



## **Biblical Hermeneutics on the Move**

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As we move fully into the eighties, something seems to be happening at the fronts of biblical hermeneutics. It is still too early to assess the new mood after the devastating seventies, but things seem to be moving again, fresh questions appear, new windows are being opened.

### I

This optimistic outlook must surely be good news for weary Christians, especially pastors, who feel frustrated and confused by what they have heard from the lecterns of academic theologians in recent years. On the one hand there was plenty of crisis talk. Brevard Childs provided the start in 1970 with his *Biblical Theology in Crisis*. Hans Frei's *Eclipse of Biblical Narrative* followed suit only to make room soon thereafter for the declaration of historical criticism's "bankruptcy" (Walter Wink) and of "The End of the Historical-Critical Method" (Gerhard Maier). On the other hand, everyone noticed a considerable hardening of lines in the older hermeneutical debates. The conservative side went through a resurgence of its more militant positions. After the purge of biblical dissidents in the major seminary of the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, the "Battle for the Bible" (Harold Lindsell) was on in the Southern Baptist Convention threatening less radical elements at seminaries like Fuller. The International Council on Biblical Inerrancy is gathering strength since its Chicago Statement of October, 1978, and tries to impress its message on the wider public. At the same time the critical study of the Bible under the auspices of professional societies, the Council on the Study of Religion, and the university departments of religion has been flourishing, reaching out in more and more directions and applying freely the insights of sociology, anthropology, psychology, modern linguistics, and other branches of knowledge with their appropriate methodologies to the biblical texts. Jewish, Christian, and non-religious scholars collaborate in these efforts as a matter of routine and claim attention for a plethora of new theories and possibilities in interpretation. The gulf between the two hermeneutical worlds is widening at a breathtaking pace leaving few bridges between them.

Many Christians and their pastors are caught in between. Left with the task

of applying the biblical message to their daily lives because their churches are committed to the Bible as the norm for teaching, preaching and living, they often cannot in good conscience endorse the rigid inerrancy propositions of the one side, nor do they find much help for their task from the esoteric work of the other. It is not surprising that many pastors have turned to a new professional emphasis in their ministry, stressing care and counseling more than teaching and giving up more or less on expository preaching. One pastor put it in these terms: "My walls are

lined with critical commentaries. I have bought the *Interpreter's Bible* and Kittel's *Theological Dictionary*. I am browsing through the pious popular scripture series which are full of subjective, irrelevant side remarks, but I just do not find what I'm looking for in order to be able to preach that text to my congregation." Neither do congregations get what they need and are looking for. As a woman said to me recently: "I'm getting tired of those sermons which just repeat in cute language what I can read every day in the paper. Is there nothing the Bible has to say other than this? When the pastor visited me in the hospital he tried valiantly to make me feel better. He even prayed with me a little. But there was no word of comfort from the Bible, no psalm, nothing." A failure of discernment and courage? Maybe. But the "strange silence of the Bible in the Church" (James D. Smart) has deeper roots. The hermeneutical confusion of the last decade or so points to a deep insecurity vis-à-vis the normative Bible in church and schools.

The problem of biblical hermeneutics is given with the Bible itself, with its nature as a canonical collection of authoritative writings, and with its linguistic form. Concerning the first point we seem to be somewhat more pragmatic than a previous generation, perhaps as a result of closer ecumenical contacts with the Catholic side. The dialectic of Scripture and Church and Church tradition no longer bothers Protestants greatly. The resonance which Brevard Childs' proposal has found, to give primary authority for the understanding of biblical texts to their final canonical form, may illustrate the trend.<sup>1</sup> Yet it remains a problem why only the final form of a text should be theologically normative. Neither "canon analysis" nor "canon criticism" (James Sanders) are without serious problems in the present situation. We also speak with relative ease of "God's Word" in relation to Scripture. The recent volume of *Studies in Lutheran Hermeneutics*, prepared under the auspices of the Division of Theological Studies of The Lutheran Council in the U.S.A., documents this fact for Lutheran theologians of all shades.<sup>2</sup> Only the Missouri Synod contributors claim the simple identification of Bible and Word of God as the proper interpretation of the confessional stance,<sup>3</sup> but the distinctions made since Karl Barth between Word of God as event (Christ), witness (Scripture), and proclamation (Preaching) have helped other Lutherans, too, to recover the general use of the theological term in reference to Scripture.

The problem of biblical language, however, goes deeper. God did not use a

<sup>1</sup>B. Childs. *Biblical Theology in Crisis*. Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1970, esp. pp. 99-122.

<sup>2</sup>J. Reumann, Ed. *Studies in Lutheran Hermeneutics* (in collaboration with S. H. Nafzger and H. H. Ditmanson), Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1979. The introductory essay by the editor not only gives a fascinating account of the discussions within the Division but relates it in a most helpful way to the general situation in biblical scholarship.

