

Protestant Biblical Interpretation

A Textbook of Hermeneutics for Conservative Protestants

by
Bernard Ramm, B.D., Ph.D.

CHAPTER III

THE PROTESTANT SYSTEM OF HERMENEUTICS

A. INSPIRATION: THE FOUNDATION

The divine inspiration of the Bible is the foundation of historic Protestant hermeneutics and exegesis. With the Jews Protestants accept the inspiration of the Old Testament, and with the Roman Catholic and Eastern Oriental Churches they accept the inspiration of the New Testament. Protestants differ from Orthodox groups in rejecting the Apocrypha.

Historic Protestant interpretation shares much in common with the classicists in that it has documents coming from antiquity in ancient languages, and in terms of the cultures of those times. Both the Biblical interpreter and the classicist have the problem of determining the text, of translating, and of stating ancient concepts in their modern counterparts. For example, the classicist must explain that Aristotle's word for matter (*hyle*) is not the equivalent of our word *matter*. Likewise the Biblical interpreter must take a word like soul (*psyche*) and relate it by comparison and contrast with our present usage of the word in English.

The classicist has no documents he considers inspired although he may greatly value and admire them. One life-time scholar of the classics said in the hearing of the author that his idea of heaven was a group of Greek students sitting around a seminar table reading through the Greek literature again and again. The Protestant, however, is professedly dealing with inspired documents. At the point of inspiration a new dimension for interpretation is added. This new dimension has the following features:

(i). It has a *moral* or *spiritual* aspect. There is no moral or spiritual qualification necessary to understand the classics unless a man defends the brief that only a moral man can understand great art. The spiritual requisite is, however, central in Protestantism. The Bible, being a spiritual book, demands of its interpreter a minimum of spiritual qualifications which are not necessary for the classicist.

(ii). It has a *supernatural* aspect so that what is suspect in classical studies is sober history in the Biblical records. The myths and marvels of Greek mythology are taken by the classicists as inventions of the human imagination. The Protestant accepts the existence of an Almighty God who in the progress of redemption performed mighty miracles. Therefore, in interpreting his text the Protestant takes soberly the miraculous whereas the classicist rejects it in his documents--and rightly so.

(iii). It has a *revelational* aspect adding new content to old words. Granted that the bulk of New Testament vocabulary is derived from classical and *Koinē* Greek, and that many of the meanings remain unchanged in the New Testament, there is yet no question that added depth is given to words in the New Testament. We are not here defending the notion--exploded by Deissmann--that there is a special or ecclesiastical Greek. But the New Testament does add new depth, new connotations, to such words as *faith, love, mercy, redemption, salvation, heaven, and judgment*.

The evangelical Protestant interpreter in accepting the plenary inspiration of Scripture severs company with all forms of rationalism, e.g., neo-orthodoxy, religious liberalism, or Reformed Judaism. Many of the critical judgments of the nineteenth century are today either discarded or modified. The imposition of an evolutionary theory of religion on the Scriptures has undergone some modification and even rejection by some scholars. The archeological researches have shown that much more is sober history in the Old Testament than was previously believed. Archeology has also shown the radical contrasts of Israelitish religion with surrounding religions. The conservative trend in Old Testament studies is one of the unexpected phenomenon of the mid-twentieth century.¹

The position of the evangelical is that only a *full-fledged, intelligent Biblicism is adequate to the present day situation in science, philosophy, psychology, and religion*.

Because historic Protestantism accepts the plenary inspiration of Scripture certain over-all attitudes characterize it. (i) It approaches the Bible from the spiritual dimension of faith, trust, prayer, and piety. (ii) It engages in Biblical criticism to save it from being deceived or deluded or naïve. It is not foundationally anti-critical. Unfortunately some representatives of the conservative viewpoint have unenlightened opinions as to the nature and purpose of criticism, but anti-criticism is not part of the necessary structure of evangelicalism. Evangelicalism, however, is patient and watchful when confronted with critical problems, trusting that further research and investigation will weigh the evidence in its favor. The rewards of such an approach have been many, particularly from archeological research. (iii) It exercises the utmost care and scruples to discover the true text of both Testaments, to discover the true rules of interpretation, and to apply them with the greatest of pains and care that the word of man may not be intruded into the Word of God. It therefore does not indulge in the wholesale reconstruction of texts, histories, and documents which characterizes liberalism.

