

Asbury Theological Seminary

MAKING SENSE OF THE OLD TESTAMENT:
A STUDY OF BIBLICAL INTERPRATION AND METHOD

Submitted to Dr. Lawson Stone
In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for
BT605 Theology of the Old Testament

By:
Benjamin D. Kickert
April 28, 2008

History has shown a tendency to dichotomize understandings of scripture. Take for instance distinctions such as recognizing the human author of scripture and the divine author of scripture, or John H. Sailhamer recent book which is entirely framed around opposing ways to view scripture such as: “Text or Event,” “Criticism or Canon,” “Descriptive or Confessional,” and “Diachronic or Synchronic.”¹ While these are important issues to discuss, the most common duality of scripture is certainly found between what the text actually says and what it means. This is often referred to as the literal sense of scripture versus the higher or spiritual sense.² This paper will explore the historic oscillation between these two options by providing a general outline of the history of biblical interpretation, sketching major streams of thought and including relevant interpretive examples. This historical overview will then be used to introduce a simple theological method for understanding the Old Testament.

History of Biblical Interpretation

The patristic era of church history remains one of the most defining periods in the life of Christianity. It was in these few hundred years that the church fathers set the course for orthodoxy with creeds and councils. In this time of emergence, it was of the utmost importance to define heresy against orthodoxy. This setting placed an increasingly important role on the process and conclusion of Biblical interpretation. It is Irenaeus who provides the first major stepping stone in the interpretive process. In the face of heretics like Marcion and the increasing influence of Gnosticism, Irenaeus helped provide a framework from which Christians could work with the scriptures. This framework took the form of the Rule of Faith, which articulated

¹ John H. Sailhamer, *Introduction to Old Testament Theology: A Canonical Approach* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995).

² As we shall see, this distinction can take on several designations: Plain Sense vs. Spiritual Sense; Remoteness vs. Proximity; Peshat vs. Remez, Derash or Sod.

basic beliefs; from those beliefs the scriptures could be rightly interpreted.³ In many ways this produced a conjoined view of scripture, faith and practice.

As Christianity continued to develop, more complex approaches to interpretation began to emerge. The third and fourth centuries brought two schools of interpretive thought: the Alexandrian School and the Antiochene School. Both schools affirmed that scripture had a “plain sense” as well as a “spiritual sense;” but it was the Alexandrian school that made the sharpest distinction between these two through the heavy use of allegory. For those affiliated with this school the words of the Old Testament pointed directly to the New Testament and every passage held a higher meaning. This school did more than just distinguish between what the text said and what it meant (or pointed to), they argued that the plain sense was inferior and not finally necessary.⁴

The most notable thinker coming from the Alexandrian School was Origen. He not only advocated for a duality in understanding scripture, he went as far as to say that scripture actually held three parts: body, soul and spirit.⁵ He argued that incongruities in the text were actually markers that called the reader to enter into an allegorical understanding of Scripture.⁶ For Origen, Song of Songs in particular was a biblical text that required a higher reading. For instance, he maintained that the references to “kisses” were actually pointing to an understanding of the word of God.⁷ Likewise, the phrase breast should be understood as “the bosom of Christ.”⁸ In fact, the entirety of his commentary on the book revolves around allegory. He even

³ See Kugel and Greer, *Early Biblical Interpretation*, esp. pp. 155-176.

⁴ Lawson Stone, *Old Testament Interpretation in the Early Church*, class lecture.

⁵ Origen, *First Principles*, in *Biblical Interpretation in the Early Church*. 57-58.

⁶ Origen, *First Principles*, 62.

⁷ Origen, *The Song of Songs*, 61-62.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 62-65.

comments that unless the book is taken spiritually, it holds no value and is a “mere tale.”⁹ In this way, Origen serves as a perfect example of Alexandrian School of thought.

The Antiochene School largely emerged in response to the teachings of Origen and other Alexandrians. These scholars also pursued the higher sense of scripture but they contended that the text must first be understood in light of its plain sense and from there a higher sense could be obtained. For this school, the best way to see the higher sense was through an understanding of typology where people, places and events in the Old Testament point to New Testament equivalents. In this school Diodore of Tarsus emerged as a leading figure as did the Cappadocian Fathers. Jerome and Augustine also had roots in the Antiochene School, but in the end, these spiritual heavyweights did more to provide a synthesis between the two schools.¹⁰

Despite the advances in the study and interpretation of scripture, the late fifth through the seventh centuries exhibited a downward movement. The plain sense of scripture faded and allegory was allowed to present a message in conflict with text of the Bible and also with the Rule of Faith.¹¹ Unfortunately, this decline lasted throughout most of the Middle Ages. Beyond simply an overemphasis on allegory, this era produced a tendency for doctrine to develop apart from scripture. The Bible became a “proof-text” rather than a normative text. The bright points in this period ironically came from Jewish interpreters who placed an immense value on scripture. Within the Christian communities, it was the monastic orders that stood as exemplary.

