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8 Stating the Meaning of the Text

Our concern is with the statement to be made by the exegete qua exegete. As in the other functional specialties, so too in interpretation the exegete experiences, understands, judges, and decides. But he does so for a specific purpose. His principal concern is to understand, and the understanding he seeks is, not the understanding of objects, which pertains to the systematics of the second phase, but the understanding of texts, which pertains to the first phase of theology, to theology not as speaking to the present but as listening, as coming to listen to the past.

It is true, of course, that texts are understood in the seven other functional specialties. They are understood in research, but then the aim of the textual critic is to settle, not what was meant, but just what was written. They are understood in history, but then the aim of the historian is to settle, not what one author was intending, but what was going forward in a group or community. They are understood in dialectic, but then the aim is confrontation: interpreters and historians disagree; their disagreement will not be eliminated by further study of the data because it arises from the personal stance and horizon of the interpreters and historians; the purpose of dialectic is to invite the reader to an encounter, a personal encounter, with the originating and traditional and interpreting and history-writing persons of the past in their divergences. As understanding texts is relevant to the dialectic that invites or challenges the theologian to conversion, so too it is relevant to the foundations that objectify the conversion though, of course, objectifying a conversion is one thing and understanding a text is quite another. No less, understanding texts has its importance for the specialty 'doctrines,' but there the theologian's concern is the relation between the community's origins and the decisions it reached in its

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successive identity crises. In like manner, a systematic understanding of objects is something quite different from a commonsense understanding of texts, even though one learns about the objects from the texts. Finally, all this listening to the past and transposing it into the present have no purpose unless one is ready to tell people of today just what it implies for them; and so we have the eighth functional specialty, 'communications,' concerned with the effective presentation, to every individual in every class and culture through all media, of the message deciphered by the exegete.

I have not the slightest objection to the existence of highly gifted individuals that can perform and do so superbly in all eight of these functional specialties. My only concern is that there be recognized that the eight performances consist of eight different sets of operations directed to eight interdependent but distinct ends. This concern is, of course, a concern for method, a concern to obstruct the blind imperialism that selects some of the ends, insists on their importance, and neglects the rest. Accordingly, when I ask about the expression of the meaning of a text by an exegete qua exegete, I am in no wise impugning or deprecating the occurrence or the importance of many other modes of expression. Professor Gadamer has contended that one really grasps the meaning of a text only when one brings its implications to bear upon contemporary living. This, of course, is paralleled by Reinhold Niebuhr's insistence that history is understood in the effort to change it. I have no intention of disputing such views, for they seem to me straightforward applications of Newman's distinction between notional and real apprehension. All I wish to say is that there are distinct theological tasks performed in quite different manners, that the kind of work outlined in the preceding sections only leads to an understanding of the meaning of a text, and that quite distinct operations are to be performed before entering upon the specialty 'communications' and telling people just what the meaning of the text implies in their lives.

Again, Rudolf Bultmann has employed categories derived from the philosophy of Martin Heidegger to express his apprehension of the theology of the New Testament. His procedure imitates that of St Thomas Aquinas, who used Aristotelian categories in his scripture commentaries. I have not the slightest doubt about the propriety of a systematic theology, but the procedures to be employed in developing one are not outlined in an account of hermeneutics as a functional specialty. Similarly, I hold for a doctrinal theology, but I refuse to conclude that the language of the exegete qua exegete is to be that of Denzinger's *Enchiridion* or of theological textbooks. Finally, I believe in a theology of encounter, but I would not confuse theology and religion. Theology reflects on the religion; it promotes the religion; but it does not constitute religious events. I consider religious conversion a presupposition of moving from the first phase to the second, but I hold that that conversion occurs not in the context of doing theology, but in the context of becoming religious. I point out to the exegete that coming to understand himself may be the condition of his understanding the author, his words, and what the author meant. Nonetheless, I conceive that coming to understand himself, not as part of his job as an exegete but as an event of a higher order, an event in his own personal development.

Now we have been narrowing down just what is meant by the expression of the exegete qua exegete, namely, the expression of what you get out of understanding the object, the words, the author, and oneself.

