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An Evangelical Approach to Scripture

by Stephen Reid

Evangelical theology and the exegesis from which it springs is based on a number of premises; prime among them is the affirmation that exegesis is not merely historical reconstruction. The goals of exegesis are social and personal transformation. Exegesis without personal transformation loses its sense of spirituality; exegesis without social transformation loses its sense of mission.

Approaches such as canon, canonical and canonical-contextual criticism present important tools for the evangelical exegetical process. The recent work on the materialist reading of Scripture also has much to commend it for evangelical exegesis. Both of these pay attention to issues of personal and social transformation. Rightly used, both can be valuable assets to those working in contemporary evangelical theology.

The argument here begins with the set of problems presented by traditional form critical and tradition history approaches. This discussion of the impetus is followed by an analysis of the theoretical presuppositions of the canon/canonical approach to Scripture as well as the materialist reading of the Bible. The next step is to begin to envision the exegetical process as part of the process of believing communities. Finally we will pay some attention to issues of method of an evangelical approach to Scripture.

Impetus For An Alternative Approach

It is important that we not think of canon/canonical criticism as a new creation. It has roots in the form critical and the tradition history style of investigation as well as in the exegetical style of the Reformation.

From the very beginning of the form critical movement in biblical criticism there was an awareness of a relationship between the stories which come from texts, in this case Scripture, and the communities that they spring from. These communities of faith are a reflection of the personal and social transformation that comes from God's encounter with them. Canon/canonical critics agree that the documents of Hebrew and Christian Scriptures are integrally related to the believing communities.

The term used by these form critics to talk about this relationship was *Sitz im Leben*. While one could argue that this term in the work of Herman Gunkel is not sufficiently sociologically nuanced to be helpful, it nevertheless shows that Gunkel understood the role of believing communities.[1]

The second generation of form criticism-tradition historical analysis was heir to this sensibility about the text. Here we find the roots of the canon-contextual approach. "Canon criticism clearly has roots in tradition criticism especially as articulated by Gerhard von Rad."[2]

The third generation of scholars trained in form criticism and tradition criticism in dialogue with the believing communities began to notice some limitation to the movement of biblical studies, dominated by the form and tradition critical methods of exegesis. James A. Sanders has argued that there are eight factors that contributed to the rise of canon-contextual analysis: 1) There is an awareness of the growing irrelevance of biblical research in the churches. 2) At the same time there is an awareness of the theological diversity in Judaism and Christianity of the biblical period; we might add, the contemporary scene as well. 3) This approach takes seriously the issue of acceptable diversity within communities of faith. As such it represents an excellent model for ecumenical theology, which has consistently been a hallmark of evangelical theology. 4) Further, we have new perceptions of the ancient tradents. It is fairly clear that the tradents had their own hermeneutics that shaped the text. 5) These tradents have finally begun to be respected by biblical researchers as creative theologians rather than religious hack writers. 6) There is an increased awareness that the texts have been transmitted through believing communities with particular sociological and historical contexts—Sitz im Leben, if you like. 7) It has become clear that the pluralism of the Scriptures is not going to go away. 8) Further, there is a commitment to Scripture such that the evangelical refuses to leave behind either biblical authority or intellectual honesty.

In the work of Brevard Childs, among others, this has meant fighting the imperialism of the historical critical method which Brueggemann notes has a tendency to relativize the text.[3] At the same time there is a sense that the historical critical method is not sufficiently self-conscious about the social location of its practitioners. Hence Childs is concerned that exegesis not be a handmaiden to any philosophy. "What is clear is that Childs wishes to develop an approach to Scripture which is completely text-centered, in which no constructs of an existential or historical sort become an additional step intervening."[4] While this is the tendency of the discipline, I will argue that we can still be in dialogue with philosophy, and in particular the symbolic interactionism of American Pragmatism as well as the Critical theory of the "Frankfurt school," as theoretical building blocks in the hermeneutics of canon-contextual analysis as well as a materialist reading of the Bible.

