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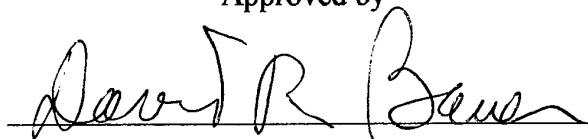
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**RULES OF FAITH AND RULES OF METHOD:
*ENGLISH BIBLE AS POSTMODERN BIBLICAL CRITICISM***

A Thesis
presented to
the Faculty of the School of Theology
Asbury Theological Seminary

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Divinity

Approved by

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "David R. Beuss", written over a horizontal line.

by
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CHAPTER 1

Introduction

Introduction to the Problem

If the title of Reclaiming the Bible for the Church is to be taken at face value, we are in the midst of a serious hermeneutical crisis.¹ Essays such as “On Reclaiming the Bible for Christian Theology,” “The Loss of Biblical Authority and Its Recovery,” and “Reclaiming Our Roots and Vision: Scripture and the Stability of the Christian Church” point up the depth, breadth, and variety of challenges to the Church.² That scholars from so many different theological traditions are moved to issue a call to examine our most basic assumptions, to reflect on where they have brought us, and to consider where we might be led reinforces the impression that this not a parochial matter, but one of wide-ranging significance.³

From what is the Bible to be reclaimed? Karl P. Donfried states the issue plainly: recent biblical interpretation employs an “alien” hermeneutic.⁴ Two factors make this so. First, the locus of interpretation has shifted from the context of the faith community to that of the academy. Second, within the academy, what “lies at the core of many of these [interpretive] enterprises is an epistemological monism that assumes that historical knowledge is omniscient and that it determines theological truth.”⁵ This combination of context (outside the community of faith) and rule (the methodological primacy of historical absolutism) “results in a hermeneutic which is alien to the text being

¹ Carl E. Braaten and Robert W. Jenson, ed., Reclaiming the Bible for the Church (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995).

² Brevard S. Childs, Ray A. Harrisville, and Alister E. McGrath, respectively, in Braaten and Jenson, pp. 1-18, 47-62, 63-88.

³ See also James Smart, The Strange Silence of the Bible in the Church: A Study in Hermeneutics (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1970), and Richard John Neuhaus, Biblical Interpretation in Crisis: The Ratzinger Conference on Bible and Church (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989).

⁴ Karl P. Donfried, “Alien Hermeneutics and the Misappropriation of Scripture”, in Reclaiming the Bible, pp. 19-46.

⁵ *ibid.*, p. 20.

interpreted.”⁶ The Bible must be reclaimed from that place and perspective where it now languishes as a stranger in a strange land.

According to Reclaiming the Bible, this involves the “notorious gap” between the historical-critical method and the Church’s task to transmit the Christian faith.⁷ Yet, for all that these writers are troubled by aspects of this method, they are genuinely hesitant to attribute the crisis solely to the historical critical approach. For instance, in the “Introduction,” Braaten and Jenson explicitly distance themselves from any sense that they are Biblical fundamentalists who “reject the use the historical-critical method *tout court*.”⁸ In his essay, Donfried affirms the value of historical-critical findings and the dangers of rejecting an historical approach.⁹ Frequent nuancing of this kind leaves open the question of whether historical criticism really is the problem.

The arguments in this book succeed not so much in proving their case as in pointing beyond themselves to another level. Donfried acknowledges this: the issue “is not with the tools employed by historical biblical critics...but the domain of meaning into which the results of such critical study are placed.”¹⁰ Ultimately, the problem is not historical-criticism *per se* but the deeper epistemological and philosophical principles which underlie contemporary interpretation.

What, then, is this “domain of meaning” to which Donfried refers? One likely candidate might be what has come to be known as postmodern biblical criticism. Cornel West has described postmodernism as “antifoundational, antitotalizing, and demystifying.”¹¹ A. K. M. Adam explains it in the following terms:

“Postmodernism is antifoundational in that it resolutely refuses to posit any one premise as *the* privileged and unassailable starting point for establishing claims to truth. It is antitotalizing because postmodern discourse suspects that any theory that claims to account for everything is suppressing counterexamples, or is applying warped criteria so that it can include recalcitrant cases. Postmodernism is also demystifying: it attends to claims that certain assumptions are ‘natural’ and tries to show that these are in fact ideological projections. All these characteristics deal with one of the

⁶ Ibid., p.21.

⁷ See the back cover of Braaten and Jenson, Reclaiming the Bible.

⁸ Ibid., pp. x

⁹ Donfried, “Alien”, pp. 22-23,25.

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 23.

¹¹ Quoted in A. K. M. Adam, What is Postmodern Biblical Criticism? (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995), p. 5.

most common characteristics of postmodern thinking: postmodern critics characteristically problematize *legitimation*, the means by which claims about truth or justice or reality are validated or rejected.”¹²

One particular concept deemed to suffer from a high degree of ‘problematized legitimation’, and to be particularly worthy of suspicion, is ‘metanarratives,’ those accounts which claim to address a totality with some supposed degree of actual force, truth, or verisimilitude. The implications for biblical interpretation are daunting: “A critic who stresses metanarrative incredulity as the definitive mark of postmodernism may want to chastise the (Christian) Bible’s *pretension* to tell the story of everything from Creation to Apocalypse; there are sources galore for metanarratives here, as the history of interpretation has well illustrated.”¹³ Note that it is the history of biblical criticism itself which serves as a warrant for this approach. The simultaneous existence of mutually exclusive biblical interpretations (e.g., those involving presence in the Lord’s Supper) demonstrates that metanarrative claims are illusory at best and delusory at worst.

The contrast between this hermeneutical approach and that of Donfried, *et al*, is stark. Where Donfried takes seriously metanarrative claims about Scripture, postmodern critics both suspect such claims and actively work to expose their lack of legitimacy. Where Donfried would arbitrate differing interpretations according to their conformity to the communal standards of the Christian Church, a postmodern critic would question: first, the very possibility of such a hypostasized entity; second, granting its existence, its potential to serve any interest but its own; and third, the basis for any sort of adjudicatory hierarchy.¹⁴ The interpretive approach of postmodern biblical criticism functions within, and as, a radically philosophical and epistemological grid. Should this not suffice as criteria for being designated ‘alien’, perhaps its attitude toward the Christian narrative does. On either view, it would seem that this approach validates the general claim that there is at least one contemporary interpretive method which seems outside the usual bounds of traditional interpretation.

¹² *ibid.*, p. 5, italics in the original.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 17, italics added.

¹⁴ On *ibid.*, pp. 22-23, Adam assures us that this sort of interpretive approach would not lead to “a chaos of *absolute* relativism” because the antifoundational, antitotalizing, and demystifying tenets of postmodernism could lead, at worst, to a kind of *relative* relativism.

From this brief presentation, one might be justified in concluding that the milieu of postmodern biblical criticism is at the heart of a mounting sense of hermeneutical crisis. However, there are at least two considerations to take into account. First, postmodern biblical criticism is not the whole of present-day biblical criticism. There are many other strategies which are presently in use, e.g., narrative, socio-rhetorical, literary, etc. In addition to these more widely known methods, Asbury Theological Seminary offers a distinctive approach. Labeled *English Bible*, it traces its lineage back to the work of Wilbert Webster White at Yale and the Bible Seminary in New York, Howard Kuist at Princeton, Donald G. Miller at Union Theological (Virginia), and Robert Traina at Asbury, and others, into the present. As an interpretive framework, it stresses objectivity, the postulation of evidentially justifiable hypotheses, legitimate ascription of meaning, and the trustworthiness and normativity of metanarratives in the Christian Bible. For all that, it sees itself as neither reductionist nor fundamentalist, but as nuanced and transcendently open. It is an approach with which Donfried might be very comfortable, because it holds that these qualities are intrinsic to the process of Christian exegesis.

A second cautionary remark about ‘postmodern’ biblical criticism is that this kind of postmodernism may not actually be ‘post’. That is, it might be the case that what is self-described postmodern may be more ultramodern. It might be well worth exploring the history of biblical interpretation to determine alternative definitions of a postmodern strategy.

In light of this introductory material, we may pose several questions. If a biblical hermeneutic can be construed as alien, what might constitute one which is “non-alien”? Might there be a way out of the thicket of epistemological, methodological, and philosophical considerations which are causing such difficulties in the process of late-twentieth century biblical criticism? Which of the many options available to an interpreter might be best suited to the task at hand? And, more particularly, how does *English Bible* relate to the present state, and larger traditions, of biblical criticism?

Statement of the Problem

This thesis will analyze *English Bible (EB)* practices and assumptions in order to suggest a location for *EB* in the broader context of contemporary biblical interpretation.

Procedures and Organization

I will take as my starting point, and my overarching focus, the issue raised in Donfried's essay and particularized in the Introduction to Reclaiming the Bible: the relationship between faith and method, confession and *kanon*, in biblical interpretation.¹⁵ It is my contention that the relationship between faith and method takes one of two characteristic forms: method subordinate to faith; faith subordinate to method. This schema has the greatest heuristic value for classifying individual interpretive strategies, as well as for ordering the larger tradition. Specifically, I believe that those eras which are now called premodern and modern may be identified most rightly as such on the basis of faith/method considerations in each, and that what is presently called postmodern criticism is not actually 'post'. In light of this, I will propose a definition of postmodern criticism grounded in the faith/method issue. I will conclude this paper by analyzing the extent to which *English Bible* might be construed as having potential for supplying just such a genuinely postmodern interpretive approach.

This thesis will be organized much as its title suggests: the first part, surveying and analyzing rules of faith and method; the second, explicating *English Bible* as postmodern biblical criticism. Chapter One will present a review of literature related to biblical criticism. To facilitate this, I have adopted standard chronological boundaries for premodern and modern: the premodern period includes Patristic, Medieval, and Reformation interpretation; the modern, from approximately the mid-18th century onward. I have assigned postmodern to the late 20th century. Chapter Two will offer a brief overview of the history of biblical interpretation, organized and analyzed according to the relationship of faith and method, and will propose what I would take to be a genuinely postmodern biblical criticism. Chapter Three will present and analyze the assumptions and practices of *English Bible*, with a view to determining the extent to which it may be a truly postmodern approach. The final chapter will summarize the analyses and conclusions of the thesis as a whole.

Definitions and Delimitations

¹⁵ Carl E. Braaten and Robert W. Jenson, "Introduction: Gospel, Church, and Scripture," in Braaten and Jenson, p. x.

Before moving forward, it will be both helpful and necessary to define the two focal terms of this thesis and to delimit some of aims and objectives of the thesis as a whole. There is a great deal of material covered here and many terms employed. Words like faith, method, criticism, interpretation, hermeneutic(s), and Scripture have many layers of significance. In order to limit equivocal usage, and ambiguous understanding, I offer these qualifications and amplifications.

