Comparing Literal & Allegorical Schools of Interpretation; Exegetical Fallacies in Middle Ages; Allegory Introduced by Greeks to Jewish Theologians at Alexandria

30.   A review of the literal and allegorical approaches helps answer the question, "How do we know what we are learning is right and true?"

31.   First of all we must define "allegory" and for that we turn to:

Douglas, J. D. (ed.). *The New International Dictionary of the Christian Church*. Rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1978), 27-28:

ALLEGORY. The use of language to convey a deeper and a different meaning from that which appears on the surface. [A good literary example is *The Pilgrim's Progress* by John Bunyan.]

In biblical usage a distinction must be drawn between allegory as a medium of revelation and allegory as a method of interpretation. There are undoubtedly allegorical passages in Scripture; Paul explicitly declares his use of the method in Galatians 4:21-31, but evidently this was a departure from his usual practice. In the early church, allegory found expression, e.g., in the works of Clement \klem' ent\ of Rome, Irenaeus \ī-rē-nē' us\, and Tertullian \ter-tul' yan\. Jerome, Hilary, Ambrose, and Augustine gave more or less prominence to the allegorical hermeneutic. Bernard \ber' nard\ of Clairvaux \kler-vō\ was the supreme allegorist of the Middle Ages.

32.   In the second and third centuries there was a drift away from literal interpretation of Scripture over to the allegorical method.

Couch, Mal (ed.). *Dictionary of Premillennial Theology*. (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 1996), 142-43:

HERMENEUTICS, MEDIEVAL. The logical, grammatical principles used to interpret and explain the Bible in the Middle Ages were dominated by allegorical persuasions and the authoritative doctrinal rule of the papacy.

A shift from the literal hermeneutic of the first-century church to an allegorical approach began to take place as early as the third century. (p. 142)

Origen \ar' e-jin\ [A.D. 185-254; head of the catechetical school at Alexandria] was the first theologian to spiritualize, or explain away, the future kingdom as the present reign of Christ in the human heart. During the Middle Ages, millenarianism was generally regarded as heretical. (pp. 142-43)

A movement that came to be known as scholasticism began around the year 1000 with Anselm \an' selm\ and Thomas Aquinas recognized as the most influential leaders. Depending almost exclusively on the allegorical method and giving no recognition to the importance of the original language of biblical texts, this movement further perverted the truth of Scripture. This method of interpretation dominated the Middle Ages and was characterized by unlimited speculation without any objective, consistent standard for correctness.

Medieval interpretation was influenced and restrained by three factors: the prevalence of illiteracy among both the clergy and the congregation; the study of Scripture was restricted primarily to monasteries; and the desire to support the dogmas of Rome.

One of the most significant dogmas that developed from medieval hermeneutics was transubstantiation. Declared as dogma by (Pope) Innocent III in 1215, it decreed that priests had the power to transform the bread and wine into the body, blood, soul, and divinity of Jesus Christ.

From the Middle Ages also emerged the dogma of purgatory that proclaimed the temporal punishment and purging of sins by fire was necessary for entrance into heaven. With no literal support from Scripture, it has been used by Rome to supplant God in His righteous judgment of sin. It was in conjunction with this doctrine that the practice of selling indulgences developed. The church began to give indulgences as a remission before God of the temporal punishment due to sins by means of reducing time spent in purgatory.

In 1302 (Pope) Boniface \ban' e-fes\ VIII's bull decreed that submission to the pope "is absolutely necessary to salvation." Since Rome interpreted the kingdom of God as the church, the pope wielded dogmatic control over people's eternal destiny. With the "keys to the kingdom" he exercised the power to open and close the gates of the kingdom based on people's allegiance to him [see note]. (p. 143)

NOTE: For a more details study on this subject see 2004 East Texas Bible Conference: *Church Keys*:

http://www.joegriffin.org/MediaMins/archive_id.asp?seriesid=ETBC04

33.   When some people's preconceived opinions about what the Bible teaches are challenged they rationalize their rejection of the message by asserting, "Well, that's just your interpretation."

34.   This statement is often from someone who has been taught the Bible from the allegorical method of interpretation which allows human imagination to determine the content and intent of the passage. This observation is directed at such an approach:

Ramm, Bernard. *Protestant Biblical Interpretation: A Textbook of   Hermeneutics*. 3d rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House,   1970), 14:

The Spirit of God does not communicate to the mind of even a teachable,   obedient,   and devout Christian, any doctrine or meaning of Scripture which is not   *contained in Scripture itself*. He makes men wise *up to* what is written, not beyond   it [Angus and Green, *Cyclopedic Handbook of the Bible*, p. 179].

