

## *Primary Sense and Plenary Sense*\*

**F. F. Bruce**

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Any biblical student might well feel honoured in being invited to deliver a lecture in the series dedicated to the memory of Arthur Samuel Peake, but it is with a sense of double honour that the invitation is accepted by one who is already honoured by holding the academic position which was first held—and with rare distinction—by Dr Peake.

### **1 A. S. Peake and biblical exegesis**

For the last 25 years of his life (1904-1929), Dr Peake occupied the Rylands Chair of Biblical Exegesis in the Victoria University of Manchester. Throughout his incumbency that was the designation of the Chair: only with the coming of C. H. Dodd as his successor in 1930 was the wording amplified to 'Biblical Criticism and Exegesis'. Dr Peake was, of course, a practitioner and teacher of biblical criticism as well as exegesis, but the original designation of the Chair perhaps implies that criticism, whether lower or higher, is but means to an end. As Dr Peake himself said, 'criticism has never attracted me for its own sake. The all-important thing for the student of the Bible is to pierce to the core of its meaning.'<sup>1</sup> When criticism has done its perfect work, the important question remains: What does the text mean? Critical study will help very considerably to find the answer to this question, but the meaning of Scripture—its meaning for those to whom it came in the first instance, and its meaning to readers today—is what matters most.

Dr Peake was well aware of this, and he taught the principles of biblical interpretation not only to his students in the lecture-room but to the rank and file of his fellow-Christians also. *The Bible: Its Origin, its Significance and its Abiding Worth*—a book which I found particularly helpful in my formative years—was written for a wider public, consisting, to begin with, of readers of *The Sunday Strand*. His *Main Thoughts On Great Subjects*, a posthumous collection of more popular articles and addresses, illustrates his concern that Christians should free their minds from time-honoured interpretations which have no basis in the proper meaning of the biblical text. The 'wayfaring men, yea fools', who 'shall not "err"' in the way of holiness, he pointed out, are reprobates who may not trespass on the path reserved for 'the ransomed of the LORD'

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(Isaiah 35.3, 10);<sup>2</sup> the bloodstained figure who comes from Edom, 'with dyed garments from Bozrah', having 'trodden the winepress alone', is as far as can well be imagined from our Lord, fresh from the scene of his passion; the blood which reddens the apparel of the warrior of Isaiah 63.1-6 is that of the slaughtered sons of Esau.<sup>3</sup> (I am bound to add that I suspect that

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\* This was the Peake 'Memorial Lecture in 1976.

<sup>1</sup> A. S. Peake, *The Bible: its Origin, its Significance and its Abiding Worth* (London, 1913), p.455.

<sup>2</sup> A. S. Peake, *Main Thoughts on Great Subjects* (London, 1931), pp.175ff.

<sup>3</sup> *Plain Thoughts...* pp.170ff.

the sees of Patmos made an early contribution to the christological interpretation of this oracle; but he could bend the most recalcitrant material to serve his purpose.)<sup>4</sup>

The distinction between the primary and plenary sense of Scripture is not one that I recall coming across in Dr Peake's writings. He does draw attention to the distinction between the primary and secondary sense,<sup>5</sup> but that is not always the same distinction. The plenary sense, I suppose, is always secondary; but the secondary sense need not be plenary.

Dr Peake distinguished, for example, between the primary and the secondary sense of the Servant Songs of Isaiah 42-53. He was convinced that 'the collective judgment of Christendom has been right in finding the fulfilment of these prophecies in Christ' because "the prophet's language is fulfilled in Jesus as in no other".<sup>6</sup> In saying this, he attaches what we should call a plenary sense—the plenary sense—to the Songs, pointing out that 'we often find meanings in great works of Art which were probably not intended by the authors themselves' and that 'when inspiration works at so high a level as it often does in the Bible we may not unnaturally expect to find deeper senses than that of which the original author was aware'.<sup>7</sup> But such a deeper sense, even if it be acknowledged as plenary, is chronologically secondary; the sense of which the biblical author was aware is the primary sense, and the Christian interpretation is therefore not the primary sense of the Servant Songs. As it happens, the primary sense of these particular scriptures is not so readily ascertainable; the Ethiopian's question to Philip, 'I pray thee, of what speaketh the prophet this—of himself, or of some other man?' (Acts 8.34) is still a suitable question to be set in an examination paper. In my own view, Dr Peake's estimate of the primary sense of the Servant Songs was not so near the mark as that of another great Methodist scholar, the late Christopher North.<sup>8</sup>

## 2 'Springing and germinant accomplishment'

When we speak of primary sense and plenary sense we may imagine that primary sense is a straightforward matter by contrast with the complexities of plenary sense. Primary sense is the sense which the author intended by his words, the sense which he expected his readers or hearers to understand by his words. Plenary sense is a richer thing than that. It can best be defined and described, perhaps, in a passage which I quote from Dorothy L. Sayers:

