

EARLY CHRISTIAN BIBLICAL INTERPRETATION

by DAVID E. AUNE

MR. AUNE, who gave us a study in July-September, 1966, of "St. John's Portrait of the Church in the Apocalypse", is now completing a doctoral programme in the University of Chicago Department of New Testament and Early Christian Literature. His present paper underlines the lesson that many have been learning afresh in recent times—that early Christian teaching consists largely in a new understanding and interpretation of the Old Testament writings.

THE gospel proclaimed by the earliest Christian community was a phenomenon which was radically new on the one hand, and yet one which had its roots deeply planted in the Old Testament on the other. The Jewish Scriptures became one of the primary means by which the Christian faith was communicated. This is verified by the great dependence which the literature of the New Testament shows upon the Old, both in vocabulary, thought-forms, and especially in the great number of quotations and allusions to the Scriptures.¹ Much of the distinctiveness of Christian interpretation is difficult to trace back to any historical antecedent other than the radically new message of Jesus which was in vivid contrast with the Judaism of his time. C. F. D. Moule, in connection with the appearance of Jesus and the subsequent attitudes which the Church developed, observes that ". . . the distinctiveness of the early Christian use of scripture is part of the conviction that, in Jesus, God has spoken directly to his people; that thus the voice of 'prophecy'—the immediate witness to the behest of God—had begun to sound again; that God had visited and redeemed his people and that a new understanding of his purposes had been vouchsafed".²

In a very real sense, the understanding of the early Church's method of Biblical interpretation is inseparable from their view of history. Christianity is not only a historical religion in the sense that it has a history like that of all other religions, but in the unique sense that it is the only one of the world's religions which seems

¹ A. J. B. Higgins, *The Christian Significance of the Old Testament* (London: Independent Press Ltd., 1949), p. 88. Higgins shows the great dependence of the New Testament upon the Old by stating that 1,368 passages and phrases from the Old Testament are quoted in the New.

² C. F. D. Moule, *The Birth of the New Testament* (London: Adam & Charles Black, 1962), p. 70.

to take history seriously in that it assumes that the knowledge of God is associated with historical events which actually took place within the plane of human history.³ The dominant features of the various schools of Jewish Biblical interpretation are not characteristic of the distinctive Christian method of exegesis as embodied in the New Testament writings. For the former, history had little or no bearing on their interpretation; for the latter, a particular view of history formed the very basis for their exegetical method and the ground of their *Weltanschauung*. For the early Church, the Old Testament was transformed from a book of symbolic and oracular sayings to a divine record of the acts of God in the history of the Jewish nation, which culminated in God's final revelation to man, Jesus Christ. Whatever parallels may be drawn between the New Testament on the one hand and rabbinic or Philonic interpretation on the other, these are not characteristic of Christian exegesis. "What marks the New Testament use as new is precisely this treatment of scripture 'in the round', as a three-dimensional entity—indeed, one ought to say four-dimensional, for time is a very important factor. The most characteristic New Testament use of scripture is 'modern' in that it treats the Old Testament as a *record* of revelation—as a historical narrative of God's dealings with his people, to be listened to as a whole and learnt from as a continuous story. There is a world of difference between this and the use of scripture as a divining medium."⁴ Evangelicals would hasten to emphasize the fact that the record itself is a divinely inspired interpretation of the acts of God. This distinctive Christian view of history was not an entirely new phenomenon, but has direct antecedents in the Old Testament.

Ancient Israel's way of viewing history is best seen if one begins with the prophets, in which God's earthly activity is seen from a redemptive and eschatological perspective.⁵ Throughout the Old

³ G. Ernest Wright and Reginald H. Fuller, *The Book of the Acts of God: Christian Scholarship Interprets the Bible* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday & Company, 1957), p. 18.

⁴ Moule, p. 68. Moule demonstrates here his rejection of propositional revelation, one of the significant traits of the neo-orthodox view of Scripture.

⁵ Friedrich Baumgärtel, "Das alttestamentliche Geschehen als 'Heilsgeschichtliches' Geschehen", *Geschichte und Altes Testament*, ed. Gerhard Ebeling (Tübingen: Verlag J. C. B. Mohr, 1953), p. 22. Baumgärtel's reason for beginning with the prophetic view of history is that he concurs with the critical reconstruction of the Pentateuch which dates its final redaction after the exile, and therefore later in time than the Latter Prophets. I prefer to begin with the Prophets because they make explicit the Biblical view of history which is implicitly present in the early Pentateuchal narratives of Moses.

