The Bible as Text
Ray CW Roennfeldt

Introduction

If nothing else, postmodernism has reminded us of the influence that our own experience has on how we interpret Scripture. We bring as our 'text' to the text, as it were. But if all of us bring our own 'texts' to the text of Scripture, how will we interpret it in a consistent, meaningful, and nourishing fashion? Such is the disparity among Bible-believing Christians regarding the 'plain meaning' of Scripture that some have given up the idea that Scripture is to be interpreted. Rather, they say it should be merely read or listened to, whereby the biblical worldview will automatically permeate the hearer.[1]

Several important factors necessitate the interpretation of Scripture. One of these is the fact that Christians of every ilk claim biblical support for their positions, no matter how unnatural. Although it may only be a very selective support, Mormons find their doctrine of baptism for the dead in the Bible, Jehovah's Witnesses base their Arianism in Scripture, charismatics offer biblical texts as the basis of their doctrine of health and wealth, and 'Bible Belt' snake handlers justify their practice by a clear word from the Scriptures.[2]

The other major factor is the nature of the Bible itself. In fact, the beliefs we hold in regard to what the Bible is, how it was written, and the manner of its transmission have an enormous impact on the way in which we will read it, interpret it, and apply it in our lives.

The Nature of Scripture: A Vital Key to Understanding

At the foundational level, conservative Christians attribute far greater authority and value to the Scriptures than they do to any other book. It is seen as God's

1. This option is mentioned by Gordon D Fee and Douglas Stuart, *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2003), 21. In the same place, Fee and Stuart argue that this is a 'false option'. 'The antidote to *bad* interpretation is not *no* interpretation, but *good* interpretation based on common-sense guidelines.'
2. These examples are mentioned in *ibid*, 20.

book, God's Word to humankind 'in every age and in every culture'[3] Thus, Christians do not just read the Bible. They listen to its words in order to obey.

However, while Scripture comes as God's Word to us, it does not appear in the form of a list of divine legislative decrees or propositions. Rather, its shape is very obviously human. It is characterised by human language and employs human modes of thought and expression. Differences of literary ability and style in its writers are clearly evident. Yet, in spite of the fact that the Bible does not 'answer to the great ideas of God'. God is satisfied that 'the utterances of the man are the word of God'[4]

Christians have stressed either the humanity or the divinity of the Bible. Focusing on its humanity involves one primarily in an historical and descriptive task. The meaning of Scripture, in this view, is to be found in what the words originally meant to the writer and his or her readers. On the other hand, an over-emphasis on the divinity of the Bible has resulted in its being read in an extremely literalistic fashion. The words of the Bible are considered to be God's words untainted by human culture.[5] This, of course raises the issue of the interaction of God with culture; both that of the writers of the Bible as well as our own.

God and Culture

At a cursory glance, the biblical writings do appear to make claims that put them above the relativities of human culture. For instance, Scripture points to divine revelation as its origin (2 Tim 3:16; 2 Pet 1:21). Its message transcends place and time. Jesus Christ is seen as the single source for salvation (Acts 4:12). The differences in the human situation cannotinvalidate the message of the gospel for 'the word of the Lord stands forever' (1 Pet 1:25). The Scriptures are *the* 'norm of truth by which all human thought is tested (Heb 4:12–13; John 10:35)'.[6]

Such a one-sided view of the Bible places it in a unique position from which it operates as 'the source for a metahistorical and metacultural framework within which one can understand and communicate across historical eras and cultures'.[7] It seems to me that such a position is open to the twin dangers of either ignoring the fact that the biblical books were written and conditioned by the culture pertaining at the time of writing as well as by the personality, etc. of the various culturally conditioned writers, or that of assuming that the culture of the Bible is 'Christian' culture.

