

FAITH, HERMENEUTICS, AND THE LITERAL SENSE OF SCRIPTURE

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THE SCOPE of interest in this article is, in one sense, extremely narrow, namely, the problem of the "literal sense of Scripture" and the implications of various understandings of this technical term for the role of the Bible in contemporary Christian experience. The interest, in other words, is technical, but in no sense purely academic. In the few decades since the Second World War, while Protestants have been rediscovering the importance of tradition as the source, the content, and the context for interpretation of Scripture,¹ Catholics have been rediscovering the centrality of the biblical expression of the Word of God for Christian faith and practice.² Perhaps at no time since the Reformation have Catholic Christians been more interested in and open to that Word. This interest and openness was blessed by Vatican II, is being fostered by a vernacular liturgy, and is being constantly nourished by the abundant results of biblical studies.

The depth and reality of the Catholic reinvolvement with the Scriptures is difficult to assess at this stage, but there are important indications that it is to be taken with great seriousness. On the one hand, Catholic spirituality is becoming increasingly biblical. Prayer services, the charismatic renewal, retreats, and study clubs are markedly biblical in content and focus. On the other hand, there is a growing sense that any seriously Christian public enterprise, whether it be active opposition to war, the struggle for the liberation of the oppressed, or the rethinking of such sensitive issues as sexual morality, the ordination of women, abortion, euthanasia, divorce, or capital punishment, must be based solidly upon biblical revelation.

In short, Catholics have rediscovered the centrality of the Word of God for Christian experience and are seeking in the Scriptures nourishment for personal and communal spirituality as well as justification and direction for Christian involvement in the world. This raises the very serious question of how the Bible can be legitimately used by Christians who are not trained in biblical exegesis. On the one hand, biblical fundamentalism is increasingly the refuge of the spiritually hungry who find authoritarian dogmatics stale, contemporary systematics confusing, and biblical technicalism arid. On the other hand, a war of interpretations escalates as

¹ R. M. Grant, *A Short History of the Interpretation of the Bible* (rev. ed.; New York: Macmillan, 1963) 187-90.

² See Vatican II, *Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation*, chap. 6.

opponents and defenders of homosexuals' rights trade textual blows over the Sodom and Gomorrah story,³ the Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith overrides the Pontifical Biblical Commission on scriptural evidence against the ordination of women,⁴ and pacifists debate with revolutionaries over the biblical sources of liberation theology and the justification for various strategies against oppression.⁵

Two things, at least, are strikingly novel in this confused situation and merit our concerned attention. The first is that already noted: Catholics, for the first time in centuries, are vitally interested in the biblical bases for their faith and practice, convinced that "the force and power of the Word of God is so great that it remains the support and energy of the Church, the strength of faith for her children, the food of the soul, the pure and perennial source of spiritual life."⁶ The second is the conviction on all sides, right, left, and center, that only the "real" meaning of the Scriptures is truly life-giving. Neither fundamentalists nor liberal activists nor theologians nor pastors are any longer interested in "proof-texting" from the Scriptures convictions derived from other sources. Furthermore, an age which has nearly equated facts with truth will base nothing on accommodation of scriptural data. On all sides the desire is to know what the Scriptures really say and to face the challenge that the unmitigated Word of God offers.

It is this contemporary situation which raises again the time-battered question of the "literal sense of Scripture." Those who are turning to the Bible for guidance and nourishment in their lives of discipleship want to know what the Bible really says, and for the ordinary reader "really" means "literally," that is, not accommodated or amplified or reduced. Nevertheless, among ordinary Christians there is increasing disaffection with serious biblical scholarship whose avowed objective is precisely to make the literal meaning of the text available. The reason is devastatingly simple. As will be shown, the very definition of the literal sense that still guides much, if not most, biblical scholarship creates an unbridgeable gap between the sense of the text uncovered by the exegete and the life of the contemporary person.

In the remainder of this article I will attempt to trace the most significant developments in the meaning of the "literal sense" in the

³ J. J. McNeill, *The Church and the Homosexual* (Kansas City: Sheed, Andrews and McMeel, 1976), devotes Part 1, chap. 2, to an investigation of the uses and counteruses of Scripture in the debates over the morality of homosexuality.

⁴ For an account and analysis of this recent event see J. R. Donahue, "A Tale of Two Documents," in *Women Priests: A Catholic Commentary on the Vatican Declaration*, ed. L. Swidler and A. Swidler (New York: Paulist, 1977) 25-34.

⁵ For a good example of this type of debate, see H. Kung, *On Being a Christian* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1976) 183-91.

⁶ Vatican II, Constitution on Revelation, no. 21.

postwar period, indicate some of the more fruitful efforts from within the world of biblical scholarship to widen the concept, and finally suggest the contribution which contemporary philosophical hermeneutics could make toward giving the nonexegete Christian access to the real meaning of the biblical text without nullifying or ignoring the essential contribution of technical biblical criticism to the Church's ongoing appropriation of the Word of God.

DEVELOPMENT OF UNDERSTANDING OF LITERAL SENSE

Modern scientific exegesis has consistently assigned itself, as its primary task, the uncovering of the "literal sense" of the biblical text. The meaning of the term "literal sense" has varied significantly during a long and complicated history,^{6a} the tracing of which is outside the scope of this study, but the meanings which are important for our purposes are those which have been operative among respectable biblical scholars during the past few decades and which are rooted in the understanding of the term developed by historical-critical exegetes.

