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https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_grace-journal.php

GUIDING PRINCIPLES FOR HISTORICAL GRAMMATICAL EXEGESIS

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Well-known, traditional, conservative definitions for hermeneutics and exegesis are as follows: Hermeneutics treats of the laws of interpretation and exegesis applies those laws in dealing with the text of Scripture. Actually the Greek word hermeneia in its various forms includes the concepts of explanation, interpretation, language (i. e., expressing thoughts in words, either in audible or written form) and translation. Likewise the Greek word exegesis and its several forms, in addition to the idea of lead or lead out, carries similar meanings of exposition, explanation and interpretation.¹ Therefore, it is quite obvious that linguistically there is a considerable similarity in meaning between these two Greek terms. Although a concept of history is not explicitly conveyed in the primary meaning of either of the two Greek words, the idea is certainly implicit for the very idea of explaining and interpreting suggests taking into account the historical background and culture of the author and his readers.²

In this presentation, what is discussed as guiding principles for historical grammatical exegesis will be developed from the viewpoint that there is an inter-action and inter-relation between hermeneia and exegesis and that they both are concerned with the principles of interpretation which the interpreter applies to the ancient text of Scripture to determine its meaning in its own setting and culture and to "translate" or make meaningful that message to the lives of the interpreter and those to whom he propounds the message. James Robinson has correctly criticized any form of conservative hermeneutics that takes a very superficial view in the hermeneutical task in applying the principle of "understanding" the text to "simply explaining where ideas or influences come from, rather than penetrating into the meaning of the text."³

In the definition of hermeneutics, stress must be placed on the fact that meaning or understanding involved in hermeneia and exegesis must include the two foundation stones of grammar, language and historical background. Kimmerle has stated that "hermeneutics ultimately is always hermeneutics of language, of words and sentences, of meanings

and constellations of thought,"⁴ and Robinson too holds that in the new hermeneutic history also must have a place in the sense that man is called upon "to encounter the history of the past" but seemingly only "in such a way as not to deny his own existential future and present responsibility."⁵ In the hermeneutics presented here, this history and historical background is to be understood to carry the concepts of "past facticity" and temporal enactment or actuality.⁶ This distinction in the meaning of history held here points up the difference in the concept regarding fundamental thought forms that exist between those who hold the conservative view of hermeneutics and those who espouse forms of the new hermeneutic. In the latter group are such as John Dillenberger, who goes on to define hermeneutic as "the program by which total configurations, in which truth is enshrined, endlessly confront each other, in the totality and concreteness of their central claims."⁷

In the discussion in this article, frequent references are made to studies in the new hermeneutic since arguments presented in such material can be helpful in evaluating the theological position of conservative hermeneutics and can assist in emphasizing or re-emphasizing factors which have always been a basic part of conservative hermeneutics.

Presuppositions for Conservative Hermeneutics

It is the responsibility of the contemporary conservative Christian to think through again the Christian presuppositions which are to guide him as he defines the hermeneutical task of interpreting the text of Scripture. Although Oscar Cullmann argues for an exegesis of Scripture without presuppositions,⁸ such a view actually places man in an unrealistic mental vacuum. From a biblical viewpoint, the conservative Christian must take the position that some presuppositional groundwork must be laid before engaging in a meaningful discussion of guiding principles for a conservative historical-grammatical exegesis.

Basic to such a discussion is the biblical teaching of the verbal inerrancy and inspiration of the Old and New Testaments (II Timothy 3:14-17). This concept of the trustworthiness and authority of the Bible does not follow from the literature being merely ancient, as Ernst Fuchs would have us believe was the viewpoint of Protestant orthodoxy,⁹ but because the Scriptures were written by men through the inspiration of the Holy Spirit (II Peter 3:14-17), so that what was written was the truth of God verbally communicated to men in the canonical Old and New Testaments. Dillenberger has caught the distinction when he says: "That transformation [following the first seventeen-eighteen centuries A.D.] can be characterized as the transition from the notion that truth has been delivered in the past and is to be uncovered and recovered in every age to the view that truth is fundamentally to be discovered or that it

lies in the future¹⁰. . . . Until well into the eighteenth century, the citation of authority was standard practice."¹¹

