

IS EXEGESIS WITHOUT PRESUPPOSITIONS POSSIBLE?¹

The question whether exegesis without presuppositions is possible must be answered affirmatively if "without presuppositions" means "without presupposing the results of the exegesis." In this sense, exegesis without presuppositions is not only possible but demanded. In another sense, however, *no* exegesis is without presuppositions, inasmuch as the exegete is not a *tabula rasa*, but on the contrary, approaches the text with specific questions or with a specific way of raising questions and thus a certain idea of the subject matter with which the text is concerned.²

I

1.

The demand that exegesis must be without presuppositions, in the sense that it must not presuppose its results (we can also say that it must be without prejudice), may be clarified only briefly. This demand means, first of all, the rejection of allegorical interpretation.³ When Philo finds the Stoic idea of the apathetic wise man in the prescription of the law that the sacrificial animal must be without blemish (*Spec. Neg.* I, 260), then it is clear that he does not hear what the text actually says, but only lets it say what he already knows. And the same thing is true of Paul's exegesis of Deut. 25:4 as a prescription that the preachers of the gospel are to be supported by the congregation (I Cor. 9:9) and of the interpretation in the Letter of Barnabas (9:7 f.) of the 318 servants of Abraham (Gen. 14:14) as a prophecy of the cross of Christ.

2.

However, even where allegorical interpretation is renounced, exegesis is frequently guided by prejudices.⁴ This is so, for example, when it is presupposed that the evangelists Matthew and John were Jesus' personal disciples and that therefore the narratives and sayings of Jesus that they hand down must be historically true reports. In this case, it must be affirmed, for instance, that the cleansing of the temple, which in Matthew is placed during Jesus' last days just before his passion, but in John stands at the beginning of his ministry, took place twice. The question of an unprejudiced exegesis becomes especially urgent when the problem of Jesus' messianic consciousness is concerned. May exegesis of the gospels be guided by the dogmatic presupposition that Jesus was the Messiah and was conscious of being so? Or must it rather leave

¹"Ist voraussetzungslose Exegese möglich?" *Theologische Zeitschrift*, XIII (1957), 409-17. This article was transcribed from the book *Existence and Faith: Shorter Writings of Rudolf Bultmann*. Bultmann, Rudolf. "Is Exegesis Without Presuppositions Possible?" *Existence and Faith: Shorter Writings of Rudolf Bultmann* (Cleveland, OH: The Word Publishing Co., 1965), 289-96.

²Walter Baumgartner, to whom the following pages are dedicated, has published an essay in the *Schweizerische theologische Umschau*, XI (1941), 17-38, entitled "*Die Auslegung des Alten Testaments im Streit der Gegenwart*." Inasmuch as I completely agree with what he says there, I hope he will concur if I now attempt to carry the hermeneutical discussion somewhat further.

³If there is actually an allegory in the texts, then, of course, it is to be explained as an allegory. However, such an explanation is not allegorical interpretation; it simply asks for the meaning that is intended by the text.

⁴A criticism of such prejudiced exegesis is the chief concern of the essay of W. Baumgartner mentioned above (cf. n. 1).

this question open? The answer should be clear. Any such messianic consciousness would be a historical fact and could only be exhibited as such by historical research. Were the latter able to make it probable that Jesus knew himself to be the Messiah, this result would have only relative certainty; for historical research can never endow it with absolute validity. All knowledge of a historical kind is subject to discussion, and therefore, the question as to whether Jesus knew himself as Messiah remains open. Every exegesis that is guided by dogmatic prejudices does not hear what the text says, but only lets the latter say what it wants to hear.

II

1.

