

Concordia Theological Monthly



J A N U A R Y • 1 9 5 8



ARCHIVES

BRIEF STUDIES

A THEOLOGY FOR BIBLICAL INTERPRETATION

[ED. NOTE: This paper was read before the New Testament section of the Society for Biblical Literature and Exegesis meeting for its ninety-second annual session in New York City.]

Among Biblical scholars there is a growing demand for some valid principles of interpretation that will serve to give relevance and meaning to the extensive and intensive researches going on in this area. In an opening essay of a rather bulky volume prepared to honor Prof. C. H. Dodd of Cambridge, Mr. E. C. Blackwell, for example, makes the apt observation: "It has been too long assumed that one who has had the discipline of historical study of the Bible is *eo ipso* equipped to expound it. It is time to awake out of sleep and put the tools forged by criticism to their proper use. Hermeneutics has lain too long neglected."¹

More than a quarter century has passed since the publication of Frederick Torm's *Hermeneutik*, the last in a number of notable works on the art of interpretation, most of them dating from the turn of the century. All of these books from past decades are oriented, quite naturally, to conditions and problems that no longer prevail among us to the same degree. So much energy has been expended and so many discoveries have been made in Biblical research since these publications were given to the world that some concentrated and sustained effort in this field becomes increasingly urgent, particularly among Protestant scholars.

Some activity along this line, of course, is going on in countless divinity schools; yet most of us are being left in the plains of Moab though we should prefer to be led beyond Jordan. It is characteristic of our present situation that fewer than a hundred pages in Richardson and Schweitzer's *Biblical Authority for Today* are devoted to problems and principles of interpretation. Included in this section is a unique document prepared by the Ecumenical Study Conference at Wadham College, Oxford, a little more than seven years ago. It is called "Guiding Principles for the Interpretation of the Bible." The guidelines set forth there are truly heartening; yet they cover only three printed

¹ "The Task of Exegesis" in *The Background of the New Testament and Its Eschatology*, ed. W. D. Davies and D. Daube (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1956), p. 5.

pages and are confined to the question of the social and political implications of Biblical texts. The time would seem to be ripe, therefore, for giving more than an occasional thought to the major problems we face in the art of Biblical interpretation.

This morning we have time to touch briefly on one matter only. We want to raise the question of presuppositions, comprising as they do what we might call the first hermeneutical circle.

It is hardly necessary in a distinguished group such as this to observe that it is utterly naive to expect an interpreter to come to the text of Scripture in a totally objective spirit, with his mind a *tabula rasa*, so to speak. Any interpreter starts his task with certain presuppositions, drawn from his own subjective background and experience, if from nowhere else. Now the question arises, What shall our presuppositions be? And how can they be shown to have maximum validity?

The Tübingen school, and Ferdinand Christian Baur in particular, approached the task of interpretation with assumptions taken over from Hegelian philosophy. Its adherents looked everywhere for evidences of a running conflict in the theology of the early church. For the validity of the view that there had been such a struggle they appealed to the famous triad of Hegel, which they felt controlled and directed every aspect of life.

The efforts of the exponents of the social gospel to have the Scriptures, particularly the New Testament, read like the manifesto of some socialist party are too well known for their superficiality to merit more than a passing reference. The postulates of this method could be derived only from the rather parochial outlook of an exaggerated American social and political activism eventually absorbed by the philosophy of the New Deal. Possibly an all-time low for this approach was established by Bouck White in his translation of John 5:17 as follows: "My father is a workingman to this day, and I am a workingman myself."² This could be done only in the light of categories derived from a philosophy dominated by the idea of class struggle.

The liberal of the recent past, however, deserves a more serious reference. He approached the task of Biblical interpretation with a method and concepts taken from the study of comparative religion, on the theory that the key of meaning could be found within this circle of postulates. Lest I be misunderstood, let me hasten to add that we owe much to the representatives of this school of thought. Because of the refreshing courage and integrity demonstrated by some of these

² *The Call of the Carpenter* (New York: Doubleday, 1911).

men, Biblical interpretation will never be the same again. Yet when all is said and done, these presuppositions brought us no farther than to a point where many of us would have to agree with G. Ernest Wright. He sums up his reaction to present methods of Old Testament research: "Most of our histories of Israel attempt to marshal the facts and the theories based upon them, in a secularized manner, without any serious attempt to deal with that which was the chief concern of the Biblical writers themselves. The Church cannot afford the luxury of such a seemingly 'objective' approach. Its primary aim must be to view Biblical history through the eyes of its interpreters, grappling with those vital questions of faith and meaning with which the Biblical authors themselves were concerned."³

