

Biblical Hermeneutics

or

Principles of Bible Interpretation Based on Works on Hermeneutics

By

Prof. W.M.H. Paterson, St. Paul, Minn., 1896

Dr. L. Fuerbringer, St. Louis, Mo., 1912

Dr. C.O. Hofmann, St. Louis edition, 1876, of

“Institutiones Theologiae Exegeticae,” (Wittenberg, 1754)

[Mankato, Minn. 1957]

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Notes on Hermeneutics, or Principles of Bible Interpretation.

Chapter I: Concerning the Sense of Scripture in General.

Par. 1) The sense of Scripture is that which God through Scripture intends to reveal, to convey to us; its thoughts and truths.

Language is the vehicle of thought, though there are other minor means of expressing ideas, such as signs. Ordinarily we try to get at the thought of the writer. Although his words and sentences might mean various things, we do not try to see how many meanings we can get into his writings. We assume that God is the Author of the Bible. Though the writers knew what they were writing, they did not always understand fully the import of what they wrote, 1 Peter 1,10ff.

Par. 2) The sense of Scripture is to be sought in and determined by the words of Scripture. This is one of the fundamental principles of Biblical interpretation. There is much wrong reading between the lines though there are times when something may be inferred or suggested by the words actually written. If the words concerned do not convey the thoughts attributed to them, we are guilty of putting meanings into the words, instead of taking them out-“eisegesis vs. exegesis.”

The words must be considered in their connection; parts and sentences likewise. One book of the Bible will help to understand another. If we know the writers, their peculiarities, their ways of expressing themselves, etc., we may modify our interpretation of their words and writings. One of the fundamental errors of the Catholic Church is that the oral decrees of their Church Councils, their traditions, are also counted as the word of God. They make these things of equal authority with Scripture. Tradition and Scripture must harmonize but they put tradition first as the final norm. In interpreting Scripture they must take into account tradition also. They claim that there are many deeper senses to be found in Scripture, and ordinary church members must go to the priests to find out the “hidden senses.” Their (Catholic) distinctive doctrines do not lie on the surface; they are hidden under several “layers of meanings.” The Church is infallible in its interpretations. The Church and its priesthood have an especially holy character and holy endowments in the Sacrament of Ordination. The pope is the head of the priesthood, hence all truth heads up in him and he speaks infallibly whenever he speaks “ex cathedra.”

We cannot understand the truths of Scripture, unless we have the enlightenment of the Holy Spirit; He must guide us. Some people believe in an “inner illumination” aside from the word of God. But when illumination is thus dissociated from the word, it cannot be true, but represents only human fancies and conceits. The Spirit enlightens us through the word of God. cf. Heb. 4,12; 2 Tim. 3,14-17.

Another error is to say that the meaning of a Scripture passage is to be determined by the general spirit of the Bible; e.g. eternal damnation, they say, conflicts with the general spirit of mercy and love expressed by the Bible.

Par. 3) Every word, phrase or sentence has one and only one definite sense in a certain given connection. When we say this, we must remember that a word may be actually written only once, but yet may be used in different senses, the figurative and the literal.

Par. 4) Hence the sense of Scripture is sometimes impressed literally, sometimes figuratively. It is necessary to determine when it is used in the literal and when in the figurative sense.

Chapter II: Concerning the Literal Sense of Scripture

Par. 1) The literal sense is the common, ordinary meaning of a word. This must, however, be distinguished from the original meaning or the etymology which is often obsolete and quite different from the common meaning.

Par. 2) The literal or proper sense of a word or phrase must always be accepted as the intended sense, unless there is an absolute necessity for understanding it figuratively.

