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A Defence of Allegorical Interpretation

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‘— to understand a proverb and an allegory’

Prov. 1:6 (JND)

‘It is . . . folly to mock things as mere dreams or fancies because we cannot see them’
Andrew Jukes

Prologue

The speaking (Heb. 11:3) whereby God framed the worlds was such that visible things are emblematic of the spiritual world; those without Scripture can understand something of God (Ps. 19 etc.). In the record, OT and NT, of God’s subsequent speakings (Heb. 1:1,2), spiritual truths are expressed in terms of man’s life and environment (Isa. 66:13; Deut. 32:11,12; 1 Cor. 15:42-44). Against this background allegorization arises. While the letter of Scripture is precious, much more so is the spiritual sense that its words enfold.

Allegory in Revelation

According to some contemporaries of Paul, ‘saying one thing and signifying something other than what is said is called allegory’.¹ Paul appeals to the Galatians (4:21-26) on the basis of the account of events in the life of Abraham, adding, ‘This contains an allegory’, i.e. tells us something beyond the historical sense of the Genesis account. This is not an isolated instance, as 1 Cor. 10:11 attests. Remarking on typological allegory, MacQueen notes that it ‘forms an important subdivision of the more general prophetic and situational allegory, which is characteristic of Old and New Testament alike.’²

Allegory in Interpretation

The NT can behold in the OT what the OT does not appear to mean,

as Matt. 2:15 and Hosea 11:1 strikingly exemplify. It was early felt that there is more to Scripture than the historical sense, often called the 'literal' sense. In this connection, Mauro pointed out that '— in Scripture the contrast is not between the spiritual and the literal, but between the spiritual and the natural; . . . the literal interpretation may call for a thing which exists in the realm of nature, or for the counterpart of that thing which exists in the realm of spiritual realities (1 Cor. 15:46).'³ So too Danielou: 'In Scripture the literal meaning is often figurative.'⁴

Some early allegorical interpretations appear fanciful to us, but not to those who perceived them. Their authors were right in feeling after a richness and depth in the Scriptures. Thus, the writer of Ps. 119 knew the words of the law, yet prayed that God would *open* his eyes that he might behold wonderful things hidden therein. The Lord interpreted to those on the Emmaus road the things concerning himself in all the Scriptures; and their hearts burned while he *opened* to them the Scriptures. C. S. Lewis realized that in principle, 'the allegorical way of reading the Psalms can claim the highest possible authority'.⁵

The fact that it was first that which is natural and afterwards that which is spiritual has wide application. The Genesis account is not primarily to impart information about 'evolution' or to date creation, but to convey spiritual truths e.g. under the figure of light and darkness (2 Cor. 4:3-6; Col. 1:12,13). How interesting then to find Hans Kung saying, about God and creation: 'Thus the Bible in the metaphors and analogies of its time answers questions that are infinitely important also for people today — in metaphors and analogies, it must be noted. *The language of the Bible is not a scientific language of facts, but a metaphorical language of images.*'⁶ (HK's own italics.)

Of crucial importance for a Christian understanding of the Scriptures is that Christ has brought us into the good of the new covenant (Luke 22:20; 2 Cor. 3:6), not of the letter but of the Spirit. R. M. Grant seems to be quoting Michel in saying, most perceptively: 'The letter is not the Old Testament as such; it is the Old Testament as a legal document, as the unconverted Israelites interpret it. By the aid of the Spirit we are able to understand the Old Testament as a spiritual book.'⁷

The old (Mosaic) covenant had ordinances of divine service, concerned with meats and drinks and diverse washings and carnal ordinances, and also festivals, new moons, sabbaths. All those rites are collectively a shadow of the reality found in Christ (Col. 2:16,17; Heb. 9:1-10). Their performance was done away through his death and resurrection (Heb. 8:13; 10:5); here is contrast between new and old. Their prescriptions are still God's words (Heb. 1:1) and are all *for our*

sakes. We have been redeemed to serve God, we are a chosen people — the Israel of God; we have a passover, a high priest, an altar, a place of refuge, a mediator, bread from heaven; we may offer sacrifices. Here is comparison between new and old.

The performing of their rites by Israelites who saw only the outward, profited them nothing (Heb. 4:2, 13:9). The reading of the prescriptions of those rites will profit us nothing unless, according to our measure (cf. Rom. 12:3), we receive them (Matt. 11:14) even in all their details as redolent of the things of God's spiritual kingdom (John 18:36; Acts 1:3); i.e. perceive them spiritually, allegorically. Those prescriptions are not merely recipes for bygone procedures of the Jews' religion; God speaks in them today, super-charging them by his Spirit with spiritual significance (cf. 2 Pet. 1:20).

