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## By grammar alone? Humanism overcome and the hermeneutics of Matthias Flacius Illyricus

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Wilhelm Dilthey once admitted that Matthias Flacius Illyricus either appropriated the fourth book of Augustine's *De Doctrina Christiana* in detail or took advantage of all of the early Christian exegesis in general in his *Clavis Sacrae Scripturae*. The aim of this paper is partly polemical. While Flacius himself frequently proved Dilthey's unfavourable judgment to be correct, he also followed the innovatory footsteps of biblical philologists such as Gianozzo Manetti, Lorenzo Valla and Desiderius Erasmus in order to reaffirm and concretize the Lutheran principle of the intelligibility of Scripture based on its strictly immanent, that is to say grammatical, investigation. Consequently, I would like to discuss the *Clavis Sacrae Scripturae* as the confessional yet deliberate outcome of the grammatical and rhetorical curriculum of studia humanitatis. All of this, however, will not lead to the conclusion that the *Clavis* should still remain the enterprise of a less distinguished follower. For decisions made by Flacius regarding the tradition of patristic, medieval, and humanistic exegesis was constantly founded upon the heuristically critical and genuinely hermeneutical principle. Therefore, it is worth asking what this principle was, or more precisely, how can man use philological tools that do not deprive God of his unconditioned sovereignty?

**Keywords:** Matthias Flacius Illyricus, hermeneutics, *sola scriptura*, tradition, grammar

## INTRODUCTION

All too often we fail to understand the Protestant principle of *sola scriptura*, for we recklessly tend to contrast tradition with the Scripture itself or even to accuse the Scripture-principle of hostility to tradition, and in result to strip the tradition of any positive hermeneutical significance in Protestant theology.<sup>1</sup> This set of misunderstandings dates back to the first half of the sixteenth century, when theologians like Desiderius Erasmus and especially Johannes Driedo defended traditional hermeneutical authority against the alleged scripturalism of Luther. From the very beginning, the relation between Scripture and tradition, although more vital for different early-modern theology than *studia humanitatis*, was not an issue discussed exclusively in academic theology or judged by church dogmatics, but was first and foremost a hermeneutical problem of understanding the Word of God. Luther, however, never wrote a separate treatise either on biblical hermeneutics, biblical exegesis, or on tradition as an element of hermeneutical investigation. This was a task first undertaken systematically by the following generation of Lutheran theologians, especially by Martin Chemnitz in his *Examen Concilii Tridentini*, of which the first volume, including the separate chapters on Scripture and tradition, was already published in 1566, and in the *Clavis Sacrae Scripturae* by Matthias Flacius Illyricus, published a year later, in 1567.

Accordingly, this paper aims to examine the meaning of grammatical (as well as rhetorical) procedures prescribed and exercised in the treatise that gave rise to the science of hermeneutics, as Wilhelm Dilthey once labeled the *Clavis Sacrae Scripturae*.<sup>2</sup> In other words, the issue in question here is what do we actually do, and what do we actually use when we deliberately introduce philological tools (grammar in particular) to biblical hermeneutics? The proposed interpretation of the second part of the *Clavis Sacrae Scripturae* might be a good opportunity to reconsider the Protestant Scripture-principle in its unclear relation to tradition, and will thus be helpful in answering this question, while the first part of the *Clavis*, consisting of an enormous biblical dictionary, will not be discussed here. Flacius and Chemnitz among other Lutheran theologians left no doubt that the Protestant principle was invariably

1 See Ebeling 1966: 98-112.

2 Dilthey 1966: 597; idem 1968: 324.

founded upon the heuristic and hermeneutical principle. Therefore, this principle should be scrutinized, or, more precisely, the question should be posed of how a man can use philological tools which do not deprive God of his unconditioned sovereignty.

## THE THEORY OF LANGUAGE

Every serious, *i.e.* carefully arranged, well thought-out and fundamentally justified, hermeneutical project is founded upon a precise theory of language. Therefore, “critical hermeneutics needs to include a theory of language in general and of textual signification in particular”.<sup>3</sup> Whether or not we make use of hermeneutics in a technical or philosophical way, if we grasp hermeneutics in epistemological or ontological terms, if understanding remains the mode of knowing or becomes the mode of being, if we want hermeneutics to become a general or fundamental science, language always remains its starting point. In order to support his critical reflection on hermeneutics by the preliminary theory of language Flacius began his chapter *De ratione cognoscendi Sacras Literas* with a concise, yet essential, definition of *sermo*: “Language is a sign or an image of things, like a pair of glasses through which we see the thing itself. Therefore if language is obscure, whether in itself or for us, it is hardly possible to inquire the thing itself”.<sup>4</sup> Appearances can be deceptive, for Flacius didn’t employ here either vocabulary from ancient and early-Christian semiotics (*nota*, and especially *imago rerum*), nor the relationship between items and names as described by Aristotle and the mediaeval Modistae. Instead, he followed in the groundbreaking footsteps of Lorenzo Valla and Erasmus, who loosened the logocentric covenant between language and reality, and then pushed that same language into innumerable varieties. Although Flacius accepted correspondence, a logocentric or simply realistic theory of language, and thus used *sermo* as a means of signifying something other than language itself, this was only a part of the story. The sermocinal medium (as opposed to the real thing) must be mastered if the reader wants to reach the subject matter

