The Hermeneutical Principles and Exegetical Method of Rev. John Lightfoot, D.D.

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Abstract

This article demonstrates that John Lightfoot's consistent goal in interpreting the Bible was to discern the intended meaning of the human authors of the text and then to show how this also functioned as the divinely intended meaning for the contemporary church. His approach to exegesis is shaped by his recognition of the value of the Rabbinic literature in understanding the biblical text. His hermeneutics, however, is driven by his deep piety and his pastoral concern to see the divine Scriptures read and understood by the church.

Rev. John Lightfoot (1602-75) was a seventeenth century Anglican clergyman who, among his many other interests, was a major contributor to the London Polyglot Bible, kept an important journal of the Westminster Assembly, was Master of Catherine Hall, Cambridge, and ministered at churches in Staffordshire, Shropshire and Hertfordshire.[1] Lightfoot was distinguished among his

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[1] For a fuller account of Lightfoot's life and works, see R. A. Muller, 'Lightfoot, John', in *Historical Handbook of Major Biblical Interpreters*, ed. Donald K. McKim (Downers Grove, Il: IVP, 1998): 208–12; also J. Strype, 'Some Account of the Life

contemporaries by his mastery of Jewish literature and his outstanding linguistic abilities. Both of these are perhaps best exemplified in his series of commentaries on the New Testament, the *Horae Hebraicae et Talmudicae*. Each New Testament text is analysed in terms of its historical and geographical location, its textual variants and by comparison with the Jewish texts. These illuminate the biblical text by providing linguistic, cultural and traditional backgrounds which help to elucidate the original meaning. Richard Muller describes his significance thus:

> Although Lightfoot was preceded in his interest in Judaica as a means to the understanding of the linguistic, cultural and religious background of the New Testament by such important seventeenth century exegetes as Henry Ainsworth, Johannes Buxtorf Sr., John Weemes and Christopher Goodwin, he was the exegete who most clearly and convincingly applied the knowledge of Judaica, and specifically of the Talmud, to the text of the New Testament. He was also one of the first to argue the profound significance of the rabbinic Judaism as a context for understanding the life and ministry of Jesus.[2]

In the post-reformation era during which Lightfoot flourished, the science of biblical interpretation was still in the process of transition

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of the Reverend and Most Learned John Lightfoot, D.D.' and J. Strype, 'An Appendix, or Collection of Some More Memorials of the Life of the Excellent Dr. John Lightfoot', in *The Whole Works of the Rev. John Lightfoot, D.D.*, ed. J. R. Pitman (Oxford, 1822-1825). Though this latter set of volumes describes itself as 'The Whole Works', it should be noted that Pitman, possibly following the example of earlier editors, considerably abridged Lightfoot's journal of the Westminster Assembly, reproducing just 15% of the original. We shall thus prefer to use the more recent edition of the journal produced by Chad van Dixhoorn as part of the Appendix to his PhD thesis, 'Reforming the Reformation : theological debate at the Westminster Assembly, 1643-1652' (PhD Dissertation: University of Cambridge, 2004, vol. 2).

A further regrettable feature of the Pitman edition is the lack of comprehensive information regarding the original publications. The preface to volume 1 includes a survey of the major works with suggested publication dates and information about possible earlier editions. Many of the shorter works, however, are not included in this survey and contain no indication within the text of their dates. Where the original publication dates are available, these will be included.

[2] R. A. Muller, 'Lightfoot, John', 209.

away from the principles of mediaeval scholasticism, towards a more fully-developed Protestant hermeneutic. The fourfold method of exegesis, encompassing historical, allegorical, moral or typological, and anagogical interpretations had been nominally rejected in favour of a more strictly literal approach to the text.[3] Calvin, for example, had this to say about the allegorical method:

> Origen, and many others along with him, have seized the occasion of torturing Scripture, in every possible manner, away from the true sense. They concluded that the literal sense is too mean and poor, and that, under the outer bark of the letter, there lurk deeper mysteries, which cannot be extracted but by beating out allegories. And this they had no difficulty in accomplishing; for speculations which appear to be ingenious have always been preferred, and always will be preferred, by the world to solid doctrine.[4]

This shift away from the allegorical method left the exegetes of the post-reformation era with a number of problems to be resolved. What, exactly, was meant by the literal sense of Acripture? How did that apply to parts of the Bible that were quite obviously written in intentionally figurative language? More pressingly, what support could be found for orthodox doctrine, which had previously rested on precisely the allegorical interpretations of the Bible that were now rejected? If there was but one meaning of the text and that was literal and historical, how could doctrines for the contemporary church be derived at all? Furthermore, if as Luther and the other reformers had insisted, the Bible was plain in its meaning, how was it that parts of it still seemed so hard to understand? And why was there still disagreement on what certain texts meant? As Muller observes, 'The loss of elements of the older hermeneutics and the loss of a single primary language of Scripture, exegesis, and theological discourse created a new burden on doctrinal formulation.'[5] For the

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[3] See Richard A. Muller, *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics: The Rise and Development of Reformed Orthodoxy, ca. 1520 to ca. 1725, Volume Two: Holy Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003), 35. The rhetoric of reformers and their descendants was sharply opposed to the medieval methodology. However, as we shall see, many of the traditional approaches still persisted under different terminology.

