

## Hermeneutics of the Bible

The most important truth and tool for interpreting the Bible is understanding just how it is the “Word of God”. Just as it is extremely misleading, although formally correct, to say “Jesus is God”, so is it extremely misleading, though formally correct, to say the Bible is the “Word of God.” It is more accurate and helpful to say that Jesus is the marriage of Divine and Human, and also to say, in the words of an old textbook on Scriptural interpretation, that the Bible is “The Word of God in Words of Men (sic)”. Philosophy tells us that God, as Pure Act and Creator of the Universe, is the First Cause of everything, even of actions we perform ourselves as created, Secondary Causes. So, even if we posit a more intense and involved engagement of God as First Cause in the Revelation of the Scriptures, God ALWAYS passes through Secondary Causes, in this case, the human author. God never substitutes for Secondary Causes, including in the process of Revelation. In other words, it is childish and absurd to imagine God dictating into the ear of an author, who, in any event, would have to interpret it through the prism of his own psychology, language and culture. Similarly, God does not inscribe tablets with lightning bolts on Mt. Sinai; these are all metaphors for the presence and action of God in our lives. Hence, God inevitably passes through the obfuscations and limitations of the human communities and authors with whom He is engaged, along with their culture, psychology, projections, shadows, resistances, desires and agendas. In fact, precisely therein consists the very majesty and beauty of God’s action, the true revelation of his Love, Patience and Mercy, that, over millennia, he molds the recalcitrant clay of his people’s hearts and minds to approach, ever so gradually, the comprehension of His authentic Being and Action. It is an enormous distance from the radiant revelation of God as Love, and the central exhortation of Jesus to “Love your enemies” (which generations of Christians have assiduously neglected) to the warlike desert sheikh in the sky who commanded the Israelites to take over alien territory and slaughter all the inhabitants, including the animals! Does anyone really think the latter was a transparent revelation of God’s inmost heart and will? A huge amount of projection was going on, in the midst of a literally infinite divine patience! That was perhaps the only way the Chosen People could believe themselves chosen in that epoch, and that he was really “on our side”!

So, a number of issues immediately become illuminated, once this basic premise is clear. It is not, for example, the least bit blasphemous or presumptuous to examine and question the Bible. On the contrary, we run the risk of blasphemy if we do NOT seriously question our hermeneutics. Otherwise, we will likely and often ascribe to God the most heinous and primitive of sentiments, simply because we have, willfully or not, failed to understand that the Word is always filtered through our own human words, cultures and psychologies. On the other hand, how much more brightly does the divine patience, love and mercy shine forth when we

realize how he has maintained his love affair with his people despite our recalcitrance, and our almost infinite capacity for opacity!

And indeed, this is a journey of millennia, as already stated. That is another common misconception: the “Good Book” is not actually a book. The Greek “Biblia”, from which we derive our word “Bible”, is actually plural, meaning “books”. And every diligent student of Scripture knows that the “Bible” is indeed dozens of books, with various authors and multifarious literary forms, with complementary, if not occasionally conflicting, agendas.

A good example are the “historical” books, such as Kings and Chronicles. If we say that God Alone “wrote” the Bible, then it is going to be “inerrant”. Yet, if it is also a human word, then, of course, there will be discrepancies and errors and mistakes of fact, along with differing agendas on the part of the many authors and sources that came together to form these books.

Also, there are all sorts of literary forms in the Bible, besides these histories. There is poetry and prayer, as well as mythological tales that present profound wisdom and spiritual truth, and are not concerned, even in the intent of the original authors, with giving us eyewitness reports of historical events. Thus, for example, the first chapters of Genesis have rightly been called an “etiologial myth” (a deep explanation for why things are as they are), and are most emphatically not a scientific discourse, or a literal account. To put it bluntly, reading these chapters literally is not to believe in the literal truth of the Scriptures but to grievously and dangerously misread them. There was not a literal tree, with a literal talking snake, in a literal garden, with two naked humans, one male and one female. The truth of that wondrous tale is more on the archetypal, mythical, mystical level, and to take it as actual history, in the modern sense, is ludicrous, and extremely dangerous, giving the Bible a bad name.