B. EDIFICATION: THE GOAL

Not only is Protestant interpretation grounded in the plenary inspiration of the Scriptures, but it takes also as the counterpart of that truth the great purpose of the Bible, namely, to produce a spiritual effect in the life of the man that reads it. Augustine was not wrong when he said the guide of interpretation

1 Liberals may well note that there is a considerable number of erudite scholars of the Jewish and Catholic faiths that have not capitulated to rationalism in criticism. Cf. Felix A. Levy, "Contemporary Trends in Jewish Bible Study," *The Study of the Bible Today and Tomorrow* (Willoughby, editor), pp. 98-115; and, James Harrel Cobb, "Current Trends in Catholic Biblical Research," *ibid.*, pp. 116-128. Other essays showing how liberalism has failed to really understand the Bible are: G. E. Wright, "The Christian Interpreter as Biblical Critic," *Interpretation*, 1:131-152, April, 1947; and, H. H. Rowley, "The Relevance of Biblical Interpretation," *Interpretation*, 1:3-20, January, 1947.

was *LOVE*--love to God and love to man. All the historical, doctrinal, and practical truth of the Bible is for one purpose: *to promote the spiritual prosperity of man. The Bible is not an end; it is a means.* Its purpose is first of all to make us wise unto salvation, and secondly to benefit us in our Christian life through doctrine, reproof, correction, and instruction in righteousness (2 Tim. 3:15-17). The end result is that we might be *men of God* completely equipped in good works. The prostitution of the Bible from *means to end* is an ever present danger for little groups who study the Bible for no other reason than to study the Bible. Such groups frequently fall prey to such spiritual maladies as Pharisaism, spiritual pride, and popishness in interpretation.

This is to say the goal of all interpretation is *spiritual results* in the listeners. Hobart correctly says that "no man does good interpretation who does not look for results in men as the final aim of his interpretation."² Nor can we gainsay Rowley when he wrote:

There is yet another principle of interpretation which remains to be mentioned, without which no interpretation can be adequately relevant. . . . This means that the theological interpretation of the Bible which is often called for, and which indeed is to be desired, is not sufficient. For the Bible is more than a theological book. It is a religious book; and religion is more than theology. Its study should do more than develop right views about God, man, and duty; it should nurture right relations to God.³

The practical significance of this is that the crowning method of preaching is the expository method. This method puts the Holy Bible at the center of the public ministry of the preacher. It is a professed acknowledgment that the only dependable source for preaching is the Scriptures. It enables the full power and pungency of the Word of God to be released among the people of God. When resigning a church a pastor gave to his people this advice for the selection of his successor which shows directly the necessity for an expository ministry: "*Do not choose a man who always preaches on isolated texts, I care not how powerful and eloquent he may be. The effect of his eloquence will be to banish a taste for the Word of God and substitute a taste for the preacher in its place.*"⁴

C. THE HISTORIC PROTESTANT METHOD: LITERAL, CULTURAL, AND CRITICAL

1. *Literal*

The word *literal* is certainly ambiguous. To some scholars it means *letterism*--the exaggerated importance of the insignificant elements of grammar and spelling. To other scholars it means a metaphysical (or philosophical) belief that words signify things directly, and to express a given thought, one and only one set of words may be used. It is this sort of "literalism" to which neo-orthodoxy takes so much exception. The term may also stand for a drab, unimaginative, "flat" approach to the meaning of the Bible.

2 Hobart, *A Key to the New Testament*, p. 11.

3 Rowley, *op. cit.*, p. 16.

4 *The Moody Monthly* (editorial), 45:261, January, 1945. Italics are ours. Cf. also Chafer's discussion of "Animation" (the power of the Bible to influence life and conscience), *Systematic Theology*, I:120-123.

Because the word "literal" has been used so odiously in polemics--both liberals and neo-orthodox accusing the conservative of being a wooden literalist--other terms have been suggested such as "normal," or "literary," or "proper." However we shall use the word *literal* and explain precisely what we mean by it, and so expect to be understood throughout the rest of the book.