Such presuppositions tend to overlook or rationalise away the differences between the Old and New Testaments as well as the differences between the various books within each of the Testaments. The ambiguities of Scripture are well illustrated by a selection of the 'strange' laws that formed part of the divine code at least from the time of the Exodus onwards. The death penalty was prescribed for cursing one's parents (Exod 21:17); fair and equal treatment was required for the first wife when a second was taken (Exod 21:10); Israelites were admonished against boiling a baby goat in its mother's milk (Exod 34:26); and Ammonites and Moabites were not allowed to join the congregation of Israel, even to the tenth generation (Deut 23:3).[8]

Now, it is important to point out that although we may consider such commands as 'strange', Moses 'found none of them strange or even burdensome'.[9] On the contrary, he pointed out the privileges offered to Israel in divine code: 'What other nation is so great as to have such righteous decrees and laws as this body of laws I am setting before you today' (Deut 4:8 NIV). The hermeneutical and logical difficulties of applying such laws to twenty-first century society are immense.[10]

The Old Testament laws of levirate marriage illustrate quite dramatically the difficulties we have in bracketing out the strangeness of Scripture. How are we to interpret the 'grimy' story of Genesis 38? Aren't we more than a little sympathetic with Onan who refused to fulfill his obligations to his sister-in-law? Aren't we somewhat scandalised by the statement that 'What he did was wicked in the LORD'S sight, so he put him to death . . . '? Was Judah's conduct less reprehensible in the sight of God than that of his sons, Er and Onan? So it seems, for Judah escapes the punishment of God for his 'one night (day?) stand' with his daughter-in-law, whom he mistakes for a 'shrine prostitute' (Gen 38:21).

There is no easy explanation for some of the most obviously culturally conditioned passages of Scripture. Perhaps the best solution is that of John Calvin who maintained that God 'accommodates' himself to the human situation by adjusting to human 'ignorance' when he 'prattles to us in Scripture in a rough

3. *Ibid*, 21.
4. Ellen White expresses these concepts well in *Selected Messages* (Washington, DC: Review & Herald, 1958), 1:15–23.
5. The literalistic view has been vigorously attacked by John Shelby Spong, *Rescuing the Bible from Fundamentalism: A Bishop Rethinks the Meaning of Scripture* (San Francisco, CA: HarperCollins, 1991), and by Ian Plimer, *Telling Lies for God* (Milsons Point, NSW: Random House, 1994). Plimer's work, written from a humanistic standpoint contains a particularly strong polemic against a literalistic reading of the Genesis creation and flood narratives.
6. William J Larkin, Jr, *Culture and Biblical Hermeneutics: Interpreting and Applying the Authoritative Word in a Relativistic Age* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1988), 192.
7. *Ibid.*
8. These examples are derived from Alden Thompson, *Who's Afraid of the Old Testament God* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1989), 71–73.
9. *Ibid*, 73.
10. A rather tongue-in-cheek attempt is found in AJ Jacobs, *The Year of Living Biblically: One Man's Humble Quest to Follow the Bible as Literally as Possible* (New York, NY: Simon & Schuster, 2007).

and popular style'[11] and in 'mean and lowly words'.[12] Alden Thompson similarly concludes that,

> . . . divine laws are no more enduring than that human situation that makes them necessary. The beauty of the divine condescension is precisely that God recognised the human condition and moulded his revelation accordingly. Different people in different culture need to have great enduring principles of divine government applied in different ways.[13]

The only other solution is to selectively apply some of the passages of the Bible to the contemporary situation, while ignoring the force of others. The result is a rather opportunistic primitivism and a jaundiced rejection of almost anything pertaining to modernity.

To take such a stance pits Christ against culture. As Richard Niebuhr aptly points out, the results are a radical disjunction between reason and revelation that stresses the transcendence of God over his immanence in the world through his Spirit and his community, the church.[14]

The Problem of Subjectivity

Conservative Christians are very nervous about acknowledging that the Bible is, in any way, culturally conditioned. After all, where will it stop? Are there any absolutes left if God expresses himself in the context of human culture and society?[15] What can we really know about God and the world? If the biblical writers used the thought forms and world view of their own day in which to express the divine story, how are we to separate their presuppositions from the truth?

