Lion and Lamb Apologetics
Hermeneutics

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Hermeneutics, term derived from the Gk. verb 'interpret' (*hermēneuō*).

Definition and scope

Hermeneutics may be defined briefly as the theory of interpretation. Traditionally and until very recently it has been taken to mean the study of rules or principles for the interpretation of particular texts. But this definition is too narrow. First, hermeneutics concerns not only the interpretation of texts, but the interpretation and understanding of any act of communication, whether written or oral, verbal or non-verbal (such as symbols or symbolic acts). Biblical hermeneutics is a specific area which concerns the interpretation, understanding, and appropriation of biblical texts. Second, theorists are no longer content to speak of rules for the interpretation of texts, as if to imply that understanding can be generated merely by the mechanical application of purely scientific principles. Hermeneutics raises prior and more fundamental questions about the very nature of language, meaning, communication and understanding.

The subject thus involves an examination of the whole interpretative process. This raises issues in the philosophy of language, theories of meaning, literary theory, and semiotics (theory of signs), as well as, in biblical hermeneutics, those which also arise in biblical studies and in Christian theology. The subject is no longer seen as a supplementary tool for ensuring 'correct' interpretation, but as a profound reflection on the very basis and purpose of interpretation and of how we decide what would count in the first place as a 'correct' interpretation. Indeed, whether we should speak of an interpretation as 'correct', 'productive', 'valid' or 'responsible' remains still a hermeneutical question. The first step is to enquire into the conditions under which any kind of interpretation is possible or appropriate to certain given purposes of reading, writing or understanding.

Main issues in the history of traditional biblical hermeneutics

The period of the Bible itself. The term 'hermeneutics' appeared probably for the first time as the description for a subject-area in J. C. Dannhauer's *Hermeneutica Sacra* (Strasburg, 1654). But reflection about interpretation and interpretative processes began long before this in the ancient world. Interpretation begins within the Bible itself,

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Gk. Greek

whenever earlier traditions or writings are reviewed from the standpoint of later ones. Jesus interprets his death in accordance with the OT Scriptures, and interprets the OT in accordance with his own work (Lk. 24:25–27; Gk. *diermneusen*, 'interpreted'). He interprets Is. 61:1–2 in terms of his present ministry (Lk. 4:21). Some scholars see a parallel between this kind of 'fulfilment' in the NT and the so-called *pēsher* interpretations in the Dead Sea Scrolls, which interpret certain OT passages in terms of the present or imminent experience of the Qumran community. Present applications of earlier texts is a persistent concern in hermeneutics. The term *midrash* more broadly denotes 'interpretation' in rabbinic Judaism. Rabbi Hillel is credited with the formulation of seven 'rules' (*middōth*) of interpretation, although their value is strictly limited. For the most part they concern the drawing of logical inferences and comparisons.

Allegorical interpretation and typology. The theory and practice of allegorical interpretation goes back to pre-Christian times. Many Stoic philosophers respected Homer as a classic text, but were embarrassed by the crudities and absurdities of stories about the gods and goddesses of ancient polytheistic Greek religion. Some interpreters in the Stoic and Platonic tradition reduced this tension by reinterpreting the personages and activities of these gods and goddesses as human qualities or elements of nature. Stories about Apollo, Hera and Poseidon could thus be read as accounts of interactions between sun, air and water. Plato spoke of a 'meaning below' (*hyponoia*) the surface of the text, and many 1st-century writers describe this as *allegoria*. From Greek thought, this method of reading a text found its way into Jewish circles. Philo wrote as a Jew seeking to commend Jewish faith to educated Greeks and Romans. He used allegorical interpretation as a device for re-reading passages in the early chapters of Genesis which he found embarrassingly anthropomorphic, or passages in Leviticus which described the minutiae of animal sacrifice. Thus the method was established in Jewish and Greek circles before its growth within the Christian church.

