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LITERATURE: A NEW PARADIGM OF BIBLICAL INTERPRETATION

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"It is not regret for the sunken Atlantides
that animates us, but hope for a *re-creation
of language*. Beyond the desert of criticism,
we wish to be called again." (it.mine, T. F.)

Paul Ricoeur: *The Symbolism of Evil*, p.
349.

I. PARADIGMS OF INTERPRETATION

The exciting activity we call "interpretation" is undoubtedly a basic pillar of all theology, but every pillar has a pedestal with its own Achilles-heel. The strength of a perceptive interpretation supports the best of humanistic and theological insight but interpretation trading on its inherent vulnerability to manipulation, may support prejudice, trivial self-interest, or shallow dogmatism. For historians of interpretation it is most difficult to speak about any "beginnings" of interpretation. Interpretation seems to be as old as humanity itself and we may even say that man/woman is *homo interpretans*, a being who continuously perceives and interprets the world and the texts around him/her. Interpretation is therefore a stance, a perspective, a kind of conviction, indeed, a synonym for "belief". The canonical biblical text is itself a strange mixture of events, earlier texts and interpretation: it witnesses events but (inspiredly) interprets them and even reinterprets earlier interpretations of texts and events. Texts inherited from the past have always been interpreted by various communities, and what we call Churches, are also, to borrow the phrase of Stanley Fish, "interpretive communities."¹ These interpretive communities have given birth to various traditions and traditions have produced cultures with idiosyncratic tastes. Thus from a cultural perspective interpretation of texts is indeed something of a primordial activity, it is somewhere present in the genesis of cultures.

¹ Stanley Fish, *Is There a Text in This Class? The Authority of Interpretative Communities*, Cambridge Mass. Harvard UP, 1980.

When we survey the history of interpretation of Scripture we can discern that there have always been certain paradigms that governed or determined the activity of interpretation. Following the suggestion of Peter A. Macky I shall briefly discuss three paradigms: the philosophical, the historical and the literary.²

In the course of the Middle Ages the paradigm of philosophy and theology regulated the interpretation of the Bible. Ideas were "read out" from Scripture in order to construct marvellous theological and philosophical systems. It was generally agreed that the Bible is the "result" of the Church and until the Reformation it remained unrecognised that the Church is also the result of the "Word". During the Middle Ages the status of poetic language and poetry was reduced to the notion of the "ornament" that could illustrate, justify and strengthen doctrine. The Reformation meant a revolution against that practice with its emphasis on the primacy of the text. Both Luther and Milton emphasised that the Church is not so much a "mother" of the Word as a "bride" to be instructed by the Word. However significant a change it was, the Reformation did not bring about a new paradigm: biblical interpretation still remained doctrinal even if the source of doctrine was not Bible plus philosophy but the Bible itself (*sola scriptura*). For all the great respect the status of the text enjoyed, it nevertheless remained only the "source" of the "idea". In such a matrix "theology" or "concept" is seen as primary and "language" as a source is only secondary.

With the advent of the Enlightenment scholars began to find biblical history as presented in the Bible (later called *Heilsgeschichte*) an unuseful supernatural idea and their interest gradually turned to unmythical *Weltgeschichte*, i.e. world-history and their honest programme was to uncover the events of the past without any bias or prejudice. Radically rejecting dogmatic postulates, their modest purpose was to find out what actually happened in history (*was eigentlich geschehen ist*). This movement from the philosophical or theological approach to that of history was the first important paradigm-shift in the history of interpretation. Thus "history" is the second major paradigm in the history of interpretation. The most important feature of this second paradigm is that a precritical naiveté is superseded by the arrival of the modern-critical consciousness and the analytical, scientific method. Peter Stuhlmacher writes that Protestantism in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries "resolved to appropriate this critical system of knowledge, which for the history of science yielded an interesting constellation of parallels to the

² Peter A. Macky, "The Coming Revolution: The New Literary Approach to New Testament Interpretation", repr. in, *A Guide to Contemporary Hermeneutics. Major Trends in Biblical Interpretation*, ed. Donald K. McKim, Grand Rapids, William B. Eerdmans, 1986, p. 263-279. Originally published in *The Theological Educator* 9, Spring, 1979, p. 32-46.

second and third centuries."³ My presupposition in this paper is that the Enlightenment and modernism are responsible for the birth of both fundamentalism and historical criticism. The liberal, progressive and open-minded child of this period is undoubtedly the historico-critical method. However, as a counter-effect, this rationalistic period also gave birth to another, perhaps "illegitimate", child, i.e. conservative fundamentalism. Gerald T. Sheppard recently argued from a similar position: "fundamentalism is a position advocating the right wing of modernism, old liberalism being on the left."⁴ Paradoxically, fundamentalism is a precritical movement produced by a critical age. Fundamentalism with its dogmatic adherence to the external, historical-referential truth (a centrifugal rather than a centripetal reference, as Northrop Frye calls it) of the Bible (supposedly a Reformation-heritage and mistakenly called as the "literal sense") is, in fact, rooted in the 17th and 18th century views of "truth", "language", "myth" etc.

It is the premise of the present paper that nowadays we are again witnessing a change in the paradigm of interpretation of Scripture, a "post-modern" and "post-critical" challenge to "modernism" (cf. Edgar V. McKnight, *Post-Modern Use of the Bible. The Emergence of Reader-Oriented Criticism*, Nashville, Abingdon Press, 1988). The Enlightenment and modernism is the common denominator of both fundamentalism and historical criticism. History has served as a paradigm of interpretation during the past two hundred years but its central role is diminishing and it is gradually giving way to a new paradigm, namely, to literature. We can read predictions about "The Coming Revolution" in biblical studies suggesting that "we are moving from the historical era to the literary era in biblical studies,"⁵ but even if not all predictions are so straightforward there is a general feeling that biblical hermeneutics is "on the move". Literary criticism can give, as Charles Morgan and John Barton argue in their recent *Biblical Interpretation* (1988), "wider hermeneutical issues the chance to breathe."⁶ This change is also

³ Peter Stuhlmacher, *Historical Criticism and Theological Interpretation of Scripture. Towards a Hermeneutics of Consent* London, SPCK, 1977 p. 40.

