

Wiles on Interpretation

Maurice Wiles makes three statements on interpretation that are worth further reflection.

1. "The Bible, we are sometimes told, should be studied and interpreted as any other book. That demand is one way of expressing the insistence that the Bible must not be exempted in deference to false piety from all appropriate forms of critical inquiry. But it is not a very satisfactory way of making the point. For how does one interpret 'any other book'? We do not interpret all books identically. To interpret a legal statute is not the same thing as to interpret a novel. They exist for different purposes and we therefore ask different questions of them in the two processes, although we use the one word 'interpretation' for them both" (*A Shared Search*: 29).

2. "Critical study of the Bible, it is rightly claimed, has been conducted too exclusively in terms of *historical* criticism. Not all the scriptural writings are historical in character, except in the trivial sense that they all come from the past. But they are all *writings*, varied forms of literature. Any insights from literary criticism are therefore to be welcomed as likely to redress a balance and correct the lopsidedness resulting from overemphasis on historical criticism. A more balanced approach, it may be hoped, will have the potential to overcome the present impasse, without requiring any repudiation of the valid insights of earlier critical work" (34).

3. "Most literary critics are unwilling to speak of *the* meaning of a text; they reject the idea that a work of literature has one and only one meaning. But if we allow for a plurality of meanings, the question that naturally arises is: Are there any limits? How do we distinguish between good and bad, between valid and invalid interpretations? There is obviously no rule of thumb method by which such discrimination can be effected. But some guiding principles can be enunciated. An interpretation is to be taken seriously if the one who proffers it is someone who is steeped in the tradition to which that piece of literature belongs, if he has given to it not just a passing glance but sustained and critical attention, and if his interpretation once put

forward speaks to others who are prepared to share in the same serious quest for understanding" (104).