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Q&A#151 Grammatical Historical Exegesis and a Theopolitan Hermeneutic

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Today's question: "What differences would you highlight when comparing the Theopolitan Hermeneutic and a traditional grammatical-historical approach? Also, would you make any significant distinctions between the Theopolitan Hermeneutic and Iain Provan's "Seriously Literal" interpretive rubric that he lays out in his latest book *The Reformation and the Right Reading of Scripture*? He states that his Seriously Literal approach is 'to read [Scripture] in accord with its various, apparent communicative intentions as a collection of texts from the past now integrated into one Great Story, doing justice to such realities as literary convention, idiom, metaphor, and typology or figuration.' "

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Transcript

Welcome back. Today's question is, what differences would you highlight when comparing the Theopolitan Hermeneutic and a traditional grammatical historical

approach? Also, would you make any significant distinctions between the Theopolitan Hermeneutic and Ian Provan's seriously literal interpretative rubric that he lays out in his latest book, *The Reformation and the Right Reading of Scripture*? He states that his seriously literal approach is, quoting, to read scripture in accord with its various apparent communicative intentions as a collection of texts from the past, now integrated into one great story, doing justice to such realities as literary convention, idiom, metaphor, and typology or figuration. Now that definition by Provan, I think, is worth closer attention.

What he's doing within this is guarding the definition of a grammatical historical reading or a literal reading of the text against a number of misrepresentations of that. So a literal reading of the text is not dismissing idiom, metaphor, typology, and figuration. It's not saying that everything must be literal in the sense of being concrete, that there's no metaphor allowed, that there's no figural reading allowed, that we can't see Christ in the text.

He's not ruling that out. That is in accord with the grammatical historical and literal reading of the text. He's rather protecting the text as a literary artifact.

So the literal sense is the literary sense. What does that text mean taken on its own terms? The other thing that you'll note here is he talks about a collection of texts collected into one great story. So there's a unity there, but there's also a diversity that we don't want to lose sight of.

We're dealing with these texts on their own terms, so we're not going to collapse all the gospels into each other. Rather, we need to recognize their distinctions as distinct literary artifacts. And that concern for the literary aspect of the text, I think, comes through in the approach of Provan and others.

And the other thing that you'll see in this sort of approach is a concern against allegorizing. Allegorizing is seen, whether in a theological or philosophical system, when that sort of thing is imposed upon the text from without. So the text is largely effaced or treated as a wax nose that can be twisted into whatever shape the reader makes of it.

So the reader of this sort of approach can read the Old Testament and see Christ wherever, or see some sort of Platonic philosophy in every single text. It always seems to appear because the reader is reading everything through this system and forcing that system onto the text. And that sort of allegorical reading has, I think, a fair amount of precedent within the history of the church.

The church fathers could be accused of this sort of reading on numerous occasions. Now, if you read Origen or someone like that, I think you have a good example of this sort of allegorical reading. Note that when you're reading someone like Origen, he's not just taking an allegorical reading and a more general hermeneutical approach.

Rather, it's warranted on the basis of some sort of dominical warrant that has been given to the New Testament reader of the Old Testament text. So Christ has said that he can be seen in all parts of the Old Testament. All these things testify concerning Christ.

So the reader of the New Testament can go throughout, the reader of Scripture can go throughout the Old Testament and point to Christ everywhere. Now, that's not actually a good way of reading Scripture. It ends up forcing the text into a mould that is often quite alien to the text read on its own terms.

So what Provan and other people taking a grammatical historical approach are trying to do is to protect the reading of the text on its own terms. The other thing that that does is gives us a certain reticence about thinking in terms of figural reading, thinking in terms of reading a philosophical system into the text, whatever it is. We want to work from the text itself, from its own structures, and then work towards a full understanding of what typology or other things might be there.

Now, that sort of approach, in principle, is not ruling out typology. What it's doing is trying to answer the question of authority. And this, again, getting the question of hermeneutics down to the question of authority can be helpful because both the reformers and the patristics were dealing with the same sort of question, the question of biblical authority.

The question is particularly keenly felt in the context of narrative texts. So people aren't arguing generally about allegory and literal reading of Scripture when they're dealing with something like the book of Romans or even the book of Proverbs or the Psalms, for the most part. Rather, they're dealing with it in the context of Genesis or in the context of Exodus or in the context of 1 Samuel, that context, the context of a more narrative text.

