

THE EXEGESIS OF THE SCHOOLMEN.

1. *Their Neglect of History and Philology.*
2. *Their Dialectic Method and Barbarous Phraseology.*

It is only by compression that I can hope in these Papers to give the reader any notion of the prevalent characteristics of Scholastic Exegesis. To treat the subject with fulness would require a volume rather than a few papers. But my object has not been to unearth the errors of the past, but to learn from them. Even from the mistakes of ancient commentators we may gain some aid towards a truer and sounder method.

I shall now endeavour to shew that much of the exegesis which fills whole folios of the Schoolmen was radically vitiated—

1. By lack of all adequate equipment, and especially—
 - a. By their neglect of History ; and
 - β. By their neglect of Philology.
2. By the introduction of dialectics, leading to endless attempts to systematize and to argue.
3. By the tendency to subtle, futile, and delusive speculations.

Instead of dwelling at length on these defects, which is not possible since I am "*spatiis exclusus iniquis*," I shall content myself mainly with illustrating them by actual examples, which will, I hope, speak for themselves.

1. The Schoolmen shew for the most part a singular deficiency in the training requisite for successful expositors.
 - a. They shew a strange neglect of History.

No one who has looked, ever so little, into the history of exegesis can be unaware that down to the present day it has been almost exclusively swayed by traditional methods and conceptions. If in these days a flood of light has been

thrown upon Scripture—if a reality, an intensity, a vividness have thus been given to it which it did not possess before—if our affection and reverence for it have been deepened by the awakening of ten thousand human sympathies which were comparatively destroyed when the Book was treated as a dead sea of enigmas and abstractions—these blessed results have sprung in no small measure from the conviction that in all Scripture narratives the instruction primarily intended is enshrined in the narrative itself literally understood. We have begun to see that Scripture always has a definite and primary sense which is of infinitely deeper importance than the thousands of inferential and secondary senses under which it has [too often been overwhelmed. Now the importance of the literary and historic sense has indeed been asserted in almost every age. It was again and again laid down as an axiom, even by the Mystics and the Schoolmen. But practically the axiom was praised and neglected; instead of being prepared for use in the workshop of the understanding it lay “in the lumber-room of the memory side by side with the most exploded errors.”

The Schoolmen went on repeating the rule that the literal sense was the first which ought to be elucidated, and that no truth was ever expressed by Scripture allegorically which did not elsewhere find its literal expression.¹ But in practice they ignore every historical element nearly as much as Philo did, who when he deigns to touch upon it at all always glances off instantly to his “spiritual” and “philosophic” inferences. They seem to be guided by the remark of St. Jerome, that “to be content with the literal sense is to share the curse of the serpent, Upon thy

¹ “Si littera tollitur scriptura quid est?” *Hugo of St. Victor*. They say this because Augustine had said it (see Trench, *Sermon on Mount*, p. 52), yet Hugo elsewhere compares the letter of Scripture to *mud* which must be used to anoint the eyes of the blind (*Praenott. Elucidar.*, 5).

belly shalt thou go, and dust shalt thou eat all the days of thy life.”¹

As a general rule they left the historical narratives of Scripture without any critical examination, and treated them as matters of entirely subordinate importance. It is hardly, therefore, to be wondered at that they scarcely deign to notice such questions as the date and authorship of the books of Scripture. On such subjects they seem to follow the dictum of Gregory the Great already quoted, “Of what importance is it to know the authors of books written by the pen of the Trinity,” or “by the Triune God”?

To us who have learnt the impossibility of really understanding or duly estimating the relativity, the authority, and the meaning of the books of Scripture, without a knowledge of their date and the conditions under which they appeared, it will cause no surprise that the neglect of all such enquiries led to the strangest errors. We know, for instance, to how great an extent our judgment as to the meaning of any particular passage or precept is influenced by the circumstances under which it was spoken, and the hearers to whom it was addressed. But by the Schoolmen all Scripture was treated as though every part of it had been equally addressed to all persons under all circumstances. To this was due, among many other errors, the Mediæval disparagement of marriage, the glorification of mendicancy, the absolutism of the Papacy, the abominations of the Inquisition, the doctrine of Divine right, the defence of exterminating wars, the cruel judicial murders of thousands of witches.

Again, the neglect of all historical criticism affected the entire position of the Canon. Honorius of Autun (1130), in his *Gemma*, says that the Books of Judges and Ruth were written by Gideon and Samuel, and that the four

¹ “*Littera inutilis est nec curandum quid loquatur*”! Joh. Sarisb., *Polycrat.*, vii. 12.

