

Biblical Evidence beyond Doctrine: Dealing with the Content of Scripture

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The careful and analytical study of Scripture is a fairly recent phenomenon. In fact, Biblical Studies itself as a means to try to understand the communication of the biblical text on its own terms apart from the doctrines of the church has only been around for a little over 200 years. (1) For most of its history, the church, as much as it has revered Scripture, has not given the interpretation of Scripture a central role. That does not mean that the church has not taken Scripture to be authoritative or has not used Scripture to inform Christian doctrine and practice. But throughout most of the history of the Church, Scripture has shared its role with ecclesiastical authorities, more often than not subsumed under those authorities. The role of Scripture was primarily to support the doctrines and dogmas of the Church that had been developed in the life of the Church in various historical circumstances quite apart from careful biblical study. It was not until the Protestant Reformation in the 1500s that a clear emphasis on Scripture as a basis for the doctrine and practice of the Faith community began to emerge.

There were four basic periods of approaches to the Bible that we can identify. Of course, any schematic way of looking at historical developments is going to be overly simplified. History does not move as smoothly as our categorical analysis would imply. Yet, these four stages are helpful as a means to describe the development of modern Bible study.

The Ancient and Medieval Period (100-1450)

This period extends from the beginning of the Christian Era (after the NT, around AD 100) to the unfolding of the Renaissance about AD 1450. Here we have to consider the chicken and the egg question: Did the Bible create and shape the church or did the church create and shape the Bible?

Of course, on one level, the answer is both. The early church already had the Old Testament, which by the Christian Era had for the most part already achieved authoritative status. Yet Christianity did not come to an understanding of Jesus, his death, and the resurrection and what that meant for the Kingdom of God in the world by a careful study of Scripture, which at that time was only the Old Testament. Even when we read something in the New Testament that sounds like it is developing Christology or Christian Doctrine from Old Testament Scripture, we have to remind ourselves that the early church was not using Scripture in this way (see, for example, [Nazareth and the Branch: Matthew 2:23 and Interpretation of the Old Testament](#)). Rather, the early church had already discerned a meaning for those events (most Christians would speak of inspiration here) and was using the Old Testament to establish continuity between the work of God throughout the Old Testament and this new revelation of God in Jesus Christ.

In other words, the NT, for example in the “fulfillment” formulas of Matthew or in the four-chapter introduction of Luke, most often uses the Old Testament to reinforce and illustrate the truths that the early church was already expressing about Jesus. That certainly does not invalidate the Old Testament, or in any sense render the Old Testament subservient to the New Testament, nor does it imply any supercessionist view of the New Testament. But it does suggest that the early church was not exegeting the Old Testament for its own meaning. Instead, they were working from already established doctrine developed mostly quite apart from the Old Testament Scriptures (the Gospels themselves present a little different situation).

To put it very simplistically, the early church could use the Old Testament in this way because of an overarching belief in the unity of truth and God’s revelation. They believed that the faith and practice of the community were identical to what was taught in Scripture. Since God had ordained this Faith community through the revelation of God in Christ, and since God was directing the community in its faith and practice, what the community believed and did was God’s will and therefore true. Since the Bible, Old Testament Scriptures at that point, were also

believed to be given by God to reveal truth, therefore what the community did and believed must be the same as that taught in Scripture.

On one level this led to bitter polemic and hostility between early Christians and Jews, since obviously the Jewish Faith community did not agree with this assessment of either Scripture or truth. On another level, the practical result for Christians was that the faith and practice of the community was not directly related to the understanding of Scripture, but depended on early church leaders and the needs and constraints imposed by historical realities (persecutions, the need to cast the message into the Roman thought world, the growing dominance of Gentiles and subsequent loss of continuity with the OT traditions, the dangers of syncretism, the political influence of Rome, etc.).

