

BIBLICAL HERMENEUTICS: PART II

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V

A SECOND basic principle is: *each passage must be interpreted according to its literary form.*

Some years ago the Scriptures were published under the title, *The Bible Designed to be read as Literature*. While this may lead to the danger of reducing the Bible to the level of any other book it at least reminds the reader that the Bible is literature. As literature it employs all kinds of literary forms and categories: poetry (Psalms), prose (Samuel), parable (much of our Lord's teaching), allegory (Ezekiel 16), apocalyptic (Revelation), fable (Judges 9: 8-15) and so on. One of the grave errors of some biblical interpretation is a refusal to recognize these literary forms and to interpret accordingly. As a result it is not surprising that the conservative attitude to Scripture has been dismissed by many sincere scholars in the belief that such interpretation represented the main stream of evangelical thought. To many a literal understanding of the Bible has meant interpreting every part of Scripture as though it were prose. As Dr. Packer says, 'It would be better to call such exegesis literalistic rather than literal so as to avoid confusing two very different things.'

The question, then, which must be asked by any serious student of the Bible is, 'What is the literary form or genre of the passage?' (though it must be admitted that the answer is not always crystal clear). Then once the form is determined the passage must be interpreted according to this form. To treat poetry as prose would lead to all manner of absurdities. Who has seen Lebanon exercise a calf-like skip (Ps. 29: 6)? or the stars take up weapons of war (Jdg. 5: 20)? Moreover, a recognition of the literary forms of Judges 4 and 5 would preclude any suggestion that these accounts of the battle of Deborah are contradictory. They are two different ways of describing the same event. It must be recognized that poetry may employ much metaphor, hyperbole (exaggeration for emphasis) and so on. On the other hand, it also must be recognized that poetry can include plain statements of fact. 'I'm just a mole, And I live in a hole' is poetry (of a sort), but it is also a plain statement concerning the habitat of that particular creature. Again, to treat parable as allegory leads to many mistakes. Much of what is merely furniture to set the scene in a parable (the broom, the fatted calf, the two pennies) is sometimes given a meaning (the evangelist, Christ, the two sacraments) which distorts and distracts from the true meaning of the story. So with apocalyptic: it must not be treated as though it is continuous narrative. A course in literary criticism would serve as a useful prelude to the study of the Bible.

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Our third main principle is: *The Old Testament must be interpreted by the New Testament*. Since Scripture interprets Scripture and revelation is progressive (though not contradictory), the next major rule to be adopted is that the New Testament must act as our authoritative guide in understanding the Old. Three preliminary points must first be considered.

(i) There is a distinction between quotations which are given authoritative explanations and quotations which are merely literary allusions. These are not always easy to distinguish but it may safely be said that the vast majority of quotations from the Old Testament are given authoritative interpretations. Many such are introduced by a introductory formula (*e.g.* 'It is written', 'that it may be fulfilled which was spoken by the prophet') but not necessarily so. In the Apocalypse for example there are many references to the Old Testament without such an introductory formula. At other times, however, because its contents are well-known to him, the

writer may naturally use the language of the Old Testament in expressing his thoughts without meaning to give an explanation of such a phrase.

(ii) Often there is a presupposed theology in the mind of the New Testament writer which he assumes his readers share. For example, it would seem that the perplexing quotation, 'Out of Egypt have I called my son' (Ho. 11: 1; Mt. 2: 15) which Matthew uses in reference to Christ's departure from Egypt had some such theology. Two points are assumed: the Exodus typology and the embodiment of Israel in Christ the true Son. This factor may also account for the slightly altered text used by the New Testament writers. Paul not only uses other versions than the Hebrew but even *ad hoc* renderings of his own, for he valued the letter not for its own sake but because it conveyed a meaning. His method was a quotation-exposition. Ellis has described Paul's use of the Old Testament as 'grammatical-historical plus', for Paul does not ignore the grammar and the history but his exegesis begins where the grammatical-historical ends. The Old Testament has a wider meaning than its immediate historical application. The text must be fitted to a proper interpretation of Old Testament history as a whole and it is this added factor which must be borne in mind.

The theological concept of solidarity throws light on Paul's use of Psalm 69: 9 (Rom. 15: 3), for the application of the Psalm can naturally and easily pass from the persecuted Psalmist to the persecuted Christ (though this does not make the whole Psalm Messianic in every detail). Again, the New Testament's use of the 'Servant' passages in Isaiah makes them sometimes refer to Christ and sometimes to the church, that is, to *the* Servant and the servants of the Servant united to Him by faith and the Holy Spirit. See, for example, Matthew's use of Isaiah 42: 1-4 (Mt. 12: 18-21) and Paul's use of Isaiah 49: 6 (Acts 13: 47). The former finds its primary fulfilment in Christ (though it would seem that part of the Servant's work must be accomplished *through* the ministry of Christ's body, the Church, and the latter is made to refer to the Church and to Paul and Barnabas in particular).

