

HERMENEUTICS TODAY

By

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Introduction

The practice of hermeneutics has been part and parcel of human history. Hermeneutics as a human activity arises from the need to interpret a thought or text of another. Although throughout history the word hermeneutics has been defined in numerous ways, there is inherent in the Greek word *hermeneuein* a basic aim or thrust, namely, to impart or convey. Already in this basic understanding of hermeneutics, the structure of hermeneutics as a discipline is evident. In the simple act of conveying or imparting, we may discern two fundamental components.¹ First, it is impossible to impart any thought or text without a correct conception of that thought. Thus the first important component of hermeneutics is *conception*. Second, a thought is not completely imparted until what has been *correctly* conceived has been properly represented. Consequently, the second important component of hermeneutics is *representation*, which has generally been understood as *interpretation*, i.e. to give one's own *conception* of something. In the following presentation, we shall be concerned with the general principles of hermeneutics as applied to the Bible. Generally, contemporary biblical hermeneutics evidences a fixation with the first component of hermeneutics. The origin, nature and significance of the contemporary emphasis on conception will be the subject of this presentation. Before doing so, however, a quick overview of the state of hermeneutics before contemporary times will be given to provide the backdrop of the contemporary situation.

Hermeneutics Then

By hermeneutics "then", I intend the understanding and practice of biblical interpretation from the early church till the Reformation.

The Early Church. The beginnings of Biblical Christian hermeneutics date back to the first century. It is recognized that the early Christians shared not only the Holy Scriptures of the Jews, i.e. the Old Testament, but their methods of interpretation.² David Dockery identifies four main Jewish approaches to Biblical interpretation: literal, midrash, peshet, and typological.³ While the early believers adopted some of these approaches, they presupposed a fundamental Christological hermeneutic, which meant

¹ See Gerhard Maier, *Biblical Hermeneutics* (Wheaton, Ill: Crossway Books, 1994):15.

² David S. Dockery, *Biblical Interpretation Then and Now: Contemporary Hermeneutics in the Light of the Early Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1992), 23.

³ *Ibid.*, 27-33. The literal approach which was considered foundational to all the other approaches was based upon a plain, literal understanding of the biblical text. While the literal approach represented a homiletical application and contemporizing of the text, peshet looked at the biblical material from an apocalyptic perspective. Finally, the typological approach seeks to discover correspondence between people and events of the past and of the present or future.

that the Christ-event provided the basic lens or framework through which the Old Testament was viewed.

Critical to the foregoing approaches to biblical interpretation was the firm conviction in the divine inspiration of Scripture, and the belief that since the Torah contained the entire truth of God for the guidance of humanity, the purpose of all interpretation is to *translate* the words of God into life.⁴

The second century onwards saw challenges that led to new developments in biblical interpretation. In general, Scripture continued to be seen as having its origin with God, and that a divine purpose rested behind each passage. Such was the case even with the contrasting approaches of the Alexandrian and Antiochian schools, although the former emphasized the allegorical approach while the latter adopted a more literal and historical approach. Dockery's summary is helpful: "...all of the Fathers gave assent to the literal sense of Scripture, but a contextual, grammatical, and historical interpretation was emphasized by Theodore and Chrysostom, with a developing convergence in that direction with Jerome, Augustine, and Theodoret."⁵ It is a rather curious fact of history, however, that while the Bible was equally of primary divine authority for the Marcionite, Gnostic, and Montanist heretics, the response by the early church to the challenge they posed led to the elevation of ecclesiastical authority in the hermeneutical activities of the early church.

Medieval and Reformation Hermeneutics. John Cassian (d. ca. 433) charted a path of interpretation that was followed from Augustine through the medieval period. There was developed the theory of the fourfold sense of Scripture comprising the literal, allegorical, tropological and anagogical senses. Scriptural interpretation was meant to nurture faith, hope and love, and it was acknowledged that the literal interpretation often accomplished the purpose. However, where it was sensed that the literal interpretation fell short in meeting that goal, the allegorical interpretation was called into service to advance faith, the tropological to nurture love, and the anagogical to improve hope.⁶ It was in this sense, for example, that the city of Jerusalem was generally understood *literally* as a Jewish city, *allegorically* as the church of Christ, *tropologically* as the souls of men and women, and *anagogically* as the heavenly city.⁷

During the Reformation, hermeneutics saw the gradual rise of the priority of the literal sense over the allegorical sense. The credit for this development belongs, in a progressive manner, to Luther (1483-1546), Erasmus (1466-1536) and John Calvin 1509-1564. In particular, Calvin is recognized as the greatest exegete of the Reformation who gave impetus to the development and use of the grammatical-historical exegetical method.⁸

Presuppositions of Hermeneutics "Then." A fundamental conviction of the practitioners of biblical interpretation, then, was the belief in the divine origin of Scripture. That being the case, it was believed that a divine purpose rested behind each

⁴ Ibid., 27.

