

Implications of I&I's Hermeneutic Method

The LORD saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every intention of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually. And the LORD was sorry that he had made man on the earth, and it grieved him to his heart. So the LORD said, "I will blot out man whom I have created from the face of the land, man and animals and creeping things and birds of the heavens, for I am sorry that I have made them." But Noah found favor in the eyes of the LORD. (Gen 6:5-8).

This short paper is one illustration of how the hermeneutic of I&I leads to unacceptable, harmful and detrimental conclusions for evangelicals, generally, and for Reformed Christians and seminary students, more specifically. Although I remain open to correction, it seems clear to me at this juncture that this is one of the places where I&I is clear in its intent and in what it proposes; the matters dealt with clearly follow from the hermeneutic (and doctrine of Scripture) presented earlier in the book. The problems presented below are not a result of ambiguity in I&I, and are not a product of unfortunate phraseology.

It should be stated at the outset that, under the section, "Does God Change His Mind?," in the chapter, "The Old Testament and Theological Diversity," initially, I&I wants to affirm a distinction between Creator and creature. The affirmation is given that God "is supreme *over* his creation" and that he "does not need creation in any way to be complete." I&I initially affirms that "God is in control" and that "no one can stop what he determines to do" (103). These affirmations are correct, as far as they go. What is most troublesome is the material that follows, the substance of the section introduced with, "Yet..." Given the material that follows, the best one is left with is that the Bible is confused (because of I&I's view of its humanity?) in its descriptions and ascriptions of God.

In this section of I&I, a discussion of Genesis 22 ensues (Abraham's near-sacrifice of Isaac). In commenting on Gen. 22:12 ("Now I know that you fear God..."), I&I says:

It is clear that the purpose of the test was not to prove anything to Abraham but to God. For God to say "Now I know" makes sense *in this story* only if the test was a *real* test; if something was at stake. ...*In this story*, God did not know until after the test was passed (103).

Without elaborating on various ways one might understand this passage, the obvious question, given the above, is just how the God of *this story* is related to the God who is supreme and self-complete. The answer I&I gives is simply that we cannot "allow either of these dimensions" of God's character "to override the other." This answer is, at best, confused, but should be seen as a direct result of the hermeneutic offered in I&I (and perhaps of a confused Incarnational analogy). Not only so, but the indictment is given in I&I that to try to reconcile different descriptions of God given in Scripture is somehow to go beyond the Bible, to be interested in a God *behind* the scenes (see 106-107). This, too, is a result of the hermeneutic method espoused, in which any attempt at bringing together passages that appear to be inconsistent is illegitimate, in that it does not do full justice to the "humanity" of Scripture.

Commenting on Genesis 6:5-8¹ (quoted above), I&I notes:

The scene is straightforward: (1) God creates everything good; (2) wickedness and evil enter; (3) God *reacts* by intending to wipe out everything he made. Of course, it is possible to say that God already anticipated step 3 in step 1, that is, he knew what was going to happen, and so step 2 does not take him by surprise. That may be so, but that is only a guess that goes far beyond what we read. The story is told in such a way that steps 2 and 3 have an unexpected quality to them. Any attempt to force the God of *Genesis 6* into a mold cast by certain theological commitments or to reconcile this description to other biblical passages simply amounts to reading past this story. I take it as a fundamental truth, however, that God did not put this story here so we could read past it (104).

In an attempt to defend this section in I&I, the HFC Reply (p. 66) states:

Finally, we should perhaps broach one more issue which apparently has been troubling to the authors of the HTFC Response. Page 7 of the Response refers to the fact that Enns, on p. 104 of *I&I*, in describing the process of reading Genesis 6, comments that, according to the story line, God as a character in the story *reacts* by deciding to wipe out everything. Enns then comments:

Of course, it is possible to say that God already anticipated step 3 [the reaction] in step 1 [creation], that is, he knew what was going to happen, and so step 2 does not take him by surprise. That may be so, but that is only a guess that goes far beyond what we read....

