

# Recognition of Conceptuality as a Hermeneutical Tool

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The rise of interest in the problem of hermeneutics during the modern period must surely be regarded as a blessing by all who are engaged in any way in the task of interpreting the meaning of human constructs, of the products of art rather than of nature; for the signal advances in any field usually derive from a re-examination of the methods utilized by its practitioners, rather than from a more rigorous utilization of methods already current. Of course, the interpreter is always threatened by any question thrown against the very basis on which he has carried out his interpretation; but, unless he is more concerned to defend his own past efforts than to understand and illuminate the works he is interpreting, he will accept this challenge as a stimulus to further and better interpretation.

It is not the purpose of this essay to announce a new discovery of method, but merely to point to an aspect of modern developments in this field which has been widely, though tacitly, accepted in most fields of interpretation, and which has been utilized quite constantly in the more fruitful phases of Biblical interpretation. This aspect may seem, to many, too obvious to be mentioned; and would that it seemed so to all! On the other hand, some of the grossest confusions in interpretation stem chiefly from a failure to recognize this very issue. It is in the hope of clarifying the problem, and making explicit what is generally only implicit in hermeneutics, that this essay is offered. The aspect or problem with which we shall deal is that of *Conceptuality*.

## I

It is the task of hermeneutics to find methods of interpretation which will enable the interpreter to ask the same questions of the construct that the work actually attempts to answer, and in doing so to perceive the answer offered by the construct 465 itself. Though interpretation is often carried on for ends other than this, yet, in such cases, we are not truly interpreting the work itself, but rather are using it as a means to another end. (To simplify our language and examples henceforth, we shall limit the question of interpretation to *documents*; the principles are essentially the same, however, for other constructs as well, such as paintings, music, dramas, etc.)

For example, one might study Shakespeare's *Hamlet* for the purpose of discovering the extent to which various sources were utilized by the author in writing the play — how much from the *Historica Danica* of Saxo Grammaticus, how much of Kyd, how much of de Belleforest, and so on. One could also attempt to determine the extent to which the drama conforms to medieval and Renaissance patterns for tragedy as compared to the Aristotelian pattern. We might likewise examine it as a possible instance of psychological problems as clarified by Freud; and we might consider the evidence it gives concerning attitudes toward royalty in Tudor England. None of these approaches may be labeled a crime in interpretation. But we are left with a question none of them has touched, to wit: What does this play, in itself, say to the reader or viewer? What is *its* question? And what answer or answers or refusal to answer does *it* offer? However much we may treat a work as a means to another end, even quite legitimately, we are still faced with the work as an end in itself; and that means, the problem of interpretation of it *as* an end, in its own right.

That the four Gospels are subject to the same variety of approaches is now clearly evident; it is similarly evident that such approaches do not ask the really central question as far as the works themselves are concerned. We have long wrestled with such questions as: What literary sources do these Gospels have, and what are their dates of composition? What methods of transmission preserved the tradition before its incorporation into our present documents, and what changes did these methods introduce into the tradition? To what extent do the various narratives correspond to events in the career of Jesus? How much evidence of later church controversies is present in the narratives? And so on. These questions have been important, for they have assisted us in moving toward the solution of a question we rightly regard as significant: What can we know of the career and 466

words of the man Jesus of Nazareth?

But significant as this question is, it does not enable us to interpret the Gospels as works asking their own questions, and offering their own answers. And their questions may not be our questions, and we may not even have imagined their answers. We have been in the position of those who study the Parthenon to discover the quarries from which various parts of it were taken, and to learn the methods of shaping stone applied by its builders. It remains to ask about the Parthenon itself, and *its* meaning. The stones and quarries and tools and methods are only means to an end, although of course we might also reverse this order and examine the building as a means to the end of learning about stone-workers' methods.

## II

In any attempt to interpret a document from another time or another culture, a major barrier to the attempt, in addition to the usual problems of interpretation, is the *difference* between the author's language and ours, between his culture and ours, between his assumptions and ours, between his way of looking at things and ours. On the most elementary level, this barrier appears when a contemporary author, from our own Western culture, writes a work in a language other than our own. The problem of translation between his language and ours is interposed into the task of interpreting the work, whether the translation is done by one man and the interpretation by another, or the interpretation is done by a man who learns the second language, and so to speak translates himself rather than the work. In any case, a new stage of the hermeneutical process has been added.

