

Protestant Biblical Interpretation

A Textbook of Hermeneutics for Conservative Protestants

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CHAPTER V

THE SPECIFIC PRINCIPLES OF PROTESTANT INTERPRETATION

Having enunciated the basic theory of Protestant hermeneutics, and given its panoramic principles, we must now clearly show how the theory expresses itself in exegesis. It is assumed at this point that the inspiration, canon, and text of the books of the Bible have been established. Suppose now we have a definite passage of Scripture before us. What is our procedure?

(1). *The principle of the study of words.* Words are the units of thought, and the bricks of conceptual construction. Any study of Scripture, therefore, must commence with a study of words, and words may be studied different ways.

(a). Words may be studied *etymologically*. This study is best done with a lexicon. Such investigations into words add to our insight into the meaning of words. For example, *hell* (as derived from *hades*) literally means *invisible*, being composed of the alpha privative (prefix of negation) and the verb *to see*. It is, therefore, the place that is invisible, the abode of departed spirits. But the word *hell* (derived from *Gehenna*) has no etymological derivation in the Greek coming from the Hebrew. In that it refers to a locality it is of little help to further trace its etymology in the Hebrew. When we track down the word *paradise* we find it comes from the Persian so there is no help to be derived here from its etymology. A steward is a *ruler of a household*, the word being composed of *household* and *to rule*. A bishop is an overseer, the word composed of *over* or *upon* and *to look*. Such a study can be followed throughout the vocabularies of both Testaments.

Etymology helps further in understanding how words are constructed. From primitive roots both Hebrew and Greek have methods of constructing several possible other words. For example, from the Hebrew verb *to rule* may be derived *king*, *queen*, and *kingdom*. From the Greek root *krin* we may add a verb ending and get *krino*, "to judge"; or we may add the instrumental ending *tēs* and get *kritēs*, "the judge"; or the noun ending *ma* and get *krima*, "judgment."

To the student with the books, time, and training, many profitable hours of such study are awaiting, although we must be reminded that frequently the etymology of a word offers no help in exegesis. The etymology of the word may be obscure (*diakonos*, for example), or the meaning of the word may have shifted far from its original etymological sense.

(b). Words may be studied *comparatively*. This is best done with concordances in the original languages. This study reveals how many times a word is used, what writers in the Bible use it, and the various meanings of the word evident from its usage. A comparative study of the word *spirit* reveals

that it has several meanings. In some instances it means an evil spirit; in others, the human spirit; in others, the proper inner attitude; and in still others, The Holy Spirit.

The same is true of the word *soul*. Sometimes it means person; other times it means enthusiastically like our expression "from the heart"; and again it may mean the spiritual and immortal part of our being. Such a flexibility of usage of word justifies Kuyper's observation that "a sharply drawn distinction of conceptions and a constant usage of words is foreign to the Scripture."¹

Another feature of the comparative study of words is the study of *synonyms*. Fortunately we have in hand Girdlestone's *Synonyms of the Old Testament* and Trench, *Synonyms of the New Testament*. There is also some material on synonyms in Thayer's *Lexicon*. Such studies reveal the shades of meaning in similar words. These studies also help us discover what words are used as equivalents. For example, in the synoptic Gospels there are scores of instances where one writer uses one word or expression, and the next one another, and yet they are used so as to leave the clear impression that they are equivalents. Matthew 20:21 speaks of Christ's being seated "in his kingdom," and Mark 10:37 of His being seated "in his glory." Hence, to be seated in His kingdom, and to be seated in His glory are equivalent. Matthew uses the expression "to enter into life" (18:9) whereas Mark uses the expression "to enter into the kingdom of God," (9:47). Evidently the two terms are considered equivalent.