He expresses it to different groups. He expresses his interpretations to his colleagues technically in notes, articles, monographs, commentaries. The expression is technical in the sense that it puts to full use the instruments for investigation provided by research: grammars, lexicons, comparative linguistics, maps, chronologies, handbooks, bibliographies, encyclopedias, and so on. The expression, again, is technical inasmuch as it is functionally related to previous work in the field, summarizing what has been done

and has become accepted, bringing to light the grounds for raising further questions, integrating present results with previous achievement.

Besides speaking to his colleagues, to other exegetes, the exegete will also speak to his pupils, and he must speak to them in a different manner. For notes, articles, monographs, commentaries fail to reveal the kind of work and the amount of work that went into writing them. That revelation only comes in the seminar. It can come to a great degree by working with a director on some project that he has still in process. But I think there is much to be said for the value of an occasional seminar that repeats previous discovery. This is done by selecting some complex and basically convincing monograph, finding in the original sources the clues and trails that led the author to his discoveries, assigning one's students tasks based on these clues and trails so that they may repeat his discoveries. Even though it is only rediscovery, it is an exhilarating experience for students, and also it is well for them in one of their seminars to have been confronted with a finished piece of work and to have understood why and in what sense it was finished.

However, the exegete has to speak not only to his colleagues in his own field and to his pupils but also to the theological community, to exegetes in other fields and to those engaged principally in other functional specialties. Here there are, I suggest, two procedures, one basic and the other supplementary.

The basic procedure I derive from a description by Albert Descamps, now a bishop, of the biblical theologian qua exegete, in a paper entitled 'Reflexions sur la methode en théologie biblique,' *Sacra Pagina*, I, 142 ff. He argued that biblical theology must be as multiple and diverse as are, for the alert exegete, the innumerable biblical authors. So there will be as many biblical theologies as there were inspired authors, and the exegete will aim above all to respect the originality of each of them. He will appear to be happy to proceed slowly, and often he will follow the ways of beginners. His descriptions will convey a feeling for things long past; they will give the reader an

impression of the foreign, the strange, the archaic; his care for genuineness will appear in the choice of a vocabulary as biblical as possible; and he will be careful to avoid any premature transposition to later language, even though that language is approved by a theological tradition. Any general presentation will have to be based on the chronology and the literary history of the biblical books. If possible, it will be genetic in structure; and for this reason questions of date and authenticity, which might be thought secondary in biblical theology, really have a decisive importance. Further, general presentations will not be very general. If they regard the whole bible, they will be limited to some very precise topic. If their object is more complex, they will be confined to some single writing or group of writings. If a biblical theology were to aim at presenting the whole or a very large part of the bible, it could do so only by being content to be as manifold and internally differentiated as some 'general history' of Europe or of the world. It is true, Bishop Descamps admits, that there are those that dream of some sort of short-cut, of a presentation of the divine plan running through the history of the two testaments; and many of them would claim that this is almost the proper function of biblical theology. But he himself is of a contrary opinion. A sketch of the divine plan pertains to biblical theology only in the measure that a historian can feel at home with it; not even the believer reaches the divine plan except through the manifold intentions of the many inspired writers.

The foregoing account of the expression proper to an exegete speaking to the theological community seems to me eminently relevant, sane, and solid. Many perhaps will hesitate to agree with the rejection of general presentations of the divine plan running through scriptural history. But they too will come around, I think, when a distinction is drawn: such general expositions are highly important in the functional specialty 'communications'; but they are not the vehicle by which the exegete communicates his results to the theological community.

It remains, however, that the basic mode of expression just described has to be supplemented. While every theologian has to have some training in exegesis, he cannot become a specialist in all fields; and while the exegete of ancient texts very properly gives an impression of the foreign, the strange, the archaic, his readers cannot be content to leave it at that. They want to know what is meant. This need would seem to be at the root of efforts to portray the Hebrew mind, Hellenism, the spirit of Scholasticism, and so on. But these portraits too easily lead to the emergence of mere occult entities. Unless one oneself is a specialist in the field, one does not know how to qualify their generalities, to correct their simplifications, to avoid mistaken inferences. What is needed is not mere description but explanation. If people were shown how to find in their own experience elements of meaning, how these elements can be assembled into ancient modes of meaning, why in antiquity the elements were assembled in that manner, then they would find themselves in possession of a very precise tool, they would know it in all its suppositions and implications, they could form for themselves an exact notion, and they could check just how well it accounted for the foreign, strange, archaic things presented by the exegetes.