3 Jeanrond 1991: 146.

4 *Clavis Scripturae Sacrae, seu De sermone sacrarum literarum, plurimas generales Regulas continentis, altera pars.* Authore Matthia Flacio Illyrico Albonense. Editio ultima. Basileae apud Henricpetrinos. M.DC.XXIIIX [1628], p. 2, l. 16-19: “Est vero sermo nota aut imago rerum, et veluti quaedam perspicilla, per quae res ipsas intuemur. Quare si sermo sit, vel per se, vel nobis obscurus, difficulter ex eo res ipsas cognoscimus”.

of a biblical text, but the very meaning of that medium differed considerably from the well-established contemporary understanding of philological sciences.<sup>5</sup>

Lorenzo Valla, who was responsible for the said change in sermocinal media, introduced a pivotal distinction between the two modes of using language – namely *grammaticae loqui* and *latine loqui*. The first manner is relevant to those who restrict language to a set of universal rules, while the second is suitable for one who relies on the criterion of pragmatic appropriateness. Therefore, the opposition between traditional, high-principled *grammaticae* and early-modern, ever-changing *latine* stood for the juxtaposition of *ratio* and *consuetudo*, that is, an abstract phenomenon that defines the principles of correctness versus historically mediated, and thus individual, language usage. This is a crucial distinction for the development of the Protestant hermeneutics elaborated by Valla in his *Dialecticae disputationes*:

... we must speak according to a grammatical standard, speaking not so much grammatically as in Latin – following not so much the rules of an art, in other words, as the usage of educated and cultured people, which is the best art of all. And who does not know that speaking is based mainly on usage and authority? [...] just as nations and peoples have different customs and different laws, so do the natures of languages differ, each one sacred and unsullied among its own. Therefore we must rely on usage, as if it were a kind of established practice in the community.<sup>6</sup>

Erasmus, however, went even further. He pointed out that every vivid language seemed to actually offer no choice between *grammaticae* and *latine loqui*, since the meaning of a word was constantly determined by consecutive, ever-changing social habits rather than the universal order of things and names. In his dialogue *De rebus et vocabulis* Erasmus gave a number of examples which, depending

5 Cf. Grondin 2001: 42; Eden 1997: 91-92. Both Grondin and Eden overlook, however, that slight change.

6 Valla 2012: 84; 88-90: “Nobis quidem ad normam grammatices loquendum est, nec tam grammaticae quam Latine loquendum – hoc est non tam ad praecepta artis, quam ad consuetudinem eruditorum atque elegantium, quae optima est. Nam quis maximam loquendi partem auctoritate niti et consuetudine? [...] ut sunt varii mores variae leges nationum ac populorum, ita variae naturae linguarum, apud suos unaquaeque intemerata et sancta. Itaque consuetudine, tanquam quodam more civili, standum est”.

on the ethical terms defined by social convention, such as 'good' or 'bad', could, and actually did, take on different meanings.<sup>7</sup>

It is worth noting that already during the fifteenth century vernacular translations of the Bible, the Vulgate in particular, were assigned to be bound by the rule of *consuetudo*. According to Valla, Saint Jerome must have been aware of the conventional origins of language, as he was proficient in distinguishing the practical and normative modes of using Latin, and exercised pragmatic *latine* instead of synchronous and normative *grammatice*.<sup>8</sup> In consequence, the *grammatice–latine* distinction was equally suitable, at least as a postulate, for understanding secular and biblical text as well. Although exercised consistently by Valla and partly by Erasmus in their versions of *Annotationes in Novum Testamentum*, it was Flacius who went one hermeneutical step further that consisted in gathering the exegetical achievements of his predecessors and arranging these findings together into the brand new system of hermeneutics.

