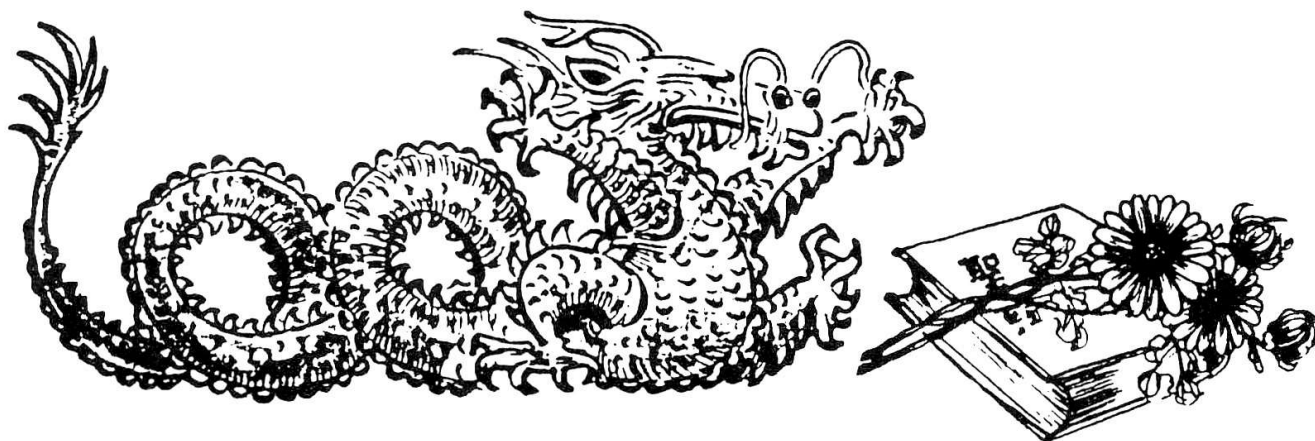


HOW THE CHINESE READ THE BIBLE



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The Bible is a book of wide circulation and marvelous adaptability. For centuries now people of different times and places have been reading and interpreting it in a variety of ways. Without going into the long and venerable history of Jewish exegesis, or the exegetical heritage passed down by the 16th century Reformers who challenged the traditional interpretations of the Christian Church, we can safely say that the Bible today is being read and interpreted with even greater diversity and differences than ever before. This is not only true of Protestants but among Catholics as well. What remains the same amid all these differences, however, is the commonly held conviction that the Bible is the foundation of all Christian faith. The Chinese came late to this exegetical enterprise. As a matter of fact, it was only with the publication of the Concordia Edition by Protestant missionaries in 1919 that we had a Chinese translation of the complete Bible in one volume.(1) And it was not until the Studium Biblicum of OFM came out with a new translation of both the Old and New Testaments

in 1968 that Chinese Catholics had all the Sacred Scriptures between two covers. Presently, on both sides of the Taiwan Straits, there is an interest in Bible reading that is growing and expanding with each passing day; as for members of the Chinese diaspora, Bible movements continue to develop and multiply among them at a rapid pace. How then do the Chinese read the Bible? Obviously, there is little from past history on which to comment; however, the present does offer some interesting indication of how China's cultural past does influence the way Chinese read the Bible today, and this might also offer some guidelines about how we will be reading it in the future as well. How the Chinese approach the reading of the Bible might be of more than passing interest, then, to those who believe the Bible to be heaven's gift to all peoples.

Different Approaches to Bible Reading

There are three fundamental reasons why we find such diversity in approaches to the reading of the Bible. First, the exegetes themselves come from very different historical situations, second, they resolve basic exegetical and theological problems in significantly different ways; and third, differences arise from the exegetical process itself.

As for the effect a particular historical situation can have on the way an exegete reads the Bible, a good example may be found among proponents of liberation theology. These exegetes live in societies torn by class conflicts, where the gap between rich and poor is an ever-widening one. In such concrete historical circumstances, these exegetes identify with the poor and interpret the Bible accordingly. Their identification with the poor has led them to a lively sense of the role God plays in the Old Testament as defender of the poor,(2) and it has also led them to uncover a key message in the teachings of Jesus as recorded in the Gospel according to Luke.(3) Another source for differences among exegetes arising from historical situations, is the wide spectrum of ecclesiologies inherited from the past. How one understands the Church influences how one reads the Church's Scriptures. Catholic exegetes tend to affirm hierarchical authority structures and institutional order, while Protestant emphasis is on pluralism within the local communities. Some Lutheran

exegetes will see in the message of the Gospel, a challenge to any and all visible Church structures.(4) Different histories produce different readings.

