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HOW NEW IS “NEW HERMENEUTIC”?

Neapolis, the New Town of the Greek colonists of the 6th century B.C., has now become Naples, one of the most ancient cities of the Old Continent. It is the fate of everything “new”, slowly to age and soon to become outdated. The so-called “New” Hermeneutic has now been with us for quite some time. In fact, it would be time to start preparing its *sashtipoorthi*, its sixtieth anniversary, if we go with the commonly accepted view that its first manifesto and official appearance in biblical studies was Karl Barth’s Preface to the second edition of his commentary on Romans, in September 1921. Sixty years is quite a long period in the fast moving world of today. Can a sixty years old movement of ideas still be called “new”? Does not the fact that this label is still in currency simply demonstrate that biblical scholarship moves at a pace markedly slower than the world it lives in? Is not “new hermeneutic” an old lady still playing the coquette when the time has come for her to prepare her will and quit the scene?

I. What is New Hermeneutic?

“Hermeneutic” is not new in the sphere of biblical studies. The old manuals of introduction to the Bible used to carry a chapter on Hermeneutics which dealt with methods of interpretation: knowledge of biblical languages, of the geographical, historical and cultural background of the texts, of the literary forms and their structures. Hermeneutics extended also to the sense the text took in the light of further revelation, and particularly of the Christ event, to the “more-than-literal sense,”¹ variously called typical, spiritual or fuller sense.

1. Cf. R. E. Brown, “Hermeneutics”, in *The Jerome Biblical Commentary*, ed. R. E. Brown, J. A. Fitzmyer and R. E. Murphy, London: Chapman, 1968, vol. 2, pp. 610-619.

In agreement with the etymology of the term, biblical hermeneutic extended to whatever was relevant for the interpretation of the text

“New” Hermeneutic grew out of the awareness of the complexity of the operation called “interpretation.” Interpretation can be the abstract operation that dismantles the thought of an author by a kind of vivisection in which its constitutive elements are isolated and their origin retraced. This operation takes the text as an object and fails to grasp the human subjectivity which is the very life of the text. This is particularly true of religious texts subjected to an exegesis that may be very intelligent but is void of faith and remains extrinsic.

At a time when the approach to the text had begun being enmeshed in technicalities, Schleiermacher introduced the distinction between “explaining”, that belongs to “reasoning” and is a matter of grammatical and rhetorical exposition, and “understanding”, which pertains to “feeling” and is divinatory and creative.² This distinction was acutely felt by K. Barth and forcefully expressed in his Preface to the Epistle to the Romans :

I have nothing whatever today against historical criticism.. My complaint is that recent commentators confine themselves to an interpretation of the text which seems to me to be no commentary at all, but merely the first step towards a commentary. Recent commentaries contain no more than a reconstruction of the text, a rendering of the Greek words and phrases by their precise equivalents, a number of additional notes in which archaeological and philological material is gathered together... Jülicher and Lietzmann...intend quite clearly to press beyond this preliminary work to an understanding of Paul. Now, this involves more than a mere repetition in Greek or in German of what Paul says : it involves the reconsideration of what is set out in the Epistle, until the actual meaning of it is disclosed.. Intelligent comment means that I am driven on till I stand with

2. Schleiermacher started writing notes in 1805. Those pertaining to Hermeneutics were published in vol. VII of the *Sämtliche Werke (Hermeneutik und Kritik : mit besonderer Beziehung auf das Neue Testament*, ed. F. Lucke, Berlin Reimer, 1838). A recent edition of Schleiermacher's notes on Hermeneutics was prepared by H. Kimmerle, *Hermeneutik*, Heidelberg : Karl Winter, 1959. On Schleiermacher and Ernesti (*Institutio interpretis Novi Testamenti*, 1761), see R. E. Palmer, *Hermeneutics. Interpretation Theory in Schleiermacher, Dilthey, Heidegger and Gadamer*, (Evanston : Northwestern University Press, 1969), pp. 85-86, 187,

nothing before me but the enigma of the matter; till the document seems hardly to exist as a document; till I have almost forgotten that I am not its author; till I know the author so well that I allow him to speak in my name and am even able to speak in his name myself... I cannot prevent myself asking what comment and interpretation really mean"³.

