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## The Importance of Authorial Intention

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## The Importance of Authorial Intention

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# THE IMPORTANCE OF AUTHORIAL INTENTION

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Donald W. Parry

**Abstract:** *It is important when evaluating the words of others to consider the intention of their writing. It also does not hurt to consider what may go on behind the scenes before an article (or a book review) even reaches a particular readership.*

I recently penned a review of *The Vision of All: Twenty-Five Lectures on Isaiah in Nephi's Record*, a book by Joseph M Spencer.<sup>1</sup> Josh Sears, a colleague of Spencer's, felt compelled to take issue with certain portions of my review.<sup>2</sup> Rather than respond to Sears's arguments point by point (and continue to drag this discussion out), I will briefly express matters in general terms, specifically by examining the concept of authorial intention.

The concept of authorial intentionality is a topic of great interest as well as controversy.<sup>3</sup> To demonstrate that author intentionality continues to hold significance to biblical scholars, view the following words of the eminent biblical scholar and literary critic, Meir Sternberg:

As interpreters of the Bible, our only concern is with “embodied” or “objectified” intention; and that forms a different business altogether, about which a wide measure of agreement has always existed. In my own view, such intention fulfills a crucial role, for communication presupposes a speaker who resorts to certain linguistic and structural tools in order to produce

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1. Donald W. Parry, “An Approach to Isaiah Studies,” *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 34 (2020), 245-64.

2. Joshua M. Sears, “An Other Approach to Isaiah Studies,” *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 37 (2020), 1-20.

3. Clarissa Breu, editor, *Biblical Exegesis without Authorial Intention? Interdisciplinary Approaches to Authorship and Meaning* (Boston: Brill, 2019).

certain effects on the addressee; the discourse accordingly supplies a network of clues to the speaker's intention.<sup>4</sup>

To provide an example of authorial intent, consider the opening paragraphs of an article I published in 2010, titled "Hannah in the Presence of the Lord":

The Hannah pericope features representative characteristics of a narrative: a plot structure with an exposition, a conflict and resolution; a comparison and contrast of characters; and a narrator's evaluative point of view. The narrative is dialogical; the narrator cites the words of Elkanah (1 Samuel 1:8, 23), Hannah (1 Samuel 1:11, 15–16, 18, 22, 26), and Eli (1 Samuel 1:14, 17). The pericope also contains linguistic forms that are characteristic of biblical narratives, such as chronological markers and multiple examples of *waw* conjunctions, articles, and object markers. Similar to other biblical narrators, the narrator of the Hannah story is omniscient. The narrator knows the precise words uttered by Hannah, Elkanah, and Eli, is aware of a particularly personal and private matter — that the Lord shut up Hannah's womb, and the narrator is even cognizant of the thoughts of the characters in his story, for Eli *thought* that Hannah was drunk.

In this narrative, Hannah's character zone is greater than others, including her rival wife Peninnah and the story's male characters, Elkanah, Hannah's husband, Eli the chief priest of the Shiloh cultus, and Samuel, the boy destined to become one of Israel's great prophets. The Hannah story is much more than a birth narrative in which all events are designed to lead up to the hero's birth, for the episodes focus on Hannah, a relatively obscure woman who would rise to fame because of her great faith in Israel's God. The Hannah-centric nature of the narrative is as follows — Hannah's husband, his genealogy and his piety (1 Samuel 1:1, 3); Hannah and the rival wife's introduction (1 Samuel 1:2; Hannah is mentioned first); the priests of the temple (1 Samuel 1:3); Hannah's closed womb (1 Samuel 1:5); Hannah's depression (LXX 1 Samuel 1:6); Hannah's weeping (1 Samuel 1:7); conflict between Hannah and Peninnah (1 Samuel 1:5–7);

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4. Meir Sternberg, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative: Ideological Literature and the Drama of Reading* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), 9.