Just as the canon/canonical approach is a response or corrective of a certain type of biblical exegesis, a materialist reading of the Bible is a response and corrective of "idealist exegesis." The situation outlined above presented a malaise for many believing communities and those biblical students who wanted to work with believing communities. A materialist reading of Scripture is a natural outgrowth of the hermeneutics of the Confessing Church and of Rudolf Bultmann, outlined in his attempt to combat the misinterpretation of Scripture at the hands of the Nazis.[5]

"Idealist exegesis" is an aberration of the hermeneutics of one of the high points of the church's history. The blasphemy of "idealist exegesis" is that it maintains that despite the plurality of methods there is an orthodoxy of right interpretation. This orthodoxy of right interpretation is based on the credentials of those who do it. They become "reading experts." "Their exegesis has thus become in large measure a legitimating science, and authentic exegesis has been distorted into an ideology."[6]

Community

The form critical movement and the tradition critical work of von Rad begin the process of approaching the presuppositions of canon-contextual analysis. "Canon and community must be thought of as belonging togeher both in antiquity and today."[7] This becomes the basic affirmation of the canon-contextual approach. Its theological translation is that God has spoken to the community of faith who were the earliest tradents and continues to talk to the community of faith through the traditions of earlier communities of faith. This is the hermeneutics of the Holy Spirit at work in the Body of Christ that we call the Church.

The connection between canon and community is a point of consensus for these scholars; hence it is not accidental nor surprising that the title of James Sanders' new volume on canonical criticism should be Canon and Community.[8] The persons who find a materialist reading of the Bible helpful likewise affirm the connection between canon and community. A materialist reading affirms that the past community of Scripture can and should be a contemporary conversation partner to the believing community today.[9]

One place where much is left to be done is the relationship between a materialist reading or a canon/canonical approach to Scripture and the material culture of Palestine and early Christianity. One of the questions for this approach is: how did these people live who wrote the text? This is the truly new frontier for what has been in the past called biblical archeology.

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Pluralism

There is an affirmation of the pluralism within the Bible as a whole. Coupled with this is a sense that biblical texts are on the whole multivalent; hence there is no one proper interpretation of a text. This would explain to some degree the proliferation of interpretations, or "meanings," if we want to use the language of symbolic interactionism. This makes the text adaptable for the changing contexts of a given community of faith as well as the pluralism of the range of communities of faith that share the Scripture. At the same time, there is inherent in the text restraints that inhibit the abuse of Scripture, as demonstrated in allegorical interpretation.

One of the gains from Childs' canon critical approach is the recovery of the pre-critical tradition. "Perhaps the Reformation cry sola scriptura has unwittingly provided for subsequent Protestant exegesis an excuse for depreciating the history of Christian interpretation. Once the normative religious content is defined along the axis of a canonical shape rather than a peculiarly modern prerequisite of historical writing, then the theological wealth of not only the Reformation, but of the pre-Reformation commentators and of the Apostolic Fathers can no longer be passed by."[10] However, the inclusion of the pre-critical material of an earlier period should remind us of the non-critical material of the believing communities that do not write commentaries. Once we have moved in the way that Childs et al have proposed, namely, to take as serious conversation partners the pre-critical exegesis of Judaism and pre-Reformation Christianity, then feminist, Hispanic and black pre-critical (in the methodological, not the historical sense) biblical interpretation can not be dismissed as it has been for so many years. This means that canon/canonical criticism enables the biblical student to listen to those who have been traditionally underrepresented in the resources we check in our Bible study.

The repetition of a given tradition is the first step toward canonization; therefore we search and pay special attention to repetition. We are thus able to discern the contours of pluralism in Hebrew religion and Judaism. It is the place in which the theological position of a given tradition or text becomes part of the "taken-for-granted-world" of the believing community. As such it becomes a keystone, the perception of the world for that community. However, at the same time that repetition is important for its part in the stability of the life of a given community of faith, the resignification of symbols and traditions is also a mark that is scrutinized in the canon-contextual approach. How has the community changed to warrant a change in the perception of a major symbol or tradition? Finally, we presuppose that the ancient texts have their own principles of interpretation (hermeneutics). Thus part of the task in analysis is to uncover the principles of interpretation at every level of interpretation from the most ancient to the most recent.

