Elements of interpretation

Ernesti Johann August
ELEMENTS OF INTERPRETATION

TRANSLATED FROM THE LATIN OF

J. A. ERNESTI

AND

ACCOMPANIED BY NOTES;

WITH AN APPENDIX CONTAINING EXTRACTS FROM MORUS BECK AND KEIL

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THE publication of the following work, in its present form, originated from the want of a text-book, in our country, on the science of interpretation. But few copies of Ernesti’s *Institution Interpretis* have yet been imported; and the Library of the Theological Seminary, with which the Translator is connected, contains by far too few for classic use among the students.

The importance of regular scientific instruction in the Principles of Interpretation, has been long acknowledged, by the best Biblical and classical scholars of Europe. A multitude of books within a few years have been published, with a view to present a regular digest of the principles and rules of Hermeneutics. Of these, some are much too copious to admit of publication in our country. Others are mere text books of particular lecturers, and formed upon a plan not adapted to our circumstances. The work of Ernesti, now re-published, has been through several editions in Europe, and has been more extensively used as a class-book, than any publication of this nature.

It may be asked, why it is not now re-published in the original form. My reasons for making an English translation are, (1) That the original Latin, though sufficiently pure in respect to the choice of words, is arranged very much according to the idiom of the German language, the vernacular tongue of Ernesti. It is therefore difficult to be understood by any young man, who has read Latin only in the Roman Classics. (2) Repeated trials, by using the work as printed in Latin for a class book, have satisfied me that comparatively little profit is gained in reading it, by most who are entering upon their theological studies. For the work is not only difficult, but from its brevity and technical form, it soon becomes dry and uninteresting to a beginner. (3) I wished to add some explanations for the sake of perspicuity, and if possible, of creating additional interest in the study of interpretation. (4) An edition in Latin, with the mere text, would hardly meet with sale enough to defray the necessary expenses of publication.

The edition, from which I have made the translation, is that published at Leipsic, in A. D. 1809, and edited by Dr. Ammon, who has interspersed many notes of his own. Of these I have made but little use. My reason for this is, that I did not regard them as being of much value. Besides, they not unfrequently partake of the extravagancies of the author; who, in his Preface, among various improvements recounted by him as introduced since the time of Ernesti, mentions one, which may serve as a specimen of many others; viz. that when Jesus is said by the Evan-
gelist to have walked upon the sea, the interpreter can now give
the real meaning, which is, that he waded as far as the shoal wa-
ter would permit, and after that began to swim.

I do not deny that Dr. Ammon is learned; but that sobriety
and discretion, which are the first characteristics of a good in-
terpreter, I am unable to find in him; at least to such a degree as
to make his opinions worthy of special consideration.

Besides; I have found a much better commentator on Ernesti,
from whose labours I have reaped great advantage. I refer to
Morus; whose Hermeneutica is a system of Lectures on Inter-
pretation, of which Ernesti's Instituto is the basis or text-book.
This work of Morus I prize so highly, that I have, at the close
of almost every Section of Ernesti, referred to the corresponding
part, in his Commentator. The notes which I have added to the
work, contain, for the most part, a summary of what Morus has
said. For the fidelity of this summary, and for the matter of
some of the notes, specially of the longer ones, I am responsible.
The notes are distinguished from the text, by being printed in
smaller type. Any more distinction was thought unnecessary.

Morus is an author too copious for republication in our coun-
try, but may easily be imported. The Student cannot fail to
read him with great profit. The Latin is uncommonly easy; and,
if I may judge by my own feelings, very pure and classical. I
would earnestly recommend it to every student, to compare Mo-
rus with Ernesti, in all the places where reference in the follow-
ing work is made to him.