<sup>3</sup>See S. H. Nafzger's review of the essays: *Studies*, pp. 119-123.

language of his own or the "language of angels" (1 Cor. 13:1), but made human language of particular times and places the vehicle of biblical revelation. Ralph Bohlmann of the Lutheran Church–Missouri Synod, in the volume mentioned above, concludes from this divine authorship that "the Scriptures are qualitatively different from every other form of human expression in every age."<sup>4</sup> One could draw the opposite conclusion: God has the same problem with human language we all have. This is the price of incarnation. Human language is contingent, open, ambiguous, and therefore in need of interpretation. Many factors have to be considered in such

an interpretation. Modern linguistic studies give us an idea of their extent. It is not enough to ask for the intention of the original author. Language always involves a speaker and a listener. The process of reception, language as it is *heard*, must be part of the investigation. Modern semantics warns against the determination of the meaning of a word field apart from the conversational and syntactic context. Human language does not communicate unambiguously or in the abstract. It does so in a subtle interaction of contingent factors which are complicated even further in the case of written texts. The entire web of human relationships and their key role in the perception of reality plays into the interpretation of language. There is, nevertheless, reluctance today to attribute to hermeneutics the role of a universal science of understanding all reality simply because of the linguisticity of human perception. Humans themselves have probably not been the same genus throughout the history of the race. Much of what language does has to be seen functionally in terms of the act of communication, and precisely in this context it is not identical with reality. We are today more aware of the fact of non-verbal communication and of a world of reality not reached by language.

Biblical hermeneutics, however, is not only a question of human language used by God. In any written text the hermeneutical issue of language and reality takes the concrete form of the relation between language and history. Language points to something. Biblical language, the language of a collection of writings from a distant period of history, points to a history. Its relation to a specific history and to historical reality in general has emerged as one of the major problems of the recent debates. Based on their understanding of inspiration and divine authorship, fundamentalist and conservative interpreters, for instance, have claimed a close relationship. Biblical interpretation is needed but the need arises more from the use of language than from problems with the reality of the history it points to. The Bible is a book *sui generis* precisely in terms of its unique historical reliability. This is the central point of its widely affirmed inerrancy. Most exegetes, on the other hand, see the distance more clearly. They draw the conclusion from the human language of the Bible that its relation to historical reality is the same as it is in other written sources. This does not mean that the biblical word is not true. Rather, the historical truth in and behind the text, the history to which the text points, is part of the goal of interpretation, not its presupposition, and this goal must be reached by the same means that are applied to all other literature. A third position prominent in the discussion reinterprets the terms of the debate by taking its clue from modern literary criticism. Here the language angle of the text is the primary concern. All texts have a history of their own as soon as they leave

<sup>4</sup>*Studies*, p. 192 (Thesis 2).

the hand of the author and enter the public domain. They become a paradigm for interpretations of reality of which the author may never have dreamed. The historical reality to which the word of the Bible must be related is not only tied to the then and there of ancient history. It is the history or, to use the more current term, the story of the hearer today and in all ages. My story participates in the general structure of reality communicated by the linguistic metaphor. The recent theology of the story and the practice of structuralism, while finding a considerable following among exegetes, have also been suspected of being sophisticated tools of a conservative mentality.

In America the most serious development in the turmoil of biblical hermeneutics during

the 1970s was the apparent decline of what Childs termed the “Biblical Theology Movement.”<sup>5</sup> Highly influential during the 1950s and early 1960s through such writers as G. E. Wright, B. W. Anderson, Paul Minear, Floyd V. Filson, it seemed to provide a middle ground between critical and uncritical extremes by focusing with equal determination on historical research and theological interpretation of the Bible in and for the Church. The historical investigation of developing traditions in the biblical community of faith itself seemed to lead directly to extrapolations such as a theology of the history of tradition (Von Rad) or the theological concept of *Heilsgeschichte* (Oscar Cullmann). Biblical history understood as God’s mighty acts (G. E. Wright) could be seen as a vigorous stimulus to Christian witness in society by the contemporary Church without the fear of losing touch with modern historical consciousness. If one follows Childs’ analysis, the movement turned most fervently against the old ethics of theological liberalism and its basis in a misused historical criticism, finding itself in league with neo-orthodoxy at this point. But it reserved equally sharp polemics for the fundamentalist position in biblical studies, and thus made itself a strong advocate of the use of the historical-critical method in the churches. When the method itself came under fire, the movement which had suffered heavy blows already in the 1960s was doomed. This may be a somewhat simplistic picture. Whether the movement really is dead can rightly be doubted. Childs himself wants to build a “new biblical theology” on a different foundation. The deeper issue in the dissolution of the movement’s strength was not, at any rate, that of method but a changing view of history. Not only language is ambiguous. History is, too—even a carefully constructed history of tradition. It always allows for more than one theological extrapolation in different communities of faith, and the resulting pluralism has not yet found a common focus. Uneasiness with the historical-critical method is certainly not enough to provide common ground and focus for a new movement. Yet it is this methodological issue that seems to keep the discussion in suspense at the moment.

