JOHANN AUGUST ERNESTI: THE ROLE OF HISTORY IN BIBLICAL INTERPRETATION

JOHN H. SAILHAMER*

I. INTRODUCTION

This article will address the question regarding the role of history in Biblical interpretation. It will do so within the context of an evangelical view of Scripture. By this I mean a view that holds the Bible to be the inspired locus of divine revelation. There are, of course, other approaches to Scripture and hermeneutics. There are probably also other definitions of the evangelical view of Scripture; but I think the view I have described is the classical view that is rooted in classical orthodoxy and the Reformation creeds.

My primary interest in the subject of this article is and has been in the hermeneutics of the OT. The literature and historical situation of the composition of the OT and the NT are different enough to caution against a facile application of the same hermeneutical principles to both. Nevertheless, I believe that the same principles do apply to both, but each in terms of its own specific issues and questions.

In this article I will approach the question of the role of history in Biblical interpretation from the point of view of the history of interpretation. I have elsewhere given a lengthy theoretical discussion of the issue.[1] There I argued that history, and especially the discipline of philology (the study of ancient texts), should play a central role in our understanding *about* the Biblical texts. Who was the author? When was a book written? Why was it written? What is the lexical meaning of its individual words? History also plays a central role in the apologetic task of defending the historical veracity of the Biblical record. Are the patriarchal narratives historically reliable? Were the Biblical authors influenced by ancient mythology? Did Jesus rise from the dead?

When it comes to the meaning of the Biblical text, however, I argued that history, that is, historical reconstructions of the Biblical events, cannot, or at least should not, take the place of the depiction of the actual events described in the text.

It is not a question of whether we can accurately fill in the many historical details that have been left out of the Biblical picture. I believe we can do that. Our ability to fill out the Biblical picture is, in fact, the chief

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* John Sailhamer is professor of Old Testament and Hebrew at Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary, 222 N. Wingate St., Wake Forest, NC 27588.

[1] John H. Sailhamer, *Introduction to Old Testament Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995).

problem. We have the same ability to fill in the historical details of Scripture as we have of painting over the shadows of a Rembrandt painting with intricate details of seventeenth-century life. Our effect on the Rembrandt painting would be no more or less than on the Bible. By filling in the Biblical narratives in this way, we may learn much about the events narrated by the Biblical writers, but our goal in hermeneutics is not an understanding of those events as such. It is understanding the Biblical text. We want to know what the Biblical texts say about the events they record. No amount of information from history outside the text will tell us that.

The task of understanding the events themselves is the task of Biblical historiography. That, of course, is an extremely important task. It is not, however, the same task as Biblical hermeneutics. Hermeneutics, as I understand it, always is and always should be devoted to discovering the meaning of the Biblical text. To quote Sternberg, "the text itself has a pattern of meaning."[2]

II. HISTORY OF INTERPRETATION

1. *Introduction*. I now want to turn to the history of Biblical interpretation to address the question of the role of history in Biblical hermeneutics. My aim will be to trace the meaning of the phrase "grammatical-historical method." My thesis is that the meaning of these two terms, "grammatical" and "historical," were best defined and defended by Johann August Ernesti.[3] Not only does Ernesti's viewpoint best fit the nature of the Biblical texts as such, but his view is also most commensurate with the view of Scripture held by classical orthodoxy and modern evangelicalism.

Ernesti's approach has long been hailed as the definitive statement of what was to be known as the "grammatical-historical method." Many changes have occurred in the meaning of the expression "grammatical-historical method" since Ernesti. Almost all of them make the claim to be the legitimate heirs of Ernesti's method. The most notable change, of course, was the transition to the phrase "historical-critical method." I do not intend to say anything about that transition. Much has been written about that subject,[4] and I do not intend to add to it.

There were, however, more subtle changes in Ernesti's method, and these have come to have a fundamental effect on evangelical hermeneutics. The "grammatical-historical" approach of Ernesti came to the American evangelical world in the nineteenth century by means of the highly successful English translation of Moses Stuart. Stuart had his own ideas about hermeneutical method and about the importance of historical studies in Biblical interpretation; and he had a life-long commitment to introduce the

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[2] Meir Sternberg, *Poetics of Biblical Narrative* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985) 15.

[3] *Institutio Interpretis Novi Testamenti* (Leipzig, 1761; editio altera 1765).

[4] See especially Hans-Joachim Kraus, *Geschichte der historisch-kritischen Erforschung des Alten Testaments* (Neukirchen: Neukirchener, 1969).

American public to the results of recent German criticism. In light of such matters, Stuart's translation of Ernesti offered a highly interpreted version of Ernesti's method to the English world. He did this, as we will see, in both the translation itself and in the notes he copiously supplied along with his translation.

