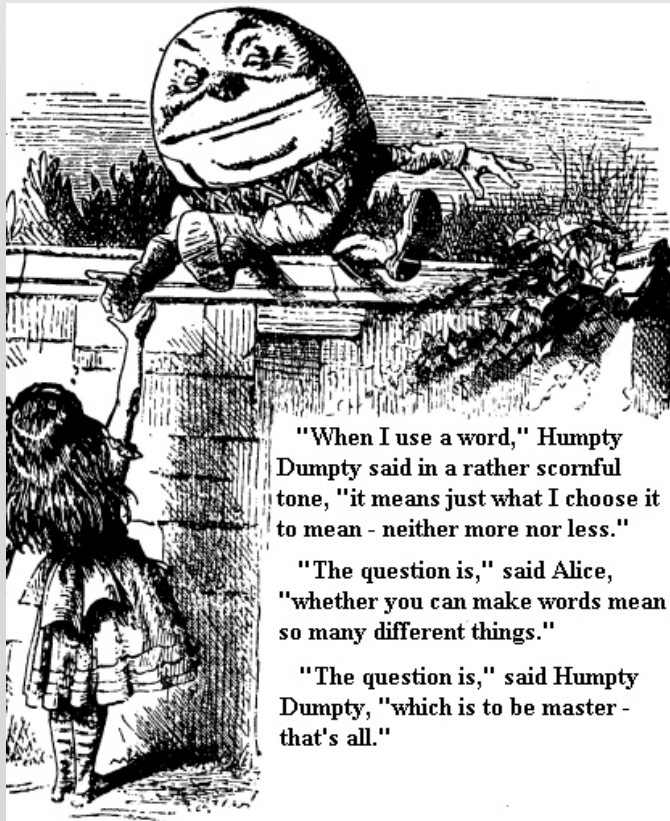


# APOLOGIA

... always be ready to give a defense [Greek, *apologia*]  
to everyone who asks you a reason for the hope that is in you ... 1 PETER 3:15

---



## Humpty Dumpty & the history of hermeneutics

OR, RIGHT AND WRONG WAYS TO READ THE BIBLE

By David Aspinall

# Humpty Dumpty & the History of Hermeneutics

or, RIGHT AND WRONG WAYS TO READ THE BIBLE

**W**OE unto the world because of occasions of stumbling! for it must needs be that the occasions come; but woe to that man through whom the occasion cometh! (Matt.18:7, ASV)

We have all lamented the current spate of 'prophetic' ministries which captivate millions of North American evangelicals. The stratospheric sales of 'supermarket' eschatology illustrates that **hermeneutics** -- the science of biblical interpretation -- is a subject we cannot afford to know nothing about, whether we measure our loss in dollars or sense. We cannot chuck this subject in the attic beside the piles of Hal Lindsey and Grant Jeffrey tapes and paperbacks. For what has led us to another prophetic dead end? Why the Y2K fiasco? Did we learn nothing from the similar debacles of the '30s and '40s, when Hitler and Mussolini sat in the roles more recently occupied by Kissinger, Gorbachev and Saddam Hussein, according to professional 'Bible prophecy' teachers.

One reason we keep following these self-appointed eschatological gurus is that we have not learned the basic principles of Bible interpretation. So intoxicated are we by the glossy titles in Christian bookstores that we fail to check the basic assumptions of their authors. Why, for example, should we think the book of Revelation is mostly about the remnant of fleshly Israel when its first chapter clearly tells us that what follows is for the encouragement of the 7 churches? If the church is already raptured when the events of chapter 13 take place, why the sudden warning of 13:10, *Here is the endurance and the faith of the saints*? If 7 years separate the rapture and the appearance of the Lord, why does Paul encourage the church at Thessalonica, a church undergoing tribulation, to look to the hope of "repose with us, at the revelation of the Lord Jesus from heaven", at which time Christ will "render tribulation to those that trouble you" (2 Thess.1:6,7, Darby translation)?

