Hermeneutics: A brief assessment of some recent trends

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Background

The recent explosion of interest in hermeneutics should not be taken to mean that the subject was of no concern before 1950. One of the most profitable ways for the student to approach the subject is by studying its history.[1] Every debate in the history of the church is conditioned in part by hermeneutical considerations; and those happy souls who naively think they can without loss avoid such considerations and 'just believe the Bible' in fact adopt all sorts of hermeneutical stances unawares. Although hermeneutical positions *alone* do not *necessarily* determine one's theological conclusions in advance, the role they play is much larger than is often allowed.

Especially in the North American context, evangelicals still rely very largely on the conservative works of Ramm[2] and Mickelsen,[3] and to some extent on the reprints of Berkhof[4] and Terry.[5] These works are largely unknown outside North American evangelical circles: a recent and invaluable bibliography, prepared in Britain,[6] lists only Mickelsen. Nevertheless these books have some important things to say, however dated they may be. They treat the Scriptures as the given, the thing to be studied, and then trace out the principles by which various forms, figures and topics in the Scripture should be understood—parables, diverse poetical forms, typology, apocalyptic language, assorted figures of speech, riddles and fables. Moreover they include some reflection on the use of the Bible for establishing doctrine, and on the piety, devotion or spirituality of the interpreter engaged in his hermeneutical task. Hermeneutics in these works is conceived primarily as the enunciation of principles of interpreting the sacred text, principles largely derived from previously

[1] See, for example, the 1885 Bampton Lectures of F. W. Farrar, *History of Interpretation* (New York: E. P. Dutton and Co., 1886); and, more recently, R. M. Grant, *A Short History of the Interpretation of the Bible* (New York: Macmillan, 1963).

[2] B. Ramm, *Protestant Biblical Interpretation: A Textbook of Hermeneutics for Conservative Protestants* (Boston: W. A. Wilde, 1956).

[3] A. B. Mickelsen, *Interpreting the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1963).

[4] L. Berkhof, *Principles of Biblical Interpretation* (London: Evangelical Press, 1950).

[5] Milton S. Terry, *Biblical Hermeneutics: A Treatise on the Interpretation of the Old and New Testaments* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, repr. 1974).

[6] *Viz.*, the bibliography at the end of *New Testament Interpretation: Essays on Principles and Methods*, ed. I. H. Marshall (Exeter: Paternoster, 1977).

established epistemological, philological and literary categories.

In the past, evangelical writers have sometimes designated their approach to interpreting the Bible as 'grammatico-historical' exegesis, over against the 'historical-critical' method; but by and large the four works cited avoid the pitfalls implicit in such distinctions. Ramm, for instance, takes pains to defend the word 'critical', defining it to mean 'that *any interpretation of Scripture must have adequate justification.* The grounds for the interpretation *must be made explicit*',[7] whether these grounds are lexical, historical, grammatical, theological, geographical, or whatever. For Ramm, the critical approach stands in opposition, not to orthodoxy, but to highly personal interpretations, or to interpretations determined arbitrarily, dogmatically, or speculatively.

These works are dated (Mickelsen's less so); but their understanding of hermeneutics as the study of principles used to interpret the given text to determine its meaning, in a simple subject-object relationship, constitutes both their strength and their weakness. Their approach may appear simplistic in the light of the later developments I shall survey in a moment; but they preserve some invaluable emphasis too easily sacrificed on the altar of hermeneutical fads for which *exclusive* claims are temporarily made. It is very refreshing to observe that in a very recent book, *The Method and Message of Jesus' Teaching*,[8] Robert H. Stein focuses attention on some of the same interpretive questions as these older books, albeit in an up-to-date context.

For introductory surveys of developments in hermeneutics, largely outside evangelical circles,[9] one may turn with profit to the books by C. E. Braaten,[10] W. G. Doty,[11] and R. W. Funk.[12] In what follows I shall survey five large areas of discussion in contemporary hermeneutical debates, but restrict bibliography to representative works. The presentation will be largely descriptive, only occasionally evaluative, until the concluding section, which attempts to assess these developments.

Modern Literary Tools

Seventeen years ago Otto Kaiser and Werner G. Kümmel collaborated to write a little book which, in English translation, was titled, *Exegetical Method: A Student's Handbook*.[13] Although the book avoided terms like 'source criticism', 'form criticism', 'tradition criticism', 'redaction criticism', 'audience criticism', and the like, in fact it included a gentle, low-key introduction to these and other literary tools. The same year that the English translation put in an appearance, George Eldon Ladd came out with his *The New Testament and Criticism*,[14] essentially a competent effort to introduce conservative students to the legitimate aspects of literary criticism, coupled with the occasional warning about the dangers. Over the years, several publications have attempted to introduce students to one or more of the modern literary 'criticisms', no series being as widely received as the one published by Fortress.[15] Now, I. Howard Marshall has edited a symposium entitled *New Testament Interpretation: Essays in Principles and Methods*.[16]

It is important to grasp the development that this book represents. When these literary tools were first introduced, they did not make their appearance as hermeneutical principles but as ways of getting behind the Gospels as we have them in order to illumine the 'tunnel' period and perhaps learn something more about the historical Jesus. To use these tools at that stage usually meant buying into a large conceptual framework concerning the descent of the tradition—a framework with which evan-

[7] *Op. cit.*, p. 101.

