

# Is the Big Idea Big Enough? Single Meaning Hermeneutics and Single Idea Preaching

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## Affirmation of Single Meaning Hermeneutics

The goal of interpretation is to discover and discern the intended meaning of the author as expressed in the biblical text. Suggestions that the author's intention gives way to the reader's intuition must be rejected. Hirsch argues convincingly that just because "a text *might* represent several structures of meaning does not imply that it does in fact represent all the meanings which a particular word sequence can legally convey" (emphasis his). Instead, "the interpreter's job is to reconstruct a determinate actual meaning, not a mere system of possibilities."<sup>1</sup> While that meaning cannot always be known exhaustively, it is clear enough to demand a response. Vanhoozer affirms that interpretation can yield "*adequate* knowledge- adequate for the purpose of understanding. Interpreters may not know everything but they can know *enough*- enough to understand a text and respond to it appropriately" (emphasis his).<sup>2</sup> So then, an interpreter can sufficiently determine meaning from a biblical passage.<sup>3</sup>

The intended meaning of a biblical text is not only accessible, but also single. A text does not represent multiple meanings, but a single objective meaning controlled by the expressed intent of the author. The classic and oft quoted statement by Terry exemplifies this axiom: "A fundamental

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<sup>1</sup> E.D. Hirsch. *Validity of Interpretation* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1967), 231.

<sup>2</sup> Kevin Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning in This Text?* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998), 139.

<sup>3</sup> For a sampling of views within single-meaning hermeneutics, see Robert Thomas, "The Principle of Single Meaning" *The Masters Seminary Journal* (Spring 2001) 33-47; Walter Kaiser, "The Promise to David in Psalm 16 and its Application in Acts 2:25-33 and 13:32-37" *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* (Spring 1980) 219-229; and Elliott Johnson, "Dual Authorship and the Single Intended Meaning of Scripture" *Bibliotheca Sacra* (July-September 1986) 218-227.

principle in grammatico-historical exposition is that the words and sentences can have but one significance in one and the same connection.”<sup>4</sup> The International Council on Biblical Inerrancy also reflects a single-meaning affirmation: “We affirm that the meaning expressed in each biblical text is single, definite and fixed.”<sup>5</sup>

Therefore, commitment to single meaning stands as a central principle in interpretation that guides expository preaching. That single meaning represents the intended sense as expressed by the biblical author.

### **Affirmation of Big Idea Exposition**

Just as a single meaning hermeneutic forms a foundation stone for interpretation, so too the big idea principle grounds expository preaching. Haddon Robinson states in his classic preaching text, “A sermon should be a bullet, not buckshot. Ideally each sermon is the explanation, interpretation, or application of a single dominant idea...”<sup>6</sup> Further, Robinson observes “students of public speaking and preaching have argued for centuries that effective communication demands a single theme. Rhetoricians hold to this so strongly that virtually every textbook devotes some space to a treatment of the principle.”<sup>7</sup>

A host of contemporary preaching books share this commitment to big idea preaching. Bryan Chapell contends that

Sermons of any significant length contain theological concepts, illustrative materials, and corroborative facts. These many components, however, do not imply that a sermon is about many things. Each feature of a well-wrought message reflects, refines, and/or develops one major idea. This major idea, or theme, glues the message together and makes its features stick

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<sup>4</sup> Milton Terry, *Biblical Hermeneutics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1952), 205. Here Terry utilizes the term “significance” as synonymous with “meaning.”

<sup>5</sup> Article VII, “Articles of Affirmation and Denial,” International Council on Biblical Inerrancy, November 10-13, 1982.

<sup>6</sup> Haddon Robinson, *Biblical Preaching* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2001), 35.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid*, 35-6.

in a listener's mind. All the features of a sermon should support the concept that unifies the whole.<sup>8</sup>

John MacArthur also argues for big idea preaching. "Everything else in the sermon builds to elucidate, convict, and confront the hearer with the main truth. This means every expository sermon is a unit with one main theme or topic, rather than a rambling verse after verse."<sup>9</sup> Lloyd-Jones terms the big idea as a "particular doctrine" which represents the key emphasis of biblical text. Referring to the main and subordinate points of a message, he concludes, "Each one should lead to the next, and work ultimately to a definite conclusion. Everything is to be so arranged as to bring out the main thrust of this particular doctrine."<sup>10</sup>

