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Essays in Hermeneutics

By M. H. FRANZMANN

NOTE.—This and the succeeding articles are designed to serve as guidelines for the writer's course in Hermeneutics at Concordia Seminary. They are to be viewed, therefore, merely as a summation of time-honored and time-tested hermeneutical materials. They are, of course, to be supplemented by lectures and by practice. I should like to express especial indebtedness to L. Fuerbringer's *Theological Hermeneutics*, Terry's *Biblical Hermeneutics*, and Torm's *Hermeneutik des Neuen Testaments*. My debt to Luther is so great and so obvious in what follows that it need hardly receive special notice. Since these articles are to be the first steps toward a textbook on Hermeneutics, it was thought that they might interest a wider circle and might benefit from the suggestions and criticisms of our brethren, which are herewith invited.

INTRODUCTORY

Hermeneutics is that branch of theology which sets forth the principles that are to guide us in the interpretation of Scripture; in other words, it is the theory of exegesis, or interpretation.

For the Lutheran theologian hermeneutical questions are anything but academic questions. Our life as Christians and as a Church depends on the Word; and since the Word is the ultimate authority, the Church of the *sola Scriptura* dare not be indifferent to the manner of its interpretation. "We believe, teach, and confess that the sole rule and standard according to which all dogmas together with all teachers should be estimated and judged are the prophetic and apostolic Scriptures of the Old and the New Testament alone, as it is written Ps. 119:105: 'Thy Word is a Lamp unto my feet and a Light unto my path.' And St. Paul: 'Though an angel from heaven preach any other gospel unto you, let him be accursed.' Gal. 1:8." As long as these solemn and stately words of the Formula of Concord are taken seriously in the Lutheran Church, there should be little need to vindicate the place of Hermeneutics in the theological curriculum.

In thus asserting the sole authority and power of Scripture, our Confessions are but reverting to the convictions of the Church catholic, which confesses in the Nicene Creed: "And I believe in the Holy Ghost, the Lord and Giver of life, who proceedeth from the Father and the Son, who with the Father and the Son is worshiped and glorified, *who spake by the Prophets.*" And the Confessions are also speaking the

distinct accents of Luther, whose utterances on the sole authority and sole power of the Word are a veritable *florilegium* of fresh and bracing theological thought on this point. For him the Word and the Word alone is the place where, and the means by which, man meets God: "Wo Gottes Wort nicht ist, wohnt Gott nicht, man baue ihm ein Haus, so gross man wolle." Man cannot see Him outside the Word: "Gottes Wort muss uns zu Huelfe kommen, um Gott recht zu treffen, dass man ihn hoeren, sehen, greifen, fassen und erkennen moege." "Allein durch das Wort kann Gott ergriffen werden; stellt man sich recht zum Worte, dass man es liebt, und meint es von Herzen, so wird Gott auch geliebt." Without the Word there is no road to heaven; to essay to establish a private road thither is insolence: "Es soll sich niemand unterstehen, mit Gott zu handeln ohne das Wort, oder sich einen sonderlichen Weg gen Himmel zu bauen." For there and only there, in God's Word, is Christ to be found: "Gott hat uns kein ander Mittel gegeben als sein goettliches Wort, darin man allein Christum hoert." By it and it alone is the Holy Spirit given: "Gott will den Heiligen Geist geben durch das Wort; ohne das Wort will er es nicht tun." Over against the claim of this Word neither the "harlot Reason" nor "experience" has any claim whatsoever; that is the will of the Holy Ghost who by that Word does His work: "Der Heilige Geist will die Wahrheit so angebunden haben, dass man Vernunft und alle eigene Gedanken und Fuehlen hintenansetze und *allein* an dem Worte hange." There is indeed no choice: "Das Wort Gottes reisst uns von allen Dingen, das nicht Gott ist." There is the same sharp either-or here as in all God's dealings with man: "Wenn bei uns Gottes Wort nicht ist, so sind wir im Reiche des Teufels und sind junge Teufel und Teufelskinder. Also sagt der Herr Christus auch zu Petro, da er widerriet, dass er nicht in Judaeam ziehen sollte: Hindere mich nicht, du Teufel. Aber wer Gottes Wort hat, der ist ein junger Gott."

