History of Interpretation

We’ve been talking in the last section about the history of interpretation and we’ll continue to do that for a couple of sessions, again moving rather quickly through the main characters and the main features of the history of interpretation. The main purpose is to demonstrate, number one: that no one picks up the biblical text and interprets for the first time. We all stand as part of a long tradition that actually goes all the way back to the Old Testament itself, where Old Testament authors picked up and utilized, interpreted and applied biblical texts for their own readers, and to demonstrate and to understand that we’re not the first ones to pick up and read the text. But second, along with that, to demonstrate the influence and how the way we approach Scripture and interpret it, whether we realize it or not, we’re often indebted to and influenced by what we employ or what we avoid negatively. The way we approach Scripture is often indebted to a long history in engaging the biblical text.

Interpretation in the New Testament Period

We ended by looking at New Testament authors and how New Testament authors frequently picked up and utilized Old Testament texts with the conviction that Jesus Christ himself was the fulfillment of the Old Testament. He was the climax of God’s revelation to his people.

A very interesting text in that regard is Hebrews 1 and verses one and two. We’re at the very beginning of the book. The author in a sense establishes how the Old Testament was read, at least by himself, but I think other New Testament authors as well, where the author of Hebrews said, “in the past God spoke to our forefathers,” that would be the prophets and Old Testament authors through the prophets, “at many times and in various ways but in these last days,” in the time of fulfillment “he has spoken to us by his son.” So Jesus Christ is seen as not removing, eclipsing or setting aside the Old Testament but as showing, as bringing
it to fulfillment, as the climax and the true intention of what the Old Testament was pointing to. So the New Testament authors wrote and read the Old Testament with the assumption that Jesus was the climax and the fulfillment of God’s revelation to his people.

We said that probably stemmed from Christ himself, where several places especially in texts like Luke 24 Jesus demonstrates, or he argues, unfortunately Luke doesn’t record what Jesus said, but he simply records that Jesus explained from the entire Old Testament how all Scripture was fulfilled in him, how all Scripture pointed to him. Even later on, Paul will say that when he’s summarizing the Gospel in 1 Corinthians 15 he says, “I pass onto you what was passed onto me, that is, Jesus died, was buried and rose again on the third day according to the scriptures.” New Testament writers operated with the assumption that the Old Testament was to be understood as pointing to Christ and to be interpreted through the lenses of fulfillment in Jesus Christ.

We also said that the New Testament reveals a number of ways of demonstrating that, from what we might call more literal, more strait forward prediction of fulfillment all the way to more a analogical or typological type fulfillment. So, for example, an example of a more literal type of fulfillment can be found in Matthew 2:5, in the early section of Matthew the narrative of the birth and the early childhood of Jesus Christ. Chapter two and starting with verse five. I’ll back up, this is part of the story where the magi come to King Herod in Jerusalem to ask where this Messiah is, where he’s been born and Herod has to go to his some of his scribes to find out. So he calls the people, the chief priest and the teachers of the law together and he asks them, where is the Christ, this Messiah, to be born because obviously King Herod wants to exterminate him since he’s a threat to King Herod’s throne. He can’t have another king laying a claim to his rulership, there can’t be another Christ, Messiah, or king to compete with his throne. So he asks them, where is this Christ to be born, because, of course, he wants him to be found so he can kill him. “‘In Bethlehem of Judea’ they reply ‘for
this is what the prophet has written.”’ Now comes a quotation from Micah 5:2: “but you Bethlehem in the land of Judah are by no means least among the rulers of Judea, for out of you will come a ruler who will be the shepherd of my people Israel.” Although there may be a couple other things going on with this text, there is at least at a basic level, the author sees, and at least his scribes saw a rather straightforward, literal fulfillment, that the Messiah would be born in the city of Bethlehem. A city of very little means would become great in reputation because the Messiah would come from there. So chapter two verse five and six of Matthew probably provides one possible example of a more strait forward, literal reading of fulfillment of a biblical text. We often think of when we think of fulfillment, we think of a prophecy or prediction which then gets fulfilled according to pretty much the way it was predicted, and this is as close as we get to that.

