

Ways of Interpreting the Bible

Introduction: Most Christians today would ascribe to the ancient Jews' understanding of the Bible as the Word of God. In the Babylonian Talmud we read "He who says 'the Torah is not from God,' or even if he says, 'The whole Torah is from God with the exception of this or that verse which not God but Moses spoke from his own mouth'---that soul shall be rooted up" (San 2, 99a). In short, Jews believed that every word of scripture had been delivered by God.

Curiously enough, the Jew Jesus of Nazareth *did* find a difference between what had been given by God and what was spoken by Moses. In Mark 10:2-12 Jesus holds that God had intended marriage from the beginning of creation to be an unbreakable bond, and that it was Moses who had permitted divorce because of the hardness of his people's hearts. Well! This distinction of Jesus makes us aware that perhaps the interpretation of the Bible is not as obvious as the ancient Jews, or as many today believe. And so in today's lecture I would like to spend a third of our time looking at ways in which Christians have interpreted the Bible, another third on the literalist interpretation of the Bible, and another third on some alternative ways which are common among Christian scholars today.

I. The History of Christian Interpretation of the Bible

A. SAINT PAUL (Typology and Allegory): Let us begin with the Apostle Paul, whose writings are the canonical Word of God. Paul knew that the Old Testament was fulfilled in Christ, and so he used typological and allegorical methods to explain this relationship. Paul does not use allegory as it is defined by modern literary critics; he uses it as it was used in the Greco-Roman world of his time to explain diverse forms of figurative speech: “Saying one thing and signifying something other than what is said is called allegory.”¹ When he comes to discuss the ways in which Christ’s covenant surpasses that of the Jews, he interprets Gen 16:15 allegorically. You know that Abraham first had a son Ishmael by Hagar, his wife’s slave. Then later he had Isaac by Sarah. When strife arose between the two women, Ishmael was sent away, to become the ancestor of the Arabs, while Isaac became the father of the Jews. But this is how Paul interprets the passage:

It is written Abraham had two sons, one from the slave girl and one from the free. The one from the slave girl was born according to the flesh, but the one from the free, through the promise. These things are meant allegorically: for they are two covenants, one from Mount Sinai in Arabia, but it is parallel to the present Jerusalem, for it is in slavery with its own children. But the Jerusalem above is free, which is our mother. (Gal 4:22-26)

Now the Hebrew text clearly means that Hagar the slave girl represents those who do not have any covenant with God, and Sarah, the free woman represents the whole line of covenants God makes with the Jews. But Paul has stood this

¹ Pseudo-Heraclitus, Quaestiones Homericae, 6.

understanding on its head, making Hagar represent the covenant with the Jews and Sarah the covenant in Christ!

Now remember: Paul's interpretation is the Word of God. But this Word is not the literal interpretation of the text, but an imaginative understanding that comes from faith. The interpretation of the Bible is more complicated than is often thought.²

B. THE SCHOOL OF ALEXANDRIA: Skipping ahead 150 years, we find the monumental figure of Origen (185-253), one of the five most creative and prolific theological writers of the Christian Church. He was a disciple of Philo of Alexandria and Clement of Alexandria, and so developed an allegorical method for the interpretation of the Bible. Origen begins with the fact that all Scripture is the Word of God. But there are some things that simply could not have happened as they were literally described. Such instances are the first three "days" of creation without sun, moon, and stars, the concept of a literal tree of "good and evil," the notion of a high mountain from which Jesus could have seen all the kingdoms of the world, the discrepancies between the various evangelists' narrations about Jesus. Although the passages which are literally true far outnumber those which are literally untrue, the latter must be

² An equally egregious example of Paul's figurative interpretation of scripture, is in 1 Cor. 10:10:1-4, where Paul not only says that the rock which Moses struck followed the Israelites through the desert, but that this rock was Christ. In so interpreting, Paul is not only following the allegorical method of Philo of Alexandria, but also adding his own Christocentric dimension to the figurative interpretation.

