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A table of contents for *Indian Journal of Theology* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_ijt_01.php

J.G.F. Collison, "Issues in the history of biblical hermeneutics: a Protestant perspective," Indian Journal of Theology 31.3-4 (July-Dec. 1982): 212-235.

Issues in the History of Biblical Hermeneutics: A Protestant Perspective

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This paper deals with the issues that have exercised the minds of people as they have struggled with the task of understanding and interpreting the Christian Scriptures, each in their day.

I Background

1. The Greek verb *hermeneuein* and its cognates *hermeneuia, hermeneus* and *hermeneutēs* are used in a variety of senses. They are used of translations. Thus Clement of Alexandria and Tertullian both use the word for the translation of the Hebrew Scriptures into their Greek counterpart, the Septuagint. The primary reference in the famous Papias quotation, "Matthew wrote the oracles in the Hebrew Language and every one 'interpreted' them as he was able" (Eus. *EH* III, 39, 16) is probably also translation, though obviously the meaning goes beyond that. The fathers were not unaware of the interpretative aspect of any translation. Another aspect of the translation or interpretation phenomenon belongs to the use of the words in connection with the interpretation of "tongues." The word is used in this context both in the New Testament and in the Fathers. "Tongues" depicts ecstatic divine utterance which needs interpretation and clarification. In I Cor. 12:10 it is a charismatic gift. In Chrysostom, it ranks just below exorcism. In Greek mythology, Hermes is the spokesman for the gods and in Acts 14:12 Paul is called Hermes because "he was the chief speaker." Barnabas, the silent one, is called Zeus! The words are also used frequently in the fathers of interpretation of Scriptures and of commentaries on Scripture. The verb in its passive form is used of "having something explained." In a few instances it seems to be used of Jesus as the revealer of God. In secular usage, it is used of anyone or anything that is a link between two entities. Thus it can be used equally for interpretation of music as of a marriage broker.[1] Speech-translation-exegesis-interpretation

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[1] The attestations for these meanings may be found in G.W.H. Lampe, *A Patristic Greek Lexicon* and H. G. Liddell and R. Scott, *A Greek-English Lexicon, sub verbis.*

seems to be the conspectus within which the words function, with varying emphasis in different ages. The study of issues in Biblical Hermeneutics, then, becomes the study of these varying emphases.

2. Christian hermeneutics originated and developed within the background of Jewish hermeneutics—the Talmud and the Midrash. While Targums are translations into Aramaic of the Hebrew Scriptures involving as always some interpretation, Midrash is interpretation of Scripture. It is "the manner in which the Jewish mind approaches Scripture as the Word of God which addresses each successive generation. Both the written word and personal experience are involved in it. Midrash makes the message of Scripture relevant, understandable, and acceptable to later generations."[2] There were two aspects to this task. One was a rational aspect. "Obscurities in the text were elucidated, gaps filled in, and situations clarified, partly by comparison with words and verses from other Biblical loci, partly by what appeared appropriate from the perspective of the Rabbis. Thus, on the one hand, Midrash involves the principle of learning the unknown from the known, and in this connection sometimes proceeds via logical inference and sound philological observations, yet usually without making the clarifications of a Biblical text a goal distinct from the actualization of that text in the present." But there was another principle, an almost mantic, magical principle. "The Bible is regarded as a vision and portent of the future. Its language is not only laconic but intentionally elliptical and ambiguous, the language of dreams and oracles, those direct modes of divine communication known from antiquity (cf. the earlier biblical meaning of *dārash*, "to inquire of God") As an oracular text, Scripture is not bound by the grammatical properties, semantic possibilities, literary contexts, and temporal sequences of ordinary texts. Hence, especially in the atomistic interpretation of words and letters and the variety of word-play, Midrash proceeds in a manner similar to magical and symbolic procedures employed in interpretation of dreams and oracles in the contemporary Graeco-Roman world and known from high antiquity."[3]

3. What has been said above applied to Rabbinic Midrashim. There were at least two other kinds of Midrashim. One was closely connected with Philo of Alexandria, representing Hellenistic Judaism. Philo sought to commend Judaism to the Greeks. Thus he sought to show that the Pentateuch really contains all the highest wisdom of the Greeks. He held to a theory of biblical inspiration that was close to the dictation theory. But he believed that allegorical[4] interpretations were more important than literal meanings. Thus he was able to find the profoundest of meanings in the simplest of statements. Michelsen gives some examples. "The dietary laws which made the gentiles ridicule the Jews really taught various kinds of discriminations nece-

[2] M. Mcnamara in *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, Supplementary Volume, (Nashville: Abingdon, 1976), p. 858.

[3] M. P. Miller in *ibid.*, p. 594.

[4] Allegorical interpretation, it should be noted, did not originate with Philo. Plato had used it of Homer. The Stoics also used it.

ssary to obtain virtue. Whether animals chew the cud really points to the fact that 'the act of chewing the cud is nothing else than the reminiscence of life and existence.'"[5] It should also be noted that Philo did not consider prophets to be on the same level as the Pentateuch.

The other kind of Midrash was connected with the biblical hermeneutics of the Qumran community. Like all eschatological communities, they believed that the final age had already begun. Therefore, they searched the Scriptures to find verses capable of being so interpreted, on the "fulfilment of prophecy" motif. Thus, "In their endeavour to prove that their community had replaced the Jewish people as God's elect and that their council had been substituted for the Jerusalem temple, the sectaries discovered in Hab. 2:17, 'for the violence done to Lebanon shall overwhelm you,' the evidence they needed. To understand how they managed to render this text as, 'For Lebanon is the Council of the Community' (I Qp. Hab. 12:3-4), it should be borne in mind that there was already in existence a popular Jewish tradition identifying Lebanon with the Temple. The application, therefore, of the same Lebanon metaphor to the Council simply proclaims the community's belief that the replacement of Jerusalem by the spiritual sanctuary of the sect was predestined by God and foretold by Habbakuk. Hab. 2:8b, 'Because of the blood of men and the violence done to the land, to the city and to all its inhabitants,' is explained in I Qp. Hab. 9:8-12 as referring to 'the Wicked Priest whom God delivered into the hands of his enemies because of the iniquity committed against the Teacher of Righteousness and the men of the Council,' the exegete does not proceed to explain the text by means of a contemporary illustration, but adopts a dogmatic stand. The event, he asserts, is the fulfilment of Hab. 2:8b and as such it was foreordained by God from all eternity."[6] They also collected proof-texts in much the same way as the biblical writers did.

II The New Testament

1. The most basic principle of the hermeneutics of the New Testament writers seems to be that the Old Testament was written for the sake of the Church. Thus Paul writes, "For whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, that by steadfastness and by the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope" (Romans 15:4). It follows then that a proper interpretation of the Old Testament cannot be done except through Christ. A veil lies on the heart of the Jew (2 Cor. 3:14-17). They misinterpret their Scriptures (John 5:39-47).

2. The prophecy-fulfilment motif is prominent. It is explicitly expressed in 1 Peter 1:10-12. The eleven fulfilment formula quot-

[5] A. B. Mickelsen, *Interpreting The Bible*, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1963), pp. 28-29.

