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A Study of Scottish Hermeneutical Method from John Knox to the Early Twentieth Century: From Christian to Secular

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A Study of Scottish Hermeneutical Method from John Knox to the Early Twentieth Century: From Christian to Secular

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Chapter 1: Introduction

The literature on the general history of biblical interpretation or hermeneutics is quite extensive.¹ Moreover even if one were to limit his or her survey to the period from the Reformation to the beginning of the twentieth century, the literary output is still formidable.² Yet in this literature dealing with hermeneutics, one is forced to look very hard to find even a few words or paragraphs related to the method of interpretation in Scotland after the Reformation (let alone before that period). It seems to be assumed that Scottish method should simply be lumped together with either English hermeneutics during that period or with the Reformed method arising out of Geneva in the sixteenth century. While such an assumption may be partially true, it has by no means been shown conclusively by a careful study of the origins, development and influence of hermeneutical method in Scotland, that Scottish method simply borrowed either of both of those approaches wholesale. Nor has it been demonstrated that Scottish method arose out of and followed slavishly the continental method. Is it possible that the Scottish biblical interpreters, churchmen and theologians, developed, at least for a time, their own rather unique method of interpretation, which combined their own insights with the best (from their perspective) of the continent and from England itself? The answer to that question remains to be answered.

In attempting to answer this question, I am not assuming that the Scots simply struck out on their own, though given the stereotypes about the fierce Scottish

¹ The literature is so extensive as to make exhaustive listing impossible. See the Bibliography for a listing of the most important works.

² Though it has been argued that the Reformation and Post-Reformation eras have been relatively neglected. See Richard Muller, *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics, Volume 2, Holy Scripture: The Cognitive Foundation of Theology*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker, 1993, 470, 540-543. In contrast, much ink has been spilled on related, but different doctrines, such as inspiration.

independence it might be tempting to adopt this view. I would posit the influence of both continental thought, not only in the form of John Calvin but other reformers and post-reformers, and English thought arising out of the English Reformation. Nevertheless, it is also possible to speak of a "Scottish Reformation" and that label, by definition, implies a distinctive movement with a distinctive method of hermeneutics. Besides the Scottish Reformation however, we may also speak of a distinctively Scottish variety of Post-Reformation Protestant Scholasticism beginning somewhere toward the end of the sixteenth century.³ During this period also, the researcher must sort out the continental (Dutch and/or Swiss) influences from the uniquely Scottish contributions to hermeneutics. In fact, given the influence of Reformed scholasticism in general on later conservative Reformed and Presbyterian theology, the study of Scottish hermeneutics during this period might even prove to be more important (for reasons I will take up below).

This study is not interesting however for its own sake, but for reasons that go beyond the borders of Scotland. The Scottish reformers and those who lived and wrote during the Post-Reformation period have helped to shape the theological tradition of Reformed theology in America and among conservative Reformed churches in other locations of the world. This shaping of theology involved also the passing on and acceptance of a peculiar hermeneutical method to the conservative Reformed world primarily in America but also certain other areas of the world. In other words the American conservative Reformed tradition, that tradition with ties to Old Princeton, to Southern Presbyterianism, to J. Gresham Machen, to John Murray, and to others, owes a debt to Scotland which has often been neglected in certain of its aspects, including hermeneutics. It is the purpose of this study to trace the origins and influence of the Scottish hermeneutical method from the Reformation, beginning with John Knox, to the beginning of the twentieth century. In addition I will be concerned to explain the nature of the

³ See Carl R. Trueman and R. S. Clark, editors, *Protestant Scholasticism: Essays in Reassessment*. London: Paternoster, 1999, 196-210.

method and its uniqueness *vis a vis* methods arising out of other Reformed or Presbyterian traditions. I cannot of course neglect the debts owed to other traditions and so I will be vitally interested in the connections to them as well. Nor will I restrict my study to “conservative” Reformed theology. I will also show how the Scottish method itself was modified and transformed over time as Scotland came under the influence of the Enlightenment from the mid-1700s. Thus, I will be examining both conservative and “liberal” or moderate Reformed hermeneutical method in Scotland. Moreover, was Scotland equally influential in both conservative and liberal Reformed American biblical studies or was the “modernist” Scottish hermeneutic simply drawing on the same sources as those drawn on in America, with no real influence in either direction? This question is also important to answer since, if the liberal hermeneutic of later Scotland (later being defined as the period after the Enlightenment and into the 19th century) exerted no substantial influence on America, then we need not devote as much attention to that particular trajectory except to indicate its essential nature and practices.

It might be argued that it was not the Scottish hermeneutical method that exerted any influence in other areas of the world, but rather the Scottish theology itself. While I would agree that such an argument can be supported, indeed is true, it does not follow that hermeneutics played no substantial role. In fact, I would counter that it was hermeneutics which provided the base, the foundation, for the very theology which was received and adapted in America as well as a few other regions of the westernized world. In other words, we must trace theology back to its hermeneutical roots. This is especially true for Scottish theology which relied so heavily in Scripture and so little (until later) on philosophy.

It has already been presupposed that the conservative Scottish hermeneutical method influenced interpretational practice in both England and America. It will remain to be established exactly how this influence began and was transmitted over time. But before we can even get to that stage, it will be necessary to

examine the origins and nature of the Scottish hermeneutical method along with the sources of its origin, as well as the historical context for its development. Following Chapter 1, concerning the historical context, this task of tracing the origins will occupy Chapter 2 of the dissertation. Chapters 3 and onward will deal with the characteristics of the Scottish method both at the time of the Scottish Reformation and as the method was refined among theologically conservative Scottish Biblical interpreters. A chapter will also be devoted to examining the influence of this method on Biblical interpretation in other lands, particularly in England and America. Throughout the chapters on the historical development of the Scottish interpretational method, we will, where appropriate, compare that hermeneutical method with other prevailing approaches falling within the historical scope of this dissertation. This last element of the dissertation is especially interesting, as it will enable us to trace general intellectual shifts between the Reformation and the end of the nineteenth century and to relate these changes to parallel interpretational changes.

