

Theology on the Web.org.uk

Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

[PayPal](https://paypal.me/robbradshaw)

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

A table of contents for *The Evangelical Quarterly* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_evangelical_quarterly.php

CALVINISM AND INTERPRETATION¹

LET us recall that the genuine Calvinist has always held with Calvin² that, since we are not favoured with daily oracles from heaven, and since it is only in the Scripture that God has been pleased to preserve His truth in perpetual remembrance, it obtains the same complete credit and authority with believers, once they are satisfied of its divine origin, as if they heard the very words pronounced by God Himself. Holy Scripture is, therefore, God's word to us. Here are three factors: the God who speaks, what He speaks, and those to whom He speaks. It is this third factor that involves the problem of interpretation. Some overlook it. The ethical theologians attend exclusively to the *dicta*, and claim for it (ethical) value apart from Him who uttered it; the Barthians emphasise the *Deus loquens* and from this develop their doctrine of revelation; but the Calvinist following Holy Scripture includes the third factor, *the person to whom spoken*, and wrestles successfully as we shall show with the problem of interpretation. The seed, said the Lord, is the word of God, but those who received it into good ground, were those who not merely heard the word, but *understood* it. "Understandest thou what thou readest?" inquired Philip of the Ethiopian. "Be ye not unwise" was the Apostle's exhortation to his Ephesian believers, "but *understand* what the will of the Lord is." The situation we have in mind involves thus three terms, and the problem of interpretation is unavoidable.

You may, however, question my calling interpretation a modern, i.e. a present, problem, because little thought is given to it in Church circles, especially in English-speaking lands. Ten years ago Professor von Dobschütz³ remarked that between 1720 and 1820 there was published well nigh every year a book on interpretation, but since 1880, with the exception of von Hofmann's *Biblischen Hermeneutik*, nothing of note had appeared. And just the other day a student in one of our oldest and best-known American theological schools observed casually, " ' We ' no

¹ The second of five lectures on the L.P. Stone Foundation, Princeton Theological Seminary, 1931, dealing with Calvinism and Modern Problems. A preliminary draft of the first lecture was published in this QUARTERLY, October, 1930, under the title *What is the Religious Object?*

² *Instit.*, 1559, I, ch. 7.

³ Vom Auslegen insonderheit des Neuen Testaments. Rede beim Antritt des Rektorats der Universitäts Halle-Wittenberg, July 12, 1922.

longer pay much attention to exegesis." Why should they, when Holy Scripture is no longer at the centre of the curriculum? But even in the Bible Schools where the Word of God written is still studied with meticulous care, such is the gusto of unfettered understanding that it would almost seem as if Samuel Werenfels' ironical couplet were as true today as when written in Basel two centuries ago :

This is the book where each his doctrine seeks,
And this is the book where each his doctrine finds.

In view of these conditions I should like to interest you in the problem of interpretation and in the Calvinist's solution of it. For although we students of theology may pay scant attention to it, in law and literature, in music and fine art, in logic and ethics and philosophy, it has come increasingly forward in recent years. It is well worth our consideration both for its own sake and for the rich returns even a slight regard for its principles will bring to us.

We shall begin historically, in order to place the Calvinistic view of interpretation where it belongs.¹

In Western culture the problem of interpretation began when men became conscious of the fact that the explanation of literary masterpieces involved some attention to the technique of understanding. Thus in Plato's *Republic* 378e we read that "since the young cannot distinguish between what is allegorical and what is literal, great care must be exercised to keep them from false appearance," where the reference is to the proper interpretation of the poets in teaching. Further, in the so-called Greek "Enlightenment" 450-400 B.C., it seems to have been a cultured amusement to interpret and criticise Homer. The Sophists connected this art with rhetoric and thus furthered a development that culminated in Aristotle's *Rhetoric* and *Poetics*.