It is interesting to observe how the predominant concern over the historical-critical method in recent years has led to talk about a “pre-critical,” a “critical,” and a “post-critical” approach to biblical interpretation. Such verbal constructions of historical developments should always be viewed with suspicion. As in most similar schemes they express a highly partisan vision which in this case is no less biased than the alternative picture of original fidelity, defection, and return. The distinction of a pre-critical and a critical era echoes Ernst Troeltsch’s famous

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<sup>5</sup>*Biblical Theology in Crisis*, pp. 13-87.

analysis which saw the primary characteristic of the modern age in the step from an unscientific to a scientific world view. The addition of a post-critical era reveals that the sequence reflects the program of a generation which, having lived within the camp of historical criticism long enough, now wants to move out. But “pos-critical” itself bestows only an ambiguous identity. Many conservative scholars today seize upon the term in the hope that a jump on the bandwagon of this inner-critical debate will circumvent the need for a real confrontation with the critical method. Obviously the term is usable by both reactionary and avant-garde forces when the repudiation of the dominant parent generation is at stake. In terms of historical periodization Troeltsch’s dichotomy may still be helpful for our understanding of the “modern” age since the Enlightenment of the eighteenth century, although his scheme is really more a historical

judgment about the crucial importance of the Enlightenment itself than it is an accurate analysis of two epochs. To add the idea of a “post-critical” age can only compound the historiographical problem. It demonstrates even more clearly the unhistorical character of the scheme and its polemical thrust in the larger battle of our generation to find a new historical identity of its own.

## II

These deliberations press home the importance of considering the setting in which exegetical work is done today if we want to understand the promise and the limitations of the hermeneutical debate. Scholars (including this one!) who advance their theories (including theories about the periodization of the history of their field!) are part of a specific sociological setting, a community of scholars in seminaries and universities participating in the general scholarly ethos of their time and yet tied to the life of the Church in however faint or indirect a manner individual circumstances suggest. All these factors exert their influence on the direction of their thinking and their agenda. Much has been theorized about the history of biblical scholarship in the abstract, but little attention has been paid to the sociology of professional exegesis.<sup>6</sup> In order to gain a fresh perspective it may be wise to focus not on scholarly hermeneutics as such but on the scholars who formulate its theories, not on interpretation but on the interpreters to whose professional work the exegetical consumer looks for guidance.

Who is the professional biblical interpreter today? Posing the question this way, Church people probably think of the biblical professors in our educational institutions, the professionals whose job it is to teach exegetical method to seminarians, to provide expert commentary on Scripture in the classroom and in their writing, and to contribute to the application of biblical teaching in the discussion of the issues their churches are facing as responsible theologians of the Church. What is often forgotten is the fact that they all are also members of the academic establishment of our culture, subjected to the requirements of academic professionalism, susceptible to peer pressure and to the demands of the guild ethos. Their teaching in and for the Church owes much to this life setting and cannot be divorced from its dynamics.

<sup>6</sup>An exception is the recent book by Patrick Henry. *New Directions in New Testament Studies*. Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1979.

Such a guild of professional biblical interpreters in the Church is, however, a fairly recent development dating back in its beginnings to the rise of the high medieval universities. In the ancient Church the bishops were regarded as the professional interpreters of Scripture. Preaching and the exposition of the Bible was *their* business. Augustine was brought to Hippo Rhegius to fill in as a preacher for the aging bishop who did not feel up to the task. In the Middle Ages, while the exposition of Scripture by the clergy had to be authorized and delegated by the local bishop and excluded the unlearned laity, the highest decisional authority on matters of biblical interpretation was reserved for the *magisterium* of the pope. One can observe how in the late Middle Ages the theological masters of the rising universities started to assert their professional role as the Church’s exegetes. Without their expert advice popes would not pronounce on matters of faith, and the masters’ self-image as sharers in the apostolic *magisterium* of the Church is reflected in the sources.<sup>7</sup> Martin Luther the Reformer must be seen in this context. His professional status throughout his life was that of a doctor of Holy Scripture as far as he was

