

## IV.

## PRINCIPLES OF INTERPRETATION.

IN endeavouring to ascertain the meaning of St. Paul, it may be well to state explicitly at the outset the two assumptions—or presuppositions, as the Germans would call them—on the basis of which such an inquiry must proceed. We take for granted, 1st, That St. Paul *had* a meaning which he wished to *convey*; and, 2nd, That he had in each instance only *one* meaning. It might seem unnecessary to express thus formally the circumstances under which exegesis is called for and is possible, if experience did not show that they are apt to be practically overlooked or disregarded. It cannot be too constantly borne in mind that St. Paul wrote for, and intended his meaning to be understood by, the readers whom he primarily addressed; and that he would necessarily use, as the vehicle of his thoughts, language which was already familiar to them, or, if not so, was at least such as they might reasonably be expected to put a like meaning into with himself. The character of his writing must

have been, to a great extent, determined by the position and circumstances of the readers; must have been in accordance with their need, and adapted to their capacity of receiving it.

What, then, was the standing of those original readers? Not that certainly of modern German philosophers or exegetes of the nineteenth century, nor that even of the Asiatic, Greek, or Roman "wise men" of the first century—for the Apostle has himself told us that not many of the wise or the powerful or the high-born of the world were among the partakers of the Christian calling—but that of men for the most part probably of humble rank and limited culture, who had been either themselves Jews by birth and training, or Hellenic proselytes who had frequented the synagogue and become familiar with Jewish ideas, or converts to Christianity who, in the very act of coming to Christ, had learned that "salvation is of the Jews," and had been brought into close contact with Jewish thought. It is to these—to readers of Jewish race or at least deeply imbued with interests and sympathies akin to those of the Jews—that the Apostle addresses himself; and as what he has written must be read by us in the light of its destination for, and of its adaptation to, those original recipients, we are naturally led to expect that under the exigencies of the case his thoughts and his language will bear a Hebrew rather than a

Hellenic complexion, and will be such, moreover, as to be, in broad outline at least, readily intelligible by a reader of average Jewish culture. It is *à priori* improbable that they should be pervaded either by a recondite philosophy or by a dreamy mysticism.

And this leads us to our second assumption as a basis for a clear and sure exegesis—that the Apostle must be taken to have on any single occasion of using a word only *one* meaning, and not *two* or more meanings. Whatever may be said of special cases where a double sense has been recognised, as in those of allegory, or of parable, or of prophecy having a double reference—and in each of these cases the literal and the figurative, the primary and the secondary, the proximate and the more remote, can hardly perhaps be in strictness termed double—it will readily be granted that the ordinary use of language rests on the footing of each word being conceived to represent a single definite idea, and not more. But expositors, who have been unable to determine to their own satisfaction which of two possible meanings is to be assigned to a word in a given place, have not seldom allowed themselves to attribute their own indecision to the Apostle's mind, and have expressed themselves as though he might have meant either the one or the other, or both at once. And Dr. Jowett, in his thoughtful

and suggestive, but often vague and hazy commentary<sup>1</sup>—a singular mixture of refining and refusing to refine—has not only exhibited various instances of hesitation in his choice, but has expressed theoretical doubts as to the Apostle's having only one meaning. Often we find him setting down two possible constructions side by side without indicating a preference for either ; and not unfrequently we find him suggesting that they may be blended, or that the one may pass over into or be lost in the other. Bishop Ellicott seems at times inclined to a similar view—as when he says, in language strangely combining definiteness and doubt, on Phil. i. 27 : “ In most cases in the New Testament it may be said that in every mention of the human *πνεῦμα* some reference to the eternal Spirit may always be recognised ”—and even Bishop Lightfoot on one occasion at least gives his countenance to the same idea, when at Phil. i. 19 he asks, “ Must the genitive be considered subjective or objective ? Is the Spirit the giver or the gift ? Ought we not to say, in answer to this question, that the language of the original suggests no limitation, that *it will bear both meanings equally well*, and that therefore any such restriction is arbitrary. The Spirit is both the giver and the gift.”

<sup>1</sup>The Epistles of St. Paul to the Thessalonians, Galatians, Romans, with critical notes, 8vo, Lond., 1855.

Dr. Jowett has devoted an Essay<sup>1</sup> to the discussion of the question, "Is it possible for the same word to have two meanings in the same passage?" In the very title of this characteristic Essay, which is a good specimen of the play on words of which it professes to treat, the author has unconsciously illustrated the double meaning of which he speaks by using the word "passage" in an ambiguous sense. For, when we turn to the Essay itself, we find the word applied sometimes to a single clause in which a word *occurs*, sometimes to a paragraph or section in which it more or less frequently *recurs*. There is an obvious difference between the two cases which Dr. Jowett has run together, namely, whether a word may have two meanings simultaneously imposed on it when it stands singly, and whether it may have different shades of meaning associated with it on successive occasions of its use; between the examples adduced by him, on the one hand, of *ἄγων* in 1 Thess. ii. 2 which, he contends, may mean at once inward conflict and outward persecution, or of *παράκλησις* in the following verse, which, he conceives, may denote at once consolation and exhortation, and those of the different occasions on which *νόμος* recurs in Rom. vii., or *πνεῦμα* in Rom. viii.