11. John Calvin, *Calvin's Commentaries* (Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd, ca. 1960), on John 3:2.
12. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Library of Christian Classics, volumes 20–21, edited by JT McNeill, translated by FL Battles (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster, 1960), 1.8.1. Calvin used his idea of accommodation to explain such biblical features as anthropomorphic references to God, metaphorical references of various kinds, apparent errors in quotations and lists, etc. See also Dirk W Jellema, 'God's "baby-talk": Calvin and the "Errors" of the Bible', in *Reformed Journal* (April 1980): 26.
13. Thompson, *Who's Afraid?*, 79. This same idea is extended (with New Testament examples) in Thompson's *Inspiration: Hard Questions, Honest Answers* (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald, 1991), 147–50.
14. H Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture* (New York, NY: Harper & Row, 1951), 76–82. Although now somewhat dated, Niebuhr's work remains the classic discussion on Christianity and culture.
15. It seems to me that conservative Christians are justified in their fear that cultural relativism will tear the heart out of the Christian message. They have seen too many illustrations among those engaged in the liberal experiment.

Let us sharpen the issue just a little. The Bible does not appear averse to using a wide range of literary genres in order to transmit what had been revealed to its writers.[16] But are we open to allowing them 'the liberty . . . to choose their forms of literary composition, even if it shocks us and contravenes our standards of writing'?[17] I do not wish to infer that we must travel the route of the liberal biblical critics in rejecting traditional interpretations just because they are traditional. Still, if Jesus could tell fictional parables, as is the case with the parable of the rich man and Lazarus, then perhaps not all of the biblical narratives are to be read as if they were sections in a modern historical or scientific textbook.[18]

Clark Pinnock maintains that 'despite history being crucial to the biblical message, we have to grant the Bible its freedom to employ styles of historical writing it wants to'.[19] It seems that to demand that God could not do otherwise then to always 'write' his revelation in a strictly historical format is to ignore the testimony of the data of Scripture as well as to lock ourselves into a doctrine of total divine control which is presupposed by biblical inerrantism.[20]

16. The biblical writers did not just use different literary forms in which to express their ideas. They also engaged a wide range of metaphors in order to translate the divine actions into understandable terms. For instance, salvation can be spoken of in terms of atonement, reconciliation, sacrifice, justification, etc. See Richard Rice's discussion of theories and models of the atonement in his *Reign of God: An Introduction to Christian Theology from a Seventh-day Adventist Perspective* (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press, 1997), 188–99. Millard Erickson remarks that 'in the doctrine of the atonement we see perhaps the clearest indication of the organic character of theology . . . ' See Erickson, *Christian Theology*, second edition (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1998), 799.
17. Clark H Pinnock with Barry L Callen, *The Scripture Principle: Reclaiming the Full Authority of the Bible*, second edition (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2006), 145
18. This perspective has always made Seventh-day Adventists extremely nervous. What would happen if they were to read the Genesis creation story as a symbolic narrative rather than a descriptive account? Certainly, they should keep in mind that they bring to the creation story their own 'story' that has been developed in opposition to evolutionary biology. However, it seems that the intention of the biblical writer is to counteract the errors contained in the creation myths of the ancient world. See for instance Gerhard F Hasel, 'The Polemic Nature of the Genesis Cosmology', in *Evangelical Quarterly* 46 (974): 81–102. For an engaging portrayal of the evangelical struggle to interpret the creation texts, see Clark H Pinnock, 'Climbing out of a Swamp: The Evangelical Struggle to Understand the Creation Texts', in *Interpretation* 43 (1989): 143–55.
19. Pinnock and Callen, *The Scripture Principle*, 145.
20. For an introduction to the lively discussion on inerrancy and divine control, see Randall and David Basinger, 'Inerrancy, Dictation and the Free Will Debate', in *Evangelical Quarterly*, 55 (1983): 177–80. Norman L Geisler critiques the Basingers in his 'Inerrancy and Free Will: A Reply to the Brothers Basinger', in *Evangelical Quarterly*, 57 (1985): 352, while the Basingers continue the debate in their 'Inerrancy and Free will: Some Further Thoughts', in *Evangelical Quarterly* 58 (1986): 351–54. For my own discussion of Clark Pinnock's paradigm shift from divine control inerrancy to a free-will model of biblical authority see Ray CW Roennfeldt, *Clark H. Pinnock on Biblical Authority: An Evolving Position* (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press, 1993), 349–61.

