural units (which are therefore the meaning to which the code makes the system of sign-vehicles correspond) involves understanding language as a social phenomenon."[27] The meanings of words are not solely

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[24]Ibid., 56.

[25]Ibid., 67.

[26]Ibid.

[27]Ibid., 67-68.

determined by individual authors; rather, they are determined by the culture in which they find their existence. Eco then notes that the different "series of clarifications which circumscribed the cultural units of a society in a continuous progression"[28] is representative of what C. S. Peirce referred to as the interpretants.

Interpretants are not the same thing as interpreters. Eco, following Peirce, defines an interpretant as "that which guarantees the validity of the sign, even in the absence of the interpreter."[29] The interpretant is what is produced by the sign in the "quasi-mind which is the interpreter."[30] Eco claims that the most fruitful understanding of the interpretant is "*another representation which is referred to the same 'object'*."[31] In other words, the best way to describe the identity of an interpretant is by using another sign, which in turn has its own interpretant that must be described by another sign, *ad infinitum*. Eco refers to this as an "unlimited semiosis."[32] He notes that it is this unlimited semiosis that is the sole guarantee for "the foundation of a semiotic system capable of checking itself entirely by its own means."[33] All this finally leads Eco to provide his definition of what a sign is. He defines a "sign" as "'anything which determines something else (its *interpretant*) to refer to an object to which itself refers (its *object*) in the same

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[28]Ibid.

[29]Ibid.

[30]Ibid.

[31]Ibid.

[32]Ibid.

[33]Ibid.

way, the interpretant becoming in turn a sign, and so on *ad infinitum*'. Thus the very definition of 'sign' implies a process of *unlimited semiosis*."[34]

Clearly, Eco's semiotic theory is significant for hermeneutics. Anthony Thiselton notes, "All texts presuppose code. . . . the *code* is not the items of information which constitute the 'message'. The code is the sign-*system, lattice, or network, in terms of which* the linguistic choices which convey the message are expressed."[35] All theories of texts ultimately rest upon a theory of codes.[36]

As noted above, Eco understands meaning as a cultural unit. This understanding of meaning seems a possible solution to the problem of meaning posited above. Whereas understandings of meaning that overemphasize authorial intention or reader significance are too narrow, understanding meaning in the way that Eco does in his semiotics can provide a broad enough understanding to account for issues of both aforementioned theories.

If meaning is a cultural unit, then the meaning of a sign and its function in texts cannot be solely determined by how an individual author intends to use it, but along with the culture that designated it. Authors' and readers' horizons of understanding are determined by their cultures, and this horizon of understanding includes the very language they speak. Eco's semiotic theory is significant here because texts, which can be understood as discourse in writing, are aggregates of sign systems.

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[34]Ibid., 69.

[35]Thiselton, *New Horizons*, 80.

[36]For more on the significance of semiotic theory for hermeneutics, see Thiselton, *New Horizons*, 141.

If the meanings of the signs that comprise the text are determined by the culture that designated them, along with the grammar that provides them their structure, then how can texts be that much different? Eco's distinctions of denotation and connotation can prove helpful here. One could say that in generating a text, an author's intention is its denotation while the reader's significance is its connotation. One might consider the example mentioned in above concerning the two friends at the bond fire, when friend *A* says to friend *B*, "The fire is scorching hot tonight!" The denotation of this expression is the elevated temperature of the bond fire. A connotation of this expression is that one will burn her hand if she sticks her hand in the fire. In this example, friend *A* does not *intend* to warn friend *B* of the consequences of sticking her hand in the fire; rather, she *intends* merely to comment on the high temperature of the flames. Regardless of the intent, friend *A*'s above expression still *means* that one would burn herself if she put her hand into the fire. The connotation mentioned above does not come from the author's/speaker's intent, but from the significance it has for the listener/reader. *Both denotations and connotations are present in the meaning of a sign or text, for both are part of a cultural unit.* In other words, both authorial intention and reader significance are present in meaning, for both are parts of a cultural unit.

