EARLY CHRISTIAN INTERPRETATION OF THE JEWISH SCRIPTURES: PRECURSOR TO MODERN HISTORICAL CRITICISM?

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Abstract. This essay explores C. F. D. Moule's intriguing suggestion that early Christian interpretation of Scripture, especially the use of promise-fulfillment and typology as hermeneutical approaches, anticipated some aspects of the modern historical-critical method. Included is a discussion of the metaphorical use of "flat" (two-dimensional) and "round" (three-dimensional) to characterize ways of reading Scripture. Attention is given to two ancient authors—Philo of Alexandria and Ptolemy's *Epistle to Flora*—both of whom exemplify three-dimensional approaches to Scripture interpretation, although in different ways.

Keywords: C. F. D. Moule, promise-fulfillment, typology, Philo of Alexandria, Ptolemy, *Epistle to Flora*, Scripture interpretation, dimensionality in Scripture, "flat," "round" views of Scripture.

Of the many remarkable insights offered by C. F. D. Moule in his ground-breaking book *The Birth of the New Testament*, none is more intriguing than his suggestion that early Christian interpretation of the Jewish Scriptures foreshadows, and, in a certain sense, initiates historical criticism as it emerged and developed in the modern period.[1] This essay explores this claim and how it fits into Moule's overall understanding of how the New Testament writings originated, especially in relation to his understanding of Jewish methods of interpreting the Bible that were both prior to and contemporary with emergent Christian interpretations of the Old Testament.[2]

[1] C. F. D. MOULE, *The Birth of the New Testament*, BNTC (London: Adam & Charles Black, 1962; 2nd edition, with minor revisions, 1966; 3rd edition, revised and rewritten, 1981).

[2] In exploring this aspect of the early Christian use of the Jewish Scriptures, I wish to honor the scholarly career of Prof. Dr. Karl-Wilhelm Niebuhr, with whom I have worked over the years in the Eastern European Liaison Committee of The Society of New Testament Studies. He has brought energetic, creative leadership to this initiative, and he has done so while carrying out his professorial duties at the University of Jena. His numerous publications relating to Second Temple Judaism have explored important aspects of Jewish hermeneutics, and many of these essays are now available in his collection of essays *Tora und Weisheit: Studien zur frühjüdischen Literatur*, WUNT 1/466 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2021).

In the first edition of *Birth*, in his discussion of "The Use of the Jewish Scriptures," which he treats as the second stage in which "The Church Explains Itself" (Ch. 4), Moule rehearses how Scripture was interpreted in pre-Christian Judaism,[3] by Jesus himself,[4] and finally by Jesus's earliest followers.[5] Acknowledging that NT writers often employed "verbal play and literalism" when interpreting the OT, Moule insists that a way of interpreting Scripture emerged among early Christians that can be characterized as follows: "This new use has been described as a use of scripture 'in the round', in contrast to its use—for instance by Philo—as a flat, two-dimensional area."[6] With this metaphor, Moule describes a way of interpreting Scripture in which a reader sees the entirety of Scripture as a collection of "divine pronouncements," each of equal value (and authority), each functioning like an oracle or as part of an oracle. This way of viewing Scripture enables and encourages interpreters to derive meaning or an application from a text even when the words are "intractable and unpromising." Moule finds these interpretive practices especially in the rabbis and Philo.

Moule concedes that this way of reading Scripture can be found in the NT, but insists that it does not reflect what is truly distinctive about early Christian interpretation. He writes:

> But this is not the distinctively New Testament use of scripture. Whatever New Testament specimens there may be of rabbinic and Philonian interpretations, these are not the most characteristic. What marks the New Testament use as new is precisely this treatment of scripture "in the round", as a three-dimensional entity—indeed, one ought to say four-dimensional, for time is a very important factor. The most characteristic New Testament use of scripture is "modern" in that it treats the Old Testament as a *record* of revelation—as a historical narrative of God's dealings with his people, to be listened to as a whole and learnt from as a continuous story. There is a world of difference between this and the use of scripture as a divining-medium.[7]

He observes further, "And the reason why the Christians began thus to use scripture 'historically' (as we should say) was that they had actually found in Jesus of Nazareth the climax of the long story of God's dealings with his people."[8]

Moule spells out this latter claim by rehearsing the ways in which Jesus repristinated the numerous individual roles one finds in the OT such as "anointed king, anointed priest, prophet and sage"—all representative figures—but in which

[3] MOULE, *Birth* (1966), 58–62.

[4] Ibid., 62–67.

[5] Ibid., 67–71.

[6] Ibid., 67; and 67 n. 2, citing C. H. DODD, *The Old Testament in the New* (The Ethel M. Wood Lecture for 1952); and idem, *According to the Scriptures* (1952).

[7] Ibid., 68.

[8] Ibid.

