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COLLEGE



TEXTBOOK (ACADEMIC VERSION) DEVELOPING SOUND HERMENEUTICS

COURSE: DEVELOPING SOUND HERMENEUTICS (BT640)

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DEVELOPING SOUND HERMENEUTICS

THE SCIENCE AND ART OF
BIBLICAL INTERPRETATION

Second Edition
Revised and Expanded

Dr. Ian A. H. Bond

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FOREWORD

by Frank R. Babish, B.A., M.S.Ed., Th.D.

Christians know by faith that God's desire is that we all come to recognize He has spoken to us by His Word. There are but few who do not accept the Holy Scriptures as the words inspired by the Holy Spirit. However, what is not universally accepted is "what He meant by what He said." This has resulted in various interpretations of His Word which have caused division in the Body of Christ.

All doctrines are set forth from interpretation of the Word, and the difficulty that has arisen is not over revelation and inspiration but rather over interpretation and application. Hermeneutics is the art and science of biblical interpretation. It attempts to discover "what God meant by what He said" and explain this to others.

We believe the basic principle used in the interpretation of the Word is the literary method. This principle was used in the writing of Scripture and is the predominant guide in the interpreting of Scripture. Other sacred principles and laws of interpretation are revealed in the Word of God. When these are correctly applied, we are able to understand the meaning of what was said. However, when these laws principles are not correctly applied, misinterpretation and misunderstanding occurs.

The author, Dr. Ian A. H. Bond, has discovered these laws and principles. He has set forth in this book knowledge which will aid every student of the Word. With this knowledge, students will discover the many hidden treasures and truths unrecognizable without the application of these principles.

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

In his account of the walk of the risen Lord with the two disciples on the way to Emmaus, Luke tells us that Jesus, “beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them the things about himself in all the scriptures” (Luke 24:27, NRSV). The word here translated *interpreted* is the Greek word διερμηνεύω, *diermeneuo*. This is a compound of the verb ἐρμηνεύω, *hermeneuo*, meaning to explain in words, expound, and the prefix διά, *dia*, which means through, and is used to denote the ground or reason by which something is or is not done. *Hermeneuo* is derived from the Greek name *Hermes*, who was the messenger and interpreter of the gods. It came to denote explaining the meaning of words in a different language. According to Strong it means “to translate what has been spoken or written in a foreign tongue into the vernacular.”¹ Swanson understands the verb to mean “translate, interpret, explain, give the meaning.”² In both the broader field of literary criticism and the narrower discipline of biblical studies, “hermeneutics” means the science and art of textual interpretation.

The word “revelation” is derived from the Greek word

¹ James Strong, *The Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible*, electronic ed. (Ontario: Woodside Bible Fellowship, 1996), G2059.

² James Swanson, *Dictionary of Biblical Languages With Semantic Domains: Greek (New Testament)*, electronic ed. (Oak Harbor: Logos Research Systems, Inc., 1997), DBLG 2257.

᾽αποκάλυψις, *apokalupsis*, which means unveiling, disclosure. Revelation signifies God unveiling Himself to mankind. Paul Enns argues that the fact that revelation has occurred renders theology possible.³ Systematic theologians identify two streams of divine self-disclosure—general and special revelation. General revelation is God disclosing certain truths about His nature to all mankind. Nature is the most obvious demonstration of general revelation (Psa. 19:1–6; Rom. 1:18–21). Enns points out that general revelation, “although not adequate to procure salvation, is nonetheless an important antecedent to salvation.”⁴ *Special revelation* is restricted to Jesus Christ and the Scriptures. Wayne Grudem defines special revelation as “God’s words addressed to specific people, such as the words of the Bible, the words of the Old Testament prophets and New Testament apostles, and the words of God spoken in personal address, such as at Mount Sinai or at the baptism of Jesus.”⁵

The phrase “the Word of God” has several different meanings: (1) a person: Jesus Christ, (2) speech by God, (3) words of personal address, (4) speech through human lips, and (5) God’s words in written form (the Bible). That God has spoken in the Bible is the very heart of the Christian faith and without this conviction we would be left to *human* knowledge with its relativism and uncertainties. If *revelation* knowledge is embodied in the Scriptures, this demands that the primary need for hermeneutics is to ascertain what God has said and revealed in the Scriptures—to determine the meaning of the Word of God. Students have sometimes asked me, “Why do we need to adhere to a system of rules in studying the Bible?” We need to know and apply the correct methodology of biblical interpretation so that we do not confuse the voice of God with the voice of man. The second great need for hermeneutics is to bridge the gap between our minds and the minds of the biblical writers. The biblical writers lived in

³ Paul Enns, *Moody Handbook of Theology* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1989), 155.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 156.

⁵ Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 123.

a culture 2,000 to 3,000 years and 6,000 miles away from the biblical student in post-modern, twenty-first century America. There is the need to bridge the gaps of language, culture, geography and history.

To develop a sound hermeneutic framework, the interpreter must first determine the boundary of Scripture. This is determined by a study of the Canon. The term *canon* refers to “a group of books acknowledged by the early church as the rule of faith and practice.”⁶ In this volume the present writer has limited the scope of study to the Protestant canon.

