

Understanding and Faith

"How is it, for example, with understanding Paul's doctrine of justification, which is an explication of the self-understanding of believing existence? Is it understandable only to faith, or also to unfaith? Must I be sure, if I want to interpret it, that I believe or that I will believe? Is the understanding that I may work out a guarantee to me that I believe? Must I therefore present myself to my hearers and readers as a believer? And am I to say to anyone who has understood my interpretation, 'You believe'? Or, if this is all nonsense, may one no longer interpret scripture at all? In a word: exegesis presupposes the *lumen naturale*; otherwise, it is senseless" ("Die Geschichtlichkeit des Daseins und der Glaube" [1930], *Heidegger und die Theologie*: 84; cf. *Existence and Faith*: 101).

(iv) "That the Bible, like other historical documents, not only *shows* me a possibility for understanding my existence, which I can decide either to accept or to reject, but beyond this becomes a word addressed to me personally that *gives* me existence—this is a possibility that I cannot presuppose and reckon with as a methodical principle of interpretation. That it is ever actualized is—in traditional terminology—the work of the Holy Spirit" ("Zum Problem der Entmythologisierung" [1952], *Kerygma und Mythos* 2: 191 f.; cf. *New Testament and Mythology and Other Basic Writings*: 106).

"Understanding in the first instance can only be understanding of the question of decision addressed to me as the interpreter. The yes [to this question], by virtue of which understanding would become faith and the interpretation itself would become preaching, can be understood only as the gift of the Holy Spirit. But I do not have to reflect on this in methodological reflection. I cannot appear for my exegetical lectures in the consciousness, or feeling the responsibility, that I have to produce as a believer. Nor can I offer my interpretation as *direct* preaching. Rather, I can endeavor only to clarify the question of decision posed in the text as a question put to both me and my hearers, and so my interpretation (if it more or less succeeds) becomes *indirect* preaching. . . .

"Translation does not answer the question, 'How do I say it to my child?' but rather consists in asking, 'How do I say it to myself?' or, better,

'How do I hear it myself?' I can understand the New Testament as a word that encounters me only if I understand it as addressed to my existence, and in so understanding it, I already translate it. . . . [O]f course, *believing* understanding and translation are not identical. [But] understanding the question of decision directed to me in the text and translation are identical. Nevertheless, the believing yes is . . . *donum Spiritus Sancti*" (Letter to Karl Barth [11-15 November 1952], *Karl Barth—Rudolf Bultmann Briefwechsel*: 173 f.).

"Existential encounter with the text can lead to a yes as well as to a no, to confessing faith as well as to express unfaith, because in the text the exegete encounters a claim, or is offered a self-understanding that can be accepted (as a gift) or rejected, and therefore has to make a decision. Even in the case of a no, however, the understanding is legitimate, because it is a genuine answer to the question of the text and, being an existential decision, is not to be refuted by argument" ("Ist voraussetzungslose Exegese möglich?" [1957], *Glauben und Verstehen* 3: 149; cf. *New Testament and Mythology and Other Basic Writings*: 152).

Addendum to "Understanding and Faith"

"The statement that 'instead of wanting to understand the text within the framework of its supposedly normative (!) self-understanding, [one should want] to understand oneself as one finds oneself understood in the text' misses the point. For 'to understand the text within the framework (better: under the question) of its self-understanding' is precisely the way to understand oneself as one finds oneself understood in the text. Naturally, the only thing I can strive for methodically is an existentialist interpretation; what the *Divinus Spiritus* works is an existential understanding. . . . Insofar as the latter presupposes or is a peculiar movement of the will, it can only be received—if it is understood radically as self-surrender—as the gift of the Holy Spirit" (Letter to Karl Barth [11-15 November 1952]: 189 f.).