The contrast and comparison is reflected in the following, attributed by White to Tyndale: 'Sacrifices and ceremonies can be no ground or foundation to build upon, yet when we have once found Christ, and his mysteries, then we may use figures, similitudes, etc., to open Christ, and the secrets of God hid in Christ, even to the quick.'⁸

Whatever was written in earlier times was written for our instruction (Rom. 15:4). Thus, the regulation about such an apparently mundane matter as 'not muzzling the mouth of the ox . . .' was not given because God cares for animals, which he does anyway, but 'no doubt' and 'altogether *for our sakes*' (Deut. 25:4; 1 Cor. 9:9,10; 1 Tim. 5:18; Jonah 4:11). Of the tabernacle, A. T. Pierson wrote: 'But of this we are sure: that there is here a wealth of meaning yet unexplored and unsuspected by even the children of God, and which only the ages to come will fully unveil and reveal.'⁹

The allegorical in interpretation is not limited to Mosaic rites. The following cogent comment relates to Melchisedec.

We have . . . a very striking illustration of the way in which the Spirit of God makes use of Scripture here. Not even the most fanciful interpreter would have got as much out of this occurrence (and I say it reverently) as the Spirit of God has got out of it. If we had taken up a Scripture, and had endeavoured to get meaning out of the names, out of the official position, out of the place where a man was king, and, more than that, out of the very order in which his personal name and his official position were given, it would have been said, You are carrying this too far; you are indulging in fanciful interpretation of Scripture. Furthermore, if we had gone on to say that Melchisedec had no genealogy mentioned, there is nothing said of his parents nor of his successors — neither his birth nor death recorded — and therefore he is a type of the Son of God, who abides forever, people would have said, 'If this is to be allowed in the interpretation of Scripture, where will it end?'

And yet that is exactly what is found here . . . It means that God's word is so perfect that you can take every jot and tittle of it, and need not be afraid, in a reverent, prayerful, dependent way (using this as an example), to go through that whole Word and seek for the treasures which you will find everywhere in it.¹⁰

J. G. Bellett described Genesis as 'a book of "allegories", as Paul speaks — divine stories written for the school of God'. It may be noted that the exercises in that school do not consist of sitting down to work out for ourselves, independent of the teacher as it were, what the Scriptures could mean. That way lie unacceptable fantasies that debase allegorization. It is as the spirit of our mind is renewed and we lean not on our own understanding that we shall have the spirituality of profit from the 'typical, symbolic, parabolic teaching' latent in the 'divine stories' of Genesis and the rest of Scripture.

According to the measure of our understanding of the new covenant, we shall realize that it inheres in the liberty wherever the Spirit is, that we are not, as some suppose, limited to only those interpretations of the OT for which there is specific NT warrant. Those instances are grapes of Eshcol (Num. 13:21-24; cf. Deut. 8:7-9, 11:11,12).

We have been blessed with all *spiritual* blessings, and the apostle prayed that we might be given the spirit of wisdom and *revelation* in the knowledge of him; the eyes of our understanding being *enlightened* (Eph. 1:17,18). The Scriptures were inspired to make wise unto salvation. Emphasis on the so-called literal sense of the Scriptures rather than their spiritual, allegoric, parabolic sense, regrettably overlooks that their primary purpose is not to convey historical information but, as illuminated by the Spirit, to disclose the Word — message — of God.

The leaders of the Jews treasured the letter of Scripture, but nevertheless failed to recognize Jesus of Nazareth as the Messiah of the OT. Around 1900, F. E. Raven remarked that 'Protestantism makes everything of the letter of Scripture, but the Spirit is what we have to depend upon.'¹¹ In our day, let us beware of becoming spiritual Jews; of handling the Scriptures 'intellectually', as one has put it. Rather let us pray that the Spirit will remove the veil of the letter, and enable us to perceive spiritual realities (cf. 2 Cor. 3:14-16).

NOTES

1. R. M. Grant, *A short history of the interpretation of the Bible*, revised edition, 1965, p.19, 20.
2. John MacQueen, *Allegory*, p.23.
3. Philip Mauro, *The hope of Israel*, Reiner Publications, 1974, p.14.

4. Jean Danielou, *Origen*, 1955, p.179.
5. C. S. Lewis, *Reflections on the Psalms*, p.102.
6. Hans Kung, *Does God exist?*, p.639.
7. *Op. cit.*, p.23, 24.
8. Frank H. White, *All of blue* (1882), p.6.
9. A. T. Pierson, *Knowing the Scriptures*, p.283.
10. S. Ridout, *Lectures on Hebrews*, p.117.
11. *Ministry by F. E. Raven*, New Series, Vol. 3, p.206.