Is this a possible project? I would like to suggest that the section on stages of meaning, on our third day, last Wednesday, offers a beginning. If transcendental method coupled with a few books by Cassirer and Snell could make this beginning on early language, on the development of Greek language, and so on, why might not transcendental method coupled with the at once extensive and precise knowledge of many exegetes in many fields not yield far more? It is a matter not merely of the exegete having the feel for what is being thought in this or that book but of reconstructing the mode of apprehension. I reconstructed the mode of apprehension in primitive language by noting that primitive language rests on insight into sensible presentations, that it doesn't work much from linguistic feedback; that is a later stage. Because it is not using linguistic feedback but just sensible presentations, it is strong in the spatial but weak on

the temporal, it is strong on the specific as distinct from the generic, the objective as opposed to the subjective, possessive pronouns prior to personal pronouns, and, finally, the human as distinct from the divine. These properties of insight and the way insights and language can develop can give you general lines for understanding; a very comprehensive study of early language done by Cassirer gives you clues into understanding it, and if you get exegetes working along this line you could carry the thing much further. Anyway, the benefits would be enormous; not only would the achievements of exegetes be better known and appreciated but also theology as a whole would be rid of the occult entities generated by an inadequately methodical type of investigation and thought. In other words, you would be into explaining these mentalities of different places and times and not merely saying it is the Hebrew mind, or something like that, and not going very much further. That last point, of course, is just a suggestion. But I think something can be done with it.

Question 45: Can you point to an author who has done this more extensively and methodically?

Lonergan: There is Cassirer and Snell, their surveys. Kittel, *The Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, does an awful lot of pinning things down, but it hasn't got this thing systematized, it is descriptive. If you can connect it up with insights, feelings, and so on, to work with the psychology behind the language, explaining why people thought this way and others thought that way, and so on. There can be, of course, even in contemporary languages -- to take an example, I once wrote an article for a French-Canadian monthly, *Relations*, on the Catholic university in the modern world. It was about six columns of a format, Commonweal, America. I had a man whom I taught theology to for three years and a literateur on *Relations* doing the translating. We worked at it for three weeks and I rethought my article so it could be said in French. There is a precision to the French language, an interconnectedness of every phrase, and so on, there

is an absence of the English tendency to be allusive, apocryphal, and so on. French is a perfect instrument for didactic exposition, French prose; English has its advantages in different fields, but you don't write in English that way. If Blondel had written in English, he wouldn't have been attacked as much, because he did have a certain amount of that fluidity which if you bring it into French you are interpreted as meaning much more precise things than you really want to say. Now those differences, well, that's the sort of difference, of course, that has a historical explanation. In France you have the Medieval universities, you have Descartes and the Cartesians, you have the *grand siècle*, and *academie francaise*, all converging towards this highly precise type of language. In other words, what I am saying is that we need, besides this type of thing that Descamps described as the right way for the exegete to speak to his colleagues, there is the need for the colleagues to have some sort of a systematic, explanatory approach towards moving into other areas by some less elaborate process than spending twenty years on Hebrew literature or something.

Question 46: I'm thinking along the lines of symbolic expression and exegesis of symbolic expression, and in what you said earlier it seems to me that that your focus was primarily on exegesis of systematic expressions or a systematic understanding of the author, the words, the objects. But what if the objects are symbolic as intentional objects?

Lonergan: Well, you understand them too. In other words, my presentation is not of systematic thought. I say, if thought is systematic, and insofar as it is systematic, there is not a problem of exegesis. There is no problem of exegesis in Euclid. There may be a problem of learning geometry, but that is a different sort of thing. The type of text I was considering, fundamentally, was the commonsense type; but if it is a matter of understanding the words, it makes no difference whether the words are employed symbolically, you have to understand the symbols then, and so on. This understanding of the object, the words, the author, and oneself are four components, four dimensions of the

understanding, and they arise no matter what you are doing, provided there is a problem of exegesis. The understanding arrived at is not a systematic understanding, it is a commonsense understanding. Understanding the author is moving into the common sense of another place and time, it is not systematic. But what I am speaking of at the end is the need for the development of some system that will enable one to reconstruct the development of mentalities and also their aberrations.

