

Hermeneutical Values in the Writings of Wilhelm Dilthey 1833 - 1911

Robert A. Traina*

Wilhelm Dilthey, the German philosopher of history, has had a significant impact upon contemporary biblical hermeneutic. At times this impact has not been salutary. One reason for this phenomenon is that the use of Dilthey has depended on the point of view of the user. His works suggest various possibilities to various interpreters. In addition, it needs to be recognized that Dilthey himself was not a biblical expositor, and that his position hardly accorded with an evangelical interpretation of Scripture. In fact, he probably had pantheistic leanings which obviously would not lend themselves to a sound biblical hermeneutic.¹

Nevertheless, if one utilizes Dilthey's thought with care, it may be possible to find in his writings valuable hermeneutical insights which can be adapted to the articulation of a biblically-oriented theism. It will be the purpose of this article to state some of these insights without implying approval of his entire philosophy of history and without engaging in an exhaustive analysis of his thought.

The assumption underlying our findings is that the Scriptures consist of kerygmatic-historical documents, and that therefore a hermeneutic of history is most appropriate to their interpretation.

One of the significant insights of Dilthey involves his distinction between the material and methodology of the natural and the historical sciences. In fact, it was probably this distinction which provided his starting point.² He held that whereas the natural sciences are concerned with the non-human world, the essence of the historical sciences is the

* Vice President-Academic Administration and Professor of English Bible at Asbury Theological Seminary.

1. Cf. William Kluback's statement that "the concept of pantheism was central to Dilthey's thought . . . the basic idea of a pantheistic force in the world was a key to Dilthey's thinking," in *Wilhelm Dilthey's Philosophy of History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1955).

2. *Ibid.*, p. 52.

psycho-physical world of *dem Geist*, expressed and manifested in certain concretions and objectifications. He consequently held that the *nomothetic approach* is germane to the natural sciences, for they are concerned with working out general algebraic laws of phenomenal behavior based upon abstracting natural phenomena from their context and substituting symbols which can be manipulated and which can be used to explain recurring causal patterns. In contrast, the idiographic method corresponds to the subject matter of the historical enterprise, and its goal is to find and to understand *den Geist* behind its expressions.

Two inferences may be drawn from these distinctions: First, historical documents demand a hermeneutic, whereas no hermeneutic is possible in the investigation of the non-human world; second, a scientific approach which supposedly limits historical possibilities to what complies with the so-called "laws of nature" does not accord methodologically with the character of historical materials. For whereas science deals with the usual, history deals with the unique. Consequently, the canons of science are not properly applicable to biblical history, especially to miraculous history, by way either of interpreting its significance or determining its occurrence.

Dilthey further illuminates an historical hermeneutic by suggesting its twofold character as involving both outer history and inner history. Inner history consists of a dynamic reality which finds various modes of external self-expression. Historical understanding has as its goal a hermeneutic of such inner history. However, the understanding of the inner history of *Geist* can be achieved only through an understanding of its expressions, for in the last analysis understanding is the reversal of the causal process. When a hermeneutic based on the dual character of history is applied, it follows that one must move through the literature to the life and spirit of the writers and characters who produced it. The purpose of such a process is to understand (*verstehen*) the inner life which gave expression to the literary externalization. Thus biblical hermeneutic would need to be concerned with understanding life through the expressions which it causes and by which its knowledge is mediated.³

In fact, it is Dilthey's contention that linguistic and literary documents are the most reliable vital expressions for interpreting *den Geist*. This view is based on two major factors. First, such expressions represent relatively fixed and stable phenomena to which one can return time and time again, in contrast to momentary and fleeting expressions which are not

3. Wilhelm Dilthey, *Gesammelte Schriften*, 6 Vols. (Stuttgart: B.G. Teubner-Verlagsgesellschaft, 1959-60), Vol. V, p. 332; cf. also p. 318 and Vol. VI, p. 309. Also cf. Herbert Arthur Hodges, *The Philosophy of Wilhelm Dilthey* (London: Routledge and Paul, 1952), pp. 128, 263.

subject to careful and repeated reflection. It is for this reason that Dilthey defines exposition as "the skilled understanding of permanently fixed manifestations of life."⁴ Second, mental life finds in language alone complete, exhaustive, and objective expressions, with the result that hermeneutic finds its perfect form in the development of rules for interpreting documentary expressions of the past.

Dilthey thus holds that hermeneutic is interpersonal: The interpreter-I moves through literary expressions to the writer-Thou. Such an interpersonal hermeneutic involves the interpreter's empathetic re-enactment of the writer's life which produced the document. Thus to interpret is to relive or to re-experience the life of the writer. To understand the Gospels, for example, is to relive the experience of the disciples, to follow in their original encounter with the historical Christ.

Such re-enactment seems to be the essence of the feasts of the Hebrew calendar and the sacraments of the New Testament. To commemorate the Feast of the Passover one needed to re-experience the Exodus-event; and to eat the broken bread and to drink the wine was to relive the death of Christ and to take up one's cross and follow Him. Properly to engage in these memorials was to re-perform the life and events which they embodied.

Such interpersonal re-enactment, which bridges the historical time-gap, is possible, claims Dilthey, because of the fundamental similarity between the present I and the past Thou. The interpreter is able to discover the I in the Thou and the Thou in the I, because every I and Thou have universally shared life and meaning which provide the basis for the possibility of an immanent pre-understanding. Such pre-understanding is foundational to the indispensable ability to interrogate the text. Just as in conversations the listener needs to be able to ask questions of the speaker when the speaker's meaning is not clear, so the reader must be able to interrogate the writer or any vital expression in order to understand it. And this ability to ask questions presupposes at least a possible point of contact between the interpreter-I and the interpreted-Thou.

