

The History of Interpretation

Biblical Interpretation - 1. Introduction

1. Ancient Jewish Hermeneutics

Ancient Jewish hermeneutics is best described as an attempt by those who were passionately committed to the inspiration of Scripture to make God's word relevant to the current context. In their zeal, they often took an overly literal and legalistic approach in which every detail of the Scriptures had out-of-context meaning and significance for their current situation.

- **Abusive Characteristics of Midrash:**

- Often gave meaning to texts, phrases, and words without regard to the context in which they were meant to apply.
- Combined texts that contained similar words or phrases whether or not such texts were referring to the same idea.
- Took incidental and obscure aspects of grammar and gave them interpretive significance.

- **Deut 21:18–19:**

- "If a person has a stubborn, rebellious son who pays no attention to his father or mother, and they discipline him to no avail, his father and mother must seize him and bring him to the elders at the gate of his city."
- **Misshnah Sanhedrin 8.4:** "If either of them [the parents] was maimed in the hand, or lame or blind or dumb or deaf, he cannot be condemned as a stubborn and rebellious son, for it is written, 'so the father and mother shall lay hold of him'—so they were not maimed in the hand; 'and bring him out'—so they were not lame; 'and they shall say'—so they were not dumb; 'this is our son'—so they were not blind; 'he will not obey our voice'—so they were not deaf."
- **Matt. 23:23:** "Woe to you, experts in the law and you Pharisees, hypocrites! You give a tenth of mint, dill, and cumin, yet you neglect what is more important in the law—justice, mercy, and faithfulness! You should have done these things without neglecting the others."

- **Matt 15:1–9**

- Another good example... (How to avoid having to honour your father and mother.)
 4. For God commanded, 'Honour your father and your mother,' and, 'Whoever reviles father or mother must surely die.'
 5. But you say, 'If anyone tells his father or his mother, "What you would have gained from me is given to God,"
 6. he need not honour his father.' So for the sake of your tradition you have made void the word of God.
 7. You hypocrites!

- **Jesus gives a hermeneutics lesson**

- Jesus didn't leave the disciples with no idea of how they *should* interpret the Old Testament, but in Luke 24 we read of how the risen Jesus met two of the disciples on the road to Emmaus.
 - We read [And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he interpreted to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning himself. v27]
 - afterwards we read [They said to each other, "Did not our hearts burn within us while he talked to us on the road, while he opened to us the Scriptures? v.32]
- In other words, the key to opening the O.T. Scriptures was to show them that their main theme was himself.

2. The Church Fathers: Allegory

- This period immediately follows the New Testament times
- It is important to distinguish allegory from typology

Allegory →bad	Typology (prophetic pictures given by God) →good
Finding hidden meaning in characters, places, events, numbers, and other details that would not otherwise be found	Finding a foreshadowing of present and future events in <i>historical</i> events and people of the past.
e.g. "oil" that Elisha gives the woman to sell to make money = Holy Spirit?	e.g. Ark→Christ brass serpent→Christ

- **Typology**
 - Types cannot be applied to us personally ("The ark is a type of me") but is Christ-centred.
 - Must be *historical* event
 - The N.T. *never* uses allegory, only typology
- **New Testament use of Types**
 - Approximately ten percent of the New Testament is quotations, paraphrases, or allusions to the Old Testament.
 - All but nine Old Testament books are referred to in the New Testament.
- **Example of Allegory from Augustine, the wedding at Cana:**
 - John 2:6 "Now there were six stone water jars there for the Jewish rites of purification, each holding two or three firkins each."
 - 2 or 3 = Trinity
 - 6 pots = the six ages of men
 - every detail has an underlying meaning
 - our goal is to find it
- **The idea of allegory came from Greek mythology**
 - how to re-interpret the immorality of the behaviour of the gods to make it something more noble.
 - Plato's idea of material things being evil led to the *literal* meaning being denigrated.

The chaos in interpretation that resulted meant that all kinds of weird teaching confronted the church.

- **The rise of Gnostics who claimed to have the "secret" teachings of Christ handed down to them from the Apostles**
 - the Church increasingly appealed to Church tradition as the authority
 - Thus early Church tradition became the basis for all interpretation
- **So the result was that the Creed became an "umbrella" to protect the Scriptures**
 - They really didn't mind *what* allegory you got from the text as long as it
 - fitted in with the creeds
 - was Christ centred
 - They meant well!
- **What is the problem with this?**
 - There was no way to correct false ideas, such as "salvation by baptism"
 - People lost interest in trying to understand the Bible for themselves
- **We may think we are free from this, but we are not!!**

Three levels of meaning were developed

- **Literal:** Actually happened.
- **Moral:** Lot represents the rational human mind. Lot's wife represents the flesh. Lot's daughters are vainglory and pride.
- **Spiritual:** Lot represents the OT Law. Lot's wife represents the Israelites' rebellion in the wilderness. Lot's daughters represent Jerusalem and Samaria.

