

The historical-hermeneutical prelude to the legacy of Karl Barth

G M M Pelser & Andries G van Aarde¹

Faculty of Theology
University of Pretoria

Abstract

The article aims to explain Karl Barth's hermeneutical legacy against the background of the influence of the Enlightenment in philosophy and theology during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. It consists of a discussion of a "hermeneutic chart", mapped by Schleiermacher, Dilthey, Bultmann, Ebeling, and Ricoeur. This "map" is introduced in the foreword by outlining mileposts and concluded by pointing to the so-called postmodern "hermeneutic critique against hermeneutics". The cord that keeps the fragments of individuals' contributions together in the article is the function of the notion "hermeneutic circle" and, especially, how this notion had been adapted since the Enlightenment through Romanticism until Dialectic Theology, conducing to present-day Postmodernity.

1. INTRODUCTION

Can anything new be written about Karl Barth's² (1886-1968) hermeneutics? The answer is probably no. Therefore, these two articles³ are not intended to focus on the contribution of Karl Barth (1886-1968) as such to the field of theological hermeneutics and Biblical interpretation, but to describe his place in

¹ Gert M M Pelser and Andries G van Aarde are retired professors who previously lectured in the Department of New Testament Studies, Faculty of Theology, University of Pretoria. This article is a revised excerpt from the study course "Theological Hermeneutics" presented jointly by Professor G M M Pelser and Professor A G van Aarde at the Faculty of Theology from 1989-2000. With this and the following-up article on hermeneutics Professor Van Aarde would like to thank Professor Pelser for his influential heritage with regard to the teaching tradition in hermeneutics in the Department of New Testament Studies at the University of Pretoria.

² See inter alia Weber ([1963] 1967); Korsch (1996); Busch (1975), Härle (1975:207-224); Bromiley (1979); Jüngel (1980:251-268; 1982:22-60); Maurer (1989); Schmithals (1996:23-52); Trowitzsch (1996:73-109); Burnett (2001); Torrance (1976, 1990); Sykes (1982); Hartwell (1964); Webster (1981:31-35; 1994:35-52; 1995, 1998, [2000] 2004); Plasger (2000); Dawson (2007).

³ See also G M M Pelser & A G Van Aarde (2007), Historical consciousness and existential awareness in Karl Barth's hermeneutics. *HTS* 63(4), 1377-1411.

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the *Aufklärung* (Enlightenment) of the nineteenth century. It is well known that the *Aufklärung* had consequences for the relationship between “understanding” and a view of “history”, culminated in Hegel’s⁴ philosophy of history.

According to Van Hoozer & Warner (2007:42), “[t]he focus of Continental hermeneutics is focused human being (‘life’), historicity and understanding.” Everyone lives in a particular historical context. Understanding humankind’s existence is to take historicity into account. The life of people in the Judeo-Christian tradition is formatively shaped by experiences shaped by “events” such as the exodus of Israel from Egypt and the resurrection of Jesus Christ. However, since the Enlightenment and its effect on the convolution of the relationship between “understanding” and a view of “history”, these “events” are considered neither to be simply “factual” nor restricted to a relevance in the past. VanHoozer showed that someone such as Ricoeur (1991:95-98) “insists that events such as the exodus and resurrection point not to *post facts* as much as present existential possibilities for the reader” (in VanHoozer & Warner 2007:42).

Karl Barth’s hermeneutic legacy⁵ prolonged this proclivity in the Western Christian tradition.⁶ Specifically his conditional, sometimes half-hearted, acceptance of historical criticism,⁷ is influenced by Hegelian philosophy of history⁸ which led to Barth’s “theological exegesis” instead of historic-critical

⁴ See G W F Hegel [1969], *Hegel’s science of logic*; [1986a], *Vorlesungen über die Geschichte der Philosophie*, II. Werke in 20 Bänden, Werke 19; [1986b], *Vorlesungen über die Geschichte der Philosophie*, III. Werke in 20 Bänden, Werke 20.

⁵ See, e.g., Barth ([1919] 1985, 1922; [1924] 1966:49-76; 1925a:215-245; [1925b] 1966:197-218; 1925c:18-32; 1926, 1947, 1932, 1945, 1952).

⁶ See inter alia K Scholder (1966), *Ursprünge und Probleme der Bibelkritik im 17. Jahrhunderts: Ein Beitrag zur Entstehung der historisch-kritischen Theologie*; A G Van Aarde (1996), *Historical Jesus research in perspective*.

⁷ Mark Wallace ([1990] 1995:8) puts it as follows: “The debate was intense, and Barth fought his opponents’ charges. He consistently maintained that he was not an opponent of the historical method in biblical studies: ‘I am not an enemy of historical criticism’ [*The Epistle to the Romans*, tr by E C Hoskyns from the 6th German edition. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1933, p 90]. His complaint was never against historical criticism per se but against its historicist bias – the appeal to the historical world behind the Bible instead of the subject matter within the Bible. Barth avers that real criticism does not stop at the threshold of historical inquiries into the language, backgrounds, and authors of the Bible; rather, it presses forward to understand better the text as a message concerning God’s relationship to humankind. He recognizes that the Bible is not an ahistorical, authorless text, but, by the same token, the thrust of the scriptural message is missed if the Bible is read exclusively in the light of its ancient world origins and not in relation to its own inner-Christian starting point. The Bible’s words contain *Deus dixit* written.”

⁸ Cf inter alia D Henrich ([1967] 1971), *Hegel im Kontext*; H Küng ([1970] 1989), *Menschwerdung Gottes: Eine Einführung in Hegels theologisches Denken als Prolegomena zu einer künftigen Christologie*; W Jaeschke (1986), *Die Vernunft in der Religion: Studien zur Grundlegung der Religionsphilosophie Hegels*; J Ringleben (1994), *Hegels neue Philosophie des Lebens von der Bibel aus*, in Ziegert, R (Hrsg), *Die Zukunft des Schriftprinzips*, 75-92.

exegesis. Mark Wallace ([1990] 1995:113) puts it as follows: “Barth, ... even as early as 1918 [in his *Romans* 1], took issue with the practitioners of the then-regnant historical-critical method who assigned more weight to the scientific discipline of historical exegesis than to the always more difficult (but also more important) task of seeing ‘through and beyond history into the spirit of the Bible, which is the Eternal Spirit’” (quote from Barth’s commentary on Paul’s letter to the Romans; Barth [1918] 1933:1).

