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CHAPTER SEVEN

I N T E R P R E T A T I O N

Our concern is with interpretation as a functional specialty. It is related to research, history, dialectic, foundations, doctrines, systematics, and communications. It depends on them and they depend on it. None the less, it has its own proper end and its specific mode of operating. It can be treated separately.<sup>1</sup>

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1) One of the advantages of the notion of functional specialty is precisely this possibility of separate treatment of issues that otherwise become enormously complex. See, for example, such monumental works as Emilio Betti's Teoria generale della interpretazione, Milano: Giuffrè, 1955, and Hans-Georg Gadamer's Wahrheit und Methode, Tübingen: Mohr, 1960. Or see my own discussion of the truth of an interpretation in Insight, pp. 562-594, and observe how ideas presented there recur here in quite different functional specialties. For instance, what there is termed a universal viewpoint, here is realized by advocating a distinct functional specialty named dialectic.

On the historical background of contemporary hermeneutical thought, see H.G. Gadamer, op. cit., pp. 162-250.

I shall follow a common enough terminology and understand by "hermeneutics" principles of interpretation and by "exegesis" the application of the principles to a given task. The task to be envisaged will be the interpretation of a text, but the presentation will be so general that it can be applied to any exegetical task.

First, then, not every text stands in need of exegesis. In general, the more a text is systematic in conception and execution, the less does it stand in need of any exegesis. So Euclid's Elements were composed about twenty-three centuries ago. One has to study to come to understand them, and that labor may be greatly reduced by a competent teacher. But while there is a task of coming to understand Euclid, there is no task of interpreting Euclid. The correct understanding is unique; incorrect understanding can be shown to be mistaken; and so, while there have been endless commentators on the clear and simple gospels, there exists little or no exegetical literature on Euclid.

However, besides the systematic mode of cognitional operations, there is also the commonsense mode. Moreover, there are very many brands of common sense. Common sense is common, not to all men of all places and times, but to the members of a community successfully in communication with one another. Among them one's commonsense statements have a perfectly obvious meaning and stand in no need of any exegesis. But statements may be transported to other communities distant in place or in time. Horizons, values, interests, intellectual

development, experience may differ. Expression may have inter-  
subjective, artistic, symbolic components that appear strange.  
Then there arises the question, What is meant by the sentence,  
the paragraph, the chapter, the book? Many answers seem possible,  
and none seems quite satisfactory.

Such in general is the problem of interpretation. But  
at the present time four factors have combined to heighten it  
enormously. The first is the emergence of world consciousness  
and historical consciousness: we are aware of many very different  
cultures existing at the present time, and we are aware of the  
great differences that separate present from past cultures. The  
second is the pursuit of the human sciences, in which meaning is  
a fundamental category and, consequently, interpretation a  
fundamental task. The third is the confusion that reigns in  
cognitional theory and epistemology: interpretation is just a  
particular case of knowing, namely, knowing what is meant; it  
follows that confusion about knowing leads to confusion about  
interpreting. The fourth factor, finally, is modernity:  
modern man has been busy creating his modern world, freeing  
himself from reliance on tradition and authority, working out  
his own world-view, and so re-interpreting the views held in  
the past. So the Greek and Latin classical authors have been  
removed from the context of Christian humanism and revealed as  
pagans. So the Law has been removed from the context of  
Christian morality and theology to be placed in the context of  
some post-Christian philosophy and attitude to life. So the  
Scriptures have been removed from the context of Christian

doctrinal development and restored to the pre-dogmatic context of the history of religions.

Embedded in the problem of hermeneutics, then, there are quite different and far profounder problems. They are to be met neither by wholesale rejection of modernity nor by wholesale acceptance of modernity. In my opinion, they can be met only by the development and application of theological method. Only in that fashion can one distinguish and keep separate problems of hermeneutics and problems in history, dialectic, foundations, doctrines, systematics, and communications. In fact the most striking feature of much contemporary discussion of hermeneutics is that it attempts to treat all these issues as if they were hermeneutical. They are not.

1. Basic Exegetical Operations →

There are three basic exegetical operations: (1) understanding the text; (2) judging how correct one's understanding of the text is; and (3) stating what one judges to be the correct understanding of the text.

Understanding the text has four main aspects. One understands the object to which the text refers. One understands the words employed in the text. One understands the author that employed the words. One arrives at such understanding through a process of learning and even at times as a result of a conversion. Needless to say, the four aspects are aspects of a single coming to understand.

