

NOT MISSING THE WOOD FOR THE TREES

Pastoral Exposition in the Light of Modern Old Testament Hermeneutical Trends

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I have been asked to present a survey of current Old Testament trends as I see them. Now since the only reason I have been burdened with this task is because some “cartoon” in our midst suggested I do this, I shall be making what is really a “cartoon” sketch rather than a comprehensive survey of Old Testament interpretation! And just to make sure you remember it is only a simple sketch, let me start with a simple story.

Three men were standing, for the first time, before the massive Grand Canyon in Arizona. The first man was a geologist. He was visibly excited. “What an astounding phenomenon of geological forces of nature working over millions of years!” The second was an artist. “What a majestic and awe-inspiring sight. I must try to paint this.” The third man worked on a ranch. He shook his head and quietly muttered, “What a terrible place to lose a cow!”

The same canyon, but looked at from three different perspectives. The geologist is interested in the natural history that must have contributed to the formation of such a remarkable phenomenon. The artist is less interested in the Canyon’s geological history, but is more than content simply to appreciate its majestic beauty, as it is in the present. And the cowboy? He feels only pity for the person who has the misfortune of losing a cow in such rugged terrain. One canyon, but three different views.

Turn with me now from the Grand Canyon towards another ancient entity: the well-known story of Adam and Eve in Genesis 2-3. The same story, but let me quickly walk you through three different views or interpretations that have been applied to it.

THREE INTERPRETATIONS

1. Adam as a symbol of a king's lust and abuse of power

Like the geologist interested in plotting the history of natural geological forces that led to the formation of the Grand Canyon, the first view of Genesis 2-3 finds meaning from the history that is thought to lie behind the writing of these chapters. The proposed historical background provides the key to the proper appreciation of the story. Adam is King Solomon. He holds dominion and power over all the animals and creatures within his garden. The Garden of Eden symbolises the Royal Gardens of King Solomon's palace. The serpent in Genesis 3 is an allusion to a deviant cultic practice¹ that seduced Adam into seeking knowledge of all things good and evil. The cherubim in Genesis 3:24 who were placed there by God to prohibit re-entry to Eden symbolise the cherubim in Solomon's temple who watched over the ark of the covenant (cf. 1 Ki 8:6-7). Kings were not allowed access to the innermost place of the Temple. Their power must be restrained. Only priests may enter. The fall of Adam is the death of Solomon. After the fall of Adam, we see a split between the two brothers, Abel and Cain. There is violence. After Solomon's death, the family of united Israel splits into two kingdoms (1 Ki 12). This split into north and south was one of the legacies of Solomon's quest for power and glory. The building of the tower of Babel in Genesis 11 is an allusion to Solomon's feverish building activities. And as the Tower of Babel led to great division, so also great division followed Solomon's building programme. 1 Kings 12:4 informs us that the kingdoms divided because people were not happy with the heavy burdens laid upon them by Solomon. In short, the story of Adam in Genesis 2 is part of a sustained critique against the kind of reign that Solomon exerted. It is thus a strong critique against pride, oppression and the misuse of power by those who, like Solomon, rule as king.

¹ Cf. 2 Kings 18:4 for evidence of a cult that worshipped the bronze serpent from Moses' day.

2. Adam as a symbol of the human race in rebellion against God

A second interpretation of Genesis 2-3 corresponds to the artist's appreciation of the Canyon. There is no concern with the historical forces that may have contributed to the formation or writing of the text. What we see in the present literary context is enough. And what do we see in the present? We see that Genesis 2-3 comes immediately after Genesis 1. And the description of creation in Genesis 1 is clear: God saw that the created earth was good, nay, very good (Genesis 1:31). But the picture perfect world of Genesis 1, where everything falls neatly and symmetrically into place, provokes the question: what has happened to that picture perfect world? Why is the world today not so very good? Indeed, why is it often very bad? This is where Genesis 2-3 begins to provide an answer. It gives a theological explanation of why the creation that was so very good in Genesis 1 is now so very bad. Why do human beings fight and quarrel with each other? Why do husband and wife love and hate each other at the same time? Why can't human beings relate in peaceful harmony with each other? Why do so many people, who desire to be employed, find no joy or enthusiasm for their work? Why is work such a chore and a bore? Why does the prospect of childbirth cause women anxiety and anguish? I speak not only of the physical pain of childbirth, but of the questions and uncertainties that women agonise over: will I have to give up my job? Will my husband want another child? On a more trivial level, "Why are most people terrified of snakes? More seriously, why is there a constant struggle between good and evil, both in the world at large and in our individual lives? Why does the earth sometimes fail to produce a good harvest, despite the best efforts of farmers? Why are there famines and natural disasters? In short, why is the world so different from the picture perfect world described in Genesis 1? Genesis 2-3 offers a theological explanation why life in today's world is so bad. Humanity as a whole has not learned to live in obedience to God.