Luke 4:18-21 Interprets Isaiah 61

But interestingly, there are other examples, in Luke 4:18-21. Again to set the stage Jesus then goes to Nazareth, this is the early, after Jesus’ temptation. Remember Jesus is tempted in the wilderness by Satan, now he begins his ministry. According to Luke then he goes to Galilee, then he goes to Nazareth where he had been brought up, “and on the Sabbath day he went into the Synagogue, as was his custom, and he stood up and read,” and perhaps this would have been the reading for the day, “and in the synagogue the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was handed to him. Unrolling it he found the place where it is written ‘the Spirit of the Lord is on me because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor, he has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and the recovery of slight for the blind, the release the oppressed and to proclaim the year of the Lords favor.’” Again this is a promise or prediction in Isaiah of what would happened when God restores his people. Now Jesus literally seems to see himself as fulfilling this. The Spirit of the Lord has come upon him, which we saw taking place back in the temptation and baptism of Jesus when the Spirit came as a dove. Now Jesus says “the Spirit of the Lord is upon me,” he’s been anointed to
proclaim the good news to the poor, which is exactly what he does, to recover, the
sight to the blind, to release the oppressed, all of which he does in the rest of the
quotation from Isaiah 61:1-2 probably now seems rather literally as a predictive
promise that gets fulfilled in the person of Jesus Christ.

But as I said there are other types of fulfillment that New Testament
authors see happening in the Old Testament as they read the Old Testament texts
in light of Christ. Sometimes I’m convinced, and this I find this happening often,
the connection between the Old and New Testament especially when you find
New Testament authors quoting Old Testament texts saying they’re fulfilled but
there doesn’t really seem to be a connection when you look at what’s going on in
the original context in what the Old Testament authors seems to be saying and
how New Testament author seems to be using it. There doesn’t seem to be a strait
forward connection. Although this is not the only possibility, one that I find often
taking place is what can be called more of a typological or analogical connection
that is an event or person in the past and the Old Testament provides a model or
type of something that now takes place, a person or event in the New Testament.
The idea or assumption that seems to underlie it is not so much that the Old
Testament writings is actually prophecy and predicting this, but instead the New
Testament authors, because they operated with the conviction that God, the same
God that was at work under the Old Covenant with his people, who delivered them
and who is redemptively and historically at work with his people under the Old
Covenant, the same God was now in a great way, and in fulfillment of the Old
Covenant, was now acting again to redeem and restore his people in a greater way
through the person of Christ in the New Covenant era of salvation.

Because of this conviction New Testament authors often see
correspondence and analogies again because they are convinced what God did
under the Old Covenant has now escalated, now been repeated, in a far greater
way in fulfillment in Jesus Christ. So they’re not necessarily saying the Old
Testament author was predicting this but within the text and the event or person it attests to, we see a pattern, model or type that is now being repeated and filled up as it were in a greater way in the person of Jesus Christ and the New Covenant of Salvation that he brings.

Matthew 2 Interprets Hosea 11

We’ll deal with this text a little more, but this may be the explanation for, again to go back to Matthew 2:14-15 especially verse fifteen. We’ve already seen in the beginning part of chapter two of Matthew and verses five and six that Jesus could be seen as rather literally fulfilling a text, that is the king, the Messiah would be born in Bethlehem of Judea. Now we see a very different reference to the Old Testament in chapter two and verse thirteen, the angel appears to Joseph, and it’s not accidental that I mention Moses because this chapter two is modeled on a New Exodus motif. We’ll talk about that later on when we talk about the old use of the Old Testament in the New Testament, but Joseph, now an angel appears to him and tells him to take the child because Herod is now on the warpath looking to exterminate this rival to his throne, this Messiah. Now an angel appears to Joseph and says “take the child and escape to Egypt and stay there until I tell you, for Herod is going to search for the child to kill him.” So verse fourteen says, “they got up, he takes the child during the night and leaves for Egypt.” Then verse 15, “and they stayed there until the death of Herod, and so it was fulfilled what the Lord had spoken through the Prophet, ‘out of Egypt I have called my son.’” This quotation is actually a quotation from Hosea 11:1. We’ll deal more with this text when we talk about the use of the Old Testament in the New later on in this course.

