

PART II (Afternoon)

Introductory remarks:

A. Finding what the text means:

2 Timothy 3.16 “All Scripture is inspired by God”. For the author “all scripture” denoted the Jewish scriptures – what we call the Old Testament. However in 2 Peter 3. 15-16 we see the beginning of an enlarged understanding of Scripture: “So our beloved brother Paul wrote to you according to the wisdom given him, speaking of this as he does in all his letters. There are some things in them hard to understand, which the ignorant and unstable twist to their own destruction, as they do the other scriptures”.

B. Cultural Context

There is no word of the Bible that was written other than in a cultural context and this culture needs to be considered. Thomas Aquinas wrote of Scripture: “All is from God, all is from human authors”. Thus the words of Scripture are the word of God conveyed by human words, conditioned by cultural context.

C. Literary Genres

Different books and different passages in a book have different genres. Accordingly we understand prose differently than poetry and both prose and poetry differently than proverb. A story, as in a parable, is not the same as history although it could be included in a historical piece as an example of the teaching of Jesus.

D. Literal versus Symbolic Meanings

Ezekiel 37 is Ezekiel’s vision of the valley of the dry bones. It is a vision which is rich in meaning but not the same as a description of an historical occurrence that others would have also seen. This doesn’t detract from its truth value.

E. Natural Meaning:

Many have said that the obvious place to start is the natural and obvious meaning. This is not the same as the literal meaning, for the natural meaning can be figurative. As Martin Luther once cautioned, one should not conclude from the psalmist “Under his wings you will find refuge”, that God has feathers. Rather God will give Himself for shelter.

The number and sequence of the Books of the Bible:

The Old Testament: 3 divisions according to Jewish usage.

The Law: (5 books, a.k.a. Pentateuch)

The Prophets:

(Not according to date but place in the Old Testament)

former: Joshua – 2 Kings

latter: Isaiah – Malachi

The Writings:

Psalms, Proverbs, Job, Song of Solomon, Ruth, Lamentations, Ecclesiastes, Esther, Daniel, Ezra-Nehemiah, 1 and 2 Chronicles.

The New Testament:

The early Church divided into four:

The Gospels

Acts and General epistles (James, Peter, John and Jude)

Pauline letters

Apocalypse

Introduction to the Old Testament

Almost entirely originally written in Hebrew. A small section (part of Daniel, Ezra, Jeremiah verse) in Aramaic originally.

The process by which the Jews became people of the Book was gradual. We know that the Law preceded the prophets and writings as authoritative books.

Pentateuch = 5 Books of Moses = Torah = The Law.

Six major movements:

1. Genesis 1 – 11 - Story of primeval times(the beginnings)
2. Genesis 12 – 50 - Israel's ancestors
3. Exodus 1 – 18 – The Exodus from Egypt
4. Exodus 19 – Numbers 10.11 – Sojourn at Sinai
5. Rest of Numbers – Wandering in the wilderness
6. Deuteronomy – The anticipated entrance into Canaan

All this is the story of the Holy God, Creator of heaven and earth, who chooses to become involved in the lives of the Hebrew people, i.e. Israel.

Heart of the Pentateuch = the Exodus story. But also essential is the Abrahamic covenant Genesis 17. To the people represented by Abraham and Sarah, God make a promise that has a three-fold dimension: children, land and a relationship with God.

Covenants:

1. creation covenant with Noah (Genesis 9.1-17)
2. Abraham and Sarah (Genesis 12; 17)
3. Moses at Sinai (Exodus 19-24)

In the “priestly” view, these are everlasting covenants. Regardless of human weakness, and sin, God has a steadfast love.

The New Covenant or New Testament

A foretaste is found in Jeremiah 31. 31-34 – written 500 years before Christ – there is mention of a different and new covenant that would be everlasting.

Paul claimed this for Christ (2 Corinthians 3. 6-18)

Another (author of Hebrews) claimed it for the Last Supper Mt. 26.28 (Hebrews 9. 11-15, 15-20 and 10.16).

The New Testament is written in the common or koine Greek of the day.

The earliest Christians would have read from the Jewish Scriptures when they gathered for worship. Of equal authority was the oral tradition of Jesus (his remembered words). Then came the apostolic interpretations of the person of Jesus and their understanding of his importance. Gradually things were written down and letters shared. A community might have a copy of one of Paul’s epistles and some present might have heard others read aloud.

The canon of the New Testament was established when heretical sects with their own sacred books made it necessary for the Church to set limits. The test was 1) apostolic authorship and 2) apostolic content and 3) harmony with the Jewish scriptures and the other apostolic books. In a very real sense choices weren’t so much made. It was more a recognition of books that knew Jesus and helped others know him.

St. Athanasius in 367 AD named the 27 books of the new canon although not everyone would have agreed with him at the time.

Story from John Sandys-Wunsch What Have They Done To The Bible? tells of a Seminary professor who complained to a librarian that he had looked under “G” for God in an author search for the Bible and hadn’t found it listed.

Understanding Language

Words usually have a range of meanings in any given language, but their normal equivalents in other tongues probably don't have the same range. For example, think of the English word right. It has a political meaning, a directional meaning, and a meaning about civil entitlement, as in human rights. It can also mean 'correct', when used to describe something.