Definitions

Faith

Historically, faith has been defined along two axes - the objective and the subjective. Most broadly put, faith here involves “the faith believed in” (*fides quae creditur*). While I do not think it either advisable or actually possible to omit the subjective facet of faith at the personal level, the “faith whereby belief is reached” (*fides qua creditur*), this thesis will be specifically concerned only with the objective component. This is done for several reasons. First, as a truism that all persons who hold beliefs have faith in them, focus on the internal dimension of faith reduces discourse to a comparison of degrees of feeling. On this view, then, there is no way to distinguish between differing interpretations, since it is likely that each is held with comparable emotional intensity. Second, the traditional understanding of *fides qua creditur* involves a supernatural epistemological claim.¹⁶ While epistemological claims and issues may be dealt with here, I will not focus on epistemological concerns. To avoid explicit and vicious circularity, I am not defining faith such that one may know certain things (or know things certainly) only as a result of divine agency. If that should figure among the conclusions of this thesis, it will do so only after appropriate argument. Third, it is an assumption of this thesis that the Christian faith is true. In addition, it is an assumption that most critical methodologies are not intrinsically errant. Further, it is an assumption that we can have genuine knowledge, rather than relative skepticism. Therefore, the subjective aspect of faith does not come immediately into play, since I am not arguing against adherence to any particular mode or strategy in itself. Loyalty is not at issue here - content is.

¹⁶ “Faith”, F. L. Cross and E. A. Livingstone, The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church (Oxford: Oxford Press, 1983), p. 499.

In terms of the positive content of the term “faith”, the widest sense of its meaning is summed up in the words of the Vincentian canon (or rule), “what has been believed everywhere, always, and by all.”¹⁷ More specifically, it is found in “The Old Roman Symbol.”¹⁸ The details of this early creed provide the framework for the working definition of faith in this thesis. Of especial importance are the historical markers present in this confession. This Creed should be understood in its developmental history. It is the sum of a stream of belief statements including, but not necessarily limited to, such texts as Mk. 8:29 and parallels, 1 Cor. 15:3-7, and 1 Tim. 3:16. As might be anticipated, another assumption of this thesis is that *all* the events described in this creed did in fact occur. So, faith which is defined ahistorically, or which excludes certain episodes in this confession, is ruled out, *a priori*, as a valid definition of faith in this thesis.¹⁹ Those times when the personal, subjective, and relational aspects of this term are intended will be clearly signaled.

Method

Related to this term are ‘methodology’, ‘strategy’, ‘approach’, and others which imply an intentional employment of steps in a process. Methodology is a term which suggests that a number of particular tactics have been utilized in an effort to render a result. In this paper, the terms cited above will be considered to name the same thing. “Method” will represent the construct which methodology studies, and to which strategy and approach allude.

As to a working understanding of method, I stand with the tensions outlined by Bernard Lonergan: “Method is not a set of rules to be followed meticulously by a dolt. It is a framework for collaborative creativity...A method is a normative pattern of recurrent and related operations yielding cumulative and progressive results. There is a method,

¹⁷ “*quod ubique, quod semper, quod ab omnibus creditum est,*” The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church, p. 1443.

¹⁸ Henry Bettenson, Documents of the Christian Church (New York: Oxford Press, 1967), p. 23. I have selected it because of its simplicity, especially in comparison to the Nicene Creed which attempts greater precision in definition and broader scope in focus.

¹⁹ This, then, specifically excludes an interpretation such as Bultmann’s. While it may be well argued that he did indeed have faith, I would respond that his faith was not in *the* faith, but rather in existential transformation. His interpretation fails on first comparison to historic definitions of faith. It may succeed as subjective feeling, but not in terms of objective content.

then, where there are distinct operations, where each operation is related to the others, where the set of relations forms a pattern, where the pattern is described as the right way of doing the job, where operations in accord with the pattern may be repeated indefinitely, and where the fruit of such repetition are, not repetitious, but cumulative and progressive.”²⁰

Delimitations

In terms of limits to this study, it must be noted at the outset that this is not a comprehensive account of the history of biblical interpretation. Therefore, I will rely to a large extent on secondary sources for details about individual interpreters and their periods. Further, I do not claim exhaustiveness of example. I have attempted to select genuinely representative illustrations with which to exemplify the most general and characteristic traits of each period. I do not wish to appear simplistic or reductionist - I am aiming for conciseness. Along these lines, I do not intend to pursue issues other than those relating to faith and method as they pertain to biblical interpretation. For that reason, I will not *debate* the relative merits of such approaches as allegory, typology, spiritual exegesis, historical criticism, structuralism, etc., *per se*. These approaches will be analyzed only to that extent necessary to illumine their contribution to the faith/method question. Two other brief qualifications need to be mentioned. I will not be commenting on the orthodoxy or heterodoxy of any individuals or strategies explored here. I do not believe this to be the forum for addressing these kinds of soteriological claims. Finally, this paper is more than somewhat limited by the fact that I do not have facility with German. A reader with a grasp of that language will only profit by bringing the riches of those writings to bear on this problem. As best I could, I have tried to dialogue with persons who are well-read and highly conversant with German scholarship on this matter. I sincerely hope that nothing argued here will be immediately refutable by appeal to a single source.

Importance of this Study

The present state of crisis in biblical interpretation, and the historical developments which contributed to it, are such as to pose significant problems to the preparation of

²⁰ Bernard Lonergan, Method in Theology (New York: Herder & Herder, 1973), pp. xi, 4.

ministers, as well as to the edification of the laity. If this thesis can suggest a way to transcend some of the present difficulties, and can present a workable framework in which to proceed in the future, the results could have widespread salutary and irenic effects. It is with this hope that this thesis is presented.

CHAPTER 2

Review of the Related Literature

There are four main areas to investigate in the process of addressing the primary research questions of this thesis. These are pre-modern, modern, post-modern, and *English Bible* hermeneutics. These proceed roughly along chronological lines, but I will review literature related to each area topically. The question of the relation of faith and method serves as the unifying thread of this thesis, so I will address it as necessary in each section.

The pre-modern period is defined in this thesis as the period from the Ante-Nicene Fathers (i.e., post-Apostolic) until the mid-1700's. Modern interpretation picks up from that point and continues to the present. It is still a vital force whose suppositions inform much of contemporary biblical studies. Postmodern biblical interpretation exists side-by-side with the modern approach. As will be discussed below, these are distinguishable more by their assumptions and practices than by their historical timeframe. The *English Bible* approach has its beginnings in the late 19th century and is still practiced today, most notably at Asbury Theological Seminary.

General Works

To begin to come to terms with a research interest as wide-ranging as this one, it was necessary to compile a set of secondary sources that could paint the broadest possible picture while remaining clear on details. Several of these are classics. History of Interpretation, written in 1886, is one such work.¹ Organized chronologically, it sets forth the major events, persons, and literature in biblical interpretation from the earliest times up to the time it was written. Although it is now dated in several respects, it is often cited in the literature and is a book one must deal with. A more up-to-date study is A Short History of the Interpretation of the Bible.² In the revised edition, David Tracy has added

¹ Frederick Farrar, History of Interpretation (1886; reprint, Grand Rapids: Baker, 1961).

² Robert M. Grant with David L. Tracy, A Short History of the Interpretation of the Bible 2nd ed., (N.p.: Fortress, 1963, 1984).

several chapters that address recent concerns. Divided according to historical period, each period is explicated along the lines of its relation to the general history of the age, as well as to significant theological movements. It has a very good select bibliography, and the additional section by Tracy makes it more useful than it otherwise would be. It, too, is regularly cited. Although its focus is less technical than Farrar's *History*, it is an excellent introductory survey. The treatment of the patristic and medieval periods is particularly good.

The Cambridge History of the Bible is perhaps the most-cited standard reference work for biblical interpretation.³ Divided into three volumes, it covers the history of the Bible from the earliest times to Jerome, then to the Reformers, and finally to the mid-20th century. It is highly technical. Each area of special interest, e.g., versions of the Bible or Medieval studies, is an excellent scholarly work. Several of the contributors have individuals works which will be mentioned below. As a single source for biblical study, it is unrivaled. A second reference work that deserves mention is A Dictionary of Biblical Interpretation.⁴ It is an excellent source of information regarding all areas of interpretation. The contributors represent a variety of faith traditions. As a tool to spark investigation, it is a great help. New Horizons in Hermeneutics is a recent addition to the literature.⁵ It successfully merges historical and hermeneutical inquiry. It is both topical and chronologically arranged. Thiselton's contention is that each era is distinctive, yet conditioned by its social, historical, and philosophical location. He concentrates on the major modern hermeneutical approaches, with due attention to the conditions which fostered and tempered their use. It is a very valuable secondary source.

Pre-Modern

The hermeneutic of the early Christian period has received much attention recently. Echoes of Scripture in the Letters of Paul is considered a seminal work.⁶ Hays explores the intertextuality of Paul's use of the Old Testament. This focus builds on the insight that

³ The Cambridge History of the Bible, 3 vols., (Cambridge: Cambridge Press, 1963-70).

⁴ R. J. Coggins and J. L. Houlden, eds., A Dictionary of Biblical Interpretation (Philadelphia: Trinity Press, 1990).

⁵ Anthony Thiselton, New Horizons in Hermeneutics (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992).

⁶ Richard Hays, Echoes of Scripture in the Letters of Paul (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992).

no text or interpreter stands alone. Instead, we are all part of a larger ongoing conversation. This work seeks to place Paul within the context of the interpretive issues of his day. At the same time, it succeeds in providing a clear and incisive perspective on the general assumptions and practices of 1st century Christian interpretation. This book aids in developing an appreciation for the pre-eminence of confessional considerations in Paul's biblical criticism.

Biblical Interpretation Then and Now seeks to link pre-modern and modern hermeneutics.⁷ In doing so, Dockery provides a rich survey of the methods of the early Christian writers. His thesis is that there was a shift from functional to authoritative interpretation in the early church. This has not received sufficient emphasis from present-day interpreters, so we fail fully to appreciate the quality of their efforts. That is, we misread them because we lack the necessary conceptual framework, not because their communicative style is so foreign to our ears. It is not allegory or typology which separates us - it is basic orientation. His contention seems valid, although I am not sure that his survey of modern interpreters is fully focused on this main idea. Nonetheless, this an extremely helpful tool. The clear sense which emerges is that biblical interpretation must necessarily be grounded in a confession of Christ, no matter the place, era, or method used.

