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# Principles of Biblical Interpretation

BY THE REV. J. STAFFORD WRIGHT, M.A.

**T**O one type of mind the interpretation of the Bible represents a problem; to another it is a thrill. In this the Bible is like life itself, which to one man is a problem to be reduced to cut-and-dried terms, and to another is something thrilling to be lived. Both of these viewpoints are extremes, and each needs the other if the interpretation is to be properly proportioned.

In Evangelical circles the first type of mind is seen in those who lay their primary emphasis upon "soundness." The first question that they ask about any man is not, "Does he love the Lord?" but, "Is he sound?" The Bible becomes not a book of life, but a catalogue of doctrines that our Evangelical forefathers pinned on the dissecting board, and classified and labelled for all time. For this type of mind there are continuous problems that are concerned with the letter of Scripture. An awkward text, which refuses to fall into logical line with the rest, becomes an intolerable burden. And between different schools of thought there are constant wrangles over the precise interpretation of individual verses which might seem to threaten the particular truth for which one school stands.

The second type of mind is impatient of all this; its main concern is to get on with the job of living. To this end it brushes away the Bible difficulties as being of no great account. What does it matter to them if one writer contradicts another, or if there are scientific and historical difficulties in the Bible? They would rather be bees than botanists; wherever there is a flower with nectar in it, gather the nectar; where there is no nectar, pass the flower by; but do not waste time picking the blossoms for dissecting and classifying!

Here are the two extremes—and they are extremes, probably not wholly true of any Evangelical. But we all of us find that we naturally tend towards one or the other in our Christian experience. The problem is that the further we go towards one of the extremes, the harder we find it to have any sympathy with those who have moved towards the other. For this reason bitter quarrels have sprung up.

Yet in actual fact both extremes may act as a check and a spur to one another. The tendency of the first is to fossilize into dead dogmatism. The tendency of the second is to diffuse into unsubstantial air. Each is naturally afraid that if it yields one iota to the other, it will be yielding to that which it sees to be bad. Yet there is no doubt that the first may learn from the second the paramount importance of the life and the nectar, while the second may learn from the first that the house that is to be permanent must have sure foundations.

The reader who has read this far has a right to ask where the writer himself stands, so that he may make due allowance for possible bias as he reads. As a thorough-going conservative the writer has his roots with the first type, and it is from this direction that he approaches the present subject.

## I.

A welcome characteristic of present-day Christian thinking is a renewed respect for the Bible. This naturally brings to the fore again the question of its interpretation. There have been times in the history of the Church when this was a burning question. Thus in the first days of the Church Christians found themselves in conflict with Jews over the interpretation of the Old Testament. At the Reformation again Protestantism challenged the interpretation of the Bible that was held by the Church of Rome. In the last century the liberal element in the Church has challenged even that interpretation on which the Protestants agreed with Rome. Those who wish to study the different schools and methods of interpretation down the ages will find a very full treatment of the subject in Dean Farrar's Bampton Lectures of 1885, published under the title of *History of Interpretation*. The book is, of course, long since out of print, and is not easy to find, but there is a copy in Dr. Williams's Library (14, Gordon Square, W.C.1.). A much smaller book was published in 1944 by the S.P.C.K. under the title of *The Interpretation of the Bible*, this book being a series of lectures by six well-known theologians. For the Reformation period there is also Dr. C. S. Carter's book, *The Reformers and Holy Scripture*, which again unfortunately is out of print.

Dean Farrar begins with Jewish interpreters. All the early Jewish expositors were agreed that Scripture was inspired to the fullest degree. In the minds of many of them this inspiration extended to any unusual feature in the sacred text. Thus Aqiba (c. 50-132 AD) "not only explained every particle and copula, but said that there was a mystic meaning in every letter of Scripture, and in every horn and letter-flourish of every letter" (p. 74).

One can see a broad difference of interpretation between the Palestinian expositors and those of Alexandria. In Palestine all interpretation was directed towards the elaboration and elucidation of minute points of law. The result was a casuistry, sometimes good and sometimes bad. But in general the method of interpretation is one that appears to us to-day to be highly artificial and of little permanent validity. In saying this one is not accusing all the rabbis of dishonesty and hypocrisy. There are gems of high value to be found in rabbinic exegesis; but there is little doubt that our Lord was justified in denouncing their methods, and in appealing from the conclusions of casuistry to the original and foundational laws of God. In Alexandria, on the other hand, the Jews were in immediate contact with Greek philosophy, in which they found much that appealed to them. The subtleties of Palestinian exegesis were a hindrance to them, rather than a help. Accepting as they did the fullest inspiration of their Scriptures, they were forced to adopt the method of allegory in order to find a meeting-place for their own law with Greek philosophy. To quote Farrar again, "While the Rabbinic casuists were spinning cobwebs of ceremonial inferences out of the letter of the Law, allegory was used by the Hellenists for the totally different object of developing out of Moses the attenuated semblance of an alien philosophy. To the Rabbis the Pentateuch was the germ of all ritualism, to the Hellenists