concerned, and he used the obligations of this office as a warrant for his reforming activity. In opposition to the papacy which still claimed the sole right to binding interpretation, he even broadened the base of the shared authority in biblical interpretation far beyond the realm of the academy. In the beginning of his Reformation he regarded all duly called ministers of the Gospel as competent interpreters of Scriptures and could locate the authority to judge doctrine by the standards of the Bible in the Christian congregation itself. The sobering experience with the actual state of biblical illiteracy during the Saxon visitations and with the independent scriptural exegesis of more radical reformers led, however, back behind this advance. Later developments in the Lutheran territories favored again the academic expert as the authoritative interpreter of Scripture. In fact, during the time of Lutheran Orthodoxy, the theological faculties functioned practically as the *magisterium* of the Lutheran churches.<sup>8</sup> It was in the context of the academy with its biblical experts that the modern historical-critical method emerged. In its application to biblical studies it reflected the double loyalty of the theological professors, both to the ideals of the university of the eighteenth century, committed to the progress of human knowledge and to the cause of the Church. In the same limited academic context the picture of a pre-critical, a critical, and a post-critical epoch of biblical hermeneutics has its *Sitz im Leben*. Its model of a development in three steps has no claim to historical validity but is a value judgment. It explains the present dynamics of an academic field, however, in which the Church and all its members have a vital stake.

Our survey has already shown that the history of biblical hermeneutics involved more fundamental shifts than that of the eighteenth century, if we focus on the role of the professional interpreter rather than the method of interpretation. But even if we would consider the latter one might wonder whether such phenomena as Origen's systematic hermeneutics, the shift from the patristic

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<sup>7</sup>See Y. Congar O.P., "Theologians and the Magisterium in the West: From the Gregorian Reform to the Council of Trent," *Chicago Studies* 17/2 (Summer, 1978), pp. 210-224.

<sup>8</sup>See W. A. Quanbeck, "The Magisterium in the Lutheran Church," in: *Teaching Authority and Infallibility in the Church*. P. C. Empie; T. A. Murphy; J. A. Burgess, ed. Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1978, p. 151f.

chain commentary to the scholastic commentary of the twelfth century, the nominalist erosion of trust in an unambiguous biblical language, or the shift to the dominance of the literal sense, did not constitute equally decisive turning points as that marked by the impact of the Enlightenment.

When we turn to an examination of the label "pre-critical," the problem of the three steps is even more obvious. The label turns out to be simply wrong when we try to verify it outside the limited context which we have sketched. The early history of the biblical canon is full of examples of critical, even historical-critical work. Bishops had to make decisions about the authorship of specific books such as Hebrews, Revelation, and the Catholic Epistles. Church Fathers debated questions of the best text, reliable translations, the historical referent of Old Testament prophecy, and the historicity of New Testament stories. Medieval popes had to render a critical judgment on the biblical evidence concerning Christ's actual poverty. The traditional fourfold sense of Scripture was a sophisticated method of critical biblical interpretation dealing precisely with the relationship between text and history.<sup>9</sup> The simple identification of the two

was for medieval exegetes only the first, the surface level, no more. For centuries the designation “letter,” literal sense, remained interchangeable with “historia,” historical sense. Origen of Alexandria already taught that such a literal, historical sense, while not absent in the Bible, cannot be expected to be the main object of exegesis. There is much more in the Bible than a compend of guaranteed facts. As an inspired book Scripture must have a spiritual sense everywhere but not necessarily a literal sense also. This assumption called for a very critical attitude toward the surface of a text. There was always the possibility of further levels of meaning behind the words. Building upon Augustine, the medieval tradition standardized the number of the further senses to include three: allegory, tropology or moral sense, anagogy or eschatological-mystical sense. A widely circulated rhyme in the later Middle Ages which names the four senses reveals the principle under which the “higher senses” were chosen: “The letter teaches facts; allegory what one should believe; tropology what one should do; anagogy where one should aspire.” The three spiritual senses represent the three theological virtues, faith, love, and hope. These virtues are the true goal of biblical exposition. Biblical texts are rarely to be taken at face value. There is always something behind them, beyond them which has to be spelled out.

When Luther collapsed the fourfold scheme into a single “literal” sense he lost an important instrument of biblical criticism. His single sense now had to carry the burden of the *total* meaning of the text.<sup>10</sup> Luther himself eased the problem by concentrating on an internal criticism of the biblical text under the theological axiom: “Scripture is everywhere about Christ.” It led him to critical decisions about rank both within the canon and on the fringes of the canon. It also led to his use of the new philological criticism which the humanists had developed for literary texts in general. It was only in the period of Protestant Orthodoxy that the reductionist potential of his insistence on the one literal sense was fully imple-

<sup>9</sup>For a spirited defense of medieval exegesis see D. C. Steinmetz, “The Superiority of Pre-Critical Exegesis,” *Theology Today* 27/1 (1980) pp. 27-38.

