

Presuppositions and Biblical Interpretation

The Role of Hermeneutics and Exegesis in Biblical Studies

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Every student studying for the ministry has taken the required course of "Hermeneutics and Exegesis." Both words have their roots in the Greek language and culture. The word "exegesis" should be discussed first, in that biblical research begins there. The word derives from *exegetomai* which literally means, "I go or take out;" more technically it has to do with taking something out of something, and in literary studies, especially in terms of ancient literature it means "to make the meaning known." It means more than to translate from one language to another, it is used to describe something much more involved, the mining of ore from a hidden source; for our purposes, to mine the ore of the revelation of God from the mine of Scripture. Exegesis in biblical studies has to do with digging out the intended meaning of the ancient writings of the Hebrew and Greek Scriptures and giving interpretation of its meaning for the modern reader. Biblical exegesis is the science of biblical excavation.

The second word of our study, "hermeneutics," is another Greek term drafted into the service of biblical interpretation. The English word "hermeneutics" comes from the Greek verb *hermeneuo* and noun *hermeneia*, meaning to interpret or tell the meaning of something, as did the Greek deity Hermes who was the messenger having wings on his feet in Greek mythology. He was said to be the god who gave language to humans, and later taught them to read and write.

In biblical studies hermeneutics is considered the art of interpretation and differs from exegesis in that it takes the findings of the exegesis and considers them in terms of their application to the original readers and then to the modern reader. So, the science of exegesis has to do with digging the ore from the mine of these ancient documents considered as Sacred Scripture, where hermeneutics is the art of determining the value of the ore for the one intending to make use of it.

In this article it is the art of hermeneutics with which we are concerned. Here one takes the language of a text as derived from the exegetical enterprise and subjects it to a body of interpretative disciplines as (1) the laws of thought, (2) principles of logical argumentation, (3) literary analysis or composition criticism, (4) historical analysis, and most importantly (5) the application of the text of ancient piece of literature to the life of a person of another time and culture. One of the most useful ways of accomplishing this goal is to find examples of how it was done by others; especially, others whose practice of this art is considered exemplary, such as Jesus, Paul, or other similar figures. This is possible with the stories or parables of Jesus and his use of rabbinic argumentation, as may be seen in Matt 22.

Hidden Dangers of the Hermeneutic Task

In spite of the expertise involved these disciplines one often finds conflicts in the exegetical findings of different scholars, but the greater problem is seen in the area of hermeneutics. Most controversy associated with the meaning of Scripture derives not from the failings of the exegesis but with application of the ore mined from the text. The christological controversies of the first five hundred years in the history of Christianity were not problems of exegesis but the presence of presuppositions that offset the objectivity of the interpreter. Such is also the case with every major controversy rising out of the Protestant Reformation. The meaning of Scripture carried little weight in the Roman Church; its dogma was rooted in tradition and the pontifications of the Vatican hierarchy. However, with the Reformation scholars and the doctrine of *sola scriptura*,

matters of biblical teaching were taken more seriously. Such was the case with the doctrine of salvation by faith only, predestination, election, eternal security, and their eschatological beliefs. The controversies associated with these matters were not the result of exegetical failures, but with the presuppositions of the theologians that so heavily influenced their interpretations and applications of the exegetical data; e.g. the role of grace, faith only, predestination, and the nature of the inspiration of Scripture, and biblical authority.

Interpretative Methods of Jesus

The role presupposition plays in the way many interpreters use the words of Jesus in Matt 19, *et al*, can be seen in Jesus' use of Genesis 2 in his discussion of the abuse of women by the Jewish men and their use of illegitimate writs of divorcement in ridding themselves of an unwanted wife. Jesus' use of Scripture in Matt 19:1-12 is a hermeneutical example of how he interpreted and applied the words Scripture. It is clear that he did not consider all Scripture as a collection of universal mandates applicable to all persons, in all places, at all times, under all circumstances; a presupposition of considerable appeal in the thinking of many fundamentalists.

Concerning his biblical understanding of marriage, Jesus says to those questioning him that it was God's will that man leave his father and mother and be united to a wife, and become one flesh. Jesus then tells his interrogators that what God had joined together, man should not separate. His understanding of the texts he quotes is that it was the will of God that a man join himself to a wife and what God had joined together man should not separate.

The area of most interest in this text has been on Jesus' understanding of God's will concerning a man putting away the wife to whom he had been joined. Jesus made it clear that it was the will of God as that a man remain joined to his wife as expressed in this text; but, what of the will of God concerning a man leaving father and mother and joining himself to a wife. This was clearly the will of God as well, and this was reinforced by Jesus. But was he in compliance with the will of God in this matter. It is clear that man, identified

throughout the Genesis 2 text as *ha adam* (the man), transliterated in the Greek Septuagint as “*adam*” and *anthropos* with the article, was to marry. The word man is to be understood as “all men–mankind,” and this is reinforced by Jesus’ use of *anthropos* in quoting verse 24.