To judge the correctness of one's understanding of a

text raises the problem of context, of the hermeneutical circle, of the relativity of the totality of relevant data, of the possible relevance of more remote inquiries, of the limitations to be placed on the scope of one's interpretation.

To state what one judges to be the correct understanding of the text raises the question of the precise task of the exegete, of the categories he is to employ, of the language he is to speak.

## 2. Understanding the Object —————>

A distinction has to be drawn between the exegete and the student. Both learn, but what they learn is different. The student reads a text to learn about objects that as yet he does not know. He is required to have learnt the meanings of words and to know about similar or analogous objects that he can use as starting-points in constructing the objects he is to learn about. On the other hand, the exegete may already know all about the objects treated in a text, yet his whole task remains to be performed; for that task is not to know about objects; it is not to know whether or not the text reveals adequate knowledge of the objects; it is simply to know what happened to be the objects, real or imaginary intended by the author of the text.

In practice, of course, the foregoing distinction will imply not a rigid separation of the roles of student and of exegete but rather a difference of emphasis. The student also is something of an interpreter of texts, and the exegete

also learns from texts something that otherwise he would not know. However, though the distinction in practice is only of emphasis, it remains that our present concern is theory and, indeed, not the general learning theory that regards students but the special learning theory that regards exegesis.

I have said that the whole exegetical task remains to be performed even though the exegete already knows all about the objects treated in a text. I must now add that the more the exegete does know about such objects, the better. For he cannot begin to interpret the text unless he knows the language in which it is written and, if he knows that language, then he also knows the objects to which the words in that language refer. Such knowledge, of course, is general and potential. Reading the text, when its meaning is obvious, makes that general knowledge more particular and that potential knowledge actual. On the other hand, when the meaning of the text is not obvious because of this or that defect, still the greater the exegete's resources, the greater the likelihood that he will be able to enumerate all possible interpretations and assign to each its proper measure of probability.

Now the foregoing amounts to a rejection of what may be named the Principle of the Empty Head. According to this principle, if one is not to "read into" the text what is not there, if one is not to settle in a priori fashion what the text must mean no matter what it says, if one is not to drag in one's own notions and opinions, then one must just drop all preconceptions of every kind, attend simply to the text, see all that

is there and nothing that is not there, let the author speak for himself, let the author interpret himself. In brief, the less one knows, the better an exegete one will be.

These contentions, I should say, are both right and wrong. They are right in decrying a well-known evil: interpreters tend to impute to authors opinions that the authors did not express. They are wrong in the remedy they propose, for they take it for granted that all an interpreter has to do is to look at a text and see what is there. That is quite mistaken.

(8) The principle of the empty head rests on a naive intuitionism. So far from tackling the complex task of, first, understanding the object, the words, the author, oneself, secondly, of judging just how correct one's understanding is and, thirdly, of adverting to the problems in expressing one's understanding and judgment, the principle of the empty head bids the interpreter forget his own views, look at what is out there, let the author interpret himself. In fact, what is out there? There is just a series of signs. Anything over and above a re-issue of the same signs in the same order will be mediated by the experience, intelligence, and judgment of the interpreter. The less that experience, the less cultivated that intelligence, the less formed that judgment, the greater the likelihood that the interpreter will impute to the author an opinion that the author never entertained. On the other hand, the wider the interpreter's experience, the deeper and fuller the development of his understanding, the better balanced his judgment, the greater the likelihood that he will discover just what the

author meant. Interpretation is not just a matter of looking at signs. That is imperative. But it is no less imperative that, guided by the signs, one proceed from one's habitual general knowledge to actual and more particular knowledge; and the greater the habitual knowledge one possesses, the greater the likelihood that one will be guided by the signs themselves and not by personal preferences and by guess-work.<sup>2</sup>

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2) In this connection, Rudolf Bultmann has written: "Nothing is sillier than the requirement that an interpreter must silence his subjectivity, extinguish his individuality, if he is to attain objective knowledge. That requirement makes good sense only in so far as it is taken to mean that the interpreter has to silence his personal wishes with regard to the outcome of the interpretation... For the rest, unfortunately, the requirement overlooks the very essence of genuine understanding. Such understanding presupposes precisely the utmost liveliness of the understanding subject and the richest possible development of his individuality". From an article entitled "Das Problem der Hermeneutik", Zschr. f. Theol. u. Kirche, 47(1950), 64. Reprinted in Glauben und Verstehen, II, 230.