(c). Words may be studied *historically*. Sometimes a word has a history, or has historical or cultural reference, and such information enriches our understanding of the word. When it is said that our Lord offered *supplications* (Hebrews 5:7), the word used is associated with the custom of bringing an olive branch to a dignitary from whom one is requesting a favor to assure him of the sincerity of the appeal. When our Lord mentioned that if we were *compelled* to go one mile, we should go two (Matt. 5:41) He was referring to a well-known Persian custom. When a Persian messenger carried the message of the empire he could compel inhabitants of a locality to carry his baggage one mile, or to perform any service the messenger commanded. Such historical studies of words not only enrich our understanding of words, but supply interesting illustrative material for preaching.

Information of this sort may be had from the better commentaries and lexicons. In addition to this are studies in archeology which specialize in linguistical and lexical matters such as Deissmann, *Light from the Ancient East* or Cobern, *The New Archeological Discoveries*.

In connection with the historical studies of words, the principle of *usus loquendi* may be mentioned. This rule calls for the interpreter to try to discover the meaning of the word to the people at the time and locality in which the document being interpreted was written. Illustrative of this is the change of mood among New Testament scholars. Previous generations of New Testament scholars moved too easily from classical studies in Greek to the meanings of the New Testament. Abrahams registered a protest to this in 1909 in his essay in the *Cambridge Biblical Essays*. Recent studies have emphasized that Palestinian Jewish literature forms the real basis for the *usus loquendi* of New Testament words, and not the Greek classics. We are thankful to Doeve who has summarized for us the history of the use of rabbinical studies in New Testament exegesis in his *Jewish Hermeneutics in the Synoptic Gospels and Acts*.

Another violation of *usus loquendi* is to read our own theological meanings into words rather than

¹ Kuyper, *Principles of Sacred Theology*, p. 496 fn.

investigating the meaning of these words during Old or New Testament times.

(d). Words may be studied in terms of their equivalents in *cognate languages*. Studies in the Arabic and Aramaic languages clear up some of the obscurities in the Hebrew. Tablets from Egypt to Babylon have created a new chapter in Semitic and Old Testament philology. The Septuagint is of great importance in discovering what Greek words the translators considered as parallel to Hebrew words. The Vulgate gives us some appreciation of what was considered the Latin equivalents to Hebrew and Greek words in Jerome's time. Similar assistance can be had from the Syriac Peshitta, Old Italia, Coptic, and Armenian versions.

A thorough study of the word *to baptize* would take us through the Greek classics, then over to the Septuagint, then to the Targums, then to rabbinic literature, then to the New Testament, then to the versions. Extra information might be garnered from the papyri or Patristic writings. This would then give us the best possible basis for ascertaining the *usus loquendi* of the word at the time the New Testament was composed.

Most interpreters of Scripture have neither the linguistic training nor the library facilities to carry on such an extensive inquiry. Most of us are shut up to the best possible secondary sources such as grammars, lexicons, concordances, journals, Bible dictionaries, and commentaries. An interpreter sensitive to these finer points will build his library to make it a good interpretive tool. The student who knows the languages of the Bible will find much material in lexicons and critical commentaries. All students may glean much from such works as Vincent's *Word Studies in the New Testament*; Robertson's *Word Pictures in the New Testament*; *Cambridge Greek Testament*, etc.

(2). *The principle of grammatical interpretation*. Although words are the bricks of thought, a sentence is a unit of thought. Basic notions only are conveyed by single words. The complexities of thought must be expressed in sentences. Grammar states the principles which arrange the formation of words into meaningful sentences.

First of all, much of that which has been said of words applies to grammar. Secondly, one must be fully aware of the entire routine of grammar--verbs, nouns, adjectives, prepositions, adverbs, pronouns, etc. He must have clearly at his finger tips grammatical concepts as number, gender, case, mood, tense, state, participle, infinitive, etc. Some training or understanding in the science of linguistics can greatly help the interpreter. It will sharpen his understanding of grammar and translation problems very much.

