

Interpreting Scripture with the Great Tradition

What follows is a select summary of Interpreting Scripture with the Great Tradition: Recovering the Genius of Premodern Exegesis by Craig Carter. This is followed by my personal reflection on the entire book.

Hermeneutics

We must interpret the Bible in a unique manner because it is uniquely inspired. The purpose of exegesis is to understand what God is saying to us today through the inspired text. The text may have one or several meanings because of the complexity of God the Holy Spirit inspiring the text through a human author. The authority of the Bible is God's self-authenticating Word speaking through it, and in order to hear God's Word, it is crucial that we interpret it as a unified book with Jesus Christ at its center. The meaning of the text for today is what we seek to hear as we study the text carefully and reverently. Biblical exegesis is a spiritual discipline by which we are gradually made into the kind of readers who can receive with gladness the Word of God.

The fathers, following the explicit example of the writers of the New Testament, interpreted the Old Testament text as having multiple levels of meaning. The christological meaning of an Old Testament text could be discerned on this side of the resurrection because it was always there in the text, even though it was not necessarily discerned (or at least not *clearly* discerned) by those who lived before the incarnation of God in Christ. The awareness of divine authorial intent, in addition to human authorial intent, enabled them to see the *sensus plenior* as resident in the text itself and not as something read into the text by readers.

The Great Tradition¹

Theologians and pastors of the Great Tradition had (1) Christian Platonist metaphysical assumptions (which they believed were exegetically justified), (2) a method of spiritual exegesis (which they believed was the same as the way the New Testament apostles interpreted the Old Testament), (3) a social location within the believing community of faith (to which they saw themselves as accountable), and (4) a set of doctrines (contained in the ecumenical creeds).

Traditional Christianity of the Great Tradition held to trinitarian classical theism; the necessity of correcting and supplementing general revelation with the special revelation found in Scripture; a view of truth as being found primarily in the incarnation of God in Jesus Christ and in Scripture read as his word; a doctrine of sin as moral rebellion resulting in true moral guilt; the

¹ Carter defines the Great Tradition as the doctrine revealed in the Bible as articulated by the orthodox church fathers in the creeds of the first five centuries of the undivided church. Especially the Apostle's Creed as expanded by the Nicene Creed in 325 and 381, with the clarifications added in the definition of Chalcedon (451). This trinitarian and christological tradition is handed on to the middle ages through Augustine, summarized in Thomas Aquinas, presupposed by the Protestant Reformers and by the Post-Reformation scholastics and 18th century evangelicals, attacked by the enlightenment philosophers, but it continues to undergird the Roman Catholic church and all major protestant bodies right up to the present day. The Great Tradition is what the Bible teaches about God in Christ and what orthodox Christians both east and west, roman and protestant, agree and have always believed.

corruption of human nature and the helplessness of humanity to save itself; salvation through faith in the penal, substitutionary sacrifice of Christ on the cross; the church as the fellowship of the redeemed; and eschatology as a living hope centered on the personal return of Jesus Christ to earth at the end of the age.

Classical interpretation of Scripture, which was the approach in Western culture from the early centuries up to the Enlightenment and still is the approach followed in the preaching and teaching of much of the worldwide church today, depends on the doctrine of inspiration. The doctrine of inspiration requires a Christian Platonist metaphysics in which supernatural divine revelation can take place at the moment that the prophets and apostles write the text, in which divine providence can ensure the preservation and transmission of the text, and in which the Holy Spirit can illumine the meaning of the text to readers in every century. There has to be a metaphysical framework in which God is able to speak into history on an ongoing basis in order for special revelation to be possible. This metaphysical framework depends entirely on a uniquely Christian doctrine of divine transcendence that comes from the Bible.

The Inspiration of Scripture

The doctrine of divine inspiration consists of two complementary parts: miracle and providence. The canonization of the New Testament writings is an example of divine providence at work. But there would have been no writings to canonize if the miraculous aspect of inspiration had not already occurred. God's providential work is responsible for the preparation of the historical situation in which the human authors wrote, for the preparation of the human authors themselves, for the writing of the text, for the preservation of the inspired text once it was written, and for the process of canonization. In the midst of the process, however, certain events occurred that cannot be explained by the usual laws of nature.² If God's providence is his *usual* way of acting in the world, God's miraculous acts are his *unusual* ways of acting in the world. Inspiration is made up of both providence and miracle. In his miraculous acts, God introduces novelty into history in the form of special revelation.

Christian Platonism

When we look at Greek philosophy as a whole during the patristic era, we can see a range of views about the gods/God. First, we have those who either denied the existence of the gods (like Lucretius) or denied that the gods involved themselves in the affairs of human beings (like Epicurus). Then there are those who saw God as the "soul of the universe" (like the Stoics) or as the universe itself at the most general level of description (Eastern pantheism). Most ancient people were polytheistic, although many intellectuals doubted the crudely anthropomorphic accounts of the gods given in the myths. Then there were the Platonist philosophers who acknowledged that there is one, simple, immutable, perfect, transcendent God who created all things and upholds all things in existence.

² For example, God's giving of the law to Moses at Sinai, John's vision at Patmos, and the inspiration of both the writers and editors of Scripture.

Lloyd P. Gerson argues for a construct he calls “Ur-Platonism,” which defines the unity binding together all Platonist philosophers. He expresses the five points of this construct in negatives. The five points of Ur-Platonism are antimaterialism, antimechanism, antinominalism, antirelativism, and antiskepticism.

