Changing Direction:
Moving Away From Technique-Driven Exegesis

By Benjamin Shaw

Beginnings

The history of biblical exegesis is often divided into two parts: pre-critical and critical. While there is some truth to that division, it tends to obscure divisions in the pre-critical period as well as developments in the critical period. These divisions and developments arise from the fact that any interpretive method must be suited to the nature of the text being interpreted. In the history of the church, different conclusions about the nature of the biblical text have led to differing approaches to its interpretation. To oversimplify, the pre-critical period can be divided into two parts. The first part extends from the early church up to the period of the Reformation. The second involves the Reformation and the post-Reformation period up to the time of the Enlightenment. In the pre-Reformation period, various approaches to exegesis were employed. In the early church, there is often a distinction drawn between the Alexandrian school, which tended to take a more figurative approach to the text, and the Antiochene school, which tended to take a more literal approach. Various approaches to interpretation were tried during the medieval and pre-Reformation period, each enjoying varying degrees of success and popularity. Medieval exegesis, however, is most commonly connected to the fourfold method, or *quadriga*. That is, any text was assumed to have, or to be capable of showing four different senses. The first of these was the literal sense, or the meaning of the text taking the words at face value and in their ordinary sense. The second sense is allegorical, in which the literal sense is linked to some spiritual truth. The third sense is the moral sense, by which the Christian is taught proper Christian conduct. The fourth sense is anagogical, leading the reader to heavenly realities.[1] The use of "Jerusalem" in Galatians 4:22ff can give us an illustration of these four senses. The literal meaning of Jerusalem is the city in Palestine. Allegorically, Jerusalem is the church of Christ. Morally, Jerusalem is the human soul. Anagogically, Jerusalem is the heavenly Jerusalem.[2]

Most interpreters of the Bible recognize that some passages in Scripture do operate on more than one level. But the medieval interpreters had applied this fourfold sense to any text, which produced not only many strained interpretations, but also contributed to "Scriptural" support for some eccentric Roman Catholic doctrines. With the rise of the Reformation, there was a widespread recognition that a change in interpretive approach was needed. This change of direction was away from the fourfold sense to an emphasis on the literal meaning of the text. However, this emphasis on the literal meaning of the text was not a literalistic approach. In other words, the Reformers and their successors recognized that sometimes in the Old Testament, for example, the literal meaning of Jerusalem was not the city in Palestine but was instead a figure of the church. Another way of putting it is that sometimes the literal meaning of a passage is figurative.

The Critical Period

As the post-Reformation period moved into the period of the Enlightenment, another change in direction

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1. Cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church: Second Edition* (Doubleday, 1995; ebook, 2012), 115–117.

2. See Richard A. Muller, *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics: Volume Two: Holy Scripture*, second ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2002), especially Chapter 1, which traces the medieval developments in the doctrine of Scripture, and Chapter 7, which deals with issues related to the interpretation of Scripture.

took place. It is at this point that biblical interpretation moved from the pre-critical to the critical phase. The change was introduced by the English political philosopher Thomas Hobbes, and more thoroughly by the skeptical Jewish philosopher Baruch (Benedict) Spinoza.[3] The primary element in this change of direction was a rejection of the fundamental assumption concerning the Bible that characterized pre-critical interpretation. Whatever differences there were between medieval and Reformation exegesis, they both operated on the fundamental assumption that the Bible is the Word of God, given to His church to make His will known. For Spinoza and Hobbes, the Bible was not a sure word from God, but instead a collection of Jewish and early Christian literature. Its meaning was to be determined by an analysis of its statements in their historical context. This approach has been identified as the historical-critical method. It can be defined as "the application of our historical knowledge to the ancient text unfettered by religious or ideological strictures that would destroy the light history can shed upon the Bible."[4]

The rise of the historical-critical method corresponded with the rise of the Enlightenment. There were two characteristics of the Enlightenment that also influenced the development of the historical-critical interpretation of the Bible. The first was the sufficiency of human reason for the discovery and the understanding of truth. The second was the importance of science. The natural sciences developed what is often called the scientific method. The scientific method is the use of techniques in an investigation such that, if another person used the same technique with the same materials, he would reach the same result. In other words, the scientific method sought for repeatable techniques that would guarantee a reliable result. Scholars in fields other than the natural sciences sought to make their disciplines scientific as well, aiming at the development of techniques in their disciplines that would produce repeatable results.