Testament there is little development in the essential character of Israel's view of history. The pre-exilic view of the prophets, then, may be taken as typical of what must have been the basic view of the Jewish nation even before the first historical records were made.⁶ Israel viewed historical progress, in the words of Millar Burrows, as ". . . the work of a personal divine will, contending with the foolish, stubborn wills of men, promising and warning, judging and punishing and destroying, yet sifting, saving, and abundantly blessing these found amenable to discipline and instruction".⁷ The distinctive presupposition of the Hebrew philosophy of history, if we may call it such, is that one eternal, sovereign God is working out his purposes and plans for the good of his creatures, especially for his own chosen people. History is therefore personal, and in no sense mechanistic or unrealistic. Consequently their view of history is teleological and not cyclical or arbitrary:

Time moves on steadily in a straight line; history is like a graph, with many ups and downs, but a clearly perceptible trend of direction. The end to which history is leading, moreover, in all forms of the Hebrew conception of history, is not a Götterdämmerung with a conflagration consuming earth and heaven, man and gods alike; it is a new heaven and a new earth in which dwells righteousness. Even the eighth-century prophets, with their insistence on overwhelming doom, had some idea of a better future for the remnant of the people.⁸

The eschatological hope which found expression in the prophetic writings was the result of the tension which existed in Israel between the desire to realize the reign of God within the context of an ethnic people, and the impossibility of this realization due to the inherent pride and rebelliousness on the part of the people themselves.⁹ The prophets saw God's guiding hand behind all of history, and his acts within history were viewed in the light of a future eschatological event which would give meaning to the whole.¹⁰ God was sovereign in history, and the categories of promise and fulfilment were used to understand the direction which history was taking under the direct guidance and control of God.¹¹

⁶ Millar Burrows, "Ancient Israel", *The Idea of History in the Ancient Near East*, ed. Robert C. Dentan (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 1955), p. 112.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 128.

⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 127-28.

⁹ H. J. Schoeps, *Paul: The Theology of the Apostle in the Light of Jewish Religious History*, trans. Harold Knight (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1961), p. 89.

¹⁰ Raymond Abba, *The Nature and Authority of the Bible* (London: James Clark & Co. Ltd., 1958), p. 80.

¹¹ Burrows, p. 113.

Thus their theological orientation to history resulted in the fact that the past acts of God were recalled to remind them of the true nature of the God of their covenant. God's character is revealed through his dealing with Israel and is constantly evident when the history of the nation as a whole is considered. Basically, this is the reason why the prophetic writers would often recast the future in terms of the past history of the nation: God would vindicate himself and his people on the plane of history.

The apocalyptic hope arose in exilic and post-exilic times, and is characterized by a disparagement of earthly things, an extreme pessimism regarding the progress of human history, and viewed the consummation of the ages as about to occur catastrophically, bringing an end to the historical process and introducing the age to come, the Kingdom of God. "In the apocalyptic interpretation of history", says Burrows, "with which our story of ancient Hebrew ideas of history ends, it is expressly indicated that the accomplishment of God's righteous will and the final establishment of his kingdom will not come about on the plane of human history in the present order of the universe."¹²

The mission of Jesus with his proclamation of the Kingdom of God became the basis of the Christian faith. His unique interpretation of the Old Testament lay in the fact that he proclaimed the Kingdom of God as partially present and as about to appear imminently in its fulness in fulfilment of the prophetic predictions.¹³ Jesus claimed a number of messianic titles for himself, and re-interpreted them in an entirely original way. Jesus himself was introduced as the fulfilment of the law and as the embodiment of the promise which God had made to Israel centuries before. The turning point of history came to be viewed as the death and resurrection of Jesus, which was the focal and culminative point of redemption. When the disciples read and studied the Old Testament in the light of the gospel events which had recently transpired in their experience, they were convinced that the events which had taken place were the fulfilment of the promises which God had made to his people Israel from the beginning of their national life. The Old Testament, then, was not looked upon as a Jewish book which had been taken over by Christians, but rather, the early believers retained the Old Testament as their own possession, and conceived of themselves as the heirs of the promises which had been fulfilled for them in Christ. The meaning which they saw in the

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 130.

