

SUBJECTIVITY AND OBJECTIVITY IN BIBLICAL EXEGESIS ¹

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Addicts of contract bridge are all aware of the requirement for each one of a foursome to declare his or her intentions through a system of making bids before a single card is played. Much of the fascination of the game lies in observing whether or not those intentions are fulfilled and, if so, how. Perhaps this lecture may attract some of the same kind of interest if I declare my hand at the outset and tell you what I intend to do; you can then observe whether or not I am successful and, if so, how. My intention is to point to the inadequacies of what has become a sacred cow in theological circles, of that which has assumed the character of a rigid and virtually untouchable orthodoxy. In short I hope to show what are the limitations of the historical-critical approach to the bible, an approach which in the terms of my title is believed to promote objectivity and eschew subjectivity.

What is fundamental to this approach is soon apparent when one looks at questions typical of final examination papers in the New Testament that are yearly produced by more or less all departments and faculties of theology in this country. Here are three examples:

1. From a study of St Luke's gospel outline the distinctive theological themes of its author.
2. 'The fourth gospel was aimed at the Jews of the Diaspora'. Discuss.
3. Consider the authorship and date of the Epistle to the Hebrews.

The task of biblical exegesis which these questions presuppose is to establish the meaning of a document in its historical context. To this end the student must seek to discover the author's identity and intentions, the interests of those addressed and as much information about the *Sitz im Leben*, social, political, economic, cultural and religious, as possible. By adopting this approach,

¹ A lecture delivered in the John Rylands University Library on Wednesday, 4 May 1983.

the text together with its author can be allowed to speak for themselves. The result will be exegesis and not eisegesis, since when used by those with open minds free from preconceptions the method is highly objective.

In questioning these several articles of belief I will begin by drawing attention to the peculiar nature of each and every historical document. Once something has been written, it attains a certain fixity and at the same time it escapes from the control of its author i.e. every text in course of time becomes decontextualised. It assumes the character of an atemporal object which has broken free from its moorings in the period of history when it originated. It achieves a measure of autonomy; it can be read by anyone at any time. Released from the social and historical conditions of its production, it is no longer closed in and restricted. In the process of being read and reread it can be interpreted in relation to the historical situations of its readers.

A text is consequently very different from the spoken word. The latter is an invitation to dialogue, since both speaker and hearer may share the same situation, but the text allows of no such exchange and writer and reader may be separated by some 2000 years. Since a shared reality no longer exists, a text assumes a dimension which is other than that of speech. Moreover whereas in the interaction of, say, conversation, language is interpersonal, this cannot be the case with a document. As Paul Ricoeur puts it: "the writing-reading relation is not a particular case of the speaking-hearing relation which we experience in a dialogical situation".² From this follow three consequences.

First, romantic hermeneutics can no longer be accepted as feasible. This took the dialogical model as the standard for the hermeneutical operation applied to a text and this is only possible when the difference between the two is ignored. Moreover romantic hermeneutics was based upon the idea of 'getting inside' another person or of the fusing of one with another, viz. of the exegete with the author. This conception goes back to Schleiermacher who, by emphasizing this psychological interpretation, turned hermeneutics into a divinatory process, involving the penetration by one person of the mind of another. He believed this to be possible because he considered each individual to be a manifestation of universal life so that the gap between exegete and

² P. Ricoeur, *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences* (C.U.P., 1981), p. 165.

writer can be bridged through a common human substratum. But this is to treat human nature unhistorically and the exegete himself is wrongly supposed to be free from all historical limitations. In other words the psychological dimension of romantic hermeneutics must now be seen to block the historical dimension precisely because it presupposed that there is no distance between then and now. *Pace* scholars who used this approach, hermeneutics is not the meeting of two subjectivities.

Second, the meaning of a text cannot be confined within what may be supposed to have been an author's intentions nor within that understanding of which he may have been consciously aware. Right understanding for me in my situation is not to be gained by a simple return to an author's aims and era. According to Ricoeur: "the text is an autonomous space of meaning which is no longer animated by the intention of its author; the autonomy of the text, deprived of this essential support, hands writing over to the sole interpretation of the reader".³

Third, it is erroneous to attribute a primacy to the original addressees with whom we must seek to coincide. The epistles of Paul are as much directed to us as they were to the Romans, Corinthians and others. To quote Ricoeur again: "From the moment that the text escapes from its author and from his situation, it also escapes from its original audience".⁴ The historical-critical method is applied in an attempt to take an historical object (a document) and recontextualise it in the period when it originated, but this is to cut it off from all the other interpretations given over the centuries and this is an impoverishment whose only outcome, if it is at all successful, is to formulate a dead meaning. Instead, it should be acknowledged that a document means all that it can mean. In other words, the 'meaning' of a text is much wider than the historical-critical method can allow. Let us look then at this wider meaning in an attempt to appreciate its scope.

