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Biblical Hermeneutics : Some Insights from the Use of Scripture in the Fourth Gospel

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S incere efforts are on to formulate new hermeneutics in Indian situation. In this context, it is fitting to ask, what insights can we gain from 'inner biblical hermeneutic', i.e. the way the scripture itself interpreting the scripture. The interpretation of the Old Testament in the new has been an area of much interest among the biblical scholars in the recent past. The present writer has chosen the fourth gospel for the study of the use of the Old Testament for two reasons : its pluralistic context and its rootedness in the OT. We will attempt to look at the hermeneutical axioms, methods and the issues involved in John's interpretation of the scripture.

1. Hermeneutical Axioms

Hermeneutical axioms are those convictions held by a particular interpreter or his community which together make the hermeneutical matrix. Though it involves the entire theological system, two areas are more important in the hermeneutical process : the understanding of the nature of the scripture and the interpreter's (or community's) own sense of self-indentity.

1.1 THE NATURE OF THE SCRIPTURE

As Jews could not find history any longer as a revelatory stage, they looked back to earlier revelation (scripture) for evidence of their identity and direction for their life.[1] Johannine community shared this outlook though this was transformed because of the new revelatory basis in Christ.

1.1.1 *Authority.* The use of the term *graphe* for scripture, the encapsulation of all scripture into the title *nomos* ('law')

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and the use of introductory formulae ("it is written" etc.) imply the authority that John attributed to the scripute.[2] But that John did not consider the text of the scripture as an inerrent phenomenon is evident in the remarkable freedom he exercised in adapting the text to his context. Revelation was located in Christ and only secondarily in the scripture that bore witness to him. Hence, the authority of the scripture is not an ontological feature of it but is functional and Christological.

1.1.2 *Historicality*. For John, scripture is the witness to the historical revelation of God which culminated in the revelation in Jesus. Two observations are helpful. First, John does not use the scripture as it is detached from its original historical context. Secondly, he makes use of Typology which is closely tied to history. In typology, the correspondence is not between the texts but between the events that the text signified.[3]

1.1.3 *Unity*. John considers the whole scripture in unity. When he uses *graphai* in plural, the reference is to the whole Jewish scripture. The key to the unity of the scripture is Christ : all parts witness to him (cf. 5:39-40) The promise-fulfillment scheme of John also unites the OT and the revelation in Christ. If the suggestion that John uses 'scripture' for Jesus-logion also is acceptable,[4] we have a hint for the unity of the OT and the Jesus-logion which is part and parcel of the NT.

1.2 THE COMMUNITY'S SELF-IDENTITY

It is indisputable that the Fourth Gospel has a community perspective. It is a community product. Biblical interpretation in this gospel is also a community affair. There are two axioms related to the self-understanding of Johannine community.

1.2.1 *Corporate Solidarity*. 'Corporate solidarity' or 'corporate personality' has been defined as that semitic complex of thought in which there is a constant oscillation between the individual and a group- family, tribe or nation — to which he belongs.[5] Some representative figure may be said to embody the group or the group may be said to sum up the host of the individuals. For example, Isaiah 53:1 has to be understood of Israel corporately. But when John quotes it in Jn. 12 : 38, the reference is to Jesus individually. Here the fulfillment is explicated on a corporate solidarity basis.

1.2.2 *Tradition and Experience*. Any hermeneutic process takes position within the flow of some tradition. In the early christian community both the scripture and the tradition were authoritative, but not in themselves. They were not taken independently of each other. Johannine community's

dependence on Testimonia[6] (part of early christian tradition) and its use of Jewish lectionaries[7] (part of Jewish tradition) must be seen in this light. Experience of Christ was central to the existence of the community. Its coception of itself as a spirit-filled community[8] also has hermeneutical implications.

2. Hermeneutical Method

First we will isolate the exegetical categories employed by John and then make two observations with regards to his method.

2.1 EXEGETICAL CATEGORIES

Four broad exegetical categories can be distinguished in John's cospel.

2.1.1 *Targum*.[9] Targum means translation. emergence of Aramaic as the common language necessitated translation of the scripture into Aramaic. In targums, straightforward renderings were mixed with harmonistic modifications, expansionistic and homiletic paraphrases. Scripture quotations in Jn. 6:31 and 13:18, where the text does not agree with either Septuagint or the Hebrew manuscripts, may be taken as examples. We in our cross-cultural setting, must be able to give due attention to effective translations as a category of biblical interpretation.

2.1.2 *Midrash*.[10] Midrash (from Hebrew *darash*, "to search") is exposition of a passage or text. Midrash is not just concerned with the primary meaning. It starts from text but its meaning is extended and its implications drawn out with the help of every possible association of ideas. Midrash often takes the form of a running commentary. The best example for Midrash is Jn. 6:31–52 which is a running commentary on Ex. 16:4 in the Palestenian midrashic pattern.[11] We may take note here that *bhashya* is an important hermeneutical category in Indian hermaeneutics, beginning from Sankara.

2.1.3 *Pesher*. It means simply interpretation. While Midrash expands the relevance of the text, pesher explains its meaning with a one-to-one correspondence.[12] The emphasis is on the precise meaning in terms of the present : 'this' is 'that'. This pattern which is characteristically eschatological in nature is used widely in the fourth gospel to invoke the fulfillment motive. It is this pesher concern that we make use of whenever we attempt interpreting scripture in the light of the events or situation today.

