

READING THE NEW TESTAMENT: METHODS OF INTERPRETATION by Christopher Tuckett, *SPCK*, London, 1987. 200pp.

It is not easy to review a book by a friend, especially when, as in the case of Chris Tuckett's introduction to the New Testament study there is so much one could welcome. Tuckett has demonstrated in his publications a critical acumen and disregard for fashion which makes his voice one to be heard with respect in New Testament circles. What he has offered us in his latest book is a wise and sensitive introduction to the ways in which the New Testament is read in most of our colleges and university faculties of Theology. As such it enables the reader to have some idea of what is going on in contemporary New Testament scholarship. Tuckett is an avowed supporter of the historical critical method (a short-hand for the concern to get at what the text originally meant) though he has not neglected to include discussion of the more eccentric features of contemporary biblical interpretation. As well as chapters on the text of the New Testament, source, form and redaction criticism, problems of date authorship and purpose of the NT documents, he covers recent interest in the use of sociological methods to elucidate problems in the study of Christian origins and those approaches which express little or no interest in the original meaning of the text which are loosely bracketed under the heading of structuralism and literary critical approaches. What he has to say is fair and often perceptive (particularly the point that so called sociological approaches are not all that new to those steeped in the form critical approach of Bultmann and his followers).

My reservations about the book must be seen primarily as a confession of my own unease with the method which most of us still seek to propound in our teaching and research. Now I do not think for one moment that Tuckett thinks that the historical method he prefers is without its philosophical problems, but a hermeneutics of suspicion surely demands that he is a little more forthcoming about the hidden agenda which is set by those who support the dominance of the quest for the original meaning of the text. If ever there was a good example of ideology at work in a contemporary discipline it is the way in which the historical critical method has become a 'normal', common sense way of reading the Bible uncluttered by all these hermeneutical problems dreamt up by theologians. I happen to think this issue is important in a book of this kind where the intention is to enable a person to understand what is going on when he reads a text. One factor which ought to be in the mind of the critical reader is set out very well by Tuckett: what the text might originally have meant in its original setting and how the text reached us in the form it has. But surely that cannot be the only issue? In a decade when liberation theology and feminist hermeneutics have made their mark on our exegetical work to find little about their contribution to our interpretative task seems to me to impoverish the possibility of developing a critical awareness of the political agenda which attends our reading. When most readers of the Bible can get some meaning out of a text without resort to the sophisticated tools of the historians, can exegetes enable us to see what is going on when texts are used in a particular way? Or are those of us who earn our living by teaching Scripture forced to admit that our role in life is either to offer accurate editions of the text or to suppose that academic rigour is satisfied when we get as near as possible to what Paul, Jesus or the evangelists originally meant to tell us? If reading the Bible is primarily about that task, I would want to ask whether Scripture study in the Church should allow antiquarian interests to dominate the reflection on the reading of Scripture and prevent its word piercing to the heart of the iniquities and self-interest of our social systems which are an affront to the righteousness of God.

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