

3. Developments and trajectories

To move further than our cautious first steps beyond the Bible (in Directions not Rules) we may take the idea of 'directions' further. It relates to a cluster of metaphors for reading the Bible faithfully while needing to go beyond the Bible.

Developments

I Howard Marshall ((
Iconic Evangelical scholar of the New Testament who published a series of lectures that in some ways looked back on his career, but even more looked towards the future: I. Howard Marshall, Kevin J. Vanhoozer, and Stanley E. Porter. *Beyond the Bible: Moving from Scripture to Theology*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2004.))
proposed that we notice the 'developments' in Scripture. ((
Ibid.
77.))

Marshall noted a number of features of biblical teaching:

1. There is **development**, there is some diversity of teaching on (a

number

of/all?) important issues and within this diversity we can discern greater 'maturity' in some texts than others.

2. Because

biblical teaching is always contextual (Marshall's word is 'occasional') there must be **questions which go beyond** the available scriptural teaching.

3. Revelation is

not found so much in small fragments of the Bible as in the whole.

Some texts may be **staging posts** to something greater.

4. There is

continuity. Not least we must affirm that the God of the Old Testament is the God of the New Testament.

5. The

developments are **principled**, changed circumstances e.g. old covenant to new, the liminal period soon after Jesus to the more established early church.

6. Further

development after the closing of the canon is inevitable. But they must show **continuity with Scripture and fit with the 'mind of Christ'**. E.g. the gospel may relativise some teachings that were for specific occasions.

7. *"In this*

way we affirm the ongoing supreme authority of

Scripture, but we recognize that Scripture needs interpretation and fresh application, both in our doctrine and in our practice.” ((Ibid. 78-79 number 7 is quoted, the others summarised. Much better than this brief approximate summary would be to read his third lecture, *ibid.* 55-80.))

Marshall gives the example of christology, 1 Cor 12:3 affirms the statement '*Jesus is lord*' as a test of orthodoxy. Such a test neatly distinguishes followers of Jesus from others. Except that as time passes the church's understanding of Christology develops in response to new errors, and in 1 John 4:2-3 the statement is rather '*Jesus Christ has come in the flesh*' because the error of docetism ((The belief that Jesus was God merely appearing to be human.)) is troubling the churches and so a new test statement is needed. In this case we have decided to retain both, because the 'development' is not a refining but rather a response to an additional need. And, of course, as new errors presented the church added and refined its christological touchstones further, until in 451 the Fourth Ecumenical Council at Chalcedon arrived at the more complex and sharp definition still in use today.

Trajectories



Marshall's presentation of 'development' that goes beyond Scripture, but is founded in Scripture and coherent with the 'mind of Christ,' strikes me as being quite similar to the language of 'trajectory' which also points to continuity and change. Marshall recognises that talk of 'development' is in danger of implying that what is newer is necessarily better, and makes a point of denying this. Trajectory language also courts this danger, but to compensate it strengthens the continuity and shared direction and aims of new and old.

The mind of Christ, Gentiles and the law

One of the clear and interesting ways in which the Bible exhibits such development or trajectories concerns the covenant law of four of the first five books of the Bible. The law with its over 600 commands was central to Jewish identity. As Gentiles began to confess their faith in Jesus, and to receive the Holy Spirit and baptism, the question of law became acute. With powerful guidance from God (Acts 10-11), there was heated debate (Gal 2:11-21) in which James' traditionalist Scriptural position was strongly attacked by Paul, not on Scriptural but theological grounds. He bases his argument on the claim that demanding Gentiles conform to the biblical laws is 'not acting consistently with the truth of the gospel'. (Gal 2:14) As a result a meeting of the most vociferous parties in Jerusalem (Acts 15) reached a conclusion that did not demand circumcision of Gentiles. Since circumcision was the sign of God's covenant with Abraham. (Gen 17:11) the minimal requirements that are laid on Gentile believers cohere with the 'covenant with Noah' (Gen 9:1-17) where the only requirement is dietary, not to eat blood. (cf. Gen 9:3-6 with Acts 15:20 which adds requirements to abstain *'from things polluted by idols and from fornication and from whatever has been strangled'*. (Act 15:20) ((Even this curtailed list may not have lasted long, in 1 Cor 8 Paul seems to be saying that food offered to idols was a matter of personal conviction and care for others, who might be offended or led astray, rather than a rule to be obeyed (but cf. perhaps 1 Cor 10:19-23).))

In the next post I plan to present a similarly over-simplified version of Vanhoozer's ideas of 'Performances and pilgrimages'.