The importance of this doctrine of verbal inerrancy and inspiration of Scripture for conservative hermeneutics is further seen in observing the remarks of Robert Funk when he says: "Biblical Theology began by having to challenge the very basis on which it rested, *viz.*, the orthodox doctrine of verbal inspiration. The challenge was necessitated by the desire to break the effective control of dogmatics over the interpretation of Scripture"¹² and thus to establish Biblical theology as a historical discipline."¹³ Fuchs has described this enlightenment as the protest "against procedures of a Scriptural interpretation that continued to claim historical truth for itself."¹⁴ This denial of verbal inerrancy of Scripture often ends up in a two-level approach to the Scriptures, which as Martin Woudstra notes, results in the creation of two Bibles, the one compelling faith in God and in His revelation, the other a historical document which may be read, as Piper says, so as to 'leave us free to accept or reject their content."¹⁵

Thus it can be seen that what is really at stake for a conservative hermeneutic is definitive propositional truth given by a personal God who has verbally communicated to man made in his image, and that this propositional truth is given in the supernaturally inspired Scriptures. Fitting in with this concept is the doctrine of supernatural predictive prophecy which conservative hermeneutics accepts as foundational, but which existential theology and the new hermeneutic have forsaken and rejected. Conservative hermeneutics presupposes that the Bible is accurate and true in its predictive prophecy, as exemplified when God predicts through His prophet Isaiah seven hundred years before Christ that Jesus was to be born of a virgin (Isaiah 7:14; cf. Matthew 1:23). The new hermeneutic rejects the idea, among other things, that such a time span between prophecy and fulfillment argues for the validity of the prophecy. It rather posits, as in a view expressed by Dillenberger, that

when we read along in a New Testament text and incessantly stumble upon quotations from the Old that interrupt the flow of the text, and when we conclude that they are not really relevant to make a point,¹⁶ it is important to recall the ancient way of thinking their predictive value was significant. If the notion of prediction is accepted, successful documentation is possible; if it is not accepted, documentation is itself the most dubious of all the enterprises of substantiation."¹⁷

Another important presupposition for conservative hermeneutics is the principle of a personal historical scientific research which sincerely approaches the subject studied from an objective scientific viewpoint and,

while doing so, realizes that there is something out there that really factually happened in the past. Will Herberg in his article, "Five Meanings of the Word 'Historical,'" has delineated five basic conceptions of the word history: (1) the ordinary usage, as past facticity, as opposed to the mythical and legendary; (2) as temporal enactment, in contrast to "the timeless and eternal" (as in the Eastern religions); (3) as Geschichte (in contrast with historie), which makes the historical and existential really "historic" in the sense that the true inner meaning of an "event" has significance for the future and a determinative effect on the on-going life of people;¹⁸ (4) as the essence of man's being (in contrast to individual man's fixed structure of being); and (5) as the continual existential shaping of man's nature by future decisions and actions (a view held by Rudolf Bultmann).¹⁹

A conservative hermeneutics must find its understanding of history within the first two definitions just outlined since such a hermeneutics is based on the logical and rational presupposition of a personal God communicating verbally and in written factual form to personal man in space and time, telling him all about his created world and his plan to redeem men. This is quite different from the perspective of Heinrich Ott who states that "a view of history which confines itself to what really happened gives us an inadequate and ultimately an abstract and superficial view of things."²⁰

This view of a personal historical scientific research is the viewpoint that is found in the Bible's own handling of interpretation, as it stresses the true nature of the factual history and the true role of the interpreter in taking into consideration his own time as well as that of the material being studied and in striving to make the material in the ancient document relevant to his own experience and life. Such an example of this is seen in Galatians 2:20, where Paul makes the historical death and resurrection of Christ (of which he was not a personal observer or participant at the time of their actual occurrence) a vital part of his own living experience. There is some truth to Wolfgang Pannenberg's statement that "historical research, as a universal historical conception of events, cannot represent the events it seeks to reconstruct, when it moves behind the texts, as something entirely past, but rather that research must understand those events in the contexts of the meaning they have for the historian himself, and for his time"²¹ -- there is some truth in this statement if we understand it from a conservative hermeneutical viewpoint that past is to be recognized truly as "factually past" and not made to be equivalent to the present.

