

The Maximalist Hermeneutics of James B. Jordan

R. S. Clarke

Abstract

James B. Jordan's maximalist hermeneutic seeks to read the Bible in a way that allows the depth and richness of its meaning to be discerned. The relationship between special and general revelation is important, as the world teaches us how to understand the Bible, and the Bible shows us how to interpret the world. The reader of the Bible should learn to be sensitive to all its literary tropes, in particular its rich symbolism and typology. Controls on this maximalist hermeneutic are not found in externally imposed rules but in theological and ecclesiastical traditions which themselves derive from the Bible.

Introduction to Interpretive Maximalism

David Chilton, in the introduction to his commentary on the book of Revelation, first coined the term 'interpretive maximalism' with respect to the hermeneutics of James B. Jordan.¹ Jordan himself had earlier described his method by way of contrast with the prevailing trend towards interpretive minimalism he perceived in evangelical

¹David Chilton, *The Days of Vengeance* (Ft. Worth, Tex.: Dominion, 1987), 37.

commentaries.² For Jordan, 'maximalism' was simply a way of expressing his conviction that Scripture uses types and symbols to express deeper meanings than can be found by a straightforward grammatical-historical exegesis of the text. The commentary on Judges in which he first outlines this approach displays numerous examples of such a maximalist hermeneutic. However, it is in his later works that Jordan's interpretations are given fullest expression, most notably in his book on biblical world view, *Through New Eyes*,³ and in his recent commentary on Daniel, *The Handwriting on the Wall*.⁴ Other examples of his biblical interpretation can also be found in numerous Biblical Horizons newsletters and similar publications.⁵

Jordan's works are nothing if not divisive. Over the years, they have been thrown brickbats and bouquets with approximately equal force. Perhaps it is his claim to stand firmly within the tradition of Reformed hermeneutics that most dismays his opponents. Greg Bahnsen, for example, has forcibly expressed his view of the potential dangers of Jordan's hermeneutic:

I believe the 'interpretive maximalism' that he [Jordan] promotes - to the degree you can get any clear sense from him as to what that objectively entails - is *extremely* dangerous. I believe that it is one of the most dangerous things in the theological world today that might entice otherwise evangelical and Reformed people.⁶

R. C. Sproul, Jr. gives a slightly less aggressive account of the opposition to Jordan's work, observing that, 'Among those who are familiar with him, Jordan is often laughed off as a crazy Origenian, a

²James B. Jordan, *Judges: God's War Against Humanism* (Tyler, Tex.: Geneva Ministries, 1985), xii.

³James B. Jordan, *Through New Eyes* (Brentwood, Tenn.: Wolgemuth & Hyatt, 1988).

⁴James B. Jordan, *The Handwriting on the Wall: A Commentary on Daniel* (Powder Springs, GA: American Vision, 2007).

⁵ Jordan is the Director of Biblical Horizons, a ministry which publishes various newsletters, books, and other media exploring theological, biblical and liturgical issues in line with its mission statement. For more information, see the Biblical Horizons website: <http://www.biblicalhorizons.com>.

⁶Greg Bahnsen, An Interview with Greg L. Bahnsen (1994) <<http://www.cmfnow.com/articles/pe179.htm>> [last accessed 17 November 2008].

person given to allegorical flights of fantasy.⁷ The danger that Bahnsen perceives in Jordan's approach to the Bible is precisely this apparent uncontrollability. He sees no evidence of a reproducible method in Jordan's work and thus he fears that interpretive maximalism allows readers to make the Bible mean anything at all.

In response, Jordan denies that his work is either strange or innovative. In his 'Apologia on Reading the Bible', he tells of a Sunday School class he taught that was attended by no fewer than four members of the Westminster Theological Seminary faculty, including Cornelius Van Til, who all approved of the general approach to the book of Judges which later formed the basis of his commentary.⁸ Throughout his work, Jordan cites men such as Meredith Kline, Vern Poythress, Gordon Wenham, John Frame, Cornelius Van Til, Herman Bavinck and other notable Reformed scholars who he claims have been influential on his thinking. It is clear that he considers himself to be working largely within the same theological and hermeneutical traditions as these men.

