SCHOLARS, THEOLOGIANS, AND ANCIENT RHETORIC*

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A PROPER interpretation of ancient texts requires a prior recognition of the kind of literature we are dealing with. It has long been agreed that account must be taken of the literary form or *genre* of the passage in question: whether it is prose or poetry, whether it is law or chronicle, whether it is liturgy or parenesis. A more general problem arises when we confront ancient texts of a mytho-poetic character, whether prose or poetry, whether liturgy or prophecy or apocalypse. Here we are often dealing with poetry in the wider sense, rather than with poetry in the strict sense. The interpretation of material of this kind is a complex matter. The extended discussion of biblical mythology has furthered our awareness of such issues. Much, however, remains to be done. Proposals for demythologizing the Scriptures have been more concerned with modern apologetics than with the basic question of the nature of religious symbol and of symbolic discourse.

Misunderstanding of the character of the biblical imagery can lead the interpreter far astray in his exegesis of particular passages or in his wider conclusions as to the religion of the OT or NT. A modern analogy will illustrate: when the Negro spirituals speak of "crossing over Jordan" we give the phrase a spiritualizing or an eschatological interpretation. We suppose it to refer to entrance into heaven. But Dr. Miles Mark Fisher, Professor of Church History at Shaw University, in his volume entitled *Negro Slave Songs in the United States*,[1] has made a very good case for the view that the Negro slaves, in their clandestine way, were alluding to crossing the Atlantic to Liberia or to crossing into free territory or to Canada, depending upon the decade in which the slave songs were sung.

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[1] Ithaca, N. Y.: Cornell University Press, 1953. "One constantly recurring theme in all slave songs was the longing for escape. Past students have pictured this as an unworldly desire; the horrors of slavery, they said, made death welcome. This view Dr. Fisher shows to be false. The desire to escape was there, of course, but the 'heab'n' of the slave lay in Africa not on some celestial shore." From the Foreword by Ray Allen Billington, p. viii.

Religious symbol is open to various forms of misinterpretation. It is generally recognized that the interpreter can err through literalism. He can also err by too prosaic an approach. A third form of faulty exegesis is that of the rationalist who insists on seeking what he calls a clear idea in imaginative discourse.

Our understanding of the outlook of the early Christians depends not only on our knowledge of what they believed but on how they believed it. It is a question not only of the furniture of their minds but of their mentality. Here we are brought sharply up against the whole problem of religious psychology. We find ourselves dealing with the question of the religious imagination, indeed with the imagination in general. The fact is that we are handicapped in dealing with the whole topic of religious symbol and religious rhetoric because of our modern categories. We make a sharp distinction between reason and emotion, between reason and imagination. It necessarily follows that we tend to judge biblical symbol as essentially emotional and irrational or non-rational.

The most promising aspect, therefore, of the continuing discussion of NT mythology is what we may call the basic semantic question, rather than its theological corollaries. What is the nature of imaginative symbol? Any contribution I can presume to bring to this problem rises out of my special interests in modern literary criticism, a discipline which has been much concerned with imaginative and symbolic statement and with the function of myth.

This whole question of the mythology of the NT has disturbed us as historians for several reasons. We do not deny the large and even decisive place that such symbolic elements have, but we recognize the difficulties of handling such material systematically, and we have been disturbed by the seemingly arbitrary procedures that have been adopted in connection with it.

Biblical scholars have been first of all, and rightly, philologians and historians. No doubt there have been some outstanding workers, both in the classical and in the biblical fields, men like Eduard Norden, who have been both philologians and humanists. But this combination is rare. We can recall the time all too easily when the Psalms, for example, were treated without adequate recognition of their rhetorical and liturgical character by a too pedestrian or rational approach. My own original interest in NT eschatology was motivated by the conviction that the plastic character of this material had been slighted by interpreters who were primarily philologians or literary historians. Here was a tremendous expression of the religious imagination, an extraordinary rhetoric of faith; and I could not feel that justice was done to it by either critics or theologians.[2] In what concerns biblical symbolism, we seem

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[2] Albert Schweitzer's greatness in this area lay in the fact that he could combine powers of imagination with his scientific attainments. Only a scholar who possessed

today to be at a point where a new cross-fertilization can be helpful from the side of wider humanistic and rhetorical study.