This article, however, does not intend to critically analyse Barth’s hermeneutic legacy.⁹ The aim is rather to explain our contextualisation of Barth’s view on the Bible and his understanding of the history of early Christianity to readers in the South African context. The article’s style is therefore discursive and less critical. Yet, the open-endedness of the article’s conclusion by paving the way to deconstructionist hermeneutics (to be discussed in another article), will demonstrate our own “postcritical” stance towards Barth’s “metacritical” position (see Jüngel [1982:91-98] over against Smend’s [1966:215-237] opinion that Barth is rather “uncritical” [*nachkritisch*]).¹⁰

The article consists of discussing a “hermeneutic chart”, mapped by Schleiermacher, Dilthey, Bultmann, Ebeling, and Ricoeur. This “map” is introduced in the foreword by outlining mile posts and concluded by pointing to the so-called postmodern “hermeneutic critique against hermeneutics”.¹¹ The thread that keeps the fragments of individuals’ contributions together in the article is the function of the notion of “hermeneutic circle”¹² and, especially, how this notion had been adapted from the time of the Enlightenment through Romanticism until Dialectic Theology conducive to Postmodernity.

⁹ Argumentation in this article is not qualitatively substantiated in a pro and contra manner by means of various cross-references to different sources. What materializes is rather an internalized belief that has been contended and reasoned in unpublished lectures on “theological hermeneutics” at the Faculty of Theology (University of Pretoria). However, some primary and secondary sources with regard to theological and philosophical hermeneutics are listed in footnotes when referring to prominent scholars in the field.

¹⁰ Cf also M Trowitzsch (1996), *Nachkritische Schriftauslegung: Wiederaufnahme und Fortführung einer Fragestellung*, in Trowitzsch, M (Hrsg), *Karl Barths Schriftauslegung*, 73-109.

¹¹ See, e.g. D E Klemm (1986), Introduction to Habermas’ *On systematically distorted communication and Toward a theory of communicative competence*, in Klemm, D E (ed), *Hermeneutical inquiry, Vol 2: The interpretation of existence*, 203-208.

¹² “The hermeneutical circle, then, is a productive circle that consists of our first pregrasp of the text’s subject matter (understanding) and our later critical construal of the text’s constituent elements (explanation) which, in turn, sets up our pregrasp as a candidate for revision in order to enable a new understanding of the text’s subject matter (appropriation)” (Wallace, M I [1990] 1995, *The second naiveté: Barth, Ricoeur, and the New Yale Theology*, p 60).

2. A HERMENEUTIC MAP

A particular perspective on the relatedness between *historicity* and *understanding* had consequences for the Orthodox theory of Biblical inspiration. By the end of the eighteenth century the pendulum swung back from Orthodoxy, which explains the unilateral historical-critical handling of the Bible.¹³ The solution to a historical impasse caused by Hegel's (1770-1831) philosophy of history (see Crouter 2005:70-97) should be understood against this background and how F C Baur¹⁴ (1792-1860) employed this philosophy for the study of the New Testament (cf Crouter 2005:241). The work of the History of Religions School played no small role in such a context of historical positivism (see later). This *Aufklärung* thinking provided the basic concepts which were used by Liberal Theology.

It was the influence that the philosophy of Immanuel Kant¹⁵ (1724-1804) and Romanticism had on the thinking of Friedrich Schleiermacher¹⁶ (1768-1834) which led to the latter's objections to the design of a "general hermeneutics".¹⁷ Schleiermacher's insight into what was understood by "congeniality" stabilised the use of the concept "hermeneutic circle" (see Warner 2007:24-25). This concept forms part of his insight that *understanding* that human beings only have *finite knowledge*. Human beings have only *relative certainty* about things. In the process of understanding there is always a polar tension between

¹³ See inter alia W Pannenberg (1979), Über historische und theologische Hermeneutik, in *Grundfragen systematischer Theologie: Gesammelte Aufsätze*, 123-158; [1996] 1999. Zur Begründung der Lehre von der Schriftinspiration, in *Beiträge zur Systematischen Theologie, Band 1: Philosophie, Religion, Offenbarung*, 246-248.

¹⁴ See, for example F C Baur's (1847), *Lehrbuch der christliche Dogmengeschichte*.

¹⁵ See, esp, I Kant ([1793] 1977), Die Religion innerhalb der Grenzen der bloßen Vernunft, in *Die Metaphysik der Sitten: Werkausgabe VIII*, hrsg von W Weischedel, 645-879 (cf Kant [1793] 1914).

¹⁶ F D E Schleiermacher [1927-1928] 1981. *Schleiermachers Werke: Auswahl in vier Bänden*, hrsg von O Braun & J Bauer. Aalen: Scientia Verlag; ([1985]), *Die Allgemeine Hermeneutik*, hrsg von W Virmond. Schleiermacher-Archiv, vol 1.1271-1230. Berlin: De Gruyter.; ([1814-1815] 1833] 1988. *Einleitung zur Dialektik*, hrsg von A Arndt. Hamburg: Felix Meiner. (Philosophische Bibliothek 386.); ([1995]), *Hermeneutik und Kritik*, hrsg von M Frank. 6. Auflage. Frankfurt a M: Suhrkamp.

¹⁷ H-J Birkner (1959), "Offenbarung" in Schleiermachers Glaubenslehre, in Fischer, H (Hrsg), *Schleiermacher-Studien*, 81-99; H Birus (1982), Zwischen den Zeiten: Friedrich Schleiermacher als Klassiker der neuzeitliche Hermeneutik, in *Hermeneutische Positionen*, 15-58; W Gräb (1985), Die unendliche Aufgabe des Verstehens, in Lange, D (Hrsg), *Friedrich Schleiermacher 1768-1834: Theologe – Philosoph – Pädagoge*, 47-71; D Lange (Hrsg) (1985), *Friedrich Schleiermacher 1768-1834: Theologe – Philosoph – Pädagoge*; R Smend (1985), Die Kritik am Alten Testament, in Lange, D (Hrsg), *Friedrich Schleiermacher 1768-1834: Theologe – Philosoph – Pädagoge*, 106-128; K Nowak (2001), *Schleiermacher: Leben, Werk und Wirkung*; H Schnub (1994), *Schleiermachers Hermeneutik und ihre Vorgeschichte im 18. Jahrhundert: Studien zur Bibelauslegung, zu Hamann, Herder und F Schlegel*; C Albrecht (1994), *Schleiermachers Theorie der Frömmigkeit: Ihr wissenschaftliche Ort und ihr systematischer Gehalt in den reden, in der Glaubenslehre und in der Dialektik*; M Schröder (1996), *Die kritische Identität des neuzeitliche Christentums: Schleiermachers Wesensbestimmung der christliche Religion*; A Bowie (ed) (1998), *Hermeneutics and criticism and other writings*; D Schlenke (1999), "Geist und Gemeinschaft": *Die systematische Bedeutung der Pneumatologie für Friedrich Schleiermachers Theorie der christliche Frömmigkeit*.

familiarity and *strangeness*. Reproduction is therefore not identical with production (cf Stiver 2007:147-150).

