



THE VIRGIN OF THE WORLD

HERMES
TRISMEGISTUS

The Virgin of the World

Hermes Trismegistus

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Hermeneutics

By Anthony J. Maas

Derived from a Greek word connected with the name of the god Hermes, the reputed messenger and interpreter of the gods. It would be wrong to infer from this that the word denotes the interpretation or exegesis of Sacred Scripture. Usage has restricted the meaning of hermeneutics to the science of Biblical exegesis, that is, to the collection of rules which govern the right interpretation of Sacred Scripture. Exegesis is therefore related to hermeneutics, as language is to grammar, or as reasoning is to logic. Men spoke and reasoned before there was any grammar or logic; but it is very difficult to speak correctly and reason rightly at all times and under any circumstances without a knowledge of grammar and logic. In the same way our early Christian writers explained Sacred Scripture—as it is interpreted in particular cases even in our days by students of extraordinary talent—without relying on any formal

principles of hermeneutics, but such explanations, if correct, will always be in accordance with the canons of our present-day science of exegesis.

I. NECESSITY OF HERMENEUTICS

The reader must not infer from what has been said that hermeneutics is a mere accomplishment in the Biblical exegete, that its knowledge is not necessary for the Bible student. It is true that in the early Church the science of exegesis was not developed; but it must be remembered that the so-called sacred languages were the vernacular tongues of the Syrian and Greek writers, who were familiar with what are to us Biblical antiquities, and who were also imbued with the early oral traditions containing the true explanation of the many difficult passages of Sacred Scripture. As soon as these natural aids of the Christian interpreter began to wane, the principles of hermeneutics began to develop. Even at the time of St. Augustine they were collected into a single book, so that they could be made known and put into practice without much difficulty. Anyone acquainted with the variety of opinion concerning the meaning of some of the most important passages of the Bible will wonder rather at the suggestion of explaining Scripture without the aid of hermeneutics, than at the claim for its urgent necessity. Nor can it be said that the variety of exegetical results on the part of writers well-versed in the principles of scientific interpretation shows the uselessness of hermeneutics in the explanation of Sacred Scripture. No scientific principles have ever done away with all disagreement of scientists in any branch of knowledge; besides, in the case of Scripture, hermeneutics has diminished the number of the opinions of interpreters by eliminating the views not supported by any solid scientific principle. Such principles are even more

necessary for the Biblical interpreter than a study of logic is for the thinker; for while the laws of thought are based on an inborn tendency of the mind, the rules of hermeneutics rest to a great extent on facts external to the mind. And the results flowing from the application of the principles of hermeneutics are not less important than those derived by means of the formal laws of logic, since the controversies between Jews and Christians, between Christians and Rationalists, between Catholics and Protestants, are in the end brought back to hermeneutic questions.

II. LIMITS OF HERMENEUTICS

Though the influence of hermeneutics is so far-reaching, its efficiency must not be overestimated. Hermeneutics does not supply a deficiency of natural ability, nor does it rectify false philosophical principles or perverse passions, nor again does it impart the needed philological and historical erudition. Secondly, of itself hermeneutics does not investigate the objective truth of a writer's meaning, which has been established by its canons; it does not inquire what is true or false, but only what the writer intended to say. Hence a hermeneutic truth may be an objective falsehood, unless the writing subjected to the hermeneutic rules be endowed with the prerogative of inerrancy. Thirdly, hermeneutics does not inquire into the authenticity of a writing, nor into the genuineness of its text, nor again into its special character—for instance, whether it be of a sacred or profane nature. Biblical hermeneutics presupposes, therefore, a knowledge of the history of the Canon of both the Old and the New Testament, an acquaintance with the results of the lower or textual criticism, and a study of the dogmatic treatise on inspiration. The number of limitations of hermeneutics will

not render the reader impatience, if he keeps in mind that he bears with the limits which circumscribe the field of other branches of learning; no one blames grammar, for instance, because it does not confer any special linguistic aptitude on the grammarian, or because it does not improve the melody or the syntactical structure of the language.

III. OBJECT OF HERMENEUTICS

After removing what is foreign to hermeneutics, we are enabled to understand its proper object more thoroughly. Its material object is the book or writing which is to be explained; its formal object is concerned with the sense expressed by the author of the book in question. Thus, Biblical hermeneutics deals with Sacred Scripture as its material object, furnishing a complex set of rules for finding and expressing the true sense of the inspired writers, while the discovery and presentation of the genuine sense of Sacred Scripture may be said to be its formal object.