⁵ Ibid., 157.

⁶ Ibid., 158.

⁷ Ibid., 159.

⁸ Ibid., 160.

passage of Scripture. Consequently, the literal sense of Scripture was important, namely, the words of Scripture carried particular meanings that needed to be understood in order to discover the divine purpose behind the text. Thus even when distinctions were made as in Thomas Aquinas (1224-1274) between the spiritual and literal sense on the basis of Aristotelian philosophy, he understood the literal sense to be the primary sense.⁹ It should be mentioned that, even among the Fathers---Theodore, Chrysostom, Jerome, Augustine and Theodoret--- the literal sense of Scripture did not preclude giving due consideration to context.

Hermeneutics Now

By hermeneutics “now,” I have in mind the principles and practice of biblical interpretation after the Reformation to the present.

The single most significant cultural development in the West that stands between hermeneutics *then* and *now* is the Enlightenment of the 18th century. The Enlightenment is relevant to the discussion on hermeneutics because of its engagement in what has been described as the “objective project.” From the dawn of the Enlightenment, there was a search for “a fixed and permanent ahistorical matrix which could be appealed to in determining what is true, real, rational, right, and good.”¹⁰ Primarily, the people of the Enlightenment found this matrix in *reason*, thanks to Rene Descartes.

It is, however, an irony of history that the Enlightenment, with its passion for the “objective,” should be the very phenomenon that spawns the relativism which characterizes the hermeneutic impasse that we face today. Larkin provides us with the ingredients in this process: “Rene Descartes supplied the concept of the “knowing self”; Gotthold Lessing, that of the “ugly ditch” of historical distance. Immanuel Kant explicated a distinction between knowledge of the noumenal and knowledge of the phenomenal; Friedrich Schleiermacher, “preunderstanding” and the idea of the “hermeneutical circle.”¹¹ Arising from the combination of these forces was the

⁹ Aquinas, on the basis of Aristotelian philosophy, distinguished between “things” and “words,” where words in this case function basically as “signs.” Yet he maintained that the *things themselves* that words are used to signify may also function as signs. In this scheme, when *words* take on the function or character of signs, we are dealing with the *literal* sense of the text. On the other hand, when *things* take on the function or character of signs, we are dealing with the *spiritual* sense of the text. See, David C. Steinmetz, “The Superiority of Precritical Exegesis,” *Theology Today* (27(1980): 31-32.

¹⁰ William J. Larkin, Jr. *Culture and Biblical Hermeneutics* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1988): 29. See also Richard J. Bernstein, *Beyond Objectivism and Relativism: Science, Hermeneutic, and Praxis* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1983): 8-15.

¹¹ Larkin, 30. The significance of Descartes’ turn to the self lies primarily in the fact that “truth,” and for that matter meaning, was determined by “reason” and no longer by “revelation.” The consequent suppression of revelation was captured by Leibniz: “The truths of reason are necessary and their opposite impossible, factual truths are contingent and their opposite possible,” in Meier, 31. On his part, Lessing’s comment about the “ugly ditch” simply states the obvious implication from Leibniz’ distinction noted above. The implication of Kant’s distinction between *noumena* and *phenomena* in the realm of meaning in theology has been well captured as follows: “Metaphysics and natural theology have both assumed that the principle of causality applied to reality itself, to noumena. It is this assumption that makes possible inferences about God or any other proposed ultimate. But in Kant’s interpretation of human experience the categories do not properly apply to such supersensible realities. Neither inferences concerning the existence nor definitions of the nature of God or ultimate reality are possible for the theoretical use of human reason. This is not to say that we cannot offer speculative conjectures in which we employ the categories in an analogical or symbolic way, but it does rule out the possibility of *knowledge* in

development of the historical-critical method. It is generally agreed that the application of reason to the Bible, i.e. *rationalism*, was one of the main causes that led to historical criticism.¹²

The Historical Critical Method. Space does not permit us to give a full account of the historical-critical method, but its hermeneutical significance needs to be outlined briefly. For one thing, the historical-critical method, as applied to Scriptures, promised to uncover what really happened *objectively*. But as a method committed to the Enlightenment project, it had certain principles: principles of *criticism, analogy, and correlation*.