Willhite argues that two lines of evidence support big idea preaching. Hermeneutical commitments and rhetorical theory both demand big idea preaching. He discusses four hermeneutical commitments that demand big idea preaching:

(1) We embrace a high view of Scripture for preaching. (2) The only way to say "thus saith the Lord" is to say what the Bible says. (3) Expository preaching requires an exegetical or hermeneutical process that requires both analysis and synthesis of the text. (4) Expository preaching is text-centered and audience focused.<sup>11</sup>

He adds that rhetorical theory supports big idea preaching. "The mind of the listener searches for overall unity...our propensity toward unity makes trying to have more than one point (buckshot) like

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<sup>8</sup> Bryan Chapell, *Christ-Centered Preaching: Redeeming the Expository Sermon* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2005), 44.

<sup>9</sup> John MacArthur, "A Study Method for Expository Preaching," *Rediscovering Expository Preaching* (Dallas: Word, 1992), 220.

<sup>10</sup> D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Preaching and Preachers* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1971), 77.

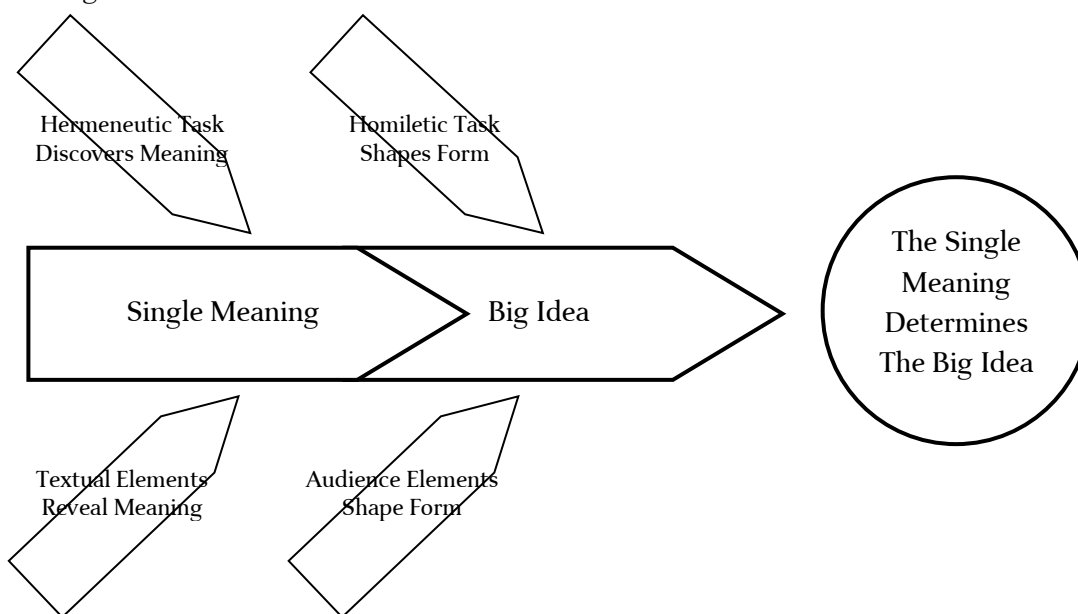
<sup>11</sup> Keith Willhite, "A Bullet Versus Buckshot: What Makes the Big Idea Work?" *The Big Idea of Preaching* ed. by Keith Willhite and Scott Gibson (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1998), 14.

having no point at all.”<sup>12</sup> He later concludes “though a text may say many things, listeners need to hear the synthesis of what was intended.”<sup>13</sup>

So preaching experts widely accept that the development of a single idea represents the goal of expository preaching. The question that now rises concerns the relationship of hermeneutical single meaning and homiletical single focus.

### Relationship of Single Meaning and Big Idea

The relationship seems clear: the single meaning yielded by proper interpretation forms the big idea of exposition. The goal is to grasp the sole intended meaning then shape that meaning into an effective homiletical idea. The big idea represents simply a creatively-shaped statement of the single meaning of the text.



Willhite exemplifies this approach, “It [the sermon’s big idea] is the target message for a particular audience that represents the same major intent that the passage had for its original readers.”<sup>14</sup>

McDougal likewise argues:

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<sup>12</sup> Willhite, p. 20.