[6] G. Vermes in *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, Supplementary Volume, p. 440.

ations in Matthew and the thirteen in John are reminiscent of Qumranic hermeneutics. Typology which links Old Testament persons or events with persons or events in the new age is not infrequent (Rom. 5:12-21; Heb. 7:1-17; 1 Pet. 3:21; 1 Cor. 10:1-13). The use of single quotations (Gal. 3:16), the construction of a chain with a single theme (Rom. 3:10-19) and the joining together of various quotations to draw one firm conclusion (Rom. 10:5-13) are found. These are accepted Rabbinic procedures for interpreting Scripture.

3. But, it must be noted with a good deal of emphasis that Jesus is not only the fulfilment of the law but he is also the end of the law. "The law and the prophets were until John," one tradition has Jesus say, "since then the good news of the kingdom of God is preached" (Lk. 16:16). "Christ is the end of the Law," Paul writes, leaving no doubt as to his meaning (Rom. 10:4). "For freedom Christ has set us free" (Gal. 5:1).[7]

III The Patristic Period

Throughout the Patristic period (A.D. 95-590) the Christo-centric-typological hermeneutics continues. During this period three major problems exercise the minds of the fathers.

1. Marcion, in the middle of the second century, by his truncated canon, raised a question against the very hermeneutical approach of the apostolic Church. The Church successfully defended its approach, principally through Justin Martyr (d. 165), Irenaeus (d. 202) and Tertullian (d. 220). Justin rejects the idea not only of a radical dichotomy between the God of the Old Testament and the Father of Jesus Christ, but also the idea of any dichotomy between Christianity and God's witness in the world. He writes: "We have been taught that Christ is the firstborn of God, and we have declared above that He is the Word of whom every race of men were partakers; and those who lived reasonably were Christians, even though they have been thought atheists as among the Greeks, Socrates and Heraclitus . . ." (I *Apol.*, 46). Justin also, I think, is the first writer who crosses over fairly extensively from typology to allegory. Tertullian and Irenaeus set out to analyse and establish the relationship between the two Testaments. Henceforth the Christian hermeneut had to deal with a Bible consisting of two Testaments.

2. The Marcionite heresy and the rise of other heresies in the second and third centuries led to another development which had far-reaching consequences for the history of Biblical Hermeneutics. A problem was raised because the heretics too appealed to the authority of Scripture. A need for an external authority to fix the meaning of Scripture was felt. This authority was found in the tradition of the Church and its rule of faith. Tertullian, for example, writes, "For wherever it shall be manifest that the true Christian rule and faith shall be, there will likewise be the true Scriptures and expositions thereof

[7] A short but adequate treatment of the use of the Old Testament by the New may be found in R. M. Grant, *A Short History of the Interpretation of the Bible*, (London: A. and C. Black), pp. 7-41.

and all the Christian traditions" (*On Prescription against Heretics*, 19); he claims that the apostolic churches are the voice of the apostles; the heretics have to establish their apostolic claims (*ibid.*, 36). Augustine has a twin principle. All Scripture must be interpreted by the law of love. "Whoever, then, thinks that he understands the Holy Scriptures, or any part of them, but puts such an interpretation upon them as does not build up his two-fold love of God and of our neighbour, does not yet understand them" (*On Christian Doctrine*, I. 36. 40). And where there is doubt, "Let the reader consult the rule of faith which he has gathered from the plainer passages of Scriptures and from the authority of the Church" (*ibid.*, III. 2.2).[8] In Vincent of Lirinum this theory of authoritative interpretation reaches its climax. He writes: "the line of interpretation of the prophets and apostles must be directed according to the norm of ecclesiastical and Catholic sense."[9] "The Bible had been once called upon to vindicate the authenticity of tradition. It now had to be vindicated by the tradition.[10] A kind of hermeneutical circularity has begun.

3. A third basic issue that arose during this period was a debate as to how many meanings a passage may have.

(*a*) *The School of Alexandria:* The interpretations here have, in both their aims and methods, affinities with Philo. Clement of Alexandria (d. 215) seems to have been the first to propound a theory of multiplicity of meanings of Scripture. Thus he writes: "The sense of the law is to be taken in three ways—either as exhibiting a symbol, or laying down a precept for right conduct, or as uttering a prophecy. But I well know that it belongs to men (of full age) to distinguish and declare these things. For the whole Scripture is not in its meaning a single Myconos, as the proverbial expression has it, but those who hunt after the connection of the divine teaching, must approach it with the utmost perfection of the logical faculty" (Clement, *Stromata* I. 28.4). By such understanding the Christian will become a true gnostic.[11]

Origen gives a more systematic rationale for the method. Mere historical meaning conceals truth. Allegorical reading reveals it. "But if the sense of the letter, which is beyond man, does not appear to present itself at once, on the first glance, to those who are less versed in divine discipline, it is not at all to be wondered at, because divine things are brought down somewhat slowly to (the comprehension of) men, and elude the view in proportion as one is either sceptical or unworthy. For although it is certain that all things which exist in this world, or take place in it, are ordered by the providence of God, and certain events indeed do appear with sufficient clearness to be under the disposal of His providential government, yet others again unfold themselves so mysteriously and incomprehensibly, that the plan

[8] I am indebted for these references to R. M. Grant, *op. cit.*, pp. 87-8.

[9] R. M. Grant, *op. cit.*, p. 88.

[10] D. E. Nineham (ed.), *The Church's Use of the Bible*, (London: SPCK, 1963), p. 33.

[11] R. M. Grant, *op. cit.*, p. 62.

of Divine Providence with regard to them is completely concealed, so that it is occasionally believed by some that particular occurrences do not belong to (the plan of) Providence, because the principle eludes their grasp, according to which the works of Divine Providence are administered with indescribable skill...Each one, then, ought to describe in his own mind, in a three-fold manner, the understanding of the divine letters—that is, in order that all the more simple individuals may be edified, so to speak, by the very body of Scripture; for such we term that common and historical sense; while, if some have commenced to make considerable progress, are able to see something more (than that), they may be edified by the very soul of Scripture. Those again, who are perfect, and who resemble those of whom the apostle says, 'We speak wisdom among them that are perfect, but not the wisdom of this world, nor of the princes of this world, who will be brought to nought; but we speak the wisdom of God, hidden in a mystery, which God hath deemed before the ages unto our glory;' all such as these may be edified by the spiritual law itself (which is a shadow of good things to come), as if by the Spirit....For, with respect to Holy Scripture, our opinion is that the whole of it has a 'spiritual,' but not the whole a 'bodily' meaning, because the bodily meaning is in many places proved to be impossible" (Origen, *De Principiis*, IV.1.7, IV.1.11, IV.1.20).

