FIRST THINGS

BIBLICAL INTERPRETATION IN CRISIS

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by

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In Wladimir Solowjew's *History of the Antichrist*, the eschatological enemy of the Redeemer recommended himself to believers, among other things, by the fact that he had earned his doctorate in theology at Tübingen and had written an exegetical work which was recognized as pioneering in the field. The Antichrist, a famous exegete! With this paradox Solowjew sought to shed light on the ambivalence inherent in biblical exegetical methodology for almost a hundred years now. To speak of the crisis of the historical-critical method today is practically a truism. This, despite the fact that it had gotten off to so optimistic a start.

Within that newfound freedom of thought into which the Enlightenment had launched headlong, dogma or church doctrine appeared as one of the real impediments to a correct understanding of the Bible itself. But freed from this impertinent presupposition, and equipped with a methodology which promised strict objectivity, it seemed that we were finally going to be able to hear again the clear and unmistakable voice of the original message of Jesus. Indeed, what had been long forgotten was to be brought into the open once more: the polyphony of history could be heard again, rising from behind the monotone of traditional interpretations. As the human element in sacred history became more and more visible, the hand of God, too, seemed larger and closer.

Gradually, however, the picture became confused. The various theories increased and multiplied and separated one from the other and became a veritable fence which blocked access to the Bible for all the uninitiated. Those who were initiated were no longer reading the Bible anyway, but were dissecting it into the various parts from which it had to have been composed. The methodology itself seems to require such a radical approach: it cannot stand still when it scents the operation of man in sacred history. It must try to remove all the irrational residue and clarify everything. Faith itself is not a component of this method, nor is God a factor to be dealt with in historical events. But since God and divine action permeate the entire biblical account of history, one is obliged to begin with a complicated anatomy of the scriptural word. On one hand there is the attempt to unravel the various threads (of the narrative) so that in the end one holds in one's hands what is the "really historical," which means the purely human element in events. On the other hand, one has to try to show how it happened that the idea of God became interwoven through it all. So it is that another "real" history is to be fashioned in place of the one given. Underneath the existing sources—that is to say, the biblical books themselves—we are supposed to find more original sources, which in turn become the criteria for interpretation. No one should really be surprised that this procedure leads to the sprouting of ever more numerous hypotheses which finally turn into a jungle of contradictions. In the end, one no longer learns what the text says, but what it should have said, and by which component parts this can be traced back through the text.

Such a state of affairs could not but generate a counterreaction. Among cautious systematic theologians, there began the search for a theology which was as independent as possible from exegesis. But what possible value can a theology have which is cut off from its own foundations? So it was that a radical approach called "fundamentalism" began to win supporters who brand as false in itself and contradictory any application of the historical-critical method to the Word of God. They want to take the Bible again in its literal purity, just as it stands and just as the average reader understands it to be. But when do I really take the Bible "literally"? And which is the "normative" understanding which holds for the Bible in all its particularity? Certainly fundamentalism can take as a precedent the position of the Bible itself, which has selected as its own hermeneutical perspective the viewpoint of the "little ones," the "pure of heart." The problem still remains, however, that the demand for "literalness" and "realism" is not at all so univocal as it might first appear. In grappling with the problem of hermeneutics another alternative process presents itself: the explanation of

the historical process of the development of forms is only one part of the duty of the interpreter; his understanding within the world of today is the other. According to this idea, one should investigate the conditions for understanding itself in order to come to a visualization of the text which would get beyond this historical "autopsy." In fact, as it stands, this is quite correct, for one has not really understood something in its entirety simply because one knows how to explain the circumstances surrounding its beginning.

But how is it possible to come to an understanding which on one hand is not based on some arbitrary choice of particular aspects, but on the other hand allows me to hear the message of the text and not something coming from my own self? Once the methodology has picked history to death by its dissection, who can reawaken it so that it can live and speak to me? Let me put it another way: if "hermeneutics" is ever to become convincing, the inner harmony between historical analysis and hermeneutical synthesis must first be found.