In the fifties, scholars of the stature of Krister Stendahl and John L. McKenzie were defining the task of the exegete as determining the meaning intended by the human author and understood by his original audience.⁷ McKenzie did not hesitate to affirm that "if all scholars were perfectly objective, entire unanimity should be theoretically possible in exegesis itself; for the meaning of the Bible has been determined by its authors, not by its interpreters."⁸ According to this view, the literal meaning of the text is perfectly stable and univocal, and its meaning in the past is its only meaning. The task of the exegete, in Stendahl's words, is to "furnish the original,"⁹ that is, to reconstruct the transaction of

^{6a} The reader interested in the very diverse understandings of the term "literal sense" which have developed at different times in the history of exegesis could profitably consult H. de Lubac, *Exégèse médiévale: Les quatre sens de l'écriture* (Paris: Aubier, 1959-64) for a sympathetic and scholarly (although not uncontested) treatment of the patristic roots of medieval exegesis, and B. Smalley, *The Study of the Bible in the Middle Ages* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame, 1964) for a widely recognized treatment of exegesis in the medieval period. S. Neill, in *The Interpretation of the New Testament 1861-1961* (London: Oxford University Press, 1964), and E. Krentz, *The Historical-Critical Method* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1975), can be usefully consulted on the rise of modern exegesis. The collection of papers entitled *The New Hermeneutic*, ed. J. M. Robinson and J. B. Cobb (New York: Harper & Row, 1964), remains valuable as an introduction to the contemporary hermeneutical discussion in the biblical field.

⁷ K. Stendahl, "Implications of Form Criticism and Tradition Criticism for Biblical Interpretation," *JBL* 77 (1958) 38; J. L. McKenzie, "Problems of Hermeneutics in Roman Catholic Exegesis," *JBL* 77 (1958) 202. Obviously, both of these scholars have continued to develop their thought on this subject. Their work of twenty years ago is cited simply to indicate the mainstream position in the 1950's.

⁸ McKenzie, "Problems of Hermeneutics" 199.

⁹ Stendahl, "Implications of Form Criticism" 38.

author (sender) to original audience (receiver) by way of text (message). All the literary, textual, historical, philological, and linguistic tools of criticism as well as the modern techniques of form and redaction criticism, tradition-history analysis, study of comparative religion and history of religions, and investigation of intellectual and sociological environment were to be brought to bear upon the text in order to reconstruct as accurately as possible what the human author meant to say as it was understood by his original audience.

By the time Robert M. Grant revised his *Short History of the Interpretation of the Bible* in 1963, there was widespread recognition among biblical scholars that there is no such thing as "pure objectivity" in exegesis any more than there is in any other scientific investigation. Presuppositionless understanding is a figment of the imagination of nineteenth-century historicism. Furthermore, biblicists were becoming increasingly aware of the importance of treating the Bible as literature first and history second.¹⁰ Consequently, they were becoming somewhat more comfortable with the idea that multiplicity rather than unanimity in interpretation corresponded better to the nature of what they were studying and derived legitimately from the methods appropriate to the study of that object. It is intrinsic to the nature of literature to be polyvalent rather than univocal in its meaning and therefore to call forth different interpretations from different people at different times.

Despite his recognition of these important advances in the understanding of the task and nature of exegesis, Grant still espoused the basic meaning of the literal sense that was current in the fifties. "It would appear that the primary task of the modern interpreter is historical, in the sense that what he is endeavoring to discover is what the texts and contexts he is interpreting meant to their authors in their relationships with their readers."¹¹

The major difference, it would seem, between the positions being taken by scholars in the fifties during the lively discussions about the nature and task of exegesis which went on in the Society for Biblical Literature and Exegesis¹² and the attitude Grant describes as already in the ascendancy in the sixties is in their respective attitudes toward the relationship of exegesis to theology. The growing attention to this relationship gradually expanded the understanding of the "literal sense" in such a way that a bridge could be built between the transaction of author and original audience in the past and the concerns of contemporary Christians.

¹⁰ See Grant, *A Short History*, esp chap 15

¹¹ *Ibid* 186

¹² J Mulenberg, J C Rylaarsdam, K Stendahl, "Problems in Biblical Hermeneutics," *JBL* 77 (1958) 18-38, W A Irwin, "A Still Small Voice Said, What Are You Doing Here?" *JBL* 78 (1959) 1-12

In the fifties, most biblical scholars were still convinced that exegesis was, as W. A. Irwin declared in his 1958 presidential address to the Society for Biblical Literature and Exegesis, essentially a historical discipline. Its task was completed when it had correctly presented what the author meant to say and as the author meant to say it.¹³ However, the development of the biblical-theology movement in the forties and fifties was due to a growing realization on the part of some Scripture scholars that the biblical texts were not primarily concerned with the recording of historical data but with proclaiming faith convictions to a faith community. In other words, "what the author intended to say" was much more theological, moral, and spiritual than factually historical, and "how the author meant to say it" was in such a way as to articulate faith, call people to faith, and nourish faith. Consequently, the literal meaning of the text was understood to include primarily theological material in kerygmatic form.¹⁴ The biblical-theology movement involved various kinds of attempts to present the theological content of the Bible in a truly kerygmatic way, without surrendering the descriptive model characteristic of exegesis to the philosophical model characteristic of systematic theology. History may judge that it never really succeeded in finding its way, despite some truly brilliant products such as J. L. McKenzie's *The Two-Edged Sword* and *The Power and the Wisdom*,¹⁵ and G. von Rad's *Old Testament Theology*.¹⁶

