

NOTES

EXEGESIS AND IMAGINATION

Every once in a while, when I happen to mention that I am a student of the New Testament, I am asked how it is possible to say anything new about a book that has been the subject of such intense scrutiny for so many centuries.

Considering the yearly volume of scholarly writing in the NT field, such a question might seem naive, and yet it has led me to ask myself about the future of NT studies during the last two decades of our century. Will it be mainly "more of the same," or can we hope for a contribution truly new, in the sense not merely of providing new insights on particular points of exegesis but of setting new directions which may have an influence beyond the discipline of NT studies?

Of course, one's hopes and expectations are necessarily affected by one's own particular interest. The NT can be studied for a number of reasons. It can be studied to advance our knowledge of the Greek language during the Greco-Roman period.¹ It can be studied to cast light on the origins of Christianity. Although NT books were not written primarily to document the history of the early Church, methods have been devised for extracting from them precious information on the life, beliefs, and practices of the communities for which these books were written.

But my personal interest in the NT is not primarily that of a philologist or of a historian. During the ten years that I have taught the NT, I have also exercised a preaching ministry, and I have had personal experience, in a number of quite different congregations, of the power and efficacy of biblical preaching.² And so, while I am fully aware of the importance of philology and history for the responsible use of Scripture, my primary concern is for the religious use of religious texts, and it is this concern which colors both my perception of the accomplishments of NT studies to date and my hopes for the years to come.

Thirty-six years have passed since the appearance of the document which has been called the Magna Charta of the Catholic scriptural movement.³ During these years biblical studies have become established as an autonomous branch of theology, with its own methodology and its own questions. Gone are the days when the role of the biblical scholar in

¹ S. Brown, "Philology," in G. W. MacRae and E. J. Epp, eds., *The Bible and Its Modern Interpreters* 3 (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1980).

² S. Brown, "The Good News Today: Reflections on the Sunday Readings." *Worship* 49 (1975) 234-42, 295-307, 337-59, 419-34, 476-97, 543-59, 597-614; 50 (1976) 71-80, 163-73, 260-68.

³ *Divino afflante Spiritu*, issued by Pius XII on Sept. 30, 1943 (EB 538-69).

the Catholic Church was to provide proof texts for the theses of dogmatic theology.

This emancipation of biblical studies has not been free from conflict, since it has introduced an approach to the biblical books which contrasts sharply with the way in which they were used in the previous history of the Catholic Church. Apart from Vatican II—and even this is only a partial exception to the rule⁴—the conciliar pronouncements of the Church were marked by a precritical approach to Scripture. Until Pius XII emphasized the importance of literary forms for biblical interpretation,⁵ the Bible was generally used in the Church as a collection of timeless oracles of divine truth, and it was often cited completely out of context in support of doctrinal positions ranging from the bodily assumption of Mary⁶ to the immorality of artificial contraception.⁷

Actually, such a use of the Bible in the Church was not so very different from the use of the OT by NT authors. For they too believed that the Scriptures contained God's will for His people here and now. For Paul, the story of Abraham proved that God was now offering Jew and Gentile alike the gift of righteousness through faith in Jesus Christ, apart from the works of the Mosaic law (Gal 3:6–18; Rom 4:1–25). Was such an interpretation of Gen 15:6 so very different in kind from Vatican I's use of the "Thou art Peter" text (Mt 16:17–19) to establish the authority of the Roman pontiff?⁸

Modern exegesis, on the other hand, has emphasized, with the support of Pius XII's encyclical,⁹ the literal sense of Scripture, that is, what the original author intended to say, as determined both by the literary and by the historical context of the passage in question. This emphasis has brought out the doctrinal diversity within the NT, a diversity of which earlier credal formulations were unaware. For example, the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed,¹⁰ in confessing that Jesus Christ is "the only Son of God, eternally begotten of the Father," depends on the Johannine prologue, where Christ is called "the Father's only Son" (Jn 1:14) and is identified with the Word, which "was in the beginning with God and was God" (1:1). But when that same Creed goes on to say that Christ "was born of the Virgin Mary by the power of the Spirit," it is dependent on the Matthean and Lucan infancy narratives, both of which explain Jesus' premature conception by the influence of the Spirit of God (Mt 1:18–25; Lk 1:26–38). The Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed, following early Fa-

