

THE DEVELOPMENTS OF DIVINE ACCOMMODATION AND SOME PROBLEMS OF ITS PROPOSITIONS

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Abstract: The doctrine of accommodation was introduced by the church fathers early in the second century and its developments became a major tool for Bible critics of the eighteen century. This article briefly investigates the early propositions of the teachings of accommodation by the church fathers, and it also investigates the major proponents of new theological directions for the doctrine of accommodation in the eighteenth century, followed by the severity of problems generated by the NT critics.

Keywords: Accommodation, Divine Accommodation, Biblical Rationalism, Biblical Criticism.

Resumo: A doutrina da acomodação foi introduzida pelos primeiros pais da Igreja, no segundo século, e foi desenvolvida como um dos principais instrumentos da Crítica Bíblica do século dezoito. O presente artigo faz uma breve investigação das primeiras propostas desse ensinamento pelos pais da Igreja, e também explora o pensamento dos proponentes centrais dessa doutrina no século dezoito e suas novas diretrizes teológicas, seguidas por graves problemas gerados pelos críticos do Novo Testamento.

Palavras-chave: Acomodação; Acomodação Divina; Racionalismo Bíblico; Criticismo Bíblico.



The Discussion of Divine Accommodation

From the church fathers to the eighteenth-century Bible critics, the theological developments of the doctrine of divine accommodation appeared to have stretched beyond its original applications. In early Christianity, Justin Martyr, Origen, Chrysostom, and Augustine saw in Scripture a communication mode of a God who accommodated Himself to the position and limitations of the persons being addressed. By the beginning of the eighteenth century, the principle of accommodation had advanced to a more critical and rational perspective. Theologians like Wettstein, Semler, Seiler, and Rosenmuller contributed to the development of a view of accommodation that was more fitted to the historical context than to the biblical canon in its entirety.

In this article I will investigate whether the accommodation of biblical truth with temporal knowledge can be accepted without compromising other major principles of the Scriptures. To accomplish this task, I will first take a look at the church fathers and examine their applications of Divine accommodation. Then I will look into the new developments of accommodation given by some theologians of the late seventeenth century. After that, I will look at the implications of those advancements for the major teaching of the Scriptures, and finally, I will draw conclusions from the studies presented.

The Early Church Fathers

The authoritative view of scripture is a major characteristic of the fathers of the early Christian church. For them, the Bible was "a collection of sacred writings which contain the Divine Word of redemption," and therefore, they believed their lives should be filled with acts of faith in a life of faith. Such faith (either human or divine¹) was "conditioned upon the validity of the objective Word of God"² and the work of the Spirit. In other words; their actions through life (temporal, historical) were supposed to be a result of their faith, which was ultimately validated by the Word of God. In essence, the validity of faith and life were centered in the "Divine Word."³

Origen

Origen of Alexandria held the Scriptures as high standards. He considered the Bible as "sacred books," "holy documents" without which we could have no

¹ George Trumbull Ladd, *The Doctrine of Sacred Scripture* (n.p.: 1883), 179.

² *Ibid.*, 538-539.

³ *Ibid.*, 530-532.



knowledge of God.⁴ He also believed that the Scriptures of the Old and New Testament had an "inseparable unity."⁵ The Bible sustained harmony through all pages and was "supernaturally perfect in every particular." At the same time, Origen was very conscious of the human element in the Holy Scriptures.⁶ He thought the New Testament was not written in the best Greek, but he considered the revelation more important than the words.⁷ For Origen, humans were capable of knowing the revelation of God because He had "accommodated" to ways that we sinners could understand and communicate with Him.⁸

According to Origen, "He condescends and lowers himself, accommodating himself to our weakness like a schoolmaster talking 'little language' to his children, like a father caring for his own children and adopting their ways."⁹

John Chrysostom

John Chrysostom appears to have made more intensive use of accommodation than the other church fathers.¹⁰ He was influenced by the works of Origen and held the doctrine of accommodation in his writings. He stated that "Christ often checked himself for the sake of weakness of his hearers when he dealt with lofty doctrines and that he usually did not choose words as were in accord with his glory, but rather those which agreed with the capability of men."¹¹

Augustine of Hippo

Augustine is considered the link between the ancient church and the Middle Ages. His theological method is reflected throughout his writings, which integrated Platonic philosophy and biblical data. The famous maxim of Augustine's theology is

⁴ The words in quotation are from Origen, "De principiis," trans. F. Combie, *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, Vol. IV, ed. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson (Buffalo: Christian Literature, 1885) IV, 9; IV,8, pp. 356-357. Reference extracted from Jack Bartlett Rogers, *Biblical Authority* (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1977), 19.

