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Hermeneutic(s) (Reading Programs in Theology)

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HERMENEUTIC(S)*

MARTIN H. SCHARLEMANN

(This article continues the series of presentations titled "Reading Programs in Theology" and offered under the sponsorship of the Department of Continuing Education of Concordia Seminary. The series is designed to provide reading courses in various areas of theology, offering brief introductions to limited fields of theological study combined with a recommended bibliography for further study by individuals or groups. Enrollees are entitled to purchase the books discussed in these articles at a discount price through the Seminary Store. For additional information interested persons may write to the Director of Continuing Education, Concordia Seminary. A new course will appear each quarter. The accompanying study guide in the field of Biblical interpretation was prepared by Martin H. Scharlemann, graduate professor of exegetical theology at Concordia Seminary. ED.)

I. ORIGIN OF THE DISTINCTION IN TERMS

The ancient Greeks called him Hermes. In their view of things he had the job of communicating what the gods on Olympus might want men to know and what human beings, in turn, hoped to bring to the attention of their several divinities. His name therefore went into the making of the word "hermeneutics," which was first used to designate the art of getting one's message across to others and only later began to be applied to the formal study of the rules and principles governing the task of interpretation.

As part of a book title the word was first employed in 1654, when Johann Konrad Dannhauer's formidable treatise on Biblical interpretation appeared in print

* This is a survey article. In such presentations certain oversimplifications are bound to occur. They are known to the author and will be obvious to the reader.

under the name *Hermeneutica sacra sive methodus exponendarum sacrarum litterarum*. This volume was written in the tradition of hermeneutics as the discipline which dealt with the techniques employed to discover and to explain the sense of ancient documents. Books of this kind normally dealt with such matters as the text, the qualifications of the interpreter, figures of speech, and the history of interpretation. That epoch came to an end in Europe with the publication of Frederik Torm's *Nytestamentlig Hermeneutik*.¹ Only a few examples of this kind of approach remain today.

Torm still worked on the assumption that the relationship of the exegete to the Biblical text could be adequately described in terms of the subject-object formula. He accepted as basic Harnack's insistence that the theological task consists of getting "intellectual control of the object."² But even while Torm was at work on his *opus magnum*, a contemporary of his, Wilhelm Dilthey, took issue with the notion that the Biblical interpreter deals with his text in the fashion of a mathematician working at a problem in arithmetic. For his own work he adopted a distinction between

¹ Published by G. E. C. Gads Forlag, Copenhagen, 1928; the first German edition appeared in 1930.

² Quoted from "Ein Briefwechsel mit Adolf Harnack" in Karl Barth, *Theologische Fragen und Antworten: Gesammelte Vorträge*, III (Zollikon: Evangelischer Verlag, 1957), 8 and 14; cf. James M. Robinson and John B. Cobb, Jr., *The New Hermeneutic*, II, of *New Frontiers in Theology* (New York: Harper & Row, 1964), p. 25.

"explanation" and "understanding" as it had begun to emerge in the 19th century and as it is now described at great length in Joachim Wach's monumental three volumes entitled *Das Verstehen*.³

When the limitations and distortions of the Cartesian relationship between subject and object became obvious, a new way of looking at things began to develop in the Western World. Exegetes too became increasingly aware of the importance of the interpreter's understanding of himself and of the historical moment in which he was at work for an adequate grasp and practice of interpreting Scripture. That is to say, they began to feel the distance created by history.

The language gap between the Biblical languages and modern tongues had been taken into account for several centuries. But the realization that Western man's whole outlook on life had been revolutionized by the scientific approach developed rather slowly. In fact, only in recent decades have Biblical interpreters taken full cognizance of the extent of the change introduced into our culture by our transition to the world of the 20th century. Exegetes too have been compelled to reckon with the fact that mankind has moved into the Einstein universe, where everything is in movement and open to the future.

