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A table of contents for *Irish Biblical Studies* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_ibs-01.php

Interpreting the New Testament and Interpreting Christ

Ernest Best

The angle from which we approach any document and the pre-suppositions with which we come clearly affect the way we interpret it. A historian of music comes to a Beethoven sonata with different questions in mind from those of a concert pianist. I approach Scripture as an academic who is paid to interpret it and as a Christian who holds the NT in high regard. I do not approach it as one who accepts its verbal infallibility. Clearly this leaves open a considerable number of options.

Let me begin with a simple question: From time to time church drama groups present Biblical plays: should the characters be dressed in biblical or in modern costume? In either case a theological position is implied. If the characters are dressed as in the first century, the remoteness of what is said in the play becomes apparent; if the characters are dressed in the clothes we wear the historical nature of Christianity is lost. The issues will become more clear as we continue. As a first step we need to realize that this is a modern problem. If you look at paintings of biblical scenes made at any time prior to the nineteenth century you will see that the characters are dressed in the clothes of the artist's own day and the scenery is that of the artist's own country, usually Italian or Dutch. However in some of the paintings of the pre-Raphaelites (as those by Hunt, Millais) the characters wear clothing drawn from the biblical period and depicted with great accuracy. Painters prior to the nineteenth century did not think about the matter; they saw no problem. The pre-Raphaelites saw a problem and solved it in one particular way. How and why did this change come about? This is a very simple statement of one of the underlying problems in biblical interpretation and before we are finished we shall see that we have to qualify it in many ways.

The Reformers by the very nature of the appeal to the authority of Scripture were forced to evolve a theory of the interpretation of Scripture. Previously it had been held that Scripture could be interpreted in more than one way, allegorization being particularly important, though as we

approach the time of the Reformation we find that the literal sense is gradually gaining the upper hand and interpretation is expected to accord with that sense. Both Luther and Calvin strongly affirm that the only valid sense of Scripture was the literal. In practice Luther did not always adhere as closely to this sense as Calvin. Not only was the Gospel clear in its essential sense to any one who read Scripture, but most of the Scripture itself in its literal sense would be clear to any one. Those parts which were not at once clear could be clarified in respect of their meaning from other passages that were clear. Scripture being clear in this way could be applied directly to the lives of men or, if some adjustments had to be made, these were perfectly obvious. Thus Luther, while applying the arguments of Paul in Galatians to personal salvation and the lives of believers, also adapted much of what Paul said against the Judaizers into attacks on the Pope and his followers. To Luther this seemed to be a simple and clear updating of the literal sense of Scripture for his own situation.

By and large the Reformers and their successors found it easy to apply most of Scripture directly to their own situations. The world of the sixteenth century was very like that of the first century: people thought and behaved in the same way; personal salvation could be conceived in the same way; ethical problems had hardly changed. If we go back to our original question, the answer of the Reformers would have been: put Jesus in dress contemporary with yourself; it makes no difference.

The search for the literal sense of Scripture once begun led finally to the historical-critical movement, the modern way of interpreting Scripture. The process was long and devious and many outside influences played a part in it. We cannot examine these in detail. There was the discovery of the New World and the realisation that the world's centre did not lie in Jerusalem or Judaea; this was symbolized by the selection of Greenwich as zero longitude. A civilisation as old as that of Israel, but with a chronology different from Israel's, was discovered in Egypt. Descartes sent modern philosophy on its way by taking as his starting-point not God but himself. The scientific movement asserted that proof lay in examination and observation rather than in the acceptance of authority. Within the church the

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literal sense came to be understood as closely associated with the intention of the writer. Despite the assertion that Scripture was its own interpreter and ought to be interpreted from within itself it was soon realised that there were passages which could not be understood without passing beyond the bounds of Scripture. The Greek and Latin Classics were searched for parallels to words and thoughts; the Jewish writings were re-read for the light they could throw upon the Jewish authors of the NT and the life and time of Jesus. Thus the minds of the original writers were illuminated with material drawn from outside Scripture and so illuminated were better understood.

