

THE PROBLEM OF NEW TESTAMENT EXEGESIS

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The problem of interpreting a passage from the Bible is one to which we would all like to find the key, some simple and easy formula that will enable us to approach any text of Scripture and quickly establish its meaning. Alas, there is no such simple answer, but it is possible to indicate some general principles and types of approach which will enable us to wrestle with the text and come to an understanding of it.

The problem of course is not one confined to study of the New Testament or indeed of the Bible as a whole. It is part of the general problem of hermeneutics, *i.e.* the attempt to understand anything that somebody else has said or written. It follows that much of what will be said here would also apply to any other material that requires interpretation, especially to similar texts from the ancient world. The New Testament, however, poses distinctive problems because of its own individual literary characteristics and also because it is in some sense the Word of God. Our discussion, therefore, will concentrate on the problems of hermeneutics as they apply to the New Testament in particular.

I

In order to appreciate the nature of these problems it may be useful for us to examine a passage from the New Testament. For this purpose let us look at John 4:1-45, a passage which has the merits of illustrating a variety of points and also of being a fairly familiar story: How does one begin to understand it?

The starting point is no doubt to establish the correct wording of the passage by *textual criticism*. Different editions of the Greek New Testament vary in their wording according to their editors' estimate of the relative reliability of the early manuscripts. So far as the present passage is concerned, it may be assumed that the average modern Greek New Testament gives the text with sufficient accuracy.

A second stage consists in understanding the vocabulary, grammar and syntax of the passage in order to give a good *translation* of it into English. It is to be feared that many of us start from the English text, and, to be sure, one does not need to know Greek in order to understand the New

1. B. M. Metzger, *The Text of the New Testament*, Oxford, 1968²; cf. J. H. Greenlee, *Introduction to New Testament Textual Criticism*, Grand Rapids, 1964; J. N. Birdsall, 'The New Testament Text', in P. R. Ackroyd and C. F. Evans, *The Cambridge History of the Bible I*, Cambridge, 1970, pp. 308-377.
2. The 'circular' nature of interpretation is evident at this point. On the basis of a provisional translation of a passage, one proceeds to interpret the details; this in turn may lead to a revision of the translation. See further pp. 9f.

Testament; at least, the individual may not need to do so, provided that in his language group there are others who do possess and share this knowledge with the rest of the community. Translation is of great importance, and there is a case that it is the goal of interpretation rather than a preliminary stage on the journey, since the precise character of a translation is moulded by our total understanding of the passage in the light of the factors that have still to be considered.² Its importance may be quickly illustrated by two points.

First, the central figure in the story is a yuvn, regularly translated as 'woman'—'the woman of Samaria'. What visual image does that word convey to you? To me it is a word that suggests somebody approaching middle-age or even old-age, and it has a faintly derogatory air; one has only to think of the subtle difference in tone between church intimations about 'the Women's Meeting' or 'the Ladies' Guild' and the way in which one type of women's meeting has to be called 'the Young Wives' Group' in order to attract members! Suppose that we translated by 'lady' (a perfectly correct equivalent of yuvn) or even by 'girl'? 'Woman' tends to put her on the shelf, but the story implies that she was possibly youthful and attractive.

Second, the word 'living', used of the water offered to her by Jesus, poses a problem. In Greek it could be used to mean 'running', as opposed to stagnant, water. This ambiguity between 'running' and 'living' may be significant in the story. How does one get it over in English? And does the fact of this ambiguity mean that other words also in John may be used with a double sense?

Translation, therefore, is important both for the meaning and for the 'feel' of the incident.

A third stage in understanding is concerned with *background*. It may be useful to know something about the geography of the scene, the historical state of Jewish-Samaritan relationships and matters of this kind. A knowledge of the character of the author of the Gospel and his intended audience will help us to appreciate the point of the story. Much of this can be found fairly simply from reference books.

But now the fun begins. Where did the author get the story from? The Gospel of John is based on information gathered from various *sources* by the author. Can we distinguish between such information in its earliest form and the way in which the author has used it? Where did he get this particular story? Some parts of it deal with a private conversation between Jesus and the woman: which of them passed it on? Or has John written the story up in the manner he thought appropriate? These are tricky questions, and the experts differ in their answers.³ But, however difficult the problem

3. R. Bultmann (*The Gospel of John*, Oxford, 1971, p. 175) attempts to distinguish between a piece of tradition used by John and the additions which John has made. C. K. Barrett (*The Gospel according to St. John*, London, 1955, p. 191) states that a pre-Johannine nucleus of the story cannot be isolated, while R. Schnackenburg (*The Gospel according to St. John*, London, 1968, I, p. 420) speaks of the way in which the Evangelist has skillfully constructed his narrative. Commentators are in general agreed that the narrative rests upon tradition, and that the tradition has a historical basis (R. E. Brown, *The Gospel according to John I-XII*, New York, 1966, pp. 175f.).

may be, it is surely relevant for our understanding of the story to know whether it is a historical report about an actual conversation, or is a narrative developed by the evangelist to bring out points which he thought to be significant for his readers, or is a mixture of these two.

