

# *Protestant Biblical Interpretation*

## A Textbook of Hermeneutics for Conservative Protestants

by

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

### CHAPTER I

#### INTRODUCTION

##### A. THE NEED FOR HERMENEUTICS

Hermeneutics is the science and art of Biblical interpretation. It is a science because it is guided by rules within a system; and it is an art because the application of the rules is by skill, and not by mechanical imitation. As such it forms one of the most important members of the theological sciences. This is especially true for conservative Protestantism, which looks on the Bible as *sola fidei regula* and not as just *prima fidei regula*. *Sola fidei regula* is the Reformation position that the Bible is the only authoritative voice of God to man. The Roman Catholic Church and the Eastern Oriental Church accept the Bible as the first or primary authority among other authorities, *e.g.*, the moral unanimity of the Fathers, the ancient Creeds, the decisions of the ecumenical councils, and oral tradition.

These additional authorities function to help interpret the Scriptures. In that conservative Protestantism takes *only* the Bible as authoritative, there is no secondary means of making clear the meaning of the Bible. Therefore we know what God has said by the faithful and accurate interpretation of the Scriptures. The authorities of the Roman Catholic and Eastern Oriental Churches will not be ignored by a careful exegete, but he will consider them as helps and assistants, human and fallible, not as divine authorities.

##### 1. *The Primary Need*

That God has spoken in Holy Scripture is the very heart of our faith, and without this certainty we should be left to the relativity and dubiousness of *human* knowledge. God has spoken! But what has He said?

This is the primary and basic need of hermeneutics; *to ascertain what God has said in Sacred Scripture; to determine the meaning of the Word of God*. There is no profit to us if God has spoken and we do not know what He has said. Therefore it is our responsibility to determine the meaning of what God has given to us in Sacred Scripture.

To determine what God has said is a high and holy task. With fear and trembling each should be ever so careful of that which he has adopted as his method of Biblical interpretation. Upon the correct interpretation of the Bible rests our doctrine of salvation, of sanctification, of eschatology, and of Christian living. It is our solemn responsibility to know what God has said with reference to each of these. This can be done only if we have carefully, thoroughly, and systematically formulated that system of Biblical interpretation which will yield most readily the native meaning of the Bible.

Further, we need to know the correct method of Biblical interpretation so that we do not confuse the voice of God with the voice of man. In every one of those places where our interpretation is at fault, we have made substitution of the voice of man for the voice of God. We need to know hermeneutics thoroughly if for no other reason than to preserve us from the folly and errors of faulty principles of understanding God's Word.

Because Scripture has not been properly interpreted, the following has been urged as the *voice of God*: in that the patriarchs practiced polygamy, we may practice it; in that the Old Testament sanctioned the divine right of the king of Israel, we may sanction the divine right of kings everywhere; because the Old Testament sanctioned the death of witches, we too may put them to death; because the Old Testament declared that some plagues were from God, we may not use methods of sanitation, for that would be thwarting the purpose of God; because the Old Testament forbade usury in the agrarian commonwealth of Israel, we may not employ it in our economic system; because the Scripture makes certain remarks about the suffering of women in childbirth, we may not approve any method of easing the pain; because tithing was a law (*de jure*) in Israel, it is a law to the Church--and, incidentally, when it was so considered, the people were tithed to such a point of penury that the Church had to check it before complete economic exhaustion prevailed.

A sound hermeneutics would have prevented all of this. It would prevent an uncritical and unrealistic application of the Old Testament to Christian morality. It would prevent an expositor from using some mere phrase as an eternal principle of morality. It would prevent the effort of trying to force some binding principle upon contemporary life from an obscure Old Testament incident. It would prevent the justification of ritualism and priestcraft from an improper extension of the Tabernacle worship and sacrificial system.

The result of an erratic hermeneutics is that the Bible has been made the source of confusion rather than light. "There is no folly, no God-dishonouring theology, no iniquity, no sacerdotal puerility," writes Edward White, "for which chapter and verse may not be cited by an enslaved intelligence. And under these circumstances it is impossible to express in adequate terms the importance of a correct estimate and exposition of 'The Bible'" (*Inspiration*, p. 153). In Bassanio's mouth Shakespeare puts these words: "In religion, what damned error but some sober brow will bless it, and approve it with a text, hiding the grossness with fair ornament" (*The Merchant of Venice*, Act III, scene 2).

