The problem of "meaning" in texts

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ABSTRACT
A text has various semantic dimensions - conveys meaning on various levels - in a way which is much more complex than suspected by Hirsch. Especially important is the meaning of what is depicted or asserted by the words of a text as signs. A great problem, however, is how meaning on this level may be found. It is suggested that such discovery is a complex task which involves the arranging or "matrixing" of evidence according to an unarticulated "grammar". A further problem is the rôle of the reader in the discovery of meaning on all levels in a text. At times the reader's meaning corresponds to authorial intention and at times it does/can not.

In the discussions which have taken place in "The rôle of the reader in the interpretation of the New Testament" section of Studiorum Novi Testamenti Societas (SNTS) in past years, it has become apparent to this observer that much difficulty has arisen in discussions because of confusion over both the ways in which the word "meaning" has been used, and to what it has been applied. What I propose to do in the pages which follow is to try to disentangle the various types or levels of meaning which may be found in a text, and to try to determine how meaning at these various levels may be ascertained or "made". To keep the paper to manageable proportions, I will limit myself to texts or portions of texts which are essentially descriptive or informative in form, that is, which portray events or present ideas or concepts.

1 PART 1

1.1 Semantic dimensions of a text
1.1.1 Texts convey meaning on various levels, especially when one considers that signs may be both verbal and non-verbal. (I propose the vocabulary which follows as a way of distinguishing these various levels or types of meaning.)
1.1.2 Sense (level 1) = the meaning of (the words of) a text as sign. This, the most basic level, constitutes what a text is saying. For example, Luke 9:1: ἐδώκεν αὐτοῖς ἑξουσίαν...θεροποιεῖν means "he gave them power to heal", not, "they ate with sinners in a house".

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1.1.3 Significance (level 2) = the meaning of the sense (1.1.2 above) of a text, that is, the meaning of what is depicted or asserted by (the words of) a text (events or acts, and ideas or thoughts are themselves signs)\(^3\). (See also 2.3 below.)

1.1.3.1 The fact that something is/was done (in a story) has significance. The significance of what is depicted in Luke 9:1 is multifaceted, but the following significance may be found: The kingdom of God and the powers of the New Age were present in the person and ministry of Jesus, and participated in by the apostles. Other examples: the fact that Jesus raised the young man at Nain (Lk 7) may be said to signify that in Christ God was visiting his people; the fact that they passed by on the other side of a beaten man (Lk 10) probably signifies that the priest and Levite were pious Jews who were keeping themselves ritually clean; the fact that Jesus was stoned by the Jewish leaders (Jn 8) indicates that he had blasphemed.

1.1.3.1.1 Note: How something is/was done (in a story) also has significance. It may be said that how Jesus handed authority over to his disciples in Luke 9:1 signifies that they were in a rabbi-pupil, not a slave-master, relationship. Another example: the fact that Jesus raised the man at Nain almost by accident (chancing to encounter the procession) may signify that it was not his mission to raise all of the dead in Israel at that time, that is, that his mission was a preliminary fulfillment of the coming of the New Age.

1.1.3.2 The fact that something is true (in a presentation/argumentation) has significance. Thus, the idea presented in Galatians 5:1: "For freedom Christ has set us free" - the fact that this is so according to the argumentation of St Paul - may be said to signify, for example, that the Old Testament law was only provisional and not the goal of the work of Jesus Christ. Another example: the fact that it is true (according to Paul) that the spirit and the flesh are at odds with one another (Gl 5:17) may be said to signify that in this age the δυσμαχίαν αἰώνιον is never fully present. See also additional notes 2 (1.2.2) and 3 (1.2.3) below.

1.1.4 Implication (level 3) = the meaning of writing a text with its sense and significance\(^4\).

Here the form or the sense or the significance of what is written or depicted or asserted (cf levels 1 and 2 above) has a meaning apart from its semantic value as such. Two categories are apparent.

