

A Short History of Interpretation

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The word hermeneutics stems from *ερμηνευειν*, a verb in Plato and Sophocles meaning to interpret by way of explanation and understanding, in Xenophon, to interpret by utterance or saying in words, and in Thucydides, by translation of another language (*OED*). The associated messenger-god Hermes is the giver of all good things, Homer's Quicksilver in *The Odyssey*. The noun occurs in the title of a treatise attributed to Aristotle.

On Interpretation (*Περί ερμηνείας*) is a concise foundational philosophy of language and logic concerning the truth of utterances. Thomas Aquinas would comment systematically on the text by treating language to be the interpretation of thought or movement of the mind that discerns the relation of a word and the thing it signifies. This in turn generates meaningful utterance judged by other minds to be true or untrue according to formal correspondence between essence and actual existence. In the event of truth, time and reason validate the result and settle ambiguities presented by possible contrary results. Aristotle gave the example of true oracular prophecy, an oral and written tradition woven deep into the fabric of Greek antiquity on the interpretation of signs. He made the crucial distinction between formal interpretation and the arts of

rhetoric and poetics, different topics with different rules for interpreting ambiguous signs like metaphors which transform the simple correlation between one word and one meaning.

Aristotle called rhetoric the correlative of dialectic with practical uses in politics and persuasion meant to prove a truth or apparent truth to souls the orator knows are capable of enacting justice. His treatise on rhetoric, plagiarized by Cicero, would serve as a handbook for civic hermeneutics in the Roman Empire, in Arabia, well into late antiquity with Augustine, and in Europe from the ninth century onward into the Renaissance. The text incorporates Socratic methods of interpretation and develops Plato's astonishing demonstrations of inquiry in public dialogue held for the purpose of understanding truth. Critical methods of ancient Greek philosophy inform contemporary discourse such as semiotics and poststructural hermeneutics based upon Aristotle's theory of signs and relevant treatments of meaning in the public realm where questions of truth presuppose knowing that it exists.

Philosophers of language rarely practice critical method upon biblical hermeneutics, the most ancient and complex form of text interpretation intelligible to the modern mind, and technically the province of biblical scholars. Few philosophers are philologists; fewer still understand the exegetical apparatus needed to practice formal hermeneutics which, I believe, should start with extreme impartiality toward authorship and language rather than with current trends in hermeneutics out of

postwar Europe. Allow me to explain my position and extend it from biblical to philosophical hermeneutics.

I. Scope of Reflection

The enormous scope of hermeneutical activity suggested by Aristotle concerns every act of interpretive cognition and utterance of thought into language. The hermeneutics of texts, however, is no more varied or profoundly wide-ranging than in the formation and interpretation of the Bible. In scriptures the truths of Greek philosophy cohere in a vastly diverse expression of the biblical past that shaped the Judeo-Christian tradition.

During the twentieth century the validity of historical truth on evidence of texts was renounced when Martin Heidegger established the absolute role of the subject in interpretation and revised hermeneutical discourse altogether. His colleague Hans-Georg Gadamer soon modified Heidegger's position toward historical truth by way of a concept he named the "fusion of horizons" (*Horizontverschmelzung*). Gadamer felt this to be the essential operation of understanding texts, including scriptures. The fusion of horizons describes the negation of the temporal or "historical distance" (*Abstand*) between the world of the text and the reader. Prejudice and the power of personal history make reading a text so inextricable from the reader's past that "the true historical object is not an object at all, but

a unity of the one and the other.” The “phantom” of a historical object belongs to the naïve premise of historical method holding that prejudice impairs reliable judgments on dating, authorship, and the authenticity of texts and events they record. For Gadamer the aims of traditional historical criticism result in the kind of understanding “dead enough only to have historical interest” (*Wahrheit und Methode*, 1960). Would this include historical interest in the Holocaust? Gadamer’s work is innocent of anti-Semitism. He developed in the Frankfurt School independently of Heidegger, an avid member of the Nazi party ordered to persuade his colleagues to join. It is no coincidence that Heidegger’s work would generate new forms of philosophical deconstruction which argue the unreality of historical truth. Deconstructive thought of this kind is given easily to Holocaust denial easily inferred from the denial that historical truth can be known or that events witnessed in texts inviting prejudice, such as Hebrew scriptures, can be verified. I acknowledge my own interest in formalizing the temporal distance between texts and events, biblical or otherwise. My aim is first to bracket the level of reflection at which the interpreter may experience a “temporal unity” with the text being read in the moment at hand. Setting aside the question of whether temporal unity exists as a plausible category of experience, I describe the foundations of formal hermeneutics and give reasons for factoring temporal and spatial distance into any hermeneutical theory of prejudice.