"Wer Gottes Wort hat, der ist ein junger Gott." The Church that has the Word is impregnable; the gates of hell shall not prevail against it. And it is the sole business of Hermeneutics to see to it that we really have the Word that spells our life. Positively, Hermeneutics is to lead us into Scripture in such a way that its perpetually fresh and in-

finite life may be constantly open to us and in progressive abundance be ours. (Luther: *Dass man das Wort studiert und lernt, soll nicht allein ein oder zwei Jahre waehren, denn es ist Gottes Wort, welches unendlich ist.*) Negatively, Hermeneutics can provide a defense against the two gravest dangers that ever threaten the Church of the Word: satiety and the perversion of Scripture. Satiety can arise when Exegesis is permitted to degenerate into a sort of Dogmatics in reverse, a procedure that does disservice to both Dogmatics and to Exegesis; for the pleasant and salubrious pools of Systematic Theology cease to be so when they cease to be fed by the living waters of Exegesis. A sound Hermeneutics can provide defense against the wresting of Scripture, too, against error and falsification; for it can make us critical of men's interpretations of Scripture and will constantly drive us back into Scripture and so place us, again and again, under the influence of the Spirit, who leads into all truth. If this be deemed a high claim for a humble subbranch of theology, it should be remembered that the claim is made only on the basis of the fact that a sound Hermeneutics keeps us with, and so under, the Word. It is hard not to quote Luther again: "Der Herr haelt dich mit seiner Hand, so lange du sein Wort hast." And: "Gott kann und will Geduld mit uns haben, wenn wir am Worte festhalten."

THE NATURE OF SCRIPTURE

It is, or should be, a truism that the principles governing the interpretation of a document ought to be derived from, and in keeping with, the nature of that document; that, for instance, poetry be interpreted as poetry with due regard for the nature and conventions of that literary genus; that a novel be interpreted as a novel and not as a chronicle or a tract for the times. Accordingly, the principles that are to guide us in the interpretation of Scripture must be derived from the nature of Scripture itself. 2 Pet. 1:21 may serve to indicate the nature of the documents that are the object of Biblical interpretation: "Holy men of God spake as they were moved by the Holy Ghost." In Scripture God is speaking by men, has spoken by men, "at sundry times and in divers manners . . . in times past." The oracles of God are not a book fallen from heaven; rather, God spoke through men at a

certain time, in a certain place, and in certain language. "*Men spake*" — that is one aspect of Scripture, the aspect that it shares with every other document ever written. The other aspect lies in the fact that here *God* spoke through men, and in this aspect Scripture is unique. We have in Scripture God speaking *once*, at a certain point in history, by men; and God speaking *once and for all*. We might, then, picture the interpreter approaching the sacred text through three concentric circles: the circle of language, the circle of history, and the circle of theology, or of Scripture. The first two of these circles are a recognition of the fact that in Scripture God spoke once in the tongues of men at a certain point in history. The third circle is a recognition of the fact that in thus speaking God has spoken once and for all; that Scripture is a unity by virtue of the one Spirit that inspired all the books of the canon. It is a recognition also of the implications of Scripture for us, of the fact that Scripture is "*profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness; that the man of God may be perfect, thoroughly furnished unto all good works.*" That these three circles are distinct in analysis only and must inevitably interlink and interlock in practice should be understood at the outset and will become more obvious as we proceed.

I. THE CIRCLE OF LANGUAGE

Wiewohl das Evangelium durch den Heiligen Geist gekommen ist und taeglich kommt, so ist es doch durch das Mittel der Sprachen gekommen, muss auch dadurch behalten werden. — *Luther*.

It was Matthew Arnold, I believe, who said that a man who knows only his Bible will not even know that well. There is a modicum of truth in that, especially in so far as it applies to the language of the New Testament. The cry of the practical-minded for an exclusive concentration on the Greek of the New Testament, to the exclusion of the "heathen," may be prompted by zeal for God, but it can hardly be called a zeal according to knowledge. The long way round is the shortest way home, here as so often. One does not learn the full potentialities of a language from one book; and without a feeling for the potentialities of a language, its tones and overtones, the one book is not fully grasped either; the mind's hold remains slippery and partial. Our fathers builded wisely when they designed a broad base of secular Greek, upon which to rear the tower of specialized knowledge of New Testament

Greek; we shall do well to think long and hard before substituting a six-easy-lessons procedure for their four hard years.