So, from Gen 2:22-24 it appears that it is the will of God that all men must leave father and mother and be joined to a wife. There can be no escaping the fact that if all Scripture is to be understood as absolute truth and, thus, applicable universally to all men, in all places, at all times, under all circumstances, then Jesus did not live his life in complete compliance to the will of God as expressed in Gen 2:24. Such a conclusion, however, is not warranted unless one approaches the text with the presupposition that all Scripture is to be understood as absolute truth applicable to all men, in all places, at all times, under all circumstances.

Principles of Interpretation

Most biblical scholars do acknowledge that the Scriptures are to be recognized as the communication of God to man, but how that communication is to be viewed as a body of literature and how man is to understand and apply it as literature is a matter of much controversy. Most students of the Bible readily acknowledge that the Bible is a body of literature consisting of narratives and letters, not a book that dropped down from heaven with every word inscribed with the stylus of God. So, we attempt to understand these writings as literature and utilize certain principles of interpretation in our efforts to understand them. An example of such a set of principles readily acknowledged by most student of the Bible are those of John Wycliffe. Even though time worn they are time tested and are yet recognized as exemplary of hermeneutical principles of interpretation used by Bible students today. Wycliffe’s rules of interpretation are as follows:

It shall greatly help you to understand Scripture,
if you mark not only what is spoken or written,
but of whom, and to whom,
with what words,

at what time,
where,
to what intent,
with what circumstances,
considering what goes before
and what follows.

Every text of Scripture must be understood through the words used, and the words must be understood in their context. Identifying the human author of the words is also important, whether the author is known by name or not. The recipients of the words will very often have a great deal to do with the meaning of the words as well as the location of the recipients and the location of the writer. What the writer intended to communicate by the words, what the circumstances were, and the contexts of the words, and what proceeds and what follows the text under consideration.

It should be obvious that the meaning one draws from the text must be readily acknowledged as “what he sees!” Others may also see what he sees, but others may not. Why is this, if they have all used the same exegetical skills and followed the same hermeneutical principles? The reason for the difference may not lie in the exegetical work but in the presuppositions governing the exegete’s thinking as he engages in his exegetical enterprise.

Presuppositions are powerful things, both legitimate and illegitimate presuppositions. One of the most influential prepositions is that which most influenced much of the scientific community and the liberal scholarship of our universities in social sciences and religion. This would be the presupposition inherited from the European Enlightenment of the eighteenth century, which insisted that there was no divine causation within the universe, only that which occurs within the confines of natural law. This was an announcement to the world that there was no supernatural beings or supernatural activity such as miracles. As a result of the presupposition of no divine causation, which has not by any stretch of the imagination been scientifically established only assumed to be true, it is argued that everything in the Scriptures having to do with

the presence or power of the supernatural is to be interpreted as the creation of the human author.

All believers have a will to believe. A belief held by a person is that person's subjective understanding. His view cannot be called his objective view; it is the view of the subject of the sentence not the object of the sentence.

Influence of the Enlightenment

The European Enlightenment of the 18th century produced several ideologies, which were intended to provide ways for man to arrive at truth through the processes of discursive reasoning. The term "absolute," however, was not used to define the conclusions drawn from reason, nor was the word "relative" found to be useful to the discussion. Scottish philosopher John Locke, followed by other rational empiricists (David Hume, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, and Immanuel Kant), introduced a way of determining truth called rational empiricism.

In this philosophical ideology truth is determined by the physical senses of man as interpreted by discursive reasoning. All matters of truth drawn from human communication must be determined by the content of explicit statements and what may be implicitly drawn from such statements. Conclusions drawn from this discursive reasoning process were at best the subjective understandings of men in their employment of the powers of ratiocination. Objective truth could only be determined by empirical data, which may be scientifically determined by observation of natural phenomena, experimentation to determine the laws associated with the phenomena, followed by the consistent demonstration of the phenomena as to the natural laws associated with it in terms of cause and effect.

The Will of God as Absolute Truth

The expression "the will of God" is given to many interpretations, but to claim that the will of God, as revealed in Scripture, is "absolute truth" does not appear to have some problems when applied to the interpretation of Scripture. The term absolute

becomes important as a theological concept in Thomas Aquinas' treatise *Summa Theologica* with his reference to God as an Absolute Being, meaning an infinite being whose existence is not contingent or the product of a cause and effect process occurring within the confines of natural law. He was the Prime Mover or First Cause, himself being uncaused. This is the view expressed in his argument that the very fact of creation demands a creator; called in theism the cosmological argument for the existence of God.

In the theology of the Reformation the term absolute was used to speak of God's absolute sovereignty and as an adjective to reinforce the concept of God's word as absolute truth. This concept became an essential part of the theology of the Protestant movement of Europe in the 17th century; especially, in the theology of John Calvin, Knox, and Zwingli of what came to be known in Europe as the Reformed Church.

From the sovereignty of God followed the view that if God was absolute, then all utterances of God were absolute and could not be questioned. In this thinking the traditional view of the meaning of Scripture became absolute in the same sense that "the dogma" of the Roman Catholic Church, from which the Reformed Church had separated itself, was considered absolute truth. This view exchanged dogma for dogma in the name of *sola scriptura*, which did not mean what voice of Scripture stated, but what the authoritative spokesmen of the Reformed Church heard the voice of Scripture state.