With this view I agree as far as it goes. However, I sharply distinguish between understanding and judgment, between the development of the one and the development of the other. Bultmann stands in the Kantian tradition in which Verstand is thought to be the faculty of judgment.



3. Understanding the Words →

Understanding the object accounts for the plain meaning of the text, the meaning that is obvious because both author and interpreter understand the same thing in the same way. However, as in conversation, so too in reading, the author may be speaking of P and the reader may be thinking of Q. In that case, sooner or later, there will arise difficulty. Not every<sup>7</sup> thing true of P will also be true of Q, and so the author will appear to the interpreter to be saying what is false and even absurd.

At this point there comes to light the difference between the interpreter and the controversialist. On his mistaken assumption that the author is speaking of Q, the controversialist sets about his triumphant demonstration of the author's errors and absurdities. But the interpreter considers the possibility that he himself is at fault. He reads further. He rereads. Eventually he stumbles on the possibility that the author was thinking, not of Q, but of P, and with that correction the meaning of the text becomes plain.

Now this process can occur any number of times. It is the self-correcting process of learning. It is the manner in which we acquire and develop common sense. It heads towards a limit in which we possess a habitual core of insights that enables us to deal with any situation, or any text of a group, by adding one or two more insights relevant to the situation or text in hand.

Such commonsense understanding is preconceptual. It is

not to be confused with one's formulation of the meaning of the text that one has come to understand. And this formulation itself is not to be confused with the judgments one makes on the truth of the understanding and formulation. One has to understand if one is to formulate what one has understood. One has to understand and formulate if one is to pass judgment in any explicit fashion.

Moreover, it is understanding that surmounts the hermeneutic circle. The meaning of a text is an intentional entity. It is a unity that is unfolded through parts, sections, chapters, paragraphs, sentences, words. We can grasp the unity, the whole, only through the parts. At the same time the parts are determined in their meaning by the whole which each part partially ~~partially~~ reveals. Such is the hermeneutic circle. Logically it is a circle. But coming to understand is not a logical deduction. It is a self-correcting process of learning that spirals into the meaning of the whole by using each new part to fill out and qualify and correct the understanding reached in reading the earlier parts.

Rules of hermeneutics or exegesis list the points worth considering in one's efforts to arrive at an understanding of the text. Such are an analysis of the composition of the text, the determination of the author's purpose, knowledge of the people for whom he wrote, of the occasion on which he wrote, of the nature of the linguistic, grammatical, stylistic means he employed. However, the main point about all such rules is that one does not understand the text because one has observed the rules but, on the contrary, one observes the rules in order to

arrive at an understanding of the text. Observing the rules can be no more than mere pedantry that leads to an understanding of nothing of any moment or to missing the point entirely. The essential observance is to note one's every failure to understand clearly and exactly and to sustain one's reading and rereading until one's inventiveness or good luck have eliminated one's failures in comprehension.

4. Understanding the Author →

When the meaning of a text is plain, then with the author by his words we understand the object to which his words refer. When a simple misunderstanding arises, as when the author thought of P but the reader of Q, then its correction is the relatively simple matter of sustained rereading and inventiveness. But there can arise the need for a long and arduous use of the self-correcting process of learning. Then a first reading yields a little understanding and a host of puzzles, and a second reading yields only slightly more understanding but far more puzzles. The problem, now, is a matter not of understanding the object or the words but of understanding the author himself, his nation, language, time, culture, way of life, and cast of mind.

Now the self-correcting process of learning is, not only the way in which we acquire our own common sense, but also the way in which we acquire <sup>an</sup> understanding of other people's common sense. Even with our contemporaries with the same language, culture, and station in life, we not only understand things with them but also understand things in our own way and, at the same time, their different way of understanding the same things.

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We can remark that a phrase or an action is "just like you". By that we mean that the phrase or action fits in with the way we understand your way of understanding and going about things. But just as we can come to an understanding of our fellows' understanding, a commonsense grasp of the ways in which we understand not with them but them, so the same process can be pushed to a far fuller development, and then the self-correcting process of learning will bring us to an understanding of the common sense of another place, time, culture, and cast of mind. This is, however, the enormous labor of becoming a scholar.