2. Directions not Rules

One helpful way to step 'beyond the Bible' faithfully responds to the first issue we considered in the previous post. It is also hidden in how I presented the problem.

When moving from the message of a biblical passage for its intended recipients (the message back then) and its message for us we noticed the importance of identifying the theological idea or principle that that message expressed or on which it was based. In the examples concerned with charging interest in the previous post, perhaps we can take this idea of identifying the theological idea or principle a step further and mitigate our issue. What is the direction in which the biblical teaching was pointing? What was/were its goal(s)?

The 'bite'



Coin minted in Lydia, under the rule of Cyrus the Great to Darius I. Circa 545-520.

When considering Bible teaching on interest it is probably

helpful to know a little of the socio-economic background to lending and borrowing in the ancient world. In the period before money, ((Roughly from 600BC – conveniently about the time of the Babylonian exile.)) and even for some long time after, ‘interest’ in our modern sense (e.g. 5% per year) was not charged. Rather one ‘borrowed’ the item, and then repaid it after the agreed period with an added amount. This added amount was known as *neshek*. from a word meaning ‘bite’.

In normal lending between family and friends (or neighbours in the village) one does not expect such a ‘bite’ – though sometimes a token one is given, when I lend my chainsaw to a guy from church I am often happy to receive it back with the petrol tank full :)

In loaning larger amounts (or for loans that were not within a community relationship) the ‘bite’ could be large usually 20% per year. An amount that could easily drive a poor borrower into slavery.

The Bible passages seem to be addressing such ‘friendly’ or community lending, not the business of lending. So Ex 22:25 speaks of lending ‘to one of my people among you who is needy’, the situation in Lev 25:36 is setup in Lev 25:35 ‘If any of your kin fall into difficulty...’

The goal here seems to be to avoid profiting from helping someone who is disadvantaged. We can be far from sure that if Moses were delivering God’s laws for the 21stC he would say ‘Do not take interest’ as most translations render Lev 25:36, but for sure he would abject to profiting from others misfortunes.

But that's not 'going beyond the Bible!

At this point some may object that this is not 'going beyond the Bible, but merely identifying what the biblical text 'was really saying'. To them I'd say, notice what we have done, we have moved from 'Do not take interest ' (Lev 25:36) to 'do not profit from those who are needy'.

That may be a small step for someone, but it is a huge leap for humanity! Because it keeps God's word living and active today – and probably all my readers can think of examples in their town where people do profit from the needy. If you can't just examine the effect of your desire for lower prices in the supermarket on the people enslaved to make the Thai fishing industry 'competitive'!

Nor does it solve all the difficulties

The other objection is that this approach only solves a small proportion of our needs. Of course this is true, but in something as necessary yet dangerous as 'going beyond the Bible' small steps are significant.

1. Do we need to go 'beyond the Bible'?

*It seems paradoxical to read scholars, who respect the Scriptures as the authority in matters of both faith and practice, talking about going 'beyond the Bible'. Yet in recent years a vibrant discussion has grown up around this expression. Major contributors include: I. Howard Marshall (longstanding British Evangelical New Testament specialist); Kevin J. Vanhoozer (doyen of US Evangelical writers on hermeneutics); and William J. Webb (Baptist pastor and New Testament scholar). ((See e.g. I. Howard Marshall, Kevin J. Vanhoozer, and Stanley E. Porter. *Beyond the Bible: Moving from Scripture to Theology*. Baker Academic, 2004; Gary T. Meadors, *Four Views on Moving Beyond the Bible to Theology*. Harper Collins, 2009 [contributions from Walter C. Kaiser; Daniel M. Doriani; Kevin J. Vanhoozer; William J. Webb].)) In this post we will explore why going 'beyond the Bible' is a necessary part of reading the Bible faithfully. Then in subsequent posts we will explore how this may be done, and how this evidently dangerous freedom may be properly restrained.*

Changed circumstances

Reading the Bible using the approach outlined in the first section of this material is sufficient for many everyday needs. It is certainly a good way to get faithfully from a Bible passage to a message/application for today. Yet even here there is often a need to go "beyond the Bible".

Often when we look to Scripture for guidance about complex moral, or social issues, even when the Bible addresses the issue we cannot make our application directly.

To consider why moving beyond the direct teachings of Scripture is necessary we will consider loaning money as an

example. The Bible teaches in several places about loaning to those in need. This teaching can be simply summarised in neat principles.

We should **loan what others need**, even if they may be unable to repay us (Proverbs 19:17; Luke 6:34-38; cf. Matthew 5:42); charging **interest is wrong** (Exodus 22:25; Leviticus 25:35-37; Deuteronomy 23:19-20 ((Though it is apparently OK to charge interest to those outside the community of God's people!)))

