

ON FREI'S *ECLIPSE OF BIBLICAL NARRATIVE*

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Hans Frei's book deserves much more attention than it has yet received in historical, philosophical and literary circles. His text is the best historical study we have in English of developments from Post-Renaissance hermeneutics to the modern hermeneutics of Schleiermacher and Hegel. Frei's fascinating interpretation is intertwined with a complex argument regarding the problematic status of modern theological discourse. This argument rests upon conceiving "the Bible as writing," which thereby requires appropriate literary critical tools. Frei's philosophical perspective is inspired by Karl Barth and indebted to Gilbert Ryle, Peter Strawson and Stuart Hampshire. His literary critical approach is guided by the monumental achievement of Erich Auerbach. And Frei's historical interpretation is wholly original—an imaginative reshaping of the terrain of early modern interpretation theory.

Frei's fresh interpretation demonstrates the specific ways in which forms of supernaturalism, historicism, classicism, moralism and positivism have imposed debilitating constraints on the emergence of modern hermeneutics. These constraints resulted in a discursive closure which prohibited the development of a perspective which viewed Biblical texts as literary texts depicting unique characters and personages. Instead, early modern hermeneutical discourse conceived such texts as manifestations of divine presence, sources for historical reconstruction, articulations of the inner existential anxieties of their authors, bases for moral imperatives or candidates for verifiable claims. In a painstaking and often persuasive manner, Frei examines the "precritical" (a self-serving adjective coined by modern hermeneutical thinkers) interpretive procedures of Luther and Calvin, the pietistic viewpoint represented by Johann Jacob Rambach, the rationalistic approach of Spinoza and the proto-*heilsgeschichtliche* outlook of Johannes Cocceius.

At the turn of the 18th century, the major split arises between narrative and subject matter, literal explicative sense and actual historical reference. In short, the texts no longer render the reality of the history they depict. Following the pioneering work of Mark Pattison and Sir Leslie Stephen, Frei locates the crystalization of this split in England. With the decline of the Metaphysical poets, the rise of Bunyan's allegorical stories and the emergence of the authority of scientific discourse, the Deist controversy—the search for external evidence for divine revelation—acquires a position of eminence in theological discourse. For Frei, this controversy constitutes the beginning of modern theology.

In Germany—traditionally regarded as the cradle of modern theology—the issues of the factuality of revelation and the credibility of the Bible loom large, but the Lutheran tradition linked them to the broader issue of the meaning of Biblical texts. This latter issue focussed on the semantic conditions under which the Biblical texts support human salvation. The exegetical and theological notion of “positivity”—the endorsement of a direct divine intervention in the finite realm manifest in the unique “miracle” of character and being of Jesus Christ—emerged as the major candidate to satisfy the semantic conditions.

The exemplary Deist debate between the literalist William Whiston and the sceptic Anthony Collins in England and the line of development from the sophisticated supernaturalist Sigmund Jakob Baumgarten to the neologist Johann Salmo Semler signify the radical fissure between Biblical words and Biblical subject matter, between Biblical realism and “real” facts, between Biblical history-like stories and “actual” historical events. And the weight of modernity, especially modern science, accented and elevated the side of subject matter, facts and events. Thereafter, the major traditions in modern theological hermeneutics remained caught in this fissure, oscillating between allegory and historical occurrences (Kant), apologetics and historical facts (Schleiermacher), and myth and historical events (Hegel, Strauss). In each tradition, the Biblical texts as writings are reduced to mere sources for moral allegories, springboards for theological apologetics or launching pads for existential myths—all against the backdrop of unverifiable historical occurrences, events and facts.

Frei’s ingenious tale about the emergence of this situation in 18th- and 19th-century hermeneutics demonstrates the way in which viewing the Biblical texts as writings was unable to gain a foothold in early modern theological discourse. Furthermore, he argues that modern theology and hermeneutics is the worse owing to this situation. Frei’s central culprits are German historicism and British positivism. The former precluded realistic narrative analysis of the Bible because of its rigid conception of the Bible as an object of scholarly commentary; the latter prompted the rise of realistic narrative form in the novel but did not permit a corresponding tradition of criticism viewing the Bible as such.