Origen worked on the principle that the "letter kills but the spirit gives life." And his work served its purpose for his time. R.M. Grant writes: "The allegorical method, at a critical moment in Christian history, made it possible to uphold the rationality of Christian faith. It was used to prevent obscurantism. And though we may question not only its assumptions but also its results, we must not forget what we owe to it. We are not indebted so much to the method itself as to the spirit of the men who employed it. The method alone is lifeless; the spirit of the interpreter makes his text live."[12]

(*b*) *The School of Antioch:* The Alexandrian hermeneutic and the view of God and Jesus that issued out of it came under attack from the school associated with Antioch. Theodore of Mopsuestia (d. 428) and John Chrysostom (d. 407) were perhaps the most important of the group. Origen had disparaged the "literal" meaning of Scripture. The Antiochean school also recognised a higher or deeper meaning, but these scholars insisted that this higher meaning is grounded in the historical meaning, as an image is based on the thing it represents. They did use typology, but they insisted that the hermeneut should take the historicity of both the type and the anti-type seriously. Even the Messianic prophecies of the Old Testament were to be understood historically first and only then were they to be applied to Christ. Few of the writings of Theodore of Mopsuestia have survived. He was caught up in the troubles of his student, Nestorius. But the following quotations from Chrysostom make clear the intentions of the School of Antioch :

[12] *Ibid.*, p. 68.

> For it is not the right course to weigh the mere words nor examine the language itself, as many errors will be the consequence but to attend to the intention of the writer.... Let us then inquire into the intention of Paul in thus writing, let us consider his scope and general deportment towards the apostles, that we may arrive at his present meaning (On Gal. 1:17). Contrary to usage he calls a type an allegory; his meaning is as follows: this history not only declares that which appears on the face of it, but announces somewhat further, whence it is called an allegory. And what hath it announced? No less than all things present (On Gal. 4:24). The type is given the name of the truth until the truth is about to come; but when the truth has come, the name is no longer used. Similarly in painting: an artist sketches a king, but until the colours are applied he is not called a king; but when they are put on the type is hidden by the truth and is not visible; and then we say, "Behold the King" (On Phil. 3:2).[13]

One cannot help but feel that the course of hermeneutics would have been incomparably more sober if Chrysostom's methods had been followed.[14]

(*c*) *The Latin Fathers:* But biblical hermeneutics till the Reformation, on the whole, flowed as if the School of Antioch had never been. The exceptions in this period are Jerome (d. 420) and Augustine (d. 430). Jerome came to the hermeneutical task equipped with a knowledge of the Scriptures in their original languages acquired in the course of fulfilling Pope Damascus' commission of revising and editing the Latin Bible. While not discarding allegorical methods, he came to place a good deal of emphasis on the literal sense as the basis of sound interpretation. In his preface to the *Commentary on Obadiah*, written in A.D. 403, he professes shame about an allegorical commentary on the same book which he wrote some thirty years earlier. He restates the doctrine of full inspiration of all Scriptures. Though there may be degrees of inspiration, in Christ they reach their fulness (*Preface to Philemon*). Augustine was, of course, the master of allegory. He insists on the study of biblical languages (*On Christian Doctrine* II.11.16), on the usefulness of auxiliary sciences (*ibid.*, II.28 ff.), on searching for the intention of the author and on interpreting Scripture by Scripture (*ibid.*, III.27.38). He also said that all Christian doctrine is subject to the authority of Canonical Scriptures (*City of God* XI.3.3).

[13] Wording taken from R. M. Grant, *op. cit.*, p. 75.

[14] Chrysostom also has a curious doctrine of Scripture. In his prefatory homily to the homilies on Matthew he writes: "For neither to the apostles did God give anything in writing, but instead of written words he promised them that he would give them the grace of the Spirit...now that we have lost that honour and are come to have need of these... consider how heavy the charge of not choosing to profit even after this assistance."

IV The Middle Ages

1. The Middle Ages (500-1540) saw the rise of tradition as the dominant element in biblical hermeneutics.[15] To the *Catena*, a chain of patristic comments on biblical texts, the medieval scholastics added "glosses." Interpreting Scripture was compared to the erecting of a great edifice (Gregory the Great). Anselm compiled the *Glossa Ordinaria*, a codification of catena and gloss spanning nearly a thousand years. The multiple senses hermeneutics still operated and was brought to a fine art. The commonly accepted procedure is brought out in the following two quotations.

> There are four rules of Scripture on which every sacred page revolves as if on wheels; that is, the historical, which relates deeds that have happened; the allegorical, in which one thing is understood from another; the tropological, that is, moral discourse in which the establishment and regulating of morals is discussed; the anagogical, namely spiritual understanding through which as we are about to deal with the highest and heavenly things we are led to still higher.... For example, Jerusalem is a certain city, historically speaking; allegorically, it represents holy Church; tropologically, that is morally, it is the faithful soul of anyone who sighs for a vision of eternal peace; anagogically, it means the life of the heavenly citizens who see the God of gods when his face is revealed in Zion. Therefore, though out of these four modes everything can be made, or certainly from them individually, nevertheless, if one considers what is more useful for the care of the inner man, the moral mode appears to be of greater value and intelligibility in sermons.[16]
>
> How shall they distinguish truth from falsehood in the Holy Scriptures? They will, of course, take great pains to follow the advice which at the beginning of this *Commonitory* we said the holy and learned men had handed down to us, namely, to interpret the divine canon according to the oral traditions of the ecumenical church, and in close accord with the rules of catholic doctrine. In this catholic and apostolic church, likewise, they must follow the principles of ecumenicity, antiquity and consensus. And if at some time a party should rebel against the whole, innovation against antiquity, dissent of one or of a few in error against the consensus of all, or, in any case, of nearly all the catholics, then they should set greater store on the preservation of ecumenicity than on the corruption of the part. In this same ecumenicity they must prefer the religion of antiquity to godless innovation; likewise, in that very antiquity, to the rashness of one or of a few, the general decrees of a uni-

[15] On this school, see B. Smalley, *The Bible in the Middle Ages*, (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1952), pp. 83-195.

[16] Guibert of Nogent, *How to Make a Sermon*, quoted in *Library of Christian Classics*, Vol. IX (tr. and ed. G. E. McCrachen and A. Cabaniss), (London: SCM Press, 1957), pp. 291-292.

versal council, if any there be. Then, after that, if there are none, let them follow the best, the harmony of the concordant opinions of many and great teachers. Having with the Lord's help, faithfully, seriously, earnestly followed these authorities, we shall, with no great trouble, unmask the harmful errors of the heretics as they arise.[17]

2. But there were other voices too. The Victorines, belonging to the Abbey of St Victor in Paris in the twelfth century, while not excluding allegorical interpretation, began to emphasise the "literal" sense as the primary referent. Andrew of St Victor says: "It would all be the same if the cow had been black; the allegory is worthless; whatever the colour of the cow, some sort of allegory would be found in it."[18] Allegorical interpretation survived largely in the preaching of the school. Thomas Aquinas too, in the first question of his *Summa Theologica*, takes up this hermeneutical issue and establishes the literal sense as the primary and decisive one from which all other senses have to proceed. In fact, R.M. Grant notes that, "Aquinas' exposition of the eighth chapter of Isaiah was so literal that a later commentator calls it a 'Jewish exposition, quite unworthy of Thomas' mind.'"[19]

The Middle Ages also saw the growth of clericalism, institutionalism, and the system building of Aquinas and Duns Scotus.

