

## *The Principles of Interpretation*

**Ernest F. Kevan**

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After it has been established that the Bible is the Word of God, there can be no more important subject for consideration in Biblical studies than the inquiry into the principles, laws and methods of its interpretation. To be without an understanding of these principles is to be, as it were, before an ancient chest containing treasures of rare value, but without a key with which to open it.

The surest way to an understanding of the true principles of interpretation is to give first attention to what the Scripture itself reveals.

### **I. DATA SUPPLIED BY THE NEW TESTAMENT**

It seems possible to classify the New Testament use of the Old in a fourfold way: the historical, the propositional, the homological, and the illustrational.

#### *Historical Use*

By this is meant the New Testament habit of referring to persons and events of the Old Testament in a way that takes their historicity for granted. It has been computed that the New Testament alludes to over 100 Old Testament events; among these are the creation of Adam and Eve, the murder of Abel, the Flood, the call of Abram, the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, the birth of Isaac, the choice of Jacob, the selling of Joseph into Egypt, Pharaoh's oppression, the leadership of Moses, the Exodus, the passage through the Red Sea, the 40 years in the wilderness, the giving of the

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Law, the capture of Jericho, the career of David, the building of Solomon's temple, Elijah's ministry, the experience of Jonah, and the steadfastness of Daniel.

This body of evidence bears witness to a factual and objective understanding of the Old Testament as a literally true and reliable history. The New Testament regards the Biblical events as having occurred and as having occurred in the manner described.

#### *Propositional Use*

That familiar phenomenon of the Gospels associated with recurring phrases as "that it might be fulfilled which was spoken" and "then was fulfilled that which was spoken" may be placed under this heading. Instances of these prophetic propositions are noted, for example, in connection with Bethlehem as the place of Christ's birth, Galilee as the area of his ministry, and his being numbered with the transgressors.

The propositional use of the Old Testament by the New goes much farther than this, however. Unequivocal statements of the Old Testament are employed in the New either for the support

of doctrine or as the basis of behavior. The Lord appeals to the primeval marriage state of Genesis 2 in his reply to a question about divorce; the Ten Commandments are accepted as the unchallengeable foundation of man's duty to God and his neighbor; the doctrine of the resurrection is supported by appeal to the divine statement, "I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob"; the unity of the Godhead is substantiated from the teaching of Deuteronomy; the atonement is expounded in terms of the "Suffering Servant"; the universality of sin is proved by passages from the Psalms and the Prophets; justification by faith finds its evidence in Genesis; and the demand for sanctification is based on Leviticus. Statements made in the Old Testament are thus regarded as authoritative for the proof of doctrine, and this establishes a pattern for the construction of principles of Biblical interpretation.

It would be negligent to ignore what Dr. A. G. Hebert calls

a certain antinomy running through the Christian acceptance of the Old Testament. St. Paul, writing to the Galatians, solemnly warns them that they must on no account undergo the circumcision which the Law commands; to the Romans he says that no peace with God is to be attained by the observance of the Law; in Ephesians, that the exclusion of the Gentiles from the privileges of Israel, symbolized by the Wall of Partition in the Temple, has been broken down. The readers of Hebrews are told that the day of the Temple sacrifices is over. St. John makes it clear that the Jews who reject Jesus are no true sons of Abraham. Behind all this lie the actions attributed to Jesus himself in the synoptic Gospels: He had broken the rules of Sabbath observance; he had called the Pharisees hypocrites; he had declared the laws of ritual uncleanness to be no longer binding, annulled the Mosaic permission for divorce, and had performed, as the last act of his ministry, a rite, independent of the Levitical sacri-

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fices, in which he had declared the New Covenant to be inaugurated through his blood (A. G. Hebert, *The Authority of the Old Testament*, p. 200).

This amounts to saying that in their propositional use of the Old Testament the Biblical writers are cognizant of transition from the dispensation of the Old Covenant to that of the New.