<sup>10</sup>For this aspect see my article, “Problems in Lutheran Hermeneutics,” in *Studies in Lutheran Hermeneutics* (above, note 2), pp. 127-141.

mented. Verbal inspiration, contrary to Origen’s understanding of it, came to mean that the literal level of the biblical text in its identity with history was its only true meaning.

These remarks do not mean to suggest that nothing new happened with the Enlightenment. The unity of text and history stressed so much by Protestant Orthodoxy started to disintegrate under the obvious overload the single literal sense now had to carry. Without denying the ultimate role of the divine author and the rights of dogmatic theology, academic exegetes shifted the hermeneutical focus to the human authors of Scripture in order to speak about literal sense and history in terms verifiable by the rational sciences of their time. For them this was not a proud change from unscientific to scientific method or from pre-critical to critical attitudes. Rather, it was the humbling experience of stepping down from the height of the proud dogmatist who could confidently talk about the “hidden things of God” to the lowly realms of contingent human language and history. In the horizon which interests us here, however, something else is more important: the new concentration on the human author was a clear indication that the academic interpreter of the Bible was now tipping the scale of a double loyalty in favor of academic commitment. Henceforth he would see himself primarily responsible for his

colleagues in the developing secular sciences of history and philology, not to his peers and authorities in the Church.

The new type of professional interpreter has dominated the nineteenth and twentieth centuries: professional historians who also, secondarily, recognize and often practice their loyalty and responsibility to and in the Church. It should be remembered that the latter aspect was rarely missing. Schleiermacher, Harnack, Bultmann, and many others were devoted churchmen whose commitment to their churches must not be doubted. But how can this commitment be carried out effectively if the primary interest of the exegete remains tied to the world of professional scholarship which has its own agenda and its own social dynamics? The question still stands and has to be answered constantly in hundreds of lives to whom pastors and Church people look with expectancy but often also with suspicion. To focus attention on the chances for a viable balance between the two loyalties of the professional interpreter seems to me more fruitful today than to debate pre-critical, critical, and post-critical methods. Is the alternative to the dominant type a new type of church theologian who dabbles in modern scholarship on the side? Karl Barth looked like this to the guild of scholars in the early 1920s. While inadequate, the impression was not totally wrong in terms of Barth's priorities. His relegation of historical criticism to the level of a mere tool for church dogmatics, where he used it himself, probably prevented for some time a penetrating analysis of its ideological character. Today more and more churches seek to exercise stricter control over the teaching of their professional exegetes in the seminaries, degrading the loyalty to the guild of scholars within which these people function to an entirely secondary position. The risks of such pressure are obvious.<sup>11</sup> As long as the professional exegete is located in the setting of modern academe, the churches should expect and respect his or her strong sense of loy-

<sup>11</sup>Cf. the report of an investigating committee on the question of academic freedom at Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, Mo., "Academic Freedom and Tenure: Concordia Seminary (Missouri)," *AAUP Bulletin* 61 (1975) pp. 49-59.

alty to the academic context and its common weal. The churches should also expect, however, that their exegetes recognize the limiting nature of their academic context and relate themselves and their work freely, openly, and loyally to their churches' well-being.

### III

The good news for pastors and Christians in the churches is that new models of such a balance of the two loyalties seem to be emerging today. The balance is not just a private matter for the individual exegete but a matter of the public record of his or her work. As an illustration, let me briefly analyze the work of a younger continental scholar who is already influential in Germany through his teaching and writing and whose contribution needs to be better known abroad. Peter Stuhlmacher, former assistant to Ernst Käsemann, is now the successor of his teacher in the second New Testament chair at the university of Tübingen.

Edgar Krentz in his standard introduction to the historical-critical method<sup>12</sup> still classified Stuhlmacher among the critics of the method. One could say, indeed, that in comparison with his German colleagues such as Ferdinand Hahn, Martin Hengel, or Ulrich Wilckens, he is the one who has formulated the clearest and most penetrating scholarly critique of the method's results



and presuppositions to date.<sup>13</sup> What he stresses, however, is not so much its failure but its limits which should, he feels, be easily visible to the self-critical eye. In a masterful survey, Stuhlmacher leads his reader through the problems with some main results of the method's standard branches.<sup>14</sup> Biblical philology still suffers from concentrating on abstract word history and selective attention to hellenistic lexicography in its standard tools such as the *Kittel Dictionary* or the Bauer-Arndt-Gingrich-Danker *Lexicon*. Textual criticism is still divided over its primary goal: textual history or critique of variant readings in order to recover the *Urtext*. Literary criticism all too often overlooks the need to verify its source hypotheses against a plausible total picture of the early Christian traditioning process. Form criticism needs to be aware of the tenuous basis for some of its major axioms: the assumption of an anonymous corporate author; the attribution of the same liter-

<sup>12</sup>E. Krentz. *The Historical-Critical Method*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1975, p. 84f.

