

HISTORICAL IMPLICATIONS OF ALLEGORICAL INTERPRETATION

by Thomas Ice

The well-known truism that “ideas have consequences” certainly applies to the issue of how to properly interpret Scripture, especially Bible prophecy. The Book of Proverbs speaks of the end of a matter,¹ in other words, where does one’s viewpoint lead? A good way to examine this issue is to see where interpretative methods have lead in the past. I believe that Hank Hanegraaff’s interpretative approaches, as taught in his recent book *The Apocalypse Code*², if they become widely accepted, would send the church back to the Dark Ages hermeneutically. He may want to emphasize only a method of interpretation, but the moment anyone applies a method it produces an outcome or model of eschatology. There are clear implications.

THE EARLY CHURCH

During the first two hundred years of the early church two competing schools of interpretation arose. One was the Syrian School of Antioch that championed literal and historical interpretation and the other was in North Africa at Alexandria, Egypt, which advocated an allegorical or spiritual hermeneutic. Bernard Ramm says, “The Syrian school fought Origen in particular as the inventor of the allegorical method, and maintained the primacy of the literal and historical interpretation.”³ Alexander of Alexandria and Origen (185–254) developed the allegorical approach to biblical interpretation in the early third century.

“The fundamental criticism of Origen, beginning during his own lifetime,” notes Joseph Trigg, “was that he used allegorical interpretation to provide a specious justification for reinterpreting Christian doctrine in terms of Platonic philosophy.”⁴ Origen believed that “Proverbs 22:20 authorizes interpreters to seek a three-fold meaning in each passage of Scripture: fleshly, psychic and spiritual.” Since Origen believed that “the spiritual meaning belongs to a higher order of ideas than the literal,”⁵ he was attracted to the spiritual or allegorical meaning of the text.

Hanegraaff sounds just like a twenty-first century Origen when he exhibits just such a rationale in his rejection of a literal interpretation of Bible prophecy on a number of issues. For example, Hanegraaff labels LaHaye’s view of Revelation 14:20 as a “literal-at-all-costs method of interpretation.” He declares: “Interpreting apocalyptic imagery in a woodenly literal sense inevitably leads to absurdity.” Hanegraaff explains: “Since it is difficult to imagine that the blood of Christ’s enemies could create a literal river reaching as high as ‘the horses’ bridles for a distance of 1,600 stadia,’ LaHaye exercises extraordinary literary license.”⁶ A page later Hanegraaff says, “Figurative language requires readers to use their imagination . . . Such imaginative leaps are the rule rather than the exception.”⁷ Hanegraaff imagines that the blood in this passage, rather than just emanating from the subjects of God’s judgment as the text says, it is also a symbol “of blood that flowed from Immanuel’s veins.”⁸

Although the Syrian school had great influence the first few centuries the Alexandrian school eventually won out, as Jerome and Augustine were advocates of the allegorical approach in the area of Bible prophecy. Their influence paved the way for the dominance of allegorical interpretation during much of the Middle Ages. Augustine developed a dual hermeneutic. On the one hand, he tended to interpret the Bible literally, but when it came to eschatology he interpreted that spiritually or allegorically.

THE MIDDLE AGES

The Middle Ages was a time that was dominated by allegorical interpretation. One of the beliefs that became dominant, especially in late-Medieval times, was the belief that every sentence in the pages of Scripture has to be understood as referring to Christ. This erroneous interpretive dictum was based upon a misapplication of Luke 24:44, which says, "Now He said to them, 'These are My words which I spoke to you while I was still with you, that all things which are written about Me in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms must be fulfilled.'" This passage does not say that every word or sentence in the Old Testament has to refer to Jesus, the Messiah, but instead it says Jesus is the one being referenced in the Old Testament when it speaks of the Messiah. This would mean that a clearly historical passage like 1 Chronicles 26:18, which says, "At the Parbar on the west there were four at the highway and two at the Parbar," would have to be interpreted as referring to Christ. This sentence is not speaking about Christ, but through allegorical alchemy it was explained in some kind of Christological way. "During these nine centuries we find very little except the 'glimmerings and decays' of patristic exposition," notes Farrar. "Much of the learning which still continued to exist was devoted to something which was meant for exegesis, yet not one writer in hundreds showed any true conception of what exegesis really implies."⁹

THE REFORMATION

It was not until the dawning of the Reformation that biblical interpretation began to return to the sanity of literal interpretation. The Reformation could not have occurred if the reformers did not have the confidence that they knew what God's Word was saying. "The tradition of the Syrian school . . . became the essential hermeneutical theory of the Reformers."¹⁰ Ramm points out that in Europe "there was a hermeneutical Reformation which preceded the ecclesiastical Reformation."¹¹ Thus, we see demonstrated once again in history that one's interpretative method precedes and produces one's exegesis and then their theological beliefs (i.e., model). Luther and Calvin generally returned the church to literal interpretation. Had they not done this, then Protestantism would have never been born and reformation would have never taken place. Luther said, "The literal sense of Scripture alone is the whole essence of faith and of Christian theology."¹² Calvin said, "It is the first business of an interpreter to let his author say what he does, instead of attributing to him what we think he ought to say."¹³ However, like most of us Luther and Calvin did not always follow their own theory, but they and like-minded reformers turned the hermeneutical tide in the right direction.