Related to this concept that the interpreter must deal with the history of the past as truly past is the distinction which conservative hermeneutics has always made between the subject which observes and

appropriates and the object which is observed and is appropriated. This distinction is seen in Peter's statement in II Peter 1:16-19, where he in reflection distinguishes himself and his readers who are to realize that the past facts related are not "cunningly devised fables" from the past facts themselves seen and heard on the mount: Christ in his majesty and the voice of God the Father. Then having made this distinction, he asks the readers (the original interpreters of his statements) along with himself to appropriate the truth to their own experience by "paying attention" to the truth of these things that had happened.

Robinson sees the tension regarding the subject-object relationship that exists between the conservative hermeneutics and the new hermeneutic when he says: "Thus the flow of the traditional relation between subject and object in which the subject interrogates the object, and, if he masters it, obtains from it his answer, has been significantly reversed. For it is now the object which should henceforth be called the subject matter--that puts the subject in question."²² Bultmann shows this distinction and radical approach in the argument of the new hermeneutic even more when he says in remarks about his exegesis of Paul's Romans, "it is a matter. . . also of the fact no man--not even Paul--can always speak only from the subject matter. Other spirits also come to expression through him than the Spirit of Christ. Hence criticism can never be radical enough."²³ In the answer of conservative hermeneutics, it is to be observed that it is Paul, the author of Romans, who purports to be presenting his own well thought out teachings to the Roman church, and furthermore, as Paul considered the Old Testament writings as God inspired (I Timothy 3:14-17), so it is reasonable to posit that Paul himself was under the aegis of the Holy Spirit, not another spirit, in so writing to this church. This distinction and correlation between subject and object make sense in the conservative Christian system of hermeneutics because this latter is based on the premise that the same reasonable personal God who made the universe, the thing to be known (Genesis 1; Acts 17:24-31; Colossians 1:15-18) made also a personal man the knower, and the object, the thing known. Actually, as Francis Schaeffer has pointed out,²⁴ man in his daily life regardless of his philosophical viewpoint, lives on the basis of a correlation and distinction between subject and object: For example, man knows and treats real the fact that if detergents are poured into rivers, the rivers are polluted and the fish die; and that the tree or car he sees and feels is there as a distinguishable object that he can really know and know to the extent that he cannot walk through the tree nor smash into the car without the car and himself being damaged.

Based upon the reasonableness of a personal God communicating to a personal man in propositional written truth, the holy Scriptures, and based upon the reasonableness that such a written biblical communication would tell about God's universe in terms describing historical

facticity and substance, a conservative hermeneutics has the right to discuss among its examples and models for grammatical and historical principles of exegesis the New Testament record itself, and in particular, the historical life and teachings of Jesus, and it also has a right to advocate and expect that such hermeneutical models should be followed.²⁵

A sampling of ideas from the New Testament will be considered in the following brief sections dealing with grammatical and historical principles.

Grammatical and Related Principles in Exegesis

1. The Use of Words--Language

From the grammatical side of hermeneutics and exegesis, the use of words is one of the most important subjects. Involved in this is one's theory of language. Schaeffer has pointed out that there has come a demise of the philosophy of positivism, a philosophy which assumes that the knower approaches things without presuppositions, and which, without any means of control or standard, is unable to determine whether anything is real or whether it is simply fantasy. With this collapse of positivism, two systems are left which are really anti-philosophies: (1) existentialism because it deals with the important questions of meaning and existence but leaves out rationality; and (2) linguistic analysis because although it is involved in the area of reason and the definitions of words, its viewpoint of language only leads to language and not to values.²⁶

Now conservative hermeneutics based on examples of the New Testament proceeds on the premise that language is meaningful and does involve values and that the words in God's biblical communication carry historical, cultural, spiritual and moral meaning and values. As the interpreter approaches the Scripture, he is conscious of the words and endeavors to discover the kind of meaning carried by them: the current meaning (the usus loquendi), an etymological one, a special or derived one (as an extension from the current or etymological meaning) or a combination of some or all of these. A simple New Testament illustration of this definiteness of word meaning is to be seen in Greek words ho nomos and hoi prophētai in Matthew 5:17 where Jesus employs them with the understanding they carried in this kind of contact and connection, as referring in a technical sense to all the sacred writings of the Old Testament.²⁷ This illustration in the historical sense is an example of language and subject matter coming together. This is quite different in the definiteness of its conclusion from that viewpoint described by Robinson when he talks about the dialectic between language and its subject matter, (Sprache and Sache) in that the word "disappears" into what it has to say--this being the point at which the hermeneutical discussion

in Germany in these days stands.²⁸ Involved in this may be what John Cobb means when he states that in the minds of some who hold to the new hermeneutic there is an understanding that "God, Jesus Christ, Holy Spirit, and other key elements in the Christian scheme of things" are to be systematically "created as dimensions or structures of faith."²⁹