<sup>13</sup>Only one of Stuhlmacher's pertinent essays is available in English at present: *Historical Criticism and Theological Interpretation: Toward A Hermeneutics of Consent*. It has been translated and furnished with an excellent introduction by R. A. Harrisville, Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1977. It contains a detailed answer to Gerhard Maier's *The End of the Historical-Critical Method*, St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1977 (German original edition: 1974). Others include: "Neues Testament und Hermeneutik: Versuch einer Bestandsaufnahme," *Zeitschrift für Theologie und Kirche* 68 (1971) pp. 121-161; "Thesen zur Methodologie gegenwärtiger Exegese," *Zeitschrift für die neutestamentliche Wissenschaft* 63 (1972) pp. 18-26; "Zur Methoden- und Sachproblematik einer interkonfessionellen Auslegung des Neuen Testaments," in *Vorarbeiten zum Evangelisch-Katholischen Kommentar zum Neuen Testament*, Heft 4. Zürich/Neukirchen: Benziger Verlag und Neukirchener Verlag, 1972, pp. 11-55; a contribution in W. Schrage, K. Haacker, et al. *Biblische Theologie Heute: Einführung - Beispiele - Kontroversen*. Neukirchener Verlag, 1977 (= *Biblische Theologische Studien*, 1) entitled, "Zum Thema: Biblische Theologie des Neuen Testaments," pp. 25-60; and especially his *Hermeneutik* published under the title *Vom Verstehen des Neuen Testaments. Eine Hermeneutik*. Göttingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 1979 (= *NTD, Ergänzungsreihe*, 6). See also the items mentioned below, note 23.

<sup>14</sup>"Zur Methoden- und Sachproblematik," pp. 23-38.

ary criteria to both written and oral tradition, and the postulated correlation of such genres to a specific *Sitz im Leben*. Redaction criticism lacks clear criteria to judge the success of its complex working hypotheses. Religio-historical research needs to revise its theories about Hellenization and pre-Christian Gnosticism in light of the complexity of contemporary Judaism which recent scholarship has brought to light. All of this is obviously a critique from within. It reflects the critic's sensitivity and loyalty to his academic discipline and its progress.

The limits, not the failure, of the historical-critical method are also the focus of Stuhlmacher's critique of the method's presuppositions. Historical criticism is not just a tool but an ideology of considerable dimensions. Whether it must be seen as the direct historical consequence of Reformation theology (Ebeling) or as the most appropriate modern means to recover the radical confrontation character of the original Gospel (Käsemann) can remain open. But it still carries with it the overtones of its emancipatory origins and the resulting freight of its limited scope. Interpreting a biblical text, the historical-critical exegete is content to ask only questions that look backward from the present life of the Bible, deliberately creating a distance rather than bridging a gap, isolating a passage rather than allowing it to speak as part of a unified whole. Much information about the text can be gathered in this way but the intention of the text itself is being slighted. The method's "right lies in its power to inform, its limit in its restricted

perspective.” IS For stuhlmacher, historical criticism is not wrong but “in need of further development.” He indicates the direction of this development by proposing to supplement Troeltsch’s three classical principles of criticism (or methodical doubt), analogy, and correlation with a fourth: the principle of “hearing” (*Vernehmen*). The German term has affinity to Adolf Schlatter’s notion of “perception” (*Wahrnehmen*), as Stuhlmacher himself admits.<sup>16</sup> It retains a certain vagueness and open-endedness which renders it somewhat incongruous to Troeltsch’s triad. Troeltsch’s terms described methodical principles. Stuhlmacher’s term focuses on the commitment of the interpreter. As a correlative factor to Troeltsch’s methodical doubt “hearing” means the interpreter’s readiness to listen to the text sympathetically in all its claims and dimensions, including the full range of its exegetical history. What Stuhlmacher calls for is the exegete’s loyalty to the context of the Church’s life. To take such a commitment directly into the definition of historical-critical methodology is a bold step. It illumines Stuhlmacher’s basic quarrel with the presuppositions of the method as practiced, namely that it is not historical-critical enough with itself and its ideological underpinnings.

Stuhlmacher’s controversy with Gerhard Maier proves that he would defend the historical-critical method rather than abandon it when it is attacked in the name of loyalty to an orthodox theory of inspiration. Against Maier he stresses the impossibility of a return to a *hermeneutica sacra*, a hermeneutics of the born-again just for the Bible. Such a step would be a retreat from the Church’s mission in the world. The exegete cannot eschew the obligation felt in the Church

<sup>15</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 47.