Those who praise Jordan acknowledge that his method is not strictly scientific, but argue that this is his strength, rather than his weakness. Sproul, in his review of *Through New Eyes* admits that, 'Jordan finds things in the text of Scripture that probably aren't there, as his critics charge.' However, Sproul considers that this is more than compensated for since, 'he also finds more in the text that is there than all his critics combined.'⁹ It is here that the value of Jordan's work may be seen. As evangelical interpreters, we have been so careful to avoid reading too much into the text of the Bible that perhaps, unwittingly, we have been blind to much of what the Bible does say.

In this paper, we shall give an account of James Jordan's hermeneutic with the aim of showing that there is an underlying method to it, although we shall see that this method is more literary than scientific. In particular we shall argue that the controls that govern Jordan's interpretation are sufficient to mitigate the dangers of

⁷R.C. Sproul Jr., *Seeing Better* (2000) <<http://highlands.gospelcom.net/articles/ReviewThroughNewEyes.php>> [last accessed 17 November 2008].

⁸James B. Jordan, 'Apologia on Reading the Bible', *Contra Mundum* 3 (1992): 28.

⁹Sproul Jr., "Seeing Better."

wild and fanciful interpretation. And by contrast, we shall hope to demonstrate that the positive gains from this method are well worth the effort of learning to read through new eyes.

The Location of Meaning

Modern views of meaning may be broadly divided into three categories: those which insist that meaning resides in authorial intention; those which locate meaning in the text itself; and those in which meaning is to be found in the response of the reader. Interpretation of the biblical text is further complicated by its dual divine and human authorship. For Jordan, meaning is primarily located in the text, though his theological framework allows him to identify this with the intent of the divine author who communicates his meaning perfectly through his word. Although the human authorial intent may not precisely match the divine intent in all respects, Jordan does attribute a much higher degree of understanding to the human authors than most interpreters will grant.

Meaning is located in the text

Chilton explains the reason for Jordan's focus on the text as the location of meaning in the introduction to his commentary on Revelation:

James Jordan once observed that most conservative evangelicals unintentionally pursue a 'liberal' approach toward Scripture in their sermons and commentaries. Liberals have held for years that the Bible is not revelation itself; rather, they maintain, it is a (flawed) *record* of revelation. ...In practice, conservatives themselves often treat the Bible as only a 'record' of revelation. Evangelical commentaries tend not to deal with the actual text of the Bible, treating only of the *events* related in the text and paying scant attention to the wording and literary architecture [*sic*] of God's revelation.¹⁰

The text, Jordan insists, is God's revelation, not merely the events which the text records. God communicates perfectly, through

¹⁰Chilton, *The Days of Vengeance*, 36.

divinely-ordained events recorded by divinely-inspired writers using divinely-ordained language. Since Jordan's concern is with the divinely intended meaning, his focus is naturally on the whole of the divinely-given revelation. He therefore reads the scriptures as a literary whole, each part contributing to and conditioned by the whole, so as to interact with the rest in ways which the individual human authors could not always have foreseen or intended.

Further, since God's revelation is the revelation of God, Jordan interprets the Scriptures theologically:

I believe that every detail in the text is there for a specific *theological* reason. The Bible is not first and foremost entertainment (though it does, obviously, have a very intense artistic dimension). It does not give us details of time, place, geography, number, etc., simply to 'create a sense of reality.' That is what novelists do, but that is not what the Bible does. I believe this very firmly, and I believe that those who dismiss the details of the text as 'unimportant' or as 'mere literary color' are guilty of neglecting the work of the Holy Spirit. I don't believe the Spirit wastes His breath. The books of the Bible do indeed have literary beauty, and we should appreciate this. But such literary beauty is not 'art for art's sake.' The details are there to add to the revelation [of] Christ and His Church.¹¹

This focus on detail is characteristic of Jordan's exegesis. Meaning is found not merely in the general sense of longer passages, but in the small, deliberate details of the text. Everything is divinely inspired and so everything must contribute to the theological meaning of the text.

One of the ways Jordan takes seriously the detail of the text which may seem strange to modern readers is the significance he gives to numbers and repetition. In Daniel, for instance, he notes that names are highlighted as significant by the fact that Daniel and his companions are given new names in Babylon. Counting the number of uses of each name in the book yields the following statistics: Daniel, 75x (5x15; 5x5x3); Belteshazzar, 10x (5x2); Hananiah, Mishael, Azariah, 5x; Shadrach, Meshach, Abed-Nego, 15x (5x3).¹² The number five represents power¹³ and so 'the carefully arranged counts

¹¹Jordan, 'Apologia on Reading the Bible', 29.

