

INTERPRETING THE BIBLE

by

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PREFACE

Since the close of World War II there has been a rapidly growing interest in the theological science of hermeneutics. This revival of interest in the methodology of interpreting the Scriptures is found among diverse groups of Christians. It is prominent in the various branches of Protestantism. It is clear among the various Roman Catholic orders and in the Greek orthodox communion. Christians not only want to communicate to the men of today, but they want to know the biblical basis for what they have to say.

This serious interest in hermeneutics has helped to show why Christians differ with each other. Different principles and procedures yield different results, and even the same basic principles may be applied differently. Such an understanding of differences, however, is necessary to helping others and to being helped by them in one's own interpretative endeavors.

The same serious interest in interpretation has also brought into focus agreements among various interpreters. When interpreters from various groups have worked together to unfold the meaning of a passage, agreement on many significant conclusions has been reached. Thus hermeneutics is a potent unifying force in the Christian church.

The most impelling motive for learning to interpret the scriptures correctly is the necessity to understand clearly for ourselves exactly what we are trying to communicate to others. The need to communicate all of the gospel message is urgent: "Woe to me if I do not preach the gospel" (I Cor. 9:16); but double is the woe to one who, though he claims to be preaching the gospel, does in fact not do so because he has misinterpreted the written record that presents the gospel. It is my earnest desire that every reader of this book shall proclaim the

truth of God with new urgency, and with greater understanding.

The principles found in this book will help the reader to understand that much of the variety in interpretation is good and that it represents a creativity for which the Christian church may be grateful. The principles will also show that much of the variety is caused by a failure to follow sound methodology in interpretation. The purpose of this book is (i) to show that the student of the Bible must have a proper method of interpretation to get at the full meaning of the Bible; (ii) to discuss the many elements of such interpretations; and thus (iii) to guide the serious reader into a correct understanding of the Scriptures.

A book of this kind makes one aware of how much he owes to others. My teachers and students, and a great number of writers on biblical interpretation have all contributed to this volume. Others have contributed in a very specific way.

I am greatly indebted to my wife, Alvera Johnson Mickelsen, for editing the first draft of the manuscript and for helping in many other ways. I am also indebted to Clifton J. Orlebeke for his pertinent criticisms and his editing of the entire manuscript to give it evenness and consistency of expression. Any deficiencies in arrangement or manner of presentation are my sole responsibility.

To the Alumni Association of Wheaton College I offer my thanks and tribute for their support of research in the various areas of the humanities, biological sciences, physical sciences, and social sciences. I was the recipient of the Alumni Research grant for the 1961-62 school year. This grant freed me from all teaching responsibilities during that year so that I could devote my whole time to research and writing. Without such help, I could not have written this volume.

I would like to thank Professor Merrill C. Tenney, Dean of the Graduate School, Wheaton College, for his many indications of help and support. In the second semester of the 1960-61 school year he took over one of my courses so that more time was available to me for research. Such unselfish giving is a beautiful expression of Christian love in action. In addition I would like to acknowledge my indebtedness to Professors Otto A. Piper, Amos Niven Wilder, and Warren Young for their help in providing bibliographical information. Finally, for his painstaking work on the subject index, I express my thanks to Mr. Warren A. Harbeck, who was my graduate assistant during the past academic year.

Part of this volume I used in the spring of 1963 as the McElwain Lectures at Gordon Divinity School, Beverly Farms, Massachusetts. I was happy indeed to discuss with Gordon faculty members and students many of the subjects here presented.

A. BERKELEY MICKELSEN

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INTRODUCTION

I Source of the Interpreter's Principles

IMPORTANCE OF INTERPRETATION

The term "hermeneutics" designates both the science and art of interpretation. The Greek verb *hermēneuō* means "to interpret or explain." The Greek noun *hermēneia* means "interpretation," "explanation."¹ In both the Greek counterpart and the contemporary technical term, interpretation has to do with meaning. Interpretation as a discipline is important because meaning has to do with the core of a man's thinking.

The need for interpretation is not peculiar to the Scriptures. Any document, ancient or modern, must be interpreted. The decisions of the Supreme Court are actually interpretations of the Constitution of the United States. Philosophers often debate what Plato, Aristotle, or Kant meant by certain phrases or assertions. The archaeologist who carefully analyzes a religious writing from the Dead Sea Scrolls often finds statements that puzzle him, and he must use all the principles and skills he knows to reach even a tentative conclusion of meaning.

Whatever the documents, the interpreter must be careful not to distort the meaning. Such care is required especially in the interpretation of the Scriptures, for they involve not only history, proverbs, peoples, and institutions, but the very message or revelation of God. Timothy was commanded to exercise great care in handling this authoritative message: "Make every effort to present [render] yourself approved [by test] to God, a workman who does not need to be ashamed, rightly handling

¹ Henry George Liddell and Robert Scott, *A Greek-English Lexicon*, 9th ed. (1940), I, 690.

the message of truth" (II Tim. 2:15).² To handle the message of truth rightly demands sound principles of interpretation.

Some Christians fear that an emphasis upon such principles ignores the illumination of the Holy Spirit. This fear has some foundation. Many have approached the Bible in a mechanical, rationalistic fashion. Fleeing from the extreme of mystical pietism, they have rushed into the error of regarding man's intellect as self-sufficient. They have thought that man, strictly by his own intellectual efforts, could search out and make known the true and deep meanings of Scripture. On the opposite side, there have been some sincere people who have thought that the witness of the Spirit in the heart of the believer enables him automatically to know the correct meaning of every phrase, or verse, or passage. True, the illumination of the Spirit is essential, but such illumination can be hindered by wrong approaches to the Scripture. The Christian must skillfully use sound principles in his efforts to uncover meaning. Paul speaks forcefully on this point: "Now we are not, as the many, adulterating [i.e., lit. falsifying in the process of selling] the message of God, but as out of pure motives, certainly as from God, before God, in Christ we are speaking" (II Cor. 2:17).³ The interpreter must have pure motives. He must speak as one sent from God. He must present his conclusions before God. He must do all this with an awareness that he is bound to Christ.