It was, however, in Alexandria and Pergamos, beyond the Greek mainland proper, that the art of interpretation made a further advance. In Alexandria, in connection with the famous library, literary remains were collected, recensions of texts were made, a critical system of signs was adopted, spurious writings were excluded, and the rules of the art were brought to full consciousness. The distinctive marks of the Alexandrian school

¹ I have drawn here on W. Dilthey, *Die Entstehung der Hermeneutik*, 1900; Heinrici's article *Hermeneutik* in PRE3, 1899; Schleiermacher's posthumously published treatise on Interpretation, E. Fascher, *Vom Verstehen des Neuen Testaments*, 1930, J. Wach, *Das Verstehen*, I and II, 1929.

were grammar and common sense. The school of Pergamos, on the contrary, felt the necessity of equating the differences between the teachings of the poets regarded as religious documents and contemporary (sceptical) views. This was done by reading into the original texts fanciful meanings based on allegorical exegesis.

Christianity derived the technique of interpretation from these Greek sources, and practised it first in Alexandria and in Antioch. The same difference arose that had formerly divided Alexandria and Pergamos. Only now it was Antioch that stressed grammatical common sense in opposition to the extravagant allegorising of Alexandria.

In our attempt to make clear the subsequent development of the theory of interpretation, let us distinguish the three following well-marked periods :

The allegorical culminating in Thomas Aquinas.

The philological exemplified by the Renaissance.

The psychological initiated by Schleiermacher.

First, then, we shall treat the allegorical tendency. Out of the differences between the Antiochean and the Alexandrian schools came the first *reasoned* theory of interpretation, which may be put roughly as follows. The real author of Scripture is the Holy Spirit. The interpreter therefore must strive to grasp the mind of the Spirit. But when he tries to do so, he finds that many Scriptural statements are bafflingly obscure. For example, how is Zech. ix. 10 to be understood? *And I will cut off the chariot from Ephraim, and the horse from Jerusalem, and the battle bow shall be cut off: and he shall speak peace unto the heathen: and his dominion shall be from sea even to sea, and from the river even to the ends of the earth.* Evidently the meaning of such passages is not on the surface. Consequently the interpreter must seek deeper. He must treat the literal sense as the body, and the moral sense as the soul, and the "pneumatic" sense as the spirit. This last is the meaning intended for the "perfect." As said Paul in 1 Cor. ii. 6f, *We speak wisdom among them that are perfect: yet not the wisdom of this world, nor of the princes of this world, that come to nought: but we speak the wisdom of God in a mystery, even the hidden wisdom, which God ordained before the world unto our glory.*

This theory was exemplified by Origen (*d.* 254?). If, as Christians believe, the Holy Spirit is the author of Scripture,

then the Scripture must contain only what is worthy of the Holy Spirit. This worthy content or meaning is to be gotten in five ways, described by adverbs which we may translate by: mystically, tropically, typically, anagogically, cryptically.

It should be readily understood how useful this theory of interpretation was in establishing Scripturally the dogmatic position of the Church. But even those who availed themselves of it could not but recognise its danger of extreme subjectivism. A corrective was needed, and this was furnished by Tertullian, Irenæus and Cyprian, who applied to Biblical interpretation the principle used in legal practice of combining with a law its authorised interpretations. The ecclesiastical analogy of the latter was tradition, and thus a limit was put to the license of the expositors.

It would seem as if the work of the school of Antioch was entirely lost. But this is not quite true, because its sober and common sense grammatical methods had some influence on Chrysostom and Athanasius in the east and Ambrose and Augustine in the west. Yet even when the theory was grasped, it was not applied, as witness Gregory of Nyssa (*d.* 394), who in his *Hexaemeron* enumerates the fundamentals of grammatical interpretation only immediately to disregard them. Augustine (*d.* 430) also, who in Confess. xii. 32-33 writes: *even if the man who wrote them did not perceive all the truths which his words contained, yet the Spirit who guided him intended them all to be conveyed. Therefore the interpreter must pray to be guided in choosing one interpretation, whether that of the author—at which he will chiefly aim—or such other as the Divine Truth may reveal to him.*

The Middle Ages worked out the legal analogy mentioned above to its logical conclusion. Vincent of Lerins (*d.* 450) held that our faith as Christians rests on two pillars, Holy Scripture and the traditions of the Catholic Church. Theoretically the former might suffice us, but practically individual interpretation is dangerously arbitrary. A norm is necessary and this is supplied by tradition. If you ask for a norm of tradition, you will find it in *quod semper ubique et ab omnibus*. Of course no tradition has ever been held always, everywhere, and by all, and this has been urged against Vincent. But he was not so stupid as his critics seem to think him. He was stating not a fact but an ideal or limiting concept to enable us to judge of tradition and to make

our Scriptural interpretations conform to it. But a much keener mind than Vincent's now took up the theory and gave it its final formulation.

