

A Short Introduction
to
Hermeneutics

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Preface

This short introduction to hermeneutics has grown directly out of years of classroom teaching, mainly in the University of Glasgow and most recently in the University of Iowa. In the last two years, the Department of Theology and Religious Studies at Glasgow has developed a distance-taught degree in religious studies, and this proved to be a golden opportunity to set my increasingly dog-eared lecture notes out into a more comprehensible, ordered, and up-to-date form. That is the immediate basis for this book.

It is, therefore, very modest in its aims and objectives (to use the ghastly “quality assurance” parlance of the modern university). Its scholarship is, I trust, well founded, but it makes absolutely no claims to originality. Indeed, quite the opposite, for my aim is to give the reader a good grounding in the basic issues and in historical information on which further thought and reading may be built. It is limited very largely to the Western Christian tradition and its roots in the interpretation of the Bible.

Generations of students have contributed ideas, and I thank all of them! My colleagues in Glasgow, Marije Althorf, Darlene Bird, Andrew Hass (now of the University of Stirling), and Sarah Nicholson, have helped me teach this material at one time or another, and especial thanks go to them. Dr. Nicholson, in particular, was the genius behind the distance-taught degree, and has labored valiantly over lecture notes to make them comprehensible and coherent outside the walls of the traditional classroom.

For most recent help, I must thank Professor David E. Klemm and his colleagues in the Department of Religious Studies at the University of Iowa. The bestowal on me of an Ida Cordelia Beam Visiting Professorship in the spring semester of 2003 gave me the space and time actually to write the book and put it into its present expanded form.

The German nineteenth-century theologian and scholar Friedrich Schleiermacher reminds us that the task of hermeneutics is never finished. Reading is an art as much as writing, and a skill with many parts. This book is just a first step along the road, but one that will, I hope, set the reader in the right direction with a little more confidence and mindful of the company of many who have gone before and acquired a little wisdom in their travels.

The New Revised Standard Version of the Bible is used throughout.

Introduction

Donald K. McKim begins the Introduction to his book *A Guide to Contemporary Hermeneutics* (1986) with a fine understatement that is nevertheless profoundly true! “To launch into the field of hermeneutics is a major undertaking.” The student of the present book will encounter issues in a bewildering range of intellectual disciplines, frequently, it seems, at odds with one another: historical inquiry, literary studies, philosophy, theology, and more. This small work is intended only as a brief introduction to this hermeneutical minefield, but I hope a useful one, inasmuch as it seeks to provide the reader who has little or no prior knowledge of the subject with a map that will enable him or her to get around a little more easily as the going becomes tougher later on. Its background is largely limited to the Western Christian tradition and its ways of reading the Bible, as a way to more general questions about texts and reading and the issues facing us in our contemporary cultural situations. It makes no claims to be more than a beginning, but it will, I trust, provide a good foundation for the future. As important as any information that it contains are the questions it poses. It must be made clear from the start, however, that to these there are no final or correct answers.

“Hermeneutics” is not a word we use in everyday English, but it is a useful technical term to describe our understanding of the nature of texts and how we interpret and use them, especially with respect to the Bible, a collection of ancient texts with distinctive

and abiding authority. How we read and understand the Bible has constantly changed across the millennia of its history in both the Jewish and Christian traditions. Indeed, the problem of hermeneutics begins actually *in* the Bible itself, as we shall see, and part of this book will be a sort of Bible study. It will look at the way in which it is impossible to read the Bible without acknowledging that processes of interpretation are going on even in the canon of Scripture. It is pretty clear, for example, that the author of Matthew's Gospel is reading and interpreting the Gospel of Mark and adapting it for his own theological purposes, and that all four Gospels are different "interpretations" of the life and passion of Jesus. In the Hebrew Bible (that is the term I prefer to use for what is also broadly known as the Old Testament, which implies the Christian interpretation of an originally Jewish collection of documents), books are continually interpreting and reinterpreting one another.

For instance, 1 and 2 Chronicles are essentially a rewriting of the books of Kings to suit a different culture, and different theological and even different ethical requirements. We need to be aware of what is happening in such a process. Part of this process is also the history of the development of the *canon* of Scripture, to which some attention will be given. Understanding a book is not simply a matter of looking at how it was *written*, but also the history of how it has been *read* and accepted as authoritative.

The aim of this book is to give students an understanding of the importance of hermeneutical reflection for religious thought and understanding in the broad context of the Bible and later Christian theology, noting the historical and philosophical contexts of the subject as it develops from the earliest days of the Christian church to the present day. It offers a general introduction to the history of Christian hermeneutical inquiry, and it will also provide a theoretical basis for beginning to understand the processes of hermeneutics in different faith traditions, such as Judaism and Islam. These are only very briefly alluded to, and the reader should not expect anything like comprehensive descriptions of the huge range of hermeneutical possibilities that lie outside the limited parameters of this small book. But we shall see, for example,

how at least an awareness of them can indicate that the Christian and Western understanding of such terms as “text,” “reading,” and “meaning” is actually quite limited and by no means should be taken as universal or absolute. When the contemporary French hermeneutical thinker Paul Ricoeur asked in a very difficult essay (anthologized in David Klemm’s two-volume reader *Hermeneutical Inquiry*), “What Is a Text?” he was indicating that this is by no means the simple question we might assume it to be and that, as we shall see, the rabbinic tradition has an answer to it very different from a tradition that derives essentially from Greek philosophical ways of thinking and understanding.