The phrase, understanding another's common sense, must not be misunderstood. It is not a matter of understanding what common sense is: that is the task of the cognitional theorist. It is not making another's common sense one's own, so that one would go about speaking and acting like a fifth-century Athenian or a first-century Christian. But, just as common sense itself is a matter of understanding what to say and what to do in any of a series of situations that commonly arise, so understanding another's common sense is a matter of understanding what he would say and what he would do in any of the situations that commonly arose in his place and time.

5. Understanding Oneself →

The major texts, the classics, in religion, letters, philosophy, theology, not only are beyond the initial horizon of their interpreters but also may demand an intellectual, moral, religious conversion of the interpreter over and above the broadening of his horizon.

In this case the interpreter's initial knowledge of the object is just inadequate. He will come to know it only in so far as he pushes the self-correcting process of learning to a revolution in his own outlook. He can succeed in acquiring that habitual understanding of an author that spontaneously finds his wave-length and locks on to it, only after he has effected a radical change in himself.

This is the existential dimension of the problem of hermeneutics. It lies at the very root of the perennial divisions of mankind in their views on reality, morality, and religion. Moreover, in so far as conversion is only the basic step, in so far as there remains the labor of thinking out everything from the new and profounder viewpoint, there results the characteristic of the classic set forth by Friedrich Schlegel: "A classic is a writing that is never fully understood. But those ~~who~~ <sup>that</sup> are educated and educate themselves must always want to learn more from it." <sup>3</sup>

From this existential dimension there follows another basic component in the task of hermeneutics. The classics ground a tradition. They create the milieu in which they are studied and interpreted. They produce in the reader through the cultural tradition the mentality, the Vorverständnis, from which they will be read, studied, interpreted. Now such a tradition may be genuine, authentic, a long accumulation of insights, adjustments, re-interpretations, that repeats the

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3) Quoted by H.G. Gadamer, Wahrheit und Methode, Tübingen: Mohr, 1960, p. 274, n. 2.

original message afresh for each age. In that case the reader will exclaim, as did the disciples on the way to Emmaus: "Did not our hearts burn within us, when he spoke on the way and opened to us the scriptures?" (Lk 24, 32). On the other hand, the tradition may be unauthentic. It may consist in a watering-  
 - down of the original message, in recasting it into terms and meanings that fit into the assumptions and convictions of those that have dodged the issue of radical conversion. In that case a genuine interpretation will be met with incredulity and ridicule, as was St. Paul when he preached in Rome and was led to quote Isaiah: "Go to this people and say: you will hear and hear but never understand; you will look and look, but never see" (Acts 28, 26).

At this point one moves from the functional specialty, interpretation, to the functional specialties, history, dialectic, and foundations. If the interpreter is to know, not merely what his author meant, but also what is so, then he has to be critical not merely of his author but also of the tradition that has formed his own mind. With that step he is propelled beyond writing history to making history.

6. Judging the Correctness of One's Interpretation

Such a judgment has the same criterion as any judgment on the correctness of commonsense insights.<sup>4</sup> The criterion is whether or not one's insights are invulnerable, whether or not they hit the bull's eye, whether or not they meet all relevant

4) On commonsense judgments, see Insight, pp. 283-299.

questions so that there are no further questions that can lead to further insights and so complement, qualify, correct the insights already possessed.

The relevant questions usually are not the questions that inspire the investigation. One begins from one's own Fragestellung, from the viewpoint, interests, concerns one had prior to studying the text. But the study of the text is a process of learning. As one learns, one discovers more and more the questions that concerned the author, the issues that confronted him, the problems he was trying to solve, the material and methodical resources at his disposal for solving them. So one comes to set aside one's own initial interests and concerns, to share those of the author, to reconstruct the context of his thought and speech.<sup>5</sup>

But what precisely is meant by the word, context? There are two meanings. There is the heuristic meaning the word has at the beginning of an investigation, and it tells one where to look to find the context. There is the actual meaning the word acquires as one moves out of one's initial horizon and moves to a fuller horizon that includes a significant part of the author's.

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5) My own experience of this change was in writing my doctoral dissertation. I had been brought up a Molinist. I was studying St. Thomas' Thought on Gratia Operans, a study later published in Theological Studies, 1941<sup>19</sup> 42. Within a month or so it was completely evident to me that Molinism had no contribution to make to an understanding of Aquinas.

