

Biblical Logic and Interpretation

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The Modern Interpretive Dilemma

People who live since the Enlightenment of the seventeenth century, when a supposedly “scientific” view of reality came into vogue, have trouble with the Bible because they feel compelled to reconcile various parts of Scripture that seem to be contradictory, or at least not to mesh very well with each other. And they feel compelled to reconcile what we read in the Bible with the findings of today’s science and cosmology. The modern view of truth is that words, to be true, must correspond to an external, scientifically verifiable, reality. In this view the Bible is true because it can be proven to correspond to “truth,” scientifically and logically established. The Bible, then, is referential to truths that are external to the Bible.

Consider, though, what this does to the authority of Scripture. Instead of the Bible being the authority for our view of reality, science and logic become the criteria, and Scripture must be forced into their mold. But Jesus Christ said, “Thy Word is truth” (John 17:17). In other words, we begin with Scripture and try to understand it on its own terms, without forcing its words into the framework of a world view that came into vogue only three or four centuries ago. Instead of letting our culture build our world view, we start with the Bible’s world view and allow it to critique the pathological world views being foisted upon us by Western or other world cultures. (On biblical logic and world-building, consult such titles as G. B. Caird, *The Language and Imagery of the Bible*, 1980, or Hans Frei, *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative*, 1974.)

What’s “logical” about biblical argumentation?

This means that when we read the Bible we must enter its own world and be governed by its logic, or we misread its message. Biblical logic is not linear, like modern logic that says “If this first condition exists, then that second condition follows to the exclusion of other possibilities.” Biblical argumentation is circumferential, rather than linear. That is, to make a point the speaker or writer surrounds his topic, approaching it from as many angles as possible — and any particular way of approaching the subject may not necessarily be consistent (by modern standards) with the others. The purpose of a biblical argument is not to prove a point, but to “talk it to death.” Obviously, in a biblical argument the “winner” is whichever speaker is left standing after the problem has been bombarded from all possible viewpoints. The loudest or most persistent voice, in other words, is the one whose argument prevails

The Book of Job is a primary example of biblical logic. Though Job’s three friends offer perfectly good arguments that are consistent with other parts of Scripture, they are ultimately in the wrong because Job meets Another with a more powerful voice than theirs who is finally able to confront Job with his own presumption. The young man Elihu interrupts the debate with what he considers to be a conclusive argument in defense of God’s ways. Nevertheless, neither Job nor God take any notice of Elihu’s utterance. Only when God himself speaks does the issue come to any resolution, even though God’s argument was anticipated in many of the things Elihu had said.

Proverbs 26:4-5 provides another example of biblical reasoning:

*Answer not a fool according to his folly,
lest you be like him yourself.
Answer a fool according to his folly,
lest he be wise in his own eyes.*

The question is, How should one respond to a foolish person’s utterance? By “modern” logical standards the advice of the second couplet contradicts that given in the first. But the approach of biblical logic is to surround the question and bombard it from two directions at once. There are situations when it’s appropriate to call a foolish person’s pronouncements into question; in other situations it’s useless to do so. Biblical logic doesn’t require a uniform response in every case.

A New Testament example of biblical logic appears in Paul’s discussion of the resurrection in 1 Corinthians 15:12-20. Paul’s argument for the certainty of resurrection seems to be circular. He asks, in

effect, “How can you deny the resurrection, since we testify that Christ has been raised?” On the other hand, if there’s no resurrection then Christ has not been raised, after all. There’s no “logical” way out of this circle, so the escape is provided not by reasoning but by an event that demonstrates the power of God: “But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have fallen asleep” (15:20).

As a further instance from Paul, consider his attitude toward the Law of Moses. In one context he states that “the law is holy, and the commandment is holy and just and good” (Romans 7:12). In another place he appears to contradict himself, by Western standards, when he characterizes the law as “the dispensation of death, carved in letters on stone” (2 Corinthians 3:7). Paul is approaching the question of the role of the Mosaic Law from two perspectives. In the first instance, he views the Law as a witness to God’s plan for the restoration of a humanity that has fallen away from the purpose for which God created us. In this case, the Law is a testimony to God’s faithfulness, or righteousness, toward his people. In the second instance, Paul’s context is a discussion of self-commendation, or self-justification. In such a context the Law is subject to misuse as a criterion against which one might claim his own righteous standing before God. To use the Law in that way excludes the work of the Holy Spirit, who brings us into the proper relationship with God in which he, alone, receives the glory (see 2 Corinthians 3:17-18). To so separate oneself from God is sin, which results in death (Romans 6:23), so that the Law becomes the instrument of death.

