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Interpreting Scripture (Part 1)

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What is involved in understanding a passage from the Bible?

In one sense, understanding is a quite straightforward task, one that we are successfully fulfilling all the time – reading newspapers or novels, watching plays or advertisements, listening to confidences or weather forecasts or sermons or jokes. At the same time it is a task which periodically catches us out – we can't see the point of the novel or the play, we mishear the confidence and hurt the one who shared it. Further, beneath that recurrent experience of failure to understand lies something of a mystery: what is this thing called understanding, anyway? What makes it possible, what encourages it, what hinders it, what prevents it? How is it that communication takes place?

Understanding Scripture is a particular instance of the overall task of understanding. It, too, is in one sense a straightforward enterprise which quite ordinary people accomplish as effortlessly as they understand newspapers, television, or each other. It, too, however, periodically catches them out (partly because of the cultural differences that separate most modern readers from the Bible): they make little sense of ritual instructions in Leviticus or visionary material in Revelation, they are unsure (or too sure) what we are supposed to learn from stories in the gospels or Acts, or they read Genesis 1–3 as more parabolic (or more historical) than it actually is. It, too, raises questions of baffling depth: what do we mean by understanding Scripture, anyway? What makes it possible, what encourages it, what hinders it, what prevents it? How can I hear what this human author was saying in God's name to his hearers? How can I hear what God wants to say to me through Scripture?

Another question is raised by the element of mystery about the task of interpretation which we are reminded of when we have difficulty in understanding a text, or when an interpretation which is compelling to us is quite unconvincing to someone else. Who knows whether we miss whole aspects of the meaning of particular texts, or fundamentally misconstrue them, even when we do not feel uncertain about their meaning or do not find our understanding contradicted by someone else? Texts, after all, cannot answer back ('No, I didn't mean that!') in the way that people can. If we feel we have grounds for being confident about the meaning of Scripture, we can obey and preach that meaning with confidence; but we cannot at the same time be open to being coaxed towards some other understanding of it. Openness to

new understanding demands the willingness to yield old convictions.

The task of understanding can rightly be considered in the abstract, but discussion of it then becomes rather rarified. Here I propose to forego discussing the task in its 'neat' or theoretical form, and to concentrate on particular instances of it – on what is involved in understanding specific types of material in Scripture. For understanding is a highly multiplex skill or art (understanding *Hamlet*, understanding the football results, understanding an atlas, understanding my wife . . .!); ultimately a different approach is required for each form of the task. The varying objects of understanding with which Scripture presents us similarly require varying approaches. Further, as it happens, many of the different insights that have emerged from the study of interpretation at the rarified, abstract level over recent decades come into sharper focus and more direct relevance when applied to specific kinds of material.

To be comprehensive would involve us in examining one-by-one every scriptural genre – ultimately every scriptural text; but that would be to sacrifice ourselves to the concrete as fatally as we might otherwise do to the abstract. I propose instead to consider three broad scriptural genres, narrative texts, instruction texts, and prayer texts, which between them raise most of the issues we need to be concerned with. It may be no coincidence that they constitute examples of the three main ways of speaking that appear in Scripture: in instruction texts such as laws or prophetic oracles God himself addresses people, in narrative texts people address each other, in prayer texts people address God. They also constitute genres from the main divisions of Old and New Testaments (Torah, Prophets, and Writings, or Historical books, Poetic books, and Prophetic books; Gospels and Epistles). They embody three forms of language, the discursive, the imaginative, and the existential.