It is in such a context of a nuanced historical consciousness that Wilhelm Dilthey's¹⁸ (1844-1911) "pursuit of knowledge" and "manner of knowing" with regard to historical phenomena are understood. It also applies to the hermeneutics of Martin Heidegger (1889-1976) who, with his distinction between the concepts "having been" (*Sein*) and "ephemerality" (*Dasein*) gave a new thrust to the use of the concept "hermeneutic circle".¹⁹ The purpose of such a hermeneutics is not only *Einverständnis*. It also continuously generates new possibilities of understanding. In addition to this trajectory since Schleiermacher, Dilthey and Heidegger – as well as the "abductive" theory of discourse of the American founder of "pragmatist philosophy", Charles Sanders Peirce (1839-1914; see Peirce 1957:236-237; cf Reilly 1970:30-31, 37; Fann 1970:17-18; Ochs 1998:114-120) – French-born philosopher Paul Ricoeur (1913-2005; see Ricoeur 1974:24-45; 1976:45-68) with his unique "post-structuralist hermeneutics", gave a new dimension to the concept "hermeneutic circle" (see Warner 2007:26-27; Simms 2003:2, 37-38, 42, 80, 86-87, 132-133).

Ricoeur's²⁰ emphasis on narrative in the hermeneutic process made people realise that the readers'/listeners' involvement in a story opened up possibilities for them to be the "agent" (not victim) in their own lives, in symmetrical subject-subject interaction with others. Reading is not simply about reading and listening. It is also about the reader's/listener's ability to tell his or her own story. Thus the relationship between text and reader/listener brings the reader/listener to self-understanding and an interpretation of the self. Seen in this way, the configuration of a text becomes the conscious and existential actualisation of new existence on the basis of the process of refiguration. Narrative texts and the assigning of cognitive meaning become the "laboratory" where feelings, as well as the personal ability to be readers/listeners and agents are tested (Pambrun 2001:297). The openness of the life story means that the text is continuously being revised. In this way, different narratives can be told about one's life from a variety of points of departure. The openness lies not only in the personal narrative but also in being open to the stories and histories of others (Ricoeur 1995:313-314; cf Simms 2003:79-100).

¹⁸ See inter alia H A Hodges (1944), *Wilhelm Dilthey*; (1952), *The philosophy of Wilhelm Dilthey*.

¹⁹ See inter alia H-G Gadamer (1964), *Martin Heidegger und die Marburger Theologie*, in Dinkler, E (Hrsg), *Zeit und Geschichte: Dankesgabe an Rudolf Bultmann zum 80. Geburtstag*, 479-490.

²⁰ See, e.g., Ricoeur (1970:123-141; 1976; 1978:177-202; 1979:141-157; 1981, 1984, 1985, [1986] 1991; 1991:53-74; 1995).

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It is this self-realisation which Rudolf Bultmann²¹ (1884-1976) envisaged by employing the dialectic word-pair *historisch* and *geschichtlich* in his historical investigation of the Bible (see Painter 1987:45-116). He understood his hermeneutic programme as “demythologising”. It is only against the background of these developments that the movement known as “New Hermeneutics” began to comprehend language and the function of language in such a way that the concepts *Einverständnis* (by Fuchs)²² and prejudgement (*Vorurteil*) (by Gadamer)²³ became understood *through* language (by Ebeling)²⁴ as common property in Biblical interpretation.

This article therefore wishes to offer, against the background of the above-mentioned trends in *Aufklärung* thinking, a description of the most important hermeneutic insights of the nineteenth century which had a major influence on twentieth-century hermeneutics, so that we can better explain Karl Barth’s “Christological view of the Scriptures”. This is done by expounding Barth’s understanding of what he referred to as the *indirect identity* between the Scriptural word and God’s *revelatory word*,²⁵ as well as his understanding of the relationship between the *evidence* of the Bible and the *matter* it is concerned with. In this way we can better understand Barth’s attitude toward the place and role of historical criticism, and briefly describe what his view was regarding “presuppositionless exegesis”, the dualism between *scientific* and *practical* interpretation, the “intentional fallacy”, and the “Cinderella fallacy”.²⁶ This exposition concludes with Barth’s continuation of the *Schleiermacher legacy*, namely that Biblical hermeneutics as well as secular hermeneutics display a particular dialectical realism. In conclusion, the universally well-known positivism traits in the *Barth legacy* are raised once again, but this time to open the door to

²¹ Bultmann [1933a] 1993:114-133; [1933b] 1993:188-213; [1933c] 1993:245-267; [1933d] 1993:1-25; [1933e] 1993: 26-37; [1941] 1988, [1948-1953] 1984, [1949] 1992; 1952:179-208; [1961a] 1993:268-293; [1961b] 1993:142-150; 1967a:47-71; 1967b:72-92; [1968] 1993:211-235; 1971:297; [1984] 1993:141-189).

²² See Fuchs ([1946] 1965:55-65; [1954] 1970; [1960] 1965:424-430; [1962] 1965:193-230; 1965:231-248; 1968).

²³ See H-G Gadamer ([1961] [1986] 1999:121-132); ([1990] 1999).

²⁴ See Ebeling (1950:1-46; 1959:224-251; 1962; 1966:91-143; 1978:99-116; 1981:1-19; [1994] 1995:209-225; 1995a:313-318; 1995b:492-508).

²⁵ See inter alia G Plasger (2000), *Die relative Autorität des Bekenntnisses bei Karl Barth*, esp. pp 42-48.