This point brings us to our next question: what is the form and *function* of this narrative in the Gospel? Our immediate inclination is perhaps to see it simply as a historical episode. Let me say that I personally find no difficulty in accepting it as substantially the story of something that actually happened: Jesus met a woman by a well and held a conversation with her in which He led her to realize that He was the Messiah, and as a result of her conversion and Jesus' contact with other people from Sychar they too came to believe in Him. To say this is to make a decision about the *form* of the story. But this is an insufficient answer. We have still to ask, Why is this story in the Gospel, and what is its function at this particular point? It is the question of *context*.

According to John's own statement of purpose in 20:30f., a story like this is included so that the readers of the Gospel may themselves come to faith in Jesus. It is, therefore, not simply an interesting story, but it has a lesson to teach, namely that, just as the Samaritans came to faith, so you also ought to believe in Jesus, the Saviour of the world.

Granted this point, however, what is the precise function of this story at this point in the narrative? It is true that John provides chronological links with what precedes and what follows the story, but this does not completely solve the problem. John has only presented a few of the stories about Jesus that he knew (Jn. 20:30); why did he include *this* one? And did he put it here simply because of chronology?

One commentator at least has seen in our story a kind of foil to the preceding story of Nicodemus. Here is an example of belief to be placed over against Nicodemus' difficulty in accepting the idea of rebirth, so that each story may throw light on the other.⁴ Or again the story may be part of a series in which the gospel message is seen to be not merely for Jews but also for Samaritans and ultimately for the whole world.⁵ Or again there may be a contrast between the old ways of Jews and Samaritans—symbolised by water in jars or wells—and the new life offered by Jesus and symbolised by wine and living water.⁶ Some or all of these suggestions may be true, and they add precision and fulness to our understanding of the story.

More than one writer has detected a kind of dramatic *form* in the way the story is told. The story is said to be presented like a play on a forestage and a backstage, with the centre of interest shifting to and fro, from the well to the town, from the woman to the disciples and to the townsfolk. A similar kind of structure is to be found elsewhere, e.g. in John 9, and this raises the question whether we have discovered a technique of presentation used by John, the appreciation of which may help us to under-

4. B. F. Westcott, *The Gospel according to St. John*, London, 1882, p. 67.

5. E. g. J. Marsh, *Saint John*, London, 1968, pp. 207f.

6. E. g. A. M. Hunter, *The Gospel according to John*, Cambridge, 1965, p. 45.

7. C. H. Dodd, *The Interpretation of the Fourth Gospel*, Cambridge, 1954, p. 315.

stand the structure of the story.⁷

Then there is the question of double meaning, already hinted at earlier. At the beginning of the story there is a time note, that Jesus was at the well at the sixth hour. Details of time and place are common enough in John, and may be claimed as evidence for eye-witness testimony. But why does John include this detail? Background information may tell us that the sixth hour was the hottest time of day, and it has been conjectured that the woman came to the well at this unusual hour (evening being the customary time) because the other women ostracised her on account of her sin.⁸ This would be a historical explanation. But it has also been noted that in John 19:14 the same time note occurs to indicate the moment when Jesus was condemned and delivered to His executioners: is the reader meant to link these two events theologically and let them mutually interpret each other?⁹

Again, Jesus reproached the woman for having had five husbands. Such immorality is perfectly credible, even in the pre-film and pop-star era, and is an entirely valid reason for needing to hear the gospel. But it has been suggested that the reference is an allegorical one to the five false gods of the Samaritans mentioned in 2 Kings 17:30f., and this would tie in with the condemnation of Samaritan piety in John 4:22.¹⁰

If these suggestions of allegory are present, two questions arise. How does one recognise that allegory is present? And does the presence of this amount of allegory justify us in searching for more of it in less likely places in the story?¹¹ A related problem is that of *symbolism*. Water is undoubtedly used here by Jesus as a religious symbol, and therefore we require to ask what ideas would be conjured up for John's readers by the religious use of the term 'water'?¹² It is equally important to ask how these ideas can be made relevant and understandable to a modern reader who may not appreciate the symbolism.

With the mention of the modern reader we pass, finally, to a further question regarding the interpretation of the story which may take us beyond the original intention of John. It may be illustrated by mentioning two types of exposition. One or two writers have seen in this story an ex-

8. R. Schnackenburg, *op. cit.*, p. 424. There is, however, some controversy regarding the manner of time reckoning adopted by John. Cf.: J. E. Bruns, 'The Use of Time in the Fourth Gospel', N.T.S. 13, 1966-67, pp 285-290.