Jesus also was understood—and experienced—as a corporate figure symbolizing "the ideal people of God." Thus "upon Jesus converged the whole history of Israel in the past, and from him deployed the whole future of the People of God. It was the coherent organizing of all this into a single inclusive personality that made a completely new thing of Old Testament exegesis."[9] This unusual convergence of images from Israel's Scriptures, illustrated and confirmed by various passages used by early Christian interpreters, formed the body of *testimonia* that eventually saw their way into the NT writings. In one sense, this process of Scripture interpretation is traceable to Jesus himself, to his own use of Scripture to clarify his identity and mission, but equally, and perhaps more, important was the role that Jesus's own personality played:

> [Although] . . . Jesus' own expositions no doubt set a precious example and began a lasting tradition, it was this living person even more than his remembered words that conditioned its course. To have lived responsively through the events of the ministry, death, and resurrection was to have gained a completely new angle of approach to scripture: or, to change the figure, it meant viewing the map of scripture for the first time as a genuinely three-dimensional relief map illuminated centrally by a brilliant light.[10]

Moule's use of the metaphors "two-dimensional" and "three-dimensional" to distinguish between different construals, or even different paradigms, of Scripture continues in the thoroughly "revised and rewritten" third edition of *Birth*. Here, in his discussion of pre-Christian Judaism, Moule takes a slightly different tack, explaining how Jews, especially the rabbis, conceived of Scripture as a single, unified whole:

> It appears that the basis of all methods was an assumption alien to modern critical scholarship, namely, that the Torah (and other scriptures also, in their degree) constituted a divine means of revelation in the sense that it might be treated as a kind of oracle—not historically and, as it were, three-dimensionally, but as a kind of two-dimensional flat surface, from any part of which equally authoritative words might be drawn."[11]

One of the major changes in the third edition of *Birth* is Moule's identification of five different modes or devices used by pre-Christian Jews in interpreting the OT: (1) direct, simple application in which moral instruction is given in a straightforward manner so that readers/hearers experience "God's voice" addressing them directly; (2) *pēsher* exegesis, in which words or a message from an earlier context is "contemporized" in order to be applied to the interpreter's own situation; (3) prediction, in which an

9 Ibid., 69–70.

10 Ibid., 70.

11 MOULE, *Birth* (1981), 75.

OT text explicitly foretells an event that will occur in the near or distant future; (4) allegory, which especially typified Alexandrian exegesis, most notably Philo, though also practiced at Qumran; and (5) etymology, or "etymological conceits," in which a certain meaning is deduced from how a word is spelled or from its "root meaning," or some other aspect of its usage.[12] Each of these methods is illustrated with specific examples, especially from Qumran, but also from Philo. The latter four devices illustrate how, in the long history of pre-Christian Judaism, a biblical text can be the starting point for interpretive embellishment and serve simply as a vehicle through which new meaning is derived from an old text. Moule calls this a "vehicular use" of Scripture.[13] Reviewing the five devices, he observes that in all except the first (direct application), "no attention is paid to the original meaning or to historical perspective. The whole is treated in the flat, two-dimensional way already referred to."[14]

Another change in the third edition is Moule's explanation of how each of these five devices, sometimes blending with each other, can be found in the New Testament.[15] After reviewing in rich detail some of the ways in which Christian interpreters employed each of the five modes of Jewish interpretation rehearsed earlier, Moule notes that "the sheer arbitrariness and the flat, 'two-dimensional' character of such methods were in no way repudiated by Christians."[16] "It is easy enough," he writes, "to find in the New Testament the old, 'two-dimensional', arbitrary uses of scripture, in which words originally referring to something quite different are simply commandeered to serve purely as vehicles for a conviction or message of which the authority (of whatever sort it may be) is derived from somewhere else."[17]

A major aspect of Moule's exposition is to contrast early Christian forms of interpreting the Jewish Scriptures with those known at Qumran. He observes that both communities can practice "vehicular" interpretation in which some word or phrase from an OT text such as Isa 40:3 or Hab 2:4 can be taken out of context and simply appropriated in order to explain some aspect of either community's beliefs. While both groups can be described as eschatological communities who saw themselves as living in the "last days," convinced that the end of the world is near, one of the main differences, Moule insists, is how each community regarded its leader—the Teacher of Righteousness and Jesus Christ respectively. While the former was revered by the Qumran community, he did not function as an interpretive lens through which his followers read Scripture in the same way that Jesus Christ did within early Christian exegesis of the OT. For Christians, it was "their experience of

12 Ibid., 77–80.

13 Ibid., 86–87.

14 Ibid., 80.

15 Ibid., 81–84.

16 Ibid., 84.

17 Ibid., 85–86.

Christ," both the historical Jesus and the risen Lord, or what might be called the "Christ factor" (my term), that was the determinative element shaping Christian interpretation of the OT.[18] What especially characterized Christian ways of reading the OT was:

> the discovery that, in a historical and "three-dimensional" way, Jesus actually implemented and achieved in his person, and represented the culmination of, that relation between God and [humanity] which is the basic theme of scripture. This genuinely historical and "three-dimensional" approach to scripture—the lines of divine-human relations converging on Jesus—which has only become deliberate and conscious in "modern" thought, is, nevertheless, implicit in ancient Christianity in typology, when typology means drawing analogies and tracing connexions between Jesus Christ with his Church, and figures in the Old Testament representing relations between the divine and the human.[19]

The use of typology to illustrate a distinctive feature of early Christian interpretation is another innovation of the third edition.[20] Elaborating on the Christian use of typology, Moule envisions a form of insightful exposition that "[bears] witness to a real and unforced correspondence between the great types and patterns of relationship and their fulfillment and consummation in Christ, both as an individual (God's beloved Son) and as an inclusive and 'summary' figure (the Son, Israel, whom God called out of Egypt)."[21] When this broader, more comprehensive perspective of Christian exegesis of the OT is fully understood, it is "something that the modern historian, whose approach is 'three-dimensional' not 'two-dimensional', can recognize as valid and supremely significant and quite distinctive."[22]

Reflecting further on the importance of typology, Moule writes: "Christian uses of scripture . . . although starting from common ground, created in the end a new thing. 'Historical typology came into existence with Christendom.'"[23]

[18] Ibid., 86–87.