⁴ Gerald T. Sheppard, *The Future of the Bible. Beyond Liberalism and Literalism* Toronto, The United Church Publishing House, 1990, p. 56.

⁵ Macky, *op. cit.*

⁶ Karlfried Froehlich, "Biblical Hermeneutics On the Move", in Donald K. McKim (ed.) *A Guide to Contemporary Hermeneutics. Major Trends in Biblical Interpretation* Grand Rapids, William B. Eerdmans, 1986, p. 175-91. Most recently Robert Morgan and John Barton in their *Biblical Interpretation*, Oxford University Press, 1988 have very powerfully argued for a "switch to a literary paradigm" (p. 198) and for the "theological potential of the new literary approaches which at first sight seem more remote from theological concerns" (p. 172); Morgan writes: "One attraction of the new literary approaches for theologians is that they are loosening the stranglehold of historical scholarship and so giving wider hermeneutical issues the chance to breathe" (p. 180). Barton maintains: "Historical reconstruction of biblical persons, events, and traditions is an entirely legitimate activity, but possibly less fruitful for theology than the

noticeable in the new edition of the Roman Catholic *New Jerome Biblical Commentary* (1990) in which Raymond Brown's article on "Hermeneutics" in the earlier edition (1968) has now substantially been updated by Sandra S. Schneiders who introduced the various forms of literary criticism: structuralism, deconstruction, rhetorical criticism etc., and she also confirmed the "paradigm-shift" which "reflects the 'turn to language' in both philosophy and the study of literature."⁷ Of course, those who observe, or predict, this paradigm-shift do not insist that the paradigms of either philosophy or history will totally disappear from biblical studies; they only suggest that just as the absolutism of philosophy was shaken during the Enlightenment, the exclusivism of the historical paradigm is similarly being undermined with the advent of the literary approach.

What is the *differentia specifica* of the literary approach? It recognises the text primarily as language and, "unlike the historical approach... is not looking for the historical process that led up to this text but is concerned with seeing and hearing the fullness of the text itself. Unlike the philosophical-theological approach, it is not using the text to develop a system of doctrine but is concerned with the text as it is."⁸

While for the theological and the historical approach the *locus* of meaning was *behind* the text, either in the "doctrine" or in the "event": the literary approach maintains that the *locus* of meaning is in the text *itself*. According to Ricoeur's new, objective theory of the text it is not the author but the text that speaks and interpretation is not an act "on" the text, but "of" the text.⁹ Elsewhere he distinguishes various types of discourses in the Bible such as the "prophetic", "narrative", "prescriptive", "wisdom" and "hymnic" discourses that constitute the basis of his "hermeneutics of the idea of the revelation."¹⁰ For our present purposes, however, we shall label all these types of discourses as "biblical language".

While studying the nature of biblical language it is our presupposition that this is a special kind of language. Wherein lies its speciality? Sometimes it is said to be "performative" rather than informative. We can add that this language often deviates from the standard significance of words but by this

newly emerging literary approaches. These offer more points of connection for the theory of religion and reality" (p. 203).

⁷ Raymond E. Brown - Sandra M. Schneiders, "Hermeneutics", in *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary* ed. R. E. Brown, J. A. Fitzmeyer, R. E. Murphy, New Jersey, Prentice Hall, Englewood Cliffs, 1990, p. 1158.

⁸ Macky, *op. cit.*, p. 268.

⁹ Paul Ricoeur, "What is a Text?" in, David Klemm (ed.) *The Hermeneutical Inquiry* Vol. I. Atlanta, Georgia, Scholars Press, 1986, p. 233-45. Originally published in, David Rasmussen (ed), *Mythic-Symbolic Language and Philosophical Anthropology*, The Hague, Martinus Nijhoff, 1971, p. 135-50.

¹⁰ Paul Ricoeur, "Toward a Hermeneutic of the Idea of Revelation", in, ed. Lewis S. Mudge, *Essays on Biblical Hermeneutics*, London, SPCK, 1980, p. 73-118.

deviation it achieves a special meaning. I do not wish to argue that biblical language is exactly the same as poetic language since the Bible is not just a "poem" but I am in absolute agreement with Northrop Frye who, borrowing Bultmann's phrase (but not its content!) suggests that biblical language is the language of *kerygma*, i.e. the language of "proclamation" and each language of proclamation is, by its nature, a rhetorical language which uses figures of speech. However, *kerygma* is a special kind of rhetoric, it is a mixture of the metaphorical and existential rhetoric and "unlike practically all other forms of rhetoric it... is not an argument disguised by figuration."¹¹ But the rhetoric within the text is not the writer's own rhetoric but the rhetoric of a power beyond the writer. We would be very much mistaken if we considered figures merely as "ornaments" of thought, some "beautiful expressions of high theological ideas". We shall see that 20th century views of language prohibit such dualistic or "expressive" notions: language or the "word" is not simply the "means" of expression but it is rather the "thing itself". Biblical language as the language of proclamation, "a vehicle of revelation" (Frye) is much closer to the poetic-figurative rather than to a plain, referential "literal" language, by which science undoubtedly communicates certain "truth". As opposed to the denotative- referential language of science, biblical language, especially that of the prophecies, is emotive, associative and connotative. The language of the Bible radiates words with power, the purpose of its rhetoric is to affect, transform and change its reader. It has an exclusive claim for "truth" in its own terms and it definitely aims at demolishing, overcoming the sense of reality in its reader. Auerbach powerfully illustrated this aspect of biblical language in his excellent essay on "Odysseus' Scar":

