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Timo Eskola

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## An Era of Apologetical Hermeneutics—Detecting a Neo- Kantian Paradigm of Biblical Interpretation

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For almost two hundred years New Testament hermeneutics have been developing side by side with historico-critical investigation of the Bible. This parallel development has affected the formation of biblical interpretation so significantly that it is no longer easy to discern the inner dependence between them. There have been many theoretical and even philosophical solutions to define their relationship, however, and these have had a constructive status when determining interpretation. In the following lines we shall attempt to detect one paradigm in the history of scholarship.

One of the main factors affecting the formation of biblical interpretation has been the growth of the empirical sciences, which have often placed 'scientific' demands on theology. From the very beginning of modern biblical criticism one can recall many rationalistic interpretations, for example, that the sound heard at Jesus' baptism came from a meteor, or his walking on the water was a misunderstanding because the disciples could not see the shore because of the mist.<sup>1</sup> These early examples are amusing enough when read today, but they disclose an important principle of criticism.

Academic biblical criticism wished to remain within the scholarly community. This was achieved by placing it among other empirical sciences. What was common to all of them was

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<sup>1</sup> See the thoughts of Paulus and Hase in A. Schweitzer, *Geschichte der Leben-Jesu-Forschung*. Band 1. 3. Auflage des Taschenbuches. GTB 77. Tübingen 1977, 91, 98; also W. G. Kümmel, *The New Testament. The History of the Investigation of its Problems*. SCM Press Ltd. London 1978, 90-95.

an axiomatic ideal of science. Consequently the Bible was compared with secular history and the latest ideas of the natural sciences. This gave rise to many problems which theologians attempted to cope with.

In this article I shall attempt to detect some of the principal ways in which biblical interpretation was formed in the context of modern academic sciences. There are good reasons to maintain that most of the prominent exegetical programmes of interpretation were apologetic. They attempted to rescue the message of the Bible because it seemed to be threatened by modern science. The apologetic goal was achieved by using (neo-) Kantian ideas in order to separate historical exegesis from theological interpretation. This led to a dualistic concept of science and knowledge.

### 1. What is neo-Kantian interpretation?

When biblical interpretation is connected with the name of Immanuel Kant a brief explanation is appropriate. Kant was a philosopher, not a theologian, and his writings on theology mostly concerned ethics. What is important in the influence of Kant is his theory of knowledge, not his personal theology.

According to Kant, knowledge can be split into two categories. First we have 'empirical' knowledge which can tell us much about the causality of nature. In addition, we have personal *a priori* knowledge which does not require observations for its justification. Kant called it 'transcendental' knowledge. This dichotomy was adopted by theologians and it was developed into a strict dualism.

Theologians did what Kant himself would not have done. They applied the theory of knowledge to the interpretation of the Bible. Historical criticism was left on one side. It was considered an empirical science which must be consistent with the natural sciences. Nature and history did not need interpretation. One only had to explain them. Religion by contrast was personal and did not need 'empirical' knowledge for its justification. This is why the message of the Bible was to be interpreted by its own standards.

We can simplify the concept as follows:

**EMPIRICAL  
KNOWLEDGE**

Historical explanation of  
the Bible

**TRANSCENDENTAL  
KNOWLEDGE**

Interpretation of the message

The basic idea of the Kantian theory of biblical interpretation was quite clearly apologetic. Historical study of the Bible had given rise to much discussion about the reliability of the Scriptures. Now this new theory rescued the message from the attacks of the natural sciences and brought it into a domain where it could never be touched. How all this was done we shall see when we examine the hermeneutical programmes of some famous scholars in the history of scholarship.

## 2. Roots of the paradigm: D.F. Strauss and a programme of 'theological phenomenology'

D. F. Strauss is not known for his dedication to Kant but rather for being a keen disciple of Hegel's. This is why it may seem surprising to call him the first proponent of the Kantian paradigm. Strauss's relation to Hegel is not simple, however. His theological phenomenology differs from Hegel's so much that most scholars would no longer equate them.

