

BASIC NEW TESTAMENT

LESSON 1 --INTRODUCTION TO NEW TESTAMENT STUDIES

Divine Science endorses a growing, open-ended approach to Bible study and interpretation. We recognize the inadequacies of the "literal" approach which grew out of the work of Martin Luther and John Calvin in the 16th Century. We understand today that all language, by its very nature, is symbolic. As the semanticist, Alfred Korzybski observed, "The map is not the territory." The Bible, moreover, shares the trait of all things in that it has both an inside and an outside. Its basic character is discovered by making meaningful contact with its imagery and nonverbal symbology, which channel spiritual energy and awareness. The text itself, though of great importance, is secondary to the Bible's foundation in deeper levels of consciousness.

The British educator, Tony Buzan, sees a need to redefine reading: "Reading, which is often defined as 'getting from the book what the author intended' or 'assimilating the written word' deserves a far more complete definition. It can be defined as follows: Reading is the individual's total interaction with symbolic information." ¹

This definition implies, among other things, that the reader and his text must interact dynamically with each other. The New Testament scholar, Norman Perrin, noted that the final step in biblical interpretation--in seminary language, hermeneutics--is "a dynamic process of interaction between text and interpreter." ² Also, "the other elements in the hermeneutical process, textual criticism, historical criticism and literary criticism, are subordinate to it and designed only to serve it." ³

SPIRITUAL INTERPRETATION

Spiritual interpretation has a long history. Certain of the ancient Greeks interpreted the poems of Homer and Hesiod allegorically. Theagenes of Rhegium did so in his Apology, and Crates of Mallus built on this tradition. Also, the rabbis of Alexandria interpreted the Law of Moses symbolically. An early example is Aristobulus, who lived in the Second Century B.C. A student of both Greek philosophy and of the Hebrew Scriptures, he correlated the philosophy of Plato with Judaism. Fragments of his writings are still extant.

Malinda E. Cramer, the founder of Divine Science, contributed in a major way to reviving and deepening the spiritual interpretation of the Bible. Her major place in the early history of New Thought is becoming clarified as her writings, recorded in Harmony Magazine (1888-1906), are being read and evaluated. Her metaphysical approach to the Bible has been continued in Divine Science through the writings of Fannie B. James, Emmet Fox, Joseph Murphy, and many other ministers and authors. Further study is available in spiritual interpretation through the Divine Science School of Higher Consciousness, in courses such as Old Testament Metaphysical Interpretation, New Testament Metaphysical Interpretation, and The Parables of Jesus.

Emmet Fox, in The Sermon on the Mount, emphasized the importance of a spiritual key in understanding the Bible. His advice is most important: "As you read your Bible, you should constantly affirm that Divine Wisdom is enlightening you. This is the way to get direct inspiration."⁴

In endorsing the Spiritual Key, Dr. Fox declared:

“It is the Spiritual Key that unlocks the mystery of the Bible teaching in general, and of the Gospels in particular. It is the Spiritual Key that explains the miracles and shows that they were performed in order to prove to us that we too can perform miracles, and thereby overcome sin, sickness, and limitation. With this key we can afford to discard verbal inspiration and all superstitious literalism, and yet understand that the Bible really is the most precious and most authentic of all man's possessions.”⁵

HISTORICAL METHOD

The tools of historical method have evolved within the movement of thought known as the Enlightenment in the 18th Century. The systematic historical approach, sometimes called the “higher criticism,” has continued to be used and further refined since then. It is an axiom of this course that it is valid to study the Biblical books in relation to the times of their writing or compilation. Biblical historians try to discover, for example, who wrote a given account, when and where it was written, and what goals the original author had in mind.⁶

Nevertheless, the effort to determine or even to define intent has certain inherent limitations. The fact is that various images and nonverbal symbols kept appearing in scriptural writings at different times, in different places, by different authors, often apart from any conscious planning. In a widespread manner, this still occurs in literature--independently of language, tradition, and other outside influences.

Historical method, as method, is valid and valuable. It must not, however, be turned into a new dogma and thus used to thwart the very interpretive process which it is intended to enhance and clarify. This often occurs in scholarly circles. Walter Wink, in his insightful book, The Bible in Human Transformation: Toward a New Paradigm for Biblical study, reviews both the strengths and the limits of historical method. He writes:

“Historical biblical criticism is bankrupt... Biblical criticism is not bankrupt because it has run out of things to say or new ground to explore. It is bankrupt solely because it is incapable of achieving what most of its practitioners considered its purpose to be: so to interpret the Scriptures that the past becomes alive and illumines our present with new possibilities for personal and social transformation.”⁷

TEXTUAL STUDIES

The books of the New Testament, in their completed form, first circulated in Greek. While the Greek of the New Testament reflects various levels of style and quality, basically it is written in the Koine dialect of the early Roman period, which grew out of Attic Greek over a period of centuries. Nevertheless, since Jesus' native tongue was Aramaic, it is also essential to consider the Aramaic background of most of the sayings of Jesus, and of the oral and written sources upon which the Four Gospels are largely based. The relative importance of Aramaic and Greek within the context of New Testament scholarship is an ongoing issue, which is certain to occupy generations of scholars.

The Gospel of Thomas, rediscovered in Egypt in 1945, is also valuable as a source for the teachings of Jesus that is independent of the four biblical gospels. For a line-by-line commentary on this work, with cross-references to the Bible, see The Fifth Gospel by Robert Winterhalter, published by Harper & Row in San Francisco in 1988.