"The understanding of something written is not a reproduction of something that is past, but the sharing of a present meaning"—so H.-G. Gadamer.⁵ Hence, while the historical-critical approach is supposed to result in an account of what

³ *Ibid.*, p. 174.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 192.

⁵ H.-G. Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (London, 1975), p. 354.

the bible may have meant once upon a time, the hermeneutic challenge is to affirm what it means today. Every age, to continue with some pertinent remarks also from Gadamer, "has to understand a text in its own way ... The real meaning of a text, as it speaks to the interpreter, does not depend on the contingencies of the author and whom he originally wrote for. It certainly is not identical with them, for it is always partly determined also by the historical situation of the interpreter".⁶ Understanding is not mere reproduction.

Of course every writer and every exegete has what is termed nowadays his 'horizon of understanding'. The word 'horizon' is carefully chosen to exclude any implication of a rigid frontier or barrier. An horizon moves with us; it invites us to advance; it extends as we do so. In hermeneutics the horizon of an exegete encounters that of the original writer and the result, as regards understanding, may be expressed as either a fusion of horizons—not of consciousness—or an expansion of the horizon of the exegete. The historical-critical method may assist the exegete to perceive an horizon other than and possibly alien from his own, but meaning cannot be confined within either horizon in separation otherwise it will be compressed; indeed one of the essential benefits of all historical works, viz. the enlargement of one's own horizon, will be excluded. This will become clearer if I seek to illustrate it with two examples. In the nineteenth century the entire eschatological dimension of the horizon of the gospel writers was alien to the heirs of the Enlightenment; it was consequently excluded from all accounts of the ministry and message of Jesus. It took an Albert Schweitzer to show how, so far from the horizon of the exegetes being enlarged, it was thereby being diminished. Bultmann's programme of demythologisation to a certain extent produces the same result. Regarding the New Testament world as alien to twentieth century human beings, he has not sought an expansion of his horizon but a reduction of that of the New Testament until it corresponds more or less exactly with that of today. In the one case: leave out eschatology; in the other: leave out the myth. The New Testament can then be fitted into a straightjacket fashioned in either the nineteenth or twentieth century and understood accordingly.

⁶ Ibid., p. 263.

But what, we must go on to ask, does 'understanding' actually involve? It is not based, let me repeat, upon an intersubjective relation of mutual understanding but on a relation of apprehension stemming from the horizon of the work. Moreover it includes what some scholars call application and others appropriation. Obviously the conscious horizon of a reader will be expanded when the meaning of a text is actualized. In the process of actualisation, it is necessary to recognise that the person reading a text is himself part of the meaning he apprehends. Understanding develops as the text is either applied to the contemporary situation of the exegete or is appropriated by him so that the understanding culminates in his self-understanding as a subject, who now understands himself better or differently or simply begins to understand himself.⁷

However the proponents of the historical-critical method would maintain that a text must be allowed to speak for itself. But a text cannot speak for itself for the simple reason that it has no vocal chords. And what is more, the assumptions that a document has a single meaning and that is the one intended in its original context are not well founded. It is also very doubtful if such a meaning could ever be recovered and it is doubtful for two reasons. First, it ignores the material conditions of the production of a literary work and their profound influence upon it, i.e. language is affected by the interests of those using it, by the different material conditions within which operate both author and exegete.⁸ Second, there is the phenomenon of polysemy i.e. the fact that words have more than one meaning and that a context does not necessarily disclose a single precise significance. It is by no means easy to penetrate behind these interests and cut down the polysemy to arrive at some supposed inner core. As soon as an exegete tries to allow a text to speak through him—or to give it voice—all these difficulties have to be faced and his own personal involvement cannot be discarded. This means that we have to acknowledge the fallacy of what Bernard Lonergan has called the principle of the empty head.

Defining a text as a series of signs, Lonergan remarks: "Anything over and above a reissue of the same signs in the same order

⁷ Cf. *ibid.*, p. 302; Ricoeur, *op. cit.*, p. 358.