Within the circle of language, we may treat, first, words in isolation (etymology and usage), and then words in relation to one another (grammar, context, figurative language).

ETYMOLOGY

As regards etymology, we shall do well to remember that it is, in most cases, an excellent starting point in the study of a word, but usually no more than that. Exegesis of the word-picture variety usually sins in the direction of over-reliance on etymology. How insufficient etymology alone is for the interpretation of a word may be seen in the case of words with no recorded usage, where there is nothing but etymology to go by, words like ἐπιούσιος in the Fourth Petition of the Lord's Prayer, where etymology alone has led to such Babelish confusion of interpretation as "daily," "supersubstantial," "of tomorrow," "necessary," "of the future," and "of the future kingdom." In the case of *hapax legomena* and of newly formed compounds (e. g., θεοδίδακτος, 1 Thess. 4:9) etymology renders a substantive service. But commonly it is useful chiefly as fixing the concrete sensuous basis upon which usage has built the structure of actual meaning and connotation (e. g., συναντιλαμβάνεται, Rom. 8:26; note that the usage as observed in Luke 10:40 is the more helpful). We dare not forget that the vast majority of the New Testament words have behind them hundreds of years of history, especially the epoch-making history of God's inscripturated revelation of Himself (LXX), the incarnation of the Son of God, and the coming of the Holy Ghost.

USAGE

In regard to usage, it is important to be clear on the nature of New Testament Greek. It is, first of all, non-literary Greek, the spoken language of the people. That does not mean that it is vulgar (in the derogatory sense) or illiterate Greek; it does mean that "the Holy Ghost spoke that language in which the largest possible number of people could understand Him" (Moulton). And it means that the documents of non-literary Greek, the papyri, ostraka, and inscriptions, are invaluable for establishing the connotations that New Testament words had for their first readers; that books like Moul-

ton and Milligan's *Vocabulary of the Greek Testament Illustrated from the Papyri* and Deissmann's *Light from the Ancient East*, as well as dictionaries like Bauer's, which take cognizance of non-literary usage, should be on the shelves of every New Testament exegete. There can never again be talk of a Biblical Greek in the old sense, or of a "language of the Holy Ghost."

But that is not the whole story. There is also the ever-present possibility of Semitic influence. The authors of the New Testament were, with one exception, bilingual and probably thought in Aramaic. And the influence of the Septuagint, all-pervasive and incalculable, must always be reckoned with. Especially in religious and ethical concepts the Greek Old Testament is the immediate and living background to the New Testament vocabulary.

The context, especially the immediate context, will also play an important role in the determination of usage. Any great new event brings with it new words and fills old words with new meanings (one need but think of the effect of two world wars and of atomic fission on our present-day vocabulary), and the event that marked the turning point of the world's history was no exception. And so, in the last analysis, the whole of the New Testament must help determine the meaning of its parts; this is the so-called Hermeneutical Circle, the working from the part to the whole and back again from the whole to the part. Practically, this points to the importance of having a wide knowledge of the whole Bible, especially the Greek Bible of both Testaments, for the interpretation of any part of it; and it underlines the value of the concordance, which enables us to focus and bring to bear that knowledge without undue consumption of time or the danger of omitting anything essential.

Usage works in various ways. As we trace the development of meaning, we note that in New Testament usage some words *deepen* in meaning; for example, the Greek εἰρήνη has, by way of the Septuagint, taken on the richer and more inclusive sense of the Hebrew *shalom*. Other words are *revaluated*, as the word κόσμος, which passes from the sense of "the harmoniously ordered universe" to that of "the world as opposed to God." Others *appreciate*; so δούλος and the whole complex of words denoting servitude and humility,

words infinitely ennobled by the New Testament. Again, the development may amount to a *complete change*; so the use of χάρις to denote the love of God which forgives sins, a sense not prepared for by the Septuagint, which uses ἔλεος for this sense; or the word μυστήριον as used by St. Paul. Or we may find a *new concrete application of established terms*, as in the case of παρουσία, used of royal or imperial visits in Hellenistic and Roman times, but given the specific sense of the Second Coming in the New Testament.

