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The Sociology of Knowledge and Biblical Interpretation

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quite easily be established, since they were placed in such a way that the first line of the obverse always could be seen without removing the tablet from its place (Matthiae 1980:158). Furthermore, the contents of the text was written on the side of the tablet, very much like our spine titles are written today.

It is interesting to note that Pettinato (1981:48-51) does not agree with Matthiae on this point. He maintains that, upon studying the photographs of the tablets, one has to come to the conclusion that the tablets were in fact arranged with the obverse towards the wall and the reverse towards the centre of the room. He feels that this view is borne out by the fact that with economic texts it is precisely the last column which is of importance. He argues that the date on which the transaction took place would be found in the last column on the reverse side of the tablet. Which of these two scholars is correct, one will never know for "... there will always be lacking one item of information: the precise position

occupied by each tablet in the individual rows. To be sure, approximate criteria can be guessed at, but it will never be possible to identify the real criteria of Eblaite archive science" (Pettinato 1981:49).

The fact that these two scholars differ about the interpretation of the discoveries at Ebla is not all that important. What is far more important is the insight Ebla provides into library practices in use some 4 500 years ago. These practices seem quite normal in the twentieth century, but it is remarkable that they were in use so long ago.

The Ebla excavations are almost twenty years old and yet there is much of the 140 acre site to be uncovered. Many of the tablets have only been scanned and have still to be studied in detail. What future study of Ebla will reveal, one cannot know. That it can be as rewarding as in the past can hardly be hoped, for the fact that Ebla revealed the world's oldest great archive will be difficult to surpass.

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The sociology of knowledge and biblical interpretation

Edward E Hindson*

ABSTRACT

The social, economic, political and other contexts of texts as well as of interpreters have an important bearing upon the 'meaning' of such texts. Any interpreter should be conscious of this fact and inculcate it into his pronouncements on the 'meaning' of a text.

The multidimensional character of the human enterprise dictates the complexity of the scholarly assessment to articulate man's understanding of truth. In the liberal theology of the nineteenth century issues were evaluated in historical terms.¹ In neo-orthodoxy, following Bultmann, issues were conceived in existentialist terms.² More recently, linguistic philosophy raised the issue of how language functions to create human meaning.³ Still further, the sociology of knowledge challenges our understanding of the whole issue of hermeneutics even further.⁴ What has become obvious is that the hermeneutical task is much more complex than simply trying to deduce a few rules by which to read the Bible.

In the sociology of knowledge the issue is raised about the social context of the interpreter as well as the text he is interpreting. Thus, the science of hermeneutics must treat as problematic the social context of the observer, as well as the social context of the author.⁵ Thus, the interpreter becomes an ingredient in the total look of translating the message of one era into another era. This is

especially true of twentieth century attempts to interpret biblical passages that are millennia old. The task is what Rohrbaugh calls translating an agrarian Bible into an industrial age.⁶ Thus, hermeneutics becomes more than just translating words of one language into the equivalent words of another language. The purpose of biblical hermeneutics sets as its goal the translating of a culturally conditioned meaning of one society into the culturally conditioned meaning of another society. For example, Samson's leaving the wedding festivities (Judges 14:19-20) had a completely different connotation in that ancient culture than it would in ours today. We would consider the couple still married, but they did not. In fact, we tend to superimpose our whole conception of marriage upon the text.

