INTENTION AND INTERPRETATION OF THE BIBLE:
SUMMARIZED SCRIPT

by

Aaron Jung
SID 400488784
Christian Theology

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Introduction

During my first summer as a PhD student, I became deeply fascinated by the process of infant language development, exploring how human intention forms and intertwines with the use of language. My initial study concluded with a desire to expand this investigation, particularly into hermeneutical discussions about interpreting texts with regard to authorial intention. I believe this subject holds significance in four key ways.

First, Ferdinand de Saussure's assertion that "[t]he bond between the signifier and the signified is arbitrary" often leads scholars to focus solely on the lack of a natural connection between the two. While this idea has profoundly influenced structuralist and poststructuralist thought, a critical nuance is frequently overlooked: the arbitrariness of the sign depends on human agency, whether as its creator or selector.

Second, the question of intention remains a point of vigorous debate across disciplines like philosophy, literary studies, and linguistics, yet no consensus has been reached despite its crucial role in interpreting texts.

Third, even within linguistics, intention is rarely explored. For instance, Systemic Functional Linguistics scarcely addresses the intentionality of language.

Fourth, the history of biblical interpretation is, in many ways, a history of interpreting intention. Even studies ostensibly focused on meaning often invoke authorial intent—either abruptly at the conclusion or explicitly from the outset—without a robust methodological framework.

One note in advance: Part II of this paper, offering a more linguistically rigorous analysis, will be presented at the upcoming ETS Conference. Today's presentation, as Part I, focuses on broader hermeneutical perspectives. I hope this discussion proves meaningful not only for

colleagues engaged with biblical texts but also for those involved with church communities, social phenomena, or ideological studies.

Authorial Intention from Antiquity to Modernity

Discussions about the relationship between text and authorial intention date back to the Hellenistic period, beginning with Plato. He depicted authors as conduits of divine inspiration. Over time, this theocentric view shifted. By Aristotle's era, interpretation began centering on the connection between an author's intention, the text, and its audience. Ralf Grüttemeier, to whom I am indebted for the premodern discussion of this paper, succinctly encapsulates the ancient perspective: "The author must try to say what had to be said, and the interpreter must read what had to be read from the text." This prescriptive approach resonates with Immanuel Kant's interpretative framework, where a single correct meaning transcends the author's expressive limitations and converges on rational and moral truth. Kant even suggested that an interpreter could discern an intention more clearly and coherently than the author, offering a more accurate reading than the author might have conceived.

This notion of a "better interpretation" was developed further by Friedrich Schleiermacher, who emphasized the critic's role in uncovering the author's intention. According to Schleiermacher, a skilled interpreter could articulate the author's intent more fully than the author themselves. He argued that textual interpretation is guided by "regularities and rules within the artwork that the author may not have consciously recognized."

Russian Formalists similarly approached texts through structural and literary analysis rather than focusing on authorial intent. Roman Jakobson and Viktor Shklovsky emphasized the inherent features of literature, such as narrative structure and literary devices. Shklovsky,

especially, noted how Cervantes' depiction of Don Quixote evolved from foolishness to wisdom, driven by the narrative's demands rather than Cervantes' original intent. For formalists, authorial intention was accessible but ultimately subordinate to the structures and devices governing literature.

A major shift in how we view authorial intention came with W. K. Wimsatt and Monroe C. Beardsley's essay, "The Intentional Fallacy," and the rise of New Criticism. They emphasized the autonomous and aesthetic value of the text, arguing that poetry, unlike practical messages, does not rely on the author's intention for interpretation. They asserted that a text is "detached from the author at birth" and exists beyond the author's control, with the author's design or intention being "neither available nor desirable" as a standard for judgment. This approach discouraged prescriptive interpretations, favoring a descriptive, technical, and aesthetic focus.

In contrast, E. D. Hirsch argued for the centrality of authorial intent in textual interpretation, countering Wimsatt and Beardsley. Similarly, Walter Michaels and Steven Knapp claimed that "the meaning of a text is simply identical to the author's intended meaning." Their pro-intentional stance influenced scholars like Stanley Fish, while Charles Altieri critiqued "The Intentional Fallacy" in his essay, "The Fallacy of 'Fallacy,'" offering an alternative understanding of intention in literary theory.