Also of significance is what Eco says elsewhere concerning "model readers." He notes that every author, in writing a text, envisions a model reader, and in turn uses a code that is understandable by said reader. He states, "To organize a text, its author has to rely upon a series of codes that assign given contents to the expressions he uses. To make his text communicative, the author has to assume that the ensemble of codes he relies upon is the same as that shared by his possible reader. The author has thus to foresee a model of the possible reader (hereafter Model Reader) supposedly able to deal interpretatively with the expressions in the same way as

the author deals generatively with them."[37] What is worth noting here is that the author of a text does not have absolute freedom in how she uses signs when generating a code. Instead, she must use a code that is recognizable by her reader. Authors must follow the rules of a sign system when seeking to generate a meaningful code. These rules are provided by a culture rather than individual authors.

Eco's theory of signs also has some structuralist similarities in the relationship of signs to other signs factors into a theory of codes as well as a theory of sign production. A similar understanding of meaning can be found in the theological method of Wolfhart Pannenberg. Pannenberg argues from what he terms a "totality of meaning," namely, that all occurrences of meaning presuppose a totality of meaning which determines their validity and coherence.[38] This has significance for the thesis of this essay in that such an understanding of meaning does not allow for one simply to distinguish between the meaning of a text and its significance, for both must find their place in the totality of meaning, which presupposes coherence. The meaning of texts, in as much as they presuppose a totality of meaning, must incorporate issues of authorial intention and reader significance. Pannenberg's notion of the totality of meaning allows for the significance of a text to be included in the meaning of a text, but it also necessitates continuity between the author's intentions and the significance it has for readers. Since the totality of meaning presupposes a coherent system of meaning, the significance the text has for readers cannot be in discontinuity with what the author intended when he generated the text. This fits

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[37]Umberto Eco, *The Role of the Reader: Explorations in the Semiotics of Texts* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1979), 7.

[38]Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Theology and the Philosophy of Science* trans. by Francis McDonagh (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1976), 214-224.

well with Eco's theory of codes in that in order for the appropriate response to occur, there must be continuity between the intentions of the coder and its significance for the receiver.

I have sought in this section of the essay to provide an exposition of Eco's semiotic theory and show how it can serve as a possible solution to what I had termed the problem of meaning. I will now provide a case study to show how Eco's understanding of meaning can better illuminate how New Testament authors interpret the Old Testament for meaning. I will specifically use Paul's interpretation of Sarah and Hagar in Genesis as found in his letter to the churches of Galatia.

ECOS OF MEANING: PAUL AND GENESIS—A CASE STUDY

This section of the essay will provide a case study to help show that narrow understandings of meaning as mentioned above do not fit with how New Testament authors interpret Old Testament texts for meaning. As will be demonstrated in what follows, Paul does not simply interpret the Genesis narratives to discover what their original authors intended. Rather, the meaning he gleans from these texts seems to fit better with what Eco calls a cultural unit. Specifically, Paul's interpretation of Old Testament texts in his letter to the Galatians will be examined here.

The specific passage that will be examined here is Galatians 4:21-31. Up until this point in the letter, Paul has been dealing with a sort of identity crisis in Galatia.[39] A group of Jews

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[39]Though many interpret Paul's contention with the Judaizers to be concerning a works based salvation versus a faith-based salvation, this is not my interpretation. Along with N. T. Wright, Richard Hays, James Dunn, and others affiliated with the New Perspectives on Paul movement, I interpret Paul's contention with the Judaizers to be over an identity crisis. In other words, I do not interpret the trouble the Judaizers had stirred up to be concerned with doing the right things but with being in the right group. The Judaizers seem to have still been holding on to the idea that the people of God were the Jews and that Gentile Christians must also become part of the Jewish community. This is the issue in which Paul had to deal. How are Gentiles included in the covenant community of God? As Paul argues, it is not through becoming part of the

referred to as the Judaizers, have come into the Galatian churches and are trying to convince the Christians there that they must convert to Judaism in order to be part of the covenant community of God. This entailed circumcision. Paul, in response to the Judaizers, provides several arguments to show how Gentiles have become included in God's covenant community. The bulk of Paul's arguments come from his interpretations of the Genesis narratives concerning God's promise to Abraham. He notes that Abraham received circumcision after being declared righteous by God in light of his, Abraham's, faith. Paul then continues his argument by discussing the figures of Sarah and Hagar.

One will notice that Paul does not interpret the Genesis narratives here with an eye to historical-critical issues, nor does he attempt to decipher the original ancient author's intentions. Frank Matera comments, "Even the general reader immediately notices that Paul's allegorical interpretation goes against the plain and literal sense of the Book of Genesis by apparently associating the descendants of Hagar with the Sinai covenant."[40] Rather, he interprets the narratives concerning Sarah and Hagar figuratively, or allegorically (Gal 4:24). He has been arguing up to this point that those who seek a righteousness from the law stand under the curse of the law.

