

# EXEGESIS AND HOMILETICS

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## *Introduction*

**A**N UNDERSTANDING OF THE MEANING of the biblical text and the proclamation of the Christian gospel have gone hand in hand since the inception of the Church. Exactly how these two activities are related, however, has always been a contentious question. This article makes no claim to provide a definitive answer. Its aim is limited to a discussion of the similarities and differences between the task of the exegete and that of the preacher, in the light of some trends in contemporary biblical studies.

### *1. Has modern exegesis failed the preacher?*

All academics are accustomed to the allegation that they inhabit an 'ivory tower' rather than the 'real world', and the professional exegete is no exception. Not infrequently we meet the claim that what goes under the rubric of 'Biblical Studies' on the university timetable has little relevance to or bearing upon the needs of the preacher in the church. This is no new criticism. It was expressed powerfully by Karl Barth in 1922 in the preface to the second edition of his *Commentary on Romans*:

I myself know what it means year in and 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 had been surrendered. (p 9)<sup>1</sup>

The particular 'awe in the presence of history' to which Barth referred and against which he inveighed had its roots in Hegelian philosophy, with its positive assessment of history as the arena of self-revelation and realization of the divine Idea.<sup>2</sup> For Barth the First World War and its aftermath put paid to any such optimistic view of history or confidence in human cultural achievement.<sup>3</sup> Subsequently

many have raised their voices not only, like Barth, against nineteenth-century historicism but against the historical-critical method to which it gave birth and which has dominated biblical scholarship in the twentieth century.<sup>4</sup> Although few would go so far as Gerhard Maier's *The end of the historical-critical method* (St Louis, 1977),<sup>5</sup> most biblical exegetes today are aware of the limitations of this approach and are looking to alternatives which may better enable them to bridge the linguistic and cultural gulf which exists between the bible and its modern reader.

One of the criticisms levelled against the historical-critical method is that, having demonstrated the difference between the world of the bible and our own world, it has been unable to bring them together.<sup>6</sup> This is the problem which confronts exegete and preacher alike. Yet to be fair, the historical-critical method never claimed to be able to bridge the hermeneutical gap between the two. The historian's skills, which lie behind text, source and redaction criticism<sup>7</sup> (not to mention more recent social setting approaches to the Bible)<sup>8</sup> have been brought to bear principally upon an understanding of the text in terms of its first audience, rather than attempting to reinterpret it for today. The latter has been seen by the historical exegete as the task of the contemporary theologian and preacher. Thus the focus of NT exegesis has been the first rather than the twentieth century. As J. Leslie Houlden has described it:

N.T. scholars spend their lives *studying the N. T. documents within their original context and quite regardless of their future destiny*. They have no responsibility to see them propelled towards Chalcedon or supporting Lutheran orthodoxy or tending towards the eucharistic teaching favoured by Vatican II Catholicism.<sup>9</sup>

The interest of the preacher, however, is with understanding faith in the present and not simply the past. The would-be preacher, impatient to address that issue, may well fail to see the relevance of having to grapple with the perfect tense in *koinē* Greek or to appreciate the intricacies of the Synoptic problem. Yet, as it is the exegete's responsibility to point out, no text can be understood apart from the historical and social context from which it emerged, and that, not least, because language itself is neither arbitrary nor timeless, but consensual and contextual. A. C. Thiselton's reminder of this bears repetition:

To try to cut 'propositions' in the NT from the specific situation in which they are uttered and try thereby to treat them as 'timeless' is

not only bad theology; it is also bad linguistically. For it leads to a distortion of what a text means.<sup>10</sup>

Thus an adequate understanding of the bible involves at least an appreciation of its original context. And that is what exegesis aims to supply. For the preacher that context may be both limited and limiting, but it is seldom irrelevant and never wholly avoidable, and that, not only because of the nature of language itself, but because of the Christian claim that revelation has taken place within history. Therefore, as H. Richard Niebuhr stated it: 'It remains true that Christian faith cannot escape from partnership with history, however many other partners it may choose'.<sup>11</sup>

## 2. *The contextual difference between exegesis and homiletics*

Perhaps the single most important factor in appreciating the difference between the task of the exegete and that of the preacher is to take seriously the different contexts in which the two activities take place. Today the former is an activity located mainly in the study, library or class-room, whereas homilies are delivered within the context of a faith community's worship. The great Nonconformist tradition in this country of preaching in the open air to the largely unchurched has almost died out. In the main, Christian preaching is addressed 'from faith to faith'.