In the *Summa Theol.* I, art. 10, Thomas Aquinas wrote, *The Author of Sacred Scripture is God, in whose power it is, not only to fit words for signifying, which man may also do, but things themselves.* From this principle follows the rule of interpretation: *And therefore since in all the sciences words signify, this science has this property, that the things themselves signified by the words also signify something. Therefore the first signification by which the words signify the things, belongs to the first sense, which is the historical or literal. But that signification, by which the things signified by the words again signify other things, is called the spiritual sense, which is founded upon the literal and supposes it.* This procedure is embodied in the following *vox memorialis* :

*Littera gesta docet, quid credas, allegoria :
Moralis, quid agas ; quid speres, anagogia.*

Or to cite an example, Jerusalem means literally a city in Palestine; allegorically it means the Church; morally, a well-ordered state; anagogically, eternal life. Thus in Thomas the long centuries of interpretational development begun in Alexandria reached their logical perfection. The allegorical method could advance no further. A fresh start was therefore necessary.

This was made by the philologists of the Renaissance. They were aware that many centuries separated them from classical and Christian antiquity, and that consequently there was need of a fresh interpretation for a new age. A rich literature on method soon arose. The interpretative technique as applied to the classics was termed *ars critica*, as applied to the Bible, *hermeneutics*, a name which in usage denoted the science, the art of which was exegesis.

Let us consider as example of the new movement Matthias Flacius (*d.* 1575), whose *Clavis Scripturæ Sacræ*, 1567, was the first and most thorough going treatise on the new method written by the Reformers. He found the foe on two fronts. The Anabaptists with their fresh explanatory revelations tended to make any reasoned hermeneutics superfluous; the Romanists with their church traditions would make it unnecessary. Against both adversaries Flacius held to the authority and perfection of the Word of God written. He assumed that a universally valid

understanding of the Scripture is attainable if our interpretation is (1) in accord with universal Christian experience, (2) in accord with universal human reason, and (3) in accord with grammar and rhetoric. This last rule was original with him, and really meant that the part is to be considered a function of the whole, as in grammar we study the "parts" of speech, and in rhetoric the "topics" of discourse. Implicit in the view of Flacius is the assumption that each Scripture writing was composed according to "rules" and that its meaning can be unfolded by a due attention to these rules. But succeeding thinkers on our theme were not so firmly convinced of this as was Flacius.

Almost two centuries passed and philological knowledge increased enormously. Then S. J. Baumgartner (*d.* 1757) of Halle turned from the "written" to the writer, and advised those who would get at Scripture's meaning to interpret with a view to speech usage and historical circumstances. This epoch-making demand definitely freed interpretation from dogmatic traditions, and placed on a secure footing the so-called grammatical historical school of exegesis. A less profound thinker, but a more elegant person both in manners and diction, J. A. Ernesti (*d.* 1781) in his *Institutio interpretis Ni. Ti.* 1761, made the new emphasis fashionable, and it became the accepted method in all scholarly circles, in opposition to the practice of those who, as Ernesti expressed it, in spite of an appearance of reverence for the word of God, interpolate into Scripture their own fanatical barbarisms, and turn interpretation into an art of dreaming and playing.

It would seem as if in the grammatical historical method interpretation had reached its final formulation, and that henceforth there was nothing more to do save to accumulate and apply to exegetical practice all possible philological lore. But the fertile brain of Schleiermacher (*d.* 1834) conceived the possibility of a new departure. It was in the autumn of 1804 in lectures at Halle (published as *Hermeneutik* etc. by one of his pupils four years after the master's death) that he unfolded his view. All literary interpretation implies a common understanding between the writer and those to whom or for whom he writes. These two are not to be taken as two incommensurables, for both share the human nature which makes possible a common speech and a common understanding. The mind that understands the symbols is analogous to the mind that produced them. It may be

objected that individual differences make the process of correct interpretation difficult. But these differences are not qualitative but quantitative. Hence the interpreter by strengthening this or that quality in himself, can evoke an imitation of the author's life process and thus achieve the sympathy which is the mother of mutual understanding.