3. Adam as a symbol of a male chauvinist p.. (person!!)

We laughed at the cowboy who describes the Canyon as a terrible place to lose a cow. Why? His perspective seems so very unexpected, so unnatural, in the face of such a wonderful Canyon. Even if we are not a geologist, we might well have asked, “Wow! I wonder how this vast Canyon came into being?” Even if we were not an artist, we might still appreciate the beauty and wonder that the Canyon evokes. But unless you were a cowboy who often had to spend long hours looking for lost cattle, you would probably never have seen the Canyon in the way he does. Likewise, I suspect that most of us here, would probably never have dreamed it possible to read Genesis 2-3 as an attack against a ... male chauvinist p...(persons!). But this is in fact the basis of a truly stimulating interpretation of Genesis 2-3.

In this interpretation, Man is *not* created before woman. What is created first is an earth creature that is neither male nor female. It is from this earth creature that male and female are created. After all, a male is only defined as the opposite of a female. This genderless earth creature needs a “companion” – neither subordinate nor superior. So when Adam and Eve are simultaneously created, they are equals, companions. In Genesis 3:6, Adam eats the fruit “without question or comment”. In other words, the woman gives to the man who accepts without question. There is no description of the female tempting him. She ate. He ate. This was a joint act of disobedience. They are equal partners in crime.

The naming of the animals indicates a sense of control or dominion over them. But notice that the man does not name the woman in the first instance. It is only after the fall that Adam names Eve (Genesis 3:20). This means that the female was never intended to be under the domination of male. The act of Adam naming Eve is a characteristic of fallen man seeking to exert his power over the woman. He takes it upon himself to name her. Adam’s act of naming Eve is a wrongful assumption of power.

And how is the last half of Genesis 3:16 to be understood? “Your desire will be for your husband” is understood *positively* as the woman’s desire to return to the perfect relationship of equality

and companionship that she had with her husband before the fall. However, he will rule over you” is the *negative* and sad fact that the man does not reciprocate. Instead, Adam chooses to exert power and dominion over Eve. *He* wants to rule. In other words, the verse is not understood as God’s *prescription* of the way things are meant to be, but rather a sad *description* of sinful Adam’s domineering attitude. In this interpretation, then, Genesis 2-3 stresses that the equality of men and women was and is God’s intention, and the failure for the present inequality is more the fault of man rather than woman.

To summarize, the different interpretations of Genesis 2-3 view Adam in these three ways:

1. Adam as a king who abuses his position and power
2. Adam as humanity that has sinned against God
3. Adam as sinful man exerting power over woman

THREE TRENDS

These three interpretations illustrate three current trends in Old Testament biblical interpretation.

1. The author’s historical context

The first trend is still widely assumed to be the only serious way to study the Old Testament. The assumption is that in order to understand a text we must first determine the historical background and context.

“I am mad about my flat.” (I gleaned this simple illustration in conversation with Professor Andrew Macintosh of Cambridge.)

A simple looking sentence composed of very simple English vocabulary. But what does it mean?

1. I am so angry at things related to my apartment.
2. I am so very happy with my lovely apartment.
3. I am so irritated because my automobile has a puncture.

We need to ask who said it? Was he English or American? When did he say it? Was he standing by a car or talking about Real Estate? By discovering more about the author and his historical context, we will have found the key to understanding this text.