[8] (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1978).

[9] Within evangelical circles, little development has taken place in the area of hermeneutics, aside from the work of a handful of men. What has been written has often been for in-house consumption, not infrequently in the area of prophecy: e.g. Paul Lee Tan, *The Interpretation of Prophecy* (Winona Lake: BMH Books, 1974), a book as remarkable for its ignorance of primary sources as for its *non sequiturs*; J. Wilmot. *Inspired Principles of Prophetic Interpretation* (Swengel: Reiner, 1975), a book with a very different eschatological perspective, but sometimes guilty of generating more heat than light. Even the more responsible books in the area are designed primarily for lay persons: e.g. P. E. Hughes, *Interpreting Prophecy* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976); Carl E. Armerding and W. Ward Gasque, edd., *Dreams, Visions and Oracles: The Layman's Guide to Biblical Prophecy* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1977).

[10] C. E. Braaten, *History and Hermeneutics* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1966).

[11] W. G. Doty, *Contemporary New Testament Interpretation* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1966).

[12] R. W. Funk, *Language, Hermeneutic and the Word of God: The Problem of Language in the New Testament and Contemporary Theology* (New York: Harper and Row, 1966).

[13] (tr. E. V. N. Goetchius; New York: Seabury, 1967; German, 1963).

[14] (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1967).

[15] Some of these have been published in the UK by SPCK: e.g., N. Perrin, *What is Redaction Criticism?* (London: SPCK, 1970); cf. also E. V. McKnight, *What is Form Criticism?* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1969). Cf. also R. S. Barbour, *Traditio-Historical Criticism of the Gospels* (London: SPCK, 1972).

[16] *Op. cit.*

gelicals (and many others, for that matter) were bound to differ.

Yet in the case of the Synoptic Gospels, at least, we have enough comparative material to be certain there are literary borrowings; identifiable forms whose history can be traced, however tentatively; and demonstrable re-arranging and shaping of the pericopae to support certain theological ends. The literary 'criticisms' were not necessarily evil after all; they became increasingly acceptable as *exegetical* tools, devices to enable us better to understand the text.

Now, however, we have moved one stage further. Traditionally, 'exegesis' was the actual study of the text in order to determine its meaning, and 'hermeneutics' the principles by which one attempted to perform 'exegesis'. But Marshall's book is subtitled, *Essays in Principles and Methods:* have the literary 'criticisms' been upgraded to the status of hermeneutical principles or has the word 'hermeneutics' broadened its semantic range? It is no accident that Marshall, in introducing the questions to be studied by the contributors, calls them 'hermeneutical questions'.[17] Of course, since in the traditional distinction both 'exegesis' and 'hermeneutics' deal with the interpretation of Scripture, there is some legitimate semantic overlap; but we shall discover that one of the corollaries of modern 'hermeneutical' debate is that the word 'hermeneutics' is skidding around on an increasingly broad semantic field.

More than the semantic range of a word is at stake; for as 'literary tools' become 'hermeneutical principles', they are upgraded not simply in dignity and in their ability to dominate the discussion, but in their ability to dominate what is legitimate in interpretation. That is not itself bad; but the situation is worsened by the fact that these 'hermeneutical principles' are frequently handled, outside believing circles, as if they enable us to practise our interpretive skills with such objective distance that we never come under the authority of the God whose Word is being interpreted, and never consider other personal, moral and spiritual factors which have no less 'hermeneutical' influence in our attempts to interpret the text. And not all the contributors to this volume have escaped these malign influences.[18]

The New Hermeneutic

For the student brought up on traditional hermeneutics, the 'new hermeneutic' is an extremely difficult subject to get hold of. The writings of Gadamer, Fuchs, Ebeling[19] and others are not easy, even in English translation; and many of their essays have not been translated. English expositions of the new hermeneutic have been prepared by, *inter alios*, Robinson and Cobb[20] and by Walter Wink.[21] Two articles by A. C. Thiselton[22] and another by Richard B. Gaffin[23] provide helpful introductions to the subject.

According to the exponents of the new hermeneutic, the starting-point for understanding any text is the recognition of the common humanity and historicality of the text's author and the text's interpreter. The point was made by Schleiermacher, and is related to Bultmann's conception of *Vorverständnis*. As developed by Bultmann's students, this common historicality dismisses the nineteenth-century claims to sheer objectivity in interpretation, and establishes a pattern of dialogue: the interpreter asks questions of the text out of his own psychological, historical, cultural limitations, and finds that the text, in answering his questions subtly *changes* his psychological, historical, cultural condition. As a result, the next round of questions posed by the interpreter is somewhat different—as indeed are the answers and implicit questions provided by the text. This sets up a 'hermeneutical circle'. The interpreter recognizes the 'distance' between himself and the text (not least in documents written twenty centuries or more before he was born, in different languages and cultures!), and seeks to come to common horizons with the author of the text by means of this dialogue.