Before proceeding a word is in order regarding my own methodology and about definitions of terms. First, with respect to methodology, this work is squarely in the older or classical tradition of intellectual history. I will be examining ideas here, but ideas in their historical contexts. I will also be tracing the changes in the same concepts over a relatively short time period. Moreover while I will be examining the ideas held by a selected group of individuals, churchmen and theologians who were prominent in the history of the Scottish Protestant church, I will not neglect less well-known individuals where their works are available. The inclusion of lesser known figures will help to fill out any gaps we may have regarding the question of how widespread a particular hermeneutical approach may have been in the churches.⁴ I will elaborate further on the methodology below.

⁴ This approach of including not only the "great men" but even those at the lower levels of society in general and the church hierarchy in particular, has received widespread attention in the field of intellectual history. It is recognized that generalizations from the great men may not be

With regard to the period of time covered, the beginning point is more or less self-evident, given the obvious impact of the Reformation theological tradition on all later Reformed and Presbyterian churches. Moreover, John Knox would seem to be the logical individual to begin with since it was he who is considered to be the “father” of the Scottish Reformation, certainly its major mover. The end point of this study may not be as obviously appropriate. The beginning of the twentieth century was chosen for two reasons, one practical and one historical. Practically, to go very far beyond the end of the nineteenth century would have entailed a considerably larger work. This outcome would render the dissertation itself infeasible given its already fairly long time period. In addition, the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century did move Scotland more decisively into the theologically liberal era than any time before, despite the earlier divisions based on theological disagreements.⁵ In one sense Scotland paralleled the United States where “modernism” began to come to the fore at the beginning of the twentieth century (though it had certainly existed before then). In turn, we see the same theological liberalism beginning to dominate in Germany around the same time (for example, Ritschl). Given the dominance of this “paradigm shift” around, if not exactly at, 1900, it makes some sense to draw the line of inquiry at that date, give or take a few years.

The primary original sources I will be consulting for this work are of five types: (1) commentaries written by Scottish biblical scholars (churchmen and

valid for an entire culture, or, in this case, churches and/or theological education. In other words, the older downward diffusion model has been questioned. See for example Dominick LaCapra, “Rethinking Intellectual History and Reading Texts,” in Dominick LaCapra, editor, *Rethinking Intellectual History: Texts, Contexts, Language*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1983, 23-71, Roger Chartier, “Intellectual History of Sociocultural History: The French Trajectories,” in Dominick LaCapra and Steven L. Kaplan, editors, *Modern European Intellectual History: Reappraisals and New Perspectives*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1982, 13-46. See also generally the important work by Peter Burke, *Popular Culture in Early Modern Europe*. London, 1978.

⁵ One does see the beginnings of a “liberal” versus “conservative” division as early as the 18th century during the so-called Scottish Enlightenment, but this division was not precisely the same as the later theological divisions of the nineteenth century. The rise of the Historical Critical method arguably played a major role in every theological conflict after the beginning of the nineteenth century.

“professional” theologians—the distinction was virtually non-existent for much of the period in question); (2) works of systematic theology in which are contained interpretations of biblical passages or actual sections on the theory of interpretation; (3) works by Scottish writers which are neither commentaries on books of the Bible nor systematic theologies, but rather treatments of particular biblical topics which contain substantial exegetical information enabling the researcher to determine how these individuals interpreted the Bible; and (4) sermons which have been transcribed and published (as well as any unpublished sermons available). Examples of topical monographs on biblical studies would include the atonement, sin, the doctrine of man, and justification. Typically the Scottish writers of this period would examine some specific topic with ample discussion of biblical passages buttressing their positions. In fact, as we will see, relatively seldom do these writers make reference to anything other than Scripture to support their works. Hence in this last type of literature, we have an important and unexpected source of data to draw from to help us understand their hermeneutical methods.

With regard to commentaries, there are an ample number to draw from among the entire spectrum of Scottish hermeneutical thought over the period in question. As we shall see, the Scottish biblical scholars were prolific in the production of careful studies of various books of the Bible (or even the entire Bible). This assertion holds true for both theological “conservatives” and “liberals” (using those terms loosely at this point), though I will certainly focus on the commentaries of the “conservatives” or “evangelicals.”⁶ In examining the commentaries of Scottish interpreters, we should be able to see both the continuity of Scottish thought with Continental European thought and also the uniqueness of the Scottish method in interpretation. The Scottish systematic theologians will also prove to be a fruitful source of hermeneutical thought, one reason being that most of them were essentially Biblical theologians using a

⁶ I will define terms such as “liberal”, “conservative”, “moderate” and others more precisely below.

systematic arrangement, rather than philosophical theologians. I do not mean to leave the impression that they were in no way innovative in their arrangement of material or in additions of material under other “heads” of doctrine. But whereas systematic theology in the twentieth century manifests an evident indebtedness to philosophy, the Scottish theologians, though familiar with and even knowledgeable of philosophical trends, tended, at least among the more conservative writers, to rely much more heavily on Scripture as their guide.⁷ Thus they devoted considerable effort to examining and interpreting verses and passages of the Bible. Sermons will provide invaluable insights into hermeneutical method, including its final element, the application phase, for which many Scots were justly famous. A sermon was not, as we will see, merely an “off the cuff” topical address, but in Scotland, by long tradition as well as partially through force of ecclesiastical law of the *Book of Church Order* and the *Directory for Public Worship*, it amounted to a carefully crafted public proclamation of the meaning of a Scriptural passage backed by considerable time spent in exegesis to prepare for its deliverance.⁸

Besides the four primary sources mentioned above, I will also make use of the relevant confessional statements of the Scottish churches. The *Scots (or Scotch) Confession* (1560) and the *Westminster Confession of Faith* (1647), both held in esteem by the churches in Scotland, will yield the primary benefit.⁹ But I will

⁷ This tendency was less pronounced as one moves toward the end of the nineteenth century, so that even Scottish writers were using philosophical categories to an increasing extent.