² The Greek word *orthotomeō* (rightly handling) only occurs here and in Prov. 3:6: 11:5 (LXX). In Proverbs the Greek word *hodos* (ways) is found with the verb. There the figure is one of cutting a path in a straight direction. Walter Bauer suggests here, "guiding the word of truth along a straight path," *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament* (1957), p. 584. But the context here does not involve a builder of roads or a guide, but rather a workman. Hence, R. St. John Parry suggests that the figure may be of a stone mason who cuts stones fair and straight to fit into their places in a building. *The Pastoral Epistles, ad loc.* Moulton and Milligan argue that *orthotomeō* is analogous to *kainotomeō*. Since the latter word means "to make a new or strange assertion," the former word would mean "to teach the word aright," *Vocabulary of the Greek Testament*, pp. 456-57. Spicq agrees with this emphasis when he says that Timothy is "to set forth [the message of truth] correctly and exactly as he understands it," *Les Épîtres Pastorales*, p. 353. The Vulgate, often criticized when it misses the mark, certainly has an excellent translation of *orthotomounta* by its rendering *recte tractantem*—"handling rightly" (correctly, accurately). The passage urges a careful handling of the various elements in the message of truth as one puts them together and proclaims that message.

³ The participle (*kapēleuontes*) which is translated above as "adulterating" means to trade in, peddle, huckster something; Bauer, *op. cit.*, p. 404. Since the tradesmen engaged in many tricks, the word often had a bad connotation. Windisch (*TIVNT*, III, 608-09) points out that Paul's usage combines two ideas: the offering or presenting of the message of God for money and the falsifying of the word by additions. He concludes by saying: "*kapēleuein*

BASIC OBJECTIVE OF INTERPRETERS

Simply stated, the task of interpreters of the Bible is to find out the meaning of a statement (command, question) for the author and for the first hearers or readers, and thereupon to transmit that meaning to modern readers. The interpreter will observe whether a given statement tends to be understood by a modern reader identically, similarly, or differently from the sense intended by the ancient writer, and will adjust his explanation accordingly.

It is evident that all biblical interpretation has two dimensions. The first is concerned with discovering the original meaning of a statement, while the second takes account of changes in meaning which contemporary readers may attach to the same words. Much attention has recently been paid to the second dimension, and properly so. From the first century A.D. through the Middle Ages, the gulf between the New Testament world and later generations was not great. From the Renaissance to the nineteenth century, however, the gulf widened, and today modern man can scarcely appreciate many features of the ancient world and its outlook which are simply assumed by the biblical authors.

Modern man belongs to an age of technology and to the culture which accompanies it. His environment is different, and his concepts are often correspondingly different. For instance, he tends to think of society individualistically, while the biblical writer emphasizes group unity. The modern reader understands little of family solidarity, of the ancient pantheon of pagan deities, and of the tensions peculiar to a society composed of aristocrats, freedmen, and slaves. Hence he does not grasp fully Paul's discussions of racial solidarity, of meat offered to idols, and of the attitude and reaction of a slave. He understands *something*, but seldom realizes how much of the total meaning eludes him.

VALID AND INVALID PRINCIPLES

Principles of hermeneutics are precepts which express or describe the various ways followed by interpreters to get at

ton logon tou theou is thereby a drastic expression for a monstrous misuse which is carried on with the Holy Word. Paul for that reason on his part immediately sets forth in comparison the correct deportment, his deportment: unselfishness, subjection to God's own word, responsible self-consciousness in relation to God, subjection to Christ." The abbreviation TWNT, as used above, refers to G. Friedrich and G. Kittel, *Theologisches Wörterbuch zum Neuen Testament* (8 vols.; 1933 and ff.).

meaning. They are statements of procedure. These principles may be *adopted* (i.e., consciously learned), *adapted* (i.e., consciously changed), or simply *appropriated* from one's habits of thinking (i.e., unconscious acceptance of what the person regards as axiomatic or the natural way to treat any particular kind of subject matter). These principles of hermeneutics are *valid* or *invalid* depending on whether or not they really unfold the meaning a statement had for the author and the first hearers or readers. They are *valid* or *invalid* depending on whether or not readers get the *idea* that the original author intended to convey. The difference between valid and invalid principles or procedures may be illustrated as follows.

(a) One valid principle for determining the meaning of a word is to study the context of the word plus the usage or meanings which the word is known to have in other contexts. To do this, one must have specific examples of the various meanings of the word, and these examples must be drawn from the same period of history as the writing being studied. On the other hand, an invalid principle is the rule that one may use etymology to determine the meaning of later occurrences of a word. Etymology is the science of tracing the meaning of a word back to its root. The etymologist asks: what did this particular word mean in its earliest form? When a word may be broken up into two or three parts, the root meaning of each part may be considered. But etymological meaning without clear-cut examples of actual usage contemporary with the given example is worthless. Such procedure may sound profound, but in reality etymological meaning may lead the interpreter far from the true meaning of a word in a particular context. For example the English word "enthusiasm" has a Latin and Greek derivation and means etymologically "the fact of being possessed by a god." As late as 1807 it is used in the sense of "possession by a god, supernatural inspiration, prophetic or poetic ecstasy."⁴ But now this etymological meaning is no longer used. The word simply means "rapturous intensity of feeling on behalf of a person, cause, etc.; passionate eagerness in any pursuit."⁵ To take an example of the word "enthusiasm" from a work written in the twentieth century and to give it the meaning "possessed by a god" would be to misinterpret it completely. In the twentieth century there are no examples of the word which reflect the etymological meaning.

(b) For a second and more sophisticated example of valid and invalid hermeneutic principles, we may begin by consider-

⁴ *The Oxford Universal Dictionary on Historical Principles* (1955), p. 617.

⁵ *Ibid.*

ing a valuable discussion by Rudolf Bultmann. Bultmann has a chapter on "The Nature of History (A)" in which he discusses the problem of hermeneutics and the question of historical knowledge.⁶ He rightly insists that "each interpretation is guided by a certain interest, by a certain putting of the question."⁷ Why is a man interested in a particular document? What question or purpose makes him consider the text? This interest and purpose Bultmann calls a *pre-understanding*. A document from the past may be interpreted from the standpoint of an historian. Or the interest may be that of a psychologist. Another reader may turn to a document because of his interest in aesthetics. Finally, Bultmann suggests that one may view a document from an existential perspective—seeking to understand history not in its empirical course but as the sphere of life within which the human being moves, within which human life gains and develops its possibilities.⁸

This is, of course, Bultmann's own framework or perspective. Yet any technical framework only makes possible a more unified interest. Certainly an historian could be interested in aesthetics and could also consider an ancient document from the standpoint of men looking for meaning to existence. Most people who approach the Scriptures have a rather complex "pre-understanding." But all of the various elements in this pre-understanding do affect the results. Bultmann himself is no mere existentialist in his approach to the biblical literature. He claims to be the kind of historian who holds to an unbreakable chain of cause and effect in history. This view of history is also held by philosophers known as logical positivists.

