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A BRIEF HISTORY OF BIBLE INTERPRETATION

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Introduction

The interpretation of any text depends to a large extent on the kind of commitment we have to its content. Should we study the writing under consideration in order to know more about the author and the community that treasured his work and their circumstances, but without getting personally involved, in the same way biologists study flowers or insects? This is actually how the greater part of the scholarly study of the Bible is conducted today. Or, in contrast, should we rely on the message of the text, even to the point of life-or-death decisions? This is the conservative approach to the Bible.

The first principle in this commitment to the value of a text is categorization. How do we conceive of the book as a whole? The importance of categorizing texts may be illustrated by comparison with other kinds of works. Suppose we find some kind of map with the outline of this island (Luzon, Philippines). Is this a chart for sailing around the island? Or is it perhaps a blank map for school children so that they may locate the main natural resources and crops of Luzon for an exercise in economics or geography? In the first case, we may test the reliability of the outline by personally checking a particular section of the coast, and keep the chart if we find it accurate. In the second case, there is no need to check the accuracy of the coastline; it is valuable even as a rough sketch. If the chart is used for sailing, every line on the map should be taken with utmost faithfulness to avoid shipwreck; if it is used for economics, only the general location of a line is important. This is not to say that one kind of map is better than the other; they may both be adequate or inadequate for their own purpose. The point is that we interpret a work on the basis of the category we think it belongs to.

In the case of the Bible, the commitment it gets from faith communities such as Judaism or Christianity starts with its categorization as the word of God. The Scriptures are unambiguously called the word of God in Mark 7:13; John 10:35; and Rom 3:2. In addition to these references, "word of God" occurs about sixty times in the OT, mainly for prophetic messages, and about forty in the NT, mainly

referring to apostolic preaching. This in itself defines the canon: the scope of Scripture, or God's word, is the full collection of extant, authentic prophetic and apostolic writings. But the sense in which the Bible is understood as the word of God has changed with the times. We will now review the main stages in these changing conceptions.

Interpretation in Traditional Judaism, the Church Fathers, and the Middle Ages

Traditional Judaism

Systems of interpretation arose as soon as the Bible was complete.¹ The first is found in traditional Judaism. In order to understand it adequately, we may ponder exactly what elements found in the Bible constitute the word of God. Are the words of the original text themselves to be taken as the voice of God, or is it rather their sense that constitutes the word of God, no matter how that sense is expressed through human authors? In the first case, not only the thoughts contained in the Bible, but its very terms are inspired. If so, no translation of the original text, no matter how good, can be God's word in the same way and to the same degree as the original.

This is precisely the conviction often found among the Jewish interpreters after the destruction of the Second Temple (70 C.E.). They took a dim view of all translations. The first translation of the OT into a non-cognate language, that is, the LXX, was compared by ancient rabbis to the making of the golden calf. They said that if a translator renders the original literally he is a falsifier,² while if the translator interprets the sense freely, he is a blasphemer, because he dares to present his own views as God's words!³ A similar conception is still current in Islam, as common translations of the Quran take pains to remind the reader.⁴

Because of their conviction that the words themselves are inspired, ancient Jews developed *gematria*. This technique assumes that the very letters of the text

¹The division of the history of hermeneutics into periods and their characterization here follows standard hermeneutical works such as Walter C. Kaiser Jr. and Moises Silva, *An Introduction to Biblical Hermeneutics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 218-47. However, the identification and evaluation of main principles is the sole responsibility of the present author.

²Probably because the literal rendition of a phrase may be completely misleading for those who do not know its usage in the original language.

³H. L. Strack and P. Billerbeck, *Kommentar zum Neuen Testament aus Talmud und Midrasch* (Munich: C. H. Beck, 1978), 4:414 w, x.

⁴For example, the title of the translation by M. M. Pickthall (New York: New American Library, 1953) is not *The Koran* but *The Meaning of the Glorious Koran*. The foreword (p. vii) states flatly that "the Koran cannot be translated," contradicting the description on the title page.

are significant: Hebrew phrases with the same number value as the letters in the original text are held to point to its meaning. As a "proof," it was observed that the letters forming the name of Eliezer, the servant of Abraham, add up to a numerical value (based on their alphabetical order) of 318, which is precisely the number of Abraham's servants as specified in Gen 14:14.⁵

But not all was *gematria* in the Jewish system of interpretation. Independently of its mechanical concept of biblical inspiration, it developed reasonable exegetical criteria employed by NT authors, even Jesus Himself in His capacity as "rabbi." This includes the seven *middot* or techniques of interpretation attributed to Rabbi Hillel, often encountered in the NT.⁶

Church Fathers

Early Christians also performed *gematria*. For example, the Epistle of Barnabas points out that the number 318 may be written in the Greek system of number values as *TIH*, where *T* has the figure of the cross and *IH* is the beginning of the word *Iēsous* (Jesus) in Greek. Both Jews and Christians of those times accepted the gematrical reasoning for applying Shiloh in Gen 49:10 to the Messiah: the phrase "Shiloh comes" adds up to 358 in Hebrew, just like "Messiah."

