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FOREWORD

Those familiar with contemporary discussions about hermeneutics will sympathize with Tertullian's sentiment that ". . . arguments about Scripture achieve nothing but a stomach-ache or a headache" (*Prescriptions Against Heretics* 16). Nonetheless, hermeneutics is not only a complicated but also a necessary topic for Christian reflection.

The term "hermeneutic" (from Greek *hermeneuein*, "to interpret") generally designates the theory of the interpretation of texts. Hermeneutics includes but is broader than exegesis. While exegesis seeks to establish the original meaning of the text, hermeneutics is concerned with how understanding bridges the chronological, linguistic, and ideological distances between the original meaning/setting and the contemporary reader.

With apologies to Tertullian, the essays in this issue of *Christian Studies* are technical but not tedious. They are presented not to promote "arguments about Scripture," but to broaden readers' perspectives on the manner in which contemporary Christians understand and apply the ancient texts of Scripture to modern faith and life.

Finally, a special word of recognition is owed Mrs. Denise James for her cheerfulness and competence in preparing the manuscript for publication.

Michael R. Weed, *Editor*

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Hermeneutics Then and Now

James W. Thompson

A fundamental principle of biblical studies has been the conviction that the study of the Scripture can be rescued from arbitrary and sectarian interpretations by applying a scientific method to the text. The handbooks on Bible study describe the basic common-sense methods by which the Bible is read in the same way that any other ancient text is read. To understand Scripture using this scientific method, one faces the formidable task of removing the distance between the ancient writings and our own time. This distance is removed by analyzing texts in their original languages, recognizing that the ancient context illuminates what the writing meant to its original audience, and asking how the original recipients would have understood the passage in question. The task of exegesis, therefore, is to ask what the ancient text meant to its original audience.

One who has been schooled in the modern methods of exegesis is likely to be amazed, if not disturbed, by the ways in which New Testament writers approach their Scriptures, the Old Testament, for the modern scientific approach is foreign to the ancient writer. In this essay I shall focus on the New Testament writer who has delivered a "word of exhortation," which is composed primarily of the interpretation of his Bible. In the context of the modern uncertainty about biblical interpretation, I shall ask if the method of interpretation used by the author of Hebrews offers insight for our own time.

The author of Hebrews does not follow the rules for exegesis laid out in the standard manuals on exegesis. Indeed, he is more acquainted with the interpretive rules of Hillel, Philo, and the Jewish apocalyptists than those which we recognize. Arguments are sometimes based on the silence of Scripture, as in the case of the comments on Melchizedek, who was "without father or mother," according to 7:3. He does not follow many other accepted axioms of exegetical work which are recognized throughout the world. He reads his Bible, not in its original language, but in the Greek translation. Linguistic

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analysis, the establishment of the original text, and attention to the historical context are not among his steps to exegesis. Moreover, he does not accept our modern distinction between what the text meant and what it means, for words spoken long ago in a different setting are quoted as words to the author's own community, and the "today" of the psalm becomes the "today" of the author's community. Thus he does not make our distinction between exegesis, hermeneutics, and exposition. When the author does exegesis, he seldom if ever asks our most basic question: "What did the text mean to its original recipients?"

Many people today recognize the chasm separating the hermeneutics of this author and other New Testament writers from our own interpretation with some discomfort, for the natural conclusion is that our approach represents a great advance over more primitive exegetical methods. The exegetical practice of all New Testament writers belongs to a different world from our own, for it is axiomatic to us that the meaning of a text is to be determined by its earliest form. Exegesis and scholarly papers rule out as inappropriate the attempts to move beyond what the text *meant* to what it means.

As much as questions are raised about the viability of Stendahl's distinction between what it meant and what it means,[1] we rigorously hold to the distinction. The departments of New Testament and Old Testament ask what texts meant in their original setting, while what they mean is left to courses in hermeneutics and homiletics. The characteristic of commentaries since the eighteenth century has been to limit the text to the original meaning of the words. In its worst forms, historical exegesis has left us thinking that the task of understanding is complete when the philological work is done on the text. We therefore conclude that the hermeneutics of the ancient writers represents a primitive stage in the history of hermeneutics, and that our own methods of reading ancient texts is the culmination in the development of a theological discipline.