⁴ For example, Vatican II's repetition of the doctrine of Vatican I that the bishops are "successors" of the apostles (W. M. Abbott, *The Documents of Vatican II* [London: Chapman, 1967] 39–40) would be difficult to substantiate on the basis of a critical reading of the NT—and other early Christian—evidence.

⁵ EB 557.

⁶ Denz. (1966 ed.) 3900–3904.

⁷ Ibid. 3716.

⁸ Ibid. 3053.

⁹ EB 550.

¹⁰ Denz. (1966 ed.) 150.

thers, such as Ignatius of Antioch (*Magn.* 8, 2; *Eph.* 19, 1), has conflated John's pre-existence Christology, according to which Christ was God's Son before the world was created, with Luke's conception Christology, which declares Jesus to be God's Son because of the intervention of the Spirit at his conception (Lk 1:35).

I have the impression that systematic theologians such as Schillebeeckx and Küng have run afoul of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith partly because they have drawn theological conclusions from the doctrinal diversity which the exegetes have pointed out within the NT. Why is it that, unlike the time of the anti-Modernist crisis in the early part of this century,¹¹ the exegetes themselves now seem to be left in peace?¹² Is it because it is now safe to write about what the Scriptures meant, as long as one makes no inferences which could affect the present faith of the Church? Have exegetes purchased immunity to pursue their historical research at the price of a certain irrelevance?

Commenting on "the bankruptcy of the biblical critical paradigm," W. Wink has declared that this approach to the Bible has become "cut off from any community for whose life its results might be significant."¹³ In a more constructive vein, R. E. Brown has attempted to bridge the gap between critical scholarship and problems facing the Church.¹⁴ Biblical scholars who feel a responsibility towards their religious communities are not unaware, then, of the danger that their work may make itself irrelevant to the churches it is supposed to serve.

Nevertheless, the influence of research in this area on church leadership and laity remains inconsiderable. The exegetes are not solely responsible for this situation. Popular writing on the Bible is usually expected to be uncontroversial and "inspirational." Some months ago, after I had submitted a section for one in a series of popular commentaries, I received a letter from the editor, himself an exegete, in which he advised me: "Don't write with the scholarly world looking over your shoulder." Much of my commentary, he alleged, "will be of no concern for the readers."

Those afraid of "scandalizing the faithful" are quite content with the chasm which exists between critical scholarship and the use of the Bible in the Church. Nevertheless, after having taken the Bible apart, so to speak, the exegetes have a responsibility to wrestle with the consequences of their research for the truth of the Scriptures and of the doctrinal

¹¹ Denz. (1950 ed.) 2113-36.

¹² This is true, at least, of the situation in Rome itself, where John Paul II has expressed his support for the work of the Biblical Institute. It is more difficult to assess the attacks on distinguished Catholic exegetes which have followed the Pope's visit to the U.S.

¹³ *The Bible in Human Transformation: Toward a New Paradigm for Bible Study* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1973) 10.

