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Some Points at Issue in the Interpretation of the Bible¹

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WHEN the Word became flesh, God was manifested perfectly, and those of mankind, who had eyes to see, beheld His glory. But it was not easy to interpret Him. From that day to this Christians have tried to find principles of interpretation to guide them. Some have stressed His Deity ; others His Humanity. But all have agreed on His perfection.

There is a certain similarity between the Incarnate Word and the Written Word. Both are the revelation of God ; both are dynamic and powerful ; both enshrine the eternal within the sanctuary of the temporal ; and both ultimately evade interpretation. Some interpreters stress the Divinity of the Book ; others the humanity ; some, but not all, agree on its perfection.

Thus, to accept the Person or the Book as the revelation of God, even the perfect revelation, does not solve the question of the interpretation of the Person or the Book. It might, for example, appear to the casual thinker that the acceptance of the Bible as the infallible Word of God would *ipso facto* remove all problems of interpretation. As the chorus says, "God has said it, it must stand". But what is the "it" that God has said? When I read of what He said to Samson, or to Gideon, or to the Rich Young Ruler, or to the children of Israel at Sinai, what is the meaning of those words to me to-day?

It is because the Bible is often so involved in the time process that it requires for its interpretation certain principles that will be relevant from age to age. There are many parts, certainly, that are timeless, in the sense that they appear to be independent of special historical events. Some of the Psalms are of this kind, and portions of the Epistles, such as, for example, Ephesians 1. These create problems of understanding, but not of interpretation in the sense in which we are discussing interpretation in this paper.

But the need for principles of interpretation arises because the Bible is not from end to end a dictated exposition of eternal truths. It is closely tied to centuries of history, and came into existence at different times in different circumstances, and often with an obvious application to conditions that do not always exist to-day. If the circumstances are no longer the same, to what extent do the words of God apply to-day? Surely they are not obsolete ; but are they in any sense living, or are they but dead records?

Moreover, it is obvious that there is often a development of revealed doctrines. It is not that fresh doctrines are added to the old, but individual doctrines are expanded and developed as the Bible grows. Of what force, then, are the less complete expositions of the doctrines? May we not more profitably make a digest of what is revealed in the New Testament, and ignore all that precedes?

¹ A paper read at the Tyndale Fellowship Summer School, Cambridge, 1952.

These are the types of problem that we have to face, as indeed Jews and Christians have tried to face them down the centuries. It may, in fact, be wisest to begin by looking at solutions that have been suggested, so as to see whether any of the suggestions may fairly be adopted to-day.

I

To put the matter on a broad base, we may say that the Christian Church has often solved its problems of interpretation by adopting the contrast between "the letter" and "the spirit" of what is written, using these two terms in a way that Paul surely did not intend in 2 Corinthians iii. 6. Paul's words, "The letter killeth, but the spirit giveth life," cannot fairly be pressed to mean, in their context, that a literal interpretation of Scripture is a deadly thing, while life comes through spiritualising. Paul's contrast is between the old Law written on stones, and the new Law written by the Holy Spirit on the hearts.

But some, like Origen, have openly maintained that the literal meaning could be completely ignored where its acceptance could create difficulties, or even where its acceptance could not yield any profitable lesson. Origen successfully applied his methods to the opening chapters of Genesis, and he and others made much of such incidents as the story of Rahab as depicting the coming and the work of Christ. The spies are the forerunners of Christ. Rahab represents the publicans and sinners. The scarlet thread is the precious Blood of Christ; and Rahab's household is the Church.

But of course this type of exposition did not begin with Origen, nor did it end with him. Already, to take an obvious example, the Jewish Rabbis had adopted a mystical interpretation of the Song of Songs; while the early chapters of Genesis have formed fair game for the spiritualiser up to the present day.

This form of interpretation reaches a ludicrous climax in Mrs. Eddy, the founder of Christian Science, who in her efforts to accept the Bible and at the same time to support her private theory that Spirit could not create matter, spiritualises all the concrete statements of Genesis i. Thus she makes the firmament into spiritual understanding which separates human conception from Truth, and the heavenly bodies into mental enlightenment. Swedenborg adopts a similar treatment of a large part of Scripture, and his followers have compiled a kind of dictionary of "Correspondences".