The Limits of Historical Criticism

As advanced as our own scientific approach to ancient texts may be, our exegetical practice leaves us in a serious dilemma within the church and the graduate school of religion or seminary. The preacher

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is most likely to experience the dilemma when he faces the congregation. Frederick Buechner describes the scene:

> The preacher pulls the little cord that turns on the lectern light and deals out his note cards like a riverboat gambler. The stakes have never been higher. Two minutes from now he may have lost his listeners completely to their own thoughts, but at this minute he has them in the palm of his hand. [2]

The preacher discovers immediately, in Fosdick's words, that "no one cares about the Jebusites."[3] Exercises in ancient history and archaeology, which are necessary for the exegetical task, are likely to be far less helpful to others than to us. Congregations care very little about the layers of tradition in a prophetic oracle or the various disputes about the dating of the book. In this moment the preacher faces the problem which Leander Keck describes in *The Bible in the Pulpit* and James Smart described several decades ago in *The Strange Silence of the Bible in the Church*. Leander Keck attributes much of the malaise in biblical preaching to the preacher's difficulty in moving from historical exegesis to the sermon.[4]

The path from exegesis to sermon becomes territory that is difficult to cross because it is much easier to tell what a text meant than to tell what it means. Few courses prepare the preacher to move from the critical commentary to a word for the congregation that is "living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword."

The Heritage of the Enlightenment

The difficult path from exegesis to preaching is a consequence of the impact of the Enlightenment and its insistence that exegesis must concern itself only with the points originally made by the ancient author. Prior to the Enlightenment, exegetes and commentators did not exclude hermeneutical and homiletical concerns from their work, for they wrote on behalf of believing communities. The new approach to the interpretation of Scripture is indicated in H.A.W. Meyer's introduction to his magisterial commentary series. Meyer writes,

> The area of dogmatics and philosophy is to remain off

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> limits for a commentary. For to ascertain the meaning the author intended to convey by his words, impartially and historicogrammatically—that is the duty of the exegete. How the meaning so ascertained stands in relation to the teachings of philosophy, to what extent it agrees with the dogmas of the church or with the views of its theologians, in what way the dogmatician is to make use of it in the interest of his science—to the exegete as an exegete, all that is a matter of no concern.[5]

The advantages of Meyer's commitment to the study of Scripture, free of dogma and church tradition, are undeniable. This freedom from ecclesiastical dogma ultimately allowed scholars from many traditions to work with the same methods of exegesis. However, the liberation from church dogma which allowed for ecumenical scholarship also produced a scholarly tradition which operated independently of the concerns of the believing communities. One of the results of the triumph of historical criticism, according to James Sanders, is that the Bible ceased to be the property of the church and became the property of the university. "Scholarship subsequent to the Reformation," he writes, "has so focused on the original historical meanings that it has nearly decanonized the Bible."[6] He continues,

> One of the results of the Reformation was to break the chains that bound the Bible to the church lectern and give the Bible to the people. In the course of Protestant scholarship of biblical criticism, the Bible never reached the people but became as firmly bound to the scholar's study as it ever had been to the church lectern. Biblical criticism made the Bible into an archaeological tell which only the experts could dig.[7]

If research in biblical studies has become the property of the academy and not of the church, this development is a consequence of the origins of historical exegesis in the Enlightenment. Exegesis became an academic discipline, and the scientific method became dominant in the study of Scripture. With this scientific method, the study of the Bible took its place among the other disciplines in which the objectivity of the scholar was the prerequisite for study. The only

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meanings now acceptable were those which could be attained through the methods of historical study.[8]

For some practitioners of the method, the freedom from the church also meant that the interpreter approached his text as if nothing were at stake. Texts which were originally canonized because of their life-giving power now became decanonized within the scholarly guild. Graham Hughes quotes a statement from K.H. Miskotte, in *When the Gods are Silent,* in which Miskotte says,

> For later generations of Christians than ours it will be almost incomprehensible that academic scholarship was capable of reducing the sacral narrative . . .to little stories which mean nothing whatsoever to us in our existence, which affect us less than the Greek or Teutonic myths and contain less wisdom than Grimm's fairy tales. [9]

Daniel Harrington has made a similar criticism when he says that the weakness of the historical-critical method is that it does not tell people what they want to know or anything that would be useful to know.[10] It has only answered the questions which have been raised within the academic guild.

