

# Towards an Applicability-Aimed Exegesis<sup>1</sup>

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What I am going to present in this paper are considerations about biblical exegesis. The paper reflects my own experiences made in two years of teaching Old Testament in an Indian college. I shall put forward a suggestion of a methodology of biblical exegesis which is not meant as a solution, but rather as a first step which needs correction and supplementation.

## A. The irrelevance of biblical exegesis

There is a rumour today that biblical exegesis as it is practised in our colleges and presented in commentaries and articles is irrelevant for the pastor, and therefore also irrelevant for the student who understands his theological training as a preparation for his work in the parish. He does not feel attracted by questions and problems discussed in exegetical classes. They are at best intellectual exercises. What are the reasons for this? In what follows we shall discuss some reasons, and we shall take notice of the fact that a similar uneasiness about historical critical exegesis has been voiced in Europe and America as well.

### 1. *The exegetical method is too complicated*

The first reason seems to me to be that the exegetical method as developed in the last 200 years is too complicated for our BD students. They simply have not enough time during their theological training to learn how to use this highly complicated instrument. They are, therefore, unable to apply it. There are, of course, some top students, who learn things in the shortest possible time. But for the average student, and he is the norm for the requirements of our courses, three or three and a half years are not enough to study and practise the method of exegesis in a way that would enable him to use it independently. The skill of exegesis is not something to be learnt by heart like the list of the Roman emperors. It is a refined form of hearing which needs to

<sup>1</sup> This is the revised form of a paper read at the Joint Staff Meeting of Bishop's College (Calcutta), Morning Star College (Barrackpore) and Serampore College, held in Bishop's College on 15th July 1978. I am much indebted to the participants of this meeting for criticism and suggestions.

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be practised again and again. And for this there is not enough time in our BD courses. The student gets a vague and unclear idea of what exegesis is, and he forgets it as soon as he has left the college. He learns something about literary criticism, form criticism and so on. But these are for him not instruments which he is able to use in order to listen more carefully to the Bible. If one has not noticed this during the course, then the examination papers make it clear beyond doubt that most of our students have not learnt to apply the exegetical method independently. Students present as exegesis anything between a free repetition of the biblical passage and a sermon on the passage.

## 2. *No clarity about exegetical method among teachers*

The examinations show not only that the students cannot apply the exegetical method independently. They show also that there is no clarity among the teachers of what an exegesis is. This can be seen from the question papers. So called "exegetical notes" are asked for. I must confess that I do not understand what this means. Is it an exegesis or is it the repetition of some exegetical details which the student has learnt by heart? Another examination paper expects the student to answer 13 questions in 3 hours, among them an exegesis of Ps. 110: 1-4. A calculation shows that the candidate has 13.8 minutes for each question. Anybody who has only the slightest idea can imagine what type of exegesis can be produced in 13 minutes. Or is perhaps the candidate not really expected to write an exegesis and to show that he is able to apply the exegetical methods, but rather to repeat an exegesis which he has learnt by heart? There are, finally, —to confine myself to three examples<sup>2</sup>—students who are asked to write an exegesis on Ps. 84 without a Bible! No professional Old Testament scholar would be able to do this, or at least he would refuse to do this. This last example needs no comment. But it discloses beyond doubt that the student is not expected to make an exegesis, but to repeat a well prepared exegesis. This type of examination question prevents the students from using their resources independently. Those students will get high marks, who have the answers to a lot of questions ready made in their mind and write them down without much consideration. The students must get the impression that independent thinking or the independent use of an exegetical method are quite unnecessary if not obstructive for the purpose of passing this examination.

## 3. *The exegetical method is not oriented to the pastor's needs*

There might be a third reason why biblical exegesis seems irrelevant to our students. The method of biblical exegesis has been developed by scholars who were interested in the history of Israel and the ancient world, in the history of religion and in the development of Old

<sup>2</sup> All examples are taken from the Senate of Serampore examination papers, of the B.D. and M.Th. examinations, 1978.

