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# THE NEW TESTAMENT AND ITS INTERPRETATION IN THE WORK OF KLAUS BERGER

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## **Abstract**

The present article concentrates on the stimulating ideas of the German theologian Klaus Berger. He is one of the most significant contemporary experts on the exegesis of the New Testament in Germany. We wish to discuss his philosophical anchoring as well as the historical and biblical hermeneutics frequently considered highly critical to contemporary academic theological mainstream approach. Regardless of certain reservations, we consider Berger's hermeneutics of confidence and his hermeneutics of otherness in principle adequate to the Christian Revelation testified to in the Bible. It is the aim of the present article to introduce the above hermeneutics to the reader.

*Keywords:* hermeneutics, New Testament, German theology, Klaus Berger

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## **1. Introduction**

Our text wishes to deal with certain prerequisites of a correct interpretation of the Holy Book of the Christians, a book that the Church considers to be the fundamental visor offered to man regarding the transcendent mystery of God. The exegesis of the New Testament should then be on sentry duty at the service of transcendence, and we shall make an attempt to clarify that wish with the assistance of selected ideas of Klaus Berger, a theologian not widely known outside the German-speaking territory whose ideas we, however, consider most stimulating. By way of introduction it should be mentioned that the German New Testament scholar Klaus Berger takes a critical attitude towards the state of the art of the exegesis of today and contemporary Theology in general. He finds consensual university theology provocative and he likes to disrupt the well-established routine approaches to problems. His cardinal reservations concern primarily the philosophical points of departure and hermeneutical prerequisites of the neotestamentarian scholarship. We wish to concentrate briefly on both of the above under the conviction that the author in question may be an inspiring partner for discussion. Klaus Berger supports such exegesis that wishes to be of service to divine Revelation; if you will, he is the pioneer of an exegesis that stands on guard at the service of transcendence

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entering history. The principal aim of our efforts will then be the presentation of some of the essential ideas of an outstanding as well as controversial German theologian. Should his opinions be occasionally contextualized, commented or evaluated, such passages will clearly be distinguished from the rest of the text.

## **2. Relationship of exegesis and Philosophy**

We all sometimes ask ourselves what philosophy to seek behind one thing or another. The expression philosophy would then evidently be used in a figurative sense. Within the usage of our author, Philosophy is, indeed, understood as a discipline of scholarship strictly speaking, and he keeps putting the question to his colleague exegetes as to what sort of philosophy they undertake their craft with. Besides this, he talks of two principal modes of tuning the Scripture interpreters in relation to Christian faith. He thus draws attention to the ideological and personality background of such exegetical work: "What makes exegesis an unreliable undertaking is the fact that no exegete can simply say: The results of scholarship are.... Since scholarship is always also the will of the individual and therefore there are precisely [faith] friendly and [faith] hostile exegetes." [1]

Let us, however, go back to the relationship of exegesis and Philosophy in the true sense of the word. In his book *Exegese und Philosophie* [2] Klaus Berger deals with a theme that in a certain sense touches upon both the glory and the controversial issues of German exegetic tradition from the time of the Enlightenment onwards. Berger documents in a most inspiring manner the above mentioned interdisciplinary relations that remain, regardless of their seminal significance, meagrely reflected there.

### **2.1. Philosophical threads**

Berger alerts his readers to the fact that when interpreting the Scripture, it is precisely the philosophers who are pulling at the exegetic threads in the end. Understandably so, since the principal problem of exegesis is philosophical in nature: "From the time of the Enlightenment the interrelations of exegesis and philosophy have been determined by the question after the relationship of rational truths and history. The answer to that question is solved as a rule in favour of rational truths; [the New Testament] news is frequently assessed as historically unreliable and in the rest irrelevant for faith." [2, p. 194]

