

St. Philip: “Do you understand what you are reading?”
Ethiopian Eunuch: “How can I, unless someone guides me.” (Acts 8:30-31)

✠ Lecture III: Biblical Interpretation ✠

Every text demands to be interpreted; Holy Scripture is no exception. In the Holy Book of Nehemiah we read that the Levites “helped the people to understand the law” (**Neh 8:7**) and that they “gave the sense, and helped them to understand the reading” (**Neh 8:8**). Our Lord Jesus Christ interpreted many Old Testament passages to His disciples, “And beginning at Moses and all the prophets, He expounded [explained] to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning Himself” (**Lk 24:27**). He also challenged the views of the Pharisees about the Sabbath by introducing the correct interpretation of the commandment (**Mt 12:7-12**). There is a sense in which the history of Christian theology can be regarded as the history of biblical interpretation.

I) The Golden Rule for Interpreting Holy Scripture:

The early church was confronted with a major challenge from a movement known as Gnosticism. This diverse and complex movement, not dissimilar to the modern New Age phenomenon, achieved considerable influence in the late Roman Empire. The basic ideas of Gnosticism do not concern us at this point; what is of relevance here is that Gnosticism appeared very similar to Christianity at many points. For this reason, many early Christian writers, especially St. Irenaeus, viewed it as a major challenge.

Furthermore, Gnostic writers had a tendency to interpret New Testament passages in a manner that dismayed Christian leaders and prompted questions about the correct manner of interpretation of Holy Scripture. In such a context, an appeal to tradition became of major importance. The word ‘tradition’ literally means ‘that which has been handed down or over’, although it can also refer to ‘the act of handing down or over’. Irenaeus insisted that the Apostolic Church faithfully preserved the ‘rule of faith’, and that it had found its expression in the canonical books of Holy Scripture. The Church had faithfully proclaimed the same gospel from the time of the apostles until the present day. The Gnostics had no such claim of continuity with the early Church. They had merely invented new ideas, and were improperly suggesting that these were ‘Christian’. Irenaeus thus emphasized the continuity of the teaching and preaching office of the Church and its officials.

St. Tertullian adopted a related approach. Holy Scripture, he argued, is capable of being understood clearly, provided that it is read as a whole. However, he conceded that controversy over the interpretation of certain passages was inevitable. Heretics, he observed gloomily, can make Holy Scripture say more or less anything they like. For this reason, the tradition of the church was of considerable importance, as it indicated the manner in which Holy Scripture had been received and interpreted within the church. The right interpretation of Holy Scripture was thus to be found where true Christian faith and discipline had been maintained. A similar view was taken by St. Athanasius, who argued that Arius’ Christological mistakes would never have risen if he had remained faithful to the church’s interpretation of Holy Scripture. Tradition was thus seen as a legacy from the Apostles, by which the church was guided and directed toward a correct interpretation of Holy Scripture. It was not seen as a ‘secret source of revelation’ in addition to Holy Scripture, rather it was seen as a means of ensuring that the church remained faithful to the teaching of the Apostles, instead of adopting idiosyncratic interpretation of Holy Scripture.
(Adapted from Alister E. McGrath, *Christian Theology*, 1997, Blackwell publishers.)

It is really sad to see people who believe in the divinity of our Lord Jesus Christ, and hence are called Christians, misinterpret the word of God and fall in various heresies. The same word of God that is considered food for our spirits becomes a stumbling block in the path of their salvation⁺.

⁺ “Now the works of the flesh are evident, which are...dissensions, **heresies**...those who practice such things **will not inherit the kingdom of God**” (**Gal 5:19-21**)

St. John Chrysostom explained this sad state of events in his introduction to the homilies on the Holy Epistle to the Galatians, he said, ‘Diseased persons are injured even by healthy food.’

