Confessions of a Chastened Literalist: Overlooked Hermeneutical Implications of John 11:47–52

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A Paper Presented to
The Evangelical Theological Society 78th Annual Meeting
Denver, Colorado, 19 November 2026

In this paper I argue two things: First, I argue that the phenomenon of John 11:49–52 presents a significant challenge to some common definitions of literal interpretation that restrict textual meaning to the conscious intention of the human author. Second, this same phenomenon, though, falls short of establishing a general hermeneutical principle that authorizes modern interpreters to identify fuller meanings in the sacred text beyond that which can be discerned through grammatical-historical interpretation.

To support this compound claim, I will take the following steps: First, I define "literal interpretation," its connection to authorial intent, single-meaning, and

grammatical-historical exegesis. Second, I examine Caiaphas's prophecy in John 11:47–52 and, third, I explain how this passage, interpreted literally, meddles with literal interpretation. Fourth, I explore the theological implications of this passage for the concept of *sensus plenior* and a meaning of a prophetic text distinct from that intended by the human author. Fifth, I introduce the epistemological problem inherent in this discussion, which forces me back to my starting point, which is, sixth, a chastened literal hermeneutic that is functionally equivalent to that which can be discerned by grammatical-historical interpretation but is open to a divinely revealed fuller sense in some explicit instances.

Introduction: The Question of Meaning and Authorial Intent

In his very recent work on the four senses of Scripture, Patrick Schreiner defines the "literal sense" thusly: "*The literal sense is the most natural sense of the words with respect to their immediate referent, considered in their grammatical and historical context, which will be discovered by sound exegesis.*"[1] Despite some dispute over both the historical and contemporary meaning of the

[1] Patrick Schreiner, *The Four Senses of Scripture: Learning from Ancient Ways of Reading the Bible* (Baker Academic, 2026), 79.

term,[2] for the purposes of this paper I am adopting the "literal sense" defined as "the intention of the human author."[3] While not the only definition used in the literature, it appears to be relatively standard in many influential evangelical circles.[4]

> As just a few representatives of this common position, Paul Lee Tan noted, "To interpret 'literally' means to explain the original sense of the speaker or writer according to normal, customary, and proper usages of words and language."[5] He equates the "literal method of interpretation" with "Grammatico-Historical Method."[6] In a similar vein, Blomberg notes: "The grammatico-historical method…refers to studying the biblical text, or any other text, in its original historical

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[2] Schreiner notes, "While 'the literal sense' is a popular phrase, its meaning has been rigorously debated and quite flexible throughout the Christian tradition…. In a strange turn of events, 'the literal sense' is one of the most slippery phrases" (Schreiner, *Four Senses,* 72). Similar, Clowney notes that the "literal meaning" defined as "the meaning intended by the author…is debated." Edmund P. Clowney, "Interpreting the Biblical Models of the Church: A Hermeneutical Deepening of Ecclesiology, in *Biblical Interpretation and the Church: The Problem of Contextualization,* ed. D. A. Carson (Thomas Nelson, 1984), 99. Raymond Brown writes, "The term 'literal' is commonly employed today to denote the most basic sense of Scripture," and he adds that there is "a certain amount of confusion about its definition." Raymond E. Brown, *The "Sensus Plenior" of Sacred Scripture* (St. Mary's University Press, 1955), 1, 2.

[3] Schreiner, *Four Senses*, 74.

[4] Clowney, "Interpreting the Biblical Models of the Church," 99.

[5] Paul Lee Tan, *Literal Interpretation of the Bible* (Assurance, 1978), 15.

[6] Tan, *Literal Interpretation*, 16.

> context, and seeking the meaning its author(s) most likely intended for its original audience(s) or addressees based on the grammar and syntax."[7] Likewise, in their work on biblical hermeneutics, Bauer and Traina assert, "We contend that the basis for determining the interpretation of texts is an appeal to the intention of the author, as the author can be inferred from the text itself."[8] Köstenberger and Patterson write, "In our quest to understand the Bible, *author, text,* and *reader* each have an important part to play. Every document has an author, and the resulting text is shaped by his or her intention. It is this authorial intention the interpreter must aim to recover."[9]

As a corollary to the view that the literal sense is identified as the intention of the human author, literal interpreters often emphasize that the text has a single meaning. In his foundational nineteenth-century work on biblical interpretation, Benjamin Jowett famously advanced the simple precept: "*Interpret the Scripture like*

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[7] Craig L. Blomberg, "The Historical-Critical/Grammatical View," in *Biblical Hermeneutics: Five Views*, ed. Stanley E. Porter and Beth M. Stovell, Spectrum Multiview Books (IVP Academic, 2012), 27. Later he notes, "The historical-critical/grammatical approach… seeks to recover an author's meaning as disclosed in a text or utterance designed for a specific audience or audiences." Blomberg, "Historical-Critical/Grammatical View," 46.

[8] David R. Bauer and Robert A Traina, *Inductive Bible Study: A Comprehensive Guide to the Practice of Hermeneutics* (Baker Academic, 2011), 42.

[9] Andreas J. Köstenberger and Richard D. Patterson, *Invitation to Biblical Interpretation: Exploring the Hermeneutica Triad of History, Literature, and Theology*, Invitation to Theological Studies Series (Kregel Academic, 2011), 57–58.

any other book."[10] He thus advanced the single-meaning view: "Scripture has one meaning—the meaning which it had to the mind of the Prophet or Evangelist who first uttered or wrote, to the hearers or readers who first received it."[11]

Thus, in sum, I am defining "literal interpretation" as Schreiner succinctly defines it: "the natural sense of the words in their contexts according to the author's intent."[12] From both common-sense and practical perspectives, this understanding of literal interpretation is attractive. The definition respects the historical and linguistic context of a passage. It provides an objective basis for interpretation. And it guards against arbitrary eisegesis. As such, it provides guardrails against the intrusion of wrong meanings into a text and thereby prevents the destructive grounding of doctrines and practices upon wrong interpretations.

Caiaphas's Problematic Prophecy in John 11:47–52

Despite the positive methodological advantages of the literal sense as the single meaning intended by the human

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[10] Benjamin Jowett, "On the Interpretation of Scripture," in *Essays and Reviews,* 9th ed. (London: Longman, Green, Longman, and Roberts, 1861), 377.

[11] Jowett, "Interpretation of Scripture," 378.

[12] Schreiner, *Four Senses*, 71.

author as discerned by grammatical-historical exegesis, this approach seems to be at odds with the phenomenon of John 11:47–52. In that pericope, Scripture presents a prophetic utterance that communicates a meaning beyond the conscious intention of the human speaker.

My translation of the passage is as follows:

> **47** Therefore the chief priests and the
> Pharisees assembled a council and were saying,
> "What are we going to do, since this man is
> performing many signs? **48** If we let him get away
> with this, everyone will believe in him, and the
> Romans will come and take away from us both
> this place and this nation." **49** But one of
> them, Caiaphas, being high priest that year, said
> to them, "You know nothing at all, **50** nor are you
> considering that it is better for you that one man
> should die for the people, and the whole nation
> should not be destroyed." **51** Now he did not say
> this from himself, but being high priest that year,
> he prophesied that Jesus was going to die for the
> nation, **52** and not for the nation only, but in order
> to gather together as one the children of God
> scattered abroad. **53** Thus, from that day they
> decided that they would kill him.

Caiaphas's Conscious Intention (John 11:47–50)

The setting for this pericope is a "council" of leading priests and Pharisees, an apparently ad hoc meeting called together to address the crisis of Jesus and his miracles (John 11:47). Because he was performing signs that led many people to follow his teachings, an exasperated group of Jewish leaders expressed their fears that everyone would believe in him and then "the Romans will come and take away from us both this place and this nation" (11:48).[13]

In response to their concern, Caiaphas replies with words that reveal shrewd political expediency: "But one of them, Caiaphas, being high priest that year, said to them, 'You know nothing at all, nor are you considering that it is better for you that one man should die for the people, and the whole nation should not be destroyed'" (11:49–50).[14] Caiaphas's concern was the preservation of

[13] While it may be that their fear was losing the land of Judaea and their population through an invasion by the Roman army, their language may also indicate a more limited, selfish interest: that the Romans would come and take away their position of authority (τὸν τόπον) and thus their power over the nation. That is, they feared they would lose their own personal power; the fate of the nation was not on their immediate radar.

[14] If the worries expressed by the council really were focused on their own political positions, Caiaphas's sharp "you know nothing at all" may be taken as a rebuke of their self-serving, myopic perspective. He then shifts their focus to the larger, existential issue they seem to be overlooking. Jesus is more than just a threat to their own policial power; his movement could be the spark that ignites a revolt that leads to an annihilation of the entire nation by a Roman invasion.

the nation and the people from destruction by their Roman oppressors. His calculation was therefore utilitarian: The good of the many—both of the Jewish nation and of their leaders—self-evidently outweighed the good of the one, Jesus.[15] The intention of Caiaphas's words at this point, even if they enlarge the council's narrower concerns, is unambiguous: by bumping off the rabble-rousing rabbi, they could snuff out his message and prevent a war with Rome that would certainly end in destruction.