With a little persuasion, they can also be harnessed to illustrate other diversities of approach to interpretation. For instance, texts may offer confrontation, reassurance, or response. Their meaning may be located *within* the text (in the inherent form and interrelationships of the various elements in the text itself), *beneath* the text (in the common human experiences, feelings, and convictions that it concretely symbolizes and expresses), *behind* the text (in the aims and intentions of its author or the life-setting of its tradition), or *in front of* the text (in the possible mode of being in the world which it sets before us). Interpreters may take one of several foci for their work: perhaps the world out there, the work's universe, the objective truth as the work conceives it; perhaps the needs of the audience to which it was addressed and the effect it had on them; perhaps the personal feelings and experience of the author, to which the work gives expression; perhaps the inner dynamic of the work itself as a world of its own. They may regard texts as windows (onto another world), as mirrors

(reflecting back insight on the interpreter's world), or as portraits (with a world of their own).¹

Different genres cause different questions about interpretation to surface; I doubt whether any one philosophy of interpretation opens up all secrets. It is unwise to treat all texts as fundamentally expressive of an understanding of human existence (as Bultmann does), though some are. It is unwise to treat all texts as primarily didactic, concerned to 'teach' something (an assumption for which Barr faults fundamentalists). It is unwise to treat all texts as 'story and poem'.² Like literary criticism, biblical interpretation needs to cultivate an eclectic, 'open methodology'.³ Indeed, such a methodology will then recognize that the genres do overlap in their inner nature; the questions about interpretation consequently also overlap. A prayer text is also an instruction text; a narrative text reflects the experience of God and response to God that are more the overt concern of a prayer text. What a narrative tells a story about, an instruction text expresses as a theology or an ethic and a prayer text responds to in worship, commitment, and plea. So I make such distinctions in the sections that follow in order to let the issues emerge as sharply as possible; the distinctions themselves can then be allowed to become fuzzy in order for the insights to be applied across any artificial divides.

I Instruction Texts

By instruction texts I mean material that overtly offers people direct teaching on belief and behaviour; it is instanced by the laws, the prophets, Proverbs, the words of Jesus, and the epistles. It is not with such material that Old or New Testaments actually begin; Genesis and Matthew are narrative texts. But it is convenient to consider instruction texts first.

The least controversial shibboleth of biblical interpretation for a century has been the conviction that any passage of Scripture should be understood against its historical background. Many instruction texts in Scripture offer some justification for that belief in that they themselves draw attention to their historical context. Most prophetic books begin by telling us something about the author's background and the period to which his message related, as if to say 'You need to see the oracles that follow as the work of this prophet in this context'. The reason for this is clear as we go on to read the prophets. Their persons, lives, and personalities commonly enter into their message or embody it in some way; the way they express themselves and the kind of emphases they bring reflect *their* individuality. It is important to see Amos as a Judaeon prophesying in Jerusalem, to see that Isaiah's name ('Yahweh is salvation') embodies the theme that is taken up by his message and that Hosea's marital experience shapes his interpretation of Yahweh's relationship with Israel.

In a parallel way, an epistle characteristically begins by identifying its writer and its recipients; these introductions, too, often indicate key aspects to the epistle's interpretation. Paul's direct apostleship (Gal. 1:1) is of key importance in Galatians, as is his own person in Philipians of 2 Corinthians; John's sharing on Patmos his brothers' experience of tribulation is of key importance in Revelation.

The historical context often alluded to by the introductions to prophetic books or epistles can be illuminated from sources inside and outside the canon. Inside the canon, Kings or Acts provides us with an account of the reigns referred to by the prophets, or of Paul's visits to churches from where and to which he wrote his letters. Elsewhere, ancient near eastern sources offer us information on the international (and sometimes the national) context of the prophets, or sources from the Roman Empire illuminate the background of the epistles. Nevertheless, neither of these sources is as helpful as one might expect. Kings and Acts have interests of their own which shape their presentation of Israelite and early Christian history. Often they do not give us the kind of background information that we might hope for. Extra-canonical sources, for their part, rarely clarify the content of the biblical documents in any direct way, and often an interest in archaeology and near eastern background constitutes a diversion from seeking to interpret texts themselves.⁴

In fact the books themselves are our major resource for a knowledge of the situation which the prophets or the epistles address, of the question which they are concerned to answer. So one of the interpreter's first tasks in studying Amos or 1 Corinthians is to read through the book with this interest in mind: what were the various aspects of the needs, circumstances, beliefs, or lives of the readers which the writer needed to address? Even when you have understood clearly the words that a person uses, you have not understood what he means until you know 'what the question was (a question in his own mind, and presumed by him to be in yours) to which the thing he has said or written was meant as an answer.'⁵