In the science of semantics the process of associating words (oral or written) with objects is called *designation*. How our first parents commenced speaking is not known save that speech was a divine gift as the necessary correlate of the rationality of the *imago Dei*. However, the process of designation is observable in the development of speech in children, and in the adoption of new words into a language. For communication designation must be a mutual or social process. We may create our own individual designations but we cannot communicate with others if we do. *The customary, socially-acknowledged designation of a word is the literal meaning of that word.*

To be sure, this is a complex process for we not only designate objects (cows, barns, feet, sticks, etc.), but actions (running, walking, eating), attitudes (fear, hate, love), adverbs (rapidly, slowly, falteringly), adjectives (gray, beautiful, small, large), and abstractions (history, justice, morality, force). One word may have two or three basic designations (e.g., bar, lug, tear), and one object (or action, etc.) may have more than one designation as is the case with synonyms (e.g., barrister, lawyer, attorney, counsel). But there is enough usage of terms in speech and writing to create a *common language mentality*, if we may so speak, and the literal meaning of terms is their native meaning in this common language mentality.

Not only does customary social usage help determine the native or literal meaning of a word, but the context of speech does also. The meaning of the word "ball" would be determined by the context of the conversation. If it were about dancing it would mean one thing, and if about sports, another.

The literal meaning of a word is the *basic, customary, social designation of that word*. But speech is a very complicated and flexible activity. It is actually the most complicated activity man engages in, and the toil necessary to learn another language is testimony to this. On top of the basic, native, primitive meanings of words are heaped many shades, nuances, and figures of speech, i.e., the entire retinue of rhetorical use of language. These secondary, tertiary, and even quaternary meanings depend upon and are derived from the literal meanings in the sense literal is here defined.

Therefore, in so-called *spiritual or mystical or pneumatic* interpretation, the literal is primary and basic, and the spiritual, pneumatic, or mystical derives from the literal.

To interpret literally (in this sense) is nothing more or less than interpreting words and sentences in their *normal, usual, customary, proper designation*. Let us set before us two definitions of literal interpretation which bear out what we have here been advocating. Horne's definition is:

Further, in common life, no prudent and *conscientious* person, who either commits his sentiments to writing or utters anything, intends that a diversity of meanings should be attached to what he writes or says; and, consequently, neither his readers, nor those who hear him, affix to it any other than the true and obvious sense. . . . *The Literal Sense* of any place of Scripture is that which the words signify, or require, in their natural and proper acceptation, without any trope, metaphor, or figure, and abstracted from any

mystic meaning.⁵

Craven's excellent comments are as follows:

Normal is used instead of literal . . . as more expressive of the correct idea. No terms could have been chosen so unfit to designate the two great schools of prophetic exegetes than *literal* and *spiritual*. These terms are not antithetical, nor are they in any proper sense significant of the peculiarities of the respective systems they are employed to characterize. They are positively misleading and confusing. *Literal* is not opposed to *spiritual* but to *figurative*; *spiritual* is an antithesis on the one hand to *material*, and on the other to *carnal* (in a bad sense). The *Literalist* . . . is not one who denies that *figurative* language, that *symbols* are used in prophecy, nor does he deny that great *spiritual* truths are set forth therein; his position is simply, that the prophecies are to be *normally* interpreted (i.e., according to the received laws of language) as any other utterances are interpreted--that which is manifestly literal being regarded as literal, and that which is manifestly figurative being so regarded. The position of the *Spiritualist* . . . is not that which is properly indicated by the term. He is one who holds that certain portions are to be *normally* interpreted, other portions are to be regarded as having a *mystical* . . . sense. Thus for instance, Spiritualists . . . do not deny that when the Messiah is spoken of as 'a man of sorrow and acquainted with grief,' the prophecy is to be normally *interpreted*; they affirm, however, that when He is spoken of as coming 'in the clouds of heaven' the language is to be 'spiritually' (mystically) interpreted . . . The terms properly expressive of the schools are *normal* and *mystical*.⁶

The reader will note in these citations the emphasis on "natural," "proper," "obvious," and "normal." These are but other ways of expressing the social designation of the primitive meanings of words. This is not *letterism*--the exaggerated importance attached to incidentals, nor is it so-called wooden literalism. Historic Protestantism as illustrated by the studies of Luther and Calvin is in this sense literal. There is no doubt that Catholic hermeneutical theory has been moved towards a very healthy respect for the literal meaning of Scripture. The view among so many of the Fathers that the literal and historical senses were for the weak and babes is now no longer defended. At the time of the Reformation, however, the Catholic Church had not picked up its contemporary respect for the literal sense of Scripture although Aquinas and the Victorines did anticipate it. It must also be kept in mind that modern studies of hermeneutics among Catholics still emphasize (i) authoritative interpretation--e.g., papal definitions, the consent of the Fathers, unwritten tradition, and (ii) the validity of the medieval pattern of the four senses (literal and historical, anagogical, allegorical, and tropological). It is still distinctively Protestant hermeneutics to be especially pledged to the literal interpretation of Scripture.