### *Homological Use*

The novelty of the notion of homology in the context of Biblical interpretation may perhaps justify an explanation. The concept of homology belongs strictly to the realms of mathematics and science and stands for "the state or quality of identity of nature, make-up, or relation." Homology differs from analogy; in analogy there is resemblance without identity of nature, but in homology the resemblance is based on identity. This concept has recently been lifted out of its normal context and used by Dr. Phythian-Adams in the service of Biblical interpretation. Expositors have customarily spoken of "analogy" and "metaphor" when confronted in the New Testament with certain expressions belonging to the Old. Phythian-Adams writes:

But surely, the truth is that St. Paul did not go to the Old Testament for appropriate figures of speech: he went to it—or rather he lived in it—because he read there a story of Redemption which was *repeating itself* in the events of the New Age of Christ. It was for

him no mere *analogy* that there was a new Israel, a new deliverance from bondage, a new Covenant, a new Inheritance: and what is true of St. Paul is equally true of the other writers of the New Testament.... How shall we describe this interpretation of the Old Testament? At the risk of seeming pedantic I would urge that we need a special term. To speak of "analogy" and "metaphor" in this connection is not merely inadequate, it misses the mark at which the writers were aiming. The relation which they perceived between the old and the new Dispensation was, in fact, wholly unique and cannot be indicated in quite ordinary language. But there is another term, less common yet not entirely unfamiliar, which may help us, namely, "homology." By "homology" we mean that there is between two things not a mere resemblance but a real and vital—in this case, an "economic"—correspondence: and this seems to be precisely what the writers of the New Testament expound (W. J. Phythian-Adams, *The Way of At-one-ment*, pp. 10 f.).

Phythian-Adams is not strictly the pioneer in the use of this term, for Dr. F. W. Farrar employed it earlier in his account of Theodore, who "believed that the relation of the Old to the New Testament lay mainly in the homology of facts due to a sort of pre-established harmony" (F. W. Farrar, *The History of Interpretation*, p. 218).

Phythian-Adams recognizes that the time-honored expression for this fundamental unity between the Old Testament and the New is, of course,

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the word "type" or "typical," but the ambiguity attaching to this term, and the abuse of the idea in illegitimate directions make it desirable to find another. For this reason Phythian-Adams "baptizes" homology, employing it to express the identity and correspondence which exist between things under the Old Covenant and things under the New. The beginnings of homology can be seen in Jeremiah's prophecies of a second "exodus" and a "new covenant," but, says Hebert, "it is only in the New Testament that 'homology' comes fully into its own, and the thought is clearly worked out that the pattern of God's working, under two dispensations, is one and the same" (*op. cit.*, p. 219).

Representative homologies include such features as the following: "the last Adam," "Abraham's seed," the "Israel of God," the "great high priest," "Christ our Passover," "sacrifice," "my blood of the new covenant," "redemption," and "Mount Zion... the heavenly Jerusalem." The entire range of material relating to the Messianic hope is also of this same homological kind, as also the imagery of the Apocalypse.

### ***Illustrational Use***

Indisputably the New Testament employs historical material for illustrating truth and for enforcing moral lessons. Examples are found in the reference to David's eating of the shewbread, Jonah and the great fish, the Flood, Elijah sent to Zarephath, the serpent of brass, the patience of Job, and Elijah's prayer for rain.

Illustrational use of the Old Testament is not confined to persons or events but is found in the quotation of sayings. For example, when the Apostle in I Corinthians 9:9 cites the Old Testament injunction, "Thou shalt not muzzle the mouth of the ox that treadeth out the corn," in connection with his demand for the adequate support of the ministry, he must not be understood as implying that the passage from Deuteronomy was written to *teach* that the ministry must be adequately remunerated, but only that the humanitarian treatment of animals

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provides an excellent illustration of the greater importance of caring for the servants of God. It is in keeping with the "much more" argument of Christ in Matthew 6:30.

