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# God's Word

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### III

## Biblical Interpretation in Conflict \*

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The Question of the Basic Principles  
and Path of Exegesis Today

I. Preliminary Considerations:  
The Situation and the Task

a. *The Current Problems*

In Vladimir Soloviev's story of the Antichrist, the Redeemer's eschatological opponent recommends himself to believers not least by alluding to the fact that he has been awarded a doctorate in theology at Tübingen and that he has written an exegetical work recognized by experts as groundbreaking. The Antichrist as a famous exegete—it is with this paradox that Soloviev, almost a hundred years ago, drew attention to the ambivalence of modern methods of interpreting the Bible. Today, to speak of the crisis of the historical-critical method has become almost a truism. And yet it has set out with enormous optimism. In the new freedom of thought toward which the Enlightenment had advanced, dogma appeared as the one real hindrance to a proper understanding of the Bible in itself. Freed from this inappropriate presupposition, and armed with methodological means guaranteed to ensure strict objectivity, it seemed that we

would at last be able to hear once more the voice of the source, pure and undistorted. And in fact, long-forgotten things did come to light once more; the polyphony of history could be heard again behind the homophony of the traditional interpretation. Because the human factor in sacred history came to the forefront in ever more concrete fashion, God's action was at the same time larger and closer.

Yet gradually, the picture became more and more confused. The hypotheses branched out, separated from each other, and became a visible fence that barred the way to the Bible for the uninitiated. The initiate, however, no longer reads the Bible, but dissects it into the elements from which it is supposed to have grown. The method itself seems to require this radicalizing process: it cannot stand still anywhere in the process of getting to the bottom of the human activity in sacred history. It must try to remove the irrational remnant and explain everything. Faith is not a component of this method, and God is not a factor in the historical events with which it deals. Yet because, in the biblical depiction of history, everything is saturated with God's activity, you must begin a complicated anatomy of the words of the Bible: you must try to separate the threads in such a way that you can ultimately hold in your hand what is "actually historical"—that is, what is purely human in the events—and explain, on the other hand, how it came about that the idea of God was woven in everywhere. Thus, in opposition to the history depicted, another, "real" history must be constructed; behind the surviving sources—the books of the Bible—more original sources must be found, which then become the criteria for interpretation. No one can be surprised that in the course of this, hypotheses increasingly branch out and subdivide and finally turn into a jungle full of contradictions. In the end, we find out, no longer what

the text says, but what it ought: to say and to what components it can be traced back.<sup>1</sup>

Inevitably, in such a situation, counterreactions have arisen. The more cautious among systematic theologians are looking for a theology that is as independent of exegesis as possible.<sup>2</sup> Yet what can be the value of a theology that keeps at a distance from its own foundations? Thus, the radical path known as "fundamentalism" wins adherents, who say that applying the historical method to God's Word is wrong in itself and nonsensical and want to hear the Bible again in its pure literal sense, just as it stands and as the average person understands it, as the word of God. But when do I in fact hear the Bible "literally"? And what is the "normal" way of understanding it, that leaves it entirely to itself? Certainly, fundamentalism can appeal to the fact that the Bible's position, the hermeneutic perspective it has itself chosen, is the viewpoint of the "little ones", of people who are "simple hearted".<sup>3</sup> It nonetheless remains true that the demand for "literalism" and "realism" is by no means as unambiguous

<sup>1</sup> With refreshing directness and yet with a great knowledge of literature, C. S. Lewis has described this situation in *Fern-Seed and Elephants and Other Essays on Christianity*, ed. W. Hooper (London: Collins Fontana, 1975). E. Kästner also offers reflections on the problem based on great knowledge of the subject in *Die Stundentrommel vom heiligen Berg Athos* (Inselverlag, 1956). Also important for a diagnosis of the situation is J. Guitton, *Silence sur l'essentiel* (Paris, 1986), 47-58. For a survey of the history of historical-critical exegesis, see W. Kümmel, *Das Neue Testament: Geschichte der Erforschung seiner Probleme* (Freiburg and Munich, 1958).

<sup>2</sup> On the Evangelical side, Paul Tillich's *Systematic Theology* may serve as an example (Chicago, 1951-1963); it is not by chance that here the index of biblical references for all three volumes requires barely two pages; on the Catholic side, there is the later work of K. Rahner, who succeeded at any rate in keeping the *Grundkurs des Glaubens* (Freiburg, 1976) largely independent of exegesis (see, e.g., p. 25).

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Guitton, *Silence sur l'essentiel*, 55ff.; R. Guardini, *Das Christusbild der paulinischen und johanneischen Schriften*, 2nd ed. (Würzburg, 1961), p. 15.

as might appear. Another way out is offered in taking up the problem of hermeneutics: The explanation of the historical process of development is said to be only one part of the interpreter's task; understanding in today's context is the other. Accordingly, one must investigate the conditions for understanding and come to a realization of the text that goes beyond a historical "anatomy of the dead".<sup>4</sup> That is the right way to start, for in fact we are still far from understanding something when we are able to explain the process by which it arose. Yet how can I arrive at an understanding that is not based on what I have arbitrarily posited myself but that allows me to hear the text's message and gives me what I do not have on my own? Once the method, with its anatomy, has turned history into something dead, then who can resurrect it so that it may speak to me as something living? In other words, if "hermeneutics" is to be convincing, we must find the inner harmony between historical analysis and hermeneutic synthesis.

No doubt there are serious attempts in this direction in the hermeneutic debate; yet I certainly do not see any convincing answer.<sup>5</sup> When Bultmann employed the philosophy of

<sup>4</sup> Thus expressed by Kästner, *Sündenbrot*, 121; some related thoughts in L. Kolakowski, *Die Gegenwärtigkeit des Mythos* (Munich, 1973), 95f.

<sup>5</sup> We must here refer especially to the studies of P. Ricoeur, for example, *Hermeneutik und Strukturalismus* I (1973); *Hermeneutik und Psychoanalyse* (1974). A helpful survey showing just where the question stands now is offered by P. Stuhlmacher, *Vom Verstehen des Neuen Testaments: Eine Hermeneutik* (Göttingen, 1986). Significant approaches are further to be found in P. Toinet, *Pour une théologie de l'exégèse*, preface by I. de la Potterie (Paris, 1983); R. Laurentin, *Comment réconcilier l'exégèse et la foi* (Paris, 1984); P. Grech, *Ermenautica e Teologia biblica* (Rome, 1986); P. Grelot, *Évangiles et histoire* (Paris, 1985). In 1979 the *Theologische Quartalschrift* (Tübingen) devoted an entire issue (pp. 1-71) to a discussion of this question, in the form of a debate about J. Blank's article, "Exegese als theologische Basiswissenschaft" (2-23). Unfortunately this contribution is not productive, since it seems to attribute the problems

Heidegger as a vehicle for making the biblical word present, then this was consistent with his reconstruction of what was characteristic of the message of Jesus. Yet was not this reconstruction itself a product of his philosophy? How historically reliable is it? In this way of understanding it, are we in the end listening to Jesus or to Heidegger? Even so, we cannot deny that Bultmann has seriously grappled with the problem of how to approach the message of the Bible.

