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The Gospels and the Reader

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5 The Gospels and the reader

SANDRA M. SCHNEIDERS

FROM OBJECT TO SUBJECT IN NEW TESTAMENT STUDIES

From at least the eighteenth to the mid-twentieth century the prevailing understanding of history and of texts and their meaning was almost exclusively object-centred. The reader of the text seldom came into view, and if she or he did, the exegesis was suspect. History was understood as a free-standing state of affairs which existed 'in the past' independently of the reader. Texts were free-standing semantic containers in which a single, stable meaning was intentionally embedded by the author. The meaning in the biblical texts was presumed to be primarily information about history. Thus, the task of the biblical scholar was primarily if not exclusively to extract from the text what it had to say about history. The primary concern was, at first, to discover 'what really happened' in the past; for instance, who Jesus really was and what he really said and did.

Gradually, as source criticism gave rise to redaction criticism in gospel scholarship, the interest shifted to what each evangelist contributed to the presentation of this historical material and how that contribution both influenced the data about Jesus and his message (e.g., through selection and emphases) and gave the reader access to another sphere of historical data, viz., the *Sitz im Leben* or the community context in which the oral tradition about Jesus was transmuted through practice into text. However, the interest still focused on the information that was embedded in the text, either explicitly or implicitly. The ideal was still historical objectivity, but now less focused on 'what really happened' and more on 'what the author intended to say' about what really happened.

This move from concern with what was presumed to be objectively behind the text to what the evangelist intended to communicate precipitated a shift in perspective among New Testament scholars. The text, which had been virtually invisible because it was understood as a kind of clear

window through which the scholar examined first-century realities, had now become visible as an object of study itself.¹ 'New Criticism', which had developed in secular literary scholarship in the 1950s, began to influence New Testament studies in the 1970s and 1980s. New Criticism focused directly and exclusively on the text itself as a 'closed world' which was completely independent not only of authorial intention but also of the context and genetics of the text's production or the existence and/or significance of its extra-textual referent. Such an approach could never have become absolute in New Testament studies because the significance of the subject-matter of the text, the story of Jesus, was dependent on the actual existence of its historical referent. It did, however, precipitate a new focus on the received text in its final form. Methodological interest shifted to text-oriented approaches such as structuralism, narrative criticism and rhetorical criticism, which challenged the hegemony of historical concerns in the field.

The emergence of this new, predominantly literary interest positioned New Testament scholarship to experience the impact of what has been called, in both philosophical and literary studies, the 'turn to the subject'. From a virtually exclusive concern with history, attention turned first to the text itself as a literary entity rather than simply as a source of historical data, and then, inexorably, to the subject, the reader of the text. The path of New Testament scholarship from the 1950s into the 1990s was from exegesis as the extraction of a single valid authorially established meaning *from* the text, to attention *to* the text itself as a literary structure, to interpretation *of* the text, now understood as a mediation of meaning *by* a real reader engaged in a unique process of reading.

This development gave rise to a number of new questions. What is meaning? How is it achieved? What does it mean to interpret a text? Can a text have more than one valid meaning, and, if so, how is validity determined? Can the text 'change' in the process of interpretation, and, if so, what does this imply about the authority and normativity of the biblical text as scripture in and for the Christian community? Who is the competent reader and what kind of responsibility does the reader have to the text on the one hand and to the community on the other? And who is served by various interpretations?

In this refocusing of attention on the reader and the reading process, the historical referent and the text retained their importance even as the understanding of them was modified. History was now seen not as a free-standing, objective reality but as an aspect of the subject-matter of the witness of the evangelists emerging from the experience of the Jesus event

in real communities. The text was seen, not as a window through which to see something else (viz. the first-century world and the theological concerns of the evangelist, or as a closed literary object detached from any context or content outside itself), but as a dynamic literary structure which mediates the interaction between the subject-matter of the text and the reader. The reader, once virtually invisible, and the activity of reading, once thought to be an exclusively methodological operation on an inert textual object, had become the primary focus of attention.

This new perspective has given rise to a number of new approaches to the study of the New Testament involving new historical, literary and theological methods.² The new approaches with which this particular chapter is concerned belong to the field of *hermeneutics*, or theories of interpretation and the practices of reading. The engagement of the text by the contemporary reader is the focus of attention. In what follows, three clusters of subject-matter will be discussed: first, a group of approaches to interpretation which are primarily concerned with the reader and which I will call 'pragmatic'; second, hermeneutics as a global philosophical theory of interpretation which grounds particular approaches to reading, whether historical, literary, theological or pragmatic; third, particular questions about the text, the reader and reading which arise from a reader-oriented approach to interpretation. The interaction among the topics discussed in the third section will suggest the effect of interpretation in the reader, in the community and in the world.

