

Lion and Lamb Apologetics

What Should We Hope to Gain from a Study of Hermeneutics?

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What might we expect from a serious study of hermeneutics? I began teaching hermeneutics as a degree subject in the University of Sheffield in 1970. Since then I have taught hermeneutics in three other U.K. universities, as well as in America, Canada, Europe, and the Far East. Frequently I have asked my classes (from B.A. to Ph.D.) what they have gained, if anything at all, from this subject. Three answers have emerged with regularity.

First and most frequently, students say that by the time they have completed the course or module, *they have come to read the biblical writings in a different way* from before. If pressed, many will add that they have learned especially from Gadamer the importance of *listening* to a text on its own terms, rather than rushing in with premature assumptions or making the text fit in with prior concepts and expectations they may have. They have also gained from Paul Ricoeur (1913–2005) a realization of the need to examine the ways in which they read with a healthy measure of critical *suspicion*, knowing how easy it is to be seduced into self-deception by self-interest.¹ It is all too easy to opt for convenient or self-affirming interpretations.

Second, many find that hermeneutics, by virtue of its multidisciplinary nature, provides an *integrating dimension* to their theological and religious studies. If previously there had seemed to be little connection between biblical studies and fundamental philosophical problems, or between New Testament studies and the history of Christian thought, all these different areas and methods of approach *came together* in hermeneutics as *coherent, "joined up," interrelated* factors in the process of understanding texts.

Third, a number express the view that hermeneutics produces habits of respect for, and more sympathetic understanding of, views and arguments that at first seem alien or unacceptable. Hermeneutics seeks *to establish bridges* between opposing viewpoints. This does *not* necessitate *giving ground* to the other view, but sympathetically to understand

¹ Ricoeur explains this in many writings, but his classic study of this aspect is *Freud and Philosophy: An Essay on Interpretation*, trans. Denis Savage (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1970), e.g., p. 27.

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the diverse *motivations and journeys* that have led in the first place to each respective view or argument.

This features as a persistent theme in multidisciplinary hermeneutics from Schleiermacher to the present. In his early aphorisms of 1805 and 1809, Schleiermacher writes: “In interpretation it is essential that one be able to step out of one’s own frame of mind into that of the author.”² Interpreters must use imagination and historical research to learn how the “first readers” of a text would understand it.³ Wilhelm Dilthey (1833–1911), who effectively succeeded Schleiermacher in the development of hermeneutics, speaks of the need to try to step into the shoes of the author or dialogue-partner that one seeks to *understand*. This involves a measure of *empathy* (for which he uses the German word *Hineinversetzen*).⁴

In the mid-twentieth century the New Testament scholar Rudolf Bultmann (1884–1976) took up Dilthey’s hermeneutics and insisted that understanding a person or a text must entail having “a living relationship” to what one seeks to understand.⁵ He cites the examples of trying to understand a text of music or of mathematics. This would be almost impossible if music or mathematics played no part at all in the life of the reader or interpreter. In the second half of the twentieth century another New Testament specialist, Ernst Fuchs (1903–83), the main architect of “the new hermeneutic,” insisted that *empathy* or *mutual understanding* stood at the very heart of hermeneutics. He used the broad German word *Einverständnis* to convey this.⁶ One writer suggested that this word meant “penetrative understanding.”

Emilio Betti (1890–1968) provides probably the most striking comments on what we might hope to gain from the study of hermeneutics. Betti wrote on philosophy, theology, and law, and many regard him as third in importance behind Gadamer and Ricoeur in twentieth-century hermeneutics. He argues that hermeneutics fosters “open-mindedness” and “receptiveness” to such an extent that the subject should be obligatory

² Friedrich Schleiermacher, *Hermeneutics: The Handwritten Manuscripts*, ed. Heinz Kimmerle, trans. James Duke and J. Forstman (Missoula: Scholars Press, 1977), p. 42.

³ Schleiermacher, *Hermeneutics*, p. 107.

⁴ Wilhelm Dilthey, *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 7 (Leipzig and Berlin: Teubner, 1927), pp. 213–14; translated in *Selected Writings*, ed. H. P. Rickman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976), pp. 226–27.

⁵ Rudolf Bultmann, “The Problem of Hermeneutics,” in *Essays Philosophical and Theological* (London: SCM, 1955), p. 242; the essay is on pp. 234–61.

⁶ Ernst Fuchs, “The Hermeneutical Problem,” in *The Future of Our Religious Past: Essays in Honour of Rudolf Bultmann*, ed. J. M. Robinson, trans. C. E. Carlston and R. P. Scharlemann (London: SCM, 1971), pp. 267–68; the essay is on pp. 267–78.

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in all universities. It nurtures tolerance, mutual respect, and *reciprocal listening* one to another with patience and integrity.⁷

A fourth benefit probably concerns Christians and biblical hermeneutics, although it also has relevance to wider religious interests. Hermeneutics helps to explain two types of phenomena. On one side hermeneutics shows that “understanding” can be a slow process in which disclosure of the truth can take many years. Understanding is not an on/off event in which we expect belief always to happen suddenly. Some take many years fully to come to faith. Yet it is equally otherwise with others. Some experience understanding dramatically and suddenly, as if scales fell from their eyes. Both means, however, are equally in accord with what it is to understand. To understand understanding helps people to see that both ways of belief are to be expected.⁸

⁷ Emilio Betti, *Allgemeine Auslegungslehre als Methodik der Geisteswissenschaften*, German translation and edition of the Italian (Tübingen: Mohr, 1967), p. 21. As yet, it appears that no full English translation has been made, although this appears to be in progress, and extracts can be found in Josef Bleicher, *Contemporary Hermeneutics: Hermeneutics as Method, Philosophy, and Critique* (London and Boston: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1980), pp. 51–94.

⁸ Thiselton, A. C. (2009). *Hermeneutics: An Introduction* (pp. 5–7). Grand Rapids, MI; Cambridge, U.K.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company.