II. Ancient Biblical Hermeneutics

Long before the emergence of formal Greek hermeneutical theory and practice, the Hebrew patriarchs from Mesopotamia migrated to Palestine during the early second millennium BCE. According to the Hebrew Bible, they began the history of Israel toward the end of the early bronze age. Israel's pre-history traces back to inscriptions found in Egypt and Mesopotamia dating at least a millennium before the dates assigned to Abraham and Moses. But the actual origins of coherent text interpretation, intelligibly received, evolved in the formation of the Torah and the Hebrew Bible as a whole — with the history, literature and law of Israel — and indeed of all creation at the breath of Yahweh. The real origins of formal hermeneutics belong to the written interpretation of moral and positive law, prophets and writings which superb anonymous scholars transmitted in the process of midrashic activity and redaction. This process resulted in codification of the Hebrew canon during the second century CE after Roman troops destroyed Jerusalem 70 CE, with surviving texts — Torah, Nevi'im, Ketuvim — stating the covenant (*b^erit*) of the Israelites bound together in memory of unimaginable adversity in the desert among hostile nations.

Broadly speaking, the Hebrew Bible emerged from three interwoven text traditions, the oldest called the Mosaic covenant or Sinai tradition of the pre-monarchic period of Israel's sacred confederacy, 1250–1050 BCE.

Ethical monotheism is the theological foundation of this tradition which expands recorded memory of the exodus from bondage in Egypt to the wilderness on Mount Sinai. There Moses is said to have received laws and instruction at the founding of Israel (Exod. 18–14; Leviticus; Numbers 1–10; Deuteronomy, esp. 1:6–18, 4:9–14, 5:2–31, 9:8–10:11; cf. also Acts 7:35–46).

The Solomonic-Davidic covenant or Zion tradition elaborates the transition from Israel's existence as a sacred league to a dynastic state. From the Zion materials came the poetical books or "Writings" of authors who believed God had elected Jerusalem on the cosmic Mount Zion to be his earthly dwelling — a belief probably recorded soon after David moved the Ark of the Covenant to Jerusalem during his reign 1010–970 BCE (II Sam. 6). It is written that he entered then into a divine covenant, built an empire, and appointed a priesthood symbolizing continuity with Israel's ancient order. From this history proceeded the royal theology of kingship scholars ascribe to the Zion tradition (cf. Joel 3:16–17; Zech. 14:8–9; Pss. 48:1–2; 76:1–2, 12; cf. also Matt. 5:35).

Prophetic materials comprise a third text tradition and synthesis of contents from Sinai and Zion which reinterpret the Torah, the sacred book of Israel by the time the prophetic tradition appeared in writing. The canonical category of the prophets includes the later works of Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel and the Twelve, but the materials reflect earlier traditions from Joshua, Judges, Samuel and Kings. Like the covenant

texts, the prophetic materials came into the hands of learned scribes responsible for preserving them in temple libraries and court schools of instruction upon the interpretation of signs. Scribes recorded intellectual exchange among peripatetic scholars from such distant cultures as Persia, Egypt, and Greece. Scholars of the day exchanged manuscripts documenting the redaction of priestly, oracular, and wisdom text traditions.

Prophets of the day were thought to be divine messengers and visionaries. Some became powerful court counselors; others lived in wilderness caves outside cities and villages. In one such cave in the Judaeian wilderness near the western shore of the Dead Sea during the Spring of 1947, a Bedouin shepherd boy of the Ta'âmire tribe searching for a lost sheep accidentally discovered pottery jars containing possibly the oldest biblical texts now extant: the Dead Sea Scrolls at the Qumran locale of the Essene community witnessed by Philo of Alexandria, Flavius Josephus, Pliny the Elder, and Dio Chrysostomos. In that desert cave (Cave 1) was found the great Isaiah scroll along with a copy in an accomplished scribal hand dated roughly 100 BCE, some six-hundred years after Isaiah flourished 742–701 BCE (Isa. 1:1). Canonically the Book of Isaiah was the first and most important of the prophetic materials. Scholars of Qumran agree widely that Isaiah was the Essenes' favorite text and a legitimating historical witness. Consider a fragment of interpretive commentary discovered in Caves 3 and 4. The commentary quoting Isaiah

54:11 reading, “And I am about to set your foundations with sapphires” [or lapis lazuli], can be rendered, “The interpretation (*peshet*) of the matter concerns the people who laid the foundations of the council of the community. . . . The council of his elect [will glisten] like a sapphire among stones.”