Twenty years ago Bishop Anders Nygren wrote a short but incisive essay for *The Journal of Religion* entitled "The Self-Evident in History."⁴ Here he sketched

³ Joachim Wach, *Das Verstehen. Grundzüge einer Geschichte der hermeneutischen Theorie im 19. Jahrhundert* (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr).

⁴ Anders Nygren, "The Self-Evident in History," *The Journal of Religion*, XXVIII (1948), 235—41.

the effects which a change in world outlook has on theology. The article describes the ferment created by the introduction of the Ptolemaic view of the universe during the third and fourth centuries of our era. Until then interpreters had worked with the Biblical description of the *kosmos*. Suddenly they were faced with a new understanding of the universe. Out of this confrontation developed the vigorous and often violent discussions which in time produced the Nicene Creed. The Ptolemaic view gave way to the Copernican theory at the time of the Reformation. Again there were upheavals in theological thought. In our own day we live surrounded by the revolutionary consequences inherent in the adoption of the Einstein universe with its insistence that nothing is static and that almost everything must be viewed in terms of function rather than of being.

An awareness of the historical distance between text and interpreter, induced by life in a world of rapid movement into the future, has created the need to distinguish sharply between what a Biblical passage once meant and what it signifies today. With the many textual, grammatical, and lexicographical tools available today, it is a comparatively simple task to determine what a Scriptural passage once meant. It is much more difficult to transpose that meaning into the contemporary situation, because of the size of the gap which has grown out of our moving into a new kind of universe.

This transition is the most drastic intellectual fact of our history. No interpreter can leave it out of account. In fact, his task has become that of analogically translating from one universe of discourse to

another, fully cognizant of the fact that, in the contemporary view of life, truth is not just something that has been delivered in the past to be uncovered or recovered in every age but is fundamentally to be discovered anew as life moves into the future.⁵

Out of this upheaval has sprung the theological discipline of hermeneutics, understood as the study of the many factors involved in the work of translating meaning from one world of thought to another. For all practical purposes the singular "hermeneutic" has become the doctrine of the Word of God, as Robert Funk has pointed out.⁶ Roughly speaking, the new hermeneutic may be divided into what we might call existentialist hermeneutic and historical hermeneutic. We shall take each of these in turn, quite well aware that such a distinction overlooks all the many nuances within and between these two basic positions.

II. THE ROLE OF LANGUAGE IN HERMENEUTIC

Central to existential hermeneutic is the recognition that language itself constitutes interpretation. Accordingly Gerhard Ebeling and Ernst Fuchs have introduced into the method of exegesis their penetrating analysis of the function of language. Ebeling's views are set forth in his article on "Hermeneutik" as offered in the most recent edition of *Die Religion in Geschichte und Gegenwart* (III, 242—62); and Ernst

Fuchs' position may be examined in his book, *Hermeneutik*, published in 1954.⁷

While we may quarrel with some of the individual conclusions reached by both Ebeling and Fuchs, their work makes it abundantly clear that the old subject-object scheme is in fact reversed in the task of interpreting Scripture. In a very real sense a Biblical text interprets the exegete; for it confronts him with words that already comprise an explanation of what God has done for His people to provide them with an insight into reality.

An example or two may clarify the intention of both Ebeling and Fuchs in their observation that working with a text creates what they respectively call a "Wortgeschehen" or a "Sprachereignis." A simple instance might be that of Simon Peter's confession, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God" (Matt. 16:15 RSV). Here is language which reflects a relationship in force even prior to the moment of verbal response. What is more, the words are such as could not have been spoken except within the context of a people which had been given the promises of a coming Messiah. Matthew can report Peter's statement meaningfully because He was writing for persons who stood in continuity with Israel. In short, the language of Peter's confession may be called performatory rather than discursive. His words are those of proclamation, offering an interpretation of the words and works of Jesus of Nazareth. They lay a claim on the hearer and reader instead of simply reporting an incident from the remote past.

We may discover a second instance in

⁵ Cf. John Dillenberger in James M. Robinson and John B. Cobb, Jr., *The New Hermeneutic*, p. 153.