While some of those leaders, such as Paul, wrote instructions to the community that eventually became Scripture, the real authority was the testimony of the apostles that was assumed to be the same as the testimony of Scripture (see [Notes on 2 Timothy 3:16](#)). Therefore Scripture was interpreted to support the teaching and preaching of the early church.

This led to a dogmatic approach to Scripture, in which the Bible was used primarily as the source of proof texts for doctrines. Especially in the Christological controversies of the second and third centuries, the Bible played very little role in helping the church establish doctrine, with philosophy and logic used as the primary tools to construct and defend doctrine.

Yet, even though Scripture was not a primary authority to inform doctrine, because of the equation of Scripture with the faith and practice of the church, it achieved the status of authority on all matters. Because of the idealist Platonic and Neo-Platonic philosophical views that dominated the early church, following Augustine in the fifth century, the Bible, since it came from God, came to represent that external authority from the ideal plane uncontaminated by human fallibility. In effect, it was viewed as directly revealing the mind of God. In this role, the Bible could be appealed to as the source of truth about everything. Reality was understood to be fixed and unchangeable, determined directly by the decree of God, so the Bible was seen as describing that ultimate reality. It was from this perspective that the Bible, seen as a repository of absolute truth about everything, could be used as late as the 16th century to force Galileo to recant his Copernican theories of planetary motion.

Of course, early Christians understood that the Bible had to be interpreted to be used in the church. And yet that interpretation was not for the purpose of discerning what the Bible said or meant. Rather the technique of allegory was used, in which hidden meanings could be found in the biblical stories that illustrated the doctrines of the church. A recent example of this use of Scripture can be seen in the American Holiness Movement in which various OT narratives were treated as allegories for the doctrine of entire sanctification. The most notable and widely used example was the conquest of the land in Joshua, in which the exodus stood for salvation and the crossing of the Jordan into “Beulah land” stood for sanctification.

So, even though the Bible was presented as the source of truth about everything, the practice of interpretation used the Bible to support already established “truths” developed form within the community of Faith. Scripture served the dogma of the Church.

This is not to say that there was no movement toward what we consider critical study of Scripture. There were some meager beginnings. There were isolated instances of those who tried to deal with what they saw as problems in the biblical text that challenged some of the dogma. But as Greek and Roman culture gradually declined after the Fall of Rome in the fifth century, and the world collapsed into the Dark Ages, dogma triumphed.

The Renaissance and Reformation (1450-1700)

The Renaissance, as we all learned in high school and college, was a “renewal” of culture and learning after the long night of the medieval period. There was a renewed sense of history, leading to new interest in antiquity, classic Greek and Roman culture, and classical languages. In the best sense of the term this was a development of humanist perspectives, an emphasis on the dignity and worth of humanity (see [Humanism in Scripture and Culture](#)). Along

with this came the rise of scientific curiosity, an interest in how the world worked beyond just saying that God made it work. This is the beginning of scientific investigation. With the work of Copernicus, Galileo, and Kepler there was established a thirst for understanding the origins of things, the development of history, and a sense that these things can only be investigated by us being objective, that is, but not allowing the dogmas of the church to dictate the results.

So, based on his observations, Galileo promoted the idea that the earth was not the center of the solar system but rather moved around the sun. The major paradigm shift that began to occur was in how they saw the world. While they still understood reality to be fixed and unchangeable, it was now conceptualized in terms of natural law rather than the direct decrees of God.

Along with this interest in the physical world, humanism also led to an interest in history and historical documents. Some began to examine ancient documents as to their authenticity and validity. A crucial point came with the work of Lorenzo Valla in 1440. A student of (Catholic) canon law, he researched the *Donation of Constantine*, a document supposedly dating to the fourth century that gave large parcels of land to the Church in the name of the Roman Emperor Constantine. Valla demonstrated conclusively that the document was a forgery, which seriously undermined the Church's claim to authority in terms of documents. While the implications of this would not work out until much later, it established the idea that what the Church declared to be true, even in terms of historical documents, may not in fact be valid.