Yet today, forms of interpretation are appearing that can only be described as symptomatic of the decay of interpretation and hermeneutics. Materialist or feminist interpretations of the Bible cannot seriously claim to be an understanding of this text and its intentions. They are at best an expression of the fact that the real meaning of the Bible is regarded either as completely unknowable or as meaningless for the reality of life today, and hence one no longer inquires about the truth at all but only about what can serve the practical course one has chosen. Combining this course of action with elements of the biblical tradition is then justified by the way that the influx of religious elements reinforces the impetus of the action. A historical method may even serve as a cover for this maneuver, insofar as it dissects the Bible into discontinuous individual parts, which can then be applied in new ways and inserted in a different way into a new montage.<sup>6</sup> "Analyses" of Scripture in terms of depth psychology are only in appearance more serious. Here, the events narrated by the Bible are traced

surrounding exegesis exclusively to a dogmatism that has not yet risen to the level of historical thought.

<sup>6</sup> Characteristic of this are the new forms of materialist and feminist interpretation of the Bible; cf., e.g., K. Füssel, "Materialistische Lektüre der Bibel", in *Methoden der Evangelien-Exegese*, Theologische Berichte XIII (Einsiedeln, 1983), 123-63.

back to mythic archetypes, which are said to have arisen from the depths of the psyche, in varying forms, throughout the history of religion and are supposed to point the way for us to a redeeming journey into the healing foundations of our soul.<sup>7</sup> Here, too, Scripture is being read contrary to its own intention: it is no longer supposed to be a renunciation of idols but the way in which the eternal myth of salvation is communicated to us in the West. The fact that such forms of "interpretation" are being eagerly taken up today, are indeed, in many cases, regarded as acceptable alternatives in theology, is perhaps the most dramatic sign of the crisis into which exegesis and theology have fallen.

Essentially, this picture applies in similar fashion today both to Evangelical and to Catholic theology, even if the forms of expression differ in detail, in accordance with the differing academic traditions. As far as the Catholic side is concerned, Vatican II did not in fact bring this situation about, but neither was it able to prevent it. The Constitution on Divine Revelation attempted to bring the two sides of interpretation—historical "explanation" and holistic "understanding"—into a well-balanced relationship. In the first place, it emphasized the correctness (indeed, the necessity) of the historical method, which it saw as springing from three elements: paying attention to literary forms, research into their historical (cultural, religious, and so on) context, and the investigation of what people usually call the *Sitz im Leben* (setting in life) of the text. At the same time, however, the Council's text also insisted on the theological nature of exegesis and mentioned the main points of

<sup>7</sup> The principal representative of this depth-psychology exegesis, which is steadily gaining ground, is E. Drewermann. Cf. G. Lohfink and R. Pesch, *Tiefenpsychologie und keine Exegese* (Stuttgart, 1987).

the theological method in the interpretation of the text: the fundamental presupposition on which the theological understanding of the Bible is based, it said, is the unity of Scripture; the method to follow, corresponding to that presupposition, is the *analogia fidei*—that is, the understanding of individual texts on the basis of the whole. Then there are two further indications as to method. Scripture is one, on the basis of its continuing historical vehicle, the one people of God. Reading it as a unity therefore means reading it on the basis of the Church as its locus in life and regarding the faith of the Church as the true hermeneutic key. That means, in the first place, that tradition does not obstruct access to Scripture; rather, it opens it up; and secondly, that it is for the Church, through her official organs, to pronounce the decisive word in the interpretation of Scripture.<sup>8</sup>

This canon of theological methods, however, stands in conflict with the basic methodological direction of modern exegesis; it is precisely what the latter set out to overcome. On its basis, we could say that interpretation is either carried out critically or it is done by means of authority: both together will not work. Expounding the Bible "critically" means setting aside any recognized authority in interpretation. "Tradition" does not then necessarily have to be rejected as an aid to understanding, but it will only count so long as it is based on something that stands up to "critical" methods. "Tradition" cannot in any case be a yardstick for interpretation. Seen as a whole, traditional interpretation is regarded as prescholarly and naive; the historical-critical interpretation

<sup>8</sup> See esp. *Dei Verbum* 11 and 12 and also J. Gnllka, "Die biblische Exegese im Lichte des Dekretes über die Göttliche Offenbarung", MThZ 36 (1985): 1-19.

alone appears as a true expounding of the text. Thus, ultimately, the unity of the Bible, too, becomes an outdated postulate. From the viewpoint of history, it is said to be discontinuity, and not unity, that applies not only to the relationship of the Old and New Testaments, but even within each Testament.

On such a basis as this, the task of exegesis as defined by the Council appears contradictory—both “critical” and “dogmatic” at the same time, things that are irreconcilable for modern theological thought. Personally, I am in fact convinced that a careful reading of the *whole* text of *Dei Verbum* will detect the elements essential for a synthesis between historical methodology and theological “hermeneutics”, but the connection between them is not immediately manifest.<sup>9</sup> Thus, the reception of this after the Council, in practical terms, brushed aside the theological part of the statement, as being a concession to the past, and understood the text simply as an unqualified official approval of the historical-critical method. The fact that in this way, after the Council, the confessional differences between Catholic and Evangelical exegesis practically disappeared may be set on the positive account of such a one-sided reception of the Council. The negative side to this process consists in the fact that in the realm of Catholicism, too, there is now a total hiatus between exegesis and dogma and that here, too, Scripture has become a word from the past that each person tries in his own way to bring into the present day, without being altogether able to trust the raft he is using for the purpose. Faith declines into a kind of philosophy of

<sup>9</sup> Cf. Gnllka, “Biblische Exegese”, 1-9; see also A. Grillmeier’s commentary on the third chapter, in LThK, Ergänzungsband [supplementary volume] II, 528-58.

life, which each individual attempts to distill for himself from the Bible as well as he is able. Dogma, from which the ground of Scripture has been pulled away, no longer stands. The Bible that has freed itself from dogma has become a document about the past and, thereby, itself belongs to the past.

#### b. *The Task*

This situation is not equally obvious everywhere. The methods are not always used in the same radical manner, and the search for corrective factors has long been underway. In this respect, in striving for a better synthesis between historical and dogmatic methods, criticism and dogma, we are not entering new territory. Hardly anyone, on the other hand, would maintain that we have already found a convincing overall conception that does justice to the positive insights of the historical method while at the same time transcending its limitations and opening it up into an appropriate hermeneutic. To accomplish this, the work of at least another whole generation will be necessary. What is said hereafter is intended as part of one such effort, indicating a few steps that may take us farther along this path.

There is no particular need to demonstrate that taking refuge in a supposedly pure literal understanding is of no help and that a merely positivist, rigid ecclesiasticism would also be inadequate. A denial of particular hypotheses that are especially daring and questionable will not do, either. Just as inadequate is a tepid stance, in which one picks out from what is offered by modern exegesis whatever answers are most easily reconciled with tradition. Such caution may be useful, but it does not grasp the root of the problem and

remains arbitrary if it cannot explain its reasoning. To arrive at a real solution, we have to go beyond disputes over details and get at the root of it. What is needed is a criticism of criticism, developed, not from outside, but simply from within, from critical thought's potential for self-criticism: a self-criticism of historical exegesis, which could be expanded into a criticism of historical reason, as a continuation and modification of Kant's critique of reason.