<sup>13</sup> Willhite, p. 22.

<sup>14</sup> Willhite, p. 18.

Our task is NOT to create a central theme;

It is rather to

1. find the author's central theme
2. build a message around that theme
3. make that theme the central part of all we have to say.<sup>15</sup>

Sunukjian similarly concludes that exposition demands a single idea: "it's essential that your sermon have this take-home truth." This "take-home truth" is "the essential core of what the author is saying. It's the idea that dominates all other ideas-it's the 'Big Idea.'"<sup>16</sup>

This linear approach clearly honors the authority of Scripture by committing to communicate its central intended meaning. The method places the powder charge of authorial intent behind Robinson's homiletical bullet. Though this scheme obviously has much to commend, is it the only effective approach? Two challenges confront an exclusive commitment to single meaning-big idea preaching.

### **The Challenge of Current Preaching Practice**

The single meaning-big idea construct necessitates consistent agreement in big ideas from the same passages. If the single meaning sets the sole boundary for a big idea, then every expositor preaching from the same text should reflect that meaning in their sermon ideas. While the big ideas will not be identical, they should share a common focus. A survey of two biblical passages tests this commonality.

**Joseph in Potiphar's House – Genesis 39.** The story of Joseph in Egypt has impacted hearers' lives from flannel graph to lectern for many generations. Its popularity for teachers and preachers makes it a good candidate for case study.

The story of Joseph in Potiphar's house resides in the broader pericope of Genesis 37-50. As the final *toledoth* in Genesis, the pericope records the account of Jacob (37:2). The focus is on Jacob's

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<sup>15</sup> Donald McDougal, "Central Ideas, Outlines, and Titles," *Rediscovering Expository Preaching*, p. 229.

<sup>16</sup> Donald Sunukjian. *Invitation to Biblical Preaching* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2007), 66.

sons, particularly Joseph. Wolf notes that this section features God's providence and presence as He moves His people from Canaan to Egypt.<sup>17</sup> Hill and Walton understand the same theme:

The main intent of the Joseph story appears to be to recount how the family of Abraham ended up in Egypt. In this way it is preparatory for the exodus narratives. Though the covenant is barely mentioned, God's providential care of Joseph and sovereign control of history are evident as the plot develops and is resolved.<sup>18</sup>

This theme of Yahweh's purposeful providence fulfilling His promises despite human obstacles finds support in three lines of evidence. First, the *toledoth* sequence ties each of the Genesis narratives into a unity. The Joseph narrative must be understood in light of the preceding patriarchal narratives. It is not Joseph's story, but an extension of the narrative begun with Abraham. Second, though the activity of God, which had been direct in the earlier *toledoth*, becomes more indirect in the Joseph narrative, it nevertheless remains the focal point.<sup>19</sup> This represents a variation, not abandonment, of God's active involvement in creation and history. Third, Yahweh continues to fulfill His promises to Abraham and his descendants in the final chapters of Genesis.<sup>20</sup> Connections to the Abrahamic promise surface in 41:52; 46:1-4; 47:27; 48:15-16; 50:24).<sup>21</sup> That God's blessing to and through Abraham continued to Joseph is found in 39:2-5. God blessed Joseph even in captivity and blessed Potiphar through Joseph (cf. 12:2-3). The emphasis of God's presence and blessing serves to frame chapter 39 through the bracketing statements in 39:2-5 and 39:21-23. Therefore, the author-intended meaning of Genesis 39 could be stated as Yahweh's protection and blessing to and through His promise recipient, Joseph.

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<sup>17</sup> Herbert Wolf, *An Introduction to the Old Testament Pentateuch* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1991), 121.

<sup>18</sup> Andrew Hill and John Walton. *A Survey of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000), 74.

<sup>19</sup> Bill Arnold, *Encountering Genesis* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998), 151.

<sup>20</sup> Gordon Wenham, "Genesis 16-50 in *Word Biblical Commentary* ed. by David Hubbard, *et al* (Dallas: Word, 1994), 344.

<sup>21</sup> Kenneth Matthews, "Genesis 11:27-50:26," in *The New American Commentary* ed. by Ray Clendenen (Nashville: Broadman, 2005), 666-7.

