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0521650488 - Theology, Hermeneutics, and Imagination: The Crisis of Interpretation at the End of Modernity

Garrett Green

Excerpt

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I

Theological hermeneutics in the twilight of modernity

When philosophy paints its gray on gray, a form of life has grown old, and with gray on gray it cannot be rejuvenated but merely recognized. The Owl of Minerva begins her flight only at the coming of twilight.

Hegel

... there are no facts, only *interpretations*.

Nietzsche

Theological hermeneutics began in the Garden of Eden, as any careful observer of the serpent, that subtle hermeneut of suspicion, will at once recognize. In the earliest recorded misinterpretation of a religious text, he asks the woman, “Did God say, ‘You shall not eat of any tree of the garden?’” We do not need to have read Foucault in order to discern the power ploy underlying the serpent’s exegesis. And even without a Freudian or a feminist to decode the real meaning of snakes who offer their interpretive services to young women, we may suspect that gender (not to mention sex) plays a role in the interchange. Now, whether or not the issues we call hermeneutical have really been

The first epigraph is from Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Vorlesungen über Rechtsphilosophie 1818–1831*, ed. Karl-Heinz Ilting (Stuttgart/Bad Cannstatt: Friedrich Frommann Verlag (Günther Holzboog), 1974), vol. II, p. 74; the second is from Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will To Power*, § 481 (my translation).

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around since creation, they have surely been with us for a very long time indeed – as long as human beings have appealed to oral or written texts for orientation and meaning in their lives.

Even though issues of textual interpretation have ancient roots, however, there is something inescapably *modern* about the seemingly intractable hermeneutical questions that we encounter so frequently in theology and religious studies today; and it is the modern discussion on which I plan to focus our attention in the following chapters. If we could discover why it is that virtually every important religious issue from the late seventeenth century onward leads ineluctably to hermeneutical questions, I think we would have the key to modernity itself. Now I am not so rash as to suggest that I can deliver that key. But I think I know the direction in which theologians should be looking for it: namely, in the interpretation of the Bible, together with all the attendant issues of authority, canon, and meaning. Moreover, the problem of scriptural interpretation is an important clue to the obsession with hermeneutics that afflicts not only Christian theology but virtually every humanistic discipline today. Even though theological hermeneutics therefore has implications for various fields, I intend to concentrate on these issues as they impinge specifically on Christian theology. But that does not mean my remarks are intended only for the ears of Christians, or of academic theologians. I cannot share in the theological separatism that has recently become fashionable in some theological circles, because I do not believe that the church exists as a distinct linguistic community separated from the secular society that surrounds it. The line that separates religious language from secular, that distinguishes Christian discourse from the many other forms of modern and postmodern speech, runs not around the perimeter of the Christian community but right through the middle of the church itself. Speaking for myself, I can say that the line runs through me, through my own experience and

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therefore through my attempts to think about what it means to live as a follower of Jesus Christ in the present age. Thinking Christianly about the interpretation of scripture is therefore not something Christians can do by withdrawing from the secular world into a realm of allegedly pure biblical or ecclesiastical discourse. Likewise, and for similar reasons, secular humanists, those who deny the Christian vision and reject its hope, cannot ignore two thousand years of theological tradition, for it has helped to shape them and remains in important ways a part of themselves. So I invite you, whether you see yourself as a Christian insider struggling with the meaning of the Bible in the modern world, or as an outsider to the Christian faith, to join me in thinking through some fascinating and baffling challenges to the claim that the Bible should continue to be the source and norm for human life today, in the twilight of modernity, just as it has been for generations of Christians before us.

