

A BRIEF HISTORY OF HERMENEUTICS

I. Rabbis

- A. The Rabbis guarded the meaning of the Old Testament
- B. F.W. Farrar gives credit to Ezra as one of the first interpreters of scripture, translating the Hebrew and Aramaic in ways to expound the sense of the Old Testament scriptures during the Babylonian captivity
- C. The priests were the original keepers (Guardians) of the law; but as esteem for the law grew, so did the need for full time, professional interpreters. This gave rise to the scribes, or professional students of the law. (International Society Bible Encyclopedia)
- D. Nehemiah 8:8 by reading the law “distinctly” Hebrew word parish the law was made clear by revelation, explanation, or translation. The result was that the people had understanding or insight.

II. Apostolic Period/Early Church

- A. The apostles were not able to exercise the strictness in guarding the New Testament scripture that the rabbis were with the OT. 2 Peter 3:15-16 - Unlearned and unstable individuals were “wresting” the scriptures. To wrest is a method to twist or wrench limbs for torturing people on a rack. This word is used figuratively to distort, twist, or misinterpret words into a false meaning - see also 2 Pe. 2:1; Jude 1:4
- B. Heresy was a problem in the early church. 2 Ti. 2:14-17; 1 Ti. 1:19-20
 - 1. The influence of Greek allegorization
 - a) This school of thought deemphasized the literal meaning of the texts of scripture as being for the unlearned. The emphasized seeking an underlying spiritual or “higher” meaning.
 - b) Allegory was the result of a synthesis of biblical study and Greek philosophy
 - c) Clement of Alexandria and Origen of Alexandria were some of the major proponents

C. DANGERS OF ALLEGORY

- 1. Satanic attempt to distort the meaning of God’s word
 - a) Gen 3:1-5 - *“Now the serpent was more subtil than any beast of the field which the LORD God had made. And he said unto the woman, Yea, hath God said, Ye shall not eat of every tree of the garden? And the woman said unto the serpent, We may eat of the fruit of the trees of the garden: But of the fruit of the tree which [is] in the midst of the garden, God hath said, Ye shall not eat of it, neither shall ye touch it, lest ye die. And the serpent said unto the woman, Ye shall not surely die: For God doth know that in the day ye eat thereof, then your eyes shall be opened, and ye shall be as gods, knowing good and evil.”*
 - b) Mat 4:5-7 - *“Then the devil taketh him up into the holy city, and setteth him on a pinnacle of the temple, And saith unto him, If thou be the Son of God, cast thyself down: for it is written, He shall give his angels charge concerning thee: and in [their] hands they shall bear thee up, lest at any time thou dash thy foot against a stone. Jesus said unto him, It is written again, Thou shalt not tempt the Lord thy God.”*
 - c) 2Co 11:1-4 - *‘Would to God ye could bear with me a little in [my] folly: and indeed bear with me. For I am jealous over you with godly jealousy: for I have espoused you to one husband, that I may present [you as] a chaste virgin to Christ. But I fear, lest by any means, as the serpent beguiled Eve through his subtilty, so your minds should be corrupted from the simplicity that is in*

Christ. For if he that cometh preacheth another Jesus, whom we have not preached, or [if] ye receive another spirit, which ye have not received, or another gospel, which ye have not accepted, ye might well bear with [him].”

- d) 2Pe 2:1 -“*But there were false prophets also among the people, even as there shall be false teachers among you, who privily shall bring in damnable heresies, even denying the Lord that bought them, and bring upon themselves swift destruction.*”
- e) 2Pe 3:15-16 -“*And account [that] the longsuffering of our Lord [is] salvation; even as our beloved brother Paul also according to the wisdom given unto him hath written unto you; 16 As also in all [his] epistles, speaking in them of these things; in which are some things hard to be understood, which they that are unlearned and unstable wrest, as [they do] also the other scriptures, unto their own destruction.*”

III. Later Church Fathers

- A. This period saw a marriage of allegorization and an emphasis on church authority
 - 1. Jerome, Vincent, and Augustine played a significant role
 - 2. Scriptures were allegorized and biblical doctrine was twisted to provide the “church” with a basis for its authority

IV. Middle Ages

- A. “As Mickelsen observed, ‘the Middle Ages was a vast desert so far as biblical interpretation is concerned;’ (Interpreting the Bible, p. 35)
- B. “During this period the principle was generally accepted that any interpretation of a biblical text must adapt itself to the tradition and doctrine of the church. The source of dogmatic theology was not the Bible alone, but the Bible as interpreted by church tradition.” - Dr. Stephen Lewis
- C. John Wycliffe lost his life opposing this unbiblical view of the authority of the Catholic Church

V. The Reformation (1518-1550)

- A. This was a time period noted for a return to a literal interpretation of the biblical texts
 - 1. Martin Luther - “...when I was a monk, I was an expert in allegories. I allegorized everything. But after lecturing on the Epistle to the Romans I have come to have knowledge of Christ. For therein I saw that Christ is no allegory and I learned to know what Christ is.” - Lewis
 - 2. Calvin held to a literal interpretation as well. He believed that illumination was the necessary preparation for the interpreter of God’s word. He rejected allegorical interpretation calling it “Satanic, because it led men away from the truth of Scripture” and asserted that “Scripture interprets scripture” - Thomas
- B. This return to the principles of a literal interpretation of scripture led many to break from the Roman Catholic Church

VI. Post-Reformation (1550-1800)

- A. During this time there were various reactions to the literal interpretation of scripture advocated by Calvinism
 - 1. Arminianism, Mysticism, Pietism, and Wesleyanism emphasized experience
 - 2. Textual Criticism and attacks against the literal interpretation began to gain momentum during this time
 - 3. Rationalism stated that if the scriptures make sense to our human way of thinking it is valid if not then it is to be disregarded - reason is divorced from theology
- B. This period set the foundation for a skeptical view of scripture

VII. Modern Era (1800-Present)

- A. The skepticism that developed in the post-reformation era led to further hermeneutical errors
 - 1. Subjectivism - emphasized how the Bible made you feel
 - 2. Historical Criticism - discounted the supernatural accounts found in the Bible
 - 3. Liberalism - the Bible is a book written by men and has no divine origin
 - 4. Neo-orthodoxy - The Bible is not God's word but it "becomes" the Word