Regardless of its founding role in the modern history of hermeneutics, the *Clavis Sacrae Scripturae* was equally inspirational for the phenomenological investigation of language.<sup>9</sup> Even though the word 'hermeneutics' is nowhere to be found in the *Clavis*, it is actually, as one may read in its subtitle, a treatise on biblical language more than anything else: *The key to sacred scriptures or on the language of sacred books*. No less and no more. Apart from accepting the complementary relationship of intentionality and signification as the sources of meaning, Flacius left no doubt that there is no universal system of language, neither ancient, nor vernacular. Even one and the same tongue inevitably differs in terms of time and space, nation and

7 See Erasmus 1972: 566-571.

8 Valla 1962: 330: “Dixi Hieronymum maluisse latine, quam grammaticae loqui. Nunquid grammaticae loctus est, an contra grammaticam, cum transtulit Graecum nominatiuum per latinum accusatiuum [...] Si grammaticae, loctutum dices, grammatici negabunt. Sin non grammaticae, ergo aut barbare, aut latine. Vides, ut dixi, latine locutum, ne dicerem barbare? et excusau, non accusau? At enim, ut magis laudarem, debui dicere locutum grammaticae, inquires. Tu, quod falsum est, quod non sentis, dicto: ergo quod sentio, loquar. Quanquam non puto maiorem esse laudem grammaticae, quam latine loquendi. Et istud est, inquis, quod pecco. Si pecco, certe in laudem interpretis siue Hieronymi pecco, quem tu calumniaris a me uituperari, quod dixerim: praelarius fecisse latine, quam grammaticae loquendo. At hic error, inquis, quia male accipio Quintilianum, cuius illa sunt uerba: aliud est latine, aliud grammaticae loqui”.

9 See Shpet 2019: 15-24.

confession, state and estate. Flacius was keen to acknowledge that the way that every language conveys ideas and gives them a significant shape was thoroughly determined by the custom established and followed within a particular community more than anything else.<sup>10</sup> Accordingly, the so-called *mos loquendi* of one and the same language consisted not only of grammatical rules, but most of all of peculiarities that determine its distinctive way of being. Moreover, words never take on fixed meanings, because their figurative nature multiplies the factual shapes of language itself. “In many different ways language is extremely figurative. [...] Very often two or even three different figurative uses of a word apply to one and the same word”, Flacius observed.<sup>11</sup> Consequently, he was forced to speak of language difference, or *diversitas sermonis*, rather than of its sameness and durability, and therefore to admit that there are no transferable linguistic blueprints from one age or place to another. There are only vivid and therefore idiosyncratic languages, either written or spoken, repeatedly reinforcing their capability of communicating or signifying. It should be noted that Flacius, just like Valla and Erasmus, arrived at this sort of conclusion through a careful observation of linguistic praxis. It was not a matter of speculative investigation:

The experience shows that language used by the different people is always difficult for the foreigners; the same goes for the common languages in which many people are engaged for many years by the endless practice of speaking, reading, writing, and thereupon by earnestly inquiring the skillful ones. Ancient language remains obscure for the later generations. [...] The ancient method of speaking, and even the way of living, is obscure and difficult for us in its entirety.<sup>12</sup>

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10 *Clavis Scripturae Sacrae... altera pars, op. cit.:* 31, l. 31-37: “Aliquando etiam, ut non sit figurata oratio, est nihilominus obscura, vel ob res minus notas: vel etiam ob sermonem aut intricatum, aut alioqui a nostro more loquendi nimium alienum: cuiusmodi nobis necessario multa in Sacris literis sese offerunt, utpote iam olim et a gente linguaque remotissima a nostra conscripta”.

11 *Ibidem:* 3, l. 13, 27-28: “Sermo valde figuratus est, idque multipliciter. [...] Saepe in una voce duplicatos aut etiam triplicatos tropos habent”.

12 *Ibidem:* 2, l. 20-25, 30-31: “Aliarum gentium sermo semper aliis est difficilis: quod experientia docet, idque etiam in vulgaribus inguis, in quibus multi multos annos versantur perpetuo colloquendo, legendo, scribendo, et subinde peritos percunctando. Vetustus sermo recentioribus obscurus est. [...] Tota omnino illa vetustissima ratio dicendi, atque adeo etiam vivendi, est recentioribus et obscura et difficilis”.

Such conclusions apply to “the diversity of language used by the particular writers, but especially in New and Old Testament”,<sup>13</sup> as Flacius adds a little later. In consequence, language alone (or more precisely *diversitas sermonis*) constitutes the distance between the written text and its reader, and as such becomes a major challenge to the science of hermeneutics.

If language usage, instead of grammatical regulations, becomes the basic rule and lays down the ever-changing criterion of correctness, effective examination of language must take into account the historical and conventional origin of its every single usage. Instead of universal and thus abstract rules, every single habitual experience (*quotidiana experientia*) provides the reader with decisive help in indicating and elucidating the obscurities.<sup>14</sup> Consequently, the critical analyses recommended and exercised by Flacius were primarily focused on the particular usage in order to grasp its various circumstances making up together the proper, or often even the unique meaning of a particular word. Such an analysis went far beyond an insufficient comparison of a particular usage with its abstract pattern (which was all too often practiced by Erasmus in his *Annotationes*), it transcended a mere collation founded upon the universal rules which governed every single usage. Since normative rules were no longer conclusive for grasping the complete meaning of a word, pragmatic *consuetudo* elaborated by Valla, or *mos loquendi*, to use Flacius’ own term, finally took the privileged place once occupied by the synchronous *ratio loquendi*.