Strauss was an apologist *par excellence*. Even though we know him as a rationalist and a radical when it comes to the historical criticism of the Bible, he also desired to preserve the important content of the message as far as possible. According to Strauss the truth of the message cannot lie in uncertain history. The message has its basis in the divine world of ideas (cf. Hegel). The word of the Bible can be a divine truth and a religious truth even if it were not a historical truth.

Strauss thought that eternal truths will not fall even when their historicity is uncertain. One may doubt the birth of Christ, his miracles, his resurrection and his ascension as historical phenomena. In spite of this they will always remain eternal truths, says Strauss.<sup>2</sup> Strauss's terminology is close to Hegel's and so are many of his ideas. The concept of an eternal truth was important to him even though he understood it in a different way than Hegel.

The theoretical structure came from Hegel. Strauss adopted two categories: form (*Vorstellung*) and content/concept (*Begriff*). In Hegel's phenomenology these terms were central. It is well known that Hegel spoke of a world of Spirit (*Geist*) where the ideas/concepts had their true content (*Begriff*). When human beings attempt to understand the absolute world of ideas they only attain forms (*Vorstellung*) of the true ideas. These forms

<sup>2</sup> See the introduction of D. F. Strauss, *Das Leben Jesu, kritisch bearbeitet*. Erster Band. Tübingen 1835, VII.

have an inner connection with absolute ideas but they are not perfect. A deeper understanding of ideas is to be achieved by a dialectic between *Vorstellung* and *Begriff*.<sup>3</sup>

As a true disciple Strauss applied this structure to the interpretation of the Scriptures. He thought that the (written) Gospels were 'forms' (*Vorstellung*). Above these forms was the world of God, which was the world of eternal truths. The eternal truths thus formed a Hegelian world of ideas. In the Gospels these truths became visible. At the same, however, time the gospels were human history. This is why one could treat them with strict historical criticism.<sup>4</sup> Hegelian phenomenology was connected with traditional empiricism.

This is where Strauss differs from Hegel and turns out to be a true Kantian. He did not follow Hegel, who said that the Spirit realizes itself in history. To Strauss history was something different. History could not have direct connection with eternal truths because history had turned out to be uncertain. Strauss complained that Hegel had not answered the difficult question about the relationship between eternal truths (*Begriff*) and the historical gospel. It remained his task to answer it.<sup>5</sup>

Hegel had thought that absolute truth was to be achieved only by rational thinking. Knowledge based on perception and observation was uncertain. Strauss applied this dichotomy so that for him theological knowledge (the Bible and dogma) was uncertain. This is why the Gospels can be unhistorical and do not as such have contact with absolute truth.<sup>6</sup> The disagreement with Hegel is even clearer here. According to Hegel's phenomenology, the substance (and truth) of forms is always based on the

<sup>3</sup> G. W. F. Hegel, *Phänomenologie des Geistes*. Gesammelte Werke 9. Hrsg. von der Rheinisch-Westfälischen Akademie der Wissenschaften. Düsseldorf 1980, 103-108, 286-291.

<sup>4</sup> See D. F. Strauss, *Streitschriften zur Vertheidigung meiner Schrift über das Leben Jesu und zur Charakteristik der gegenwärtigen Theologie*. Tübingen 1841, 57, 68.

<sup>5</sup> The relationship between Strauss and Hegel is discussed in a few articles, see e.g. Strauss *Streitschriften*, 57-58. Courth thinks that the difference between Strauss and Hegel is found in their different ways of understanding the truth value of history. 'Diesem Bruch zwischen Wahrheit und Geschichte, Vorstellung und Begriff würde Hegel nie zugestimmt haben. Für ihn ist die Geschichte als Ganze konstitutiv für das Werden des Geistes zum absolutem Geist.' F. Courth, *Das Leben Jesu von David Friedrich Strauss in der Kritik Johann Evangelist Kuhns*. Göttingen. 1975, 77. Cf. G. Backhaus, *Kerygma und Mythos bei David Friederich Strauss und Rudolf Bultmann*. ThF 12. Leipzig 1956, 16-17.