Testament literature (to confine myself to the Old Testament). The theologian and the pastor, however, have to study the Bible in order to apply it to our situation. The scholars understood themselves as historical exegetes. They tried to go into the past, to understand the Old Testament as Israelite literature in its historical context. The pastor wants to make the Old Testament word a word for today, challenging and confirming, rebuking and comforting, liberating and guiding. And he cannot understand why he should go on the detour of the historical exegesis, why he should spend his time with questions which might be historically interesting, but which afterwards turn out to be irrelevant for applying the old word. It is perhaps interesting in this connection to remember that Julius Wellhausen changed from the theological to the philosophical faculty. In a letter of 5th April 1882, addressed to the Minister of Education, he explained his step: "I became a theologian because I was interested in the scientific treatment of the Bible. It was only in the course of time that I realised that a professor of theology has also the practical task of preparing the students for their ministry in the Church. And I realised that I was unable to meet this requirement. I am afraid to make the students rather incapable for their ministry."<sup>3</sup> What Wellhausen suspected was that the historical method which he used brilliantly in interpreting the Bible was not helpful for the pastor. It has sometimes been suggested that the necessary mediation between historical exegesis and the pastor's work was the task of the practical theologian. But in reality this has worked very seldom, because the two subjects have already been too far from each other, and often the preparedness to understand each other has been lacking. Exegesis came to be understood as a predominantly historical, philological and linguistic discipline. The question of the message of the biblical passage was dealt with, if at all, in more or less general terms in an appendix. A serious attempt at entering into a dialogue with the Bible was rarely made. It was left to the pastor who in turn treated historical exegesis as a more or less unnecessary preparatory step, a luxury which can be dispensed with if need be without losing much.

The result is that our students do exegesis without knowing why and for what purpose. And this is true especially for mature students, who have already worked in a congregation and want to do this again. They feel that they cannot afford to spend all their time and energy on questions like form, literary genre, structure, philological and historical details of a passage, with no energy left for the other question, what the biblical passage says to them in their particular situation surrounded by urgent human and social problems. And the students are supported in their suspicion against ostensibly "purely academic" questions by the author of a modern "theological best seller." Kosuke Koyama in his book *Waterbuffalo Theology* refers to Buddha's parable of a man who had been wounded by a poisoned arrow. But when the doctor tried to

<sup>3</sup> Translation of the German original given in H. J. Kraus, *Geschichte der historisch-kritischen Erforschung des Alten Testaments*, Neukirchener Verlag, Neukirchen-Vluyn, 1969, 2nd edition, p. 256.

pull out the arrow he did not allow him to do so. He first wanted to know who had shot the arrow, whether he was a Brahmin or of the warrior caste, what his name was, and other unimportant things in the given situation. In connection with this parable Koyama asks his theologian-colleagues: "Why do you ask 'non-crisis' questions while you are yourself caught in crisis?... Why have you arranged some distance between your intellect and your existence?"<sup>4</sup>

To make myself clear, I do not think that historical exegesis is irrelevant for somebody who wants to understand and to apply the word of the Bible. On the contrary it is indispensable. But we must take into account that both the time of a BD course and the intellectual abilities of a BD student are limited. And we have to keep in mind that theological training in the biblical field falls short of its aim if it does not help the student to hear the living message of the Bible for today.

#### 4. *Questioning of historical critical method in Europe and America*

"Irrelevance has been one of the stock charges brought against traditional ministerial training in both developed and developing countries."<sup>5</sup> This is perfectly true, at least so far as the training in biblical exegesis is concerned. It is not necessary to deal here with the rejection of the historical critical method from a fundamentalistic point of view.<sup>6</sup> Everybody who is teaching Old Testament or New Testament in a German university finds himself permanently confronted with questions like these:

- Why should we learn a method of interpretation which we later cannot use for lack of time?
- Does historical exegesis help to solve our social problems?
- Historical exegesis is purely academic and has lost its connection with the real world. Why should we waste our time with practising it?
- Historical exegesis makes the Bible a dead letter instead of helping us to find in it the word of life.
- Historical exegesis makes students dependent by forcing upon them a lot of useless philological, historical and linguistic details.

<sup>4</sup> Kosuke Koyama, *Waterbuffalo Theology*, SCM Press, London, 1974, pp. 136, 137.

<sup>5</sup> A. S. Dunstone, "Rarongo Theological College: Teaching by Themes in Papua New Guinea," in *Learning in Context*, TEF Publication, New Life Press, Bromley, 1973, p. 87.