But the thing I want to mention now is, when you go back to Hosea 11:1. Without Matthew 2 I’m convinced that most of us would never read this as a reference to Jesus Christ and Joseph taking his family to Egypt and then bringing him back once Herod has died. In fact Hosea 11:1 doesn’t appear to really be a prophecy at all. It’s more of a recitation of the deeds of God in rescuing,
delivering and caring for his people. So Hosea 11:1 is not a prophecy of a coming Messiah, it’s a reference to when God delivered his people out of Egypt back in the book of Exodus.

Now the question is, how does Matthew get off finding in this a fulfillment in Jesus Christ? Well probably, instead of seeing this as a prediction or having some double meaning or hidden meaning that now Matthew uncovers, is it possible that Matthew is reading the text typologically, that he finds in the same way that God acted to rescue and deliver his people from threat under the Old Covenant, now he is acting in a greater way to deliver his people, starting with the Messiah, Jesus Christ, from threat as well? He now begins to save and deliver his people under the New Covenant of salvation. So I think the relationship between Hosea 11 and Matthew 2 is more of a typological or analogical, that is, the same God who was working to deliver and rescue his people is now acting again in a greater way in the person of Jesus Christ. In the same way God kept his son, the people of Israel, delivered them, kept them safe and rescued them, now in a new exodus God is acting again to recuse his greater son Jesus who now basically will fulfill what Israel failed to accomplish as a people.

So we could point to other examples of the where apparently New Testament authors saw a typological or analogical connection between the New Testament events and persons, especially Christ, and the Old Testament in certain events and persons and seeing the New Testament as the fulfillment, the climax of that pattern.

Again the fundamental assumption behind this is that Jesus Christ has brought the long awaited age of fulfillment. What the Old Testament texts were pointing to and awaiting, has now been brought to fulfillment in the person of Jesus Christ. Therefore New Testament authors could find types and patterns being picked up and repeated in light of the conviction that in the same way that God acted in the Old Covenant to rescue and deliver his people in a significantly
redemptive-historical event is now repeating itself in the new redemptive-
historical event founded in the person of Jesus Christ.

**Lesser to the greater: Rabbinic Interpretation**

Now sometimes the New Testament authors may reflect typical or common
methods of rabbinical interpretation. Remember we looked at a couple: the lesser
to the greater, or connecting texts together via connections of vocabulary. Two
Old Testament texts might be brought together because they refer to similar
themes or refer to a similar word or similar vocabulary. For example we’ve
already looked at Jesus’ statement in Matthew 6. Matthew 6:26 Jesus is telling his
disciples, his kind of, the nucleolus of the new people of God not to worry about
life, what they will eat or drink in the context of the well-known Sermon on the
Mount. Then Jesus says in verse twenty-six, “Look at the birds of the air. They do
now sow or reap or store away in barns and yet their heavenly father feeds them.
Are you not much more valuable than they are.” Notice that argument from the
lesser to the greater. If God would care for the birds of the heaven certainly he will
care for his people who seek his kingdom and his righteousness as the rest of the
text goes on to tell us.

**Hebrews 1:5 and Rabbinic word association interpretation**

But another interesting example in the New Testament is Hebrews 1:5,
where the author as we’ve said, is demonstrating the superiority of Jesus Christ
over the Old Covenant scriptures, not that they were bad, inferior or useless, but
simply that now Jesus is the fulfillment, the climax. Therefore, he is the climatic
revelation of God to his people. Now the author is demonstrating that by appealing
to a number of Old Testament texts, especially showing Jesus as superior to the
angels who were part of the Old Covenant and part of the giving to the law. In
chapter one and verse five, notice this, he says, “for to which of the angels did
God ever say,” and here’s the first quotation “‘you are my son, today I have
become your father’, or again ‘I will be his father, and he will be my son.’” That
first quotation, “‘you are my son, today I become your father’” is taken from
Psalms 2, which is one of those psalms which is considered a royal psalm that often gets applied to Jesus Christ in the New Testament. But the second text the author of Hebrews says again, “I will be his father and he will be my son,” this is part of the covenant formula. When God spoke to David and made a covenant with David in 2 Samuel 7:14, “I will be his father,” that is, the king who sits on David’s throne, “and he will be my son.” Probably these two texts, whether the author of Hebrews did this, or whether early Christians did this, because these two texts appear to be combined elsewhere, most likely much like the Rabbis at time brought Old Testament texts together based on word associations and similarities of vocabulary. Most likely both these came together because of the similar wording and similar theme of father and son and the covenant formula. The author now brings these together and again finds their fulfillment in the person of Jesus Christ. Now this may be an example of the Old Testament linked together by the words “father and son” and perhaps because of the covenant formula as well.