The first technique used among biblical scholars was adopted from those who studied Greek and Roman classical literature. Among the classicists, it had become a standard assumption that Homer could not have written the complex epics *The Odyssey* and *The Iliad*. Instead, their view was that these epics had been compiled over an extended period from a variety of sources. Biblical scholars adopted the same approach and applied it to the Pentateuch. Their fundamental assumption was that writing was unknown among the early Hebrews, so that Moses could not have written the Pentateuch. Instead, as with *The Odyssey* and *The Iliad*, the Pentateuch as we have it must have been developed over an extended period, compiled from a variety of sources. This approach, from the assumption that a variety of sources were used in the compiling of the work, was called source criticism. Underlying this approach is another assumption—that the real meaning of the text is not in the Pentateuch as we have it, but in the sources from which it was compiled. Source criticism was the scientific technique used by these scholars to determine the meaning of the biblical text. This approach characterized almost all of the biblical studies work done in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in Germany.[5] From there, it spread throughout Europe and the United Kingdom, eventually making its way into the United States. It reached its zenith in the formulation made by J. Wellhausen in his *Prolegomena to the History of Ancient Israel*.[6] While source criticism was widely used, and was seen as a scientific technique, it was unable to produce repeatable results. The variety of results arrived at by a variety of scholars litter the publications on Old Testament studies throughout the nineteenth century.

Because of the lack of consistent results from the employment of source criticism, the search began for another technique that would permit reproducible results. In the late nineteenth century, another German scholar by the name of Herman Gunkel came under the influence of the Brothers Grimm. These collectors of European folk tales had the view that literature had its beginnings in shorter forms, each of which had distinctive characteristics. For example, a fairy tale ordinarily begins with "once upon a time." A newspaper article will ordinarily give a summary of the whole story in the opening paragraph, filling in the details in the following material. On the basis of distinctive characteristics,

3. Benedict de Spinoza, *A Theologico-Political Treatise*, trans. R. H. M. Elwes (New York: Dover Publications, 1951). Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, ed. C. B. MacPherson (New York: Penguin Books, 1985), Part III, Ch. 23.

4. Fred L. Horton, "What Is the Historical-Critical Method?" http://users.wfu.edu/horton/r102/hc-method.html (accessed: August 4, 2018). See also "Historical-Critical Method" in Richard N. Soulen, *Handbook of Biblical Criticism*, second ed. (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1981).

5. For more extensive surveys of these developments, see John H. Hayes, *An Introduction to Old Testament Study* (Nashville, Abingdon, 1979), 83–120; and R. K. Harrison, *Introduction to the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1969), 1–82. Hayes has a more critical view, while Harrison has a more evangelical treatment. Both of these survey the development of biblical criticism from the beginning of the Enlightenment up to the beginning of the postmodern period.

6. Julius Wellhausen, *Prolegomena to the History of Ancient Israel* (New York: Meridian Books, 1957).

different forms could be identified. It was Gunkel's conclusion that the sources that made up the Pentateuch traced back to earlier forms, such as sagas, legends, and etiologies (a story that explains the origin of something). Gunkel saw this form criticism as a new and more reliable technique than source criticism.[7] Further, the real meaning of the text was not to be found in the sources, but in the various forms that had been brought together in the sources. As with source criticism, the results of form criticism that appeared from a variety of scholars showed that form criticism also was not reliably repeatable.