⁸ W. J. Hollenweger, "The Other Exegesis", *Horizons in Biblical Theology*, Pittsburgh Theological Seminary, 3 (1981), pp. 155, 162.

will be mediated by the experience, intelligence and judgment of the interpreter".⁹ To suppose that the ideal approach to a text is to study it with a completely blank mind is absurd and is in any case unattainable. The sensitive exegete has to bring all his experience, intelligence and judgment to his task. Further, any and every person has what psychologists call a 'mental set'. A mental set "comprises the attitudes and expectations which will inform our perceptions and make us ready to see, or hear, one thing rather than another".¹⁰ Not only has everyone his or her pre-understanding but without such a conceptual framework observation and interpretation are not possible.¹¹ The only way to approach an object such as a text with a so-called unbiased mind is to be mindless. But we all have ideas, presuppositions, theories, knowledge, prejudices, values etc. In other words the interpreter cannot leave himself on one side; to seek to do so—which would in any case be to attempt the impossible—would be to try to eliminate that which alone makes understanding possible. "To interpret means precisely to use one's own preconceptions so that the meaning of a text can really be made to speak for us".¹²

It is of course essential both to be critical of one's preconceptions and to beware of projection. These are not easy tasks. Many of those who use the historical-critical method do not reflect upon the origin and justification of the concepts they use and often seem unaware of the extent to which they are assimilating what is historically different from that which is familiar to them, thus subordinating the alien being of the object to their own conceptual framework. As long ago as 1797 attention was directed to two highly questionable preconceptions that are still widespread and continue to affect exegesis and it is not difficult to discern at least a third to add to these. According to the twenty fifth *Lyceums-Fragmente* of Friedrich Schlegel: "the two basic principles of so-called historical criticism are the postulate of the commonplace and the axiom of familiarity. The postulate of the commonplace is that everything that is really great, good and beautiful is improbable, for it is extraordinary or at least peculiar. The axiom

⁹ B. J. F. Lonergan, *Method in Theology* (London, 1972), p. 157.

¹⁰ E. H. Gombrich, *Art and Illusion* (Oxford and London, new ed., 1962), p. 157.

¹¹ S. K. Langer, *Mind: An Essay on Human Feelings*, I (Baltimore, 1967), p. 58.

¹² Gadamer, *op. cit.*, p. 358.

of familiarity is that things must always have been just as they are with us, for things are naturally like that". The third preconception that can inhibit understanding and so cut off an alien horizon from an exegete is the dogma of the Enlightenment that everything must be decided before the judgment seat of reason. Quite apart from the fact that the idea of an absolute reason is inconceivable for historical humanity, since reason is dependent upon the given circumstances in which it operates, that which is reasonable or plausible at any epoch is largely determined by the social basis of knowledge. While the reasonableness of an argument depends upon observance of the laws of logic, the reasonableness of hypotheses is determined by what the majority in a society believes to be reasonable.¹³ Those who differ will belong to a cognitive minority and be regarded as unreasonable.¹⁴ To become aware of this effect of one's mental set and to be constantly on the look out to refine it does not mean that one can leave one's own concepts aside and think only in the concepts of the era one is seeking to understand. This is a naïve illusion, not because it remains unfulfilled but because, as I have already intimated, no interpreter can conform to an ideal of leaving himself aside. To think historically, which is what we human beings in time cannot avoid, is to try to establish a connection between one's own thinking and the concepts of a bygone age—here is where the encounter of horizons, of which sufficient has already been said, again becomes relevant.

Although I have scarcely used the term so far, it will be evident by now that I consider 'objectivity' in relation to biblical exegesis to be an impossibility. I hold that the practitioners of historical-criticism, if they think that by the application of this method they can attain it, are pursuing a vain search for the philosopher's stone. Objectivity is really only meaningful within the field of the natural sciences. There is no reason to deny that there is or can be a mechanical objectivity i.e. that which can be measured quantitatively by means of precise instruments. Perception in the physical sciences is external and is directed towards physical appearances which can then be described. It is, for example, possible, once certain scales have been agreed upon, to determine

¹³ P. L. Berger, *A Rumour of Angels* (New York, 1969), p. 147.

¹⁴ P. L. Berger and T. Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality* (Harmondsworth, 1967), p. 174.

objectively the intensity of heat or light. But this kind of objectivity can never be predicated of historical facts. The meaning of an event is not definable in the sense of mechanical objectivity. The biblical record does not belong to a neutral world of objects which are the proper sphere and the product of the physical sciences.