On the other hand, Roland Barthes proclaimed the "death of the author," arguing that meaning is created by the reader's engagement with the text. He viewed writing as a dynamic interaction of multiple influences, with the text's unity stemming from its reader, not its author. Barthes famously concluded, "the birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the Author."

Michel Foucault introduced the "author-function," describing it as shaped by interpretive practices rather than being rooted in an individual's intentions. He cautioned against replacing the author's authority with that of the text itself.

Not all poststructuralists rejected authorial intent. Paul de Man critiqued New Criticism for dismissing intention. He claimed that the aesthetic act creates a "closed and autonomous structure" where intention operates to unify the text.

Now, I will briefly address how these concepts have been treated within the field of linguistics, focusing particularly on intention-centered linguistic models. Among these, the most prominent is speech act theory, heavily influenced by Ludwig Wittgenstein's perspective on goal-oriented language. Wittgenstein's synthesis of language and action across diverse contexts is epitomized in his concept of the "language game."

Significantly, even before the formalization of speech act theory, Adolf Reinach, in 1913, introduced a preliminary concept of performative utterance. Similarly, Karl Bühler, in his exploration of linguistic structures, addresses *Sprechhandlung*, which means, speech acts. Bühler observes that "The immediate target of intention for all signals is the behavior of the recipient."

Speech act theory was fully developed through John L. Austin's Oxford and Harvard lectures, later published posthumously as *How to Do Things with Words*. Austin argues that "the issuing of the utterance is the performing of an action." Within this framework, language use constitutes a form of social behavior. Austin identifies three key components of a speech act: the locutionary act, referring to the production of the utterance itself; the illocutionary act, representing the intended social action; and the perlocutionary act, describing the behavioral outcome elicited by the utterance. For Austin, the success of a speech act often depends on the alignment between the speaker's intention and the listener's interpretation, a notion he explores

through his discussion of "infelicities." Thus, within the framework of speech act theory, understanding the author's intention is critical.

H. P. Grice proposes principles for interpreting a speaker's intention, introducing the concept of conversational implicatures. These implicatures involve inferring implicit meaning in conversation through adherence to the cooperative principle, articulated through four maxims: quantity, quality, relation, and manner.

John R. Searle advanced speech act theory by extending Austin's framework and also explored indirect speech establishing on Grice's view. Particularly noteworthy is Searle's work on intentionality. According to Searle, intentionality refers to the property of various mental states characterized by their directedness or aboutness toward objects or states of affairs in the world. Searle emphasizes that intentionality is not confined to deliberate intentions for action but includes a broad range of mental phenomena, such as desires, fears, and hopes. Searle considers intentionality a fundamental element in interpreting texts, even suggesting that meaning itself is an aspect of intentionality.

Jacques Derrida critically examines Austin's views on speech act theory and explores the intricate relationship between intention and text—a discourse that subsequently sparked a series of intriguing debates with Searle. He frequently employs the terms "intention to signify" and "intention of signification" in his discussion. Using the concept of a "signature," he illustrates how texts retain a connection to their author while functioning autonomously. Much like a signature on a document, which identifies the author without requiring their physical presence, writing communicates meaning independently of the writer's original context or intentions.

Contrary to Austin's assertion that speech acts rely heavily on context to function effectively, Derrida argues that context is never entirely stable or predictable. He highlights the

iterability of language—the capacity for language to be repeated across diverse situations. As Derrida explains, "in order to be legible, a signature must have a repeatable, iterable, imitable feature; it must be able to detach itself from the present and singular intention of its production." Furthermore, he asserts that every expression is capable of citation, irrespective of its original context or intention. For him, words and sentences can always be reused in new contexts, acquiring interpretations beyond the original intentions of the author or speaker.