Indeed, hermeneutics is about the most fundamental ways in which we perceive the world, think, and understand. It has a philosophical root in what we call *epistemology*—that is, the problem of how we come to know anything at all, and actually how we think and legitimate the claims we make to know the truth.

My hope is that after working through this book, the reader should be in a position to understand and reflect on the history and theory of interpretation in the West, both in the context of biblical study and in the range of disciplines taught in departments of religion and seminaries. I hope that it will also be useful for all students of literature, whether they are concerned with the Bible or not. Its purpose is to provide a point of reference for students and teachers from which they can advance to further thought and study. From it the reader will be able to acquire a clear knowledge of biblical hermeneutics from a historical perspective as well as an introductory knowledge of the theoretical and philosophical issues that underlie their development. In addition, this knowledge will be closely related to contemporary questions in literature, religion, and theology and the place and authority of the Bible in our culture.

This book therefore serves a very different function from that of a standard work like Robert Grant’s *A Short History of the Interpretation of the Bible*, being at once more limited and at the same time more comprehensive. Behind Grant’s work lies a vast library of biblical and historical/theological scholarship. My concern is much more interdisciplinary and rooted in my fundamental interest in the relationship between literature and religion, which is

about how texts function, about the processes of reading, and about how these questions impact immediately on religious and theological questions. It is thus, in the end, as much about reading novels and poems as it is about reading the Bible.

Because this is a study book, and indeed grows directly out of my own classroom teaching, at the end of each chapter there are questions and suggested topics for discussion and reflection. These are, of course, only suggestions, and can be safely ignored if you wish. Some of them are in the form of group exercises and some are simply essay questions that have proved useful to students over the years. From time to time I have also introduced some practical examples of hermeneutics for the reader within the texts of the chapters. For instance, at the end of chapter 2 (pp. 42–43) there is a passage from Augustine’s *City of God* that raises a number of issues in interpretation, but it is left up to the reader to work at these himself or herself. In other words, my hope for this book is not simply that you will *know* more about hermeneutics, but that you will become a better reader yourself—and this latter aim is by the far the more important.

Recommended Reading

There are a number of useful readers in hermeneutics. They provide brief excerpts from original texts with notes and explanatory commentaries, and are a helpful way into some of the primary material covered in this course.

(The books marked ** are strongly recommended, and those marked * are recommended.)

**Klemm, David E., ed. *Hermeneutical Inquiry*. Two vols. AAR Studies in Religion 43/44. Vol. 1, *The Interpretation of Texts*; Vol. 2, *The Interpretation of Existence*. Scholars Press, 1986. (This is the best overall introduction to the subject.)

Mueller-Vollmer, Kurt, ed. *The Hermeneutics Reader*. Blackwell, 1985. (This deals only with the eighteenth century to the present day. It is not specifically concerned with religious questions, but is an excellent introduction to the primary critical issues.)

The Best Introductions to the Subject

- **Jeanrond, Werner G. *Theological Hermeneutics: Development and Significance*. Macmillan, 1991. (Recently republished by SCM Press. Clear, straightforward, and essential reading. This deals with both ideas and the historical development of the subject as a category of theological thinking.)
- *McKim, Donald K., ed. *A Guide to Contemporary Hermeneutics: Major Trends in Biblical Interpretation*. Reprint Wipf & Stock, 1999. (A very useful collection of essays indicating the range and complexity of the subject, by major authors.)
- *Thiselton, Anthony C. *New Horizons in Hermeneutics: The Theory and Practice of Transforming Biblical Reading*. HarperCollins, 1992. (Large and unwieldy, but a comprehensive mine of information.)

Other Useful Texts

- Barton, John. *The People of the Book? The Authority of the Bible in Christianity*. SPCK, 1988.
- Bleicher, Josef. *Contemporary Hermeneutics: Hermeneutics as Method, Philosophy and Critique*. Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1980.
- Bruns, Gerald L. *Hermeneutics Ancient and Modern*. Yale University Press, 1992. (This is a series of essays that looks also at non-Christian hermeneutics, for example, the issues raised by the reading of the Qur'an.)
- Caputo, John D. *Radical Hermeneutics: Repetition, Deconstruction, and the Hermeneutic Project*. Indiana University Press, 1987. (This is a difficult book, not for the fainthearted, but one of the best introductions to contemporary and postmodern hermeneutics.)
- Gabel, John B., Charles B. Wheeler, and Anthony D. York. *The Bible as Literature: An Introduction*. 3d ed. Oxford University Press, 1996.
- Grant, Robert M. with David Tracy. *A Short History of the Interpretation of the Bible*. 2d enlarged ed. Fortress Press, 1984. (A reliable, standard work.)
- Jasper, David. *The New Testament and the Literary Imagination*. Macmillan, 1987. (A simple and straightforward introduction to New Testament interpretation, which covers particular questions concerning such matters as narrative, proverbial form, the problem of history, and the nature of biblical poetry.)
- Jost, Walter and Michael J. Hyde, eds. *Rhetoric and Hermeneutics in Our Time*. Yale University Press, 1997.
- Loades, Ann and Michael McLain, eds. *Hermeneutics, the Bible and Literary Criticism*. Macmillan, 1992.