John's Interpretive Interjection (John 11:51)

At this point, John could have easily continued with the statement in verse 53: "Thus, from that day they decided that they would kill him." The narrative would have made sense, and an insight into the motives of that cabal of priests and Pharisees would have been revealed and preserved for all generations. Instead, John as the inspired narrator provided an interpretive interjection: "Now he

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[15] Bultmann writes, "Political sagacity requires that the lesser evil be preferred to the greater, and it demands that the fundamental principle be put into effect that the individual be sacrificed in the interest of the nation." Rudolf Bultmann, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary,* trans. G. R. Beasley-Murray, R. W. N Hoare, and J. K. Riches (Westminster: 1971), 411. In a note, Bultmann points out, "For the maxim of Caiaphas see 2 Sam. 20:20–22; Jon. 1.12–15; Jos. Bell 11, 103ff." Bultmann, *Gospel of John*, 411n1. Cf. George R. Beasley-Murray, *John,* Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 36, ed. David A. Hubbard, Glenn W. Barker, and Ralph P. Martin (Word, 1987), 198.

did not say this from himself, but being high priest that year, he prophesied that Jesus was going to die for the nation" (John 11:51).

A few important observations need to be made. First, John informs us that Caiaphas "did not say this from himself" (τοῦτο δὲ ἀφ᾽ ἑαυτοῦ οὐκ εἶπεν).[16] This means he did not say this willingly or consciously. Caiaphas meant one thing by his words, but God meant something else. Carson rightly acknowledges what John asserted: "When Caiaphas spoke, God was also speaking, even if they were not saying the same things."[17]

Commentators spanning the confessional and non-confessional continuum throughout the history of interpretation take for granted that Caiaphas meant one thing by his words while John interpreted them to mean something different. Thus, the words of Caiaphas were "an unconscious prophecy"[18] as a "higher impulse guided

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[16] See Colin G. Kruse, *John: An Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 4, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (InterVarsity Press, 2003), 255

[17] D. A. Carson, *The Gospel according to John*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Eerdmans, 1991), 422.

[18] Many commentators use the term "unconscious" prophecy to refer to Caiaphas's utterance, or they observe that Caiaphas "unconsciously" prophesied. See J. H. Bernard, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel according to St. John*, ed. Alan Hugh McNeile, International Critical Commentary (Scribner's, 1929), 405. Cf. Brooke Foss Westcott, *The Gospel According to St. John,* vol. 2 (John Murray, 1908), 106; R. C. H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. John's Gospel* (Augsburg, 1961), 829–830; D. A. Carson, *Divine Sovereignty and Human Responsibility: Biblical Perspectives in Tension* (John Knox,

his tongue."[19] It was an "involuntary"[20] and "unwitting"[21] prophecy. Pink observes, "Little did he know of the deep

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1981), 128; Raymond E. Brown, *The Gospel according to John (i–xii),* The Anchor Bible (Doubleday, 1966), 442; C. K. Barrett, *The Gospel according to St. John: An Introduction with Commentary and Notes on the Greek Text* (Macmillan, 1955), 339; John Tindall Harris, *The Writings of the Apostle John,* vol. 1, *The Gospel and Epistles* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1889), 169; R. H. Lightfoot, *St. John's Gospel: A Commentary,* ed. C. F. Evans (Oxford University Press [Clarendon], 1956), 228; Joseph MacRory, *The Gospel of St. John* (Dublin: Browne & Nolan, 1897), 204; R. H. Strachan, *The Fourth Gospel: Its Significance and Environment,* 3rd ed. (Student Christian Movement Press, 1941), 244; Philip W. Comfort and Wendell C. Hawley, *Opening the Gospel of John* (Tyndale House, 1994), 191.

[19] John Calvin, *Commentary on the Gospel according to John*, vol. 1, ed. William Pringle (Logos Bible Software, 2010), 453

[20] Merrill C. Tenney, "The Gospel of John," in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary,* vol. 9, *John–Acts,* ed. Frank E. Gaebelein and J. D. Douglas (Zondervan, 1981), 122; Alfred Loisy, *Le Quatrième Évangile,* 2nd ed. (Émile Nourry, 1921), 358; Rudolf Schnackenburg, *The Gospel According to St. John,* vol 2, *Commentary on Chapters 5–12* (Seabury, 1980), 349; John Peter Lange, *A Commentary on the Holy Scriptures: Critical, Doctrinal, and Homiletical,* vol. 3, *The Gospel According to John*, trans. Edward D. Yeomans and Evelina Moore, ed., rev. and enl. by Philip Schaff (T. & T. Clark, 1872), 364.

[21] James Montgomery Boice, *The Gospel of John: An Expositional Commentary,* vol. 3, *John 9:1–12:50* (Zondervan, 1977), 287; Bruce Milne, *The Message of John,* The Bible Speaks Today, ed. J. A. Motyer and John R. W. Stott (IVP Academic, 1993), 174; Marianne Mey Thompson, *John: A Commentary,* The New Testament Library, ed. C. Clifton Black, M. Eugene Boring, and John T. Carroll (Westminster John Knox, 2015), 254; Kenneth O. Gangel, *John,* Holman New Testament Commentary, ed. Max Anders (Broadman & Holman, 2000), 222.

meaning of the words that he uttered."[22] Ryle explains, "He spoke these words, though he was not aware of it, under the influence of an overruling power, making him say things of far deeper meaning than he was conscious of himself."[23] Dodd says, "He was prophesying without being aware of it."[24] And Osborne asserts, "He was led to prophesy in spite of himself."[25] That is, the words were "expressed without self-knowledge and will."[26]

Second, this very phenomenon of uttering words with one meaning in the mind of the human speaker but a

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[22] Arthur Walkington Pink, *Exposition of the Gospel of John* (Swengel, PA: Bible Truth Depot, 1923–1945), 626.

[23] J. C. Ryle, *Expository Thoughts on John*, vol. 2 (New York: Robert Carter & Brothers, 1878), 300.

[24] C. H. Dodd, "The Prophecy of Caiaphas: John 11:47–53," *More New Testament Studies* (Manchester University Press, 1968), 63. Cf. Beasley-Murray, *John*, 198.

[25] Grant R. Osborne, *John: Verse by Verse*, ed. Jeffrey Reimer et al., Osborne New Testament Commentaries (Lexham, 2018), 282. Cf. A. Plummer, *The Gospel According to St. John,* The Cambridge Bible for Schools and Colleges, ed. J. J. S. Perowne (Cambridge University Press, 1894), 243; Gerald L. Borchert, *John 1–11,* The New American Commentary, vol. 25A (Broadman & Holman, 1996), 365; Herman N. Ridderbos, *The Gospel according to John: A Theological Commentary,* trans. John Vriend (Eerdmans, 1997), 409.

[26] Heinrich August Wilhelm Meyer, *Critical and Exegetical Handbook to the Gospel of John,* vol. 2, trans. Frederick Crombie (T. & T. Clark, 1874), 143. See also G. Campbell Morgan, *The Gospel According to John* (Revell, 1945), 203; Friedrich Spitta, *Das Johannes-Evangelium all Quelle der Geschichte Jesu* (Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1910), 256.

distinct, fuller meaning with theological import is what John calls "prophesying" (ἐπροφήτευσεν). John even provides some kind of explanation for how such a profound prophecy could fall from the unwilling lips of a scoundrel like Caiaphas by pointing out that he was high priest that year.[27]

Pertinent to our issue is the nature of prophesying itself, according to John. These, after all, are John's words and thus his inspired apostolic understanding of what prophesying may entail: the human author uttering one thing, while the words uttered take on a different meaning unintended by the speaker.[28] Dunwell noted, "We have the

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[27] On the significance of the office of high priest and the ability to prophesy, Kruse writes, "There is evidence in the writings of Josephus that a high priest might function as a prophet and that it was thought that a 'true priest' was necessarily a prophet. There is also evidence in rabbinic writings that it was thought people might prophesy without knowing that they were doing so (Str-B 2, 546). In any case, the evangelist explains that Caiaphas was not speaking 'on his own' when he said Jesus would die for the nation." Kruse, *John*, 255. See also Andrew T. Lincoln, *The Gospel according to Saint John*, Black's New Testament Commentary (Continuum, 2005), 330; Charles H. Talbert, *Reading John: A Literary and Theological Commentary on the Fourth Gospel and the Johannine Epistles*, Rev. ed., Reading the New Testament Series (Smyth & Helwys, 2005), 182.

[28] In a Masters Thesis in 1984, David Ingrassia addresses the issue of authorial intent in hermeneutics. David F. Ingrassia, "A Theological Appraisal of Authorial Intent in Hermeneutics," ThM Thesis, Dallas Theological Seminary, 1984. The readers of this thesis were Norman Geisler and Roy Zuck. Ingrassia primarily interacts with and critiques E. D. Hirsch, Jr., the champion of "authorial intent" as the "purpose" of the

authority of St. John himself that though Caiaphas himself did not attribute any such sense to his words, that the meaning conveyed in them by the Holy Spirit was that Jesus should die for the salvation of the Jewish nation and not of the Jewish nation only."[29] At this very point, what is commonly known as the "literal" sense—the meaning intended by the human author—is all but lost.