Heuristically, then, the context of the word is the sentence. The context of the sentence is the paragraph. The context of the paragraph is the chapter. The context of the chapter is the book. The context of the book is the author's opera omnia, his life and times, the state of the question in his day, his problems, prospective readers, scope and aim.

Actually, context is the interweaving of questions and answers in limited groups. To answer any one question will give rise to further questions. To answer them will give rise to still more. But, while this process can recur a number of times, while it might go on indefinitely if one keeps changing the topic, still it does not go on indefinitely on one and the same topic. So context is a nest of interlocked or interwoven questions and answers; it is limited inasmuch as all the questions and answers have a bearing, direct or indirect, on a single topic; and because it is limited, there comes a point in an investigation when no further relevant questions arise, and then the possibility of judgment has emerged. When there are no further relevant questions, there are no further insights to complement, correct, qualify those that have been reached.

Still, what is this single topic that limits the set of relevant questions and answers? As the distinction between the heuristic and the actual meanings of the word, context, makes plain, the single topic is something to be discovered in the course of the investigation. By persistence or good luck or both one hits upon some element in the interwoven set of questions and answers. One follows up one's discovery by further questions. Sooner or later one hits upon another



element, then several more. There is a period in which insights multiply at a great rate, when one's perspectives are constantly being reviewed, enlarged, qualified, refined. One reaches a point when the overall view emerges, when other components fit into the picture in a subordinate manner, when further questions yield ever diminishing returns, when one can say just what was going forward and back it up with the convergence of multitudinous evidence.

The single topic, then, is something that can be indicated generally in a phrase or two yet unfolded in an often enormously complex set of subordinate and interconnected questions and answers. One reaches that set by striving persistently to understand the object, understand the words, understand the author and, if need be, understand oneself. The key to success is to keep adverting to what has not yet been understood, for that is the source of further questions, and to hit upon the questions directs attention to the parts or aspects of the text where answers may be found. So R.G. Collingwood has praised "... the famous advice of Lord Acton, 'study problems, not periods'".<sup>6</sup> So H.G. Gadamer has praised Collingwood's insistence that knowledge consists, not just in propositions,

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6) R.G. Collingwood, Autobiography, London: Oxford University Press, 1939, 51967, p. 130. See also The Idea of History, Oxford: Clarendon, 1946, p. 281.

but in answers to questions, so that to understand the answers one has to know the questions as well.<sup>7</sup> But my present point is not merely the significance of questions as well as answers<sup>em</sup> though, of course, that is in full accord with my cognitional theory<sup>em</sup> but also regards the interlocking of questions and answers and the eventual enclosure of the interrelated multiplicity within a higher limited unity. For it is the emergence of that enclosure that enables one to recognize the task as completed and to pronounce one's interpretation as probable, highly probable, in some respects, perhaps, certain.

7. A Clarification →

A few contrasts may add clarity to what I have been saying. Collingwood has conceived history as re-enacting the past. Schleiermacher has contended that the interpreter will understand the text better than the author did. There is some<sup>f</sup> thing in these statements but they are not quite accurate and so may be misleading. To clear things up let me take a concrete example. Thomas Aquinas effected a remarkable development in the theology of grace. He did so not at a single stroke but in a series of writings over a period of a dozen years or more. Now, while there is no doubt that Aquinas was quite conscious of what he was doing on each of the occasions on which he returned to the topic, still on none of the earlier occasions was he aware of what he would be doing on the later occasions, and

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7) H.G. Gadamer, op. cit., p. 352<sup>Ⓞ</sup>

there is just no evidence that after the last occasion he went back over all his writings on the matter, observed each of the long and complicated series of steps in which the development was effected, grasped their interrelations, saw just what moved him forward and, perhaps, what held him back in each of the steps. But such a reconstruction of the whole process is precisely what the interpreter does. His overall view, his nest of questions and answers, is precisely a grasp of this array of interconnections and interdependences constitutive of a single development. }

What I find true, then, in Schleiermacher's contention is that the interpreter may understand very fully and accurately something that the author knew about only in a very vague and general fashion. Moreover, this precise knowledge will be of enormous value in interpreting the text. But it does not follow that the interpreter will understand the text better than the author did for, while the interpreter can have a firm grasp of all that was going forward, it is rare indeed that he will have access to sources and circumstances that have to be known if the many accidentals in the text are to be accounted for. Again, with respect to Collingwood, it is true that the interpreter or historian reconstructs but it is not true that in thought he reproduces the past. In our example, what Aquinas was doing, was developing the doctrine of grace. What the interpreter was doing, was building up the evidence for an element in the history of the theology of grace and, while he can arrive at a grasp of the main movement and an understanding of many details, he rarely achieves and never needs an understanding of every detail. Judgment rests on the absence of further relevant questions.

