

Bible Reading for Orthodox Christians II

A Brief History of Biblical Interpretation

Or

Another fine mess we've gotten ourselves into

Plan of the Series

- What is the Bible? Where'd it come from?
 - Last Week
- Today: Brief History of Biblical Interpretation
- Next Week: Problems we all bring to Bible Study
- Finally (mercifully?): A modest proposal for Bible Study

The Bible

- Essentially: the Church's Book
 - Church came before the N.T.
 - Church chose to utilize *Septuagint* of O.T.
 - Church decided contents of N.T.
 - N.T. Canon first appears in A.D. 367
- Fact of enormous if oft ignored significance
 - If the Church Fathers were wrong about _____
 - How come they were so right about the Canon?

Interpreting Holy Scripture

- Six basic periods shape modern hermeneutics
 - Age of the Fathers
 - Medieval Humanism
 - Reformation
 - Enlightenment
 - 19th c. Positivism
 - 20th c. “Age of Doubt”

Age of the Fathers

- Two “schools” or techniques or tendencies
 - Alexandrian: Origen & St. Clement of Alexandria
 - Stressed allegorical interpretations
 - Antiochene: Theodore of Mopsuestia & Diodore of Tarsus
 - Stressed literal & historical meaning of texts

Alexandrian---Allegory

- Allegory: a literary, dramatic or pictorial device in which each literal character, object, or event represents a symbol illustrating an idea or moral or religious principle.
- Doesn't necessarily deny truth of depiction
- Earthly realities interpreted symbolically to bring out heavenly realities

Why Allegory?

- Find deeper, spiritual meaning of text
- Transcend difficulties in Biblical text
- Provide a Christian interpretation of O.T.
- Remarkable freedom (inside dogmatic boundaries---still available)

Alexandrian Allegory

- Easily Used
 - What did the plagues in Egypt represent?
 - How to interpret the “Prodigal Son?”
 - Virtually all parables interpreted allegorically
- World a symbol of heavenly kingdom
- Doesn't matter how you interpret
 - PROVIDED YOU AVOID HERESY
 - Ex. Creation Account

Origen

- c. 180 – 250
- First great Scriptural exegete
- Condemned at 2nd Council in Constantinople
 - Pre-existence of souls
 - Apokatastasis
 - Subordination of Son to Father
- Has modern defenders
- Christ the hermeneutical key to Scriptures

Antiochene Typology

- Typology: theory concerning the predictive relationship between O.T. & N.T.
- Historical reality foreshadows another historical reality
- Emphasis on literal interpretation
- People/events of O.T. fulfilled in N.T.
 - Sign of Jonah
 - Paschal Lamb
 - Types of the Cross

Age of the Fathers

- A “four-fold sense of Scripture”
 - Literal
 - Allegorical
 - Tropological (moral)
 - Anagogical (Eschatological)
 - St. John Cassian
- Balance of Faith & Reason
 - Reconcile scientific thought & theological data
- Scripture and Tradition interdependent

Medieval Humanism

- Rise of the University
 - Professionalization of learning
 - Scripture object of academic study
 - Link to living Church sometimes forgotten
 - New ways of interpretation
 - Scholasticism
 - Reconciling faith & reason
 - » God of faith is the God of reason!
 - » Transubstantiation
 - Importance of Aquinas---no closed doors

Reformation

- No new methodologies/two critical insertions
 - *Sola Scriptura*
 - Private Interpretation over Church/Tradition
 - Luther believed Bible easily accessible
 - Beginning of intense Biblical study
 - Scholarship focused on Masoretic text
 - Luther contemplated N.T. revisions
 - *James* the “epistle of straw”
 - Reconciling Paul & James
 - Not the only one to doubt canonicity of *James*

Reformation

- Real problem with Luther
 - The validity of personal interpretation
- Colloquy of Marburg
 - Zwingli vs. Luther over Real Presence
 - LUTHER: “I know of no other way than for you to honor the word of God and believe as we do. I remain true to my faith and cannot yield.”

