

The Dangers of Allegorical Interpretation Part 1

Introduction

How does God intend for us to interpret His written Revelation? Certainly, that is the most important question to be asked as we seek to understand what God has revealed in Scripture. “This is the primary and basic need of hermeneutics: to ascertain what God has said in Sacred Scripture; to determine the meaning of the Word of God. There is no profit to us if God has spoken and we do not know what He has said.”¹ Those who allegorize the Word of God would likely agree with that statement but would add that the actual or “deeper” meaning of what God has said must be determined by the interpreter.

Allegorical Interpretation is Rooted in Greek Philosophy

“Allegorizing is searching for a hidden or secret meaning underlying but remote from and unrelated in reality to the more obvious meaning of a text. In other words, the literal reading is a sort of code, which needs to be deciphered to determine the more significant and hidden meaning. In this approach the literal is superficial; the allegorical is the true meaning.”² How did some church leaders arrive at the conclusion that a human interpreter must search for a hidden meaning to what God has stated clearly?

The allegorical interpretation of Scripture can be traced back to Alexandrian Jews, notably Philo who lived during the time of Christ and who applied Greek philosophy to portions of the Septuagint translation of the Scripture in an attempt to remove or reinterpret those passages that attributed human characteristics to God (anthropomorphism) or that exposed the immorality of biblical characters.

Greek philosophers were embarrassed by the immoralities of the gods of Greek mythology; so, to get around this problem, the philosophers allegorized the stories, looking for hidden meanings underneath the literal writings. The use of allegorizing also enabled the Greek philosophers (as it enables allegorical interpreters today) to promote their own pre-conceived ideas, while appearing to be faithful to the writings of the past.

¹ Bernard Ramm, *Protestant Biblical Interpretation: A Textbook of Hermeneutics*, Baker

² Roy B. Zuck, [Basic Bible Interpretation](#) (Colorado Springs, CO: Cook Communications, 1991), 29.

Clement of Alexandria (A.D. 155-216) who was influenced by Philo and Greek philosophy believed God's Word could only be understood by applied human intelligence. He wrote, "As we are clearly aware that the Savior teaches His people nothing in a merely human way, but everything by a divine and mystical wisdom, we must not understand His words literally but with due inquiry and intelligence we must search out and master their hidden meaning."³ Those who followed Philo and Clement in approaching God's Revelation allegorically (such as Origen and Augustine) continued to reinforce the erroneous concept that God either did not, or could not, communicate His revelation to mankind in a way it could be understood by the normal usage of language, but that God's actual meaning could only be deciphered by the aid of human intelligence.

[Allegorical Interpretation Disregards God's Intention for Scripture](#)

Because God's intention is for mankind to know with certainty what He has said, He provided the vehicle of language which makes effective communication between intelligent beings possible. God is the originator of language which is comprised of words which have meaning intended to be understood in their normal usage.

There is no "hidden meaning" in God's audible words of warning to Adam not to eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil "for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die."⁴ It was Satan who cast doubt in Eve's mind about what God had said, convincing her that she should not take God's words literally or authoritatively.

There are many other occasions in scripture when God spoke audibly using the gift of language, and there was never ambiguity in what He said. God has also spoken in an accurate, understandable, written revelation. In that revelation, God intentionally said what He meant and meant what He said.

We can be sure that whenever God has spoken to men and women audibly or through the inspired writings of Scripture, He fully intends and expects what He communicated to be understood and obeyed. The allegorical approach disregards God's intention and applies "the unconstrained imagination and presuppositions of the interpreter."⁵

³ [Clement of Alexandria](#), The Rich Man's Salvation, [Loeb Classical Library](#) Volume 92, p. 281.

⁴ Genesis 2:16

⁵ Mal Couch, [Classical Evangelical Hermeneutics](#) (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications), 36-37

Allegorical Interpretation Does Not Truly Interpret Scripture

James White accurately states, “Allegorical interpretation has no way of communicating anything meaningful. The final arbiter of allegorical interpretation is the one who is practicing allegorical interpretation.”⁶ Allegorical interpretation is not a true interpretation of Scripture, because it disregards God’s intention to convey truth to humanity through the normal usage of words. As a result, it confuses the actual meaning of what God inspired human authors to write.

A true interpretation of Scripture is simply focused on “giving the sense” of what God said. When the Israelites returned to Jerusalem from their captivity in Babylon, they requested that Ezra the scribe read to them from the Scriptures. For several hours, Ezra “read distinctly” from the Scriptures and “gave the sense,” helping the people to “understand the reading.”⁷ There was no indication Ezra sought for a “hidden, deeper meaning” to what God had plainly said.

