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978-1-107-01949-2 - Biblical Interpretation and Philosophical Hermeneutics

B. H. McLean

Excerpt

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Introduction



Have patience with everything unresolved in your heart
and try to love the questions themselves as if they were locked rooms or books
written in a very foreign language.
Don't search for the answers, which could not be given to you now, because you
would not be able to live them.
And the point is, to live everything.
Live the questions now.¹

This book is intended for those who love the questions concerning the meaning of the Christian scriptures. In the face of those who believe they already possess the answers, and those who have ruled out the very possibility of there being *any* answers, those who love the questions will have an opportunity in this book to, in the words of Rainer Maria Rilke, “live the questions” of biblical interpretation. The purpose of this book is not to explain specific methods of textual interpretation but rather to explore biblical hermeneutics as a mode of questioning the meaning of biblical texts, especially as it has been carried out in the Continental (European) tradition.

One of the expected attributes of anything one calls a “text” is its meaningfulness. But what is meaning? This book focuses particularly on two kinds of meaning. The first kind of meaning I term the “*founding* sense-event,” which specifies the meaning of any biblical text as understood in terms of its relation to three sets of components: its prior sociohistorical referents, its author’s intentions and beliefs, and language itself. In addition to these components is a fourth component, which is that of “sense.” As I discuss in Chapter 1, language always conveys something more than, or in addition to, that which is communicated through its three primary components. This “something more” is termed “sense.” The second kind of textual meaning I discuss is a “*present* sense-event,” which is the significance of the “founding sense-event” for us, in our own world. The present sense-event emerges from the “text-reception complex,” which is the a priori role of the situated interpreter (within a changed set of “value” relations) in the disclosure of textual “sense.”

¹ Rainer Maria Rilke, “Letter Four (16 July 1903),” in *Letters to a Young Poet*, trans. Joan M. Burnham (Novato, CA: New World Library, 2000), 35.

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[More information](#)

2 BIBLICAL INTERPRETATION AND PHILOSOPHICAL HERMENEUTICS

The present sense-event always involves a replaying, or counteractualizing, of the founding sense-event in the world of the interpreter. It involves the care of the self, and one's own purposeful engagement with others and the contemporary world in the present. One could say that this present sense-event has an existential dimension, with the understanding that the present sense-event is not anthropocentric, extending, as it does, well beyond the realm of human, intentional "meaning-making." In a very real sense, meaning is our destiny.

Over the past century, the discipline of biblical studies has almost exclusively concerned itself with the "founding sense-event" of texts, traditionally understood historically as an aggregate of their antecedent sociohistorical contexts, authorial intentions, and semantic contents. There can be no doubt that this model of interpretation has contributed greatly to our understanding of biblical texts and the sociohistorical worlds behind them. For this reason, I argue that any formulation of a renewed "post-historical" hermeneutics should continue to appreciate the insights afforded by historically focused methods of analysis. However, the interpretation of texts in terms of their respective historical contexts, authors, and semantics has often functioned as the *limit point* of interpretation, beyond which biblical scholars have been reticent to venture. In point of fact, few critical scholars dare to enter into the domain of the "present sense-event," which concerns their very selves and the world within which they live. Indeed, it has become a point of principle for many critical scholars *not* to venture there. Many hold the conviction that the role of the biblical scholar is actually to clarify the objective sense of biblical texts and dispel superstitious misconceptions.

But this conviction, which may appear laudable at first glance, is highly problematic because, as Heidegger observes, such critical scholarship "never recollects itself." In other words, this epistemological model leaves no room to examine and critique the role of the scholar, as ordering, thematizing, positing, and naming subject. As such, it overlooks a key component of the text-reception complex. Why do scholars ask some questions of texts and not others? Why do they write books on one subject rather than another? Historical positivism leaves no room to ask such questions. As such, Heidegger has argued that *many scholars grasp the phenomenon but never the thinking of the phenomenon*.

Rather than attempting to absent themselves from the process of biblical interpretation, other critical scholars have followed a different path. For example, Hans-Georg Gadamer and Paul Ricoeur have maintained that biblical interpretation necessarily requires one to venture beyond the mere recovery of a text's founding sense-event to an appreciation of a text as a present sense-event. According to this view, interpretation requires that the interpreter enter into a *dialogical* relation with biblical texts, the goal of which extends beyond that of clarifying the purported objective sense of a text to replaying or counteractualizing a text's founding sense-event as a present sense-event. This book argues that it is *only by going beyond a text's founding sense-event that the interpretive act becomes complete*.