One might say that through Stuart's translation, the "grammatical-historical method" came to be a kind of safe haven from the "historical-critical method." It came to be a way of using the results of some historical methods without committing oneself to the full war-chest of critical tools. It provided a kind of lighthouse to guard against venturing too far into the dangerous waters of "historical" science (*Wissenschaft*). There was a feeling of safety in the dark waters of the historical method as long as one could see somewhere on the horizon a clear beacon of light from the text.

This was not, however, the intent of Ernesti's work. It was, in fact, intended to be just the opposite. In his own day, the historical method was already calling Biblical scholars, critical and non-critical, away from the text, and it was Ernesti's intent to bring them back solely to the text itself.

To gain a sense of Ernesti's approach, I want to use one of his own basic principles. I want to look at the way he uses two key terms in describing his method. These are the terms "grammatical" and "historical." What did Ernesti mean by these terms? What was the relationship between these terms? In earlier hermeneutical works, the two terms "grammatical" and "historical" were commonly connected by the Latin conjunction *sive*, meaning something like our word "namely." It was "the grammatical, namely, the historical" sense of Scripture that was sought after. When later Biblical scholars such as Karl August Keil connected the two terms with a *dash* or an *et*,[5] it suggested the two terms no longer meant the same thing. It was now "the grammatical *and* the historical" method.

After a discussion of the background of Ernesti's terms "grammatical" and "historical," I want to give a description of his own specific use of these terms. I will then attempt to show something of the way in which Ernesti's method came to be viewed within American evangelicalism through the eyes of Moses Stuart's translation.[6]

2. *A review of the history of the use of the terms "grammatical" and "historical."*   A review of the history of the use of the terms "grammatical" and "historical" in earlier hermeneutical works reveals many subtle shifts in meaning. The phrase "grammatical-historical" was, in fact, coined by Karl Augustus Theophilos Keil in his work entitled *Elementa Hermeneutices Novi Testamenti* (translated into Latin by Christoph August Emmerling; Leipzig, 1811). Keil was attempting to update the central thesis of Ernesti that the Bible should be studied like any other book from the ancient past. For Keil that meant the Bible should be studied according to the newly

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[5] *Keilii opuscula academica ad N.T. interpretationem grammatico-historicam et theologiae christianae origines pertinentia* (ed. J. D. Goldhorn; Leipzig, 1820).

[6] Moses Stuart, *Elements of Interpretation* (translated from the Latin of J. A. Ernesti and accompanied by notes; Andover, 1827).

developed historical consciousness introduced by Johann Salomo Semler (1753–91), a student of the celebrated Sigmund Jakob Baumgarten at the University of Halle in the early eighteenth century.

It was with Baumgarten that, as historian Emanuel Hirsch has argued, "German Protestant theology reached a decisive stage. . . . It went from being a faith based on the Bible to being one based on revelation—a revelation for which the Bible was in reality nothing more than a record once given."[7] It was also with Baumgarten, and his colleague Johann Franz Buddeus (1667–1729), that the concept of "the historical" was given a completely new direction in Biblical studies. Before Baumgarten and Buddeus, the notion of "Biblical history," which was introduced into the concept of revelation by Johannes Coccejus (1603–69), was that series of events *recorded in* the Scriptures. Divine revelation was to be found in the events recorded *in Scripture*.

With Baumgarten, and particularly with Buddeus, "Biblical history" came to mean that series of events *referred to* in the Bible. Hence, divine revelation was to be found in the events referred to in Scripture, rather than in the Scriptures themselves. Though subtle, it is not hard to see that such a view represents quite a different view of "Biblical history." Recent works on the history of Biblical interpretation, such as those of Hans Frei and Hans-Joachim Kraus, maintain that sometime during the eighteenth century a fundamental shift in the meaning of the term "Biblical history" swept over Europe. It was a shift in which the meaning of the Bible ceased to be located in the words and sentences of the Biblical narratives and came rather to be located in the events and persons referred to by those narratives.

While I am convinced of the basic truthfulness of this oft-rehearsed account of the history of interpretation, I want to look at these same events from another perspective. Most, if not all, accounts of the development of the phrase "grammatical-historical method" are pre-programmed to explain the rise of the "historical-critical method." As important as that is, I want to look at these same events from a more internal perspective. It is rarely noted that most of the people involved in the actual transition were, at least at one time or another, evangelical in their theology. I want thus to ask how this transition affected that part of Biblical scholarship that remained evangelical.