The major hermeneutical issue is not between a narrow, unimaginative, wooden literalism or a fanciful, imaginative allegorical system. The basic issue is whether the Biblical documents are to be approached in the normal, customary, usual way in which men talk, write, and think; or, whether that level is only

5 T. Horne, *An Introduction to the Critical Study and Knowledge of the Holy Scriptures* (eighth edition), I, 322. Italics are his.

6 Craven, *Revelation* (in the *Lange Commentary*), p. 98. Italics are his.

preliminary to a second deeper level.⁷ Allegorists do not deny necessarily either the literal meaning of sentences nor the historical reality of events, but they insist that the literal and the historical represent a lower, immature or elementary understanding of the Bible. In defence of the literal approach to Scriptures it may be argued:

(i). *The literal method of interpretation is the usual practice in interpretation of literature.* When we read a book, essay, or poem we presume the sense is literal. This is the only conceivable method of communication. The non-literal is always a secondary meaning imposed upon a previous stratum of language. The previous stratum of language is the literal. This previous stratum is *necessarily* the point of commencement for the interpretation of all literature. If some strange oriental mystical writing be set before us (in translation) we endeavor to make sense out of it by a literal interpretation as our first and necessarily first procedure. In history, for example, when we read of Paul Revere's famous ride we take it as such, and not as conscience riding to the rescue of virtue at the approach of temptation.

Therefore, without prejudging the nature of the Bible one way or the other as to any deeper or profounder sense (typological, allegorical, mythological, existential), we insist that *we ought to commence interpreting it literally.*

(ii). *All secondary meanings of documents depend upon the previous meaning of these documents, namely, upon their literal interpretation.* Parables, types, allegories, symbols, and figures of speech (metaphors, similes, hyperboles) presume that the words have a more primitive reference than the sense in which they are used. The parable of the sower depends for its understanding upon the actual practice of farming; the lion as a symbol of strength is derived from real lions who are strong; incense as a symbol of prayer grew out of the observation of a sweet aroma ascending heavenward; and the allegory of Abraham, Sarah, and Hagar depends for its meaning upon these historical personages and their real experiences. If all secondary meanings are additions to a more primitive meaning, then interpretation ought to start at the more primitive meaning, namely, with literal interpretation.

(iii). *A large part of the Bible makes adequate and significant sense when literally interpreted.* The claim of many of the early allegorists that the Scriptures were only *really* understood allegorically is not difficult of refutation. All the great doctrines of the Bible rest clearly on literal exegesis. Practically all of the historical books make sense interpreted literally. Certainly save for the book of Revelation practically all the New Testament yields a *significant* sense when literally interpreted.

Allegorists usually do not realize how much actual literal interpretation they do. The interpretations they impose on Scripture have as their content material which the allegorists have derived from their literal understanding of the New Testament. The inherent insecurity of the allegorical method was made evident in early church history when the gnostics sought to allegorize the New Testament as freely as the orthodox Christians allegorized the Old Testament. This meant a denial of the incarnation and the orthodox fought it, but in principle the gnostics had as much right to allegorize the New Testament as the orthodox did the Old. Perhaps even more so; for would not the fuller revelation of

7 That Calvin himself rejected a slavish literalism is evident from the following: "To show themselves men of letters, these good doctors prohibit even the least departure from the literal signification . . . If this canon of interpretation be admitted, all the light of faith will be overwhelmed in crudest barbarism." *Institutes*, IV, 17, 23.

God be filled with even greater mysteries and hidden meanings?

Of course the literal interpretation of Scripture does not blindly rule out figures of speech, symbols, allegories, and types. The *literal* meaning of a figure of speech is its proper meaning. "Ephraim is a cake not turned" (Hosea 7:8) means that Ephraim is "half-baked." The literal meaning is not that Ephraim is an actual cake which is semi-cooked. The literal meaning is the intention of the metaphor. The same is true of such a saying as "I am the true vine." The literal meaning here is *the intention of the imagery employed*.

(iv). *The literal method is the necessary check upon the imagination of men.* Catholics find their sacramentalism and sacerdotalism by an allegorical interpretation of passages in the Old Testament. Religious liberals so "spiritualized" the teachings of the prophets, our Lord, and the disciples as to fashion them in their own image. The prophets were thus Rauschenbushes before Rauschenbush, and the disciples were Fosdicks before Fosdick. The hermeneutics of Christian Science, Swedenborgianism, divine science cults, and theosophy is all some form of excessive spiritualizing or allegorizing.