Admittedly, this is perhaps one of the more ambiguous and easily misunderstood parts of *I&I*. If taken alone, this might appear to be a denial of God's foreknowledge and providential ordering of all things, or a denial that Scripture teaches God's foreknowledge, or a denial that Scripture is ultimately coherent, and it might therefore have been better phrased differently. But in the larger context, it is better to read these sentences as talking about *the story within Genesis* and how it functions as a story. And in the story, God appears as a character, who, like other characters, reacts. The "only a guess" isn't a denial that there is a true and immutable God revealed in the whole of the Bible, nor does it imply that the believer now, from the benefit of the whole of revelation, cannot know that actually God knew what was going to happen; it is rather a reference to the *story line* within Genesis itself, which is a humanly contextualized story (which is also what makes it interesting to human beings), and within which God is grieved and changes his mind. It is precisely this presentation of God as an actor in a *human* story that exemplifies God's accommodation, his "incarnation" of his word, as it were. And while importing what other passages say about God is useful for putting together a systematic theology that asks about the God "behind the scenes" so to speak, appreciating the *story* of Genesis (and what God is teaching us therein)

¹ We need not engage all the passages mentioned in this section of I&I. The points made apply, more or less, to each example given.

requires that we stick with the God *of* the scenes, just as he is portrayed in them (see *I&I*, p. 106).

In response to this section in *I&I*, and to the Reply, some troubling questions still remain - some specific, some more general.

Specifically, on what basis can *I&I* claim that God's omniscience is "only a guess?" If the answer (given in the HFC Reply) is that it is "a reference to the *story line* within Genesis itself..." then the assumption is that the knowledge of God that those reading the story possess is gained exclusively and only from that story. This answer is confused, at best, for at least two reasons. (1) It presumes that those reading the story have *only that story* in which to glean their knowledge of God. It would seem, however, that they have the fact of God as Creator in view as well, given the Genesis story up to chapter 6 (*I&I* affirms that a part of the story is that God is Creator; the truth of God as Creator cannot be divorced from the notion of God as sovereign and independent of his creation). (2) It assumes that no knowledge of God is present universally and clearly by virtue of God's natural revelation, such that his "invisible attributes, that is, his eternal power and divine nature" (Rom. 1:20) have *not* been clearly seen since creation. That is, "the story" comes to those who, by virtue of being created in God's image, already know him. There is not, nor can there be, any reading of any Biblical passage from any other standpoint than the true and accurate knowledge of God given in and through creation. No one comes to any passage of Scripture neutrally, or *de novo*, with respect to who God is.

Secondly, and specifically, just who *is* the "God of Genesis 6"? The clear answer seems to be that he is the God of the story, and that to import anything into the God of the story that is not given in the story is to misunderstand, not just the story, but who God is (or who the God of the story is). This answer is in keeping with the Reply's comment that "appreciating the *story* of Genesis (and what God is teaching us therein) requires that we stick with the God *of* the scenes, just as he is portrayed in them." In other words (the words of *I&I*), it is a "fundamental truth...that God did not put this story here so we could read past it."

This hermeneutic method begs a number of questions. Is it the case that an affirmation of God as the sovereign, independent Creator of all, and who himself is grieved by the sin of creation, is "reading past" the story? Is it really "reading past" the story to understand who God is, from Genesis 1 to 6, attempting to see the character of God in all of his majestic glory, rather than simply a God who grieves? Can this hermeneutic method possibly help evangelicals, or anyone else, in their attempt to know God better?² Hasn't this hermeneutic, in its concern to highlight the humanity of Scripture, rendered a consistent knowledge of God impossible?