In the end, evangelicals during this time opted to retain the phrase "grammatical-historical method" as their distinguishing trademark over against the more negatively charged "historical-critical method." In my opinion, that was largely an apologetic decision. But what effect did such a decision have on the meaning of the phrase itself? The phrase, which was coined to describe a hermeneutic, had come, in fact, to be used as a basis

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[7] "Alles in allem darf man wohl sagen: die deutsche evangelische Theologie ist mit Baumgarten in das entscheidende Stadium des Übergangs vom Bibelglauben zu einem Offenbarungsglauben getreten, dem die Bibel im Wesentlichen nichts ist als die nun einmal gegebne Urkunde der Offenbarung." Emanuel Hirsch, *Geschichte der Neuern Evangelischen Theologie*, Vol. 2 (Gütersloh: C. Bertelsmann, 1951) 378.

for an apologetic. By the time we arrive at later evangelical expressions of the phrase "grammatical-historical method," the term "historical" had come to mean something quite different than Ernesti intended.

a. *Words and things*.   To understand the sense of the phrase "grammatical-historical method," we need to look at two other important terms found throughout the history of interpretation. These are the terms "words" (*verba*) and "things" (*res*). Here I should begin with the observation that up to and including the work of Ernesti, treatises on Biblical hermeneutics were written in Latin. This was even long after vernacular languages had begun to be used in Biblical studies and theology. Even in the nineteenth century, Keil's work on Biblical hermeneutics, which was originally written in German, was translated into Latin. The reason for this is not merely conservatism. The reason was that a long-standing use of certain Latin terms had been maintained in hermeneutical works since the time of Augustine's book *On Christian Doctrine*. Some of these terms have come over into English, such as the "literal sense" (*sensus literalis*) and the "historical sense" (*sensus historicus*). But the two most fundamental terms have, to my knowledge, never been adapted properly into English. These are the terms introduced by Augustine at the beginning of his treatise, "things" (*res*) and "words" (*verba*).

Augustine's basic formula was that "words signify things." "Words" are parts of language; "things" are what "words" point to. Throughout the history of Biblical interpretation, the major treatises begin by laying this basic groundwork. Ernesti was no exception. He begins by stating, "corresponding to every word (*verbum*) in Scripture there is an idea or notion of a thing (*res*) which we call the sense (*sensus*)." Meaning (*sensus*) consist of *words* which point to *things*.

It is not an exaggeration to say that the history of Christian Biblical interpretation is a history of the attempt to either narrow or expand the meaning of the term "things" (*res*). Augustine, and the medieval scholars who followed him, saw in the relationship of "words" to "things" the possibility of accounting for both a literal and a figurative interpretation of Biblical texts. *Words* point to (signify) *things*, but *things* also can point to (signify) other *things*. All *things* get pointed at by *words* (literal sense), but some *things* also point to other *things* (figurative sense). For Augustine, the "wood" which Moses cast into the bitter waters (Exod 15:25) was both a thing which the word "wood" pointed to, and a *thing* which points to another *thing*, the cross ("wood") of Christ.

Medieval interpretation, both Christian and Jewish, is characterized by establishing links between *words* and *things*, and *things* and other *things*. What often appears to us as a purely arbitrary labeling of words and meanings, is more often than not the result of a carefully drawn matrix of *things* which signify other *things*. The control factor is, obviously, the acceptance of the links between the *things*. In the medieval church that was the role of tradition. It is thus no surprise that the early Protestant treatises on hermeneutics were preoccupied with nailing down the *things* to which the

words could refer. Since there could only be a single meaning to the text, any *word* in Scripture could only signify a single *thing*. At the same time, Protestants were concerned to maintain the "spiritual sense" of Scripture, particularly the OT, as it was understood by Jesus and the NT. If the *words* did not seem to point to that "spiritual sense," then it may, or must, be found in the *thing* to which the *words* refer.

The resolution of this problem played itself out in two ways, the Lutheran and the Reformed approaches. Lutherans, such as Glassius, saw every *word* in Scripture as referring either to a *thing* (*res*) or a "mystery" derived from a *thing* (*res*).[8] The single meaning (*sensus*) of Scripture was identified by Glassius as that which the Holy Spirit intended, either the *thing* or the "mystery." It is especially important here to note that Glassius identified the meaning intended by the *words*, that is the *thing* referred to by the *words*, as "the literal, that is, the historical sense."[9] The literal sense was the historical sense which was the *thing* pointed to by the *word*.

In Reformed hermeneutics the literal meaning (*sensus literalis*) of Scripture lay in the meaning of the *words* (*verba*) of Scripture. Those *words* were either intended in their proper sense, in which case they pointed to *things* (*res*); or they could be taken in a typological sense, in which case they pointed to future spiritual realities (*mysterium*).[10] When *words* pointed to *things*, this was simply called "history," or *res gestae*. In Reformed hermeneutics, *things* had no inherent possibilities for meaning. Meaning (*sensus*) resided only in *words*. It was the *words* that rendered *things*, or history, meaningful. What this meant was that meaning, whether literal or spiritual, could only be read off the surface of the Biblical text. There could thus be only one meaning, and that was the literal sense, but that literal sense could, and often should, be understood "spiritually."[11]

In Reformed hermeneutics the meaning of "history" was, and still is in many cases, tied securely to the meaning of the Biblical texts. For Luther-

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[8] "Ergo praeter sensum literalem, qui ex verbis colligitur, mysticum etiam dari, qui ex rebus ipsis hauritur, negari nulla ratione potest." Salomon Glassius, *Philologia Sacra* (Leipzig, 1705 [1623]) 350.