A good illustration of our dilemma is afforded by the study of ancient liturgy. We can deal with the festivals of Israel in a phenomenological way: describe the calendars, the priesthood, the sacrifices, the hymns involved. But we recognize that much has slipped through the mesh, and such protests as those of Professor Gaster in his volume *Thespis* become understandable.

> Thus far — perhaps by necessity — the material has been studied primarily (and sometimes exclusively) by philologians. Wider interpretations have therefore perforce been neglected; and a tradition has even arisen that the meaning of a text can be regarded as determined when it has been correctly translated. But this ignores the fact that words are, at best, the mere shorthand of thought, and that folk tales originate in the mind rather than in the mouth or from the pen. Our task must be to get behind the words to what semanticists call their 'referents'; and this is the domain of Cultural Anthropology and Folklore rather than of Philology.[3]

Will we not all admit that in dealing with biblical symbol our usual tools come short? Yet when students of this material seek other tools we are often rightly disturbed by the results. I would like to illustrate this dissatisfaction in connection first with the work of the "myth and ritual" school, and secondly in connection with the work of some of our biblical theologians.

I

The labors of the "myth and ritual" school have certainly made a first-rate contribution to our understanding of biblical symbol. The light cast on such matters as eschatology by recognition of its cultic background is highly significant. The comparative method of these scholars, of course, begins with the philological study of the texts in question. They also recognize, however, the social and cultural factors behind the myths and sagas of the ancient Near East, and behind many elements in the traditions, oracles, and Psalms of the OT. They are surely right to identify specific ritual patterns behind much of the material.

The bearing of this approach upon NT study may be illustrated by Professor Riesenfeld's exploration of the background of the episode of the Transfiguration in the Gospels. This work, *Jésus Transfiguré*,[4] illustrates

a certain esthetic and even visionary capacity could have made the kind of cogent intuitive observations, often in dramatic image, which we find scattered through his works.

[3] Theodor H. Gaster, *Thespis: Ritual, Myth and Drama in the Ancient Near East* (New York: Henry Schuman, 1950), p. 112.

[4] København: Ejnar Munksgaard, 1947.

both the value and dangers of the method. Riesenfeld connects the Transfiguration narrative and its various details or motifs with the Feast of Tabernacles and the associated eschatological and messianic conceptions. In so doing, he corrects our tendency to treat NT theology as an abstraction. As he says, the connection of the national hope with the official festivals of the people "always prevented the eschatological ideas from taking on a completely abstract character and passing over into a merely individual plane."[5] Riesenfeld's concrete study of the social and cultural backgrounds of such mythological symbols as those of the glory, the divine cloud, the tabernacle, the white garment, represents a right semantic approach. We may associate with it Paul Minear's similar motif study in his *Christian Hope and the Second Coming*,[6] of the trumpet, the clouds of heaven, the earthquake, etc. Riesenfeld also recognizes the important differences between living cultic symbol, the spiritualization of symbol when separated from the rite, conventional formulas, and mere poetic terminology or stage properties.[7]

Yet how great is the temptation of those using the "myth and ritual" approach to cast everything into one pattern! How easy it is to overlook the idiosyncrasy of particular texts, related as they are to different backgrounds and periods. The differentia of OT materials over against those of Canaan and Babylonia have been insisted upon by Henri Frankfort, H. J. Kraus,[8] and others. And, quite outside the OT itself, full justice must be done to the differences in the patterns of myth and ritual in the ancient Near East. Frankfort has well stated this matter in his Frazer Lecture (1950) on "The Problem of Similarity in Ancient Near Eastern Religions."[9] These observations bear also upon NT backgrounds. The danger always is that of a too facile *Gleichschaltung* of the apparently similar texts and ritual patterns.

This suggests a more fundamental criticism of the "myth and ritual"

[5] P. 53. Note also Riesenfeld's citation of Küppers: "Herein we grasp the stature and distinctiveness of the conception of redemption which animates apocalyptic thought: for here, in fundamental contrast with surrounding Hellenism, redemption can never be thought of as *jenseitig* and individualistic."

[6] Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1954, Part II.