Certainly many of the doctrinal variations in Christendom are due to differences in interpretation. As our subsequent historical study will reveal, there are major differences in approach to the interpretation of the Bible among the Roman Catholics, Eastern Oriental Church, and Protestantism. The hermeneutical systems of orthodoxy, neo-orthodoxy, and religious liberalism have very important divergences. Even a cursory reading of the literature of Christian Science will bring to light the fact that a different system of Biblical interpretation is being employed than that which is characteristic of historic Protestantism. Cults and sects employ one or more specialized principle[s] of Biblical interpretation which makes their basic hermeneutics a different species from that of the Reformers and historic Protestantism. Differences in eschatology arise from the adoption of different principles of prophetic interpretation.

The only way to clear the atmosphere and to determine what is right and wrong, proper and improper, orthodox and heretical, is to give one's self to a careful study of the science of Biblical hermeneutics. Otherwise we deal with symptoms, not with causes; we debate about superstructure when we should be debating about foundations.

It is important, therefore, to determine how God's Word is to be understood that we may know what God has said. This is the chief and foremost need for hermeneutics.

## 2. *The Secondary Need*

The second great need for a science of hermeneutics is *to bridge the gap between our minds and the minds of the Biblical writers*. People of the same culture, same age, and same geographical location understand each other with facility. Patterns of meaning and interpretation commence with childhood and early speech behaviour, and by the time adulthood is reached the principles of interpretation are so axiomatic that we are not aware of them.

But when the interpreter is separated culturally, historically, and geographically from the writer he seeks to interpret, the task of interpretation is no longer facile. The greater the cultural, historical, and geographical divergences are, the more difficult is the task of interpretation. In reading the Bible we find ourselves with a volume that has great divergences from us.

The most obvious divergence is that of *language*. The Bible was written in Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek. To formulate rules to bridge this gap is one of the most important tasks of Biblical hermeneutics. The basic problem at this point is that languages are structurally different. The English language is analytic in structure. The *sense* of a sentence depends largely on word order. "The rat ate the cheese" does not have the same meaning as "the cheese ate the rat" although the same words are used in both sentences.

Greek is an agglutinative language, and so declines nouns and adjectives, and conjugates verbs. Hence one can alter the order of a Greek sentence two or three different ways and still get the same meaning, for meaning is not basically dependent on *word order*, but on *word endings*.

To translate from Greek to English is not the simple task of finding an English word for each Greek word. The translator has to tack back and forth between languages that are structurally different. He has the tricky job of trying to find equivalents in the English verb system of forms in the Greek verb system.

Nor is it easy to find words in English that closely match the word in the Hebrew or Greek text. Each word is a little pool of meanings. Here again it taxes the learning and judgment of the wisest scholars to decide out of the pool of meanings which is the meaning intended in a given sentence, and then to try to match it with some word in the English language which is itself a pool of meanings.

There is also the *culture-gap* between our times and Biblical times which the translator and interpreter must bridge. Culture, in the anthropological sense, is all the ways and means, material and social, whereby a given people carry on their existence. Until we can recreate and understand the cultural patterns of the various Biblical periods, we will be handicapped in our understanding of the fuller meaning of Scripture. For example, the web of relationships among husband, wife, concubines and children that existed in Abraham's time, has now been recovered from clay tablets. Abraham's treatment of Hagar is now seen as protocol in terms of these relationships. Joseph's shaving before he saw Pharaoh, his receiving Pharaoh's ring, and his wearing the gold chain about his neck, are now understood as Egyptian practices. Many of the features in the parables of our Lord are drawn from the manners and customs of the people of his day, and the better understanding of the parables is dependent upon a knowledge of the Jewish culture of that century.

A knowledge of marriage customs, economic practices, military systems, legal systems, agricultural methods, etc., is all very helpful in the interpretation of Scripture.

The *geography* of the various Bible lands is very instrumental for understanding the Sacred Text. The geography of Egypt is apparent in many of the features of the Ten Plagues as recorded in Exodus. Some light is shed on the life of Christ and the travels of Paul by a knowledge of Palestinian and near-East geography. References to towns, places, rivers, mountains, plains, lakes, and seas all lend a flick of light to the meaning of the Bible if we will study them with the help of geographical science.