The key to understanding Genesis 1-11 as a critique of Solomon's reign lies in the assumption that the author lived and wrote during the historical period following Solomon's death. It is that historical background that plays the key role in producing this particular interpretation.

Scholars, of course, do not agree. They debate and argue over the plausibility of such an author and historical context. Geologists too may argue over the natural history of when and how the Grand Canyon came into being. But they all agree that the discovery of the author and his historical context must remain their central concern in the quest for the key that unlocks the mystery of the text or the wonder of the canyon. Historical context is crucial. This is the crux of the first trend, and for over a hundred years has been the dominant force in Old Testament interpretation.

2. The book's own literary context

Trend number 2 is much more recent. The focus here is not on the history that lies behind the text. "I don't know what geological forces in ancient history created this canyon, and I don't really care. I just appreciate the Canyon as it is. The text alone speaks volumes." This is the artist's approach to the text.

"I don't know who wrote Genesis 2-3. The text does not say it was written around the time of Solomon's death. Maybe it was, maybe it wasn't. None of you know for sure. You geologists can argue about your historical theories. I just love this Canyon the way it is today. And I can hear Genesis speak loud and clear without knowing who the author is, and without knowing the historical context in which he wrote. Genesis 2-3 has its own literary context. It follows Genesis 1. It answers the question raised by Genesis 1. It unfolds the story of sin and increasing sin. It speaks of humanity's rebellion against God as the cause for all the evil and frustration in the world. None of this requires me to know who wrote it, or when

and where. We don't need the author or his historical context. All that truly matters is the literary context of the book itself." This emphasis on the book's own literary context as the key to interpretation is at the heart of this second trend.

This recent trend has won over many scholars, and even many more students who are bored with trying to uncover historical background, or tired of trying to understand the seemingly endless arguments over who was or was not the author of a particular book. But even as this trend on the text alone is being increasingly appreciated and adopted by scholars, an even newer wave has begun to sweep through. This is so new that we do not even call it modern. It is *post*-modern! In fact, when scholars today speak of "the new literary criticism", one is not always sure whether they are referring to the second trend which emphasizes the text and its literary context alone, or this third "post-modern" trend. In order to avoid confusion, someone has suggested we speak in terms of the "older new literary movement" versus the "newer new literary movement." What is this post-modern or newer new literary trend?

3. The reader's present context

I'm falling asleep, so I better tell myself a joke. A Sunday School teacher turned to one of the children in class. "Melvin," [Since Melvin was the cartoon who made me give this talk, I shall use his name in vain!] So the teacher asks, "Melvin, are you able to tell me the name of the first man created by God?" Mel shut his eyes in deep concentration, as he strained his brain to remember. "I should know, I should know ... let me think. (Pause). Uh .. yes. Was his name Hoss?" The teacher was shocked. "Hoss? No. It was Adam." "Oh ya!" said Melvin. "I just knew it was of those Cartwright brothers."

I have heard this joke used to make the point of how low the level of even basic Bible knowledge is today. But I have also heard this joke used to stress the need for historical background in understanding a text. In order to understand this joke, the reader or listener must know who the Cartwright brothers are. In order to laugh, they would need to be people who watched the popular TV series in the 1960s called *Bonanza*. Without this historical background or knowledge, the joke

here could not be understood. Today there were still a few of you who laughed. If I used this joke in a school talk, the whole student body would still be waiting for the punch line!

One preacher uses this joke to lament the deplorable state of Bible knowledge. Another sees it as an illustration of the importance of the first trend – knowing the historical background. I will use it to illustrate the third trend.

From where do these speakers derive their interpretation of the joke? They almost certainly have absolutely no clue as to who originally composed this joke. The original composer probably never intended the joke to communicate the importance of historical background. Similarly, nothing from the words or text of the joke itself would legitimise the preachers' application of it. So where do they find their interpretation and application? The answer: from within themselves. The preachers themselves supplied meaning or significance to that joke.

This is at the heart of the third trend in Old Testament hermeneutics. The meaning or significance of a text is found within oneself. Not in the author of the text, nor from knowing his historical background. It is not even to be found in the text alone. The interpretation of a text is found or supplied by the reader himself.

