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ESCHATOLOGY AND HERMENEUTICS:
REFLECTIONS ON METHOD IN THE INTERPRETATION
OF THE NEW TESTAMENT*

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A FEATURE of NT scholarship at the moment is that, as is the case with all academic disciplines, we are witnessing a veritable explosion of information. We have had extremely important discoveries, e.g., the Qumran texts and the Nag Hammadi codices, and we have had equally important methodological developments, e.g., the rise of redaction criticism. At the same time our fundamental concern, hermeneutics, has become a focal point of concern for scholars from disciplines other than those of theological or biblical scholarship. Here I need only mention in German, H. G. Gadamer, Wahrheit und Methode (1960); in French, Paul Ricoeur, Le conflit des interprétations (1969); in Italian, E. Betti, Teoria generale della interpretazione (1955); and in English, E. J. Hirsch, Validity in Interpretation (1967) to show that we are in the midst of a very lively multi-lingual and inter-disciplinary debate. In view of these developments I want to take this opportunity to address myself in general terms to the question of method in the interpretation of the NT. At the same time, I am almost constitutionally incapable of discussing anything “in general terms.” I much prefer to take a concrete example and then to reflect more generally in light of it. The natural example for me to take in this instance is eschatology, for this has been a constant concern of mine throughout the years. Hence the subject of this address, “Eschatology and Hermeneutics: Reflections on Method in the Interpretation of the New Testament.” But eschatology is itself a very broad subject, so I shall focus attention quite concretely upon one particular form of it, viz., “kingdom of God” in the proclamation of Jesus.

The advantage of focusing attention concretely on this form of eschatology for me is, of course, that it is a subject with which I can claim a degree of familiarity. I began my academic career with a doctoral dissertation directed towards it,¹ and when I was invited to present a paper to a seminar we held last year in

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Los Angeles I returned to it. But there is another point, more important than my familiarity with the subject, and that is that in a consideration of the kingdom of God in the proclamation of Jesus the methodological issues come very sharply into focus. Today these issues are my primary concern.

In any discussion of the kingdom of God in the teaching of Jesus the first methodological issue to come into focus is the importance of historical criticism. By "historical criticism" I mean that aspect of our scholarly endeavor by means of which we seek to determine what "kingdom of God" was intended to mean in the proclamation of Jesus, what the teaching concerning this subject was intended to say. To put the matter in the language of a more general discussion of hermeneutics, "historical criticism" describes the attempt to understand the meaning of a text in its specific and original historical context, the endeavor to recover, so far as is possible, the meaning intended by the author and understood by the first readers or hearers.

The modern historical critical discussion of the kingdom of God in the proclamation of Jesus may be said to have begun in 1892 with the publication of Johannes Weiss' Die Predigt Jesus vom Reiche Gottes. Weiss claimed that in the proclamation of Jesus the kingdom of God was an overpowering divine storm which erupted into history to destroy and to renew, a storm which man can neither bring about nor prevent. Moreover Weiss further claimed that Jesus had proclaimed the outbreaking of this divine storm as imminent, but nonetheless as future. In other words he interpreted kingdom of God as an apocalyptic concept in the teaching of Jesus and then interpreted that teaching as claiming that the coming of the apocalyptic kingdom was an event to be anticipated in the immediate future. We are all aware of Albert Schweitzer's popularization of this understanding and of the violent debate it occasioned, a debate that is as yet unresolved.

From the standpoint of method the historical critical work begun by Weiss and continuing to this day on kingdom of God in the teaching of Jesus is simply characteristic of historical criticism altogether. One seeks to establish the cultural historical milieu of the message of Jesus and to come to understand that milieu using all the resources of historical scholarship, including finally an act of historical imagination. One seeks to establish the actual text of the teaching of Jesus from the sources available to us and then to understand that teaching in terms of its historical context. Put that way, it sounds simple; and indeed from the standpoint of methodological theory it is simple, although, as we are all only too well aware, in practice it turns out to be inordinately complex, as indeed does all historical critical work on texts from another time and another culture. But the


theoretical principles involved in historical criticism are thoroughly established and well understood, and I need spend no time discussing them. Instead I may turn immediately to what is neither thoroughly established nor well understood, and that is the relationship between historical criticism and hermeneutics.

