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BIBLICAL INTERPRETATION AND FUNDAMENTALIST APOLOGETICS IN BRAZILIAN POLITICS

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Abstract: This text proposes to discuss the hermeneutical characteristics of fundamentalist apologetics related to Brazilian politics in the context of the last two electoral campaigns for the presidency of the Republic of Brazil. Such an undertaking, therefore, requires a brief analysis of the history of biblical interpretation over the centuries, as well as the emergence of Protestant hermeneutics and the development of biblical fundamentalism, as opposed to theological liberalism. This approach will demonstrate the fundamental aspects of the apologetic rhetoric of fundamentalism applied to the Brazilian political discourse. Finally, it is intended to illustrate a biblical hermeneutic alternative to fundamentalist apologetics, methodologically guided by contemporary literary studies of the Bible.

Keywords: The truth shall free you; Fundamentalist Apologetics; Biblical Interpretation; Brazilian Politics; Religious Hermeneutics.

INTRODUCTION

Since the start of the electoral process for the Presidency of the Republic in 2018 until the end of the presidential elections in 2022, a biblical quote has become a true political campaign slogan: “And you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free!” (John 8:32). When repeated to exhaustion, this quote, which in its original locus makes up an apologetic section about the mission and authority of Jesus, accommodated itself to the rhetoric in the electoral discourse. Such endeavor, therefore, is symptomatic of the methodological features that characterize the fundamentalist interpretation of biblical texts.

It is assumed that the fundamental beliefs of this fundamentalism, because of the deciphering of the biblical code, constitute themselves as the truth, which, in turn,

1 A more extensive version of this approach can be seen at BREY. *Filosofia e exegese bíblica*, pp. 71-96.

2 JOSEFO. *História dos Hebreus*, pp. 247-248.

crystallizes in a moral dogmatism, whose generalization corresponds to a work of salvation. As a result, a political-religious grip quickly develops involving the content of a moral agenda, reputed to be the deciphered truth of the biblical code and the mythical figure of the apologist of truth. Thus, the messiahship of the political defender of the truth revealed by the Word of God is legitimized.

Evoking the dignity of Christ in the gospels through a fortuitous hermeneutic application to legitimize the moral superiority of a candidate in opposition to others constitutes a characteristic feature of the exegetical features of biblical fundamentalism. The present article, however, does not intend to take this phenomenon as a mere coincidence; on the contrary, it is assumed that this process of biblical interpretation is the heir of certain hermeneutical paradigms historically developed throughout the extensive Christian tradition. Therefore, it is intended to verify the premises that give fundamentalist exegesis its current physiognomy in the history of biblical interpretation.

A BRIEF OVERVIEW OF BIBLICAL HERMENEUTICS THROUGHOUT HISTORY¹

As far back as one can go back in biblical interpretation, the dispute over the true application of biblical texts has already been the subject of countless debates. It is possible to envision this potential for interpretive diversity in the periods of composition and/or editing of the Old Testament texts. For example, from the period of exile onwards, when the socio-religious mentality of Ancient Israel, epically described in the ethnopoetic narratives of the Hebrew Bible, started to share space with the culture of the Sumerian and Babylonian gods.²

While the interaction between YHWH and his people, dramatically represented in the plot of Hebrew narratives, ended the understanding of all reality,³ the Sumerian-Babylonian deities interfered in human affairs only ad hoc, moreover, often with obscure motivations.⁴ This mythological strangeness added to the sociopolitical context. The Jewish nation, being exiled under foreign rule and no longer having a sovereign, even reconfigured its literary production when political and social issues of the new reality updated monarchical themes.⁵ However, it is more precisely in the Hellenic period that the rabbinical schools of biblical interpretation are established.⁶

