

Unveiling the Scriptures – The Christian Exegesis of the Old Testament

We now turn to a look at how Christians read the Old Testament.

The Christian Exegesis of the Old Testament

The Christian approach to the Old Testament shared with the Second Temple interpreters their approach to the Scriptures in that the Christians combed through the texts carefully to find hidden meanings—i.e. meanings not immediately apparent to an historical critical method of interpretation. But the Christian approach was different than all other Jewish interpretations in that it centered upon Jesus. His life, death, and resurrected glory were the key to understand everything. It was the grid which, when placed over the ancient texts, made everything there finally make sense.

It is important to understand what drove the first Christians to adopt such a revolutionary way of understanding the Hebrew Scriptures. They did not pore over its pages intent to find second meanings as arbitrary proof-texts for their new movement. By supertime on the day Jesus died, as far as they were concerned, their movement was over, for their hopes had died with Jesus on the cross. What compelled them to rethink absolutely everything was the resurrection of Christ. He returned from the dead, overturning everything that they thought they knew about the history of Israel and Israel's Scriptures.

Before the Resurrection, most people thought that Israel's history was leading to a glorified nation. Israel had a mission from God to save the world, to be a light to the nations. Though they had clearly failed that mission, they still expected that God would act to help them fulfill their mission when the Messiah came. They expected the nations of the world to be defeated, and Israel raised in the world to glorious heights after God returned in power to His Temple, restoring His divine presence there.

The resurrected glory of Christ proved that Israel's destiny was being fulfilled not in a glorified *nation*, but in a glorified *Messiah*. In Jesus, God Himself had returned to His Temple and restored His divine presence to His people. On the cross, He had overcome the powers of the world and defeated Satan, the god of this age. Through baptismal incorporation into the glorified Christ and receiving the baptismal gift of the Spirit, His people shared Christ's ascended glory, for Christ (and His Church after Him) were the new Temple. Messianic Israel—i.e. the Church—was sent out to be a light to the nations, fulfilling Israel's original destiny and calling. Thus, the trajectory and *telos* (or goal) of Israel, hinted at since the time of Abraham, had been fulfilled in Christ.

This provided the key to unlock all those hidden secret meanings in the Scriptures. Israel's history was intended to culminate *in Christ*. Israel's Scriptures spoke ultimately of Christ and His Church, and this new way of reading the Scriptures, forced on the Christians by the fact of Christ's resurrected glory, was completely unexpected. Yet it brought together all the disparate strands and disconnected themes scattered throughout the Hebrew Scriptures in a way that made them all finally make sense. The Old Testament found its unity in Christ. That is what Saint Paul meant when he said that Christ had died and been raised “in accordance with the Scriptures” (*1 Corinthians 15:3-4*). He was not referring to an occasional proof-text yanked out of its context, but to the entire over-arching narrative of Hebrew history from the time of Abraham. Christ's life, death, resurrection, and ascended glory embodied all of Israel's history, and provided the answer to all its unanswered questions.

Given this key, we conclude our talk by asking:

How Do Christians Read their Scriptures?

Before answering this question, we must again distinguish, because the Old Testament is much different than the New Testament—as the very names “old” and “new” reveal.

First, we read the Old Testament Christotelically—i.e. with Christ as its *telos*, its goal. That does not mean that we somehow find a Christological meaning to every single verse (how would that work, for example, in the Book of Esther?), but that we see Christ and His Church as the key to Israel’s existence and as the answer to its exilic plight. With Him, Israel’s long exile was over, and forgiveness had come flooding into the world—not just for Israel, but for anyone willing join to commonwealth of Israel as Jesus’ disciples, even if they were uncircumcised Gentiles. We read the Old Testament to find Christ there—not only in scattered hints prefiguring details of His life, but also to learn how Israel’s long journey of covenant, apostasy, and return found its destination in Him. Each event in the Old Testament narrative is another step along the path to Jesus.

We therefore read the Old Testament knowing that it is (in the words of Saint Paul) *prophetikos*, finding its final goal in Christ. Sometimes this means reading the text with shocking literalism, such as in *Psalms 22*, where the psalmist says, “They pierced my hands and my feet”. Sometimes it means reading the text in a Second Temple way, finding in it meanings not immediately apparent to a plain historical reading, such as in *Hosea 11*, where God says of Israel, “Out of Egypt I called My son”. Sometimes it means mining historical figures for underlying symbolic meanings, such as in Genesis where Sarah symbolized the new covenant of freedom in Christ and Hagar symbolized the old covenant of slavery in Judaism (as Saint Paul saw and wrote about in *Galatians 4*). This latter method has been styled “allegorical”, and it has enjoyed a long history in the Church, where the term described any deeper Christotelic meaning. The Fathers using this allegorical method did not thereby mean to disparage or deny the plain historical meaning of the sacred text. But they saw that deeper Christological treasures lay buried in the text, and needed the tools of allegory to dig them out.

Secondly, we read the New Testament historically. That is, if the authority of the Old Testament for us lies in what it prophetically reveals *looking forward to Christ in the future*, the New Testament’s authority resides in what the apostles said *looking back to Christ in history*. That is why (a few examples aside), the Fathers treated the narratives of Christ’s life as history, and not as allegory. Certainly, there were some people back then who did more or less junk the historical meaning, and interpret every Gospel text allegorically. These people are known to us now as “the Gnostics”, and since at least the days of Irenaeus we have recognized they were not really part of our movement.

The New Testament cannot be viewed non-historically, as the Gnostics attempted to do. *Everything in the Bible is about the Jesus of history*: the Old Testament prophets looked *forward* to Him, and the New Testament apostles looked back to Him. Thus the choice between an allegorical interpretation and an historical one depended upon one’s place along the historical time-line. For the Old Testament writings which looked *forward in time* to Jesus—an allegorical interpretation. For the New Testament writings which looked *back in time* to Jesus—an historical reading.

The role of the apostles as witnesses to Jesus, then, is clear. They wrote their letters to the churches teaching them about the significance of the Jesus of history and how the people in the churches should then live. They wrote their gospels (what Saint Justin called their “memoirs”) as records for the coming generations of what the Jesus of history said and did. Even the Book of Revelation is the exception that proves this rule, for it begins with a revelation of the Jesus of history to John in his Patmos exile, and declares what He is doing now and will do at the end of the age. But, we may ask, what is the role of the Fathers?

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