[4] From his *Commentary on Galatians*, cited in Muller, *Holy Scripture*, 471.

[5] Muller, *Holy Scripture*, 523.

Westminster divines, charged with the defence of such traditional doctrinal statements as the Apostles' Creed, this task of interpretation was problematic. Chad Van Dixhoorn notes that, 'The relation of the creeds to scripture was not self-evident for some divines.'[6] This tension between the Scripture and the historic creeds was at the heart of some of the Assembly's debates, notably those recorded by John Lightfoot himself.

Throughout the seventeenth century, these problems continued to be debated and discussed. The principles of orthodox exegesis and hermeneutics were far from established. There was great disagreement even over such fundamentals as the doctrine of inspiration. At what stages of the process was the Holy Spirit involved in the production of the Bible? This particular matter was most sharply focussed in the great debate over the Hebrew vowel points. Some argued that they were both early and inspired; others that they were late, not inspired and subject to corruption; and a few held that though the textual record of the vowel points was late, the words that the vocalization fixed were the original and inspired Scripture.[7]

The purpose of this article is to demonstrate Lightfoot's contribution to the development of hermeneutics within this context. Despite his scholarly interests, Lightfoot was by no means a critical scholar in the post-Enlightenment sense of that word. He was a true Puritan, with a devout faith that drove his pastoral ministry as well as his hermeneutical aims and method. For Lightfoot, the Bible was the word of God, inspired and authoritative, and his goal was to better hear, understand, and minister the teaching of the Holy Spirit contained therein.

Divine inspiration and Human Authorship

Human authorship

Possibly the most striking feature of Lightfoot's approach to the

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[6] Van Dixhoorn, 'Reforming the Reformation' vol. 2, 226.

[7] See Richard A. Muller, *After Calvin* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 146–55 for a clear and thorough account of this debate and the related theological issues.

Scriptures is his commitment to the use of extra-biblical background materials. Muller describes his method: 'He took copious notes on his readings and divided his written work neatly into categories, examining first the chronology of Scripture, then the "chorography" or places mentioned, next the original texts and versions, and finally the collateral evidence offered by the Talmud and other Judaica.'[8] For Lightfoot, this work gave him the knowledge of the language, customs, geography and history that pertained to the text under consideration and was necessary in order to rightly comprehend the original human author's intended meaning. As Lightfoot himself explains:

> ... in the obscurer places of th[e New]Testament (which are very many) the best and most natural method of searching out the sense, is, to inquire how, and in what sense, those phrases and manners of speech were understood, according to the vulgar and common dialect and opinion of that nation; and how they took them, by whom they were spoken, and by whom they were heard. For it is no matter, what we can beat out concerning those manners of speech on the anvil of our own conceit, but what they signified among them, in their ordinary sense and speech.[9]

The proper concern of the biblical interpretation is, for Lightfoot, the communication between the human author and the implied original reader. This is what determines the sense of the text. Meaning can only be acknowledged on the basis of what was 'signified among them, in their ordinary sense and speech.' Lightfoot knows that some clever readers will be able to make the words mean otherwise, but he dismisses this as merely an exercise in the reader's own conceit and of no significance.

Lightfoot seems prepared to level this criticism anywhere it is deserved. So, for example, when we consider what it means for John the Baptist to dwell in the wilderness, Lightfoot thinks it is quite wrong to take into account the modern sense of the term 'eremite'. This is what the Catholics do, calling John a hermit. But this sense of 'eremite' is quite far removed from the first century use of the term ἐρεμος from which it is etymologically derived. The 'wilderness' was

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[8] R. A. Muller, 'Lightfoot, John', 209.

[9] John Lightfoot, 'Horae Hebraicae et Talmudicae', in *The Whole Works of the Rev. John Lightfoot, D.D.*, vol. 11 (London: Dove, 1822 [first published in 1658]), iii-iv.

not a wholly unpopulated desert, but included towns and villages. Lightfoot concludes that John 'lived in the country, not the city; his education was more coarse and plain in the country, without the breeding of the university, or court at Jerusalem.'[10] While we might argue that Lightfoot's description is not without its own anachronisms, he certainly attempts to understand the term in its first century context.