I. "MEANING" OF A CULTURAL CONTEXT

A. The meaning of words

One of the vital issues in hermeneutics is that of understanding the meaning of words

* This paper was originally offered as part of Dr. Hindson's doctoral programme.

used in another culture. For example the word "compromise" has a much more positive meaning to the British than it would to Americans (even though both use the same English word). Thus, it is necessary to examine the entire process by which a word attains a certain meaning in a particular culture. The term, "redemption" had definite social and economic meaning in ancient Israel, whereas in our culture today it is generally viewed as being entirely theological.⁷

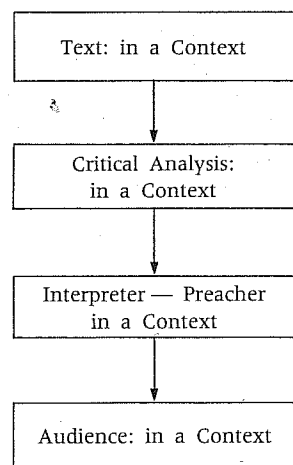
The biblical interpreter is attempting to understand language that is often more than two thousand years old. In so doing he struggles with a gap of understanding between the modern world and ancient society, as well as an existential gap as to the significance to our generation of the meaning of the text. Does a word or term that had meaning in one society have meaning in our society? If it does, how can we best express that word or term in our language? Different cultural contexts caused the translators of the Geneva Bible (1560) to refer to the "covering" of the fig leaves as "breeches" and for the translators of the Authorized Version (1611) to read "aprons"⁸

B. The meaning of ideas

The major task in understanding the phenomenology of language is not to determine what a word says but what idea it conveys.⁹ Therefore, the gap between the interpreter and the biblical text cannot be bridged by historical criticism alone. While that is part of the necessary process, it stops short of asking what the words (properly understood) meant then as well as what they mean now. Under what circumstances does the particular text have relevance today? For example, cultures in which women wore head coverings readily accept I Corinthians 11:3-15 as binding upon them, whereas Western cultures readily explain away the text as culturally irrelevant.¹⁰

From the standpoint of preaching, the

task of the theologian-preacher is to proclaim what the text proclaims in a manner that is ideologically significant to his audience. Thus, the critical understanding of the text alone does not necessarily give us the intended meaning of the text. Therefore, the whole process of traditional biblical criticism must change in order to allow God to speak through the medium of the text.¹¹ Thus, the interpreter himself becomes a vital link in the entire process of getting the text to the congregation.



C. The experience of the interpreter

It is now being recognized that the cultural milieu of the interpreter greatly affects how a text is used at a given period of time.¹² The hermeneutic framework of the interpreter affects his use of scripture.¹³ For example, covenant theologians appeal to passages that seem to emphasize the unity of the people of God, whereas dispensationalists make a strong distinction between Israel and the Church. Accordingly, the former identify the New Testament Church with Old Testament Israel even when such identification is obviously forced.¹⁴ On the other hand, the latter limit Israel to a nationalistic identity only.¹⁵ While the cove-

nant theologian finds the fulfilment of "Israel" in the Church, the dispensationalist finds it in the modern state of Israel!

The danger of any hermeneutic framework is the tendency to want to use only those proof texts or analogical examples which seem to prove our preconceived viewpoint. In Puritan theology, for example, apocalyptic expectation rose or fell with whoever was on the throne at the time.¹⁶ Therefore, the Antichrist figure was interpreted by the Roman Catholics as Protestant heretics, whereas, the Protestants were equally convinced the Antichrist had to be the pope and the "locusts" out of the bottomless pit had to be his agents: cardinals, bishops, priests, etc.¹⁷ In more recent times, American Fundamentalists viewed themselves as the faithful remnant of the Church of Philadelphia, conveniently making the liberal "modernists" the lukewarm Church of Laodicea.¹⁸

II. SELF-CONSCIOUS AWARENESS OF THE HERMENEUTICAL PROCESS

Knowing that one is both a product and a victim of his own cultural context does not, in itself, guarantee that he will approach a text properly. One must continue to analyze his own cultural framework and hermeneutical subconscious in order to approach the Bible as honestly as a human being can in light of the total tradition of the Church.

A. Self-knowledge

Every society has elevated its heroes on the same basis that was meaningful to the preservation of that society.¹⁹ In time we tend to accept the criteria of elevation as legitimate. In fact, we ourselves reduplicate it. We accept some particular criterion and build our whole concept of reality and meaning upon it.²⁰ Therefore, we must evaluate ourselves in order to understand our own biases and presuppositional beliefs which we bring to the scripture. These biases (more than a lack of critical metho-

dology) stand between the interpreter and the text.