¹²Jordan, *Handwriting on the Wall*, 140.

¹³In an Appendix on 'The Numerics of Kingship in Daniel', Jordan gives some

of these names indicates that God's people have power over the Oikumene in which they serve.¹⁴ By contrast, the names of Nebuchadnezzar, Belshazzar, and Darius all appear a multiple of four times in the book. Jordan notes that four is the number of metals and the number of beasts that occur in Daniel's vision. The regularity of the numbers suggests that this is more than mere coincidence and that Jordan is right to see this repetition as part of the deliberate structure of the book.

Meaning is located in the text within the world

Although the Bible is God's revelation, it does not constitute the whole of God's revelation and for Jordan, the interaction between special revelation found in the text and general revelation found in creation is vital. The words of the Bible and the things of the world give meaning to each other in the way that God has planned, in order to reveal himself through both.

First, the world teaches us how to read the Bible. That is to say, when the Bible talks of rocks or lions or trees, we turn to our experience of these things in the world in order to know what these words represent. We trust that the words of the Bible describe the reality of the world so that when, for example, it uses the word 'rock' it means, at least in part, that which we can see with our eyes and touch with our hands and call a rock. Jordan illustrates this idea from the account of creation in Genesis 1. The categories which distinguish the different kinds of animal are not scientific groupings but rather they seem to be based on the outward appearance of the animals. We can work out that the group called 'creeping things' includes various kinds of lizard, insect and rodent because these all share the same outward visible quality, even though they come from different biological classes.¹⁵ Our knowledge and experience of the world

explanation for the meaning attached to the number five. He notes that the term kingdom occurs in multiples of five (9 x 5 in chapters 1-6, and 5 x 5 in chapters 7-12). In addition Jordan observes that the term 'hand' is often used in the Old Testament to refer to strength or power, and hands, of course, have five fingers. See Jordan, *Handwriting on the Wall*, 705-7.

¹⁴Jordan, *Handwriting on the Wall*, 140.

¹⁵Jordan, *Through New Eyes*, 15.

enables us to interpret the biblical terminology.

More significantly, perhaps, the Bible teaches us how to read the world we live in. Since the world was designed to reveal God, we need to learn to read the world theologically. Rather than talking about this in the general terms we may be more familiar with, Jordan's aim in *Through New Eyes* is to show us *how* the world reveals God: 'The way the Bible uses symbols shows us how to interpret God's natural revelation. When we see how the Bible speaks of stars, gemstones, lions, lambs, fish, trees, and thorns, we will be able to walk outside and appreciate God's world.'¹⁶ The Bible teaches us the way in which the objects we encounter in the material world reflect the God who designed and made them.

So, for example, following Meredith Kline, Jordan understands that 'The heavens declare the glory of God in the special sense that they are a copy of the archetypal Glory of God.'¹⁷ This symbolism is indicated by the verbal link: 'The fact that the word *heaven* is used for the firmament means that the firmament is analogous to the original heaven, and this is symbolic for it.'¹⁸ He then extends this symbolic structure to the objects of the heavens/skies, so that '...the phenomena that appear in the sky are signs and symbols of things in the original heaven. Clouds remind us of God's glory-cloud. Rainbows remind us of the rainbow around His throne. Stars speak of angels. The sun speaks of Christ. The blue speaks of the heavenly sea before the Throne. And so forth.'¹⁹ These symbols are not chosen arbitrarily by Jordan but accumulated from a variety of different biblical texts to form a coherent whole.²⁰ When attention is paid to these kinds of biblical symbols, we can begin to see how specifically the created world reveals God's glory.

This understanding of the symbolic nature of the world gives Jordan a way of extending meaning beyond mere reference to a

¹⁶Jordan, *Through New Eyes*, 26.

¹⁷Jordan, *Through New Eyes*, 43 cites Meredith Kline, *Images of the Spirit* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1980), 20.

¹⁸Jordan, *Through New Eyes*, 45.

¹⁹Jordan, *Through New Eyes*, 46.