The question of exegesis without presuppositions in the sense of unprejudiced exegesis must be distinguished from this same question in the other sense in which it can be raised. And in this second sense, we must say that *there cannot be any such thing as presuppositionless exegesis*. That there is no such exegesis in fact, because every exegete is determined by his own individuality, in the sense of his special biases and habits, his gifts and his weaknesses, has no significance in principle. For in this sense of the word, it is precisely his "individuality" that the exegete ought to eliminate by educating himself to the kind of hearing that is interested in nothing other than the subject matter of which the text speaks. However, the one presupposition that cannot be dismissed is *the historical method* of interrogating the text. Indeed, exegesis as the interpretation of historical texts is a part of the science of history.

It belongs to the historical method, of course, that a text is interpreted in accordance with the rules of grammar and of the meaning of words. And closely connected with this, historical exegesis also has to inquire about the individual style of the text. The sayings of Jesus in the synoptics, for example, have a different style from the Johannine ones. But with this there is also given another problem with which exegesis is required to deal. Paying attention to the meaning of words, to grammar, and to style soon leads to the observation that every text speaks in the language of its time and of its historical setting. This the exegete must know; therefore, he must know the historical conditions of the language of the period out of which the text that he is to interpret has arisen. This means that for an understanding of the language of the New Testament the acute question is, "Where and to what extent is its Greek determined by the Semitic use of language?" Out of this question grows the demand to study apocalypticism, the rabbinic literature, and the Qumran texts, as well as the history of Hellenistic religion.

Examples at this point are hardly necessary, and I cite only one. The New Testament word $\piνεῦμα$ is translated in German as "*Geist*." Thus it is understandable that the exegesis of the nineteenth century (e.g., in the Tübingen school) interpreted the New Testament on the basis of the idealism that goes back to ancient Greece, until Hermann Gunkel pointed out in 1888 that the New Testament $\piνεῦμα$ meant something entirely different—namely, God's miraculous power and manner of action.⁵

The historical method includes the presupposition that history is a unity in the sense of a closed continuum of effects in which individual events are connected by the succession of cause and effect. This does not mean that the process of history is determined by the casual law and that there are no free decisions of men who actions determine the course of historical

⁵Cf. H. Gunkel, *Die Wirkungen des Heiligen Geist nach der populären Anschauung der apostolischen Zeit und der Lehre des Apostel Paulus* (1888; 3rd ed., 1909).

happenings. But even a free decision does not happen without a cause, without a motive; and the task of the historian is to come to know the motives of actions. All decisions and all deeds have their causes and consequences; and the historical method presupposes that it is possible in principle to exhibit these and their connection and thus to understand the whole historical process as a closed unity.

This closedness means that the continuum of historical happenings cannot be rent by the interference of supernatural transcendent powers and that therefore there is no "miracle" in this sense of the word. Such a miracle would be an event whose cause did not lie within history. While, for example, the Old Testament narrative speaks of an interference by God in history, historical science cannot demonstrate such an act of God, but merely perceives that there are those who believe in it. To be sure, as historical science, it may not assert that such a faith is an illusion and that God has not acted in history. But it itself as science cannot perceive such an act and reckon it on the basis of it; it can only leave every man free to determine whether he wants to see an act of God in a historical event that it itself understands in terms of that event's immanent historical causes.

It is in accordance with such a method as this that the science of history goes to work on all historical documents. And there cannot be any exceptions in the case of biblical texts if the latter are at all to be understood historically. Nor can one object that the biblical writings do not intend to be historical documents, but rather affirmations of faith and proclamation. For however certain this may be, if they are ever to be understood as such, they must first of all be interpreted historically, inasmuch as they speak in a strange language in concepts of a faraway time, of a world-picture that is alien to us. Put quite simply, they must be *translated*, and translation is the task of historical science.

2.

If we speak of translation, however, then the hermeneutical problem at once presents itself.⁶ To translate means to make understandable, and this in turn presupposes an understanding. The understanding of history as a continuum of effects presupposes an understanding of the efficient forces that connect the individual historical phenomena. Such forces are economic needs, social exigencies, the political struggle for power, human passions, ideas, and ideals. In the assessment of such factors historians differ; and in every effort to achieve a unified point of view the individual historian is guided by some specific way of raising questions, some specific perspective.

