

Hermeneutics of New Testament eschatological texts*

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“Hermeneutic” – this word is used to describe a variety of things these days. In what follows, however, I should like hermeneutics to mean “basic principles for how to arrive at an understanding of texts”¹. These principles can concern different abstraction levels, i.e., bear more *generally* upon different texts, or upon a more *restricted* number of such.

Although I have the NT eschatological material in mind, I am first going to deal with principles which are so general that they could apply to any text. After this rather general discussion, I shall move on to a lower level of abstraction and suggest some interpretative perspectives which I think are particularly appropriate for an understanding of NT eschatological texts.

I am also going to differentiate between two forms of understanding or interpretation, both of which need a hermeneutic. The first form of understanding approaches texts in their historical, original situation. The other attempts to understand the same texts within the framework of a modern, responsible reflection on Christian beliefs and/or ethics. I am persuaded that both the historical, scholarly interpretation, and the topical, Christian, benefit by not being mixed up with each other².

Of course it is easy to declare that one wants to keep the historical and the contemporary Christian interpretations apart. But we know all too well that one never is totally objective and that all sorts of pre-understandings influence our interpretative attitudes. In spite of the difficulties, I think, however, that we should try, as honestly as possible, to be historically fair to the texts in our scholarly work, and also, to be conscious of what we are doing when adapting old texts to new problems in new situations.

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A couple of times I have spoken of “understanding”. A philosopher could comment on that concept, but I refrain from that and content myself with stating that I am going to use the word in a common-sense manner. Adopting such a common-sense usage also means that I am a bit sceptical about attempts “to understand an author better than he understood himself”, as Schleiermacher put it. In so far as texts function primarily in a communication, such a view tends to leave precisely the aspect of communication aside. In showing due respect to a text in an interpretation, one has to make some things explicit that were not so from the beginning – spelling out things that only were there in the air, etc. But all the time the interpreter strives to understand the communication between the sender and the receiver of the message³.

May I, finally, in these preliminary remarks, point out that I am going to use the word eschatology⁴ in the old-fashioned way, as referring to theological ideas about the farthest future of man and/or the world⁵.

I now enter upon a few hermeneutic deliberations concerning what I call *historical* understanding. Let us start with a simple fact: the texts which we want to understand are linguistic phenomena. Their authors have written in the language of their environment, they have used current words and normal grammar, they have steeped their texts in the same literary forms, genres, and thought patterns as those found in their milieu. That does not preclude that they may have been creative and original. But it does mean that their changes and innovations were made within the conditions provided by the linguistic culture in which the writers lived. If this were not so, the rules of communication would have been so vehemently violated that the messages could not have functioned as messages any more. They would have been monologues of hermits, heard by no one, understood by no one.

Thus, to understand texts within their linguistic framework demands due respect to the linguistic expressions – vocabulary, style, genres, forms.

All this may appear to be self-evident. But, it seems to me, in the domain of eschatology, this principle of respecting the literary communication has not received due attention. In this connection apocalypticism has played a particular role. As is well known one has since long differentiated between apocalypticism and eschatology. Apocalypticism is thought of as rather concrete, phantastic expecta-

tions of cosmic convulsions, of paradise and hell etc. Eschatology, on the other hand, is said to concern man and transcendence, God the eternal, and it can – or should – be independent of spatial and temporal categories⁶. Several scholars who have been working on Jewish and Christian apocalyptic texts hold the opinion that this differentiation is not fair, not least because it does not pay due respect to the linguistic means of expression of the texts⁷.

As is well known, the concepts “apocalypticism, apocalyptic”, etc., originally denoted texts of a revelatory character. Everyone who has read a few apocalypses also knows that, although they mostly deal with eschatological matters, other things are also “revealed”, e.g., astronomical secrets⁸.

Furthermore, we should note that apocalyptic texts have been used in very different circles. In both Early Judaism and Early Christianity one held eschatological ideas, but it is doubtful that there existed a clearly delineated phenomenon that could be labelled “*the* apocalypticism”. This is so, either one takes apocalypticism as denoting a philosophical and theological system, or one uses the word to signify a sociological reality in the form of particular groups⁹.

