

The theological interpretation of the Bible as Scripture

by Ian Paul



To call the Bible “Scripture” involves making an assumption about the nature of the Bible before we open it (a theological presupposition) and leads to reading it in a certain way once we do open it (a methodological consequence), writes Ian Paul.

Revd Dr Ian Paul is Associate Minister of St Mary’s, Longfleet in Poole, Dorset, and Managing Editor of Grove Books Ltd. His PhD was in hermeneutics and the Book of Revelation, and is due to be published by Paternoster Press next year. He is Theological Adviser in Salisbury Diocese and a member of General Synod.

Theological presupposition has to do with what the Bible is and what reading it will do for us. It suggests that the Bible, in its part and as a whole, has a unifying purpose behind it, and therefore a coherence (at some level or other) that supports this purpose. The purpose itself is, ideally, manifested in our reading – the revelation of something of the nature of God to the reader. The methodological consequence is implied in the very term “Scripture”, drawing our attention as it does to the nature of the Bible as something inscribed, written. It implies that we pay attention in the first instance to the writing itself and how it is organised internally, rather than in relation to something else which is more important than the text itself. It invites us to think of the Bible primarily as picture, rather than a window or mirror.

The early Church was not unaware of critical problems with the Bible (once the canon

was agreed), but theological concerns were always to the fore in interpretation. Without the controls of critical methodology, the range of possible meanings came to be organised by the mediaeval scheme of four senses of Scripture. The first was the literal sense; this is very similar to what we might understand as reading a text in its original historical context, though now our historical understanding is much more developed. The second sense of Scripture is the allegorical, and relates to the potential construal of meaning of a text apart from its plain meaning to the first hearers. The third level is the moral or tropological; here the shift is from the text itself to patterns or examples that have bearing on the reader’s world. The fourth sense is the analogical, or prophetic.

The Reformation’s concern with the importance of the text and of freeing it from the *magisterium* of the church led to impatience with the four-sense schema. How can we prevent the interpreter from reading something *into* the text, rather than reading out of it? All too easily, authority lay with the interpreter more than with the text. This impatience foreshadowed post-Enlightenment rationalism’s search for objectivity in meaning, which was suspicious

of anything that looked like prejudicial assumptions made prior to reading. In the nineteenth century, the German theologian Schleiermacher firmly placed biblical hermeneutics within the wider task of general hermeneutics, ruling out dependence on any kind of extra-textual authority and any prior assumption about what a text must be. Critical scholarship since then has largely abided by this principle.

But a recent resurgence of interest in understanding the Bible as Scripture has followed in the wake of the postmodern turn against Enlightenment rationalism. The rejection of assumptions about the nature of a text is in itself an assumption; the modernist dogma that all can be apprehended by reason alone without presuppositions is itself an oppressive meta-narrative.

Paul Ricoeur, starting out as a disciple of existentialism and in turn being tutor to Jacques Derrida, stands at a crucial point in this development. We must not live by a pre-critical naïveté, he says, but neither must we be satisfied with criticism in itself. For criticism, in its suspicion of everything, produces a semantic wasteland where we end up knowing less than we did before – unless it is followed by a commitment to the meaning of a text, what he calls a second,

post-critical, naïveté. It is a commitment that is rationally informed but not rationalistic, as personal commitment to meaning transcends the purely rational. After being suspicious about false meanings, we must retrieve true meanings. With respect to the Bible, criticism (that is, historical critical methodology) takes us into the world behind the text, whether that is the world of first-century near east, or the world of the transmission of oral traditions and their inscription. Recent literary disciplines have made us look more closely at the world of the text, the interrelation of the different parts. But what is of ultimate importance is the world *in front* of the text – the possibilities for existence and for faith that are opened up for us as we read the text. (There is an interesting correspondence between this “behind/of/in front of” scheme and the mediaeval four senses. The difference is that one is pre-critical, the other post-critical.)

There have been a number of recent champions of reading the Bible as Scripture. Brevard Childs has argued for the importance of “canonical criticism”, where the primary context for our reading is the shape of the canon of Scripture as we have it. Walter Brueggemann’s writings emphasise the theological significance of the text, and this makes his commentaries very useful for the preacher and pastor. John Goldingay has proposed four models as part of our understanding the Bible as Scripture – witnessing tradition, authoritative canon, inspired word and experienced revelation – and has argued that it is possible to employ radical criticism in reading and still hold a “conservative” view of the Bible as Scripture. Richard Hays’ careful study of Paul’s use of the Old Testament led him to conclude that Paul’s reading was “ecclesiocentric” or even “pneumatocentric” – his understanding was driven by what would build the Church, or be in tune with the work of the Spirit. The implication is that our reading should have the same concerns. More generally, there has been a small explosion of interest in the study of “intertextuality” – how one text

affects the meaning of another – and in particular the theological use made by the New Testament of the Old, especially in the Book of Revelation.

But even as we approach the Bible as Scripture and try to read theologically, we are aware that the conclusions of a sceptical criticism are still present. How can we integrate what we “know” from criticism with what we “believe” about the Bible as Scripture? The post-modern approach is simply to let the two understandings co-exist without trying to resolve the apparent contradiction. Alternatively, we can modify our understanding of the nature of truth, so that, for example, John’s account of what Jesus said is “more truly true than mere tape-recorded facts could ever be” (Richard Burridge). Or perhaps we need to find a way of thinking about the place of criticism and its methodology that is more productive.

The heart of the matter is the question of where meaning is found in the process of reading. For the rationalist concerned with objectivity, meaning lies within (or behind) the text. For the postmodern relativist meaning is found within the reader. But in fact, meaning lies in the interaction of reader and text; there is an objective element (a text cannot simply mean anything) and a subjective element (a text cannot mean something without a reader making sense of it). On the larger scale, this points to a dialectical relation between exegesis and theology as part of the hermeneutical circle (or spiral). Exegesis, the reading of particular texts, can develop, clarify and correct theological assumptions – here is the objective aspect to reading. But the reading cannot take place without a theological understanding of the whole, of the Bible as Scripture – a necessary subjective commitment on the part of the reader. This position has been forcefully argued by Francis Watson, but it is not a view that will gain much popularity in the academic world, since it asserts that understanding the Bible aright only happens when the Bible itself is located first in the Church, and only then in the world.

Interestingly, reading the Bible as Scripture has implications for the place of doctrinal debate. A Bible that has been fragmented by criticism needs to be supplemented by well-developed doctrine in order to speak to contemporary contexts. But a Bible read theologically as a unity offers a more coherent resource that has less need of doctrinal supplementation. So seeing the Bible as located primarily within the Church – to read it as Scripture is not to enhance insularity, rather it has profound implications for the life of the Church as well as for the reading of the Bible in today’s world. ■

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