The History of Interpretation and Current Approaches To The Bible

Biblical Interpretation through the Centuries

Throughout the centuries there have been hot debates about the meaning of Scriptures. In fact many church councils were called to end what was considered heretical teachings and debates about the meaning of God’s written word. At the heart of all biblical interpretation lie two basic questions: 1) How many meanings can a text have? and 2) Where is / are the meanings found? In the history of the church there have arisen two views of the Scriptures and their proper interpretation: 1) Scripture meaning lies only in its primary, historical sense or 2) Scriptures ultimate meaning lies in its fuller, revelatory sense.¹

The Early Church

The early church fathers in the second century found much of their truth in the teachings of the Apostles. These men had to fight many rising heresies such as Gnosticism and other false teachings which threatened to dilute or destroy true faith. Beginning with Ignatius and then progressing with Justin, Irenaeus (ca. A.D. 140-202), and Tertullian (ca. A.D. 155-212), there developed the idea that to correctly read, interpret and understand the Scriptures, one must study under the guided authorities of the bishops of the church. This seemed a very necessary approach at the time to safeguard the infant church from growing heresies. By the time of and through the work of Irenaeus, the Old Testament Scriptures were understood to point to Christ through types and shadows. His work provided the key for theological interpretation which found its total focus in the Incarnate Christ. As a result of this approach, a ‘rule of faith’ was developed and most interpretation needed to pass through that rule.²

As time passed, in the theological circles of Alexandria, creative biblical interpretation took off through the work of Clement (ca. A.D. 150-215) and Origen (ca. A.D. 185-254). The style of Christian allegorical interpretation developed. This assumes that the Bible intends to say something more than what its literary wording suggests, that is, the Bible has deeper, mystical meanings together with the plain meaning. Origen created a basic two step approach to interpreting the scripture whereby the Bible student first discovered the literal, plain meaning and then the deeper, spiritual interpretation.³

The Alexandrian school of biblical interpretation was soon challenged by the leaders of Antioch where the Antiochene school of interpretation arose. The brilliant scholars, John Chrysostom (ca. A.D. 347-407) and Theodore of Mopsuestia (ca. A.D. 350-428) emphasized a literal and historical approach to the Scriptures. They focused on the biblical writers’ aims, motives, usages, and methods in which a literal-historical sense of Scripture was primary and through it, moral implications and applications must be made.⁴

2 Dockery & Guthrie, p. 28, 29.
3 Dockery & Guthrie, p. 29, 30.
4 Dockery & Guthrie, p. 30, 31.
As the church approached the fifth century, Augustine of Hippo (ca. A.D. 354-430) and Jerome (ca. A.D. 341-420) established the course for this period. They emphasized a more balanced approach of Scripture emphasizing the literal meaning, the allegorical meaning and above all the theological meaning.

The Middle Ages

Out of this more balanced approach of the late church fathers arose a powerful four-fold approach to biblical interpretation which was carried into the Middle Ages:

1) The literal-historical sense
2) The allegorical sense - deeper meaning for theology and faith
3) The tropological sense – what people should do
4) The anaological sense – what does this mean for future and for eternity

This method was clearly used by Bernard of Clairvaux (1090-1153) but later Thomas Aquinas (1224-1274) rooted the spiritual meaning of Scripture much more securely in the literal meaning. He taught that all deeper, spiritual interpretation had to flow out of the clear, literal meaning of the text. He and others after him, clearly taught that the historical, literal meaning of Scripture was clear, but the full and final meaning of the text was in no way restricted to what the first audience thought or heard.5

The Reformation and Reformers

Martin Luther (1483-1546) and Erasmus (1466-1536) pushed forward a strong return to earlier principles favored by the school of Antioch years ago. These men and other reformers rediscovered the priority of the literal, historical sense of Scripture. Luther broke the stronghold of allegorical interpretation of Scripture feeling he must stress the historical sense which will in turn provide a framework for sound doctrine. He insisted that the Bible itself is its own best interpreter.