The difference between the contexts is perhaps more pronounced in North America, where it is usual to find Theology undertaken in the seminary, leaving the university to pursue Religious Studies. (Biblical Studies normally features in both programmes.) In the UK, however, there is a greater overlap between the two types of institution—perhaps because our ancient universities originally began their lives as theological colleges. Most denominational seminaries are now either a constituent part of a university faculty, and/or send their students to the university for their degree work. Often both types of establishment share the same teachers, and both Theology and Religious Studies are seen as disciplines which, although different in scope and method, are equally appropriate in a university context.

Homiletics, however, unlike biblical exegesis, is exclusively associated with the seminary's task of clergy training. The very shift of location from university to church signals a difference in function and purpose. The exegete's main concern is with the meaning of the text, and that remains true whether s/he employs historical, literary, or sociological methods in exploring that meaning. Exegesis is essen-

tially text-centred. The preacher, on the other hand, is attempting to evoke or sustain faith within a believing community, and to that end utilizes scripture as one of his/her major resources. Even in those sermons which take a biblical text as their starting point the object is to go further and explore its meaning within a contemporary context. Therefore, unlike the exegete, the preacher cannot be content with the question, 'What does the bible *mean*?' S/he must go on to ask, 'How is the bible *meaningful* for the contemporary believer?' (This is not to suggest that the latter question is of no personal interest to the exegete. Since the vast majority of exegetes in our universities are also members of faith communities which accept the bible as scripture, this is clearly not the case.)

If we were to look at the various theories which have been put forward about the aims and methods of homiletics we would find them to be as diverse as those concerning exegesis. Perhaps the two models of preaching which have been most pervasive in Christian tradition have been (1) that of the preacher as prophet and herald of new insight; and (2) the preacher as teacher of established, inherited religious wisdom. The bible itself affords evidence of both models. Yet even here it would be over-simplistic to draw a rigid distinction between the two. The prophet and his/her message may well stand over against the community, challenging its stance in the light of fresh revelation. Nonetheless, the prophet never stands wholly aloof from the religious tradition of which s/he is a part.<sup>12</sup> Similarly, the teacher, whose principal task is instruction and illumination, whilst drawing heavily upon inherited tradition, can also evaluate and reinterpret that inheritance afresh in the light of the present situation. Thus the goad and the guide are not infrequently found in tandem.

For Rudolph Bultmann preaching is the act of proclamation by which Christian faith is actually brought into being. It is not simply *a* means but *the* means of encounter with the risen Christ:

Christ the crucified and risen one encounters us in the word of proclamation, and nowhere else. And faith in the Word is the true faith of Easter.<sup>13</sup>

Commenting on this 'high' view of the role of the sermon in Reformation and Neo-Reformation tradition, D. E. Nineham has observed:

We might almost speak here of a quasi-sacramental view of preaching in the sense that only as the bread of the word is broken and distributed in preaching does it have its intended effect.<sup>14</sup>

The aim of the exegete, however, is more limited than that of the minister of word and sacrament—or even word as sacrament. S/he is not necessarily seeking to evoke religious faith but to understand the faith whose experience is expressed in and through the text. Sharing the faith of the community which originally produced the bible and continues to regard it as in some sense normative is not an essential prerequisite for the exegete. Indeed, there are a growing number who have an interest in the bible whose agenda is very different from that of the preacher or theologian, either because they come from non-Christian religious traditions or because they have no religious affiliation whatsoever. This is a comparatively recent development in the history of theological education in this country, but one which I believe should neither be dismissed as irrelevant nor lamented as disastrous. Not least such pluralism should remind us that the exegete's task is not synonymous with preaching.

If the exegete's aims were necessarily identical with those of the preacher then faith would indeed be essential for both. Yet they are not. The exegete's purpose does not have to be kerygmatic, paraenetic or apologetic, even if the text s/he is explicating is so. It would of course follow that, since exegesis aims to be the faithful repetition in my language of what an author says in his, then a secular stance on the part of the exegete should not be allowed to obscure the biblical writer's religious purposes. Yet just as surely, an exegete's personal religious beliefs should not be read back into the text—not least because fidelity to the text demands a recognition of the distinction between its linguistic, literary and theological conventions and those of our own time. As long ago as the fourth century Theodore of Mopsuestia<sup>15</sup> allowed for, if not a possible difference in faith stance, at least a functional distinction between the work of the exegete and that of the preacher. The former's concern was with the elucidation of any obscurities in the text, whilst the latter's function was to expound, communicate and commend the Christian faith. Few contemporary exegetes would be content to see themselves relegated wholly to the realms of the arcane, although most would want to assert that exegesis is not conterminous with the commendation of the religious stance of either the text or the community of faith which accepts that text as scripture. By definition, for the latter the bible is normative, whereas exegesis can be a largely descriptive discipline.<sup>16</sup>