Books of Kings were written by four prophets. We find very varying treatment of the Apocrypha, and no clearly defined practice as to the method of quoting it.¹ Even so great a man as Roger Bacon expresses his astonishment that the Church had not received the writings of the Patriarchs—by which he seems to mean such books as Enoch, the Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs, etc.—into the canon! The “Articles of Faith,” he says, “are contained in these books far more definitely than in the canon,” and he only supposes that they were not regarded as canonical “because of their *too-great* antiquity”!² It was naturally the same in secular history. Albertus—though he was the “*Doctor Universalis*”—numbers the Pythagoreans among the Stoics; calls Socrates a Macedonian; and says that Empedocles and Anaxagoras were Italians.

Again, this neglect of history led to the actual explaining away of narratives of primary importance. The example of such treatment of Scripture had been set ages before, especially by Philo, who sometimes speaks of a particular event or expression in the historical books as obviously too trivial to be narrated by direct inspiration, and therefore as only admitting of an allegorical sense.³ The Fathers continued this bad method, and thus, as Daillé says, often “rack the text, and as it were drag it along by the hair, and make the sense of the Scripture evaporate in empty fumes,” as when Jerome on Matthew xxi. 7 explains the “ass” to mean the Synagogue, and the “foal of the ass” to mean the Gentiles. In snatching at shadows both the Fathers and the Schoolmen often lost the substance altogether. We trace the weakening influence of the seven rules of Tichonius in the note of Albertus Magnus on Psalm xliii. 1, “Judge

¹ On this subject, see Diestel, *Gesch. d. alt. Test.*, pp. 180–183.

² *Opus Majus*, ii. 8.

³ Thus on Gen. xxxii. 10 he says that it would be “abject” (*ραπεινόν*) to understand literally “With my staff I passed over this Jordan;” so Jordan must mean all that is base, and the staff means discipline! (*Leg. allegg.*, ii. 22).

me, oh God," "Here" he says "the whole Church is called David, which groaning desires to reach its end." Hervæus Dolensis, whose works were long attributed to St. Anselm, prefaces the Epistle to the Hebrews with the remark that "Hebrews" means "*those who cross over*," and that therefore the Epistle is addressed to those who have crossed over from worldliness to spirituality! Commenting on Matthew xvii. 1, "after six days Jesus taketh Peter and James and John his brother and bringeth them into a high mountain apart," he says that Jesus "is the preaching of the Gospel"; Peter means "one who learns"; John, "in whom is grace"; James, "supplanter." Jesus took them after six days, or after eight days—six because the world was made in six days; eight because the Resurrection was on the eighth day! "They therefore who have ascended above the world, they can be led by the words of the Gospel into the mountains of sublime intelligence," *etc.*, *etc.*¹ This then is exegesis of the narrative of the Transfiguration!

Yet we find nothing better in the *Catena Aurea* of St. Thomas. He quotes Rabanus as saying that the six days indicate the six ages before the Resurrection, and Origen who compares them with the six days of creation. He thinks that the three Apostles remind us of Shem, Ham, and Japheth, or (as Hilary says), of the Holy Trinity.

β. Not less marked is the neglect of all Philology.

The vast majority of the Schoolmen knew no Greek and no Hebrew. Even men like Abelard and St. Thomas knew very little Greek, and next to no Hebrew. Since therefore they often lay down the abstract rule that knowledge of the original languages of Scripture is a necessary preparation for the work of an interpreter, they at once condemn their own labours.²

¹ See Elster, *De Med. Ævi theol. exeget.*, 39.

² Thus Roger Bacon: "Impossibile est quod proprietas unius linguæ servetur

The result is that they had to rely all but exclusively on the Vulgate. "They philosophized" says Schröckh "over the Latin translation," with the assistance of glosses heterogeneously collected from the Fathers, often ill-rendered and often represented by spurious writings. The disadvantage of depending on a version is shewn both by Primasius and St. Thomas Aquinas on Hebrews ii. 9, "that by the grace of God (*χαρίτι Θεοῦ*, *gratiâ Dei*) he should taste death for every man," where they take *gratiâ Dei* as a nominative, and as a title of Christ! The result of not knowing the original was specially fatal to their "parallel-passage" method. Thus on Psalm lxxix. 3, Albertus Magnus has an excursus about the Scripture uses of the word "substance," and by way of shewing that the meaning of the word is fourfold, he says that it means: 1. *All nature*, which he illustrates by "sin is no substance, because it is not nature but the corruption of nature." 2. *Earthly goods*: Genesis xiii. 6, "Their *substance* was great"; Proverbs iii. 9, "Honour the Lord with thy *substance*" (to which he adds Luke xv. 12). 3. *Stability of life*. 4. *Virtue*, because in Proverbs xiii. "Bona est *substantia* cui non est peccatum in conscientiâ." But unhappily for this scheme the "*substantia*" used by the Vulgate in these passages represents quite different words in the Hebrew and the LXX. If, as Luther said, "the science of theology is nothing else than grammar exercised on the words of the Holy Spirit," the Schoolmen were ill equipped indeed.