INTRODUCTION

3

From one perspective, this book can be read as a kind of narrative. Chapters 2 and 3 tell the story of the loss of biblical significance in the late nineteenth century: with the rapid rise of historical approaches to biblical interpretation in the nineteenth century, there also arose a growing appreciation of the cultural and social difference between the ancient worlds out of which biblical texts emerged and those of our own world. This new appreciation of historical difference caused a growing recognition that *we* are not the intended readers or recipients of the books of the Bible. With this greater appreciation of historical difference came the loss of what Ricoeur has called our “first naiveté.” To read the scriptures in the present, with an historical awareness, is to experience the profound cultural distance between our own world and that of the ancient world in which the scriptures were written. The scriptures have now become for us “texts” requiring historical interpretation.

What is more, these “texts” have been transformed by historically minded scholarship into historical “sources” for reconstructing the ancient peoples and worlds behind the texts, such as the “historical Jesus” and various historical forms of early Judaism and Christianity, whose faint traces can be discerned in the texts of scripture. In the process of this transformation of scripture to texts, and texts to historical sources, it has also become clear that the beliefs and ethical teachings of Jesus, Paul, and the first Christians were culturally conditioned and historically contingent. In the nineteenth century, this heightened awareness raised a question: How can such “biblical” beliefs and ethical teachings be binding upon the modern believer, who lives in a very different cultural and social context? In other words, How can the founding sense-event of biblical texts be relevant today?

With the growing recognition of the historical relativity of all biblical texts has also come an appreciation of the historical relativity of those who interpret biblical texts in the present, for if the original authors of biblical texts were themselves conditioned by social and cultural factors within their own historical worlds, then modern-day interpreters must likewise be shaped by similar social and cultural factors. Thus, the historicization of biblical authors has brought with it the unexpected discovery that even the consciousness of biblical scholars in the present is historically conditioned. Though often ignored, this discovery has actually subverted the possibility of objective, scholarly knowledge of the Bible.

The point of this very brief overview of the recent history of the discipline of biblical studies is to demonstrate why scholarship’s initial optimism over the benefits of “historicism” (historical approaches) to biblical interpretation has given way to a pervasive pessimism in the early twentieth century. Whereas the original impulse of historical analysis was to provide a secure historical and reasoned foundation for faith, many Christians and Jews later came to view it as a dehumanizing force that subverts the ethical values and truths of Christianity and Judaism. Indeed, a widespread perception arose that historicism leads to “nihilism,” broadly

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[More information](#)

4 BIBLICAL INTERPRETATION AND PHILOSOPHICAL HERMENEUTICS

defined as the belief that truth, meaning, and morals are socially, culturally, and historically relative. Thus, just as Friedrich Nietzsche had previously prophesied, when early Christianity is analyzed into “completely historical” knowledge, and is “resolved ... into pure knowledge,” it “ceases to live” and is thereby “annihilated” by the historicizing process itself.²

At the very time when this crisis of historical meaning was unfolding in Europe, the First World War broke out, resulting in a magnification of the experience of nihilism. When historicism was viewed against the background of the carnage, misery, and upheaval of the war and postwar period, historicism’s undistracted quest for the objective historical meaning of biblical texts and the reconstruction of the Bible’s historical sources seemed to be spiritually arid and socially irrelevant. The fact that historicism (and German liberal Protestantism, which had embraced it) had no wisdom to share in the face of the bloodiest war in human history also contributed to a sense of profound disillusionment concerning the continuing relevance of purely historical approaches to the Bible.

Reflecting in our own time on this disillusionment, Emmanuel Levinas has observed that the very act of reducing the Bible to its historical foundations “calls into question, relativizes and devalues every moment.”³ Given this long-standing disillusionment with historicism, it is all the more surprising that the discipline of biblical studies in the present continues to be guided by the theoretical structure of nineteenth-century historicism, in the form of historical positivism (see Chapter 4). As a result, it has largely lost its ability to reflect on the significance of biblical texts for life in the present.