## HERMENEUTICAL MARROW OF THE BONE

Up to this point Flacius still followed the footsteps of Valla and Erasmus in essential features. A closer examination of some practical guidelines from the *Clavis* may, however, unravel the way that Flacius radicalized the already radical idea of his humanist predecessors. Being the prominent spokesman of a genuinely Lutheran immanent interpretation of biblical text and together with Philip Melanchthon, the person greatly responsible for elaborating and developing many of Luther’s hermeneutical intuitions, Flacius found

13 *Ibidem*: 3, l. 1-5: “Diversitas quoque sermonis singulorum scriptorum, praesertim autem Novi et Veteris testamenti (cum tanquam unius auctoris, sicut et est, accipi debeant tota Biblia) non modicum impedimentum adfert imperitiori lectori”.

14 *Ibidem*: 7, l. 22-25: “hic quoque sicut et in omnibus aliis scientiis ac artibus, vera ac viva experientia: quae omnino obscuriora Theorices mirifice illustrat ac declarat”.

the decree made by the Council of Trent on the exegetical insufficiency of the Bible to be blasphemous or simply incorrect in terms of hermeneutics.<sup>15</sup> He argued that the Scripture was generally understandable, clear and unambiguous; consequently, every time we come across any obscure places all these stumbling blocks are actually far remote from the immanent constitution of the text itself. The preeminent source of every difficulty with the Scripture lies solely in external, extratextual factors. For Flacius, as for Luther, so-called external obscurity of the Scripture did not come from the thing itself, but from the external ignorance of language.<sup>16</sup> Therefore, every difficulty originated exclusively from the reader's deficient abilities, in particular from the deficient knowledge of language, or more precisely of the *mos loquendi* exercised in a certain fragment of a discussed text.

We must not overlook a slight, yet absolutely decisive, distinction regarding the biblical obscurity introduced by Flacius at the beginning of his work, namely the difference between *sermo per se* and *sermo pro nobis*.<sup>17</sup> It obviously develops the idea of a double clarity and obscurity of the Scripture discussed by Luther in the *De servo arbitrio* – if internal clarity lays beyond the rules of human sciences, external clarity depends on philological proficiency.<sup>18</sup> Furthermore, such a distinction also forges connections with the

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15 *Clavis Scripturae Sacrae, seu De sermone sacrarum literarum*, Authore Matthia Flacio Illyrico, pars prima... Basileae apud Henricpetrinos. M.DC.XXIX [1628], p. 3recto: "horrendum in modum blasphemant, vociferantes Scripturam esse obscuram, ambiguum".

16 Luther 1908: 606, l. 22–24: "Hoc sane fateor, esse multa loca in scripturis obscura et abstrusa, non ob maiestatem rerum, sed ob ignorantiam vocabulorum et grammaticae, sed quae nihil impediunt scientiam omium rerum in scripturis"; Flacius 1628: "Hic enim ferme primarius fons est difficultatis Sacrarum literarum, quod propemodum nunquam theologi summa diligentia in id incubuerunt, ut perfectius vel cognoscerent ipsi, vel aliis explicarent, ipsum Sacrum sermonem ac textum: contenti de rebus potius ipsis factu quod facilius est, disserere".

17 See footnote 4.

18 Luther, *op. cit.*: 609, l. 4–14: "Duplex est claritas scripturae, sicut et duplex obscuritas, Vna externa in uerbi ministerio posita, altera in cordis cognitione sita. Si de interna claritate dixeris, nullus homo unum iota in scripturis uidet, nisi qui spiritum Dei habet, omnes habent obscuratum cor, ita, ut, si etiam dicant et norint proferre omnia scripturae, nihil tamen horum sentiant aut uere cognoscant; neque credunt Deum, nec sese esse creaturas Dei, nec quicquam aliud, iuxta illud Psal. 13: Dixit insipiens in corde suo: Deus nihil est. Spiritus enim requiritur ad totam scripturam et ad quamlibet eius partem intelligendam. Si de externa dixeris, Nihil prorsus relictum est obscurum aut ambiguum, sed omnia sunt per uerbum in lucem producta certissimam, et declarata toto orbi, quaecunque sunt in scripturis". See also Beisser 1966.