interpreted not according to the material letter, but according to their spiritual meaning. To uncover the whole meaning of the Bible, then, Origen develops a threefold sense in Scripture: 1) the “bodily” or literal sense, 2) the “soul” or moral sense, and 3) the “spiritual” or allegorical-mystical sense (cf. 1 Thes 5:23).³

C. THE SCHOOL OF ANTIOCH: Origen’s spiritual exegesis was extremely subjective and often fanciful, and so it was opposed by a number of biblical interpreters from Alexandria’s chief rival, Antioch. The chief theorist, and most extreme example, of this school is Theodore of Mopsuestia (350-428). He rejected the Alexandrian theory that OT prophecy referred also to the coming of Christ, accessed only by allegorical interpretation. Rather, Theodore distinguished between those prophecies which are genuinely messianic and those which are entirely historical. He interpreted the Bible according to its literal meaning, and found figurative meaning only where figures of speech were properly used.⁴

D. THOMAS AQUINAS: The allegorical method remained popular until the Middle Ages, now expanded to a four-fold meaning.⁵ Thomas Aquinas (1225-

³ Origen’s distrust of the literal method was founded in an accurate assessment of the literalists of his day as so simple-minded and prosaic that they could not understand metaphors, parables, and allegories, and so even turned the figurative sense of poetry into prose.

⁴ The principal followers of the school of Antioch are St. John Chrysostom and St. Jerome.

⁵ *Litera gesta docet, quid credas allegoria // Moralis quid agas, quo tendas anagogia*

1274) was the principal exponent of the literal meaning of the text. Thomas allows that events and things can be types and metaphors for other meanings of the text, but all of these must be founded on the literal meaning of the text:

Since the literal sense is that which the author intends, and the author of holy scripture is God, it is not unfitting...if even according to the literal sense one word in holy scripture should have several senses. (S. T. I, q. 1, a. 10)

Thomas' Aristotelian sense of the reality of the text was the basis for the study of Hebrew and the production of literal and historical commentaries on the Bible, and it also introduced a criterion for objectivity which founds our modern interpretation of the Bible. But Thomas himself was able to use figurative interpretations of the Bible alongside of his basic literal sense, as did the Reformers up to the time of the Enlightenment.

E. SUMMARY: Thus, throughout the first 1700 years of Christian interpretation of the Bible, a figurative or allegorical interpretation of the text was the major Christian access to its meaning. Those who insist on only a strict literal interpretation of the passage are innovators, and have to explain why the Holy Spirit erred within the canonical text itself (St. Paul's exegesis) and for 1700 hundred subsequent years of interpretation within the believing community.

II. The Fundamentalist Interpretation of the Bible

A. BACKGROUND: To understand Christian fundamentalist interpretation we need some background. Throughout the modern period, from the 16th to the 20th centuries, an increasing reliance on human reason to explain all mysteries reduced all knowledge to scientific knowledge.⁶ Increasingly the scientific revolution's use of empirical critical thinking led to development of more exact understandings of the world and human beings, and a concomitant rejection of mythical and metaphysical understandings of those realities. Eventually the *Geisteswissenschaften*, the social sciences, followed suit: history came to be defined as the science which determines what objectively happened in the past, *wie es eigentlich geschehen worden ist, as it actually happened* (von Ranke).

These successes stimulated the Enlightenment, when the thinkers of Europe claimed that human reason was supreme and would understand and solve all problems of the universe. The Enlightenment was a movement dominated by 1) Rejection of metaphysical knowledge and any tradition, in favor of empirical and critical scientific reasoning. Pursuing empirical methods exclusively led to the belief that critical human reason, apart from revelation or influence of the supernatural, could understand and solve all the problems of

⁶ There is an increasing development of secularization in the major cultural shifts of the modern era--the mercantile revolution, the scientific revolution, the Enlightenment, the industrial revolution, the development of historical science, the Freudian revolution, the Keynesian revolution in economics, etc.

the universe. Rational man, freed from the mystification of the Church, would lead inevitably to progress. This optimistic rationalism eventually meant the rejection of revelation, the supernatural, and the Church as the promoter of these.