To be sure, great strides have already been made in this direction, but I must honestly say that a truly convincing answer has yet to be formulated. If Rudolph Bultmann used the philosophy of Martin Heidegger as a vehicle to represent the biblical word, then that vehicle stands in accord with his reconstruction of the essence of Jesus' message. But was this reconstruction *itself* not likewise a product of his philosophy? How great is its credibility from a historical point of view? In the end, are we listening to Jesus or to Heidegger with this approach to understanding? Still, one can hardly deny that Bultmann seriously grappled with the issue of increasing our access to the Bible's message. But today, certain forms of exegesis are appearing which can only be explained as symptoms of the disintegration of interpretation and hermeneutics. Materialist and feminist exegesis, whatever else may be said about them, do not even claim to be an understanding of the text itself in the manner in which it was originally intended. At best they may be seen as an expression of the view that the Bible's message is in and of itself inexplicable, or else that it is meaningless for life in today's world. In this sense, they are no longer interested in ascertaining the truth, but only in whatever will serve their own particular agendas. They go on to justify this combination of agenda with biblical material by saying that the many religious elements help strengthen the vitality of the treatment. Thus historical method can even serve as a cloak for such maneuvers insofar as it dissects the Bible into discontinuous

pieces, which are then able to be put to new use and inserted into a new montage (altogether different from the original biblical context).

The Central Problem

Naturally, this situation does not occur everywhere with the same starkness. The methods are often applied with a good deal of prudence, and the radical hermeneutics of the kind I have just described have already been disavowed by a large number of exegetes. In addition, the search for remedies for basic errors of modern methods has been going on for some time now. The scholarly search to find a better synthesis between the historical and theological methods, between higher criticism and church doctrine, is hardly a recent phenomenon. This can be seen from the fact that hardly anyone today would assert that a truly pervasive understanding of this whole problem has yet been found which takes into account both the undeniable insights uncovered by the historical method, while at the same time overcoming its limitations and disclosing them in a thoroughly relevant hermeneutic. At least the work of a whole generation is necessary to achieve such a thing. What follows, therefore, will be an attempt to sketch out a few distinctions and to point out a few first steps that might be taken toward an eventual solution.

There should be no particular need to demonstrate that on the one hand it is useless to take refuge in an allegedly pure, literal understanding of the Bible. On the other hand, a merely positivistic and rigid ecclesiasticism will not do either. Just to challenge individual theories, especially the more daring and dubious ones, is likewise insufficient. Likewise dissatisfying is the middle-ground position of trying to pick out in each case as soon as possible the answers from modern exegesis which are more in keeping with tradition. Such foresight may sometimes prove profitable, but it does not grasp the problem at its root and in fact remains somewhat arbitrary if it cannot make its own arguments intelligible. In order to arrive at a real solution, we must get beyond disputes over details and press on to the foundations. What we need might be called a criticism of criticism. By this I mean not some exterior analysis, but a criticism based on the inherent potential of all critical thought to analyze itself.

We need a self-criticism of the historical method which can expand to an analysis of historical reason itself, in continuity with and in development of the famous critique of reason by Immanuel Kant. Let me assure

you at once that I do not presume to accomplish so vast an undertaking in the short time we have together. But we must make some start, even if it is by way of preliminary explorations in what is still a largely uncharted land. The self-critique of historical method would have to begin, it seems, by reading its conclusions in a diachronic manner so that the appearance of a quasi-clinical-scientific certainty is avoided. It has been this appearance of certainty which has caused its conclusions to be accepted so far and wide.

