

Protestant Biblical Interpretation

A Textbook of Hermeneutics for Conservative Protestants

by
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AUTHOR'S PROLOGUE

The author has endeavored to present that system of hermeneutics which most generally characterizes conservative Protestantism. In pursuit of this goal we have not defended any specific school of thought within Protestantism.

The material has been, therefore, kept general, and individual instructors may make their own emphases. Some writers on hermeneutics devote considerable space to detailed exposition or illustrations. We have tried to restrict our illustrations to a minimum, leaving that part of hermeneutics to the teacher to supply. Other writers defend distinctive doctrines that a literal method leads to, e.g., hyperdispensationalism, dispensationalism, or premillennialism. In our view of hermeneutics these are different conclusions that men have come to following the same general method of interpretation.¹ They are the result of the interpreter's skill or art, or lack of the same. It is our purpose to lay bare the essential features of the literal system. If we commence defending specific doctrines, we confuse hermeneutics with exegesis.

Greek and Hebrew words have been put in italics. Those who know the languages may resort to them, and those not familiar with them will not be too confused by the presence in the script of the original languages.

The word 'literal' is offensive to some even within the conservative circle. In subsequent definitions, however, we make clear what the word means in our system of hermeneutics. The reader may turn to our citation in Chapter III in which E. R. Craven so clearly defines what is meant by 'literal.' There is no other word that can serve our purposes except possibly 'normal.' But the use of that word has its limitations and problems.

A special word of gratitude is to be extended to Dr. Gleason Archer for linguistic help; Dr. Edward Carnell for assistance in the chapter dealing with neo-orthodoxy; Dr. Wilbur Smith for many valuable suggestions throughout the book; Dr. Charles Feinberg for correcting the manuscript and giving valuable assistance in every way; Professor Walter Wessel for reading parts of the manuscript; Miss Inez McGahey for reading the manuscript for grammatical matters; Miss Barbara Pietsch for typing the manuscript; and to my wife for help in literary and grammatical matters.

¹ For example, Graber definitely claims that dispensationalism and ultradispensationalism do *not differ in their respective hermeneutical systems*. The difference is in exegesis of various passages of Scripture. John B. Graber, *Ultradispensationalism* (unpublished doctoral dissertation, Dallas Theological Seminary, 1949), p. 1.

We are grateful to God that this book in its first edition has been used in Christian schools literally around the entire world. Since the first edition we have rethought some problems, and read wider in hermeneutical literature. We have rewritten much of the book and changed the order of it in certain places.

The preaching and pulpit teaching in our land is not as yet sufficiently guided by a sound hermeneutics. One saying of Alexander Carson has stayed with us during most of this revision and could well be the theme of this revised edition:

No man has a right to say, as some are in the habit of saying, The Spirit tells me that such or such is the meaning of such a passage. How is he assured that it is the Holy Spirit, and that it is not a spirit of delusion, except from the evidence that the interpretation is the legitimate meaning of the words? (*Examination of the Principles of Biblical Interpretation*, p. 23.)

PREFACE

by
Wilbur M. Smith

St. Luke, in his record of what has been called by some the most beautiful chapter in all the Bible, the account of the walk of the risen Lord with the two disciples on the way to Emmaus, tells us that Jesus, "beginning from Moses, and from all the prophets, interpreted to them in all the scriptures the things concerning himself." The word here translated *interpreted* is the Greek word *diermēnēuo*. If we take away the two first letters, the prefix, and give a rough breathing to that initial letter "e" we have exactly the word from which our word *hermeneutics* is derived, meaning, then, the science of interpretation. (In the New Testament this word, in its various forms, may be found, e.g., in Matt. 1:23; Mark 5:41; 15:22, 34; John 1:8, 38; 9:7; Acts 4:36; 9:36; 13:8; I Cor. 12:10; 14:28; Heb. 7:2.) Hardly any study in the whole vast realm of intellectual life could be more important than the science of hermeneutics as applied to the Word of God, that which gives us an understanding of the eternal revelation of God to men. When such is absent not only have men misinterpreted the word, but they have taken falsehood out of the truth, and thus have deceived many when they should have led them out of darkness into light.