For the normal reading of the Hebrew Bible, a system of vowel points fixes the traditional pronunciation and therefore the vocalization and word division. In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the times of Protestant scholasticism, these vowel points and even the *te'amim* (chant notation), which fixed the punctuation of the Hebrew text, were held to be inspired.

However, the Bible never claims to have been mechanically inspired, or to be significant in every detail. Quite the opposite, the Bible authors observe that "the spirits of the prophets are subject to the control of the prophets" (1 Cor 14:32 NIV), and the relationship between God and His prophet is comparable to that of a leader and his spokesman (Exod 7:1; cf. 4:15-16). A spokesperson, as we know, is not just a speaker. A speaker on television may merely read the text given to him or her on the teleprompter. In contrast, a spokesperson knows the mind of a

⁵Even in our own times, the mechanical inspiration of the Bible has its defenders. Those who believe in the "Torah code" (the title of a popular paperback) cast the Pentateuch in lines of particular lengths, so that by reading vertically across them, Hebrew phrases can be formed which are supposed to "predict" events. This system of prediction is greatly aided by the flexibility of Hebrew writing, which represents only consonants. The vertical reading suppresses all separation between the supposed "words," so with a little ingenuity all kind of things can be read in this way.

⁶For example, a technique called *gezerah shawah* allows comparison and connection of verses sharing the same original key term (as in Rom 4:3, 6-7). The *qal wahomer* principle is used to argue that if A is true (as proven by the Bible), being more difficult than B, then B can also be inferred to be true with all the more reason (as in John 10:35-36).

leader and enjoys his or her trust. The spokesperson then relays the ideas of the leader to the people according to need. In the case of the Bible, the diversity of style and other parameters of composition are consistent with the dignity of its authors, who were spokesmen and not mere mediums, as are authors under pagan or spiritist (spiritualist) inspiration.

Middle Ages

In fact, the Greco-Roman pagan belief in mechanical inspiration was in part the source of the medieval interpretation system. A Greek poet hallowed by time and fame, such as Homer, according to the pagans, had composed his work under the inspiration of particular deities. Teachers of Greek literature at Alexandria, which was also the center of philosophical teaching, combined lofty philosophical conceptions with this mechanical concept of inspiration and developed the theory that, beyond the obvious meaning of the narrative found in the poem, stood a mysterious metaphorical sense, so that the narrative was actually an allegory of philosophical truth. Church Fathers at Alexandria adapted this theory to Christian beliefs. They taught that Scripture has multiple meanings, only one of which is the literal or "historical." Following them, medieval interpreters tried to find "spiritual lessons" in every biblical statement, the so-called "moral sense," as well as theological and eschatological allusions. These second, third, and fourth senses were obtained by assuming, as pagans did with Homer, that the text functions as an allegory (extended metaphor). The allegorical (figurative) method of exegesis presupposes, like *gematria*, hidden meanings in the biblical text. NT authors do not use the allegorical method.⁷ During the early Middle Ages, however, the school of Christian theology at Antioch, a rival of Alexandria, was the only one rejecting the allegorical method.

The Reformation and the Conservative Evangelical System of Interpretation

The Reformers (sixteenth century) made the Bible their only rule of faith and practice. They often encountered the objection that Scriptures, like "a wax nose," can be twisted to accommodate many different opinions. The "wax nose" refers to a toy of the times, namely dolls featuring a nose made of beeswax, which children could turn whichever way in play. A wax nose is certainly the case of the Bible if we allow the allegorical method of interpretation, but not if we hold strictly to the evident meaning of the biblical author, the literal or "historical"

⁷Paul used the term "allegory" in Gal 4:24-31, but he does not claim Genesis speaks about Judaism and Christianity under the figure of Sarah and Hagar. He is making a "contemporary application" of the passage (4:25), which remains the responsibility of the author of the reflection.

sense. For this reason the Reformers championed a return to the literal method of exegesis practiced in the patristic age by the School of Antioch. Their position became the evangelical, or conservative Christian, system, the one followed by the Seventh-day Adventist Church.

