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Symbolic and Literal Interpretations of Eschatological Passages: Reconsidering Biblical Language

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Introduction

I have heard Dr. John Bowling several times tell a story about Bob Benson. Invited to speak at prestigious gathering, Benson bought a new 3-piece suit which he wore to the event. After he concluded his address to the crowd he discovered that he had mis-buttoned his vest and that he had addressed this auspicious crowd with a vest that was misaligned. The lesson that he drew from his experience – and the lesson Dr. Bowling wanted to make – was that if you get the first button wrong the rest follows from there. So start in the right place.

I found myself thinking of this story, and its lesson, as I prepared for this presentation. My assignment was to address the question of problematic eschatological passages of Scripture, and the challenge of rightly discerning the correct reading. My primary resource for this challenge was to be found in the lessons of the history of exegesis. This growing area of biblical and theological study attempts to better understand and constructively appropriate the exegetical work of the church throughout its history.

I began with the expectation that the contribution of historic exegesis would be in the productive insights of its practice that would inform modern exegesis. Examples of the work of earlier exegetes might help us clarify the correct reading of the text – literal or symbolic. However, I quickly came to the conclusion that the most helpful contribution of the church's pre-critical exegesis would not come from method or interpretive results. The most significant contribution of pre-critical exegesis to this conversation concerns assumptions about the nature of biblical language.

Modern Biblical Understanding

Modern (i.e. post-Enlightenment) understanding of biblical language has begun from the assumption that language is singularly referential. The highest and best use (and understanding) of language is in an accurate correspondence between language and the reality being referred to by it. Biblical interpretation becomes, then, a search for the correct understanding of the original author, a discernment of authorial intent. Historical-critical tools aid in the understanding of immediate historical context, language and purpose of the authors or editors of the text. The search is, fundamentally, for the “correct” meaning.¹

The assumptions of Modern biblical interpretation include assumptions about the nature of biblical language and meaning. Biblical language is understood to be, effectively, univocal. It has one correct, preferred, or primary meaning. Implicit in this understanding is the assumption that the reality being signified in biblical language is likewise univocal.² Thus the task at hand. How can we **correctly** discern whether apocalyptic imagery should be understood literally or symbolically?

Postmodern Biblical Understanding

Modern assumptions concerning language have come under serious critique in postmodern reconsiderations of the nature of language and meaning. Our ability to understand the meaning of language in terms of a singular referent has been fundamentally challenged. The impact of context on perceived meaning and the nature of texts themselves predispose postmodern interpreters to the plurality of meaning available in, or through, the text. The perceived incapacity of the interpreter, or the nature of the language being interpreted, to reference singular meaning “behind” the text moves the postmodern interpreter to defer to plural meanings “in front of” the text. The meaning of the text is evocative rather than informative. The search for the meaning of the text becomes what it means to us or how it affects us.³

¹ Christopher A. Hall, *Reading Scripture with the Church Fathers* (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1998), 15; John J. O’Keefe and R.R. Reno, *Sanctified Vision – An Introduction to Early Christian Interpretations of the Bible*, (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2005), 8-9.

² This assumption is even evident in some discussions of non-literal, metaphorical, meaning. See J. Muis, “The Truth of Metaphorical God-Talk,” *Scottish Journal of Theology* 63(2): 148, 156.

³ Michael Cahill, “The History of Exegesis and our Theological Future,” *Theological Studies* 61(2000): 337, 344-5; David Aaron, *Biblical Ambiguity: Metaphor, Semantics and Divine Imagery* (Leiden: Brill, 2001) 5; Hall, 29.

We find ourselves attempting to navigate between the Scylla of a modern singularly referential understanding of language and the Charybdis of postmodern effectual, but non-referential language. Our goal must be “a hermeneutical theory adequate to the nature of the text which it is interpreting.”⁴ Method and conclusions are consequent to our foundational assumptions about the nature of biblical language. As Cahill notes, “Differing methods of exegesis commonly derive from differing understanding of the nature and function of the biblical text precisely as text.”⁵ It is precisely here, in our foundational assumptions about the nature and function of the biblical text, that historical exegesis may give us another option for a constructive way forward.⁶

Pre-Modern Biblical Understanding

The methods of earlier exegetes and their exegetical approach reveal significant points of commonality with the modern exegete. They reveal concern with the actual historical events, historical context, accurate understanding of original languages, philosophical concerns, and awareness of the nuances and meaning of language. Mayeski concludes, “What scholars call ‘the historical meaning’ of the text is close, but not identical, to what patristic and medieval theologians called the historic meaning.”⁷ The crucial difference is not pre-critical indifference to historical meaning or in different tools or methodologies, but in their understanding of the biblical text.

Throughout most of the history of the church its exegetes worked from different assumptions about biblical language.⁸ The reality described in Scripture was not easily reducible to propositional definition. The transcendent character of spiritual reality, including, but not limited

⁴ David C. Steinmetz, *The Superiority of Pre-Critical Exegesis*, *Theology Today* 37(1980-81): 37-38. Also Aaron, vii.

⁵ Cahill, 344

⁶ Cahill proposes that historical exegesis “illustrates and effects” what postmodernism proposes. Cahill, 337. However, pre-critical exegesis offers us more than a prior version of postmodern interpretive assumptions.