² It should be noted here that to miss what this passage says about God is to miss the gospel itself. God condescends to his creation to deal definitively with wickedness. This judgment of wickedness is not tangential to this passage, but is at its heart. How a sovereign, omniscient and independent God can stoop to grieve over the sin of his creation has been thoroughly and biblically worked out in Reformed thought, and is obscured, not aided, by the human emphasis, and the hermeneutic proposed, in *I&I*.

The Reply notes that, this passage, "If taken alone, ...might appear to be a denial of God's foreknowledge and providential ordering of all things, or a denial that Scripture teaches God's foreknowledge, or a denial that Scripture is ultimately coherent" and that, "it might therefore have been better phrased differently." The Reply misses, however, the clear intent of the passage in I&I. The intent, stated more than once, just *is* that the story, to be understood properly, *must* be "taken alone." What is taught by I&I in this portion of the book is that it is just those who do *not* take the story "alone" who themselves "read past" the story and thus misconstrue its meaning. If *the story* is not taken alone, the clear accusation is given, then the concern is for a God *behind* the scenes, rather than for the God of the story. I am at a complete loss as to how a different phrasing could rescue such a view.

More generally, and related to the specific concerns noted above, just why is it the case that "Any attempt to force the God of *Genesis 6* into a mold cast by certain theological commitments or to reconcile this description to other biblical passages simply amounts to reading past this story"? Presumably, as the Reply states, because "importing what other passages say about God is useful for putting together a systematic theology that asks about the God "behind the scenes" so to speak," but that it does not do justice to the text itself.

While not wanting in any way to undermine the importance of textual exegesis, it should be noted here that the conclusions reached concerning this passage in *Genesis 6* are given as a result of the hermeneutic, together with a (reassessed) doctrine of Scripture, proposed in I&I. The clear obstacle to this hermeneutic method proposed in I&I comes from those who would force "the God" of a certain text "into a mold cast by certain theological commitments," "reconciling biblical texts which speak of God with other texts that speak of him," and "importing what other passages say about God for putting together a systematic theology."

This methodology seems to be in direct conflict with an understanding of Scripture that affirms one divine author (and therefore one truth), and with a hermeneutic that, for the sake of knowing God and his gospel better, seeks to bring the entire relevant teaching of Scripture to bear on a particular passage.³ This is the reason, it seems to me, that I&I can state, quite erroneously, that whether or not prayer has "some *effect* on God" is "for God to know, not us" (107). Even though I&I states that there is a "ring of truth" to the notion of prayer's effect on God, this statement, no matter the context or point being made, betrays a basic confusion with respect to knowledge of God and of his Word, rather than a proper hermeneutic. If this is what evangelicals are needing to hear, or what seminary students are being taught, then there is no room for an evangelical or Reformed theology.

Not only so, but it seems impossible to avoid the conclusion that those who are involved in

³ In Silva's words, "...our evangelical view of the unity of Scripture demands that we see the whole Bible as the context of any one part. ...To the extent that we view the whole of Scripture as having come from one Author, therefore, to that extent a systematic understanding of the Bible contributes to the exegesis of individual passages" (Moisés Silva, "The Case for Calvinistic Hermeneutics," in *Revelation and Reason*, Oliphint and Tipton ed., (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2007), 87).

working out (as WCF 1.5 states) "the consent of all the parts, the scope of the whole (which is, to give all glory to God), the full discovery it makes of the only way of man's salvation," are, in fact, if I&I's hermeneutic is applied, involved in the obscuring of the various texts of Scripture.

A few pages later in I&I (106), some qualifying remarks are added to this discussion:

I am not trying to drive a wedge between the Bible and God. Actually, and somewhat ironically, this is what I see others doing [examples here would greatly clarify, KSO]. I feel bound to talk about God *in the way(s) the Bible does*, even if I am not comfortable with it. The Bible really does have authority if we let it speak, and not when we -- intentionally or unintentionally -- suspend what the Bible says about God in some places while we work out our speculations about what God is "really" like, perhaps by accenting other portions of the Bible that are more amenable to our thinking. God gave us the Bible so we could read *it*, not so we can ferret our way *behind* it to see how things really are.