Despite the limitations of the historical-critical method, its benefits have been numerous, and no serious student can forgo what has developed since the eighteenth century.[11] Its focus on historical context and philological analysis are indispensable to biblical studies, and its rigorous demand that we ask what texts meant has been beneficial to the advance in our understanding of Scripture. Nevertheless the modern reader must ask if a text has been understood when one answers only the questions raised by historical exegesis. K. Barth raised this issue in the introduction to his commentary on Romans. He writes: "I have been accused of being the enemy of historical criticism."[12] He then says that, although he sees the necessity of historical criticism, the historical and philological analysis of the text is only an initial stage in the task of interpretation. Barth adds, "The critical historian needs to be more critical."[13] Barth challenges the academic establishment when he says,

> I cannot prevent myself asking what comment and interpretation really mean. Have men like Lietzman never

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> seriously put this question to themselves? Can scientific investigation ever really triumph so long as men refuse to busy themselves with this question, or so long as they are content to engage themselves with amazing energy upon the work of interpretation with the most superficial understanding of what interpretation really is? [14]

True interpretation, according to Barth, was not limited to the explanation of texts on the basis of their background. The biblical texts, he claims, are documents which "compel men to speak at whatever cost, because they find in them that which urgently and finally concerns the marrow of human civilization." [15] David Steinmetz has also suggested that the problem of historical criticism is that it is insufficiently critical. He writes

> Until the historical-critical method becomes critical of its own theological foundations and develops a hermeneutical theory adequate to the nature of the text it is interpreting, it will remain restricted—as it deserves to be—to the guild and the academy, where the questions of truth can endlessly be deferred. [16]

To be more critical in the study of biblical texts is to interpret them in the full recognition of the claims which they make and the subject matter to which they direct us. These texts have as their subject matter the "strange new world of God," and they summon believing communities to respond to his call. These texts were preserved because of their capacity to give life to believing communities. To interpret them, therefore, is not to come to them only with our own questions, as if they were the only legitimate ones, but to be open to what they claim about us, our world, and the transcendence we learn from these texts. [17] Recent scholars have suggested that the hermeneutics of the biblical writers, far from being naive in its approach, can actually be paradigmatic for our own interpretation. A consistent theme in the work of James Sanders has been the importance of the hermeneutics of the biblical writers. Sanders shows that the meaning of authoritative traditions was never limited to the original contexts. Successive generations returned to these texts for illumination on their own situation, asking "Who are we and what are we to do?" Communities, reading these texts to discover the claim of

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God on their lives, found both a word of encouragement and a word of judgment on themselves as they identified with the ancient communities. The Bible, says Sanders, is a veritable textbook of the contemporization of ancient texts which continued to give life.[18]

G. von Rad has shown that Israel's typological way of thinking was the impetus to the constant reappropriation of traditions in her history. Salvific moments of the past pointed toward the future, where the events of creation, exodus, conquest, and installation of the monarchy would be repeated. The New Testament appropriation of ancient traditions was only the continuation of a tradition in which the divine words were never frozen in the past.

> We see how the ancestors of Israel were called by the divine word, and how in obedience to the divine words they wandered thither and yon; we see the promise of great posterity come to fulfillment, and Israel become a people. Then we see this people wandering at God's direction, and we see offices and institutions come into being within it, founded by God's word. In other words, we see this people continually driven, moved about, shaped, reshaped, destroyed, and resurrected through the divine word that ever and again came to it. [19]

Von Rad points out that Israel was never content with a fixed understanding of the past. Rather, a continuing process of reworking is to be observed, one that is never finished but always led to new interpretations. Thus life-giving texts were not limited to their original meanings. They functioned within communities and opened their eyes to the future which God held before them. Hermeneutics was the task of reappropriating the tradition, and it was carried on within the community of faith.

The Hermeneutics of Hebrews

If the hermeneutic of the author of Hebrews is different from our own, it is because the author shares the biblical view that the meaning of traditions is not limited to the points which they originally made. The author invites the community of faith to recognize that, because they are the descendants in faith of the ones who originally heard the ancient words, they too are addressed and

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encouraged by the words of Scripture (cf. 12:5, 25-27).

Hermeneutics, for the author of Hebrews, is the task of everyone who teaches the word of God (cf. 13:7), including the author himself. Indeed, the challenge for the whole community to become teachers of the word of God (5:11-14) and to "exercise the faculties" suggests that the entire church is to be nourished by the continuing power of Scripture. The repeated calls for members to "encourage one another" (3:13) and to find encouragement (6:18) may be an invitation for the entire church to become engaged in the task of hearing what the Scripture says to their own time, and thus to join with the author in giving a "word of exhortation."