The whole thing is summarized in this way by K. Stendahl: if exegesis answers the question: "What did Scripture mean when it was written?", hermeneutics goes beyond to answer the further and more fundamental query: "What does it mean for me today?"⁴

The same distinction between explaining and understanding underlies the words of Pope Paul VI in his address to the members of the Pontifical Biblical Commission on March 14, 1974:

Your work is not limited to explaining old texts, reporting facts in a critical way or going back to the early and original form of a text or sacred page. It is the prime duty of the exegete to present to the people of God the message of revelation, to set forth the meaning of the Word of God in itself and in relation to man today, to give access to the Word, beyond the envelope of semantic signs and cultural syntheses, sometimes far removed from the culture and problems of our time.⁵

Elsewhere in the same message, he had said:

Does not the hermeneutic function, which for about a decade now has won recognition alongside historico-literary exegesis invite the exegete to go beyond the research for the 'pure original text' and remember that it is the Church, a living community that 'actualizes' its message for contemporary man?⁶

There could hardly be a better and more authorized summary of what the new hermeneutic means. There is only one point on which the papal statement can be faulted: even in 1974, the hermeneutical quest had been going on for much more than "about a decade."

3. K. Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans* (tr. from the Sixth Edition by E. C. Hoskyns), London: Oxford University Press, 1968, pp. 6-8.

4. K. Stendahl, art. "Biblical Theology", in *IDB* I, p. 419.

5. See the original text in French in *OR*, 15-3-1974, pp. 1-2; English translation in *Voice of the Church*, May 1974, pp. 681-682.

6. *Ibid.*, p. 681.

II. The "Old" Hermeneutics

If hermeneutics consists basically in the actualisation of the message beyond the "envelope" of a language "far removed from the culture and problems of our time", can it really be so new? Is it not what any reader does, consciously or unconsciously? Actually once the hermeneutic operation is identified as the other side of the exegesis of a text, it appears to be as old as reading and writing and it can easily be traced back to the biblical period itself.

Hermeneutics in the New Testament

In his book on Hermeneutics,^{6a} R. E. Palmer draws our attention to the interesting use of the verb *hermeneuein* in Lk 24, 25-27, in the context of the apparition to the disciples of Emmaus: "Beginning with Moses and the Prophets, he interpreted to them (*diêrmêneusen*) in all the Scriptures the things concerning himself." In this text, Luke describes Jesus as a "hermeneut": he actualizes the Scripture in terms of the new situation of which he is the focal point; he brings out not only what "Moses and the Prophets" could mean in the past of the history of Israel but what they mean presently on the day of the Resurrection. This reinterpretation of the Scriptures in the light of the Christ event is the basic principle of Christian hermeneutics. It was one of the main lines of thrust of the theology of St. Paul⁷ and of the New Testament in general.⁸ It continued to be the basic underlying principle of the Christian reading of the Bible.⁹

6a. R. E. Palmer, *op. cit.*, pp. 23-24.

7. Whereas the previous New Testament scholarship was inclined to explain Pauline theology in terms of Hellenistic influence, the trend now is to insist on the continuity it shows with rabbinism: see the description of this present orientation in E. P. Sanders, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism*, London: SCM Press, 1977, pp. 1-12, and the bibliography surveyed by B. Rigaux, *Saint Paul et ses lettres*, SN 2, Paris: Desclée-De Brouwer, 1962, pp. 175-176.
8. As regards a hermeneutic reflection on the Old Testament as a formative element of the New Testament, see P. Grelot, *L'Achèvement des Écritures. Introduction à la Bible*, Tome III, vol. 5, Paris: Desclée, 1977; pp. 60-65;

A. Diez-Macho, "Deraś y exegesis del Nuevo Testamento", *Sef* 35 (1975), pp. 37-89, and, of course, the suggestive even if overstated thesis of B. Gerhardsson, *Memory and Manuscript. Oral Tradition and Written Transmission in Rabbinic Judaism and Early Christianity*, ASNU 22, Uppsala, 1961, pp. 193-335.

