

The Bible Part 4:

On the Interpretation of Scripture

Nothing has caused more debate within the realm of Christianity and the world than the correct interpretation of Scripture. Even in the early stages of the Christian faith this issue was discussed with differing results. Most of the people who argued for a position contrary to the Christian faith defended their position by using a limited amount of biblical texts or through reducing the contents of Scripture. In the modern era, most of the branches of Christianity formed through new and varied interpretations of Scripture. Thus, the interpretation of Scripture is vital for a coherent and well-formed faith.

Scripture is a complex series of books. The Church declares that the primary author of Sacred Scripture is God. Many people scoff at this idea that God is the author. These people contend that God cannot be the author of Scripture given the many errors, contradictions, and strange events that occur. To some extent I see where they are coming from. This understanding of God as the author of Scripture implies that the books came down from Heaven as they are, no changes or additions made. The way we understand that God as the author of Scripture is that he inspired the authors who wrote these words to write as they did. Thus the inspired words contain the messages that God wanted portrayed to his people and the world.

How do we understand Scripture?

In order to answer this question, we need to start from several different points. First of all, the writers of each book of the Bible have a specific theme, idea, or message the author is trying to portray through the author's writing. Realistically we should be able to guess the main message in a given text. Finding and understanding this message can become a rather difficult challenge as historical clues and references are largely lost over the centuries. Second, the Bible is the living word of God. We can easily take for granted the power of this phrase and its importance for the life of a Christian. If we believe that the Bible is the living word of God, then we also believe that we can hear God speak to us through the Bible. This way of understanding God's word is also a form of interpretation, but of personal interpretation. Third, the Bible is interpreted in light of the Christian tradition. The events of the Old Testament are meant for the people of that time and place who needed that message. But God didn't have only a specific people and time in mind when he planned the salvation of all people. Therefore we can see the foreshadowing of future events of the Old Testament in the New Testament and interpret them as such.

On Interpreting the Bible:

The above simplified discussion of a much larger topic clearly doesn't provide justice for a debate that has raged over the centuries. For the remainder of this session, I will give an overview of the different styles and modes through which the Bible is interpreted while explaining their strengths and limitations.

Literal interpretation:

This form of interpretation is always the starting place. The Church Fathers, who had very little historical knowledge and commentaries to guide them, always started with this type of interpretation to insure they understood the main message of the text before applying other forms of interpretation. The method is simple: what did the author of the text intend to tell me, the reader? Although it sounds simple, we all know that this posed quite a challenge. First of all, we are guessing at the intended meaning of a historical document whose people we cannot ask and don't know. Second, religious texts tend to be a compilation of different writers who all have their own views and create a text of jumbled opinions. Nevertheless, we must start at this point.

A few ideas ease the challenge of finding the intended meaning of a text. What type of text am I reading? Is it a poem, a story, an interpretation, a song? Many of the problems of interpretation occur when we misinterpret the style of the text and force it to become something it is not. The best example comes from Scripture. When the Devil tempted Jesus in the desert, Jesus always used passages from the Books of Law whereas the Devil used hymns and psalms – not law – to justify his position. In many cases, the author of the book is very clear about the intended meaning of the text. St. Paul's letters and the prophetic books are great examples of texts in the which the author clearly has a reason for writing. For most of the books of the Bible, if we are willing to suspend judgement and read the book with an open mind, we will find the intended meaning.

The Bible is not simply one book with one meaning, it is a compilation of books that have a range of meaning. Yet, within this range and differentiation, one meaning remains clear: who is God? The Bible is trying to tell the story of a people who encountered God and told the story of their encounter for our faith. Regardless of what they discovered and their interaction with God, God also is telling the story of himself. Although we may find the intended meaning of a book, we are also looking for the intended meaning of all the books. This is called the canonical method. A canon is a measuring tool for how to understand a group of objects. Thus the canon of Scripture is the list of books that create the ruler by which we measure our definition of Scripture. Since the books can be seen as one, we can interpret with, amongst, and through one another. Thus the passage where Moses states that he wishes all people could have the spirit of God is a foreshadowing of Pentecost in the Book of Acts. We should also be looking for the places where Scripture comments on itself for our sake.

Even a literal interpretation of Scripture will have its limits. The greatest limitation is the "silence" of Scripture. The "silence" of Scripture are places where the Bible does not clarify a point or explain a message clearly. We can either gloss over these points or try to resolve them. The reality is that it takes more than a clear interpretation of Scripture to fully explain these passages. Thus the Church has more tools than simply Scripture. As the Second Vatican Council made clear, the two forms of revelation are Scripture and tradition. The lived experience of the Christian people, aka tradition, clarifies the message of Scripture by the faith and prayer of the people. Whenever we come across a passage of immense difficulty or contains a lack of historical weight for the current era, we can evaluate the claims of Scripture based on the lived experience of the peoples throughout the course of Christian history.