The understanding of most passages of Scripture is dependent on some understanding of *history*. If geography is the scenery of Scripture, history is the plot of Scripture. Each incident is dependent on a larger historical context for its better understanding. To

understand the life of Christ, it is necessary to know what occurred during the inter-Biblical period. We must know something of the Roman rule of the entire ancient world; Roman practices with reference to local governments; and the history of Roman rule in Palestine.

To understand Paul's travels, it is necessary to know the history of the various provinces of Asia Minor. Sir William Ramsay has demonstrated how much such historical knowledge helps to interpret the book of Acts. And what may be said of the life of Paul and of the life of our Lord, pertains to the entire Bible.

In summary, the two great needs for the science of hermeneutics are: (i) that we may know what God has said, and (ii) that we may span the linguistical, cultural, geographical, and historical gaps which separate our minds from those of the Biblical writers. Speaking of the fact that in modern times a host of data have come to light with reference to the geography, culture, and history of the Bible, Barrows correctly says:

The extended investigations of modern times in these departments of knowledge have shed a great light over the pages of inspiration, *which no expositor who is worthy of the name will venture to neglect.*<sup>1</sup>

## B. GENERAL INTRODUCTION

### 1. *Assumptions*

The conservative Protestant interpreter comes to his text believing in its divine inspiration. This is not an assumption but the demonstration of the theologian and the apologist. Exegesis itself is involved in demonstrating the divine inspiration of Scripture, to be sure. But exegetical work is carried on within a circle of theological conviction, and the conservative Protestant works within a circle which affirms the divine inspiration of the Holy Bible. This also involves the demonstration of the true canon of Scripture. Theological considerations and historical criticism unite to settle the problem of the canon. The Jewish faith accepts its Hebrew Old Testament as the only inspired Scripture. The Roman Catholic faith adds to these books the Apocryphal books and the New Testament. The Protestants accept the Jewish canon for the Old Testament, rejecting the Apocryphal books, and have the same canon in the New Testament as the Catholics.

When an interpreter sets out to interpret *Scripture*, the boundary of Scripture must be determined. It is the study of the Sacred Canon which determines the boundary of Scripture. The interpreter presumes that the Protestant canon has been demonstrated to be the true content of Sacred Scripture.

---

<sup>1</sup> *Companion to the Bible*, p. 525. Italics are ours.

After the Sacred Canon has been settled, the next task is to determine its truest text. There is no single manuscript of the Old or New Testament which is *the official manuscript*. There are *manuscripts*. A study of these manuscripts reveals many differences. The first task is to collect all the manuscripts and other materials which will help to determine the true text. The second task is to work out *basic theory* concerning how the true text is to be determined. The third task is to determine how the basic theory determines the text of any given verse.

The publication of the Revised Standard Version and the discussion it provoked revealed how improperly many ministers understood the problems of textual criticism. The deletion of a phrase or verse was judged as tampering with the Bible. But if some previous copyist added to the Scripture, the only sane thing to do is to delete his addition. The textual critic is not trying to add to nor take away from the Word of God, *but to determine what was the original wording of the Word of God*.

Textual criticism is complicated and difficult. Enormous labors have been spent on collecting, collating, and interpreting the readings. This material is presented in critical editions of the Hebrew and Greek Testaments. Textual criticism is absolutely necessary. The careful and faithful interpreter will avail himself of the findings of textual criticism and will endeavor to determine his text before he commences his actual exegesis.

After the most careful scrutiny by scholars of the Old and New Testament texts, it is now evident that the Old and New Testaments are the best preserved texts from antiquity. The number of really important textual variations of the New Testament that cannot be settled with our present information is very small, and the new manuscripts available from the various caves around the Dead Sea show the remarkable purity of our present Old Testament text.

After the canon and text have been settled, the matters of *historical criticism* must be discussed. Lower criticism is the Biblical science which determines the text of Scripture. Historical criticism deals with the literary and documentary character of the books of the Bible. Historical criticism deals with such matters as authorship of the book, date of its composition, historical circumstances, the authenticity of its contents, and its literary unity. Historical criticism is a necessary Biblical science if we wish a faith that is neither gullible nor obscurantistic.

