CHAPTER 7

HISTORICAL SCHOOLS OF HERMENEUTICS

Milton S. Terry, *Biblical Hermeneutics*, Part 3, pp. 601-738

Frederick W. Farrar, *History of Interpretation* (1886)

The Cambridge History of the Bible (various authors; 1963-70; 3 vols.)

The standard hermeneutics books have discussions; Bernard Ramm, *Protestant Biblical Interpretation*, is especially good; pp. 23-84.

Trends of error

The history of exegesis is quite complex, with each historical period containing many conflicting methods. However, in each major period there have been certain trends and established methods which later were considered misled. In this chapter we will examine the major trends, in the approximate chronological order in which they predominated or reached their zenith of popularity in the church. These trends are as follows:

1. Allegorizing away the natural sense

2. Equating traditional interpretations with Scripture itself

3. Unbelief: rejecting the natural sense

4. Subjectivism: judging every interpretation by current historical needs or philosophical outlooks

Afterwards, we will look at the literal school of interpretation.

The allegorical schools

Definitions

Allegory—an extended metaphor (an implied comparison)

Allegorical interpretation—treating material which is not evidently an allegory as though it were an allegory; giving a new, often arbitrary meaning to a text without sufficient basis; "spiritualizing"

Greek allegorism

The Greek gods were coming into disrepute. Allegorical interpretation of their histories made them into religious myths, which had spiritual value.

Often allegorism was employed by the Stoics as they interpreted the myths of ancient Greece and her gods. They extracted spiritual meanings from these stories which were compatible with the Stoical "four-fold remedy" for life:

1. Don't fear the gods (they don't exist)
2. Don't fear death (it is painless)
3. Don't fear pain (it is short)
4. Don't fear man (he can inflict only pain or death)

Jewish allegorism

[See Richard Longenecker, *Biblical Exegesis in the Apostolic Period*, ch. 1; also G. Vermes, "Bible and Midrash: Early OT Exegesis," in the *Cambridge History of the Bible* 1:199-231]

Rabbinical exegesis

Occasionally the Jewish expositors of Palestine engaged in this sort of interpretation of the OT (especially with the Song of Songs).

Examples can be found in Alfred Edersheim, *The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah* 1, ch. 2-3, although he distinguishes the quality of the allegorism from that of the Hellenists (cf. Vol. 2, App. 9).

In general the Palestinian Jews were more normal in their exegetical methodology. See for example the basically sensible rules of interpretation taught by Hillel (enumerated by Berkhof *PBI*, 15-16).

Philo

(20 B.C. – A.D. 54)

Philo was the supreme example of Jewish Hellenistic culture and allegorism. Philo developed allegorism into a system. It was his desire to synthesize the OT with the prevailing Greek philosophy; by using allegorism in the OT, he was able to remove many of the objections people had to accepting its statements.

Several of the hermeneutical rules of Philo are quoted in Farrar, *History of Interpretation*, 149-152.

Christian allegorism

The earliest Christian writers seem to have taken a more literal view of Scripture, but several famous fathers developed allegorism as a Christian system, and thus led the way for the standard Roman Catholic interpretations of the Middle Ages.

Christian writers had a double motive for allegorism: to find both the OT and the NT to be in harmony with accepted Greek philosophy, and to maintain and promote the OT as a Christian book.

Origen

(A.D. 185-254)

Origen did not deny the literal meaning of Scripture, but he associated it with Judaism and with the common people. His teacher, Clement of Alexandria, was the first well-known and respected father to employ allegorism consciously as a system. Origen followed him and developed the system further. His influence was spread by his important position in Alexandria in Egypt, by his detailed and fine scholarship on the text of Scripture, and by his devotion to the church. Allegorism was natural for Christians who were already acquainted with Greek allegorism.