IV. DIVISION OF HERMENEUTICS

The most direct and simple method of determining the meaning of an author consists in the latter's statement of the sense he intended to convey. Such a statement, whether it proceed from the author himself or from another person who has certain knowledge of the author's mind, is called an authentic interpretation. The legal interpretation differs from the authentic in that it proceeds, not from the lawgiver himself but from his successor, or from this equal in legislative power or from the supreme legal authority. The scientific interpretation differs from both the authentic

and the legal; its value is not derived from authority, but from the trustworthiness and the learning of the commentator, from the weight of his arguments, and from his faithful adherence to the rules of hermeneutics. Authority as such does not enter into the field of general hermeneutics. The rules of hermeneutics, thus circumscribed, may be either of universal or particular application, that is, they may be valid for the right explanation of any book or writing, or they may be adapted for a particular class of books, e. g., Sacred Scripture or canon law. Biblical hermeneutics belongs to this second class, not because the universal rules of exegesis are inapplicable to the Sacred Books, but because the sacred character of the Bible demands additional rules of interpretation, which are not applicable to profane writings. Finally, Biblical hermeneutics is either general or special, according to the character of the exegetical rules it contains: it is general if its rules are applicable to the whole Bible; it is special if they are intended for the explanation of particular books only, e.g., the Psalms or the Pauline Epistles. But, as in logic the species contains all the essential notes of the genus, so does special hermeneutics contain all the exegetical rules of general hermeneutics, and so does particular hermeneutics embrace all the laws of interpretation imposed by universal hermeneutics.

V. FIRST PRINCIPLE IN HERMENEUTICS

Since the more special hermeneutical laws do not contradict the more general laws, but only determine them more accurately in order to adapt them to the particular writings which they are to explain, it ought to be possible to determine the first and highest principle or law of hermeneutics, from which all the special exegetical rules are derived. The reader will remember that such first

principles exist in other sciences, too; in logic, for instance, and in ethics, we have the principle of contradiction and the principle of doing good respectively. Returning to hermeneutics, thought must be derived from language according to the same law which regulates the expression of thought in language, the process alone being inverted. In this respect language in general does not differ from a cipher message which must be read according to the code in which it was written. Now a writer commonly uses the code of his day and of his own peculiar circumstances; he employs language in accordance with its peculiar usages and its rules of grammar; he follows in the expression of his thoughts the sequence of logic, and his words reflect his mental as well as his physical and social conditions. If the interpreter wishes to fully understand the writer, he must be guided by these quasi-criteria of the author's meaning: his language, his train of thought or the context, and his psychological and historical condition at the time of writing. Hence flows the first and highest principle of hermeneutics: Find the sense of a book by way of its language (grammatically and philologically), by way of the rules of logic (from the context), and by way of the writer's mental and external condition. Expressing the same truth negatively, we may say that any meaning of a passage which does not agree with its grammar, its context, and the internal and external conditions of its author, cannot be the true sense of the writer. In the case of Scripture, the fact of its inspiration and of its authentic interpretation by the Church must be added to the three common criteria of interpretation; hence any meaning not in keeping with Scriptural grammar, context, or the concrete conditions of the Biblical writers, or not in harmony with the fact of inspiration and the spirit of the Church's interpretation, cannot be the true sense of Scripture. Regard to only the first three of these criteria renders the exegesis rationalistic; observance of the first four is a recognition of

the specific Christian doctrine of Biblical inspiration; but it is only the conjunction of the fifth with the other four that gives birth to true Catholic exegesis without destroying the rational and simply Christian character of the interpretation.

VI. SOURCES OF HERMENEUTIC PRINCIPLES

The foregoing remarks reveal the sources from which hermeneutics derives its secondary principles. It presupposes a grammatical and philological knowledge of the language in which the work is written, an acquaintance with the laws of logic and rhetoric, and a familiarity with the data of psychology and the facts of history. These are the sources of the rules of universal hermeneutics; in the case of the Sacred Scriptures, the scientific interpreter must be well-grounded in the so-called Sacred or Biblical language; he must be well-versed in Biblical history, archaeology, and geography; he should know the various Christian dogmas bearing on the Bible and their history; finally he must be instructed in patrology, ecclesiastical history, and Biblical literature. Before entering on the explanation of any particular book of Scripture, the commentator must also be versed in the dogmatic, moral, philosophical, and scientific questions connected with his particular subject. In the light of these many requirements, one easily understands why it is so hard to find commentaries which are fully satisfactory, and one also realized the need of reading several commentaries before one can claim fully to understand the Scriptures or any part thereof.