2) Toleration. Since religious truths, based on revelation and metaphysical arguments, were not susceptible to objective empirical proof, the *philosophes* understood religion as a personal decision to be made by autonomous individuals following the light of their own conscience. The state was to promote freedom of religion everywhere. Eventually Deism, the practice of a reasonable, “natural” religion without belief or cult, became the religious expression of this tolerance.

The Catholic Church rightly rejected this movement, but unfortunately, it also threw the baby out with the bath water---it rejected the critical methods of modern thought, and so for over 200 years retreated to a defensive orthodoxy increasingly alienated from the developing world culture. The effects were disastrous, both for the Church and the world.

Protestantism, built on the individual interpretation of the Bible, entered into a dialogue with these Enlightenment thinkers. For years the Lutheran and Calvinist divines in Europe wrestled with the higher criticism, the use of modern history and archaeology to interpret the Bible. As they did so, their

religious understanding moved to the Liberal Protestantism of the late 19th century. The liberal Protestantism of Albrecht Ritschl (1822-1889) and Adolf von Harnack (1851-1930) is best summed up by Harnack's *What is Christianity?* (1900). The essence of Christianity is the gospel of Jesus Christ rather than the gospel about him. The gospel of Jesus embraces three themes: "First, the kingdom of God and its coming; second God the Father and the infinite value of the human soul; third the higher righteousness and the commandment of love (p.51)." 1) Jesus used contemporary apocalyptic language of the KOG to inculcate "the rule of the holy God in the hearts of individuals. It is not a question of angels and devils...but of God and the soul (p. 56)." 2) Jesus shows that all life is rooted and safe in the Eternal, but the individual human soul holds the highest value. "The man who can say 'My Father' to the Being who rules heaven and earth, is thereby raised above heaven and earth (p. 67)" 3) Jesus' gospel also sets humans a task, an ethical message of the higher righteousness and the commandment of love. "The love of one's neighbor is the only practical proof on earth of that love of God which is strong in humility (p. 73)." The ethical task of building a community inspired by love of neighbor is an indispensable dimension of Jesus' gospel.

All of this, of course, is true; what is missing is that Harnack's gospel as Jesus proclaimed it has to do with the Father alone, and not with the Son (or

the Spirit). There is no (metaphysical) doctrine of the God-man unity; for Harnack Jesus' divine sonship resides in his knowledge of God. This view required no doctrine of the Trinity, no sense of the supernatural or the miraculous, no soteriology of the God-man dying for his people, no resurrection, no inspiration or revelation, except the profound wisdom of a perfect sage. As a result, Harnack, in spite of his eminence as a professor⁷ never received any position of authority or honor from the Lutheran church.

B. FUNDAMENTALISM: Of course mainline Protestants protested this rationalistic view of Christianity. In 19th century America principally the Princeton Theological Seminary, under its professors Charles Hodge and Benjamin Warfield, elaborated a theory of 1) the verbal inspiration of the Bible, 2) which is inerrant in its every reference, statistic, and quotation, 3) when first written down on the original autographs. Gradually this view became the first of the 5 fundamental doctrines held as a unit by "Fundamentalists" in late 19th century America.⁸

Commonly, fundamentalist understanding of inerrancy means that the Bible is a historically accurate description of events as they actually happened, and a

⁷ He wrote over 1600 books, monographs, and articles, and his *History of Dogma*, *Marcion*, *The Mission and Expansion of Christianity*, and *What is Christianity?* Are still considered classics in their fields.

⁸ The actual term "fundamentalist" derives from the American Biblical Congress at Niagara, NY in 1895, when biblical inerrancy became the first of "five points of fundamentalism."

scientific exposition of the creation of the world, and its structure.⁹ Such an interpretation can lead to great “security” not only in matters of religious belief, but in many of the questions of our world today.

