
HERMENEUTICS AS INTERPRE- TATION AND THE CARIBBEAN STUDENT: PART I

by

N. Samuel Murrell

Introduction

As an art of human understanding in general, hermeneutics can be defined as the art of interpretation of texts and traditions, whether written or oral, sacred or profane. In this regard, the student who studies one of Bob Marley's reggae hits is as much a hermeneut as the Hindu scholar who interprets the Bhagavad Gita (a sacred Hindu text). Since all of the major religions of the world interpret their sacred traditions and texts, one should not regard hermeneutics as an exclusively Christian idea. Historically, however, the use of the term hermeneutics has been largely Judeo-Christian and conceptualizes two types of activities related to biblical studies. One regards hermeneutics as the art of interpretation of biblical texts and is governed mainly by the historical-grammatical method of interpretation. It involves "the critical examination of a text whereby the interpreter, using a variety of tools, seeks to penetrate behind the text to the original meaning of the author as he addressed his original audience" (Tate 1991, 33-34). The other conception of hermeneutics is historical in nature. It views hermeneutics as a discipline which *surveys the history of biblical interpretation* and, thus, analyzes the various methodologies which scholars have proffered over the centuries for proper interpretation of Scripture. In most of the scholarly works on hermeneutics more time is spent on description than actual biblical interpretation.

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Some scholars make a distinction between interpretation and hermeneutics as well as between interpretation and exegesis (Thiselton 1980, 10). For Paul Achtemeier, exegesis deals with inquiry into the meaning that a text had for its original author and readers, interpretation focuses on the text's present meaning for today, and hermeneutics formulates "rules and

methods to get from exegesis to interpretation” (Achte-meier 1969, 30). Tate explains that interpretation has the “task of explaining or drawing out the implications of...understanding for contemporary readers and hearers,” but exegesis is concerned with “the process of examining a text to ascertain what its first readers would have understood it to mean” (Tate 1991, 33). Although these subtle distinctions between interpretation, hermeneutics and exegesis are not without merit, they are supposed to do the same thing, interpret texts and derive meaning. As C. F. Evans says, “hermeneutics...is only another word for exegesis or interpretation” (Evans 1971, 33). Regardless of how they define this discipline, most scholars contend that hermeneutics must go beyond the mere grammatical understanding of a text within its historical context; it must apply to human existence and reality in the world.

“Hermeneutics as Interpretation and the Caribbean Student: Part One” reviews the historical development of this academic discipline and is therefore concerned with the descriptive project rather than the exegetical task to be dealt with in Part Two. This essay is also designed for the theological student rather than the lay person. The main objectives are: One, to trace the origins, concepts, methods and proponents of hermeneutics in Jewish and Christian traditions. Two, to show the student who feels intimidated by the technical nature of the discipline that it developed gradually among simple everyday folks as they interpreted their sacred traditions and defined their identity. Three, to raise questions and offer suggestions relative to the appropriateness of North American and European hermeneutical models to Caribbean biblical interpretation in theology and ministry.

The History of Biblical Interpretation

Some scholars trace the roots of hermeneutics as an art to Greek culture. Wolfhart Pannenberg says,

in a manner which is not fully clear, the word ‘hermeneutics’ is connected with the name of the god Hermes, the messenger of the gods who announces their decisions. By analogy with this function of Hermes...Plato in his *Ion* calls poets ‘interpreters of the gods’ (*hermenes ton theo*), in contrast with the bards, who merely received Homer and were only ‘an interpreter’s interpreters’ (Pannenberg 1976, 157-58).

From Aristotle’s “*Peri hermeneias*,” the word hermeneutics came to a secular use in Greek culture and dealt “simply with the theory of a statement” and an essay or linguistic expression. So Pannenberg says,

“From classical rhetoric and Stoic philosophy, which had developed an allegorical method of construing the mythical tradition, reflection on the rules of hermeneutic was taken over into Christian exegesis of scripture” (1976, 158). Christians produced a typological reconstruction of the scriptures which was then added to the literal and allegorical forms, and used the term hermeneutic to describe the study of the rules of exegesis. Then,

hermeneutic was developed into an independent discipline in 1567 by Flacius, who hoped, by formulating universally valid rules of interpretation, to establish the possibility of a universally valid scriptural exegesis in opposition to post-Tridentine Catholic theology (Pannenberg 1976, 158).

A. Interpretation Within the Hebrew Bible

I contend that the scholarly hermeneutical enterprise in the Christian tradition began with the Church Fathers’ use of the historical-grammatical method of interpretation but the practice is as old as Scripture itself. If one reads the Hebrew Bible at a non-technical level, one sees interpretation occurring throughout the biblical narratives. In Genesis 3, the serpent reinterprets the meaning of God’s command not to eat of the forbidden fruit. According to the later narrative in Genesis 37, Joseph’s brothers **interpreted** his dreams and concluded that he had a political ambition to control the family; for which they hated him and sought to destroy him. After they sold him into slavery in Egypt, as an alternative to murdering him, Joseph was imprisoned on false charges of sexual harassment. But Joseph’s fellow inmates discovered that he had the gift of **interpretation** and had him **interpret** their dreams; after which one of them was reinstated into his previous job position and the other was executed by Pharaoh. Eventually, Joseph was summoned to interpret Pharaoh’s dreams for which he was promoted to Prime Minister of Egypt. Later, Joseph himself made use of an interpreter while communicating with his brothers who went into Egypt to buy food during a severe famine in Canaan; an act which was repeated when Joseph’s family of 72 joined him in Egypt to settle in the fertile plains.