Half a century ago the great London preacher, Dr. Joseph Parker, delivered a sermon on the phrase, "which being interpreted is," which he entitled "The Interpreter."

Perchance most of the readers of this book have not seen a copy of this sermon. I would like in this preface to confront this generation of Bible students once again with the opening and closing paragraphs, from the heart and mind of him who did so much to awaken new interest in the Word of God in the London of another generation:

"Which being interpreted,"--that is what we need: a man to tell us the meaning of hard words and difficult things and mysteries which press too heavily upon our staggering faith. The interpretation comes to us as a lamp, we instantly feel the comfort and the liberty of illumination. When we heard that word Emmanuel we were staggered; it was a foreign word to us, it brought with it no home associations, it did not speak to anything that was within us; but when the interpreter came, when he placed his finger upon the word and said to us. The meaning of this word is God with us, then we came into the liberty and into the wealth of a new possession.

"So we need the interpreter. We shall always need him. The great reader will always have his day, come and go who may. We want men who can turn foreign words, difficult languages, into our mother tongue; then how simple they are and how beautiful, and that which was a difficulty before becomes a gate opening upon a wide liberty. We need a man who can interpret to us the meaning of confused and confusing and bewildering events; some man with a key from heaven, some man with divine insight, the vision that sees the poetry and the reality of things, and a man with a clear, simple, strong, penetrating voice who will tell us that all this confusion will one day be shaped into order, and all this uproar will fall into the cadences of a celestial and endless music. We shall know that man when we meet him; there is no mistaking the prophet; he does not speak as other men speak, he is not in difficulty or in trouble as other men are; on his girdle hangs the key, the golden key, that can open the

most difficult gates in providence and in history, and in the daily events that make up our rough life from week to week. How distressing is the possibility that a prophet may have been amongst us, and we may have mistaken him for a common man? How much more we might have elicited from him if we had listened more intently to his wonderful voice! What miracles of music he might have wrought in our nature; but we take the prophet sometimes as a mere matter of course: he is a man in a crowd, his speciality we overlook and we know not that he is talking to us from the mountain of the heavens, from the altar of the temple unseen. . . .

"It is the prophet's business to interpret things to us, to tell us that everything has been from the beginning, to assure us that there are no surprises in providence, to calm our hearts with the deep conviction that God has seen the end from the beginning, and that nothing has occurred on all this theatre of time which God did not foresee and which God cannot control. The devil is but a black servant in the kitchen of God; the devil has limited chains; he counts the links, he would like to make seven eight, he strives to strain the links into greater length, he cannot do it, he was chained at the first, he has been chained ever since, he will be chained for ever--hallelujah! the Lord reigneth! There is but one throne, and all hell is subject to the governance and the authority of that throne . . .

"Which being interpreted.' We need the interpreter every day. We say, Affliction, and he says, I will interpret that word to you; it needs interpretation, it is a very bitter word, but affliction being interpreted is chastening, refining, sanctifying, making meet for the Master's use. The Cross being interpreted is law, righteousness, pardon, redemption, atonement, salvation. Being misinterpreted, it is to one class a sneer, to another an offence, to another foolishness; but to believe its interpretation at its best, it is the power of God and the salvation of God. Man being interpreted is child of God, son of the Eternal, a creature made in the image and likeness of God, and meant to live with God and to glorify Him for ever. The Church being interpreted is the most vital centre of the most blessed influence, an association of souls that love the Cross, that live in Christ, that are saved by Christ, and that have no joy that is not consonant with the purposes of God. God being interpreted is Love."