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'A phrase used by Dante not only contains and is illumined by the meanings it derived from Virgil or the Vulgate: it, in its turn, illuminates Virgil and the Vulgate and gives new meaning to them. It not only passes on those meanings, supercharged with Dante's own meaning, to Tennyson and Landor, to Rossetti and Yeats, to Williams and Eliot and Pound, but it receives back from them the reflected *splendore* of their own imaginative use of it.'<sup>9</sup>

Thomas Aquinas, in the thirteenth century, put it this way: 'Prophecies are sometimes uttered about things which existed at the time in question, but are not uttered primarily, with reference to there, but in so far as they are a figure of things to come. Wherefore the Holy

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<sup>4</sup> Cf. Rev. 19.13, with G. B. Caird, *The Revelation of St John the Divine* (London, 1966), pp.242ff.

<sup>5</sup> *The Bible...*, p.455.

<sup>6</sup> *The Bible...*, p.453.

<sup>7</sup> *The Bible...*, p.452.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. C. R. North, *The Suffering Servant in Deutero-Isaiah* (Oxford, 1956).

<sup>9</sup> D. L. Sayers, *The Poetry of Search and the Poetry of Statement* (London, 1963), p.272.

Spirit has provided that., when such prophecies are uttered, some details should be inserted which go beyond the actual thing done, so that the mind may be raised to the thing specified.<sup>10</sup>

These words had reference to the interpretation of one particular area of biblical literature—predictive prophecy. St Thomas uses the word 'primarily' where we should say 'plenarily', when he says that the contemporary reference of biblical prophecies was not their primary reference. As we are now using the words, their contemporary reference was their 'primary' reference; the 'things to come' of which the contemporary reference was a 'figure' belong to the plenary sense, in so far as they have a genuine relevance to the scripture in question. Thus the primary sense of Isaiah's virgin oracle (Isaiah 7.14) is to a prince about to be born in the near future; Matthew's application of the oracle to the birth of Jesus (Matthew 1.23) can be said to set forth the plenary sense because the idiom of the original oracle was already a well-established form of words for the annunciation of the birth of a coming deliverer, and was therefore appropriately used to herald the nativity of the Messiah.<sup>11</sup>

To the same effect Francis Bacon at a later date spoke of the necessity of 'allowing... that latitude which is agreeable and familiar unto Divine prophecies; being of the nature of their Author with whom a thousand years are but as one day, and therefore are not fulfilled punctually at once, but have springing and, germinant accomplishment throughout many ages, though the height or fulness of them may refer to some one age'.<sup>12</sup>

What Bacon here pleads for is sufficient scope to accommodate not only the primary reference but further provisional fulfilments as well, until at last their 'height or fulness', their plenary sense, is manifested.

A biblical scholar of the present century, the late Cuthbert Lattey, S.J., attached high value to this interpretative approach in what he called the principle of 'compenetration'. He found this principle helpful in the exegesis of such a passage as Isaiah's virgin-oracle and of larger literary units.<sup>13</sup> An adequate exegesis of the visions of Daniel.

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he believed, 'must take into account, as it were, three historical planes, that of the persecution of Antiochus IV Epiphanes, and of the first and second comings of Christ'.<sup>14</sup> Whether or not this three-dimensional perspective is necessary for the interpretation of Daniel, it must be insisted that the exegete's first responsibility is to establish the primary historical reference of the author and his first readers, and then to decide how far visions or oracles whose primary sense is thus ascertained can be related, by implication or principle, to later situations.

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<sup>10</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on Psalms*, preface. What we here call the primary sense, he called the literal sense.

<sup>11</sup> Cf. the Ugaritic poem 'The Wedding of Nikkal and Yarih' (Text 77), lines 5, 7, *apud* C. H. Cordon, *Ugaritic Handbook* (Rome, 1947), p.152; *Ugaritic Literature* (Rome, 1949), pp.63f.

<sup>12</sup> F. Bacon, *Advancement of Learning*, ii (*Ecclesiastical History* 2.2: 'History of Prophecy'), in *Works*, ed. D. Montagu, ii (London, 1825). p.117.

<sup>13</sup> C. C. Lattey, *Back to Christ* (New York, 1919), pp.64ff.; 'The Emmanuel Prophecy (Isaiah 7.14;)', *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 8 (1946), pp.369ff., 'The Term *Almah* in Isaiah 7.14', *ibid.* 9 (1947), pp.89ff.

<sup>14</sup> C. C. Lattey, *The Book of Daniel* (Dublin, 1948), p.vii.