While it may be tempting to assert, like Moloney, that Caiaphas "did not know what he was saying,"[30] the opposite is the case. Caiaphas knew exactly what he was saying. This was no mantic utterance, as in the case of Balaam (Num 23–24).[31] Caiaphas was fully in control of

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author, that is, why the author wrote the text. He argues that Hirsch's views are "logically untenable." Ingrassia, "Theological Appraisal of Authorial Intent," 1–2. Ingrassia notes that because of the dually authored text of Scripture—human and divine, "the question, then, is whether or not there is one truth-intention in the text, expressed by the finite human author, or two (or more) different meanings which can be unknown to the human author. It must be noted that the question at hand deals with *different* meanings from that willed by the author." Ingrassia, "Theological Appraisal of Authorial Intent," 89–90.

[29] Francis Henry Dunwell, *A Commentary on the Authorized English Version of the Gospel According to St. John* (London: J. T. Hayes, 1872), 264.

[30] Francis J. Maloney, *The Gospel of John,* Sacra Pagina Series 4, ed. Daniel J. Harrington (Liturgical, 1998), 334.

[31] Calvin places this in the same category as Balaam's unwilling prophesying. John Calvin, *Commentary on the Gospel According to John*, vol. 1, ed. William Pringle (Logos Bible Software, 2010), 453–454. In that case, though, Balaam did not intend to say what he said, but the words did not carry a meaning different from the utterance. Lange

his own will and words. What Caiaphas did not know was that what he said had a deeper, unintended theological meaning. This action of uttering words with a loftier, unintended meaning is what John refers to as "prophesying." Dunwell notes, "It is plain from the Evangelist's explanation that Caiaphas by these words meant one thing, and that the Holy Spirit intended quite another."[32]

Finally, John's interpretation of the deeper meaning of Caiaphas's words cannot be reduced to simply pointing out their irony.[33] John, the inspired author of the text,

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rightly corrects the comparison to Balaam's unwilling prophesying in that Balaam switched from conscious utterances to an "inspired mood," a kind of ecstatic, mantic state, in which "his words of blessing are not susceptible of a double interpretation." Lange, *Gospel According to John*, 364. For Caiaphas, he clearly intended one thing consciously while the words he uttered as prophecy took on a fuller, distinct significance Caiaphas would never have intended. Klink clarifies, too: "The narrator does not just explain the meaning of Caiaphas's statement but describes its true *source* ('he said this not by himself') and its true *nature* ('he prophesied'). The narrator is not claiming that Caiaphas was speaking like Balaam's donkey….but that by his own 'cognitive processes' (v. 50) Caiaphas's intended and plain-sense meaning actually carried with it a clear and retrievable extended-sense meaning." Edward W. Klink III, *John,* Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament, ed. Clinton E. Arnold (Zondervan, 2016), 514–515.

[32] Dunwell, *Gospel According to St. John*, 263.

[33] Numerous commentators point out the obvious irony in Caiaphas's words. See John A. Dennis, "Conflict and Resolution: John 11.47-53 as the Ironic Fulfillment of the Main Plot-Line of the Gospel," *SNTU* 29 (2004): 23–39; Dorothy A. Lee, *John,* Word Biblical Themes, vol. 4, ed.

explicitly calls Caiaphas's utterance "prophesying." Being high priest that year, he "prophesied" (ἐπροφήτευσεν). The term does not mean "he spoke ironically." Yes, Caiaphas's words were ironic.[34] But the irony rests on the

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Nijay K. Gupta (Zondervan, 2025), 179. J. Ramsey Michaels writes, "The Gospel writer is merely seizing the opportunity to attach an ironic double meaning to the Chief Priest's words. He does this by simply repeating the core of Caiaphas's pronouncement, 'that one man die for the nation,' substituting 'nation' for 'people,' while omitting the introductory words, 'it is to your advantage,' and the concluding words, 'and the whole nation not be lost.' Ironically, the structural elements in the pronouncement that parallel the structure of Jesus' own words (in Mt 5:29–30) are precisely the ones omitted." Michaels does not emphasize the fact that the meaning drawn out by John does not match the meaning intended by Caiaphas. J. Ramsey Michaels, *The Gospel of John,* The New International Commentary on the New Testament, ed. Gordon D. Fee (Eerdmans, 2010), 653-653. Culpepper, too, leans into the idea of irony and softens the much sharper edge of prophecy: "Caiaphas ironically judges that it is better for one man to die than for the nation to perish. He intends the words as cold political expediency, but the reader knows that Jesus is the good shepherd who laid down his life for his sheep. The narrator underscores the irony through his comment that the high priest was actually prophesying Jesus' death, though he did not know it." R. Alan Culpepper, *The Gospel and Letters of John,* Interpreting Biblical Texts, wed. Charles B. Cousar (Abingdon: 1998), 190.

[34] On irony in John's Gospel see Andreas J. Köstenberger, *A Theology of John's Gospel and Letters,* Biblical Theology of the New Testament (Zondervan, 2009), 150–155, 230. Köstenberger places the episode in the category of "irony," particularly unintended irony. To be clear, Köstenberger does not reduce the episode to mere literary irony, but notes that the prophesying of Caiaphas functions as a sort of divinely-intended irony. Köstenberger writes, "While Caiaphas, like possibly

fact that he meant them to be understood one way while God, the real author behind prophetic utterances, meant them in a profoundly different way. The real irony is that by killing Jesus, the Jewish rulers began a series of events that would ultimately result in the judgment of the nation—the very thing that Caiaphas intended to avoid by killing Jesus.[35] Neyrey writes, "Caiaphas mocks his audience, 'You know nothing at all' (11:49), but neither does he. True, he 'prophesied' when he spoke. But when prophets received or spoke oracles, it fell to another figure to interpret and communicate them."[36] Thus, the irony is in the fact that while Caiaphas accused the rest of the council of ignorance (11:49), he himself spoke prophetic

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John the Baptist in 1:29, 36, was speaking better than he knew, this unwitting prophecy presents Jesus as the vicarious sacrifice for the nation of Israel, and, by Johannine extension, also for the 'scattered children of God' (i.e., the Gentiles; cf. 12:20–33)." Köstenberger, *Theology of John's Gospel*, 417. Cf. Gerald L. Borchert, *John 1–11,* The New American Commentary, vol. 25A (Broadman & Holman, 1996), 365; Comfort and Hawley, *Opening the Gospel of John*, 192; Paul D. Duke, *Irony in the Fourth Gospel* (John Knox, 1985), 88–89.

[35] Carson, *John,* 128. Ironside writes, "[Caiaphas] meant that the death of this innocent man would be used to save the nation from the Romans. It did not do that, for the Jews were carried away in due time." H. A. Ironside, *Addresses on the Gospel of John* (New York: Loizeaux Brothers, 1942), 473.

[36] Jerome H. Neyrey, S.J, *The Gospel of John,* The New Cambridge Bible Commentary, ed. Ben Witherington III (Cambridge University Press, 2007), 204.

words, the deeper meaning of which he was himself ignorant.

So, the literal meaning intended by the author did not, in fact, prove true. Rather, the deeper meaning drawn out by the apostle in his explication of the prophetic meaning of the words turned out to be the actual meaning.

Expansion of the Prophetic Meaning (John 11:52)

John's editorial interjection ultimately expands the import of the divinely intended interpretation of Caiaphas's unintended prophecy in a direction even less connected to the high priest's intention. Caiaphas prophesied that, yes, Jesus would have to die for the nation, "and not for the nation only, but in order to gather together as one the children of God scattered abroad" (John 11:52).

Building upon the fuller unintended meaning of Caiaphas's words in verse 51, John applies the saying even more broadly, well beyond Caiaphas's original, narrow scope of the land of Judaea and its inhabitants. Dodd says, "The words following, καὶ οὐχ ὑπὲρ τοῦ ἔθνους μόνου, as we have seen, are a part of the evangelist's 're-interpretation' of the saying."[37] Dodd notes, "Jesus was indeed to die for Israel—no doubt in a more profound sense than Caiaphas dreamed of."[38] This extended, universal import of the words is grammatically

[37] Dodd, "Prophecy of Caiaphas," 62.

[38] Dodd, "Prophecy of Caiaphas," 63.

and syntactically connected to the meaning of Caiaphas's prophetic utterance.

So, by applying a grammatical-historical hermeneutic to the words of Caiaphas and John's inspired interpretation, John 11:47–52 distinguishes between the human speaker's intention expressed in Caiaphas's words and God's distinct prophetic intention with the very same words. The text itself forces us to set aside any claim that the prophetic sense of Caiaphas's words as explained by John were the sense in which Caiaphas intended them. Rather, "Caiaphas' words proved true, though in a way that he never intended, wished, or expected."[39] In fact, Caiaphas "unknowingly prophesied."[40] Westcott notes that Caiaphas "interpreted the results of the death of Christ truly, though in a way directly opposite to that which he apprehended."[41]

> Charles Simeon writes, "The text informs us, that this advice, pronounced as it was with oracular authority, was indeed an oracle; though it was dictated by God in a very different sense from that in

[39] Ryle, *Expository Thoughts on John*, 301. Cf. Frederick Dale Bruner, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary* (Eerdmans, 2012), 689; Bultmann, *Gospel of John*, 411.

[40] Andrew T. Lincoln, *The Gospel according to Saint John*, Black's New Testament Commentary (London: Continuum, 2005), 330. Cf. R. C. Sproul, *John,* St. Andrew's Expositional Commentary (Reformation Trust, 2009), 218; Gail R. O'Day, *John,* Westminster Bible Companion, ed. Patrick D. Miller and David L. Bartlett (Westminster John Knox, 2006), 119.