3. The great issue in such an age was not so much hermeneutics —very few including priests, it seems, read the Scriptures—as a return to the reading of Scripture and for making Scripture the touchstone of all doctrine and thought. Thus of John Wycliffe in the middle of the fourteenth century it is said:

> The basic principle upon which he sought to ground his reform was the supreme authority of the Scriptures. This doctrine, which more than anything else links him with the Reformation, was carefully worked out in *De veritate sacrae Scripturae* (On the Truth of the Holy Scriptures) published in the very year in which the schism broke out. Wyclif asserts and defends therein the absolute superiority of the Scriptural doctrine over scholastic theology or the current assertion of papal supremacy in all matters of faith and practice. For him, "Holy Scripture is the highest authority for every Christian and the standard of faith and of all human perfection." The Bible alone is the supreme organ of divine revelation; the Church's tradition, pronouncements of the councils, papal decrees, and all other expositions of Christian doctrine must be tested on the Scriptu-

17 Vincent of Lérins, *The Commonitory*, quoted in *ibid.*, pp. 78-79.

18 R. M. Grant, *op. cit.*, p. 97. It must also be noted that this revival of the study of the "literal" sense of Scripture corresponds roughly to the period of the Karaite School of Jewish Exegesis which regarded Scripture as the sole authority in matters of faith and disregarded oral tradition and rabbinical hermeneutics in favour of a fresh study of the text of Scripture.

19 *Ibid.*, p. 100.

ral touchstone. All truth is contained in the Scriptures. They are divinely inspired in all their parts, hence, equally authoritative throughout. As such, they alone are a sufficient guide in all matters, religious and secular. Every Christian must know them and read them in his own language. This explains Wyclif's interest in procuring a Middle English version of the Bible.[20]

Similarly, of Erasmus it is said:

> The chief (weapons of the Christian knight) are prayer and knowledge, i.e., study of the Scriptures. "For all Holy Scripture was divinely inspired and perfected by God its Author. For its study the classical literature is the best preparation, particularly the Platonic writers—a strange advice if addressed to an almost illiterate soldier. But even so, the Scriptures alone are pre-eminently the book of instruction for the Christian. Erasmus furthermore chooses as the most reliable interpreters of the true spiritual sense of the Scriptures—for "the letter killeth"—Paul, Origen, Ambrose, Jerome, and Augustine. He deliberately turns to the ancients as against the moderns (e.g., Duns Scotus) because the latter counseled that it was not necessary to study the Scriptures, regarding themselves as the "absolute theologians."[21]

Erasmus pleaded for an open Bible and published a fresh Latin version with notes.[22] "Erasmus' new Latin version had all the fresh attraction that a Moffatt or J.B. Phillips has had for undergraduate minds."[23] Hermeneutics is no longer the issue. Whether or not one ought to read the Bible is.

V The Period of the Reformation

The primary hermeneutical issue in the Reformation Period was the place of tradition in the interpretation of Scripture. The concept of *Sola Scriptura* became the battle-cry of the Reformation and this emphasis served to advance both the methodology of interpretation and the actual practice of interpretation.

1. (*a*) For Luther himself, "the Bible is a book of life through which God directly speaks to the human souls."[24] This does not mean that prior interpretations are to be ignored but they are no longer the authorities on the meaning of Scripture. Thus Luther writes:

[20] M. Spinka in *The Library of Christian Classics*, Vol. XIV, London: SCM Press, 1953, pp. 26-27.

[21] *Ibid.*, p. 285.

[22] D. E. Nineham, *op. cit.*, p. 77 quotes the note on "1 Cor. 14:9 on Worship in an unknown tongue. There is so much of this in England that the monks attend to nothing else. A set of creatures who ought to be lamenting their sins, fancy that they can please God by gargling in their throats."

[23] *Ibid.*, p. 77.

[24] R. M. Grant, *ibid.*, p. 102.

> Now you will say, "Do you not believe then what the Fathers have said?" My answer is, "Ought I to believe? Who has decreed that they must be believed? Where is the command of God in respect to that article of faith?"... "But, you say," "they were holy men and elucidated the Scriptures." But who has ever proved that the Scriptures have been elucidated by them? Suppose they obscured them?... I am not commanded to believe their fancies but the word of God...O wretched Christians, whose Scripture and faith still depend on the glosses of men, and await their clarification! These things are common to us all. They are clear enough in all things necessary for salvation, and at the same time difficult enough for enquiring minds. Let every man, strive for his own portion in that most abundant, universal Word of God! Let us either reject the word of man or read it with caution.[25]

(*b*) This does not mean that man gets no help. One method is to interpret Scripture with Scripture. One section of Luther's *Christian Answers* is entitled "On comparing Scripture with Scripture." Another method is to read Scriptures historically and with the Christological hermeneutical principle. Thus Luther writes in the introduction to his lectures on Isaiah 1-39:

> Two things are necessary to explain the prophet. The first is a knowledge of grammar, and this may be regarded as having the greatest weight. The second is more necessary, namely, a knowledge of the historical background, not as an understanding of the events themselves as expressed in letter and syllables but as at the same time embracing rhetoric and dialectic, so that the figures of speech and the circumstances may be carefully heeded... The chief and leading theme of all the prophets is their aim to keep the people in eager anticipation of the coming Christ...The prophets must be read in such a way that we prepare ourselves for the coming of Christ. But although the majority of the prophets do speak about a physical kingdom, yet they do (however tersely) lead to Christ. For this reason we must pay more attention to the designs and intentions of the prophets than to their words. Thus, therefore, Isaiah has much to say about his people and the physical kingdom; he condemns sins in one place and praises righteousness in another, and it seems that almost the entire prophecy is directed toward the people. Meanwhile, however, he also prepares the hearts of the people and causes them to look forward to the coming reign of Christ. But the chief aid is the Holy Spirit. He writes: "You will understand them in the end with the help of the teaching of the Holy Spirit...' Accordingly, those who presume to comprehend the sacred Scriptures and the law of God by their own natural capacity, and to undersand them

[25] *The Answer to Latomus* 8.98.27, quoted in *The Library of Christian Classics*, Vol. XVI (tr. and ed. by J. Atkinson), London: SCM Press, 1962, pp. 343-344.

by their own efforts, are making a most grievous mistake. It is from this sort of attitude that heresies and impious dogmas arise, the moment men approach the Scriptures not as receptive pupils but as masters and experts.

Luther, of course, used allegory, but only for building up faith. "Faith must be built upon the basis of history, and we ought to stay with it alone and not easily slip into allegories, unless by way of metaphor we apply them to other things in accordance with the method of faith" (*Commentary on Isaiah* 37:31).

It is not to be used for constructing doctrines.