Though historians existed in the Greek and Roman world and though chroniclers and historians continued to be found from time to time in the Middle Ages and afterwards there was no serious study of history as such. Whenever it was studied or written about this was done in order either to glorify the past of a particular dynasty or to give guidance to the present; it was never studied purely as an interest in itself. History was not included in the curriculum of the ancient world from which those of the Middle Ages and the post-Reformation period were derived; only in the nineteenth century for the first time were history and archaeology studied seriously; it was 1893 before a Chair of History was founded in the University of Glasgow, and Glasgow was not particularly late in this. The discoveries archaeologists brought back from Greece and the Middle East to European centres of culture showed quickly and clearly that people had dressed very differently in the ancient world both from what the sixteenth and later centuries believed and from what was worn in the nineteenth century. This combined with the emphasis of the historians on the correct reporting of historical facts quickly led in the visual arts to the presentation of first century characters in first century dress. Hence the stress some artists began to lay on depicting characters drawn from the NT in first century garb.

Before we go on we should note one important feature of the historical method, a feature which would have been rejected by the successors to the Reformers. When we attempt to discover what was in the mind of its original writers, the literal sense of Scripture, we have to treat Scripture as we would treat any other writing. Scripture cannot be given a special status, nor can any section of it be exempt from the

same examination as the same event or narrative would receive if the account of it was found in another book. The literal sense must be the sense detected by the ordinary methods of historical analysis. In the nineteenth century it was assumed that the application of these methods to historical material would result in highly probable, if not certain, results in respect of events in the past. Historians expected that just as physical scientists could produce conclusions which would be accepted by anyone who examined their experiments, so they, the historians, could produce equally sure conclusions about the past, which anyone who examined the evidence would accept. Returning to our initial question about the presentation of Jesus in a biblical play that would mean that if we were to present a biblical play showing Jesus in first century guise, then we could do this without any dispute as to the way in which he was portrayed. Unfortunately for such a view historians today are much less confident of our ability to create a picture of the past which would be generally accepted. They realize that when they examine the evidence from the past, estimate its reliability and the relationship of one piece of evidence to another, they allow their modern presuppositions to govern the way in which they view the evidence. Thus the hoped for neutral picture of Jesus in first century guise will be in part shaped in terms of today. We have certain views about the development and understanding of personality; these views may have a Freudian or Jungian slant and the slant will force us to look at Jesus from that particular angle and may lead us to explain him in terms drawn from a modern psychological theory. The modern view of an incident in the life of Jesus or of the development of his character would then be incomprehensible to a person from the first century, even if we could be assured that it would accurately represent what happened then.

This means that one side of the original two alternatives must be qualified. We are unable to present Jesus or any figure from the biblical period in a natural and unambiguous way so that he fits into that period and is at the same time able to be understood by us. If we are to understand we need to be able to present the ancient world in terms that belong to our world. We shall later go on to examine the other alternative and find that it also needs to be qualified; however we can see now how our initial question arose.

Best, Interpreting NT, IBS 3, 1981

Interest in history together with a rapidly changing modern world made men realize the great difference between the world of the first century and our world. It was no longer possible to evade the problem simply by dressing Jesus in contemporary clothing knowing that no one would perceive the difference. Today with the spread of education everybody sees the difference.

As we have looked at the problem we shall have begun to realize that it is not simply the question of the dress that Jesus or any first century figure wore that makes the difference between the first century and this century, nor is it such a simple thing as the change in transport from chariot to car. The problem facing the artist who attempts to represent a biblical scene is comparatively simple. The problem facing the man or woman who wishes to interpret the Bible for today is much more profound and complex. One aspect of this can be illustrated by a retelling of the story of the Samaritan. "A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell among robbers, who stripped him and beat him, and departed, leaving him half-dead. Now by chance a priest was going down that road; and when he saw him he passed by on the other side. So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. A Samaritan came along and saw the man lying at the side of the road. He went across and realized that he was a Jew. At that moment the man opened his eyes, looked up and whispered "Help me". The Samaritan kicked him in the teeth. Then when he saw that, although he was almost naked, he had on a decent pair of trousers, he undid the zip, pulled them off, rolled that man to the edge of the road and pushed him over the cliff. Taking the trousers he went on to the next village. In the inn there he sold them for two pence." That is how every Jew expected the story to end when Jesus began it. Jesus' conclusion was as sharp a kick in the teeth to his Jewish hearers as the Samaritan had given the injured man. None of us can today experience the gut reaction that Jesus' hearers had when they heard the story as Jesus told it. We miss that gut reaction because the story is so familiar, but even more so because in most parts of the Western world there is no radical division within society in which one portion of it hates the other with the venom with which Jew and Samaritan hated each other. Making

Best: Interpreting NT, IBS 3, 1981

the priest into a bishop, the Levite into an elder and the Samaritan into a commercial traveller, as I have heard done, will not bring the story alive in the way it was alive in Palestine in the first century. The difference between our society and that of the first century Palestine is not one of dress alone, but the absence of a deep cleft which ran through Jewish society. Undoubtedly there are many little clefts in Western society but that is not the same. Northern Ireland is the only country in western society in which there is such a deep division as existed in Palestine in the first century. There, at least, the story ought to be understood.