<sup>6</sup> Strauss *Streitschriften*, 65-66.

absolute content (ideas). Strauss was never able to apply this structure to Gospel criticism because he was working on the conditions of Kantian dualism.<sup>7</sup>

Strauss was an apologist. It is easy to see that his work received its motivation from the growing discrepancy between the empirical natural sciences and the content of the Bible. Even if one no longer adopts his theory one must admit that he has posed one of the most debated questions of modern biblical criticism. If the Bible turns out to be unhistorical (in an 'empirical' analysis) how can it give us information about the reality of God? How can we have knowledge of God's revelation if the text of the Bible does not present it as such?

### 3. A. von Harnack and the consolidation of neo-Kantian theology

Strauss did not have many pupils and we cannot identify his theory with nineteenth-century Tübingen theology. Neo-Kantian theology was developing only gradually in different areas, and it was only later, at the end of the century, that it came to the surface nearly everywhere in Germany. One should not forget the influence of A. Ritschl during this phase, but in the area of biblical criticism it was actually his pupil A. Harnack who consolidated the status of neo-Kantian interpretation as a standard paradigm of critical study.

The neo-Kantian approach of Harnack is evident and well known. In the area of historical study he had rejected most of the information found in the Gospels. This did not, however, prevent him from searching after some kind of eternal truth in the Bible. The title of his famous book, 'The Essence [*Das Wesen*] of Christianity' reveals its neo-Kantian objectives. There is true reality in the Christian religion and one can find it with a right interpretation of the Scriptures.

Harnack did not begin with Christology or soteriology. He sought to find the religion of Jesus.<sup>8</sup> Jesus himself could not be the subject of religion because it was the gospel about God that

<sup>7</sup> According to Courth, Strauss transferred Hegel's ontological terminology to an analysis of the theory of knowledge. Then he hurried back to ontology when searching for eternal truth. Courth *Das Leben Jesu*, 77. Klaus Berger says that Strauss did not use the relationship of form and content dialectically but in a dualistic way. K. Berger, *Eregese und Philosophie*. SBS 123/124. Stuttgart 1986, 55.

<sup>8</sup> A. von Harnack, *Das Wesen des Christentums* (a new edition: GTB Siebenstern 227, Gütersloh 2. Aufl. 1985), 92.

was preached. This is why there could not be any other profession of faith than the one acknowledging the Father. This profession became realized in the fulfilling of God's will.<sup>9</sup>

The profound neo-Kantian nature of Harnack's interpretation can be seen in his assertion that the nature of true religion is ethics. Religion must be seen in one's life and works. This is the only dogma of Christianity.<sup>10</sup> This interpretation was a direct application of Kant's concept of transcendental knowledge. The only inspiration, revelation and dogma binding on all generations must be found in the area of personal knowledge (because the historical gospel was a fallacy)—and the essence of personal knowledge was ethics. The idea of atonement was obsolete and even harmful for the sincere conduct of ethical life.<sup>11</sup>

A book concerning the essence of Christianity is in itself of an apologetical nature but the neo-Kantian programme of Harnack's also had this nature in theory. When searching after modern faith he tried to overcome the same discrepancy that had troubled Strauss. His question about the content of revelation had turned into a question about the essence of religion. What could be preserved from classical Christianity was the striving after a good life, love and peace. This kind of apology naturally differed greatly from classical Christianity. Soteriology had changed into moralism.

The interpretation of Harnack's is neo-Kantian in the true sense of the word. It is personalistic and concentrates on the inner experience of men. Theology is ethics. The essence is not in ontological statements about God. It is in a relationship: one between men and ultimately between God and men. This concept had a strong influence on biblical criticism at most universities on the Continent and later became the basis for many theories of interpretation.