For scholars who read neither Greek nor Latin at the expert level, the Writings of the Ante-Nicene Fathers and the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers are outstanding primary sources.⁸ The thirty-eight volume set contains fewer documents than the Patrologie Graeca or Patrologia Latina and was first published overseas in 1885. Although it is limited by those two factors, it is still an important source which is widely quoted. In it, one may investigate the writings of the early church fathers without the filter of an interpreter (although the translation is one such layer). Disadvantages of this set include its lack of a comprehensive index, its age, and its document base. However, these are

⁷ David Dockery, Biblical Interpretation Then and Now (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1989).

⁸ Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, eds., Writings of the Ante-Nicene Fathers (1925; reprint, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993); Philip Schaff, ed., Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers (reprint, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994).

outweighed by its availability and convenience. One way to begin exploring these sets is to use one of the secondary sources which excerpt from these writings.⁹

In the medieval period, the work of Beryl Smalley remains definitive. The Study of the Bible in the Middle Ages is a magisterial accomplishment.¹⁰ In this book, Smalley sets out to trace and explicate the trajectory of biblical interpretation from the early to late Middle Ages. Although she states that her purpose is more descriptive than constructive, she does present several insights regarding the development of the academy and its relation to the church which illumine our present situation. Her contribution is her exposition of the organic separation of the study of the Bible from the life of the church. That is, the Middle Ages is the period during which the Bible became an object of study rather than a devotional tool. The introduction of The Sentences of Peter Lombard as the main text for theological study marks this split. From this point, students were evaluated on, and teachers primarily lectured from, a text other than the bible. Of all the books which I have consulted, this has been the most rewarding. In it, I came to understand many of the factors which still operate today.

An interesting essay, which deals with some of the underlying issues of this thesis, was written by David Steinmetz.¹¹ In it, he argues for the superiority of what he calls “pre-critical” exegesis. His idea is that modern interpreters fail to account fully for the primary biblical task of edification. Pre-critical exegetes, rooted in the Rule of Faith, founded their interpretation in Christological confession, rather than methodological conformity. Steinmetz labels the modern stress on the notion of a single meaning in Scripture as patently false. Further, their use of allegory was more method than madness. It is a conceit of the present age that we are somehow free of typological and figurative interpretations. This conceit is also an avenue for error, because our lack of self-awareness blinds us to our behaviors. Therefore, we are more vulnerable to delusion than those who are self-consciously reflective about their use of metaphor and figure. Lacking the ground of faith, our interpretive structures sway with every wind of change. This focus on the

⁹ see, for example, Karlfried Froehlich, Early Biblical Interpretation (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1986).

¹⁰ Beryl Smalley, The Study of the Bible in the Middle Ages (Notre Dame: Notre Dame, 1955)

¹¹ David Steinmetz, “The Superiority of Pre-Critical Exegesis,” Theology Today 37 (Apr. 1980), pp. 27-38.

relationship of faith and method is a significant contribution to the present conversation, and a major part of my thesis. While he specifically addresses the single-meaning of Scripture issue, his article is very useful and suggestive regarding the relationship of faith and method in biblical interpretation.

A book-length discussion of the relation of pre-modern and present interpretation is set forth in Andrew Louth's *Discerning the Mystery*.¹² He contends that the solution to our present difficulties (which he defines as rootless interpretation) is a return to the methodology of the Fathers. Early Christians used metaphorical and allegorical devices because of the depth of the mystery which they attempted to communicate. Rather than being trapped by their literary conventions, they freely chose these means. Our perspective, built on the rationalism and empiricism developed first by Descartes and Locke, is completely out of touch with the reality of the nature of God.¹³ Therefore, we should question our reliance upon such an inadequate epistemological base and move toward an appropriation of the Fathers' techniques. While Louth has been criticized for a certain naiveté regarding the faults of those persons and their age, his approach has been praised as timely and helpful. I believe that there is much that is worthwhile in his suggestion, and proceed along several of the same lines as he.

Modern

There is a great deal of material covering this period, because this was the time when biblical studies (and other areas of academic inquiry, cf. Louth above) became extremely concerned with methodology. Much of the literature concerned with this period has congealed into book form.

Regarding the relationship between *Truth and Method*, Hans-Georg Gadamer has written an important book which is widely quoted.¹⁴ In it, he seeks to evaluate the claim of modern scientific method with a view to distinguishing between the kinds of methods and approaches that are appropriate to given areas of study. He posits that scientific knowledge and truth differs from what might be called humanistic fields of study.

¹² Andrew Louth, *Discerning the Mystery* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986).

¹³ He cites Peter A. Schouls, *The Imposition of Method* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980), several times as his warrant for this claim.

¹⁴ Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (New York: Continuum, 1989)

Therefore, he holds that there is validity in accepting and devising different methodologies and criteria for each. Perhaps the best way to summarize the distinction he makes is to explore the difference between an “art object” and a “work of art.”¹⁵ An art object is most notable for its physical characteristics, which only truly becomes a work of art when it is appreciated. The aesthetic element of interaction between object and perceiver calls for different categories of explanation and description. While it seems reasonable to describe an art object in terms of weight or material composition, it seems equally absurd to describe a work of art in the same terms. Michelangelo’s *Pieta* has enduring, fundamental physical attributes. However, its claim is one of pathos, not weight. It is more than several tons of marble - and yet is also just that. For the purposes of this thesis, Gadamer’s work helps to clarify some modern attitudes, but will not be dealt with extensively.

There are a number of books which survey the various disciplines which have emerged during the past two hundred years. While most of them suffer from either a certain unevenness or a pronounced ideological slant, a good introductory text is New Testament Criticism and Interpretation.¹⁶ Another worth looking at is Terence Keegan’s Interpreting the Bible.¹⁷ Both books are organized topically and both offer good biblical information. Keegan’s book approaches the field by organizing specialties according to their orientation to time. Those who work with a text synchronically are separated from those with a diachronic approach. Its primary contribution here is to give a sense of how a Roman Catholic exegete presents contemporary methods. Perhaps the most scholarly survey is The New Testament and Its Modern Interpreters.¹⁸ Sponsored by the *SBL* to commemorate its centennial, it is an exhaustive examination of each of the specialties in New Testament studies since 1945. It is somewhat biased toward historico-grammatical methods, and dated by the elapse of time and the explosion of postmodern biblical

¹⁵ *ibid.*, pp. 94-100, and chapter 2, “The Ontology of the Work of Art and Its Hermeneutic Significance,” pp. 101-169.

¹⁶ David Alan Black and David S. Dockery, eds., New Testament Criticism and Interpretation (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1991).

¹⁷ Terence Keegan, Interpreting the Bible (New York: Paulist Press, 1985).

¹⁸ Eldon Jay Epp and George W. MacRae, eds., The New Testament and Its Modern Interpreters (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1989).

criticism, but its bibliography is outstanding. Its Old Testament counterpart is similar in design and usefulness. Also worth noting is The Interpretation of the New Testament 1861-1986.¹⁹

An emerging classic is The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative.²⁰ In this thought-provoking book, Frei analyzes the movement from pre-modern to modern biblical interpretation. It is his particular contribution to focus on the shift in reading of the text from historically referential narrative to historically evidential material. Rather than being understood as a temporally unified text anchored to real historical events, the Bible became a *sourcebook* for evidence that the events referenced in its pages actually occurred. The Bible was placed in service of an agenda radically different from that envisioned by its compilers. Its theological purpose was eclipsed by the historicism of the modern interpreters. In a certain sense, Frei may be understood to demonstrate the development of an alien biblical hermeneutic. It is precisely the move away from confessional to methodological concerns which distorted biblical interpretation.

Post-Modern

This term has many facets that vary across disciplines. In addition to the difficulty presented by cross-discipline use of the term, the self-understanding of those who are self-avowedly postmodern evolves rapidly. Therefore, a relatively short volume of the Fortress Guides to Biblical Scholarship is very helpful. What is Postmodern Biblical Criticism? sets out to answer that and other related questions.²¹ In its most recognized forms (e.g., structuralism, deconstruction), postmodern criticism is heavily indebted to the linguistic and philosophical work of Saussure and Derrida. Two works by Stephen Moore, Literary Criticism and the Gospels and Poststructuralism and the New Testament: Derrida and Foucault at the Foot of the Cross, are excellent for more detailed analysis of the practices and assumptions of this hermeneutical approach.²² Semeia is a rich resource

¹⁹ Stephen Neill and Tom Wright, The Interpretation of the New Testament 1861-1986 (New York: Oxford Press, 1988).

²⁰ Hans Frei, The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative (New Haven: Yale, 1974).

²¹ A. K. M. Adam, What is Postmodern Biblical Criticism? (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1995).

²² Stephen Moore, Literary Criticism and the Gospels (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989); Poststructuralism and the New Testament: Derrida and Foucault at the Foot of the Cross (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995).

for articles on post-modern exegesis. Issue no. 54, “Poststructuralism as Exegesis” provides several good examples of postmodern interpretation. In each of these, one is able to see how the dependence of postmodern biblical criticism on the methodology of language study.

Another among those who have significantly influenced the trajectory of recent thought is Paul Ricoeur. His Interpretation Theory: Discourse and the Surplus of Meaning interacts with the relationship between the symbol on the page and its significance.²³ In many ways, I find his work to echo some medieval emphases on this relationship.²⁴ His overarching conclusion is that the principles and practices of language are such that there is a dialectical relationship between words and events. This dialectic ensures that there is never a “final” meaning at which one may arrive. There is always more meaning available to a reader because separate readings are separate events. Each event carries with it the potential for new insights based on previous events and their assimilation. However, he stands in contrast with premodern interpreters in this implication of a never-ending chain of meanings. His is an interpretive strategy of infinite regress, where one never arrives at a first cause.

A work whose subject matter is outside the boundary of biblical criticism, but which is helpful to understanding the overarching relationship between issues of method and faith, is The Structure of Scientific Revolutions.²⁵ This book explores the ways in which the procedures called “the scientific method” are influenced by the beliefs of the community which employs them. That is, scientific faith resides in the “paradigms” which are considered, at a given point in time, to have the greatest explanatory power. This faith base is actually determinative of the kinds of questions which are considered and acted upon. Therefore, the objectivity of scientific research proceeds, in many ways, along “faith’ lines. Faith and method are inextricably related in the very discipline which was to have freed humanity from subjective prejudices. Although Kuhn attempts to refute the

²³ Paul Ricoeur, Interpretation Theory: Discourse and the Surplus of Meaning (Fort Worth: TCU Press, 1976).

²⁴ see, for example, G. R. Evans, The Language and Logic of the Bible in the Early Middle Ages (Cambridge: Cambridge Press, 1984), chs. 6 and 7 for an explication of the Medieval theory of signification, transference of meaning, and their role in interpretation.