- *Lundin, Roger, Anthony C. Thiselton, and Clarence Walhout. *The Responsibility of Hermeneutics*. Eerdmans, 1985. (Recently reprinted. This is a clear and straightforward defense of why hermeneutics is important.)
- Morgan, Robert with John Barton. *Biblical Interpretation*. Oxford Bible Series. Oxford University Press, 1988.
- Prickett, Stephen and Robert Barnes. *The Bible*. Landmarks of World Literature. Cambridge University Press, 1991.
- Ricoeur, Paul. *Figuring the Sacred: Religion, Narrative and Imagination*. Edited by Mark I. Wallace. Fortress Press, 1995. (A selection of essays by Ricoeur that provide a very good introduction to his work and thought.)
- Schleiermacher, Friedrich. *Hermeneutics and Criticism, and Other Writings*. Edited by Andrew Bowie. Cambridge University Press, 1998. (The best and most accessible way into this pivotal figure in the history of hermeneutics through selections of his writings, with an excellent critical introduction that sets Schleiermacher in historical and philosophical context.)
- Wadsworth, Michael, ed. *Ways of Reading the Bible*. Harvester Press, 1981. (This book, now sadly long out of print, is a series of fascinating essays on different issues in biblical hermeneutics through particular texts such as the parables of Jesus.)

Texts and Readers: Reading and Writing

1 Introduction

The word *hermeneutics* is an English form of the classical Greek word *hermeneus*, which means an interpreter or expounder—one who explains things. At one point in the writings of the philosopher Plato, poets are described as “interpreters of the gods.” Throughout this book I will use the rather unusual term “hermeneut,” rather than, say, “interpreter,” in order to be true to this tradition. In Greek mythology Hermes was the messenger of the gods, noted for his speed and athleticism, whose job it was to carry to the people of earth the messages and secrets of the gods of Olympus. With his winged sandals Hermes was able to bridge the gap between the divine and human realms, putting into words those mysteries which were beyond the capacity of human utterance. Without such a messenger how would these two realms communicate with each other, and how would the gap in the understanding between the gods and humankind be overcome? His task was to bridge this gap and to make that which seems unintelligible into something meaningful and clear to the human ear.

Hermeneutics, then, is about “interpretation” or even “translation,” and especially the interpretation of sacred texts, which believers may understand as in some sense divinely inspired or “the word of God.” Much of this book will be about how people

through the millennia have interpreted the Bible, the sacred Scriptures of both the Jewish and the Christian traditions, though references will occasionally be made to other sacred texts such as the Muslim Qur'an and the Hindu Bhagavad Gita. Nor is this unrelated to the wider questions of how we read anything at all, and how we understand or too often fail to understand the texts that we read; how we frequently disagree among ourselves about the meaning of texts, or how some texts that we find deeply meaningful can seemingly have no meaning at all for other readers. At the same time, reading is not just a question of seeking meanings. Texts can affect us in many ways. They can make us angry, or frightened, or they can console us. *Writing*, then, is a kind of action that can work on us in ways far beyond our mere understanding. This is sometimes called the "literature-as-action" model, which regards texts not simply as language but as performance and action. Texts can make us *do* things as well as *understand* meaning. One thing will, I hope, quickly become clear—hermeneutics is never static: how we read and understand the nature of a text is changing all the time, just as we ourselves change in our self-understanding. Indeed, what we actually mean by "reading," "text," and even "author" is very complex and actually not at all self-evident. And so we must start with a review of these apparently very simple terms so that as we begin to approach the history of Western hermeneutics we may be a little more wary and suspicious. We must begin by upsetting a few assumptions that we have perhaps made too readily, and acknowledge that maybe we understand a little less about first principles than we imagined.

2 Faith and Suspicion, Texts and Readers

At the beginning of the nineteenth century, the English romantic poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge maintained that as we read a text (he was actually referring specifically to poetry) it must be with "that willing suspension of disbelief for the moment, which constitutes poetic faith" (*Biographia Literaria*). To read anything requires, if you will, an initial act of faith in the text before us. In other words, if we are reading a novel, we have to believe that the

hero is a real person, who matters to the reader even though we know that this is “just fiction.” The text becomes a “world” which we inhabit for a while (“for the moment”), participating in its drama and its claims on us. We can find instances of how this textual world can affect a whole public. In Victorian England, for example, so great was the public outcry at the first ending of Charles Dickens’s novel *Great Expectations*, in which the lovers Pip and Estella are condemned to a life apart, that the author had to write another ending, which brought the lovers together so that Pip can finally say, “I saw no shadow of another parting from her.” His reading public breathed again and felt much better. People’s lives can be deeply influenced by a text, even though we know that it is just “made up,” just an imaginary world. Such fictional texts and narratives can be pretty powerful in our lives, even though we *know* that, in a sense, they are not “true.” We *believe* in them, and we are drawn into their worlds and the lives of the characters who inhabit those worlds. How much more has this been so of sacred Scripture! That collection of texts which Christians call their Bible (a title derived via French and Latin from the Greek word *biblia*, which just means “books,” or a collection of scrolls stored in a chest or cupboard) has been immensely powerful in the history of Western culture, engendering tremendous faith and belief, arguments and even wars, and thereby effecting enormous outcomes in people’s and nations’ lives, for both good and ill.