⁷ Marie Ann Mayeski, “Quaestio Disputata: Catholic Theology and the History of Exegesis,” *Theological Studies* 62(2001): 144. Mayeski also cites Jean Leclercq’s extensive study of medieval biblical interpretation, concluding, “medieval authors generally gave full attention to the historical sense of the text insofar as they could establish it.” 149. Also, Lewis Ayres, “Patristic and Medieval Theologies of Scripture – An Introduction” In *Christian Theologies of Scripture*, ed. Justin S. Holcomb (New York: New York University Press, 2006), 14-16 and Steinmetz, 33.

⁸ Ayres, 17.

to, statements about God, was rich with meaning and multi-dimensional in its reality.⁹ Discerning authorial intent was an enterprise in discerning the mind of God, the author of Scripture. An accurate discernment of the historical, or literal, meaning was an important component of biblical interpretation. But once this was established the interpretive work was not finished, but only begun.¹⁰

Scripture, as language describing this multi-dimensional realm of meaning, was essentially understood to be multivalent (or polyvalent). The largely misunderstood practice of allegory, the development of the Quadriga, the use of figures and types, and the search for “spiritual” meaning were expressions of exegetical efforts that worked from this particular assumption about the text. When properly exercised they were not importing extraneous meaning into the text (a form of inappropriate eisegesis), but were attempting to utilize interpretive tools adequate to understand the multivalent meaning of language describing a multivalent reality.

Danielou’s work on the typology of Gregory of Nyssa explains it as “another kind of extended meaning that discloses realities grounded in history, the life of Christ, and of the church.”¹¹ DeLubac’s study of interpretation from the patristic period through the 13th century concluded that, far from designating only the spiritual or non-historical meaning of the text, the term allegory was used for the totality of strategies by which the reader arrives at the full and multivalent meaning of the text.”¹² Louis Bouyer argues, further, that spiritual exegesis has biblical validation. “The core of his argument was a demonstration that, far from being an arbitrary framework imposed upon Scripture, such theological interpretation, in fact, constitutes a large part of the biblical corpus itself.”¹³

⁹ Richard A. Muller and John L. Thompson, “Biblical Interpretation in the Era of the Reformation: A View from the Middle Ages,” In Biblical Interpretation in the Era of the Reformation, ed. Richard A. Muller and John L. Thompson (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 338-9. Muller and Thompson note that pre-critical exegetes “accepted as a matter of principle what historical-critical exegetes often dismiss as a matter of principle, namely, that the text could have more than one level of meaning.” 339.

¹⁰ Ayres 17, O’Keefe and Reno, 7, 11.

¹¹ Mayeski, 145.

¹² Mayeski, 148.

¹³ Mayeski, 150; Muller and Thompson, 340.

Pre-critical exegesis did not understand the text as endlessly plural in meaning but as richly multivalent in meaning. While it is not simply, or singularly, referential, it is referential nevertheless, but in a way that more adequately accounts for the rich meaning inherent in the text. This includes accountability to the broader witness of Scripture beyond a particular text. The interpretation of that meaning was guided and constrained by the Rule of Faith, an essential accountability to the church's consensual reflection on Scripture.¹⁴

Contemporary Conversations

Similar considerations of language are evident in contemporary conversations. Colin Gunton, for example, addresses the question of “the degree to which human language is adequate to that which it seeks to express.”¹⁵ He observed a growing discontentment with “the old divides between...objectivism and relativism, and realizing that the question has to be put in an entirely different way.”¹⁶ Alternatively, he proposes considering biblical (and theological) language as metaphor. As Muis notes, most people consider metaphor as non-descriptive because it fails to be singularly referential. Even advocates of metaphor tend to accept that judgment. “Even defenders of metaphorical God-talk presuppose or accept that it is not cognitive at all or only in a weak sense.”¹⁷ Gunton, however identifies the “indirect” character of metaphorical language as a strength rather than a weakness. Language used effectively in description of a transcendent reality can only be indirect. Univocal language is fundamentally inadequate to the task. Thus, metaphor “becomes the most, rather than the least, appropriate means of expressing the truth.”¹⁸ A multivalent understanding of biblical language is not a concession to our inability to be more accurate (definitively referential) or a recognition of the multivalence of our own subjectivity (rejecting referential language) but a consequence of understanding the multivalent character of the reality biblical language references.

¹⁴ O’Keefe and Reno, 23, 118.

¹⁵ Colin E. Gunton, The Actuality of the Atonment – A Study of Metaphor, Rationality and the Christian Tradition (London: T & T Clark, 1998), 47.

¹⁶ Gunton, 40.

¹⁷ Muis, 146.

¹⁸ Gunton, 38. This brief characterization cannot do justice to Gunton’s developed argument for the superiority of metaphor. Gunton, 1-50. See also Muis, 153-157.

Our goal is a hermeneutic that is adequate for our understanding of the text. If our understanding of the text – and the reality to which it refers - is multivalent, then our hermeneutic must be adequate to account for multivalent meaning. The historical exegesis of the church can help us here. Neither endlessly plural, nor narrowly referential, historical exegesis approaches the text as rich with inherent, but multivalent meaning. When asked if the text should be understood literally or figuratively, the historical exegete’s answer would be, “yes.”

Conclusion

This brings us back to the beginning. If you begin to button your vest with the wrong button your vest will inevitably be aligned improperly. So, be careful where you begin. How you understand biblical language will significantly determine your conclusions about its meaning. Which brings us to our consideration of the Church’s long history of biblical exegesis. Its most significant contribution to us may be its understanding of the nature of biblical language and meaning, offering us a different place to begin, and perhaps leading us to a hermeneutic that is adequate for the text we seek to understand.¹⁹

¹⁹ Ayres, 18; Hall, 31; Muller and Thompson, 345.