one examined by Erasmus in his final work, *Ecclesiastes sive de ratione concionandi*. In search of necessary conditions for the effective proclamation and understanding of the Word of God, Erasmus was particularly interested in the relationship between the reality constituted by the divine λόγος and human language. The divine origin of every single thing made it permanent and fixed, but the thing itself is known to man only through a verbal sign. In consequence, every language had to differ in terms of time and person, that is, to convey one and the same thing differently with different words in order to provide everyone with a clear image of reality. “The law of God – Erasmus admits – remains the same, just as his unchangeable will. It is, however, expressed differently according to times and persons”.<sup>19</sup> Therefore, *sermo pro nobis* stands for the Word of God accommodated to man’s own way of being, and as such is made intelligible. Biblical text in itself (*per se*) is always clear by itself, as witnessed by the old, patristic method of reading *collatio locorum*, while the language for us (*pro nobis*) can and thus should be clarified with the supplementary help of tradition. Conditioned by the ever-changing, and thus effective, language, *sermo pro nobis* could not deny its historical genesis. Indeed, Gerhard Ebeling noticed that the quest for appropriate language not only took extratextual factors into consideration, but most of all explained the reason why the Word of God could reach a man through tradition.<sup>20</sup> That genuinely hermeneutical alliance of the Bible and tradition stands here for understanding a biblical text in human terms that do not violate the immanent meaning of the divine *sermo*. Prescribed rules of understanding are “general and external”,<sup>21</sup> as Flacius firmly insisted, they are hermeneutical, not dogmatic. Consequently, the meaning of *sermo per se* remains immanent and, so to speak, stable and permanent, while *sermo pro nobis* is transcendent and restless. It involves an internal and external perspective of understanding. Flacius’ hermeneutics belongs to the latter, therefore its task is to clarify *externa obscuritas*. What we have here is the starting point, a grammatical stage in a long process of an efficient reading.

19 Erasmus 1994: 320, l. 190-191: “Lex Dei semper eadem est, quemadmodum Dei voluntas est immutabilis. Varie tamen exhibita est pro ratione temporum et personarum”.

20 Ebeling, *op. cit.*: 96; 98.

21 *Clavis Scripturae Sacrae... altera pars*, *op. cit.*: 22, l. 31-33: “praeceptiones sunt quasi externae et generales: nunc de iis dicamus, quae ipsum textum propius attingant”.

The idea of internal and immanent clarity carries over the hermeneutical problem from *verbum* to *mens*. Among the principal causes of obscurity Flacius named at least five hermeneutical obstacles: philological and historical ignorance, figurative ambiguity, contradiction and discrepancy taking place between the text and its author's intention. Not only is the first obstacle of a purely grammatical nature, but most of all the ultimate aim of understanding is to go beyond the grammatical layer of the text itself to the layer of meaning lying behind the word. For according to Flacius, a genuine interpretation considers what the author means rather than what he wrote.<sup>22</sup> If the grammar of a word gives way to the intention underlying it, the relative limits of purely grammatical inquiry have to be indicated and elaborated for a useful and beneficial purpose. From the grammatical *intentio operis* to the rhetorical *intentio auctoris*, that is the way hermeneutical investigation is carried out, and in the long run the radical humanistic idea of *consuetudo / mos loquendi* even more radicalized. Indeed, an examination of the writer's intention, as the very aim of hermeneutics, consists of rhetorical analyses.

At this point Flacius remained under the strong influence of Melancthon's rhetoric, his idea of the *scopus orationis* as a key element in the status of the text in question.<sup>23</sup> Melancthon's impact on the rise of the science of hermeneutics consists not only in profound change in the functional aspect of rhetoric – from speaking/writing to reading, that is effectively understanding the written word<sup>24</sup> – but most of all in making the author's intention (*intentio, voluntas, scopus*) the principal key to a proper understanding.<sup>25</sup> In consequence, it is equally incorrect to limit hermeneutics to grammar as well as to elevate the written word above the writer's intention. Flacius deliberately took over the rhetorical hierarchy between *scriptum* and *voluntas* in order to consti-

22 *Ibidem*: 31, l. 31-38: "Aliquando etiam, ut non sit figurata oratio, est nihilominus obscura, vel ob res minus notas: vel etiam ob sermonem aut intricatum, aut alioqui a nostro more loquendi nimium alienum: cuiusmodi nobis necessario multa in Sacris litteris sese offerunt, utpote iam olim et a gente linguaque remotissima a nostra conscripta: ubi non raro expedit magis in mentem quam in verba Scriptoris respicere".

23 See Grondin, *op. cit.*: 43; Eden, *op. cit.*: 94-95.

24 Melancthon 2017: 275, l. 12-14: "Haec utilitas movit homines prudentes ad excogitanda precepta, ut in commune consulerent omnibus, et adolescentes, non tam ad recte dicendum, quam ad prudenter intelligenda aliena scripta praepararent".

