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Philosophy and the Interpretation of the Bible*

By Vittorio Hösle (University of Notre Dame)

For Hans-Georg Gadamer on the occasion of his 100th birthday on February, 11th 2000

One can hardly deny that hermeneutics is one of the basic disciplines of philosophy. Philosophers deal not only (or at least ought not to deal only) with texts and other entities in need of interpretation, as lectures or interventions in conferences, but certainly they dedicate to them a very great amount of their time. Partly they are the direct object of their efforts, as, e. g., in philosophy of literature or in history of philosophy; partly they are a necessary medium and tool in order to develop a theory of something which is in itself not an *interpretandum*: The philosopher of biology has to observe the organic world and to reflect about the phenomenon of life, but he will make progress probably only if he is willing to study what other philosophers of biology have written on the subject, and therefore even he needs to engage in hermeneutical activities. Hermeneutics may well claim to be the sister discipline of logic, insofar as every philosopher should have studied it at the beginning of his career before any specialization. This, though, would grant hermeneutics only the honorary title of »organon«, enjoyed in the Aristotelean tradition by Aristotle's logical works – it would not show that it is an end in itself and even less that philosophy might be reduced to it. Nevertheless, to be an indispensable tool is something of considerable importance, and thus it must be complained that in the Anglosaxon world hermeneutics often enough is not even regarded as a normal discipline of philosophy.[1] However, also the exaggerated expectations connected with hermeneutics in parts of contemporary continental philosophy are misleading: Hermeneutics does not answer the fundamental questions of metaphysics, epistemology and ethics, as little or even less than logic does. It is therefore not their legitimate heir, not a mod-

* For fruitful discussions on the subject I want to thank David Burrell, CSC, Richard Schenk, OP and Rabbi Michael Signer, and particularly Jennifer Herdt who was kind enough to correct my English.

1 In the Dimensions of Philosophy Series edited by Norman Daniels and Keith Lehrer one will miss a philosophy of hermeneutics.

ern form of First Philosophy. Furthermore, Heidegger's and, to a lesser degree, Gadamer's hermeneutics stand in opposition to classical rationalism, insofar as they suggest that the dependence on traditions inherent in human nature confutes the pretensions of an autonomous reason. But the recognition of the basic character of our hermeneutical activity does not entail any rejection of rationalism whatsoever; it is in fact compatible with a host of different epistemological and ethical positions. There may be good arguments against rationalism, or there may not; the fact that humans are necessarily interpreting beings is in any case not such an argument. There is a rationalist hermeneutics, as well as a conception of hermeneutics directed against rationalism, and particularly if we take Heidegger's and Gadamer's claim of an existential historicity seriously, it should be worthwhile to analyse the historical development of hermeneutics in order to see how different forms of hermeneutics have emerged. Perhaps one might even succeed in the anti-Heideggerian activity of finding a logic of development in the history of hermeneutics; in any case it is extremely important to recognize that not only historicist hermeneutics, as Gadamer rightly insisted upon, but also Heidegger's and Gadamer's hermeneutics, are only different historical realizations of what hermeneutics can be. For new reflections on hermeneutics it may well be useful to consider also the oldest form of hermeneutics, which existed before the rise of historicism.

In the history of the West there has been no text which has been regarded as a worthier object of interpretation than the Bible. Therefore, ideas about the history of hermeneutics can best be exemplified by some reflections on the development of the interpretation of the Bible. Obviously, an analysis of the philosophical presuppositions in the various historical interpretations of the Bible is interesting not only for the philosophy of hermeneutics, but also for the philosophy of religion and theology. The existence of a text with authoritative claims is a challenge for any rationalist philosophy, and there is no doubt that the revolution in the hermeneutics of the Bible is due not only to an improvement of the tools of historical analysis, but also to profound changes in the concept of reason (also, but not only insofar as these changes are at the basis of the just mentioned improvement of the historical method). There is little doubt that due to these changes our approach to the Bible has become somehow disenchanted and that this price we had to pay is a very high one. One can argue that there have been very few (if any) changes in the history of religions as profound as those which transformed particularly the more intellectual branches of Protestantism at the end of the nineteenth century, after the general reception of modern hermeneutics by official theology, and one has the impression that Catholicism, a century later, is in a similar process of transformation, due to analogous causes. (An important difference, however, lies in the fact that Scripture in Protestantism played a far more central role than in Catholicism, so that a paradigm change in exegesis within a Protestant framework entails more radical theological consequences.)

Despite all feeling of loss which probably most readers of the Bible have experienced when they became for the first time familiar with the work of critical exegesis, it is quite manifest that these changes were intellectually necessary and that we can only hope to go beyond them, not to fall behind them. In the following I shall, firstly, describe in very general terms the mode of Bible interpretation which was in force from the beginning of Christianity till its eclipse in the eighteenth century and, secondly, the reasons for and consequences of the great revolution in Biblical hermeneutics. Thirdly, I want to discuss the question whether Gadamer's criticism of historicist hermeneutics can be of significance for the theological study of the Bible and to sketch how, on the basis of rational theology, a hermeneutics of the Bible may be conceived which renders justice to the greatness and even holiness of this book without betraying the demands of rational autonomy. Being a philosopher and not a historically trained theologian, my quotations will rarely stem from theological Bible commentaries, but mainly from philosophical works dealing with the Bible. I do, however, consider also those philosopher-theologians who deal explicitly with classical metaphysical issues, such as Augustine, Aquinas and Nicholas of Cusa, and those exegetes who were influenced in their work by philosophical ideas, such as David Friedrich Strauss. Obviously, neither my competence nor the space allow for an exhausting account; the names I select could be easily complemented by many others whose neglect has to do with my ignorance and not at all with any objective value judgment about their importance.

I.

In his study *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative. A Study in Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century Hermeneutics*[2] Hans W. Frei characterizes the interpretation of the Bible before the rise of historicism by the following three features. Firstly, an acknowledgment of the literary sense of the Bible implied immediately its historical truth. One could, as we shall see, certainly deny that a literary interpretation was appropriate, but one could not accept the literary interpretation as capturing the true sense of the text and simultaneously refuse the conclusion that the facts described had really occurred. Secondly, the interpretation of the Bible presupposed an encompassing unity of the histories narrated. Not only were the stories of the Old Testament supposed to depict a unitary historical process beginning with creation, in typological interpretation they were thought to refer to persons and events in the New Testament. Thirdly, the encompassing character of the biblical narrative entailed that the reader would find all his real and even

2 New Haven/London 1974.

possible experiences anticipated in the holy book. »Not only was it possible for him, it was also his duty to fit himself into that world in which he was in any case a member, and he too did so in part by figural interpretation and in part of course by his mode of life.«[3] The Bible was the book of the books, thought to contain at least implicitly all the knowledge of the world, and much more than merely theoretical knowledge – it pointed the only way towards salvation.

Nothing shows in a more obvious way the break with the ancient ideal of education than the manner in which Augustine conceived his program of Christian education as focusing on the study of the Bible. He succeeded, however, in saving the traditional arts by recognizing their importance for an appropriate interpretation of the Bible.[4] Nevertheless their function is only a subservient one – one may be a saint without any education in the liberal arts, as it is possible to know them well without being a decent human being. In his famous autobiography he recalls in a witty pun the studies of his youth when he was forced to learn Aeneas' odyssey (errores), while forgetting his own moral faults (errores).[5] The *Confessions* may be interpreted as the long and tortuous path of an educated pagan towards the recognition of the Bible as God's own word – one could even call the *Confessions* a sublime love story, namely the narration of a complex relationship of Augustine with God and with the Bible as his manifestation. The presupposition for writing the text is a stable bond with God and a recognition of the Bible's authority, as the innumerable quotations from the Bible show; but the text has as one of its main contents the description of Augustine's manifold resistance against the formation of this bond and against this recognition. It was also his classical education which prevented him at the beginning from embracing the Bible: Compared with the dignity of Cicero's eloquence it seemed unworthy of his attention, when he first began to study it.[6] Augustine needed a change in his hermeneutics of the Bible in order to acknowledge its authority: In Milan, he learned from Ambrose a spiritual and non-literal interpretation of those passages of the Bible which had repelled him.[7] Ambrose liked to quote *2 Cor* 3:6 about the letter killing and the spirit giving life, and Augustine saw that

3 Ibid., 3.

4 Cf. the second book of *De doctrina christiana* and particularly III 1.

5 *Confessiones* I 13: »Tenere cogebar Aeneae nescio cuius errores oblitus errorum meorum.«

6 III 5: »Non enim sicut modo loquor, ita sensi, cum adtendi ad illam scripturam, sed visa est mihi indigna, quam Tullianae dignitati compararem.«

7 V 14: »Maxime audito uno atque altero et saepius aenigmate soluto de scriptis veteribus, ubi, cum ad litteram acciperem, occidebar. spiritaliter itaque plerisque eorum librorum locis expositis iam reprehendebam desperationem meam illam dumtaxat, qua credideram legem et prophetas detestantibus atque irridentibus resisti omnino non posse.« For Ambrosius' moral and allegorical interpretation of Scripture see, e. g., his *De Cain et Abel* I 4f.