#### 4. R. Bultmann—a neo-Kantian existentialist

Rudolf Bultmann is a towering figure in the field of biblical criticism. His person forms a bridge between German schools at the turn of the century, on the one hand, and contemporary European biblical criticism, on the other. The neo-Kantian background of this Marburg theologian, too, is fairly well known in the history of scholarship. Bultmann was an heir of the

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<sup>9</sup> Harnack, *Das Wesen*, 92.

<sup>10</sup> Harnack, *Das Wesen*, 93.

<sup>11</sup> Harnack, *Das Wesen*, 98-99.

'Marburger Neukantianer' and he had learnt much from his teacher W. Herrmann. The theological atmosphere was filled with neo-Kantian philosophy.<sup>12</sup> This was to produce one of the basic elements of Bultmann's biblical criticism—even in his existentialist period.

Already in his early years Bultmann attempted to answer the difficult question which Strauss had posed. As a neo-Kantian he was interested in the essence of religion. One of his main positions was to investigate man's relationship to the transcendent, the world of God. He did not accept the ontology of idealism, however, but desired to find another way of solving the dilemma.<sup>13</sup> His most important term was 'experience' (*Erlebnis*). According to Bultmann, every religious experience is new and original. We can understand religion in a right way only when we understand that every religious statement or proposition has grown out of a religious experience. Religious language is an effort to explain one's relationship to the transcendent.<sup>14</sup>

On this basic conviction Bultmann gradually built his theory of *Entmythologisierung*.<sup>15</sup> Because the Bible is a compilation of efforts to explain religious experiences, these experiences must have been described in a time-bound language. This language was mythical. That is why a proper interpretation of the Bible must go beyond the mythical language and discover the experience.<sup>16</sup>

After finding existentialist philosophy Bultmann obtained new construction materials for his theory of interpretation. We must remember, however, that the foundation had already been laid much earlier. In his book *Theology of the New Testament*

<sup>12</sup> About Herrmann and the 'Marburger Neukantianer' see Berger *Eregese*, 130–131. The neo-Kantian background of Bultmann is also discussed by R. G. Gruenler, *Meaning and Understanding*. The philosophical framework for Biblical interpretation. Foundations of Contemporary Interpretation 2. Zondervan, Grand Rapids, Michigan 1991, 87.

<sup>13</sup> R. Bultmann, 'Die Bedeutung der Eschatologie für die Religion des Neuen Testament', *ZThK* 1917, 76–87, see 81.

<sup>14</sup> Bultmann, 'Bedeutung', 81–82.

<sup>15</sup> This conclusion becomes evident when reading his book *Neues Testament und Mythologie*. Das Problem der Entmythologisierung der neutestamentlichen Verkündigung. Nachdruck der 1941 erschienenen Fassung hrsg. E. Jünger. München. 1985.

<sup>16</sup> Thiselton has noted that Bultmann had a dualistic theory of knowledge: God can never be the object of observation. That is why knowledge concerning God was searched for in the domain of human existence. A. C. Thiselton, *The Two Horizons*. New Testament Hermeneutics and Philosophical Description with special reference to Heidegger, Bultmann, Gadamer and Wittgenstein. The Paternoster Press, Exeter 1980, 210–211.



Bultmann presents a hermeneutical theory which is properly in line with some of his earliest works.

According to Bultmann, the text of the New Testament as such does not give us the true content of the Christian message. 'Theological propositions—even those of the New Testament—can never be the *object* of faith; they can only be the *explication* of the understanding which is inherent in faith itself.'<sup>17</sup> A key-word is new self-understanding, with which Bultmann renews his earlier thought of 'religious experience': 'the theological thoughts of the New Testament are the unfolding of faith itself growing . . . out of one's new self-understanding.'<sup>18</sup>

The frequently misunderstood concept of *kerygma* belongs in this context but one has to be cautious and place it correctly in Bultmann's theory. *Kerygma* is not something found in the texts of the Bible. It belongs in another position. *Kerygma* precedes the new understanding and even precedes faith. It is something between God and man. This is why the theory of interpretation must have a method for distinguishing kerygmatic statements from theological statements.