²⁶ See, especially, K Frör (1967), “Die Hermeneutik Karl Barth’s”, in *Biblische Hermeneutik: Zur Schriftauslegung in Predigt und Unterricht*, pp 31-34.

Jürgen Habermas and other deconstructionist thinkers of the postmodern era²⁷ in hermeneutics – matters which will however not be attended to in this article.

2. ENLIGHTENMENT IN THE EIGHTEEN HUNDREDS

Even the most elementary introduction to hermeneutics would inform readers that a new approach to the interpretation of the Scriptures had emerged among the exponents of the *Aufklärung*.²⁸ The *Aufklärung* resulted in an *emancipation of natural thinking* which was independent of the so-called “divinely revealed” church doctrine. It led to a view about the relationship between intellect and history (see esp Frör 1967:26-31) which relativised the value of the “historical” data in the Bible. *Aufklärung* thought therefore opposed Orthodoxy which took as point of departure what was considered to be *supertemporal, eternal* and *non-historical truths*.

The distinction in Protestant exegesis between historical critical and orthodox approaches to the Scriptures is that for the *Aufklärung* these timeless truths are not produced by *historical revelation*, but by the *human mind* or *intellect*. Historical revelation is seen solely as a short cut to the knowledge about the essential intellectual truths that people would eventually have discovered without it. Therefore the Bible cannot teach people anything new, in any case nothing other than what they would have learned sooner or later through their own mind or intellect. *The intellect is the divine* and must therefore also establish the *norm* for interpreting the Bible. The intellect stands above the Bible and decides on Biblical truths. Moreover, only that in the Bible which is capable of being understood can lay claim to be the truth.²⁹ This is why it is also essential to highlight the intellectual truths in the Bible and release them from all bonds. An effective means to this end is historical criticism. History is then seen as something in which the eternal comes only imperfectly to the fore. The perfect clarity of religion in the Age of Reason is attained after rising above the darkness of superstition and mysticism. God could not have made God self known in any other way than by adapting to the conditions of thought and the restricted possibilities of thinking of the relevant Biblical time. It is clear that such a view of the Scriptures uproots Orthodox *inspiration doctrine*.

²⁷ See, inter alia, A K M Adam (1995), *What is postmodern biblical criticism?*

²⁸ See E Lessing ([1870-1918] 2000), *Geschichte der deutschsprachigen evangelischen Theologie von Albrecht Ritschl bis zur Gegenwart*, Band 1.

²⁹ This conviction found classical expression in the words of Lessing (1777, “Über den Beweis des Geistes und der Kraft”, in K Frör [1961] 1967, *Biblische Hermeneutik: Zur Schriftauslegung in Predigt und Unterricht*, p 27): “Zufällige Geschichtswahrheiten [miracles of nature, resuscitation from the dead, etc.] können der Beweis von nothwendigen Vernunftwahrheiten nie werden.”

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By the end of the eighteenth and beginning of the nineteenth centuries, however, this *Aufklärung* thinking had to give way to a new view of history, namely that history is the actual creative force. History is now seen as the process of the self-unfolding of the human spirit, invariably in new forms of life. According to this view, then, religion can also be interpreted as a phenomenon, and consequently the Bible as the scriptural crystallisation of the religion of Israel and the earliest Christians. Now it was the task of *historical-critical* methodology to identify and describe the development and self-unfolding of the different religions in history. This philosophy of history perspective persisted until halfway through the nineteenth century.

It was *J P Gabler*³⁰ (1753-1826) who by the end of the eighteenth century treated the historical character of Biblical “theology” with real seriousness, and with the need to approach the proclamation of the Scriptures as it had been expressed *historically*. This approach was stimulated particularly by dissatisfaction with ecclesiastical dogma, which did not sufficiently take note of the historical character of the Bible and which used the Scriptures merely as an arsenal of texts upon which to base dogma. In this new approach, the theological opinions of the different Biblical writers were distinguished from one another and attention was also focused particularly on the *mythological* character of many of these opinions.³¹ This awakening of a historical consciousness led to claims that the Biblical texts should be studied in light of the historical circumstances in which they originated.

Ensuing from such a historical awareness the so-called “grammatical-historical method” developed during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, in terms of which one should put oneself in the shoes of the authors of the books of the Bible and repeat their thoughts. Gabler, however, did not make any difference between the method of interpreting the Bible and any other piece of literature. The idea that the books of the Bible were inspired, should be completely discarded. This view, which was also shared by others, is in essence that the exegete should tackle her or his work with complete freedom and without prejudice, and this can be done if exegetes do not take into account that the Bible is Holy Scripture and contains the truth.

Fairly soon, however, objections were made to this approach which was regarded in certain circles as too narrow and biased, although the need for historical investigation was no longer in doubt. Nevertheless, “historicism’s” sole

³⁰ See J P Gabler [1789] 1975, *Von der richtigen Unterscheidung der biblischen und der dogmatischen Theologie und der rechten Bestimmung ihrer beider Ziele*, in Strecker, G (Hrsg), *Das Problem der Theologie des Neuen Testaments*, 32-44. Darmstadt.

³¹ See especially David Friedrich Strauss’ three volumes on *Das Leben Jesu*, written between 1836 and 1840 (in Lauster 2004:485).

validity was questioned and several theologians became convinced that the proclamation of Jesus was about “divine truths” which could not have a merely temporal and historical meaning. Accordingly, deeply religious views are expressed in the teachings of the “prophets and the apostles”. The philosopher of history, *Hegel* (1770-1831), sees the *absolute* present and active in the continuing unfolding of history. In history, his notion of the Absolute Spirit attains the freedom of self-consciousness through *development*. History is the solution of the “being-in-itself” and the “being-for-itself” in the “being-in-and-for-itself”. History is also the medium of revelation. To Hegel, the study of the self-movement of history is the only path to the truth, a conviction diametrically opposed to *Aufklärung* thinking about the truth.

In emulation of Hegel, Ferdinand Christian *Baur* (1792-1860) based his interpretation of the New Testament on the dynamics or continuous movement of religious consciousness in history.³² To him, history is the self-unfolding of the spirit in which the particular give way to the general. And the history of earliest Christianity is, like all history, determined by the interaction of human conflict. On the basis of this insight, Baur states that the task of the historical critic of the New Testament cannot be carried out if the *historical place of origin* of a document has not first been determined within the framework of the history of earliest Christianity.