Having mastered the words of the sentence, the interpreter must then give attention to grammar and note the construction of the sentence giving special attention to idioms. For this study he may use Hebrew and Greek grammars, critical commentaries, and reliable translations. Granted a modicum of intelligence and a good hermeneutical sense, the interpreter is then ready to pronounce a reasonably accurate judgment of the meaning of the sentence.

The larger portion of the exposition in exegetical and critical commentaries is concerned with grammatical exegesis. Word studies and historical studies are valuable as they are made to contribute to grammatical exegesis. As a guiding principle capable of modification only by larger and more theological considerations we may assert that *nothing should be elicited from the text but what is yielded by the grammatical explication of the language*.

There is great value in paying attention to grammatical details. Tense generally refers to location in time, or state of completion or of existence in time. In John 1:1 we read, "In the beginning was the Word." *Was* is in the imperfect tense. Now the imperfect tense implies a previous state and its continuance. If John 1:1 were interpreted to bring out the full force of the imperfect it would be translated: "In the beginning the Word had been existing, and is still existing." The theological point is that it so nicely indicates the eternal existence of the Son. He was already existing before the dawn of creation. In John 1:14 we read, "And the Word became flesh." *Became* is an aorist, which means the completion of an event in historical time. If the imperfect were used, then the incarnation would have been a process enduring over a period of time. Nor could the present or future be used as the event is accomplished in history. Thus the aorist clearly indicates the point-event in historical time of the incarnation of God in Christ.

In Hebrews 1:1 the King James Version states "God spake" but in the Greek it is an aorist participle, and should be rendered "God having spoken." The import of this is that in the next verse with reference to the New Testament, the Scriptures say "has spoken to us," the verb being an aorist indicative. The meaning then is this: God commenced speaking in the Old Testament but He did not speak all his mind; then in the New Testament he finally finished what he had to say.

The Greek preposition also deserves careful attention. Hebrews 6:1 mentions faith *toward* God. The word *toward* is the preposition *epi*. The Jews had believed *in* God but had rested their salvation *upon* the law.² But in the Christian faith they must learn to put faith *upon* (resting upon) God for salvation, in the same sense that they had rested upon the law.

Some of the crucial points in the theology of the atonement are concerned with the different meanings of the prepositions: *peri* (with reference to), *hyper* (for the benefit of), and *anti* (in place of).

Atkinson's *The Theology of Prepositions* is an interesting and charming study revealing the importance of the study of the Greek preposition.

In any language there is a long list of grammatical rules which the interpreter applies from his knowledge of that particular language. Special attention must be given to those grammatical constructions known as *idioms*.³ Both the Hebrew and the Greek have many of them which are important for the proper interpretation of the Bible. Many of the details about the time of our Lord's death, burial and resurrection must be understood in terms of idioms about time reckoning.⁴

(3). *The principle of contextual interpretation.* Todd has correctly observed that "The Bible is no mere collection of good texts or verses put together without any relation to one another, but careful study very soon shows that each verse or passage has a very real relation to that which immediately precedes as well as what follows,"⁵ and Barrows aptly states that "To interpret without regard to the context is to

2 Cf. *epanapaue nomō* of Romans 2:17.

3 Cf. Angus and Green, *Cyclopedic Handbook to the Bible*, p. 181 ff. Young, *Analytic Concordance* (twentieth edition) has a list of 71 Biblical idioms (p. vii). C. F. D. Moule, *An Idiom Book of New Testament Greek*.

4 Cf. A. T. Robertson, *A Harmony of the Gospels*, notes 11, 12, 13, and 14. Pp. 279-91.

5 Todd, *Principles of Interpretation*, p. 20.

interpret at random; to interpret contrary to the context is to teach falsehood for truth."⁶ Both of these writers speak to the point that an understanding of the contexts of sentences is important for their proper interpretation.