<sup>6</sup> For this question see G. Ebeling, "The Significance of the Critical Historical Method for Church and Theology in Protestantism," in *Word and Faith*, English Translation, SCM Press, London, 1963, pp. 17-26.

But criticism comes not only from the students. It comes also from the teachers of theology. Karl Barth's challenge to historical critical exegesis, in the preface to his commentary on Paul's letter to the Romans (1922, 2nd edition) is still not forgotten. To Barth the historical exegetes seemed to be not critical enough, especially not critical of their own presuppositions. He asks for and practises a "pneumatical exegesis," which takes its position decidedly within the Christian community. In his last lecture held in Basel in 1968 and published under the title *Evangelical Theology: An Introduction*, he writes: "The science of biblical theology does not work in empty space but in the service of the community of Jesus Christ, which is founded by the prophetic and apostolic testimony."<sup>7</sup> This of course has consequences, and Barth does not hesitate to draw them. This paper is not the place to describe Barth's hermeneutic.<sup>8</sup> He himself of course has not written an exegetical methodology. But the reference to Barth can show us that questions of the method of biblical exegesis are not located at the fringe of theology. They are connected with the centre of theology, provided of course they are reflected as theological questions, and not only taken as a minor matter which can be left to everybody's didactical skill.

Uneasiness about the historical critical method can even be heard from exegetes themselves. Thus J. Roloff, Professor of New Testament in Erlangen (West Germany), writes in the preface to an introduction to New Testament exegesis: "In the biblical subjects the student is in danger of losing every orientation. Very often he is not able to employ the different methods in an independent way and to make use of them in dealing with concrete problems." And he goes on to say: "But it is exactly this independence which is the aim of theological study."<sup>9</sup>

Much more radical is W. Wink, Professor of New Testament at Union Theological Seminary in New York. He begins his essay *The Bible in Human Transformation: Toward a New Paradigm for Biblical Study* with the statement: "Historical biblical criticism is bankrupt."<sup>10</sup> He wants this statement to be understood in the exact sense of the term "bankrupt": "A business which goes bankrupt is not valueless, nor incapable of producing useful products. It still has an inventory of expensive parts, a large capital outlay, a team of trained personnel, a certain reputation, and usually, until the day bankruptcy is declared, a facade which appeared to be relatively healthy. The one thing

<sup>7</sup> K. Barth, *Evangelical Theology: An Introduction*, The Fontana Library, Collins, London and Glasgow, 1963, p. 165.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. with this P. Stuhlmacher, *Schriftauslegung auf dem Wege zur biblischen Theologie*, Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, Göttingen, 1975, pp. 19ff. and 87 ff.

<sup>9</sup> J. Roloff, *Neues Testament*, Neukirchener Verlag, Neukirchen-Vluyn, 1977, p. 1. (English translation of the German original by the present author.)

<sup>10</sup> W. Wink, *The Bible in Human Transformation*, Fortress Press, Philadelphia, 1973, p. 1.

wrong — and the only thing — is that it is no longer able to accomplish its avowed purpose for existence: to make money.”<sup>11</sup> The purpose of biblical exegesis is to explain the Bible in such a way that the intention of the Bible is conveyed. The intention of the biblical writers was to provoke faith and to change people. “The historical critical method has reduced the Bible to a dead letter.”<sup>12</sup> “The outcome of biblical studies in the academy is a trained incapacity to deal with the real problems of actual living persons in their daily lives.”<sup>13</sup> This starting point does not lead Wink to the consequence of discarding the historical method completely. Rather he develops a paradigm of exegesis in which historical exegesis is one part of a larger whole. I shall come back to this point.

Historical exegesis fails to reach the aim of exegesis. This was Wink’s opinion. What exegesis looks like depends on what is considered to be the aim of exegesis. To this question the next chapter is devoted.

## **B. Applicability as the aim of biblical exegesis<sup>14</sup>**

Applicability is the aim of biblical exegesis because the biblical texts aim at applicability. A few examples will substantiate this thesis.