¹⁴ *Biblical Reflections on Crises Facing the Church* (New York: Paulist, 1975).

formulations which are based on the Scriptures. They must prevent their work from being exploited in the interest of a facile scepticism which says: "It ain't necessarily so. The things that you're liable to read in the Bible—it ain't necessarily so."¹⁵

One root of our present crisis, it seems to me, lies in the problem of religious language. The diversity within the NT appears to pose a threat to its truth because of the notion of truth which underlies the thinking of many religious people today. How many are aware of the ancient principle of apophatic theology, accepted by St. Thomas, that we can know *that* God is but not *what* He is?¹⁶ And how many are conscious, when they talk about religious matters, that all theological language is really "disembodied metaphor"?¹⁷

Here, I believe, is where the exegete can make a decisive contribution. For if, as Vatican II has observed, the study of the Scriptures is "the soul of theology,"¹⁸ then the exegete's continual contact with the primary language of metaphor, symbol, and myth may assist in the creation of a secondary language of conceptual, systematic reflection which will be at the service of faith and not an obstacle to faith. In other words, my hope is that the exegesis of the 80's and 90's may help revive the role of the imagination in theology.

When religious subjects are represented in painting or sculpture, creative diversity is expected and appreciated. One does not require a crucifixion scene by Dali to resemble a representation of the same subject by Rembrandt. Why, then, should differences in the Gospel narratives be thought to threaten the Gospel truth?¹⁹

Biblical narrative, as has often been pointed out, does not distinguish between event and interpretation. The interpretation of the event is written into the very telling of the story. The difficulty which many of us have with this procedure stems from the disastrous divorce in modern thinking between intellect and imagination, between sense and sensibility. Amos Wilder has criticized "the stultifying axiom that genuine truth or insight or wisdom must be limited to that which can be stated in discursive prose, in denotative language, stripped as far as possible of all connotative suggestion, in 'clear ideas,' in short, in statement or description of a scientific character."²⁰

¹⁵ Song from *Porgy and Bess* by George Gerschwinn.

¹⁶ *Sum. theol.* 1, c. 12, a. 13, ad 1.

¹⁷ R. Butterworth, review of S. TeSelle, *Speaking in Parables*, *HeyJ* 17 (1976) 477.

¹⁸ *Documents* 127.

¹⁹ That this is still the case is indicated by the dossier of letters sent to me by Mr. David Murphy, General Secretary of the Catholic Truth Society, which were written in response to the British reprint of my pamphlet *Tell Me the Gospel Truth* (orig. ed. Forward Movement Publications: Cincinnati, 1978).

²⁰ *New Testament Faith for Today* (London: SCM, 1956) 60.

Even Jesus' preference for the parable form has not sufficed to legitimate for all of us the use of imaginative narrative as a vehicle for religious insight. We are still victims of a creeping Cartesianism which identifies truth with clarity. We still assume, in the words of Leonard Hodgson, that "someone, somewhere, at some time in the past, really knew the truth, and that what we have to do is to find out what he thought and get back to it."²¹ When religious truth is viewed in this way, then the problem of diversity within the NT can only be resolved by forming a "canon within the canon." This was Luther's response to the diversity between Paul and the Letter of James on the relation between faith and works,²² and many exegetes in the Lutheran tradition still see in the Pauline doctrine of God's justification of the impious the essential "good news" of the NT.²³

Hans Küng, on the other hand, rejects this sort of exclusive Paulinism as more Pauline than Paul,²⁴ but his preferred locus for the truth of the NT seems to be the message of the historical Jesus,²⁵ even though there is still widespread disagreement among scholars over the reconstruction of this message.

Generally speaking, Catholic authors have resisted the idea of the canon within the canon, but we have not sufficiently exposed the fallacy of the objectivistic approach to religious truth which has led to this desperate "solution." The exegete is in an advantageous position to rehabilitate the place of imaginative narrative as a vehicle of religious insight and to exorcize the compulsive search for historical facts and clear and distinct ideas. Far from being a primitive and inadequate means of expression, the language of metaphor, symbol, and myth is uniquely suited to involve the whole person, and not simply our powers of reasoning, which by themselves rarely lead to religious commitment.

By pointing out that clarity must sometimes be sacrificed in the interest of truth, the exegete can help us summon up the courage to enter the darkness where God is (cf. Exod 20:21). But to do this, the exegete must surrender his own preoccupation with the "original meaning" of the text.²⁶ For an insistence on *the* meaning has the same constricting

²¹ *Sex and Christian Freedom* (London: SCM, 1967) 42-43.

