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## Why Should We Try to Understand the Author's Intent When Interpreting the Bible?

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### #STRask - Stand to Reason

Questions about how to argue in favor of an “authorial intent” hermeneutic and why we don’t see more demon-possessed people today.

\* How would you argue in favor of an “authorial intent” hermeneutic as opposed to others?

\* Why don’t we see more demon-possessed people today?

### Transcript

(upbeat music) (bell dings) - I'm Amy Hall, I'm here with Greg Cokel, and you're listening to the #straskpodcast from Stand to Reason. Greg's waving at the camera. All right, here's a question from Daniel Karington.

How would you recommend arguing in favor of an authorial intent hermeneutic as opposed to any others? And what are some other common hermeneutics that people may use? - Well, the idea of an authorial intent is that we interpret a text based on what the author intended to mean with the words the author used. That's called authorial intent. And my defense is what other way is there to determine what an author had in mind.

Now, I know there's another way, and it's a postmodern subjectivistic relativistic way that doesn't care what the author meant, that you can just read a text however you want. That's a postmodern way of reading it. It's called in the postmodern lexicon deconstruction.

That is, you might take a text, you might take Mark Twain's Tom Sawyer, okay? And Mark Twain wrote this story about Tom Sawyer, and it has a plot, and he has an intention of communicating certain things. But you could read it and deconstruct it from a Marxist perspective. In other words, you read into it certain Marxist concepts that Samuel

Clemens, Mark Twain, had did not have in mind.

And then you let that be your story. Well, this is my interpretation of Tom Sawyer. But keep in mind, when one says that it's my interpretation, that's utterly subjective, you're not saying this is what Tom Sawyer is about, you're saying I'm making it into something else, okay? Now, that's completely ignoring authorial intent and deconstructing according to your own subjective way of thinking.

I actually listen to a terribly upsetting chapel at Biola University, as it turned out, unfortunately, of a woman who was reading the Beatitudes, Matthew 5, and deconstructing them according to liberation theology. That is, she's reading into it Marxist liberation theology. Now, this isn't what Jesus intended by those words, but it's what she intended.

And so you have this grotesque distortion of the text, but one could say, well, it's not a distortion 'cause she's not even trying to exegethe the text proper. She's doing this other thing. And my response is, well, you shouldn't be doing this other thing with Jesus' words.

Okay, that's why it was disgusting. And so those are the two options. Notice though, if you don't go with authorial intent with the Bible, then the Bible is no longer the Bible.

All the Bible is, there's a bunch of words that you can twist and turn into anything you want to say what you get out of it. And by the way, a lot of Christians do this in a certain sense, encourage this unintentionally. When they have Bible studies and they say, okay, here's a passage.

What does this passage mean to you? You should never ask that question because it doesn't matter what it means to the person, okay? What it matters is that what it meant to the person who under God's inspiration spoke certain ideas represented in certain words. If we take the Bible as God breathed, these are God's words, this entails that the verses have authorial intent, the author ultimately being God. God intends something particular.

This is captured in the first Peter chapter one, no, second Peter chapter one, where Peter says, in talking about broader revelation, he said, no prophecy of scripture is ever a matter of one's own interpretation for no scripture is ever given by an act of human will. And that's what he means by human interpretation. We always have to interpret everything we read.

But it's not just up to the human to make up the meaning is what Peter's saying, because God is the one by the Holy Spirit who worked through these authors. That's what he says. Men moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God, okay? So his point is scripture has a determined or determinate meaning that God intends and it's our job to

figure what that meaning is, figure out what that meaning is.

And if it's not our goal, why are we reading the Bible? Why don't we read the phone book? I mean, these numbers mean something different to me than they mean to you. This is the problem by the way of having a living constitution. This is a way a lot of people approach the constitution.

Well, this is alive. I think it's alive within the authorial intent. It's original intent.

And if it's not that, then it doesn't protect us. If it's just a matter of what people subjectively interpret it to mean, and they find all kinds of rights in the constitution that aren't really there, in the original sense of things, then they're just making it up as they go along and they're not protecting and preserving the constitution. So this habit can be applied in different ways.

One to the Bible, one to the constitution and it's the problematic in both cases because the original document has no inherent meaning of its own that is meant to guide and direct and to regulate us. It's just a jumping board, a springboard for us to make up our own interpretation. Okay.

So if you don't go with authorial intent, there is nothing left to go with except for your own whim. And who cares about your own whim? Why should I care about what it means to you? I care about what it means to me. You know, not what it means to you.