²⁰The notion of the rainbow around the throne is taken from Ezekiel 1:28; the stars are associated with angels in Isaiah 14:12; the blue sea is found in Exodus 24:10; and Christ is referred to as the sun in Revelation 1:16.

material object. Symbolism is inherent in creation and thus in language. Because an object symbolises something beyond itself, so the word which refers to the symbol also carries the connotations of what is being symbolised. Understanding this symbolic reference of both words and objects allows Jordan to find symbolism throughout the Bible, not just in those passages which most obviously employ figurative language.

Discerning Meaning

Jordan's understanding of the location of meaning inevitably translates into certain characteristic interpretive approaches. Here, one hesitates to talk about method or technique, since his work is not that of a scientific exegete. For him, interpretation is clearly an art, born out of experience, character and natural flair.

The literary approach

Since for Jordan, meaning is located in the text, his approach has much in common with literary interpretation. This is explained most clearly in his essay, 'Apologia on Reading the Bible'.²¹ For Jordan, the good reader is one who 'is able to distinguish important from secondary themes, make relevant connections, not get lost in details, etc.'²² He recognises that not all will be gifted in this kind of reading, just as not all are gifted to be evangelists, pastors or teachers. The Bible can be used to gain information and insight even through 'non-literary' reading and Jordan is quite clear that 'the Spirit ministers to us through and with the Word,'²³ whatever kind of reader we are. Nevertheless, 'The Bible is literature, and those who wish to deal with it in depth need to become "literary" readers.'²⁴

First, good literary readers must recognise that the Bible is *ancient* literature written in a context where:

Few people could read, and there was no easy way to write very much.

²¹Jordan, 'Apologia on Reading the Bible'.

²²Jordan, 'Apologia on Reading the Bible', 30.

²³Jordan, 'Apologia on Reading the Bible', 30.

²⁴Jordan, 'Apologia on Reading the Bible', 34.

Reproduction was by hand copying. Thus, writers were constrained by [sic] make *every jot and tittle count*. They did this by the use of literary structures such as chiasms (ABCBA) and palistrophes (huge chiasms that cover vast reaches of text). They did this by the use of symbolic numbers and numerical structures. They did this by the use of symbolic names. Particularly in the Bible, since it is a cumulative book, they did it by means of allusions to pre-existing literature. In this way, they could say a lot in a small compass, for the alert reader (the only kind there was back then) knew to pore over the text for additional depths. Nowadays we rarely encounter this kind of writing.²⁵

In order to begin to grasp the depths of meaning contained within the text of the Bible, we need to become more like its ancient readers. For Jordan this involves becoming more alert to the kind of literary structures and devices that shape the text. He also notes that the Bible was originally intended to be heard, rather than read silently, and that this would promote greater awareness of the patterns and meanings of the text:

God shapes our consciousness through its cadences and repetitions. The Bible abounds in numerical symbolism, large parallel structures, intricate chiasmic devices, astral allusions, sweeping metaphors, typological parallels, and symbolism in general. The ancient servant of God was able to *hear* these aspects of the text, because he heard these passages read over and over, week after week, in worship.²⁶

Learning to read according to the conventions of ancient literature is just one of the necessary skills of the good Bible reader. To explain more of what it means to be a literary reader, Jordan draws heavily on C. S. Lewis's essay, *An Experiment in Criticism*.²⁷

Basically, the literary reader is a person who is *open and receptive* to the text, and allows himself to be molded by it. The unliterary reader is a person who *uses* the text for his own purposes, whether that purpose be the gathering of information or sheer recreation. Lewis then goes on to say that 'good literature' is literature that tends to compel a literary reading, while 'bad literature' is literature that does not have the depth to

²⁵Jordan, 'Apologia on Reading the Bible', 31.

²⁶Jordan, *Handwriting on the Wall*, 123.

