



*Introduction to Biblical Hermeneutics*

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## Chapter 1

# Who Needs Hermeneutics Anyway?

MOISÉS SILVA



The term *hermeneutics* (as well as its more ambiguous and even mysterious cousin, *hermeneutic*) has become increasingly popular in recent decades. As a result, it has been pulled and stretched every which way. With so many writers using the word, it seems to behave as a moving target, and some readers have been known to suffer attacks of anxiety as they seek, in vain, to pin it down and figure out what it means.

Its traditional meaning is relatively simple: the discipline that deals with principles of interpretation. Some writers like to call it the *science* of interpretation; others prefer to speak of the *art* of interpretation (perhaps with the implication, “Either you’ve got it or you don’t!”). Apart from such differences of perspective, the basic concern of hermeneutics is plain enough. It remains to be added, however, that when writers use the word *hermeneutics*, most frequently what they have in mind is *biblical* interpretation. Even when some other text is being discussed, the Bible likely lurks in the background.

This last observation raises an interesting question. Why should such a discipline be needed at all? We never had to take a class on “How to Interpret the Newspaper.” No high school offers a course on “The Hermeneutics of Conversation.” For that matter, even with regard to courses on Shakespeare or Homer, which certainly deal with the interpretation of literature, no hermeneutics prerequisite is ever listed. Why then are we told, all of a sudden in our academic training, that we need to become proficient in an exotic-sounding science if we want to understand the Bible?

One possible answer that may occur to us is that the Bible is a divine book, and so we require special training to understand it. But this solution simply will not

work. As a Roman Catholic scholar has expressed it: “If anyone is able to speak in an absolutely unambiguous fashion and to make himself understood with irresistible efficacy, such a one is God; therefore, if there is any word that might not require a hermeneutics, it would be the divine word.”<sup>1</sup> Protestants, for that matter, have always emphasized the doctrine of the *perspicuity* or clarity of the Scriptures. The Bible itself tells us that the essential prerequisite for understanding the things of God is having the Spirit of God (1 Cor. 2:11) and that the Christian, having received the anointing of the Spirit, does not even need a teacher (1 John 2:27).

It turns out, in fact, that we need hermeneutics, not precisely because the Bible is a divine book, but because in addition to being divine, it is a *human* book. Strange though that may sound, such a way of looking at our problem can put us on the right track. Human language, by its very nature, is largely equivocal, that is, capable of being understood in more than one way. If it were not so, we would never doubt what people mean when they speak; if utterances could signify only one thing, we would hardly ever hear disputes about whether Johnny said this or that. In practice, to be sure, the number of words or sentences that create misunderstandings is a very small proportion of the total utterances by a given individual in a given day. What we need to appreciate, however, is that the *potential* for misinterpretation is almost always there.

To put it differently, we do need hermeneutics for texts other than the Bible. Indeed, we need principles of interpretation to understand trivial conversations and even nonlinguistic events—after all, the failure to understand someone’s wink of the eye could spell disaster in certain circumstances. But then we are back to our original question. Why were we not required to take hermeneutics in second grade?

Why is it that, in spite of that gap in our education, we almost always understand what our neighbor tells us?

The simple answer is that we *have* been taught hermeneutics all our lives, even from the day we were born. It may well be that the most important things we learn

are those that we learn unconsciously. In short, as you begin a course in hermeneutics, you may be assured that you already know quite well the most basic principles of interpretation. Every time you read the newspaper or hear a story or analyze an event, you prove yourself to be a master in the art of hermeneutics!

That is perhaps a dangerous thing to say. You may be tempted to close this “useless” book immediately and return it to the bookstore, hoping to get your money back. Yet the point needs to be made and emphasized. Other than enjoying a right

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1. Luis Alonso-Schökel, *Hermenéutica de la Palabra* (Madrid: Crisandad, 1986), 1:83.

The problem grows if there are significant linguistic and cultural differences between the speaker (or writer) and the hearer (or reader). Suppose that, having only a basic acquaintance with Shakespeare's writings, we decide to tackle *Othello*. From time to time we would come across passages containing words that we have never seen before or that seem to have very unusual meanings. For example:

*If I do prove her haggard,  
Though that her jesses were my dear heart-strings  
I'd whistle her off and let her down the wind  
To prey at fortune.... (3.3.260–63)*

Even after we find out that *haggard* = "hawk" and that *jesses* = "fastenings," we may find it quite difficult to figure out Othello's meaning, namely, that should his wife be shown to be unfaithful, he would allow his heart to be broken by letting her go.

Consider a more puzzling problem. Earlier in the play the duke of Venice and some senators are discussing recent news regarding a Turkish fleet, but there is considerable discrepancy regarding the number of galleys involved. The duke then says:

*I do not so secure me in the error,  
But the main article I do approve  
In fearful sense. (1.3.10–12)*

What may baffle us about a passage such as this one is that all the words are familiar to us—indeed, even the meanings of those words approximate modern usage—yet the total meaning seems to escape us. Unless we are quite familiar with Shakespearean literature, it may take us a while to interpret this statement correctly: in modern prose, "The fact that there is a discrepancy in the accounts gives me no sense of security; it is with alarm that I must give credence to the main point of the story."

The most insidious problems, however, arise when a word or phrase is familiar and the meaning we attach to it makes sense in the context, yet our ignorance about the history of the language misleads us. When Iago reports something that Cassio said in his sleep, Othello calls it monstrous. Iago reminds Othello that it was only a dream, to which the latter responds: "But this denoted a foregone conclusion" (3.3.429). In our day, the expression *a foregone conclusion* means "an inevitable result," and it is possible to make some sense of the passage if we take that to be the meaning here. In Elizabethan times, however, the expression simply meant "a previous experience"; Othello believes that what Cassio said in his sleep reflects something that had indeed taken place.

These are the kinds of difficulties we encounter when reading a work written in our own language and produced within the general Western culture of which we are a part. When we approach the Bible, however, we see a book written neither in English nor in a modern language closely related to English. Moreover, we are faced with a text that is far removed from us in place and in time. It would indeed