In fact, at the heart of the historical-critical method lies the effort to establish in the field of history a level of methodological precision which would yield conclusions of the same certainty as in the field of the natural sciences. But what one exegete takes as definite can only be called into question by other exegetes. This is a practical rule which is presupposed as plainly and self-evidently valid. Now, if the natural science model is to be followed without hesitation, then the importance of the Heisenberg principle should be applied to the historical-critical method as well. Heisenberg has shown that the outcome of a given experiment is heavily influenced by the point of view of the observer. So much is this the case that both the observer's questions and observations continue to change themselves in the natural course of events. When applied to the witness of history, this means that interpretation can never be just a simple reproduction of history's being, "as it was." The word "interpretation" gives us a clue to the question itself: every exegesis requires an "inter," an entering in and a being "inter" or between things; this is the involvement of the interpreter himself. Pure objectivity is an absurd abstraction. It is not the uninvolved who comes to knowledge; rather, interest itself is a requirement for the possibility of coming to know.

Here, then, is the question: how does one come to be interested, not so that the self drowns out the voice of the other, but in such a way that one develops a kind of inner understanding for things of the past, and ears to listen to the word they speak to us today?

This principle which Heisenberg enunciated for experiments in the natural sciences has a very important application to the subject-object relationship. The subject is not to be neatly isolated in a world of its own apart from any interaction. One can only try to put it in the best possible state. This is all the more the case with regard to history since physical processes are in the present and repeatable. Moreover, historical processes deal with the impenetrability and the depths of the human being and are thus even more susceptible to the influence of the perceiving subject than are natural events. But how are we to reconstruct

the original historical context of a subject from the clues which survive?

We need to introduce at this point what I have already called the diachronic approach to exegetical findings. After about two hundred years of exegetical work on the texts, one can no longer give all their results equal weight. Now one has to look at them within the context of their particular history. It then becomes clear that such a history is not simply one of progress from imprecise to precise and objective conclusions. It appears much more as a history of subjectively reconstructed interrelationships whose approaches correspond exactly to the developments of spiritual history. In turn, these developments are reflected in particular interpretations of texts. In the diachronic reading of an exegesis, its philosophic presuppositions become quite apparent. Now, at a certain distance, the observer determines to his surprise that these interpretations, which were supposed to be so strictly scientific and purely "historical," reflect their own overriding spirit, rather than the spirit of times long ago. This insight should not lead us to skepticism about the method, but rather to an honest recognition of what its limits are, and perhaps how it might be purified.

A Self-Criticism of the Historical-Critical Method on the Model of How the Method Was Taught by Martin Dibelius and Rudolph Bultmann

In order not to let the general rules of the method and their presuppositions remain altogether abstract, I would like to try to illustrate what I have been saying thus far with an example. I am going to follow here the doctoral dissertation written by Reiner Blank at the University of Basel, entitled "Analysis and Criticism of the Form-Critical Works of Martin Dibelius and Rudolph Bultmann." This book seems to me to be a fine example of a self-critique of the historical-critical method. This kind of self-critical exegesis stops building conclusions on top of conclusions, and from constructing and opposing hypotheses. It looks for a way to identify its own foundations and to purify itself by reflections on those foundations. This does not mean that it is pulling itself up by its own bootstraps. On the contrary, by a process of self-limitation, it marks out for itself its own proper space. It goes without saying that the form-critical works of Dibelius and Bultmann have in the meantime been surpassed and in many respects corrected in their details. But it is likewise true that their basic methodological approaches continue even today to determine the methods and procedures of modern exegesis. Their essential elements underlie more than their own historical and theological judgments and, to be sure, these have widely achieved an authority like unto dogma.

For Dibelius, as with Bultmann, it was a matter of overcoming the arbitrary manner in which the preceding phase of Christian exegesis, the so-called "Liberal Theology," had been conducted. This was imbued with judgments about what was "historical" or "unhistorical." Both these scholars then sought to establish strict *literary* criteria which would reliably clarify the process by which the texts themselves were developed and would thus provide a true picture of the tradition. With this outlook, both were in search of the pure form and of the rules which governed the development from the initial forms to the text as we have it before us today. As is well known, Dibelius proceeded from the view that the secret of history discloses itself as one sheds light on its development. But how does one arrive at this first premise and to the ground rules for further development? Even with all their particular differences, one can discover here a series of fundamental presuppositions common to both Dibelius and Bultmann and which both considered trustworthy beyond question. Both proceed from the priority of what is preached over the event in itself: in the beginning was the Word. Everything in the Bible develops from the proclamation. This thesis is so promoted by Bultmann that for him only the word can be original: the word generates the scene. All events, therefore, are already secondary, mythological developments.