1. *The Psalms* want to be used. This is clearly indicated by many of the superscriptions. They point to the cult as the place where most of the Psalms were used. The form critical examination of the Psalms points in the same direction. The Psalms are not private poems by which an individual wanted to express his thoughts and feelings. And even if this was the case, as at present is assumed for more Psalms than fifty years ago, even then it can be said that the Psalms owe their preservation to the fact that they were included in a fund of songs which were meant to be used in private and public worship and prayer by many Israelites. An Israelite who wanted to express his own distress or his own joy did not depend on his own ability to find the right words, which is an extremely difficult task, especially in times of distress. He could resort to a fund of songs which was at his disposal and could be used. The inexactness of the descriptions of diseases in the individual laments, which does not allow us to give a medical diagnosis as to from which disease the psalmist was suffering, is one sign that these Psalms were meant to be used by many persons.

2. There is no doubt, that the *prophetical oracles* originally were spoken in a certain situation. But many of the additions which were added in the course of time show us that these oracles were applied to new situations, which the prophet himself had not had in mind. For

<sup>11</sup> W. Wink, *op. cit.*, p. 1.

<sup>12</sup> W. Wink, *op. cit.*, p. 4.

<sup>13</sup> W. Wink, *op. cit.*, p. 6.

<sup>14</sup> This chapter owes much to F. Mildenerger, *Theorie der Theologie*, 1972.

**example Am.3:2f. was originally addressed to the Northern Kingdom of Israel:**

Hear this word that the Lord has spoken against you, O people of Israel:

You only have I known of all the families of the earth,  
Therefore I will punish you for all your iniquities.

A later redactor of this text made it a message to Judah as well by adding in a syntactically very rough way:

...against the whole family which I brought up out of the land of Egypt.

The same attempt to apply the message of a prophet who worked in the Northern Kingdom of Israel to Judah can be seen in Hos. 1:7. A message of judgement to Israel is secondarily made a message of salvation for Judah by adding: "But I will have pity on the house of Judah, and I will deliver them by the Lord their God."

These examples may suffice to prove that the Old Testament wants to be applied. More evidence could easily be taken from other parts of the Old Testament: Exodus story, commandments, proverbs etc. An exegesis of these texts has to aim at applicability.

3. One example may suffice to show that the same is true for the New Testament as well. So far as I know it is a commonly accepted result of form critical study that the root of the *Synoptic tradition* lies in the preaching and teaching of primitive Christianity. A purely historical exegesis of these texts does not therefore convey their own intention.

4. The biblical texts call for an applicability-aimed exegesis. The same is the case if we look at this problem from the view point of the student. Except for a few scientists who study the Bible for purely scientific reasons, the majority of those who read or listen to the Bible want to apply the biblical passages to their own life. Our students study the Old Testament and New Testament in order to apply these texts. If we do not take this into account, then of course biblical exegesis will be irrelevant to the students. But I think there is no dispute, that studying should be relevant and significant for the students, significant in the sense that the psychologist C. Rogers describes it: "By significant learning I mean learning which is more than an accumulation of facts. It is learning that makes a difference—in the individual's behaviour, in the course of action he chooses in the future, in his attitude and in his personality."<sup>15</sup> This can only happen, according to Rogers, if learning is in contact with the real problems of the student.

<sup>15</sup> C. Rogers, "Significant Learning," in *On Becoming a Person*, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1961, p. 280.

It is another question, whether we follow Rogers in the consequences which he draws. They should at least be mentioned:

- to do away with examinations. "They measure only the inconsequential type of learning."<sup>16</sup>
- to do away with grades and credits for the same reason.<sup>17</sup>
- to "do away with degrees as a measure of competence partly for the same reason."<sup>18</sup>

The whole process of learning should be determined by the interests and activities of the students themselves. The teacher would want his students to know that he was prepared to provide resources (e.g. a lecture). But "he would want this to be perceived as an offer which could as readily be refused as accepted."<sup>19</sup> All resources are "offerings to be used if they were useful to the student."<sup>20</sup>

These suggestions are at least worth discussing. So far as I can see in our colleges a rather authoritarian style of teaching prevails, and marks and degrees are terribly overestimated.

But what I wanted to illustrate with reference to Rogers was above all that students, as well as the biblical texts, call for an applicability-aimed biblical exegesis.

### C. Further requirements of an exegetical method to be practised in Indian theological colleges

There are some more demands to be made on an exegetical method which can be employed in an Indian theological college at the B.D. level (this specification seems to me necessary).