9. R. H. Lightfoot, *St. John's Gospel*, Oxford, 1956, p. 122.

10. E. C. Hoskyns and F. N. Davey, *The Fourth Gospel*, London, 1947, pp. 242f.

11. It must be admitted that neither of these examples of allegory is particularly convincing. The first is unlikely because the reader does not yet know that the sixth hour is to be the hour of the crucifixion, and when he does reach that point in the story he may not note the coincidence with the hour in ch. 4. As for the second, a. the woman had six husbands in total, not five; b. 2 Kings lists seven deities, not five; c. while the number five does occur in the account of the Samaritans in Josephus (Ant. 9:14:3), it is doubtful whether John is dependent upon him rather than upon the Old Testament itself. We may also doubt whether John does in fact use allegory anywhere (W. F. Howard, *The Fourth Gospel in Recent Criticism and Interpretation*, London, 1955⁴, pp. 182f.).

12. R. Bultmann, *op. cit.*, pp. 182-186; R. E. Brown, *op. cit.*, pp. 178-180.

13. W. Temple (*Readings in St. John's Gospel*, London, 1945, pp. 65-68) considers the narrative as 'an example of the Lord's pastoral dealing', but proceeds to apply it to the way in which He deals with 'my soul' rather than as an example for the Christian evangelist. Cf.

ample of *how Jesus dealt pastorally* with the woman in leading her to conversion. They have then suggested that the story provides an example for His followers to employ in their own activity of personal evangelism.¹³ This is surely a valid interpretation of the story, but is it one intended by John himself? Two answers seem to be possible here. John might say to us, 'I hadn't consciously thought of the story like that, but now that you suggest it to me, I would agree that you could also understand it in that way. My primary purpose was of course to help the unbeliever who can see himself in the picture of the woman, but naturally it could have the secondary purpose of helping the Christian evangelist to model himself on Jesus'. A passage, therefore, may have a further interpretation or application, which was not present to the author, but is legitimate because can be held to fit in with his intentions. Or John might say that he did intend this secondary, pastoral purpose of the story. If so, the question arises as to how far he has been influenced, consciously or unconsciously, by the needs of the church for advice on this pastoral problem and hence how far the historical narrative has been presented or even 'adapted' in order to draw out these lessons.¹⁴

Another school of thought interprets the story in an *existential* manner. It is an expression of the way in which a person comes to self-awareness regarding his being and enters into 'authentic existence'. Thus R. Bultmann heads verses 16-19 'The Revelation as the Disclosure of Man's Being'. The ideas of a gift of salvation and of faith in the traditional sense disappear, and are replaced in effect by categories drawn from existentialist philosophy.¹⁵ Whether this is a legitimate interpretation of John or is rather 'read into the text', is a matter for discussion.

II

It is time to draw the lines together. A sufficiently bewildering set of exegetical possibilities has now been produced to raise some doubts regarding the good Reformed doctrine of the perspicuity of Holy Scripture. The purpose of this essay, however, is certainly not to lead the reader to doubt and despair, but rather to raise the questions that must be faced by defenders of this doctrine, so that in the end their acceptance of it may rest on a more solid basis than mere formal assent. We may, offer some tentative suggestions that may help to answer these questions.

First, in interpreting a passage a number of different lines of investigation must be followed. Textual and linguistic study, research into background, study of sources, form and context—all these have their vital part to play in exegesis.

Second, we have in effect uncovered three main levels of understanding. There is the 'historical' level in which we treat the story as plain history with its own implicit meaning. There is the 'Johannine' level in

14. Compare the way in which the treatment of the blind man in John 9 is often thought to be based upon the Jewish excommunication of Christians in apostolic times rather than upon actual history in the time of Jesus. See J. L. Martyn, *History and Theology in the Fourth Gospel*, New York, 1968.

15. R. Bultmann, *op. cit.*, p. 187.

16. R. Schnackenburg, *op. cit.*, p. 433.

which we explore the uses that John may consciously have made of the story to bring out what he regarded as its full meaning and in order that the story may contribute to the total impact made by the Gospel.¹⁷ And there is the 'interpreter's' level in which we may gain impressions from the story which were not consciously in the author's mind, but may nevertheless be valid insights into his message. Moreover, at any of these levels a given passage may have a number of different interpretations, or rather its interpretation may have different facets. There may be a 'straight' meaning and a less direct one, organically related to it.