So far, so good. However, as this new hermeneutic is normally expounded, both the interpreter *and the*

[17] *Op. cit.*, p. 11.

[18] Cf. especially V. Poythress, 'New Testament Interpretation,' *WTJ* 41 (1978-79), pp. 190-201.

[19] H.-G. Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (London: Sheed and Ward, 1975). Of the many works by Fuchs and Ebeling, cf. esp.: E. Fuchs, *Gesammelte Aufsätze*, vol. I: *Zum hermeneutischen Problem in der Theologie: Die existentiale Interpretation* (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1965); *idem, Hermeneutik* (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1970); *idem*, several essays in *Studies of the Historical Jesus* (London: SCM, 1964); G. Ebeling, *God and Word* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1967); *idem, Introduction to a Theological Theory of Language* (London: Collins, 1973); *idem*, several essays in *Word and Faith* (London: SCM, 1963).

[20] James M. Robinson and John B. Cobb, edd., *The New Hermeneutic* (New York: Harper and Row, 1964). *Cf.* also P. Achtemeier, *An Introduction to the New Hermeneutic* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1969).

[21] W. Wink, *The Bible in Human Transformation: Towards a New Paradigm for Biblical Study* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1973).

[22] A. C. Thiselton, 'Explain etc.' in NIDNTT I, esp. pp. 582-584; *idem.* 'The New Hermeneutic,' in I. H. Marshall, ed., *New Testament Interpretation, op. cit.*, pp. 308-333.

[23] 'Contemporary Hermeneutics and the Study of the New Testament,' in J. H. Skilton, ed., *Studying the New Testament Today* (Nutley: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1974), pp. 3-18.

text are swallowed up in a sea of historical relativity. In interpreting the text, the interpreter finds that the text interprets him. As horizons are increasingly shared and an *Einverständnis* (Fuchs' term, rendered either by 'common understanding' or by 'empathy') develops, the text is capable of grasping hold of the interpreter and radically altering his thinking by introducing something shocking and unexpected. Fuchs treats the parables in particular this way. The language of the text becomes a 'language-event' (*Sprachereignis*) by challenging the interpreter toward 'authentic human existence'. Moreover, the 'hermeneutical circle' thus set up has no necessary *terminus:* it is not the objective meaning of the text that is the goal, since the text is considered to be no more 'objective' than the interpreter. The goal is that moment of encounter between text and interpreter in which the 'meaning' *occurs* or *takes place:* that is, it is the encounter between text and interpreter in which the interpreter hears and responds to some claim upon his person. Obviously that might be a different thing for a different person, or different things for the same person at different times, or different things for different generations of students of Scripture. Moreover, to share common horizons does not entail shared world-views. The 'distance' between text and interpreter is, as I have indicated, repeatedly stressed.[24] A Bultmann may discount the possibility of supernatural phenomena in coming to grips with texts abounding in reports of such phenomena; but modern exponents of the new hermeneutic would point out not only that the adoption of supernatural categories by the first century writers is historically conditioned but so also is Bultmann's rejection of the same. It makes no difference: provided Bultmann and the text develop *Einverständnis*, it is possible for *Sprachereignis* to take place. This is the true 'meaning' of the text; and it is the goal of the new hermeneutic.

This painfully brief summary of the new hermeneutic verges on the simplistic; yet it should be obvious that there is much of merit in these developments, even if there is not less of demerit. The new hermeneutic is certainly a welcome antidote to nineteenth and early twentieth-century belief in the impartiality and neutrality of the interpreter, the Enlightenment commitment not only to human autonomy but also to the capacity of human reason to achieve, by itself, objective knowledge. Moreover, the new hermeneutic, when utilized within a less sceptical framework, offers valuable insights into the parables and other forms of Biblical language, enabling us to sense again the shock of the first hearers, the first readers of Scripture. The danger engendered by our very familiarity with them is thereby partially overcome.

Nevertheless it must be clearly understood that the term 'hermeneutics' (or, to be pedantic, 'hermeneutic') is undergoing a considerable semantic shift. We are now no longer interested in the principles whereby an interpreter attempts to understand the meaning of a text within its original context. Rather, hermeneutics becomes the discipline by which we examine how a thought or event in one cultural and religious context becomes understandable in another cultural and religious context. In Thiselton's terms, 'Whilst the new hermeneutic rightly faces the problem of how the interpreter may understand the text of the New Testament more *deeply* and *creatively*, Fuchs and Ebeling are *less concerned about how he may understand it correctly.*'[25] Of course, to word a criticism of the new hermeneutic in this way is to accept what is regularly denied, *viz.* that there *is* a 'correct' interpretation to be pursued. If the new hermeneutic and her twin sister the new history have delivered us from believing in our own omniscience and impartiality, they must not be permitted to seduce us into thinking we can enjoy *no* true and certain knowledge of objective truths and events. If they have delivered us from the false notion that a historical record may be exhaustively true (*wie es eigentlich gewesen*) and have taught us that historical records, including the documents which constitute Scripture, are at best partial statements, partial interpretations; nevertheless they must not be permitted to seduce us into thinking that partial knowledge is necessarily false knowledge. Finite human beings may know truly, even if they cannot know exhaustively. The study of history is the study of objective phenomena, akin to geology if not to physics, as Passmore has brilliantly argued.[26]

It follows, then, that the new hermeneutic pursues 'what is true for me' at the expense of 'what is true'. Theology proper becomes impossible. It is not for

[24] This is one of the chief characteristics of the new hermeneutic, according to C. F. Evans, 'Hermeneutics,' *Epworth Review* 2 (1975), pp. 81-93.