⁸ The sermon or “preaching of the Word”, sometimes called “prophesying” represented the focal point of the Lord’s Day worship and often was not limited only to Sunday. The favored practice was to preach without notes, though this was often honored in the breach, and the sermon itself was traditionally, until much later, divided into main points containing the text, doctrine, and application. See Horton Davies, *Worship and Theology in England*, 6 volumes. Princeton, New Jersey: University Press, 1962 etc.

⁹ For the texts of these and other confessions, see Philip Schaff, editor, *The Creeds of Christendom with a History and Critical Notes*, revised by David S. Schaff, 3 volumes (1931). Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker, 1981). In addition, any contemporaneous records of the debates surrounding the ratification of these confessional statements would certainly be relevant. See for example, *Minutes of the Sessions of the Westminster Assembly of Divines, from transcripts of the originals procured by a committee of the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland*, edited by Alex F. Mitchell and John Struthers (1874). Edmonton, Alberta, Canada: Still Waters Revival Reprint, 1991.

also make reference to other confessions, for example, *The Irish Articles of Religion* (1615). Additionally I will refer to the *Directory for Public Worship*, which was also adopted by the Church of Scotland and which contains material relevant to hermeneutics.¹⁰ I should note here that the Church or Kirk of Scotland, in its various manifestations, was known, from the time of its reception of Protestantism, as a “subscribing” or “covenanting” church. That is, early on, the confession, essentially thought of as a covenant, exerted a very powerful influence by calling publicly for subscription to its words as binding. This fact may help to explain why Scotland was so relatively long in coming to terms with the critical method or the results such interpretation. As we shall see, the confessions held up by the churches in Scotland did deal with interpretational method. They in fact were seen by many as themselves being a framework for proper interpretation, within which one ought to exegete a passage in accordance with the doctrinal tenets of that confession.¹¹

Survey of the Literature

Before we proceed to Chapter 1, it will be helpful to provide at least a cursory survey of the secondary literature dealing with the subject of Scottish biblical hermeneutics. As I alluded to above, not much exists on the specific topic of the Scottish hermeneutical method during the period in question. I have been hard-pressed to discover even remotely related literature. The first place to turn is the *Scottish Dictionary of Church History and Theology*.¹² While it may violate the canons of research to mention a reference work, when one has little else to go to, even this represents a legitimate beginning. I mention this dictionary simply

¹⁰ The *Directory*, though not a confessional statement, had the same “legal” force as the confession and *Larger and Shorter Catechisms*, and so we would expect that it influenced hermeneutics to some extent.

¹¹ The subject of confessional statements as interpretational frameworks continued to be debated throughout the period in question here, but toward the end of the period, the confessional subscription requirements sufficiently loosened that notion so as to make it essentially irrelevant. See Ian Hamilton, *The Erosion of Calvinist Orthodoxy: Seceders and Subscription in Scottish Presbyterianism*. Edinburgh: Rutherford House, 1990.

¹² Nigel M. de S. Cameron, editor. Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1993.

because it is an indispensable, if somewhat abbreviated, source of information on Scottish biblical exegesis as well as on specific individual writers and historical context. Interestingly a work such as the recently published *Historical Handbook of Major Biblical Interpreters* contains only a single article on a Scottish interpreter, W. Robertson Smith.¹³ John Knox, whom one might have expected to be included, is not. Finally, among reference works, the *Dictionary of Biblical Interpretation*, edited by John H. Hayes, does contain an article on John Knox as well as a few modern interpreters, for example, A. B. Bruce, A. B. Davidson, and John Skinner, but it completely excludes any mention of eighteenth and nineteenth century evangelical churchmen and theologians.¹⁴

Another monograph work, though not devoted exclusively to Scotland (the usual drawback), is the recent work by Nigel M. de S. Cameron, entitled *Biblical Higher Criticism and the Defense of Infallibilism in 19th Century Britain*.¹⁵ Even though Cameron is concerned with the issue of biblical criticism more broadly, he devotes some space to discussion of exegetical method arising out of the presuppositions of the higher critical method. Richard Muller's seminal work on *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics* devotes an entire chapter to the interpretation of Scripture by churchmen and theologians writing between about 1565 and the mid-1700s.¹⁶ In that chapter Muller mentions only Robert Rollock among the many Protestant scholastics he deals with.¹⁷

Beyond these works one may look to books and articles on the history of hermeneutics. But as we shall see, these sources have little time for Scotland in its own right and give little attention to individual Scottish interpreters. To take one example, the most recent survey of the history of hermeneutics by Gerald

¹³ Edited by Donald McKim. Downer's Grove, Illinois: Intervarsity, 1998, 359ff.

¹⁴ 2 volumes. Nashville, Tennessee: Abingdon Press, 1995. The article on Knox, volume 2, page 34, is most helpful as a starting point, mentioning as it does the differences between Knox and Luther and Calvin.

¹⁵ Lewiston, New York: Edwin Mellen Press, 1987. See especially Chapter VI and Appendix A.

¹⁶ *Volume 2: Holy Scripture: The Cognitive Foundation of Theology*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker, 1993, Chapter 7.

