Introduction to the New Testament History and Literature

Lecture 22: Interpreting Scripture: Medieval Interpretations Transcript

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Overview

The principles of interpreting the New Testament in this course assume a historical critical perspective. The historical critical method of interpreting a text privileges the intended meaning of the ancient author, the interpretation of a text's original audience, the original language the text was written in, and the avoidance of anachronism. However, for most of the last two thousand years, this has not been the method of interpretation of the Bible. Pre-modern interpreters, such as Origen and Augustine, felt free to allegorize and use the text as they saw fit. It was only through the Reformation and other events in modern history that the historical critical method became the predominant method of interpretation.

1. The Principles of the Historical Critical Method of Interpretation

[1] *Professor Dale Martin:* Last time I talked about the Letter to the Hebrews and I used it mainly as an example of early Christian interpretation of scripture. If you recall I was talking about Hebrews 7 where there's the story, the interpretation of the Melchizedek story from Genesis. To review briefly, Abraham comes back from a raid, he has a lot of booty, he has his relatives from defeating some kings, he comes to Melchizedek who's not of course a descendant of Abraham, therefore he's not a Jew, he's not part of the people of Israel but he is a priest, a high priest of Yahweh, according to the text. Melchizedek gives him a tenth of the spoils and then this writer interprets that as being that since Levi, the head of the progenitor of the priestly tribe among the Jews, is within the body of Abraham. That means that Levi himself is giving tithes to Melchizedek. The entire priesthood of Israel, of the Jews, recognizes the superiority, according to this interpretation, of the priesthood of Melchizedek. And then the writer takes Melchizedek to be a type, a sign of Jesus and his priesthood. This makes perfect sense of course because, as the text says, Melchizedek had no father or mother, or it doesn't give a father or mother, and no genealogy, no lineage, came out of nowhere so the same way happens with Christ as the priesthood. Jesus of course was not of the tribe of Levi according–Jesus couldn't be a priest in the normal sense of the Jewish priesthood. The writer takes Jesus to be a priest not of the line of Levi or Aaron, but of the line of Melchizedek. Now this obviously is not the way any of us in the modern world would read Genesis, in its historical setting. That's precisely the other way this reader does it, and it's all part of a synkrisis, a comparison of the leitourgia, the liturgy of Christ with the inferior leitourgia or liturgy of the Jews. It's done sort of to convince this congregation that you don't need to go back to that, you've got something superior.

[2] Hebrews ends with this kind of admonition in 13:8, "Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, and today, and forever." Now remember, this writer believes that Jesus Christ has existed all the way back, so that's why he can read the Psalms, which a historian would read as addressed to a Davidic King, as being addressed actually to Jesus. So Jesus Christ is back in history too. "

[3] Do not be carried away by all kinds of strange teachings, for it is well for the heart to be strengthened by grace, not by regulations about food [You don't need to keep kosher], which have not benefitted those who observe them. We have an altar from which those who officiate in the tent [that's referring to that tabernacle, the tent of the tabernacle in Exodus, which he's been comparing all the way

through] We have an altar from which those who officiate in the tent [that is the Levites] have no right to eat. For the bodies of those animals whose blood is brought into the sanctuary by the high priest as a sacrifice for sin are burned outside the camp.

[4] When you sacrifice an animal, according to the Exodus' instructions, you don't burn the materials of the sacrifice inside the camp. You do it outside the camp. So he's going to do something like that too. "Therefore, Jesus also suffered," where? Outside the gates of Jerusalem. So now Jerusalem has become like the Israelite camp talked about in Exodus, and Jesus is the sacrifice who was sacrificed on the cross outside the walls of Jerusalem. "Jesus suffered outside the city gate in order to sanctify the people by his own blood. Let us then…" now this is a really big period on this whole speech. "Let us then go to him outside the camp." Basically he's symbolically saying, let us follow Jesus out of Jerusalem, out of the camp of the Israelites.

[5] Now this is much more radically supercessionist then we've seen in Paul. I've taught that Paul never saw himself as a Christian; he never saw himself as starting something new. In fact, he saw himself as bringing the Gentiles into Israel. And so he never–although they didn't have to keep the law, they didn't have to keep Torah, they didn't have to be circumcised, in fact they weren't supposed to at all be circumcised, Paul never thought–he never talks in this way about the supercession of a new kind of liturgy from an old kind of liturgy. When you talk about Christian supercessionist kind of language–and the term just means the traditional Christian teachings which you've seen throughout two thousand years of Christianity, that Christianity is superior to Judaism–when you see that kind of supercessionist kind of language in the New Testament, it's not in Paul so much. It is here in Hebrews because that's the way it works. What's interesting from our point of view is that he actually uses Jewish scripture to teach this.