Augustine

(A.D. 354-430)

Hearing the allegorical interpretations which the famous bishop and preacher Ambrose gave to the texts of Scripture, especially the OT, Augustine was able to overcome many of his philosophical objections to the Bible. Augustine later magnificently presented the classic allegorical interpretation of the kingdom of God as the church in his *City of God*.

Roman Catholic allegorism

Through most of its history the Catholic Church has used Jerome's Vulgate translation as the basis of its interpretation (Jerome, A.D. 340-420). After the sixth century nearly all of the church's exegesis was marked by extensive allegorizing. Gradually the so-called fourfold sense of Scripture was standardized:

1. Literal sense

2. Allegorical sense

3. Moral sense (or tropological sense)

4. Anagogical sense

Thus, the city of Jerusalem in a passage such as Ps 51:18 ("In your good pleasure make Zion prosper; build up the walls of Jerusalem.") could be made to represent: (1) the literal city, (2) the church, (3) the human soul, and (4) the heavenly city.

With this methodology in use, it is easy to see how exegesis became a dry shuffling of combinations of possible allegorical meanings, with the multitude of possible interpretations. In general the method ignored the primary element in sound exegesis: context.

Protestant allegorism

With the Reformation came a new appreciation for the Bible as the only authority for the church. As a result, exegesis became more Bible-centered, with context replacing the role of church authority. The more literal interpretation of the Bible spread through the various doctrines. The early reformers still maintained a more allegorical interpretation of eschatological portions, however (e.g., both Luther and Calvin), although Calvin did not write a commentary on Revelation. Many of the "old-style" amillennialists allegorize much of the OT even today. Even in these cases, however, the allegorization is more controlled by supposed NT analogies than it was in former years.

Traditionalist interpretation

A second trend in hermeneutics became a source of error in succeeding centuries. This trend was to bestow absolute authority on the ecclesiastical or traditional interpretation of a passage.

Influence of battles with heresy

Many of the early heresies in the Christian church appealed to various portions of the Bible for support. Defenders of what are now considered fundamental Christian

doctrines supported the orthodox doctrines from the Bible also, often giving a totally different interpretation to the same Scriptures from that given by the heretics. As the early church struggled with the various heresies surrounding the Trinity and the person of Christ, there needed to be some authority which could be appealed to, as a judge for biblical interpretation. In one way or another, the church itself became this authority.

The ecumenical and regional councils

Based on the example of Acts 15, many early controversies were settled by recourse to a gathering of church officials. These councils were considered authoritative to a greater or lesser degree—depending on the quality and number of the assembled divines, and upon whether or not their conclusion agreed with one's own. In the fourth century and beyond the state provided enforcement, which greatly increased their authority in the eyes of the church.

The bishops

From the second century onward, as diocesan bishops gained respect and authority in the major regions of the Roman Empire, their opinions were considered representative of the church in their area. If several or all of them agreed, their opinion was considered orthodox.

The pope

Gradually the Roman bishop became the most respected and influential bishop in the church. From the early Middle Ages on, his views ruled the church's doctrine. After the Eastern church broke away in the eleventh century, the pope continued to rule the Western church. Since the nineteenth century his views on doctrine or morals have been considered by Roman Catholics as infallible when he speaks *ex cathedra* ("from the throne"; i.e., officially). This ruling was made retroactive to the beginning!

The fathers

To support various doctrines, the Roman church considered the tradition of the church to be equally authoritative with the Scriptures. This tradition is recorded in the writings of the church fathers (Christian writers whose works are extant, dating from the Nicene age and before).

Many, most notably Abelard, have pointed to the glaring contradictions in the fathers. The official response was that the fathers are interpretational guides when they reflect the "uniform tradition of the church."

Scholasticism

Catholic scholars in the late Middle Ages, headed by Thomas Aquinas, sought to harmonize biblical theology with Aristotelian philosophy. The result was a wooden exegesis, which became not only the pattern, but also the authoritative conclusion, of all subsequent exegesis.