One way the Church has traditionally come to terms with the distinct functions of exegesis and homiletics has been to adopt a two-stage model: (1) the understanding of scripture in its own terms

(*explicatio*), followed by (2) its contemporization and commendation to the community of faith in the present (*applicatio*). More recently Robert Morgan has suggested that the two-stage model should give way to a two-task model:<sup>17</sup> (1) that of historical exegesis whose aims can be descriptive and secular, and (2) theological interpretation, whose concern is with making faith meaningful for the contemporary believer. Both approaches to the bible are legitimate. Indeed, they have insights to offer each other. As Morgan puts it:

There is room in the world of biblical interpretation for historical curiosity, literary tastes, religious hunger, and theological cooking, and the occasional conflict of interests provides mutual stimulus.<sup>18</sup>

The recognition of biblical studies as a discipline in its own right and not necessarily dogma's servant has been hard won.<sup>19</sup> It has to be admitted, however, that part of the price of that victory has been an increasing polarity between the interests of the academic exegete and the needs of the preacher. No doubt in reaction to this, in some scholarly circles the pendulum is beginning to swing back again. Thus Peter Stuhlmacher<sup>20</sup> pleads, if not precisely for a union, at least for a re-connection between historical criticism and dogmatic theology. Fighting what he regards in Germany today as the twin foes of pre-critical fundamentalism on the one wing and radical political hermeneutics on the other, he sees a need for biblical exegesis which is both critical and theological. Therefore, for Stuhlmacher, far from standing apart from the text, the interpreter must 'consent' to the claims made by the text upon the reader and thereby affirm his/her tie with the religious tradition. For many feminist critics, however, the bible should be approached with a 'hermeneutic of suspicion',<sup>21</sup> rather than one of 'consent', since it is permeated by patriarchal attitudes to which no assent should be given. These critics, like Stuhlmacher, want to bring together once more biblical exegesis and contemporary theology—only to very different ends. In company with the wider category of liberation theologians, they unashamedly adopt an advocacy stance *vis à vis* biblical interpretation, regarding claims to value-free objectivity in scholarship as both spurious and socially irresponsible. Thus Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, in her presidential address to the Society of Biblical Literature in 1987, appealed to scholars to move beyond the confines of academia with its preoccupation with the text's original context in order to bring the insights of the bible to bear upon the contemporary situation in the world.<sup>22</sup> This was a timely reminder to all scholars of the responsi-

bility we owe to the wider society. Whether that should lead us to conclude that the distinction between exegesis and theology should be collapsed, however, is another matter.

What distinguishes the two is not that the exegete comes to his or her task without presuppositions or personal agenda. Few even among those wedded to the historical-critical method of exegesis would dare to make any such rash claims in the light of what we now know about human psychology. Morna Hooker has reminded us that even what are now accepted as the fundamental tools of the exegete's trade were partly constructed 'in his own image'. Source criticism reflected the preoccupations of a generation of Oxford dons who pored over their literary sources, piecing them together, in the conviction that biblical authors shared their concern for the careful preservation of historical data. On the other hand, for the form critic, whose overarching interest was in the communities which lay behind the texts, the evangelists were but faceless stringers of pearls. And it was the redaction critic's own aspirations to be creative theologians which led them to believe that the Gospel writers had no interest in history whatsoever.<sup>23</sup> Modern scholars, whether engaged in historical, literary or scientific studies, now see that a wholly 'objective' approach is impossible. Therefore there can be no such thing as presuppositionless exegesis.<sup>24</sup> Those who want to use the bible for advocacy purposes (Marxists, feminists, et al.) not only accept this; they appeal to it to justify their method. The great virtue of these modern advocacy stances is that the particular bias of the interpreter is openly declared at the outset. In this important respect it is like preaching, which (whatever else it may be) is an overt commendation of the religious faith in which the preacher stands. In this enterprise detachment would be a denial of one of the principal functions of the preacher, i.e., to act as a personal witness to the truth of the proclamation.