The reader may feel, however, that I have been arguing from a very special case, from which general conclusions should not be drawn. Certainly, I have not been arguing about a case that is universal, for I have already affirmed that there are cases in which the hermeneutical problem is slight or non-existent. The question, accordingly, is how general are the main lines of the instance from which I have argued.

First, then, my instance was from the history of ideas. It is quite a broad field and of major interest to theological method. But it is uncluttered by the complexities involved in interpreting instances of intersubjective, artistic, symbolic, or incarnate meaning. In these cases understanding the author is inadequate unless the interpreter has some capacity to feel what the author felt and to respect the values that the author respected. But this is re-enactment, not in understanding and thought, but in feeling and value-judgments.

Secondly, even within the history of ideas, the selected instance was exceptionally clear-cut. But while the same clarity is not to be had in other types of instance, the points that here are clear either recur in other instances or possess different features that compensate. In the first place there is always the distinction between the author's consciousness of his activities and his knowledge of them. Authors are always conscious of their intentional operations but to reach knowledge of them there must be added introspective attention, inquiry and understanding, reflection and judgment. Further, this process from consciousness to knowledge, if more than general and vague,

is arduous and time-consuming; it leads into the impasse of scrutinizing the self-scrutinizing self and into the oddity of the author who writes about himself writing; such authors are exceptional. Finally, the selected example was a slow development that can be documented. But any notable development occurs slowly. The insight that provokes the cry, Eureka, is just the last insight in a long series of slowly accumulating insights. This process can be documented if the author writes steadily while it is going forward. On the other hand, if he does not write until the development is completed, his presentation will approximate logical or even systematic form, and this will reveal the nest of relevant questions and answers.

So much for judging the correctness of an interpretation. We have concentrated on the possibility of this judgment. On actual judgment little can be said. It depends on many factors and, in general discussion, these factors can be no more than hypothetical. Let us suppose that an exegete has grasped with great accuracy just what was going forward and that his understanding of the text can be confirmed by multitudinous details. Now, if really there are no further questions, his interpretation will be certain. But there may be further relevant questions that he has overlooked and, on this account, he will speak modestly. Again, there may be further relevant questions to which he adverts, but he is unable to uncover the evidence that would lead to a solution. Such further questions may be many or few, of major or minor importance. It is this range of possibilities that leads exegetes to speak with greater

or less confidence or diffidence and with many careful distinctions between the more probable and the less probable elements in their interpretations.

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 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 em to every individual in every class and culture through all media em of the message deciphered by the exegete.

Now 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. H.G. Gadamer has contended that one really grasps the meaning of a text only when one brings its implications to bear upon contemporary living.<sup>8</sup> This, of course, is paralleled by Reinhold Niebuhr's insistence that history is understood in the effort to change it.<sup>9</sup> I have no intention of disputing such views, for they seem to me straight-forward 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

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8) H.G. Gadamer, op. cit., pp. 290-324.

9) I am relying on C.R. Stinnette, Jr., "Reflection and Transformation," The Dialogue between Theology and Psychology, Studies in Divinity No. 3, The University of Chicago Press, 1968, p. 100.



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 exegete qua exegete is to be that of Denzinger's Enchiridion or of theological textbooks. Finally, I believe in a theology of encounter, but 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. None the less, 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.

The exegete qua exegete 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, etc.. 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 results with previous achievement.

The exegete also speaks 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 a 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 of Albert Descamps of the biblical theologian qua exegete. 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.<sup>10</sup>

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. This need would seem to be at the root of efforts to portray the Hebrew mind, Hellenism, the spirit of Scholasticism,

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10) Albert Descamps, "Réflexions sur la méthode en théologie biblique," Sacra Pagina, I, 142 f., Paris: Gabalda, and Gembloux: Duculot, 1959.

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? Might I suggest that the section on stages of meaning in chapter three offers a beginning? If transcendental method coupled with a few books by Cassirer and Snell could make this beginning, why might not transcendental method coupled with the at once extensive and precise knowledge of many exegetes in many fields not yield far more? 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.