Now I need to define my terms again and say what I mean by "hermeneutics." Here I am content to follow Wilhelm Dilthey and Rudolf Bultmann and to define hermeneutics as "die Kunstlehre des Verstehens schriftlich fixierter Lebensäußerungen" (the art of understanding expressions of life fixed in writing).4 There is, however, one point that I must emphasize since it is really the crucial point and that is what is meant by "understanding" when one speaks of an "expression of life" being "understood." Those of us who stand in the hermeneutical tradition epitomized by such names as Schleiermacher, Dilthey, and Bultmann would insist that "understanding" must be interpreted broadly and deliberately to include a conscious concern for relevance to and impact upon the interpreter and the interpreter's life. For those of us for whom texts are, in Dilthey's phrase, "schriftlich fixierte Lebensäußerungen," the model of the relationship between the interpreter and the text being interpreted is that of meaningful dialogue.

The relationship between historical criticism and hermeneutics is, then, in my view, that of a first and a second stage of the total process of coming to understand a text and of entering into meaningful dialogue with it. In the case of texts from the past or from a different culture the task of historical criticism can be both difficult and quite inordinately complex, but in the case of any text it is essential. I would never accept a view of hermeneutics which did not see historical criticism as the essential first step in coming to understand any text, whether it be from the ancient past or today's newspaper. At the same time historical criticism is only the beginning of the process of coming to understand a text, not its end. Historical criticism is essential to hermeneutics but it is not in and of itself hermeneutics. Essential to the process of understanding is the further step of meaningful dialogue with the text in terms of relevance and impact. This I hold to be true not only in the case of religious texts but of any texts that are "expressions of life fixed in writing"; it is true of the rock musical, Hair, every bit as much as of Godspell. It is, I hope, clear that I am using the word "text" only as one form of the "expression of life." What I have said of written texts would apply equally to oral texts and, mutatis mutandis, to any form of human artistic expression.

To return to Johannes Weiss and his interpretation of "Jesus' proclamation of the Kingdom of God," one most interesting aspect of his work was that he became convinced of the validity of his historical critical understanding of Jesus' proclamation, but that he then could see little relevance of this understanding for him or the theology of his day. The apocalyptic eschatology of Jesus could be understood historically, but it had little hermeneutical significance for a thes.

ologian of the late nineteenth century. The editors and translators of Weiss' book, R. H. Hiers and D. L. Holland, make this point very perceptively in their introduction. Weiss, they say, "articulated an issue which went beyond the historical question of Jesus' eschatology, namely, the question of the relation of the results of historical scholarship and contemporary theology . . . he raises the question of hermeneutics." Having raised this question, Weiss was almost entirely negative in his response to it. He wanted to keep his contemporaries honest and to make them refrain from imputing their conception of the kingdom of God to Jesus; but in the end it was the late nineteenth century understanding of the kingdom of God that Weiss himself was prepared to accept and not that of Jesus. He could and did argue that "Jesus did not use the term 'Kingdom of God' to refer to the 'supreme ethical ideal,'" but then he could go on and define "kingdom of God" for a contemporary theological understanding as "the Rule of God [which] is the highest Good and the supreme ethical ideal," freely admitting that "this conception of ours of the βασιλεία τοῦ θεοῦ parts company with Jesus' at the most decisive point."

It is very important in the context of a discussion of hermeneutics to recognize why Weiss could arrive at the historical understanding of kingdom of God in the proclamation of Jesus as essentially an apocalyptic concept concerned with an overwhelming divine storm which would erupt into history to destroy and renew, but nonetheless could himself continue to think in terms of the rule of God which is the highest good and the supreme ethical ideal. It is not enough to say simply that he reached the conclusion that his historical understanding of kingdom of God in the teaching of Jesus had little relevance for his own personal theology or his own religious life. The question is, Why did he reach this conclusion? That question is no sooner asked than answered for the answer is quite clearly "because of his presuppositions," or, if you like, "because of the element of cultural conditioning in any act of interpretation." Weiss, himself both a product of and vital part of the late nineteenth century German liberal theological movement, could appreciate historically an apocalyptic eschatology in the message of Jesus, but existentially he was too committed to "the highest Good" and "the supreme ethical ideal" as the essence of the religious life to find in that historical understanding any direct challenge to his own theology and his personal religious life.