[6] Now in order to use Jewish scripture to teach the supercession of Judaism by Christianity you know that he's going to have interpreted it in what we would consider very creative ways. We can use that to contrast the way I've been teaching you to interpret these texts in this course, which is through historical critical exegesis, from the way that Christians have interpreted this text for all the way through history. This is not just Christians. Jewish interpretation of scripture is just as creative as Christian interpretation of scripture before the modern period. What, then, is historical criticism? And I'm going to review some things that you've been learning all the way through the semester, but I'm going to line up some things so they get them really clear in your mind. What is it you've been learning in this class, the method you've been learning, and then we're going to go back to the pre-modern stuff today and look at the examples that you read about and the reading from The Pedagogy of the Bible.

[7] The meaning of a text, according to historical criticism, is what the ancient human author intended it to mean. For example, in Jeremiah 3:6 it says, "The Lord said to me in the days of King Josiah." Now, if I wanted to be creative in my interpretation I might say that the Lord said to me, Dale Basil Martin, in the days of King Josiah, but that would of course not be a historical critical interpretation. It has to be "me" meaning Jeremiah, so the Lord says to Jeremiah. That's who the author clearly must be referring to, and we have to take "the King Josiah" to be the king who actually sat on the throne of David in Jerusalem, the ancient King Josiah, not Josiah Bumbershoot, who happens to own a liquor store down the street from me. The text is not referring to that Josiah; he's referring to the ancient Josiah; that's the basis of historical criticism.

[8] The expansion of this, that it's the author's intention, comes to be in a lot of studies even within historical criticism that another way to think about the meaning of the text is that the meaning of the text is what the original readers probably would have thought it meant. Because of course we can't get to the intentions of the author; that's lost to us completely. We have no idea what's going on inside the minds of these ancient authors. But by practicing historiographical research we can guess at what probably an ancient reader would have taken the text to mean, and so that's been added on as another meaning that historical criticism looks for.

[9] The third point about historical criticism I want to make here is that it assumes a sort of modern

historical consciousness. By this we mean modern people just have the notion that really pre-modern people didn't so much, that the world was radically different in the ancient world. The ancient world is just not like our world. They thought about the world as being in levels like stories. Well, we think about the cosmos as being a bunch of different spheres in an infinite space. We read ancient texts and we see not only were they different kinds of people–they had different ethics–but their whole cosmos, their whole universe that they inhabited was different for them. What that means with historical criticism in the twentieth century: you have theological students being taught a little bit about ancient near-eastern society and culture. In fact, you have entire departments of ancient near-eastern studies arise in modern universities, and they don't arise just because people are automatically interested in near-eastern cultures. They arise as a support for biblical studies. That's where they come from. The idea that if you want to read the Old Testament or the Hebrew Bible responsibly in the modern world you must know something about ancient Assyria and ancient Egypt because that's where it came from. Also, then you learn something about the Greek world, why I gave an entire lecture at the beginning of the semester on the Greek world and the Roman world, and second temple Judaism. We have the idea that Judaism before the rabbis, which is the time of Judaism we're talking about, was a different kind of Judaism than Rabbinic Judaism that you might see now in the modern world or in the Middle Ages. This reflects the idea that if you want to get back into these texts in their ancient period you have to develop knowledge of that period. Why? Because we've developed a historical consciousness. We see ourselves in a place, in a timeline of history, and the history is different in those different times.

[10] This also means that we teach people: you need to read these texts if possible in the original languages. How many times in this class have I told you what the original Greek word of some particular word the English translation was? This is not a Greek class, most of you haven't studied Greek, but I'll often scribble on the board some Greek term. Why am I doing that? The text that Christians read all over the world today is not in Greek; it's in English. So why is it important for us? Why do you accept that it's important? Why does it seem natural to you that I write the Greek text up here and explain what its Greek meaning means in the ancient world? Because you have this historical consciousness too, you have the assumption that this ancient meaning of the original language is important for the interpretation of this text.

[11] Fourth, historical criticism teaches you we don't interpret the Bible canonically. That means a couple of different things. We don't take the whole Canon of the Bible and interpret it all by reference to other parts of the Canon. Remember, how many times have we said, well that thing you're talking about may be in the Gospel of John but it's not in the Gospel of Matthew, and right now we're talking about the Gospel of Matthew. You can't use the Gospel of John to interpret the Gospel of Matthew. Well, why not? Christians have been doing it for two thousand years. Historical criticism, though, takes the Canon apart and says each individual document must be studied in its own right and for its own content. So one thing that means is that we don't study the whole Bible as one book. We study the Bible as a series, as a library of books, each one individually studied. The other aspect of this is that we in the modern period don't limit ourselves to the study of the Canon. What did we talk about last week? The Acts of Paul and Thecla. That's not in the Bible. Why did I, as a crazy mixed up professor that I am, think that it was worthwhile for you to read a non-canonical second century document in a class called Introduction to New Testament History and Literature? I'll tell you why. I've been brainwashed by the modern historical critical method to believe that putting the Pastoral Epistles and those other canonical texts into a historical context that included non-canonical materials is a good way to teach you how to think about this New Testament thing. That's part of the historical critical method also.