B. Interpretive critique

The sociology of knowledge is not merely concerned with the causal nexus of textual contexts. Cause-effect parallels alone do not necessarily tell us *why* a certain people interpreted a text in a certain way. Properly understood, the sociology of knowledge is not merely a history of ideas, it is a prerequisite to the investigation of the meaningful character of social events. It demands the establishment of self-limiting, objective criteria by which to approach the texts of scripture. It also demands that the same criteria control our application of those texts to our own time.

C. Cultural complexities

During a recent visit to Israel, I ate in the home of a Palestinian Christian in Jerusalem, spoke to Jewish rabbis and picked up hitchhiking Israeli soldiers and Moslem Bedouins. All of them "believed" the Bible. Yet, all of them believed something totally different about it! The Westbank Moslems believed they were the "descendants" of the Canaanites and had a prior claim to the land. The rabbis believed in the biblical promise regarding the ultimate borders of "Israel." The soldiers "believed" the Abrahamic covenant, but wanted to possess no more land than they already held. The Palestinian Christian believed that he had a prior claim to the land as a "descendant" of the Philistines. He then added a further claim as a "Christian" to whom the promises to "Israel" were fulfilled in the Church.

D. Logical fallacies

In America, many preachers opposed the cultural influence of the Beatles and the Hippie Revolution of the nineteen-sixties,

CONCLUSION

The greatest benefit of the application of the sociology of knowledge to biblical hermeneutics is its methodology of 1) self-criticism; 2) self-awareness; 3) self-clarification; 4) self-extension.²¹ It challenges the whole field of biblical hermeneutics to examine the cultural context from which the interpreter is coming, as well as the cultural context from which the biblical passage was written. It urges us to find some experiential consanguinity between author of the text and the contemporary interpreter. It takes interpretation beyond a merely historical exercise to a genuinely theological exercise in which the text can become truly significant for us today.