Allegorical interpretation has had an ambivalent status in Christian tradition. Origen argued that Paul himself provides precedent for allegorical interpretation in his identification of the wilderness rock with Christ in 1 Cor. 10:1–4. There has always been controversy about whether this passage and Gal. 4:22–26 constitute genuine examples of allegorical interpretation. Much depends on definition and questions about Paul's purpose. Many draw a firm distinction between allegory, which depends on a correspondence between *ideas*, and typology, which depends on a correspondence

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OT Old Testament
OT Old Testament
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NT New Testament
OT Old Testament

between *events*. Some argue that Paul uses typology but not allegory. However, while it is true that events are given whereas ideas are entertained, criteria for the typological interpretation of such events remain problematic.

Clement of Rome (*c.* ad 96) provides a very early example of Christian allegorical interpretation. Commenting on Jos. 2:18, he observes that the Israelite spies gave Rahab a sign 'that she should hang out a scarlet thread from her house, foreshowing that all who achieve and hope in God shall have deliverance through the blood of the Lord' (*1 Clem.* 12:7). Clement of Alexandria, a century later, argued that the interpreter should expect to find hidden meanings in the biblical writings, because the mystery of the gospel transcended the meaning of any particular passage. Origen argued that the interpreter should begin with the plain or grammatical meaning, but should then 'rise from the letter to the spirit'. He saw the outward events or outward grammar of a text as like the human body: what gave it *soul* was *moral* application, and what gave it *spirit* was the frame of reference informed by *spiritual* perception. In spite of his attempt to acknowledge, at least in theory, the importance of the letter, or of the grammatico-historical meaning of a text, his own use of allegorical interpretation moved too far in the direction of those Gnostic opponents who also ransacked the Bible for esoteric or 'secret' meanings. By way of response and reaction, the fathers of Antioch, especially Theodore of Mopsuestia (350–428) and John Chrysostom (344/354–407), opposed the allegorical excesses of Alexandria, and insisted on the priority of linguistic considerations.

Multiple meaning and the perspicuity of Scripture. In the medieval period Origen's threefold sense was developed into four. The basic meaning of a passage (the so-called 'literal' or letter-sense) was expanded by considering its place in the context of salvation (the allegorical or typological sense). An interpreter might then draw out its significance for practical conduct (the moral sense), and finally consider its relation to the culmination of God's purposes in eternity (the anagogical sense). From the standpoint of religion, this might yield edifying results. But often the primary meaning of a text became buried and lost under layers of pious tradition. The Reformers were concerned to show that the Bible could stand on its own feet, and could actually speak as judge of the validity of church traditions. Neither Luther nor Calvin belittled the importance of history and tradition. But Luther insisted that the primary or grammatical meaning of the Bible was clear (*claritas Scripturae*) rather than obscure, while Calvin urged that the meaning of a passage was one (*simplex*) rather than many. In no way did they intend to imply that hermeneutics was unnecessary. Quite the reverse was the case. As against Erasmus, Luther argued that biblical knowledge was sufficiently accessible to yield productive results when all the appropriate tools of language and literature were applied. Calvin's 'one' meaning was

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c. circa. (Lat.), about, approximately

that which could be recovered by historical, linguistic and contextual enquiry. Neither term must be taken out of the context of the Reformation debate in such a way as to devalue the need for hermeneutics.

The status of the OT. Following the example of Jesus and the earliest Christian communities, Christian tradition has always affirmed the authoritative status of the OT. In the 2nd century, Marcion attempted to devalue the OT on the basis of a Pauline contrast between gospel and law. But Christians repudiated his work. The main resultant hermeneutical problem has been simultaneously to respect the integrity of the OT writings in their own right, and also to acknowledge their relationship of fulfilment to the NT, and their decisive witness to Christ (see Biblical Theology).

