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Exegesis and Biblical Theology in Germany

Experiences, Tendencies and Prospective

The German situation that Theological faculties do belong not only to Church but also to State universities has influenced, and will influence, the hermeneutic of both, Old and New Testament exegesis. The Bochum constellation is similar to other big universities like Vienna, Munich, Tübingen, Bonn and Münster. There is not only a Catholic but also a Protestant Faculty with chairs of both Old and New Testament exegesis. The two faculties work closely together, as partners of other faculties, in an international research centre of religious studies, which also deals with topics of biblical history, texts, and reception horizons. This university structure gives us a good chance in ecumenical understanding and interreligious dialogue, but needs also to clear what, on the one hand, Catholic theology means in the field of exegetical studies and what effect, on the other hand, exegesis working in inter-confessional and interreligious research networks has on Catholic theology. The history, and presence, of Biblical science in Germany shows a lot of experience with specific tendencies und new prospective.

There are three dimensions of the Bible to be opened by exegetical research:

- the philological dimension of the Bible as literature, i.e. as text book, as library,
- the historical dimension of the Bible as narrative, i.e. as source book for the history of Israel and Early Judaism, Jesus and the Early Church,
- the theological dimension of the Bible as Holy Scripture, i.e. as canon book for liturgy and Church teaching.

The way in which these three dimensions were, and are and will be, weighted, distinguished, and connected is the criterion of Catholic exegesis, described in *Dei Verbum* 12. This criterion is also an ecumenical talent to be traded because of the renewing of history and covenant theology in Lutheran and Reformed traditions of

the 20th century. If this criterion is a starting point for interreligious research projects as well, it is one of the open discussion topics in the present situation.

The 19th century has seen the German „Leben Jesu Forschung“, self defining as highlight of university research on the central figure of human culture, developed in Protestant liberty and profiled against Catholic antimodernism. In the Old Testament section the liberal exegesis was producing the well known big theories of Pentateuch sources and growing segments of the prophetic books, especially Isaias. The answer of the Catholic magisterium was an immunisation strategy struggling with the ambivalence that ideas of philological and historical affairs have been seen as of direct theological relevance.

The 20th century is the century of the crisis of these hermeneutics. On the one hand, the Jesus research was recognising the subjectivism of the so called “objective” Jesus portraits, imagined by the “Leben Jesu Forschung”, and was working out new stories of the historical Jesus, nearer to the Judaism of that time, but mostly far away from the Christology of the Early Church. In the same period there was not only the intention to differentiate more and more the diachronic analysis of the bible literature but also the beginning of the critique of the Pentateuch models and the stressing of synchronic methods.

On the other hand, the Catholic magisterium made clear that – in the words of Pius XII. Encyclical “Divino afflante spiritu” from 1943 – there are only a few of subjects belonging to the competence of the magisterium, just matters of faith and ethics. This was the time Catholic exegetes from Germany like Alfons Deissler or Rudolf Schnackenburg and Heinz Schürmann, well connected to their American colleagues like Raymond E. Brown or Joseph A. Fitzmyer, were starting to establish historic-critical exegesis in Catholic theology and to establish Catholic exegesis in the scientific community pushing the ecumenical dialogue with Protestant exegetes. Big new projects were configured like the “Evangelisch-Katholischer Kommentar zum Neuen Testament”, the leading series of German speaking New Testament exegesis until today.

Now, at the beginning of the 21th century and after the paper of the Pontifical Bible Commission on the Interpretation of the Bible in the Church (1993) we have new challenges.

1. Biblical exegesis today has fresh interest in religious history, in Germany as well as in the whole English speaking world (not so strong in the Romance countries). It is not a copy of the old “Religionsgeschichtliche Schule” with its aversion against

theology, but a method of exploring the culture in which the Bible has come into being and the Jews were living like Jesus and the first Christians. This new interest in religious culture has been growing in the horizon of constructivism. The result is of ambivalence. A lot of motives and themes in biblical texts selected by the existential theology under the pressure of acceptance in modern times turn back in the fields of research: for instance, the history of the heaven, the forms of evil, the phenomena of angels, the eternity of souls. So the map of biblical theology becomes more colourful. However, the question of truth is mostly excluded. That cannot be the last evidence if the Bible is to read as Holy Scripture. The Catholic Theology with *Nostra Aetate* has a theory of religion which does not depend on a religion pluralism like Hicks but goes back to a theology of Spirit which blows where it wishes (John 3:8) but is always the same Holy Spirit. So Catholic revelation Theology should no be afraid of "Religionsgeschichte"; but the religious history is asked by theology on the intellectual, spiritual and moral claim of the biblical texts.

2. Biblical exegesis has a strong interest in cultural remembrance. New research on the history of Israel, of Jesus and the Early Church integrating archaeology, the history of minds and social structures distinguishes between the history of events and the history of remembrance. As difficult it is to reconstruct the facts in biblical history as important is it to investigate the construction of history in the biblical books; it is these concepts of history self defining as memory which make up the important "Wirkungsgeschichte". The discussion on the Jesus book of the Pope which is very intensive in Germany shows the tensions between the classical historic critical and the canonical approaches. The positions exegetes hold do not depend on the confession but only on the hermeneutic paradigm they prefer because of their sights of the presuppositions, chances, and responsibilities of exegese in the university, in the church and in the society. There is the chance that the analysis of the manner and the content of memory in biblical tradition help to build the bridge.

3. Biblical exegesis has a new interest in canon theology. The American books by Childs and Sanders are well known in German exegesis. But here the canon discussion does not only depend on the inner church interest to establish norms for the teaching of the Church and for the life according to the Gospel but also on the discussion of cultural identity defined by holy texts and the critique of the cultural aggression by monotheism. By searching an answer it helps a lot to see that the biblical canons do not delete the names of authors, the dates and places of books but do arrange them in a sense of "Heilsgeschichte". *Dei Verbum* 12 with its two

parts postulates to bring together the plurality and unity of the Scripture. The canonical approach has to cooperate with historic-critical exegesis; the historic-critical exegesis has to widen its horizon of research for the canonical process, the composition of the canon and the canonical context of single biblical texts and books. The Catholic revelation theology of *Dei Verbum*, in a critical way interpreted by Joseph Ratzinger is the key to solve the problem of unity and diversity of the Bible as well as the relation between Scripture and Tradition.

The German exegetes seem to be the philosophers in the academic club of Bible scholars. They are learning a lot from transatlantic crossovers. It is of good tradition in leading American universities that German is necessary for high level exegesis. So we have the best chance to keep the line of further communication.