²⁵ Thomas S. Kuhn, The Structure of Scientific Revolutions. (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1970).

charge that his work is the linchpin of postmodern relativism, he is unsuccessful on at least two accounts: his own arguments fail to demonstrate a belief in one, knowable reality; he is referenced heavily for strategic justification in Adams' What is Postmodern Biblical Criticism?²⁶

English Bible

Two works in particular are standards in this field. Methodical Bible Study and Bible Study That Works are both by Asbury Seminary professors.²⁷ Thompson's book is self-avowedly non-technical. He specifically acknowledges that his book derives to some extent from Traina's earlier work. Traina's method focuses on exploring the structure of a book based on several rhetorical devices. A potential problem with the method as set forth there is its declared resemblance to the inductive scientific method. It appears open to two critiques in this regard: first, in light of Gadamer, in terms of quantitative and qualitative distinctions (how does one measure texts?); and second, how one is to determine which texts might be given interpretive precedence over against others? (how does one weigh texts?) He does suggest that evaluation is an area upon which more work could be done. A later exposition of the method is found in his essay, "Inductive Bible Study Reexamined in the Light of Contemporary Hermeneutics".²⁸

Two other works that must be mentioned in this context are The Bible in the Making of Ministers, by Charles R. Eberhardt, and These Words upon Thy Heart, by Howard T. Kuist.²⁹ Both of these trace the history, practice, and underlying motivations and assumptions of the English Bible Movement. They are the foundational works in this area of the study.

Summary

While there is a great deal of literature in the field of biblical interpretation, there seems to be a need for a work which addresses this history from the perspective of the

²⁶ For Kuhn's response to critics, see *ibid.*, pp. 191-198; for Adams' reliance upon Kuhn, see p. 15.

²⁷ Robert A. Traina, Methodical Bible Study (Grand Rapids: Zondervon, 1952); David L. Thompson, Bible Study That Works (Nappanee: Evangel Press, 1994).

²⁸ Robert Traina, "Inductive Bible Study Reexamined in the Light of Contemporary Hermeneutics", in Interpreting God's Word for Today: an inquiry into HERMENEUTICS from a biblical theological perspective, Wayne McCown and James Earl Massey, eds. (Anderson: Warner Press, 1982), pp. 53-110.

²⁹ Charles R. Eberhardt, The Bible in the Making of Ministers, (New York: Association Press, 1949); Howard T. Kuist, These Words upon Thy Heart (Richmond: John Knox Press, 1947).

relationship between faith and method as it is worked out in each period. For that reason, this thesis may well contribute to the larger conversation as it seeks to locate the *English Bible* approach, as historically conceived and presently practiced, on the interpretive landscape.

CHAPTER 3

A Survey of Biblical Interpretation

The categories of ‘pre-modern’, ‘modern’, and ‘postmodern’ were applied above as categories for literature related to biblical criticism from the early Christian era to the mid-1700’s, the period mid-1700 to today, and the period from the mid-1900’s till today, respectively. As we begin our survey of biblical interpretation, it would be a good idea to validate the selection of these terms and their approximate meanings.

As a rough beginning, an analysis of the terms themselves seems to provide support for their use. Postmodern is defined explicitly in terms of its reaction to and against things modern.¹ David Steinmetz’ use of the term “pre-critical” indicates or implies that there is a ‘critical’.² Epps and MacRae provide warrant for the use of the term “modern” in the title of their book.³ So, at least at the level of generally accepted professional usage, there is justification for the use of these terms. Similar kinds of evidence is available for the chronological divisions I have suggested.

However, what I have in mind is a more significant criterion than common usage. It is one of my goals to demonstrate that these terms imply a faith/method relationship of particular kinds and degrees. To review, these relationships are: method subordinate to faith (pre-modern); faith subordinate to method (modern); an as yet undefined relationship in the postmodern (although it is my suggestion that they should be placed in synergetic, dynamic tension versus opposition). Thus, the key term here is modern, since the others are defined in relation to it. What is so distinctive about modern biblical interpretation that it is the locus around which others are grouped? In order to answer this question, let us investigate the general practices and assumptions of biblical interpretation according to the categories I have put forward. The appropriateness of these categories will become apparent as the survey proceeds.

¹ Adams, Postmodern Biblical Criticism, p. 1.

² Steinmetz, Superiority.

³ Epps and MacRae, NT and its Modern Interpreters.

Premodern Biblical Criticism

Donald Juel sums up the earliest interpretation in this way: “The beginnings of Christian reflection can be traced to interpretations of Israel’s Scriptures, and the major focus of that scriptural interpretation was Jesus, the crucified and risen Messiah.”⁴ Undergirding this development is “the confession of Jesus as Messiah,” that is, assent and belief in the historical reality of the events set forth in 1 Cor. 15:3-5: “that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures, and that he appeared...”⁵ Rowan Greer enumerates several techniques employed in the service of this confessional appropriation, including *exempla*, *testimonia*, types and allegory, and Midrashic and Haggadic methods.⁶ The function of these methods was to support conclusions about the identity of Christ. However, there were certain paradoxical inconsistencies involved in proof-texting on behalf of Christian confession. As Greer explains it,

“The majority view saw in the *Hebrew* Scriptures a set of warrants for Christian practice and belief, and yet the authority of Israel’s Bible for the church depended entirely upon reading it in particular ways. The central development of Christianity insisted equally that the *Hebrew* Scriptures promised Christ, and that Christ was the key to their meaning. But at another level, granted the paradox of using the Scripture this way, the transformed meanings they were given did not completely adhere with one another. On the one hand, the text proved that the Jews were wrong, and it was used to authorize the abolition of practices central to Judaism. On the other hand, Christians used it positively to show how it pointed beyond itself to its fulfillment in Christ.”⁷

It is clear that faith in Jesus Christ was the normative principle for interpretation and that a variety of methods could be employed to support that faith. It is equally clear that this kind of technique-based reading led to fundamental difficulties. The same text which was viewed as a God inspired prediction of Jesus, the Christ, was ignored when thought of as a

⁴ Donald Juel, *Messianic Exegesis* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1988). p. 1

⁵ *ibid.*, p. 173,179.

⁶ Rowan A. Greer, “The Christian Bible and Its Interpretation”, in Kugel and Greer, *Early Biblical Interpretation* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1986), pp. 137-142.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 156.

prescription for behaviors. Putting on Christ entailed the putting aside the Law. How was one to keep the necessary continuity between Jew and Christian, yet at the same time move forward along the lines of Christian discontinuity with Judaism? Was there a more basic, and yet a more comprehensive, strategy?

The resolution of this dilemma was formulated by Irenaeus. Biblical interpretation was to be grounded in the Rule of Faith, a process by which confessional faith determined the possible meanings of Scripture.⁸ That is, it was a negative rather than a positive standard. The Rule was intended to exclude incorrect interpretations without specifying correct interpretations.⁹ Therefore, it is entirely possible for a passage of Scripture to have more than one valid meaning. In adjudicating possible ‘not-incorrect’ exegesis, Augustine held that the ideal of charity, of love of God and neighbor, should be the ultimate guide. In a move which contrasts with present-day Gettier problems in epistemology (in which accidentally true beliefs are not counted as knowledge of those beliefs), Augustine was willing to declare an interpretation valid even if it was incorrect, so long as it built up charity. He clarified this with a metaphor about a Christian on a journey. The only thing which counts is progress along the way to the destination. “Consequently, if someone ‘is deceived in an interpretation which builds up charity, which is the end of the commandments, he is deceived in the same way as a man who leaves a road by mistake but passes through a field to the same place toward which the road itself leads.’”¹⁰ The *telos* justified the method.

Was faith as a basis for interpretation an ongoing principle for Christian interpretation, or was it modified or abandoned soon after it was promulgated? To explore this, let us turn to the above referenced essay by David Steinmetz. In it, he presents four later premodern interpretations of Mt. 20:1-16, the parable of the Workers

⁸ See J. Stevenson, A New Eusebius (London: SPCK, 1987), pp. 111-112 for a good excerpting of one text of the Rule. It is important to note that this was not a fixed formula. Frances Young notes that “Irenaeus spells out his Canon of Truth in more than one place, and in quite different wording; Tertullian uses another form still.” Yet, this variation should not obscure the fact that “they go over the same ground as became the norm in the later fixed credal formulae”, Dictionary of Biblical Interpretation, p.150.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 197.

¹⁰ On Christian Doctrine 1.36.41, in Greer, *ibid.*, p. 198.

in the Vineyard. I have chosen to present only his explication of Thomas Aquinas' and Martin Luther's exegesis of this passage.

Aquinas offered two interpretations, dating back to Origen and Irenaeus. First, if 'the day' was understood as the lifespan of an individual, the parable could be about the various ages when one may be converted to Christ. Second, if 'the day' referred to the history of salvation, the parable could be about the relationship between Gentiles and Jews.¹¹ Luther offered two interpretations also, but at different points in his life, with very different results. The first, in 1517, attempted to argue that the last workers paid were more humble than the first and that, therefore, their one hour of service was worth more than the lengthier service of the other workers. As Steinmetz points out, "the parable, however, seems to make exactly the opposite point."¹² In 1525, Luther took a different tack, exegeting this parable to mean that all are unworthy and that it is solely the providence of God which enables salvation, not our own efforts. If we wish to praise ourselves for being the early workers, we should recognize that our unworthiness is represented in our disproportionate pay, as well as our grumbling attitude. If we are the later workers, we need to remember that we had idled much valuable time away. While each has a unique focus, both of these men (as well as the others Steinmetz included) see "with considerable clarity that the parable is an assertion of God's generosity and mercy to people who do not deserve it."¹³ It is Luther's "emphasis on a fuller sense located in the Christological meaning of Scripture" which keeps his explanations within the bounds of the Christian faith, and "which linked the Reformers with Jesus, the apostles, and the early church."¹⁴ Aquinas' interpretation is informed by his belief that one's thinking must proceed along lines which "well up from the deeper and more mysterious cleaving to God himself in faith, which itself is a sharing in God's own knowledge given to the blessed in Christ."¹⁵ Despite their many dissimilarities, both men shared Christian confession as the norm for their exegesis.

¹¹ Steinmetz, *Superiority*, p. 33.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 35.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 35.

¹⁴ David Dockery, *Biblical Interpretation Then and Now* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1992), p. 160.

¹⁵ Aquinas, *Summa*, p.87, from a series of citations by the editor.