A further axiom is formulated which has remained fundamental for modern exegesis since the time of Dibelius and Bultmann: the notion of discontinuity. Not only is there no continuity between the pre-Easter Jesus and the formative period of the church; discontinuity applies to all phases of the tradition. This is so much the case that Reiner Blank could state, "Bultmann wanted incoherence at any price."

To these two theories, the pure originality of the simple word and the discontinuity between the particular phases of development, there is joined the further notion that what is simple is original, that what is more complex must be a later development. This idea affords an easily applied parameter to determine the stages of development: the more theologically considered and sophisticated a given text is, the more recent it is, and the simpler something is, the easier it is to reckon it original. The criterion according to which something is considered more or less developed, however, is not at all so evident as it first seems. In fact, the judgment essentially depends upon the theological values of the individual exegete. There remains considerable room for arbitrary choice.

First and foremost, one must challenge that basic notion dependent upon a simplistic transferral of science's evolutionary model to spiritual history. Spiritual processes do not follow the rule of zoological genealogies. In fact, it is frequently the opposite: after a great breakthrough, generations of descendants may come who reduce what was once a courageous new beginning to an academic commonplace. They bury it and disguise it by all kinds of variations of the original theory until it finally comes to have a completely different application.

One can easily see how questionable the criteria have been by using a few examples. Who would hold that Clement of Rome is more developed or complex than Paul? Is James any more advanced than the Epistle to the Romans? Is the *Didache* more encompassing than the Pastoral Epistles? Take a look at later times: whole generations of Thomistic scholars have not been able to take in the greatness of his thought. Lutheran orthodoxy is far more medieval than was Luther himself. Even between great figures there is nothing to support this kind of developmental theory.

Gregory the Great, for example, wrote long after Augustine and knew of him, but for Gregory the bold Augustinian vision is translated into the simplicity of religious understanding. Another example: what standard could one use to determine whether Pascal should be classified as before or after Descartes? Which of their philosophies should be judged the more developed? Further examples could be mentioned to illustrate the whole of human history. All judgments based on the theory of discontinuity in the tradition and on the assertion of an evolutionary priority of the "simple" over the "complex" can thus be immediately called into question as lacking foundation.

But now we must explain in an even more concrete way what criteria have been used to determine what is "simple." In this regard there are standards as to form and content. In terms of form, the search was for the original forms. Dibelius found them in the so-called "paradigm," or example narrative in oral tradition, which can be reconstructed behind the proclamation. Later forms, on the other hand, would be the "anecdote," the "legend," the collections of narrative materials, and the "myth."

Bultmann saw the pure form in the "apothegm," "the original specific fragment which would sum things up concisely; interest would be concentrated on the word [spoken by] Jesus at the end of a scene; the details of

the situation would lie far from this kind of form; Jesus would never come across as the initiator . . . everything not corresponding to this form Bultmann attributed to development." The arbitrary nature of these assessments which would characterize theories of development and judgments of authenticity from now on is only obvious. To be honest, though, one must also say that these theories are not so arbitrary as they may first appear. The designation of the "pure form" is based on a loaded idea of what is original, which we must now put to the test.