There is much in the fundamentalist interpretation to which Christians must subscribe.

The bible is a supernatural revelation of God himself, it is divinely inspired and it is inerrant. The New Testament describes a Jesus who is both God and man, and therefore able to redeem humanity from its sin. As a result of his death and resurrection Jesus pours out his Spirit on his disciples, who are consequently enabled to live as Jesus lived. With all of this, Christian interpreters with a different method agree.

But fundamentalist insistence on an inerrancy which extends to scientific explanation of the heavens and earth and absolute historical accuracy is an anachronism which does not correspond to the reality of the scriptures. Take the fundamentalist insistence that Genesis 1 is a scientific explanation of the creation of earth. Genesis 1:3-13 says that there are three days, complete with evening and morning before the creation on the fourth day of the sun and moon which create days, evening, and morning (1:14-19). How can you have three days and nights before you have sun and moon? Sometimes fundamentalists get around this contradiction by interpreting the days as eons, but this

⁹ Ironically, this position is also a rationalist position, but it is a pre-Kantian rationalism.

expedient does not work, for two reasons. One, it does not take the plain meaning of the text, and so violates fundamentalism's own principles, and second, the author plainly means these to be days as we understand them, for he wants to vindicate the Sabbath day of rest as the end of the Jewish week (Gen 2:1-3). Thus the intelligent reader sees that the biblical author is not giving a scientific explanation of the sequence of days in God's creation of the universe, and so he does not construe Gen 1:1-2:4a as a scientific explanation of the universe.

Neither can the bible be construed as a modern historical account of events. Consider these problems, all of which were seen by the earliest Christian interpreters of the gospels.

1. Words Jesus can have said only once are differently reported in the gospels:
 - a. Jesus' last words: Matt and Mk—*lema* +loud cry; Lk F, into your hands; Jn: finished
 - b. the last supper: Lk 22/1 Cor 11 the new cov. in my blood; Mt/Mk the blood of t cov.
2. Different chronologies for day of last supper (John 18:28 vs. Luke 22:7,15).
3. Where is the mountain from which Jesus saw all the kingdoms of the world?

In short, the fundamentalist attempt to take the bible as exact historical narration cannot be squared with the text itself, because it is an anachronistic

understanding of history.¹⁰ Neither God nor the Jewish writers intended to write science or history as these are conceived twenty to thirty centuries after their writing.

How then can we get to a reading of the Bible which can hold it to be the Word of God, and so inerrant, and yet can satisfy the demands of critical human intelligence?

III. A Critical Method of Interpreting the Bible as the Word of God.

Catholics are late-comers to a critical reading of the Bible. Nevertheless, there is a passage in Pope Pius XII's encyclical *Divino Afflante Spiritu* which illuminates a way to read the Bible which safeguards its inerrancy and still meets the demands of critical intelligence:

Interpreters should keep in mind that their chief task must be to discern and determine ...the literal sense of the words of the Bible...It is absolutely necessary for the interpreter to go back in spirit to those remote centuries of the East, and to make proper use of the help given by history, archaeology, ethnology, and other sciences, in order to discover what literary forms the writers of those early ages intended to use and did in fact use. For, to express what they had in mind, the ancients of the East did not always avail themselves of the same forms and expressions as we do today; they used those that were current among people of their own time and place...The sacred writers, like the other ancients, use certain arts of exposition and narration, certain idioms...which are typical of Semitic languages, certain hyperbolic ways of speaking, and certain paradoxes intended for emphasis. The sacred books need not

¹⁰ There are a host of other problems with fundamentalist interpretation as it is actually practiced. For example, English speaking fundamentalists assume that the King James Version is the inspired word of God, which not only goes beyond what the Princeton Theologians held, that only the Hebrew and Greek autographs were the inspired Word of God, but also labors under the many difficulties that any translation presents.

exclude any of the forms of expression that were commonly used in human speech among the ancient peoples...so long as they are not incompatible with God's sanctity and veracity...