One of the more serious problems posed by this difference between the author's ways and our ways is the risk we run of confusing some of these features of difference — especially those which seem unusually strange or novel to us — with the actual intent of the author. We might easily, for instance, mistake a feature of *Hamlet* which Shakespeare shared with all his contemporaries for a part of his message. I do not believe in ghosts; I might suppose that Shakespeare wishes to prove the importance of ghosts in the affairs of men, if I am ignorant of the widespread belief in ghosts in Shakespeare's England. Ghosts were "at hand", so to say; Shakespeare had no need to argue or them, they simply offered themselves for his use. This risk of confusion between the author's ready-to-hand tools and his intent makes it quite important to know well the nature of the tools he actually employed, and what form they already had when he set his hand to them. 467

The importance of this distinction is almost painfully obvious to those who have read labored exegesis of a Biblical passage which hammers away at the definite article or its absence before some crucial word, laying great stress on the definiteness or lack of it, in blissful ignorance of the considerable differences between Greek use of the definite article and ours. Such confusions seem comedy to most of us; but on other levels the problem remains with us. The level of Conceptuality is one which may best be illustrated by an examination of the prior level of *language*.

### III

A *language* in the usual sense of the word is a vehicle provided to an individual by his society which enables him to formulate whatever he wishes to understand, interpret, and communicate. Without this vehicle, apparently, he is not even able to think, in the human sense; his raw experiences and impressions become thoughts through the agency of language, which is a necessary tool of reflection and understanding and interpretation and communication. It is no objection to this point to bring up the question of music (or the like), for we simply begin to speak of another language, not of non-language. That the languages of music are less well examined and understood than the verbal languages is simply an indication of the great need for continued study, and not of the failure of music to qualify as a language. But our concern here is with verbal languages, since we are dealing with verbal documents.

Viewing a variety of languages from the outside, it is plain that for some purposes one language is better than another, while for other purposes, yet a third may prove better. I am persuaded of the superiority of English over Swahili for purposes of philosophical and theological inquiry; but it may well be that a treatise on lions would be better written in Swahili, if it be true that it has more than a score of words for various kinds of lions, and many nuances available to describe their behavior. Languages which make careful time distinctions have advantages over Chinese which does not, if matters involving time-relationships are to be discussed. On the other hand, it is also the case that one is forced in English to make a time-assertion, because of the necessity for tense, even when the question of time may only confuse the issue. 468

But further, a given language restricts its users in highly significant ways; it limits the thinker to its structure. To return to the lion example, about which I know absolutely nothing: Suppose I am traveling in lion-country, and see a lion.

this datum is translated by my intelligence into a thought: “There is a lion”, I think. My language asks no more of me than to decide whether it is an elephant or a lion or a zebra. Of course, I may choose to decide between lion and lioness; but beyond this, I have no further interpretation to make unless I am a zoologist with an extended special language for lions. But now suppose I am a native of lion-country, and my language is much more refined relative to lions. My thought cannot be crystallized until I decide whether it is a young lion or an old one; a lion hunting food or merely resting; an individual lion or a member of a group; a lion of this variety or that. If my language demands a choice between these terms, then I must think about the choice; but if my language does not, then I find my thought limited without my ever having reflected about the matter. The range of possibilities of my thought is set by my language. Of course, it is also possible for me to make a deliberate alteration of my language; if I am a zoologist, I will greatly extend the English language, or use Latin — or even Swahili, perhaps — in order to speak more adequately about lions. But without very special effort, my thinking will be restricted to the language which I am given.

This restriction is not limited to the question of vocabulary. It also extends to the matters of grammar and syntax. We have already spoken of the matter of tense in Chinese. The studies of Aristotle’s logic which seem to show that what he found to be logical is simply the structure of the Greek language, are another example of this restriction. And the current studies comparing the Greek and Hebrew languages and their related modes of thought also illustrate the point.

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In a sense, it is not correct to speak of *restriction* of our thought because of language; rather, it *channels* it, in one way rather than another. In order to make thought possible at all, a structure of language is necessary; but a structure implies this structure rather than that, and thus limitation to this rather than that. In mathematics, some system of numeration is necessary; and the use of a decimal system rather than a duodecimal (or the other way around) means limitations and restrictions of various sorts. One loses the advantages of whatever systems one does not choose. Yet, a choice is necessary — *some* system must be used, and thus one’s thought is channeled into that system’s restrictions and advantages rather than those of another.