[9] "literam seu historiam" (350).

[10] "Ubi unicum tantum esse scripturae sensum, eumque literalem, asserit; Et locos illos in quibus praeter historiam, eamque veram & gestam, significatur aliquid futurum typicè, non duos habere sensus, sed unicum, cumque literalem, verum tamen integrum sensum & totum non esse in verbis proprie sumptis, sed partim in typo, partim in re ipsa quae gesta fuit." William Whitaker, *Controvers. de S. Script*, quaest. 5, cap. 2; Bartholomaus Keckermann, "sensum verbi divini per se tantum umicum esse, eum nimirum, quem intentioni dicentis, & rei significatae natura importat, qui quidem literalis sive grammaticus dici solet," both quoted by Andre Rivet, *Isagoge Sev Introduction generalis, ad Scripturam Sacram Veteris & Novi Testamenti* (1627) 214.

[11] One can see in this not only how such a hermeneutic (Reformed) provided a firm basis for the typological interpretation that developed in Reformed Orthodoxy in the seventeenth century (Coccejus), but also why questions about the role of "history" in Biblical interpretation have not dogged Reformed hermeneutics quite as much as Lutheran. Another, less charitable, way of putting this is that one can see why classic Reformed theologians often see themselves as taking an historical approach to exegesis when, in reality, they are doing nothing more than retracing the history recorded in the Biblical narratives themselves. In my opinion, there is nothing wrong with such an approach as long as one recognizes it for what it is—a textual approach.

ans, however, the meaning of Scripture was detachable from *words* and could become resident in the *things* themselves.

Since Ernesti was a devout Lutheran, it is necessary to take a closer look at the Lutheran notion of *things* and *words*. In Lutheran hermeneutics, the *sensus* of Scripture was located either in the *words* or in the *mysterium* pointed to by the *things*. Meaning (*sensus*) was thus often only indirectly connected to the *words* of Scripture. Though not intended to be so, in this system of interpretation, the *things* of Scripture enjoyed a certain degree of independence from the *words*. Only the literal sense (*sensus literalis*) was securely tied to the *words*. Consequently, in Lutheran approaches to the Bible, the *things* of Scripture could often become the means whereby, apart from the *words*, outside meaning was introduced into the text. This worked well in allowing a great deal of freedom for Christological interpretations of the OT, but there was a price to be paid for such freedom. Allowing Christological meaning to reside in the *things* pointed to by *words* opened a door so wide into Scripture that both orthodox scholars and Pietists could import their own doctrines and personal beliefs by truckloads into the text.

By the eighteenth century, the *things* behind the *words* of Scripture were hard, if not impossible, to control by means of the *words* alone. Hence, it was one of Ernesti's primary goals to secure the legitimate control of the *words* of Scripture over the *things* themselves. That was necessary and important for Ernesti, because he genuinely believed that it was the *words* of Scripture, and not the *things*, that were divinely inspired. His basis for that view was the same as all orthodox theology in his day, Paul's statement in 2 Tim 3:16, "All Scripture [*words*] is inspired."

In writing his work on Biblical hermeneutics, Ernesti was particularly concerned that the meaning (*sensus*) of Scripture was becoming just as vulnerable in the hands of modern historians as it had once been to theologians and Pietists. Historians, too, had gained remarkable access to the *things* of Scripture. Given Lutheranism's stress on *things*, the historian's newly gained knowledge of *things* was quickly being put into service to manipulate the sense of Scripture just as effectively as the orthodox theologians and Pietists had once done.

Therefore, for several reasons—the most important being his concern for verbal inspiration—Ernesti established his first basic rule of interpretation: the meaning (*sensus*) of Scripture could come only through the *words* of Scripture. Regarding that rule, Ernesti said quite clearly, "Entirely deceitful and fallacious is the approach of gathering the sense of words from things. Things, rather, ought to be known from words."[12]

b. *History and things.*   From an early period, Protestant Biblical scholars had used the term "history" to refer to the *things* pointed to by the *words* of Scripture. That does not mean, however, that they used the term in the same sense we do today. Kraus, in fact, has argued that for Lutheran and Reformed Biblical scholars, the Biblical "history" (*res*) to which the

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[12] Ernesti, *Institutio* 13.

words of Scripture referred was little more than a static system of Christian symbols used in support of orthodox doctrine. Kraus labels this *"Dogmatic Biblicism."*[13] Two further stages of development of the term "history" or *things* (*res*) were necessary before the notion of *things* came to be seen as problematic for Ernesti.