But there was the literary genre of apocalypse, and there was the eschatological-apocalyptic *mode of speech*. The person who wants to understand apocalyptic texts must, then, have an idea of what this mode of speech is like, or, to be more precise, what kind of semantic function it may have.

Contemporary theologians sometimes express themselves in a manner like the following¹⁰: With the OT prophets we encounter a way of regarding man’s and history’s relationship to God which is truly “eschatological”, and which can be the point of departure for a biblically based, contemporary eschatology. This outlook – one goes on to say – was also that of Jesus and of a few people in the Early Church, especially of Paul. Paul, one maintains, used apocalyptic language, but did so in a non-apocalyptic manner.

I have a feeling that behind a presentation of this sort there lies a questionable presupposition, namely, that Jesus and a few of his followers used language in a way that radically differed from that of their cultural and religious environment. One seems to think that we can forget about the eschatological-apocalyptic texts of Early Judaism and have Jesus and some Christians inspired directly by the OT prophets.

For my part, I am convinced that the scholars of the so-called

consistent eschatology were more correct. Johannes Weiss and Albert Schweitzer, its most renowned representatives, wanted to understand Jesus and his followers in the light of their contemporary culture, also and not least when it came to the eschatological preaching. But, I would maintain, and here I deviate from these giants of scholarship, the eschatological preaching was held in a mode of speech that it is more correct to call symbolic than literalistic – if we have to make a choice between the two.

Norman Perrin suggested with some justification that P Wheelwright's terminology could be useful when one discusses these matters. Wheelwright differentiated between stenosymbols and tensive symbols¹¹: A "stenosymbol" can literally be translated "a narrow symbol": it has a fixed meaning, like, for example, the *pi*-sign. A tensive symbol, on the other hand, stands for something less precise; it has vaguer and more unstable referents.

In our century apocalyptic groups have appeared which have presented precise schedules of history – past, present, and, above all, of the eschatological future. Taking up Wheelwright's term, we can label their understanding of Biblical texts stenosymbolic. I have a strange feeling that these groups at times give serious theologians something like a bad conscience: Do they not actually read the Bible in the same way as the first Christians did? Didn't the first readers of the Book of Revelation read it as these enthusiasts do, i.e., in a "stenosymbolic" way? And shouldn't one also do the same thing now?

I would say, no. Certainly more or less literal interpretations of the apocalypses did appear, both in Judaism and Christianity, but nevertheless, a tensive-symbolic, more expressionistic way of reading them seems to have been the normal one.

When I call the apocalyptic-eschatological mode of speech tensive-symbolic, I am speaking of its semantic function in a general way¹². And this, in turn, means that I apply to a mode of speech such distinctions which more often are made concerning clauses. Thus, we can say that the modern apocalyptic sects give the texts an informative function. But even the passages in the Book of Daniel which seem to give precise information of years and days, have normally been understood by Early Judaism as being expressive and admonishing rather than serving concrete informative functions.

So much for the hermeneutic principle of rendering due respect to the linguistic means of communication. Much more briefly, I will

touch upon another similar principle, that is that one must pay due attention to the individual author. This principle may seem self-evident, but also in this case scholars have failed when dealing with our theme. All too often one has harmonized different texts in order to arrive at "Jewish apocalypticism" or something similar. But one should not too easily, e.g., combine the ideas of the author of *2 Baruch* with, say, those of the writer of *The Apocalypse of Moses*. As Mark and Matthew can require to be taken as individual theologians, so can these. In this connection there is also the danger that one is a little too eager to make the ideas of the particular authors applicable to modern age. In eschatological matters, Jesus has taught things which may be a little uncomfortable to a modern mind. Not only did he think that his work inaugurated the Kingdom of God, indeed, in a way realized it, but he also looked forward to its future coming – "thy kingdom come". We come across similar tensions throughout the NT¹³. Thus, one should not be too quick in construing a NT eschatology, which tries to harmonize ideas from different strands of the Early Church¹⁴. There is an obvious risk that in so doing one pays too little attention both to the tensitivity of the mode of speech and to the individual authors, their particular circumstances, etc.