In the sixteenth century, Martin Luther paved the way for the current chaotic state of western Christians. He introduced his doctrine of *Sola Scriptura* or *Scripture alone* as a reaction to the distorted concept of tradition found in the Roman Catholic Church at that time. He argued that every individual had the right to interpret Holy Scripture as he or she pleased, without adhering to tradition. The way was thus opened for individualism, with the private judgment of the individual raised above the corporate judgment of the Church. In 1530, Sebastian Frank wrote, ‘Foolish Ambrose, Augustine, Jerome, Gregory – of whom not even one knew the Lord, so help me God, nor was sent by God to teach. Rather, they were all apostles of the Antichrist.’

So what was the result of this so-called ‘Reformation’? Look around you and you will see thousands of different Protestant groups claiming to rightly understand the Holy Bible but yet disagree on the basic aspects of what it says, or even on what it means to be a Christian. Some would even argue heatedly over verses on love.

“Taken from its context within Holy Tradition, the solid rock of Scripture becomes a mere ball of clay, to be molded into whatever shape its handlers wish. It is no honor to the Scripture to misuse and twist them, even if this is done in the name of exalting their authority. We must read the Bible; it is God’s Holy Word! But to understand its message, let us humbly sit at the feet of the saints who have shown themselves ‘doers of the Word and not hearers only’ (**Jam 1:22**), and have been proven by their lives worthy interpreters of the Scriptures. Let us go to those who knew the apostles, such as saint Ignatius of Antioch and Polycarp, if we have a question about the writings of the Apostles. Let us inquire of the Church, and not fall into self-deluded arrogance.” Fr. John Whiteford, *Sola Scriptura*, 1996, Conciliar Press.)

✚ Consider the following verses*:

- “Therefore, brethren, stand fast and **hold the traditions** which you were taught, whether by word, or our epistle” (**2 Thess 2:15**)
- “Now I praise you brethren, that you remember me in all things and **keep the traditions** as I delivered them to you” (**1 Cor 11:1**)

Every Protestant sect has developed its own tradition to interpret the Holy Bible. “Thus, the question is not really whether we will just believe the Bible or whether we will also use tradition. The real question is, *which* tradition will we use to interpret the Bible? Which tradition can be trusted – the Apostolic Tradition of the historic Church, or the modern and divergent traditions of Protestantism, which have no roots deeper than the advent of the Protestant Reformation?” (Fr. John Whiteford, *Sola Scriptura*, 1996, Conciliar Press)

II) The Old Testament Interpretation between the Church & the Synagogue:

The theologians of the School of Alexandria adopted the *Allegorical*⁺ interpretation of the Old Testament comparing the literal sense of Holy Scripture to the shadow that the body casts, finding its authentic, profounder truth in the spiritual meaning that it symbolizes. They did not want to depreciate or abolish the literal or historical meaning, but look to it as man’s body, which merits the fullest respect. Origen confirms that if the Holy Book of Leviticus is taken literally, Christians would be required ‘to sacrifice calves and lambs and to offer fine wheat flour with incense and oil.’

* Also (**Acts 15:27; 2 Thess 3:6; Phil 4:9; 2 Tim 2:2**)

⁺ Allegory is saying one thing, and meaning something other than what is said.

✚ Examples of Allegorical Interpretation:

a) In the New Testament:

1. Some scholars believe that St. Paul introduced the allegorical interpretation of the law by his question ‘Is it oxen God is concerned about? Or does He say it altogether for our sakes?’ (1 Cor 9:9-10)
2. Our Lord interpreted allegorically the brazen serpent (Num 21:9; Jn 9-10) as a type of salvation by His cross.
3. In (Mt 12:40-42), we acknowledge Jonah the prophet in the whale’s belly as an allegory of the burial of our Lord.
4. Allegory is applied to cleaning out the old leaven at the Passover to indicate the Christian community’s purity (1 Cor 5:6-8)
5. In (Rom 5:14), St. Paul suggests that Adam was a ‘type’ of our Lord.
6. In (1 Cor 10:6-13), St. Paul teaches that events mentioned in the Holy Books of Exodus and Numbers (Ex 13:21-22; 14:22-29; 16:4-35) prefigure the Holy Sacraments.