The desire of the New Testament authors again is to actually summarize the material from the Dead Sea Scrolls and the Qumran community and rabbinic interpreters and all the way back to Old Testament authors. The desire over and over again is to understand Scripture but also to demonstrate its relevance for the contemporary readers and their situation. In one sense, many of these examples are nothing less than what good preachers and expositors attempt to do today. It is not so much a dry exposition of the explanation of the text but to demonstrate the ongoing relevance and significance for modern day readers of the text. So in biblical interpretation, it goes back, in fact, all the way back even to the Old Testament. Later Old Testament authors, sometimes pick up earlier Old Testament texts and reinterpret, and reassert them for subsequent generations. We see that interpretative activity continuing through the New Testament authors, through Rabbinic interpretive methods, and the Dead Sea Scrolls.
Apostolic Fathers

But now I want to move on to, jump ahead a little bit and consider beyond the Old and New Testament to look at just very briefly early methods of interpretation. I want to start with the apostolic fathers and then just briefly, that is the early church founders and leaders after the writing of the New Testament documents, that period roughly from 100 to 150 A.D. The apostolic fathers actually belong to a larger period from about 100-600 A.D sometimes called the Patristic period. So if you see those terms Patristics or early church fathers, often times the Patristics is the broader period of 100-600 A.D roughly I think. The church fathers is a more limited period of time from 100-to roughly 150 A.D. But the significance of this is that the early church fathers give us a glimpse into biblical interpretation of the period immediately following the writing of the New Testament. So many early church leaders and church fathers, names such as Clement, Polycarp or Ignatius produce writings where they actually appeal to Old and New Testament texts and interpret them therefore giving us examples of early biblical integration. Often what they’re doing is they’re frequently defining and defending the Christian faith especially against false teaching that has arisen. So they’re often interpreting the biblical text to show how they should be understood and how they support Christian belief as opposed to Gnosticism or some other heretical teaching.

There are actually two characteristic features of the interpretation of the church fathers that I want to look at. One of them is what is known as typological interpretation. This is a more extreme form of the typological or analogical approach we looked at with the New Testament authors. The other is more allegorical interpretation, and we’ll briefly describe those and give a couple of examples. For example, typological where the church fathers would often find reference especially in the Old Testament and find correspondences in the life of Christ and in the teaching of the New Testament.
For example, one early writing called the Epistle of Barnabas in chapter twelve of the first seven verses, sees the outreached arms of Moses in Exodus 17. In Exodus 17, you have that story of where Moses stretches out his arms as the Israelites are fighting I think the Amalekites, and as long as he has his arms stretched out, they are victorious. But the Epistle of Barnabas sees that as a type of the death of Christ where he literally has arms stretched out and nailed to the cross. So again he’s found a reference starting with the assumption that Jesus Christ fulfills all of the Old Testament, he’s found a reference to Jesus’ stretched out arms and the reference to Moses’s arms being stretched out in Exodus 17.

Another more famous one that perhaps you’ve heard of or are familiar with is an example in another document called 1 Clement. 1 Clement 1:7 refers to the scarlet thread of Rahab. You remember the Old Testament story of the spies, that Rahab is to keep the spies from danger and she’s to hang out a scarlet thread in her window. 1 Cement is the book that took this scarlet thread of Rahab mentioned in the Old Testament as a type of the blood of Christ, the scarlet or red blood of Christ. So he saw, the author of 1 Clement, saw the scarlet thread that Rahab hung in her window as actually a type of or foreshadowing of the salvation that would come through the blood of Jesus Christ. So there other types of examples especially in those two books of a typological type of interpretation where many of them to us seem rather extreme where some little detail in the Old Testament is seen as foreshadowing some detail in the life of Christ.