The border line between the typical and the illustrational is difficult to draw. It is possible that some Old Testament persons and events have been wrongly interpreted as types when they were intended to be understood as no more than illustrations. In the foregoing paragraph, for example, the allusion to Jonah has been classified as an illustration, though some expositors speak of Jonah's entombment in the fish as a "type" of Christ's three days within the grave. The distinguishing characteristics of types, and the question whether they merge into homologies on the one side or illustrations on the other, require an examination of each separate instance, but the presence of types in the Scripture is undeniable.

Another form of the New Testament's illustrative use of the Old is

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allegory, found in such places as Galatians 4:22-31 and Hebrews 7:1-3. In Galatians 4:24 Paul says he is speaking "with another meaning" (Greek) and uses a historical event of the Old Testament as an analogy of things in the New. The literal sense is not denied or destroyed but itself forms the basis of the spiritual realities which Paul seeks to illustrate. Again, the reference to Melchizedek being "without father, without mother, without descent, having neither beginning of days, nor end of life" is an allusion, not to a physical fact about Melchizedek, but to the way he appears on the page of Scripture. This designed absence of reference to parentage and birth—a matter of such importance in the line of the Aaronic priesthood—is taken as illustrative of the eternity of the person of Christ.

## II. SURVEY OF INADEQUATE METHODS

During the long years of Biblical study many methods of exposition of Scripture have been evolved. No one of them seems adequate, however, to the demands of Scripture itself. Farrar finds a testimony to the grandeur of Scripture in that it remains undiscredited by the dangerous uses to which it has been perverted (*op. cit.*, p. ix). These inadequate methods may be surveyed as follows.

### *Superstitious*

This is perhaps a question-begging title for this group of methods, but few scholars today would challenge the correctness of the description. Its beginnings are found in the interpretative principles of Palestinian Jews who sought for "all possible hidden meanings" (Oesterley and Box), and which allowed oral tradition so to dominate the written word that arbitrary interpretations were forced upon Scripture. The Cabbalists of the twelfth century went to the length of assuming that the Massoretic text with its verse enumeration, its vowel-points and its accents was divinely given to Moses, and that the "numbers of the letters, every single letter, the transposition, the substitution, had a special, even a supernatural power" (Louis Berkhof, *Principles of Biblical Interpretation*, p. 17). Jewish exegetical methods degenerated into "a mere art of leading astray" (Farrar, *op. cit.*, p. 505). Certain modern methods approximate to this superstitious approach, such as those of Ivan Panin and the Concordant Version.

Criticism need go no farther than to point out, first, that this type of interpretation proceeds on false views of inspiration and, indeed, of revelation; and second, that it has no support in Scripture itself.

### *Allegorical*

This exceedingly old device still maintains an amazing hold upon certain minds in the present day. From the philosophical treatment of the Greek myths it passed into Biblical interpretation through Philo. Clement of

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Alexandria propounded the theory of a threefold sense of Scripture—mystic, moral, prophetic (or fourfold, by adding the literal sense). His successor Origen projected an analogy from the alleged tripartite nature of man and spoke of the bodily sense (grammatical), the psychic sense (moral) and the spiritual sense (mystical). All passages, he held, carry a mystical sense, but not all bear a literal sense; in many instances, therefore, the apparently literal had to be spiritualized. Origen appealed to New Testament precedent for the allegorical method, particularly to Galatians 4:21-31, I Corinthians 10:1-4 and Hebrews 7:1-3. In point of fact, none of these passages is strictly allegorical in method even though, as Paul suggests in Galatians, they are allegorical in appearance; as already observed, they are purely illustrational. Further, in none of these examples is allegory employed in proof of doctrine, nor does the Apostle assert that the relevant Old Testament passage teaches the truth he is expounding. The "allegorical" use, then, is either an argument *ad hominem*, as Hebert suggests (*op. cit.*, p. 209) or it is purely illustrational. No warrant exists, therefore, for the claim that the allegorical method finds support in Scripture (cf. J. B. Lightfoot, *Commentary on Galatians*, pp. 199 f.).

