THE OTHER EXEGESIS

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Introducing the Topic

When the hermeneutical question was reopened more than twenty-five years ago it was done on the basis of a discussion of language as an inter-personal event. In the meantime, however, it has become more and more clear that language—even and in particular academic language—is a social phenomenon which is at least in part determined by the "material conditions" of its production. Thus materialistic exegesis destroyed the fiction of an objective historiography, and forced us to a new definition of the "Sitz im Leben" of biblical texts and also of our own interpretations of the Bible.

As all language is shaped and sometimes determined by our interests, i.e. the material conditions in which we operate, it becomes more and more difficult to assess the truth of a statement. The structuralists solved the problem by giving up any search for meaning. There are only "signs". And they signify meaninglessness.

Apart and separate from these discussions on the level of the universities, new experiences have been made with several methods of bible studies. The best of them are not just practical guides to bible study but an applied methodology before that methodology has been theoretically formulated—a state of affairs which one expects to be a challenge to all exegetes. So far the challenge has hardly been taken up by biblical scholars, except by Third World theologians such as Juan Luis Segundo and James Cone. What these theologians have in common with the practical bible study leaders is the will to place exogetical scholarship where it belongs, namely in the universal community of all Christians. This presents enormous difficulties, which exemplify how far we have allowed biblical scholarship to deteriorate.
Narrative exegesis (as I practice it) cannot produce a new hermeneutics but it can at least open our eyes to the catastrophe which we have brought on ourselves. This paper, therefore, does not propose a new hermeneutics but it shows how such new hermeneutics can be found and tested, namely by developing a scholarly exegesis which can be and is tested within the whole body of Christ. An exegesis which is understood and discussed within the whole body of Christ is a theologically and academically acceptable exegesis (which is not the same as saying that everybody must agree with its conclusions, but at least Christians should be able to make up their minds on what they agree or disagree). Rejection or acceptance of certain theological and exegetical positions should not be based on fear but on knowledge. In other words, the exegesis of the future is an exegesis to which all the charisms contribute, all "the interests", all the cultures, female and male insights, all the gifts in the body of Christ.

In addition to the historical-critical exegesis, new types of scholarly interpretations of the biblical texts are emerging. Amongst them are the materialistic, the interactionist and psycho-analytical, the narrative, and the structuralist exegesis, and their practical applications. The aim of this research review is to discuss these different approaches on the basis of some of their representative publications and to situate my own position in relation to them.

The Fiction of an Objective Historiography

Stefan Heym was born in 1913 in Karl-Marx-Stadt. He emigrated in 1933 to Czechoslovakia, studied later in Chicago, was conscripted in 1942 into the American army and took part in the invasion of Normandy. As an American army officer he had, during the first years of the occupation of Germany, a special assignment for psychological warfare. Because of pro-communist leanings he was sent back to the United States and dismissed from the army, whereupon he handed back his officer's insignia and his war decorations and emigrated to East-Berlin. As a writer he was highly praised and won the German Democratic Republic national prize, but because of his public stand on behalf of Wolf Biermann and other critics of the regime and on the basis of his novel, "The King David Report" (originally published in America; 1972 published in German but not in the GDR!) he was publicly condemned as a reactionary. In the official jargon he lacked the necessary "objectivity" because he questioned the officially proclaimed truth (which in East German parlance is identical with objective truth).