Elkanah and Hannah’s serious conversation followed by eating and drinking (1 Samuel 1:8–9); Hannah’s prayer and vow (1 Samuel 1:10–12); Hannah and Eli’s first interaction (1 Samuel 1:13–18); the Lord’s remembrance of Hannah and her conception (1 Samuel 1:19–20); Hannah’s decision to remain home during Elkanah’s second pilgrimage to nurse Samuel (1 Samuel 1:21–24a); Hannah’s journey to take Samuel to Shiloh’s temple and present him to Eli, fulfilling her vow (1 Samuel 1:24–28a); Hannah’s worship (4QSam<sup>a</sup> 1:28b); and Hannah’s Song (1 Samuel 2:1–10).<sup>5</sup>

After reading the title and the opening two paragraphs, the reader should know the intent of my article; however, if the reader misses my intent, the thesis statement sums up the objective of the writing: “The chief goal of this paper is to examine Hannah’s relative position in the narrative . . . ”<sup>6</sup>

My primary intent in the review of Spencer’s book pertains to the concept that Jesus Christ (who “is the Jehovah of the Old Testament”<sup>7</sup>), was of paramount importance to the prophet Isaiah. In the review I titled one section, “Searching for Jesus Christ in Isaiah’s Text.”<sup>8</sup> Then I wrote, “First and foremost, I wish to briefly (*briefly*, because this is a book review and not a scholarly article or monograph) make a case for the distinct presence of Jesus Christ in Isaiah’s text.”<sup>9</sup> Note the use of the superlative expression *first and foremost*. My primary intent, my *authorial intent*, was to demonstrate Jesus in Isaiah’s text. In order to establish that intent, I set forth seventeen different categories that establish that Isaiah’s book focuses on Jesus Christ. The seventeen include Messianic prophecies, the name *Jehovah*, equivalent designations in the Old and New Testaments, names and titles of God, theophoric names, types and shadows, revelatory speech forms, self-identification declarations, witnesses of Jesus Christ in the New Testament, and much more.

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5. Donald W. Parry, “Hannah in the Presence of the Lord,” in *Archaeology of the Books of Samuel: The Entangling of the Textual and Literary History*, ed. by Philippe Hugo and Adrian Schenker. *Supplements to Vetus Testamentum* [132] (Leiden, NLD: E. J. Brill, 2010), 53-54.

6. *Ibid.*, 54.

7. President Russell M. Nelson, “Prophets, Leadership, and Divine Law,” worldwide devotional (speech), Brigham Young University, January 8, 2017, Provo, UT, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/broadcasts/article/worldwide-devotionals/2017/01/prophets-leadership-and-divine-law?lang=eng>.

8. Parry, “An Approach to Isaiah Studies,” 246-55.

9. *Ibid.*, 246.

Judging from the positive responses I received concerning the book review — in the form of personal visits and also written communications — *Interpreter's* readers appropriately grasped my intent, the *authorial* intent. A number of the positive responses came from Sears's colleagues in his own department. In sum, the authorial intention (*my* intent), was to urge *Interpreter's* readers to take into account the crucial consideration that Isaiah's text focuses its attention on Jesus Christ. All other items and details in my review took subordinate positions.

### Top-Tier Peer Reviews — an Important, Scholarly Method

It may be helpful to some to understand what took place behind the scenes, before my review went to press.

There exist scores of academic articles that establish the considerable benefit of scholarly peer reviews.<sup>10</sup> The field of biblical studies, similar to other disciplines and fields, utilizes open or blind reviews for various types of publications. Premiere biblical (Old and New Testament) journals and established book presses throughout the world utilize various peer-review methods to ensure top-quality publications. In fact, the practice of blind peer reviews is one of the multiple scientific<sup>11</sup> methods scholars utilize to ensure the highest quality writings, and peer reviews have been utilized for more than a century in the field of biblical studies.