VII. HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT OF HERMENEUTICS

Seeing the importance of Biblical hermeneutics, it may seem a matter for surprise that this branch of study was not developed earlier. But the history of every science shows that practice precedes theory. Language, for instance, had been in use for many generations before systematic grammars were written, health had been the object of care for centuries before the growth of the science of medicine. In a similar way, the books of Sacred Scripture were read and explained by means of what may be called natural hermeneutics before the science of exegesis was thought of. Deut., xvii, 8-12, 18; xxi, 5; xxxi, 9-13, 24-26, may be regarded as containing at least implied testimony in favour of the practice of exegesis, though it is impossible to determine the hermeneutical laws then in force.

A. Jewish Development

Not long after the days of Christ, R. Hillel set forth seven hermeneutic rules (*middoth*), among which are found the inference from the greater to the less, from the general to the particular, from the context, and from parallel passages. At the beginning of the second century R. Yishma 'el ben Elisha' increased the number of Hillel's rules to thirteen, treating among other questions the way of harmonizing contradictory passages. About the middle of the second century R. Eli'ezer derived thirty-two hermeneutic rules from the then prevailing method of interpretation, and these are still to be found in the editions of the Talmud after the treatise "Berakhoth". In the Middle Ages Aben Ezra and Maimonides explained certain hermeneutic rules, but no rabbinic writer has written *ex professo* any complete treatise on Biblical hermeneutics.

Christian Development

The First Three Centuries

Among the earliest Christians, too, the Scriptures were read and explained without the guidance of any acknowledged rules of hermeneutics. We may infer from the sayings of the Fathers that tradition and the analogy of faith were the sovereign laws of the early Christian interpreters. In the second century Melito of Sardis composed a hermeneutic treatise, entitled "The Key", in which he explained the Biblical tropes. The Fathers of the third and fourth centuries suggested many rules of interpretation without collecting them into any distinct work. Besides Tertullian and Clement of Alexandria, Origen proposed and defended against Jews and heretics his rules of exegesis in his work "De principiis", lib. IV; Diodorus of Tarsus (d. before 394) wrote on the difference between type and allegory, but his work "Quomodo differt theoria ab allegoriâ" had been lost; St. John Chrysostom urges the commentator to study the context, the author, the readers, the intention of the speaker, the occasion, place, time, and manner of writing (Hom. in Jer. x, 33; Hom. xv in Joan.) St. Jerome, too, has left many hints on the proper method of interpretation ("Ep. ad Pammach."; "De optimo genere interpretandi"; "Lib. quaest. Hebr. in Gen."; "De nominibus et loc. Hebr."; "Praef. in 12 prophet."; "In quat. evang.", etc.).

From the Fourth to the Fourteenth Century

About A. D. 390 the Donatist Tychonius published a work entitled "Septem regulae ad inquirendum et inveniendum sensum S. Scripturae", which was both incomplete and infected with error; it was on this account that St.

Augustine (d. 430) wrote his work "De doctrinâ Christianâ libri quatuor", in which he treated the rules of interpretation more satisfactorily than had ever been done before his time. Hermeneutic principles may be found scattered also in other works of the great African Doctor,, e. g., in his "De Genes.", his "Exposit. Psalm.", and his "De civit. Dei". Isidore of Pelusium (d. about 440-450) left letters explaining the hermeneutic principles of the School of Antioch, and also a work entitled "De interpretatione divinae scripturae". To Eucherius of Lyons (d. about 450) we are indebted for two hermeneutic works, "Formularum spiritualis intelligentiae ad Uranium liber unus: and "Instructionum ad Salonium filium libri duo". In the fifth century, too, or at the beginning of the sixth, the monk Adrian explained the figurative expressions of Sacred Scripture, especially of the Old Testament, according to the principles of the School of Antioch in a work entitled "Introductio ad divinas scripturas". About the middle of the sixth century Junilius Africanus wrote his celebrated letter to Primasius, "De partibus divinae legis" in which he expounds the rules of Biblical interpretation, as he received them from an adherent of the School of Edessa. About the same time M. Aurelius Cassiodorus (d. about 565-75) wrote, among other works. "De institutione divinarum litterarum", "De artibus et disciplinis liberalium litterarum", and "De schematibus et tropis".