This means that a text does not have only one meaning. Different interpreters will read different meanings into the text before them. "Beauty is in the eye of the beholder", Keats tells us. This newest trend tells us that "Meaning is in the heart of the reader."

Consider again the feminist interpretation of Genesis 2-3. Nothing in the Hebrew or English text of Genesis 2 suggests a reason to distinguish the Adam in verse 7 as a genderless "earth-creature". It is the same Hebrew term "Adam" in verse 22 who lays eyes upon his newly created woman companion. But through the eyes of one modern female scholar, this distinction is supplied. Yet from this, she goes on to make a number of enlightening points from the text.

Three different trends, three different emphases, and all of them very much in evidence today.

1. The author's historical context as the key to understanding.
2. The text's own literary context as the place in which one finds meaning.

3. The reader's own context and concerns as the real key.

Author, text or reader? Three different trends, producing three different methods of finding meaning from a text.

Other images have been used to distinguish these three trends. The first trend treats the text as a window that lets you look out to another world, the ancient historical world of the author. The second trend regards the text as a beautiful portrait, a painting of a world that is to be appreciated in its own right. Finally, the third trend treats the text as a mirror that simply reflects insight from the reader's own world. [Cf. Goldingay p.6 for references to Abrams and others.]

Let me say a little more on how these trends have affected Old Testament scholarship.

1. A focus on individual units in the past

Back to trend number 1. The search for the author and his historical background led scholarship to the conclusion that most Old Testament books were authored or written by more than one person. Different parts of each book and even different parts of each chapter were attributed to different authors and editors, who may have lived in different historical eras.

So, for example, it was noticed that in Genesis 1, the author refers to God consistently as "God". In the story of creation in Genesis 2-3, the author consistently refers to God as "LORD God". Does this different way of referring to God suggest that the author of Genesis 1 was a different person from the author of Genesis 2-3? Scholars felt there was sufficient evidence to conclude that different people preferred address God in different ways. For example, Psalm 14 and Psalm 53 are almost identical psalms. One conspicuous difference, however, is that Psalm 14 speaks of God most often as "the LORD" whilst Psalm 53 prefers the simple title "God". Thus Psalm 14 reads, "The LORD looks down from heaven on the sons of men" whereas Psalm 53 says, "God looks down from heaven on the sons of men." Again, Psalm 14:4 reads "Will evildoers never learn – those who ... do not call on the name of the LORD?" The same

verse in Psalm 53 uses “God”. The last verse shows the same difference. “When the LORD restores the fortunes of his people, let Jacob rejoice and Israel be glad!” In Psalm 53, it is “When God restores the fortunes of his people, let Jacob rejoice and Israel be glad!” These two almost identical Psalms suggest that different people either consciously or unconsciously referred to God in different ways.

Similarly most scholars think that the person who wrote Genesis 1 was probably a different person from the one who wrote Genesis 2-3. Since it was believed that the identification of the author and his historical background was crucial to understanding a text fully, Old Testament scholarship preoccupied itself with identifying and isolating the different authors who were responsible for different sections of each book. As a consequence of this, interpretation focused on individual sections and paragraphs, each illuminated by the supposedly different historical context of each individual author. Thus Genesis 2-3 was studied independently of Genesis 1.

The process was and is sometimes carried to such an extent that not only are different chapters studied separately, but even individual paragraphs or verses within the same chapter are assigned to different authors and historical backgrounds. Let me give you a simple example, this time from a prophetic book. At the end of Isaiah 5:25, we find this refrain, “Yet for all this, his anger is not turned away, his hand is still upraised.” Four chapters later, in Isaiah 9-10, this same refrain is found, repeated four more times. 9:12, 17, 21 and 10:4. Many scholars, operating with the first approach that seeks to isolate the authors of individual sections, believe that the composer of Isaiah 5:25 must have been the same person who composed Isaiah 9-10. Since it is believed that the meaning of a text is best understood in terms of the one author’s intentions, Isaiah 5:25 was studied together with the verses in Isaiah 9-10. So if you consult the expository commentary by George Adam Smith in 1904, the German commentary of Hans Wildberger in 1965 and that of Ronald Clements in 1980, you will find the comments on Isaiah 5:25 grouped together with Isaiah 9-10. The scholars responsible for the 1970 New English Bible translation even decided that they should print Isaiah 5:24-25, not in Isaiah 5 at all, but together with Isaiah 9-10. So if you turn to chapter 5 of Isaiah in the New English Bible,

verses 24 and 25 are missing, and are found only later in chapter 10 after verse 4.

