

Exegesis and Hermeneutics¹

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Exegesis and hermeneutics are two terms familiar to specialists in the biblical sciences.² In those environs and academic documents they are constantly referred to in order to reference the interpretive process, certainly complex, which the reading of the biblical texts requires. On the other hand, it's quite probable that for those not initiated into this field of knowledge such words may be practically unknown. In fact, they do not belong to the vocabulary which people habitually use in everyday life. And so, if in place of exegesis and hermeneutics, we were to speak about the study of the text and the current meaning of its message, I am sure that the above-mentioned difficulty would be automatically superseded.³

The objective of my mentioning this is not to do a detailed study of these disciplines, which is much beyond our realistic possibilities of time

¹ This text is a reduced version and with some variants of the article published in the *Boletín Dei Verbum*, no. 108 (2018).

² See B. Maggioni, "Exégesis bíblica", in P. Rossano, G. Ravasi, A. Girlanda (eds), *Nuevo Diccionario de Teología Bíblica*, adapted to the Spanish edition by the redaction team EP, Madrid, Paulinas, 1990, 620-632; P Grech, "Hermeneutica" *ibid.*, 733-762 and *ibid.*, "Ermeneutica intrabiblica", in R. Penna, G. Perego, G. Ravasi, eds, *Temî teologici della Bibbia* (Dizionari San Paolo), Cinisella Balsamo (Milano), San Paolo, 2010, 415-423.

³ We recommend the reading of J. Simian-Yafe, "Introducción: Exégesis , fe y teología". In *idem* (ed.), *Metodología del Antiguo Testamento* (Biblioteca de Estudios Bíblicos 106), Salamanca, Sígueme, 2001, 13-26 as well as pages 177-201 concerning hermeneutics and pragmatics.

and space. Rather we want to illustrate in a simple form and through concrete examples in what exegesis and biblical hermeneutics consist, their respective paths, their principle difficulties and, definitely, the close relationship which exists between them. We will attempt to demonstrate something about which we are fully convinced: there is no opposition between exegesis and hermeneutics since they are two moments of a single interpretive process which are not only intimately related, but which reciprocally illuminate each other.

We will begin our overview with some observations of a terminological nature. Then we will focus on the relation between exegesis and hermeneutics in light of the Synod of the Word (2008) and of the Apostolic Post-Synodal Exhortation *Verbum Domini* as the interpretive process and its principle components. We will conclude with an example of hermeneutical or contextualized reading.

1. Terminological Questions

The word “exegesis” is derived from the Greek *exégesis*, narrative, exposition, explanation, commentary, interpretation which in turn comes from the verb *exegéomai*, to explain, to exhibit, to interpret. Considering the etymology of this verb, doing exegesis means interpreting a text, “releasing” its meaning.⁴ This is precisely the fundamental task of exegetes, those persons specialized in the study of biblical texts and their interpretation.

⁴ See B. Maggioni, “Exégesis bíblica”, in *op.cit.*, 620.

Many passages in the Bible, in particular in the Old Testament, appear obscure, strange and incomprehensible.⁵ Their meaning is hidden “behind the language”, some literary forms or some cultural parameters very different from our own. In order to “enter into” the text and capture its meaning, one needs a key, better said, a bunch of keys which exegetes have at their fingertips because they have dedicated to them many hours of study and of sleep. With them an infinite number of doors are opened which lead, by different paths, to the interior of the text, that is to say, to the heart of the message.

The word “hermeneutics” also comes from the Greek, precisely from the verb *ermeneúo* which means to show, to declare, to explain, to interpret and also to translate from a foreign language.⁶ From this also comes “hermeneut”, that is to say, the person who practices hermeneutics, as well as the adjective hermeneutical. This Greek verb corresponds to the Latin *interpretari*, from which come the terms used in our modern languages: to interpret, interpretation, interpreter, interpretive. And so, by hermeneutics we understand the art of interpreting texts and especially of interpreting the sacred texts.⁷

Often the word hermeneutics is synonymous with exegesis. Insofar as sacred scripture is concerned, the two words were interchangeable up

⁵ J.L. Ska, “Cómo leer el Antiguo Testamento?”, in *Metodología del Antiguo Testamento*, 27-42; N. Calduch-Benages, “Le pagine ‘oscure’ della Bibbia, in Carmen Aparicio Valls and Salvador PiéNinot (a dura di) *Commento alla Verbum Domini*. In memoria di P. Donath Hersick, S.J. (Thologia 4) Roma, GBPress, 2011, 85-94.