²⁷C. S. Lewis, *An Experiment in Criticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1965).

withstand a literary read.²⁸

Openness and receptivity are vague terms, hard to quantify or assess, and impossible to prescribe a method for. They depend on the character and skill of the reader. It is this focus on the reader rather than the method of interpretation that worries Jordan's critics so greatly. Here Greg Bahnsen expresses his concern for the lack of objectivity and the corresponding potential dangers of Jordan's hermeneutic:

One must always be concerned when a certain method is so ambiguous as to allow for conflicting conclusions or arbitrary conclusions to be drawn from it. I have maintained for quite a long time that Jordan's approach to the Bible is a matter of rhetorical and creative flourish on his part and does not reduce to principles of interpretation which are public or objective and predictable, and for that reason you can go just about anywhere once you try to interpret the Bible in the manner observed in his publications. It's just a matter of *whose* creativity you are going to follow this week.²⁹

However, it is not the case that there is no method at all to Jordan's interpretation, as we have seen. There are clear principles to be followed: use insights from general revelation; pay attention to the detail; interpret theologically; recognise the conventions of the ancient literature; and be open and receptive to the text. More important than any of these, perhaps, is the principle of 'repeated exposure.'³⁰ Simply reading the Bible more often and more open-mindedly is the surest way to becoming a better Bible-reader.³¹

Typology

In the introduction to his commentary on Judges, Jordan explains something of his approach to the historical narratives of the book:

Judges is numbered among what are called the 'Former Prophets'. These books were called prophecies because the histories they recorded were

²⁸Jordan, 'Apologia on Reading the Bible', 33.

²⁹ Bahnsen, 'Interview'.

³⁰Alastair Roberts, *Some Thoughts on 'Interpretive Maximalism'* (2005) <<http://40bicycles.blogspot.com/2005/06/some-thoughts-on-interpretive.html>> [last accessed November 2008]; Jordan, 'Apologia on Reading the Bible', 35.

³¹Jordan, *Handwriting on the Wall*, 117, 124.

regarded as exemplary. The histories showed God's principles in action, and thus formed prophetic warnings to the people. If we read Judges merely as a set of exciting stories, we miss this.³²

God's principles are displayed in the events recorded in the Bible. They are there not merely as a matter of historical record, but for the benefit of the later reader who, presumably, can expect God to display similar characteristics to those he has shown in the past. A typological reading relies on the consistency of God's actions in the world, but it goes beyond this. Typology is seen not in events, *per se*, but in the literary portrayal of events. Identifying a type involves a claim that the earlier event both took place and that it was deliberately recorded in such a way as to form a pattern for later events.

To illustrate his view of typology, Jordan uses the example of Othniel and Achsah in Judges 1:11-15. He sums this story up as 'The Son destroys the Enemy in order to win the Bride from the Father,' and asks, 'Can we see a *vague* image of the gospel here? Certainly; it fairly leaps off the page.' Or again, 'After the marriage, we find the Bride asking the Father for springs of water. Can we see in this a *vague* image of the Church asking for and receiving the Spirit?' He concludes:

These are *vague* images, snapshots of truth as it were. It would be stretching matters to try to make this story into a prophetic type in the full sense, but at the same time we ought not to blind ourselves to the possibility that a more general picture of the kingdom of God is presented here. Without any doubt, the story of Othniel and Achsah is designed to picture for us the winning of the kingdom, and the blessings that come to the righteous after the kingdom is won. In a general way, this is parallel to the work of Christ in winning the kingdom, and the blessings that come to the Church afterwards. Given this *general* truth, we are invited to inspect the passage more closely to see more specific parallels.³³

The larger type in the overall story sets the frame work for observing minor types in the detail. Jordan recognises that sometimes these patterns are vague and that 'one does not burn at the stake for

³²Jordan, *Judges*, xi.

³³Jordan, *Judges*, xiii.

interpretations such as this.³⁴ Nonetheless, he argues that 'we would not be doing our duty to the text if we did not at least give some reflection to them.'³⁵

The typological interpretation of events does not deny their historicity, rather it depends on it. God's control of events is such that the things recorded are both true and bear the significance given them in their literary form. They could not function as examples of God's actions in history if they were not themselves historical. The discernment of the type, however, does depend on the literary presentation of the event to show its significance. 'God does not waste words. God has absolute superintendence of events, and every detail recorded in the text is to be pondered for significance.'³⁶ Here again we see the interaction between God's self-revelation in the Scriptures and his self-revelation in the world.

Typology is not restricted, in Jordan's view, to the relationship between the testaments and nor is typology monovalent. The story of Daniel, for example, can be seen as a reprise of the creation story,³⁷ the Joseph story,³⁸ and the Ten Commandments, with Daniel himself as the new Moses.³⁹ These typological patterns are not in competition with one another as if there was one right way to understand the meaning of the book. Rather, each of them highlights different theological meanings in the text, each contributing to the whole.

