

History of Biblical Interpretation March 2022

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As Protestants we take as self-evident the importance of the Bible to Christian belief and practice. Yet we also affirm the rich variety of experience and contexts that comprise the history of Christianity as a global faith. How did the church in different times and places relate to Scripture and understand its meaning? In what ways did significant cultural shifts impact methods of interpreting Scripture in the church? What can the history of biblical exegesis teach us about the diverse questions God's people brought to God's word in various situations, the answers they found, and the implications of these lessons for our reading of Scripture today?

Schedule

Week 1 (3/6)	Heresy and Early Christian Approaches to Scripture
Week 2 (3/13)	Spiritual Exegesis from Origen to Thomas Aquinas
Week 3 (3/20)	The Protestant Reformers and the Bible's "Literal Sense"
Week 4 (3/27)	<i>Case Study: Context and Reformation Era Exegesis</i>

I. The Reformation and the Bible's Literal Sense

Analogy of Faith

"Expanded Literal Sense"

II. Contextual Realities in Reformation Era Biblical Interpretation

Embeddedness and Ideals

Calvin on Exile in the Psalms and Genesis

The Requirement (1513)

III. Concluding Thoughts

Psalm 27:4, 8

⁴One thing I asked of the Lord,
that will I seek after:
to live in the house of the Lord
all the days of my life,
to behold the beauty of the Lord,
and to inquire in his temple.

⁸“Come,” my heart says, “seek his face!”
Your face, Lord, do I seek.

Gen 12:1-10

12 Now the Lord said to Abram, “Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show you. ²I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. ³I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.”^[a]

⁴So Abram went, as the Lord had told him; and Lot went with him. Abram was seventy-five years old when he departed from Haran. ⁵Abram took his wife Sarai and his brother’s son Lot, and all the possessions that they had gathered, and the persons whom they had acquired in Haran; and they set forth to go to the land of Canaan. When they had come to the land of Canaan, ⁶Abram passed through the land to the place at Shechem, to the oak^[b] of Moreh. At that time the Canaanites were in the land. ⁷Then the Lord appeared to Abram, and said, “To your offspring^[c] I will give this land.” So he built there an altar to the Lord, who had appeared to him. ⁸From there he moved on to the hill country on the east of Bethel, and pitched his tent, with Bethel on the west and Ai on the east; and there he built an altar to the Lord and invoked the name of the Lord. ⁹And Abram journeyed on by stages toward the Negeb.

¹⁰Now there was a famine in the land. So Abram went down to Egypt to reside there as an alien, for the famine was severe in the land

Calvin, Preface to his Commentary on the Psalms (1557):

“When considering the whole course of the life of David, it seemed to me that by his own steps he showed me the way, and this has been a great solace to me.”

Calvin, Sermons on Psalm 27:4 and 27:8 (1552):

“We should note well who speaks. This is no poor idiot, rude and crude, but a prophet as excellent and enlightened by the Holy Spirit as there has ever been [David understood that] the order of calling on God’s name in the assembly of the faithful is permanent. It is not one of the symbolic observances of the Old Testament, but a requirement that our Lord Jesus Christ has given to us until the end of the world. ...

[It is] a matchless privilege and benefit to be in the church of God, and thus to be participants in the means this kind father has given to his children in order that they approach him. ... The necessity to be taught by sermons, to be confirmed by the sacraments, and trained in public prayers and confession of faith, we share with the ancient fathers.”

Calvin, Commentary on Gen 12 (1554):

On Abram’s leaving Ur:

“[Moses] now explains that [Abram and his family] had not been impelled by levity, as rash and fickle men are wont to be; nor had been drawn to other regions by disgust with their own country, as morose persons frequently are; nor were fugitives on account of crime; nor were led away by any foolish hope, or by any allurements, as many are hurried hither and thither by their own desires; but that Abram had been divinely commanded to go forth, and had not moved a foot but as he was guided by the word of God.”

On Abram’s wandering in Canaan:

“Piety has its appropriate seat in the heart, but from this root confession emerges afterwards as fruit.”

Calvin, Sermons on Gen 12 (1560):

On Abram’s leaving Ur:

“Abram was not a fickle man ... [he] did not leave for his own reasons nor was excited by some whim. In short, he did not set forth recklessly, but obeyed God.”

On Abram’s wandering in Canaan:

“[Abram’s open confession was intended] to edify those in need and prick those who are sluggish, using not only verbal exhortation but also showing with actions the duty of all and their responsibility toward God. To sum up, this is the altar of Abram.”

“[It addresses] many people today “who keep the knowledge of God on the inside ... [who allege that] the world is today so evil that it is not permissible to serve God ... and [who assert that ... it is impossible to worship God as we should if we live in the Papacy.”