The study of the New Testament text is a specialty in itself, which many scholars treat as a life's work. Known as the "lower criticism," this includes a comparative evaluation of manuscripts--and of variant readings--not only in Greek, but in the Aramaic and closely related Syriac dialects, and in Latin and other languages into which the Bible was translated at a comparatively early date. Translation from one language to another is a difficult and ongoing process, not only because additional early manuscripts become available, but also because of differing shades of meaning within various languages and cultures. In many cases, also, a given word has a variety of meanings, and the preferred translation becomes an issue of a given translator's judgment.

It is important to have a text as close to a document's original form as possible. This is essential to the translator's work. A translation into English, or into any other modern language, cannot be more accurate than the text upon which it is based.

THE BIBLE AND HEMISPHERIC BRAIN RESEARCH

Both the spiritual and historical traditions of Bible interpretation have ancient roots, in Christian and even pre-Christian times.⁸ Modern neuroscience provides a basic frame of reference by which to account for these disparate trends. In reviewing these two traditions, we can infer a definite and unmistakable connection between (1) the functions of the hemispheres of the brain, and (2) the nature of the two traditions. The brain does not originate thought. It is, rather, a vehicle of thought, an organ of its activity which is not ultimately dependent upon the physical brain. Nevertheless, the way that the two sides of the brain actually function, in most persons, illustrates two essentially different types of mental activity.

It is clear that the right hemisphere of the brain is the control center for the left side of the body; the left hemisphere of the brain controls the right side. In most persons, the left hemisphere of the brain acts as the vehicle for analytical, logical reasoning, for verbal orientation, mathematics, and the time sense. The right side of the brain, in contrast, serves as the channel for imagery, nonverbal symbolism, analogy, artistic talent, visualization, and intuition.

This is information of great importance. For it points to the fact that the spiritual interpretation of the Bible is related to the activity of the right hemisphere. Also, that the historical interpretation is related to the activity of the left hemisphere.

The Bible's basic framework, however, is found by overcoming this psychic split. One educator, in applying modern neuroscience to human development, wrote that the goal is "to wed the functions of intuition and metaphor with the functions of logic and rationality and create the potential for the synergic mind."⁹ The same goal applies to the Bible. We, too, need a creative interaction between the two approaches, one aspect helping to clarify the other, and even a synthesis leading to new heights of understanding. A term sometimes used is synergy, from two Greek words which mean "with; together with" and "work." Our methodology, then, can be called synergic method.

DEPTH PSYCHOLOGY AND SYMBOLIC IMAGERY

The work of Carl G. Jung, Roberto Assagioli, and others has demonstrated conclusively that the symbolic imagery of the Bible has an empirical basis. That is to say, its images and nonverbal symbols have an existence apart from a given individual's knowledge and use of them. They can enter into individual awareness from below the threshold of conscious mind, i.e., into the right brain hemisphere in most persons, which is closely connected with the subconscious phase of mind; and then impress themselves upon the left brain hemisphere, which in turn translates them into words.

This can occur, for example, through dreams, guided imagery as practiced by Ira Progoff and his students, and mental pictures seen in meditation. A writer, while under the influence of this collective imagery, will show an interaction between R-mode images and L-mode language that goes beyond his or her conscious intent. While these images can, of course, be shared through literary and cultural influence, the capacity exists for them to be communicated across time and space apart from any such influence.

We can, if we are committed, find deeper levels of meaning in the Bible that are universally valid. We need not hold to a doctrine of verbal inspiration to claim this inheritance. The spiritual key is within us, and it is within that the door to God's indwelling Word and Spirit must be unlocked. When we discover the spiritual key, we also find that the Bible is of great practical value. For it then becomes an effective tool for changing our consciousness, and thus changing every aspect of our lives for the better.

NOTES

1. Buzan, Tony; Use Both Sides of Your Brain; New York, E. P. Dutton, c. 1974, p. 24. Buzan goes into considerable detail about the nature of reading as it involves both hemispheres of the brain.
2. Perrin, Norman; Jesus and the Language of the Kingdom; Philadelphia, Fortress Press, 1976, p. 10
3. Ibid, p. 9
4. Fox, Emmet; The Sermon on the Mount; New York, Harper & Brothers, 1934, 1935, 1938, p. x
5. Ibid, p. 12
6. For a basic introduction to the life and teachings of Jesus, and to the background and development of early Christianity, including the New Testament, as viewed by historians, read Jesus: The Evidence. by Ian Wilson. Published in 1988 by Harper & Row in San Francisco.
7. Wink, Walter; The Bible in Human Transformation: Toward a New Paradigm for bible Study; Philadelphia, Fortress Press, 1973, pp. 1-2
8. For information on this subject, see Early Biblical Interpretation by James L. Kugel and Rowan A. Greer, published in 1986 by The Westminster Press in Philadelphia.
9. Samples, Bob; Essentia, Fall 1974 Edition; Published by the Evergreen State College in Olympia, Washington. From lead article, "Toward the Synergic School Room."

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OTHER RESOURCE BOOKS

Crossan, John Dominic; Sayings Parallels: A Tradition; Philadelphia, Fortress Press, 1986

Throckmorton, Burton H. Jr., Gospel Parallels: A Synopsis of the First Three Gospels, Second Edition; New York, Thomas Nelson & Sons, 1957

QUESTIONS

1. What is the error in “literal” interpretation?
2. What is the value of spiritual interpretation?
3. What is the value of historical study of the Bible?
4. Why is the textual study of the Bible important?