Allegorical interpretation

Following from the canonical interpretive method that I just described, the same idea can be applied in many different situations. Instead of striving to find the internal interpretations, some authors create interpretations consistent with the main themes but clearly not what the author intends. These types of interpretations are called allegorical interpretations. The most prominent example of an allegorical interpretation comes from the Book of Genesis. When Abraham is taking Isaac to be sacrificed, the main message is the faith of Abraham that he was willing to give up his son. The Church Fathers interpreted this passage allegorically to refer to the sacrifice of Jesus on the Cross. Isaac carries the wood which will be used for the sacrifice, Jesus carries the wood of the Cross on which he will hang. No sacrifice is provided, as Isaac makes clear in his question to Abraham, implying that Isaac is the sacrifice, the death of Jesus is considered the sacrifice as John makes clear in his Gospel. This form of interpretation adds layers and new dimensions to the already simple stories noting the strong connection of all of Scripture to the central theme of Jesus. Some people contend that Christians are trying to find these connections in Scripture to justify their belief. I argue that the Jewish people interpret Scripture in the same way through their teaching on the law as found in the Talmud.

As you can imagine, allegorical interpretations of Scripture must have their limits. Realistically, I could interpret Scripture to justify any position that I want. Jephthah's vow in the Book of Judges condones child sacrifice; the wars of the Israelites to conquer the Land of Canaan advocates for the destruction of the infidel; St. Paul seems to condone slavery, an all-male leadership, and a dismissiveness of the women in the church. All of these ideas come directly from passages in Scripture. For this reason, we must be careful with the weight and process of condoning biblical interpretations and especially allegorical interpretations.

Personal vs. public interpretations of Scripture

A personal interpretation of Scripture is either an interpretation revealed by God for a specific person or a specific way in which a person has interpreted Scripture. This form of interpretation is meant for the good of the individual or to help the individual to understand God. Anyone who feels that they have a specific interpretation as revealed from God must work to discern the following. 1. What am I called to do from this revelation? Is this in line with the Church's teachings? Is it moral? Does it conform to what I believe? 2. Does this interpretation conform to my image of God or to Scripture? We can easily convince ourselves that a particular interpretation is correct even though it might not conform to the faith or the whole of Scripture. 3. Granted that the above hold true, how did this interpretation affect me? Did I grow closer to God? Did I feel more peaceful, tranquil, grow in self-control, more able to love and forgive? Did I become more angry, selfish, prideful, frustrated? This is the way of discerning God's actions in one's life.

A public interpretation is a type of interpretation of Scripture meant for the good of all people. This type of interpretation undergoes the scrutiny of the Church to declare its authenticity and good for people. Those who think their interpretation is for public use must defend it against the rest of Scripture and the tradition of the Church. These two poles – Scripture and tradition – help maintain the authenticity of an interpretation to the faith and prevent conflicting and contrary interpretations from being accepted.

Moral or Anagogical Interpretation

This final form of interpretation focuses on the teaching component of Scripture. Scripture is meant to teach the faithful about the ways of God and how to live as his people. Thus we should be able to glean from Scripture moral laws, ways to live as people of faith, and a clear understanding of what God wants from his people. Much like the allegorical interpretive method, this interpretive method also needs the scrutiny of the Church and tradition to ensure that the interpretation holds to the truth of the Christian faith.

Evaluation of Interpretations

Although the primary question or point of interest of most people regards how to understand the Bible, more commonly today people are asking whether an interpretation is correct. Much like the other principles I have outlined in this document, the same principles apply to understanding the validity of an interpretation. If you are presented with an interpretation that seems strange or odd and you want to figure out its validity, follow these steps:

1. Read the passage that the interpretation is from. Does it make sense in light of this passage? Does it match with the main themes of the book? Does it seem to be consistent with the author of the text?
2. Does it conflict with the Christian tradition? Does it teach something contrary to Scripture or the teachings of the Church?
3. How am I meant to understand the interpretation? Is it a musing or a hypothetical idea? Is it intended to be the only authentic interpretation? Scripture cannot be exhausted on its meaning. Most passages have many different ways in which it can be interpreted.
4. Do I have to believe it? Most interpretations you will hear are personal interpretations and ideas that help us to understand the nature of God and to follow his ways. We are not required to believe these interpretations. Interpretation that directly relate to how we live as Christian people are more essential to follow.