Now, one does not normally have freedom as to what language or what numeration system he will use; where I was born, they were already counting by tens and speaking English. Language is *given* to us, in the first place. And even though it is subject to our demands upon it, in a limited way, and changes somewhat in time

and under stress, yet whatever language we have, it is seldom completely suited to our needs. We begin to need (whether consciously or unconsciously) to clarify and understand matters for which our language is unable to provide assistance. It is usually when we learn a second or third language that we are enabled to perceive some of our problems with clarity, and make them the subject of explicit reflection and thought. It is even occasionally the case that a man exchanges his native language for another, in order better to accomplish whatever it is he wishes to accomplish. But for most of us who retain our original language as our chief tool for reflection, there is a greatly enhanced possibility for understanding and interpreting given to us by an awareness of the differences between another language and our own. The schoolboy method of learning a language tries to avoid this very advantage, by reducing the foreign language to a code for his own: "What is the translation of this word? And that tense? And this idiom?" Everything is reduced to a system of equivalents, and one loses the other language and its possibilities in the process. The advantage is gained only when the other language is allowed to be different, with its own lack of equivalents for much of our language, and its additional stock of possibilities for which our language has nothing comparable. 470

Thus we see that a language is necessary, is superior or inferior in various ways for various purposes, is restrictive or channeling, is normally given rather than chosen, and is better understood by comparison with other languages.

A final note is more than obvious: It is not the purpose of a text in the Greek language to persuade us to learn or accept the Greek language, even though knowing Greek is indispensable if I am to grasp the meaning of it (unless someone else translates it for me, and tells me what it means). But even if I learn Greek in order to understand, for example, *Oedipus Rex*, it is certainly not the case that Sophocles' purpose is to demand of me that I change my language to Greek, and give up English. And although Greek may be far better for *Oedipus Rex* than English, nonetheless, unless we imagine that the whole world is to be taught Greek, we must undertake to translate *Oedipus* out of an alien tongue and into one known by its would-be readers, doing the best we can to explain what is lost in the process and what is inadequately said in English.

#### IV

Beyond the facilities provided for thought and understanding by a language proper, something further seems to be required by the human being engaged in reflection and interpretation of experience — something like a language raised one

power. (Indeed, in much contemporary philosophy, the term “language” is used in this extended sense.) This is a *structure of concepts*, a framework for thought made up of conceptual elements, in terms of which one thinks, interprets, understands, and communicates. At its most elementary level, this structure overlaps the upper levels of language; every language structures concepts to a certain degree. But languages, or at least the languages most of us know best, generally offer the possibility of structuring thought in more than one way, and of conceptualizing in alternative ways. For want of any other term, we may refer to this structure of concepts as a *conceptuality* — using the word not in the sense of the power of forming concepts, but in the sense of the already-formed variety and arrangement of them.

On the most highly sophisticated level, a conceptuality may be refined and explicated to the degree that we call a *philosophy*. But philosophy is engaged 471 in by a few, on the conscious level; while conceptual structures are utilized by perhaps every man who thinks and talks. A given conceptuality may be shared by people who use several different languages; while people of one language may have diverse conceptualities. Nonetheless, it is generally the case that people of a given time and place tend to share the same conceptual structure, even more so than the same language — i. e., a conceptuality tends to be more widespread than a language. (We are here using the term “language” in its linguistic sense, not the current extended philosophic sense.)

Whether the particular term is used or not, it has long been the practice of historians of thought to identify conceptualities. In some instance, only special aspects of a conceptuality are singled out for description, instead of the comprehensive system of conceptualizing as a whole, while in other cases the whole structure is elaborated. Often the structure is given no special name, while in some instances labels are applied to simplify references. At times we say merely, “the thought-world of ancient Egypt”; but sometimes we can distinguish various conceptualities within a period by speaking of “Apocalypticism” and “Stoicism” and “Gnosticism” and the like. Some conceptualities are honored by carefully worked-out philosophic formulation when they first appear, such as Stoicism; others receive such attention only later, such as Gnosticism; and some never discover a philosopher, such as perhaps Apocalypticism. Possibly some of the labels we give are simply subdivisions of larger structures; certainly many conceptual features of Apocalypticism and Gnosticism are more or less the same, despite many crucial differences as well. The differences are no doubt most obvious to the insider,

while the similarities are more evident to the alien from another time or culture.

But the issue in studying conceptualities is not to find the hard-and-fast lines between every type; rather, it is to discern the actual features of each type, and the extent to which it is similar to, and different from, each other type. One of the interesting aspects of the last decade in New Testament study has been the way in which the interpenetration — or should we say interrelationship? — of Gnostic and Apocalyptic thought has been discovered. This has led to some silly-season battles over terms, which might better have been left unfought.