There is a similarity between Bacon's idea of 'springing and germinant accomplishment' and the idea of Christian tradition as expounded in our time, for example, by Père Y. M.-J. Congar. Tradition, he says, is another mode by which the truth embodied in Scripture, the apostolic heritage, is communicated to man. 'Scripture has an absolute sovereignty',<sup>15</sup> whereas Tradition is a *thésaurisation* or constant accrual of meditation on the text of Scripture in one generation after another, 'the living continuity of faith quickening God's people'.<sup>16</sup> The reality of this tradition cannot be doubted: many parts of Scripture have a richer meaning for Christians today than they had for Christians in the early centuries A.D. because of what they have meant for intervening generations of Christians. (It is equally true that many parts of Scripture had a meaning for Christians in earlier centuries that they cannot have for us today, but that is another story.) However, such tradition is derivative and dependent: the interpretation of Scripture, even if it accrues at compound interest from generation to generation, cannot get more out of Scripture than is their already—implicitly if not expressly. This was certainly Dr Peake's view, I think; it is equally mine—but is it valid? I know some theologians who would suggest that the Holy Spirit may bring forth from Scripture today truth, which bears little relation to that conveyed by the text in its historical setting, but I cannot think they are right. Even the devotional application of Scripture, which is specially impatient of strict exegetical controls, must be reasonably deducible from what Scripture says; otherwise why base a 'blessed thought' on one text more than another, or why base it on a text of Scripture at all?

One example of the way in which a new and widely accepted interpretation can be attached to an ancient scripture is provided by the lament of the desolate city of Jerusalem, after the siege and devastation which she has endured at the hands of the Babylonian army: 'Is it nothing to you, all ye that pass by? Behold, and see if there be any sorrow like unto my sorrow, which is done unto me, wherewith the Lord hath afflicted me in the day of his fierce anger' (Lamentations 1.12).

It is safe to say that the majority of English-speaking Christians at least, when they hear these words, do not think of the sack of

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Jerusalem in 587 B.C. but of the passion of our Lord. We recognize that George Frederick Handel and Charles Wesley between them bear considerable responsibility for this, but neither Handel nor Wesley originated this passion interpretation: it goes back to the traditional employment of the language of Lamentations in the Church's Holy Week commemoration.

Yet the application of the words to our Lord's passion may be acknowledged as a valid instance of the 'plenary sense' of Scripture if (as Norman K. Gottwald has argued), the expression of communal disaster found in Lamentations draws upon various categories of individual lament, constituting a 'deliberate fusion of hitherto comparatively separate types'—a process which reached a climax in the fourth Isaianic Servant Song (Isaiah 52.13-53.12).<sup>17</sup> If, then the distinctively Christian interpretation of the Servant of Yahweh is as justified as Dr Peake held, the plenary sense of the fourth Servant Song can legitimately be

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<sup>15</sup> Y. M.-J. Congar, *Tradition and Traditions*, ET (London, 1966), p.422.

<sup>16</sup> *Tradition and Traditions*, p.4.

<sup>17</sup> N. K. Gottwald, *Studies in the Book of Lamentations* (London, 1954), p.46.

read out of certain passages of Lamentations, where the language (like that of the passage quoted) lends itself to this extended application.

### 3 The complexity of 'primary sense'

To this matter of extended application we shall return but, having provided one illustration of what is meant by 'plenary sense' in relation to the Bible, we must look more closely at what is involved in 'primary sense'.

I recall some correspondence in one of our literary journals a few years ago which was started by someone's taking a passage from a poem by Roy Fuller and drawing certain inferences from it. Roy Fuller in due course wrote to the editor and said that the first writer had misunderstood the passage: that was not what he had meant at all. This brought an indignant rejoinder: what business was it of the author of a poem to say what his poem meant? Once the poem had become public property, the sense in which the reader understood it was as valid as the sense which the author claimed to have had in mind when he composed it. The terms 'primary sense' and 'plenary sense' were not used, so far as I can remember; but from the tone in which the reader wrote I doubt if he would have conceded that the author's interpretation had any more right to be called 'primary' than his own. As we are using the terms now, however, the author's meaning would be 'primary' and the reader's interpretation, whether legitimate or not, would be 'secondary'—not, I think, 'plenary'. The reader's protest reminded me too forcibly of the attitude of those whose main exegetical criterion in Bible study is 'I like to think that it means this'.

But the establishment of the primary sense of a passage of Scripture is not always such a straightforward matter as is commonly supposed. Take, for example, a Gospel parable in which the intention

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of Jesus may have been one thing and the evangelist's application something else. You may recall C. H. Dodd's remark on Matthew's interpretation of the parable of the tares: 'We shall do well to forget this interpretation as completely as possible.'<sup>18</sup> What he meant was, that we ought to forget this interpretation if we are concerned to discover the original point of the parable—which he took to be essentially dominical. But if we are speaking of biblical exegesis in the strict sense—in this instance, the exegesis of the Gospel according to Matthew—from the Matthaean interpretation is of the first importance. If Jesus meant to teach a different lesson from that which the evangelist inculcates, which of the two is primary? Jesus' meaning, of course, both in regard to historical order and in regard to our understanding of his teaching; but so far as biblical exegesis is concerned, it is the Gospel of Matthew, not the tradition lying behind it, that is part of holy writ, and a case could be made out in this context for regarding Matthew's interpretation as 'primary'. Admittedly, important as the four evangelists' theology and presentation may be, their primary value resides in the witness which they bear to Jesus and his ministry, so that, absolutely, it is the intention of Jesus that is of 'primary' importance. But when we are dealing with the Gospels and the other biblical writings as literary documents, the work of their respective authors, then the intention of the authors is of primary importance for the interpretation of their writings.