The recognition that theological concerns were an integral part of the literal sense of the text both fostered and was fostered by the development of redaction criticism.¹⁷ Biblical theology considered as a study of the theology expressed in the Bible or in one of the Testaments as a whole gave way to an interest in biblical theologies, for example, the theology of Deuteronomy^{17a} or of John^{17b} or of Mark,^{17c} and to an interest in

¹³ Irwin, "A Still Small Voice" 3, 7

¹⁴ The term "kerygmatic" is here used as shorthand for "the proclamation of the Word as salvific revelation" and thus as embracing many literary forms of that proclamation, e.g., catechesis, exhortation, doxology, liturgical forms, teaching, etc. See the article of E. Simons, "Kerygma," *Encyclopedia of Theology*, ed. K. Rahner (London: Burns and Oates, 1975) 797-800.

¹⁵ J. L. McKenzie, *The Two-Edged Sword: An Interpretation of the Old Testament* (Milwaukee: Bruce, 1956), *The Power and the Wisdom: An Interpretation of the New Testament* (Milwaukee: Bruce, 1965).

¹⁶ G. von Rad, *Old Testament Theology* (2 vols., New York: Harper, 1962-65).

¹⁷ See N. Perrin, *What is Redaction Criticism?* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1969), for a good brief description and some examples of redaction criticism.

^{17a} The commentary of P. Buis, *Le Deuteronomie* (Paris: Beauchesne, 1969), is a good example of biblical theology based on sound scientific exegesis.

^{17b} See, e.g., R. Kysar, *John, the Maverick Gospel* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1976).

^{17c} See, e.g., J. R. Donahue, *Are You the Christ? The Trial Narrative in the Gospel of Mark* (Missoula: University Printing, 1973).

investigating all the theological material in the Scriptures on given topics, for example, on resurrection,¹⁸ or Peter,¹⁹ or ministries in the Church.²⁰

These developments led to the rise of "theological exegesis," the breakthrough that has partially liberated the literal sense from its fixation in the past. The basic theological concerns of the Jews in 800 B.C., of Jewish Christians in 60 A.D., and of Catholic Christians in 1970, are not essentially different. All are concerned with who God is, what it means to be a human being created and saved by God, how one is to live within the believing community, and how that community is to live in and relate to the world. One can hardly explain, for example, how Matthew understood the Church without raising questions about the theological presuppositions of present church order. (In fact, the uneasiness of many exegetes with biblical theology as theory or practice arises precisely from the abiding suspicion that the interests of the biblical theologian are generated more by contemporary concerns than by the theological content of the text, and the consequent suspicion that the biblical theologian is reading foreign agenda into the exegetical program.) Theology in the broad sense, including not only dogma but morality and spirituality, is thus seen to constitute the common ground between the historical period in which the text was composed and the contemporary period in which it is being interpreted. Consequently, it was a short step from biblical theology, which tried to explicate the theology of the past, to theological exegesis, which considered it part of the exegetical task to relate the theological content of the text to the contemporary Church's theological concerns.

Theological exegesis, therefore, actually brought to fruition the tendency of biblical theology to escape imprisonment in the past. There are several ways of understanding the term "theological exegesis," but they have in common a certain faith attitude toward the text which is explicitly operative in exegesis.²¹ The theological exegete is operating on the principle that Scripture is the Word of God in human words and that the business of the exegete is not limited to the latter. The human words may be time-bound but the Word of God is not. Consequently, it belongs to the legitimate task of the exegete not only to explain what the original author meant to say to his original audience, but also to explain in contemporary terms what the Word of God says, through the text, to

¹⁸ For example, F. X. Durrwell, *The Resurrection: A Biblical Study* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1960).

¹⁹ E.g., *Peter in the New Testament*, ed. R. E. Brown, K. P. Donfried, and J. Reumann (Minneapolis: Augsburg; New York: Paulist, 1973).

²⁰ E.g., R. E. Brown, *Priest and Bishop: Biblical Reflections* (New York: Paulist, 1970); A. Lemaire, *Ministry in the Church* (London: SPCK, 1977).

²¹ R. A. F. MacKenzie, "The Self-Understanding of the Exegete," in *Theology, Exegesis, and Proclamation*, ed. R. Murphy (New York: Herder and Herder, 1971) 11-19, esp. 12-13.

people of every age, including this one. This work is one which calls into play the faith of the exegete and which must be carried out within and according to the tradition of the believing community of which the exegete is not only servant but member.