Three scholars worth noting in this time period are Bernard of Clairvaux, Thomas Aquinas and Nicholas of Lyra. Bernard in particular follows Origen’s lead to argue that the imagery of kisses in Song of Songs must be a metaphor. Here however, he contends that the

⁹ Ibid., 270.

¹⁰ Lawson Stone, Old Testament Interpretation in the Early Church, class lecture.

¹¹ Ibid.

kisses are representative of Jesus and his desire to redeem humanity.¹² Aquinas argued that scripture could rightly be understood in terms of allegory and representation,¹³ and that in the end, it should possess multiple senses.¹⁴ It was the argument of Nicholas that Song of Solomon could not possibly be about humanly lovers because the Holy Spirit dictated it; instead it must refer to God and the church. It is interesting to note that Nicholas understands the first section to be about the Old Testament church while the second half of the book refers to the New Testament church.¹⁵ Once again, we see allegory and representation being used to point to a higher sense.

As the Middle Ages wore on the church began to take a more and more unhealthy approach to the dichotomy of biblical senses as it placed itself as the dispenser of the spiritual sense while the text itself only conveyed the plain meaning. It would be easy to assume that the de-emphasis of the text that accompanied much of the Middle Ages continued until Martin Luther and his bold call to action. As we shall see, Luther's actions were paramount; however, even before the beginning of the reformation, the Renaissance displayed rays of hope. In particular, the Renaissance represented an increase in biblical knowledge, better manuscripts and continued usage of the literal sense to get to the spiritual sense.¹⁶ This period from the Middle Ages through the Renaissance produced a massive amount of commentary. In many cases the commentary, which was passed down with the text, overshadowed the text itself. With the coming of the Reformation, a trend of adding layers to commentary to the text was replaced by the trend to prune Scripture down to the biblical text itself. This was not a statement concerning the plain or spiritual sense as much as it was a return to the Bible itself.

¹² Bernard of Clairvaux, Song of Songs I, 8-16

¹³ Thomas Aquinas, Summa Theologica, 15-17.

¹⁴ Ibid. 17-19.

¹⁵ Nicholas of Lyra, The Song, 31-35.

¹⁶ Lawson Stone, There and Back Again, class lecture.

A discussion of the Reformation must certainly include commentary on the work of Martin Luther, whose work as a scholar included much more than just an emphasis on the Bible. He also presented a unique way of understanding the higher sense of the Old Testament. He argued that the Old Testament represented the voices of God's people anticipating the coming of Christ. This allowed the text to point to the message of the New Testament without having to do theological gymnastics. This did not mean that he rejected the idea of a spiritual sense of scripture. In fact, in his discussion of the Song of Solomon, he makes a point that is similar to that of Origen when he argues that the term "kisses" refers to the word of God. Also, like Nicholas of Lyra, he argues that the true subjects are God and his people. In keeping with the trend that was identified above, Luther does not comment on authorship as being that of Solomon, but at the same time he points out that the literature is collective in nature.¹⁷

The advances of the Reformation carried with them their own dangers. Instead of leaving the text behind like the Middle Ages may have done, the Reformation swung the pendulum in the opposite direction where textual study nudged out the importance of tradition and in some ways, the spiritual sense of scripture. The Enlightenment furthered this tendency and the Bible was often studied "scientifically" rather than as the Word of God. Theophile James Meek provides a good example of this in his work on Song of Solomon. In his article he argues that Song of Solomon is best understood when its connection with the Tammuz cult is explored. He argues that the Song of Solomon is actually borrowed material and refers to the love between two mythical characters: Dod and Sala.¹⁸

History to this point had displayed the dangers of overemphasizing either the plain sense or the spiritual sense. A major push towards synthesis came with the emergence of the Biblical

¹⁷ Martin Luther, Lectures on the Song of Solomon, 191-197.

¹⁸ Theophile James Meek, Canticles and the Tammuz Cult, 1-14.

Theology Movement. The birth of this movement is most commonly attributed to Johannes Gabler and his 1787 speech entitled “On the Proper Distinction between Biblical and Dogmatic Theology and the Specific Objectives of Both.” However, the true thrust of the Biblical Theology Movement came in the 1900’s with Karl Barth and others. This movement emphasized the “kerygma” of scripture while also embracing historical criticism. The result was a school of thought that sought to understand the message of the Bible in terms of its historical context. This approach provided a method that tapped into both the literal sense and the spiritual sense of the text.¹⁹ Barth demonstrates this in his treatment of the Song of Solomon – in fact, he is the first in this survey to see the human side of the book. He argues that the Song of Solomon does in fact tell the story of two human lovers. From there, he ties the text with the Genesis account of Adam and Eve to show that sexuality is part of humanity. With this, the literal sense, he is able to draw connections to a higher meaning of God and his love – but it begins first with the plain sense of the book.²⁰

