

PRINCIPLES OF BIBLICAL INTERPRETATION

Sacred Hermeneutics

Annotated

Louis Berkhof



Ligature

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PUBLISHER'S PREFACE

Louis Berkhof (1873–1957) was a pastor, professor, seminary president, and one of the most widely read Reformed theologians of the twentieth century. His ordered style helped generations of ministers and students move from close reading to clear theological judgment.

First published in 1950, *Principles of Biblical Interpretation* presents Berkhof's mature account of sacred hermeneutics. The book surveys the history of interpretation before treating grammatical, historical, and theological interpretation in detail. Its compact form joins a broad field of study to practical rules for reading difficult texts.

This edition follows the first edition. Ligature transcribed and proofed the text against that setting. We corrected recorded transcription faults and clear printer errors. We preserved Berkhof's wording, structure, examples, questions, exercises, and original argument.

Ligature added seven chapter study guides. Each guide contains a summary, key terms, passages for further study, review questions, and interpretation exercises. We also prepared a detailed contents section, rebuilt the Scripture and General Indexes for this pagination, consolidated Berkhof's reading lists, and added a sourced biography and selected bibliography.

These additions help readers follow the book's structure and continue their study. They remain separate from Berkhof's original text.

—The Editors
Ligature Press

PREFACE

Much of the present day confusion in the realm of religion, and in the application of Biblical principles, stems from distorted interpretation and misinterpretation of God's Word. That is true even in those circles which adhere unwaveringly to the infallibility of Holy Scriptures.

We are convinced that the adoption and use of sound principles of interpretation in the study of the Bible will prove surprisingly fruitful. We believe that this is one means which "the Spirit of truth" is pleased to use in leading His people "into all truth." It is with this in mind that we offer this book for individual guidance in the study of Scriptures, and particularly for use in seminaries and Bible schools. The early adoption of valid procedure in Biblical interpretation will lead the devoted kingdom worker to a life of useful service for the advancement of God's kingdom.

—The Publishers

I. INTRODUCTION

The word Hermeneutics is derived from the Greek word HERMENEUTIKE which, in turn, is derived from the verb HERMENEUO. Plato was the first to employ HE HERMENEUTIKE (sc. TECHNE) as a technical term. Hermeneutics is, properly, the art of TO HERMENEUEIN, but now designates the theory of that art. We may define as follows: Hermeneutics is the science that teaches us the principles, laws, and methods of interpretation.

We must distinguish between general and special Hermeneutics. The former applies to the interpretation of all kinds of writings; the latter to that of certain definite kinds of literary productions, such as laws, history, prophecy, poetry. Hermeneutica Sacra has a very special character, because it deals with a book that is unique in the realm of literature, viz., with the Bible as the inspired Word of God. It is only when we recognize the principle of the divine inspiration of the Bible that we can maintain the theological character of Hermeneutica Sacra.

Hermeneutics is usually studied with a view to the interpretation of the literary productions of the past. Its special task is to point out the way in which the differences or the distance between an author and his readers may be removed. It teaches us that this is properly accomplished only by the readers' transposing themselves into the time and spirit of the author. In the study of the Bible, it is not sufficient that we understand the meaning of the secondary authors (Moses, Isaiah, Paul, John, etc.); we must learn to know the mind of the Spirit.

The necessity of the study of hermeneutics follows from several considerations:

- (1) Sin darkened the understanding of man, and still exercises a pernicious influence on his conscious mental life. Therefore, special efforts must be made to guard against error.
- (2) Men differ from one another in many ways that naturally cause them to drift apart mentally. They differ, for instance,
 - (a) in intellectual capacity, aesthetic taste, and moral quality resulting in a lack of spiritual affinity:
 - (b) in intellectual attainment, some being educated, and others uneducated; and
 - (c) in nationality, with a corresponding difference in language, forms of thought, customs, and morals.

The study of Hermeneutics is very important for future ministers of the Gospel, because:

- (1) The intelligent study of the Bible only will furnish them with the material which they need for the construction of their theology.
- (2) Every sermon they preach ought to rest on a solid exegetical foundation. This is one of the greatest desiderata of the present day.
- (3) In instructing the young people of the Church, and in family visitation, they are often called upon unexpectedly to interpret passages of Scripture. On such occasions, a fair understanding of the laws of interpretation will aid them materially.
- (4) It will be a part of their duty to defend the truth over against the assaults of higher criticism. But in order to do this effectively, they must know how to handle it.

In the Encyclopaedia of Theology, Hermeneutics belongs to the Bibliological group of studies, that is, to those studies that center about the Bible. It naturally follows the Philologia Sacra, and immediately precedes Exegesis. Hermeneutics and Exegesis are related to each other as theory and practice. The one is a science, the other an art.

In this study on Hermeneutics, we deem it necessary to include the following in the order here given:

- (1) A brief outline of the history of Hermeneutical principles. The past may teach us many things both negatively and positively.
- (2) A description of those characteristics of the Bible that determine, in measure, the principles that are to be applied in its interpretation.
- (3) An indication of the qualities that should characterize, and of the requirements that are essential in an interpreter of the Bible.
- (4) A discussion of the threefold interpretation of the Bible, namely,
 - (a) the Grammatical, including the logical interpretation; (b) the Historical, including also the psychological interpretation; and
 - (b) the Theological interpretation.