The emphasis on author and original historical context – what I have referred to as the first approach - may thus be characterised as a focus on the past, dividing the text into many separate paragraphs or verses thought to have been composed by different authors in different historical contexts.

2. A focus on the whole rather than the individual parts

The second trend is less interested in identifying and isolating the different units or parts that may have been written by different authors. It is concerned with the finished product, the completed whole. The Grand Canyon may have been formed in different historical stages, and different sections may have emerged or collapsed at different times. But the artist is contented with the present product, completed whole as it now appears. Study is thus not focused on the historical background of the different authors of individual parts. It is the completed text as a whole that forms the focus of the study.

Returning to my example of Isaiah 5:25, the second trend says, “I am only interested in the final form or final product. I don’t care if section A and section B of the Grand Canyon were formed or written at the same time before section C came up between them. All that matters is how they lie in the present shape of the Canyon. I will not try to bring Isaiah 5:25 and Isaiah 9-10 together as they may have once existed in some bygone history of the Grand Isaiah Canyon. I simply accept the Canyon in its present wonderful form. And in its present form, Isaiah 5:25 is in Chapter 5, and separated from Isaiah 9-10. I appreciate them in their present setting, rather than in some hypothetical original historical grouping.”

I mentioned above how the New English Bible printed Isaiah 5:24-25 in chapter 10. But when this translation was revised and published as the Revised English Bible in 1989, the new scholars decided to place Isaiah 5:24-25 back in chapter 5, reversing the decision of their predecessors who printed the verses in Isaiah 9-10. Another telling illustration of this change from the first approach to

the second may be seen in Otto Kaiser's commentary on Isaiah. In his first 4 editions, his commentary on Isaiah 5:25 is found together with Isaiah 9-10. But in Kaiser's completely revised edition of 1980, he no longer makes this grouping. Rather than isolating Isaiah 5:25 from the rest of chapter 5, the concern is to appreciate the verse in its present literary context in chapter 5. The focus is not on the individual parts that may have been written separately in the past. Even if Isaiah 5:25 was originally written together with Isaiah 9-10, the focus now is on the present completed text as we have it. We do not concern ourselves with the historical context of the author who may have composed Isaiah 5:25 at the same time as Isaiah 9-10. Instead, we must appreciate Isaiah 5:25 in its present literary context. We comment on why verse 25 is now where it is in chapter. We do not comment as if it still belonged with chapters 9-10. We focus on the completed text in the present. This is the characteristic of the second trend.

2. No Focus on the text at all, whether in part or in whole.

In the third approach or trend, the focus is not on each individual author's historical context, nor on the present complete literary context. The focus is, in fact, hardly on the text at all. One of the better known proponents of this literary theory is Stanley Fish. The title of his book says a lot: "Is There a Text in This Class?" The focus is not on the text. The text functions only as a springboard for the reader to reach his own individual heights of meaning and significance. The story of Adam and the Cartwright brothers has a significance that the preacher alone wants it to have. It is the preacher or reader who provides the text with significance or meaning. Thus, looking at the refrain of Isaiah 5:25, I do not worry about what that text means when studied in the same historical context of Isaiah 9-10. I am not concerned either with what that verse means in the literary context of Isaiah chapter 5. What then might Isaiah 5:25 mean? Let me suggest an example of interpretation that might be given by a Christian reader. The text speaks of God's hand stretched out in anger. Jesus, the Son of God, also had his hands stretched out on the cross. But in so doing he bore the full and

final brunt of God's anger. The outstretched hands therefore speak, not of God's anger against sin, but of His unconditional love despite our sin. Like the father of the prodigal son, God's hands are stretched out to embrace us.

THREE DANGERS

There are obvious dangers presented by each of these three approaches, and I suspect that most of you are aware of them. Let me briefly state three dangers before spending the rest of my time on three more positive reflections.