it was the veil of all gnosis" (p. 131). Philo (c. 20 BC-50 AD) is the supreme example of the allegorical method. Although he professes to respect the literal sense of Scripture, "to him the Bible furnished not so much a text for criticism as a pretext for theory" (p. 139).

This allegorizing method was seized upon by the Christian Church. The Church, too, wished to make its peace with Greek philosophy, and in addition it needed to have a simple method ready to hand for interpreting the Old Testament in the light of the New. Origen, in the Alexandrian tradition, was a powerful exponent of the allegorical method, and, in spite of the suspicion with which he was regarded later, his principles of exegesis took deep root in the Church. The only school which set itself to cultivate other methods was that of Antioch, which especially under Diodore of Tarsus (c. 320-390) and Theodore of Mopsuestia (c. 350-428) set itself to discover and expound the literal sense of Scripture. But the charge of Nestorianism which overwhelmed this school effectively silenced the method of interpretation that it had followed.

Thus up to the time of the Reformation we find a traditional development of Christian interpretation largely resting upon allegory, or upon something that closely approached it. The Schoolmen adopted the idea of the fourfold sense of Scripture, literal, allegorical, anagogical, and tropological, by means of which one expression in Scripture could stand for several different things. Such a system of interpretation could be used to bolster up any ideas whatsoever, and, once the validity of the system was granted, its conclusions were impossible to disprove.

The Reformers refused to grant the validity of this fourfold sense. They were determined to go back to the plain sense of Scripture. As Calvin says in his preface to the Epistle to the Romans, "It is the first business of an interpreter to let his author say what he does say, instead of attributing to him what we think he ought to say." There could be no higher interpretation than that of allowing Scripture to speak for itself. The attitude taken up by Article VI of the Church of England is typical of the reformed position; "Holy Scripture containeth all things necessary to salvation: so that whatsoever is not read therein, nor may be proved thereby, is not to be required of any man, that it should be believed as an article of the Faith, or be thought requisite or necessary to salvation." The Protestant tradition is that Scripture, as the inspired Word of God, is to be treated as the sufficient revelation of God for man; that if it is studied seriously, it will yield up treasures; and that the same Holy Spirit who inspired it will enlighten the mind of the Christian reader, without leading him into the flights of fancy that can find anything in the world in the sacred text.

## II.

It is not proposed here to attempt a survey of methods of interpretation since the Reformation, but rather to turn to more practical issues and to see what principles are vital in seeking to interpret the Bible to-day. But the brief outline that has already been given is of value in bringing out the necessity for looking for the

plain sense of Scripture and the danger of venturing on the troubled sea of allegory.

The importance of the plain sense of Scripture sounds so obvious that we might wonder why it was ever regarded with suspicion. Yet there are two reasons that are to some extent still operative amongst us to-day. The first is the desire to bring the teaching of the Bible into harmony with the prevailing thought of the present day. This was Philo's chief reason for adopting the allegorical method. The second is the assumption that every word of Scripture is of permanent validity irrespective of the circumstances in which it was uttered.

The first of these reasons is one of which we must continually beware. There are fashions in thought that change from age to age, and the temptation always is to make the Bible conform to the prevailing fashion. This is specially foolish when one is dealing with matters of speculative philosophy. A good example is the attitude towards the after-life and towards eschatology. When it is supposedly unscientific to believe in a final irruption of God into human history, the Bible teachings about the Second Coming must be spiritualized. In deference to the same scientific outlook one must abandon a belief in the Virgin Birth and in the bodily Resurrection of Jesus Christ, and the Bible statements about the future resurrection of Christians. Whilst one may fully recognize the need for expressing Bible statements in terms that are in current use at the present-day, a true interpretation makes sure that in re-expressing the Bible statements it does not change their meaning.

