Adversus Haereses?

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The early Church engaged in a trenchant, philosophical debate over the nature of scriptural interpretation. Some writers on hermeneutical method showed great insight and perspicacity; others seemed to make less of the problem it raised than they ought. Although most held some general view of inspiration of the scriptures, it was more often over the question of interpretation that they disagreed. We shall examine one or two of the philosophical difficulties of hermeneutics which were raised by early Christians and which are debated still.

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There were, of course, many areas of disagreement about how scripture ought to be interpreted but we can distinguish two major schools of thought, both of which cover a broad spectrum of ideas: the literalists and the allegorists.

a) *The literalists:* these were the people who believed that scripture could, somehow or other, be taken "at face value"; that there is an obvious and evident meaning of the text or, alternatively, that there is no hidden meaning.

A great literalist was Porphyry (c. 230 - c. 305), one of Christianity's detractors. He attacked the allegorising tendency in the Church when he wrote of those "who boast that the things said plainly by Moses are riddles, treating them as divine oracles, full of hidden mysteries, and bewitching the mental judgment by their own pretentious obscurity, and so they put forward their own interpretations" (*Against the Christians,* III). The attack did not always come from those outside the Church. Clement of Alexandria (c. 150 - c 215) denounced those who do not accept the scripture at its face value: "but selecting ambiguous expressions, they wrest them to their own opinions, gathering a few expressions, here and there; not looking to the sense, but making use of the mere diction . . . they attend to the words alone, while they alter the meanings, neither knowing how they are spoken nor using the quotations they adduce according to their true nature" (*Stromateis,* vii 16). A wonderfully ambiguous passage!

b) *The allegorists:* of course, not all those who were non-literalists were allegorists but we shall use this title because allegorical interpretation was a device common to many.

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Possibly as early as A.D. 70 (?) there is, in the Epistle of Barnabas, a strong allegorising tendency. The author of Barnabas thought that the Jews "shipwrecked" themselves because they took the scriptures literally and not "according to the Spirit". Indeed, understanding the meaning according to the Spirit became a somewhat elitist activity, requiring such things as knowledge of philosophy. Clement (of Alexandria) tells us that Origen "instructed many of the less learned in the common school branches (of philosophy), saying that these would be of no small help to them in the study and understanding of the divine scriptures" (*Strom.* vi 18). It seems that Origen (c. 185-254) accepted a three-fold division of meaning in scripture:

"The right way, therefore . . . of approaching the scriptures and gathering their meaning is the following, which is extracted from the documents themselves . . . One must record the meaning of the sacred writings in a three-fold way upon one's soul; so that the simple man may be edified by what we may call the flesh of the scripture, this name being given to the obvious interpretation; while the man who has made some progress may be edified by its soul, as it were; and the man who is perfect . . . may be edified by the spiritual law . . . for just as man consists of body, soul and spirit, so in the same way does the scripture, which has been prepared by God to be given for man's salvation." (*De Principiis,* iv.2.4)

Origen, however, saw that interpretation according to the soul and the spirit is somehow tied to that according to the flesh: "The careful reader will detect thousands of passages like this (Genesis 1) in the gospels, which will convince him that events which did not take place at all are woven into records of what did happen" (*De Prin.* iv.3.1).

Origen, and other Alexandrians, used the historical life of the "human" Jesus as a point of departure for their quest for the spiritual truth and meaning of scripture. But even this presupposition was attacked by those allegorists *par excellence,* the gnostics. The Valentinians, for example, dismissed as "literalism" the Church Fathers' "historical" view of the gospels. They claimed that even the simplest narratives constitute allegories. In fact, the single common link between the diverse methods and results of gnostic interpretation was the belief that the Christians' basic error was their preoccupation with the historical reality of Jesus. Although some, such as Heracleon, did not deny the historicity of all the events in the gospels, they denied rather that the events have any importance in themselves — on a literal understanding. In support

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of this, gnostics turned to the number of passages where Jesus re-
bukes his hearers for understanding solely on a literal level (e.g.
Nicodemus, John 3; the Samaritan woman, John 4; and Peter is
the worst offender [see Irenaeus, *Adv. Haer.* 3.12.9]). For the
gnostics, "the literal level of *any* text, then, including that of the
gospels, offers only the outward manifestation of inner meaning;
it contains the metaphorical form of the ineffable truth".[2]

For the most part then, the debate was between those who
accepted an evident ("literal") meaning *plus* a hidden ("spiritual",
usually allegorical) one, and those who accepted an evident mean-
ing only.