But after Origen's time, although some followed his methods, others were more cautious. Thus Hugh of St. Victor rebukes those commentators who scorned the literal interpretation in favour of the spiritual. "It seems to me," he says in his homilies on Ecclesiastes, "that equally blameworthy are those who persistently deny that in Holy Scripture there is any mystical understanding or depth of allegory to be found, where in fact it exists, and those who superstitiously insist on serving one up where there is none".

In the Middle Ages it was axiomatic that the scripture has four senses; the literal or historical; the allegorical; the anagogical (leading up and pointing to things above); and the tropological

(moral, guiding our behaviour). A standard example is the title Jerusalem. Literally it is the city in Palestine; allegorically it is the Church on earth; anagogically it is the heavenly city; tropologically it is the moral behaviour of every believing soul.

The Reformers saw that this fourfold sense of Scripture could be used to bolster up all kinds of doctrines, and, once its validity was granted, its conclusions could not be disproved. They, therefore, preferred to move back towards the plain sense of Scripture; as Calvin says in his preface to his Commentary on Romans, "It is the first business of an interpreter to let his author say what he does say, instead of attributing to him what we think he ought to say".

Under the influence of certain critical theories, this sort of axiom came to be applied in a sense in which Calvin himself would not have used it. We are all familiar with this type of interpretation, the examination approach, in which everything has to be set in one specific historical occasion and interpreted rigidly in the light of that occasion. Revelation becomes a by-product: the important thing is to account for the writer's reactions to current events.

We are now moving beyond this phase, and such writers as A. G. Hebert, W. J. Phythian-Adams, and H. H. Rowley, are seeking to shew once more the majestic movement of the Divine Mind through the events of sacred history and their interpretation. We welcome what they are doing, even though we may regret that they often start from premises that we cannot accept, and show a certain self-consciousness in case an unwary reader should actually think that they were conservatives.

II

This preliminary review has disclosed the first important point at issue. How far is the literal meaning of Scripture the primary meaning for us to-day? Is our ultimate aim to discover what the writer or compiler intended when he wrote a certain verse? Or can we ignore the original meaning and look only for its meaning to-day? Or is an in-between position possible, whereby, having discovered, so far as we can, the precise meaning intended by the writer, we proceed to see whether the Holy Spirit so guided the writer's expression of his thought that he set down more than he realized at the time?

In this instance the third view would appear to have the support of the Bible itself. The assumption of the New Testament is that the Old Testament writers were not always aware of what they themselves were inspired to set down. 1 Peter i. 11, 12 indicates that the prophets of old were often puzzled about the contemporary relevance of their utterances. The application of national prophecies to Jesus Christ, as in the opening chapters of Matthew, suggests that there is a certain broad and necessary correspondence between peak events in the nation's history and peak events in the life of their great Representative, which the prophets may not have seen, but which was understood by the Holy Spirit who inspired them. So one might quote case after case of the fuller understanding of the Old Testament in the light of the New.

Yet some of us may still have a feeling that the New Testament

writers are not playing fair with their material. I think, however, that they are, and that we should try to discover the principles which they adopted so that we may apply those principles ourselves, and not limit ourselves simply to those passages and interpretations that actually occur in the New Testament.

But even here the matter is not entirely without difficulty, for it is clear that the writers of the New Testament also were the children of a certain age. To what extent must their interpretations be subject to modification to-day? In examining this we shall, I hope, be led to discover certain principles of interpretation that we can lay down as valid for ourselves.

Let us take three examples. One concerns methods of exegesis. When Paul in Galatians iv. 21f. builds an argument on an allegorical interpretation of the story of Hagar and Ishmael, he was employing a method of reasoning that would be valid according to Rabbinic standards. But is it valid to-day? And if it is valid, what is there to prevent us from going to all lengths of allegorising in attempting to prove a point?

The other examples are foundational for the Gospel. The one concerns the sacrificial language of the New Testament that governs the interpretation of the death of Jesus Christ. It seems as though the first Christians used that language and gave that interpretation because they were so thoroughly familiar with Jewish ritual practices. Did not, in that case, the Jewish background produce the doctrine, and can we legitimately rely upon their interpretation to-day when our background is totally different?