Sanders has properly seen what advantages this has for evangelical theology. "The perspective of canonical criticism on biblical pluralism is that it provides a built-in corrective apparatus so that we do not absolutize any one agenda, or think that we have boxed God into a set of propositions."[11]

Scripture and the Communion of Saints

A symbolic interactionist hermeneutic fits well into the canon-contextual analysis and a materialist reading of the Bible. The pluralism and community are not things that existed only or even primarily in the past. Both the American Pragmatist philosopher George Herbert Mead and social theorist Jurgen Habermas hold that the social self is a result of life in a communicating community. Responsible exegesis enables the member of the community of faith to take seriously the perspective of the communities of faith. It is this taking on the perspective of the other that represents the possibility for personal transformation. The communities were able to reread the Scriptures anew in each age. This is the process of resignification that makes Scripture possible and adaptable for human experience. The past was for them the interpretation of the present, communicating community.[12]

In summary, there are three presuppositions. First is that canon (or texts) is related, even if in only a mysterious way, to communities. One might imagine that this means that we must ask questions about how they are related and how they shape and are shaped by their communities. This includes such mundane or exciting things as biblical archeology. Second, there is the assumption of pluralism that gives us the multivalent text which we affirm as Scripture. However, this plurality indicates that there were probably coalitions as well as some conflict which we must attend to in our exegesis. Third, each new generation participates in some resignification of Scripture, but often this is, if only subconsciously, related to previous significations.

Community and Exegetical Process

The concepts that human reality is primarily social and social reality is perspectival and relative[13] are not as earth shattering as they were in the period of George Herbert Mead's work in the 1930s. These affirmations have become part and parcel of exegetical practice. However, Mead maintains that persons can take on the role or perspective of another. It is in the role taking that one comes

Canon/Canonical Criticism

These scholars, while not agreeing on every aspect of exegesis, do form a consensus: that form critical exegesis on the whole has taken the historical critical method too far. As the form critical style of historical criticism has occupied itself with the literary prehistory of the text, several theological points have been lost. 1) Prime among these is the issue of canon itself. The Church has never affirmed as canon the hypothetical reconstruction of the pre-literary stage of the biblical text. 2) Further, the method has meant that Scripture became available only to scholars and not to the pre-critical Christians such as Luther and Calvin as well as the people in the modern congregation. In order to correct these excesses, scholars such as Blenkinsopp, Brueggemann, Childs, Sanders, and Sheppard have made two affirmations: 1) The text should be taken first and foremost in its received form. 2) Scripture is a part of the believing community and should be read as the Church works to articulate faith in the history of interpretation of Scripture.

J. Blenkinsopp, *Prophecy and Canon* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame, 1977).

W. Brueggemann, *The Creative Word: Canon as a Model for Biblical Education* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1982).

B. Childs, *Biblical Theology in Crisis* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1970).

Childs, *The Book of Exodus*, OTL (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1974).

_____, *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979).

J. A. Sanders, *Torah and Canon* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1972).

_____, *Canon and Community: A Guide to Canonical Criticism* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984).

G.T. Sheppard, *Wisdom as Hermeneutical Construct*, BZAW 151 (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1980).

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closer to the truth or health. Hence, good exegesis is that which facilitates role taking.

Scripture is important in this process not only because the community of faith has said it is. Scripture and tradition, that is to say the history of interpretation of Scripture, are a reservoir of meaning from which the church and the synagogue have drank in their process of roletaking and socialization. Therefore it is appropriate that we begin there in the exegetical process.

In order that this exegetical process have power to work with instead of against the Holy Spirit it must begin in a spirit of truth. The truth is that exegesis is always a theology of the present. "The long and short of it is that the past (or the meaningful structure of the past) is as hypothetical as the future."[14] There is a sense in which the past can never be so fully reconstructed that we have it before us as a totality.

For the purposes of personal and social transformation, categories such as past, present, and future are not helpful. A useful alternative is to take seriously the idea that the present is past and present combined in the emerging event.[15] The roletaking that can take place in the process of exegesis in the midst of the emerging event opens up to the community of faith the transforming power of the Holy Spirit.