At the heart of the hermeneutical task for the author is the conviction that the God who had spoken through the prophets has finally spoken in a son through his life, death, and exaltation, inaugurating the new age. The basic Christian convictions were first spoken by the Lord himself, and then they were attested to by the generation of those who heard him. Thus the author affirms the validity of a Christian confession about the significance of Jesus Christ. On three occasions he indicates that he and his readers share a commitment to this confession (3:1; 4:14; 10:23). This basic conviction is the author's point of orientation as he reads the Scripture. He reads the Bible as one who, in Paul's words, has "turned to the Lord" (cf. 2 Cor. 3:16). Thus the various moments in the history of Israel find their culmination in the event when God spoke in Jesus Christ.

One notes the hermeneutical circle which consists of Scripture, the faith of the church, and the work of the Holy Spirit in the task of interpretation. The faith of the church is to be found in the confession of the saving events of the death and exaltation of Jesus. Interpretation occurs within the community of faith, as the Holy Spirit guides the church in its interpretation (9:8). This hermeneutical circle is the basis for reading the Bible as the book of the church, a word which takes on a new meaning for those who recognize in Jesus Christ the turn of the ages. With the author's hermeneutical achievement, the Bible addresses the church, and the author's "word of exhortation" is nothing less than a contemporizing of the ancient words, for the author confronts his readers with God's words, and not his own.

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As an interpreter for the church who recognizes the continuity of the people of God and God's continuing voice which comes through Scripture, the author of Hebrews is a significant model for the hermeneutical task in the church. By interpreting Scripture within the context of the faith of the church and the presence of the Holy Spirit, the author interprets the Scripture in a spirit which is fully consistent with the nature of the documents. He approaches the texts, not as the objective scientist who stands outside the claims of these texts, but as one who is absolutely open to the claims which they make about God and his summons to the believing community.

The author's Scripture, we have observed, sets before the church the future which continues to await the readers. Consequently the readers identify with the heroic and faithful people of the past who both "inherited the promises" (6:12) and who did "not receive what was promised" (11:13, 39). The community is invited to recognize that it has been preceded by a "great cloud of witnesses" (12:1) to faith, and that one still lives in a world where the promises have not yet been realized and in which "we do not see everything in subjection to him" (2:8). In the meantime, the church faces the future with the insecurity which faces a pilgrim people, and it is asked to live only with a faith in unseen things and a hope for promises which have not yet come to pass. Its only security is the oath of God, which gives the church confidence for the future. Just as ancient words moved Israel to expect the future which God would provide, the hermeneutics of the believing community placed before the church a word which called them to the future which God would provide and models of those who bore witness about the future.

In addition to challenging the readers with the heroic models of endurance, the author's interpretation of Scripture also summons the church to recognize the awesome consequences of trifling with God. Rather than stand over Scripture as a surgeon wielding the knife, the author recognizes in the Old Testament accounts the sword which does surgery on the church. God's final words must be taken seriously, for "how shall we escape if we neglect such a great salvation" (2:3)? The same words which offer hope to the church also offer a word of judgment. Readers are counseled, "Do not refuse him who is speaking" (12:25). To identify with the ancestors in the faith

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is to identify not only with the heroes, but also to identify with those who failed to hold firm until the end. Their Scripture was thus their most relentless critic.

In describing the piercing, penetrating power of the word of God to separate even what we find almost impossible to separate—soul and spirit, joints and marrow—the author also provides the reminder that the Bible offers judgment as well as assurance. To interpret the Bible consistently with its own purpose is to be open to what it reveals about us. Indeed, as Leander Keck has observed, "The Bible is a series of critiques of the communities for which it was written."[20]

> Had the faith of Israel been on target the prophets would not have denounced it. The prophets are a protest against the prevailing faith and life of Israel. In the same way, the New Testament is a critique of early Christianity. This is especially true in Paul's letters. Had the church in Corinth, for example, been developing properly he would not have written his letter to it. The letters of Paul are nothing less (though considerably more) than a trenchant critique of his own churches. [21]

The author of Hebrews is one among many biblical writers who read the Bible as a penetrating judgment on the conduct and the faithlessness of the community. When he contemporizes the ancient text, he invites his readers to identify with those who received a word of judgment. James Sanders, who observes that this hermeneutic is to be found throughout Scripture, appropriately challenges us to follow this hermeneutic method. Sanders says, "Whenever our reading of a biblical passage makes us feel self-righteousness, we can be confident that we have misread it."[22]

In the hermeneutics of Hebrews, Scripture has primarily a parenthetic function. In some instances, the exhortation of Scripture speaks directly to the church (12:5-6). In other instances words of assurance from the past continue to assure the Christians that God continues to be the helper who cares for those who are content with what they have (13:5-6). Indeed, even the theological passages are aimed at providing the weary church with the resources for maintaining its faithfulness (6:18-20; 10:19-39). Descriptions of the heroes of the past are intended to challenge readers to endure when faith can see no assurances on earth.