through such an interpretation it could at least be shown that the relevant passages were not manifestly wrong.[8] However, this did not yet prove their truth, and also the belief in God was not sufficient to do so. Augustine's answer is partly that one has simply to believe in the authority of the Bible, as we believe in many other things, as historical facts, the assertions of friends etc., and to reject the critical question how we can know that the Bible is inspired by God. Partly, however, he adds some rational arguments for the necessity of believing: on the one hand, the weakness of our reason renders authority indispensable, on the other hand, God hardly would have allowed the almost universal recognition of the Bible's authority if he hadn't wanted to be known via the Bible. The fact that the Bible can be read by everybody and at the same time contains a profound meaning understandable only by few persons was a further argument in favor of the trustworthiness of its authority.[9] It was the study of (Neo-)Platonism which enabled Augustine to find a spiritual meaning in the Bible, even if he repeats again and again that the truth of Christianity transcends the insights of Platonism by far: only in the Bible did he find charity based on humility.[10] But the intellectual and moral recognition of the Bible was not the last act in Augustine's relation to it: even more important was the existential conversion, i.e. the change of his form of life, motivated by a passage in the Bible (*Rom* 13:13f.) which he had found by chance, when he opened the Bible after hearing a voice, probably of a child, saying »Take and read«, and after remembering that Anthony had also found his monastic vocation after reading by chance another passage of the Bible (*Mt* 19:21).[11] However, neither the narration of Augustine's final conversion nor

8 VI 4: »Et tamquam regulam diligentissime conmendaret, saepe in popularibus sermonibus suis dicentem Ambrosium laetus audiebam: littera occidit, spiritus autem vivificat, cum ea, quae ad litteram perversitatem docere videbantur, remoto mystico velamento spiritaliter aperiret, non dicens quod me offenderet, quamvis ea diceret, quae utrum vera essent adhuc ignorarem.«

9 VI 5: »Nec audiendos esse, si qui forte mihi dicerent: ›unde scis illos libros unius veri et veracissimi dei spiritu esse humano generi ministratos?‹ id ipsum enim maxime credendum erat ... ideoque cum essemus infirmi ad inveniendam liquida ratione veritatem et ob hoc nobis opus esset auctoritate sanctarum litterarum, iam credere coeperam nullo modo te fuisse tributurum tam excellentem illi scripturae per omnes iam terras auctoritatem, nisi et per ipsam tibi credi et per ipsam te quaeri voluisses. iam enim absurditatem, quae me in illis litteris solebat offendere, cum multa ex eis probabiliter exposita audissem, ad sacramentorum altitudinem referebam eoque mihi illa venerabilior et sacrosancta fide dignior apparebat auctoritas, quo et omnibus ad legendum esset in promtu et secreti sui dignitatem in intellectu profundiore servaret, verbis apertissimis et humillimo genere loquendi se cunctis praebens et exercens intentionem eorum, qui non sunt leves corde, ut exciperet omnes populari sinu et per angusta foramina paucos ad te traiceret ...«

10 VII 20: »Ubi enim erat illa aedificans caritas a fundamento humilitatis, quod est Christus Iesus? Aut quando illi libri me docerent eam?«

11 VIII 12.

that of the death of his mother Monica, preceded by a mystical experience shared by mother and son, concludes the work. The first nine autobiographical books are followed by one book dealing with philosophical psychology, which forms an apt transition to the last three, which consist of a detailed philosophical commentary on the beginning of *Genesis*, including important hermeneutical reflections – Augustine proves by this act of interpretation that he indeed achieved the aim of his development, namely to become a philosophical exegete of the Bible.

Even in the late Middle Ages almost every research had to be justified by the fact that either it was enlightened by the study of the Bible or it helped to foster its correct understanding. »Henry of Langenstein found it helpful to arrange a series of studies on scientific problems (in physics, optics, zoology, and so on) in an order dictated by the six days of creation as they are described in Genesis. It must of course have been the case that a number of scholars were drawn to these subsidiary subjects for their own sake, and secretly had little use for their theological application. But the study of such matters continued to be justified by the need to understand the Bible better.«[12] Nevertheless, within this general framework there are remarkable differences in interpretative approach, and it is possible to discover a slow progress towards the emergence of modern critical thought during the Middle Ages. Although in Aevery surviving library catalogue of the early medieval centuries »books of the Bible, glossed and unglossed, outnumber every other kind of book, even the liturgical in many cases«[13], and although the number of extant medieval commentaries on the Bible is huge,[14] surprisingly enough the study of medieval Bible hermeneutics began quite late: the first explicit monograph is Beryl Smalley's amazing work *The study of the Bible in the Middle Ages*[15], which recognizes the need of a thorough analysis of medieval Bible hermeneutics in order to understand medieval culture, even if she does not deny the profound difference between it and the modern art of interpretation. It is to her book and to the studies of her pupil Gillian Evans that I am indebted most for the following information about the methodology of patristic and medieval hermeneutics (even if I am primarily interested in the common traits of premodern hermeneutics).

One of the main differences between premodern and modern hermeneutics is, as we have already seen, the devaluation of the »literal« approach contrasted with the »spiritual«. What does this exactly mean, and how did this hermeneutical po-

12 Gillian R. Evans, *The language and logic of the Bible. The earlier Middle Ages*, Cambridge 1984, VII.

13 Ibid., 164f.

14 Cf. F. Stegmüller, *Repertorium Biblicum Medii Aevi*, 11 vol., Madrid 1940-1980

15 Oxford 1941.

sition manifest itself? Certainly one of the most striking features of precritical hermeneutics is its extended use of allegorical interpretation. This assertion is valid not only for Christian access to the Bible; it is valid for every culture which possesses authoritative texts belonging to an era with a less refined intellectual or moral taste. Allegorical interpretations allow two things which under the presuppositions of modern hermeneutics are almost impossible to reconcile: one may reject the more primitive meaning of the text without having to challenge its authority – for the text is now supposed to mean in truth something very different from its face value. The Stoic allegorizations of traditional myths – which only to a limited amount were also applied to poetry, e. g. to Homer – are a good example of the procedure I have in mind; and already before the beginning of Christianity, hellenized Jews, beginning at least with Aristobulos, had developed an analogous method of interpreting the Bible. The greatest of them is Philo of Alexandria. Philo does not deny that there was such a historical person as Samuel; he thinks, however, that the fact of his existence is only probable and in any case of much less importance than its allegorical significance, namely of a mind worshipping God.[16] Smalley comments: »The abstraction which Samuel signifies is more real to him than the historical Samuel. Scripture has become a mirror which he studies only for its reflections. Then, as he watches them, the distinction between reality and imagery is melted. Reading Philo one has the sensation of stepping through the looking glass. One finds, as did Alice, a country governed by queer laws which the inhabitants oddly regard as rational. In order to understand medieval Bible study one must live there long enough to slip into their ways and appreciate the logic of their strict, elaborately fantastic conceptions.«[17] While commenting on *Genesis*, Philo introduces again and again philosophical and scientific ideas which every historically trained person today recognizes immediately as incompatible with the worldview of the authors of the corresponding texts. One can certainly revere the Priestly source because of its non-anthropomorphic concept of God without being able to assume that the six days of God's creation are an allusion to the number six's property of being a perfect number (i.e., the sum of its factors), as Philo maintains.[18] Such properties of numbers were analysed by Greek mathematicians, but nothing suggests that they were present to the mind of a Jewish priest not familiar with Greek mathematics. Not less extravagant are Philo's etymologies from the point of view of our modern knowledge, even abstracting from the fact that Philo, whose knowledge of Hebrew was poor, usually refers to the text of the Septuagint which he regarded as equally inspired.

16 *De ebrietate* 144.

17 Smalley (note 15), 3.

18 *De opificio* 3.

Philo's impact on Christian exegetes was strong, as later Rashi's and Maimonides'. Obviously, only Christian exegetes tried to show that figures and events of the Old Testament foreshadowed those of the Gospel, but despite this important difference the Jewish and the Christian approach to the Bible was structurally similar. Origen, also born in Alexandria, distinguishes literal, moral, and allegorical sense, corresponding to body, soul, and spirit (the latter two, however, often flow together), in order to make sense of theoretical assertions of the Bible which seem absurd – e. g. about God walking in the Garden (*Gen* 3:8) – as well as of moral precepts, both in the Old (*Gen* 17:14) and in the New Testament (*Mt* 5:29). Every passage of the Holy Scripture, he thought, had a spiritual, but not every passage a corporeal, literal meaning which often enough seems simply impossible.[19] In opposition to the Alexandrian school the Antiochene school insisted more on the literal meaning, in which the spiritual sense was inherent, but also here the typological interpretation of the Old Testament was practised. On the other hand, Origen himself was an excellent philologist aiming at a solid textual basis for the Bible. As a Platonist with a profound consciousness of historical developments, Augustine combines a predominant interest in the spiritual meaning with a recognition of the historical truth of the letter, at least in most cases. He does not object against and even demands a spiritual reading, as long as this does not entail a negation of the truth of the litteral meaning.[20] He defends thus the possibility of a plurality of different, but equally valid interpretations; wanting to address various persons with quite different intellectual capacities, God will have given several senses to his word.[21] Two things, however, are according to him undoubtable: First, God's word is true, and, second, the human writer of the text had this truth in his mind.[22] Moses, e. g., must have had in his mind all the different meanings of the beginning of the *Genesis* which are possible.[23] Since the *mens auctoris* fundamentally does not differ from the objective meaning of the text envisaged by God himself, for the premodern hermeneutics there is no need to find out something about the mental

19 *De principiis* IV 3, 5.