1.1.4.1 The fact that something was written by the author has implications. Thus, the fact that Luke wrote 9:1 with its sense and significance may reveal that the early church had difficulties concerning: the authority of its leaders (who was an authority?, the nature of that authority etc) (cf 1), or concerning: the nature of apostolic miracles (cf 2). Other examples: Luke's emphasis that Jesus ate with tax collectors and sinners may reveal the composition of Luke's church; the appearance of John the Baptist throughout the book of Acts may show that his place was still problematical for the early Christians;
Paul's assertion that the spirit and the flesh are at odds with one another (Gal 5:17) may show that he endured severe inner personal struggles after his conversion experience.

1.1.4.2 *How something was written by the author* has implications. Thus, how Luke expresses himself reveals something about him, his audience, and so forth. Luke's mode of expression reveals, for example, that he was somewhat educated, that he wrote for the educated, that he was acquainted with the LXX, and so forth. Other examples: the use of "Atticisms" in the book of Hebrews marks the author as literarily aware; ungrammatical speech may reveal a lack of formal training (cf Rv).

1.1.4.3 Note: Both of these categories reveal something about the author and/or his "Sitz im Leben", not about the milieu of people and events which may be described. Traditional "introduction" (*Einleitung*) and historical-critical investigation often operate on this level.

1.1.5 *Application* (level 4) = the meaning of the sense, significance, and implication of a text for the interpreter and/or his people. This level concerns what the text (on levels, 1, 2 and/or 3 above) "means for me" in the present situation. Thus, Luke 9:1 may mean, for example, that power is not a "dirty word" in the kingdom (cf 1.1.2); that the new age is here with the coming of Christ (cf 1.1.3.1); that God does not deal with his people as a cruel potentate but as a loving mentor (cf 1.1.3.1.1); that we should not be discouraged if there are arguments in the church today, because the church of Luke's day had them, too (cf 1.1.4.1); and that one can be well educated and serve the church of God - simplicity is not the ultimate virtue (cf 1.1.4.2).

1.2 *Additional notes*

1.2.1 Note 1: All that has been said above has been largely confined to the cognitive level. The same operations can be repeated on the affective level as well. For example, the fact that the father ran to meet his son in the parable of the prodigal son shows, not only that he was deeply moved at seeing his lost son, but also and especially that his love for him was stronger than his regard for the contempt of his neighbors at his actions (cf Bailey 1976:181-182).

1.2.2 Note 2: Of special interest is the relationship between the ideas (thoughts, truths) on the one hand, and the events (acts) on the other, which are asserted or depicted in a text. An idea (thought, truth) is frequently nothing other than a perceived significance of (an) event(s) explicitly expressed.

1.2.3 Note 3: Extensions of some (if not all) of the above categories can easily be seen. For example, the fact that Jesus' raising of the lad at Nain signifies that in Christ God was visiting his people itself signifies that God was a faithful God, keeping his promises to his people from years before. Such an extension of significance can then be used in application (e.g., God will be faithful...
to me now). In fact, given the relationship between ideas and events (see previous note 1.2.2), finding the significance of an idea (cf 1.1.3.2 above) often involves nothing more than an extension of the significance of an event.

1.2.4 Note 4: Another category of meaning is possible: deductions. These are inferences which can be drawn from acts or statements and which have factual but not religious or cultural import (though the line between this and significance is not at all clear). For example, from Luke 9:1 it can be deduced that Jesus himself had power; from the election of Matthias in Acts 1 it can be inferred that more than the twelve regularly followed Jesus in his ministry, and so forth.

2 PART 2
2.1 As reader-oriented literary critics, we in the seminar deal especially with story and with the task of making meaning out of what is presented in a text. As a result, our major concern is not essentially with the level of sense (which is basically grammar), neither is it with the level of implication (which is essentially historical, though the concept of "implied author" is relevant here). Rather, our concern is the level of significance (as well as the application of significance to the present situation). Therefore, additional comments are appropriate on the matter of significance. We will look first at the problem of what may be considered to be the proper object of an investigation to determine significance in a text. Next, we will consider the sort of significance (in general) which may be found in texts. Finally, we will consider the problem of how the significance of what we are investigating may be determined.