⁵ Richard Patrick Crosland Hanson, *Allegory and Event* (Richmond: John Knox Press, 1959), 198.

⁶ Bruce Vawter, *Biblical Inspiration* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1972), 38-39.

⁷ F. W. Farrar, *History of Interpretation* (London: Macmillan, 1886), 190.

⁸ Vawter, 33.

⁹ Hanson, 226.

¹⁰ Peter M. van Bemmelen, "Divine Accommodation in Revelation and Scripture," *Journal of Adventist Theological Society*, September 1998 (2000): 222.

¹¹ G. C. Berkouwer, *Holy Scripture*, trans. Jack Bartlett Rogers (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975), 175-176.



"I believe in order that I may understand."¹² Augustine was adamantly against any type of discordance in the Scriptures; if apparent discordance existed, he would claim that either the manuscript was faulty, the translation was wrong, or the reader had not properly understood.¹³ Just like Origen and Chrysostom, Augustine accepted the concept that God accommodated Himself to reach human capacity. In order to communicate with mankind, he stated, God uses specific ways in "the Holy Scripture, which suits itself for babes."¹⁴

I venture to say, brethren, that not even John himself has presented these things just as they are, but only as best as he could, since he was a man who spoke of God—inspired, of course, but still a man. Because he was inspired, he was able to say something; but because he who was inspired remained a man, he could not present the full reality, but only what a man could say about it.¹⁵

The General Perspective of the Church Fathers

In summary, it is difficult to say precisely how far the church fathers who introduced and applied the accommodation principles meant to carry them. Unfortunately, they were not always explicit or consistent in their statements.¹⁶ Moreover, they had many significant differences in approaches and applications that indicate a compromise of biblical truth and cultural background.¹⁷ Nevertheless, for the most part, it appears that they viewed accommodation as an adaptation of the form of Divine communications to the modes of human thoughts and speech, while the matter remained true and Divine.¹⁸

Accommodation in the Eighteenth Century Theology

The new ideas and theology proposed by Wettstein, Semler, Seiler, and Rosenmuller, among others, anticipated a new rational approach to reality, and the laws they used for interpretation inevitably permeated theology. This early

¹² Cited in John Edwin Smith, *The Analogy of Experience: An Approach to Understanding Religious Truth*, [1st ed. (New York: Harper & Row, 1973), 40.

¹³ Vawter, 38-39. ; R. M. Grant, *The Letter and the Spirit* (London: SPCK, 1957), 108.

¹⁴ A. D. R. Polman, *The Word of God According to St. Augustine* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1961), 57.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 59-60.

¹⁶ George Nathaniel Henry Peters, *The Theocratic Kingdom of Our Lord Jesus, the Christ, as Covenanted in the Old Testament and Presented in the New Testament* (London: Funk & Wagnalls, 1884), 195-199.

¹⁷ Stephen D. Benin, *The Footprints of God : Divine Accommodation in Jewish and Christian Thought* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1993), 1-30.

¹⁸ Patrick Fairbairn, *Hermeneutical Manual; or, Introduction to the Exegetical Study of the Scriptures of the New Testament* (Philadelphia: Sheldon, Blakeman & Co., 1859), 107.



eighteenth-century rationalist approach and their views of accommodation raised the question of whether one is able to distinguish the Scriptural texts that are of essential content from those of time-related form. Beyond these two aspects, the critics and rationalists (and later the historical critics) raised the problem of the criteria used to legitimize and define the two elements.¹⁹

Berkouwer suggests that when the conflict arises between essential content and time-related form, the question for the theologian to answer is whether the pure perspective of the substance of the Gospel can still be preserved despite the intentions to preserve the essential elements.²⁰ It was during the development of modern rationalism that the principle of accommodation began to be applied to Scripture in a more expanded meaning and distanced from the initial applications made by the church fathers. The emergent Bible criticisms gradually started to apply accommodation without specific principles or limitations.

Johann Jakob Wettstein.