Perhaps we may come to the Bible and read it with the eyes of faith, believing every word (or most of them), and believing that it is “a pantry of wholesome food, against mouldy traditions; [and] . . . a fountain of most pure water springing up into everlasting life” (words from “The Translators to the Reader” prefixed to the Authorized Version of the Bible of 1611). This response we call a “hermeneutics of faith.” As we shall see, a hermeneutics of faith can take many forms, but it was, on the whole, the predominant way of reading the Bible for at least the first fifteen hundred years of Christian history.

On the other hand, we may come to read a text with caution, even skepticism, determined to test every claim and proposition against such humanly defined standards as the light of reason or

the evidence of history. This we call a “hermeneutics of suspicion,” and it has characterized most (though not all) thinking about hermeneutics in the past three or four hundred years. As we shall see in this book, these two attitudes of faith and suspicion are actually present in almost all acts of reading and interpretation in one way or another, sometimes more the one, sometimes more the other.

On the whole, it must be said, we do have a tendency to believe what is written down in a text, even though no less an authority than Plato, in his dialogue called *The Phaedrus*, warns us against the claims of the written word and the difficulty of interpreting it. After all, we cannot interrogate the text or ask it to explain itself more clearly as we can a speaker, whom we can ask to pause and repeat what has just been said in a different way or define for us an unfamiliar word that we have heard. To such demands the text can only remain silent. Thus Socrates warns his friend Phaedrus:

Once a thing is committed to writing it circulates equally among those who understand the subject and those who have no business with it; a writing cannot distinguish between suitable and unsuitable readers.

And so he concludes:

And [the] writer, past or future, who claims that clear and permanently valid truth is to be found in a written speech, lays himself open to reproach. (Plato, *The Phaedrus*, trans. Walter Hamilton.)

Ironically, of course, the same thing can be said of Plato’s text itself!

And yet, still, the written word has considerable authority, and above all we seek there for *meaning*. Almost invariably the first question asked by a pupil given a difficult book to read is, “What does it *mean*?” This would seem to presuppose a clear, objective meaning or content to be “excavated” from the text, provided we have the right tools and are clever enough to do it. Yet actually

what we mean by “meaning” is not altogether clear if you stop and think about it.

Second, we often try to make a clear distinction between texts that deal in facts and therefore claim to be “literally” true, and texts that are fictional or “made up.” Actually the distinction between the literal and the literary truth is extremely difficult to pin down. “Literally” basically means “according to the letter,” and in biblical interpretation relates to a grammatical and *non-metaphorical* understanding of the “letter” of Scripture. Its relationship to the “truth,” however, is extremely difficult to define, and the literal is often closely associated with the historical. Thus, many Christians, especially in the nineteenth century, discouraged the reading of novels and works of fiction because they were “not true,” while the Bible, as the Word of God, was regarded as both true and historically accurate. As we shall see, however, the sense in which, say, the Gospels are “true” or “historical” is fiercely debated throughout the history of hermeneutics. We sometimes speak of the “literal truth” as if a “literal reading” (whatever that means) stands in sturdy contrast to the vain imaginings of metaphor or other rather vaguely understood terms. Metaphors

The word “parable” is very like metaphor, derived from the Greek, and meaning that which is “thrown alongside” or parallel to the literal truth.

(the word is derived from two Greek words, *meta phero*, which mean to “carry over”) are suggestive of displaced meaning. Something does not *really* mean what it appears to *say*, and so we cannot speak *literally* of the kingdom of heaven; we can only describe it metaphorically as

being “like” something more familiar. In Mark’s Gospel Jesus asks, “With what can we compare the kingdom of God, or what parable will we use for it?” (Mark 4:30). The word “parable” is very like metaphor, derived from the Greek, and meaning that which is “thrown alongside” or parallel to the literal truth. In fact, the idea that a text, least of all a biblical text, may have just one *meaning*, which, once grasped, remains firm, absolute, and unchanging forever, is a relatively modern concept, and an odd one at that, and would have been very alien to an early Christian interpreter, or

hermeneuts like Origen of Alexandria (ca. 185–254), Augustine of Hippo (354–430), or even Thomas Aquinas (1225–74), all of whom we shall turn to in later chapters.