Because men with little regard for traditional views of historical criticism and some with no respect for the divine inspiration of Scripture have written much in this field, historical criticism is sometimes known as *radical criticism* or *German rationalism*. It was called *radical* because of the novelty and extremeness of many of the positions defended in contrast to traditional views. It was called *German rationalism* because many of the leaders in the radical movement were Germans. Sometimes it is called *higher criticism*. "Higher" in

contrast to "lower" meant no more than historical or literary criticism in contrast to lower or textual criticism. But unfortunately the term *higher criticism* became synonymous with *radical criticism*, and so the expression is now ambiguous. Because these radical critics engaged in many innovations, they were also called *neologists* and their views, *neologism*.

Unfortunately, due to the heated controversy of radical criticism with conservative and traditional<sup>2</sup> scholarship, the entire task of historical criticism has not been given the attention by conservative scholarship that it deserves. Literary and historical criticism of the Bible is not an evil but a necessity, and no man can do full justice to a book of the Bible till he has done the best he can to determine who wrote the book, when it was written, if its contents are authentic, and if the book is a literary unit or not.<sup>3</sup>

These three things hermeneutics assumes as having been accomplished. It is at this point that exegesis begins. The study of the canon determines the inspired books; the study of the text determines the wording of the books; the study of historical criticism gives us the framework of the books; hermeneutics gives us the rules for the interpretation of the books; exegesis is the application of these rules to the books; and Biblical theology is the result.

## 2. Definitions

The word *interpretation* occurs in both Testaments. The Hebrew word *pathar* means "to interpret," and *pithron* means an interpretation. Most of the usages in the Old Testament refer to the interpretation of dreams, for they were usually symbolic in form and their meaning therefore was not obvious.

The word occurs many times in many forms in the New Testament (*hermēneia*, interpretation; *hermēneuō*, to interpret; *diermēneuō*, to interpret, to explain; *methermēneuomai*, to interpret, to translate; *dysermēneutos*, difficult to interpret; *diermēneutes*, interpreter; *epilusis*, interpretation). Most of the references are to

---

2 By traditional in this sentence we mean referring to those opinions about dates and authorships of Biblical books as held from great antiquity by the Jews and by the early Christian Church, which though not infallible, are held as reliable until proven otherwise. The *conservative* position is frequently the *traditional* position, but not uniformly so. The belief in the authenticity and genuineness of Scripture involves *ex hypothesi* that many of the traditional views are the correct ones.

3 "Exegesis proper presupposes textual and literary criticism of the document. The exegete of the New Testament has to know, for instance, whether the text upon which he works represents the original text of the autographs, or the textual form of the fourth century. His work also presupposes knowledge of the historical background of the author, the document, and its subject matter." Otto A. Piper, "Principles of New Testament Interpretation," *Theology Today*, 3:192, July, 1946.

translations from Hebrew or Aramaic into Greek.

The word *hermeneutics* is ultimately derived from Hermes the Greek god who brought the messages of the gods to the mortals, and was the god of science, invention, eloquence, speech, writing, and art.

As a theological discipline, hermeneutics is the science of the correct interpretation of the Bible. It is a special application of the general science of linguistics and meaning. It seeks to formulate those particular rules which pertain to the special factors connected with the Bible. It stands in the same relationship to exegesis that a rule-book stands to a game. The rule-book is written in terms of reflection, analysis, and experience. The game is played by concrete actualization of the rules. The rules are not the game, and the game is meaningless without the rules. Hermeneutics proper is not exegesis, but exegesis is applied hermeneutics.

Hermeneutics is a *science* in that it can determine certain principles for discovering the meaning of a document, and in that these principles are not a mere list of rules but bear *organic* connection to each other. It is also an *art* as we previously indicated because principles or rules can never be applied mechanically but involve the skill (*technē*) of the interpreter.

### 3. Divisions

There is no set number of divisions to the study of hermeneutics. Some writers make *psychological hermeneutics* (the requisite spiritual qualifications of the interpreter) a basic division. Others do not. Most books follow at least the two-fold division of *general* and *special* hermeneutics. General hermeneutics refers to those rules which pertain to the interpretation of the entire Bible. Special hermeneutics refers to those rules which are developed with reference to special parts of Scripture, e.g., parables, prophecy, apocalypse, and poetry.

