Implicated vs. Incidental: Relevance Theory and The Meaning of Genesis

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The distinction between *genealogical* Adam and Eve and *genetic* Adam and Eve is one of the most important concepts to be introduced into the conversation about Genesis 2 and science. With this distinction, models of interpretation that posit a historically and theologically distinct couple within a larger human population group remain scientifically viable. In his book, *The Genealogical Adam & Eve*, Dr. Swamidass presents some hypothetical scenarios that bring together universal genealogical ancestry and a historical Adam and Eve in a plausible fashion. He has made a significant contribution by keeping all possible options on the table.

Concerning the biblical aspects of his model, Dr. Swamidass asked me to share some helpful linguistic categories that are useful when considering interpretive options for Genesis 2. A communication model called " Relevance Theory" has been widely received in linguistic circles for decades but is barely known in biblical studies.

The strength of Relevance Theory is its focus on how texts interact with the cognitive environment in which they are written, including implicit assumptions that are drawn upon by an author as s/he communicates with an audience. In particular, it is crucial to understand the difference between implicit assumptions that are *incidental* in the cognitive environment of an author and audience and the assumptions that are actually *implicated* by the author as relevant for the intended message.

"There is a Tree" in Three Different Ways

Let me illustrate with a simple, non-biblical illustration, and then I will offer a couple of suggestions as to how this distinction is important when considering interpretive options in Genesis 2.

Imagine that we are walking in a field, and I say, "There is a tree." The contextual environment, including our present circumstances, provides the crucial context upon which to draw in making sense of my statement. We share implicitly many assumptions about trees that may or may not be implicated in my communication. Consider three different contexts and how they contribute to the interaction between my statement and our shared assumptions that are implicit about trees:

(1) It is hot outside, and we are weary of the sun. This would lead you to consider the assumption about a "tree" that it can provide shade; and my statement, "There is a tree," is really a suggestion that we seek shelter in its shade. The assumption about trees providing shade is *implicated* in the meaning of my statement. However, there are other assumptions *incidentally* true of trees that were not implicated in the meaning of my statement.

Let's change contexts: (2) We are now in a desert and we are contemplating our empty water bottles. A different assumption about trees comes into play; that is, where there are trees there is water. In this case, the exact same words used in illustration 1 now *implicate* an implicit assumption about water.

Consider a third scenario: (3) We cannot see over the rise in the field but wish to get a more distant view of what lies ahead. A whole schema about tree climbing comes to mind whereby we can climb the tree to gain a visual advantage. Nothing about shade or water is relevant or *implicated* to this third circumstance, rather the fact that trees give shade and are near water is *incidental*.

These assumptions remain true *implicitly,* that is trees (A) provide shade and (B) grow near sources of water, but A and B are not *relevant* to the statement, "There is a tree" in all these cases. So neither assumption is *implicated* in the communicative event. There are many other incidental facts that we might know about trees that are also not implicated. Trees provide fuel (if we need a fire), trees are sometimes edible (if we are hungry), etc., etc.

Implicated vs. Incidental

With a distinction between *implicated* and *incidental* assumptions, Relevance Theory describes how the human mind maximizes the cognitive benefit derived from the words with minimal mental processing effort.

On the audience's side, within the right context of the communication, assumptions that are not implicated are automatically ignored.

On the author's side, assumptions not relevant to the informative intention are not *implicated*. Many assumptions are implicit in our schema about trees, but they are not necessarily implicated in any given discourse involving a tree.

Another related concept is how strongly (or weakly) an assumption might be related to meaning. For example, in scenarios (1) and (2) above, both assumptions might or might not be relevant to my meaning. In the case of needing shade, the assumption that trees provide shade is *strongly implicated,* but the assumption about water may not be implicated at all if our water bottles are full. This assumption might actually come to mind on a hot day, but in this case

it is at best only weakly implicated and not important at all to what I am intending to communicate.

For a biblical example, the meaning of the well known phrase, "the sun rose," can be analyzed in this manner. The use of this expression in Gen 19:23 *implicates* the assumption that sunrise marks the time of day and so provides the chronological setting for the narrative. Assumptions about astrophysics are not strongly implicated by the text even though the original audience held a geocentric model of the solar system and *may* have *incidentally* thought about solar motion in this context. Astronomical assumptions in the cognitive environment of the audience would be at best only weakly implicated, but in any event, they were not part of the informative intention of the text.

What Does Genesis Implicate?

Let's now consider Genesis 2 and some of Swamidass's suggestions. A central idea in *The Genealogical Adam and Eve* is that Adam and Eve co-existed with a larger human population group. If *genealogical* connections are in view, and not *genetic* connections, then the number of people existing at the time of Adam and Eve is an assumption not necessarily implicated in the text.

Indeed, as Swamidass and others observe, there is evidence in the text of Genesis 4 that might encourage the assumption of a larger population group; but the existence or non-existence of such a group are assumptions not *implicated* in Genesis 2 (or at best only weakly implicated).

Further, if Adam is primarily archetypal (even if historical), then *de novo* creation is not implicated. Swamidass shows that the scientific evidence does not show us either way, and the wording of Genesis 2 pushes some to conclude *de novo* creation is implicated; As is well known, however, there are also reasons to read the creation from dust metaphorically. Interpreters are then left with a text that is underdetermined on these points and are free to speculate regarding a weakly implicated idea such as this.

My point is not to weigh in on a particular interpretive option, rather, to explain that interpretive options are all dependent on implicit background assumptions that are not strongly implicated by the text. A *historical* human pair may be strongly implicated in the chapter as a whole, but the manner of their origin and the existence of a larger people group might not be implicated. For assumptions that are only weakly implicated, the interpreter bears responsibility for reading

them into the context, and they are not necessarily pertinent to the author's informative intention.

The Implicated Image of God

Another important issue of discussion is the nature of the "image of God" and the scope of individuals within the human population that constitute as image bearers. Exegetes and theologians need to consider more carefully the difference between human attributes that are *implicitly* necessary for people to bear the image and what Gen 1:26–28 actually *implicates.* Such features as intellect, emotion, and will, for example, may be necessarily true of humans, but they are not thereby implicated in the teaching of Genesis 1 regarding the image.

In my opinion, vocational and relational aspects to the image are strongly implicated by the text, but structural (i.e., ontological) elements are only *implicit* but not *implicated*. This analysis reinforces the idea of a *recent* genealogical Adam and Eve, which in some versions might downplay the importance of structural considerations when considering which creatures may or may not be considered image bearers.

Hopefully, these examples illustrate the utility of differentiating between *incidental* and *implicated* in authorial intent.

Whether the reader of this post agrees with my assessment or not is unimportant. What is important is that more robust linguistic considerations be brought into the discussion.

From a linguistic viewpoint, we have liberty to explore different assumptions on incidental points such as the possibility of people outside the Garden. The assumptions brought to the text by original readers, or by us, are not necessarily the teaching of Scripture when they are not strongly implicated.

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