(iii) At other times when the New Testament quotes the Old by way of fulfilment it is not implied that the Old Testament words have exclusive reference to the New Testament situation but that in both passages there is a similarity of principle. The example of Acts 1: 20 may elucidate. Here Luke makes two quotations from imprecatory Psalms (69: 25 and 109: 8) as being fulfilled in the fate of Judas and the appointment of a successor. It is not suggested that this is a specific prophecy of Judas; rather the two situations in the Psalms and Acts have a common principle, the deposing of all enemies of God and His cause and the raising up of the righteous to supplant them.

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It may further be said that *the Old Testament is to be understood Christologically and churchly*. God is primarily concerned with people and their relationship to Him rather than with things and places. He may teach by way of things and places (*e.g.* the tabernacle and Jerusalem) but they find their primary fulfilment in Christ and the Church. The New Testament clearly gives very little place to what is merely earthly and temporary; in fact it goes out of its way to show their redundancy. Their purpose has been that of 'object lessons' to portray the relationship between Christ and His Church. The 'object' has no significance in its own right.

(i) *The Old Testament is to be understood Christologically*. Our Lord Himself has laid the foundation for this rule in Luke 24: 27, 44; John 5: 39. The Old Testament speaks of Christ in various ways.

a. *Particular prophecies*. For example see Isaiah 7: 14 and Matthew 1: 23; Micah 5: 2 and Matthew 2: 5, 6; Isaiah 53: 7, 8 and Acts 8: 32-35; Psalm 22: 18 and John 19: 24, though it is possible that some of these particular prophecies may have a double fulfilment or a twofold reference.

b. *The Old Testament is incomplete without Christ*. There are question marks over some parts of the Old Testament which disappear only at the

appearance of Christ. This has been well shown by Campbell Morgan in his book *The Answers of Jesus to Job*. The problems set by certain verses in Job are given their answer in the person and work of Christ. For example, Job 23 and John 14: 9; Job 14: 14 and John 11: 25; Job 19: 25 and Hebrews 7: 25. Ecclesiastes, with its limited view of the world and its questionings on life, finds its completion in the Christ who comes to the world from the outside and thus gives us a new perspective. Its cry of 'vanity' is answered by the 'not in vain in the Lord' of 1 Corinthians 15: 58. The Psalms with their limited doctrine on life after death with its attendant problems are also answered in resurrected Christ.

c. *Typologically*. The Old Testament also witnesses to Christ by way of type but as typology has reference to both Christ and the Church this will be treated later in Part III.

(ii) *The Old Testament is to be understood in terms of the Church*. Much confusion arises in our appreciation and understanding of the Old Testament on account of a twofold failure: a failure to recognize the organic unity that exists between the people of God in both Testaments, and a failure to accept the New Testament interpretation of the Old Testament promises to Israel concerning her future, her land, her city and so on.

The people of God in the Old Testament and the New are one. The same terms are used to describe them, *e.g.* a peculiar people, a chosen nation, a royal priesthood. There is only one basic covenant which is common to both Testaments, the Abrahamic, of which all the faithful are members. The Christian of the New Testament is the seed of Abraham (Gal. 3: 29). The olive tree of Romans 11 represents the believing Jew of the Old Testament and the Gentile of the New. There is only one olive tree. The condition of entry is the same for all — faith. The New Testament is quite clear that the Jew is only accepted on the ground of faith: there is no alternative way of salvation. The New Testament, moreover, in its use of the Old Testament prophecies concerning the Jews does not allow the Jews to have a theocratic destiny outside the Church. As Carnell says, 'Prophecy is not self-interpreting. When Malachi says, "Behold I will send you Elijah the prophet before the great and terrible day of the Lord comes" (Mal. 4: 5) no exegesis of the Old Testament would suggest that Malachi spoke of John the Baptist. Yet Jesus assures us that John was the object of the prophecy (Mt. 11: 14, 17: 9-13).' National Israel has been rejected because of its rejection of Christ (Mt. 21: 40-43). In the light of all this it is not enough to say that the promises to Old Israel are taken over by the Church. Because of this organic unity and continuity they are already the possession of the Church as part of the continuing people of God. The New Testament does not seem to allow a separate destiny for the Jew.

Secondly, it would seem from the New Testament that the writers there know of no future for earthly Jerusalem, the earthly promised land, the earthly temple. These have all served their purpose in the Old Testament and have now given way to their spiritual counterparts. John, for example, speaks of the New Jerusalem which comes down from above (Rev. 21: 2); Paul writes, 'The Jerusalem above is free and she is our mother' and makes a strong contrast with the earthly Jerusalem. Compare also Isaiah 62: 2 with Revelation 2: 17, Isaiah 60: 11 with Revelation 21: 25, 26; Isaiah 60: 14 with Revelation 3: 9. Similarly with the land: the condition of entry is meekness (Mt. 5: 5; compare Is. 60: 21 and Ps. 37: 11), and the land is a spiritual experience not a geographical location (Heb. 4). The return to the land is experienced by the faithful, and not the unbelieving, for it is a high and holy way along which the ransomed of the Lord walk (Is. 35).

It is clear then that Old Testament prophecies *need* interpreting and cannot be accepted as they stand, and that the interpretation we must accept, on the ground that scripture interprets scripture, is that which is given by the New Testament. This, in part, is what is meant when we say that the Old Testament must be interpreted in terms of the Church.