But, does not a more flexible view of the origin and nature of Scripture place the reasoning powers of the human interpreter over the Bible, rather than God's Word judging the reader? That is clearly the result when some engage in radical, even agnostic, biblical criticism. However, the committed Christian is not about to pronounce as unreliable a book that has introduced her or him to Jesus Christ.[21] In fact, it appears that only those readers who are submitted to Jesus will actually know what the Bible teaches (John 7:17).

Some Limits on Subjectivity

Although we do not always recognise it, the very subjectivity of the hermeneutical process is an acknowledgment of the Bible's power and genius. It actually speaks to all of us across a wide variety of situation. Thus, biblical hermeneutics is far more than merely analysing the meanings of words or unraveling the grammar of sentences, as important as that task may be.[22] But we are not left with the kind of 'chaos' which results when we bring our 'text' to the biblical text and make it mean whatever we want it to.[23] There are a number of very vital controls.

There is, of course, the control implicit in the text itself. 'Any claim to interpretation has to appear credible in the light of the text itself and must be a legitimate and possible use of it'. There, there is also the 'counsel' of the interpretational tradition. 'Tradition plays a stabilising role in hermeneutics', and protects the church against Scripture twisting and heresy. Finally, there is the community of believers who 'collectively hear the Word and assess the interpretation'.[24]

How? A Personal Note

How will we then read and apply Scripture? I cannot speak for everyone as to the best way to interpret the Bible, but I can share how it operates in my experience. I have found the idea of the Bible as 'case-book' helpful in understanding the Bible as God's Word.[25] Given the power of narrative in the formation of individuals and communities,[26] as well as the fact that far-and-away the most common form of literature in the Bible is narrative, would appear to indicate that one should learn to listen to the story/stories of the Bible.

The narratives of the Old Testament, for instance, are not just accounts of the lives of the various characters. Rather, they operate as divine stories on a least three levels: the level of the working out of the universal plan of God; that of God's specific call to Israel; and the level of the individual narratives that combine to make up the other two levels.[27]

It is clear that the Old Testament does not just tell us about the people who lived in those times. Instead, the stories function primarily as divine narratives. Thus, Old Testament narratives do not directly teach doctrines (although they may illustrate doctrines); they record what happened rather than what should have happened (and so do not always provide us with a perfect example); they invite us to judge for ourselves as to whether a particular course is right or wrong; they are always selective and incomplete; they do not answer all of our theological questions; and they consistently portray God as their hero.[28]

The Joseph narrative (Gen 37, 39–50), while having Joseph as the central character—a personality flawed by arrogance and parental favoritism—is clearly identified as a divine narrative. The biblical writer emphasises again and again that in spite of Joseph's imperfections and 'ups-and-downs' that 'the LORD was with him' (Gen 39:2–5, 21). 'The focus is on God. He can accomplish what He wills. Using such unlikely vehicles as Joseph, his family, and the Pharaoh, God preserved many people and began to create for himself a special people.'[29] Scripture invites us into the story, not to replicate the life of Joseph by doing what he did, but to actively respond to God's involvement in our own sphere.[30] As a Christian, I bring