And the question is, underlying that, how can this text be authoritative? And one of the reasons why you have allegorical readings of the text is because that is one way you can see that text being authoritative, that that text is giving us sort of philosophical or theological pictures of some greater eternal truths that, as we read the text in terms of this philosophical or theological framework, we can then understand how it is addressing our particular situation. Another example of this could be seen in something like the reading of the Old Testament in the light of Christ. And so whenever we read the Old Testament in the light of Christ, we can think, okay, that is how that text relates to us because it's a picture of Jesus.

And then we don't have so much problem applying it to our situation. So it's an attempt, that allegorical reading is an attempt to connect the reading of Scripture with the life of the people of God. And that disconnect that I think people feel from the narrative is one of the problems of reading the Scripture as an authoritative text.

An allegory is one way of trying to avoid that. But the reformers are dealing with a problem on another side. And that's the problem that when you're reading the text allegorically, you can make the text mean all sorts of different things because the text is not exerting a very clear controlling force upon your readings.

Rather, the text can be taken in this way or that, and it can be used in ways that can seemingly do violence to the actual literary sense of the text. And then you have the literal sense and the allegorical sense or typological sense starting to diverge and starting to become detached things. So you have the literal sense and then you have almost placed over that as sort of concreting over the actual ground of the literal reading of the text.

You have this allegorical sense which can efface what we have at the very basic level of the reading of the text. And it can also lead us to this problem of then how exactly is this text authoritative? Now we've got this allegorical reading speaking into our situation, but how is that authoritative? It doesn't seem to be authoritative. It leaves us with the problem of if this text teaches this, it's not in a way that gives us a clear sense of how the text itself is controlling the interpreter.

Indeed, the interpreter can come up with all sorts of different readings. There may be controls from the theology of the church, but the text itself ceases to exercise force, controlling force upon interpretation. And so the reformers are dealing with that problem and trying to push back and say we need to return to the literal reading of the text and we need to be very aware of these sort of allegorical readings that can end up forcing the text into whatever mould the interpreter brings to it.

Even though the interpreter is trying to address that problem of trying to speak that text into the life of the church with force, the problem is that they've treated the text in a way that leaves that reading of the text, that allegorical reading of the text, unmoored from the actual literary artefact that we have in front of us. So we have problems on both sides. On the one side, we have texts that would not seem to have clear authority within the life of the church.

Maybe they're true stories, but it's not entirely clear how this speaks to our situation, how it conveys God's truth, how it tells us anything about who God is. And on the other hand, you have the problem of, well, if you're reading these texts allegorically, how is the text itself controlling your reading? And so both of these, in their own way, are problems of authority. The first is the question of how can that text be authoritative in the situation of the church's life? How can a text that is a narrative of some different people in a different time speak with authority and force into the life of the church? How can that look us directly in the eyes? And on the other hand, the question is, how can such an authority be the authority of this text? An authority that is not forced into the text from without, an authority that can be made to move whatever way we want.

How can it be an authority that is rooted and grounded within the controls of the text itself? And in that respect, we can see that there's not necessarily a reason why we can't say both of those concerns are necessary. The concerns of the patristics who want to speak with authority and force from Old Testament narrative into the life of the church, to bear witness to Christ and to see Christ within the text and to see that these texts are addressing the situation of the church, that as Paul can say in 1 Corinthians 10, all these things were written for our example. That the text should be read that way.

That's the one hand, that that text, that narrative, those narratives should be authoritative for us and they should speak as examples to us. On the other hand, we want to ensure that we are grounded within the text itself. Now I think a theopoietic hermeneutic or more generally a figural hermeneutic, I mean it's not something that's exclusive to a theopoietic approach.

This is something that is more general for good readers of scripture. We are trying to maintain both of those things and it's found in drawing the typological or figural reading of the text out of the literary reading of the text, the literal sense of the text. And that's I think what we see in theopolitical reading more generally.

What you see again and again is let's look at this text more closely. Let's look at the literary structure of the text. Let's look at the chiasm within the chiasms within this text.