This ignorance of Greek and Hebrew accounts for the grotesque etymologies in which the Schoolmen abound. Albertus Magnus derives "Epicurean" from "*super cutem*," and Endymion from *en* and *dymion* "intellect!"¹

in aliâ." *Opus Majus*, iii. 1. And Wicklif: "Patet quod totus error in Scripturæ notitiâ et quare idiotæ ipsam turpificant atque falsificant, est *ex grammaticæ et logicæ ignorantiâ*." *Trialog.*, i. 8.

¹ Stöckl, *Gesch. d. Philosophie d. Mittelalters*, vol. ii. p. 353.

Hervæus Dolensis derives *sinceritas* from *sine carie*; and says that "Timotheus" means "beneficent." St. Thomas says that *diabolus* means "falling downwards"; that *terra* is so called "quia teritur pedibus;" that *tenebrae* comes from "*tenere umbram*"; that *abyssus* is derived from *a* and *byssus*, or *a* and *basis*; and that *prophetia* comes from *procul* and *phanos*. Writing on the name Paul, he says that it cannot be of Hebrew origin, because Hebrew does not possess the letter P (!); but it may be from some word with a Hebrew letter like P, and then it means "wonderful," or "elect"; if it be Greek it means "quiet;" if Latin it means "small." He then proceeds to shew how each of the three derivations suits St. Paul, and to prove this from passages of Scripture,—and so on at great length. Roger Bacon derives *Παρασκευῆ* from *parare coenam*.¹ Peter Lombard on Matthew i. 19 makes *traducere* (*παραδειγματίσαι* "to make an example") mean "*rem habere cum sponsâ*." Durandus derives *Alleluja* from *Alle, salvum*; *leu, me*; *ja, fac!* or—by way of alternative—from *alle*; to sing; *lu, praise*; *jah, to the Lord*; and *alle, light*; *lu, life*; *jah, salvation, etc.*²

2. A second radical defect of scholastic exegesis is its extravagant abuse of the dialectic method.

This is specially observable in the great Schoolmen of the thirteenth century. They rarely aim at setting forth the meaning of the passage with which they are dealing, but they work it up dialectically according to the categories of Aristotle,³ and throw it into systematic form by the aid of endless divisions and sub-divisions. They argue about it in an eristic manner with all kinds of subdichotomies, objections, solutions, definitions, conclusions, corollaries,

¹ See Elster, p. 14. Tribechovius, *De Doct. Schol.*

² Durand. *Rational. div. offic.*, p. 58. See many other instances in Tribechovius. Espensæus (on 1 Tim. iii.) says "In Latinis auctoribus Græce nosse suspectum fuit, Ebraicum pœne hæreticum."

³ See Diestel, p. 193.

propositions, and distinctions.¹ "The human mind," as Bacon says, "if it works in contemplation on the nature of things and the works of God, works in accordance with the material . . . but if the mind is turned towards itself (like a spider weaving its web) then it has no limitations, and certainly produces some webs of teaching marvellous for the tenacity of the thread and workmanship, but for any useful purpose trivial and inane."² Can we wonder if all truth and sense were lost sight of in deluges of declarations, objections, confirmations of objections, points of replies, distinctions of these points, statements, declarations of statements, proofs of declarations, disproofs of these proofs, reasons of the disproofs, refutations of these reasons, exceptions of distinctions, and so on *ad infinitum*? "In Divine things," says Ludovicus Vives, "they divide, singularise, particularise, completely, incompletely, as though they were dealing with an apple."³

Some accuse Abelard⁴ and others Peter Lombard⁵ and others Duns Scotus,⁶ and others Albertus,⁷ of having been the originators of this useless method. But the method arose with the adoration of the works of Aristotle, and it was, so to speak, in the air.⁸ And it led to that *coacervatio*, as Sixtus Senensis calls it, that boundless prolixity which wearies us to death. Langenstein, after lecturing four years on Genesis, and publishing four huge folios, had only got to the fourth chapter. Haselbach wrote twenty-four books

¹ See Erasmus, *Encom. Mor.*, p. 193 (ed. 1666).

