

Unfortunately, pp. 4 ff. of "What Is 'A Theological Interpretation of the Bible?" (Notebooks, 10 November 1994) are flawed by the same confusion into which I've occasionally fallen elsewhere.

"Existentialist interpretation" may also occur on the primary level of self-understanding and life-praxis. So it is not, as I imply, a phenomenon *only* on the secondary level of critical reflection and proper theory.

The real difference between "existential understanding" and "existentialist understanding/interpretation" is that the first is constituted as well as oriented by an existential—indeed, *the* existential!—question, whereas the question that constitutes as well as proximally orients the second is an *intellectual* question, although it remains remotely oriented by the existential question. Therefore, on whatever level it occurs, existentialist understanding/interpretation is different from existential understanding in the way in which, in general, intellectual understanding is different from existential understanding.

This means that this entry, which in all other ways seems adequate enough, needs to have distinguished—as I in fact do in "Theology and Biblical Interpretation"—between "existentialist interpretation" and "*critical* existentialist interpretation" (*Doing Theology Today*: 36-51).

19 July 2006

What Is "A Theological Interpretation of the Bible"?

1. *There is no single thing properly called the "interpretation" of any text, because there are many different things that may be properly so called.*

One reason for this is that a text itself may be addressed to any number of different questions and types of questions, any of which may provide a perfectly proper objective in questioning the text with a view to understanding and/or interpreting it. Another reason is that there are any number of questions not addressed by the text itself that an individual may nonetheless choose to put to it and that may provide perfectly proper objectives in questioning it with a view to understanding and/or interpreting it.

2. *But not every so-called reading of a text may be properly called an "interpretation," since interpreting a text differs from simply using it, in that it satisfies, and must satisfy, the following five conditions:*

(1) *It is unprejudiced in that it does not presuppose its results.* This means that the interpreter silences her or his own personal wishes in determining the meaning of the text—such wishes, say, as that a text should agree with certain beliefs held to be true or that it should provide useful guidelines for life-praxis. It also means that what the interpreter believes or does not believe, proposes or does not propose, is in no way a condition of her or his interpretation. Another way of saying this is that the interpreter respects the sole primary authority of the text itself by allowing that the only arbiter of what the text means is what the text itself says.

(2) *It presupposes the methods of historical- and literary-critical research, including the so-called hermeneutical rules of grammatical interpretation, formal analysis of structure and style, and explanation in terms of contemporary conditions.* Whatever the question that a text addresses or that the interpreter may choose to put to it, understanding and/or interpreting it is a matter of understanding a

piece of history and of literature and, therefore, has to follow the historical- and literary-critical methods of questioning it.

(3) *It presupposes the interpreter's prior life-relation to, and thus preunderstanding of, "the thing" (= res = die Sache) that somehow comes to expression in the text.* Without such a prior life-relation and preunderstanding, there can be neither a motive for questioning the text nor an objective in doing so, and hence no understanding and/or interpretation of it. On the other hand, with such a prior life-relation and preunderstanding, an individual can properly understand and/or interpret any text, provided that she or he also presupposes and follows historical- and literary-critical methods in questioning it.

(4) *Once its objective is chosen, it proceeds in a critically reflective way, which is to say, more rather than less deliberately, methodically, and reasonedlly.* By "methodically" here is meant following the methods necessary to realizing the objective of the interpretation, including the historical- and literary-critical methods presupposed by any interpretation, while "reasonedly" means giving reasons for whatever one determines to be the meaning of the text and then submitting one's interpretation to critical validation by any and all of one's fellow interpreters.

(5) *It does not absolutize its own objective in questioning the text by challenging or denying the propriety of understandings and/or interpretations having different objectives.*

3. *Therefore, if anything is to be properly called "a theological interpretation of the Bible," it must be one of the many different possible ways of interpreting the biblical writings, and hence satisfy all of the preceding five conditions.*

Whatever else "a theological interpretation of the Bible" is, it must be an interpretation and must therefore satisfy the conditions that any proper interpretation satisfies. Thus it is unprejudiced in that it does not presuppose its results, which means, among other things, for example, that it is not an

allegorical interpretation; it presupposes both the methods of historical- and literary-critical research and some objective in questioning the biblical writings, the basis for which lies in the interpreter's prior life-relation to, and preunderstanding of, "the thing" expressed by these writings; it is critically reflective and, therefore, more rather than less deliberate, methodical, and reasoned; and it does not absolutize its way of questioning the biblical writings by challenging or denying the propriety of other ways of questioning them.

4. By this standard, what Robert Morgan John Barton mean by "a theological interpretation of the Bible" is nothing of the kind, because it is none of the different things that may be properly called an "interpretation" of the biblical writings.

This is clear, first of all, because "a theological interpretation of the Bible" in Morgan/Barton's sense of the words is not unprejudiced but prejudiced in that it presupposes its results. The sufficient evidence of this is that, if it were otherwise, Morgan/Barton could not claim, as they do, that Philip's teaching the Ethiopian eunuch to read Isaiah "through the Christian master-code" (Acts 8:30-35) is "a classic case" of such interpretation (274; cf. 296). For Philip's reading of Isaiah is "a classic case" of a prejudiced reading of the text that presupposes its results—or, as we may also say, "a classic case" of the interpreter's *not* respecting the sole primary authority of the text itself in determining its meaning. Philip obviously knows who the prophet is speaking about before he ever reads what the prophet actually says.

