

GIVE THEM WHAT YOU HAVE

Interpreting the New Testament for Today

John J. Denniston



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Introduction

Give them what you have...

They say beginnings and endings are the easiest to endure. We do them only once. The span between those markers—the great middle—is where we more often confront complexity, even weariness. In response to our confusion, a Scripture scholar and popular Church leader on Long Island, New York, once offered a homily that concluded with a paraphrase of Jesus' words to his bewildered apostles when they tried to feed five thousand people with only a few loaves of bread: *Give them what you have...I will take care of whatever else is needed* (see Mark 6:37). In the end, the mission of the Lord's closest followers is to share the bits and pieces they have come to believe about God's presence, despite personal failings and blindness, and then allow God to complete it.

Those familiar with the New Testament will recognize the feeding of the multitudes as one miracle story repeated in each of the four canonical (authorized) Gospels. Mark has two versions (6:31–44; 8:1–10), so does Matthew (14:13–21; 15:32–39). It is found once in John (6:1–15) and once in Luke (9:10–17). Some scholars think the story was popular in the early community celebrations of the Eucharist, especially with its call for the active participation of Jesus' friends in his mission. In any event, the paraphrase of the Gospel text is an example of a traditional and ancient way of understanding Scripture, a practice often used in homilies. That is, the paraphrase arises from a so-called spiritual reading of the Gospels with an application to everyday life (what theologians refer to as *tropology*). Such spiritual reading (often used in preaching) can make a Gospel theme “come alive” for listeners, putting Jesus into our streets, and hopefully into our hearts. This book uses the same hermeneutic tools, that is, the devices that help us build our understanding of Scripture with respect to our world. At times, there is a “homiletic,” sometimes “spiritual,” tone in the essays—a ring no different from what echoes throughout the Scriptures. As we will see, the final versions of the New Testament as we know it arose from

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a time when theologians, philosophers, scientists, artists, and preachers alike applied the Word of God to everyday life, making clear that Scripture is not static. The Scriptures, they say, are dynamic, empowering us to live every aspect of our life with respect to revelation. The issues, problems, and hopes the New Testament addresses are painfully similar to the ones we experience today. In the study that follows, attention is paid to the way some contemporary people feel and behave, and the unfinished work of biblical scholarship.

I am grateful to the undergraduate students at Fordham University. It was the experience of listening to their requests for a simple resource to use before reading the biblical text—a first for many—that planted the seeds for the essays. It seems to me, when the ordinary experiences of people are brought near to the word of God, light is thrown not only on their experiences, but on the Word of God as well. We give “what we have”; sometimes, we give a few reasons to believe. And the most promising question we can ask as we read the New Testament is: What kind of God is presented? Images of God, like self-images, never exhaust the reality in question; they remain as unfinished as the mission Jesus gave his friends or the expectations we make about ourselves—others are needed to complete them. My hope is that these essays will encourage people, especially beginners, to explore the New Testament with thoughtfulness and excitement, and to recognize along the way the debt we owe to those who have made generous, lifelong commitments to biblical scholarship and to the mission of the Lord’s church to feed and to be fed by his words.

Learning to Drive

The Bible is a complex book. If the Bible were a car, most of us couldn't identify the make, model, or power of the engine, and we would have difficulty discerning whether or not we should drive or be passengers. In fact, we may not even recognize it as a mode of transportation. A few passages of the Bible are immediately understandable, but anyone looking for more than a superficial knowledge must puzzle over its obscure genealogies and place names, archaic rituals, unfamiliar ideas, and apparent contradictions. Students soon learn that the Bible is a collection of letters, poetry, histories, and narratives. These materials were preached, edited, liturgically prayed, translated, and laboriously recopied centuries before the translations available to us today were printed.

Some of us know people who attempt to read the entire Bible from Genesis to the end of the New Testament but stop exhausted at the Book of Exodus or soon thereafter. Frustrated and no wiser, they settle for more entertaining and less venturesome interpretations from media documentaries, family, friends, the Internet, or Sunday sermons. Others honor their version of the Bible to the letter and without gloss as God's word. Still others are so deeply committed to confessional allegiances (for example, Catholic versus Protestant or believer versus atheist), they sometimes ignore even their intellectual integrity to defend their community.

Ultimately, we must learn how to assimilate the various components of the Bible—structure, authorship, history, style, and so forth—before we can move our faith forward. This book is a Bible driver's manual, a simple introduction to the key concepts that shape our understanding of God's word.

EXTREMES OF BIBLICAL INTERPRETATION

Isn't it amazing how extremes teach us about life? Our first experience behind the wheel of a car, for example, teaches us that the gas pedal moves us forward and the brake pedal brings us to a stop—it takes some skill before we find the happy medium between fast and slow (some never do)—not to mention the fact that we have to steer the wheel and shift gears at the same time. The

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brake pedal, we quickly learn, is diametrically opposed to the gas pedal, but we must learn to operate them in harmony before we can arrive at our destination. Similarly, two popular forms of biblical interpretation today espouse radically different viewpoints and require unique skill sets: one of blind acceptance (“literal fundamentalism”) and one of complete suspicion (“secular postmodernism”). Navigating our way between these extremes will help us get a feel for the wheel—and hopefully discover the richness of the Bible.

