END TIMES LESSON 4 | *History of Interpretation*

1. **Ezra.**
    a. See Nehemiah 8:1-8.
    b. During the Babylonian exile, the Jews began to speak Aramaic rather than Hebrew. Ezra interpreted God's word literally and explained it to the people in Aramaic.

2. **Rabbis between Ezra and Jesus.**
    a. Rabbinic scribes employed a literal-grammatical-historical method, not an allegorical method. At times it was hyper-literal, especially when it came to the requirements of the Mosaic law. But, "Misuse of the method does not militate against the method itself."[1] In Jesus' time, the allegorical method of interpretation was not prevalent.

3. **Jesus and the Apostles.**
    a. Allegorical interpretation is used once by Paul by way of illustration (Ga 4:22-26). But: (1) there is no indication Paul believes the Genesis account of Sarah and Hagar is not historical; and (2) Paul is not interpreting the original meaning of the Genesis account but using the original story to make a new analogy, under the inspiration of the Spirit, to prove a point.
    b. Outside of this single instance, neither Jesus nor the apostles ever use the allegorical method to interpret the Old Testament.

4. **Before Nicaea.**
    a. <u>Alexandrian school.</u>
        (1) Aristobulus of Alexandria (181-24 bc) was a Hellenistic Jewish philosopher who attempted to fuse ideas in the Jewish scriptures with those in Greek thought.
        (2) Philo of Alexandria (20 bc-ad 50) defended allegorism as *something new* and was therefore opposed by many Jews. His use of allegory to harmonise Jewish scripture with Greek philosophy was the first documented of its kind.
        (3) Clement of Alexandria (150-215) was influenced by Plato and the Stoics to a greater extent than any other Christian thinker of his time.
        (4) Origen (185-253) believed the tenants of Greek philosophy could be found in Moses and the Prophets by those who use the right method of inquiry. We should therefore attempt to unite the Old and New Testaments and Greek philosophy.
            (a) "[Origin] considered the Bible a living organism, consisting of three elements which answer to the body, soul, and spirit of man, after the Platonic psychology. Accordingly, he attributed to the Scriptures a threefold sense: (1) a somatic, literal, or historical sense, furnished immediately by the meaning of the words, but only serving as a veil for a higher idea; (2) a psychic or moral sense, animating the first, and serving for general edification; (3) a pneumatic or mystic and ideal sense, for those who stand on the high ground of philosophical knowledge."[2]

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[1] J. Dwight Pentecost, *Things to Come*, 42.

[2] Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, 2:521.

b. <u>Antiochene school.</u>
  (1) Diodorus of Tarsus (d. 390) and Theodore of Mopsuestia (350-428) held to a historical-grammatical method of interpretation. They believed Scripture passages must be studied as a whole and not as isolated jumbles of separate texts.

5. After Nicaea.
  a. Jerome (342-420) and Augustine of Hippo (354-430) lived 300 years after Jerusalem's destruction (ad 70). Augustine believed the church age *is* the kingdom of God. He allegorised prophecy by squeezing everything into a city of God versus city of man paradigm.
  b. The fourfold sense of Scripture (literal, tropological, allegorical, and analogical) was generally accepted in the Middle Ages. All interpretation of the Bible had to adapt itself to tradition and to the doctrine of the Church, and few concerned themselves with anything resembling literal interpretation.

6. Protestant Reformation.
  a. John Wycliffe (1331-84): "[T]he whole error in the knowledge of Scripture, and the source of its debasement and falsification by incompetent persons, was the ignorance of grammar and logic."[3]
  b. William Tyndale (1494-1536): We may borrow similitudes or allegories from the Scriptures and apply them to our purposes, which allegories are not sense of the Scriptures, but free things besides the Scriptures altogether in the liberty of the Spirit. Such allegory proveth nothing, it is a mere simile. God is a Spirit and all his words are spiritual, and His literal sense is spiritual."[4]
  c. Martin Luther (1483-1546).
    (1) "Every word should be allowed to stand in its natural meaning and that should not be abandoned unless faith forces us to it…It is the attribute of Holy Scripture that it interprets itself by passages and places which belong together, and can only be understood by the rule of faith."[5]
    (2) "I have observed this, that all heresies and errors have originated, not from the simple words of Scripture, as is so universally asserted, but from neglecting the simple words of Scripture, and from the affectation of purely subjective…tropes and inferences."[6]
    (3) "In the schools of theologians it is a well-known rule that Scripture is to be understood in four ways, literal, allegoric, moral, anagogic. But if we wish to handle Scripture aright, our one effort will be to obtain *unum, simplicem, germanum, et certum sensum literalem*."[7]
  d. John Calvin.

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[3] John Wycliffe.

[4] William Tyndale.

[5] Quoted in J. Dwight Pentecost, *Things to Come*, 53.

[6] Martin Luther, quoted in J. Dwight Pentecost, *Things to Come*, 54-55.

[7] Martin Luther, quoted in J. Dwight Pentecost, *Things to Come*, 54-55.

(1) "Let us know then, that the true meaning of Scripture is the natural and obvious meaning, and let us embrace and abide by it resolutely."[8]

(2) "It is the first business of an interpreter to let his author say what he does say, instead of attributing to him what we think he ought to say."[9]

e. Richard Hooker (d. 1600).

(1) "I hold it for a most infallible rule in exposition of Sacred Scriptures that when a literal construction will stand, the farthest from the letter is commonly the worst. There is nothing more dangerous than this deluding art which changeth the meaning of words as alchemy doth or would do the substance of metals, making of anything what it listeth, and bringing in the end of all truth to nothing."[10]

f. Johann August Ernesti (d. 1781).

(1) His *Principles of New Testament Interpretation* was published in 1761. He was the founder of the grammatico-historical school. The believed there is no inconsistency between the doctrine of inspiration and the normal principles of hermeneutics. The Bible must be rigidly explained according to its own language and not be controlled by church tradition, emotion, allegory, or any external philosophical system.

7. Summary.

a. "[A]ll interpretation began with the literal interpretation of Ezra. This literal method became the basic method of Rabbinism. It was the accepted method used by the New Testament in the interpretation of the Old and was so employed by the Lord and His apostles. This literal method was the method of the Church Fathers until the time of Origen when the allegorical method, which had been devised to harmonize Platonic philosophy and Scripture, was adopted. Augustine's influence brought this allegorizing method into the established church and brought an end to all true exegesis. This system continued until the Reformation. At the Reformation the literal method of interpretation was solidly established and, in spite of the attempts of the church to bring all interpretation into conformity to an adopted creed, literal interpretation continued and became the basis on which all true exegesis rests."[11]

b. Especially with the establishing of the state of Israel in 1948, we need to recalibrate our interpretation of prophecy, in the vein of Copernicus and Galileo.[12]

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[8] John Calvin, *Commentary on Galatians*.

[9] John Calvin, *Preface to Romans*.

[10] Richard Hooker, quoted in J. Dwight Pentecost, *Things to Come*, 56-57.

[11] J. Dwight Pentecost, *Things to Come*, 60.

[12] Michael Thomas, Celebrate Messiah New Zealand.