It is not only the Roman Catholic interpreters who are guilty of such false interpretation. In a debate at the Westminster Assembly concerning the descent of Christ into Hell, Lightfoot records his own contribution to the discussion:

> This morning the glosse given by the first Committee upon the 3rd Article, about the descent into hell, was taken into hand and earnest debate againe. Some stood for his sufferings in soule in his agony & on his crosse to be signified by this Articles [sic], but this was concluded against in these resolves[:]
> 1. That no right sense can be given of this Article which cannot be prooved & confirmed by expresse scripture.
> 2. That the locall descent is not intended by it.
> 3. That it intendeth not his suffering the torments of hell in his soule after death.
> 4. That it intendeth not his sufferings in soule at all.
> That sense being thus excluded, I impleaded the sense that was given by the Committee, as too short and not reaching to the meaning of the Greeke Phrase. For[,] said I[,]
> 1. There is not soe much difference betweene "He was dead till he rose againe" & "he continued under the power of death till he rose againe" as to make two distinct Articles of a Creed.
> 2. The Greeke Phrase is a Phrase used among the Heathen originally: & therefore from them best to be understood.
> 3. That Ἁδης among them signifieth properly & constantly in relation to the soule departed: for this I cited Homer, Diphil & other Heathens which proove this undeniable.
> 4. Κατηλθειν importeth Locomotion, & there is a plaine difference betweene "descending into" & "continuing in."
> 5. It is without doubt that this Article came into the Creed upon emergent occasion because it was inserted after so many scores of yeeres absence out: Now the detention of Christ after death was not such an emergency as to cause an Article of so obscure a nature for expression of that which

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[10] John Lightfoot, 'Horae Hebraicae et Talmudicae', vol.11 45–6.

was so well knowne before; but it seemeth rather to have come in upon the Heresy of Apollinarius, which denied Christ to have had a true humane soule:

These things I pleaded at large, & at last prevailed to have this clause[,] "In the state of the dead," added to the explication: but could not straine it to any expression of his Soule.[11]

There are many interesting things about this debate, but for our present purposes it is Lightfoot's second and third points which are significant. First, he notes that the terminology under consideration is Greek in origin and should be understood accordingly. Hades was not primarily a Jewish, let alone Christian, term. The original sense of the word, not the later doctrinal uses of it, should be considered. Second, he cites from a range of Greek authors in order to demonstrate the meaning that should be inferred from the term, proving conclusively (to himself, at least) that it is concerned with the action of the soul after death. Lightfoot concludes his account by noting sadly that his arguments were not persuasive to the Assembly at large. Possibly this was because of his lack of rhetorical skill; possibly the texts he cited were simply not fit for the task; but possibly this also indicates that others present at the Assembly had a different approach to the task of hermeneutics.

For Lightfoot, the value of the extra-biblical literature is to help the reader have the best possible understanding of the 'vulgar and common dialect' in which the New Testament was written. Although, as we have seen, Lightfoot would also make use of Greek literature where he deemed it relevant, the most important evidence was found in the Jewish literature.

For though it is true, indeed, that there are no greater enemies to Christ, nor greater deniers of the doctrine of the gospel, than the Hebrew writers; yet, as Korah's censers, and the spoils of David's enemies, were dedicated to the sanctuary-service, - so may the records, to be met with in these men, be of most excellent use and improvement to the explication of a world of passages in the New Testament. Nay, multitudes of passages are not possibly to be explained, but from these records. For, since the scene of the most actings in it, was among the Jews, - the speeches of Christ and his apostles were to the Jews, - and they Jews, by birth and education, that

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[11] John Lightfoot, 'A Breife Journal of Passages in the Assembly of Divines' (1643), 13–14 in Van Dixhoorn, 'Reforming the Reformation', vol. 2, 1–116.

wrote the Gospels and Epistles; it is no wonder if it speak the Jews' dialect throughout; and glanceth at their traditions, opinions, and customs, at every step. What author in the world, but he is best to be understood from the writers and dialect of his own nation? ... So doth the New Testament; 'loquitor cum vulgo:' though it be penned in Greek, it speaks in the phrase of the Jewish nation, among whom it was penned, all along; and there are multitudes of expressions in it, which are not to be found but there, and in the Jews' writings, in all the world.[12]

The New Testament writers were Jews writing to Jews, about the actions and speeches of Jews. In that sense, the New Testament is no different from the other Jewish texts and the evidence of the Jewish literature is not merely an optional extra. There are 'multitudes of passages' which can only be understood in the light of the Jewish material. Terms such as Gehenna, Maranatha, and Raca, for instance, which are nowhere to be found in classical Greek, can only be translated by reference to the Aramaic material in the Targums.