During the post-reformation period many protestants began to slowly cast off a thousand years of allegorical interpretation of the Bible, especially in the area of Bible prophecy. They applied literal interpretation first in issues relating to the doctrine of salvation and then began to apply it increasingly to the entire Bible. In the early 1600s there was a return to premillennialism because some started applying the literal hermeneutic to Revelation 20. At the same time many protestants began to see that there was a literal future for national Israel, which was spearheaded by reading the premillennialism of the early church fathers and for the English-speaking world the notes in the Geneva Bible.

It was not until the late 1700s and early 1800s that some biblical interpreters began to become consistent in applying a literal hermeneutic. Wallis tells us that, "a consistent

futurism, which completely removes the necessity for calculating the times, did not emerge until the early nineteenth century."¹⁴ In general, the Evangelical church, especially in the English-speaking world, returned to the premillennial futurism of the early church. Now they would apply the literal method and develop it beyond the beginning stage of the early church.

IMPLICATIONS FOR TODAY

Hanegraaff admits to the current dominance of the futurist emphasis among Bible-believing evangelicals toward literal interpretation for the entire Bible including prophecy, but he wants to change this 200-year trend. In fact, he wants to create a paradigm shift away from the literal interpretation of Bible prophecy and back toward the mysticism of the Alexandrian school and the hermeneutical trends of the Middle Ages. This is not progress, rather if it were to happen it would be retrogression and downgrade.

When one studies the interpretive trends of the Middle Ages, we need to realize what this would mean for us today. Beryl Smalley, a Medieval scholar who specializes in their views of biblical interpretation tells us: "Conditions today are giving rise to a certain sympathy with the allegorists. We have a spate of studies on medieval 'spirituality'."¹⁵ Hanegraaff demonstrates in his *AC* that he is following the overall trends of both secular society and too many evangelicals who are moving away from literal interpretation into the shadowy darkness of non-literal hermeneutics.

Norman Geisler says that his chief concern about *The Apocalypse Code* is that it "is based on an allegorical method of interpreting prophetic Scripture, that if applied to other teachings of Scripture, would undermine the salvation essentials of the Christian Faith."¹⁶ I share Geisler's concern, especially in light of the fact that it is his method that Hanegraaff wants to emphasize.¹⁷ It is clear from 2,000 years of church history that if we do indeed adopt Hanegraaff's method for interpreting Bible prophecy then it will put us back on the road to the subjectivism and mysticism of the Dark Ages. "It is sad that a man who has fought so hard for so long against cults and aberrant teachings," concludes Geisler, "has himself succumbed to a method of interpreting the Bible that is not significantly different from those used by the cults which he so vigorously opposes."¹⁸ Maranatha!

ENDNOTES

¹ For example Proverbs 5:4, 11; 14:12, 13; 16:25; 18:18; 20:21; 25:8; 29:21.

² Hank Hanegraaff, *The Apocalypse Code* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2007),

³ Bernard Ramm, *Protestant Biblical Interpretation: A Textbook of Hermeneutics*, 3rd edition, (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1970), p. 49.

⁴ Joseph W. Trigg, "Introduction," in R. P. C. Hanson, *Allegory & Event: A Study of the Sources and Significance of Origen's Interpretation of Scripture* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002), p. vi.

⁵ Ronald E. Diprose, *Israel in the development of Christian thought* (Rome: Instituto Biblico Evangelico Italiano, 2000), p. 87.

⁶ Hanegraaff, *Apocalypse Code*, p. 21.

⁷ Hanegraaff, *Apocalypse Code*, p. 23.

⁸ Hanegraaff, *Apocalypse Code*, p. 22.

⁹ Frederic W. Farrar, *History of Interpretation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, [1886] 1961), pp. 245–46.

¹⁰ Ramm, *Protestant Biblical Interpretation*, p. 51.

¹¹ Ramm, *Protestant Biblical Interpretation*, p. 52.

¹² Martin Luther cited in Ramm, *Protestant Biblical Interpretation*, p. 54.

¹³ John Calvin cited in Ramm, *Protestant Biblical Interpretation*, p. 58.

¹⁴ Wilber B. Wallis, "Reflections on the History of Premillennial Thought," in R. Laird Harris, Swee-Hwa Quek, & J. Robert Vannoy, editors, *Interpretation & History: Essays in honour of Allen A. MacRae* (Singapore: Christian Life Publishers, 1986), p. 229.

¹⁵ Beryl Smalley, *The Study of the Bible in the Middle Ages* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, [1964], 1982), p. 360.

¹⁶ Norman L. Geisler, "Review of Hank Hanegraaff's *The Apocalypse Code*," www.ses.edu/NormGeisler/ReviewApocalypseCode.html

¹⁷ Hanegraaff, *Apocalypse Code*, p. 2.

¹⁸ Geisler, "Review of Hank."