The Church's principal use of the bible throughout the ages has been for advocacy purposes. Then and now this carries with it dangers, however—not least the temptation to read into the text whatever position is being espoused (whether vegetarianism in the book of Job or the bodily assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary in the Song of Songs). We may all approach the bible with presuppositions, but are all presuppositions equally valid? If so then a text, like Humpty-Dumpty's 'word' in *Through the looking glass*, means whatever I choose it to mean! In which case language ceases to be a means of communication. Most branches of the Christian Church have tried

to avoid the pitfalls of private and idiosyncratic interpretations of scripture by insisting that its meaning is determined by the community and not by the individual. In so far as this expresses the truth that there is no such thing, strictly speaking, as a private language, that is acceptable. But attempts by ecclesiastical authorities to arbitrate between possible meanings of the bible and to impose their conclusions upon biblical scholarship cannot but call into question the integrity of the exegete, who does not necessarily see his or her function as advocacy.<sup>25</sup> The great merit of the two-stage model, with its functional distinction between exegesis and theology, between what a text meant and what a text means,<sup>26</sup> is that it allows those engaged in exegesis to come to their task with aims which need not be those of advocacy nor, if they are, with a common agreement as to what it is they advocate. Exegesis can therefore be 'ecumenical' in the widest possible sense, engaging scholars of all religious persuasions and none. Thus I am arguing for a two-stage model combined with a two-task model. Rather than castigate the exegete for not providing for the needs of the preacher, therefore, we must accept that for many this is not their aim.

Yet, if all exegetes need not be concerned with preaching, the preacher cannot avoid exegetical questions, and that, not because the two tasks are the same, but because in all Christian traditions the bible has a central place in the life and faith of the Church. For Roman Catholics this was reaffirmed by Vatican II, which among other things insisted that preaching should be nourished and ruled by scripture.<sup>27</sup>

All Christian churches claim a continuity between the faith to which the bible bears witness and that of contemporary experience. Yet continuity is not the same thing as identity, and preaching, unlike exegesis, does not aim to be simply the repetition of either the bible or subsequent tradition. The preacher's task, like that of the theologian, is ' . . . the interpretation of the tradition *anew* in every age in the light of contemporary experience which includes rationality'.<sup>28</sup> The exegete's world may be confined to that of the biblical text, but the preacher's must be firmly within the community of faith, where the text functions as scripture in the present. It is for the preacher rather than the exegete to effect a meeting of the two worlds.

### 3. *Is 'The bible as literature' a more helpful approach?*

It is not only preachers who are confronted with the limitations of historical criticism; many biblical exegetes have concluded that this



particular method is a worked-out seam which has largely lost its usefulness. Now they are looking to alternative ways of interrogating the text, which may yield more fruitful results. Foremost among these is the route taken by modern 'secular' literary critics.<sup>29</sup> It would be misleading to suggest that they, any more than their biblical counterparts, are united in their aims and methods. Many of the selfsame divisions can be found in both areas. Thus, for example, there is no agreement as to how far it is permissible to read a text through the eyes of the contemporary reader's own 'cause'.<sup>30</sup> In spite of these differences, however, what unites the various modern literary-critical approaches is a shift away from a primarily historical focus to a more text-orientated one, from what lies behind the text to how the text is constructed and how it operates.

With the advent of the New Criticism in the 1930s the text itself, rather than what might lie behind it or be in its author's mind, came to the fore. Since then, broadly speaking, literary criticism may be seen to have taken two divergent approaches to the text: (1) that which concentrates exclusively upon the text itself, and (2) that which focuses upon the interaction between the text and the reader. Structuralism falls into the first, text-immanent category. According to this the text is a 'world' of its own, an enclosed system of signs which may be read without reference to its author and his intentions, or indeed any other context. The text is an artefact in and of itself, rather than a vehicle which attempts to convey an underlying meaning. There is, therefore, no 'behind' to the text. Those exegetes who have tried to apply structuralism to the biblical text<sup>31</sup> have done so with meagre results, however. As a method it seems to have even less to offer the preacher.

More fruitful for both preacher and exegete is the second approach. This includes the reader as part of the context of the text's meaning. Recently there has been a revival of interest in ancient rhetoric—the art of persuasion—and an appreciation of the rhetorical character of much NT writing.<sup>32</sup> With this has come an acknowledgement that the biblical author's intent was to influence his audience. Therefore, by the very nature of the writing, the reader cannot be left out of the equation, as was so often the case with historical-critical method. Thus if historical-critical exegesis looked *behind* the text, and structuralism looks exclusively *at* the text, the reader-response critic includes the reader *in front of* the text as an essential actor in determining its meaning. Without the reader the text remains unfulfilled, like a musical score, mute until it is made to

speak by its contemporary interpreter. (Here the analogy between the 'reader' and the 'preacher' in Bultmannian tradition is evident.) The text is thereby freed from its original context to take on new meaning in the contemporary setting. The original author loses 'control' of the meaning of the text, just as surely as any writer loses the copyright to his/her work after his/her death. Thus there is nothing normative about a historical reading of the bible. What is more, since the readers of the text are numerous, so are its interpretations. There can be no one, exhaustive reading of the text, and to proceed as if there were is to misunderstand the hermeneutical enterprise.