In the 15th century Erasmus of Rotterdam, a linguist, began to use the developing methods of historical inquiry on the biblical texts. He was not working to interpret the Bible, but to examine the physical writing of the Bible (see [Sacred Words or Words about the Sacred?](#)). In his critical editions of the NT, he succeeded in divorcing theological study (dogma) from grammatical and linguistic study. He used reason to understand the literal sense of the text apart from the dogmas imposed on it by the Church.

Many of these influences from the Renaissance would take many years to work out in biblical studies. In Religion, perhaps more than any other area, change comes slowly. But there were seeds sown in both ways of viewing the world and how religious authority was understood that would soon bear fruit.

We cannot pursue this in detail here, but we can note that the Reformation of the 16th century was partly a product of the Renaissance. One of the corner stones of the Reformation was the idea of *sola scriptura*. Some today use this idea to mean we should use nothing but the Bible and never do any biblical exegesis or use biblical study tools. But that is never what this concept meant. *Sola Scriptura* is about authority, the rejection of the dogmas and doctrines of the church as the final determiner of what Scripture means. It is an affirmation that Scripture should take precedence over tradition, that the Bible should be the source of developing doctrine, not doctrine used to interpret the Bible.

Martin Luther rejected the allegorical approach to biblical interpretation. Instead, he advocated the plain literal reading of the biblical text. However, he did not mean what some want to mean by that today, in which they advocate a "plain sense" reading in which the Bible means whatever they think it means (see [The Problem with "Plain Sense" Reading of Scripture](#)). Rather, Luther contended that the Bible should be read for its own meaning not as proof texts for doctrines, or as allegories with hidden meanings that had no connection to the sense of the text.

As good as those intentions were, Luther still subsumed the Bible under the goals of the Reformation. He placed different values on different parts of the Bible (he wanted James removed from the canon because it did not seem to support salvation by faith alone), subsumed the OT under the NT (OT=law, NT=Gospel), and adopted a thoroughly Christological approach to the OT with the dictum "what manifests Christ." These are ways of dealing with the Bible that still thrive today.

But for the first time in Luther, attention was drawn to the fact that there are material differences in the Bible, differences that cannot be reconciled by appealing to allegory and cannot be ignored just because they do not accord with certain doctrine. That was part of his argument against the abuses of the established church, practices that were supported by appeals to a dogmatic view of Scripture. In appealing to the "plain sense" of Scripture beyond dogma,

Luther allowed the multiplicity of views and ways of thinking in the Bible to be seen clearly, if not totally understood.

The Reformation also fostered an attitude of hostility to traditional and doctrinaire ways of dealing with Scripture. Although Luther's reforms were aimed at the church's traditions, canon law, it also laid the groundwork for challenges to traditional ways of viewing the Bible.

We do not need to trace the history of the development much further here. But we can note that following the Reformation, new attitudes developed toward Scripture. During the 17th and 18th centuries, the first critical approaches to Scripture that tried to deal seriously with the Bible text on its own terms emerged. There were tremendous advances in text criticism, with linguists discovering the many variant readings in manuscripts as well as errors of copying. Richard Simón, a Catholic linguist defending against Protestant views, in 1678 concluded that the biblical text was so full of errors and so unreliably transmitted that only the Church could determine its true meaning. Of course, his case was seriously overstated. But it did underscore not only the need for textual criticism, but the fact that canon law, the doctrines and dogmas of the Church, did not rest on a biblical basis.

The Rise of Critical Study (1700-1970)

The date of 1700 is usually seen as the beginning of the Enlightenment or the rise of rationalism, since John Locke, the English Rationalist, published his influential work in 1695. There were several factors that were influential in the era. The work of Hobbes, Locke, Descartes, and Spinoza all emphasized a rationalist approach to truth. The Age of Reason emerged as a movement that used reason to examine previously unquestioned doctrines and traditions, as well as social customs and ways of viewing the world. In this era scientific investigation came into its own. The idea still prevailed that reality was fixed and unchangeable and governed by "natural laws." However, to this was added the idea that with enough knowledge, human beings could master the natural world. Armed with this idea, modern scientific investigation emerged in full force.