PRAGMATIC APPROACHES TO THE TEXT

Hermeneutics as a global theoretical enterprise is concerned with the interpretation of 'texts', which includes not only literary texts such as the gospels but also any meaningful material such as oral discourse, actions or artefacts. It asks about the meaning and conditions of possibility of human understanding, the process of meaningful engagement with texts, the effects of understanding, and the criteria of validity of the whole enterprise. In other words, hermeneutics is an ontological and epistemological inquiry into understanding through interpretation.

Most biblical scholars leave this global enterprise to philosophers while they operate within and in terms of certain intermediate hermeneutical frameworks which allow them to address their particular interests in regard to the texts (e.g., the gospels) with which they are concerned. Many scholars have a preferred hermeneutical framework, (e.g., historical, literary or theological) within which they tend to apply a particular set of methods to all the

texts they interpret and to select for interpretation texts amenable to this framework. But other scholars, especially those involved in what I am calling 'pragmatic interpretation', will move back and forth among a number of hermeneutical frameworks, using methods from all of them. Pragmatics is the theory of how texts and their users are related. Reading, in this perspective, is concerned not exclusively with the knowledge obtained through interpretation but with the way that knowledge and life, both personal and social, affect each other.

Although the earliest interpreters of the NT understood biblical interpretation primarily as a life-transforming activity (i.e., as a dimension of their spirituality), contemporary pragmatic hermeneutics has no real antecedents in the precritical or Enlightenment periods. The starting-point of pragmatic interpretation, unlike that of traditional historical, literary, or theological interpretation, is not the text but the present situation of the reader. Furthermore, the various forms of this type of interpretation are asymmetrical in relation to each other so that even grouping them together is problematic. I am calling them 'pragmatic' approaches because of the emphasis in all of them on enlisting New Testament resources in a conscious and structured project of action for social or personal transformation. I will discuss several such approaches without attempting to be exhaustive.

Liberation hermeneutics

Liberation hermeneutics has arisen in the communitarian context of the oppressed poor. The biblical text read in these communities, whether in Latin America, Asia, Africa, or among people of colour or native peoples in first-world countries, is seen first and foremost as being about the readers and their present situation rather than about the first century. Often these readers lack academic training in biblical studies and their approach to the text is not linguistically, historically or literarily sophisticated. They read from their own place addressing to the text the survival questions of their everyday life. Often they are aided by trained biblical scholars who have articulated the hermeneutical framework for this kind of reading and who can be especially helpful in maintaining a critical appreciation of the 'otherness' of the text, but the real work of interpretation is done by the poor themselves.³

The oppressed find in the biblical text resources for their struggle. Liberation interpreters, both the lay people participating in the reading and the scholars who have made the liberation of the oppressed their primary academic agenda, read the biblical text through the lens of grinding poverty,

rampant disease, premature death and socio-political powerlessness. In the text they find the assurance that their suffering is not willed by God but unjustly imposed by those in power and that God is on the side of the oppressed. They are concerned not primarily with what the text means intellectually but with what it means for transformative action in their own situation.

Characteristic of this and other pragmatic approaches is the emphasis on praxis. Praxis is not simply the application to behaviour of the understanding of the text. Rather, it is an ongoing spiralling process in which the interpretation is incorporated into action and the lived experience is then brought back into dialogue with the text, which, in turn, is reinterpreted in light of the experience as the basis for further action.

Feminist hermeneutics

Although feminist hermeneutics is rightly considered a form of liberationist hermeneutics, it is marked by distinctive features it does not share with the former. Like other forms of pragmatic interpretation, it begins in the experience of oppression, specifically the gender-based oppression of women. Patriarchal oppression, however, is not the oppression of a particular group (e.g., people of colour in a particular society), but of half the human race. It cuts across all races, ethnic groups, social classes and religions. This lends numerical strength to the feminist cause but it also makes it more difficult for feminists to come together around biblical interpretation or the action to which it gives rise, because different women (e.g., poor and middle-class, educated and illiterate, black or Asian or white, married and single women) experience their oppression in vastly different ways around very different foci of urgency.

In contrast to other forms of liberationist interpretation which can appeal to the biblical testimony to God's preferential option for the poor, feminists often confront a biblical text in which God is in league with the male oppressor. In the biblical text, women are often marginalized or even invisible; their suffering is regarded as acceptable collateral damage within male projects; their agency is devalued or subverted. Thus, feminist interpreters see the need not only to liberate the oppressed, namely women, *through* scripture, but also to liberate the biblical text itself *from* its own androcentric perspective, patriarchal assumptions, and tolerance or approval of sexist practice. Furthermore, the biblical academy must be liberated from its collusion, conscious and unconscious, with the patriarchy and sexism in the text.