[19] Ibid., 87.

[20] In the 1966 edition, in his discussion of later Alexandrian and Antiochian schools of exegesis, Moule explains the latter approach as "not so much in rejecting other senses as in preferring 'typology,' which recognizes the importance of historical events as such, to allegory, which would reduce everything to timeless truths" (p. 163).

[21] MOULE, *Birth* (1981), 87, noting Matt 2:15; 3:17.

[22] Ibid., 88.

[23] Ibid., 89. Here Moule is quoting G. W. H. LAMPE and K. J. WOOLLCOMBE, eds., *Essays on Typology* (London: SCM, 1957), which, he reports, is cited by D. Moody SMITH, "The Use of the Old Testament in the New," in J. M. EFIRD, ed., *The Use of the Old Testament in the New and Other Essays*, FS W. F. Stinespring (Durham, NC: Duke University Press), 37n93. On Harnack's claim that typological exegesis originated with Paul, see Joseph A. FITZMYER, "The Use of Explicit Old Testament Quotations in Qumran Literature and in the New Testament," *NTS* 7

> [What was new in the] Christian phenomenon was the convergence of the Old Testament images and patterns on Jesus. That in him, as both an individual and one who transcended the individual, these patterns became coherent meant that the history of Israel converged on him and that from him deployed the future of the people of God. It was the coherent organizing of all this into a single inclusive figure, the crown of Israel and the ultimate Adam, that made a completely new thing out of Jewish exegesis. And whatever antecedents there were in the uses of scripture by Jesus himself, it was his living person even more than his remembered words that conditioned its course. To have lived responsively through the events of his ministry, death, and resurrection was to have gained a completely new angle of approach to scripture: or, to change the figure, it meant viewing the map of scripture for the first time as a genuinely three-dimensional relief map illuminated centrally by a brilliant light.[24]

Dimensionality in Scripture

The spatial metaphors "two-dimensional" and "three-dimensional" are used to characterize two fundamentally different ways of viewing Scripture. The former envisions Scripture as a single genre—the Bible understood as the Word of God, or, at least, throughout its pages mediating the Word of God, and thus uniformly divine revelation. So conceived, it is read as though every statement in Scripture is of equal value and authority. What is said in one place is on the same level as what is said in another place. This construal of Scripture is said to typify what one finds in rabbinic interpretation and in Philo of Alexandria.

The three-dimensional view, by contrast, still conceives of Scripture as a single whole, but just as a topographical map or model displays variation in height within a given terrain, so does Scripture contain statements of different literary quality and theological insight. Some of its statements reveal penetrating insight into human nature and the reality of God, while others are problematic in their depiction of human relationships and behavior, along with how they portray God. Scripture thus reflects highs and lows in both style and content. It has peaks and valleys—some parts reflecting profound religious experience or probing theological insight (the Psalter, Second Isaiah), other parts prosaic, even superficial and humanly demeaning. Such awareness requires readers to differentiate between the various claims of Scripture, some unimaginably compelling, others highly problematic, even repulsive. Reading Scripture this way means that it is viewed "in the round" as opposed to being read "on the flat."

(1961): 297–333, esp. 332; repr. in idem, *Essays on the Semitic Background of the New Testament* (London: Chapman, 1970; repr., Missoula, MT: Scholars Press, 1974), 3–58. E. Earle ELLIS, *Paul's Use of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1957), 90–92, 129, finds typological exegesis present in pre-Pauline strata of the NT.

[24] MOULE, *Birth* (1981), 89–90. See n. 10 above.

The suggestion that a fourth dimension—time—can also be taken into account can imply two things: temporal linearity within the story unfolded in Scripture, and with respect to its composition.

In the first instance, rather than being seen simply as a collection of writings, even if these can be arranged into sub-groups according to genre, Scripture is read as a continuous narrative in which the story of God's people Israel is rehearsed sequentially from the time of creation until the post-exilic period. As such, Scripture is a "record of revelation" that is envisioned as moving through time and in which distinct chronological periods can be delineated—patriarchs, Egyptian captivity, exodus, wilderness, conquest, judges, kings, etc.

In the second sense, Scripture can be seen as having been composed—written and edited—at different times or during different periods of Israel's history. Some parts are read as early, others as late, that is, from the standpoint of their time of composition. This can be reflected in the titles given to different sections, some writings attributed to Moses, others to David—both claims implying different time periods in which the writings originated.

While the latter aspect became especially prominent in the modern stages of historical criticism, the former—temporal linearity within the OT narrative—is the primary focus of Moule's argument. What distinguishes early Christian interpretation of the OT is its pervasive awareness of an ongoing, continuing story that can be conceived in periods or stages, and within which the relationship between God and humanity/Israel is depicted cyclically. Through the ups and downs of this sometimes turbulent, sometimes calm, even constructive, relationship readers of the OT can detect what God intends humanity to be—what the ideal divine-human relationship should be like.

Two aspects of this linear way of reading Scripture are especially important and prominent within early Christian interpretive practice: the notion of fulfillment and the use of typology.

