

What Does It Mean?: Puritans and (Biblical) Interpretation

Welcome to the lecture, “What Does It Mean?: Puritans and (Biblical) Interpretation.” Have you needed to interpret words before? Of course, we all do! Whether it is an email at work, a letter from a friend, words someone has said at the grocery store, or another situation, we all have needed to interpret and make sense of what someone has said. We develop a version of what was communicated that makes sense to us. Have you needed to interpret a specific text? Maybe it was a poem that you read for school or a book you are reading outside of school; it could even be a religious text. How do you know what exactly is being said through that text; how do you decide how to respond to others’ interpretations; and how do you know if your interpretation is “right,” or if there even is a “right” interpretation? In this lecture, I will discuss the New England Puritans’ ideas about interpretation, but specifically how they interpreted the Bible. I focus on the Bible because this was a core text that they were interested in. The learning goals are for you to be able to explain why the Holy Spirit played a prominent role in interpretation; explain the role of the minister in interpretation; and identify a version of the Bible that a minister might have used. Finally, this lecture relies greatly on Lisa Gordis’ book *Opening Scripture* and draws on several of her sources; I’ve cited where I do this in the lecture.

The first point I want to make about Puritan interpretation is that the Holy Spirit was supposed to be crucial in helping people to interpret and understand the Bible passages they read. Many Puritans thought the Holy Spirit gave understanding and illumination. If you’re not familiar with Christianity you may be wondering who the Holy Spirit is. The Holy Spirit is part of the Trinity. He is supposed to be the same being as God and Jesus, the other two elements of the Trinity, but also distinct from them. In the book of John (specifically John 14) the Holy Spirit is described as an “advocate” and the Holy Spirit is referred to as “he,” not “it” so this is partly why the Holy Spirit is described as the third person in the Trinity, and not just a force.

Two of the most prominent guidebooks for New England preachers state the crucial role of the Holy Spirit for understanding the Bible. The first one is *The Faithfull Shepheard* (1607) by Richard Bernard, an English Puritan. In this book, he mentions how the Holy Spirit will add on to one’s own thoughts in order to help one explain the Bible to others. He speaks specifically about how the Holy Spirit helps ministers, describing how listening to the Holy Spirit is a crucial quality for them: “[First] is a quicke apprehension, either in premeditation, or els in publicke deliverie: thereby to take what the Spirit of God presently doth offer to our minds. The holy Ghost forsakes not his owne worke, neither faileth to assist a painfull Muinister, but even in his preparation is with him; and helps by affording much in the verie speaking not before thought of...” (Bernard qtd in Gordis 82). Bernard shows that one of the key ways to understand and preach about scripture is to listen to what the Holy Spirit says.

The second guidebook is William Perkins’ *The Arte of Prophecyng*. Perkins uses a metaphor from John Calvin in which one is actually *unable* to understand the Bible without the Holy Spirit: “Indeed, the Word of God is like the sun, shining upon all those to whom it is proclaimed, but with no effect among the blind. Now, all of us are blind by nature in this respect. Accordingly, it cannot penetrate into our minds unless the Spirit, as the inner teacher, through his illumination makes entry for it” (qtd in Gordis 23). According to Perkins and Calvin, the Holy Spirit is the one who opens people’s eyes to see the Bible for what it really is. The Bible in the metaphor is already “light,” but just having the light is not sufficient for people, because their eyes are closed to it. According to Perkins there are two layers of blindness: not being able to see in the dark, which the Bible remedies, and not being able to see when one’s eyes are closed,

which the Holy Spirit remedies. People needed to be unblinded in order to see the light, and ultimately to use the light to see other things. It is this connection with the third person of the Trinity that is seen to be crucial to unlocking the Bible—to understanding and interpreting it. Perkins also describes the Holy Spirit as allowing people to hear the voice of God in understanding the scriptures—if God is the author of the scriptures, then what better way to understand them than to have access to the original source. Perkins writes, “The elect having the spirit of God ...could discern the voice of Christ speaking in the scriptures” (Gordis 23). The elect are those who are saved—they can understand the author’s, or God’s, original meaning through the Holy Spirit.

The second point I want to make about Puritan interpretation is that interpretation involved awareness of textual history. Many Puritans examined multiple versions of a text, in this case multiple versions of the Bible, in order to make their interpretations. They took into account the multiple forms and multiple origins of the text of the Bible in their analysis. Ministers looked at the original Greek and Latin and used different translations of Bible passages—sometimes they made their own translations of the Hebrew and Greek and referred to those translations as well as contemporary translations in English (Gordis 26). They also used different versions of the Bible. This includes the Geneva version which was popular during the Reformation, as well as the Authorized Version of 1611, which we also know as the King James version. The Geneva version had commentaries which the reader could look at. Its commentaries also focused on the topic of one’s own salvation and did not focus as much on doctrinal controversies. Sometimes ministers drew on both the Geneva and the Authorized versions in order to make their point. Ministers used Bible quotations that mixed different translations and versions. Since some of them relied on their memory to preach, what they quoted happened to mix these different versions (Gordis 26). Gordis uses evidence like this to make her own point that the text of scripture was seen as more dynamic, more generative, more “open,” in early New England, than we might think.