The fact that we learn most about an instruction text's historical context from the contents of the book itself perhaps explains the presence in Scripture of some exceptions to the generalization that most of the prophets and the epistles begin by telling us about their authors and background. A book such as Joel leaves us uninformed on its date; a document such as Hebrews tells us nothing of its authorship. But the contents of these works make clear what were the aims of their writers in relation to the needs they perceived. Biblical scholarship has been centrally concerned with establishing the nature of the actual historical process whereby Israelite and early Christian religion developed, and for this purpose to locate each of the biblical documents chronologically is of key importance. Whether we date Joel in the ninth, fifth, or third centuries (three favoured possibilities)

affects our understanding of this development. But it makes no difference to the meaning of the work itself. What matters is what *kind* of context the document was addressing, and the nature of that the document itself makes clear enough. It is this that decided what form of continuity and discontinuity the prophet had to manifest in relation to where his audience were, or that determined whether his ministry was fundamentally a reassuring one or a confrontational one.

The importance of appreciating the kind of circumstances that a writer was addressing comes into especially clear focus when we contrast the contradictory emphases of different writers. Ezekiel 33:23–9 disallows appeal to the example of God's blessing of Abraham as a key to hope of return from exile; Isaiah 51:1–3 itself offers that example as a key to hope of a return. Paul in Roman 4 declares, 'People are justified by faith, not by works – you only have to look at the example of Abraham to see that'; James in James 2 declares, 'People are justified by works, not by faith – you only have to look at the example of Abraham to see that'. A large part of the reason for the differences between these two pairs of statements lies in the different contexts to which they were addressed. Only as we appreciate the circumstances of their audiences can we appreciate the significance of their statements.⁶

The fact that the prophets press us to understand their writings against their historical context exposes a fundamental weakness of the approach to predictive prophecy which appears in many Christian paperback bestsellers such as Hal Lindsey's *The Late Great Planet Earth*.⁷ Here a prophet such as Ezekiel is read as if he were giving a coded preview of events in the twentieth-century middle east. But to read Ezekiel that way is to ignore the hermeneutical hint with which his book begins and the pointers it gives to its audience as it goes along.

A historical approach to instruction texts, then, rules out one form of finding contemporary relevance in them. But a historical approach does not rule out all concern with their contemporary relevance. Indeed it makes a contribution to that, insofar as the distancing effect that a historical approach brings can actually help us to grasp the text's real meaning.

An awareness of the historical nature of instruction texts emphasizes for us their human origin. We have already noted, however, that it is among such texts that we find the scriptural material that is overtly addressed from God to man. The laws are presented as dictated by God to Moses. The gospels give us the teaching of the Son of God. In his letters Paul claims to write in words taught by the Spirit, and, even when most tentative, associates the Spirit of God with his judgments (1 Cor. 2:13; 7:40). Most strikingly, the prophetic books combine with; their initial allusions to their human and historical origins the reminder that what you are to read is not merely human words but the

vision or the word or the oracle that Yahweh revealed. The prophets also combine with their ongoing allusions to their historical context the repeated reminder that they function as God's direct messengers who declare 'Thus says Yahweh'.

A first implication of this way of speaking is that the teaching of these books overtly makes special demands on its readers. Both the notion of inspiration and the notion of authority are especially at home with material of this kind. It speaks as the word of God, and expects to be treated as such. The interpreter is challenged to approach it with a special openness, and with a special expectancy. In his study of the phenomenon of translation, George Steiner includes an analysis of 'the hermeneutic motion, the art of elicitation and appropriative transfer of meaning'. Its starting-point, he suggests, is an act of trust that 'there is "something there" to be understood'. Without this, the effort to understand will soon collapse. "This means nothing", asserts the exasperated child in front of his Latin reader or the beginner at Berlitz' (the language school): if he gives in to that tempting conclusion, he will never reach understanding.⁸ This is all the more true with the trusting conviction that I am reading words God spoke. For the task of interpretation, this conviction carries the significant implication that Scripture is neither unintelligible nor trivial, and it encourages me to persist in the effort to understand even where I am tempted to give up.