¹⁷ Even this mention is quite short.

Bray lists and provides very brief information on a few of the more important Scottish biblical interpreters, including David Dickson, James Fergusson, George Hutcheson, John Brown, John Brown of Haddington, Alexander Geddes, Patrick Fairbairn, Hugh Martin, Andrew Bonar, A. B. Davidson, William Robertson Smith, William Blaikie and George Adam Smith. But it must be reiterated that this work did not deal at all in detail with the method of these Scotsmen and also placed them within the same tradition as their contemporaries, as if they contributed nothing unique to hermeneutics.¹⁸ It is virtually impossible to find any in depth treatment of a Scottish school of interpretation in any of the standard historical works on hermeneutics.

It is possible to find some discussion of hermeneutical method in works dealing specifically with individual Scottish writers. For instance, one can read monographs, articles or unpublished dissertations about men such as W. Robertson Smith, John Knox, A. B. Bruce and Thomas Boston, as well as many others, in which are contained at least limited examination of the approach to the Bible utilized by each of them.¹⁹ This information is, to be sure, useful, but it suffers from at least two flaws: (1) it represents a piecemeal approach and (2) it is not comprehensive but only cursory. Because it is piecemeal, dealing with individuals in isolation, one is unable to get a sense of any continuity (or discontinuities, that is, "paradigm shifts") among and between the entire group of

¹⁸ Gerald Bray, *Biblical Interpretation: Past and Present*. Downer's Grove, Illinois: Intervarsity, 1996. Milton Terry, *Biblical Hermeneutics: A Treatise on the Interpretation of the Old and New Testaments*, New edition. New York: Eaton and Mains, 1911, a conservative favorite even after nearly a century, does mention approvingly names such as Patrick Fairbairn and others as illustrative of valid hermeneutical method. However, Terry does not examine the Scottish "school" in its own right in his "Historical Sketch" and does not consider them to be a unique school of interpretation.

¹⁹ See respectively R. A. Riesen, *Criticism and Faith in Late Victorian Scotland: A. B. Davidson, William Robertson Smith, and George Adam Smith*. Landham, Maryland, 1985; R. Kyle, *The Mind of John Knox* 1984; Idem, "The Hermeneutical Patterns in John Knox's Use of Scripture", *Pacific Theological Review* 17, 3 (1984) 19-32, and Idem, "John Knox's Methods of Biblical Interpretation: An Important Source of His Intellectual Radicalness", *Journal of Religious Studies* 12 (1985) 57-70; A. P. F. Sell, *Defending and Declaring the Faith: Some Scottish Examples, 1860-1920*. Exeter, UK: Paternoster, 1987, 89-116 (on A. B. Bruce); D. M. G. Stalker, "Boston of Etrick as Old Testament Scholar", *Records of the Scottish Church History Society* 9 (1947) 61-68 (on Thomas Boston).

Scottish interpreters. It is impossible to see the "big picture." Naturally there is therefore the sense that there was nothing particularly unique about Scottish hermeneutical method. Moreover, because the works mentioned do not always deal primarily with hermeneutics, the reader is not able himself to place the individuals in their appropriate larger context or to connect them to other writers either in their own day or later who shared a similar method. We simply do not have enough evidence to make any such leaps. This is not to criticize these works. On the contrary it points up the need for a single work which deals with the entire period in question as a whole and which gives primary attention to the hermeneutical method of the individuals examined along the way.

Besides the problems mentioned above, there is also that of the nearly total absence of works on evangelical Scottish biblical interpreters of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. John Knox may be mentioned, at the least, and the proponents of the Higher Critical method are prominently treated. But we have a virtual void of information between about 1700 to around the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth centuries. Yet, as I will argue, it is precisely during this period that Scottish hermeneutics flourished and exerted its greatest influence outside Scotland. This influence is borne out in part if one takes the time to peruse a relatively recent list of re-published biblical commentaries by companies such as Klock and Klock, Baker, Zondervan, Banner of Truth and many more obscure publishers. The demand for works from this time period is even today quite large, an assertion evidenced by the prices these works command in the second hand book market.²⁰ What this indicates is that a work is needed which seriously examines the hermeneutical method of these Scottish interpreters without neglecting the works of those before 1700 (they

²⁰ This author surveyed the going prices for a few of the more important of these writers, for example, Candlish, Haldane, Johnstone, Andrew and Horatius Bonar, John Brown(s), Buchanan, Eadie, Fairbairn and Dickson, and found them to be selling for upwards of \$30 per volume in most instances. To my knowledge none of these works are currently in print. Therefore, the volumes available in the second hand market are 20 years old or older. Nevertheless, demand remains strong, presumably among evangelicals or fundamentalists (anecdotally, I have found this to be the case).

would presumably be the forerunners) or those “liberal” writers who published during the same period, especially after 1800.²¹

Methodology

First, this work is not merely a survey of ideas regarding hermeneutical method in the Scottish churches, though it certainly will include such a survey. In this respect, as I alluded to above, the study will not be completely in the older tradition of intellectual history which was criticized for its isolation of ideas. Though I will deal with ideas, the ideas held by various Scottish writers of the period in question, I will also differ from a pure “history of ideas” approach in at least two respects: (1) a concern for the development of these ideas over time and (2) relatedly, a concern to place these ideas in their total intellectual and social contexts. Ideas are not static. They change and are modified over long or short periods of time. Moreover, if one accepts Thomas Kuhn’s ideas about paradigm shifts, we can see that ideas often change in predictable ways, both in isolation and in terms of broader “worldview” changes.²² To apply Kuhn’s analysis to the subject of this study, we may posit at least one and possibly two major paradigm shifts during the period from the beginning of the Reformation and the end of the nineteenth century. The major shift occurred as hermeneutical method was influenced by the presuppositions of the Historical Critical method.²³ Hans Frei has captured the essence of this shift in method by showing how theologians and churchmen began to abandon the “pre-critical” method of hermeneutics, with its specific set of presuppositions, and to move toward the new “Historical Critical”

²¹ Nor do I wish to neglect the unusual, though not classifiable as liberal, interpreters of this period. Examples might include Alexander Campbell, the Irvingites, the Scottish Roman Catholics and Scottish Episcopalians. This study is not limited to Presbyterianism.