The Pharaohs and other Egyptian leaders used interpreters to communicate with the Hebrews before the Exodus. Beyond the Exodus experience, Moses claimed to have received the Ten Commandments from YHWH (God) which he communicated to the people and urged them to obey. Later, some authors (or an author) interpreted and expanded the law and combined theological reflections with historical narratives, the many “God speeches” from the meeting of God with

Moses, Joshua and the people, liturgical or sacrificial practices and other scriptural elements to form the large body of sacred traditions which formed the Pentateuch. According to the writers of these traditions God made the people wander around the Wilderness for forty years until all those who disobeyed and did not believe YHWH perished. Therefore, "Beyond the Jordan, in the land of Moab, Moses undertook to interpret the law" to the new generation so they would not forget their roots, God, and tradition (Deut. 1:5).

For many centuries, judges, priests, Levites, kings and prophets—in what the Hebrew Bible called the Former Prophets (Joshua, Judges, Samuel and Kings)—interpreted this body of tradition for the people. Collectors and collaborators of biblical traditions, also compiled and interpreted such materials as poems, proverbs, wise sayings and philosophical discourse on the problem of suffering, which they put in writing. In the eighth century, classical prophets used the Torah as the basis of social, political and moral critique of the society, and challenged entire nations to moral responsibility, monotheism.

After Israel had spent 70 years in Babylonian captivity, King Cyrus allowed the Israelites to return and rebuild Jerusalem and the Temple through which they re-established Yahwehism based on their written and oral traditions. At the rededication of the Temple, the Hebrew scribes read from the Torah and taught the people about YHWH. But the written law was in Hebrew so the scribes and translators had to interpret the oral presentation of the law for the people whose language had changed during the 70 years. The text suggests that the interpreters did more than mere translation; they "gave the sense of the words;" they did interpretation. After Alexander the Great over-ran Palestine and its surrounding constitutencies in 332 BCE, the Greeks attempted to Hellenize the Israelites as part of their "Grecianization" program. Hellenistic Judaism became strongest in Alexandria, Egypt, where Greek was the common language among diaspora Jews. In order to communicate with the people in Hellenistic culture, 70 Jewish scribes translated the Hebrew Bible into Greek. The LXX, as it is also called, produced in ca. 250 BCE, was not a mere translation of the Bible by disinterested scholars; it involved much interpretation.

It is interesting to note that the three-fold division of the Tanakh (the Hebrew Bible) reflects a Hebraic hermeneutical decision which shows the ranking of the biblical books by means of their perceived level of importance. Jewish Rabbis regarded the Torah as the direct revelation from God to Moses on Mount Sinai (Gen. 19:3-6; Ex. 20:1), and therefore of primary importance and authority. After a while, the Torah became synonymous with the Law of Moses (1 Kgs. 2:3 and Ezra 3:2)

and the Book of Moses (2 Chron. 25:12; Neh. 13:1)—a hermeneutical designation used later by Jesus (Mk. 12:26). Jewish scholars regard the Former and Latter Prophets as having been “written by men” under the inspiration of God’s Spirit and having some authority, but not on the same level with the Torah. The Writings (*Kethubim*), however, were viewed as communications which were written after prophecy ceased and represent human initiative in the attempt to understand and relate to YHWH. As a hermeneutical decision, the Writings were ascribed the lowest level of authority on the totem pole of the Tanakh.

Critical biblical scholarship has found much more technical and sophisticated forms of interpretation at work in the Bible than the one I just depicted above. About 300 years ago, for example, the German scholar Karl Graf argued that the whole “Hexateuch” (Genesis to Joshua) is an interpretation of a series of stories, events, ideas and strands of theological concepts and was pulled together in its present form from several different sources or authors. He grouped all of the texts that used the name YHWH in a “J” category, those that employed ELOHIM in an “E” group, the ones that deal with the law in a “D” category, and the texts used in priestly or liturgical practices he listed as “P”. This “form” and “literary” reconstruction of the biblical materials was later called “JEDP” or the Documentary Hypothesis. Graf also believed that the authors and collectors (or Deuteronomists) operated in an environment where Yahwehism (the worship of YHWH, or God) and monotheism were the dominant ideas. The information in the Genesis story and other narratives of the Hexateuch therefore reflects more of the authors’ ideal and theology than it does actual words of God. This was developed and expanded in the nineteenth century by Wellhausen.

