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“The Process of the Text”

The Reformation Hermeneutics of William Tyndale and John Frith

The father of English Bible translation and thus of English Protestantism is, undoubtedly, William Tyndale (1492?-1536). Several articles have already been published on Tyndale as a biblical scholar¹, as a translator², as a maker of the English language³ but only a few scholars have tried to explore Tyndale’s hermeneutics⁴.

The issue of the literal sense is a frequently debated question in biblical studies. The Old Testament scholar Brevard S. Childs in a 1976 article argued that it was both an “ancient and modern problem”⁵. He pointed out that while during the time of the Reformation the literal sense meant the explicative theological sense of the text as well as the historical reference. However, for the historical-critical method, emerging in the eighteenth century, the *sensus litteralis* became simply *sensus historicus*, and this method was characterized by a total commitment to this new understanding of the literal sense. The general assumption has been that there is an unbroken line of continuity between the Reformation and the eighteenth century with regard to the literal sense. Arguing against this mainstream, Hans Frei, in his *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative* (1974), has demonstrated the discontinuity between the Reformers and the eighteenth and nineteenth century critics.⁶

Tyndale’s writings are in a way all hermeneutical treatises, and I am suggesting that he raises modern questions concerning the nature of the literal sense. In the following paper I wish to show (1) what Tyndale means by the literal sense when he radically rejects allegory, permitting at the same time certain forms of it; (2) how frequently Tyndale and his colleague John Frith (1503-1533) use the modern-sounding term “process of the text” in their writings;

¹ Hammond, Gerald, “William Tyndale’s Pentateuch: Its Relation to Luther’s German Bible and the Hebrew Original,” In, *Renaissance Quarterly*, (33), 1980, pp. 351-85.

² Cummings, Brian, “The Theology of Translation”, in *Word, Church and State*. Tyndale Quincentenary Essays. (Washington D.C. The Catholic University of America Press, 1998) pp. 36-61.

³ Davies, Norman, *William Tyndale’s English of Controversy*, The Chamber Memorial Lecture delivered 4 March 1971 at University College London, London, University College, 1971.

⁴ Parker, Douglas, “Tyndale’s Biblical Hermeneutics”, in *Word, Church and State*, pp. 87-101.

⁵ Brevard S. Childs, “The Sensus Litteralis of Scripture: An Ancient and Modern Problem”, in H. Donner at alt. eds. *Beiträge zur Alttestamentliche Theologie* FS Walter Zimmerli, (Göttingen, Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 1976), pp. 88-99.

⁶ Hans Frei, *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative. A Study in Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century Hermeneutics*. (New Haven and London, Yale University Press), 1974.

(3) how their ideas conform both to the Fathers of the Church, and to some modern views of textuality.

1. Tyndale's Literal Sense

The Prologue to the 1525 Cologne Fragment⁷ and its expanded edition *A Pathway into Holy Scripture* (1531)⁸ might be considered as the first documents of Lutheran-type hermeneutics in English. Nevertheless I would propose “The Four Senses of Scripture”, the last long section of *The Obedience of a Christian Man* (1528), as the first *par excellence* hermeneutical treatise in English. It is here that Tyndale gives a definition of the literal sense:

the scripture hath but one sense, which is the literal sense. And that literal sense is the root and ground of all, and the anchor that never faileth, whereunto if thou cleave, thou canst never err or go out of the way. And if thou leave the literal sense, thou canst not but go out of the way.⁹

Tyndale rejects the medieval *Quadrigo*, or, “Four senses of Scripture” the idea of which goes back to John Cassian (c365-c435) a contemporary of Augustine. Tyndale emphasized “the one sense” which is the “root”, the “ground” and the “anchor” of every signification.

Tyndale shared the Lutheran and Reformation principle of *sacra scriptura sui ipsius interpres* when he said:

The scripture giveth record to himself and ever expoundeth itself by another open text. If the Pope cannot bring for his exposition the practicing of Christ or of the Apostles and prophets or an open text, then is his exposition false doctrine.¹⁰

2. The “Process of the Text”

In the age of “word-processors” Tyndale’s idea of the “process of the text” strikes us as surprisingly modern. To my knowledge the English reformers William Tyndale and John Frith are quite unique in using this terminology. Though it conforms to the idea of *sacra scriptura sui ipsius interpres* and the *analogia fidei* principles of the main reformers, there is no similar terminology either in Latin or in German. I hope to show how modern the term is.

⁷ William Tyndale, *The Beginning of the New Testament. Translated by William Tyndale 1525. Facsimile of the Unique Fragment of the Uncompleted Cologne Edition*, Ed. A.W.Pollard, (Oxford, 1926).

