

CHURCH HISTORY LITERACY

Lesson 15

Alexandria and Early Biblical Understanding

Have you ever had someone ask you about a very difficult passage of scripture? Have you ever read a passage and wondered what it means? Or, how it might be true? Perhaps you have wondered why the Old Testament forbids eating pig. Most Christians today will eat pork. Some might wonder why it is allowed today, especially in light of Jesus stating that he came to fulfill the law, not to destroy it. Maybe you have read Old Testament prophecies about Israel that seem to have not come true. You might have any number of questions about what a certain scripture means or how it applies today. In these questions, you are not alone.

All passages do not always seem to make immediate sense, leaving open the matter of “interpretation.” Some dismiss difficult passages as simply wrong. Many do not believe in a clear and inerrant inspiration of scripture. For these people, sometimes the easiest explanation is to declare a passage as a mistake. Others probe for a better understanding of the passage out of a conviction that the scripture is true, but hard to understand. While still others approach scripture in a non-literal fashion, using allegory and symbolism to explain difficult passages.

An example is the creation account in Genesis 1 and 2. Some readily dismiss the account as fictional mythology that is contrary to the evidence of science and archaeology. Others see the story as literally true and not at odds with the true history of earth, whether the science *de jour* of the day is consistent or not. These might note that science itself seems to change its view of true history on a regular basis. Still, others might see the account as a co-opting of a localized myth in Hebrew history which was appropriated under God’s divine hand not for a history lesson, but to teach the principles that God is the designer behind humanity, humanity was made in God’s image for fellowship with Him, and that man sinned and fell from the purity of that relationship.¹

For centuries Christians have sought to understand difficult Bible passages. A specific school of thought came out of Alexandria, Egypt, that is important in the annals of church history. That is our focus this class.

In order to understand the issues, we will look at Alexandria and its own religious heritage. We will then focus on an early Christian writing (*The Epistle of*

¹ These lessons of Genesis are also points that can be made and are usually made with the literal view of scripture. The difference being emphasized here pertains to whether Genesis is claiming the creation account to be literal as a historical science/archaeology lesson or simply a story or fable that is included for the force of its moral and religious lessons.

Barnabas) and two early church fathers, Clement of Alexandria and Origen. These focus points give us a good idea of what many scholars call the “Alexandrian” approach to scripture.

ALEXANDRIA

Alexandria was a large city at the mouth of the Nile where it dumps into the Mediterranean Sea. As a port city, it thrived with a large international population. Founded by and named after Alexander the Great, Alexandria had grown into the second largest city on earth by the first century, behind only Rome.

Among the masses of the Alexandrian population were a great number of Jews. Egypt was a refuge for Jews at various times throughout history going back before Abraham had his name changed! (Gen 12:10) A good map illustrates why: Egypt was relatively close to Israel. History and the Bible consistently show that many times Jews went to Egypt to avert a crisis. When the Babylonians were taking Israel into captivity, a large number of Jews escaped by fleeing to Egypt. Over time, the Jewish population in Egypt grew quite large. By the time of the New Testament, most of the Jews in Egypt had concentrated in Alexandria.

It was not just the Jews that found a home in Alexandria. As a cultural and literary center, Alexandria was home to adherents of many Greek philosophies as well as eastern religions (yes, Buddhism had followers in first century Alexandria). There was often an effort by scholars to find interrelations between the various philosophies and teachings. In that regard, Philo of Alexandria is worth noting.

Philo, one of the greatest Jewish philosophers and commentators of the Old Testament at the time of Christ lived in Alexandria. Philo, who lived from about 15 B.C. to 50 A.D. had a considerable influence on Hellenistic Judaism² and a resulting influence on certain aspects of early Christianity. Philo sought to find consistency between the Old Testament and the Greek philosophies prevalent in his day. One way he did so was by looking at the Old Testament in a bit of a different manner than many others. Rather than interpret the Old Testament literally, Philo used a symbolic/spiritual approach.

