

## THE METAPHYSICS OF BIBLICAL STUDIES

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Someone with fine historical perspective should write a history of the various frameworks that have been used to interpret the Biblical texts. From early times Roman Catholicism felt confident in treating the texts as subject to external criteria. For all Luther made of the centrality of Scripture, when he taught Scripture for the Roman Church before his break he was free in his interpretation. It would be interesting to know how the determiners of the canonical texts thought about how the texts might be interpreted once established. In any case it is clear that there have been numerous frameworks used to interpret Scripture, so that, unless we simply assume that "the later the better," we need to understand all the approaches that have been used so that we can make an informed choice.

In defining this special kind of metaphysical inquiry Aristotle said that most of us assume our first principles and argue from them rather than turn back and question the first principles themselves. Someone must, he thought, set out the various principles that could be used and evaluate them comparatively. The metaphysician's task is not a welcome one, since a first principle, if it remains unquestioned, gives the one who argues from it a greater degree of security. To try to consider all the principles known is to commit one to insecurity, since even when categorized there always remains a haunting suspicion that there still remains another principle that if known would be superior. Biblical study needs such a metaphysical inquiry, primarily because we have for some time assumed the superiority of modern methodologies that seemed to transfer mere interpretation into a science.

There was a time of scientific optimism (which transferred across to fields other than the physical sciences and mathematics) when such optimism to replace old views once and for all was warranted. Philosophy fell under this spell too and is only now emerging from it. Linguistic analysis adopted the borrowed optimism that philosophical problems could be solved by the examination of language and its uses. Careful as philosophers have always been about their use of terms, and sensitive as they have been to the strengths and weaknesses of written expression, Biblical scholars seem even more to have fallen under the spell of settling old questions and achieving certainty regarding Biblical texts by using supposedly new textual tools.

Few can doubt the benefit of learning all we can from historical study about the times and cultures in which the texts originated. It is quite

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another matter, however, to think that one recent form of interpretation or method of approach is somehow superior to others and is to be used preferentially. It is any assumption of exclusivity that must be questioned. This is the metaphysical task. It is a different matter from what is sometimes called hermeneutics, the interpreting techniques we use to expound or to interpret a piece of literature, Biblical or otherwise. We have long known that interpretations vary, but it is crucial to decide if the meaning and even authenticity of the texts themselves are subject to some finally formed meaning. One may know many languages and have all historical knowledge, but it is quite another thing to believe that a historical-critical method is in any way to be preferred or is superior.

For instance, what was the use intended for the texts as the authors wrote them or as the codifiers selected them? We know that novels are to enjoy and respond to. If the Biblical texts were to inspire (for one thing), an uneducated reader could well have a superior insight, although of course if we allow the Holy Spirit in, illumination may be necessary to achieve insight into the texts. This is not to demean the scholar's knowledge of grammars and historical circumstances. Even granted a metaphysical inquiry into the forms of interpretation of sacred Scripture, Biblical scholars need not fear a loss of tenure. Scholarship deserves our honor; learning should never lose its importance. Even granted that inspired lay interpretation is fully within the notion of the use of Scripture, our concern is more for the possible variety of approaches available as technical frameworks for defining the texts.

Does entrance into the guild demand a single approach, or can the union of Biblical scholars be accused of restraint of trade? Most important of all, however, is the question of whether the enlightenment and the rise of science has given us a superior approach that must be enforced upon all. Granted, the enlightenment needed to break us loose from dogmatic interpretation. But did it in turn enforce its own dogma of approach from which we now dare not deviate for fear of being "unscholarly"? Do fully respectable scholars in fact have open to them the use of a variety of ways to approach Scripture? Can we, for instance, really establish authorship simply from examining texts?

Much the same problem infects Platonic scholarship. We compare styles in the dialogues and rank them earlier or later in time of composition according to repeated themes or styles. But what if Plato was not as consistent as his scholarly interpreters? What if, at a later time, he returned to an earlier theme or mode of composition? Although texts can be ordered according to similarities, what is to prevent the author of Job from being a single person whose mood changed and who altered his earlier conclusions after later thought? We know that creative authors are often unpredictable, so it is possible that they are not as rational in their development as their later interpreters would like them to be. In spite of the way themes appear and reappear, what is to prevent John from being a more complete gospel versus the simpler gospels that come earlier?