A more common way of interpreting biblical text that begin to become popular all the way through the Reformation period in the fifteenth and sixteenth century and with Martin Luther and John Calvin and their approach to interpretation. The method that dominated until then was the allegorical method. It was a very popular way of interpreting the Old Testament particularly and what happened is some person or something in the Old Testament a person or event, an object or institution was given a deeper level of meaning, a deeper spiritual
meaning. So usually a physical person, object or event was then given a deeper spiritual meaning, which was often seen as its true meaning.

So, for example, without giving any specific examples, the Epistle of Barnabas that I already mentioned with the outstretched arms of Moses, finds detailed allegorical meaning in a number of details from the Old Testament law in particular. It’s also important to recall that during this time church tradition begin to play an important role in hermeneutics, and again it wasn’t until Martin Luther and John Calvin and the Reformation, especially Luther, that would react to that. Church tradition will begin to play an important role and appeal to what the church believed.

**Allegorical Method: Origen and Augustine**

One dominant approach to biblical interpretation in the early centuries of the church, during the first few centuries of Christianity’s existence was associated with Alexandria of Egypt and that was the allegorical method. One of the most well-known practitioners of that was Philo. Philo was well known for interpreting the Old Testament text especially narrative, allegorically, probably demonstrating how it actually supports Greek philosophical ideals. He would go through and interpret the Old Testament allegorically. In references to physical, literal, events and persons and he found a deeper, allegorical second level of meaning behind that.

The most well-known allegorizer, I guess that’s a word, is Origen, from 185-254 A.D so that is the second century to early third century. Origen was most well known for interpreting the Old Testament allegorically and you can read more about his hermeneutical method in his First Principals. You can Google that and find translations of that online, but it is very interesting and instructive in his approach to hermeneutics and interpretation. Origen started with the ideas especially found in Pauline works, that just as the human consists of body, soul, and spirit, and you can find that phraseology in Paul’s letter in a couple of places, and just as a human being consisting of three parts, body, soul, and spirit, so does,
does Scripture. Scriptures have a threefold part meaning that corresponds to body, soul, and spirit, that is Scripture has a literal meaning, a physical/literal meaning that would correspond to the physical body. It also has a moral meaning that would correspond to the soul, and then it also has a theological meaning that would correspond to the spirit.

Now this was important for Origen, it’s interesting that Origen isn’t just concocting this out of thin air. Number one it was an important methodology in the day and in some senses he might just be a child of his day. On the other hand, he also tied allegory into inspiration. If the biblical text is inspired there’s certainly more than just the surface physical meaning, there must be more to it. So he saw allegory as a natural corollary of the text of Scripture being inspired.

Furthermore, Origen also, intriguingly, saw allegory as a sign of one’s intellectual and spiritual maturity. So, one who was spiritually mature but also intellectually astute was able to allegorize the text. It’s interesting today we often think the opposite. Someone who allegorizes the text today we think is a dolt whose lost their mind and frequently that is the case. There all kind of crazy things that can take place, and the one who can interpret it literally or exegetically correctly is one who is spiritually and intellectually mature. Origen saw it the other way around interestingly.

So, for example, an example from Genesis 19:30-38, the story of Lot having sexual relations with his daughters, I believe, allegorically interestingly to make sense of this text because again for Origen this seems to be rather crass, what value can there be in a story of Lot’s sexual exploits, what value can there be spiritually and theologically in that? So, according to Origen, Lot allegorically represented the human mind, Lot’s wife, the reference here is to Lot’s sexual relations to his wife. Lot’s wife represented the flesh and pleasure and Lot’s daughters represented pride. So he took each of the persons and allegorized them to give them some spiritual meaning to basically give the text value. Probably, and again I don’t want to go into any more details as to why he does that or how he
does that, but just to demonstrate what Origen was trying to do and what allegory entails in the story of Lot and his wife and daughters in Genesis 19.