2. Figures, types, and prophecy.

Figures, types and prophecy, especially since they are frequently used in Scripture, must be seriously considered in any discussion of conservative hermeneutics, and they are important in getting to the meaning of the text and applying that meaning to life. For example, it was Jesus who used the figure of the "bush" (the Greek expression is epi tou (tēs) batou Mark 12:26; Luke 20:37) in a perfectly obvious reference, well understood in his day and also by us today, to the passage in Exodus 3. He also used as a figure and a type the historical situation in Noah's day to portray what it will be like at the time of Christ's second coming (Matthew 24:36-44), as well as using Jonah's being three days in the fish's stomach as a figure and a type of Christ's being in the grave three days (Matthew 12:38-40). It was Jesus who predicted that the stones of the Herodian temple would fall (Matthew 24:1-2) and that in a far distant future day of Christ's second coming "the desolating sacrilege" would stand in the holy place (Matthew 24:15). He also pointed out in retrospect a factor which the Jews in their first century historical situation could not or would not explain, that the Messiah was prophesied by David to be David's Lord (Matthew 22:42-45). These and many other examples which could be adduced can be meaningfully interpreted on the basis of factual historical events and which men in that time experienced and contemplated, and which modern man can understand and apply to his own life. On the other hand, such "details" of language in the biblical text understood in the existential sense minimize and actually obliterate all sense of concrete historical continuity in human experience and actually allow modern man to use the biblical words for any kind of meaningless non-rational experience which suits his fancy.

That this is a critical point of distinction between the conservative hermeneutics and that of liberal theology and the more recent new hermeneutic is pointed up in the remarks of Robinson: "It was often in connection with the special rhetorical figures and literary forms of biblical literature that one came to treat the problems of allegory, typology, prophecy, and, in general, the Christian interpretation of the Old Testament. This part of hermeneutics had in a sense been replaced by the debate about the critical historical method, so that the decline of hermeneutics was in this regard in direct proportion to the rise of critical scholarship. Liberalism and conservatism tended to divide criticism and hermeneutics between them. This may in part explain the fact that hermeneutics as a discipline has survived in conservative circles even down to the present."³⁰

3. Points of Syntax.

A factual and historical consideration of points of syntax is also important in giving meaning to the biblical text. It can be pointed out, for example, that the present tense in the verb prosechō used in Matthew 6:1 is appropriately used to get across Jesus' emphasis that his disciples were to continue to pay attention as to how they were to exercise their charitable giving. Also purposeful is the series of punctiliar aorists used in the Lord's Prayer in Matthew 6:9-13.

4. Context.

In relating the various parts of the life of Christ together, the consideration of the context in which a particular part of Jesus' life is found is important in conservative hermeneutics. This does not mean that every part of each evangelist's Gospel is necessarily or completely narrated in chronological or logical order, but it does mean that the records make factual sense and hang together so that what the interpreter sees and understands to be in the records is a factual life of Christ, in which his teachings and actions make sense as they are related to human experiences found in a continuity of time and space. For example, Christ's teaching on prayer in Matthew 6:5-8 certainly fits into the context of the Lord's Prayer of Matthew 6:9-13, and vice versa. Similarly, the reference Jesus makes to the Old Testament event in which David and his men ate the bread of the Presence (Matthew 12:3-4, Mark 2:25-28) fits naturally into the context of the preceding historical reference to his disciples eating the grain on the Sabbath as they walked through the grainfields (Matthew 12:1-2; Mark 2:23-24).

Some Historical and Other Related Principles

It is not the purpose here to cover exhaustively all the historical aspects involved in conservative hermeneutics and exegesis, but a few important principles in this area are highlighted by posing some pertinent questions which a conservative hermeneutics must ask itself.