With regard to Moses reinterpreting the Law to the new generation about to enter Palestine, in Deuteronomy, Thomas Hoyte says, “From the point of view of modern scholarship, this is a potent example of the Deuteronomic school updating and explaining an already ancient tradition in religion to a new situation” (Hoyte 1991, 18); that is, the author was reinterpreting earlier traditions contextually. Hoyte notes that Gerhard von Rad made the same observation in his “tradition-historical” approach to Scripture. Von Rad “stressed the manner in which Israel remembered the bases of salvation; the covenant with the patriarchs, Sinai, the covenant with David, and the establishment of the special status of Zion” (Ibid.). These were reenactments and reinterpretations of traditions in the context of the people’s worship of YHWH. Although, as Hoyte notes, “the same process of interpretation and reinterpretation transpired within the New Testament” (Ibid.), the Graf-Wellhausen reconstruction of the Hebrew Bible sparked a furious

debate over the nature of Scripture and biblical interpretation that is still alive in 1997.

B. Interpretation Within Rabbinic Judaism

In the present era (CE) one finds a long history of dialogue and commentary, as a form of interpretation, within Palestinian Judaism. With the disappearance of the temple, the synagogue developed into the main center of learning and the Rabbi became the quintessential interpreter-expositor of Jewish sacred traditions. These Rabbinic teachers developed a tradition of appealing to their revered predecessors as great authorities whom they studiously cited in their commentaries on the Torah (Carmody and Carmody 1992, 268). Out of this practice came a huge body of materials, later called the Talmud (the learning), which began as oral traditions. When the “sea of interpretations” made the oral Torah too large for memory, it was written down as the Mishnah (ca. 100-200 CE). The Mishnah is itself a collection of interpretations of legal materials from the Hebrew Bible and developed from the practice of settling legal disputes through an organized appeal to recognized rabbinic authorities. But conflict arose between the Pharisees and the Sadducees over this practice. So the former adopted a Midrashic approach (a *peshet*) to the Mishnah, in order “to outflank the Sadducees who denied the binding character of the oral law and relied on the literal biblical text” (Carmody and Carmody 1992, 269). “At times *peshet* is simply a verse-by-verse commentary, but it often takes the form of a specialized, non-literal interpretation. “Such is the case with the *peshetim* of Nahum, Habakkuk, and Isaiah” found at Qumran (Hadley 1986, 104). After 70CE, the legal opinions and commentaries of all of the distinguished rabbis were put into writing at a little town on the west side of Jerusalem (on the coast) called Jabneh where many teachers lived. Rabbi Aliba (50-135CE), one of the organizers, later set up his own academy at Bene-Berak to study, preserve and systematize the Mishnah.

When the Bar-Kokhbah revolt mounted by the Jews was crushed by the Romans in 135, many perished in the onslaught and others fled to Babylon (Iraq) where they began developing a lengthy work called the Babylonian Talmud (completed ca. 600 CE.). After Hadrian died in 138, Jewish scholars who had remained in Jerusalem started developing the shorter Jerusalem Talmud (completed ca. 400 CE.). They began with the elaboration and systematization of the Mishnah into: 1) Biblical precepts; 2) Sabbath (with festivals, feasts, calendars); 3) Women (marriage and divorce, relationships between the sexes); 4) Damages (civil and criminal laws); 5) Cultic matters (slaughtering of animals,

making offerings etc.); 6) Ritual purity or cleanliness. To these were added Midrash and Kabbalistic ideas, searching for hidden, spiritual (and fanciful) meaning in the text; Halakah (rules to go by), a style of commentary on the Torah which derived principles and regulations for human conduct; and Haggadah (telling), the practice of drawing on the stories, proverbs and sayings of the Hebrew Bible to illustrate a biblical text. Rabbinic Judaism therefore showed several distinct features of biblical interpretation: 1) It depended heavily upon rabbinic interpretative traditions. 2) Its commentaries often interpreted scripture literally (plain sense), which often led to very wooden interpretation. 3) A very common practice was the Midrash which aimed at uncovering the deeper meanings that the rabbis assumed were inherent in the actual text.

In the first century CE, Jesus bridged the hermeneutical gap between Jewish interpreters of the Hebrew Bible and what would be called (after his death) “those of the way” or “Christ ones” (Christians). In many respects, Jesus interpreted the Hebrew Bible as a rabbi; and was even given the titles Rabbi and Rabboni (teacher). He recognized the authority of the Torah and appealed to it constantly under the title “Moses;” a term he sometimes used to interpret the whole Hebrew Bible. Jesus also corrected and refuted misinterpretations of the Torah while rigorously defending the idea of Monotheism—“God and my Father are One,” he said. But Jesus clearly adopted a new hermeneutical approach to the Hebrew Bible in the following ways: 1) He regarded his approach to the Hebrew Bible as “new wine which must go in new wine bottles;” 2) he called Rabbinic interpretation of the Torah “an old garment” which cannot be sewed to his “new fabric” of the kingdom; 3) he made himself the hermeneutical point of departure, by claiming that the Hebrew Bible pointed to him and his coming; 4) he used parables to interpret the kingdom of God in ways that no rabbi had done before; 5) Jesus used a new hermeneutic and, “beginning at Moses and all the prophets, he expounded unto” his disciples “in all the scriptures the things concerning himself,” his messianic theology and mission (Lk. 24:27). This is the first place in the NT where the word hermeneutics occurs (διεμενευω); and, for the disciples, it was like Theology (or Religion) 101.