Just as words are not properly understood until seen in the prospect of the sentence, so sentences are not properly understood until they are seen in the prospect of their context. For example, the English word *nature* has several major meanings and its meaning in a given sentence can only be determined by the sentence as a whole. Parallel to this is the truth that a *thought* expressed in a sentence can only be properly deduced when that *thought* is set in the light of the thoughts which precede it and which follow after it. The study of the context of a passage takes its place with the study of words and grammar as absolutely basic to the interpretation of Scripture. There are several *circles* of context which a good interpreter notes.

(i). Every writer of the Bible writes in a given *culture* and hence a vital part of the context of any passage is the cultural background of the writer of the passage. When we interpret Judges we are sure of a very different cultural background than that of John when he wrote Revelation. Revelation was written after the coming of Greece and Rome and the supremacy of the west. Judges is located in the Palestinian bronze-age culture. It is this *cultural circle of context* which supplies the clue for matters of history and social and material culture mentioned in the text.

(ii). The second *circle of context* is the Bible itself. Every volume of Scripture is within the boundary of inspired writings. Hence every volume has its own unique contribution to the great history of sin, redemption, and salvation. It is a segment of a body of literature inspired for our edification, instruction, and doctrinal learning. Because a given volume is part of Sacred Scripture it is treated with reverence and studied with prayer. Further, its place in the total plan of God in Sacred Scripture is noted, and its peculiar contribution to that plan is studied. If any of its teachings are qualified by subsequent revelation, this too must be noted.

(iii). The third *circle of context* is the specific book in which the passage occurs. It is either a book in the Old Testament or New Testament, in either case demanding a special approach due to the very Testament it is situated in. The interpreter realizes that he has one mental set if he interprets Isaiah 12 and another one if he interprets Romans 12.

Further, the interpreter notes *the general intent of a book* as a clue to the meaning of the particular passages within the book. Hebrews endeavors to prove that what a Jew gives up in Judaism he receives again in an exalted spiritual form in Christianity. Galatians is Paul's defense of his gospel, apostleship, and doctrines of grace. Matthew is a concerted effort to demonstrate the Messiahship of Jesus. The better we know the theme of a book, the motivation of the author, the goals intended, the better we can handle the individual passages and sentences.

(iv). The fourth *circle of context* is the material which immediately precedes and follows the passage under consideration. If we know the flow of thought leading to a passage, and the flow of thought away from it, we can predict with some certainty the flow of thought within the passage. Clues to the meaning of a passage are frequently found in such preceding or following materials. Paul uses the word *law* over sixty times in Romans and with different meanings. A most careful study of the context

6 Barrows, *Companion to the Bible*, p. 531.

is necessary to determine the meaning of the word *law* in each of its uses.

Some examples to illustrate the necessity of observing context are as follows: (i) In Luke 15 are given the parables of the lost sheep, the lost coin, and the lost son. Luke introduces the parable by stating that the publicans and sinners drew near to hear our Lord. The Pharisees then murmured and said, "This man receiveth sinners, and eateth with them." The three parables then are our Lord's justification for his eating with sinners and are parables about sinners finding the Saviour and not of backslidden Christians. (ii) In Matthew 16:28 our Lord says that "There be some standing here, which shall not taste of death, till they see the Son of man coming in his kingdom." Then if the reader follows through into the seventeenth chapter he will find the fulfilment of this is the transfiguration of our Lord, which interpretation is verified by Peter's subsequent remarks on this event (2 Peter 1:15-18). (iii) in 2 Peter 2, Peter mentions the dog which returns to its vomit, and the sow that returns to the mire. Some have regarded this as a reference to believers, and have so urged the amissibility of salvation. However, by noting what Peter says in verse 1 of this chapter we realize he is discussing false teachers bringing in damnable heresies and not believers. (iv) In Colossians 2:18-23 Paul discusses the futility of a barren asceticism. But the true nature of spirituality is discussed in the next chapter and unless the reader follows through he does not grasp the totality of Paul's thought. The marvelous invitation at the beginning of the third chapter must be interpreted in view of the context, namely, as a description of the true spirituality in contrast to the false spirituality which he is attacking in the second chapter.