9. See particularly the elaborate studies of H. De Lubac, *Historie et Esprit. L'Intelligence de l'Écriture d'après Origène*, Th. 16, Paris: Aubier, 1950; *Exégèse Médiévale. Les Quatre Sens de l'Écriture*, Th. 41-42.59, Paris: Abugier, 1959, 1961, 1963.

Hebrew Hermeneutics

But what Paul and the New Testament did was nothing new. The Christian way of reading "Moses and the Prophets" continued the process of reinterpretation carried on in Judaism: the Christian reinterpretation and the Jewish midrash belong to a common continuum.

The Targums: Much has been written about the various forms of Jewish hermeneutics in the intertestamental period.¹⁰ The Targums were done on the principle that "he who translates (the Scriptural text quite literally) is a falsifier."¹¹ The Greek translation of the Septuagint has been compared to a Greek Targum having its own hermeneutic dimension.¹² When the LXX tones down the anthropomorphisms of the Hebrew Bible and, for instance, transforms the description of God as Lord of Battles" (cf. Ex 15 : 3) into "the God who brings wars to nought," or when it systematically glosses over the familiar metaphor of God as the "Rock," the Greek version assumes a hermeneutic stance and attempts to adapt to the Greek outlook a message once culled in the Hebrew semantic system.¹³

The Encounter of Judaism and Hellenism: This was but an aspect of a more general phenomenon: the encounter of Judaism and Hellenism. It has been a common assumption of Christian exegesis to set Greek and Hebrew thoughts in contrast.¹⁴ An elaborate study of M. Hengel has shown that, not only in Egypt and in Syria, but in Palestine as well, Judaism and Hellenism lived a close encounter in which conflict and mutual interchange were closely intertwined. The

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10. Cf. P. Patte, *Early Jewish Hermeneutics, in Palestine*, Missoula: Scholars' Press, 1975.
 11. Tos. Meg. 4, 41; Kidd 49a; cf M. McNamara, *The New Testament and the Palestinian Targum to the Pentateuch*, An Bib 27, Rome: PIB, 1966, pp. 40-45; R. Le Déaut, *La Nuit Pascale*, An Bib 22, Rome: PIB, 1963, pp. 58-62; "Un Phénomène spontané de l'Herméneutique Juive Ancienne: Les Targumim," *Bib* 52 (1971), pp. 505-525.
 12. Cf. P. E. Kahle, *The Cairo Geniza*, 2nd ed., London: OUP, 1959, pp. 209-264 and discussion by S. Jellicoe, *The Septuagint and Modern Study*, Oxford: Clarendon, 1968, pp. 314-318; 321-322; C. Buzzetti, *La Parola Tradotta, Aspetti Linguistici, Ermeneutici Teologici della Traduzione della Sacra Scrittura*, Brescia: Morcelliana, 1973, pp. 319-328.
 13. Cf. H. B. Swete, *An Introduction to the Old Testament Greek*, New York: Ktav, 1968 (1° ed. 1902), pp. 325-341.
 14. See references and the vigorous reaction of J. Barr, *The Semantics of Biblical Language*, London: OUP, 1961, pp. 8-20.

revolt of the Maccabees against Antiochus is only an aspect of the story. The Wisdom literature particularly witnesses to a more positive approach in which the issues raised by Greek cosmology, psychology and metaphysics are seriously considered. The cosmic and theological dimensions assumed by the theme of Wisdom in Prov. 8, Job 28 and Sir 24 : 3–9 illustrate the hermeneutic reinterpretation of Israel's key concepts when they met the new horizons of Greek thought.¹⁵ Another example of this "actualization" of the old texts is the second part of The Wisdom of Solomon (Wis 10–19), a reinterpretation of the Exodus traditions from the view point of Israel's encounter with Alexandrian Hellenism. It manifests a rare "willingness to take secular culture seriously and to use it as a catalyst in developing a more universal understanding of divine providence and of human nature"¹⁶ and thus it "presents a new synthesis in a language that the new age would understand,"¹⁷ which is exactly what the "new" hermeneutic purports to do.