1. Who the Author Is and Who Are Those to Whom He Writes.

In a truly historical hermeneutics, the answer to this is an important question which helps in the understanding of the message given. Jesus' interest in this question is seen in the Gospel event in which he identifies Moses as the author of that section of Exodus 3 which he calls the "bush." Jesus specifically claims Moses to be the author when he uses the words, "even Moses showed in the passage about the bush." (Luke 20:37, RSV). The author Mark is conscious of those with Roman background to whom he writes, when he preserves for their understanding Latin terms transliterated into Greek: such as legio (Mark 5:9, 15), centurio (15:39, 44, 45) and praetorium (15:16).

2. What Are the Cultural Settings of the Subject (the Interpreter) and the Object (The Facts and Events Contemplated).

Biblical examples of interest from a historical perspective in such cultural settings can be seen in the accounts in which Jesus describes the times of Noah and the flood (Matthew 24:36-39) and of Sodom and Gomorrah (Luke 17:28-30) as characterized by flagrant materialism and wickedness, and in which Jesus states that in the neighboring Phoenician towns of Tyre and Sidon the inhabitants used sackcloth and ashes to show their sorrow and repentance (Matthew 11:21). The ability to observe and evaluate as to their similarities and differences such cultural and moral patterns in different historical ages and places evidently is not recognized by Ernst Fuchs when dealing with the Bible, for he says:

If I were to say that Rembrandt is the painter normative forever, Beethoven, the musician normative forever, and Goethe, the poet normative forever, I would be a barbarian who indeed had not grasped the essence of culture. But what is false in the field of culture must risked in the field of theology: that there is only one Gospel.³¹

In reply, it is reasonable to argue that this is a false dichotomy because the Bible, in presenting the message of God's salvation, does so in the context of the same real world in which the secular man lives, a world in which there are real differences and similarities. Furthermore, since all men are made by God, it is wrong to grant that men can really see distinct and different aspects of culture portrayed and produced by secular artists of more recent times, but deny that different cultural situations of ancient times can be accurately and factually portrayed by the biblical speaker and author.

3. What the Author Wants To Say and Why He Wants To Say It.

This question for conservative hermeneutics involves the content of the author's message, which is centered in historical facticity. The question also concerns the intention of the author. Jesus emphasizes the importance of intention when he implies that the moral implications of the Ten Commandments and the other commandments which flow from them (Exodus 20 ff., etc.) which he cites in Matthew 5:21-48 have to do with a moral and orderly Jewish Old Testament society, and he makes clear his own intention in applying these same commandments to the New Testament era when he emphasizes the heart morality involved, a point that was also stressed in the Old Testament (cf. Leviticus 19:18). This is certainly exemplified in a grammatical-historical sense what Dillenberger seems to be calling for in another sense when he says,

"The task of theological hermeneutic is to penetrate to the theological intention in all theological statements," but he adds the disturbing thought, "whether the statements are affirmed or rejected."³²

4. How the Material Affects the Interpreter.

This question, always important in the Bible itself, concerns the application of the message of the text to the interpreter and to those who hear his exposition. Biblical examples of such application of the text--the object--to the interpreter and hearer--the subject--is seen when Jesus, in applying the truth of Isaiah 61:1-2 to himself, cried out, "This day is this Scripture fulfilled in your ears" (Luke 4:21), and when Paul applies the message of Galatians 2:16-19 to his own heart and says, "I am crucified with Christ: Nevertheless I live; yet not I, but Christ liveth in me: the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God who loved me and gave himself for me" (Galatians 2:20. Certainly this is the deeper role of understanding which has always been true of a conservative hermeneutics but which with another emphasis and existential meaning has been called for by Wilhelm Dilthey and others who have advocated the new hermeneutic.³³

Conclusions

It has been observed that the hermeneutical and exegetical principles seen used in the New Testament, the same ones in fact that have always been emphasized in a truly conservative hermeneutics, are similar to some of the procedures called for by the advocates of the new hermeneutic and existentialism. But there is this basic difference: New Testament and conservative hermeneutics only and always have practiced these principles within the context of a history that involves true facticity and enactment in a continuity of time and space, and also involves a true subject-object distinction.

