

LECTURES

For Moravian Theological College, Mbeya, Tanzania

Arthur Freeman
Moravian Theological Seminary
Bethlehem, PA USA

These lectures were presented on various subjects at the Moravian Theological College at the time of my visit, June to August 1995. In December of 1994 I received the kind invitation to lecture and to assist with the development of the projected B.D. program, an honor to which I was happy to respond. I arrived on June 17 and delivered these lectures to the students on June 19-26. I dedicate them to the Moravian Theological College in Mbeya, its students, its staff, and its future -- to the honor and glory of God.

THE PSYCHOLOGICAL: ONE PERSPECTIVE ON NEW TESTAMENT LITERATURE

The Biblical Canon is a rich resource which unfolds its treasures according to the questions one asks of it and the perspectives one brings to it. Certainly there is something that each author of a biblical book intends and there is something that the church intended by the creation of the Canon. But the expression of what the author intends is multi-dimensional as well as the text itself having several possibilities. Like a prism in the sunlight, if rightly viewed it produces a rainbow of many colors. Let me just quickly illustrate this.

The Ways the Bible Speaks

1. There is something that the author intends to communicate to a specific audience. This may not be simple, but may have many dimensions: spiritual, psychological, social, ethical, political, etc.. This historical meaning creates boundaries by which other meanings are questioned.
2. The author who intends something in the text and who expresses here something about God or life has a life history and personal experience beyond what was said in a concrete moment in the text, and so the text puts us in touch with the author behind the text.
3. The text, in a more symbolic and mystical way, may become a window to the experience itself about which the author speaks.
4. Beyond what the text meant historically is what the text comes to mean as it is taken seriously and responded to. Theologically one can understand this as the ongoing activity of the Spirit in the "creative remembrance" of the text, a process which Jesus' words in John 16:12-15 define and which is explicitly referred to in John 2:22 and 12:16.
5. Then there is that mysterious phenomenon of hearing or reading words and suddenly some of them leap to life because what has been going on in your life longs to be named so that it may be understood.
6. Lastly, there is the fact that God seeks to relate to us and may use Scripture for this purpose without consideration of the historical meaning of the text.

Now, the perspective which we take to the text affects how we see the many possibilities within it. We could take Neo-orthodox or Barthian glasses to the text, we could take existentialist glasses to the text, we could use the perspective of sociology, we could use the perspective of liberation theology in its various forms, or could take the perspective of the human longing for salvation and conversion --- to name a few. The psychological perspective is just one perspective on our Scriptures, but it is a very important one. If I am right in saying that the ultimate concerns of the biblical materials are the resolution of life's primary issues and the enabling of meaningful life with God as life's primary resource, this is really very close to psychological concerns. The only danger in pushing the psychological is that it might neglect concerns for other important matters, such as justice. But a sole concern for justice will also neglect other aspects of the text.

The Psychological Perspective: What One Might Look For

To find psychological understandings in the New Testament, one might look for:

1. Is there a view of what it is to be human (seeking an anthropology which is akin to psychology)?

Important is the nature and purpose of human existence as presented in the creation stories and their reinterpretation in the New Testament (John 1, Col. 1, Heb. 1).

2. Are there any explicit Psychological views?

For example, the Jewish assertion, seemingly reflected in Rom. 7, that human life was driven by a good and an evil impulse, or the model for the development of humankind in Gal. 3-4 which even seems to be a model of personal development.

3. What is the world described as being like? What powers impinge on human existence?

Is there a God who helps? Are there evil powers which hinder? Is life determined and fated? Does life move on towards a new future and create a vision which can inspire and empower?

4. Can you find a presentation of the way the social (family and community), political, and cultural contexts of the person shape personal life.

A few psychologists have explored not only parts of the Bible psychologically, but large segments of the biblical material. Freud did with this with the Old Testament and Jewish traditions¹ and Jung did this with the whole of the biblical materials (from Genesis through the Intertestamental Period, and on beyond into the New Testament and the history of the theologies of the church) in his book, *Answer to Job*.² As you might guess, both Freud and Jung interpret biblical materials according to their psychological models.

The Models of Matthew and Paul

Now let us focus briefly on two models of personal life in the New Testament which provide a type of psychological model: the Gospel of Matthew which reflects not just the understanding of an author but the way an early Christian community lived,³ and the Apostle Paul whose understanding was shaped both by his own experience and his need to interpret the Christian life to others.

The Gospel of Matthew comes from a Christian community strongly influenced by Pharisaic Judaism. The religious position and ethical stance which it advocates is really that of a Pharisaism pushed to the

¹ . W.W. Meissner, SJ, MD, *Psychoanalysis and Religious Experience*, New Haven: Yale U. Press, 1984

² . C. G. Jung, *Answer to Job*, translated by R.F.C. Hull, Bollingen Series, Princeton: Princeton U. Press, 1973.

³ . Many scholars conclude that the Gospel of Matthew reflects the views of a Christian community and that the Sermon on the Mount was something like its Manual of Discipline.

extremes, a righteousness greater than the Scribes and Pharisees (5:20), calling for perfection: "You, therefore, must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect" (5:48).