The midrash : The second part of Wisdom can be considered as a Greek transposition of the Jewish midrash,¹⁸ a literary form in which the Jewish hermeneutic quest found its most typical expression. The midrash—either *halakah* (pertaining to law and behaviour) or *haggadah* (narrative) is "a work that attempts to make a text of Scripture understandable, useful and relevant for a later generation... The treatment of any given text may be creative or non-creative but the literature as a whole is predominantly creative in its handling of the biblical material." A. G. Wright, who gives this definition,¹⁹ quotes the analysis of R. Bloch who gives as the two primary characteristics of rabbinic midrash, 1. "le rattachement constant à l'Écriture" and 2. "l'adaptation au présent."²⁰ This tension between the normative past of a given text and the newness of the present is indeed at the heart of the hermeneutic operation.

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15. M. Hengel, *Judaism and Hellenism. Studies in their Encounter in Palestine during the Early Hellenistic Period*, Vol. 1, London : SCM, 1974, pp. 153–163.
 16. J. M. Reeve, *Hellenistic Influence on the Book of Wisdom and its Consequences*, An Bib 41, Rome : PIB, 1970, p. 162; cf. C. Larcher, *Études sur le Livre de la Sagesse*, EB, Paris : Gabalda, 1969, pp. 179–236.
 17. A. Di Lella, "Conservative and Progressive Thinking : Sirach and Wisdom," *CBQ* 29 (1966), p. 147.
 18. See discussion in J. M. Reeve, *op. cit.*, pp. 93–95.
 19. A. G. Wright, *The Literary Genere Midrash*, Staten Island : Alba, 1967, p. 74.
 20. R. Bloch, art. "Midrash", in *SDBV* 5, col. 1266, quoted by Wright, *op. cit.*, p. 75.

A particularly obvious type of actualisation of the text is provided by the *midrash peshet*, or commentary of a text in terms of the present situation of the commentator. This genre was particularly popular among the Qumran sectarians.²¹ Thus the *peshet* on Ps 37 : 32-33 :

The wicked watches out for the righteous and seeks to slay him. The Lord will not abandon him into his hand or let him be condemned when he is tried.

Interpreted, this concerns the Wicked Priest who rose up against the Teacher of Righteousness that he might put him to death because he served the truth and the Law, for which reason he laid hands upon him. But God will not *abandon him into his hand and will not let him be condemned when he is tried*. And God will pay him his reward by delivering him into the hand of the violent of the nations, that they may execute upon him the judgments of wickedness.²²

Other types of midrash are more discreet. The midrash of the Passover Haggadah seems just to comment the Exodus story with the help of other Scriptural texts. But the interpretative remarks are, in fact, veiled allusions to the present day persecutions and trials of the people of Israel.²³ The whole tone of the midrash is expressed by the well known statement of the Jewish Paschal *seder* :

In each and every generation, it is a man's duty to regard himself as though he went forth out of Egypt... Not our Fathers only did the Holy One (Blessed be He!) redeem, but us too He redeemed with them... Therefore it is our duty to thank, to praise, to laud..."

There can hardly be a better definition of Hermeneutics—both old and new.

In the Old Testament Texts : This process of reinterpretation and actualization of the text is a constant feature of Hebrew literature and a

21. See Commentary of Habacuq (1QpHab), of Nabum (4QpNah), of Micah (4QpMich), of Zeph (1QpSoph), of Hosea (4QpOs a and b), of Psalms (4QpPs 37, 57, 68) and five commentaries of Is (3Q4; 4QpIs a, b, c, d).

22. Translation of G. Vermes, *The Dead Sea Scrolls in English*, Penguin Books, 1962, p. 242.

23. Cf. Finkelstein, "The Oldest Midrash : Pre-Rabbinic Ideas and Teachings in the Passover Haggadah," *HThR* 31 (1938), pp. 291-317.

constitutive principle of the Old Testament texts themselves. G. von Rad has analysed the "way in which tradition mounts and grows... in the prophetic writings"²⁴ and he remarks that this is not a matter of 'spurious' additions distorting the original meaning but "a sign of the living force with which the old message was handed on and adapted to new situations."²⁵

Thus, for example, the very old prophecy of Balaam was finally even made to refer to the Greeks (Num xxiv, 24). In Isaiah xxiii a few later additions made an earlier oracle against Sidon refer to Tyre. To the Messianic prophecy of Is xi. Iff was added in a later day vs. 10, and it was applied to the Gentile world.²⁶