The Jesuit variation

In order to make church membership easier and Catholic doctrine and exegesis more palatable to educated and worldly people, the Jesuits developed the concept of "probabilism." If two fathers diverged in their understanding of a doctrine or passage, either view was considered "probable," and thereby could be held by orthodox Catholics (unless, of course, the church specifically forbade that interpretation). Thus a great many passages, with their ethical requirements, could be watered down. A great enemy of the Jesuits and of probabilism was Blaise Pascal (esp. in his *Provincial Letters*).

The Council of Trent (1545-63)

This lengthy and important council was called to counteract the progress of the Protestant Reformation and solidify loyalty to the Roman church. It in effect codified the superstitions of the Middle Ages, and made them official doctrine, which must be believed for salvation. The council also established a required mode of exegesis:

1. The only authoritative biblical text was the Latin Vulgate, Jerome's translation of the Bible into Latin. No argument in controversy could be based on Hebrew or Greek originals.

2. The canon of Scripture included the Apocrypha.

3. The only authoritative interpretation of Scripture was that which the church as a whole, represented by the pope, declared.

> [Allister McGrath writes extensively about the Protestant principle of individual interpretation and responsibility, along with its drawbacks and advantages in *Christianity's Dangerous Idea: The Protestant Revolution— A History from the Sixteenth Century to the Twenty-First* (2007).]

Ecumenical theology

In modern times Catholic exegesis and liberal Protestant exegesis are converging. Both now favor a critical approach to Scripture. The Catholic theologians are recognizing the need for some private judgment (especially when it opposes supernaturalistic orthodoxy). On the other hand, Protestants are recognizing the need for some authoritative interpreter other than the individual Christian, to unify the ecumenical movement and give it some clout. This normative interpreter is seen in the ecumenical church; "God still speaks through the church," they say.

The new authoritarianism found in Protestantism is a dangerous trend. Because of our sinful natures human traditions nearly always tend to move away from God's true message in the Bible. It is coming to the point when Catholic and Protestant theologians alike will claim that the Bible believers are unbiblical!

The critical schools

The denial of the supernatural, as a philosophical presupposition, has led to radical changes in biblical interpretation. As scholars in the visible church have denied the supernatural, they have had to find a proper understanding of the Bible in some way different from simple faith in its plain teachings.

[The history of these changes is summarized well in the *Cambridge History of the Bible* 3, ch. 7.]

Rationalism and Liberalism

The earliest deviation in this direction assumed the genuine belief of the biblical authors in the miraculous element in the Bible. This belief could be accounted for by misunderstanding on the part of the witnesses of the events (rationalism), or it could be due to the church adding to the "genuine" non-miraculous core, found, for example, in the pared down gospel of Mark (Liberalism). There is considerable overlap between these two views.

The history of the rise and fall of this school was beautifully traced for the life of Jesus research by Albert Schweitzer, *The Quest for the Historical Jesus*.

As an exegetical system, this approach has been disproved by both the theological left and the theological right. Rationalism demands more faith than that exercised by fundamentalists. And the tenants of Liberal theology reflect a very shallow exegesis of both the OT and the NT.

The consistent eschatological school

Following Schweitzer, many critics assumed that Jesus and the early apostles believed in a literal fulfillment of the Jewish prophecies in their own day. This hope was mistaken. Jesus was wrong. But his greatness lay in his absolute dedication to his religious belief and his consequent turning of the religious aspirations of millions to himself—the bending of history to his will, though in a way not perceived by him.

Most scholars have rejected this school, although they recognize many positive contributions it has made to understanding the importance of eschatology and its relation to the soteriology and the ecclesiology of the NT.

The neo-orthodox schools

Recognizing the spiritual bankruptcy of Liberalism, yet adhering to a critical view of the Scriptures, neo-orthodoxy has made use of philosophical existentialism to forge a new union between orthodox concepts of sin, with orthodox terminology, and a critical use of the Bible.