Bultmann proposed this kind of method in his book. The reader 'must interpret the theological thoughts as the unfolding of the self-understanding awakened by the kerygma.'<sup>19</sup> This is why the New Testament can never be a direct source for modern theology. It can only be an object of interpretation. The proper means and methods of interpretation do not arise from the Bible but they come from outside it: from modern philosophical ontology.

Here again we can use a diagram to simplify the structure of Bultmann's hermeneutics.

(God)

kerygma

inspiration

THE WRITER

Self-  
understanding

⇒

Mythical  
theology

i.e. THE BIBLE

↓

THE READER

A right self-  
understanding

∩ (existential  
interpretation)

<sup>17</sup> *Theology of the New Testament*. Volume two. London. SCM Press 1983, 237-238.

<sup>18</sup> *Theology*, 239.

<sup>19</sup> *Theology*, 240.

This brings us to the programme of Bultmann's theory of interpretation. It can be summarized as follows:

1. Experience (*Erlebnis*) is the source of theological knowledge.
2. The content of theology is the explication of self-understanding.
3. Theological statements are determined by the writer's situation.
4. This is why New Testament theology must be de-mythologized, and
5. interpreted as statements concerning self-understanding.

The hermeneutical programme of Bultmann is so extensive and comprehensive that it is almost an understatement to call it apologetic. He had a theory about the ontology of religion and he was certain that his hermeneutics were a scientific description of biblical 'revelation'. His aim was, of course, to present the real message of God to modern man, and this is why all his theoretical thinking had an apologetical purpose. As regards the content of theology, Bultmann is in some respect following the lines of Harnack. For him the idea of an incarnate, self-sacrificing Son of God is a myth which must be interpreted by existential means.<sup>20</sup>

Again in the writings of Bultmann we find a neo-Kantian dualistic concept of knowledge. It is actually a little astonishing that he had preserved Kantian ontology so clearly because his reputation as a friend of Heidegger's and a keen existentialist would point at least in some respect in another direction. In his theory the strangest feature is the somewhat mystical nature of the basic concept of kerygma. In Bultmann's hermeneutics theology cannot really have a propositional content because every statement is merely an explication of some kind of experience which alone is real.

##### 5. A later neo-Kantian reversal of the 'New hermeneutic'

In the preceding lines we have been talking about the application of the Kantian theory of knowledge to biblical interpretation. When we think about the nature of the purely philosophical neo-Kantian tradition, some explanation is needed. Neo-Kantian philosophers actually had little to do with pre-Bultmannian biblical interpretation. In philosophy the neo-Kantian tradition in

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<sup>20</sup> See *NT und Mythologie*, 19-20.

fact changed the whole way of understanding the humanities and the result was quite far from the concept of historical research held by the theologians. In time this affected the formation of a post-Bultmannian 'New hermeneutic'. Before turning to some concluding considerations we must briefly deal with these questions.

Since knowledge concerning (freely acting) men was considered different from knowledge concerning (causal) nature, historical study was defined as an attempt to understand the actions of men. The neo-Kantian concept of science was again based on a dichotomy but it had changed from the previous Kantian definition.

#### EXPLANATORY

nature laws

the natural sciences

#### UNDERSTANDING

description

the humanities (such as history)

historico-critical study?

The new understanding of the science of history had altered the scene considerably. In this dichotomy historical research should be placed among the 'understanding' or even 'hermeneutical' sciences. This did not change the traditional problem concerning the explanation of miraculous events, but it posed a totally new challenge for historico-critical methodology.