Hermeneutics demystified

Those uninitiated into the mysteries of academic theology, philosophy, or literary criticism may be excused for paling upon seeing a phrase like “theological hermeneutics.” Let me hasten to assure such readers that even those of us accustomed to chatting away in the argot of our disciplines are not necessarily any clearer about interpretation, or able to read texts any better, than many a lay member of the church or reader of books from the public library. Indeed, I believe that in some cases hermeneutical theory has actually obscured interpretive practices that good nonspecialist readers know implicitly. But that, of course, is the rub: scholars want to make explicit what lay people know implicitly. And when lay people become confused about practices they once took for granted – as in the case of the Bible over the past two or three centuries – scholars attempt to shine a theoretic light into the cultural murk in the hope that it may aid us in finding our way back to the path. Theories of this kind generally go under the name

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hermeneutics. Hans Frei, who did so much to clarify the issues surrounding the modern interpretation of the Bible, once noted that “Hermeneutics, by and large, is a word that is forever chasing a meaning.”¹ He also liked to point out that it used to mean something far more straightforward in premodern times than it has come to mean in the past couple of centuries. And unlike most theologians today, he also preferred to use the word in its older, more straightforward sense.

Put most simply, hermeneutics is the “theory of interpretation.”² Even that definition may be too formal, since hermeneutics originated, not among philosophers or theologians in search of a theory, but among biblical interpreters, who compiled lists of rules one should follow in order rightly to interpret scripture. Out of this originally practical need for guidelines in reading the Bible, there eventually emerged the theoretical enterprise of hermeneutics. One reason for the widespread perception that hermeneutics is an especially dense and arcane field of inquiry is the direction taken by modern hermeneutical theory in its dominant line of development since the early nineteenth century. Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768–1834), who is widely acknowledged to be a major figure in modern Christian theology, has also been called “the father of modern hermeneutics” because he is the one responsible for developing it into a philosophical theory of understanding.³ Schleiermacher’s approach was developed by later thinkers, the most important of whom are Wilhelm Dilthey, Martin Heidegger, and Hans Georg Gadamer. For recent theology and religious studies, this tradition is represented by such thinkers as Paul Ricoeur and David Tracy. In this tradition – which is frequently simply identified with the

¹ Hans W. Frei, *Types of Christian Theology*, ed. George Hunsinger and William C. Placher (New Haven, CT and London: Yale University Press, 1992), p. 16.

² *Ibid.*, p. 16; Werner G. Jeanrond, *Theological Hermeneutics: Development and Significance* (London: Macmillan, 1991), p. 1.

³ See, for example, Jeanrond, *ibid.*, pp. 44ff.

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enterprise called hermeneutics – the focus of attention shifts from the interpretation of texts to the nature of human understanding. From its beginnings in Schleiermacher right up to the present day, hermeneutics as understood in this way has been concerned with (in Frei’s words) “the notion of a unitary and systematic theory of understanding” rather than “the older view of hermeneutics as a set of technical and *ad hoc* rules for reading.”⁴ Frei offers compelling reasons, which I shall not repeat here, for rejecting this modern sort of hermeneutical theory in favor of an approach more like the older *ad hoc* variety.⁵

There is a still more substantial reason – a specifically theological one – for eschewing the approach of modern hermeneutical theory. One of the hallmarks of modern theology (for which Schleiermacher is once again a paradigmatic figure) has been its tendency to preface the work of theology proper – what has been traditionally called dogmatics – with methodological prolegomena, whose purpose is to locate theology on the map of the academic disciplines, to describe its warrants and proper method of inquiry, and to justify it to the wider academic community – before one actually begins to do theology. The first 125 pages of Schleiermacher’s chief work of systematic theology, *The Christian Faith* (or *Glaubenslehre*), is the classic example, in which he “borrows” theses from other disciplines in order to describe and justify theology in terms of extratheological criteria.⁶ One can find countless examples of similarly non-theological introductions in the works of theology produced since Schleiermacher’s day. Indeed, in the twentieth

⁴ Hans W. Frei, *Theology and Narrative: Selected Essays*, ed. George Hunsinger and William C. Placher (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), p. 124.

⁵ For Frei’s argument, see his essay “The ‘Literal Reading’ of Biblical Narrative in the Christian Tradition: Does It Stretch or Will It Break?,” in *Theology and Narrative*, pp. 117–52, and George Hunsinger’s summary of his case against Ricoeur and Tracy in the volume introduction, pp. 15–18.

⁶ Friedrich Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith*, ed. H. R. Mackintosh and J. S. Stewart (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1928). This work is commonly referred to as the *Glaubenslehre* (“Doctrine of Faith”).