This celebrated Swiss theologian is better known as a New Testament critic. Wettstein was born in Basle in March 1693, the son of a minister of St. Leonard's Church. His early attention was turned upon the New Testament manuscripts, which led to his first dissertation, on the subject of *De variis Novi Testamenti lectionibus*. Later in his life, he enlarged his works and views as he traveled to Zurich, Bern, Lyons, Paris, and England and gained access to more important manuscripts of the New Testament. In the 1720s, after succeeding his father at St. Leonard's Church, Wettstein worked on a critical edition of the New Testament that brought upon him charges of heresy against the doctrine of the Divinity of Christ. Wettstein was dismissed in 1730 and went to Amsterdam, where he taught Hebrew and philosophy under the conditions of not expressing Socinian views, not publishing his New Testament, submitting his works to supervision, and printing no apology for his cause. Nevertheless, he printed his New Testament, and died shortly after in March 1754.²¹

Wettstein is considered one of the forerunners in establishing principles for the use of accommodation in modern theology. In his works of criticism and interpretation of the New Testament, he established that as a canon of interpretation, in regards to those passages that seem to disagree with each other

¹⁹ Berkouwer, 175.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 176.

²¹ John McClintock, *Cyclopaedia of Biblical Theological, and Ecclesiastical Literature* (New York: 1891), vol. 10, 970-971. ; *The New Schaff-Herzog Encyclopedia of Religious Knowledge*, (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1950), vol. 12, 333-334.



or vary from the truth, the writers should be understood "as not always expressing their own opinion, nor representing matters as to their real state, but occasionally also expressing themselves according to the sentiments of others, or the sometimes ambiguous, sometimes erroneous, opinions of the multitude."²² Wettstein argues that "this mode of explanation should be especially adopted in regard to what is often said in the new testament of sacrifices, of Satan, of angels, and demons."²³

Johann Salomo Semler

Semler was a German theologian who is considered the pioneer and founder of modern biblical criticism. He was born in Saalfeld in 1725 and grew up under the influence of the pietism of Halle, where he studied and later occupied a theology chair in 1752. His lectures on hermeneutics and church history were stepping stones to his views that characterized differences between theology and religion. Semler took the Scriptures as the object of scientific research, with concern for the transmission and the nature of the text. He came to believe in many revisions of the New Testament text, striving for more solid standards for evaluation of the manuscripts and discernment of the importance of patristic writings. His major achievement is considered to be piloting theology into a new phase of development by importing into theology the historical mode of contemplation.²⁴

From Semler's perspective, the exposition of Scripture should be pre-eminently historical; this implies that the spiritual conditions of the time should be considered, and moreover that the external circumstances when Christ and the Apostles lived did not always allow the truth to be spoken in the way that it should have been. Thus Semler concluded, "that teachers after the undeniable example of teachers and the apostles, condescended to their listeners' mode of thought or accommodated themselves to their own circumstances, is historically certain."²⁵

According to Baird, Semler's views of accommodation were also tools to illuminate the differences between the word of God and the words of the Bible. As such, "the biblical writers were free to use their own vocabulary and style to

²² Quotation from Fairbairn, 108.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ See Carl Mirbat, "Semler, Johann Salomo," *The New Schaff-Herzog Encyclopedia of Religious Knowledge*, vol. 10, 354-355. ; McClintock, vol. 9, 522-524.

²⁵ Quotation from Trutz Rendtorff, *Church and Theology; the Systematic Function of the Church Concept in Modern Theology* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1971), 47-48.



employ contemporary myths and metaphors to give expression to the gospel. Since the gospel in accommodating words it is never to equate with the words of scripture."²⁶

Georg Friedrich Seiler

Seiler was a German theologian born in October 1733 at Kreussen. In 1770, he became a professor of theology at Erlangen, an eighteenth-century Protestant foundation in largely Catholic Bavaria, where he also founded an institute for morals and liberal arts. His main theological contribution is a supra-naturalistic view of Scripture, mostly with practical implications. In his book *Biblical Hermeneutics, or, the Art of Scripture Interpretation*, Seiler explores the use of accommodation as a technique of interpretation in critical commentary.²⁷

Seiler, as much as Semler, believed that every reasonable man "must adapt his language to the modes of thinking and to the perception of those he addresses."²⁸ When Seiler deals with the New Testament, he makes a distinction between two types of accommodation: the accommodation that enables understanding, and the accommodation that includes false teachings in order to appeal to the audience. Although Seiler recognized that sometimes it was difficult to distinguish both types of accommodation, he condemned the "accommodation of error."²⁹ He further classified the biblical errors into two categories: the innocuous and the noxious. "Innocuous errors are such as do not necessarily introduce other errors into doctrines of faith, and from which no results could flow which were injurious to morals."³⁰ By contrast, he concluded that noxious errors are those which would introduce many other errors into doctrines and would lead to injurious morals.