Again, How far do the New Testament doctrines of the Ascension, the Session, and the Second Coming, depend upon outmoded ideas of a two-story universe? Must a strictly scientific view inevitably lead to a rejection of the doctrines in question? How far must we carry Boultmann's ideas of 'demythologizing'?

Let us look at these objections in reverse order. Natural science has its limitations. There are spiritual realities into which it cannot penetrate with the tools that are at its disposal. It may be able to demonstrate that the most powerful telescope in the world has never located a solid heaven, and a throne surrounded by angels; but the terms "up" and "above" may still be the only valid ones that can be used in translating the reality of heaven into the language of earth.

It is, I believe, wrong and misleading to use the term "myth" of such phraseology. There are certain thought-forms that are valid for human apprehension in every age. Such terms as light, darkness, fire, water, bread, home, marriage, nation, family, enemies, life, death, temple, city, father, are gateways through which we must pass to the understanding of eternal realities. This is so important for the unitive interpretation of the Bible that we may perhaps lay down a further principle here. The Bible is the divinely given guide to the understanding of the basic experiences of the human race. One might take any of the words that I have mentioned, and see their unitive treatment in Scripture. Take "city" for example. It is the social abode for man, since man is not an isolated individual. But it may become a place where divine values give place to social comforts. The patriarchs

had no city, but they looked for the city of God. Jerusalem was the city of God for those with eyes to see it, but merely an earthly home for those who wished no more than that. Hence, all that is said in the Bible about life in the city can be worked into such a picture as is given in the Book of the Revelation, where the city of Babylon is set over against the city of the New Jerusalem. Identical principles of good and bad city life run through Scripture on the earthly and the spiritual planes.

The same is true of enemies. The universe is split from top to bottom by the forces of good and evil. This earth is a miniature battleground in which the people of God contend against the forces of the devil. The people of God must always seek the extermination of the forces of evil, and must always pray against the highest enemies of God that they know. Unless we are universalists, our attitude towards Satan and his hosts must be the same as that of the Israelites towards the Canaanites. If we are on God's side in the eternal overthrow of Satan, on what moral grounds can we blame Him for ordering the temporal destruction of the Canaanites?

It is by using a principle of this kind that some of us find no inherent difficulty in following the New Testament in its picture of the Church as the new Israel of God, with Jerusalem as their heavenly city where the Davidic king reigns; and we are prepared to apply both the warnings and the promises that the Old Testament makes to national Israel to the Church. We can do this without necessarily denying a future fulfilment on a national level for the Jews.

By the use of this same principle we may interpret the Song of Songs both as a love song, or series of love songs, and also as speaking of that same relationship between Christ and His Church as Paul sees in Ephesians v. 22-23 and elsewhere.

We may then conclude that there are certain universal thought-forms and experiences that are interpreted by the Bible in accordance with the mind of God. This is not to argue from Nature to God, which can be dangerous, as it was in the Canaanite nature religion. But revelation can speak in the language of nature, and shew the world as a mirror of divine truth.

III

How does this apply to our second example, the interpretation of the death of Jesus Christ in the language of Jewish ritual laws? Sacrifice, although so extensively practised, is not in quite the same category as the thought-forms of which we have spoken. It is possible to interpret it in various ways. Here one must bring in a further thought. For one who accepts the working of God in history, it is impossible to hold that the birth of Jesus Christ came to pass by chance in Judaea. Could He equally well have been born in Buddhist surroundings? If we say No, it is clear that God became incarnated in Judaea because only the Jews had been adequately prepared to interpret the significance of His death. If this is true, then obviously the Jewish outlook did not determine the significance of Christ's death, but Christ's death took place deliberately amongst the only people who could understand it. We too can understand it as they did,

because the Old Testament is part of our Bible. If we do not study the Old Testament doctrine of sacrifice, we shall be more inclined to cavil at the New Testament doctrine of the Atonement.

So here again there emerges another principle of interpretation. The Incarnation and the work of Christ did not happen by chance. It had been prepared for in the Old Testament, and the Jews, with the background of their Scriptures, were able to understand it. This means that we can fairly read the Bible backwards, and interpret the Old in the light of the New, since God's guiding hand is over both.