Let us grasp the novelty of this view. Previous theorists had been aware of a "making" power in the author of literary works, but they had conceived it as logical and rhetorical. Schleiermacher thought of it as wider—the full rounded power of an individual. Of course the process of expression has its "logical" side, not in the traditional Scholastic sense, but in the new idealistic sense of an "idea" that unfolds itself in symbols, grammatically and historically conditioned to be sure, but yet expressive of an individual whole, in the light of which the interpreter must read them. At this point enters the difficulty of the method. The whole is to be understood from its parts and the parts from the whole, just the central obscurity of the philosophy which Schleiermacher professed. Practically he attempted to overcome it as in his introduction to Plato's Republic, where like a rapid reader he outlines the entire work, and then proceeds to the interpretation of the details. But although this method, since Schleiermacher, has been applied in hundreds of school-texts of literary works, and although it is reasonably successful, yet as Dilthey sententiously remarks, the truth is that no interpretation can ever grasp its object completely, for *Individuum est ineffabile*, and this is true both of the personal source and its expressions.

Since Schleiermacher no *new* theory of interpretation has arisen. The three mentioned continue in varying *nuances* and combinations. The allegorical emphasis may be noted in Roman Catholic commentaries, in the output of the so-called "Bible" Schools, and in the ordinary sermon. In the *New Commentary on Holy Scripture*, 1928, edited by Gore, Goudge and Guillaume, there is a section written by the Principal of Pusey House, Oxford, on *The Mystical Interpretation of the Old Testament*, with an appended note by Dr. Charles Harris, in which, while it is acknowledged that the entire method of mystical (allegorical) interpretation is alien and repellent to the modern mind, it is yet contended that it requires more consideration than it has recently received. But those who make what

they term the "modern" scientific approach to the Scriptures will have none of the allegorical or mystical method. They cultivate exclusively the Historical-Grammatical-Critical approach. This philological view has been developed in many directions. The Tübingen school made use of the Hegelian schemata; the Christian Literature school argue that no Christian text is understandable unless set in the context of contemporary non-Christian literature; the Comparative Religions school contend that no Christian text is comprehensible apart from the environing non-Christian religions; the "Language of the People" school maintain that the key to unlock the door that admits to the real meaning of the New Testament is the "Common" Greek in which the authors wrote; the "Form-historical" school would have us study closely the literary *genre* of each Scriptural document; the "Jewish" school would subject all our interpretations to the control of Rabbinic literature; the "sociological" exponents of the Bible are untiringly zealous in persuading us that no statement of Scripture is really clear until close attention is given to the social and economic condition both of the speaker and of the hearer. The Psychological method has never been adequately developed, and indeed has been regarded with contempt by the dominant philological school, and with suspicion by the allegorisers.

In this bewildering variety of hermeneutic theories what place is there for Calvinistic interpretation? Let us recall that the Calvinist has never been in favour of the allegorical or mystical way of explaining Scripture. His conviction is that "the true and full sense of any scripture . . . is not manifold, but one." What this *one* sense is we shall presently explain. Let us note also that the evangelically minded Christian with no wish to be obscurant is dubious concerning any philological method that results, as unquestionably much of the historical-grammatical-critical exegesis does, in alienating its students from the documents upon which repose the faith and practice of the Christian Church. Some of the partisans of this method admit the fact. So Holtzmann in his *New Testament Theologie*, 1911, *It is no longer possible for us as it was for the fathers to make the New Testament world of thought without abbreviation and immediately a decisive part of our present thought concerning God and the world.* Others vehemently deny it, asserting that the modern "scientific" approach to the Bible

has strengthened their faith. But the evidence is against them. Holy Scripture is not as it once was, at the centre of the life of the Protestant Church; it has been displaced towards the periphery and superseded by other interests: social, moral, æsthetic, literary, institutional, etc. Hence the waning interest in exegesis; the feeble position of the original languages of Scripture; and the declension of the modern use of the Bible to the level of a storehouse of "mottoes" for moralisers, and "sentiments" for sentimentalists. It is no longer for multitudes of our contemporaries *the living voice of the living God to those in need of saving from their sins.*

But this is exactly what it has always been for the convinced Calvinist, and this assurance has ever been normative for his interpretation. Can he still maintain his persuasion? I am sure that he can, and in support of my contention I ask you to consider carefully the following argument.