Reconsiderations

We have reviewed the evolving perspectives on authorial intention, moving from pre-Kantian prescriptive approaches to Schleiermacher and Russian formalism's technical methods, followed by Wimsatt and Beardsley's rejection of authorial intent in favor of textual autonomy. We also noted the subsequent revival of interest in authorial intention, alongside theories emphasizing the death of the author and the centrality of the reader, as well as linguistic models foregrounding intention.

These shifts do not follow a single trajectory but reflect a diversification of approaches. Given this diversity, it would be reductive to claim any one perspective as the absolute truth. The relationship between intention and text remains open to varied interpretations, shaped by the priorities and methods of individual scholars. While interpretive freedom should not be unduly constrained, clarifying key concepts and understanding the basis for these differing views may help bridge gaps and offer guidance, particularly for biblical scholars.

Reconsideration on Intention

Ideas on intention and text offer relatively clear definitions of author and reader, leaving little room for disagreement. The real divergence lies in how intention, text, and context are understood, shaped by differing academic perspectives. Modern scholarship generally views intention as an intrapersonal mental element, distinct from ancient Greek notions of divine will or socially normative intent.

Wimsatt and Beardsley define intention as a "design or plan in the author's mind," emphasizing its structured and aesthetic nature. However, they also broaden its scope by linking it to the author's attitudes, feelings, and motivations for writing. They further categorize textual elements as internal evidence and intention as external evidence, coining the phrase "evidence for meaning." Searle, in contrast, situates intention within the broader concept of intentionality, describing it as inherently directed toward external objects. While it is reasonable to view intention as a mental, intrapersonal element, we must avoid conflating it with unrelated mental factors or blurring its boundaries.

I define intention as the driving force behind text production, realized through the deliberate selection of textual elements and culminating in an anticipated action—whether directed toward oneself or the reader—upon the text's delivery. Intention not only serves as evidence for interpreting meaning but also guides all linguistic choices in meaning-making.

Reconsideration on Text

Let's now address reconciling differing perspectives on the text. To begin, we must revisit the concepts of objectivity and subjectivity in text interpretation. Wimsatt and Beardsley advocated for "the way of objective criticism," arguing against seeking authorial intent. This raises two key

questions: Can their approach truly be considered objective? And, even if so, should our ultimate goal be objective interpretation?

There is little disagreement that texts are human-made products. As such, they inherently reflect subjective choices in both their creation and interpretation. Even when a text lacks explicit information about the author, readers approach the text subjectively, filtered through their own linguistic systems. However, rather than projecting their intentions onto the text, interpreters may need to understand the intentions behind the text as shaped by the author's linguistic and cultural framework. While fully discerning these intentions may be impossible, striving to do so remains a responsible approach.

One could argue that interpreters are free to approach a text objectively or subjectively. However, all texts carry embedded intentions through the author's choices made during the text production, whether paradigmatic—selecting among possible expressions—or syntagmatic—organizing these expressions into coherent sequences. Disregarding these linguistic intentions can stem either from ignorance or a deliberate choice to ignore them.

This also leads us to reflect on the various types of texts and the distinct interpretive demands they entail. Wimsatt and Beardsley focused on poetry and novels, prioritizing aesthetic value while excluding authorial intent. In contrast, Grüttemeier, examining legal texts, argues for the importance of understanding authorial intention. These examples suggest that interpretive methods are not universal but vary based on the nature of the text.

Texts, as human-made products, also reflect both internal content and external production factors—what Wimsatt and Beardsley called "evidence for meaning." Texts inherently embody content, which always implies at least one context. This context may represent the author's environment or depict a story unrelated to the author, such as historical novels that portray past

eras or fantasy novels that depict entirely fictional worlds. Nevertheless, even the most fantastical works often reflect some degree of reality, a tendency amplified in biblical studies. For instance, despite its fantastical imagery, Revelation is widely interpreted as reflecting concrete realities.

Texts entirely devoid of reality would merely be random linguistic assemblies, but even incoherent or inconsistent stories, such as those crafted under the influence of alcohol or madness, often reflect some specific context. The Bible, with its intellectual and structural complexity, is neither random nor incoherent. It contains layers of context: Paul's letters reflect his immediate circumstances, while Old Testament historical books depict contexts predating their authors.