²² See Thomas Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, 2nd enlarged edition. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970. I have not, however, accepted Kuhn’s conclusions about how affairs ought to be.

²³ On the Historical Critical method or Historical Criticism in general, see the detailed analysis and criticism by Gerhard Maier, *Biblical Hermeneutics*, trans. by Robert W. Yarbrough. Wheaton, Illinois: Crossway, 1994, esp. 247-307. See also Gerald Bray, *Biblical Interpretation Past and Present*. Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity, 1996, esp. Chapters 6-8.

method (sometimes called "Higher Criticism") with its own unique set of presuppositions.²⁴ As Frei points out, the process of moving from general acceptance of a pre-critical method to a critical approach extended over the better part of century and a half. The process also fits well Kuhn's paradigm shift model in which the new paradigm is gradually, and at first grudgingly, accepted by more and more individuals who practice some particular endeavor. We will be able to see this development or shift at work in Scotland as well as the rest of Europe and America. However, I will posit that the process took longer in Scotland, so that the critical method and its various implications were not widely accepted until the end of the nineteenth century. Moreover, I will also give due attention to the Scottish Enlightenment as the "preparation" for the reception of later, more radical developments.²⁵ This period would then represent the second, "minor" shift in thought.

It will also be crucial to view the development of ideas (and practice) regarding interpretation in the context of both social and intellectual changes in Scotland and the rest of Europe. Without this context, we cannot understand why and how hermeneutics changed in Scotland or why and how it remained constant for so long. In short, we must place Scotland as a whole next to its neighbors and examine the changes occurring elsewhere, as well as Scottish resistance to those changes, in order to fully grasp the development of hermeneutics in Scotland itself. When we think about changes, we need not limit ourselves to intellectual changes (or what could profitably be labeled "worldview shifts"). Social changes, for example, the Industrial Revolution (or lack thereof) or other social trends, also play an important role. Nevertheless, I will be primarily interested in intellectual currents over the roughly 350-year period. Social change cannot effectively

²⁴ See Hans W. Frei, *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative: A Study in Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century Hermeneutics*. New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 1974.

²⁵ See Richard B. Sher, *Church and University in the Scottish Enlightenment: The Moderate Literati of Edinburgh*. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1985; Jane Rendall, *The Origins of the Scottish Enlightenment, 1707-1776*. London: Macmillan, 1978; and Anand Chitnis, *The Scottish Enlightenment: A Social History*. London: Croom Helm, 1976.

explain ideas about hermeneutics on its own, though it can, within limits, play a partially causal role.²⁶

Though I will cover the entire period from the beginning of the Reformation in Scotland (roughly 1560) to the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth century, because of the sheer weight of available evidence, I will focus particularly on exegetes of the nineteenth century. This focus will simply reflect numerical predominance of nineteenth century works and will not, I hope, prejudice the treatment of the previous centuries in terms of quality. But in addition, the greater quantity of nineteenth century works examined can be justified on independent grounds. The nineteenth century in Scotland was marked by both a flowering of conservative biblical study and the rise and relative acceptance of the historical critical method. With regard to the former, this also means that the Scottish conservative hermeneutical influence was greatest outside of Scotland during this century. I do intend, however, to show the continuity between this conservative hermeneutical method in the nineteenth century and that of previous centuries in Scotland.²⁷

With regard to the sources of the ideas which initially influenced Scottish hermeneutical method and which then influenced its shift(s) toward the critical method, I will examine not only England, but also Germany and more importantly, Switzerland and the Netherlands. All of these regions had their specific role to play. In particular, the city of Geneva and John Calvin were extremely important at the beginning stages of Protestantism in Scotland.²⁸ The

²⁶ For example, the rise of social clubs in eighteenth century Scotland can account in part for the exchange of new ideas of the Enlightenment and thus, in a broad fashion, help explain changes in hermeneutical thought. Nevertheless, one cannot lose sight of the nature of the ideas exchanged in focusing on the particular medium.

²⁷ I will also examine the beginnings of critical hermeneutics in *eighteenth* century Scotland. However, as we will see, "non-conservative" or critical hermeneutical method was not nearly so prevalent even during the Scottish Enlightenment, as it would become in the nineteenth century. With respect to the nineteenth century, I will also discuss the so-called "believing criticism", a sort of hybrid of pre-critical and higher critical approaches. See Nigel M. de S. Cameron, *Biblical Higher Criticism and the Defense of Infallibilism in Nineteenth Century Britain*, op. cit.

²⁸ Although we would be remiss to ignore the very early influence of Lutheranism.