The second reason why there are differences in interpretation arises from the way fundamental theological and exegetical problems are resolved. Such problems have to do with the nature of biblical inspiration, inerrancy, revelation and authority. The stand an exegete takes in relation to such questions will, of necessity, have an influence on the way he reads the texts themselves. Add to this another crucial problem, which arises from within the canon of books themselves. Each book or parts of it represent different theologies. What is the relative theological weight that must be given to them? What is the criterion for developing a unified whole, and what norms are to be used to produce a standard for interpretation? Those following in the path of Martin Luther, for example, consider Paul's letters to the Romans and Galatians, the Gospel of John, and First Peter to comprise a "canon of canons" by which the truth and value of all other canonical books may be evaluated. On the other hand, Catholic exegetes accept the whole canon as equally the Word of God and turn to the living tradition of the Church for authoritative judgment. Among the many Protestant sects, the entire Bible is accepted as the Word of God, and, therefore, the contradiction and tensions that arise from different interpretations must be seen as secondary and peripheral.(5)

A final reason for such diversity in reading and understanding the Bible comes from the exegetical process itself. There can be as many different interpretations as individuals reading the Bible. Taking scriptural passages and adapting them to life's situations can be a highly subjective exercise. This is why a great deal of careful discernment is called for when reading and applying scripture. We must be careful to distinguish between what is the core message a particular text wishes to convey and what are merely its cultural elements. To say that the Gospel is the Good News and the Bible the Word of God, and let it go at that, is not enough. This begs the question of whether there can be any precise norm or standard by which one can determine the objective meaning of any given text. Today everywhere in the world people are reading



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in the sociological reading of the Bible texts themselves. When it comes to race, rank or sex, God does not discriminate. Authority in the Church, and in the realm of theology, should not be used to dominate or oppress women, but rather it is to be shared with them and used to serve those who have suffered from sexual domination throughout the centuries. A feminist reading of the Bible will certainly help to promote sexual equality in a Church that strives to realize its goal in this world to bring about the kingdom of God.

Unity Amid Diversity

While there may be a great deal of diversity in Bible reading, there are also major points of unity. Although

the Bible. These people belong to every race and nations; they represent the rich and poor and come from the First, Second as well as the Third World. And they are reading the Bible in hope of finding answers to their personal and social problems. In such circumstances, differences in understanding and interpreting the Bible can only multiply in the years ahead. Where will all this lead to? One example may be found in the feminist movement. In recent years women, who represent half of the world's total population, have been challenging masculine assumptions regarding the nature of social authority. This has led feminist exegetes to call into question the patrilineal social order so evident among biblical peoples and so prevalent

approaches differ, it is still the same text that is being read. And translated versions, be they from Catholic Protestant or secular sources, are remarkably reliable in their fidelity to the original texts. Also, the tools used by modern biblical scholars to study the Bible are identical. These include the sciences of archaeology and palaeography as well as other related disciplines along with their methodologies and forms of criticism.

The science of literary criticism (e.g. philology) examines the words and phrases of the original texts. It studies their literal and figurative meanings, and then proceeds to analyse the composition as a whole in order to demonstrate how style, form and content are used to convey meaning. Source criticism concerns itself with tracking down the original biblical words and phrases as they may appear in non-biblical writings and inscriptions of those times. Form criticism investigates the various literary genres that can be found throughout the Bible, such as prose, poetry, apocalyptic writing, lamentation forms, etc., relating them to their community of origin. Finally, it is the work of redaction criticism to study the final author or "editor" of a piece, his particular theological point of view, his environment and life-style.

What historical criticism attempts to do is to establish the historical authenticity of each of the books of the biblical canon. By applying the findings of archaeology, history (including the history of cultures), and examining both internal and external evidence, a certain degree of credibility can be reached in ascertaining the time and circumstances which have produced the original text. It must be noted, however, that modern scholars are somewhat cautious about conclusions sparked off by the proponents of 19th century and early 20th century historicism and rationalism. Strictly speaking, history is not an exact science, and there is no such thing as completely objective history. Historians are highly selective in their choice of material, and very personal in the way they present it. This is even more true when it comes to the Bible, where narrative selection, the identification of fact with meaning, the witnessing nature and theological justification of an individual author, all come together to produce the full meaning and message of a specific biblical text. There

is no way that this process can be reduced to merely a simple recording of historical facts. On the other hand, historical criticism does have an important functional value in providing thorough research before establishing the historicity of a certain narrative as basically reliable and therefore credible.