In view of the frequent abuse of the principle of considering carefully the context, we may fully understand and sympathize with Robertson's remark that "The first step in interpretation is to ignore the modern chapters and verses."⁷

(4). *The principle of interpreting according to the literary mold.* The Spirit of God in the inspiration of Scriptures chose to use a variety of types of literature. In that the type of literary form employed governs the attitude and spirit in which a document is approached, it is necessary for the interpreter to recognize literary forms *as necessary to the interpretation of Scripture.* The principle of strict literal interpretation needs sufficient qualifications to be able to adequately interpret varieties of literature.

Many parts of Scripture are *poetic*. Poetry has some rules to itself, and Hebrew poetry has a genius of its own. The structure of Hebrew poetry has received considerable attention since the times of Bishop Lowth and the interpreter should have some familiarity with the subject.

A strict literalistic approach to the poetic language of the Scripture is certainly not adequate. "Poetic license," and the rich imagery of language must be handled with the requisite measure of insight into poetic language.

Some parts of the Scripture are *dramatic* in form. This is certainly true of Job. In truth, Job is a combination of the poetic and dramatic, and a wooden approach to Job will yield nothing but an inadequate understanding of its contents. Bowman has recently argued that the book of Revelation is very dramatic in character being divisible into acts and scenes, and that even some of the accoutrements of dramatics of that period may be noted.⁸

⁷ Cited by Miller, *General Biblical Introduction*, p. 11.

⁸ J. S. Bowman, "The Revelation to John: Its Dramatic Structure," *Interpretation*, 9:436-453, October, 1955.

We may note in passing that some books of Scripture are historical in form, e.g., Acts; some are biographical, e.g., the Gospels; others are letters or epistles. We also have in the Old Testament the chokmatic or wisdom literature. Job, Ecclesiastes, and Proverbs are typical of this literature.

The point to be noted is this: *the literary form governs the meanings of sentences* and therefore the interpreter must be sensitive to the implications of the literary form for the interpretation of the passage of Scripture.

(5). *The principle of interpretation by proper use of cross references.* The same topic may occur two or more places in Scripture, and the interpreter may gather information from one reference to guide his interpretation of another. Such cross references may be verbal or conceptual or parallel.

(i). *A verbal cross reference* is a reference which contains the same word or expression occurring in the passage being interpreted. Not all verbal cross references are valid for exegetical purposes, hence they must be divided into *real* verbal cross references, and *apparent* cross references.

An *apparent* cross reference is a reference which contains the same word or expression used in the passage being interpreted, but the relationship is that of pure verbal coincidence and nothing is gained by comparison. One writer may use such words as *sacrifice, fat, wood, or save* in such a way as to be of no interpretive help for their occurrences in other passages. An uncritical listing of word-occurrences can lead an interpreter to some silly mistakes and superficial generalizations.

A *real* cross reference is a reference in which the words used in one instance aid in the understanding of the same word used in another instance. A study of the word *soul, or spirit, or expressions such as son of man or flesh* may lead to some very helpful conclusions.

The most valuable tools for this sort of study are the *Hebrew* and *Greek* concordances.

(ii). *Conceptual* cross references are those references which, although not containing the same words, contain the same substance. For example, Hebrews 2 and Philippians 2 discuss the incarnation. Romans 3 and Hebrews 10 both treat the atonement. 1 Corinthians 15 and Revelation 20 discuss the resurrection from the dead. Conceptual cross references enable one to see a given passage in greater depth and detail. What one passage omits the other contains. On the other hand what we would be tempted to read into a passage is checked by what a conceptual cross reference contains. It is well to note, for example, that Paul apparently considers *the filling of the Spirit* and *letting the word of Christ dwell in us richly* (Eph. 5:18 and Col. 3:16) as equivalent expressions.