1. The method should be practicable for the average student. The fully developed historical critical method is too complex to be practised by our B.D. students. It would take them too much time to learn the method. At the end they would be completely exhausted—I am talking about the average students; they would have lost all their own questions and interests; they would be full of foreign questions, forced upon them and only half understood. And still they would not be able to use this instrument independently. The exegetical method should be an instrument which helps the student to enjoy reading the Bible. If the instrument deprives the student of reading the Bible with pleasure, then he has been given the wrong instrument. The instrument is made for the student, not the student for the instrument. An exegetical method is required which the student is able to use independently. This implies, for example, that this method cannot consist of seven or eight steps, like textual criticism, literary criticism, form criticism, linguistic analysis, analysis of traditions and

<sup>16</sup> C. Rogers, *op. cit.*, p. 277.

<sup>17</sup> C. Rogers, *op. cit.*, p. 277.

<sup>18</sup> C. Rogers, *op. cit.*, p. 277.

<sup>19</sup> C. Rogers, *op. cit.*, p. 289.

<sup>20</sup> C. Rogers, *op. cit.*, p. 289.



motifs, detailed exegesis, comprehensive exegesis and so on.<sup>21</sup> The student would follow such a method step by step with increasing hopelessness and boredom. At the end he would understand neither the text, nor the method, nor himself. For the B.D. level, according to my experience, the historical critical method has to be drastically shortened and simplified.

2. The method should be open to supplementation. The M.Th. student should be able to build on the basis laid in the B.D. course. It would be confusing to him and unreasonable, if he had to discard the method learnt in the BD course and to learn something completely different.

3. The method employed in Indian colleges should not be totally different from the one used in other parts of the world. This seems to me at least desirable in order to make dialogue and exchange of views possible. Contextualisation does not mean that everything which originated beyond the borders of my village, state or country has to be avoided as foreign and for me useless. This attitude will not help one to find one's identity, but will lead to narrow minded provincialism!

4. Indian colleges should try to avoid two more or less different methods being used for Old Testament and New Testament. A natural consequence of this would be that introduction to biblical exegesis is taught in one course by Old Testament and New Testament teachers jointly.

5. The exegetical methods used in different Indian colleges should not be too much different from each other. This can only be avoided by a dialogue which might lead step by step to an agreement.

6. The exegetical method should be understood as a transitional solution, not as something final.

Keeping in mind these points I shall try now to present an outline of an applicability-aimed exegesis.

#### **D. Outline of an applicability-aimed exegesis<sup>22</sup>**

As a method of an exegesis which aims at applicability I suggest a procedure consisting of three steps, which I call "historical exegesis," "reflection" and "towards application."

<sup>21</sup> For a detailed presentation and discussion of the historical critical method see: H. Barth, O. H. Steck, *Exegese des Alten Testaments. Leitfaden der Methodik*, Neukirchen, 1971, 2nd edition. W. Richter, *Exegese als Literaturwissenschaft, Entwurf einer alttestamentlichen Literaturtheorie und Methodologie*, Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, Göttingen, 1971. G. Fohrer and others, *Exegese des Alten Testaments, Uni-Taschenbücher 267*, Quelle und Meyer, Heidelberg, 1976, 2nd edition. O. Kaiser, "Die alttestamentliche Exegese," in G. Adam, O. Kaiser, W. G. Kummel, *Einführung in die exegetischen Methoden*, Kaiser Verlag, München, 1975, 5th edition, pp. 10-60.

<sup>22</sup> The following suggestion is based on the full discussion of the historical critical method in G. Fohrer and others, *Exegese des Alten Testaments*. It also owes much to W. Wink, *The Bible in Human Transformation*.