To the Council of Trent

Though we meet with fewer complete hermeneutic works during the period of the Middle Ages, still we have copious exegetical rules in the commentaries and introductions of St. Venerable Bede, Alcuin, Rabanus Maurus, Hugh of St. Victor, and especially St. Thomas (Summ. theol., I, Q. i, n. 9 sq.). There were several special reasons which led to the promotion of Biblical and hermeneutical studies in the

fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. The Council of Vienne (1311) ordained that chairs of Oriental languages were to be erected in the universities; the humanistic studies began to flourish anew and reacted favourably on the pursuit of Biblical languages; the discovery of the art of printing (1440-1450) facilitated the spread of the Scriptures; the taking of Constantinople by the Turks (1453) occasioned the westward emigration of numerous learned Greeks, who carried with them their literary treasures as well as their learning and artistic skill. It was during this period, too, that Nicolaus Lyranus (d. 1340) wrote his works, "Tractatus de differentiâ nostrae translationis ab Hebr. litterâ and "Liber differentiarum V. et N. Testamenti", and John Gerson (d. 1429) produced his hermeneutic treatise entitled "Propositiones de sensu litterali Scripturae Sacrae", in which he considers the various kinds of Scriptural sense, and expresses his preference for the literal sense to be determined according to the teaching of tradition and the pronouncements of the Church. In the sixteenth-century the so-called Reformers began with regarding the analogy of faith and the symbols as the criteria of Biblical exegesis, but in the end they had to fall back on the rules of Christian and even rationalistic hermeneutics, so that they naturally prepared the way for the Biblical rationalism of the eighteenth century. The Catholic hermeneutic literature also grew during these centuries, partly owing to the rivalry between Catholic and Protestant scholars. As this tended to enlarge the hermeneutic works, clearness and thoroughness demanded the separation from hermeneutics of critical, historical, and dogmatic questions, and the development and solid proof of the strictly hermeneutic principles.

VIII. RELATIONS OF HERMENEUTICS TO THE OTHER BRANCHES OF SACRED STUDY

It may be of interest to consider the relation in which hermeneutics, thus reduced to its own specific limits, stands to the other branches of Scriptural studies. Needless to say, the first step in the scientific study of the Bible consists in acquainting oneself with the foundation and the extent of the human and Divine authority with which the Scripture is endowed; the so-called historico-critical introduction to Sacred Scripture teaches us all this. The second step leads us to the key for the right understanding of this doubly authoritative collection of books, that is, to the study of hermeneutics proper. The final stage of Bible study is exegesis, which opens to us the innermost treasures of the inspired writings. All this would be very simple and clear, if the second stage did not demand the additional knowledge: sacred philology, history, and sacred archaeology. It would be quite impossible to apply the rules of hermeneutics without possessing this knowledge. Finally, those who arrange theological studies systematically place philosophy and Bible study, together with ecclesiastical history and patrology, among the preambles preparing us for theoretic theology (fundamental, dogmatic, and apologetic), practical theology (moral), pastoral theology, and canon law.

IX. CONTENTS OF HERMENEUTICS

After considering hermeneutics in relation to its cognate branches of study, we may return to a more accurate scrutiny of its own contents. We have seen that the science of interpretation has for its formal object the discovery and the presentation of the sense of Sacred Scripture. Starting from this fact, we may infer that

- a complete treatise of hermeneutics ought to treat first of the sense of Scripture in general;
- it must lay down definite rules for finding this sense;
- it must teach us how to present this sense to others.

These three questions have been fully explained in the article EXEGESIS, so that it is unnecessary to repeat their respective developments here. It will be useful, however, for the reader to have before his eyes a summary of the principal points treated in that article.

X. SUMMARY OF HERMENEUTIC PRINCIPLES

(1) The writer begins by dividing the genuine sense of Sacred Scripture like so:

- the literal sense
 - its nature
 - its division
 - its ubiquity
 - its unity and multiplicity
- The two kinds of a so-called sense of Scripture which at best bear only an analogy to the real Biblical sense:
 - the derivative or consequent sense, and
 - Biblical accommodation.
- the typical sense.
 - its nature
 - its divisions