¹¹ It is worth quoting the whole passage: "*Kerygma* is a mode of rhetoric, though it is a rhetoric of a special kind. It is, like all rhetoric, a mixture of the metaphorical and the 'existential' or concerned but, unlike practically all other forms of rhetoric, it is not an argument disguised by figuration. It is the vehicle of what is traditionally called revelation, a word I use because it is traditional and I can think of no better one. But if we take this word to mean the conveying of information from an objective divine source to a subjective human receptor, we are making it a form of descriptive writing. Perhaps that is not out of the question either, but it cannot be a *simple* form of descriptive writing, as in the populist view (as we might call it) which speaks of the Bible as literally true. The Bible is far too deeply rooted in all the resources of language for any simplistic approach to its language to be adequate. Then again, the word *kerygma* is associated with the theology of Bultmann, and in Bultmann's view *kerygma* is to be opposed to myth, which he regards as an obstacle to it... myth is the linguistic vehicle of *kerygma*, and that to 'demythologize' any part of the Bible would be the something as to obliterate it." in, Northrop Frye, *The Great Code. The Bible and Literature*, London, Melbourne, Henley, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1982, p. 29-30.

The Scripture stories do not, like Homer's court out of favour, that they may please us and enchant us – they seek to subject us, and if we refuse to be subjected we are rebels.¹²

Perhaps a new aspect of biblical language can be gained again from Northrop Frye who recently argued that biblical language is not simply "creative" but "recreative" which means that it is able to recreate itself.¹³ Frye's programme seems to be exactly the same as Ricoeur's commitment to a post-critical recreation of language as it was quoted in the motto of this paper.

It is the thesis of the present paper that we have to be aware of the poetic nature of biblical language in order to be able to correct the distorted and often exclusive claims of either precritical fundamentalism or critical historicism. The new literary approach to the Bible, I would suggest, is mainly a post-critical activity because by listening to, and exploring the fullness of the text, it wants to arrive at, what Ricoeur calls, a "second naïveté". It appears to me that we have to struggle between the Scylla and Charybdis of precritical fundamentalism and historical criticism in order to arrive at the revelatory power of the symbols of language. To put it another way: we must get rid of the strait-jacket imposed on us by fundamentalism just as we have to unmask the illusions created by historical criticism. Ricoeur wrote that "idols must die so that a symbol of being may begin to speak."¹⁴ Let us now first confront the "idols" and then open our ear to the "speech" of the "symbol"!

2. FUNDAMENTALISM

What is, then, fundamentalism? Fundamentalism as a term appeared only in the 20th century but the attitude we call "literalism" is very old in interpretation. Literalism in the modern sense was conceived as a counter-effect of the mainstream historical and analytical criticism and thus both are the products of the modern scientific paradigm. Northrop Frye, in one of his lectures quoted the 17th century Archbishop Ussher who on the basis of his literal reading of biblical numbers came to the conclusion that the world was created in 4000 BC and would last for six thousand years. And since he found that there was an error in the official chronology, he predicted that millennium

¹² Erich Auerbach, "Odysseus' Scar", Chapter 1. in, *Mimesis*, New Jersey, Princeton, UP, 1971, p. 14-15.

¹³ Northrop Frye, *Creation and Recreation*, Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 1980.

¹⁴ Paul Ricoeur, "Religion, Atheism and Faith" in, *The Religious Significance of Atheism*. Edited by A. MacIntyre, Ch. Alasdair and P. Ricoeur, New York – London, Columbia University Press, 1969, p. 58-98.

would start in 1996.¹⁵ Now, today, apart from some extreme sects within the fundamentalist family such views are not very widely held any more. Therefore we should investigate the roots of fundamentalism not in some extreme and fanciful cases but in the nature and the structure of their thought and logic. It is our hope that a perceptive literary approach will be able to shed some new light on this phenomenon.

If a literary approach to the Bible should begin with, using David Jasper's phrase, "attending to the text,"¹⁶ we can say, no doubt, that fundamentalism does attend to the text with vengeance! James Barr in his seminal book *Fundamentalism* (1977) aimed at understanding and describing this phenomenon. He found that the most important characteristic feature of fundamentalism is "a very strong emphasis on the inerrancy of the Bible, the absence from it of any sort of error."¹⁷ His conclusion is that fundamentalism is "a highly self-enclosed ideology" and "intellectually it is a sect."¹⁸ In his more recent book *Escaping from Fundamentalism* (1984) Barr intended to give a pastoral help for those "who have grown up in their world of fundamentalism... but who have in the end come to feel that it is a prison from which they must escape."¹⁹ Both in his analytical and practical book Barr wittily challenges and refutes the main tenets of the "closed" fundamentalist ideology and as a contrast to it he upholds the "openness" of the critical tradition. Barr is a theologian of a powerful intellect and therefore it is difficult not to embrace his perceptive and persuasive intellectual conclusions. However, with the help of a post-critical literary approach I wish to contribute with some new insights to the understanding of the fallacies of the fundamentalist position.

I agree with James Barr in finding that the emphasis on inerrancy is the *differentia specifica* of fundamentalism. Indeed, fundamentalism is a rapidly growing movement especially in North American Protestantism (I am not considering various appearances of fundamentalism e.g. in Islam or in Marxism). Among North American Protestants the movement was recently manifested by the declarations of "The International Council on Biblical Inerrancy" and the "Chicago-Statement on Biblical Hermeneutics."²⁰ I would suggest making a distinction between the "infallibility of God's Word" on the

¹⁵ Northrop Frye, *The Bible and Literature: A Personal View from Northrop Frye*, Toronto, Media Centre, University of Toronto, 1982-3. Thirty colour video programs, Executive producer: Bob Rogers. Manual to Program 28. p. 3.

¹⁶ David Jasper, *The New Testament and the Literary Imagination*, Oxford, Macmillan, 1987. Chapter 1.

¹⁷ James Barr, *Fundamentalism*, London, SCM Press, 1977, p. 1.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 341-2.