And so this is a problem with that approach. And what we ought to be asking is, what did Paul have in mind when under the Holy Spirit, he penned these words? What was he trying to communicate to us? And of course, when you and I go to the text, this is what we're trying to do. Here's what Paul says.

Paul's the authority, not us. We want to get his words right. The concept of using authorial intent now is controversial because subjectivism rules everything, even reading texts.

And I actually have a book that I studied called Them of the Pentitute that has a postscript in a later edition, which I own. And the whole thing you read it and here's this author's understanding of what the Pentateut is about. And in the postscript, he says, yeah, I don't really mean that anymore.

Because that was when I used to think that there was authorial intent. Now I realize that's not the way we read. Now we just find whatever, there is no right interpretation.

That's in the book. Okay. Now, of course, the problem is, how am I to understand his statement now about the way he reads his text? Am I supposed to take the authorial intent of that author in his comments about his writing now? Or can I just deconstruct that and say, what he's really saying is, everybody who doesn't live in Massachusetts is

going to hell.

Why don't you get that out of there? Well, that's the way I interpret it. Doesn't matter how I got it. It's just the way I subjectively interpret it.

See, if you're gonna go with that way, you can't even trust the words of authors and books who teach you, you should go that way. You know, no authorial intent isn't really the right way to go. Okay, is that your authorial intent? Maybe I could just say the opposite of what you say and that's what I get out of it.

You see the problem. So not only is it, language begins to lose its meaning in authoritative text, not begins to, it does. If you take, if you disregard authorial intent, but any instruction you might give regarding this issue, all the postmodern authors, Derrida, you know, leotard, the whole crowd, why should we trust anything they write as theirs? And why can't we reinterpret their thing like they're reinterpreting other things if their rules are their rules, are the appropriate way? So that's just one.

I think Daniel said what about others? This is the key one. This is foundational. This is the starting point.

Getting authorial intent sometimes is difficult. And this is why we practice the principle, never read a Bible verse, because that focuses in on the flow of thought in the context as critical in understanding the author's intent and what the author was trying to communicate. So there's two things right there that are foundational.

- I think it's pretty simple. If God was inspiring the writers to give us a particular message, then we should want to find out what that message is. I mean, that's the bottom line.

- The dot, right. - I want the message God was giving. I don't want the message that some random person is putting into it, including myself.

I don't want, I don't want to just make something up. Then what's the point of God inspiring the message? So the reason why we care about the authorial intent is because we care about truth and we care about reality. And this is where-- - And we believe God is the one who gets those things correct.

- Yes. - And communicates it to us. - Yes, but also we think there is a truth about spiritual things.

We think there's a reality about spiritual things. And this is where I think people, our even Christians can be very confused about this. We are making the claim, not that we think Christianity makes us happy or it makes us feel good or something we like.

We're saying that it's actually an element of reality and that there is a spiritual reality.

So I think if you look at it that way, all you have to do is ask yourself, if I were trying to create a spaceship to go to the moon, how would I read a math textbook? You wouldn't just put your own meaning into the math textbook because you're trying to match reality. - That's right.

- You're trying to match what really is. And if you start putting your own ideas into that math book and making up your own ideas, you're not gonna know the truth and you're not gonna match reality and you're certainly not going to know anything about the moon or how to get there. - Or just getting anywhere with a GPS.

It's the exact same concept because you have a map that represents allegedly the way the world actually is and you're using that representation to get to different places in the world. And if you didn't believe, if you didn't take seriously that this was an accurate representation, then you wouldn't use it. And if it wasn't an accurate representation, you wouldn't arrive at your destination.

So the lot caught up in that illustration, including you can test reality to see if the claims about reality are correct in a lot of ways, just like you drive and arrive, you know, kind of deal. But it's exactly parallel to your illustration about going to the moon. You know, we have to get reality right in order to traffic in reality, to navigate reality.

- So if somebody's asking you this question, I would just compare it to some, ask, you know, it could be math text, but it could be the GPS, it could be any of those things. - Phone book. - That actually are saying something true about reality because I think what you might get back from them is surprise and maybe they won't really understand.

That's different. And now you've come to the real problem. They don't think there is a spiritual truth and a spiritual reality in the same way that they think math is true.

- In many cases, but some cases might be just because they think, well, you're treating the Bible just like any other book. And in one sense, we are, in the sense that we gather information from the Bible, there's only one way to do that. It's the way language works.

Now, the information we get isn't any old information. It's God's word if we follow the authorial intent, if we don't, it's not even God's word. You can't even, and this is what happens when people quote verses out of context or promises that aren't there.

There's, they're not theirs. It's not even God's word anymore if you subjectivize it in that fashion, if you misuse it. - Right.