⁸ William Tyndale, *A Pathway into the Holy Scripture*, in, *Doctrinal Treatises and Introductions to Different Portions of the Holy Scripture by William Tyndale*, Ed. Henry Walter, The Parker Society 42, (Cambridge, University Press, 1848.) pp.1-28.

⁹ William Tyndale, *The Obedience of a Christian Man*, Ed.David Daniell, (London,Penguin Books, 2000), p. 56.

¹⁰ Tyndale, *Obedience*, p.172.

Tyndale in the *Obedience* recommends his reading of Scripture according to the “process of the text” as it corresponds to Christ as the foundation (christological reading) and the “common articles of faith” (confessional reading) and the “open scriptures” (hermeneutical reading). He makes it clear that this sense is obtained by the Holy Spirit and this reading is for the benefit of the congregation.

Prepare thy mind therefore unto this little treatise; and read it discreetly; and judge it indifferently. And when I allege any scripture, look thou on the text whether I interpret it right: **which thou shalt easily perceive by the circumstance and process of them**, if thou make Christ the foundation and the ground...¹¹

In the last part of *The Obedience* Tyndale writes:

when we have found out **the literal sense of the scripture by the process of the text, or by a like text of another place**, then go we, and as the scripture borroweth similitudes of worldly things, even so we again borrow similitudes or allegories of the scripture, and apply them to our purposes; which allegories are no sense of the scripture, but free things besides the scripture, and altogether at the liberty of the Spirit.¹²

The allegorizers, or, the followers of Origen “forgot the order and the process of the text”¹³ when they imposed allegories on the text.

False interpreters, says Tyndale, in his Preface to Genesis, “darken the right way with the mist of their sophistry... with worldly similitudes and apparent reasons of natural wisdom, clean contrary unto the **process, order, and meaning of the text**; ... Which thing only moved me to translate the new Testament. .. that they might see **the process, order, and meaning of the text...**”¹⁴

For Tyndale the “process of the text” is entirely christological:

The scriptures spring out of God, and flow unto Christ, and were given to lead us to Christ. Thou must therefore go along by the **scripture as by a line**, until thou come at Christ, which is the way’ s end and resting-place.¹⁵

William Tyndale’s younger colleague John Frith (1503-1533) who is said to have assisted him in translating the Bible and probably in answering Sir Thomas More’s allegations in his *Dialogue Concerning Heresies* (1529), uses the expressions “the process of the texts”, or, “the process of Scripture” also with conspicuous frequency in his *A Book ... Answering Unto M. More’s Letter, which he wrote Against the First, Little Treatise that John Frith Made*

¹¹ William Tyndale, *Obedience*, p. 30. The bold text is always my addition: TF.

¹² William Tyndale, *Obedience*, p. 158.

¹³ William Tyndale, *Obedience*, p.160.

¹⁴ William Tyndale, *Tyndale’s Old Testament*. In a modern spelling edition And with an introduction by David Daniell, (New Haven, Yale University Press, 1992), p. 4.

¹⁵ William Tyndale, *Obedience*, p. 169-70.

*Concerning The Sacrament of the Body and Blood of Christ*¹⁶, written in the Tower within a few months of his martyrdom.

When More charged that with his figurative interpretation of the words of the Last Supper Frith contradicted Luther, who had affirmed the real presence, Frith's reply was

Luther is not the prick that I run at, but the Scripture of God. I do neither affirm nor deny anything because Luther so saith, but because the Scripture of God doth so conclude and determine.¹⁷

The Swiss reformers, Frith says,

more purely expound Scripture, and that **the process of the text** doth more favour their sentence.¹⁸

For Frith both common sense and the authority of St Augustine dictate that Jesus' words concerning the Last Supper cannot be interpreted in the literal sense, but only in a figurative way :

but now, in our matter, the **process of Scripture** will not stand with the literal sense, as shall hereafter appear. And therefore necessity compelleth us to expound it figuratively, as doth St Austin and other holy doctors...¹⁹

If the literal sense is absurd, or, gross, the dynamic process of the text teaches us to take it figuratively:

because the literal sense is impossible, and cannot be true; **meaning that cannot stand with the process of scripture** but that other texts do of necessity constrain me to construe it spiritually²⁰.

I say that this gross imagination **may not stand with the process of Scripture** which is received, as it shall appear by certain texts...²¹

¹⁶ John Frith, *A boke made by Iohn Frith prisoner in the tower of London answeringe vnto M. Mores lettur which he wrote agenst the first litle treatyse that Iohn Frith made concerninge the sacramente of the body and bloude of, christ vnto which boke are added in the ende the articles of his examinacion before the bishoppes ... for which Iohn Frith was condempned a[n]d after bur[n]et ... the fourth daye of Iuli. Anno. 1533., [Imprinted at Monster [i.e. Antwerp] : Anno 1533 (really London, 1533). A modern version edition is by N. T. Wright (ed.), *The Work of John Frith*, Oxford, Sutton Courtenay Press, 1978. 318-455.*

¹⁷ Frith in Wright, p. 341.