² *De Augm. Scient.*, i. 16. Wetstein, in the Pref. to the third edition of his Testament, speaks of "Methodicam illam, aridam, mortuam, ligneam, stramineam, artificiosam et φιλοσοφοτεχνουδιαλεκτικοθεολογικην theologiam."

³ Tribechovius, p. 24. Lud. Vives, *De Corrupt. Art.*, 1.

⁴ So Trithemius says, *Cat. S. E.*, p. 97 (Brucker, vol. iii. p. 716).

⁵ So Aventinus, *Annal.* vi. (ap. Tribechov.). See Baur, *Dogmengesch.*, p. 159.

⁶ See Brucker, vol. ii. p. 875. Duns Scotus, *Sent.* iii. *dist.* 24. *qu.* i.

⁷ "He brought Aristotle into the midst of Christianity." Vaughan, *Life of St. Thomas*, vol. i. p. 248.

⁸ Hagenbach (ii. 433) says that Alexander of Hales was the first to make a general use of Aristotle.

on the first chapter of Isaiah. Gregory, long before, had written thirty-five long books on Job. To this day the "divisions" and "distinctions" of the Schoolmen have infected sermons. They applied their "divisions" to every text however short, and their "distinctions" to almost every word.¹ But John of Salisbury even in the twelfth century might have taught them that "dialectic is inefficacious if it be unsupported by other knowledge."²

Instances without number might be given of this defect; but in order to do the Schoolmen no injustice we will choose two favourable specimens from the greatest of their writers—St. Thomas. Both instances are interesting in themselves, and neither of them is a tenth part so flagrant as many which might have been chosen.

Here then is his sermon (*Homil.*, cxxv.) on True and False Riches, which illustrates the Scholastic fondness for dividing.

Riches, he says, are of three kinds. I. Temporal. II. Spiritual. III. Eternal.

I. 1. Temporal riches are to be despised for four reasons: because they are, *a.* useless; *β.* transient; *γ.* they lead to poverty; *δ.* the contempt of them leads to hope.

2. By them men sin in *four* ways: *a.* by unjust acquisition; *β.* by avaricious tenure; *γ.* by bad use; *δ.* by pride.

II. 1. Spiritual riches are of *two* kinds: *a.* knowledge; *β.* virtue.

2. They are to be sought for *three* reasons: *a.* their immensity; *β.* their utility; *γ.* their dignity.

III. Eternal riches are also to be sought for *three* reasons: *a.* their reality; *β.* their joyousness; *γ.* their eternity.

Thus on this very simple and practical theme we have no less than twenty divisions.

¹ Sixtus Senensis, *Bibl. Sanct.*, p. 218.

² Joh. Sarisb., *Metalog.*, ii. 9.

My second instance will shew, in a remarkable way, the dangers which arose from that systematization, that *schematismus*, that method of partitioning every subject in a formal manner, and storing it in compartments, which the Schoolmen learnt from Aristotle.

It is St. Thomas's scheme for arranging the Epistles of St. Paul. It is given as a note on the words "*a vessel of election*," in Acts ix. 15, and on it, as on a pivot, turn the 700 pages of his commentary on the Epistles.

First he takes the word "vessel." Men, he says, are compared to vessels in Scripture, for three reasons. i. Because as regards make they depend on the will of the artificer (*Auctor in vase*). ii. Because they are filled (*plenitudo vasis*). iii. Because of their use.

Now St. Paul carried Christ in three ways. i. In his body (Gal. vi. 17). ii. In his mouth (Matt. xii. 36, which admits of reference to the dove with the olive branch). iii. To those absent as well as to those present. And his excellence in this office is shewn in four ways. i. By his grace of election. ii. By his fidelity. iii. By his singular excellency. iv. By the results he produced.