3. The Medieval fourfold method of interpretation

The use of the Medieval fourfold method was firmly established from the fourth until the sixteenth century. Each text was examined for 4 meanings: literal, moral (tropologic), mystical (allegorical), and future-prophetic (anagogic). Here is a sermon from Origen, who although he was earlier (third century) showed a disinterest in the literal meaning:

- **The sermon is on Abraham's marriage with Keturah (Hom. vi. in Genes).**

- *(Origen does not expressly disavow his belief in the fact of such a marriage having actually taken place between the parties in question, though his language seems to point in that direction; but he intimates that this, in common with the other marriages of the patriarchs, contained a sacramental mystery. And what might this be? Nothing less than the sublime truth:)*
- "that there is no end to wisdom, and that old age sets no bounds to improvement in knowledge.
- The death of Sarah (he says) is to be understood as the perfecting of virtue...
- Abraham, therefore, when an old man, and his body in a manner dead, took Keturah to wife...
- Then Keturah, whom he married in his old age, is by interpretation **incense**, or **sweet odor**.
 - For he said, even as Paul said, 'We are a sweet savor of Christ.' Sin is a foul and putrid thing; but if any of you in whom this no longer dwells, have the fragrance of righteousness, the sweetness of mercy, and by prayer continually offer up incense to God, ye also have taken Keturah to wife."
- He proceeds to show, how many such wives may be taken: hospitality is one, the care of the poor another, patience a third,
 - each Christian excellence, in short, a wife; and hence it was, that the patriarchs are reported to have had **so many wives**, and that Solomon is said to have possessed them even by **hundreds**, he having received plentitude of wisdom like the sand on the seashore, and consequently grace to exercise the largest number of virtues (p.4).

- **Medieval Ignorance**

- "During the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, dense ignorance prevailed concerning the content of Scripture: there were some doctors of divinity who had never read the Bible through its entirety." Henry Virkler, p.65

- **Ordinary people were prevented from reading the Bible for themselves**

- Pope Pius VII (1800–1823) "It is evident from experience, that the Holy Scriptures, when circulated in the vulgar tongue, have, through the temerity of men, produced more harm than benefit... eminently dangerous to souls... undermining the very foundations of religion."

Scholasticism

- Medieval scholars, such as Thomas Aquinas, became preoccupied with abstract questions, like
 - "is an angel in a place, can he be in several places at once"
 - "does an angel moving from A to B pass through the points in between"
 - "can several angels be in the same place at once"
 - there is a [story](#) that they even held a debate on "how many angels can dance on the head of a pin"

4. Coming out of the dark ages

- **People realized that the actual message of the Bible had been lost in centuries of fanciful interpretation**
- **The cry was “back to the sources”**
- **Scholars learned Hebrew and Greek and began to read the Bible in the original**
 - Story of Byzantine monks, fleeing from the Turks, carrying ancient manuscripts and the knowledge of Greek
- **The Result**
 - They focussed on the *most clear and straightforward meaning* when read *in context*
 - They discovered God’s *grace* and *love* and the *free gift of salvation* and were saved
 - The emphasis was to allow the Bible to *speak for itself* rather than impose a meaning from outside
- **“It is the first business of an interpreter to let the author say what he does say, instead of attributing to him what we think he ought to say.” John Calvin**
- **Their principles were very good**
 - but they didn’t always get it right because they still had a lot of theological baggage (e.g. church and state being connected)
- **In general we still follow these principles today, except we**
 - are more sensitive to the culture of the N.T.
 - know more about their language and literature
 - have the benefit of several centuries of Christian writers, and their Spirit-given gifts
 - have less wrong theological baggage (we hope!) because of the “hermeneutical spiral”
 - as a result of these things, there is real progress in how well Christians can understand the Bible

5. Modern Critical Scholarship (Also known as Modernism, Liberalism or Higher Criticism)

- *this is a very rough sketch*
- During the 1800’s there was an growing idea among scholars that we should study the Bible just like any other book.
- The key question this came down to was whether it is inspired by God or not and what this means.
- The result was devastating, with everything supernatural in the Bible being questioned and the Scriptures essentially being relegated to quaint myths of a bygone age
- There was a huge split at the end of the 1800’s between “liberals” and “conservatives” (fundamentalists)
 - Initially there were very good reasons for the conservatives, but it led to
 - an over-polarization (wary of anything that could be “the thin end of the wedge”)
 - an anti-intellectualism
 - a “fortress mentality” unwilling to engage the culture
 - lack of interest in any social programs
- By the middle of the 1900’s Evangelical scholarship was beginning to recover and once again there were good scholars who truly believed in an inspired Bible

Some material taken from *The Theology Notebook* 2005, bible.org [Ⓔ]

(Andrew Fountain 2018-10-16)