C. Early Christian Interpretation

Early Christian preachers, teachers, evangelists and writers interpreted and reinterpreted the body of oral tradition which came from Jesus and the Hebrew Bible to define who they were, what they believed and how they should live. Jesus and the Septuagint were the major sources of information and points of reference for the development of

NT theological paradigms in the writings of Paul, Peter, James, John, Luke and others. "There are over 1,600 Old Testament citations in the New and many more allusions" (Hadley 1986, 104). To early Christians, Jesus was not only the great teacher and messiah, he was the hermeneutic through which all texts were filtered and on whom all theology was grounded (e.g., Rom. 5:12-21; Heb. 7:1-17; John 1:1). Peter and others viewed the promises in the Hebrew Bible as being fulfilled through Christ in their time (Acts 2:14-36; I Peter 1:10-12). Paul says, "Whatever was written in earlier times was written for our instruction" (Rom. 15:14). Within two decades of Christ's death, Paul discovered and used the oral "Jesus tradition" in his preaching, teaching and writing on law and grace, freedom and bondage, life and death, etc. But while Paul's theology in the epistles and his preaching as seen in Acts were built on the "Jesus hermeneutic" and tradition (I Cor. 11:23-26), the apostle also discovered that teachings in the Jesus tradition on such issues like marriage and divorce (Mk. 10:29) were not adequate for dealing with the moral issues at Corinth; he must contextualize by giving his own interpretation (I Cor. 7:10). Paul used traditions in a creative way "because of the freedom that he had experienced in the risen Lord" and his interpretation of law and grace (Hoyte 1991, 19). Paul even felt free to use the Jewish pesher method in his exegesis (I Cor. 15:54-55).

Early Christians were also influenced by Hellenistic Judaism and Greek philosophy in the Hellenistic culture. John said Jesus was present at the beginning of creation and, therefore, He is the logos and the starting point of theology (John 1:1f). To John the Divine, Jesus is the Alpha and the Omega (Greek words and ideas), the beginning and the end of all hermeneutical discussion and theology. Paul's allegorical interpretation of the Jerusalem which is from above and the one which hails from below, based on the paradigm of the bond and the free women in Abraham's life, is rooted in Greek Platonic thought and Hebrew traditions. From this fertile Hellenistic soil sprang the school of biblical interpretation called the allegorical method. It held the belief that true reality lay behind the physical, the text's true meaning lay behind the written word, and the text serves as a form of extended metaphor which pointed to the ideas that are hidden behind it. Philo (20 BCE-54 CE), the brilliant Alexandrian Jew, was the main practitioner of this method. For him, a Bible passage had body (Literal), soul and spirit (allegorical). While the literal is important, only the allegorical method could reveal the true inner meaning that God intended. Out of this Philo developed several rules related to theology, grammar and meaning in Scripture.

Many Church Fathers in the Alexandrian and Antiochene Schools of thought used the methods of interpretation adopted from Judaism, Philo and Greek culture, in order to make Scripture speak to their own context.

As a direct response to the need to defend the Christian faith against “paganism” and various types of “heresies,” the “Fathers” placed much emphasis on the spiritual sense of the text. They moved freely between the literal-historical (Jerome and Augustine), grammatical-historical (Chrysostom), allegorical (Origin) and typological (Titus Flavius Clement) methods of interpretation of the Scriptures. According to David Dockery, “Clement’s *Paidagogus* presented the divine Word as the teacher and trainer of humankind from the beginning,” and also interpreted the story of Abraham’s choice for Hagar (Gen. 16) as “an example of choosing only what was profitable from Platonic philosophy,” but also embracing secular culture (Dockery 1992, 84-85). In the works of Augustine one sees an emphasis on the four-fold sense of scripture (literal, allegorical, typological or moral, anagogical or futuristic).

Dockery contends that by the fifth century, all of these hermeneutical models converged to emphasize seven aspects of an interpretative preunderstanding:

- (1) The primacy of the literal sense of Scripture; (2) an allowance for a deeper or a multiple sense of Scripture; (3) the need for faith presupposition in interpretation; (4) the canonical context for interpretation; (5) Scripture should be interpreted for edification of the church... (6) the interpretation should not be out of line with the church’s rule of faith; and (7) Scripture should be interpreted christologically (Dockery 1992, 158).

These prevailed throughout much of the Medieval period. Under the influence of the Renaissance in Europe (ca. 1250-1600) and the search for literary accuracy, the literal (*Sensus plenior*) or plain sense of the text, was reemphasized. Some “Schoolmen” in high Medieval Roman theology recommended *Sensus Plenior*, rational thinking and church traditions to guard against fanciful aspects of allegorical and typological interpretations of the Bible. The works of Bonaventura (1221-1274), Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274), Nicholas of Lyra (1265-1349), John Wycliffe (1328-1384) and Erasmus of Rotterdam (1466-1536) show heavy dependence on the study of the history and grammar of the text; but the quest for the spiritual sense of scripture was always in sight.