Sometimes the necessary background is purely at the linguistic level. For example, in 2 Peter 2:15, Lightfoot notes that some interpreters have presumed that the author made a mistake in naming Balaam's father 'Bosor', since the Hebrew text has Beor. Lightfoot thinks that this is not an error, but merely an Aramaicisation of the same name. For him, this example illustrates

> …how necessary human learning is for the understanding and explaining of Scripture, which is so much cried down and debased by some. They that cry out against human learning, and take on them, that they can expound the Scripture by the Spirit, - I doubt they would be very hard set to clear this place, and to reconcile Moses and this apostle about the pronunciation of the word Beor and Bosor.[13]

Without the fruits of scholarship, and here specifically the study of language, this passage might remain controversial.

Extra-biblical information is also useful in understanding the Jewish traditions that the New Testament writers sometimes allude

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[12] John Lightfoot, 'The Harmony, Chronicle, and Order of the New Testament', in *The Whole Works of the Rev. John Lightfoot, D.D.*, vol. 3 (London: Dove, 1822 [first published in 1655]), vii-viii.

13 John Lightfoot, 'Sermons', in *The Whole Works of the Rev. John Lightfoot, D.D.*, vol. 7 (London: Dove, 1822), 81. This comes from a sermon originally preached by Lightfoot at Ely, on November 5th, 1672.

to.[14] One example of this is found in Paul's reference to Jannes and Jambres in 2 Timothy:

> Of Jannes and Jambres you have no more mention, by name, in all the Scripture. For Moses himself nameth no such men, though the apostle says, 'they were the men that did resist him.' And the apostle gives no other signification of them, but only that 'they resisted Moses.' Who, then, were they? And whence had the apostle their names? From the common-received opinion and agreement of the Jewish nation, that currently asserted, that the magicians of Egypt were called by these names. So their own authors tell us in their Babylonian Talmud, in the treatise Menacoth: Aruch a Talmudical Lexicon in the word ינהוי; and the Chaldee paraphrase of Jonathan upon Exod. i; to omit more. So that the apostle takes up these two names, neither by revelation, as certainly asserting that the sorcerors of Egypt were of these names; but as he found the names commonly received by the Jewish nation, so he useth them.[15]

Although Paul could not have known the names of Jannes and Jambres from the Old Testament, it is not necessary to assert that he received any direct revelation concerning them. He merely uses the commonly-held tradition of the Jews. Hence, Lightfoot concludes, he is not 'certainly asserting' these names. The reliability of Paul's statement does not depend on the actual names of the two magicians in history, but on their communicative effect with his intended readers. He therefore refers to the magicians using the names by which they are commonly known. If some further piece of evidence were to come to light indicating that the magicians were not, in fact, called Jannes and Jambres, that would not concern Lightfoot. Paul's reference was as correct as it needed to be to say what he intended to say to those he presumed would be reading his letter. Here we see that knowledge of the Jewish traditions not only enables the reader to comprehend such references, but also to evaluate them appropriately.

A third category of useful evidence from the Jewish literature includes information about Jewish customs and practices that are assumed by the New Testament writers. In his comments on John's practice of baptism, Lightfoot cites numerous references to baptism from the Jewish literature. He concludes that 'baptism was

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[14] John Lightfoot, 'Sermons', 90–101. Jannes and Jambres formed the subject of a sermon preached by Lightfoot at Ely on November 5th, 1673.

[15] John Lightfoot, 'Sermons', 90.

inseparably joined to the circumcision of proselytes.'[16] In particular, he notes the evidence for the baptism of the children of proselytes and from this concludes that the burden of proof regarding paedobaptism rests with the anabaptists. 'For when Paedobaptism in the Jewish church was so known, usual, and frequent, in the admission of proselytes, that nothing almost was more known, usual, and frequent ... there was no need to strengthen it with any precept, when baptism was now passed into an evangelical sacrament.' By contrast, 'since it was most common, in all ages foregoing, that little children should be baptized, if Christ had been minded to have that custom abolished, he would have openly forbidden it. Therefore, his silence, and the silence of the Scripture in this matter, confirms Paedobaptism, and continueth it unto all ages.'[17] Here, Lightfoot uses the evidence of the common practice of infant baptism to argue that the apparent silence of the New Testament on the subject must be interpreted in favour of the practice. To this he adduces the evidence of the baptism of households recorded in Acts. In the light of Jewish baptismal practices, this should be understood as support for continuing paedobaptism.