If these secondary interpretations end in hopelessly contradictory theologies, how is the conflict resolved? *They must all give first account to the literal exegesis of Scripture*, and if they fail there we need not believe them when they allegorize. To rest one's theology on the secondary stratum of the possible meanings of Scripture is not interpretation but imagination. That which fills in the details of the imagination is the particular religious system of the interpreter who has derived it from non-biblical sources. In such a procedure the native meaning of the Bible is sure to be lost.

The only sure way to know God's word is to anchor interpretation in literal exegesis. Literal interpretation is to be our *control* in interpretation. Literal interpretation is not the Charybdis of *letterism* nor the Scylla of *allegorism*. It recognizes the value of attention to words and grammar, but knows that human communication is very subtle and complex and cannot be fully sounded by *letterism* in interpretation. It also realizes the human mind is rich in imagination and expression and that interpretation must be awake and adequate to poetry, figures of speech, analogies, types, allegories, and parables. It also knows that flexible literary forms are capable of abuse and so literal interpretation keeps a cautious eye on the literal and primitive meaning of all words and sentences. Hence literal interpretation is not a method followed unimaginatively or woodenly but it is really *a principle of control*.⁸

2. Cultural

The word "cultural" is here used in its anthropological sense referring to the total ways, methods, manners, tools, and institutions with which a given people or tribe or nation carry on their existence. It

8 The Ecumenical Study Conference which brought in a report on "Guiding Principles for the Interpretation of the Bible" specifically brands allegorical interpretation as "arbitrary," (I, f), and in section II makes literal exegesis the necessary basis for all interpretation of Scripture. To be sure it advocates principles which go beyond this, but also to be sure, it *starts* with literal and grammatical exegesis. Cf., Richardson and Schweitzer, *Biblical Authority for Today*, pp. 240-246 where the report is given.

also includes the history of these peoples. If the literal meaning of terms is their *socially designated meaning* then we must of necessity know the culture in which these terms were first used. What a term or word or expression literally means can be determined only from an inspection of the culture of the people who used it. Protestant hermeneutics has insisted that a knowledge of the history and culture of the peoples of the Biblical record is necessary for an adequate understanding of Sacred Scripture.

There is something unusually important involved in this matter. The Catholic Church followed at the time of the Reformation, and still does so today, the rule that the Church is the authoritative interpreter of Scripture. Catholic exegetes do not ignore grammar, culture, and history, but in the final analysis it is the Church which interprets Scripture. Their thesis is that an inspired Book requires an infallible interpreter. When the Reformers broke with the Roman Catholic Church they of necessity broke with dogmatic interpretation (although they did not break with the importance of tradition in understanding the Bible, for none of the major Reformation groups repudiated the Apostles' Creed, Nicean Creed, or Athanasian Creed). In place of dogmatic interpretation they placed *the laws of the understanding of language*. If the major law of the understanding of language is the law of literal interpretation, then the second law is the law of cultural backdrop for the first implicates the second.

This principle is also polemically directed at theosophy, Christian Science, Swedenborgianism, Unity, etc., for all these groups use the language of the New Testament in radical divorcement from its original cultural associations and meanings.

(i). The interpreter must study *Biblical geography*. This is the spatial background of Scripture just as history is the temporal background. He needs to know the data about mountains, rivers, plains, crops, flora, fauna, seasons, and climate. If the interpreter is ignorant of the geography of Egypt he will have a superficial understanding of the significance of the various plagues. A knowledge of geography is indispensable for practically every book of the Old Testament, for the Gospels, and Acts, and for many other elements in the epistles and Revelation. Many figures of speech in the Psalms have a geographical referent. To try to interpret the Bible without a basic geographical understanding of Bible lands is like trying to watch a drama with no scenery.

A knowledge of geography is necessary to follow the trek of the Israelites from Egypt to Canaan; to follow the conquest of Joshua of the land; to understand the hundreds of references in the poetic and prophetic books to items of geography; to comprehend many of the Biblical figures of speech; to appreciate many incidents in the life of Christ and the journeys of Paul; and to know the significance of many symbols in the book of Revelation.