The second reason demands fuller consideration. It is fatal to assume that every Scripture is of permanent validity irrespective of the circumstances in which it was given. The Bible is not a magic oracle that gives infallible answers from any verse on which we happen to put our finger. In interpreting it we must always distinguish between what is of permanent validity and what belongs to the circumstances of the time. The most obvious example of the distinction between the two is seen in the commands of the Law of Moses. Here quite clearly there are commands that are of permanent validity in themselves, as, for example, the Ten Commandments. There are other laws that were applicable to a simple peasant community settled in Palestine, but not suitable in their literal form for our highly mechanized society. There are others that are concerned with animal sacrifices and Tabernacle rituals that are completely obsolete for us. Yet, underlying each law there is a principle that is applicable for to-day. The ritual, with the warrant of the Epistle to the Hebrews, is to be interpreted as a picture type of the Work of our Lord Jesus Christ. Other laws contain principles of practical generosity, or are directed against superstitious practices, which in some other form may be as rife to-day as they were in the time of Moses. Even the law of the "eye for an eye" contains the principle of exact retribution and full damages, which must underlie all national law, even if the Christian, in obedience to the law of Christ in the Sermon on the Mount, is content not to claim the damages to which he is legally entitled, but to do positive good to the offender instead.

The same principle must guide in the interpretation of some of the

moral pronouncements of the Old Testament. It is fatal to read the Old Testament as though the speakers and actors in it were living after the time of Christ. Such passages as occur in the "imprecatory" Psalms must not be isolated from the fact that practically no revelation had been made about God's vindication of Himself in the after-life; the psalmist was as anxious as we are to see God's honour vindicated, but he had to pray for it in ignorance of something that we now know. The execution of the Canaanites must not be isolated from the Bible's own statement that the New Covenant in Christ introduced man to a power such as Israel of old never knew (Jeremiah xxxi. 31-34; Ezekiel xxxvi. 25-28; John vii. 37-39; Romans viii). What is necessary for children with limited powers may not be right for those who have experienced the powers of maturity.

One enters upon more precarious ground when one seeks to sift the temporary from the permanent in the New Testament, but it belongs to a true Christian interpretation to do this. For example, when our Lord commanded His disciples to leave all and to follow Him, or when He commanded the rich young ruler to sell all, was He giving a command that was intended to be of permanent validity? Interpreting Scripture by itself, we find that the early Church did not regard the command as binding upon all. St. Paul, in writing to the Corinthians, does not command them to sell all their property, but to practise proportional giving each week (1 Cor. xvi. 2). In the light of this we interpret Christ's command as having literal applicability to those who had to fling all away in order to live the life of itinerating evangelists during the three short years of His earthly ministry. For some to-day, who are called to a like pioneering work, the command has a literal applicability; but for others there is the underlying principle of the need to hold very lightly to the possessions of earth.

There are other instances in which the plain text of Scripture may not always be applicable. An example which provides a good illustration of the need for a balanced interpretation is the statement of St. Paul in 1 Corinthians xi. 2-16 about women being covered when they pray. Without attempting to come down on one side or the other, one can see the points with which an interpreter must deal. First he must reject the conventional interpretation which says that a woman must not even look round a Church or Cathedral without a hat or a handkerchief on her head; this Scripture has no bearing on this matter at all. In the light of modern practice one may try to find a temporary application of this Scripture to conditions at Corinth. This may be done by looking for a principle underlying St. Paul's words. Such a principle may be that of decency and decorum. An unveiled woman suggested the flouting of the rules of respectable society and of the principle of authority. If to-day there is no such suggestion when a woman does not wear a hat, then the letter of the Scripture need not apply. On the other hand the high level upon which St. Paul treats the subject, and his reference to its relation to the angels (verse 10), may show that some eternal principle is at stake even though we cannot understand what it is.

This matter of an eternal principle is important whenever there is a revelation of the character and being of God, and of the things that

concern the salvation of the soul. Here the plain text must be accepted, but not in isolation from other plain texts. Thus a balanced interpretation will accept both the texts that emphasise the sterner side of God's character and those that emphasise the gentler side. Our human minds often find it hard to hold both sides together, and therefore revelation leads us first in one direction and then in another. If we follow it only in the one direction, and refuse to accept the other pathway, our vision of God is bound to be inadequate. The doctrine of the Atonement also is a matter of eternal moment. The Cross of Jesus Christ has more branches than a tree, but its trunk is that "full, perfect, and sufficient sacrifice, oblation, and satisfaction, for the sins of the whole world." It is good to examine the branches, but not to speak slightly of the trunk.