Third, our aim is to discover what the text meant in the mind of its original author for his intended audience. Exegesis seeks for an interpretation of a passage which will account satisfactorily for all the features of that passage, both on its own and in its context. This context includes both the historical environment of the New Testament and also the literary environment of the work in which it occurs, in the example above, the Johannine literature. This may produce an appearance of circularity, since the context itself needs to be interpreted, and the meaning of John's Gospel as a whole depends upon the meaning of the various individual passages, including ch. 4 itself. The circle, however, need not be a vicious one, and a better analogy is provided by dialogue; the whole and the parts question each other, so to speak, and hence knowledge of both is gradually built up.

Fourth, how far can we go beyond the meaning intended for the original readers and reach a meaning for ourselves? As indicated earlier, I would be prepared to accept a 'pastoral' interpretation of John 4, even if this was not the author's mind, but I would be inclined to doubt the particular existentialist interpretation given by Bultmann—or at least I shrewdly suspect that John himself would say 'No' to it if he was confronted by it. But is John's verdict (or my guess regarding it) the criterion? It could, for example, be argued that the significance of a story may lie in the unconscious motifs which come to expression in it, especially in the symbolism employed. Thus, to take an extreme example, the significance of a schizophrenic drawing lies not so much in the 'objective' interpretation of it which the artist might give, but rather in the 'subjective' reflection of the pathological state of his mind to which he unconsciously testified. It could be that in Scripture too there was a meaning different from that intended by the author. Though John himself might deny the existentialist interpretation of his Gospel, it could be argued that unconsciously he has been laid hold of by the existential plight of man and has been led to express it in the religious categories which made sense to him and which he felt to be objectively true, but which are merely one way expressing an essentially human situation nowadays described more aptly in the language of Heidegger.

A more traditional Christian might prefer to argue for a *sensus plenior*

17. One should note that this second level may comprise a number of 'mezzanine' levels at which the significance of the tradition for its various bearers should be considered. In the case of the Gospel of John it has been suggested that some of the narrative material comes from a 'Gospel of Signs', in which case it may have had one meaning for the author of this source and another meaning for the author of the final work (R. T. Fortna, *The Gospel of Signs*, Cambridge, 197).

in Scripture. Divine inspiration may have given to a passage a deeper meaning of which the author himself was unconscious. John himself tells us that certain texts in the book of Isaiah were written because the prophet saw the glory of Jesus and spoke of Him (Jn. 12:41). We can, I think, be certain that a pre-Christian commentator on Isaiah would not have perceived this interpretation of such passages, nor is it exactly fashionable among modern commentators, and we may feel that the prophet himself saw the glory dimly; but looking back from our Christian vantage point we may truly say 'The prophet was speaking about Jesus', and use these passages to throw light on Him. Here we reach a point where the category of divine inspiration must be brought into the discussion and a purely human interpretation is inadequate.

How, then, are we to interpret the New Testament for a modern audience? Even if some of the writers did compose their works in the hope that posterity would value them and not simply consign them to the waste papyrus basket, they cannot have known how posterity in its different situation would understand them. The task of exposition is surely to put the audience into the position where it can feel for itself the original impact of the story. It can then pick up the original meaning, together with any fresh elements that may have accrued to it.

It may, however, be argued that regaining the original meaning is impossible, alike for the exegete and the congregation. For exegesis and exposition involve two-way traffic, as the modern student inevitably contributes something of himself to the exposition. This problem of dialogue between a modern reader and an ancient text is a complicated one, but the effects of the process need not necessarily be harmful; the significance of the doctrine of inspiration is surely that the message of the New Testament rings true in every generation. Certain situations, however, may enable us to feel its impact in a more telling manner. I have long had a theoretical knowledge of 1 Thessalonians 3, and could expound it to a congregation. But something happened to that chapter for me on 24th January, 1959. The visiting preacher that day in Christ's College, Aberdeen, was the aged Professor Josef Hromadka of Czechoslovakia, and as he read those verses I saw how he felt himself to be in Paul's situation, normally prevented by Satan from visiting his friends in the west, and longing both to draw comfort from them and to know that they (i.e. you and I) hold fast to their faith.

Perhaps this sort of experience could happen with any secular text—'some chorus ending from Euripides'. We as Christians have something more to do. The passages which we interpret must be the means through which God speaks to men and women today. Our belief in the inspiration of the Bible is thus a testimony that New Testament exegesis is not just a problem; it is a real possibility. God can and does speak to men through even the most ignorant of expositors of His Word. At the same time He calls on us to devote ourselves to His Word and to use every resource to make its message the more clear. Sadly the history of the church demonstrates the evils that can arise from false interpretations of the New Testament; our task is to avoid such errors by seeking a true understanding.¹⁸

18. This essay reproduces substantially the opening chapter of a forthcoming symposium on *New Testament Interpretation* which is being edited by its author.