Johann Georg Rosenmuller

This German Lutheran theologian was born in Ummerstädt in December 1736 and studied at the University of Altdorf. He climbed the academic ladder starting as a private teacher, then became a pastor, later a professor of theology,

²⁶ Ibid., 124.

²⁷ McClintock, 510. ; Paul Wood, *Science and Dissent in England, 1688-1945*, Science, Technology, and Culture, 1700-1945 (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2004), 183.

²⁸ Georg Friedrich Seiler, *Biblical Hermeneutics; or, the Art of Scripture Interpretation* (London: F. Westley and A. H. Davis, 1835), 39-41.

²⁹ Ibid., 422-434.

³⁰ Ibid., 429.



and finally superintendent at Leipzig. His theological views were based on the principle that unbiased reason carries as much authority as the clear expression of Scripture.³¹

Rosenmuller reasoned that the Jews brought forth a unique mode of writing the Scriptures due to their preference of style, filled with sentiments in allegorical figures and seeking strained and imaginary support in Scripture. In his view, the apostles were wise in accommodating themselves in these aspects to the “genius and habits of their countrymen.” According to his account, many texts hold what he calls a kind of rabbinical flourish, an embellishment of the narrative, so that what was completely away from the ordinary was happily applied to the circumstances and events of the Gospel history.³²

What the Critics Changed in Accommodation

In short, the growth and expansion of Biblical criticism involving the use of accommodation is a sign that no strict principle had been drawn by the church fathers who first applied it. The apparent laxity of principle led critics to apply accommodation to scriptural variances with historical assumptions that implied the representation of mistakes in biblical teachings.

The Proposition of Accommodating Error

There is a vast distance between the church fathers and the eighteenth-century Bible critics in the usage of biblical accommodation. The different assumptions and premises led to different applications of accommodation, and over time theologians developed different methods that challenged Bible authority. Church fathers like Origen, Chrysostom, and Augustine all believed the Bible to be authoritative, above human experience. However, the same can not be fully said about late eighteenth-century theologians who were interacting with the Enlightenment philosophers.

Opposition to False Accommodation

³¹ Chambers's Encyclopaedia : A Dictionary of Universal Knowledge for the People , Rev. ed. (New York: Collier, 1884), vol. 7, 809. ; The New Schaff-Herzog Encyclopedia of Religious Knowledge , vol. 10, 95-96.

³² Johann Georg Rosenmueller, *Historia Interpretationis Librorum Sacrorum in Ecclesia Christiana* , vol. 1 (Hildburghausen: 1795), 27-33.



Van Bemmelen, in his article "Divine Accommodation in Revelation and Scripture," touched on two important aspects of the debate of false accommodation. First, he reasoned that because Christ's incarnation is the ultimate example of accommodation and Jesus declared himself to be "the truth" (John 14:6), it becomes a contradiction to the very nature of Jesus to accommodate Himself to error.³³

Second, van Bemmelen argued that the human limitations did not always allow Jesus to accommodate to the circumstances, for it is known that "[Jesus] often kept silent when He could have spoken. Even in teaching His disciples He restrained Himself."³⁴

In van Bemmelen's conclusion, the accommodation phenomenon is a reality in the Scriptures; however, there are plenty of misconceptions and the failure to grasp this concept has often led to wrong interpretation. Although his article clearly established false applications of accommodation, it did not move on to indicate any principle for the true application of the principle.³⁵

Inconsistency of False Accommodation

In this quest to contain the false application of accommodation, van Bemmelen is not alone. Heringa³⁶ also had the concern that the accommodation of the Divine with error would be inconsistent. He argued to Seiler:

This [accommodation to error] were inconsistent neither with wisdom, nor with honesty; it had not been suited to the case of extraordinary ambassadors of God, furnished with such full powers, and assisted by such Divine interposition as they were. There is a vast difference between leaving errors untouched which would in time expire either of themselves, or by deeper views of the very doctrine preached, and the confirmation of the same errors, by admitting them into their own instructions.³⁷

³³ Van Bemmelen: 227.