Philo taught, for example, that the sevenfold vengeance of Cain from Genesis 4:15 must be understood as a spiritual allegory. The passage itself reads, “But the Lord said to him, “Not so; if anyone kills Cain, he will suffer vengeance seven times over.” Then the Lord put a mark on Cain so that no one who found him would kill

² The term “Hellenistic Judaism” references the Judaism practiced outside Israel in the Greek speaking lands after the dispersion. Alexandria was the very Greek city that produced the Greek translation of the Old Testament referenced in earlier lessons and called the Septuagint.

him.” Of this, Philo wrote, “We must make up our minds that all such language is figurative and involves deeper meanings.... The irrational side [read that as the “physical/material side as opposed to the rational or thought side”] of the soul is divided into seven parts, seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, touching, speaking, begetting. Were a man to do away with the eighth, mind, which is the ruler of these and here called Cain, he would paralyze the seven also. For they are all strong by sharing the strength and vigor of the mind, and with its weakness they wax feeble” (*The Worse Attacks the Better*, 167-169).³

In every day terminology, one might present Philo’s argument/exposition of the Genesis passage as follows: “Don’t read Genesis 4:15 literally. It is symbolic. Cain represents the mind. So when God says, ‘If anyone kills Cain, he will suffer vengeance seven times over,’ God is talking about anyone who kills the mind. For the mind governs the seven parts of material man. These seven parts are the five senses of sight, hearing, smell, taste, and touch, along with two more aspects of physical man, speaking and procreating. So when one damages the mind, which rules over these seven aspects of man, one brings about a seven fold punishment, for seven parts of man are affected.”

While there is no substantive evidence that Philo was a Christian, there can be no doubt Philo heavily influenced Christianity. As the church moved into the second century, certain leaders and teachers of the church attempted to marry their faith with the Greek philosophies that held sway. This certainly followed the footsteps of Philo who sought to marry the Greek philosophers with the Old Testament and its teachings. Philo’s approach to scripture itself, as we see throughout this lesson, similarly affected a number within the church. Some scholars speculate that Philo also affected Paul, John, and the writer of Hebrews.⁴

³ Interestingly, Jewish history did not save the writings of Philo for posterity, Christians did. Ultimately, Judaism went through phases of disinterest in philosophy and did not use Philo in such a way that his writings were copied adequately to last until our day. That the church saved Philo’s writings is not that surprising. Philo was among the first, if not the very first, to marry philosophy with biblical faith. Philo was classically trained and considered the philosophers in a religious light. Philo referred to Plato as “the most holy Plato.” Philo also considered Pythagoras, Aristotle, and many others as having accurate and ultimate views of religious/philosophical truth. The interchange in philosophy and religion went both ways for Philo. He considered Moses as the “summit of Philosophy.” Philo considered the development of Greek philosophy a build on the teachings of Moses. Philo saw Moses as the “teacher” of not only Pythagoras (who was born around 570 B.C.) but also other key Greek philosophers. Some early church fathers indicate that Philo became a Christian, or at least had interactions with Christians late in his life. Eusebius wrote in the early 300’s that two of the groups Philo wrote of were both Christian communities (though scholars doubt that today). Eusebius also indicated that Philo met Peter while both were in Rome shortly before Peter’s death (*The Encyclopedia of Philosophy*).

⁴ C.H. Dodd, R. Williamson, and H.W. Attridge.

As a thriving international center, Alexandria was soon home to Christianity as well, although we do not know exactly how the early church was established and grew there. Acts 2:10 indicates that there were some Jews from Egypt in Jerusalem hearing the Apostles at Pentecost. We also know that in the range of 50 A.D., Priscilla and Aquila met Apollos in Ephesus. Acts 18:24-25 reads, “Meanwhile a Jew named Apollos, a native of Alexandria, came to Ephesus. He was a learned man, with a thorough knowledge of the Scriptures. He had been instructed in the way of the Lord, and he spoke with great fervor and taught about Jesus accurately, though he knew only the baptism of John.”

In addition to those biblical references, we have *The Epistle of Barnabas*, which was likely written in Alexandria.

THE EPISTLE OF BARNABAS

This epistle is one of the earliest writings beyond the New Testament that bears significantly on how parts of the early church interpreted the Old Testament in light of their faith in Jesus as Messiah. The Epistle, which Lightfoot asserts was written between 70 and 79 A.D.,⁵ uses the allegorical approach to the Old Testament much as Philo did.⁶

Some of the allegorical approach of the epistle does not seem so strange to us today. For example, when God tells Moses in Exodus 33:3 to “Go up to a land flowing with milk and honey,” the epistle asserts that the real meaning of the passage references Christians as entering that promised land. The milk and honey is seen as illustrating the nourishment of infants, which applies to Christians as the food of our faith that nourishes us (6:13-17).

Similarly, in chapter 7 of the epistle, there is a great deal written about Jesus as the real meaning of the scapegoat in the Day of Atonement (*yom kippur*) regulations written up in Leviticus 23, among other places. Much of this might be found in any Christian work or sermon today.