We must take every precaution that we don't head down the same hermeneutical dead ends that our forefathers innocently, but ignorantly,

walked down. And not only for our own good. For the world has wondered at our cockeyed interpretations of Scripture before. And worse still, the world has stumbled over them. We've stood on our "sure interpretations" of Scripture before -- to our later regret. There was an avalanche of prophetic misinterpretation during the Reformation and the Puritan period. Even Isaac Newton and the great New Testament scholar Johannes Bengel got caught up in the interpretation of the books of Daniel and Revelation, the "sure word of prophecy". The world was watching our speculative misadventures, and the age of rationalism was upon us -- the Bible's authority was now publicly under attack. Without intending to -- in fact, with every intention of defending the word of God -- we stumbled many seekers after truth who perhaps were on their way into the kingdom. *Woe to the world because of the stumbling blocks!* Will we Christians have no accountability for stumbling sincere people who cannot accept our sci-fi eschatology, or our 6-day, 6000-years-ago creation? The issue is not whether these interpretations of Scripture are right or wrong. It is just that we have made issues of non-essentials before, with disastrous results we could not have foreseen.

## A Brief History of Bible (Mis)Interpretation

[In the preface of his *History of Interpretation* (1886) F.W. Farrar lamented the space limitations that restricted his scope. Over 500 pages later he ended his survey with a 12-page bibliography. We shall attempt our survey in a yet more confined space. About the most we can hope is that what may be learned -- and forgotten again-- after 500 pages will still be remembered after 10 or 12.]

\* \* \*

*"We count it no gentleness or fair dealing in a man of power, to require strict and punctual obedience, and yet give out his commands ambiguously. We should think he had a plot upon us. Certainly such commands were no commands, but snares. The very essence of truth is plainness and brightness; the darkness and ignorance are our own."*

So wrote John Milton in the midst of a volcanic era, when both church and world were examining afresh the nature of authority. In the 17th century just **who** had ultimate power on earth? Has God given divine

right to kings? Or should monarchs be accountable to a duly-constituted parliament? In Milton's day a king (Charles I) lost his head over this issue. In the church, for a century already, war had raged over another authority issue: who or what should have ultimate authority among Christians? Church or Scripture? And if Scripture, as Protestants voted in theory, how was Scripture to be rightly interpreted? The Roman Church insisted that the ordinary Christian had not the skills to rightly divide the Word, that the Bible was dangerous in the hands of the common man. The Protestant sentiment, however, was generally in favour of dissemination of the Bible to peasant as well as prelate. Suddenly, after the Reformation, there was an urgency to make the Word accessible to the common man in his own languages. The faith of Milton, that God would not speak in dark sentences if He wished to be obeyed, was about to be carried through in practice. But why had it taken 1600 years?

For the first generations of Christians, it was sufficient that Christ and the apostles had orally laid down sufficient truth for faith and conduct. That usually oral deposit was faithfully transmitted for about 100 years, that is, until the apostles and those who heard them had died off. In this circumstance heresy could make limited inroads. However, in the second century controversy over church authority would make both the canon of Scripture and its right interpretation issues of practical urgency. Christ himself, to be sure, had run into a seemingly immovable object on this issue. That object was the inert mass of Jewish tradition accumulated upon (Old Testament) revelation. That tradition, Christ told the Jews, was already nullifying the Word of God (Matt.15:6). Against that system of interpretation, which effectively made every Bible text the sport of its interpreter, Christ set a standard which seemed radical. God, Christ asserted, had given parts of his revelation as an **accommodation** to man's incapacity and sin. This principle effectively eroded the foundation of the Jewish reverence for the Torah, which by now was more idolized than understood by the scribal system that had virtually come to view the law as if it were eternal as God Himself. The ultimate comment on the wrongness of that approach is that those very Jews who idolized Scripture failed to recognize the One of whom Scripture testified (John 5:38-47).