Frei’s conception of Biblical texts as literary texts depicting unique characters and personages achieves saliency in theological discourse upon the appearance of Karl Barth’s powerful section on the humanity of Jesus Christ entitled “The Royal Man” in his *Church Dogmatics*. For Barth and Frei, Biblical narratives render an agent whose identity—whose intentions and actions—serves as the center of theological reflection. Following Ryle, Strawson and Hampshire, Frei refines Barth’s treatment of identity-descriptions by understanding intentions as implicit actions and actions as enacted intentions. This understanding—delineated in his book *The Identity of Jesus Christ*—allows Frei to view Biblical narratives as constitutive writings wherein the unique character and being of Jesus Christ is depicted.

Frei’s argument appeals to Auerbach’s *Mimesis* primarily because of Frei’s insistence on the realistic character of Biblical narratives and the central role of “figura” traditionally invoked by Christian thinkers to hold the Bible together.

Yet this appeal to Auerbach is the least convincing component of Frei's argument. First, Frei's project rests upon an internal realism within the Biblical texts (with the appropriate exclusions such as Psalms, Ecclesiastes, Proverbs, the Gospel of John, and others)—a realism readily apparent on the surface which depicts human actions and intentions in history-like fashion. In contrast, Auerbach's conception of realism is regulated by his Hegelian viewpoint. Auerbach's realist texts reflect the unfolding of underlying processes and forces within a changing social context in the literary form of mixed styles. Therefore Auerbach can view Zola's *Germinale* as the exemplary realist novel and read Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* as realist literature (since it reflects inner processes of consciousness). In short, Frei's anti-Hegelian Barthian position flies in the face of the Hegelianism of Auerbach.

In a more philosophical vein, Frei rightly exposes the limitations of historicism and positivism on early modern hermeneutics, but his appeals to Auerbachian realistic narratives only reenact the problematic of historicism by reinvoking the Hegelian reality/appearance distinction. Auerbach's *Mimesis* not only depends on this distinction, it also begins with it in the initial opposition between Homer and the Bible, foreground and background, externality and interiority, presence and hiddenness in the famous "Odysseus' Scar" chapter. In other words, Frei seems inclined to reduce the Biblical texts to mere history-like narratives which render identity-descriptions accessible by ignoring Auerbach's Hegelian conception of reality. In so doing, Frei too easily sidesteps an inescapable hermeneutical problem: the problem of radical indeterminacy in textual interpretation.

Even if we accept Frei's position and view the Bible as principally narrative-texts-rendering-agents, we still are left with little theoretical machinery to face the problem of indeterminacy. This is so because the very act of "rendering agents" is an interpretive act. It seems Frei either wishes the Biblical texts were more Homeric (that is, with little hidden meaning) or dreads the perennial interpretive process of separating reality from appearance, meaning from significance, sense from reference.

Frei's nostalgia for figural interpretation—though he is too sophisticated to call for a return to precritical hermeneutics—reveals his dismay regarding radical indeterminacy. Figural interpretations provide precisely what hermeneutics of radical indeterminacy preclude: totalizing frameworks, unified texts, homogeneous readings, chronological continuities and recuperative strategies. In contrast to these aims, contemporary interpretation theory promotes anti-totalizing approaches, dissemination of textual meanings, heterogeneous readings, anti-teleological discontinuities and deconstructive efforts. Ironically, such consequences seem to result from recent attempts to view all texts as writing. Frei indeed would shun the textual idealism and interpretive freeplay of avant-garde literary critics who promote a slogan similar to his own. Yet, crucial questions remain. Is this textual idealism and interpretive freeplay the logical consequence of Frei's own efforts to view "the Bible as writing"? If not, what kind of hermeneutics lurks beyond "the eclipse of Biblical narrative" in our time?

Despite Frei's powerful critiques of the major developments in 18th- and

19th-century hermeneutics, he remains much closer to the aims of these developments than to those of contemporary interpretation theory. Frei's intellectual achievement lies primarily in his profound insights regarding the "path not taken" by these developments. His insights generate an intricate and incisive argument which constitute the major Christian intervention in contemporary criticism in which the very nature of theological discourse is at stake. Frei's intervention is hardly a modest achievement in this post-Christian and postmodern age.