## I. Historical exegesis

In historical exegesis we listen to the text as a document of a far distant time. We try to understand the biblical passage in its historical context. We try to keep silent and to listen to the biblical writer. Keeping silent and listening is certainly one of the most difficult things for human beings. There will always be a temptation in us to interrupt the biblical text. And there is certainly no such thing as "pure listening," unaffected and not influenced by leading interests and presuppositions. Objectivity in understanding is an aim which will perhaps never be reached. But this should not prevent us from making the attempt to listen as carefully as possible to what the biblical author wants to say. We try to keep ourselves open, to hear not only what we want to hear, although we know that our hearing ability is limited and conditioned. We try to avoid reading our own presuppositions into the biblical text, although we know "that there cannot be any such thing as presuppositionless exegesis."<sup>23</sup> The distinction between historical exegesis and reflection is therefore somewhat artificial, and justifiable only for practical reasons. The ideal would be understanding as an act of the whole person, at the same time listening and reflecting, totally open, totally exposed to the word, undisturbed by any distraction. There may be persons who have attained to this highest form of hearing and understanding, enabled by the Spirit. Even we may reach this point sometimes in moments of silent devotion. What we are aiming at here, in this paper, is something much more elementary. It is a form of listening which can be learned. It takes seriously that we are outwardly and inwardly talkative and often unable to listen, and are therefore in need of a discipline, something like a hearing aid. This is what historical exegesis aims to provide. The elementary character of this method points to something far beyond. But it is always dangerous to take the second step before the first. It may therefore be adequate for theological students and teachers to devote themselves first to this elementary form of hearing.

Historical exegesis tries to understand the biblical text in the framework of its historical context. The biblical texts are literary documents of a far distant time. We do not try to ignore or to blur this distance. On the contrary, we try to realise this distance. "O God, break their teeth in their mouth!" (Ps. 58:6) may be an unusual and strange prayer in our eyes. For Israel it was obviously not unusual to pray in this way. What religious conceptions stand behind such a prayer? We must try to understand this psalm as a psalm of Israel, not as our psalm. We are not Israelites of the time Before Christ. And all our sympathetic understanding and exegetical skill will not enable us to think and to feel as an Israelite. And this is not necessary. From a certain distance things often appear much clearer. To under-

<sup>23</sup> R. Bultmann, "Is Exegesis without presuppositions possible?" in *Existence and Faith, Shorter Writings of Rudolf Bultmann*, selected, translated and introduced by Schubert M. Ogden, Fontana Library, London and Glasgow, 1973, pp. 343, 344.

stand a text as a text of the distant past, for example as an Israelite text, we use an abbreviated form of the so called historical method. I suggest the following steps:

### 1. Detailed exegesis

This may include the following questions:

(a) Is the passage under discussion an intact text unit with clearly recognisable beginning and end, and without disturbing cracks and interruptions?

(b) How is the passage related to the context?

The questions (a) and (b) could later be developed into what traditionally is called "literary criticism." The M.Th. course could build on the ground laid in the B.D. course.

(c) Which details need clarification (geographical, historical, philological, archaeological questions; theological and anthropological thoughts)?

This is the detailed exegesis proper enlarged by the inclusion of theological questions.

(d) Does the passage contain thoughts or tell of events which remind me of other biblical or non-biblical texts? What is the peculiarity of their use in the given passage?

These two questions are the first stage of the analysis of motifs and traditions, and could be developed into this direction in the M.Th. course.

(e) Would it be useful to know something about the author and the time of origin of the passage?

### 2. Structure analysis

This is concerned with the following questions:

(a) Into which sections and sub-sections does the passage fall? How are the sections and sub-sections interrelated to each other?

(b) Do we find similar structures in other passages? What would be a suitable designation of texts which show this structure?

Question (b) is the basic question of the form critical method. In the M.Th. course a full treatment of this method could be given.

### 3. Comprehensive exegesis

At this stage of the exegesis we ask: What is the centre (central idea, event, intention) to which the parts found in the structure analysis are related? In what relationship do the parts stand to the centre?

It is impossible and unnecessary to deal with all questions comprehensively. A single semantic problem (e.g. the meaning of the word *chesed*) could easily engage us one full term. The interpreter has to make a choice as to which questions he wants to take up. His choice will depend on his own interests on the one hand, and on the character of the text on the other hand. The beginner may boldly follow his interests and take up those questions which seem to him auspicious for achieving the purpose which he pursues in interpreting the text. Once again, it must be remembered that this first part of the exegesis is meant to establish distance between the text and us, not to bridge over this distance and to make the text contemporary to us. In excluding, as far as possible, our existential questions we allow the text to speak, notwithstanding the undisputable fact that we never can exclude ourselves completely from the process of understanding. The selection of questions dealt with is for example a subjective decision which shows how the person of the interpreter influences the results of the exegesis. But nevertheless, we must develop a maximum ability to listen before responding and taking up a position. It is not creativity that is required of the exegete, but the ability to keep silent and to listen. "The fool takes no pleasure in understanding, but only in expressing his opinion" (Prov. 18:2). Historical exegesis can help us to develop a maximum ability to listen. Having tried to understand the text in its historical context, we can proceed to the second part of the exegesis.