Fulfillment

Although Qumran research was still in its early stages when the first edition of *Birth* was published (1962), Moule drew heavily on the scholarship then available in his analysis of early Christian use of the OT. The profoundly transformative experience of Jesus's resurrection convinced Christians that "they were living in the midst of a divine fulfillment of all the hopes of Israel."[25] In support of this claim, Moule notes:

> It is very striking, that, with all the parallels between the New Testament use of scripture and its use in the Qumran writings and in other Jewish literature, the note of *fulfilment*

[25] MOULE, *Birth* (1966), 57.

seems to be peculiar to the New Testament. *CD* vii.10–11 is not far off, but מלא appears not to occur in this connexion.[26]

If fulfilment is a distinctive, or even prominent, element in NT interpretation of the OT, its presence heightens the sense of temporal linearity by sharpening the difference between past and present while simultaneously connecting them conceptually as part of an ongoing historical continuum. This is the force of Moule's claim that Christians "began thus to use scripture 'historically' (as we should say)."[27] His reformulation in the third edition is even more emphatic: it is "this genuinely historical and 'three-dimensional' approach to scripture" that distinguishes early Christian use of Scripture from its Jewish counterparts.[28] Although Moule does not elaborate on how he is using "historical" and "three-dimensional," he appears to be emphasizing, first, the notion of temporal linearity—that Scripture can be read as a "record of revelation" in which the continuing, ongoing story of Israel is narrated. By his use of "three-dimensional," he does not appear to be thinking of the "highs and lows" of literary and theological quality within the OT, but rather signaling his insistence that the OT story as

[26] Ibid., 57n1, citing FITZMYER, "Use of Explicit Old Testament Quotations," 297–305 (see n. 23 above); similarly, *Birth* (1966), 61n1, noting "the absence of the idea of 'fulfilment'" in the Qumran writings. These assertions are repeated in *Birth* (1981), 74n1, which now includes reference to Moule's SNTS Presidential Address in 1967: "Fulfillment-Words in the New Testament: Use and Abuse," *NTS* 14 (1967–1968): 293–320. In this article, he examines in detail the Hebrew and Greek terminology relating to the overall theme of "promise-fulfilment." Through this linguistic analysis, he mainly sharpens the point originally expressed in *Birth* (1966): "to locate that in the faith of the New Testament which gives unique and distinctive appropriateness to the use of promise and fulfilment to describe the 'Christ-event' in its relation to the entire design of God" ("Fulfillment-Words," 295). He also acknowledges his indebtedness to Fitzmyer's 1961 article, which noted the absence of fulfilment phrases in the Qumran writings that "first set me thinking along these lines" (304). Another impetus was an anonymous review of *Birth* (1962) in *The Times Literary Supplement* (1963), 220, in which the reviewer questioned Moule's argument about the distinctive understanding of fulfilment in the NT. According to the reviewer, "It is at least arguable . . . that though the object of applied prophecy in the New Testament is more specific than in the Qumran literature, the application of prophecy itself is in the latter just as much concerned with fulfillment." See Julio TREBOLLE BARRERA, "The Interpretation of the OT in the Qumran Writings," in idem, *The Jewish Bible and the Christian Bible: An Introduction to the History of the Bible*, trans. Wilfred G. E. WATSON (Leiden: Brill, 1998), 452–59. Barrera adduces 1QpHab 7:3–8 as an example of applying an OT text to the Teacher of Righteousness; he also sees "fulfillment" within Qumran exegesis comparable to what later occurs in the early Christian community: "The Qumran community called itself 'Israel,' meaning that the history, promises, and institutions of the OT had their fulfillment in their community, just as later Christians also presented themselves as the 'true Israel,'" (455); similarly, 1QH 3:6–18, in which the prophecy of Immanuel is applied to the Qumran community; 1QH 6:25–27; 7:8–9, applying the cornerstone image (Isa 28:16) to the community in a manner comparable to the NT (455).

[27] MOULE, *Birth* (1966), 68.

[28] MOULE, *Birth* (1981), 87.

reinterpreted by Christians points forward to, and culminates in, the person of Jesus Christ and his Church as a living community.

In what sense has this way of reading Scripture "only become deliberate and conscious in 'modern' thought"?[29] Presumably Moule is thinking of the modern understanding of history growing out of the Enlightenment in which interpreters distinguish between "the story being narrated in the text" and the story (or history) that can be constructed through critical inquiry in which the biblical text is used, along with other literary and non-literary evidence such as archaeology, as evidence for historical reconstruction.

Typology

As already noted, in the third edition of *Birth*, typology is adduced as another indication of historical, "three-dimensional" consciousness. Rather than seeing certain OT expectations or "promises," variously conceived, coming to fulfilment in NT persons or events, especially those relating to Jesus, typology envisions some perceived connection, perhaps best understood as an analogical relationship, between OT and NT persons or events. Fulfilment imagines a promise or some statement of future expectation articulated in a specific text as the beginning point of an arc or trajectory that reaches forward to another, usually distant, point in the future, which is seen as the target, or realization, of the promise. Typology, by contrast, envisions no such one-directional arc, but instead imagines a moment in the OT story—a person or event—that is captured with a certain characterization, which is then set beside another person or moment in the NT story. The main interpretive move is comparative not chronological. It is as though the first moment—the type—and the second moment—the antitype—are separated by a colon, as if to say: "x is to y" in some plausible sense. Not only is y thought about in relation to x, but in this form of comparison the reverse is true. The interpreter can also think about x in relation to y. It is a form of reciprocal comparison that trades on analogical imagination—seeing each moment, type and antitype, in their relation to each other. Even if the claim that biblical typology is a Christian innovation is contested, its hermeneutical function in various strata of the NT is indisputable.