[7] Unconvincing aspects of Riesenfeld's study arise especially in connection with his messianic (as contrasted with eschatological) interpretation of the motifs. That enthronement motifs with an eschatological connotation were carried down through the centuries in association with the Feast of Tabernacles is most probable. What is not so clear is the central place of specific royal and messianic ideas in the Feast in the time of Jesus. Even more problematic is the association of the suffering of the Messiah with these ceremonies at this time, or the contemporary significance of such ancient motifs as those of the ritual battle (with the "rest" that followed) and the "sacred marriage" (with the nuptial pavilion).

[8] *Die Königsherrschaft Gottes* (Tübingen, 1951); *Gottesdienst in Israel* (München, 1954).

[9] Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1951.

approach to the interpretation of biblical mythology. This school commonly sees the basic motivation of the pattern as utilitarian. It is a question of theurgy and dramatic magic. Now no doubt the seasonal fertility rites often had this aspect, or degenerated into it, but primal rite and myth had a much more profound significance. We have much to learn here from what is now known of the "mythic mentality" or "mythic ideation" as explored by the anthropologists and by students of the origins of language and myth. Early ritual had the aspect of enactment or mimesis, indeed, and its outcome was felt as salutary, but the emphasis lay on participation with the divine powers and their manifestation, not on an end to be sought. The ceremony and story arose as responses to, as dramatization of, the divine epiphany in the life of the group. This positive, non-utilitarian aspect of myth and cult recurs even though the pragmatic function often prevailed in particular periods and settings.[10]

Now these considerations have perhaps brought us a long way from NT symbols. We do not often find NT scholars today connecting the early Eucharist or the early confessional formulas with theurgy, but we do find a failure to perceive the distinctiveness of the Christian salvation-cult and its cult theology. We fail to recognize adequately the dynamic-mimetic character of early Christian worship and symbol. The error lies again in our understanding of symbol. It is not merely "poetry." To proclaim in worship that Christ is at the right hand of God is neither a crass statement of fact nor a literary figure of speech but a precise mytho-poetic affirmation.[11] This is part of what Paul means when he says that no one can call Christ "Lord" except by the Holy Spirit. Paul is speaking in the context of ritual procedure.

We are speaking of the problem of what tools we can use in dealing with the symbolic material in the Bible. I have referred to the difficulties that inhere in comparative mythology. We might add here that some scholars have sought to go beyond comparative mythology by the use of modern psychological insights. One of the most interesting aspects of Professor Goodenough's fourth volume in his study of Jewish symbols is just such an explanation. Frankfort does the same thing at the close of the paper to which we have referred. This approach to mythology at least has one value: it recognizes the dynamic depth of the texts. The chief handicap of the procedure lies in the competing claims made by the diverse schools of psychology, and who can arbitrate among them?

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[10] Cf. W. F. Otto, *Dionysos: Mythus und Kultus* (Frankfurt-am-Main: Klostermann, 1933). "What makes ritual so strange to the modern world is its non-utilitarian character" (p. 34).

[11] Cf. E. G. Selwyn, "Image, Fact and Faith," *New Testament Studies*, I, 4 (May, 1955), 237–39.

II

We turn now to several of the most-discussed attempts in contemporary NT theology to deal with this material. Brief characterization of proposals of Rudolf Bultmann, C. H. Dodd, and Oscar Cullmann should be illuminating here. We may preface our findings by saying that the biblical theologians appear too often to impoverish the vital symbols so as to obscure their concrete diversity. This makes it possible, then, to discover a dominant theme to which these diversities may all be said to witness. We can recognize the value of generalization and of schematic simplification, and we can acknowledge how much we owe to such scholars as those named. But we believe that one or another misunderstanding of imaginative symbol has handicapped their contribution.

Bultmann has long recognized the need of correcting and supplementing the older tools used in the study of the history of religion. In the first volume of his *Glauben und Verstehen* (1933), he calls our attention to the inward meaning of terms which the historian of religion uses in an external way. He was already concerned with that existential dimension in religion which plays so large a part in his more recent work. In his proposal with regard to demythologizing the NT and in the discussion which has ensued, he has defined the problem with which we are here concerned in such a way that scholars and theologians everywhere have had to face it. I am not interested here in the question of how he interprets the symbols of the NT but rather in the question of how he understands metaphorical language.