A common misconception is that interpreters can freely view a text from an omniscient perspective. However, this freedom is grounded in the author's explicit structuring of information and shared knowledge between author and reader. For example, a reader follows the narrative's pacing, whether it accelerates in Exodus 1 or slows in John 12, and naturally emphasizes highlighted details. While interpreters may selectively focus on certain parts of the text, the act of observing inherently follows the internal design established by the author.

Next, let's consider the external purposes behind the production or use of texts as human-made products. The intended purpose often determines how a product is used. For instance, an umbrella is specifically designed to provide shelter from rain, while a cap allows for more flexible uses, unconstrained by specific conditions. Some items, like a ball, are even more versatile, able to be kicked, rolled, or thrown. But are there any human-made products entirely devoid of purpose?

In rare cases, like a lump of clay shaped by a child or a randomly drawn picture, there may be no clear intention. However, such items typically lack structural complexity. More intricate products almost always serve at least one specific purpose. Even relatively simple products may allow for varied uses, but it is unlikely that something created with significant effort and complexity would lack any intended purpose. Even descriptive texts like novels— often free from normative constraints—usually aim to convey aesthetic, playful, or artistic value, or to reflect life in some meaningful way.

Consider another example: while natural resources can be used freely, refined materials like processed lumber or iron ore have more defined applications. Although refinement may increase their functionality, their potential uses are inherently limited compared to their natural state. Texts function similarly. Pure, unstructured sounds offer limitless potential uses, but once organized through grammar and structure, their purpose becomes more defined, shaped by the design choices involved.

What we must consider is the distinction between text types: in the case of a normative text, the author's intention takes precedence, whereas with non-normative texts, interpreters may exercise greater autonomy. This distinction explains why Wimsatt and Beardsley emphasized aesthetic value in their analysis of poetic texts, while Grüttemeier underscored the authority of the author in his study of legal texts. Consequently, discerning whether the Bible is understood as a normative text is crucial, as the interpretive approach will diverge based on this perspective.

Reconsideration on Context

The significance of context in understanding meaning within biblical interpretation is widely recognized today. However, the depth of analysis regarding how context shapes authorial

intention has not progressed to the same degree. Despite James Barr's emphasis on the critical role of context, modern biblical scholarship has frequently neglected to engage in rigorous and nuanced examinations of this concept.

Stanley E. Porter aptly noted, "linguistic research has called into serious question the notion of the autonomous text that is said to exist without context." While a full discussion of context is beyond the scope of this essay, I propose three key types of context relevant to understanding authorial intention: first, the social context influencing the author; second, the actual or imagined social context described within the text; third, the linguistic co-text—nearby textual elements shaping meaning. Each of these plays a critical role, though in this paper I will focus on the first type: the author's social context.

Scholarly debates often suffer from a lack of consensus on the concept of context, leading to unnecessary disputes. For example, Austin and Derrida both addressed the author's social context but from contrasting perspectives. Austin viewed context as stable and excluded "non-serious" contexts from his framework. Derrida, however, saw context as limitless and inherently unstable, with texts generating ever-new meanings. While Austin focused on fixed conditions, Derrida emphasized phenomenological elements like iterability and différance, framing interpretation as a continually new event. Yet, we need to see language is shaped not only by shifting contexts but also by conventions and codes. Even within seemingly infinite contexts, patterns emerge that allow for categorization.

Given the ancient nature of the Bible, identifying the author's social context significantly limited. Consequently, interpreters primarily depend on the descriptions of social contexts within the text and intertext and the linguistic co-texts. Even within these domains, evidence for the author's intention frequently appears contradictory. For instance, what was Paul's intention in

addressing the law to the Jewish community? Whom was he criticizing in Galatians? Did the New Testament authors intend Hellenistic or Hebraic meanings in particular expressions? Faced with such constrained data, interpreters must approach the text with caution, eschew conjecture, and prioritize a careful analysis of multilayered contexts while giving due consideration to the author's explicitly stated intentions.

