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Q&A#65 Did the Scriptural Authors Intend their Figural Meanings?

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Today's question:

"I'm wondering to what degree you believe that the original authors of the text(s) were deliberately employing [analogies, types, themes, metaphors, "word pictures", etc.]? Was the intellectual complexity that you perceive present in the original authorship context, or has the Spirit has orchestrated a significantly bigger picture than those authors could have ever intended?

For example, on your recent answer to the Pool of Bethesda question, you draw attention to and relevance from the 38-year infirmity of the healed man, and offer a many-minutes-long unpacking of the significance of that number and how it fits the oft-employed water theme in the book of John, etc. My question(s), as applied to this particular situation, would be something like the following:

- Was the man really suffering for exactly 38 years, or did John just pick a number that fit the metaphor he intended to convey?
- Did John know the significance of 38 years. Was he intentionally communicating as deeply as [you believe], or is that depth something the Spirit applies "at a layer above", that is, across the larger biblical narrative?"

See my discussion of John 5 here: <https://alastairadversaria.com/2018/09/29/video-whats-the-deal-with-the-weird-healing-pool-in-john-5/>.

If you have any questions, you can leave them on my Curious Cat account: <https://curiouscat.me/zugzwanged>.

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Transcript

Welcome back. Today's question is, I'm wondering to what degree you believe that the original authors of the text were deliberately employing the various devices of biblical analogies, types, themes, metaphors, word pictures, etc. Was the intellectual complexity that you perceive present in the original author's context, or has the Spirit orchestrated a significantly bigger picture than those authors could have ever intended? For example, on your recent answer to the Pool of Bethesda question, you draw attention to and relevance from the 38-year infirmity of the healed man, and offer a many minutes long unpacking of the significance of that number, and how it fits the often played water theme in the Book of John, etc.

My question, as applied to this particular situation, would be something like the following. Was the man really suffering for exactly 38 years, or did John just pick a number that fit the metaphor he intended to convey? Second, did John know the significance of 38 years? Was he intentionally communicating as deeply as you believe? Or is that depth something the Spirit applies at a layer above, that is, across the larger biblical narrative? First of all, on the more general question, I believe that there are occasions when the meaning of the biblical text is not limited to the author's intent, but can go beyond it. And that's in part because of the unfolding of context.

And context is something that is temporal in character in many respects, and can unfold over time. As scripture is one book, and it's given over a period of time, there are certain things that come later that place earlier material in a new context, and change its meaning in certain respects. Change its meaning not by adding something in that wasn't there before, but by expanding the context.

So, for instance, if we read the story of David fleeing from Absalom after his coup, David crosses the Brook Kidron, he ascends the Mount of Olives and is weeping, and he's attended by a small band of people with him, and ministered to by a zebra at the top of the Mount of Olives. There's a confrontation with Shimei, throwing stones, and then Abishai wants to kill Shimei, and David prevents him. And all these different themes are taking place.

And I imagine that the first author of Samuel recognized that there was something going on here, that there was more to the text than just the surface meaning would suggest. But I don't believe that they would have realized exactly what that meant, its full meaning. When it's drawn into a broader context, we see that relating to the story of Christ.

As Christ leaves Jerusalem with his band of disciples, crosses the Brook Kidron, ascends the Mount of Olives, weeping, and there's ministering angels that come at that point. There's the crowd that comes to capture him, and then his right-hand man, Peter, tries to strike the high priest's servant. And so there are these parallels taking place, which then lead us to go back to that passage in 2 Samuel and read it with new eyes, to see in that passage a deeper meaning that we might have originally seen.

Now did the original author intend that? No, I don't believe they did. I believe that they probably recognized that there was more to this passage, but they did not fully appreciate what was there. That requires the unfolding of context by the spirit, as the spirit expands the word of scripture over time, and then we can read back these previous statements, these previous passages, and see in them a lot more than we first did.

That's just the development of these themes in scripture. When we come to John 5 and many other such passages, I believe that the authors did intend these deeper meanings. Something like 38 years of wandering in the wilderness is not after the sin of not entering into the land properly.

That's not an obscure fact. That's a fact that everyone should really know within that context. And when the Gospels give us numbers like that, they are very often numbers that are given great significance.

So the woman who has the issue of blood for 12 years, Jairus' daughter is 12 years old. Anna is 84 years old, 7 times 12. You have things like we're told the exact number of fish that were caught in John 21.