A form-critical approach to the Bible characterized Biblical studies in much of the first half of the twentieth century.[8] But a general dissatisfaction with irreproducible results prompted the search for newer and more effective techniques. The next to appear was tradition criticism. This approach argued that the biblical forms originated as oral presentations, and these oral presentations developed into the forms that Gunkel and others had identified. The real meaning of the text was not in the forms, but in the oral traditions behind the forms. Other approaches that appeared in the twentieth century include redactional criticism (the examination of the techniques used by those who had turned the oral traditions into forms, the forms into sources, and the sources into the text that we have. The meaning of the text was then to be found in identifying the work of the redactor. This was not, of course, the original meaning of the text, but the meaning given to the text by the redactor. Rhetorical criticism, which examined the rhetoric of the texts to read between the lines of the text, was intended to get at what was really going on in the text. Thus, the story of Dathan and Abiram was intended to show the struggle between Levites and Aaronides over control of the religious practices of the early Hebrews.

Perhaps the last of the attempts at developing a scientific technique for the analysis of the biblical text was structuralism.[9] Structuralism was sufficiently complex and confusing that even its practitioners could not agree among themselves as to the meaning that could be derived from the biblical text. Structuralism also served to provide a transition between historical criticism and postmodernism.

Postmodernism

By the 1980s, postmodernism had appeared, touting the view that no text has an inherent meaning. Rather, all texts can be read in a variety of ways, and the goal of reading is to get behind the apparent meaning of the text, which (in the postmodern view) was largely determined by political interests, preserving the rights and privileges of the ruling classes. The postmodern search was to find a meaning of the text that was hidden by the apparent meaning. The search for a scientific technique that could yield a reproducible result had been abandoned. Instead, postmodernism in biblical studies is "characterised [*sic*] by flux, change, instability, and crisis."[10] The field of biblical studies is now littered with a variety of approaches intended to deconstruct the biblical text in order to deliver the reader from its oppressive patriarchal Eurocentric character. Among the many approaches now in use are feminist criticism, womanist criticism (black feminism), LGBTQ criticism, and post-colonialism. All of these approaches are considered to have their place, because of the inherent plasticity of the text. There is no one right way to interpret the text, because there is no single metanarrative that controls the methodological approach. The point here is that "in scholarship there is by definition no heresy. We should rather practice and accept methodological pluralism."[11] Each of these approaches has, however, implicitly adopted its own metanarrative that drives and determines the meaning read in the text. In addition, each of these approaches has adopted its own techniques in the interpretation of the text. Particular readings of the text are, for example, ruled out by a "queer theory" reading of the text, even though those readings may be found perfectly acceptable in another reading of the text.

The Situation Among Evangelical Scholars

Evangelical scholars generally have adopted some of the earlier critical approaches. While they have mostly avoided the use of source criticism, they have broadly adopted form criticism, redaction criticism, and rhetorical criticism.[12] In addition, other approaches to the

7. Hermann Gunkel, *The Legends of Genesis: The Biblical Saga and History*, trans. W. H. Carruth (New York: Schocken Books, 1964). For a full display of the approach, see Klaus Koch, *The Growth of the Biblical Tradition* (New York: Scribner's, 1969).

8. Brief, but substantive discussions of each of these critical approaches can be found in the series "Guides to Biblical Scholarship" published by Fortress Press. Some of the titles are *What is Redaction Criticism*, *Tradition History and the Old Testament*, and *The Historical-Critical Method*.

9. Daniel Patte, *What is Structural Exegesis?* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1976).

10. Craig Bartholomew, "Reading the Old Testament in Postmodern Times," *Tyndale Bulletin* 49.1 (May 1998): 93.

11. Rolf Rendtorff, cited in Bartholomew, 96.

12. See, for example, the plainly technique-driven approach to exegesis found in Douglas Stuart, *Old Testament Exegesis*, fourth ed. (Philadelphia: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010).