The first development was the introduction into Biblical study of the notion of "time periods," a system of Biblical interpretation associated with the name Johannes Coccejus. Coccejus understood the history portrayed in the Bible as itself an actual flow of events, changing with time, and leading to a definite conclusion.[14] Biblical history as such was no longer like a Rembrandt painting that could be contemplated in its totality. It was now like a motion picture that could be understood only in terms of its temporal sequence. With Coccejus and his school, the *things* to which the Biblical *words* referred were forever changed into dynamic, unrepeatable events. They were still the events recorded in Scripture, but they were no longer viewed as verbal events portrayed in *words*. They were more like the ever-changing patterns of a kaleidoscope. One could understand those events only by becoming a part of them and by experiencing them in their own unique moment.

As Kraus has pointed out, it is important to see that for Coccejus, and those after him, Biblical history was still *Biblical history*. That meant it still consisted only of those *things* (*res*) to which the *words* of the Bible referred. The whole of "history" as such was contained within the range of the *words* (*verba*) of Scripture. Biblical history was not yet submerged into the ocean of world history. World history rather was still viewed within the panorama of the events in the Bible. Moreover, in Coccejus' system, "history" was still controlled by divine providence. It was, in true Reformed fashion, a "history" read off the pages of the Bible itself. There was still no thought of a "history" whose events and meaning could be known apart from the Biblical text.

A complete reversal of the view of Biblical "history" came about in the early eighteenth century. It came with the Lutheran Franz Buddeus.[15] Buddeus was, of course, still thoroughly orthodox, but he was also the first Biblical scholar to approach the events and meaning of Biblical "history" independently of the *words* of Scripture.[16] As Buddeus approached the Bible, he took it that what he could say about the *things* would also be

[13] Sailhamer, *Introduction* 120.

[14] Kraus, *Geschichte* 21.

[15] *Historia eccles. V. Ti* (Jennae, 1715, 1719, 1726).

[16] "Der Begriff 'oeconomia' wird durch 'historia' ersetzt. Hier dämmert die historische Idee." H-J. Kraus, *Die Biblische Theologie* (Neukirchener-Vluyn: Neukirchener, 1983) 24. Buddeus's new understanding of history can be seen in Diestel's description of his major work on Biblical history. Buddeus, in very learned comments, enumerated and critically evaluated a large number of viewpoints about the meaning of various events recorded in the Bible. His primary purpose was to explain with the strictest objectivity the events recorded in the Bible and those of the ancient world in terms of the conditions and wider range of events that were true in Biblical times. In doing so, says Diestel, Buddeus still understood himself to be explaining the meaning of the text (Ludwig Diestel, *Geschichte des Alten Testamentes in der Christlichen Kirche* [Jena: Mauke's, 1869] 463).

true about the *words* which referred to those things. In other words, what could legitimately and historically be said about the *things* referred to in the Bible was linked semantically to the words of Scripture. In taking such an approach, Buddeus, of course, reversed the order of meaning. Instead of the *words* giving meaning to the *things*, the *things* were now giving meaning to the *words*. It was at that point, says Kraus, that a genuine historical consciousness had made its way (unconsciously) into orthodox Biblical interpretation.

III. JOHANN AUGUST ERNESTI

Ernesti's primary goal was to provide an exegetical approach to the NT that was identical to the newly developed philological approach taken in the study of all other ancient literature. Only in that way, Ernesti argued, could NT exegesis free itself from arbitrary interpretation, by which he meant the control of *things*.[17] His basic thesis was that a text could have no other meaning than its grammatical, or historical, sense. That sense, which Ernesti usually called the *literal sense*, is located in individual words. The *sense* of a word is assigned to the word by "human arrangement and custom."[18] We would call it today "linguistic convention." That *sense* consisted of a specific idea, or mental notion, of a *thing*.[19] *Words* assign meaning to *things*. The fact that the *sense* of words is dependent on human custom means that its relationship to *things* is arbitrary.[20] When in a certain language and at a certain time and place, a *sense* is affixed to a *thing* by a *word*, that *sense* becomes the necessary meaning of the *word*.[21] It is for that reason that hermeneutics is grounded in historically conditioned situations and hence the *sense* of words must be investigated by means of a proper philological method.[22] That means, the *sense* of the *words* should be discovered from the usage (*usus loquendi*) of the words at the time of the writing of the Biblical books.

For Ernesti, the "use of words" (*usus loquendi*) is central to his method. It is just here, in fact, that Ernesti's method clearly distinguished itself from the historical method in his day, and ours. What Ernesti saw as the "historical" dimension of the meaning of a word was the "fact" that at a certain place and time in the past a living human being *recorded* a word in a text in such a way that its usage could be derived by reading that text. A historical moment was preserved, lexically and grammatically, in an ancient text. The historical moment preserved was not the event recorded but rather the

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[17] Gottlob Wilhelm Meyer, *Geschichte der Künste und Wissenschaften* (5 vols.; Göttingen, 1802–1809).