The classic example of allegory probably comes later from St. Augustine (ca AD 400). St. Augustine’s interpretation of the parables proved to be very ripe for this sort of allegorical explanation and continued on for quite some time. Here’s the parable of the Good Samaritan where a person is on the road and is jumped by robbers and beaten and left half dead and a priest comes by and a Levite comes by, two Jewish leaders and significant persons, yet they fail to stop for various reasons to help the person who is beaten. Lo and behold, the Samaritan comes by, a most unlikely hero, and takes this person and bandages him up and takes him to an inn and pays for his stay and his upkeep. And St. Augustine read this allegorically and gives us one of the more classical examples of an allegorical interpretation.

So here it is. Basically when the parable says, “a man was going down from Jerusalem on the road to Jericho where he gets beaten.” This man is Adam. Jerusalem then allegorically stands for the heavenly city of peace. So Jerusalem isn’t the physical city Jerusalem. It now stands for the heavenly city from which Adam fell. Jericho allegorically stands for the moon and therefore signifies Adam’s mortality. The robbers that beat this man allegorically stand for the devil and his angels. The fact that they stripped him means they stripped him of his immortality. They beat him means they persuaded the man to sin, again the man is allegorized to be Adam. So you can see this parable starting out is kind of a commentary on the creation narrative. “They left him half dead” means allegorically that he died spiritually; therefore he’s half dead. The priest and the Levites stand for the priesthood and ministry of the Old Testament. Interestingly, this is one point that most people would dispute today. The Samaritan is said to mean “guardian.” Therefore the Samaritan is meant to be Christ himself. That would have been rather shocking to a Jewish reader who despised Samaritans. The Samaritan stands for Christ himself, the fact that he bandages his wounds means
the binding and restraining of sin. The oil symbolizes the comfort of hope. The wine symbolizes the exhortation to work with a fervent spirit. The donkey symbolizes the flesh of Jesus’ incarnation interestingly. The inn symbolizes the church. The next day, after he takes him to the inn, the very next day refers to the resurrection. The two silver coins allegorically stand for the promise of this life and of the life to come, and the inn keeper is the apostle Paul.

So that’s how St. Augustine made sense of this parable by taking the different elements of the parable and actually finding a deeper level of meaning, an allegorical meaning that he finds elsewhere in the Old and New Testament. We’ll talk about the parables later on but I’m simply giving you an example of the allegorical approach, which became the dominant approach in early biblical interpretation.

Now let me say that it’s important to understand, though this approach certainly is susceptible to a lot of subjectivity and is certainly susceptible to abuse and while we may look at what the early church fathers and early interpreters did and want to rightly avoid that and especially excesses and extremes, it’s still important to understand that we do something very similar to what they were doing when we attempt to make the text relevant. The allegorical method was not just some arbitrary playing with the text of Scripture and trying to extract all kinds of strange meanings, but was an attempt to make the text relevant. How was one going to make a story of Lot and his relationships with his wife and daughters, how was one going to make that relevant spiritually and theologically. How does one make a story like the Good Samaritan relevant to today. Allegory, whatever we may think of it at the very least is instructive since it reminds us that interpretation has always been aimed at demonstrating the relevance of God’s words for modern readers, however much it may have been overdone by early interpreters of scriptures.

We can look at other examples of interpretation by the early church fathers in the Patristic era, but the two points I want to make is number one: the dominant
approach became allegorical interpretation, allegorizing the biblical text. As we’re going to see later there’s actually a difference between allegorizing and interpreting an allegory. Allegorizing is something that is not intended to be treated that way as opposed to interpreting a text that is meant to be taken allegorically. But early interpretation was characterized by what became kind of the dominant approach up until the Reformation of treating an Old Testament text especially, allegorically finding a hidden level of meaning, finding a deeper meaning within the text. The second feature of early interpretation that begin to get steam and begins to get rolling was focused on early church tradition interpreting in light of the tradition of the Church and theological belief of the church and the interpretations that supported and reflected the church’s theology. So, allegorical interpretation and also giving preference to church tradition now become a dominant hermeneutical or interpretive approaches to the Old and New Testament.