With the flourishing of the era of Greek philosophical schools (323 BC – 33 BC), a period in which Hellenic greatly influenced biblical interpretation thought, rabbis such as Hillel and Shammai, for example, and their schools, established mediated interpretive currents, largely due to updated issues of the primitive ideological context of the sacred texts.⁷ During this period, the Rabbis were constantly impelled to answer: “How could an ancient text continue to function as law for the Jewish people?”⁸ This issue is symptomatic of the great paradigm shift of the religion of Ancient Israel, which had its understanding of the world based on its mythical ancestral narratives, towards a religious model that subverts the concrete experience into abstract

doctrinal apparatuses, which will give rise to today’s religiosities.⁹

In the context of New Testament authors, when they make direct statements based on allusions and/or mentioning or quoting the Old Testament, it must be assumed that their speech carries a range of meanings that expands the concepts extracted from their original locus.¹⁰ Although they frequently use the rabbinic methodology for interpreting the Old Testament texts,¹¹ It should be considered that the meaning of the term new, in the New Testament, implies a different theological reading of Judaism.¹² So, too, the Christians of the first centuries, in the face of the accommodation of their beliefs to the currents of philosophical thought of their time,¹³ Took the abstraction of Greek philosophy as the most crucial intellectual structure for which they could express their ideas.¹⁴

Augustine, through Neoplatonic categories, established the thought that the human intellect could deduce the doctrines of God, that is, the Christian principles, directly from the meaning of the words of the Bible.¹⁵ For him, the spiritual meaning of biblical texts is not hidden. It can be found through exegesis that, although allegorical, survives the comparison between texts that deal with the same theological issue.¹⁶ Although moving away from the allegorical aspect of Augustinian exegesis, the scholastic Thomas Aquinas, when evoking Aristotelian

3 PERSON Jr. *Biblical Historiography as Traditional History*, p. 73.

4 LAMBERT. *Ancient Near Eastern Studies: Mesopotamia*, p. 85.

5 GARBINI. *Hebrew Literature in the Persian Period*, pp. 180-188.

6 SCHIFFIMAN. *From Text to Tradition: A History of Second Temple & Rabbinic Judaism*, pp. 60-79.

7 KUGEL/GREER. *Early Biblical Interpretation*, pp. 67-72.

8 BRAY. *História da interpretação bíblica*, p. 55.

9 PORTUGAL. *Filosofia da religião*, pp. 216-219.

10 BEALE. *O uso do Antigo Testamento no Novo Testamento e suas implicações hermenêuticas*, p. 55.

11 BRAY. *História da teologia cristã*, p. 50.

12 DUNN. *New Testament Theology*, p. 700.

13 KELLY. *Patrística: origem e desenvolvimento das doutrinas centrais da fé cristã*, pp. 3-5.

14 BOEHRNER/GILSON. *História da filosofia cristã*, p. 11.

15 YARCHIN. *History of Biblical Interpretation*, pp. 61-62.

16 WANSBROUGH. *The Use and Abuse of the Bible: A Brief History of Biblical Interpretation*, pp. 86-87.

thought, stated that both the truths revealed in the natural sphere and the metaphysical ones are within reach of human perception, either using reason in the first case, whether by deduction and/or analogy, in the second instance.¹⁷ Since then, with great emphasis on the literal meaning of the words of the biblical text, exegesis has come to be regarded as a scientific process.¹⁸

BIBLICAL INTERPRETATION FROM THE PROTESTANT REFORMATION ONWARDS

In the period of the Protestant Reformation, however, under the strong influence of Renaissance Humanism, which distrusted medieval philosophy and preferred to re-read the philosophers of antiquity and build its intellectual foundation, Protestantism advocated a return to the sources of the Scriptures, Greek and Hebrew, in question the integrity of the Latin translations of the Catholic Church.¹⁹ Therefore, the proposition of SOLA SCRIPTURA that each person should have free and personal access to biblical texts, without interference from the clergy,²⁰ proclaimed that the people should possess the Bible in their language, to have direct access to Christ.²¹ However, from Luther's perspective on the indispensability of teaching the Gospel through doctrinal formulations,²² it can be said that the difference between Protestantism and Thomist scholasticism resides primarily in the issue of rejection of Catholic theological authority but maintains the same abstract