As this view moved into religion there emerged several rationalistic approaches to the Faith. Probably the most influential of these for the fledging United States was Deism, which was basically a rationalist critique of Christianity that eliminated any non-natural explanations for the human condition.

In terms of biblical study, rationalism meant that the focus moved away from the close relation between Church dogma and development of doctrine to an emphasis on the historical background of Scripture, the role that human beings played on a social and cultural level. For the first time, Johann Semler in the late 18th century noted that the word of God, which was an issue of faith, is not identical to the Bible, which is an issue of historical and rational investigation. This marked the beginning of the division of biblical studies into doctrinal and historical approaches.

By the early 19th century, the "scientific method" dominated biblical studies. A very strict "historical positivism" prevailed in biblical studies in which a rigid cause-effect model was applied to Scripture. Everything in Scripture needed to be explained by a prior cause within history, which was assumed could be accessed by investigation and reason. If it could not be, then doubts were raised about the historical status of the account, and thus its validity.

On some levels this was a positive move for biblical studies. It allowed questions to be asked of Scripture that could not be asked under previous approaches, even following the Reformation. Questions of origin, source of writings, dates, locations, as well as the authenticity and integrity of the biblical texts were all investigated. On another level, the negative effects were a neglect of the Bible as a document of Faith produced by and intended for a Faith community. With almost all of the emphasis on historical concerns, the issues of theology and meaning often were neglected for the sake of dealing with issues that could be handled by reason alone.

However, at the same time, there began a shift away from a preoccupation with purely historical studies. World War I shook confidence in human ability to control the world. With the efforts of several Neo-orthodox theologians such as Barth and Bultmann from one direction and others working with literature such as Gunkel, there emerged a focus on the theological communication of the Bible apart from its historical background. The Neo-Orthodox theologians

and the literary critics both noted that the biblical text was intimately connected to a community of Faith, and it should be that community of Faith's confession that receive the most attention.

As a reaction to the purely rationalistic approaches, this new emphasis on theology focused on the belief of the community of Faith and rejected concern with historical issues. For some, the historical issues were irrelevant, even to the point of contending that whether or not the historical event happened at all was immaterial, as long as the Community of Faith was transformed by an "existential" encounter with God. In an attempt to recover the theological focus of the Bible, this perspective tended to abandon the historical grounding of the biblical witness.

As might be expected there was a reaction from many in the church to this perceived neglect of the Faith in favor of historical fact on the one hand and what many perceived as moving the Bible too far away from historical fact into myth on the other. However, the reaction was not necessarily a positive move either. Some of the rationalists (and certainly not all biblical scholars who were working historically were rationalists!) had concluded that scientific historical investigation could not directly support the Faith claims of the Church, and that in fact some aspects of Scripture denied some of those claims. Unfortunately for Christians who saw all of those claims as essential to the Faith, they were right in some areas (see [Conquest or Settlement? History and Theology in Joshua and Judges](#)).

Yet without recognizing that genuine Faith claims cannot be measured by scientific proofs any more than God can be proven by scientific investigation, some Christians tried to fight a "battle for the Bible," as it would later be called, by adopting the assumptions and techniques of the rationalists. To counter the Neo-Orthodox theologians and biblical scholars who were moving away from a totally historical approach to Scripture, many Christians focused on defending the absolute historicity of the Bible. Because the rationalists were using historical approaches to prove their case, oddly enough some Christians began using the same methods and the same evidence to reach radically different conclusions. But they did so by using evidence selectively, ignoring contrary evidence, or simply making assumptions without evidence and presenting it as evidentiary fact.