A closer definition of allegory, and its comparison with "homology" or "type," is now appropriate. The Greek verb employed by Paul in Galatians 4:24 is *allēgoreō* and means "to speak so as to imply other than what is said." *Allēgorein*, then, merely implies that in addition to the plain grammatical meaning of the words, something more is to be perceived. The term is capable of covering all forms of metaphor, parable or illustration and supremely, so far as Scripture is concerned, homology or type. The presence of the word *allēgoroumena* in Paul's writings does not of itself determine the nature of the *allēgoria* used; the form could possibly be any one of the above (cf. J. B. Lightfoot, *ibid.*, p. 180). In its stricter use, however, an allegory is a story composed for the purpose of instruction and is thus clearly to be distinguished from the illustrational use of an event of history. *The Pilgrim's Progress* is an undisguised example of allegory in this strict sense: it is a story composed for the sake of its moral and one in which the descriptions and incidents are but accessories.

Clement and Origen and their long line of imitators employed the allegorical principle in its stricter sense and not after the Pauline manner. They were ready to throw away the literal sense of a passage if they thought it unacceptable. To the charge that they were throwing away the Word of God, their reply doubtless would have been that they were doing nothing of the kind; professedly they were rejecting only the outer shell which surrounded the truth. They insisted that there are many meanings to a passage, and that the literal meaning is the least valuable, and possibly not a meaning at all. Indeed, Origen held that the difficulties in the literal sense were interposed specially by God as a kind of wire across the interpreter's path, causing him to stumble and to look for some secret meaning (*De princ.* IV, ii. 7-9).

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Sheer allegorism of the Alexandrian kind introduces nothing but chaos into speech and destroys all objectivity of truth: it is "fantasy unlimited." Historically it led to the wildest forms of interpretation and became an arbitrary instrument for making the Old Testament say whatever the expositor wished; it brought serious study to a standstill and awarded the prizes to the most ingenious. It is small wonder, therefore, that this arbitrary handling of Scripture provoked a reaction. Alexandria was confronted by Antioch, the center from which healthier methods of exegesis began to emerge under the guidance of men like Theodore and John Chrysostom. Theodore studied passages as a whole and not as "an isolated congeries of separate texts": his procedure was first to consider the sequence of the thought, and then to examine the phraseology and the separate clauses. The impulses given at Antioch were a long while gaining ascendancy; indeed, it would be true to say that even yet they have not fully won the day. The delightful art of allegorization dies hard, and many allegedly evangelical expositors in the present day prefer glamorously to display their inventive powers rather than patiently to plod the unspectacular paths of conscientious work on the Biblical text.

### ***Dogmatic***

Those who immediately followed the Reformation retained the sound principle of the interpretation of Scripture by Scripture. While they refused, however, to submit exegesis to the domination of ecclesiastical tradition as formulated by councils and popes, they nonetheless "*were in danger of leading it into bondage to the confessional standards of the Church.... Exegesis became the hand-maid of dogmatics, and degenerated into a mere search for proof-texts*" (Berkhof, *op. cit.*, pp. 28 f.). The domination of interpretation by dogmatics is sometimes called the interpretation of Scripture according to "the analogy of faith." This term is quite incorrectly lifted from Romans 12:6 where, of course, the reference is to the subjective aspect of faith. The phrase came to be employed, however, for the necessity of conforming Scripture to the dogmatic formulations of the Church. It is certainly wise on the part of the inexperienced expositor to check his findings by reference to the common Christian faith, and he may rectify many idiosyncrasies of his interpretations in this manner. But this is something quite other than forcing all passages of Scripture to echo the same dogmatic truth.