> This kind of game may, of course, be permitted to those who want it, provided they do not accustom themselves to the rashness of some, who tear the Scriptures to pieces as they please and make them uncertain. On the contrary, these interpretations add extra ornamentation, so to speak, to the main and legitimate sense, so that a topic may be more richly adorned by them, or—in keeping with Paul's example—so that those who are not well instructed may be nurtured in gentler fashion with milky teaching, as it were. But these interpretations should not be brought forward with a view to establishing a doctrine of faith (*Commentary on Galatians* 4:22-24).

(*c*) Luther stressed also that it was necessary for the hermeneut to experience the meaning of the text personally. There is another type of hermeneutical circle here. Religious experience comes about by the reading of the Word of God, but the true meaning of the Word of God can only be discovered in experience: "God must say in your heart, this is God's Word."[26] There is in Luther, undoubtedly a fair amount of subjectivity in the realm of the understanding of Scripture. Luther believed that the sense of the Bible is open to any ordinary believer. This was the driving force behind Luther's translation of the Bible into German.

(*d*) It is well known that Luther found the key to his biblical hermeneutics in the doctrine of Justification by Faith. He used this doctrine to discriminate between the various parts of Scripture. This concept of a doctrine or kerygma as a hermeneutical key to the Scriptures has perhaps had even more influence on subsequent hermeneutical endeavours than his doctrine of *Sola Scriptura*. This raises the issue of selectivity on the basis of subjectivity and/or relevance.

2. Calvin agrees with Luther on the primacy of Scripture over tradition. He is equally hostile to allegorical interpretation. He is equally insistent on the need for faith in the study of the Scriptures, and of the help of the Holy Spirit.

(*a*) An issue arises out of Calvin's treatment of the doctrine of Scripture in his *Institutes*. He seems to propound a mechanistic theory of inspiration of Scripture. In discussing 2 Tim. 3:16-17 Calvin writes: "Any man then who would profit by the Scriptures

[26] Quoted in R. M. Grant, *ibid.*, p. 105.

must hold first of all and firmly that the teaching of the law and the prophets came to us not by the will of man, but as indicated by the Holy Spirit."

Of the Pentateuch, he says: "But whether God became known to the patriarchs through oracles and visions or by the work and ministry of men, he put into their minds what they should hand down to their posterity" (*Institutes* I.6.2).

Of the discourse between God and man, he says, "Now daily oracles are not sent down from heaven, for it pleased the Lord to hallow his truth to everlasting remembrance in the Scriptures alone" (*Institutes* I.7.1.). Thus for him, "the highest proof of Scripture derives in general from the fact that God in person speaks it" (*Institutes* I.7.4.). Even the style of the writers is attributed to the Holy Spirit: "I admit that some of the prophets had an elegant and clear, even brilliant, manner of speaking, so that their eloquence yields nothing to secular writers, and by such examples the Holy Spirit wishes to show that he did not lack eloquence while he elsewhere used a rude and unrefined style" (*Institutes* I.8.2).

(*b*) Calvin finds his hermeneutical key in the concept of the covenant. He explains the similarity between the Old and New Testaments thus: "The covenant made with all the patriarchs is so much like ours in substance and reality that the two are actually one and the same" (*Institutes* II.10.2).

There is, of course, also a difference: "In the absence of the reality, it showed but an image and shadow in place of the substance; the New Testament reveals the very substance of truth as present" (*Institutes* II.11.4).

3. The Reformation also led to excesses. The rejection of allegorical interpretation, the emphasis on private reading of Scripture, and the concept of a hermeneutical key led to many claims of private revelations through which the Scriptures were interpreted. Pacificism, militarism and unitarianism which arose around this period are examples of such interpretations. Another aspect of this problem was the identification of the individual interpretations of the reformers with national interests. This has led both ancient and modern Roman Catholic scholars to speak of the problems in determining the literal sense.[27]

VI The Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries

1. The immediate consequences of the Reformation in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries were two-fold. On the one hand, the study of the Bible opened up by the Reformation was used to support dogmatically held confessional positions. It became evident that the meaning of the Bible was not always transparently clear. Nor did the

[27] Pronouncements of the Medieval Councils. For a modern author see Raymond E. Brown, in *Jerome Biblical Commentary*, Vol. II, (Bangalore: TPI, 1972), pp. 606-609.

texts seem amenable to one interpretation only. The Spirit seemed to authenticate more than one interpretation. So, there developed a kind of Protestant scholasticism, which built objective systems, in one of which the Christian had to believe in, for salvation.

2. Pietism arose as a reaction to the confessionalism of Protestant scholasticism, partly on account of the post-Reformation phenomenon of stark literalism and partly as a consequence of the theory of plenary inspiration of Scripture propounded by Calvin and accepted by subsequent Protestant orthodoxy. Pietism emphasised the subjective element of personal experience. The reading and exposition of the Bible was aimed primarily at edification. This attitude by itself does not exclude serious exegetical and doctrinal studies of the Bible.[28] But, as the aim was edification, it led to a contempt of the science of hermeneutics and a gradual falling back into a mystical and allegorical interpretation of the Scriptures. And, in so far as, modern missionary movements had some links with the growth of the pietistic movements in the seventeenth to nineteenth centuries, the consequences of the effects of Pietism on biblical hermeneutics have been far-reaching.

3. The second half of the seventeenth century also saw the beginning of the rise of Rationalism. This was the period of Hobbes, Spinoza and Locke. Hobbes was a political philosopher who sought to find in the Bible a satisfactory basis for a political philosophy. He treated the Bible as the record of revelation rather than revelation itself (*Leviathan* ch. 32) and, since it is attested by miracles, it must be true (ch. 12). He contests the idea of the identification of the Kingdom of God with the Church (ch. 44) and argues that the Bible contains rules and regulations both for the temporal and the spiritual domains (ch.12).

Spinoza cannot find anything in Scripture that is not in the philosophies of Plato and Aristotle. Nor does he find anything in Scripture which does not agree with reason. The existence of miracles is explained by the custom of Jews not to discuss secondary causes. In fact, Scripture is intended for the stupid masses. The same morality can be achieved by men who live according to reason. Since Scripture has only this kind of authority there is no need for any kind of understanding of it except historical understanding.[29] A similar attitude is found in John Locke except that he is prepared to allow in the Bible some revealed doctrine. The issue here is " to lift the interpretation of Scriptures out of the hands of the theological expert dedicated to a persecuting orthodoxy; yet equally to protect them from the anarchy of enthusiastic and eccentric exposition." [30] All of them are dealing with the problem of the " open Bible." An attempt is being made to make interpretation of Scripture a matter of reason.

4. Even more serious questions were raised by the rise of Deism. The deistic controversy, at once reacting to, shaping, and testing

[28] Bengel and John Wesley are two outstanding examples.

[29] This paragraph is a summary of R. M. Grant, *op. cit.*, pp. 117-120.