But it is also clear by the same evidence and reasoning that what Morgan/Barton mean by "a theological interpretation of the Bible" does not really presuppose the methods of historical- and literary-critical research, including the so-called hermeneutical rules. To be sure, they repeatedly protest to the contrary, insisting that "a theological interpretation" in their sense must respect the integrity of the text and that, although its interpretive aims or priorities are different from those of both historians and literary critics, it nonetheless "includes" their aims and follows their methods (170). But such protest rings hollow if we again consider what Morgan/Barton themselves

represent as "a classic case" of theological interpretation. It was not by following the methods of historical- and literary-critical research, but only by ignoring them, that Philip could assure the Ethiopian eunuch that the one about whom the prophet Isaiah was speaking is the Jesus to whom Philip would bear witness. For these and many other reasons, one must conclude that what Morgan/Barton mean by "a theological interpretation of the Bible" is not really an interpretation of the Bible at all, but, at best, a "reading" of it that simply uses it and for which, ironically, not it, but something beyond it is the real primary authority for determining its meaning, and hence is the *real* Bible in the sense of the *auctoritas canonica*.

5. *By the same standard, however, what I mean by "a theological interpretation of the Bible" is exactly that, because it is one of the many different ways in which the biblical writings may be properly interpreted—that way, namely, in which the objective in interpreting them, and hence the question guiding the interpretation, is, or is about, the possibility of understanding human existence that they represent as our authentic self-understanding as human beings.*

Among the questions that some texts—notably the texts of religion, philosophy, and (to a considerable extent) great literature—address is the existential question about the meaning of ultimate reality for us and thus about the authentic understanding of our existence. But because all of us as human beings are unavoidably engaged in asking and answering this existential question at some level, if only implicitly, it is also among the questions that an individual may choose to put to any text and to which any text may be properly understood and/or interpreted as somehow giving an answer. For both reasons, then, a reading of the text for which this existential question provides the objective in questioning it is an understanding and/or interpretation of the text in the proper sense of the words, provided, of course, that it also presupposes and follows historical- and literary-critical methods in questioning the text.

But here it is important to distinguish—as Morgan/Barton, incidentally, quite fail to do—between an individual's *existential* understanding of the text as

addressing her or his own *existential* question as a person and an individual's *existentialist* understanding and/or interpretation of the text as expressing a certain possibility for understanding human existence and thus answering the existential question of any woman or man simply as such. While the first—existential understanding—is a phenomenon on the primary level of living humanly, and thus understandingly, the level, as I call it, of self-understanding and life-praxis, the second—existentialist interpretation—is a phenomenon on the secondary level of living understandingly, the level, in my terms, of critical reflection and proper theory. This means, among other things, that the existentialist interpreter, properly so-called, is like any other theoretician in not addressing the existential question, whether her or his own or anyone else's. Her or his own task *qua* existentialist interpreter is simply to understand and to set forth in appropriate concepts and terms the answer given to the existential question by the text itself, and to do this, as we have seen, in a more rather than a less deliberate, methodical, and reasoned way.

But now the distinction between the two levels of living humanly, and thus understandingly, is also important for our purposes because it serves to clarify the distinction between religion and theology. Just as religion is properly understood as a special case of self-understanding and life-praxis, and as involving existential understanding, so theology is to be understood as a special case of critical reflection and proper theory, and as involving existentialist interpretation.

Theology necessarily involves existentialist interpretation because it is constituted as such to be critical reflection on the validity of the claims that are made or implied by religion, or, more exactly, by the life-praxis that religion explicitly mediates. Because any religion, including biblical religion, represents an explicit answer to the existential question, this question must provide the objective in understanding it if it is to be understood and/or interpreted in accordance with its own intentions and claims. But just such an interpretation is evidently necessary before theology can validate these claims, assuming that nothing can be fairly validated or invalidated unless it is first understood.

Consequently, theology involves existentialist interpretation as the kind of critical interpretation required by its constitutive task of critical validation.

With this in mind, we may say that, just as a religious understanding of the Bible is the special case of existential understanding in which the texts to be understood are the Bible, so "a theological interpretation of the Bible" must be the special case of existentialist interpretation in which the texts to be interpreted are the biblical writings.

What is special about "a theological interpretation of the Bible" in my sense of the words, then, is completely exhausted by its special *interpretandum*, the biblical writings. In all other respects, it is indistinguishable from the existentialist interpretation of any other text(s). This means that, even as it satisfies the same five conditions that any proper interpretation satisfies and must satisfy, it differs from other ways of interpreting the biblical writings, insofar as it does so, only in that its objective in questioning them is provided by the existential question about the meaning of human existence. As an existentialist interpretation, however, its *interpretans* consists in the same concepts and terms as any other such interpretation—namely, those in which the existential question and, therefore, any answer that may be given to it can be understood and appropriately set forth.

Distinct as it is, then, from all proper interpretations of other texts as well as from all other proper ways of interpreting the biblical writings, what I mean by "a theological interpretation of the Bible" is exactly that and, therefore, is also distinct from all ways of "reading" the Bible that simply use it, and so are not proper interpretations of it at all, including what Morgan/Barton mean in using the same phrase.

(All parenthetical page references are to Robert Morgan with John Barton, *Biblical Interpretation*.)

10 November 1994