⁶ See P. Grech, “Hermenéutica”, in *op.cit.*, 733.

⁷ See *Diccionario de la Lengua Española*. Real Academia Española, Madrid, Spain, 2001, vol. II, 1201.

to the 18th century, when “hermeneutics” assumed different nuances of meaning according to various schools and philosophical theories of the moment. Currently the distinction between the two terms is based on their respective objectives. While exegesis intends to discover and understand what the author wanted to communicate to his contemporaries, the hermeneut proposes to understand what the text means and represents for us today. And that means taking into account our current context and using a language which is understandable to the reader and to modern readers.

2. Exegesis and hermeneutics in dialogue

In the Synod on the Word (2008), in which I had the privilege of participating as an expert, Canadian Cardinal Marc Ouellet affirmed in one of his interventions that “due to the presence of some tensions, it's necessary to continue the reflection about fundamental questions which determine the way to read scripture, to interpret it and to utilize it beneficially for the life and the mission of the Church.”⁸ The responses of the synodal Fathers to this request were certainly quite varied. Some accentuated the importance of the magisterium, others accused historical critical exegesis of creating confusion among the faithful and there was even one who was applauded warmly by the group of experts because he recognized the valid contributions of the historical critical method and

⁸ Concerning this question, see N. Calduch-Benages, “Exégesis, teología y hermenéutica bíblica en la ‘Verbum Domini’”, *Phase* 51, núm. 302 (marzo/abril 2011) 109-121.

the hard work of exegetes, who many times are misunderstood and criticized. (We almost got up from our seats to offer him an ovation.)

The same attitude surfaced in the Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Verbum Domini*, when, citing the document of the Pontifical Biblical Commission *The interpretation of the Bible in the Church*, Benedict XVI reminds us that “Catholic exegetes ought never to forget that what they are interpreting is the Word of God. Their work does not end with the distinction of sources, the definition of forms or the explanation of literary procedures. The goal of their work is achieved when they clarify the meaning of the biblical text as the contemporary Word of God” (*VD* 33).

In my judgment, the polarity “exegetical process and believing hermeneutics” is not to be understood as an opposition (in the Synod they used terms like “divorce” and “dichotomy”) but as a reciprocal and dialogic relationship, in continual movement and with oscillations to one side and to the other according to the historical future. The exegesis of Sacred Scripture, rigorously historical and literary, is realized frequently in the context of a horizon of faith which implies an ecclesial understanding of the Bible and its texts, be it in the present or in the historical past. As regards believing hermeneutics, this is realized very often utilizing methodologies which are applied in a systematic form and accompanied by a profound critical reflection. With all this, in the two

spheres it is not rare to encounter opposing contrasts, which have been sharpened in the last years.

If, on the one hand, it's true that an excessively technical exegesis results in being incomprehensible for the majority of Christians (the principle audience of the Bible); on the other hand, it's also true that an excessively simple or superficial exegesis does not only not contribute to nurturing the Christian faith, but it favors a fundamentalist reading of the scripture. In addition, as Jean Louis Ska, the internationally recognized Biblicist, commented to me on a certain occasion, “not all exegetes can be good specialists and good communicators at the same time”. They need to work as a team. Pastors, preachers, teachers, pastoralists and catechists ought to be well formed and consult the work of exegetes. These in turn ought not to forget that they belong to a believing community in which they are called to give witness to the faith. Both, with distinct tasks and at the service of the faith of the people of God.

3. The interpretive process

We are going to attempt to present the interpretive process in a simple form focusing our attention on the relationship between the exegetical and the hermeneutical moments. Let us imagine the situation. We have decided to study, for one reason or another, a determined biblical text. The text attracts us, we want to know it in depth and to capture its meaning. What to do? Where to begin? Before anything else

we must establish contact with that text, draw near unhurriedly, dialogue with it and ask it questions. There are four principle questions that the described situation requires: objectively what does the text say? how does it say it? in what historical context does it say it? and lastly, what message does it communicate to me today? It's obvious that a reader believing what in reality interests him, needs to reach the final question, because his desire is located in the sphere of faith. He wants to do nothing other than to illuminate his life with the Word of God. And so, to arrive at the fourth question without first addressing the other three is an incorrect process in approaching the biblical text. To jump over the first three questions is to reduce the process to a desired goal and consequently to annul the path which leads to it. Deep down, this excessive valuing of the final objective works to the detriment of each of the previous steps. In other words, it means they are not considered important much less necessary in order to understand the text.

