

Friedrich Schleiermacher and the Age of Romanticism

1 The Bible and History

As we move nearer to the nineteenth century we find everywhere a biblical criticism and a hermeneutics that are firmly established on "Enlightenment" principles, that is, on the use of reason in what philosophy would call an "empirical" manner of reading and interpretation and what the English writer Anthony Collins (1676-1729) refers to as "the common rules of grammar and logic." The Bible now comes under the glare of a self-conscious critical scrutiny, often regarded more as an interesting work from antiquity than as a sacred text. In 1724, Collins published his book entitled *Discourse of the Grounds and Reasons of the Christian Religion*, having previously published in 1707 his *Essay Concerning the Use of Reason*. Collins's work is important, since he argued that early Christianity was essentially a literary adaptation of the earlier narratives and texts of the Hebrew Bible. In other words, Christianity very largely sprang out of a particular way of *reading* the Old Testament as types, allegories, and prophecies of the future events and persons of the New Testament. An exercise in literary history was now presuming to answer questions about the origin and nature of Christianity itself. (This, as we have seen, has some truth in it, although there is more to the story than that. For some people, however, this may be a debatable point.)

Collins was a freethinker—a new kind of hermeneut quite unlike all those whom we have studied so far, even Chladenius, who was, as you will recall, anxious to protect the Bible from the corrosive effects of his otherwise rational theories. But for Collins, the Bible must take its chance alongside every other text. In the eighteenth century, hermeneutics and the interpretation of the Bible finally moved largely away from the church and readers whose purpose was pious or religious, to find its focus in the academy and university and in readers whose purpose was essentially academic.

It was during this century in England and Germany that the business of reading the Bible became both a learned and *skeptical* exercise. Edward Gibbon's (1737–94) great work, *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (1776–88), set a new standard for historical inquiry and its march forward that set little or no store by the effective claims of faith or religious belief.

A little earlier (although his famous *Fragmentes* were published only posthumously by G. E. Lessing in 1774–78), the German H. S. Reimarus (1694–1768), who was professor of Oriental languages in a Hamburg *Gymnasium*, sought to recover the lost “historical Jesus” by his reading of the Gospels as early Christian elaborations on the simple “facts” by speculation and mythologizing. The Bible was to be read as Oriental stories through which, by the tools of reason, philology, and the apparatus of modern learning a portrait of the true Jesus might be recovered. Reimarus was the great iconoclast (or “breaker of idols”) who is sometimes credited with being the first in the line of scholars who have embarked on the “quest for the historical Jesus,” but it should be clear that his purpose was explicitly antitheological and anti-Christian. For Reimarus the cold light of history evacuates religious belief, and his aim was to show that the real Jesus of Nazareth, once recovered, could not be the basis for Christian faith. More will be said shortly about this growth of *historical criticism* in the development of hermeneutics.

(Hermeneutics and theology, as must be abundantly obvious by now, are never far apart. Reimarus was actually exploiting

the potential split between the Jesus of *history* and the Christ of *faith* evident in the rather anxious remark of the reformer Philipp Melancthon (1497–1560) when he said, “Unless one knows why Christ took upon himself human flesh and was crucified, what advantage would accrue from having learned his life’s history?” Reimarus simply turns this around. If for Melancthon the Christ of faith precedes and enlightens for us the Jesus of history, for Reimarus the Jesus of history, once recovered by a particular reading of the Bible, would obliterate the Christ of faith.)

Another important figure that demands mention is Robert Lowth (1710–87), bishop of London. Like Anthony Collins, Lowth was interested in the literature of the Hebrew Bible, though he was far more learned than Collins and an excellent Hebraist. In 1753, Lowth published (in Latin) his Oxford lectures *On the Sacred Poetry of the Hebrews*. An Anglican clergyman, Lowth had also been an academic and as a relatively young man was elected as professor of poetry at the University of Oxford. (Until the nineteenth century, all the lectures of the professor of poetry were required to be delivered in Latin!) The combination of Hebrew scholar and poet in Lowth is interesting and not without importance for us. Lowth, quite literally, rediscovered the form and structure of Hebrew poetry, quite different from classical or modern poetic models, which are based largely on principles of rhythm and rhyme. Hebrew verse, Lowth claimed, was based on the principle of *parallelism*, lines that appear to repeat or almost repeat one another in a variety of subtle ways. Here are two examples of what I mean. The first is familiar enough. It is the victory song of the women of Israel in 1 Samuel 18:7.