Symbolism

We have already mentioned Jordan's symbolic view of the world and of the Bible. These symbolic interpretations are not arbitrarily imposed but are drawn from the Bible itself.⁴⁰ The Bible uses symbols within a complex network, reusing the same symbols in different contexts highlighting different structures and relationships. In this way the symbolic meaning of words and the things they refer to

³⁴Jordan, *Judges*, xiii.

³⁵Jordan, *Judges*, xiii.

³⁶Jordan, *Judges*, xvi.

³⁷Jordan, *Handwriting on the Wall*, 675–86.

³⁸Jordan, *Handwriting on the Wall*, 687–90.

³⁹Jordan, *Handwriting on the Wall*, 667–73.

⁴⁰Jordan, *Handwriting on the Wall*, 176n.

develops and accumulates through the canon of Scripture.

One of the symbols Jordan traces through the Bible is the tree. Trees should be seen as God's provision for his people; trees can represent God's presence (most notably in the wooden tabernacle and temple); trees are sometimes used to symbolise ladders to heaven; and finally trees represent God's people. Each of these symbolic meanings is developed through the Bible. The symbolic link between people and trees, for instance, begins in the Garden of Eden where Jordan sees 'a planting of trees and also the first planting of humanity.'⁴¹ The connection is made explicit in passages such as Psalm 1 and Judges 9, as well as the parables of Jesus likening the Kingdom to a tree. With the confidence given by these explicit statements of the symbolic connection, Jordan also observes links between men and trees in a number of less obvious passages. The oaks of Moreh where Abram dwelt come to be the identifying feature of Abraham's living in the land. The settlement of Israel in the land is described as planting a grove of trees. The first city destroyed in Canaan was Jericho, the City of Palm Trees. The temple-house was made from wood.⁴²

In *Through New Eyes*, Jordan gives a number of rules which set out his view of proper symbolic interpretation of the Bible.

1. Biblical symbolism and imagery is not a code
2. Biblical symbols do not exist in isolation
3. We must always have clear-cut Biblical indication for any symbol or image we think we have found.
4. The heritage of the Church in systematic theology and in the history of exegesis is always a check on wild speculation.
5. Biblical symbolism must be interpreted in terms of Biblical presuppositions and philosophy.
6. The student of Biblical imagery must be alert to the work of other scholars.⁴³

The first two rules are concerned with the nature of symbolism itself, and the final four provide certain controls on the interpretation of symbolic imagery. In saying that biblical symbolism should not be

⁴¹Jordan, *Through New Eyes*, 90.

⁴²See Jordan, *Through New Eyes*, 90–92.

⁴³Jordan, *Through New Eyes*, 15–17.

treated as a code, he means that a literal statement cannot adequately replace a symbolic one. Symbols carry with them a whole range of associations and connotations that express much more than their literal counterparts, and the interpreter must be sensitive to all of these. Second, he reminds us that symbols exist within a coherent network of relationships. The symbolic meaning of plants must be appropriately related to the symbolic meaning of fruit, for example.

The controls that Jordan lists indicate his concern only to discover those symbols which the Bible itself permits. It should also be clear that he does not aim for novelty or idiosyncrasy in his work. Checks and balances from systematic theology, the history of exegesis and the work of other scholars must be made. In particular we must be careful to avoid reading modern symbolism or ancient pagan symbolism into the Bible.

Keeping it Under Control

As we have seen, one of the main concerns with Jordan's hermeneutic is that such a creative, literary approach to interpretation does not lend itself to the rigorous kinds of control that, for example, grammatical-historical exegesis allows. If the principles of interpretation cannot be laid down, then, it is argued, there is no objective standard against which to judge conflicting or novel interpretations. Further, Jordan's proclivity for typological and symbolic interpretations leads some to conclude that he indulges in mere fanciful allegorisation of the text. These tendencies, it is argued, leave the Bible susceptible to all kinds of unorthodox interpretations.