[25] A. C. Thiselton, 'The New Hermeneutic,' *art. cit.*, p. 323. One cannot help wryly observing that the editor of this volume, I. H. Marshall, has wisely included this essay not under the second section, 'The Use of Critical Methods in Interpretation', nor under the third, 'The Task of Exegesis', but under the fourth 'The New Testament and the Modern Reader'.

[26] J. A. Passmore, 'The Objectivity of History,' in W. H. Dray, *Philosophical Analysis and History* (New York/London: Harper and Row, 1966), pp. 75-94. Cf. also the important work by Earl R. MacCormac, *Metaphor and Myth in Science and Religion* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1976).

nothing that the first volume of Fuchs' collected essays bears for its subtitle *Die existentiale Interpretation*. Among the things overlooked by such an approach is the possibility that the transcendent, personal God has chosen to reveal himself at historical intervals in both events and in propositions. At the strictly hermeneutical level, the exponents of the new hermeneutic overlook the crucial distinctions between 'meaning' and 'significance' ably advanced by Hirsch.[27] To say that the 'meaning' of such and such a text is the claim it makes upon me in the *Sprachereignis* of the hermeneutical encounter is to adopt an approach which, were it applied to the writings of the exponents of the new hermeneutic, would dissolve their work in a sea of subjectivity. They have written to be understood, to convey information and theories which they regard as true and important: is it too much to suppose that some of the Biblical writers entertained similar intentions? And when we accept the Scriptures' own perspective and hold that God himself addresses us by the words of Scripture, it does not seem too bold to think that God has something to say—that is, that there is intent in the text, meaning which must be discovered, however many secondary significances there may be and however far such secondary significances may sometimes lead us astray from that meaning. If the new hermeneutic forces us to an awareness of these diverse significances, and helps us hear the Word of God afresh by challenging our alleged objectivity, it will have served us well. But if the new hermeneutic denies that writers, including God, have intent and can convey meaning, it is but another faddish aberration in theology.

Canon Criticism and Hermeneutics

One may wonder why canon criticism and hermeneutics belong together. Perhaps they wouldn't, had it not been for the fact that J. A. Sanders, one of the leading proponents of canon criticism, was asked to write the article on 'Hermeneutics' in the new *Supplement* to IDB.

Sanders claims that, as used today, the term 'hermeneutics' 'signifies (1) the principles, rules, and techniques whereby the interpreter of a text attempts to understand it in its original context [i.e., the classical definition]; (2) the science of discerning how a thought or event in one cultural context may be understood in a different cultural context [i.e., a definition associated with the new hermeneutic]; and (3) the art of making the transfer [the direction in which Sanders himself is moving].'[28]

After sketching in the rise of the new hermeneutic, Sanders insists that the task today, the challenge ahead, is 'canonical hermeneutics'.[29] Essentially, this is the study of the means whereby early authoritative traditions were utilized by Israel (in the Old Testament) and the Church (in the New Testament) to span the gaps of time and culture to be re-formed according to the needs of the new believing communities. The process itself is as canonical as the traditions found in the canon. *Canonical* hermeneutics is thus 'the means whereby early believing communities pursued, and later believing communities may yet pursue, the integrity (oneness) of God, both ontological and ethical.'[30]

It would take us too far afield to detail the principles and rules which Sanders enumerates. What must be pointed out, however, is that Sanders focuses not on what the text says, but on how the traditions are transformed from generation to generation. 'Hermeneutics,' he writes, 'is as much concerned with the contexts in which biblical texts were and are read or recited as with the texts themselves. It is in this sense that one must insist that the Bible is not the Word of God. The Word is the point that is made in the conjunction of text and context, whether in antiquity or at any subsequent time. Discernment of context, whether then or now, is thus crucial to biblical interpretation.'[31]

Sanders is partly right in what he affirms, and certainly wrong in what he denies. His emphasis on keeping an eye on context is most helpful, especially from the pastoral point of view. A man careless in prayer might better hear Luke 18 than Matthew 6; a man given to thinking that God hears him and blesses him in proportion to his much speaking, the reverse. Recently Longenecker has studied the 'faith of Abraham' theme in the New Testament and, noting the rich diversity of emphasis, has underscored the 'circumstantial' nature of the New Testament documents.[32] But to establish as normative the *changes* in tradition, and not the content

[27] E. D. Hirsch, Jr, *Validity in Interpretation* (New Haven/London: Yale University Press, 1967). Cf. also his *The Aims of Interpretation* (Chicago/London: University of Chicago Press, 1976).