25 *Ibidem*: 279, l. 26-27: "finis orationis, hoc est, praecipua intentio, et summa consilii, seu ut vocant, scopus orationis". Cf. Erasmus 1933: 154, l. 10-22. In general, on Melancthon's significance for the science of hermeneutics see Leiner 1997: 468-487.

tute the ultimate tool designed for biblical interpretation.<sup>26</sup> Since all sorts of writing exhibit their own *scopus*, it became indispensable to include an intentional analysis of the *circumstantiae* that finally make authorial intention accessible, namely: person, time, manner, cause (being a synonym of *voluntas*), place, and finally, instrument. As the will governs our actions, all of these extratextual circumstances determine the quality of a written text. Last but not least, basic problems of biblical interpretation, like above-mentioned ambiguity and contradiction, can be easily solved by means of discovering the *intentio auctoris*. In short, the true meaning of a text resides in the intention of its author. Thus, *mens auctoris*, his *intentio* or *voluntas*, stands for the versatile yet protean key to the Sacred Scriptures, the key which provides a skillful reader with a measure for distinguishing one valid interpretation from groundless and, in fact, countless overinterpretations.

Neither discrepancy between *scriptum* and *voluntas*, nor preference given to the authorial intention, however, means that in such hermeneutical investigation the problem of language is being lost. Not at all. Specificity of the *mens auctoris* consists solely of the historical conditions that altogether constitute the features defining one's own distinctiveness. With regard to its written expressions, language alone, the *consuetudo* and *mos loquendi*, becomes a principal feature of singularity. By taking the authorial intention into consideration, Flacius gave special importance to the linguistic implications of man's behavior, since language usage involved both the established, that is grammatical and rhetorical, way of conduct, as well as its different applications. In order to distinguish the proper and improper modes of interpretation, Flacius introduced the distinction between two kinds of understanding – spiritual and corporeal respectively. Proper in terms of the hermeneutical concept of the *spiritus* stands for authorial idiosyncrasies. Flacius explained:

By *spiritus* I mean the method, intention, judgment or practice of the one who speaks. Even if someone comprehends not only what, but also why and even how, even if someone comprehends the words or a sense of the speech, he understands little. Many fail in this way, but especially the blind Jews, who cling to the skin of a

26 *Clavis Scripturae Sacrae... altera pars, op. cit.*: 22, l. 34-38: "Cum igitur aggredieris lectionem alicuius libri, id statim initio, quoad eius fieri potest, age, ut primum scopum, finem aut intentionem totius eius scripti, quod veluti caput aut facies eius est, protinus antequam notum habeas". See also Oftestad 2008: 610.

letter so much so they hardly understand the *spiritus* of the most important passages of Bible.<sup>27</sup>

Even though Flacius explicitly spoke of a set of principles (*ratio*) as an object of hermeneutical inquiry, it is not an abstract set of universal rules, but always the *ratio* of a particular author with all of his idiosyncrasies, including grammatical and rhetorical conditions. Therefore, in certain hermeneutical conditions there is no antithesis between the Scripture and beyond-scriptural reality. Melanchthon already observed that discovering what the author means is possible merely by taking a historical context into account. Flacius in turn added that textological and exegetical support was of prime importance among the guidelines prescribed to elucidate the scriptural obscurities: “the last remedy are good and clear copies, as well as trustworthy interpreters of the Sacred Scripture, those in particular who have handled the text with a more skillfully manner”<sup>28</sup>.

## TRADITION REGAINED AND THE CONTEMPORARY TECHNICAL HERMENEUTICS

Once philological tools were introduced to biblical hermeneutics interpreters were bound to take advantage of tradition, since both the grammar and rhetoric, perforce, entail the non-biblical, secular horizon of understanding the language used in the Bible. Flacius convincingly proved that interpretation began with the grammatical analyses of language usage, but that it eventually winded up itself behind or beyond the text, namely authorial intention immersed in tradition forevermore, which gave the writer a meaningful form of being. By means of restoring the original writer’s intention, that is by taking extratextual, historical conditions into account, hermeneutics shortens the distance between the written text and the reader; its task is to enable the reader to understand the undisturbed, yet still idiosyncratic, languages of the Holy Scripture. In the long run it overcomes long-established and exercised methods of exegesis and consequently constitutes the science

27 *Clavis Scripturae Sacrae... altera pars, op. cit.:* 82, l. 57-65: “*Spiritum autem voco rationem, mentem, consilium ac propositum loquentis. Hac intelligitur nonsolum quid, sed et quare, et quo fine dicatur. Sine ista intelligentia parum in Scripturis intelligit, etiam qui verba ac sensum orationis intelligit. Hac in parte deficiunt admodum multi, praesertim caeci Iudaei, qui sic cortici literae inhaerent, ut potissimum Scripturae locorum spiritum haud quaquam cognoscant*”.