John Calvin (1506-1564), one of the pivotal figures in biblical studies during the Reformation period, developed the grammatical-historical method of interpretation focusing on the meaning of the text in its historical sense (what it meant to the first hearers in their situation and their times) and then deriving all spiritual messages directly from the text. Calvin said.

Since it is almost the interpreter’s only task to unfold the mind of the writer he has undertaken to expound, he misses his mark, or at least strays outside his limits, by the extent to which he leads his readers away from the meaning of his author. . .6

Lastly, both Luther and Calvin formed the christological method of interpretation. . .that is, that all Scripture has as its primary purpose to reveal Christ and His redemptive work, therefore, all Scripture must be interpreted, applied, and experienced in its revelation of Christ and His work.7

5 Dockery & Guthrie, p. 33.
6 Dockery & Guthrie, p. 34.
7 Dockery & Guthrie, p. 35, 36, 37.
Biblical Interpretation Since the Reformation

Although the reformers moved us back to safer ground with the literal-historical approach to interpreting the Scriptures, over the years, this resulted in a dogmatic approach to the Bible. A dogmatic approach represents a moving away from a living, active theology to a ‘rule of faith’ which every MUST believe in order to be in the faith. As time passed, instead of vibrant faith filled hearts, confessional orthodoxy emerged in the church.

As enlightenment thinking hit the world, many rejected this dogmatic rule of faith. A newfound Pietism emerged in Philipp Jakob Spener (1635-1705) and August Herman Franke (1663-1727). This piety focused on a real experiential reality of God and of biblical morality. This has led people to read the Bible more devotionally as they focus upon experiencing God, moral obligation and practical application of the Scriptures. The weakness of this period has been very little new thought of true biblical interpretive methods.

Current Approaches to the Bible

Christians believe that the Bible is God’s revelation of himself and of his will for man. But this basic presupposition is sometimes qualified by other views. Four different approaches to Scripture, that is, the naturalistic, supernaturalistic, existential and dogmatic need to be recognised. These approaches will often yield totally different interpretations of the same passage of Scripture.

Four General Approaches

It is common to isolate four general approaches to Scripture:

1. Scripture may be viewed rationally and equated with any other literature.
2. Scripture may be viewed reverently as a supernatural book.
3. Scripture may be viewed existentially by way of personal experience.
4. Scripture may be viewed dogmatically through a system of doctrine.

It is important to see that we all approach the Bible with our own viewpoint and presuppositions.

We now consider how different sections of the Christian church view the Scriptures.

The Evangelical View Of Scripture

Evangelicals hold the Bible to be God’s written Word. But beliefs within evangelical circles vary on the doctrines of inspiration and revelation. A fundamentalist approach to Scripture may emphasise the divine involvement in its production to the exclusion of any human contribution; likewise, a dogmatic approach to the Bible may limit its message to a fellowship or denomination.
Generally speaking, however, conservative evangelicals take the view that ‘Christ and the apostles viewed the Bible as a document written by men, to be sure, but at the same time as a document whose source was God himself’ (R. McQuilkin)\(^8\)

This view embraces what is called a grammatical-historical approach to Scripture – an approach adopted in this book.

Evangelicals use a number of meaningful terms in reference to the Bible:

**God’s Word**

Evangelicals believe that the Bible is God’s Word - and reject the view that it just contains God’s word as insufficient. A number of arguments support this belief, for example:

a. The Scripture’s internal testimony (see 2 Tim. 3:16; 2 Pet. 1:21; Rev. 22:18-19). It may be a weak logical argument to say that we believe the Bible is the Word of God because the Bible says so - but it is a valid first argument.

b. The unity of the Bible. Considering that its 66 books have been written over a period of 1600 years by some 40 different authors, writing on different continents in two or three languages, using different literary styles, the unity of the Bible is extraordinary. This unity is evident in its consistent witness to one God. It is true that there are differences (some would say contradictions) in some passages, but these can often be explained. Continuing research is accounting for some difficult passages.