I do not presume to undertake so great a task alone and, as it were, at one stroke. Yet we have to begin, even if it is at first just a matter of exploratory expeditions into rather uncharted territory. Self-criticism of the historical method would have to begin with reading its own results diachronically and with moving away from the appearance of quasi-scientific certainty with which its interpretations have hitherto largely been declared. The historical-critical method is in fact based on the attempt to reach a similar degree of accuracy, and thereby of certainty, in its results as is exhibited in natural science. What the exegete has decided can only be called into question by exegetes—that is the rule in practice, which for the most part is presupposed as being absolutely self-evident. Now, the natural science model itself ought of course to lead to the application of Heisenberg's "uncertainty principle" to the historical method as well. Heisenberg showed that a substantial part in determining the result of an experiment is played by standpoint of the observer—that indeed his questioning and examination themselves enter into the "natural process" and change it.<sup>10</sup> That is true to an even greater extent in dealings with the witnesses of history: interpretation can never be a simple reproduction

<sup>10</sup> Cf. W. Heisenberg, *Das Naturbild der heutigen Physik* (Reinbek, 1955), esp. 15-23.

of it, "how it actually was". Here, the word "interpretation" puts us on the track of the real matter: any exposition demands an element of "inter", an entering into and a standing in between, an accompanying presence of the interpreter. Pure objectivity is an absurd abstraction. It is not someone who is uninvolved who experiences something; involvement is the presupposition for knowledge. The question is merely how to achieve an involvement in which the self does not drown out the other voices but rather in which an inner understanding with the past allows the ears to be clear for their message.<sup>11</sup>

The law formulated by Heisenberg for experiments in natural science expresses a fact that is true of the subject-object relationship in general. The subject cannot be neatly excluded from any constellation; we can only attempt to bring it to the best possible state. In dealing with history, this is—as we said—even more the case, since physical processes are present and can be repeated, while historical processes are past and cannot be repeated. Beyond this, they have all the impenetrability and depth of what is human, and in that sense they are far more dependent on the attitude of the perceiving "subject" than are the operations of natural laws. Yet how are we to trace the constellation of the subject? This is where we should employ what I previously called diachronic relationships with the exegetical findings. After some two hundred years of historical-critical work on the texts, we can no longer read their results two-dimensionally; we have to see them in the perspective of their own history. Then it is seen that this history is not

<sup>11</sup> I am basing myself here on Stuhlmacher, *Vom Verstehen des Neuen Testaments*, who formulates his own answer to these problems in a "hermeneutic of agreement with the biblical texts" (222-56).

just a story of progress from inaccurate results to accurate and objective ones. It becomes clear that it is also, and far more, a story of subjective constellations, whose path corresponds exactly to the development of the history of ideas and reflects this in the form of textual interpretation. In a diachronic reading of exegesis, its philosophical presuppositions become visible of their own accord. From a distance, the observer discovers with astonishment that what apparently were strictly scientific, purely "historical" interpretations nonetheless reflect "their masters' own spirit" more than the spirit of past ages. That should lead, not to scepticism, but certainly to self-limitation and to a purification of method.

## 2. Self-Criticism of the Historical-Critical Method Following the Paradigm of the Methodological Doctrine of Martin Dibelius and Rudolf Bultmann

### a. *The Principal Elements of Method and Their Presuppositions*

So as not to remain altogether in the abstract realm of general rules, I should like to try to clarify what I have said by an example. I am drawing here upon the dissertation at the University of Basel by Reiner Blank, on *Analyse und Kritik der formgeschichtlichen Arbeiten von Martin Dibelius und Rudolf Bultmann* (Analysis and criticism of the form-critical work of Martin Dibelius and Rudolf Bultmann).<sup>12</sup> This book seems to me an outstanding example of the self-criticism of the historical-critical method I have mentioned: any exegesis

<sup>12</sup> Basel, 1981, vol. XVI of Theologischen Dissertationen, ed. Bo Reicke.

that has become self-critical in such a way ceases to pile "results" upon "results", to construct and dispute hypotheses. It looks at the path it has followed so as to recognize its foundations and to purify itself by reflection on these foundations. It does not by any means cancel itself out in doing so. On the contrary, by self-limitation it discovers its proper place. No doubt the form-critical studies of Dibelius and Bultmann have meanwhile been superseded in many respects, and details have been corrected. Even today, however, their basic methodological approaches are decisive for the method and the path of modern exegesis. Their basic components still underlie its historical and theological judgments—indeed, they have to a great extent virtually attained the status of dogma.

Dibelius, like Bultmann, was concerned to overcome the arbitrary attitude into which critical exegesis had fallen in its previous phase—of so-called "liberal theology"—in its judgments about what was "historical" and "unhistorical". Both scholars were therefore looking for strictly literary criteria that would explain in a reliable way the process by which the New Testament text developed and thereby produce a faithful picture of the process of transmission. For this reason, both were searching for "pure form" and for the laws that led from the forms existing at the beginning to the text as we have it. Dibelius assumed, as if it were self-evident, the notion that the mystery of history allows itself to be uncovered when one illuminates the process by which it became what it is.<sup>13</sup> But how do we arrive at the "beginning" thus postulated and the course established for

<sup>13</sup> Cf. Blank, "Exegese als theologische Basiswissenschaft", 72. As opposed to this, Kästner, *Stundentrommel*, 120, speaks of the "superstition . . . that anything and everything can be understood on the basis of its origins".



further development? Despite all differences in detail, we can discover here a series of fundamental presuppositions common to Bultmann and Dibelius, which they both unquestioningly regard as reliable. Both assume a priority of proclamation over event: in the beginning was the word. Everything develops from proclamation. In Bultmann's writings, this thesis is taken so far that for him, only the word can be original; the word creates the scenario.<sup>14</sup> Everything that an event is, is accordingly secondary, a mythical development.

A second axiom is already given along with this, one that has remained constitutive for modern exegesis since Dibelius and Bultmann: the notion of discontinuity—not just that between pre-Resurrection and post-Resurrection tradition, between the pre-Resurrection Jesus and the Church in her formative period, but a discontinuity that holds good in all phases of the tradition, to the point where R. Blank could observe, "Bultmann intended disconnectedness at any price."<sup>15</sup> One advantage of this thesis was that in this way the problem of the relation between the Old and New Testaments became less acute. For if discontinuity is continuously at work within the New Testament tradition, then the discontinuity with the Old Testament is no longer actually a problem. The continuity of the two Testaments alleged by the New Testament writings is then simply one of those mystifying elements that the historian can see through, one of those elements with which the later community built its house. Yet at the same time, it is instantaneously clear at this point how far away this going back to what is allegedly original is from what the New Testament actually says. A

<sup>14</sup>Cf. Blank, "Exegese als theologische Basiswissenschaft", 97.