However, there is nothing new about this loss of biblical significance. As far back as the 1920s, many scholars had grown skeptical of historicism’s usefulness as a way of addressing the question of biblical meaning. In part, this growing skepticism explains why Barth’s ground-breaking *Commentary on Romans*, Ernst Troeltsch’s classic essay “The Crisis of Historicism,” and Martin Heidegger’s epic *Being and Time* were all published within a few short years of each other – in 1919, 1922, and 1927, respectively. Each, in his own way, had come to view historicism, and its ideal of objectifying textual meaning according to historical categories, as an *inadequate* interpretive tool. In fact, by the time Troeltsch published his essay in 1922, the belief that a crisis had overtaken historicism had virtually become a cliché in the German academic world. Far from being the first to sense the crisis, Troeltsch’s *own* admission only served to demonstrate how wide skepticism regarding historicism’s continuing value had spread.⁴

² Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Advantage and Disadvantage of History for Life*, trans. Peter Preuss (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1980 [1874]), 39, 40 (§ 7).

³ Emmanuel Levinas, *Beyond the Subject: Talmudic Readings and Lectures*, trans. Gary D. Mole (London: Athlone Press, 1994), 17.

⁴ Jeffrey A. Barash provides a lengthy account of the emergence of the problem of historical meaning after 1850 in his *Heidegger and the Problem of Historical Meaning*, rev. and expanded ed. (New York: Fordham University Press, 1988).

INTRODUCTION

5

For his part, Martin Heidegger set out to formulate a new foundation for *authentic*, historiological practice that could help make the “past vital again” and bring it into the future. Heidegger addressed this crisis of historicism by arguing that it is not really an epistemological problem at all but rather an *existential* phenomenon of human existence. He further argued that this crisis of meaning creates an opportunity, for if the meaning of the past concerns what it means for human beings to be historical beings, then the crisis of historicism creates an opportunity for us to explore our own human historicity. To this end, in *Being and Time* (1927) Heidegger embarked upon an ever-deepening analysis of the very structures of human historicity that constitute the hermeneutic conditions for all forms of interpretation. In fact, *Being and Time* can be read as an exploration of the “situatedness” of the interpreter, as a nonsubject, full of care, living in a particular time and place.

Heidegger reminds us that we, as interpreters, can grasp the significance of biblical texts (as founding sense-events) only by appropriating them from within our own historical lives as present sense-events. We cannot bypass the text-reception complex in the pursuit of final, scientific objectivity. This fact represents an “opportunity” rather than an obstacle, because our “historically effected consciousness” is actually the very *source* of all hermeneutical significance. Therefore, the real challenge for biblical interpreters is not to reinstate their objectivity as ahistorical, sovereign subjects but rather to reject their tacit acceptance of themselves as ahistorical subjects. This book argues that the writings of Heidegger, Bultmann, Gadamer, Habermas, Ricoeur, Levinas, and Deleuze provide alternatives to purely historical approaches of biblical interpretation. The principles they enunciate provide a kind of framework for interpreting biblical texts outside the narrow subject-object epistemological structure of traditional biblical studies.

Following the chapters dealing with Heidegger and Bultmann, this book discusses the rediscovery of Saussure’s semiotic theory in the late 1950s and 1960s, and the ensuing advent of structuralism. With the so-called linguistic turn that followed in the Western philosophic tradition came the recognition that the language is more than a tool of human communication: it is also a form of codifying reality, a form that structures what is thinkable and expressible. This principle of *linguistic relativity* is officially known as the “Sapir-Whorf hypothesis” (or “Whorfianism”). According to this principle, the structures of individual languages influence the ways in which we linguistically conceptualize our world (either in speech or writing). Hans-Georg Gadamer was the first to explore how language as a form of codification informs the work of biblical hermeneutics.

After our discussion of Gadamer’s *Truth and Method*, we turn our attention to Jürgen Habermas, who engaged with Gadamer in what is now widely considered to be the classic debate on the nature of hermeneutical praxis. In contrast to Gadamer, who worked within the phenomenological tradition of Husserl and Heidegger, Habermas came out of a different tradition, known as the Frankfurt

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6 BIBLICAL INTERPRETATION AND PHILOSOPHICAL HERMENEUTICS

school or critical theory. Whereas Gadamer deferred to the language of tradition, Habermas argued that one must also be critically reflective about the complicity of language – even in the guise of the language of tradition – in distorting communication. He insisted on the necessity of *critiquing* language as a possible carrier of ideology. Paul Ricoeur mediated in this debate by exploring the productive space of interaction between the positions of Gadamer and Habermas.