A word needs to be said about the familiarity of biblical stories and therefore the difficulty of understanding them. During the centuries as music has developed it has experienced many innovations. At the time they were recognized as new, and those who heard them objected strongly. Today we hear the same music but any idea of its "newness" has gone. Our ears are attuned to accept what seemed strange to the music's first hearers. Our ears equally miss the newness in stories from the NT. Like the music the stories have become part of our culture.

We need then to look at the differences between our society and that of the Bible. Of course man is basically the same kind of being now as he was then, a mixture of goodness and selfishness. Many individual problems within the field of the family and personal relationships still exist in the same intensity as they possessed in the first century; on the other hand, as we shall see, new problems have appeared and some old ones have disappeared or no longer worry us. Man is still called on to deny himself, to take up his cross and to lose his life for the sake of Christ and the Gospel, though the way in which he does these may be different today from the time of the Bible.

It is undoubtedly true that on the one hand life seems to have shrunk, the borders of the world are so much closer; on the other hand life has become very much more complex. Until a few generations ago most people lived their entire lives within the village or small town in which they had been born; they rarely moved out of its area. Occasionally a war might recruit them, but even then they did not go far afield often; they remained to fight for their own area.

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The wealthy may have made the "grand tour" but they were only a tiny few. Contrast that with the way in which people move around today; almost any one can, in fact many do, go overseas for their holidays. The world has shrunk, and shrinking it has become more complex. Fifty years ago it did not matter how what would then have been thought of as minor arab rulers acted; today we take an avid interest in what they do. The industrialisation of Japan closes motor factories in Britain. Cheap labour in Hong-Kong brings unemployment to the mills of Lancashire.

Not merely has life shrunk and become more complex but attitudes have vastly changed. If I go out and find my car will not start I look for a mechanic; in the ancient world I would have looked for a magician. If a cow goes dry, the farmer calls in the vet and not the witch doctor. If we want to know what the future holds, we do not kill a bird and examine its entrails or have an astrologer read the stars for us; we send for a statistician to tell us about general trends and we base our decisions upon his conclusions. The supernatural has disappeared out of daily life. We no longer attribute what happens to us to the gods or to evil powers. When we want to find out if a fact or a theory is true we do not sit down and argue about it but we observe, experiment and draw conclusions.

If you then want to present Jesus or some other NT character in a play for today how do you go about it? Let me set up a few unfinished scenarios of the way in which this might be attempted.

Jesus was flying back from Dublin to Manchester. In the airport lounge he noticed this woman who was very agitated. By chance he found himself sitting beside her on the plane. She began to talk to him. She told him that she was flying over to Manchester to her sister who had made all the arrangements. "You see it's my sixth", she said. "The last isn't a year old yet and the oldest is only seven. I am just worn down with looking after them and I can't have another." Finish the story by telling how Jesus advised the woman, and realise that different people will finish it in very different ways.

Paul was travelling up from Sheffield to London by train. He begins to talk to the man in the seat next to him and learns that he is a trade union official going up to a union

conference to decide whether to have a strike or not. They are not a large or powerful union and have few resources to fall back on; they had lost out badly in the last round of wage increases; if they had a rise, others would demand that differentials be maintained; there would be inflation all round; because of their weakness they might in any case have to settle for something less than their fair increase. What does Paul say?

It would be quite easy to go on multiplying instances like this. You can see that once you put Jesus or Paul into modern clothing you release a whole set of problems for which there are no easy answers. Yet it is these problems which we often try to solve using the NT. How then are we to interpret the NT?

The problem is intensified because a great deal of what we find in the NT is tied down to its own particular situation. The story of the good Samaritan was a good illustration of this. There are many more. Jesus said that new wine put into old bottles would split them. The obvious reference is to the new faith which Jesus brought, as destructive of the old Jewish faith. For the first Christians the relationship of Christianity to Judaism was a live issue; it is not for the vast majority of congregations in almost every part of the world today. We can understand intellectually the change from Judaism to Christianity, but we cannot experience it as an existential problem. A great part of the NT is couched just in terms of this change. Paul's teaching on justification by faith relates to the Jewish law. The teaching of Hebrews on the sacrifice of Jesus is based on the Jewish sacrificial cultus. It is not easy to transfer such passages, and remember they are very large sections of the NT, to our situation and find easy parallels. Do we then just set them entirely aside and pay no heed to them because today it is impossible to apply them directly?