The works of Keil, Beck, and Seiler, to which reference is
made at the head of most of the chapters, are very useful Manu-
als of the Science of Interpretation, and can be procured at a
very moderate expense. In point of arrangement, and in the ex-
clusion of matter which does not belong to the proper province
of Hermeneutics, they have some advantages over Ernesti. I
believe, however, that Ernesti has exhibited the essential part of
the science in question, more fundamentally, and in a more con-
vincing and instructive way, than either of these authors. Still,
as they are more recent, and have been much used by those who
study interpretation, I thought it might be acceptable to refer to
them.

Other books are occasionally referred to, but not often, with
the exception of Morus. It would have been easy to add a mul-
titude of references to books, on every subject, and every ramifi-
cation of subjects, throughout the work. But I am not persuad-
ed of the utility of this method, with beginners. The mind is
overwhelmed with the endless task, which the reading of so many
writers would occasion. There may be a shew of learning in a writer, who makes his references so copious; but the real
profit to the student is comparatively small. A few of the best
books are of more importance than the undistinguished mass,
which presents a mere catalogue of what has been published. Beck is not free from this fault; and even Keil has not made his "select literature" sufficiently select.

My reasons for omitting some parts of the original work of Ernesti, are stated at the end of the Introduction. It is sufficient here merely to say, that as Ernesti's work was one of the first respectable efforts, to reduce the principles of interpretation to a science, it is not a matter of any surprise, that he has included in it much more than appropriately belongs to this subject. Subsequent writers have marked out the limits of the science, with more accuracy. I have omitted what is now commonly omitted, in works of this nature.

There are some topics, belonging to Hermeneutics, on which the work of Ernesti has not touched. I have omitted them in this work, because it is not my object to appear as an original writer here, on these subjects. It is proper however to say, that the topics omitted are much less the subject of precept or rule, than those inserted; and that the principles of several of them are very far from being settled, to the satisfaction of critics. What is most useful will be found in Ernesti. The rest experience will supply; or the instructor, who uses Ernesti, and consults the books referred to, will be able to give the student some adequate views of them. As my duty leads me to read lectures in this department of science, to those whom I am called to instruct, it will be my aim, so far as I am able, to supply deficiencies of this nature; in order that no topic may be neglected, which may be useful to those, who are beginning the study of interpretation.

To Part III. of this work, which treats of translating from one language into another, I have added the greater part of an excellent Dissertation of Morus, which comprises this topic. In order to do this, I have omitted a part of the chapter in Ernesti, pertaining to this subject; as I thought it far less useful, than what is inserted from Morus.

Part IV. contains a summary of the laws of criticism, which are to regulate the judgment of those, who form opinions about the genuine text of the Scriptures. Exceptions might be made to some of these laws; but I have not thought them of sufficient importance to be urged here, where every thing is designed to be a mere summary of general Maxims. Beck has given a more brief view of the subject of criticism, than I have been able elsewhere to find; and the Biblical student should not be altogether ignorant of it, as cases of controversy may arise about the text, where ignorance of this nature would subject him to serious disadvantages.

Part V. consists of a chapter from Keil, on the Qualifications of an Interpreter. It is so much more brief and comprehensive than the corresponding chapter in Ernesti, that I could not hesi-
tate to prefer it. A list of some of the best books, on the topics to which the chapter adverts, will be found at the close of the respective Sections.

In regard to the manner of the following Translation, it may be proper to state here, that my first attempt was to make a close version of Ernesti, and publish it in this simple form. I proceeded through the work of translating, with this design in view. When I began to review my labour, I found that there was so much of Latinism in it; the sentences were so long and involved; the connecting particles and words of this nature so few and indefinite; and the form in general so technical and uninviting, that I abandoned the design of publishing it in this way; renewed my work of translating; broke up sentences, or sections as became necessary for the sake of perspicuity; supplied connecting words where they seemed to be wanting; added parts of sentences for the sake of explanation, and in a few cases, whole sentences and even paragraphs have been added for the sake of explanation or connexion. I have not wittingly changed or perverted the sentiment, in any case; but I have taken the liberties of a free translator, who is more concerned to make his book perspicuous and useful, than to represent the exact style and manner of his Original.