The method must ask a number of questions given the presuppositions and process laid forth thus far: 1) What is the community behind each interpretation of the text and how did they live as well as believe? 2) What are the communities that have shaped the subsequent development of the text and how do they relate to the other pluralities in Scripture? By so doing the method is paying attention to the biblical pluralism as well as the multivalent nature of many biblical texts. In answering these two questions we will pay close attention to the repetitions in a given text or trajectory of texts. 3) What perspective(s) are embodied in the texts? 4) How did those perspectives shape the community and how do they continue to shape and challenge us?

Method

There is no consensus on what canon/canonical criticism or a materialist reading of the Bible must do. Nevertheless, some rudimentary steps can be discerned. I want to point out that good theological exegesis is informed by steps but does not slavishly follow them. One should note that there is a new appreciation of certain aspects of methods that have been used previously but not in quite the same way.

Good exegesis is like good Chinese cooking. It is not so much the steps in the process as it is the issues addressed. Issues in Chinese cooking are the way certain vegetables complement each other in taste and appearance. Likewise the method here orients the student of the Bible to certain issues, not pedantically moving from step to step.

Materialists Approaches to the Bible

One of the assumptions of the materialists' readings of Scripture is that the text has to do with daily (i.e., material) life today as well as daily/material life in antiquity. As such, Scripture is tied to issues of struggle of the community of faith in antiquity and today. This approach is really several different approaches that share this hermeneutic. It first came to prominence with the work of Ferdinand Belo in 1974, *Lecture materialiste de l'evangile de Marc* [later translated into English *A Materialist Reading of the Gospel of Mark*]. It has found support among many European scholars such as Kuno Fussel and Michel Clevenot.

Ferdinand Belo, *A Materialist Reading of the Gospel of Mark* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1981).

Georges Casalis, *Correct Ideas Don't Fall from the Sky* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1984).

Michel Clevenot, *Materialist Approaches to the Bible* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1984).

Kuno Fussel, "Materialist Readings of the Bible: Report on an Alternative Approach to Biblical Texts," in *God of the Lowly: Socio-Historical Interpretations of the Bible* eds. Schottroff and Stegeman (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1984).

First, we should ask about the theopoetic structures of the text. These texts are the remnant of the contact between God and a believing community, and in that respect they are theopoetic. At the same time, they have structures and literary conventions. Materialist reading of the Bible as represented by F. Belo, M. Clevenot and K. Fussel has some intellectual dependence on structuralism, and because of this their writings stress issues of structure. Nevertheless, one does not have to be a structuralist to ponder profitably about the structures of a given text as the structure tells the audience something.[16] The canon/canonical critics likewise pay attention to issues of structure. They discuss this in terms of repetition as we have noted earlier in this essay.

Second, we should pay attention to the pluralities of the community of faith in the interpretation of the passage and in the creation of the passage. Such will often lead us to issues of religious conflict as well as the resignification of particular themes and texts by different communities of faith in the broader world of Hebrew religion and Judaism and later Christianity.

Finally, we ask, how did these people live? This means we pay attention not only to the ideas of the text but also the material culture. More to the point, what did these people eat? How did these people work? How did these things affect the way they gave witness to God's action in their midst?

Each of these issues or questions must be pressed at every level of the history of Judaism and Christianity. I shall propose six levels of Judaism and Christianity. I hope that you will refine these as you feel is appropriate.

1. We begin chronologically with the tradition history of the text as well as the inner biblical exegesis of the passage; that is, how later biblical authors make use of the passage. 2. We look at the passage in midrash, both Jewish and Christian. This midrash includes that which we find in the New Testament. 3. We examine the use of the passage in Jewish and Christian mysticism. 4. We look at the work of the reformers such as Luther and Calvin. 5. We bring in the interpretation of our passage by a marginal group, whether Hispanic, Asian, African or feminist. 6. In order to balance this we pay attention to the way dominant European culture, contemporary and older, has made use of the passage.