On the analogy of the Hegelian historical-philosophical (or dialectical-teleological) scheme, *thesis*→*antithesis*→*synthesis*, Baur sees different forces at work in the New Testament and places the books of the New Testament in such a scheme. He views “gentile-Christianity” (represented by the “authentic” Pauline epistles Romans, 1 and 2 Corinthians, Galatians) as opposed to “Jewish-Christianity” (Revelation). The synthesis between the two extremes is then given impetus by the Synoptic Gospels and Acts, and is eventually accomplished *inter alia* by the Pastoral Epistles, Hebrews and 1 Peter, culminating in the Gospel of John. According to Baur’s view, each New Testament document therefore either reflects or represents a certain *trend* in the theology of the early church, and the documents should be interpreted taking due account of this.

Baur’s methodology is for this reason called *trend criticism* (“Tendenzkritik”). He also defines New Testament theology as “the history of

³² Cf inter alia H Liebing (1960), *Historisch-kritische Theologie: Zum 100. Todestag Ferdinand Christian Baur* am 2. Dezember 1960; K Scholder (1961), *Ferdinand Christian Baur als Historiker*; F W Graf (1983), *Ferdinand Christian Baur (1762-1860)*, in Fries, H & Kretzschmar, G (Hrsg), *Klassiker Theologie, Band 2: Von Richard Simon bis Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 89-110; U Köpf (1992), *Ferdinand Christian Baur als Begründer einer consequent historischen Theologie*; J Rohls (2002), *Ferdinand Christian Baur: Spekulation und Christentumsgeschichte*, in Neuner, P & Wenz, G (Hrsg), *Theologen des 19. Jahrhunderts: Eine Einführung*, 39-58.

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Christian dogma as it moves through the New Testament". Though Baur carried his trend criticism a little too far, his insight into the theology of the New Testament, and therefore also into hermeneutics, bore the fruit that the documents of the New Testament could thenceforth be seen against the background of a *total historical perspective* and that comprehension ensued for the *sequence* and *historical development* of the theological opinions encountered in the New Testament.

At this stage of the hermeneutic engagement with texts, the emphasis had for some time been placed on the necessity for historical-critical investigation, gradually developed into a *historical positivism* which dominated *speculative thinking* and restricted hermeneutics solely to *the study of facts*, also as far as the Bible was concerned. One comes under the impression of what this kind of historical approach encompassed, when one takes note of the three principles that Troeltsch³³ (1865-1923) laid down for historical investigation, namely *criticism*, *analogy* and *correlation*.³⁴ The maxim of *criticism* entails that nothing from the past has unquestioned validity and that the results of historical research can have absolute validity. They can only be described as probable results. For the Christian faith this entailed that these results had been based on events in respect of which a plausible claim could only be made according to *degrees of probability*. According to the maxim of *analogy*, all historical events must correspond with what oneself has already experienced or what someone else has experienced. We can therefore only attain knowledge of an event and describe it if we have already had experience of such an event. The maxim of *correlation* means that all historical events are related to and even correlate with other events. History is therefore an uninterrupted cohesion of events in respect of which there can be no question of anything such as *supernatural factors*.

In this climate Biblical religion was regarded, together with the other religions, as one of the ingredients of a process which was developing within history. The *History of Religions School* in particular studied Biblical religion in the context of and comparison with the other religions of Biblical times. The result was that many Biblical ideas were explained and understood against the background of parallels to non-Biblical religions, a development that detracted greatly from the "uniqueness" of Biblical religion. Moreover, the texts of the Bible were also regarded as not much more than a source for reconstructing the religion of a bygone era and an alien cultural world. This approach, which

³³ See Troeltsch (1922), *Über historische und dogmatische Methode in der Theologie*, pp 729-753.

³⁴ Cf inter alia K-E Apfelbache (1978), *Frömmigkeit und Wissenschaft: Ernst Troeltsch und sein theologisches Programm*; T Rendtorff (1985), Ernst Troeltsch, in Greschat, M (Hrsg), *Gestalten der Kirchengeschichte, Band 10, 1: Die neueste Zeit, III*, 185-203; H-G Drescher (1991), *Ernst Troeltsch: Leben und Werk*; J H Claussen (1997), *Die Jesus-Deutung Ernst Troeltsch im Kontext der liberalen Theologie*; F W Graf (Hrsg) (2000), *Ernst Troeltschs "Historismus"*.

became known as *historism*, led to a radical relativisation of all binding traditions and values. Anything that could not withstand the test of historical verification was not accepted as true. The ideal was historical reconstruction and the determining of *bruta facta*. History was interpreted as a causally determined working context which could in no way be influenced by factors outside this worldly reality. Historism that also became known as *historical positivism* due to the absolute demand it made for verification, moreover stated as its conviction that the Biblical texts have nothing say to us. The texts did have something to say for the people of their time only, and it all belonged to the past. This historical relativism obviously created huge problems for theology, and some theologians were of the opinion that theology had to be protected against it. Many sought the solution in a combination of two different paths to knowledge from the Biblical text:

- the theologian works first and foremost with the usual recognised historical method, just like any other historian;
- from the data that obtained ideas and values can be taken which could be of significance to and a reinforcement of the religious self-consciousness of the congregation.

Therefore the interpretation consists of two work phases, namely exact historical research on the one hand, and the existential functioning of its findings on the other.

In this situation, *Liberal Theology* came strongly to the fore during the second half of the nineteenth century. The Biblical contents were approached on the basis of the fundamental concepts prevailing in nineteenth-century philosophy. The fundamental concepts that repeatedly became prominent in the interpretation of the Scriptures were (see Frör 1967:30): *development*, *progress* and *personality*.

- The *development concept* was employed particularly for the empirical investigation of the Scriptures. This concerns the study of the religion of the Bible as a religion that developed historically alongside other religions.
- The *progress concept* qualified Biblical religion as a step-wise elevation out of the murky heathen depths to the heights of ethical monotheism of the Scriptural prophets, and eventually the perfected representation of God by Jesus.

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- The *personality concept* entailed that the great personalities of the Bible were regarded as the visible incorporations of the religious-ethical ideas that are to dominate the inner life of the listeners. Of fundamental importance here is Jesus as the visible, personified manifestation of God, instilling morality in the community and the moral control of life in trust and love, based on his incarnation of the Divine in the earthly dispensation. The religious personalities of the Bible can and should therefore serve as examples for the moral-ethical life of the faithful. Of all these personalities Jesus is the most ideal and the example worthiest of emulation.