First, antimaterialism is “the view that it is false that the only things that exist are bodies and their properties.”³ The antimaterialist maintains that entities exist that are neither bodies nor properties of bodies yet exist independently of bodies.

Second, antimechanism is “the view that the only sort of explanations available in principle to a materialist are inadequate for explaining the natural order.”⁴ Antimechanism denies that an adequate explanation for the behavior of physical things is inherent in the things themselves. Behind this is the idea that an adequate explanation for a thing must be a different sort of thing from the one being explained. This is a corollary of the idea that things need an explanation of their existence, which is a rejection of the divinity and aseity of the cosmos.

Third, antinominalism is “the view that it is false that the only things that exist are individuals, each uniquely situated in space and time.”⁵ The antinominalist insists on this view primarily to explain how two things can be the same in some way without being identical, and a causal explanation is sought. The usual approach is to affirm some sort of view of universals.

Fourth, antirelativism is the “denial of the claim that Plato attributes to Protagoras that ‘man is the measure of all things, of what is that it is and of what is not that it is not.’”⁶ Antirelativism says that goodness and truth are properties of being. They are not relative to what is “true for me” or what is “good for me.”

Fifth, antiskepticism is “the view that knowledge is possible.”⁷ Gerson writes, “Knowledge refers to a mode of cognition wherein the real is in some way ‘present’ to the cognizer.”⁸ Skeptics do not deny cognition, only knowledge. If either materialism or nominalism were true, skepticism would necessarily follow because it would not be possible for the real to be present to the cognizer; there could be only representations of the real.

This brief sketch of Ur-Platonism is a description of what all Platonists held in common from Plato to Plotinus and the last of the major Neoplatonic philosophers such as Porphyry and Proclus. Gerson suggests that the main thrust of the five points is explanatory; all forms of Platonism believe that true explanation is always a top-down, never a bottom-up, process and that the true explanatory framework will converge on the smallest possible number of principles. The one explains the many; the many do not explain themselves. An additional way to get at the essence of Platonism, according to Gerson, is to see that Platonism is fundamentally antinaturalism. Yet another way of getting at the essence of Platonism is to say that it is the view

³ Gerson, *From Plato to Platonism*, 11

⁴ Gerson, *From Plato to Platonism*, 11

⁵ Gerson, *From Plato to Platonism*, 12

⁶ Gerson, *From Plato to Platonism*, 13

⁷ Gerson, *From Plato to Platonism*, 13

⁸ Gerson, *From Plato to Platonism*, 13

that the world is meaningful, as opposed to random, purposeless, or chaotic. In other words, for all Platonists, teleology is inherent in reality; the task of philosophy is to discover it.

The Bible emerged out of the ancient Near Eastern mythological worldview and was influenced by an encounter with Greek rationalism during the Second Temple period. The Old Testament prophets and the New Testament apostles, as well as the early church fathers, had the task of encountering the metaphysical assumptions of their culture and correcting those assumptions in the light of divine revelation.

Personal Reflection

I thought Carter's summary of the Christian Platonist metaphysics of the Great Tradition was very helpful. He describes how Christian Platonism embodies the metaphysical implications of the biblical doctrine of God. It was necessary for Christian Platonism to develop because it provided a hospitable metaphysical context for the practice of exegesis.

I am aware that some Christians believe that Platonism had an entirely negative influence on early Christianity. I agree that there is a negative aspect to its influence on early Christianity, namely, that it did contribute to some Christian thinkers over-spiritualizing the Old Testament. However, I do think that Christian Platonism did have a positive influence in that it gave a way of describing an anti-naturalist worldview consistent with Scripture which also provided a metaphysical context for thinking about the inspiration of Scripture and doing the actual practice of exegesis.

Carter also describes well the hermeneutical principles the fathers followed. They interpreted scripture as a coherent whole with Jesus Christ as the central theme. They believed that biblical interpretation is a spiritual discipline that requires spiritual discernment rooted in piety, prayer, and the grace of the Holy Spirit. They believed that there is not only human authorial intent but also divine authorial intent that may go beyond what the human author consciously intended. They believed a text may have a spiritual sense in addition to the literal sense.⁹ However, although the spiritual meaning of a text may go beyond the limits of what the literal sense says, all spiritual meaning must be consistent with, and grow out of, the literal sense of the text.¹⁰ These are all things that I and the majority of evangelicals believe today!

For me a new idea that Carter presented was prosopological exegesis. This form of exegesis acknowledges that Christ is actually speaking in Old Testament texts. It is not sufficient to say that an Old Testament text typologically concerns Christ. For example, the Psalms do not merely speak of Christ; rather, in the Psalms Christ actually speaks. In Augustine's reading of Psalm 3, he sees Psalm 3 as a psalm of David. The psalm is literally about David. But the psalm is also prophetic speech, which can be understood to have been spoken by Christ, who inspired the prophet David and speaks through him. Christ was really inspiring David so that David's

⁹ "For the Great Tradition of Christian orthodoxy, the "literal sense" refers to the meaning of the biblical text, whether that meaning is conveyed through literal statements or through some sort of figural language and whether that meaning is what the human author consciously intended or is an extension of the human author's intention implanted in the text by the Holy Spirit through inspiration." (166-167)

¹⁰ Carter defines the spiritual sense as the Christological sense.

psalm became Christ's own speech. Jesus Christ speaks through his prophet to his people, and this is an extension of the literal meaning of the text. In typological exegesis we may see Christ opaquely in the Old Testament text, but in prosopological exegesis we actually hear Christ speak clearly in the text.