

## Item #47 (Validity in Interpretation)

This is the title of a justly famous book on hermeneutics, *Validity in Interpretation* by E. D. Hirsch, Jr. (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1967). Professor Hirsch, now emeritus, has been a productive faculty member of the University of Virginia his entire professional life. As the author of *Hebrews—An Interpretation* (Subsidia Biblica, 47; Rome: Gregorian & Biblical Press, 2016), the present writer is naturally interested in Professor Hirsch's book, though it had no part in the shaping of his book on the interpretation of the Epistle to the Hebrews. (Hirsch's book was a favorite of one of the present writer's closest friends, Fr. Dennis J. McCarthy, S.J., who died in 1983.) The present Item is designed to give the reader a general idea of Professor Hirsch's book (Part A), how Hirsch in his book considered some of the problems faced by the present writer when he was trying to interpret the Epistle to the Hebrews (Part B), and how in fact the present writer considered such problems independently of Hirsch's work (Part C). The result, it is hoped, will be that both the present writer and his readers will have some grasp of what is present and what is lacking in *Hebrews—An Interpretation* for the possible benefit of future interpreters of the epistle.

### Part A

The following is the Table of Contents of E. D. Hirsch, Jr., *Validity in Interpretation*, the work cited above. It is not presented as a substitute for reading the work itself, but it will give some idea of the depth of Professor Hirsch's thinking.

#### Preface

#### Chapter 1 IN DEFENSE OF THE AUTHOR

- A. Banishment of the Author
- B. "The Meaning of a Text Changes—Even for the Author"
- C. "It Does Not Matter What an Author Means—Only What the Text Says"
- D. "The Author's Meaning Is Inaccessible"
- E. "The Author Often Does Not Know What He Means"

#### Chapter 2 MEANING AND IMPLICATION

- A. Defining Verbal Meaning
- B. Reproducibility: Psychologicistic Objections
- C. Reproducibility: Historicistic Objections
- D. Determinacy: Verbal Meaning and Typification

- E. Determinacy: Unconscious and Symptomatic Meanings
- F. Determinacy: Meaning and Subject Matter
- G. Determinacy: Meaning and Implication

### Chapter 3 THE CONCEPT OF GENRE

- A. Genre and the Idea of the Whole
- B. Intrinsic Genre
- C. Genre Logic and the Problem of Implication of Probability
- D. The Historicity of Genres
- E. Variety of Genres and Unity of Principles

### Chapter 4 UNDERSTANDING, INTERPRETATION, AND CRITICISM

- A. The Babel of Interpretations
- B. Understanding, Interpretation, and History
- C. Judgment and Critic
- D. Intrinsic Criticism
- E. Critical Freedom and Interpretive Constraint

### Chapter 5 PROBLEMS AND PRINCIPLES OF VALIDATION

- A. The Self-Confirmability of Interpretation
- B. The Survival of the Fittest
- C. The Logic of Validation: Principles of Probability
- D. The Logic of Validation: Interpretive Evidence
- E. Methods, Canons, Rules and Principles

### Appendix I OBJECTIVE INTERPRETATION

- A. The Two Horizons of Textual Meaning
- B. Determination of Textual Meaning
- C. Verification

### Appendix II GADAMER'S THEORY OF INTERPRETATION

- A. Tradition and the Indeterminacy of Meaning
- B. Repetition and the Problem of Norms
- C. Explication and the Fusion of Horizons
- D. The Historicity of Understanding

### Appendix III AN EXCURSUS ON TYPES

#### A. Self-Identity of Types

#### B. Verbal Meaning as Types

### Index

### Part B

How Professor Hirsch's book, *Validity in Interpretation*, may illumine the present writer's book, *Hebrews—An Interpretation*, in retrospect.

1) "With respect to the discipline of interpretation, the demonstration that a reading is valid implies ... a great deal more than individual interpreters generally provide. A validation has to show not merely that an interpretation is plausible, but that it is the most plausible one available" (*Validity in Interpretation*, p. 171). When I wrote *Hebrews—An Interpretation* I thought in terms of plausibility, but not in terms of "what is the most plausible" interpretation of Hebrews. (Note the use of "An" in the title; this implies that I do not present it as the best of all possible interpretations. It may well be the best, but I do not feel qualified to present it as such.) As I explain in my introduction to my website ("Home"), all that I present is presented as being "plausible" and nothing more. I am familiar with a number of interpretations of Hebrews, and of these I have presented what I consider the most plausible. But there may well be other interpretations I am not acquainted with that are more plausible and I would be delighted to acknowledge one of them as such for it would be a better knowledge of God's word.

2) "... in biblical exegesis the Bultmanians hold that the meaning of the Bible is a new revelation to each succeeding generation. In literary theory the most familiar form of the analogous doctrine holds that the meaning of a literary text is 'what it means to us today.' I have given the name 'radical historicism' to such theories, and have taken arms against them in Chapter 2 and Appendix II . . ." (*Validity in Interpretation*, p. viii). When I wrote *Hebrews—An Interpretation* no such theory as "radical historicism" occurred to me. The meaning of the text as it was written in the early 60s of the present era was what I was trying to understand and present, the same meaning that the text has for us today.