NOTES

- On the historical-verification basis of liberal theology, see H. Sasse, "European Theology in the Twentieth Century," in C.F.H. Henry (ed.), *Christian Faith and Modern Theology* (New York: Channel Press, 1964), pp. 3-22; A. von Harnack, *What is Christianity?* (New York: T. Saunders (New York: Macmillan, 1901); E. Troeltsch, *Christian Thought: Its History and Application* (New York: Meridian Books, 1957); A. Schweitzer, *The Quest for the Historical Jesus* (New York: Macmillan, 1961 reprint).
- See K. Barth, *Epistle to the Romans*, trans. E. Hoskyns (New York: Oxford University Press, 1933) and *Protestant Theology in the Nineteenth Century*, trans. B. Couzens (New York: Harper & Row, 1959). On the significance of Barth's theology, see H.U. von Balthasar, *The Theology of Karl Barth* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1971); G.C. Berkouwer, *The Triumph of Grace in the Theology of Karl Barth* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1956); J. Dillenberger, *God Hidden and Revealed* (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1953); H. Küng, *Justification: The Doctrine of Karl Barth and a Catholic Reflection* (New York: Thomas Nelson, 1964).
- Cf. N. Ferré, *Language, Logic and God* (New York: Harper & Row, 1951); J. Barr, *The Semantics of Biblical language* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1961); J. Moreau, *Language and Religious language* (New York: Macmillan, 1954).
- On the significance and development of the sociology of knowledge, see K.H. Wolff, "Introduction to Fifty Years of 'Sociology of Knowledge,'" in *Cultural Hermeneutics*, 3 (1975), pp. 1-5; A.P. Simonds, "Mannheim's Sociology of Knowledge as a Hermeneutic Method," in *Cultural Hermeneutics*, 3 (1975), pp. 81-104; and H.O. Dahlke, "The Sociology of Knowledge," in H.E. Barnes, et. al. (eds.), *Contemporary Social Theory* (New York: Appleton-Century, 1940). For an adaptation to biblical hermeneutics, see F.E. Deist, "Hoeveel betekenis heeft die Bybel dan? Bybel-interpretatie in 'n heterogene gemeenskap," in *Theologia Evangelica*, XIV, 3 (December 1981), pp. 2-11.
- K. Mannheim, *Essays on the Sociology of Knowledge* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1952), p. 61, states: "To understand the 'spirit' of an age, we have to fall back on the 'spirit' of our own — it is only substance which comprehends substance."
- R.L. Rohrbaugh, *The Biblical Interpreter: An Agrarian Bible in an Industrial Age* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1978). He wrestles with the issue of the social and historical dimensions of preunderstanding in relation to the contrast of agrarian and industrial societies. He takes a detailed approach, using the methodology of the sociology of knowledge, to 1 Kings 21:1-29 and Luke 16:19-31 as sample passages.
- For a discussion of "redemption" from a theological standpoint only, see virtually all the standard systematic theologies, and specific examples in J. Murray, *Redemption Accomplished and Applied* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1955) and to a lesser degree, L. Morris, *The Apostolic Preaching of the Cross* (London: Tyndale Press, 1965). A much better attempt to trace the meaning of the term from its Old Testament derivation is C. Brown, "Redemption," in *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1978), pp. 177-223, where he follows D. Leggett, *The Levirate and Goele Institutions in the Old Testament* (Cherry Hill, N.H.: Mack, 1974).
- The Hebrew term *chagôrôth* means "belts" or "girdles." On the translation by the Geneva Bible, see S.L. Greenslade (ed.), *The Cambridge History of the Bible*, Vol. 3 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1963), pp. 155-159; and G. MacGregor, *A Literary History of the Bible: From the Middle Ages to the Present Day* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1968), pp. 142-152.
- G. Ebeling, "Word of God and Hermeneutic," in *New Frontiers in Theology* (New York: Harper & Row, 1964) p. 93 writes: "The primary phenomenon in the realm of knowledge is not understanding of language, but understanding through language."
- For example, see F.W. Grosheide, *Commentary on the First Epistle to the Corinthians* in F.F. Bruce (ed.), *The New International commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1953), pp. 247-262.
- See the comments of R.W. Funk, "The Hermeneutical Problem and Historical Criticism," in *New Frontiers in Theology*, p. 165ff. and *Language, Hermeneutics and the Word of God* (New York: Harper & Row, 1966).
- See the very perceptive study by C. Villa-Vicencio, "Israel: An Image of Captivity for Contextual Theology," in *Theologia Evangelica*, XIV, 2 (September 1981), pp. 48-62, where he examines the use of the concept of "Israel" in both imperialist and liberation theologies, contrasting in the latter American, South African, Black and Latin American approaches.
- Accordingly Deist, op. cit., observes four characteristics of a hermeneutical framework: 1) It works unconsciously; 2) it looks obvious to the interpreter; 3) it posits new understanding in the perspective of existing understanding; 4) it views a text from one preferred angle.
- Cf. varying examples in H. Hoekema, *The Bible and the Future* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979), pp. 49-78; J.M. Kik, *An Eschatology of Victory* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1971). A. Kuyvenhoven, *The King is Coming* (Grand Rapids: Christian Reformed Church, 1973); R.J. Rushdoony, *Thy Kingdom Come* (Fairfax, Va.: Thoburn Press, 1978).
- See A.W. Kac, *The Rebirth of the State of Israel* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1976); H. Lindsell, *The Gathering Storm: World Events and the Return of Christ* (Wheaton: Tyndale House, 1980); H.L. Willmington, *The King is Coming: An Outline Study of the Last Days* (Wheaton: Tyndale House, 1973); L.J. Wood, *The Bible and Future Events* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1973).
- See the excellent discussions of the impact of civil affairs upon Puritan apocalyptic expectation in P. Christianson, *Reformers and Babylon: English Apocalyptic Visions from the Reformation to the Eve of the Civil War* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1978); K.R. Firth, *The Apocalyptic Tradition in Reformation Britain 1530-1645* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979); P. Toon (ed.), *Puritans, the Millennium and the Future of Israel* (Cambridge: James Clarke & Co., 1974).
- See comments in J. Bale, *The Image of Both Churches*, in *Select Works of Bishop Bale* (London: Parker Society, 1849), p. 312ff.; also J. Foxe, *Actes and Monuments*, now known as *Foxe's Book of Martyrs*, pp. 101-112.
- See the lengthy discussion of the dispensational approach in T.P. Weber, *Living in the Shadow of the Second Coming: American pre-Millennialism 1875-1925* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979), pp. 82-104; and in G. Marsden, *Fundamentalism and American Culture: The Shaping of Twentieth Century Evangelicalism 1870-1925* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980), pp. 43-71.
- For an example of this process in the Western world, see P. Karsten, *Patriot-Heroes in England and America* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1978). He traces the development of such heroes as