Divine inspiration

Lightfoot's evident commitment to the historical human origins of the biblical text is matched by an equal recognition of its divine inspiration. The Bible is, first and foremost, the word of God which enables its readers to come to know God.

> Two ways we come to the knowledge of God, - by his works and by his word. By his works, we come to know there is a God; and by his word, we come to know what God is. His works teach us to spell; his word teacheth us to read. The first are, as it were, his back parts, by which we behold him afar off; the latter shows him to us face to face. The world is as a book consisting of three leaves; and every leaf printed with many letters, and every letter a lecture.[18]

Divine inspiration, however, does not equal automatic dictation.

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[16] John Lightfoot, 'Horae Hebraicae et Talmudicae', vol. 11, 57.

[17] John Lightfoot, 'Horae Hebraicae et Talmudicae', vol. 11, 59.

[18] John Lightfoot, 'Miscellanies', in *The Whole Works of the Rev. John Lightfoot, D.D.*, vol. 4 (London: Dove, 1822 [first published in 1629]), 62.

When Lightfoot compares the work of Luke the evangelist with those other accounts to which Luke refers in his prologue, he indicates his view of the process of inspiration:

> It was not in the power of this kind of writers, either to select what the divine wisdom would have selected for the holy canon, or to declare those things in that style, wherein the Holy Spirit would have them declared, to whom he was neither the guide in the action, nor the director of their pen....
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> Our evangelist, therefore, takes care to weigh such kind of writings, in such a balance, as that it may appear they are neither rejected by him as false or heretical, nor yet received as divine and canonical.[19]

The Holy Spirit is described as selecting, guiding and directing the work of writing canonical books. Yet Luke, an author of two such books, is also consciously engaged in the process. He weighs his source material and carefully considers how to use it and refer to it. Lightfoot also offers an alternative translation of Luke 1:3, rendering ἄνωθεν as 'from above', signifying 'from heaven', rather than the more usual 'from the beginning.' If Luke had only written what he learned from others, then his account could offer no more authority than the others he mentions in verse 1.

One of Lightfoot's great concerns is that readers of the Bible should be able to compare the true chronology of events with the order they are recorded in scripture. He attributes the difference between the two, which we might assign to the work of a later redactor, to the work of the Holy Spirit.

> The first thing, then, for them, that only read translations, to be looked after, in reading the Scriptures, is, - to lay the books and chapters in their true order. The Holy Spirit hath, in divers places, purposely and divinely, laid stories and passages out of their proper places, for special ends. The evangelists especially witness this. Here the skill of the reader is, first, to reduce each thing to his own place; and, secondly, to seek the Divine

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[19] John Lightfoot, 'Horae Hebraicae et Talmudicae', in *The Whole Works of the Rev. John Lightfoot, D.D.*, vol. 12 (London: Dove, 1822), 5–6. This edition was first published in 1674, though earlier editions were published in 1658 and 1663.

reason, why it is misplaced.[20]

It is the Holy Spirit who has 'laid stories and passages out of their proper places' but the evangelists, and other human authors, are certainly consciously partaking in this process.

Inspiration is a complex process for Lightfoot. His work on the Polyglot Bible and other documents meant that he was fully aware of the problems of textual criticism and to some extent other critical issues, though inevitably subject to the constraints of his age in terms of available manuscripts and resources. He could not sustain a simplistic doctrine of inspiration, attached to a single act of writing, preserved whole and perfect. The process was evidently more complex than that. Still there was no doubt for Lightfoot that God superintended the whole process. This in no way lessened the active involvement of the human authors, collectors and editors.

Finding Meaning

How then, should meaning be discerned? Since the Holy Spirit guides the author and directs his pen, it may be concluded that there is an overlap, if not a precise one-on-one match, between the divinely intended meaning and the humanly intended meaning. Lightfoot's work on determining the grammatical-historical meaning of the text might seem to suggest that he does indeed think that meaning is limited in this way, so that the biblical text only sustains one true meaning. And yet, there are situations where this seems altogether too restricted a view of meaning. Perhaps the strongest evidence for divine meaning superseding the human intent is found in Lightfoot's use of Scripture to interpret Scripture. So, for example, Lightfoot interprets Genesis 3:15 by means of Luke 3-4 and Psalm 91:13. Yet even, here the later texts are said to offer a 'commentary' upon the earlier, making plain what was obscure. The meaning of the original is unchanged, though its precise fulfilment can now be seen. Its sense remains that intended by the human author, and thus, by implication, the divine author.