In Berger's view, that analogically includes strict divorce of form from content that is being pursued to the detriment of particular and contingent forms. The contentious point is how the exegete will explain why he arrived at one or another content with regard to (or in spite of) its form. Berger likes to use the text describing the transfiguration on the mountain (Mark 9.2-9) to show how wilfully a scholar can choose the place to cut in with his exegetic implements and divorce form from content. And he puts forward the question: having divorced form from content, what then is the content of the epiphanic form

concerned with? That Jesus is the Son of God? That he is a good man? That God loves people? [3]

Klaus Berger concludes his brief work on the relationship of exegesis and Philosophy in his statement concerning the greatest philosophical challenges facing the discipline of exegesis: “Above all, we need to philosophically master [the following]: To find a balance between the historical concreteness and the general, between the non-rational human dispositions and the requirements of his brain – and not acknowledge one at the loss of the other. Nontruncated anthropology and at least a little appropriate philosophy of history are primordial for the encounter with the Scripture. The thing is that both are vital for the kind of path that Theology is going to take to Israel and to the dimension of the Church”. [2, p.194]

The last sentence of Berger’s quotation above reacts to that part of contemporary German theology characterized by a detachment from the history of the Church and the Church hermeneutics of the Scripture in favour of *Vernunft* – rational points of view – as the appropriate instrument of the exegesis of the Holy Scriptures of Israel and the Christians. At least since the mid-1980s the Heidelberg exegete has been claiming with constantly rising vehemence that the philosophical reason is yet limited to deal “with the elementary, bizarre, and oriental strangeness of the Bible” [1, p. 37]. That very *hermeneutics of otherness* (*Hermeneutik der Fremdheit*) is the key concept of Berger’s reasoning, and it is so even within the relationship of exegesis and Philosophy. Berger is convinced that for the philosophical, mainly Western thinking, biblical texts are as a message very difficult to grasp. Berger’s polemic with Joseph Ratzinger may serve as an illustration in that sense, precisely about the degree of the rational in the Book of books and of the degree of rationality of faith corresponding to it: “[The logic of the Bible is the logic] of the God of Abraham not of the philosophers. The choice of persons lacking any special worth, the theology of the cross negating all the values, the new creation as an answer to the questions of theodicy, the loss of identity of bread and wine in the process of Eucharistic transfiguration, the loss of the logic identity of Jesus in the utterances by which God made Jesus the sin, the damnation and the place of reconciliation. That is not an exaggeration – as such pronouncements would be labelled by Aristotelian logic, on the contrary, for us the Westerners the unfathomable closeness of Jesus to sin (without, naturally, Jesus becoming a sinner). [There is no validity here] for Aristotelian and Kantian categories such as identity and causality, or any order of values.” [1, p. 40]

Berger’s intermittent text wants to show that the utterances of the Bible are not rational but “they have the potential to be reconstructed” [1, p. 40]. Berger’s intuition takes here an interesting direction. We assume, therefore, that precisely a kind of ‘vital reconstruction’ of the neotestamentarian message in history is the essence of the Church tradition – a category that Berger keeps seeking with great intensity in his late work.

## 2.2. Wisdom of the exegete

It would certainly not be correct to let Berger speak about the influence of philosophical preunderstanding on the work of exegesis and Theology and not ask him in person from which premises he himself departs. In this sense, Berger marks himself off and defines himself predominantly negatively. He does not like the way Scripture is dealt with in Scholasticism, and his notes inspire the impression that Scholasticism used the Bible to turn it into a kind of ‘stone quarry’ of quotations for its systematic interests. Berger cultivates a sort of negative philosophy in which he has a special down on the Enlightenment. He keeps warning scores of times against *radical Enlightenment* or the *uncritical taking over of Enlightenment* in Theology. That danger to him is personified in Kant and Hegel: “I must, with regard to my own experience... strictly refuse the uncritical taking over of Enlightenment. There [admittedly] exegesis learned to ask meaningful questions, the answers were, however, due to the absolutism of causality mostly scientifically short-sighted and devastating for faith... The word ‘Aufklärung’ takes its origin in Cistercian theology and that is quite clear to G.E. Lessing when the concept is launched by him. In Cistercian theology the Holy Spirit is something other than reason (Vernunft); [in conformity with that theology] there are not values but commandments, there are no human rights but the responsibility of man before God, there is not the scholars’ state of Plato but one Holy Church. To start newly, once again, five minutes before Lessing and prevent the ruthless secularization, that would be a programme!” [4]

It will not do harm to mention that Lessing, the one to explicitly contest the Revelation, sees in the Bible a mere product of the childhood and adolescence of humanity. He holds the view that it befits the rational ripening of the human race to discover rational communications in biblical utterances, however shrouded in mythical and figurative forms. Such an ‘enlightened’ conception of the Scripture – means Berger – stands in the background of more than one exegetic initiative.