Okay, Greg, let's take a question from Josh. - Oh, we get two questions this time, huh? Okay. Josh.

- Seems that demon-possessed people were somewhat common when you read the gospel. So why don't we see these types of things today? - It's a little bit hard to answer.

I mean, basically we have conjecture, okay? We do have examples in the gospels of a number of demon-possessed people.

No, I don't know how many. I never counted them, it'd be interesting to see, is it as much as some people think? I mean, if you take into account parallel characterizations like in the Synoptic Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, where the same event is recorded a couple of times, I don't even know if there is any demon-possessed in John. Maybe you don't have that many.

You have the Gattering demoniac, you have the, after the Transfiguration, the boy in Gospel of Mark who was demon-possessed and mute and whatever. But how many of those are? - It does talk about, they're saying he's casting out demons by beals above the Prince of demons. So maybe he was-- - Maybe more common.

Anyway, so that's just a question. Then, but the other question is, I don't know that it's more common than it is now. Nowadays, people would not characterize the demonic manifestations that were evident there and some of them related to physical disabilities like deafness or muteness or what would probably be considered now convulsions or what do you call epileptic seizures.

They don't associate that with demonic possession. Now, I'm not saying that all seizures like that are demonic, but certainly some could be. But it's never taken into consideration 'cause the medical community doesn't even acknowledge the existence, characteristically, as a community, the existence of immaterial realities as features of separate personalities, as features of medical conditions.

There can be psychosomatic illnesses, but not invasions from some spirit being outside that's causing this manifestation. So maybe there are more examples of that nowadays. I think there was a song by the late Keith Green, very late now, died in 1982.

When I was in Thailand, as it turned out, I actually met him two or three times, but he had a song called, I think no one believes you anymore. It was about the devil has free reign in a culture that doesn't believe he exists. He can do whatever he wants.

And nobody's gonna attribute it to him because they're philosophically disinclined to acknowledge that it's the devil doing this. And so if the devil comes on too strong, like radical manifestations, head spinning and stuff like that, a demon possessed people, then it's supernatural. And so he's not gonna show his hand and it might be that he's just laying low with manifestations because there's no sense alerting a largely materialistic culture to the reality of spirit beings in the immaterial realm.

Okay? This is working out just fine for him. So there's no sense doing that. Now, when you have a culture that is deeply committed to the existence of the supernatural, then you're gonna have more manifestations of supernatural control.

That's obvious because that feels like you can't get away, you can't escape that control. Now I lived in Thailand, I think I just mentioned 1982 and seven months and a big part of their, whether it's a Buddhist country largely, but animism is what drives the visceral convictions of the people. And so there are all these different things that they do, amulets they have and little, all kinds of particulars that are meant to managing control the spirit world because you got these real spirits.

How do you keep them from taking your children or controlling you and so, will you name your kid frog? 'Cause he's not so gop, you know? It's like, no, demon's gonna want a kid with a name of gop, you know, or something like that. It's kind of crazy, but notice that the attempt is to manipulate the demons and it's not a denial of the demons, okay? And so the demons can be really powerful and can control you how do we manage the demons. That's what you get in a spiritist culture.

So a lot, I think could be attributed to speculation now just from the devil's perspective to strategic concerns. It does say in Ephesians 6 that the devil has schemes, okay? And other passages, so we are not ignorant of his schemes. And so he does think strategically.

And so if he can accomplish his goal by hiding Western civilization, then he's gonna do that. If he accomplishes his goal by manifest himself with overwhelming power, more pagan or animistic cultures, then he's gonna do that. So that might be a consideration.

You also have one other thing, and that is that Jesus, the time of Jesus was unique in a lot of ways. Jesus obviously unique. And so he's doing all these miracles.

And it's a mistake to say that the kind of things that Jesus did all the time routinely, it seemed, is a kind of thing that Christian should be doing all the time routinely. Jesus also attracted a lot of spiritual attention. Just about his person, the incarnate God, the Emmanuel God with us.

That just was a very unique time. And so some of the unique nature of the appearances, manifestations of demons may be attributed to the fact that this was the unique time with Jesus too. - Well, thanks, Greg.

I actually have another question about spirits, but I'm gonna save it for the next episode since we're at 20 minutes. So everyone can come back for the next episode, and we'll talk a little bit more about this topic. All right, thank you, Daniel.

Thank you, Josh. We appreciate hearing from you. Send us your question on Twitter with the hashtag #strask or go through our website.

Just go to the #straskpodcast page and you'll find a link there to give us your question. Thank you for listening. We're glad you are, and we're thankful for your questions.

This is Amy Hall and Greg Cogle for Stand to Reason. (bell dings)

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