In many cases in which the authors are accused of some historical inaccuracy or inexact recording of certain events, there is in fact nothing else to be found than those customary and characteristic forms of expression or style of narration which were current among people of that time, and were in fact quite legitimately and commonly used. Just impartiality demands that when these are found in the world of God...they should no more be considered as error than when similar expressions are used in everyday speech.¹¹

Notice how this shifting from a scientific or historical perspective to a literary one enables one to accept the Bible as both inspired and containing supernatural revelation, and yet to read the Bible critically, with all the gains of modern science.

What is articulated here is no more than an appreciation of the Christian doctrine of the incarnation. When God becomes man he does so in a certain time and place, so that Jesus of Nazareth is a man with the limited horizon of a Jewish man of the first century. Neither Jesus nor the disciples who wrote the gospels knew anything about relativity theory, evolution, or the canons of modern historiography. When God speaks to man, he does so in the conventional terms of a man of that age. Thus the Bible is the Word of God in human words. The author of Genesis did not know about the big bang; he knew about the Babylonian cosmogonic myth *Enuma Elish*, and he rewrote its

¹¹ Pius XII, *Divino Afflante Spiritu*, AAS 35 (1943), 314-316.

cosmology into the theology he received from God, making the Babylonian astral gods into mere creatures. He taught that God creates the world effortlessly, creating order out of chaos, and in such a way as to vindicate the practice of rest on the Sabbath which the Jews received on Mount Sinai. These, and not the modern sequence of days, are the inerrant truths written in the Bible for our salvation.

Recently a new dimension has enriched the critical reading of the Bible. For over two centuries Christian interpreters have used the Bible to understand the history which lay behind the biblical narratives. For some theologians (the Salvation History school) it was the events which were revelatory, not the narration of the events. This was to read the text as a window on the past. One read through the text to the revelation of God in the exodus or the crucifixion.¹²

But in the last thirty years biblical interpreters have come to see the text not as a window, but as a mirror. The meaning resides in the text itself, the literary forms which the author chose, the world which his narrative creates. Now it is literary analysis of the text itself which provides the meaning which the interpreter is to uncover. This means that Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John each has his own story to tell about Jesus. The important thing to grasp is not

¹² Various exegetical tools to uncover this past were Source Criticism (19th century), Historical Jesus Criticism and Form Criticism (19th and early 20th century), and Social-scientific Criticism (late 20th century).

the Jesus of history that lies behind the story, but the Jesus that acts and reveals God within the story. Luke's world of Jesus is different from John's, but each has a story about Jesus that the early church recognized as the Word of God, verifiable in their own existence. The interpreter's task is to say who Jesus was and what he meant for John's church, from which the preacher or the reader can extrapolate what Jesus means for himself or herself in today's world.¹³

This more literary approach leads to an appropriation of the various senses of scripture that were used in the first 1700 years of interpreting the Bible.

In Mark 4: Jesus tells the parable of the sower and the seed.

Perhaps you are uneasy with this solution. If so, I suggest that the uneasiness may come from our Enlightenment conviction that scientific theorems or historically verifiable data are truer than metaphor or myth. But that is an Enlightenment prejudice that is now called into question by the postmodern critique in philosophy, anthropology, historiography, and all the social sciences. Indeed, I have discovered over a lifetime that literature is much more likely to deliver unrevisable truth than is science or history. That is why, in God's providence, the Bible is literature rather than science or history.

¹³ Methods which investigate the literary meaning of the text have to do with theories of metaphor, rhetorical analysis, narrative analysis, semiotic analysis.

Conclusion: We have seen that throughout the history of Christian interpretation of the bible, the spiritual meaning of the text for contemporary Christians guided the methods of interpretation. Today we have come back to that original practice of the Church. We read the Bible not as scientific explanation nor as historically verifiable narrative. We read it as a story which truly explains that God is the creator of our universe, and his Son Jesus is the salvation of mankind. As the members of St. Mary Star of the Sea well know, that is the Good News.

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