### III.

One might continue this discussion of the plain sense for many pages. But a word must be said about the relation between the plain sense interpretation and the allegorical. If one takes the Bible as a guide here, one may say that the allegorical interpretation is additional to the plain sense, but not a substitute for it. Two standard passages should be noted.

The Epistle to the Hebrews gives a warrant for seeing pictures of the work of Christ in the ritual law. The study of typology, which is a form of allegory, has rightly endeared itself to Evangelical thought. But typology first accepts the plain sense, and then proceeds to show that one reality represents a greater reality. Thus Israel really made use of the sacrifices, and found spiritual satisfaction in them. They were current coin under the Old Covenant, or rather under the Old Covenant they were the paper money, which was recalled under the New Covenant and given back in gold. They had a value under the Old because they were to be redeemed with the gold of the Kingdom later.

The other passage is in Galatians iv. 21-31, where St. Paul gives what he calls an allegorical (verse 24) interpretation of the story of Hagar. St. Paul may be using an *argumentum ad hominem* in dealing with Jewish allegorizers, but he is not substituting an extravagant allegory for the plain sense of the Scripture. It is clear from other passages that he takes the incidents in the life of Abraham and Sarah literally. They have a validity in themselves to teach moral and spiritual truths (Romans iv. 19-22). But St. Paul's deductions here should be noted. He does not draw out of the story any truth that he does not expound elsewhere as a piece of revealed or logical teaching. In this he sets an example that we must follow. It is one of the first principles that, while a truth may be illustrated by employing an allegorical interpretation, nothing may be proved by allegory that is not clearly present elsewhere in Scripture.

Is there any example of pure allegory in Scripture, *i.e.*, where the plain sense has no significance in itself? Apart from parables and some prophetic visions, such cases are rare. The Song of Solomon is a book in which Jews and Christians have found much blessing by the use of an allegorical interpretation, and without this interpretation it

would be difficult to justify its place in the canon. The justification for treating it as allegory is that both in the Old Testament and in the New the relation between the Lord and the Church is likened to that of the bridegroom and the bride. None the less it is probable that the book is a genuine record of human love, and the non-mystical commentator has every right to discuss it as this.

Some latitude must be allowed for allegorical or picture language in interpreting the opening chapters of Genesis. Anthropomorphic language about God, and the suggestion that the seventh day still continues (since no eighth day occurs), give a clue that some symbolism is present, and that a baldly literal interpretation may not be the true one. But the use of the term "myth" of these early stories is likely to obscure rather than to help a sane interpretation, because "myth" is used nowadays in theological circles both of what is true and of what is untrue. The teaching of the Bible as a whole would suggest that the early chapters of Genesis are either literal truth, or true history presented in pictorial or allegorical form.

If, however, the teaching of the Bible is not regarded as a whole, it is possible to make these early chapters mean just what one wishes. An extreme case of this is seen in Christian Science. In her standard text book, *Science and Health, and Key to the Scriptures*, Mrs. Eddy is concerned to maintain that matter is not the creation of God, since God is pure Spirit. One turns to her exposition of Genesis i and ii to find how she can evade the evidence there. The whole story of creation is allegorized verse by verse into something quite unrecognizable. Thus when Genesis i. 7 speaks of God as making the firmament and dividing the waters, Mrs. Eddy interprets, "Spirit imparts the understanding which uplifts consciousness and leads into all truth . . . Understanding is the line of demarcation between the real and unreal" (Chapter xv). Here is an extreme example of starting with a theory and allegorizing Scripture to fit the theory which the Bible as a whole contradicts.

On this note of taking the Bible as a whole we may bring this article to a close. This is what the Protestant claims to be essential. His right of private judgment does not mean the right to decide for himself what any text shall mean, but the right prayerfully to test Scripture by Scripture in order to elucidate its meaning. He does not despise the judgment of the Christian Church in the past or in the present. In fact, a large part of Scripture can be interpreted only in the context of the Church. But he claims the right to make the Church prove its teachings by Scripture, since experience has proved that Churches may be as bigoted as individuals. An "*ipsa dixit*" is insufficient authority. Moreover, for himself he seeks to preserve the same balance and emphasis as Scripture as a whole shows. Queer ideas have arisen through the over-interpretation of a few texts. Above all he looks for the guidance of the Holy Spirit in the interpretation of Scripture, since the Holy Spirit inspired the writers in the first place. There is a sense in which he studies the Bible in the presence of the Author. This does not make him infallible, since his mind is under the influence of the effects of the Fall, and infallible interpretations are not flashed

(continued at foot of page 186.)