A survey of sermons on Genesis however, reveals a split of big ideas for the text. Sermons from *Preaching* magazine do not share this single meaning in their big ideas. In fact, the three sermons published preach the following big ideas:

“Sometimes God leads, sometimes God supports, sometimes God simply is there. Hidden and silent perhaps, but there, with us.” Kenneth Gible.

“Adultery: You Can’t Have Your Kate and Edith, Too.” Louis Lotz.

“Sexual Morality: The Forgotten Alternative.” Brian Harbor.<sup>22</sup>

So one of the sermon big ideas closely reflects the intended meaning (Gible), but the two other big ideas feature the moral commitment of Joseph. Their focus is not on God’s promise-fulfilling work (the clear meaning of the entire patriarchal narratives), but on Joseph’s moral commitment. Likewise, Epp proclaims that the key of the narrative is “the lesson of obedience through suffering.” It shows in two tests of Joseph: the adversity with his brothers and the temptation with Potiphar’s wife.<sup>23</sup> Swindoll offers that we “look at Joseph’s memorable example and see how he resisted the seductive enticements of a sensual temptation.”<sup>24</sup> So then, preachers seem split as to whether to preach the faithfulness of God or the purity of Joseph.

The dilemma that comes from a text like Genesis 39 is that the text itself and the broader context clearly demonstrate that the intended meaning is of Yahweh’s work in providing for His promise. Yet, the text also contains elements that support the emphasis on Joseph’s protecting his purity. The detail given to the temptation by Potiphar’s wife as well as the foil provided by Judah in chapter 38 highlight Joseph’s morality. Have some simply missed the point while others have hit it? Is there justification for a sermon big idea even if it does not reflect the single meaning?

**The Forgiving Father and the Prodigal Son and the Jealous Son – Luke 15.** This much loved and oft preached text has been utilized for many lessons.

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<sup>22</sup> All three example sermons from [www.preaching.com](http://www.preaching.com).

<sup>23</sup> Theodore Epp, *Joseph: God Planned It for Good* (Lincoln, NE: Back to the Bible, 1971), 33, 36.

<sup>24</sup> Charles Swindoll, *Joseph: From Pit and Pinnacle* (Fullerton, CA: Insight for Living, 1990), 12.

The message of Luke may be stated as portraying Jesus as the “perfect and innocent Savior”<sup>25</sup> who brings salvation to all the world, especially the Gentiles. Geldenhuys argues convincingly that Luke, more than the other three Gospels, emphasizes Jesus’ universal work of redemption, while taking unique interest in the Gentiles.<sup>26</sup> This message sharpens its focus in Luke 15-19 as the section portrays Jesus’ interest in the social outcasts of His day.<sup>27</sup> These outcasts provide the background of the prodigal parable of chapter 15.

The prodigal parable serves as the climactic story of three parables spoken to accusing religious leaders (15:2-3). The religious leaders bristled against Jesus’ welcoming the outcasts of His day. He not only opened His public ministry to them, but even fellowshiped with them around the table (15:3). Jesus makes transparent the intent of the first two parables of the triad when He concludes each with a refrain of heavenly rejoicing over repentant sinners (15:7, 10). The refrain, though unvoiced in the third parable, echoes in the rejoicing by the father at the returning son (15:20-24). So then, the author-intended meaning of the parable is to demonstrate the joyful Father who receives repentant sinners.<sup>28</sup>

Surveying sermons on the prodigal parable uncovers four categories of big ideas. First, some emphasize the intended meaning by building big ideas around the receiving and rejoicing father. Ogilvie calls him the “prodigal father” and places him squarely in the center of the message.<sup>29</sup> Jones also communicates this meaning through his “Twice in One Day” big idea. He develops the gracious

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<sup>25</sup> Mark Bailey and Thomas Constable, *New Testament Explorer* (Dallas: Word, 1999), 101.

<sup>26</sup> Norval Geldenhuys, “The Gospel of Luke” in *The New International Commentary on the New Testament* ed. by F.F. Bruce (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977), 41-2.

<sup>27</sup> Cf. 16:19-25; 17:11-19; 18:1-8; 9-14; 19:1-10. Walter Liefeld, “Luke” in *Expositor’s Bible Commentary* ed. by Frank Gaebelin (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984), 981.

<sup>28</sup> Bailey and Constable, 135; David Gooding, *According to Luke* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), 271.