Literal Fundamentalism

A popular biblical theme park in Texas depicts dinosaurs and people living together in the Garden of Eden. The creators and enthusiastic visitors revere the Bible as, quite literally, “words from God.” Scripture, they say, is exempt from contemporary archaeology, linguistics, science, history, and cultural studies. In fact, for them, the trajectory of knowledge is opposite—the Bible teaches us about contemporary science (which may explain why one can find Deuteronomy and dinosaurs in the same space). If the Bible says that God made the world in six days or that Jonah lived in a fish’s stomach, then that is what happened and no further discussion is needed. Christians who subscribe to this view are known as *literal fundamentalists*. Most will stop at nothing to reconstruct their existence with respect to the Bible, and they are bold enough to assume that they have the signature (original) version of God’s word. Unfortunately, their all-gas-and-no-brake interpretation of the word can sometimes crash them head-on into the historical inaccuracies and inconsistencies within the Bible. They often speed by the rich nuances and healing power of the Gospels in favor of black-and-white answers. Christians are not alone in this regard.

An equivalent view is found in Islamic fundamentalism. The Qur’an (meaning “recitation”) is revered as a miracle. According to fundamentalist Muslims, the Qur’an is *the* direct and final divine revelation given to Muhammad (ca. 571–632) in Arabia during the seventh century. So, too, the Church of Jesus Christ, Latter-Day Saints (the Mormons) records that its founder, Joseph Smith (1805–1844), received a series of private revelations from God delivered by the angel Moroni, son of the prophet Mormon, near Binghamton, New York, in 1830. The angel presented golden tablets to Smith and provided him with spectacles to translate its writings. The Book of Mormon is revered, among other things, as a sequel to the New Testament. In fact, Mormons are still waiting for an unspecified date when God’s revelation will be finished, perhaps through another prophet. In most fundamentalist traditions, God’s “literal” authorship of the Bible makes every word sacred for its adherents.

Secular Postmodernism

On the opposite end of the spectrum, if not in another sphere altogether, stand secular postmodernists. Secular postmodernism, like biblical fundamentalism, has many varieties. However, the term typically refers to thinkers who have a profound skepticism toward the assumptions people make about knowledge, truth, reason, and religious faith. Some advocates question the validity of any claim to absolute truth (such as the “absolute” existence of a transcendent God or the Trinity). They understand the basis of “truth” as a story (sometimes referred to as a “narrative”) that privileges certain groups and marginalizes others. The “truth” of the Bible, they claim, is no exception. Some postmodernists evaluate claims to absolute truths, such as one might experience in the Bible, as either myths or a power plays to impose an overarching story (or “meta-narrative”) on the vulnerable and voiceless. They are particularly cautious of religious metanarratives. Common to those who share these sympathies is the fear of any person or system of people that claims to understand ultimate truth. Thus, according to a secular postmodernist, any dogmatist (a person who defines beliefs for a particular church) or absolutist (one who sees the world as black and white, such as a fundamentalist) is particularly naïve, reactionary, and dangerous. In contrast to the all-or-nothing literal fundamentalist, secular postmodernists have their feet firmly against the brake, refusing to acknowledge anything that has to do with faith. As anyone has witnessed when driving behind a garbage truck, it’s hard to get to your destination when your foot is on the brake. Similarly, it is difficult to discover the heart of Jesus’ message when stopping short of the transcendent and universal elements of faith that prompted the writing of the Bible in the first place.

This synopsis of fundamentalist and postmodernist viewpoints is not meant to deny their prevalence, complexity, and relevance or to wish them away. To the contrary, they each provide a partial description of the ways in which contemporary Western thought and opinion unfolds, and they offer a corrective to our sometimes lazy interpretations of Scripture. They are moods that seem to represent deep preconceptual attitudes toward the meaning of existence and thus are worthy of consideration. They are the ways in which people characteristically apprehend the world and their place in it. Langdon Gilkey once explained that these moods are not philosophies as much as they are backgrounds for specific philosophies of life. They are presuppositions of thought, sometimes unconscious or unreflective, that form part of the cultural life of an epoch. In the following chapters, we will evaluate these descriptions, especially as they inform and explain the current atmosphere in which people approach the Bible, if not life itself.

Beginning to Interpret the Bible

To begin the analysis of any biblical passage, we should *not* ask “Is it true?” but rather “*What* is true?” or “What does it *intend* to say?” Focusing on subject matter (as opposed to the truth of the matter) upholds the long-standing teaching of the Western Christian church, going back as far as Athanasius (296–373), Jerome (347–419), and Augustine (354–430). The idea is this: The inspired truth—that which God intends to communicate to us—of a biblical passage is usually not the “obvious,” modern-day interpretation that comes to mind in the reader. Rather, God’s truth is shrouded in the idioms and thought patterns of the original human authors and it is up to us—with some help from the Holy Spirit and much diligent research—to bring the word alive today. The original authors did not intend to write a static history of Jesus. The dynamic structure of the Bible demands our active participation, translation, interpretation, and appropriation into our lives.