¹⁹ James Barr, *Escaping from Fundamentalism*, London, SCM Press, 1984. p. vii.

²⁰ In, Macky, *op. cit.*, p.17.

one hand and "radical inerrancy of Scripture" on the other hand. The suggestion that the Word of God is "infallible" (which holds that God's Word is holy and true) is a *statement of faith* but the suggestion of "radical inerrancy", namely, that the Bible is inerrant from all sorts of *human* errors whether they be historical, geographical or factual, is, a *statement of credulity*. The conviction that the biblical words are inspired, "that no prophecy of Scripture is a matter of one's own interpretation, because no prophecy ever came by the impulse of men, but men moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God" (2 Peter 1:20-21) or that *pasa graphe theopneustos* i.e. "Every Scripture inspired by God is also profitable for teaching" (2 Tim 3:16, RSV), these passages do not entail the notion of what I called "radical inerrancy".

Fundamentalists maintain that the Word of God is Scripture, it is identical to the positive, "material" text. And, if the text itself is the revelation it *must* be "holy", "true", "inerrant" etc. According to this logic, if I do not accept the claim that Jonah was literally or historically in the belly of the whale then I implicitly state that the author of this text – who is in fact God – is a "liar" and thereby the message, the *kerygma* is also unreliable. What they simply neglect is what the reformers called the "principle of accommodation", namely, that God used various figures of speech: metaphors and even *myths* (which, in its original sense means "stories"!) to communicate, with the help of human authors, his message to mankind.

Although fundamentalists do not explicitly maintain that God revealed a history book or a geography book to mankind, and by sticking to their idea that revelation, though partial but still inerrable, they *make* an authoritative and correct, though partial, book of history or geography out of Scripture. At least they claim to be able to reconstruct history or geography from the mosaics of biblical passages. Article XIV of the "Chicago Statement of Hermeneutics" sounds as follows:

WE AFFIRM that the biblical record of events, discourses and sayings, though presented in a variety of appropriate literary forms, corresponds to the historical fact.

WE DENY that any event, discourse or saying reported in Scripture by the biblical author or by the traditions they incorporated.²¹

For fundamentalists biblical writings appear as being ultimately homogenous and if the reader discovers factual or historical contradictions they offer a solution by "harmonisation". Or, if an event is described in a historically contradicting way by the evangelist their quick solution is that the event in question must be "two" events. For example the synoptics show that the cleansing of the temple took place at the *end* of Jesus' ministry while in John

²¹ *Ibid.*

it takes place right in the beginning of his ministry. The fundamentalist conclusion is: there were *two* cleansings. (Why then do the authors never refer to the "first" or the "second" cleansing?)

Fundamentalists often try to substantiate their belief in the inerrancy of Scripture by "proofs" about the fulfilment of the prophecies or by "proofs" from later historical discoveries that confirm the prophecies. I believe that all this passionate hunting for "evidence" basically undermines the biblical notion of "justification by faith". They do so because all these "proofs" are *external to the realm of faith* and therefore I do not think that one can rationally be persuaded to believe simply on the basis of objective "evidences" or "proofs" from historical discoveries under the pious *Die Bibel hat doch recht* attitude. Credulity is based on external events but faith is internal, and verification comes not from a sensational media but from the indwelling Spirit.

Let me try to summarise the fundamentalist position. They say that for them God's Word is "true and holy" *because it is written*. I find that the case is exactly the other way round: *the Bible is written because God's Word is true and holy*. And the difference is immense! From the first statement it is not difficult to arrive at Scripture-worship or "bibliolatry" in Coleridge's phrase.²² Bibliolatry claims that the Bible is like a photograph or a like a tape that has correctly preserved and recorded God's message. Coleridge does not deny the inspiration of the biblical writers but he rejects the idea that they were "divinely informed".²³ The implication of my alternative understanding of the relationship between the "Bible" and "truth" ("the Bible is written because God's Word is true and holy") is, that the Bible's "truth" is rather like a "painting" radiating divine power that aims at restoring human being. As I said earlier it is the language of proclamation, the language of *kerygma*. The great danger of fundamentalism is, that with its naive enthusiasm it creates a *material idol* out of an instrument, the sword of the Spirit. (Ephesus 6:7)

The real issue involved here, is the question of truth communicated by language. And this is the very moment when literary and aesthetic principles can enter the debate. Fundamentalists, I think, share an 18th century view of truth as well as an 18th century view of language. They consider biblical language as being throughout *referential*, a language that refers to something

²² Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Confessions of an Inquiring Spirit*, Philadelphia, Fortress Press, Fortress Texts in Modern Theology, 1988. p.61. The problem of inerrancy resulting occasionally in "bibliolatry" is related to "dictation-theory" or "verbal inspiration". These fundamentalist aspects of biblical inspiration are not explicitly being dealt with here. On the huge issue of inspiration the most up-to-date article is by Raymond F. Collins in *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary*, p. 1023-1033. Among modern theories of inspiration a radically fresh and new literary-hermeneutical model was suggested by W. Vogels, "Inspiration in a Linguistic Mode", in *Biblical Theological Bulletin* 15 (1985) p. 87-93.

²³ Coleridge, *op. cit.*, p. 27.

exterior to itself. We have seen that the language of science is indeed mainly referential and denotative. But if the language of the Bible is mainly a figurative-metaphorical language then it is a fallacy to demand from it any external "verifiability", which is rightly an aspect of scientific language. Prophetic, divine and *poetic truth* is radically different from the "truth" element in analytical science. Terry Wright suggests that literalism is the "common enemy" both for the theologian and the student of literature.²⁴ For many people language appears to be a transparent, "clear" window to the world. Language, as Macky suggests, is rather a stained glass than a transparent window:

For too long now we have believed that the Bible is a window through which we are intended to look through to see what lies behind it. We have supposed that the primary purpose of the biblical writers was to report events but that unfortunately did not do an adequate job. Their glass was stained. But perhaps the colours in the glass are the meaning and not just the obstacle.²⁵

Literalism and the overall exclusive claim for scientific "truth" in Northrop Frye's system is the product of the third, descriptive-demotic phase of language. The main body of the Bible was written in the first, metaphorical and some parts of it in the second, metonymic phase of language. Literalism and the descriptive phase appears roughly with the 18th century. This new, analytical habit of mind has tended to consider the poetic use of language as "abuse" and it wished to "purify" language from all kinds of figures: symbols, metaphors and myths, which, it was believed, only distorted truth, the "clear and distinct" ideas.

