

Deconstructing the Bible: Understanding the Crisis in Biblical Interpretation

Outline Part 1

Jeffrey L. Morrow, Ph.D.

I. Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI's "Biblical Interpretation in Crisis"

- A. Modern Biblical Interpretation claims to be objective and neutral, free of bias, in contrast, so it claims, to traditional theological biblical interpretation.
- B. Pope Benedict pointed out numerous problems with Modern Biblical Interpretation
 - 1. It is not neutral or objective. Even the hard sciences are not completely neutral.
 - 2. It too often makes the Bible appear to be simply an ancient text from long ago, like any other ancient text, with no implications for our lives.
 - 3. Faith's hermeneutic (method of interpretation) has greater explanatory power than more skeptical methods that start from a position of doubt. Our loving investment with the text, which means we are not neutral, helps us understand the text better.
- C. Traditional Biblical Interpretation had many strengths.
 - 1. Traditional biblical interpretation involved multiple senses of Scripture which correspond to the way the Church teaches the faith (e.g., in the *Catechism*) and which correspond to our spiritual life as Catholics.
 - a. The literal sense—which corresponds to the first part of the *Catechism* on the Creed—seeks to discover the sense of the words of the text.
 - b. The spiritual sense of Scripture, which is always grounded in the literal sense, is subdivided further into three types of spiritual senses.
 - 1) The first spiritual sense is called typology (or allegory)—which corresponds to the second part of the *Catechism* on the Sacraments and the celebration of the Church's saving mysteries. Typology points to how the Old Testament looks forward to the coming of

Jesus, the Church, and the Sacraments. It sees these as hidden in the Old and made manifest in the New.

- 2) The second spiritual sense is called tropology (or the moral sense)—which corresponds to the third part of the *Catechism* on living the Christian life. The moral sense helps us apply Scripture to our lives, to grow in the virtues, avoid sin, and live justly.
- 3) The third spiritual sense is called anagogy—which corresponds to the fourth part of the *Catechism* on the life of prayer. Anagogy elevates our minds to contemplate heavenly realities.

2. Pope Benedict proposes that if Exegesis (interpretation) “A” is traditional interpretation, and Exegesis “B” is modern interpretation, then what is needed is an Exegesis “C” which takes into account the best of both methods. I think this is what he tried to do in his *Jesus of Nazareth* trilogy.

D. In order to accomplish this task, Benedict says we need a “criticism of criticism” where we examine the philosophical foundations of modern biblical interpretation in order to explore its limits and save what is useful. That is what we are attempting to do in part in these webinars.

II. We have good reasons for trusting the text of the Bible

A. Much of the skepticism we find in classrooms and on t.v., comes from the lack of external evidence outside of the Bible for what the Bible contains. Edwin Yamauchi and other ancient historians, however, point out that fallacy with this sort of reasoning—e.g., Edwin Yamauchi, *The Stones and the Scriptures*; Edwin Yamauchi, *The Scriptures and Archaeology*; and Edwin Yamauchi’s 1994 essay, “The Current Status of Old Testament Historiography,” in *Faith, Tradition, and History*, edited by Millard, Hoffmeier, and Baker.

1. Of all that once existed, only a fragment has survived to the present day.
 - a. Material remains (evidence) can be destroyed by time by becoming crumbly and decaying naturally.
 - b. Material remains (evidence) can be destroyed in warfare (fire, etc.).
 - c. Material remains (evidence) may not be preserved due to the environment (wet or muddy, as in the Egyptian Nile Delta region), etc.

2. Only a fragment of the sites/locations, where what the material evidence of what has survived to the present day is located, have been discovered.
 - a. Many of the places that we know once existed (from attestations both in the Bible as well as in other non-biblical ancient documents) have not yet been discovered.
 - b. Virtually every decade, more and more of these sites/locations are discovered.
3. Of the sites/locations that have been discovered—in most cases, only a fragment of the sites have actually been excavated.
 - a. Excavations sometimes have to be cut short due to lack of funding or war breaking out in the region.
 - b. In some instances (like Jerusalem) the cities are still occupied by inhabitants and thus they cannot completely be excavated.
4. Of the remains uncovered in the fragment of the sites that have been excavated, only a fragment of those remains have actually been examined by scholars. E.g., of the hundreds of thousands of cuneiform documents that have been uncovered, only about 25,000 have actually been examined by scholars.
5. Of what has been examined by scholars, only a fragment has actually been published, and this usually in obscure scholarly journals.
 - a. It takes a long time to study the finds from an excavation—sometimes as much as or more than a decade.
 - b. It takes a long time to write up and edit sufficiently for publications the articles that will reveal publically to other scholars the results of the findings/arguments, etc.
 - c. It can take many years for an article to actually be published. Sometimes they will be rejected for a variety of reasons.
 - 1) Perhaps the journal had too many submissions, and the topic was insufficiently groundbreaking, but still important.
 - 2) Perhaps it wasn't the best fit.