One of the effects of reading, apart from acquiring information (and part of the task of hermeneutics is to establish criteria to enable us to begin to distinguish between true and false information), is to stimulate us into thought and action. “Using our imaginations” actually may be a very good and creative thing, and retarding the imagination, especially in children, a negative or even dangerous policy. Texts that require the exercise of the imagination may provoke us into ethical reflection or aesthetic appreciation, although there is certainly a *wrong* use of the imagination as well. But the imagination may properly carry us beyond the limitations of systems of thought or even the orthodoxies of religion.

The English writer Edmund Gosse, in his book *Father and Son* (1907), wrote an account of his Victorian childhood under the tutelage of his evangelical parents, who feared the imagination and believed in the literal truth of the Bible and the terrible dangers of “fiction.”

Never in all my early childhood [wrote Gosse], did anyone address to me the affecting preamble, “Once upon a time!” I was told about missionaries, but never about pirates; I was familiar with humming-birds, but I had never heard of fairies. Jack the Giant-killer, Rumpelstiltskin and Robin Hood were not of my acquaintance, and though I understood about wolves, Little Red Riding Hood was a stranger even by name. So far as my “dedication” was concerned, *I can but think that my parents were in error thus to exclude the imaginary from my outlook upon facts*. They desired to make me truthful; the tendency was to make me positive and skeptical. (Gosse, *Father and Son*; emphasis added)

What do you think Gosse is saying here? Why should the exclusion of fairy stories and the exercise of the imagination from childhood tend to make one skeptical? Are there any stories in the

Bible like the ones he refers to? (I did warn you that this is a book that does not provide all the answers!)

Texts, you see, can offer to us more than literal, historical, or scientific truth. Actually, such categories that we tend to take for granted are often relatively recent in the history of human understanding. The writer of Matthew's Gospel, for example, as we shall see later, would have had no concept of what we now mean by the word "history" or its claims in our systems of inquiry. And so, if words like "literal," or "meaning," or even "text" itself are beginning to become a little more difficult and problematic for you, then we are actually getting somewhere, for it is the business of hermeneutics to get us to think rather more carefully than we are wont to do about just such words, and so perhaps to be a little less absolute in our claims to understand them. Hermeneutics warns us also about taking too simply and straightforwardly the idea that a text is just exactly what it was intended to be in the mind and intention of its author, as if understanding the letters of Paul were equivalent to entering into the mind and purposes of the apostle himself. Too often people will say "Paul" when they actually mean the text of the "Letter to the Romans." The careful reading of the letter should avoid the over-simple equation of Paul and his text, and we sometimes call this too straightforward conflation the *intentional fallacy*—that is, the fallacious belief that Paul's intentions in writing are utterly and without reserve reflected in the text of his letter. Why this is a fallacy can be simply illustrated, for now, by the familiar words "I never quite say what I mean, and I never quite mean what I say." When you are writing an essay or paper, is it always the case that you are able to find exactly the right words to encapsulate what (you think) is in your mind? Do we not often struggle to express our thoughts, often remaining dissatisfied that we have done so adequately in our writing? Or, is it not the case that someone may read your essay and remark, "Do you realize what you have said and its implications?" To which you can only humbly reply, "No, I did not mean to say this and I will try and do better next time." No more are Paul's great letters entirely and simply a statement of his conscious intentions. Texts, we might say, have a life of their own, and as Plato warned us, they are always

in danger of being misinterpreted, for no one is a perfect reader or a perfectly controlled writer.

You will find an excellent verbal exercise on this point in Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland*, when Alice becomes confused at the Mad Hatter's tea party:

"Then you should say what you mean," the March Hare went on. "I do," Alice hastily replied; "at least—at least I mean what I say—that's the same thing, you know." "Not the same thing a bit!" said the Hatter. "Why you might just as well say that 'I see what I eat' is the same thing as 'I eat what I see!'"

Hermeneutics recognizes this slippage between intention and meaning, or worse, between the slipperiness of written words and human understanding. One and the same text may be understood very differently by different people—one will be persuaded of the "truth" of the book of Revelation, another will find it tedious nonsense. It is important to realize that neither is necessarily right or wrong, but we must establish some rules for judgment. We need also to bear in mind that our understanding of a text is not simply dependent on universal principles that are equally shared by all, but depends on such things as age, gender, cultural assumptions, and so on. Also, as readers we change—I do not understand things the same way now that I am in my fifties as I did when I was in my twenties. These are obvious points, but they need to be kept clearly in mind. In hermeneutics we must think for ourselves, but at the same time we cannot just make up the rules as we go along, regardless of other people, tradition, or, indeed, the conventional claims of language and its grammatical rules. We cannot be content to be like Lewis Carroll's Humpty Dumpty when he says, rather inconsequentially, to Alice, "There's glory for you!"

"I don't know what you mean by 'glory,'" Alice said. Humpty Dumpty smiled contemptuously. "Of course you don't—till I tell you. I meant 'there's a nice knock-down argument for you!'"

“But ‘glory’ doesn’t mean ‘a nice knock-down argument,’” Alice objected.

“*When I use a word,*” Humpty Dumpty said in a rather scornful tone, “*it means just what I choose it to mean—neither more nor less.*” [Emphases added.]

“The question is,” said Alice, “whether you *can* make words mean so many different things.”