[28] IDB *Supp.*, p. 402. The rich literature on canon criticism, springing in part from the biblical theology movement, is too extensive to be treated here. But I cannot forbear to mention the latest (and magisterial) volume by Brevard S. Childs, *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1977). This substantial work is immensely suggestive; but it arrived too late for consideration in this paper.

[29] *Ibid.*, p. 403.

[30] *Ibid.*, p. 404.

[31] *Ibid.*

[32] R. N. Longenecker, 'The "Faith of Abraham" Theme in Paul, James and Hebrews: A Study in the Circumstantial Nature of New Testament Teaching,' *JETS* 20 (1977), pp. 203-312.

(with all due regard for the varying contexts) is certainly a false step. Contexts are not as easy to retrieve as Sanders intimates. Moreover, Sanders' approach looks good when it is applied to attitudes and morals, but it is extremely difficult to see how it could establish much doctrine—which is the first purpose of Scripture to be listed at 2 Tim. 3: 16.

In any case, the term 'hermeneutics' as Sanders wants us to use it establishes principles, not for understanding or obeying the text *per se*, but for isolating 'conjunctions of text and context' in such a way that modern parallels may be guided aright. However, unless the text itself is normative in some sense, it is not easy to believe that the *conjunction* of *text* and context should have any normative status or authoritative value.

Structuralism

For the unwary, structuralism is a minefield of explosive and sensitive topics, laced with the barbed wire of an esoteric language and pitted with deep unknowns. I cannot hope to introduce the subject here; but fortunately three recent essays, one of them in the pages of an earlier number of this journal, have undertaken the challenge.[33] These three essays are not redundant: structuralism is such a vast field, and the ways of approaching it so numerous, that perhaps it is not too surprising how little they overlap. To plumb the subject it is necessary to go back at least as far as de Saussure and Lévi-Strauss, and, in linguistics, to the work of Noam Chomsky.[34] From there one may move forward to a veritable flood of literature.[35]

Structuralism is extraordinarily difficult to define. At one level it does little more than examine literary structures (*e.g.* chiasm, repetition, various kinds of narrative interchange), often in terms of set roles, schematized plots, and binary oppositions, in order the better to understand a biblical passage.[36] As such it becomes another hermeneutical tool, nothing more. However, the nerve centre of structuralism is at the other end of the spectrum. This radical structuralism, if I may so label it, no longer assumes that truth from Scripture (or any other piece of writing) derives from the intent of its authors, and that such intent may be discovered by patient, painstaking literary and historical analysis. Structuralism, or structural analysis, seeks truth at quite another level. Structuralists hold that the study of the relationships among words and themes reveals codes, codes which reflect the 'deep structures' of the human brain and which, potentially, could enable researchers to map the human mind. As these codes are revealed most clearly in language, the relationship between linguistics and structuralism is a very close one. Structural analysts of the extreme sort disavow the historical critical method,[37] focus on the text as a whole made up of constituent parts which may be analyzed and classified, in the hope of decoding the text into a series of structures of increasing abstraction, leading ultimately to the deep structures. Here there is strong, anti-historical bias, dismissal of diachronics, and little concern with what the text says at the 'surface' level.

The literature already cited attempts to list some of the strengths and weaknesses of structuralism: I shall not repeat them here. There are only two things I want to emphasize. The first is that structuralism in its radical form is offering a total package, a wholistic method of approaching Scripture (and other literature) which at its most virulent renders the historical irrelevant and provides a *method* for avoiding the transcendent at every level. The second is perhaps more important yet. So far proponents of existential hermeneutics and the new hermeneutic have denied the relevance of

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[33] V. Poythress, 'Structuralism and Biblical Studies,' *JETS* 21 (1978), pp. 221-237; A. C. Thiselton, 'Keeping up with Recent Studies II. Structuralism and Biblical Studies: Method or Ideology?' *ExpT* 89 (1977-78), pp. 329-335; Carl Armending, 'Structural Analysis,' *Themelios* 4 (1979), pp. 96-104. Cf. also V. Poythress, 'Philosophical Roots of Phenomenological and Structuralist Literary Criticism,' *WTJ* 41 (1978-79), 165-171.

[34] I cannot forbear to mention also a virulent attack on the latter: I. Robinson, *The New Grammarians' Funeral: A critique of Noam Chomsky's linguistics* (Cambridge: University Press, 1975).