In the words of Van A. Harvey, the principle of *criticism* means that “our judgments about the past cannot simply be classified as true or false but must be seen as claiming only a greater or lesser degree of probability and always as open to revision.”¹³ In other words, we must always begin with *doubt*. The principle of *analogy*, on the other hand, requires that we proceed on the assumption that the events of the past are analogous to the events of our own present experience. In other words, the principle refers to “the fundamental homogeneity of all historical events.”¹⁴ The conclusion is inevitable: present reality determines the truth status of the past. It is for this reason that miracles are deemed improbable today. Finally the principle of *correlation* requires us to see every historical event as correlated with others in the same series. Macquarrie captures the essence of this principle

There is an integral continuity in history, so that everything which happens has to be considered as immanent in the immensely complex causal nexus. Troeltsch can even say that ‘the history of mankind merges in the purely evolutionary history of the earth’s surface’... The point of the principle of correlation is, however, that although there may be distinctive events, and even highly distinctive events, all events are of the same order, and are explicable in terms of what is immanent in history itself.¹⁵

Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768-1834): Father of Modern Hermeneutics

To the extent that the principles of the Enlightenment and the historical-critical method diminished the possibility of divine revelation/inspiration, the urgency of establishing the literal sense of the text was already lessened. Schleiermacher, a mystical pietist and philosopher understood the hermeneutical challenge posed by historical criticism and sought to emphasise a different locus for meaning. Thus, while many focussed on the historical-critical method, Schleiermacher demonstrated new hermeneutical interests.

In the introduction to this discussion, I made the observation that contemporary hermeneutics show a predilection for issues regarding conception and understanding. Although hermeneutical discussions in the nineteenth century began with the

metaphysics and theology.” See Jeffery Hopper, *Understanding Modern Theology: Cultural Revolutions and New Worlds* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1989), 54.

¹² Maier, 251.

¹³ See Gerhard F. Hasel, *Biblical Interpretation Today* (Lincoln: College View Printers, 1985), 77.

¹⁴ Words of Ernst Troeltsch, trans. By Hasel, 75.

¹⁵ John Macquarrie, *Twentieth-Century Religious Thought* (Philadelphia: Trinity Press International, 1988) 142-143.

development of rules for proper interpretation, the attention subsequently shifted to the more basic question regarding the conditions for the very possibility of understanding.¹⁶ Already in Schleiermacher, we begin to see the beginning of this shift as we examine his key, trail blazing themes in the area of hermeneutics.

“Preunderstanding.” With the notion of preunderstanding, Schleiermacher begins to address the conditions for the possibility of understanding anything at all. By this term, he meant that minimum, necessary common ground, in terms of experience and categories of understanding, which the interpreter possesses and brings unavoidably to the task of interpretation. Stated more technically, the notion of preunderstanding reflects the idea of the impossibility of a presuppositionless hermeneutic. A corollary to the notion of preunderstanding is the idea of the “hermeneutical circle.” The hermeneutical circle pictures a dynamic interaction between the whole and the part. While a concept derives its meaning from a concept or horizon, the context itself is also made up of the very elements/concepts to which it gives meaning.

The result of this move by Schleiermacher was very clear, namely, that lack of understanding is never removed since understanding now becomes a dynamic, progressive process, and not simply an act of interpretation that can be definitely completed.

Special Hermeneutics and General Hermeneutics. Prior to Schleiermacher, a distinction was made between *hermeneutica sacra* (special hermeneutics), and *hermeneutica profana* (general hermeneutics).¹⁷ Following his analysis of the general process of understanding, Schleiermacher was now unable to maintain the erstwhile distinction. Hence, the understanding of linguistic symbols, whether biblical or not ought to be conducted along similar lines of interpretation.

Authorial Intention. Here we come to the center of Schleiermacher’s hermeneutical interest. I have observed that the nineteenth century witnessed a shift in focus on understanding rather than interpretation. The question is what was the subject matter of understanding? For Schleiermacher, understanding had to do with the author’s intention. It is true that for him understanding involved the knowledge of some grammatical issues, but no less important was the possibility of intuiting the author’s experience. Clearly, this was a psychological moment in the hermeneutical process which Schleiermacher hoped to attain through empathy and imagination of the author’s experience.¹⁸ In other words, in the hermeneutical process the interpreter seeks a life-relationship.

Wilhelm Dilthey (1833-1911), expanded this initial insight of Schleiermacher. While he also understood the goal of hermeneutics to be the understanding of life, he postulated the idea of a universal nature such that, in interpretation, one sought to capture the universal nature in every human being.

