BIBLICAL HERMENEUTICS: PART I

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I

HERMENEUTICS (from the Greek hermeneutos, to interpret) is the science of interpretation. It may be applied to both sacred and secular literature, so that the application to Holy Scripture is further defined as Biblical Hermeneutics or Hermeneutics Sacra.

The purpose of Biblical Hermeneutics is to provide rules and principles for an understanding and correct understanding of Scripture. It serves as an aid in interpreting such questions as: Is Genesis 1-3 history in the sense in which we normally understand the term? To what extent may we see Christological significance in the tabernacle? Is the Song of Songs just a love poem or an allegory of Christ and His Church? Who is the beast with the number 666? Is there any deeper significance in the two pennies given by the Good Samaritan to the innkeeper?

The need of such rules and principles is paramount for several reasons. First, because to so many teachers of Holy Scripture it has never occurred that there is any place for such a study. Every man his own interpreter has been taken to excess and the Bible has suffered too much and too long at the hands of those to whom any kind of check is unknown.

Second, to prevent further division in the Christian Church. One of the understandable results of the Reformation with its emphasis on private judgment has been the coming into being of an increasing number of denominational sects. But if we can at least agree on some rules and principles of interpretation we are one step nearer to agreeing on the interpretation itself.

Third, and allied to this last reason, such study will help to prevent the existence of further heretical sects and the increase of existing sects; or at least to show more clearly why existing sects are heretical. For the majority do, or say, they do, accept the authority of the Word of God. Yet, through the various and informal use of the text, it is plain that they constitute their particular heresy. The words which Shakespeare put into the mouth of Bassanio have some point here: ‘In religion what damned exegesis will sound more loud and approve itself than the ten hiding the grossness with fair adornment!’ The Bible can be used to support the most flagrant heresy simply by faulty hermeneutics. The tragic tenet of the Jehovah’s Witnesses concerning blood transfusion, based on Leviticus 17:12, is a glaring example of this.

Fourth, such principles are necessary because of the sinful and biased mind of the interpreter, for so often it is more convenient and less costly in Christian living to interpret Scripture in one way rather than another. We may be able to arrive at a hermeneutical opinion to help us to remedy our own moral prejudices. Moreover, tradition has such a powerful influence on our thought that we often fail to investigate the meaning of the Word of God for ourselves. Indeed, we approach Scripture with certain predispositions and preconceptions which in themselves may be untrue and unbiblical and consequently our minds may well be closed to alternative interpretations. The tradition may be right, but at least let us make sure that such traditional interpretations have been thoroughly thought out firsthand and checked by sound hermeneutical rules. Truth matters more than loyalty to a local group. Scripture must never subserve a dogmatic system, and neither must the interpretations of Scofield, Thomson, or any other pundit be put on the same level of authority as the Bible itself. Commentaries written right alongside the text of Scripture can be an insidious snare. ‘Scofield says so’ does not necessarily finish any discussion on the meaning of a verse. Luther has said, ‘The function of the interpreter is to let the biblical author speak. What he says he says instead of attributing to him what he thinks he ought to say.’

And though we may not easily and lightly disregard the thought of the Church throughout the centuries (the communis opinio), the Church must never dominate matters of interpretation.

Lastly, and not of least importance, hermeneutics is necessary because of its bearing on the conservative-liberal debate. So often liberals, in dismissing the conservative evangelical view of Scripture and authority, have really dismissed a certain interpretation of the word ‘authority’ (and an obscure one at that). The way of authority has been thrown out with the bathwater of a false interpretation. Since both had been so closely allied (to some, alas, the bath water is the baby) it is understandable that one was lost with the other. We shall not begin to make ground on the question of authority until we have divorced it from certain interpretations which have little to do with a thoroughly hermeneutic. Let us beware of unscriptural stumbling-blocks.

It is hardly possible this side of heaven (and in heaven we won’t need them anyway) to get a complete set of rules by which the correct meaning is arrived at infallibly. We must not lean from so far from the completely subjective point of view that we fall over backwards and remain even farther from the ground. We must aim at eliminating as much of the subjective as possible on the one hand, so ensuring that exegesis does not become esegesis. (for example, how many so-called ‘direct’ missions of today talk Krauss is really a religious inspiration?) The most famous magician would be hard put to produce more hitherto unseen pigeons and rabbits from his hat than many Bible teachers get from the Word. The Bible is not a magician’s top hat.) Yet, of course, we shall allow for the freedom of the Holy Spirit and not cramp Him by a water-tight system. And sometimes, many times, we must in all honesty confess our ignorance! The Talmudic rule, ‘Teach thy tongue to say, “I do not know,” should constantly be observed. It is salutary to remember that there have been at least thirty interpretations of 1 Corinthians 15:29.