This is a very important principle for which we have the most practical use, not only in the Bible, but universally. The proper sense has the right of way. Otherwise it would be impossible to be sure of anything. It becomes necessary, however, to depart from the literal sense: a) When that is incompatible with the context or scope of the passage. (The scope is the purpose or aim of a certain passage) Cf. 1 Cor. 3:13 where “fire” does not mean physical fire, but a means of testing. In Is. 51:1, “rock” means human beings who follow the word of God. In Is. 61 the terms “prison” and “captives” are meant spiritually. In Matt. 8:22, the first “dead” cannot mean the physically dead, as that would involve an evident absurdity. Cf. also Rom. 12:20, “coals of fire”; Rev. 20:1-2; Matt. 7:4-5 (the beam); Luke 13:32, where Jesus calls Herod “a fox,” etc. b) When parallel passages explain the word or phrase in question and clearly show that the literal is not the intended sense, cf. Luke 11:20 with Matt. 12:28; Mal. 4:5 with Matt. 17:11-12. c) When the literal sense conflicts with doctrines, precepts or historical facts clearly set forth in other passages of the Bible. Cf. the chiliastic interpretation of Rev. 20, which conflicts with the rest of the Bible. “Scriptura ex scripturis explicanda est.” Jesus shows this in Matt. 4:7-8, etc.

However, we must note that there are also insufficient reasons for departing from the literal sense: a) The mere fact that a word, phrase or passage might be understood figuratively and would give good sense if so understood, is not sufficient reason for understanding it so. b) The mere fact that the literal interpretation yields a sense that is beyond the comprehension of human reason, e.g. John 1:14, the problem how God and man can be united in one Person; the accounts of miracles; of Baptism, the Lord’s Supper; of regeneration, etc. c) The mere fact that the literal interpretation involves difficulties which would be avoided by a figurative interpretation. d) The mere fact that the Church or the “fathers” have interpreted a word, phrase or passage figuratively. This is a point which must be urged against Catholics particularly. e) The mere fact that the literal interpretation does not yield such lofty or edifying thoughts as a figurative interpretation would. f) The fact that a word is used in a figurative sense in one passage is not sufficient reason for understanding it figuratively in another passage.

These rules are the most important in Biblical hermeneutics and must always be followed.

Chapter III. Concerning the Figurative Sense of Scripture

Par. 1) When a word or expression is used in another than its proper sense, or is applied to some object different from that to which it is appropriated in common usage, it is used in a figurative sense.

Par. 2) Figures of speech are used very extensively in the Bible; and all the various figures of speech used in other books are used there also: Similes, metaphors, metonymy, synecdoche, hyperbole, irony, etc.

Par. 3) The simile is a figure in which one thing is formally compared to another, so as to impress the mind with the resemblance or likeness. Cf. Is. 55:10-11; Jer. 23:29; Is. 1:8; Is. 29:8; Ps. 102:6. Similes involve no difficulties or interpretation.

Par. 4) Metaphor is a figure by which from some supposed resemblance or analogy, a name, attribute or action belonging to or characteristic of one object is assigned to another to which it is not literally applicable. Cf. Gen. 49:9,14,21; Jer. 2:13; Job 26:8; Deut. 32:40ff.; Ps. 51:7; Matt. 5:13; Eph. 6:11.

Rules governing the use of metaphors: a.) The thing from which a metaphor is taken and with which some other thing is compared must be known. Cf. John 10, the Good Shepherd. Therefore a knowledge of Biblical archaeology—the customs, geography, history, etc.—is necessary. b) The scope of a metaphor must be studied. The immediate context may indicate this, or the general scope and context of the chapter in which it is found. Metaphors may have different places, cf. the use of “lion” in 1 Pet. 5:8; Rev. 5:5; 2 Tim. 4:17. c) The point to comparison must be carefully considered and care must be taken that points of resemblance are not unduly multiplied.

Par. 5) Metonymy—change of name—is a figure in which the name of one object is put for another object, the two being so related that mention of the one naturally suggests the other. It is founded on the close relation between the two, not the resemblance, e.g. “bottle” for “liquor”; “cup” for “wine”; etc.. There are various kinds [sic]: 1) The cause for the effect or the effect for the cause; 2) The subject for the adjunct, or vice versa; 3) The container for the thing contained; the sign for the thing signified. Cf. Deut. 17:6; Prov. 12:19; [??] 5:2; Deut. 30:20; Luke 2:30; Lev. 19:32; Gen. 42:38; Is 1:2; Ps. 23:5; 1 Cor. 10:21; Rom. 3:30; Gen. 49:10, etc..