If we analyze in detail each one of the questions, we become aware of the complexity of the process, since all four belong to distinct levels and require therefore distinct methodologies. In the first three questions, the text appears as an object situated in front of us, an object that we're going to analyze in all its material and formal aspects. Our relationship with it is of a scientific character, that is to say, the text is our object of study, it is outside of ourselves and does not interact with our life. It's worth noting that the first three questions are quite distinct among

themselves. The first is situated at the level of the literal sense of the text, which requires textual criticism; the second refers to the form in which the text expresses its content, for which a literary analysis is required and the third focuses on the time of the narrated deeds, for which a historical critical analysis is required.⁹ All of these steps that are indicated up to this point focus on the understanding of the text. One tries to understand what the text says, in what way it says it and what is its historical context, in order to be able to explain it with our words.

The final question, on the other hand, is distinguished from the former ones because it eliminates the distance between the reader and the text. It ceases to be an object of analysis in order to become part of the reader. The text enters the reader and the reader enters the text, in such a way that the interpretive process moves from a comprehension of the text to a realization of the same. A direct line between the text and the reader is established, both become dialogic subjects and the result is a dynamic, vital and enriching communication which in reality is present throughout the process, from the beginning until the end. The text (ancient) acquires a force which influences the life of the reader (modern). And so we pass from exegesis to hermeneutics. This is expressed in the document *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church*:

⁹ See the document of the Pontifical Biblical Commission, *La Interpretación de la Biblia en la Iglesia*, in the section on the historical-critical method (I.A.) and the following articles of Jean Louis Ska, "Les vertus de la méthode historico-critique", *Nouvelle Revue Théologique* 131 (2009) 705-727 and "Note sul metodo storico-critico in esegesi" *Civiltà Cattolica* 161 (2010) 381-389.

One tries to cross the distance between the time of the authors and the first audience of the biblical texts, and our contemporary era, in order to be able to correctly make current the message of the texts and to nurture the life of faith of Christians. All exegesis of texts ought to be completed by a “hermeneutic” in the recent sense of the term (II.A 2).

According to Cardinal Prosper Grech, emeritus professor of Hermeneutics at the Pontifical Biblical Institute in Rome, three hermeneutical factors come together in this last step in the process: first, the change of historical circumstances and the historical salvific action of God which provokes a rereading of the text; second, the maturation of the community which reads the text and which assumes in a certain way its paternity; third, the illumination of the Spirit who causes a deeper understanding of the text through the diverse charisms which he continually showers on his Church.¹⁰ In this way, history, maturation and charism form a hermeneutical triangle which absorbs the biblical text and allows it to reincarnate itself in the language of the time and the place where it is read anew.¹¹ The interpretive process just described is performed one or the other time, continually, that is to say every time we read the text. Therefore, Sacred Scripture is open to multiple updatings,

¹⁰ See *La Interpretación de la Biblia en la Iglesia*: “Con el crecimiento de la vida en el Espíritu, aumenta en el lector la comprensión de las realidades de las cuales habla el texto bíblico” (II.A.2).

¹¹ See P. Grech, “Hereménutica”, *op.cit.*, 759-760.

because it continues to speak to men and women of every time and place. According to *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church*:

Biblical knowledge ought not to stay focused on language, but ought to reach the reality about which the text speaks. The religious language of the Bible is a symbolic language which teaches how to think, a language which does not end in discovering the riches of meaning, a language which achieves reaching a transcendent reality and which, at the same time awakens the human person to the deep dimension of his being (II.A.1).

4. From exegesis to hermeneutics

Not being able to stop, for obvious reasons of time, at each one of the stages of the interpretive process, we are going to concentrate on the last one. In this one, as I have pointed out before, one moves from an understanding of the text to an updating of the same, or what is the same thing, from exegesis to hermeneutics. After having analyzed and studied a certain biblical passage on the textual, literary and historical levels, we now ask ourselves for the meaning that these words have for us, contemporary readers who live in a situation quite distinct from that described in the scripture. In what way does the biblical text touch our personal or communal history? Are we enlightened or transformed by its

Word? In order to illustrate the move from text to life, the *lectio divina*, also called the praying or believing reading, can help us greatly.¹²

Therefore, we conclude our presentation with a brief reading of Jer. 26:1-6, a text where the attitude of listening—and in contrast that of rejecting—the Word of God constitutes the central axis around which the whole narrative turns. It is enough to note that in only six verses the verb “to listen” is repeated four times.

a) Prophet against prophet (Jer. 26-29)