**Reformation and Interpretation Methods**

To skip ahead, and again there’s a lot we could say about other periods of church history and other important individuals in interpretation, but again we’ll skip ahead and touch on some of the major movements in the history of Church interpretation. So I want to skip ahead to the Reformation of the sixteenth century. Again previously as we’ve said, interpretation focused on church tradition, and then the allegorical method of interpretation. In a sense, the hermeneutics or the interpretative approach of the Reformation grew out of a dissatisfaction and with reaction to both of these tendencies. We’ll see that the Reformation could generally, before we look just very briefly at two individuals Martin Luther and John Calvin, the Reformation could be characterized as an interest in studying the Bible itself in the original languages, both Hebrew and Greek and also even an awareness of the literary types of the texts, the desire to understand the text in light of its original historical contexts. Those seem to begin and characterize the approach of the reformers to biblical interpretation again in reaction to, and with
dissatisfaction to the previous approach of focusing on simply church tradition and allegorizing of biblical text.

One thing that obviously lies behind this approach too is, now with the Reformation the Bible now is no longer only in the hands of the church leaders but now is in the hands of the common person, so it can be understood. One of the important implications and focuses of the Reformation was the perspicuity of the Scriptures meaning that it can be understood by the common person. One does not need Church tradition or authority to interpret it. One can understand it in the light of the original languages such as Hebrew and Greek, one can understand the text as it should be understood not in light of church tradition but in light of its own original context et cetera et cetera.

**Martin Luther**

Martin Luther (ca 1517 AD) one of the more well known of the Reformation Movement was known for interpreting both the Old and New Testament. Again, he did not see church tradition as the locus of interpretation or as the locus of biblical authority, but the Old and New Testament text itself. So this was a direct challenge to how hermeneutics or how biblical interpretation had gone on until this time. Also, Luther advocated for a single literal meaning or literal sense of the biblical text again in a direct contrast to the allegorical approach where we find multiple meanings. You remember Origen’s body, soul, and spirit that were even expanded to four meanings not just three but four possible allegorical meanings. But now Calvin and Luther react to that and so there is a single literal approach to the biblical text.

Luther also emphasizes grammar and history and the role they play in interpretation. Interpretation must take into account the historical context of the biblical text. It must also be consistent with the grammar though it’s interesting when you read Luther he did not completely divest himself of allegorical tendencies. He still at times did follow allegorical and typological responses that resemble early approaches to interpretation.
In fact, it’s interesting Luther had such an impact that some of his commentaries, especially his commentaries on Romans and particularly in Galatians, are still seen as valuable contributions to our understanding today. In fact, modern understanding of Paul, modern interpretation of Paul can basically be divided between Luther and what is known as the new perspective, and where we fall in relationship to that. So Martin Luther had a profound impact on biblical interpretation and how the text is approached. As I said, his commentary, particularly in Galatians, is still seen, even where one might disagree with some of the details, as a model of exegesis and interpretation of a biblical text in light of its historical and grammatical context.

**John Calvin and Interpretation**

The other person to emphasize that I want to just point you to very briefly is John Calvin. John Calvin also rejected allegory and instead sought to ground his interpretation in the biblical text. You know John Calvin more for his *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, but within that we find Calvin discussing principles of interpretation. We’ll see in just a moment John Calvin also wrote commentaries on biblical texts but he did so seeking to ground meaning and interpretation in the biblical text and rejected, therefore, allegorical interpretations that were finding multiple spiritual meanings underneath and behind these texts. Calvin also championed a more grammatical and historical approach to interpretation that is taking a text and putting it in its historical context as far as: who is the author, what is the situation of the reader, what is the author intending to communicate, examining the grammatical elements, the grammatical structure of the text in order to arrive at the meaning of the text.

Calvin also understood and advocated that the Bible itself is its own best interpreter and perhaps in response to giving preference to the early church tradition and to the authority of the church. Now Calvin says, the Bible is its own best interpreter where Scripture interprets Scripture. We still see that today, I still think we see the influence of that today in some of our Bibles that have in the
margins or in the footnotes parallel passages that would point you to other texts that would be paralleled and help you understand the text that you’re reading or dealing with. So Calvin was very clear that Scripture is its own best interpreter. Scripture interprets Scripture, and primarily what he meant by that is that the correct meaning resides in the text itself and that the final arbitrator of meaning is the biblical text itself, not church authority or church tradition.