2.2 Matrices of events or ideas and significance
2.2.1 Understanding "significance" as the "meaning of the sense" of a text, that is, the meaning of the events or ideas depicted or asserted by (the words of) a text, it must be said that significance - whether of a single event or idea, or of a whole story or discourse - is to be found not only, or even principally, in individual events or ideas in isolation. Rather, what is important is the significance of events or ideas in a matrix of events or ideas. But a number of problems become apparent:

2.2.1.1 What events or ideas does one choose to connect or matrix (and then interpret "significantly")? Just as not every item in a story or presentation is "significant", so one cannot find helpful significance in every possible matrix/combination of events or ideas. Does one "connect" the presentation of John the Baptist's head on a platter at Herod's banquet with the Last Supper in Matthew and find significance in that matrix? Why or why not? What about the feeding of the 5 000 and the Last Supper? (It may be noted that often the events or ideas which are good candidates for matrixing are those which seem to have a relatively independent significance on their own).

2.2.1.2 On what basis are events or ideas connected (matrixed)?
2.2.1.2.1 Often matrixing is done on the basis of context. Thus, the story of Mary and Martha in Luke may be "connected" to the immediately preceding story of the Good Samaritan (which matrix may signify that, while the Lord desires mercy and not sacrifice, deeds of kindness do not "earn" divine approval). Often the context is very large. In Paul's letters, the first portion is often "promise" (i.e., statements about what God has done), while the latter part is "demand" (parenesis to his readers). These sections, each of which encompasses whole chapters, may be matrixed (which matrix may show that [in Paul's theology] demand follows, and is not the basis for, God's saving activity).

2.2.1.2.2 Matrixing may be done on the basis of similarity of "content". All healing stories in the Gospels may be connected - compare Jesus' reply to John the Baptist's disciples in Matthew 11:2-6 (which matrix of events may signify that Jesus is divine); Mark 8:23-24 [healing of blind man in two tries] may be connected with Mark 3:5 [Jesus getting angry] and with Mark 5:16 [Jesus' inability to do miracles] (which matrix may signify that Jesus was totally human); Matthew's genealogy, his portrayal of Jesus as giving his sermon on a mountain, and the statement of Jesus in his gospel that he has been sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel may be connected (which matrix may show the utter Jewishness of Jesus). It must be noted that contrasting matrixing is always possible: Jesus tells his disciples in Matthew 10 to go only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel, but he goes to the area of Tyre and Sidon; Matthew's genealogy is very "Jewish", yet the first visitors to Jesus are the foreign Magi.

2.2.1.2.3 Matrixing can also be done on the basis of identity of vocables used to depict events or to assert ideas. This has often been a cornerstone of traditional exegesis. Note the procedure of Lategan (Lategan & Vorster 1985:20) in his analysis of Matthew 23:

The genealogical terminology is continued in the opening statement of the third section (v 33), where the Pharisees are called "offspring of vipers" and a little later "this generation". These are exactly the words used in Matthew 12:34... and 12:41... to describe the Pharisees... By this linking of Matthew 23 to Matthew 11-12, the macrostructure of Matthew as a whole is brought into play and we are forced by the text itself to take this wider context into account when attempting to interpret Matthew 23 (emphasis added).

2.2.2 There is, then, a virtual "grammar" for connecting textual events or ideas. In general, acts or thoughts/truths which are in proximity, alike or contrasting in content, portrayed/presented by the same vocables (we may add, repeated, related in time, and related by cause and effect), seem likely candidates for "matrixing", that is, for connecting for interpretation. Literary analysis normally proceeds along these lines, matrixing especially like/contrasting stories (cf Barr's [1987:151-155] analysis of the Gospel of
Mark), and material presented by identical vocables (cf the traditional fivefold division of Matthew on the basis of τελειόω at the end of each of the five "discourses").

2.3 Nature of significance in texts
What significance may be given to the events or ideas, or matrices thereof, which are portrayed or presented in a text? In general, the "significance" found will be either cultural or philosophical/theological. But while cultural significance is important and interesting (it is important to know, e.g., that the owner of a field in which a treasure lay hidden [cf Mt 13:44] had no legal rights to that treasure [Derrett 1970:13]), it is generally true that the philosophical/theological significance of events or ideas (or matrices of these) are of greater concern. (Whether such significance is seen as basically existential, i.e., in the realm of self-understanding, is a matter of the relationship between text and reality [cf endnote 1 below].) It may be noted that the line between the cultural and the religious or theological is often virtually non-existent (cf the passersby keeping themselves ritually clean in the story of the Good Samaritan).