Others have shown the same hermeneutic interest at work in the development of the psalter. Thus Ps 22, originally an individual lamentation, was reinterpreted as a prophecy of the tragedy and of the restoration of Israel by the addition of vv. 27-31 after the Exile.²⁷ Ps 47, an old procession song on the occasion of a pilgrimage of the tribes, became a meditative song on the universal vocation of Israel by the addition of vv. 8b-9a.²⁸ The development of the scribal attitude and profession in the Persian period corresponds to an intense activity of reinterpretation of the old traditions in the light of the Exilic crisis and of the abortive restoration that followed. The whole work of the Chronicler is a re-reading of the Deuteronomistic history based on the assumption "that you understand the present by understanding the past."²⁹ The Priestly redactor of the Pentateuch belongs to the same movement. In point of fact, the whole codification and first canonisation of the old traditions is governed by that post-exilic attempt to understand the present in the light of the past and the past texts in the light of the present events.

24. G. Von Rad, *Old Testament Theology*, Vol. II : *The Theology of Israel's Prophetic Traditions*, New York : Harper & Row, 1965, p. 46.

25. *Ibid.*

26. G. Von Rad, *op. cit.*, p. 46.

27. Cf. A. Gelin, "Les Quatre Lectures du Psaume XXII", *BVC* 1 (1953), pp. 31-39.

28. Cf. A. Gelin, "La Question des Relectures Bibliques à l'Intérieur d'une Tradition Vivante," in *Sacra Pagina. Miscellanea Biblica Congressus Internationalis de Re Biblica*, BETL 12, Gembloux : Duculot, 1959, pp. 305-309.

29. Cf. J. Goldingay, "The Chronicler as a Theologian", *BTB* 5 (1975), pp. 108-116.

III. The Background of New Hermeneutics

Considering the old story of Bible interpretation, the adept of New Hermeneutics finds himself meditating on the words of Qoheleth:

“Is there anything of which it is said :

‘ See : this is new ’ ?

It has been already in the ages before us” (Eccl 1 : 10)
In his preface to the German edition of De Lubac’s book on Origen, H von Balthazar remarks that the faith in the presence of Christ as Word in the community is not a discovery : it goes back at least to Origen. Does not the very term “new” Hermeneutics constitute an empty boast or, at least, a highly exaggerated claim ? The first chapter of one of the best introductions to Hermeneutics is entitled : An Old Problem is Resumed.³⁰ But why was it resumed ? And how is it that it has come to be recognized as key theological issue ?

It may not be irrelevant first to notice that the New Hermeneutics is largely of German origin and that, outside Germany, it has developed mostly in the United States. In other words, it has developed over against a background of Protestantism and of high technicality.

The link between the present problem of hermeneutics and Protestant thinking is obvious enough. It has been analysed by R. Marlé.³¹ The Protestant tradition of *Scriptura Soia* leaves the believer face to face with a text, a history, a set of representations and concepts which are separated from him by, at least, two thousand years. “Hence inevitably the vertiginous feeling that there is a real chasma to be bridged.”³² In the Catholic tradition, on the contrary, whether it be Roman Catholic, Anglican or Orthodox, the belief in and recourse to a living tradition has not left the reader alone with the bare literality of a text. Liturgy for Eastern Christianity, a living concern for history in Anglicanism, the interplay of hierarchial guidance and of a strong spiritual tradition in Roman Catholicism have played a role of relay between the old text and the present reader. The sacred text does not reach the reader from across the past in splendid isolation and so “the hermeneutic problem could not assume in

30. R. Marlé, *Introduction to Hermeneutics*, (London : Burns & Oates), 1967, p. 11.

31. R. Marlé, *op. cit.*, pp. 106-114.

32. R. Marlé, *op. cit.*, p. 108.

Catholicism the same urgency and the same character it had in Protestantism.”^{32a}