If the modern historical critical discussion of kingdom of God in the teaching of Jesus may be said to have begun with Johannes Weiss, then it may certainly be further said that the single most important contributor to that discussion is Weiss' pupil, Rudolf Bultmann. Bultmann is such a towering figure in biblical and theological studies, and his work has been so widely and thoroughly discussed, that I need spend no time on this occasion in a general description of his work but may turn immediately to his discussion of kingdom of God in the proclamation of Jesus.

* Jesus' Proclamation, 16.
* Ibid., 134-35.
Bultmann begins by accepting his teacher Weiss' contention that Jesus' conception of kingdom of God was essentially that of ancient Jewish apocalyptic. In his *Primitive Christianity in Its Contemporary Setting* he writes of "the eschatological preaching of Jesus" and describes it as "controlled by an imminent expectation of the Reign of God," affirming that in this Jesus "stands in line with Jewish eschatology in general." At the same time he has reservations about this. "If Jesus takes over the apocalyptic view of the future, he does so with considerable reductions. The unique feature of his teaching is the assurance with which he proclaims that *NOW* the time has come. The Reign of God is breaking in. The time of the End is at hand." Historically speaking, Jesus was mistaken. "Of course," says Bultmann, "Jesus was mistaken in thinking that the world was destined soon to come to an end." But although he was mistaken in the form of his expectation—that God was about to bring the world to an end—there is still validity in Jesus' proclamation because that proclamation expresses Jesus' *understanding of life*, and the understanding of human life implied by the proclamation of Jesus concerning the kingdom of God "clearly does not stand or fall with his expectation of the end of the world." Jesus' expectation of the end of the world, with its concomitant expectation of the judgment of the world is important as an indication of the fact that Jesus sees the world "exclusively *sub specie Dei*." 

In his famous essay, *Das Problem der Hermeneutik*, Bultmann specifically accepted Dilthey's definition of hermeneutics as "die Kunstlehre des Verstehens schriftlich fixierter Lebensäußerungen"; and in his discussion of the eschatology of Jesus we can see the importance of his acceptance of Dilthey's understanding of a text as an "expression of life." For Bultmann Jesus' proclamation of the kingdom of God is an expression of Jesus' "understanding of life," of his "understanding of existence," of his "self-understanding." We could go so far as to say that it is an expression of Jesus' "vision of reality" and still be formulating Bultmann's conception. For Bultmann Jesus' proclamation is a text to be interpreted, and, as a text, it is a "Lebensäußerung."

Bultmann's understanding of the nature of Jesus' proclamation of the kingdom as a text enables him to look beyond the paraphernalia of the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven to bring the world to an end, and so on, to the meaning of this apocalyptic mythology as an "expression of life." As an expression of life the proclamation of Jesus means that Jesus sees the world as *sub specie Dei*; it means that Jesus sees man as confronted by the immediacy of God and being challenged to decision. It is because he sees the proclamation of Jesus in this way that Bultmann can describe that proclamation as he does in his book *Jesus:*

The Reign of God is a power which wholly determines the present although in itself it is entirely future. It determines the present in that it forces man to de-

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cision. . . . Because Jesus so sees man as standing in the crisis of decision before the activity of God, it is understandable that in him the Jewish expectation becomes the absolute certainty that now the hour of the breaking-in of the Reign of God has come. If man stands in the crisis of decision then . . . it is understandable that for Jesus the whole contemporary mythology should be pressed into the service of this conception of human existence. . . . 10

When I first translated and commented on this passage in my Kingdom of God in the Teaching of Jesus, I simply did not understand it. All I could think to say was: "It is difficult to see how far Bultmann regards Jesus as the author of this existentialist understanding of eschatology."11 I can only thank those who must have known better for their forbearance in not publicly taking me to task for my lack of understanding of the Bultmannian hermeneutic, and now I hasten to correct myself. Bultmann can and does regard Jesus as the author of this understanding of eschatology because he sees it as a valid interpretation of the "understanding of life" which is being expressed in the apocalyptic mythology which Jesus in fact used.