⁶ Robert W. Funk, *Language, Hermeneutic and Word of God* (New York: Harper & Row, 1966), p. 14.

⁷ Ernst Fuchs, *Hermeneutik* (Bad Cannstatt: R. Müllerschön, 1954).

the parable known as the Laborers in the Vineyard (Matt. 20:1-16). Much of it consists in a description of what could well have been an everyday occurrence in Biblical times, except for the householder's decision to pay every workman the same wage. That action shatters everything familiar in the parable. It turns "everydayness inside out or upside down"⁸ and thereby confronts the interpreter with the challenge to make up his mind about Jesus Christ, in whose service the procedure followed by the employer becomes part of a radically new relationship. This is a way of saying that reading this parable is a language-event which insists that the exegete must choose between two worlds. Matthew records the telling of this parable on the basis of an interpretation of reality which he has come to share with Jesus of Nazareth.

III. THE PROBLEM OF CONTINUITY

Matthew's task was a comparatively simple one. He wrote to and for people who in general shared the outlook on the world within which Jesus Himself had lived and spoken. In our age, however, we live in a universe of thought and discourse radically different from that of the first century. How, then, is it possible to transmit to people of today a message rooted in an era which looked at the world in quite another way? What does it take to translate words spoken and written long ago into terms and concepts which might be comprehensible to people living some 1,900 years later? Here we confront the problem of continuity.

On this point Dilthey used to say that "hermeneutics is the art of understanding

⁸ Funk, p. 161.

written expressions of life."⁹ For him "life" represented the common factor of existence. Life is the ground out of which all historical manifestations originate, he was sure. What brings text and interpreter together in a meaningful way is the fact that both belong to history.

Later theologians built on Dilthey's suggestion and refined it. At the present time, as we have already indicated, two general solutions are offered to the problem of continuity. They represent the two main schools of thought in the hermeneutical efforts of our day. One group of theologians follows in the tradition of Bultmann's existentialist categories; the other concentrates more on the nature of history than on the dimension of individual existence.

Theologians who have chosen to take the path set by Heidegger and Bultmann are persuaded that the structures of existence are the same from moment to moment, and that therefore it is possible to transmit meaning from any point in the past to the present. From their perspective understanding means the process of entering into that occurrence of transmission in which past and present are constantly being mediated on the basis of universal human nature. Such commonality of experience renders possible man's capacity for community both in speech and understanding. This is the "metaphysical *a priori*" for the existentialist approach to the work of Biblical interpretation.

IV. EVALUATING EXISTENTIALIST HERMENEUTIC

What shall we make of this view of the exegete's task? It may perhaps be

⁹ Wilhelm Dilthey, *Gesammelte Schriften*, V (Stuttgart, 1957), 332.

useful to note, first of all, that the interests of this method are highly anthropocentric. It offers at best a Christology from below.

Second, man is viewed in terms of the categories of being rather than of function. The hermeneutic of existentialism is persuaded that our age has raised the issue of man's being acutely enough to provide a point of contact between it and the message of the Scripture. Yet it is very questionable whether the Biblical revelation moves in these categories at all. It prefers the concepts of function and eschatology. But what difference does it make? A great deal.

In the first instance, Scriptures indicate that man, the individual, was created to fulfill a function, namely that of response to his Creator in terms of service and worship. Accordingly the central question of life is not "Who am I?" but "What am I here for?" When Saul of Tarsus, for example, was confronted with the risen Lord on the road to Damascus, he was moved to ask, "What shall I do, Lord?" (Acts 22:10), and not "Who am I?"

With its interest centered in anthropology the existentialist kind of interpretation tends to internalize what the Scriptures describe as being part of the world around men. The "principalities and powers" of Pauline theology, to take an instance, are seen in terms of the individual's experience of bondage to himself. Any suggestion that the apostle might have intended to indicate that social and religious structures could be demonic in their effect would not fit the categories used.