<sup>15</sup>Ibid., 154.

constitutive element of the latter is the awareness of being in unity with the entire witness of the Old Testament, which only now can be understood as a unity and as a meaningful whole. And indeed, any interpretation of the New Testament has to let itself be measured by the question of whether it can be consistent with this fundamental conviction. When this cannot be done, any possibility of understanding the inner logic of the New Testament writings has been excluded from the outset.

Let us return to Dibelius and Bultmann. Associated with the theory of the word alone being original and that of the discontinuity between the individual phases of its development is the notion that only simple things are original and what is complex is necessarily late. This produces a parameter that is easy to use in determining the stages of development: the more theologically considered and discriminating a concept is, the more recent it is; and the simpler something is, the more we can attribute it to the origin.<sup>16</sup> Yet this criterion, by which people regard something as being more developed or less developed is by no means so obvious as at first appears. A judgment about this depends substantially on the exegete's own theological appraisals; ample space is allowed here for arbitrariness. Above all, however,

<sup>16</sup>Cf. *ibid.*, 89-183. Characteristic of the practically universal acceptance of this rule (to mention just one example) is the way that L. Oberlinner adopts as a criterion for dating, as a matter of course and without reflection, the "no doubt more developed thought (in comparison with Paul, for instance), in, for example, ecclesiology and in eschatology" that he sees in the synoptic Gospels (review of J. Carmignac, *La Naissance des Évangiles synoptiques* [Paris, 1984], in *Theol. Rev.* 83 [1987]: 194). By what criteria is one thought to be described as "more developed" and another as "less"? That does, after all, depend on the standpoint of the observer. And even if the criterion were appropriate, who can demonstrate that a conclusion about "earlier" or "later" can be drawn from it?

we have to dispute the fundamental notion that is based on a simple transfer of the evolutionary model from natural science to the history of the mind.

Mental processes do not follow the law of animal general-ogies. In this case, it is frequently the opposite way around: a great breakthrough is followed by generations of imitators, who bring down the bold new beginning to the banality of school theories and bury and obscure it until, by way of many and varied ramifications, it comes to be once more effective. How questionable the proposed criteria are can easily be seen in examples: Who would maintain that Clement of Rome is "more developed" and "more complex" than Paul? That James is more advanced than the Letter to the Romans? That the Didache has progressed beyond the Pastoral Epistles? Let us look at later ages: whole generations of Thomistic scholars have been unable to sustain the greatness of his thought; Lutheran orthodoxy is far more "medieval" than Luther himself. And even between the great, such a scheme of development cannot be maintained. Gregory the Great, for instance, wrote long after Augustine and knew his works, but in his writing everything is translated from the bold view of Augustine into the simplicity of a believing comprehension. Another example: By what criterion could anyone declare whether Pascal is to be placed before or after Descartes, which thinker is to be regarded as more developed? Examples could be produced through the whole of history. All judgments based on the theory of the discontinuity of tradition and on the evolutionist assertion of the priority of the "simple" over the "complex" must therefore from the outset be challenged as having no real foundation.

We must now, however, explain in more concrete terms the criteria used in the attempt to ascertain what is "simple".

There are criteria for this with respect to both form and content. In formal terms, the original forms were sought. Dibelius found them in the paradigm, the narrative example recited orally, which, he said, could be reconstructed as underlying the sermon. Late forms, on the other hand, were [he said] the "novelle" (or story), the "legend", the collection of narrative material, and the myth.<sup>17</sup> Bultmann saw the pure form as existing in the apophthegm: "The original individual piece was succinct and rounded off; the interest was devoted to what Jesus said at the end of the scene; information about the situation lay far from this form; Jesus never appeared as initiator. . . . Everything that did not correspond to this form was ascribed by Bultmann to development."<sup>18</sup> The arbitrary nature of these rules, which still affect theories of development and judgments about what is genuine, is only too obvious. To be fair, we would have to say, of course, that they are not so arbitrary as they might sound when you first hear them. For the identification of "pure form" is based on an idea, with respect to content, of what comes first: and we must now test this idea.

We have already met one element of this: the theory of the priority of the word over the event. This conceals two other pairs of opposites: the pitting of "word" against cult and eschatology against apocalypse. Closely connected with this is the antithesis between Jewish and Hellenistic. For Bultmann, for instance, the idea of the cosmos, the mystical adoration of God, and religious worship were Hellenistic. The consequence is simple: What is Hellenistic cannot be Palestinian and, thus, cannot be original. Whatever has to do with the cult, with the cosmos, with "mysticism",

<sup>17</sup> Blank, "Exegese als theologische Basiswissenschaft", 11-46.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 98.

must be excluded as a later construction. The rejection of "apocalyptic" as the supposed opposite of "eschatology" leads to yet another element: the alleged antagonism of the prophetic against the "legal" and, thus, in turn against what is cultic and what is cosmic. That then also means that "ethics" is regarded as incompatible with what is eschatological and prophetic; in the beginning, there was no "ethics" but, rather, an "ethos".<sup>19</sup> Here, some of Luther's basic choices are surely also still having an effect: the dialectic of law and gospel, which advises ascribing ethics and cult to the realm of the law and thereby sets them in a dialectical opposition to Jesus, who as the one who brings the gospel completes the line of promise and thus overcomes the law. In this respect, in order to understand modern exegesis and arrive at a correct judgment about it, one would have to reflect again on Luther's view of the relationship between the two Testaments; in place of the previous model of analogy, he set a dialectical structure. Perhaps this turning point is the real rift dividing the old and the new exegesis.

However that may be, in Luther's case this all still remained in a very subtle balance; even for Jesus himself, and thus also for Christian life, both sides of the dialectic remain essential—Jesus is not only pure justification by grace, but is also an "example", and in that sense the ethical element belongs in his figure. In the cases of Bultmann and Dibelius, on the one hand, the whole has degenerated into a scheme of development whose simplicity is scarcely tolerable, even if it has contributed to its impact. With these presuppositions, the picture of Jesus is determined in advance.

<sup>19</sup>M. Dibelius, "Die Unbedingtheit des Evangeliums und die Bedingtheit der Ethik", *Christliche Welt* 40 (1936): 1103-20, esp. 1107 and 1109; Dibelius, *Geschichtliche und übergeschichtliche Religion im Christentum* (Göttingen, 1925); see on this Blank, "Exegese als theologische Basiswissenschaft", 66-71.

Accordingly, Jesus has to be conceived as being strictly "Jewish"; everything "Hellenistic" has to be removed from him. Apocalyptic, sacramental, and mystical elements are excluded; what remains is a strictly "eschatological" prophet, who actually proclaims nothing of substance at all, but only calls "eschatologically" in watchfulness for the wholly other, for the transcendent, which he sets before men as a challenge in the form of expectation of the imminent end of the world. Two tasks arose for exegesis from this point of view: it must explain how we got from the unmessianic, unapocalyptic, prophetic Jesus to the apocalyptic community that worshiped him as Messiah; to a community in which Jewish eschatology, Stoic philosophy, and mystery religions were joined together into a syncretistic phenomenon—that, in fact, is how Bultmann describes primitive Christianity.<sup>20</sup> The second task consists of relating Jesus' original message to Christian life today, thereby making it possible to "understand" his call.