By the 1920s, the Fundamentalist movement had coalesced around concerns about the absolute inerrancy of Scripture, especially about the absolute historical accuracy of the bible in every detail (see [The Modern Inerrancy Debate](#)). In many ways, that was a return to the medieval approach in which prior doctrine was the governing factor in biblical interpretation, using Scripture to support that doctrine. Sadly, this approach to biblical interpretation still prevails today in some segments of the church.

With all of the faults and excesses by some, it was during this period that the foundation of modern critical investigation of the Bible was laid. By 1900 historians were studying the Pentateuch and the Gospels to authenticate the sources they used. With the rapid growth of archaeology, a tremendous amount of knowledge about the ancient world had been recovered that provided a historical and cultural background in which to place many of the Bible stories. The discovery of many new manuscripts of the Bible, as well as advances in knowledge of ancient languages allowed far more accurate analysis of the biblical text. These factors invigorated the study of Scripture.

Post-modern (1970 – present)

The date of 1970 is an arbitrary date to mark this shift. I choose it because in biblical studies it marks the publication of Brevard Childs' book, *Biblical Theology in Crisis*, in which he critiques the idea prevalent in some segments of Christianity that the Bible presents a totally coherent body of doctrine about everything along with a preoccupation with historical background issues, as well as the loss of biblical authority in other circles. He took to task both sides of the spectrum for not dealing honestly with all the biblical evidence, both because of faulty assumptions and methods of study that prevented seeing the range of material in the text and because assumptions or prejudices about the nature of the Bible itself eliminated consideration of some options and evidence.

It is not that Child's book precipitated an immediate and radical change in how biblical studies were done. Rather this book exemplified and gave voice to the changes that were already under way in biblical studies. Modernity, the Age of Reason, had a great deal of confidence in human ability to gain enough knowledge to master our environment. That attitude carried into biblical studies as both sides of the "battle for the Bible" assumed that with enough knowledge they could prove the other position wrong and come to truth. The gradual influence of post-

modern ways of thinking, coming from both the “hard” sciences and the social sciences, began to erode that confidence. The focus of biblical studies gradually shifted during the 1970s and 1980s from an almost total preoccupation with historical background issues behind the text to a concern with the text itself. The focus was not only on *what* was being said but *how* it was said and *what response* it evoked. This allowed a larger place for the community of Faith’s testimony, while still allowing that testimony to be given in the historical and cultural particularity of ancient Israel and the Roman world.

The assumptions of a post-modern perspective have shifted how we view the world, which in turn impacts how we do biblical studies. We no longer see reality as fixed and unchangeable. Even modern science has made this shift in quantum theory that speaks more in terms of rates of change than it does in describing what is. We see the world now as dynamic and constantly changing. Social institutions that only a generation ago were seen to be the expression of the stability of the world, even as decreed by God (for example, slavery and the subjugation of people of color by white Europeans and Americans), are now seen as human creations that can be changed by human beings. One battleground of this conflict that is being played out in the modern church is the role of women in ministry.

In terms of Biblical study, this does not mean that we see the Bible as constantly changing. But it does mean that we have to study the Bible in terms of the people and the context that produced it, the testimony they passed on to us about God and ourselves, and then ask what the message of their testimony is that can be applied to a modern world. That requires being fluent not only in our own culture but in the world of the Bible. It means that we can no longer simply assume a meaning for the biblical text based on what we have always heard that it means. It suggests that we need to listen to the biblical testimony with new ears, ready to hear a new word from God rather than a confirmation of the word we have always heard from the Church, or from our favorite pastor, or the person with the latest book, or from the most popular person on Christian television. It means as pastors and leader that we have the responsibility to study Scripture diligently for the evidence that is there rather than imposing onto the biblical text what we think it needs to say, what the Church says that it must say, or what society demands that it say (or not say!). The Biblical evidence must move beyond doctrine and opinion if it is to be the living word of God for a new millennium. That is our task as faithful interpreters of Scripture.

(1.) While this discussion is about Christian biblical interpretation many of the same points could be made about interpretation of Scripture within Judaism.