(ii). The interpreter must study *Biblical history*. From clay tablets and monuments, from inscriptions and papyri fragments, and from historical documents such as the writings of Josephus and Manetho, we are able to gradually reconstruct much of ancient history. This historical knowledge is indispensable to the best exegesis. The discoveries in Mesopotamia have illuminated the early chapters of Genesis and the life of Abraham. The archeological investigations of Rome, Greece, Asia Minor, Mesopotamia, Palestine, Arabia, and Egypt have all added something to the further understanding of the Sacred Text, both of the Old and New Testaments. A study of Egyptology makes the story of Joseph come to life.⁹

A knowledge of the political intrigues and military campaigns among the Egyptians, Canaanites,

9 Cf. E. A. Wallis Budge, *The Dwellers on the Nile*.

Syrians, Assyrians, and Chaldeans is helpful in understanding passages in the prophetic books. The archeological work of Ramsay has done a yeoman's job in revealing how important archeological matters are to the understanding of the book of Acts and the life of Paul.

History (with geography) sets the stage for the Biblical interpreter. A knowledge of the inter-Biblical period sets the stage for the entire New Testament period. It is necessary to know something of the Herodian family to adequately interpret parts of the Gospels and Acts. Greek, Roman, and Jewish history are all necessary for the best comprehension of the book of Acts and life of Paul.

God's revelation is set in a historical context and involves historical personages and events. Rowley is therefore correct in writing:

A religion which is thus rooted and grounded in history cannot ignore history. Hence a historical understanding of the Bible is not a superfluity which can be dispensed within biblical interpretation, leaving a body of ideas and principles divorced from the process out of which they were born.¹⁰

(iii). The interpreter must study *Biblical culture*. Culture is divided by anthropologists into *material* and *social*. Material culture refers to all the things, tools, objects, dwellings, weapons, garments, etc., that people use in their existence. The Scriptures are filled with references to material culture and the wise interpreter makes himself acquainted with the items as he comes across them by referring to Bible dictionaries or specialized treatises on Oriental culture, e.g., E. Rice, *Orientalisms in Bible Lands*.¹¹ For example, upper-rooms were large rooms and best adapted for group gatherings (Acts 1:13). In the time of Christ people ate by reclining on cots (John 13:23-24). Water was purified by the Jews by letting it stand in huge jugs (John 2:6). Bread was baked in thin sheets over small earthen ovens frequently fired with grass (Mt. 6:30). Grecian lamps (in use in Palestine) were very small and for the foolish virgins to expect them to burn for the three-hour vigil (or longer) was very improvident and therefore foolish (Mat. 25:1 vv.).

Social culture comprises the various customs and practices of people about such matters as puberty rites, marriage rituals, burial rituals, etc. It examines *political* structures of a community to see how it governs itself; its *legal system* and methods of penalty; its *religious* practices; and its *economic* structure. The Bible is as replete with references to social culture as it is with references to material culture. Here again the wise commentator will seek to discover the content and meaning of all references to social culture.

The principal purpose of the cultural approach to Scripture (and we are here using culture with reference to this second rule of interpretation after "literal") is to aid us in understanding what the normal, usual, customary, and therefore *literal* meaning of the Bible is. Words, sentences, and expressions are meaningful only in terms of a culture, and all discussion of "literal interpretation" is beside the point if it does not reckon with cultural factors. The cultural approach to Scripture is absolutely necessary and essential to the literal approach to Scripture.

¹⁰ Rowley, *op. cit.*, p. 8.

¹¹ Cf. also M. Miller and J. Miller, *Encyclopedia of Bible Life*, and, F. Wight, *Manners and Customs of Bible Lands*.

The cultural approach is capable of abuse. It is a basis of departure, not the *dominating factor* in interpretation. The form-criticism of the Old (Mowinckel, Gunkel) and of the New (Bultmann) Testaments are examples of an improper use of the cultural approach to the Scriptures (*sitz im leben*). The "Chicago school" with its emphasis on the psychology and sociology of religion is equally aberrant at this score. The cultural approach is (like the literal) a *controlling* principle, and is therefore a flexible tool. If an Old Testament scholar says that a given passage meant so-and-so to the Jews (on the grounds that the passage must have meaning to its contemporaries) *and limits its meaning* to that meaning, he is misapplying the cultural principle and denying the *sensus plenior* of the Old Testament prophecy. If a scholar not only explains some Old testament passage, but explains it away by an appeal to the cultural, he is again abusing this principle.