The thrust of Moule's claim is that typology captures a dimension of Scripture interpretation that anticipates, even foreshadows, modern historical consciousness and thereby attests to a "genuinely historical and 'three-dimensional' approach to scripture" that is reflected in the NT. As with fulfilment, typology is predicated on a clearly perceived difference between "then" and "now," which is axiomatic within modern historical criticism. As such, it is another expression of temporal linearity.

[29] Ibid.

Philo's Conception of Scripture: Flat or Round?

While it is true that Philo, in both the Exposition of the Law and the Allegorical Commentary, frequently treats Scripture as a divine oracle in which each part is of equal value and authority, two-dimensional as it were, there are clear indications that he views Scripture as a textured composition that should be seen as multi-dimensional.[30]

This becomes evident in several passages. In *Mos.* 2.45–48, Scripture is referred to as "the sacred books" (αἱ ἱερώταται βίβλοι, 45), which are said to consist of two parts: the historical (τὸ ἱστορικὸν μέρος) and "commands and prohibitions" (τὰς προστάξεις καὶ ἀπαγορεύσεις). The historical section of Scripture also has two parts, one treating the creation of the world (περὶ τῆς τοῦ κόσμου γενέσεως), the other treating individual people (τὸ γενεαλογικόν). The latter does not appear to be a reference to the genealogies of Gen 5, 10–11, but to persons like Noah and his descendants, Abraham and his descendants. In particular, Philo observes that such persons are portrayed in order to show how the righteous are rewarded and the wicked punished. Although Philo does not specify which people he has in mind, he is probably thinking of all the named individuals treated in Gen 4–50.

In *Decal.* 175–176 Philo distinguishes between the ten oracles "which God gave forth Himself as well befitted His holiness" and the special laws delivered by Moses:

> For it was in accordance with His nature that the pronouncements in which the special laws were summed up should be given by Him in His own person, but the particular laws by the mouth of the most perfect of the prophets whom He selected for his merits and having filled him with the divine spirit (ἐνθέου πνεύματος), chose him to be the interpreter of His sacred utterances.[31]

One of the most revealing passages is *Mos.* 2.187–191 in which Philo differentiates between three types of inspired utterances. He acknowledges that "all things written in the sacred books are oracles delivered through Moses," but that some are "more especially his." Within the latter, three sub-types are delineated:

[30] See Francis T. FALLON, "The Law in Philo and Ptolemy: A Note on the *Letter to Flora*," *VC* 30 (1976): 45–51.

[31] PHILO, *Decal.* 175. Trans. F. H. COLSON, LCL 7:93. Cf. *Decal.* 18, in which Philo distinguishes between those oracles "God judged fit to deliver in His own person alone without employing any other," and those given "through His prophet Moses whom He chose as of all men the best suited to be the revealer of verities." In *Decal.* 175, Moses's role is portrayed as that of interpreter of God's sacred utterances; cf. *Spec.* 2.104. In other places, Philo emphasizes that some aspect of legislation is attributed specifically to Moses's initiative or his special insight: *Spec.* 1.262, 344; 2.58, 64; 3.24, 47, 91, 117. References given in FALLON, "Law in Philo," 50n15.

(1) Some "divine utterances" are "spoken by God in His own Person with His prophet for interpreter." These are "absolutely and entirely signs of the divine excellencies, graciousness, and beneficence, by which [God] incites all [humanity] to noble conduct, and particularly the nation of His worshippers, for whom He opens up the road which leads to happiness."[32]
(2) Some "divine utterances" occur through question and answer; these occur through "combination and partnership; the prophet asks questions of God about matters on which he has been seeking knowledge, and God replies and instructs him."[33] The examples Philo cites include the following: (1) Lev 24:10–16, treated in §§193–208; (2) Num 15:32–36, treated in §§213–220; (3) Num 9:1–14, treated in §§222–232; and (4) Num 27:1–11, treated in §§234–245.
(3) Others "are spoken by Moses in his own person, when possessed by God and carried away out of himself."[34] This group of utterances "are assigned to the lawgiver himself: God has given to him of His own power of foreknowledge and by this he will reveal future events."[35] Philo's examples include: (1) Exod 14, treated in §§247–257; (2) Exod 16:4–30, treated in §§258–269; (3) Exod 32, treated in §§270–274; (4) Num 16, treated in §§275–287; and (5) Deut 33–34, treated in §§288–291.

The first group, Philo insists, cannot be discussed because they "are too great to be lauded by human lips; scarcely indeed could heaven and the world and the whole existing universe worthily sing their praises. Besides, they are delivered through an interpreter, and interpretation and prophecy are not the same thing."[36]

The second group can be discussed, although Philo admits that his discussion of this group will be interwoven with the third group, in which the speaker is motivated to speak through divine inspiration or possession "in virtue of which he is chiefly and in the strict sense considered a prophet."[37]

While many aspects of these fascinating passages remain obscure, it becomes clear that Philo envisions Scripture, the Mosaic legislation, at least, as having different levels. The ten oracles of the Decalogue are in a category unto themselves: they are utterances by God that are to be understood as having been delivered by God without any intermediary—they come directly from God, and God alone. The

[32] PHILO, *Mos.* 2.189.
[33] PHILO, *Mos.* 2.190.
[34] PHILO, *Mos.* 2.188.
[35] PHILO, *Mos.* 2.190.
[36] PHILO, *Mos.* 2.191.
[37] Ibid.

special laws, by contrast, are in another category, but even this category must be conceived at different levels. Some are divine utterances in which Moses functions as God's interpreter—they are God's words, but in a different category from the Decalogue, and yet they need explanation. This group of utterances are inescapably collaborative. They fuse God's voice with that of Moses, God's interpreter.