Let's look at the way that this particular frame of the text may be related to another frame elsewhere in the text. Let's think about the juxtaposition of characters. Let's think about the sequence and the movement of the narrative and the plot.

Let's think about the way that this character is playing out a similar pattern to other characters. Let's think about the way that the place names and other things are conveying something within this text. Let's think about the punning within the text.

Why use this particular word? Why give this detail about a particular number? What connections are we being invited to draw? Now that sort of reading of the text is not one that you'll necessarily arrive at straight away. When you're reading the text at first it may seem this is a far-fetched and extreme way of reading the text. But then as you read the text over time you begin to see that that way of reading the text is rewarded with insight.

It becomes clear that the text was written with this sort of reading in mind. That there are patterns within the text. That there are these details being foregrounded for that sort of reason.

Now when you've started to read the text that way you begin to see that the literary sense of the text and the figural sense of the text start to converge. They're no longer at odds with each other. Rather the more that we read the text in a literary manner the

more we'll find that a figural reading emerges.

And so when we're reading the story of Abraham for instance we will arrive at juxtapositions of characters like Sarah and Hagar. And that will be quite developed. And so when Paul in Galatians chapter 4 talks about the allegory of Hagar and Sarah and the child of promise and the child of flesh it's not something that's coming as a bolt from the blue.

We can see where he got this in Genesis itself. There is a pattern being played out there and it's a pattern that we see within the text itself. Paul is not just imposing this upon the text from without.

Now how does that differ from the approach of someone like Provan? I don't think it differs in principle. Rather Provan is fighting a particular side of the battle. He's fighting against this forcing of the text, a forcing of moulds and readings and philosophies and theologies upon the text in a way that can end up effacing the text's own force.

That that authority should be the authority that comes from the text itself not an authority that is lent to it by the author, by the reader. And that in that respect I think he's pushing back against people like Hans Bosmer and others who in their sacramental reading of the text can often fall prey to that sort of danger. And so what he's doing is maintaining that literary sense of the text not in a way that excludes the more typological reading.

And he makes very clear that it is a literary reading. A literary reading is one that precisely will pay attention to literary convention, idiom, metaphor and typology or figuration. So that is part of the literary reading of the text.

The grammatical historical reading of the text should lead us to this sort of way of approaching the text. Now in that respect I don't think that there's any principal difference between him and a theopolitical approach. Where I do think there are differences are in exegetical instincts.

And that is where you will see a lot of differences between people who will hold a grammatical historical approach which in practice ends up being in a minimalistic reading of scripture. A reading of scripture that cannot see the typology that's playing out because they're not looking closely enough at the literary structures. They're not looking closely enough at the patterns that are playing out.

They're focusing too much upon these discrete and detached texts that they can't see the unifying themes that are playing throughout. And there I think the theopolitical approach and the approach of others that have a very strong emphasis. And I think this is an important part of the approach that a theopolitical reader will take.

It has a very strong emphasis upon your unitary authorship of scripture. That God has

inspired all of this. It's a unified text and there are themes that unify the entirety of the text even in its diversity.

So you're recognizing the diversity but you're also recognizing these unifying themes playing out. And when you do that I think the literary reading of the text has far more of a punch to it. Because there's a lot more weight given to the canonical reading of the text.

Not as an artificial amalgam that's formed that is almost imposed upon this text that exists in abstraction from the canon in its primary form. But rather it is seen as something that's natural to it. It's seen as something natural to it because they all arise from the authorship of God.

Now I don't think Provan is against that sort of thing in principle. But I think that in exegetical practice this is the sort of thing that gets downplayed in the approach of most grammatical historical readers. And what Jordan and Biblical Horizons and Theopolis and others have represented is a movement from a minimalistic reading to a maximalist reading of scripture.

Now that maximalist reading of scripture is not just turning everything up to 11 and saying let's take all the crazy things that we can see within the text, whether they are there or not. Rather it's just saying let's look a lot more closely at these literary patterns. Let's put a lot more weight upon scripture.

Let's think about the details, not just the ones that are absolutely certain, absolutely explitted. But let's think about some of the more implicit patterns that are playing out. And in those implicit patterns we're not giving them the same sort of weight but we're giving them some weight.