The historical method includes the presupposition that history is a unity in the sense of a closed continuum of effects in which individual events are connected by the succession of cause and effect. . . . This closedness means that the continuum of historical happenings cannot be rent by the interference of supernatural transcendent powers and that, therefore, there is no "miracle" in this sense of the word.⁹

Here it becomes clear that "pre-understanding" and "presupposition" are related as a part to a whole. A presupposition is one particular part of a total pre-understanding.

Bultmann himself illustrates the fact that presuppositions tend to control the interpreter in his investigation. He readily

⁶ Rudolf Bultmann, *The Presence of Eternity* (1957), pp. 110-22.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 113.

⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 114-115.

⁹ Rudolf Bultmann, "Is Exegesis Without Presuppositions Possible?" in *Existence and Faith* (1960), pp. 291-292.

admits that the Old Testament speaks of the interference by God in history. But he claims that since historical science cannot demonstrate such an interference, the Old Testament merely records that there were those who believed in such an interference. The interpreter cannot say that God has not acted in history. If a man wants to see an act of God in an historical event, he may do so. But history will always record this event in terms of immanent historical causes.¹⁰ Hence a Christian may believe that God led some Israelites out of Egypt. Yet since there are no accounts outside of the Bible "of a company of slaves that escaped from Egyptian slavery and that was established as a racial and religious community by a man named Moses,"¹¹ one must depend upon evidence which is circumstantial. The people known as *Habiru* or *Apiru* led a seminomadic life. It is likely that the Hebrews of the Old Testament were a part of these peoples since their migration to Egypt and their manner of life seen in Genesis and Exodus is very similar. History indicates the "perennial tendency of nomadic and seminomadic groups to infiltrate into the sown lands of Egypt and Palestine."¹² Thus for Bultmann, history is limited to cause and effect relationships in a time-space framework. The possibility of God breaking through into these relationships is automatically ruled out by an empirical definition of what is possible. This view is widespread among many who would not classify themselves as sharing Bultmann's existentialistic demythologizing approach to scriptural materials.

There is no neutral ground in this controversy. If God did break through into history¹³ as the Bible records, then he is not only active in history, but he acts freely and purposefully above and beyond history. He then becomes the Cause of all other causes and effects, and at the same time he may act in, with, alongside of, and apart from any secondary causes or effects. Instead of Bultmann's *closed continuum*, such an interpreter would have a *controlled continuum*. Nothing is haphazard or erratic. God has established laws, but he is not a prisoner of his own laws. Bultmann has a universe with a lid on. Unfortunately one gets the uncomfortable feeling that not only is man shut up to existence under this lid but so is God.

Hence orthodoxy, insisting on a controlled continuum, is

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 292.

¹¹ Cf. J. Coert Rylaarsdam, "Exodus," *The Interpreter's Bible*, ed. George Arthur Buttrick *et al.*, I, 836.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ See H. H. Farmer, "The Bible: Its Significance and Authority," *The Interpreter's Bible*, I, 5-7.

actually asserting the freedom of God. That God is free to act becomes clear in the miracles of Jesus. As we examine these carefully, certain characteristics emerge. There are other accounts in ancient times of miracles, but there are vast differences between these and the biblical accounts. Grundmann makes some wise observations on this point:

As a doer of miracles Jesus does not stand alone in his time. The Hellenistic and Jewish environment is full of miraculous events and miracles of the gods, and miraculous deeds. The miracles of Jesus are to be differentiated in a threefold manner from the miracles of his time: *a.* The NT miracles of Jesus have nothing to do with magic or magical means and proceedings as do the majority of the miracles outside of the New Testament. *b.* The miracles are called forth through the powerfully fulfilled word of Jesus which has nothing to do with magical formulæ . . . The miracles of Jesus are a part of the breaking through of the reign of God, which Jesus brought with his person in proclamation and action. They are the reign of God which overcomes and represses the Satanic-demonic sphere of influence. The miracles of Jesus are, as his entire history, eschatological events. . . . In this situation the basic distinction to all other miraculous events appears although the miracles of Jesus may exhibit a number of parallels. Therein the history of Jesus is eschatological history so that with him the reign of God breaks through. *c.* The miracles have as a supposition the faith of the authors and of those who receive the miracles. They are accomplished thus in a thoroughly personal relationship. Jesus can do no miracles in Nazareth because faith is lacking (Matt. 13:58 & parallels). The disciples were not able to heal the boy because they lacked faith (Matt. 17:19-20; Mark 9:28-29). By this, magic is removed in this supposition: not the knowledge of magical means or formulæ, but on the contrary, the personal relation between God and Jesus on the one hand, between Jesus and men on the other, accomplishes the miracle without magical compulsion or force.¹⁴

Miracles then become a sample of what will happen when God's power is fully expressed and when his rule becomes total. The idea of a controlled continuum in which God may act according to his purposes for men is a motif that occurs frequently in Scripture. The idea of a closed continuum is invalid because it tries to make a norm that controls God. But God will not be regulated in this fashion. The Scriptures assert God's freedom: "Who knows the mind of the Lord, or who has become his advisor, who has instructed him" (Isa. 40:13LXX, cf. Rom. 11:34). Obviously the Scriptures know nothing of a God who adheres to the norm of a closed continuum.

¹⁴ Walter Grundmann, "Dunamai / dunamis," *TWNT*, II, 302-03.

AREAS OF STUDY FROM WHICH PRINCIPLES ARE DRAWN

Every interpreter, whether he is aware of it or not, draws his principles from certain areas of study. It is important, therefore, to survey these areas and to discuss briefly the relevant principles derived from them.