2.4 Determining significance in texts
2.4.1 How may the significance to be found in an event or idea (or matrices thereof) be determined? If such significance is cultural, there are often no clues in the text itself, since the author assumes a "world" or "repertoire" on the part of the reader. Thus, when the priest and Levite passed by the beaten man in the story of the Good Samaritan, they kept themselves ritually clean, but that is nowhere stated in the text. If significance is philosophical/theological, often here, too, a world or repertoire is also assumed. Frequently, however, definite clues are given. On the one hand, significance may be (or seem to be!) made explicit on the level of sense. In such cases, it may be given in close proximity (near context): the significance of the resurrection of the lad at Nain (Lk 7:14-15) is given in verse 16: "God has visited his people". Or, one may have to move further afield (remote context): the significance of the Christ-event as portrayed in the Gospel of Mark may be revealed in 2 Corinthians 5:19: "God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself" (cf Gl 4:4-5). (In such cases the problem of canon and intertextuality is raised in an acute way.) On the other hand, one may be "forced" to matrix like events or ideas: for example, the resurrection of the lad at Nain may be "explained" by Isaiah 26:19 in the Old Testament (which may be how the onlookers in the story made their evaluation). Still, it must be admitted that more than occasionally one seems to be left on one's own: the wedding at Cana miracle in John 2, Jesus' seeming inability of contrasting matrices (cf Jesus' prohibition of mission to the Gentiles for his disciples and his own trip to Tyre and Sidon).
2.4.2 Often the significance of events/ideas, or matrices of these, is most clear vis-à-vis other versions of the text or story. Matthew’s genealogy would be much less meaningful if Luke’s were not available. Luke’s mention of Naaman, in describing Jesus’ return to his home town, would be much less meaningful if we did not see the other synoptists omitting it. Textual variants may be seen as "other versions of the story" and are extremely important in this regard. (It seems apparent that what is said here also applies to the determination of the "implications" of a text.)

2.4.3 It seems that the task of matrixing and the task of finding significances is very much an art and not a science. Should one matrix the disciples’ names in John and make something out of the fact that in the early chapters of John many "unusual" disciples appear (Nathaniel, Thomas, Andrew), while in the last chapter more "normal" disciples (Peter and John) are prominent? If so, what is the significance? The influential scholars and teachers, it seems, are often those who can "find" new significances or matrix in new or creative ways.

3. PART 3
3.1 How does the reader relate to what has been proposed? What follows are some tentative thoughts and ideas.

3.2 The reader and meaning
What is the role of the reader in making meaning from texts? The reader, it would seem, functions in the determination of meaning on all four of the levels we have detailed above (cf 1). He makes sense out of the words (level 1) according to commonly accepted rules of grammar pertinent to the language of the text. He discovers significance (level 2), first, by following (consciously or unconsciously) agreed-upon rules of "grammar" for matrixing components of what is depicted or asserted (cf 2.2), and, then, either by seeking out explicit explanations in the text (or in related texts), or by finding explanations on the basis of his own theological orientation, following further matrixing (cf 2.4). He detects implications (level 3) on the basis of his own knowledge of life and history. And, finally, and perhaps most importantly, he makes application (level 4) to himself and others, which application is done on the basis of his own perception of the similarity between the "meanings" conveyed by a text and the contemporary situation.

3.3 The reader and authorial intention
3.3.1 How do the "meanings" made by the reader from the text correspond to authorial intention? They are, it seems clear, in no way limited to the intention of the author (either real or implied). An author may not see all that can be drawn from his own work (a history is a good example of this). Indeed, the level of implication (level 3) may very well not correspond to authorial intention at all! It seems reasonable to suppose, however, that there is an intended
sense to the words of the text and an intended significance to the content of the text, otherwise it is hard to explain why a given work was produced. Likewise, it seems reasonable to suppose that there is some sort of "intended application" to a work, for a text is produced so that another may benefit from what it conveys (but see endnote 6).

