

A Brief History of Biblical Interpretation

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The history of the interpretation of the Bible is a long and involved one. For many centuries people have approached the Scriptures supposing that it should be interpreted literally whenever possible, or that one ought to look deeper than the surface meaning to find its true spiritual center. Still others have believed that the Old and (to a lesser extent) the New Testament is opened up by means of three or four hermeneutical categories. In this paper we shall try to review the main schools of interpretation, especially throughout the history of the Church.

1. Pointers Within The Bible.

If we take certain statement sin the Bible itself it will help us to see how the Holy Spirit wants us to interpret His Word. “To the law and to the testimony, if they speak not according to this word, it is because there is no light in them.” (Isa.8:20). What is important about this verse is that it implies a standard by which false teaching can be measured. For that standard to have any credence it has to be literally interpreted. Moreover, the reference to “the law and the testimony” (cf.v.16) implies that the whole Old Testament is to be interpreted in its natural, normative sense. In John 21:21-23 the Evangelist seems to want to make a point that what God says must be grasped before we can correctly interpret. Thus, we think there is scriptural warrant for plain or ‘literal’ hermeneutics.

2. The First Two Centuries of the Early Church.

We cannot understand the church of the second and third centuries without knowing something about the difficulties which these early Christians encountered. On the one hand there was the very real threat of persecution from a Roman state not at all sympathetic to the beliefs and aims of these people. And on the other there was the persistent problem of heresy which dogged the early church. These two major issues both played their parts in the formulation of hermeneutics. As a defense against the polemics of the influential Roman writers such as Pliny the Younger, Menander, and Celsus, believers had to produce apologies that could address them, and in particular, their attacks upon the Old Testament, and their misunderstanding of the Christian God. But alongside this the Christians had to respond to the rise of Gnosticism and the proliferation of Gnostic writings throughout the church. To cite two examples, Valentinus (born, c.A.D. 100) was an extremely effective communicator who was perhaps even on the verge of becoming a bishop before his heresies were discovered. It was his followers who first composed commentaries on New Testament books. Secondly, Marcion (active ca. A.D.140-155) taught that the Old Testament was useless as a Christian document. He also severely edited the New Testament, producing one in which only Paul’s epistles were included, together with a condensed version of Luke’s Gospel, carefully purged of any Jewish “contamination.” All the Gnostics held that the God of the Old Testament was another lesser deity than the God of the New.

This, then was the kind of pressure that was being applied to these early saints and their Scriptures. It is hardly surprising then, that the most prominent Christians of the second century were apologists. The main three were Justin Martyr (c. A.D. 100-163), a converted Platonist who was the first to use the term “Israel” to describe the Church (A.D. 160). Irenaeus (c. A.D. 130-200), Bishop of Lyons in Gaul (modern day France), wrote extensively against the heretics, and in the course of doing so, produced the first formulation for Biblical

1 <http://drreluctant.wordpress.com/2007/02/27/a-brief-history-of-biblical-interpretation/>

A Brief History of Biblical Interpretation

interpretation; the so-called “Rule of Faith.” This formulation was really a short statement of doctrine. Irenaeus believed that a trinitarian meaning attached to both Testaments. This trinitarian schema was observed in the apostolic witness, which, in turn, placed an emphasis upon the Christological interpretation of the whole Bible.

Hence, the rule of faith gave unity to the Bible. Any interpretation which did not measure up to the rule of faith (such as the teachings of the Gnostics), could therefore be rejected as being contrary to the preaching of the Apostles. The rule of faith also made the interpretation of the Bible a province of the Church, and so, of Church tradition. This side-effect would have serious repercussions later on. It is worth noticing that all the early fathers of the Church were premillennial in their eschatology. Zuck notes that, “From these early church fathers it is obvious that while they started out well, they were soon influenced by allegorizing.” This form of interpretation became the dominant one from the middle of the second century until the Reformation in the sixteenth century. It would therefore be helpful to review this phenomenon before examining the major figures of Jerome and Augustine.