It is at this point that the question of the "literal sense" must be raised again, for obviously the theological exegete is concerning himself or herself with something beyond the explicit concern of the human author. Is there a ground, in the text, for theological exegesis? Does the relevance of the theological content of the text to the contemporary community belong in some way to what the biblical author meant to say to his original audience, or is it purely an extrapolation occasioned by the encounter between the faith of the exegete, the concerns of the contemporary Church, and the literal meaning of the text? The answer to this question concerning the ground of theological exegesis is crucial for our purposes, because it is precisely theological interpretation which bridges the gap between the biblical text in its historical context and the contemporary believer. If the ground of theological exegesis is really, in some sense, in the text (as I believe it is), then the contemporary meaning of the Bible belongs to the real meaning of the text itself, and we must expand the definition of "literal sense" to include both what the human author meant to say and what biblical revelation continues to mean. If, on the contrary, the ground of theological exegesis is completely outside the text, that is, simply in the faith of the exegete and/or the community, then the contemporary meaning, however inspiring, does not belong in any real way to the literal sense of the text. If the former is the case, then there can and do exist criteria by which contemporary interpretations can be judged. However various, all valid interpretations would constitute a cluster of related meanings which belong somehow to the literal meaning of the text. If the latter position is true, there is no way to judge the validity of contemporary interpretations except perhaps by their perdurance within the community over a long period of time. However, given the long life span of such errors as the biblical justification of slavery and anti-Semitism, this latter criterion is of dubious value.

GROUND OF THEOLOGICAL EXEGESIS

Just as there are several understandings of the term "biblical theology," so there are various ways of explaining the meaning of theological exegesis. What these meanings have in common is a conviction that the real meaning of the biblical text "exceeds" in some way the meaning clearly understood and explicitly intended by the human author. They tend to expand the meaning of the literal sense to include a content really "in the text" but available only from some higher or wider perspective than that commanded by the human author.

The most provocative theory on this subject in recent times was that of the *sensus plenior* or "fuller sense." This theory was most coherently developed by Raymond Brown in 1955 and was the object of much lively discussion in the late fifties and early sixties. Brown was particularly concerned with the problem of the Christian interpretation of the Old Testament, but the theory is not limited to this problematic, because the relevance of the Old Testament for the New Testament is of the same order as the relevance of the Bible for the contemporary community. Brown defined the fuller sense as follows: "The *sensus plenior* is that additional, deeper meaning, intended by God but not clearly intended by the human author, which is seen to exist in the words of a biblical text (or group of texts, or even a whole book) when they are studied in the light of further revelation or development in the understanding of revelation."²²

The important point in the definition, for the present study, is Brown's attempt to ground in the text itself a meaning which was not clearly intended by the human author, for example, a prediction of the sufferings of Jesus of Nazareth by Isaiah. He grounded it in the text by ascribing it to the intention of the divine author, God. Hence the "literal sense" is expanded somewhat. While Brown accepted the traditional definition of the literal sense as that which was intended by the human author, he maintained that the fuller sense is somehow included in the literal sense because, even though the human author was not clearly aware of it, the author's words themselves (which constitute the text) really contained a fuller meaning put there by the divine author, God. This idea of the words bearing a meaning beyond the author's understanding is a very important insight (which Brown himself develops in his later writing^{22a}) to which we will return in our discussion of contemporary hermeneutics. The higher perspective which, according to Brown, allows the interpreter to grasp the fuller sense of the text is subsequent revelation or development in the understanding of revelation. Thus the continuity of the fuller

²² R. E. Brown, *The Sensus Plenior of Sacred Scripture* (Baltimore: St. Mary's University, 1955) 92. I am dealing here with Brown's original integral presentation of the theory of the *sensus plenior*. In "The Problems of the *Sensus plenior*," *ETL* 43 (1967) 460-469, Brown brings his earlier thought (and therefore that of others like Coppens and Benoit, who have supported the theory) into dialogue with more recent understandings of the nature of biblical inspiration, the relation of Bible to revelation, the autonomy of the Old Testament in relation to the New, and the New Hermeneutic. (See also Brown's article "Hermeneutics," in *JBC* [Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1968] 71:57-70.) Brown maintains a hope, however, that a reformulated theory of the *sensus plenior* can be integrated into the wider hermeneutical theory which is currently developing and can make a genuine contribution to our understanding of biblical revelation.

^{22a} Brown ("The Problems of the *Sensus plenior*" 467) points to the contemporary understanding of language as a possible alternate (and better) explanation for the excess of meaning in the text.

sense with the meaning of the human author and with the whole of tradition constitutes a kind of criterion for validity in interpretation. As we shall see, the idea of subsequent history somehow revealing the heretofore unrealized content of a text is not totally unrelated to certain insights in contemporary hermeneutics.

The major difficulty with the theory of the *sensus plenior* is its somewhat unintegrated "supernaturalism," which is less congenial to the secular mentality of the seventies than it was in the fifties. The theory simply attributes to the divine intention whatever we discover in the text which appears from subsequent experience to be valid but which could not have been intended by the human author. It may well be that God intended such a meaning. But many contemporary people are uncomfortable with explanations which rest on confident assumptions about the nature or effect of divine influence on human activities.^{22b} They suspect that such theories are more representative of our limited intellectual powers than of anything we can really know about God. Contemporary exegetes are even less comfortable about ascribing their discoveries, however well founded, to the divine intention.