We know that thoughts and interpretations extant at the time influenced the writing of the gospels. But could those "early Church" theologies

have been "real," "true" interpretations, not additions? We have pretty well escaped any dogmatic determination of doctrine in theology except in some fundamentalist circles (both Christian and Muslim). It would be ironic if dogmatism lingered on in Biblical studies, when it began as a movement to free interpretation of texts from authoritative restriction. Are there, then, popes and bishops of Biblical interpretation whose hold on "authenticity" must be challenged in the hope of freeing us to use a variety of modes of approach in our attempt to interpret sacred texts? Is every principle used to fix meaning in a text subject to a metaphysical comparison of assumed first principles of approach, since science leaves us open to change theoretical frameworks?

One example: Why are the words in the earliest gospel the "truest"? Why are sayings later in time not "more true"? Certainly our disciple-authors did not fully understand what was going on, or its significance, at the time. Perhaps it was only later that the full meaning sank in. When first we speak of something important, are our earliest remarks always our best, or does it take time to formulate truth accurately? Certainly there is a metaphysical assumption involved to assert that the most primitive words, those uttered nearest to the source, rather than later theological reflection, are somehow more true. Why can it not be argued that, metaphysical assumption aside, John's gospel is "more true" than Mark's?

Metaphysically we need to distinguish between what we have inherited as texts and what we know (with any real certitude) about the process by which the canon was established. But most of all we need to separate out theories we have about the process of composition from how we might decide "truth" in the text. The determination of that is never an obvious affair but depends on a hundred theories, the most recent of which are not necessarily superior. That is, they are not unless we accept one theory about "progress" in theories as somehow obvious—a very unmetaphysical thing to do.

We must distinguish the procedures appropriate to studying ancient texts from matters in the physical sciences. Even there one cannot call the most recent theory the best. Aristotle, who defined "metaphysics" for us, also said that we must distinguish what is appropriate methodology for one subject matter from what is appropriate for another. Sacred texts surely have little resemblance to scientific experimentation, and so our degree of certainty available begins to recede toward zero in spite of seventeenth-to-nineteenth-century optimism to the contrary.

Where Biblical studies are concerned, then, our primary question concerns whether our position now is any more privileged than at the time of their composition. If there were uncertainties and differences and mysteries at the beginning, which the texts certainly reveal, why should we expect to become any more certain about crucial meanings today, at a time so distant from the generating events? True, we probably know more about language structures than our authors, who probably were more concerned with their message and their authorship. But what assumptions have we made about what a greater knowledge of language structure can reveal?

Certain theories did arise in philosophy, and were transferred to theology, about what one can learn by a careful study of language. But we must ask our metaphysical question: If the events were unclear and uncertainly perceived at their origin, particularly if they involve divine transcendence, why do we assume that our sophisticated knowledge of language structure can overcome that?

Where God is present, such events may always elude our grasp—or at least we must ask that question. In addition to linguistic sophistication we are more aware of the details of history than our early predecessors, or at least of a certain view of what “history” means. Along with assumptions about what linguistic study can do for us we must ask another metaphysical question. What do we mean by “history”? Is there only one concept of history? And what is it about any study of history that would lead us to believe that our comprehension is or could be superior to those present at the time? Such questions about the study of history have no obvious answers, and we must not assume a possible certainty available to Biblical scholars that historians themselves do not take for granted.

These metaphysical questions are of course separate from the issue of attempted translations of texts into various languages other than their originals. That is the province of scholars and linguists. If the original texts are not absolutely clear, however, their translation into languages other than those of their primitive composition in no way guarantees clarity, except as it may reflect the skill of the translator. The modern translator’s mind may very well be more clear than that of the original writer, who probably was laboring under a veil of religious excitement if not ecstasy. But are we better off with the later calm, or is there not something more authentic about spiritual possession? Perhaps we should require that all later scholars and interpreters testify to their experience with religiously inspiring experiences as one qualification of office.

Thus one of the chief metaphysical problems of Biblical studies is the place of ecstasy. In a rationalist and empiricist age, emotional involvement is often thought to be distorting, something to be removed in the interest of pursuing “truth.” But what if it is the case that, at least where religious documents are concerned, a dispassionate approach may not yield the “truth,” precisely because truth in such matters comes with inspiration? Like the pre-Socratics, perhaps we need to pray that God will break the bonds that chain our understanding for us and open the gates to insight. The ultimate metaphysical question for us all: What is necessary for, and what is the source of, insight where religious documents are concerned? Dangerous as emotional ecstasy can be, is it our only path to truth?