Let me pick up a point which ought perhaps to have been introduced earlier but comes in more easily now. Do we interpret the NT or do we interpret Christ? Without a doubt in the church we are sent to interpret Christ. We do not set out to see which parts of the NT speak with power to our situation, but to see how Christ himself speaks to us within our situation. Once we say this we see new aspects of our problem. So far we have talked mainly about ethical problems

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and moral situations. The question of Christology ought to
have been raised before this. Now it becomes acute.

At Caesarea Philippi Jesus asked his disciples what they
and others were saying about him. The disciples reported
that people were saying that he was John the baptizer or
Elijah or one of the prophets. These are all Jewish terms
and are hardly the kind of estimates that any one would
make of Jesus today. The disciples for their part confess
he is the Christ; this is also a Jewish term. We have
become used to it, though we rarely appreciate its meaning.
It would have meant nothing to a Jew or a Greek in the
ancient world other than after a bath they had rubbed oil
into their skin to soften it; it had no religious value for
them as it had for the Jew. The Christians quickly had to
begin to express their faith in Jesus, using terms which
would be understood both in the Jewish and the Greco-Roman
worlds, so they used terms like Son of God or Lord. We
know how the discussion went on for centuries and how
orthodox christology was forged on the basis of current
philosophical concepts and psychological ideas of personality.
If we wished to update Caesarea Philippi we would not wish
to express the alternatives to "Christ" in Jewish terms, for
these would need to be explained to people if they are to
grasp their significance and thus his. With whom then
should we contrast Christ and what terms should we use to
describe him? There is no christology in fixed terms which
we can bring into every situation. The very expression of
christology is itself subject to the culture and situation
in which it is verbalized.

If we distinguish between interpreting Christ and inter-
preting the NT we need to say something about the relation of
the NT to Christ. The books of the NT might be looked on as
a number of windows through which we can look at Christ.
The preacher does not preach a particular book of the NT,
e.g., he does not preach Mark, but he preaches or interprets
Christ as seen through the window of Mark. Another analogy
would describe Christ as a theme-tune and the NT as
variations on it. We have no access to the original tune
except through the variations. To interpret Christ for
ourselves is to produce the variation in our situation which
is appropriate to that situation and culture. The books of
the NT might yet again be regarded as similar to photographs
of a great building. No one photograph can include more

than one aspect of the building; we must photograph from south or east or north or west; each picture only gives a limited view. It takes all the photographs to begin to build up the total picture. The building is more than each individual picture, even more than all the pictures taken together. And the stance from which we need a photograph today may not be any of the positions from which the original photographs were taken.

None of these metaphors is perfect, and none of the books of the NT gives a perfect representation of Christ. They are tied to their own situation and limited by the peculiarities of that situation and the failings of their writers. It might seem that we could extrapolate from their situation to ours, but any statistician will tell you that to extrapolate from a given set of figures to produce a prediction of what may happen is a very dangerous process. Yet this is what we have to do, given the NT. From it and the personalities, incidents, events, teaching, etc. it provides we have to bring Christ into our situation and our culture. To interpret the NT we have to interpret that which the NT itself interprets the act of God in Christ.

I do not intend to provide examples of how this may be done. Needless to say when I preach or teach I am concerned with this process of interpretation but here I am concerned only with the theory which underlies the process and I only need to indicate some of the guidelines along which interpretation must always take place.

(1) We need to know as much as we can about what the author meant when he wrote some particular bit of the NT, about the situation of his readers and how they would understand what he wrote, about the ancient world in general and how people thought and acted then. That means that we use the historical-critical method with all the exactitude and rigour that is possible. This knowledge alone does not as we have seen provide an interpretation valid for today of either the NT or Christ, but it is an essential preliminary.

There is a subsidiary point to be made. Within the Christian church subsequent to the writing of Scripture there has been a continual process of re-understanding what God has done in Christ in relation to the changing situation of the church; examining that process we can see how the church's understanding of Christ has changed with changing context.