[18] "Eum sensum verba non habent per se; sunt enim non naturalia aut necessaria rerum signa: sed ab institutione humana et consuetudine, per quam inter verba et ideas rerum copulatio quaedam inducta est" (Ernesti, *Institutio* 9).

[19] "Omini verbo respondere debet, in sacris quidem libris semper et haud dubie respondet, idea seu notio rei, quem *sensum* dicimus, quod eius rei, quae verbo exprimitur, sensus audiendo verbo instaurari in animo utcumque debet" (ibid. 3).

[20] "Sed ea (sensus) cum esset ab initio, et institutione, arbitraria" (ibid. 8).

[21] "Semel constituta per consuetudinem facta est necessaria" (ibid.).

[22] Meyer, Vol. V, 494–95.

recording of the event itself. An event (*res*) had slipped over into a text (*verba*). To discover the meaning (*sense*) of a *word*, one had to look at the *word* in context of other *words* at the time of the recording of an event.

Ernesti was emphatic that to understand the meaning of *words* one should not look at the *things* the words pointed to. The relationship of *words* to *things* was arbitrary and could be discovered only by noting the usage of a *word* at a particular point in time and place. Ernesti believed that different times, places, and settings could radically alter the relationship between *words* and *things*.[23] It is the task of philology to discover the "usage of words" in specific written texts within various historical contexts. That goal remains today the goal of the science of philology.

The hermeneutical aim of the historical method, on the other hand, was, and continues to be, to discover the "sense" of ancient words by reconstructing the world of thought of the ancient writer who used the words. For the historian, the *sense of words* is gained from a knowledge of what the *words* are about, that is, it is gained from a knowledge of *things*. Such a historical approach is recognizable from Keil's description of the "*sense*" of Scripture. According to Keil, to know the *sense* of the words of Scripture one must think the same thoughts as the Biblical writer when he was writing the book.[24] The meaning, for Keil, is not in the *words* of the author, but in his mind (*mens scriptoris*). To know the mind of the writer is to know the *sense* of Scripture.[25] It is for this reason that Keil understands the investigation of the *sense* of words to be an historical task.[26]

For Keil, the investigation of the historical *sense* is a different task than finding the grammatical *sense*. The *sense* of a Biblical book must be drawn first from the *words*.[27] The *words* are a necessary help[28] which the writers use for getting their thoughts across to the readers.[29] But knowing the meaning of the *words* is not enough. The *sense* of a book cannot always be known solely from the *words* actually in the text.[30] For Keil, there are also other matters to consider. One must, for example, have a ready command of those *things* which enable us to better grasp the mind of the author.[31]

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[23] "*Usus* autem *loquendi* multis rebus definitur, tempore, religione, secta et disciplina, vita communi, reipublicae denique constitutione: quae fere efficiunt characterem orationis, qua quisque scriptor tempore quoque usus est. Nam ab iis rebus omnibus vel oritur vel variatur modus verborum usurpandorum: aliterque saepe idem verbum in vita communi, aliter in religione, aliter in scholis Philosphorum dicitur, quae et ipsae non consentiunt satis" (Ernesti, *Institutio* 11).

[24] "Sensum orationis aut libri cognoscere nihil aliud est, quam iis occupatum eadem cogitare, quae, dum composuit, auctor ipse cogitauit. . . . " (Keil, *Keilii Opuscula* 11).

[25] "Quod ubi in quopiam locum habet, is recte scriptoris mentem cepit . . . " (ibid.).

[26] "Unde patet, indagationem, quae circa sensum orationis aut libri versatur, esse historiam. . . . " (ibid.).

[27] "Hic vero unus librorum N.T. sensus necessario primum e verbis, quae auctores in singulis locis adhibuerunt, cognosci debebit" (ibid. 13).

[28] "velut adminiculo . . . " (ibid.).

[29] "His enim, velut adminiculo, illi ad designandas, quas cum lectoribus communicare volebant, notiones et cogitationes usi sunt, neque uti non potuerunt" (ibid.).

[30] " . . . sensus libri non semper unice e verbis in illo obuiis cognosci potest . . . " (ibid. 14).

[31] "ut res quoque eae in promtu sint, quarum est vis aliqua in definienda accuratiusque cognoscenda scriptoris mente" (ibid.).

Ernesti could not have disagreed more with Keil. Ernesti had, in fact, argued just the opposite. Instead of the meaning (*sensus*) of the *words* being derived from *things*, as Keil maintained, Ernesti taught that the meaning of *things* ought to be derived solely from the *words*. Ernesti could not have been more clear on this point. Hear him again: "Altogether deceitful and fallacious is the approach of drawing the *sense* of *words* from *things*, since *things*, rather, ought to be known from *words* and their *sense* investigated through legitimate means (philology). For something may be true which is not in the *words*, but that which is to be maintained about the *things* themselves, ought to be understood and judged from the *words* of the Holy Spirit."