As for the name of the most famous pupil of Socrates mentioned in Berger’s quotation above, let us note that it is precisely Plato’s intellectual heritage that Berger is vigilant to. Berger holds the view that it is especially the influence of Platonism that creates the problems to contemporary Theology concerning the sensorially perceptible and corporal. Should exegesis interpret the miracles of Jesus only as symbolic narratives or inner experiences of his disciples or followers, there is, in Berger’s opinion, Platonizing preunderstanding of the exegete at work. For instance, in connection with the widespread purely symbolic interpretations of the miraculous feeding of the multitude (John 6), Berger defends the primary literal, sensorially perceptible and historical guise of the event. As such it is then possible to set the story within a context: “Anyone who underestimates the visible and holds it to be trivial, that one is the disciple of Plato, not the disciple of Jesus. After the Gospel of John the origin of power and of the mission of Jesus is constantly linked to where the journey of Jesus and his disciples is bound and its destination. The

visible [miraculous feeding], that we now are able to see, is a mere particle between the origin and the goal. A particle that is not worthless, since that is where all the transfiguration begins.” [5]

In analogy to the above, Berger reacts when the physical nature of the Resurrection of Jesus that he himself places an emphasis upon is called into question. Again, he claims, we have to deal with the Platonizing vanishing of Christian faith. Klaus Berger made a very clear statement in that respect in a violent polemic with Eugen Drewermann that took place on the pages of a prestigious German daily at the end of the year 2003 [6].

More than any philosophy strictly speaking does Berger more and more obviously avow spirituality and considers it an inevitable prerequisite for competent exegetic work. By spirituality he understands Christian spirituality, at best the spirituality of some Catholic order. It need also be mentioned that when Berger translates and publishes the work of Nicolas Cusanus *De pace fidei* [7] it is not only for literary and historical reasons. That is to say that Cusanus is for Berger one of the few personalities among the philosophers that he takes truly seriously.

By stressing the importance of wisdom in his hermeneutics of the New Testament, in accord with the encyclical *Fides et ratio*, Berger declares his support to the sapiential nature of Philosophy [John Paul II., *Fides et ratio*, art. 81].

### **3. Philosophy of history and the exegesis of the New Testament**

Berger adopts the post-Bultmann trend in the New Testament Bible studies that turns away from the hypercritical line of treatment of the historical value of the New Testament. Together with others he wishes to listen to secular historians who – he believes – trust the ancient Christian sources often more than theologians and who have observed that there is no other person from antiquity that we have as much historically well-founded information as we do about Jesus of Nazareth [3, p. 37-86].

Berger is certainly right in saying that Rudolf Bultmann departed from the premise that history is an enclosed system where the causes and effects are linked through strict necessity. History thus conceived – warns Berger – allows no space for anything unique, miraculous or supernatural, and in particular not for the direct act of God. It was in the optics of such philosophical approach to history that Bultmann was reading the New Testament [8]. Who would not know the quotation of the Bible scholar of Marburg that aptly suggests how he understood the historical value of the New Testament texts? “One cannot use the electric light and the radio receiver and in sickness use modern medical and clinical means and at the same time believe in a world of spirits and miracles of the New Testament. And if someone thinks that he for his person can do that, he should realize that if he is presenting it to be the attitude of the Christian faith, he is making Christian evangelization at present incomprehensible and impossible.” [9]

Although Berger bears considerable respect for Bultmann's epoch-making work, he is in principle opposed to his programme of demythologising the New Testament – an attempt to give the 'images' of the vanished Biblical world existential significance for the man of today. The stories, events and the talk of the New Testament are to Bultmann mere ahistorical skin, a myth that should be removed to get to the existentially valid core: "The sense proper of myth does not repose in it to provide an objective image of the world; it is much more an instrument to express how man understands himself; myth should not be interpreted in the cosmological sense but anthropologically – better so: existentially" [9, p. 22].