The role of historical criticism. In the 17th century Baruch Spinoza argued the importance of asking questions about the authorship, date, occasion and purpose of particular biblical writings. A hundred years later J. S. Semler (1725–88) went further, and argued that purely historical questions should be asked without reference to doctrine or theology. But historical-critical enquiry need not, and indeed should not, exclude theological considerations. Hermeneutical theory calls for broader, not narrower, horizons of interpretation, and a positivist or reductionist perspective conflicts with the interpretative openness which hermeneutics invites. However, by the very same token this openness also includes a recognition of the importance of historical method and the concrete contributions of rigorously critical historical enquiry (see Biblical Criticism).

Modern and recent perspectives and approaches

Romanticist hermeneutics. With the work of Friedrich Schleiermacher a new era in hermeneutics began. In the Romanticist tradition, the goal of the interpreter is to reach 'behind' the text to the mind of its author, and ultimately to the creative experience which called the text into being. The text is seen as an objectification, or objective residue, of this creative human experience. Following G. A. F. Ast (1778–1841) and F. A. Wolf (1759–1824), Schleiermacher saw the circular nature of hermeneutical enquiry. The interpreter has to undertake a creative leap into a provisional understanding of what the text is about, *i.e.* to grasp its meaning as a whole. But this depends on an understanding of its parts, *i.e.* of its component words and phrases. However, what the words and phrases mean depends equally on their context within the meaning of the text as a whole. Hence

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there remains a circular interplay between grasping the parts and grasping the whole. This is one aspect of the hermeneutical circle. Similarly, interpretation entails both linguistic and psychological processes. At the linguistic level, the scientific considerations of grammar and vocabulary have a part to play. But at a deeper level, the interpreter must seek to enter into psychological rapport with the author. An essential hermeneutical bridge is that of 'lived experience' (*Erlebnis*).

Wilhelm Dilthey developed Schleiermacher's approach with particular reference to the problem of historical understanding. The aim of the interpreter is 'to re-discover the "you" in "me" '. In other words, the life-experience of the interpreter provides a point of contact, or of 'pre-understanding', with which to approach a text. Dilthey admitted that this method stands in contrast with that of the physical or natural sciences. But historical understanding and the interpretation of texts born out of human history cannot be equated with any purely scientific enterprise. What counts as objectivity is not the same in each case. Natural science turns on 'knowledge'; interpreting the utterances of persons turns on 'understanding' (*Verstehen*). Understanding is never entirely value-free, for both author and interpreter are historical persons whose horizons are shaped by their place in history.

The best-known and most important representative of the Romanticist hermeneutical tradition in our century is Emilio Betti (1890–1968). Betti sees hermeneutics as vital to the well-being of society. The recognition that all interpretation is open to correction and revision should, he argues, promote greater tolerance between persons. Like Schleiermacher, he sees interpretation as essentially a tracing back of the process of composition, in which we move back from the text to the experience which produced it.

Existential and phenomenological hermeneutics. The impossibility of beginning enquiry other than from within *given* horizons was the starting-point for Martin Heidegger's (1889–1976) earlier thought. A particular person, Heidegger urged, will interpret what he or she sees in terms of the purposes and practical standpoints around which his or her life is already organized. Pre-understanding becomes, therefore, a major hermeneutical issue. In theology, Rudolf Bultmann shared some, but not all, of Heidegger's perspectives. Bultmann believed that the biblical writings only apparently or secondarily presented generalizing and descriptive statements about God and man. Their primary purpose, he urged, was the existential or practical function of calling persons to appropriate attitudes and responses of will. For example, the utterance, 'God will judge the world' is to be interpreted less as a statement about a future event than as a call to responsibility before God in the present moment. The affirmation 'Jesus is Lord' represents not so much a statement about Christ's cosmic status as a confession that Christ directs and controls my own life (see Myth).