3. Retrospect: The Roots of Allegorical Interpretation.

The word “allegory” is derived from the Greek words “allos” – meaning “other”, and “agoreuein”, “to speak”. So an allegory is a method of giving (or deriving) hidden meanings from a literal text. For this reason many authorities like to define allegory as “an extended metaphor”. It appears that from around the sixth century B.C. some Greek writers became sensitive to the portrayal of Greek gods and heroes (in Homer and Hesiod), as less than upright in their private and inter-personal dealings. The method of allegorizing the poets was invented so as to teach better moral principles while maintaining respect for these great works. “The stories of the gods, and the writing of the poets, were not to be taken literally. Rather underneath is the secret or real meaning (hyponoia)”

By the 2nd century BC, Greek influence was showing itself throughout the Greco-Roman world. By this time, a sizeable number of Jews were living in the city of Alexandria, Egypt. Alexandria had become one of the leading intellectual centers in the world and Greek allegorism was a common method of interpretation. It is thought that a Jew named Aristobulus was the first to incorporate this method into his expositions of the OT. Alexandrian Jews were absorbed in the philosophical tradition of Plato, who taught that there was a difference between the physical and the spiritual. This way of thinking is the basis for seeking spiritual meaning behind literal sentences.

The most famous Jewish allegorist was Philo (d. AD 54). Philo’s whole method was to find the spiritual meaning behind the literal text. Ramm writes, “There were three canons which dictated to the interpreter that a passage of Scripture

A Brief History of Biblical Interpretation

was to be allegorically interpreted: 1) If the statement says anything unworthy of God; 2) If a statement is contradictory with some other statement or in any other way presents us with a difficulty; 3) If the record itself is allegorical in nature.” The difficulty with these canons was that they were in large part subjective; being determined by the interpreter’s own philosophical predispositions.

4. From The Third to the Fifth Centuries.

It is no coincidence that allegorical interpretations of Scripture filtered into the Christian Church from Alexandria. It was there that Clement (c. A.D. 150-215), and Origen (c. A.D. 185-254), who disdained the more literal interpretation of the Antiochian School, used allegory to find ‘deeper’ meanings in the OT and NT. They particularly found difficulty in assigning OT prophecies about Israel to the Christian Church. By finding a mystical sense to Scripture, they could reassign these troublesome passages and explain away what appeared to them to be incongruities within the Bible. Augustine (A.D. 354-430), who was a native of North Africa, was the greatest theologian-philosopher of the Early Church. It was his endorsement of the allegorical method of interpretation which had the decisive influence upon hermeneutics up until the time of the Reformation. Thus, early Roman Catholic allegorism was given its impetus by the Alexandrian school under Clement and Origen. Origen’s prominence as a Biblical scholar, influenced many interpreters of the Latin church. One of these, the Donatist Tychonius, was the man who would set out the principles of interpretation which the great Augustine would follow. A major premise of Augustine’s interpretation was that the Roman Catholic Church was the city of God – the kingdom. Therefore, Old Testament statements which gave promises to Israel, were to be re-interpreted so that the promises were inherited by Roman Catholicism. He often allegorized Old Testament passages in order to solve its problems. Augustine’s elder contemporary, Jerome (c. A.D. 341-420), was a man of great learning, particularly in Hebrew and Greek. Although his first commentaries followed the allegorical method, later in life he adopted a far more literal hermeneutic. This was due, in the main, to the influence upon him of the Antiochene school. Jerome’s latter Commentary on Daniel “remained strictly within the confines required by the text.”

The school of Antioch in Syria was renowned for its exegetes Lucian (c. A.D. 240), Diodore (d. c. A.D. 394), and Theodore of Mopsuestia (c. 350-428), and for its great preacher John Chrysostom (c. A.D. 354-407), and its greatest theologian, Theodoret (c. A.D. 393-466). All of these men employed a more literal hermeneutic than the Alexandrians, wherein the literal sense was given precedence. But, in the end, it was the spiritualizing of the Alexandrian school that prevailed and which was to hold sway for the next thousand years.