Jewish community; rather, it is through being united with Christ in faith. It is my opinion that very few Jews in Paul's day believed that salvation was attained through performing the right deeds. Rather, for the Jews, salvation was inseparable from being part of Israel. One could not be part of God's community, i.e. saved, and be outside of Israel. To be saved was to be part of God's covenant community. For more on this interpretation of Galatians, see N. T. Wright, *Paul and the Faithfulness of God* 2 vol (Minneapolis, Fortress Press, 2014); James D. G. Dunn, *The Theology of Paul the Apostle* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006); and Richard B. Hays, *Echoes of Scripture in the Letters of Paul* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989).

[40]Frank J. Matera, *Galatians* (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1992), 172.

Paul's point is that righteousness comes not from the law but from the God who promises. This is where his figurative interpretation of Sarah and Hagar comes into play. According to Paul, Abraham had two sons, one from a free woman and one from a slave woman. Sarah is the free woman and Hagar is the slave woman. Ishmael, who was born from Hagar was born "according to the flesh," while Isaac, who was born from Sarah, was born "according to the promise." Paul then claims that Hagar represents Mt. Sinai and the earthly Jerusalem and that Sarah represents the heavenly Jerusalem. Each woman is a covenant. Hagar is the Sinai covenant, which is "bearing children into slavery" (Gal 4:24). Sarah is the heavenly Jerusalem covenant, and the children she bears are born into freedom (Gal 4:26-27). The Christians of Galatia, like Isaac, are children of the promise rather than children of slavery. The Sinai covenant is considered to be a covenant of the flesh while the covenant of the heavenly Jerusalem is considered to be a covenant of the promise. The children of the promise are those who have been united to Christ in faith while the children of slavery are those who seek to live under the law.

Much of Paul's interpretation of the Genesis narrative here draws from material not found in Genesis. The Sinai covenant has not yet been made, nor is Jerusalem a city of significance yet in the historical context of the Genesis narrative. Much of Paul's interpretation of Genesis for meaning here has little to do with its historical context or the original author's intentions. His allegorical interpretation deals more with this text's *significance* rather than its author's intentions. The meaning of the figures of Sarah and Hagar develops over time as they become more significant. In this case, the meaning of these two figures cannot be distinguished apart from their significance. The original author's intent in the Sarah/Hagar narratives most likely was concerned simply with Isaac being the son through whom the promise given to Abraham would continue. The concepts of "according to the flesh" and "according to the Spirit,"

which are very prevalent in the letters of Paul, do not appear in the Genesis narratives. Yet Paul interprets the figures of Sarah and Hagar for meaning in light of these concepts. Nevertheless, one should note that the significance of Sarah and Hagar as figures does not stand in discontinuity with the original author-intended meaning of the narratives. The original author of Genesis clearly understood Isaac as the son of promise and not Ishmael, which meant that Sarah, not Hagar, was the woman through whom God's promise would come to fruition.

Richard B. Hays provides helpful insight into Paul's hermeneutics in his work *Echoes of Scripture in the Letters of Paul*. Specifically, in this work, Hays is concerned with intertextuality as in the letters of Paul. He specifically uses the theory of echo proposed by John Hollander. Hollander's work "exemplifies a style of interpretation that focuses neither on the poet's psyche nor on the historical presuppositions of poetic allusions but on their rhetorical and semantic effects."[41] Unlike other intertextual theories, Hollander's approach also sees continuity in the understanding of meaning throughout the interpreting tradition. Concerning what is called "metalepsis," Hays states, "When a literary echo links the text in which it occurs an earlier text, the figurative effect of the echo can lie in the unstated or suppressed (transumed) points of resonance between the two texts."[42] He further states, "Allusive echo functions to suggest to the reader that text B should be understood in light of a broad interplay with text A, encompassing aspects of A beyond those explicitly echoed."[43] In Eco's terms, the cultural units of text B are to be understood in its relationship to text A. As noted above, the theory of intertextuality that Hays

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[41]Hays, *Echoes*, 19.

[42]Ibid., 20.