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[20] John Lightfoot, 'Rules for a Student of the Holy Scriptures', in *The Whole Works of the Rev. John Lightfoot, D.D.*, vol. 2 (Oxford: Dove, 1822), 4. Original publication date unknown.

Clarity and Obscurity

Plainer and more obscure texts

For Lightfoot it is self-evident that there are parts of Scripture that are difficult to understand. Peter even acknowledges this, with respect to Paul's writings, and so, Lightfoot concludes, we should expect to find that this is so with respect to the whole Bible. The Old Testament, as a whole, is considered to be less clear than the New,[21] though even the New Testament is recognized to have very many 'obscurer places'.[22] Sometimes these difficulties are caused by lack of linguistic evidence or skill on the part of the reader. On other occasions the words may be clear, but their reference uncertain. Some verses seem straightforward when taken on their own, but become difficult to understand in their context. For example, Lightfoot considers John 3:1-3 easy to understand in itself, but the difficulty comes when Jesus' apparently unrelated answer is given in verse 4.

Lightfoot's view of the reasons for this obscurity can be seen in his solutions for overcoming it. First, in the manner common to the Puritans, he invokes the analogy of faith. 'That the Scripture is the best expositor of itself, none ever denied.'[23] The plain should be allowed to shed light on the obscure. In particular, the two testaments should be read in the light of the other. The New Testament which speaks more plainly, can help to interpret the Old, as in the example of Gen. 3:15 above. Sometimes we find the Bible difficult to understand simply because we are not thoroughly enough acquainted with it.

To understand the New Testament, there are further tools to aid the interpreter: 'for the attaining of the understanding of the expressions that it useth in these explications, you must go two steps farther than you do about the Old; - namely, to observe where, and how, it useth the Septuagint's Greek, as it doth very commonly; and when it useth the Jews' idiom, or reference thereunto, which indeed it

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[21] John Lightfoot, 'Rules for a Student of the Holy Scriptures', 43–4.
[22] John Lightfoot, 'Horae Hebraicae et Talmudicae', vol. 12, iii.
[23] John Lightfoot, 'Rules for a Student of the Holy Scriptures', 3.

doth continually.'[24]   That Lightfoot considers the task of interpreting the New Testament as more complex than the Old seems to be more a product of his own research interests than any theologically driven principle. Had Lightfoot been aware of the Qumran manuscripts, for example, or the range of ancient Near Eastern literature that Old Testament scholars now have to wrestle with, he might have phrased this differently. Still, the problem that Lightfoot perceives here is essentially one of intellectual inadequacy, to be overcome by scholarly application. The more obscure texts of Scripture can be understood through diligent consideration of comparative texts and application of a linguistic analysis. Something closely akin to the techniques of modern grammatical-historical exegesis are Lightfoot's answer to the problem of difficult texts.

Problem of unbelief

The difficulty does not always lie with the text; sometimes it is the reader who is the problem. For some, the intellectual approach will be sufficient to prevent them falling into unbelief.   So, Lightfoot observes, with regard to the non-chronological nature of the gospels: 'But few men mark this, because few take a right course in reading of Scripture. Hence, when men are brought to see flat contradictions (as unreconciled there be many in it), they are at amaze, and ready to deny their Bible.' For such as these, 'A little pains right spent will soon amend this wavering, and settle men upon the Rock; whereon to be built is to be sure.'[25]

Interpretive skill, however, is no sufficient guarantee of orthodoxy. Of the rabbis, Lightfoot has this to say, '[t]hat the doctrine of the gospel had no more bitter enemies than they, and yet the text no more plain interpreters.'[26] All the intellectual ability in the world cannot turn the heart of one who is an enemy of the gospel to see the truths of Scripture. There is a distinction to be made between interpretation

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[24] John Lightfoot, 'The Harmony, Chronicle, and Order of the New Testament', viii.

[25] John Lightfoot, 'Rules for a Student of the Holy Scriptures', 9.

[26] John Lightfoot, Pitman, ed., 'Preface to the Octavo Edition of Dr. Lightfoot's Works', *The Whole Works of the Rev. John Lightfoot, D.D.* (Oxford, 1825), 70.

of the text and understanding of the truths contained therein.