Text-immanent and reader-response approaches, when applied to the bible, are not without their problems, however. From a theological viewpoint, to regard the text itself as the object of meaning (as does the former) would be biblicism, if not bibliolatry. In Christian tradition, however, the bible is not regarded as an end in itself. Coming into being as a response to and expression of the religious experience of first Israel and then subsequently the Church, the bible is not faith's object but its witness.<sup>33</sup> On the other hand, literary approaches which stress the creative role of the reader, can at first sight seem to offer more to the preacher, since they emphasize the living present rather than some dead past or self-sufficient world of the text. Yet are there no constraints which should be placed upon the creativity of the interpreter of the bible, or is the Humpty-Dumpty school of semantics to be allowed its head? Surely not? After all, when we translate from a foreign language, whilst recognizing that there can be more than one accurate translation, we nonetheless rule out some renditions as wrong. So it must be with interpretations of the bible. The text cannot simply be extracted from the context of meaning in which it was created, and made to serve whatever ends we now choose. To prevent such abuse some historical controls are essential and we rightly look to the exegete to provide these. This is not necessarily to confine the meaning of the bible to its original context, but it does involve an acknowledgement of the integrity of that context, and a recognition that what it expresses may be analogous to, but is not identical with, the experience of the modern believer.

The principal virtue of reader-response criticism for biblical studies is also its main weakness. The focus on the reader and his/her contemporary context can obscure the 'alien' character of the bible. And yet it is precisely the bible's 'strangeness' which can be its most

challenging feature: To focus upon the preoccupations of the present may initially seem liberating. Yet this can be as tyrannous as any antiquarianism. We can see this in the modern appeal to 'relevance'. What looks initially like a refreshing emancipation from the past, once made into a touchstone of what should or should not be considered, acts as an inhibiting, conservative factor. Whereas:

One of the theological functions of biblical interpretation is that it must *expand* our concept of what is relevant and introduce new perspectives. Any attempt to judge relevance at the beginning of our study must only perpetuate the value system we previously accepted.<sup>34</sup>

The most positive contribution that contemporary literary criticism has to offer the preacher is the insight that the bible, like great literature, has a superabundance of meaning. It is neither confined to its original context, nor to any one, definitive interpretation. Countless readers had discovered this long before the advent of the New Criticism:

We limit not the truth of God  
To our poor reach of mind,  
By notions of our day and sect,  
Crude, partial and confined;  
No, let a new and better hope  
Within our hearts be stirred:  
*The Lord hath yet more light and truth  
To break forth from His word.*<sup>35</sup>

This is no insight new to NT scholarship either. It has long been recognized that the NT writers themselves, like all preachers, were concerned to reinterpret their scriptures (i.e. the OT) in the light of their contemporary experience, and they do so with striking diversity. Which is not to say that there were no boundaries imposed upon their interpretation by the emergent Christian community.<sup>36</sup> Like Israel before her, the Church tried to distinguish between true and false prophecy. Discernment, however, is a complex matter, not some guaranteed litmus test. What constituted the commonality of faith (*consensus fidelium*) then as now was not easy to define. From the point of view of the connection between exegesis and homiletics, we meet the issue in the form of the question, 'What does the faith of the bible and that of the contemporary believer have in common?'

Various answers have been suggested, including a common psychology of human nature, a unified dogma, or even the universality of language itself. Personally, I would prefer to define the *consensus fidelium* more broadly as a common religious experience, whose expression is inevitably both contingent and changing. Thus, both similarity and difference between the faith of the bible and that of the contemporary believer need to be held in tension and not collapsed wholly into either the past or the present.