<sup>29</sup> Lloyd John Ogilvie, “God’s Love: The Prodigal God Text: Luke 15:11-24” on [www.preaching.com](http://www.preaching.com).



love of the father as he deals with both sons.<sup>30</sup> Second, some draw big ideas from the parable's father, but draw in other elements of the story. Anderson incorporates acceptance, availability, care, forgiveness, generosity, happiness and sovereignty into his big idea while Huffman finds consistent teaching, respect for the individual, enduring love, forgiveness, celebration and willingness to live with ambiguity.<sup>31</sup> Third, some draw their big idea from the older son. Gibble labels this son as the true prodigal because of his cheerless self-pity.<sup>32</sup> Fourth, still others have drawn their big idea from the actions of the prodigal. The big idea then revolves around the human tendency to run in rebellion and the need for all to return in repentance.<sup>33</sup> Again the question arises: are some of the big ideas right and the others wrong? If so, which ones?

These two biblical texts serve to illustrate one of the challenges in directly linking the single meaning intended by the author with the single big idea utilized by preachers. Can one conclude that so many expositors simply miss the author's point in their own sermon point? Admittedly, poor exposition thrives in pulpits today. At the same time, is the only effective exposition the one that directly links the single meaning to the big idea? Chapell seems to acknowledge this quandary:

We want this theme [the big idea] to be the Bible's theme. This does not mean that only the major theme of a passage can serve as the theme of an expository sermon.... If minor themes were not legitimate foci of individual sermons, preachers would ultimately be forced to preach on only whole books at a time.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Peter Rhea Jones, "Twice in One Day," *ibid.*

<sup>31</sup> Paul Anderson, "Fathers: What is Your Father Like?" and John Huffman, "The Model Father," on [www.preaching.com](http://www.preaching.com).

<sup>32</sup> Kenneth Gibble, "The Prodigal Who Stayed at Home," on [www.preaching.com](http://www.preaching.com).

<sup>33</sup> See overview of sermon ideas from Huffman, "Model Father." Compare this emphasis with MacArthur who acknowledges the textual focus on the father, but develops his argument on the repentance of the prodigal. John MacArthur, *The Gospel According to Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1988), 152-3.

<sup>34</sup> Chapell, 46.

## The Challenge of New Testament Practice

Biblical practice also seems to challenge the notion that the single meaning must be the single big idea. New Testament writers often began with spiritual virtues and turned to Old Testament texts to exemplify them. Paul turned to Israel's ignoble history to illustrate his warning for the Corinthians to avoid idolatry, immorality, and discontent (1 Cor 10:6-11). Also, the fact that long before Sinai Abraham received righteousness through faith (Gen 15:6) serves as a key piece of Paul's argument for salvation through faith apart from the Law (Rom 4:9-15). The writer of Hebrews gathers a host of examples to demonstrate enduring faith in chapter eleven. An expositor focusing on the authorial intent in those Old Testament contexts might not come to the same conclusions as the New Testament authors did. However, these narratives were employed to teach key New Testament truths.

Some scholars have dismissed this practice as less than valid for preaching today,<sup>35</sup> but two key passages demonstrate that Old Testament texts can serve as legitimate sources of model behavior. Paul writes in Romans 15:4 that the Scripture record was written for our spiritual benefit. The written events of the past serve to instruct and encourage believers so as to produce endurance that fosters our Christian hope. This statement follows Paul's quote of Psalm 69:9, but broadens the significance to include all of the Old Testament.<sup>36</sup> Paul's extensive illustrative use of the Old Testament and his general assertions concerning Scripture (i.e. 2 Tim 3:16-17) further bolster this perspective.

In the second key passage, Paul declares the value of examples specifically from Old Testament narrative. Twice in 1 Corinthians 10 Paul states that Old Testament narrative serves to

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<sup>35</sup> Compare David Deuel's comments in "Suggestions for Expository Preaching of Old Testament Narrative" (*Master's Seminary Journal* vol. 2 no. 1, Spring 1991), pp. 45-60.

<sup>36</sup> For elaboration, see Everett Harrison, "1 Corinthians," *Expositor's Bible Commentary*, 152 and Gordon Fee, *1 Corinthians* New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1965), pp. 199-200.

guide believers by example:<sup>37</sup> “Now these things occurred as examples to keep us from setting our hearts on evil things as they did” (10:6 NIV) and later “These things happened to them as examples and were written down as warnings for us” (10:11 NIV). Paul here seizes the analogous nature of God’s people, Israel and Church, to warn his readers that evil can infiltrate the believing community with dire consequences.

