

Approaches to the Bible¹

Introduction

The title of my presentation is like a can full of worms. It includes simple terms but at the same time very controversial ones. First, what do we mean by the “Bible”? Are we talking about the Old Testament or both testaments? What do we mean by the Old Testament? Does it include the deuterocanonical or apocryphal books and which ones? Obviously, the deuterocanonical books in different church families (Orthodox, Oriental Orthodox, and Catholic) are not identical!² Furthermore, should we use the Hebrew text of the Old Testament or the Greek one, the Masoretic or the Septuagint text? Second, why are the approaches “to” the Bible? Are we assuming that the reader, or the community of readers, approach the Bible or does the Bible approach us? Is the direction of the process of interpretation from the reader to the text or the other way around or does it go both ways? Third, are we equating the Bible with the Word of God or is the former a vehicle of the latter?³ Last, at least I can endorse without much resistance one component in the title, i.e. “s”. Indeed there are several

¹This title was assigned to me by the International Council of Christians and Jews as well as by the Kairos Group. The essay is based on the following unpublished paper: Yohanna Katancho, “Approaches to the Bible” (paper presented at ICCJ – Kairos Consultation, Beit Jala, October 27, 2011). I was asked to speak for 15 minutes.

²The term deuterocanonical has different connotations in different church traditions. The Armenian Orthodox church, for example, has the book of Fourth Maccabean which is not accepted in the Greek Orthodox or Catholic traditions. The Greek Orthodox has Psalm 151 or First Esdras which is not found in the Catholic Tradition. Furthermore, the Ethiopian church has books that are not accepted by all of the above. They have seven “extra” books in the New Testament.

³See Tim Meadowcroft, *The Message of the Word of God* (Nottingham: InterVarsity, 2011), 23 – 24.

approaches. In the rest of my presentation, I will point out few major approaches and point out few implications to the Palestinian – Israeli context.

Historical Critical Approach

John Barton in “Historical-Critical approaches” explains that many interpreters read the Bible with the following assumptions.⁴ They ask genetic questions. When and by whom books were written? What was their intended readership? They look for the original meaning. For example, what does the word “mirror” mean in the epistle of James or what does “justice” mean in the book of Psalms? They try to do historical reconstruction with a hermeneutics of suspicion. Moreover, they distinguish between what really happened and what the authors want us to believe. Last, they affirm that the best reading strategy is to have a disinterested reader who is neutral and objective.

Many of the genetic questions are related to identity. Who is the “true” Israel? Should we adopt a maximalist point of view of biblical history and believe in the historicity of Abraham, Moses, David, Joshua, and others? Should we accept that the biblical events are actual historical events? Others prefer a minimalist perception of biblical history and point out that many biblical stories are simply ideological, political, literary, or mythological depictions? Many Israeli archeologists strive to establish a particular reading of biblical history in order to gain political advantage. Names of places are changed to ancient biblical names. On the other hand, such reading strategies put the Palestinian church at a disadvantage. They are perceived as the Canaanites or Philistines? Some Palestinians are tempted to delve into this history game and argue: they were in

⁴John Barton, “Historical-Critical Approaches,” in *Biblical Interpretation* (ed. John Barton; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 9 – 20.

the land before the ancient children of Israel; as if an ancient historical presence is the basis for contemporary human rights including the right to own your home that you inherited from your grandfather.

Social Scientific Approach

In continuity with the historical critical method, several scholars wanted to reconstruct the pre-textual social world in order to understand and interpret the Bible properly. They emphasized the importance of sociology and anthropology. Their approaches have enriched our understanding of the text. However, most of them focused on Israel and its social world overlooking other inhabitants who lived in the land. The social world was constructed through the eyes of the privileged community and the marginalized nations in the land were overlooked or considered an inferior group whether ethically or religiously or in other aspects. Such depictions created a social conceptual grid that encouraged segregation and ethnocentricity. The current state of Israel continues to suffer from the latter. Admittedly, social scientific approaches are not the reason for Israel's ethnocentric perception but it facilitated accepting such beliefs.