This does not mean a falsification of the historical picture, provided that the perspective that is presupposed is not a prejudice, but a way of raising questions, and that the historian is self-conscious about the fact that his way of asking questions is one-sided and only comes at the phenomenon or the text from the standpoint of a particular perspective. The historical picture is falsified only when a specific way of raising questions is put forward as the only one—when, for example, all history is reduced to economic history. Historical phenomena are many-sided. Events like the Reformation can be observed from the standpoint of church history as well as political history, of economic history as well as the history of philosophy. Mysticism can be

⁶Cf. with the following, my essays, "Das Problem der Hermeneutik," *Glauben und Verstehen*, II (1952), 211-35. [Eng. trans. by J. C. G. Greig in *Essays, Philosophical and Theological* (1955), pp. 234-61], and "Wissenschaft und Existenz," *Ehrfurcht vor dem Leben: Festschrift for Albert Schweitzer* (1954), pp. 30-45; and also *History and Eschatology* (1957), ch. VIII.

viewed from the standpoint of its significance for the history of art, etc. However, some specific way of raising questions is always presupposed if history is at all to be understood.

But even more, the forces that are effective in connecting phenomena are understandable only if the phenomena themselves that are thereby connected are also understood! This means that an understanding of the subject matter itself belongs to historical understanding. For can one understand political history without having a concept of the state and of justice, which by their very nature are not historical products but ideas? Can one understand economic history without having a concept of what economy and society in general mean? Can one understand the history of religion and philosophy without knowing what religion and philosophy are? One cannot understand Luther's posting of the ninety-five theses, for instance, without understanding the actual meaning of protest against the Catholicism of his time. One cannot understand the Communist Manifesto of 1848 without understanding the principles of capitalism and socialism. One cannot understand the decisions of persons who act in history if one does not understand man and his possibilities for action. In short, historical understanding presupposes an understanding of the subject matter of history itself and of the men who act in history.

This is also to say, however, that historical understanding always presupposes a relation of the interpreter to the subject matter that is (directly or indirectly) expressed in the texts. This relation is grounded in the actual life-context in which the interpreter stands. Only he who lives in a state and in a society can understand the political and social phenomena of the past and their history, just as only he who has a relation to music can understand a text that deals with music, etc.

Therefore, a specific understanding of the subject matter of the text, on the basis of a "life-relation" to it, is always presupposed by exegesis; and insofar as this is so no exegesis is without presuppositions. I speak of this understanding as a "preunderstanding." It as little involves prejudices as does the choice of a perspective. For the historical picture is falsified only when the exegete takes his preunderstanding as a definitive understanding. The "life-relation" is a genuine one, however, only when it is vital, i.e., when the subject matter with which the text is concerned also concerns us and is a problem for us. If we approach history alive with our own problems, then it really begins to speak to us. Through discussion the past becomes alive, and in learning to know history we learn to know our own present; historical knowledge is at the same time knowledge of ourselves. To understand history is possible only for one who does not stand over against it as a neutral, nonparticipating spectator, but himself stands in history and shares in responsibility for it. We speak of this encounter with history that grows out of one's own historicity as the *existentiell* encounter. The historian participates in it with his whole existence.

This *existentiell* relation to history is the fundamental presupposition for understanding history.⁷ This does not mean that the understanding of history is a "subjective" one in the sense that it depends on the individual pleasure of the historian and thereby loses all objective significance. On the contrary, it means that history precisely in its objective content can only be understood by a subject who is *existentiell* moved and alive. It means that, for historical understanding, the schema of subject and object that has validity for natural science is invalid.⁸

⁷It goes without saying that the *existentiell* relation to history does not have to be raised to the level of consciousness. By reflection it may only be spoiled.

⁸I do not deal here with certain special questions, such as how an *existentiell* relation to history can already be present in the research of grammar, lexicography, statistics, chronology, and geography or how the historian of mathematics or physics participates *existentiell* in the objects of his research. One thinks of Plato!