In reality the proponents of Liberal Theology read their own religious ideas into the Bible. For this reason, attempts to give a description of the person and life of the historical Jesus resulted in sketches of Jesus as He was seen from the perspective of the investigator.

Liberal Theology also lived in the conviction that the will of God could be known, but this too was determined by what the people of that time thought the will of God should be – in other words, a human projection of God. They believed that there was a firm fellowship between God and human beings and that human beings had gained a grasp of God's plan for the world. This led to a religious optimism which was shaken to its foundations by World War I. Liberal Theology regarded as unimportant the problem of myths in the New Testament, which was strongly advocated by *D F Strauss*³⁵ (1808-1874), since this problem had little to do with the Gospel proclaimed by Jesus. For the same reason, Biblical stories about "miracles of nature" and the apocalyptic influence on Jesus could also be ignored.³⁶ All of these things had to be disposed of in order to reach the timeless *moral* truth of the Gospel.

Though the nineteenth century was characterised by great turbulence in theology and concomitant struggles to find the right approach to and interpretation of the Scriptures, the second half of the nineteenth century in particular did not yield much in theological circles to reflection about hermeneutics as such. One does in particular, not gain the impression that importance was attached to certain insights that were brought to the fore by Schleiermacher. Though a publication on hermeneutics appeared virtually every year in the period 1720-1820, the only work worth mentioning that

³⁵ See again David Friedrich Strauss' three volumes on *Das Leben Jesu*, written between 1836 and 1840 (in Lauster 2004:485).

³⁶ However, see A G Van Aarde's (2000), *Understanding Jesus' healings*; (2001), *Millennialism, eschatology, and apocalypticism*.

appeared in the second half of the nineteenth century was J Chr K von Hofmann's *Biblische Hermeneutik* (1860).³⁷

The next textbook on hermeneutics only appeared in 1928 from the pen of *F Torm*,³⁸ New Testament professor at the University of Copenhagen. This university was one of the few at that time which still included lectures on hermeneutics in its syllabus. *Barth's* commentary on the Epistles to the Romans appeared in this hermeneutic vacuum in 1919. It introduced a new direction and was a powerful stimulus to hermeneutic reflection. It was not a textbook on hermeneutics, but as a commentary it was itself a showcase of hermeneutics which, as someone put it, "exploded" in the hermeneutic vacuum of that time. The situation was considerably different, however, in the field of philosophy.

Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) (see especially his work, *Kritik der reinen Vernunft*) rejected positivism. Rationalism is the foundation of positivism. In positivistic terms, knowledge (including that of metaphysics) can only be obtained through empirical observation. Knowledge is grounded in rationally controlled, objectified exactitudes. The development of positivism went through several stages. This empirical theory of knowledge was carried further particularly by Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679), John Locke (1632-1704) and David Hume (1711-1776). Hobbes, for example, understood the principle of "causality" as the empirically observed association between phenomena and events.³⁹ This type of theory underpinned anthropological idealism, namely that humanity was progressively advancing. Henri Saint-Simon (1760-1825) held the view that science could alone make a positive contribution, if it could make valid positivistic claims that had been tested against empirical reality. Auguste Comte (1798-1857) wanted to design generally valid, causal laws which would describe the immutable and constant associations between observable phenomena. In terms of this, all research begins and ends in the "reality of observable empirical facts". Even the validity of non-recurring phenomena was recognised only when it could be explained as a "special case" of a "general law". Later an attempt was made (by the "Viennese Circle") to exchange the "objectivity principle" of rigid verification for the idea that theoretical, subjective constructs/hypotheses could serve as the point of

³⁷ See J Lauster (2004), *Prinzip und Methode: Die Transformation des protestantischen Schriftprinzips durch die historische Kritik von Schleiermacher bis zur Gegenwart*, p. 479.

³⁸ See K Frör ([1961] 1967), *Biblische Hermeneutik: Zur Schriftauslegung in Predigt und Unterricht*, p. 116.

³⁹ See J Mouton (1987), Die positivisme, in Snyman, J J & Du Plessis P G W (reds), *Wetenskapsbeelde in die geesteswetenskappe*, 1-29.

departure for scientific research, as long as the point of departure was followed up inductively and could be verified by empirical research.

Immanuel Kant⁴⁰ pointed out that the bias of the so-called “objective scientific” approach. He points out that objects appeared to the knowing subject according to the questions that the subject himself/herself wants to ask. He also distinguishes between the scientific (sensory) world and the (non-objectified) world to which the “postulates” such as God and infinity, belong. To these “postulates” also belong human beings’ “affective experiences” such as joy, grief, hope, shame, sudden fright and horror, anxiety and fear, wonder and astonishment, laughter, weeping, rage, trust (i.e. faith) and love. The objectified sensory world is knowable on the basis of “theoretical reason” and the non-objectified world of experience on the basis of “practical reason”. As human beings are part of the sensory, finite world, they are subjected to natural causality and transience, though human beings have the duty and the freedom to do good for the sake of good. In another work (*Religion innerhalb der Grenzen der bloßen Vernunft*) he writes that human nature (owing to its bondage to mortality) is, however, aimed at self-preservation and that this is essentially self-gratification, and not doing good for the sake of doing good. A religion aimed at self-gratification (i.e. at reward) is false and tantamount to superstition. The “faith” that commands human beings to serve God unconditionally (called the “categorical imperative”), comes with authority from outside humanity, is “immutable” faith that rests on normative Scriptures. It is especially in this regard that Kant’s influence can be seen on Gabler’s distinction between “Biblical theology” and “dogmatic theology”. The place Kant awarded to Jesus in this regard also deserves mention, and it strongly influenced a theologian such as Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768-1843).

3. FRIEDRICH SCHLEIERMACHER’S LEGACY

Schleiermacher (see in particular his work, *Über die Religion: Reden an die Gebildeten unter ihren Verächtern*) sharply criticises the “scorners of religion” (who from the perspective of the *Aufklärung* invoked Kant in a biased manner and took their stand solely on the primacy of so-called “theoretical reason” and “pure scientific reason”). Schleiermacher explains, especially in two influential works (*Weihnachtsfeier: Ein Gespräch*, and *Der christliche Glaube nach den Grundsätzen der evangelischen Kirche im Zusammenhänge dargestellt*), his view of *Jesus as the Christ* (the “historical/*wahre*” and the “dogmatic/*reine*” in one).