5. Approaching The Reformation.

The Protestant Reformation was probably the most momentous social, political, and intellectual movement in history. As far as hermeneutical methodology goes, it broke the iron grip of allegorism which had made the Bible a book full of confounding meanings, and restored it, in great measure, to the realm of the common man. There had been a few gleams of light in the previous millennium, although their effect was largely unfelt. In the 12th century the Victorines, Hugo, Richard, and Andrew of St. Victor in France took a more plain-sense approach to the Scriptures. The following century saw Nicholas de Lyra (1279-1340) recommend the same approach, and John Wycliffe's (c.1330-1384) influence was felt far and wide. It was Wycliffe who, while lecturing on the Bible to his students at Oxford, began to see that the allegorism of the Scholastics (Albertus Magnus, Aquinas, Duns Scotus, etc.) obscured the saving message of the Gospel. Lechler observes that, "In teaching the Scriptures to others, he learned the true meaning of them himself." This led him to insist upon the sufficiency of Scripture alone, to repudiate transubstantiation, to call the Pope "a fallible man", to insist upon the priesthood of all believers, and to undertake to translate the Latin Vulgate into English. Wycliffe's writings, although placed on the index of forbidden books, were disseminated all over Europe, where they became a decisive influence on Jerome of Prague and John Huss.

6. The Reformation Breakthrough.

It was Martin Luther who finally overthrew the allegorical interpretations of the Catholic Church. Although he never fully escaped the temptation to allegorize himself, he could see that such a tactic could only deprive Christianity of its God-given message. In characteristic humor, Luther said that some of the Church Father's would be better called "the church babies." Luther emphasized the need to go back to the original languages and do exegesis. His commentaries on Romans, Galatians, and the Epistles of Peter, although not so helpful today, set new standards of exposition when they were published. Along with Luther, his Swiss contemporary Ulrich Zwingli used to preach directly out of the original languages to his congregation in Zurich. But it was John Calvin who took Biblical exegesis to new heights. His commentaries, which follow what came to be known as the grammatical-historical hermeneutic, are still respected today, especially the book on the Psalms. he wanted the Scriptures to speak for themselves without being fettered by the prior assumptions of the interpreter. Although he did not always succeed in doing this (especially when dealing with OT prophecy), he nonetheless deserves the plaudits that have been heaped upon him, including that of none other than Jacob Arminius, who said that he considered Calvin to be the best interpreter of Scripture the Church possessed.

The post-reformation period was the time of the Puritans in England and the Protestant scholasticism of Switzerland (e.g. Turretin, Pictet). The new

A Brief History of Biblical Interpretation

scholastics unfortunately dealt more in dogmatics than exegesis – a problem that was to be addressed by Cocceius in Holland. The Puritans, on the other hand, although they were greatly concerned with what they called “experimental teaching”, their works were usually founded upon good principles of exegesis. The sermons of Thomas Goodwin are fine examples of exegetical preaching, and the Hebrews expositions of John Owen and William Gouge teem with exegetical insights.

It must always be remembered that despite these prodigious works, the interpretation of the prophetic portions of the Bible never kept apace with that of the rest. Although some of the Puritans were Historic Covenant Premillennialists, even they regularly applied OT passages directly to the Church. One reason for this was the increasing dominance of covenant theology on hermeneutics – dominance which continues in the Reformed traditions until the present day.