D. Protestant Biblical Interpretation

During the Protestant Reformation, Wycliffe’s emphasis on the Bible’s saving function, the desire to find the literal sense of the biblical text, and the perceived need to counter the theology of Rome was reinforced by the battle cry “*Sola Scriptura*”—scripture and scripture

alone as the interpretative tool for biblical hermeneutics. This was especially the case in the works of Martin Luther (1483-1546), John Calvin (1509-1564) and Flacius (1567). Luther held out “faith against reason” in order to nullify what he saw as the influence of Aristotelian logic in the hermeneutics practised by the “Schoolmen” (Anselm, Okam, Ableard, Aquinas, et al.). In his debate with Eck (the Catholic theologian in Germany) in 1519, Luther contended that only Scripture should be used to interpret Scripture—without the help of the traditions of the church as informed by its priests, bishops, cardinals and councils. Eck, however, showed the logical fallacy of the *Sola Scriptura* idea by arguing, like Augustine, that people need an environment, a context, or church traditions, within which to make sense of scripture. Almost 400 years after Luther, Rudolf Bultmann would show that there is indeed a “preunderstanding” at work in all readings of the Bible which is affected by church tradition. It is no wonder that, although Luther’s ideas have prevailed in Protestant Christianity, he actually lost the debate to Eck on logical grounds.

Since the need for the plain sense (and focus on scriptural authority) of the text depended heavily on the study of grammar and history, hermeneutics developed quite naturally into the “grammatical-historical” method of interpretation—a rational approach to biblical exegesis, which overshadowed Luther’s emphasis on faith over reason. Theological meaning for the formation of dogma, derived from the study of the language of the text (its grammatical, syntactical and lexical structure) within its context, was the primary focus of the biblical scholar during this period. According to Bultmann, prior to the nineteenth century, hermeneutics was construed as dealing only with “formal analysis of a literary work, with reference to its structure and its style,” through the study of “foreign-language texts” according to the rules of grammar (Bultmann 1955, 234). This practice, which Randy Maddox calls “hermeneutics as method” (Maddox 1985, 517), focused on developing proper methods of arriving at the correct interpretation of a text, and stressed objectivity in the interpreter’s use of language, grammar, vocabulary, and literary and historical data.

But the historical-grammatical approach to the Bible did not go unchallenged. Textual and literary-critical rationalists, since the 1500s, have challenged the long-held understanding of the inspiration, authority, authenticity and reliability of the Bible. For example, Elijah Ben Asher shocked Christians in 1538 when he proved that the Hebrew vowel pointing was added at a much later date. In his *Leviathan* (1651), Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679) argued that the Bible was not God’s words but contained the word of God, a precursor to Karl Barth’s view of 1914. In *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* (1650), Baruch Spinoza (1632-1677)

argued that there are inconsistencies and contradictions in the Pentateuch. This position was followed by Richard Simon in the 1680s. Before the turn of the 1700s, the physician Jean Astruc and Johann Eichhorn began identifying different sources in Genesis based on the use of certain names for God. Later, Graf and Wellhausen developed the Documentary Hypothesis described earlier, and Joseph Semler (1725-1791) raised serious questions with regard to the form and integrity of the biblical text. All of these critical ideas put a new spin on the “hermeneutical wheel” that changed biblical interpretation permanently.

Modern Hermeneutics

A. Schleiermacher and Bultmann

As Joseph Bleicher noted, although the historical grammatical method is still defended today as the only objective reliable and valid way to interpret the Bible, it encountered another serious challenge at the turn of the nineteenth century in the works of Friedrich Schleiermacher and Wilhelm Dilthey (Bleicher 1980, 51). The challenge began as an attempt to get beyond the grammar of the text and, instead, grasp the spirit or “*geistige*” of the author (his *sitz im Leben* or general life situation). Schleiermacher based his hermeneutics “on a systematic conception of the operations of human understanding in dialogue” with texts (Palmer 1969, 82). He sought to make hermeneutics an art or theory of human understanding in general, in all forms of communication, a truly “*allgemeinen Hermeneutik*” which was coherent, systematic and scientific rather than a mere collection of rules for biblical interpretation (Schleiermacher 1986, 15-16).

“Although the traditional division between exegesis and criticism is retained in his work, Schleiermacher does not restrict hermeneutics to a collection of rules for textual interpretation” (Pannenberg 1976, 158). Schleiermacher viewed hermeneutics within the context of the operation of human consciousness through such actions as feeling, acting, speaking and perceiving. As Hans Frei noted, “this fundamental distinction of speaking and understanding formed the basis for a new direction in hermeneutics in the theory of understanding” (Frei 1974, 342) into the twentieth century. Schleiermacher’s views on hermeneutics influenced Wilhelm Dilthey, Martin Heidegger, Rudolf Bultmann and Hans Georg Gadamer, who laid the foundation for the New Hermeneutic developed in the last few decades.

More than anyone else, however, Bultmann revolutionized the field of NT studies by turning traditional hermeneutics on its head (although some Bultmanians would say on its feet). He published several works on NT interpretation—*New Testament and Mythology* (1941), *The*

Problem of Hermeneutics (1950), *On the Problem of Demythologizing* (1952), *Is Exegesis without Presupposition Possible?* (1957)—which changed the course of biblical hermeneutics forever. Bultmann's question as to whether one could do objective interpretation of ancient texts free of preunderstanding challenged the idea that only scripture must interpret scripture. He said interpretation "is never without presuppositions; more exactly, it is always guided by a preunderstanding of the subject matter about which it questions the text" (Bultmann 1958, 48). "Every interpretation incorporates a particular prior understanding" (Bultmann 1955, 241). The interpreter "brings with him certain conceptions, perhaps idealistic or psychological, as presuppositions of exegesis, in most cases unconsciously" (Bultmann 1958, 48) which affect the result of the interpretation. This conditioning from the environment, according to Ferguson, "includes a wide range of historical, cultural, social, and psychological factors." Indeed,

We are influenced by our culture and by the very language we speak. No less important in the formation of our preunderstanding are religious, political, and educational exposures, social and economic status, family relationship, group association, and our vocational choice (Ferguson 1986, 11).