The combination of the thoughts of Schleiermacher and Dilthey had a significant implication for hermeneutics. The psychological orientation of their thought had the

¹⁶ Randy L. Maddox, “Contemporary Hermeneutic Philosophy and Theological Studies,” *Religious Studies* 21(1985):517. This shift involved a fundamental distinction between the classical Cartesian and Kantian epistemology, conceived as “explanation” (*erklären*), and the evolving new hermeneutic conceived as “understanding” (*verstehen*).

¹⁷ Dockery, 162.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

unavoidable consequence of diminishing the value of the *literal sense* of Scripture. It should be mentioned that Dilthey in particular was committed to the radical historicity of human life. The historical emphasis in Dilthey will pave the way for yet newer conceptions of hermeneutics.

Heidegger (1889-1976): Existential Hermeneutics

If human life had become the subject matter of hermeneutics, and human life was radically historical, it was inevitable that it would be subjected to rigorous analysis. Such was the work of Heidegger as evidenced in his magnum opus *Being and Time*.

Heidegger represents a significant turning moment in hermeneutical understanding. Whereas Schleiermacher, Dilthey, Frege and Husserl remained committed to the possibility of objective interpretation leading to objective knowledge, Heidegger remained unconvinced that objective, determinate meaning was ever possible. Heidegger's failure to embrace objectivity has in part to do with his phenomenological analysis of the world as an environment (*unwelt*), in which things should be conceptualised less as "present-at hand" (*vorhanden*)---i.e. objects in space, than "ready-to-hand" (*zuhanden*)---as equipment.¹⁹ For someone who was dedicated to the practice of phenomenology (to let the facts appear as they are), this seem somewhat contradictory. Yet, it is true in Heidegger that while on the one hand he aimed at philosophical description, on the other hand, he remain convinced that man can only interpret the world as he sees it from the given life situation.²⁰

Heidegger's distinction between things as "present-at-hand" and "ready-to-hand" has immediate hermeneutical significance. All "signs," including linguistic signs, "take their place within the world of equipment or service."²¹ Therefore, words are to be seen more as "ready-to-hand" than "present-at-hand." As Anthony Thiselton explains, "the indicating of a sign is not the 'property' of an 'entity'; but occurs as 'the' 'towards-which' (*das Wozu*) of a serviceability and the 'for which' (*das Wofur*) of a usability."²² Stated in less technical terms, we may not, in understanding anything, including words, seek to delineate any fixed, determinate attributes of the thing since it not to be conceived primarily in terms of its attributes as an entity anyway.

The point made immediately above also means that in Heidegger, the emphasis in hermeneutics has shifted from *historical concerns* (facticity) of the text to the *a priori* existential awareness of the interpreter. From his analysis of *Dasein*, the human being has this *a priori* existential awareness embedded in him as an indicator of *Dasein*'s possibilities. Understanding is the projection of the human possibility that may be brought forth out of the text, on the basis of the *a priori* (preunderstanding) understanding of human existence of the interpreter. It is this *a priori* understanding of the interpreter that causes the text to open up. Hence, the source of meaning has shifted from the author/text to the reader.

¹⁹ See Anthony Thiselton, *The Two Horizons* (Grand rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1993):154-155.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 27.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 157.

²² *Ibid.*

Rudolf Bultmann (1884-1976). The consistent application of the existential insights of Heidegger to the New Testament fell to Rudolf Bultmann. For Bultmann's hermeneutics then, the New Testament is properly interpreted (understood), when the existential possibilities of the language of faith are appropriated to yield a new self-understanding of existence.²³ As an example, when in Acts 17:31 the Bible says, with respect to God, that He has fixed a day on which he will judge the world, this according to Bultmann only means that man "must choose his way in responsibility and decisions..."²⁴

Existential hermeneutics, as it flourished especially in the works of Bultmann came under pressure. The major point of objection had to do with the fact that in existential hermeneutics, interpretation was basically oriented towards human existence to the negligence of the theological and cognitive aspects. Wolfhart Pannenburg, for example, wondered whether given the existentialist's handling of the text, it (i.e. the text) is able to say what it has to say on its own.²⁵

Hans-Georg Gadamer wished to move beyond existential hermeneutics by focusing hermeneutics on language and subject matter.