Not a few of the topics, interesting enough in themselves, that are introduced into this celebrated

<sup>1</sup>Vol. I. p. 125-135.

Essay, seem to me quite irrelevant to the subject as proposed, and tending by their very irrelevancy to confuse the issue. For example, the discussion of the variation in the meaning of words from age to age, of the growth of language, of the transition from fluctuation to fixity of usage; the inquiry how far the hearers may have been able to put at once all the Apostle's meaning into his words; the question how far one language lends itself to the exact reproduction of the words of another; the question, above all, whether Dr. Jowett is entitled to look for the fulfilment of his own expectations at the hands of St. Paul, or to impute his own unconsciousness of distinctions to the Apostle's inability to make them clear, or to say that the Apostle "blends in one the acts of the Spirit and the acts of man" when he does his best to distinguish them, or to hope that people will be content with the "general" or "the substantial" meaning of a whole passage, when they can get nothing definite as to its details—all these points seem to me utterly beside the simple question with which from the title of his Essay we should have expected him to deal, namely, whether a writer such as St. Paul can, consistently with the known laws of thought and language, be conceived to have used a word in two senses at one and the same time without consciously knowing, or specially willing, the predominance of one of them.

Dr. Jowett illustrates his meaning by the case of *ἀγων*. "If a statesman were to say, in writing to a friend, of some political measure which was the crisis of his fate, that 'it was a great struggle,' he might mean a great struggle to himself and to his own feelings, or a great struggle of parties or opinions; it might have been also a struggle in which violence had been resorted to. It is possible that all these three associations were passing through his mind at the time that he wrote down the word. Some light might be thrown by the context of the sentence, or by other parts of the letter, on the true sense. But language is not always used with the degree of exactness necessary in such cases to enable us to determine the meaning or associations of meaning which the writer had in his mind. Probably a critical analysis of the words would only lead to the conviction that the person who used them was not distinctly conscious of their import to himself." In this passage there is an apparent confusion of the process in the interpreter's mind with the process in the writer's mind; and it is suggested that, because we have not precise means of determining what the writer exactly meant, we may reasonably infer that he did not himself know his meaning exactly. But we are not entitled thus summarily to make our inability to discern which of three meanings an author wished to express a

ground for asserting either that he meant in some confused fashion each or all of the three, or that he was not himself conscious of what he really purposed to say. Because in a given case Dr. Jowett does not understand St. Paul, does it necessarily follow that St. Paul cannot have exactly understood himself? In point of fact Dr. Jowett's illustration imputes the attitude of the expositor, hesitating amidst possibilities, to the writer who has in reality no such difficulty or hesitancy. It is not possible that all the three associations were passing through his mind at the time he wrote down the word. If the writer in the case supposed was in earnest and not merely constructing an ingenious play on a word to puzzle his friend, he cannot have had the three thoughts simultaneously present to him; one alone must have been present, or at any rate dominant; and assuredly he meant that and nothing else, whatever his friend might take him to mean. For the latter there might be doubt as to what he may have meant; for himself there could be none as to what he *did* mean, and for himself it could not be for a moment uncertain whether the struggle of which he spoke was *inward*, *outward*, or accompanied by a resort to *violence*. Exegesis can only address itself to its task with any hope or confidence of a successful result on the assumption that the author whom it seeks to interpret has not thus

played fast and loose with language, but has attached to it in each instance a definite meaning, not manifold, but one.

And how are we to get at that meaning? Simply by applying the recognised principles and methods of exegesis. One of its first canons is that an author is his own best interpreter; and, in the case of a thinker so original and unique as St. Paul, our light must be sought mainly from himself. If he does not define formally his terms, we must seek to supply the want by examining them in the light of the context, by comparing their use in parallel or analogous passages, by invoking the aid of predicates or of contrasts to elucidate their import. On the basis of these materials we must start a provisional hypothesis, which may be applied as a means of grouping, correlating, and explaining them, and which may gather increasing probability in proportion to the success with which it connects and holds them together.

We must presume that the passages which are less clear are to be interpreted in the light of those that are more definite, explicit, and salient; and we must not permit the value or validity of the results obtained from the latter to be neutralised by the element of uncertainty clinging to the former. If the problem is complicated to some extent by the variety of apparent uses to be taken

into account, its solution is aided on the other hand by the facilities of comparison afforded by the numerous writings of the Apostle, issued at different dates and under different circumstances, but shown by their common characteristics, as well as vouched by tradition, to have come alike from him.