It seems clear from this statement, again, that those who, in their exegetical work, ascertain the unity of Scriptural teaching on a particular passage, or who bring the Bible's teaching to bear on a text (1) are denying the authority of Scripture by not letting God speak (2) suspend what the Bible says about God in some places (3) work out speculations about what God is "really" like and (4) accent portions of the Bible that are more amenable to our thinking. This, however, is a caricature both of evangelical theology and (especially) of Reformed theology. It cannot be shown, in either case and in the main, that "speculations" about God have superseded what passages of Scripture say about him.

It seems impossible to avoid the conclusion, given the above, that there is a great chasm fixed, impossible to bridge, as far as I can tell, between systematic theology and the hermeneutic of I&I. Though I&I affirms, with respect to the diversity of Scripture, that "the different colors and textures" of Scripture *together* make a portrait," the portrait made (to continue the analogy), given the discussion above, could only be a non-objectivist, abstract painting, lacking any meaningful consistency and unity.

It should be noted as well that this hermeneutic method is destructive of the Bible's organic unity. As Murray says:

The Bible is an organism; its unity is organic. It is not a compilation of isolated and unrelated divine oracles. Our knowledge of the Bible, if it is to be really adequate, must be knowledge of the Bible as it is, and must reflect this organic character, not knowledge of the piecemeal or block variety but knowledge of the vital organic unity that belongs to the Bible. We must understand that the whole Bible stands together and that the fibers of organic connection run through the whole Bible connecting one part with every other part and every one truth with every other truth (John Murray, "The Study of the Bible," in *Collected Writings of John Murray*, vol. 1, *The Claims of Truth* (Carlisle, Pennsylvania: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1976), 5).

Not only so, but, given Silva's correct assessment, it is detrimental to the basic tenets of a Reformed, Calvinistic hermeneutic:

Indeed, the most serious argument against the view that exegesis should be done independently of systematic theology is that such a view is hopelessly naïve (Moisés Silva, "The Case for Calvinistic Hermeneutics," in *Revelation and Reason*, Oliphint and Tipton ed., (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2007), 88).

...exegetes who convince themselves that, through pure philological and historical techniques, they can understand the Bible directly - that is, without the mediation of prior exegetical, theological, and philosophical commitments - *are less likely to perceive the real character of exegetical difficulties* (Ibid., my emphasis).

To put it in the most shocking way possible: *my theological system should tell me how to exegete* (Ibid., 86, my emphasis).

The stark conclusion to this discussion in I&I is difficult to avoid. It is the hermeneutic method in I&I, presupposing as it does its doctrine of Scripture, that is able to ascertain the true meaning of a particular text, and thus the true doctrine of Scripture. A hermeneutic method that attempts consistency and unity will inevitably be one that skews the meaning of the various, diverse texts of Scripture. If this is the case, multiple problems persist. For example, practically speaking, students who are trained under this method cannot, as pastors, confidently stand in their pulpits and expound the truth of a given text in any coherent and consistent way, week after week. The truth one week will be countered the next week.

Not only so, unless I have misunderstood the above, there is no hope for those whose theological commitments influence their exegesis. To put the matter squarely within a Reformed context, anyone allowing the "system of doctrine" taught in the Westminster Standards to influence their reading of particular texts of Scripture will inevitably mis-read, and therefore, misunderstand any given passage. And that, because they have failed adequately to grasp what seems to be the hegemonic, universal and all-pervasive application of the messiness of Scripture's humanity as it is offered in I&I.

On the other hand, the hermeneutical parameters marked out by Silva, along with the organic view of Scripture delineated by Murray (a view which Scripture itself demands), provide the ground on which the unity-in-diversity of Scripture can be faithfully articulated, and thus the ground on which the God of Scripture may be rightly and obediently understood.

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