The main pioneer of this movement was Karl Barth, followed by Emil Brunner and Rudolph Bultmann. Of these three Barth was the soundest exegete, and Bultmann the most radical. However, Bultmann has had the strongest impact on technical biblical exegesis.

Barth taught that Christ is the Word of God, and that no revelation can take place through propositions—God is too distinct from man. The Bible is only a recollection of past non-verbal revelations. Man meets God only in existential divine-human encounters, which God dispenses in a sovereign manner.

Barth distinguished therefore the Jesus of history from the Christ of faith: *Geschichte* (faith's history) *vs. Historie* (empirical history).

Bultmann developed the exegetical procedure of "demythologizing," stripping the NT of its first century theological trappings, and re-clothing its central message in twentieth century concepts. Normally the result is hardly recognizable. This technique enables neo-orthodox preachers to affirm belief in orthodox doctrines by name, while considering them as religious myths with an entirely different meaning from that understood by the ordinary layman.

> An interesting illustration of this shift is seen in William B. Kennedy, "Neo-orthodoxy Goes to Sunday School: The Christian Faith and Life Curriculum," *Journal of Presbyterian History* 58:4 (Winter, 1980), 326-39.

Subjectivism

It is most natural that when one studies the Bible, he would see in it both items that he would appreciate and fully sympathize with, and items that he would find objectionable or awkward. These reactions in the reader are largely based on his personal makeup, background, prior training, and environment. If one studies the Bible with a submissive spirit, he will be willing to adjust his thinking and eventually his feelings to agree with Scripture. On the other hand, the temptation is ever present to interpret the Bible differently, so as to agree with our thinking or with the prevailing culture. This is done for two reasons: to make us more comfortable with the Bible, and to make it easier to present the Bible to others. Already, we see that much of the allegorical school's thinking is shaped by this subjectivism. However, it shows up frequently in other forms.

Medieval mysticism

Many Catholic writers of this period wrote pious interpretations of biblical portions, intended to awaken devotion to God or Christ, without much regard to exegesis. A famous example of this pious allegorism is that of Bernard of Clairvaux. Many of these writers especially liked the Song of Songs as a fruitful source of devotional re-interpretation.

Pietism

The two most prominent leaders of this movement were Philip James Spener (1635-1705) and A. H. Francke (1663-1727). These men reacted against the bitter theological feuds raging throughout Protestantism at the time. As Farrar has said, "They read the Bible by the unnatural glare of theological hatred" (*History of Interpretation*, 363-64).

The pietistic movement in Germany emphasized the importance of Christian love and service, and sought to de-emphasize the importance of doctrinal controversy. It produced great missionary and benevolent efforts, but tended to neglect serious and scholarly Bible study. As a result, many of these works soon fell into serious doctrinal error and eventual apostasy.

Modern devotional Bible study

This approach to the Bible is very common—*e.g.*, on radio and television Bible programs. It has a good and needed place in the lives of Christians, but should not become a substitute for serious study of the Bible and contending for doctrinal purity. Ramm has noted two dangers of this method:

- A tendency to employ excess allegorism, especially in the OT

- A neglect of doctrinal portions or detailed exegesis, which are vital to the maintenance of orthodox Christianity

Social or political agendas

Frequently devotees of a particular school or movement in the public sphere desire to either blunt the Bible's opposition to what they believe, or even to enlist the Bible's support for it. They accomplish this by discovering new interpretations of the relevant Bible portions. These interpretations, not surprisingly, agree with their positions.

In American history passages were misinterpreted to justify black slavery and teach white racial superiority. Today examples of this kind of misuse of Scripture interpretation include those who use the Bible to justify sexual license or homosexuality, promote socialism by "liberation theology," further a "feminist theology," declare a "health and wealth" gospel, or promote the beliefs and practices of the New Age movement.

This abuse of Scripture deserves the ancient censure of Peter:

2 Pet 3:16, He [Paul] writes the same way in all his letters, speaking in them of these matters. His letters contain some things that are hard to understand, which ignorant and unstable people distort, as they do the other Scriptures, to their own destruction.