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A knowledge of church history is therefore of assistance in helping us to see how we may understand. And it will also be of assistance since we stand in the direct continuous chain of Christian witness which goes back to the first apostles. It is this chain which we wish to extend into our period.

There is however one error that needs to be avoided here, the error of stopping in some period of church history. When sixteenth century painters depicted biblical characters in sixteenth century dress that was perhaps excusable; what was not excusable was eighteenth century painters depicting biblical characters in sixteenth century dress. Too often we are satisfied to depict Christ in terms of the Reformation or the counter-Reformation and to forget that the world has moved on since then.

(2) Whoever would interpret for Christians the scriptural report of God's work in Christ in its relation to today must participate in the Christian experience; he stands at the end of that chain of witness that goes back to the beginning and is a part of it. The agnostic scholar can argue cogently about the meaning of Scripture as it was intended by its authors, and many agnostics and Jewish scholars have contributed greatly in the search after the meaning of the NT within the first century and so brought genuine insights into its meaning. The interpretation for the church today must however come from those who stand within the Christian experience. This experience is never individual but always corporate. The Christian who attempts to interpret draws from an existing experience, that of the whole church, and in turn contributes to it. He depends not only on his contemporaries but also on all the past life of the church. He expresses the individual aspect of this experience by saying that he interprets as one who has the mind of Christ (1 Cor.2.16), who by the Lord's mercy is trustworthy (1 Cor.7.35), who has the charisma of the utterance of wisdom and knowledge (1 Cor.12.8), or who knows the living and exalted Christ.

(3) All interpretation takes place on the basis of a theological and philosophical position. The culture in which we have been brought up, the church tradition in which we have been nurtured and the thought we have given

to working out our own theological position determine the way in which we interpret every part of Scripture and in the end interpret Christ. If we go back to the example of the woman flying to Manchester for an abortion the way in which we would finish the scenario will depend to a very high degree on the philosophical and theological presuppositions we bring to it. If we believe that life begins at conception we shall certainly decide in one way; if we do not hold this belief we may have others which affect us in determining what advice we would give the woman. What we have also to observe is that our cultural, theological and philosophical viewpoints are in part determined by the existing way in which we interpret Christ. As we interpret him in relation to an existing situation so he should in fact be readjusting the philosophical, theological and cultural views with which we started. We must always be ready to allow this to happen, otherwise, in a real sense, the solutions we reach are already dictated for us before we approach Scripture and Christ. And since we cannot interpret in any other way than through theological, philosophical and cultural presuppositions it must be our duty always to re-examine these so that we never make absolute claims for our own interpretations.

(4) It is all very well knowing everything about the original meaning of a passage in Scripture and possessing a true and valuable experience of Christ and of the church and an awareness of the theology and philosophy which determine many of our decisions but all this is useless unless there is added to it a sensitivity to the world in which we live. The context in which we interpret is both universal, we belong to a common culture, and particular, we are dealing with particular situations. Christological re-interpretation will belong to the former; it cannot be over-particularized. Many personal ethical problems belong to a particular situation and a solution to them must be found in relation to that situation. Work at the original meaning of Scripture will show us the difference between the culture of our world and the world as it was two thousand years ago, but there is more to this than just knowing the difference. It is necessary to be aware of the real problems that affect people today; but to approach the matter through "problems" is, perhaps, to take the wrong approach; we can learn about the intricacies of making a decision in respect of abortion, unemployment and war but these are not the only issues which affect people. Whoever wishes to interpret must be sensitive to the loneliness and

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anxieties of one kind or another which affect individuals, sensitive also to the moods of an age, its despair or optimism.

(5) The ultimate interpretation of the NT is not into a new set of words, but into a life lived amongst people. Theologians look for a new formula in words that will express the christology relevant to our culture; moralists look for solutions to the problems with which we are faced in our varying situations; preachers attempt to apply texts to their congregations. All end by using a set of words. The translation that really counts is not that into words but that into lives. The NT is a set of words but as such it is a set of words which leads us back to the activity of God in Christ. The theme tune to which it provides variations is not a verbalized "idea" but an actual life lived by a real person. The only ultimate translation of this is into another life. Words are one stage on the way from the actual loving existence of Jesus to the re-expression of his love in the lives of man today. The life which is to appear must be a life based on his life and be a true exegesis of it. It must also be part of a community of lives, a part of the body of Christ which itself is an actual re-presentation of the life of Christ. It must be so lived amongst other lives that it is sensitive to their needs and attempts to meet those needs.