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century many works of academic theology amount to little more than extended prolegomena to theology. (In other words, theologians are forever telling us what it is they would be doing should they ever actually *do* any theology!) As theology has been progressively marginalized in modern society and academia, one could say, its quest for identity and justification as a discipline has threatened to become its primary subject matter. Karl Barth, more than any other modern theologian, exposed the self-contradictory and self-defeating character of doing theology in this way, and taught us instead to see that theological definition and methodology are properly theological enterprises – part of the subject matter of theology, not a preliminary activity in which one engages before starting to do theology. To see the practical effects of this point of view, one need only compare the table of contents of his *Church Dogmatics* with that of Schleiermacher's *Glaubenslehre*. Barth's first volume does indeed contain a discussion of the nature of the discipline of theology and its proper method, but he calls it not "Prolegomena" or "Introduction" but "The Doctrine of the Word of God."⁷ As such it does not precede his dogmatics but rather comprises its opening chapter. Barth also has much to say about the issues of theological hermeneutics, yet he produced no work with such a title (nor one that might appropriately be given that title) because these reflections form an integral part of his dogmatics.

The theological character of theological hermeneutics is an instance of what is frequently called the "hermeneutical circle." I am tempted to say "the much overrated hermeneutical circle," for I am convinced that it is neither as troublesome nor as interesting as most writers on hermeneutics seem to assume; but that case cannot be made until a little later, when we get to the question of postmodernity

⁷ Karl Barth, *Die kirchliche Dogmatik* (Zurich: TVZ, 1932–67), vol. I, part 1; *Church Dogmatics*, ed. G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1956–69), vol. I, part 1, 2nd edn. (1975).

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and the paradigmatic imagination. Werner Jeanrond identifies two “dimensions” of the hermeneutical circle.⁸ The first is produced by the fact that “we need some form of prior understanding in order to begin our engagement with a text or work of art,” a situation that can be described in a way that sounds paradoxical or worse: we cannot understand something unless we already have a preliminary understanding of it; but if we already understand it, even preliminarily, our understanding will be biased or “subjective.” The circularity of the situation is troublesome to the extent that one assumes there to be a neutral vantage point for understanding, from which one can gain an “objective” view of things. But that is an assumption that fewer and fewer people are prepared to make (more on this later, when we venture into postmodernism). Jeanrond’s other form of the hermeneutical circle “consists in the fact that we can never understand a whole without understanding all of its parts; nor can we adequately understand the parts without seeing them functioning in the overall composition to which they contribute.” In other words, understanding the whole presupposes an understanding of the parts; but understanding the parts presupposes that one has understood the whole. This form of the hermeneutical circle is more interesting, for it turns out to be an indicator of the holistic nature of human perception and understanding, and thus a basic clue to the paradigmatic imagination.⁹ Again, it is troublesome only to the extent that one remains committed to epistemological neutrality. At any rate, it is undeniable that interpretation has an inherently circular logic, and Barth’s insistence on defining theology theologically indicates his acknowledgment of that hermeneutical circularity.

I propose accordingly to discuss the issues raised by the

⁸ See Jeanrond, *Theological Hermeneutics*, pp. 5–6. The surprising brevity of Jeanrond’s account is, I think, a sign of the inflated character of the “hermeneutical circle.”

⁹ See Garrett Green, *Imagining God: Theology and the Religious Imagination* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1998), especially chapters 3 and 4.

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hermeneutics of suspicion, not as a prolegomenon or pro-paedeutic to Christian theology, but as an exercise *in* Christian theology. This volume, in other words, might appropriately be classified under “theological hermeneutics” only if this phrase is preceded by no definite or indefinite article, expressed or implied: what you are about to read, then, is not *a* theological hermeneutics (much less, heaven forbid, *Die theologische Hermeneutik!*) but rather an *ad hoc* theological exploration of some pressing hermeneutical issues confronting us today. And because we do not live in hermetically sealed linguistic universes, as I indicated earlier, I am hopeful that this piece of theologizing might also be of interest, and perhaps even of use, to those who are neither Christians nor theologians.

Modern or postmodern?