Ministers discussed whether it was better to have one translation of the Bible or several. One person, John Cotton, wrote that it could be valuable for ministers to use their own translation skills in order to examine the translations that they read to the congregation (Gordis 26). Ministers might have used different versions of the Bible in order to make their own idiosyncratic points. For example, one scholar suggests that the Puritans became more interested in the Authorized 1611 version as they sought to build a model society, because the Authorized Version was very well accepted by scholars and other people (Stout qtd in Gordis 25). Also, John Winthrop might have used different translations in his famous sermon *A Modell of Christian Charitie* in order to better convey some of the points that he had developed (Stout qtd in Gordis 25). It seems that Puritan ministers drew from a variety of versions and translations in order to make their interpretations.

The final point I want to make about Puritan interpretation is that interpretations from ministers and other teaching figures were often presented as arising from the text itself. These interpretations were supposed to be less invasive for one’s own thinking. William Perkins, whom I mentioned earlier, discusses this in his preaching manual. He says that ministers should avoid showing the audience the skill and knowledge that they use in interpreting the Bible. He writes, “...the Minister may, yea and must privately use at his libertie the artes, philosophie, and varietie of reading, whilst he is in framing his sermon: but he ought in publike to conceale all these from the people, and not to make the least ostentation. *Artis etiam est celare Artem; it is also a point of art to conceale art*” (Perkins 133). Perkins says that knowledge of different scholarly areas is

important for understanding the Bible; that the minister actually should be drawing upon his knowledge of these areas in order to explain the Bible in his sermon. However, he also says that the minister was supposed to not reveal that he was drawing on the knowledge that he had amassed. This was partly in order to make sure that ministers did not show off. He makes another point, too: “it is also a point of art to conceale art.” This meant that sermons were actually a form of art—but that they posed as something real and original. Perkins indicates that interpretations might be presented as interpretation-less—not as interpretations, but as the logical next step of understanding a text. Of course, the minister would know that what he was presenting was one interpretation, but he might not have wanted the audience to know that. Lisa Gordis has described the role of the preacher as one of “self-effacement” (31)

One example of concealing one’s own interpretation is the practice of collation. This is a technique in which Bible verses on the same topic are gathered together for the purposes of comparing what they say. For example, one might cite six different Bible verses all about joy. Using this technique allowed the text to point back on itself so that the interpretation might seem to arise naturally from examining other passages in the Bible. However, ministers still had to practice a little caution around collation. Richard Bernard advised caution around excessive collation because it could be seen as showing off. Bernard describes how excessive collation could reveal “pride the inventor, to publish the excellencie of memorie, seeking praise from Gods gift and abusing his natural worke...” (qtd in Gordis 28-9). If preachers used this technique, they still had to use it more discreetly.

It wasn’t just that preachers weren’t supposed to show off. They were also supposed to have precisely a secondary or assistive role because God had to be the primary guide for the Puritans. The preacher could not become crucial for understanding the text. John Calvin says to ministers, “God, in ascribing to himself illumination of mind and renewal of heart, warns that it is sacrilege for man to claim any part of either for himself” (Gordis 13). Preachers could not propose a monopoly on interpretation, nor could they take on the role of the one who helped someone come to a good interpretation--the Holy Spirit had this place.

So I’ve just made some points about the significant role of the Holy Spirit; attention to different versions of the Bible; and the discreet presence of ministers. I’ll end by telling an interesting story of an interpretive conundrum that led to some tension within Puritan society. This is an example where actually, emphasizing the importance of the Holy Spirit too much seemed to have led to more independence for readers of the Bible than official authorities might have wanted. I’m referring to the case of Anne Hutchinson. You may have heard of her because of some of the controversy she caused. Hutchinson’s main claim was that some preachers in the colony were preaching a “covenant of works” and not a “covenant of grace.” In other words, she was criticizing some of these preachers and indicating that they were preaching false ideas. For Hutchinson, a covenant of works meant thinking that one’s justification before God was based upon evidence of one’s own good works and holiness. It meant that you could be saved because you had done enough good actions. However, what people were supposed to be preaching, and what was supposed to be at the core of faith, according to Hutchinson, was that one’s justification before God came only from one’s faith that God had given it through His grace. This was the “covenant of grace.” Hutchinson was brought to trial for what she said and she was eventually excommunicated from Puritan society.

The reason why there was so much outrage was in part based upon her boldness in interpreting the Bible. During the trial, part of the reason that she upset the authorities was that she claimed to have heard directly from God. This prompted some outrage. She said that she

knew that a false covenant was being preached the way that Abraham in the Bible knew that “it was God that bid him offer his son,” which is to say, hearing directly from God (*The Antinomian Controversy* 337). She described what she experienced as “an immediate revelation... by the voice of his own spirit to my soul” (337). This produced discomfort because of the boldness of its claim and because it seemed unsubstantiated.