The second part of the book of Jeremiah begins with chapters 26-29, usually considered as the biography of a persecuted prophet. In fact, these chapters present some episodes of the persecution of Jeremiah by the false prophets (the prophets of *shalom*), that is to say, those colleague-adversaries who were announcing a message completely different from his. If Jeremiah was exhorting the people to submit to the yoke of Babylon, they in turn promised them immediate victory and prosperity if they continued the struggle against Babylon. In summary, Jeremiah 26-29 reflects quite well the conflict among prophets (“prophet against prophet”) a characteristic theme of the book of Jeremiah, if not exclusive to it.

b) The discourse in the temple (Jer. 26:1-24)

¹² N. Calduch-Benages, *Saboreando la Palabra. Sobre la lectura orante o creyente (lectio divina)* (El mundo de la Biblia. “Horizontes” 11), Estella, Verbo Divino 2012.

Jer. 26 narrates the consequences of the discourse which Jeremiah pronounced in the temple in Jerusalem by order of God. After a brief synthesis of the discourse (26:1-6),¹³ the narrator tells us how the prophets and priests accused the prophet of blasphemy against the Temple and of announcing the destruction of Jerusalem (26:7-11). The self-defense of Jeremiah (26:12-15) is essentially reduced to a repetition of the phrase “the Lord has commanded me”. This response of Jeremiah, although being juridically weak, manages to convince the leaders and the people such that everyone protests before the priests and the prophets in his favor: the fact of announcing a message from God does not make him merit death. Some elders of the people propose the absolution of Jeremiah (26:16-19) with an argument based on a historical precedent, that is, an analogous message pronounced by the prophet Micah in the time of the King Hezekiah (Mi. 3:1-2). The accusers, the priests and the prophets retire from the scene because, evidently, they cannot respond to these arguments. On this occasion Jeremiah saves himself, but in order to underline the gravity of the danger, the narrator recounts the history of another prophet, Uriah, who at that time prophesied “with words similar to those of Jeremiah” and, despite his intent to flee, ended up being executed (26:20-4).

a) *A brief synthesis of the discourse (Jer. 26:1-6)*

¹³ The complete discourse is found in Jer. 7:1-8:3.

In the first year of King Joachim (609-608), the Lord sends Jeremiah to the temple in Jerusalem to denounce the people and at the same time to exhort them to conversion, and in this way, to avoid the imminent destruction of the temple and of the city (vv. 1-3). The discourse takes place in the temple, or perhaps in the atrium, probably on the occasion of some feast at which many people gathered from other parts of Judah. It seems to treat of a very important discourse, since the Lord tells Jeremiah not to omit even a single word. In effect, the theme undertaken is a burning one for everyone: the priests, the false prophets and the people and, consequently, is a very dangerous one for Jeremiah. Here is the text:

¹At the beginning of the reign of Joachim, son of Josiah, king of Judah, Jeremiah received this word from the Lord. ²The Lord says this: “Stand in the atrium of the temple and, when the citizens of Judah enter it in order to worship, repeat to them all these words which I command you to say to them; do not leave out even one.

³If they *hear* and are converted each one from his evil conduct, so I will repent of the evil which I have been planning to do to them because of their evil actions”.

⁴You will say to them: “Thus says the Lord: ‘If you do not *listen to me* and do not walk according to the law which I have given you, ⁵if you do not *hear* the words of my servants the prophets, whom I have sent without ceasing, but to whom you have not *listened*, ⁶I

will treat this temple as that of Shiloh, and I will make of this city a formula of benediction for all the peoples of the earth””.

From the beginning of their history the chosen People have always been free to follow the Lord or to choose another path. Israel was never obligated to follow the ways of the Lord and to observe his precepts. On the contrary, they always had the freedom to decide their own destiny. For this reason, in our text, the Lord does not discount a favorable reaction of the people to the words of Jeremiah. “And so, see if they listen” (v.3), the Lord warns the prophet. In any case, this warning is very positive. In fact, the underlying text is, on one hand, the freedom of the human being and, on the other, the openness of God, whose action is conditioned by the free and conscious response of the person. And so, if the people hear the words of the prophet and cease to do evil, the Lord will hold back his punishment.