This interpretative principle is guided by the fact that we have unprecedented resources today for knowing the past. Techniques for uncovering, classifying and reconstructing the ancient world are scientific and extensive. For example, we know the history of Israel far better than the apostles Peter or Paul could have, and specialists have more data about Peter and Paul than their ancient contemporaries. Scholars tell us that the churches existed before one line of the New Testament was ever actually recorded in text. Twenty years separates the lifetime of Jesus from the oldest book in the New Testament, Paul’s First Letter to the Thessalonians (ca. 49).

A COMMUNITY RECORD OF FAITH

Preaching and worship preceded writing about the risen Christ, and a number of biblical writings sometimes developed in response to controversies in and around the emerging Christian communities. Believers gathered in groups to pray and to celebrate a common developing faith. Their faith, we are told, rested

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on the testimony of eyewitnesses and others. They claimed to share a personal relationship with Jesus, interacting with him as we would our neighbors, friends, and family. Thus the Bible is *NOT* a history book or news commentary, but a communal record of faith. As such, it requires unique rules of engagement.

Not surprisingly, then, a number of problems with the Bible are resolved when we utilize a variety of methods to assess biblical religious teachings and spiritual messages. Without assistance from several types of research, for example, our contemporary way of reading news reports, novels, or histories may cause us to overlook and/or discern the subtle, allegorical, and/or the direct, literal meanings of Scripture. We are often caught between the brake pedal (suspicion) and the gas (blind acceptance), and thus we tend to fall short—or overshoot—our destination. By studying history and language, culture and society, and anything else that pertains to a given era, we try to establish what the authors meant. In the process, we may come to know people of great religious faith and complexity, not unlike some people of our day. We learn more about their choice of analogies and metaphors, and we learn the strategies that they used to communicate of the reality of Jesus, his mission, and discipleship. In the end, of course, our nuanced understanding of biblical authors frees us to bring the Word to life in the metaphors, symbols, and actual events of our own age.

METAPHOR

Metaphor may be described as a kind of verbal dare. Someone interprets one reality using terms borrowed from a different reality. For example, a term or phrase from one context (such as an apple falling close to its tree) is related to another term or phrase from a different context (such as a child who looks or acts like a parent). A “child” (the *subject*) relates to “apple” (the *vehicle*) while “tree” (subject) relates to “parent” (vehicle). In logical terms, “A is *like* B.” Metaphor, however, can take several forms: (1) a standard *metaphor*—“A is B”; (2) *simile*—A is *like* B; or (3) *synecdoche*—“A is used in the place of B,” where A is part of B or vice versa (for example, “His parents bought him a new set of wheels [car]”). In short, metaphors stir attention and facilitate understanding, particularly when directed toward someone who is familiar with one context but unfamiliar with another. The results can be quite powerful.

The Problem of Metaphor

Some metaphors are well known in contemporary English: *wallflower* (a shy or unpopular person who does not participate in events), *cold fish* (an aloof person), or *wet blanket* (one who discourages enthusiasm or enjoyment). Other metaphors, however, are far more complex, particularly those from Scripture

that are derived from other languages and cultures (such as Greek or Aramaic), or if the context is based on unfamiliar historical settings (such as the Hellenistic world of the New Testament). Even modern English metaphors do not translate well into other modern languages. Consider the following example: *“Andrew is like a sheep.”*

When translated to or from other modern languages, this sentence can take on the following meanings:

“Andrew has long hair.”

“Andrew is a drunkard.”

“Andrew does not answer back.”

“Andrew follows without thinking.”

“Andrew is a young fellow waiting for girls to follow him.”

We can’t easily bridge the gap between modern metaphors, much less discern the meaning of ancient metaphors. We need proper tools, symbols, and ways of reading that help us understand other cultures.

Fortunately, Jesus was a champion of metaphors, and he left us with some tools that will help. We’ll learn more about his technique later. For now, we must recognize that it is critical to understand Jesus’ worldview before we can understand his metaphors or his message. He knew the value of daring images to keep his audience interested, and he knew that his creativity would keep his mission alive in the hearts of later generations. It’s up to us to learn how and why he said what he said to the people he encountered in the context of his day, and then we can begin to bring his Spirit into modern translations of the word.

Jesus often used parables to deliver his metaphors. A parable has been variously described as a story with a scene from everyday life, or imaginary ones. A parable must tell a brief story with several levels of meaning: one meaning is clear from the story line; the other is on a deeper level that lures people toward other, more significant interpretations. In the pages ahead, we’ll learn some techniques that can help us peel away the various layers of interpretation contained within Jesus’ parables.

SYMBOL

Another term used in biblical scholarship is *symbol*. Like metaphor, there is a spectrum of definitions and implications associated with the word. In fact, symbol is a type of metaphor—where one term relates to another. Some claim that symbols such as earth, wind, and fire, for example, automatically touch nerves in people. They stir folks to feeling, even to thinking. Sometimes symbols remind us of something unfinished, of possibilities or needs to be filled. Symbols may express personal or collective histories in enigmatic ways. If I