For Berger the New Testament is not a collection of myths, and it is existentially relevant above all and precisely because it is historically credible. Berger puts a number of questions to Bultmann [10]: Is demythologising necessary? For what reasons must man accept the conviction about the mythological nature of the texts of the New Testament? Is demythologising possible at all? Is it possible to separate the wording of the New Testament from the message reposing beyond that text? Is it healthy to radically separate and divorce the existential experience from historical reality? What ethical impact does it have when history is perceived only as an illustration of human potential? The two exegetes, one from Marburg and the other from Heidelberg are certainly linked together by their interest in the prerequisites of their field of study. Bultmann is right to note: "Exegesis cannot exist without any prerequisites [...]" [11] The indispensable prerequisite in the process of questioning a text is, however, the historical method. Exegesis as interpretation of historical texts is therefore already somehow a historical discipline." [11]

History, however, cannot say practically anything historically relevant about Jesus, means Bultmann. And there comes, Berger claims, Bultmann's brilliant – and at the same time erroneous – move. Bultmann proclaims this situation, dismal from the point of view of historians, as resounding with the Protestant principle *sola fides*. There is no need of 'acts' in the sense of the historical words and acts of Jesus Christ. Man is justified by faith without acts. True faith and confidence in God can do without facts [3, p. 25].

Berger, though, does not consider the texts of the New Testament as myth and faith to be a leap of confidence to which a Christian is taking off outside the firm ground of history. On the contrary, he in fact indicates Bultmann to be the maker of myths and he understands faith to be a humble acceptance of suffered-through testimony and reliable neotestamentarian memory [3, p. 26]. He accompanies his claims with archeological and historical arguments, as well as methodological and hermeneutical suggestions.

### ***3.1. Confidence and loyalty as a methodological choice***

Berger calls his hermeneutics also the *hermeneutics of confidence* (*Hermeneutik des Vertrauens*) [12] and he trusts the New Testament authors as truthful and honest people who do not wish to deceive or mystify their readers. If

we tried to identify the kind of hermeneutics related to the texts of the New Testament that is espoused in the constitution *Dei Verbum*, it would certainly not be misleading if for that purpose we adopted Berger's above mentioned term. In the constitution we can find the statement that the evangelists "preserved the form of preaching but always so that they bring us true and sincere facts about Jesus" [Vatican Council II, *Dei Verbum*, art. 19].

*Dei Verbum* does avoid in this connection the adjective 'historical' (facts), but the general diction of the document clearly indicates that the *form* of preaching the joyful news in no way betrays the historical *content* of the message announced. Berger is well aware that by his choice of the hermeneutics of confidence he is by far not done with the texts of the New Testament. To trust does not mean to understand, mainly if we have to do with a world in all respects as distant as Judaism of the first century indeed is. Berger's confidence in the neotestamentarian text is higher than the indignation he can cause to the critical reader. From the standpoint of confidence, he unleashes a *criticism of criticism* that is mainly a criticism of the historical criticism which has, in our author's view, for over decades been manifesting non-viability of the virginal conception of Jesus, walking on water, resurrection of the dead and many others [3, p. 159-181].