²² "What does not teach Christ is not apostolic, not even if taught by Peter or Paul. On the other hand, what does preach Christ is apostolic, even if Judas, Annas, Pilate or Herod does it. The epistle of James, however, only drives you to the law and its works. . . . He does violence to Scripture, and so contradicts Paul and all Scripture" (*Preface to the Epistles of St. James and Jude*, tr. B. L. Woolf, *Reformation Writings of Martin Luther 2* [London: Lutterworth, 1956] 307).

²³ This is the position of a number of contributors to the *Festschrift* for Hans Conzelmann, ed. G. Strecker, *Jesus Christus in Historie und Theologie* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1975).

²⁴ *Christ sein* (Munich: Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag, 1976) 488-89.

²⁵ *Ibid.* 167-92 ("the real Christ").

²⁶ J. F. A. Sawyer, "The 'Original Meaning of the Text' and Other Legitimate Subjects for Semantic Description," *BibETL* 35 (1974) 63-70.

consequences as the search, to which Hodgson referred, for that truth which someone sometime in the past knew and expressed.

In fact, the study of the Bible makes abundantly clear that the "original meaning" of biblical tradition is often irrecoverable. The amount of material of which it can be said that the literary context in which we first encounter it is also the original context is quite small. The remainder has already been subjected to the process of reinterpretation and updating. The fact that the Scriptures reinterpret previous stages of an ongoing tradition whose origins are largely unknown to us prevents us from absolutizing the "original meaning" of the text.

To be sure, the charism of inspiration, which the Church finds only in the written stage of the tradition, gives importance to the "original meaning" of the text to the extent that it must not be nullified by subsequent interpretations. The "original meaning" thus plays, in relation to biblical interpretation, a role analogous to that of the historical Jesus in relation to theology. However modest the assured results of scholarship concerning the Jesus of history, they suffice to exclude, for example, an interpretation of Christianity which would proclaim a doctrine of racial hatred or of individualistic self-centeredness.

Nevertheless, to return to Wilder's important distinction, the "original meaning," insofar as it can be recovered, is usually limited to what the text denotes. The more subtle connotations of the literary work cannot be frozen by scholarly analysis. Frank Kermode speaks of "the elusiveness of secret senses, their way of varying from one period and one person to another; their status with respect to what a cultural or institutional consensus chooses to regard as well-formed narrative; their relation, as narratives purporting to be historical reports, to fact."²⁷ Like the secular critic, the biblical interpreter must therefore be open to "two views of interpretation—one retrospective, which attempts to reconstruct an original meaning or truth, the other prospective, which explicitly welcomes the indeterminacy of meaning."²⁸

The reinterpretation of biblical texts is the continuation of a process which is constantly at work in the Bible itself. The Bible, like any literary work, has a life in history, and the shifting perceptions of its meaning, as it is passed on from age to age, are as much a part of it as the meaning intended by the original author or perceived by the original audience.

The rehabilitation of imaginative narrative, which is my hope for the 80's and 90's, is, like philology and history, only a precondition for the religious use of the Bible, which is my primary concern; for such use is

²⁷ *The Genesis of Secrecy: On the Interpretation of Narrative* (Cambridge: Harvard University, 1979) xi.

²⁸ J. Culler, "Jacques Derrida," in J. Sturrock, ed., *Structuralism and Since: From Lévi-Strauss to Derrida* (Oxford: Oxford University, 1979) 158.

incomplete apart from prayer, and the art of prayer goes beyond the competence of the exegete. Nevertheless, the rediscovery of the imagination may help us enter into the spirit in which the ancient tales were told and so enable us to tell *our* story, which, after all, is the essence of prayer: "I will declare your fame to all generations" (Ps 45:17).

Heythrop College
University of London

SCHUYLER BROWN, S.J.