17 ALLEN/SPRINGSTED. *Filosofia para entender Teologia*, p. 136.

18 OCKER. *Scholastic Interpretation of the Bible*, pp. 254-259.

19 RUMMEL. *The Renaissance Humanists*, p. 280.

20 MATHESON. *The Language of the Common Folk*, pp. 260-267.

21 GEORGE. *Teologia dos Reformadores*, pp. 307-3154.

22 BRAY. *História da interpretação bíblica*, p. 199.

23 GILSON. *L'être et l'essence*, pp. 132-143.

24 LEGASPI. *The term "Enlightenment" and Biblical Interpretation*, p. 73.

25 FRAMPTON. *Spinoza and His Influence on Biblical Interpretation*, pp. 120-141.

26 YARCHIN. *History of Biblical Interpretation*, pp. 195-197.

27 BRAY. *História da interpretação bíblica*, pp. 221-224.

28 WELLHAUSEN. *Israelitische und Jüdische Geschichte*, pp. 1-9.

matrix of rationalization of thought, that is, it turns to the text with different theological premises, however, with the same theory of knowledge production: truth and essence.²³

The philosophical spirit of the Enlightenment, in turn, expanded the scientific rigor of biblical exegesis by assigning it the qualification of the method.²⁴ In response to the demands of the Spinoza method applied to the interpretation of the Bible, according to which there is a difference between the moral sense and the cosmology of biblical texts, it began to repudiate any interpretive method used to align biblical texts with religious dogmas.²⁵ Since, according to Spinoza, the reputation of the Catholic religion was at stake, mainly for using a literalist interpretation of biblical cosmology to condemn scientists to the stake, the esteem of biblical exegesis should be maintained by some method that proposed to identify, through a critical approach to the founding/originating historical context of the biblical texts, the moral meaning of the Word of God.²⁶

From then on, many theologians, especially those influenced by Hegelian philosophy, established *historical-critical methods* as the main academic approach to biblical texts.²⁷ Studies on the writing sources of biblical texts, based on historical and archaeological data, such as Julius Wellhausen's *documentary hypothesis*,²⁸ began gaining more prominence. Thus, this diachronic exegesis category, which proposed identifying the founding context (*Sitz im Leben*) of biblical texts, guided the

main academic centers in the last two hundred years.²⁹

However, when based on *critical-historical* investigations, biblical exegesis subverted the dialogue between the world of Scripture and the existential questions of contemporary humanity into an arid theological production about *documentary hypotheses*.³⁰ In the meantime, in the religious sphere, especially in North American Protestantism, a certain unwillingness to deal with more radical critical issues developed in parallel, resentful of the course of theological liberalism linked to *historical-critical exegesis*. Proposing to bridge the gap between higher academic criticism and the popular reading of the Bible, evangelical exegesis was developed on two fundamental pillars: (1) the meaning of the term *historical* diverges from *critical* understanding, being, therefore, reputed as historical (founding/originating context of the biblical text – *Sitz im Leben*) the very plot of the world narrated in the Scriptures; (2) the grammatical investigation of the original languages (Greek and Hebrew) constitutes an acceptable *method* to decipher the original meaning of the biblical text.³¹

This is because, due to the exegetical results achieved using *historical-critical methods*, *theological liberalism*, mainly of European origin, began to relativize the historicity of biblical accounts, thus challenging the traditional theological model based on the concept reputed as the *history of salvation*. The liberal reconstruction of the theological path, influenced by the Renaissance spirit, came to be feared by fundamentalist evangelicals as a deconstruction of orthodoxy.³² For this reason, any reading and/or biblical theology that relativizes the historicity of the facts narrated in the Bible should be considered

heresy since its assimilation could jeopardize the central *truths* of the evangelical Christian faith.