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<sup>18</sup> C. H. Dodd, *Parables of the Kingdom* (London, 1935), p.184 (on Matthew 13.36-43).

A further complication is introduced into our study of Matthew's Gospel from this point of view when we have documentary evidence of an intermediary stage between the teaching of Jesus and the literary activity of the evangelist. There is no other New Testament version of the parable of the tares, but there are some parables in the same Matthaean context which appear in an earlier form in Mark's Gospel. There we may have to distinguish between the intention of Jesus, the intention of Mark and the intention of Matthew, and to which of these we accord 'primary' status will depend on what the primary purpose of our study is: the exposition of the teaching of Jesus or the exposition of one or the other of the two Gospels in question.

Even if we concentrate on the earliest Gospel and study (say) the parable of the sower, we may trace successive stages in the growth of the tradition in (a) the parable itself (Mark 4.3-9), (b) the interpretation of the parable with its explanation of the four kinds of soil into which the good seed fell (Mark 4.14-20), and (c) the appended statement about the purpose of parables (Mark 4.11f.) with its allusion to the Isaianic passage about unresponsive hearts, deaf ears and unseeing eyes (Isaiah 6.9f.). The primary sense of a passage of Scripture may thus be quite a complex thing.

To take an example from the Old Testament, the primary sense

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of psalm 51 was the sense intended by the penitent who first made it his prayer of confession. It is traditionally ascribed to David, as though it were an expansion of his response to Nathan: 'I have sinned against Yahweh' (2 Samuel 12.13). In any case, it belongs originally to the period of the monarchy, as probably do most of the individual psalms. The penitent, however, knows that where the soul has direct dealings with God in the way of repentance and forgiveness, ritual performances are irrelevant (verses 16f.):

Thou hast no delight in sacrifice;  
were I to give a burnt offering,  
thou wouldst not be pleased.  
My sacrifice, O God, is a broken spirit;  
a broken and contrite heart, O God,  
thou wilt not despise.

But the time came when this psalm was included in a collection designed for liturgical use in the Second Temple. This liturgical use implied a sacrificial context, so something had to be added which modified the sense of the psalmist's words about sacrifice. The editor who adapted it to its new role suggested that the psalmist's omission of sacrifice was due not so much to his conviction that Yahweh had no pleasure in any such thing as to conditions of exile, when no sacrifice was possible. Hence his supplement runs (verses 18f.):

Do good to Zion in thy good pleasure;  
rebuild the walls of Jerusalem  
then wilt thou delight in right sacrifices,  
in burnt offerings and whole burnt offerings;  
then bulls will be offered on thy altar.

If the editor or compiler lived towards the end of the exile, this may have been his prayer, although it was not the prayer of the original psalmist. But in the exegesis of the psalm, do we

concentrate on what happens to have been its original text, or accept it in its fuller canonical form? We must certainly pay attention to the canonical form, in order to ascertain the significance of the composition for worshippers who made it the vehicle of their praise in the postexilic age. But, where the fuller form conflicts with the meaning of the earlier form, we cannot say that the fuller form gives the plenary sense, for the plenary sense must preserve, even when it amplifies, the primary sense.

Similar considerations apply to practically every part of the Old Testament. We have to ask what each part meant in its original form and setting, what it meant when it was embodied in a larger corpus, and what it meant in the completed Hebrew Bible. Then, as Christians, we have to take a further step and ask what it means in the total volume of Christian scripture, Old and New Testaments together. An examination of the use of the Old Testament in the New, as bearing witness to Christ, helps to answer this last question.

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When we come to the use of the Old Testament in the New, however, we have left the primary sense and reached the plenary sense, as we have seen, in relation to the Servant Songs and their Christian application. But we find a half-way house between primary and plenary sense when earlier Old Testament passages are taken up and re-applied in later Old Testament books. Some of these re-applications have little to do with plenary interpretation, as when (say) Habakkuk applied to the Chaldaean invaders the language which Isaiah had used of their Assyrian predecessors.<sup>19</sup>