If we ask a computer to translate into Russian: "The Spirit is willing but the flesh is weak", it will give a literal translation that amounts to "The vodka is good but the meat is bad". In Genesis 1.2 we read "the Spirit of God moved over the face of the waters". It could be translated to say "An almighty wind was blowing over the flood".

Put bluntly one cannot translate well unless one already has a sense of what it means! Extraordinary! One book in the Old Testament that is an example of this is Song of Songs. If you see it as an allegory of the soul with its creator, or of Christ and the church, then you won't give such an erotic interpretation as you might if reading it as a secular love poem.

Exegesis of Scripture

1. Exegesis of Scripture is the scholarly working out of what the author of the text meant to say, i.e. the original meaning.
2. When one goes on to explain how the original meaning throws light on decisions we have to make in the present world, one has moved beyond exegesis to application, by way of either meditating or doing theology.

A good illustration of application is the famous story of Albert Schweitzer, who on hearing the parable of the rich man and Lazarus, decided he was the rich man and the sick of Africa were Lazarus, and he went immediately to be a medical missionary in Africa.

The Role of Belief and Unbelief when reading Scripture

If the Bible is seen as making authoritative claims on how we live and the choices we make, how does this affect our attempts at formal exegesis and interpretation?

To interpret the Bible in the context of Christian faith requires a honesty and a certain rigor. I personally don't find it helpful when people pretend it is amazingly straight forward and obvious, with no contradictions. It isn't a recipe book guaranteed to make good Christians. But to be a faithful Christian you better pay attention to the Bible. It's formative. You may remember hearing parts of Scripture read so beautifully that you knew you had been changed forever by the impact. I know I have.

Two rules of interpretation

1. We have to see the Bible as a book with a complex history of possibly a 1000 years. It is not one book but many books under one cover. The different books contain different types of writing, sometimes in just one book.

While there are continuities and strands like the various covenants, there are also huge leaps of perception. Jesus' teaching on the sermon on the Mount to love your enemies is infinitely superior to Elijah's belief and practice that the best Baal prophet is a dead Baal prophet. And we can't always claim evolution because Isaiah's vision of the moral holiness of God precedes (is earlier than) the anger and resentment of Nahum and Obadiah.

Even within the New Testament we have different pictures of Jesus.

For Matthew, Jesus is a law giver, hence the permission for divorce under certain circumstances.

For Luke, Jesus was infinitely kind and compassionate. Attention is paid to the little ones . . .

For John, Jesus is the incarnation of God's wisdom and as much Greek as Jewish.

For Mark, Jesus is the one who never walks away no matter how terrible the failures, which is good since it is believed to be inspired by Peter.

2. The church fathers began the tradition of the study of scripture that has lasted and lasted, and changed and changed. From early on it was clear that there were few black and white clear cut answers to the questions that bother us.

Three approaches:

1. We can pretend it is all very simple but we might as well believe the world is flat.
2. We can appeal to an infallible interpreter. Anglicans don't do well with that, in case you haven't noticed.
3. We can decide that it is very difficult and yet very worthwhile to have been given the gift of freedom by God in Christ, and that we need to work it out using the Bible and gazing upon the image of God before us. This means some will hold on to legislation laid down in the Bible, and others will talk of love and justice. Still others will say what would Jesus do? Others will say Who is being hurt by this? And who is being helped? What brings a person closer to God? What helps the human community? It will never be simple but in and through our struggles we will begin to understand that Christ is inviting us to grow into a fuller humanity in the image and likeness of God. I think this is the Anglican way. Not everyone will agree, which is also the Anglican way.

To give one example: debate over the ordination of women.

Mary Magdalene – witness to Resurrection, and called the apostle to the apostles.
early female leadership in churches (Paul in Acts gives us evidence).
don't talk in church (you don't make laws for what doesn't happen).
Blessed Virgin Mary's role in the Incarnation.

But is it really obvious? Is there no question? No. Hence we say it is in reception . .

When the Archbishop of Canterbury gave his lecture in Toronto last week, it was on the reading and hearing of Scripture. He emphasized that all Christians hold the Scriptures to be normative for Christian formation. Even the most hierarchical church doesn't discount the Scriptures and even the most liberal church doesn't.

Again and again he spoke of hearing the Scriptures in a Eucharistic setting as a Eucharistic community. Like the Eucharist itself the Scriptures are an invitation from God to partake of that which has the ability to change and transform us.

Stressed the importance of looking at the context of Scripture passages. Cited two very important Scriptures for current debates and showed they can't be used to proof text: John 14 and Romans 1. They don't provide black and white answers.

1 John 1. 1-3:

“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being.”

When we had this Scripture conversation at the House of Bishops, members spoke of the experience of reading a portion of the Scriptures and feeling it spoke directly to their heart. Or reading a passage as if for the first time. No amount of scholarship explains that. That's the work of the Holy Spirit.

The above is heavily indebted to:

N.T. Wright

The Last Word

Rowan Greer

Anglican Approaches To Scripture

John Sandys-Wunsch

What Have They Done To The Bible

+Victoria Matthews
Bishop of Edmonton