“Truth” in the Bible

The circumferential character of biblical logic stems from a basic presupposition of the biblical world view, the understanding that all truth inheres in the will of God. Truths — we might speak of them today as “facts” or insights — have no force apart from the intention and activity of the Creator. As Proverbs puts it, “No wisdom, no understanding, no counsel, can avail against the LORD” (Proverbs 21:30). This must be the perspective behind Jesus’ prayer, “Thy Word is truth.” No factoid, principle or “law of physics” can have independent reality apart from the work of Yahweh — or, in the case of the New Testament, apart from Christ who is the incarnation of the Word of the Lord, in whom “all things hold together” (Colossians 1:17) and who is “upholding the universe by his word of power” (Hebrews 1:3).

The Hebrew word *’emet*, often translated as “truth,” does not denote abstract factuality independent of the operation of God’s purpose. Instead, biblical truth is reliability or faithfulness, in particular faithfulness to God and his will as revealed in the purposes of his covenant with Israel. The New Testament writers understand these purposes to be fulfilled, or renewed, in the ministry, death, resurrection and reign of Jesus Christ. Truth, then, consists in faithfulness to God’s covenant, and in submitting to his purpose for human life as revealed in the event of Christ.

But the divine purpose is not confined to the sphere of religion, nor even to the realm of human culture; it encompasses all that the Creator has brought into being. Hence the apostolic witness views the appearance of Christ, especially his resurrection from the dead, as a window into the renewal of the entire created order. When humanity, as “the sons of God,” comes to participate in the life of the risen Christ, then “the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay” (Romans 8:21). For Paul, indeed, there need be no “waiting period” since the Christian believer, incorporated into Christ through baptism (Romans 6:3-5), already shares the life of Christ’s resurrection (Colossians 3:1). If anyone is “in Christ,” incorporated into the body of the resurrection, that person belongs to the renewed creation (2 Corinthians 5:17). The writings of the apostle John present the same essential perspective — if stated in different terms — based on the understanding that the coming of Jesus Christ brings to human incarnation the very creative purpose which underlies the existence of all things (John 1:1-3, 14).

God, then, has written two “books” as the revelation of his truth, or his purpose for the universe and life within it. The first book is the Holy Scripture, with its testimony to the living Word in Jesus Christ. But the second “book” is the universe itself, which also testifies to the Creator’s activity and intent. Paul states the matter clearly in Romans 1:19-20: “For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. Ever since the creation of the world his invisible nature, namely, his eternal power and deity, has been clearly perceived in the things that have been made.”

Since truth inheres in faithfulness to the divine purpose, and both “books” testify to that purpose, they cannot be played off against one another in a supposed search for “objective truth” according to the

Western pattern of logic. The two “books” must remain in dialogue, consistent with the circumferentiality of biblical logic. The findings of science, or cosmology, regarding the structures and operations of the physical universe can’t be marshaled in an attack upon the perspective of Scripture, nor can the teaching of the Bible be made to contravene the results of scientific inquiry and experimentation. Truth is commitment to the Creator’s intention, and each witness to that intention must be heard in its integrity since God is the author of both.

Can “lines of type” distort the meaning?

The invention of printing changed the way in which the Bible came to be understood. Biblical literature was never meant to be lines of type on a page. Written copies of biblical books were only a control for oral presentation. In the ancient world a message was never considered to have been delivered until it was read or spoken aloud. Reading was not silent or meditative, but always aloud. The letters of Paul, for example, were exactly that — letters, not theological textbooks — and they were meant to be read aloud in the churches.

Christian worship leaders, in structuring the service, need to include plenty of Scripture readings. And the congregation should listen to the reader and absorb the message in an auditory manner, not follow along in pew Bibles. And preachers and Bible teachers need to take an approach that is different from that commonly practiced. Dissecting the printed text of Scripture into individual words, as though the Bible were a dictionary — or treating the printed text like some sort of arcane code that needs to be deciphered — is an approach foreign to the origin and intent of the Word of God as a living message.

The context for Scripture was not the classroom or the private study, but the gathered assembly of believers, and its “meaning” is its message for the worshiping community. Even Paul’s letters to individuals (i.e., Philemon, Timothy, Titus) were written with the needs of local congregations in mind. Remembering this helps to clarify what is being said in Scripture. Applied to eschatology, for example, it is noteworthy that when Paul speaks of what we call the “rapture” — a Latin term, not New Testament Greek — he concludes, “Therefore comfort one another with these words” (1 Thessalonians 4:18). The purpose of his writing was not merely to give information, but to encourage a congregation under persecution.