Fundamentalism is unaware of the nature of figurative language, it makes a homogeneous whole out of the diverse biblical discourses. Therefore, it misreads *the literary as literal*, and it misreads *the story as history*. This blunt and insensitive literal-mindedness is undoubtedly the product of the third phase of language of Frye's system. Its logic, in fact, is very similar to that of popular etymology. Biblical language, suggests Frye, blocks off referentiality to the outside world and as the Old and the New Testament in the Bible form a "double mirror", therefore the Bible points only to itself and not outside of itself. It does not mean, however, that there is no allusion to the facts of history but it simply means that the language of the Bible, the *kerygma* absorbs history and therefore it rejects being treated, as fundamentalist treat it, as partial but "correct" historical, geographical or factual "information". Paul Ricoeur has also convincingly suggested that the mentality insisting on reading Genesis 1-3 as a historical account necessarily resulted in speculation on when and how Adam ate from the forbidden fruit. This kind of speculation

²⁴ Terry Wright, *Theology and Literature*, Oxford, Basil Blackwell, 1988, p. 13.

²⁵ Macky, *op. cit.*, p. 263.

is indeed the result of a literal-mindedness and this kind of "rationality" and logic has done much harm to Christian faith. In order to understand Genesis 1-3 one has to read it as a "story", a narrative and not as a record of history. Story in Greek is *mythos* and myth as a figure of speech is not "less" than history but *more* because as a figure of speech it has a special power and ability to "reveal".²⁶ I doubt that fundamentalists ever read and appropriated either Aristotle's *Poetics* or Sir Philip Sidney's *Defense of poetry* where the authors made it absolutely clear that history-mindedness (just as philosophy-mindedness) are less powerful and less expressive than the nature of poetry. If we accept that the Bible abounds in figures of speech like metaphor and parable then why be so neurotic about "myth"? The answer again lies in the fact that fundamentalists share an 18th century view of myth, for them it simply means a story that is "not true". It appears to them as an alternative to "history" and "truth". The 20th century turn to the language especially in philosophy (e.g. Cassirer), however, has demonstrated that myth is also an aspect or element of language. Myth and parable are, in fact, "extended metaphors" because they are given a time-dimension. Fundamentalists should be reminded that Jesus' most characteristic type of teaching is by way of the parable which is also ultimately a kind of *mythos*. An important aspect of poetic language is that meaning is not "wrapped up" in it but the content is organically intertwined with the form. I cannot but agree with Terry Wright when he concludes that "the biblical tradition of talking about God is indeed indirect, allusive and figurative. He is described in terms of a series of metaphors: regal (He is a King), legal (he is a Judge) and domestic (He is Husband, Father, Lord, Master)."²⁷ This indirectness is nowhere more apparent than in prohibiting the uttering of God's name. Wright says: "The Jewish practice of never presuming to utter or to write the sacred name maintains this reverent recognition of the limits of language."²⁸

Fundamentalists when supposing that the Bible as a divine document contains inerrant though partial information reject the dynamic potential inherent in the figurative nature of language. I have not argued that they reject figurative language *per se* but they tend to understand figures only as "ornament" or "expressions" of some high religious "truth" and not as something autonomous, objective, containing the truth in itself!

The loss of the poetic at the expense of the literal is definitely an impoverishment. But fundamentalists for all their thorough knowledge of the Bible and for all their pious lives do more harm than that: they misunderstand the very intention of the biblical writers, which is primarily a witnessing or

²⁶ Paul Ricoeur, "The 'Adamic' Myth and the 'Eschatological' vision of History" in, *The Symbolism of Evil*, Boston, Beacon Press, 1967, p. 235-6.

²⁷ Wright, *op. cit.*, p.17.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 18.

testimony. While proclaiming the *kerygma* the prophets moved by the spirit of God looked forward to, and the apostle moved by the Holy Spirits looked backward to, a central event of history, the Christ-event, the Incarnation. This is the only, but indeed relevant "material point" in the Bible.

James Barr has been a helpful guide in my understanding and describing fundamentalism. I found his criticism of fundamentalism in most cases useful and it was my purpose to complete his significant remarks from the perspective and with the insights of the literary critic.²⁹ At this point, however, I must part company with Barr as he is a passionate defender of modern historical criticism, a tradition, the presuppositions of which I wish to question too, especially in the light of the post-critical literary paradigm.

3. HISTORICAL CRITICISM

Having got rid of the strait-jacket of fundamentalism, which, I think is the "illegitimate child" of the modern period beginning with the 18th century³⁰ now let us confront its legitimate child, the analytical and historical criticism. The critical or scientific mind presupposes a neutral, objective position of the critic or the scientist from which he wants to understand and analyse his "object" and therefore he has to take up a necessary "distance". The "modern" critic or the scientist believes that it is possible for him to reconstruct a historical or a scientific reality without any bias or prejudice. However, after Gadamer's hermeneutics, the "Heisenberg-principle"³¹ and post-modern

²⁹ Since the writing of this essay I read a very lucid discussion of fundamentalism from literary critical perspective by Kathleen C. Boone. *The Bible Tells Them So. The Discourse of Protestant Fundamentalism*, Albany, The State University of New York Press, 1989. From a Catholic perspective a balanced approach touching also literary aspects was published recently by Thomas F.O' Meara, *Fundamentalism. A Catholic Perspective*, New York, New Jersey, Paulist Press, 1990.