The third point that we raised was the use of allegory by the New Testament writers. The use of the story of Hagar is perhaps the most extreme example, in the sense that a commentator to-day would not dream that any such significance could be found in the story.

This is a notoriously difficult point. Can anything we please be used as an allegory? Let us look at the use that Paul makes of the story in Galatians iv. 21-31. He does not ignore the sense of the passage, since in Romans iv. 19-22 he uses similar incidents of Abraham's life to teach clear moral and spiritual truths. Nor does he draw out of the story any truth that he does not expound elsewhere as a piece of revealed or logical teaching. It is a fact that the children of Abraham should be children of freedom, and not of bondage. It is a fact that to return to Judaism since the revelation of Christ is to return to bondage, i.e. one may be a child of Abraham and still be a slave child. Therefore the story of Sarah (the free) and Hagar (the slave), with their children, is an eternal story that has been perpetuated ever since their day. It is something more than a bare illustration, even though by itself it is not a proof.

It will, I think, commonly be found that the New Testament allegorical uses of the Old are not arbitrary. To say of the smitten rock, "That rock was Christ" (1 Cor. x. 4) is no more arbitrary than for Christ Himself to identify Himself (though only to transcend it) with the manna-bread from heaven. Pilgrims to the Land of Promise must live by the way, and man does not live by bread and water alone. What are his bread and water? None other than the Lord Jesus Christ.

Hence we may lay down another principle. Bible incidents may be used as illustrations, and often as illustrations that are so relevant that the mind can use them as one with that which they illustrate; in which case they become a kind of allegory. But illustrative or allegorical reasoning must never be used to prove a point that is not set out specifically elsewhere in Scripture. Thus the Old Testament priesthood cannot be made an allegory of the Christian ministry, since the Christian minister is never regarded as a sacrificing priest in the New Testament. Nor can the sacrificial offering of the Old Testament be a type of the Eucharist, since the New Testament picture of the Lord's Supper is that of symbolising God's gift to man and not man's offering to God. Nor may we apply to the Virgin Mary the title "the second Eve" with the intention of drawing out a doctrine comparable to that of Christ as the Second Adam, and speak of ourselves as "her spiritual children", since such a view of Mary is alien to the New Testament.

Space will not allow a discussion of the subject of myth. It may be true that the Old Testament at times uses language which reminds us of pagan mythology, as when Isaiah xxvii. 1 speaks of God's smiting of Leviathan, the serpent. But the pagan mythology may itself be a remnant of the actual fact of the fall of Satan, and the consequent warfare that will ultimately end in Satan's destruction. The picture of Satan as the serpent and the dragon runs through Scripture from Genesis to Revelation. One may count it as another example of a basic thought-form, but it may well be something more.

IV

There remains one important point at issue upon which we have hardly touched. It concerns the character of God Himself. Here the conflict of opinion has been acute since at least the time of Marcion. Is the God of the Old Testament an inferior Being to the God of the New? If we say that He is inferior, we are bound to hold a view of revelation which makes man the gradual discoverer of truth through processes of trial and error. In other words, God Himself was the same God, but man erroneously supposed that He possessed certain qualities that he did not in fact possess, and man believed that God had revealed that He did possess such qualities.

When we try to estimate whether an alleged statement about God is true, or only partially true, or actually false, by what standards are we trying to judge? Surely not by our own feelings, though the argument is sometimes used that we cannot imagine God acting in such and such a way. Usually we say that we must judge the character of God by the character of Jesus Christ. This of course is perfectly true, since Jesus Christ is the manifestation of the fulness of the Godhead.

But Jesus Christ apparently found no antagonism between the Jehovah of the Old Testament and the Father whom he preached. He disputed many of the orthodox beliefs of the religious Jews of His day, but he met them on common ground when he spoke of the God whom they worshipped and the Scriptures that revealed Him. It was Jehovah their God whom they had to love with all their heart, mind, and strength (Matt. xxii. 37). It was Jehovah who created the first man and woman and who instituted marriage (Matt. xix. 4, 5). It was Jehovah who said, "He that speaketh evil of his father or mother, let him surely die" (Matthew xv. 4).