To speak of the bible as 'literature' can be misleading, moreover. 'Secular' literary critics vary in their definitions of 'literature'. For a few it can be any discourse, in which case the bible can count as well as a Minoan laundry list. For most, however, literature consists of either (a) that which is aesthetically pleasing, and/or (b) discourse which is 'either evidently fictional or may be read as such'.<sup>37</sup> Parts of the bible, especially the OT,<sup>38</sup> may fall into either or both categories. To admit this is in no sense to diminish its authority. Indeed, it is important to recognize that historicity is not the only mode of truth, or of itself a guarantee of the same. The fictional books of the bible are no less inspired because they are not historical. Nonetheless, the principal reason for the influence of the bible in the Christian world has not been because of its aesthetic qualities, and certainly not because of its fictionality. The reason why the bible has commanded attention is because it has been revered as a religious text which makes claims to truth, and lays claim upon people's lives. We meet similar difficulties with the analogy which is sometimes drawn between the bible and a literary 'classic'. It is true that both (1) are works rated highly by the community, which invests them with a certain authority; (2) are made to transcend their original context; and (3) are sufficiently flexible and adaptive to enable them to be so reinterpreted. Yet the 'canon' of secular literature can and does change, whereas to all intents and purposes the canon of Christian scripture has been fixed since the fourth century. The comparison with secular literature, therefore, can never be more than partial, since the type of authority vested in a religious text by a faith community has no true secular parallel. Furthermore, in spite of the high status given to the bible, the text for the Christian theologian, unlike the text for the exegete or modern literary critic, can never be the sole object of attention. And that, because Christianity claims that meaning lies not simply in the text, but behind and in front of it too—in the 'Word made flesh' who is the locus of faith, and to whom the text bears witness.

4. *What can exegesis contribute to homiletics?*

Against those trends in contemporary scholarship which would blur the distinction between exegesis and homiletics, I have deliberately emphasized their differences. This is not to suggest that current biblical studies have nothing to offer the preacher. On the contrary. The need for the rigorous study of biblical texts remains an essential prerequisite in the preparation of any sermon which appeals to the bible. Ironically, in my opinion, it is often those very features of the exegetical method which have been regarded as obstacles for the preacher, which have most to offer a contemporary theology. I propose, therefore, to conclude by briefly summarizing some of these insights:

1. Increasingly, scholars see the bible as the product of the constant reinterpretation of earlier religious traditions in the light of ever-changing, specific situations. Thus, biblical writers were engaged in the same task as the modern preacher and theologian. Of course, by now the bible's present has become our past tradition, which in turn we seek to reinterpret. Nonetheless, the authors of the text explored by the historical exegete were engaged in the same type of activity as the modern preacher. Their 'sermons' will not be identical to ours, but the bible and the preacher are united by the bond of a common process.

2. Past generations exaggerated the discontinuity between Christianity and ancient Judaism, whereas modern biblical scholarship reminds us that the New Testament cannot be understood apart from the Jewish faith from which the early Church sprang. What this has to say to the preacher is that s/he can neither simply ignore nor denigrate the Old Testament, but must treat it as an integral part of the Christian canon of scripture. All too often contemporary preaching reflects either a Marcionite tendency to deny the Church's Jewish *matrix*, or (as is the case among some conservative Evangelicals) one which would Judaize Christianity.

3. Potentially one of the most liberating insights of modern biblical studies for the preacher is an appreciation of the occasional nature of much of the bible. This is no ready-made book, but rather a collection of religious insights, originally delivered to a variety of specific situations. Since these situations differed in time, place and circumstance, inevitably the message changed accordingly. Earlier traditions were reinterpreted, some were dropped, and others added. What we find, therefore, is no ossified code book, but a living word, with all the signs of change, which is itself evidence of life. The

preacher should take heart from this, and neither be embarrassed by the diversity of the biblical witness, nor seek to hide it from the congregation, as if it were a skeleton in the family cupboard. Attempts at harmonization can sometimes be successful only at the expense of intellectual honesty, which is far more scandalous to the faithful than any admission that the bible does not always speak with one unified voice. The Christian believer needs the preacher at least to acknowledge, and preferably seek to address this fact, and to relate it to the ongoing task of understanding the community's past inheritance in the light of the present, changing experience of faith.

4. The single most worthwhile contribution that secular literary criticism has to make to homiletics, is the insight that there is no one, definitive reading of a text. This does not imply that all readings are equally valid, but it does affirm that, although there are certain constraints upon interpretation, the text is not thereby necessarily confined to one meaning. One of the more destructive effects of a dogmatic control of the bible is that, by limiting its interpretation to one reading, it tends to make scripture less rather than more accessible to contemporary faith. For all the drawbacks involved in comparing the bible to secular literature, nonetheless, a multiple-reading approach has far more to offer the preacher than the dogmatic certainties of '*the* definitive interpretation'.