1. The danger of forgetting theology in one's quest for history

I do not doubt the importance of the first approach in one's quest for legitimate interpretation of the biblical text. It is the approach that I have been trained in, and it continues to be an important influence in the way I interpret and understand the text. For the historian, to uncover the historical background underlying the various Old Testament texts may be a legitimate end in itself. His goal is to describe history. But for the church and theologian, the quest for historical background must never become an end in itself. Historical background is a means towards illuminating and understanding the message of the Scriptures. We should not equate a description of history with an exposition of God's living word. Nor should we assume that we are helpless to understand a text if we cannot ascertain its historical background. "(I)ncrease in historical detail simply does not necessarily mean better understanding."² Thus, even if Genesis 2-3 was not written in the historical period following Solomon's reign, the warning against lusting after knowledge and power are still insightful, and form legitimate reflections on the nature of sin and disobedience to God. The preacher does not need to affirm or deny that particular historical background in order to justify the pastoral warning in the text.

² Goldingay, p. 130.

2. The danger of rejecting history in championing literary independence.

In warning of the danger of giving history too exalted a place in interpretation, we must not swing to the opposite extreme and refuse to allow history any place in guiding our interpretation. The focus on the text itself as the key to interpretation must not be used as an excuse to reject any historical information that lies outside the text. This is particularly important because archaeologists are discovering more and more information about life in the ancient world, much of which has the potential to illuminate the historical world of the Old Testament literature. The first approach on history may have been too optimistic about the amount of detail and precision that could be attained. However, this second approach that emphasises the text alone should not make the mistake of being too pessimistic about attaining any knowledge of history at all! (cf. R. Gordon's closing essay in *The Place is too small for us.*) History and historical background does help to illuminate our understanding of the Old Testament. We would be foolish to reject it. [KIV example of ANE cosmologies and the likelihood that Gen 1 is a polemic against them, probably Babylonian cosmologies in particular; the hot water supply of Heiropolis and the cold refreshing waters of Colossae as opposed to the insipid, lukewarm water supply of Laodicea in Rev 3:16 cf. Cotterell & Turner, p.96-97.]

3. The danger of equating imagination with interpretation.

The third approach correctly points out that we bring to the text, inevitably, our own way of looking at things. But in stressing the role that the reader plays, we must not think that there is no such thing as an *unreasonable* interpretation of the text. By placing too much emphasis upon the reader's role, we put ourselves in danger of interpreting the biblical text only in a way that confirms our own position³. A text then will never confront our existing

³ On this danger, see, e.g., Thiselton, pp. 410-70, esp. p. 450.

presuppositions. A feminist will only find support for her position, and refuse to allow anything that challenges her presuppositions. The Christian reader thus becomes the real master of the biblical text, and can never find himself challenged by it. An over-emphasis on the legitimacy of every reading promotes the idea that there is no basis on which to distinguish between more probable and less plausible readings. The comments of Alter, Goldingay and Fisch are salutary. Interpretation “cannot be based merely on an imaginative impression of the story but must be undertaken through minute critical attention to the biblical writer’s articulations of narrative form.” (Alter, p.12, 21) In other words, we do not want “imagination imagining its own meanings into the text” (Goldingay, p.23). We require not just imagination, but precision (Alter, p.21). —“Imagination and the distrust of imagination go together.” (Fisch, p.5; cited by Goldingay, p.23). In short, we must not make the mistake of simply equating imagination with interpretation.

THREE CHALLENGES

What I have called the first approach – the emphasis on author and historical background – emerged with force in the 19th century and was the dominant focus for most of our 20th century. The investigation of scholars soon led to theories that Moses did not write Genesis, or that much of the book of Isaiah was not written by Isaiah, or Daniel may have been a pseudonymous work written well after the lifetime of Daniel. When this happened, the church began to react negatively. These scholarly results were perceived as attacking the very foundation of the church’s belief in the authority and inspiration of the Bible. Now that some time has passed, the church, including now much of the evangelical wing, has begun to learn how to sort out the good from the bad. More and more, we have finally started to appreciate the contributions of the historical-critical method, and I, for one, think this is a very good thing. I, for one, have found a deeper appreciation of the Old Testament, and a sharper understanding of its divine message for the church today. But just as the church today is slowly coming to terms with this historical-critical method, the scholarly world is increasingly turning