The hermeneutical procedure is entirely historical and follows the formulaic rules of *peshet*, a genre used widely to interpret scriptures at the time the Qumran community was active. Theologically this commentary links ancient Jewish prophecy to the Essenes and the progression of the sacred priestly order of Zion. As a formal genre it indicates ways in which the Essenes would interpret visions, dreams, and celestial events.

Hermeneutical methods known to the Essenes were known among Jewish redactors who transmitted the oral or written gospel source materials from Hebrew and its sister language Aramaic into the lingua franca, Koine Greek. The Gospel of Mark, the earliest of the four, dates probably before 70 CE during Roman persecution (Mark 10:30). Mark literally began the story of Jesus of Nazareth by quoting Isaiah 40:3, a text the Essenes at Qumran used to explain their purpose in the wilderness (1QS8:12–14). Mark and each of the gospel writers made use of Isaiah to establish historic continuity with traditional prophetic texts, just as Zion had been linked irrevocably to the Mosaic covenant (Mark 1:1–3; cf. also Matt. 3:1–2; Luke 3:4; John 1:23). This all suggests the depth of reliance upon Hebrew Scripture Jesus shared with his followers in the language of

public testimony against Roman law forbidding the treason of dissent from the Emperor. In great danger Mark and the authors of Jesus' story took his message (*κηρυγμα*) into homes and synagogues (Mark. 1:38–39; cf. also Matt. 4:23; Luke 4:15, 43–44), as on the Sabbath in Nazareth when the chazzan handed Jesus the scroll of Isaiah, and Jesus said after reading it that the Scripture had been fulfilled (Luke 4:16–21; Isa. 61:1,2; 58:6).

It is possible that Jesus was an Essene Jew living intermittently among Essene villagers attending synagogue away from the more ascetic desert communities. Certainly he was a seditionist in violation of some Jewish laws from which the wilderness Essenes, perhaps even John the Baptist, had set themselves apart. By reinterpreting the laws — Roman, official Jewish, and the clandestine Essene *Rule of the Community* — Jesus was said to be disclosing what had been “hidden from the foundation of the world” (Matt. 13:35), a reference in the manuscript tradition to Asaph the seer and assigned author of Psalm 78 (II Chr. 29:30).

Jesus asked the rhetorical question of a lamp being placed not under a bushel basket but on the lampstand (Mark 4:21; Matt. 10:26; Luke 8:17; 12:2). The symbol anticipates a mystical elaboration of the seven golden lampstands in the Book of Revelation (Rev. 1:12–13, 20; 2:1). These seven lamps signify the seven public churches addressed by the author John, possibly an Essene Jew in exile from Ephesus on Patmos during persecutions under Domitian 81–96 CE. By the time the churches came

into being, the mysteries of God were said to be meant for anyone with ears to hear and eyes to see.

On the ancient Semitic idea of mysteries, Paul of Tarsus wrote in the language of public testimony. He called himself a steward of mysteries and a reliable eyewitness to Jesus of Nazareth (I Cor. 4:1–2; 9:1). Paul was a scholar of the Torah traveling through Mediterranean cities and the synagogues of the Diaspora. His first extant letter is the oldest of the New Testament materials, written to the Thessalonians from Athens or from Corinth near the year 50 CE during the reign of Claudius or of Nero. Paul would reinterpret Judaic midrashim which scholars have found in Qumran literature concerning the revelation of mystery “kept in silence” but now manifest (Rom. 16:25–26; cf. also Eph. 3:3–9; IQS). As a former Pharisee he argued in the brilliant rhetoric of Jewish legal testimony meant to prove the truths corroborated by visible or infallible “exhibits” and signs of sacred mysteries. (I Cor. 2:9; Isa. 64:4).

Paul taught that mysteries were made visible by water and spirit (John 3:3–5; cf. John 1:33; Eph. 5:26; Titus 3:5; Ezek. 36:25–27), a rite of transformation Jesus’ cousin John the Baptist practiced in the wilderness until he was executed by Herod Agrippa I. Luke suggested that John was foretold in the *Benedictus* hymn (Luke 1:68–79), with Mosaic features of Qumran hymns redacted from Hebrew scriptures. John administered the open rite of baptism typical of the initiatory lustrations practiced at Qumran, but he performed public rites said to transform the mind

(μετανοια) as prelude to the paraenetic vision of the eschaton written in the Book of Revelation: a vision expressed primarily in symbols, metaphors and forms of speech characteristic of the apocalypse the Baptist knew. It is no coincidence that the Qumran Hymn Scroll identifies the Teacher of Righteousness with wilderness waters “in a mysterious realm” where “trees of life are hidden.” The Teacher, a “Shoot of ho[li]ness,” suggests the mystery once “sealed with none to know it” but now revealed.