We must, of course, distinguish between general and particular usage, between general *koine* usage and that of the New Testament; and within the New Testament, between the general New Testament usage and that of a St. John or a St. Paul. The immediate context and particular usage is decisive in any given case. So in using a concordance, in the case of a Pauline usage, the Pauline parallels receive primary consideration. It is in the matter of usage that the value of the larger dictionary, with its careful classification of usage and grouping of parallels, becomes evident. Not that the dictionary is a substitute for independent study. It is a good map for the way; but each must go the way himself if he would really interpret, that is, meet the text and receive its impact at first hand. At the level of language, too, Scripture must interpret Scripture. The concordance and the dictionary are indispensable aids to firsthand acquaintance but not a surrogate for it.

GRAMMAR

In the matter of grammar, the present generation of exegetes is more fortunate than any generation of scholars before it. The vast accessions of comparative material in the field of popular or vernacular Greek in the last fifty years, together with an unprepossessed study of the sacred texts themselves, has cleared away the grammatical fog that darkened earlier exegesis on the grammatical side. No longer will the structure of New Testament Greek be tortured to fit the classical pattern. There is perhaps, rather, a tendency to exaggerate the difference between *koine* and classical Greek. The student well grounded in classical Greek is not entering an altogether alien world when he takes up the study of the *koine*. The changes are all in the direction of what seems 'natural' to him as an English-speaking person; a grammar

of fifty pages can tell him all that he needs to know, to begin with, of the peculiarities of the later Greek. The present writer read his Greek New Testament for years, and not unprofitably, without benefit of any special grammar whatever. There were, to be sure, some puzzles, but really very few that further reading and continued observation did not clear up satisfactorily. New Testament Greek is, after all, Greek, popular Greek, which has transcended the dialectical boundaries of the earlier periods and has relaxed, not abrogated, the strict regularity of the classical literary Greek.

There is still a sharp division among New Testament scholars as to the Semitic influence on the structure of New Testament Greek. The fact, noted above in another connection, that the authors were with one exception born Jews and spoke and wrote Greek as a second language and the influence of the Semitizing Greek of the Septuagint make it precarious to minimize the Semitic influence. On the other hand, the study of the papyri and other documents of late popular Greek has shown that many features once considered Semitisms occur, at least sporadically, in non-Semitic popular Greek, and that should make us wary of exaggeration.

CONTEXT

Consideration for the connection in which a word or group of words occurs is among the most elementary rules for the interpretation of any text. But like all commonplaces, it is easily forgotten, especially when we should like the text to mean something; when we have hit upon a bright idea, homiletically valuable, which we should like to "get out" of the text. It is indicative that so many exegetical questions take the form, "Can this text mean so and so?"

The immediate context is the most important and is usually decisive. In 1 Thess. 2:6, for instance, the sense of ἐν βύρει εἶναι is fixed by the contrast with 6 a and the example of the nurse in the following verse, rather than by the remoter verse 9, so that we are justified in translating "we might have stood upon our dignity" with Goodspeed, rather than "we might have been burdensome" with the Authorized Version.

Where there is no immediate context, as is the case in some of the loosely joined series of exhortations in St. Paul

or in an isolated passage like Rom. 16:17 ff., consideration of the remoter and remotest context is imperative. The whole larger context of St. Paul's treatment of error and errorists in *Galatians*, *Colossians*, and 1 and 2 *Corinthians*, with its drastic rejection of the misleaders and its tender concern for the misled, would cast much light on the scope and meaning of the passage in *Romans*, which breaks in so unexpectedly into the chapter of greetings.

The connection of thought which we call context is variously established. The connection may be merely historical, the chronological sequence of events. For instance, the time and place of the Sermon on the Mount, so obvious in St. Luke and clear enough in St. Matthew, ought in themselves have been enough to preclude the characterization of the Sermon as "die grundlegende Predigt" or as "the inaugural discourse of the Kingdom." Or the connection may be at once historical and dogmatical, as when St. Paul in *Romans* 4 argues from the sequence of events in *Genesis* concerning the connection between circumcision and the imputation of righteousness.