Moving on to the next point, we must observe that a concentration on the individual in his existential situation obscures

the significance of history for an understanding of the redemptive activities of God. The central thrust of the Gospel proclamation is that the situation of all mankind was radically changed on the morning when our Lord rose from the dead. At that moment in history all men stood justified before God. This event has endowed the centuries subsequent to the resurrection with a new quality.

As the existentialist interpreter sees it, however, such temporal expressions as "then" and "now" refer to the status of the individual as he confronts the *kerygma*. Man lives before Easter as long as he has not come to an adequate self-understanding and so achieved authentic existence. He moves into the era of *Anno Domini* when he has come to an understanding of himself. At that moment he is also at the *parousia*. This is how existentialist hermeneutic views eschatology. Whatever years, decades, or centuries may still be before us, these are without great significance in terms of redemption. Liberation has already taken place in the man who has reached self-understanding.

The corollary of this, of course, is that history before Christ is devoid of great significance. Exegetes of this tradition show an astonishing lack of interest in the Old Testament. Accordingly they rarely reckon with what is surely the very heart of the Biblical revelation, namely the story of God's dealings with His people over the centuries—with Israel in days of old and with the church since Easter and Pentecost.

It should not surprise us, moreover, that there is little appreciation of what the church is and does. To be sure, Ernst Fuchs allows himself a bow in the general

direction of the church by speaking of it as an assembly where the language-event of proclamation takes place.¹⁰ Yet this remark reflects a rather stunted understanding of the church, especially in terms of community and continuity.

Oddly enough, it is a contemporary German philosopher, Hans-Georg Gadamer, who has taken the time to point up this major deficiency in the hermeneutic of existentialism. He has observed that self-reflection, experience, and autobiography build no bridges to such great historic realities as society and the state. "Long before we understand ourselves in retrospection," says Gadamer, "we understand ourselves as a matter of course in the family, society, and state in which we live. . . . This historic 'prejudice' with which our experience is loaded is primarily our language."¹¹

No Biblical interpreter should need this reminder, since the Scriptures themselves insist that by Baptism we get to understand ourselves as members of another great historic reality, the church. Our individual self-reflection is only a flash within the flow of life as experienced by the people of God through the centuries.

Finally, there is very little in the presuppositions of this type of hermeneutic which would move the interpreter of Scripture from the intellectual activity of unfolding a text to the response of worship, especially not in its sense of actualization. That is to say, the sacramental dimension

of God's saving acts finds no way of expressing itself in this kind of interpretation. The exegete is nowhere challenged to place himself into that community which, in its worship, has been called into being to "re-present" the history and experience of God's people.

By now it should be clear that many interpreters of Scripture have found the existentialist approach to be defective. They have turned, therefore, to that method which we have called historical hermeneutic.

V. EVALUATING HISTORICAL HERMENEUTIC

The word "history" does not occur in the Scriptures; and yet the Scriptures offer us an interpretation of what has gone and is going on in the world. They provide us with an "aeon theology,"¹² containing as they do the witness to God's dealings with His people within history; and they give us a glimpse of the origin and the destiny of His children before and beyond history. The whole account of Israel's relationship with Yahweh is set within the context of that people's dealings with surrounding nations. It is impossible to comprehend the Old Testament fully without taking history itself seriously.

A whole school of interpreters therefore is persuaded that the search for the meaning of existence is hardly an adequate description of the purpose of Biblical interpretation. Men participate in history. They suffer from its absurdities, its chaos, and its transiency. They inquire after the goal and purpose of the historical process. The Scriptures speak just to this search for

¹⁰ Ernst Fuchs, *Zur Frage nach dem historischen Jesus* (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1960), p. 426.

¹¹ Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode: Grundzüge einer philosophischen Hermeneutik* (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1960), p. 275.

¹² Hans Joachim Schoeps, *Paul* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1961), p. 173.

significance, since they describe the unfolding of God's plan of salvation within history and so present a prophecy of history.