Saul has killed his thousands,
and David his ten thousands.

If Saul’s reaction to this comparison of their achievements is anything to go by, it is a good example of the power of poetry! The second is from Psalm 69:2.

I sink in deep mire,
where there is no foothold;
I have come into deep waters,
and the flood sweeps over me.

Is the psalmist simply repeating himself? Or, rather, does not the second line add dramatically to the first in a kind of incremental progression?

Although the technical details of Lowth's "discovery" are not particularly our concern here, it is important to realize that this is a major step forward in the understanding of the Bible *as literature*. Lowth is reading these texts in the first instance as literary masterpieces, and from this draws his conclusions. He speaks of the "writings of Moses" as some of the earliest examples of poetry, and to these he adds (from Genesis) the "inspired benedictions" of Isaac and Jacob. For the Hebrews, he affirmed, poetry stood

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preeminent as "the highest commendation of science and erudition." (Reimarus, in short, is studying the Bible as history; Lowth is studying it as literature—meanwhile, theology is now having to take its chance!) It might not be an overestimation to say that Lowth's lectures *On the Sacred Poetry of the Hebrews*, which were translated into German long before they were translated into English, transformed the manner in which we read and interpret the poetic parts of the Bible, and were a herald of the movement of mind and spirit in Germany, England, and France called *romanticism*. This movement constituted a crucial shift in hermeneutical theory and understanding, and we are still assessing the consequences of it today.

Lowth's Lecture 17 is entitled "Of the Sublime of Passion." He emphasizes the importance of the "language of poetry" in the exercise of the imagination and for "exciting the passions." Yet, drawing directly on the writings of Aristotle in the *Poetics*, Lowth insists that the reading of poetry should not inflame the passions,

thus making them unruly, but rather, he said, "it is the office of poetry to incite, to direct, to temper the passions, and not to extinguish them." Taking Aristotle as our guide, this is as true of the poetry of the Bible as of any other poetry. (Imagine the horror Luther would have felt at this critical move from a "pagan" writer!) As regards the Hebrew texts of the Old Testament, this poetic activity is linked directly to liturgical practice in worship, and is a means of understanding more clearly how the ancient Jews sang the praises of God. Again, we see how literary insights are now feeding theological conclusions. Here is the opening paragraph of Lowth's nineteenth lecture, where we notice how he brings in the art of music and performance as well as poetry.

The origin and earliest application of the Hebrew poetry have, I think, been clearly traced into the service of religion. To celebrate in hymns and songs the praises of Almighty God; to decorate the worship of the Most High with all the charms and graces of harmony; to give force and energy to the devout affections was the sublime employment of the Sacred Muse. It is more than probable, that the very early use of sacred music in the public worship of the Hebrews, contributed not a little to the peculiar character of their poetry, and might impart to it that appropriate form, which, though chiefly adapted to this particular purpose, it nevertheless preserves on every other occasion. But in order to explain this matter more clearly, it will be necessary to premise a few observations concerning the ancient Hebrew mode of chanting their sacred hymns. (Lowth, quoted in John Drury, ed., *Critics of the Bible*, 1724–1873)

Now, how does all this help us in our study of hermeneutics? Well, first, note how Lowth's concerns in reading the Bible are still essentially historical. For him as for others in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, to read was to reach back to the historical origins and conditions that were hidden within the text. These were to be brought to light by proper processes of interpretation, rather as an excavation in archaeology digs up its truths from the

earth where they lie hidden and overlaid by the centuries. The biblical interpreter must carefully scrape away the layers of dirt and the additions of later cultures onto the text in order to recover the truth beneath in its pristine splendor. Second, Lowth looks forward to romanticism in his recovery (via Aristotle) of the sublime and emotive power of poetic texts such as, for instance, the psalms. Reading is a matter of feeling and the stimulation of the emotions, and by reason of Lowth's "discovery" we can now once again read and even sing these psalms with something of the response and feelings of the ancient Hebrews themselves! Reading the Bible has finally moved beyond the walls of the church and its theological debates, and yet, at the same time, for Lowth (though certainly not for Reimarus) his work calls on the theologians to respond, if they will. Still, the underlying implications are clear. Lowth is setting a new agenda for reading, and in this new age of critical hermeneutics a crucial question is asked: What is the nature of the Bible's *authority*, and is it in the end different from the authority of any other literary or historical text?