We're told that the man is 38 years with this infirmity. All these different cases suggest that these numbers are not given accidentally. We're supposed to pay attention.

And as we pay attention, these numbers will start to reveal themselves, the deeper significance of what's taking place. So I don't believe that John was unaware of the significance of this number. He isn't wasting his breath in giving us this detail.

There is so much within the Gospel of John and the Gospels more generally, and also in Acts, where numbers have significance and they're given weight. They're mentioned for the purpose of creating connections. So Jairus' daughter or the woman with the issue of blood, they're connected with Israel.

Or we have the number of the generations that are given of Jesus. Three sets of 14. 42.

42 is, if we counted that in months, it would be three and a half years. It would be one hundred one thousand two hundred and sixty days. It will be a time, time and half the times.

These things are not accidental. It's six times seven. All of these details are supposed to

be recognized.

We're supposed to think about them. We're supposed to think about how many generations there are leading to Christ in Luke three. We're supposed to think about the significance of 40 days in the wilderness.

All of these details are not accidental or 40 days that leads up to the ascension. Every single one of these details has some sort of significance. And the gospel authors routinely use these things or draw attention to them.

So we should expect that they know what they're all about. They're not putting in these details without thought. Do I think he was actually infirm for 38 years? Yes, I do.

But what we do need to recognize is that these events are not just bare recording of facts. The authors of the gospels and the authors of other parts of scripture are purposefully drawing certain facts to prominence in order to help us to draw the connections. So it's not just the event, the bare event in itself.

And many people have talked about typology as if typology is located in the bare event, person, event or person or institution and their connection with something later on. But the textual mediation is very important. It's the textual mediation that particularly helps us to see how these things are orchestrated together, how they connect.

And so you could tell the story of the healing of that man in a way that dulled every single one of the connections with the Exodus story. But John tells it in a way that brings those parallels to the forefront. And in a number of ways, he wants us to recognize that connection.

Now, he could tell the story differently. And if he told the story differently, we probably wouldn't see it at all. And so it is an intentional communication that's taking place.

The fact that it's 38 years, that is a fact. But the significance of that fact is not just that that is the actual fact, but it's the fact that John has drawn that fact to our attention, that that fact is going to help us to get a grip upon what this event means. The other thing to notice in John is that John is a book of signs, that Jesus' healings are not just general acts of power over nature, his power of healing, exorcism, that sort of thing.

They are signs. They represent some deeper meaning. They disclose something about Christ's identity, about his purpose, about the mission of the church, whatever it is.

So when there's a miraculous catch of fish in John 21, as I mentioned earlier, that is not accidental. It happens as a sign of something more. It happens as a sign of the age of the church and the role of the apostles in that.

So when we're reading through the book of John, we should recognize that these events,

these miracles are not just, wow, look what Jesus did, look at his power. But Jesus is doing an act that is meaningful and that has miraculous character to it on most occasions. But that miraculous character is not the only point or even the main point.

The main point is that we should see in this action a reality being disclosed. So the feeding of the five thousand and the walking on the water, those are Exodus themes associated with the manna. And then Jesus goes into the manna discourse after that.

Or we can have the turning of the water into wine. Jesus is the bridegroom who does what the bridegroom is supposed to do and provides wine for the feast. He brings wine in the place of water.

Where Moses turned the water into blood, Jesus turns it into wine. And so instead of a sort of curse coming, there's a sort of blessing that comes through Christ's advent. Christ's advent is the arrival of the bridegroom.

And so when we read accounts of miracles or signs in the gospel of John, I think we should expect that John is witting as to what's going on. He knows what's going on. He's bringing certain details to our attention, not just recording the bare historical facts, but he wants us to see the significance of what Jesus is doing.

He wants us to recognise that Jesus is not just performing a miraculous action, but in that action he is disclosing a deeper truth about his kingdom, who he is, or the mission of the church and the spirit. I hope this helps. There's a lot more that could be said on this subject and I've opened up a number of questions here I'm sure that people would be interested in exploring in some greater detail at a later point.

If you found this helpful, please consider subscribing and maybe even supporting me using my Patreon account. It makes it possible for me to make videos like this on a very regular basis. And also, if you would like to ask any questions, you can leave them on my Curious Cat account and I'll leave the links for both of those below.

I'm going to be away for the next few days, but Lord willing I'll be back early next week. God bless and thank you for listening.