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Interpreting the Bible

John Goldingay

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The Rev. J. E. Goldingay, B.A., is Lecturer in Old Testament at St. John's College, Nottingham. The following is the outline of a paper originally given at the C.B.R.F. Seminar in June 1980.

Four key features of the way we go about this task:

1. REVERENTLY

- (a) The Bible is God's book:
by his providence (books such as Kings, Luke) by his initiative (books such as Isaiah, Revelation)
- (b) It is therefore wholly true, because he is true (Jn. 17:17)
- (c) But each individual theological statement has to be seen in the context of the whole of biblical truth and of its place in the biblical story (e.g. God's justice and his love).

Each individual behavioural demand has to be seen in the context of the whole of biblical theology and ethics and of its place in the biblical story (cp. Jesus's discussion of divorce, Mk. 10).

Each individual 'historical' narrative has to be understood in the light of the kind of narrative it is (e.g. Genesis 1; differences between the Gospels).

- (d) (Hence part of the problem of the stress on inerrancy is that it tends to imply that the whole Bible is a blow-by-blow chronological narrative, when actually its narrative is more like a portrait than a photograph; and, of course, much of the Bible is not narrative at all, so that the concept is an inappropriate one. It's not that the Bible has any 'mistakes'—it's that this is the wrong question.)
- (e) It is the fact that it is a collection of God's words that gives us confidence it will speak today, and obliges us to be committed to believe and do all that we find in it.

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2. HISTORICALLY

- (a) Because God spoke through men who lived in history, the only way to understand his statements is to understand them on the lips of the men who uttered them and in the ears of those to whom they were spoken. (The problem with much prophetic interpretation lies in ignoring this point.)

- (b) (The NT doesn't always interpret the OT historically, but it encourages us to do so by picturing God himself speaking historically.)
- (c) In understanding the Bible, however, we are building on the fact that we are one with the biblical writers in many ways (we share in their humanity, their experience of God, their indwelling with the Holy Spirit, and so on).
- (d) At the same time, the fact that we feel one with them can also make us mishear what they are saying, and we need all possible aids to true hearing.
- (e) Thus understanding the Bible involves a paradoxical combination of being objective, distancing ourselves from it (to try to lessen the extent to which we mishear it and enable us really to hear what God was saying back then) with appropriating it for ourselves by making our response to God as we hear him speaking in some long-past context—speaking not just then but to me too. The Holy Spirit is involved in the whole of this process.

3. RELEVANTLY

- (a) Many passages of Scripture are of clear meaning and timeless significance, and can be applied directly to today. But precisely how they apply we have to 'work out', 'guess', or seek the Spirit's leading on. We need to understand the world, ourselves, and our congregation as well as Scripture, to be able to do this. A preacher has to be a man of two worlds. (J. D. Smart)
- (b) Different biblical books address different situations and have different emphases according as they see people needing challenge or encouragement, the building up of faith, hope or obedience, and so on. We need to be able to understand where our congregation is so as to be able to apply the right biblical emphasis to them, to move them on from where they are now to the next place of God's leading.

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- (c) A brief consideration of books such as Deuteronomy or 1 Chronicles reveals that many chapters are of no direct application today. Here we have to seek to see what principles may be inferred from these chapters and then see how those principles apply today.
- (d) Biblical narratives (e.g. stories in Genesis or the Gospels) can be relevant in one of two ways. Sometimes their once-for-all historicalness is what we note. (Jesus rose from the dead: that fact is part of the basis of my faith in him.) Sometimes they can be examples of how God always acts (God's raising Jesus is paralleled by his giving me new life). We can thus link our story to God's story. But note that in preaching we too easily fall into 'moralizing—turning stories into examples of how we ought to act (or ought not to act)—which often wasn't their purpose (e.g. stories about Abraham).
- (e) The Bible itself remains the check on what we think is the Spirit's teaching on how it applies today.

4. IMAGINATIVELY

Our aim in preaching is to enable the inspired Word of God to get home today to the people of God by the help of the Spirit of God. This involves him breathing new life into:

- (a) the direct teaching of the Bible (e.g. prophets, letters). Classical expository preaching is at its best here, following the writer's argument and letting the sermon's structure reflect it. Note the need of bringing biblical symbols back to life (e.g. kingdom, redemption, fatherhood).
- (b) the narratives in the Bible (Genesis to Esther, Matthew to Acts), which teach indirectly. We usually turn them into direct teaching, losing their particular value. We need to retell stories, incorporating new insight, comment, and application as the original writer did (in the way Chronicles does this to Kings, and Matthew to Mark)—not making the story the mere lead into a list of 'lessons'. Help people to get into the story, identifying with situations and characters as if hearing it for the first time. Value of drama.
- (c) the imaginary stories in the Bible (parables). The parables worker: by starting in people's familiar world and taking people on to something totally revolutionary; a parable is a story with a kick in the tale. Our problem is that the familiar world is now strange and the revolutionary punchline is old hat. We have to bring old parables to life and tell new ones.

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