[35] To list but a few examples, all in English: D. Patte, *What is Structural Exegesis?* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1976); J. Calloud, *Structural Analysis of Narrative* (Missoula: Scholars Press, 1976); J. J. Jackson and M. Kessler, ed., *Rhetorical Criticism* (Pittsburgh: Pickwick, 1974); R. M. Polzin, *Biblical Structuralism: Method and Subjectivity in the Study of Ancient Texts* (Missoula: Scholars, 1977); R. Detweiler, *Story, Sign and Self: Phenomenology and Structuralism as Literary-Critical Methods* (Missoula: Scholars, 1978); P. Pettit, *The Concept of Structuralism: A Critical Analysis* (Berkeley/Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1977); R. C. Culley, *Studies in the Structure of Hebrew Narrative* (Missoula: Scholars, 1976); R. Barthes *et al.*, *Structural Analysis and Biblical Exegesis: Interpretational Essays* (Pittsburgh: Pickwick, 1974); S. Wittig, ed., *Structuralism: An Interdisciplinary Study* (Pittsburgh: Pickwick, 1975); A. M. Johnson, Jr, ed. and transl., *The New Testament and Structuralism* (Pittsburgh: Pickwick, 1976). Most of the fascicles of *Semeia* have also been given over to structural analysis of one sort or another.

[36] *E.g.*, B. Olsson, *Structure and Meaning in the Fourth Gospel: A Text-Linguistic Analysis of John 2: 1–11 and 4: 1–42* (Lund: C. W. K. Gleerup, 1974). Not a few of the essays appearing in *Semeia* are of this sort. *Cf.* also the studies by P. Auffret which have appeared from time to time in *NTS*, *VT*, *RevQum* and elsewhere.

[37] One of the strongest statements to this effect is by B. W. Kovacs, 'Philosophical Foundations for Structuralism,' *Semeia* 10 (1978), pp. 85-105.

structural analysis to their own studies and see it merely as an alternative way of approaching the text. Recently, however, Edgar V. McKnight, in a brilliant book entitled *Meaning in Texts: The Historical Shaping of a Narrative Hermeneutics*,[38] has convincingly shown how the two approaches are necessarily linked. Such linking, as it is worked out in the future, will offer our generation some of the toughest hermeneutical challenges ever faced.

Once again it is worth stressing that I am referring only to one extreme but vociferous group of structuralists. As far as I am able to discern, most structural analysts—*e.g.* the majority of those contributing specific examples to *Semeia*—have not developed an exclusive approach to structuralism which turns more on ideology than method. Despite the arbitrariness of much structural exegesis, there are nevertheless important lessons to be learned; and the field is wide open for mature, programmatic assessment.[39] Just as we refuse to think that we have a corner on all truth, we must equally refuse to think that we have nothing to learn from developments of a hermeneutical nature.

The Maier/Stuhlmacher Debate

Gerhard Maier and Peter Stuhlmacher have for some time been involved in an important debate over the historical-critical method. Each man has a book on the subject, translated into English, where the essence of his position is presented,[40] although in fact the debate has waged beyond the pages of the two books.[41]

Both of these books deserve thoughtful reading. Maier argues that the historical-critical method is an invalid approach to the Bible because it is not suited to its subject matter, *viz.* divine revelation. The problem, he affirms, is that the historical-critical method becomes the historical-*critical* method: *i.e.* the emphasis comes to be placed on the interpreter's autonomous intellect and assessment of what he feels he can or cannot accept from God. This inevitably leads to some form of 'canon within the canon', a concept which Maier devastatingly exposes for the ambiguous and useless category it is.

The only proper approach to the Bible is to accept its claim and operate on that basis. Twice he refers to John 7: 17 as the touchstone of his approach: *credo ut intellegam* [I believe in order to understand], he insists; not *credo, quia intellego* [I believe because I understand].[42] Maier in these passages comes perilously close to basing his adoption of the position that all of the canon is itself the very Word of God, on his understanding of John 7: 17. John Piper, in criticizing Maier in this regard,[43] is correct in pointing out that John 7: 17 in its context has nothing to do with *establishing normative Scripture*, but with a person's desires in discerning whether or not Jesus' teachings are in conformity with the will of God already revealed; but perhaps Piper is over-reacting when he accuses Maier of a simplistic fideism which is not guided by knowledge. Maier, after all, includes substantial sections of his book, proportionately speaking, to what the Scriptures claim for themselves, what the scope of the canon is, how to approach alleged contradictions and scientific errors, and the like.

What Maier wants to do is replace the historical-critical method with what he calls the 'historical-Biblical' method. He concludes his volume by outlining the specific elements he defines as constitutive of the method.

Peter Stuhlmacher is scarcely less upset with recent developments in theology than Maier himself; yet he reserves his strongest language for disagreement with Maier. Stuhlmacher wants to preserve the historical-critical method, but with two important *caveats*. He insists that the notion of absolute 'objectivity' be scrapped (here he leans on Schleiermacher and Gadamer); and he appeals for what he calls a 'hermeneutics of consent'. By this he means that the historical-critical method must not be applied to the Bible in such a way that analogical arguments rule out *a priori* the possibility of supernatural events, of unique events; rather, the interpreter 'consents' to leave himself open to the possibility of 'transcendence'. Stuhlmacher represents a growing movement in Germany against the sterility of existential theology.

What shall we say of the profound differences that divide these two men? Maier, it is true, adopts a stance *vis-à-vis* the Scriptures which is closer to the traditional evangelical position than is Stuhlmacher's; but that does not mean his entire position is thereby vindicated.

