

Item #30 (Toward a More Explicitly Catholic Approach to the Teaching of Sacred Scripture)

This was Entry #34 in my previous website.

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It is no small honor to have received the invitation to give the keynote address for the beginning of what I hope will develop into a movement for a more explicitly Catholic approach to the teaching of Sacred Scripture.¹ For me this invitation has a particularly personal relevance, for I was a friend of Msgr. Jerome Quinn. He was present at the celebration at the Pontifical Biblical Institute in Rome of my doctoral degree from the University of Oxford, and I dedicate this inaugural conference to his memory.

Personal Background

I would like to begin my presentation by giving something about my background. Although my formal course work at the Pontifical Biblical Institute was limited to the teaching of Introductory Greek and Hebrew (for thirty-six years), elsewhere, beginning in the 1960s but particularly since my retirement from the Biblical Institute in 2003, I have taught exegesis to a great variety of students. This

¹ It is quite important that the words “a more explicitly Catholic approach to the teaching of Sacred Scripture” be understood clearly. With this phrase I do not mean to imply that Scripture is nowhere being taught according to the mind of the Church at the present time. But it is my hope that the Institute named for Msgr. Quinn will result in a greater number of teachers of Scripture in the Church being more self-consciously aware of the primary sources of the Church’s teaching with regard to the approaches to be used in this teaching and that they base their teaching on this awareness.

teaching was an invaluable help for my conducting seminars at the Biblical Institute for more than twenty years, and vice versa.

Further, ever since my ordination in 1958 I have been concerned to get as much pastoral experience as a priest as possible. This has taken on the form of countless homilies, numerous presentations of “Lectio Divina”, and more than seventy Ignatian “retreats” in various parts of the world, retreats in which Scripture figured prominently. In addition, for twenty-two years I have been the delegate of the Pontifical Biblical Institute to the Catholic Biblical Federation, the official organization of the Catholic Church for the pastoral use of the Bible, and have attended international meetings of this organization in Bogotá, Hong Kong and Beirut. I consider this pastoral experience quite germane and quite important for the challenge of explicitly teaching Scripture academically according to the mind of the Church.

Three “Clusters of Concern”

My experience in the teaching of Scripture suggests to me three main “clusters of concern” which seem to me relevant for our meeting here in St. Paul:²

1) the fundamental importance of teaching Scripture explicitly in the context of my Roman Catholic faith;

2) the fundamental importance of focusing primarily on the

² It is by no means my intention that the mind of the Church that the approaches to the teaching of Scripture be limited to the three “clusters of concern” enumerated below. But it is my contention that these three clusters are at the center of what is needed.

meaning of the text as it stands;

3) the fundamental importance of assuring that what I teach can be the basis for pastoral relevance in the contemporary world.

1) *Teaching Scripture Explicitly in the Context of Faith*

Basic to my teaching of Scripture is the conviction that it should be explicitly rooted in my Catholic faith as taught by the Magisterium of the Church (the “analogy of faith” as understood in the context of the Roman Catholic Church, if you will).³ This implies that what I teach about the meaning of the text should in no way be opposed to the great Tradition of the Catholic Church as presented in the Church’s official doctrine. My basic responsibility is to understand the meaning of a text in the explicit context of my faith, not in the implicit context of the Enlightenment. Every exegesis involves presuppositions, and, as I see it, every teacher of exegesis should explicitly indicate his presuppositions at the beginning of each course. He should not be judged on the basis of these presuppositions, but (in part at least) on the basis of the consistency attained between his exegesis and his presuppositions as well as by the coherence of the meaning he proposes and objective indications in the text.

Does this mean that all the scholarly research of the past has to be disregarded if it is not in accord with my presuppositions based on my

³ See the Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation of Vatican II, *Dei Verbum*, §10. For a convenient source of official Church documentation in the context of a holistic presentation of the entire matter in an organic context cf. P. Williamson, *Principles of Catholic Interpretation in the Pontifical Biblical Commission’s “The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church” 1993* (Subsidia Biblica 22; Rome: Gregorian & Biblical Press, 2001), pp. 137-141.

Catholic faith? Of course not. The results of scholarly research of all ages, no matter how it has been arrived at or what it is, is an immense treasure and an invaluable tool for investigating the meaning of Scripture, no matter what were the presuppositions involved in their production. The crucial question is, How should this research be brought to bear on my understanding of a text as I view it through the lens of faith?

As I see it, my faith should not only be a negative norm so that, for example, I can discount any interpretation of Scripture which says that God does not exist or that he is evil. As I see it faith should also be a positive norm, a kind of flashlight which allows me to look at a text and see better what is objectively there. Obviously this light should not be a license for my indulging in eisegesis: the integrity of the text has to be respected at all time, and this means that nothing should be read into it. There are objective norms built into the text itself or its context for checking whether a proposed exegesis respects the integrity of the text or not. But these objective norms are not always easy to come by, and this is where my faith as flashlight can help.

Further, it should always be remembered that exegesis deals in plausibility. If a rival interpretation can be shown from objective norms to be more plausible, by all means it should be adopted. But plausibility frequently depends on one's presuppositions as regards a text, and not on objective norms in the text or context themselves. It is part of the art of exegesis to be not only objectively savvy, that is,

knowledgeable about the text being interpreted, but also subjectively savvy, that is, reflectively knowledgeable about oneself as exegete.