2 Johann Salomo Semler (1725–91) and the Canon of Scripture

Johann Salomo Semler (1725–91) was professor of theology at the University of Halle in Germany. Still writing within the Lutheran tradition, Semler gave extensive consideration to the theory of hermeneutics and its bearing on our reception of the Bible. In a work on theological hermeneutics published in 1760, Semler wrote:

The most important thing, in short, in hermeneutical skill depends upon one's knowing the Bible's use of language properly and precisely, as well as distinguishing and representing to oneself the historical circumstances of a biblical discourse; and on one's being able to speak today of these matters in such a way as the changed times and circumstances of our fellow-men demand. . . . All the rest of hermeneutics can be reduced to these two things. (Semler, quoted in Frei,

The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative)

This is a pretty categorical statement, and with scholars like Semler hermeneutics has moved finally and without reserve into the university and its classrooms. In this passage you can see the learned professor speaking to his students and requiring of them the willing suspension of religious belief and the acquiring of particular skills as they get down to their critical task. This is a business requiring precise linguistic knowledge and learning and a clear sense of *cultural relativity*—we need to be acutely aware of our *own* cultural circumstances, as well as our cultural differences from those of the ancient biblical texts.

One of the major consequences of Semler's labors was the fragmentation of the unity of the Bible and the breakup of the traditional unity of the *canon*. How so? We have seen in chapter 2 how the canon of the Christian Bible developed over the first few centuries of the church and became the yardstick of authority, reaffirmed confidently by Luther's principle of *sola scriptura*. The canon of Scripture had been for almost two millennia the collection of authorized texts against which the Christian tradition was measured and maintained. To remind ourselves briefly, from the earliest days of the church it was important to establish which texts were canonical and authoritative (e.g., the four Gospels), and which were not (e.g., the apocryphal Gospel of Thomas). Although the canon was never completely stable (Luther, for example, thought that the book of Revelation should be left out), nevertheless its establishment ensured both the broad *unity* of Scripture and its *authority* as a comprehensive collection of texts. (In modern scholarship, C. F. D. Moule in his book *The Birth of the New Testament* argues that in spite of the contradictions and differences between its books, the New Testament does reflect a remarkable unity, implying that the hand of God was at work in their selection. His argument is not unpersuasive.)

But to take a more lighthearted diversion for a moment, in his book *The Tabloid Bible* (1998) Nick Page makes some serious points while presenting biblical incidents in the manner of the *Sun* or *Mirror* tabloid newspapers. His "reporter" comments on Paul:

Paul has become famous for his letters to churches throughout Asia Minor. Many churches are now basing their understanding of the Christian faith on Paul's "epistles," as they are known.

"I'm just trying to make sense of everything that happened," said Paul. "*Obviously not all my letters are equally important.* There are several to Auntie Beryl that are merely thanking her for my birthday present." (Page, *Tabloid Bible*; emphasis added)

The point is that in Semler's hermeneutics not all books of the Bible are of equal importance and historical reliability. Some are more authentic and useful than others. In a major work on the canon, published between 1771 and 1775, Semler held in question "the formerly commonly held assertions of the general and undifferentiated divinity of the whole so-called Bible." The discerning (and learned) reader must discriminate, by proper academic criteria, between texts that are "reliable" and those that are less so, and learn, says Semler, "to judge for himself."

What we have here is a serious and direct threat to "so-called" sacred Scripture and its unity and authority. The science of hermeneutics is here opposing itself to the whole tradition, which understands the Bible, and *all* the Bible taken together, as the Word of God. Critical reading itself, in short, has become a threat to biblical authority.

Another learned German academic, Johann Gottfried Eichhorn (1752–1827), a professor of philosophy, wrote massive scholarly "Introductions" to both the Old and the New Testaments. Eichhorn summarily dismissed much of the Old Testament as merely primitive outpourings of an almost prehistoric and unsophisticated people (unsophisticated, that is, as compared to civilization defined in terms of German Enlightenment scholarship), and he proposed that the truth and validity of Christian claims could only be laboriously picked out and extricated from the primitive ramblings of a people who lacked the necessary philosophical and linguistic skills that "modern" theology has developed and required. Through hermeneutics, not only the Bible but religion

itself was becoming a scholarly business.