Questions: What is the difference between Hermeneutics and Exegetics? Are general and special Hermeneutics mutually exclusive or does the one in some sense include the other? In what respect did sin disturb the mental life of man? Why should we apply a threefold interpretation to the Bible?

CHAPTER I STUDY GUIDE

CHAPTER SUMMARY

Berkhof defines hermeneutics as the science of interpretation. Sacred hermeneutics applies that work to Scripture as God's inspired Word. The interpreter must bridge differences of time, language, culture, and thought. He must seek the human author's meaning and the mind of the Holy Spirit. Berkhof therefore places hermeneutics between the study of biblical language and the practice of exegesis.

The chapter also explains why interpretation requires discipline. Sin affects human judgment. Readers differ in knowledge, culture, ability, and moral character. Ministers need sound interpretation for theology, preaching, teaching, pastoral care, and defense of the faith. Berkhof's full method has three parts: grammatical, historical, and theological interpretation.

KEY TERMS

- **Hermeneutics:** The principles and methods used to interpret a text.
- **Exegesis:** The act of drawing out a text's meaning by using sound interpretive principles.
- **General hermeneutics:** Principles that apply to many kinds of writing.
- **Special hermeneutics:** Principles that apply to a specific kind of writing.
- **Sacred hermeneutics:** The interpretation of the Bible as inspired Scripture.
- **Grammatical interpretation:** Study of words, sentences, and the flow of thought.
- **Historical interpretation:** Study of the author, readers, setting, and occasion.
- **Theological interpretation:** Study of a passage within the unity and doctrine of Scripture.

SCRIPTURE FOR FURTHER STUDY

- Luke 24:25–27, 44–47: Christ opens the Scriptures and places each part within the redemptive whole.
- Acts 17:10–12: The Bereans test teaching by Scripture.
- 1 Cor. 2:10–16: Spiritual truth requires the Spirit’s work and careful judgment.
- 2 Tim. 2:14–15: The minister must handle the word of truth accurately.
- 2 Pet. 3:15–18: Scripture can be distorted by unstable readers.

REVIEW AND DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. How does hermeneutics differ from exegesis?
2. Why does the doctrine of inspiration affect the method of interpretation?
3. Which forms of distance separate a modern reader from a biblical author?
4. How does sin affect interpretation without making sound interpretation impossible?
5. Why must preaching rest on exegesis rather than on a useful theme?
6. What error follows when grammatical, historical, or theological interpretation is omitted?

PRACTICAL INTERPRETATION EXERCISES

1. Read Phil. 2:1–11. Write one grammatical, one historical, and one theological question about the passage.
2. Compare Luke 4:16–30 with Isa. 61:1–2. List what the historical setting adds to your reading.
3. Choose one sermon you have heard. Identify its main claim. Test whether the claim arises from the sermon text.
4. Write two assumptions you bring to a difficult passage. Mark each assumption as doctrinal, cultural, or personal.
5. Explain 2 Tim. 2:15 in one paragraph. Distinguish interpretation from application.

II. HISTORY OF HERMENEUTICAL PRINCIPLES AMONG THE JEWS

A. DEFINITION OF HISTORY OF HERMENEUTICS

We must distinguish between the history of Hermeneutics as a science and the history of Hermeneutical principles. The former would have to begin with the year 1567 A.D., when Flacius Illyricus made the first attempt at a scientific treatment of Hermeneutics; while the latter takes its start at the very beginning of the Christian era.

A history of Hermeneutical principles seeks to answer three questions;

- (1) What was the prevailing view respecting the Scriptures?
- (2) What was the prevalent conception of the method of interpretation?
- (3) What qualifications were regarded as essential in an interpreter of the Bible?

The first two questions are of a more perennial character than the last one, and naturally require a greater amount of attention.

B. PRINCIPLES OF INTERPRETATION AMONG THE JEWS

For the sake of completeness, a brief statement is given of the principles which the Jews applied in the interpretation of the Bible. The following classes of Jews must be distinguished.

1. THE PALESTINIAN JEWS

These had a profound respect for the Bible as the infallible Word of God. They regarded even the letters as holy, and their copyists were in the habit of counting them, lest any of them should be lost in transcription. At the same time, they held the Law in far greater esteem than the Prophets and the Holy Writings. Hence the interpretation of the Law was their great objective. They carefully distinguished between the mere literal sense of the Bible (technically called *peshat*) and its exposition of exegesis (*midrash*). "One controlling motive and feature of *midrash* was to investigate and elucidate, by all exegetical means at command, all possible hidden meanings and applications of Scripture" (Oesterley and Box, *The Religion and worship of the Synagogue*, p. 75.f.). In a broad sense, the *Midrashic* literature may be divided into two classes:

- (a) interpretations of a legal character, dealing with matters of binding law in a strict legalistic sense (Halakhah), and
- (b) interpretations of a free and more edifying tendency, covering all the non-legal parts of Scripture (Haggadah). The latter were homiletical and illustrative rather than exegetical. One of the great weaknesses of the interpretation of the Scribes is due to the fact that it exalted the Oral Law, which is, in the last analysis, identical with the inferences of the rabbis, as a necessary support of the Written Law, and finally used it as a means to set the Written Law aside. This gave rise to all manner of arbitrary interpretation. Notice the verdict of Christ in Mark 7:13.