[41] Westcott, *Gospel according to St. John*, 175.

which it was intended by Caiaphas."[42] Craig Keener notes that "the high priest inadvertently uttered truth that differed considerably from the message he intended as truth."[43] Commentators refer to Caiaphas's utterance not only "as a prophet,"[44] but "inspired,"[45] even

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[42] Charles Simeon, *Horae Homileticae: Luke XVII to John XII*, vol. 13 (London: Holdsworth and Ball, 1833), 540. Simeon describes Caiaphas's intention this way: "Caiaphas meant only, that, as the state would be (in his apprehension) endangered by the popularity of Jesus, common policy required that they should destroy him at once. But what advice was this to come from a minister of religion, yea, from God's high-priest!... But we are told that Caiaphas 'spake this not of himself.' He meant indeed what he said; but his words bear a very different construction." Simeon, *Luke XVII to John XII*, 540, 541.

[43] Craig S. Keener, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary*, 2 vols. (Hendrickson, 2003), 856. Keener points out differences between the speaker's meaning and the one attributed to the words by John's interpretation of the prophecy: When Caiaphas speaks of the "people" (11:50; 18:14), he refers to the Jewish people. But whereas the "children of God' scattered abroad (11:52) could refer to Diaspora Jews, especially if we thought of how Caiaphas would have meant the phrase had he been the one to use it here, the prophetic, hence divine perspective must agree with the omniscient narrator, and in the context of the Fourth Gospel it refers to believers in Jesus (1:12; 3:3–5). That they would be "one" (11:52) reflects Jesus' mission for his followers (10:16; 17:22), after he delivers them from being "scattered" (10:12; 16:32). Keener, *Gospel of John*, 857.

[44] Carson, *John*, 422; Kruse, *John*, 255; John Lightfoot, *A Commentary on the New Testament from the Talmud and Hebraica, Matthew-1 Corinthians: Luke-John*, vol. 3 (Logos Bible Software, 2010), 372.

[45] Dodd, "Prophecy of Caiaphas," 50; Bernard, *Gospel according to St. John*, 405; William Bruce, *Commentary on the Gospel According to St. John* (London: James Speirs, 1891), 274.

"miraculously compelled by the Holy Spirit."[46] Dodd refers to John's inspired exposition of Caiaphas utterance as "the evangelist's 're-interpretation' of the saying."[47] And Morris says, "God used him to enunciate a truth that was greater and more significant that Caiaphas ever dreamed."[48]

The Hermeneutical Problem: Literal Meaning and Authorial Intent

The close association between the author's intended meaning and a single meaning of Scripture discerned by a grammatical-historical exegesis is well established in evangelical literature on biblical interpretation and hermeneutics, and it has been for a long time. In his highly influential 1861 essay, "On the Interpretation of Scripture," Jowett rejects the notion that passages have multiple meanings: "Such complexity would not place them above but below human compositions in general; for it would deprive them of the ordinary intelligibleness of human language. It is not for a Christian theologian to say that words were given to mankind to conceal their thoughts, neither was revelation given them to conceal the

[46] Arno Clemens Gaebelein, *The Gospel of John* (Van Kampen, 1936), 216.

[47] Dodd, "Prophecy of Caiaphas," 62.

[48] Leon Morris, *Reflections on the Gospel of John,* vol. 3, *The Truth Vine: John 11–16* (Baker, 1988), 424.

Divine."[49] Jowett also distinguishes between the interpretation and the application of Scripture, noting, "Many of the errors alluded to, arise out of a confusion of the two."[50] This principle of "one interpretation, many applications," is common in literature on evangelical hermeneutics.[51]

On the single meaning of Scripture, Berkhof wrote, "It is of the greatest importance to understand at the outset that Scripture has but a single sense."[52] He pits this

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[49] Jowett, "Interpretation of Scripture," 382. But this appears to me to be an *argumentum ad consequentiam,* and the undesirable consequence of words given to conceal rather than reveal is negated by Jesus's own explanation for why he used parables in his teaching (Matt 13:10–13; Luke 9:45). It is simply not the case that God's words are always given with the intention that their meaning be understood immediately. Sometimes they are given in such a way in order to conceal from some—even, it seems, from his own disciples (Luke 9:45)! But neither is it the case that God's words always contain a deeper meaning distinct from the obvious. Jowett's hyperbole caricatures the situation: "every sentence…a mystery, every word a riddle, every letter a symbol." Jowett, "Interpretation of Scripture," 382.

[50] Jowett, "Interpretation of Scripture," 404. Jowett also regards the use of the Old Testament by the New Testament writers to fall generally in this category as well. Jowett, "Interpretation of Scripture," 409.

[51] Bernard Ramm wrote, "We must remember the old adage: 'Interpretation is one, application is many.' This means that there is only one meaning to a passage of Scripture which is determined by careful study. But a given text or a given passage may speak to a number of problems or issues." Bernard Ramm, *Protestant Biblical Interpretation: A Textbook of Hermeneutics*, 3rd rev. ed. (Baker, 1970), 113.

[52] Louis Berkhof, *Principles of Biblical Interpretation,* 2d ed. (Baker, 1952), 57.

principle against hermeneutics that "accept a manifold sense," which, Berkhof insists, "makes any science of Hermeneutics impossible, and opens wide the door for all kinds of arbitrary interpretations."[53]

> Berkhof says the principle of "one proper sense" necessarily follows from four considerations: 1) the veracity of God; 2) the purpose of God's revelation; 3) the necessary congruity between the revelation of the Logos in the mind of man and his revelation in nature and in Scripture; and 4) the character of human language, in which the Bible is written.[54] But the first consideration, the truthfulness of God,[55] overlooks the fact of intentional double or triple entendres, in which language is intentionally equivocal in order not to communicate less but to communicate more. Consider the following sign outside a Christian school: "Trinity Christian Academy: Restoring Faith in Education." The sign is not deceiving with regard

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[53] Berkhof, *Principles of Biblical Interpretation,* 57. Thus, like Jowett, Berkhof also appears to reject any notion of a *sensus plenior* on the basis of an *argumentum ad consequentiam.* If a manifold sense of Scripture were true, he alleges, then the consequence would be the impossibility of a science of hermeneutics, which would then open the door to arbitrary interpretation. Maybe those things are true consequences of the manifold sense of Scripture, though I think the matter is greatly overstated. Even if true, the fact that the consequences are perceived as unfavorable does not itself disprove the conclusion.

[54] Berkhof, *Principles of Biblical Interpretation,* 57–58.

[55] The first argument goes this way: "It is a settled principle among men that a man of undoubted veracity will habitually express himself in unequivocal language….And if a really truthful man would not consciously resort to the use of ambiguous language, then certainly God, who is the absolute truth, cannot have given us a revelation that is calculated to mislead." Berkhof, *Principles of Biblical Interpretation*, 57–58.

to its meaning of "Faith in Education"—either a) trust in education; or b) the Christian faith as part of the content of education. The sign intends to communicate both things simultaneously. It may even have a third, less obvious meaning: restoring faith, not just reason, as a component of education.

Berkhof's second consideration, the appeal to the purpose of God's revelation,[56] can be generally true of the overall message of God's revelation without applying to every instance of verbalization. That is, the overall message of creation, fall, promise, and redemption through the person and work of Christ can be sufficiently clear that it serves as an effective means of redemption. Yet Jesus also spoke in parables to hide the redeeming truth from some (Matt 13:10–15). And he spoke things they did not understand at the time that needed to be more fully understood later (John 14:26; 16:12–13). And prophets did not fully understand the visions they received (Dan 8:27; 12:8–9; 1 Pet 1:10–12). If we apply the general principle of perspicuity to every instance, Scripture itself breaks its own rule. Berkhof's third consideration, from revelatory congruity,[57] falls into the same problem as the appeal to the purpose of God's revelation. Finally, Berkhof's fourth

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[56] Berkhof writes, "God reveals His will and the way of salvation to men, in order to glorify Himself in the redemption of sinners. He had in mind a gracious and glorious end. And in view of this, it is utterly inconceivable that He should have provided man with a dubious revelation, since this would defeat the very purpose which He sought to realize." Berkhof, *Principles of Biblical Interpretation,* 58.

[57] Berkhof writes, "All revelation, in order to be understood, must be rational. And it would be the height of inconsistency to think that God had revealed himself in a reasonable manner in nature, but not in Scripture, which is said to constitute his most perfect revelation. It would mean that the truth of the Bible could not be investigated by logical methods, nor intellectually comprehended." Berkhof, *Principles of Biblical Interpretation,* 58.

consideration, the character of human language,[58] fails to take into consideration that even human language itself employs double and even triple entendres intended by a human author, as demonstrated by my example in addressing the first concern.

In the same vein, in response to the idea that Scripture could have more than one sense, Walter Kaiser writes, "The whole revelation of God as revelation hangs in jeopardy if we, an apostle, or an angel from heaven try to add to, delete, rearrange, or reassign the sense or meaning that a prophet himself received."[59]

Kaiser elaborates elsewhere:

Almost as if to prepare for the banishment of the author in later theories of literary criticism, evangelicals began to excuse their multiple interpretations of a single text as logical outgrowths of the fact that: (1) Scripture had two authors (God and the human writer); (2) prophecy had at least two meanings (the prophet's understanding and God's surprise meaning in the distant fulfillment); and (3) interpreters are divided into two groups: the natural man who fails to "receive the things of God" (1 Cor.