[30] D. E. Nineham, *op. cit.*, p. 101.

the notion of revelation, began a series of arguments about the credibility of special divine communication and (later on) of divine self-presentation through the medium of historical occurrences. Two issues were at stake from the beginning. The first was of a predominantly philosophical nature. It concerned the inherent rationality or credibility of the very idea of a historical revelation. Was it conceivable or intelligible? Is it likely, it was asked, that a perfectly good God should have left mankind without decisive guidance for so long, only to grant the privilege finally to a tiny, rude, and isolated fraction of the human race? Or, is what is called revelation nothing more than a specific instantiation of what God had made known everywhere and all along, concerning truth and human happiness? Furthermore, is the appeal to the "mystery" of revelation anything other than an admission that the idea itself is unintelligible, a token of that unwarranted intrusion of imagination or, worse yet, sheer ignorant superstition about matters on religion which the new intellectual rigour must repel?

The second question was: even granted the rationality or inherent possibility of revelation, how likely is it that such a thing has actually taken place? This is no longer an issue of theoretical but of factual inquiry. The immediate question was whether there are good grounds for believing in the actual occurrence of the miraculous events constituting the indispensable evidence for historical revelation. How authoritative, in short, how well attested are biblical accounts, especially those of miracles, since the natural presumption in a "scientific age" is obviously against them? And closely associated with miracle as the cognate "external evidence" for Christian truth was the argument from the fulfilment of Old Testament prophecies in the events of the New Testament.[31]

5. There were many responses given to these questions. Peter Toland (1696) and J. Butler (1740) try to prove that Christianity is really not contrary to reason. Another response was the pietistic movement which we have discussed earlier. A third response provided by Schleiermacher (1830) places the locus of religion in feeling which is an intuitive self-consciousness, "the universal existence of all finite things, in and through the Infinite, and of all temporal things in and through the eternal... It is to have life and to know life in immediately feeling, only as such an existence in the Infinite and Eternal.[32] It is "the consciousness of absolute dependence, or, which is the same thing, of being in relation with God."[33] Thus he sought to

[31] H. W. Frei, *The Eclipse of the Biblical Narrative*, (Yale: Yale University Press, 1974), pp. 52-53.

[32] F. Schleiermacher, *On Religion: Speeches to its Cultured Despisers*, quoted in J. C. Livingstone, *Modern Christian Thought*, p. 100.

[33] F. Schleiermacher, *Christian Faith*, quoted in J. C. Livingstone, *op. cit.*, p. 100.

fuse together the rationalism of his hermeneutical approach[34] with the subjectivism of Romanticism.

VII The Rise of Higher Criticism

The major response to rationalistic criticism of biblical hermeneutics was positive, one of accepting the challenge. Semler (1775) and Michaelis (1778) for the New Testament and Wellhausen (1883) for the Old Testament gave the decisive stimuli for the historical investigation of the Scriptures. This has led to linguistic and grammatical studies, to the study of sources, to the study of the history of contemporary religions, to the study of forms and the like to enable the scholar to study the books of the Scripture like any other ancient book.[35] There are two assumptions here, both of which are issues of importance. The first is the assumption that the Bible consists of books primarily intended for the times for which they were written. Second, is the Troeltschian assumption that history is a controllable discipline.

1. Strauss (1835) was perhaps the first man to investigate the Gospels historically. He considers much of the Gospel narratives as myths, of Jewish expectations of a coming Messiah, which were used of Jesus simply because they lay at hand. The historical Jesus was simply unattainable. F.C. Baur (1860) arrived at the result that the simple Jewish Christianity of Jesus had been overlaid by Paul's universalistic theology and a later Catholic synthesis. A. Harnack (1901) posited a humanistic understanding of a Jesus who preached a kingdom of God, based on the fatherhood of God, the infinite value of the human soul and the commandment of love. Wrede maintained that the Messianism of Mark was a post-resurrection creation of the community. Schweitzer has this to say about the studies of the nineteenth century:

> The study of the Life of Jesus has had a curious history. It set out in quest of the historical Jesus, believing that when it had found Him it could bring Him straight into our time as a Teacher and Saviour... But He does not stay: He passes by our time and returns to His own. What surprised and dismayed the theology of the last forty years was that, despite all forced and arbitrary interpretations, it could not keep Him in our time...The mistake was to suppose that Jesus could come to mean more to our time by entering into it as a man like ourselves. That is not possible. First, because such a Jesus never existed. Secondly, because, although historical know-

[34] F. Schleiermacher's *Hermeneutics*, (Scholars Press, ET, 1977), is quite a seminal work. Much of modern German historical criticism is based on it. He pleads not only for a grammatico-historical interpretation, but also for a psychological interpretation—the art of putting oneself subjectively in the position of the author.

[35] The history of this period is well described in W. G. Kümmel, *The New Testament: The History of the Investigation of its Problems*, tr. S. Gilmour and H. Kee, (London: SCM Press, 1973).

ledge can no doubt introduce greater clearness into an existing spiritual life, it cannot call spiritual life into existence. History can destroy the present; it can reconcile the present into the past; but to contribute to the making of the present is not given unto it... Jesus as a concrete historical personality remains a stranger to our time, but His spirit, which is hidden in his words, is known in simplicity, and its influence is direct. Every saying contains in its own way the whole Jesus. The very strangeness and unconditionedness in which He stands before us makes it easier for individuals to find their own personal standpoint in regard to Him. He comes to us as One unknown, without a name, as of old, by the lake-side, He came to those men who knew Him not. He speaks to us the same word, " Follow me !"[36]

Inevitably there is a turning towards a more theological approach to the Bible.

2. Karl Barth (1886-1968) was brought up in the liberal school, but as a Swiss pastor he found it difficult to retain his interest in purely historical questions. Therefore, he evolves a new understanding of biblical hermeneutics. The approach is best seen in his *The Word of God and the Word of Man:*

> The Bible gives to every man and to every era such answers to their questions as they deserve. We shall always find in it as much as we seek and no more; high and divine content if it is high and divine content that we seek; transitory and " historical" content, if it is transitory and " historical " content that we seek. The question: What is within the Bible? has a mortifying way of converting itself into the opposing question, Well, what are you looking for, and who are you, pray, who made bold to look? ...The man who is looking for history or for stories will be glad after a little to turn from the Bible to the morning paper or to other books. For when we study history and amuse ourselves with stories, we are always wanting to know: How did it all happen? How is it that one event follows another? What are the natural causes of things? Why did the people speak such words and live such lives? It is just at the most decisive points of its history that the Bible gives no answer to our Why.... Large parts of the Bible are almost useless to the school in its moral curriculum because they are lacking in just this wisdom and just these " good examples "... And in how many phases of morality the Bible is grievously wanting! How little fundamental information it offers in regard to the difficult questions of business, life, marriage, civilization and statecraft, with which we have to struggle? ...When we come to the Bible with our questions—How shall I think of God and the universe? How arrive at the divine? How present myself?

[36] A. Schweitzer, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus*, (New York: MacMillan, 1968), pp. 398-403.