If the text I am reading is the word of God, this will also mean that I relate to it as a man of prayer seeking to hear what God has been saying, as well as a man using his reason to decipher a human artifact. It makes interpretation a charism.⁹ What by the exercise of the charism of interpretation I understand I can then go on to commit myself to; but it is also the case that what I commit myself to I can then go on to understand. My commitment to it can enable me to open myself to understanding. (It can, however, do the opposite; if I know I have to be committed to it, that may inhibit what I allow myself to perceive in it!). So an academic or historical approach and a believing or theological approach are not in tension with each other: they can be partners, and either on its own is inadequate as a means to interpreting a text. To put it another way, I may think that in interpreting a text I am subject in relation to it as object, master in relation to it as servant. I am doing it the favour of letting it speak once more. But if this is the word of God that we are reading, the interpretive movement is put in reverse. God is the subject and I am the object, he the master and I the servant, he is doing me the favour of letting me overhear what he has said. At least, he may be – I cannot assume that or force him to speak. Hence 'prayer must have the last word'.¹⁰

A second implication of seeing instruction texts as the word of God is that they can and should be brought into relationship with each other. A historical approach reflects and reveals the fact that these texts

offer not a timeless theology or ethic but concrete, contextual insights and commands. (This historicity of Scripture perhaps explains much of its ambiguity – as it seems to us – over topics such as what baptism means and who are its proper recipients). Even as merely human documents they might be taken to be the contextual embodiment of more far-reaching principles which we could seek to identify; as the words of God (who does not slip into irrational *obiter dicta*) they are certainly so. We are invited, then, to look behind them and relate them to each other. What Paul (and God) wanted to say to the Corinthians we discover from 1 and 2 Corinthians. What he might want to say to us we learn by considering that discovery in the light of other scriptures.

How Mark, Paul, and John conceive of the person of Christ is rather different, even when they use the same expressions (e.g. ‘Son of God’). If God spoke through them all, interpreting them as Scripture means considering them in the light of each other when one has established what each writer meant by them individually. They will be capable of becoming part of a coherent whole, though at the level of thought and concepts, not necessarily of their own words. What Chronicles and Ecclesiastes imply about the attitudes and beliefs appropriate to the man of faith is very different, even though (indeed, especially because) they probably lived in approximately the same period. They need to be understood individually, often as in reaction to each other.¹¹ Interpreting them as Scripture also involves determining in what way and with what qualifications their messages will make a claim upon us when they are considered in the light of each other.¹²

A third implication for interpretation is that, although their human and historical origin demands that we interpret them in accordance with their meaning as it would be understood by intellectually and spiritually competent contemporary readers such as God was originally addressing by means of his human agents, their divine origin opens up the possibility that God might have meant by his words more than human author or original reader would have understood. When New Testament authors tell us how Old Testament prophecies have been fulfilled (e.g. in Matt. 1–2), they sometimes attribute to these prophecies meanings that must have been foreign to their human authors. It seems that in the light of the Christ event and by the Spirit’s guidance they are able to see meanings which God knew about but which (as far as one can tell) the prophet himself did not. The example of Hal Lindsey quoted above draws attention to the hazards of reading non-historical meanings into Scripture on the basis of *extra*-scriptural information; but perceiving such meanings in the light of other scriptures is difficult to prohibit, though as difficult to test. It is also without so much point now that we have got the New Testament to tell us directly about Christ; we can therefore allow the

Old Testament to press its own agenda upon us, not one determined by later considerations.