Netherlands played an important part in the era of Protestant Scholasticism.²⁹ In addition, we cannot ignore the influences of the Continent during the Enlightenment era.³⁰ Finally, we must look to Germany for the intrusion of the Higher Critical method.³¹ But in the end, we may still find a "remainder" which can only be explained by the uniquely Scottish situation. As to Scottish influence, I will be concerned almost exclusively with the one-way influence of Scottish hermeneutical method on American, particularly Presbyterian and Reformed, method in theologically conservative circles.³²

As I stated earlier I will be relying on a variety of primary sources to explain the origins, nature, and influences of the Scottish hermeneutical method. Aside from confessional statements, which are collective efforts, the individual interpreters with which I will be dealing can be classified as follows: (1) biblical commentators; (2) systematic theologians; and (3) preachers/pastors. It should be recognized that there is a degree of overlap among the individuals in each category. For example, a commentator might also be a pastor/churchman. In other words, his output would not consist only of biblical commentaries but also of sermons which might have been published. Nevertheless even though this distinction has its flaws, it will serve for the sake of convenience. In addition, as we proceed in this study I will distinguish between liberals and conservatives, between moderates and confessionalists, "Believing Critics" and radical critics, as well as other groups of biblical interpreters. Moreover, I will include all varieties of Presbyterians (for example, Free Church, Church of Scotland, etc.), as well as Episcopalians, Baptists, and Independents.

The vast bulk of the individual interpreters examined in this study will come from that segment of churchmen who were pre-critical in their method, though the

²⁹ See A. L. Drummond, *The Kirk and the Continent*. Edinburgh, 1956, 76-168.

³⁰ See R. H. Campbell and A. S. Skinner, editors, *The Origins and Nature of the Scottish Enlightenment*. Edinburgh, 1982.

³¹ See generally on the development of the critical method Gerald Bray, *Interpretation Past and Present*, op. cit. For Scotland, see Nigel M. de S. Cameron, *Biblical Higher Criticism*, op. cit.

³² I will be dealing especially with the "Princeton School" as well as Southern Presbyterianism, both of which in turn exerted the greatest influence in American Presbyterianism.

adherents of the Historical Critical method will also play a prominent role, if not in numbers, certainly in influence. It is only in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries that we will begin to encounter first "freethinkers" and later higher critics. It is at this point that I must interject a word of qualification. Both pre-critical and critical interpreters used essentially the same practical methods of hermeneutics: studies of words, syntax, and contexts as well as attention to genre issues.³³ The difference in their results however was often striking because of the vast differences in presuppositions or worldview.³⁴ This is not to say that there were no important differences in method between the two groups. Later critical scholars would give much more credence to issues of contemporaneous religions and the development of religion than would pre-critical interpreters. In addition, the higher critics tended to discount some of the oldest Protestant principles such as "Scripture is its own best interpreter" or the perspicuity of Scripture, in order to elevate other practices to the forefront.³⁵ Nevertheless both groups did give an important place to the most elementary principles of hermeneutics, including proper word meanings, taken in context, consideration of syntactical issues, and consideration of the non-linguistic contexts. Once again, it has been partly because of the differing presuppositional foundations that interpreters within the Scottish tradition have reached increasingly divergent conclusions. But we should not underestimate the differing practices arising out of those presuppositions, as factors in arriving at their very different interpretations at

³³ Compare, for example, the examination of the pre-critical interpreters in Richard Muller, *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics, Volume 2*, op. cit., esp. Ch. 7 with the work of men such as W. Robertson Smith in the late nineteenth century.

³⁴ Note again the discussion of the presuppositions of the Historical Critical method in Bray, op. cit.,

³⁵ Scholars believe the origin of the principle that "Scripture interprets Scripture" (as it sometimes appeared) can be traced back at least to the very beginning of the Reformation, if not before, in the Latin maxim "*scriptura sui ipsius interpres*." The Latin phrase for the clarity of Scripture was "*in illis quae ad salutem creditu sunt necessaria, clara est et perspicua*." Both of these intertwined principles were undermined by the Historical Critical method. See Gerhard Meier, *Biblical Hermeneutics*, trans. by Robert W. Yarbrough. Wheaton, Illinois: Crossway, 1994, 182ff.

times.³⁶ Though I will deal with the presuppositional issue in some detail, I will be most concerned with the actual hermeneutical practices as they arose at the time of the Reformation and developed over time to the nineteenth century.

Before moving to the first substantive chapter, let me restate my essential thesis. By examining the hermeneutical method of Scottish interpreters from Knox to the beginning of the twentieth century, I hope to show that, although the Scots owed a great deal to the Continental tradition, they brought to the task their own unique elements of interpretation which arose either out of the distinctly Scottish traditions or from the unique work of the earliest Scottish interpreters such as Knox. Moreover, I will examine in detail the precise nature and elements of this Scottish hermeneutical method as it developed over time. A key aspect of my analysis is to show any significant development in method associated with general major paradigm shifts that affected Scotland from the outside. Primarily, I have in mind the broader shift to a so-called historical consciousness, beginning in the eighteenth century but intensifying in the nineteenth century. Finally, I will show the influence of this somewhat unique Scottish method of interpretation on other regions of the world, primarily the United States, but also England and even South Africa.³⁷

Two Crucial Terms and Concepts

Throughout this study, two terms will recur frequently. Each of them denotes a specific paradigm which has influenced Scottish hermeneutical method, as well as the method of other parts of the Protestant West in the early modern and modern periods. The terms are “primitivism” and “historicism” or “historical consciousness.” It would not be overstating the case to say that these two

³⁶ The importance of the issue of presuppositions or “worldview” has been increasingly recognized by scholars. See Arthur F. Holmes, *Contours of a Christian Worldview*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1983 and many other works (for example, by Ronald Nash, Cornelius van Til, Gordon Clark, etc.)