Applying these remarks to the Epistles, he says that we have: 1. The *Auctor in vase*. 2. The fulness of the vessel—the teaching of Christ. 3. The method of carrying, since the Epistles were carried by messengers (with reference to which he very needlessly quotes 2 Chron. xxx. 6). 4. The distinction of different kinds of use. For St. Paul wrote fourteen Epistles, of which nine instruct the Church; four instruct chief persons in the Church—prelates and kings; and one the people of Israel (Heb.); while all the fourteen treat of the Grace of Christ, which may be considered in three ways:—

I. As it is in Christ, the Head (Heb.).

II. As it is in the principal members of his body (Pastoral Epistles and Philemon).

III. As it is the mystic body—the Church. (The Epistles to the Gentiles.)

But in these again Grace is handled in a threefold manner.

1. As it is in itself (Rom.).

2. As it is in the Sacraments: viz. *α.* in the Sacraments themselves (1 Cor.); *β.* in the ministers of them (2 Cor.); and as it is *not* in superfluous sacraments, which are excluded (Gal.).

3. With regard to its effects.

α. In ecclesiastical unity (Eph.).

β. In its confirmation (Phil.).

γ. As a defence against errors (Col.).

δ. As a defence against present persecutions (1 Thess.).

ε. As a defence against future persecutions (2 Thess.).

Then, as regards II., the rulers of the Church are, i. Temporal; ii. Spiritual.

i. Temporal heads of the Church are addressed in Philemon.

ii. Spiritual heads of the Church are taught:—

α. Unity (1 Tim.).

β. Constancy (2 Tim.).

γ. The resistance of heretics (Tit.).

“And thus,” adds the saint, “we see the distinctions of means and order in all the Epistles.”

Could anything be more ingenious, and yet at the same time more entirely beside the mark? What are we to think of a scheme of the Epistles which deals with that to the Galatians as a sort of appendix to the treatment of the Sacraments? Yet what abler scheme could be suggested when men paid no attention to critical and historical considerations, and excluded every purely human element in the origin of the Epistles in order to range them in a compact scheme of abstract doctrines?

3. Another defect of scholastic commentaries is the barbarous nature of their language.

It will be needless to dwell on this point. I will not deluge the reader with a flood of "formalities, haecceities, realities, quiddities, relativities," etc. The Schoolmen often mistook for learning and for knowledge an obscure and barbarous terminology, which was so difficult of comprehension that Erasmus once heard a "theologian" say that nine years would not be enough to understand what Duns Scotus wrote merely as a preface to Peter Lombard's Sentences; and that unless a man had all the metaphysics of Duns Scotus in his memory he would be unable to comprehend a single sentence in all his writings. Duns Scotus is chiefly responsible for these subtle technicalities, and often respecting matters which he himself barbarously calls "*incircumscribitabiles*."

But instead of dilating on this point, two or three instances shall suffice.

Here for instance is the scholastic definition of "Person," which I cannot pretend to translate. "*Persona non dicit relationem originis nec communem sed duplicem negationem communicabilitatis in genere non extra genus, significans aliquid positivum et intentionem primam non secundam connotans circuminsessionem.*"—If such a definition be necessary, who shall profess to understand the Athanasian creed?

Then follows the definition of their theological *arcanum* the circuminsessio (*περιχώρησις*), *communicatio idiomatum*, or in plainer language the relation of the two Natures to each other in the Person of Christ. It is defined as "*Subsistentis in subsistente realiter distincto mutua præsentialitatis assistentia in eadem essentia.*" The Hypostatic Union is "*Relatio disquiparantiæ realis quidem in uno extremo cui in altero nulla realis relatio respondet*"; and the Union of the Word in Christ is "*relatio extrinsecus*

adveniens terminata ad Verbum, et fundata in assumpta humanitate, et est ista relatio non dependentis ad causam effectivans sed sustentificatio ad sustentificans."

Doubtless when they had mastered this barbarous and nonsensical jargon, the scholastics were inflated by the semblance of knowledge without the reality, and, like other "theologians" in all ages, imagined that they knew something more than most men about the nature of Christ!

I will give one more instance from no less a person than the great Nicolas of Lyra. On Genesis i. 18 he observes, "Ad primum cum dicitur *actus* est qui distinguit dicendum quod omnis distinctio est per actum, non tamen oportet quod sit semper per actum actualiter informantem; materia igitur cœli et materia corruptibilium differunt in quantum sunt in potentia ad actus diversarum rationum, quod actus cœli est actus inseparabiliter informans. Non autem forma elementi aut mixti. Ad secundum," etc., etc. Well may Dr. Siegfried ask "whether in any age whatever any human being whatever could have gained from such language a single distinct conception?"¹

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¹ In Merz, *Archiv.*, vol. i. p. 431. *Rashi's Einfluss über Nicolaus von Lira und Luther.*