

THE ALLEGORIZATION OF THE BIBLE

BY

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ABRAM JOSHUA HESCHEL (1907-1972) was perhaps the most significant Jewish theologian of the 20th century. He was a descendant of preeminent rabbinic families of Europe, both on his father's and mother's side. In his teens he received a traditional yeshiva education, and obtained traditional smicha (rabbinical ordination); he then studied at the University of Berlin, where he obtained his doctorate, and at the Hochschule für die Wissenschaft des Judentums, where he earned a second liberal rabbinic ordination. He later taught Talmud there. Escaping from the Nazis, he found refuge both in England and America, where he briefly served on the faculty of Hebrew Union College, the main seminary of Reform Judaism, in Cincinnati.

Increasingly uncomfortable with the lack of observance of Jewish law at HUC, Heschel sought an academic institution where critical, modern scholarship of the Bible was allowed, and yet also held that Jewish law was normative (i.e. the way that Jewish people should actually live their lives.) He found such a place in 1946 when he came to the Jewish Theological Seminary of America (JTS), the main seminary of Conservative Judaism. He accepted a position there as Professor of Jewish Ethics and Mysticism, where he served until his death in 1972.

In Rabbi Heschel's *Israel: An Echo of Eternity*, one of the foremost religious figures of our century gives us a powerful and eloquent statement on the meaning of Israel in our time. Heschel looks at the past, present and future home of the Jewish people. He tells us how and why the presence of Israel has tremendous historical and religious significance for the whole

world. The following excerpt titled "The Allegorization of the Bible" indicates this Jewish author's rejection of a spiritualizing hermeneutic reflected in much of early Christendom.¹

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While it is proper and even necessary to seek to derive by a variety of interpretive methods new meaning from ancient sources, it is a fact that the attempt of traditional Christian theology to reduce concrete narratives, hopes, expectations connected with a living people and a geographic land, to paradigms of Church dogma has had detrimental results for Christian theology.

The radical use of the method of allegorization of the Hebrew Bible, the tendency to spiritualize the meaning of its works and to minimize its plain historical sense has made many Christians incapable of understanding or empathy for what the Holy Land means to the Jewish people and to the authors of the Hebrew Bible, or for what the people Israel means in the flesh, not just as a symbol or as a construct of theological speculation. Even many Christian theologians who are no longer committed to the method of allegorization react in a way as if the concrete people of Israel, the city of Jerusalem, the hope of the restoration of Zion, were illusory entities.

"The allegorical method essentially means the interpretation of a text in terms of something else, irrespective of what that something else is."² Its use in biblical exegesis

¹ Abraham Joshua Heschel, *Israel: An Echo of Eternity*, pp. 139-144.

² H. A. Wolfson, "Philo," *The Philosophy of the Church Fathers*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1956, Vol. I, pp. 3-4.

which goes back to Philo has often been accompanied by the assumption that we must distinguish in Scripture a body and a soul, a literal sense and a spiritual sense. The literal sense is depreciated, the spiritual sense exalted.

finds acceptance in the Church, for example in the *Epistle of Barnabas*, and in Justin Martyr.

Allegoric interpretation is based on the supposition that Scripture intended to express some other meaning than what is literally said. Extreme allegorization, or the exclusive nonliteral method of interpreting Scriptures, particularly when adopting neo-Platonic methods of thinking, tends to contrast the real which is heavenly and eternal with the apparent which is earthly and temporary. By such a method biblical history and laws were construed as being, in reality, mere imitations of the mysteries of faith. Over and above The allegorical method developed by Philo has its echoes in the *Epistle to the Hebrews*. By the middle of the second century, allegory, though not generally used by the New Testament writers,

that, it was maintained that in the Bible the spirit is concealed in the letter, that the immediate and apparent meaning of the Bible is but a shadow of the mystery, the "shadow" tending to obscure the mystery.

Since the Hebrew Bible was but a foreshadowing, and the New Testament a reality, it was possible to allegorize the Hebrew Bible while taking the words of the New Testament literally. While Philo used the method of allegorizing to derive from the Hebrew Bible timeless truths of philosophy, the New Testament writers sought to demonstrate that the events of the present are fulfillments of predictions contained therein. Subsequently, Christian typological exegesis saw the events of the Hebrew Bible as the prefiguration of the events of the New Testament. It saw in the facts of the Hebrew Bible something in preparation, something sketching itself out, of which the writers themselves were not aware because it lay quite beyond their purview.