Most of us who are trained in history and in the history of ideas tend to read poetry for its didactic content. This is not precisely the error, if error there be, in Bultmann's method. He finds in mythology not ideas or doctrine but rather this or that "sense of existence." But this seems to me only another abstracting procedure. Take as an analogy the interpretation of a poem: we miss the meaning of a poem if we reduce it to a prose equivalent. But we also miss the meaning of a poem if we deduce from it a testimony to the poet's attitude toward life. A poem is a concrete creation which offers "news of reality," and our interest is in the experience or revelation it affords rather than in the subjectivity of the poet. So, in dealing with the symbolism of the NT, it seems to me we should take seriously the imagery we find, and not either rationalize it or existentialize it. Bultmann is, of course, alert to the diverse provenance and particularity of the mythological material which we find in the NT. This can be illustrated in the discussion in his *Johannesevangelium* of such syncretistic imagery as is found in the episode of the marriage feast at Cana, as well as in passages dealing with the Vine, the Good Shepherd, etc. Our point is, however, that in his interpretative procedure he tends to translate the plastic imagery into a uniform kerygmatic

statement. Indeed, this same existential thesis is found by him consistently not only in John but in the message of Jesus and in the gospel of Paul. Where Paul uses apocalyptic or Gnostic symbol, Bultmann does not appear to be inclined to give it its rights as a genuine part of what Paul means.

It is in connection with Bultmann's interpretation of the futurist eschatological symbol that the most insistent questions have been raised. In their various forms, whether in Jesus' announcement of the Kingdom, with its vivid social imagery, or Paul's portrayal of cosmic redemption, Bultmann feels that he can discount the inherited dramatizations of the future: hence, his emphasis on the purely otherworldly and existential character of the crisis. Future is seen as wholly unpicturable possibility rather than as concrete corporate destiny. But this conclusion is based upon a semantic decision with regard to the pictorial imagery of the early Christians, a decision which may be questioned.

In the case of Dodd, the chief question to be raised has to do with his realized eschatology. We are not concerned here with his disputed rendition of several crucial passages in the Synoptic Gospels, but with his wider view of the kerygma. Dodd recognizes that after the early days the Church, by and large, came to think in futurist terms about the consummation. This futurist emphasis, however, he tends to disallow in favor of a realized eschatology in Platonic terms.

One aspect of the Platonizing tendency appears in connection with Dodd's book, *The Interpretation of the Fourth Gospel*. Bultmann's remarks upon Dodd's understanding of the symbolism of this Gospel are of special interest at this point. The symbols in question are those of the true Light, the true Bread, the true Vine, etc. Bultmann would seem to be justified in questioning Dodd's use of Platonic categories here, as though it were a matter of the contrast between appearance and reality. To quote Bultmann:

> It is not a matter here of the contrast of prototype and antitype in the Platonic sense, such that the problem of μέθεξις (participation) could arise. What is involved is rather the opposition of reality and illusion; and so far as one can speak of antitype what is involved is demonic imitation. The Johannine ἀληθινά are not transcendental ideas, but those things which are actually sought after in the demands men make upon life. Thus the Greek (Platonic) contrast of the ever-abiding over against that which becomes and which passes away is remote from the Johannine dualism.[12]

On this point, the rights of the matter would seem to be with Bultmann. Platonism here acts as an ideological thesis to do violence to the symbolic concreteness of the imagery. In his work *Ego Eimi*, Eduard

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[12] "The Interpretation of the Fourth Gospel," *New Testament Studies*, I, 2 (November, 1954), 80–81.