I suspect that at least part of the difference between the two positions turns on definition and on some difficult problems in epistemology. If the

[38] (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1978).

[39] *Cf.* the preliminary conclusions of A. C. Thiselton, 'Keeping up,' *art. cit.*, pp. 334f.

[40] G. Maier, *The End of the Historical-Critical Method* (St Louis: Concordia, 1977); P. Stuhlmacher, *Historical Criticism and Theological Interpretation of Scripture* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1977).

[41] Earlier essays were published in German in *ZTK* and *ZNW;* and a continuing debate has been carried on in *Theologische Beiträge.*

[42] *Op. cit.*, pp. 23, 56.

[43] J. Piper, 'A Reply to Gerhard Maier: A Review Article,' *JETS* 22 (1979), pp. 79-85.

historical-critical method *necessarily* means that the interpreter claims independent authority over the text *in such a way as to exclude the possibility* that he might come to the position where he understands the text to be nothing less than the very Word of God, with absolute authority over him, then the historical-critical method is invalid: it is too limiting. If, however, 'historical-critical method' be understood in a way akin to that proposed by Ramm in the first section of this paper (and n. 7), it is difficult to see why either Maier or Stuhlmacher would object to the term. Maier is loading the expression 'historical-critical method' with unsatisfactory conclusions; but other men may use the same method without demonstrable *methodological* distinctions, and come out with conclusions perfectly acceptable to Maier. Is it the method *per se* that Maier finds objectionable, or its results in the hands of most (but not all) of its practitioners? Is it the historical-critical method that is offensive, or the claims to intellectual autonomy that are the heritage of the Enlightenment?

To put the matter this way raises a host of epistemological problems about how we came to know that the Bible is indeed the very Word of God; but it enables us to detect that, terminological problems aside, there are probably few *strictly hermeneutical* (in the classical sense) questions which divide Maier and Stuhlmacher. What divides them is that one holds the position that the entire canon is the Word of God, while the other, fighting against extreme scepticism, allows for the possibility of meeting transcendence in Scripture but does not think it justifiable to posit a traditional doctrine of Scripture. *The problem is that both men camouflage their essential doctrinal differences and choose to meet in the hermeneutical arena instead*, despite the fact that their essential differences of opinion are only marginally hermeneutical. From the point of view of a more traditional definition of hermeneutics, both men are confusing hermeneutics with the results of hermeneutics. Their early hermeneutical *results* become fresh hermeneutical *controls: i.e.* both men implicitly accept the validity of the 'hermeneutical circle' and therefore see the entire debate in terms of hermeneutics; but such hermeneutics is no longer essentially methodological, but includes *every* factor which influences the interpreter to come to an interpretive decision.

One of the immediate effects, of course, is that 'hermeneutics' is again enlarged in its semantic range. It is true that one's beliefs about the Bible will at many points affect how one will interpret the Bible; and in this sense such beliefs have a hermeneutical function. But clearly, this means we have arrived at the place where almost anything—one's presuppositions, one's literary tools, everything one has learned so far (true or false), one's sleep the night before—might be meaningfully labelled 'hermeneutical'. But equally clearly, such 'hermeneutical' factors, as influential as they might be, are not tools or principles independent of the interpreter; rather, they are *everything* that prompts an exegetical or interpretive decision. But at that point the term 'hermeneutics' has become so broad as to be well-nigh meaningless. Certainly it is no longer an appropriate term for referring to a distinct discipline. And that, I submit, is one of the painful lessons to be learned from the Maier/Stuhlmacher debate.

Interpreting the Old Testament

I am not referring by this heading to the peculiar problems surrounding Old Testament interpretation which face the modern interpreter,[44] but to the manner in which the Old Testament is interpreted both by early Jewish writers and by the New Testament. For a long time the most popular category employed by Christian writers assessing the latter problem was 'typology'.[45] Now however our ears ring with words like *pesher*, *midrash*, *halakah*, *haggadah*, *gal wahomer*, and the like.

In principle, the study of how the Old Testament is used by writers roughly contemporary with the New Testament writers promises significant results. This is one of the reasons why the Dead Sea Scrolls are so important,[46] and why the books by Daube,[47] Doeve,[48] Longenecker[49] and others make important advances along the right lines. These works have been followed up by very competent specialized studies.[50]

Nevertheless, three cautions are needed. The

[44] Issues confronted, for example, by C. Westermann, ed., *Essays on Old Testament Hermeneutics* (Richmond: John Knox, 1963), or by A. H. J. Gunneweg, *Vom Verstehen des Alten Testaments: Eine Hermeneutik* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1977).

[45] *Cf.* the reprint of P. Fairbairn, *The Typology of Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Baker, repr. 1975). Cf. also the classic by L. Goppelt, *Typos: Die typologische Deutung des Alten Testaments im Neuen* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, repr. 1973).

[46] *Cf.* esp. F. F. Bruce, *Biblical Exegesis in the Qumran Texts* (London: Tyndale, 1960).