Then come passages in which divine revelation occurs through question and answer sessions between Moses and God. A question of interpretation within a given life situation arises, which prompts Moses to convene with God, seeking explanation, and in which God answers with a divine response. The four examples given illustrate how human inquiry can interact with divine response, thereby producing a clearly defined set of divine utterances.

Closely related, though still conceived as a separate category, are those instances in which Moses experiences divine, prophetic ecstasy. These utterances can be understood as "Mosaic" in a distinct sense, for although God may initiate the moment of inspired ecstasy, the formulation of the prophetic utterance comes from Moses himself.[38]

Another example, although in a different category, is Philo's exposition of Gen 1–3 in *De opificio mundi*. Rather than reading this account of the creation "on the flat," or two-dimensionally, Philo recognizes that not one, but two accounts of creation are given. Accordingly, this requires him to find some explanation, which he does by drawing on the Platonic tradition, Middle Platonism in particular. The first account of creation Philo interprets as the creation of the noumenal world, the second of the phenomenal world. While Philo insists that time is created as part of God's original creative process, it is nevertheless clear that Philo reads the two Genesis accounts as sequential, the creation of the phenomenal world following that of the noumenal world. Given Philo's account, these have to be characterized as two separate creations that occur in different moments of time. Whether Philo's reading of Gen 1–3 reflects his "historical" perspective depends on what one means by "historical." But at the very least, it seems to envision some form of temporal linearity.

Ptolemy's Epistle to Flora

Although Ptolemy's *Epistle to Flora* represents a later perspective, well after the NT period and more than a century after Philo, it provides yet another example

[38] John BARTON, *The Nature of Biblical Criticism* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2007), 135, sees similar differentiation in ancient Jewish canonical divisions: "The Torah is thought of as direct revelation through Moses, the Prophets as the result of a somewhat lower level of inspiration, and the Writings, according to some, as primarily human works." He also notes the threefold canonical division in JOSEPHUS, *Ag.Ap.* 1.37–43.

of how the Old Testament was read within one stream of early Christianity.[39] It reflects the outlook of Valentinian Gnosticism, since Ptolemy is remembered as a major exponent of this stream of Gnostic thought. It was written in Greek and conforms to the genre of a philosophical epistle in which a teacher offers instruction to a pupil. In this case, the recipient is Flora, a Christian woman, to whom Ptolemy writes, giving simple, elementary instruction. The provenance is not known but Rome is a reasonable guess, since Ptolemy's sphere of activity and influence was in the West.[40]

The topic of this epistle is the "law established by Moses" (33.3.1), i.e., the Pentateuch. Ptolemy begins by asserting that the law was not established "by the perfect God and Father" (33.3.4), nor is it attributable to "the adversary," the devil (33.3.5). Ptolemy's stated aim is to explain to Flora "what sort of law the law is" and "which legislator established it" (33.3.8). He also indicates that his exposition will draw on Jesus's own remarks—"our Savior's words"—which he regards as a definitive source of authority (33.3.8).

One of Ptolemy's major claims relates to different levels of authorship in the Pentateuch: "the law contained in the Pentateuch of Moses was not established by a single author, I mean not by God alone: rather, there are certain of its commandments that were established by human beings as well" (33.4.1). The core assertion here is the multiple authorship of the Pentateuch.

Specifically, Ptolemy differentiates between three strands within the Pentateuch. "Our Savior's words teach us that the Pentateuch divides into three parts" (33.4.1): (1) "one division belongs to God himself and his legislations"; (2) "<another division> belongs to Moses—indeed, Moses ordained certain of the commandments not as God himself ordained through them, rather based upon his own thoughts about the matter"; and (3) "a third division belongs to the elders (or, presbyters) of the people, <who> likewise in the beginning must have inserted certain of their own commandments" (33.4.2). Ptolemy insists that this three-fold schematization can be derived from Jesus himself: "you will now learn how all this can be demonstrated from the Savior's words" (33.4.3).

Ptolemy's first argument, that the legislation of God must be distinguished from the legislation of Moses, is based on his analysis of Jesus's teaching about divorce in Matt 19. He observes that Jesus distinguishes between what God originally

[39] For this analysis, I am dependent on the introduction and translation of Bentley LAYTON, *The Gnostic Scriptures: A New Translation with Annotations and Introductions*, ABRL (New York: Doubleday, 1987), 306–15. I am using Layton's translation although I capitalize "God" and "Savior." Also see G. QUISPEL, ed., *Ptolémée, Lettre à Flora: Analyse, texte critique, traduction, commentaire et index grec.* 2nd ed. Sources chrétiennes, no. 24 *bis.* (Paris: Cerf, 1966); Adolf HARNACK, *The Letter of Ptolemaeus to Flora*, Materials for the use of theological lecturers and students 9 (Bonn: A. Marcus and E. Weber/Cambridge: Deighton Bell, 1904).

[40] The text is preserved in EPIPHANIUS, *Against Heresies* 33.3.1–33.7.10, composed ca. 375.

intended—that marriage should be permanent and indissoluble—and what Moses allowed—divorce owing to human "hard-heartedness." The implication is clear: the "law of God" can be distinguished from the "law of Moses."