Schweizer has vividly presented the widespread cultural concreteness of such images as those of the Vine, the Shepherd, and the Tree of Life.[13] The author of the Fourth Gospel is saying that all the life satisfactions of nourishment, security, and joy, so vividly appropriated in these current symbols, are to be found in their fullest reality in Christ. Bultmann himself appears to us to short-change the full value of the symbols by invoking a dialectic of the divine and the demonic here, in line with his thesis of radical choice.[14]

Thus we may claim that our biblical theological treatment of the myth and symbol of the NT suffers from an inadequate understanding of mytho-poetic language. In the case of Cullmann, we have a scholar whose interpretation submits itself more readily to the real import of the ancient vehicles of thought. Many feel, however, that in his case a selected body of material is allowed to furnish the larger pattern, while disparate expressions in the biblical text are conformed to it. Bultmann's review of *Christus und die Zeit* made the point effectively. Where in the case of Bultmann and Dodd a quasi-philosophical thesis (Existentialism or Platonism) operates to the disadvantage of the texts, in Cullmann's case, a theological pattern has the same disadvantage. It is perhaps unfair to reproach these masters in our field for seeking a unifying thesis in terms of which so rich a documentation can be given structure. We all do the same thing. Our only purpose is to expose better the basic problems of religious discourse with which we are concerned.

III

I have stated earlier that, as historians, we find that our tools for dealing with the symbolic elements in our texts are not altogether adequate. Neither are we satisfied with some of the attempts that have been made to provide such tools or to invoke new methods. I have given some examples of such proposals. Their defect lies, it seems to me, in an inadequate understanding of symbolic discourse. For light on the matter, I suggest that we turn to contemporary work on this problem, especially to literary criticism and esthetics. The question of myth and symbol is very much to the fore in these circles. One can say that both literary criticism and theology have one dominant theme today: that of the nature of symbolic statement. Bultmann is concerned finally with the same basic issue in theology which interests critics like T. S. Eliot, I. A.

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[13] See also the cultural-historical interpretation of the terms, "bread of life" and "water of life" in J. Jeremias, *The Eucharistic Words of Jesus* (New York: Macmillan, 1955), pp. 155–57.

[14] The contrast of the good shepherd and the false shepherds of John 10 represents a secondary theme based on Ezekiel which crosses that of the contrast of the "true" shepherd and the Hellenistic shepherd-figures.

Richards, Jacques Maritain, and others. The attention given to writers like William Blake, Herman Melville, Dostoyevsky, Kafka, etc., revolves about basic matters of myth and symbol and their interpretation.

In many ways, the workers in esthetics have explored these matters more profitably than the theologians. This may be partly because they have learned much from anthropology and psychology. In any case, the theologian has been handicapped in this field. We see three special factors which tend to obscure the real nature of imaginative symbolism for the theologian: 1) a dogmatic prejudgment may impose the view that the biblical imagery is literally true, thus obscuring its real significance and forfeiting the kind of truth it does convey; 2) a sentimental prejudgment, associated with religious idealism, may jumble all such imagery together as "mere poetry" and so obscure its rich and specific import; 3) a rationalistic prejudgment may operate in a reductive way to extract this or that idea or doctrine. There is a cognitive element in myth, but it is not of this order.

Now when we turn to the work of the literary critics and others today who have been interested in the character of symbolic discourse, we find pointers to our own task as follows:

1. Our critics tell us, for one thing, that mytho-poetic statements have a dynamic dramatic character resting on deep cultural associations. They represent the "available past" in potent form. When we are dealing with such social myth and symbol, we are dealing with the dynamics of group life. We have here the images which are used recurrently like signals to renew group loyalties and to arouse action. This whole aspect of mythology is, of course, well understood by the "myth and ritual" school. The main point for the exegete to understand here is that the symbol in question draws its meaning from its concrete social context. Evidently literalism in interpretation is ruled out, but also any colorless theological interpretation. Take, for instance, such an image as that of the New Jerusalem. This is not to be understood as gratuitous, as a merely idealistic symbol, easily exchangeable for some other token of frustrated aspiration. The particular figures are intended and specific and should be taken in all their concreteness as suggested by their social antecedents.

