Our Story as Text

Ray CW Roennfeldt

Introduction

Biblical interpretation is a crucial subject for all Christian believers. If the Bible is the Magna Carta for the Christian community (2 Tim 3:16–17), it is important that the community and individuals within it understand and apply the Scriptures correctly. The Seventh-day Adventist Church is an example of a denomination that has long recognised the necessity of following proper hermeneutical rules. For instance, the Millerites, clearly spelled out their 'rules' as follows:

1. The Bible contains a revelation from God to humankind, and of course must be the best, plainest and simplest that can be given. It is a revelation in human language, to human beings, and must be understood by the known laws of language.
2. The Bible is always to be understood literally, when the literal sense does not involve contradictions, or is not unnatural.
3. When the literal sense involves the passage in contradiction, or expresses ideas, which are unnatural, it is figurative, or parabolic, and is designed to illustrate rather than reveal the truth.
4. When a passage is clearly figurative, the figure is to be carefully studied, and the passage compared with, other parts of the Word where the same or similar figure may be employed.[1]

This close interest in hermeneutical principles has been an increasing preoccupation among Seventh-day Adventists through to the present day.[2] It is commend-

1. 'Second Coming of Christ No. 1', in *Signs of the Times*, April 15, 1840, cited in Kai Arasola, *The End of Historicism: Millerite Hermeneutics of Time Prophecies in the Old Testament* (Uppsala, Sweden: Datem, 1990), 218.
2. Especially notice the section on 'Biblical Interpretation: General Principles', by Gerhard F Hasel, in the *Australasian Division Bible Conference 1978* notebook ([Wahroonga, NSW:] Australasian Division of the Seventh-day Adventist Church, 1978. An even greater portion of the *North American Bible Conference 1974* notebook (Washington, DC: Biblical Research Committee of the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, 1974) was devoted to biblical interpretation.

able that a community of Christians considers the correct interpretation of Scripture to be vital. However, could it be that in their desire to present a unified front on matters of biblical interpretation or doctrine, they have produced apathetic Christians on the one hand, and theological fundamentalists on the other?

Putting Biblical Interpretation into Perspective

Let me illustrate the former and the latter dangers. Recently, a second-generation Adventist who is a pastor's wife told me that she found the study of the Bible 'totally boring'. When I asked her, 'Why?', she replied, 'Because we know it all. Everything is laid out for us in such detail that there is no room for individual interpretation or belief. The possibility of discovering something new in Scripture is almost nonexistent.'

While apathy and boredom is personally destructive, the fundamentalist ideal of absolute doctrinal uniformity is devastating for the unity of the Christian community.[3] There will always be some diversity of belief in the local or corporate church. Yet, that variation should not interfere with Christian unity. On the contrary, unity, compassion, understanding, and love are most evident where there are differences of perspective (1 Cor 12–14).

If our biblical interpretation is designed to build a system of coherent and consistent doctrines we have done a good thing. The Bible writers commend true doctrine and condemn false doctrine (for example, Tit 2:7–8; 2 John 9). The Bible is 'useful for teaching' (2 Tim 3: 16), but what is truly profitable is doctrine that functions 'so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work' (2 Tim 3:17). Biblical interpretation that does not take into account real life is inadequate and irrelevant at best, and divisive and damaging at worst.[4]

See also *A Symposium of Biblical Hermeneutics,* edited by Gordon M HydeWashington, DC: Biblical Research Committee of the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, 1974).

3. I am using the term 'fundamentalist' in its wider sense as applying to those who profess 'strict adherence to (especially Protestant) orthodoxy in the matter of Biblical interpretation. See, eds., "Fundamentalism," *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church,* edited by FL Cross and EA Livingstone (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005, third edition, revised), 650. For a wider perspective and an historical overview of the fundamentalist phenomenon see Karen Armstrong, *The Battle for God: Fundamentalism in Judaism, Christianity and Islam* (London: HarperCollins, 2000). Samuel Koranteng-Pipim's *Receiving the Word: How New Approaches to the Bible Impact Our Biblical Faith and Lifestyle* (Berrien Springs, MI: Berean Books, 1996) appears to be cast in the mould of fundamentalism from an Adventist perspective.