³⁰ Cf. Sheppard, *op. cit.*, p. 56.

³¹ On the "Heisenberg-principle" and on its relationship to biblical interpretation J. Ratzinger wrote as follows: "at the heart of the historical-critical method lies the effort to establish in the field of history a level of methodological precision which would yield conclusions of the same certainty as in the field of the natural sciences. But what one exegete takes as definite can only be called into question by other exegetes ... Now, if the natural science model is to be followed without hesitation then the importance of the Heisenberg principle should be applied to the historical-critical method as well. *Heisenberg has shown that the outcome of a given experiment is heavily influenced by the point of view of the observer.* So much is this the case that both the observer's questions and observations continue to change themselves on the natural course of events. When applied to the witness of history, this means that interpretation can never be just a simple reproduction of history's being, 'as it was'. The word 'interpretation' gives us a clue to the question itself: every exegesis requires an 'inter', an entering in and a being 'inter' or between things; this is the involvement of the interpreter himself. Pure objectivity is an absurd abstraction. It is not uninvolved who comes to knowledge, rather, interest itself is a requirement for the possibility of coming to know." (*it. mine, T. F.*): Joseph

philosophy it is becoming more and more evident that this position of modernity is either an illusion or a pretence. Historians, critics and even scientists have always written on the basis of their often hidden philosophies, prejudices or tacit assumptions. Therefore, we should rather confess our biases and instead of trying to rule over the text we should recognise that it is the text that rules over us and thus the proper attitude of the scholar should be humble service rather than proud dominance. While the position of historical criticism is that meaning in the Bible is a problem which we are in charge of solving especially in view of the historical background, the reader-response, post-critical or hermeneutic viewpoint is that rather *we* are the problem, "we need to stand under the light of the Bible to let it solve us."³² The pursuit of objectivism has proved to be an illusion and at the same time a good pretext for the avoidance of understanding.

Another anomaly of the historical approach of the Bible results from the fact that the interpretation is subordinated to the principle of science. Thus the Bible as an object of interpretation is understood in reference to something "external" to it. The historical-critical method tries to locate the message of the Bible in terms of external facts e.g. the history of the age; the biography of the author; the religious movements of the age. In interpretation the responsible and committed quest for the present meaning and message of the text is shifted into an (only!) intellectual "excitement" for the "original" meaning of the text, for the author's intention or for his special theology, for "what was on his mind when he composed the text" etc.³³ We shall

Cardinal Ratzinger, "Biblical Interpretation in Crisis. On the Question and Foundations and Approaches to Exegesis Today" in, R. J. Neuhaus, ed. *Biblical interpretation in Crisis. The Ratzinger Conference on the Bible and the Church*, Grand Rapids, Michigan, Eerdmans, 1989. p. 6-7.

³² Macky, *op. cit.*, p. 17.

³³ Brevard S. Childs has published a brilliant article on his subject: "The Sensus Literalis of Scripture: An Ancient and Modern Problem", in, H. Donner, R. Hanhart, R. Smend (ed.) *Beitrage zur Alttestamentliche Theologie* (FS Walter Zimmerli) Vandhock & Ruprecht, Göttingen, 1977. p. 80-99. Childs has shown that the historical criticism has identified the *sensus literalis* with the *sensus originalis*. It wanted to get rid of the interpretive layers within the text in order to arrive at an "original" meaning. This has resulted in the fact that the exegesis of the biblical text became governed by historical research. Thus the focus of meaning was supposed to be found "behind" the text, in a historical reality. Not only the integrity of the literal sense was denied but the Bible lost its "scope" or "shape" as a concept of Scripture of a community of faith. This resulted in some desperate attempts to bridge the huge gap between the "historical meaning" "then" and the present significance "now". Childs demonstrates that the integrity of the literal sense can only be regained in the context of the canon as the Scripture of a community of faith. I find that Childs' grand and heroic programme of "relocating" of the literal sense in the canon of Scripture finds a conspicuous parallel with Northrop Frye's literary vision of the unity and the "shape" of the Bible. The passionate defender of the modern critical paradigm, James Barr in a recent article: "The Literal, the Allegorical and the Modern in Biblical Scholarship" in, *Journal for the Study of Old Testament* 44 (1989) p. 3-17, I think, abuses Childs' argument: "a fundamental characteristic of the critical movement was its total

immediately see that the historical attitude is rooted in the logic of *causality*, while the language of the Bible that demands its own interpretative logic and hermeneutics, is not.

We have to recognise that the historical criticism of the Bible has been modelled on the methods of secular philology: the text was discussed *in relation* to something external to it. However, in the secular field old philology and the relation-hunting schools have been superseded by more immanent and intrinsic criticism. The new recognition is, that the work of art is interesting *per se*, and not in relation to something external to it. The historical background, the biography of the author are at most secondary and it is the text that should be given primary significance. The work of art is a living organism, a living monument rather than a dead document. The intrinsic approach discusses primarily the language, the imagery, the symbol-system as they are clues to meaning.