Bultmann's interpretation of the eschatology of Jesus is very important indeed, from the standpoint of method. What he has done, in effect, is to offer a solution to the problem of the relationship between historical criticism and hermeneutics. By means of historical criticism he establishes that Jesus made use of ancient Jewish apocalyptic mythology in his proclamation, with the significant difference that there was an element of immediacy in that proclamation that was lacking in other ancient Jewish apocalyptic. At that point Bultmann's understanding of hermeneutics takes over. He views the oral text of this apocalyptic proclamation as an expression of Jesus' understanding of life. Now two things become important. In the first place, it no longer matters whether Jesus was mistaken or not about the coming end of the world. What is important is not the accuracy of Jesus' expectation concerning the future of the world but the validity of his understanding of life in the world. Then, secondly, Bultmann has found a way of bridging the gap between the ancient Jewish apocalyptic preacher and the modern interpreter: both are concerned to come to an understanding of life in the world and hence meaningful dialogue can take place between them.

Bultmann's achievement in interpreting the eschatology of Jesus is breathtaking; neither the interpretation of the kingdom of God in the proclamation of Jesus nor the understanding of hermeneutics among NT scholars was ever to be the same again. He himself was, of course, to go on to elaborate his hermeneutical method further in his demythologizing program. But I need not go into that program and the controversy it aroused because my concern is specifically with the discussion of the eschatology of Jesus as a means of approaching the problem of hermeneutics. I will, therefore, stay with Bultmann's interpretation of the eschatology of Jesus, and since I have already acknowledged my admir-

10 Quoted from the translation given in N. Perrin, Kingdom, 116.
11 Ibid.
ation for it as a breath-taking achievement I may now go on to raise some questions with regard to it.

The first such question to be raised is in connection with Bultmann's historical critical understanding of the proclamation of Jesus: Is it valid or has subsequent research invalidated it in any serious manner? The answer to this question has to be that by and large it is still valid. Jesus did proclaim a message couched in the imagery of ancient Jewish apocalyptic and yet, at the same time, there are some significant differences between Jesus and other ancient Jewish apocalypticists. I myself would want to argue the point that Jesus did not in fact use the particular imagery associated with the Son of Man of Daniel 7:13, but that is a comparatively minor difference. Jesus certainly did use the imagery associated with "kingdom of God," and he did use it with an intensity and a sense of immediacy which distinguishes his message from that of other apocalyptic preachers of his generation in ancient Israel. Bultmann established that point and subsequent intensive research has not shaken it, and that is really the point at issue. I myself want to expand beyond Bultmann somewhat in connection with the difference between Jesus and the other apocalyptic preachers of his generation in ancient Israel but only in the sense of building upon the foundations Bultmann has laid. But before I do that I must introduce a third category into this discussion. Having said something about historical criticism and hermeneutics, I now wish to turn to a third category, literary criticism.

Many NT scholars, and indeed many text books in NT studies, tend to think of literary criticism as concerned solely with such questions as authorship, date, and sources of the NT documents. This is, indeed, a legitimate use of the term, but literary criticism does in fact go beyond this and discusses also issues as those of the function of specific literary forms and of distinct kinds of language. Let me give some examples of what I mean. In Paul's letter to the Philippians we would all recognize that in ch. 2, vss. 5-11 the apostle is quoting a christological hymn. That is a form critical and literary critical question. But under the rubric of literary criticism we must also ask: What difference does it make that Paul here quotes a hymn rather than indulging in a flight of rhetoric — which, incidentally, he was quite capable of doing? What does a hymn do in terms of evoking a response from the reader that a flight of rhetoric from a master preacher would not do? To take another example, as my published work indicates, I have been particularly impressed by Ernst Käsemann's work on what he calls "Sätze heiligen Rechtes" in the NT.\(^1\) True, I would much prefer to call them "eschatological judgment pronouncements," because that is what they are; but there is no doubt but that Käsemann has identified both a literary form — a pronouncement of eschatological judgment upon dissident members of early Christian congregations — and its *Sitz im Leben* — the early Christian Eucharist. Accepting this, I want to go on to ask the question: Why then do we find this form in places where a eucharistic context is out of the question, e.g., in Mark 8:38 or