The Eighteenth Century Enlightenment gave another meaning to the term using it in the philosophical discussion to speak of the absolutism as contrasted with relativism. In philosophical discussion these terms were not antagonistic toward one another; in religion, however, it was a different matter. Those thinking themselves absolutists discouraged inquiry or questioning of what was considered absolute truth; i.e. that which was the traditional or understanding of the meaning of Scripture. Those not sharing this view were identified as "relativists," whose questioning of "the absolute truth" of the traditionally established interpretations of Scriptures was a rejection of the absolute sovereignty of God and the doctrine of *sola scriptura*.

If every word of God is absolute truth, then every word of it is inspired verbally in its entirety and is a body of instruction from God. The view that all Scripture was to be understood as a body of absolute truth assured the believer that they had the will of God to instruct them in all matters of life; all they need do is accept it unquestioningly and obey whether they understood it or not.

The problem here is that the greater majority of the people who called themselves Christians either could not read the Scriptures or they had no access to them, only the scholastic community could read, interpret, and translate the Sacred Writings for the people. So, this body of absolute truth was what the scholastics determined it to be. All manuscripts of the Bible were written in Hebrew, Greek, and Latin and only the clergy and academics could know what the Scriptures actually said; hence, the concept of dogma (i.e. authoritative decrees) concerning the authoritative teaching of the church became the sanctioned tradition of Christianity, even with its diversity of traditions in the form of sectarian divisions within the Reformation Movement.

Objective and Subjective Truth

This method of determining truth empirically has remained in place in the scientific community to the present day, in spite of significant challenges; however, the way one determines matters of a non-empirical nature has had no such consensus, from the beginning of the enlightenment to the present. This is true within all areas of inquiry: intellectual, emotional, and social; especially in realms of historical investigation, and in no area more so than in the historical investigation of religious truth claims.

Interpretations of communication is more complex than observable empirical data, due to the subjectivism of those doing the interpretation of data of communication. The truth contained within communication is found within the words and the ideas or concepts associated with those words and the syntactical arrangement of those words in sentences. Even one's interpretation of empirical data is subject to the language used to discuss it, and more so with data which may be empirically verified.

This fact has proven to be a great difficulty for man; especially, in his desire to have certitude of mind concerning the meaning of that which is found in ancient writings such the Old and New Testament Scripture. The interpretation of an expression of thought is determined by multiple factors such as the definition of the terms, the context in which they are found, and the variety of meanings associated with these terms from text to text.

Contingent factors of interpretation have to do with the usage of words, concepts, syntax, and context, such contingent factors will always be an essential part of the interpretation process. To obtain the meaning of what we think of as objective truth is a subjective enterprise. One's interpretation of any matter even if he considers it objective or absolute truth, becomes subjective once he has subjected it to his thinking.

It can be argued theoretically that truth can be absolute, but any thought or statement uttered by a non-absolute and subjective being cannot be said to be more than the assumed conclusions of a subjective being. All matters "subjectivized" by the thought processes of a subject being cannot be more than a subjective statement of the subject uttering it. This does not make the statement either true or false; it is, none-the-less, a subjective statement.

Absolute truth is attainable, but only by means of the discursive reasoning process of the being to which absolute truth is revealed, and then he must be satisfied with the interpretative results of the reasoning process. Such is clearly possible if legitimate tools of interpretation are used. Aristotle taught that one ought to draw only such conclusions as are warranted by adequate evidence. Faithfulness to this "law of rationality" has been man's most effective means of determining truth. This process, however, does not always lead to absolute certainty, only certitude of mind. If the evidence considered is not "adequate" enough to warrant a given conclusion, then the conclusion drawn may not be the truth of a given matter.

Only arrogance would lead one to assume that his or her conclusions are always the absolute truth on a given matter. Objective truth is a reality, but it is not always that easy to attain. This is why the truth seeker must make every effort to gain the skills

necessary to mine out the ore of truth from that in which it dwells. Truth must always be seen as a treasure and is attained only by honest, competent, and thorough and investigation of the data provided. The skills necessary to investigation are not unavailable to us, but they are not given to us without effort, they must be attained with much desire and effort.

The Subjective Nature of Interpretation

One cannot make statements without words and all words are subject to interpretation in order to be functional or useful to intelligent beings. The Ten Words (*daberim*), or Commandments as they are called in English translations, are all subject to interpretation. The third command "Do not take the Lord's name in vain" is an excellent example of the need for interpretation of God's word by men. What does the word "vain" mean here in this text? The Hebrew word here is *shav* which is translated in the KJV as "vain" and "vanity" 44 times, "false" 5 times, and "to lie" twice. It can also mean emptiness, nothingness, or worthlessness. So what is being said here? What is forbidden? Further, the name that is not to be taken in vain, what is that name? In this text we have *Yahweh* used twice, *Elohim* once, and the word *shem* once. Is it *Yahweh* that is not to be uttered, which is the way the Hebrews understood the command, or was it *Elohim* (God) or *Shem* the word for "name," which is used in the place of *Yahweh* to prevent violating this command. Children are often scolded for saying the word "God," so also with the word "Lord." In some English translations, the word "Lord" is substituted for *Yahweh*, so if someone says "Oh my Lord," are they violating this command? Of course the Hebrew for Lord is *Adonai*, and it does not appear in this text.

