

*Is there such a thing as a special biblical or theological hermeneutics?*

There is no such thing as a special biblical or theological hermeneutics because "[i]nterpretation of the biblical writings is not subject to any different conditions of understanding from those applying to any other literature" (NTM: 86; cf. 90 f., n. 4).

Even so, theological interpretation of the biblical writings is like any other interpretation in that it must be guided by a certain way of asking questions without which it is impossible but which is also different from other ways of questioning them. Naturally, the biblical writings may be understood religiously, at the primary level of self-understanding and life-praxis, without raising this way of asking questions to the level of critical reflection, and thus of theological interpretation, properly so-called. But if we do not ask some question, at some level, the biblical writings remain dumb. Needless to say, the particular way of asking questions to be followed by a theological interpretation "may not prejudice the contents of what is asked about by presupposing certain results of exegesis; on the contrary, it is supposed to open our eyes for the contents of the text" (106).

Therefore, while there is indeed no special biblical or theological hermeneutics, there *is* a "particular hermeneutical principle" for a theological interpretation of the biblical writings, insofar as the question to be put to them in a properly theological interpretation is different from several other questions that may well be put to them in other equally legitimate interpretations (83; cf. 127, n. 24).

The particular hermeneutical principle that is appropriate to a properly theological interpretation of the biblical writings is constituted by the interpreter's own existential question about the meaning of her or his existence as a human being. The theological interpreter's task *qua* interpreter, however, is to ask, not this *existential* question, but rather the cognate *existentialist* question about the understanding of human existence, or the possibility for understanding it, expressed in the biblical writings.

There are two reasons why asking this question, and thus producing an existentialist interpretation of the biblical writings, is theologically appropriate. First, the biblical writings themselves, being properly religious writings, intend to address the existential question, and thus to express a certain understanding of human existence. Second, the use of these writings in and by the church (which is purely accidental for nontheological interpretations) expresses or implies a claim for their decisive existential authority precisely because they express a certain possibility for understanding human existence.

Of course, for those who accept the church's claim, the understanding of existence that the biblical writings express is accepted as true and, therefore, as indefinitely more than simply one possibility among others for understanding ourselves. But that the biblical writings, unlike others, not only *show* me a certain possibility for understanding myself, but, being accepted by me through faith as expressing a true understanding, actually *give* me existence is an eventuality that cannot be presupposed and followed as a principle of methodical interpretation. That it comes about is—in traditional terminology—*donum Spiritus Sancti*, the gift of the Holy Spirit (106). By the same token, the reflective judgment that the understanding of existence expressed in the biblical writings is true is not and cannot be a matter of methodical existentialist interpretation, but, going beyond the limits of any possible interpretation as such, is properly a matter of critical *validation* and, therefore, must be the business of systematic, rather than historical (or biblical) theology.

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