³⁴ Ibid.: 228.

³⁵ Ibid.: 229.

³⁶ Hermann Julius Heringa was a German Lutheran born in Dallmin in February 1838. He was educated at Halle (1858-62) and from 1878 until retirement was professor of practical theology at Halle. The New Schaff-Herzog Encyclopedia of Religious Knowledge, 237.

³⁷ Note from Heringa to Seiler. Quote extracted from Fairbairn, 112.



The arguments of Heringa are expanded even more by Georg C. Knapp, who pointed out that the Scriptures do not indicate that Jesus or His disciples, in conformity with their generation, "ever taught anything or seemingly affirmed anything to be true which they themselves considered as false."³⁸ Knapp also upholds the same in regards to the teaching and explanation of the Old Testament. He reasoned that "such compliance is entirely contrary to their usual course of action; (Matt. v. 19, 23;) nor can it be at all justified on pure moral principles, as even modern theologians are beginning more and more to allow."³⁹

Arguments against False Accommodation

Storr and Flatt also strongly rejected the notion of false accommodation. They presented five main arguments denying false accommodation and maintaining that "the declarations of Jesus and the apostles relative to the Old Testament are not an accommodation of popular opinion and prejudice." Their arguments are anchored in a) the moral character of Jesus and His apostles, b) the miracles working as evidence of their authority, c) the lack of clear criteria established for verification of the apostles' knowledge, d) that incorrect expectation that history can be used to prove many aspects of Scripture, and e) the critics' failure to prove the necessity of false accommodation. In their view, the schemes of false accommodation "not only make a very arbitrary supposition, but they violate the fundamental and unexceptionable principles of interpretation, and deny that authority and credibility" that are ascribed to the teachings of Jesus and the apostles through Scripture.⁴⁰

Landis, in his book *The Doctrine of the Resurrection of the Body Asserted and Defended*, proposed another ten arguments against the rationalists' ideas of false accommodation. He argued that a) the results of this principle are "utterly false and indefensible," b) it is unreasonable and contrary to all principles of interpretation, c) there is no degree of certainty in the meaning of the word "God," d) it is impossible to clearly distinguish knowledge from accommodation, e) there is no solid proof, f) the necessity can not be proved, g) it is against the moral character of Jesus, h) it ruins the character of God, i) it propagates falsehood

³⁸ Georg Christian Knapp, *Lectures on Christian Theology*, 2d American ed. (Philadelphia: T. Wardle, 1850), 326.

³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ Gottlob Christian Storr and Karl Christian Flatt, *An Elementary Course of Biblical Theology*, 2nd ed. (Andover, NY: Gould and Newman, 1836), 153-154.



embedded with truth, and j) it is a grotesque thought against God's sincerity and the fidelity of the record of Scripture.⁴¹

A Strong Argument against False Accommodation

Thus, the argument of van Bemmelen is aligned with those of Heringa, Knapp, Storr and Flatt, and Landis, who exposed false accommodation as a fallacy and an aberration to any consistent biblical thinking. However, none of them denied the principle of accommodation in itself. Within the theological debate of accommodation, false accommodation (innocuous) appears to be illogical and unjustifiable in Scripture. It is not acceptable that Scripture would destroy the same principles that it is trying to convey.

Conclusions

This article indicates that considering error as an aid for biblical truth is a contradiction in itself; it goes far beyond the views of the church fathers and discards biblical authority. Although the church fathers never set boundaries for the doctrine of accommodation and failed to consistently use the principle, it is clear that they worked with the premise of the authoritative value of Scripture. The use of accommodation by the late seventeenth-century and early eighteenth-century theologians imported a historical rationale to texts that might appear in variance to a subject; it also created a multitude of serious problems related to the core nature of biblical teachings.

This article discussed, for further discussion, about the problem of the accommodation has been used since the church fathers; however, the main challenge is to establish the appropriate boundaries of this principle. This research also indicates that further study of the principles that the church fathers applied in their usage of accommodation will shed more light on the debate and correct the abuses of the Divine accommodation principle.

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⁴¹ Robert W. Landis, *The Doctrine of the Resurrection Asserted and Defended* (n. p.: 1846), 125-130.



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