20 Cf. *De civitate Dei* XIII 21: »Haec et si qua alia commodius dici possunt de intellegendo spiritaliter paradiso nemine prohibente dicantur, dum tamen et illius historiae veritas fidelissima rerum gestarum narratione commendata credatur.« See also XVII 3 and *De doctrina christiana* III 5/9 und 10/14. Even a wrong interpretation is accepted as long as it enhances charity: »Quisque vero talem inde sententiam duxerit, ut huic aedificandae caritati sit utilis, nec tamen hoc dixerit, quod ille quem legit eo loco sensisse probabitur, non perniciose fallitur nec omnino mentitur.« (*De doctrina christiana* I 36/40)

21 *Confessiones* XII 26.

22 XII 23.

23 XII 31: »Sensit ille omnino in his verbis atque cogitavit, cum ea scriberet, quidquid hic veri potuimus invenire et quidquid nos non potuimus aut nondum potuimus et tamen in eis inveniri potest.«

states of the author – they coincide with the objective meaning of the text. In a certain sense the whole human author is superfluous, because the real author is the Holy Spirit.[24]

In the later development of Biblical exegesis, the pneumatic, allegorical sense was further subdivided into two: the allegorical and the anagogical. The literal meaning was thus reduced to only a quarter of all meanings, and in the early Middle Ages it lost increasingly its importance. In the twelfth century, however, important changes take place. The consciousness of possible contradictions within the Bible grows, and different methods are proposed to deal with them.[25] Furthermore, a strong interest in history develops, and in this context the Victorines reevaluate the literal meaning.[26] This tendency continues in the thirteenth century with the appropriation of Aristotle and a new attitude towards empirical reality. Thomas Aquinas is a good example. On the one hand, he recognizes the fourfold sense of Scripture, the literal or historical, the allegorical, the tropological or moral, and the anagogical. The three spiritual senses refer to events in the New Testament, alluded to by events of the Old Testament, to our moral duties and to the coming glory.[27] Metaphors are necessarily used by the Bible, and we should raise our minds from the sensible veils to their intellectual content.[28] On the other hand, Thomas insists on the literal sense as the basis of the others; everything which is necessary for faith is also said in a literal manner, never solely in a spiritual one.[29] In the literal meaning – which contains also the aetiological, analogical and parabolical and which is what the author has in mind – sounds signify things; in the spiritual meaning, things signify other things. The latter presupposes the first and is founded on it.[30] Two examples

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24 Cf. Gregorius Magnus, *Moralia in Iob*, Praefatio, 2: »Sed quis haec scripserit, ualde superuacue quaeritur, cum tamen auctor libri Spiritus sanctus fideliter credatur. Ipse igitur haec scripsit, qui scribenda dictauit.(...) Si magni cuiusdam uiri susceptis epistolis legeremus uerba sed quo calamo fuissent scripta quaereremus, ridiculum profecto esset non epistolarum auctorem scire sensumque cognoscere, sed quali calamo earum uerba impressa fuerint indagare.«

25 Cf. Evans (note 12), 133-163.

26 Nevertheless, for Hugh of Saint Victor, the last function of the study of the Bible is a moral one: *De institutione novitiorum*, cap. VIII (PL 176, 933f.).

27 *Summa theologiae* I q.1 a. 10 c.

28 I q. 1 a. 9 ad 2: »Ut mentes quibus fit revelatio, non permittat in similitudinibus permanere, sed elevet eas ad cognitionem intelligibilium.«

29 I q. 1 a. 10 ad 1: »Et ita etiam nulla confusio sequitur in sacra Scriptura: cum omnes sensus fundentur super unum, scilicet litteralem (...) Non tamen ex hoc aliquid deperit sacrae Scripturae: quia nihil sub spirituali sensu continetur fidei necessarium, quod Scriptura per litteralem sensum alicubi manifeste non tradat.«

30 I q. 1 a. 10 c: »Illa vero significatio qua res significatae per voces, iterum res alias significant, dicitur sensus spiritualis; qui super litteralem fundatur, et eum supponit.«

shall show how Thomas' hermeneutics is applied to concrete cases. The question whether the paradise described in the *Genesis* is a physical place is answered by Aquinas in the affirmative: There may be a spiritual sense, but the historical truth has to be taken as foundation.[31] However, Aquinas regards it as necessary to give up the literal meaning when it contradicts known facts. The truth of Scripture has always to be defended, but since there are different interpretations of it, one must choose that one which avoids false statements and never stick stubbornly to one which may be confuted by reality; otherwise the Scripture will be derided by the infidels and their access to faith will be precluded.[32] These remarks are in the context of a discussion of the apparent contradiction between *Gen* 1:1 and 1:9; Aquinas proposes various interpretations in order to avoid a conflict with Aristotelean cosmology and metaphysics, whose truth he defends.

In the later Middle Ages progress is achieved with regard to textual criticism, to information about the historical background and to the study of the original languages – Nicholas of Lyre, interested in the rehabilitation of the literal meaning, was a good Hebrew scholar.[33] At the same time efforts spread to translate the Bible into the vernacular languages. These efforts were regarded as dangerous: »In the case of the Dominicans, whose *Chapter General* of 1242 forbade the friars themselves to make translations to help in their preaching, the reason may lie in the practice of the Waldensians. The Waldensians seem to have been the earliest sect to set out to master the Bible in their own language and the result of their efforts was that many of them were able to match text for text with those who sought to convert them. There was, then, a danger of heresy in putting the Bible into the hands of laymen, which the missionary preachers were the first to feel in its practical results. They insisted that the ›naked text‹ at any rate could not be put into their hands; they needed interpreters to guide them as to its meaning.«[34] However, in the Reformation the idea becomes triumphant that Scripture is its own interpreter – only the Holy Spirit mediates between the reader and

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31 I q. 102 a. 1 c: »Ea enim quae de Paradiso in Scriptura dicuntur, per modum narrationis historicae proponuntur: in omnibus autem quae sic Scriptura tradit, est pro fundamento tenenda veritas historica, et desuper spirituales expositiones fabricandae.« See also I/II q. 102 a. 2 and a. 6 ad 4.

32 I q. 68 a. 1 c: »Primo quidem, ut veritas Scripturae inconcusse teneatur. Secundo, cum Scriptura divina multipliciter exponi possit, quod nulli expositioni aliquis ita praecise inhaereat quod, si certa ratione constiterit hoc esse falsum, quod aliquis sensum Scripturae esse asserere praesumat: ne Scriptura ex hoc ab infidelibus derideatur, et ne eis via credendi praecludatur.«

33 A good example for the criticism of the political abuse of an allegorical reading of the Bible can be found in Dante, *De monarchia*, III 4.

34 Gilian R. Evans, *The language and logic of the Bible: The road to Reformation*, Cambridge 1985, 82.

the text, no longer the hermeneutical authority of the church. *Sola scriptura* – this famous slogan goes hand in hand with Luther's philological work on the Bible and his superb translation into German. Luther insists strongly on the literal meaning, although he, too, is unable to dispose of the spiritual meaning completely and maintains the typological interpretation.[35] But certainly with early Protestantism's focus on the literal meaning (later challenged by Pietism), the philosophical interpretation of the Bible so masterfully represented by Origen comes to a halt. Nicholas of Cusa – one of the great medieval philosophers and theologians who did not write exegetical books (at least not on the Bible – he authored, however, the Cribratio Alchorani) – in his *De genesi* could defend the idea that the world had no beginning in time: Moses had spoken to the people according to their understanding, not intending literally what he wrote in the *Genesis*.[36] But this idea, with which Origen could have agreed, would have appeared nefarious to early Protestant orthodoxy; only in the course of the eighteenth century was the biblical chronology of creation and of human history rejected by the intellectuals of the time.

II.

Early Protestant Biblical interpretation is the stage of transition between premodern and modern hermeneutics. The interest in the original languages, the awareness of philological problems (shared with Humanism, despite the strong differences contentwise), the rejection of the patristic and scholastic hermeneutical tradition are steps towards the modern »scientific« reconstruction of the *mens auctoris* as the aim of the hermeneutical process. Nevertheless, three very important differences remain. Firstly, early Protestantism is convinced of the absolute truth of the Bible: The reconstruction of its meaning regardless of the question of truth would have appeared idle to it. Since now the literal meaning is what mainly counts, the way of escape open to earlier allegorizations is closed: if the Bible contradicts scientific or philosophical opinions, these must be wrong (or, one would say later, the Bible cannot be right); the reconciliation of tradition and progress has become far more difficult. Fundamentalism is therefore a product of modernity and its revolution in hermeneutics; it is not a phenomenon conceivable in traditional societies. Secondly, despite all subjective seriousness in the determination of the literal meaning of the Bible, certain dogmatic bounda-

35 Cf. Gerald L. Bruns, *Hermeneutics ancient and modern*, New Haven/London 1992, 139ff.

36 Nikolaus von Kues, *Philosophisch-theologische Schriften*, ed. by L. Gabriel, 3 vols., Wien 1964-1967, II 408ff.

ries must not be crossed: Calvin had Servet executed for his important discovery that the doctrine of Trinity is not present in the New Testament. It seems difficult to us to assume that the Calvinist fathers of modern capitalism could really believe that their new rationalization of economic behavior breathed the spirit of Jesus – to us, the contrast between *Mt* 6:19ff. and their maxims seems strident; but since they regarded Christianity as the final criterion of morality and felt (probably rightly) that their revolution of the spirit of economy was necessary for moral reasons, they simply had to overlook that contradiction. Thirdly, the early Protestant approach to the Bible is, although philological, not yet permeated by the spirit of historicism. The idea that the way of thinking of the authors of the Old and even of the New Testament could be radically different from their own would not have occured to them – although awareness of the break between the two testaments certainly facilitated the development of a historical consciousness. What are the factors that contributed to the triumph of the modern historicist approach to the Bible?