Another aspect of the background over against which modern hermeneutics has grown is the continuously increasing technical complexity of biblical studies. With its formidable apparatus of textual criticism, comparative grammar and philology, reconstitution of the historical background through geography, archeology, papyrology, its recourse to source criticism, tradition criticism and redaction criticism, the present historico-critical method of analysis of the biblical text has grown—or is it degenerated?—into a highly sophisticated machine which only highly trained technicians can handle. The point has even been reached when no technician can control the whole machine: the “biblical scholar” or even the Old Testament or New Testament scholar is looked down upon by the expert in archeology or papyrology with the same kind of patronizing condescension as the general medical practitioner is viewed by the specialist in urology or dermatology. But what can be the use of this huge machinery of biblical research which has become so complex that it can no longer be controlled by man? The Bible has now entered the computer age. Any tool is good when it extends the range of man’s action and penetration. But what of a tool that has become so sophisticated that it starts functioning without reference to man? Is it not the stage reached by biblical scholarship which covers the text with such a haze of technicalities that the message is no longer perceptible? The equipment tends to run for its own sake. The exegetical energies are absorbed in the mere running of the exegetical machine. Long scholarly footnotes intricate accumulation of data, disquisitions on sources and layers of redaction tend to become a mere display of exegetical skill with a very meagre product at the end of the production line.

The remark is frequently made nowadays in reviews on books dealing with structuralism that a formidable technical display of quasi algebraic formulas comes to very pale conclusions. But those who formulate such criticism from the vantage point of their own historico-critical methodology, hardly seem to be aware that their approach to the text often is hardly more productive of meaning.

In a book published in 1973, W. Wink has spoken of the bankruptcy of biblical criticism.³³ The previous year, he had already expressed

32a. R. Marlé, *Ibid.*

33. W. Wink, *The Bible in Human Transformation: Towards a New Paradigm for Biblical Study*, (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1973), p. 1.

himself on this point, in a very articulate manner, on the occasion of a book review published in the *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* :

In the American climate of scientism, NT scholars have increasingly adopted a *wissenschaftliche* style...The Bible was only 'in' if its study involved a scientific methodology. It was not enough that it was a 'humanity'; it had to be a 'science.' Bless God for science and all that, but on the American scene science was itself caught in an ideological trap. In its hankering after the fleshpots of scientism, NT studies have taken on its worst traits.. Would it be too much for a Protestant to plead with Roman Catholics to match their new-found freedom for scientific biblical study with a profound criticism of the manner in which we culture-Protestants have carried it out? Technique need not be disastrous, whether in oil production or redaction criticism. But it must be subordinated—always, in every field, and without exception—to an adequate hermeneutic.³⁴

Barth already had attributed the failure of classical biblical criticism to the same academic positivism :

I myself know what it means year in year out to mount the steps of the pulpit, conscious of the responsibility to understand and to interpret, and longing to fulfil it; and yet, utterly incapable, because at the University I had never been brought beyond that well-known 'Awe in the presence of History' which means in the end no more than that all hope of engaging in the dignity of understanding and interpretation has been surrendered."³⁵

The two reactions are symptomatic. They constitute a vibrant appeal "to achieve a scholarship which feeds our humanity"³⁶ and rely on hermeneutics to reach that goal. But can hermeneutics rescue exegesis from de-humanizing scientism if the situation is as bad as Wink describes it?

IV. An Assessment of New Hermeneutics

The examination of this background may help us to assess the quest for meaning which the New Hermeneutics represents.

34. *CBQ* 34 (1972), pp. 123-124.

35. K. Barth, *op. cit.*, p. 9.

36. W. Wink, *CBQ*, *loc. cit.*, p. 124.

Though it is true that the hermeneutic concern for actualization is as old as reading itself, it would be unfair to deny the originality of New Hermeneutics. While it may not be as "new" as it claims to be, modern interpretation has certainly brought *new insights* to the quest for meaning. The main new element is a better awareness of the *linguistic implications* of the simple act of reading. Whereas the Jewish, patristic and medieval hermeneutics functioned on the principle of the *analogia fidei*, that is, by assuming the old text in the global structure of a dynamic vision of faith, the New Hermeneutics moves along the lines of a linguistic analysis, which, in the case of Heidegger, for instance, may ultimately reach the dimensions of an epistemology and of an ontology. For better or for worse, the New Hermeneutics is therefore more *scientific* than the old one. It is also more *secular*, by nature. It concerns as much the interpretation of Shakespeare or of a Japanese elegy of the Nara period than the canticle of Moses or the Pauline regulations concerning the veiling of women in the Corinthian church.