(iii). *Parallel* cross references are those passages in one book of the Bible which recount the same events or material in another part of the Bible. To get the full account and the necessary facts before us, it is necessary to have all parallel passages examined. The four Gospels contain much material common to each other and the faithful interpreter will work with a Greek harmony of the Gospels to be sure he has all the necessary data at hand to interpret any given passage in the Gospels.

The life of Paul may be patched together from the book of Acts, and from biographical remarks in the Epistles. These two sets of data must be compared and contrasted in writing the life of Paul.

Other passages of the Scriptures which exhibit this sort of parallelism are: Kings and Chronicles; Exodus and Deuteronomy; and various Psalms which treat of similar themes.

For such a study the student has available a number of harmonies of the Gospels in both English and Greek. For the life of Paul he may consult Goodwin, *A Harmony of the Life of St. Paul* and for Old Testament historical books he may use Crockett, *A Harmony of Samuel, Kings and Chronicles*.

(6). *The principle of the interpretation of figurative language.* The literal interpretation of Scripture readily admits the very large place which figurative language has in the Scriptures, and Feinberg is correct when he writes that "It is not true that [the literalists] require every single passage to be interpreted literally without exception."⁹ Literal interpretation does not mean painful, or wooden, or unbending literal rendition of every word and phrase. The literal meaning of the figurative expression is the proper or natural meaning as understood by students of language. Whenever a figure is used its literal meaning is precisely that meaning determined by grammatical studies of figures. Hence figurative interpretation does not pertain to the spiritual or mystical sense of Scripture, but to the literal sense.¹⁰

The careful exegete notes quite a number of figurative elements in the Scriptures.¹¹ The Scriptures employ the *simile* (a comparison of two things in one or more aspects usually employing the words "as" or "like"); the *allegory* (where a moral or spiritual truth is told in terms of a narrative or segment of history); the *ellipsis* (the condensation of the meaning of a sentence by the omission of elements supplied by the reader usually gathered from the context); the *metaphor* (the comparison of two things without the use of the words "as" or "like"); the *paradox* (the assertion of two propositions as true which seem to be contradictory but may in fact not be); *irony* (a method of criticizing or judging by seeming to praise or congratulate); the *hyperbole* (the intentional use of exaggeration for effect); *synecdoche* (a form of expression in which the whole is spoken of for the part, or the part for the whole); *zeugma* (the yoking together of two nouns in association with another word in which the other word applies to just one of the nouns), and the *euphemism* (a soft or moderate expression for a more direct and perhaps shocking one). This does not exhaust the list of figures of speech but the student may check the following in an unabridged dictionary: *brachylogy*, *litotes*, *meiosis*, *oxymoron*, *personification*, *paranomasia*, and *metonymy*.

The student of Scripture also notes the longer type of figurative expression: the allegory, the fable, the parable, the symbols, and the proverb. In all of these his interpretation is guided by a thorough grammatical, historical, and contextual study of each, and an effort is made to derive all the light possible from other Scripture references, from archeology, from history, and from customs of the times. With reference to these figurative elements in the Bible the serious student of Scripture concurs with the opinion of Barrows that they are "no less *certain and truthful* than its [the Bible] plain and literal

9 Feinberg, *Premillennialism or Amillennialism?* (second edition), p. 27.

10 Cf. Unger's remark that "Figurative language is, therefore to be thought of as an ally and not an enemy of literal interpretation, and as a help to it and not a hindrance." *Principles of Expository Preaching*, p. 170.

11 Both Unger (*op. cit.*, Chapter XVI), and Berkhof (*Principles of Biblical Interpretation*, p. 82 ff.) have full discussions of figurative language, and cite examples from Scripture. Horne, *An Introduction to the Critical Study and Knowledge of the Holy Scriptures*, has a full discussion of figurative language. I, 359-372.

declarations. The figures of the Bible are employed not simply to please the imagination and excite the feelings, but to teach *eternal verities*.¹²

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12 Barrows, *Companion to the Bible*, p. 557. Italics are his.