In first place one has obviously to mention the revolution in natural sciences which broke radically with the cosmologies of premodern times (which despite all differences among them had a lot of traits in common, but stand in marked contrast to modern science). The trial against Galileo is the most famous example of the conflict emerging, but far more important than a contradiction on a finally minor point is the idea, shared by most modern metaphysicians, that God acts through natural laws. The concept of natural law begins to emerge in the late Middle Ages and is alien to the ancient world. If one accepts this concept, miracles become a problem. Spinoza's *Ethics* is the grand attempt to propose a new philosophical theology which eliminated traditional teleology and regarded natural laws as the proper way in which the manifestation of God is structured. Spinoza distinguishes between that which follows from God's absolute nature and the finite and individual, i. e. between natural laws and singular events, and he teaches that the latter can be explained only on the basis of natural laws and other singular events (I p. 28). Spinoza anticipates thus the Hempel-Oppenheim scheme of causal explanation, and that is not compatible with the idea that God could act against or even past natural laws (which according to Spinoza are strictly deterministic). Every event is lastly performed by God, and it is not possible to regard a certain class of events as acted in a higher degree by God than another. However, that is not the only contribution of Spinoza to a new interpretation of the Bible. On this basis, he could – so at least it seems at first glance – still have tried to show that the Bible, rightly understood, pointed towards his conception.

But in fact his hermeneutics (which is not integrated into the systematic structure of the *Ethics*, but developed separately in the *Tractatus theologico-politicus*) criticizes in an acute way the traditional attempts to find metaphysical truths in the Bible. When he declares it as ridiculous to try to find the Aristotelean absur-

dities in the Bible,[37] he seems to voice similar concerns as Luther. But the central difference – and here we come to the second point – is that for Spinoza the Bible not only does not contain these absurdities, but even less the true metaphysics he himself had elaborated, for the simple reason that the Bible did not achieve the level of rationality philosophers aim at. The phenomenon of prophecy as well as the writing of the Bible has to be explained on the basis of the metaphysical structure sketched above, i. e. by finding their immediate, secondary causes – which does not exclude the existence of a First Cause, as long as it is not assumed that it acts directly, without mediation through immediate causes. According to Spinoza, the prophets did not possess more perfect minds, but more vivacious imaginations (therefore they spoke in riddles)[38]; the biblical explanation of events by miracles simply has to do with lack of knowledge of the relevant secondary causes[39]; the differences in style between the courtier Isaiah and the peasant Amos show that God adapts his style to the person he is speaking to (i. e., that God manifests himself through the personal peculiarities of those humans with a strong imagination whom we call prophets)[40]. Spinoza regards it as obvious that Joshua and perhaps also the author of the text (10:12-14) had a false geocentric cosmology, and he thinks that to deny that destroys any, however limited, usefulness the Bible has, because it allows the most arbitrary way of interpretation.[41] In general, the Jews knew little about God, and their religious representations were the only ones a people of their level could have had; therefore Moses – who was a moral legislator and insofar indeed legitimized by God, but had no philosophical insights himself – addressed them as children.[42] (Spinoza maintains, however, that Jesus did not believe in demons, but spoke of them only in order to communicate with his contemporaries; for he regards Christ not as prophet, but as God's mouth.[43]) The Hebrews were not the only nation endowed with prophets, as they are not in any special sense a chosen nation – the augurs of the gentiles can also be regarded as prophets.[44] In the seventh chapter, Spinoza develops his hermeneutical rules. Essential for them is his postulate that the method of the explanation of Scripture must be the same as the method of the explanation of nature.[45]

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37 *Tractatus theologico-politicus*, cap. 1, in: Spinoza. *Opera*, ed. by C. Gebhard, 4 vols, reprint Heidelberg 1972, III 18.

38 Cap. 1; 28f.

39 Cap. 1; 23.

40 Cap. 2; 33f.

41 Cap. 2; 35ff.

42 Cap. 2; 40f.

43 Cap. 2; 43 and cap. 4; 64.

44 Cap. 3; 53.

45 Cap. 7; 98: »Eam autem, ut hic paucis complectar, dico methodum interpretandi Scripturam haud differre a methodo interpretandi naturam, sed cum ea prorsus convenire.« See also 102.

The rules state, firstly, that one has to study the language of the books of the Bible and its history; secondly, that one should group the different statements of the single books in order to understand on their basis the difficult passages, not confounding the sense of a text with its truth; thirdly, that one should try to write, as far as possible, the history of the authors of the books, of the fate of the text, and of its canonization.[46] These maxims are opposed to Maimonides' premodern hermeneutics[47], and on their basis, in the eighth and ninth chapter, Spinoza can doubt, as shortly afterwards the Catholic priest Richard Simon, Moses' authorship of the Pentateuch (whose final redaction he ascribes to Ezra), thereby endangering the unity of the Bible. Moreover, biblical chronology loses its reliability[48]; the literal meaning no longer has historical truth attached to it. Nevertheless Spinoza defends with conviction the divine truth of most moral precepts contained in the Bible, particularly in the gospels.

With Spinoza modern hermeneutics has definitely overcome the precritical way of interpreting holy texts. However, something is still missing: Perhaps because he regards time as finally an illusion, Spinoza lacks any consciousness of a real change in the human mind over the course of history. He certainly recognizes that prophecy belongs to an earlier epoch; but he would never have stated that archaic men thought in a radically different way than modern ones. This discovery we owe – thirdly – to Vico, whose contribution to the understanding of the Bible is deeply ambiguous. On the one hand, Vico proposes a theory of the evolution of culture which, if applied to the Bible, leads to far more radical consequences than those developed by Spinoza. For according to Vico human nature is not ahistorical, but changes profoundly in the three ages into which he subdivides history: the age of gods, the age of heroes, the age of men. The men in the age of gods are dominated by phantasy and passions and think according to a poetic logic which is fundamentally animistic. It is absurd to assume that their myths, the only way they can express their historical experiences, hide metaphysical insights[49]; and it is no less erroneous to believe that fraud played a role in the formation of their religions.[50] Based on the assumption that the three ages, due to a collapse of the age of men, recur again and again, Vico interprets in the first two chapters of the fifth book the Middle Ages as analogous to early Roman

46 Cap. 7; 99ff.

47 Cap. 7; 113ff.

48 Cap. 9; 134: »Ex his itaque clarissime sequitur veram annorum computationem neque ex ipsis historiis constare, neque ipsas historias in una eademque convenire, sed valde diversas supponere. Ac proinde fatendum has historias ex diversis scriptoribus collectas esse, nec adhuc ordinatas neque examinatas fuisse.«

49 *Scienza nuova seconda*, 208f., 361f., 412, 901. (I refer to the paragraph numbers introduced in Nicolini's classical edition and adopted by almost all subsequent editions.)

50 *Scienza nuova seconda* 408.

and Greek history and compares not only social and political institutions, but also religious beliefs of the three epochs. He recognizes thereby several connections between social and religious systems. With the concept of the fantastic universal, Vico tries to explain why premodern societies ascribe to certain individuals – like the seven Roman kings[51] – a series of innovations, even if in fact it is historically not true that they authored all of them. Such a fantastic universal is Homer, whose poems in the third book are taught to have developed over centuries, being the product of the collective poetic force of the Greek nation. Even if Vico does not take historical accounts of mythical sources as literally true, he is a master in discovering which historical facts are indeed implied by the text, e. g. by the form of the narrative or by incidental allusions. On the other hand, not only this account of human history is founded in a complex metaphysics which borrows much from Spinoza, but even more from Leibniz and Plato – the devout catholic Vico refuses furthermore to apply the principles of his new science to sacred history and defends biblical chronology (something also Newton had done in his last decades). Symptomatically, the comparisons between Moses and Homer in the first edition of the *Scienza nuova* are reduced in the larger second edition in which Vico for the first time proposed his theory according to which the Homeric poetries had evolved over centuries.[52] It is not clear whether the motive was fear of sanctions or the sincere conviction that the comparison now could be misleading, but it is obvious that the application of Vichian categories to the interpretation of the Bible could have led already in the eighteenth century to a mythical interpretation even of the New Testament.

David Hume's *The natural history of religion* continues the program of finding the secondary causes of religious beliefs, but radicalises it to a new degree, since he rejects any search for a First Cause. Hume is indeed an absolute naturalist – something which can be maintained of Spinoza only with several caveats and not at all of Vico. Besides this theoretical aspect, his book is important in our context for two reasons. On the one hand, Hume reflects explicitly about the Bible – in passages which he had to eliminate in the galleyproofs he remarks, e. g., that the eldest Jewish religion was not, to use modern terms, a monotheism, but only a monolatry.[53] On the other hand, he compares ancient polytheism and christian monotheism with regard to values and makes clear that the two religious systems foster different moral principles and virtues, showing a certain nostalgia for the pagan world. We have now named the fourth reason for the demise of the traditional authority of the Bible – the conviction that the belief in it contradicts not

51 *Scienza nuova seconda* 417ff.