Since there is no evidence that mechanical inspiration is the normal situation in the Bible, Adventists believe that “the writers of the Bible were God’s penmen, not His pen.”⁸ For Adventist exegesis, the meaning intended by the biblical author is paramount, since the communication of divine ideas is mediated by the intelligence of the human author. In some cases, however, the purpose of the author has been merely to testify to a revelation from God, the signification of which he could not fully know at the time (1 Pet 1:10-12), so that he merely transmits the revelation verbatim and lets us know that he is doing just that. The signification or “full import”⁹ of such revelation constitutes the application of the prophecy today. In those cases we are interpreting the divine revelation to the prophet rather than his writing. In all cases, however, the author’s intention can be confidently recovered through the procedures of exegesis, and the authorial purpose is never lost sight of when interpreting prophecy.

Rationalism and the Origin of the Historical-Critical Method of Interpretation

During the time of the Enlightenment (seventeenth and eighteenth centuries), there was a general revolt against the oppressive authority of the kings (i.e., absolute power) and the clergy (i.e., absolute dogmas). The system of interpretation that arose in that age and blossomed during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, known as the historical-critical method of exegesis, largely ignored the authority of the Scriptures. “Authority” means the right to be obeyed, and the right of the Scriptures to be believed and obeyed was perceived during the Enlightenment as dependent on dogma. In fact, the Bible is autonomous in its claims, and church authority depends on the revelation embodied in its pages, not the other way around. By ignoring the authority of biblical statements about the circumstances in which the various books were written, this system of interpretation constructed its own isagogics. In other words, it identified the author, time, unity, purpose, and historical setting of each writing guided by the principles of historical criticism commonly applied to profane literature. Thus, for instance, the Pentateuch is held to have been written after the prophetic books of the OT, Isaiah to be a work of composite authorship, and Daniel a prophecy *ex post facto*.

⁸Ellen G. White, *Selected Messages* (Washington, DC: Review & Herald, 1958, 1980). 1:21.

⁹Ellen G. White, *The Great Controversy between Christ and Satan: The Conflict of the Ages in the Christian Dispensation* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1950), 344.

Criticism of Criticism: The Problems of Modernistic Interpretation

This alien isagogics radically alters the meaning of biblical statements by changing the presumed original verbal context and historical setting. But it does not end there. As explained above, the authority of the Scriptures does not depend on church pronouncements, such as canon-fixing council decrees, but on the fact that the Bible issues from a succession of prophets and apostles raised up by God in the course of the history of salvation, as leaders and witnesses to that salvation. We should be wary of constructs such as the "Council of Jamnia" or the "Alexandrian canon of the OT" for which there is no shred of historical evidence.

Since it is the calling of the biblical author, not a church pronouncement, that makes a writing sacred for Protestants, the altered isagogics of the historical-critical system of exegesis has far-reaching consequences. By separating many biblical books and book sections from their connection with the prophetic and apostolic channels of revelation, this system has tended to make belief in the authority of large parts of the Bible impossible, at least in the sense in which the Bible itself defines authority. Only a pale secondary "authority" clings to those sections of the Bible, as a result of the say-so of church pronouncements, in Roman Catholic fashion, or because of individual convictions, in a subjective and non-normative way.

The Rejection of the Historical-Critical Method by Conservative Christians

The historical-critical system, though still widely influential, has not been successful in all areas. As a consequence of its hostility to biblical authority, this system of interpretation is particularly impotent in the areas of doctrinal formulation and practical application. Any faith applications of biblical statements are in fact considered by historical-critical scholars to lie outside the system, in the province of "theology," which is left to fend for itself in finding meaning in the Bible with few tangible benefits from such exegesis. The vital connection between Biblical Studies and Systematic Theology is thus severed. Whatever usable results the system may produce belong in the history of literature, the history of religions, and other human sciences with no supernatural perspective. At its 1986 Annual Council, the Seventh-day Adventist Church approved a report from the Methods of Bible Study Committee, thereby rejecting the historical-critical method of interpretation. Many other conservative Christians have protested against this modernistic and rationalistic method throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

Post-modern Systems of Interpretation: Neo-orthodox, Existentialist, and Canonical

Disappointment over the theological impotence of the historical-critical system led to the creation of new systems of interpretation in the post-modern age. We will briefly review the Neo-orthodox, Existentialist, and Canonical methods.