It is interesting to compare the note of Moses Stuart on this last point of Ernesti. Stuart says, "By *things*, [Ernesti] means the application of our previous views of things to the words of an author, in order to elicit his meaning, instead of proceeding to our inquiries, in the way of grammatico-historical exegesis. Not that our previous knowledge of things can never aid us, for it often does so; but that this can serve for nothing more than an assistant to our philological efforts. . . . "[32] It is clear that Stuart completely reverses the point Ernesti has made. Ironically, he does so by suggesting that Ernesti really does not mean what he says. Stuart suggests that what Ernesti really means to say is that we should look at the *things* of Scripture without prejudice. In other words, we should look at them as objective historians. But it is clear that Ernesti does not mean to say that. He means to say exactly what his own words say—that we should not attempt to understand the *words* of Scripture by investigating the *things* they refer to. We can only understand the *things* by looking at what the *words* tell us about those *things*.

Ernesti does acknowledge that sometimes *words* are ambiguous and texts are unclear. In such cases, says Ernesti, *things* can assist an interpreter to "select some one particular meaning." But here, he says, we must use only those *things* which are know to us from the *words* of other texts. "For," he concludes, "when we investigate the sense in any other way than by a grammatical method, we effect nothing more, than to make out a meaning, which in itself perhaps is not absurd, but which lies not in the words, and therefore is not the meaning of the writer."[33] For Ernesti, the *mens scriptoris* is clearly only in the meaning of the words.

To show the effect of the later interpretations of Ernesti by Keil and Stuart on American evangelicalism, I want to look briefly at the work by

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[32] Stuart, *Elements* 17.

[33] "Itaque res et analogia doctrinae, quam dicunt, hactenus modo prodest in interpretando, ut in verbis vel a multitudine significationis, vel a structura, vel alia qua caussa, ambiguis, ducat nos ad definiendam verborum significationem, sive ad delectum significationis. In quo tamen et ipso cautio est, ut res, quibus ad definiendum utimur, ductae sint ex verbis planis et perspicuis et certo cognitis aliorum locorum, nec adversentur verba, quorum sensum quaerimus. Cum autem aliter, aut per eam solam, sine grammatica ratione, sensus quaeritur, nihil aliud efficitur, nisi, ut sensus repertus in se fortasse non absurdus sit, non ut in verbis lateat, sitque menti scriptoris consentaneus" (Ernesti, *Institutio* 13).

Milton S. Terry, *Biblical Hermeneutics*, a work that continues to enjoy considerable influence among evangelicals today. According to Terry, "The grammatico-historical sense of a writer is such an interpretation of his language as is required by the laws of grammar and the facts of history." For Terry, the historical sense is "that meaning of an author's words which is required by historical considerations. It demands that we consider carefully the time of the author, and the circumstances under which he wrote." Terry then quotes Davidson to show that the two terms, grammatical and historical, "are synonymous."[34]

So far, Terry appears to follow Ernesti fairly closely. Then Terry begins to specify more precisely what he means. Even though the terms grammatical and historical "are synonymous," there is a difference. Where they differ is that the laws of grammar are universal; the special uses of grammar (*usus loquendi*), however, are determined by "the religious, moral, and psychological ideas, under whose influence a language has been formed and molded."[35] Hence, "all the objects with which the writers were conversant, and the relations in which they were placed, are traced out *historically*."[36] It is clear that Terry (and Davidson) have parted company with Ernesti on the crucial issue of the role of history in hermeneutics.

Only a few pages later Terry demonstrates just how much he has learned from the later versions of the "grammatical-historical method" in works such as those by Keil or Stuart. In discussing the importance of "the historical standpoint," Terry says, "The interpreter should, therefore, endeavour to take himself from the present, and to transport himself into the historical position of his author, look through his eyes, note his surroundings, feel with his heart, and catch his emotion. Herein we note the import of the term grammatico-*historical* interpretation. We are not only to grasp the grammatical import of words and sentences, but also to feel the force and bearing of the historical circumstances which may in any way have affected the writer. . . . The individuality of the writer, his local surroundings, his wants and desires, his relation to those for whom he wrote, his nationality and theirs, the character of the times when he wrote—all these matters are of the first importance to a thorough interpretation of the several books of Scripture."[37]

What is wrong with what Terry is saying here, in my opinion, is not his hopelessly naïve romanticism. What is wrong is that he presents it as an explication of "the principles so ably set forth by Ernesti [which] were further elaborated . . . by Karl Augustus Keil, whose various contributions to Biblical hermeneutics [here he refers to the grammatical-historical method] did much to prepare the way for the solid and enduring methods of exegesis which are now generally prevalent in Germany, England, and America."[38] Whether Terry's approach to the use of historical reconstruction is valid in hermeneutics today, I leave to the reader to decide. The point I want to

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[34] Terry, *Biblical Hermeneutics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1974) 203.
[35] Ibid. 204.
[36] Ibid.
[37] Ibid. 231.
[38] Ibid. 708.

make is that it does not in any way represent the "grammatical-historical method" envisioned by Ernesti.