52 *Scienza nuova prima* 28, 192, 293; *Scienza nuova seconda* 585, 794.

53 *The philosophical works*, ed. by Th.H.Green and Th.H.Grose, 4 vols., reprint Aalen 1964, IV 331 and 332.

natural laws, sound hermeneutical rules or historical facts, but moral principles. But Hume is certainly not the most important author to use this objection; since his own conception of ethics lacks any absolute basis and its content differs explicitly from some of the traditional christian norms, his criticism cannot surprise. Much more weight is carried by the criticism brought forth by that moral philosophy which claims to offer a solid basis for our religious beliefs and to have conceptualized the universalism present in christianity – I have in mind, of course, Kant's ethics.

Kant is an enlightener insofar as he strenuously defends an autonomous conception of morality – something is moral because my practical reason recognizes it, not because it has been mandated by God. At the same time the absolute, i. e. unconditioned character of the categorical imperative and particularly the relation between the moral Ought and the physical world leads to the idea of ethicotheology, an idea completely foreign to Hume, whose forceful criticism of traditional onto- and cosmotheology Kant shares and deepens. It is on the basis of this idea that the biblical representations have to be evaluated, and not *vice versa.* But what, then, is the function of the Bible? Obviously, no statement of the Bible which contradicts practical reason can be accepted as valid – Kant rejects forcefully the conception that God could have ordered Abraham to slaughter Isaac. We can never be sure that God is speaking, but we can at least be sure that it is not he who is speaking if something immoral is imposed upon us.[54] In his work on religion he tends – as the young Hegel and later in the most extreme form Arthur Schopenhauer – to see mainly the morally problematic aspects of the Old Testament; he does not search for any moral evolution within the Old Testament. (Only in the essay *Mutmasslicher Anfang der Menschengeschichte* he refers respectfully to *Gen* 2-6, using it, however, as a historical, not as a moral source, and accepting its authority only insofar as it corresponds structurally, not literally, to the conceptual reconstruction of human history by philosophy.) The commands given in the Old Testament are not of moral, and therefore of religious, but merely of a political nature: The ten commandments are the basis of every commonwealth; the threat and the promise with regard to future generations (*Ex* 20:5f.) are not compatible with moral justice; the notion of a chosen people contradicts the notion of a universal church. Even the monotheism of the Old Testament deserves less credit than a polytheism whose gods are believed to help only the virtuous persons, since the god of the Old Testament is more interested in rites than in moral improvements.[55] However, with christianity sud-

54 *Der Streit der Fakultäten,* A 102f. On the very different analysis of the story in Kierkegaard's *Fear and Trembling* see Vittorio Hösle, »Kann Abraham gerettet werden? Und: Kann Sören Kierkegaard gerettet werden? Eine Hegelsche Auseinandersetzung mit ›Furcht und Zittern‹«, in: Vittorio Hösle, *Philosophiegeschichte und objektiver Idealismus,* München 1996, 206-239.

55 *Die Religion innerhalb der Grenzen der bloßen Vernunft,* B 186ff./A 177ff.

denly, although not without preparation, a moral revolution takes place which replaces the old statutes for a single nation with a new moral spirit for the whole world.[56] The apparent continuity with Judaism was preserved only for strategic reasons. Kant is very critical of the history of real christianity, but he regards it as possible that its founder corresponded indeed to the ideal of mankind pleasing God, an idea necessary to practical reason. He insists, however, that such a belief could be justified only by historical documents, while the religion of reason does not need any such accreditation. True religion, therefore, cannot consist in professing a belief in God's acts for our salvation, but in moral actions.[57] In his late work *Der Streit der Fakultäten* Kant elaborates hermeneutical maxims for dealing with the Bible which are based on his philosophy of religion. His hermeneutics falls insofar behind Spinoza, as he does not aim at capturing the *mens auctoris*. Kant wants to make sense of the Bible, even if he has to contradict the convictions of its finite authors. Kant seems to adopt here the hermeutical rule that one has to understand an author better than he understood himself.[58] (However, since one can say that the Bible has both a finite author and an infinite author, perhaps he would have claimed that he tries indeed to capture the *mens auctoris*, »auctor« intended here as God himself.) Of particular importance is the first rule, according to which we may interpret certain passages of Scripture containing theoretical doctrines which transcend reason (as the doctrine of trinity or that of resurrection) in a way which is to the advantage of practical reason and must do so in case of those doctrines which contradict practical reason. An example of the latter is the doctrine of predestination which Kant regards as Paul's private opinion, but as incompatible with the belief in our freedom. Even in the case that a passage in the Bible contradicts not our practical reason, but only necessary maxims of theoretical reason, as in the case of the stories about persons possessed by demons, a reasonable interpretation is to be recommended in order not to facilitate superstition and fraud, although it is difficult to doubt that the authors of the gospels believed literally in the stories told.[59] (Kant does not note that already John has eliminated all exorcisms.) Kant discusses several objections against his hermeneutics, one being that it is neither a biblical nor a philosophical, but an allegorical-mystical one. His answer is that his way of interpreting the Bible is opposed to the traditional typological one and that only the acceptance of a solid conceptual framework as that of moral concepts avoids mysticism. But does not the reduction of revelation to practical reason destroy its divine character? No, because compatibility with the doctrines of reason about God is a *conditio sine*

56 B 189ff./A 180ff.

57 B 199f./A 190.

58 Kant quotes this rule: *Kritik der reinen Vernunft*, B 370/A 314. On the history of this rule cf. Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode*, 4th edition, Tübingen 1975, 182ff.

59 *Der Streit der Fakultäten*, A 49ff., particularly 54ff.

qua non for assuming that we really have to do with revelation and because a historical fact never can be proven definitely to be divine revelation.[60]

It is this last point which was urged with energy by Fichte in his first book *Versuch einer Kritik aller Offenbarung* which, published anonymously, was regarded as Kant's long expected work on religion. The book need not be analyzed here, because it deals with the Bible almost not at all, but only with the formal criteria which allow one to recognize something as being possibly a divine revelation (which type of acknowledgment is never cogent and furthermore useful only for persons who are not morally perfect). In accordance with Kant's ethicotheology, compatibility both of the content and of the means of communication of the alleged revelation with the demands of practical reason is a necessary condition for regarding something as revelation. (A set of sufficient conditions does not exist.) For A to be a revelation, it is, by the way, not a necessary condition that God intervened in the casual order immediately before – there may be an infinite series of intermediate causes between God's will to communicate himself and the act of revelation itself, Fichte writes in a passage reminiscent of Spinoza's basic theorem discussed above.[61] Fichte's rationalist impetus becomes particularly manifest when he discusses *Mt* 5:39ff. and denies that this passage, certainly one of the most sublime of the whole Bible and the core of Jesus' moral revolution, can have the status of divine revelation, because these precepts do not follow from the moral principle, but are merely prudential rules, valid under certain conditions only.[62] Now, it is as manifest that Fichte misses completely the prophetic power of this central part of the Sermon on the Mount as it is true that from the beginning christians have not obeyed, and could not obey, these rules in every situation. One can recognize a certain honesty in Fichte's criticism which tries to make sense of the behaviour of us all; but one can rightly object that Fichte does not take the provocation of what we regard as reason seriously enough and therefore misses the opportunity of giving a more profound interpretation of that passage.

While Fichte is not really interested in the historical figure of Jesus, it is Hegel's merit to have applied Kant's ethicotheology to a reconstruction of Jesus. Hegel's *Das Leben Jesu*, written in 1795, but published only in 1907, is on the one hand the attempt to show that Jesus was a perfect moral teacher who enhanced practical reason and was willing to die for his beliefs. Miracles and exorcisms are completely eliminated in this reconstruction, and the work ends with Jesus' burial, not his resurrection, already rejected by Kant and Fichte who saw in it only a form of expressing the immortality of the soul. On the other hand,

60 *Der Streit der Fakultäten*, A 63ff.

61 *Fichtes Werke*, ed. by Immanuel Hermann Fichte, 11 vols., reprint Berlin 1971, V 71.

62 V 123f.

the work can claim a certain philological accuracy. It is based on schemes trying to bring order into the facts narrated, partly in contrasting manner, in the different gospels[63], mentions, e. g., the contradiction between John's and the synoptics' account of the place of Peter's denial,[64] and takes into account the historical knowledge of the late eighteenth century about Jesus' time, e. g. when it says that probably only the hands, but not the feet were nailed to the cross.[65] One may well say that Hegel is the only great philosopher who has dedicated so much energy to the search for the historical Jesus – with the possible exception of Nietzsche. Nevertheless, Hegel's interpretation of Jesus as moral teacher is not really original – it follows almost necessarily from the first and fourth above mentioned reason. Therefore, firstly, Hegel was not alone in his endeavour to make moral sense, and moral sense only, of Jesus' life and doctrine. Around one decade later, Thomas Jefferson began with a similar work – a miracle-free account of Jesus' morals and life (also ending with his burial), which was for the first time published in 1904 (in a limited edition distributed only to the members of the house of representatives and of the senate of the USA).[66] Secondly, in Hegel's mature philosophy of religion Jesus plays a limited role, because Hegel came to see the moral interpretation of religion in the manner of Kant and Fichte as extremely reductive. His own speculative philosophy of religion is much closer to the Alexandrinian theology of, e. g., Origen than to Kant's and Fichte's ethicotheology, not to speak of the biblicism of Lutheran orthodoxy, even if he, as a distinctively modern thinker, manages to combine with his theological metaphysics a philosophy of history, in which the history of religious consciousness has a prominent place. From his point of view, the spiritual interpretation of the Bible is what counts, not the literal, this being a postulate of the Bible itself (*2. Cor* 3:6).[67] Every exegetical effort shows not so much what is written in the Bible as what the presuppositions and categories of the interpreter are – almost everything can be proved with the Bible, even heretics and the devil like to quote the Bible, tradition is as such necessarily a transformation of older concepts into new ones.[68] A good example of Hegel's Bible interpretation is his analysis of the story of the Fall in *Gen* 2-3. He does not take the story literally and not even historically as Kant had done, but as mythical expression of a general truth about the

63 Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Frühe Schriften* I, ed. by F. Nicolin und G. Schüler, Hamburg 1989, 413.