He who interprets must deal with meanings. We should therefore attempt an analysis of a typical meaning situation. At once two questions propose themselves for answer: What are the *psychological* conditions of meaning, and what are the *logical* conditions?

Meaning is a current psychological topic treated at some length by the average text-book.¹ The psychologists have many interesting things to say concerning the correlations of meaning as a conscious state or form of behaviour with the physiological apparatus of nerve, gland and muscle, and with other conscious states, but little that bears directly on the solution of our problem. For our interest here is not in the physiological conditions of the apprehension of meanings, but in the situation which is the end result of apprehension. We therefore turn to the logical conditions.

From the logical viewpoint meaning is a function of a three-term relation: a speaker, what he says, and a hearer, as already remarked in the opening paragraph of this lecture. This relation has a direction indicated by the order in which I have expressed it, and this direction cannot be changed without destroying the relation. Note again that meaning as an abstractable quality

¹ Cf. E. B. Titchener, *A Text Book of Psychology*, 1910, pp. 367ff; M. Bentley, *The Field of Psychology*, 1924, pp. 192ff; A. I. Gates, *Elementary Psychology*, 1928 *passim*; W. B. Pillsbury, *Essentials of Psychology*, 3rd ed., 1930, p. 289. See also Ogden and Richards, *The Meaning of Meaning*, 1923, where, much to the authors' merriment fifteen incorrect meanings of meaning are contrasted with one correct meaning. W. D. Ellis, *Gestalt Psychology and Meaning*, 1930, is a somewhat *bizarre* exposition of Gestalt psychology under one caption.

belongs to the triad and therefore, as it has been well said, to ask which member is primarily possessed of it is like asking to which tone in a chord the harmony belongs.¹

If this analysis of the meaning situation is accepted, it follows that no interpretation can be satisfactory unless all three of the terms in the relation are duly attended to. The allegorisers concentrate on the speaker and what he says, and assuming a multitude of intentions in the speaker attempt to puzzle these out in all sorts of fantastic ways. The philologists concentrate on what is said, and use the speaker merely as human environment, and ordinarily ignore the hearer entirely, thinking of the meaning situation as logically a two-term relation, which it cannot be as our analysis indicates. Schleiermacher's insight led him to include the third factor, but his peculiar philosophy prevented his developing a full orb'd interpretational universe. But the merit of the Calvinistic view of interpretation is that it includes all the terms of the relation in their proper order and with due emphasis. The ultimate speaker is not man but the ever-living God; what is said is not myth nor saga nor folk lore, not story and precept of mere antiquarian interest, but a living word concerning man's salvation from sin; and the hearer is not only this or that known or unknown worthy of years gone by to whom first the "Word of the Lord" came, but *each* human being who actually reads or hears this ever-living word. The Calvinist therefore cannot interpret the Scripture and leave the *existential* hearer out of the count. He cannot lose himself in knowledge *about* Scripture, although he must never despise erudition. But apart from the living God who speaks and the living hearer who listens, all bare knowledge *about* is just so much dead matter cumbering our struggles forward into the clear light of genuine understanding.

Let me now exemplify from Calvin himself the actual, even if unconscious, practice of these principles.² It is generally agreed that his talent for exegesis was so great that he is rightfully entitled to the term genius. Ludwig Diestel asserted that Calvin was the creator of genuine exegesis. Reuss, the chief editor of Calvin's works, says that he was beyond question the greatest exegete of the sixteenth century, and Schaff adds his

¹ This is interestingly explained in J. Royce, *The Problem of Christianity*, 1913, Vol. II, pp. 117-152, *The Nature of Interpretation*; and in S. K. Langer, *The Practice of Philosophy*, 1930, Part II, *Meaning*.