Despite this difficulty, the theory of the *sensus plenior* marked an advance in reflection on the possibility of bridging the gap between the classical "literal sense" which is imprisoned in the past and the concerns and realizations of the contemporary believer. It affirms a "fuller sense" in the text itself which is related to the literal sense in that it is localized in the interaction between the words of the text itself and the understanding of those words by later generations of believers. The weakness of the theory is its appeal to the divine intention to explain how this could be.

In 1971, R. A. F. MacKenzie, in a brief article,²³ attempted to explain and justify theological exegesis. MacKenzie maintained that it is integral to the work of exegesis not only to uncover the "thought, the vision and the message, embodied in his work by the ancient author," and "its impact on the writer's contemporaries," which together constitute the traditional "literal sense," but also "its possible relevance for our present generation."²⁴ MacKenzie claimed that this contemporary relevance is not an extrapolation of the exegete but a meaning that really belongs to the text itself. He did not, however, maintain that the contemporary meaning, which is integral to the object of theological exegesis, was consciously intended by the human author. It is, rather, part of the "plus-value" which the text has because it is the product and the object of the faith of the community.

^{22b} Brown (ibid. 466) raises this problem of the a priori approach to biblical inspiration and suggests that it must be transcended if the *sensus plenior* is not to become simply a Catholic curiosity in the history of exegetical theory.

²³ MacKenzie, "The Self-Understanding of the Exegete."

²⁴ Ibid. 11-12.

It is the faith of the community which brought together into a single literary entity all the works which now constitute the Bible and excluded all other works from this unity. The "canon" thus established constitutes the hermeneutical whole in function of which all the parts will be interpreted. Furthermore, it is the faith of the community which declares this book to be the Word of God. Neither the establishment of the canon nor the conviction of inspiration can be established by internal criticism of the Bible. Neither is derived from the text; both are imputed to the text. Consequently, the community recognizes in the Bible a "plus-value" which exceeds the "literal sense" and which is believed to be due to its divine authorship.

MacKenzie's theory, although concerned more with the relation of the Bible to the contemporary community than of the Old Testament to the New Testament, is very similar to Brown's 1955 work. MacKenzie attaches the "plus-value" to the text itself, not because of the human author's intention, nor because of the divine author's intention, but because the text is recognized by the community to be the Word of God. He thus supplies the basis for expanding the literal sense to include meaning which is integral to the text but which emerges only if the text is correctly discerned to be the revealing Word of God. MacKenzie implies a criterion for valid contemporary interpretation. That interpretation is valid which is in continuity with the meaning intended by the human author and accords with the subsequent tradition of the believing community which created the book as Bible. MacKenzie, like Brown, attributes the "plus-value" to divine causality, but he does so not by directly affirming something about God but by affirming something about the believing community. It is the community which recognizes in this book something more than the intention of the human author or the understanding of the original audience can account for. MacKenzie does not entertain the question of whether this recognition corresponds to fact or not, nor would it be methodologically proper to the believing exegete to do so. Grounding the affirmation that the Bible is the Word of God is a theological, not an exegetical, task. What he asserts is that this community believes the Bible to be the Word of God and consequently, when it interprets its own book in function of its own beliefs, it is carrying on a legitimate and adequately grounded activity.

These two examples can suffice to indicate the tendency of fairly recent exegesis to overcome the imprisonment of the biblical message in the past which had resulted from the narrow equation of the literal sense with the meaning intended by the human author and understood by the original audience. Theological exegesis, without explicitly claiming to do so, tended to expand the understanding of the literal sense. The theological exegete's treatment of the text implied that the literal sense included not only the meaning intended by the human author but also that

intended by the divine author, insofar as the latter can in some way be discovered in and through the biblical text itself. The "meaning of the text" was being distinguished in some way from the "intention of the human author," and the former was seen not only to exceed somehow the latter but also to be in some way integral to the text. This distinction, as will be shown, has something important in common with contemporary hermeneutical theory. By dealing explicitly with the Bible as revelation, the theological exegete makes available that aspect of Scripture by which it bears as directly on the present as it did on the past. The faith of the exegete becomes integral to the work of exegesis, and the results of exegesis become intimately related to the faith of the present community. The gap between the past sense and the present relevance is bridged, and the latter is seen to belong in a real sense to the literal meaning of the text. The two inadequacies to which these developments in exegetical theory seem unable to respond are the somewhat unintegrated understanding of divine authorship as responsible for something in the text for which the human author is not responsible, and the progressive restriction of understanding of the biblical text to experts. I would like to suggest that contemporary hermeneutical theory, especially as developed by H.-G. Gadamer, can help in responding to both of these difficulties.^{24a}

CONTRIBUTION OF CONTEMPORARY PHILOSOPHICAL HERMENEUTICS

The hermeneutics of Gadamer²⁵ is not a method of interpretation but a study of the structure of understanding. Although this structure is operative in the interpretation of any object which is obscure to the