It was not only those who reflected upon the text of scripture,
however, who exercised the hermeneutical freedom of people like
the gnostics. The gospel writers themselves, for example, although
they do not say anything explicitly about their own hermeneutical
methods do display tendencies which reflect a certain freedom of
interpretation. For example, if, as is likely, the author(s) of John
knew Mark then his placing of the Cleansing of the Temple and his
demythologised eschatology (among many other things) cannot
reasonably be accounted for except on the basis of a theological
motivation being allowed to suppress historical accuracy. That is,
we might reasonably assume that John exercised some hermeneu-
tical presuppositions in his reconstruction of Markan chronology
and Markan accounts of Jesus' teaching.

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It is possibly the fact that allegorical method was the major
hermeneutical device of the early centuries that leads many to
assume that it is only since the "Lives" of Strauss (1835) and
Renan (1863) that it has been considered impossible to extricate
fact from fiction in the gospel stories. We believe, however, that
the Church Fathers, and even the gnostics, were rather more aware
of this difficulty than is sometimes assumed.

Professor Bornkamm's assertion that "no-one is any longer in
the position to write a life of Jesus"[3] encapsulates the general
trend of recent twentieth century opinion. Indeed, Bornkamm
goes on to note that "mathematical certainty in the exposition of
a bare history of Jesus, unembellished by faith, is unattainable".[4]
But if this is the case, what can the historian hope to achieve? We
can answer this question, in some degree, by noting the trends in
the development of hermeneutics itself.

The aim of the initial (objectivist) theories of hermeneutics of
the nineteenth century was to render biblical criticism as equally
objective as scientific procedures. This type of hermeneutic
attempted a reconstruction free from bias, prejudice and other

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(often polemical) interests of the writer. The nineteenth century quests for the historical Jesus typified this method. After Schweitzer, it came to be seen, however, that objectivity is not attainable. The historian or interpreter cannot be free from self-interest and influence, as G Radnitzsky has pointed out: ". . . the social disciplines have been too exclusively guided by internal interests".[5] With existentialist hermeneutics, the subject of debate became subjectivity. Bultmann, for example, argued that anthropological, or better, existential interpretation (rather than cosmological) should be applied to the Bible. Authenticity and subjectivity are not mutually exclusive and so the interpreter's predisposition is brought out into the open: "from the interest of the subject arises the nature of the formulation of the enquiry, the direction of the investigation".[6] Theological hermeneutics thus comes to be seen as for the sake of the preaching of the Church and the life of faith. If this is so, then the predisposition of the interpreter becomes vital and itself important; interpretation is now governed by the interpreter's existence and so interpretation changes as (interpreters') cultures change.

Bultmann's pupil, H G Gadamer, took existentialist hermeneutics one step further in his dialogic theory of hermeneutics. Gadamer argues that: "Actually, history does not belong to us, rather we belong to it. Long before we understand ourselves in retrospect, we understand ourselves as a matter of course in the family, society, and state in which we live . . . the self-interpretation of the individual is only a flicker in the closed-circuit of historical life".[7] Thus, while the existential theory sees the interpreter as a lone individual faced with the message of the text, the dialogic sees him as historically rooted in an opportunity for dialogue with the text: "The work of hermeneutics is a conversation with the text".[8] The interpreter considers the text within a given "horizon" — the mental range which circumscribes and includes everything visible from his view-point — and this horizon can be broadened as his experience is broadened.

The fourth hermeneutic trend draws upon elements of the first three but adds, often under the influence of Marxist theory, the notion of *praxis*. J M Bonino states that: "we think always out of a definite context of relations and actions, out of a given praxis. What Bultmann has so convincingly argued concerning pre-understanding must be deepened and made more concrete, but in the concrete condition of men who belong to a certain time and people and class . . . who reflect and read the texts within and without of these conditions".[9] So also, Schillebeeckx contends that "theologians . . . often have a barely idealist conception of history, they

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tend to regard the history of the church's *kerygma* and her dogma purely as a kind of history of ideas".[10] History is a sphere of human activity which emanates from the interpreter's questions and answers, so orthopraxis is an essential element in the hermeneutical process: ". . . it is in any case certain, on the basis of both human and Christian motivation, that any praxis which manipulates human freedom and brings about alienation is both wrong and heterodox".[11] Hermeneutics becomes, therefore, a means of emancipation.

We can see then, that there has been a movement away from the objectivist conceptions of hermeneutics of the early Church, whereby the meaning of a text was thought either to be evident or hidden but, in either case, somehow or other still derivable from the text itself, to modern theories which shift the locus of meaning from the text itself to the interpreter who engages with the text and within a particular social context. Because the historian works within a living dialogue he can hope to achieve emancipation from the fetters his existence places upon him, just as the writers of the text were themselves emancipated by the living word.