c. The fulfilment of Bible prophecy is a powerful argument to the authoritative nature of Scripture. Daniel’s prophecies about world empires came to pass. Many OT prophecies have been fulfilled in Jesus Christ. Following Jesus, the early church used proof texts to demonstrate the fulfilment of Scripture (see Lk. 24:27, 44).

d. Archaeology has given support to many biblical statements about places, events and people.

e. The witness of Jesus Christ to the inspiration and authority of Scripture has to be faced. A disciple of Jesus Christ must accept the Master’s view.

f. The literary excellence of the Bible suggests its divine inspiration. As a library of books the Bible represents some of the world’s richest literature.

g. The divine authorship of the Bible can be sensed in its moral laws and judgments. Laws such as those found in the Decalogue or Ten Commandments have a universal application (Ex. 20:3-17).

h. Born-again Christians testify to the transforming power of the Bible in their lives. This influence is an ongoing one, it begins with conversion and continues in sanctification. The prayer of Jesus for his followers, ‘Sanctify them by the truth; your word is truth’ (Jn. 17:17) is realized by the Scriptures.

The Bible is essentially a book of salvation. Its concern is God’s relationship with man, and man’s relationship with God. As such evangelicals refer to its infallibility and inerrancy.

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\(^8\) R. McQuilkin, *Understanding and Applying the Bible*, p. 20. But see the whole of chapter one.
Infallible

We affirm that God’s Word is infallible because God is infallible; if we affirm that God speaks through the Bible we must speak of its infallibility. But the word requires careful definition. J. I. Packer says:

‘Infallible’ denotes the quality of never deceiving or misleading, and so means ‘wholly trustworthy and reliable’; ‘inerrant’ means ‘wholly true’. Scripture is termed infallible and inerrant to express the conviction that all its teaching is the utterance of God ‘who cannot lie’, whose word, once spoken, abides for ever, and that therefore it may be trusted implicitly.9

Inerrant

‘Inerrancy’ implies the absence of error. Like ‘infallible’ the term is a corollary of divine inspiration. B. Milne states:

If the Bible has been supervised down to its very words by the God of truth, we can be confident that it will be free from error. Thus whenever the Bible prescribes the content of our belief (doctrine) or the pattern of our living (ethics) or records actual events (history), it speaks the truth. Again we must make clear that the degree of inerrancy claimed in any particular passage is relative to what the text intends to teach; when a passage of Scripture is interpreted in accord with the writer’s intention and in harmony with other biblical passages, its inerrant truth will be plainly perceived.10

Further Clarification Of The Terms Infallible And Inerrant

We need to make two observations on the use of the words ‘infallible’ and ‘inerrant’:

a. First, the terms are not used to suggest that the biblical writers had irrefutable revelation into every realm of human knowledge. The Bible is not a scientific textbook but a book of salvation. As J. I. Packer says, ‘It claims in the broadest terms to teach all things necessary to salvation, but it nowhere claims to give instruction in (for instance) any of the natural sciences, or in Greek or Hebrew grammar …’.11 In reference to the OT, Paul said to Timothy, ‘All scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness’ (2 Tim. 3:16).12

b. Secondly, the terms refer to the infallibility and inerrancy of biblical teaching, and not to any man’s interpretation of that teaching. Nor does the reliability of Scripture depend upon any person’s experience.

Propositional Revelation

Evangelicals believe that the Bible consists of revealed truths, that is, of verbal statements about God and his purposes, his will, his predictions and promises. This is contrary to the belief of some biblical scholars, who state that God has revealed himself solely in acts of history. Revelation, according to them, comes through salvation history or Heilsgeschichte, and not through pronouncements. Such a view dismisses the testimony of sacred history itself, and limits the ability of God to communicate with his

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10 B. Milne, Know the Truth, p. 43.
11 J. I. Packer, Fundamentalism and the Word of God, p. 96.
12 The subject of inerrancy has been a hot issue of debate among evangelicals in America fairly recently and resulted in the ‘Chicago Statement’ (1978).
creatures. If we read the Old or New Testaments we are left with the conviction that God has communicated with people through their experiences and his spoken word. For example, the OT story of the exodus would not be the same without the stories of Moses and his divine call to lead his people.