³⁷ The influence on South Africa was relatively short-lived, virtually ending after the mid-nineteenth century, but for a time intriguing.

concepts form the core of this work. But terms, if they are to be useful as organizing themes, must also be defined and explained.³⁸

Primitivism may be defined as an attitude which is essentially conservative with regard to the traditions, practices and beliefs of the past. The Puritans, for example, have been labeled primitivists because of their emphasis on purity, simplicity and other characteristics of the era of the early church, to which they believed they were “reverting” in proper reaction to the unbiblical accretions of the Roman Catholic tradition.³⁹ Generally speaking, Primitivism has been distinguished into two forms: chronological primitivism and cultural primitivism. The former “maintains that the earliest [or earlier] stage of human history was the best, that the earliest period of national, religious, artistic, or in fact any strand of history was better than the periods that have followed....”⁴⁰ Cultural primitivism on the other hand, maintains that “whatever additions have been made to what is called the ‘natural’ condition of mankind have been deleterious.”⁴¹ Applying the former type of primitivism to my own analysis, I will argue that a significant number of Scottish interpreters, if you will, a significant remnant, persisted in utilizing a particular method of hermeneutics, even into the twentieth century. This method looked not forward, but back to the era of the beginning of the Scottish Reformation and the time immediately following. In other words, Scottish interpreters who were of the Reformed Orthodox or Evangelical camps generally, though not necessarily wholly, rejected the newer method which began to make itself felt somewhat later in Scotland.

I would add that the use of the term “primitivism” ought not to be understood in a pejorative sense. It is intended in this work to be understood to have a

³⁸ The issue of definition of course is a completely different question from that of the correspondence of the terms to the reality of the situation to which they are to be applied. I do believe these concepts accurately represent the reality of history in Scotland.

³⁹ See Theodore Dwight Bozeman, *To Live Ancient Lives: The Primitivist Dimension in Puritanism*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1988, esp. 15-19.

⁴⁰ George Boas, “Primitivism,” in *Dictionary of the History of Ideas*, edited by Philip P. Wiener, 5 vols. New York: Scribners, 1973, 3: 577.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

completely neutral connotation. Certainly some scholars may have used the term pejoratively, as if a return to a previous age, with its associated worldview, was somehow anti-progressive. Moreover, it would tend to be progressive historians who would view the term this way. But one sees little criticism of the apparent primitivist orientation of, for example, the Renaissance humanists, whose motto was *ad fontes*.⁴² To be sure, the humanists were not only backward looking. But this fact also brings me back to my point from a different perspective. The primitivists examined here were not only backward-looking either. They were not dogmatically anti-progressive. Rather, it is in this area of hermeneutics where they will exhibit their primitivist propensities most clearly. In summary, primitivism does not necessarily imply a rejection of progress. At least in our case, it implies a rejection of undesirable change, not change in general because it is change.

The second crucial term comes into play at this point. Historicism or historical consciousness has frequently been said to have arisen just before and at the beginning of the Enlightenment.⁴³ The term itself, believed to have been first used in the nineteenth century by historians⁴⁴, denotes an attitude among historians which assumed that all cultural forms can be adequately explained by reference to the historical context in which they emerge. Two other assumptions were also part of historicism: epistemologically, that everything known "is forged in a particular historical setting and bears the unique imprint of that setting" and that supposes that "all creations of the human spirit are swept along in a process of ceaseless change, governed by functional laws of social development...."⁴⁵

⁴² See Paul Oskar Kristellar, *Renaissance Thought and Its Sources*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1990. See also Peter Burke, *The Renaissance Sense of the Past*. London: Edward Arnold, 1970.

⁴³ See George G. Iggers, "Historicism," in *Dictionary of the History of Ideas*, edited by Philip P. Wiener, 5 volumes. New York: Scribner's, 1973, 2: 456-464.

⁴⁴ See *Ibid.*, 2: 456-457.

⁴⁵ See Terry A. Chrisope, *Toward a Sure Faith: J. Gresham Machen and the Dilemma of Biblical Criticism, 1881-1915*, Mentor, 2000, 26. See also Peter Hanns Reill, *The German Enlightenment and the Rise of Historicism*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1975, George Iggers, "Historicism," in *Dictionary of the History of Ideas*, op. cit., 2: 456ff, Friedrich Meinecke,

With regard to biblical interpretation, historicism or a "historical consciousness" refers to the notion that even special revelation must be understood in its particular historical context and, more importantly, it is to be judged by modern historical standards, assuming that its own context rendered it, to some degree, "primitive." Therefore, it must be reinterpreted in some fashion, taking into consideration its own context. In general, historicism is connected to the philosophical presupposition that there are no timeless values and also that certain events could not have occurred as they were reported, simply because of the untrustworthiness of the report in light of modern historical methods.⁴⁶ To put this idea another way, as Michael Stanford has written, historicism is "the recognition that all social and cultural phenomena are historically determined."⁴⁷ No religion can exceed the limitations of its age. Relatedly, revelation cannot stand outside history, but is an integral part of it in every way.

Primitivism and historicism, from the eighteenth century onward co-existed with each other in Scotland and after the middle of the nineteenth century, clashed on more than one occasion as historicism vied for supremacy. It is this struggle which will occupy a substantial portion of this dissertation. However, contrary to what might be expected, though historicism in biblical interpretation did eventually prevail, it is primarily the continuing primitivism with which we will be concerned. This primitivism originated in Scottish Protestantism at the time of the Scottish Reformation, though it had already begun to be discussed among some Scottish interpreters and theologians as well as among Continental thinkers. Historicism was not yet a factor in Scotland at the time of its Reformation. To gain a greater understanding of Scottish hermeneutical method we must first survey the Reformation movement as a whole in Scotland.

Historicism: The Rise of a New Historical Outlook, trans. by J. E. Anderson. New York: Herder and Herder, 1972, and Dwight E. Lee and Robert N. Beck, "The Meaning of 'Historicism'", in *American Historical Review* 59 (1954), 568-577.

⁴⁶ See Terry Chrisope, *Toward a Sure Faith*, op. cit., 26-27.