The same kind of interpretative difficulty can be seen in other commandments, such as "You shall not kill." The Hebrew for kill is *ratsach*, which can be translated "to break into pieces, to kill, to slay, to put to death, execute, to kill by accident or by homicide." Those who attempt an interpretation of this commandment often insist that the word here means, "murder," but this cannot be determined by the Hebrew word used. So, how does one determine the nature of this prohibition against killing; especially, in view of the fact that God

himself instructs the Israelites to kill many of the people of Canaan. The rabbinic interpretative methods were diverse in determining the interpretation of this commandment.

One of the most famous controversies of Jesus' time was the debate over the fourth commandment, "Remember the Sabbath Day to keep it holy." The scribes of the Pharisees were in constant debate with Jesus concerning his "violations" of the Sabbath, but Jesus did not recognize their interpretations of this commandment as legitimate. No one was bound by their interpretative opinions and their attitude concerning his transgression of the Law were of little consequence to him. It is without dispute that most of the commandments of the ten *daberim* (words) from the violation of the Sabbath, to honoring father and mother, killing a man, adultery, stealing, giving false testimony and coveting that which belonged to ones neighbor. All were disputed concerning the absolute meaning or objective truth of each of these commandments. Why was this so if the Scriptures were so clear and no interpretative skills were necessary to fully grasp the meaning of God's word?

Matters of Religious Truth

Matters of religious truth are often distinguished as matters of faith and matters of judgment, opinion, or expediency. Matters of faith are not only matters to be confessed by those embracing them; they are often considered matters of life and death, or matters of eternity. Because of their gravity matters of faith are given great weight in terms of truthfulness of the statements from which such matters are determined. Because of this, determining the truth of the statements found in the sacred writings of a religious community is critical to that community. This is the underlying purpose of the creation of rules of interpretation for the use of those of the community of faith to utilize in their investigation of the content of their sacred writings as to meaning and application.

If a propositional statement is said to be absolute truth would it not follow that it cannot be subject to any mitigating or interpretative factors, which means "not subject to interpretation," and consequently the whole of human inquiry is prohibited or forbidden

and exegetical inquiry becomes a useless enterprise. The terms absolute, relative, objective, and subjective are all terms used in popular and also in academic discussion to qualify other terms. The use of adjectives are deemed necessary in order to properly define the term "truth." Why? Because we do not trust what we hear when someone simply uses the word "truth," he is suspect of being evasive or equivocal.

This was not the case with Jesus. When he said, "You shall know the truth and the truth shall make you free," what did he mean by the word "truth," absolute truth, relative truth, objective truth or subjective truth? Was it a subjunctive issue (either-or), or a conjunctive issue (both-and)? Why would any of these qualifying expressions be used? Why would one not simply say what he actually meant? In Jesus' case, he did. Never did he qualify his use of the word "truth." When he used the word "truth" he had no difficulty making himself understood. He did not need adjectives to make its meaning clear. When one suggests that such is necessary what is being implied about what has been said or written? The whole thing of absolute truth verses relative truth is an effort at imposing the problem of equivocation on everything said, whether inspired or not inspired.

The words of Jesus stand without the need of qualifying adjectives or adverbs. He said what he meant to say and those who repeated his words in the period of oral retelling of what he said were using the words and grammar of the language of the people, when this happens those retelling what they heard and those hearing the speaker's retelling of the wording used were engaging in a subjective action. He cannot be speaking objectively; he is speaking subjectively as a subject being.

Understanding the Will of God

God's expression of his will is subject to the circumstances of the giving of that will. The Greek word translated in English as "will," is much broader than many understand. The Greek *thelema*

may equally translate as “wish” or “desire,” which takes away the ominous overtones of the word “will.”

God’s will is not always issued as a mandate or command of a sovereign being, as was the imagery portrayed by many of the Reformer theologians. Jesus tried to show to reveal God to the people of his time as a God who was a father, whose will for his children was not a matter of issuing absolute mandates; rather, it was what he desired for his children, his sons and daughters, the offspring of Creation. This is a critical point because much of the imagery in which God is portrayed is that his will toward man consist of life or death mandates with severe consequences for failing to comply with his will. His will as portrayed by Jesus is not as much for his satisfaction as a sovereign being as much as it is his desire for his children, expressed as *agape*, good will toward.

This has been a constant problem for man and God’s attempt to reveal himself to them. At times the behavior of man has warranted God’s actions as an austere father who must respond to his children’s’ disobedience with severity in order to change their attitude and consequent behavior. Over the centuries men have been drawn to this image of God to the exclusion of all images of himself he has revealed. Jesus came to change that as may be seen in his words, “in that you have seen me you have seen the Father.”