It follows that whereas any object subjected to scientific investigation can be described *idealiter* as that which would be known when nature itself is perfectly known, it is, to quote Gadamer once more, "senseless to speak of a perfect knowledge of history, and for that reason it is not possible to speak of an object in itself towards which its research is directed".¹⁵ To similar effect Gerhard Ebeling has affirmed that "there are interpretive tasks that, as a consequence of changing perspectives and due to the inexhaustible character of the content, require ceaseless attempts at understanding. A person basically cannot expect that the task of exegesis can be solved once and for all".¹⁶ At the same time he warns against the "danger of a high-powered scholarly technique that has become sterile".¹⁷

To commit oneself uncritically to the historical-critical approach is to forget its own historical conditioning. In an age when science is dominant, the method appears to provide a basis for understanding that is equivalent to the objectivity extolled by scientists, but faith in such a method can lead to a denial by an exegete of his own historicity. After all, hermeneutics, since it is an activity of the historical consciousness, cannot be absolute; it is unable to conform to the natural sciences' ideal of objectivity. Time, in other words, is not a gap to be bridged; temporal distance between exegete and author is not to be overcome in an endeavour to attain historical objectivity. On the contrary this distance provides fresh opportunities for new and enriched understandings.

That there are some texts that have the nature of neutral objects and therefore do not require exegesis provides no grounds for rejecting my thesis. Such texts are those that themselves treat of neutral objects, e.g. Euclid's geometry. This does not have to be interpreted because it presents a self-contained universe of know-

¹⁵ Gadamer, *op. cit.*, p. 253.

¹⁶ G. Ebeling, *The Study of Theology* (London, 1979), p. 22.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 23.

ledge understandable entirely in terms of itself. It does not interact with any culture and the 'facts' it records are neutral. To state that a circle has 360° is to make an affirmation of the same kind as that the boiling point of water is 100° Centigrade. In neither case is exegesis necessary or indeed possible. The bible on the other hand is not a neutral object and the 'I' of the interpreter cannot be separated from the act of understanding it. The horizons of past and present do come together, but in so far as the present of an exegete will be the past of a future scholar, whose own present will be an element affecting his hermeneutics, there can be no invariable objectivity brought to light by the use of historical criticism.

If objectivity is a pretentious illusion, what of the danger of subjectivity or perhaps more exactly of subjectivism? The question at issue here is: if objectivity be ruled out, how can projection be avoided i.e. the reading into a text of preconceived ideas? This would be to practise what I have previously called eisegesis. To guard against projection it is essential to be fully conscious of one's own pre-understanding and to be prepared to change it if it can be shown to be inappropriate for discerning the meaning of a text. Understanding in any case, as I have been contending, is not the projection of the self into a text but the reception of an enlarged self when differing horizons or worlds are brought together. Self understanding in front of a text or of the world of a text is not reading in one's prejudices or beliefs; it is the increase of the understanding that the exegete has of himself ... It is here that historical criticism still has a part to play.

Such a remark may seem difficult to reconcile with my attack upon this method, but I must emphasise that my intention throughout has not been to reject it but to relativise it. I am indeed mindful of the verse in Ecclesiastes which tells us that "there is a time to break down", but it continues with the words that many modern theologians seem to forget, viz. there is also "a time to build up". The negative is relatively easy, the positive is the more difficult.

To be positive then: historical criticism can help us to appreciate the peculiarity and alien character of the biblical horizon and to that extent it may assist the exegete, with his own horizon, to be challenged and to be on his guard against mere repetition in lieu of actualizing the meaning of the text in the present. Historical criticism, once its limitations are acknowledged and not forgotten

can be of value in that it leads to awareness that the horizon of the bible was not simply that of another age and culture but was constituted by a community. The separate authors were members of a community and they wrote for that community. The meaning of their works is not just what they had consciously in mind, but what the community made of them. This insight provides a corrective to two aspects of contemporary theological activity which, to say the least, are questionable. On the one hand we frequently encounter writings that are principally exercises in self-indulgence, in that they turn theology into the spiritual autobiography of the author—that a theologian has or should have a responsibility to and for the community is simply not recognised: renaissance individualism continues to be rampant in this respect. On the other hand, this individualism gives pride of place to every separate exegete and each one becomes *the* authority on the meaning of the bible and this again can exclude the worshipping community. Perhaps it would be right to finish here with a question: is the proper context for hermeneutics the liturgy?