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Appendix

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APPENDIX

HERMENEUTICS AS SEEN FROM A DISTANCE

If we're going to have a meaningful discussion about hermeneutics, we'd better first come to some agreement on the meaning of the term we're discussing. Few subjects have as chameleon-like characteristics as the term *hermeneutics*. Each standard reference gives a somewhat different picture. *The New Schaff-Herzog Encyclopedia of Religious Knowledge* (New York: Funk & Wagnalls, 1909) has a "see" reference to *Exegesis or Hermeneutics*, and devotes 11 double-columned encyclopedia-sized pages under five major categories and 28 minor ones, with a 45-item bibliography.

The opening sentence states: "Biblical exegesis or hermeneutics is the first of four departments of theological science (interpretative, historical, dogmatic, practical); its function is the interpretation of Scripture." The third and fourth sentences are: "Understanding is achieved either directly by *simple apprehension* or mediated by a process...(in order) that it may be learned in its *limits, essence and causes*."

The term comes from the Greek *hermeneutike* ("interpretation"), and Plato first used the technical term "hermeneutics" to express the art of rightly apprehending and setting forth "the *etymology* and value of a given word." Its early Christian meaning was "to translate from a foreign tongue"; in support it cites John 1:38, 41-42, presumably because the word "translated" appears three times there. Among the Church Fathers, this meaning became nuanced as "to *explicate*."

The Oxford English Dictionary bears out the explicatory sense. Under s.v. *Hermeneut* it refers to a person in the early Church who interpreted "the service to worshipers who used a different language." Under *Hermeneutics*, the definition is: "The art or science of *interpretation*. Commonly distinguished from *Exegesis* or practical exposition."

The first dated quotation in the *O.E.D.* is 1737, a highly critical one from Waterland *Eucharist* (ed. 2), p. 315: "Taking much liberties with sacred Writ, as are by no means allowable upon any known rules of just and sober hermeneuticks" [sic].

An 1839 citation referred to Longe's great work on biblical hermeneutics. In 1843, S. Davidson (*Sacr. Hermeneut.* I, L) referred to "the meaning of all language, written or spoken, is developed by the application of general laws, usually termed hermeneutics." Another critical citation, dated 1871, was from [the anthropological classic] Taylor *Prim. Cult.* I 287: "No legend is safe from the hermeneutics of a thorough-going mythologic theorist."

S.v. *Hermeneutical* the *O.E.D.* includes a gem that speaks of "uncandid hermeneutical dexterity." A solid historical approach to modern theory is the 1837 Hallam *His. Lit. ii, III*, ¶67: "The Lutherans extol Gerhard, and especially Glass, author of *Philologia Sacra*." [If you are interested in more on the continental contributions to work in England, cf. my *The Bible—its Criticism, Interpretation, and use—in 16th and 17th Century England*.]

The *Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church* second ed. (London: Oxford, 1974) gives a remarkably balanced overview on Hermeneutics in less than a column, starting with the middle of the seventeenth century. It states that "although the Latin term *hermeneutica* dates from then, "the English form 'Hermeneutics' is found only in the eighteenth century. It credits F.D.E. Schleiermacher (1768-1834) [who incidentally translated Plato's works] with "giving new prominence in modern times to the act of correctly understanding the speech of others, especially in Christian theology in relation to communication by speech of the consciousness of God." Building on Schleiermacher's work, W. Dilthey and M. Heidegger broadened "philosophical analysis of understanding to include all expressions of man's awareness, especially as a socially and historically conditioned being."

Richard N. Soulen's *Handbook of Biblical Criticism* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1976) throws into a single batch: *Hermeneutics*; (*The New*) *Hermeneutic*, *Hermeneutic Problem: Hermeneutic Circle*; (and) *Hermeneutic Principle*; as its topic heading. It opens: "Hermeneutics is variously defined, from a theory of interpretation to a phenomenology (description) of understanding." It adds that Hermeneutics "in practice goes back to antiquity...the NT depicts Jesus employing contemporary rabbinic rules of interpretation," as does Paul on the significance of Jesus. From the Church Fathers through the Middle Ages, four levels of meaning were attributed to the biblical text: the *literal*, the *allegorical*, the *anagogic* and the *topological*. It was in the seventeenth century, that the term

Hermeneutics as the name of a field of inquiry originated. Friedrich Schleiermacher, following the canons of universal reason attempted to overcome the division between sacred and secular hermeneutics by outlining a *General Hermeneutics* and a *Special Hermeneutics*, the former devoted to general principles applicable to the interpretation of all languages and writing, the latter to particular books and classes of writings (prophecy, allegory, parable, etc.). This distinction permitted the interpretation of Scripture in the same manner as all other literature, and yet left open the question of its historical and religious uniqueness.

Soulen continues with well-balanced individual treatments of all the topics he had lumped together in the title of his article. Nevertheless, the more you read on the subject, the more you become convinced of the wisdom in Fox's warning to "keep to Biblical language!" But there's the challenge. As soon as we begin to make sense of biblical content, or even our impressions about something we've read, we begin to attach meaning to our experience and understanding. When it comes to the Bible, we have no choice but to do hermeneutics; the question is whether we will do interpretation poorly or well.