

CHRISTIAN SCHRAMM, *Alltagsexegesen. Sinnkonstruktion und Textverstehen in alltäglichen Kontexten* (SBB 61), Stuttgart 2008.

SUMMARY

“Alltagsexegesen: The Construction of Meaning and the Comprehension of (Biblical) Texts in the Context of Every-Day Life”

The classical relationship between traditionally understood scientific exegesis and today's common reader of the Bible, might best be described as that of *professional academics visiting amateurs!* Therefore, contact between academic exegesis and that done in the context of every-day life, if such contact takes place at all, is often viewed as a one-way-street. The scientific exegetes impart their knowledge to interested readers of the Bible. An actual exchange between the academic scholar and the reader is rare – unfortunately. This one-way-street leads increasingly to a dead end for academic exegesis itself. Consequently, academic exegesis is faced with decreasing recognition as an academic subject. Neither other theological disciplines nor non-academic recipients show outstanding interest in its insights. The result seems to be an overall confusion and lack of comprehension. Academic exegesis faces a far-reaching crisis due to its basic deficit in communication: only seldom do the questions and problems dealt with correspond to those of every-day life. Rarely indeed do biblical scholars employ a language understood outside academic circles.

Academic research on *Alltagsexegesen* i. e. the interpretation of biblical texts in the context of every-day life might provide a way out of this dilemma and at the same time contain great potential for the future. By looking at the *ordinary reader* a new field of hermeneutical observations reveals itself. In order to make this approach a success, however, the *ordinary reader* must be accepted as an equal. The key question in research is not: “Do you understand what you are reading?” (cf. Acts 8:30) but, “How do you understand *while* you are reading?” The experience of listening to an *every-day exegete* while he is constructing or producing meaning can be fascinating for the academic exegete.

Inter-disciplinary cooperation between scientific exegesis and sociology, therefore, is necessary: the method of group-discussion (*Gruppendiskussionsverfahren*) has proved itself to be an excellent tool for collecting the necessary data for this. Twelve groups, selected according to different ages, educational levels, gender, geographical origins and confessional backgrounds, were asked to discuss two biblical texts (Matthew 5:38–48: i. e. “Go the second mile”, and, “Love for one's enemies”; and Mark 5:24–34: i. e. “The woman with the flow of blood”). Their discussions were analyzed for the participants' implied comprehension of the texts. In order to analyze these group-discussions a new – completely innovative – method was developed consisting of four steps.

At the start (step A), the methods used by the groups interpreting the texts are investigated. Secondly, (step B), the focus falls on the perception of the text. Each group constructs a text of its own, forming their own specific virtual text. In terms of modern computer slang, the groups construct a *hypertext* by focusing on certain passages of the text and ignoring others, as well as by inserting further material (e. g. proverbs, song-texts and biblical references). In the mind of the group members a virtual text evolves. This is done by deconstructing the text basis into different units and then putting these units together anew, i. e. by *linking*. The group can also create links to further texts in the form of virtual *pop-ups* or *substituting windows*, to use an analogy to the Internet. For the researcher it is important to look at the groups' intentions underlying these linking activities (e. g. *contradictions, support, generalizations, additions*). In the third step, the specific *self-positioning* of the groups is analyzed. Each group concentrates on different figures in the text. Via identification and demarcation the groups try to find a place within the *hypertext* they constructed themselves. In the end, the results of the three previous steps of analysis are synthesized. This synthesis leads to an overall-strategy aimed at the construction of meaning for each group. Afterwards, the researcher examines the *Orientierungsrahmen* (frames of orientation), i. e. the main topics and *central point* stressed by each group, which are – on the basis of the same material – reconstructed using the sociological *Dokumentarischen Methode der Interpretation* (documentary method of interpretation) developed by R. Bohnsack. The inclusion of the *Orientierungsrahmen* into the analysis provides answers to the question of why the groups constructed their own specific meaning. Last but not least, by viewing these single-case studies it is possible to develop reading-strategies that help to understand the construction of meaning in general.

The method of analysis introduced by this study is a methodologically proven and theoretically based approach to the phenomenon of *Alltagsexegesen*. Instead of dealing with the hypothetical reconstruction of historical, idealised or implicit readers, today's concrete, actual reader of the Bible can be studied empirically. The spotlight is very much on the real *ordinary reader*. Thus the traditional one-way-street mentioned at the beginning is turned around. It becomes possible to observe hermeneutically relevant procedures, as it were *live*. Here, some basic insights can be won. First of all, the complex process of text comprehension (cf. the model of *hypertext*) is better understood. Secondly, basic reading strategies (*translating/transferring, criticizing and selecting*) can be identified. Thirdly, it can be shown that each interpretation is dependent on the interpreting subject (in this case the groups). This basic hermeneutical principle is empirically verified. Construction of meaning takes place before, during, after, and beyond reading. The specific *Orientierungsrahmen* has a great impact on this procedure.

In relation to scientific, academic exegesis this research-project is a committed appeal for an exit from the ivory tower of the academy, keeping in mind a broader self-image, one that explicitly includes the analysis of *Alltagsexegesen* as part of academic exegetical research. An honest interest in *Alltagsexegesen* guarantees that one will be richly

rewarded – also by the non-academic recipients! Furthermore, this research demands that more bridges be built between the university and every-day life. We need more publications, which present the knowledge of academic exegesis to the *ordinary reader*, who ought to be able to understand the crucial points of such research at the level of every-day life. Biblical-pastoral work should aim to reach people where they are, in their own reading and understanding; it should take into account the specific reading-strategies used by different groups.

Scientific, academic exegesis and *Alltagsexegese* are similar: Therefore, the latter functions as a mirror for the work of the professionals. On the one hand, this comparison is interesting in terms of exegetical methods. *Alltagsexegesen* apply methodological procedures and even more, show what a method can and cannot do. As “a way to a certain goal” methods are intentionally chosen and used. They help to interpret texts but do not lead to “objective” results. On the other hand, *Alltagsexegesen* remind the professional exegete of the fact that there is always a specific reading subject that is responsible for a particular interpretation of a biblical text. This is true as well for “professional interpretation”. These interpretations, too, have an individual coinage: the academic exegete is just as unable to escape the hermeneutical circle. Therefore, the interpreting subject should not be denied but on the contrary considered a hermeneutical constant in the process of interpretation. This can be achieved through several approaches developed particularly in the North American context (e. g. cultural exegesis, autobiographical biblical criticism and the use of autobiographical essays). In this field, further elaboration and development are needed. As on-going contribution to the academic debate between scientific exegetes (e. g. in the context of conferences or by means of publications) this paper is a plea for a more mediative approach, which does not aim to *knock out* one’s opponent, but rather, first and foremost, to understand the other’s point of view. On this basis, constructive criticism becomes possible and a way is opened up towards a better understanding of the Bible.