Because it rests on a more refined linguistic analysis, the New Hermeneutics, prolonged by the application of Structuralism to biblical studies, has brought the *sociological dimensions* of the biblical text into better focus. The meaning of the text does not pass only through the intention of the author but also through the collective linguistic, cultural and sociological structures of an age and of a milieu. And since the reader himself is penetrated and conditioned by his own "language", i.e., through it, by his own environment, the simple operation of reading a text raises the whole question of encounter between generations and cultures, of the possibility and problems of communication across the human varieties, of the one and the many in the human kind. When the text is a biblical text, Bible reading and interpretation carry with them the entire problem of Tradition, i.e., of a continuity and unity and yet of freedom and creativity across ages and continents.

But precisely because of its "scientific" origin, the New Hermeneutics may be inclined to neglect the theological aspects just mentioned. The new quest for meaning *may be weak where the old one was strong* and vice versa. Issued from academic circles and based on a technical linguistic analysis, it may give too little attention to the fact that the whole linguistic transfer implied in reading the old canonical texts is carried over by a community of faith.

It is very attentive to the linguistic *avatars* of the written and spoken word and, in that line and in agreement with a certain Protestant spiritual sensibility, it is articulated as a Theology of the Word. But it

pays very little attention to the *hermeneutic role of the Spirit*,³⁷ already mentioned in Jn 14 :26; 15 :13; 1 Cor 2 :10-14 and richly developed in the Eastern Christian Tradition.

It tends to remain *individualistic* :

We have a 'problem' of private interpretation because we see hermeneutics as a primarily individualistic activity. Under the impact of the dominant liberal ideology of Western society, the insistence of the reformers on the freedom of conscience of the interpreter has led to a view of hermeneutics in which an interpretation is a matter of opinion of the individual and in which one opinion is as good as another. Against this we need to insist that interpretation is not a matter of 'opinion' but of *praxis*. Secondly, the *praxis* which is the end of interpretation is not individual but corporate. In the last analysis, it is the involvement of the interpreter in a community of interpretation, in a community of *praxis*, which makes interpretation a meaningful activity.³⁸

As P. Ricoeur has shown it, one of the abiding results of structuralism will have been to demonstrate that, in the very process of writing, a dynamism of language is brought into play which goes far beyond the intentions of the author. The understanding of the text places in a "semantical space which the text has carved out by severing itself from the mental intention of the author."³⁹ When the text is biblical text, the "semantical space" is a world of faith and so the discussion on *Scriptura Sola* and individual interpretation recoils at the level of hermeneutics. Is the actualization of the text to be done by the modern reader of, say, St. Mark, or by the believing community of today relaying the believing Markan Church? In other words, is the hermeneutic task the responsibility of the Bible reader—or of the

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37. It is significant that the basic collection of studies on *The New Hermeneutic* published by J. M. Robinson—J. B. Code in the Series *New Frontiers in Theology* vol. 2 (New York : Harper & Row, 1964), has two elaborate studies on the theology of the Word of God (G. Ebeling, "Word of God and Hermeneutic," pp. 78-110 and A. N. Wilder, "The Word of God as Address and the Word as Meaning, pp. 198-218) but very few references to the Spirit (if I am not mistaken, only one on p. 83 in a quotation of K. Barth).
38. D. Lochhead, "Hermeneutics and Ideology", *The Ecumenist* 15 (1977), pp. 83-84, quoted by G. T. Montague, "Hermeneutics and the Teaching of Scripture", *CBQ* 41 (1979), p. 12.
39. P. Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory : Discourse and the Surplus of Meaning*, (Fort Worth : Texas Christian University), 1976, pp. 75-76.