⁴⁷ Michael Stanford, *A Companion to the Study of History*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1994, 255, quoted in *Ibid.*, 27.

The distinction made above between primitivism and historicism should not be confused with that having to do with the earlier debates between the "Ancients" and the "Moderns," which took place, for the most part, in the seventeenth century.⁴⁸ That "debate" marked the shift from one basic worldview, the medieval, to the worldview that formed the basis for the rise of rationalism and empiricism and led eventually to the Enlightenment movement. It is true that the Ancients, making up the bulk of the population in the seventeenth century, looked back in time or wished to preserve the intellectual and cultural *status quo*, just as the primitivists did, but several characteristics distinguish the Ancients from the primitivists here. First, the term itself, "Ancients," denotes a general attitude to life and culture, while the term "primitivism, as used here, refers to a specific attitude to religious thought and practice."⁴⁹ This is not to say that the Ancients were anti-religious. On the contrary, it appears that they were quite conservative in their adherence to the older way of life, which was, if not always doctrinally orthodox, certainly medieval and thus essentially religious. On the other hand, the Moderns cannot be equated with the "historicists," even though the Moderns did show a new interest in historical thought. Moreover, the Moderns were never anti-religious for the most part.⁵⁰ Thus, although one can see a conceptual overlap between these two sets of terms, and even a degree of historical connection, it would be inaccurate to think of these terms as equivalent.

Historicism or, as it has also been called, a historical consciousness, in this dissertation is not merely an arbitrary term used to describe the growth of a phenomenon in the history of biblical interpretation. It marks a "paradigm shift" which developed over a period of roughly 150-200 years and came to permeate nearly every endeavor Western thought. I will show that after the beginning of the nineteenth century, historicism was increasingly applied to biblical studies in connection with the rise of the Historical Critical method. As it was applied, it

⁴⁸ See Franklin Lee van Baumer, *Modern European Thought: Continuity and Change in Ideas, 1600-1950*. New York: Macmillan, 1977, 26-46.

⁴⁹ On the Ancients, see *Ibid.*, 26-28.

⁵⁰ See *Ibid.*, 28-29.

also became more and more radicalized as it came into contact with various philosophies of the nineteenth century, so that by the end of the century, even Scotland, besides America, arguably the last bastion of the old pre-critical approach, had been thoroughly influenced by radical historicism. I will also argue (and show), however, that this historical consciousness, rooted in movements like the *Religionsgeschichteschule*, did not destroy the primitivism embodied in the pre-critical method. The primitivists survived both, in Scotland and in America, as well as in other regions where pockets of more conservative theology remained (and remain).

In connection with the concept of historicism, I also need to add here, though I will expand on this below, a brief introduction to what has come to be known as the Historical-Critical method or Higher Criticism. This approach to Scripture is a direct outgrowth of the new sense of history and will play a crucial role in our examinations of hermeneutics in Scotland. Scholars have perceived the beginning of the Historical-Critical method, as applied to the Bible, in the writings of Richard Simon and Baruch Spinoza, both of whom lived in the seventeenth century.⁵¹ Both men perceived behind the documents of Scripture a long "pre-history" as well as a cultural context conditioning the meaning of those documents.⁵² Of course this was only the beginning of the Historical-Critical method and its beginning coincided with the rise of a historical consciousness in European culture in general. Franklin Baumer characterizes this latter development as "more secular, more critical of past epochs, more optimistic about present and future....[but] inconceivable without the scientific revolution...contemporary Pyrrhonism, which questioned historical as well as metaphysical certainties...."⁵³ The new "philosophy" of history flourished and

⁵¹ See Spinoza's *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*, translated by Samuel Shirley. Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1989 and Richard Simon, *Histoire critique du Vieux Testament* (1677).

⁵² See Gerald Bray, *Biblical Interpretation Past and Present*. Downer's Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity, 1996, 237-240.

⁵³ Franklin Lee van Baumer, *Modern European Thought: Continuity and Change in Ideas, 1600-1950*. New York: Macmillan, 1977, 117.

continued to develop in more radical directions in the eighteenth century and on into the nineteenth century, paralleled in its growth by the critical biblical approach.⁵⁴ In other words, in the realm of hermeneutics, historicism and the Historical-Critical method went hand in hand. I will have more to say on the later developments, but for now it will suffice to reiterate that the Historical-Critical method was an outgrowth of historicism and provides the link between that concept of historicism and the paradigm shift in Scottish hermeneutics.

In the following chapter I will examine the general historical background relevant for the study of Scottish hermeneutical method. This historical context will be a more general survey of the period from the beginning of the Reformation to the end of the nineteenth century, but will also include a preliminary discussion of the more important paradigm shifts of ideas which affected hermeneutical thought during that period. The historical survey of the period will include also include the major events of the period, the political and economic changes, and cultural and social circumstances and changes. Though I will not confine this broad examination to Scotland, I will give special attention to Scotland. This chapter is designed only to provide a background for understanding the hermeneutical thought of Scotland via the broader spectrum of ideas in Scotland and other regions influencing Scotland.

Potential confusion is possible with the use of certain terminology throughout the dissertation. I will be using the terms "pre-critical" or "Orthodox" as synonymous with the primitivist mentality I have described above. On the other hand, I will use "Historical Critical method" and "critical" as essentially equivalent to the definition of historicism or historical consciousness. This is not to say that the terms used are exact equivalents. Both primitivism and historicism also have broader connotations. But they do subsume the presuppositions and methods discussed in the examination of Scottish hermeneutical method, and so they are very convenient, helpful, and, I believe, realistic labels.

⁵⁴ See *Ibid.*, 237-255 (on the eighteenth century) and 330ff (on the nineteenth century).