5. What for many is the principal weakness of historical exegesis, i.e. that it emphasizes the distance between ourselves and the bible, is, in my opinion, one of its major contributions to the preacher, since, for all her/his desire to reinterpret the text and make it meaningful for today, s/he must never forget that the text has an integrity of its own, which should not be manipulated, even in the interests of a good cause. By directing our attention to the original context of the text, the historical exegete reminds us that the bible is not made in our image; it is foreign, and therefore needs to be listened to, not dictated to; to be translated, not tamed. Preachers who ignore the distinction between the world of the bible and that of today end up either modernizing the past or archaizing the present. The path between this particular Scylla and Charybdis may be difficult to negotiate, but nonetheless it is one which we should try to follow if we are to be true to either exegesis or homiletics.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> ET, 1933.

<sup>2</sup> For an outline of Hegel's philosophy see C. Welch, *Protestant thought in the nineteenth century, Vol 1, 1799-1870* (New Haven and London, 1972), pp 86-103.

<sup>3</sup> For the intellectual context of Barth's thought see T. F. Torrance, *Karl Barth: biblical and evangelical theologian* (Edinburgh, 1990), pp 27-81.

<sup>4</sup> See, e.g., B. Childs, *Biblical theology in crisis* (Philadelphia, 1970), pp 61-87, and W. Wink, *The bible in human transformation* (Philadelphia, 1973), which opens with the dictum that the historical-critical method is now 'bankrupt' (p 1).

<sup>5</sup> For a criticism of Maier see P. Stuhlmacher, *Historical criticism and the theological interpretation of scripture* (London, 1979), pp 66-75.

<sup>6</sup> For a work which emphasizes the cultural divide see D. E. Nineham, *The uses and abuses of the bible: a study of the bible in an age of rapid social change* (London, 1976).

<sup>7</sup> For source, form and redaction criticism of the OT see J. Barton, *Reading the Old Testament: method in biblical study* (London, 1984), pp 20-60, and of the NT, C. Tuckett, *Reading the New Testament: methods of interpretation* (London, 1987), pp 78-135.

<sup>8</sup> There are numerous recent studies which apply sociological insights to the bible. As an introduction to this approach see N. K. Gottwald (ed), *The bible and liberation: political and social hermeneutics* (New York, 1983); C. Osiek, *What are they saying about the social setting of the New Testament?* (New York, 1984); C. Tuckett, *Reading the New Testament*, pp 136-150.

<sup>9</sup> J. L. Houlden, 'Trying to be a New Testament theologian', A. E. Harvey (ed), *Alternative approaches to New Testament study* (London, 1985), p 133 (my italics).

<sup>10</sup> A. C. Thiselton, 'Semantics in New Testament interpretation', I. H. Marshall (ed), *New Testament interpretation* (Exeter, 1977), p 79.

<sup>11</sup> H. Richard Niebuhr, *The meaning of revelation* (New York, 1962), p 59.

<sup>12</sup> Most modern OT scholars now think that Wellhausen overemphasized the 'new' element in the prophetic message, and thereby ignored its links with earlier tradition. See E. W. Davies, *Prophecy and ethics: Isaiah and the ethical tradition of Israel* (Sheffield, 1981), pp 12-24.

<sup>13</sup> R. Bultmann, *The New Testament and mythology and other basic writings* (ET, M. Ogden, London and Philadelphia, 1985), p 39.

<sup>14</sup> D. E. Nineham, *Uses and abuses*, p 88.

<sup>15</sup> See M. F. Wiles, 'Theodore of Mopsuestia as a representative of the Antiochene school', P. R. Ackroyd, C. F. Evans (eds), *The Cambridge history of the bible*, vol 1 (Cambridge, 1970), pp 489-510.

<sup>16</sup> The case for a descriptive approach to biblical exegesis is put by K. Stendahl, 'Contemporary biblical theology', G. A. Buttrick et al. (eds), *Interpreter's dictionary of the bible*, vol 1 (N. Y. and Nashville, 1962), pp 418-432.

<sup>17</sup> R. Morgan with J. Barton, *Biblical interpretation* (Oxford, 1988), pp 184, 271, 275, 295.

<sup>18</sup> R. Morgan, *op. cit.*, p 204f.

<sup>19</sup> From J. P. Gabler's 1787 lecture 'On the proper distinction between biblical and dogmatic theology and the specific objectives of each' (ET and commentary, J. Sandys-Wunsch and, C. Eldridge, *SJT* 33, 1980, pp 133-158) onwards, biblical critics have attempted to free exegesis from dogmatic control. The insistence that the bible could be read within a wider context is one of the enduring legacies of the History of Religions School (see W. G. Kümmel, *The New Testament: the history of the investigation of its problems* (ET, London, 1973), pp 206-324).