Par. 6) Synecdoche is a figure by which a part of a thing is put for the whole, or a whole for the part, the species for the genus, etc. It is closely related to metonymy. But here we do not change the name from one thing to another, but give the subject a name which signifies something more or less than we intend. Acts 2:25; Gen. 6:12; Matt. 12:40. Thus the species is put for the genus, “man” for “human beings” in general, in Ps. 1:1. Cf. “gold” for “money”, a “sword” for “weapons”; “Jew and Greek” for all mankind, Rom. 1:16, etc. More rarely the genus is put for the species, as e.g. in Mark 16:15; Col. 1:23; Luke 3:6. There are all kinds of figures of speech in the Bible.

Par. 7) Hyperbole is a figure of speech in which the expression is an evident exaggeration of the meaning intended to be conveyed, or by which things are represented as being much greater or less, better or worse, than they really are. The exaggeration is not intended to deceive but to make the thought or word more effective and emphatic. Nor does the exaggeration deceive, because it is clear to every one what is meant. It is a legitimate figure of speech. Cf. “skyscrapers”. Note the examples in Ps. 6:6; Ex. 8:17; Ps. 119:136; 1 Sam. 25:37; 1 Kings 1:40; Gen. 13:16; 2 Sa. 1:23; 1 Kings 10:27; Judges 7:12.

Par. 8) Irony is a figure of speech in which the language literally means exactly the opposite of what the author intends to say: Irony ridicules while it pretends to praise. Cf. 1 Kings 18:27; Job 12:2.

Par. 9) Personification is a figure of speech by which life is attributed to inanimate things. This figure is used very much in the Old Testament especially. Cf. Ps. 114:3-4; Is. 55:12.

Par. 10) Apostrophe is a figure of speech in which the speaker or writer addresses an absent person as if present, a dead person as if living, or an inanimate thing as if it were living. Apostrophe is often combined with personification, or includes it. Cf. Ps. 114:5ff. 2 Samuel 1:19ff.

Par. 11.a) Interrogation is a figure of speech in which a question is asked for the purpose of stating one's own opinion more strongly, not actually to get information. It is called a rhetorical question. Cf. Job 13:7ff. Rom. 8:33ff.

Par. 11.b) Exclamation is a figure similar to interrogation, used to express more strongly one's feelings or thought.

Par. 12) Fable, Riddle, Enigma, Allegory, and Parable.

A fable is a story in which animals or inanimate things are represented as speaking and acting like intelligent man. Some do not recognize that there is such a thing as a fable in the Bible; they call it a parable instead. But see Judges 9:9-15; 2 Kings 14:9; Ezekiel 17:1-10.

A riddle is a puzzle or conundrum. Cf. Judges 14:12ff.

An enigma is about the same as a riddle; it is a dark saying, like that in Revelation 13:18.

An allegory is a figure of speech in which one thing is described under the image of another.

It is a continued metaphor. Allegory and parable might be considered under the 4th chapter, concerning types. But strictly speaking they belong here. There are only two or three instances of mystical allegory and parable in the Bible and these should be classed under "types". Types are such sections of Scripture as have a mystical sense but also some intended literal sense. There is no intended literal sense in allegories and parables. Cf. Ps. 80 which may be termed a rhetorical allegory; Eccles. 12, etc..

A parable is a figure of speech in which a narrative, not historical, but true to the facts and experiences of human life, is used to illustrate some spiritual truth. A parable is a continued simile, as an allegory is a continued metaphor. The word comes from the Greek *parabolē*, "To compare something to something else."

Chapter IV: Concerning Types

Par. 1) A type is a person, thing, office, institution or event of the Old Testament that is intended by the Holy Ghost to prefigure some corresponding person, thing, office, etc., in the New Testament. That which prefigures is called the type; that which is prefigured is called the antitype. For example, Melchizedek was a type of Christ and Christ is the antitype of Melchizedek. An emblem or figure is of the same nature as a type. There must be one or more points of resemblance between the type and the antitype. In many respects they may be totally dissimilar; in fact, it is essential that it be so, or else there would be identity. In the antitype there is always something higher or more noble than the type. But in order to be a type, it must be intended as such by God. Only what according to Scripture itself is intended may be called a type.