interpretation of the Bible have been worked into an evangelical reading of the Bible. Linguistic techniques are currently widely used and heavily influence the approaches to Bible translation as well as Bible interpretation.[13] The use of archaeology is also common. Archaeology is generally unobjectionable, as it can give us background information about life in the ancient Near East (ANE). However, scholars, including evangelical scholars, have largely insisted that the Bible must be interpreted in light of other ANE writings.[14] In the view of these scholars, the opening chapters of Genesis cannot be properly understood without reference to the ANE creation myths. Genesis 1–11 is then understood to be an Israelite creation myth, influenced by, and in some sense in reaction to, the Babylonian and Assyrian myths. Beyond Genesis, reference to Mesopotamian, Egyptian, and Canaanite myths and epics are allegedly found throughout the Old Testament. It is commonly argued that without the information from these ANE sources, the reader misses much that is of importance in the Scriptures.

Technical Difficulties

There are three problems with this technique-driven approach to the interpretation of the Bible. The first is that it pretends to a scientific character that it does not have. That is, these techniques are not unbiased approaches to the reading of the Scriptures that can produce objectively repeatable results. Rather, the biases are anti-supernatural, which goes directly against the claims the Bible makes for itself. In addition to this anti-supernatural bias, the techniques employed do not yield reproducible results. Scholars, allegedly using the same technique, come to very different conclusions about the nature and meaning of the text. Second, the techniques were primarily developed by scholars who could devote a great deal of time to learning and perfecting their techniques. It is not possible for the average pastor, let alone the average Bible reader, to devote the time necessary to master one of these techniques, let alone master the multiplicity of techniques that have been developed over the last two centuries. The pastor and the layman then become subject to the masters of the techniques, forced to take the assertions of the masters at face value. When faced with two masters making different claims about the meaning of the text, the reader is forced to make a choice based on mere "gut sense." Third, technique-driven exegesis further separates those in the church from the text. The biblical text becomes a sort of gnostic collection that can be accessed only by the enlightened ones. This tends to make people in the pews liable to take seriously "Bible code" approaches to the Bible, since they do not sound too different from the esoteric techniques taught by the scholars.

Time for a Change

It is clear that, as with the time of the Reformation, it is time for a change of direction in the interpretation of the Bible. But what direction are we to go? In the most recent generation, there has been a movement among scholars, especially evangelical scholars, toward what is called "theological exegesis."[15] It sounds good. After all, shouldn't we read the Bible theologically? But on closer investigation, much of this theological exegesis reveals itself to be another technique, largely dependent on the medieval model, tacked on to the use of some of the more theologically-oriented techniques already in play. That this is really a move back to the pre-Reformation model is indicated by the number of recent publications surveying and encouraging the revival of medieval exegesis. The problem with that is two-fold. First, those proposing this approach really see it as another technique, guaranteed to produce *the* meaning of the text. The idea of a scientific approach has not changed. The other problem is that it reintroduces the difficulties caused by the medieval model in the first place.

The "New" Old Approach

My proposal is that we jettison altogether the idea that one technique, or even a cluster of techniques, properly applied, will lead us unerringly to the meaning of the text. We need to get rid of the idea that exegesis is a scientific enterprise. And instead of going back to the swamp of medieval exegesis, the move ought to be toward the other part of the pre-critical period—the exegesis of the Reformation and post-Reformation period.[16] The Westminster Confession of Faith sums up

13. Peter Cotterell and Max Turner, *Linguistics and Biblical Interpretation* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 1989). Douglas Mangum and John Westbury, eds. *Linguistics and Biblical Exegesis* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2016).

14. See, for example, John H. Walton and D. Brent Sandy, *The Lost World of Scripture* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2013); John H. Walton, *The Lost World of Genesis One: Ancient Cosmology and the Origins Debate* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2009); Tremper Longman, III and John H. Walton, *The Lost World of the Flood: Mythology, Theology, and the Deluge Debate* (IVP Academic, 2018).

15. Daniel Trier, *Introducing Theological Interpretation of Scripture: Recovering a Christian Practice* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008). A significant number of other books on the same topic have appeared in the intervening decade.