Language

Language is one of the most important areas from which principles are drawn. The Bible is written in three languages: Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek. The better an interpreter knows these languages, the easier will be his task. But what about those who do not know these languages? They should know all they can *about* the languages. With such knowledge they can adapt some of the principles which should be applied to the original text to the English translation (or German, French, Spanish, etc., as the case may be).¹⁵

Hebrew and Aramaic. Both Hebrew and Aramaic are part of the Semitic language family. Semitic languages were spoken over a wide territory. Snaith points out that "the Semitic languages may be roughly grouped over four geographical areas: (a) *Eastern*—Akkadian (the modern name for Assyrian and Babylonian); (b) *Western*—Hebrew and the languages of ancient Palestine and Trans-Jordan; (c) *Northern*—the various Aramaic dialects, including the later Syriac; (d) *Southern*—Arabic and Ethiopic."¹⁶ All of the Old Testament was written in Hebrew except for two words of Aramaic in Genesis 31:47, a verse of Aramaic in Jeremiah 10:11, a large section of Aramaic in Daniel 2:4-7:28, and two Aramaic sections of Ezra consisting mostly of letters (Ezra 4:8-6:18; 7:12-26). These quantitative comparisons do not, however, convey accurately the influence of each of these languages. Hebrew, as one of the languages of ancient Palestine, dominated a relatively small territory. Aramaic, on the other hand, had a long history and developed to cover a large territory. Albright points out that in the late Bronze Age (about 1550-1200 B.C.) there are many references to the Semitic nomads of the Syrian Desert who were then called the Ahlamu. These were scattered from the Persian Gulf to the Upper Euphrates Basin.¹⁷ Tiglath-pileser I (1116-1078 B.C.) clarifies who these Ahlamu were

¹⁵ Norman H. Snaith, "The Language of the Old Testament," *The Interpreter's Bible*, I, 220.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ William F. Albright, "The Old Testament World," *The Interpreter's Bible*, I, 263.

by calling them specifically in his inscriptions "the Aramaean Ahlamu," that is, the Aramaean Bedouin.¹⁸ When the Hittite and Egyptian powers collapsed early in the twelfth century B.C. these Aramaeans occupied much of Syria. But Aramaic itself, as Albright sees it, developed as the local speech of some district of the Middle or Upper Euphrates basin. From here it spread among the seminomadic population in the oases around the fringes of the Syrian desert. In the spread of Aramaic the original Aramaean tribal groups were re-enforced by Arab tribes. As time went on Aramaic reached out to more and more tribes. Finally "Aramaic became the principal language of all Mesopotamia, Syria, and Palestine, and the secondary language of the entire Persian Empire."¹⁹

A history like this leads us to view the whole history of the Hebrew language as a fight against its first cousin, Aramaic.²⁰ The Aramaeans in their advance were nomadic and possessed no urban culture of their own. When they came into eastern Syria and northwestern Mesopotamia they adopted the Syro-Hittite culture found in these territories. As an oral language, Aramaic goes back into the middle and late bronze age and antedates Hebrew. The written form developed when these wandering people settled in urban communities. This written form may be recovered archaeologically by going down through the various strata which remain from these settled communities.

When the Israelites came into Palestine, they may have spoken a dialect similar to Aramaic. When Jacob departed from Haran, he made a covenant with Laban by a heap of stones. Laban gave the spot an Aramaic name while Jacob spoke in Hebrew (Gen. 31:48). Since Laban and Jacob lived together for quite some time, it is obvious that they understood each other. We do not know how extensive were the differences between Hebrew and Aramaic, or how the language of Jacob's descendants developed during the sojourn in Egypt, or whether the popular speech of the Israelites when they returned to Palestine was the same as their formal literary writing. When the people of Israel settled down in Canaan, the Aramaic language was still a rival. Snaith shows indications of Aramaic in the book of Judges.²¹ By the time of Hezekiah, however, there was a marked difference between Hebrew and Aramaic (II Kings 18:26; Isa. 36:11) so that the average person

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ Cf. Snaith, p. 223.

²¹ *Ibid.*

in Jerusalem could understand little or nothing of Aramaic. It must be noted that only oral speech was involved in the discussion between the messengers of Sennacherib and those of Hezekiah. Those who could read and write Hebrew may not have found the written form of Aramaic so difficult.

After 721 B.C. the Aramaic influence on Judah increased. Assyria moved deportees into the Northern kingdom. With the Babylonian captivity of Judah, the Jews were confronted with Aramaic both in their captivity and in their return to Palestine. After the captivity, Hebrew was used among the educated people because to them it was a religious and literary language. But the common people used Aramaic. By the time of Jesus, Aramaic had been the dominant language for hundreds of years.

In the Talmuds both Hebrew and Aramaic are found. Throughout the centuries the Rabbis fought to keep alive the knowledge of Hebrew. During the Renaissance Hebrew again became an active tool in the hands of Christian scholars. Since the formation of Israel in 1948, Hebrew has become a modern, living language.

Biblical Hebrew, like all Semitic languages, has a tri-literal or three consonantal verb root. Prefixes and suffixes of various kinds are added both to verbs and nouns. Throughout its active use Hebrew was a consonantal language. This means that when the language was written no vowels were used. The Hebrew read from right to left. When he saw consonants, he mentally added the vowels which went with the consonants to form syllables. If two words had the same consonants, he distinguished meanings by the context. Take for example the following two English sentences: (1) My brother is strngr than I. (2) My brother felt like a strngr when he returned to the place of his birth. The context makes it clear that in the first sentence the word is "stronger" and in the second sentence the word is "stranger." But sometimes ambiguities can occur. For example, the English consonants "frm" are found in a number of English words such as "firm," "form," "frame," "farm," "from," etc. In Hebrew, to help overcome some of these difficulties, certain consonants served as a partial expression of vowels. But since the Hebrews were used to working without vowels, they felt no need to designate specifically the vowel sounds. Yet during the centuries when the language was no longer spoken (well over two thousand years) those who copied the Hebrew writings feared that the correct pronunciation would be lost and the ambiguities would multiply. So in the sixth and seventh centuries A.D. vowel signs or points be-

gan to be used to indicate which vowel should be supplied. In the present Hebrew text these points are placed under the letters and over the letters. Similar marks are placed within letters to show that consonants should be doubled or that certain consonants should have a harder or softer sound: *b* and *v*, *k* and *ch* (weak), *p* and *ph*, *t* and *th* (in thin), *go* and *age*, *day* and *this*. The first of these pairs is hard and the second is soft.