In the area of philosophy Heidegger's pupil H.-G. Gadamer developed many themes of the new hermeneutic. In his book *Wahrheit und Methode* he searched for a new method for the humanities and also attempted to understand their real nature. He dealt above all with history and the understanding of old documents.<sup>21</sup> Gadamer also sought a method for the new 'hermeneutical' science. His concept of a hermeneutical circle is well known and much used in several modern methodologies.<sup>22</sup>

The new hermeneutic entered biblical criticism mainly through E. Fuchs. He was a pupil of Bultmann's and had a strong existentialist foundation to his theology. His hermeneutical approach was new, however. Fuchs' key term in hermeneutics was 'language event'. For him the preaching of the gospel is not only a 'speech event' (*Sprechereignis*) but it is actually a 'language event' (*Sprachereignis*).<sup>23</sup> Here we have another kind of neo-

<sup>21</sup> See the introduction in H.-G. Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode*. Grundzüge einer philosophischen Hermeneutik. 2. Aufl. Tübingen. 1965, XXVII.

<sup>22</sup> Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode*, 251-252.

<sup>23</sup> 'Erst im Sprachereignis ist alles entschieden, nicht schon im Wollen—das Wort ist hier die Tat' (E. Fuchs, 'Alte und neue Hermeneutik', in *Glaube und Erfahrung*. Tübingen 1965, 193-230, see 212).

Kantian theory of interpretation. Interpreting a historical text means the encountering and reception of the message transmitted by the language. This may also have been a decisive step towards modern 'reader-response' theories in hermeneutics.

In everyday use at the universities the new hermeneutic has not, however, become the only method for the interpretation of the Bible. It seems that both the methodology of historical criticism and hermeneutics are in a process of change. Due to the lack of a comprehensive theory many scholars have, perhaps unintentionally, combined old and new theories. The rôle of the science of history is not clear and so the concept of biblical criticism often seems to be dualistic in a new way.

EMPIRICAL

RESEARCH

historical biblical  
research

(?)

THE 'UNDERSTANDING'  
HUMANITIES

interpretation of the  
message

There appears to be an effort to take the 'understanding humanities' into consideration. This means, for instance, that scholars use the hermeneutical circle when interpreting the message of the Bible. It is, however, somewhat strange that at the same time history and historical biblical research are not considered to be included among the humanities. Instead they are assigned to a compartment of their own, and the earlier dualistic concept of the theory of knowledge is preserved.

I would use a question mark in between these two areas because their relationship in this case is no longer defined by one consistent theory. The methodological reversal of the new hermeneutic has surely provoked many modern hermeneutical schools but in practice it did not always change the older neo-Kantian theory of interpretation. The question posed by Strauss has been too problematic for it to be left behind even when new theories have arisen. After these analyses we must now turn back to the basic problems of neo-Kantian theory and consider how consequent its hermeneutical dualism is.

## 6. Neo-Kantian hermeneutics as a 'scientific' theory

One of the main foci of neo-Kantian theory has always been the natural sciences. The demand for an empirical approach in historical research has produced an agnostic attitude whereby the idea of an acting God has to be ruled out in favour of an immanent (causalist) explanation. From the point of view of the natural sciences this demand is a neutral and common one. In

spite of this agnostic approach in one part of the theory, the neo-Kantian theory of interpretation as a whole was not agnostic or immanent. And this drives the theory into problems.

Hermeneutics were thought to have a different kind of theory of knowledge than historical explanation. Hermeneutical theory was not agnostic but it was not founded on faith either. The interpretation was scientific without being agnostic. This is why scholars in the neo-Kantian tradition believed that they had a *scientific method* for the interpretation of the divine message of the Bible.