If Paul, the writer of Hebrews, and other New Testament authors can utilize biblical texts beyond their single intended meaning, can today’s preacher do the same? Can Jephthah be part of a sermon on faith (Heb 11:33)? Can Exodus 3:6 serve as a main point in a resurrection sermon (Matt 22:32)? It seems then that both current and biblical practice argue against a hermeneutical-homiletical model that requires that all sermon big ideas reflect the single meaning intended by the author. If this hermeneutical limit is removed, are there no exegetical boundaries? Is it homiletical open season?

### **A Suggestion Toward a Solution**

Having a single meaning hermeneutic that honors the authorial intent remains necessary. Once the author relinquishes meaning control of the text, meaning careens out of control. Yet it also seems apparent that a text’s single meaning cannot be the sole source of sermonic big ideas. Does this not also wrest meaning control out of the author’s hand? Can there be a solution that allows proper homiletic flexibility within a meaning boundary set by the author?

Perhaps a step toward a solution comes from recognizing the relationship of minor supporting elements to the main textual intent. In narrative like the above Genesis text, for instance, the meaning surfaces through literary techniques such as plot development, characterization, foils,

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<sup>37</sup> Some scholars see the meaning of τύποι as referring to more than examples or analogies, understanding instead that the OT events typologically prefigured the believers at Corinth. See John Murray, *Romans*, NICNT, pp. 451-453 for discussion.

repetition, authorial inserts, pacing and structuring devices.<sup>38</sup> These elements may not only point to the focal meaning, but may also carry related components that could support sermon ideas. A supporting element of a narrative may represent one thread in a pattern woven through a series of related narratives. The prevalence of the element suggests it plays more than a supporting role within a single pericope. In fact, the element itself may contain an important message for the reader. This may be the case for Genesis 39. While the main idea remains God's fulfilling of His promises to His people despite obstacles, Joseph's obedient response shares the spotlight. The detail given to his devotion plus the foil of Judah's immorality in chapter 38 indicate that the theme is more than peripheral.

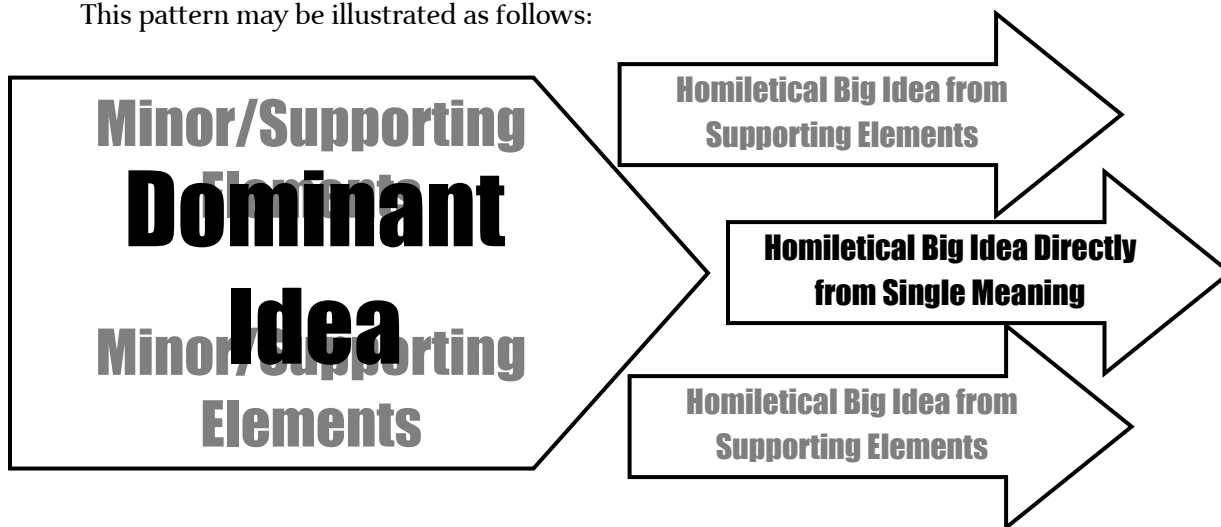
Another example is seen in the contrast of reality and appearance in the David and Goliath pericope (1 Sam 17). This aspect continues a theme already established in 1 Samuel. Hannah appeared to Eli to be drunk in the house of the Lord (1 Sam 1:14), but in fact she was appearing before Yahweh to voice her earnest plea (1 Sam 1:10-11). Hannah was not drunk, but devoted. Saul had a handsome appearance and literally stood out among the people because of his height (1 Sam 9:1-2). Saul, however, had the heart of a spiritual midget. His height meant nothing as he desperately grasped for Samuel's robe, begging him to worship with him so that Israel would believe Yahweh remained with Saul (1 Sam 15:26-31). In fact, the mention of Saul as the biggest of the Israelites later subtly condemns him when he cowers before the biggest of the Philistines (1 Sam 17:4). Appearance also deceived in the case of Eliab, David's oldest brother. Samuel saw his impressive stature and concluded that he was viewing the next leader of Israel (1 Sam 16:6). Eliab's heart revealed however an angry coward (1 Sam 17:28-29). Of course, these elements served to highlight David's