16. For a thorough presentation of this idea, see Iain Provan, *The Reformation and the Right Reading of Scripture* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2017).

well the Reformational approach to exegesis: "The infallible rule of interpretation of Scripture is the Scripture itself: and therefore, when there is a question about the true and full sense of any Scripture (which is not manifold, but one), it must be searched and known by other places that speak more clearly" (I.9). This summary is preceded in the Confession by two important caveats. The first is: "All things in Scripture are not alike plain in themselves, nor alike clear unto all" (I.7) The second is: "in all controversies of religion, the church is finally to appeal unto them [the Hebrew and Greek originals]" (I.8). These may be summed up in this fashion: First, the Scripture interprets itself. Second, due to the imperfect knowledge and character of even the most sanctified persons, there will never be universal agreement on the meaning of some places in the Scriptures. Third, the responsibility of resolving these controversies rests with the consensus of the church based on the study of the Hebrew and Greek Scriptures, and not with any one individual interpreter.

The Scripture interprets itself. We must begin with the recognition that the Bible is the Word of God. God designed it to speak to people of every time and of every place. As such, it was intended to be self-contained. If it was to fulfill its intended purpose, it could not require any outside material for its proper understanding. If any additional information outside of the Scriptures was necessary to the proper understanding of the Scriptures, then it would be likely, indeed, almost certain, that most people in most times and in most places would not be able to interpret the Bible properly, for they would not have access to this material external to the Scriptures. The best example here is the insistence by some that an understanding of ANE literature is necessary to a proper understanding of the Bible. If that were indeed the case, then the church, for the first eighteen-and-a-half centuries of its existence, was almost certain to misinterpret the Bible. Those ANE materials did not become available until the middle of the nineteenth century. We must insist that the Bible, and the Bible alone, serves as its only interpreter. Another example that has arisen more recently is the insistence that we must know and understand the literature of Second Temple Judaism to understand the New Testament. But again, were that the case, the church would have been subject to a serious misunderstanding of the Bible, since much of the Second Temple material has only recently come to light.[17]

There will never be universal agreement on the meaning of some, perhaps many, biblical passages. We must be willing to give up on the idea of perfect comprehension of the Scriptures. We, even as justified saints, are not up to it. And we must be satisfied with that. There is no technique, there is no approach to the study of the Bible that can overcome the incomplete knowledge and the incomplete competence of the interpreter of the Bible. However, this does not absolve the interpreter of the responsibility to strive for a fair and thorough understanding of the text.

The meaning of the Bible, that is, the summation of what the Bible teaches, does not depend on the individual interpreter, though the individual interpreter does play a role. Instead, the teaching of Scripture on any point of doctrine is the responsibility of the church, based on what the Scriptures say in the original languages.

If the exegesis of the Bible is not to be carried out using various techniques, how then is it to be done? The exegesis of the Bible is to be done by the careful examination of the scriptural statements in their various contexts. There is, at the bottom, the context of the word in the sentence. Then there is the context of the sentence in the paragraph. Then there is the context of the paragraph in the larger literary unit. Then there is the literary unit in the larger context of the book. Finally, there is the book in the context of the entire collection of the books of the Bible. That is, exegesis is no more, and no less, than a careful reading of the biblical text. Fundamentally this approach to biblical exegesis requires a thorough and profound knowledge of the content of the entire Bible.

In the past, techniques have been used as shortcuts to determine the meaning of the text. When I was in elementary and junior high school, we would occasionally have multiple choice tests. The teacher would have a template that they could lay over each student's test paper. The template would show for each question whether the student had marked the correct answer. It was a quick and easy way for the teacher to grade the tests. The various techniques developed in the critical period have been used as templates to read out the correct meaning of the text. Unfortunately, the Bible is not a multiple-choice test, and it does not give up its answers so easily. While the fundamental message of the Bible is clear, reaching the understanding of that message requires, for both the learned and the unlearned, the "due use of the ordinary means" (WCF I.7). Part of the reason for the continuing popularity of technique-driven exegesis is that most people read poorly. They do not pay careful attention to what they read, so need

17. This is precisely the assertion of N. T. Wright and other proponents of the New Perspectives on Paul.

techniques to help guide them to the content of the text. But the multiplying of techniques ends up distracting from the text, rather than illuminating it.