I am convinced that modern literary criticism can shed some new light on the Bible and it is our hope that biblical scholars will also benefit from the insights of their colleagues in literary studies. Nowadays historical critics of the Bible have become so specialised that they do not even attempt to grasp the "unity" of the Bible. Literary critics are more successful in doing this, especially in grasping the imaginative unity of the Bible. Northrop Frye on whom a professional theologian recently wrote that he "in a paragraph can throw more light on the Christian Bible than one usually finds in several issues of technical journals"³⁴ begins his *The Great Code* (1982) as follows:

The analytical and historical approach that has dominated Biblical criticism for over a century was of relatively little use to me... At no point does it throw light on how or why a poet might read the Bible... There remained the more traditional approaches of medieval typology and of certain forms of

commitment to the literal sense of the text", by taking this statement out of its context. Barr fails to relate this statement to Childs' significant insight that this literal sense became identified with the historical ("original") sense. Barr attacks a fundamentalist sense of the literal sense that Childs never represented. Moreover, his conclusion that the critical tradition was never committed to a literal, not even to a historical, but to a "theological" sense, is highly questionable. He argues that in the critical tradition the historical study is "part of the theological process of exegesis" (p.15) but I find that it is only a pretence or illusion. The case, I think, is rather the other way round: if you want to find out the "theology" of this or that author, namely, what on his mind was (!) is *ultimately a historical and not a theological commitment*. So contrary to Barr's view, with the critical attitude it is not the historical study that is part of the theological one but the theological one is part of the historical one. Historical approach, in Frye's view is mainly a *causal* approach but the Bible is not based on the figure of a past-oriented causality but on a future-oriented typology.

³⁴P. Joseph Cahill, Review of *Creation and Recreation*, in, *Studies in Religion / Sciences religieuses* 10 (1981) p. 235-6.

Reformation commentary. They were more congenial to me because they accepted the unity of the Bible as postulate.³⁵

Frye has already used typology as early as 1957 in his famous *Anatomy of Criticism* in which he dealt with it as a "heuristic principle" of a higher criticism of the Bible that perceives the "synthesising process" and the imaginative unity of the Bible. (The "lower" principle, as he understood were the analytical-historical methods.)³⁶ But Frye's great and original insight about typology is developed at length in *The Great Code* where he discusses typology first of all as a figure of speech opposed to causality. What is common between causality and typology is that both figures move in time but causality is a past-oriented, backward-looking figure based on reason, observation and knowledge while typology is a forward-looking figure based on faith, hope and vision.³⁷ In Frye's grand vision typology "particularly in its spiralling phases, gives the Bible thematic unity, recurring imagery furnishes a protracted motivational unity."³⁸ Finally, the imaginative unity is visible in stylistic characteristics, especially in the repetitive symmetry of the narrative: "one who would understand the New Testament first should understand the Old Testament."³⁹ The Canadian Catholic theologian noticed the theological significance of Frye's literary criticism of the Bible:

the outcome of literary criticism is not to uncover external decoration or ornamental form... but to disclose that the theological and religious meaning in the Bible is inextricably bound up with its literary character.⁴⁰

Now perhaps it is becoming clear why I cannot find the historical-critical discourse adequate for biblical interpretation. The historical-critical-discourse is *causal* discourse and the Bible that is an anti-causal or typological discourse demands its own hermeneutics. Instead of imposing my preconception *on* the Bible I have to subordinate myself to the discourse *of* the Bible. (We have seen that for Ricoeur interpretation is not an act *on* the text but an act *of* the text.) I suspect that not only does Ricoeur's "intratextual" theory of interpretation, but also the post-modern idea of "intertextuality" bear a conspicuous resemblance to the Reformation-principle of *scriptura sacra sui ipsius interpres* (the Holy Scripture interprets itself).

The last difference between the historical and the literary paradigm is the question of *context*. For historical critics the context of a biblical text was

³⁵ Frye, *The Great Code*, p. xvii.

³⁶ Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism. Four Essays*, New Jersey, Princeton, 1957. p. 315.

³⁷ Frye, *The Great Code*, p. 80-81.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ P. Joseph Cahill, "The Unity of the Bible", in, *Biblica*, Vol. 65, 1984, p. 404-11.

located in the age and the place of its birth, i.e. in the external circumstances. Literary criticism does acknowledge these factors as a kind of context, but, I think, considers it secondary. For the literary critic the primary context of a certain text is not to be found in the historical background, "behind" the text but in the *corpus* of other texts, i.e. in the totality of the Bible. I suspect that a biblical author was not primarily influenced by the thoughts of his "age" but he was rather inspired and moved by earlier and other sacred texts. Frye has frequently insisted that literature is not the imitation of the "world" but the imitation of "other texts". That is the explanation for the many quotations, direct or indirect, for the recurring images, for the promise and fulfilment pattern, for the typological structure etc. I believe that other texts within the Bible should be seen as a more authentic "context" than the historical background.⁴¹

A last remark: a post-critical literary approach does not intend or reject the findings of the historical era of criticism. But instead of "explaining" things it wants to arrive, perhaps more radically than its predecessor, at a fullness of meaning revealed in the fullness of language. Therefore its proper attitude is the humble listening to the Word of God. The critical tradition was at pains to collect contradictions, just as it was keen on pointing out the "mythical elements" of the text and it wanted to get rid of them as from some disturbing "illusions" in order to arrive at a "reality" over "truth". Behind this militant attitude was, what Ricoeur calls, the "hermeneutics of suspicion" (with the great apostles of Nietzsche, Marx and Freud).⁴² The other kind of hermeneutics is called to be the hermeneutics of the recollection of meaning. I think that the post-critical literary paradigm will prove to be a more proper tool for this kind of hermeneutics.

4. A CASE STUDY:

THE SYMBOLISM OF THE GARMENT IN SCRIPTURE (AN EXERCISE IN INTERTEXTUALITY)

To close my train of thought I wish to illustrate how theory can work in practice. In his seminal essay "Original Sin" Paul Ricoeur has pointed out that the concept of "original sin" does not in fact exist in the Bible.⁴³ Instead, there is a symbolism of evil as "contagion", "stain", "blemish", as "captured will", "tortuous road", "being a debtor", "being lost" etc. This insight suggests that concrete images and symbols always precede conceptual doctrines. Symbols,

⁴¹When I wrote this essay I was not yet familiar with "canonical criticism", the works of B. Childs, J. Sanders, G. Sheppard, etc.

⁴²Paul Ricoeur, *Freud*, Chapters 1-2.