In contrast, Origen attempted to explain by means of allegory the Parable of the Good Samaritan. Unfortunately, his insistence to find a deeper meaning did not give the sense of the parable but resulted in nonsense. Origen identified the man robbed as Adam, Jerusalem as paradise, Jericho as the world, the priest as the law, the Levites as the Prophets, the Samaritan as Christ, the donkey as Christ’s physical body bearing the wounded man (the wounds being his sins), the inn as the Church, and the Samaritan’s promise to return as the promise of the second coming of Christ. How any rational person could read this parable and dream up such bizarre interpretations is unimaginable.

Milton Terry says the habit of the allegorical interpreter “is to disregard the common signification of words and give wing to all manner of fanciful speculation. It does not draw out the legitimate meaning of an author’s language but foists into it whatever the whim or fancy of an interpreter may desire. As a system, therefore, it puts itself beyond all well-defined principles and laws.”⁸

⁶ James White on Harold Camping, Tuesday, July 21, 2009

⁷ Nehemiah 8:8

⁸ Milton S. Terry, “Biblical Hermeneutics”

Dr. Dwight Pentecost goes so far as to say, “It would seem that the purpose of the allegorical method is not to interpret Scripture, but to pervert the true meaning of Scripture, under the pretext of seeking a deeper or more spiritual meaning.”⁹

Allegorical Interpretation Ignores the Evidence of Scripture

Allegorical interpreters argue that the church has replaced Israel because of Israel’s sin and rejection of God. However, that argument ignores much clearer evidence to the contrary. For example, Moses explained to Israel why it was that God chose the Jewish race saying, “because He loved your fathers, therefore He chose their descendants after them.”¹⁰ God’s election of Israel was never based upon their righteousness or their obedience to Him; therefore, it is impossible for Israel to be rejected as God’s chosen people because of their unrighteousness or disobedience. As Israel was on the threshold of the land God promised to give them, Moses clarified, “. . . understand that the LORD your God is not giving you this good land to possess because of your righteousness, for you *are* a stiff-necked people.”¹¹ The Jews would have understood the picture presented by the words “stiff-necked,” as it was originally an agricultural term referring to unruly oxen. Israel was seen by God as stubborn and rebellious from the time He elected them to be His chosen people. Clearly, God’s choice of Israel as an elect nation was never dependent upon their national response to Him. Scripture provides clear evidence that God’s covenant to Israel is based on His faithfulness. “For what if some did not believe? Will their unbelief make the faithfulness of God without effect? Certainly not!”¹²

The original disciples of Jesus who talked with Him and heard His teaching over several years obviously believed God’s promises to the nation of Israel were still in effect. In fact, the last question these disciples asked Jesus before they saw Him ascending into the clouds was, “Lord, will You at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?”¹³ Plainly, the question of the disciples reflected their understanding of a literal, actual kingdom on earth and a literal ethnic Israel. Clearly, there was no thought in their minds that God had

⁹ Dwight Pentecost, “Things to Come”

¹⁰ Deuteronomy 4:37, NKJV

¹¹ Deuteronomy 9:6, NKJV

¹² Romans 3:3-4

¹³ Acts 1:6

changed His mind and would either forget His promises to Israel altogether or give those promises to another entity. It might be argued that there was much the disciples did not fully understand at that time, but significant is the fact that the Lord never challenged their understanding of *what God would do* but told them it was not for them to know *when God would do it*.

Allegorical interpreters do not believe all prophecy will be fulfilled literally, yet Bible prophecies have always been fulfilled literally in every detail. Examples can be found in fulfilled prophecies of the nations such as Babylon and Tyre, prophecies concerning Israel, and prophecies of the first coming of Christ. It can only be concluded that all remaining prophecies will likewise be fulfilled literally to the smallest detail.

Charles H. Spurgeon noted, "I think we do not attach sufficient importance to the restoration of the Jews. We do not think enough of it. But certainly, if there is anything promised in the Bible it is this."¹⁴ Walter C. Kaiser, Jr. agrees saying, "To argue that God replaced Israel with the church is to depart from an enormous body of biblical evidence."¹⁵

[Sanford Bible Church](#)

¹⁴ Spurgeon, "The Church of Christ," The Spurgeon Archives, <http://www.spurgeon.org/misc/eschat2.htm#note55>

¹⁵ W.C. Kaiser Jr., Dispensationalism, Israel and the Church, (C.A. Blaising and D.L. Bock, Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992), p. 364.