The Hebrew and Aramaic languages may be studied and classified in a threefold way: (1) *Accidence*—the forms of words; (2) *Lexicography*—the meaning of words; (3) *Syntax*—the relationship of words, phrases, and clauses. The first and third subjects are covered in the standard Hebrew and Aramaic grammars,²² while the second is treated in the Hebrew and Aramaic lexicons. Hence if the student uses these sources correctly, he is in effect applying those *principles* of biblical interpretation which derive from the languages themselves.

Greek. The Greek language has a magnificent history. It has been a living language continuously for 3000 years, beginning in the second millennium B.C. and passing through four distinguishable periods. The classical period extends from Homer (about 1000 B.C.) to Aristotle (died 322 B.C.), followed by the "Koine" period, which lasted to A.D. 529 when Justinian closed the academy of Plato at Athens and prohibited the teaching of Greek philosophy. The Byzantine period ends with the capture of Constantinople by the Turks (A.D. 1453), and is succeeded by the modern period, which extends to the present day.²³

Although the interpreter of the New Testament is interested primarily in the "Koine" period (322 B.C. to A.D. 529), he does not ignore the meaning of words in classical Greek. He knows that the "Koine" simplifies classical Greek in its use of particles, its syntactical constructions, its failure to change moods after secondary tenses, and the like. Yet he cannot afford to ignore the indispensable background of usage established by the classical writers.

Moreover, although the biblical interpreter is primarily interested in the "Koine" of the New Testament, he does not ignore other authors and writings of the same period. These include the Septuagint; the writers of literary "Koine" such as Polybius, Diodorus, Strabo; a Stoic philosopher such as Epictetus; the Jewish theologian, Philo; and the Jewish historian, Josephus. He is aware that the Greek fathers of the

²² See Chapter 6.

²³ Bruce M. Metzger, "The Language of the New Testament," *The Interpreter's Bible*, VII, 44.

church also wrote in "Koine" Greek. All those mentioned above belonged to the educated level of society. In addition, there are abundant materials written on papyrus and ostraca which show us how the common man in the lower classes of society expressed himself. These are also valuable to the interpreter.

Greek, like Hebrew, may be analyzed and classified under the headings of: (1) *Accidence*—the forms of words; (2) *Lexicography*—the meanings of words; (3) *Syntax*—the relationship of words, phrases, and clauses. Greek is inflected even more highly than Hebrew or Aramaic, and hence is capable of great precision. Its fuller range of possibilities permits thought to be expressed in richer and deeper nuances, offering a real challenge to those who want to find the exact meaning of a word in a particular context. Here the interpreter is helped by excellent lexical tools.²⁴ In the relationship of words, phrases, and clauses, the interpreter who knows Greek can study the flow of thought very accurately. The person who does not know Greek must depend upon a good commentary. Unfortunately, the commentator often gives only one choice of meaning and proceeds to show why this is correct, or he may show a number of possibilities and confuse the reader who does not know the basis for choosing one over the others.

Principles which rest on the best procedures in *accidence*, *lexicography*, and *syntax* are essential for the interpreter of the Greek New Testament. The conscientious interpreter must analyze language to draw out its meaning but must steadfastly resist any procedure that "reads in" meaning. The true linguist is impatient with historical, philosophical, or theological ventriloquists who project their ideas upon the author.

Textual Criticism. Textual criticism is the science of determining as closely as possible what the original author wrote. Valid principles of textual criticism are those that have stood the test of usage and criticism. Westcott and Hort did a monumental job in their day of showing what was involved in textual criticism.²⁵ They dealt with the need, method, and application of principles of textual criticism. They pointed out that the "textus receptus" (received text) is a late, polished text which deviates frequently from the original writings, and

²⁴ See Chapter 6.

²⁵ Brooke Westcott and F. J. A. Hort, *The New Testament in the Original Greek: Introduction; Appendix* (Cambridge and London: Macmillan and Co., 1881). The Introduction consists of 324 pages, the Appendix of 188 pages. These 512 pages are a strong protest against any haphazard approach to N.T. textual criticism.

that the King James version, which is based on this text, contains similar faults. Burgon and Miller²⁶ opposed Westcott and Hort and defended the "textus receptus," but in the years that followed, the defenders of the "textus receptus" became fewer and fewer. Westcott and Hort's principles won out. Yet their theory has also been modified by now, as is inevitable and necessary when new data and materials continually become available. At the present time the New Testament scholar has at his disposal 78 catalogued papyrus manuscripts, 247 capital letter manuscripts, 2,623 manuscripts in a cursive hand, and 1,968 lectionary manuscripts.²⁷

The biblical interpreter cannot, of course, expect that all textual problems have now received definitive solution. He must be careful to consult the most competent scholars and to employ valid principles when he must exercise his own option. But in general, the interpreter can be quite sure of a text that closely reproduces the original writing. Basic works in textual criticism will help the student to understand this important area.²⁸

In Old Testament studies, the Dead Sea Scrolls brought about a major breakthrough in textual criticism. One-fourth of the manuscripts found in the Dead Sea caves consists of books or fragments of books in the Old Testament.²⁹ During the first ten years after the discoveries at Qumran complete copies or fragments were found of every book in the Old Testament except Esther. Ten or more copies were found of Deuteronomy, Isaiah, the Minor Prophets, and the Psalms.³⁰ The manuscripts from Qumran were written between 200 B.C. and A.D. 100; manuscripts from Murabba'at south of Qumran and another unidentified area come from the first century A.D. and from the second century about A.D. 135, the time of the second Jew-

²⁶ John W. Burgon and Edward Miller, *The Traditional Text of the Holy Gospels* (1896).

²⁷ Kurt Aland, *Kurzgefasste Liste der griechischen Handschriften des Neuen Testaments*, Vol. I: *Gesamtübersicht* (1961).