### ***Rationalistic***

The rationalistic method of interpretation persists whenever the authority of human reason is exaggerated. Its normal procedure is to deny what cannot be speculatively understood nor proved and to reject the supernatural and miraculous as legendary accretion. All endeavors to produce a non-supernatural Gospel have failed, however; the liberal or rationalistic method

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stands condemned by its own impotence to account for the Scriptures. The main rationalistic argument is that its human historical origin requires also that the Bible be historically conditioned. From this, much of the content of the Bible is inferred to be ephemeral in value and mixed with error. The Bible is assigned the inspiration of religious genius, representing man's highest thoughts about God; it is nevertheless regarded as a human production to be explained and interpreted by naturalistic principles. Dr. John Lowe remarks, "The humanistic and rationalistic tendencies of many of the critics became a fixed bias which distorted

interpretation. What should have been a provisional working hypothesis, a legitimate reluctance to admit the supernatural so long as a natural explanation was possible, became an unquestioned axiom" (*The Interpretation of the Bible*, edited by C. W. Dugmore, Chapter VI, "The Recovery of the Theological Interpretation of the Bible," p. 113). This is undoubtedly the indictment that must be brought against such prejudiced criticism.

### ***Mythological***

The allegorical method has reappeared in recent days in the guise of Dr. Rudolf Bultmann's plea for the "demythologization" of Scripture. Bultmann argues that the New Testament is written in "myths," that is to say, in existential allegories of the thought and experience of those whose lives had been touched by the vitalizing and redeeming power of Jesus, but whose mental images were restricted to the New Testament world. This, says Bultmann, accounts not only for the unscientific language offensive to the modern man, but for the theological concepts which trouble modern readers of the New Testament. "The thesis of Bultmann is that something has to be done with what he calls the mythology of the New Testament. As long as this is taken at its face value as literally true, Christianity remains meaningless to modern man. It is useless to summon him to decide for or against Christ because an undemythologised Christianity is simply not a live option for him" (Ian Henderson, *Myth in the New Testament*, p. 9).

Bultmann seeks to differentiate his position from the rationalistic criticism of the Bible prevalent at the end of the nineteenth century. Whereas liberalism eliminated the "mythological" (the supernatural) and ignored the fact of Christianity as an event, he reasserts both myth and event, simultaneously interpreting them in his special way. He contends rightly, of course, that what Christ has done is more than something historical (*historisch*): it is of experiential and religious significance (*eschatologisch* or *geschichtlich*). That this is so can be clearly seen from the fact that Christians refer to the death of Christ not only as an event which occurred under Pontius Pilate but also as the sacrifice of "the Lamb of God which taketh away the sin of the world." To affirm the latter, moreover, contends Bultmann, is to speak mythologically: it is a theological allegory to convey the idea of what Christ's saving power means to the Christian. It becomes the task of the interpreter, on this

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approach, to strip the gospel of this mythological form of speech and to translate it into the forms of experience of Christ which are familiar to a man of the present day.

This demythologization of the Scripture seems little different from the "de-allegorization" of earlier generations and it must be rejected for the same reasons. What Bultmann is pleased to call "myth" is in many instances more appropriately understood in terms of homology, but it is in any case the historical and human medium through which God has chosen to speak to man. What lies behind the forms of Christian theology is not existential thinking, but divine action in historical events bearing an eschatological significance.

## **III. FOUNDATIONAL PRINCIPLES**

Dr. Farrar does not weary of reminding his readers of his opinion that the interpreter's view of the nature of the Bible and its inspiration largely determined the methods of interpretation. This opinion is on the whole true, but it is not to be applied in the one and only direction that

Farrar delights to apply it in his antagonism to the doctrine of verbal inspiration. The Cabbalists and other similar Jewish interpreters produced their systems as a result of their superstitious view of the nature of Scripture. The Alexandrian and their successors interpreted Scripture in accordance with their view that Scripture cannot be held to contain anything inharmonious with their view of God and of spiritual reality. The Dogmatists and the Rationalists likewise came to Scripture with their own presuppositions. It is not, therefore, a peculiarity of conservative evangelical theologians that they also are guided in their view of the Bible by what they think of it. Presuppositions there must be, but the difference between the presuppositions of conservative theology and the presuppositions of the other groups is that those of the former are provided by the Scripture itself whereas those of the other groups are not.