Bible scholar—alone? Can it be dissociated from the cult, the thinking, the *praxis* of the believing communities?⁴⁰

This leads us to another shortcoming of the present hermeneutic quest: it is based on an artificial conception of language. It is not only the "intention of the author" that cannot be absolutized as if it existed in a linguistic vacuum; it is the language itself that cannot be reified and pinned like a dead butterfly on the pages of history. A language lives and so do the linguistic expressions and literary productions in which living people express themselves. Exegesis supposes that there is such a thing as the original meaning of a text and hermeneutics takes over that assumption and raises the question of rendering this "original meaning" in terms of today. But all those who have been engaged in Bible translation know the awesome problems lurking behind terms like "original text" or "original meaning." For the Old Testament, the present Massoretic text represents a codification done in the Second Century A.D. under the impact of the scribal revival that followed the fall of Jerusalem in 70. Behind the present standardized massoretic text, there is a history of centuries of reading, interpreting, conscious or unconscious revising. Is the "original sense" to be the most ancient sense that can be traced, a sense that, if we follow Dahood, may go back to pre-biblical Western Semitic thought patterns? Is the "original sense" of the Yahwistic chapters of the Pentateuch the one they had when the Traditions were circulated among the tribes and the various sanctuaries of Israel, or the sense it took when those traditions were first set in writing, presumably at the royal court of Jerusalem. Or is it the sense they took when aggregated in the complex of the Pentateuchal post-exilic redaction, enriched by all the maturation of the prophetic movement and by the terrible Babylonian experience? Is Nathan's oracle to be understood as the "original" pronouncement of the court prophet of the 11th century BC (presumably reduced to 2 Sam 7:11 and 16) or should we rather consider the meaning it took under the reign of Solomon (with the addition of vv. 12-13) or again should we privilege the messianic post-exilic meaning the oracle took in 1 Chr 17?⁴¹ The same problem arises for the Psalms. Is the Psalter to be understood as a Dahoodian quasi Ugaritic psalter? or as the prayer book of the First Temple? Should we rather read it as it was re-interpreted during the Persian period? Or again is the "regulative" psalter to be that of

40. See the challenging paper of F. Dreyfus, "Exégèse en Sorbonne, exégèse en Eglise," *RB* 82 (1975), pp. 321-359.

41. Cf. G. Von Rad, *op. cit.*, p. 46.

the LXX an idea which is not a priori more preposterous than that of making the Second Century massoretic psalter the regulative text ?

These questions are better perceived now. The *Wirkungsgeschichte* makes us aware that the meaning of a text is to be perceived in the way in which it works on successive generations of readers. The French School has developed a method of "relecture" which has been particularly successful in the explanation of the Psalter.⁴² The present day reader is not left alone in front of an old text. He just comes as the last link of a chain of readership which, for better or for worse, through acceptance or rejection, reaction or interaction has effectively given the text its present shape and its present place in the mental structures of the reader. In other words, like the "mass" of Einstein, *the "text" exists only in a continuum of space and time* out of which it cannot be abstracted without being distorted and killed.

V. Conclusion

The New Hermeneutic has fulfilled a useful role by reminding us that biblical interpretation cannot be reduced to an archeological exercise; it is a search for meaning that concerns the man of today. But it is linked with an approach to Scripture which is typical of the Western Academic world and it remains therefore of a limited interest. The redeeming feature is that now the Western academic world is better aware of its limitations as it appears from the new lines of approach which are tried out to go beyond the historico-critical analysis. It would be a pity if those whose background is not Western Protestant Academism were, at this juncture, to forget their patrimony and thereby fail to contribute their specific share to the present quest for meaning.

India particularly may have its role to play. In so far as the traditional forms of exegesis of the Hindu texts have not dichotomized explanation and understanding and move more harmoniously in the space-time continuum of a living tradition, they may present alternative models of interpretation. At any rate, the situation in which the exegete finds himself in the Third World compels him to look for an alternative to the present academic approach to the text. The poverty of means at his disposal may have the salubrious effect of compelling him to go for an "ecological" interpretation, free from the exegetical pollution that fogs a certain amount of modern biblical research.

The challenge of today lies beyond the New Hermeneutics. It is to return to a more integral approach to the text that will again expose the reader to the creative dynamism of the Word of God.

42. Cf. Auvray, "Les Psaumes", in *Introduction à la Bible*. Tome II, *Introduction Critique à l'Ancien Testament*, ed. H. Cazelles, Paris : Desclée, 1973, pp. 509-510.528; J. Becker, *Israel deutet seine Psalmen*, SBS 59, Stuttgart : KBW, 1966,