Ontological hermeneutics. A closely related but different tradition in hermeneutical theory refuses to reduce questions of meaning and truth to individual experience in the way suggested in existentialist hermeneutics. Heidegger, in his later writings, and more especially his pupil Hans-Georg Gadamer (b. 1900), seek to relate language and meaning to the disclosure of truth in a way which transcends and calls attention to the reality of the 'world' projected and mediated by a work of art. In theology Ernst Fuchs (1903–83) pays attention to the narrative 'world' of the parable. The reader enters such a world and is grasped *by* it. The hermeneutical focus is not now upon the interpreter actively scrutinizing the text as object, but on the text actively addressing and scrutinizing the interpreter. The text must translate us, before we can translate the text. Hermeneutics, for Gadamer and Fuchs, is not a matter of simply using the right method. Their approach is sometimes known as the 'new' hermeneutic.

Socio-critical hermeneutics. Among the social sciences, hermeneutical explorations also began with Dilthey, and called attention especially to the role of 'interest' in interpreting texts. Interests shape what seems to count as a 'natural' interpretation within the framework of a tradition of social assumptions and practices. The interpretations of biblical texts about slavery, women or the poor, provide examples in recent liberation theologies and feminist hermeneutics (see Feminist Theology). Neo-Marxist social theory and the work of J. Habermas (b. 1929) are often pressed into the service of this approach. Many Latin American liberation theologians call for a second reading of the Bible which is undertaken within the context of present social struggles, or present praxis. Juan Luis Segundo (b. 1925), for example, speaks of the need not so much to demythologize but to 'de-ideologize' in interpretation. The hermeneutics of traditional Western scholarship are largely rejected as intellectualist and incapable of sufficient ideological suspicion.

Biblical hermeneutics and the problem of unity and diversity. The recent revival of interest in biblical hermeneutics has received added impetus from two major trends in biblical studies, namely redaction criticism and canon criticism (see Biblical Criticism). 1. Whereas the so-called biblical theology or salvation-history movements of the 1940s had emphasized the unity of the biblical writings, increasing attention has been paid since the mid-1950s to distinctive theological emphases and concerns represented by individual authors or editors within the Bible. Redaction criticism, in other words, called attention to a range of emphases within the biblical writings. 2. At the same time, these different emphases belong together to a single canon of Scripture. Their coexistence and interaction shape their canonical meaning. Concern for this level of meaning, currently known as

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canon criticism, is associated especially with the name of Brevard Childs (b. 1923). Contemporary biblical hermeneutics thus wrestles with two sides of a single problem. Paul and James, for example, must be interpreted each on his own terms. Each speaks to a particular pastoral and historical situation on faith and works. But their distinctive emphases within the canon must not be reduced or flattened out in the interests of superficial harmonization; nor should one be eclipsed by treating the other as the key to the whole gospel message. How the interpreter can best avoid these pitfalls and yet do full justice both to biblical unity and diversity remains a major focus of contemporary biblical hermeneutics.

Other hermeneutical approaches. It is impossible to list in a short article the full range of hermeneutical approaches at present under exploration. In his earlier works Paul Ricoeur (b. 1913) explores the role of suspicion in interpretation, not on the basis of Marx, but taking as his point of departure Freud's work on our capacity for self-deception in the interpretation of dreams, symbols and language (see Depth Psychology; Psychology of Religion). In his later work Ricoeur examines metaphor and theories of signs (semiotics). Increasing attention is being paid in literary and biblical hermeneutics to the active role of the reader in creating meaning (reader-response hermeneutics). Alongside the more usual notion of hermeneutics as the process of understanding (related to the theory of knowledge), other models are brought into play, such as that of textual action or the reading process. All this is not merely the result of academic fashion. It represents a widespread recognition over several different disciplines of the fundamental and far-reaching nature of hermeneutical questions. Biblical interpretation can never outgrow the work of the biblical specialist. But neither can biblical hermeneutics ever again be isolated from these broader yet fundamental interdisciplinary questions.

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[1] Ferguson, S. B., & Packer, J. I. (2000). In *New dictionary of theology* (electronic ed., pp. 293–297). Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press.