Neo-orthodox Method

The Neo-orthodox school of theology adopted its own system between the World Wars. Even though admitting the results of historical-critical exegesis, the school insisted on the authority of whatever biblical statements the Holy Spirit leads the interpreter to appreciate. For Neo-orthodox theologians, beginning with Karl Barth, God's word is indeed contained in the Bible, though not because God actually speaks, but because the prophet feels He does in the course of an existential encounter with Him. A similar encounter may be experienced by the interpreter, and biblical statements are the medium through which this non-propositional (i.e., nonverbal) revelation is produced. The content of the Bible, then, is not so much God's word as the trigger of an event in which God may be perceived as speaking. However, Neo-orthodoxy allowed some reconnection between systematics and biblical theology, and has been therefore popular among many theology students.

Existentialist Method

The critical consensus about the isagogics of the Pentateuch and other sections of the Bible began to dissolve in the second half of the twentieth century in the hands of its own practitioners, as difficulties in its theoretic framework became more visible. Precisely at that time a radically existentialist system of interpretation arose challenging the supposedly scientific character of modernist exegesis.¹⁰ Historical-critical exegetes recognized the problems their system created for theology, but held that they had to be faced in the name of objective and scientific truth. Theologians who have ignored those results have been branded as having zeal not according to science. In contrast, for existentialist thinkers, no real objectivity is possible, and so the claims of a "scientific" isagogical reconstruction over the acceptance of biblical statements are not valid.

However, that does not make existentialists conservative. The true intention of the biblical authors, according to these interpreters, may not be recoverable with certainty. This is no great loss, because meaning does not exist in objective reality (such as texts), but only in the human mind, just as "beauty is in the eye of the beholder." Readers are told to follow the "arrow of sense" (the general direction

¹⁰This position is represented, among others, by Liberation theologians.

in which the text is pointing) to the present situation instead of trying to recover the thing precisely signified by the author in the past. Texts and other cultural works are autonomous and become progressively independent from their authors. While in the historical-critical system scientific exegesis is all-important and the practical application of the text is of little importance, in existentialism the reverse is true.

Like Neo-orthodoxy, existentialist hermeneutics, assumes that God did not really communicate his ideas to the prophets; instead God's word is an idea discovered by them and perceived as divine. The "theology of liberation," in particular, utilizes an existentialist hermeneutic, allowing a socialist-revolutionary interpretation, the so-called "updated reading" of biblical passages, for which it has been widely criticized.

Canonical Method

"Canonical interpretation" was the name given by B. S. Childs to his system. He, like many other twentieth century interpreters, accepts the results of historical-critical exegesis, but tries to find meaning in the "canonical," that is, the final stage of the composition of the Bible as fixed in the canon. This implies that the authority of the Bible is independent from the identity of their human authors, a highly controvertible theological position, though understandable as a reaction to the sterility of the historical-critical exegesis described above.

Conclusion

What key ideas can be gleaned from this brief historical survey? Authorial intention (AI) appears to be the touchstone to differentiate between the various systems of interpretation. In traditional Judaism, that intention is not really important because God himself is the Source of the words and even individual letters of Scripture. In conservative Christian interpretation, divine revelation is always mediated by the authorial intention of the prophets and apostles identified in the Bible itself. In historical-critical exegesis, the author or his purpose is not necessarily the one stated by the Bible, so his intention must be reconstructed by human science. In Neo-orthodoxy, the Bible authors did not just mediate but rather originated the message, while in existentialist hermeneutics the reader, rather than the author, provides the significant message of the text. This may be presented in table form:

SYSTEMS	ATTITUDES TOWARD AI
Traditionalist Conservative Modernist Neo-orthodox Existentialist	God speaks independently from AI AI mediates between God and the reader AI must be reconstructed by human science AI is the source, not the medium of the message Reader derives meaning independently from AI

In order to evaluate these systems, we should return to the root concept of the Bible as the word of God. This concept has two parameters, one human ("the word") and the other divine ("of God"). The traditional Jewish system emphasizes the divine to the exclusion of the human. In contrast, the conservative Christian approach keeps both in balance. The Modernist approach implies questioning the reliability of the self-presentation of the text and, therefore, the reality of mediating God's mind. The Neo-orthodox system gives up such reality expressly, while existentialism points to the reader, rather than the prophet or apostle, as the source of sense. We may well conclude, then, that only the conservative approach sees the Bible truly as the word of God, rather than a magical oracle, an ancient work of literary or religious genius, or a tool for personal meditation.