This kind of dualism is in fact very strange. Where does the theory find justification for the rejection of an agnostic approach when the message is considered? When we consider the original theory of knowledge of Kant himself we see that the justification cannot be based on his philosophy. The linkage to Hegelian idealism and phenomenology is useless as well. And moreover, where can one find a true Kantian or Hegelian theologian today? These philosophies have lost their attractiveness in the course of history. It seems that in the end the apologetic hermeneutic has a somewhat mystical nature. An eternal truth or kerygma has never really needed justification.

When criticising the apologetic neo-Kantian paradigm one must take into account changes in the modern theory of the philosophy of science. After Kuhn, Popper, Lakatos and many others we can no longer speak of a dualistic theory of knowledge. Scientific research is based on a process of understanding. No matter whether you are investigating the texts or trying to interpret their message there is but one mode of understanding and one way of gaining knowledge. The researcher forms hypotheses and attempts to justify them. The object of the research and the questions considered no doubt do differ but the way of gaining knowledge does not change.

For these reasons we need to re-write the above formula concerning the theory of knowledge.

Historical context

The content of the text

PROBLEMATIZING  
MAKING HYPOTHESES  
PROBLEM SOLVING

Reconstruction of history

Interpretation of the message

This formula should be read as follows. Historical research on a text (presented on the left) can no longer be considered an objective, 'positivistic' study. It is part of the humanities in

general. Thus it must be based on a method of producing and testing hypotheses. With these hypotheses scholars postulate the main explanations which they attempt to justify on the basis of the evidence provided by the texts. There is a hermeneutical perspective in all historical study, as such study is an effort to understand the course of history from the sporadic evidence we have in the extant historical texts. The result of historical study is thus but one reconstruction of history, not an objective fact revealed by the historian.

It is quite easy to see that, for instance, Harnack's conception of the 'real' historical Jesus is already implied by his method. It is in no sense a mere result of his historical exegesis. Likewise, Bultmann's demythologized Jesus is already a concept in his '*Entmythologisierung*' programme. So his reconstruction of the figure of the historical Jesus is far from the Jesus of Mark or Matthew.

The interpretation of the message (presented on the right in the formula) must be based on the same theory of knowledge. In the process of interpretation one makes hypotheses with respect to the content of the message. We should note that historical reconstruction is one factor in this process. Sentences cannot be understood without a proper context. Hypotheses are also necessary—and new ones are undoubtedly being produced all the time. This should be clear when we consider the wide range of interpretations given to the message of the New Testament over the centuries.

The neo-Kantian theory of interpretation has been confusing the development of historical research because it has clung to its dualistic concept of knowledge. This, however, is something that we can no longer accept today. Interpretational theory cannot be defined merely in an antagonistic position towards and in opposition to historical research. Similar criticism must be directed against the apologetic nature of hermeneutics.

Following these critical remarks we may begin to consider the results of this study:

1. First of all, we have seen that there is no proper justification for the application of the neo-Kantian theory of knowledge to the theory of interpretation. It is impossible to accept the claim that one would gain knowledge about the message in some other way than we have knowledge about things in general. Strauss and Bultmann actually thought that one could obtain scientific divine knowledge about God's revelation. Strauss attempted to achieve it through 'theological phenomenology' and Bultmann by an existential interpretation of the 'kerygma'. In the light of the

modern theory of knowledge we must say that these efforts have been over-optimistic. We have only one method of understanding the things we see. Should there be something distinct from this, it must be direct divine revelation.

2. We must also briefly note that the Kantian theory of knowledge was wrongly exploited by theologians. Kant himself never meant that 'a priori' knowledge could be identified with divine knowledge.

3. It is easy to see that the neo-Kantian interpretation was of an apologetic nature. Scholars wished to save the message of the Bible from the attacks of positivistic science. Scientific hermeneutics do not need this kind of apologetics. Instead, we should realize that the scope of scientific interpretation is rather narrow. Scholars attempt to understand the texts that have been preserved from ancient times—not the essence of the religion behind these texts. Science, as we today understand it, has no tools for examining the divine. Beliefs with respect to the truth of the texts are religious and ideological.