Matt 6:14-15? It must be that the author of these texts in their present contexts expected them to have a particular force, and to function in a particular way, a force or function that another literary form would not have or do in that context. An eschatological judgment pronouncement was expected to evoke a particular kind of response that another literary form would not evoke and hence it was used in preference to another literary form, however unconsciously on the part of the author. Incidentally, may I venture the aside that I say "however unconsciously on the part of the author" only to avoid cluttering up the discussion of eschatology and hermeneutics by introducing the question of how far and in what ways the NT writers were in fact literary authors. In our present context any such discussion is irrelevant. What is relevant is the fact that an eschatological judgment pronouncement functioned in a way that another literary form would not have functioned: it evoked a response on the part of the reader or hearer that another form would not have evoked.

I want, therefore, to define literary criticism so as to include consideration of the ways in which literary forms and types of language function, and a consideration of the nature of response they evoke from the reader or hearer. It can be seen that for me there is a close relationship between literary criticism and hermeneutics because if a consideration of literary form and type of language is literary criticism, then a consideration of their function, especially of the nature of the response they evoke, is hermeneutics. Now let us return to the discussion of kingdom of God in the proclamation of Jesus in light of this understanding of literary criticism and its relationship to hermeneutics.

At our meeting last year in Los Angeles I argued that a hitherto unduly neglected factor in the discussion of the eschatology of Jesus is the literary critical fact that "kingdom of God" is a symbol.13 True, it is an ancient Jewish apocalyptic symbol, but it is nonetheless a symbol. I want to return to that point now because it seems to me that to consider the nature and function of kingdom of God as a symbol is one way of making progress beyond Bultmann in the discussion of the eschatology of Jesus. Let me, therefore, now return in a rather different context to some of the things I discussed last year.

My understanding of the nature and function of symbol is heavily influenced by Philip Wheelwright, Metaphor and Reality (1962) and Paul Ricoeur, The Symbolism of Evil (1969). I begin, therefore, with Wheelwright's definition of a symbol: "A symbol, in general, is a relatively stable and repeatable element of perceptual experience, standing for some larger meaning or set of meanings which cannot be given, or not fully given, in perceptual experience itself."14 A symbol therefore represents something else, and Wheelwright makes a most important distinction within symbols in terms of their relationship to that which they represent. A symbol can have a one-to-one relationship with that which it represents, such as the mathematical symbol π, in which case it is, in Wheelwright's terms, a "steno-symbol," or it can have a set of meanings that can neither

13 See the reference in note 2 above.
14 Metaphor and Reality (Bloomington: Indiana University, 1962) 92.
be exhausted nor adequately expressed by any one referent, in which case it is a “tensive symbol.”

Paul Ricoeur makes a similar distinction. For Ricoeur a symbol is a sign, something which points beyond itself to something else. Not all signs are symbols, however, for sometimes a sign is transparent of meaning and is exhausted by its “first or literal intentionality.” But in the case of a symbol the meaning is opaque and we have to erect a second intentionality upon the first, an intentionality which proceeds by analogy to ever deeper meanings. Concerned with the symbolism of evil, Ricoeur discusses “defilement.” This is a sign in that it has a first, literal intentionality; it points beyond itself to “stain” or “unclean.” But “defilement” is also a symbol because we can, by analogy, go further to a “certain situation of man in the sacred which is precisely that of being defiled, impure.”

What for Wheelwright is a distinction between a “steno-symbol” and a “tensive symbol” is for Ricoeur a distinction between a “sign” and a “symbol.”

These distinctions are modern distinctions, but they are distinctions in the way men use language and as such they are applicable to the use of language by any man at any time. It is my claim now that these distinctions are applicable to the proclamation by Jesus of the apocalyptic symbol “kingdom of God,” and that this literary critical distinction is important at the level of both historical criticism and hermeneutics.