This seems like an awesome task. The answer is twofold. First, exercise some prudence. Don't try to read all the reformers; pick one or two. The same is true at every level of the history of interpretation: pick one or two representative persons. Sometimes you will not find all the information you would like for your pasage in a particular period, but do not be dismayed. Second, good exegesis is tied to prayer as a guide for the interpretation of Scripture.

The advantage of this evangelical approach to Scripture is threefold: 1) It brings in the underrepresented communities of faith in

The Frankfurt School

On February 3, 1923, the Institute for Social Research was founded as part of the University of Frankfurt. From its beginning it represented a different type of Marxism. During the years 1933-1950 the members of the Institute were forced into exile for the Neo-Hegelian philosophy. These were such men as Max Horkheimer, Herbert Marcuse, Erich Fromm, Thomas Adorno. They tried to provide a critical theory that could stand outside of both capitalism and Marxism as understood by the Eastern block nations. A major assumption was that contemporary societies, both Marxist and capitalist, are shaped by a bureaucracy which determines what is "acceptable" culture and behavior. Hence, for these men, theology as well as philosophy is political. The most prominent member of the Frankfurt School is Jurgen Habermas.

A. Arato & E. Gebhardte, *The Essential Frankfurt School Reader* (New York: Continuum, 1982).

T. Bottomore, *The Frankfurt School* (New York: Tavistock Publications, 1984).

M. Jay, *The Dialectical Imagination: A History of the Frankfurt School and the Institute of Social Research, 1923-1950* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1973).

D. Held, *Introduction to Critical Theory:Horkheimer to Habermas* (Berkeley: University of California, 1980).

our examination of Scripture. 2) It puts some order to the archeological information that we have but do not know what to do with at the present time. It gives new life to biblical archeology for the person interpreting particular passages. 3) This evangelical approach to Scripture is a combination of orientations that strives to make the exegetical task more wholistic.

Nevertheless, we barter not for exegetical methods on the open market. On the contrary, exegesis has as its goal personal and social transformation; its test is in that arena. Only you can administer the test and vouch for the results.

[1] M. Buss, "The Idea of Sitz im Leben—History and Critique," ZAW 90 (1978) 157-170.
[2] W. Brueggemann, The Creative Word (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983) 4.
[3] Ibid.
[4] B. Kittel, "Development of thhe Canonical Approach," JSOT 19 (1980) 5.
[5] K. Fussel, "Materialist Readings of the Bible: Report on an Alternative Approach to Biblical Texts," in God of the Lowly: Socio-Historical Interpretations of the Bible, eds. W. Schottroff and W. Stegemann (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1984) 15.
[6] Ibid.
[7] J. A. Sanders, "The Bible as Canon," Christian Century 1252.
[8] J. A. Sanders, Canon and Community (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984).
[9] A. von Juchen, "What a Pastor Expects from a Materialist Reading of the Bible: A Letter," in God of the Lowly: Socio-Historical Interpretations of the Bible, eds. W. Schotroff and W. Stegemann (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1984) 7.
[10] G. T. Sheppard, "Canon Criticism: The Proposal of Brevard Childs and an Assessment for Evangelical Hermeneutics," Studia Biblica et Theologica 4 (1974) 15.
[11] Sanders, "The Bible as Canon," 1254.
[12] J. Habermas, Communication and the Evolution of Society (Boston: Beacon, 1979).
[13] A. Smith, Jr., The Relational Self: Ethics and Therapy from a Black Church Perspective (Nashville: Abingdon, 1982) 67.
[14] G. H. Mead, The Philosophy of the Present (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1982) 12.
[15] Mead, Philosophy of the Present, 23.
[16] Fussel, "Materialist Readings of the Bible," 21.

Epistemological Foundations For Science and Theology

by Paul Hiebert

Christian theologies, like other systems of human thought, emerge in different historical and cultural contexts. To be sure, Christians seek to root their theologies in the revelation by God of Himself in history, particularly as this is recorded in the Bible. But this does not preclude the fact that they are deeply influenced by the cultures in which they live.