⁴⁰ See J Lauster (2004), *Prinzip und Methode*, pp 27-29.

Schleiermacher claims, especially on the basis of the Johannine proposition “the *Logos* became flesh”, that Jesus/Christ is the *Urbild* of harmony between finiteness and infinity. People are ephemeral, can become aware (*das schlechthinnige Abhängigkeitsgefühl*) of the split between finiteness and infinity, and therefore long for salvation (*gottglaubige Selbstbewußtsein*). People find salvation by becoming one (*einheimisch*) with Jesus/Christ who bears in Himself the harmony of the *Erdegeist* and also the eternal *Sein*. In this sense, (the historical) Jesus as (the kerygmatic) Christ is also the *Vorbild*, in other words simultaneously in the dialectical sense “archetypal image” and “example” but obviously not an “example” in the moralistic or methodist sense of the word. To Schleiermacher, the *reality* of Jesus’ / Christ’s Divine Being is his humanness, but the human being’s *truth* is infinity. We as people need this “truth which is there in Jesus/Christ” for our salvation.

Schleiermacher therefore clearly gives preference to “practical reason”, though in dialectical inextricability with “theoretical reason”. Just like Kant, he does not see faith in God as belonging to the natural science-theoretical activity of humankind and he also wants to liberate theology from positivism. Kant refers to such a historical positivism as “dogmatism”, a reflection on faith which emerges in positivism.

Schleiermacher wrote at a time when two “hermeneutical” movements were strongly in the foreground, namely the *Aufklärung* (Enlightenment) and *Romanticism*. He was part of the latter (although he was not uncritical of it in all respects), whereas he strongly criticised the former (although he was again strongly influenced by it – especially by Semler’s work). Romanticism placed particular emphasis on “aesthetic reason” which had as basis a strong historical consciousness, as against both “theoretical reason” (human nature, characterised by its limitations) and “practical reason” (in particular that aspect which Kant called “dogmatism”). On the basis of a (biased) appeal to Kant, Semler and Gabler, some exponents (e.g. Baron d’Holbach [1723-1789] and Thomas Paine [1743-1804], in Duling 1979:141) of the *Aufklärung* regarded myths, legends and sagas as expressions of “primitive” religiosity which could not serve as the basis for faith.

By contrast, Romanticism, seen literarily-historically, is related to the old French word *romanz* (*escrire*) that since the Middle Ages has referred to the “romance” as a form of literature. This relates to the type of narrative which is deliberately not a version of actual events; in other words, a novel. “Truth” was no longer found only in propositions or discourses corresponding to empirical “reality”. Truth was associated instead with the “irrational” (i.e. in the experience of faith as a gift from outside human nature). Myths are a kind of

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metaphor which can also be proof of authentic existence.⁴¹ Therefore Romanticism as a movement gave rise to the fact that exegetes and theologians not only began identifying also in the Bible the presence of fairytales, myths, sagas and legends, but also saw this form of literature (*Gattung*) as “objectifying proverbs” in which the faithful’s existential *coram Deo* is expressed. For this reason, Rudolf Bultmann – see later – used the expression the “intention of a myth” to describe the purpose of his demythologising programme (cf Painter 1987: 203-226).

Schleiermacher brought about an important new direction in reflection on hermeneutics. He maintained the grammatical-historical interpretation of the Scriptures, but linked it to a *psychological* understanding of the texts. He sees history as the process of establishing the manifestation of religious consciousness in individual forms. So, too, the Biblical texts are evidence of “pious” states of consciousness, which are expressed in language. Schleiermacher is generally recognised as the father of philosophical hermeneutics. He asserts that the hermeneutic question relates to all forms of communication in which one person wants another person to understand his or her experiences of meaning, with a view to be understood or to gain consensus.

Schleiermacher’s design of a general hermeneutics emanated from the two objections he levelled against traditional hermeneutic reflection. In the first place, the traditional approach focused too much on ad hoc problems instead of an understanding of *all* utterances of human language, which clearly indicated the need for a general and fundamental hermeneutics. His second objection was that traditional hermeneutics was *pedagogically occasionally* determined, in other words directed at a teaching situation which would manifest itself when someone in a particular situation asked for an interpretation. The supposition here is that the one who gives the guidelines for understanding, has already himself or herself understood or can understand, and therefore has the pedagogic authority to give guidance to others.

Schleiermacher rejected this opinion on the grounds of his conviction that the interpretation problem applies to *all* people and in fact to *all* forms of communication. This universal problem of interpretation is based on the ever-present possibility of *misunderstanding*, and so Schleiermacher’s design is aimed at eliminating this possibility of misunderstanding. He finds the cause of this possibility in the *individuality* of people who express themselves in a spoken or written form of language. Understanding is aimed at the individuality of the text and asks about its meaning, which cannot however be completely individual, otherwise it could not be shared. In authentic communication,

⁴¹ See, e.g., Joseph Campbell (19720, *Myths to live by*, p 13); concurring with Carl G Jung ([1956] 1967), *Symbols of transformation: Collected works*, vol 5, p 156.

language operates as something more than 'n rule-bound medium for sharing. Here it is the expression of the thoughts that reveal the spiritual life or consciousness of a *unique individual*. Misunderstanding occurs because the conscious life of the individual is not directly accessible to the listeners or readers, because they are in a certain sense strangers or outsiders to it. Someone can be familiar with the linguistic conventions and believe that he or she understands, but then nevertheless not grasp what is being said. The strangeness has to be conquered by authentic understanding and this requires more than being familiar with linguistic conventions. What is required is an assimilation or appropriation of the ideas expressed in words. This assumes that the *true* intention is grasped, that is the quality of the meaning of language utterances, the "something" that the person wants to convey. To grasp the true intention, one must be able to *reproduce* the origin and development of someone's thoughts. This requires the ability to do so through the linguistic conventions at one's disposal.

Consequently, authentic understanding is determined by *interpretability*; whatever cannot be interpreted in one's own language, is not understood. Actually the moment of interpretation is already present when the text is constituted. One cannot think correctly if one does not want to be understandable. The reader or interpreter is therefore already present when the text is constituted, because the writer makes an appeal to the reader's understanding.