What did the original hearers understand?

In interpreting Scripture we always need to ask ourselves, “How would the inspired author, and his original readers and hearers, most likely have understood what is being said?” I mention just one type of instance where asking this question can affect our understanding of eschatology: the use of pronouns. When Paul says, “we who are alive, who are left, shall be caught up” (1 Thessalonians 4:17), who are the *we*? Or when he says the account of Israel’s sin in the wilderness was “written down for our instruction, upon whom the end of the ages has come” (1 Corinthians 10:11), to whom does *our* refer? It is not clear that in every case the writer is using “we” in the sense of “all Christians, through all time including the 21st century.” Very likely the writer is speaking of himself and those who are going to be reading his work at that time.

Granted that when we read these words today we may see an applicability to ourselves as the spiritual descendants of the earliest Christians, nevertheless when the writer is referring to specific events soon to occur he has in mind events that will take place within his own lifetime and those to whom he is speaking. In the same vein, when we hear a phrase such as “let the reader understand” (Mark 13:14) or “you know what is restraining him now” (2 Thessalonians 2:6), we should suppose that the original hearers knew exactly what events and persons were being referred to, as being present in their own cultural environment. If, today, we have lost the key to unlocking these mysteries, that is not warrant for projecting them into our own era and beyond as though the “lines of type” had fallen, pristine, out of the sky into our twenty-first century environment.

What sort of literature is it?

We need to develop an appreciation for what type of literature we are reading. Looking at the Revelation to John, for example, we see that it begins as a series of letters and then moves into a more dramatic vein rich with symbolism. Some interpreters have seen in it echoes of early Christian liturgy (M. H. Shepherd, *The Paschal Liturgy of the Apocalypse*, 1960). The book has features in common with

classical Greek drama, though written in a thoroughly Semitic Greek idiom. Because it is held to be not very good Greek, and for other reasons, I personally think John wrote it before he had developed the Greek style of the Gospel and Letters. The drama proceeds in a series of scenes, as does the Gospel of John. The scenes may actually be tableaux rather than episodes, not necessarily in what we should take as chronological order.

Again, we are looking at the particular nature of biblical logic, in which the “argument” doesn’t always proceed in a straight line but doubles back on itself, encircling the subject matter at hand with now this, then that, set of symbols. Trying to make everything we find in the Revelation consistent with itself, or with Paul’s letters which John may not have known at this point, is like “mixing apples and oranges.”

How does Scripture use language?

It is commonly asserted that “the Bible does not contradict itself.” Now the “law of non-contradiction” as commonly understood depends on a referential use of language, i.e., that what is said *refers* to a truth external to itself. Attempting to apply the law of non-contradiction, according to the canons of Enlightenment logic, to literature that is not formulated according to those canons may be an exercise in futility. But if the Word itself creates the reality, if “thy Word is truth,” if God creates by speaking (“Let there be light . . .”), then the question of contradiction moves to a point other than the ostensive referents of the words.

When Paul, for one, defines Scripture as inspired, he explains its inspired quality as being “profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness” (1 Timothy 3:16). If we found parts of the Bible that were unprofitable for these purposes, we would be facing a contradiction. But it is not contradictory to recognize that not all parts of the Bible easily harmonize with one another in terms of their ostensive external referents. Speakers in ancient cultures, especially Semitic, did not always use words the way we use them today — or deceive ourselves that we use them that way. They often used words to create, rather than to describe, a reality, and this was recognized as a legitimate use of language. There are places where clear, unambiguous statements are made, as in the Commandments, but there are other places — depending on the type of literature involved — where we should not expect to find a matter-of-fact, transparent meaning in the text but rather more symbolic or metaphorical expressions appreciated not for their referential content but for their aesthetic, motivational, devotional, liturgical and world-building impact. Such language imparts the mystery of God’s presence, the sense of the numinous or holy, far more effectively than language that is simply the barren expression of rational concepts. It is important to avoid reducing the Bible to the level of mere ammunition for “logical” argumentation and debate.

The above is only an attempt to outline a general hermeneutical approach to Scripture. It is offered not to promote the exegesis of the Bible according to any particular theological tendency, but only to advocate a sober approach to Scripture that is not hindered by ideological presuppositions — though these can never be totally avoided. I recommend that interpreters apply these considerations to their understanding of Scripture, even though the result may challenge some traditional assumptions regarding the message of the Bible. It is well to follow the example of the Jews of Beroea, who “were more noble than those in Thessalonica, for they received the word with all eagerness, examining the scriptures daily to see if these things were so” (Acts 17:11).

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