Jesus is to Berger above all a Jew of antiquity that is why he is to us, Europeans of the early third millennium, to a large extent a stranger. And Berger comes hurrying in with an example: to contemporary Western culture Jesus is a greater stranger than a Polish Jew of the 18<sup>th</sup> or 19<sup>th</sup> century. Berger would have it that precisely the Polish Jewish community was closer to the time of Jesus than any religious culture of today whatsoever and that included its attitude to magic, mysticism and miracles. Also the wisdom of Jesus is unfamiliar to the contemporary Central European, and therefore the reader of the New Testament must be very much on the alert and attentive [13]. Berger expresses the desirable attitude of the reader of the New Testament through a telling expression – *loyal*. Such manner of reading does not, imply, though, in any case any intellectual passivity [14]. Berger's confidence does not concern only canonical texts but also, to a certain extent, the Apocrypha. His knowledge and frequent use of the apocryphal texts represents a no small part of his exegetic originality and theological mark of distinction. Berger obviously knows that he is moving there on somewhat thin ice and so he usually formulates his conclusions derived along the path of the Apocrypha in the conditional.

### **3.2. Historicity of mystical messages**

Biblical visions, messages about angels appearing [15], the effect of demons [16], the Easter encounter with the Resurrected are called by Berger mystical messages and he considers them in a certain sense as historical. "That is mystical facticity. With its part and parcel being miracles, charismata, prayer and visions, the existence of demons and the corporal nature of the Resurrected – not private, but objective, although causally unjustifiable reality." [4, p. 402]

To draw attention to the reality and historicity of mystical facts is doubtless one of the central points of emphasis of the Heidelberg theologian. Our author claims that an analysis of the ideological structure of those mystical messages makes it possible to exclude that it is a case of private, subjective or pathological experiences. Rather, we have to make do in those cases with an independent sphere of reality that can manifest itself in space and time.

However much as it may sound mythical and fairy tale-like, Berger holds firmly by the existence and effect of angels: "I insist that it is meaningful to talk of angels and that it is so after both the Old and the New Testament. While in the New Testament angels are talked about more frequently than in the Old one." [15, p. 4]

Berger considers as a historical fact also the exorcisms performed by Jesus and he refuses to accept that it is only the charismatic and positive influence of Jesus on people with psychosomatic or psychiatric diseases that Jewish antiquity did not understand and therefore they were demonized: "The Bible cleared of demons and exorcisms may appear to many as yet a product fit to be consumed, but that is as if you removed the original taste from wine" [12, p.78].

At the end of the 1990s the Göttingen neotestamentarian scholar Gerd Lüdemann [17] published his propositions concerning the Resurrection of Jesus where he identifies the reality of the empty grave as entirely ahistorical and the Easter visions as the result of depth psychological processes in the minds of the disciples processing the loss of the dear person of their master. It was doubtless the sharp clash between Berger and Lüdemann that reopened the question of the real character of the mystical events depicted in the Bible. The evaluation of the plausibility of resurrection, the existence of angels and of purely religious visions, Klaus Berger notes, are not among the topics of the Natural sciences of psychoanalysis.

All that has so far been said is connected to the relationship between exegesis and neotestamentarian hermeneutics. Berger is well aware of the relations and of the differences of both the categories. While exegesis explains and interprets concrete texts, hermeneutics determines the rules of approach to that text. Cautiously expressed, hermeneutics is to exegesis as grammar is to language. Without good hermeneutics it is impossible to do relevant exegesis. The applied results of exegesis in Theology are then consistently separated from the discipline as such. The application, indeed, requires previous meticulous exegetic work. It is, however, another independent and a more demanding step in theology with its own criteriology [10, p. 80].

#### **4. Hermeneutics of otherness**

Berger has been struggling with the issues of neotestamentarian hermeneutics since his student years, and he has worked out his own hermeneutic approach to the texts of the New Testament that he calls: "Hermeneutics of the third way: It is not fundamentalist, as if the objective of



exegesis was to find out in what kind of inn the Good Samaritan put up the Jew mugged by the robbers. Neither does it proceed so that each word of Jesus [in the New Testament] must originate directly from [historical] Jesus. This particular hermeneutics is, however, neither rational. If it were, then all the 'loud' miracles would come to life in the imagination of the time after Easter, and Jesus's title the Son of God would have no origin before Easter [...] - The third way consists in the following: With respect to the words and acts of Jesus is the hermeneutics of doubt an apriori made decision. The texts disliked among the exegetes, as e.g. the Transfiguration or Resurrection should be taken seriously in their claim for reality (mystical facticity). In translating the text, let us not reduce its otherness, on the contrary, let us guard it and let us comprehend it as provocative otherness in the strict sense of the word. After all, mystical reality of God is just as strange and timeless. Religion will not stand any kind of modernization in the essential (the Scripture, the Church Fathers, and liturgy); there is a need for it, though, in pastoral care and in preaching." [4, p. 402 at al]