[12] Fifth, in spite of the fact that we don't study the Bible canonically in modern historical criticism, we actually do look for source analysis. For example, we take the idea that these ancient authors actually did use sources. For example, we've taught you that Matthew and Luke probably used Mark as one of their sources. That's actually doing an intra-canonical comparison; we compare the shape of this parable in Mark to the shape of the same parable in Matthew and Luke. Isn't that kind of

an intra-canonical comparison? Yes it is, but the reason we're doing it is we're trying to get behind the text of the Canon into the pre-history of the text. The form these texts assumed in a pre-canonical shape. Famously, historical criticism in the nineteenth century, when it was really invented, came up with the idea that the five books of Moses are not written by Moses, they're written by different people, and they were an edition of originally four separate strains of tradition and four separate documents. This was called the JEPD Theory. The J stands for Jahwist and it's those parts of the Hebrew Bible that use the name of God as Yahweh because this came from Germany, right, so they pronounce a J like "ya", so Jahwist. The Elohist is a strain that uses the term Elohim for God, so scholars said these are originally two different things. The P stands for the priestly documents written by some kind of priestly class, and the D stands for Deuteronomy, so Deuteronomy and some other things. The idea was the Deuteronomist was an editor who wrote some of this stuff and then edited the five books–or at least a good bit of the Pentateuch–so that it resembled a certain shape, so scholars called–they set out these four different traditions–and if you took a course in Hebrew Bible, an introduction to Hebrew Bible, or even in a seminary introduction to Old Testament, you're going to get this theory crammed down your throat because this is one of the most dominant theories of modern historical criticism of the Hebrew Bible. It's source analysis, that's part of what we're doing. I taught also that 2 Peter, the letter 2 Peter, used Jude as one of his sources, again, that kind of source analysis is part of the method.

[13] The next one, I think I'm up to six, in spite of the fact of talking about authorship of all these documents, part of modern historical criticism questions the authenticity of authorship all the time. How many times in this course have I said, well the Gospels say they're written by Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, but we doubt they were. They're anonymous. So I've taught you what it means to call a document "anonymous": we don't know who the author is. I've taught you what it means to call a document a "pseudepigrapha" or "pseudonymous," which means it gives the false name of somebody for what it is. These are basic aspects of modern historical criticism. Now if you went to a very conservative seminary you might not get as much emphasis on this, but even there they'll probably tell you something like, well those liberals at Yale or Princeton Theological Seminary, they'll tell you that Paul didn't write I and II Timothy and Titus, but they're wrong and here's why they're wrong. You can tell you're in the modern period because they feel the need to explain the theory to you anyway. Even if they don't buy it, they'll teach it to you because it's part of this modern way of approaching the Bible.

[14] Next, the avoidance of anachronism. This is the big, bad thing in modern historical criticism. Don't be anachronistic; don't think back into the ancient text something that actually arose later. For example, most historical critics of the Bible would say, it's certainly wrong to read the doctrine of the Trinity into Genesis. Now you already read in the chapter I gave you that that's exactly what Augustine does, right? Augustine reads the first chapter of Genesis and when the text says, "In the beginning," he says that refers to Jesus, the Son, the wisdom through whom all things were made. The spirit that hovers over the chaos in Genesis 1, that refers to the Holy Spirit. So you've got the Trinity, the God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit right in Genesis. Modern historical criticism rejects that and says that's wildly anachronistic. The doctrine of the Trinity was only developed centuries after the writing of Genesis; you can't read it back in there, its anachronism.

[15] The last big, big boogey man of historical criticism is eisegesis. If you go to any kind of seminary, they'll warn you against eisegesis. Why? Because this is reading into the text something that's not in the text, and they're playing off the word, of course I've used this before, exegesis. Exegesis means simply, as you've already learned in this course, interpreting a text. Some people think it only refers to historical critical interpretation, and that's often what it's come to mean in schools, but originally it just means interpreting a text. Any kind of interpretation of a text is exegesis. It's come to mean historical critical interpretation of the text because this is what's really in the text. What is eisegesis is just some modern pious person picking up the Bible and seeing anything they want to see in it. It's "reading into" because this means "out of" and this Greek word means "into." So eisegesis, you're taught to avoid that.

