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

B. H. McLean

Frontmatter

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This book applies philosophical hermeneutics to biblical studies. Whereas traditional studies of the Bible limit their analysis to the exploration of the texts' original historical sense, this book discusses how to move beyond these issues to a consideration of biblical texts' existential significance for the present. In response to the rejection of biblical significance in the late nineteenth century and the accompanying crisis of nihilism, B. H. McLean argues that the philosophical thought of Heidegger, Bultmann, Gadamer, Habermas, Ricoeur, Levinas, Deleuze, and Guattari provides an alternative to historically oriented approaches to biblical interpretation. He uses basic principles drawn from these philosophers' writings to create a framework for a new "post-historical" mode of hermeneutic inquiry that transcends the subject-based epistemological structure of historical positivism.

B. H. McLean is Professor of New Testament Language and Literature at Knox College, University of Toronto. He is the author of *New Testament Greek: An Introduction* (Cambridge University Press, 2011), *An Introduction to the Study of Greek Epigraphy of the Hellenistic and Roman Periods from Alexander the Great down to the Reign of Constantine (323 BCE–337 CE)* (2002), and *Greek and Latin Inscriptions in the Konya Archaeological Museum* (2002).

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To Brigid

my muse



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Preface

Speaking as one trained as a scholar in historical methods of interpretation, I can only express my profound appreciation to scholars of past and present generations who have given us new eyes with which to view the historical dimensions of ancient Judaism and early Christianity. In no way is this book intended to be disrespectful of this grand tradition, which has accomplished so much. But, as Paul Ricoeur once observed, one of the consequences of our heightened appreciation of the historical development of Judaism and Christianity has been the loss of our “first naiveté” concerning our own existential relation to the scriptures.

No doubt, the application of these historical methods of analysis will continue to lead to exciting new insights. Nonetheless, I have written this book with the conviction that we have placed too much trust in historical methods of interpretation. I suspect that historicism and historical positivism have not taken us where previous generations of scholars had hoped it would, for it has ended in a crisis of historical meaning. This crisis has led to a loss of our second naiveté, this time a loss of naiveté concerning the possibility of historical interpretation to provide a secure historical and reasoned foundation for Christian faith. Of course, Ernst Troeltsch, a pioneer in the development of historicism in the nineteenth century, came to this same realization almost a century ago, as did Friedrich Nietzsche a generation before him.

The situation in which we find ourselves is all the more serious because with the discipline’s ongoing fixation on historically based methodologies has come a corresponding dislocation with new developments in the closely related fields of study in the humanities and social sciences. For example, the impact on contemporary biblical studies of such movements as poststructuralism, psychotherapy, feminism, critical theory, neopragmatism, gender studies, New Historicism, and postcolonial criticism, to name but a few, has been modest in comparison with the continued hegemony of the discipline’s traditional methodologies.

But if these new forms of scholarship have taught our world anything, it is that the human being is not a sovereign subject and that our world – and biblical texts by extension – is not a detached object of inquiry. Thus the primary question that has motivated me to write this book is, What difference would it make to the discipline of biblical studies if scholars were to disavow their “subjecthood”? And what difference would it make if scholars were to cease reading the scriptures as objects of inquiry? This book constitutes an exploration of these two basic questions.

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If sovereign subjecthood is a myth of the Enlightenment (as I think it is), then the continued reliance on the subject-object epistemological model can only lead scholars more deeply into forms of alienation, from ourselves, others, and the environment. I will leave it up to my readers to assess the adequacy of my response to this crisis of historical meaning. For my part, I am sure that I have not provided a definitive answer to these questions. However, it is my hope that I have helpfully raised these two questions at a time when they need to be raised again. I believe that the process of answering these questions can lead to a renewed form of hermeneutic inquiry.

Now, it is my pleasant duty to give my sincere thanks to those who have helped make this work possible. I would like to thank Thomas Reynolds and James Olthuis, my colleagues, who provided much encouragement during the early stages of writing. I must also express my deep appreciation to Brigid Kelso and Michael Sohn, both of whom read the manuscript in draft form. Their helpful comments, criticisms, and suggestions improved the overall quality of the book. Finally, I would like to express my gratitude to Cambridge University Press for its faith in this adventurous project.

B. H. McLean
10 September 2011