III. From Biblical to Philosophical Hermeneutics

A complete history of hermeneutics would explain how and why biblical texts survived intensely complex cultural change when Essene asceticism expanded, the Gnostics emerged, and Christians developed theological and text traditions at variance from orthodox Judaism. During this period criteria for text commentary and authenticity in the formation of the New Testament canon were decided on the basis of normative and apostolic usage at synods in Hippo 393 CE and in Carthage 397 and 419 CE. The vexed formation of the canon followed centuries of political upheaval in Eastern and Western churches legally protected by Constantine’s Edict of Milan in 313 CE. As the canon came to be decided hermeneutical innovations were made in the translation of the Alexandrian Septuagint (LXX), in Jerome’s fourth-century Vulgate, and in the developing Mishnah. Many of these changes followed exegetical practices

of Origen and Philo of Alexandria, a first-century Hellenized Jew who called for a return to the literal foundation of scriptures.

A complete history of hermeneutics would include the patristics and Augustine's remarkable synthesis of Plato's dialogues, classical Greek interpretation theory, and early Christian doctrine. Augustine sustained Aristotle's distinction between interpretation and rhetoric in the formation of a standard exegetical philosophy of scriptures during the years the New Testament canon was chosen. The history of hermeneutics would also include exegetical innovations made in twelfth-century France during a revival of Aristotle's rules for interpretation which medieval theologians such as Aquinas later developed during the thirteenth century. In the fourteenth century William of Ockham, the Oxford philosopher and heretic, wrote the foundations of formal logic from his own synthesis of Aristotle and Augustine.

In early modern Europe the spectacular revival of classical and biblical antiquity shaped the Renaissance of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Desiderius Erasmus proposed new exegetical rules for New Testament translation and commentary from the original Greek (*Novum Testamentum*, 1522). Knowing it meant heresy he corrected the Vulgate canon on historical grounds based on the philological precedents of Guillaume Bud'e, Lorenzo Valla, and his friend John Colet. Never before had philology played such a transformative role in biblical hermeneutics. Erasmus invented the empirical method of text interpretation in his effort

to formalize the difference between figurative and historical truth. His work guided the efforts of theologians such as Martin Luther and John Calvin to establish the Christian faith upon Scripture alone (*sola scriptura*). Their new creeds flowed swiftly into the Reformation culture of a growing audience eager buy their pamphlets and books in the now movable type of Johannes Gutenberg.

Reformed rules of interpretation came from advancing philological insights worked into a regrettable Christocentric minimization of the Hebrew Bible by Luther. Calvin developed a new political philosophy based upon the messianic theme from commentaries on the prophets by Augustine, his “best witness to antiquity.” Trained by Andrea Alciati as a humanist and jurist at the University of Bourges, he used Aristotle and Aquinas to systematize Christian doctrine and then revise and enforce Genevan law somewhat like a fanatic.

In the next two centuries in Europe and England, advances in philology gave rise to new formal distinctions between hermeneutics and exegesis, first seen in J. C. Dannhauser’s *Hermeneutica sacra sive methodus exponendarum sacrarum litterarum* (1629). Dannhauser wanted to help scholars work through a sprawl of hermeneutical textbooks, grammars, and lexicons while the rationalist schools of the Enlightenment entered into theological and philosophical speculation independent of biblical texts *per se* — a change developed quickly by Locke, Hume, Kant, and Hegel. Later at the Tübingen School, nineteenth-century biblical scholars developed

methods and theories of interpretation from palaeographical discoveries that shaped form and source criticism. Evidence for the formation of the Pentateuch led them to name some of its chief redactors, J (Yahwist), possibly a woman, P (Priestly), D (Deuteronomist), and E (Elohist). New Testament texts and pseudepigrapha then came under new text-critical methods to establish dates, authorship, and authenticity. This proceeded from the philological contributions of Friedrich Schleiermacher and Wilhelm Dilthey.

From ever more realistic methods of interpretation, Schleiermacher proposed a hermeneutical theory making him the founder of modern hermeneutics. In some respects he expanded Dannhauser's distinction between exegesis and hermeneutics so that the disciplines thereafter came to represent separate fields of inquiry, one being philology and the other philosophy. Schleiermacher believed that understanding the original languages and the genius of their authors involved two separate tasks: the first exegetical, the latter called *Kunstlehre* or the "technical" domain in which an interpreter apprehends the author and the conditions from which a text emerges. In this second domain he called for a hermeneutical theory to account for the preconditions of interpretation that cause misunderstanding and thus define the parameters of the so-called hermeneutical circle. Dilthey modified Schleiermacher's theory and set forth an epistemology of interpretation and understanding (*Verständnis*) of history in its true life forms, as it actually happened. Dilthey wished to

interpret the past not by rational explanation (*Erklärung*), but through an imaginative experience of reconstruction or “historical consciousness” of the world of a text (Richard E. Palmer, *Hermeneutics*, 1969).