Instead of the subdivision of Sections under each chapter in Ernesti, they are here numbered continuously through the work; which is by far the most convenient method. The titles of the parts and chapters have also received some alteration.

After all, such is the excessive difficulty of putting English costume upon Ernesti, that I cannot flatter myself that the book does not still contain many Latinisms, which may be unpleasant to a reader, who is not acquainted with the original. Quod potui, feci. Without absolutely abandoning the idea of being a translator, and making a new book, I could not in general well do more than I have done.

At the commencement of each Section of the text, I have placed a very brief notice of the Contents; which, for convenience to the reader, in order to find easily any subject after which he is seeking, has been printed in Italics. These summaries belong not to the original work; I am responsible for them.

If the Manual shall prove to be intelligible and useful, my wishes and highest expectations will be gratified. It is possible, if this endeavour to promote a knowledge of the science of Interpretation should meet with approbation, it may excite an effort on my part, at some future period, to give the whole work a new form, more specially adapted to the circumstances of this country. At present, official duties are too numerous and urgent, to admit of such an effort.

M. STUART.

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INTRODUCTION.

OF INTERPRETATION IN GENERAL.


§ 1. Necessity and utility of it. The interpretation of the sacred books is the highest and most difficult task of the theologian. This may be shown from the nature of the case, from experience, and also from the consent of all enlightened periods. All solid knowledge and judicious defence of divine truth, must originate from a right understanding and accurate interpretation of the Scriptures. The purity of the Christian religion has shone brighter or been obscured, in proportion as the study of sacred interpretation has flourished or decayed.

Finally, those have always been reckoned as the most distinguished theologians, who have excelled in this kind of learning. (Compare Morus, Hermeneutica, p. 3. I.)

As Christian doctrine is preserved only in written records, the interpretation of these is absolutely essential to a knowledge of it; and unless we know what Christianity is, we can neither maintain its purity nor defend its principles, to the best advantage.

§ 2. Difficulties attending interpretation. The science of interpretation in general is difficult; because it requires much learning, judgment, and diligence. Not unfrequently, a felicity of talent, or a more than usual degree of understanding, is requisite to manage an exegetical inquiry with success. But the interpretation of
the sacred books is, from various causes, (a) still more difficult; as the general consent of the learned, and the wonderful paucity (b) of good interpreters fully evince. (Morus, p. 4. II.)

(a) These causes are, their antiquity; the peculiar dialect of the Scriptures, which greatly differs from that of the western languages; the manners, customs, education, style, modes of thinking and expression, situation, government, climate, &c., of the authors, in many respects so very dissimilar to ours; the fewness of the books written in the Scriptural dialect; and the want of commentators and lexicographers to whom the language was vernacular. To these causes may be added, the authority and influence which many erroneous commentaries of distinguished men have had, over the Christian world.

(b) The paucity of good interpreters, who, unbiased by party sentiments, have pursued the interpretation of the Scriptures in a simple philological manner, and been consistent throughout in the application of principles purely exegetical, is much greater than any one will be disposed to believe, until experience, acquired by consulting Commentaries, shall have convinced him.

§ 3. Definitions. The art of interpretation is the art of teaching what is the meaning of another's language; or that faculty, which enables us to attach to another's language, the same meaning as the author himself attached to it. (Morus, p. 6. III.)

It is better to define interpretation as an act than as an art. To interpret a passage is to shew or declare the sense of it, or simply to explain the meaning, i.e. the meaning which the author himself of the passage attached to it. Any other meaning than this, can never be called, with propriety, the meaning of the author.

Interpretation, strictly speaking, may be called grammatical, when the meaning of words, phrases, and sentences, is made out from the usus loquendi and context; historical, when the meaning is illustrated and confirmed by historical arguments, which serve to evince that no other sense can be put upon the passage, whether you regard the nature of the subject, or the genius and manner of the writer.

§ 4. Requisites of a good interpreter. The act of interpretation implies two things; viz., a right perception of the meaning of words, and a proper explanation