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Presuppositions of Biblical Interpretation

General Approaches

The basic presupposition about the Bible that distinguishes believers from unbelievers is that the Bible is God's revelation of Himself and of His will for us humans. Although Christians are united in that basic affirmation, the implications of the statement are viewed in very different ways. It is important to understand those different approaches, for a person's presuppositions will determine, to large extent, how he understands and interprets Scripture. One author has explained it this way:

We must know ourselves. . . . Each of us approaches Scripture with his own, or her own presuppositions. These presuppositions are part of our world view, part of our personal theology. In the first instance they relate to the way we regard Scripture. Does it consist of infallible propositions? Is it the record of certain acts of God? Is it an inspired record? Is there revelation outside Scripture? Our views here will dictate how we handle the text. Our minds are not empty

when we read or listen to Scripture; what we hear is already partly predetermined by what is already in them; our presuppositions shape what we understand. It is not necessary to argue here for any one particular set of presuppositions, but to insist that we become aware of our own so that when we understand and interpret we know how we are being influenced by them. It is also important that we see that our presuppositions are consistent, that we do not operate with one set at one time and with another at another.¹

If the Bible is accepted in any sense as a communication from God, a logical place to begin would be to inquire if the Bible itself tells us what approach we should take in seeking to understand its meaning. Does the Bible in one part interpret the meaning of statements in another part? It could almost be said that the whole New Testament is an interpretation of the Old Testament. Whether or not the methods employed by Christ and the apostles in determining the meaning of Old Testament passages are models for us to follow, certainly the presuppositions they held should be a model for us. What presuppositions, then, did Christ and the apostles hold about interpreting the Old Testament?

Christ and the apostles viewed the Bible as a document written by men, to be sure, but at the same time as a document whose source was God Himself.² Let us examine the implications of those two basic presuppositions—that the Bible is both a divine book, the Word of God; and a human book, the Word through men to fellow human beings.

The Bible Is Supernatural in Character

Authoritative

Since God is the author, the Bible is authoritative. It is absolute in its authority for human thought and behavior. “As the Scripture has said” is a recurring theme throughout the New Testament. In fact, the New Testament contains more than two hundred direct quotations of the Old Testament. In addition, the New Testament has a large and

uncertain number of allusions to the Old. New Testament writers, following the example of Jesus Christ, built their theology on the Old Testament. For Christ and the apostles, to quote the Bible was to settle an issue.

Trustworthy

Since God is the author, all the Bible is *wholly trustworthy*. Nowhere does Jesus Christ or any New Testament writer leave room for error. To be sure, Christ and the apostles presented a revelation of God and His will that went far beyond what was revealed in the Old Testament. But there is not the slightest hint of error, even when the new covenant is explained as setting aside the temporary, old covenant. Since the Bible is the Word of God, it is considered absolutely trustworthy in its overall message and in each part of the revelation.

Because its source is God, the Bible is trustworthy in all its parts so that all parts form a harmonious unity. Paul wrote that “*all Scripture is given by inspiration of God*” (2 Tim. 3:16; italics added). New Testament authors quoted from every section of the Old Testament and from almost every book of the Old Testament. Furthermore, the message of the Old Testament was seen by Christ and the apostles to be a single message—redemption.

Because of its divine authorship, the Old Testament is viewed as a Christian book. The apostles used the Old Testament as the basis for their teaching concerning Jesus Christ. Christ did things “that Scripture might be fulfilled.” That formula was characteristic of Jesus’ teaching. The gospel writers and the apostolic letter writers followed the same approach.

Many prophecies in the Old Testament were direct, such as that concerning the death of Jesus Christ in Isaiah 53.

But such clear predictive prophecy and fulfillment is seldom found in the New Testament; it is the exception rather than the rule. Instead, . . . the New Testament writers looked for the meaning of the Old Testament as contained in its *sensus plenior* (full meaning). In

so doing, they found varied correspondences, analogies, and suggestive similarities—some more substantial, some less substantial—but all based on the underlying presuppositions of the sovereignty of God in the affairs of history; the unique character of the Scriptures as divinely inspired; and the identity of Jesus as the telos, or goal, of the history of salvation.³

We will study later whether we should follow the example of Christ and the apostles in making allegorical interpretations of Old Testament history and teaching. At this point, it is enough to emphasize that the Old Testament was viewed as a supernatural, Christ-centered book by both the Lord Jesus Himself and by His apostles.

The Bible Is Natural in Character

The New Testament treats the Old Testament as a supernatural book. The Old is filled with prophecy concerning the Messiah and the new covenant. Those prophecies are explicit and found by Christ and the New Testament authors hidden within the events and words of the Old Testament. However, the New Testament does not treat the Old Testament as exclusively supernatural, or as a “magical” book. It treats the Old Testament as a human communication, using language in its common sense. The authors of the Old Testament are often designated. Moses, David, and Isaiah are constantly quoted, and lesser-known prophets are named as a source of revelation. Peter expressed it clearly: “Men moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God” (2 Pet. 1:21).