[16] Then finally, one of the last major presuppositions that relates to the historical consciousness I talked about: the idea that there's a gap between the world of the Bible and our world. If you go into most churches in the United States–there are very, very few that might do this–but if you go into most churches–I don't care how liberal or how conservative they are, I don't care if they're a radical leftist or fundamentalists–most of the women will not be wearing veils. If they're really conservative they might have a hat on, but not a full veil. We say, well, you want to be true to the Bible and right there in I Corinthians 11, you've read it, you know it's there, Paul's telling women, you have to wear veils in church when you pray and prophesy. Why aren't your women veiled? It doesn't matter whether these Christians are liberal or conservative, they'll have some way of saying something like, well that was their culture and it's not our culture. It was important in the ancient world for women to wear veils because it expressed humility; it expressed control. If they didn't wear veils they might be thought of as a loose woman. Well, veils don't mean that in our culture, so we don't have to obey that text like it's a rule. They will talk about–and they might not use the term "gap" but that's what I call it–what they're doing is saying, there is a gap between their culture and their world and ours. That consciousness of that gap is a major aspect of modern historical criticism.

[17] So those are several principles, you're not going to probably find those listed in a textbook, Introduction to the Bible. I actually do list them in my Pedagogy of the Bible in the first chapter. But those are list of things that I just said these are basic principles of historical criticism that set it apart from the centuries of interpretation of the Bible that have existed beforehand. I'm going to stop for a minute and just say, is that clear, do you have any questions? This is all familiar to you because you've been practicing this now all year but it should have struck some of you, at least, a little odd in the beginning of why we were asking this text what we were doing, why we were pushing you to do the exegesis papers in a certain way we're doing, why is it wrong to read these texts and just write a sermon on them and turn it in as an exegesis paper? No, a sermon is different from an exegesis paper. We were teaching you this method with all these principles and presuppositions all semester long. Is there any question about that? Okay good.

2. The History of Historical Criticism

[18] This historical criticism didn't just spring out of the Bible itself. Where did it come from? Why do we have it and where did it come from? Well, as you know, before the Reformation, basically the Bible–scripture was supposed to mean what the Catholic Church said it meant, what the Pope said it–what the bishop said it meant. The authority structure of the church was taken to be the way that you controlled wild interpretations. People in the ancient knew, you can interpret a text any way you want to. So what keeps heretics from interpreting this text in false ways? The institution of the church. So we'll see later Ignatius, when we're reading his letters, he says, you can't just interpret scripture any you want to; you must be in agreement with your bishop. The rule of the bishop and the rule of the church was the way to keep control over the interpretation of the text. Of course in the pre-Reformation time, you did have the rise of humanism and the Renaissance, which started questioning that a bit, and they started going back and looking at the original Hebrew, the original Greek, insisting that you should read these texts in their original languages and not just in Latin. That was before the Reformation. You already had this move toward history and reading the text in historical context in the humanist movement and the Renaissance.

[19] With the Reformation, though, of course you really get it in the sixteenth century with Martin Luther, John Calvin, Melanchthon, different writers saying, well, we're going to throw out this Catholic authority on the text. We're going to get back to the text itself. The only authority for the radical reformers was scripture. You know this as, sola scriptura, scripture only; scripture only will be the guide for authority for Protestants. Of course then they start realizing that different people can interpret scripture differently. They're very familiar with medieval Christian ways of interpreting scripture to have several different meanings and layers of meanings. And so they say, well the predominant guide of scripture isn't going to be just scripture; it's going to be one particular meaning of scripture. And that's

sensus literalis. The literal sense of scripture is what will be now the guide for the Reformation, not the Pope, not the bishops. Even the bishop must submit to the literal sense of scripture. Now it's rather debatable what they meant by "the literal sense" because some of these reformers said that the literal sense of scripture could even be a prophetic sense, so they still said that the literal sense of scripture could be in a Psalm when the Psalm says, "The Lord said to my Lord, 'Sit at my right hand.'" Well they knew that the text if you're interested in an ancient text would be referring to the Davidic King, but they also said that Psalm also could refer to Jesus, even in its literal sense. The literal sense that they were talking about in the Reformation was not necessarily what we would call the historical critical sense. It was what they took it to be the most fundamental plain sense meaning of the text. So that was the literal sense. Then again they realized the more they did this that Protestant churches started splitting all over the place. Presbyterians and Calvinists split off from the Lutherans, the Anabaptists split off from the Reformation. And then you have a rise of so many Protestant movements that the idea that scripture alone could settle debates and give you a foundation started becoming questionable.

[20] In the nineteenth century, beginning somewhat in the eighteenth century but mainly in the nineteenth century, and mainly in Germany, German speaking lands, scholars started pushing the historical reading of the text. They said, we've got to get down to what the author meant. What did the historical Paul mean? How did we discover that? That's when you have the rise, in the nineteenth century, of the dominance of the historical critical method with all these presuppositions. It was elaborated and invented in the nineteenth century, and in some places it was precisely invented in order to try to make the text of the New Testament and the Bible a firm foundation for doctrine and ethics within Protestantism and within the wide of varieties of different kinds of Protestantism.