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We do not wish to assess the valuable insights afforded by recent hermeneutics so much as to question, at a very basic level, whether and how far the meaning of a text can be seen to be independent of the author; whether, in fact, the dialogue in which the interpreter engages is actually dialogue and not monologue. In particular, two questions about biblical hermeneutics will be considered. First, the importance of the author's intentions and how these would have been understood by his contemporary audience. Secondly, whether or not scripture may be interpreted in the present day to give a different, but equally valid, meaning.

We shall suppose, without arguing the case, that, for the most part, the authors of the canonical scriptures did not consciously attempt to obscure their meaning in what they wrote (the book of Revelation is a good counter-example here, but one of an entirely different genre to most of the New Testament, and therefore deserving of particular hermeneutical considerations not appropriate in respect of the rest). In other words, St Paul wanted the Corinthians to understand what he wrote; St Luke wanted Theophilus to have "authentic knowledge about the matters of which (he) had been informed" (Luke 1:4); St Mark wanted the Christians in Rome to . . . etc.

Given then, that the New Testament authors' motivation was, in this narrow respect, uniform were their intentions the same? Obviously not. They had different audiences, different subjects to

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communicate, etc. Although they did all intend that their readers should understand and apprehend what they meant. We must distinguish then, between this general intention of understanding, i.e. what the author hoped would be the readers' relationship to the text, and the particular intention of meaning, i.e. the author's own relationship to his text.

Let us consider now the latter question, viz the author's relationship to his text and, particularly, the question of whether it is possible that his "subjective intentions" (as if there were such things) only have currency in a public context. This, in effect, is one of the major criticisms levelled against truth-conditional theories of meaning, viz that they treat natural language as a sort of context-free calculus and this, it is argued, cannot be done.

If I say "Fermez la porte" in an English speaking context, and by that I intend to mean "Close the door", it will not be understood by other English speakers who do not speak French. They will (correctly) assume that I am either speaking some other language or nonsense. No matter what the intention, I will not be understood in such an instance because language is public property and intention can only be conveyed given that the public requirements of certain noises arranged in a particular syntax are met. Now if this is the case, then hermeneutics must be a wider ranging activity than simply the recovery of intention: recovering meaning will be more than recovering the intention of the language speaker. But will it entail more than the (apparent) additional requirement of the recovery of the public meaning of past utterances? And of what does this public meaning consist? Weber certainly thought that such an enterprise was possible and constructed his "rationalistic" hermeneutic which attempted to provide classifications for the world of historical experience. Nevertheless, we can conclude of intention-recovery alone that it is insufficient for a complete hermeneutic. As B Harrison suggests: "The capacity to predict other competent speakers' linguistic judgements is essential to the concept of a language. Without publicity, the responses of an isolated speaker would become simply a curious pattern of behavioural response, without linguistic significance".[1 2]

Here some might want to consider the argument that a rejection of an intention-belief theory of meaning has application in a theory of discourse (*parole*) but not in a theory of semantics and syntax as a timeless entity (*langue*), i.e. that intention may be significant in a theory of discourse or speech but not in one relating to a written text. We do not propose to consider this difficult question but will operate on the assumption that what a speaker or writer can mean by a given sentence (p) depends on what p

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means, whether it is written or not.

All this would seem to indicate that the meaning of a sentence is more fundamental, in language theory, than the intention of the utterer. But having said this, is it possible to extract the meaning of a sentence without regard to an author's intentions? J E Altham, in considering theories of reference, suggests a reason to consider that intentions are significant:

> "The possibility which is sometimes considered by philoso-phers that there might have been, unknown to Jane Austen, a woman satisfying all the descriptions of Emma Wodehouse in the novel, will not do as an example ... Certainly, if the imag-ined possibility were actual, 'Emma Wodehouse' as we use the name, would not thereby be a name of the real woman ... The proper explanation would seem to lie in Jane Austen's and our intention."[1 3]

So surely if Matthew, for example, *intended* that his descriptions of the nature of the post-resurrection Jesus were to be under-stood as visionary experiences then, even if we mistake his inten-tions and read them as reports of a physical nature *and* it happens to be the case that Jesus' post-resurrection appearances *were* of a physical nature, we still misconstrue Matthew's meaning precisely because we misunderstand his intention. So what bearing does the author's intention have on the meaning of a text where the latter is thought to have its meaning, in some way, independently of the author's intentions? And once we have recovered the author's inten-tions, if this can be done, together with the "independent" mean-ing of a text, can we say that there's an end of it; that the meaning of the text is exhausted?