In summary, we see a consistent appeal to the contents of the central historical, Christological faith in all ‘not-incorrect’ biblical interpretation we have examined.¹⁶ While method as such existed, and arguments about it could become quite heated, the ultimate arbiter was the confession of faith. As Rowan Greer points out, “[the] Rule of faith did not settle the question of method... [it] does not so much solve the problem of what Scripture means as supply the context in which the quest for that meaning may take place.”¹⁷ It is within the bounds of the Christ confession that interpretation occurs. At this point in our survey, this principle has been operative for more than 1500 years. Surviving the tumult of the Reformation, it remained foundational in both Protestant and Catholic exegesis, as evidenced by the existence and function of “the Augsburg Confession in Lutheranism, the Westminster Confession in the Church of Scotland, and the Thirty-nine Articles within Anglicanism - all have served not only as a summary of Christian belief but also (in the tradition of the early church) as a ‘rule of faith’, a guide to the main teachings of the church as derived from Scripture.”¹⁸ It is this tradition of interpretation which is the hallmark and legacy of premodern biblical criticism.

Modern Biblical Criticism

In 1728, J. A. Turretini published his De Sacrae Scripturae interpretatione methodo, in which he set forth his principles for biblical interpretation.¹⁹ David Dockery summarizes them as follows:

- “(1) Since the God who gave revelation in the Bible also endowed people with the rational faculty necessary for receiving communication, the Bible’s communication is to be grasped in the same way as other communications.
- (2) Since the Bible presumes the validity of the law of contradiction, which states that a thing cannot be both true and not true at the same time, no biblical interpretation can be accepted as true that clashes with what is already known to be true.

¹⁶ Calvin’s interpretations are equally guided by the normative definition of the Christian faith at work here. See Moises Silva, Has the Church Misread the Bible? (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1987), p. 96.

¹⁷ Greer, “Christian Bible”, pp. 198-199.

¹⁸ Mark Corner, “Fundamentalism”, in The Dictionary of Biblical Interpretation, p. 246.

¹⁹ There are those who would mark the emergence of the modern approach with Spinoza’s Theological-Political Treatise. I have selected Turretini because his work is exclusively concerned with interpretation, whereas Spinoza’s touches on interpretation more as a manifestation than as the central issue.

(3) Since it is a historical book, the Bible must be understood from the vantage point of its writers as they lived in their own times and places, rather than from any modern vantage point.

(4) Since the Bible is to speak for itself like any other book, the mind, subject to the law of contradiction, must come to the Bible as a *tabula rasa*, emptied of all cherished concepts derived from the modern view of life.²⁰

This was a significant change. The causes of this shift in interpretive orientation are variously attributed: to the need to replace the *magisterium* after the Reformation,²¹ as reaction to the destruction and violence to which religious tempers had contributed in countless wars; or as the fruit of the Renaissance emphasis on humanism, and the Enlightenment rejection of authoritative and dogmatic approaches.²² However explained, the primacy of the confessions of faith had waned.

What waxed strong in its place emphasized the historical, the rational, and the reasonable. Andrew Louth has suggested that it was due to the Cartesian and Locke-ian methods that the transference of reliance on normative faith to abstract method occurred.²³ Method was seen as a way of leading one to truth in ways that ‘subjective’ (read dogmatic) reasoning could not. A *mathesis universalis* was on the horizon: a universal science which would certify anything to which it had been applied; an infallible, non-personal truth machine.²⁴ The amazing results which had occurred when this ‘scientific method’ was applied to the natural world gave it impressive credentials.

The contrast with the premodern era is stark. Here, there are to be no determinations from ‘vantage points’ outside the Bible itself (yet what is this statement but just such a vantage point?). There is belief that reason alone, in the form of the law of

²⁰ Dockery, *Biblical Interpretation*, p. 161. See also, W. G. Kummel, *The New Testament: The History of the Investigation of its Problems*, trans. S. Maclean Gilmour and Howard Clark Kee (Nashville: Abingdon, 1970), pp. 58-60.

²¹ Moises Silva, *Has the Church Misread the Bible?* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1987), pp. 79-80, 94-97 for material which is suggestive, though not fully acknowledged as such, re: the need to develop means to evaluate different interpretations after the authority of the Teaching Office was cast off. See also, Neill and Wright, *Interpretation of the NT*, p. 445ff.

²² See Robert M. Grant, with David L. Tracy, *A Short History of the Interpretation of the Bible*, 2nd edition, revised and enlarged (N.p.: Fortress, 1963, 1984), pp. 90-109 re: the rise of Renaissance and rationalist emphases. See Dockery, *Biblical Interpretation*, p. 160 re: Enlightenment influences.

²³ Andrew Louth, *Discerning the Mystery* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983), pp. 1-9.

²⁴ see also Peter Schouls, *The Imposition of Method* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980), pp. 1-29 for an overview of this process.

non-contradiction and the natural rational faculty for communication, can lead one rightly to appropriate the contents of Scripture. No *a priori* confession of faith is necessary. Further, the requirement that “no biblical interpretation can be accepted as true that clashes with what is already known to be true” sets up a potential conflict with that category of knowledge labeled special revelation. Just so long as one accepts that miracles are potentially “known to be true”, just so long may one accept Scripture which avers their occurrence. Thus, there intrudes a sociological, culturally relative criterion for faith. In the absence of confession, there must be confirmation.

For Scripture to be believable, there must be historical evidence for it. Claims drawn from Scripture must be examined critically according to the canons of historical method. No longer might one appeal to the witness of others, creeds, or the writings themselves. This is a fundamental shift in attitude toward the text. It now has an evidential function, as opposed to its previous use as testament within and for the community of faith. In fact, this evidential function supersedes its testimonial function, because the content of faith claims must be evidentially verified before they may be accepted. Where premodern interpreters shared a common view that the text was ‘realistic’, that is, a reliable witness to genuine events and situations in the lives of the people of God, modern interpreters adopted a methodological skepticism. Hans Frei presents the differences between modern and premodern biblical interpretation in terms of their: (1) understanding the biblical materials as evidence of a history rather than referentially grounded in a history; (2) seeing formal differences, e.g. genre categories, as reason to justify diverse treatments of the materials rather than seeing the temporal sequential unity of that history as the underlying principle which unified those disparate materials; and (3) holding the text to be historically or culturally conditioned, and therefore subject to generational appropriation, rather than trans-historically normative because of its unbroken, underlying temporal *schema*.²⁵ The key move here is from depiction and participation to evidence and historical reconstruction. It is this which epitomizes the modern situation.

²⁵Hans Frei, The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative (New Haven: Yale, 1974), pp. 2-3.

Twentieth Century Biblical Criticism

From this beginning, biblical interpretation based on methodological considerations has grown to encompass a wide variety of approaches.²⁶ For the purposes of this paper, I will explore those areas of study which are considered to be the major categories: historical criticism, literary criticism, and reader-response criticism.²⁷ Perhaps the best way to illustrate the differences between these is by reference to the oft-used metaphor of a person standing before a lightly stained glass window. All accept that the only reason to be there is to experience the window. Broadly stated, however, historical-critical methods seek to look through the glass to whatever might be behind it. Literary criticism investigates the way the window itself is arranged into its whole. Reader-response criticism explores the viewer's reflection. In terms more suited to literature: historical-criticism has to do with authorial issues as they pertain to meaning; literary, with compositional details; reader-response, with the reader.

Historical Criticism

As defined by Ernst Troeltsch, historical criticism has three foundational principles:

- “(1) criticism - namely, that all historical knowledge is a matter of probability and thus always open to revision,
- (2) analogy - only that which is analogous with what we have experienced can have a claim to being accepted as historical, and
- (3) correlation - all reality is interconnected through an inviolable network of cause and effect.”²⁸

Several observations related to the issue of faith may be made. First, there is no confessional element operative here. The bases for evaluating all faith claims are probability, experience, and rational causal relations. Knowledge, defined as the

²⁶ Black and Dockery, *NT Criticism and Interpretation*, list eight. This does not include sub-specialties within each areas, or newer areas such as socio-rhetorical, narrative, reader-response, liberation, feminist, or post-structuralist. This listing itself is only partial and suggestive.

²⁷ Following Epps and MacRae, p. viii. historical criticism would serve as an umbrella category for textual criticism, philology, form, source, and redaction criticism; literary for compositional, rhetorical, narrative, structural, etc.

²⁸ Donald A. Hagner, “The New Testament, History, and the Historical-Critical Method”, in Black and Dockery, *NT Criticism and Interpretation*, pp. 83-84, citing E. Troeltsch, “Ueber historische und dogmatische Methode in der Theologie,” in *Gesammelte Schriften*, Zweiter Band, 2nd ed., 1922 (Aalen: Scientia, 1962), pp. 729-753.

compendium of anthropologically determined facts, is the realm in which judgment takes place. Special revelation, for example prophetic utterance, is not acceptable for consideration. Second, there seems to be an implicit tension between the certainty required (or desired) by the faithful and the admission of approximation in (1). It appears that Lessing's ditch remains unbridged. In fact, these principles would seem to support Kierkegaardian fideism as much as confessional Christian faith. Third, the causal network criterion may rule out supernatural intervention *a priori* (although this does not necessarily follow if the workings of God are considered as part of the nexus).

A more modern statement of historical criticism rejects the positivistic scientific model, explicitly includes divine intervention in the causal chain, urges pursuit "without restriction [of] the explanation that best explains the phenomena under investigation," and restates its methodological dependence on canons of historical research.²⁹ However, these emendations still leave the approach in basically the same state as before. The basis for accepting faith claims remains wedded to the techniques, hence perspectives, of historical research. Therefore, by establishing that the text is an accurate, historically explainable record, a Christian may find herself in the position of abolishing the miraculous in the very process of demonstrating its authenticity. Regarding 'best explanation', the best possible explanation of resurrection may be that it doesn't happen - given the centuries of evidence attesting to the fact that dead people do not come back to life of any kind.

Literary Criticism

If historical criticism looks behind the experience of the text, this approach restricts itself to surface matters organic to the text. It "focuses on the finished form of the text,...emphasizes the unity of the text as a whole,...views the text as an end in itself, ...[and] is based on communication models of speech-act theory."³⁰ Elements such as point of view, narration, symbolism and irony, narrative patterns, events, characters, and setting are the materials from which literature is fashioned.³¹ A critic explores each of these, alone and in combination, in an effort to let the text itself suggest its range of

²⁹ Hagner, in Black and Dockery, pp. 89-91.

³⁰ Mark Allan Powell, What is Narrative Criticism? (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990), pp.7-10.