[21] Then the last part of this, and this is a big sweep of history I'm giving you in five seconds, what happens in the last part of the twentieth century, just in the last, say, thirty years, is that people like me come along and say, you know it hasn't worked. This attempt to use historical criticism, to settle disputes about the meaning of the text, doesn't work. Because even the historical critical method can render wildly varying interpretations of these texts. So you've got some people reading Romans 1 as a condemnation of modern homosexuality and thinking they're doing a good historical reading of this text. You've got other people who read the same text, using the same methods of historical criticism, and say, are you crazy? He's not talking about homosexuality, that's not his concern. It's talking about idolatry or something else. Even scholars using the same method of historical criticism, trained in the same schools, getting degrees from the same places, come up with different interpretations of these texts even using the historical critical method. And that's why you have right now a lot of questioning of this method as not supplying the firm foundations that Protestants originally thought it might.

[22] You have new methods now being brought back into seminary education, like feminist analysis, or literary criticism, or liberation theology, or African American approaches, or Latino approaches. Or queer readings, gay and lesbian readings and queer readings, you have all these different kinds of ways of approaching the text being brought back as ways to if not displace then at least to supplement historical criticism that was dominant for the twentieth century.

[23] Now the question is, why do all this stuff anyway? Why have I first been teaching you the historical critical method? Well I can answer that, it's because that's the dominant way that the Bible is taught in modern American universities. It's sort of like, how do you learn Shakespeare? How do you learn these kinds of things? There are methods, and it's not necessarily the historical method in English departments anymore, but there are different dominant methods that academics use to construct their disciplines. The main way still that biblical studies is constructed as an academic discipline, as opposed to a discipline of faith in a church, is through at least learning about the historical critical method. So I make that the basic part of this, when I'm introducing you to this discipline, because I'm not just introducing you to the text; I'm introducing you to a modern scholarly discipline, practices, and assumptions.

[24] But I also believe that we should study other ways of studying the Bible also, at least to be introduced to them. That's why later this week you're supposed to go to the Art Museum. None of us are art critics who work in this class. None of us are historians of art. I know nothing about art history. The teaching fellows know very little about art history also. Some of you in this class will be much better at going through the Yale Art Gallery and analyzing the artwork there because you will have taken art history classes like I never did. The purpose of this visit is not to do a typical art historical kind of move. It's so that you can contrast the stuff you've been learning in this course with especially early Christian and medieval representations of the Bible. Why did they portray in painting and in artwork these stories the way they portray it? What does it tell us about their mentality? What does it tell us about their world? To get you to see this is what interpretations of the Bible look like without historical criticism, before the dominance of historical criticism. It's to show you there are other quite legitimate ways to interpret this text.

[25] We could have done the sort of literary interpretation where we take these texts and we talk about things like character, development of plot. We could read the Gospel of Mark–a lot of people read the Gospel of Mark as almost like a modern short story. It's full of puzzles; it's full of ways that it leads the reader astray. Remember how the Gospel of Mark ends? You don't even see the resurrected Jesus. The women are told to go announce he's been raised to the disciples, and they don't even do it. They run off, and that's the end. That doesn't end like a normal ancient text would end, but it does end like kind of modernist sort of literature which poses many questions to the reader often as it does give answers. We could have read the Gospel of Mark like we would read a modern short story by Flannery O'Connor. You can do that and there's nothing wrong with that. Why is all that important? I think it's important to realize that because the vast majority of Christians throughout human history have not read the Bible the way you're learning to read it in this class. The vast majority of Christians, even now throughout the world, don't read the Bible as you're learning to read it in this class. In spite of the fact that I'm teaching you this method, I still want to drum it into your heads, at least this week, that this is just one way of doing it and you need to be aware of the other ways of doing it because in some ways they are culturally more important as far as the impact of the Bible on western civilization.

[26] What I'm saying is that historical criticism is important to learn because it's part of our environment too. But I would say that even as an important way to approach the Bible it's not a sufficient way to approach the Bible. It's certainly not sufficient when it comes to the importance of scripture in the Bible for western civilization and culture. It would be much better to keep in mind how Milton read the Bible for Paradise Lost. How Dante read the Bible, how Flannery O'Connor uses the Bible in our literature, and how artists use the Bible, that's also very important. It certainly, historical criticism, is not sufficient for the Christian theological reading of the Bible because the historical meaning of the text, I think, as people are beginning to realize in churches, cannot provide you with enough to use this text theologically and ethically. You've got to do something else with the text besides just history if you still want to use it as scripture. That's why today I'm mixing these things up and trying to get you to see things differently.

3. Pre-modern Interpretation and "Literal" and "Allegorical" Meanings of Texts

[27] Now let's look at what you were reading for today, the different medieval interpretations, ancient Christian and medieval interpretations of text. First you should know that before the modern period there were these different meanings of the text and in fact they would even talk about them as different levels. The two most important were the ones that I've already talked about basically as the literal sense and the other one is the allegorical sense. You've seen this sort of thing. Eventually textbooks would be written that say medieval interpretation of the Bible have four different levels of meaning. But the most important, throughout history, has been basically a two part division. This literal sense, which sometimes can be called the body sense, the bodily sense, or the physical sense, and then the spiritual sense or the allegorical sense, or the higher meaning, or the elevated meaning. Over and over again those two levels of

interpretation will be stressed in pre-modern interpretations of the Bible.