It should not surprise us, therefore, that theologians of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries were influenced by modern science which had captured western thought with its obvious successes. Many, in fact, came to see theology as a kind of science. For example, Alexander (1888:1:1) defined systematic theology as "the science of God." Wiley, Pipe, Wakefield, Hovey, Shedd and Hodge did the same (Wiley 1960:1:14-15, Shedd 1889, Hodge 1928:15-17). Chafer (1947:v) noted that "Systematic Theology, the greatest of the sciences, has fallen upon evil days." Strong defined theology as "the science of God and of the relationships between God and the universe." He added,

> If the universe were God, theology would be the only science. Since the universe is but a manifestation of God and is distinct from God, there are sciences of nature and of the mind. Theology is 'the science of the sciences,' not in the sense of including all these sciences, but in the sense of using their results and of showing their underlying ground (1972:1)

More recently, Griffiths (1980:169-173) has sought to show that theology is indeed a science.

Often this definition of theology as a kind of science meant no more than that theology was an orderly and systematic pursuit of knowledge. Theologians have long emulated philosophers in this. But in many instances there was an attempt to build theology on the apparently solid epistemological foundations that seem to make science so certain and trustworthy. In any case, however, we as Christians use the term "science," its definition and nature is largely controlled by the modern natural scientists.

In the past decades a radical change has been taking place in the epistemological foundations of science, a change in the way science itself is perceived. This change has profound implications for those seeking to integrate science and theology, and, indeed, for theology itself, for the epistemological crisis in the sciences raises questions about the epistemological foundations of theology and about the relationship of science and theology.

The crisis has not yet been resolved in the sciences. Because of this, and because I am not a trained philosopher, this article is more a set of questions than of answers. It is easier for us to stay within the fields of our specialization, but this limits us to narrow questions and to piecemeal answers. We dare not avoid the big questions for fear of being wrong. The consequences of the current epistemological crisis are far reaching, and will affect us as Christians whether we examine them or not.

A word about my assumptions: I am committed to the full authority of the Scriptures, and to an evangelical anabaptist understanding of Christian theology. I am also an anthropologist and missionary seeking to understand our modern, pluralistic world, and to make Christ known within it.

The Crisis

In its early stages, science was based largely on an uncritical form of realism. While most philosophers and theologians argued from positions of idealism, scientists, with a few exceptions, "assumed that scientific theories were accurate descriptions of the world as it is in itself" (Barbour 1974:34). Scientific knowledge was seen as a photograph of reality, a complete and accurate picture of what is really real. In its positivistic forms it rejected metaphysics and transempirical realities. Consequently there was little room for theology or integration. This stance seemed justified in view of the great strides made by science in its examination of nature.

The certainty of scientific knowledge, and the optimism that marked its early years were undermined from within. There were three major attacks on the epistemological foundations of naive realism, all reflecting the growing study by scientists of the scientific process itself.

First, in the physical sciences, Einstein in relativity, Bohr in quantum mechanics and others showed that the personal factor of the scientist inevitably enters into scientific knowledge. There is no such thing as totally objective knowledge. Second, social scientists began to study the psychological, social and cultural factors involved in the scientific endeavor, and demonstrated that there are no unbiased theories. Science is built on the cultural assumptions of the west, and is deeply influenced by social and psychological processes. Third, historians and philosophers of science such as Polanyi (1958), Kuhn (1970) and Laudin (1977) found that science is not cumulative and exhaustive. It is a sequence of competing paradigms or models of reality. But if theories taken as fact today are replaced by others tomorrow, what is the nature of scientific knowledge? Clearly we can no longer equate scientific knowledge about reality with reality itself. The old assumption that scientific theories have a one-to-one correspondence with reality has been shattered. We cannot have science without metaphysics. We must understand it within its historical, sociocultural and psychological settings. Whatever it is, science is not a photograph of reality.

Where To?

Forced to leave the comfortable certainty of naive realism, scientists are now looking for a new epistemological foundation. What are their options?

To answer this question, we need a taxonomy of epistemological systems, a meta-epistemological grid by which we can compare and contrast various epistemological options. There are dangers, of

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