Now suppose for example that someone in your church needs to borrow money. ((Or perhaps 'wants to' borrow money, in a complex society it is difficult, except at the extremes, to distinguish needs from wants, with everyone judging cases differently. But let us assume "needs" for this example.)) They cannot get a bank loan because of previous poor credit history. You are retired, and living on your superannuation payments, supplemented by the earnings from your savings. What should you do?

The Bible teaching is clear and almost unequivocal. ((If you had only a little to supplement your basic superannuation you might be able to resist the claim on the grounds of your own poverty, but even this excuse involves stepping a little beyond the strict letter of the biblical texts, which envisage no excuses for someone who has the resources to lend.))

But, our situation is different from that in Moses' or Jesus' time. Then, there was no money ((They exchanged goods much of the time: "I'll give you 2Kg of my barley for that cup...", and for large-scale trade used silver weighed in scales.)) and even the needs and the loans were usually made in "kind". Someone borrowed a sack of grain to feed their family, and repaid it when the next harvest came in. Now we have money (that is paper or coins that represent units of value, and are subject to inflation or loss of real value in other ways). Then, only greedy merchants charged interest, now (almost) ((

See post on Kingdom Banking for an exception.)) everyone charges interest and savers are paid by banks and building societies for the use of their money. Then, fraternal loans were part of a close-knit communitarian society. Now loans are “big business”.

If the possible helper in our example above is living from the interest, or other investment returns of their savings, then to make a loan at no interest (especially to someone who may not be able to repay) effectively takes future income from them!

Notice what is happening here, as we translate the clear biblical principles from their world to ours they have ceased to be neatly and simply appropriate. This has happened because the social and economic contexts are quite different in ways that directly impact the biblical principle’s application. We cannot live **directly** by those principles in many 21stC contexts. ((Kingdom banking and this scheme to assist farmers in the north of Myanmar offer nice examples of how the biblical principles can inspire action today. In a later post we will consider these for what they can show us about going “beyond the Bible” in ways that are faithful to the Bible.))

We need principles by which we can go beyond the Bible, in ways which are faithful to Scripture!

Issues the Bible could not address

As well as issues like that above where changed circumstances make biblical principles not directly applicable, there are also many issues today that the Bible’s teaching simply do not address. Taking human life is wrong (Gen 9:6; Ex 20:13 cf. Dt 5:17).

But at what stage does life begin? The question is important for **our** decisions about some forms of contraception, for if fertilised eggs are human life even in the first minutes, then

IUDs and some other forms of birth control are killing.

The Bible did not know of such technologies and so does not talk about the exact moment when a human life begins. Though one might argue that passages like Ps 139:16 and Jer 1:5 provide enough guidance to answer this question.

However, what about other forms of birth control? The issue did not really arise in Scripture because the technological means of contraception were not known to the Bible writers (including perhaps the rhythm method which relies on information about conception and fertility that was not available in biblical times).

Conclusion

In this post, I have argued that there are two main, and pretty clear, ways in which change in circumstances between us and the Bible writers mean that we **must** “go beyond the Bible”. There may be others but there are at least these two.

If we are to “go beyond the Bible” then we need principled and faithful ways to do so, and/or ways to ensure that our conclusions are still faithful to Scripture. (For if we do not ensure this, we can no longer claim that Scripture is our authority.)

Kingdom Banking



LIBERTY *Trust*

Once we recognise both the need to try to be faithful to these biblical principles (loaning to those in need and avoiding the extra burden of interest) and the need to in some ways go 'beyond the Bible' in adapting to the contemporary world, some interesting possibilities emerge.

Church-based organisations that operate rather like banks can accept savings and then make loans at lower than bank interest rates. Note that some interest must be charged to cover inflation and costs, and often to cover an interest payment to the savers (who today may indeed be funding their retirement out of such savings).

There are also cooperative mortgage groups some like Liberty Trust explicitly trying to put these biblical principles to work in the contemporary housing market. In this model people contribute 2% each year of the mortgage they want to borrow. Because they are "sowing before they reap" they will have paid in something like 20% before they borrow, the eventual loan is thus able to be 'interest free'.

Notice how inspired by the biblical principles, but going beyond the Bible – the biblical texts do NOT envisage "sowing before you reap" but rather someone needing to borrow because of a crisis need, this model succeeds in being faithful to the Bible by going beyond it! (We will need to discuss later the criteria that allow us to assess whether a particular example succeeds in being thus faithful despite going beyond.)