Like the work of Ricoeur and Gadamer, the hermeneutic thought of Emmanuel Levinas also originated in the phenomenological thought of Husserl and Heidegger. But whereas Heidegger argued for the priority of self-understanding over scientific explanation, Levinas exposed what is lost in Heidegger's undistracted quest for self-understanding, namely, one's individual ethical responsibility to others, which precedes self-understanding. Levinas's hermeneutical model is based on what he terms the "solicitation" and "elevation" of biblical meaning before the gaze of the other, which entreats us to ethical action.

The final chapter of this book takes up a consideration of the philosophical thought of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari. Whereas previous chapters provided an overview of key figures in the canon of philosophical hermeneutics, this final chapter presents ideas that have yet to find a home within the field of biblical hermeneutics. No less a philosopher than Michel Foucault once predicted that the twentieth century would be known as the "Deleuzian" century.⁵ With the benefit of hindsight, we can see that Foucault misjudged the rapidity with which the writings of Deleuze and Guattari would be received in North America. Nonetheless, their writings are now being read widely across many disciplines, including theology. Thus, the final chapter looks forward in anticipation of what may be on the horizon for biblical hermeneutics, arguing that the role of the "embodied" biblical interpreter is to enact a present sense-event within an ever-expanding global ecology of relations. In a real way, the very act of biblical interpretation both reveals and creates new relations of "sense" and bestows upon the "body" of the interpreter a "spiritual" quality that greatly exceeds its own material dimensions.

In addition to those already named, many other voices over the past century have problematized the implied scientific mindset of the humanities and social sciences in general. After all, the crisis of historicism overlapped not only the aftermath of the First World War but also the reception of the writings of Nietzsche, Freud, and Marx, the impact of which triggered a crisis of the Enlightenment model of rationality. Their respective explorations of the "will to power," the unconscious, and ideology, respectively, challenged the epistemic status of all forms of objectifying knowledge, including the positivistic methodologies associated with biblical studies. In the present, one can still easily recognize the continuing impact of

⁵ Michel Foucault, "Theatrum Philosophicum," in *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice*, ed. Donald F. Bouchard, trans. Donald F. Bouchard and Sherry Simon (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1977), 165–96, esp. 165.

INTRODUCTION

7

their thought in such movements as poststructuralism, psychotherapy, feminism, critical theory, neopragmatism, gender studies, New Historicism, and postcolonial criticism, to name but a few.

We can likewise perceive their continuing influence in the form of the many “deaths” that have been proclaimed and celebrated over this past century, beginning with the most famous of all deaths, Nietzsche’s “death of God” (i.e., the death of universal Truth). Like the collapse of the proverbial castle of cards, the “death of God” resulted in many other deaths, including Roland Barthes’s “death of the author,” Michel Foucault’s “death of man,” Theodor Adorno’s “death of poetry,” and Francis Fukuyama’s “death of history.” Against this backdrop of death upon death, this book argues that biblical studies’ continued attachment to historical positivism is *more tragic than it is flawed*. It is tragic because the discipline’s incapacity to conceptualize the present sense-event has allowed nihilism to take hold of it. Whether or not individual biblical scholars in their professional lives remain capable of experiencing this crisis of nihilism is irrelevant: this present crisis of nihilism is *the* dominant theme of postmodernity. Biblical studies’ unwitting surrender to it simply provides yet another witness to its pervasiveness in society as a whole. What is more, the ongoing tyranny of historicism, in the form of historical positivism, within biblical studies continues to have the effect of normalizing the outmoded epistemological framework of the Enlightenment with the result that other ways of knowing continue to be marginalized and excluded.

This book not only narrates this loss of significance and the advent of the crisis of nihilism but also explores modes of biblical interpretation that return to the biblical interpreter the capacity to speak again of the significance of biblical texts, of the spiritual dimension of life, and even of revelation. In other words, this book articulates an alternative mode of hermeneutic praxis. Now, keeping this brief overview in mind, let us begin “living the questions,” by exploring the meaning of meaning.

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PART I



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