The mere fact that there is some resemblance between the two does not make something a type. However, it is not necessary that Scripture expressly states it, just so it is indicated in some way. Thus the whole Old Testament is spoken of as an adumbration of the New Testament. Cf. Col. 2:16-17. In Heb. 4:9 the Sabbath is presented as a type of the everlasting rest in heaven. According to 1 Peter 2:9-10 the priests were types of the New Testament Christians. The cities of refuge (Numbers 35:6) foreshadow the provisions of the Gospel by which sinners may be saved from death. According to Deut. 18:15 the prophetic office in the Old Testament was a type of Christ's prophetic office. Certain events may be types, e.g. 1 Peter 3:20-21. The Exodus from Egypt, the sojourn in the wilderness, the giving of manna, the supplying of water from a rock, all were types, cf. 1 Cor. 10:1-11. The lifting up of the serpent of brass was a type of the cross, John 3:14. The conquest of Canaan, the restoration from the captivity, Jonah in the belly of a great fish, all were types of greater things to come.

The following rules must be observed in analyzing types:

1.) The question as to which things described in the Old Testament are types and of what they are types must be determined by the Scriptures themselves, by either explicit or implicit testimony.

2.) We must first ascertain carefully the literal sense of the passage describing a type and then note the points of resemblance between the type and the antitype, and seek to determine in what respects the former prefigures or represents the latter.

3.) We must not unduly multiply points of comparison, remembering that the type is always inferior to the antitype.

Chapter V: Concerning The Analogy Of Faith.

Par. 1) Scripture must be interpreted according to the analogy of faith.

Par. 2) The analogy of faith in the clearly revealed Scripture doctrines, or in other words—the body of doctrines derived from those passages in which the doctrines are clearly set forth (*sedes doctrinae*). It has become a technical term in theology. The term is derived from Romans 12:6, where the Greek reads: ἀναλογίαν τῆς πίστεως. ἀναλογία means proportion, correspondence, harmony, something analogous to. To expound Scripture according to the analogy of faith is to explain all passages so as not to conflict with other clear passages. Romans 12:6 is interpreted in different ways; but as the term “analogy of faith” is used, “faith” must mean not the subjective faith of the believer, but objective faith, that which is believed. It means simply that Scripture is to be interpreted by Scripture. Obscure and doubtful passages are to be interpreted in the light of clear passages.

Par. 3) There is in reality agreement and harmony between all the doctrines of Scripture. But in many cases we cannot see this agreement, at least not clearly.

Par. 4) We can determine the connection and relation between the various Scripture doctrines only in so far as Scripture itself reveals such connection.

Par. 5) When two doctrines which to us seem to contradict each other are both clearly revealed in Scripture, we must accept them both. (points 4 and 5 are very important!)

Par. 6) Obscure passages must be interpreted in accordance with those that are clear and plain; e.g. Revelation 20.

Par. 7) Scripture itself teaches that the doctrine of justification is the most important article of faith and that therefore no interpretation that conflicts with this doctrine must be admitted. Cf. Matt. 10:43.

Par. 8) An interpretation may be according to the analogy of faith and still not be the correct one.

Par. 9) An interpretation which is not according to the analogy of faith cannot be correct.

Chapter VI: The Comparison Of Passages.

Par. 1) Parallel passages are passages that are similar; that is, there are different passages in which the same words or phrases occur; or which treat of the same subject matter, or express the same idea or doctrine. In the former case the parallel is said to be verbal, in the latter real. When two or more passages correspond exactly in words and meaning, the parallel is called complete, e.g. Eph. 1:7 and Col. 1:14; Is. 40:7-8 and 1 Pet. 1:24-5. The parallel is partial or incomplete when the passages correspond only in part, e.g. Rom. 11:32 and Gal. 3:22.

Par. 2) To ascertain the meaning of a word or passage, it is very frequently of the greatest importance to study parallel passages. What is obscure or doubtful in one passage is often clear in another; or one passage may

throw light on another, e.g. Heb. 12:17 might be misunderstood if we did not compare Gen. 27:34ff. This shows that Esau could not succeed in changing the mind of his father—the “repentance” referred to means merely that change of mind. So also Ex. 4:21 and 10:27 compared with Ex. 9:34. Luke 14:26 is to be compared with Matt. 10:37. In Matt. 24:15 and Mark 13:14 the “abomination of desolation” there spoken of might not be understood aright, if we did not have also Luke 21:20, showing that the desolation referred to is physical, the attack of an army.