Richard Longenecker writes concerning Jesus’ method of interpreting the Old Testament:

A number of times in the Gospels, Jesus is portrayed as interpreting the Old Testament in a literalist manner, particularly in matters concerned with basic religious and moral values. . . . In his teachings on human relationships, Jesus is represented as employing the Scriptures in a straightforward manner as well, with only minor

variations in the texts cited. In rebuke of the Pharisees, for example, he quoted Exodus 20:12, "Honor your father and your mother," and 21:17, "Whoever curses father or mother, let him die the death." In support of the indissolubility of marriage he quoted Genesis 2:24, "For this reason shall a man leave his father and mother and be faithfully devoted to his wife, and the two shall be one flesh." . . . Like Judaism generally—whether pharisaic, nonconformist, or even Hellenistic—on matters having to do with man's basic orientation to God, man's basic moral values, and man's basic human relations, Jesus interpreted the Scriptures quite literally. These are matters of foundational importance upon which God had spoken plainly, and therefore they were taken by Jesus and his contemporaries in Judaism without further elaboration.⁴

Inasmuch as the subject of his letter was basically ethical, James used the Old Testament in a direct, literalistic way. Stephen's recitation of Jewish history (Acts 7) may be the longest of that nature in the New Testament, but it is typical of New Testament handling of Old Testament history. Stephen was not using the stories of history to draw out a secret message. The real meaning upon which he based his argument is not hidden beneath the historic facts; the historic facts themselves are the real point.

Not only are biblical moral teachings and history taken by biblical writers in their ordinary sense, but even in theological teaching, both Paul and the author of Hebrews in most instances adhered to the original sense of the passage. Christ and the apostles often found meanings in the Old Testament that the ordinary reader would not suspect were there, and thus treated the Old Testament as a supernatural book. But their overwhelming use of the Old Testament was in the original, manifest sense of the passage.

In other words, the teaching of the Bible is to be accepted as straightforward, human communication to be taken in its natural sense.

Distorted Approaches to Understanding And Applying the Scriptures

Before we examine the principles based on the two presuppositions held by Christ and the apostles—that the Bible is both divine and human—we should note several ways those presuppositions have been distorted and misapplied.

Throughout history the emphasis of interpreters has changed. For the premodern era, there was an emphasis on the divine nature of Scripture, in the modern and postmodern eras the emphasis has been more on the human nature of the Bible. Each of these eras has offered needed correction for approaches prominent in the previous era, but in each era many interpreters have gone seriously astray from a biblical approach. Before developing a biblical approach to understanding and applying the Bible, we pause to consider the presuppositions that have prevailed in each era. We shall also look briefly at a fourth approach, the dogmatic, which has been well represented in each era.

Chapters 2 through 5 of this book discuss in order the subtle, and not so subtle, elements of interpreting Scripture. It is important to begin with this overview since many interpreters today tend toward one or another of these approaches.

First, *the supernaturalistic approach*, dominant in premodern days, interprets all Scripture from a supernatural point of view. The interpreter's task, consequently, is to seek several meanings or hidden meanings, which are to be uncovered through intuition and spiritual experience. The "natural" meaning of the text is downgraded or totally ignored. Second, the *naturalistic approach*, often found among modern rationalists, limits the meaning and significance of Scripture to those elements that conform to natural processes and human insight. The possibility of divine authorship and supernatural events are ruled out from the start. A second form of the naturalistic approach is the *postmodern view*, which finds the significance of the passage in one's personal perception of reality in an encounter with the biblical author's witness to his own experience.

The final approach is *the dogmatic*. All specific interpretation is made to conform to a predetermined system of doctrine or external authority. This approach often is used by those who advocate either the supernaturalistic or naturalistic approach. In addition, some believers, with otherwise sound approaches, may err in dogmatically setting aside the plain meaning of the text to make it conform to a system of doctrine, some human authority, or even a personal experience. Few would admit to espousing this approach, yet it is all too common. All of us are subject to the temptation.

Obviously, these approaches to understanding Scripture differ so basically that the meaning one finds in Scripture will be radically different. For example, take the story of Joshua's conquest of Jericho (Joshua 6). Since the supernaturalist is looking for a hidden meaning, he may see the marching around Jericho in silence as a mandate for Christians to witness by their "walk" in silence six days a week until the leader (preacher) on Sunday proclaims the gospel, and the walls of unbelief come tumbling down and people are converted. The naturalist modern may see the account as an ancient story that was made up (since walls do not normally tumble before trumpet blasts) to teach the victory of good over evil against great odds. The naturalist postmodern might focus on the call to personal religious faith that was at the writer's center of attention. The story for the postmodern might be only a legend, the details of which hold no importance. Among dogmatists, some might have a problem with the slaughter of the citizens of Jericho at God's command—a loving God would never order the death of innocent people. Other dogmatists would have no problem at all, believing that the people of Jericho were created for the purpose of damnation anyway.

Note that these examples are not made up, but are based on actual interpretations by those who espouse each approach.

Chapters 2 through 5 of this book discuss in order the subtle, and not so subtle, elements of interpreting Scripture using the premodern, modern, postmodern, or dogmatic approaches. It is important to begin with this overview since many interpreters today tend toward one or another of those approaches.

The balance of the book will outline a basic approach for understanding and applying the Bible in a way that gives full value to both its human and divine authorship. Some have called this the “grammatical-historical” approach, but that term suggests only a few of the many principles necessary for understanding human communication. And it does not include at all the dimension of divine communication that will modify, at certain points, the normative approach for understanding human language. Perhaps we could call the approach the Bible has for itself, and which we will seek to follow, “the human/divine communication analysis” approach. But first, let us consider those approaches that err in understanding and applying the Bible through an overemphasis on one characteristic of Scripture at the expense of another.

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