—it answers us, as it were, " My dear sir, these are your problems; you must not ask me!"... It is not the right human thoughts about God which form the content of the Bible, but the right divine thoughts about men. The Bible tells us not how we should talk with God but what he says to us.[37]

With this may be compared the following from the *Church Dogmatics:* " The Bible is God's Word so far as God lets it be His word."[38]

This does not mean, however, that historical criticism is to be abandoned. Barth is no Biblicist. He writes in the Preface to the first edition of his commentary on Romans :

> The historical-critical method of Biblical investigation has its rightful place: it is concerned with the preparation of the intelligence—and this can never be superfluous. But, were I driven to choose between it and the venerable doctrine of Inspiration, I should without hesitation adopt the latter, which has a broader, deeper, more important justification. The doctrine of Inspiration is concerned with the labour of apprehending, without which no technical equipment, however complete, is of any use whatever. Fortunately, I am not compelled to choose between the two. Nevertheless, my whole energy of interpreting has been expended in an endeavour to see through and beyond history into the spirit of the Bible, which is the Eternal Spirit. What was once of grave importance, is so still. What is today of grave importance stands in direct connexion with that ancient gravity. If we rightly understand ourselves, our problems are the problems of Paul; and if we be enlightened by the brightness of his answers, those answers must be ours... The understanding of history is an uninterrupted conversation between the wisdom of yesterday and the wisdom of tomorrow.[39]

Doty's comment on Barth's hermeneutical position is perceptive:

> If the text is a human word and therefore conditioned by the cultural circumstances in which it was written, it is not the text that is the Word of God, for the text itself is already an interpretation of the Word of God. Hence, Barth's early methodology, as he set it out in the commentary on Romans, was to live with the text until it disappeared and the divine Word itself confronted the interpreter.[40]

3. Another response was the Christian existentialism of Rudolf Bultmann (1884-1976). Bultmann, generally speaking, is in agree-

[37] Karl Barth, *The Word of God and the Word of Man*, tr. D. Horton, (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1928), pp. 32, 35, 38f., 42f.

[38] Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* I. 1, tr. G. W. Bromley, (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1975), pp. 123f.

[39] Karl Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, tr. E. Hoskyns, (London: Oxford University Press, 1933), p. 1.

[40] W. G. Doty, *Contemporary New Testament Interpretation*, (New York: Prentice Hall, 1972), p. 3.

ment with Barth's exegetical goal. But he maintained that there can only be one hermeneutical method, historical critical. But Bultmann firmly rejects historicism, the objective learning of facts. What we have in the New Testament is *Geschichte*, meaningful history. What we have presented to us in the Gospels is the Christ of faith not the Jesus of history. The Christian comes to the Scriptures with an anticipation of what he will discover in Scripture, namely God's address to man. Bultmann defines the quest of man as a quest for authentic existence. Man has a pre-understanding of his existence. He comes to the text so that the text may call into question man's self-understanding and summon him to a decision. Bultmann writes:

> The decisive question is just this: Are we to approach history in such a way that we recognize its claims on us, that it has something new to say to us? If we abandon neutrality in relation to the text, this means that the question concerning the truth dominates exegesis. Ultimately, then, the exegete is not interested in the question: How are we to interpret what has been said (thought of only as something articulated) in its historical and temporal setting, in its historical and temporal contexts? Rather, in the end he asks: What is the passage referring to? To what realities does the articulation lead? By seeking to understand it as a pointer to its real content, exegesis of "central matter" seeks to deal seriously with the original and genuine meaning of the word "Word"....
>
> In general it may be said that the area of "what is meant" reaches as far as the possibilities of man extend. Whether the interpreter can enter into it depends, then, on how far he is open to the range of what is possible for man. In the end, therefore, the question regarding the possibility of understanding a text depends on what openness the exegete has to the existential possibility as a human possibility, what interpretation the exegete has of himself as a man.[41]

The interpreter seeks to re-understand what it means to be authentically human (anthropological term) and what God wills for man (theological term). Bultmann says:

> Knowledge of God is first of all a knowledge which a man has about himself; God is the power who breaks through this limitedness and thereby elevates man to his proper being.

Bultmann has a hermeneutical method. He, like Strauss, understands the Bible to be myth-like. God-language has to be indirect language. But, unlike Strauss, he does not wish to eliminate the mythological elements. Nor does he want to search for history behind the sources. He wants to demythologise so that he can interpret.

Demythologizing is a hermeneutical method, that is a method of interpretation, of exegesis.[42]

[41] Rudolf Bultmann, quoted in W. G. Kümmel, *op. cit.*, p. 373.

[42] Rudolf Bultmann, *Jesus Christ and Mythology*, (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1958), p. 45.

It may be noted that in the concept of the pre-understanding that a man brings to the text Bultmann raises questions about Troeltsch's understanding of history:

> Now what has just been said includes an important insight—namely, that historical knowledge is never a closed or definitive knowledge, any more than is the pre-understanding with which the historian approaches historical phenomena. For if the phenomena of history are not facts that can be neutrally observed, but rather open themselves in their meaning only to one who approaches them alive with questions, then they are always only understandable now in that they actually speak in the present situation. Indeed, the questioning itself grows out of the historical situation, out of the claim of the now, out of the problem that is given in the now. For this reason, historical research is never closed, but rather must always be carried further. Naturally, there are certain items of historical knowledge that can be regarded as definitively known—namely, such items as concern only dates that can be fixed chronologically and locally, as, for example, the assassination of Caesar, Luther's posting of the ninety-five theses. But what these events that can thus be dated mean as historical events is always first knowable for what it is—precisely as a historical event—in the future. And therefore one can also say that the future of the historical event belongs to that event.[43]

VIII The Modern Period

1. A further development in biblical hermeneutics, associated with the names of Ernst Fuchs and Gerhard Ebeling, has taken place to which the name "The New Hermeneutic" is usually given.

> The characteristic flow of Bultmann's hermeneutics has been away from language—of which mythological language serves as model—back to the understanding prior to, and more authentic than, language.[44]

The new hermeneutic asserts that there is nothing more authentic than language itself. Language is not an objectification behind which we seek understanding; language itself is understanding. "Language itself says what is invisibly taking place in the life of a culture."[45] Language is that which is called forth by an event.

> Language, as far as the new hermeneutic is concerned, does not represent an arbitrary choice of vocal sounds to represent certain things that man runs up against "out there." Rather, event and word are born together, and are not to be understood

[43] R. Bultmann, *Existence and Faith?*, (London: Collins, 1964), pp. 348-9.

[44] Robinson and Cobb, *The New Hermeneutic*, (New York: Harper and Row, 1964), p. 38.

[45] *Ibid.*, p. 39.

in any other way. That means that an event needs the words, the language, it calls forth in order to be itself. We could call this event-word unity a "word-event" or "language-event." The language thus given birth illumines the reality that summoned it forth, so that, in terms of man's existence, the purpose of the word, of language, is to lighten the darkness of existence. Thus, language is itself a hermeneutical entity, illuminating the situation into which it is spoken.[46]

But a language-event is more than even this. All men have some pre-understanding of reality and of their relation to it. But at times, a man is confronted with a situation for which his pre-understanding is not sufficient. Then a man has to call into question his understanding and make a decision about adjusting his understanding to include this new experience. So a man's language is also

> a reflection of those decisions by which prior expectation and actual event have been adjusted to one another. The ability of language to bring about such a unity of experience and prior conception is what is meant by "language-event." It follows, given such an understanding of language event, that it also underlies the unity achieved between people in their common usage of language, and the agreements that can be achieved through its use. The term "language-event," therefore, refers to the power of language to bring about unity within a man and between men.[47]

The issue here is concerning the understanding of "understanding" itself.