It is the more austere image of God that developed in Israel following the captivities of Israel (722 BC) and Judah (586 BC). This was the portrait of God portrayed by Ezra in the return of Judah to the land of Israel around 516 BC. This concept of God was the prevailing one in the first century AD. When Jesus appeared, his mission as the Messiah was the redemption of Israel as well as the human race; hence, the concept of God portrayed by Jesus, the human revelation of God, was that of a Father. Jesus portrayal of God as the Father of the Luke 15:11-2 is the most revealing of all that Jesus showed us concerning the nature of God. Not only was God his Father, he was the Father of the whole of mankind; in fact, he created mankind (*anthropos*) in his image, after his own likeness.

Here is how Jesus' attempt to "show us the Father," came into conflict with the view of the Sovereign God of the Jewish hierarchy; especially the Pharisees, who were in constant tension with Jesus concerning the nature of the will of God. Jesus repeatedly revealed God's will as his desire for the development of men as beings created in his own image.

Man's concept of God has been one of the greatest problems in his relationship with God, his faulty presupposition of the nature of God. From the church of the fourth century to the time of the Reformation people were kept in subjection by the portrayal of God as a Sovereign Being whose punishment for disobedience of his will was rejection and even flames of fire, a presupposition instilled into the people by the clergy of the Roman church. Unfortunately, the Reformed Church carried over this concept into the Reformation Movement. This may be seen in the Puritan movement with their spokesman, Jonathan Edward's infamous sermon "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God."

Martin Luther and the tradition that followed for that part of the Reformation differed from the tradition of Calvin, Knox, *et al.* His emphasis was on the faith verses works doctrine and his concept of God was a rejection of the concept of God advanced by the Roman Church. Others preserved the austerity of God and the presupposition of the will of God as absolute mandates applicable to the whole of mankind. This presupposition has colored the theology of fundamentalism and its ultra-conservative mentality in a large contingent of modern day Christianity.

The eventual reaction to this portrait of God by many theologians of the Reformation, especially in Germany, was to swing the pendulum to the opposite extreme and portray God as a promiscuous parent who required no responsible decision making (acts of will) on the part of his children. Neither of these presuppositions of the nature of God was the God portrayed by Jesus. He said that he was here to show us the Father, and he did this in all he said and did. Jesus was a human manifestation of the moral being of God and he portrayed God as he was traditionally seen by

the Jews of his time, as a Holy God, whose holiness was manifested in his righteousness, his justice or fairness, and in his wrath or intolerance of evil. This way of seeing God Jesus never compromised; however, Jesus wanted man to see God as a Benevolent God as well, who manifested his goodness in his love (*agape*), his mercy (*eleios*) and his loving-kindness or grace (*charis*), all words that fill the New Testament but were sparse in the theology of the Reformed Church and modern day fundamentalism. Every word Jesus spoke, every story he told, every miracle he performed tells us something about the nature of God. The God Jesus revealed was the Father, *Abba*, the one who loved the human race he created and was here to deliver it from the power of sin to which it had enslaved itself.

It is clear that presuppositions play a significant role in biblical interpretation. In order for one to determine the adequacy of his interpretation of Scripture he must honestly question the presupposition with which he engages in the exegetical and hermeneutical task. Everyone comes to the text with presuppositions; i.e. things they believe to be true and beliefs they use in their interpretation of the text. It is not whether they have presuppositions but whether they are legitimate. One should always ask concerning his presupposed beliefs: "Is there every good reason to believe it and no good reason to doubt it."

Conclusion

One of the major problems of biblical interpretation has to do with the presuppositions the interpreter brings to the text to a matter of doctrine under consideration. Fundamentalists come to the text with the presupposition that every word of the text is dictated by God, thus, every expression of God's will is an absolute mandate binding upon all persons, in all places, at all times, under all circumstances.

The liberal interpreter comes to the text with the presupposition that the origins of the text of Scripture are not known and any use of Scripture must be a matter of personal choice, reinforced by the

Enlightenment belief that there is no evidence of divine causation associated with any sacred writings of any religion.

The sectarian traditionalist comes to the text with the presuppositions associated with the theology, dogma, or tradition of the sect with which he is identified. At the center of their belief system is the dogma or tradition of their sect. Sectarianism centers in the community and the beliefs of that community that distinguish it from the beliefs and practices of other communities of belief. In the beginning the church of the first century centered its beliefs in this person whom they believed to be the Messiah. Who he was, his identity and why he was here was the consuming passion of this community. Who they were was not what stood at the center of their existence; it was who he was that gave them their identity. This is what is lost in sectarianism.

Matters of faulty interpretation are not usually matters of true or false exegesis; the problem is more often in the presuppositions with which the interpreter enters into the text or issue under consideration. One's objectivity in the exegetical or hermeneutical enterprise in no way eliminates his subjectivity in the conclusions he draws. Even the translations we use are the subjective productions of the person or subject doing the translation. The objective truth may be within the subjective production, but it is yet a subjectively rendered work, and the ghost indwelling that interpreter is his presuppositions.

Excurses on Jesus' Teaching on Marriage, Divorce, and Remarriage

An issue that exemplifies the influence of presuppositions is that if marriage, divorce and remarriage in the culture of Jesus and is yet a controversy of today. As a way of investigating the interpretation and application difficulties of the texts dealing with the biblical teaching on this issue, this excursus will look primarily at the most cited texts of Jesus' teaching on this issue. The question we will repeatedly ask concerns how all that is said in these texts is to be understood in relation to this issue? Is all that is said to be understood as an absolute mandate universally applicable to all persons, in all places, at all times, under all circumstances?

