

Bible came from a single homogeneous clerical class, and so long as this class was providing the rationale for the pastoral discipline of a largely inactive laity, it was inevitable that the biblical text and the dogmatic tradition would be read as but alternate forms of a single truth. Only the historical critic could have raised the issue of the distinction between the *meaning* of the text and its *significance* in dogmatic tradition. Only when that distinction was appreciated could the text be considered as a relatively independent object of inquiry.

Modern specialization, such as led to emergence of biblical studies and theology as distinct disciplines, creates problems of which we are all aware. Nevertheless, when the Bible ceased to be simply the book through which grammar, rhetoric, ethics and rudimentary science as well as theology might be taught, an inevitable development, it might have been relegated entirely to the theological faculties (i.e., seminaries), had biblical studies not been shaped as a largely historically oriented field of study. It is instructive to observe that the classics became increasingly subject to historical criticism, that the meaning of the word *philology* shifted from the love of learning and literature to the study of texts in terms of their authenticity and meaning, and that modern literature came to be accepted in the university curriculum after, and largely because its advocates demonstrated its susceptibility to historical analysis (Palmer). Perhaps, the definition given biblical studies has been too restricted; still, without clear definition, and very probably had the definition been other than historical, biblical studies would have had little if any place in the academic community.

In the past, historical critics, revealing layer on layer of significance without arriving at determinate meaning, were open to the charge that their effect was disintegrative. Stock notes that redaction criticism marked a turn in the road for historical criticism in as much as it demonstrated increasing concern for the meaning of larger biblical units in their present forms rather than in their original forms. But it also needs to be pointed out that this course has been pursued much further. Thus, canonical criticism assesses the meaning of individual traditions and books in terms of the whole biblical canon. Some find the point of integration in the dynamics of the process by which the canon took shape (Sanders), while others place the integration in the final shape of the canon itself (Childs). But all the canonical critics have used historical approaches with fresh sensitivity for comprehensive meaning. Finally, comparative midrash studies, analysing patterns of textual development and elaboration during the latter stages of formation of the biblical texts and canon, have narrowed the gap between exegesis and theology. They show how such adaptation and commentary serves as a response to canonical literature and is guided by the canonical framework (White).

Given the propensity of modern western thought for historical categories, some have questioned whether history has not become a dogmatic foundation, or even an explanatory tool that is ultimately reductionistic in

biblical studies. Again, earlier tendencies are in process of reversal. For example, efforts to place the text in social context, which often appear to move in reductionist directions, are being followed by attempts to discern the overall strategies and designs inherent in the texts through socio-cultural analysis (Malina; Elliott). This anthropological form of the historical method serves especially well in clarifying how biblical authors responded creatively to their historical situations rather than merely reflecting historically conditioned givens. Thus, four emerging forms of historical criticism: redaction criticism, canonical criticism, comparative midrash and socio-cultural studies, reinforcing one another, promise the theologian paradigms helpful in showing the overall meaning of human experience, as well as paradigms in continuity with the biblical tradition.

Literary Criticism in Theological Perspective

At the risk of sounding like a Madison-Avenue analyst, I think it theologically proper to ask that when we treat the Bible as literature we show concern for the size and nature of the markets the various forms of literary criticism have. Theologians are not competent judges of the intrinsic merits of the new criticism, structuralism or deconstructionism. But we may ask if the Bible is being treated in such a fashion that it remains the scripture of the believing community as a whole. We may rightfully reject methods that transform it into a code to be deciphered by elite illuminati. Theologians will have to be convinced that structuralists are not a new wave of gnostics and that deconstructionists are not rather literate charismatics.

We must be open to the possibility that moderate strains of structuralism and deconstructionism might be incorporated into contemporary readings of the scriptures; after all, moderate strains of gnosticism and enthusiasm were accepted into the biblical canon. The following minimal conditions would have to be satisfied: (1) the believing community would have to be conceded control over the meaning of its scriptural tradition adequate to the fulfillment of the community's task of understanding its most general meaning; (2) this general meaning would have to have been available in some form for the bulk of the community throughout its history; (3) this general meaning may be supplemented, but not contradicted by whatever is to be described as a deeper structure of meaning or personally determined reader-response. These conditions will not be met easily. Moreover, it will undoubtedly take considerable time to garner evidence that they are being met. This means that all sides will have to await the longer-term and cumulative impact of the newer literary methods. This impact might be far more apparent from the vantage point of 2080 at an ecumenical council to be held perhaps in Peking rather than at any point in the near future.

Besides asking if literary critics permit the Bible to serve as the scripture of the believing community, the theo-