## II. Reflection

Now we try to enter into a dialogue with the text. While in the first part of the exegesis we were looking at the text, away from ourselves, we now look at ourselves. We ask: What reaction does the text cause in us? This should be done as emotionally and spontaneously as possible. In my experience it is extremely difficult to reach a personal level and to come to a personal encounter with the text in the class. The difficulty is not an intellectual one; it is more a psychological difficulty. We do not allow our real reactions to come to the surface. Often we hide them even from ourselves. We are afraid to get perturbed and disturbed. There are "prohibited reactions," prohibited because they might be dangerous to our inner psychological harmony. It requires courage and confidence in the other members of a group to allow one's reactions to become apparent. It is often not taken into account that these psychological factors play a part in the scientific interpretation of a text.

Some questions may help to uncover our reactions:

- Was there anything in the text which surprised me?
- Was there anything which made me angry?
- What did I like especially?
- Is there anything which seems to me unacceptable?

—Which associations came into my mind?

—Do I remember similar situations to those mentioned in the text?

—Do I already have an understanding of this text, and what is the basis of this understanding?

This list of questions is by no means comprehensive and badly needs to be supplemented. There might be certain techniques which help us to come to ourselves and to listen to ourselves in the presence of the Bible and the Lord who wants to address us through the Bible.

There may be other forms of reflection, more adequate to the study of the Bible in a theological college. The reflection could be less active than in the suggestion made above. It could be more like a meditative exposing of ourselves to the biblical text. As a very impressive example, the form described by Abhishiktananda<sup>24</sup> will be cited:

We envisaged...a prayerful reading, the *lectio divina* of Patristic and monastic tradition, a reading done in the Presence and aiming above all at inward assimilation of the message of God under the guidance of his Spirit. Moreover, this reading was to be undertaken within the community (*koinonia*) of the Church—that Church of which every group of believers gathered together in the name of the Lord is already the sign (Matt. 18:20), and whose unity is shown sacramentally in the “breaking of bread” celebrated in common (Acts 2:42).

This would involve the quietening of our understanding and having what the Bible calls “a listening heart”; even more it demands the silencing of our instinctive egotism which urges us to impose our own views, our own aims, our own impressions, even in the holiest matters, and so often drowns the voice of the Spirit. It would also mean that we must allow ourselves to be “vulnerable” to the Word of God, and to the unpredictable demands with which he is liable to confront us when we come face to face with him in the holy Scriptures. Faced with the living actuality of the Word of God in the Bible, man can only tremble; but, relying on his faith, the Christian should remain steadfastly open to his call.

Lastly, as the foundation of all this, we must have a firm purpose of *metanoia* or conversion. Otherwise we should not be ready to change, to “turn back” (*con-versio*), if God should require it of us, to “obey the Gospel,” as Paul puts it in his Epistle to the Romans (10:16).

It was therefore proposed that, after a moment of recollection and a prayer drawn from Christian tradition, the Scriptural passage should be read in two different translations, followed by a brief commentary by one of the group, aimed at bringing out its essential points. The chief purpose of this commentary

<sup>24</sup> Abhishiktananda, *Hindu-Christian Meeting Point*, ISPCK, Delhi, 1976, pp. 27-29.

would be to show the relevance of the message for those who were listening to it at that moment, Christians of India, or at least Christians involved in the mission of the Church in India, called to serve India in her approach to the Church, and the Church in her advance to meet India. The commentator should be far less eager to propound his own pet ideas than to help his brothers to enter more deeply into the thought of the inspired author and become more fully open to the action of the Spirit present in the Word.

There would follow ten or fifteen minutes of recollection, to be spent in either reflecting on the text in the presence of the Master within, or simply waiting on him in silence.

After this would begin the sharing of the thoughts and questions awakened in each one during his hearing of and meditation on the sacred Word.