I have already found it impossible to avoid another exasperating, if trendy, term: “postmodern.” (Professor Frei once confessed that “in the next life, if I have any choice, there will be two terms that I shall eschew, one is ‘hermeneutics,’ the other is ‘narrative!’”¹⁰ I should like to add “postmodern” to the list. But just as Frei, in this life, found it necessary to speak frequently of both hermeneutics and narrative, I seem to be stuck with postmodern.) So I would like to introduce a distinction, for the sake of clarity and simplicity, between two senses of “postmodern.” The first, which may be called *descriptive postmodernism*, is simply a way of referring to the “nonfoundationalist” situation that increasingly characterizes our cultural world. If modernity is defined by the Enlightenment appeal to universal norms to which in principle we have access through the right use of reason, postmodernity can be defined in negative terms as the rejection of that possibility. Modernist thinkers seek to ground our knowledge and experience of the world in certain incorrigible foundational truths or experiences. If

¹⁰ Frei, *Theology and Narrative*, p. 155.

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we define the modern in this way, the postmodern begins wherever foundationalist certainty ends. The descriptive use of the term “postmodern” neither celebrates nor vilifies; it simply points to the cultural-historical fact that we seem to have lost the foundationalist certainty in universal criteria that transcend traditions, cultures, and languages. In this sense, to describe our situation as postmodern is simply to take note of the fact that fewer people today are willing to accept the “modernist” axiom that there are universal norms of truth and morals, transcultural and trans-historical, to which we have access through reason. But there is also a *doctrinaire* or *normative postmodernism*, flourishing especially among continental philosophers and their disciples, which denies that texts have any determinate meaning of the kind that modernist interpreters presuppose. This latter kind of postmodernism is a philosophical doctrine – one of several that respond to the postmodern situation in the descriptive sense. My distinction between descriptive and normative postmodernism, I should point out, is not the same as John Milbank’s attempt to distinguish “benign” from “malign” forms of postmodernism. The former, he says, remains “optimistic about the possibility of admitting irreducible difference, and the historical situatedness of all truth-claims, without lapsing into a perspectivism which denies absolute truth and value altogether.”¹¹ This benign postmodernism, which Milbank finds exemplified in Alasdair MacIntyre, represents a sympathetic if not finally satisfactory attempt to recover classical and Christian tradition in a postmodern age. The other, “malign” variety of postmodernism is Milbank’s primary target, the avowed enemy of Christianity, which he also calls “Nietzschean postmodernism” or (more often) simply “nihilism.” Both of Milbank’s types fall under what I am calling normative postmodernism, because both are

¹¹ John Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990), p. 61.

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philosophical responses to the situation depicted by descriptive postmodernism. I will be exploring the roots of normative postmodernism in Nietzsche in chapter 5, and examining a contemporary version in the thought of Jacques Derrida in chapter 6. In the meantime, I will be using the word in its descriptive sense, without implying any predilection for the doctrinaire kind of postmodernism. As will become evident, however, I am not nearly as convinced as Milbank that this kind of postmodern thought can simply be dismissed as “malign.”

Remaining for the time being, then, at the level of description, ought we to describe our cultural present as postmodern? There can be little doubt that modernist axioms have come increasingly under criticism, and a number of contemporary intellectuals are proclaiming the arrival of the postmodern age. Even some of the leading postmodernist philosophers, however, hesitate simply to declare the end of modernity. Jean-François Lyotard, for one, prefers to see the postmodern as a continuing possibility arising out of the modern. Calling postmodernism “the condition of knowledge in the most highly developed societies,” he prefers to describe it as “undoubtedly a part of the modern” rather than an age following upon and supplanting the modern.¹² So, rather than simply describing the contemporary cultural situation as postmodern, I will adopt a more modest discourse, employing the metaphor of twilight – an image that echoes Hegel’s Owl of Minerva as well as the language of Nietzsche’s madman – suggesting that modernity is not simply past and gone but rather survives in a state of profound crisis and self-doubt. As Hegel’s owl knew, twilight is a particularly favorable vantage point from which to look back over the course we have traveled in order better to understand our present situation and the

¹² Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi in *Theory and History of Literature*, vol. X (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984), pp. xxiii, 79.