### 4. Limitations of a Mere Knowledge of Hermeneutics

Learning the rules of hermeneutics does not make a student a good interpreter. A person with a good memory may memorize the rules of chess and yet be a mediocre player. A person may be limited in his native mental endowment, and although able to memorize the rules of hermeneutics, unable to apply them with skill. A person with a good mind may go astray due to the pressure of very strong biases. Equally great scholars are to be found among Jewish, Catholic, and Protestant interpreters. It can hardly be denied that bias in this regard will prevent one scholar from seeing an opposing position sympathetically, and will in turn see his own position glow with invulnerability. Millennial and eschatological

biases are the source of many over-statements, under-statements, and unguarded statements found in the literature of this subject.

A good knowledge of hermeneutics may aid a poor education but it cannot supply what is lacking from an inadequate education. To know that a man should resort to the original languages for the best interpretation does not give the interpreter the knowledge of the languages. An interpreter unfamiliar with the history of interpretation may fall into some error of long standing.

### 5. *Qualifications of an Interpreter*

That spiritual qualifications have an important place in the list of qualifications cannot be debated. If spiritual things are spiritually discerned, only the spiritual man can discern them. If the natural or carnal mind is at enmity with God, only a regenerate mind will be at home in Scripture. That an interpreter must have the same Spirit who inspired the Bible as the *sine qua non* for interpreting the Bible has been well stated by Marcus Dods:

In order to appreciate and use the Bible, the reader of it must himself have the same spirit which enabled its writers to understand their revelation of God and to record it. The Bible is a record, but it is not a dead record of dead persons and events, but a record inspired by the living Spirit who uses it to speak to men now. . . . It is the medium through which the living God now makes himself known. But to find in it the Spirit of God, the reader must himself have that Spirit.<sup>4</sup>

The first spiritual qualification of the interpreter is *that he be born again*. Angus and Green write: "This first principle of Bible interpretation is taken from the Bible itself. It occupies the same place, too, in the teaching of our Lord, who, in His first recorded discourse, assured Nicodemus that 'except a man be born again, he cannot see'--can neither understand the nature nor share the blessedness--of the kingdom of God."<sup>5</sup>

The second spiritual qualification is that a man have *a passion to know God's word*. He must have the zeal that consumes; and the enthusiasm that breeds both reverence and industry.

The third spiritual qualification is this: *let the interpreter have always a deep reverence for God*. Meekness, humility, and patience are prime virtues for understanding Holy Scripture, and these virtues are a reflection of our reverence for God. The devout and scholarly Dean Alford has said: "Approach the Holy Gospels from the side of trust and love, and not from that of distrust and unchristian doubt. . . . Depend upon it, FAITH is the great primary

---

4 *The Nature and Origin of the Bible*, p. 102. Cf. Cell erier, *Biblical Hermeneutics*, "Psychological Hermeneutics." Pp. 56-72.

5 Angus and Green, *Cyclopedic Handbook to the Bible*, p. 170.

requisite for the right use of the Gospels."<sup>6</sup>

The final spiritual qualification is that of *utter dependence on the Holy Spirit to guide and direct*. A good proverb for a student of Scripture is: *Bene orasse est bene studuisse*.<sup>7</sup> "To pray well is to study well." Aquinas used to pray and fast when he came to a difficult passage of Scripture. Most of the scholars whose Biblical studies have blessed the church have mixed prayers generously with their studies. The heart must be kept sensitive to the indwelling Spirit who in turn has inspired the Word.

This leading of the Holy Spirit will never be as crystal clear as the original inspiration of the Scriptures. This would be a confusion of inspiration and illumination. Inspiration is infallible, but not illumination. No man can say he has had *infallible* illumination from the Holy Spirit. The illumination of the Spirit is not the conveyance of truth, for that is the function of inspiration. The holy Spirit influences our attitudes and spiritual perception. Devout expositors who do not understand the distinction between illumination and inspiration should weigh well the words of Angus and Green:

It is necessary to complete this truth by adding that the Spirit of God does not communicate to the mind of even a teachable, obedient, and devout Christ, any doctrine or meaning of Scripture which is not *contained already in Scripture itself*. He makes men wise *up to* what is written, not beyond it.<sup>8</sup>

Matters of fact cannot be settled solely by spiritual means. One cannot pray to God for information about the authorship of Hebrews and expect a distinct reply. Nor is it proper to pray for information with reference to other matters of Biblical introduction expecting *a revelation about the revelation*.