2) Teaching Scripture and the Meaning of the Text as It Stands

Contemporary Catholic exegesis came to be in the context of the need for a vigorous defense of the authenticity of the biblical text. This need for a vigorous defense was grounded in a variety of causes, for example, a very late dating of the text of John's Gospel and the attendant denial of the reliability of what John's Gospel says. Or, the obvious similarities among the Synoptic Gospels and the resultant search for an explanation of these similarities, a search that in turn led to an investigation into sources. For decades this investigation into the sources of the Scriptural text has resulted in the formation of a mentality which often tends to see in this investigation the underlying fundamental goal of scholarly research. Only in the past thirty to forty years has the focus on the meaning of the text as it stands assumed in many places the primary importance it deserves. Investigation of the sources of a text should normally be in the context of what a text means, and not vice versa.⁴ Or so it seems to me.

This assumed priority of research into the sources of the Scriptural text seems to me to be at the root of the often testy defense of the "historical-critical method", it also seems to me. If the historical-critical method is identified as the basis for scholarly study of Scripture, then any impugning of the historical-critical method will be

⁴ Cf. Williamson, p. 31.

taken as an attack on serious study of the Bible. And the alternative of serious study of the Bible is assumed to be a sort of obscurantism, a denial of the vast heritage of scholarly research of the past several hundred years.

Further, it also seems to me that the “historical-critical method” should be regarded as a multi-splendored thing made up of a variety of results of the scholarly study of Scripture in its original context. Source criticism is only one part of this method, and not even the most important part at that. Philological research seems to me to be a much more valuable source for the contemporary scholarly study of Scripture than source criticism, for example.

Focusing on the meaning of the text as it stands means focusing on the meaning of the text as it was intended by the original author. It is the recovery of this original meaning, as that meaning was intended to be understood by the original addressees of the text, that should be the primary goal of biblical scholarship of any age. Or so it seems to me. This search for the author’s intention is usually possible only from objective indications in the text. But the author/editor had a purpose in writing or editing what he did, and as far as possible this purpose should be the object of what the exegete is looking for.

3) Teaching Scripture and the Fundamental Importance of Relevance

Frequently the insistence on the centrality of the original meaning of the biblical text seems to be taken as implying that serious academic study of the Bible should be value-neutral as regards the pastoral use

of the Bible. An analogy with the relation between “pure science” and “applied science” (that is, technology) seems to be taken for granted in some cases, with the superiority of pure science being assumed to be so obvious that any attempt to link scholarly research to pastoral use is seen as a demeaning. The scholar who brings pastoral concern explicitly into his field of vision is a disloyal to his academic colleagues by sullyng the objective purity and disinterestedness of their research.

From a different perspective, how can writings from a culture, a place and a time so different from ours possibly be translated from that culture, place and time to our culture, place and time? The basic reply to this legitimate question depends on whether the exegete is interested in presenting what the original meaning of the text was in all its fullness. For the original meaning of the text was intended by an author who wrote in a spirit of faith, for persons who listened/read in a spirit of faith, and about persons who lived their lives in the context of faith. It is the religious meaning of the text in the context of a lived faith which is the bridge which serves to link the world of yesterday with the world of today.⁵

By centering his/her exegesis on the religious aspect of the text the exegete makes possible the appearance of the relevance of that text for today. For example, if the faith-trust of Abraham at the moment of the Aqedah is brought into focus in the exegesis of Genesis 22, the

⁵ See Williamson, pp. 148-160.

perceptive person of faith in a culture radically different from that of pre-Christian Israel can see the relevance of that faith-trust for his or her own life. An exegesis which zeroes in on what Genesis 22 teaches about child-sacrifice or covenant or the place in which the Aquedah occurred is not helpful unless it is viewed in the context of this faith-trust. Or so it seems to me.

What I Hope For from This Gathering

The recurrence of the phrase “it seems to me” in the above presentation of the “Clusters of Concern” should indicate what I hope for from this gathering. I have personally dedicated a considerable amount of reflection to the role of faith in objective interpretation of the Bible, to the role of the importance of what the text means, to the role of pastoral relevance in academic exegesis. I have read and pondered. But I have never had a chance to attend a meeting in which such topics as these (and others as well) are subjected to a critical analysis by my peers. As I have attempted to make clear, I think that an exegete should take explicit, reflective awareness of how he does exegesis and why: “The unexamined exegetical life is not worth living”. Well, that may be a bit strong. But at least one can say that the unexamined exegetical life can profit from a large dose of explicitness about basics.

But there is an important caveat in all of this. I personally do not want the word to get out that I am taking part in these proceedings because I think Catholic exegesis is not being practiced anywhere in

the world. And this for the simple reason that I think Catholic exegesis *is* being practiced elsewhere in the world. But, as I said above, I think more attention to reflexive self-criticism would benefit all of us exegetes, neophytes and veterans, believers and non-believers alike, no matter in what tradition (i.e., with what presuppositions) we work.

In a word, I hope to leave St. Paul next Sunday morning not with the conviction that all of my exegetical problems as a Catholic are resolved, but with the conviction that some of my exegetical problems have been illuminated.

The above text was delivered as the keynote address at the founding of the Monsignor Jerome D. Quinn Institute of Biblical Studies, St. Paul Seminary School of Divinity, St. Paul, Minnesota, June 11, 2009.