Let me conclude these remarks on the grammatical-historical method by a brief look at the assessment of Ernesti by the standard work on the history of Biblical interpretation in his own lifetime, that of Gottlob Wilhelm Meyer.[39] What one misses most from Ernesti, Meyer says, is any instructions on the use of the historical method. One should, however, not expect to find such instructions in Ernesti because, Meyer asserts, Ernesti relied solely on a grammatical interpretation.[40] Meyer goes on to argue that it was only with Semler (independently of Ernesti) that we find an interest in historical interpretation as part of the *sensus literalis*.[41]

IV. CONCLUSION

In several of his hermeneutical and philological observations, Ernesti was remarkably ahead of his time. Ernesti, for example, was thoroughly aware of the implications of the fact that the languages of the Bible are dead languages. Such implications have been recognized only recently in Biblical studies. In my opinion, there are many valuable and important features of Ernesti's approach, not the least of which is his clear focus on Biblical philology over against the historical method.

I have not, however, focused attention on Ernesti because I think we should all follow his hermeneutic today. In looking at Ernesti I have wanted to make only two points. First, what we commonly think of as the "grammatical-historical method" is a far cry from the method of Ernesti. We have, in my opinion, been too quick to link Ernesti with those who later claimed to represent him.[42] The result is that we have come to think of the "grammatical-historical method" as a warrant for the use of all kinds of historical material in Biblical interpretation. Ernesti was clear that he believed historical research, that is, historical reconstructions of the events recorded in the Bible, could not and should not be used to inform the text about the meaning of its words. It is the meaning of the words, gained through the study of ancient texts (philology), that is to tell us about the Biblical events.

Secondly, I think Ernesti is a good example of how one's view of inspiration can, and perhaps should, effect a hermeneutical method. What characterizes Ernesti's approach more than anything else is the importance he

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[39] Meyer, *Geschichte*.

[40] The full quotation is: "Aber noch mehr vermisste man in dieser Ernestischen Anwerfung, da sie zunächst auf die grammarische Interpretation allein berechnet war, eine Anleitung zur historischen Interpretation . . . und besonders eine Anleitung, die Herablassung Jesus und seiner Apostel zu den nationalen und temporellen Begriffen ihrer Zeitgenossen zu beachten, und aus den Apokryphen des A.T., wie aus andern lautern Quellen, diese Zeitvorstellungen möglichst genau zu erforschen" (Meyer, Vol. V, 499).

[41] " . . . so suchte bald darauf Semler durch ähnliche belehrende Winke neben der grammatischen noch die historische Auslegung des N.T. zu empfehlen, und selbst an seinem Theile zu befördern (ibid. 501).

[42] Note the remark of Gerhard Maier, "Andrerseits wählten Ernesti und seine Schule gerade den Begriff 'grammatisch-historisch,' um ihre Art von Schriftauslegung zu charakterisieren" (*Biblische Hermeneutik* [Wuppertal: R. Brockhaus, 1990] 296–97).

placed on the meaning of the *words* of Scripture. It is true that Ernesti was trained in philology and that he had a greater appreciation for it than the historical method as such. But the more important factor in Ernesti's approach is the reason why he preferred philology to history in the first place. The reason lay in his understanding of Biblical inspiration. Ernesti held to the classical orthodox view of inspiration. The *words* of Scripture were inspired, not the historical events (*things*). Consequently, the method that best rendered the meaning of the *words* of Scripture was to be preferred. In the annals of the history of the rise of Biblical criticism, Ernesti is generally derided for not jumping on board the "history is the answer to everything" bandwagon. But he is also credited with being the last Biblical scholar to have held fast to the doctrine of Biblical inspiration in the classical sense of identifying inspiration and Scripture. By the beginning of the nineteenth century, the accepted view of inspiration had become focused not on Scripture but on the events (*things*) to which the Scriptures referred. Instead of a "holy Bible," we were given a "holy history." It is therefore no wonder that Biblical hermeneutics was eager to make the shift away from the meaning of *words* to the meaning of *things*.

If, today, evangelicalism still makes the claim to believe in an inspired text (*words*), then we would do well to heed the advice of one of our most esteemed Biblical philologists. History has an important role to play in telling us *about* the Bible, its authorship, time and place of writing, etc., but when it comes to the meaning (*sensus*) of the Bible itself, there is no substitute for the old-fashioned way—reading the *words* in terms of their grammatical, namely historical sense—as understood originally by Ernesti.