Bultmann went further than many scholars would have wanted him to and argued that the NT, especially the synoptics, is filled with mythological (fanciful or unscientific) ideas like miracle stories, resurrection, Peter walking on water, Lazarus rising from the dead, etc. which reflect the wishful and pre-scientific thinking of the first-century writers. In order for the twentieth century reader to get to the real truth of the life of Jesus, one must demythologize these "unscientific ideas" which were built around the sayings of Jesus. Because of Bultmann's hermeneutic, critical discussion on hermeneutics shifted from a focus on language to the conscious preunderstanding and life situation (*sitz im Leben*) of the interpreter. The spirit of this method is best exemplified in the New Hermeneutic which, according to Ian A. Fair, "agrees with Gadamer that there is no objective meaning in a text beyond the meaning of the language of the text to the interpreter" (Fair 1986, 33). Important to this hermeneutical mode is the "hermeneutic circle" which claims that "the subjective presuppositions of the interpreter play a significant role in interpretation and influence the meaning of the text as much as the interpreter is influenced by the text" (Ibid). Essential also to this hermeneutic is the notion of interpretation as a "language-event," the dynamic relationship between language and the meaning that the interpreter derives from a text during a dialogue with the text.

B. Post-Bultmanian Hermeneutics

The recent developments in hermeneutics provided new and creative ideas for research in biblical studies at universities, colleges and seminaries. Scholars see the Bible functioning in many different ways as a source for knowledge about God and humanity. There is lively debate on how the Bible should be read and studied in the church. Should the Bible be interpreted literally or figuratively? In what ways is the Bible the word of God or God's Revelations? Is the Bible to be viewed just as a good ancient classic or piece of literature? Wherein lies biblical authority, in the words themselves, in the written and preached word, in the received canon, in the function of the word, in *Sola Scriptura*, in the Christ event? Much scholarly research in hermeneutics is now preoccupied with questions specifically related to the interpreter. Is the interpreter's role to study the text only in terms of what it meant in Bible culture? What are the specific biases of the interpreter and how does one's preunderstanding affect one's reading of the text? Then there are questions related to meaning: what the writer or speaker meant in a statement, what the recipient understood, and what channel the message came through linguistically and culturally. Is the meaning connotative or denotative, referential or contextual? How does the reader hear the ancient text in the modern context? How does the audience's preunderstanding affect its hearing of the text?

But Post-Bultmanian hermeneutic is a mixed blessing. It has become a relative, indefinable and even divisive enterprise. As African American scholars argue, it is often used as a political tool in "the old-boy network" to determine theological allegiances and control positions in the academy. Historical-critical scholarship often influences what young Bible scholars believe about the historical Jesus, where they find a teaching position and what kind of research they should do. African Americans students pursuing graduate work in biblical studies say they have to practice a "double consciousness." That is, they often swallow the words and ideas of their professors in class and give them what they require in research papers and on exams in order to graduate but, privately, they choke on what they call professors' "narrow-minded liberalism"—the unwillingness to hear other points of view, especially those that depart from the Bultmanian and Graf-Wellhausen reconstruction of the Bible. Biblical scholar, William Meyers, said he does not think this is a conspiracy. But he is certain that:

In a rather insidious way, this approach creates a dilemma for the African American biblical student. Since the literature is dominated by a Eurocentric approach, the lectures, assignments,

and examinations in the discipline of biblical studies tend to prepare the African American student to answer more Eurocentric-oriented questions and concerns (Meyers 1991).

Post-Bultmanian hermeneutics also caused some commotion in the church; some theologians are known to have lost teaching positions, church parishes and denominational affiliations as a result of their views of the Bible. Religious bodies (e.g. Southern Baptist) even split over the question of "Who is Jesus Christ and how should the church read or hear his teachings today?" In the Presbyterian Church U.S.A., attempts were made in the spring of 1996 to discipline and expel a professor in theology at one of their seminaries in Georgia for challenging the reliability of biblical materials on the resurrection of Christ. At the heart of the controversy is the "Jesus Seminar," the lingering ghost of the "Quest of the Historical Jesus," which debates whether it is ever possible to have accurate knowledge of the life of Jesus based on the NT documents.