The presupposition of conservative theology is that the Bible demands an approach in reverence and faith. It claims to be the Word of God and must be examined and interpreted in that light. This does not carry with it any preconceived notions of what it ought to contain, but merely anticipates that the book will be studied for what it has to say. This respectful attitude will therefore not require a resort to allegory to remove the "inharmonious" or to invent the fanciful in an eisegetical manner; nor will it require that the supernatural be eliminated, as attempted by rationalism, nor the objective factor destroyed, as by neo-orthodoxy.

The basic principle of Biblical interpretation which emerges from this point of view is that the sense of Scripture is to be found in the grammatical meaning of the words. To respect the grammatical sense is the fundamental rule in the study of all books, and the Bible, though rightly revered as "the Book of books," is nevertheless still a book. It is no magical object left

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mysteriously lying in man's path and requiring occult methods for extorting its powers. Every word is therefore to be accepted in its normal meaning and in the context of the style of writing in which it appears. Law, history, poetry and prophecy, each has its own literary style, and the interpreter will not be unmindful of these characteristics when endeavoring to reach an understanding of any given passage.

Legal and documentary material is necessarily found in the form of plain prose, but common speech is enlivened by metaphor, simile and parable to a degree far greater than is generally realized. The prophetic writings of the Bible are full of such figures of speech; so also are its poetical and apocalyptic portions. The presence of metaphor and symbol must be recognized, but this does not require the abandonment of the principle of obedience to grammatical sense. The words must still be taken in their grammatical sense, though that sense will vary as the style of the writing departs from prose and conforms to one or other of the modes of figurative speech. This recognition of metaphorical style is not to be thought of as a return to allegorization, nor is it a "spiritualizing" of the passage. When a writer employs metaphor he is to be understood metaphorically and his metaphorical meaning is his literal meaning: that is to say, it is the truth he wishes to convey. The term "literal" stands strictly as the opposite of "figurative," but in modern speech it often means "real," and it is used in this way by those who want to be sure that they know what the writer really and originally meant. In this sense a metaphorical saying is "literally" true. To avoid the ambiguity in this word "literal" and at the same time to find an expression to denote an idea which is nonmetaphorical, it might be useful to return the word to what might conceivably have been its first shape and spell it



"literal" or "letteralistic." Hebert has recourse to the word "literalistic" (*op. cit.*, p. 271) in the endeavor to remove the ambiguity. Thus a metaphorical statement is "literally" true but cannot be "literalistically" true. The "literal" meaning, then, is what the particular writer intended, and although he used metaphor, no one familiar with the language in which he expressed himself could reasonably misunderstand him.

The bearing of all this on Biblical interpretation must now be clear. When it is affirmed that the Bible is literally true, it is not implied that it contains no metaphorical elements, but merely that what was said metaphorically must be understood to be its real meaning. The question is occasionally asked whether it is right to believe in the literal fulfillment of prophecy. The answer, of course, is affirmative, but that affirmative answer does not require that the fulfillment shall be "letteralistic."

To have discovered the grammatical sense of a passage is by no means to have exhausted it, for the grammatically understood sentence must be interpreted theologically. In seeking the theological sense of a passage, it is important to recognize the historical principle in revelation. Earlier methods of exegetical study seem occasionally to have neglected this feature of histori-

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cal development, and to have been held down by a static conception. But the Bible cannot be treated as a mere "word-book," "as a compendium of homogeneous doctrines, as 'an even plane of proof texts without proportion, or emphasis, or light, or shade'" (Farrar, *op. cit.*, p. x). The most elementary application of the historical principle requires the interpreter to transpose himself to the time and place of the author, and this can be achieved only by historical study. This history, however, is no mere ordinary history. Rather, it is sacred history, made by the movements of the self-revealing God, known in earlier times through the laws and institutions of worship he gave to the chosen nation of Israel and subsequently manifested in the person and work of the Lord Jesus Christ. The former is sometimes called the Old Dispensation and the latter is called the New Dispensation.