With this I leave the higher abstraction level, the level of rather general hermeneutic principles. Instead, I will dwell at a lower level of abstraction, suggesting interpretative perspectives for an understanding of eschatological passages. But note that we are still on a level of abstraction, in the sense that we are not looking for the historical messages of the particular texts to their receivers in NT times. Instead we seek for more general and more comprehensive ideas and ways of thinking which are represented by these texts. In addition, I present these interpretative perspectives, having in mind an interpretation for a Christian theology of today.

Of course already the first Christian generation re-read older texts applying them to new situations – to do so belonged to their Jewish heritage. They did not, however, re-read only the OT, but also, for example, the letter to Philemon. A letter which concerned a very private business was apparently regarded as representing ideas or principles of a more general impact, ideas or principles that could be used when reading the text in another situation to another audience.

So the texts have been handed over from generation to generation – they have become tradition. To re-read them as, in some sense or

another, authoritative documents is also tradition. But when Christians follow this tradition, their ways of applying the texts become more or less bound by their particular traditions. (Somebody may here recognise the distinctions of the Montreal conference in 1966). Thus the interpretations are nowadays, as earlier, coloured by traditional Christian usages of the texts throughout Church history. The texts have, as the Germans put it, a *Nachgeschichte*, a post-history.

In general hermeneutics one attaches a considerable importance to the post-history of a text, to the ways in which it has been understood in later times¹⁵. It happens quite often that a text is regarded as really significant only when one does not care about its original meaning any more. This has, e.g., been the case with Sophocles' tragedies, and something similar is going on with the Bible. Thus I do not think that one should be ashamed of recurring to the Christian traditions in one's use of the Bible, learning from interpretations of it in earlier days.

But nonetheless it seems to me that there is a difference between interpreting Sophocles' *Antigone* and Paul's epistle to the Romans. Both have received their importance in a time when their original situation is not topical any more. But to my mind a Christian interpretation has a greater duty to care for the original, historical meaning of the text. For Christianity has historical roots and lives from those roots in a characteristic way. It is in and through real historical events God has revealed himself, and consequently Christian theology should not dispense itself of historical work. So one should start with a historical interpretation.

Now we are at a critical point. For a historical understanding hopefully arrives at interpretations of individual texts, i.e. at several individual messages. But using them in a new situation can mean two things: On the one hand, one can seek "a remaining message" of a particular text, on the other, one can use several texts of different authors to construct a "-logy", e.g. a Christian eschatology for today. Seeking for something like "a remaining message" one has to arrive at a higher abstraction level than that of the direct message of the pericope. And when making an eschatology etc. one has to advance beyond a mere cumulation of punctual messages in the past, and again, work on higher abstraction levels.

Let us regard two examples of how scholars have suggested "a remaining message" of a passage in Mark, viz. Mark 13:14–27. The

passage deals with the abomination of desolation, the appearance of false prophets and the parousia of the Son of Man.

Edward Schweizer¹⁶ depends on a largely implicit presupposition of the passage, namely that the events described are due to God's plan. So, when asking for the 'abiding significance' of the text, Prof. Schweizer answers that it is that 'behind these agonizing experiences which are full of apocalyptic horror God stands as the God who is accomplishing his objective' (to 13:20). Furthermore: 'In the end what really matters is God, his triumph and honour; and God, who will meet us in this triumph, will at that time have the appearance of the Son of Man' (p 277).

Joachim Gnilka¹⁷, on his part, seems, on the one hand, to take account of the great number of imperatives in the text, and on the other, to be impressed by the motif of the gathering of the elect. He presents the remaining message in this way: The reader is admonished 'not to loose sight of the Lord God but to recognize him in a world that can become a chaos'. The aim of the parousia-passage is, he says, that the reader shall 'be able to be and live with Jesus, the Son of Man' (202).

Both these attempts to gather something more general from Mark 13 build on the text, but they represent different abstractions of its message. What they do is to recur to perspectives and attitudes which can be supposed to lie behind the specific wordings and to ask for thought structures which carry and determine the contents. One might say, however, that Dr. Schweizer's interpretation represents a somewhat higher degree of abstraction than the one by Dr. Gnilka.