⁵ Chapter 16 of the *Epistle* indicates it was written after the destruction of the Temple in 70 A.D. The question for scholars is, *how soon after?* The epistle indicates it was likely written before Hadrian rebuilt Jerusalem in 132-135 A.D. So, the authorship is somewhere between 70 and 132 A.D. Because of this early dating, *The Epistle of Barnabas* is included by scholars in the collection of works known as the “Apostolic Fathers” (if interested, please see the earlier lesson that explains this categorizing).

⁶ Some find this same allegorical approach employed by Paul to some degree. For example, in Galatians 4:21-31, Paul writes of the two children of Abraham born by Hagar and Sarah. Paul writes that the mothers “may be taken figuratively, for the women represent two covenants.”

Still, some of the allegorical insight in the epistle seems out of sync with teaching today. For example, in chapter 9 of the Epistle, we read something that seems almost as if we have found an early edition of *The Bible Code*! In talking about Abraham instituting circumcision, the author draws an interesting allegory from Genesis 14:14 and Genesis 17:23-27. From Genesis 14, we read that Abraham had 318 trained men born in his household. The Genesis 17 passage indicates that Abraham circumcised these men born in his household. The epistle breaks down the 318 number as “10 and 8” plus 300.⁷ This much is valid from the Hebrew of Genesis. The author of the epistle, however, is not working with the Hebrew! He is using the Septuagint, the Greek version of the Old Testament that, coincidentally, was translated in Alexandria!⁸ The author notes that in the Greek, the letter “I” is used for the number “10,” while the letter “H” is used for the number “8.” The letter “T” is used for “300.” The epistle puts all this together as a profound message! The author asserts that the numbers 10 and 8 are ordered as such in the Old Testament because they are the letters “I” and “H” which are the first two letters in the Greek form of “Jesus” (IHΣΟΥΣ). This would have been a common abbreviation of the name Jesus, allowing the writer to assert,

“Observe that it [Genesis 14:14] mentions the ‘ten and eight’ first, and then...the ‘three hundred.’ As for the ‘ten and eight,’ the I is ten and the H is eight; thus you have ‘Jesus’” (9:8).

And, for the 300? This the author notes is the Greek T, which is “shaped like a cross.”

So, we see in this part of the epistle an allegorical approach to scripture that goes beyond any apparent meaning and instead claims to discern a secret spiritual messianic message in an otherwise innocuous passage.

The epistle takes other Old Testament passages on dietary laws and explains them in a spiritual sense as well. Where Moses wrote that the Jews were not to eat pig (Lev. 11:7-8), the epistle asserts “Moses spoke spiritually.” The real meaning of

⁷ The Hebrew text itself does not give the number as “318.” As would be expected, the text sets out the number as “8, 10, and 300.” This is translated 318 by the N.I.V. because it is the normal way to write that number. But, the Epistle makes a point out of the way the number is broken down in Hebrew as well as the order of the breakout (e.g., 8 first, then 10, then 300).

⁸ At the risk of bogging this down unnecessarily, accuracy dictates the additional note here that the ordering of the numbers, which is a big deal to the Epistle is found in the Hebrew, but not in the Septuagint copies we have today. So, it seems that the author uses the Hebrew for the ordering of the numbers, but uses the Greek for the actual numbers and their allegorical meaning.

this passage is seen as indicating that one was not to associate with men who acted like pigs! (10:2-3) The epistle spends several chapters explaining the dietary laws for eating everything from eagles and hyenas to shellfish and eels. After doing so, the writer concludes, “You now have the full⁹ story concerning food!” (10:10)

Over and over in the *Epistle of Barnabas* we read interpretations of the Old Testament in allegorical terms. Perhaps the most important offering of the epistle in this regard concerns the nation of Israel itself. In chapter 13, the author asserts that the true nation of Israel, the true heir of the promises of Abraham, are not the Jews themselves, but rather Christians. The Jews were not worthy for God’s everlasting covenant, illustrated poignantly by the sin that compelled Moses to throw down and break the tablets with the Ten Commandments. Christians received God’s promised inheritance through Christ. Similarly, though Jerusalem’s temple was destroyed at the time of writing, God himself built the *real* temple of God in the Christian believer (16:1-8).

To some degree, this message might seem consistent with the apostolic message of Paul and the book of Hebrews about the church being the Israel of faith and the temple of God, but it is not! Paul teaches that the true Israel were those who were not only descendants of Abraham, but were also those who set their hearts on God. The church does not replace this Israel. The church is grafted on and considered spiritual offspring and heirs of Abraham along with the true spiritual Israel. This is why Paul sets out in Romans 9-11 that God is not yet finished with Israel in his plan!