Yet even an historical approach to instruction texts may be able to justify finding more in them than their author knew; for prophecy, at least, is rather like poetry.¹³ Like prophets, poets often feel that their message has been 'given' them, and that they may not be able fully to express in words the vision they have seen, or that they cannot necessarily perceive all the implications of the words that they have heard and expressed. The meaning of his poem may go beyond what the poet can indicate. Any further meaning an interpreter finds in his work is to be expected to be a deeper grasping of what the poet himself grasped. It will not be an allegorizing of it which reads into it a quite other meaning; it will be a fuller understanding, not an unrelated one.

Metaphor, in particular, invites the reader beyond the strictly circumscribable semantic significance of words; it expresses 'what ideas feel like'. But it does more than that. While one needs to be wary of over-extending a metaphor (Jesus is the true vine – but you can't ask what is the soil the vine grows in; God is our Father – but you can't ask who is our Mother), equally one needs to be wary of under-interpreting it, because a metaphor points to a depth and breadth of meaning that may go beyond what the author himself had perceived. Its language is deliberately open and suggestive rather than totally defined and specific.

At the same time, metaphor trades on everyday earthly reality. To the urban westerner 'vines' sound inherently spiritual; to the Palestinian they were originally little more so than coffee or concrete, and they worked because the writer was utilizing the everyday and down-to-earth to extend the boundary of the sayable. Interpreting biblical imagery, then, involves an attempt to hear everyday statements in their everyday significance and yet with their transcendent allusions.

In this respect, as in others, metaphor merges into symbol, whose central function is 'to connect the clear and focused area of our experience with a dim but insistent kind of experience that is a constituent of consciousness but is, nevertheless, not clearly apprehended'.¹⁴ One way of distinguishing them is to see a symbol as a community metaphor, one widely accepted without (necessarily) being dead; one which 'acquires a stable and repeatable meaning or association'¹⁵ which enables it to be a means of a community evoking indirectly what cannot be articulated as powerfully in a direct way. Jesus is the real vine: a variety of significances and resonances from the Old Testament belongs to the symbol, whether or not Jesus or John was immediately aware of all of them. God is our Father: a range of experiences of fatherhood and sonship (positive and negative) can help to unfold the meaning of the symbol. Of course symbols need to be

understood historically; images of fatherhood vary in different cultures. At the same time, they are particular cultural embodiments of widely known archetypes. 'There is one Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth receives its name' (Eph. 3:14).

So particular occurrences of the symbol need to be interpreted in relation to the archetype as well as in relation to its historical context. In using metaphor and symbol a writer is fitting his work into the larger whole comprised by reality as God constitutes it, creates it, sees it, and orders it. He is seeking to be open to God. Metaphor and symbol do trade on the familiarity of the down-to-earth, but they also trade on the fact that things like vines (or even coffee and concrete) have their own place in God's scheme of things. It is for this reason that they can bring to expression other realities of which we are only more vaguely aware – or only become aware through them.¹⁶

Metaphor and symbol with their openness and potential, however, are not the only or sufficient ways of speaking of God – as, for instance, Sallie TeSelle sometimes implies in her suggestive book *Speaking in Parables*.¹⁷ The creativeness of metaphor and symbol (intuitive, experiential, self-involving, allusive, plurivocal, holistic, open-ended, dynamic) needs to be complemented by the discipline of conceptual thinking (analytic, cerebral, distanced, defined, measured, nuanced) which tests it. Paul Ricoeur, with whose approach TeSelle identifies herself, recognizes this, noting that one can see taking place in Scripture itself a move from symbol to system and conceptualization (not, of course, to be understood as more advanced than symbol – the two complement each other, and the latter is parasitic on the former).¹⁸ And within Scripture, the special locus of this incipient theologizing is instruction material such as the wisdom teaching of Proverbs 1–9, the discourses in John, and the letters of Paul.