It might assist if we identify three areas of meaning to be re-constructed:

a) the meaning intended by the author
b) the meaning independent of the author taken by his (intended) audience
c) the meaning independent of the author taken by *any* audience (other than (b) above).

All of these meanings are, to some extent, hidden. (a) and (b) are hidden in a different language than our own, a different culture with its own thought forms, etc. To that extent they need to be searched out and laid as bare as possible. Professor Meyer calls the beginnings of this task "pure exegesis".[1 4] But is there such a thing as (c), one which can, as it were, be extracted from or even imposed upon the text by any reader. As an example of (c) we might think of Barth's commentary on St Paul's Epistle to the Romans, where

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he was less concerned with literary "critical history as such as with the inadequacy of a theology that regarded its findings as an understanding of scripture".[15]

Let us consider whether the meaning of the text is exhausted by (a) and (b) and thus that (c) is illegitimate. There can be no doubt that language is dynamic in the sense that, over the course of years, words and phrases and the sentences which contain them come to mean different things. Professor W C Smith has argued extensively, for example, that "belief" does not mean now what it meant in the time of King James I and Shakespeare and this affects, at a fundamental level, our understanding (or, as he sees it, our general misunderstanding) of the occurrence of the word "belief/faith" (*pistis*) in the New Testament.[16]

It is also true that words acquire a different meaning for each individual in the course of his development. What "God" means to a child will generally be quite different from what it means to that same person as an adult. In all cases, however, it is true to say that a piece of language, if it is meaningful at all, is meaningful for someone. Even though the meaning of a word, phrase or sentence may be elusive to us (e.g. what did Mark mean by ". . . when you see the abomination of desolation . . ." 13:14?) It is always true to say that if a word's meaning is hidden or obscured for some, it cannot be hidden or obscured for all. The fact that Mark had a meaning for the phrase "abomination of desolation" that we do not have means, quite simply, that we do not use it as language as he used it. If, for example, we say that "the abomination of desolation usurping a place which is not his" refers to the Russian invasion of Afghanistan then we cannot mean that it so refers in the senses (a) or (b) above, in that Russia and Afghanistan were meaningless to Mark and his audience. Here we do not mean that "Russia" and "Afghanistan" had no referents in Mark's day but, quite simply, that there were no definite descriptions available to Mark or his audience which could be substituted for "the abomination of desolation" and "a place which is not his" to render any kind of semantic identity with what we now call "Russia" and "Afghanistan".

We have already noted the tendency to think of meaning as somehow independent of the speaker but we have also seen the importance of a speaker's intentions in any given utterance. H Grice argued that the latter case is prior to the former and that what a word means is ultimately reducible to what a speaker means. This distinction is accounted for in some semantic theories by speaking of what a name denotes and what a speaker denotes. Gareth Evans makes the point thus:

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"Suppose for example on a TV quiz programme I am asked to name a capital city and I say 'Kingston is the capital of Jamaica'; I should want to say that I had said something strictly and literally true even though it turns out that the man from whom I had picked up this scrap of information was actually referring to Kingston-upon-Thames and making a racist observation."[17]

But even in this example we can see that is the speaker's intention which makes it possible to say of it that he said something strictly and literally true; just as it is the speaker's intention, and the audience's apprehension of that intention, which makes it possible for this also to be a racist observation in the original case. But while this distinction between what the name denotes and what the speaker denotes (i.e. roughly (b) and (a)) may be seen to obtain, what of (c)? The problem here seems to be that there is an assumption that there is an "objective" meaning beyond what (a) and (b) allow. Of course, such a thing can be done. It could, for example, be the case that over the course of time "Kingston" came to be the name for the letter "J". In which case, when a schoolboy is asked the question, "What is the capital of Jamaica?" he answers, "Kingston is the capital of 'Jamaica'". But notice just how arbitrary this is and how unconnected it is with either (a) or (b). Were this a written text, the relation to the text would be lost and hence the value of that text in terms of its authority. That such a new meaning is possible can have no bearing on the understanding of texts precisely because it cuts the ties ((a) and (b)) with the text altogether.