It is certainly the case that Jordan's hermeneutic cannot be easily expressed in terms of objective rules or standards. However, we have shown there are some fundamental principles underlying his approach to the Bible and that he outlines certain rules applying to the interpretation of types and symbols which do constitute various kinds of control ensuring that symbols are not arbitrarily imposed on the text. These controls include an acknowledgement of the historic faith of the church as expressed in its creeds and confessions: 'The tradition of the faith handed down by these men through the ages is the legacy of the Spirit, and is not to be despised. That tradition is subordinate to the Bible, but not to any individual hothead who

thinks he has come up with a new theological insight.⁴⁴ Or again:

Speculation concerning the meaning of a particular text of Scripture can be very valuable, but it must not be confused with speculation concerning the received doctrines of the faith, summarized in the Apostles' and Nicene Creeds. We can debate over whether the parables in Matthew 25 refer to the destruction of Jerusalem or the Second Coming. We do not debate over the doctrine that one day Christ will return to transfigure this present cosmos into a *physical* new heavens and earth.⁴⁵

This respect for tradition is not only theological but also exegetical. Novel interpretations are neither to be sought nor expected. Jordan describes his own caution with respect to novelty: 'I don't believe God blesses men who are on a quest for fame or novelty. Many times I have been forced to make a connection that seemed new (since I have been working on passages that are relatively untouched), only to find later that my insight was not new at all, only new to me.'⁴⁶

Such distrust of novelty or, one might better say, such respect for his fathers in the church, makes a refreshing contrast to the arrogant quest for novelty that drives much scholarly research today.

With respect to the charge of allegorisation, Jordan distinguishes his work from such externally imposed interpretations.

In the early Church, the school of Alexandria became notorious for allegorical and symbolic exegesis; but their problem did not lie in the fact that they studied Biblical imagery. The problem was that they were trying to squeeze Biblical teachings into the categories of Platonic philosophy, and to do so they had to interpret the Bible allegorically. The Bible has its own presuppositions and its own philosophy of type and allegory; we do not need to borrow anything from Plato.⁴⁷

The Bible, Jordan claims, is its own interpretation guide. Imposing external categories of Platonic philosophy will certainly distort its meaning. So too, we might suggest, imposing the modernist rules of grammatical-historical exegesis will result in a distortion of the Bible's meaning. Proper presuppositions and principles for interpretation can only be derived from the Bible itself.

⁴⁴Chilton, *The Days of Vengeance*, 30.

⁴⁵Jordan, 'Apologia on Reading the Bible', 30.

⁴⁶Jordan, 'Apologia on Reading the Bible', 30.

⁴⁷Jordan, *Through New Eyes*, 17.

The obvious problem with claiming theological, traditional, and biblical controls on interpretation is that these all ultimately derive from our interpretation of the Bible. Systematic formulations of doctrine depend on exegesis of the biblical text for their authority. The church is a community formed by a common interpretation of the Bible. These controls, it turns out, are not external to the process of interpretation at all. However it seems preferable to have to deal with these interactive controls than to impose any arbitrary external standard of interpretation on the bible. Where would we look for such a standard? What authority could it have? Even were it possible to formulate such rules for the interpretation of ordinary texts, how would we know that they were relevant to divinely-inspired Scripture? Far better to acknowledge that the Bible must be our guide here, as in all things, and allow it to teach us how to read it. This will inevitably be a circular process and also one that should not be undertaken by any scholar in isolation. It is by reading the Bible within the community of the church both now and across its history that we will have the best possible guide to understanding it rightly.

In addition to these controls, we should also note that Jordan frequently invokes a principle of relative certainty: some types are vaguer and less sure than others; and certain symbols are more obviously identified in the Bible than others. A lengthy explanation of the constellations in *Through New Eyes*, for example, is hedged about on all sides with disclaimers of uncertainty: 'In this section, we want to focus on the *possibility* (please note) that the twelve signs of the zodiac *may* have been designed by God as twelve portraits of humanity, and that they *may* correlate with the twelve tribes of Israel.'⁴⁸ Jordan is very clear here that his interpretation is not to be taken as the last word.

Although Jordan openly invites challenge and discussion of his interpretations, very little such interaction has been forthcoming, and it seems possible that some of the very general criticism of Jordan's work may in fact be prompted by the practical difficulty of entering such debate. It is hard, when one finds oneself disagreeing with Jordan, to be able to articulate precisely at what point the divergence comes. He puts forward a complex system of symbolic and

⁴⁸Jordan, *Through New Eyes*, 59. Italics original.

typological interpretation, engaging with the whole canon of scripture. Each part of the system is related to the whole and cannot easily be evaluated in isolation from the rest.