Colloquy of Marburg

- LUTHER: “I repeat the passage from John. [He reads John 6:48-63.] It is your opinion that Christ moved away from the physical repast in his emphasis upon the spiritual repast. I reply that he wanted to teach the Jews of Capernaum that he should not be eaten like bread and meat in a bowl, like roast pork. When I partake of Christ in the bread, it is not in the vulgar sense, but as a gift of the Holy Spirit. Hence it is not a repast that is petty and repulsive, but one that is most holy. Man can still believe those words; the body of Christ is there.”

Colloquy of Marburg

- ZWINGLI: “I insist that the words of the Lord's Supper must be figurative. This is ever apparent, and even required by the article of faith: ‘taken up into heaven, seated at the right hand of the Father.’ Otherwise, it would indeed be absurd to look for him in the Lord's Supper at the same time that Christ is telling us that he is in heaven. One and the same body cannot possibly be in different places.”

Reformation

- The fundamental problem that won't go away
 - Is there an authoritative interpretation?
 - Can everybody be right?
 - How can such a document be the sole ground of faith?

The Enlightenment

- Application of the principles of the Scientific Revolution to society.
 - Sci Rev: physical universe works according to natural law discoverable by human reason
 - Intellectual bombshell for the elite
 - Enormously optimistic
 - Lure of science --- Ben Franklin & his kite!
 - Appeal to “humanists” --- “dare to think”

Enlightenment & Religion

- Primacy of Reason/Rejection of Tradition
- Deism---a watchmaker god
- Hostility to organized religion = superstition
 - Impedes ordinary human functions
 - Intolerant
 - Contrary to natural law
 - Barrier to reform---Marx's "opium of the people"
- Ideas inform much modern scholarship

19th c. Positivism

- Itself a “spin-off” of the Enlightenment
- a philosophical system that holds that every rationally justifiable assertion can be scientifically verified or is capable of logical or mathematical proof, and that therefore rejects metaphysics and theism.
- Theism: belief in the existence of a god or gods, especially belief in one god as creator of the universe, intervening in it and sustaining a personal relation to his creatures

Positivism & Scholarship

- History
 - Ranke’s famous “wie ist eigentlich gewesen”
 - The truth is out there & recoverable
 - Seminar method
 - Research based on primary sources
 - Primary sources
 - Find
 - Verify: source criticism
 - » External
 - » Internal

Positivism & Scholarship

- Ranke's historicism
 - Understand past on its own terms
 - History not a morality play
 - History not some grand overarching narrative

Positivism & Biblical Scholarship

- Impact on Biblical scholarship
 - Textual criticism (no autograph copies)
 - Historical criticism
 - Origins/authors/culture/historical content/literary form
 - But on Enlightenment terms
 - Primacy of reason
 - “Jesus Seminar”

20th c. “Age of Doubt”

- Is there truth out there?
- Even if there is, can it be found?
- Origins
 - Unsinkable ships that sink
 - Civilizations that go mad
 - Gulag/Auschwitz

20th c. Age of Doubt: Post-Modernism

- History as discourse
 - Difference between actual event & transmission of that event
 - Actions put into words of perceiver
 - Words themselves are signifiers---not action itself
 - Difference between narrative & how we perceive it
 - Deconstruction
 - Every time we come to a text, we're different
 - Ex. Me & Sinatra at age 20; at age 67
 - So: did author perceive the truth? record the truth?
 - Can receiver process “accurately?”

Bible & “Discourse”

- Only beginning to be applied to Scripture
 - Structuralism
 - Semiotic analysis (change in meaning in language)
 - Narrative criticism
 - Reader-oriented analysis
- Basic assumption: “literary work has life of its own beyond intentions and historical context of author & first readers”

• Stylianopoulos, *The New Testament: an Orthodox Perspective*

Agenda-Driven Hermeneutics

- Post-modern approach
 - Meaning in the eye of the beholder
 - Canonical
 - Existentialist
 - Liberationist
 - Feminist
 - Sociological/psychological
 - All give primacy to response of the reader
 - All based on primacy of human reason

So what?

- Virtually all interpretive “schools’ since the Reformation give primacy to human reason
- Ultimately, Bible is uncoupled from the Church
- Virtually all of us have been profoundly influenced by these tendencies

Next

- So why does all this (and other stuff as well) make it so hard for us to make sense of the Bible?