May the Lord keep us faithful to his own meaning when we interpret his Word!

The literal schools

What we have described as the grammatical-historical-theological method of exegesis has its roots in the history of exegesis. As one would expect, with the exception of the Middle Ages, the literal interpretation of Scripture has been well represented.

Jewish interpretation

The Jews in Palestine in NT times used several modes of interpretation, with the normal or literal mode predominating. For example, the seven rules of Hillel include such normal procedures as the context, comparing with other passages, and accepting the clear meaning over the obscure one; however, Hillel also made these rules often arbitrary and broader than the text justified, coming to exegetical conclusions which the text could not support.

For the seven rules of Hillel, see Longenecker, *Biblical Exegesis in the Apostolic Period*, pp. 18-19; several examples are found in Philip S. Alexander, "Jewish Interpretation," "Interpretation, History of," *The Oxford Companion to the Bible*, pp. 307-08.

These are the seven rules of Hillel:

1. *qal wāḥōmer*, "light and heavy"—if it is true for the lesser important case, it is true for the more important case

2. *g̱ĕzērāh šāwāh*, "equivalence"—a common term used in two laws brings the same meaning in both places

3. *binyan 'āb̲ mikkāt̲ûb̲ 'eḥād̲ ûb̲inyan 'āb̲ miššĕnê kĕt̲ûb̲îm*, "constructing a category ('father') on one text, and constructing a category on two texts"— deduction from specific cases to general principles

4. *kĕlāl ûpĕrāt̲*, "general and specific"—a general term followed by a specific term is limited by that specific term

5. *pĕrāt̲ ûk̲ĕlāl*, "specific and general"—a specific term followed by a general term is made general

6. *kayôṣē' b̲ô b̲ĕmāqôm 'aḥēr*, "analogy from another passage"—passages are to be interpreted so they do not contradict each other

7. *dāb̲ār hallāmēd̲ mē'inyānô*, "a passage is interpreted by its context"— preceding or following laws determine the meaning of the law under question

The Sadducees tended to be more literalistic than the Pharisees. It used to be thought that they accepted only the first five books of the OT, but recent scholarship has shown that they accepted the entire OT canon of the Jews (cf. Roger Beckwith, *The Old Testament Canon of the New Testament Church and Its Background in Early Judaism* [1985]). Actually, the Sadducees did to some extent avoid some of the interpretive excesses of the Pharisees, such as letterism, externalism, and traditionalism (cf. Matt 15:1-6).

NT exegesis of the OT

Careful study of the use the NT makes of OT citations has shown that in the great majority of cases the NT interprets the OT in its normal, literal meaning. And even in those cases where the literal meaning is not so plain, a good case can be made for what we call the grammatical-historical-theological method of hermeneutics.

[For more detailed discussion, see above, under Special Hermeneutics]

Antioch of Syria—Christian literalism

A center of Christian scholarship in the post-Nicene period, Antioch was the home of Chrysostom (fl. A.D. 375), Theodor of Mopsuestia (400), and Theodoret (450). They led a healthy reaction against the allegorizing of the Alexandrians. These writers are of lasting value. They employed literal exegesis, but recognized figures of speech. The Reformers were influenced by this school.

The Reformers

Precursors

The Reformation of the church was preceded by a hermeneutical reformation. Especially significant for Luther was Nicholas of Lyra (ca. 1300), who was a bridge to reformation hermeneutics (see Berkhof, *PBI*, p. 25).

Martin Luther

Luther's own study of the Bible led him to adopt a stance favoring the literal meaning of biblical statements. This was the ground on which he could stand against the collected authority of the church. A famous quotation of his: "I ask for Scripture, and you give me fathers."

Luther believed that the faithful Christian could find the proper interpretation, with the aid of the Holy Spirit working directly with the individual. Yet Luther was no "enthusiast"; he made use of all the scholarly tools available to him.