However, Schleiermacher states that apart from the strangeness to one another, there is also a fundamental familiarity or bond between individuals. He calls this *congeniality*, a commonality of spirit, which enables one to "empathise" with or "immerse" oneself in the conscious life of others. This congeniality is based on "general human nature" or an "all life" in which all people share. The essence of understanding is to change the *strange*, the *different* and the *individual* into the *familiar*, the *same* and the *communal*, precisely by taking into account the difference and not destroying it. Understanding is always an approach from the individual sense, never an elimination of it to the benefit of the communal. The individual's observation is never completely exhausted, it can always be corrected because the individuality of the text can never become obsolete.

Understanding is part of our finite knowledge which never has absolute certainty, only relative certainty. This implies that the meaning of a text can never be absolutely determined and that the history of its interpretation and the way it continues working never ends. There is a *polar tension* between familiarity and strangeness. The more creative people are the greater their individuality and the more unique their thoughts. This leads to different levels of congeniality

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and in turn it places restrictions on the possibility of understanding. The more original individuals' thoughts are, the more difficult is the possibility of congeniality between dialogue partners. Dialogue always consists of the remaining of both the differences and consensus between partners – sometimes the differences are more discernable and sometimes the correspondences clearer. Yet, meaning and understanding are not immediately accessible.

Schleiermacher distinguishes between two levels or phases of interpretation, namely the *grammatical* and the *technical* (or psychological); the former is preparatory, the latter the completion of the process of authentic understanding. The former has an objective and the latter a subjective orientation. At the grammatical level, all linguistic and contemporary literary, cultural and historical data must be taken into account so that the readers can be placed in the position of the original reader and be set in the communication horizon of that time. At this point, the grammatical interpretation crosses over into the technical, namely the subjective side of the process of understanding, when by means of congeniality the individuality of writers is plumbed in order to reproduce their train of thought.

To achieve this reproduction, however, it is necessary to determine the writer's style by taking note of the entire work and to move from the parts to the whole, and vice versa. Style gives an impression of the particular way in which thoughts are shaped. However, for the re-execution of the writer's thoughts, the understander also needs a special intuition or a capacity to "sense" and "empathise", which Schleiermacher calls a *divinatory* ability. Divinatory suggests the extraordinary as well as immediacy, the special psychic ability to gain immediate access to the creative act "behind" the writer's thoughts. (In his later works Schleiermacher speaks of the "divinatory" instead of the "technical" but it is not clear whether this represents a development in his thinking.)

The completed process of understanding is not an identification of the understander with the writer, but merely the *grasping* and *appropriation* of the writer's intentions. Nor is reproduction identical to production. For this reason, the understander can understand writers' thoughts *better* than they themselves understood them. The interpretation can bring nuances and aspects to the fore, which were only subconsciously present in the original production. Writers can therefore say more than they intended.

As winning points Schleiermacher's contribution are regarded that he (1) restored the problem of understanding from the narrower situation of the study of difficult texts and changed it to a more expansive reflection on

communication as such; (2) approached understanding not only as a case of the right exegetical guidelines to be followed but also of vanquishing the strangeness among people and of exceeding individuality in order to share in the totality of communal humanness; and (3) did not regard language solely as a medium of communication but also as a medium of expression which could establish consensus and a richer communality among people. The misgivings about Schleiermacher's hermeneutics are traditionally mentioned as that he (1) remains entangled in the psychological and strives only towards a consciousness bond and the actualisation of a community of souls with one another; (2) further, that he does not recognise that people do not only communicate *with one another* but also about *something*, about an affair; (3) interpretation is not aimed in the first place at the *true intentions* of the speaker, but at the *truth* of his or her intentions; (4) that when communication does not succeed, it is not the soul processes of the other that remain alien to me, but the matter-of-fact meaning which he or she wants to make understood; (5) that people only ask about the conscious life of others when their attempt at interpretation does not succeed in an attempt to determine what it was that had negatively influenced the message to them.

4. THE OPEN DOOR

In a 2007 publication entitled *Liberal theology: A radical vision*, Peter C Hodgson (2007:12) claims that *Aufklärung* thought continues till the present day and that it started with people such as Kant, Hegel, Baur – and that Schleiermacher should be included among this list. According to him, this liberal tradition has been continued despite, or even because of, the “neoorthodox critiques” by Karl Barth, including Rudolf Bultmann and Paul Ricoeur. However, his statement that these dialectical theologians were part of the liberal tradition, is debatable – also his view that Schleiermacher should be considered as one among the “liberals”. The result of the *Aufklärung* was indeed that a trajectory developed which Rudolf Bultmann and Karl Barth referred to as the so-called “dialectical theology”; however, not as a continuation, but in contradistinction to liberal theology.⁴²

⁴² See R Bultmann ([1933a] 1993), Die Bedeutung der “dialektischen” Theologie für die neutestamentliche Wissenschaft, in *Glauben und Verstehen: Gesammelte Aufsätze*, Erster Band, 114-133; (1933d] 1993); Die liberale Theologie und die jüngste theologische Bewegung, in *Glauben und Verstehen: Gesammelte Aufsätze*, Erster Band, 1-25; K Barth ([1924] 1966), Biblische Fragen, Einsichten und Ausblicke, in Moltmann, J (Hrsg), *Anfänge der dialektische Theologie, Teil 1: Karl Barth. Heirich Barth. Emil Brunner*, 49-76; (1925a), Das Schriftprinzip der Reformierte Kirche. ZZ 3, 215-245; ([1925b] 1966), Das Wort Gottes als Aufgabe der Theologie, in Moltmann, J (Hrsg), *Anfänge der dialektische Theologie, Teil 1: Karl Barth. Heirich Barth. Emil Brunner*, 197-218; (1925c), Die neue Welt in der Bibel, in *Das Wort Gottes und die Theologie*, 18-32.

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Therefore, to contextualise Barth's hermeneutics is not only a matter of tracing his view on Scripture against the background of the milieu of the Enlightenment, but also to understand it against the background of a reawakening of historical consciousness within the context of existential awareness. This development will receive attention in the next article.⁴³

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⁴³ See also G M M Pelser & A G Van Aarde (2007), Historical consciousness and existential awareness in Karl Barth's hermeneutics. *HTS* 63(4), 1377-1411.

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