Hans-Georg Gadamer (1900-2002): Hermeneutics of Conversation

It is not my intention to give a full treatment of Gadamer's philosophy, only to highlight the points at which he parted with the hermeneutical tradition before him. In Gadamer's *Truth and Method*, he opens his work by devoting a significant part to the nature of truth. Throughout this early part of the work, Gadamer aims at showing the insufficiency of the Enlightenment's mechanistic approach to truth. In Gadamer's view, art provides a better window to the understanding of history and reality.

With the insights developed in the first part of his work, Gadamer goes on to examine the hermeneutical tradition from Schleiermacher to Heidegger. Gadamer praises Schleiermacher's insight that the goal of hermeneutics is to understand the writer better than himself, thereby understanding hermeneutics as an art rather than a mechanical process. Against Schleiermacher and Dilthey, however, Gadamer points out their failure to resist the objectivist goal, in spite of Kant's influence. For Gadamer, this failure on the part of Schleiermacher and Dilthey reflects insufficient recognition of the whole issue of historical consciousness. Gadamer's point is that objectivism is impossible precisely because humans are so historically conditioned that one cannot assert the possibility of a standpoint "above" history.²⁶

On the other hand, while Gadamer accepts Heidegger's formulation of the significance of preunderstandings and presuppositions in interpretation, he sees a weakness in Heidegger's approach for the possibility of subject matter to correct and revise preunderstandings. Against existential hermeneutics, Gadamer argues that we

²³ Dockery, 166.

²⁴ Rudolf Bultmann, *This World and Beyond. Marburg Sermons* (London: Lutterworth Press, 1960): 21, quoted in Anthony Thiselton, *The Two Horizons*, 264.

²⁵ Wolfhart Pannenburg, "Hermeneutics and Universal History," in *History and Hermeneutics*, ed. R. W. Funk (Tubingen: Mohr, 1967): 132.

²⁶ Thiselton, 303.

should “avoid an understanding of the text which fits perfectly with our prior expectations.”²⁷

For Gadamer, hermeneutics is pictured as a conversation where the parties come to an understanding of something *about* which they have an interest. While the goal is to understand the subject matter of the conversation, Gadamer maintained that, by virtue of the nature of language and time and cultural distance, the text is an exposition of something that exceeds itself.²⁸ Thus, it is clear that Gadamer rejects “the idea that a text, an in particular the biblical text, is a fixed repository of stable content.”²⁹

The upshot of the current disdain for objectivism is seen in the various movements and philosophical perspectives that feed into the contemporary postmodern ethos. Following Gadamer’s emphasis on cultural distance, the very possibility of even finding modern equivalents for biblical meanings has been questioned.³⁰ Consequently, various sociological, psychological and anthropological studies are being undertaken, underlining the distinctiveness and specific remoteness of the biblical culture.³¹ Lewis Mudge writes that as a result of these studies, doubt is cast “on the feasibility of any significant empathetic recovery of the ancient life-world, much less of knowing the original writer’s mind better than himself.”³² Mudge refers in particular to what Paul Ricoeur has called the “career” of the text and concludes that “the question of how the text as a literary object contains meanings and conveys them independently of authorial intention now stands close to the centre of hermeneutical debate.”³³

Today’s Hermeneutical Landscape

What has been done so far is to give a quick and brief overview of the history of hermeneutics. The contemporary hermeneutical scene evidences three primary approaches to hermeneutics. Roy J. Howard’s *Three Faces of Hermeneutics* presents an introduction to different theories of understanding as they relate to meaning. Howard distinguishes the three main hermeneutical traditions to be analytic, psychosocial, and ontological.³⁴ Similarly, Josef Bleicher has identified three major schools of thought within the contemporary philosophical discussion of hermeneutics which almost parallels Howard’s classification.³⁵ Bleicher distinguishes the three schools of hermeneutics as (1) Method (Emilio Betti), (2) Philosophy (Hans-Georg Gadamer), and (3) Criticism (Jurgen Habermas).

Perhaps the key point that may be made about the contemporary hermeneutical climate is the provisionality about the process of understanding. This means that understanding does not have sharp boundaries, and that the interpreter cannot reach a completely certain understanding. It is thus that contemporary biblical interpretation is fraught with subjectivism, relativism, provisionality, and pluralism.

²⁷ Ibid., 304.

²⁸ Dockery, 169.

²⁹ Ibid., 168.

³⁰ Alan Richardson and John Bowden eds., “Hermeneutics,” *The Westminster Dictionary of Christian Theology* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1983): 252.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Roy J. Howard, *Three Faces of Hermeneutics* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982)

³⁵ Josef Bleicher, *Contemporary Hermeneutics* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1980)