It was insisted that the most important thing of all was to preserve the contemplative character of this reading within the fellowship of the Church. Careful theological and exegetical preparation was certainly not excluded, but it was assumed that this would be done in advance. The statement of differences of opinion that might arise was not ruled out, nor was frank and fraternal discussion of apparently conflicting points of view. But the basic attitude necessary for each one in order to make this free exchange possible would be that of seeking in the fellowship of the Church to listen to and question the Spirit in his brothers, and in turn to pass on to them whatever he thought in the Spirit ought to be passed on.

One question should be avoided at this stage. This is the question: How and what can I preach on this text? This question has its legitimate place, but it should never be put together with or even before one's own attempt to listen to the text. Only after the text has spoken to me, it will perhaps through me speak to others.

This part of the exegesis is also the place where the different traditions of the class members should be brought into the discussion, and where some kind of indigenisation or contextualisation could take place. In my opinion contextualisation can only be done by the individual student himself, not by the teacher. The teacher from Tamil Nadu may study for 20 years the culture, philosophy, religion and history of Bihar or Nagaland, but he will not be able to transfer biblical ideas into the Bihari or Naga context, and into the context of an individual student. The best the teacher can do is to lead the student cautiously to a point where perhaps an encounter between text and student may happen. The most important thing has to be done by the student himself.

### III. Towards application

The designation "application" is not quite adequate for this step. What is meant is the first step in the direction of application, the

transition from exegesis to application. The applicability of the text is considered, but the application itself is not performed.

I thought first of calling this stage of the exegesis "conclusion." But this would convey the wrong impression as if this step marked a final point. The contrary is true. This step is not meant to conclude the exegesis, to give a final touch of completion to the exegesis. It is rather meant to keep the exegesis open towards the application.

At least two questions should be considered here:

- (a) What seems to us the most appropriate way of dealing with this text in the congregation?
- (b) Which results of historical exegesis and reflection are relevant for the application?

It goes without saying that this is not meant to be a comprehensive description of this step.

## E. Conclusion

This paper was concerned with mainly practical questions of teaching biblical exegesis. There is no doubt that the suggestions put forward are based on a certain understanding of biblical hermeneutics which cannot be dealt with here in detail, although the problems involved would certainly deserve thorough study. Again and again we meet with the opinion that all methodological considerations in connection with the understanding of the Bible are irrelevant as it is the Holy Spirit alone who can bring about understanding of the Scripture. Religious literature, it is perhaps rightly said, needs another approach than secular literature. Does not what Abhishiktananda says about the Upanishads apply *mutatis mutandis* to the Bible: "It remains true, however, that a purely rational and so-called scientific approach to any sacred Scripture will never succeed in penetrating its secret."<sup>25</sup> The Upanishads point to "profound intuitions."<sup>26</sup> "However, these intuitions, these flashes of light, which at their source defy expression, are transformed at the level at which they are grasped by mental reflection, into abstractions and ideas."<sup>27</sup> The Upanishads point to an experience which cannot be described. Understanding is only possible for him who has had the same experience. He of course is no longer in need of the texts which speak by way of suggestion of what he has experienced clearly. This leads to a dilemma: the Scriptures are for those who are not yet realised, who have not yet had the experience of awakening to themselves, but they can only be understood by those who have had this experience. The solution is: "The Upanishad can therefore only be truly communicated through this communion between guru and disciple at the deepest centre of

<sup>25</sup> Abhishiktananda, *The Further Shore*, ISPCK, Delhi, 1975, p. 61.

<sup>26</sup> Abhishiktananda, *op. cit.*, p. 59.

<sup>27</sup> Abhishiktananda, *op. cit.*, p. 59.

the self. The only possible alternative to the guru's instruction is an openness of oneself to the inner mystery so complete that it allows the true sense of the Scriptures to be discerned beyond the words, the parables and paradoxes — and even quite independently of the Scriptures in the solitude of mountains of jungles or caves like those of Arunachala. There can also be the direct impact of the Self, which struck Ramana Maharshi, as so many others, like a thunderbolt."<sup>28</sup> Parallel questions arise from the character of the Bible as the Christian churches understand it. It is not with those questions that the present paper is concerned. The very fact that exegesis of the Bible is taught in almost all Christian colleges shows that there is an agreement that at least some aspects of the understanding of the Bible can be learned by practice and studying. This paper seeks to contribute to making this learning helpful for students, pastors and congregations.

<sup>28</sup> Abhishiktananda, *op. cit.*, p. 63.