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## *Two Opinions About Exegesis*<sup>1</sup>

**Conrad Gempf**

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### **INTRODUCTION**

You are about to read at least two different essays, because I am of at least two different minds on the topic under discussion. My dilemma began to manifest itself in earnest when a colleague, in the process of tearing to shreds the arguments of a particular well-known New Testament redaction-critic, went on to question something about New Testament criticism so fundamental that we don't often discuss it. The question, put very simply, is this: Can a non-Christian correctly understand the Bible? Tim Geddert, in his thesis on the gospel of Mark,<sup>2</sup> concluded that part of that author's message was that Jesus' teachings could not really be understood outside of the commitment of faith. Until they were truly 'in him', the disciples constantly misunderstood, misheard and misinterpreted; they could not do otherwise. Jesus' parabolic teachings reflected the truth about his gospel: only the one with ears to hear can be called to hear. Does this hold true for the Bible in general? Is it impossible to hear correctly the message of the Bible with no intention of allowing it to change you? In this article my aim is to introduce the two opinions that are struggling inside me, without necessarily deciding between them.

### **COMMON GROUND**

Despite being of two minds about the central question, there are some things that I feel fairly certain about and on which both of my internal factions agree. So perhaps it would be best to start with those. First of all, my two opinions are agreed that the Bible is not just another ancient text, that it is in fact inspired by God in a way that makes it different from any other book. I am sure that it would be a mistake to read it as ancient literature and do nothing more.

Another point which commends itself to both factions is that whatever I eventually decide about comprehending the gospel, I feel sure that it is impossible to completely accept and internalize that message without the Holy Spirit; the Christian life is for Christians only. Part of this concerns the next fact that I am agreed about within myself: that Christians are primarily called to faith in someone, rather than belief in something. The demons believe and tremble, but have denied themselves the relationship: God is personal.

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One phrase that has come to be important to me in this question is 'the modes of knowing must be determined by the nature of the object'. We cannot decide in advance of an encounter what tools will and will not be relevant; any science constructs its tools and methods in conversation with what it is studying. Interested in astronomy, we discover that stars give off light, so we build optical telescopes. Once we learn that they also emit radio waves, we build

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<sup>1</sup> A form of this paper was presented to the New Testament Seminar at the University of Aberdeen and at the annual meeting of the US Evangelical Theological Society in December 1987.

<sup>2</sup> *Mark 13 in its Markan Interpretative Context*, Univ. Aberdeen, 1986; now revised and published as *Watchwords: Mark 13 in Markan Eschatology*, JSNT Suppl Series 26 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press 1989).

radio telescopes. But these excellent instruments are of no use at all in studying photosynthesis in green plants. So too the critical methodology that people have put together in attempts to study ancient texts may or may not be appropriate when dealing with the scriptures. It depends upon in what senses scripture is unique, and in what senses it is another example of ancient literature. It is the nature of the object studied that must tell us the ways to study it.

Still under the heading of things that both sides of me accept, I am united against the idea that biblical study should aim for subjective truth. To interpret 'I go to prepare a place for you' only in the context of a perceived need to find a parking place is quite wrong. It is the nature of the *object* that determines the modes of knowing, not the needs or desires of the subject. To say that Christianity is a personal thing and that it is a subjective thing are very different statements. When I say 'personal' in this context, by the way, I mean neither individual nor subjective, but that it has to do with persons. On the other hand, I acknowledge that true 'objectivity', is an impossibility. I think it is safe to say that most of us use the word in a sort of shorthand way of saying, 'Although presuppositionless exegesis is an impossible goal, we are trying to declare and allow for our biases, rather than completely giving in to them.' Putting aside the question of the advisability of this course of action, I at least am not making the mistake of assuming that I can be totally objective.

Now then, those points made, on to the first of my opinions.

## OPINION 1

When I am in this mode of thinking, there appears to me to be no problem with the statement that as far as cognitive grasping of the content goes, a Christian has no advantage over a careful and sensitive non-Christian exegete.

If I were to draw a square on a blackboard, it would be possible to measure the sides of the square with a ruler. If I then draw more lines onto the square, that give it a sense of perspective and change it into a cube, we would still have a measurable square as well. Adding the third dimension doesn't mean that the 6 inch square is no longer measurable with a ruler or no longer 6 inches; we may continue our investigations of the square just as before; its squareness has not been altered. It has

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become more than a square, perhaps, but measuring the square itself yields the same results and the results may be arrived at in the usual way. So too, the Bible is at least a book; the Israelites were at least an ancient civilization. In both cases they may have been more, but they are at least that. Therefore it seems reasonable that people who are trained to investigate those types of phenomena should be able to tell us something of use about them.

If both I and a famous sociologist read the text of the New Testament looking for the attitude toward spouses espoused therein, the difference is that I end up with some changed relationships, while the sociologist ends up with a marketable book. But we both read the thing. We use similar skills in translating the Greek; we both try and familiarize ourselves with the cultural expectations of Hellenism; when we run across apparent contradictions we both seek to reconcile them if possible and if not try to apply the same principles about prescriptive as opposed to descriptive statements. What distinguishes us are things that have

nothing to do with the text *as text*. I might pray, the sociologist might hum softly, as we work. I submit myself to the authority in what I'm reading, the sociologist could not care less about it. It changes my life, it only changes his or her curriculum vitae. But none of that concerns the understanding of what the text says about the matter.