[28] Then you will often see other names and other terms attached to other things. For example, sometimes you'll come across the term "anagogical sense" of the text, and anagogical is not exactly the literal but it's also not exactly the allegorical because the anagogic– "anagogic" means "leading up" in Greek. The idea was that this is a reading of the text that will help you be a better Christian; it'll help you be a more ethical person. So an anagogical reading would lead you to something else and the varieties of different ways of reading the text. Medieval theologians will talk about this: they'll use the term literal, they'll use the term allegorical, they'll use the term anagogical, and they'll mean by that three different meanings. Notice they don't necessarily just mean these are three different ways to interpret the text, although that's the way I've been talking about them because that's the way I hear that. They actually believe that these are three different meanings that are in the text itself: the anagogical meaning, the allegorical meaning, the literal meaning.

[29] Sometimes you'll hear them talking about maybe the ethical meaning, which sometimes looks a lot like the anagogical meaning, and then sometimes you'll even hear them talk about the historical meaning. What's funny here is that when they use that word historia for the meaning of a text–and they sometimes bring–it's a Greek word originally, but they'll bring it into Latin also–don't get confused when you see that, especially if you're reading something on medieval interpretation of the Bible, because it doesn't mean the historical meaning of the text in our understanding. By historia in this sense, they usually mean the narrative reading: f you were to read this text as a story, regardless of whether it ever happened. So they don't mean historical in the sense of, this is what really happened. They mean the word historia–this is a narrative sort of shape, it's reading the text as if it's telling a story. Sometimes they'll call that the historical meaning of the text and add that onto some of these other ones. The medieval notion that there are four senses of the text, literal is always one, allegorical is always one, and what counts as the other two varies among different authors. That is definitely there in medieval theorizing about scriptural interpretation, but it shouldn't be exaggerated because you don't see it quite that rigidly as always four and the same four levels of meaning. But you will come across that if you do any literary study of the Bible in English literature and the European context and that sort of thing.

4. Pre-modern Interpreters: Origen

[30] The people I gave you to read illustrate these things. The first part about Origen, if you brought your readings turn to the part about Origin like around page 56. What Origen is doing is he's giving an example of what he takes to be the literal meaning of this text. The story is from I Samuel 28, and in case you don't remember the story, Saul, who is the king, is fighting a battle, and he wants to know whether he's going to win the battle the next day, whether he and Jonathan his son are going to win, or they'll lose. He goes and he finds a witch, and of course he's already outlawed all the witches in the country, so he's not supposed to find one at all. He goes and finds this woman, she's actually called a belly myther, a person who speaks fabulous stories from the belly because I guess they would kind of do it like this and it sounded like it was coming out of their gut. They would sort of sound like a ventriloquist or something, and they're speaking hidden messages. He goes and finds this woman. It's translated often in English as "the witch of Endor." That's the popular name for the story. And he says call up the spirit of Samuel the dead prophet, and he's going to ask the spirit–of course in–in these kinds of cultures the idea is that dead people can see the future because they're dead, they live in the realm that they're not limited by our kinds of sight. The idea is that the woman is supposed to call up the dead Samuel, the spirit of Samuel, so he comes out of the ground–like all the dead are under the ground in this kind of cosmology–and he asks, are we going to win the battle? Samuel is all angry because he's being called up, and he curses Saul and all this kind stuff, so the story doesn't end too well for Saul. And sure enough the next day Saul and Jonathan die, they lose the battle.

[31] Origen has a problem because Christians all know that it's wrong to use witches, and here's the King Saul using a witch. And they also know, but wait a minute Samuel obeyed the woman, she calls him to come out of the ground

and he obeyed her. Why would a great prophet obey a witch? Early Christians reading this text had a lot of problems, and so sometimes they would allegorize it, and they would say, well it doesn't mean that, it means this, and it doesn't say the woman actually saw Samuel, she thought she saw Samuel. Then other people would say, but a good prophet like Samuel couldn't have been in hell, how could he have been in hell? Great prophets can't be in hell. So they would say, oh it's just–it's an allegory. It doesn't really mean he was in hell; it meant he was in something else. Origen comes along and says, no you can't allegorize this text, and it means exactly what it says. So he says, you have to read it literally. He argues for a while. And this is very funny because Origen is famous throughout history for being a great allegorizing reader of scripture. In fact, a lot of historians don't like him because he tends to read scripture allegorically in different places. But in this case, Origin this great allegorizer, is insisting on the literal reading.