But in the visions of Daniel we Assyrian something that does belong more recognizably to the category of plenary interpretation. For example, describing the rebuff which Antiochus Epiphanes received, during his second invasion of Egypt, from the Roman delegation led by Popilius Laenas which was put ashore by the flotilla of Roman vessels anchored in the harbour of Alexandria, he says 'ships of Kittim shall come against him' (Daniel 11.30). By referring to the Roman vessels as 'ships of Kittim' he established a precedent which was to be followed in the Qumran texts, where Kittim is regularly a code-word for Romans. But why should Daniel use this expression? Almost certainly he was harking back to Balaam's oracle of the latter days which foretold how ships shall come from Kittim and shall afflict Asshur and Eber' (Numbers 24.24). The original historical reference of this oracle is a question in its own right: few will suppose that Balaam had Antiochus Epiphanes in mind. But the implication of Daniel's language is that the incident of 168 B.C. was the true fulfilment of Balaam's oracle: an interpretative tradition was thus set up which finds independent written attestation centuries 'Later in the Targum of Onqelos, it which Numbers 24.24 is rendered 'ships will come from the Romans', and in Jerome's Vulgate, which renders the same clause 'they will come in triremes from Italy'.

Here, then, within the Hebrew Bible itself are two levels of exegesis. Balaam's oracle had one distinct primary sense: it is the task of historical exegesis to determine what it was—whether the invasions by the sea peoples at the end of the lath century B.C. or some later occasion, perhaps in the period of the monarchy. But when we come to Daniel and his successors we recognize the beginning of a new exegetical tradition which in their eyes represented the definitive sense of the oracle: we may classify their interpretation under the heading of

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<sup>19</sup> Compare Habakkuk 1.5 with Isaiah 29.1.4.

'plenary sense' but they might perhaps have maintained that it was the 'primary sense' it was to this that the oracle pointed from the beginning.

Again, Daniel goes on to describe the sequel to Antiochus's rebuff in terms which can be checked, point by point, against the available historical evidence (Daniel 11.31-39). But there comes a moment when history fails and yet the remaining career of Antiochus must be traced, until his final downfall. However, the apocalyptist is not

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thrown back on unaided imagination: the last stages in the oppressor's career had been foretold by the prophets. Isaiah had told how 'the Assyrian', invading the holy land from the north, would fall with a mighty crash at the peak of his arrogance, in the very act of shaking his fist at Jerusalem, and how he would be devoured by no human sword (Isaiah 10.27b-34; 31.8). In more explicit detail, Ezekiel had told how Gog, the invader 'from the north, would be turned round in his tracks, be made to go back by the way that he came, and be overthrown on the mountains of Israel (Ezekiel 39.1-6). With this wealth of information about the fate, of the last Gentile invader, all that was necessary for Daniel was to reword it in accordance with the idiom of the preceding part of his vision, until at last the invader comes to his end 'with none to help him' (Daniel 11.45).

#### 4 Wrestling Jacob

We come back now to the matter of extended application accruing in the development of a plenary sense well beyond the biblical period, and this time a well-known patriarchal narrative will serve as an example.

The story of Jacob's wrestling with the angel at the ford of Jabbok (Genesis 32.24-32) is one that is capable of being interpreted at several levels. We know it as an incident in the life of Jacob as recorded in Genesis, but it may have had an earlier currency—earlier even than its inclusion in an oral or documentary source underlying the Pentateuchal narrative. Sir James Frazer suggested that 'we may, perhaps, provisionally suppose that Jacob's mysterious adversary was the spirit or jinnee of the river, and that the struggle was purposely sought by Jacob for the sake of obtaining his blessing'; he compared Menelaus's grappling with the sea-god Proteus.<sup>20</sup> well, maybe: Frazer acknowledged that any explanation of the story 'must be to a great extent conjectural', and one might equally well conjecture that the river-god was disputing passage with this intruder into his domain.<sup>21</sup> But neither of these conjectures belongs to the realm of biblical interpretation. In this realm the primary sense of the story is the sense intended by the biblical author.

If we were examining the significance of an episode in Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, it would be unsatisfactory to look up Holinshed's *Chronicle*, from which Shakespeare is said to have derived the plot, and conclude that the 'primary' sense of the episode is the sense which it bears in that work of historical fiction, or even in some oral tradition antedating Holinshed. For the student of Shakespeare, the primary sense would be that which Shakespeare intended it to bear. So, for the student of Scripture, the primary sense of the incident of wrestling Jacob

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<sup>20</sup> J. G. Frazer, *Folk-Lore in the Old Testament* (London, 1923), pp.251ff.

<sup>21</sup> Cf. A. S. Peake in Peake's *Commentary on the Bible* (London, 1919), p.160.



is that intended by 'the author of Genesis',<sup>22</sup> to quote a form of words from the 1962 edition of Peake's *Commentary* which one would not expect to find in the

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original edition. For our present purpose it makes little difference whether we think of the Yahwist or of the final author of Genesis: for the one or the other, the significance of the incident is that which it has in the context of the story of Jacob, his dealings with God and the development of his character. It is not, I think, reading into the narrative something which the author did not intend if we conclude that Jacob's experience at the ford of Jabbok crystallizes the whole tenor of his life up to that point: only when his strength and his self-confidence were drained away, when he was disabled by a stronger than himself and could do nothing but cling for dear life and refuse to let the stranger go until he received his blessing, was that blessing actually given. Jacob received the name Israel there because he had striven with God and men, and had prevailed (Genesis 32.28); he left the place, empowered and enriched. because, as he said, 'I have seen God face to face, and my life is preserved' (Genesis 32.30). There is no need to import this language into the narrative, because it is there already, and points to the sense which the author intended—the primary sense.