Matthew 19:1-12

The most involved discussion of this issue is Matt 19:1-12

Now it came to pass, when Jesus had finished these sayings, that He departed from Galilee and came to the region of Judea beyond the Jordan. 2 And great multitudes followed Him, and He healed them there. 3 The Pharisees also came to Him, testing Him, and saying to Him, "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for just any reason?" 4 And He answered and said to them, "Have you not read that He who made them at the beginning 'made them male and female, 5 and said, 'For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh' 6 So then, they are no longer two but one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, let not man separate." 7 They said to Him, "Why then did Moses command to give a certificate of divorce, and to put her away?" 8 He said to them, "Moses, because of the hardness of your hearts, permitted you to divorce your wives, but from the beginning it was not so. 9 And I say to you, whoever divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality and marries another, commits adultery; and whoever marries her who is divorced commits adultery." 10 His disciples said to Him, "If such is the case of the man with his wife, it is

better not to marry.” 11 But He said to them, “All cannot accept this saying, but only those to whom it has been given: 12 For there are eunuchs who were born thus from their mother’s womb, and there are eunuchs who were made eunuchs by men, and there are eunuchs who have made themselves eunuchs for the kingdom of heaven’s sake. He who is able to accept it, let him accept it.”

Genesis 2:18-24

Two texts from the Old Testament appear in this discussion. The first is Genesis 2:18-24, which is the text containing the beginning of the marriage of a man and woman.

And the LORD God said, “It is not good that man should be alone; I will make him a helper comparable to him.” 19 Out of the ground the LORD God formed every beast of the field and every bird of the air, and brought them to Adam to see what he would call them. And whatever Adam called each living creature, that was its name. 20 So Adam gave names to all cattle, to the birds of the air, and to every beast of the field. But for Adam there was not found a helper comparable to him. 21 And the LORD God caused a deep sleep to fall on Adam, and he slept; and He took one of his ribs, and closed up the flesh in its place. 22 Then the rib which the LORD God had taken from man He made into a woman, and He brought her to the man. 23 And Adam said: “This is now bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called Woman, because she was taken out of Man.” 24 Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and they shall become one flesh.

The fact that Jesus uses this text at the outset of his answer is significant. The hermeneutical question before us is this: “In Jesus use of this text is all that is said here to be understood as an absolute mandate universally applicable to all persons, in all places, at all times, under all circumstances?” If so, then the mandate “*a man is to leave father and mother and be joined to his wife, and they shall become one flesh,*” not to be understood as universally applicable to all persons, in all places, at all times, under all circumstances? If so, then all men not married are in violation of the will of God; and the fact that Jesus

was not married would mean that he was not obedient to God's will as expressed in this text? If Jesus' use of this text is proof that a man is not, under any circumstances, to be separated from his wife once joined to her, and this text is universally applicable to all persons, in all places, at all times, under all circumstances, then the statement that "*a man* [read throughout this text in both the Hebrew and the Greek Septuagint texts as *adam* and *anthropos* - mankind] *is to leave father and mother, be joined to his wife, and they shall become one flesh,*" is also an absolute mandate universally applicable to all persons, in all places, at all times, under all circumstances? But more realistically it would seem that this expression of God's will should be understood more as his desire or intention for the human race than as an absolute mandate to the human race. The presupposition that all statements of Scripture are to be understood as absolute mandates universally applicable to all persons, in all places, at all times, under all circumstances is not a presupposition applicable to this text. This is determined by the discipline of hermeneutics in the applicational aspect of this text.

Deuteronomy 24:1-4

The second text found in Jesus' discussion is Deut 24:1-4, the text quoted to Jesus in support of the view that a man may put away his wife for any cause. In this text Moses says,

"When a man takes a wife and marries her, and it happens that she finds no favor in his eyes because he has found some uncleanness in her, and he writes her a certificate of divorce, puts it in her hand, and sends her out of his house, 2 when she has departed from his house, and goes and becomes another man's wife, 3 if the latter husband detests her and writes her a certificate of divorce, puts it in her hand, and sends her out of his house, or if the latter husband dies who took her as his wife, 4 then her former husband who divorced her must not take her back to be his wife after she has been defiled; for that is an abomination before the LORD, and you shall not bring sin on the land which the LORD your God is giving you as an inheritance.

Here we could ask again, "Is all that is said here to be understood as an absolute mandate universally applicable to all persons, in all places, at all times, under all circumstances?" If the presupposition that all Scriptures is to be understood as an absolute mandate universally applicable to all persons, in all places, at all times, under all circumstances, then the answer is "Yes." But if one properly interprets this text he finds that Moses is addressing the return of a woman to her first husband after she has been married to a second. If the first husband received her back he risks her being impregnated by the second husband and the offspring would not be child of the first husband, and if a son, the offspring would illegitimately inherit the land of the woman's first husband. So, this text is applicable to those Jewish males who considered taking their wives back after having rejected her as a new bride or sent her away at a later time. If this text is an absolute mandate universally applicable to all persons, in all places, at all times, under all circumstances, then a man having divorces his wife who marries another after having been rejected, he may not take her back again. That is what is forbidden here in this text.