Probably in no department of Biblical and theological study has there been such a lack of worthwhile literature in the twentieth century as in the field of Biblical hermeneutics. The nineteenth century witnessed the appearance of the best hermeneutical works the Church has ever known: the twentieth century has seen practically none that are important--trivial, wretchedly written, fragmentary works, without exact scholarship and incapable of making real contributions to this study. The older works are now all out of print, and some of them would prove too bulky, too exhaustive for present needs. Moreover, so much has occurred in the last sixty years bearing directly upon Biblical interpretation that a new volume on hermeneutics has long been overdue. Vast discoveries in the ancient lands of the Bible, great strides in linguistics, in the understanding of ancient Hebrew, and Ugaritic, and the earlier Semitic languages, new emphases on certain portions of the Word of God, and the sudden appearance in history of a resurrected Israel, along with the crazy interpretations of certain parts of the Word of God by cults that are now winning converts by the thousands--all these call for a new work in the field of Biblical interpretation. I have taught hermeneutics from time to time, and unless I have missed something more important than anything I have been able to discover for use in classroom work, it is my opinion that this volume by Dr. Ramm is the only work covering the entire field of hermeneutics that has been published in the last forty years suitable and satisfactory for seminary work.

The author of this volume, from whom I believe many notable works will yet be forthcoming, if the

Lord wills, Dr. Bernard Ramm, received his B.A. degree from the University of Washington in 1938, followed by a B.D. degree from Eastern Baptist Seminary in Philadelphia. In 1947 Mr. Ramm received his M.A. degree from the University of Southern California, and in the spring of 1950 had conferred upon him by the same institution the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, in the preparation for which he specialized in the field of the philosophy of science. While at Eastern Baptist Theological Seminary, he earned the Middler's Scholarship Award, and the Church History prize. After a short period as pastor of the Lake Street Baptist Church of Glendale, California, Mr. Ramm for one year, 1943-1944, was Professor of Biblical Languages in the Los Angeles Baptist Theological Seminary; from 1944 to the spring of 1950, he was the head of the Department of Philosophy and Apologetics at the Bible Institute of Los Angeles. During this time he was a Mid-Term Lecturer at Western Baptist Theological Seminary, the lectures later appearing in his first work, *Problems in Christian Apologetics*. As this book comes from the press, Dr. Ramm begins his new work as Associate Professor of Philosophy in Bethel College and Seminary in St. Paul, Minnesota.

Personally, it amazes me that one as young as Dr. Ramm has been able to produce such a mature work as this volume will immediately appear to be to those who know something of the problems and the literature of hermeneutics. Teachers in Bible institutes and professors in theological seminaries will unite in gratitude to this young man for making available for them a greatly needed textbook. I predict that in the next two years it will be the accepted text for hermeneutical studies in the majority of conservative schools in this country, where men are being trained in that holiest of all work, the interpretation of the Word of God, the group which Dr. Alexander Whyte called "that elect and honorable and enviable class of men that we call students of New Testament exegesis . . . the happiest and the most enviable of all men who have been set apart to nothing else but to the understanding and the opening up of the hid treasures of God's Word and God's Son."

Wilbur M. Smith

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Note: Dr. Parker's sermon, "The Interpreter," appears in his *City Temple Pulpit*, London, 1899. pp. 40-47. The words quoted from Dr. Whyte are to be found in his inimitable work, *The Walk, Conversation, and Character of Jesus Christ Our Lord*, p. 53.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter

- I. Introduction
- II. Historical Schools
- III. The Protestant System of Hermeneutics
- IV. The Perspective Principles of Interpretation
- V. The Specific Principles of Protestant Interpretation
- VI. The Doctrinal Use of the Bible
- VII. The Devotional and Practical Use of the Bible
- VIII. The Problem of Inerrancy and Secular Science in Relation of Hermeneutics
- IX. The Interpretation of Types
- X. The Interpretation of Prophecy
- XI. The Interpretation of Parables

Epilogue