The word "dispensation" raises in the minds of some readers the disputations associated with the "dispensationalist" viewpoint so-called. But "dispensationalists" have no monopoly of the term and it has a connotation of its own independent of any particular school of thought. Strictly taken, of course, the word does not refer to a period of time, but rather to a manner of working; it points to the sovereign way in which God has been pleased to "dispense" his grace to his people. *A passage of Scripture has theological meaning according to its dispensational place*; that is to say, its true significance as part of the revelation of God is to be discovered by paying heed to its position in the unfolding of God's progressive self-revelation.

There is deep harmony and unity between the Old and the New Testaments; though written in different tongues they speak a common theological language. They speak the same truths, but what was in outline in the one is fully-painted in the other; what was shadow in the former is substance in the latter; what was typified in the Old is realized in the New. The unifying principle of interpretation is the homological; that is to say, the clearly discernible prearrangement of things in the one dispensation "corresponds" to things in the other. It is on the principle of homology that the entire Bible may be said to be a Christian book.

The homological principle which binds the meaning of the two dispensations points the way to the theological significance which lies within. This theological significance is sometimes called the "mystical" sense, but it is not for one moment to be thought of as a "second" sense not based on the literal meaning of the words. Where a mystical sense is found, writes Berkhof, it "does not constitute a second, but the *real sense* of the Word of God" (*op. cit.*, p. 140).

The crux of the problem raised by the allegorical method is whether secret and independent senses of Scripture exist, as it were, in their own right—or whether there is but one sense only, from which derivative senses may be inferred. Only the second of these alternatives can meet the demands of the facts. Scripture is not *multiplex*, but *simplex*; and this unity of meaning resides in the grammatical sense. This grammatical or literal meaning forms

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the basis of derivative meanings. and in relation to these subsequent interpretations the grammatical and literal must be regarded as primary while the others are secondary. The School of Antioch, and such teachers as Augustine, Luther and Calvin have always insisted that the theological sense is found only in the literal.

That Scripture contains inner and deeper meanings must not be denied; for the Bible is no ordinary book and has the profundities of the mind of God in it. While, therefore, allegorization in the strict sense must be repudiated, the search for an inner significance of a homological or typical kind must be held to be part of the legitimate study of the Bible.

On the importance of the principle of mystical interpretation Dr. Darwell Stone writes, "This interpretation is closely bound up with the permanent value of the Old Testament. If the Old Testament is to fulfill its purpose as 'written for our admonition' (I. Cor. 10.11), something much more than its merely literal and historical meaning is needed" (*A New Commentary on Holy Scripture*, article on "The Mystical Interpretation of the Old Testament," p. 695). "Christ in all the Scriptures" may perhaps be a slogan which some expositors have abused, but its essential truth is verified in the words of Christ (John 5:46). The devout and spiritually-minded reader of the Bible will find more in it than the bare literal sense: he will discern the deeper truth of timeless applicability which lies within the meaning originally intended by the author as he addressed his contemporaries. The reverent reader will not ignore or discredit the literal and historical meaning, but neither will he fail to search for the eternal truth that it enshrines.

### ***A Practical Rule for Interpretation of Prophecy***

Prophecy had to be spoken within the framework of the present and the past; that is to say, in the terms of the old dispensation. This determines its outward material forms. In all their statements about the kingdom of God, even when uttering the most spiritual and glorious truths regarding it, the vocabulary which the prophets employ is always that of the kingdom of God in the forms in which they knew it in their own day. Interpretation must first discover these "dispensational forms," namely, the historical and circumstantial factors of the prophecy, and then, and only then, can it make the necessary inferences. Putting this succinctly, the rule is that a passage must be examined for its dispensational place.

The prophetic pronouncements against Assyria are a good illustration of this principle. Says Dr. Davidson:

Certainly the prophet, so far as his own mind was concerned, did not use the term "Assyrian" merely as a symbolical name for the foe of the Church. He meant the Assyrian—who, no doubt, was the foe of the Church.... It is safer to say, not that Assyria is a symbol or type of all enemies of God's kingdom, but that the truth expressed by the prophet in regard to Assyria is, of course, not limited to

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Assyria, but may be applied to all foes of the people of God. It is a truth which may be generalized.... This way of stating the case conserves the literal sense of the prophet's words, and allows us to perceive how he thought and spoke, as one would naturally do in the circumstances in which he was placed (A. B. Davidson, *Old Testament Prophecy*, pp. 187 f.).