8. The Requirement (1513)

Translated from Spanish by Arthur Helps

This document, probably written by the legal scholar Juan López de Palacios Rubios in 1513, reflects sixteenth-century Spaniards' legalism, as well as their concerns about the morality of the conquest in the New World. It was drafted for the conquistadors to read to the people of the New World before engaging in battle there, but unfortunately it was often read in places where the intended audience could not even hear it, and of course there were rarely interpreters available to read it in the local languages. Moreover, the concepts it contained would have been completely foreign to the locals. Despite its absurdities—which some Spaniards pointed out at the time—it did play some role in assuaging the conquerors' consciences, and it is certainly valuable from a historical point of view in that it illustrates Spanish self-images and the ideology of the conquest of the New World in its early years.

SOURCE: Arthur Helps, *The Spanish Conquest in America*, vol. 1 (London: John Lane, 1900), 264–67.

On the part of the king, Lord Ferdinand, and of Lady Juana, his daughter, queen of Castile and León, subduers of the barbarous nations, we their servants notify and make known to you, as best we can, that the Lord our God, living and eternal, created the heavens and the earth, and one man and one woman, of whom you and we, and all the men of the world, were and are descendants, and all those who come after us. But on account of the multitude which has sprung from this man and woman in the five thousand years since the world was created, it was necessary that some men should go one way and some another, and that they should be divided into many kingdoms and provinces, for in one alone they could not be sustained.

Of all these nations God our Lord gave charge to one man, called Saint Peter, that he should be lord and superior of all the men in the world, that all should obey him, and that he should be the head of the whole human race, wherever men should live, and under whatever law, sect, or belief they should follow; and he gave him the world for his kingdom and jurisdiction.

And he commanded him to place his seat in Rome, as the most appropriate spot from which to rule the world; but he also permitted him to have his seat in any other part of the world, and to judge and govern all Christians, Moors, Jews, Gentiles, and all other sects. This man was called pope, as if to say, admirable great father and governor of men. The men who lived in that time obeyed that Saint Peter, and took him for lord, king, and superior of the universe; so also they have regarded the others who after him have been elected to the pontificate, and so has it been continued even till now, and will continue till the end of the world.

One of these pontiffs, who succeeded that Saint Peter as lord of the world, in the dignity and seat which I have before mentioned, made donation of these isles and Terra-firme [mainland] to the aforesaid king and queen and to their successors, our lords, along with all that there is in these territories, as is contained in certain writings issued on the subject, . . . which you can see if you wish.

So Their Highnesses are kings and lords of these islands and land of Terra-firme by virtue of this donation; and some islands, and indeed almost all those to whom this has been notified, have received and served Their Highnesses, as lords and kings, in the way that subjects ought to do, with good will, without any resistance, immediately, without delay, when they were informed of the aforesaid facts. And also they received and obeyed the priests whom Their Highnesses sent to preach to them and to teach them our holy faith; and all these, of their own free will, without any reward or condition, have become Christians, and are so, and Their Highnesses have joyfully and benignly received them, and also have commanded them to be treated as their subjects and vassals; and you too are held and obliged to do the same. Wherefore, as best we can, we ask and require you that you consider what we have said to you, and that you take the time that shall be necessary to understand and deliberate upon it, and that you acknowledge the Church as the ruler and superior of the whole world, and the high priest called pope, and in his name the king and queen, Lady Juana, our lords, in his place, as superiors and lords and kings of these islands and this Terra-firme by virtue of the said donation, and that you consent and allow these religious fathers to declare and preach the aforementioned to you.

If you do so, you will do well, and that which you are obliged to do to Their Highnesses, and we in their name shall receive you in all love and charity, and shall leave you your wives, and your children, and your lands, free without servitude, that you may do with them and with yourselves freely that which you like and think best, and they shall not compel you to turn Christians, unless you yourselves, when informed of the truth, should wish to be converted to our holy Catholic faith, as almost all the inhabitants of the rest of the islands have done. And, besides this, Their Highnesses award you many privileges and exemptions and will grant you many benefits.

But if you do not do this, and maliciously make delay in it, I certify to you that, with the help of God, we shall powerfully enter into your country, and shall make war against you in all ways and manners that we can, and shall subject you to the yoke and obedience of the Church and of Their Highnesses; we shall take you and your wives and your children, and shall make slaves of them, and as such shall sell and dispose of them as Their

Highnesses may command; and we shall take away your goods, and shall do you all the mischief and damage that we can, as to vassals who do not obey, and refuse to receive their lord, and resist and contradict him; and we protest that the deaths and losses which shall accrue from this are your fault, and not that of Their Highnesses, or ours, nor of these cavaliers who come with us. And that we have said this to you and made this Requirement, we request the notary here present to give us his testimony in writing, and we ask the rest who are present that they should be witnesses of this Requirement.