Now what has just been said includes an important insight—namely, that historical knowledge is never a closed or definitive knowledge—any more than is the preunderstanding with which the historian approaches historical phenomena. For if the phenomena of history are not facts that can be neutrally observed, but rather open themselves in their meaning only to one who approaches them alive with questions, then they are always understandable now in that they actually speak in the present situation. Indeed, the questioning itself grows out of the historical situation, out of the claim of the now, out of the problem that is given in the now. For this reason, historical research is never closed, but rather must always be carried further. Naturally, there are certain items of historical knowledge that can be regarded as definitively known—namely, such items as concern only dates that can be fixed chronologically and locally, as, for example, the assassination of Caesar or Luther's posting of the ninety-five theses. But what these events that can thus be dated *mean* as historical events cannot be definitively fixed. Hence one must say that a historical event is always first knowable for what it is—precisely as a historical event—in the future. And therefore one can also say that the future of a historical event belongs to that event.

Naturally, items of historical knowledge can be passed on, not as definitively known, but in such a way as to clarify and expand the following generation's preunderstanding. But even so, they are subject to the criticism of that generation. Can we today surmise the meaning of the two world wars? No; for it holds good that what a historical event means always first becomes clear in the future. It can definitively disclose itself only when history has come to an end.

III

What are the consequences of this analysis for exegesis of the biblical writings? They may be formulated in the following theses:

- (1) The exegesis of the biblical writings, like every other interpretation of a text, must be unprejudiced.
- (2) However, the exegesis is not without presuppositions, because as historical interpretation it presupposes the method of historical-critical research.
- (3) Furthermore, there is presupposed a "life-relation" of the exegete to the subject matter with which the Bible is concerned and, together with this relation, a preunderstanding.
- (4) This preunderstanding is not a closed one, but rather is open, so that there can be an *existentiell* encounter with the text and an *existentiell* decision.
- (5) The understanding of the text is never a definitive one, but rather remains open because the meaning of the Scriptures discloses itself anew in every future.

In the light of what has already been said, nothing further is required in the way of comment on the first and second theses.

As regards the third thesis, however, we may note that the preunderstanding has its basis in the question concerning God that is alive in human life. Thus it does not mean that the exegete must know everything possible about God, but rather that he is moved by the *existentiell* question for God—regardless of the form that this question actually takes in his consciousness (say, for example, as the question concerning "salvation," or escape from death, or certainty in the face of a constantly shifting destiny, or truth in the midst of a world that is a riddle to him).

With regard to the fourth thesis, we may note that the *existentiell* 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, i.e., is there offered a self-understanding that he can accept (permit to be given to him) or reject, and therefore is faced with the demand for decision.

Even in the case of a no, however, the understanding is a legitimate one, i.e., is a genuine answer to the question of the text, which is not to be refuted by argument because it is an *existentiell* decision.

So far as the fifth thesis is concerned, we note simply that because the text speaks to existence it is never understood in a definitive way. The *existentiell* decision out of which the interpretation emerges cannot be passed on, but must always be realized anew. This does not mean, of course, that there cannot be continuity in the exegesis of Scripture. It goes without saying that the results of methodical historical-critical research can be passed on, even if they can only be taken over by constant critical testing. But even with respect to the exegesis that is based on *existentiell* there is also continuity, insofar as it provides guidance for the next generation—as has been done, for example, by Luther's understanding of the Pauline doctrine of justification by faith alone. Just as this understanding must constantly be achieved anew in the discussion with Catholic exegesis, so every genuine exegesis that offers itself as a guide is at the same time a question that must always be answered anew and independently. Since the exegete exists historically and must hear the word of Scripture as spoken in his special historical situation, he will always understand the old word anew. Always anew it will tell him who he, man, is and who God is, and he will always have to express this word in a new conceptuality. Thus it is true also of Scripture that it only is what it is with its history and its future.