In this way, an element of faith becomes a methodological premise. That is, rejecting any *critical* approach to history, the plot of biblical narratives is attributed to the status of *Sitz im Leben* (founding/originating historical context) of the texts of the Bible. It is said, therefore, in this line of reasoning, that a scientific determination about the *Sitz im Leben* is methodologically possible, suppressing, however, the fact that the initial axiom is, at the same time, the very conclusion that constitutes the exegete's belief.

Such reasoning finds shelter in the conceptual displacement regarding SOLA SCRIPTURA since, in its initial proposition, the idea was to demonstrate the Protestant theological emancipation of the papal magisterium, reiterating the autonomy of the believer in freely investigating the Scriptures. However, what is happening now is the transformation of SOLA SCRIPTURA into a closed hermeneutic circuit; that is, it ceased to be a papal protest domination to become an interpretative presupposition, according to which the *essence of truth*, whether historical or theological-philosophical, is found in the literality of the biblical text. An idea that, paradoxically, evokes certain propositions of both Augustine and Thomas Aquinas concerning their understanding of the theory of knowledge.

Regarding the linguistic aspect, the same subversion of SOLA SCRIPTURA can be easily verified. This is because, from this epistemological mutation of the term, it is equated as follows: the Bible is the Word of God, the word is language, language is a code, and code needs to be deciphered. Therefore, it

29 SIMIAN-YOFRE. *Diacronia: I Metodi Storico-Critici*, pp. 79-81.

30 GARCIA LÓPEZ. *Pentateuco: introducción a la lectura de los cinco primeros libros de la Biblia*, pp. 71-75.

31 TOLAR. *The Grammatical-Historical Method*, pp. 21-38.

32 OLSON. *História da teologia cristã: 2000 anos de tradições e reformas*, pp. 577-586.

is thought that exegesis is the deciphering of the code, which, in turn, is the biblical languages (Greek and Hebrew). In this way, grammatical analysis is the scientific *method* through which it is possible to access the *truth*, the only *truth* expressed in the syntactic-semantic meaning of the textual sentences of the Bible. Again, paradoxically, this directly evokes the Thomist and Augustinian conception that, in the first instance, it was intended to invalidate.

From the perspective of the Aristotelian-Platonic theory of knowledge, according to which the exercise of reason can reach the truth, it is believed that the grammatical decipherment of the biblical text provides access to the pure *truth* of the Word of God. This *truth*, in turn, is expressed in the form of the evangelical doctrines. Opposing them constitutes heresy, against which the Bible authorizes the apologist to fight.

As already mentioned, such logic has the premise that language is a code (abstract objectivism); that is, language only transmits the sender's thought, having the receiver as a passive subject and without any interference from the environment. In this way, the biblical message is a code that, when grammatically deciphered, reveals the author's original thought: the *truth*. Unlike symbols, codes do not admit multiple meanings. They are rigid. Therefore, from this perspective, the Word of God has a single truth that cannot be relativized. By the way, *word = truth*.

Hence an interpretative methodology that could be called *biblical dictionary exegesis*, whose main operation is investigating the semantic field of words (Greek and Hebrew). Many biblical interpreters of this line develop long studies about the theology of the expression x or y as if they were codes that contain a specific theological *truth*. Therefore, the apologetic clashes in this fundamentalist

arena revolve around the correct decipherment of the *coded language* of the Bible, which, consequently, implies having or not having the *truth*.