For example, Jordan offers an interesting argument in support of his view of women's ministry. He perceives the role of the OT priest as imaging God to the people. This is demonstrated in part through the priestly garments, which Jordan argues, reflect the image of the glory-cloud. Jordan's understanding of the relation of the covenants leads him to assign this imaging role to NT ministers as well. This is then linked with the symbolic representation of the church as the Bride and Christ, her Bridegroom. Since the minister must therefore represent the Bridegroom to his Bride, it is important that he is male. However, since this role is primarily liturgical and sacramental, in Jordan's view, it is not inappropriate for women to teach men in informal settings, nor to be in positions of authority over men outside the church.⁴⁹

What is interesting about this explanation is that it is very difficult to disagree with Jordan's conclusion if one accepts his typological interpretation of the priesthood in the NT church, and his symbolic interpretations of the role of the priest and the relationship between Christ and the church. The matter must, therefore, be discussed at a hermeneutical level: Has Jordan interpreted the symbolism and typology of the Bible rightly? Does he force symbols to bear more meaning than he ought? Has he understood the pattern or the type correctly and does he apply it appropriately in its fulfilment?

Since there are few clear rules on these matters it is hard to show that Jordan has got it wrong. Of course, one could easily show that his conclusions are not those found by strict grammatical-historical exegesis, but that is precisely the point. The cautious minimalism which Jordan warns against can hardly be held up as the standard by which his interpretations must be judged. Nor can a hermeneutical approach be rejected merely because it is difficult to engage in debate about its conclusions. In fact, there is a standard by which Jordan's

⁴⁹Jordan, *Judges*, 77–78. See also Jordan, 'Liturgical Man, Liturgical Woman', *Rite Reasons*, 86–87 (2004), (also available on the Biblical Horizons website at: <http://www.biblicalhorizons.com/rite-reasons/no-86-liturgical-man-liturgical-women-part-1/> and <http://www.biblicalhorizons.com/rite-reasons/no-87-liturgical-man-liturgical-women-part-2/>).

interpretations can and must be judged, which is to say, the Bible.

Where there is a difference of opinion, the solution must be to turn to the Bible and read it with openness and receptivity. It may not always be possible to demonstrate the validity or otherwise of an interpretation through deductive reasoning from the text, but it will always be possible to test an interpretation through the inductive method of reading the Bible in the light of it. Such a test is not an easy or quick way to gain a consensus but that in no way diminishes its importance. Patience is an important virtue in this kind of biblical interpretation.

One further point should be noted here. Jordan's view of meaning accumulated through typology and symbolism inevitably lends itself to finding multiple layers of meaning in a text. This is a feature of all good literature and we should not be surprised to find that the Bible works this way too. The consistency and clarity we expect of the biblical text because of its divine author does not imply superficiality. We can be content with, and indeed should revel in, the multiplicity of meaning in the Bible.

Interpretive Maximalism: Some Concluding Thoughts

It is unfair to dismiss the interpretive maximalism of Jordan and others as mere allegorical fancy and rhetorical posturing. Rather, his is a serious attempt to engage with the revelation of God in the text of the Bible at a deep level, going beyond the superficiality of much modern exegesis. The aim of biblical interpretation surely should not be that of Enlightenment scientists who 'dissect the language, parse it to pieces and too often kill the patient.'⁵⁰ There are deep riches in the Scriptures for those who have the eyes to see them. If we truly believe that this text is the self-revelation of God, it must be incumbent on us to develop the reading skills we need to begin to plumb those depths. We should not be satisfied with a minimalist approach to God's word that reduces the Bible to a series of 'big ideas'. We should be longing to find every nuance of every truth he has given us.

This is not to suggest that we should accept every conclusion that

⁵⁰Sproul Jr., 'Seeing Better'.

Jordan comes to. It may well be the case, as his opponents claim, that he sometimes finds things in the text that are not there. Nevertheless, the work of James Jordan shows us beyond doubt that, with the receptivity of a good literary reader and with eyes opened to the symbolic and typological structures of meaning in the Scriptures, we can be sure of finding many more things in the text than we ever thought possible.

R. S. CLARKE

Highland Theological College, Dingwall.