But how can we approach and understand the Word if Israel failed? We have even more than sin and tradition to overcome. We have an immense linguistic and cultural gap as well. This realization brought to birth the science of hermeneutics. Berkhof defines **hermeneutics** as

*"the science that teaches us the principles, laws, and methods of interpretation"*. He goes on to set this science's task as the removing of the "distance between an author and his readers"<sup>2</sup>. Bernard Ramm likens hermeneutics to a rule book, and **exegesis** to the game<sup>3</sup>. Without the rule book Bible interpretation would resemble a dialogue with Lewis Carroll's Humpty Dumpty, who set as his rule "When I use a word, it means just what I choose it to mean -- neither more nor less"<sup>4</sup>.

### ***Hermeneutics in the early church***

It was, ironically, a NON-apostolic church that gave us the first system of Scripture interpretation. Clement of Alexandria and his disciple Origen, under the influence of rabbinic method and Alexandrian philosopher Philo Judaeus, refined an hermeneutical system that would prevail over 1000 years. Origen's method assumed 3 levels of meaning in the biblical text, corresponding to the body, soul, spirit analysis of human personality. In this system, the *spiritual* meaning of a given passage was usually the *allegorical* understanding. Particularly where the Old Testament seemed to picture God in a less than flattering light, the Alexandrians, like the translators of the Septuagint 300 years before, were prone to explain away the literal sense. Milton Terry explains: "Many of the theophanies and anthropomorphisms of the Old Testament were repugnant to the philosophic mind ... the biblical narratives were often treated like the Greek myths, and explained as either a historical or an enigmatical embodiment of moral and religious lessons"<sup>5</sup>. The famous historian Adolf Harnack called Origen's allegorical system "biblical alchemy".

Not all of the fathers, though, gave in to the gnosticizing, Platonizing tide, accommodating Scripture to Greek thought. Julius Africanus, showed a healthy respect for the literal meaning of the Bible text. So did Lucian, who founded what has come to be known as the Antioch school of interpretation<sup>6</sup>. This tradition was best exemplified by Theodore of Mopsuestia (ca.350-428) and John Chrysostom (ca.347-407). Though the former was the more exacting exegete, he came to doubt the canonicity of portions of both testaments. Chrysostom was to have more influence. Indeed he has been called the greatest commentator of the ancient church.

The church catholic, unfortunately, continued to be dominated by the Alexandrian school. Augustine, though undoubtedly the greatest

theologian and thinker among the fathers, was severely hampered by his poor knowledge of Greek and ignorance of Hebrew. As an exegete he was inferior to his contemporary Jerome, who was not as hamstrung by allegorization as Augustine, Ambrose and other fathers of this era.

### ***Interpretation in the Middle Ages***

Berkhof well sums up the hermeneutical stasis of the next millennium: “In this period, the fourfold sense of Scripture (literal, tropological, allegorical, and analogical) was generally accepted, and it became an established principle that the *interpretation of the Bible had to adapt itself to tradition and to the doctrine of the Church.*”<sup>7</sup> It is the opinion of Farrar that

the mystical system of Scripture interpretation, as embodied in the method of Augustine, “flung a dark shadow across the Church of Christ, and his [Augustine’s] intolerance was mainly the result of his views of Scriptural interpretation”<sup>8</sup>. Bible commentaries became catenae (chains of patristic quotations and references). Access to the fresh air of the original languages was cut off by reverence for Jerome’s Latin Vulgate. Even the church’s greatest thinker of the middle ages, Thomas Aquinas, was trapped in this labyrinth of mystical exegesis. His biblical expositions, in contrast to his theological, are of little value, forced as they are through an Aristotelian sieve and an allegorical hermeneutic. Thomas’s fellow scholastic Bonaventura even expanded the number of exegetical levels to seven!<sup>9</sup> The church was repeating the experience of Israel, binding on men’s shoulders “heavy burdens and grievous to be borne” (Matt.23:4). The net effect of this approach to Scripture was to thrust men’s faith upon the church, the guardian, as medieval interpreters saw it, of the *regula fidei*, the rule of faith, the patristic and medieval tradition, the only safe method of Bible interpretation.