The Biblical essence of the kind of hermeneutic which helps the interpreter to see the historical dimensions of revelation may be found in Oscar Cullmann's *Salvation in History*.¹³ This volume takes up at length such problems as the constant and the contingent in history, the connection between Israel, Christ, and the church as seen in the light of movement within history, and the phenomenon of recapitulation, to which Irenaeus already called attention.

A number of systematicians have taken up this approach to hermeneutical issues. Roughly speaking, these men are working in a way analogous to Whitehead's philosophy of organism with its replacement of static ontological categories by those which represent movement and function. Their central conviction might be said to be that the Scriptures are concerned above all with God's participation in the events of the world, and that whatever is said about man is conditioned by that perspective.

Among the representatives of this school of thought we must include especially Wolfhart Pannenberg and Jürgen Moltmann. The aim of the former is not to provide a Christian narration of history but to achieve a "total view of reality as history directed by promises toward fulfillment."¹⁴ The latter has refined some

¹³ Oscar Cullmann, *Salvation in History* (New York: Harper & Row, 1967).

¹⁴ Wolfhart Pannenberg, "Hermeneutics and Universal History" in *History and Hermeneutic* (Vol. IV of *Journal for Theology and the Church*), p. 147.

of the theses of Pannenberg to present what is currently called a "theology of hope," in keeping with the title of Moltmann's most important work.¹⁵

The general accents of this type of hermeneutic echo some of the major trends in contemporary thought. Their parallels may be found among the developments taking place in the arts, in the new left of political life, and in current revolutionary views on the structures and institutions of our culture. In theological terms, historical hermeneutic consists of an attempt to underline the importance of eschatology for an understanding of history and for the action which needs to be taken by Christians to improve the social order. In this kind of context hermeneutics has become the art of understanding all the "living documents": texts, institutions, and events as historical expressions of life within their respective setting.¹⁶

Working with Scripture from this point of view offers the opportunity to deal more adequately with what is the substance of Biblical revelation, namely, the mighty acts of God. These can be understood not only in terms of *pro nobis* but also as having occurred and occurring *extra nos*. Instead of internalizing the Pauline cosmology, as the hermeneutic of existentialism does, it can be seen in the broader view of God's liberating intent for the whole universe. Historical hermeneutic sets before the interpreter the possibility of viewing what is going on in history as it looks from the end of time with the eyes of faith. Furthermore, it offers a way of

¹⁵ Jürgen Moltmann, *Theology of Hope* (New York: Harper & Row, 1967).

¹⁶ Moltmann, "Toward a Political Hermeneutics of the Gospel" in *Union Seminary Quarterly Review*, XXIII (1968), 319.

making more relevant to our day the Biblical response to the feelings of transiency and of meaninglessness which haunt so much of society.

Having said all this, it is still imperative to indicate the points at which the hermeneutic of history, as it is generally understood today, falls short of doing full justice to the task of Biblical interpretation. We must in conclusion therefore attempt to suggest the kind of hermeneutics to be practiced in a church body which proposes to stand in the solid tradition of Lutheranism. We shall call it the hermeneutic of radical orthodoxy.

VI. THE HERMENEUTIC OF RADICAL ORTHODOXY

It would be folly to ignore the contemporary movements in the theology of Biblical interpretation. If we failed to take these developments into account, we would only be imitating Fundamentalism in its insistence that everything remains static. At the end of that road lies the graveyard of irrelevance. We cannot escape the fact that mankind lives in a world of movement and rapid change. Very few things remain as they once were. What is more, we can learn much for Biblical interpretation from what is going on all around us in the area of theological thought.

The hermeneutic of existentialism has contributed a great deal to our awareness of the pressures and structures of human existence. It has much to offer in alerting the interpreter to the fact that his own understanding is part of his historic-ness and must therefore be reckoned with. Yet it fails to exploit its own insight into the commonality of man's existence by not taking advantage of the observation that

the chief ingredient for continuity and constancy is to be found in Luther's insistence on a proper application of Law and Gospel. God's judgment and His mercy are exhibited to create the basic constant factors in existence as it moves from day to day, from age to age, forward into God's future.