2.1.4 *Typology.*[13] Typology sees a correspondence between the people and events of the past and of the future (or present). There is no attempt to assert that the original text had any forward-looking element at all. The correspondence with the past is not found within the text but in the historical event. So it must be distinguished both from predictive prophecy and from allegory. In the fourth gospel, apart from the typology employed in many of scripture quotations, typology is present in numerous allusions to OT persons and institutions.

2.2 METHODICAL OBSERVATIONS

We may make two important observations about John's hermeneutical method.

2.2.1 *Hermeneutical method is subservient to hermeneutical goal.* Jews and Christians in late antiquity agreed that a set of fundamental attitudes mattered more than method.[14] It is not the method that made christian interpretation of the scripture different from the Jewish one. Both employed similar methods but produced different results because they had different goals. Interpretation of Is. 40:3 is an example. Hebrew parallelism suggests that "in the wilderness" should go with "prepare". The Qumranites took it in the same sense for their community was in the desert and they thought that the passage referred to the founding of their community.[15] But John, alongwith other evangelists, having seen the fulfillment in John the Baptist, thought that the 'voice' must go with the 'desert'. Also we should notice that the 'desert' in the OT passage meant to be understood figuratively. Then we have here an example where both NT and Qumran use the method of 'literalization' to achieve their interpretative goals.

2.2.2 *Hermeneutical Method is Contextual and is a Product of World-View.* John did not invent any method ; he just employed the tools supplied by his context. How far can we go in adopting the methods found in the context ? The only restriction is that the method should be compatible with the attitudes and the goals. We must notice that John did not resort to proof-texting and fancy allegory though these were found in his context. Allegory did not go well with John's historical presuppositions. Moreover, John's presuppositions of correspondence in history and corporate solidarity are elements of his world view. It is this world view that enables him to use typology as a hermeneutical category. John's hermeneutical methods is a product of his world view. On the other hand, the interpreter has to be critical of the world view of his context also. For example, though John used the gnostic categories, he

distanced himself from gnosticism at the crucial point : he refused to "dissolve the history of Jesus in the acidic categories of a transcultural myth".[16]

3. Hermeneutical Issues

Using the insights from modern hermeneutical debate, we shall highlight a few of the issues involved in John's interpretation of the scripture.

3.1 THE PROBLEM OF TWO HORIZONS

Traditional hermeneutics began with the recognition that the text was conditioned by its historical context. However, this historical conditionedness is two-sided as perceived in the more recent sense of the term hermeneutics : the modern interpreter, no less than the text, stands in a given historical context and tradition. Thus there are two horizons : the horizon of the text and the horizon of the interpreter. It is the fusion of these horizons that leads to comprehension.[17]

This two-sided nature of the problem of hermeneutics was present in the New Testament interpretation of the Old also. It is by means of three categories that John and other NT writers came to terms with this hermeneutic gap : history, tradition and language. Some presupposition of history was behind the use of typology as a hermeneutical category. ". . . The history of God's people and his dealings with them is a single continuous process in which a uniform pattern may be discerned"[18] This continuous process bridges the gap between the pastness of the text and the present context of the interpreter. Secondly, it is the traditon that mediates the interpretative presuppositions to the interpreter. John finds a messianic element in Psalm 22 because he stands in a tradition which had been interpreting that Psalm with messianic connotations. Scripture did not reach John, neither does it reach us, from across the past in splendid isolation. Language is the third element. The original text which was written centuries ago in another language is brought forth to the readers in their own language. And this makes the text authentically the readers'.

3.2 THE TEXT AND ITS CONTEXT

In a stricter sense, this is a part of the basic hermeneutical problem. But this aspect deserves special attention for there is a widespread notion that the interpretation of the OT in the

NT is an ingenious twisting of the biblical texts going beyond the limits of any proper hermeneutic.[19]

There are at least two dimensions to what we call the original context of a biblical text : literary and historical. The literary context lies within the written book while the historical context lies outside. John takes into account both these dimensions. For the literary context, the quotation from Is. 54:13 at Jn. 6:45 is an example. Only Is. 54:13a is quoted but the whole surrounding text on re-creation is assumed. His concern for the historical context is best seen in his use of typological method which finds correspondence only within the historical event. At some instances, John seems to have in mind the fulfillemnt of the larger context of salvation hisory as well. All these suggest that John did not consider mere text as the Word. He saw text only in its context.

3.3 CANON WITHIN THE CANON

Did John have a canon within the canon ? Almost all the scripture quotations of John are from those blocks of the OT which have been identified as parts of the testimonia. John, alongwith other NT writers, admitted that certain parts of scripture were more amenable to Christo-centric interpretation than others.[20] John considered, as we have already noted, Jesus-logion also as scripture. It is, then, possible that this Jesus-logion functioned as a canon within canon. Christ is the norm of all norms.

Conclusion

John's hermeneutic was a hermeneutic of freedom, retrieval and suspicion : A freedom from bibliolatry to creativity ; suspicious with regard to presuppositions, a suspicion that can aid the tradition to maintain and purify its trust ; retrieval in the scripture and in the tradition that mediates it to us. In our search for new hermeneutics, we must proceed with the assurance that the NT interpretation of the OT provides us with the strong biblical basis for contextual hermeneutics.

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