The function of the cultural principle is not to do away with Biblical religion or theology, but to serve as a guide to the proper understanding of the Bible. It will save us from the extremes of allegorism and symbolic interpretation by rooting our interpretations in facts. It is not a method to rule out the prophetic and supernatural aspects of the text. The liberal method has been called the critico-historical method, and was a victim of reductive and genetic fallacies. Both orthodoxy and neo-orthodoxy have exposed the inability of this method to handle the Sacred Text.

3. *Critical*

The word *critical* is an abused word. To those who confuse principles of piety with principles of scholarship, the word is equated with scepticism. By critical we mean that *any interpretation of Scripture must have adequate justification*. The grounds for the interpretation *must be made explicit*. We may appeal to *history*. We may say this prophetic passage must mean so-and-so because of the political relations between Israel and Egypt. Or we may argue about some interpretation of the book of Acts on the grounds of some bearing that Roman history might have. It may be *lexical* justification. We may cite lexicons or word-studies of citations from profane authors. It may be *grammatical* and our justification will rest upon evidence supplied by standard Hebrew or Greek grammars. It may be a *theological* justification. We may appeal to the general teaching of Calvinism to interpret some particular passage, e.g., Hebrews 6. It may be *cultural* justification. We may argue that such-and-such was the practice among the Jews at the time of Christ as witnessed by rabbinical writings. For example, Ramsay argues that Paul's advice that women have long hair and wear a veil refers to the complete veiling of women as is practiced in Mohammedan countries today, and that paramours and courtesans were either unveiled or shaven of head. Our justification may be *geographical*. Much of the understanding of the strategy of Joshua and the significance of Joshua's Long Day depend upon adequate geographical information.

In many passages we may not have the measure of justification we desire. We should in all such cases admit our lack of justification and announce our interpretation as a hypothesis.

There is a definite purpose in emphasizing the critical element of interpretation. If our interpretations are critically determined (i.e., justified by the various criteria here suggested), then they are rooted in the sort of fact that scholars can investigate, weighing evidence one way or the other. Thus the critical approach stands in definite opposition to all interpretations determined *arbitrarily, dogmatically, or speculatively*. When our theology gets top-heavy and starts dictating to exegesis, our interpretation is likely to be arbitrary.

The standing protest of Protestantism to Catholicism is that Catholicism may dogmatically define the meaning of a text or the meaning of a doctrine, *and the justification is the claim of the Church to be an infallible teacher*. Can the Scriptures mean one thing when interpreted by adequate criteria of justification and another when made the subject of official interpretation? Is the case so completely closed that forever and ever water in John 3:5 means baptism? Strict Protestant interpretation will never build upon that which is not capable of justification by acceptable canons.

The critical approach is opposed to highly personal interpretations. These highly personal and rather arbitrary interpretations usually are introduced by such expressions as: "Now it is my earnest conviction that . . .," or, "now I know that scholars differ but it seems clear to me that . . .," or, "I put away all books of human origin and read the pure Word and the Holy Spirit showed me [in spite of much grammatical and historical material to the contrary, unfortunately] that . . ." How do we settle differences of deep convictions? A very devout and God-fearing servant of the Lord told this writer that the Lord was sure to come before 1940. (Charles Spurgeon stated in one sermon that the church should not even speculate in what century the Lord would return). Fortunately the sheer duration of time settled this speculation, but what if one should move the date up to the turn of the second millennium after Christ? How do we settle the truth when two people of equal piety and devotion have different opinions? Does the Holy Spirit tell one person the rapture is pre-tribulation, and another that it is post-tribulation?

The very fact that spiritually minded interpreters come to different conclusions about these matters distresses many people's minds. They have presumed that if a man is yielded to the Holy Spirit his interpretations must be correct. But certain things must be kept in mind. First, the Holy Spirit gives *nobody* infallible interpretations. Second, piety is a help to interpretation but it is not a substitute for knowledge or study or intelligence. Third, all of us are still in the human body and subject to its limitations and frailties and we make mistakes of interpretation in Scripture as well as errors of judgment in the affairs of life. It is the present temptation of at least American evangelicalism to substitute a class of devout Bible teachers for the Catholic pope. To such people the *meaning* of Scripture is that which their favorite Bible teacher teaches. But the Protestant principle must always be this: *the truest interpretations are those with the best justification*.