<sup>20</sup> P. Stuhlmacher, *Historical criticism*. Behind Stuhlmacher's 'hermeneutics of consent' one can detect the influence of H-G. Gadamer's dialectical hermeneutics. (See *Truth and method*, ET, London, 1975.) For Gadamer the interpreter is not the text's master but its servant. In order to enter into conversation with the text and hear what it says, s/he must be open to its transcendence.

<sup>21</sup> E. Schüssler Fiorenza, *Bread not stone: the challenge of feminist biblical interpretation* (Boston, 1984), esp. pp 136-139, and *idem*, *In memory of her: a feminist reconstruction of Christian origins* (London, 1983), pp 1-67. With regard to the NT, the 'hermeneutics of suspicion' goes back at

least as far as the Tübingen School. See C. Rowland and M. Corner, *Liberating exegesis: the challenge of liberation theology to biblical studies* (London 1990): 'The hermeneutics of suspicion has been the stock in trade of the biblical historical critic for the last hundred years or more . . . Its refusal to accept the text as it stands is based on the conviction that the literary product is itself covering up more than it reveals' (p 131).

<sup>22</sup> E. S. Fiorenza, 'The ethics of interpretation: de-centering biblical scholarship', *JBL* 107 (1988), pp 3-17.

<sup>23</sup> M. D. Hooker, 'In his own image', M. D. Hooker and C. Hickling (eds), *What about the New Testament?* (Essays in honour of C. F. Evans, London, 1975), pp 28-44.

<sup>24</sup> See G. K. Stanton, 'Presuppositions in New Testament criticism', *New Testament interpretation*, ed I. H. Marshall, pp 60-71.

<sup>25</sup> See J. M. Robinson, 'Scripture and theological method: a Protestant study in sensus plenior', *CBQ* 27 (1965), pp 6-27 (esp. 7-11), *contra* R. E. Brown, *The new Jerome biblical commentary*, eds R. E. Brown, J. A. Fitzmyer, R. E. Murphy (London, 1989), pp 1163-1165.

<sup>26</sup> See R. E. Brown, 'What the biblical word meant and what it means', *The critical meaning of the bible* (N.Y., 1981), pp 23-44, who accepts that what a text meant in its original context need not be identical to what it comes to mean for the Church. Brown is not prepared to ignore the historical-critical method in determining the former. Cf *idem*, *Biblical exegesis and church doctrine* (New York, 1985) pp 10-25. He does not, however, confine its meaning to the past. Basically, he adopts a two-stage model.

<sup>27</sup> *Verbum Dei*, 6:22. For a brief summary of the Roman Catholic Church's pronouncements on the bible see R. E. Brown and T. A. Collins, *The new Jerome biblical commentary*, pp 1166-1174.

<sup>28</sup> R. Morgan, *The nature of New Testament theology* (London, 1973), p 43 (my italics).

<sup>29</sup> See E. V. McKnight, *The bible and the reader: an introduction to literary criticism* (Philadelphia, 1985), p 30. For a defence of political criticism in secular literary studies see, e.g., T. Eagleton, *Literary theory* (Oxford, 1983), esp. pp 210-217. In the biblical area C. Rowland and M. Corner's *Liberating exegesis* reflects a similar concern.

<sup>30</sup> For a coherent explanation of structuralist theory see T. Hawkes, *Structuralism and semiotics* (London, 1977). For structuralist approaches to the bible see J. Barton, *Reading the Old Testament*, pp 181-197; C. Tuckett, *Reading the New Testament*, pp 151-166.

<sup>31</sup> See W. Wuellner, 'Where is rhetorical criticism taking us?' *CBQ*, 49 (1987), pp 448-467; B. L. Mack, *Rhetoric and the New Testament*, (Minneapolis, 1990). For reader-response criticism see E. V. McKnight, *Post-modern use of the bible: the emergence of reader-orientated criticism* (Nashville, 1988).

<sup>32</sup> See J. Barton, *People of the book? The authority of the bible in Christianity* (London, 1988), for a similar approach.

<sup>33</sup> J. Barr, *Old and new in interpretation* (London, 1966), p 193.

<sup>34</sup> George Rawson (1807-1889), *The Baptist hymn book* (London, 1962), no. 254.

<sup>35</sup> See J. D. G. Dunn, *Unity and diversity in the New Testament: an inquiry into the character of earliest Christianity*, 2nd ed (London, 1977).

<sup>36</sup> See D. Lodge, *The modes of modern writing* (London), pp 1-9 (esp. p 6).

<sup>37</sup> R. Morgan with J. Barton, *Biblical interpretation*, pp 203-268.