35.   The history of the allegorical system of interpreting Scripture finds its origin with the Greeks. It was passed on to the Jews, and finally to the Christians. Details from:

Ramm, *Protestant Biblical Interpretation*, 24-26, 28-31:

1. *Greek Allegorism*. Allegorical interpretation believes that beneath the obvious is   the   real meaning of the passage. But if we presume that the document has a secret meaning and there are no cues concerning the hidden meaning,   interpretation is   difficult. In fact, the basic problem is to determine if the passage has such a meaning at all. The further problem arises whether the   secret meaning was in the mind of the original writer or something found there by   the interpreter.

The Greeks were not concerned with Sacred Scripture but with their own writings, and in this sense it is improper to classify them within the context of Biblical interpretation. But in that their allegorical method was adopted by both Jews and Christian they deserve this special attention. (p. 24)

The Greeks had two noble traditions. (i) They had a religious heritage in Homer [Ninth century B.C. Greek poet and presumed single author of the *Iliad and the Odyssey*, epics on the Trojan War and the wanderings of Odysseus.] and Hesiod \hē'-sē-ad\ [800 B.C. Greek poet. His epic poem *Works and Days* included experiences of daily life intermingled with precepts, fables, and allegories. His *Theogony* was an account of the beginnings of the world and birth of the gods.]. Homer's influence seemed to increase with the extension of time rather than diminish. The "Bible" of the Greek was the writings of Homer and Hesiod. To question or to doubt them was an irreligious or atheistic act. (ii) They had an astute philosophical (Thales \thā'-lēz\ [625-547 B.C. Greek philosopher and scientist. One of the Seven Wise Men of Greece who discovered several geometrical theorems; considered the father of Greek philosophy.]) and historical tradition (Thucydides \thü-sid'-a-dēz\ [Fifth century B.C. Greek historian; wrote *History of the Peloponnesian War*. Ranked as the greatest historian of antiquity.] and Herodotus \hi-räd'-a-tas\ [Fifth century B.C. Greek historian. His great work was a history of the Greco-Persian wars from 500 to 479 B.C. His systematic treatment earned him the title "Father of History."]), which developed principles of logic, criticism, ethics, religion, and science.

The *religious tradition* [Homer and Hesiod] had many elements which were fanciful, grotesque, absurd, or immoral. The philosophical [Thales] and historical [Thucydides and Herodotus] could not accept much of the religious tradition as it lay in the written documents. Yet the hold of Homer and Hesiod was so great that (the two) could not be declared worthless and forsaken. The tension was relieved by *allegorizing* the religious heritage. The stories of the gods, and the writings of the poets, were not to be taken *literally*. Rather underneath is the secret or real meaning.

The important item to notice here is that this Greek tradition of allegorizing spread to Alexandria where there was a great Jewish population and eventually a large Christian population. (p. 25)

2. *Jewish Allegorism*. The Alexandrian Jew faced a problem similar to his fellow Greek. He was a child of Moses instructed in the law and the rest of a divine revelation. But as he mingled with the cosmopolitan population of Alexandria he soon learned of the Greek literature with its philosophical heritage. Some of these Jews were so impressed that they accepted the teachings of Greek philosophy. (pp. 25-26)

The Greek faced the tension of a religious-poetic-myth tradition and a historical-philosophical tradition. The Jew faced the tension of his own national Sacred Scriptures and the Greek philosophical tradition (especially Plato \plāt'-ō\ [428-347 B.C. Greek philosopher. Disciple of Socrates and teacher of Aristotle, and with them laid the philosophical foundations of Western culture. His extent works are in the form of dialogues and include *Republic* {generally regarded as his greatest work}.]). How could the Jew cling to both? The solution was identical to the Greek's solution to his problem. In fact, the Jew even got it from the Greeks.

Here is one of the strange fates of history. The allegorical method arose to save the reputation of ancient Greek religious poets. This method of interpretation was adopted by the Alexandrian Greeks. Then it was bequeathed to the Christian Church. "By a singular concurrence of circumstances, the Homeric studies of pagan philosophers suggested first to the Jews and then, through them, to Christians, a method of Scriptural interpretation, before unheard of, which remained unshaken for more than fifteen hundred years" [F. W. Farrar, *History of Interpretation*, p. 134]. (p. 26)