II

It is important and necessary to point out two differences which, by being confused or identified, have led to much wrong thinking. First, there is the difference between interpretation and hermeneutics. The hermeneutic must be based on a correct doctrine of authority, such a belief does not bind us to any one particular interpretation. Often in the past, the Church has fought unnecessary battles because it felt the Church had something to do with science. It was a long time before the Church realized that a heliocentric view of the universe was not in opposition to God’s Word (see, e.g., Gal. 1:16 and later, that they could wholeheartedly accept that ‘new’ view still keep their view of Scripture. So it must be understood that authority and inspiration are not hermeneutical concepts. A biblical view of authority accepts the Bible as the sole and final standard with the authority and inspiration are not hermeneutical concepts. A biblical view of authority accepts the Bible as the sole and final standard with the authorship of the Bible. So it is not to be interpreted. There is no imposition of a literalistic understanding of Scripture on the person who lives and thinks under the authority of the Word of God. It is not that there has been a change in the text from one hand to the other that he is thought by that other to have changed the seat of his authority. Shades of Galileo!

The second distinction is that between interpretation and application. The meaning of any passage is one, even though it may have a number of levels of meaning in prophesy, and we must do all we can to find this meaning; but the application may be many. The Bible is a book which teaches by principle as well as by example. The principle may be plainly stated or it may have to be abstracted from an historical situation. It does not and could not offer a blue print for every possible situation, e.g., may I swim at camp on a Sunday afternoon? (though it is conceivable that someone as important as Galileo and the axe-head; it is possible that if he does say instead of attributing to him what he thinks he ought to say.)

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This rule particularly applies in guidance. A missionary candidate, in trying to find guidance as to which Bible College she should attend, Lebanon or Glasgow, should not necessarily feel that Lebanon is the right one simply because she may have read in 1 Kings 5 that Solomon founded it. Lebanon. (This particular case happens to be true.) This is hardly the original meaning of the passage. And, at any rate, Glasgow was at a disadvantage since it is not mentioned in Scripture. Having a 'word from the Lord' is both justifiable and helpful providing the word is first put into its original context and the true meaning grasped. For example, a fellow should not break off his engagement because he suddenly has a 'word' from Jeremiah 16: 2: ('You shall not take a wife') though, this too, is known to have happened. The perplexed evangelist who first tries to discover if his circumstances are similar to those of Jeremiah's, that is, to put the verse into its context. (He should, incidentally, try to discover a suitable context for the word well.) We must be careful not to distort the phrase just because we cannot get guidance or a blessing from it as it stands.

Another subsidiary point which may be noted under this head is that it is the principle which must be sought in a particular historical situation before a passage is applied. That is to say, it is the present day equivalent of the holy kiss (2 Cor. 13: 12) which has behind it the same principle of action which must be applied. (J. B. Phillips interprets for us in his 'A handshake all round, please!') Likewise with the veil of 1 Corinthians 11: 2ff. is the modern hat the symbol of subjection that the veil was in Paul's letter?

The most basic of all hermeneutical rules is interpret scripture by scripture. It is founded on the fact of the self-interpreting nature of Scripture. It is the principle which must be sought in a particular historical situation before a passage is applied. That is to say, it is the present day equivalent of the holy kiss (2 Cor. 13: 12) which has behind it the same principle of action which must be applied. (J. B. Phillips interprets for us in his 'A handshake all round, please!') Likewise with the veil of 1 Corinthians 11: 2ff. is the modern hat the symbol of subjection that the veil was in Paul's letter?

A word in parenthesis must be added here. It cannot be said that Scripture throws the whole light on every passage. If this were so the study of extra-biblical knowledge would become quite redundant. But it must be admitted that such knowledge often sheds great light upon the Word of God and for the specialist is indispensable. As Terry says, 'The professional interpreter of scripture needs more than a well balanced mind, disciplined acuteness of eye and a store of information in the broad and varied fields of history, science, and philosophy.' And he goes on to list geography, history, chronology, antiquities, politics, natural science, philosophy and comparative philology.