Since the 1960s, other approaches to biblical interpretation have been proposed from different academic constituencies. Black Theology, Liberation Theology and Latin American Theology have developed models based on the preunderstanding that God is the god of the poor and the oppressed of the world and that the gospel of Jesus is a gospel for the poor. A hermeneutic of the poor is, therefore, called forth to interpret the biblical texts in a way that brings liberation, hope, dignity and salvation to oppressed peoples of the world. Black theology posits the view that God is black because God has always been on the side of those who suffer slavery and oppression in ancient biblical times and in modern western culture. God came in Jesus Christ and, through suffering and death, identified with the poor and oppressed blacks of the world as God did with the oppressed Hebrews in Egypt. The peculiar social, historical and economic experiences of black people dominate the interpretation of biblical texts in Black Theology. James Cone, for example, inquires into the role of "prior understanding of the concrete manifestation" of God in the Bible and the black community (Cone 1970, 63). But he draws paradigms and examples from African-American sources—the spirituals, blues, slave narratives, sermons of black preachers, black poets, novelists, storytellers and black freedom fighters—to dialogue with the biblical text, develop theological paradigms, and derive truths for liberation of black people (Cone 1970, 54-70).

Biblical feminism, another contemporary hermeneutical model, believes that the message of the Bible can and does speak to women's

needs and concerns. However, the biblical message is clothed in patriarchal language which paints a negative view of women and causes Bible interpreters to put them at a tremendous disadvantage to men both in the church and the society. The preponderance of male writers of the Bible, masculine images, chauvinistic ideas of human relations, and male leadership encouraged and depicted in biblical traditions give the impression that God is exclusively male and the Bible is a man's book. At the same time, negative images and acts are often associated with women—like Eve causing Adam to eat the forbidden fruit and bringing sin into the world, women being prohibited from taking part in certain religious rituals during their monthly cycles, women slaves being sold for much less than male ones, and women declared the weaker vessel by St Peter, and St. Paul who prohibited them from pastoral leadership. Even when women did great feats and accomplished extraordinary things in the Bible (Moses's mother saving his life, Miriam showing great leadership at the crossing of the Red Sea, Deborah, Rahab, et al.,) and bring the nation of Israel great success, only rarely were they praised for bravery.

Biblical feminists like Elisabeth Schlussler-Fieorenza (1985), Phyllis Trible (1984), Renita Weems (1991) et. al. believe that the strong masculine patriarchal image of the Bible was created not by God but by the men who collected the oral and written traditions and wrote the books of the Bible in language and thought forms that benefit men. For example, both Aaron and Miriam complained that Moses married an Ethiopian (a black woman) and was not giving them opportunity for leadership among the people in the wilderness. But while Miriam was smitten with leprosy and cast out for her ideas and actions, Aaron is depicted by the male biblical writer as getting off scot free. Women are therefore very suspicious of the biblical texts in their present form and view the task of hermeneutics as four-fold: One, decoding the language of texts in which women are cast in a negative light by the author or authors. Two, correcting the patriarchal ideas and concepts which portray God as male and theology as a man's thing. Three, challenging and expunging from biblical scholarship the patriarchal language which has always dominated biblical interpretation in the academy. Four, interpreting the Bible by and for women while preserving the universal message of the scriptures: This is done by equipping the church with proper literature (like an inclusive language lectionary and women's Bible study guides) for the education of clergy and laity in the formation of non-sexist communities of faith, equality of status in ministry, and fairness in the "Pastoral Call" (job description and financial package for the clergy).

In the last two decades, African American women like Delores Williams (1989), Jacquelyn Grant (1979), Clarice Martin (1991), Toinette Eugene (1988) and Bell Hooks (1984) have approached scripture from an African American “Womanist Theology” perspective. They contend that while main-line biblical scholarship is white and male in its orientation and preunderstanding, and Black theology has not freed itself from patriarchy, feminist theology is the baby of a predominantly white women “academy” which marginalizes and oppresses black women in the job market, in the workplace, in the church and in the broader society. They find a paradigm in the way in which Sarah oppressed Hagar (whom womanists say is black) and threw her out into the cold and homelessness. Womanists reject white stereotypes of black women: the idea that they are lazy, always ‘bitching’, overweight, not as intelligent as white women and always domineering black men. Biblical Womanists advocate reading the Bible through the eyes of black women—looking out for paradigms of the underdog, the sufferers, the battered and bruised woman, and the enslaved and oppressed. Womanist theologians draw paradigms from feminist theology but use them in a way that brings liberation to black women and makes them equal with the sexes and the other races in society and the church.

Scholars like Brevard Childs and James Sanders who found the historical-critical method of interpretation unproductive have advocated the canonical approach to hermeneutics. Childs says,

Attention to canon establishes certain boundaries within which the tradition was placed. The canonical shaping serves not so much to fix a given meaning to a particular passage as to chart the arena in which the exegetical task is to be carried out (Childs 1978, 54-55).

Sanders emphasizes the process by which the church inherited the canon in its present form and how that process functions in giving Scripture its distinct authority (1984). As I will show in the sequel to “Part One,” Caribbean theology stands to benefit much from the canonical approach to interpretation.