²⁸ See Vincent Taylor, *The Text of the New Testament* (1961). Jean Duplacy, *Où en est la critique Textuelle du Nouveau Testament?* (1957). Kurt Aland, *Kurzgefasste Liste der griechischen Handschriften des Neuen Testaments*, Vol. II: *Einzelübersichten*. Kurt Aland and H. Riesenfeld, *Vollständige Konkordanz des griechischen Neuen Testaments*, Unter Zugrundlegung aller moderne kritischen Textausgaben und des textus receptus, Vol. III. Kurt Aland, *Das Neue Testament auf Papyrus*, Vol. IV. Vols. II, III, IV are to be published.

²⁹ J. T. Milik, *Ten Years of Discovery in the Wilderness of Judea* (1959), p. 23.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

ish revolt.³¹ By studying the forms of the letters in these manuscripts, scholars have worked out further the development of the square script.³² Paleography (study of the forms of writing) has proved a useful tool in dating.

As a result of the Dead Sea Scrolls, scholars are seeing again that the Septuagint (the Greek translation of the O.T. made from 250 to 150 B.C.) may point to earlier readings than those found in the Massoretic text (developed from the second to ninth centuries A.D.). In the near future better texts of the Old Testament will be produced and the methods of Old Testament textual criticism will achieve greater precision and confidence in clearing up those passages where the meaning has been obscure because of errors or changes by those who copied the text. New handbooks on Old Testament textual criticism will also be forthcoming. Ernst Würthwein's *The Text of the Old Testament* (1957) represents the development of Old Testament textual criticism up to the time when Kittel-Kahle's *Biblia Hebraica* served as a standard Hebrew text. It covers the transmission of the Hebrew text, the translations made from the Hebrew text in ancient times, and the methodology of Old Testament textual criticism. The newer handbooks, like all previous works in textual criticism, must show how one goes from quantities of unsifted materials to the text chosen by the interpreter as being of the best quality according to his discriminating judgment.

The interpreter must work out his interpretation of any passage from the best text, i.e., the text closest to the original writing. If he does not know Greek, Hebrew, or Aramaic, then he should check a good commentary which goes into sufficient detail to tell the reader that different readings make a difference in meaning. Brief commentaries cannot say much, but they can point out the various possibilities of translation.³³ Those who know the biblical languages should know textual criticism well enough so that on crucial passages they can tell why they prefer one reading over another.

Interest in Semantics. Professor Barr defines "semantics" as

³¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 19, 98, 135.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 135.

³³ See G. T. Thompson, "Romans," *The New Bible Commentary*, ed. F. Davidson, A. M. Stibbs, and E. F. Kevan, p. 948, where Prof. Thompson comments on Rom. 5:1. On such seemingly small details as punctuation see A. B. Mickelsen, "Romans," *The Wycliffe Bible Commentary*, ed. Charles Pfeiffer and E. F. Harrison, p. 1209. The passage discussed here is Rom. 9:5. On Rom. 5:1, see p. 1196. On the various locations of the final doxology in Romans (in various manuscripts) see p. 1180.

"the study of signification in language."³⁴ He points out that semantics is a branch both of logic and of linguistics. Semantics in the area of biblical linguistics is concerned with "the way in which the meaning of biblical language is understood."³⁵ Semantics thus defined is almost synonymous with hermeneutics. Linguistic semantics, however, stresses how the elements of language must be fitted together, what meaning is conveyed separately by the elements, and what is the total meaning of these elements when analyzed in natural units of thought,³⁶ while hermeneutics is a broader term covering these aspects plus other factors involved in interpretation. Scholars from diverse backgrounds are giving semantics careful attention.

History

Since the Bible contains much historical data, we also must utilize principles which help to clarify this material. Sennacherib's invasions into Palestine (the crucial one in 701 B.C.) certainly receive extensive treatment in the Biblical record (cf. II Kings 18-20; II Chron. 32; Isa. 36-39). But to get a total picture we must also make use of all of the extra-biblical sources available.³⁷ This means that a valid procedure must be followed to compile the evidence, note chronological sequences, and evaluate the various facets in the historical picture. Consequently, methodology in historical research is important for the interpreter.

Philosophy

Interpreters are always influenced in their approach by phil-

³⁴ James Barr, *The Semantics of Biblical Language* (1961), p. 1.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ Prof. Barr's book illustrates this in its chapter titles: I, The Importance of the Problem; II, The Current Contrast of Greek and Hebrew Thought; III, Problems of Method; IV, Verbs, Action, and Time; V, Other Arguments from Morphological and Syntactic Phenomena; VI, Etymologies and Related Arguments; VII, "Faith" and "Truth"—An Examination of Some Linguistic Arguments; VIII, Some Principles of Kittel's Theological Dictionary; IX, Language and the Idea of "Biblical Theology"; X, Languages and the Study of Theology. The purpose of the book is "to survey and to criticize certain lines on which modern theological thinking has been assessing and using the linguistic material in the Bible" (p. 4). This book is an evaluation of the principles and procedures used by theologians which are taken from the area of language and linguistics. Prof. Barr insists that these principles and procedures be valid ones. In the process of his evaluation he uncovers a number of invalid principles and procedures.

³⁷ See William F. Albright, "The Old Testament World," *Interpreter's Bible*, I, 265-66. Samuel J. Schultz, *The Old Testament Speaks*, pp. 213-214.

osophical presuppositions. Bultmann shows how some may approach exegesis with idealistic conceptions, and others with psychological conceptions. In place of these Bultmann advocates existentialistic presuppositions.³⁸ Still other interpreters approach the Bible from the viewpoint of realism, or from a complex combination such as a synthesis of logical positivism, existentialism, and analytical philosophy.³⁹

Many interpreters do not recognize or analyze their own philosophical assumptions. But this is dangerous, since philosophical assumptions must be tested to see if they are valid in philosophy and further if they are valid for use outside of philosophy.

Consequently, the interpreter must always keep in mind philosophy as a source for principles of interpretation. The more the interpreter realizes what is controlling his thinking, the better his chance of evaluating all assumptions that control thought. He asks himself: "Should such an idea influence me on this particular subject?" Such self-questioning is necessary for good interpretation.

Theology

Ever since the Reformation, various schools of theology have divided the Christian world. There are Thomists, Calvinists, Arminians, Lutherans, and many smaller movements. Each has the loyalty of some small or large segment of Christendom. Most of these schools of thought see themselves as logically presenting the whole of biblical teaching.

