JOHANN AUGUST ERNESTI: THE ROLE OF HISTORY IN BIBLICAL INTERPRETATION

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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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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.”

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. 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, 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
the role of history in biblical interpretation

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, 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.

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

5 Keilii opuscula academica ad N.T. interpretationem grammatico-historicam et theologiae christianaee orignes 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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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 “gram-
matical-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 con-
servatism. 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 En-
glish, such as the “literal sense” (*sensus literalis*) and the “historical sense”
(*sensus historicus*). But the two most fundamental terms have, to my knowl-
dge, never been adapted properly into English. These are the terms in-
roduced 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 his-
tory of Biblical interpretation, the major treatises begin by laying this basic
groundwork. Ernesti was no exception. He begins by stating, “correspond-
ing 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 possi-
bility of accounting for both a literal and a figurative interpretation of Bib-
lical 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 mean-
ings, 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 typice, non duos habere sensus, sed unicum, cunque literalem, verum tamen integrum sensum & totum non esse in verbis proprie sumptis, sed partim in typo, partim in re ipsa quae gesta fuit.” William Whittaker, Controvers. de. S. Script, quae. 5, cap. 2; Bartholomaeus Keckermann, “sensum verbi divini per se tantum unicim esse, eum nimirum, quem intentioni dicentis, & rei significantae natura importat, qui quidem literalis sive grammaticus dici solet,” both quoted by Andre Rivet, Isagoge Seu 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.”

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

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

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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 (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchen, 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

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.).
recording of the event itself. An event (res) had slipped over into a text (verba). To discover the meaning (sensum) 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 help28 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
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

\(^{32}\) 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 definiendum 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 alicuius locorum, nec adversentur verba, quorum sensum quae rimus. Cum autem aliter, aut per eam solam, sine grammatica ratione, sensus quae ritur, 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.”

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.” Hence, “all the objects with which the writers were conversant, and the relations in which they were placed, are traced out historically.”

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.”

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.” 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

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. 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. 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.

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. 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

39 Meyer, Geschichte.
41 “. . . so suchte bald darauf Semler durch ähnliche belehrende Winke neben der grammatisch-schen noch die historische Auslegung des N.T. zu empfehlen, und selbst an seinem Theile zu befördern” (ibid. 501).
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.