

## Methods of interpretation of Scripture

Every text demands to be interpreted; Scripture is no exception. There is a sense in which the history of Christian theology can be regarded as the history of biblical interpretation. In what follows, we shall explore some of the approaches to biblical interpretation likely to be of interest to students of theology. It will, however, be clear that the vastness of the subject makes it impossible to do more than give a representative selection of approaches to the matter.

We open our discussion by dealing with the patristic period. The *Alexandrian* school of biblical interpretation drew on the methods devised by the Jewish writer Philo of Alexandria (c. 30 BC - c. AD 45) and earlier Jewish traditions, which allowed the literal interpretation of Scripture to be supplemented by an appeal to allegory. But what is an allegory? The Greek philosopher Heraclitus had defined it as "saying one thing, and meaning something other than what is said." Philo argued that it was necessary to look beneath the surface meaning of Scripture to discern a deeper meaning which lay beneath the surface of the text. These ideas were taken up by a group of theologians based in Alexandria, of which the most important are generally agreed to be Clement, Origen, and Didymus the Blind. (Indeed, Jerome playfully referred to the last-mentioned as "Didymus the Sighted," on account of the spiritual insights which resulted from his application of the allegorical method of biblical interpretation.)

The scope of the allegorical method can be seen from Origen's interpretation of key Old Testament images. Joshua's conquest of the promised land, interpreted allegorically, referred to Christ's conquest of sin upon the cross, just as the sacrificial legislation in Leviticus pointed ahead to the spiritual sacrifices of Christians. It might at first sight seem that this represents a degeneration into *eisegesis*, in which the interpreter simply reads any meaning he or she likes into the text of Scripture. However, as the writings of Didymus (which were rediscovered in an ammunition dump in Egypt during World War II) make clear, this need not be the case. It seems that a consensus developed about the images and texts of the Old Testament which were to be interpreted allegorically. For example, Jerusalem regularly came to be seen as an allegory of the church.

In contrast, the *Antiochene* school placed an emphasis upon the interpretation of Scripture in the light of its historical context. This school, especially associated with writers such as Diodore of Tarsus, John Chrysostom, and Theodore of Mopsuestia, gave an emphasis to the historical location of Old Testament prophecies, which is quite absent from the writings of Origen and other representatives of the Alexandrian tradition. Thus Theodore, in dealing with Old Testament prophecy, stresses that the prophetic message was relevant to those to whom it was directly addressed, as well as having a developed meaning for a Christian readership. Every prophetic oracle is to be interpreted as having a single consistent historical or literal meaning. In consequence, Theodore tended to interpret relatively few Old Testament passages as referring directly to Christ, whereas the Alexandrian school regarded Christ

as the hidden content of many Old Testament passages, both prophetic and historical.

In the western church a slightly different approach can be seen to develop. In many of his writings, Ambrose of Milan developed a threefold understanding of the senses of Scripture: in addition to the *natural* sense, the interpreter may discern a *moral* sense and a *rational* or *theological* sense. Augustine chose to follow this approach, and instead argued for a twofold sense – a *literal-fleshly-historical* sense and an *allegorical-mystical-spiritual* sense, although he allowed that some passages could possess both senses. “The sayings of the prophets are found to have a threefold meaning, in that some have in mind the earthly Jerusalem, others the heavenly city, and others refer to both.” To understand the Old Testament at a purely historical level is unacceptable; the key to its understanding lies in its correct interpretation. Among the major lines of “spiritual” interpretation, the following should be noted: Adam represents Christ; Eve represents the church; Noah’s ark represents the cross; the door of Noah’s ark represents Christ’s pierced side; the city of Jerusalem represents the heavenly Jerusalem. Augustine sets out his approach as follows:

It is not the Old Testament that is abolished in Christ but the concealing veil, so that it may be understood through Christ. That which without Christ is obscure and hidden is, as it were, opened up . . . [Paul] does not say: “The Law or the Old Testament is abolished.” It is not the case, therefore, that by the grace of the Lord that which was covered has been abolished as useless; rather, the covering which concealed useful truth has been removed. This is what happens to those who earnestly and piously, not proudly and wickedly, seek the sense of the Scriptures. To them is carefully demonstrated the order of events, the reasons for deeds and words, and the agreement of the Old Testament with the New, so that not a single point remains where there is not complete harmony. The secret truths are conveyed in figures that are to be brought to light by interpretation.

By the use of such lines of analysis, Augustine is able to stress the unity of the Old and New Testaments. They bear witness to the same faith, even if their modes of expression may be different (an idea developed by John Calvin). Augustine expresses this idea in a text which has become of major importance to biblical interpretation, especially as it bears on the relation between Old and New Testaments. “The New Testament is hidden in the Old; the Old is made accessible by the New.” (*In Vetere Novum latet et in Novo Vetus patet*).