The Caribbean Scholar & Hermeneutics

How should young Caribbean scholars regard the hermeneutical models whose fundamental paradigms, respected methodologies and canons of interpretation were forged on the anvil of European and North American academic battles? How relevant is Schleiermacher’s hermeneutics of consciousness or Bultmann’s view of the role of preunderstanding in biblical interpretation to the discipline in our

region? Given the social, cultural, economic and political realities which heavily impact life in Caribbean countries, is it ever possible for our Bible teachers and scholars to interpret scripture with the *Sola Scriptura* paradigm and still do justice to religious education in the region? How should a Caribbean theologian deal with the difficult questions and controversies surrounding the quest for the historical Jesus which is still “kicking up a storm” in the “Jesus Seminar” of the Society of Biblical Literature in the United States? Are Afro-Caribbean women going to learn from Womanist theory the same way Caribbean theology is using the paradigms developed in Black Theology and Liberation Theology? Or should our women theologians dismiss Womanist thought as reactionary and irrelevant to Caribbean women’s problem of unemployment, underemployment and male paternalism? Can Biblical Feminism, as “a white-North American-woman thing” teach Caribbean men and women anything about God?

Although the sequel to this essay will engage some real hermeneutical practices in the region, let me offer six preliminary suggestions here which could provide questions for further discussion. First, there is no excuse for a graduate student of biblical interpretation to be unfamiliar with the history of the discipline or the important methodologies and movements that have contributed to its present shape and form. Since Caribbean theological education aims at academic excellence and the maintaining of international accreditation, for those who teach biblical interpretation in the region, knowledge of the contemporary developments within the discipline is a must. Having a knowledge of the discipline’s gains and mistakes of the past is often our best guide to proper interpretation in the present. For example, correcting a mistake made by an allegorical approach to a biblical text with the use of a historical-grammatical method of interpretation makes a big difference in how a person interprets the same text.

Two, a Caribbean theologian who studies the Bible only within the narrow confines of the beliefs and practices of his small religious denomination does so at great peril; the peril of not being able to deal adequately with contemporary debates on the Bible. Proponents in debates on abortion and homosexuality, for example, draw heavily on biblical texts and use a variety of interpretative methods to support their positions; some of these have even led to the murder of several physicians at abortion clinics in the United States. The Bible interpreter who intends to address these thorny issues that appear so often in the media around the world must be aware of the methods used and the kinds of results they are capable of producing. At the graduate level, scholars should not be afraid of moving back the boundaries of the

church's questionable traditional ways of conceiving, knowing and "being in the world" and still maintain obedience to the word of God which they value very highly.

Three, for a Caribbean Bible interpreter, hermeneutics must go beyond mere description of the original meaning of a text or the study of the history of the discipline. Scholars in Two-Thirds world countries—where life is so fragile and many people live a "hand-to-mouth" existence could ill afford the luxury of studying hermeneutics for mere personal and esoteric enjoyment, studying a text only to arrive at the author's intention. Our dialogue with the Bible and hermeneutics is often inseparably tied to our profession, occupation or ministry to the poor, the marginalized, oppressed and the forgotten. One must therefore aim at the practical application of the fruits of the study of hermeneutics to the contemporary setting and life of the interpreter. That is, the Caribbean Bible teacher must go into the world of the text and, with the use of proper hermeneutical tools and skills, grasp the text's meaning in its cultural, historical and geographical setting and "return home with the bacon" to make the text work for people in their specific religious, cultural, social, economic and political settings.

Four, every preacher should listen to the Rastaman who said, "nuh cut no style pon me with ah de Greek and Hebrew dem. Tell I-an-I the living words of Jah." On the one hand, the Caribbean teacher must demonstrate familiarity with the languages and ideological concepts which are derived from the world of the text. On the other hand, the interpreter's knowledge of Hebrew, Greek, Latin, archaeology and history should not be on display in the pulpit, in a form that overshadows the real purpose of interpretation in preaching, bringing the meaning of a text to an audience and forcing a "language event" (*Sprachereignis*), or "word encounter," which could lead to a behavior modification of our people. There is a time and a place for everything under heaven; and it is not always kosher to say in a sermon or speech, "according to Greek," or "the Hebrew verb says..." It is most embarrassing when a "Johnny come lately" uses these words before he or she develops proper mastery of the biblical languages. The skill with which speakers use biblical tools is often more important than their knowledge of the languages; the Word changes lives but Hebrew and Greek do not.

Five, the Caribbean hermeneut must be honest and open to self criticism and self reflection encouraged by the New Hermeneutic. No Caribbean woman or man can approach scripture *tabula rasa* (with a blank slate or empty mind). We come to the Bible with much baggage—already established preunderstandings—religious education, pastoral teachings, prejudices derived from our Caribbean culture,

religions, professions, creeds, languages, political persuasions, sexual orientations, racial and class consciousness as well as self perception. The early Reformed theology notion, therefore, that we must allow scripture alone to interpret scripture is a total impossibility and often a smoke screen for narrowmindedness and myopia.

Finally, Caribbean Bible scholars must do more than imitate the North. We can and do learn much from hermeneutical models from the North. But we also chart our own course and contextually develop our own regional theology to address the critical issues facing our people in the region. Contextualization of the biblical message to global realities has been in progress for some time in many parts of the world. Professor Winston Persaud told a UTC audience recently:

Caribbean response to the globalization of theological education must creatively balance contextual and global realities. But our response should neither be an appendix to other concerns which we consider primary, nor should we treat our own response as an appendix to the responses forthcoming from other context (Persaud 1995, 35).

So my parting word is: learn from the North, the South, the East and the West but do your own creative Caribbean thing under God. In Part Two, I will demonstrate how this can be done.

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