Following these principles in a grammatical historical exegesis makes sense when presupposed by the reasonable proposition that a personal God has verbally communicated to personal man in time and space about a world he has made.

A true understanding and personal application by the personal subject--man--of God's truth about his salvation accomplished in his created world--the object--as revealed in God's written revelation can only really be experienced when a meaningful grammatical historical exegesis of the very text of Scripture has been performed. Further, it is to be realized that this exegesis is to be done by the modern interpreter under the guidance of the personal divine Holy Spirit, with the prayer that the God who communicated his eternal truth in inerrant form to man in ages past will make that same propositional truth meaningful to the Christian today.

DOCUMENTATION

1. W. F. Arndt and F. W. Gingrich, A Greek-English Lexicon (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963) and H. G. Liddell and Robert Scott, A Greek-English Lexicon (Oxford: At the Clarendon Press, 1953). Compare also the discussion of James M. Robinson, "Hermeneutic Since Barth" in The New Hermeneutic, J. M. Robinson and J. B. Cobb, Jr. ed. (New York: Harper and Row, 1964), pp. 1-12.
2. More about this will be discussed later.
3. Robinson, op. cit., p. 13.
4. Heinz Kimmerle, "Hermeneutical Theory or Ontological Hermeneutics," in History and Hermeneutic, Robert W. Funk, ed. (New York: Harper and Row, 1967), p. 121.
5. Robinson, op. cit., p. 9.
6. See John W. Montgomery, "Toward A Christian Philosophy of History" in Jesus of Nazareth: Saviour and Lord, C. F. H. Henry, ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1966), p. 230.
7. John Dillenberger, "On Broadening the New Hermeneutic" in The New Hermeneutic, pp. 162, 163.
8. Robinson, op. cit., pp. 40, 41.
9. Ernst Fuchs, "Response to the American Discussion," in The New Hermeneutic, p. 234.
10. Underlining has been added by the author of the present article.
11. John Dillenberger, op. cit., p. 156.
12. The emphasis has been added.
13. Robert W. Funk, "The Hermeneutical Problem and Historical Criticism," in The New Hermeneutic, p. 193.
14. Fuchs, op. cit., p. 238.
15. Martin H. Woudstra, Calvin's Dying Bequest to the Church (Grand Rapids: Calvin Theological Seminary, 1960), pp. 8, 9.
16. Discussion in response regarding Old Testament quotations in the New is taken up below.

17. Dillenberger, op. cit., pp. 156, 157.
18. Carl E. Braaten, Introduction in Martin Kahler's, The So-Called Historical Jesus and the Historic Biblical Christ (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1964), p. 21.
19. Will Herberg, "Five Meanings of the Word 'Historical,'" in The Christian Scholar, XLVII (Winter, 1964), 327-30.
20. Heinrich Ott, "The Historical Jesus and the Ontology of History," in The Historical Jesus and the Kerygmatic Christ, Carl E. Braaten and Roy A. Harrisville, tr. and ed. (New York: Abingdon Press, 1964), p. 170.
21. Wolfgang Pannenberg, "Hermeneutics and Universal History," in History and Hermeneutic, Robert W. Funk, ed. (New York: Harper and Row, 1967), p. 125.
22. James M. Robinson, The New Hermeneutic, pp. 23, 24.
23. Rudolf Bultmann, Chr. W. XXXVI, (1922), 372 f. through J. M. Robinson, The New Hermeneutic, p. 31.
24. Francis A. Schaeffer, Lecture at Covenant Seminary, St. Louis, March 5, 1971.
25. Ernst Fuchs himself says that "The New Testament itself is a text-book in hermeneutic," but by this he means it "teaches a hermeneutic of faith." The New Hermeneutic, p. 141.
26. Francis A. Schaeffer, Lecture, Covenant Seminary, St. Louis, March 5, 1971.
27. See nomos, Arndt and Gingrich, op. cit.
28. Robinson, The New Hermeneutic, p. 77.
29. John B. Cobb, The New Hermeneutic, p. 227.
30. Robinson, The New Hermeneutic, p. 15.
31. Ernst Fuchs, The New Hermeneutic, p. 237.
32. John Dillenberger, The New Hermeneutic, p. 154.
33. Cf. Robinson, The New Hermeneutic, pp. 20-21.