It is hardly surprising that, at the same time in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, evangelical and pietist movements in England and Germany were turning their backs on such abstruse scholarship, and resorting to a variety of kinds of fundamentalist readings of the Bible that simply claimed every word was literally true. This kind of reading the English poet and thinker Samuel Taylor Coleridge summarily dismissed as "bibliolatry"—the mindless reading of the text as itself, in effect, divine. The gap between the hermeneutics of faith and the hermeneutics of suspicion seemed absolute and unbridgeable.

3 Immanuel Kant (1724–1804) and the Romantic Spirit

We are not engaged in an exercise in philosophy or philosophical theology, but rather in a survey on how texts, and especially biblical texts, are read and understood. At the same time we have to recognize that such exercises cannot ultimately be separated from one another. Hermeneutics is no optional extra. And so we cannot proceed farther into the age of romanticism and the nineteenth century without a very brief acknowledgment of the crucial work of the German philosopher Immanuel Kant (1724–1804), who, quite literally, changed the way in which people in the West thought, and thought of themselves. Kant's thinking and writings are vast and complex, and we need to acknowledge that they amount to a very great deal more than is suggested here. Two points will suffice for our purposes.

Kant begins a famous essay entitled "An Answer to the Question 'What Is Enlightenment?'" written in 1784, with these words:

Enlightenment is man's emergence from his self-incurred immaturity. Immaturity is the inability to use one's understanding without the guidance of another. This immaturity is self-incurred if its cause is not lack of understanding, but lack of resolution and courage to use it without the guidance of another. The motto of enlightenment is therefore: Sapere

audé! Have courage to use your *own* understanding! (Kant, in Reiss, ed. *Political Writings*)

By now we should be familiar with this kind of attitude. Kant follows Descartes in his emphasis on thinking, and Eichhorn and others in his sense that modern humankind is entering into a new maturity before unknown. Elsewhere, in a book entitled *Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone* (1793), Kant “demythologizes” Western religion and attempts to demonstrate that its long history is merely a projection of our moral sensibilities. In short, we should now be growing out of such childish things.

For the reader of texts—to keep to our specific concerns—Kant means that you should not rely on the *authority* of others, whether it is the church or the professor. Read for yourself. You, yes, *you* can understand this or any text as well as I can (provided you have equipped yourself with the necessary *skills* of language, philology, and so on).

Second, and more broadly, Kant questioned the objectivity of the world “out there.” He was not suggesting that it does not exist, but rather that it is only possible to perceive and understand it on our own terms, and not absolutely. In a famous phrase from romanticism, “we half create what we perceive.” In other words, as we have already seen in chapter 1, the differences between us mean that we see the world in different ways—what for me is sublime, for you is simply terrifying. What I think is beautiful, you may see as ugly. Thus the reader does not contemplate a text in which there is “a meaning,” but brings to the text (and to the world) his or her own perspectives and even prejudices. We may, indeed, misunderstand a text (through ignorance or pighedness), but often we just have different understandings, one not necessarily any better or worse than another. The end result of this suggestion is the famous question asked of one professor of literature, “Is there a text in the class, or is it just us?” (The professor in question is called Stanley Fish, and we shall come back to him in chapter 6.)

Furthermore, for Kant, interpretation and indeed thinking itself are not merely exercises of the reason, but must also involve

intuitions and the realm of the *imagination*. As the English poet William Blake put it in his poem *The Everlasting Gospel* (ca. 1818):

Both read the Bible day and night,
But thou read'st black where I read white.

For the romantic poets and thinkers of the early nineteenth century—especially in England and Germany, such as Coleridge, Wordsworth, Goethe, and Hölderlin—after first the age of reason and then after Kant, the major problem was how to read the Bible and be true to the *critical* demands of scholars like Semler, yet also to read it in the light of the new romantic poetry with its emphasis on the supernatural and the claims of *feelings and emotions*. In their time the church and its authority was, it seemed, disintegrating, as was the authority of the Bible, and what they began to seek was a new *mythology*—a new worldview in the context of which they could read and understand. What was happening was what is now known as a *paradigm shift* in understanding such as took place when the Renaissance and the Reformation replaced the worldview of the Middle Ages. In short, people were seeking a new way of describing the world. (Another huge paradigm shift in scientific thinking nearer our own times was the “discovery” of relativity that replaced a Newtonian worldview with that of Albert Einstein. It, too, has had an enormous effect on how we read and understand texts. We shall come back to this in more detail a little later, in chapter 5.)