In fact, Calvin also wrote commentaries that are still highly valued today. Not too long ago, actually it was a little bit ago at least from our perspective, I was reading a textbook from a well-known scholar on the New Testament and surveying commentaries on the New Testament and in most of them he mentioned along with contemporary commentaries, he mention commentaries by both Calvin and Luther as still necessary for both the preacher and scholars library. So John Calvin also wrote commentaries on virtually every book of the Bible except the book of Revelation which he didn’t know what to do with. Given some of the things I’ve read from some people a lot of people should have followed his lead by not writing on Revelation. He still wrote commentaries that are still valued today for the contribution they made to exegesis, not only what they reveal about Calvin but also even for insight into the biblical text.

So Luther and Calvin are examples of a reaction to the standard approach to hermeneutics that focused on church tradition and church authority as the arbitrator of meaning and an allegorical approach. Luther and Calvin focused on the text itself as the locus of meaning, Scripture interpreting Scripture abandoning the allegorical method of interpretation even if they didn’t do so completely all the time. Instead they focused on the historical, grammatical meaning of the text. Both of them wrote commentaries that still make a valuable contribution to exegesis and to interpretation today.

**Summary of Reformation Hermeneutics**

In summary then, and in response to the current of interpretation of their day of the contributions of the Reformation to hermeneutics of their day and even
to our day I think could be summarized in the following. Number one is the priority of Scripture as the primarily locus of meaning and interpretation. The primary locus of meaning or the primary contribution to meaning is not the authority of the church or merely church tradition. Our theological or ecclesiastical traditions are to be subservient to the meaning of the biblical text. So the priority of the text as the true place where hermeneutics and interpretation takes place is one of the contributions of the Reformation.

A second one is the stress on the grammatical and historical meaning of the text. Again, a number of hermeneutical textbooks still argue for what is called the grammatical-historical meaning, or a grammatical-historical interpretation and again that goes back to the Reformation. Studying a text in light of its grammatical context, the Hebrew and Greek grammar, also studying a text by placing it in its historical context by understanding the author, the readers and the situation that the author was addressing also goes back to the Reformation as well. The emphasis on Scripture being its own best interpreter, that is, our interpretation of Scripture must have a consistency, it must have a coherency so that we don’t come up with a interpretation that contradicts what Scripture says elsewhere, that again what I think is a vestige of the Reformation.

Then, finally, the clarity or perspicuity of Scripture, the fact that any one can read it and understand it, anyone can interpret it again owes itself to the legacy of the Reformation. Although sometimes we hear interpretations and we might have not wished for, but nonetheless the Reformation has taken the Bible and put it back in the hands of the people so that they can understand it and read it. All of these I think still affect the way that we interpret and approach Scripture today by emphasizing its clarity and its understandability. By emphasizing that it should be understood in its grammatical and historical context by understanding that it should be interpreted consistently with other Scripture and by making the scriptural text, the biblical text, giving it priority in our hermeneutics and our interpretation and making the locus of meaning the biblical text.
So this rather brief survey of history of the interpretation of the Bible to this point has primarily been to demonstrate that again when you pick up the biblical text and read it and interpret it you are part of the long story, a long tradition, of encountering the biblical text. No one does it simply out of the air, no one comes as we’ll see later, as a blank slate, no one comes at it the first time. Whether you recognize it or not, you are influence by others who have wrestled with the text and interpreted the text and tried to make it relevant. This has gone on before you stretching all the way back to the Old Testament.

What I want to do next, in the next section, is take another quantum leap forward a couple hundred years and kind of switch gears and we’ll begin to branch out and start to look at influences on interpretation that go outside of biblical interpreters. As I’ve said before, one of the features of recent study and thinking about hermeneutics and how we understand has demonstrated that hermeneutics is no longer the province only of biblical interpreters but other disciplines as well. So we’re going to branch out and look at some non-biblical influences on how we read and interpret biblical text. I think we’ll see the influences are many and we’ll examine what those are and the main persons associated with that and again how that might influence the way we read and interpret a biblical passage.