¹³ Robert M. Grant, *The Bible in the Church: A Short History of Interpretation* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1948), p. 11.

Scriptures was not that seen by their Jewish contemporaries, but the Old Testament became “. . . a book transformed in its meaning in the context of the gospel and interpreted in a totally new way by the Christian church”.¹⁴ Because of the gospel events, the nation Israel had ceased being the true Israel of God, and its place was taken by the believing Christian community.¹⁵ In the mind of the apostles and early disciples, the divinely guided history of Israel had reached its complete goal and fulfilment in Jesus Christ.¹⁶

In the Christian understanding of history and of God's redemptive plan within the plane of history there was a revitalization of the message of the Old Testament. The static and literalistic approach to the Scriptures which was characteristic of rabbinic interpretation was abandoned for a dynamic view of the Old Testament as a record of the acts of God in history which had been culminated and fulfilled in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus.

The first writings of the Church which we possess are the earlier epistles of Paul, which already reflect a highly developed methodological approach to the study of the Old Testament. Any reconstruction of the origin and development of Christian exegesis from the time of the resurrection until the earliest written documents of the Church must of necessity be hypothetical.¹⁷ Moule views the factors which controlled Christian exegesis as being three in number: (1) Pre-Christian Judaism (drawing partly on Hellenistic traditions), (2) The originality exhibited in Jesus' use of the Old Testament, and (3) The consciousness which the early Church possessed that the voice of prophecy had once more become audible.¹⁸

In Lindars' reconstruction of the development of the New Tes-

¹⁴ James D. Smart, *The Interpretation of Scripture* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1961), p. 81.

¹⁵ C. H. Dodd, *According to the Scriptures* (London: Nisbet & Co. Ltd., 1953), p. 113.

¹⁶ Sigmund Mowinckel, *The Old Testament as Word of God*, trans. Reidar B. Bjormard (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1959), pp. 133-34.

¹⁷ The failure to recognize the fact that little can actually be known of this period because of the paucity of historical evidence seems to bother a great many critical scholars but little. One can only hope that the prophecy of Robert M. Grant may eventually prove true: "There is coming to be a fresh awareness of the limitations of criticism and critics, something that might be called a retreat from fancy to fact. The ancients were not always stupid; our contemporaries are not always intelligent. It is to be hoped that the interpretation of the New Testament will be more closely related to the phenomena involved and that it will be linked with linguistic analysis in general." From "The Study of Early Christianity", *Religion*, ed. Paul Ramsey (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1965), p. 152.

¹⁸ Moule, p. 58.

tament's use of quotations in the silent years between the resurrection of Jesus and the first extant writings of the apostolic church, he finds that the motivation for Biblical interpretation was based on an apologetic purpose. The chief difference between the believing community and Israel was that the former recognized Jesus as the Messiah while the latter did not. Scriptural arguments, therefore, were greatly needed in order to convince the Jews.¹⁹ The burden of proof for the Messiah's identification with Jesus of Nazareth lay with the early Church, and it was their concept of history which drove them to the Scriptures for proof. The basic facts of the kerygma, which was composed of the essential events of the life of Jesus, became the basis for their exegetical research into the Old Testament: "Thus the Church was committed, by the very terms of its 'kerygma' to a formidable task of biblical research, primarily for the purpose of clarifying its own understanding of the momentous events out of which it had emerged, and also for the purpose of making its Gospel intelligible to the outside public."²⁰ The method of literal fulfilment was first employed by the Christian community to show that there was a definite correspondence between the events of Christ's life, which were apparent defeats, and the predetermined plan of God as predicted by the prophets.²¹

The methods of Christian Biblical interpretation are based on the fact that Christ's fulfilment of the historical process recorded in the Old Testament was the key whereby the meaning could be given to the entire historical process.²² It must not be thought that there was any antithesis between a "book-religion" and a "spirit-religion", but rather, the religion of the Scriptures was completely identifiable with the religion of the spirit.²³ What was a text to the rabbis was a divinely inspired record of God's acts in history to the early Church. That the methods of interpretation should show marked continuity with that of contemporary Judaism is a foregone conclusion; the resemblance, however, is chiefly in appearance.²⁴

¹⁹ Barnabas Lindars, *New Testament Apologetic: The Doctrinal Significance of the Old Testament Quotations* (London: S.C.M. Press, 1961), p. 33.