In vv.4-6 the Lord communicates to Jeremiah what he ought to say to the people. In reality, these verses are a short synthesis of the discourse of chapter 7, which we referred to above. In particular the fate of Shiloh is mentioned, the ancient seat of the Ark of the Covenant and of worship during the time of the judges, now totally in ruins. And so, it's of particular interest to us the way the Lord directs himself to the people and, more concretely, the insistence on listening to or rejecting his words. “To listen” is parallel with “to walk according to the law”, an expression which signifies keeping the commandments which the Lord

gave to Moses on Mount Sinai. “To listen” to the Lord is not then something abstract or without connection to life. On the contrary, it is translated concretely into the observance of the law. The law indicates an attitude, a line of behavior, a path in line with the Covenant which leads to life and to happiness (cf. Dt. 30:15-16; Ps. 119:32). And this is precisely the path which Israel has not wanted to choose. The people have listened neither to the Lord nor to the prophets who are messengers of his word. Twice the Lord repeats that the people have not wanted to listen to the message of those whom he has sent. Therefore, Jeremiah is not the first nor the last prophet destined to suffer the hostility of the people. This suffering is inherent in the mission of the prophet, often not understood, threatened and persecuted because of his uncomfortable words.

d) From the text to life

“To listen to the word of God.” The prophets of the Bible have been charismatic persons who have received from the Lord the gift of prophecy. Thanks to the Christian vocation we too are participants in this gift. Each one is responsible not only for his own prophetic mission but also for the prophetic mission of the family, group, parish or community to which he belongs. Christians have not been called to proclaim our own ideas nor to spread our personal vision of the world and of life (cf. the false prophets in the time of Jeremiah), but to announce the word of God in the midst of the people each in his own

way, with his own charisms and according to his circumstances. And so, whatever be the modality of the announcement, in order to be able to transmit the Word of God to others, first one must listen to it, study it and meditate on it in one's heart, in an atmosphere of prayer. To try to listen to what the Lord wishes from each one in order to be able to respond with generosity to his invitation. We need to always be disposed to listen to the Word. In other words, the Word which God communicates to us personally would have to be the principle point of reference in our lives.

“To listen to the prophets.” God speaks to us in diverse ways, in diverse circumstances, and through diverse instruments and messengers. In effect, one needs to be very attentive in order to capture all the messages which come to us from the world, history, nature, daily life, others, our own including those from whom we feel distant. God speaks to us through them. They are his prophets. Sometimes the messages are loud because they are proclaimed with a strong voice and are heard everywhere. Sometimes, on the other hand, they're almost imperceptible and are hidden beneath false appearances of perfect observance and piety. Sometimes the messages are a shout of pain, an earth which is divided, a request in need, a tree which falls, a request for help, an unexpected sickness, a crisis which strangles us, a responsibility that is unforeseen, a tear which flows quickly, a furtive glance, a destroyed

heart, the monotony of daily life... No message and no messenger ought to leave us indifferent, because nothing and no one is indifferent to God.

“To listen to the heart.” God has formed the heart of the human being, he knows it, he scrutinizes it and is able to penetrate it in its unreachable depth for the same human being. And often it puts one to the test in order to educate one, orient one, guide one toward conversion. The heart then merits all our attention because in it the quality of our relationships with God and with others is forged. Said in a different way, one must always listen to the heart. In the words of Enzo Bianchi: “The reference to the heart makes evident how necessary is the unity of the human being in his relationship with the Lord, his sincerity in adoration, the authenticity of his adhesion and the totality of his dedication and love.”¹⁴

Are we Christian men and women capable of listening? Do we know how to listen to the word of God? And that of the prophets? Are we attentive to their messages? Are we accustomed to listen to what our heart says?

5. By way of conclusion

Having arrived at the end of our journey we wish to express a desire which would be summarized in this way: we desire that our reflection animate the readers to come ever closer to the Bible and to

¹⁴ E. Bianchi, “Cuore”, in *Temi di Teologia Biblica*, *op.cit.* 291 (our translation).

respond to the four questions which we formulated at the beginning; that it stimulate them to go through all and each one of the stages of the interpretive process; that it push them to seek the help of experts, to improve and update their biblical formation; that it cause in them an authentic thirst for the Word and which definitively leaves them transformed by its liberating message.

Convinced that exegesis and hermeneutics, science and faith, study and prayer are not contradictory but are mutually enriching, contributing to the unity of the interpretive process, we end citing once more the document *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church* which last year (2018) celebrated its 25th anniversary

Although the interpretation of the Bible may be the particular task of exegetes, it does not belong to them nevertheless as a monopoly, because it brings into the Church aspects which go beyond scientific analysis of the text. The Church in effect does not consider the Bible simply as a bringing together of historic documents concerning its origins. She takes it up as the Word of God which is directed to her and to the entire world, in the present time.

This conviction of faith has as a consequence the practice of making contemporary and of enculturating the biblical message, just as the diverse means of utilization of the inspired texts, in the

liturgy, in “Lectio Divina”, pastoral ministry, and the ecumenical movement (Introduction to point IV).