Jesus' preaching and the early Church's proclamation of Jesus are to be understood as "language-events." The Jesus "language-event" forced his audience into making a decision about a way a person understands himself and others. This "language-event" produces other "language-events," that is, texts. Of course, there can never be one-to-one correlation between two "language-events," particularly as they relate to language events widely separated in time and culture. But there can be a substantial "merging of horizons." Thus, one always understands the text differently from the author himself. Thus "understanding means primarily to understand each other on subject matter, and only secondarily to clarify and understand the view of the other person as such."[48]

If this is the way that the New Testament is to be looked at, then what is the process of understanding and interpreting the New Testament? Here there is a justifiable assumption. A religious text such as the New Testament basically is concerned with the way persons

[46] Paul J. Achtmeier, *An Introduction to the New Hermeneutic*, (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1969), pp. 90-1. This section is heavily dependent on this book.

[47] *Ibid.*, p. 117.

[48] Gadamer quoted in Robinson and Cobb, *op. cit.*, p. 75.

(Jesus or Paul or whoever) saw things in relation to God. Therefore, the New Testament cannot be understood apart from categories that have to do with human existence. The questions have to be basic enough and general enough. But

> How is such an interpretation to be carried out, or better, how are we to begin so that such an interpretation is the result? How do we approach the text, so that it functions correctly, i.e., in terms of human existence? To ask such a question is to ask about a "hermeneutical principle." By "hermeneutical principle," Fuchs, for example, means the principle by which, or the situation within which, understanding gets under way. It is a way of approaching the text, a way of questioning it, so that the text can be properly understood. Such a hermeneutical principle does not explain what understanding is or even tell what the correct understanding would be. Rather, it sets the desired process of understanding in motion. It creates the situation within which understanding can happen. For example, Fuchs says, if you want to understand what a cat is, put a mouse in front of it, and see what happens. The mouse is here the "hermeneutical principle" that sets the "catness" of the cat in motion. The mouse is that which causes the cat to show itself for what it is. It allows the cat to "happen" as cat.
>
> A hermeneutical principle is thus something that allows, or even forces, a text to "happen," i.e., to show itself, and its intention, for what it truly is. The hermeneutical principle will be a way of approaching the text, or a question directed to the text, which will allow the text to say what it has to say. Put another way, we may say that the hermeneutical principle will point to the "locus" of truth. It will indicate where the truth of a text is to be found.[49]

The task of historical criticism is that of clearing the deck so that we may discover the hermeneutical principle, a task which Fuchs and Ebeling are setting about in their various works.

2. (*a*) The structural school of hermeneutics, the latest in the schools of hermeneutics, also assumes that a linguistic paradigm is to be taken as a fundamental category and not as providing access to something else beyond it. It agrees with the new hermeneutic that exegesis and interpretation are not two separable issues, that the meaning of the language that one wants to appropriate belongs to language itself and not to something beyond it. It accepts the Gadamerian principle that understanding primarily means understanding each other. But the structural hermeneutic does not agree that this understanding can be applied, without further ado, to a text. For the text is not living language; it is a "dead" language. That is to say, the dialogue with a text needs the first step of bringing the text back to life. The

[49] Achtmeier *op. cit.*, p. 125.

first step in hermeneutics then is the "prolongation of the discourse of the text into a new discourse."[50] Reading, however, is different from dialogue. Dialogue is instantaneous and, to some extent, superficial. I have one glance at myself in a mirror. But since the text is fixed, there is time to apprehend the

> vectors of the discourse of the text.... In short, exegesis determines the discourse of the text, its nature, its semantic potentialities. As such, exegesis considers the text as a "closed system" of signs. Then, in a second step, the hermeneutic prolongs the discourse of the text into a new discourse.[51]

(*b*) There is also a particular concept of man that goes with the structural hermeneutic. Man is not considered an "author" but a creator of language "significations." When an author wants to express his "creative" and "free" response to a specific situation, he creates new "symbols" or uses old "symbols" differently, thus "making significant deformation of language." These "deformations" may be conscious or unconscious. After all he is preoccupied with conveying meaning and he needs to use the "language" available to him. Language is imposed on a man, and so are "significations." So a structural hermeneut studies the text without raising the question of "what the author meant."

(*c*) Structure is a complex entity. In any semantic discourse there are a variety of dimensions.

> If he is a linguist, the structuralist is aware that there are literary structures (studied by Roland Barthes), narrative structures (studied by Jacques Lacan), sociological structures (studies by Lucian Goldmann), mythical structures and anthropological structures (studied by Levi-Strauss). Beyond this, it appears that other methods of the social sciences are also concerned to elucidate the role of various unconscious elements which impose significations upon man.[52]

It is possible that the author meant to communicate a certain meaning. Nevertheless the text itself will exhibit a plurality of "meanings." Each layer of meaning may be studied separately and will be tested by the norms and warrants of that particular area of study. It is a "synthesis which emerges in the hermeneutic."[53] When combined together these structures limit and constrain the potentialities of each other. Thus, the meaning and effect of a text will become sharper and sharper as more and more structures are fed into the synthesis.

3. Another hermeneutical issue is also being raised increasingly, particularly among the third world hermeneuts. This pertains to the

[50] Daniel Patte, *What is Structural Exegesis?*, Guides to Biblical Scholarship Series, (New York: Fortress Press, 1976), p. 5. This section is dependent on this work.

[51] *Ibid.*, p. 6.

[52] *Ibid.*, p. 17.

[53] *Ibid.*, p. 19.

place of ideology and of "pragmatic" concerns in the hermeneutical task. Does man always ask existential questions? Can the Bible answer questions in which ultimate concern is not present? One principle of hermeneutics could be to understand and interpret the Bible as dialogue with man. A quotation from Segundo makes the point.

> When all is said and done, the Word of God has always dialogued with human beings preoccupied with every practical problem. It has dialogued with people facing the pragmatic necessity of fleeing from bondage in Egypt, with people trying to establish themselves in the promised land, with people facing the task of returning from exile and restoring the kingdom of David. Jesus himself dialogues with disciples who were constantly preoccupied with the notion of trying to make sure that they would get the choice spots in the coming kingdom. Moreover, many portions in the Bible, including the Book of Proverbs and many counsels of Jesus, seem to be completely pragmatic and even downright shrewd. Jesus, for example, advises his disciples how to sneak up to the best places at a banquet table.[54]

Another approach would be to think of Scripture as a series of successive "revelations" wherein the void between the conception of God and the problems existing in his age are filled.[55] This could be a creative task.

The discussion of the nature of the hermeneutical issue goes on.

[54] *The Liberation of Theology*, (New York: Orbis Books, 1975), p. 12.
[55] *Ibid.*, p. 116.