For various forms of the plenary sense of the narrative we go to later writers. Hosea, like the author of Genesis, uses the incident (which he may have known in a slightly different form) to depict the progress of Jacob's experience of God (Hosea 12.3f.):

In his manhood he strove with God;  
he strove with the angel and prevailed,  
he wept and sought his favour.

Centuries later, the author of the Book of Wisdom says that Wisdom acted as umpire at Jacob's wrestling-match (Wisdom 10.12):

in his arduous contest she gave him the victory,  
so that he might learn that godliness  
is more powerful than anything else.

This is a pardonable moralization, not so remote from the primary sense as the lesson drawn by Philo—that 'to win honour in both spheres, in our duty towards the uncreated and created, requires no petty mind, but one which stands in very truth midway between the world and God'.<sup>23</sup>

With the coming of Christ, and the consequent understanding of the Old Testament scriptures as bearing witness to him, a new dimension, of biblical interpretation was opened up. But the Christian interpretation of the Old Testament in the New is restrained and disciplined by contrast with what we find in the post-apostolic period. There is no reference to wrestling Jacob in the New Testament nor yet in the Apostolic Fathers. But Justin Martyr, in his *Dialogue with Trypho the Jew*, asserts confidently that the mysterious wrestler, whom the narrator describes as 'a man', and of whom Jacob speaks as 'God', must be the one whom Christians acknowledge as both God and

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<sup>22</sup> S. H. Hooke in Peake's *Commentary on the Bible* (London, 1962), p.175.

<sup>23</sup> Philo, *De ebrietate*, 82f.

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man.<sup>24</sup> Trypho is increasingly bewildered as he listens to the flow of Justin's argument: such application of ancient Scripture is quite foreign to him, and he cannot comprehend how anyone can understand it in such a sense as Justin expounds. But to Justin this understanding of the incident is all of a piece with his understanding of other Old Testament incidents in which God, or his angel, appears or speaks to human beings in the form of a man. The christological exposition of such incidents is hardly attested, if at all, in the New Testament documents, but it was a well-established tradition by Justin's time, for Justin can scarcely be supposed to have initiated it. Once established, the tradition was well maintained.

The story of wrestling Jacob, says Dr Peake, in the original edition of his *Commentary*, 'has been so filled with deep, spiritual significance (Charles Wesley's 'Come, O Thou traveller unknown' is a classic example) that it is difficult for the modern reader to think himself back into its original meaning.'<sup>25</sup> But 'Come, thou traveller unknown' as a superb example of what is meant by the plenary sense of Scripture.

I have thought from time to time that I would like to write a thesis, or else supervise one, on 'Biblical Interpretation in the Hymns of Charles Wesley'. One does not go to Wesley for historical exegesis or the primary sense, but time and again one finds in him the plenary sense. The 12 stanzas of 'Come, O thou traveller unknown' present a transmutation of the story of Wrestling Jacob into thoroughgoing something akin to Paul's mysterious experience recounted in 2 Corinthians 12.2-10, which taught hint the lesson: 'When I am weak, then I am strong'. But, so far as the author of Genesis is concerned, this in my judgement is the lesson which he intended to be drawn from the story of wrestling Jacob; and Charles Wesley, in drawing out and developing this lessons, does no injustice to the primary intention; rather, he lays bare the plenary sense in a Christian idiom:

And when my all of strength shall fail,  
I shall with the God-Man prevail.

## 5 Present application

At the beginning of the 19th century, when new critical methods were being applied to the biblical records, F. D. E. Schleiermacher manifested a hermeneutical concern as well as a critical interest.<sup>26</sup> Granted that the new methods disclosed the intention of the biblical writers in their contemporary context, what did their message mean to readers in the different context of Schleiermacher's day? How could the new critical contributions enrich the present understanding and application of that message?

Similar questions are asked. today and fresh attempts are made to answer them by interpreting Scripture as an integral and controlling element in the continuing life of the people of God, or as the

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<sup>24</sup> Justin, *Dialogue with Trypho* 58; 126.

<sup>25</sup> Peake's *Commentary* (London, 1919), p.160.