This example concerned a single text. But one can act in a similar manner with several texts at a time. And so we face the question: Are there in these texts fundamental structures that can be brought together and made useful, when one puts one's hands to composing a modern, biblically founded, eschatology? And that without violating the texts?

Of course I cannot give anything like a comprehensive answer to such a question. But I venture to suggest some perspectives which might be applied when pursuing the task. First, the eschatological texts take the *whole history* in view¹⁸, the experiences of the individual and of God's people in past and present, and in an expected future. They direct themselves to men's attitude in the present and

are meant to suggest a meaning of history, in which the individual and his people participate, willingly or unwillingly.

What I just said is also applicable to Jewish texts. For Christian texts we must add a second perspective: They are *christologically* determined¹⁹. This does not narrow down the perspective, but specifies it. The aeons are created through Christ (Hb 1,2), through him the Kingdom of God has come to men, and after his salvific work is accomplished, all authority in heaven and on earth has been given to him. He is the Lord of the Church in which the spirit of the time of salvation is at work. All shall appear before his judgement seat (2 C 5, 10).

Thus, the present time, in which man encounters the eschatological message, is a time in which, in a sense, God has already established his reign through Jesus Christ. The eschatological people already exist, the gifts of the eschatological salvation are given, the ethics of the divine reign have been revealed by Jesus and realized in his life. Now is it presented to men as a way of life they can voluntarily take on and that puts a questionmark to that which is only this-worldly.

Yet evil is there, the only too evident ungodly tendencies and powers. And hope is there, hope for liberation, and the yearning – “thy kingdom come”. But the Christological perspective may also deepen the understanding of the adversities, so that they become sufferings with Christ. Even if the cross has not made evil meaningful, the possibility opens up that one can understand individual and collective sufferings as a participation in the cross of Christ.

Into this Christological framework we can also fit the concept that beginning and end correspond with each other, the *Endzeit – Urzeit pattern*. The origin and basic principle of everything is the divine Logos, revealed and incarnate in Christ. But it is also the compelling force, the active aim of the history, in it and beyond it.

By this I have touched upon a third perspective applicable to an eschatology founded upon the Scripture, namely that it also directs one’s attention *towards the future*. Certainly eschatology speaks to the present and interprets it. But this address occurs within an outlook which embraces the whole history – the past, not least the Christ-event, and the future.

This means that one cannot rest content with an eschatology of the individual, be it thought of in categories of existential decision or not²⁰. On the contrary neither the history nor the future of the world

should be left out of sight. In so far as one confesses God as the Lord of history, this should also bear on one's eschatology, including its futuristic perspective.

To raise the question of the future in the context of eschatology means touching upon a question which, during the past century, has received different answers, namely how far man creates the eschatological future²¹. In the beginning of the century the so-called social gospel movement flourished, and its most radical representatives were of the opinion that the kingdom of God came into existence through this-worldly, social and ethical reforms. As a contrast, several exegetes have stressed that according to both Judaism and Jesus, as well as to the early Church, the establishing of God's kingdom was solely and exclusively God's concern. Man could only pray, "Father, thy kingdom come".

In accordance with the principle of complementarity, which I will explain in a while, and in accordance with the texts themselves, I would suggest that one should avoid both naive optimism and quietistic passivity. The concern is totally God's, but man has a responsibility. This is seen in the way evil is represented in several apocalyptic-eschatological passages: false prophets, persecutors and renegades are certainly responsible for the evil they work in this world. But at the same time their appearance belongs to the divine "it must occur". As to the righteous people we do not hear of an analogous responsibility. This is certainly due to the semantic function of these texts. In a critical situation they should admonish people to faithfulness and endurance, and they did so not least by referring to the power of God who had everything in his hand.

This paraenetic feature should, however, remind us of the fact that, e.g., the Sermon on the Mount, in a sense, is an eschatological text. Man is really responsible not only for himself, but also for the realisation of God's will in his environment and in his history. One may even say that God is dependent on man in this respect in a way that can be compared to God's dependence on man when he creates new human beings, viz. in that children are born of man and woman.