[58] Berkhof writes, "The logic of the human mind is naturally reflected in the language that is used by man. And it is absolutely foreign to the character of this language that a word should have two, three, or even more significances in the same connection. If this were not so, all communication among men would be utterly impossible." Berkhof, *Principles of Biblical Interpretation,* 58.

[59] Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., "Legitimate Hermeneutics," in *Inerrancy,* ed. Norman L. Geisler (Zondervan Academic, 1980), 135.

2:14) and the spiritual man who understands the deep things of God.[60]

Kaiser then engages with a some "alleged proof texts for 'double meaning.'"[61] Of these he spends the most focused time on John 11:49–52, likely because it requires the most explaining. Kaiser admits that "Caiaphas said what he wanted to say and mean,"[62] thus ruling out some kind of ecstatic utterance, the meaning of which Caiaphas did not comprehend. Quite right. But this simply underscores the fact that the words of a prophecy on the lips of the speaker can have a conscious, clear, and intentional meaning apart from its prophetic sense intended by God. This is not "one sense" that the speaker did not understand. This was an intended sense of the speaker's words that was different from the prophetic sense.

Kaiser's appeal to "irony" minimizes the language by characterizing the passage in a way the text itself does not. He writes,

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[60] Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., "The Single Intent of Scripture," in *Evangelical Roots: A Tribute to Wilbur Smith,* ed. Kenneth S. Kantzer (Thomas Nelson, 1978), 123. Like so many complainants against *sensus plenior*, Kaiser dismisses these assertions: "But such views were so antithetical to the actual statements and claims of Scripture that if any or all of them were consistently pressed, they would lead to outright departure from the concept of an intelligible revelation from God." Kaiser, "Single Intent of Scripture," 123–124. At least the last portion of his objection amounts to an *argumetum ad consequentiam*. That is, if it were the case that prophetic Scripture might communicate more than what the human author originally understood by his own words, intended by his own purpose, and willed in his own writing, then the result would be that God's revelation would become unintelligible; therefore, a *sensus plenior* cannot be true.

[61] Kaiser, "Single Intent of Scripture," 125–136. These are 1 Peter 1:10–12; Daniel 12:6–8; John 11:49–52; 2 Peter 1:19–21; and John 14:25, 26; 15:26,27; 16:12–15.

[62] Kaiser, "Single Intent of Scripture," 129.

quoting Rudolf Stier,[63] "In these words John immediately saw there was 'a grand irony of a most special Providence' in the case of both Pilate and Caiaphas."[64] That Caiaphas's words are ironic, I have already pointed out earlier. And had John left us with no editorial comment, readers of Ciaphas's statement would have recognized them for their irony. But John does not call the words of Caiphas irony. He calls them prophecy. And while prophecies may be ironic, mere ironies are not necessarily prophetic.

Kaiser then downplays the weightiness of this passage by drawing a strong distinction between the "truth-intention" of Caiaphas's words in John 11:50 and "the *significance* (v. 51) John found in these words."[65] That the words of Scripture with a definite, clear meaning may have numerous applications and significances, few would deny. The command that we "shall not muzzle the ox while he is threshing" (Deut 25:4), which Paul quotes in 1 Timothy 5:18 and applies to paying hard-working elders, represents a perfectly reasonable argument from the lesser to the greater. The original intention of the passage was to allow oxen to feed while laboring in the field. Surely, then, this has significance and application for humans working in the field, in one's household, and in the church.

Yet John does not state that the words of Caiaphas had deeper significance or broader application. He says Caiaphas spoke "not of himself" and "prophesied," and then interprets the very uttered words themselves in a way that differed from Caiaphas's meaning. Kaiser actually admits as much when he says, "For John there was a strong contrast (note John's word, 'on the contrary' [*alla*]) between what Caiaphas said and meant and what John under the inspiration of the Spirit of God disclosed by using many of the same words."[66] This shifting of the prophetic authority from Caiaphas to John as the one

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[63] Rudolf Stier, *Words of the Lord Jesus*, vol. 6 (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1865), 56.

[64] Kaiser, "Single Intent of Scripture," 129.

[65] Kaiser, "Single Intent of Scripture," 129.

[66] Kaiser, "Single Intent of Scripture," 129.

who is assigning—by the inspiration of the Spirit—a deeper significance to the words simply will not do. John, under the inspiration of the Spirit, did not merely draw out deeper significance to Caiaphas's words or provide a divinely inspired recognition of the deep irony of the utterance. Under the inspiration of the Spirit, John declared unequivocally that Caiaphas "spoke not from himself" but "prophesied." Caiaphas, not John, was the one prophesying here.

Kaiser then states "that John *corrected* Caiaphas's provincial statement with its ethnocentricities and turned it into a comprehensive statement of the universal implications of Jesus' death (v. 52)."[67] Certainly this is true, but John does this by interpreting for us the prophetic utterance which Caiaphas spoke "not from himself." By using the strong language that John "corrected" Caiaphas, Kaiser is conceding what I am asserting is plain in the text: Caiaphas meant one thing; John's interpretation of Caiaphas's words meant something different. It is Caiaphas's conscious, intentional, willful utterance, though, that is called "not from himself" and "prophesying." Therefore, in this instance at least, prophesying can involve speaking words that in the human's mind mean one thing but in God's superintendence mean something else. This is not application of the speaker's clear meaning. This is not drawing out a deeper significance of the speaker's clear meaning. This is drawing from the words a meaning that is not only distinct but separate, even contradictory—or at least objectionable—to the intended meaning of the speaker.

Kaiser then attempts to argue that the phrase τοῦτο δὲ ἀφ' ἑαυτοῦ οὐκ εἶπεν means "not the *method* in which Caiaphas spoke (unconscious or involuntary prediction), but that since he was in the office of high priest which he gave this somewhat bitter proverb, it had the *significance* of an official prediction."[68] Once again, employing the meaning-significance distinction takes away the force of the actual passage. John is not saying that being high priest gave Caiphas's words more weighty import regarding their application or

[67] Kaiser, "Single Intent of Scripture," 130.
[68] Kaiser, "Single Intent of Scripture," 130.

significance beyond what he intended. John says Caiaphas "prophesied." Kaiser attempts to show that this could not really be an actual prophecy in its primary sense because "the office of prophet and apostles was God's channel of biblical revelation."[69] John actually seems to underscore the fact that Caiaphas was high priest that year as the basis for understanding this as actual prophesying; thus, commentators who point out that the high priestly office in the Old Testament was one by which God might speak prophetically. This is no less the case with the kingly office, by which David and Solomon wrote inspired Scripture, being neither official apostles or prophets. John appeals to Caiaphas's prophetic office not to downplay the significance of his prophesying but to defend its authenticity.

Finally, Kaiser begs the question when he declares, "When verse 51 comments that he (Caiaphas) was prophesying *that* [*hoti*] Jesus was about to die, John is not giving us the contents of Caiaphas's prophecy, but only that the significance of his otherwise witty speech could be found in *reference to the fact that* Jesus was about to die."[70] This assertion assumes what it must prove. It would be as if a theologian named Svigel were to say, "Isaiah prophesied that the Messiah would suffer," and someone were to interpret this language as "Svigel is just pointing out the significance of Isaiah's words as they ironically parallel the reality of the future Messiah's suffering; Svigel isn't actually saying Isaiah literally prophesied that the Messiah would suffer." In any case, Kaiser simply falls back on a merely assumed distinction between meaning and significance rather than letting the text say what it says: Caiaphas prophesied, and that prophecy meant Jesus would suffer for the salvation of the world. But that is not what Caiaphas meant.

The real irony here is that in attempting to defend a hermeneutic that rests solely on the author's intent as derived from a careful exegesis of the original text, interpreters fail to take John's text literally when he says Caiaphas prophesied, and that included

[69] Kaiser, "Single Intent of Scripture," 130n13.
[70] Kaiser, "Single Intent of Scripture," 131.

speaking "not from himself." Even if we gloss this "not from himself" as "not of his own authority" (as a mere man), but due to his authority as high priest, that qualifier intended to explain how it is that he could have "prophesied" something beyond what he himself would have known or even intended by his words. This also involves a case of "special pleading," in that it requires one to adopt a meaning of "prophesying" that can only be applied to this particular case, and, as a verb for speaking, one would normally expect the *hoti* clause to contain the content or meaning of that prophecy, but in this case, Kaiser understands it to refer not to the contents but to the significance of Caiaphas's witty speech. No, Caiaphas isn't being witty; he is prophesying. And because he was speaking "not from himself," the meaning of those prophetic words as superintended by God were different from what Caiaphas intended.