<sup>26</sup> F. D. E. Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith*, ET (Edinburgh, .591 ff. *et passim*).

locus of that life-giving and active word which awakens the individual's faith, helps him to understand his existence and thus transforms it and imparts 'authenticity' to it, liberating him from his bondage to the past and enabling him to be 'open' towards the future. This is the idiom of the 'new hermeneutic'.<sup>27</sup>

An example on the grand scale of what is involved in interpreting a book of the Old Testament 'as scripture of the church', as an integrated element in the Christian canon, is provided by Brevard Childs' magisterial commentary on Exodus which has replaced the earlier commentary by Martin Noth in the Old Testament Library of the SCM Press.<sup>28</sup> Here is a work which takes fullest account of all that historico-critical exegesis can say about the text, but goes on to maintain that the Church's canon, and indeed the Church's life, constitute the context within which the text is most fully to be understood. The theme which gives the book of Exodus its Greek name, Israel's departure from Egypt, is of course a leitmotif in Old Testament thought about God and reflection on Israel's history from that time forth, and supplies a pattern for the enfolding of that later redemptive act in which Christians find supreme significance. But does the New Testament treatment of the Exodus theme or the New Testament application of the story of Moses make a contribution to our understanding of the book of Exodus? The answer, I think, is Yes, if we are thinking of the plenary sense; the primary sense of Exodus is to be sought within the context of the Old Testament book itself, or at least within the text. Pentateuch itself, but the later Christian interpretation brings out a deeper sense in so far as it uncovers layers of meaning implicit in the primary sense. One obvious criticism is forestalled by Professor Childs: to those who point out that Jewish tradition as well as Christian tradition has its 'plenary interpretation' of the Exodus story he replies that he is well aware of this, and that the Jewish tradition also must have its place in the full exposition of the text.<sup>29</sup>

Professor Childs has shown a measure of courage remarkable in an academic theologian, because he knows how vigorously he must be criticized by fellow-exegetes and theologians for importing 'irrelevant' considerations into the interpretation of an ancient Hebrew text. Some of the criticisms already voiced must be recognized to have some substance.<sup>30</sup> But Professor Childs' *Exodus* is a pioneer work, so far as the production of a full-length scholarly commentary along these lines is concerned. It is not to be compared with the undisciplined naïveté of Wilhelm Vischer a generation ago. In a day when it is proclaimed that 'Historical biblical criticism is bankrupt'<sup>31</sup>—a proposition with which I disagree, while I can understand the mood which lies behind it—Professor Childs' 'canonical exegesis' might point a way forward. But if it does, the way forward will be in essence the way of plenary interpretation—that is to say,

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<sup>27</sup> Cf. J. M. Robinson and J. B. Cobb, *The New Hermeneutic* (New York, 1964).

<sup>28</sup> B. S. Childs, *Exodus: A Commentary* (London, 1974), p.ix.

<sup>29</sup> Cf. his inclusion of 'Calvin and Drusius, Rashi and Ibn Ezra' among the 'giants' who 'need to be heard in concert with Wellhausen and Gunkel', p.x.

<sup>30</sup> The review of a Christian scholar, J. A. Wharton ('Splendid Failure or Flawed Success?') in *Interpretation* 29 (1975), pp.266ff. is more critical than that by a Jewish scholar, J. Neusner, in *Journal of Jewish Studies* 27 (1976), p.91.

<sup>31</sup> W: Wink, *The Bible in Human Transformation* (Philadelphia, 1973), p.1.

a way which does not break loose from the primary sense, but expounds the text so as to reveal its relevance to human life today, just as the successive generations intervening between the original readers and ourselves have heard it speak to their varying conditions.

## 6 The hermeneutical circle

We find frequent reference nowadays to the 'hermeneutical circle', an expression which bears more than one meaning. It may denote the circular movement from exegesis to theology and back from theology to exegesis; or it may denote the interpretative process flowing from subject to object (i.e., from the reader to the text), or indeed from object to subject, and then back again, as the one interacts with the other.<sup>32</sup> Any such circular motion must be treated circumspectly.

Naturally, the more one studies (say) Paul, the more one's understanding of Paul's thought grows, so that it becomes easier to determine what Paul means in any one passage of his correspondence. Yet we should remember that Paul was accused of vacillation by some of his critics, and that he himself speaks of being 'all things to all men'. While then, there is a reasonable presumption that he will not be wildly or radically inconsistent with himself, we must be prepared to find some places where he expresses himself atypically, and these cannot simply be interpreted in terms of our reconstruction of 'Paulinism'. The need for caution is all the greater when the attempt is made to construct a system or biblical theology on the exegesis of several biblical authors and then to use that system as an exegetical tool.

Such attempts were commonplace in the generations before Peake, but in more recent times we have to deal with a tendency which lays itself open to the same objection. Professor Bultmann has 'long insisted that exegesis without presuppositions is impossible,<sup>33</sup> and his own work illustrates this proposition. He sets out upon the exegetical enterprise with the presuppositions of Heideggerian existentialism and finds those presuppositions confirmed in the text. It must be conceded that, when one attempts in this way to simplify or summarize Professor Bultmann's hermeneutical procedure, it is all too easy to do him injustice: this I should be very sorry to do. His name is one that ought never to be mentioned without profound respect. But he himself affirms as explicitly as possible that Martin Heidegger and other existential philosophers 'are saying the same thing as the New Testament and saying it quite independently'.<sup>34</sup>

But whether the hermeneutical circle moves in the realm of the older scholasticism or in that of the newer existentialism, it can very readily become what logicians call a vicious circle, in which, by virtually assuming what requires to be proved, one arrives at the point from which one set out.