<sup>16</sup>See already the essay of 1971, “Neues Testament und Hermeneutik,” p. 149. Stuhlmacher’s interest in Schlatter, who had been one of E. Käsemann’s teachers, is amply documented. See the section on Schlatter in the *Hermeneutik*, pp. 156-162, and the survey of Schlatter’s work, “Adolf Schlatter als Bibelausleger,” in: *Tübinger Theologie im 20. Jahrhundert*. Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr, 1978 (= *Beihefte zur Zeitschrift für Theologie und Kirche*, 4).

ever since its early days to give account of its exegesis before the truth consciousness of the age. One cannot simply withdraw when it gets critical.

There are some important points, however, where Stuhlmacher’s professional loyalty to the context of his Church, beyond the realm of the academic setting and his criticism of the method, opens up new perspectives on old issues. First of all, the question of inspiration. Historical criticism had to discount inspiration as a factor in biblical exegesis. Stuhlmacher not only admits the presence of strong inspirational claims in the texts themselves but recognizes inspiration as the presupposition under which all biblical interpretation took place in the Church throughout most of its history. Drawing upon the Reformation principle of the “inner testimony of the Holy Spirit,” he calls for biblical hermeneutics in the horizon of the Third Article. There are problems with the concrete shape of this emphasis. Maier’s criticism, however, that Stuhlmacher does not want to fill his endorsement of inspiration with any concrete content, is unjustified. For Stuhlmacher, it is not the overpowering but the empowering of the elected human witnesses.

This decision seems to provide new breathing space for a biblical theology that considers Old Testament and New together. Historical criticism had to separate them more and more in

order to describe their individual peculiarity. Stuhlmacher shows himself impressed by the work of his Old Testament colleague, Hartmut Gese, who has argued for the unity of the Testaments from the nature of early Christian theology.<sup>17</sup> There would be no Old Testament without the New. The dynamic tradition process of Israel's literature crossed the threshold of its Semitic particularity already in the Greek Septuagint and in the universalist tendencies of apocalyptic literature, a movement which the Christian tradition consummated. Stuhlmacher also warns against taking the polemically reduced Masoretic canon as normative for Christian interpretation, rather than considering the full range of Jewish books regarded as normative by Jesus and the early Christians. Precisely the central Christian notions such as justification and resurrection would find their proper connection with Judaism in this broader "canon."

Emphasis on the unity of the Testaments calls for a consideration of a unified vantage point from which to order the manifold emphases of the biblical witnesses. Against Maier's global inspirationalism Stuhlmacher holds firmly to a concept of a discernible canon within the canon. The Reformers' *sola scriptura* did not mean *tota scriptura*, the whole Scripture in undifferentiated unity. It implied, as we have mentioned, a theological critique. With great caution Stuhlmacher has now described this central canon as the biblical message of "reconciliation."<sup>18</sup> Maier and his friends have repeatedly urged that any such distinctions of rind and core are unnecessary and illegitimate,<sup>19</sup> but Stuhlmacher has not been moved, understanding his position as the legitimate quest for the center of Scripture in direct dependence on the theological heritage of the Reformation.

To me as a church historian, the most significant opening is Stuhlmacher's

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<sup>17</sup>See several essays in Gese's two volumes, *Vom Sinai zum Zion. Alttestamentliche Beiträge zur Biblischen Theologie*, 1974, and *Zur Biblischen Theologie. Alttestamentliche Vorträge*, 1977, both published by the Chr. Kaiser Verlag, Munich.

<sup>18</sup>*Hermeneutik*, p. 243.

<sup>19</sup>See below, note 23.

appeal to take the history of interpretation seriously in the exegesis of a text. "Hearing" the text with the interpreter's loyalty to the ongoing life of the Church involves openness to its claims which are mediated through the history of its understanding. In antithesis to one of the basic dogmas of biblical criticism, Stuhlmacher holds that the exegetical tradition does not necessarily hinder understanding but may give access to its full potential. I have argued this point myself on the basis of the text's total historicity. In order to understand a text, its post-history is as important as its pre-history and *Sitz im Leben*.<sup>20</sup> Stuhlmacher adds the hermeneutical argument. Drawing on a philosophical tradition that extends from Dilthey to H. G. Gadamer, he states that "every serious historical interpretation must fulfill the requirement of having consciously reflected on the impact of the text in history."<sup>21</sup> Biblical texts as all texts point beyond themselves to the phenomenon of their reception, which may involve modification, even distortion. The history of interpretation thus becomes part of the "horizons" which have to be "fused" in the exegetical endeavor (Gadamer). It seems that Stuhlmacher's insistence on the role of the exegetical tradition will in the long run be seen not only as a contribution to biblical studies but to the much needed new integration of theological scholarship in general.