The first task was easy to accomplish in principle in accordance with the scheme of development, even though in detail it required the application of a high level of learning. The productive factor responsible for the contents of the New Testament is seen, not in particular people, but in the collective entity, the "community". Romantic ideas about "the people" and the people's way of shaping traditions play an important role here.<sup>21</sup> Besides that, there is the Hellenization theory and recourse to the history of religions school of thought. In this connection, the work of Gunkel and of

<sup>20</sup>Cf. R. Bultmann, *Urchristentum*, 2nd ed. (Zürich, 1954) [trans. as *Primitive Christianity* (London, 1960)]; cf. Blank, "Exegese als theologische Basiswissenschaft", 172ff.

<sup>21</sup>Cf. Blank, "Exegese als theologische Basiswissenschaft", 111, 175.

Bousset retained decisive importance.<sup>22</sup> The second task was more difficult. Bultmann approached it with his theory of demythologization, although he was not nearly so successful here as he was with his theories on form and development. If we were to characterize somewhat roughly Bultmann's way of appropriating Jesus' message today, we might say that the Marburg scholar posited a correspondence between the unapocalyptic prophetic element and fundamental ideas of the early Heidegger. Being a Christian, in Jesus' sense, then substantially coincides with that way of living in openness and watchfulness that is described in Heidegger. The question inevitably arose whether one could not arrive at such general and largely formal statements by some easier way.<sup>23</sup>

But what interests us here is not Bultmann the systematic theologian, whose influence came in any case to an abrupt end with the rising tide of Marxism. Here we are concerned with Bultmann the exegete, who for his part accounts for a basic consensus on the methodology of academic exegesis that is still operative. It has become apparent, in our analysis, that Bultmann the exegete is also a systematic theologian and that his exegetical results are not the product of historical perception but arise from a network of preliminary systematic choices. Karl Barth was correct in observing that "Bultmann is an exegete. But I do not think that one can discuss anything with him in exegetical terms, because he is at the same time a systematic theologian of such dimensions that one could hardly deal

<sup>22</sup> Cf. W. Klatt, *Hermann Gunkel—Zu seiner Theologie der Religionsgeschichte und zur Entstehung der formgeschichtliche Methode* (1969).

<sup>23</sup> Cf. the questions posed in the debate about demythologizing. The most important contributions to this discussion have been brought together in the five volumes of *Kerygma und Mythos*, ed. H. W. Bartsch (Hamburg, 1948-1955).

with any text, without certain axioms of his thought becoming immediately apparent, with absolutely everything being decided by the question of their validity."<sup>24</sup>

#### b. *The Philosophical Origins of the Method*

At this point the question arises of why, for Dibelius and Bultmann, their essential categories of judgment—pure form, the oppositions between Semitic and Greek, cultic and prophetic, apocalyptic and eschatological, and so on—were so convincing that they believed they had before them, in its purity, the instrument for obtaining historical knowledge. Why is this network of categories, by and large, assumed and applied unquestioningly even today? Most of them have in the meantime become a simple academic certainty, which precedes any detailed research and appears to be legitimized by its matter-of-course application. Yet what about those who founded the method? Certainly, Dibelius and Bultmann were already part of a tradition; we have already referred to their dependence on Gunkel and Bousset.

Yet what thinking guided them in this process? With this question, the self-criticism of the historical method passes into a self-criticism of historical reason, without which our analysis would get stuck in superficialities. First, we may say that in the history of religions school of thought, the evolutionary model was transferred to the analysis of biblical texts. This was an attempt to apply the methods and models of natural science in the realm of history as well. Bultmann understood this idea more generally, by attributing to the

<sup>24</sup> K. Barth, *Kirchliche Dogmatik* III, 2 (1959), 534; quoted here by Blank, "Exegese als theologische Basiswissenschaft", 148.

so-called world view of natural science a kind of dogmatic character. Thus, for him, the non-historical character of the miracle stories, for instance, was now beyond question; one only needed to explain how miracle stories came about. This conception of the world view of natural science was, on the one hand, vague and not well thought out; on the other hand, it offered an absolute standard for what could have happened and for what only had to be explained in its development. In the latter category belonged everything that does not happen in the average person's experience today.<sup>25</sup>

There could have been what there always is, and therefore, for everything else, historical processes had to be discovered, the reconstruction of which became the true task of exegesis.

I think we have to go another step farther, however, in order to understand the fundamental, systematic decision that produced the individual categories for judgment. The real philosophical presupposition of the whole system seems to me to lie in the change in philosophy brought about by Kant. After that, the voice of being in itself cannot be heard by man; he can hear it only indirectly in the postulates of practical reason, which have remained, so to speak, the narrow crack through which man makes contact with what is real, with his own eternal determination. For the rest, he has to limit himself, for the content of his rational activity,

<sup>25</sup> Some brilliant analyses on this subject are found in P. Berger, *A Rumor of Angels: Modern Society and the Rediscovery of the Supernatural* (New York, 1969). Just one quotation here: "The present, however, remains strangely immune from relativization. In other words, the New Testament writers are seen as afflicted with a false consciousness rooted in their time, but the contemporary analyst takes the consciousness of his time as an unmixer intellectual blessing. The electricity- and radio-users are placed intellectually above the Apostle Paul" (p. 58; Berger's italics). On the question of world view, there are some important considerations in H. Gese, *Zur biblischen Theologie* (Munich, 1977), 202-22.

to the realm of the categorical. From this comes the restriction to what is positive, what is empirical, to the "exact" sciences, in which by definition what is entirely different, the wholly other, a new beginning on another plane cannot occur. Translated into theological terms, this means that revelation has to withdraw into the pure formality of the "eschatological" attitude, which corresponds to the Kantian gap.<sup>26</sup> For the rest, however, it has to "explain" everything: What might otherwise appear as direct proclamation from the divine can only be myth, whose laws of development can be discovered. It is on the basis of this fundamental conviction that Bultmann—and with him, the greater number of modern exegetes—read the Bible. This is a conviction that things cannot have happened the way they are related in the Bible, and it finds methods by which we may expose what must have happened in reality. To that extent, modern exegesis presents a *reductio historiae in philosophiam*, a reduction of history to philosophy and by philosophy.