Cromwell, Hampden, Sydney, Washington and Lincoln, showing the evolution from the historical person to the mythological ideal.

20. Even those who place the highest meaning on criticizing "meaning" develop what J.C. Ping calls *Meaningful Nonsense* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1966). He argues against all attempts to make "the language of faith" objectively meaningful.
21. This list is fully defined and developed in K. Mannheim, "The Ideological and the Sociological Interpretation of Intellectual Phenomena," trans. K.H. Wolff, in *Studies on the Left*, 3 (1963), pp. 54-66. Cf. also V. Meja, "The Sociology of Knowledge and the Critique of Ideology" in *Cultural Hermeneutics*, 3 (1975), pp. 57-68. He examines the contrast between Mannheim and Marx's critique of ideology.



Religious action considered as a text: extending Ricoeur's model

Lincoln Michell

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this essay is to establish the scientific status of religious studies. Following Ricoeur's model of 'meaningful action considered as a text', it is argued that religious action is also meaningful and can therefore also be construed in this way. Having established the textuality of religious action, a science of interpretation is required to analyse its meaning.

Ritual is the language of religion. It brings into our daily life the invisible world of the spirit and the unseen presence of God.

Morris Adler

ORIENTATION

The purpose of this paper is to contextualise the study of religion within a scientific framework. This problem is not new. Nor are the strategies I propose to implement. What is innovative to some extent is my application of them to the methodology of religious studies.

My primary source will be a seminal article by Paul Ricoeur, entitled 'The Model of the Text: Meaningful action considered as a text',¹ a veritable milestone in the present debate. What Ricoeur seeks to establish here for the social sciences in terms of their focus on meaningful action, I shall attempt to secure for the systematic study of religion in terms of its focus on religious action, which is of course also meaningful action. In the process I shall be appealing to structural linguistic theory, speech act theory, action theory, hermeneutics and various other philosophical insights. My aim will merely be to propose some guidelines which may stimulate and channel meaningful debate in

this area. I make no claim either to comprehensiveness or finality.

SCIENCE OF RELIGION AS A SOCIAL SCIENCE: THE 'TRANSCENDENT' AS A THEORETICAL STRUCTURE

Perhaps we may commence our investigation by establishing what *kind* of science we are dealing with — or the *group* of sciences within which our particular discipline may be classified. I shall argue that the science of religion properly belongs to the so-called *social sciences*.² While on the surface this may be uncontested — in so far as a large proportion of religious action is clearly *social* action — the moment we probe deeper, i.e., to the essence of religion, a fundamental objection may be raised. While the social sciences are concerned precisely with the immanent structures of society in *this* world, does not religion, in the main, centre around a *transcendent* Being or beings, beings that belong to *another* world? At least this is true of the theistic religions. And if