Three keys to Luther's hermeneutics:

- Note history and context of passage.
- Seek faith and aid of Holy Spirit.
- Seek Christ in every Scripture passage (Christological interpretation)

Some have stated that Luther rejected James as a part of the biblical canon (quoting various prefaces to his translation of various books of the Bible). This attack is disproved by Luther's inclusion of James in his German Bible, and by his explicit statements (cf. his *Babylonian Captivity of the Church*, 1520).

John Calvin

Calvin is justly considered the exegete of the Reformation. His commentaries on every book of the Bible (except Revelation) still have great value, and are a dramatic break from most exegesis which predated him.

Calvin emphasized three points in biblical interpretation:

- The supreme authority of Scripture
- Divine illumination as the *sine quo non* of interpretation
- Scripture as the best interpreter of Scripture

The Westminster Confession of Faith

The assembled divines in the seventeenth century who produced this confession reached a high point in the history of doctrine. Their chapter on Scripture (ch. 1) summarizes beautifully the Scriptural doctrine on this subject. The chapter has ten sections:

1. General and special revelation
2. The OT and NT canon
3. The Apocrypha excluded
4. The authority of Scripture from God
5. Evidences of Scripture's infallibility and authority
6. Completeness of Scripture for doctrine and life
7. Perspicuity of Scripture
8. Original languages and translations
9. Interpreting Scripture by itself
10. Our supreme authority: the Holy Spirit speaking in the Scripture

Of special interest to the subject of interpretation is paragraph 9:

> "The infallible rule of interpretation of Scripture is the Scripture itself; and therefore, when there is a question about the true and full sense of any Scripture, (which is not manifold, but one,) it may be searched and known by other places that speak more clearly."

Recently some writers have attempted to show that the Westminster Assembly did not hold to the inerrancy of Scripture. This position has already been refuted thoroughly by Benjamin B. Warfield, *The Westminster Assembly and Its Work* (Vol. 6 of his collected works). Warfield proved from the writings of the Westminster divines what their intentions were when they spoke of the inspiration and infallibility of the Bible. Note especially ch. 3, "The Westminster Doctrine of Holy Scripture" (pp. 155-257) and ch. 4, "The Doctrine of Inspiration of the Westminster Divines" (pp. 261-333). The observations of Roger R. Nicole are appropriate (in Appendix 6, "The Westminster Confession and Inerrancy," in A. A. Hodge and B. B. Warfield, *Inspiration*). See also

Richard A. Muller, "Scripture and the Westminster Confession," in *Scripture and Worship: Biblical Interpretation and the Directory for Public Worship* (2007).

Current issues within the literal school

Within the ranks of those who hold to a literal form of interpretation of Scripture, there still are numerous differences and controversies. Conservative biblical interpreters have taken various stances on these issues:

- Dispensational vs. covenant hermeneutics
- Interpretation of prophecy
- Relation of law and grace
- Biblical writers' use of midrash, or other non-literal interpretation

In addition to books already mentioned, the following are significant in these controversies (note that this list only scratches the surface!):

- Dispensational hermeneutics: Charles Caldwell Ryrie, *Dispensationalism Today* (1965), esp. ch. 5, "The Hermeneutics of Dispensationalism," pp. 86-109

- Amillennial hermeneutics: William Hendriksen, *Israel in Prophecy* (1968); Philip Edgcumbe Hughes, *Interpreting Prophecy* (1976)

- Gospel and law controversy—a controversial book: Daniel P. Fuller, *Gospel and Law: Contrast or Continuum?* (1980); the subtitle shows his perspective on the conflict: *The Hermeneutics of Dispensationalism and Covenant Theology*; cf. Mark W. Karlberg, "The Search for an Evangelical Consensus on Paul and the Law," *JETS* 40:4 (Dec., 1997), 563-79.

- Exegetical methodology of Jesus and apostles—another controversial book: Richard Longenecker, *Biblical Exegesis in the Apostolic Period* (1975).