To continue Jesus' answer, at verse 9 we read, *"I say to you, whoever divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality [porneia - fornication] and marries another, commits adultery [moichatai - to corrupt, pollute, defile]; and whoever marries her who is divorced commits adultery."*

This text is usually given as the proof text for the view that a man may not divorces his wife unless she is guilty of adultery, in which case he can remarry but she cannot. Nothing is said in this text about the man being forbidden to remarry. In the OT a man was not considered an adulterer if he had sexual intercourse with a woman not his wife, unless the woman with whom he had intercourse was the wife of another man. If she engaged in sexual intercourse with someone other than her husband, she was guilty of adultery and was not to be divorced but was stoned to death. Jesus words are interpreted by many as a change of punishment from stoning to banishment in that she became an outcast to her community, not being allowed to ever remarry. Since she could not

return to her father, the woman, unless taken in by a relative became estranged to her community and often sold herself into servitude or turned to prostitution to survive.

However, the interpretation and application of this text is not that simple; in fact, without a good understanding of the culture of first century Judaism, one cannot accurately interpret what is happening here. The question asked of Jesus concerned a controversy between conflicting interpretations of the Deut 24 text by two very influential rabbis in the city of Jerusalem. Rabbi Hillel's interpretation was that a man could put his wife away for any cause whatsoever; even if he did not like her cooking. Shammai, the more conservative rabbi had said that a man could only put his wife away if she was unclean. If she was a newlywed, then fornication prior to her marriage is under consideration. If she was an established wife, it would have to be adultery, an unmarried woman did not commit fornication after marriage, any sexual activity after marriage was called adultery, not so with the male in Jewish culture. Jesus seems intent on changing that.

Jesus and rabbi Shammai disapproved of the wholesale way the men discarded their wives, not even giving them proper writs of divorcement. The Mishnah has a whole tractate on the procedure of divorcement and the writ of divorcement had to be done properly or it was of no effect. This would seem to be what Jesus is saying; without a proper writ of divorcement the man and his wife were yet married. If the woman engaged in sexual intercourse with another man, she was guilty of adultery, which meant that the failure of the male to give an approved writ of divorcement made him responsible for the adultery as well. There can be no question but that divorce was not the will of God; rather, it was his will or intent that a couple who married should remain married for life; but, if there was a divorce, it could only be for the fornication (*proneia*) of his wife which is a curious choice of words, which suggests that her sexual immorality occurred before the marriage took place.

Mark 10:1-12

Another account of Jesus' teaching on marriage and divorce is found in Mark 10:1-12,

Then He arose from there and came to the region of Judea by the other side of the Jordan. And multitudes gathered to Him again, and as He was accustomed, He taught them again. 2 The Pharisees came and asked Him, "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?" testing Him. 3 And He answered and said to them, "What did Moses command you?" 4 They said, "Moses permitted a man to write a certificate of divorce, and to dismiss her." 5 And Jesus answered and said to them, "Because of the hardness of your heart he wrote you this precept. 6 But from the beginning of the creation, God 'made them male and female.' 7 'For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, 8 and the two shall become one flesh' so then they are no longer two, but one flesh. 9 Therefore what God has joined together, let not man separate." 10 In the house His disciples also asked Him again about the same matter. 11 So He said to them, "Whoever divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery against her. 12 And if a woman divorces her husband and marries another, she commits adultery."

Here, we have an account almost identical to the situation in Matt 19:1-12. Jesus is asked the same question to which he replies, "What did Moses say to you?" The debate over the meaning of Deut 24:1-4 is again reflected in the text, as well as Jesus reference to Genesis 2:18-24. From here the discussion moves into a house where his disciples push the issue further. Here Jesus' comments address the consequences of both the husband and wife who divorce and remarry, "*Whoever divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery against her. And if a woman divorces her husband and marries another, she commits adultery.*" There is no mention of fornication as a cause of the divorce and both the man who remarries commits adultery, as does the woman. How is it that Jesus' answer in Matt 19 only involved the fornication of the wife, which would have to be an act occurring prior to the marriage, and the remarriage of the man results in adultery,

and here both are forbidden to remarry?

Of great significance here is the meaning of the word “adultery.” Adultery in this culture had more to do with the pollution of the male’s bloodline than it did the violation of one’s marriage vows. The woman was virtual property, bought and sold by means of a dowry. The presence of the Deut 24 text would suggest that the issue of the disregard for the welfare of the wife is present in Jesus’ thoughts, making the legitimacy of the writs of divorcement a possible cause of Jesus making remarriage a case of adultery; i.e. the impregnation of the woman while not legitimately divorced from the first husband. But the adultery of the man by remarrying, how would that be a pollution of the bloodline of a man? Is Jesus using the word adultery as he does in the Sermon on the Mount in Matt 5:28? There he says, “*whoever looks at a woman to lust for her has already committed adultery with her in his heart.*” The common definition of adultery had more to do with a man’s bloodline becoming corrupted or adulterated through his wife giving birth to a child that was not the child of the man to whom she was married. However, in the OT the term adultery was used by the prophets for Israel’s unfaithfulness to God. This would be a figurative or metaphorical usage of the word and perhaps this is what Jesus is doing here in the Mark 10 text; but that can only be a speculation and not an established fact.