Rudolf Bultmann has addressed himself in his own way to the problem of raising the art of interpretation above the level of a secular pursuit. Yet, for all his effort, he has landed in the awkward position of establishing as the center of Biblical interpretation the task of understanding one's own existence. This method falls short of taking into account the full claims of the Scriptures on the interpreter; for, as Professor Cullmann has shown, "That which throughout the New Testament characterizes the faith in the divine act accomplished through Christ is the complete surrender to an event in the past which certainly happened *for us*, but *for us* because entirely *outside us*."⁴ Bultmann's entire description of exegesis as the process of interpreting the mythological language of the New Testament message in terms of modern thought is of dubious validity because it operates on presuppositions derived primarily from Heidegger's existentialist philosophy. Moreover, it is only another, though very learned, attempt to get on top of Scripture rather than working with it and under it. As a consequence, the interpreter finds himself once more "incurvatus in se."

In view of the fact that we have got into something of a cul-de-sac, I should like to be so bold as to suggest that for our day and age we need to re-create the first hermeneutical circle along different lines. Perhaps we can get a hint from Origen's monumental work, *Περὶ ἀρχῶν*. This giant of the early church saw in the distinction between *γράμμα* and *πνεῦμα* in 2 Cor. 3:6 the clue to an understanding of the

³ "From the Bible to the Modern World," in *Biblical Authority for Today*, ed. Alan Richardson and Wolfgang Schweitzer (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1951), p. 222.

⁴ In a penetrating analysis of Bultmann's method, in *CONCORDIA THEOLOGICAL MONTHLY*, XXVII (Jan. 1956), 13—24.

two levels of existence that confront us in our study of the Scriptures. He made the fatal mistake, however, of identifying these two terms with the vertical distinction made by Plato between the world of the material and the realm of ideas. He was not far from the Kingdom, shall we say; and yet he took a turn that produced the allegorical method with all of its subsequent excesses.

Origen was wrong in filling two Biblical terms with extra-Biblical content. Yet the two words he chose for the fixed position of his approach can be very useful, provided they are given a Biblical frame of reference. May I suggest how this can be done to provide a theology for Biblical interpretation?

The distinction set up by the apostle himself between $\gamma\rho\acute{\alpha}\mu\mu\alpha$, on the one hand, and $\pi\nu\epsilon\tilde{\upsilon}\mu\alpha$, on the other, is one that runs through the whole of Scripture. He used these terms to describe two perspectives in God's dealings with men as He reveals Himself in the mighty acts recorded for us by the sacred writers. Both aspects are subsumed under one of the primary concepts of the Bible, and one to which Paul himself gave much time and thought; namely, God's $\eta\grave{\rho}\eta\zeta$, for which he chose as the nearest Greek equivalent the term $\delta\iota\kappa\alpha\iota\omicron\sigma\acute{\upsilon}\nu\eta$.

This $\eta\grave{\rho}\eta\zeta$, as we meet it in the Bible, is that activity of God's by which he breaks out of His Wholly Otherness with a consuming desire for communion with His creatures. His intent results in that vast cosmic drama into which we are drawn as we read our Scriptures and of which God Himself is the chief actor as well as its author.

As God extends His invitation to fellowship, the response on the part of man is not uniform. The majority in Israel, both old and new, decline or proudly reject the offer. This is the tragic theme of our drama! Men often prefer to continue living on a level which in theological terms might be described as *coram mundo*. They see in God's covenant and in His rule no more than the inconvenient demands of One who intrudes into their lives. They prefer darkness, for which some Biblical equivalents are $\gamma\rho\acute{\alpha}\mu\mu\alpha$, "shadow," "vanity," "type," and "law." For them God's righteousness turns into the consuming fire of His judgment.

A small minority, however, accepts God's offer of grace in its encounter with God; and these discover that they themselves have $\delta\iota\kappa\alpha\iota\omicron\sigma\acute{\upsilon}\nu\eta$ as nothing less than a gift from God, made available by our Lord as the One who absorbed the demands of an holy God in Himself, beginning His redemptive ministry with the very significant remark to John the Baptizer, "Thus it becometh us to fulfill all right-

ousness." The effect on the creature of walking humbly with his God on the Creator's terms is this, that he finds himself on a different level of existence, to which we might apply the phrase *coram Deo* and for which the Scriptures use "light," πνεῦμα, "truth," "fulfillment," and "Gospel."