64 Ibid., 271.

65 Ibid., 277.

66 The first edition for a broader public is: Thomas Jefferson, *The life and morals of Jesus of Nazareth*, New York 1940.

67 Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Werke*, ed. by Eva Moldenhauer and Karl Markus Michel, 20 vols., Frankfurt/M. 1969ff., XVII 201.

68 XVI 35ff., XVII 199f., 321.

human spirit. As myth, the story necessarily entails inconsistencies; only its philosophical reconstruction in the medium of the concept avoids them. The truth of the story is that the human spirit has to leave the immediate unity with nature, that by doing so it becomes free, and that freedom, even if it means openness also to the possibility of evil, contains the principle of healing.[69] »Paradise is a park in which animals but not men may stay.«[70] On the one hand, by his positive appraisal of the fall, Hegel seems to contradict the meaning of the story, to deconstruct it. On the other hand, also tradition had spoken of »felix culpa«, and even if for Hegel the redeeming event is no longer as much Jesus' death on the cross as its philosophical interpretation and the institutionalization of the right state, both conceptions share a dialectical pattern. Hegel believed, and could rightly believe, that his new interpretation of christianity was only a further step within the realm of the spirit, the third stage in his philosophy of christianity; and even if he was conscious that his conceptions were a provocation to many contemporary Lutheran theologians, he continued to regard himself as a faithful Lutheran[71] particularly because of the consequences of reformation in the sphere of objective spirit, showing simultaneously sympathy to contemporary catholic thinkers such as Franz von Baader because of their original speculations and disgust towards protestant subjectivism and biblicism.[72]

The later Hegel's idea that philosophy translated religion from the medium of representation to the medium of concept had to have an impact on the interpretation not only of the Old, but also of the New Testament. Hegel had ignored the stories about Jesus' miracles in *Das Leben Jesu* – stories which at the end of the eighteenth century had become a problem to many protestant theologians. While the so-called supranaturalists continued to defend the historical reality of the miracles, the rationalists denied that something incompatible with the known laws of nature could have occured. Hegel's former friend and later enemy Heinrich Eberhard Gottlob Paulus – to name only one – in his *Das Leben Jesu als Grundlage einer reinen Geschichte des Urchristentums* did not doubt the truthfulness of the biblical account of Jesus' deeds; but he proposed an interpretation of them which eliminated their miraculous character: The stories about persons resurrected by Jesus according to him prove that Jesus was a person with a remarkable capacity of recognizing apparent death; as he himself did not die on the cross, but was taken only half-dead from it and recovered in the cool sepulchre.[73]

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69 XVI 265ff.

70 XII 389: »Das Paradies ist ein Park, wo nur die Tiere und nicht die Menschen bleiben können.«.

71 XVIII 94: »Wir Lutheraner – ich bin es und will es bleiben – ...«.

72 VIII 27ff. (preface to the second edition of the *Encyclopedia*) and XX 54f.

73 On Paulus see A. Schweitzer, *Geschichte der Leben-Jesu-Forschung*, 6th edition, Tübingen 1951, 49-58.

Obviously, neither the supranaturalist nor the rationalist solution is coherent with Hegel's philosophy; however, Hegelian in its spirit is that book which, despite all its errors (e. g., on behalf of the chronological position of the gospel of Mark), can claim to have founded modern New Testament scholarship – David Friedrich Strauss' *Das Leben Jesu.* The central idea of this work is to apply the category of myth to the stories of the New Testament, as had already tentatively been done with regard to the Old Testament. This seems to be a rehabilitation of the old allegorical interpretation, but the difference is manifest: While the allegorization believes to have unveiled the true intention of the author of the holy text, Strauss wants to prove that the authors of the gospels themselves thought in a mythical manner and were unable to write history in a modern sense. In contrast to Hermann Samuel Reimarus who assumed a conscious fraud from the side of the pupils, Strauss thinks that the evangelists saw reality as they described it. One could say that Strauss applies Vico's theory of the age of gods to the analysis of the gospels, although he apparently did not know Vico. Strauss' sensibility for the contradictions between the synoptics and John, whose value as historical source he regards as small just because of his profound theological conception, his reversion of the typological interpretation – the stories of the gospels are woven out of allusions to the Old Testament instead of this being an anticipation of them – , his awareness of the historical context in which Jesus acted, finally the elegance of his style and the clarity of his philosophical categories, explain the impact of the book – Schweitzer lists sixty works published in reaction to it in the course of four years.[74] It is of extreme importance to recognize that Strauss at the beginning did not want to attack christianity; even if he recognized that his historical research would have an impact on christian dogmatics, he ends his book by proposing a Hegelian interpretation of Christ as compatible with his discoveries. Christ cannot be only a moral ideal, as Kant had suggested; the ideal must be real in history, as Hegel had taught. However, its reality is not that of a concrete individual, as the conservative Hegelians Marheineke and Rosenkranz had maintained, but the whole historical process of mankind.[75] This idea is radicalized in the later edition of the book, *Das Leben Jesu für das deutsche Volk bearbeitet*[76]. Here Strauss ends by saying that we know very little about the historical Jesus – less than about Socrates – and that it can never be necessary for our salvation to believe in facts whose historical ascertainment is extremely difficult, if not impossible. Only the belief in the moral ideal represented by Christ

74 Ibid., 643-646.

75 David Friedrich Strauss, *Das Leben Jesu, kritisch bearbeitet,* 2 Bde., Tübingen 1835f., II 735: »Die Menschheit ist die Vereinigung der beiden Naturen, der menschgewordene Gott, der zur Endlichkeit entäusserte unendliche, und der seiner Unendlichkeit sich erinnernde endliche Geist ...«.

76 2 Bde., 17th edition, Stuttgart 1905, II 382-390.

can have this function, he teaches with Spinoza[77] and Kant. The historical Jesus has a high rank within the series of the persons realising the moral ideal, but he is not the only one – he has had predecessors in Israel, Greece and elsewhere and he himself did not succeed in elaborating the consequences of his moral principle for such spheres as economics and politics. Furthermore, there are morally reproachable ideas already among his pupils and the canonical works of the New Testament – Strauss mentions the *Apocalypse* of John, but not the doctrine of eternal damnation for non-believers. It was this doctrine which, among other problems, motivated Darwin's break with christianity.[78]

Darwin's ideas form an ingredient of the utterly unsatisfying philosophy, no longer regarded as christian by himself, which Strauss exposed in his last book *Der alte und der neue Glaube*. The most merciless critic of this book was the young Friedrich Nietzsche. The fact that he dedicated his first *Untimely consideration* to an invective against Strauss at first seems surprising, because Nietzsche, a professor of classical philology, had himself absorbed the philological criticism of the Bible in his youth. But just because of that, Strauss' ideas, which in the 1830's had appeared revolutionary, in the 1870's seemed almost trivial to him,[79] and furthermore he disliked the awkard compromise philosophy of the late Strauss which continued to maintain a lot of christian elements, e.g. in the ethics. In our context, Nietzsche's general attack against christianity is not of interest – an attack which is profoundly ambivalent because Nietzsche never ceased to identify in an existential manner with Jesus, the model of his childhood and adolescence.[80] He continues to regard respect for the authority of the Bible as the best piece of discipline Europe owes christianity,[81] and he praises Luther's translation of the Bible as the best german book.[82] What is important here is something more circumscribed, namely his radical opposition to any attempt to find a double meaning in the Bible which transcends the literal one. Already in *Menschliches, Allzumenschliches* he compares the metaphysical explanation of nature and the self-interpretation of the saint with the pneumatical interpretation

77 Epistle 73 to Oldenburg.

78 Charles Darwin, *The Autobiography of Charles Darwin*, New York/London 1969, 87.

79 *Der Antichrist* 28 (Friedrich Nietzsche, *Sämtliche Werke*. Kritische Studienausgabe in 15 Bänden, ed. by G. Colli and M. Montinari, Berlin 1980, VI 199): »Die Zeit ist fern, wo auch ich, gleich jedem jungen Gelehrten, mit der klugen Langsamkeit eines raffinirten Philologen das Werk des unvergleichlichen Strauss auskostete. Damals war ich zwanzig Jahr alt: jetzt bin ich zu ernst dafür.«.