“The question is,” said Humpty Dumpty, “which is to be master—that’s all.”

(Lewis Carroll, *Through the Looking Glass*; emphases added)

Now, of course, we cannot, like Humpty Dumpty, simply choose what words mean. We cannot finally be their master, choosing meanings at will. The result would be a total breakdown in all agreement about meaningful communication, and we would respond to all language, whether written or spoken, with Alice’s “I don’t know what you mean.” End of story. We reach the point of what Humpty Dumpty calls “impenetrability”—which is when he gives up on the subject altogether. But words are not finally impenetrable. When I shout “Help!” I want to be pretty certain that you understand what I mean. When the road sign says “Stop,” we know what to do—and we know the probable consequences of *not* so acting! And by general consensus we *do* understand enough in common to be able to say, “I can [that is, I am able to] read the Gospel of Mark,” though perhaps only in a translation from the original Greek. (*Translation* is another issue taken up by hermeneutics.) We can read the words and get a pretty good idea of what is going on. Certainly we inevitably reflect in our reading our differences and our prejudices, although the fact that some of us do not necessarily believe that the first verse of the Gospel is actually true does not prevent us from reading the book *as though it were true*, and getting a great deal out of the exercise. Above all, we need to recognize that although we can read the *words* (perhaps with the help of a dictionary), we have very little idea what it was like to *be* a first-century Christian in the Roman Empire. Mark’s Gospel is a text that is culturally far removed from us in its origins, and we must be careful, as readers, not simply to impose

our own modern presuppositions and prejudices on it. This gap between cultures has been called “the two horizons” (by the modern hermeneut Hans-Georg Gadamer, whom we shall be looking at later on): that is, the “horizon” of the origins of the text, almost two thousand years ago, and the “horizon” of the contemporary reader who seeks to make sense of it in the modern world.

We are all different. If you give one text to thirty people, you will come up with more or less thirty different “readings,” none of them, perhaps, wholly wrong or wholly right. True, there will be a great deal of overlap, and when a powerful institution like a church seeks to impose uniformity on our reading (in the interests of orthodoxy or order), we can be persuaded pretty well all to think alike. But the fact remains that what is called “reader-response” to a text is various and often contradictory, especially with authoritative, often patriarchal, texts like the Bible. Two people may read the same words, and one will laugh while the other will weep, and they will not understand each other. Such differences make it all the more important that we attend to the discipline of hermeneutics that tries to maintain legitimacy, order, and discipline in the midst of these many claims. It may also teach us to learn to live creatively with our differences from one another.

3 Reading and Writing

One of the first things most of us learn very early as a child is the art of reading and writing. As literate people we tend to take these skills for granted, though we should never forget that literacy is the privilege of the relatively few in human history. Yet we need to pause and reflect that not only do these terms refer to very complex activities, but also that people’s understandings of them, and of the nature of a text, are not fixed and static but have changed through the course of history and will continue to change. There are many different answers to the question “What is a text?”

How we understand what a text is, is also deeply affected by technology—the development from the scroll to the codex (or book) affected how people wrote and read. The availability of words to us in different media makes a great difference in how we

understand words. The invention of the printing press was profoundly influential on Martin Luther's biblical hermeneutics, for reasons which we shall see later on, while the effect of computers and the World Wide Web on reading and writing can hardly yet even be contemplated. (It is, however, commonplace for people to say that their style of writing is changed in the shift from pen and paper to keyboard. Indeed, some of us rarely "write" at all these days, but punch keys and watch the effect on a screen.) Actually the change from the handwritten to the printed word, as we shall see in more detail when we come to consider the work of Martin Luther, altered the whole way in which the world was perceived and understood, shifting communication from dependency on the vagaries of the individually copied text (with all its inevitable "mistakes"), to texts that guaranteed uniformity and could be endlessly reprinted on the production-line model. Marshall McLuhan has shown us the startling consequences of this change.

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The uniformity and repeatability of print permeated the Renaissance with the idea of time and space as continuous measurable quantities. The immediate effect of this idea was to desacralize the world of nature and the world of power alike. The new technique of control of physical processes by segmentation and fragmentation separated God and Nature as much as Man and Nature, or man and man. (McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*)

We shall see later how hermeneutics in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries have been preoccupied with recovering a sense of *wholeness* in the business of interpreting texts, overcoming the disintegration of our thinking into different, discrete disciplines.