[43]Ibid.

is advocating here holds that this sort of meaning is not arbitrary to what it originally meant, but that it finds continuity throughout the community's tradition.

Hays provides an insightful discussion on Gal 4:21-31. He holds that rather than holding to a Christocentric hermeneutic, Paul rather holds to an ecclesiocentric hermeneutic that finds its significance in Paul's Christocentric thinking.[44] Paul's interpretation of the Genesis narratives concerning Sarah and Hagar then are approached as texts concerning the Church rather than texts concerning Christ. Hays notes that Paul's allegorical interpretation of Isaac and Ishmael is nothing new; rather, the meaning he gleans from them is new.[45] He notes that the author of Jubilees interprets Isaac to represent Israel and Ishmael to represent the Gentiles (Jub 16:17-18). Paul, on the other hand, does not explicitly focus on Isaac and Ishmael, but on their mothers. Hays states,

> The two sons are marked not by their circumcised or uncircumcised status but by the slave/free polarity that distinguishes their mothers. This polarity, however, is a hermeneutical device introduced by Paul, highlighting a minor feature of the Genesis narrative. In Genesis (LXX), Hagar is repeatedly described as a *paidiske*, but Sarah is never called *eleuthera*. The emphasis on her free status, crucial for Paul's reading, is brought to the story by Paul himself.[46]

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[44]Ibid., 86. In his work, *The Climax of the Covenant: Christ and the Law in Pauline Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992), N. T. Wright agrees with Hays's understanding of Paul's ecclesiocentric hermeneutic, though he thinks it is still incomplete. He states, "I find this basically convincing. We have seen time and again in this book that Paul does indeed draw on scripture to create a picture of the people of God which he then proceeds to apply to the church of his own day. . . . But I still find Hays' picture incomplete, and leaving Paul looking more arbitrary in his handling of the Jewish Bible than I think exegesis actually suggests. On the basis of almost all of the chapters above, I suggest that Paul saw scripture as story and as prophecy, *not* in the abstract sense of mere typological prefigurement between one event and another" (264).

[45]For a more thorough discussion of the Second Temple Jewish interpretations of this passage, see Richard Longnecker, *Galatians* (Dallas: Word Books, 1990), 200-206.

[46]Hays, *Echoes*, 113.

He goes on to note that the truly shocking element is that Paul associates Hagar with Sinai rather than with Gentiles.[47] Hays then points out that in his interpretation of Genesis, Paul is not that concerned with the intentions of the original author. Rather, he interprets Genesis in light of his current context in the Church. Hays states, "In this particular case, the latent sense is disclosed, according to Paul, only when the narrative is correlated with the present experience of the community of those whom Paul now addresses as 'brothers' (vv. 28, 31)—that is, the church. The story of Abraham, Sarah, Hagar, Isaac, and Ishmael is a figurative portrayal whose meaning can only be understood with reference to the pastoral and theological issues that Paul is now addressing."[48]

Hays is not the only one to note Paul's interpretation of the Sarah-Hagar narratives. Richard Longnecker states, "Paul was doing no injustice to the biblical text to focus attention on the contrasts and conflicts in the Hagar-Sarah story (Gen 16:1-16; 21:1-21), for those are the features on which the dynamic of the story depends. Nor was he unique in so doing. Many of the contrasts and conflicts he highlights were highlighted by other Jews as well."[49] F. F. Bruce notes, "Paul himself calls his interpretation 'allegorical' (v24)—that is to say, the entities in the story stand for something other than their *prima facie* sense, whether that 'something other' was intended by the original author or is the contribution of the interpreter (and even when it is the contribution of the interpreter, the interpreter frequently thinks that he is bringing out the intention of the original author)."[50] Hays further states, "Now in the *ekklesia* the story can be

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[47]Ibid., 114.

[48]Ibid., 116.

[49]Longnecker, *Galatians*, 200.