One element of originality is what we have just encountered: the thesis of the priority of the word over the event. But this thesis conceals two further pairs of opposites: the pitting of word against cult and eschatology against apocalyptic. In close harmony with these is the antithesis between Judaic and Hellenistic. Hellenistic was, for example, in Bultmann, the notion of the cosmos, the mystical worship of the gods and cultic piety. The consequence is simple: what is Hellenistic cannot be Palestinian, and therefore it cannot be original. Whatever has to do with cult, cosmos, or mystery must be rejected as a later development. The rejection of "apocalyptic," the alleged opposite of eschatology, leads to yet another element: the supposed antagonism between the prophetic and the "legal" and thus between the prophetic and the cosmic and cultic. It follows, then, that ethics is seen as incompatible with the eschatological and the prophetic. In the beginning there was no ethics, but simply an ethos. What is surely at work is the by-product of Luther's fundamental distinction: the dialectic between the law and the gospel. According to this dialectic, ethics and cult are to be relegated to the realm of the law and put in dialectical contrast with Jesus, who, as bearer of the good news, brings the long line of promise to completion and thus overcomes the law. If we are ever to understand modern exegesis and critique it correctly, we simply must return and reflect anew on Luther's view of the relationship between the Old and New Testaments. In place of the analogy model which was then current, he substituted a dialectical structure.

However, for Luther all of this remained in a very delicate balance, whereas for Dibelius and Bultmann, the whole degenerates into a development scheme of well-nigh intolerable simplicity, even if this has contributed to its attractiveness.

With these presuppositions, the picture of Jesus is determined in advance. Thus Jesus has to be conceived in strongly "Judaic" terms. Anything "Hellenistic" has to be removed from him. All apocalyptic, sacramental,

mystical elements have to be pruned away. What remains is a strictly "eschatological" prophet, who really proclaims nothing of substance. He only cries out "eschatologically" in expectation of the "wholly other," of that transcendence which he powerfully presents before humanity in the form of the imminent end of the world.

From this view emerged two challenges for exegesis. First, exegetes had to explain how one got from the unmessianic, unapocalyptic, prophetic Jesus to the apocalyptic community which worshiped him as Messiah; to a community in which were united Jewish eschatology, stoic philosophy, and mystery religion in a wondrous syncretism. This is exactly how Bultmann described early Christianity.

Second, exegetes had to find a way to connect the original message of Jesus to Christian life today, thus making it possible to understand his call to us.

According to the developmental model, the first problem is relatively easy to solve in principle, even though an immense amount of scholarship had to be dedicated to working out the details. The agent responsible for the contents of the New Testament was not to be found in persons, but in the collective, in the "community." Romantic notions of the "people" and of its importance in the shaping of traditions play a key role here.18 Add to this the thesis of Hellenization and the appeal to the history-of-religions school. The works of Gunkel and Bousset exerted decisive influence in this area.

The second problem was more difficult. Bultmann's approach was his theory of demythologization, but this did not achieve quite the same success as his theories on form and development. If one were allowed to characterize somewhat roughly Bultmann's solution for a contemporary appropriation of Jesus' message, one might say that the scholar from Marburg had set up a correspondence between the nonapocalyptic-prophetic and the fundamental thought of the early Heidegger. Being a Christian, in the sense Jesus meant it, is essentially collapsed into that mode of existing in openness and alertness which Heidegger described. The question has to occur whether one cannot come by some simpler way to such general and sweeping formal assertions.

Still, what is of interest to us here is not Bultmann the systematician, whose activities came to an abrupt halt

in any case with the rise of Marxism. Instead, we should examine Bultmann the exegete who is responsible for an ever more solid consensus regarding the methodology of scientific exegesis.

The Philosophic Source of the Method

At this point the question arises, how could Dibelius' and Bultmann's essential categories for judgment—that is, the pure form, the opposition between apocalyptic and eschatology and so on—present such evidence to them that they believed they had at their disposal the perfect instrument for gaining a knowledge of history? Why is this system of thought taken without question and applied in large part even today? Most of it has simply become an academic commonplace, which precedes individual analysis and appears to be legitimized almost automatically by application. But what about the founders of the method? Certainly, Dibelius and Bultmann already stood in a tradition. Mention has already been made of their dependence on Gunkel and Bousset. But what was their dominant idea? With this question, the self-critique of the historical method passes over to a self-criticism of historical reason, without which our analysis would get stuck in superficialities.