The concepts γράμμα and πνεῦμα, then, lead us to perceive that the dualism apparent to any serious student of the Scriptures is not to be explained in terms of Platonic definitions, nor in the light of the Hegelian distinction between eternal ideas and temporary forms, nor in the light of categories derived from social activism or even comparative religion, but rather from the Biblical frame of reference, which keeps suggesting that as the whole man encounters the Wholly Other, he responds in faith or rebels in pride, thus creating the two levels of existence which constitute a primary element in the drama of our salvation.

Now, if we construct our first hermeneutical circle out of this raw material found in the Biblical quarry itself, we shall get some rather exciting results, not the least of which is that we shall be using pre-suppositions which depend for their validation on the very documents we propose to interpret. And this, I submit, is a great gain. Moreover, we shall be led to discover the unity of the Scriptural revelation, all of it being an account of God's activity designed to re-establish His rule over His creation. This story moves through a series of concentric circles, starting, in the Old Testament, with the outermost circle of all created beings and moving inward through Israel and the remnant to the Father's "Well-Beloved," and proceeding, in the New, from that center through the apostles to the church as the instrument for extending God's royal claims to the outer circle, embracing all of creation.

At the same time the use of γράμμα and πνεῦμα in the creation of our first hermeneutical circle can help us to understand the diversity found in the various Biblical documents; for it will allow us to see God at work in various historical contexts and with "all sorts and conditions" of men. At this point the historical method can be of inestimable value; for the *magnalia Dei* within history are His medium of revelation.

This very observation suggests the relationship that must prevail between scientific method and exegesis. In a sense the Scriptures are *allgemeinverständlich*, to use a word from Luther. In fact, those of us who are professionals must often envy the simple Christian for his insight into the very heart of the Biblical message. Perhaps, therefore,

we shall not go far wrong in adopting Professor G. Wiesen's observation, "Die Exegese ist die Königin, und die Kritik ist der Arzt, den man ruft, wenn man ihn nötig hat."⁵

With *γράμμα* and *πνεῦμα* as our key terms we shall, moreover, find a center to that history within which God chose to work. The drama of revelation does not work up to a life and death issue, as Prof. John Marsh has pointed out.⁶ Salvation is there at the outset; God offers full communion at once. To be sure, God spoke "at sundry times and in diverse manners" before He spoke to us in a Son. But what is new to the New Testament is that the issue of life and death has been decided; and with the victory of the resurrection all history is made purposeful. At each point in history man is and has been confronted with a choice either to remain bound under the law (*γράμμα*) or to believe the Gospel, thus to live in the Spirit (*πνεῦμα*). This means that even creation can be viewed Christologically; and quite possibly Luther was right in interpreting the great psalms of creation in the light of the new creation.

In this way *γράμμα* and *πνεῦμα* underline the relevance of the Old Testament to the art of interpretation. For the *πνεῦμα* can be found there, too, behind and above the *γράμμα*, as the great apostle pointed out when he spoke of the Law as "our schoolmaster to bring us to Christ." (Gal. 3:24)

Finally, from all this we can conclude that the use of the concepts *γράμμα* and *πνεῦμα* will provide us with a theology for Biblical interpretation. And what could be more proper than that the Bible should be interpreted in the light of God's Word?

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SOME RECENT BOOKS FOR THE STUDY OF MISSIONS IN THE MODERN WORLD

[EDITORIAL NOTE. For some time the editors of the CONCORDIA THEOLOGICAL MONTHLY have each month been making available to interested subscribers who request such material study outlines based on some article or book review published in each current issue of this journal. The bibliographical notes here reprinted were thus sent out to furnish additional study material for discussion of the two articles on missions that appeared in the November 1957 issue (R. Pearce Beaver, "Some Aspects of the Asian Situation and Their Significance for Training for Service to the Church," and Hans W. Gensichen, "Imitating the Wisdom of the Almighty"). The editorial staff feels

⁵ *Jesus und die Rhetorik* (1928), p. 22, as quoted in Torm, *Hermeneutik* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 1930), p. 177.