Matthew, in the Sermon on the Mount, presents Jesus as a new Moses delivering a new Law from a new Sinai.⁴ Material that is scattered in Luke is drawn together into a topical arrangement in Matthew. Jesus, in the Matthaean form of the Great Commission, presents this from Matthaean perspective. He commands his disciples to go, make disciples, baptize, and to teach "them to observe all *that I have commanded you*" (28:18-20).⁵

Interestingly enough, the possibility of total obedience, including the controlling of feelings, does not seem to worry the Matthaean community. Perhaps this is because it bears strong signs of being a semi-monastic community in which a unique ethical life might be maintained, in contrast to the Pauline churches whose members were always very much a part of their urban society. An analysis of the Gospel of Matthew indicates that the community life which gave birth to the Gospel was strikingly like that of the Jerusalem Christian church with its common life.

The social context in which Christian life is lived is primarily the Christian community. This is a loving community in which God is equally generous with all (20:1-16), and in which no one is father but God and no one is master but Christ (23:9-11). There is even a loving process of discipline (18:15-20) and forgiveness should be unending, as God forgives (18:21-35). In such a community purity and righteousness could at least be attempted. Piety, consisting of the cardinal Jewish virtues of Almsgiving, prayer and fasting, are seen as part of one's righteousness (Matt. 6:1-18) and the loving care of God was consciously affirmed (6:25-33, 7:7-12). However, there is no real role for the Spirit.⁶

The Ancient Moravian Church from its earliest days was drawn to Matthew's Sermon on the Mount as an expression of the life it wished to live. Its first name was "Brethren of the Law." They sought to follow the commandments Jesus had given them. Zinzendorf, in his memorial of Christian David, even speaks of the importance of this Sermon to Christian David whose followers were the major link between the Ancient Moravian Church and the Renewed Moravian Church.

The model of personal growth from Paul sees life as being empowered and ethical direction provided not by external commandments but by a new interior dynamic, the Spirit (see Gal. 5). Paul's experience on the Damascus road opened him up to the possibility that God participated in life in a much broader way than just his conversion. He speaks of spiritual gifts (I Cor. 12) and an abundance of revelations (II Cor. 12:1-10). Certainly, Paul is not naive enough to think that if persons have the Spirit, they will have all they need and always do the right thing. He gives plenty of advice about life and ethics, but he does not understand this in terms of commandments but rather providing structure for the life of the Spirit.

⁴ . Jesus comes not to destroy the old Law, but to fulfill it with his commandments. In Matthew the old Law does not come to an end. Luke presents quite a different tradition about Jesus' comments on the Law (Luke 16:16-17), similar enough to Matthew 5:17ff to indicate that both may be variant translations of the same Aramaic saying of Jesus on the Law. In the saying in Luke the Law has passed away, though it is hard for one dot of it to become void. The Law was only valid until John the Baptist. Now a new way is here, the good news of the Kingdom. People enter the kingdom "violently" or "with difficulty" because it is hard to adjust to the new, ideas similar to what is expressed in Mark 2:21-22 about new wine and new cloth. In Paul Jesus is presented as the "end of the Law" (Rom. 10:4).

⁵ . In Luke it is found in Luke 24:45-49 and reflected in Acts 1:8. In John it is found in John 20:21. In Mark several endings have been added and the text of the authentic ending (16:1-8) has been affected by the addition of the words "there you will see him." In the light of Jesus promise in 14:27-28, Jesus is again going before his disciples as their shepherd. Thus the call is to follow where he goes.

⁶ . The Spirit is mentioned only in such traditional locations as Jesus' Baptism, the mission of the Twelve, the blasphemy against the Spirit (all borrowed from Mark), and then Jesus' birth and the Baptismal formula of the Great Commission.

Thus what characterizes Paul is a rich awareness of the inner life and the relationship of God to this. His understanding of the Christian life is developmental, well described in II Cor. 3-5. Living in the sovereignty of the Spirit, where there is freedom, we "are being changed into his likeness from one degree of glory to another" -- using the theme of the restoration in humans of the glory of God lost in the Fall (II Cor. 3:18). That this spiritual development is not merely conformity is clear in his emphasis on spiritual gifts where the dynamics within the lives of persons move them in different lines of development, though these differences are given by the same Spirit, inspired by the same God, and serve the same Lord for the common good (I Cor. 12:4-7).

Paul's portrayal of "salvation history", from Abraham to Christ in Galatians 3-5, provides rich resources for a psychological model. Here Paul speaks of the maturing of humanity to a new stage of freedom. In summary, he states: Abraham was blessed because he was a man of faith, an early anticipation of what the Gospel was to later say. God gave a promise to Abraham and to his seed (Christ), a promise that had to do with the blessing of the nations. That which was promised was God's Spirit, i.e., God's presence in relationship, so that humanity might be truly God's children. Until this could happen the Law was given as a way of keeping humanity under constraint, the elemental spirits (structures of the world) also fulfilling this role. Though destined for an inheritance at the time of maturity, humanity was kept under guardians and trustees until the date set by the Father, the coming of Christ. Having put on Christ, persons may now receive their inheritance. God even sends the Spirit of the Son into our hearts to help us give utterance to this new relationship, "Abba! Father!" This new relationship, called "Spirit", provides freedom from the Law and the elemental spirits, but this is not freedom from responsibility. Rather it is freedom for responsibility and love. Moreover, it provides a new inner dynamic out of which one may live: "If we live by the Spirit, let us also walk by the Spirit." Spirit has its own dynamics ("fruit of the Spirit") as does the flesh ("works of the flesh"). In 6:15 he adds in his own handwriting that what really matters is not how you describe this or how you get it, but the "new creation" which comes into being in the lives of persons.

This extended analogy is really about the history of humanity, but in this highly autobiographical letter one must be suspicious that he got this analogy from his own experience. If so, it would at least describe his personal growth if not that of others.