4. The early Adventist idea of 'present truth' is relevant here. Richard Rice remarks that 'good theology is creative and constructive. It brings to the task of interpreting the biblical message the conviction that our present experience may enable us to see things that have never been as fully appreciated before.' Therefore 'the work of theology is never once and for all'. Richard Rice, *The Reign of God: An Introduction to Christian Theology from a Seventh-day Adventist Perspective* (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press, 1997), 8–9.

Therefore our emphasis in biblical interpretation must be on how to apply the biblical teachings in our lives and in the life of the church community, rather than on creating an information bank of Christian doctrines. Do not misunderstand. I am not setting up a dualism between Christian life and church doctrines, but I am emphasising that good interpretation involves application to real-life situations.[5]

If interpretation is so important, how will we go about it? I do not intend to address the general principles of scriptural interpretation at this point. I am assuming ministers and teachers have long been familiar with such matters as the relationship between interpretation and the original text of the Bible; biblical translation, understanding specific scriptural words, sentences, units, books, and authors; and the importance of taking into account the entire canon.[6] Nor do I wish to detail the individual steps involved in interpreting and applying particular scriptural texts.[7] Rather, I want to discuss the two basic matters that we need to keep in mind if we are to interpret rather than interrupt: the listener/reader and the Word of God.

The Beginning Point: My Situation

I am taking as my starting point the human situation. Some conservative Christians may object that I have chosen the wrong place to begin. Surely, one should begin with the Bible, since it provides us with a platform that is fixed and objective. I agree, that would be the ideal place to start, but I am convinced that none of us actually begins there. Instead, our own situation provides the launching pad for our study of Scripture, and it is vital that we realise that such is the case.

Allow me to illustrate this from personal experience. I have to confess that one particular facet of my background has influenced the way I interpret the Bible more than any other. The eight years I spent pastoring and teaching in Papua New Guinea mean that I can no longer read the Word of God in the way that I did before I left Australia. I was thrown into the 'deep end' of another culture where people reason in radically foreign ways and read the Old Testament in a seemingly more consistent and less opportunistic fashion. They cannot always see the connections I draw between the gospel message and personal and social eth-

5. For instance, the details provided to the Thessalonian believers in regard to the coming of Christ are not given merely for the sake of information, but in order that they might not 'grieve like the rest of men, who have no hope' (1 Thess 4:13), and for their encouragement (1 Thess 4:18).
6. For information on these matters see Gerhard F Hasel, 'Biblical Interpretation: General Principles', *Australasian Division Bible Conference 1978* (separate pagination for each section).
7. For a convenient summary of the processes involved in biblical interpretation and application see John Goldingay, *Models for Interpretation of Scripture* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1995), 2–7.

ics, and are constantly aware of the closeness of supernatural forces (both divine and demonic). I have been forced to make some wide-ranging alterations to the familiar theological paradigms I have learned in church from my infancy through to my theology degree at Avondale College.[8]

Some of us have lost a child to sudden infant death syndrome, or have watched as a partner is gradually stripped of his/her strength and dignity by multiple sclerosis, or have had a daughter forsake family, friends, and God for the shadow land of drugs and prostitution. They will also know that they can no longer read the Bible in the same way as before.[9]

If your 'text' and mine is the place where we start our reading of the biblical text, what does our 'text' look like? Its appearance obviously varies from person to person, yet we can probably generalise. The following factors will certainly not be equally important for each of us, but most of them are common among us.

Gender

Undoubtedly, one very dominant factor in biblical interpretation throughout Christian history has been the fact that most biblical study is carried out from a male perspective. Of course, a strong biblical case can be made for insisting that women should not have a teaching /interpreting role in the church (1 Tim 2:11–15), but is it not a masculine bias which insists on a literalistic reading of the pauline instructions regarding women, while ignoring his desire that 'men everywhere . . . lift up holy hands in prayer' (1 Tim 2: 8)?[10]

Whatever one's viewpoint on the role of women in the church, the pastoral heart cannot ignore the fact that some women find the Bible, especially Paul, 'hurtful, unhelpful, not revealing of God, and not worth the effort to come to grips with'.[11]