⁴³Paul Ricoeur, "Original Sin: A Study in Meaning," in *The Conflict of Interpretations. Essays in Hermeneutics*, Northwestern UP 1974, p. 269-86.

of course, give rise to thought and this happened also with the symbolism of evil. The doctrine of the original sin was expounded by St Augustine. Doctrines might have a stabilising power within the church but they do not have such a creative power as symbols do.

Now I shall take another example. Some years ago I was supposed to write a thesis on the doctrine of God's righteousness. We were encouraged to compare the biblical, the Reformation and the contemporary views of God's righteousness. The assumption was that "righteousness" like "justification by faith" or "free will" etc. is just one of the doctrines of the church. Being trained as a literary critic I decided to find some concrete images and metaphors in the Bible that would correspond to the doctrine of God's righteousness. I soon realised that these concrete and sensuous images would provide us with fresher and more versatile insights than either by studying dogmatic theology or by investigating the historical background. Therefore I shall try to apply and evoke the symbols. I shall try to connect the same images in different writings and consider them as "isomorphisms". It is intended to be a short exercise in intertextual imagery.

In Deutero-Isaiah we read that "all our righteousness is like filthy rags" (Is 64:6). Filthiness, dirt and uncleanness are images basically derived from the symbolism of evil. For all our efforts we carry the spots of sinfulness which separates us human beings from the purity and holiness of God. Job's sufferings also imply that even the greatest human righteousness or wisdom is nothing but dirty clothes in the light of God's holiness: "If I wash myself with snow water, and make my hands never so clean; Yet shalt thou plunge me in the ditch, and mine own clothes shall abhor me" (Job 9:30-1).

When coming to the Psalms we understand that clothes, the garment, is the symbol of true existence: "Let thy priests be clothed with righteousness" (Ps 132:9).

If the garment is the symbol of righteousness, God's righteousness is best expressed in the dynamic image of God giving or providing clothes for man. This is because God's righteousness is definitely an action and not an "idea". Northrop Frye reminds us God as a "noun" might be dead for us but this is only a statement about the limitations of language. However, God as a "verb" is still alive, "not simply as a verb of asserted existence but a verb expressing a process fulfilling itself."⁴⁴ God in the Bible is always the one who initiates the relationship with man, he is the active partner who puts the garment on man in order to protect him: "I spread my skirt over thee and covered thy nakedness" – says the Lord to the unprotected Jerusalem in Ezekiel 16:8. In the vision of the prophet Zechariah Joshua the high priest, accused of being Satan, is standing in filthy garment before the angel of the Lord. But the angel ordered to take away the filthy garment from him and he said to Joshua:

⁴⁴Northrop Frye, *Creation and Recreation*, p. 70.

Behold, I have caused thine iniquity to pass from thee and I will clothe thee with change of raiment... So they set a fair mitre upon his head, and clothed him with garments. (Zech. 3:4-5)

In Isaiah we read that it is the bridegroom that clothes his bride with new raiment:

I will greatly rejoice in the Lord, my soul shall be joyful in my God; for he hath clothed me with the garments of salvation, he hath covered me with the robe of righteousness, as a bridegroom decketh himself with ornaments, and as a bride adorneth herself with her jewels. (61:10)

The symbol also survives in the New Testament. In the parable of the Prodigal Son the father rejoicing in the return of his son orders his servants: "Bring him forth the best robe, and put it on him; and put a ring on his hand, and shoes on his feet" (Luke 15:22). One might protest that this event in the parable has no particular reference to the prelogical symbolism of God's righteousness but having seen the motive of God's dressing man in various other contexts here we might, perhaps, also associate this figurative implication.

The evangelist's focus on the raiment of Jesus is particularly striking in the episode of the Transfiguration when Jesus' raiment "became shining, exceeding white as snow, so as no fuller on earth can white them." (Mark 9:3).

In the apocalyptic parable about the great wedding, the King orders that the guest who has no wedding garment on him is to be taken away and "cast into outer darkness" (Mt 22:10). The garment here is the symbol of worthiness and only wearing this garment are we accepted at the great supper. This garment was given by God in sending and sacrificing his only son and man is acceptable ("righteous") to God only thorough his faith in Christ, i.e. by receiving the garment. So the white raiment symbolises the relationship between man and God; it is the symbol of both God righteousness and man's justification by faith.

The symbolism of the garment (just as many other symbols running through the Bible) gains its full significance as an apocalyptic symbol in the Book of Revelation. Human beings have to take care of the garment received from God for its loss or defilement might mean the tragic failure of faith:

Behold I come as a thief. Blessed is he that watcheth, and keepeth his garments, lest he walk naked, and they see his shame. (Rev 16:5)

In the seventh chapter we read about the sealing of God's people, about the symbolical multitude of a hundred and forty and four thousand.

And one of the elders answered saying unto me, What are these, which are arrayed in white robes and whence came they? (7:13)

The reply is a unique paradox: it presents us the mystery of redemption and salvation in a very powerful and sensuous image.

And I said unto him, Sir thou knowest. And he said to me, these are they which came out of great tribulation and which have washed their robes and made white in the blood of the Lamb. (7:14)

The Book of Revelation and indeed the whole Bible culminates with the image of the wedding of the lamb. Here the Lamb is given some further significance:

his wife hath made herself ready. And to her was granted that we should be arrayed in fine linen, clean and white: for the fine linen is the righteousness of saints. (19:7-8)

The Book of Revelation explicitly identifies "fine linen" with the "righteousness of the saints". This image suggests, I think, that deeds are inseparable from faith.

In summarising my symbol-exegesis I can conclude that the rich garment-imagery running through the Bible embraces the concept of God's righteousness, his sacrifice for mankind, i.e. the "Christ-event" but also the believers' reply his justification by faith and his good deeds resulting from his faith. Metaphorically (and only metaphorically!) we can say that Christ put on human garment i.e. he became man, so that a human being living in Christ could also be given divine raiment.

The symbol, in accordance with its old etymology brings, binds and throws together various aspects of the human and of the divine.

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