At the same time, the leaders of these schools have never contended that their theologies were inspired of God. They know that error creeps into the best theological formulations. Sometimes this error consists in omitting part of what is found in Scripture. Sometimes the error is one of misplaced emphasis. More frequently, perhaps, error creeps in by the subtle process of extension. Since the Scriptures make this assertion, it seems natural to infer that such a statement coupled with others would lead to this further conclusion. Then this further conclusion leads to still another. Soon one is far removed from the simple, clear-cut biblical assertion. Because valid and invalid propositions often lie side by side in theological formulations, it is easy for us to allow our views in theology to control our

³⁸ Rudolf Bultmann, *Jesus Christ and Mythology*, See Chap. IV: "Modern Biblical Interpretation and Existentialist Philosophy," pp. 45-59.

³⁹ See, e.g., William F. Zuurdeeg, *An Analytical Philosophy of Religion* (1958).

interpretation and exegesis rather than to let our interpretation and exegesis control our theology. Theological principles which affect the interpreter must be examined as objectively as philosophical principles.

If the interpreter is convinced that his influencing framework is the right one and should influence him in his interpretation, then he must be prepared to establish the correctness of this controlling framework. He must not only know its basic premises, but he must be able to show that none of these premises is in the least bit contrary to the major emphases and assertions of Scripture. This will make the interpreter aware of the factors influencing his thinking.

PRINCIPLES VERSUS MECHANICAL RULES

The interpreter should realize that principles are not fixed formulas. The mechanical rule approach to hermeneutics builds mistaken ideas from the start. Finding a correct interpretation cannot be achieved in the way that a druggist fills a prescription. The druggist mixes ingredients in the exact proportions demanded by the physician. Everything is precise. But synthesizing or analyzing thought is not like synthesizing or analyzing chemicals. Ideas are imponderable: they cannot be weighed, measured, or counted. Hence they cannot be exposed to light by following set formulas. The interpreter uses the valid principles which are relevant to his particular task, but he must do so with imagination, sympathy, and judgment. He must recognize that ideas belong to persons, and that the personal factor inevitably introduces an element of subjectivity.

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II Lessons from the Past

Interpretation is not something new. Throughout the ages men have used certain principles with which to interpret the Scriptures. Many excellent books have been written about the history of interpretation.¹ The purpose of this chapter, however, is to see what lessons can be drawn from the procedures of the past and what have been the major trends in past epochs. When necessary, we may criticize some of the methods employed, even though we deeply appreciate the achievements of these men of past years. In fact, history shows that erroneous principles have often spoiled the exegetical work of fine men, some of whom were great saints. This should be a warning to us against carelessness in interpretation. There is less excuse for us because we can profit by the lessons of the past. It should also remind us that the use of correct procedures must be founded upon a dedication to God, a consecration to the task, and a love for men which unites all that we are and know. Christians now, as in the past, must be totally involved not

¹ Milton S. Terry, *Biblical Hermeneutics* (n.d.), Part III: "History of Biblical Interpretation," pp. 603-738. Robert M. Grant, *The Bible in the Church* (1948). F. W. Farrar, *History of Interpretation*, Bampton Lectures (1885). James D. Wood, *The Interpretation of the Bible: An Historical Introduction* (1958). There is also a trilogy in *The Interpreter's Bible* which shows how interpreters have approached the Bible. Robert M. Grant, "History of the Interpretation of the Bible: I, Ancient Period," *The Interpreter's Bible*, I, 106-114. John T. McNeill, "History of the Interpretation of the Bible: II, Medieval and Reformation Period," *The Interpreter's Bible*, I, 115-126. Samuel Terrien, "History of the Interpretation of the Bible: III, Modern Period," *The Interpreter's Bible*, I, 127-141.

only in the task of bidding men to be reconciled to God in Jesus Christ but also in showing what this reconciliation means.

JEWISH INTERPRETATION

Beginnings

Work of Ezra. In post-exilic Judaism Ezra was a prominent figure. He is called a ready scribe (*sopher mahiyr*) in Ezra 7:6. He is called Ezra the priest and the scribe in Ezra 7:11, 12, 21; Nehemiah 8:9; 12:26, and Ezra the scribe in Nehemiah 8:1, 4, 13; 12:36. This language must not be taken anachronistically. The term in the time of Ezra did not have the connotation of pedantic concern with minutiae, as it did in Jesus' day. Rather, Ezra was one who was learned. He was to teach the law of Moses, the law of God. Instruction demands interpretation and explanation.

Those Associated with Ezra. In Nehemiah 8 Ezra reads from the law of Moses to a large assembly of people from early morning until midday (vs. 3). He is helped in this endeavor by a group of men (vs. 7) some of whom are stated to be Levites (see 9:4, 5). If we assume that the men mentioned in Nehemiah 8:7 are Levites, it follows that this verse together with verse 9 speaks of a branch of Levites as "the Levites that taught the people." The fact of divisions of work for the Levites is indicated in II Chronicles 34:13, "And of the Levites there were scribes (*sopherim*) and officers and porters." This group could speak truth, as in Nehemiah 8, or could write falsehood, as seen in Jeremiah 8:8. The ones with Ezra were dedicated to the truth. Their role in interpretation is made explicit in Nehemiah 8:7-8:

And they gave understanding to the people in the law, and the people [stood] in their place. And they read aloud in the book, in the law of God making it distinct [expounding extemporaneously] and setting forth the understanding [i.e. the meaning], and they gave understanding in the reading.²

This was a complex operation because of the bilingual situation. As Bowman points out: "The original Hebrew text was doubtless translated aloud as Aramaic, the common speech of postexilic Palestine."³ In place of the above translation "making it distinct and setting forth the understanding" Bow-

² See Raymond A. Bowman, "The Book of Ezra and the Book of Nehemiah," *Interpreter's Bible*, III, 737.