² Cf. Phil. Schaff, *Presbyterian and Reformed*, Vol. III, 1892, pp. 462ff.

tribute that while Luther is the king of translators, Calvin is the king of commentators. We should recall, moreover, that the age of Calvin was one of translation and interpretation, and that he himself had all the linguistic background for his task that the time afforded. He knew, of course, French, his native tongue, and was able to use it with such distinction that he is counted one of the formative stylists of French literature; Latin, the learned tongue of his day, he employed with great facility in both speaking and writing; he had been instructed in Greek by Melchior Wolmar of Bourges, one of the foremost humanists of the century, and in Hebrew by Simon Grynaeus of Basel, an accomplished scholar. He had read the ancient classics, as is proved by the imposing list of references to them in his works, and he was familiar with the patristic and mediæval commentators on Scripture. His textual apparatus both in the Hebrew Old Testament and in the Greek New Testament was the best that the period of linguistic research in which he lived could afford,¹ although, of course, there was not as yet any collection of MSS. readings, ancient versions and quotations such as the present-day scholar has before him, and therefore anything like contemporary literary criticism is absent from all the commentaries of the Reformation period.

In Calvin's first commentary, that on Romans, published at Strassburg in 1539, and dedicated to Simon Grynaeus, his Hebrew teacher, he recalls in the preface a friendly conversation had three years previously on the best method of expounding Scripture. He declares that lucid brevity is most pleasing to him, and that he aimed at discreet and sober exposition. It would be sacrilege to turn Scripture any way that pleases the interpreter, and to indulge personal whimsies as in jocose playing. He acknowledges the existence of variant interpretations, but explains them by incomplete knowledge, because "God has never favoured His servants with so great a benefit, that they were all endued with a full and perfect knowledge in anything." This fact of Providence, he explains in the characteristic manner of a day that asked why and not how, as due to God's purpose,

¹ The Hebrew texts available were the following: The Hebrew Bible issued at Venice by Daniel Bomberg, d. 1549, the Dutch printer; the *Biblia Polyglotta Complutensia*, printed at Alcalá, 1514-1517, containing the Hebrew Text, the Greek LXX., the Latin Vulgate, and a Hebrew vocabulary; the Hebrew Bibles of Sebastian Münster, issued at Basel in 1536, and of Robert Stephens, printed at Paris, 1539-1546. For the New Testament the following are available: Erasmus's fifth edition printed at Basel between 1516 and 1535; the Complutensian Polyglot issued in 1520; the New Testament of Colinaeus published at Paris in 1534; and that of Stephens put into circulation from Paris and Geneva between 1546 and 1551.

first, to keep us humble, and second, to make us disposed to cultivate brotherly intercourse.

Space will not allow me to illustrate further from the other commentaries of Calvin. Suffice it to summarise in the following three propositions, which I am sure form an accurate characterisation of the exegetical attitude of the reformer of Geneva and the school of scriptural interpretation he founded: First, Holy Scripture is fundamentally the word of the living God through His chosen messengers, and thus in all our handling of it, we must treat it with due reverence.¹ Second, what God says in the Bible has to do with His saving purpose. It therefore has meaning, and this meaning can be grasped by anyone who cares to put himself into the attitude of an attentive and submissive hearer; Third, the Bible is not only for those to whom it came first, but for the chosen of God in all ages. Hence the exegete must never forget that it is for him and through him for his fellow believers.

Thus I argue that Calvin recognised implicitly that meaning is a three-term relation, and that the interpreter must attend to this fact. But our trouble in Biblical exegesis is that so many forget this, with the result that Robert Browning describes in his Master Hughes of Saxe-Gotha:

So we o'ershroud stars and roses,
 Cherub and trophy and garland;
 Nothings grow something which quietly closes
 Heaven's earnest eye: not a glimpse of the far land
 Gets through our comments and glozes.

If your verdict upon the argument is favourable, you will perhaps follow me in one other assertion: *Holy Scripture is everything that it is.* We as interpreters must grasp what it is, and there is no better method than that of the Psalmist who wrote (Psalm lxxxv. 8): *I will hear what God the Lord will speak: for he will speak peace unto his people and to his saints.* . . .

GEORGE JOHNSON.

Lincoln University, Pa.

¹ This does not mean, as some misinterpret it, that the Bible is to be dealt with as the primitive deals with his fetish. It simply means that reverence is to be the keynote of our treatment of *all* created things, the Bible included.