Kaiser concludes, "Thus we conclude that if Caiaphas had prophesied in the ordinary sense of the word, there would have been no need for any immediate corrections on John's part."[71] This is question-begging and special pleading. It assumes that which is to be proved—that "ordinary" prophesying does not and cannot and involve a meaning other than the author's single intended meaning, and therefore John *corrects* Caiaphas rather than *complements* the words with the divine meaning that differs from the human meaning. Pleading in the alternative, Kaiser notes, "Even if every part of our previous argument failed, it still remains true that Caiaphas never belonged to the class of the apostles and prophets who received revelation."[72] This, again, is a case of special pleading. The point of John's parenthetical statement that Caiaphas was "high priest" explained how it was that he was able to prophesy. And we have already seen that the strict rule that only "the class of the apostles and prophets" received revelation and could thus utter real prophecies is simply made up. By prophesying, Caiaphas functions—however

[71] Kaiser, "Single Intent of Scripture," 131.
[72] Kaiser, "Single Intent of Scripture," 131.

temporarily and ironically—as a prophet, just as David, Solomon, and other non-prophets functioned prophetically.

It appears to me that many proponents of a "single meaning as the author's intention" have diminished the force of John 11:51 through a less-than-literal interpretation of the passage. Often, they resort to question-begging, special pleading, *argumentum ad consequentiam,* or to a commitment to the principle of a single intent of a prophetic utterance as an *a priori* philosophical hermeneutical principle rather than one derived from the phenomena of Scripture itself.

Simply put, the popular hermeneutical principle that a text has only one meaning—the meaning intended by the human author—is not flexible enough to account for the phenomenon of John 11:51. In fact, many handbooks on biblical interpretation entirely overlook John 11:51 rather than incorporate it into their hermeneutical, theological, and methodological principles.[73] Yet in 1984, Edmund Clowney noted the problem we face: "In biblical interpretation the literal meaning of a passage has been identified with the meaning intended by the author…. In the case of inspiration the possibility opens at the other

[73] Note lack of engagement in Craig G. Bartholomew, *Introducing Biblical Hermeneutics: A Comprehensive Framework for Hearing God in Scripture* (Baker Academic, 2015); Gerald Bray, *Biblical Interpretation Past & Present* (InterVarsity, 1996); Schreiner, *Four Senses*; Tan, *Literal Interpretation*.

end: he may have said more than he intended, as Caiaphas obviously did (Jn. 11:49–52).”[74]

Theological-Hermeneutical Implication: *Sensus Plenior* and Divine Intention

One difference between modern and premodern approaches to the interpretation of Scripture often relates to the question of whether the *sensus auctoris* exhausts the meaning of the text.[75] That is, beyond the immediate sense consciously intended by the human author, can a later reader legitimately discern a deeper, “fuller sense” (*sensus plenior*) of a passage not fully understood or

[74] Edmund P. Clowney, “Interpreting the Biblical Models of the Church: A Hermeneutical Deepening of Ecclesiology, in *Biblical Interpretation and the Church: The Problem of Contextualization,* ed. D. A. Carson (Thomas Nelson, 1984), 99.

[75] Schreiner notes that the premodern notion of the literal sense did not exclude the divine author’s meaning: “All the energy of the current time is devoted to recovering the human author’s intention. Divine intentions are sometimes not tolerated.” Schreiner, *Four Senses*, 77. Schreiner sums up the history of the literal sense: “Some emphasize the verbal sense (the givenness of the words), others the historical sense (what really happened), others the authorial meaning (what the author intends), and others the canonical meaning (divine intention)” (Schreiner, *Four Senses*, 79). Clowney, “Interpreting the Biblical Models of the Church,” 99.

intended by the human author but intended by the divine author?[76]

Douglas Moo defines *sensus plenior* as "the idea that there is in many scriptural texts a 'fuller sense' than that consciously intended by the human author—a sense intended by God, the ultimate author of Scripture."[77] This description of *sensus plenior* seems to match the phenomenon in John 11:49–52 with Caiphas's prophetic utterance. Caiaphas intended one thing with his words; John identified them as prophetic; and John interpreted them in a way that deviates significantly from Caiaphas's meaning.

> In his influential work on *sensus plenior,* Raymond Brown sets the debate in clear contrast: "The basic point of division seems to be whether it is sufficient to define the literal sense as the one intended by the divine Author, or must the intention of the human author also be considered as integral to the definition."[78] He then defines *sensus plenior* as follows: "*The sensus plenior is that additional, deeper meaning, intended by God but not clearly intended by the human author, which is seen to exist in the words of a biblical text (or group of texts, or even a whole book) when they are studied in the light of further revelation or development in the understanding of revelation.*"[79] One major reason why *sensus plenior* must be posited

[76] Schreiner, *Four Senses*, 78.
[77] Moo, "The Problem of *Sensus Plenior*," 201.
[78] Brown, "*Sensus Plenior*," 2.
[79] Brown, "*Sensus Plenior*," 92.

is the examples of "the exegesis practiced by the N. T. writers and the Fathers."[80]

In dealing with various objections to *sensus plenior,* Brown describes and responds to several. First, "we are told that the new meaning which constitutes the *sensus plenior* does not come from within the text but is added on by new revelation… When the Christian now reads more revelation into its texts than the author clearly intended, he is doing so in virtue of an increased knowledge of revelation, not because such a fuller meaning is latent in the text."[81] In response to this, Brown notes, "Further revelation makes clear a sense that was already there; it does not create a new one."[82] He goes on: "A second objection raised against the fuller sense is that, by classifying it as an homogeneous development of the literal sense, one distends the overstuffs the literal sense, and opens the way for abuses."[83]

But the third objection is more pertinent for our discussion: "A third objection concerns the hagiographer's awareness of the fuller meaning. Most of the authors admit that in at least some examples of the *sensus plenior* the human author was unconscious of the increase in meaning that his text would alter receive. Now can one really speak of a text having a meaning which its author in no way conceived or intended? It the human author of Scripture was not even vaguely aware of the *sensus plenior,* how can we call it a sense of Scripture."[84] Brown's response: "The answer to this objection (an objection which is indeed basic to most of the adverse criticism which is encountered) lies in a renewed emphasis on the instrumentality of the human author. God is, after all, the principal Author of Scripture;

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[80] Brown, "*Sensus Plenior*," 94. Brown also refers to the exegesis practiced in the liturgy, which generally is not a concern of evangelical exegetes.

[81] Brown, "*Sensus Plenior*," 123–124.

[82] Brown, "*Sensus Plenior*," 125.

[83] Brown, "*Sensus Plenior*," 126.

[84] Brown, "*Sensus Plenior*," 129.

His awareness and His intentions are the criteria for scriptural senses, not those of the hagiographer. Of course, the hagiographer was a free instrument and real author, and therefore was generally aware of the complete meaning of what he wrote. However, he was still a deficient instrument and could be moved to say something which he understood only partially, but which God intended fully."[85] Brown adopts from others the distinction between the human author of hagiographer and prophet: "As hagiographer, the author understood and intended the literal sense. But sometimes the hagiographer was also a prophet; and in this case it is not required that he have understood all."[86]

A key term here is *sometimes.* This does not mean that in every instance and every utterance the author of Scripture was speaking both consciously and unconsciously, as active composer and as passive instrument. But it does mean that *sometimes* a human author's words may mean more in God's mind than what was in the man's mind. Brown notes, "Man's proper action of cognition and volition must be operative when God uses him as an instrument in writing the Scriptures. And truly it is: the hagiographer understands and intends the literal sense. Since there is a literal sense of every passage in the Scriptures, man's proper instrumental action is employed in the whole Bible. This assertion answers the demand that the instrument *always* exercise its proper action. But one is unjustified in going further and concluding that any additional sense surpassing the hagiographer's purview is excluded. That might be said only if the fuller sense was taking the place of the literal sense, for then there would be no instrumental action at all. But once we admit the universality of the literal sense and say that the instrument is always acting, there is no reason why God cannot elevate that instrument to produce an additional effect outside the sphere of its proper activity (outside the cognition and intention of the hagiographer)."[87] Brown provides a

[85] Brown, "*Sensus Plenior*," 129–130.
[86] Brown, "*Sensus Plenior*," 130.
[87] Brown, "*Sensus Plenior*," 133.

lengthy catalogue of biblical examples of *sensus plenior* drawn from supporters of the position.[88] He notes that Ayer includes "the Caiaphas prophecy of Jn 11:49–52" among many others.[89]

Where Brown proposes various criteria for validating *sensus plenior* in Scripture, we run into problems. He notes, "The fuller sense must be a development of what is literally said in the passage. It must be a case of the literal sense being *even more true* in the given case. Any distortion or contradiction of the obvious meaning is not a fuller sense."[90] The problem here is that the atonement interpretation of John 11:49–52 does, in fact, appear to be a mild contradiction to the intention of Caiaphas. The test is this: if someone were to reply to Caiaphas, "Sir, do you mean by your words that Jesus will die as an atoning sacrifice for our sins and for others?" Caiaphas would certainly have seen that as a distortion of his intention and would have corrected the interpretation. Thus, in the case of John 11:49–52, we only know the prophetic meaning of Caiaphas's words because John told us.

Another criterion proposed by Brown: "Besides this resemblance in meaning, *God must have willed* that the fuller sense be contained in the literal sense. We must have some objective basis for stating that the two are connected in the economy of salvation."[91] For Brown, this "objective basis" includes "the author of the N.T., the Fathers, the Magisterium, the liturgy, and perhaps even a 'majority' of the theologians."[92] However, for most Protestants and all evangelicals, this "objective basis" is reduced to the authoritative author of Scripture. We can only know for sure that a fuller sense is a real sense and not an imagined sense if we are told by a authoritative prophetic

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[88] Brown, "*Sensus Plenior*," 140–141.