In this inquiry all the Epistles that bear the name of St. Paul may legitimately, as it appears to us, be used ; for the doubts that have been expressed by German critics, more especially of the Tübingen school, as to the genuineness of several or even most of them, are, generally speaking, of so subjective and arbitrary a character as to carry little weight in opposition to the solid grounds on which the Church has accepted them.<sup>1</sup> Indeed it has been pointed out that the same process of begging the question, under which the Tübingen school have first constituted a Pauline doctrine by excluding the disputed Epistles, and then applied it as a test to warrant the elimination of the latter as containing un-Pauline elements, would, if simply reversed, necessitate the exclusion of the Epistles now admitted on all hands to be genuine. The assumption that an author, having once formulated a doctrine, must continue in

<sup>1</sup> A specimen of these arguments as applied to the Epistles to the Thessalonians, and a searching exposure of their irrelevancy and worthlessness, may be seen in Dr. Jowett's disquisitions on the genuineness of the Epistles.

season and out of season to insist on it, and must be held bound to reproduce it in every case under penalty of having his identity denied; or, that, having once expressed himself in one set of terms, he could not under altered circumstances resort to another, will never, it may confidently be asserted, commend itself to any calm and dispassionate judgment. But while we do not find any sufficient reason for setting aside any of the Pauline Epistles from bearing on this inquiry, the question is really, so far as this matter is concerned, of minor moment, for the most important materials in relation to it are actually embraced within the range of the Four Epistles acknowledged as genuine by all; and it is in them that we are enabled to recognise the most distinctive characters of Pauline usage.

But this question of the Apostle's personal *usus loquendi* leads me to recall the fact that, while he has impressed on the terms used by him a stamp of his own, he did not create those terms, but found them already existing and turned them to account, building on foundations previously laid and on an usage inherited or acquired. None of the expressions employed by him are absolutely new. Whence, then, did he derive them? and in what form did they lie ready to his hand? What, in other words, was the usage that he found current and made the basis of his own peculiar structure? To these ques-

tions we can be little at a loss to return at least a general answer. We have already spoken of the character of the readers chiefly addressed as necessarily conditioning to some extent the nature and form of the Epistles sent to them; we have now to bear in mind above all that the writer was—not less certainly than his readers—of Jewish birth, training, and sympathies. We have no means of knowing what may have been the extent or depth of his Hellenic culture, or what influence was exercised by early or later contact with Greek life over his modes of thought or habits of expression. But his Hebraic culture is beyond all doubt, and has left its deep and abiding impress on all that bears his name.

He who could speak of himself in his letters as “an Israelite, of the seed of Abraham, of the tribe of Benjamin,” as “circumcised the eighth day, an Hebrew of the Hebrews, as touching the law a Pharisee;” who could say: “I advanced in the Jews’ religion beyond many of mine own age among my countrymen, being more exceedingly zealous for the traditions of my fathers;” who could before the Sanhedrim describe himself as “a Jew brought up in Jerusalem at the feet of Gamaliel, instructed according to the strict manner of the law of our fathers,” and who could subsequently, in presence of Agrippa, declare of himself: “My manner of life

from my youth up, which was from the beginning among mine own nation at Jerusalem, know all the Jews ; having knowledge of me from the first, if they be willing to testify, how that after the strictest sect of our religion I lived a Pharisee ;” he whose zeal on behalf of his nation continued such as to lead him with solemn adjuration to declare : “ I could wish that I myself were anathema from Christ for my brethren’s sake, my kinsmen according to the flesh ”—must—whatever else he may have had—have been imbued with the highest and best of Jewish culture, and must have been accustomed above all to think in the forms, and to clothe his thoughts in the language, of the race to which he was proud to belong. And as all Jewish learning started from, and ever stood in close relation to, the Scriptures of the Old Testament that were entrusted as a sacred deposit to the nation ; as all Jewish study centred in “ the law, the prophets, and the Psalms ;” St. Paul must have been especially familiar with the Biblical *usus loquendi* as well as with the current speech of his countrymen. It is on the Old Testament and Septuagint usage that we may fall back with absolute certainty as the primary basis on which he began to build.

It is difficult on the other hand to say how far he may have had access to, or been influenced by, any of the writings that are now in the New Testament

associated with his own, such as the records of the teaching of Christ that have now come to us in Synoptic form, or the Epistle of James, or the First Epistle of Peter, which Weiss seems to be right in referring to a comparatively early date. On the whole, looking to the Apostle's own testimony as to his independence, so far as the gospel went, on man or on human teaching, it seems better to abstain from assuming any such influence of Christian literature, and to confine our inquiry to the usage which St. Paul certainly found existing, and must certainly have known, in the Old Testament and Septuagint.