Beyond Barth, two theologians in particular need to be referenced: Walther Eichrodt and Gerhard Von Rad. Eichrodt’s major contribution was his work on identifying a central theme to the Old Testament. He concluded that the concept of “covenant” was what held the text together. While covenant is certainly a central theme, there are also problems with this identification. For one, Eichrodt neglects the large portion of texts that do not address the covenant at all. Also, it has been noted that in order to bolster his claims, Eichrodt expanded his definition of covenant beyond its usefulness. Von Rad on the other hand made his focus the history of Israel and saw the whole of the Old Testament as merely a lens to view this history. In particular he focused on what Israel said about YHWH. Progressions in Israelite thought were

¹⁹ Lawson Stone, There and Back Again, class lecture.

²⁰ Karl Barth, Church Dogmatics, The Doctrine of Creation, 311-321.

considered representative of necessary reframing in light of historical situations.²¹ Like Barth, Eichrodt and Von Rad presented an approach to scripture that includes both the literal and plain sense of scripture.

In recent years the impact of the Biblical Theology movement has faded; however, no major stream of thought has definitively filled its place. It could be argued that post modernity is leaving its mark on the discipline, but even then, the impact is not nearly as defined as previous eras. The Biblical Theology Movement has allowed the disciple to appreciate both the plain sense and the higher sense. Unfortunately, it is still all too easy to overemphasize one extreme while avoiding the other. This makes it all the more important to develop a healthy theological method.

Theological Interpretation of the Old Testament

The above historical survey of Biblical Interpretation is humbling as one realizes the monumental contributions of so many theological giants. In some way, modern readers of Scripture must discover a method of Biblical interpretation that draws on the strengths of these theologians while still maintaining the ability to usefully critique their shortcomings. If the above observations teach readers one thing, it must certainly be this: in order to be rightly understood, scripture must be explored in terms of what it is saying and what it is pointing to. That is to say, a careful theological reader must seek both a plain sense and a higher sense.

Many models have been proposed over the years on how exactly this duality can be emphasized and explored. I find the most helpful approaches are those that not only affirm both aspects, but moreover use the plain sense to reveal the higher sense. If we begin with the plain sense, we first must understand all that it entails. The first task must be establishing an understanding of the cultural and historic milieu the text is describing. This information better

²¹ Lawson Stone, The Biblical Theology Movement, class lecture.

prepares the reader to look at the text itself. The next step requires careful reading and exegesis. Textual criticism and a working knowledge of the language and syntax of the text are essential. At this point the reader is simply trying to discern what the text says. With the linguistic questions answered the reader can begin looking for thought patterns and themes. This occurs on two levels: the local level and the contextual level. The local level identifies the message of the passage being studied, while the contextual level uses the narrative structure as a whole to grasp a fuller sense of the thrust of the text. This final part can be expanded to understand how the text functions in light of the canon as a whole.

Once a theological reader is confident of the message of a particular biblical text, the spiritual or higher sense of a text is ready to be set loose. It is at this point that questions concerning the implications and spiritual truths of a passage can be explored. Based on personal experience and the overall movement of the church as a whole, it is my contention that this spiritual sense of scripture is only accessible through interpretive communities and the work of the Holy Spirit. This is because the spiritual sense of a text is what provides its normative power; it is what dictates belief and behavior. In many ways, this understanding of communities grappling with the implications of a text through the power of the Holy Spirit echoes with the teachings of Von Rad and his framing of the people of God re-imagining what it means to be in relationship with the creator.²²

It is with this understanding of community and comprehension that the work of John Sailhamer can be engaged. While Sailhamer's work is laudable and his distinctions are helpful, at the end of the day his approach forces choices between poles that are not necessary. For

²² For a fuller discussion of theological method and the role interpretive communities play in that process, see Ben Kickert, *Dynamic yet Consistent: Understanding Theological Method in light of History, Postmodern Epistemology and Cultural Communities*. December 14, 2006. <http://www.wku.edu/~benjamin.kickert/dynamic.doc>

instance, it is important to understand the way scripture can be understood as text or event, but at the same time the appropriate answer is that it serves both purposes. The same can be said for his other three distinctions. In all actuality, the reader need not be forced to choose between the options presented. It is like asking a husband if his wife is beautiful or loving – a question to which the most appropriate answer is certainly “yes.” Therefore, it is my contention that in order to properly understand scripture, a theological reader does not need to define and choose attributes; rather, we must understand and apply.

History has displayed a tendency for readers of scripture to either compartmentalize understandings of scripture, or to emphasize one aspect at the exclusion of another. While we can say with confidence that history will view our own methods as lacking, we can just as certainly affirm that we have learned from those who have gone before us. Therefore, let each us seek diligently the truths which are revealed through a careful reading of God’s Holy Word – a reading that seeks the meaning of the text, but only as much as that leads us to find spiritual significance and guidance.