against the first approach and pushing very quickly indeed into the two “newer” approaches. That there are dangers with both these two “newer” approaches is something I do not deny. I expect that when these two latest approaches begin to be more widely known, and as more and more silly interpretations are sensationalised by publishers, there will be more outspoken voices from the church coming out in increasingly sharper criticism. That any approach will have inherent dangers and extreme proponents producing results that tend to discredit the whole field should not be doubted. But this must not blind us to the good that comes with these approaches. So let me conclude by mentioning three reflections on what I regard as positive contributions from these latest two approaches.

NOT MISSING THE WOOD FOR THE TREES

1. Appreciate the whole, not just the parts.

The emphasis on the text as it is, in its present form, regardless of how many authors or editors it has enjoyed in the history of its formation, has a great contribution to make. It reminds us to appreciate the whole, and it may often prove to be true that the whole is indeed greater and more wonderful than the sum of the parts. I mentioned that the first approach eventually led to the study of individual parts and sections. Each book, each chapter, and even sometimes each verse, was divided into different units on the basis that they came from different authors who lived in different historical circumstances. Although many in the church attacked this increasing division of the text into different fragments, the fact is that most of us still study and preach from the text in this fragmented way. Whether it is because there is not enough time in the pulpit on Sunday or because most commentaries still organise their comments around individual verses or small paragraphs, the fact remains that most preaching from the Bible focuses on individual verses and sometimes, individual words. In theory, we uphold the importance of the wider context, but in practice we hardly reflect on that wider context. We encourage the memorising of individual verses, with absolutely no awareness of what the verses before or after have to

say. Now please do misunderstand. I am not discouraging the spiritual practice of scripture memory per se. I believe it is a wonderful means to promote spiritual growth. But I think we have missed out a whole lot more by concentrating only on fragments of the text.

This concern with the whole text is one of the major concerns in Old Testament studies at present. I think this is a good and helpful trend.

2. Allow for a range of legitimate interpretations

Scholars have for a long time now appreciated the fact that single words in themselves do not possess definitive meaning. My teachers, Max Turner and Peter Cotterell, use the example of the word “Punch”. What does this mean in English? In itself, we cannot be certain. Is it a verb, denoting the action of striking another person with your clenched fist? Is it an instrument that is used to make holes in a paper? Is it a coloured drink that my daughter loves to consume? Is it the name of a famous cartoon couple called “Punch and Judy”? Is it the name of my neighbour’s dog?

This latest trend in hermeneutics now suggests that, not just words, but even whole sentences and complete stories do not possess definitive meaning. Whilst it is correct to point out that the attempt to locate meaning solely in the reader is not the definitive answer, I think we can benefit from this new trend by accepting that there are a range of legitimate interpretations of many biblical texts. I am not supporting the view that a text can mean anything I want it to mean. “Punch” cannot just mean anything. But it has a range of plausible meanings. The more we know of the context in which the word is used, the more we can limit the range of its possible meanings. In some cases, we may even be able to limit the interpretation to one definitive meaning. This is true also for complete sentences and texts. “I am mad about my flat” has a range of plausible meanings. The more we know of the wider historical and literary contexts in which the sentence is used, the more we can narrow the range of these plausible applications. Now these latest two trends in Old Testament studies have served to highlight the fact that, after

decades of careful investigation into the authorship and historical contexts of Old testament books, we do not have sufficient knowledge to narrow the range of plausible interpretations to one and only one. In many cases, we cannot be certain of the historical context. We do not know for sure who wrote Genesis 2-3 or even in which century it was written.

Now I have said above that we must not go the way of those who seem to think that we can know absolutely nothing about the author or her historical background. That is not true. We know certain things, and this does serve to narrow the range of plausible interpretations of a text or book. The degree of plausibility and legitimacy depends on how much we can ascertain of the historical setting or on aspects of grammar and style of the text itself.