In the first place, one can note that in the history-of religions school, the model of evolution was applied to the analysis of biblical texts. This was an effort to bring the methods and models of the natural sciences to bear on the study of history. Bultmann laid hold of this notion in a more general way and thus attributed to the so-called scientific worldview a kind of dogmatic character. Thus, for example, for him the nonhistoricity of the miracle stories was no question whatever anymore. The only thing one needed to do yet was to explain how these miracle stories came about. On one hand the introduction of the scientific worldview was indeterminate and not well thought out. On the other hand, it offered an absolute rule for distinguishing between what could have been and what had to be explained only by development. To this latter category belonged everything which is not met with in common daily experience. There could only have been what now is. For everything else, therefore, historical processes are invented, whose reconstruction became the particular challenge of exegesis.

But I think we must go yet a step further in order to appreciate the fundamental decision of the system which generated these particular categories for judgment. The real philosophic presupposition of the whole

system seems to me to lie in the philosophic turning point proposed by Immanuel Kant. According to him, the voice of being-in-itself cannot be heard by human beings. Man can hear it only indirectly in the postulates of practical reason, which have remained, as it were, the small opening through which he can make contact with the real, that is, his eternal destiny. For the rest, as far as the content of his intellectual life is concerned, he must limit himself to the realm of the categories. Thence comes the restriction to the positive, to the empirical, to the "exact" science, which by definition excludes the appearance of what is "wholly other," or the one who is wholly other, or a new initiative from another plane.

In theological terms, this means that revelation must recede into the pure formality of the eschatological stance, which corresponds to the Kantian Split. As far as everything else is concerned, it all needs to be "explained." What might otherwise seem like a direct proclamation of the divine can only be myth, whose laws of development can be discovered. It is with this basic conviction that Bultmann, with the majority of modern exegetes, read the Bible. He is certain that it cannot be the way it is depicted in the Bible, and he looks for methods to prove the way it really had to be. To that extent there lies in modern exegesis a reduction of history into philosophy, a revision of history by means of philosophy.

The real question before us then is, can one read the Bible any other way? Or perhaps better, must one agree with the philosophy which requires this kind of reading? At its core, the debate about modern exegesis is not a dispute among historians: it is rather a philosophical debate. Only in this way can it be carried on correctly. Otherwise it is like a battle in a mist. The exegetical problem is identical in the main with the struggle for the foundations of our time. Such a struggle cannot be conducted casually, nor can it be won with a few suggestions. It will demand, as I have already intimated, the attentive and critical commitment of an entire generation. It cannot simply retreat back to the Middle Ages or to the Fathers and place them in blind opposition to the spirit of the present age. But neither can it renounce the insights of the great believers of the past and pretend that the history of thought seriously began only with Kant.

In my opinion the more recent debate about biblical hermeneutics suffers from just such a narrowing of our horizon. One can hardly dismiss the exegesis of the Fathers by calling it mere "allegory" or set aside the philosophy of the Middle Ages by branding it as "precritical."

The Basic Elements of a New Synthesis

After these remarks on the challenge of a self-critique of the historical method, we now find ourselves confronted with the positive side of the problem, how to join its tools with a better philosophy which would entail fewer drawbacks foreign to the text, which would be less arbitrary, and which would offer greater possibilities for a true listening to the text itself. The positive task is without a doubt even more difficult than the critical one. I can only try to conclude these remarks by trying to carve out a few narrow footpaths in the thicket, which may perhaps point out where the main road lies and how it is to be found.

In the midst of the theological, methodological debate of his day, Gregory of Nyssa called upon the rationalist Eunomius not to confuse theology with the science of nature. (*Theologein* is not *physiologein* .) "The mystery of theology is one thing," he said, "the scientific investigation of nature is quite another." One cannot then "encompass the unembraceable nature of God in the palm of a child's hand." Gregory was here alluding to one of the famous sayings of Zeno: "The open hand is perception, the clapping hand is the agreement of the intellect, the hand fully closed upon something is the recording of judgment, the one hand clasped by the other is systematic science."

Modern exegesis, as we have seen, completely relegated God to the incomprehensible, the otherworldly, and the inexpressible in order to be able to treat the biblical text itself as an entirely worldly reality according to natural-scientific methods.