However, in another way, it must have been completely expected (which Gordis and Michael Ditmore discuss). Ministers did trust their congregants to some degree to hear from God themselves and understand scripture. John Cotton, who was Anne Hutchinson’s pastor, describes the active role of the Holy Spirit in understanding God: “for the Spirit of God will speak Scripture to you: when he comes, he will not bring a new Gospel, and new Revelations; but he alwaies speaks in the Word of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, which is given unto us: therefore if any Spirit shall speak, and not according to the Word, it is but a delusion” (Gordis 170). The Holy Spirit is described as speaking directly to the listeners as they read the Bible themselves. Cotton says, “the Spirit of God will speak Scripture to you.” In the trial of Hutchinson, Cotton admits that revelation from God is possible: “...and though the word revelation be rare in common speech ... yet notwithstanding, being understood in the scripture sense I think they are not only lawful but such as Christians may receive and God bear witness to it in his word, and usually he doth express it in the ministry of the word and doth accompany it by his spirit, or else it is in the reading of the word in some chapter or verse...” (Gordis 172). Hutchinson believed her claims about the covenant of grace were supported by the Bible, and that that in turn was revealed to her by the Holy Spirit. While believing in the important role of the Holy Spirit for understanding the Bible was common and expected, it could also lead to interesting questions where two people’s interpretations differed: in this case Hutchinson’s and some other ministers’. How could that be resolved? One of the discussion questions is about Hutchinson, so you can write down your thoughts about this in the discussion forums.

In this lecture I have made three main points about interpreting texts, specifically the Bible, in Puritan New England. The first is that the reader must rely upon the Holy Spirit as the one who provides understanding and ultimately allows the reader to come to an interpretation of the text. Second, Puritan ministers drew upon several versions of the Bible in order to make an interpretation of it. Third, interpretations from authority figures like ministers were not presented as particularly significant or crucial, even though ministers carefully produced them. One way to remember the three points I have just made is by thinking of interpretation in Puritan New England as a three-part structure with particular roles for the reader, the human guide, and the text itself. While there was some wiggle room, if the listener or preacher fell out of their role this could lead to some conflict as in the case of Anne Hutchinson. The discussion questions for this lecture involve examining Anne Hutchinson’s words more and applying the Puritan framework around interpretation to a familiar situation in your life. I look forward to reading your answers in the discussion forum!

Discussion question 1: Read the following excerpt from the transcript of Anne Hutchinson’s trial and do a little more research on her life and the trial. What do you think her view on interpretation was? How is this similar and different from the general Puritan view that I presented in the lecture?

“*Mrs. H.* If you please to give me leave I shall give you the ground of what I know to be true. Being much troubled to see the falseness of the constitution of the church of England, I had like to have turned Separatist; whereupon I kept a day of solemn humiliation and pondering of the thing; this scripture was brought unto me—he that denies Jesus Christ to be come in the flesh is antichrist—This I considered of and in considering found that the papists did not deny him to be come in the flesh, nor we did not deny him—who then was antichrist? Was the Turk antichrist only? The Lord know that I could not open scripture; he must by his prophetic office open it unto me. So after that being unsatisfied in the thing, the Lord was pleased to bring this scripture out o the Hebrews. He that denies the testament denies the testator, and in this did open unto me and give me to see that those which did not teach the new covenant had the spirit of antichrist, and upon this he did discover the ministry unto me and ever since. I bless the Lord, he hath let me see which was the clear ministry and which the wrong. Since that time I confess I have been more choice and he hath let me to distinguish between the voice of my beloved and the voice of Moses, the voice of John Baptist and the voice of antichrist, for all those voices are spoken of in scripture. Now if you do condemn me for speaking what in my conscience I know to be truth I must commit myself unto the Lord.

Mr. Nowell How do you know that that was the spirit?

Mrs. H. How did Abraham know that it was God that bid him offer his son, being a breach of the sixth commandment?

Dep Gov. By an immediate voice.

Mrs. H. So to me by an immediate revelation.

Dep Gov. How! an immediate revelation.

Mrs. H. By the voice of his own spirit to my soul. I will give you another scripture, Jeremiah 46:27-28—out of which the Lord showed me what he would do for me and the rest of his servants—But after he was pleased to reveal himself to me I did presently like Abraham run to Hagar...”

“The Examination of Mrs. Anne Hutchinson at the Court at Newtown.” 1767, *The Antinomian controversy, 1636-1638*, edited by David D. Hall, Wesleyan University Press, 1968. Pgs 336-7.

Discussion question 2: Imagine if you used the interpretive method described here in a class in school. This could be an English class, a History class, a science class, or another class. It could be applied to any text in the class—a poem, a treatise, a textbook, and so forth. Who might be in the position of the “minister” and would there be an analogue for the Holy Spirit? What would you find effective and ineffective about this method of interpretation? How do you think the teacher of your class would respond?

Additional Reading and Works Cited

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