An interpreter should have the proper educational requirements. No man in the history of the Christian church has possessed *all* such requirements. The person with an average measure of intelligence can with industry and adequate guidance from teachers and books discover the central meaning of the majority of the passages of the Bible. The requirements for understanding the principal truths of the Bible are not so strict as to shut the Bible up to the *literati*.

Rowley has very adequately stated this truth when he wrote:

Not every interpreter can have the ideal equipment. Indeed, nor can attain to the ideal, and all that any can hope to do is to attain a reasonable balance of the qualities and varieties of equipment his task demands. To ask that every interpreter of the Bible should possess a wide linguistic equipment would be

---

6 H. Alford, *How to Study the New Testament*, p. 13. Caps are his.

7 Angus and Green, *op. cit.*, p. 179.

8 *Loc. cit.* Italics are theirs.

to deny the task of the interpretation to all but a handful of specialists, who might lack other equally essential qualities even though they possessed the linguistic knowledge. It does not seem unreasonable to ask, however, that all who would interpret the Bible to others should have some acquaintance with Hebrew and Greek. We should be astonished at one who claimed to be a specialist in the interpretation of Greek tragedy but who could not read Greek, or who offered to expound the Confucian classics without any knowledge of Chinese. But too often the biblical interpreter has little or no access to the original texts that he so confidently handles.<sup>9</sup>

In the Middle Ages, theology was the queen of the sciences and therefore a student was not prepared for theology until he had been through the arts. The wisdom of a liberal arts education prior to a theological training has been justified by centuries of theological education. A short-cutting to theological education without a study of the liberal arts almost uniformly results in a cutting-short of the true dimensions of Christian theology. A good liberal arts education is the basis for good interpretation, especially a course that has been rich with studies in literature, history, and philosophy.

This should be followed by a standard theological education which should include studies in Hebrew, Greek, and theology. To be a competent Biblical interpreter, a knowledge of the original languages is indispensable. It is true that not all ministers have ability in languages. However, it is also true that all our language experts should not be theological professors, but as Barrows observes: "It is a principle of Protestantism, the soundness of which has been confirmed by the experience of centuries, that there should always be in the churches a body of men able to go behind the current versions of the Scripture to the original tongues from which these versions were executed."<sup>10</sup> These men complement the men in the seminaries, for they are in turn able to judge the worth of the commentaries written by the professional scholar.

The specialists must know various cognate languages. Old Testament scholars must now delve into Aramaic, Arabic, Ugaritic, Akkadian, and Latin. New Testament scholars can profit from a knowledge of Aramaic and Latin. Ancient tablets and inscriptions are important in the study of the alphabet, ancient culture, and in the understanding of Hebrew words and grammar. A knowledge of the Aramaic and Latin enables the scholar to study ancient, valuable versions of the Hebrew and Greek Testaments.

Finally, there are intellectual requirements for good interpretation. Hermeneutics is not only a science but an *art*. The rules must be applied with skill, and this requires intellectual ability. There must be an *openmindedness* to all sources of knowledge. The standards of the finest scholarship must be employed with insight. A judicious use of

---

9 H. H. Rowley, "The Relevance of Biblical Interpretation," *Interpretation*, 1:10-11, January, 1947.

10 Barrows, *op. cit.*, p. 525.

intellectual abilities reflects itself in a high quality of exegesis. Such men as Lightfoot, Ellicott, Calvin, Maclaren, and G. Campbell Morgan exhibited remarkable skill and taste in their expositions of Scripture.