Modern Christian interpretation relies on two questions, What did it mean? and What does it mean? Both are necessary. It may perhaps be that only a Christian can do the latter step, a task that is very nearly prophetic. But the New Testament specialist is one whose training and skills suit her or him especially to do the former task. What this specialist does with 'what it meant' is up to them, but their answers to the historical question are of use to anyone asking 'what does it mean?'

Even in cases where 'what it means for today' seems less crucial (the question of meat offered to idols, or, from the Old Testament, questions about civil and ceremonial law) we still want to know what it is the Bible says, what went on, what people in those times were thinking. This, more than the question of 'what it means for today', is the domain of the biblical scholar. Because the scriptures may be more than they appear, we need to be cautious about statements that go *beyond* the task of 'description', statements that assume the normal limitations of books and civilizations, such as 'Obviously the tribe could not really have caused the walled city to collapse.' In such cases the specialists speak outside of their area of expertise.

To summarize opinion 1, then, someone who is good at reading texts should be able to say 'the text says x', whether they believe x or not-x. Hearing is a necessary first step in 'hearing and obeying'. But it is a step that both the obedient and non-obedient can perform. The peculiar job of the Christian is to be a 'doer of the word and not a hearer only'. But there are those who are hearers only.

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## OPINION 2

Thus far the first opinion. My other half sees the matter very differently. This part of me starts off with a nagging feeling that something is wrong with the idea that the Bible should be treated the same way as a book by Josephus or a Platonic dialogue. My mental geiger counter begins clicking loudly when I think about the idea that we must do our exegesis the same way as if we were reading any book, and *only later* do we *add* the spiritual dimension. That seems so unlike anything I know about life as a Christian. I find it hard to accept that the part that has to do with God and Christ and ultimate reality is a step that comes after we've done our human best.

Every time I spend time considering the alternative, I feel as though I am standing on the edge of a very steep cliff. For surely the first opinion is correct that in terms of the way we do exegesis in the twentieth century, non-Christians can do it just as well. My second half wants, in effect, to call the whole 'modern' conception of biblical exegesis into question. A very steep cliff indeed. I started this paper by saying that the question under discussion was 'Can a non-Christian really understand the Bible' but what we have been considering until now is a different question: 'Can we define biblical exegesis in such a way as to exclude anything specifically Christian?' We found that we could. Now I want to ask, is this really a scientific way of conceiving of biblical exegesis? I have agreed with myself that the mode of knowing should be determined by the nature of the object. The crux is this: is the Bible an ordinary

book that happens to have an extra dimension tacked on? Or is it instead a phenomenon that is fundamentally different? If we want to understand it completely do we do the ordinary things and then do something different? Or do we do something different first?

Earlier I spoke of a square and a cube on the blackboard. If the jump between book and scripture is like that of jumping from 2 to 3 dimensions, then the first opinion is correct. The phenomenon of square is still visible, measurable, unchanged even though it is the larger phenomenon of cube with which we are dealing. Suppose, however, that the scripture/book difference is more analogous to the difference between 3 and 4 dimensions. If I had a cube sitting on a desk, and we considered it as a cube, you could measure it with your ruler. Suppose I throw it from hand to hand, emphasizing the 4th dimension: time. Your ruler is no longer an appropriate instrument to measure that phenomenon. In order to use it, you have to change the event by stopping the cube. Thanks to Einstein, it is more than arguable that you have not only altered the event by trying to measure it inappropriately, but that in fact, you will have changed the cube's dimensions just by stopping it. This would be easier to witness if I could juggle it at speeds approaching the speed of light, at which both time and volume would become distorted in a large way. But if I could do that, I would be playing cricket

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instead of writing papers. Even at relatively slow speeds, my moving cube is no longer exactly the same, that's the point.

Let me use another analogy which I think is particularly apt. Astronomy flourished for a very long time before Copernicus. In fact, it divested itself of astrology, and functioned as a purely descriptive science before Copernicus. Its practitioners must have thought themselves to be completely unassailable. What they did was to describe objectively the motions of the heavenly bodies. And they regarded and measured their motion in the same ways that they would measure the motion of any distant object. They were thus able to produce all sorts of marvellous results. They were able to tell planets apart from stars, able to specify the normal orbits of the planets. Eventually they were able to predict with accuracy future eclipses, conjunctions etc. But they thought that planets went backwards in their orbits sometimes. It was pure and nearly incontrovertible description. The things went backwards, you could see them when they did it, you could predict it before they did it; they went backwards. That was observable everywhere, by everyone. But it was wrong. It was flawed, and it was misleading. And it was wrong because of what it left out of consideration: something that could escape detection precisely because it was fundamental, and because it concerned an object that was not in the heavens, as far as the astronomers could tell. That fact of course is that the earth is moving.