Contrary to the text itself, *physiologein* is practiced. As a "critical science," it claims an exactness and certitude similar to natural science. This is a false claim because it is based upon a misunderstanding of the depth and dynamism of the word. Only when one takes from the word its own proper character as word and then stretches it onto the screen of some basic hypothesis can one subject it to such exact rules. Romano Guardini commented in this regard on the false certainty of modern exegesis, which he said "has produced very significant individual results, but has lost sight of its own particular object and generally has ceased being theology." The sublime thought of Gregory of Nyssa remains a true guidepost today: "these gliding and glittering lights of God's word which sparkle over the eyes of the soul . . . but now let what we hear from Elijah rise up to our soul and would that our thoughts, too, might be snatched up into the fiery chariot . . . so

we would not have to abandon hope of drawing close to these stars, by which I mean the thoughts of God . . . "

Thus the word should not be submitted to just any kind of enthusiasm. Rather, preparation is required to open us up to the inner dynamism of the word. This is possible only when there is a certain "sympathia" for understanding, a readiness to learn something new, to allow oneself to be taken along a new road. It is not the closed hand which is required, but the opened eye . . . .

Thus the exegete should not approach the text with a ready-made philosophy, nor in accordance with the dictates of a so-called modern or "scientific" worldview, which determines in advance what may or may not be. He may not exclude a priori that (almighty) God could speak in human words in the world. He may not exclude that God himself could enter into and work in human history, however improbable such a thing might at first appear.

He must be ready to learn from the extraordinary. He must be ready to accept that the truly original may occur in history, something which cannot be derived from precedents but which opens up out of itself. He may not deny to humanity the ability to be responsive beyond the categories of pure reason and to reach beyond ourselves toward the open and endless truth of being.

We must likewise reexamine the relationship between event and word. For Dibelius, Bultmann, and the mainstream of modern exegesis, the event is the irrational element. It lies in the realm of mere facticity, which is a mixture of accident and necessity. The fact as such, therefore, cannot be a bearer of meaning. Meaning lies only in the word, and where events might *seem* to bear meaning, they are to be considered as illustrations of the word to which they have to be referred. Judgments which derive from such a point of view are certainly persuasive for people of today, since they fit nicely into their own patterns of expectations. There is, however, no evidence in reality to support them. Such evidence is admissible only under the presupposition that the principle of scientific method, namely that every effect which occurs can be explained in terms of purely immanent relationships within the operation itself, is not only valid methodologically but is true in and of itself. Thus, in reality there would be only "accident and necessity," nothing else, and one may only look upon these elements as brute facts.

But what is useful as a methodological principle for the natural sciences is a foregone banality as a philosophical principle; and as a theological principle it is a contradiction. (How can any or all of God's activity be considered either as accidental or necessary?) It is here, for the sake of scientific curiosity, too, that we must experiment with the precise contrary of this principle, namely, that things can indeed be otherwise.

To put it another way: the event itself can be a "word," in accord with the biblical terminology itself. From this flow two important rules for interpretation.

(a) First, both word and event have to be considered equally original, if one wishes to remain true to the biblical perspective. The dualism which banishes the event into wordlessness, that is meaninglessness, would rob the word of its power to convey meaning as well, for it would then stand in a world without meaning.

It also leads to a docetic Christology in which the reality, that is the concrete fleshly existence of Christ and especially of man, is removed from the realm of meaning. Thus the essence of the biblical witness fails of its purpose.

(b) Secondly, such a dualism splits the biblical word off from creation and would substitute the principle of discontinuity for the organic *continuity* of meaning which exists between the Old and New Testaments. When the continuity between word and event is allowed to disappear, there can no longer be any unity within the Scripture itself. A New Testament cut off from the Old is automatically abolished since it exists, as its very title suggests, because of the unity of both. Therefore the principle of discontinuity must be counterbalanced by the interior claim of the biblical text itself, according to the principle of the *analogia scripturae* : the mechanical principle must be balanced by the teleological principle.