But in many cases, we do not know enough to narrow that range to only one. This does not mean that all interpretations are equally plausible. On the contrary, everything we do in our theological seminaries is geared towards helping students evaluate what is more or less plausible. Academic studies do not encourage students to sit on the fence. They are urged to analyse and argue for a clear position. That is part of the critical process of forcing a student to think carefully. But at the end of the day, we must be careful to avoid inculcating in our students the conviction that says, "My interpretation is the only legitimate one. All others are heresies!" We need to realise that this kind of attitude and arrogance is less than Christian, and is largely to blame for the unkind slurs and resulting divisions that have characterised the church today. The fact is our knowledge is limited, and there will remain legitimate differences of opinion amongst Christian scholars who may even belong to the same Faculty. Students imbibe this same spirit of arrogance and go out to contribute to division in our churches.

This latest trend that champions different interpretations from different readers has the potential to help us be a little less arrogant and divisive in our preaching and teaching. It also has the potential to make us more willing to listen and learn from those who understand the text in ways that are different from ours. Thus, instead of sitting in church pews and constantly picking reasons for why we reject the preacher's application of the text, we might be more willing to appreciate the good we can learn from the way he

has approached it. Or as John Goldingay so succinctly puts it: “That fifty preachers might produce a dozen different sermon angles from the same text is not necessarily cause for concern. The opposite phenomenon might be more worrying.” (Goldingay, p.55).

3. Articulate the pastoral and theological relevance of texts

The first trend dominated biblical studies for a long time. It was regarded as the only serious way to understand the Bible. One of the principal assumptions was that the scholar should try to be objective in his reading of the text. He should leave behind his Christian presuppositions, and refuse to allow the years of traditional church dogmas to cloud his judgement. The crucial goal was to be as objective as possible. This also formed the basis for some of the sharpest criticism that was levelled against popular church use of the Bible. Pastors and church leaders were largely dismissed as being completely biased in their understanding. They were blind to the objective truth that was waiting to be uncovered by the objective scholar.

Scholarship has now come round full circle. With this latest trend on the central role of the reader, this new wing of scholarship is insisting that one’s personal bias or viewpoint is the only legitimate way to read a text. In other words, true interpretation begins by deliberately bringing one’s own personal bias into the art of interpretation. And it is probably the church, formerly accused of being too biased in their reading of Scripture, who will attack this new trend by saying that readers cannot just use the Scriptures to mean whatever they want it to mean.

Yes, let us be careful to warn our people about the inherent dangers that exist in this latest approach. But I think that we should also view this as a divinely opportunity and challenge.

In this new era of scholarship, it means that we now can offer a specifically pastoral reading of the text. We can come with our Christian assumption that the text has something pastoral and theological to offer. We do not need to strip our academic writing of anything that sounds remotely devotional or pastoral. This latest trend

provides us with the opportunity to articulate the pastoral and theological contribution of each text.

One of the biggest questions faced by the church has to do with how we understand the Old Testament. The Old Testament has stories of Joshua's mass killings. There are seemingly endless lists of obsolete laws in the Pentateuch. Even the Psalms often call down curses on enemies. In what way is this Old Testament normative or applicable to people today? Biblical scholars have often excused themselves from answering this question by saying that their concern is primarily with what the Old Testament meant for the ancient reader. The sensitive and difficult question of how to apply that ancient meaning in today's context has been conveniently referred to the departments of applied or practical theology, and biblical scholars have been happy to have been able to keep themselves aloof from such practical questions. This recent, post-modern hermeneutical trend has brought this question firmly into the arena of the biblical specialist. It has done this by refusing to allow us to make a fundamental divide between what the text meant and what the text means for the reader today.

CONCLUSION

In summary, let us

1. Appreciate the whole text, not just the individual parts.
2. Allow for a range of legitimate readings.
3. Articulate more pastoral concerns from the text.

Exegesis and pastoral exposition no longer need to be sharply separated. They should never have been allowed to do so. May God help us rise to the exciting invitation presented to us by modern trends to study the Bible in a less fragmented and more pastoral way. That these trends present dangers must not be forgotten nor denied. But let us not throw the baby out with the bath water. Let us not miss the wood for the trees.

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