3.3.2 But how does a reader detect authorial intention? Assuming we have no explicit information from the author himself (e.g., a personal interview or a further explanatory work), the reader must rely upon guidance given him by the author, guidance which is in the text alone. And what this amounts to has been a recurring problem. The basis of authorial guidance must be the structure of the work - a structure, though it may be expressed explicitly on the level of sense, is normally to be found on the level of significance; that is, as a work is analysed, components are matrixed and their significance determined (cf. 2 above). This, then becomes the basis for all other interpretation; in particular, it becomes the basis for meaningful application in line with the perceived structure of the work, and, therefore, with the perceived "intention of the author". It may be noted that such a procedure allows one to see the "implicit" address to the reader by the author, that is, to see if "discourse" (between author and reader/hearer) is articulated explicitly on the "story" level. In such cases, the "application" is controlled by the author in a manner which is somewhat direct.

ENDNOTES
1 What follows is not dependent upon the now-classic analysis of E. D. Hirsch (1967), though the reader will notice similarities, especially in vocabulary. See also notes 2, 3 and 4 below.
2 This corresponds to Hirsch's "meaning" (1967:8). I have not used the vocable "meaning" to label meaning at any given level or of any given type. Instead, I have preferred to keep it as a general term which may be used as a synonym for any of the other levels or types.
3 This level corresponds roughly to Hirsch's "implication" (1967:62) = "an array of submeanings' of an utterance". For Hirsch (1967:63), "An implication belongs within a verbal meaning as a part belongs to a whole". He does not seem to distinguish between the meaning of a verbal sign (= sense, Level 1) and the meaning of the sense of that sign as itself a sign (Level 2).
4 This level corresponds in some ways to Hirsch's "significance" (1967:8), which "names a relationship between ... (a) meaning and a person, or a conception, or a situation, or indeed anything imaginable". For Hirsch (1967:63) "significance" is by "nature limitless". But see also note 5 below.
5 Hirsch does not distinguish this level or category from either "implication" or "significance", though it seems to be subsumed under the latter.
6 The move to application raises crucial questions about the relationship between texts and reality which are outside the scope of this paper (cf
Lategan & Vorster 1985). I beg to be given some latitude here! (See also 2.3 above.)

7 Actually, in all of these instances matrixing of like events or ideas is involved, since the correctness of any explicit explanation must always be assessed. See, e.g., Mark 3:11 and 22.

8 Fowler (1985) demonstrates that, in numerous instances, elements of the "story" function, in reality, at the level of "discourse" between author and reader. He says (1985:9-10), e.g., concerning Mark 1:14-15: "... while Jesus speaks, epitomizing his story-level message, the narrator is also speaking, epitomizing his discourse. No one in particular at the story level is said to have heard the proclamation of 1:14-15. It has no genuine setting at the story level; it functions only for the narratee, at the discourse level." Often such articulation of discourse can be detected by the lack of "uptake" in a conversation (Fowler 1985:45). "... the high priest's response in vv. 63-64 (of Mark 14) makes good sense as a response to the two words that Jesus without question utters: ego eimi ... I am suggesting that he does not even hear the Son of man statement, because it transcends the level of story, functioning only on the level of the discourse." See also Mark 14:27 (1985:25): "... Jesus quotes scripture to the disciples who are about to abandon him: 'And Jesus said to them, 'You will all stumble, because it is written, 'I will strike the shepherd, and the sheep will be scattered'. However, after I'm raised, I'll go ahead of you to Galilee'" (14:27-28 R [hoades] & M [ichic]). Immediately thereafter Peter responds to these words of Jesus, but the phrasing of his response is carefully limited so as to address only Jesus' prediction of their "stumbling". Peter is completely silent about the Old Testament quotation in 14:27, as well as silent about the haunting and enigmatic prediction of 14:28. It is as if he never heard the scripture quotation of 14:27 or the prediction of 14:28. Belo would call both the scripture quotation in v 27 and the prediction in v 28 "analytic": they are guides for reading, aimed principally at extra-narrative, not intra-narrative, narratees." Petersen (1984:44-45) makes the same point regarding the interplay between "story" and "discourse" from a slightly different point of view.

WORKS CONSULTED


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