However, it should be noted that, because a word or phrase has a certain meaning in one passage, this does not prove that it has that meaning in every passage in which it might occur.

Chapter VII. The Scope of Scripture.

Par. 1) In interpreting Scripture, it is of the greatest importance to ascertain the scope of the writing under consideration, i.e. the purpose or aim an author has in view.

Par. 2) We must distinguish between the “scopus generalis” of the Bible, and the special scope of a particular book of the Bible or portion of the Bible. The scope of a book or portion of a book must harmonize with the scope of the Bible as a whole.

Par. 3) The general scope of the Bible is Christ, or that Christ is the Savior of mankind. The Old Test. points forward to Christ; the New Test. back to Him. Some passages speak directly of Him, some show the need of Him, etc.. Thus in John 5:46 Christ Himself says that Moses wrote of Him. Similarly John 1:45. Of especial importance here is Luke 24:25-27; also Acts 10:43; Acts 3:24; Rom. 3:21; 1 Pet. 1:10. Those, therefore, who can find nothing of Christ in the Old Test. are false interpreters. Lutherans are accused by modern theologians of finding too much of the New Test. in the Old Test., but this is an a priori judgment of their part. But we must not explain everything in the Old Test. as applying to Christ, by falling into undue allegorizing and far-fetched interpretations.

Par. 4) The special scope of a particular book or of a portion of a book may be ascertained in various ways: 1) It is sometimes formally stated (Luke 1:4), either at the beginning or the close. Cf. John 20:31. 2) Sometimes the scope may be ascertained by the circumstances that occasioned the writing, e.g. Paul’s Epistle to the Galatians. 3) Sometimes it must be arrived at by careful observation.

Par. 5) A book or another portion of Scripture may have more than one scope. We may then distinguish between a primary and a secondary scope.

Chapter VIII. The Interpretation of Old Testament Prophecy in the New Testament.

Par. 1) There is a close connection between Old Test. prophecy and New Test. fulfillment, which God Himself has established and which, therefore, no man dare change or set aside. The same connection exists between the prophecy and the inspired account of the fulfillment. Therefore the Christian exegete must maintain both that the event which is reported as a fulfillment of prophecy has taken place by the premeditated counsel and plan of God; and also that the report of the fulfillment is decisive for the understanding and interpretation of the prophecy.

Compare Hos. 11:1 with Matt. 2:15; Jer. 31:15 with Matt. 2:17; Is. 11:1 with Matt. 2:23 and John 1:46; Num. 21, 8-9 with John 3:14-15; Gen. 22:18 with Gal. 3:16; Ps. 41:10 with John 13:18.

Par. 2) Besides this, one must also observe especially the following rules: a) In the interpretation of a prophetic word or section of the Old Test., one must investigate whether there is in the New Test. any report of an event which is expressly declared to be a fulfillment of the prophecy. If this is the case, the exegete is relieved of

further labors and investigations, and the meaning of the individual words is definitely established. Compare Is. 7:14 with Matt. 1:22-23; Micah 5:1 with Matt. 2:5-6. In this matter the parallel passages listed in the ordinary Bible editions are often of great service. But it is still necessary always to make an independent investigation to determine whether the parallels are real and not only seeming. b) If one cannot find a passage in which a prophecy is expressly said to be fulfilled, one should then ascertain whether all the essential elements of the prophecy are found again in a certain person or in a certain event; and in such a case one is justified in applying the two to each other, particularly when no other historical manifestation fulfills all the elements of the prophecy. Compare Dan. 11:36-39 and 12:1 with 2 Thess. 2:3-4; 1 Tim. 4:13 and Matt. 24:15,21-22, with Dan. 7:25; 9:27; 12:7,11; Rev. 11:2-3 and Rev. 12:6,14. c) Wherever the Old Test. prophecy speaks of the abrogation of the Levitical forms of worship and the end of the Old Covenant we may recognize a prophecy which refers to the time of the New Test.; cf. Jer. 31:31-34 with Heb. 8:6-13; likewise, wherever the coming of many heathen to the salvation of Israel is treated, or where a glorious restoration of the kingdom of Israel is treated, or where a glorious restoration of the kingdom of Israel and Judah is proclaimed, compare Is. 11:10-12 with Rom. 15:9-12; Amos 9:11-12 with Acts 15:14-17. This is important especially as against the Chiliasts. d) The Old Test. prophets have often expressed prophecies concerning the blessedness of the kingdom of Christ, both the kingdom of grace and that of glory, in words which apparently speak of temporal success and earthly glory, but which in the exegesis must be understood and explained in a spiritual way. Cf. Is. 2:2-5; 11:6-5; 60:17-20; Joel 3:23; Amos 9:13-14; Micah 4:1-5; and also Luke 17:20; John 18:36; e) To the right understanding of Messianic prophecies, the exegete must not let himself be misled by the circumstance that they often stand directly alongside of historical or temporal statements which have no prophetic import. Compare the framework or context of Is. 7:14; Micah 2:12-13. The exegete must likewise guard against the perversions of many exegetes the in just such prophecies assume a two-fold or multiple sense and set aside the direct Messianic application. Compare the typical interpretation of 2 Sam. 7:12-17 and Ps. 22.