³¹ *Ibid.*, pp.23-83.

meanings. The question which the literary critic seeks to answer is, “How does the story mean?”³² It is by careful attention to the particularly literary aspects of the Bible that meaning is derived.³³

Literary criticism is often positioned as a reaction to the strictures and aims of historical criticism. It identifies itself as an interpretive strategy which deals with the text *qua* text. However, it shares many of the same fundamental characteristics as historical criticism. First, its theoretical base is an imported methodology (in this case, secular literary theory).³⁴ It shares in the tradition which originated with Schleiermacher, that sacred hermeneutics was properly subsumed into general hermeneutics.³⁵ According to a modern biblical critic, “The principles involved in the hermeneutical process are the same for any texts, sacred or secular, ancient or modern, literary or popular.”³⁶ This speaks to the second critique: literary criticism distorts historical understandings, since it is by definition subject to an ahistorical bias.³⁷ That is, it is not necessarily grounded in the historicity of the text, preferring instead to interpret its ‘narrative world’. It may blur historical particularity by overlaying Western categories onto literature from a very different *milieu*.³⁸ Further, current literary theory contests the notion that a text actually refers to anything outside itself (the ‘referential fallacy’).³⁹

Third, literary criticism lacks an objective framework by which to guide its possible interpretations. To some, this refers to the potential for radically subjective interpretations.⁴⁰ While, at the level the charge was brought, this is in some sense inaccurate (since interpretations must be supported by ‘objective’ evidence from the text), it is exactly correct in a larger sense. Meanings are justified insofar as they accord with

³² Elizabeth Struthers Malbon, “Narrative Criticism: How does the Story Mean?”, in Mark & Method: New Approaches in Biblical Studies, ed. Janice Capel Anderson and Stephen D. Moore (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992), p. 23-27.

³³ Tremper Longman, III, Literary Approaches to Biblical Interpretation (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1987), pp. 2-10.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 19-37; Powell, Narrative Criticism, pp. 93-94.

³⁵ Dockery, Biblical Interpretation, p. 162.

³⁶ Attributed to Norman Perrin by Stephen Moore, Literary Criticism and the Gospels (New Haven: Yale, 1989), p. 7.

³⁷ Powell, p. 96.

³⁸ Longman, p. 50-53.

³⁹ Longman, pp. 54-58.

⁴⁰ Powell, pp. 94-96.

the linguistic, poetic, and rhetorical evidence of the text alone. There is nothing which prevents an interpreter from reading a passage allegorically or figuratively. In this way, one may justifiably interpret the events of the Easter story purely existentially, without regard for the actuality of the event.⁴¹ Lacking a commitment to the reality of that event, there is no reason to support it by the use of literary critical methodologies. It is but an author's license to dramatize and invent in order to impart her message. While it may be asserted that "these [texts] may be read as 'true stories', that is, as stories intended to evoke responses that are in keeping with the true will of God", there is nothing at all in the method which compels that reading.⁴² Such a reading would only occur as the result of a prior faith belief. *Pace* Powell, the story *per se* could not ensure that conclusion.⁴³

Reader-Response Criticism

The shift in focus to the text itself, and the questions raised as a result, led to the emergence of a biblical criticism which stressed the role of the reader in generating meaning. "A text does not come to us wearing its meaning, like a campaign button, on its lapel."⁴⁴ Of the many possible construals of a passage, which is the 'right' one? Is the meaning waiting to be discovered, independent of the particular reader? "In reader-response criticism, meaning is something produced in the act of reading through the unique interaction of the text and the particular reader doing the reading, at a particular moment, from a particular slant."⁴⁵ This reader is a necessary component of the interpretive process, because of the 'reader construct' present in every text. Thus, far from being an accretion to textual interpretation, this method purports only to acknowledge one of the previously unrecognized inherent factors.⁴⁶

⁴¹ So, in this way, Bultmann's reading of the NT is supportable, as is his definition of faith denied in n. 15. p. 6.

⁴² Powell, p. 99.

⁴³ Powell states as one benefit of the method that it "treats texts in a manner *consistent* with the Christian understanding of canon.", p. 88, emphasis added. However, consistency with the texts is not a necessary condition of this method. All that is being asserted here is that this method has no apparent, inherent tendency to do violence to Christian faith claims: which may or may not be a characteristic particular to this method; which may or may not influence the use to which it is put.

⁴⁴ Robert M. Fowler, "Reader-Response Criticism: Figuring Mark's Reader", in Anderson and Moore, Mark & Method, pp. 5i.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 52.

⁴⁶ Stephen Moore, Literary Criticism, p. 72.

From these relatively intuitive insights, especially those which speak to the variety of readers who come to a text (e.g., naive, expert, resistant, implied), this approach quickly moves to greater philosophical complexity as it “advocate[s] a change in our understanding of meaning.”⁴⁷ That is, it is part of a broader project of hermeneutical shift. Reception theory, phenomenology of reading, indeterminacy of meaning: these are terms with which a critic must become familiar in order to ‘do’ reader-oriented interpretation.⁴⁸ At the risk of gross over-simplification and reductionism, let us set out some of the distinctive foci involved in this critical method.⁴⁹

Reader-response criticism stresses the temporal element of reading. As we read a text, we accumulate more information. In this, our understanding of what we have previously read changes. As it changes, so we may say that the meaning has also changed. Thus, the process of reading is valued as much, or more, than the product of that reading. Related to this immediate temporality is the larger process of “looking forward and looking backward.” This points up the way in which subsequent textual details affect meaning. At a given point in a story, we are dependent upon what we have already assimilated. Later reversals will cause us to attribute meanings different from those we arrived at in our initial experience of the text. For example, reading that Jesus’ tomb is found empty alters the meaning of his death.

A synchronic factor of reading act is the presence of ‘gaps’ in the text. At the most basic level, this can involve unspecified subjects and objects, or pronouns, in the sentences we read. It is the reader who supplies the proper connections among these. In another form, this involves such situations as breaks in plot sequence, temporal leaps, or unspecified motivations. In each of these, it is the reader who is required, by the text, to arrive at an understanding or explanation. For example, Mark 1:14 reads, “Now after John was arrested, Jesus came into Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God.”

⁴⁷ Fowler, p. 52. See, also, Moore, *Literary Criticism*, pp. 114-116, especially the remark, “These ideas might seem utterly counterintuitive to some.”

⁴⁸ See Moore, pp. 83-107, for an exposition of some of these terms, critical engagement, and examples of their practice.

⁴⁹ The following material is taken from Fowler, pp. 56-75, unless otherwise noted.

Although juxtaposed, there are at least two gaps between these events: one, temporal; the other, causal. The reader must fill these with meaning.⁵⁰

Two other distinctives of this approach should be noted, both of which involve the agency of the reader in forging meaning. Reconstruction is used to describe how a reader returns to a passage and reconstructs her understanding of that passage in light of subsequent material. The paradigm example of this is irony: that which appears to be the case on the surface of the text (i.e., the apparent meaning of words or events) is undercut by the deeper reality expressed in the broader context. As example, consider the label “King of the Jews” assigned to Christ. To those crucifying him, this was patently false. In the reality of the narrative, this was truth. He was crucified as the ‘right thing’ for the wrong reasons. The reader is called upon to develop this meaning, since the story does not explicitly state it. Related to the ironic is “the self-consuming artifact.”⁵¹ Here, the apparent solidity of one’s interpretation ‘evaporates’ as the reader continues on. It is likened to a “knitting machine that knits but at the same time unravels what it has knitted.”⁵² The reader becomes enmeshed in the story, but may not return to her previous condition after having initially experienced the text.

It is the presence of these gaps, and the active agency of the reader, which has supplied much of the impetus for a theory of indeterminacy of meaning. That is, because ‘meaning *lacunae*’ occur so frequently, and, in each instance, the reader must assemble his own ‘meaning construct’ (which is highly particular to that reader), there is less actual than indeterminate meaning in texts. This theory specifically targets the meaning of the text, over against its significance: variations in interpretation are rooted in the nature and structure of communication itself, not in abstractions each individual derives. It is from this position that more radical reader-response criticisms, such as deconstruction, take their warrant.

There is much in reader-response criticism which is praiseworthy. The amount of space necessary to present this brief survey indicates that this is an overlooked part of the

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 62. This entire example is Fowler’s.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 70, quoting Stanley Fish, *Self-Consuming Artifacts: The Emergence of Seventeenth-Century Literature* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 1972).

⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 70.

interpretive process. Where literary criticism seems almost intuitive (partly because of our long-term exposure to it in the educational system), reader oriented insights are hard won and challenging. The role of the reader has often been marginalized in the past, and we are richer for taking the time and effort to explore more thoroughly one of the three complementary components of the interpretive endeavor.

My critique of this critical method for biblical interpretation is substantially the same as that of literary criticism: imported methodology, ahistorical bias, and lack of an objective framework. In addition to these, reader-response criticism posits a radical subjectivity, one which strikes at the heart of the interpretive process. Indeterminacy of meaning, pushed very far at all, leads to the paralysis of intellectual solipsism. Discourse halts because each interpreter has a claim to privileged access to her interpretation. Since meaning is a construct, and each construct is relative to the particular situation of each interpreter, then each meaning is valid so long as it is valid to that interpreter. It is epistemological internalism run aground.

Summary

The modern period of biblical interpretation is clearly characterized by a reliance on methodology. It is this which justifies distinguishing interpretation after the mid-1700's from interpretation prior to that time. Clearly, this is not to say that there have been no interpreters who have made their faith commitments a part of their work. However, it is to say that that faith commitment was in some sense alien to the process. That is, there is no modern interpretive approach which, *as such*, explicitly includes the role of a confession of faith as part of its principles: neither historical, literary, nor reader-response biblical criticism. It is this which is the hallmark and legacy of modern biblical criticism

Postmodern Biblical Criticism

As presented in Chapter 1, postmodern biblical criticism intends to challenge 'traditional' interpretive approaches. "Most varieties of postmodernism strike out against

the very notions of identity and unity in one way or another.”⁵³ It resists the modern and rebels against the ancients.⁵⁴ It is based on an assumption that there is no “unshakable truth”, because “no foundational belief has successfully commanded general assent. It depends for its philosophical framework on the work of Ferdinand de Saussure, “the ‘father’ of modern linguistics’, Jacques Derrida, and Michel Foucault.”⁵⁵ The dictum of this approach is found in Michel Foucault’s words, “To work is to try to think something different from what one has thought before.”⁵⁶ Its goal is “to make the familiar seem startlingly strange.”⁵⁷

Broadly stated, postmodern biblical criticism asserts a relativity between communities.⁵⁸ Validity in interpretation is mediated and arbitrated by a community of reference.⁵⁹ So long as the community to which one has given authority agrees with and accepts an interpretation, it is a “good” interpretation. As noted above, the philosophical base which justifies this is “indeterminacy of meaning,” belief that words and texts lack stable meaning (e.g., the difference between “Jesus saves” standing in isolation and “Jesus saves; Moses invests”). The norms of the community are to function as the guides for adjudicating differences in interpretations.⁶⁰ The history of interpretation is a model of this kind of process, as competing ideas were “bought” (or not) in the marketplace.⁶¹

Postmodern biblical criticism is heavily dependent on the philosophical insights of linguistic theorists. More so than with literary and reader-response criticism, there is neither an historical sense nor an objective framework. The radical subjectivity of reader-response criticism is here combined with a radical agenda. I will let Stephen Moore speak of postmodern criticism’s place in the larger history of interpretation:

⁵³ Adam, p. 1.