Early in my career, I learned that peer reviews serve multiple, significant purposes. I continue to appreciate peer-reviews, open and blind, for my various writings. A recent case in point is my newly published *Exploring the Isaiah Scrolls and Their Textual Variants*.<sup>12</sup> Eight reviewers scrutinized this 500-page manuscript. The review team consisted of Professor Eugene Ulrich (eminent Isaiah scholar),<sup>13</sup> Dr. Jason Driesbach (textual critic), Richard W. Medina (Hebrew philologist), a BYU-employed professional editor, and Dr. Monte Shelley

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10. The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines a peer review as, “the review of commercial, professional, or academic efficiency, competence, etc., by others in the same occupation; an instance of this” or “the process by which an academic journal passes a paper submitted for publication to independent experts for comments on its suitability and worth; refereeing;” s.v. “peer review, n.,” <https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/139736?rskey=Pgnmi0&result=1#eid>.

11. I use “scientific” in the sense of “systematic, methodical, meticulous.” *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. “scientific, adj. and n.,” <https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/172685?rskey=ljFS84&result=1&isAdvanced=false#eid>

12. Donald W. Parry, *Exploring the Isaiah Scrolls and Their Textual Variants* (Leiden, NLD: E. J. Brill, 2020).

13. Dr. Ulrich also wrote the forward for the book.

and Jesse Vincent (BYU's WordCruncher team; they ran computerized searches to seek out possible errors in the manuscript). Additionally, the series editor<sup>14</sup> invited two double-blind reviewers to conduct a high-level scrutinization of my manuscript. These two reviewers took almost a year to complete their work. Each of the eight reviewers presented me with a list of suggested changes to the manuscript. One reviewer proposed that I add lexical definitions of approximately 600 Hebrew and Aramaic words (a mammoth task, but I did it). Altogether, the reviewers' criticisms took me approximately a year to work through. Importantly, the reviewers taught me important strategies and procedures I will incorporate in future writings.

Peer-reviewed papers have a worldwide impact, and there are several famous cases where eminent scholars in biblical studies failed the peer-review process, resulting in their papers not being published. I recall one such scholar, from the University of Oxford, whose paper was rejected. Years ago, he visited BYU's campus, and I was privileged to serve as his host. In the course of two days, we had many conversations. During one such conversation he recalled, with some emotion, that one of his papers had been rejected as a result of a double-blind review. But this scholar knew the double-blind review system was a significant scientific method in many disciplines, including biblical studies.

### Six Peer Reviews of My Review

Realizing the sensitivity of writing a book review — especially one where I was taking a contrary approach to that of the author — I sought out four peer reviewers. I specifically asked them to scrutinize my review to see if it was fair, accurate, and free from *ad hominem* arguments. All four were BYU colleagues — senior scholars — who collectively have decades of experience in dealing with the academic community, peer- and book reviews, scholarly approaches and methodologies, and more. All four are prominent, experienced, and highly respected in both regional and international spheres. Collectively, the four have written or edited dozens of books and hundreds of articles. They know how to read and understand texts and how to write scholarly items. They also comprehend the concept of authorial intention — my intent. In short, they know the academy. Two additional peer reviews — the fifth and sixth — were double-blind, one from the College of Religious Education and one from *Interpreter*. (In order to protect their high quality and standards of excellence, *Interpreter*

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14. The book was published as part of Brill's *Supplements to the Textual History of the Bible* series.

engages their own peer reviewers.) Long established protocol, of course, requires the anonymity of the reviewers.

All six saw the book review as positive toward both Spencer and me. The review was designed to help Spencer, not hinder, as he moved forward on his career path. No one thought the review was a personal attack on Spencer or his discipular status in The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. None of the reviewers held that I had taken Spencer's words out of context or that my review had hidden messages implicational of Spencer's character or lack of scholarship.

Two of the six reviewers are professors of the College of Religious Education. One was the aforementioned double-blind reviewer, and the other one is prominent in both regional, national, and international circles. This reviewer carefully examined my review and then concluded that it was fair, had a proper tone, and that it would be "good" for Spencer and his career. This prominent professor was interested — in positive and constructive ways — in Spencer's career path.

I share these items with *Interpreter's* readers to demonstrate that I did my utmost to ensure my review was totally fair and impartial to Spencer. In fact, I went beyond the mark — many authors seek out one or two peer reviewers, but I had six expert reviewers scrutinize my paper. All six gave the go-ahead. This should put to rest any doubt that I had an improper purpose in reviewing Spencer's book.