[32] But now notice what he means by literal. First he says the woman really did see Samuel. Samuel really was in hell, and if you can't accept that it's your problem. Then he explains it, and he gives some answers for it. But then he says, the literal meaning of the text is not just the story. But this is what he says is the literal sense: it's on page 56 in the chapter I gave you. "Even the literal sense of the story is to teach that Christians will enjoy an afterlife existence." Now I ask you, is there anything about Christians in this story? No, we would not call that the literal historical sense of this story. It shows that Origen, when he uses this term literal meaning of this story, he's not still referring to what we call the historical critical meaning. For him, the literal meaning of the story is to teach Christians about their own after life existence. And then he has an elevated or higher sense of the story, which he takes to be that righteous Christians, unlike even righteous prophets before the coming of Jesus, won't have to spend any time in Hades or hell, or purgatory. If you're a good Christian when you die you'll go straight to heaven, and that's something that even the Old Testament prophets didn't do because they had to go hell first, according to Origen, to wait until Christ came, so Christ could open up paradise and heaven for everybody. Origen has an elevated spiritual meaning of this text, but it's not a particularly allegorical meaning, Ut's just that if you are a righteous Christian, the story teaches that you will get to go straight to heaven without passing through hell when you die. Notice how Origen is still playing with these notions of a literal reading and a higher elevated spiritual reading. The literal reading doesn't particularly look like what we would call the literal reading of the text, and the higher elevated spiritual reading doesn't look all that allegorical, it looks almost like a moral lesson to us. That's one example, though, about how Origen thinks it's perfectly fine to get at least two readings out of this same text.

5. Pre-modern Interpreters: Augustine

[33] Then you move to Augustine, Now Augustine's a great example. He's an example I use because of a pre-modern practice of not just reading scripture for the answers that it gives you about ethics or doctrine. Remember that section in the readings where Augustine prays with scripture, he prays the Psalms so he says things like,

[34] Then I read, "Let your anger deter me from sin" [which is a quotation from Psalm 4:4]. How these words moved me, my God. I had already learned to feel for my past sins an anger with myself that would hold me back from sinning again.

[35] This is from Confessions 9.10 and it's on page 57 of my chapter. Notice what Augustine's doing: he feels like it's okay for him to get into the Psalm and put himself in the role of the speaker. What God is saying to the psalmist, Augustine says he was saying to me, personally, Augustine, and then Augustine answers back with the words of the Psalm. This is actually a reading of scripture that's becoming popular more in certain modern Christian contexts, especially monastic communities and churches. And it's called sometimes lectio divina. This just means divine reading in Latin. It refers to a practice that some modern Christians are trying to resurrect from a pre-modern Christian practices of praying reading scripture, memorizing scripture, and then using the words of scripture as your own prayer to God so that God talks to you and you talk to God. People are getting this stuff straight from pre-modern practices.

[36] Augustine is also a wonderful example of the multiplicity of meanings that are contained in the text all at the same time. For example, on page 58, this is where he sees the Trinity in Genesis 1, "In the beginning," because of John 1:3-10, you've read the Gospel of John the first part of John 1 cites this "in the beginning" but then goes on to say, "That God created everything through Jesus, the logos," so Augustine looks at that in the beginning and says, oh that's a reference to John, the Gospel of John, which means that he's talking about Jesus here as also being there. Then the spirit that moves over the waters is the Holy Spirit.

[37] Then one of the most fascinating things is the way he reads the six days of creation in Genesis allegorically. On page 59 and around there, he says on the first day, the vault–God created the heavens and the earth, right? The word heaven there translated doesn't mean what we think as space in the sky. It referred to an actual firm kind of vault, like a dome, a ceiling, and that's why in older translations it's called the firmament, because it is firm. It's not air; it's firm. Augustine says, the sky, when you look up at the sky you see that blue thing, that big blue dome that's above you. We think of that as seeing space, but ancient people didn't. They thought they were actually seeing like a big canvas spread over the sky. The reason it's blue is because water is behind it. It's holding back the water that's in the sky, and the word "heaven" refers to that thing. And so Augustine says, it's like vellum, it's like the skin, the leather that you make texts out of. And so he interprets allegorically to say scripture. The making of the firmament in Genesis refers to God's giving us scripture. And that's why angels–where do angels live? They live on the other side of scripture. Why? Because they don't have to see what's written because they know everything already. But we humans we live on this side of scripture, and we look up and we read the writings of God, and so we need scripture to read things. He goes through this elaborate allegorical reading.

[38] Day two, the waters that preside over the vault, they represent angelic peoples, he says the angels. On day three, the gathered-together sea–this is when Genesis says, God separated the sea from the dry land and separated the water from the dry land, the water he called sea, the dry land he called earth. Augustine says, okay the sea represents the bitter part of humanity; the dry land represents those who thirst after righteousness and God. And so God separates out, on day three, good humanity from bad humanity, by Augustine's allegorical interpretation. All of these just are illustrations of how Augustine knew how to read this text literally, but he shows you how he also reads it allegorically. He thinks that the text is full of all these meanings, and it is perfectly legitimate to get all of these meanings of the text.