In his recent *Hermeneutik*, Stuhlmacher repeats that his methodological considerations do

not just follow the external logic of the history of scholarship in the field but are demanded by the nature of the texts themselves. This point is underscored when he now calls his own hermeneutical paradigm a “hermeneutics of agreement (*Einverständnis*) with the texts.” The focus on the commitment of the interpreter, which we recognized as central, is a necessary part of any true encounter with the biblical material. “Agreement” presupposes “hearing” and thus the willingness to commit oneself to what is being said and meant. Both the text and the history to which it points must remain ambiguous in the horizon of historical criticism as a method. But the “fusion of horizons” takes place within the interpreter, who is thus enabled to lead exegesis beyond the confines of guild loyalty into the realm of common responsibilities of all Christians in the Church. In his *Hermeneutik* Stuhlmacher has fully and honestly laid open his hermeneutical presuppositions and emphases as they are developed so far. His students, future pastors for the most part, not only are taught exegetical methodology but are given a rationale for the process in which they are invited to participate. This in itself is an exemplary step.

But the first practical test of this methodology of balanced loyalties is already under way. In 1975 Stuhlmacher published a commentary on the Epistle to Philemon as the first installment of the *Evangelisch-Katholischer Kommentar zum Neuen Testament* (EKK), a series which promises to become one of the most significant commentary enterprises of the 1980s.<sup>22</sup> The impact of the hermeneutical

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<sup>20</sup>See my inaugural lecture, “Church History and the Bible,” *Princeton Seminary Bulletin* 1 (1978) pp.213-224, especially p. 219.

<sup>21</sup>*Hermeneutik*, p. 221.

<sup>22</sup>The *Kommentar* is jointly published by the Benziger Verlag (Catholic) and the Neukirchener Verlag (Protestant) under the joint editorship of Josef Blank, Rudolf Schnackenburg, Eduard Schweizer, and Ulrich Wilckens. Available are the commentaries on Mark (J. Gnllka, 2 volumes, 1979); Romans (U. Wilckens, 2 volumes, 1978-1980); Colossians (E. Schweizer, 1976); II Thessalonians (W. Thrilling, 1980); Philemon (P. Stuhlmacher, 1975); and I Peter (N. Brox, 1979).

stance which Stuhlmacher represents can be felt in the meantime in all subsequent volumes published to date. As should be expected, the most striking innovation is the inclusion of material from the history of interpretation in all of them. One recalls that an earlier example of such an approach in the United States, Brevard Childs’ commentary on Exodus, did not yet fit in any series and had to be published as a monograph. The new series with its ecumenical orientation should provide an extremely effective platform for a broad influence of the new hermeneutical intentions on Protestant and Catholic churches in Germany. The volumes are still written singly, either by a Protestant or a Catholic author, but a common spirit and a common loyalty both to the exegetical profession in its academic context and to the life of the Church are everywhere present.

In the meantime Stuhlmacher has also become an important voice in and for the Church outside the academic establishment. The discussion with Gerhard Maier and other evangelicals has continued, especially in the evangelical journal *Theologische Beiträge*, where even the minutes of a conversation of a student group with both Maier and Stuhlmacher were published recently.<sup>23</sup> Stuhlmacher has called himself one “who walks the border between kerygmatic theology, pietism, and biblically-oriented Lutheranism.”<sup>24</sup> Such border walks may indeed be a paradigm of the method needed to find the proper balance of loyalties in the case of the

professional exegete today. Crossing borders is already in this ecumenical age a constant necessity and a joyful reality for more people than anyone would have predicted some decades ago, despite the hardening of confessional lines and the polarization that characterizes official relations in many cases. It remains a proper activity for Christians including the Church's exegetes.

Biblical hermeneutics is on the move. There are signs today that at least part of the move could have a double advantage. It might benefit the need for orientation in a profession that finds itself in turmoil, and it might benefit a Church that is in need of biblical orientation by that same profession for all its members—teachers, pastors, and congregations alike.

<sup>23</sup>The contributions include H. Lindner, "Widerspruch oder Vermittlung? Zum Gespräch mit G. Maier und P. Stuhlmacher über eine biblische Hermeneutik," vol. 7 (1976) pp. 185-197; P. Stuhlmacher, "Biblische Theologie und kritische Exegese: Zum Aufsatz von H. Lindner...", vol. 8 (1977) pp. 88-90; G. Maier, "Einer biblischen Hermeneutik entgegen? Zum Gespräch mit P. Stuhlmacher und H. Lindner," vol. 8 (1977) pp. 148-160; P. Stuhlmacher, "Hauptprobleme und Chancen kirchlicher Schriftauslegung," vol. 9 (1978) pp. 53-69; and the report, "Zum Thema: Biblische Hermeneutik. Tübinger Studenten im Gespräch mit G. Maier und P. Stuhlmacher," vol. 9 (1978) pp. 222-234.

<sup>24</sup>*Schriftauslegung auf dem Wege zur biblische Theologie*. Göttingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 1975, p. 61.