The school of rationalism required that only what falls within the grasp of reason has credibility and certainty. This condition arbitrarily imposed by certain philosophers, hampers biblical research, not because the Bible opposes or is in conflict with human reason, but because in its response to the vital questions of life, the bible often reaches beyond the reasoning faculty of man. The Bible gives rather reliable answers to such questions as the purpose of human existence, the destiny of the created order, and man's relationship with God. And such matters not only engage the reason but also the full scope of man's other human faculties as well. The contemporary biblical movement strongly recommends the application of all human gifts and faculties to the task of reading the Bible.

Biblical research, in all parts of the world today, is chiefly concerned with achieving two major goals. The first is to determine as far as possible the original meaning of a text, that is, the basic message of the author or redactor within the context of his or her historical situation. To do this, modern scholars bring all the above mentioned means and methods of scientific criticism to bear on the original text. The second goal is to question and ascertain the import that each biblical passage has for our own times. During recent years, we have developed certain methods that have proven most effective in realizing this second goal. Aside from strictly private readings of the Bible and the traditional use of the scriptures in liturgical settings, there has been an increase in the awareness of the importance of group study of the Bible. Small groups reflecting together, experiencing their individual poverty and the need for ecumenical openness, have already made some dramatic contributions to the exegetical process and added much to traditional methods of biblical criticism.

All the above is by way of offering a brief intro-

duction to our subject. We have sought to draw the readers attention to the variety of methods and tools now being used in reading the Bible, be they employed by biblical scholars or just ordinary people far from the world of higher academics. The distance between these two groups is not great. We all share a common humanity, and true knowledge is universal no matter what or where its source. There is, indeed, unity in our diversity, a unity that far outweighs our superficial differences as we address together the unchangeable Word of God in the midst of our changing times.

How Do the Chinese Read the Bible

After these brief and general reflections on unity and diversity, we may now turn our attention to how the Chinese read the Bible. What is meant here is in what way do the Chinese approach the Bible as a literary work; how does the Chinese mentality and sensibilities affect their reading, and thus monitor their general understanding of what they have read?

Both the Children of Israel and the Children of Han are 'people of the book'. Both are heirs to an ancient and venerable literary tradition. The Chinese have been formed by their classics in ways similar to the Jews by the Bible. While these two traditions have for centuries traveled along parallel roads, in our own time they have finally come to meet and greet each other. The meeting has been something more than just a casual encounter. It has opened a rich dialogue from out of which both traditions have benefited.

What first strikes the reader familiar with both traditions is how much the Bible and Chinese classics have in common. For example, the poems of Wang Xizhi in the Lan Ting Collection, have strong resemblances to Psalm 8, which is a poetic response to the first chapter of Genesis. The Book of Wisdom's assertion that "righteousness is immortal (Wis. 1:15)" compares favourably with the Book of Zuo's description of the three incorruptible achievements: "Personal integrity is ranked first; social contributions second; and success in writings third." Again we find in the Gongsunchou of Mencius the following: "Were a man to try

to fuse the four channels of good, namely, benevolence, justice, decency and wisdom, it would be like kindling a flame and unearthing the source of an underground spring." The images used here are much like those of Jesus when He speaks of Himself as one who has "come to bring fire to the earth, and would that it were already enkindled (Lk 12:14)," and when He states: "If anyone thirst, let him come to me and drink. He who believes in me, as the scripture has said, 'Out of his heart shall flow living water' (Jn 7:37)." For those acquainted with the classics of both peoples, it is an easy matter to cite hosts of other examples where the Bible and the Chinese classics meet and complement one another.

The Chinese classics are noted for the inherent truths they represent, and so, too, is the Bible, but the Bible is even more explicit and concrete in its formulation of



these truths. The biblical notion of history is another example of how the Bible can provide an apt supplement for the traditional Chinese concept of history. Chinese culture follows a cyclical view where history follows the same patterns of nature. As nature moves from spring and summer to autumn and winter, history also moves from periods of chaos, to order, and then a return to chaos. But biblical history introduces a linear element to the endless repetition of cycles, and while nature and the world cannot break free from this constant repetition, the universe and humanity are moving irrevocably towards a final destiny of everlasting life, a lasting order, peace and harmony. It is interesting to note in this regard that the Logos or Word of biblical literature is in harmony with the Chinese concept of Dao, as the integrating principle of reality (the

way), but goes beyond this as the way to eternal life.

Chinese Mentality and Sensibility vis-a-vis the Bible

"Be as simple as a child." Humility and simplicity are the two virtues most honoured by Chinese tradition and have come to characterise its moral culture. And while the promotion of modernization and democratic practices with all their complexity are essential for our people, the tradition of family love and filial piety expressed in simple and humble terms are values still very much inherent to the Chinese mentality. Filial love and piety also affect the way we Chinese approach the Bible. It allows us to comprehend easily Jesus' submission in all things to his Father's will and his child-like devotion to and relationship with Him.