Myth, as we shall see later on, became a crucial word in the nineteenth century. Looking back to particular events in *history*—such as the life of Jesus—the great romantic hermeneuts also sought to read the Bible as a text of *timeless* truths, true for all times and places. (Reimarus, you will recall, sought to undermine the claims of Christianity by trying to locate the specific *historical* Jesus.)

But how was the Bible to become, again, relevant, let alone true for their time? For another characteristic of the romantic spirit, as it perceived the changing of the sociopolitical world order after the French Revolution and the decay of the so-called *ancien régime*, was the sense of breakup and *fragmentation*. The Bible

itself (and by extension all texts), once read as a seamless unity, was now read as fragments or a series of fragments from which, at best, we can be afforded gleams and slivers of truth and glory. Reading became as much a case of filling in the gaps and seeing what is not there in the text as it was a matter of reading what *is* on the page. The romantics, as they lamented what they saw as the breaking down of the ancient order of things, regarded the old texts as, at best, broken remembrances of things past and read them as a *reconstruction* of half-forgotten truths. Their obsession with ruins, and especially ruined medieval abbeys like Fountains or Rievaulx in Yorkshire, extended to the Bible as a beautiful and still valuable but essentially ruined memorial of a world past and gone. The poet William Wordsworth expressed this sense of loss in his poem "Intimations of Immortality":

Whither is fled the visionary gleam?
Where is it now, the glory and the dream?

For many of the romantics, the Bible now simply took its place alongside the rest of literature, merely one element in what Goethe termed *Weltliteratur* ("world literature"). No longer was there a separate hermeneutic for reading the Bible, as there was even for Chladenius, but the Bible was to be read like any other book and left to take its chances—although, as we shall see in a moment, in Coleridge and Schleiermacher, it was never quite that simple. Nevertheless, for the first time in the history we have been following, reading became an activity guided not by *belief* in a tradition, God, and theology, but actually by *unbelief* and atheism. The age of reason and the shifting of the political map of Europe had done their work. Thus for the poet Shelley, Jesus was simply a fellow poet and a hero alongside others from mythology and history. For the atheist Shelley, the Bible is read as poetry alongside such myths as that of Prometheus, who stole fire from the gods for the benefit of humans and was punished accordingly, yet becomes a hero figure celebrated in romantic verse. Shelley ends his epic poem *Prometheus Unbound* (1820) with these magnificent

words, not lamenting fragmentation but celebrating the freedom of heroism:

This, like thy glory, Titan, is to be
Good, great and joyous, beautiful and free;
This is alone Life, Joy, Empire, and Victory. [Emphasis added]

4 Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Confessions of an Inquiring Spirit*, 1840

That, however, is by no means the end of the story for biblical hermeneutics. The English romantic poet, philosopher, and theologian Samuel Taylor Coleridge (1772–1834) was the son of an Anglican clergyman who anticipated many others in the nineteenth century by combining a restless, skeptical mind and a dislike of the theological and spiritual claims of the church with an equally profound sense of the holiness of Scripture. A voracious reader and an excellent linguist, Coleridge was fascinated by language and what happens in the process of reading. Indeed, his *Biographia Literaria* (1817), or "Literary Life," is in some ways an exercise in encouraging its reader to become self-reflective *in the very act of reading*. The book may be said to be not so much a source of information about his life, poetry, and philosophy as an incentive to ponder on how meaning is generated in the mind of the reader. Coleridge wants us to think about ourselves as we read and struggle to make sense of his admittedly often difficult text. He will, for example, take you through a complex philosophical argument and then pause with a question, the point being not so much that we solve its mystery, but that we come to understand a little more how we actually think through and understand it with all its difficulties.

Coleridge's collection of "letters" entitled *Confessions of an Inquiring Spirit* was published posthumously, edited by his nephew Henry Nelson Coleridge with the following "Advertisement." It is worth quoting in full.

The following Letters on the Inspiration of the Scriptures were left by Mr. Coleridge in Ms. at his death. The Reader will find in them a key to most of the Biblical criticism scattered throughout the Author's own writings, and an affectionate, pious, and, as the Editor humbly believes, a profoundly wise attempt to place the study of the Written Word on its only sure foundation,—a deep sense of God's holiness and truth, and a consequent reverence for that Light—the image of Himself—which He has kindled in every one of His rational creatures. (Coleridge, *Confessions of an Inquiring Spirit*.)