But when considering the relationships of God, man and history, we encounter questions that we perhaps should leave to the philosophers. *What is history?* How should one relate history and Reign of God, and how history and eschaton? Does the goal and meaning of history lie at its end? Or in it, beyond it, or outside it? Should one

talk of an end at all? I leave these questions without any answers, but the theologian who wants to construct an eschatology must wrestle with them²², and so I bring them to your attention.

Finally, my deliberations on man's responsibility give occasion to mention, quite briefly, two more perspectives. First: man's responsibility does not only mean a demand, but it also brings in the *perspective of judgment*. I do not think that a biblically founded eschatology of today should omit to take up that motif. As I see it, judgment expresses, on the one hand, that man is responsible before God in the present, in the glowing now. On the other hand, the motif means that it is up to man to engage freely in God's reign, at least as seen from one angle; and there is at the same time, a serious possibility that man can close himself off for ever from God's reign. I do concede that further questions arise, such as: what is "for ever"?, is there an *apokatastasis tōn pantōn*, etc. Allow me to leave them aside now.

Instead I briefly turn to my last item, which I have already mentioned in passing. I labelled it the *principle of complementarity*. The physicists use such a principle. In order to get hold of the nature of light, they use, on the one hand, a theory that light is an undulation, on the other, in that it takes particle form. The two theories contradict each other if used in a general way, but applied to particular problems they work well. In the realm of eschatology, something similar may be appropriate. Also here, matters are so complicated that concepts and language do not suffice for an unambiguous delineation: already *and* not yet; immediate confrontation at death with the divine judge *and* the final judgment; immediate life after death *and* the general resurrection of the dead; God alone brings about his kingdom *and* man is responsible for its realization. So we should be prepared to accept a tensitivity also in modern eschatological language.

So much for my suggestions as to some perspectives of a modern reflection on eschatology. I have, in several ways, expressed my uneasiness about different attempts to harmonize the texts too quickly. That is done when somebody squeezes textual statements into dogmatics of this or that sort, without taking seriously their literal and social contexts and forgetting about their semantic characteristics. But there is also a danger in going too far in another direction: In interpreting the same texts one may namely ascend into so thin an atmosphere of abstractions that the interpreter runs the

risk of hearing them say only such things he could as well have said himself without listening to the texts in question.

So I come to the end of my paper. But it ends with a demand for a beginning, a beginning, namely, of a discourse on eschatology, in which exegetes, systematicians and historians talk to one another. The difficulty of the matter requires it, and so does the importance of the topic.