[47] D. Daube, *The New Testament and Rabbinic Judaism* (London: Athlone Press, 1956).

[48] J. W. Doeve, *Jewish Hermeneutics in the Synoptic Gospels and Acts* (Assen: van Gorcum, 1954).

[49] R. N. Longenecker, *Biblical Exegesis in the Apostolic Period* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974).

[50] See, for example, the brief bibliography in I. H. Marshall, *op. cit.*, 379f.; to which one must at least add many of the essays by E. Earle Ellis in *Prophecy and Hermeneutic in Early Christianity* (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1978).

first is that the literary categories are ill-defined, and used variously by different scholars. One of the best features of a recent doctoral dissertation submitted to the University of St Andrews is its tracing of the range of meanings attributed to *midrash*.[51] Similar semantic range can easily be detected for *pesher* and for other words.

The second caution comes from Walter C. Kaiser. Over the years Kaiser has published a number of essays[52] warning students of Scripture against applying the *middoth* (the rules of interpretation) so indiscriminately to the New Testament writers as to be left with connections between the Old and New Testaments less univocal than the New Testament writers perceive them to be. Kaiser has recently put together his total perspective in a readable book.[53] One need not heed every aspect of his argument to profit from his warning.

The final caution is that, once again, use of these comparative materials does not itself guarantee faultless hermeneutics or invariably agreed results. One need only compare the work of, say, Longenecker,[54] with that of Lindars,[55] to find the point well made. Nevertheless there is much work to be done in this area by students who will submerge themselves in the several related but highly technical fields where competence must be achieved before significant contributions can be made.

Some concluding observations

1. Hermeneutics is a growing discipline, bursting its borders in several directions. It is an important and fast-paced area of study which urgently needs the close attention of evangelical students.

2. Hermeneutics is a slippery discipline, not least because the terms keep changing definition. Some of this terminological disarray stems from the legitimate growth of the discipline; but some of it springs from the imposition of alien ideologies onto the biblical data.

3. Hermeneutics is raising difficult questions in the areas of object/subject relations, historical particularity *vs.* historical relativity, and Jewish hermeneutics applied to the interpretation of the Old Testament.

4. Some movements with hermeneutical ramifications have developed somewhat exclusivistic attitudes or (otherwise put) a kind of inner ring syndrome. Structuralism for instance, often stumbles into this pitfall. Such an attitude is to be strenuously avoided: it is not axiomatic that one or two hermeneutical methods may justly claim either exclusive rights or sufficient power to exclude some other methods.

5. Although no particular *hermeneutical method* (in the traditional sense) *in itself* guarantees either heterodox or orthodox results, nevertheless each such method at least recognizes that there is a meaning to be discovered, however difficult that might be. But 'hermeneutics' in some of its modern usage is so irretrievably bound up with larger theological and ideological commitments that the possibility of discovering the objective meaning of a passage is *a priori* ruled out of court. Terminological disarray between those two poles everywhere abounds. I recently received a letter from a student inquiring about certain professors and their suitability as doctoral supervisors: he wanted to know if they were 'open to students of a conservative hermeneutic'. If 'hermeneutic' is taken in a classical sense, the question is naive. If 'hermeneutic' is taken in a more modern sense, it is difficult to see how 'conservative hermeneutic' means anything very different from 'conservative theological stance (which of course influences further interpretive decisions)'. I think I know what the letter-writer meant; but I suspect that what he said reflects the growing terminological and conceptual confusion surrounding 'hermeneutics'.

6. Just as there is a danger that exegetes will go about their task with too little awareness of hermeneutical questions, so there is a danger that the experts in hermeneutics will surpass themselves in sharpening and examining their tools, yet never use them. The proper goal of the study of hermeneutics is the better understanding of and obedience to holy Scripture.

7. Yet the most touted hermeneutical approaches today never enable anyone to hear a sure word from God: indeed, they positively preclude such an eventuality. They are too closely allied with unacceptable ideological commitments in which the only absolute is language itself. Despite the many things we must learn from these hermeneutical developments, we must not worship at their shrine.

[51] Douglas John Moo, 'The Use of the Old Testament in the Passion Texts of the Gospels' (unpublished PhD dissertation, St Andrews, 1979).

[52] *E.g.* 'The Current Crisis in Exegesis and the Apostolic Use of Deuteronomy 25: 4 in 1 Corinthians 9: 8–10,' *JETS* 21 (1978), pp. 3-18; 'The Davidic Promise and the Inclusion of the Gentiles (Amos 9: 9–15 and Acts 15: 13–18): A Test Passage for Theological Systems,' *JETS* 20 (1977), pp. 97-111.

[53] W. C. Kaiser, Jr, *Toward an Old Testament Theology*, Grand Rapids, Zondervan, 1978. The book, of course, deals with more than this one hermeneutical question; but this hermeneutical question is everywhere presupposed and occasionally enunciated.

[54] *Op. cit.*

[55] B. Lindars, *New Testament Apologetic: The Doctrinal Significance of the Old Testament Quotations* (London, SCM, 1961).