CLEMENT OF ALEXANDRIA

Clement of Alexandria¹⁰ is an interesting individual about whom we know a lot, in some ways, and in other ways little to nothing at all! The fourth century church historian Eusebius explained that Clement was the head of the catechetical School of Alexandria (read that “the Alexandrian Seminary!”) at a time we can reasonably date around 200 A.D.

While much of Clement’s personal history is lost to us, we still have five of his books today. Clement seems to have written these five as instruction books for those aspiring to be Christian leaders (Olson, *The Story of Christian Theology*).

⁹ The pun on “full story about food” is not there directly in the Greek. The Greek word translated “full” was used, however, in the sense of fruit ripening to maturity, so perhaps a bit of a play on words was intended.

¹⁰ This is not the “Clement” who wrote 1 Clement that we looked at early in this class. That letter from the church at Rome to the church at Corinth was written by “Clement of Rome” not “Clement of Alexandria!”

Clement took the Old Testament scriptures, interpreted them in the best Alexandrian method of allegory, and sought to reconcile those scriptures, the teachings of the church, and the best of the philosophical teaching of his day. Clement used philosophy vigorously, teaching that “all truth is God’s truth wherever it may be found.” Clement would go so far as to write that certain philosophical insight was “a work of divine providence” (*Stromata* 1:1). He saw philosophy as God’s preparation for Greeks to receive the gospel in the same way that the Old Testament was God’s preparation for Jews.

Clement appreciated the aspects of Platonism¹¹ that sought one ultimate reality and religious truth shunning the pantheon of multiple Gods that were part of Greek and Roman legend (and still worshipped by many in his day). In this sense, Platonism was not just an ally of the church against paganism, but was even a breeding ground for potential conversions.

Clement also liked the logical precision of philosophy. Using philosophy’s dialectic (or approach) of critical examination was key for Christian faith. To Clement, faith and reason worked together as important cogs that purifies the church from heresy and propelled it into truth.

Clement’s embracing of Platonism led him away from certain apostolic and biblical truths in ways that have affected the church today. For example, while the Gnostics believed that all matter was evil, a position shunned by Clement, Plato taught that matter was certainly lesser in value than reason and spirit. Clement embraced this Platonism, teaching that the body and matter in general was a “lower nature” in contrast to the “higher nature” of the soul.

Why do we say this is contrary to the apostolic teaching on this matter? To Paul and others in the Bible, the human (body, soul and spirit) was altogether God’s creation. The entire person, material and spiritual, was made by God to be with God. The fall did not affect body only; the spirit and soul also fell from sin. The “flesh” or “sin nature” that Paul writes about was not referencing Plato’s lesser nature of the physical body. For Paul, the “flesh” or “sin nature” was the entire fallen man: body, soul and spirit. Once man is regenerated and born again, a process starts again toward the purity we have finalized upon the day of glory. The purification process applies to all aspects of our humanity. Our minds are being renewed, even as we apply ourselves to living in purity with our bodies.

Some would argue (Edward Fudge, *The Fire that Consumes*) that Clement and Platonism also affected the church’s view of the eternity of the soul. For Clement

¹¹ By this, we include not just the teachings of Plato, but those who took Plato’s basic premises and expounded on them.

and other early church adherents of Platonism, the soul was seen as indestructible.¹².

A fair reading of Clement demonstrates his philosophical embrace and allegorical approach to scripture as dictating a fairly rigid asceticism. For Clement, we grow in Godliness as we abandon our bodily desires and passions. Clement viewed God as passionless and thereby set out the Christian goal accordingly. Clement achieved this view of God and man through his combination of consolidating philosophy with faith and allegorizing the Old Testament.

In this sense, we find a ready danger for the allegorical school of interpretation. Once one abandons the ready and apparent meaning of a text, all sorts of doctrines can be “unearthed” and justified. It is the difference between truly reading scripture for the original message and taking a current message and thought and transporting it into scripture.

This same danger exists in a less apparent form today. We have all listened to sermons and teachings that take current philosophies and principals of parenting, for example, and transport those ideas into some rendering of an Old Testament story. That is not to say that the principals are not valid. But, we should certainly recognize the dangers of what we are hearing or doing!

ORIGEN

After Clement of Alexandria, we have a follow up early church leader named Origen. Origen left an imprint on the church that caused a great deal of trouble. This legacy pertained to the “full” divinity of Jesus. We should properly deal with this as we consider the church’s development and understanding of the doctrine of the trinity.