After the Canon has been settled, the next task is to determine its truest text. This is the role of *historical criticism*, sometimes called *higher criticism*. “Higher” in contrast to “lower” refers to historical or literary criticism in contrast to lower or textual criticism. Unfortunately the term *higher criticism* has become synonymous with *radical criticism*, and so the term is now ambiguous. A basic understanding of higher and lower critical methodology is an essential tool for all serious students of the Bible. Textual or so-called lower criticism is the study of the many *variants* in the text of the Bible and the effort to *recover the original* text. George E. Ladd argues that Christians of every tradition “owe it to a critical scientific scholarship that we have in the last century achieved a trustworthy text.”⁷ Textual criticism does not ask, “Is the Word of God true?” Rather it asks: (1) What is the text of the Word of God? (2) How far can we re-establish the exact words through which God has revealed Himself? The related field of linguistic criticism is the study of the meaning of the very words in the New Testament.

Higher criticism begins with literary criticism, which is a critical *literary analysis* of the biblical books themselves. It answers questions about authorship, date, provenance or place of writing, sources, unity, etc. Form criticism (*Formgeschichte*) is defined by Robert H. Gundry as “the task of

⁶ McRay, J. R., “Bible, Canon of” in Walter Elwell, ed., *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2001), 155.

⁷ George E. Ladd, *The New Testament and Criticism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1967), 81.

inferring by literary analysis what the oral tradition about Jesus was like before it came to be written down.”⁸ The so-called *Kerygma* is the “living story of Jesus” that was passed on by oral tradition between A.D. 30 and 60. C. H. Dodd’s ground-breaking research in *The Apostolic Preaching and Its Development* (1936) reconstructs the outline of early Christian preaching. Source criticism is the study of the *literary* sources of behind the biblical books. Redaction criticism (*Redaktionsgeschichte*) is the study of the Gospels as *unified* compositions carefully redacted (*edited*) by their authors to project distinctive *theological* views. It identifies ways in which the evangelists tailored earlier materials (sources) about Jesus to the needs of their own times; thus Jesus’ words and deeds do not appear as fossils of dead history, but as applications to contemporary life.

There are two recent developments in postmodern higher critical studies are having a major influence on hermeneutics. Deconstruction criticism reflects the influence of literary deconstructionists who are convinced that no text is *stable* or *coherent*; that all texts are indeterminate in meaning and inevitably contain inherent contradictions. Kevin Vanhoozer warns, “Deconstruction is not a method of interpretation but a method for undoing interpretations, for exposing readings as functions of various ideological forces.”⁹ This leaves the thoughtful postmodern New Testament scholar with only two alternatives: (1) abandon any search for meaning in texts; or (2) find meaning in the interplay between the reader and contradictory ideas sparked by a text. Reader-response criticism insists that textual interpretation is neither author-centered nor text-centered, but *reader-centered*. D. A. Carson and Douglas Moo suggest that postmodern readers “are less interested in the hard lines drawn by truth and error, and more interested in the soft lines drawn by fuzziness and

⁸ Robert H. Gundry, *A Survey of the New Testament*, 4th ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003), 96.

⁹ Kevin J. Vanhoozer, “The Reader in New Testament Interpretation,” in *Hearing the New Testament*, ed. Joel B. Green (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 313–314.

interpretative possibilities.”¹⁰

All of the tools of lower and higher criticism have been applied in this volume. This should not be a cause for nervousness on the part of the reader. Ladd is right in explaining that the role of biblical criticism “is not to criticize the Word of God but to understand it.”¹¹ The present writer agrees with Carson and Moo that the approaches and historical developments surveyed have had some value. However, “Almost all of them have sometimes been deployed irresponsibly, primarily by claiming some kind of near-exclusive methodological control or by being married to deep-seated rationalism or even philosophical naturalism, both of which find it difficult to read the New Testament sympathetically on its own terms.”¹²

The process of biblical hermeneutics is as follows: the study of the canon determines the inspired books; the study of the text determines the wording of the books; the study of historical criticism gives us a framework of the books; hermeneutics gives us rules for the interpretation of the books; exegesis is the application of these rules to the books; and biblical theology is the result. The purpose of this book is to introduce students to this process and to establish the basic ground rules for the way in which God’s Word is to be interpreted and ministered. This task is achieved in three sections. Section one is an introduction to bibliology and a brief history of the biblical canon and the field of hermeneutics. Section two introduces basic theory, methodology, and practice of hermeneutics. Section three deals with three current issues in advanced hermeneutics: the debate over biblical inerrancy, the effects of Pentecostal and Charismatic theology and experience on hermeneutics, and the impact of deconstruction and reader-response criticism on biblical hermeneutics. Section one will be of interest especially to the general reader. Section two is aimed at Bible college students

¹⁰ D. A. Carson, D. A. and Douglas J. Moo, *An Introduction to the New Testament*. 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005), 62.

¹¹ Ladd, *New Testament and Criticism*, 81.

¹² Carson, D. A. and Douglas J. Moo, *An Introduction*, 74.

and undergraduate biblical studies majors in universities. Section three will be of interest primarily to seminary and graduate students. It is the present writer's prayerful desire that this book will help students to develop sound hermeneutics, which if applied will enable them to draw the wonders of revelation knowledge from the Bible both to enhance their own spiritual growth and to minister to others.

Part One

History of the Canon and the Discipline of Hermeneutics