[89] Brown, "*Sensus Plenior*," 142. See Ildefonsus Ayer, *Compendium Introductionis Generalis in Universam S. Scripturam*, 2d ed. (Rome: Ferrari, 1948), 109–110.

[90] Brown, "*Sensus Plenior*," 145.

[91] Brown, "*Sensus Plenior*," 145–146.

[92] Brown, "*Sensus Plenior*," 146.

> voice. In the case of John 11:49–52, this is the Apostle John. Any fuller sense of the words of Scripture proposed by non-prophetic interpreters would necessarily be regarded as merely plausible or even probable. But the *sensus plenior* cannot be validated.

In light of the evidence of John 11:47–52, I am convinced that we must regard as entirely plausible the notion of *sensus plenior* in which a divinely intended meaning is imbedded in the words of the human author in a way that the divine intention of those words differed in meaning from the human intention of the words. Douglas Moo puts the question this way: "Could God have intended a sense *related to* but *more than* that which the human author intended?" And he answers it: "I cannot see that the doctrine of inspiration demands that the answer to that question be negative."[93] Indeed, from a theological perspective, such a view is well within the ability and

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[93] Douglas J. Moo, "The Problem of *Sensus Plenior,*" in *Hermeneutics, Authority, and Canon,* ed. D. A. Carson and John D. Woodbridge (Academie, 1986; Reprint, Baker: 1995), 204. Moo's essay primarily concerns the problem of the use of the Old Testament in the New and inerrancy, as he responds to the charge that the New Testament authors could not have embraced a modern evangelical view of inerrancy because their interpretations of the Old Testament paid such loose attention to the literal meaning of the text. Moo, "The Problem of *Sensus Plenior*," 175–211. Thus, his discussion does not directly address the problem of John 11:49–52, which is John's apostolic interpretation of Caiaphas's prophetic utterance. But the problems are of the same kind. Prophecy is prophecy, whether uttered and written by Isaiah or Hosea or uttered by Caiaphas and written by John.

prerogative of the all-wise, all-powerful God who inspired Scripture. The idea that a text can have a divinely intended meaning beyond the intention of the human author is not, on the face, theologically absurd. Nevertheless, evangelical hermeneuts have often resisted the idea of *sensus plenior* or its related ideas mostly on the basis of presupposed hermeneutical grounds.

> Moo notes a common objection to *sensus plenior*: "Many object to the notion because the lack of objective controls renders it liable to abuse."[94] But this seems to be an *argumentum ad consequentiam.* Moo seems to concur: "It is a well-known logical principle that difficulties created by a theory are never sufficient to falsify that theory, if it is well-enough established on other grounds. If *sensus plenior* be demonstrated to be a viable concept, we will simply have ot live with the difficulties, much as we live with the difficulties."[95]
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> Moo notes, "Since no biblical text clearly teaches the concept [of *sensus plenior*] and no biblical text clearly refutes it, our final acceptance or rejection of the idea will depend on whether it is necessary and adequate to explain the phenomena and whether it coheres with an acceptable theory of inspiration."[96] I would argue that John 11:47–53 actually does provide a clear example of *sensus plenior.*
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> Moo focuses on the second point—whether *sensus plenior* is consistent with inspiration. He points out the problem this way: "Inspiraiton…is generally conceived to be a 'concursive' phenomenon whereby God so uses the human author that the final product, Scripture, is definitely and uniquely *God's* Word and, at the same time, the culturally, historically, linguistically conditioned

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[94] Moo, "The Problem of *Sensus Plenior*," 202.
[95] Moo, "The Problem of *Sensus Plenior*," 202.
[96] Moo, "The Problem of *Sensus Plenior*," 203.

words of human beings. If this is so, it is argued, the notion that God has placed in Scripture a meaning unknown to the human author (the 'instrument' by which God' produced Scripture) is inconsistent with inspiration. Whatever it is, then, this 'fuller meaning' cannot be part of the *text*, since the meaning of that text is limited to what the divine/*human* author intended. There is validity to this objection. A notion of inspiration that 'divides' the deivine and human authors of Scripture may be theologically as suspect as a Christology that too rigidly separates the divine and human natures of Christ."[97] Of course, the Christological analogy eventually falls apart, because one could easily accuse the single-meaning position as tantamount to bibliological adoptionism in which the human meaning is simply adopted by the divine or even bibliological miaphysitism or Monothelitism in which the dual nature of Scripture is mixed into something neither human or divine or the dual nature of Scripture is reduced to one will—that is, one intention: the human. In the end, the Christological analogy can be pushed in any direction.

Also, a problem of question-begging appears to be lurking here. The objection seems to assume that the meaning of Scripture is exhausted by the intention of the human author, which is the premise that the *sensus plenior* calls into question. And if the premise of single-meaning inspiration is defended merely by appealing to the received concept of inspiration and pointing out the inconsistencies between *sensius plenior* and the assumption of single-meaning inspiration, this may also constitute an *argumentum ad populum*. And if *sensus plenior* is rejected *because* it will result in a challenge to the single-meaning view of inspiration or the loss of control over the authoritative meaning of the text, this also may involve an *argumentum ad consequentiam.* Further, if one rejects *sensus plenior* because of the claim that it will inevitably require an outside authoritative arbiter of interpretation to place external limits on the correct meanings of the text—like the Roman Catholic Magisterium—this is an example of a slippery slope fallacy.

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[97] Moo, "The Problem of *Sensus Plenior*," 203

Moo rightly pushes back against this critique of *sensus plenior*.[98] In doing so, Moo makes a brief, passing reference to John 11:49–52, noting, "While not strictly parallel, since the production of inspired Scripture is not involved, the example of the 'prophecy' of Caiaphas (Jn 11:49–52) is suggestive: as 'high priest that year,' he communicated a message from God that goes beyond anything he consciously intended."[99] Would that Moo had expanded upon this example. That Caiaphas was not producing inspired Scripture seems irrelevant. He "prophesied." That is, he functioned as a prophet, who, whether by mouth or by writing, put into words God's words. This is simply what it meant to prophesy. In any case, the Apostle John did, in fact, record Caiaphas's verbal prophecy in John 11:49–50 and called it "prophesying."

Let us return to Moo's question and answer: "Could God have intended a sense *related to* but *more than* that which the human author intended? I cannot see that the doctrine of inspiration demands that the answer to that question be negative."[100] I would put it differently: *Could God have intended a meaning of the same words of a prophecy distinct from what the human speaker intended? Of course*!

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[98] Moo, "The Problem of *Sensus Plenior*," 203.

[99] Moo, "The Problem of *Sensus Plenior*," 203–204.

[100] Moo, "The Problem of *Sensus Plenior*," 204. Moo is thus correct when he writes, "It is not clear, then, that the usual objections brought against the idea of a *sensus plenior* are cogent. There does not appear to be any compelling reason to rejecting the hypothesis." Moo, "The Problem of *Sensus Plenior*," 204. In fact, I would add, John 11:49–53 provides a compelling reason for accepting it as a reality. But this example falls short of establishing a comprehensive hermeneutical principle to be employed throughout the Old and New Testament canon.

I would then follow up with a second question: *Has God actually done so*? Yes, at least in John 11:49–52. Try as I might, I can find no way to wiggle out from under this. Perhaps, some might suggest, we can distinguish between an oral prophetic utterance like Caiaphas's and the inspired written text of prophetic Scripture. But this does not work. The prophets "speak" through the Scripture. Scripture is seen as an extension of the prophet's prophesying.[101] Prophecy is prophecy whether spoken as "thus says the Lord" or written.[102] Both the spoken prophetic word and the written prophetic word are prophetic verbalizations.[103]

But having answered the second question in the affirmative, I then close the loop with a third question: *Do God's prophetic words* always *have meanings distinct from the human speaker's intention?* This cannot be assumed. Just because God may once or even several

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[101] Note the inextricable dynamic between the written word, spoken word, and words of the Holy Spirit in Acts 1:16, where Peter said, "Brethren, the Scripture had to be fulfilled, which the Holy Spirit foretold by the mouth of David." Also see Acts 4:25; 13:27; 28:25–27.

[102] Jeremiah—and presumably many of the Old Testament prophets—dictated their prophetic message, which was then written (e.g. Jer 36:4, 27–32). The spoken words did not become prophecy when they were written; they were already prophecy when they were spoken.

[103] Deut 18:18; 1 Kings 17:24; Jer 1:9; Zech 8:9. And in any case, as soon as the Apostle John put Caiaphas's words to paper, they became inscribed prophecy, just like the prophetic utterances recorded for any of the biblical prophets' words in narrative Scripture.

times complement the author's intended meaning with a distinct divine meaning, this does not at all imply that God regularly does so. It is just as reasonable that God normally inspires Scripture in such a way that the human author's meaning exhausts the divine meaning. Thus, both the theoretical possibility of *sensus plenior* or even the clear example of an instance of *sensus plenior* does not in itself establish a hermeneutical principle of *sensus plenior* to be employed in all, most, or many passages or pericopes.

The Epistemological Problem: Who Can Identify and Validate a Fuller Sense?