Perspicuity and Meaning

Lightfoot's view of the perspicuity of Scripture is related to his commitment to the human author's intending meaning. This meaning is not hidden, but can be discovered through the application of scientific methods. There is no deeper, spiritualized meaning, accessible only to a few. Nonetheless, it is possible to interpret the Bible incorrectly. Some errors are merely intellectual and certain people will be more susceptible to these. There is an important role for pastors and doctors of the church in informing the ordinary reader, so that they will be able to read the Scriptures for themselves. In 'Rules for the Reader of Scripture,' Lightfoot attempts to provide one such help to the ordinary reader, by giving a sketchy chronology of the Bible and then urging his reader to complete the task for himself. The work of reading and interpreting the Bible is not to be guarded by an intellectual elite; their task is rather to enable the layman to read and interpret for himself.

The non-literal literal meaning

We have already noted Lightfoot's commitment to the literal sense of scripture, understanding by this the meaning intended by the original human author. This literal meaning was understood to be reliable and accurate insofar as it was intended to be. One of Lightfoot's great tasks was the elaboration of lengthy chronologies for both Old and New Testaments. The events referred to were certainly historical and the text of Scripture could be shown to be a reliable witness to them. In a similar way, Lightfoot produced what he called chorologies, that is to say, geographical adumbrations of the Bible lands, and an incredibly detailed topology of the temple and surrounding area. He believed these accounts, which were derived from both biblical and extra-biblical data, to be factually accurate.

It should be noted, however, that Lightfoot's view of the reliability of the biblical evidence for this kind of data takes into consideration its human origin as well as its divine status. For example, when considering the number of generations to be found in Matthew's

genealogy, Lightfoot observes the way in which numbers are typically used in the Jewish literature:

> Although all things do not square exactly in this threefold number of 'fourteen generations,' yet there is no reason, why this should be charged as a fault upon Matthew, -when, in the Jewish schools themselves, it obtained for a custom, -yea, almost for an axiom, -to reduce things and numbers to the very same, when they were near alike.[27]

To illustrate this, Lightfoot lists a number of examples where he considers the Jewish reckoning of numbers and dates to be inexact. From the Babylonian Gemara, he notes that five calamitous events are all reckoned to the same day but concludes that it was 'not that they believed all these things fell out precisely the same day of the month'[28] but that they wanted to associate all the fortunate events with a holy day, and all the calamitous events to an unlucky day. In the Jerusalem Gemara, he notes a recounting of the psalms in order to fit the prescribed number of daily prayers. From the rabbinic literature, Lightfoot finds that the list of works to be avoided on the Sabbath varies according to different rabbis, and yet is always counted as thirty-nine.

Lightfoot's conclusion from this is that Matthew's kind of counting would have been easily comprehensible to the Jews of his time, and that none would have considered him to be in error, since it was the common practice:

> They do so very much delight in such kind of conceits, that they oftentimes screw up the strings beyond the due measure and stretch them, till they crack. So that, if a Jew carps at thee, O divine Matthew, for the unevenness of thy fourteens, -out of their own schools and writings thou hast that, not only whereby thou mayest defend thyself, but retort upon them.[29]

This illustrates an important point about Lightfoot's hermeneutics. Although he is committed to the literal interpretation of the text, the definition of literal is not the one that we might expect. Where the human author can be shown to have intended some approximate,

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[27] John Lightfoot, 'Horae Hebraicae et Talmudicae', vol. 12, 16.

[28] John Lightfoot, 'Horae Hebraicae et Talmudicae', vol. 12, 16–17.

[29] John Lightfoot, 'Horae Hebraicae et Talmudicae', vol. 12, 18.

idiomatic, figurative, typological or even allegorical sense, then this should be understood as the 'literal' meaning of the text.

An interesting example of this is found in the parable of the Good Samaritan. In *Horae*, Lightfoot applies himself to a more straightforward grammatical-historical approach to the parable, identifying the likely road where the incident is set, the purity rules that might have prompted the priest and the Levite to avoid the half-dead man, the history of relations between the Jews and the Samaritans, the reasons for anointing with both oil and wine, and the value of the 'two pence' that was paid.[30] He offers no interpretation of the story here, but years earlier, as an aside in a chapter of his Miscellanies dealing with the effects of the law, he gave this interpretation of the same parable:

> Such a one is man fallen among Satan, sin, and death, and by them stoppen, stripped, and striped. Satan dismounts him off his innocency, that should sustain him: sin strikes him with guiltiness and wounds him. Here is a man in woful case, and none to aid him. By comes a priest, - that is, first come the sacrifices of the legal priesthood; and they may pass by him; but they do not, they cannot, help him. By comes a Levite, - that is, the ceremonies of the Levitical law; and they may pass by him; but they do not, they cannot, help him. Or, by comes a priest, - that is, the angels may see him thus; but they let him alone for ever; for they cannot succour him. But, by comes a good Samaritan, -that is, our Saviour himself, who is called a Samaritan, and is said to have a devil, - and he pities him, salves him, lodges him, and pays for him. He pities him, in very bowels; therefore he says, 'As I live, I would not the death of a sinner.' He salves him, with his own blood; therefore, it is said, 'By his stripes we are healed.' He lodges him, in his own church; therefore, the church saith, 'He brought me into the wine-cellar, and love was his banner over me.' And he pays for him what he deserved; therefore, he saith, 'I have trod the wine-press alone.'[31]