¹⁸ Frith in Wright, p.342.

¹⁹ Frith in Wright, p. 352.

²⁰ Frith in Wright, p. 383.

²¹ Frith in Wright, p. 391.

3. Tyndale's and Frith's "Process of the Text" in a Patristic, Reformation and Modern Literary Context

Tyndale's idea of the "process of the text" is analogous to the idea of the "scope" used by the Athanasius of Alexandria and by the famous Reformation theologian Matthias Flacius Illyricus. Athanasius said:

Now the scope and character of Holy Scripture, as we have often said, is this, it contains a double account of the Saviour; that he was ever God, and is the Son, being the Father's Word and radiance and wisdom; and that afterwards for us he took flesh of a Virgin, Mary Bearer of God, and was made man. And this scope is to be found throughout inspired Scripture, as the Lord himself has said, 'Search the Scriptures, for they are which testify of me.'²²

One of the hermeneutical rules of Matthias Flacius Illyricus' (1520-1575) monumental *Clavis Scripturae* is that the literal sense was to be disclosed "by the scope, purpose, or intention of the whole book". "Scope" was meant to express how the part of a book interrelated, how they corresponded to the perspective of the total work. The Reformers' use of "scope", said Gerald T. Sheppard, is not an idiosyncrasy inspired by the Greek Fathers, but reflects a wide-ranging, text-oriented proposal common to a perception of textuality of Scripture during the post-Reformation period in Europe, England and New England".²³

This implies that by means of the "scope" the *sensus litteralis* is being expanded: the scope is the figural dimension of the literal sense. For William Perkins and for other Reformers, both the proper and figural expositions belong to the literal sense, which he called "the full sense of the Holy Ghost".²⁴

Tyndale acknowledged the existence of allegories within Scripture, but he was keen to emphasise that these allegories always serve the literal meaning.

How different is this type of allegory is from the one which is imposed upon the text while the literal is taken away. Tyndale complains that the Pope took away the literal sense, locked it up with his traditions and the four senses of scripture. Tyndale mocks the tropological sense as "chopological" and says that both tropological and anagogical are ultimately allegorical. When Tyndale uses "allegorical" modern literary criticism would, in most cases, use "metaphorical". He defines allegory as "strange speaking and borrowed speech".²⁵

²² Quoted by Vasil Mihoc, "Basic Principles of Orthodox Hermeneutics", in Moises Mayordomo (ed.), *Die prägende Kraft der Texte. Hermeneutik und Wirkungsgeschichte des Neuen Testaments (Ein Symposium zu Ehren von Ulrich Luz)*, Suttgart, Verlag Katholisches Bibelwerk GmbH, 2005, p. 60.

²³ Sheppard, Gerald T. , "Between Reformation and Modern Commentary: the Reception of the Scope of Biblical Books", in William Perkins, *A Commentary on Galatians*, ed G. T. Sheppard, New York, The Pilgrim Press, 1989, p. LXIV.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p.LXI.

²⁵ William Tyndale, *Obedience*, p. 156.

Neverthelater, the scripture useth proverbs, similitude, riddles, or allegories, as all other speeches do; but that which the proverb, similitude, riddle, or allegory signifieth, is ever the literal sense, which thou must seek out diligently: as in the English we borrow words and sentences of one thing, and apply them unto another, and give them new significations.²⁶

Tyndale recognizes that the last Book of the Bible, the Book of Revelation is highly metaphorical book and we have difficulty of finding its literal sense.

The apocalypse, or revelations of John, are allegories whose literal sense is hard to find in many places.²⁷

Tyndale, not unlike Luther, came to reject the four senses of Scripture and claimed that the letter and the spirit cannot be separated from one another. For Luther the literal meaning was basically the only meaning, but his interest was not exclusively in the *sensus litteralis*, as in the case of Lyra and the rabbinic exegesis, but in the *sensus litteralis propheticus* and therefore, his interpretation of the Psalms was christological. Luther did not separate the letter and the spirit as if the spiritual sense were ontologically a higher one.

For Luther the spirit is concealed in the letter, the exegete must draw it out from the letter. Thus he wrote: “The Spirit turns into the letter, but the letter must in its turn constantly become its spirit again.”²⁸ Luther believed in the primacy of a “spiritual understanding” and the “spiritual meaning” of the Bible, but this has nothing to do with the allegorical sense or the spiritual meaning of the Quadriga. Luther’s concept of spiritual understanding was, rather, the recognition that man understands the proclamation of God in faith with the help of the Holy Spirit. One can discern the spirit as distinct from the letter only in an attitude of humility as God also humbled himself in human body, even to the scandal of the cross. Only with the help of the spirit can man understand that God hides himself in his revelation and reveals himself in his hiddenness.