28 *Ibidem:* 7, l. 35-37: “*Ultimum remedium sint bonae ac perspicuae versiones, et fidi Sacrarum literarum interpretes, praesertim qui textum magis dextre tractarunt*”.

of hermeneutics. As such, Flacius foreshadows the grand principles of modern interpretation prescribed by Emilio Betti, namely the canon of hermeneutical autonomy of a text and the canon of the coherence of meaning. Although three of four hermeneutical canons presented by Betti were used already by Church Fathers and the forensic rhetoric in ancient legal discourse, it was Flacius who first brought them together and gave them a systematic, interconnected shape. He was firmly convinced that these rules, if only bound and used together, would provide the reader with an efficient tool not only capable of unlocking the meaning of the Word of God, but first and foremost able to justify its divine sovereignty. Regardless of the linguistic presuppositions which loosened the covenant between the word and reality, this hermeneutical project was aimed at disclosing rather than creating meaning, which was still immanent rather than transcendent. No arbitrary human act can determine the meaning of divine *sermo*, since its meaning is derived solely from the sovereign Word of God. Thus, the ultimate task of every skillful reader is to read meaning from the Bible. The old patristic principle *sensus non est inferendus, sed efferendus* here received a new, Lutheran lease on life, since it entailed the method of reading able to capture the inner meaning, finally stripped of any non-biblical implications. In other words, Flacius stressed the autonomy of meaning, and therefore paved the way for the modern, academic theory of interpretation. According to the above-mentioned canon of hermeneutical autonomy all the texts should be “judged in relation to the standards immanent in the original intention: the intention, that is, which the created forms should correspond to from the point of view of the author and his formative impulse in the course of the creative process, it follows that they must not be judged in terms of their suitability for any other external purpose that may seem relevant to the interpreter”.<sup>29</sup>

The first canon elaborated by Betti stressed the autonomy of meaning and thus the intratextual aspect of interpretation, whereas the second one, namely the canon of the coherence of meaning, provided space for

29 Betti 1980: 58. See also Hirsch 1967: 219; 222; 224: “the interpreter has to distinguish what a text implies from what it does not imply; he must give the text its full due, but he must also preserve norms and limits. For hermeneutic theory, the problem is to find a principle for judging whether various possible implications should or should not be admitted. [...] The interpreter's aim, then, is to posit the author's horizon and carefully exclude his own accidental associations. [...] hermeneutics must stress a reconstruction of the author's aims and attitudes in order to evolve guides and norms for construing the meaning of his text”.

an extratextual aspect of interpretation, and as a result eventually made the tradition a supportive yet indispensable element of understanding. This canon, founded upon another patristic principle – *collatio locorum*, again marks a considerable change already introduced by Flacius. Not only should part of the text be contextualized, that is, understood in light of the whole, but the original *intentio auctoris* together with his own *mos loquendi* remained a determinative factor for the very meaning of a biblical text. Betti actually followed this particular instruction:

Just as the signification, intensity, nuances of a word can only be comprehended in relation to the meaning-context in which it was uttered, so the signification and sense of a sentence, and sentences connected with it, can only be understood in relation to the reciprocal coherence of meaning-context, the organic composition and conclusiveness, of speech. The principle of the reciprocal illumination of parts and whole can further be developed so that, in turn, every speech and every written work can equally be regarded as a link in a chain which can only be fully understood by reference to its place within a larger meaning-context.<sup>30</sup>

The issue in question is the idea of the whole, its either intratextual or extratextual quality, whether the text can explain itself or it needs an external point of reference. Both Flacius and Betti did not reduce the idea of totality to the internal content of a particular text, but conceived it as an external coherence of the whole semiotic universe. Referring one passage from the Bible to another would not create an effective solution, as every spoken and written word belongs to extratextual reality. Betti pointed out the “cultural system” as a token of totality, while Flacius spoke here of *mos*, *gens*, *lingua*, and above all the individual *ratio dicendi* and *vivendi*.<sup>31</sup> The meaning as such is therefore not so much revealed as put back together from the shattered pieces of single words, different passages from the same text, circumstances, intentions, and last but not least, the linguistic custom constantly followed in a different manner. If every single meaning of the Bible is made up of these internal and external factors, the skillful reader cannot, in principle, take no notice of the *mos loquendi*. Thereby, Flacius was able to reconcile the intratextual autonomy of the Scripture