This can only be described as an allegorical interpretation of the parable. Each person and action in the story is found to represent something else. Some of these have clear links with their symbols: the priest represents the sacrificial system and the Levite represents the ceremonial law. Others are less obvious, such as the reference to the

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[30] John Lightfoot, 'Horae Hebraicae et Talmudicae', vol. 12, 103–4.
[31] John Lightfoot, 'Miscellanies', 81.

angels or to the healing power of Jesus' blood.

The Miscellanies are an early collection of Lightfoot's writings on a variety of subjects. He describes them as 'gleanings of my more serious studies' offered 'not so much for thy instruction, as for thy harmless recreation'.[32] What is particularly interesting about the interpretation of the parable is that Lightfoot sees no need to provide any defence for it but rather considers it sufficient evidence on which to base his conclusions regarding the law. It is possible that Lightfoot later changed his mind regarding the validity of such interpretations, but it would not be inconsistent with his general hermeneutical method if he considered the allegory to have been Jesus' intended meaning of the story.

Conclusions: Lightfoot's Contribution to the History of Interpretation

As an interpreter of the Bible, Lightfoot is remarkable for his insistence on the human-ness of the text and his consistent goal of uncovering the intended meaning of the human author, coupled with a deeply-held conviction concerning the text's divine inspiration. His work showed, beyond question, the value of extra-biblical materials in understanding the biblical text as its human authors had intended. Lightfoot's concern was then to take that meaning and show how it also functioned as the divinely intended meaning for the contemporary church.

There are gaps and inconsistencies in Lightfoot's approach: he does not deal adequately with the problem of the New Testament's use of the Old; he does not have clear guidelines for why and how his occasional allegorical interpretations may be justified; he does not seem to consider the possibility that the divinely intended meaning might reach beyond the human author's intention, and if so, how one might discern this. Perhaps the most obvious problem in Lightfoot's work, at least with the benefit of hindsight, is an unrealistic confidence in scholarly methods to produce a verifiably 'correct' interpretation. Even working within the 'scientific' constraints of the grammatical-historical method of which Lightfoot's methods were the

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[32] John Lightfoot, 'Miscellanies', 5.

forerunner, scholars have been unable to achieve anything like a consensus. The quest for the original intended meaning of the human authors has proven to be less straightforward than Lightfoot could have imagined. It seems that something more than knowledge of historical, geographical and linguistic backgrounds is necessary to guide interpretation. The obscure parts of Scripture still remain obscure, despite the efforts of many extremely knowledgeable scholars to shed light upon them. Even those parts which once appeared clear and straightforward may be thrown back into the shadows when subjected to a thorough critical examination.

It is not hard to see how the work of Lightfoot and others like him laid some of the groundwork for the more strictly rationalist approaches to scripture that arose in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. By emphasizing, and so clearly demonstrating, the human-ness of the Bible, Lightfoot opened the door to those who desired to claim that the Bible was no different from any other human book. In the hands of those with different doctrinal precommitments, some of Lightfoot's methods proved a valuable tool in dismantling the authority of the text he sought so strongly to uphold. His insistence on the historical accuracy of the text, especially when appropriated by those who had a less nuanced view than Lightfoot regarding normal conventions of communication and accuracy, allowed those who sought to assert its inaccuracy, on the basis of archaeological or other evidence, to undermine the reliability of the Bible.

Nonetheless, it would be wrong to hold Lightfoot responsible for the errors of those who followed him. The historical-critical work which he undertook was in no way opposed to the orthodoxy of the time. For Muller, Lightfoot is both a 'forward-looking exegete' and 'one of the defenders of "scholastic orthodoxy".'[33] His concern, like that of his colleagues and contemporaries, was to interpret the Scriptures for the benefit of the church and to the glory of God. Throughout his writings there is a clear sense of both his great learning and his great piety and it does not appear that Lightfoot felt any tension between the two. His sermons were influenced by his scholarly work, as the examples cited earlier concerning Jannes and Jambres, and Balaam indicate, and his scholarly work was driven by

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[33] Richard A. Muller, *Holy Scripture*, 522.

his pastoral concern to see the divine Scriptures read and understood by the church.

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