And as we do so we find that they'll bear maybe more weight than we initially placed upon them. Now I've described a lot of this using the analogy of walking a path that leads you to a great mountain. Now as you're walking that path you're walking through woods and you're walking through stones and rocky areas and most of the time you can't see the mountaintop that you're walking to directly.

You may be walking around the side of the mountain at certain points and you're not seeing much of a vista of the place that you're heading to. Occasionally you'll glance at the peak through the trees that are obscuring your vision and you'll see some glimpse of it and you'll be able to connect the point where you're standing to your destination. But it's not until you've climbed up the absolute summit and that whole vista unfolds before you as a unified entity that you'll be able to see it more clearly.

Now when you do that you'll find that that itinerary, the whole path that you've walked, it can be seen as a unity. From that mountain peak you can see every single part of that

itinerary, every single part of the path that you've walked and it will be seen as a unified thing in that moment in time, in that one glance. Yet when you're walking the path it's something that must be traveled step by step in a sequence and it will lead you progressively towards that point from which you can see it as a whole.

Now many people are wanting to airlift themselves from a particular point in the itinerary to that one point where you can see the entirety as a whole. Others are just focusing upon a particular point on the itinerary and are unable to see it as part of a wider itinerary and as something that can be unified and directed to a single point that's all leading to Christ. Now the theopultan approach or a more figural reading of scripture, the sort of reading that I would be arguing for, is one that's trying to focus upon that particular point that we find ourselves in the itinerary.

To recognize that the itinerary is a unified entity that finds its destination in Christ and to pay attention to each step of the path as it leads us towards that destination. Not to short circuit things and jump airlift ourselves directly to the destination because we won't understand the destination unless we walk the proper path towards it. And so we're trying to hold together a more literary reading of the text, paying attention to the ground that we're standing on and believing that the ground that we're standing upon as it's followed through as a proper itinerary will lead us towards Christ.

But it will lead us towards Christ as we follow the path, not as we airlift ourselves from the path onto some other realm entirely. And so when we actually arrive at the destination we can look back at particular points in the itinerary and recognize how they connect us to the destination. But not in a way that dismisses the path that we have to walk which is the literal reading of the text.

And so what I think a theopultan approach and a figural reading of the text more generally is trying to do, is trying to bring together the literary and grammatical historical controls that reformers emphasized that the authority is that of the text itself. It is the text itself that sets out the itinerary that will lead us to Christ and we must trace that itinerary within the text itself. We must show our working within and from the text rather than from some philosophy that's brought to the text that takes us up out of the text and brings us to this other point.

And so that's something that we're wary of that the church fathers could often do. The church fathers who recognized the importance of that vantage point at the top of the mountain where you have seen the glory of Christ and everything else stretches out before you. They could look from that mountain point and they could point to images of Christ throughout the scripture but in a way that did violence to the itinerary.

They did not recognize the actual path that you must walk that connects those points to the point from which they can be viewed from above. And what we're trying to do is to maintain that connection, to maintain that vantage point but to do so in a way that

honors the itinerary and the itinerary is set by the text. And so there I think it's a patristic style reading, a reading that will do the same sort of things as the church fathers were trying to do but in a way that is maintaining the controls of the reformers, the controls of the reformers that rooted things in the text again that ensured that the authority with which the text acts within the life of the church is the authority of the text itself not an authority that is imposed upon it from without.

And when we read the text that way I think what we'll find is that narrative has authority. Narrative has authority in a way that the minimalistic readings of most grammatical historical exegetes cannot capture but it also has an authority that is its own in a way that the maximalist allegorical readings of the church fathers could not capture either. And so it's trying to bring those two things together and I think that's where its real strength lies.

It's something in keeping with both aspects of the tradition of the church and bringing the best of those things together towards a reading of the text that's controlled by the text but is bringing out the full treasures and riches of the text that maintains that dominical vantage point that we are given, the vantage point that Christ gives us that we see him in every part of the scriptures but also which maintains the vantage point of the text itself and moves through its proper itinerary to lead us to Christ rather than short-circuiting things airlifting us out and making us see things from an alien vantage point that isn't actually controlled by the text itself. Thank you very much for listening if you have any questions please leave them on my Curious Cat account. If you would like to support this and other podcasts and videos like it please do so using my Patreon or my PayPal accounts.

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