Literary Reading

After failing to reconstruct the pre-textual reality, several scholars rightly moved into focusing on the text. New questions appeared; such as, what is the relationship between different texts, i.e. intertextuality? Several Israeli and Palestinian scholars highlighted the different literary dimensions of parts of the Bible. The literary approach freed the readers from the concerns of the absent author(s) or redactors. The synchronic study dominated over the diachronic one. Then the interest in the readers and their concerns escalated. This paved the way

for poststructuralist and postmodern readings. One of the important consequences in the Israeli – Palestinian context is the political reading of the Bible.

Political Reading

The literary reading led many scholars to question the ideology embedded in particular texts. The feminist scholar Tribble, for example, says “in the interaction of text and reader, the changing of the second component alters the meaning and power of the first.”⁵ The time was ripe to challenge not only a historical critical reading of the text but also a pietistic reading that is rooted in separating the church from the state claiming they have two different spheres of responsibility and that the only goal of reading the Bible is to develop a personal relationship with God. In short, some decided to expose violence of power and authority by deconstructing false assumptions and worldviews. Others wanted to consider the response of a community in the Bible and extrapolate its correspondences with a contemporary community in a similar political situation. The main goal is not to interpret the Bible but to interpret life with the help of the Bible.

The Political reading of the Bible, however, is not a new enterprise. Eusebius in the fourth century hails Constantine as the “new Solomon” who builds the new temple i.e. the church; Cromwell justifies his massacre of Catholics in Drogheda and Wexford by appealing to the slaughter of the Amalekites in 1 Samuel 15. Romans 13 has often been used to justify state

⁵Phyllis Tribble, “Treasures Old and New: Biblical Theology and the Challenge of Feminism,” in *The Open Text: New Directions for Biblical Studies?* (edited by Francis Watson; London: SCM, 1993), 48 – 49.

violence. Many Palestinian scholars approached the Bible from this perspective. Naim Ateek would be a good Palestinian example for a political reading of the Bible i.e. Palestinian Liberation theology.

The Kairos Reading of the Bible

It is fitting now to argue that the Palestinian Kairos document develops the political reading of the Bible into an ecumenical post-liberal theopolitical reading.⁶ It is obvious that the Kairos document is interested in the contemporary reality. It starts by describing the current painful reality of Palestinians and it even alludes to anti-Palestinianism which is not a private prejudice but an ideological, political, and theological issue. The description of the contemporary reality is done in biblical categories not in a naïve eisegesis that abuses the text nor in a modern exegesis that defers the interests of the reader in the name of finding the authorial intention, but in a healthy dialogue between the contemporary reality and the biblical reality. This dialogue not only makes the biblical reality a contemporary one but also makes the contemporary reality a biblical one. Admittedly, the latter is not divinely inspired but it does have divine presence as long as it is theocentric. The Kairos document presents unapologetically a theocentric reality that is rooted in God the creator of all and in our savior Jesus Christ, who was born in Bethlehem, lived in Palestine, and died on the cross in Jerusalem and rose from the dead, and ascended on the right hand of God.

Conclusion

It is important for us to remember the “s” in the title for we are located

⁶For further details, see Yohanna Katanacho, *The Land of Christ: A Palestinian Cry!* (Bethlehem: Bethlehem Bible College, 2012), 89 – 92.

socially and politically in different slots. We have a different pre-understanding and we cannot be neutral or objective. At best we can be fair. Consequently, we need to nourish and celebrate our diversity advocating a theology of humility and willingness to listen to each other. Also we need to present a religious understanding that is not void of mercy, love, or justice. Otherwise we will present an idol not the God depicted in the Scriptures. Last, hermeneutics cannot be a mere epistemological approach. It is ontological in nature. Interpreting a “sacred text” should lead us not only to a dialogue with the text but also with God who can transform us. As a Christian, the reader must conform to the image of Christ who expressed God’s love even to his enemies. Jewish interpreters can contemplate how fellowship with God transformed the children of Israel as messengers of the Kingdom of God.

Rev. Yohanna Katanacho, Ph.D.

Academic Dean of Bethlehem Bible College