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In this hermeneutic the author was not content to ask what the ancient words of Scripture said to their original audience, for he faced more urgent issues than the historical ones. A community with "drooping hands and weak knees" needed strength for its journey. The author offered them the resources of their confession (3:1; 4:14; 10:23), interpreted with the ancient words which continued to speak in a new situation. He invited his hearers to participate in the task of hermeneutics (5:11-14). His achievement in hermeneutics is a suitable model of the hermeneutic task, for the church today is nourished when it is challenged to identify with its ancestors in the faith and to recognize that Scripture continues to move us on to a future which God prepares for us, a "city which has foundations, whose maker and builder is God."

The Christian Scholar Today

The Christian scholar today will benefit by the advances in scholarship which have provided new approaches to exegesis. But the author of Hebrews reminds us that the text is not fully understood until it is allowed to speak across the centuries, providing us with a vocabulary, an identity, a word of promise and a word of judgment. The author of Hebrews is a paradigm for hermeneutics within the context of the church. Biblical interpretation ultimately introduces us, in the words of the RSV of Hebrews 4:13, to the "God with whom we have to do."

In an analysis of the hermeneutics of Hebrews, Markus Barth commented,

> We are aware that even conservative modern interpreters of the Old Testament would hardly permit or encourage their students to follow the author's methods. To many it is a disreputable procedure to use the LXX at the expense of the Masoretic text; to read and quote not exactly 'what is written'; to combine different texts into one citation; to introduce other persons as speaking than those mentioned in the Old Testament context; to tear statements out of their context; . . . to use arguments from silence as evidence.

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Then he adds,

> Ever changing 'modern' critics of Hebrews come and go. The Epistle has survived them all. And it is still a living, unique, and indispensable power that draws attention to Israel and the Old Testament, that creates knowledge and understanding of what the king of the Jews and the priest of all the weak is, and that proclaims Christ by saying words of comfort, guidance, encouragement. The witness born to Christ by Hebrews is still clearer, stronger, better than that of all commentaries written about or against it taken together. [23]

When the author of Hebrews offered a "word of encouragement" to a weary community, he became the instrument through which the ancient words could be heard. For the modern church, the words that are "living and active" are not only the words which he recited for his community, but the words of the author of Hebrews as well. This extraordinary work became a part of the canon of Scripture because it gave life to the believing community. His word of encouragement continues to speak to communities of Christians who recognize that Scripture is the source of its own word of encouragement.

NOTES

1. See K. Stendahl, "Biblical Theology," *IDB I*, 419.

2. Frederick Buechner, *Telling the Truth* (New York: Harper, 1977) 23.

3. Harry Emerson Fosdick, "What's the Matter With Preaching?" *Harper's*, July 1928.

4. Leander Keck, *The Bible in the Pulpit* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1978) 20-21.

5. W.G. Kummel, *The New Testament: The History of the Investigation of its Problems* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1970) 111.

6. James Sanders, *Canon and Community* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984) 5.

7. Sanders, 40.

8. G. Hughes, *Hebrews and Hermeneutics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979) 111.

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9. p. 199. Cited in Hughes, 184.

10. Daniel Harrington, "Biblical Hermeneutics in Recent Discussion: New Testament," in *A Guide to Contemporary Hermeneutics,* ed. Donald V. McKim (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986) 16.

11. P. Stuhlmacher, *Historical Criticism and Theological Interpretation of Scripture* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1977) 38.

12. K. Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans* (6th ed.; London: Oxford, 1933) 6.

13. Barth, 8.

14. Barth, 9.

15. Barth, 9.

16. D. Steinmetz, "The Superiority of Precritical Exegesis," in D. McKim, 77.

17. Stuhlmacher, 85.

18. Sanders, 27.

19. G. von Rad, "Typological Interpretation of the Old Testament," in D. McKim, 35.

20. Leander Keck, "The Presence of God Through Scripture," *Lexington Theological Quarterly* X (1975) 12.

21. Keck, 12.

22. Sanders, *IDBS* 407.

23. M. Barth, "The Old Testament in Hebrews," in *Current Issues in New Testament Interpretation,* ed. W. Klassen and Graydon Snyder (New York: Harper, 1962) 78.

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