80 When in *Der Antichrist* (32; VI 204) it is said of Jesus »Das *Verneinen* ist eben das ihm ganz Unmögliche«, it is hard not to think of Nietzsche's wish: »Ich will irgendwann einmal nur noch ein Ja-sagender sein!« (*Die fröhliche Wissenschaft* 276; III 521).

81 *Jenseits von Gut und Böse* 263 (V 218).

82 *Jenseits von Gut und Böse* 247 (V 191).

of the Bible.[83] In *Morgenröte* he writes that people read their own desires and needs into the Bible – »kurz, man liest sich hinein und sich heraus«[84]. With particular aggressivity he attacks the typological interpretation of the Old Testament (not surprising, given his preference for the Old Testament[85]); and he doubts the sincerity of those old interpreters: »Hat diess jemals Jemand *geglaubt*, der es behauptete?« Nietzsche suggests that christian philology lacks any sense of justice and honesty, as christian additions to the Septuagint prove.[86] Through his own philological art he wants to discover other moral depravations in christianity – particularly in Paul, whom he regards as the real founder of christianity and whose talk about love hides the most profound hatred and desire of revenge.[87] His born enemies are physicians and philologists, in general science – which is therefore forbidden by God in *Gen* 2f., claims Nietzsche in an antihegelian interpretation of the story.[88]

Nietzsche is the last great philosopher to deal extensively with the Bible. There are two reasons for that. Firstly, after his extreme attacks the question of a divine inspiration of the Bible seems settled – philosophers no longer regard themselves as threatened by the authority of the book and no longer have to try to limit it. They can simply ignore it, as do many, if not the majority, of their contemporaries. Secondly, the work of concrete interpretation has been taken over by a highly specialized discipline, biblical exegesis, with which philosophy does not dare to compete. What should a philosopher add to the studies in textual criticism, literary criticism, form criticism and redaction criticism which structure the modern exegete's work?[89] Nevertheless, one can doubt that the relation between philosophers and the Bible can end simply in parting company. Modern exegesis participates in the procedures peculiar to science – it tries to discover the *mens auctoris* and to find the causes which led to the upholding of certain beliefs and the formulation of certain texts. But with these means alone it cannot answer the question what the text means for us, i. e. whether what it says is true or not. Nor do the attempts to leave the philological interpretations behind and to give meaning to the Bible by relating it to contemporary concerns – the exodus story, e. g., to the liberation struggle of oppressed classes or an oppressed gender – seem to be the right solution because they are too obviously a modern, politicized

83 I 8 and 143 (II 28f.; 139).

84 68 (III 64).

85 *Jenseits von Gut und Böse* 52 (V 72).

86 84 (III 79f.).

87 *Menschliches, Allzumenschliches* II/2 85; *Morgenröte* 68; *Der Antichrist* 42ff. (II 591; III 64ff.; VI 215ff.).

88 *Der Antichrist* 47f. (VI 225ff.).

89 Cf., e. g., H. Zimmermann, *Neutestamentliche Methodenlehre*, 2nd edition, Stuttgart 1968.

equivalent of the old allegorizations: One reads into the text one's own ideas. Exegesis also cannot appeal to the authority of the text as to something which is warranted by the church. By analysing its causes it deprives it of the unconditioned authority it had for premodern hermeneutics; and furthermore, the circle which consists in grounding the authority of the canon on the church and the authority of the church on the events narrated by the Bible is too patent to be ignored. A similar circle is present if one founds the truth of the Bible in the miracles narrated by the Bible itself – already St.Peter alerts Dante of this circle in their talk in the XXIV canto of the *Divina Commedia*: »Dì', chi t'assicura / che quell'opere fosser? Quel medesmo / che vuol provarsi, non altri, il ti giura.« Dante's answer is famous: If christianity triumphed over the ancient world without miracles, then this is a miracle worth more than hundred times all miracles narrated – »Se il mondo si rivolse al cristianesmo, / diss'io, senza miracoli, quest'uno / È tal che gli altri non sono il centesmo.«[90] Perhaps one should take Dante's suggestion seriously and see the greatest miracle in a miracle-free account of the Bible's greatness.

III.

The fascination Gadamer's hermeneutics has exerted on so many scholars and philosophers has its main reason in a singular awareness of the limits of modern hermeneutics – in a certain sense Gadamer aims at a rehabilitation of some features of premodern hermeneutics, but on the basis of an immanent demonstration of the shortcomings of the modern Geisteswissenschaften. While before Gadamer most scholars regarded the methods they used as something obvious and not in need of any justification whatsoever, Gadamer showed, by applying the principle of historicism to itself, the complex historical genesis of historicist hermeneutics. Obviously, it is not the task of this essay to render justice to the whole of *Wahrheit und Methode*; of interest are only some ideas of the largest, the second part, dedicated to the problem of understanding in the humanities, even if an appropriate interpretation of the book would have to respect the holistic maxim of hermeneutics and consider also the peculiar position of the second part between the first on the artistic experience and the third on language. The second part consists of two sections, of a historical analysis of the evolution of modern hermeneutics from the beginnings to Dilthey and Heidegger, in which Gadamer can demonstrate his remarkable hermeneutical competences, and of a systematic theory of hermeneutical experience. Gadamer's aim in the first section is to unveil the aporias of an understanding which objectifies the interpretandum in a

90 XXIV 103ff. The argument can already be found in Augustinus, *De civitate Dei*, XXII 5 and in a rudimentary form in Arnobius, *Adversus gentes* II 44.

manner comparable to the approach of modern natural sciences towards nature and to show how phenomenology – particularly Heidegger's – overcomes the epistemological concerns of the founding fathers of the Geisteswissenschaften.[91] To isolate the search for sense from the search for truth is the peculiar feature of modern hermeneutics and the methods it elaborates. Gadamer sees this critically. The »and« in the title of his book stands for »instead«: In order to grasp philosophical truth one has to get rid of the obsession with scientific methods. He exposes convincingly the loss this new hermeneutics entails: »Aber indirekt ist doch überall, wo man sich um das Verständnis – z. B. der Heiligen Schrift oder der Klassiker – bemüht, ein Bezug auf die Wahrheit wirksam, die im Text verborgen liegt und ans Licht soll. Was verstanden werden soll, ist in Wirklichkeit nicht ein Gedanke als ein Lebensmoment, sondern als eine Wahrheit.«[92] In his constructive part, Gadamer begins with a defense of prejudices, rejected by historicism only because it continues to stand on the ground of the enlightenment movement. He rehabilitates tradition and authority as essentially kindred to the well-understood humanities: »Jedenfalls teilt das Verstehen in den Geisteswissenschaften mit dem Fortleben von Traditionen eine grundlegende Voraussetzung, nämlich, sich von der Überlieferung angesprochen zu sehen. Gilt denn nicht für die Gegenstände ihrer Forschung – so gut wie für die Inhalte der Tradition –, daß dann erst ihre Bedeutung erfahrbar wird?«[93] In this context Gadamer develops his famous concept of the »Vorgriff der Vollkommenheit«: In principle we have to assume that we can learn from the *interpretandum*, and only when this attempt fails, are we allowed to look at the mental acts of its author instead of at what he was trying to say.[94] The understanding of a text cannot be reduced to the discovery of the *mens auctoris*: »Nicht nur gelegentlich, sondern immer übertrifft der Sinn eines Textes seinen Autor.«[95] The process of interpretation can therefore never come to a completion; and the historical tradition of which the interpreter is himself a part guarantees that the interpretation does not become arbitrary. Essential is the concept of application: Understanding is applying, and one must conceive the humanities after the model of jurisprudence and theology. Gadamer recognizes the difference between the procedure of a jurist and of a historian of law. But he tends to play it down: The judge must also know something about the original meaning of the law, and the historian of law must be able to find a legal meaning in the text. In a similar way the theologian has to

91 Cf. Gadamer (note 58), 170: »daß zwischen der Philologie und der Naturwissenschaft in ihrer frühen Selbstbesinnung eine enge Entsprechung besteht, die einen doppelten Sinn hat«.