The teaching of the Law and the proclamation of the Gospel are carried on in the church. The existence of this community of believers constitutes a historic fact of crucial importance. While we can fully appreciate the insistence of historical hermeneutic on man's participation in history, its accents do not ring out as certainly as they might, because the proponents of this methodology rarely take very seriously the existence of the church in the sense of Augustana VII.

It is not enough to say with Moltmann, for example, that "the constant factor in the changing situation of history is the relation of spirit and faith, of freedom and life, to Jesus the Crucified One."¹⁷ Such a statement does not go far enough. It leaves out of account the church as the instrument of continuity and constancy amid all the contingencies of history. It is within this community alone that men may participate in the only reliable "signs" of the Easter victory as seen from the end of history, namely Word and Sacrament.

Many elements in the "theology of hope" are useful for Biblical interpretation. In general, however, this school of thought operates with a theology of glory rather than with a "theology of the cross." That is to say, its adherents seem to be much too optimistic about the human situation, failing to recognize that the future is not

¹⁷ Ibid.

kept open by our dreams but by God's promises, that there is much in these promises to suggest that the course of history is not running upward to the extension of justice and freedom for mankind as a whole but downhill to levels of deeper tragedy and greater violence.

What keeps the Biblical interpreter from becoming disappointed with the facts of history is his faith that "in, with, and under" all of these transient and ambivalent phenomena the Lord's resurrection triumph is at work. It is this assurance that empowers the sources of social imagination to work at freedom and justice for his fellow men. But even while the exegete is busy with these things in helping to change life, he remains cognizant of the fact that whatever measure of liberation is achieved among men comes as a gift of that God whose kingdom men can only receive from His grace and never attain by themselves.

Sitting rather loosely to the Lord's own predictions of the terror to prevail at the end of time is the symptom of a more serious ailment in both existential and historical hermeneutic. That ailment is its unwillingness to take in dead earnest the Biblical text as we have it. Both

methods suffer from a failure to appreciate fully the nature of Biblical authority as established by the church's acceptance of the yardstick of canonicity in the selection of those books which comprise the Old and the New Testaments. For with the aid of historical criticism it is possible to dissolve such words as occur in the gospels about the end of all things. It is done by insisting that these predictions are only the product of a *Gemeinde*theologie, which was probably mistaken. This approach constitutes a failure to take cognizance of the fact that apostle and evangelist wrote under the direction of the exalted Lord, who guided His church in her confrontation with the world.

The hermeneutic of existentialism and of history founders on this question of authority. It is to this issue that radical orthodoxy must address itself with understanding and vigor, lest theology become one of the sources of that tribulation which characterizes the approach of the end. The Portuguese have a proverb, "God writes straight, but with crooked lines." It is the business of Biblical interpretation to trace these lines in order to discover and exhibit the constancy of God's determination to lead men to salvation.

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 6. * Mayer, Herbert T. *Interpreting the Holy Scriptures*. St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1967. This paperback was written for use in the Sunday school teacher training program of The Lutheran Church — Missouri Synod. An instructor's manual and workbook goes with it. The use of these materials will provide a broad frame of reference within which to examine specifics.
 7. * Wood, James D. *The Interpretation of the Bible*. London: Gerald Duckworth and Co., 1958. Here is an excellent sketch of the history of interpretation. This volume has the additional virtue of being very inexpensive.
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 4. Frör, Kurt. *Biblische Hermeneutik*. Chr. Kaiser Verlag, 1961. It is most unfortunate that the project of putting this work into English foundered for lack of funds. This is a thoroughly Lutheran work, done by a parish pastor. It is full of specific examples of how the principles of hermeneutics apply to different kinds of Biblical materials.
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