---

8. For further details see my 'How Melanesia Shaped My Hermeneutics and Theology: Some Personal Reflections', in *Avondale and the Pacific: 100 Years of Mission*, edited by Barry Oliver *et al* (Cooranbong, NSW: Avondale Academic Press, 1997), 93–97.
9. This idea is well expressed by Ingrid Rosa Kitzberger: 'When I approach biblical texts I do so with a text already *written on my soul*, that is, with my life-experience and my own story. Key is my socialisation and history, as well as everyday experience, as a woman in a patriarchal and sexist society and church. Key also is my theological training within male-dominated and patriarchally structured and shaped discipline with its—at least until recent years—dominating sexist interpretations of the bible' (emphasis, Kitzberger). Kitzberger also observes that the idea of 'reader as text' applies 'as much to the first readers as to any subsequent reader'. Kitzberger, 'Love and Footwashing: John 13:1–20 and Luke 7:36–50 Read Intertextually', in *Biblical Interpretation: A Journal of Contemporary Approaches* 2 (1994): 192.
10. An excellent place to begin an excursion into feminist theology is with Katharine Doob Sakenfield's excellent summary article, 'Feminist Uses of Biblical Materials', in *Feminist Interpretation of the Bible*, edited Letty M Russell (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster, 1985), 55–64.
11. *Ibid*, 64. This reaction to Scripture is not unique to feminists. I have experienced the same reac-

Privilege

It is difficult for those who are part of the privileged segments of society to place themselves in the 'Bible-reading shoes' of the 'have-nots', the 'have-beens', the 'might-have-beens', the powerless, and the disenfranchised. For example, it comes as a shock to western Christians to realise that some Latin American theologians emphasise a completely different set of texts on the subject of salvation.[12]

Age

Sensitive though this issue is, one should keep in mind that we bring our particular age to the study of the Scriptures. Studies reveal that with increasing age there is usually increasing intolerance for ambiguity, although education and personality are important factors as well. This increasing rigidity may be expressed religiously in fundamentalism and in the heightened probability of an authoritarian approach to religion.[13]

Race and Culture

The culture, nationality, and place of birth of the biblical reader provide a large part of the 'text' which (s)he brings to Scripture. For example, in Australia and New Zealand, non-Anglo-Saxon Adventists at times cannot understand why Anglo-Saxon church members do not 'see' in the Bible what is absolutely plain to them. East Coast and Mid-West American Adventists look askance at Southern Californian Adventists. Tragically we tend to label people who do not interpret the Bible in the same way we do as conservative or liberal, concrete-thinkers or abstract thinkers, educated or non-intellectual, and biblically literate or scriptural neophytes.

Imagine what a wealth of biblical insight we might find if we were to listen to the insights of those who approach the Book from quite different cultural, racial

---

tions from Christians who are in the process of grieving, dealing with marital breakdown, or coping with teenagers. Also see Norman H Young's thought-provoking article, 'Women: The Silenced Majority', *South Pacific Record*, 14 January 1995, 911.

12. For instance, Gustavo Gutierrez (one of the fathers of liberation theology) explains that 'to believe . . . is to be united with the poor and exploited of this world from within the very heart of the social confrontations and 'popular' struggles for liberation'. Gutierrez, 'Freedom and Salvation: A Political Problem', in G Gutierrez and R Shaull, *Liberation and Change*, edited by RH Stone (Atlanta, GA: John Knox Press, 1977), 92.
13. For example, see the cross-sectional data from the 'Adventist Family Study, 1994', by Bradley J Strahan with Bryan Craig, *Marriage, Family and Religion* (Sydney: Adventist Institute of Family Relations, 1995), 51–65. This study focuses on a randomly selected sample of 996 Seventh-day Adventist adults from nineteen to ninety-two years of age. For a more general discussion of age-related cognitive changes, see Kathleen Stassen Berger, *The Developing Person Through the Life Span* (New York, NY: Worth Publishers, 1988, second edition).

and family perspectives, especially we Westerners, for whom 'calculation is more obviously characteristic of modern life than reflection'.[14]

Adventist

It is important to recognise that members of any given particular religious affiliation will tend to bring to Scripture a system by which they attempt to organise the material that they discover there. Accordingly, Seventh-day Adventists tend to read the Bible through 'Adventist spectacles'. For example, we view matters such as sin, salvation, God's sovereignty, and human freedom, through the lens of the 'great controversy' motif. Such an approach can be positive, if the organising principle applied to biblical data arises from the Bible itself. However, we fail to really listen to Scripture if we press the biblical story into our own mould so forcefully that we lose sight of its ambiguities.[15]