⁵⁴ Ibid. pp. 1-5.

⁵⁵ See Stephen Moore, Poststructuralism and the New Testament: Derrida and Foucault at the Foot of the Cross (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), for an explication of deconstruction and the work of these men.

⁵⁶ Adam, p. xiv.

⁵⁷ Moore, Poststructuralism, p. 117.

⁵⁸ Adam., p. 6, 7-15.

⁵⁹ David Clines, “A World Established On Water (Psalm 24): Reader-Response, Deconstruction and Bespoke Interpretation,” in The New Literary Criticism and the Hebrew Bible, ed. J. Cheryl Exum and David A. J. Clines (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993), p. 86.

⁶⁰ Ibid., pp. 87-88.

⁶¹ Ibid. p. 88.

“[It] would be historical criticism’s id, the seat of its strongest authoritarian instincts--historical criticism unfettered at last from the ecclesiastical superego that has always compelled it to genuflect before the icons it had come to destroy.”⁶²

This is too dense to unpack fully here. I would note, however, the antipathy toward the “ecclesiastical” and the use of destruction language. He imputes a terroristic motive to the critical enterprise; one which, if genuine, makes this approach clearly (or, more kindly, potentially) inimical to the contents of the Christian confession of faith. If this is the hallmark and legacy of postmodern biblical criticism, then it might be more aptly named post-Christian.

Chapter Summary

We have seen that biblical criticisms may properly be organized according to the criteria of the relationship between faith and method in the practice of that criticism. We have established the existence of two overarching patterns: faith predominant over method; method predominant over faith. These are appropriately labeled premodern and modern. The investigation of self-described postmodern biblical criticism has raised the question as to its congruence with the history of biblical tradition, given its apparent antipathy toward both that tradition and the contents of the faith which gave rise to the tradition.⁶³

The task of the next chapter will be to set forth a constructive proposal for what I would assert as a more genuinely postmodern biblical criticism and to examine what I take to be one critical approach which instantiates that proposal.

⁶² Moore, *Poststructuralism*, p. 117.

⁶³ Those of the modern period, while not explicitly placing themselves in the same relationship to faith as those of premodern interpretation, claimed at least potential neutrality, if not outright compatibility. Cf. Powell, pp. 85-90, esp. p. 88.

CHAPTER 4

English Bible and Postmodern Biblical Criticism

It has been shown that the issue of the relationship between faith and method is deeply imbedded in the history of biblical interpretation, and can be seen to have two characteristics expressions. One is that interpretive approach in which method is subordinated to confession; the other, that approach in which faith is subordinated to method.

These correlate in general with the historical periods we call “premodern” and “modern,” although there are recurring examples of “anachronistic” readings throughout the record.¹ Each of these periods is marked by a characteristic relationship between faith and method. The modern period is indeed marked by an intentional separation between an individual’s faith life and her professional life. The distinction is not absolute, but is sufficiently clear to validate my conclusion that faith and method issues have been operative during the course of the history of interpretation, and that the characteristics of their imbalance provides a helpful lens through which to view the contemporary scene.

It is from these observations that my creative proposal arises. If it is the case, as claimed above, that the present state of biblical interpretation is beset by an unbalanced relationship between faith and method, and if the history of biblical interpretation indicates that faith and method have always been in some sense opposed, and if postmodern biblical criticism as it is presently set forth is better described as ultra-modern because of its constitutive emphasis on method, then there remains a need for a hermeneutic which might be called genuinely postmodern. As such, I believe that it should be one which explicitly relates faith confession to methodological consideration in dynamic, holistic synergy. It should avoid the critique that faith issues are imported surreptitiously or implicitly into the

¹ For this reason, I think these labels (premodern, modern, postmodern) fail to render adequately the larger history and more fundamental issues. Examples of modern readers with “premodern” tendencies include those persons and groups we would label as fundamentalists or literalists. In addition to these, there are academics who aver that a “dogmatic” reading in service to faith is the best and most appropriate approach. See Eleonore Stump and Thomas P. Flint, *Hermes and Athena: Biblical Exegesis and Philosophy* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame, 1993). Examples of premodern readers/writers with “modern” emphases include Luke (1:1-4), John (20:30-31), Origen, Augustine, Jerome, Wesley, etc.

exegete's work.² In so doing, it would take seriously the overarching trajectory of the discipline and would account for the most fundamental tension in biblical interpretation. In addition, it might be a step toward crystallizing what is nascent in those approaches known in their variety and commonality as a hermeneutics of consent, an ecumenical hermeneutic, an ecclesial hermeneutic, or a Wesleyan hermeneutic.³ With these criteria for a genuinely postmodern hermeneutic in mind, it is time to examine the *English Bible (EB)* approach.

The foundational text for *EB* classes at Asbury Seminary is Methodical Bible Study by Robert A. Traina.⁴ In it, Dr. Traina sets out his recommendations for Scriptural interpretation. He divides the endeavor into four main tasks: Observation, Interpretation, Evaluation and Application, and Correlation. The goal in observation is "to enable one to become *saturated* with the particulars of a passage so that one is thoroughly conscious of the existence and of the need for their explanation."⁵ Interpretation involves "the problem of re-creation," that is the imaginative empathy of the reader toward the intentions and meanings of the author.⁶ Evaluation and application follow the efforts at establishing an interpretation and seek to enable the interpreter to move from the text to the world and situation of the reader.⁷ Correlation is the final step by which the interpreter generalizes toward second and third order construals of the text.⁸

Each of these tasks is further analyzed into the kinds of procedures and orientations which would be most conducive to their realization. The greatest amount of

² See n. 43 above. I would note in addition that historical criticism is plagued with an asymptotic relationship between individual faith and methodological requirements.

³ See, for example, Peter Schulmacher, *Vom Verstehen des Neuen Testaments* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1986) re: "Eine Hermeneutik des Einverständnisses"; Geoffrey Wainwright, "Towards an Ecumenical Hermeneutic: How can All Christians Read the Scriptures Together?" *Gregorianum* 76, 4 (1995): pp. 639-662; and Luke T. Johnson, *Scripture And Discernment: Decision Making In the Church* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1996).

⁴ (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1952). Another oft-used text is David Thompson's Bible Study That Works (Nappanee: IN: Evangel Press, 1994). It should be noted that Dr. Traina's book was written for an audience of seminary students.

⁵ Traina, MBS, p. 31. *EB* depends on MBS, but is not in every sense identical to it. For the purposes of this paper, in the absence of other published material which sets forth more recent nuances, and because MBS is a required text in many *EB* course, this paper will not continually distinguish between them.

⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 93-95.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 203.

⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 223ff.

text is reserved for observation and the least for correlation. There is a consistent movement among these steps, each building on the preceding and preparing for the following. It is a system which indeed offers a framework for methodical study. At issue here, however, is the extent to which this process might contribute to the attainment of a genuinely postmodern biblical criticism. Bracketing out the issue of anachronism, the extent to which a process whose primary text dates from the 1950's and whose deeper roots extend to the late 1800's, let us explore the way in which *EB* holds faith confession and methodological consideration in what I deem to be their appropriate explicitly synergistic relation.

As noted, *EB* meets the criteria for attention to methodological rigor. This emphasis is significant for several reasons. First, it satisfies that part of my definition of postmodern which calls for methodological intentionality. Secondly, it rules out the possibility that *EB* could be charged with fostering or sponsoring an unreflective, uncritical reading - the hallmarks of both pre-modern and fundamentalist interpretations. The basis of that kind of interpretation is the naive assumption that what one sees is all there is to see and that the interpreter (as both individual and corporate entity) does not influence perception. Methodological considerations aid one in acquiring necessary and real distantiation from the text. Third, because its particular method divides the task of interpretation into four stages, it avoids the ultramodern error of compressing the process of coming to understanding.⁹ That is, it recognizes the gap between initial experience and subsequent reflection/appropriation. While deeply interrelated, *EB*'s four steps are neither coterminous nor coextensive. Thus, the move from a construal of the meaning of the text in its temporal particularity is distinguished from its application/significance for the contemporary interpreter. In this way, *EB* conforms to the most important insights of modern biblical exegesis, while avoiding many of the perils associated with contemporary

⁹ For a recent example of both the theoretical and applied utilization of this insight, see David L. Thompson, "Women, Men, Slaves, and the Bible: Hermeneutical Inquiries," Christian Scholars Review Vol. 25, No. 3 (March 1996): pp. 326-349.

strategies designed to liberate the text from arbitrary or authoritative readings.¹⁰ It is neither modern nor premodern.

However, even with that said, it is perhaps with the modern that *EB* is most likely to be identified, and from which it is least likely to be differentiated. For example, the language and structure of the method (with its emphasis on evidence, hypothesis, single meanings, objectivity, and induction) leave *EB* open to the critique that it is paradigmatically positivistic. That is, one derives a sense that coming to an interpretation is no more difficult or involved than assaying a physical object. Just as it is often assumed that the assayer cannot alter the characteristics of that object and will arrive at as precise a measurement as her tools, and perspicuous method, allow, so the interpreter who utilizes *EB* will arrive at “the meaning of the text.”¹¹ As Gadamer has pointed out, there is an ontological distinction between a work of art and an artifact.¹² The ‘methods’ that have to do with one are not likely to be applicable to the other.¹³ So, while *EB* stresses its recognition and treatment of the text *qua* text, its scientific emphases may belie that recognition.

Further, the claim of inductive objectivity seems problematic on at least two counts: it falls prey to those criticisms of induction which stress its inherent openness and its consequent inadequacy for matters of eternal importance; at the same time, *EB* faces the charge that it is not in fact a sufficiently open system to claim it operates inductively.¹⁴ One might question the extent to which a statement like “the *Old* Testament has been transcended by the *New* Testament because it contains God’s final and supreme revelation to man in Jesus Christ,” could support the notion that *EB* is understood to be so open that

¹⁰ See N. T. Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992), pp. 6ff for an example and analysis of the ways in which various interpretations may be characterized as precritical/premodern, modern, and putatively postmodern. See also, Ben Meyer, *Critical Realism and the New Testament* (Allison Park, PA:Pickwick, 1989).

¹¹ Traina, *MBS*, p. 203: “Having discovered *the* meaning of a Biblical passage...” (italics added).

¹² See Hans Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, pp. 94-100, 101-169. It should be noted that Dr. Traina addressed these concerns to some extent in his later article, “Inductive Bible Study Re-examined.”