This distinction between the *literal* or *historical* sense of Scripture on the one hand, and a deeper *spiritual* or *allegorical* meaning on the other, came to be generally accepted within the church during the early Middle Ages. The standard method of biblical interpretation used during the Middle Ages is usually known as *Quadrigena*, or the “fourfold sense of Scripture.” The origins of this method lie specifically in the distinction between the literal and spiritual senses. Scripture possesses four different senses. In addition to the literal sense, three non-literal senses could be distinguished: the allegorical, defining what Christians are to believe

tropological or moral, defining what Christians are to do; and the anagogical, defining what Christians were to hope for. The four senses of Scripture were thus the following:

- 1 The *literal* sense of Scripture, in which the text could be taken at face value.
- 2 The *allegorical* sense, which interpreted certain passages of Scripture to produce statements of doctrine. Those passages tended either to be obscure, or to have a literal meaning which was unacceptable, for theological reasons, to their readers.
- 3 The *tropological* or *moral* sense, which interpreted such passages to produce ethical guidance for Christian conduct.
- 4 The *anagogical* sense, which interpreted passages to indicate the grounds of Christian hope, pointing toward the future fulfillment of the divine promises in the New Jerusalem.

An excellent example of allegorical interpretation can be found in Bernard of Clairvaux's twelfth-century exposition of the Song of Songs. Bernard here provides an allegorical interpretation of the phrase "the beams of our houses are of cedar, and our panels are of cypress," illustrating the way in which doctrinal or spiritual meaning was "read into" otherwise unpromising passages at this time.

By "houses" we are to understand the great mass of the Christian people, who are bound together with those who possess power and dignity, rulers of the church and the state, as "beams." These hold them together by wise and firm laws; otherwise, if each of them were to operate in any way that they pleased, the walls would bend and collapse, and the whole house would fall in ruins. By the "panels" which are firmly attached to the beams and which adorn the house in a royal manner, we are to understand the kindly and ordered lives of a properly instructed clergy, and the proper administration of the rites of the church.

The potential weakness was avoided by insisting that nothing should be believed on the basis of a non-literal sense of Scripture, unless it could first be established on the basis of the literal sense. This insistence on the priority of the literal sense of Scripture may be seen as an implied criticism of the allegorical approach adopted by Origen, which virtually allowed interpreters of Scripture to read into any passage whatever "spiritual" interpretations they liked. As Luther states this principle in 1515: "In the Scriptures no allegory, tropology, or anagogy is valid, unless that the truth is explicitly stated literally somewhere else. Otherwise, Scripture would become a laughing matter."

Luther is fully aware of the distinctions noted above, and has no hesitation in applying them to the full in his biblical exposition. In his analysis of the Psalter, he distinguishes eight senses of the Old Testament. This amazing precision (which may strike some readers as typical of scholasticism) results from combining the four senses of Scripture with the insight that each of these senses can be interpreted

*historically or prophetically*. Luther argues that a distinction had to be made between what he terms “the killing letter” (*litera occidens*) – in other words, a crudely literal or historical reading of the Old Testament – and “the life-giving spirit” (*spiritus vivificans*) – in other words, a reading of the Old Testament which is sensitive to its spiritual nuances and prophetic overtones. As a worked example, we may consider Luther’s analysis of an Old Testament image using this eightfold scheme of interpretation.

The image in question is Mount Zion, which can be interpreted either in a woodenly historical and literal sense as a reference to ancient Israel or as a prophetic reference to the New Testament church. Luther explores the possibilities as follows:

- 1 Historically, according to “the killing letter”:
  - (a) literally: the land of Canaan;
  - (b) allegorically: the synagogue, or a prominent person within it;
  - (c) tropologically: the righteousness of the Pharisees and the Law;
  - (d) anagogically: a future glory on earth.
- 2 Prophetically, according to “the life-giving spirit”:
  - (a) literally: the people of Zion;
  - (b) allegorically: the church, or a prominent person within it;
  - (c) tropologically: the righteousness of faith;
  - (d) anagogically: the eternal glory of the heavens.

The *Quadriga* was a major component of academic study of the Bible within scholastic theological faculties of universities. But it was not the only option available to biblical interpreters in the first two decades of the sixteenth century. Indeed, Luther may be argued to be the only reformer to make significant use of this scholastic approach to biblical interpretation. By far the most influential approach to the subject within reforming and humanist circles in the early Reformation period was that associated with Erasmus of Rotterdam, to which we may now turn.

Erasmus’ *Handbook of the Christian Soldier* (see p. 48) made much of the distinction between the “letter” and the “spirit” – that is, between the words of Scripture and their real meaning. Especially in the Old Testament, the words of the text are like a shell, containing – but not identical with – the kernel of the meaning. The surface meaning of the text often conceals a deeper hidden meaning, which it is the task of the enlightened and responsible exegete to uncover. Biblical interpretation, according to Erasmus, is concerned with establishing the underlying sense, not the letter, of Scripture. There are strong affinities here with the Alexandrian school, noted earlier.

Zwingli’s basic concern echoes that of Erasmus. The interpreter of the Bible is required to establish the “natural sense of Scripture,” which is not necessarily identical with the literal sense of Scripture. Zwingli’s humanist background allows him to distinguish various figures of speech, especially *alloiosis*, *catachresis*, and *synecdoche*.