³ *Ibid.*

man would render the phrase "translating at sight and giving understanding."⁴ Hence in the postexilic period the interpreter of the Old Testament had to translate the original Hebrew text into Aramaic and then explain the meaning. Note how interpretation is joined with oral discourse. The Rabbis see in this passage the beginning of the Targums—the Aramaic explanations of the Hebrew text. "Originally the Law was given to Israel in Hebrew writing and the holy language. It was again given to them in the days of Ezra in the Assyrian [i.e. Aramaic] writing and the Aramaic language' (Babylonian Talmud: Sanhedrin 21b; Nedarim 37b; cf. Megillah 3a; Jerusalem Megillah 74d)."⁵ Since this bilingual situation prevailed from this time on, the need for translation and explanation would have continued. There is reason to believe that a group of men in Israel had the task of handing down (copying) the sacred writings and also giving to the common man a translation and explanation of the Scriptures. No doubt when these men became indifferent to God it showed in their unfolding of the meaning of Scripture. We know that Judaism rose and fell between the time of Ezra and the time of Christ. The exile may have cured Israel of idolatry, but it did not prevent apathy, formalism, indifference to human need, and social and political corruption. When the Jews were oppressed, the word of God became meaningful, and they were willing to die for their faith. When oppression ceased, the Jewish people usually settled down to seeking as much political independence as possible under varying degrees of foreign domination.

The Qumran Community. Some Jews felt that the complexities of life in Palestine and the political and social forces hostile to the Jewish religious heritage made it impossible for them to serve God as they should. They could not really keep His law. They could not find enough opportunity to study the Old Testament Scriptures. Corporate worship was difficult. Some of the people with these persuasions withdrew to ascetic communities where they felt that they could live in conformity to the law of God. In times of great oppression others joined their group. Sometimes persecution blotted out all or part of the ascetic community, but after a while it would rise again with its teaching, ceremonial washings, prayer, and meditation. Qumran was one such community. Here the Scriptures were copied. Commentaries were written as well as manuals on community life and various tractates. In the commentaries interpretation is frequently carried out without reference to context.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ *Ibid.*

Milik and Burrows point out that in the commentaries on Habakkuk, Micah, and the Psalms, the biblical material is explained in terms of *the Qumran sect itself*. The commentary on Nahum interprets the biblical material of a different ethnic group from that of Qumran but *in the same contemporary setting*. The commentaries on Isaiah interpret the text of Isaiah *eschatalogically*.⁶ The Habakkuk commentary illustrates all three procedures: interpreting the text in terms of (1) Qumran, (2) another contemporary group, and (3) eschatology.⁷

This approach to interpretation has plagued interpreters from the time of the Qumran community to the present day. One of the basic principles of sound interpretation is that a later interpreter must first find out what the author of an earlier writing was trying to convey to those who first read his words. Interpreters in Qumran forgot this in their haste to apply the Scriptures to themselves and their own times. If we first find the meaning of the author's words for his original readers, we can usually see what we have in common with these readers. At these points the application is not only obvious but has a convincing relevance. Such genuine relevance is missing, however, in interpretation that is arbitrary or ignores the context.

The Pairs. From Maccabean times to the end of the Herodian age (168 B.C.—ca. A.D. 10) interpretation was highlighted by a series of friendly debates between sets of two rabbis. The rabbis of each period had their respective followers. Hence "the pairs," as they were known, kept alive crucial differences in interpretation as well as preserving the main emphases of Judaism. The schools of Hillel and Shammai were probably the climax of this type of activity. In applying legal maxims, Hillel emphasized the qualifying factors of surrounding circumstances. Shammai interpreted with strict rigidity. Hillel was famous for (1) classifying the topical discussion of the biblical material into six orders and for (2) his seven exegetical rules.⁸ Blackman summarizes his seven rules in this way:

Rule 1 was called "light and heavy" and signified the inference... from the less to the greater. Rule 2, "equal decision," meant discernment of analogies and comparisons. Rules 3 and 4 were concerned with deducing the general implications from one passage, or from more than one passage; Rule 5 with a more precise statement of the general by reference to the particular, and vice versa; Rule 6 with the use of one passage to interpret an-

⁶ Millar Burrows, *More Light on the Dead Sea Scrolls* (1958), pp. 166-67.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 167.

⁸ Farrar, *op. cit.*, pp. 65-66.

other; and Rule 7 with the use of the whole context to elucidate a verse or passage.⁹

These rules are helpful in that they stress logical procedures. Unfortunately, although the rabbis did apply these rules, they also utilized such practices as substituting one letter for another, forming new words, assigning a numerical value to words, etc. In Genesis 2:7 the Hebrew word "and he [the Lord] formed" has two yods (smallest Hebrew letter, equivalent to English "y") in the unpointed Hebrew text. In Rabbinic Hebrew the word impulse (*yētzter*) is a noun from the same root as "to form." Hence, the rabbis deduce that because of the two yods in Genesis 2:7—the first letter of the words "to form" and "impulse"—God created two impulses in man, a good impulse and a bad one!¹⁰ This makes us smile, but it at least shows that these interpreters carefully observed what was written. Unfortunately, instead of using their ingenuity to clarify the precise meaning conveyed by the language, they looked for "deeper hidden meanings."

Rabbinic Literature to the Completion of the Babylonian Talmud

This period extends from about A.D. 10 to A.D. 550. When we examine the sheer quantity of literature produced in this period, we are forced to admit that the Jewish people were zealous interpreters. When they were not interpreting the Scriptures themselves, they were interpreting the interpretations. Sometimes the interpretation of the interpretation of the interpretation had to be interpreted! This effort does indicate that the Jews were searching for the Scriptures because they believed that *in them* they had eternal life (cf. John 5:39). Only the briefest treatment of this period can be given.¹¹

Two Literary Forms. For centuries the oral law had existed in Israel. When the materials finally were written down, two distinct forms emerged. The *midrash* or *midrashim* were running commentaries on the Old Testament. The three oldest Midrashim are on the Pentateuch: the Mekilta on Exodus, the Sifra on Leviticus, and the Sifre on Numbers and Deuteronomy. These dealt primarily with the legal material. The Bereshit Rabbah on Genesis is an example of a homiletic or devotional type of commentary. In addition to the commentaries

⁹ A. C. Blackman, *Biblical Interpretation* (1957), p. 72.

¹⁰ Berakhoth, 61^a. See Herman L. Strack and Paul Billerbeck, *Kommentar zum Neuen Testament aus Talmud und Midrasch* (1928), IV, Part I, Neunzehnter Exkurs: "Der gute und der böse Trieb," p. 467.

¹¹ An excellent summary of this literature can be found in Morton Scott Enslin, *Christian Beginnings* (1938), pp. 104-110.