The real question is therefore this: Can we read the Bible differently?—Or, more correctly: Do we have to agree with the philosophy that makes this kind of reading obligatory? The debate about modern exegesis is, at heart, not a debate among historians, but a philosophical debate. Only in this way can it be carried on correctly; otherwise, it remains a battle in the fog. In this respect, the exegetical question is identical with the contemporary dispute about basic principles in general. Such a dispute cannot be carried on casually or won with a couple of suggestions. It demands, as I said, the

<sup>26</sup> Cf. Blank, "Exegese als theologische Basiswissenschaft", 137: "The non-historical nature of the miracle-stories was for him [= Bultmann] beyond question." On the background in Kantian philosophy and a criticism of it, see J. Zöhrer, *Der Glaube an die Freiheit und der historische Jesus: Eine Untersuchung der Philosophie Karl Jaspers' unter christologischem Aspekt* (Frankfurt, 1986).

considered and critical dedication of an entire generation. Nor can it simply retreat to the Middle Ages or to the Fathers, setting them in opposition to the spirit of modern times. And yet it cannot, on the other hand, renounce the insights of the great believers of all ages, either, and act as if the history of thought only seriously began with Kant. In my view, the more recent debate about the problem of biblical hermeneutics to a large extent suffers from this restriction of its horizons. Patristic exegesis cannot be dismissed by labeling it "allegorical", nor can the philosophy of the Middle Ages be dispensed with by categorizing it as "precritical".

### 3. Some Basic Elements of a New Synthesis

After pointing out the task of a self-criticism of the historical method, we are now confronted by the positive task of associating its instruments with a better philosophy, one that contains fewer preset requirements alien to the text, one that is less arbitrary and offers more presuppositions in favor of a real listening to the text. This positive endeavor is, no doubt, even more difficult than the critical one. I should like simply to try, at the end of my reflections, to cut a couple of paths into the thicket, which may perhaps suggest how and where we may find our way here.

1. In the dispute over theological method in his time, Gregory of Nyssa urged the theological rationalist, Eunomius, not to confuse theology with physiology (*θεολογείν* is not *φυσιολογείν*).<sup>27</sup> "The mystery of theology is one thing,

<sup>27</sup> Gregory of Nyssa, *Contra Eunomium* 10, ed. W. Jaeger, 227, 26 (PG 45, 828C); see also *Hom., 11 in Cant.*, PG 44, 1013. C. E. Kästner, *Stundentrommel*,

and the science of nature another", he says. You cannot, he says, "enclose within a child's hand, as it were, the uncompressible nature of God". Gregory is alluding thereby to a famous saying of Zeno, "The open hand is perception, the closing hand is intellectual assent, the hand completely closed upon the object is the judgment of the understanding, the hand clasped by the other hand is systematic science."<sup>28</sup> Modern exegesis, as we have seen, has relegated God to the wholly incomprehensible, other-worldly, and, thereby, forever ineffable, but only so as then to be able to treat the text of the Bible itself as something entirely worldly, following methods from natural science. It practices *φυσιολογείν* toward the text; it lays claim, as "critical" scholarship, to a precision and a certainty similar to those of natural science.

This claim is false, because it is based on a failure to recognize the dynamics and the depth of the word. Only when we take from it its own character as word and forcibly stretch it on the framework of a few fundamental hypotheses are we able to subject it to such exact rules. In this connection, R. Guardini talked about the false certainty of modern interpretation, "which has produced the most significant isolated results but has lost its proper subject and has thereby ceased to be theology at all!"<sup>29</sup> In contrast, a

<sup>17</sup>, expresses it quite similarly: "... anyone can feel it: science and the results of research fall away, in comparison with what those wood-carvers thought out unscientifically. The gains have been obtained fraudulently and are meager. The organ used by those others who were searching was the more noble of the two: an eye—whereas historical research is only something for grasping. It wants to 'grasp' things; it says so itself."

<sup>28</sup> That is how H. U. von Balhassar expresses it, in his introduction to Gregory von Nyssa, *Der versiegelte Quell: Auslegung des Hören Liedes*, 3rd ed. (Einsiedeln, 1984), 17.

<sup>29</sup> R. Guardini, *Das Christusbild der paulinischen und johanneischen Schriften*, 2nd ed. (Würzburg, 1961), 14. The reflections about methodology that Guardini

marvelous saying by Gregory of Nyssa remains a valid signpost: "These trembling and twinkling lights of the divine word are stars that sparkle over the eyes of the soul. . . . But now, let what we hear about Elijah happen to our soul, too, let our senses, too, be snatched up into the fiery chariot. . . . then we would not have to give up hope of drawing near to these stars—to the divine thoughts, I mean."<sup>30</sup> Thus the word should not be discussed with just any kind of enthusiasm; but preparation must be required to open up the inner dynamics of the word, and that can only be carried on through a sympathetic understanding, a readiness to experience something new, to be taken along on a new path. It is not the closed hand that is required, but the open eye. . . .

2. Accordingly, the exegete must not approach the interpretation of the text with a ready-made philosophy or with the dictates of a so-called modern or "scientific" world view, which predetermines what may and may not be. He must not exclude, a priori, the possibility that God could speak, as himself, in human words in the world; he must not exclude the possibility that God, as himself, could act in and enter into history—however improbable this may seem to him.

develops on pp. 7-15 of this book are, in my opinion, among the most important yet expressed on the problem of method in the interpretation of Scripture. Guardini had already commented at length on these problems, in the early part of his career, in the article: "Heilige Schrift und Glaubenswissenschaft", *Die Schildgenossen* 8 (1928): 24-57. M. Theobald offers a critical discussion of Guardini's exegetical theory and practice in "Die Autonomie der historischen Kritik—Ausdruck des Unglaubens oder theologische Notwendigkeit? Zur Schriftauslegung Guardinis", in *Auslegung des Glaubens: Zur Hermeneutik christlicher Existenz*, ed. L. Honnefelder and M. Lutz-Bachmann, 21-45 (Berlin-Hildesheim 1987).

<sup>30</sup> Gregory of Nyssa, *Hom: 10 in cant.*, PG 44, 980B-C. In W. Jaeger's edition, ed. H. Langerbeck (Leiden, 1960), VI, 295, 5-296, 3. In H. U. von Balthasar's German translation (cf. n. 28 above), 78.

He must be ready to let himself be taught by the phenomenon itself. He must be ready to accept that this may occur in history: a real beginning, which cannot as such be derived from what was already given, but opens up from itself.<sup>31</sup> Nor may he deny to man the capacity to hear things beyond the range of the categories of pure reason, the ability to transcend himself into the open and infinite truth of being.

The problem confronting us, which was expressed by Kant with such clarity of perception, had in any case been seen quite clearly by the Fathers and by the great medieval theologians. Thus, Gregory of Nyssa once said, "The creature as a whole is incapable of . . . putting itself outside itself. It remains constantly within itself. Whatever it may see, it sees itself."<sup>32</sup> Thomas Aquinas remarks, in the same sense, that human perception can attain, not to truth in itself, but always a human reality, which does of course lead to the discovery of other truths. In other words, spiritual truths are only ever grasped metaphorically, by means of other things.<sup>33</sup> What is, however, characteristic of the great theologians is that they never make this, their philosophical conviction, into a yardstick by which to tell what may be true in the biblical accounts; rather, they expand their thinking on the basis of the phenomenon of the biblical word as they encounter it.

Gregory of Nyssa does this in two ways: Man, who finds himself imprisoned in the dungeon of his creaturely being

<sup>31</sup> Cf. Guardini, *Christusbild*, II.