b) In the Sayings of the Fathers:

1. “Rebecca came to draw water from the well and because she went everyday, it was possible for her to be found by Abraham’s servant and be married to Isaac. You think that these are myths, and that the Holy Spirit only records history in the Scriptures. Here is an instruction for the soul and spiritual teaching which instructs you to come daily to the wells of Scriptures...All that has been written points to mysteries: Christ wishes to wed you too, and for that reason sends His servant to you. This servant is the word of the prophets. You cannot be wed to Christ if you have not first received them.” (Origen)
2. An excellent example of allegorical interpretation can be found in Bernard of Clairvaux’s twelfth-century exposition of the Song of Songs. Bernard here provides an allegorical interpretation of the phrase “the beams of our houses are of cedar, and our panels are of cypress” illustrating the way in which doctrinal or spiritual meaning was ‘read into’ otherwise unpromising passages at this time.
“By ‘houses’ we are to understand the great mass of the Christian people, who are bound together with those who possess power and dignity, rulers of the Church and the state, as ‘beams’. These hold them together by wise and firm laws; otherwise, if each of them were to operate in any way that they pleased, the walls would bend and collapse, and the whole house would fall in ruins. By the ‘panels’ which are firmly attached to the beams and which adorn the house in a royal manner, we are to understand the kindly and ordered lives of a properly instructed clergy, and the proper administration of the rites of the Church.” (Alister E. McGrath, *Christian Theology*, 1997, Blackwell Publishers)
3. Chapter 22 of the Holy Book of Genesis is interpreted typologically in the fraction of the Divine Liturgy of the Great Thursday (Coptic Liturgy of St. Basil p. 298)
4. The death of Joseph = the death of our Lord Jesus Christ:
“Joseph, the text says, ‘died and all his brothers and all that generation. But the sons of Israel increased and were multiplied and were extended into a great multitude and became very strong, for the land multiplied them’ (Ex 1:6-7). While Joseph was living it is not reported that the sons of Israel were multiplied nor is anything at all mentioned about increases and multitudes in these times...If, therefore, Joseph die in you also, that is, if you assume the dying of Christ in your body and make your members dead to sin, then ‘the sons of Israel’ are multiplied in you. ‘The sons of Israel’ are interpreted as good and spiritual senses. If, therefore, the senses of the flesh are put to death, the senses of the spirit increase, and while the vices in you are dying daily, the number of virtues is being increased.” (Origen)

5. “We can take the windows (**Song 2:9**) as meaning the bodily senses through which life or death gains entrance to the soul; for that is what the prophet Jeremiah means when speaking of sinners, he says: ‘Death is come up through your windows’ (**Jer 9:21**). How does death come up through windows? If the eyes of a sinner should look on a woman to lust after her; and because he who has thus looked upon a woman has committed adultery with her in his heart, then death has gained entrance to that soul through the windows of the eyes...And also, when she listens to the Word of God and takes delight in the reasoning of His wisdom and knowledge, to her the light of wisdom enters through the windows of her ears.” (Origen)

6. “This, then, is why it is said: ‘Catch the little foxes’. Suitably indeed he bids them to be caught and taken while they are still little. For as long as a bad thought is only beginning, it is easily driven from the heart. But if it comes again and again, and goes on for long, it surely leads the soul to agree with it; and once agreed to and entrenched in the heart, it is certain to result in the commission of sin. It must, therefore, be caught and driven out while it is still incipient and small; otherwise, when it has grown up and become a matter of habit, it can no longer be driven out. Thus, Judas too had a beginning of evil in his love of money; and that was for him a ‘little fox’.” (Origen)

* This lecture adapted from *‘The School of Alexandria- Book I’* by Fr. Tadros Y. Malaty