Note here the emphasis on *rationality*—Coleridge is, after all, still a child of the eighteenth century. At the same time, the reading of the written Word is based on a prior *feeling* which Coleridge identifies as a sense of the holiness and truth of God. For him, biblical interpretation is a proper meeting of the irrational and the rational—it is a hermeneutics of faith *and* a hermeneutics of suspicion at one and the same time. He admits that reading begins with a felt need born of his own awareness of inadequacy and limit. As a reader he comes to the text, he readily admits, as one “who is neither fair nor saintly, but who—groaning under a deep sense of infirmity and manifold imperfection—feels the want, the necessity, of religious support.” In other words, Coleridge comes to the Bible not so much seeking to understand, or with a mind soothed by sanctity, but rather to find consolation for his wounded soul.

For Coleridge this in no way implies any kind of hermeneutical fundamentalism. The solution to his initial sense of unworthiness and imperfection does not lie *in* the biblical text like a hidden meaning to be excavated by interpretive procedures. Rather, reading for Coleridge is an interactive business between reader and text, which initiates a kind of voyage of discovery. Here is a key passage in his *Confessions* from the beginning of Letter II:

In my last letter I said that . . . in the Bible there is more that *finds* me than I have experienced in all other books together; . . . the words of the Bible find me at greater depths of my

being; and that whatever finds me brings with it an irresistible evidence of its having proceeded from the Holy Spirit. (Coleridge, *Confessions of an Inquiring Spirit*)

Coleridge is a religious, but at the same time a highly intelligent, reader of the Bible. He hates what he calls “bibliolatry”—that is, the unthinking assumption that the truth is simply there in the text, clear and without contradiction, or to be found without interpretive labor. Like others after him in the nineteenth century, he encouraged us to read the Bible critically *like any other book* and then, but only then, might we discover its uniqueness. Reading is an adventure of discovery and, above all, self-discovery.

Furthermore, true to the principle of the hermeneutic circle, he insisted that you have to read the Bible *as a whole*, in all its various, difficult, and sometimes contradictory parts, in order to discover what it is about. You should not pick and choose, and the honest reader must not eliminate those bits which he or she finds difficult or even offensive, such as the notorious last verse of Psalm 137:

Happy shall they be who take your little ones
and dash them against the rock!

However unpalatable we may find this, it is in the written Word too! And we read it, just as we must read *all* of Shakespeare, the great and the not so great, the well known and the little known, if we are to understand him. I use this example because, in the *Confessions*, Coleridge places his beloved Shakespeare alongside the Bible as another great instance of literature—the same in genius, yet somehow different. And the difference between Shakespeare and the Bible can be found only *through reading*.

5 Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768–1834) and the Handwritten Manuscripts

Friedrich Schleiermacher was born of German pietist stock, and at the same time was a formidably learned theologian and philosopher,

the author of some of the most abstract and systematic works of Christian theology ever written. Writing after Kant, he gave much reflection to questions of *epistemology*—that is, thinking about the nature of knowledge and how we think and come to know. At the same time, Schleiermacher remained something of a pietist, a devout man who still said his prayers humbly. These two elements, piety and a fierce intellectualism, remain central to his hermeneutics.

Schleiermacher never published a formal work on hermeneutics—all we have are the “handwritten manuscripts” of his lecture notes for students. Nevertheless, hermeneutical reflection lies at the very heart of all his concerns. The theologian must also be the reflective hermeneut, always thinking about the processes of reading. We can here only scratch the surface of these reflections, but their importance cannot be overestimated for the story to be told in the remainder of this book. Schleiermacher is the first, and perhaps the greatest, of modern hermeneutics.

First, he insisted that reading is an *art* and that the reader of a text must be as much an artist as its author. In a sense, reading is as creative as the act of writing itself. The negotiations that go on between text and reader are born out of two anxieties: the first is the anxiety to be understood (which is why we write), and the second is the anxiety to understand (which is why we read). In order to combat this second anxiety, the reader must be thoroughly disciplined and “artistically sound.” But this does not mean, Schleiermacher insists, that such a reader ever comes to rest in final conclusions that mark the end and conclusion of the reading process. On the contrary, “the hermeneutical task moves constantly,” and each interpretation only prompts further insights and new “conversations,” rather as when we are climbing a mountain and we think we have reached the summit only to realize that there are other, higher summits beyond, hidden by the little rise over which we have momentarily triumphed. The final summit of hermeneutics is forever lost in the clouds.