(to be continued)

NOTES

- 1 For analyses such as these, see M.H. Abrams, *The Mirror and the Lamp* OUP, New York 1953, pp 3–29; R.J. Karris, 'Windows and Mirrors', P.J. Achtemeier, ed., *Society of Biblical Literature 1979 Seminar Papers*, Scholars Press, Missoula 1979, I, pp 47–58 and his references; V.S. Poythress, 'Analysing a Biblical Text', *Scottish Journal of Theology* 32, 1979, pp 113–38, 319–32; R. Lapointe, *Les Trois Dimensions de l'herméneutique*, Gabalda, Paris 1967; O. Weber, *Foundations of Dogmatics*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids 1981, I, pp 314–5; R. Jakobson, e.g. 'Linguistics and Poetics', T.A. Sebeok, ed., *Style in Language*, Wiley, New York 1960, p 353, 357; L. Alonso Schoekel, *The Inspired Word*, Burns and Oates, London 1967, pp 134–50, with his references to K. Buehler's *Sprachtheorie*; E.V. McKnight, *Meaning in Texts*, Fortress, Philadelphia 1978, pp 152–3.
- 2 So D.J.A. Clines, 'Story and Poem', *Interpretation* 34, 1980, pp 115–27.

- 3 So M.J. Valdes in M.J. Valdes and O.J. Miller, ed., *Interpretation of Narrative*, University of Toronto, Toronto 1978, p 10.
- 4 Cf T.S. Eliot, *On Poetry and Poets*, Faber, London 1957, p 112.
- 5 R.G. Collingwood, *An Autobiography*, OUP, London 1939, p 31.
- 6 J.A. Sanders, 'Hermeneutics', in K. Crim and others, eds., *Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible, Supplementary Volume*, Abingdon, Nashville 1976, pp 404-5.
- 7 Zondervan, Grand Rapids 1970.
- 8 *After Babel*, OUP, London 1975, pp 296-7.
- 9 So J. Macquarrie, *God-Talk*, SCM, London 1967, p 152.
- 10 K. Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, I, 2:531.
- 11 Cf B.M. Eijxenbaum's comments on literary interpretation, L. Matejka & K. Pomorska, eds., *Readings in Russian Poetics*, MIT, Cambridge, Mass. 1971, pp 17-18; also current discussion of intertextuality, e.g. J. Culler, *The Pursuit of Signs*, Routledge, London 1981, pp 101ff.
- 12 Cf C.M. Wood's very suggestive book *The Formation of Christian Understanding: An Essay in Theological Hermeneutics*, Westminster, Philadelphia 1981, pp 73-4.
- 13 Cf D.N. Freedman, 'Pottery, Poetry, and Prophecy', *Journal of Biblical Literature* 96, 1977, pp 21-6.
- 14 W.A. Beardslee, 'Narrative Form in the New Testament and Process Theology', *Encounter* (Indianapolis) 36, 1975, p 303, following A.N. Whitehead.
- 15 N. Perrin, 'Wisdom and Apocalyptic in the Message of Jesus', L.C. McGaughey, ed., *The Society of Biblical Literature One Hundred Eighth Annual Meeting: Book of Seminar Papers*, SBL, Missoula 1972, 2, p 553; cf his *Jesus and the Language of the Kingdom*, SCM, London 1976.
- 16 Cf T. Hawkes's discussion in *Metaphor*, Methuen, London 1972.
- 17 Fortress, Philadelphia 1975, see e.g. p 29.
- 18 See e.g. his 'Biblical Hermeneutics', *Semeia* 4, 1975, pp 129-35; cf G. Ebeling, *Word and Faith*, SCM, London 1963, pp 93-4; also B. Wicker, *The Story-Shaped World*, University of Notre Dame, Notre Dame 1975, pp 1-32 on the distinction between metaphor and analogy.

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Anvil

In the last issue we mentioned that the *Church Times* had a prior right to the title *Anvil* and that we consequently used the title with its kind permission. Since then Mr. Bernard Palmer, the Managing Director and Editor, has most kindly agreed to sell the title to the *Anvil* Trust for a nominal sum which took the form of a donation to the *Church Times* Train-a-Priest Fund. We are extremely grateful to Mr. Palmer for the courtesy, imagination and generosity which he has displayed.

Peter Williams