Thomas Aquinas

Thomas’s fellow scholastic Bonaventura even expanded the number of exegetical levels to seven!<sup>9</sup> The church was repeating the experience of Israel, binding on men’s shoulders “heavy burdens and grievous to be borne” (Matt.23:4). The net effect of this approach to Scripture was to thrust men’s faith upon the church, the guardian, as medieval interpreters saw it, of the *regula fidei*, the rule of faith, the patristic and medieval tradition, the only safe method of Bible interpretation.

It is ironic that it was by returning to its Jewish roots that the church finally escaped this labyrinth. During the Middle Ages certain Hebrew scholars had managed to escape the crushing weight of rabbinic

tradition. The Karaites promoted fairly literal exegesis. Their influence would be felt in the influential work of the great rabbis of the late Middle Ages, Rashi, Kimchi, Aben-Ezra and Abarbanel. Nicholas of Lyra, an influence on Czech pre-Reformer and martyr John Huss, was the instrument God used to reintroduce these sound exegetical principles to the Christian tradition.

### ***The Reformers and biblical interpretation***

Martin Luther came to accept Nicholas of Lyra’s insistence that Scripture must be interpreted according to its natural, historical sense<sup>10</sup>. Luther called allegory “a sort of beautiful harlot, who proves herself specially seductive to idle men”<sup>11</sup>. With John Reuchlin (1455-1522) and Desiderius Erasmus (ca.1466-1536) performing yeomen service in restoring respectively Hebrew and Greek to the church, the stage was set for an interpretive revolution. It has been well said of the Reformation, “Erasmus laid the egg, Luther hatched it”. Reformation exegesis reached its culmination in John Calvin’s commentaries. Though Calvin was behind Erasmus, Melancthon and Beza in textual and linguistic skills, he excelled all the reformers in clarity, good sense and spiritual acumen. Whereas Luther enunciated sound hermeneutical principles and sometimes followed them, Calvin’s practice was consistent with his principles.

A tragedy of the Reformation was also connected with disagreement over hermeneutical principles. Luther, Melancthon, Zwingli and Oecolampadius once sat down to iron out their differences over the Lord’s supper. When it became evident Luther would not budge on his literal reading of Christ’s words *this IS my body*, Zwingli, with tears in his eyes, offered the right hand of fellowship. But Luther wouldn’t shake it<sup>12</sup>. Not for the last time would the Protestant principle of liberty in Bible interpretation result in a fragmenting of the church.

At the same time as the question of authority was rocking the church, the scientific revolution was overtaking Europe. Augustine, 1100 years before, had warned of the danger of discrediting the Bible by what we might now term ‘Humpty Dumpty hermeneutics’<sup>13</sup>. Nevertheless, the church spent much of the post-Reformation period disputing with advancing science about issues such as whether the earth rotated around the sun, or vice versa. The opposition of the Roman Catholic church to the discoveries of Kepler and Galileo is well-known, but less

well-known is the resistance in Protestant circles. Calvin asked “Who will venture to place the authority of Copernicus above that of the Holy Spirit?” John Owen asserted “Newton’s discoveries are against evident testimonies of Scripture.”<sup>14</sup>

### ***The Rise of Modern Bible Interpretation***

The embarrassments such faulty exegesis caused the church were to be instrumental in the rise of rationalism and deism – along with the aforementioned eschatological errors and wild speculations. Educated people felt that if the Bible could not be trusted, God had left us without a reliable light other than our own reason. The positive side of this development was that Bible criticism received new impetus. The 17th and 18th centuries saw great advances in the study of the Bible against its linguistic and cultural background. John Lightfoot, Grotius, Vitringa and Bengel pioneered detailed biblical exegesis, and Ernesti gave us the first great modern work on biblical interpretation (1761). Herder, in his work on Hebrew poetry, opened up the human side of Scripture as never before. Even the blatantly rationalist German scholarship of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, exemplified by De Wette, Ewald and Baur, led to an powerful response from the German evangelical scholars Hengstenberg, Havernick, Neander, Lange etc., who used the critics’ own scholarly methods to undermine some of their more radical conclusions. When unbelief reached full tide in the writings of Strauss and Renan, the German scholars and their English-speaking colleagues and disciples met the attacks of rationalism with a plethora of commentaries which, as specimens of biblical exegesis, have still not been completely superseded. Among dozens of such teachers, we might cite especially the work of J.B. Lightfoot, Westcott, Hort, Plummer, and Godet (in French originally), who combined the deepest piety with the most rigorous scholarship. In many ways that generation of scholars (1870-1920) has not yet been matched for breadth as well as depth of scholarship<sup>15</sup>.