Or the connection may be logical, as in the discourse on avarice and care in Matt. 6:19-34, where verse 24 ("No man can serve two masters") indicates the connection between the two apparently disparate themes; the higher unity is to be found in the idea of the divided heart.

Or again the connection may be psychological, dependent on feeling or association of ideas, as often in highly personal epistles like *Philippians* and 2 *Corinthians*; or as in 1 Thess. 5:16-22, where the mention of prayer and thanksgiving leads naturally, if not by inevitable logic, to the giving of directions for the worship life of the church.

To sum up, in the case of a passage not immediately clear we look first to the immediate context, then to the remoter context of the work in which the passage occurs, then to the whole body of works by the same author, then to the whole New Testament, and then to the whole Bible. Here again, as in the case of usage, we let Scripture interpret Scripture.

FIGURATIVE LANGUAGE

Though not as luxuriant in its imagery as the Old Testament, where cedar trees bow down and the floods clap their hands and the warhorse saith ha, ha among the trumpets, yet the New Testament is rich and various in its use of

figurative language. In this respect, as in many others, the New Testament is what Deissmann calls it, a *Volksbuch*; for figurative language is frequently anything but literary—a glance at our own slang, with its tremendous and bizarre metaphors, is enough to convince one of the absolutely “popular” character of the figurative. And the Spirit who so moved men to speak shows Himself as the Spirit of Him who knoweth our frame; for figurative language appeals to every man, and it appeals to the whole man—try to imagine yourself at a sickbed with the purely conceptual equivalent of the Twenty-Third Psalm!—; as over against strictly literal and purely conceptual language, it addresses itself not only to the intellect but also to the will and to the emotions of men. It *moves* men, in the manner as well as in the substance of its speaking.

The figures are drawn from manifold aspects of contemporary life. For an understanding of them an exact knowledge of the times, customs, and usages of the New Testament world are a prerequisite. Here the circle of history interlocks with the circle of language; language is inseparable from life.

The purpose of figurative language is to illuminate a relationship or a state in one domain by means of a comparable relationship in another. Since the figure never completely coincides with the thing to be illuminated or clarified, the cardinal point in the interpretation of figurative language is to discern carefully that quality of the figure which the author evidently wishes to denote as explanatory to the idea. In other words, an understanding of the author's intent can be gained only by a careful but withal plastic and imaginative determination of the *tertium comparationis*. The *tertium* may be very limited, as when Jesus compares Himself to a vine, or when the Church is compared to a bride, or when St. Paul designates himself the nurse or the father of the Thessalonians. The context will make clear just what the point of comparison is, even where there is such a heaping up of images as in *Jude 12* and *13*.

This holds also for the extended figure, the parable; the point (in some cases, points) of comparison must be ascertained and the various components of the parable viewed in relation to it. Our Lord's own interpretations of parables

offer us sure guidance here; although His own words also do not justify the belief that the interpretation of a parable is necessarily easy. The parables serve to conceal as well as to reveal. But here, too, it will be given to the believing heart to know the mysteries of the Kingdom; a devout and humble searching will accomplish more here than any crassly schematic theory of the parable.

We might note in closing that in the religious sphere particularly we are often forced to speak figuratively, simply because there is no other way to express the truth. The idea of unreality which some naive minds associate with the figurative in religion, as in poetry, has no place here. The ultimate beauty of music is such that it can be expressed in no other terms than music; yet no one questions the reality of that beauty just because it cannot be reduced to a literally conceptual statement. The many mansions of Our Lord's discourse and the Golden Jerusalem of the Apocalypse are a more "real" heaven than any abstractly literal statement of it; and Luther's letter to his little boy is sounder theological sense than unscripturally philosophic adumbrations of the unknowable. The golden mean in interpretation lies somewhere between the extremes of an intellectual exegesis, on the one hand, which rationalizes away the flesh and blood of Scriptural expression and leaves only the bare bones of an abstract thought; and a false sort of literalism, on the other hand, which makes the inspired writers subject to all the "primitive" and naive notions that first-century flesh was heir to.

(To be continued)