Moreover, if the utmost severity is inconsistent with perfect love, then Jesus is not perfect love, since He spake words of the sternest character to those who would not repent, and he regarded the coming destruction of Jerusalem and its people as the judgment of God, in which innocent and guilty alike would perish. And some of the sternest words in the Bible about hell came from His lips. If we say that such words could not have come from Him, but were the false expressions of early Christian feeling, then we are begging the question. We assume that we ourselves know all the standards of perfection. But we have no right at all to assume that sternness and severity are no part of the character of God. There is nothing in the world of nature or experience, nor in the Bible, to give us a valid reason for such an assumption.

But probably our hesitation comes when the ancient records speak of God as acting in a way in which we cannot see Him acting to-day. We see Him smiting Uzzah with death when he did no more than steady the ark. We see Him demanding the blood of Achan. We see Him sending down fire to burn up the soldiers who came to arrest Elijah. Yes, and let us remember that we see Him smiting Ananias and Sapphira, we see Christ sending the demons into the swine, and we hear Christ telling of the awful fate of the wicked at the judgment day.

We might extend the list, but each thing that we mentioned would be a specific action on a specific occasion, and probably not repeated. There may be a significance in this. A scientist knows that when certain conditions come into conjunction, then a result follows that may not recur unless those identical conditions occur again. Every schoolmaster knows that there may be occasions when he will reward or punish in an outstanding way in order to achieve a certain result, even though he does not normally reward or punish in the same way. It is not a mark of inconsistency in his character that he does so, nor is it necessarily a mark of temper or of favouritism when he takes this unusual action.

It is legitimate to hold that there were good reasons in every case for God to act as He did, even though we may not always be able to demonstrate what those reasons were. Was Uzzah, for example, "showing off," and full of pride at doing what no Levite dared to do? Suppose that Achan had "got away with it", and at the first encounter with the awful enemy had successfully flouted the command of God. What effect would it have had on Israel? Suppose that the wandering Israelites had not at times seen the clear hand of God in reward and punishment. Might they not have equated Him, even more than they did later, with the powerless gods of the people around? And suppose that Christ had released a legion of demons in the midst of the crowd. Does any of us know so much about demonology that we can say that there would have been no risk to the people?

So one might continue, speculating. But at least let us see that we are not to doubt the ascription of some action to God simply because we cannot understand why God could have acted thus. And let us realize that whatever may be our opinion of individual incidents, we have no warrant in the words of the Bible and of Jesus Christ, for drawing the sting of severity from the love of God. God is love, but God is also light.

May we then state a further principle at issue? It is that we must seek to weigh up the whole character of God as it is revealed in the Bible, and not to draw back at once on individual issues because we cannot immediately understand the underlying reason for them.

V

It remains to sum up the points that we have seen to be vital in interpreting the Bible :

The literal sense of the Bible must be discovered, and must be accepted. Certainly it cannot be ignored, and its difficulties explained away by spiritualizing.

But so much of the Bible is concerned with ideas that have deep

roots in human experience, or even with ideas that have counterparts in several spheres of experience. What is said of one sphere is true of another, and the literal sense of a passage may have a fair application in a spiritual sense also.

Moreover, we believe that the same Holy Spirit inspired or controlled all the writers, and was able to match events in one age with events in another, so that the later events can be used for a fuller understanding of the former.

The hand of God is seen in history, and the events of the incarnate ministry of the Lord Jesus did not happen by chance. He came to fulfil what had previously been written, and the earlier writing only takes its full meaning from Him. This is the sum of Christ's own words, both during His earthly ministry and after His resurrection. Finally, the character of God must be gathered from a balanced reading of the whole of Scripture and not from mental deductions that may be based on single parts.

The Bible, then, must be read and interpreted as a whole. We do not doubt that there is growth and development, but we view this as the growth of a plant, each part unfolding from what has gone before, and not contradicting it, even when the climax renders some of the earlier phases obsolete, as the fruit supersedes and renders obsolete the bright petals, without making the petals any less perfect for their own day. Indeed, for the perfect understanding of the fruit there must be the understanding of the petals also.

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