<sup>32</sup> Von Balthasar, introduction to Gregor von Nyssa, *Der versiegelte Quell*, 16; cf. von Balthasar, *Presence and Thought: An Essay on the Religious Philosophy of Gregory of Nyssa*, trans. Mark Sebanc (Communio Book; San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1995).

<sup>33</sup> *Summa theol.* I, q. 88, art. 1 resp.; cf. q. 84, art. 7; see also q. 13, art. 6. On this point, see M. Arias-Reyero's important study, *Thomas von Aquin als Exeget* (Einsiedeln, 1971), 176 and 204, on which I rely in what follows.

and perceptions, bears within himself nonetheless the longing to break out and carries in himself the pointer toward unending love. And it is just here that God shows himself within man's own self. He himself is a mirror of God, and whenever he perceives himself completely, he perceives more than himself: the reflection of the pure light within him. Man cannot in fact transcend himself, but God can enter into him. In the dynamic of his being, man can at the same time go beyond himself, he becomes more like God, and resemblance is knowledge—we know what we are, no more and no less. With this comes a second idea in Gregory: this entering of God into man took a historical form in the Incarnation. The individual human monads are forced open in the new agent, the new Adam. God wounds the soul—the Son is thus wounded, and we are thereby laid open. The new agent, the Adam who is becoming one in the Church, is in touch with the Son and, thus, with the threefold God himself, from within.<sup>34</sup> Thomas Aquinas framed these two ideas in metaphysical terms in the principles of analogy and participation and thus made possible an open philosophy, which is able to accept the biblical phenomenon in all its radicalism. We need to think further in the direction of an open philosophy of that kind today, in contrast to the dogmatism of a world view supposedly based on natural science, in order to rediscover the presuppositions for an understanding of the Bible.<sup>35</sup>

3. Accordingly, the relationship between event and word must be seen in a new light. For Dibelius, Bultmann, and the mainstream of modern exegetics, the event is something

<sup>34</sup> Von Balthasar, introduction to Gregor von Nyssa, *Der verstiegene Quell*, 10–24.

<sup>35</sup> There is a wealth of material on this in Arias, *Thomas von Aquin*, esp. pp. 192–206.

irrational; it lies in the realm of sheer facticity, which is made up of chance and necessity. The fact, then, as such, cannot be a vehicle of meaning. Meaning lies only in the word, and when events themselves seem to be vehicles of meaning, they must be regarded as illustrations of the word and as referring back to it. Judgments resulting from this starting point are indeed to a large degree convincing to people nowadays, corresponding to our contemporary structures of plausibility, yet they are by no means necessarily based on the structure of reality itself. They are self-evident only on the presupposition that the methodological principle used in natural science, that everything that occurs can be explained causally, on the basis of purely immanent functional connections, is not only valid as a method, but is true in itself. Then, indeed, there is only "chance and necessity"—nothing else: then we may regard facts simply as *bruta facta*. Yet something that is useful as a methodological principle in natural science is no more than a platitude as a philosophical principle and an absurdity as a theological principle. In this case, if even for the sake of scientific curiosity, experiments must be undertaken with precisely the contrary principle: that something else can also be the case.

Here again, Thomas Aquinas, who sums up the philosophical thinking of more than a millennium and a half, may serve to suggest the opposite kind of model. For him, it is the case that nature, the heavenly bodies, things in general, life, and time follow a course—that is, a movement directed toward a goal. When things have reached their goal, then we can discover the true meaning that lay hidden, so to speak, within them. This meaning, which comes to light at the end of the movement, transcends whatever meaning might be revealed in the individual sections of the course followed. "This new meaning thus presupposes the existence



event into wordlessness—that is, of meaninglessness—in reality deprives the word, too, of its power to communicate meaning, because it is then left standing in a world empty of meaning. This leads to a docetic Christology, in which reality—that is, the concrete bodily existence of Christ and of man in general—is removed from the realm of meaning. With that, the essence of the biblical witness is missed.

b. This kind of dualism, however, also cuts the biblical word off from creation and abolishes the interrelationship of meaning between the Old and New Testaments in favor of a principle of disconnectedness. Whenever the connection between word and event is allowed to drop, there is no longer any unity in Scripture. A New Testament that is separated from the Old is itself abolished, however, because according to its own claim, it exists only through this unity. Hence, the principle of discontinuity must be countered by the principle of the *analogia scripturae* on the basis of the interior claim of the biblical text itself; the mechanistic principle must be countered by a teleological principle.<sup>42</sup> Certainly, texts have to be referred back to their historical setting and interpreted in their historical context. Then, however, in a second process of interpretation, they must also be seen from the perspective of the movement of history as a whole and of Christ as the central event. Only harmony between the two methods results in understanding the Bible. If, in the Fathers and the Middle Ages, the first process of interpretation was largely lacking, and thereby the second one easily fell into arbitrariness, today it is the second we are lacking. The first process is thereby rendered trivial—indeed, here

<sup>42</sup> On the proper understanding of teleology, see R. Spaemann and R. Löw, *Die Frage Wozu? Geschichte und Wiederentdeckung des theologischen Denkens* (Munich and Zürich, 1981).

of a divine providence, the existence of a (salvation-) history that arrives at a goal."<sup>36</sup> God's action thus appears as a principle by which history becomes comprehensible. The unifying principle of the whole of past and present "history, however, the only thing that gives meaning to it, is the historical Christ-event. This also gives the future its unity."<sup>37</sup> "The eras of human history are united by one act"<sup>38</sup>—by the Christ-act; the relationship of man to God is based on this act. "The whole of history, and the whole of Scripture, must be considered on the basis of this act."<sup>39</sup> That means, then, that actions which took place in the Old Testament were based on a future act and can only be properly understood from that perspective. This in turn signifies that word, reality, and history are not divided from one another. "For the word of God brings about what it denotes; on the basis of that word, there can be no division between act and word."<sup>40</sup>

In other words, the event itself may be a "word", corresponding in this way to biblical terminology.<sup>41</sup> Two important basic rules for interpretation follow from that:

a. Word and event must be regarded as equally original, if we wish to remain within the Bible's own perspective. The dualism between word and event, which banishes the

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 85; he gives here extensive references to the writings of Saint Thomas.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 106.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 107.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 102.