Only after this groundwork can we examine how the author's context interacts with the reader's. Social-scientific approaches, for instance, explore how social, religious, and political factors shaped collective identities in a context group. Critical studies, such as feminist or postcolonial readings, often critique contexts unintentionally portrayed by the author or evaluate contexts the author intended to address, and bring it into today's context. The challenge arises when interpreters prioritize contemporary critical agendas without thoughtfully linking the three types of contexts and authorial intention. This disconnect can result in miscommunication among the author, text, and reader, as readers may project or impose their own frameworks and intentions onto the text. Wimsatt and Beardsley's critique of "affective fallacy" reminds us that reader-centered approaches risk becoming overly subjective. This caution underscores the need for balance in connecting context, intention, and interpretation.

Conclusion

In light of the preceding discussions, I will now clarify my position and conclude Part 1 of this paper. I may need to identify myself as an anti-intentionalist, based on the belief that claiming to fully discern an author's intention from a text is almost always misleading. Intentions often operate across multiple layers, and even authors themselves may struggle to fully articulate or understand their own intentions. Language choices can unintentionally diverge from an author's original intent,

and authors may deliberately conceal or indirectly express their ideas. Intentions can also shift over the course of writing, resulting in discrepancies between initial and final intentions. Given these complexities, no one—except God—can fully comprehend every facet of an author's intention. However, this does not mean we should abandon the effort to discern intent. On the contrary, I strongly advocate for rigorous and careful analysis to approximate the author's intent as closely as possible. In this sense, I am decidedly an intentionalist.

Unfortunately, the history of modern biblical interpretation has often displayed undue confidence in discerning authorial intention. While interpretations may be subjected to scientific rigor, discussions on intention are often neglected, with conclusions jumping prematurely to assertions about the author's intent. Even New Criticism, which emphasizes close reading, and its intellectual descendants, such as narrative criticism, have largely overlooked the complexities of layered and evolving intentions. These approaches have often settled for basic structural observations and literary analysis without developing robust methodologies for addressing the multifaceted nature of intention.

I argue that while New Criticism emphasized close reading, the careful discernment of intention necessitates attentive listening. First and foremost, we must listen to the text itself, particularly respecting authorial intentions explicitly stated in it. To put it simply, we must extend trust to the authorial voice. This principle applies equally to written and spoken texts. In everyday conversations, we often hastily infer a speaker's intent or dismiss their explicit statements in favor of our own experience and assumptions. Yet, prudent listening requires respect for others and humility about our own limitations. Since Schleiermacher, critical analysis has often presupposed that interpreters are better equipped to understand a text than its author. Instead, we should approach texts with humility—embracing the author's explicit statements on their intention which

may operate within circumstances beyond our knowledge and remaining open to the possibility of our own ignorance regarding the challenges the author may have faced in conveying their intention.

Second, we must practice attentive listening to the multilayered contexts surrounding the text. In biblical studies, the availability of ancient contextual data is often limited, and the text itself frequently serves as the primary source for understanding its context. Supplementary materials, such as adjacent texts, are often of uncertain date and provenance. A promising avenue for further exploration lies in analyzing the internal context—examining the semantic details of situations described within the text and the logical relationships between co-texts. This work requires a strong foundation in linguistic methodologies. While some may question the applicability of modern linguistic theories to ancient texts, we face two choices: either to engage with linguistic frameworks developed through careful deliberation and research or to disregard them entirely. While linguistics cannot answer every question, it remains an indispensable tool. Additionally, approaches like historical-critical or social-scientific methods can complement linguistic analysis in addressing specific questions. The key lies in selecting methodologies that are most suited to addressing the specific questions at hand.

Finally, we must carefully classify and consider nuanced types of intention. These detailed classifications, much like discussions on context, demand a deep understanding of linguistic structures and processes. For a more comprehensive exploration of these complexities, we turn to Part II of this discussion, which will be presented at the ETS New Testament Greek Language and Exegesis section. I look forward to seeing you there.