30 Betti, *op. cit.*: 59-60.

31 See *ibidem*: 60.

with the extratextual principle of totality, or to cut a long story short – he was convinced that the essence of a text was determined by extratextual factors. Accordingly, only if the autonomy and totality of meaning were combined with each other could the Bible be its own interpreter. Since the immutable Word of God is being conveyed differently in different words according to linguistic customs, the biblical interpretation was forced then to transcend the narrow sermocinal analysis of the once separated meaningful units (*e.g.* word or sentence). Moreover, if *intentio auctoris* became the ultimate key to the Scriptures, biblical analyses had to refocus their attention on extratextual, to some degree, man-made factors as opposed to directing their exegetical and intratextual concern toward the allegedly self-contained text. That hermeneutical project was soon confirmed, developed and reinforced by Chemnitz, who in the *Examen Concilii Tridentini* discussed seven kinds of tradition, either identical with the Scripture, or in agreement with it, or not contradicting it.<sup>32</sup> Not incidentally among the advantageous *genera traditionum* hermeneutical tools and procedures attained their own place “on the explanation of a true meaning or original scope of the Scripture”.<sup>33</sup> For the time being there was no way to reject tradition in the name of the semiotically isolated text. For numerous aforementioned reasons the Sacred Scripture, at least in its oral and proclaimed form, belonged irrevocably to this tradition. It was only the abuse of tradition, improperly violating the hermeneutical autonomy of the Scripture, that the Protestant principle *sola scriptura* objected to.<sup>34</sup> From now on, the protestant door for tradition, as the supportive and inalienable element of understanding the Word of God addressed differently to the different people, finally and most of all systematically, opened wide.

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32 See Chemnitz Berolini 1861: 70-99.

33 *Ibidem*: 77.

34 Cf. Ebeling, *op. cit.*: 119-120.

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## SUMMARY

### By grammar alone? Humanism overcome and the hermeneutics of Matthias Flacius Illyricus

Wilhelm Dilthey once admitted that Matthias Flacius Illyricus either appropriated the fourth book of Augustine's *De Doctrina Christiana* in detail or took advantage of all of the early Christian exegesis in general in his *Clavis Sacrae Scripturae*. The aim of this paper is partly polemical. While Flacius himself frequently proved Dilthey's unfavorable judgment to be correct, he also followed the innovatory footsteps of biblical philologists such as Gianozzo Manetti, Lorenzo Valla and Desiderius Erasmus in order to reaffirm and concretize the Lutheran principle of the intelligibility of Scripture based on its strictly immanent, that is to say grammatical, investigation. Consequently, I would like to discuss the *Clavis Sacrae Scripturae* as the confessional yet deliberate outcome of the grammatical and rhetorical curriculum of *studia humanitatis*. All of this, however, will not lead to the conclusion that the *Clavis* should still remain the enterprise of a less distinguished follower. For decisions made by Flacius regarding the tradition of patristic, medieval, and humanistic exegesis was constantly founded upon the heuristically critical and genuinely hermeneutical principle. Therefore, it is worth asking what this principle was, or more precisely, how can man use philological tools that do not deprive God of his unconditioned sovereignty

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## SAŽETAK

### Samo gramatikom? Humanistički iskorak i hermeneutika Matije Vlačića Ilirika

Jednom je Wilhelm Dilthey ocijenio da je Matija Vlačić Ilirik u svojoj *Clavis Sacrae Scripturae* ili u potpunosti usvojio Augustinovu *De Doctrina Christiana* ili pak iskoristio sve ranije kršćanske egzegeze općenito. Cilj je ovoga rada dijelom polemičke naravi: s jedne strane Vlačić često potvrđuje istinitost te Diltheyeve po njega nepovoljne tvrdnje, dok s druge strane kroči inovativnim stopama biblijskih filologa (Gianozzo Manetti, Lorenzo Valla i Desiderius Erasmus) nastojeći reafirmirati i konkretizirati luteranski princip razumijevanja Svetog pisma na temelju strogo imanentnoga, dakle gramatičkoga, ispitivanja. Posljedično, u radu se propituje *Clavis Sacrae Scripturae* kao konfesionalni, ali istovremeno i slobodno promišljeni ishod gramatičkog i retoričkog kurikula *studia humanitatis*. To međutim ne vodi k zaključku da *Clavis* treba i dalje smatrati pothvatom manje cijenjenoga sljedbenika jer su neke Vlačićeve odluke u smislu patrističke tradicije, srednjovjekovne i humanističke egzegeze dosljedno utemeljene na heurističkoj kritici i istinskom hermeneutičkom principu. To čini legitimnim propitivanje o kojem je principu riječ, ili preciznije: na koji način čovjek može primjenjivati filološke alate koji Boga ne lišavaju njegove neprikosnovenosti?

**Ključne riječi:** Matija Vlačić Ilirik, hermeneutika, *sola scriptura*, tradicija, gramatika