To put it another way, it is because man is an historical being that he is innately equipped to interpret historical documents. This historicity of the interpreter exists in three senses. First, the interpreter, like the object of interpretation, is a living, breathing human being who has the possibility of realizing what he finds in history and is therefore able to understand history. To interpret history is to interpret one's own realities

4. *Ibid.*, V, pp. 217-300.

and potentialities. Second, since man is a product of the same historical forces which produced the past, these forces still live in him. Therefore, the interpreter is really interpreting his own past.⁵ Finally, every person is a congenital interpreter of history because he exercises the faculty of memory, which involves remembering and interpreting one's own past. The possibility of writing and understanding biography is inherent in the possibility of writing autobiography.⁶

Thus it is because the interpreter of history is at least potentially the same as the maker of history that he is capable of reliving the past, which is the essence of a hermeneutic of history. For example, the biblical experience of peace is understandable because the reader knows anxiety and he at least has the possibility of peace. Healing is interpretable because we experience brokenness and have the potentiality of being made whole. On the other hand, the person who has experienced an evil father has difficulty interpreting the Fatherhood of God. We are able to understand life out of ourselves only when we have lived it.⁷

But if understanding is the discovery of the I in the Thou, then it would follow, says Dilthey, that the presupposition to all hermeneutic is self-hermeneutic.⁸ The better we understand ourselves, the better we understand historical persons through their vital expressions. It is that person who has insight into his own life who is able to interpret life out of himself. And in turn, the better we understand past-Thous through their documents, the better we understand ourselves.

There are those who would argue that such an hermeneutic is "subjective" and therefore invalid, for a sound hermeneutic is "objective." To this Dilthey would reply that of course it is true that a good hermeneutic is not merely subjective, but he would hasten to add that a purely objective hermeneutic is impossible. Dilthey would call into question the dualistic subjective-objective schema. Proper interpretation, he would say, is transjective. To be sure, it does involve past-Thous whose personal beings and expressions stand over against the interpreter. There are real objects which are being interpreted, so that the interpreter is not holding a hermeneutic monologue. A hermeneutic of history is not merely a self-hermeneutic. At the same time, no interpretation is possible without an "I" who is doing the interpreting, and the "I" cannot interpret except in terms of his own

-
5. Jose Ortega y Gasset, *Concord and Liberty*, translated by Helene Weyl (New York: W.W. Norton and Co., Inc., 1946), pp. 166-167.
 6. Cf. Dilthey, *op. cit.*, VI, pp. 201-202, 236.
 7. Cf. Kluback, *op. cit.*, p. 14.
 8. Cf. Hodges, *op. cit.*, p. 119.

lived experience. Neither the object nor the subject can be eliminated from the hermeneutic process. Therefore both the character of the object and the character of the subject will influence the interpretive process.⁹

It is this transjective character of hermeneutic which accounts for two phenomena in biblical interpretation, namely, the fact that single passages are given different interpretations by different interpreters in the same historical period and by interpreters in different historical periods, and the fact that the failure to live the Bible affects one's ability to understand it. In both instances what is indicated is that the history of the subject necessarily colors the interpretation of historical objects. Incidentally, the same principle applies to historical value-judgments.¹⁰

The historicity and temporality of both historical object and subject leads Dilthey to hold to a dialectical view of a hermeneutic of history. On the one hand there can be no understanding of history unless there is a commonality between interpreter and interpreted. Unless there are transferrable or recurring elements as between the Thou and the I, no reliving and therefore no understanding is possible. On the other hand, the fact that each individual is influenced by the convergence of a number of temporal-historical factors which are in some sense unique and unrepeatable means that some factors are not transferrable or recurring. There is no transcendental self which is unaffected by the historical process. Man is one and yet not one; he is the same and yet not the same. To deny sameness is to deny the possibility of contact between past and present and therefore to deny a hermeneutic of history and the possibility of the relevance of such a hermeneutic; and to deny differentiation is to deny the mutability and influence of the temporal-historical process and therefore to deny history.¹¹

Thus, for example, the historical Jesus is both unique and not unique. In some ways the life of Jesus is beyond hermeneutic because it is unrepeatable and cannot be re-experienced. On the other hand, there cannot be discipleship unless there are elements in the history of Jesus which recur and are repeatable. Jesus can be followed because in some sense His history is re-livable; but we cannot be twentieth-century "Christs," because Christ was historical and is in a real sense beyond re-living.

We have stated some of the hermeneutical insights which may be gained from Dilthey. A number of others could be discussed, such as

-
9. Cf. Hajo Holborn, "Wilhelm Dilthey and the Critique of Historical Reason," in *Journal of the History of Ideas*, XI, 1 (Jan. 1950), 109.
10. Cf. Dilthey, *op. cit.*, VI, p. 297.
11. Ortega, *loc. cit.*

his fascinating concept of “divination,” but space does not permit. It is hoped that the writings of Dilthey will eventually be translated into English, thus making possible greater acquaintance with his views and further use of his insights in developing a biblical hermeneutic.¹²

12. In addition to the books mentioned and the writings of Dilthey himself, the following books will be found helpful for further acquaintance with Dilthey; William Kluback and Martin Weinbaum, *Dilthey's Philosophy of Existence* (New York: Twayne, n.d.); and Wilhelm Dilthey, *Pattern and Meaning in History*, ed. by H. P. Rickman (Magnolia, Massachusetts: Peter Smith, n.d.).