When we read the Bible we can study the beliefs of the first Christians. When we do this we notice that they told a great number of stories about supernatural events. This is the scientific level of such study. Claims as to the truthfulness of the supernatural reality involved are ideological. If one nevertheless wished to maintain the strict demands of the natural sciences as the starting-point for one's interpretation it would result in total neglect of the divine or supernatural aspect of the Bible. Immanent interpretation is consequently atheistic. Science has no means for the resuscitation of a biblical text once it is diagnosed as fatally ill. This is the unfortunate end of the apologetic programme of the neo-Kantian tradition.

4. The burning issue of hermeneutics is the relationship between the text (in a certain historical context) and its meaning. In neo-Kantian tradition the true meaning of a text was separated from its historical content. In the worst of cases the meaning of the text was eventually seen to be in contradiction with the information provided by the text itself. In such cases hermeneutics really provided a magic trick for interpretation: Jesus was divine without the incarnation; Jesus was Lord without the resurrection. These extreme examples reveal the argumentation behind the interpretation.

Are we able to solve this problem? The formula of the new theory of knowledge can lead us in a new direction, if not yet to the solution itself. If we wish to understand what the writers of the Bible say, we must listen to them carefully. The true meaning

of a text is dependent on its content and the historical information it provides. The first step in the process of interpretation is always the explanation of a text in its own context. This means that we must study the historical context as well as the nature of the language that the writer used to express the information he desired to pass on.

In the process of interpretation our own presuppositions and questions (also religious questions) naturally affect our estimation of the content of a text. Our interpretation is always dependent on an interplay between meaning and significance. Furthermore, what is meaningful for us in a text is not always identical with the meaning of the text itself. These two must not be confused, however. Hermeneutics is primarily a means for understanding a text—not a means for preparing a good speech in total disregard of the text.

Is there any scientific method that we can use to examine the divine language of the Bible? I think that there is. It is not to be found by the neo-Kantian interpretation of kerygmatic sentences but by analyzing the religious language itself. The focus of this analysis is not in the supernatural element of the Bible as such, but in the description of transcendental reality (e.g. in terms of Christology or soteriology). The theological language of the writers reveals the true meaning of the Scriptures. Our task is to sort out the content and essence of that language. It is impossible to treat this question in detail within the scope of this paper, but it remains an interesting task for further studies.

Under the influence of neo-Kantian theology we have lived in an age of apologetic hermeneutics. An analysis of our times can help us to develop hermeneutics which no doubt have already advanced considerably from the positions of past decades but which may still in many respects be dependent on the old tradition. At least one lesson taught by such an analysis could be that we should beware of holding to hermeneutical theories whose philosophical foundations we ourselves rejected a long time ago.

### **Abstract**

This article attempts to present a thesis concerning a neo-Kantian argumentation which seems to lie behind the biblical interpretation of several famous scholars of modern times. A theological exploitation of the famous Kantian distinction between 'a



priori' and 'a posteriori' knowledge resulted in separating historical study from the understanding of the message of the text.

This separation was usually made for apologetic purposes. D.F. Strauss, A. von Harnack and R. Bultmann wished to preserve the essence of Christianity from the attacks of the modern empirical sciences. Even though the historical content was lost for the most part—since the Bible was considered to be mythical and supernatural—eternal truth (Strauss) or the pure religion of Jesus (Harnack) or true existential self-understanding (Bultmann) were preserved.

If we examine the validity and justification of the neo-Kantian tradition today, we can see that it has been built on false premises. 'A priori' knowledge does not provide an entry into the transcendent. It is not a scientific method for attaining divine revelation. Neither can we agree with the assumption that the best understanding of a text is attained by separating the message from its historical content and context.

New solutions for a hermeneutical theory should be sought following the modern theory of knowledge. The meaning of a text is dependent on its precise content. This leads us to undertake a new assessment of the religious language of the Bible.

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