It is from the Greek tradition and works like Aristotle's *Poetics* (ca. 350 B.C.E.) that we gain our assumptions that texts "have meaning" and characteristically have a clear beginning, middle, and end with a unity that brings about a conclusion, after which nothing more can really happen. "They all lived happily ever after" means that this is the end of the story, and there is nothing further worth telling. For a concise statement of this you might refer to Aristotle's *Poetics*, chapters 7 and 8. (This is easily available as a Penguin Classic.) The Christian tradition, which was strongly influenced by Greek thought, has interpreted the Bible against this background, seeing it as a unified and complete "book" with a clear beginning, middle, and end. The scholar M. H. Abrams, in a classic study of Romantic literature of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, sees the Christian way of reading the Bible, from the earliest times, as characterized in a number of particular ways:

1. "Biblical history is finite. It represents events as occurring once and once for all, in a single closed temporal span." The Bible is essentially a historical document, and in the main the events that it describes from beginning to end actually happened to real people like you and me. Thus it is that scholars of the Bible, at least during the last two hundred years, have largely followed the methods of "historical criticism."
2. "The design of biblical history constitutes a sharply defined plot with a beginning, a middle, and an end, and a strongly accented sequence of critical events." In other words, the Bible has the structure familiar to most stories or novels.
3. "The plot of history has a hidden author who is also its director and the guarantor of things to come." Unlike novels, however, whose authors we immediately identify as Jane Austen, Charles Dickens, or Mark Twain, the Bible has been regarded as "written" in some sense by God. And so at the end of Bible readings in church we will frequently conclude with the words, "This is the word of the Lord." (See Abrams, *Natural Supernaturalism*)

Now, we have to be clear that none of these things about the Bible are *necessarily* true. They are the consequence of a particular way of reading and understanding how texts work. In short, they are the consequence of a specific hermeneutical strategy, which is at once the *result of* a theological perspective and also *results in* a theological perspective in a kind of circular or *dialectical* movement. A certain belief dictates how we read the Bible, and reading the Bible in this way confirms that this belief is true or at least legitimate. (This is an example of the *hermeneutic circle*, which will be explained in more detail a little later on. Furthermore, it is essential to realize that there are many other “ways of reading” and of understanding the “written” nature of the biblical texts than this primarily historical model.)

In the next chapter we will compare this very briefly with quite different and more ancient traditions of reading and textual understanding of Scripture, both Jewish and Christian, though before we do we need to recognize, by way of comparison, that distinct again are the hermeneutics of the Muslim Qur’an and the Bhagavad Gita of Hinduism. Although they will not concern us much further here, it is well to have some sense of other sacred texts.

Unlike the Bible (which has always from the beginning been a translated text—there have been over three hundred and fifty translations into English alone) the Qur’an properly cannot be translated. Gerald Bruns describes this succinctly in his book *Hermeneutics Ancient and Modern*:

It is not enough to speak of the Qur’an as a text. Rather, it is the recitation (*qur’an*) of a text that only God has seen, the *umm al-kitab*, literally, “Mother of the Book.” . . . As a text the Qur’an exists only within quotation marks. The Qur’an cannot be fixed as a text, even though the texts . . . are fixed and remarkably consistent with one another. The hermeneutical consequences of this fundamental orality are many and complex. For example, the translation of the Qur’an is not so much forbidden as it is materially or, say, ontologically impossible. . . .

... as a recitation the Qur'an surrounds us with itself, fills the space we inhabit, takes it over and ourselves in the bargain. The whole movement of reading as an appropriation or internalizing of a text is reversed. Here there is no grasping and unpacking and laying the text bare. On the contrary, reading is participation. To understand the Qur'an is to disappear into it. (Bruns, *Hermeneutics Ancient and Modern*)

The Bhagavad Gita comprises eighteen chapters of the great Indian epic poem the *Mahabharata*. Written in the context of the war to be fought by Arjuna, it is frequently claimed that the value of the poem lies in its reconciliation of many and varying views within Hinduism and the freedom it grants to different understandings and interpretations. Thus Mahatma Gandhi, who read the Gita in its entirety every week, replied serenely to the question as to whether the poem teaches both *himsa* (violence) and *ahimsa* (nonviolence):

I do not read that meaning in the Gita. It is quite likely that the author did not write it to inculcate ahimsa, but as a commentator draws innumerable interpretations from a poetic text, even so I interpret the Gita to mean that if its central theme is anasakti [selfless action], it also teaches ahimsa. (Quoted in Gwilym Beckerlegge, ed., *The World Religions Reader*)

Clearly Gandhi is not concerned with *the* meaning of the text, and certainly not the intentions of its author as a guide to interpretation!

4 The Hermeneutic Circle

We referred above to the *hermeneutic circle*, and in the next chapter we shall review it also in the context of an early Christian theologian, Irenaeus, bishop of Lyons (ca. 130–ca. 200), and his principle of *regula veritatis* or “canon of truth.” But before we go

any farther it will be wise to give some attention to this immensely important issue in hermeneutics, for it is essential that we understand it clearly. Look at it in this way.

The Bible is the origin and primary source of Christian doctrine and the belief of the church. At the same time, this very belief, known as the *apostolic tradition*, is the “canon of truth,” which regulates our proper reading of Scripture. In other words, Scripture provides the rule by which the interpretation of Scripture is tested. (Martin Luther, indeed, believed that the Bible was its own interpreter.) But which comes first—text or interpretation? The answer is neither and both. The German theologian and philosopher Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768–1834), often known as the father of modern hermeneutics, and whom we shall consider in more detail in chapter 4, described this circularity of the hermeneutic process in this way: In order to gain an overview of the text in its completeness, we must give proper attention to the details and particulars. But we cannot appreciate the significance of these details and particulars without a sense of the whole work. We begin with the big idea, read the text clearly and in detail in the light of this, and then use the text to substantiate the initial idea.