I think we can tell when, Dr Peake would have stood on this

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<sup>32</sup> Cf. H. Diem, *Dogmatics*, ET (Edinburgh, 1959), pp.236ff.; M. Heidegger, *An Introduction to Metaphysics*, ET (Oxford, 1959), pp.146ff.; E. Fuchs, Marburger *Hermeneutik* (Tübingen, 1968), pp.79ff.

<sup>33</sup> R. Bultmann, 'Is Exegesis without Presuppositions Possible?', ET in *Existence and Faith*, ed. S. M. Ogden (London, 1961), pp.289ff.

<sup>34</sup> R. Bultmann, 'New Testament and Mythology' in *Kerygma and Myth*, ed. H. W. Bartsch, ET, i (London, 1953), p.25.

issue, and I am sure I should gladly take my place beside him. Inevitably we come to the Bible with our presuppositions. But the wise course is to recognize those presuppositions, to make allowances for them, to ensure that they do not exercise an undue influence on our understanding of what we read. It is the unconscious and unsuspected presuppositions that are harmful. There are, indeed, some people who say: 'Yes, I have my presuppositions, but then, you have yours; if you read the Bible in the light of your inadequate presuppositions, I am entitled to read it in the light of my much more adequate ones.' But if I suspect that someone's false conclusions are due to the false assumptions with which he started, that does not justify me in letting my own assumptions, true though they believe there to be, play a part in exegetical work which they have no right to play.

Dr Peake was widely criticized in his day by people who believed that his conclusions were incompatible with biblical inspiration. What they often meant was that his conclusions were incompatible with what they understood biblical inspiration to involve. Let biblical inspiration or any other aspect of biblical authority be stated in the most emphatic and all-embracing fashion: any such statement is devoid of real content unless we discover, by critical and exegetical study, what the biblical text says and means. Our theology must depend on our exegesis, not vice versa. And if we allow our exegesis to be controlled by *theologoumena*, we shall quickly find ourselves involved in circular reasoning. I have friends who say, 'Well, yes; but all theological reasoning is circular; let us simply make sure that we get into the right circle'. I cannot accompany them on their magic roundabout.

To approach the exegetical task with unchecked theological assumptions is likely to have the effect which Harnack once ascribed to the canonizing process: it 'works like whitewash', he said; 'it hides the original colours and obliterates all the contours'.<sup>35</sup> There was a time when Paul and John and the writer to the Hebrews could not be allowed to express their independent insights; they had to say virtually the same thing and be fitted into a comprehensive theological system. Today indeed there has been a tendency to go to the opposite extreme: to emphasize the differences between the New Testament writers to a point where their common and fundamental witness to Jesus as Lord has been overlooked. But this unity of witness is a unity in diversity, and it is the province of exegesis to bring out the diversity within the comprehensive unity. The diversity may be found even within one writer: anyone, for example, who reads the recent work by John Drane entitled *Paul: Libertine or Legalist?*<sup>36</sup> will realize that it would be very difficult to accommodate the distinctive emphases of Galatians and 1 Corinthians within a single corpus of teaching called Paulinism.

It is not given to mortals to attain complete objectivity—not even

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to mathematicians. But one can at least acknowledge it as an ideal and endeavour to approach it as closely as possible, instead of decrying it as a misleading will-o'-the-wisp. Theology is more than the application of grammar to the text, but it cannot dispense with the application of grammar to the text as a basic procedure.

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<sup>35</sup> A. Harnack, *The Origin of the New Testament*, ET (London, 1925), p.141.

<sup>36</sup> J. W. Drane, *Paul: Libertine or Legalist?* (London, 1974), a work (based on a Ph.D. thesis written in the University of Manchester Department of Biblical Criticism and Exegesis) which discerns a dialectic process in Paul's capital epistles.

I have known classical teachers and colleagues to engage occasionally in biblical exegesis. They may have been Christians; they may have been agnostics. But when, without theological *parti pris*, they applied to the New Testament documents the interpretative skill's acquired in their classical studies, their contributions, in my experience, have always been illuminating. And why? Because they helped to uncover the primary sense of the documents.

The conclusion of the whole matter, as I see it, is this: the way to ensure that the extended interpretation or existential application of the text does not get out of hand is to determine the primary sense (even which it is complex) and keep it constantly in view. The plenary sense, to be valid, must be the plenary sense *of the biblical text*: it will remain that if its relationship and consistency with the primary sense be maintained. Hermeneutic must never be divorced from exegesis. This was something on which Dr Peake insisted in his own time and in his own way: we shall do well if we follow his example.

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