Hillel was one of the greatest interpreters of the Jews. He left us seven rules of interpretation by which, at least in appearance, oral tradition could be deduced from the data of the Written Law. These rules, in their briefest form, are as follows: (a) light and heavy (that is, a minore ad majus, and vice versa); (b) “equivalence”; (c) deduction from special to general; (d) an inference from several passages; (e) inferences from the general to the special; (f) analogy from another passage; and (g) an inference from the context.

2. THE ALEXANDRIAN JEWS

Their interpretation was determined more or less by the philosophy of Alexandria. They adopted the fundamental principle of Plato that one should not believe anything that is unworthy of God. And whenever they found things in the Old Testament that did not agree with their philosophy and that offended their sense of propriety, they resorted to allegorical interpretations. Philo was the great master of this method of interpretation among the Jews. He did not altogether reject the literal sense of Scripture, but regarded it as a concession to the weak. For him, it was merely a symbol of far deeper things. The hidden meaning of Scripture was the all-important one. He, too, left us some principles of interpretation. “Negatively, he says that the literal sense must be excluded when anything is stated that is unworthy of God;—when otherwise a contradiction would be involved;—and when Scripture itself allegorizes. Positively, the text is to be allegorized, when expressions are doubled; when superfluous words are used; when there is a repetition of facts already known; when an expression is varied; when synonyms are employed; when a play of words is possible in any of its varieties; when words admit of a slight alteration; when the expression is unusual; when there is anything abnormal in the number or tense” (Farrar, *History of Interpretation*, p. 22). These rules naturally opened the way for

all kinds of misinterpretations. For examples, cf. Farrar, *History*, p. 139 ff.; Gilbert, *Interpretation of the Bible*, pp. 44–54.

3. THE KARAITES

This sect, designated by Farrar “the Protestants of Judaism,” was founded by Anan ben David about 800 A.D. With a view to their fundamental characteristic, they may be regarded as the spiritual descendants of the Sadducees. They represent a protest against Rabbinism that was partly influenced by Mohammedanism. The Hebrew form of the word “Karaites” is Beni Mikra—“Sons of reading.” They were so called because their fundamental principle was to regard Scripture as the sole authority in matters of faith. This meant, on the one hand, a disregard of oral tradition and of rabbinical interpretation, and, on the other, a new and careful study of the text of Scripture. In order to refute them, the Rabbis undertook a similar study, and the outcome of this literary conflict was the Massoretic text. Their exegesis was, on the whole, far sounder than that of either the Palestinian or Alexandrian Jews.

4. THE CABBALISTS

The Cabbalist movement of the twelfth century was of a far different nature. It really represents the *reductio ad absurdum* of the method of interpretation employed by the Jews of Palestine, though it also employed the allegorical method of the Alexandrian Jews. They proceeded on the assumption that the whole Massorah, even down to the verses, words, letters, vowel-points and accents, was delivered to Moses on Mount Sinai; and that the “numbers of the letters, every single letter, the transposition, the substitution, had a special, even a supernatural power.” In their attempt to unlock the divine mysteries, they resorted to the following methods:

- (a) Gematria, according to which they could substitute for a given biblical word another that had the same numerical value;
- (b) Notarikon, which consisted in forming words by the combination of initial and terminal letters, or by regarding each letter of a word as the initial letter of other words; and
- (c) Temoorah, denoting a method of evolving new meanings by an interchange of letters. For examples, cf. Farrar, p. 98ff.; Gilbert, p. 18ff.

5. THE SPANISH JEWS

From the twelfth to the fifteenth centuries, a more healthy method of interpretation developed among the Jews of Spain. When the exegesis of the Christian Church was at a low ebb, and the knowledge of Hebrew was almost lost, a few learned Jews

on the Pyrenaeen Peninsula restored the light to the candlestick. Some of their interpretations are quoted up to the present day. The principal exegetes among them were Abr. Aben-Ezra, Sal. Izaak Jarchi, David Kimchi, Izaak Aberbanel, and Elias Levita. From these Jewish scholars, Nicolas de Lyra and Reuchlin received great aid.

Questions: How did Rabbinical Judaism conceive of the inspiration of the Bible? Why did the Jews ascribe unique significance to the Law? What did they teach about the origin of the Oral Law? How did it really originate, and of what did it consist? What is the Mishnah? the Gemara? the Talmud? How does the Jewish use of tradition compare with that of the Roman Catholics? What is the difference between an allegory and allegorical interpretation? What is the Massorah? How must we account for the Cabbalistic movement? Did the Jewish interpreters of the fifteenth century affect the Reformation in any way?