Question 47: I'm wondering on the discussion of judgment, you made the point that one can reach a position where no further relevant questions can be asked, and I was thinking of something like the constitution of a country, say, the constitution of the United States which has a history of interpretation and reinterpretation. Would this not be the kind of document or kind of text that would illustrate a situation where one would have continuous questioning and not an end point to the asking of relevant questions?

Lonergan: Well, interpretation as I have been speaking of it would be understanding what the framers of the constitution meant. But the interpretation of a law is an ongoing process in the development of law, and that is interpretation in a different sense. This ongoing process of reinterpretation is more akin to things like the development of dogma than to scriptural exegesis or understanding St Thomas, and so on. It is one thing to interpret Thomas as I did in the *Gratia Operans* and in *Verbum*, and another thing to change contemporary thinking. One is a historical and interpretative task, and the other is a related task but it is something quite different. Is that meeting your question?

Question 48: Those kind of documents you would say that there are two different frames.

Lonergan: In Betti's work, he distinguishes different kinds of interpretation and one is, he assimilates theological interpretation to juridical interpretation precisely because it is an ongoing process and it is what the law now means, and so on, even though that was not the original meaning.

Question 49: Which is to say: one says this is what this is what the law now means, we have ended the process of relevant questioning at this point.

Loneragan: Relevant questioning, you see, this business of relevant questioning is: you get a precise topic, and this topic is determined by a nest of questions and answers, related questions and answers, and because the topic is limited the nest will be limited. Take the very simple example of judgment in *Insight*. The man leaves his home in the morning, and everything is in perfect shape. He comes back in the evening and the windows are broken, the floor is drenched with water, the air is full of smoke. He doesn't make a rash judgment, there was a fire, it might have been all a fake, but he says, something happened. There are no further relevant questions. The point to this nest of related questions and answers all bearing directly or indirectly on a single topic is the limited field of relevance. That limited field of relevance has to be discovered. Now, with regard to a constitution and an ongoing process of interpretation, well, you have to, in each case, find what your limited topics are; with regard to a constitution, you will have a whole series, and they will be related to one another and build up, and so on. You will have still more with each reinterpretation.

Question 50: What is the relation between interpreting what precisely was done at a constitutional convention, what the meaning of all that was, and the interpretation of the thing as it now stands, where is the relation? What is the relation of an interpretation of the past to an ongoing interpretation?

Loneragan: Well, your situation is changing all along. The original group of states is something quite different from the present group of states of that constitution. The questions that have arisen since: the separation of religion and state, what was meant then? If that is in the constitution, I don't know, or an amendment. But anyway, that separation then, what was meant then and what it means at the present time; you have all this questioning about religious schools, and so on. Well, it was taken for granted then

that all schools were religious. And you have government in education to an enormous extent that was not the case at that time, and so on. All these realities, social realities change. Consequently, the meaning of the constitution in these real situations changes. It is because of this ongoing process that the British Constitution is unwritten, and they like it that way.

Question 51: Does the original interpretation not count?

Lonergan: There are invariants in meaning, and it can be the intention of the constitution to express such invariants, and it remains significantly that; but you can get people changing whole different mentalities. For example, the fact that at the time the constitution was written it was written by people who mostly believed in the existence of God, at least. There are a large number of Americans at the present time who don't, and that makes a difference in outlook and a difference in interpretation. But how far those differences go seems to vary. Again, when you have a group of people drawing up a constitution, it is not quite the problem of interpretation; you are moving into history there. Interpretation is concerned with the meaning of this man saying this. When you have a group doing something, well, it is like a battle. It is an extravagant example. But what each man who takes part in the battle knows about the battle can be very, very little, and even the history of the battle is not the plan of the general that won or the general that lost, it is some resultant of the two, depending on a lot of accidents. A good account of the battle is an account of what was going forward. The individual, at any time, does not know the history of his time. History is something you don't know as your own time. Churchill was about as much involved in the Second World War as anyone, and he wrote several volumes on it, but no one thinks that that is a definitive history of the Second World War. The definitive history, insofar as there is ever such a thing, is something that draws on all these sources. Just what that drawing on means we will be discussing tomorrow.