The minister who would explain and apply the Scriptures to his congregation must make the Bible the primary subject of his study. Commentaries are necessary. Theologies are helpful. But the exegesis of the Bible ultimately requires nothing less than an intimate acquaintance with all its details. There is no shortcut that can accomplish that. There is no technique that will enable the interpreter to make up for biblical ignorance. It is to this full-fledged intimate knowledge of the Bible that we must commit ourselves if we would faithfully expound the Word of God.

Two Examples

Two brief examples might illustrate both what is indicated by a careful reading of the text and the importance of understanding that the Bible provides its own context for interpretation. 1 Samuel 17 presents the story of David and Goliath. It is a well-known story, and there are basically three interpretations of the passage, which are not necessarily mutually exclusive. The first is that the story shows David's rise to power and the beginning of Saul's opposition to him. The second interpretation accepts the first but goes on to say that the story is really an illustration for all of us, that if we trust God, we may, with his help, slay the giants in our lives. The third interpretation agrees with the first, rejects the second, and goes on to say that the pitting of David against Goliath is really an illustration of the battle between the seed of the woman (here represented by David, God's anointed king) and Goliath (in his bronze scale armor) representing the seed of the serpent.

The first interpretation is a surface reading that could be achieved by reading the subheadings in most English translations. The second is a simplistic application of the first. The third is less simplistic, but is founded on the assumption that Jesus, or his type, must be found on every page. One wonders whether that's really the purpose of the story. None of these interpretations pay attention to all the details of the story. The chapter begins with the introduction of Goliath and his challenge to Israel. Then the story introduces David. The reader doesn't know at this point what David's role will be. Then the story introduces the Israelite army, including Saul, and its fear of Goliath. David then raises the question of why this uncircumcised Philistine should be allowed to get away with defying the armies of the living God. David at this point becomes Goliath's opponent. Saul dresses David in his own armor in order to prepare him for the contest. David, realizing that he can't operate in that armor, goes back to his shepherd's weapons, the staff and the sling. At that point, though Goliath doesn't know it, the end of the contest is certain. Rather than fighting Goliath on Goliath's terms, David is fighting the battle on his own terms. The use of the sling means that he doesn't need to get within reach of Goliath to enter into battle with him and defeat him. To sum up, we have David presented here as the man after God's heart, concerned more for the honor of God than for his own safety, and willing to put aside the obvious weapons for the weapons in which God has already trained him. These characteristics are seen throughout the rest of David's career in 1 and 2 Samuel. In other words, the conflict between David and Goliath gives the reader a peek into what David will become over the course of his life. Certainly, David is a type of Christ, but that is not the first thing on the text's own agenda.

A second example, focusing on the issue of context, has to do with the Song of Songs. Traditionally, this book was interpreted as representing the relationship between Christ and the church, or between Christ and the Christian soul. The book was understood to be an intentionally figurative work. In the nineteenth century, this traditional view was abandoned by the historical-critical interpreters. The book was first taken to not be operating at a figurative level, but on a literal level. The context for interpretation was no longer the Scriptures, but such things as Syrian wedding songs, pagan celebrations of fertility festivals, or Egyptian love poetry. As a result, the book has been in the present century presented and preached as some sort of Christian marriage manual. But the context that Scripture as a whole provides takes the reader in the traditional direction. Given the importance of marriage in the biblical view of life, the Scriptures are remarkably quiet about the physical aspect of marriage. But the Scriptures say quite a bit about the relationship between God and his people, very often using marriage as a metaphor for that relationship. It is in that context that the Song is to be understood.

Scripture interpreting Scripture, paying careful attention to the words of the Bible: That is the "new" old paradigm for biblical interpretation.▪