Thus, the fundamental beliefs of this evangelicalism, because of deciphering the *biblical code*, are constituted as the *truth*, which, in turn, crystallizes in a moral dogmatism, whose propagation, as conceived in the context of medieval Catholicism, corresponds to a work of salvation.³³ Unsurprisingly, a political-religious adherence develops so quickly involving the content of a *moral agenda*, reputed as the deciphered *truth* of the *biblical code* and the *mythical figure* of the *apologist of truth*. Thus, the messiahship of the politician who defends the truth revealed by the Word of God is legitimized.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS: THE PROPOSAL OF AN ALTERNATIVE HERMENEUTICS

After recent advances in the philosophy of language, the phenomenon of language use is understood beyond syntactic-semantic issues; that is, philosophers have been concerned with the relations between the "language-mind-world."³⁴ It is a dialogic conception of language, that is, language as a form of interaction and producer of meanings. In this perspective, contrary to abstract objectivism, language has a founding character of reality and not a mere representation of it. In addition, it is conceived that it is through a mutual relationship between sender and receiver that meanings are constructed because, in verbal interaction, the sender acts on the receiver and reacts to his reactions.³⁵

Faced with such advances in the field of language, it is recognized the need, within the scope of biblical exegesis, to exceed the

33 ALVES. *Protestantismo e Repressão*, pp. 269-284.

34 MARQUES/GARCÍA-CARPINTERO. *Filosofia da linguagem*, p. 285.

35 KUSCHEL. „Vielleicht hält Gott sich einige Dichter“ – *Literarisch-theologische Poträts*, p. 391.

semantic sphere towards the narrative form.³⁶ Because “the Bible may even be other things than a literary work, but without a doubt, it is also a literary work.”³⁷ Therefore, from the perspective of the literary configuration of the biblical texts, the narrated message is inseparable from the form (aesthetic) and the content.³⁸ Thus, biblical narratives impress their listener-readers with their literary art feature,³⁹ Since, from their composition process, biblical narratives were conceived with a view to public performance, where “the very act of unrolling the papyrus corresponded in a certain way to formed by unwinding the reel of a movie projector.”⁴⁰

Thus, as a methodology of biblical interpretation, *narrative analysis* invites the listener-reader to immerse himself in the *narrated world*, proposing, firstly, to understand it so that the corresponding and updated meanings can be verified in the *reader's world*.⁴¹ From the perspective that “biblical narratives sleep until the reader awakens them from their sleep,”⁴² The reader's active contribution is assumed so that the biblical message becomes what it is; that is, the teaching (truth /theology/doctrine) only becomes a precept from the moment the listener-reader accepts the invitation to immerse himself in the *narrated world* and allow himself to interact with it. The aesthetic fruition of this interaction has the potential to express the highest theological level that no religion in history has reached in isolation,⁴³ For if the biblical narratives were configured to be artistically experienced, theological

reflection could come from this encounter between the listener-reader. And the wisdom that flows from the text.

Unlike abstract objectivism, which assumes that biblical language is a code that contains conceptual *truths*, *narrative analysis* respects the concrete character of Scripture. Biblical narratives are not doctrinal treatises but sophisticated literature whose ability to create *metaphors* is unquestioned.⁴⁴ One of the main characteristics of these *symbols* is that the possibilities of meanings emitted by them are inexhaustible and/or unavoidable by mere human reason.

36 RICOEUR. *L'herméneutique biblique*, p. 154.

37 FRYE. *The Educated Imagination*, p. 97.

38 BERLIN. *Reading Biblical Poetry*, pp. 2184-2191.

39 MARGUERAT/BOURQUIN. *Pour Lire les Récits Bibliques: initiation à l'analyse narrative*, p. 32.

40 ALTER. *The Art of Biblical Narrative*, p. 114.

41 BAR-EFRAT. *Narrative Art in the Bible*, p. 197.

42 SKA. *Sincronia: L'Analisi Narrativa*, p. 139.

43 FLUSSER. *Vom Stand der Dinge: Eine kleine Philosophie des Designs*, pp. 26-31.

44 RICOEUR. *Stellung und Funktion der Metapher in der biblischen Sprache*, pp. 45-70. Cf. RICOEUR. *La métaphore vive*, pp. 384-399.

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