"The proper motive was the firm belief that the Old Testament was a church document. For the church, the allegorical

method was its primary means of making the Old Testament a church document."³ The allegorization of the Bible became the recognized method of dealing with the Hebrew Scriptures within the Church. This method enabled the exegetes to find intimations of the life of Jesus nearly everywhere. The two goats which are brought into the Sanctuary on the Day of Atonement typified the two advents of Jesus. Jacob served Laban for sheep, so Jesus became a servant so that he might purchase his flock. Moses holding up his hands during the battle with Amalek is a type of Jesus on the cross.⁴

There was also a tradition of more sober exegesis cultivated by Theodore in the Antiochene School. Epiphanius mentioned that "Scripture does not need allegory; it is as it is. What it needs is contemplation and sensitive discernment."⁵

Luther insisted that the Word of God is imparted through Scripture and that Scripture is above the Church. Yet what he meant by the Word was not the Bible itself but the divine offering itself to man. "Take Christ out of the Scripture and what else will you find in them? Understanding the Bible means finding Christ in it."⁶

It was modern scholarship that paved the way for the understanding of the literal and historical dimensions of the Bible that we now consider indispensable for theological understanding.

Few men today could accept the view that the mind of man created the universe as it created the principles of logic, that the universe is a form of the mind's activity deriving its being from it, authentic and authoritative only as possessed by the mind and authorized by it. It is rather difficult to comprehend how a contemporary scholar can appreciate the insight expressed in the following statement: Jesus "created the

³ B. Ramm, *Protestant Biblical Interpretation*. Boston: W. A. Wilde, 1956, p. 29.

⁴ Justin Martyr, *Dialogue with Trypho*, 54:1.

⁵ E. C. Blackman, *Biblical Interpretation: The Old Difficulties and the New Opportunity*. London: Independent Press, 1957, p. 107.

⁶ Blackman, *op. cit.*, p. 125.

Scripture as He created the Church; both are forms of His activity, valid as they derived their being from Him, authentic and authoritative as possessed of Him and authorized by Him.” It is thus mentioned that “this christocentric understanding of the Bible is the right way of approach.”⁷

“When the historical sense of a passage is once abandoned, there is wanting any sound regulative principle to govern exegesis. . . . the mystical [allegorical] method of exegesis is an unscientific and arbitrary method, reduces the Bible to obscure enigmas, undermines the authority of all interpretation, and, when taken by itself, fails to meet the apologetic necessities of time.”⁸

“This I consider the first principle in prophetic interpretation,” writes [A. B.] Davidson, “to assume that the literal meaning in *his* meaning—that he is moving among realities, not symbols, among concrete things like people, not among abstractions like *our* Church, world, etc.”⁹ Davidson treats with a measure of scorn those interpreters who blithely make Zion or Jerusalem the Church, and the Canaanite the

enemy of the Church, and the land the promises to the Church, etc., as if the prophet moved in a world of symbols and abstractions.¹⁰

That “Israel has a great future is clear from Scripture as a whole. There is a large unfulfilled element in the Old Testament which demands it, unless we spiritualize it away or relinquish it as Oriental hyperbole.”¹¹

⁷ Blackman, *op. cit.*, p. 156, quoting Farrar.

⁸ Kemper Fullerton, *Prophecy and Authority*. New York: Macmillan, 1919, p. 181.

⁹ Ramm, *op. cit.*, quoting A. B. Davidson, *Old Testament Prophecy*, p. 168.

¹⁰ Ramm, *op. cit.*, pp. 234-235. Cf. “Certainly the extreme anti-literal interpretation which considers the names Zion, Jerusalem, Israel, and the like to be mere names for the Christian Church, without reference to the people of Israel, does no justice either to the spirit of the Old Testament and its principle, or to the principles on which the apostle reasons. (*ibid.*, p. 490). The essay of Neale and Littledale (*A Commentary on the Psalms*, Vol. I, Dissertation III, “On the Mystical and Literal Interpretation of Scripture,” pp. 426-470) is a perfect illustration of the sort of exegesis Davidson refers to, and also constitutes a very stout defense of the traditional mystical system of interpretation. For a more recent defense of mystical interpretation see Darwell Stone, “The Mystical Interpretation of the Old Testament,” *A New Commentary on Holy Scripture*, pp. 668-697.

¹¹ Ramm, *op. cit.*, p. 236, quoting A. B. Davidson, ch. XXIV, “Abraham Joshua Heschel, The Restoration of the Jews.”



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