21. Thus, the ultimate criterion for the authenticity of the Christian as well as for the credibility of Scripture is primarily subjective: 'The Spirit testifies with our spirit that we are God's children' (Rom 8:16 NIV).
22. It should be observed that one can approach lexical and grammatical studies from an inerrantist perspective which assumes that the biblical writer must mean 'such and such' because he has used a particular word or construction. While that may often be the case, it should be kept in mind that large portions of Scripture are 'occasional' rather than having been carefully constructed.
23. Pinnock with Callen, *The Scripture Principle,* 240.
24. *Ibid*, 240–42. Pinnock notes that 'The authority of tradition is one of counsel, not of command. It is fallible, not infallible'. He concludes that tradition 'cannot be set aside without harming the identity of the faith community'. *Ibid*, 242.
25. This is the perspective of Alden Thompson in his *Inspiration: Hard Questions, Honest Answers*, although it is not exclusive to him. A similar viewpoint can be found in the evangelical version of narrative theology as espoused by Gabriel Fackre, *The Christian Story: A Narrative Interpretation of Basic Christian Doctrine*, revised edition (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1984). For a critique of Thompson's 'casebook/codebook' approach from an inerrantist perspective see Samuel Koranteng-Pipim, 'An Analysis and Evaluation of Alden Thompson's Casebook/Codebook Approach to the Bible', in *Issues in Revelation and Inspiration*, edited by Frank Holbrook and Leo Van Dolson (Berrien Springs, MI: Adventist Theological Society, 1992), 31–67.
26. For a discussion of the power of narrative in the secular sphere consult Khachig Tölölyan, 'Narrative Culture and the Motivation of the Terrorist', in *Texts of Identity*, edited by John Shotter and KJ Gergen (London: SAGE, 1989), 99–118. One cannot spend time working in a Two-Thirds World context (as I have) without recognising the formative function of stories.
27. This three-tiered distinction is made by Fee and Stuart, *How to Read,* 91–93.
28. This list is based on *ibid*, 92–93.
29. *Ibid*, 86.
30. This is probably the way that Hebrew 11 uses the Old Testament narratives. Since the Old Testament 'witnesses' were faithful, how much more are Christians exhorted to 'throw off everything

to my decision-making process and to my worldview not just divine imperatives, but also a bank of stories of genuine divine-human encounters which mould and inform my own walk with God.[31]

Conclusion

It is obvious that not all of Scripture can be read as narrative. Some portions are composed of prophecy, others constitute hymns, and still others provide a store of wisdom. If we are to gain optimal benefit, we must recognise that we cannot interpret everything in the same way and that the Spirit waits to guide us into all truth (John 16:13). Still, there is a 'story', for instance, behind Paul's instructions regarding food offered to idols and the participation of women in worship. To know that story (or context) provides us with a large amount of hermeneutical assistance. Finally,

> Books about interpretation are no more a substitute for interpreting than recipes are a substitute for cooking. They need correcting, but the final test is not whether they stimulate further methodological reflections: it is whether they encourage good cooking. As the aim of cooking is to promote nourishment, so the Bible is to be heard, read, marked, learned, and inwardly digested. That involves interpretation, whether this task is performed by the reader who appropriates the Bible, or by some intermediary like Philip, who offered help to the Ethiopian eunuch.[32]

> Genuine biblical interpretation is not easy, nor does it arise in a vacuum. It means grappling with the biblical text as well as interfacing it with our immediate situation. However, it also means that Scripture will only be interpreted fruitfully if adequate account of the nature of the text is accounted for. An inerrantist view of Scripture will very likely predetermine a literalistic pattern of interpretation while a more realistic view of the nature of the Bible may allow greater scope for continuing illumination from the Holy Spirit. Perhaps we have not yet 'scratched the surface' of the treasure that is Scripture!

---

that hinds and the sin that so easily entangles, and let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us'? (Heb 12:1 NIV).

31. This is *my* way of reading the story of Joseph. Other readers may not come to the same conclusions. See, for instance, Gerald West, 'Difference and Dialogue: Reading the Joseph Story with Poor and Marginalised Communities in South Africa', in *Biblical Interpretation: A Journal of Contemporary Approaches* 2 (1994): 152–70.
32. Robert Morgan with John Barton, *Biblical Interpretation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), 29.