Are we like the pre-Copernican astronomers in the way that we do exegesis? Can we do our descriptive work, trying to ignore Christ in the meanwhile, any more successfully than they could ignore the movement of the earth? Does the fact that we, as they, get results make us blind to the mistaken and misleading nature of our work?

This is not to say that I know just how an 'enlightened' exegesis would differ. When we look back at the Copernican revolution, we are able to see pretty clearly what it was that needed to be changed. This is the effect of hindsight. In quantum physics, there is another revolution going on right now, we are learning facts so inconsistent with those things we take as foundational truths that we cannot reconcile it, don't really have words to describe it. There

are particles that do and do not exist at the same time. It is impossible to measure their speed and their location at the same time. It's not that we don't have instruments that could do; for the past ten years we have. Rather, when you measure their speed they are nowhere. Somehow, our conception of the universe is going to have to change to the point where these new revelations seem only as bizarre as the fact that we are whirling around on a moving planet and the people in China needn't strap their hats to their heads.

In terms of exegetical revolutions, I remember clearly the last time I went through a shift like this in the way I read the Bible. When I was a young teenager, I attended many Bible Study sessions run by an evangelical church in my town. My view of the Bible was very different then than it is now. I saw it as a great mono-coloured source for proof

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texts, wisdom that would change my life, if I only knew what verses to read when. My most important tools were lists of situations, and verses that were relevant to them. The Bible was God's word, my task was to apply it, like a bug spray, in the relevant areas. When, at university, my awareness of its real nature expanded, I at first could not fathom how to deal with this new scripture, like the famous theologian Linus VanPelt (from *Peanuts*<sup>TM</sup>), who upon learning the meaning of the word 'epistles' exclaimed with guilty horror 'all these years I've been reading someone else's mail!' Fortunately for me, there were many people who had gone through that metamorphosis before me, and their guidance got me on the track to considering the contexts, doing mirror-reading, and so on. But now, we may be about to change views again, and I don't know who has gone before us, and what methods we will find. Copernicus and company had to work out what post-Copernican astronomy would look like, we have to figure out what post-quantum physics looks like. We may have to figure out what post-critical exegesis looks like.

One consolation is that such scientific revolutions usually do not involve abandoning tools and methodologies, just using them with a different set of assumptions. My guess is that form- and redaction-criticism would still be useful just as the telescope was. It may also mean, however, that the so-called pre-critical exegesis of the Fathers should be looked at carefully once again. Initially I shrunk in horror from this notion, thinking of the amazingly poor exposition I have read from some of the church's greatest thinkers. But our so-called scientific methods have often been abused as well, and I wonder what future generations will think of some examples of our exegesis? I still have an advert from a Sunday newspaper offering to sell me a book with 'scientific evidence' that Jesus was of English descent. Even within accepted scholarly circles, there have been works that are more embarrassing than analogical interpretations of the parables.

To summarize opinion 2, then: the Bible is more than an ordinary book with an extra dimension tacked on. To consider it as an ordinary book, intending to bring up the other matter later, is rather like a film critic studying the acetate with a magnifying glass, or hauling the screen to a laboratory.

## CONCLUSION

I've tried to present the case for each side, but I honestly don't know which way I will come out. I go back and forth, not so much on the question of whether a non-Christian can do the kind of exegesis that I have been doing. I think that point is settled. The real question is

whether I am doing the exegesis I should be doing, whether what I'm doing is valid or validly called 'studying the New Testament'. It is a question I raise without having come to a firm conclusion myself. In true

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Sheena MacDonald/*The World This Week* style, I will allow both of my opinions a final salvo, very briefly.

Opinion 1: Orthodoxy says that Jesus was fully man and fully God, not something other than man. So also the Bible is really a human book, written by human beings as well as being the inspired word of God. Just as Jesus and his followers could not neglect his earthly body, so we rightly deal with the scriptures. Martha's problem was not that she made preparations for the Lord's physical needs, but that she did so exclusively. Even Mary washed the Lord's physical feet. As long as we attend, not only to the words of the Bible but also to the Word beyond, as long as we remember why we are at his feet, then we may wash them.

Opinion 2: On the road to Emmaus, Jesus opened his disciples' hearts so that they could understand the scriptures. Did that include what it meant or what it means? How would they, thus enlightened, have written about the sociological nature of the schools of the prophets? My guess is that they learned neither what it meant nor what it means, but learned *who he is*. Our goal is not primarily to dig something out of the Bible, nor is it to read our modern situation into it. What it meant and what it means are both side issues compared to our real interest as Christian people on the planet: reading through the Bible to the Lord who gave us the stars, the quanta particles and his only Son. I have been told a story about George Wishert. A teacher of Greek, he had been reading John 14, and had come to grips with it, was ready to teach about it. Then his wife died. He read the passage again, and in a totally different light, as if he understood it for the first time. Not because the topic of death held a new subjective significance for him in his current situation, but because he had never really known death until then. Would it ever be right for him to attempt to read the passage the old way again? So, too, we who know and love the Lord: Is it good for us to deliberately leave that knowledge and love out of our research?

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