Let me begin this aspect of my discussion by pointing out that in ancient Jewish apocalyptic in general — and for that matter in early Christian apocalyptic in general — the symbols used are, in Wheelwright’s terms, “steno-symbols”; in Ricoeur’s, “signs” rather than “symbols.” Typically, the apocalyptic seer told the story of the history of his people in symbols where each symbol bore a one-to-one relationship with that which it depicted. This thing was Antiochus IV Epiphanes, that thing was Judas Maccabee, the other thing was the coming of the Romans, and so on. But if this was the case, and it certainly was, then when the seer left the known facts of the past and present to express his expectation of the future his symbols remained “steno-symbols,” and his expectation concerned singular concrete historical events. To take an actual example, if in chs. 11 and 12 of the Book of Daniel the “abomination that makes desolate” is a historical artifact — and it is — and if those who “make many understand” and the “little help” are historically identifiable individuals — and they are — then the “Michael” of Dan 12:1 is also someone who will be historically identifiable, and the general resurrection of Dan 12:2 is an event of the same historical order as the setting up of the altar to Zeus in the Jerusalem temple. The series of events described in Daniel 11 and 12 are events within history; insofar as they are described in symbols, those symbols are “steno-symbols” (Wheelwright), or they are “signs” rather than “symbols” (Ricoeur).

We have now to ask a literary critical question about the proclamation by Jesus of the kingdom of God, and it is this. In the proclamation of Jesus is the apocalyptic symbol, “kingdom of God,” in Wheelwright’s terms a “steno-symbol”

or a "tensive symbol," or to use Ricoeur's distinction, is it a true symbol rather than a sign? Now that question can be answered because on historical critical grounds it can be established that Jesus refused to give a sign. The four synoptic gospel passages, Matt 12:39 and 16:4; Luke 11:29; and Mark 8:11-13, have been examined by my pupil Richard A. Edwards, who has satisfactorily solved the problem of their origins and of the relationship between them, incidentally proving me wrong in the process. He shows that the complex of tradition begins with an account of a refusal by Jesus to give a sign, which account itself is primitive in language and form, and which underlies both Mark and Q. Edwards is himself primarily concerned with the redaction of this primitive pericope in the Q community and by the synoptic evangelists. I, however, am concerned with the authenticity of the primitive pericope in which Jesus refuses to give a sign, a pericope now best represented by the Marcan version in Mark 8:11-13. I would claim that this pericope is authentic, i.e., that it does represent a characteristic of the ministry of the historical Jesus, on the grounds (1) that it satisfies the criterion of dissimilarity — Jewish and Christian apocalyptic regularly gives signs — and (2) that it has multiple attestation in the tradition — it underlies both Mark and Q. Moreover, as I argued in my paper at Los Angeles last year, the particular use of apocalyptic symbolism represented by the refusal to give a sign coheres with what is being expressed in Jesus' distinctive use both of parables and of proverbial sayings.

I, therefore, take it as an established result of historical critical Leben-Jesu-Forschung that Jesus characteristically refused to give a sign, and in the light of this conclusion I return to the question whether, in the proclamation of Jesus, kingdom of God is a "steno" or a "tensive" symbol, whether it is a true "symbol" or only a "sign."

This question is no longer asked than answered because the whole paraphernalia of apocalyptic sign-giving is dependent upon a one-to-one correspondence between the sign/symbol and that which it represents, or, to use Ricoeur's language, that its meaning is exhausted in its first, literal intentionality. The essence of apocalyptic sign-giving is to be able to point to one historical person or one historical event and to say that this represents the fulfillment of a previously given apocalyptic symbol. A one-to-one correspondence, a literal intentionality is necessarily implied. But then the steadfast refusal by Jesus to give a sign can be held to imply the opposite, viz., that the symbol "kingdom of God" is a "tensive symbol," that its meaning is by no means exhausted by any "literal intentionality."