Ministerial

Whether or not they know it, pastors tend to treat the Bible as 'their' book, which they have been trained to dispense to the laity as needed. Even the way they conduct a Bible study is seen by the uninitiated as something they cannot possibly imitate. It is all too easy for one to hold a position of power over how the Bible is interpreted and applied. While we should not underestimate the advantages of theological training, we should also recognise that it has prepared people for exit from the culture of 'Jane Citizen' and for entrance into the 'peculiar' culture of ministers.

Sin

As sinners we have a tendency to circumvent the plain meaning of Scripture. Our natural tendency to disobedience can cause us to rationalise the radicality of the Bible. 'The heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure. Who can understand it?' (Jer 17:16). It is essential that we ponder the fact that there are two primary ways of evading the text of Scripture. One is by twisting the text in such a way that the gospel is transformed into a form suiting our own liking.[16] The other type of rebellion is 'orthodox legalism' which tithes the mint and cumin while 'the

14. Robert Morgan with John Barton, *Biblical Interpretation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), 290.
15. It is vital to notice that at times our biblical interpretations arise out of the perspectives of Ellen G White. I do not wish to call into question her inspiration, but I think she would be disappointed to find that we have not individually or collectively put ourselves into the biblical story as she herself attempted to do.
16. This attitude is condemned in 2 Timothy 4:3–4 and 2 Peter 3:16.

real meaning of the text is passed over'.[17] Is it not the sin of pride that causes us to think that we know more about God and his heaven than he has revealed to us in the written or incarnate Word?

Personality

Last, but not least, the personality type of the reader or interpreter will have a large bearing on the meaning found in Scripture.[18] For instance, the overly serious will not notice humor or irony in Scripture. More than likely (s)he will read such material in a flat, black/white, and literalistic fashion. Think of the exegetical contortions that some biblical interpreters and preachers have engaged in as they have tried to explain Jesus' 'ridiculous' statement that 'it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God' (Matt 19:25).[19]

Conclusion

All of us come to the Bible as biased readers. Conservative Christians have long warned how 'contemporary beliefs and presuppositions seem to block the way and distort all our interpretations.' How then, can the text assume 'a determining role over us, given our own place in history' when it is impossible to remove distorting assumptions?[20]

Naively thinking that we can bracket out our own story is not the answer. Rather, we 'have to take account of the bias factor when we go about hermeneutics'. One must be cognisant of the fact that it is harder to get at the original meaning than we may have previously thought and 'it calls for greater effort'.[21] If that is the case, it is not surprising that Paul should command Timothy: 'Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a workman who does not need to be ashamed and who correctly handles the word of truth' (2 Tim 2:15).

---

17. Clark H Pinnock makes this distinction in his *The Scripture Principle* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1984), 199. In commenting on the twin dangers of rebellious liberalism and orthodox legalism, Pinnock observes that the wise course must be for us to attend to the error we ourselves may be guilty of and correct that, hoping others will do the same. 'For it is not right to point out the beam in our brother's eye when there is a speck in our own.' *Ibid.*
18. A handy but somewhat outdated introduction to this aspect of biblical interpretation is found in Cedric B Johnson, *The Psychology of Biblical Interpretation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1983).
19. The overly scrupulous can miss the larger picture as 'gnats' are strained and 'camels' are swallowed (Matt 23:24).
20. Pinnock, *The Scripture Principle, op cit,* 207.
21. *Ibid,* 208.

'To be an interpreter means to be an incessant seeker.' We do not possess absolute knowledge; hence the necessity of interpretation. Neither do we have absolute goodness; so we must continually apply Scripture to our lives.[22] Nor do we come as unbiased seekers. Therefore, we must be always open to the corrections of God's Spirit as He applies God's Word to us.

22. Kevin J Vanhoozer, 'The World Well Staged? Theology, Culture, and Hermeneutics', in *God and Culture: Essays in Honor of Carl F.H. Henry*, edited by DA Carson and JD Woodbridge (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1993), 30.