Heidegger revised hermeneutical discourse in a movement away from Dilthey’s work in epistemology toward the ontological speculation of *Sein und Zeit* (1927). The book contains numerous precritical studies of Hegel on time following an analysis of Dasein, his central idea for “being-there” in a world where the person is thrown into the facts of existence. “Facticity” describes the world as the condition of understanding Being, a linguistic phenomenon without criteria for distinguishing subjective from objective categories of apprehending physical reality. Language, he wrote, is the house of Being, but the question of Being resides in the dialectical consciousness of things given to the hermeneutical circle of interpretation. The circle establishes the double character of preunderstanding revised by the event of understanding a text that opens “possibilities of meaning” vis à vis the world or the text that is existence. All interpretation remains open therefore, an endless continuum of linguistic events. The word (*λογος*) theoretically becomes a noun and a verb unfolding across the temporal horizon between text and interpreter, with no possibility of closure, only openness of new possibility.

Hans Jonas, once Heidegger’s student, wrote that his professor was wrong to deny the reality of permanent understanding. If the horizon of time and interpretation is never objectified, never “closed,” he said, it

stands open to factual claims never brought into a normative sphere of discourse to determine criteria of truth for which no anonymous Being — a silence on historical fact — could possibly exist (*Heidegger et la thèologie*, 1988). Jonas argued further against Heidegger’s claim that through the interpreter the essence of things speaks continuously. If essence could speak, on what grounds would one distinguish factual from fictitious language flowing from continuous self-revelation housed where Being lives? The open possibilities of essence speaking border on delusion. Gadamer set forth a hermeneutical theory more realistic than Heidegger’s, but each questioned the validity of historical consciousness of time and language.

Gadamer called it an abyss of estrangement from the past because the “standard slogan” to return to the original languages and authorial intentions of the text — he refers to Schleiermacher and Dilthey — lacks the “persuasive inner logic” of practical philosophy and the dialectic of “our understanding of the reality under discussion” (*Vernunft im Zeitalter der Wissenschaft*, 1976). This reality takes its precedent from the Aristotelian tradition of rhetoric practiced juridically to win a case, whether or not the argument is based on authentic witness or interpretive judgment proven to be impartial. Gadamer held that impartiality in interpretation invalidates the hermeneutical circle, the idea that prejudice should break down the historical distance between the text and reader. On prejudice he

wrote, “We must repudiate the illusion of completely illuminating the darkness of our motivations and tendencies.” Why?

Without impartial knowledge of real historical distance in matters of interpretation, there is a deep confusion between formal hermeneutics and rhetoric, with a false unity of theory and practice which dissolves the difference between formal and persuasive discourse and denies the objective status of authorial purpose or intention. In one sense the argument against impartiality affirms also that language is a fluid medium of interpenetration of past and present — clearly plausible on every level of perception, speech and writing. But the fallacy of temporal interpenetration lies in the nature of prejudice Gadamer would bind to interpretation in order to relativize every utterance proceeding from it in the interests of the interpreter predisposed against analysis of written language fixed concretely in time by the text, a real object and universe of events. The absolute openness of hermeneutical possibility makes no clear distinction between truth and falsehood in understanding such matters, but instead subsumes historical truths into the rhetoric of the inquiring interpreter’s motivations and tendencies. The more dangerous tendencies lie in some forms of deconstructive discourse congenial to Holocaust denial on the premises of Heidegger’s 16 work, with “intersubjective” claims widely known on the unreliability and indeterminacy of language and historical truth. Not that all deconstructive discourse serves falsehood or anti-Semitic prejudice: *Abusus non tollit usum*. Nevertheless hermeneutical theory and

practice this century must receive more critical and impartial analysis in the particular case of texts discovered at Qumran. In the case of philosophical hermeneutics, questions of truth in the interpretation of texts will always presuppose conditions in which language and meaning are either understood or not. Interpretation should by all means remain an open-ended activity made all the more coherent with a great measure of skepticism toward claims that historical determinations of truth and falsehood are naïve. Reliable hermeneutical discourse results from intentional impartiality in matters of explanation and understanding, and from the fragile truth that the origins of hermeneutics are deeply Jewish.