Tyndale, like Luther, recognized that the spirit is not to be sought outside of the letter but within.

God is a Spirit, and all his words are spiritual. His literal sense is spiritual, and all his words are spiritual. When thou readest (Matt. i.), “She shall bear a son, and thou shalt call his name Jesus; for he shall save his people from their sins:” this literal sense is spiritual, and everlasting life unto as many as believe it...all God’s words are spiritual, if thou have eyes of God to see the right meaning of the text, and whereunto the scripture pertaineth, and the final end and cause thereof.²⁹

At the end of my paper, let me turn to modern textual theory to show how modern Tyndale’s view is.

For modern critics, the text is not an objectivation of an idea but it has a life of its own. Paul Ricoeur in his study “What is a Text?” elaborates this idea. In the actualization of the text, he says, reading becomes like speech. Interpretation should appropriate not the intention

²⁶ William Tyndale, *Obedience*, p. 156.

²⁷ William Tyndale, *Obedience*, p.157.

²⁸ Gerhard Ebeling, *Luther. An Introduction to His Thought* trans. R.A. Wilson. London: Collins, 1972, p. 99.

²⁹ William Tyndale, *Obedience*, p. 162.

of the author but the intention of the text. The essence of Ricoeur's new theory of interpretation is that the text itself has intention: the text speaks, the text orientates our thought. Therefore interpretation is not an act on the text but of the text.³⁰ Appropriation is the recovery of what is at work, in labour, in the text. Reading is only resaying what the text says by itself, it is an act in which the destiny of the text is 'fulfilled'. Therefore it is more proper to speak about "textual intention" rather than "authorial intention".

On the other hand the literary critic Northrop Frye said in his *The Great Code* (1982) "one of the central issues of the present book [is] the nature of 'literal' meaning".³¹ This literal meaning, he says, is warranted by the "shape" of the Bible when read it as a unity of narrative and imagery.

the primary and literal meaning of the Bible... is its centripetal or poetic meaning... This primary meaning... arises simply from the interconnection of words, is the metaphorical meaning...³²

So just as Tyndale said that the literal sense is the spiritual sense, Frye asserted that the literal sense is the metaphorical sense.

To describe the effect of reading on meaning, Frye has adopted Dante's term of "polysemous" meaning. This expression does not imply many different meanings, nor does it contradict the primacy of the literal meaning. The Reformers' and Tyndale's formula that "no passage is to be interpreted in more than one sense" remains unchallenged. Frye describes what he means by this term as follows:

One of the commonest experiences in reading is the sense of further discoveries to be made within the same structure of words. The feeling is approximately 'there is more to be got out of this', or we may say... that every time we read it we get something new out of it. This 'something new' is not necessarily something we have overlooked before, but may come rather from a new context in our experience...³³

Commenting on Dante's four senses Frye writes:

What is implied here is a single process growing in subtlety and comprehensiveness, not different senses, but different intensities or wider contexts of a continuous sense, unfolding like a plant out of a seed...³⁴

³⁰ Ricoeur, Paul, "What is a Text?", in David Klemm (ed.) *Hermeneutical Inquiry* Vol. I. Scholars Press, (Atlanta, Georgia, Scholars Press, 1986), pp. 253-246. Quotation, p. 241.

³¹ Northrop Frye, *The Great Code. The Bible and Literature*, (London, Routledge, 1982), p.45.

³² Northrop Frye, *The Great Code*, p. 61-2.

³³ Northrop Frye, *The Great Code*, p. 220.

³⁴ Northrop Frye, *The Great Code*, p. 221.

Conclusion

William Tyndale's and John Frith's idea of the dynamism and openness of the literal sense and their idea of the "process of the text" is quite unique terminology in English which, according to my knowledge, has no direct equivalence in Latin or German. This category, so familiar to us in the age of word-processors, conforms not only to the hermeneutics of the church Fathers and the Reformers but also to Paul Ricoeur's and Northrop Frye's views on textuality. All these scholars were keen on preserving the integrity of the literal sense ("not different senses") and they are also able to avoid the trap of historicists or intentionalists who wanted to fix the meaning in an external, historical or biographical reality. What is common in their theories is that meaning is not conceived as something static or fixed entity but rather as a continuous, unfolding process, "unfolding like a plant out of a seed". That is the reason we find that Tyndale's and Frith's ideas of "the process of the text" strikingly modern.