6. Pre-modern Interpreters: Bernard of Clairvaux

[39] Then one of the most fascinating is the one I gave you from Bernard of Clairvaux. This I think is so interesting because Bernard is preaching on the Song of Songs, that erotic part of the Hebrew Bible, which is actually–to us moderns it just looks like a love poem. But it was read allegorically throughout the church, and even Rabbinic Judaism read the Song of Songs as being about God and people Israel. The bridegroom is God; the bride is the people of Israel. Christian Fathers read that it be about Jesus and the church, so Bernard is doing that, but now notice this is a sermon being delivered to monks in a monastery. These are men–they're all men there–and if you realize that's the social setting of this text it makes it read very differently. Like this one big paragraph I quoted, and I quote it again now, this is the young woman in the Song of Songs speaking in his sermon.

[40] I cannot rest until he kisses me with the kiss of his mouth. I thank him for the kiss of the feet. I thank him, too, for the kiss of the hand, but if he has genuine regard for me, let him kiss me with the kiss of his mouth. There is no question of ingratitude on my part; it's simply that I am in love. It is desire that drives me on, not reason. Please do not accuse me of presumption if I yield to this impulse of love. My shame indeed rebukes me, but love is stronger than all. I ask, I crave, I implore, let him kiss me with the kiss of his mouth. Don't you see that by his grace I have been for many years now careful to lead a chaste and sober life? I concentrate on spiritual studies, resist vices, and pray often. I am watchful against temptations. I recount all my years in the bitterness of my soul. As far as I can judge I have lived among the brethren without quarrel.

[41] Lived among the brethren? Wait, who are we talking about now? Are we still talking about the young girl?

[42] "I have been submissive to authority, responding to the beck and call of my superior in the monastery."

[43] Is this the girl?

[44] "I do not covet goods not mine. Rather I put myself and my goods at the service of others. With sweat on my brow I ate my bread, yet in all these practices there is evidence only of my fidelity, nothing of enjoyment. I obey the commandments to the best of my ability I hope, but in doing so my soul thirsts like a parched land. If therefore he is to find my holocaust acceptable, let him kiss me I entreat with a kiss of his mouth."

[45] Halfway through this remarkable quotation the girl morphs into the monk. The last part is a monk talking, not a virgin girl. And yet this is a male monk yearning for this male figure, and he's doing this in a monastery. Isn't this kind of odd? He uses the eroticism of the Song of Songs, not to get rid of eroticism–I don't think he's telling the monk you're going to have sex with Jesus, but he certainly doesn't get rid of the erotic at all. He doesn't explain it away or try to get rid of it like Origen would have done previously, or some of the early Christian writers. In fact, he capitalizes on the erotic and even turns it into the homoerotic because he's asking the monk to identify with the body of the girl and to yearn for this male bridegroom. Bernard reads this text not only in an allegorical way so that the girl represents the monk in a monastery who's trying to do the office: he prays every night, he does all the right things, and he doesn't feel anything about it. He feels dry, and barren, and so Bernard's using the erotic of the Song of Songs to enliven the daily office of the monastery for the monks.

[46] Then this other quotation, this is where Bernard says, oh, everybody whose lived a monastic life knows that there's time when you go to the church and you pray in the altar and you don't feel anything, you just feel depressed, you feel alone. He says,

[47] Men with an urge to frequent prayer will have experience of what I say. Often enough when we approach the altar to pray [you might not initially feel all excited about it] our hearts are dry and lukewarm. But if we persevere there comes an unexpected infusion of grace, our breast expands [the breasts of the monks?], as it were, our interior is filled with an overflowing of love, and if somebody should press on them then this milk of sweet fecundity would gush forth in streaming richness.

[48] He's talking about orgasm, folks. He's describing orgasm, the orgasm of a woman, the breast filling up, swelling, and then experiencing this explosion. Bernard is using orgasmic language taken from the Song of Songs to talk to a bunch of monks in the middle of the night to get them to continue praying, and to get them more excited about giving themselves to Jesus, the bridegroom. This is part of the remarkable reading of the text of the Bible that you get in a pre-modern world where they seem to feel remarkably free to read these texts as containing a lot more meanings than a historian like me would see them containing.

[49] Now I could go on and talk about the Thomas Aquinas stuff, but it's just there as examples. Aquinas is a wonderful example of how he quotes one interpretation of John Chrysostom and then quotes another interpretation of Augustine, and he doesn't decide. He just says, okay they're both there, they're both valid. He doesn't have any desire to narrow down the meaning of the text to one meaning. I want you to think about this, also, these are legitimate ways to interpret this text, and at least they have been for much of the history of Christianity. The modern world tended to reject them, but if you look anywhere before the modern period, you'll find them all over the place. Experience some of this stuff too when you go then to the Yale Art Gallery later this week.

[end of transcript]