Certainly texts must first of all be traced back to their historical origins and interpreted in their proper historical context. But then, in a second exegetical operation, one must look at them also in light of the total movement of history and in light of history's central event, Jesus Christ. Only the *combination* of *both* these methods will yield understanding of the Bible. If the first exegetical operation by the Fathers and in the

Middle Ages is found to be lacking, so too is the second, since it easily falls into arbitrariness. Thus, the first was fruitless, but the rejection of any coherence of meaning leads to an opinionated methodology.

To recognize the inner self-transcendence of the historical word, and thus the inner correctness of subsequent rereadings in which event and meaning are gradually interwoven, is the task of interpretation properly so-called, for which appropriate methods can and must be found. In this connection, the exegetical maxim of Thomas Aquinas is quite to the point: "The duty of every good interpreter is to contemplate not the words, but the *sense* of the words."

In the last hundred years, exegesis has had many great achievements, but it has brought forth great errors as well. These latter, moreover, have in some measure grown to the stature of academic dogmas. To criticize them at all would be taken by many as tantamount to sacrilege, especially if it were to be done by a nonexegete. Nevertheless, so prominent an exegete as Heinrich Schlier previously warned his colleagues: "Do not squander your time on trivialities." Johann Gnilka gave concrete expression to this warning when he reacted against an exaggerated emphasis by the history-of-traditions school.

Along the same lines, I would like to express the following hopes:

(a) The time seems to have arrived for a new and thorough reflection on exegetical method. Scientific exegesis must recognize the philosophic element present in a great number of its ground rules, and it must then reconsider the results which are based on these rules.

(b) Exegesis can no longer be studied in a unilinear, synchronic fashion, as is the case with scientific findings which do not depend upon their history but only upon the precision of their data. Exegesis must recognize itself as a historical discipline. Its history belongs to itself. In a critical arrangement of its respective positions within the totality of its own history, it will be able, on one hand, to recognize the relativity of its own judgments (where, for example, errors may have crept in). On the other hand, it will be in a better position to achieve an insight into our real, if always imperfect, comprehension of the biblical word.

(c) Philological and scientific literary methods are and will remain critically important for a proper exegesis.

But for their actual application to the work of criticism—just as for an examination of their claims—an understanding of the philosophic implications of the interpretative process is required. The self-critical study of its own history must also imply an examination of the essential philosophic alternatives for human thought. Thus, it is not sufficient to scan simply the last one hundred and fifty years. The great outlines of patristic and medieval thought must also be brought into the discussion. It is equally indispensable to reflect on the fundamental judgments made by the Reformers and the critical importance they have had in the history of exegesis.

(d) What we need now are not new hypotheses on the *Sitz im Leben* , on possible sources or on the subsequent process of handing down the material. What we do need is a critical look at the exegetical landscape we now have, so that we may return to the text and distinguish between those hypotheses which are helpful and those which are not. Only under these conditions can a new and fruitful collaboration between exegesis and systematic theology begin. And only in this way will exegesis be of real help in understanding the Bible.

(e) Finally, the exegete must realize that he does not stand in some neutral area, above or outside history and the church. Such a presumed immediacy regarding the purely historical can only lead to dead ends. The first presupposition of all exegesis is that it accepts the Bible as a book. In so doing, it has already chosen a place for itself which does not simply follow from the study of literature. It has identified *this particular literature* as the product of a coherent history, and this history as the proper space for coming to understanding. If it wishes to be theology, it must take a further step. It must recognize that the faith of the church is that form of "sympathia" without which the Bible remains a *closed* book. It must come to acknowledge this faith as a hermeneutic, the space for understanding, which does not do dogmatic violence to the Bible, but precisely allows the solitary possibility for the Bible to be itself.

Every year the Institute on Religion and Public Life, publisher of First Things*, sponsors the Erasmus Lecture in New York City. In 1988, that lecture was delivered by Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, now Pope Benedict XVI.*