^{24a} The rapidly increasing recognition on the part of professional theologians and Scripture scholars of the importance of hermeneutics is not simply an academic fad. It is the reflection of a profound change in the understanding of what it signifies to "know." This change has been underway since the Late Middle Ages and can be simplistically characterized as a progressive movement away from the idea that knowledge is the reproduction in the knower of an independent "object" and toward the idea that understanding is a dialogical process of interpretation. Because the hermeneutical discussion signifies not simply the change of an idea or a theory but rather of the understanding of what it means to understand, the discussion raises fundamental questions and opens completely new avenues of investigation in every area of research. Among the thinkers who are elaborating contemporary hermeneutical theory, Paul Ricoeur and Hans-Georg Gadamer stand out as perhaps the most influential. Gadamer has been more explicit and articulate about his intention to elaborate a truly universal theory of understanding and has so situated his work in relation to the entire history of Western thought that his major treatise, *Wahrheit und Methode* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1960), has legitimately been used as the basis for critical re-examinations of whole areas of study. T. B. Ommen, for example, makes such a use of Gadamer's theory in "The Hermeneutic of Dogma," *TS* 35 (1974) 605-31, and F. Mussner uses it, in *Die johanneische Sehweise und die Frage nach dem historischen Jesus* (Freiburg: Herder, 1965), to deal most creatively with one of the major problems in fourth Gospel criticism. The present article is, then, yet another (though much more limited) attempt to reap some of the fruits of Gadamer's truly prodigious intellectual sowing.

²⁵ H.-G. Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (New York; Seabury, 1975) esp. 235-341.

interpreter by reason of distance in space and time, we are here concerned only with the understanding of texts. The texts with which Gadamer's theory deals are only those which can be called "classical," that is, those which are so significant in content and beautiful in form that they have perennial value and therefore enjoy a certain contemporaneity with people of every age.²⁶ These are the texts the understanding of whose content is crucially important for people of later ages and which consequently raise the hermeneutical question. Obviously, the great religious texts of the world, especially the Bible, belong to this class.

The primary difference between the classical historical-critical approach to the biblical text and the approach characteristic of philosophical hermeneutics lies in the understanding of what the text is. For historical exegesis, the text is an artifact of the past, a fixed repository of a stable content. It has a meaning independent of the interpreter, and the task of the exegete is to uncover that meaning. According to Gadamer, however, the text is not a depository of meaning but a mediation of meaning. The reader's task is not finally to figure out what the author was trying to say (although the relative importance of this task varies among different kinds of texts) but to understand what the text actually says, and the relationship between these two is not necessarily one of identity.²⁷ The reader's encounter with the text, according to Gadamer, is like a conversation in which two people try to come to a common understanding about some object which is of interest to both.²⁸ They are not directly concerned with understanding each other but with understanding that about which they are talking. The conversation does not come to closure when the first person has correctly grasped what the other intended to say, but when both have grasped the truth about the subject matter, which may or may not be identical to what either originally grasped and/or expressed.²⁹

Obviously, there is a difference between a conversation in which both parties continually modify what they are saying in function of the contributions of the other as they move toward common understanding, and the hermeneutical "conversation" between text and interpreter. In the latter the reader's primary concern is to engage what Gadamer calls "the question behind" the text, that is, the question to which the text constitutes a response.³⁰ If the text is understood not as a "container" of meaning but as a mediation of meaning, then it confronts the reader not as a fixed, univocal statement but as an indication of something which

²⁶ Ibid. 253-58.

²⁷ The consideration of the unique importance of the historical dimension of the biblical text is beyond the scope of this paper but is crucial to adequate discussion of biblical hermeneutics.

²⁸ Gadamer, *Truth and Method* 330-41.

²⁹ Ibid. 262-63.

³⁰ Ibid. 333-41.

exceeds itself, of the question which evoked it and which challenges the contemporary reader by means of the text. This is due to the very nature of language, which is not a repository of fixed, univocal contents but a functioning structure of meanings which are always polyvalent and analogous. This does not mean, of course, that a text can have any meaning which one chooses to assign to it, but rather that every significant text has a fulness of meaning which by its very nature can never be exhausted. The text calls into play the consciousness of the interpreter, a consciousness which is effectively historically structured and which is, therefore, not identical with that of any other interpreter. Every valid interpretation is, therefore, a unique actualization of the meaning. The text functions like a musical composition, which cannot be rendered except by genuine fidelity to the score but which will be rendered differently by each artist. Indeed, both the fidelity and the originality of the rendition increase in proportion to the educated talent of the artist.

It should be clear that there is a real distinction between the "fuller sense" or "plus-value" which exegetes have posited as the ground of theological exegesis and the excess of meaning that philosophical hermeneutics recognizes as the ground of the contemporary significance of the classical text.^{30a} In the former case the fuller sense is thought to be actually and independently contained in the text, even though it cannot be recognized except under the influence of later revelation, development in the understanding of revelation, or the faith life of the Church. The fuller sense is thought to be a specific content which, at least theoretically, is finite. It is only visible from a certain perspective, but its existence is not dependent on its being perceived. In contrast, the excess of meaning which philosophical hermeneutics recognizes in classical texts is not "contained in the text" independently of the interpreter. It comes to be each time the mediation of meaning to consciousness occurs. It is theoretically infinite in its variations, just as the variety of interpretation of a great piece of music is theoretically infinite. The score becomes music only when rendered, and the text becomes meaningful only when interpreted. The "literal sense" of the text, in other words, is the real meaning of which the text is a mediation, and that real meaning does not pre-exist the understanding of the interpreter. The understanding of the reader is, in other words, constitutive (although not exclusively so) of the meaning of the text, as the interpretation of the artist is constitutive of the music.