- 3) Perhaps it was too poorly written or too poorly argued, etc.
 - 4) Even if accepted, it might still have to be revised further.
 - 5) Even if accepted, some journals still have a year, two year, or more, backlog.
6. Only a small selection of what's published in scholarly journals filters to the broader public.
 7. Thus, we're really only dealing with a fragment, of what once existed.
 8. In light of the incredibly fragmentary nature of the archaeological record, "absence of evidence can never be equated with evidence of absence," as Yamauchi and others so often wrote. Just because we haven't found it yet, doesn't mean it didn't happen.
- B. Numerous works exist highlighting both how the Bible (both Old and New Testaments) are historically reliable sources that should be used as primary sources for the history they contain, and also that where there is comparable ancient material with which to compare Scripture, the Bible does very well historically.
- C. A number of important works show the specific places that we can know the Bible gets it right, historically, in place where previously there had been some doubt.
1. K.A. Kitchen, *On the Reliability of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003).
 2. Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., *The Old Testament Documents: Are They Reliable & Relevant* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2001). Be careful with the early chapter on the canonization process of the Bible with this one. It is Protestant slanted.
 3. James K. Hoffmeier, *Israel in Egypt: The Evidence for the Authenticity of the Exodus Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996).
 4. James K. Hoffmeier, *Ancient Israel in Sinai: The Evidence for the Authenticity of the Wilderness Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

5. Craig Blomberg, *The Historical Reliability of the Gospels*.
6. Craig Blomberg, *The Historical Reliability of the New Testament*.
7. Many, many, many, many, more.....

III. Fourteenth Century Precursors to Modern Biblical Interpretation

[grounded in Scott Hahn and Benjamin Wiker's important volume, *Politicizing the Bible: The Roots of Historical Criticism and the Secularization of Scripture 1300-1700*]

- A. The Context of the Franciscan Poverty debate.
 1. The Franciscan order was divided over how to live poverty.
 - a. As preachers, the Franciscans needed books, libraries to house them, etc.
 - b. As Franciscans they were vowed to poverty which took on a special emphasis because of the nature of their order, charism, vocation, and foundation.
 - c. The “conventuals” sought a solution in the distinction between “use” and “ownership”
 - 1) The Franciscans would not own anything they used, they simply used them.
 - 2) The pope would own the things the Franciscans used. Some popes seemed ok with this distinction.
 - d. The “spiritual” Franciscans were upset with what they saw as abuses among the “conventuals”
 - e. The head of the order asked the “spirituals” to follow their other vow: obedience.
 2. Pope John XXII (ruled 1316-1334) called the “spirituals” to obey, but also refused the distinction the “conventuals” wanted.

3. The Franciscans called John XXII a heretic since he was going against his immediate predecessors who had allowed the distinction between “use” and “ownership.”
- B. Ludwig of Bavaria’s (1282-1347) election as Holy Roman Emperor was contested (with Frederick the I of Austria). Pope John XXII stepped in and asked both to abdicate. Ludwig refused, and thus began a contest between Ludwig and Pope John XXII.
- C. Marsilius of Padua (1275-1342)
1. Studied Medicine at the University of Padua
 - a. The University of Padua was a center of Averroist thought
 - b. Averroës (known in Arabic as Ibn Rushd, 1126-1198) was a Muslim philosopher [St. Thomas Aquinas referred to him in his famous *Summa Theologiae* as “the Commentator”].
 - c. Averroist thought, at least as it was received in the Latin Christian West, was one of “double-truth” where there were religious truths knowable to the common masses, but a higher philosophical truth only accessible to the truly wise (philosophers) who were in a position to judge the lower truths.
 2. Marsilius wrote his *Defensor Pacis* as a work that contributed later to the subordination of the Church to the State.
 3. As Andrew Jones’ recent volume, *Before Church and State*, has shown for the thirteenth century, so too Marsilius’ work could be understood within the broader context of a united Christendom. It was used later, however, as a secularizing force.
 4. Moreover, Marsilius’ work was used in defense of Ludwig of Bavaria, with whom Marsilius was living under Ludwig’s protection, and writing tracts in support of his politics.
 5. Marsilius saw the laity as those who should be in charge of land, rule, etc.
- D. William of Ockham (1285-1347)
1. A Franciscan at the University of Oxford in England.