With regard to a prophecy uttered with reference to Old Testament conditions and peoples, but as yet unfulfilled, Davidson wisely says: "The true way to regard prophecy is to accept it literally as the meaning of the prophet—the only meaning which in his time he could have—but to say, as to fulfillment, that the form of the kingdom of God is now altered, and altered finally, never to return to its old form; and so fulfillment will not take place in the form of the prediction, but in an altered form; but still the truth of the prophecy will, no doubt, be realized" (*ibid.*, p. 169). In this way the fulfillment of what the prophet spoke may greatly transcend what he knew.

The valuable and important principle to be learned from this is that a prophecy undergoes transmutation when it passes from one dispensation to another. The understanding of this "transmutation" must be guided by New Testament principles. The light of later and clear revelation is to be brought to bear on the earlier or the more obscure, and Old Testament descriptions of the Day of the Lord and its issues are subject to modification by fuller revelations given to subsequent generations. "Such modifications," says Dr. Beasley-Murray, "are not cancellations of the prophetic word but amplifications, glimpses of broader streams of grace than the narrower rivulets of former days" (G. R. Beasley-Murray, *The Evangelical Quarterly*, July 1948).

Obedience to this rule will yield the following working method.

- (1) If the prophet's words apply only to the Old Testament dispensation, and are to be fulfilled in it, they will, no doubt, be fulfilled literally in terms of the Old Testament dispensation.
- (2) If the prophecies refer to things to be realized only in the New Testament dispensation, then it will be the interpreter's duty to strip from them the Old Testament form, which arose from the dispensation and time when the prophet lived, and look for their fulfillment in a way corresponding to the spirit of the New Testament dispensation and the altered conditions of the world.
- (3) If a great general principle be expressed, capable of several fulfillments, that fulfillment which took place in Old Testament times will be sought in terms of Old Testament economy,

Ernest F. Kevan, "The Principles of Interpretation," Carl F.H. Henry, ed., *Revelation and the Bible. Contemporary Evangelical Thought*. Grand Rapids: Baker, 1958 / London: The Tyndale Press, 1959. pp.285-298.

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and that which either has taken place or will take place in New Testament times will be understood in accordance with the spirit and principles of Christianity (cf. Davidson, *op. cit.*, p. 192).

All this means that it is the interpreter's task to distinguish between what is of permanent validity and what belongs to a stipulated period. "It is fatal," says J. Stafford Wright, "to assume that every Scripture is of permanent

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validity irrespective of the circumstances in which it was given." The Levitical prescriptions are an example of this.

Prophecy is governed by the law of organic fulfillment. Fulfillment is real: that is to say, what the prophets forecast will come to pass. There is a genuine correspondence between prophecy and the fulfillment, though it will not necessarily be "literalistic" in the sense of a letter-by-letter mechanical correspondence of form in both prediction and fulfillment. The fulfillment of the acorn is the oak, and the fulfillment of the apple blossom is the apple. Thus, so long as the reality of the fulfillment is not abandoned, it might be safe to affirm that the best word for the true interpretative rule is "idealistic"; that is to say, it is the embodied "idea" which lives on in the fulfillment, after the "form" has been shed like a husk. The "idea" is latent in the "form," and it is the "idea" which is imperishable. The formula yielded by these considerations can be stated thus: when an Old Testament prophecy passes into the New Testament its *form* is transcended, and its substance is transmuted.

The Bible is the world's greatest book. It expresses the thoughts and purposes of God as he has chosen to reveal them stage by stage to the believing man. The interpreter's prayer must ever be for a mental capacity big enough to span the whole, lest he fail to see the wood for the trees. He needs a mind alert to the modes of divine expression and a heart open to the spiritual purposes which God has disclosed.

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