^{30a} Brown ("The Problems of the *Sensus plenior*" 468) suggests that the reformulation of the *sensus plenior* in terms of language theory may contribute to the New Hermeneutic, but he suspects that in "translating the literal sense into the present situation so that it interprets man. . .one may go farther beyond the literal sense than would be consonant with the idea of the SP." I am trying to suggest that the New Hermeneutic might eventually modify the meaning of the term "literal sense," as it has been modified a number of times in the past.

The score by itself is a normative possibility of music. The text, by itself, is a normative possibility of meaning. It must be actualized by the interpreter.³¹

According to Gadamer, therefore, it is not only possible but is always the case that the meaning mediated by the text actually exceeds the conscious intention of the author.³² The text, as a mediation of meaning, engages the reader not only with the answer which the text constitutes but, by means of that answer, with the question behind the text. It is when the interpreter encounters the question behind the text that he or she may come, through the text, to understand more than the author understood. Let us take an example. The text of Lk 15:3-7 says that God is like a shepherd who leaves ninety-nine good sheep in the wilderness to go in search of one bad, or at least erring, sheep which was lost, and that when God finds the lost sheep God rejoices over it more than over the ninety-nine who were not lost. The text makes a statement about God (that is, it gives an answer), namely, that God is the kind of being who acts like this. The question behind the text is: "What is the God who acts this way really like in regard to people considered as moral beings?" How are we to interpret the meaning of this statement about God? The interpreter must work with the answer given by the text in trying to come to his or her own answer to that question. Does the answer given in the text suggest that God prefers the evil and erring to the good and docile? Or does it perhaps mean that God is the kind of being who prefers what is more difficult to possess over what is easily possessed? Or is it perhaps the case that the text is telling us that God's activity is not determined by its object but by God's own identity as savior? God is essentially a savior rather than an owner. The question before the interpreter is not "What did Luke intend to say?" but "What does the Lukan text really mean?"—that is, what is the meaning of God's preference of the one sheep found to the ninety-nine who required no finding? Luke may have intended only to say that God's ways are not our ways, which is certainly true and is wonderfully manifested in the fact that God is so essentially a savior that God prefers to save one rather than enjoy possession of ninety-nine. The text itself, in view of the language used and the images brought into play by it, is capable of revealing even deeper meanings than Luke perhaps consciously understood or intended.

The problem presented to the classical exegete by such a hermeneutical theory is that of scientific control. How is one to prevent every interpreter from reading into the text his or her own interests?³³ What constitutes

³¹ In Gadamer's terminology this "actualization" would be called "application." I have avoided using Gadamer's term here to avoid confusion with the third step of classical hermeneutics, which, among biblical scholars, is explicitly excluded from the exegetical task as such, and to avoid negative associations with sheer accommodation of the biblical text.

³² Gadamer, *Truth and Method* 264.

³³ Grant, *A Short History* 197-98.

the criterion of validity in exegesis? It is here that the growing realization that the methods of the physical sciences are not suitable in the humanistic disciplines is of particular importance. Exegesis is not primarily a science but an art. There are scientific techniques which can be helpful, just as there are techniques for playing the violin. But in the end the techniques must be subsumed in the artistic process. This subsuming does not nullify the techniques but incorporates them into a higher synthesis. There are criteria for the adequacy of artistic renditions, but they are not quantitative criteria. Just as the score remains normative for the musician, and the rendition is always judged both by the score and by the history of interpretation of the piece, so the interpretation of the exegete remains always under the judgment of the text and of the faith tradition of the Church. It is the whole of Judeo-Christian revelation as lived in the community of belief which tells us that the Parable of the Good Shepherd does not mean that God prefers evil people to good ones. And it is the same tradition which validates the interpretation of the text as a statement about the saving identity of God.

This theory of interpretation helps us to deal with both of the problems raised at the end of the last section. First, it enables us to understand the "excess of meaning" in the text not as something put there by the divine author independently of the human author, but as the analogue in Scripture of the excess of meaning that attends every classical text. Because the biblical text is a mediation of meaning about the relation of God and the human race, the excess of meaning is religious in nature. Whatever inspiration means, it does not mean the infusion into the text of a meaning other than that intended by the human author. It refers to the divine influence on the author, who wrote, like every great author, far more than he or she knew, simply because it is the nature of language to be not a univocal record of static information but a functioning structure of meaning evoking an infinity of related and noncontradictory interpretations. In the case of biblical inspiration, of course, the community's faith recognizes that the result of the divine influence is the specifically revelatory nature of the excess of meaning. Biblical inspiration, in other words, is analogous to artistic inspiration but not identical to it.

Secondly, philosophical hermeneutical theory also enables us to affirm the possibility of the ordinary Christian's correct interpretation of Scripture.³⁴ Just as one need not be a professional musician to enjoy a symphony, or a literary critic to understand *Moby Dick*, one need not be a professional exegete to understand the Gospel of Luke. If the object of understanding is not the mind of the original author (which can only be

³⁴ Gadamer's treatment of the notion of the "classical" in *Truth and Method*, esp. 257-58, is excellent on this point.

ferred out by the exegetical specialist) but the meaning of the text as it now presents itself, it is possible for anyone of normal intelligence who operates with the structures of understanding of the faith community and of his or her own life experience to grasp at least the basic meaning of the biblical text. Faith and life experience function in this case not as a source of knowledge but as the effective historical structuring of consciousness that makes possible the conversation that the text mediates.