7. The Enlightenment and its Effects.

The Enlightenment may fairly be described as the reformation of the secularist. It was first a philosophical movement. Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679) was perhaps the first philosopher whose work started modern man off in the wrong direction. Hobbes was a materialist who, “found in sense experiences all the answers he needed.” This proud belief made Hobbes reinterpret the supernatural in the Bible and explain it in terms of natural processes. He was followed by a whole host of able thinkers, including Baruch Spinoza (1632-1677), author of a very influential work against miracles. David Hume (1711-1776) threw the viability of the existence and knowability of God into serious doubt with his insistence that belief can never be rational. His work preceded that of Voltaire and Diderot and established Hume in the vanguard of the Enlightenment. It was Hume’s work which “awoke Kant from his philosophical slumbers.” Immanuel Kant (1724-1804), was the man who more than anyone else shifted the emphasis off the propositions of the Word of God, and on to man’s reason. He effectively “walled-off” God behind the unknowable realm of the “noumenal.” Kant argued that we cannot know anything about the noumenal realm, only the phenomenal. He therefore made scientific naturalism the sphere of understanding. From his time on, many who would claim to be Bible scholars would adopt a hermeneutic that would not fall out with Kant’s critique.

One such man was Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768-1834). Schleiermacher was a devotee of Kant. He fully faced up to Kant’s dictum that it was impossible to break through to any knowledge of God. However, that did not deter him from pursuing his own brand of Christianity – a “Christianity” emphasizing “human feelings as the seat of a person’s consciousness of God.” Schleiermacher spoke about the sense of dependence which is the road to consciousness of God. For Schleiermacher it was not enough to know what the original author said. One must seek to experience what the author was experiencing. Hence, he

A Brief History of Biblical Interpretation

advocated a kind of psychological interpretation, and this has had great influence in many sectors of Christendom. This method was refined by Wilhelm Dilthey (1833-1911) who believed that there was such a thing as “the human experience”, a universal human consciousness. The goal of hermeneutics became to discover, “a universal human nature manifested in every human being past and present so that no radical difference could exist between an author in the past and an interpreter in the present.” It was upon this foundation that Rudolf Bultmann (1884-1976) built in order to preserve meaning in a religion he had demythologized out of all recognition from the faith of the Apostles.

8. The Modern-Day Hermeneutical Quagmire.

Before closing with a review of Dispensational hermeneutics we think it would be helpful to say something about what is happening outside mainstream evangelicalism. This is because what is occurring in non-conservative circles is already having a pronounced effect upon the Church. Our comments will have to be of a general nature. Hans-Georg Gadamer (1900-2002), has been a major voice in modern hermeneutical theory. Borrowing his lead from Schleiermacher and Dilthey, he sought to shift the emphasis of hermeneutics away from the original author (whom he believed was too removed by time to be comprehended), and concentrate on what the text means to the present-day reader (the receptor). In the work of Jacques Derrida, interpretation has been mocked and fatuity has run amok. For Derrida, what a text actually says is not even a starting point (unless it was written by Derrida!). For him language is to be suspected and judged subjectively. One problem which immediately comes to mind is that all ideas are conceived in words. Even pictures have words to which they make reference. This kind of unavoidable truism is what will eventually turn the deconstructionism of Derrida and Foucault into self-destructionism.

9. Dispensational Hermeneutics.

Dispensationalists have always championed a single, plain-sense or literal hermeneutic to be employed in the interpretation of the whole Bible. This is not a novel kind of interpretation, but simply a plea for consistent use of the grammatical-historical hermeneutics of the Reformation. Dispensationalists hold that “if the plain sense makes sense, seek no other sense.” This would appear to be both a logical and a safe way to proceed. For this reason, dispensationalism sees no need to alter this methodology. They believe that it ought to be impervious to (though not ignorant of) the cacophonous voices of the contemporary – in whichever period of history.

However, when that has been said, it must be asserted that dispensationalists must refine and develop their interpretive methodology. Thus, there is work to be done, and as the relativistic post-modern mindset overwhelms evangelicalism as we know it, it becomes imperative that dispensational premillennialists argue

A Brief History of Biblical Interpretation

their position cogently in the future.

In my personal opinion the best way forward is to stop looking in the direction of the dispensations and instead focus upon the covenants which are so clearly revealed in the Bible.



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