92 Ibid., 173.

93 Ibid., 266.

94 Ibid., 277ff.

95 Ibid., 280.

apply the Bible to the concrete situation, without, however, denying the priority of the text with regard to all interpretations: »Die Heilige Schrift ist Gottes Wort, und das bedeutet, daß die Schrift vor der Lehre derer, die sie auslegen, einen schlechthinnigen Vorrang behält.«[96] The task of the historian is different only in degree from the task of the philologist: In contrast to the latter, the historian tries to see what is only implied by the text, but also he must connect the text with other sources to a unity, the unity of world history of which he himself is a part. »Wenn der Philologe den gegebenen Text, und das heißt, sich in dem angegebenen Sinne in seinem Text versteht, so versteht der Historiker auch noch den großen, von ihm erratenen Text der Weltgeschichte selbst, in dem jeder überlieferte Text nur ein Sinnbruchstück, ein Buchstabe ist, und auch er versteht sich selbst in diesem großen Text. ... Es ist das wirkungsgeschichtliche Bewußtsein, worin sich beide als in ihrer wahren Grundlage zusammenfinden.«[97] After an utterly unconvincing criticism of Hegel, Gadamer ends his second part with an analysis of the fusion of horizons inherent in the process of questioning and answering. »Denn das ist gewiß richtig, daß gegenüber der wirklichen hermeneutischen Erfahrung, die den Sinn des Textes versteht, die Rekonstruktion dessen, was der Verfasser tatsächlich im Sinne hatte, eine reduzierte Aufgabe ist. Es ist die Verführung des Historismus, in solcher Reduktion die Tugend der Wissenschaftlichkeit zu sehen und im Verstehen eine Art von Rekonstruktion zu erblicken, die die Entstehung des Textes gleichsam wiederholt.«[98]

This is not the place for a thorough criticism of Gadamer, therefore I cannot argue here sufficiently for the following assertions. Gadamer's historic achievement is the insight that understanding is more than the unveiling of the *mens auctoris*. In Husserl's language one can say that hermeneutics cannot deal only with the *noesis* of the author of a text, but must consider its *noema*, and that only by doing so can it respect the author who is not taken seriously if he is psychologized. If I try to understand a person, I try to understand what he says. To learn from a text has a higher dignity than to learn about it, and insofar the operation called »Verstehen« cannot be reduced to explanation. It is also true that history cannot be conceived only as a place of errors discovered finally by the interpreter – being a part of history himself, he must interpret history as a place of the possible manifestation of truth. But these insights must not conceal the ambivalent sides of Gadamer's grand theory. Its main problem is the Heideggerian rejection of any transcendental reflection on the *quaestio iuris*.[99]

96 Ibid., 313.

97 Ibid., 323.

98 Ibid., 355.

99 Cf. 279: »daß ihre Aufgabe überhaupt nicht ist, ein Verfahren des Verstehens zu entwickeln, sondern die Bedingungen aufzuklären, unter denen Verstehen geschieht«.

We need a method to distinguish good from bad interpretations, both of the *noesis* and of *noema*, and Gadamer has little to offer in this respect. Therefore one cannot deny that, e. g., the deconstructionist hermeneutics with its appalling lack of sense for the *mens auctoris* has its roots partly in Gadamer. The »objectivity« of modern hermeneutics is certainly not everything, but it is something which must not be given up.[100] Gadamer confuses genesis and validity when he insinuates that the complex prehistory of modern hermeneutics impairs its claims.[101] Only if modern hermeneutics is integrated into a broader concept of hermeneutics, may Gadamer's conservative revolution convince. And in order to develop a plausible theory of how to understand *noemata*, we need a recognition of an autonomous reason and of a dimension of validity which cannot be offered by the radical historicism to which Gadamer continues to belong. It is true that he leads beyond historicism by pointing to the contradiction inherent in its naive belief in »objective« understanding – one cannot historicise everything except one's historic interpretation. But he brings historicism only to an explosion, he does not overcome it. In order to do so, he would have to allow more room to Husserl than to Dilthey and Heidegger, and he would have to recognize that the facticity of history is not the final criterion of validity, even if it remains true that history is not a meaningless place, alien to the ideal sphere. But it is the ideal sphere which constitutes history, and not *vice versa*.[102]

And it is only the recognition of such an ideal sphere which permits us to make sense of religion, and therefore of the Bible. I can only sketch how such a post-Gadamerian hermeneutics of the Bible might look. Firstly, it seems hopeless to me to justify the authority of the Bible by the miracles narrated in it or assumed to have led to its revelation. Even if we assume that certain miracles have taken place (and, given the darkness which encloses the body-mind-problem, we certainly should not exclude healings based on the power of spirit, even if it is misleading to believe that such events are in contradiction to the laws of nature – we only do not know how to explain them), this could never prove their divine origin; for some malicious spirit might be their cause (whose existence is hard to exclude, if we accept extramundane interventions in the course of nature). Besides that, miracles are not necessary to defend the idea of divine revelation, as Fichte was right in pointing out: It suits an omnipotent and omniscient being far better to have organized the world in such a way that his purposes can be achieved without any concrete intervention, simply by the normal course of nature

100 Cf. Emilio Betti, *Die Hermeneutik als allgemeine Methodik der Geisteswissenschaften*, Tübingen 1962, 34f., 43ff.

101 A similar fallacy with regard to natural sciences can be found in the first part (3).

102 Cf. Vittorio Hösle, *Wahrheit und Geschichte*, Stuttgart-Bad Cannstatt 1984.

and history. Secondly, the divine manifests itself in what has a particular closeness to its central values and truths, whatever its genesis may be. Obviously, as Kant and Hegel taught, we already need some apriori knowledge of them in order to find out whether a text can claim to manifest these values in a particular degree – it can be only reason which justifies the authority of the Bible, not the Bible which justifies the validity of certain rational or moral convictions. But does this not imply that any revelation beyond reason is superfluous? Not at all. On the one hand, the autonomy of reason is a late result of history and presupposes genetically both prerational experiences without which it could never have understood itself and the power of traditions in which it is embedded, as Gadamer rightly recognized.[103] On the other hand, even if the examen by a subjective reason is the necessary presupposition for the justified acknowledgment of a text, nothing excludes that the subjective reason can learn from a text innumerable things which were not known to it before. Thirdly, a rationalist framework entails that there can be many inspired texts, even in different cultures and traditions.[104] Christians should certainly not deny that, e. g., Mohammed achieved for his time and his culture what could be reasonably expected, and one should therefore not shrink from calling him an inspired prophet.

Nevertheless, there are – fourthly – good reason for regarding the Bible as a very special book. Compared with the Koran, its most striking features are the richness of the literary genres present in it and the range of time during which it was written.[105] This abundance explains the numerous contradictions one finds in it – contradictions which, by the way, favoured the development of hermeneutics within christian culture and contributed to the rise of modernity. It is senseless to downplay these contradictions, if one accepts the principles of modern hermeneutics; and on the basis of a universalist ethics it would be profoundly immoral to accept the application of those principles to other religions, but not to one's own. Furthermore, it is not necessary to downplay those contradictions in order to defend the authority of the text. That the concept of God of the Priestly source and already of the Elohist is less anthropomorphic than that of the Jahwist, that John eliminates exorcisms from his account of Jesus' acts, is a sign of religious progress which should not disturb even if entails that the more primitive concepts of God are not the definitive ones and makes it plausible that

103 One could name here also Karl Rahner, *Hörer des Wortes*, München 1941, a book which shares with Gadamer's work Heidegger's influence.

104 Christian authors have often claimed to be inspired; see, e. g., Nicholas of Cusa's letter to Cardinal Julian at the end of *De docta ignorantia*: »Credo superno dono a patre luminum« (note 36; I 516).

105 Cf. Thomas Söding, *Mehr als ein Buch. Die Bibel begreifen*, Freiburg/Basel/Wien 1995.

also the later concepts may become more subtle. The telos of the theological concepts of the Bible is in any case the rational *noema* of God – this is what gives meaning to the historical reconstruction of the earlier *noeseis*. One could defend the thesis that the story of the Fall says something about a necessary step the human mind has to take, even if we came to the conclusion that the Jahwist saw in it only something negative – but the story has its own weight, transcending the intentions of its author. In some cases one can even recognize in a story different strata representing different intentions, and here the modern interpreter has in any case to break with at least one of the interpretations given by the authors to the story.

Even less problematic are the contradictions between the Bible and our modern scientific knowledge – one can and has to demythologize the Bible,[106] as long as one recognizes that it is monotheism, as it was firstly conceived within the Bible, which is a necessary presupposition for the genesis, and perhaps also the validity, of modern science. It is also impossible to deny that several passages particularly, but not only, of the Old Testament manifest moral ideas which are unacceptable to us – as long as one recognizes that the ideas of justice and of love have hardly ever been articulated as powerfully as in the Bible, paricularly by the prophets. And has not the Bible itself shown the weaknesses of its heroes, so that we need not be surprised at some weaknesses of its authors (as well as, later, of the Fathers of the Church)? One need only to think of Peter's denial, certainly one of the most powerful scenes of the gospels and one of the most innovative texts of world literature.[107] Besides the dignity of its theological and moral ideas, the Bible excels indeed because of its literary qualities. It is significant that it not only teaches moral precepts (as in the Proverbs), but that it shows morality in action – it thus allows, particularly, but not only, in the gospels, for a personal identification which abstract ethical treatises do not offer. This effect does not depend on the historicity of the stories told, even if the Books of Samuel and of Kings can claim to have given origin as few other texts to historical thinking. It has to do with its art of narrative which is in many cases superb – I name only the Joseph novella.[108] A person with such a vast and profound knowledge of the classics as Harold Bloom writes, without reference to religious motives, that if on a desert island he could have one book, it would be a complete Shakespeare, if two, that and a Bible.[109]

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106 Cf. Rudolf Bultmann, *Neues Testament und Mythologie*, München 1985.

107 Cf. Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis*, Princeton 1953, 40ff.

108 Cf. Robert Alter, *The art of biblical narrative*, New York 1981 or Barbara Green, *›What profit for us?‹ Remembering the story of Joseph*, Lanham/New York/London 1996. By Robert Alter see also: *The art of biblical poetry*, New York 1985. In both of his books »biblical« refers only to the Old Testament.

109 *The Western canon*, New York 1995, 490.

But of course, literature cannot be the central criterion for valuing the Bible – it can only add to the weight of its theological and moral ideas. Their truth cannot be proven with exegetical tools – this is the task of systematic philosophy. And this means that exegetical studies, even after they have found their own method, are well advised not to part with philosophy. Only a philosophically enlightened exegesis can avoid the scylla of fundamentalism and the charybdis of historic relativism.