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Surely it is needless now to indicate the ways in which a conceptuality is parallel to language. It is *necessary* for thought — i. e., one can no more think and speak without concepts which cohere with each other in some way than one can speak and think without a language. Some conceptualities may be *superior* for some purposes, and *inferior* for others. Any conceptuality is *restrictive* in the sense that it partially determines how we shall go about thinking and speaking — that is, it *channels* our thought in one manner rather than another. It is usually simply there, a *given* we accept, rather than freely chosen by us. And *comparison of conceptualities* is a great aid to the use of any one of them. Finally, the purpose of using a conceptuality is not to persuade the listener-reader to adopt it; rather, it is as much taken for granted as the reader's knowledge and use of the same language as the writer's. It is simply a vehicle for thought.

## V

Now, however, we come to a crucial point: What manner of “intent” on the part of an author may be conveyed by means of any conceptuality used within the confines of some language? That is to ask, what may a conceptuality be a vehicle *for*, beyond the vague term “thought”? Here I wish to attempt no complete classification of the kinds and intents or the modes of thought, but only to point toward the special mode of intent with which the interpreter of such humane letters as serious fiction, drama, poetry, history, and the Bible is concerned. This mode is worth an unambiguous name, as is the case with conceptuality. I must therefore choose a term in use for it which also has other uses, and carefully specify the sense in which I use it. The term I shall use is *understanding*. By an *understanding*, I mean a relationship one takes up toward one's existence; or a construction of the meaning-significance of one's universe as it is engaged with the self and the self with it, in terms of which every decision is made; or a relationship between the self and its universe in terms of which all decisions are made. In



other words, I am using the word in its primordial sense — that which *stands under* — stands under choice and action. This is given as sense I.9 in *The Oxford English Dictionary*. It is not so much an attitude, as what underlies all attitudes. It is not primarily an intellectual matter, since it concerns the heart more than the head. An understanding is not an opinion, but rather the basis for action. It is at stake whenever one comes to a decision about anything affecting the self and its relationships, for to make a decision based on another understanding is to assume or take up that other understanding. And it is not a question of what theories one holds, but of the core of one's choices. It is the question of one mode of selfhood rather than another. 473

There are many possible modes of understanding, or varieties of understandings. Usually they go by the names of gods or religions, occasionally by the names of philosophies. This is of course not at all to say that adherents to a given religion hold the same understanding; their practices and opinions may be the same, while the basic relationship to existence may be quite diverse among them. We might rather say that an understanding often appears in the form of *faith in a god*. If I respond to my universe as to one where everything that is going to happen to me, will happen, and I had best try to come to terms with this fixed order, then I may formulate this basic decision concerning how I will behave in my world in terms of Heimarmene; or Kismet; or Fate; or Astrology; or something else, perhaps, possibly even a purely scientific determinism. The trappings will vary according to my culture and other factors. But a fundamental stance toward my existence which makes all decisions flow from the understanding of being involved in an inevitable process of fate or whatever I call it, may be discerned through all the trappings, if we are prepared to look for it. Another understanding might be that which has gone variously by the names Tyche, Fortuna, Lady Luck, chance, indeterminism, and the like. I am not referring to studied opinions as to how the universe operates; I am referring to the basing of one's life on such an understanding.

For just here is the rub (and it is the rub of human speech with the possibility of deception and self-deception): there is not only an understanding on which each man bases his life at any given moment, but also a talking about that understanding. The understanding is implicit in the way one involves oneself in his existence; speech and thought make it explicit. And in the process of making explicit, we may deceive others or ourselves concerning our real foundation of choice and action. Hence it is important to keep in mind the difference between an understanding, which is always inextricably tied in which choice and action, and 474

a description of an understanding, which may be not at all related to one's true understanding. This is put even better by an old Negro spiritual line, "Ever'body talkin' 'bout Heaven not goin' there".

The process of making explicit an implicit understanding is one which involves a language and a conceptual structure, as we have already seen. And this means that when we are attempting to grasp the nature of the understanding an author may be concerned to present to us as an option, it is of the utmost importance that we study the conceptual framework he uses with the same care we bestow on his language. Without such careful study, we will fall into the trap of mistaking similar-sounding or similar-appearing concepts from another structure for those in our own. In language, this is a common error of the beginner; he notices the presence of cognates, and proceeds to mistake any unknown word for its nearest apparent equivalent in his own language. In interpreting conceptualities, it is fatally easy to suppose that a concept which also exists in one's own conceptual structure must mean the same thing. The most notorious and most confused of these is the concept "God". It is possible to grasp the real meaning of this concept only when one sees what part it plays in the whole structure of concepts in which it is found.

But perhaps the greatest error made when the function of conceptuality is not perceived, is the *confusion of the understanding* presented by the document *with the conceptuality* in terms of which it is presented. One may suppose that the *intent* of the document is to impose its own conceptuality on the reader, since the reader finds the conceptuality itself strange and alien. The extent to which this is the case will probably depend on the naiveté of the reader; but to a degree it probably happens to most interpreters, in inverse proportion to their awareness of the problem.