[50]F. F. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Galatians: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982), 214-15.

read aright for the first time: the meaning of the story is found in the church, and the identity of the church is found in the story."[51]

Rather than being concerned with the meaning behind the text, Paul is concerned with what Paul Riceour refers to as the meaning in front of the text. Douglas Moo writes,

> What is most important is to recognize that Paul's interpretation cannot fairly be accused of 'willful distortions' of the text or of engaging in 'sheer Hellenistic midrash speculation'. Rather, as we have argued above, Paul grounds his reading of the Sarah and Hagar narrative in an important pattern of OT salvation-historical movement, a reading, to be sure, enhanced by his hermeneutical axioms. He gives to the narrative before him in Genesis, without denying its intended historical sense, an additional or added meaning in light of these hermeneutical axioms. What is important to note is that any contemporizing reading of the OT, whether that found in the Dead Sea Scrolls or in the rabbis or in early Christianity, is inevitably the product of some set of extratextual hermeneutical axioms.[52]

Hays goes on to show that due to other Old Testament uses of the characters in this narrative that the meaning Paul gives this text is not in discontinuity with the original meaning. This is seen specifically in Paul's use of Isaiah 54.[53]

So how does Eco's understanding of meaning fit in here? If meaning is understood as a cultural unit, containing both denotations and connotations, then Paul's interpretation of Sarah and Hagar for meaning is valid. If the meaning of a text is identical with only what the original author intended, then Paul has made some serious exegetical errors. Again, according to Eco, a unit is anything that is defined or distinguished by a culture as an entity. The figures of Sarah and Hagar, as found in the Genesis narratives, are units that belong to a specific culture, the covenant community of God. As such their meaning is further developed by this culture. One should note that the original authors of these narratives help form this community. They encoded these codes

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[51]Hays, *Echoes*, 117.

[52]Douglass J. Moo, *Galatians* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2013), 296.

[53]Hays, *Echoes*, 120.

and the reading community decoded them, but the reading community can only decode the code if they already have the capacity to do so. In other words, they have the capacity to understand the code before the code is generated. Communities contribute to the development of codes while at the same time the codes contribute to the development of communities. Overtime codes further develop as well do the cultural units embedded in them. This does not mean that the developing cultural units, i.e. meaning, in these codes stand in discontinuity with their less-developed ancestors.

Meaning might be understood as the growth of a tree. The seed from which the tree begins to grow can be understood as the intention of a text's original author, that is, its denotation(s). As the tree continues to grow, more branches grow out from it. These branches are the connotations/significance. What the root and branches of a tree have in common is that they are all part of the tree. The intentions of authors and the significance of readers are all part of meaning much like roots and branches, though different, are all part of a tree. As Israel's history continued, the meaning of the figures of Sarah and Hagar grew, and by the time of Paul's letter to the Galatians, what began as a seed with the original authors of these narratives had grown into a multi-branched tree.

If meaning is simply identical with the intentions of the original author, and there is a distinction between the meaning of a text and the significance of a text, then Paul has made some grandeur exegetical errors. Texts, as aggregates of sign-systems, have immediate denotations, but they also can have many connotations that stem from the denotations. This understanding of meaning can help one to better understand how Paul, as well as other New Testament authors, interprets Old Testament texts, and if New Testament authors such as Paul interpret texts in this way, then why would the Church today seek to interpret these texts differently?

CONCLUSION

The goal of this essay has been to provide an understanding of meaning that can prove useful to a theological interpretation of Scripture using the semiotic theory of Umberto Eco. I sought to state clearly what I have termed the problem of meaning in the first section of this essay. The problem stated is that two of the most widely accepted theories of meaning—one that overemphasizes authorial intent and one that overemphasizes reader significance—provide definitions of meaning that are too limited in scope. If one overemphasizes authorial intention, then she must be critical of how Paul and other New Testament authors interpret Old Testament texts. If one overemphasizes reader significance, then there is little or no significance in the historical-critical issues concerning the text. Eco's theory of semiotics serves a more conservative form of reader-response criticism and provides an understanding of meaning that takes into account issues of authorial intention as well as reader significance. His discussions on denotation and connotation have proven especially helpful for this essay. I then provided a case study showing how Eco's understanding of meaning fits well with how Paul interprets the Old Testament for meaning in the third section of this essay. Richard Hays's work *Echoes of Scripture in the Letters of Paul* has proven helpful here in that his theory of intertextuality also fits well with Eco's semiotic theory.

If one is going to engage in a theological interpretation of Scripture, an interpretation that pursues meaning, then he or she cannot accept the aforementioned narrow theories of meaning mentioned above. One in turn must accept an understanding of meaning that can incorporate dimensions of authorial intention as well as reader significance. Eco's understanding of meaning as seen in his theory of semiotics is such one that can take on the burden of this task.