An example will make this difficult point clear. Take the statement of Christ at the Last Supper, in which, when breaking the bread, he spoke the words “this is my

body" (Matthew 26: 26). The literal sense of these words would be "this piece of bread is my body," but the natural sense is "this piece of bread signifies my body" (see p. 528).

Zwingli's search for the deeper meaning of Scripture (to be contrasted with the superficial meaning) is well illustrated by the story of Abraham and Isaac (Genesis 22). The historical details of the story are too easily assumed to be its real meaning. In fact, Zwingli argues, the real meaning of that story can only be understood when it is seen as a prophetic anticipation of the story of Christ, in which Abraham represents God and Isaac is a figure (or, more technically, a "type") of Christ.

With the advent of the modern period, the science of biblical interpretation has become considerably more complex, reflecting the increased acceptance within academic circles of new rational methods of interpretation, grounded in the assumptions of the Enlightenment. It is impossible to survey these developments adequately in the scope of this work. However, it will be helpful to note some broad tendencies in biblical interpretation during the last two and a half centuries. Under the influence of the Enlightenment, four main approaches can be seen in academic biblical interpretation.

- 1 The *rational* approach, found in the writings of H. S. Reimarus. This regards both Old and New Testaments as resting on a series of supernatural fictions. By a process of radical logical criticism, Reimarus argued that the supernatural elements of the Bible could not be taken seriously. It was therefore necessary to interpret Scripture along rational lines, as stating (although in a somewhat muddled manner) the universal truths of the religion of reason. With the general collapse in confidence in both the universality and the theological competence of reason in more recent times, the attractions of this approach have dwindled drastically.
- 2 The *historical* approach, which treats Scripture as an account of Christian origins. F. C. Baur, probably the most distinguished early representative of this tradition, argued that it was no longer permissible to explain the origins of the Christian faith in terms of "the only begotten Son of God descending from the eternal throne of the Godhead to earth, and becoming a human person in the womb of the virgin." Instead, Baur argued that it was possible to account for the origins of Christianity in rational and non-supernatural terms. Believing that Hegelianism held the key to explaining how Christianity came into being, Baur made a direct appeal to its philosophy of history as an alternative explanation to the traditional accounts of the origins of Christian faith, and interpreted the New Testament in its light. With the waning of Hegelianism, Baur's impact also diminished.
- 3 The *sociological* approach. By the 1890s, many liberal Christians had lost interest in matters of Christian doctrine or theology, and begun to explore the wider category of "religion" in general – a trend which undergirds the development of faculties of "religious studies" in many western universities. Yet religion is a

social phenomenon; concerned with far more than “ideas” as such, it comes under the category of “social history.” The way was thus opened for a sociological approach to biblical interpretation, which treated Christianity as a specific example of a general phenomenon – religion. An example of this approach is provided by Sir James Frazer’s *The Golden Bough* (1890–1915), which applied comparative ethnology (the study of peoples and their traditions) to the Bible on an unprecedented scale.

- 4 The *literary* approach, which is concerned to do justice to the distinctive literary categories of Scripture. One such approach which has had major impact of late is *narrative theology*, which has been discussed at length earlier in this chapter (see pp. 167–70).

### Theories of the inspiration of Scripture

The notion that the special status of Scripture within Christian theology rests upon its divine origins, however vaguely this may be stated, can be discerned both in the New Testament itself, and in subsequent reflection on it. An important element in any discussion of the manner in which Scripture is inspired, and the significance which is to be attached to this, is 2 Timothy 3: 16–17, which speaks of Scripture as “God-breathed” (*theopneustos*). This idea was common in early Christian thought, and was not regarded as controversial. The Greek-speaking Jewish philosopher Philo of Alexandria regarded Scripture as fully inspired, and argued that God used the authors of scriptural books as passive instruments for communicating the divine will.

The issue began to surface as potentially controversial at the time of the Reformation, especially through the writings of John Calvin. Calvin was concerned to defend the authority of Scripture against two groups of people. On the one hand were those on the more Catholic wing of the church, who argued that the authority of Scripture rested in its being recognized as authoritative by the church. On the other were the more radical evangelical writers, such as the Anabaptists, who argued that every individual had the right to ignore Scripture altogether in favor of some direct personal divine revelation. Calvin declared that the Spirit worked through Scripture (not bypassing it, as the radicals held), and that the Spirit lent direct authority to Scripture by inspiring it, thus doing away with the need for any external support to its authority (such as that of the church).

This point is important, in that it indicates that the reformers did not see the issue of inspiration as linked with the absolute historical reliability or factual inerrancy of the biblical texts. Calvin’s doctrine of accommodation implied that God revealed himself in forms tailored to the abilities of the communities which were to receive this revelation; thus in the case of Genesis 1, Calvin suggests that a whole series of ideas – such as the “days of creation” – are simply accommodated ways of speaking, a kind of divine “baby-talk.” The development of ideas of “biblical infallibility” or “inerrancy” within Protestantism can be traced to the United States in the middle of the nineteenth century.

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