In addition to the six reviewers, I sought out and received a careful review by a professional, experienced English editor — she is employed by BYU and does superior work. I have utilized her skills and experience on a number of occasions for my books and articles. She is very careful to keep me on task, especially when I do not properly articulate my words. As she edits my writings, she makes comments, such as "did you mean to say that?"; "I wonder if you would consider recasting this sentence, because it does not state what you probably think that it states"; "you have nuanced such and such, which is incorrect; please rewrite this sentence," and so on. I mention her edits because she did not find anything out of order in my review — nothing out of context, no unfair words or expressions, and no *ad hominem* arguments.

### **Authorial Intentionality Revisited**

I cannot second-guess why Sears misreads my intent in my review of Spencer's work, but it seems clear that he did so. Not only did he misread my intent but, in my view, he also incorrectly parsed my words. The six reviewers did not misread my intent nor wrongly analyze my words

— neither did the professional editor. I maintain that Sears would have taken a different stance had he known about these behind-the-scenes proceedings, especially had he known that two of his own colleagues reviewed my review before it went to press. And there were other behind-the-scenes happenings that would give both Spencer and Sears quietness of mind and peace of heart regarding the book review.

I recognize that my review was not flawless. I also readily acknowledge that none of my writings are error-free. With this in mind, I thank Sears for pointing out that the upside-down Hebrew image (on the front cover of Spencer's book) is supposed to be that way — upside down. While the comment in my review was parenthetical and I acknowledged that the upside down Hebrew was "likely the publisher's doing, and not Spencer's,"<sup>15</sup> I acknowledge my error and I apologize to both Spencer and to his publisher for my mistake.

In no uncertain terms, I hereby state that I would never put hidden messages in a writing that undervalues other individuals or their scholarship. That does not mean, however, that an individual and I have to agree on certain points or issues. My review did not include hidden codes or implicational words or phrases designed to denigrate the author or his book. The review does *not* contain *ad hominem* (including *argumentum*, circumstantial, guilt by association, or *tu quoque*) arguments. There are also *no statements* in the form of implication, insinuation, or innuendo. Absolutely none.

Furthermore, with regard to contextomy (quoting out of context), I took nothing out of context from *The Vision of All*. Anyone who makes that claim is tugging at my words. I also refer readers to my own track record of researching, writing, and publishing peer-reviewed books and articles for more than two and a half decades. During these many years, no one has ever claimed I have misquoted someone or taken words out of context.

Finally, what is the authorial intention of the Excursus, which closes the review? The intent is to invite *scholars who teach the Old Testament* to learn Biblical Hebrew. Note my words (in the Excursus):

It would be fitting, in my view, for scholars interested in teaching the Old Testament (through classroom instruction or via published writings) to expand their scholarly competence by learning Biblical Hebrew.<sup>16</sup>

In this sentence, I am addressing "scholars" and *not* laypersons. I refer to "*scholarly* competence," not a non-specialist's competence. And I do not

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15. Parry, "An Approach to Isaiah Studies," 263.

16. *Ibid.*

address all scholars, only those “interested in teaching the Old Testament.” I, therefore, do *not* refer to non-biblical scholars. Later in the same paragraph I refer to “biblical scholars” again. Clearly, the Excursus is addressed to *biblical scholars* and no one else.

Furthermore, I write concerning the “Hebrew witnesses of Isaiah,” “scholarly publications,” “specialized journal[s] of the Hebrew Bible or Dead Sea Scrolls,” and more. These are expressions addressed to scholars and their scholarship, not to laypersons. Anyone who suggests that I am proposing that laypersons or non-biblical scholars learn biblical Hebrew is misinterpreting my words. Thankfully, the peer reviewers did not misconstrue my authorial intention with regard to the Excursus.

In sum, perhaps we would all do well to move forward and, throughout our lives, read, reread, and read again Isaiah’s words. Let us all remember that Isaiah’s words inspire us to rejoice and to lift up our hearts. As Nephi wrote, “And now I write some of the words of Isaiah, that whoso of my people shall see these words may lift up their hearts and rejoice for all men” (2 Nephi 11:8).

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