²⁰ Dodd, p. 14.

²¹ Lindars, pp. 80, 138.

²² G. W. H. Lampe and K. J. Woolcombe, *Essays on Typology, Studies in Biblical Theology No. 22* (Naperville: Alec R. Allenson, Inc., 1957), p. 27.

²³ O. Michel, *Paulus und Seine Bibel* (Gütersloh: C. Bertelsmann, 1929), p. 137.

²⁴ Franklin Johnson, *The Quotations of the New Testament from the Old: Considered in the Light of General Literature* (London: Baptist Tract and Book Society, 1896), p. 379.

The historical events recorded in the Old Testament which occurred throughout the history of Israel are more than mere historical events; they are the embodiment of revelation.²⁵ The history of redemption is not always discernible from ordinary world history. The significance of the historical events recorded in the Old Testament was recognised by the early Christian community as redemptive in and through Jesus Christ.²⁶ Jesus was not only the creative mind which set forth the distinctive method of interpretation used by the Church in the period after his resurrection,²⁷ but was also himself the key to the interpretation of the entire redemptive scheme recorded in the Scriptures. According to the distinctive Hebrew concept of corporate solidarity, Jesus was viewed as the fulfilment of the history of the entire nation, as well as the embodiment of the new people of God.²⁸

It was only natural that the concept of promise and fulfilment should reach full bloom in the early Church's approach to Scripture. This literal method of interpreting the Old Testament prophecies becomes evident in the frequent use of such phrases as "according to the scriptures," or "spoken by the prophets," or "according to the promises." There is, however, no concept of a wooden or mechanical correspondence between promise and fulfilment, but rather the important concept behind such phrases is the fact that God is viewed as being effectively at work in history, and preparing the antecedents which have effectively been fulfilled in the life of Christ.²⁹ Promise and fulfilment includes both literal prophecy as well as typological anticipation.

One of the more common ways of interpreting the Old Testament in the New was the use of typology.³⁰ Although many Old Testament passages are referred to in the New Testament as being prophetic, a closer examination is necessary in order to reveal whether the passage has been typologically or literally fulfilled.³¹ The language of promise and fulfilment in the New Testament must be given the meaning which the Biblical authors assigned to

²⁵ Wright and Fuller, pp. 22-23.

²⁶ Baumgärtel, p. 16.

²⁷ Dodd, pp. 109-10.

²⁸ Moule, pp. 69-70.

²⁹ Herbert H. Farmer, "The Bible: Its Significance and Authority", *The Interpreter's Bible*, ed. George Arthur Buttrick (New York and Nashville: Abingdon-Cokesbury Press, 1952), I, 28.

³⁰ Grant, p. 42.

³¹ Patrick Fairbairn, *The Typology of Scripture: Viewed in Connection with the Entire Scheme of the Divine Dispensations* (Philadelphia: James S. Claxton, 1865), I, 85.

it, and not that of modern theories of prophecy which are too often read back into the first century. It is precisely because dispensational interpreters disregard the methods by which the New Testament authors interpreted the Old Testament that they are able to insist on a purely literal fulfilment of many Old Testament prophecies. Lampe and Woolcombe offer a definition of typology which is excellent: "Typology, considered as a method of exegesis, may be defined as the establishment of historical connexions between certain events, persons or things in the Old Testament and similar events, persons or things in the New Testament."³² An adequate historical perspective is thus a prerequisite for effective typological exegesis. There is good evidence that typology adequately represents the view of history actually held by the Biblical writers, and it is therefore a necessary as well as legitimate method of interpreting them. The validity of the typological method lies in the fact that if the Bible is a unity, then that unity is manifest in some way—for the early Church, that way was Christ. Typological exegesis, then, is simply a method of discovering and interpreting the implications of that unity.³³

Biblical scholars are just beginning to realize the great extent to which the early Christian community was influenced by the Old Testament. The numbers of Old Testament quotation and allusions found throughout the New Testament give evidence to a great amount of laborious Biblical exegesis which was accomplished by members of the Church in a relatively short period of time. The momentous event of the Resurrection of Jesus Christ was the force which compelled them to search the Scriptures, for it was there that meaning was given to the events which they had experienced. *University of Chicago.*

³² Lampe and Woolcombe, pp. 39-40.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 23.