Question 52: To put that question in the context of scripture, would the exegesis of scripture be valuable now insofar as the present tradition is judged to be authentic or not? Otherwise, it seems to have merely academic interest. Is the point of this to judge whether the tradition of interpreting is authentic or not?

Lonergan: That isn't a part of exegesis, that is a part of doctrines, and insofar as you start applying it to concrete people it is part of communications. The point of separating eight functional specialties is precisely to keep the exegete at exegesis in this strict sense. We want that too, but it is not all that we want.

Question 53: In *Insight* the scheme has been experience, understanding and judging.

Lonergan: We have four levels, and we use one representative of each level but on any level there are several different things. On the second level there is inquiry, understanding, formulation. On the third, reflection, marshaling and weighing the evidence, judging. On the fourth, deliberation, evaluation, decision. We pick one for each of them.

Question 54: My question is the moving of formulation from the pivot between understanding and judging to following upon judging.

Lonergan: Well, the discussion of it follows. But we are thinking of judging in terms of, Are there further relevant insights? The main thing in exegesis which is this development in understanding in the exegete. When has his understanding gotten far enough for him to say: well, now I will start writing. His work is good insofar as he has closely knit contexts of questions and answers.

Question 55: Could you have an interpretation of a statue, and if so would the same procedures be relevant, and also would there be any significant differences from interpreting a text?

Lonergan: The difference would be that the type of understanding that one has in understanding a work of art is a specific kind of understanding, it is of the commonsense

type, an accumulation of insights, but it is insights into what the artist was up to. It is also the capacity for empathy, and so on, it is participation.

Question 56: Can you specify why there is no exegetical problem with Euclid while there is an exegetical problem with Aristotle?

Lonergan: Insofar as Aristotle is systematic there isn't a difficulty. But a philosopher is never purely systematic. And the Gospels, of course, there is a lot of symbolism there and metaphor and parable in their composition, and at what stage is there the Gospel? Or is there a fifth gospel to be constructed by the exegetes, can that really happen? There are all sorts of questions that come up.

Question 57: I understand that your rules here apply to exegesis in general and have nothing really specifically theological about them, and I would certainly want the theologian to observe all the rules, but the theologian, nevertheless, does come with some subjective presuppositions which may influence his work.

Lonergan: They *do* influence his work and that is why it is possible to have a later stage, dialectic, in which the different influences given in the interpretations of the many exegetes come to light.

Question 58: His subjective presuppositions as he comes to interpret may include some notions about authorship, and you seem to have limited interpretation to a literal sense. But a wider notion of authorship may show something more than the literal sense intended by the author.

Lonergan: Well, it is not this second functional specialty, interpretation, it is the ongoing process, the cultural resultant of it. We mentioned it in terms of the tradition which the exegete brings to interpreting the text. The classics form a culture of the people that interpret the classics, and that tradition can be authentic or unauthentic. Consequently, the interpreter has to criticize his tradition, be critical of his tradition and of his education. That is this business of understanding oneself, what is authentic in oneself. One gets to

that through encounter with people who interpret the thing differently; the differences come to light. That is dialectic. The tradition will be an ongoing process. Nicea wasn't solving a problem of exegesis; it was meeting a crisis in the fourth century. It was meeting a crisis of the fourth century in the light of what they saw in scripture, but the question was not an exegetical question, a question that arose out of the text. It wasn't part of the nest of questions and answers that you get from reading the text or that are relevant to pinning down under a single topic a point where you can say: Well, on this topic there aren't further questions.

Question 59: What do you mean by the hermeneutic circle and by the preconceptual getting you out of it?

Lonergan: The hermeneutic circle logically is a circle and, consequently, there is no logical solution to it. But de facto people do arrive, through the parts, at the whole, even though the meaning of the whole determines the precise meaning of the parts. How does that happen? Because it is a process of accumulating insights, each new insight complementing and qualifying and perhaps correcting previous insights. so that not only does one arrive at a satisfactory interpretation; you also arrive at something in which the meaning of each part is qualified by the meaning of other parts and, consequently, by the whole. It is through a process of learning, of increasing understanding that solves the hermeneutic circle. It is solved not by any logical process but by a process of increasing understanding.