The approach outlined above is most frequently called by Berger *hermeneutics of otherness* (*Hermeneutik der Fremdheit*) and he formulated its principles in his book *Hermeneutik des Neuen Testaments* [10]. Berger points out that this kind of hermeneutics consists in an endeavour to avoid all philosophical-hermeneutic filters, all kinds of psychological pre-understanding, and optics of sociological and theoretical-religious hypotheses during our contact with the New Testament. The German neotestamentarian scholar keeps repeating that an exegete must not insert in his interpretation of the Scripture his own ideas about the world and the morals, and to use it for one's own opinions and to reduce the value of those passages that are not in harmony with one's own personal convictions. "My most important principle goes: It is not us who criticize the text and who adapt it to our own needs, it is the text that criticizes us." [5, p. 14]

The logic of the neotestamentarian text is not our own logic, stresses Berger and he develops his hermeneutics of otherness in two steps: first he tries out the 'criticism of criticism' [18, 19], and then he undertakes a historical psychology of the New Testament [20]. He wishes to place his criticism of criticism against the well-established platitudes of exegesis; through historical psychology on the other hand he wills to build a dam against the contamination of Biblical texts of 'modern' i.e. rationalistic ideology. Historical psychology should prevent the 'interpenetration of horizons', of a merging of the ideas of the European 21<sup>st</sup> century on one hand, with the geographically and culturally foreign world of the Palestine of the second century on the other. Berger also refuses to acknowledge the validity of anthropological constants as Freud understood them and he refuses to read the New Testament through the optics of modern experiential and theoretical models.

Berger is trying to separate his *hermeneutics of otherness* from any other theological decisions. He is only interested in the otherness of the biblical text and the subjectivity of the ancient author and he does not want to fill his hermeneutics in advance with any theological contents. Although for Berger

hermeneutics is at the service of theology, or even of the Church itself, they may not be put on an equal basis [10, p. 81]. There is no need to emphasize that this hermeneutic approach of Berger arouses contradictory reactions in the scholarly circles.

## 5. Conclusions

In the present article we have discussed some stimulating ideas of Klaus Berger. We have offered the reader selected questions of Berger concerning philosophical anchoring and ideological background and the axioms of historical criticism. Readers have certainly remarked that the German theologian feels that modern exegesis knows, predominantly and over and over again, mere criticism, analogy and correlation. Berger's position in relation to the philosophical basis of exegesis and some of the faces of neotestamentarian hermeneutics could be summed up in the following questions: Why must everything in the New Testament be criticized, except historical criticism? Why must everything in the history of religion be in some way the same or similar? Where is then a place in this world for God's activity? Why must things always be somehow interconnected and derived one from another? Cannot there exist the unprecedented, the unique, the underivable? Berger answers these questions, which he puts to his colleagues, by stressing spirituality as a *sui generis* sapiential nonreductionist philosophy and also by his hermeneutics of confidence and hermeneutics of otherness. He wishes to trust historically as much as possible the narratives of the New Testament, and the respect to the Book of books should open the mystery of God himself to exegesis. In spite of a number of questions may Berger's hermeneutic proposals be considered adequate to Christian Revelation, since they correspond to God's transcendence (*hermeneutics of otherness*) and to God's immanence (*hermeneutics of confidence*). We may, certainly, from time to time reproach one thing or another to Klaus Berger, the decidedly positive thing is, however – as it is the conviction of the author of the present article – his sense for the transcendent mystery that bends down to man on the pages of the Bible and wishes to address him.

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