It should be borne in mind that the current usage of terms such as "Apocalypticism", "Gnosticism" and the like, does not distinguish between the conceptuality utilized by such ancients and the understanding which it was their real concern to promote. Hence, "Gnosticism" is used to mean both a conceptual structure which functioned as a vehicle for Gnostics and some Christians alike, and an understanding which was and is at odds with that proclamation of a peculiar understanding which we call Gospel. There is no purpose in quarreling with usage — one never wins. But at least we may discern the difference in usage, and become aware of the radical distinction between what is being proclaimed and the vehicle (necessary though a vehicle is) in terms of which the proclamation is given. In view of the his-

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toric connection between certain understandings and certain conceptualities (such as between the Gnostic understanding and the Gnostic conceptuality), a danger is evidently in store for any new or other understanding which makes use of the same conceptuality, to wit: Hearers may suppose that the old understanding is being proclaimed, or at least may confuse the old, the new, and the conceptuality; the users may themselves be seduced, by the previous function of the concepts, into adopting to some degree the understanding once associated with the conceptuality. But this danger can scarcely be avoided. The Greek language (and later the Latin language) tended to seduce Christianity in the direction of its own older associations, as any word study will quickly reveal. But this was not a ground for refusing to use Greek; for it is likely that even Sanskrit and Swahili have their drawbacks.

In the case of the New Testament, the confusion of understanding and conceptuality exhibits itself in the most diverse fashions. It ranges all the way from the naive Bible-believer who tenaciously holds to an earth-centered astronomy and a 6000-year-old creation with devils beneath every stone, to the classical liberal scholar who speaks of “influences” on early Christianity, and the elements it “adopted” from alien religions. We smile at the former, for his error is one we do not make; but it is not so obvious that we have really escaped it. We may merely have adopted other opinions about science. And as for the latter: The general tone of debate even today over such conceptual structures as Gnosticism and Apocalypticism and so-called “rabbinic Judaism”, and the like, suggests that we are accepting the same point of view as the “influence and adoption” school of interpretation. We argue over how many tenets of Gnosticism, if any, were taken over by Christianity, or whether these tenets may not also have been held by Palestinian Jews, thereby being no longer unclean for church-use. We strive to show that primitive Christianity was Simon-pure (oh, what a lovely phrase!) and untinged by non-Christian notions, or we strive to show the opposite, or perhaps a mediating position.

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But are not all of these discussions missing the real relationship of Christianity to its possible predecessors? — namely, that Christianity no more constructed its own conceptuality than it constructed its own language, although it profoundly modified both in the course of utilizing them? And if this is so, then we have separable issues: (1) What conceptuality or conceptualities are utilized by this particular document of the New Testament we are attempting to interpret, and to what extent are the concepts re-structured into a different pattern, and how far

do they represent different values than they do in their original home? (2) What understanding is presented by this document as an option for our own lives? What does it tell me might stand-under my choices and my actions, as the understanding basis of my life? In the case of the New Testament, this *understanding* goes by the name, “faith in God”. And (3), in what conceptuality meaningful to me can I interpret this understanding — or this faith — to myself, so that I can explicitly consider it as an option? This third issue is plainly impossible apart from the first and second, while the second is likewise impossible without the first and third. Each of them implies a distinct awareness of the problem of conceptualities, and in the end should make us examine our own with more care. But for this final task, we shall need the aid of those wise men whose business it is to consider questions and provide us with their reflections — the philosophers.

In brief, then: An understanding (of which *faith in God* is one mode or possibility, the one Christians assert as the only authentic and true one) inevitably uses a conceptuality when it comes to explicit formulation; and for this formulation, every conceptuality uses a language as its vehicle. A given understanding might utilize various conceptualities for its expression, just as a given conceptuality in turn might utilize various languages for its expression — in each case, with possibly differing degrees of success with differing vehicles. And genuine interpretation of a document from another culture or time is not possible without a recognition and identification of both language and conceptuality within which it is cast. This recognition may be intuitive, as often in the past; or, as increasingly in recent years, self-conscious. Those of us who are born without the gift had best plod along the hard way, much as we learned Greek. The distinction between understanding and conceptuality will no longer be one of kernel and husk, for without conceptuality, 477 an understanding cannot come to expression; we do not often refer to Greek as the husk of the New Testament, concealing the kernel. Rather, Greek makes possible the witness, even though the witness is not to Greek as such. So it is with conceptuality — it makes expression possible; and what is required is not wholesale acceptance, nor varying degrees of rejection, of the conceptualities of the New Testament — but only their interpretation.