Finally, the critical spirit in interpretation cuts short all imaginative, fanciful and far-fetched interpretations. Many sermons have been preached on losing Jesus at the Temple. Jesus (as the interpretation goes) is our Saviour; the Temple is the place of communion; we, the people in the pew, are Jesus' parents; the trip home is our daily life; the failure to see if Jesus is in the caravan is our sin of assuming that Jesus is always with us apart from the spiritual exercises of the soul. Although soul-touching sermons are preached following such interpretation the method is absurd from the perspective of a sensible hermeneutics. Such treatment of Scripture borders on trifling.

D. EVALUATION

1. *Advantages*

The merits of the literal-cultural-critical methodology in hermeneutics are:

(i). It seeks to ground interpretations in *facts*. It seeks to rest its case in any given passage on such objective considerations as grammar, logic, etymology, history, geography, archeology or theology. It is thereby loyal to the best in scholarship in our western culture, and in closest sympathy with the rigorous methodology of the sciences.

(ii). It exercises a *control* over interpretation attempting to match the control which experimentation exercises over hypotheses in science. In science a man is free to suggest any hypothesis he may wish but having propounded it, he must make peace with the rest of science. Among other things the hypothesis must have experimental confirmation if it wishes to survive. If not, the hypothesis is weeded out. Thus experimentation exercises a *control* over hypotheses. *So, justification criteria function as controls over interpretations.* All interpretations which do not measure up to these criteria must be rejected or at least held suspect.

This methodology in hermeneutics exercises a check on the constant temptation to place some extra meaning upon the Scriptures. There is not only the Catholic allegorist seeking favorite doctrines in the Old Testament, but there are Bible students who give themselves to an excessive typology, and others to fanciful spiritualizing, and still others to an exaggerated symbolism. Besides these are the numerologists, the Swedenborgians, the Christian Scientists, the mystics, and other cultists all pressing beyond the proper meaning of Scripture. A rigid following of the *criteria of justification* will put a stop to such impositions on the Word of God.

(iii). This methodology has proved itself in practice. The enduring and valuable contributions to Biblical exegesis are the result of grammatical and historical exegesis. It was the methodology of the Syrian school of Antioch, of the Victorines, and of the Reformers. It was the general methodology of such princes among exegetes as Calvin, Bengel, Tholuck, Meyer, Lightfoot, Wescott, and Broadus. It is the methodology which pervades the great exegetical literature of the nineteenth century producing both great Bible commentaries (e.g., the *Lange Commentary*) and exegetical treatises of individual books (e.g., Lightfoot's works on some of Paul's epistles).

This method has enormously enlarged our knowledge of the Bible, and has been a great artesian well of information for systematic theologians. A certain amount of excessive allegorical and typological interpretation remains today but it is under constant scrutiny and check by the grammatical and historical methodology.¹²

2. *Limitations*

This methodology, like any healthy tissue, is subject to attack by some diseases. If not carefully watched it may be afflicted by one or more of the following:

(i). It can become dry, lifeless, and pedantic. It can degenerate into a mere collection of scholarly opinions, and bookish learning. Some interpreters can give twenty opinions of others but not one of their own. People prefer one positive interpretation of a poor variety to the drone of twenty interpretations with discomfiture of the mind as the only reward of patience. Kierkegaard's essay on "Beholding One's Self in the Mirror of the Word" (in *For Self Examination*) exposes this sort of

12 Cf. Feinberg's defense of the literal methodology in *Premillennialism or Amillennialism?* p. 49 ff.

exegetical disease. Just as the little boy pads his britches with a napkin in an effort to take the sting out of a spanking, so the bookish scholar pads his soul with his dictionaries, commentaries, and lexicons so that God's Word never gets through. Such a scholar is so myopic he thinks that *translating* a love-letter is the same as *reading* a love-letter. This sort of scholarly pedantry and calloused bookishness Kierkegaard mercilessly scotches.

(ii). It is likely to stop with exegesis and not press on to the *feeding ministry of the Word of God*. It should result in a truly Biblical teaching and preaching ministry in which relevant application is made to listeners or readers. In its effort to be accurate and precise it is in danger of missing spiritual relevancy and devotional application.

(iii). It has frequently been distressingly non-committal in matters of prophetic interpretation. It has been our frequent experience to run through the commentaries on some prophetic passage expecting some help as to the locus of fulfilment of the passage only to have commentator after commentator restrict his remarks to grammatical matters. As to the *when* and the *what* they are mute. The deeper problems of prophetic interpretation must await our discussion in that chapter.