Interpretation, therefore, is not a process along a linear trajectory from ignorance to understanding via the medium of the text. By the end of this first chapter, I hope you will have some sense that it is far more complicated and actually more interesting than that. The reading process, in its various forms, does not provide us with any final conclusion (except, perhaps, when we finally come to rest at the end of all things in God) but an endless stimulation to further inquiry and conversation. And as the German philosopher Martin Heidegger (1889–1976) once remarked, what is important is not how we get *out* of the hermeneutic circle (which, arguably, is impossible anyway), but how we initially get *in*. In other words, what idea do you start with—one based on faith or one based on suspicion, or, more likely, a mixture of the two? What are your presuppositions, your presumptions, and your prejudices? These may not necessarily be either good or bad—but

we all have them! All of them will have a bearing on how you read and interpret.

The purpose of this first chapter has been to raise questions and, hopefully, disturb a few assumptions. By now you may be feeling a little perplexed and even a little disgruntled! People often complain that the study of hermeneutics only makes things more difficult, when they actually should be quite simple and straightforward. Well, as we now continue with a brief history of hermeneutics in the Christian West, with its discussions about the nature of texts (especially, though not exclusively, the Bible) and how we read, we shall see that it has never been either simple or straightforward. Indeed, hermeneutics is inseparable from the development of Christian theology and doctrine, and has often been highly contested and political. In some ways the whole of the Reformation emerges from and centers on the hermeneutic revolution provoked by Martin Luther, John Calvin, and their fellow reformers.

The end of the book, I must warn you now, will leave us with further questions, which are prompted by our particular cultural situation at the beginning of a new century. We live as perhaps never before in a multicultural society deeply influenced by faiths and traditions other than Christian and Jewish, and for many by a profound rejection of *all* faith traditions. It was partly for this reason that this chapter has included very brief introductions to the sacred texts of Islam and Hinduism. But at the same time we live, some would say, in a “postmodern” (or even “post-postmodern”) age of skepticism and relativism in which nothing is stable and no beliefs accepted as final; an age profoundly affected by the revolutions of such modern “prophets” as Sigmund Freud (in psychology) and Albert Einstein (in science), not to speak of Karl Marx (in politics) or Friedrich Nietzsche (in philosophy). All these thinkers, like them or not, have had their effect on the way we read and understand texts, and not least the “sacred” texts of Scripture.

We have a long way to travel yet, but at least we have started. We need now to proceed with a healthy mixture of faith and suspicion, and a readiness to think hard!

Summary

We might summarize the main points of this chapter as follows:

1. Hermeneutics is understood as interpretation, the word drawn from the name of the Greek god Hermes, who is the “messenger of the gods.”
2. Hermeneutics is a mixture of a hermeneutics of faith and a hermeneutics of suspicion. What do we mean by “text,” and what do we mean by “reading”?
3. Aristotle and the Greeks understood a text as a unified whole with beginning, middle, and end. The modern reading of the Bible has been largely in the light of this understanding of the nature of text, but this need not necessarily be the case.
4. We have encountered the problem of the hermeneutic circle and the “never-ending story” of interpretation.
5. Great religious traditions, apart from the Jewish and Christian, have their own distinctive hermeneutics and “ways of reading” their sacred texts.

Activities and Questions

1. Some texts inspire faith, while others arouse our suspicion. How do we get the balance right? Are there objective criteria to help us achieve this balance?
2. Imagine that you are reading a book and encounter a word that you have never seen or heard before, and you have no idea what it means. The dictionary gives you three different meanings, and it is not clear at first sight which is most appropriate. How would you set about deciding on a proper and defensible understanding of the word in this context?
3. Writing of poetry in his *Poetics*, the Greek philosopher Aristotle remarked that “a likely impossibility is always preferable to an unconvincing possibility.” What do you think he meant by this? Think of this particularly in relation to the passion narratives of the Gospels. (Don’t worry if this leaves

you puzzled—in hermeneutics it is often more important that you think hard and carefully than that you reach the “right” answer.)

4. For this activity you will need other members of your family or colleagues. Read carefully two biblical passages, preferably in a modern English version.

Genesis 22:1–14

John 1:1–18

Don’t worry so much about what these passages *mean* (whatever that means!), but try to assess how they affect you, and therefore *how* you read.

For example, will a woman read the Genesis passage differently from a man?

To what extent are you reading with a hermeneutics of faith or a hermeneutics of suspicion? You may well find that people vary enormously in this. (Refer back to your answer to question 1, above.)

How does this make a difference to your manner of reading? Do you feel angry, perplexed, consoled, or what?

Then compare notes with others—be prepared to argue if necessary! (Hermeneutics has always been about arguing and debating much more than agreeing on the correct answer. No reading is wholly right or wholly wrong. We may just have to learn to live with our differences.)

5. What do you think Martin Heidegger meant when he said that it was more important to consider how we *enter* the hermeneutic circle than any possible way out? Does this mean, perhaps, that good reading is more about being aware of ourselves and our predispositions than about “getting the right answer”? What do you think?