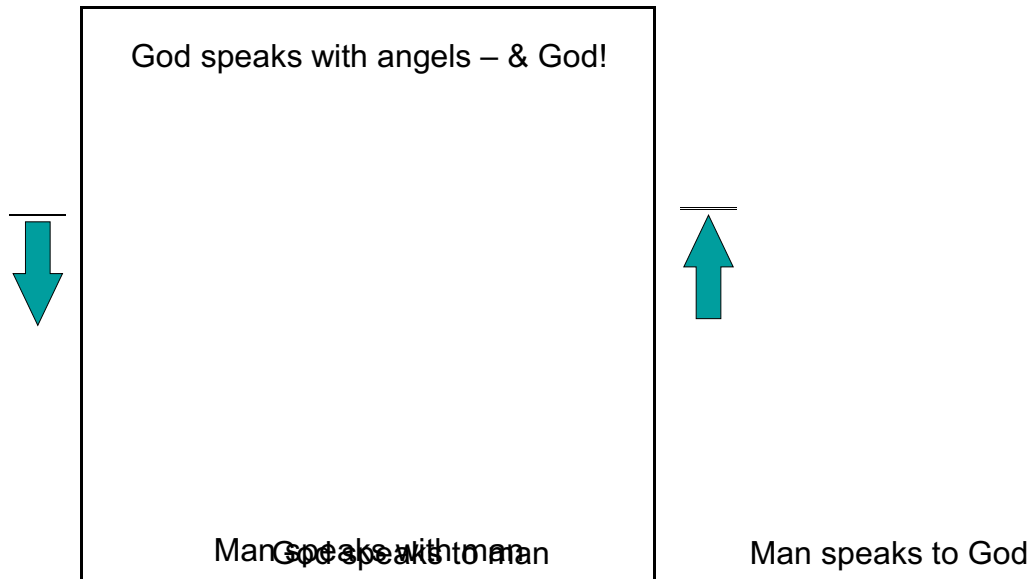
Let us thank the Lord that He is able to bring forth fragrant flowers even from the deserts of unbelief.

### **BIBLIOGRAPHY**

1. Milton S. Terry, *Biblical Hermeneutics* (Zondervan, 1883) p.160
2. L. Berkhof, *Principles of Biblical Interpretation* (Baker, 1950) p.11
3. Bernard Ramm, *Protestant Biblical Interpretation* (Baker, 1970, 3rd rev.ed.) p.11
4. Lewis Carroll, *Through the Looking Glass*, ch.6
5. Terry, p.163
6. Terry, pp.644-45.
7. Berkhof, p.23 (italics in original).
8. F.W. Farrar, *History of Interpretation* (Dutton, 1886) p.236.
9. Terry, p.666.
10. Jack B. Rogers, Donald K. McKim, *The Authority and Interpretation of the Bible: An Historical Approach* (Harper and Row, 1979) p.84
11. Farrar, p.328.
12. Terry, p.682.
13. Rogers, McKim, p.26.
14. Farrar, p.xviii.
15. See the *Apologia* booklet *He Gave Teachers* for brief biographies of about 150 of the greatest teachers of the church.

## Basic Rules for Rightly Dividing the Word of Truth

*THE SCRIPTURE SQUARE:*  
A SIMPLE PICTURE OF THE BIBLE  
(the 4-sided issue with 'inspiration')



**God speaks to angels – & God! (Gen 1:26, Job 1-2, Revelation)**