Par. 3) In the quotations from the Old Test. in the New Test. it is to be noted that not all by far are literally and exactly reproduced in the New Test.. Compare Lev. 18:5 with Rom. 10:5; Ps. 32:1-2 with Rom. 4:7-8. In this respect great freedom and variety prevail. Still these differing forms of the quotations do not conflict with the right teaching concerning verbal inspiration, but rather confirm it. For they can be explained only in this way that the Holy Ghost, the author of the whole Scriptures, quotes Himself and can hence quote freely. Note that in certain cases, the Old Test. text is expanded in the quotations, compare Luke 4:18 with Is. 61:1. In other cases it is contracted, cf. Matt. 4:15 with Is. 9:1. Oftener the clauses are rearranged, cf. Rom. 9:25 with Hos. 1:10 and 2:23. Or two passages are fused into one and are introduced under one name, cf. Matt. 27:9-10 with Zech. 11:12-13 and Jer. 32:6-15; Mark 1:2-3 with Mal. 3:1 and Is. 40:3. At times a passage may also be cited with opposite wording, but correctly according to the sense, cf. Matt. 2:6 with Micah 5:2. In very many quotations the translation of the Septuagint is retained, cf. Rom. 4:7-8 with Ps. 32:1-2; Rom. 10:5 with Lev. 18:5. This is done even in cases where the Septuagint does not translate accurately, but has hit upon the intended sense of the original text; cf. Luke 3:6 with Is. 40:5 and 52:10; Heb. 10:5 with Ps. 40:7. However, where the Septuagint has not hit upon the intended meaning, the quotation is made in an accurate translation from the Hebrew, cf. Matt. 2:15 with Hos. 11:1; Rom. 11:35 with Job 41:2. There are cases, too, where the Holy Ghost has not bound Himself either to the Septuagint or to the original Hebrew text, but has alluded freely to an Old Test. passage, cf. Eph. 5:14 with Is. 60:1. Or He has reproduced a Scripture truth freely, cf. John 7:38 with Is. 58:11; 44:3 and 55:1. Or He has used Old Test. words in a new sense, cf. Rom. 10:6-8 with Deut. 30:11-14; 1 Cor. 14:21 with Is. 28:11-12.

Note on Textual Criticism and the Interpretation of Scripture.

Modern conjectural criticism which wants to go back of the available sources and amend the text according to its own arbitrary assumptions is not to be recognized as valid. For there is, on the one hand, enough source material to determine what the true text is; and on the other hand, one must hold fast to the traditional

manuscript readings so long as these cannot definitely be proven to be wrong. Consider, e.g. how P. Ewald changes $\kappa\tau\iota\sigma\epsilon\iota$ in Col. 1:23 to $\kappa\lambda\iota\sigma\epsilon\iota$; R. Harris (and Goodspeed in his version of the New Test.) change $\epsilon\theta\omega\{\$ in 1 Pet. 3:19 to $\theta\eta\omega\chi$ etc.. Only he can be a theological exegete in the right and full sense of the term in whom the word of God has done its regenerating work. Cf. Ps. 119:18; 2 Cor. 4:6; 1 Cor. 2:14; Is. 66:2; Ps. 119:16,24,35,47,70,117, etc..