¹³ See also Michael Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge: Towards a Post-Critical Philosophy* (New York: Harper, 1958, 1964), for relevant observations about recent insights into the relationship between observer and the observed in scientific investigations.

¹⁴ I will not address here the tension between the philosophical problem of induction and the closed field of a fixed text.

a prior faith claim might be overturned.¹⁵ It appears that *EB* might not be the radically open system required for genuine induction.¹⁶ As said earlier of the historical-critical method, what seems to be the case is that the basic substance of one's faith confession is not on the table (would/could *EB* be envisioned as convincing a person of the falseness of "Jesus is Lord"?). Therefore, *EB* might be criticized as offering no more than a 'scientific' veneer which overlays one's *a priori* faith commitment. This would, however, be something of a misconstrual of the assumptions of *EB*. Dr. Traina rightly notes that "there is no such thing as pure induction...[and] because there is no pure induction, there is no absolute objectivity"¹⁷ As will be seen below, this important acknowledgment is a significant factor in *EB*'s ability to contribute to postmodern criticism.

With all this said, can it still be argued that *EB* meets the criteria for a postmodern hermeneutic? With careful attention to the matrix in which Dr. Traina and the method operate, I believe the answer to be yes. It requires careful attention because there are moments when the presentation's argument seems mixed. For example, in Dr. Traina's essay, "Inductive Bible Study Reexamined: Part I," he sets forth the idea that Christian "faith is the result of the inductive study of evidence."¹⁸ Several sentences later, he quotes Wilbert White to the effect that "the true interpreter will...depend upon the illuminating influence of the Holy Spirit."¹⁹ After noting the apparent inconsistency of these remarks, and reviewing the statements of others on this issue, Dr. Traina concludes that the extent to which they "were paradoxical or inconsistent depends on how one interprets them."²⁰ At the close of this section, Dr. Traina juxtaposes "induction [which] is to be true to itself" with "the Holy Spirit when he attempts to use the evidence to produce faith."²¹ It is this

¹⁵ Traina, *MBS*, p. 206. Or, "*the Bible is an objective body of literature* which exists because man needs to know certain truths", p. 7 (italics in the original). See also the text quoted below, referenced in n. 34.

¹⁶ In fact, *EB* stresses radical openness more so than commitment to philosophically and scientifically rigorous induction.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 8.

¹⁸ Traina, *IBSR*, p. 60. Apparently this idea is to be attributed to White, but the text is unclear.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 60..

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 62. This seems to qualify the notion of objectivity. If this is so, then in what other instances is it the case that one's interpretation is determinative for these kind of judgments? If there is an objective meaning which may be arrived at by an interpreter, then it should not depend on how one interprets them but on how well one uncovered/revealed/discovered 'the true interpretation'.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 62.

kind of interweaving of the inductive process itself, the sovereignty of the Spirit, and the agency of the interpreter which can trip the unwary.

Because there is more to it than its focus on the objective, it is possible to label *EB* a genuinely postmodern approach. It is *EB*'s particular genius explicitly to recognize the subjective in the interpretive endeavor. More than recognizing it, *EB* incorporates it into its approach. While broadly human subjectivities come into play, it is precisely in its acknowledgment that the task at hand is a specifically Christian effort which qualifies *EB* as a postmodern hermeneutic.

A most revealing instance of this is found in the "Introduction" to Methodical Bible Study. In the heart of the preponderantly modern explication of the observational step, Dr. Traina includes reverence as a necessary component to the method.²² In the footnote related to the section, the role of the Spirit is made even more explicit. Because this is a crucial passage for getting at the underlying significance of an appropriate Christian confession, I will quote it at length:

These statements do not imply that one must approach the Scriptures with a belief in the inspiration and authority in order to receive anything from them. For if one needed to believe that the Bible is God's Word before one could benefit from it, the principle of induction would be utterly negated. In fact, the validity of reason itself would be denied and there would arise the implication that one's choices must be made blindly. For example, imagine a man who has lived on an island where he has not had the opportunity of hearing about the Scriptures. Two missionaries, one a Christian and one a Mohammedan, come to the island, and both insist that their particular books represent God's revelation to man. If the islander were forced to accept the proclamation of the missionaries before examining the books, he would have no basis for choosing between the Bible and the Koran. As a matter of fact, he could choose either with impunity because the basis of his choice would be the same in both cases. The Christian missionary would have no better appeal than the Mohammedan. On the other hand, if the islander were told, "Take these two books; examine them for yourself; read them and meditate on them; test their statements, and accept the one which best reveals God," then he would have a legitimate basis for making a decision. Moreover, *we may rest assured that if the Scriptures are approached with an open mind and heart, because they do contain God's revelation to men in Jesus Christ, they will bear their own testimony through the operation of the Holy*

²² Traina, MBS, p. 13.

Spirit...What is most essential to one's approach to Scripture, then is a willingness to accept the truth once it is found.²³

While this is too dense to be fully unpacked here, the italicized text highlights the extent to which *a priori* Christian confession permeates and balances *EB* method. First, it is clear that Dr. Traina has just such a prior faith in the Bible as Scripture, both because it is a theological assertion to so label that collection of texts and because of his confession here. Secondly, it is none other than the Holy Spirit which accomplishes the transformation from investigation to confession. That is, it is not a fruit of the method that one confesses Jesus Christ as Lord. It is a gift of the Holy Spirit which is in some sense facilitated by the use of an approach which hopes to lead one to an open mind.²⁴ Method and faith operated synergistically, each building on the other, neither ideally functional without the other.

Additional evidence of faith explicitly interacting with method is found in the discussion of the broad sorts of resources which the interpreter brings to bear on a text. Dr. Traina distinguishes two: subjective and objective.²⁵ He begins with the subjective, thus suggesting, by priority of place, priority of significance.²⁶ Further, among the subjective determinants, spiritual sense is ranked first: “[interpretation] involves the nature of the interpreter of the text rather than the nature of the text itself.”²⁷ Thus, one begins to realize that the earlier commitment to the agency of the Holy Spirit, i.e. one's faith confession, is indeed fundamental to the overall orientation of *EB*. Objective determinants may not even be necessary to interpretation:

Thus, given the same aptitudes with regard to the techniques of exegesis, two persons will differ in the ability to understand Scriptural truth proportionately to their possession of spiritual sense. In fact, so important is the spiritual factor that one sometimes finds individuals who, though

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 24; italics added

²⁴ For a suggestive (and in my opinion persuasive) analysis of the effect of the Holy Spirit in bringing about genuinely Christian knowledge, see William J. Abraham, “The Epistemological Significance of the Inner Witness of the Holy Spirit,” *Faith and Philosophy* 7, no. 4 (October 1990): pp. 434-50.

²⁵ The “Subjective determinants” are spiritual sense, common sense, and experience. “Objective determinants” include term analysis, textual context, literary form, historical background, and the “interpretation of others.

²⁶ Traina, *MBS*, pp. 136-164.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 136.

deficient in the skills of interpretation, far surpass in insight those who have had the best training in exegetical procedures.²⁸

Objective determinants, however, are in fact critical to the task. They are the particular guards and guides which help the method transcend its eisegetical potential. The method recognizes that the text points beyond itself. It is the text which is the bridge and gateway through and by which all connections occur and meanings arise. That is, the text is the locus of all methods and “worlds” It serves as the starting point to the historical, the totality of “world” to the literary, and the matrix to the reader-response. It is the point where author, reader, and community intersect. So, by requiring the interpreter to consider the ways in which the text interacts with various ‘worlds’ (e.g., the author, narrator, the faithful community), *EB* avoids the pitfalls of naive or literalist readings as well as solipsistic renderings.

Perhaps this is best illustrated by means of contrast to other methods. Unlike literary critical and reader-response approaches, which do not make any necessary claims about the text or its interpreter, *EB* defines both the text and the exegete within a Christian confession. Unlike the historical-critical, which emphasizes skepticism, *EB* integrates the faith stance of the interpreter. In each of those approaches, there is at least one ‘world’ which is minimized. In *EB*, through the objective and subjective determinants Dr. Traina lists, this may be avoided.

²⁸ Ibid., p. 136-7.

CHAPTER 5

Summary and Conclusions

This paper has presented an analysis of the history of biblical interpretation in service of the larger thesis that faith and method are two crucial foci around which various approaches may be organized. It has concluded that the relationship between faith and method takes two characteristic forms: method subordinate to faith; faith subordinate to method. Further, this paper has suggested that the tension which has been demonstrated to exist between faith and method in the history of interpretation may have contributed to a present sense of crisis in this field. In response, this paper has offered a constructive proposal in which faith and method are related in explicit synergy, thus avoiding the difficulties which have arisen as a result of their dichotomization. This suggested approach was characterized as genuinely postmodern in light of this paper's conclusions that just this manner of relating faith to method resolves the underlying issues at the heart of the premodern, modern, postmodern aspects of the contemporary debate about biblical criticism.

After detailing this constructive proposal, this paper reviewed and critiqued the interpretive approach known as *English Bible (EB)*, particularly as it is understood and practiced at Asbury Theological Seminary. After determining that *EB* is fundamentally, and validly, oriented around a faith confession on the part of the interpreter, this paper concluded that *EB* has much to offer to the larger community in its move beyond modern and modernistic approaches toward what is being called postmodern. Precisely because *EB* explicitly relates faith confession to methodological consideration, it may be characterized as genuinely postmodern.

One final comment about the value of *EB* for contemporary biblical interpretation will serve to gather the main emphases and intentions of this paper. In G. Wainwright's article, "Towards an Ecumenical Hermeneutic: How can All Christians Read the Scriptures Together?", he notes the pervasive sense of the ongoing presence of Christ in the community of the faithful.¹ He sees this Christ as the potential ground for ecumenical

¹ *Gregorianum* 76, 4 (1995): pp. 639-662.

convergence and reconciliation. If this Christ who abides is understood in terms of the Holy Spirit, then *EB* stands ready to serve the ecumenical community. As indicated above, the epistemological ground of *EB*, and the hermeneutical principle which enables it to cohere, is that the Holy Spirit (the One who abides with the *ekklesia*) is the basis for all confession and understanding. While this leaves open the extent to which the Spirit may be thought of as leading to identical readings, it is striking the degree to which *EB* might well be able to contribute to the present ecumenical dialogue and serve to unite those who have been so long divided.²

² See again Abraham, "The Epistemological Significance of the Inner Witness of the Holy Spirit," in particular for the way Abraham stresses that the Spirit is primarily valuable for the initial and continuing Christological/ Trinitarian confession that Jesus is Lord and attempts to cite the Spirit as warrant for dogmatic claims may fall outside the Spirit's role.

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