Schleiermacher insists that hermeneutical principles must be universal, and neither the Bible nor the theologian is granted any special privileges. If they are to have validity, they must be equally

applicable to all texts without exception. Under this universal rule, *all* interpretation is divided into two parts:

- (1) *psychological* interpretation, which is concerned with the interplay between the reader and the text;
- (2) *grammatical* interpretation, which requires knowledge and the careful examination of the linguistic and syntactical structures of the text and its language.

The interpreter moves constantly between these two poles, the one always checking the other. Any judgments we may make or conclusions we may reach must be tested against the almost scientific demands of grammatical interpretation. In other words, our personal response is important, but it must never be *just* personal. We must test it against the linguistic demands of the text itself.

There may be varying degrees of *significance* in a text. In this sense, not all texts are equal. Generally where the language and theme are commonplace, a text will be minimally significant. But where thought and language are extraordinary and complex, Schleiermacher believes we may expect maximum significance.

Schleiermacher is a careful, almost scientific reader, yet he never forgets his pietist background and its reverent attitude toward the Bible. Two important points must finally be noted in this very brief survey of his main hermeneutical principles.

First, in a famous sentence, Schleiermacher insisted that it is the interpreter's task “to understand the text at first as well as and then even better than its author.” At first sight this might seem rather puzzling, but actually it makes perfectly good sense if you stop and think about it. For example, I may read an essay that you have written and say to you, “Do you realize what you have said here?” You, having read the passage again may, perhaps, admit that I am right and you had not quite appreciated what you were saying. Thus it might be the case that, with the benefit of scholarly research, the distance of history, and the ability to stand back from his social and cultural milieu, we may be able to claim to understand Paul's epistles *even better than he understood them himself*.

That is, if we are careful hermeneutists! We may know things of which he was unaware, being too close to them.

Second, Schleiermacher quite explicitly expounds the principle of our old friend the hermeneutic circle, seen in terms of the continual interplay between the particular parts of the text and its complete whole. Reading a part, we begin to build up a picture of the whole, and this overall picture we test by returning again to the claims of the specific and particular elements in the writing.

Summary

We might summarize the main points of this chapter as follows:

1. The broad shift in the eighteenth century away from a hermeneutics of faith and toward a hermeneutics of suspicion based on the exercise of human reason.
2. The development of a modern sense of "history" and its disintegrative impact on the unity of the biblical canon and the authority of Scripture.
3. Robert Lowth's "rediscovery" of Hebrew poetics.
4. Kant's idealist philosophy and the acknowledgment of the creative mind of the reader.
5. Coleridge's exploration in *Confessions of an Inquiring Spirit* of how the Bible "finds him" in the depths of his being, and the rejection of "bibliolatry."
6. Friedrich Schleiermacher, the father of modern hermeneutics, and the development of hermeneutics as a science.

Activities and Questions

1. Find examples of parallelism in the Hebrew Bible and analyze the way in which each one works. Try to ascertain the *differences* between various kinds of parallelism.
2. Semler and Eichhorn thought that they were marching on the high road of progress and civilization away from the primitive, though still necessary, "beginnings" of religion in the

biblical texts, into the clearer light of modern culture and learning.

As you read the Bible today, how far do you think that their attitude is valid? Would it be possible to think like this now? If not, why not?

If we think that *we* are superior to these Enlightenment critics of the eighteenth century, are we not falling into the same trap as they did if we imagine that the twenty-first century is more "enlightened" than they were?

3. Do you think that it is possible to read the Bible "like any other book"? Think very carefully about this. The Bible is a collection of texts written in human languages. Why should it be *intrinsically* different from the writings of, say, Shakespeare or Dante?
4. Do you think that the hermeneutics that have been outlined in this chapter represent progress or regression in the art of reading the Bible? Think carefully about the *criteria* you are using to make a response to this question.
5. Take a familiar passage from the letters of Paul, say 1 Corinthians 13, the great "hymn to love," and read it very carefully in a modern translation. In what sense might we claim to understand this passage even better than its author did? Why do you think that Schleiermacher is so insistent on this principle in his hermeneutics?