Luke 16:18

There is another account of Jesus’ teaching on this issue. In Luke 16:18, Jesus says, “*Whoever divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery; and whoever marries her who is divorced from her husband commits adultery.*” This text lends itself easily to the possibility expressed earlier that the absence of a legitimate writ of divorcement would make the remarriage of the woman, and the act of sexual intercourse with a man not her husband, an act of adultery by the woman yet married to another man. But the adultery of the male is yet a curiosity. Perhaps, Jesus’ usage of the term adultery for the man is a way of speaking of the potential for the perversion of the man’s bloodline by impregnating a woman other than his legitimate wife as in the case of Abraham, Hagar, and Ishmael. But the sons of

Abraham had children by different wives and they were all considered legitimate heirs of their father.

This brings us to the question presented earlier: "Is all that is said in all of these texts to be understood as absolute mandates universally applicable to all persons, in all places, at all times, under all circumstances? If so, which interpretation of all this data would one conclude was the correct interpretation in order to make an application of each to people in a different context or situation that that of the men and women of Jerusalem; especially, in view of the fact that the men could put away their wives for any reason, and the understanding of the term adulteration coming out of the tribal culture of Judah and the concern for preserving the proper lineage attached to the land from father to son, and from son to son?"

In this excursus we have considered only those texts containing the teaching of Jesus on this issue, but the apostle Paul addresses the same issue and gives answers to those questioning him, which were different questions to different situations; although not contradictory to the teachings of Jesus they are not the same in content.

This brings us again to the question of how one perceives of the will of God. In all of these texts we can say that the Genesis 2:18-24 text provides a presupposition that underlies all the other texts. It is God's will that all men marry and create families; it is also the will of God that all men and women who marry say married to one another for life. It is also the will of God that neither mate commit adultery. Now we must ask, if all men do not marry, are they in violation of the will of God? If a man and woman marry and they do not remain married, are they in violation of the will of God? And if adultery occurs is someone in violation of the will of God, and must they divorce if such occurs?

The desire of God for all men or mankind is that they live their lives in accordance to his will or wishes. If they do not, have they sinned? If they return to God in repentance, what does that require? As said earlier, ones presuppositions concerning the nature of God will have some influence of one's answers to these questions. If God

is a Sovereign Being who is characterized by his Holiness, his righteousness and wrath, then it is easier for one to see all utterances of God as absolute mandates and all those who do contrary to his will stand condemned, whether they know it or not?

Another aspect of this discussion must be considered in answering all the foregoing questions. If one balances the Holiness of God with his Benevolence or Goodness, what kind of God does he have before him? If ones God is exclusively a God who is Holy and his holiness is characterized by his righteousness, his justice, and his wrath, then one will see God more as a Sovereign Lord. If one sees God as a God who is Benevolent or is characterized by his goodness, whose goodness is seen in the attributes of love, mercy and grace, then he will see God more as a father than a Sovereign Lord.

If Jesus' story of the father who lost his son and watched daily for his return is to be taken seriously as a portrait of God, then the concept of the will of God will be influenced by that story. God does not cease to be holy because he is good, nor does he compromise his justice by showing mercy, nor does he remove the possibility of his wrath by showing his grace?

In the first letter of Paul to the church in Corinth, Paul is asked a series of questions to which he gives answers. The questions begin with chapter 7 and the first question had to do with the issue of marriage and divorce. Paul answered the questions with the wisdom given to him, and that wisdom was God's will as expressed by an inspired spokesman. In verse 27 Paul addresses the question of celibacy, should a person bound to a wife be loosed (the Greek word used for divorce in the teachings of Jesus), to which Paul answers that he should not seek to be loosed, and to the one who had been loosed (one must be bound before he can be loosed, which would be "divorced") he should remain loosed; all this counsel is given in view of the expectation of the immediate return of Jesus. This is Paul's wisdom for those asking these questions. Then in verse 28 he adds, "but if you should marry, you have not sinned." Paul's understanding of the will of God for the lives of these people was as he expressed, but if they do not follow his wisdom, he does not

consider them to have sinned by so doing.

The will of God is not something he would prefer that we do; rather, it is what we must do in order to be what we were created to be, sons and daughters created in the image of God. To disbelieve or disobey his will is to give ourselves, our belief and obedience, to something other than God, and that was what Israel did that God called idolatry. Jesus was the revelation of God and the revelation of what he created man to be. He was here to show us the Father and to show us ourselves and what we should be and can be. This can only happen through belief in God and in his earthly manifestation of himself in the person Jesus of Nazareth.

The will of God is his desire for those he created in his image, as a father to his children. How any father should relate to his children, whether obedient to his will or not shows how we should expect God to relate to us as his children, his offspring. This is the presupposition we may assume as true without fear of misrepresenting the true nature of God.

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