⁶ "History and Interpretation," in *Biblical Authority for Today*, p. 194.

that these notes merit wider circulation because of the great importance of the subject and because these notes purposely limit themselves to a few major items of special interest.]

1. Nationalism has been called the most important fact of the twentieth century. Its corollary is the development of indigenous churches. How does one go about planting an indigenous church? See Roland Allen, *Missionary Methods: St. Paul's or Ours?* London: Robert Scott, 1912 (new edition published in 1956 by the Moody Press, Chicago, Ill., available at Concordia Publishing House, \$2.50). This book is a must for everyone who cares very much about the world mission of the church. What does it imply in terms of intelligent support of missions? Are there any lessons in Allen's approach for the planting of an indigenous church in the West? How could his ideas help us in the growing shortage of home missionaries?

2. Don't do all your worrying about Sputnik I, II, etc. Save some concern for the Islamic invasion of once fertile, flourishing Christian mission areas in Africa. This invasion is going on right now south of the Sahara in the lands that Livingstone opened to Christian missions. Very few in the church seem to be aware of this grave danger. Two slender booklets sound the alarm:

J. Spencer Trimingham, *The Christian Church and Islam in West Africa* (London: SCM Press, 1957), 55 pages. Order from Friendship Press, New York.

Gustaf Gernander, *The Rising Tide: Christianity Challenged in East Africa*, trans. H. Daniel Friberg (Rock Island: Augustana, 1957), 70 pages.

3. What is the effect of missions on our theological perspective and formulations? What is the relation between missions and the church? Is it valid to say that all the truths of Scripture come to a focus in missions? Wilhelm Andersen helps to get the discussion under way with his 64-page *Towards a Theology of Mission* (London: SCM Press, 1957). Order from the Friendship Press, New York.

4. Would you like to see the big picture in Christian missions in one country such as Japan and the place our church's work occupies within it? Have a look at Charles B. Iglehart's warm and comprehensive account in *Cross and Crisis in Japan* (New York: Friendship Press, 1957). Missouri Synod missions receive generous recognition.

5. On Tuesday, Dec. 3, 1957, the first team of three Missouri missionaries and their wives and children left from the West Coast, *Deo volente*, to open work in Korea. Ninety-five per cent of Korea's

population is non-Christian. Notably the Presbyterians have done some very effective mission work there in the past seventy years. The missionary candidates heard special lectures last summer by T. Stanley Soltau and read his book *Missions at the Crossroads* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House). You'll find it intensely interesting to study his down-to-earth and practical counsel on the planting of the indigenous church. It is based on twenty-five years of mission experience among Koreans.

6. Dr. Hendrik Kraemer, world famous missionary scholar, predicts that the next twenty-five years will witness a significant invasion of the West by sophisticated forms of Eastern religions. For meaty theological fare, rich but not easy to chew, see his *Religion and the Christian Faith* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1957). For something briefer, more lucid, and more Lutheran start with Walter Freytag, *The Gospel and the Religions* (London: SCM Press, 1957), 47 pages.

7. What is happening to the churches in Red China? For fresh, firsthand information see Walter Freytag's article in the *International Review of Missions* (October 1957). This well-known quarterly is the leading periodical in its field. Another source is *Reports on Deputation of Australian Churchmen to Mainland China*, by Alfred Francis James, Managing Director, Anglican News Service, Sydney, Australia. New York: Far Eastern Office, Division of Foreign Missions, National Council of the Churches of Christ in the USA, 156 Fifth Avenue, New York 10, N.Y. This report agrees in the main with Freytag's observations and supplements them with the details which a trained newspaper man observes.

8. A study of the motivations for missions would be most rewarding. You will look far before you find a series of meditations on missions to surpass James Stewart's *Thine Is the Kingdom* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1956). R. Pearce Beaver recommends *Constrained by Jesus' Love: An Inquiry into the Motives of the Missionary Awakening in Great Britain in the Period Between 1698 and 1815*, by Johannes van den Berg (Kampen: J. H. Kok, 1956), ix, 238 pages.

9. A review of the book mentioned by Dr. Beaver in the first paragraph of his CTM article would help fill in some of the background against which he writes. See the volume edited by Bishop Rajah B. Manikam entitled *Christianity and the Asian Revolution* (Madras: Joint East Asia Secretariat of the IMC and the WCC, 1954), 293 pages. Order from Friendship Press.

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