Footnotes

1. Cf the definition of W Dressler: 'Text ist eine nach der Intention des oder der Sender und Empfänger sprachlich abgeschlossene Spracheinheit, die nach den Regeln der Grammatik der jeweils verwendeten Sprache gebildet ist' (Einführung in die Textlinguistik, Tübingen 1973², 1). This way of defining "text" means, accordingly, that, e.g., the preaching of Jesus can be dealt with as a text.
2. See also WG Kümmel, Ein Jahrhundert Erforschung der Eschatologie des Neuen Testaments, ThLZ 107 (1982), 81–96, 93. – Apparently the desire to present an interpretation that is topical for today colours the manners in which, e.g., E Käsemann as well as GE Ladd understood Jesus' eschatological preaching. The American 'Evangelical' could, in a way, be regarded as a contrast to Prof Käsemann, but in this respect the two theologians are similar to one another. See GE Ladd, The Presence of the Future (London 1979), E Käsemann, Die Anfänge christlicher Theologie, ZThK 57(1960), 162–185, id., Zum Thema der urchristlichen Apokalyptik, ZThK 59(1962), 257–284.
3. E.g., P Ricoeur, Philosophische und theologische Hermeneutik, in: P Ricoeur – E Jüngel, Metapher, EvTh Sonderheft 1974.
4. For the history of the term see J Carmignac, Les dangers de l'eschatologie, NTS 17(1970/71), 365–390, Kümmel, op. cit. (note 2), 93.
5. C-M Edsman, Eschatologie I, RGG³ II (1958), 650–655.
6. W Bousset – H Gressmann, Die Religion des Judentums im späthellenistischen Zeitalter (HbzNT 21, Tübingen 1926), 242. Cf. A Strobel, Kerygma und Apokalyptik (Göttingen 1967), 124 ff., E Schüssler Fiorenza, Eschatology of the NT, Interpre. Dict. NT, Suppl. (1976), 271–277, 272, Kümmel, op.cit. (note 2), 86 ff.
7. E.g., A Wilder, Eschatological Imagery and Earthly Circumstance, NTS 5 (1958/59), 229–245, and later works of his hand; further, Strobel, op.cit. (note 6), KI Berger, Exegese des Neuen Testaments (UTB 658, Heidelberg 1977), 253.
8. H Ringgren, Apokalyptik I, II, RGG³ I (1957), 463–466.
9. For a discussion of the apocalyptic genre (which has not yet been enough analyzed) see D Hellholm, Das Visionenbuch des Hermas als Apokalypse. Formgeschichtliche und texttheoretische Studien zu einer literarischen Gattung. Vol. 1: Methodologische Vorüberlegungen und makrostrukturelle Textanalyse (ConNT 13:1, Lund 1980), id., The Problem of Apocalyptic Genre and the Apocalypse of John, in: Society of Biblical Literature 1982 Seminar Papers (ed. KH Richards, Chico 1982), 157–198, L. Hartman, Survey of the Problem of Apocalyptic Genre, in: Apocalypticism in the Mediterranean World and the Near East. Proceedings of the International Colloquium on Apocalypticism, Uppsala, August 12–17, 1979, ed. D Hellholm, Tübingen 1983), 329–343.
10. See, e.g., E Schillebeeckx, Einige hermeneutische Überlegungen zur Eschatologie, Concilium 5 (1969), 18–25.

11. N Perrin, *Jesus and the Language of the Kingdom* (Philadelphia 1976), 29 ff.
12. See L. Hartman, *The Functions of Some So-called Apocalyptic Time-tables*, *NTS* 22 (1975/76), 1–14.
13. See Kümmel, *op.cit.* (note 2).
14. Cf. W Trilling, *Der zweite Brief an die Thessalonicher* (EKK 14, Zürich, Einsiedeln, Köln, Neukirchen-Vluyn 1980), 155.
15. Cf. Berger, *op.cit.* (note 7), 92–111, chapter 9, P Stuhlmacher, *Vom Verstehen des Neuen Testaments. Eine Hermeneutik* (Grundrisse zum NT 6, Göttingen 1979), 197 ff. (referring also to Gadamer).
16. E Schweizer, *The Good News according to Mark* (London 1971).
17. J Gnilka, *Das Evangelium nach Markus* (EEK 11/1–2, Zürich, Einsiedeln, Köln. Neukirchen-Vluyn 1978–1979). The quotations are from the second volume.
18. See Schüssler Fiorenza, *op.cit.* (note 6), 272 (referring to WG Doty).
19. This has been stressed by H Urs von Balthasar, *Eschatologie*, in: *Fragen der Theologie heute* (ed. J Feiner, J Trütsch, F Böhle, Einsiedeln, Zürich, Köln 1960), 403–422, 408 ff., K. Rahner, *Eschatologie, Sacramentum mundi I* (1967), 1183–1192, 1187 ff. See also, e.g. A. Grabner-Haider, *Auferstehung und Verherrlichung*, *Concilium* 5(1969), 29–35.
20. Cf. Rahner, *op.cit.* (note 19), 1188 f., Schüssler Fiorenza, *op.cit.* (note 6), 277.
21. See, e.g. G Lundström, *Guds rike i Jesu förkunnelse* (Lund 1947; ET and revised ed.,: *The Kingdom of God in the Teaching of Jesus*, Edinburgh, London 1963), Chr. Walther, *Typen des Reich-Gottes-Verständnisses* (*Forsch. z. Gesch. u Lehre des Prot. X:20*, Munich 1961). N Perrin, *The Kingdom of God in the Teaching of Jesus* (London 1963).
22. The articles by Rahner and Schillebeeckx, to which I have referred above, discuss these problems, as does, e.g. a W. Kasper in his *Einführung in den Glauben* (Mainz 1975⁴), chapter 10.