Babylonian mythology throws light on Rahab in Isaiah 51: 9; that a knowledge of Corinthian customs throws light on Paul's teaching on the veil in 1 Corinthians 11; that Jewish chronology helps the understanding of the phrase 'three days and three nights' (Mt. 12: 40; and so on. But it must be added that extra-biblical knowledge in no way dictates the meaning of a passage. It serves only as a handmaid. In the realm of science especially, it may warn us of interpretations of passages which are ambiguous but it may never force us into an interpretation which is contrary to other parts of Scripture. Before this parenthesis on the recognized limitation of this first rule is closed it must be said that the Bible is sufficiently self-interpreting for 'the man in the street'. After all, it is addressed to him primarily.

This basic principle of the self-interpreting nature of Scripture, sometimes known as the analogy of faith, has a number of corollaries.

(i) Interpret Scripture according to the purpose of Scripture. a. The whole of Scripture. The Bible confesses to a limited purpose. It does not profess to be an 'Enquire within on Everything'; for the wisdom it offers to its readers is a saving wisdom, that is, a knowledge which is able to make us wise unto salvation (2 Tim. 3: 15). So it is not meant to make us wise unto biology, geology, botany. The wisdom it provides is soteriological. Calvin says, 'If you would learn geology or any other recondite art, go elsewhere.' Of course, the faith does not come to us in this way. It is not meant to be an 'Enquire within on Everything'; for the wisdom it offers to its readers is a saving wisdom, that is, a knowledge which is able to make us wise unto salvation (2 Tim. 3: 15). So it is not meant to make us wise unto biology, geology, botany. The wisdom it provides is soteriological. Calvin says, 'If you would learn geology or any other recondite art, go elsewhere.'

b. Each part of Scripture. Within this one main purpose there are several subsidiary purposes for the various parts. Generally speaking, each part is written for different situations and circumstances and the particular purpose of a passage or book must be ascertained before the true meaning will become clear. Thus, to grasp the purpose of James and Galatians prevents any belief in a contradiction between Paul and James. The purpose of each letter is different. The Apocalypse can hardly begin to be understood without realizing that its primary function is to encourage the persecuted people of God (cf. Rev. 15: 10; 14: 12), and such an understanding will prevent much grave mishandling of this great book. So first ask the question: Why did the author write this? what need was he trying to meet?

(ii) Interpret by the context. Contextual interpretation is a further obvious corollary of the first basic principle of interpretation. Any study of a passage is an attempt to find its meaning. We must look to see what is the meaning primary purpose of a passage, and, if there be more than one, which is the main purpose. (i) The purpose of each letter is different. The Apocalypse can hardly begin to be understood without realizing that its primary function is to encourage the persecuted people of God (cf. Rev. 15: 10; 14: 12), and such an understanding will prevent much grave mishandling of this great book. So first ask the question: Why did the author write this? what need was he trying to meet?

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they agree with each other. Now this is true, but the passage is not primarily concerned with that. The whole context, verses 13-20, is a parallel to the disciples and verses 19 and 20 must be understood in the light of this. The Lord is here giving authority (in disciplinary matters) to the local church. For authority is not to be invested in one person, but in the two and three who are gathered in the name of Christ, thus entering His presence. Thus whatever they bind or loose on earth will be endorsed in heaven. (John 20: 19-23 should be compared with this passage, for the same thing is said in a different way.)

The disciples were the righteous remnant of Israel to whom so many promises were addressed in Isaiah. These were the people who were awaiting the messianic order of things. Into this group, Jesus, who was Spirit-equipped (Lk. 3: 22; Is. 42: 1, 19: 2, 61: 1), well-pleased of the Father (Mt. 3: 17; Is. 40: 3), preaching the gospel of the kingdom (Mt. 4: 15; Is. 61: 1). Moreover, He had already fulfilled the prophecy of Isaiah 61: 1ff. by His reading in the synagogue (Lk. 4: 16f.). So Jesus told them that the conditions promised in Isaiah would now begin to be fulfilled. To the disciples the ‘poor’ would mean the ‘poor’ in Isaiah. (The ‘poor’ was a synonym for the remnant; the humble poor became distinguished as the line in which faithfulness to the Lord was maintained and true spiritual religion developed. Cf. Is. 1: 10 and 61: 1.) Those who ‘mourn’ are those who bewail the fact that God's righteousness is not manifest in the land. (Cf. Is. 60: 20, 61: 1-34.) The ‘meek’ is a parallel term to the poor, and they shall inherit the earth or land. (Cf. Is. 60: 21.) The righteousness which is hungered and thirsted for would seem to have little to do with imputed righteousness. So the beatitudes are not primarily commands, but the gospel of the kingdom. This was good news: that with the coming of Messiah there would take place the great reversal. Because Jesus had come, the blessings of Isaiah would be fulfilled.