This last point raises the question of the meaning of faith and its role in the hermeneutical process. Faith is not a univocal term. And obviously, many people who do not stand explicitly within the Judeo-Christian tradition have understood the biblical text sufficiently to be genuinely moved by it, even to the point of becoming Christians. Although entering into the complex issue of what is required in the subject for the Bible to become revelation for him or her is completely beyond the scope of this paper, it is worth noting that contemporary hermeneutical theory could throw some light on this historically important question. Fundamentally, there are two ways of reading a text. In the first, one consciously abstains from engaging the question behind the text. One simply notes how the text answers the question. One determines, for example, what Luke affirmed that Jesus said about God in the Parable of the Good Shepherd. In the second, one allows oneself to be engaged by the question; one allows the question to become one's own question, and one enters into the conversation about the object. The question then becomes: Is God really like this, and if so, what are the implications for me? It could be maintained that a minimal definition of faith as a hermeneutical principle is the willingness to take seriously the truth claims of the biblical text. If one not only takes them seriously but finds them compelling, one has, in fact, entered into the tradition within which the fuller understanding of the text becomes possible. Faith plays a role in biblical hermeneutics not unlike that of talent and training in the listening to or performing of music. A fundamentally positive attitude is necessary if one is to enjoy the music at all; but the more musical one is, the greater the possibility of enjoyment. At least the openness to the possibility that this text contains the truth is necessary for any understanding whatever of the revelation content; but the more deeply and truly believing one is, the greater the possibility of entering into the revelatory dynamic.

A final question raised by this affirmation that the ordinary believer is capable of understanding the biblical text is whether the work of the professional exegete remains necessary.³⁵ The advantage of the exegete is analogous to that of the professional musician. Obviously, one who can play Chopin can, other things being equal, enjoy Chopin more deeply

³⁵ See L. Alonso-Schökel, "Is Exegesis Necessary?" in *Theology, Exegesis, and Proclamation*, ed. R. Murphy (New York: Herder and Herder, 1971) 30-38.

than the musically uneducated but appreciative listener. Even more importantly, unless *someone* can play Chopin, the ordinary person will never have the chance to appreciate his music. It is the exegete who brings a technical understanding to the text itself and therefore makes the meaning of the text available to the believing community. The exegete does not deliver the meaning any more than the musician delivers the musical experience. Both actualize the mediation of meaning which is the text or the score. The understanding of meaning, like the enjoyment of music, both depends upon that actualization and exceeds it.

CONCLUSION

Let us now return to the question with which this paper began, namely, the problem of the legitimate use of Scripture by the believing community. It would seem that the answer lies in a nuanced reinterpretation, or reunderstanding, of the meaning of the "literal sense." If the literal sense is narrowly equated with the meaning intended by the human author, then, on the one hand, the literal sense is available only to the trained exegete and becomes more and more unavailable to the ordinary Christian as exegetical technique becomes more sophisticated; and, on the other hand, the relevance of the biblical text is limited by its fixation in the past. The use of Scripture by the ordinary Christian will be legitimate only if and insofar as it passes by way of technical exegesis, and it will remain, to some extent at least, unresponsive to those concerns of the contemporary Christian which were not explicit concerns of the biblical authors.

If, on the other hand, the literal meaning of the text is seen to be its religious meaning actualized in innumerable ways and at varying depths throughout Christian history as the faith-structured consciousness of the believer dialogues with the revealing God through the mediation of the inspired text, then it is available in varying degrees of fulness to all believers. The role of the exegete becomes that of servant of the understanding of the community. Through the work of exegesis the text becomes more available and more understandable, just as through the playing of the musician the music becomes more available and more enjoyable.

The criterion for validity of interpretation of the scriptural text is not solely the conformity of the interpretation to the scientific results of exegesis (although the two certainly ought not to contradict each other) but the conformity of the interpretation to the whole of the revelation tradition. The problem with fundamentalism is not that it fails to take account of the distinctions and precisions of technical exegesis; it is that it fails to take seriously the faith context of the text and seeks security in the words, as if the latter were not part of a living language tradition. The problem of excessive liberalism is not that it fails to adhere to the

words of the text, but that it fails to interpret within the perimeters of the community's faith.³⁶ In other words, the task of enabling Christians to make use of Scripture in a responsible way is not simply or even primarily that of teaching them to use the results of exegesis, although this is certainly important. It is much more profoundly that of forming faith and of maintaining the community context within which that faith can live and function. In such a context the results of exegesis become an invaluable aid to the valid and profitable searching of the Scriptures by those for whom the Word of God is intended, the little ones to whom it has pleased God to reveal the secret depths of divine wisdom.

³⁶ G. O'Collins deals with these two extremes as "overbelieving" and "underbelieving" in his most recent study of the resurrection, *What Are They Saying about the Resurrection?* (New York: Paulist, 1978) esp. 41-55.