This seems to me to be a crucial point about the proclamation of Jesus. In that proclamation "kingdom of God" is a "tensive symbol"; it is a true "symbol" rather than a "sign." Last year I offered an exegesis of the crucial "kingdom sayings" of Jesus — Luke 11:20; Luke 17:20-21; Matt 11:12 — based upon the observance of this distinction, and I call attention to that exegesis as strong support for my thesis. I do not propose to repeat that exegesis here, but rather

to turn to the consequence of this distinction for the overall interpretation of the proclamation of Jesus, i.e., for hermeneutics. If "kingdom of God" is a "steno-symbol" or "sign" in the historical proclamation of Jesus, then our hermeneutical responsibility is earnestly to look for signs of the end and busily to calculate dates for the coming of the Son of Man. But if it is a "tensive" or "true" symbol, then our responsibility is to explore the manifold ways in which the experience of God can become an existential reality to man. That the symbol, "kingdom of God," in ancient Judaism had reference to the activity of God is fully established. The crux of the distinction now being made is whether in the proclamation of Jesus it has reference to a single identifiable event which every man experiences at one and the same time or whether it is something which cannot be exhausted in any one event but which every man experiences in his own time.

It can be seen that after a somewhat lengthy and circuitous discussion I have ended up essentially where I began, with a Bultmannian understanding of the eschatology of Jesus. But I would regard myself as having advanced beyond Bultmann in one important respect. Bultmann reached the historical critical decision that Jesus was mistaken in his proclamation of the kingdom of God. However, by means of his particular hermeneutical method Bultmann was able to claim that in the "understanding of life" implied by the proclamation of Jesus there was nonetheless something to be taken seriously. It is my claim today that by approaching Jesus' proclamation of the kingdom of God from the standpoint of a literary critical understanding of symbol and the function of symbol, an even more direct interpretation of the message of Jesus into our own time is possible.

There is one further thing to be said, however, and that is in connection with the function of symbol. We may have established that "kingdom of God" is a "tensive" or "true" symbol in the message of Jesus but our hermeneutical task is incomplete if we do not go on to ask, What does such a symbol do? What kind of a response does the use of such a symbol evoke? I am asking that question not so much in the sense of historical criticism — what did it do or evoke in terms of the first century — as in the sense of hermeneutics — what does it do or evoke in the terms of the twentieth century? But I ask that question only to have to admit that I have as yet no firm answer to it. I could, of course, echo Paul Ricoeur and say that the symbol gives rise to thought, that the function of a true or tensive symbol is to tease the mind into ever new evocations of meanings. This is a valid and important insight, but, even as I utter it, I am aware that I am not so much enunciating a principle as announcing a program. One of the tasks to which I believe we have to commit ourselves as biblical scholars is the investigation of the function or evocative power of biblical symbols. This will, of course, take us into the field of psychology and the psychological processes of human understanding, but then one of the characteristics of the contemporary situation in biblical scholarship is that it challenges us to do things that we have not done before. Our situation as biblical scholars is, quite simply, that our traditional understanding of the nature of our task is no longer adequate
to its fulfillment. We are all of us trained in historical criticism, and more and more of us are being trained in literary criticism, but if we are to achieve our goal as hermeneuts there is the whole field of human understanding for us to explore.

I must now conclude my address by summarizing the reflections on method in the interpretation of the New Testament that I have attempted to draw from a discussion of eschatology, specifically the eschatology of Jesus, and hermeneutics. I began by following Bultmann in accepting a definition of hermeneutics as "die Kunstlehre des Verstehens schriftlich fixierter Lebensäußerungen." The first step towards such an understanding of any Lebensäußerung, I argued, was the task of establishing a historical critical understanding of it, of establishing, so far as is possible, what the text was intended to say by its author and understood as saying by those to whom it was directed. But this process of arriving at a historical understanding of the text is only the first step in the hermeneutical process. It is an essential step, but it is only a first step. The next step, I claimed, was to consider the text from the standpoint of its literary form and its language, and from the standpoint of the natural force and function of such a form and such a language. In the case of the eschatology of Jesus this brings us, I claimed, to the evocative force of a tensive or true symbol. But a specific literary form or a distinct type of language functions in terms of the natural processes of human understanding and this fact, I argued, opens up a third dimension of our hermeneutical task, the exploration of the processes of human understanding.