A belief in verbal revelation may be held as a necessary truth. What, for example, would we make of the person and work of Christ without an explanation? How could we arrive at convictions about his divine nature and saving work without theological interpretation? For a start, according to the apostle Paul, we would view Christ’s crucifixion simply as a human execution or a divine cursing (see 1 Cor. 1:23). Jesus would just be an example of how to live and die!

Reliable And Trustworthy

Following on from what we have said, it should be observed that God’s acts and words are very closely interwoven in Scripture. You cannot tease divine sayings out of the narratives that reveal the actions of God and leave the stories intact. At this point the Bible challenges our faith - we accept its testimony as it is or we reject it. Here is a faith statement: ‘Since God is the author, all the Bible is wholly trustworthy … Since the Bible is the Word of God, it is considered absolutely trustworthy in its overall message and in each part of the revelation’ (R. McQuilkin).13

The Liberal Protestant View Of Scripture

In comparison to evangelical belief and statements, naturalistic approaches to the Bible allow for nothing supernatural.

Rationalism

Rationalism came with the Enlightenment, which followed in the wake of the Reformation. Once men were able to think for themselves, and the sciences became dominant, the authority of the Church and Scripture was challenged.

Rationalists rely on their own reasoning as the ultimate authority. Liberal Protestant theologians take a rationalistic view of Scripture. The Bible may contain the Word of God, along with many errors, they say. Ideas of revelation or inspiration are often rejected. Further, the reality of miracles, Satan, demons, creation by the word of God, the Parousia (or second coming), and heaven and hell are similarly repudiated. Human reason and ‘the spirit of Christ’, it is maintained, are needed to decide which parts of Scripture are true and which parts are false.14

So-called Higher Criticism has received a bad name due to the fact that many nineteenth and twentieth century biblical scholars were rationalists, whose views coloured critical studies. We need to update our awareness here. We live in a post-modern age where the authority of science and technology has been questioned and re-evaluated. All knowledge is now taken to be meaningful. The rise of new age religions are evidence to the fact that spiritual experience is now taken seriously.

13 R. McQuilkin, Understanding and Applying the Bible, p. 20.
14 See R. McQuilkin, Understanding and Applying the Bible, pp. 27-35. The statement is a generalisation. It is so easy to pigeonhole scholars and misrepresent their theological beliefs.
The Neo-Orthodox View Of Scripture

While rationalism is outmoded, subjectivism is in fashion. Existentialism, which majors on human experience (my experience) has colored approaches to the Bible in the twentieth century.

Neo-Orthodoxy And Existentialism

Some Protestants believe the Bible to be God’s Word only in the sense that it contains God's Word. Furthermore, it only becomes so by personal faith. The Bible is not, does not contain, objective truth. Existentialism places an emphasis on the individual, and sees an irrational ‘leap of faith’ necessary in order to experience a word from God. Søren Kierkegaard (1813-1855) is often called the father of Christian existentialism. He reacted against the formality of the Dutch Reformed Church and the way that people seemed to lose their personal identity as they entered the Church. His religious works include Fear and Trembling and The Concept of Dread. Karl Barth, Emil Brunner and John Baillie represent neo-orthodoxy. This school holds that God has revealed himself in acts rather than words. To Barth the Word of God is not a revelation in itself, but an instrument of divine disclosure: it is personal but not propositional. For Barth the Word is Christ. The Bible witnesses to Christ. Christ, to Brunner, is the Word in Scripture. What matters is man’s encounter with God.\(^\text{15}\)

So, evangelicals take the orthodox view that the Bible is God’s Word; liberals believe the Bible contains God’s Word; while the neo-orthodox hold the belief that the Bible may become God’s Word through experience.\(^\text{16}\)

\(^{15}\) See R. McQuilkin, Understanding and Applying the Bible, pp. 49-56.

\(^{16}\) It is a disconcerting fact that Pentecostal and Charismatic preachers often side (unwittingly I hope) with modern interpretations of Scripture by stating that the Bible only becomes the word of God through personal experience.