Yes, John 11:51 provides a clear example in which *sensus plenior* actually occurs through a prophetic utterance. However, we must be careful not to over-generalize and overstate the implications for biblical interpretation. The phenomenon of John 11:51 does not establish a general principle that all prophesying involves deeper or fuller meanings. Rather, John 11:51 establishes that a prophetic verbalization can have a fuller, divinely intended meaning distinct from the human author's intention.[104] Without

[104] MacRory, *Gospel of St. John*, 204–205. Gangel is rare among commentators who associate John's comment as having hermeneutical significance: "Verses 52–53 are John's hermeneutic on the Caiaphas

prophetic authority, though, the exegete has no way to validate a fuller sense of a text.[105]

Thus, for me, the reality of *sensus plenior* has little practical effect on my hermeneutics. As such, my approach is quite different from those who take the potential presence of a *sensus plenior* as a hermeneutical mandate—or at least permit—for seeking out fuller, deeper, spiritual meanings in a passage. Moo addresses the issue this way: "On the one hand, we do not have the same revelatory authority to make the specific identifications made in the New Testament. But, on the other hand, we can usually see the theological structure and hermeneutical principles on which the New Testament interpretation of the Old rests; and we can follow the New Testament in applying similar criteria in our own interpretation."[106]

To the dismay of some and relief of others, I agree with Moo's first point—we have no revelatory authority for a confident assertion of a *sensus plenior.* At this point, though, I would stop. If a passage has a divine meaning

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comment." Gangel, *John,* 227. Beyond this brief mention, he does not develop the idea.

[105] While readers may suspect a passage has a deeper meaning intended by God, exegetes cannot validate such a proposal with confidence. They are limited to what can be demonstrated through classic historical-grammatical interpretation of the text. Only a prophet like John himself would be able to validate the deeper sense of Scripture in a way that such an interpretation becomes its own objective basis.

[106] Moo, "The Problem of *Sensus Plenior*," 206.

distinct from the human author's meaning, we would only have access to that meaning by God's own revelation through a prophet. Validation of such interpretations are, in the end, impossible.

Returning to John 11:49–53, if John had simply left out his comments in verses 51–52 explaining the fuller sense of Caiaphas's prophecy, readers would have no basis for asserting that his words had deeper meaning beyond his utilitarian consequentialism. Maybe we might point out the irony of his words, that Jesus would, in fact, die for the nation, but not in the way Caiaphas intended. But to assert confidently that Caiaphas prophesied, that he spoke better than he knew, and that this meaning was God's meaning distinct from Caiaphas's—I can only know that if God were to tell us through a prophetic authority.

So where does that lead me? It leads me back to the beginning, back to the place where I started. It leads me to a grammatical-historical hermeneutic that seeks to understand the intent of the author of Scripture. But that very grammatical-historical hermeneutic has taught me that sometimes, just as an individual human author may have double or triple entendres in their texts, God may, as he sees fit, embed in his inspired text a fuller sense that only he can reveal and validate. And when he does so, I take him literally that the text has more than one intended meaning beyond that of the human author's conscious intention.

The possibility of a distinct divine intention does not confer upon the interpreter the ability to discern that intention with a high degree of confidence. And attempts at establishing principles do not ultimately avoid subjectivism. Regarding *sensus plenior,* Bauer and Traina write:

> *Sensus plenior* is the notion that God uses the interconnections between passages in the Bible to communicate a fuller meaning than the biblical authors themselves knew or intended. Certainly the writers of the New Testament often posited a fuller significance to Old Testament passages than the original authors of those passages had in mind. The New Testament writers discerned this fuller significance through reading Old Testament passages in light of one another and in light of the Christ event. The historical character of biblical revelation suggests that this more comprehensive divine intention stands in continuity with the meaning of passages in their original historical and literary contexts. This fuller significance is an expansion of the original sense of passages. It does not contradict or stand in isolation from the original sense. But it does move beyond the original sense. Readers may discern this fuller significance as they explore connections between biblical passages or as they consider ways in which earlier passages point ahead to later stages of the revelation of God within the flow of the biblical canon. In other words, readers may encounter this *sensus plenior,* this fuller sense, as they engage in correlation.[107]

Appeals to canonical and typological approaches to establish confidence in fuller meanings also have their limits. They provide plausibility and may even increase probability of a deeper divinely intended meaning or

[107] Bauer and Traina, *Inductive Bible Study*, 342.

significance; but they cannot demonstrate or validate such meaning. Recognizing a theological trajectory is not the same as establishing a particular divine intention. Identifying a typological correspondence is not necessarily establishing a second meaning beyond that of the human authors. Demonstrating canonical coherence does not validate interpretation as a divinely intended fuller sense.

Moo's canonical approach might kick the ball up the pitch, but it ultimately fails to find the back of the net. Moo himself admits that interpreters do not possess the same revelatory authority as the biblical authors. I think the various approaches for making connections, identifying patterns, and such may have a purpose in developing biblical theology, systematic theology, or practical theology, but in the realm of exegesis and hermeneutics, they will always fall short.

And Schreiner's principles for identifying additional meaning builds on the possibility of *sensus plenior*, but in the end, they simply make such an interpretation plausible and possible, but not provable. I suppose the point where I would differ with Schreiner is in the application. To the question, "Are we justified in imitating the biblical authors?" Schreiner answers in the affirmative.[108] This is where I will have to occupy a middle ground, which instead of making everyone happy with me will likely

[108] Schreiner, *Four Senses*, 181–183.

make everyone upset. I occupy the uncomfortable space in which one foot is on the dry land of the grammatical-historical interpretation of Scripture as a general rule. My other foot is in the rushing waters of *sensus plenior*, in which I acknowledge any passage may have a divinely intended meaning distinct from the intention of the human author and not accessible by straightforward grammatical-historical exegesis.

Here I run up against an unavoidable epistemological problem.[109] Unless an allegorical or tropological or anagogical sense is so obvious that every reader sees it, I have no way of validating such an interpretation *unless Jesus or an inspired apostle or prophet reveals such a deeper meaning to me.* At best I can suspect such a meaning. This leaves me with only sheepishly drawing analogies, parallels, and illustrations and pointing out patterns in the biblical canon. It prevents me from drawing binding applications to theology or ethics. And if I cannot establish or defend doctrine or practice from unverifiable spiritual meanings, what practical good are they? Only by appealing to an authoritative post-apostolic

[109] Ingrassia poses the epistemological problem well: "But, if God's meaning is something other than the human author's meaning (for the human author's meaning is in the text), then how can one know God's meaning through the text? If God's meaning is outside the text, the interpreter is left in a subjective quagmire as how to get at this divine meaning which is not expressed in the text." Ingrassia, "Theological Appraisal of Authorial Intent," 90.

magisterium could such additional meanings become binding.

To sum up: Theoretically, God may have intended a distinct meaning beyond that of the human author's conscious intention. That meaning, however, is not often discernible and can certainly not be validated unless God reveals it through authoritative revelatory means. The Old Testament prophets, New Testament apostles and prophets, and any historic prophets or men and women who prophesied had such revelatory authority. Modern interpreters simply do not have this kind of apostolic/prophetic authority or insight. Thus, *sensus plenior* is a legitimate theological possibility and a demonstrable biblical phenomenon, but it is not a general interpretive principle or a prescriptive interpretive method.[110]

[110] This is not quite the same as saying, "The New Testament authors did it, but we can't." But it is close. Rather, a better way of putting it would be, "While any prophetic utterance or prophetic writing theoretically could contain statements in which the divine author intends a meaning distinct from the intention of the human author, practically, apart from divine prophetic authority, we have no way of validating such a theoretical distinct meaning because by definition it cannot be demonstrated through grammatical-historical exegesis of the text." The end result is the same: only a fuller sense revealed as such by divine authority can be validated.

Conclusion: A Chastened Literalism

After all this, I have come full circle, and I now take back what I gave. In the end, we have no prophetic authority that gives us insight into the mind of God. Instead, we have the text of canonical Scripture as it has been given to us. This is why the doctrine of the sufficiency of Scripture is vital: while this or that statement in Scripture could possibly veil a divine meaning distinct from that which is accessible by grammatical-historical exegesis, if it were necessary for faith and love, for life and godliness, then God would have revealed this. And in any case, the discernible human meaning of the text as we have it is nevertheless true, regardless of whether God may someday reveal a deeper intended divine meaning.

However, my own grammatical-historical hermeneutic forces me to confess that John 11:51, interpreted literally, means that the human's conscious intention cannot be established as the absolute limit on the divinely intended meaning. Thus, we must *a priori* be open to the possibility that God may superintend prophetic verbalizations in such a manner that they communicate a fuller meaning beyond the speaker's conscious intention.

Nevertheless, post-apostolic, post-prophetic interpreters cannot independently validate such interpretations. They necessarily remain plausible and speculative at best, eisegetical and destructive at worst. The sufficiency of Scripture, then, means that we need not speculate about

hidden meanings discerned by expert eisegetes with second-rate revelatory authority to discern what God *really* meant by his words.

Thus, I remain a literalist, but I am a *chastened* literalist. I take the biblical text literally—that is, I apply the principles of grammatical-historical interpretation, with an emphasis on discerning the author's intention. But this includes accepting the Bible's own testimony that God sometimes intends more through human words than the human speaker consciously understood. This serves to resolve instances when the New Testament authors seem to reinterpret or draw deeper meanings from Old Testament passages and prophecies. But it does not serve as a general hermeneutical principle for finding hidden meanings in texts that are not indisputably evident in the passage itself.