2. Supported the Franciscans against Pope John XXII.
3. Sought protection under Ludwig of Bavaria, where Ockham joined Marsilius, and wrote likewise in support of Ludwig.
4. Ockham's biblical interpretation argued quite forcefully for the specialist in Scripture to wield ultimate authority in interpretation, over and against popes and councils (the Magisterium).
5. Agreed with Marsilius that land, property, finances, etc., should reside with the laity, for spiritual purposes. Those like the religious and clergy seeking perfection should not concern themselves with riches and the things of this world.
6. Seen as a Nominalist (nominalism = "name-ism"; denial of universals, only the particular instantiations exist, e.g., there are no "sheep," just this sheep and that sheep over there, etc.

E. John Wycliffe (1320-1384)

We only briefly discussed Wycliffe [and Jan Hus, 1369-1415], to show how their work prepared the soil (especially English soil where Wycliffe was from and where Hussite thought eventually found fertile ground) for the Reformation and what would later come. Although explicitly opposed to Ockham and nominalism, argued for the subordination of the Church to the State at some level, for the purposes of reform. Thus, he agreed with Marsilius and Ockham about the role of lay rulers taking charge of land, rule, etc.

IV. Niccolò Machiavelli (1469-1527)

[grounded in Scott Hahn and Benjamin Wiker's important volume, *Politicizing the Bible: The Roots of Historical Criticism and the Secularization of Scripture 1300-1700*]

- A. Father of modern politics
- B. Scandalized (and then inspired by) hypocritical Church leaders (Renaissance popes—see Mike Aquilina's *Good Pope, Bad Pope*; as well as especially bad bishops and clergy).
- C. Involved biblical interpretation in his political works.
- D. Saw religious hypocrisy as the norm.

1. For Machiavelli, religious leaders preach what they don't believe but what the populace believes, in order to control the populace.
 2. He saw such hypocrisy all around him in political and religious leaders (which were basically the same thing for him), and thus read it back into the Bible.
- E. He thus became an early figure who used a hermeneutic (method of interpretation) of suspicion, doubting the text (especially miracles)
- F. He argued that the Bible should be treated like any other ancient text.
- G. He treated Christianity like any other religion.

V. **Martin Luther (1483-1546)**

[grounded in Scott Hahn and Benjamin Wiker's important volume, *Politicizing the Bible: The Roots of Historical Criticism and the Secularization of Scripture 1300-1700*]

- A. Began the Protestant Reformation/Revolution with his attack on indulgences in his 1517 95 Theses which remained fairly well in the bounds of orthodox Catholicism, but, after which, he spiraled out of the bounds of orthodox Catholicism.
- B. Nominalist. He was an intellectual disciple of Ockham. "Ockham was my master," he once wrote.
- C. An important context for the Reformation was the history of concordats (formal agreements) between the papacy and other rulers. As William Cavanaugh pointed out, in his 1995 article, "A Fire Strong Enough to Consume the House': The Wars of Religion and the Rise of the State," in the journal, *Modern Theology*: Regions throughout Europe that already had prior concordats limiting the popes rule in their realm—e.g., curbing papal taxes, granting the ability to appoint bishops, etc.—remained Catholic through the Reformation—e.g., Spain, Naples, Sicily, Austria, France. The Protestant Reformation was only successful in regions where no such concordats were in place—e.g., Scandinavia, Germany, Switzerland. In such regions, Protestantism functioned as a theoretical justification for the princes' and nobles' political programs.

- D. Luther's espousal of *sola Scriptura*, Scripture alone as an authority, was a recipe for the fragmentation of Christianity. NOTE: Peter Candler (in his book, *Theology, Rhetoric, Manuduction*) claims in a footnote (page 71, footnote 3) that David Steinmetz claimed the actual phrase "sola Scriptura" was not used in the sixteenth century. I do think, however, that it expresses Luther's early thought, as when he proclaimed, "Here I stand I can do no other, my soul is held captive by the Word of God." Luther later changed, as he saw more and more Protestants disagreeing with him, and desired them first to be trained properly prior to interpreting Scripture.
- E. Luther opened up the canon, i.e., what books belong in Scripture.
- F. Luther held a view of a sort of canon within the canon, that is, some biblical books were more inspired than others. Romans and Galatians, for example, were especially important for Luther.
- G. Luther limited the senses of Scripture to the literal sense alone. Although, his literal sense was a bit thicker than the traditional literal sense. For example, it sometimes included typology, and often included the moral senses as well. This went for the other Reformers (like Calvin) also.
- H. As Hahn and Wiker point out, more important than Luther's doing away with the traditional senses of Scripture and just focusing on the literal sense, was his replacement of the senses with dialectic: e.g., Law vs. Gospel.