Ptolemy concludes: "Here [Jesus] shows that <the> law of God is one thing, forbidding a woman to be put asunder from her husband; while the law of Moses is another, permitting the couple to be put asunder because of hard-heartedness. And so, accordingly, Moses ordains contrary to what God ordains; for <separating> is contrary to not separating" (33.4.5–6).

In 33.4.6–10, Ptolemy explains Moses's thinking: in certain situations, the marriage is so conflicted that it jeopardizes the welfare of the husband (and by implication the wife as well). Accordingly, Moses relaxes God's original intention of the indissolubility of marriage, and does so for humane reasons. His reasoning: if the couple cannot keep God's law, they can at least keep Moses's law. Thus we find Moses "ordaining laws contrary to those of God" (33.4.10). "This law (allowing divorce) is of Moses himself and is distinct from God's" (33.4.10).

A third part of the Mosaic legislation, Ptolemy argues, is attributable to "the elders" (33.4.11). Here he argues from Matt 15, which reports the dispute between Jesus and the Pharisees and scribes in which he charges them with breaking God's commandment "for the sake of your traditions." Ptolemy reports the story in order to distinguish between a command attributable to God himself—"For God spoke: 'Honor your father and your mother, that it may be well with you'" (Matt 15:4; Exod 20:12; Deut 5:16; cf. Exod 21:17; Lev 20:9), and the tradition of the elders, which allowed children to divert money intended for parental care to other uses. From Jesus's statement, "for the sake of your tradition . . . you have made void the law of God," Ptolemy concludes (not very convincingly) that part of the Mosaic legislation can be traceable to the traditions of the elders.

His conclusion relating to the threefold authorship of the Pentateuch is stated in 33.4.14: "Thus it has been clearly shown from these passages that, as a whole, the law is divided into three parts. For we have found in it legislations belonging to Moses himself, to the elders, and to God himself. Moreover, the analysis of the law as a whole, as we have divided it here, has made clear which part of it is genuine."

Ptolemy also asserts a further level of differentiation within God's own law (33.5.1). Three subdivisions are posited:

(1) Pure, undiluted legislation "not interwoven with evil," which the Savior came not to abolish but to fulfil (Matt 5:17). Since its high expectations had never been fully met, it "did not have perfection." It is thus "pure but imperfect" (33.5.1). In view here is the Decalogue, which includes both positive and negative commands—what to do, and what to avoid (33.5.3). Although this legislation sets lofty expectations, thus is "pure" in its ideals, it remained unfulfilled until the Savior came.
(2) That part of Mosaic legislation which is "interwoven with the inferior and with injustice," and which "the Savior abolished as being incongruous with

his own nature" (33.5.1; Matt 5:38–41). In view is the *lex talionis* (Lev 24:17, 20) in which the principle of "an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth" sanctions murder as a response to murder, thereby violating the Decalogue and other scriptural prohibitions (Exod 20:13; 21:12; Lev 24:17). Even if *lex talionis* has a compelling logic that reflects justice in one sense, it nevertheless must be regarded as "a deviation from the pure law because of the weakness of those to whom it was ordained: yet it is incongruous with the nature and goodness of the Father of the entirety" (i.e., the Father of the whole universe; 33.5.5).

(3) A third part of the Mosaic legislation is "symbolic and allegorical" (or "prefigurative"), which relates to "the superior, spiritual realm" (33.5.2). In view are "offerings, circumcision, the Sabbath, fasting, Passover, the Feast of the Unleavened Bread, and the like" (33.5.8). With the Savior's arrival, the significance (and true meaning) of these practices changed. "As to their meaning in the visible realm and their physical accomplishment they were abolished; but as to their spiritual meaning they were elevated, with the words remaining the same but the subject matter being altered" (33.5.9). In what sense did "the Savior [change] (the referent of) this part from the perceptible, visible level to the spiritual, invisible one"? He commanded us to make offerings, but in the form of praise, prayer, and good deeds, not animals and incense; to circumcise our spiritual hearts rather than the physical foreskin; to observe Sabbath by suspending evil activity; and to fast by abstaining from evil. Through the Savior's teaching and example, his disciples learned to offer sacrifices, circumcise, keep the Sabbath, and fast in a spiritual sense (33.5.10–13).

Ptolemy summarizes his analysis in 33.6.1–4: The first part of the Mosaic legislation, the Decalogue, in which God's highest ideals are expressed, the Savior has not only reasserted but raised to an even higher level. Those parts such as the *lex talionis,* which reflect a certain form of justice but violate other, more basic moral norms, the Savior has abolished, substituting instead non-vindictive forms of behavior. And finally, religious practices regulating daily life and worship have been elevated to a new level, giving way to higher, more spiritual, forms of behavior that nurture genuine, internal piety rather than emphasize ritual behavior and regimen.

Although Ptolemy has relied heavily on the Gospels in his analysis of the Mosaic legislation, he also finds warrant for these distinctions in the Pauline letters (Rom 7:12; 1 Cor 5:7; cf. 33.5.15; Eph 2:15).

As to the God who stands behind the Mosaic legislation, Ptolemy envisions three possibilities: the perfect God, the God of the universe; the craftsman, or Demiurge, who made the universe and everything in it; and the adversary, the devil. Of the three, the Demiurge is the better choice since he stands midway or at midpoint between the two essences of Good and Evil. Accordingly, he is best described as

intermediate (33.7.3). If the God of all is in essence good, and the devil essentially evil, the intermediate God can be characterized as neither good nor evil, but just—simply just (33.7.5).[41]

Although there are substantial differences between Ptolemy's conception of the Jewish Scriptures and that of Philo, both reflect a clear willingness to differentiate levels of composition or authorship. Whether God or Moses is seen as the author, based on what one finds within the Pentateuch itself, it is necessary to make these distinctions. Logic requires it. In both cases, Scripture is being viewed "three-dimensionally," if that means not as an oracle, "on the flat," but as containing statements that have different levels of authority. In both Philo and Ptolemy, the oracles of the Decalogue are in a unique category. They are pure, pristine divine oracles, a distinction that Jesus respects, and whose moral demands he even intensifies.