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<sup>38</sup> These techniques are discussed at length in Steven Mathewson, "Guidelines for OT Narratives" *Bibliotheca Sacra* 154 (Oct-Dec 1997): 410-435; V. Philip Long, *The Art of Biblical History* (Zondervan, 1994); Meir Sternberg, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative* (Indiana University Press, 1987); Walter Kaiser, "Narrative," *Cracking Old Testament Codes* (Broadman & Holman, 1995), 69-88. Other good resources include Robert Alter *Art of Biblical Narrative* (Basic Books, 1981); Leland Ryken and Tremper Longman, *Complete Literary Guide to the Bible* (Zondervan, 1993); and Robert Alter and Frank Kermode, *The Literary Guide to the Bible* (Belknap Press, 1987).

underwhelming appearance, yet overwhelming heart for Yahweh (1 Sam 16:12; 17:45-47).<sup>39</sup> An expositor could rightly conclude from this latent pattern that outward appearance often deceives in spiritual matters.<sup>40</sup> From this example, a big idea may be drawn from supporting elements of a pericope. These elements serve both to clarify the main idea of the passage and to extend a pattern in the broader narrative framework.

This pattern may be illustrated as follows:



So then in narrative texts, supporting elements may be highlighted enough in the pericope to warrant consideration as a homiletical big idea. This may be especially true in cases where the supporting element plays a large role in the pericope or where it is part of a larger pattern of common themes in related pericopes.

When consideration is turned to the Luke 15 text, a similar possibility exists. Clearly the parable focuses on the Father who rejoices over returnees. This served to upbraid the accusing religious leaders. The context makes this transparent. But what of the younger prodigal? Can no lesson be drawn from him? Blomberg addresses this parable as an example of a complex meaning

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<sup>39</sup> The Hebrew term here translated “youngest” (קטן), may also be translated “smallest,” providing a contrast to the physically larger brothers and more subtly to the failed king Saul. See “קטן” *NIDOTTE* 3:910-912.

<sup>40</sup> The basis of this application is significantly strengthened by the fact that Yahweh voices this principle to Samuel at the choosing of David (1 Sam 16:7).

parable. “The parable of the prodigal son poses special problems for the theory that parables can make only one point.” He demonstrates that strong cases can be made for positing meaning in the prodigal son, the older brother and the father. “It is hard to deny the presence of any of these three themes in the parable, and it is not easy to combine them all into one simple proposition.”<sup>41</sup> His conclusion on interpreting the more complex parables is that each main character teaches a different though complementary lesson. In summarizing his findings on three-point parables, he says :

Jesus probably intended to affirm these complementary views simultaneously. In many cases the differing interpretations result from focusing on different main characters. Once many of the parables are seen as teaching three distinct lessons from the actions of their three principal characters, no need remains for choosing one of the lessons as the expense of the others.<sup>42</sup>

So then in a more complex parable, individual characters or elements may house lessons beyond a single meaning.

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<sup>41</sup> Craig Blomberg, *Interpreting the Parables* (Downers Grove, IL: Inter Varsity, 1990), 172-3.

<sup>42</sup> Blomberg, 211.