2. Our modern students of symbol tell us, in the second place, that myth and mytho-poetic statement cannot be paraphrased; they cannot be translated into a discursive equivalent. This means that they cannot be demythologized. They cannot properly even be remythologized. Such concrete, plastic representation of reality or process cannot be reduced to a philosophical or theological equivalent. A poem cannot be summarized in an outline or paraphrase. "Poetic truth is inseparable from poetic form." For example here, take the eschatological mythology

which we find in the Gospels. The pictorial, somatic language must be accorded its right if we are to put ourselves in the place of Jesus or the Evangelists. It was not meant prosaically and literally. It was not meant allegorically. It was not meant "poetically" in the sense, that is, of gratuitous embellishment. It is not to be taken as a form of crude science or as an expression of the boundary situation at which man stands over against the future. — In the discussion between Karl Jaspers and Bultmann over the question of mythology,[15] we are afforded two examples of what seem to me to be misunderstandings of the pictorial language of the Scriptures. Jaspers characterizes the mythological expressions of the NT as "Cyphers," that is, as code terms or symbols. On this view, the mythological discourse is cypher-speech, indicative of Transcendence. "Myth," says Jaspers, "is speech concerning a reality which is not empirical reality, that reality with which we live existentially." Bultmann rejects the implication here that all mythologies can be lumped together as mere pointers to the dimension of Transcendence. Bultmann rightly insists on the variety of ancient mythologies and argues that each one, biblical, Greek, Indic, discloses a different sense of existence.[16] He thus rightly recognizes the idiosyncrasy of each mythology. But, nevertheless, he reduces the meaning of NT eschatology, as of the others, to the "sense of existence" implied in it. This would seem to be an undue abstraction of the full-bodied symbolic discourse.

3. A final emphasis in the modern discussion of symbol, and one particularly important for us, runs as follows. Following on Coleridge, modern literary critics have pointed out that a poem or unit of mytho-poetic discourse represents a fusion in one act of the imagination of many contributory and often apparently contradictory aspects of experience. The poet interprets the heterogeneity and disorder of common experience by a synthetic act of vision, often by the use of a mythological pattern. So far as any particular writing is concerned, this means the use of various older strata of imagery adapted to new uses. Thus, such heavily symbolic passages as Mark 13, Philippians 2, or the Book of Revelation as a whole, are "synthetic and palimpsestic," as is the wisdom which they incorporate.

The imaginative act is such that the most subtle and profound aspects of experience can be included. The medium is therefore adequate to the totality of awareness in a way not at all possible to discursive statement. Moreover, the distinction between emotional and intellectual activity is transcended. Mythological statement represents knowledge of a kind. It has a cognitive aspect. It represents not merely an emotional reaction

[15] Bultmann, "Zur Frage der Entmythologisierung: Antwort an Karl Jaspers," *Theologische Zeitschrift*, X, 2 (März-April, 1954), 81–95.

[16] *Ibid.*, pp. 85–86.

to reality but a judgment about reality, an account of reality, and an account based upon this kind of concrete and subtle experience. Of course, there are differences in the degree of truth of such accounts. But the pictorial affirmations are to be taken seriously in their particularity. The corollaries for us of this view of symbolic statement are that we shall expect to find wisdom in NT myth, but not a wisdom that can be identified with some prose statement or some theological formula. The images or the fable must be assigned their rights in terms of all their connotations.

This paper has been concerned with method and with presuppositions. We do not have space here to apply our theses to various NT passages or conceptions. Some of these have already been suggested. We are dealing with a mytho-poetic mentality and not with a prosaic or discursive one. We cannot apply to the imaginative representations in question our modern alternatives of literal versus symbolic. They were meant neither literally nor symbolically, but naively. The meaning of the imagery is to be found in the associations and connotations it possessed, discoverable for us in their traditions. These meanings and associations had a very concrete social-cultural reference, something quite different from what we mean by a philological or theological context. Just as the imagery has concrete social reference backwards, so it has reference at the time of writing to actual historical realities in the environment of the Church.

Thus, what we call the theologumena of "the principalities and powers" is not to be understood in an abstracting theological way but in a quasi-sociological way. The early Church interpreted political and social and cultural forces mythologically — in the attempt to speak most significantly about them — but we should not be misled into thinking that the Church was only concerned here with otherworldly realities.

I began by saying that, as historians, we have been troubled by the problem of how to find tools and methods to deal with the mytho-poetic element in the Bible. And we have been troubled by some of the proposals that have been made, whether of the "cult and ritual" school or of one or other biblical-theological kind. I do not pretend to have solved the problem, but I believe that the results of contemporary discussion of symbolism, as I have outlined them, at least serve to correct prevailing misunderstandings in our field and open the way to more satisfactory interpretation.