It should be noted that this is not some modern, secular idea cooked up to dismiss the Bible. The vast majority of Christians are unaware of how the Bible was actually interpreted over many centuries, before modern Scriptural approaches. It was taken as a wisdom document, showing its divine origin by the dazzling number of inner correspondences and levels of meaning that could be found there. For Christians, this took the form of saying that the New Testament was hidden (“latet”) in the Old, and the Old was revealed (“patet”) in the New. For example, the Temple had a literal, historical meaning in Jerusalem, an “allegorical” meaning in Jesus and his Body the Church (“Destroy this Temple, and in three days I will rebuild it.”); a “tropological” or “moral” meaning as applied to the individual (Temples of the Holy Spirit), and an “anagogical” meaning as applied to the New Jerusalem (no temple, just the “light of the Lamb”.) The fact that these traditional levels of meaning are unknown to nearly everyone is shattering proof that the majority of Christians have lost touch with their own 1500-year tradition.

Even in the Jewish mystical tradition, which became the Kabbalah in the Middle Ages, and which the Fathers of the early Church, such as Origen (3<sup>rd</sup> c.) and Gregory of Nyssa (4<sup>th</sup> c.)

adopted very eloquently, the primary meaning of the Garden of Eden, and even of the Exodus story, did not depend on its historicity in the modern sense, but on its spiritual depth and applicability to the transformation of the individual and the community. Thus, for example, the Temple was first of all a revelation of the structure of the cosmos, and then of the spiritual physiognomy of the human person, before it was a physical building, itself symbolic. There is nothing “New Age” or threatening in such a mystical tradition that goes back 2500 years, and which was the primary way of understanding Scripture for all those centuries. The microcosm and the macrocosm marvelously corresponded, in the view of our ancestors. Carl Jung might have recovered and uncovered certain elements of this; but, we should be the very first to recognize it as the very heart of our own tradition, Jewish and Christian. Nor should all of this really surprise us, if and when we finally grasp that God’s whole intention in engaging with us through the millennia is precisely to consummate a love affair with us, and indeed, to transform us into Himself, so that we have the mind and heart of God. Here again, there is perfect consonance of Jew and Christian on what it is all for in the first place!

For those who speak so reverently about the “Word of God”, it is astonishing how few know the major biblical languages, Greek and Hebrew. The latter, especially, according to the rabbis, has unsuspected depths, with individual words containing hidden treasures of meaning which are completely lost in translation. Do we in the English-speaking world really believe, not only that the Bible dropped directly from Heaven, but precisely in our King James version? Is there really no need to learn the actual human languages that God used to speak to us originally?

At this juncture, we can perhaps better understand the role and person of Paul in the New Testament (although we need to abandon the bias and denigration inherent in calling the Hebrew Scriptures the “Old” Testament!). Through the study of language and style, we conclude that a fair number of works attributed to him are not directly from him, although the accepted usage of the time was to make such attributions (e.g. Hebrews, 1 & 2 Timothy, perhaps even Ephesians and Colossians). In any case, Paul was clearly a great mystic, with a deeply personal experience of conversion, and of the person of Jesus. Yet, he also had his own blinds spots and cultural biases (dress and role of women, for example) that tell us more about Paul than about God. It is salutary to realize that his perspectives, for better or worse, have determined Christian thought and history, to the point that some have rightly suggested that Paul is the founder of Christianity as a religious institution, rather than Jesus! It is also a sobering reminder that the process of transformation into Christ that Paul preaches and, to some extent, exemplifies, is an ongoing historical process, both in the lives of individuals, and in the world. In other words, the Bible was never intended to be the last word, or to give clear and definitive answers about particular points, but to show us the pattern and direction of the ongoing personal involvement of God in the lives and psyches of his people, and of their world! (“Behold, I am with you always, to the close of the age”; “I have yet many things to tell you, but you cannot bear them now...the Spirit will lead you into all the Truth”).

In conclusion, and in response to the final question, it is clearly incorrect to say that “much of the Bible was the work of Man, and not God.” As I have tried to indicate and explain, the entire Bible is the work of God, and the entire Bible is the work of Man. In fact, their intricate, enthralling, infuriating, ecstatic, and inspiring wrestling match/love affair, are what the Bible, and indeed human history, are all about!

Biographical information: Fr. Michael K Holleran does NOT have an advanced degree in Scripture studies, but over 27 years of religious life, including 5 years as a Jesuit (1967-72) and 22 years as a silent contemplative monk (1972-94), as well as 36 years as a priest (1979-present), he has studied, prayed over, and preached on, the Scriptures on a daily basis.

Michael also has an undergraduate degree in Classical Languages, and has studied Hebrew for many years.