Another Chinese traditional virtue is social and personal economy. This is hardly a virtue recognized in today's consumer society. And while the Bible invites man to "fill the earth and subdue it (Gen 1:28), it is certainly not advocating consumerism nor the kind of technological excess that greatly threatens nature itself. The Chinese have endured centuries of poverty, and have come to detest waste, be it the mindless extravagance of individuals or the corporate despoiling of nature's resources.(8) Their own attitude finds an excellent biblical foundation in the second chapter of Genesis: "The Lord God took man and settled him in the garden of Eden to cultivate and care for it (Gen 2:15)."

We Chinese have had a long history, and we are very proud of our ancient cultural heritage. Others may look upon this sprawling, populous nation of people with a certain amount of perplexed fascination and curiosity. But what we acknowledge most about ourselves is this: we are a nation who have endured much and felt deeply the bitterness of centuries of insecurity and suffering. When we read such words in the Bible as: "Upon my back the plowers plowed; long did they make their furrows (Ps 129:3)," we cannot but offer up a sympathetic groan of anguish. Indeed, here we find our own portrait as a people. And yet this is also the image of the Servant of Yahweh, the Servant who is healed and saved: "The Lord has severed the cords of the wicked (Ps. 129:4). We Chinese, when reading the Bible, will have

no difficulty in recognizing that only the God of Justice can be the ultimate Saviour of His people.

The authors of the various books of the Bible are imbued with a strong social consciousness: they emphasise man as a social being. In the Old Testament, God liberated a people, entered into a covenant with them, and gave them a code of laws. In the New Testament, the Son of God took on our human condition and established a new covenant: this time with all of humanity. The new covenant has been made with all peoples. Has not the object of God's creation and salvation always been the social person, man in his society rather than the individual in isolation?

It is regrettable that man is strongly inclined to egocentricity with its resultant pride and selfishness. Consciously or unconsciously, man has deviated from the fundamental biblical teaching of self-sacrifice for the sake of others and turned the Bible into a sort of self-protective shield and a merit-system for individuals. The principle figure of the Bible, Jesus Christ, takes a totally different stance. He offered Himself, suffered, died and was raised from the dead on the third day for the sake of all humanity. This He accomplished in His own person, and this is what He commanded His followers to do. As the Chinese come to read the Bible, it is this Jesus, "the man for others," concerned with society that they will come to accept as their teacher.

While the Bible is very much concerned with the social dimension of man, it does not ignore the individual and the dignity of individuals. While man cannot live in isolation, and in the dawning of the "new heavens and a new earth," mankind will be in communion with God our Father, Jesus our Brother, Our Lady, and all the angels and saints. However, in his birth and death man is an individual. His life is personal, private and no one can live it for him. The indispensable foundation for all society is the individual. His individual dignity and holiness make of society a human society, far removed from cogs in the wheel of a machine or a flock of sheep. At present the Chinese people are battling absolute socialism on the one hand and unharmed capitalism on the other. Eventually, it is the Bible that can offer them an antidote for both these extremes

as well as a purification of the abuses of both systems.

Finally, it is the ideal of universal equality, which is like a hunger in the heart of the Chinese, along with their highest aspiration for the union of earth and heaven that will find loud and clear echoes in the Bible. Here they will meet men and women who, like millions of their own people throughout their history, have striven to bring about universal brotherhood in this life, and who are now united with Christ in the eschaton. What is heaven? Heaven begins here and now, and finds its fulfillment in the eschaton: "You see this city? Here God lives among men. He will make His home among them; they shall be His people, and He will be their God; His name is God-with-them. He will wipe away all tears from eyes; there will be no more death, and no more mourning and sadness. The world of the past has gone (Rev. 21:3-4)."

Summary

"How do the Chinese read the Bible?" There are as many answers to this question as there are Chinese reading the Bible. Another Chinese Biblical scholar may choose a different approach than the one I have presented here. As mentioned earlier, there is much diversity in reading the Bible, but there is also a great deal of unity in that diversity. Certainly, the Chinese will reflect diversity as they adopt the trends made popular by the many modern and traditional approaches found in our world today. But they will also bring to their reading of the Bible the unique qualities of their cultural background, the modifications made by their traditional historical and cultural milieu. They will bring to the Bible their love of and faith in the classics, their filial simplicity, the virtues of economy and conservation, their compassion born of their own suffering, and their aspirations for equality among men and the unity of heaven and earth. The Bible indeed is a heavenly source of continual revelation; a book to be read often but never exhausted of the treasures it has to offer the Chinese people.

(Footnotes see p.6)