### C. THE EQUIPMENT OF THE INTERPRETER

An interpreter must work with tools. Certainly he ought to work with the latest critical editions of the Hebrew, Greek, and Septuagint texts. He must have those works which deal with the inspiration, canon, and criticism of Scripture. He should have standard grammars, lexicons, and concordances of the Hebrew and Greek languages. He should consult the learned commentaries of the past and present. For those students who need some guide through the labyrinth of books, we suggest: Wilbur Smith, *Profitable Bible Study* (revised edition); John R. Sampey, *Syllabus for Old Testament Study*; A. T. Robertson, *Syllabus for New Testament Study*; *A Bibliography of Bible Study*, and, *A Bibliography of Systematic Theology* (published by The Theological Seminary Library, Princeton, New Jersey); and the list we shall submit in the next section.

Supplementary material of importance is to be had from Bible dictionaries, Bible encyclopedias, Bible atlases, and specialized books on such subjects as Bible history, archaeology, manners and customs, and Bible backgrounds.

Exegetical and expository material of worth will be found in such journals as: *Interpretation*, *The Expository Times*, *The Evangelical Quarterly*, *Bibliotheca Sacra*, *The Journal of the Society of Biblical Literature*, *New Testament Studies*, and *Theological Studies*.

It is often asserted by devout people that they can know the Bible competently without helps. They preface their interpretations with a remark like this: "Dear friends, I have read no man's book. I have consulted no man-made commentaries. I have gone right to the Bible to see what it had to say for itself." This sounds very spiritual, and usually is seconded with *amens* from the audience.

But is this the pathway of wisdom? Does any man have either the right or the learning to by-pass all the godly learning of the Church? We think not.

First, although the claim to by-pass mere human books and go right to the Bible itself sounds devout and spiritual, *it is a veiled egotism*. It is a subtle affirmation that a man can adequately know the Bible apart from the untiring, godly, consecrated scholarship of men like Calvin, Bengel, Alford, Lange, Ellicott, or Moule. In contrast to the claim that a man had best by-pass the learned works of godly expositors, is a man like Henderson, author of *The Minor Prophets*. He spared no mental or intellectual pains to equip himself with the necessary linguistic ability to understand the Bible, and then he read patiently and thoroughly in all the literature that might help him in his interpretation of the Scriptures.

He consecrated his *entire mind* and all that that involved to the understanding of Sacred Scripture. This is truly the higher consecration.

Secondly, such a claim is the old confusion of the inspiration of the Spirit with the illumination of the Spirit. The function of the Spirit is not to communicate *new* truth or to instruct in *matters unknown*, but to illuminate what is revealed in Scripture. Suppose we select a list of words from Isaiah and ask a man who claims he can by-pass the godly learning of Christian scholarship, if he can out of his own soul or prayers give their meaning or significance: Tyre, Zidon, Chittim, Sihor, Moab, Mahershalahashbas, Calno, Carchemish, Hamath, Aiath, Migron, Michmash, Geba, Anathoth, Laish, Nob, and Gallim. He will find the only light he can get on these words is from a commentary or a Bible dictionary.

It is true that commentaries can come between a man and his Bible. It is true that too much reliance on commentaries may make a man bookish, and dry up the sources of his own creativity. But the abuse of commentaries is by no means adequate grounds to forsake the great, godly, and conservative commentaries which have been to our blessing and profit.

Thomas Horne has given us some excellent advice on the use of commentaries.<sup>11</sup> The advantages of good commentaries are: (i) they present us with good models for our interpretation; (ii) they give us help with difficult passages. But he also warns us that: (i) they are not to take the place of Bible study itself; (ii) we are not to slavishly bind ourselves to them as to authorities; (iii) we are to use only the best ones; (iv) where their interpretations are conjectures, they are to be used with utmost care; and (v) we should use original commentaries rather than those that are mere compilations of previous works.<sup>12</sup>

Ramm, Bernard. *Protestant Biblical Interpretation*. 2nd ed. Boston: W. A. Wilde Co., 1956.

---

11 Thomas Horne, *An Introduction to the Critical Study and Knowledge of the Holy Scriptures* (eighth edition), I:353-354.

12 Further bibliographical data on commentaries will be found in: Wilbur Smith, *Profitable Bible Study* (revised edition), pp. 94-202; James Orr, "Commentaries," *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, II, 680-85; C. H. Spurgeon, *Commenting and Commentaries*; R. M. Grant, "Commentaries," *Interpretation*, 2:454-64, October, 1948.