3) "The inadequacy of identifying textual meaning with 'tradition' or some other changing norm is seen first of all in the total impracticality of such a norm on the

level of scholarly interpretation. Certainly, in scriptural questions, changes in interpretation can be institutionalized at any moment by an authoritative pronouncement about the ‘consensus ecclesiae’” (*Validity in Interpretation*, p. 123, footnote 35). These remarks of Hirsch give me the occasion to clarify the remark I make about “tradition” I make in the introduction (“Home”) of my website. There I state: “True, the teachings of the Roman Catholic Church have been used to illumine what I think is objectively in the text under consideration if such there be, but no attempt to use such teaching to read things into the text is being attempted. Illumination from beliefs is legitimate if used for *exegesis*, but not for *eisegesis*.” The principal example would be my constant concern to link the Jewish *tôdâ* tradition with the tradition of the Eucharist as known and interpreted officially in the Roman Catholic Church from the Last Supper to the present day. I use this latter tradition to illumine what is objectively in the text, as a person uses a flashlight to illumine what is objectively present in a darkened space, not to create what is objectively not there.

### **Part C**

The present part will outline in brief how the problems involving validity in interpretation of the Epistle to the Hebrews were approached by me with no consideration of what Professor Hirsch had written in his book *Validity in Interpretation*. I had not even read Professor Hirsch’s book before writing *Hebrews—An Interpretation*. I knew of *Validity in Interpretation* and esteemed it because of my contacts with my friend, Fr. Dennis J. McCarthy, S.J. And because of these contacts I have now read *Validity in Interpretation* some four years after publishing my book on Hebrews, in the hope that some clarifications can be achieved.

Anyone who has studied the Epistle to the Hebrews in recent years knows that there are various views about the structure of the epistle. I myself have given credence to two such structures before settling on the structure I have elaborated in my book. (Cf. Item #27 on my present website for an outline of this structure, named “outline” in the Item.) For the first such “structure” or “outline” see A. Vanhoye, S.J., *A Structured Translation of the Epistle to the Hebrews*. Translated from the Greek and the French by J. Swetnam, S.J. (Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 1964). Professor (now Cardinal) Vanhoye taught a class on the Epistle to the Hebrews at the Pontifical Biblical Institute in Rome in the fall semester of the academic year 19962-1963 that was and remains the initial and fundamental reason why Hebrews has been the center of my interest in Scripture for most of

my professional life. He has remained faithful to the outline/structure of the epistle that I translated in 1964. I too remained faithful to it for a brief time and then what seemed and still seems to me its intrinsic weaknesses caused me briefly to adopt another structure. From about the year 1968 until the final draft of *Hebrews—An Interpretation* was decided on in 2014 I was constantly mulling over the structure/outline of the epistle.

As I mulled over the structure/outline of Hebrews the principles for elaborating such a structure became ever clearer: the macro-structure must be based on the micro-structure. The latter consisted of the individual words and sentences of the epistle which, when correctly understood, would function as the basis for the macro-structure. Particularly challenging were the many “crucis” of the epistle, especially in Chapters 1, 2 and 3. It took years of patient reflection to arrive at a plausible interpretation of each and every crux. Such reflection was not my full-time occupation, obviously. But it was the constant background of my attempts to contribute something of fundamental importance to the interpretation of God’s Word in the Catholic Tradition.

Toward the end of my thirty-years of teaching at the Pontifical Biblical Institute something occurred that, in retrospect, was of decisive importance in my understanding of the epistle. I was reading a seminar paper prepared by one of my students when I came across a footnote that led me to an article by a German Lutheran Old Testament exegete, Hartmut Gese. Gese called attention to a Jewish sacrificial practice called the “sacrifice of praise”, the Jewish *tôdâ* tradition. Although it was immediately clear that at the time such a practice needed much more research in both the Old Testament and in the New, I immediately saw in it a useful tool for understanding the Epistle to the Hebrews with relevance to the Eucharist. This initial acceptance of mine of the “sacrifice of praise” was helped by the enthusiastic acceptance as well by Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger. Ratzinger was and remains no specialist in research in Scripture, but he is an insightful theologian and his connection of the “sacrifice of praise” as a helpful background for the study of the Eucharist was and remains a strong motive for seeing its influence in Hebrews.

Here is how I summarized my book on Hebrews in its Introduction:

The following work is neither a full-fledged commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews nor a detailed outline. It falls somewhere in between. It is an attempt to come to grips with the basic presentation of the epistle so that the reader of this book knows what the author of the

epistle is talking about and why, and how he articulates his thoughts from the first verse of the epistle to the end. In other words, the macro-structure of the epistle is set out so that the various parts may be understood in relation to each other and in relation to the micro-structure on which the macro-structure is based.

The search for this goal has been based on an attempt to find the proper integration of “form” (structure) and “matter”(meaning). The “matter” as understood here is the meaning of the various concepts used by the author of Hebrews as they are used in sentence form. This integration involving structure and meaning is adduced as resulting in various degrees of plausibility—no “proof” is being attempted and hence no proof is being asserted.

The entire work has been written with the Magisterium of the Roman Catholic Church as a guide. Care has been taken not to use the Magisterium to impose a meaning on the text that is not there: eisegesis. Rather, the Magisterium has been used as an aid to see what *is* there: exegesis. In other words the faith and reason of the present writer have been used in a way that, hopefully, has avoided the pitfalls of fideism on the one hand and rationalism on the other.

Thus the present interpretation is to be judged on its own merits, i.e., the resulting coherence of the various parts of the epistle within themselves and with each other. **(11 February 2020)**