<sup>41</sup> On this point, cf. J. Bergmann, H. Lutzmann, and W. H. Schmidt, "dabar", in *Theol. Wörterbuch zum AT*, ed. G. J. Botterweck and H. Ringgren, 2:89-133 (1977); O. Procksch, "λέγω κτλ.", in *ThWNT IV*, esp. 91-97. On the unity of word and reality in Thomas' thought, see Arias, *Thomas von Aquin*, 102, 246f., etc.

too, the denial of any interconnected meaning then leads to methodological arbitrariness. One of the tasks of any appropriate interpretation is that of recognizing the inner self-transcendence of the historical word in question and thereby the inner correctness of rereadings in which the Bible event and meaning are progressively intertwined with one another. Methods can and must be found that correspond to this task. In this sense the exegetical maxim of Thomas Aquinas holds true, "It is the task of the good interpreter to look, not at the words, but at the meaning."<sup>43</sup>

4. In order to show the basis for the self-transcending of individual Scripture passages within the whole and to render the process methodologically accessible, tradition has formulated a second principle, over and above that of being christologically centered: The "christological" view is supplemented by a genuinely "theological" view, in the strict sense of the word.<sup>44</sup> That means that all of what is said in Scripture is human utterance and has to be interpreted as such in the first instance. Yet these human utterances are based on "revelation", that is to say, on being touched by an experience which goes beyond the writer's own inventory of experience. God is speaking through human words, and thus arises the strange incongruity between the concrete words and the One from whom they come. In contemporary theological language, it is customary to call the Bible simply "revelation". That would never have occurred to people in the past. Revelation is a dynamic process between God and man, which consistently becomes reality only in an encounter. The biblical word bears witness to

<sup>43</sup> "Officium est enim boni interpretis non considerare verba, sed sensum." *In Mat.* XXVII, l. no. 2321, ed. R. Cai (Turin and Rome, 1951), 358; cf. Arias, *Thomas von Aquin*, 161.

<sup>44</sup> Cf. Arias, *Thomas von Aquin*, 153-262.

the revelation but does not contain it in such a way that the revelation is completely absorbed in it and could now be put in your pocket like an object. The Bible bears witness to the revelation, and yet the concept of revelation as such goes beyond that. In practical terms, this means that a passage can signify more than its author himself was able to conceive in composing it.<sup>45</sup> That is of course true of great poetic texts, and it is with even stronger reason true of the biblical word. There is a surplus of meaning in an individual text, going beyond its immediate historical setting, and that is why there was the possibility of taking it up in a new historical context and setting it within a wider matrix of signification—the right of "rereading" it.

That is why Scripture as a whole has its own status; it is more than a text pieced together from what the individual authors may have intended to say, each in his own historical setting. We still do not yet possess the whole, even if we have all the constituent parts. Therefore, what M. Buber relates about his work with F. Rosenzweig on their joint translation of the Bible should be valid for interpretation. They paid close attention to the layers of sources that have now been detected, to which they referred with the usual abbreviations. Yet they did not, after all, want to translate individual voices; what was ultimately decisive for them was the concrete entirety of the biblical text, to which they

<sup>45</sup> On this point I must refer to my analysis of the concept of revelation in Bonaventure's thought: J. Ratzinger, *The Theology of History in St. Bonaventure*, trans. Zachary Hayes, O.F.M., 2nd ed. (Chicago: Franciscan Herald Press, 1980) 57-59; and to a few references in my lecture, "Buchstabe und Geist des Zweiten Vatikanums in den Konzilsreden von Kardinal Frings", *Internationale kath. Zeitschrift* 16 (1987): 251-65. See also K. Rahner and J. Ratzinger, *Revelation and Tradition*, trans. W.J. O'Hara (New York: Herder and Herder, 1965), 35-39.

referred with the abbreviation "R". From a technical, exegetical point of view, that ought simply to stand for "redactor". Yet they translated it, for themselves, as "Rabbenu"—our Master. The text as a whole is "our master". In its entirety, it expresses a purpose that goes beyond what we may suppose were the intentions of the individual sources.<sup>46</sup> Interpretation can, of course—and perhaps must—concern itself with J, E, P, and so on, but the ultimate goal of a correct interpretation must be R, that is, to understand the concrete biblical text as a whole that is meaningful in itself.

5. In the past hundred years, exegesis has achieved great things, yet it has also produced great errors, and these have in addition to some extent become academic dogmas, so that to criticize them is judged by many to be sacrilege, especially when this is done by non-exegetes. So great an exegete as H. Schlier warned his colleagues against wasting their time on what is futile.<sup>47</sup> Just recently, J. Gnilka gave this warning a practical application by opposing an exaggerated emphasis on the history of tradition.<sup>48</sup> Along the same lines, I should like to formulate the following desiderata:

a. The time seems to have come for a thorough reconsideration of the methods of exegesis. Scholarly exegesis has to recognize the philosophical element in a series of its fundamental principles, and on that basis it must also reappraise the results that are based on these axioms.

b. Exegesis can no longer be studied in a unilinear, synchronous way, after the fashion of scientific experiments

<sup>46</sup>M. Buber, *Zu einer neuen Verdeutschung der Schrift* (Ölten, 1954), 7f. and 40f.

<sup>47</sup>H. Schlier, "Was heißt Auslegung der Heiligen Schrift?" in *Besinnung auf das Neue Testament: Exegetische Aufsätze und Vorträge II* (Freiburg, 1964), 35-62, here 62; cf. Gnilka, "Biblische Exegese", 14.

<sup>48</sup>Gnilka, "Biblische Exegese", 14.

that depend, not on their history, but solely on the accuracy of the measurements taken. Exegesis must recognize its own character as a historical discipline. Its history is a part of what it is; by critically assigning each of its positions a place in its history as a whole, it will, on the one hand, recognize the relativity of its judgments and, on the other, be better placed to glimpse a real, if always imperfect, understanding of the biblical word.

c. Philosophical and literary methods of study are—and will remain—of decisive importance for correct exegesis. Yet a knowledge of the philosophical implications of the process of interpretation must be part of their actual application, especially in the case of a text that makes this claim. Self-critical study of its own history, by exegesis, must also be a study of the essential philosophical alternatives of human thought. It is not enough, in doing this, to look at the last 150 years. The great outlines of patristic and medieval thought should also be taken into consideration. It is equally imperative to reflect on the fundamental determinations of the Reformation with their determinations for the history of interpretation.

d. At present we do not need any new hypotheses about *Sitz im Leben*, about possible sources, or about associated processes of transmission. We need a critical view of the exegetical landscape already available, so that we may return to the text and distinguish between those hypotheses that can take us farther and those that are useless. Only if these preconditions are fulfilled can there be renewed and fruitful cooperation between exegesis and systematic theology; only in this way can exegesis really be of help in understanding the Bible.

e. Finally, the exegete must recognize that he does not stand on neutral ground above or outside history and the

Church. Such a supposed direct apprehension of the purely historical can only lead to mistaken conclusions. The first requisite for any exegesis is that of taking the Bible as *one* book. If this is done, then exegesis has already taken up a position that cannot follow from purely literary considerations. It has recognized this literature to be the product of a coherent history and this history to be the proper place for an understanding of it. If exegesis wishes to be theology, it must go a step farther: it must recognize that the faith of the Church is the kind of sympathy without which the text remains a closed book. It must recognize this faith as a hermeneutic key, as a locus of understanding that does not do dogmatic violence to the Bible, but offers the only chance we have of allowing it to be itself.

And thereby we have come back to our starting point. The dead ends of the critical method have once more made it clear that any understanding demands someone who understands—the key, without which a text has nothing to say to the present day. Bultmann's great achievement remains that of showing clearly how necessary hermeneutics are, even if he remained trapped in presuppositions that to a large extent invalidate his solutions. Perhaps the problems of current attempts can help us to understand again that faith is in fact the spirit from which the Scriptures were born and, hence, the only door by which we may enter into them.