Philo's threefold classification of Moses's inspired utterances (*Mos.* 2.187–191), in which he posits different gradations within the Pentateuch, parallels to some extent Ptolemy's notion of multiple authorship (some parts attributable to God Himself, others to Moses and the elders respectively) and his further threefold qualitative differentiation within the legislation itself. Although Ptolemy's schematization is more elaborate than Philo's, both construals of the Jewish Scriptures belong on the same conceptual continuum. In each one, the reader is shown passages within the Pentateuch itself that are difficult to explain if they are read "on the flat" or two-dimensionally. The interpretive strategy offered by both Philo and Ptolemy involves some form of classification of Scriptural passages that can be understood as stratified levels that move from higher to lower levels.[42]

Some Summary Observations

This brief survey began with a rehearsal of Moule's analysis of the ways in which the Jewish Scriptures were interpreted by early Christians, especially as reflected in the New Testament. Two aspects of his analysis stood out. First, his contention that early Christian interpretation of Scripture, by virtue of the ways in which Jesus Christ, both the historical Jesus and the risen Lord, functioned as the hermeneutical fulcrum; and, from this, his insistence that Christian uses of the Jewish Scripture acquired a fullness, a form of three-dimensionality, both in terms

[41] See Frances M. YOUNG, *Biblical Exegesis and The Formation of Christian Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 127–28, who finds Ptolemy's distinctions already implicit in JUSTIN, *Dialogue with Trypho*.

[42] See Adela Y. COLLINS, *Mark*, Hermeneia (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2007), 466–67, on Mark 10:3–5, regarding the respective roles of God and Moses in originating and mediating divine revelation, and how this hermeneutical differentiation is reflected in Philo and Ptolemy's *Letter to Flora.* She also notes Steven D. FRAADE, "Moses and the Commandments: Can Hermeneutics, History, and Rhetoric Be Disentangled?" in Hindy NAJMAN and Judith H. NEWMAN, eds., *The Idea of Biblical Interpretation: Essays in Honor of James Kugel*, JSJSup 83 (Leiden: Brill, 2004), 399–422.

of their construal of Scripture as an ongoing "historical" narrative that not only continued but culminated with Christ, and with respect to the number and type of *testimonia* that were adduced to explain who Jesus is. The distinctive way in which fulfilment was understood by early Christians and their use of scriptural typology attest to this three-dimensional quality.

Second, his occasional and sometimes cryptic remarks that the early Christians forms of interpreting the Jewish Scriptures adumbrated, perhaps even initiated, modern ways of reading the Bible that are variously designated as "historical" and "critical." Just as early Christians saw the Jewish Scriptures three-dimensionally, so did post-Enlightenment, modern interpreters, albeit in different ways and to different degrees.

Moule's contention that Christian exegesis of the OT, compared with that of the rabbis and Philo, both of which he characterizes as being "two-dimensional" and "on the flat," is now seen to require some modification. While Philo's exegesis is often "two-dimensional," reflecting his tendency to identify words or motifs in Scripture that become the basis of elaborate allegorization, elsewhere in his tractates he proposes what, by any measure, must be regarded as a "three-dimensional" understanding of Scripture. Not only does he exhibit awareness of linear temporality within Scripture, that it contains a story that moves forward from creation until later stages in Israel's history, but he also sees a qualitative difference within various statements of Scripture. And what Philo saw as a necessary differentiation within Scripture, Ptolemy developed even more elaborately. But both Philo and Ptolemy were responding to the same set of sensibilities. They were convinced that not every statement of Scripture is equally cogent.

Moule's suggestions that within the New Testament and early Christianity there are indications of modern, critical sensibilities are insightful and compelling. His insistence that early Christians read the OT as a "record of revelation," not simply as a collection of divine oracles, captures an important dimension of early Christian exegesis. This can also be seen in other ways, for example, in the numerous passages in Matthew and Luke that "correct" Mark, whether grammatically or historically. Even the Lukan prologue implies that the Third Evangelist read his earlier sources critically, and this doubtlessly included earlier Gospel material.

Both Philo and Ptolemy anticipate modern explanations relating to the composition of the OT writings, e.g., the authorship of the Pentateuch or the prophetic writings, and in some ways the authorship of the NT writings. What Philo and Ptolemy saw in their reading of the Jewish Scriptures, modern biblical critics saw when they distinguished between different levels of authorship within Isaiah; or when they distinguished between the undisputed and the disputed Pauline letters.

Moule's analysis remains pertinent to biblical scholars in the twenty-first century, even though a gap of almost a half-century separates them. His finely grained analysis of Christian use of the OT in which he distinguishes at least five different devices or strategies for interpreting the text provides ample proof of disregard

for the original context and its rather obvious "literal" sense, and corresponding forced interpretations to make Scripture fit their own experience of Jesus. His respect for the complexities of early Christian interpretation as reflected throughout the NT, but especially in difficult writings such as Hebrews but other texts as well, renders his own analysis "critical" in the best sense.

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