But is it not possible to say that the text, say, of Mark's gospel, has a hidden meaning other than that which Mark intended and other than that which his readers understood but which, say, God intended? It would not seem so because it would then be necessary to assume that there is some meaning of a set of words beyond which anyone had in mind when he used the words. The meaning of a sentence might be hidden from some people but not from all people, nor from those who are actually using the words. If Mark used words which had hidden meanings, then the hidden meaning cannot have been a part of his use of those words. So either he had no meaning for the words (then why did he use them? He certainly acted as though he meant something!) in which case they did not function as language for him (like a parrot repeating sentences!) or he did mean something by them, in which case the meaning is not hidden from him. If there was some hidden meaning, intended by God, of Mark's language then it would have been entirely irrelevant to his, and his audience's, use of it. The possibil-

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ity that what Mark said may undergo some reshaping in the course of the centuries, as it no doubt has, does not bear retroactively on Mark. This reshaping does not give his use of his langauge any more meaning when he used it than he had for it when he used it. Barth's commentary on Paul's Epistle to the Romans must, if we are correct, be entirely arbitrary in its appeal to Paul, except where Barth is able to capture Paul's intentions and those of his readers. This does not mean, however, that the book does not bring to us the words of God. Presumably, Barth used St Paul as the basis for his writing because of the authority that those writings enjoy for the Church, but insofar as he ignores (a) and (b) his task is misconceived because the authority the writing has for the Church derives from what is meant by *St Paul*, and what St Paul means entails (a) and (b). Inasmuch as God did not write Paul's letter to the Romans, his language cannot consist of written marks; and even if God's intentions can be identified with that letter that does nothing to explain how the letter is meaningful. Notice here that saying God intends or means something by x is making a claim about God in *our* language with *our* concepts.

I V

We conclude that the interpretation of a text is inextricably tied to the intentions of the author and the understanding of his audience. Of course, it may be true that an assessment of a text independent of these two elements may promote "authentic existence" or "emancipation". But if such an assessment *is* independent then one should not pretend that it is the same faith as those who originally wrote about it (as the gnostics did not). To paraphrase Professor Cullmann:[18] is it not illusion to think that we can have the same Christological faith as the early Church if we accept its Christological views, but still assert that its Christology has to be interpreted in a way other than that which the early Church interpreted it? We therefore conclude also, against the gnostics, that the mundane, evident meaning (insofar as this can be recovered) is crucial if a deeper meaning is to be found, that is, if faith is to have some historical continuity with the faith of those who wrote the documents.[19]

1 This paper is remarkable, not because it contributes significantly to current theological debate or because it is in any way innovatory, but because it was written by three Religious Studies A Level students as part of the course work I set them. Although I directed their reading and gave general advice, they wrote the paper.
        [Ian Walker, Head of Religious Studies, Dulwich College, London.]
2 pp 15-16, E Pagels, *The Johannine Gospel in Gnostic Exegesis*, Abingdon, 1973.
3 p 13, *Jesus*, Hodder & Stoughton, 1960.

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4   op. cit. p 14.
5   *Contemporary Schools of Metascience,* Akademi, 1968; forlaget, Goteborg, Vol 2, chap 1.
6   p 252, *Essays Philosophical and Theological,* S C M, 1964.
7   Quoted in, Peters, T, "Truth in History: Gadamer's Hermeneutic and Pannenberg's Apologetic Method", *Journal of Religion,* Autumn, 1975, p 40.
8   p 401, H G Gadamer, *Truth and Method,* Sheed & Ward, 1976.
9   p 90, *Revolutionary Theology Comes of Age,* S P C K, 1975.
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13 pp 210-211, "The Causal Theory of Names" in *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society,* Supp. vol xlvii, 1974.
14 p 77, *The Aims of Jesus,* S C M, 1979.
15 H G Gadamer, op. cit. p 463.
16 *Belief and History,* University of Virginia Press, 1977.
17 p 194, "The Causal Theory of Names", op. cit.
18 Preface, *Christology of the New Testament,* S C M, 1980.
19 We would like to thank Mr Ian Walker of Dulwich College for his help in writing this essay.

Hope and Optimism
Adrian Hastings

[A University sermon preached at Leeds, 24 January 1982]

What hope does 'the hope that is in us' (I Peter 3:15) offer to the world in which we live today? That is the question to which I will address myself.

Jesus said 'when it is evening, you say, it will be fair weather; for the sky is red. And in the morning, it will be stormy today, for the sky is red and threatening. You know how to interpret the appearance of the sky, but you cannot interpret the signs of the times' (Mt 16:2-4).

The Pharisees and Sadducees had just asked Jesus for some extra 'sign from heaven', and with these words he refused it to them: sufficient signs are already there, if they choose to see them: the signs of the times. Good Pope John frequently made use of this phrase, appealing to the modern church to read correctly to-

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