For this lesson, we look simply at Origen’s teachings on Old Testament interpretation. Origen was born around 185 A.D. in Alexandria. He lived until around 254 or 255 A.D. He was a prolific writer with over 800 books to his name. He watched as his father was imprisoned and martyred and was devout from an early age. He always wanted to share in his father’s martyrdom, and eventually did, though at a much later date (his father was martyred when Origen was just 16). Tradition teaches that Origen’s mother hid his clothes so he could not go outside and join his father). At just the age of 18, Origen was asked to lead the Alexandrian Catechetical School (again, read that seminary!).

¹² Other early church Platonists would acknowledge the scriptural truth that God could destroy both body and soul, but these often forgot about it when reasoning about Hell

Origen taught that there were three layers of interpretation for scripture. He related these three layers to the three aspects of a person, “body,” “soul,” and “spirit.” The “body” was the literal interpretation. Origen admitted that for some scriptures, this was a useful, if somewhat limiting, understanding of the passages. For example, the Ten Commandments are useful when understood on this level.

The second and more substantial layer of interpretation was that of the “soul.” This layer sought to establish the moral lesson or ethical principal behind the text. In this sense, for example, Origen followed the Epistle of Barnabas on the issues of the Old Testament’s prohibition of certain foods as really meaning one should not associate with certain types of people.

The third layer of meaning, the highest layer, was that of the Spirit.” This spiritual layer was most mystical. It was at this layer that the Old Testament passages were related to Christ or the Christian’s relationship to God.

Origen was combating skepticism and mockery by certain thought leaders of his day who ridiculed and mocked scripture as absurd. Passages that spoke of God’s “jealousy,” for example, did not fit within Origen’s philosophical understanding of God. While later theology would provide alternate understandings for the Biblical anthropomorphisms (passages that use human terms and attributes to describe God and his actions), Origen was relegated to re-interpreting those passages out of a literal meaning into a spiritual and allegorical one.

POINTS FOR HOME

Praise God the core message of scripture and our redemption – God coming to earth in Jesus Christ, his death for our sins, his resurrection to glory, and our salvation by faith and trust in him and his death – is simple enough and clear enough for a child to understand. There are, however, other parts of scripture that are much more difficult to understand.

In this point, we come full turn to where this lesson started. When confronted with passages of scripture that are difficult at best, what do we do? How do we understand those passages? And those that may not be so difficult, do we take our own views of life and put them into the Bible and its verses or stories? Biblical scholarship is important. It is the Lord’s word that we seek to understand. We should delight in our chances to study and do so with diligence.

We recognize as Paul told Timothy, “All scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work” (2 Tim. 3:16-17).

And, so we should do our “best to present [ourselves] to God as one approved, a workman who does not need to be ashamed and who *correctly handles the word of truth*” (2 Tim. 2:15).

Yet in the midst, we should not lose track of the *mystery* that is made known to us in Christ and is Christ (Eph. 1:9). For there is truth that God has layered multiple truths onto his scripture.

So, how do we do this? That is a subject for later classes. Suffice it to say, we do it with great care! A good resource for someone who wants to probe this further is the Gordon Fee book, *How to Read the Bible for All It's Worth*.

How we understand scripture depends on what “kind” of scripture we are reading. There is one approach for an epistle that differs a bit from reading a historical book of the Old Testament. Similarly, our approach to a Proverb is somewhat different than approaching Revelation. That being said, certain aspects of study stay consistent. Initially, always pray for God’s insight as you study. Then, consider the following as a general approach.

First, determine what type of passage you are reading by the nature of the book itself. In other words, if you are reading from 1 Corinthians, know you are reading from a letter. If you are in Revelation, know you are in a book of prophecy.

Second, read the entire book, or section in order to put the verse into its fuller context. Obviously if you are reading a verse in Psalms, this does not mean read the entire book of Psalms! But certainly read the entire Psalm that involves your verse.

Third, as you read, make notes about the major points being made. Understanding the big picture often helps understanding the finer points in a passage.

Fourth, remember that you need to understand the meaning of the passage as it was first written. In other words, before we try to understand what Paul means for us in a passage in his letters, we should first try to understand what Paul meant for his readers. Then we work on applying the scripture to our situation today.

Now when we are still stumped at what a scripture means after working through the above, we need to start looking at other verses that are referenced in margins, start reading commentaries, and seeking other information to assist us. Don’t lose faith! This is some of the fun of the journey!