A final distinctive feature of feminist hermeneutics is its universalist perspective. The liberation of women is one dimension of an agenda of social transformation which envisions the definitive dismantling of all forms of domination through the subversion of their foundation in the ideology of hierarchical dualism.⁴ The domination of women by men is the paradigmatic instance of this dominative ideology which justifies myriad systems of oppression of the weak by the powerful extending even to the rape by humans of nature itself. Consequently, the feminist agenda is indeed liberationist, but its ultimate aim is more universally transformative. Christian feminists interpreting scripture in the service of this agenda have, as their ultimate objective, the modelling of human society on the egalitarianism, dialogical mutuality and interdependence of the triune God revealed in Jesus. In short, the universality and radicality of the feminist agenda, the problems of the biblical text in regard to women, and the diversity of the social situations of many women who are oppressed not only because of gender but also because of race, class, and other factors, put feminist hermeneutics in a unique position among liberationist interpreters.

Ethical interpretation

Ethical interpretation can mean either interpreting the biblical text ethically or using the biblical text to address ethical problems. Biblical scholars are increasingly aware that there is no neutral or innocent reading of 'what the text says'. Liturgical reading, preaching, commentary, the determination of the structure and content of the lectionary, translation, are all political; that is, they respond to and serve the interests of those who engage in them. Therefore, they are ethical enterprises. Objectivity in dealing with the text is an illusion, and the claim to such objectivity is often, deliberately or not, in service of the powerful. To read historically anti-Jewish texts in Matthew or John without attending to their antisemitic potential is not objectivity but racism. The particular texts that never (or always) appear in the liturgical cycle, where they begin and end, and on what liturgical occasions certain texts are (or are not) read, as well as sexist and racist translations, are not fidelity to the text but strategies of exclusion and oppression.

A second form of ethical interpretation concerns the use of the biblical text in the effort to act ethically, personally and socially. The globalization that has increased steadily since the Second World War has raised heretofore unimagined and seemingly intractable ethical problems in the areas of social life, politics, economics, medicine and technology. This has led politicians,

scientists, educators, cultural critics and ethicists within the Christian tradition to turn to the Bible, and especially to the New Testament, for resources in facing these challenges. Because these problems were inconceivable in first-century Palestine, contemporary readers must choose between declaring the New Testament irrelevant to the Christian quest for moral wisdom in these times or finding a way to read the text that will go beyond the search for objective answers and enable present-day Christians to confront new problems with what Paul called 'the mind of Christ'.

Ethical interpretation shares with liberationist and feminist hermeneutics the starting-place in the situation of the reader(s) rather than in the engagement of the reader with the text, the high practical stakes of its success or failure, and its agenda of social transformation. Like much feminist interpretation, it is located primarily in the academy. Its practitioners are trying to develop hermeneutical understandings that can integrate biblical and especially New Testament perspectives into moral theories and reasoning in ways that will be genuinely enriching and transformative of those theories. However, since most ethical theories current in the academy were developed within philosophical rather than theological or biblical frameworks, if the project of integrating New Testament perspectives into ethical discourse is to be taken seriously a biblical hermeneutical theory which can facilitate a dialogue with this secular synthesis is needed.⁵

Spiritual hermeneutics

Spiritual hermeneutics is closely related to ethical interpretation, but its focus is on the transformation of the individual and/or community in relation to God, self and world. It, also, is pre-eminently a reader-centred approach to scripture. Christian spirituality is the lived experience of Christian faith. Within this overall project the practice of interpreting the Bible, especially the New Testament, as a resource for personal transformation began in the patristic period, was thematized in the medieval practice of *lectio divina*, was the backbone of the spiritualities of the Reformation, and has seen a renewed flowering among Catholics since Vatican II. The challenge today is to integrate appropriate critical strategies into an engagement of reader and text in such a way that the transformative participation of the reader is fostered while a relapse into a precritical naivety is forestalled.⁶ In regard to spiritual as well as liberationist, feminist and ethical interpretation, the urgent agenda is the development of an adequate hermeneutical framework for an appropriately critical, post-Enlightenment, personally and socially transformative, non-alienating engagement of the reader with the text.⁷

A HERMENEUTICAL FRAMEWORK FOR READING THE NEW TESTAMENT AS SACRED SCRIPTURE

Whether or not the interpreter attends to the fact, all particular approaches to interpretation, including those which focus on the reader, imply a philosophically based hermeneutics or global theory of what it means to understand, how the human subject achieves understanding, and what understanding effects. In other words, there is some ontological-epistemological theory operative, at least implicitly, in all interpretative processes. Contemporary interpreters who attend to this fact appeal to a variety of hermeneutical theories and theorists from deconstructionism to the thought of Mikhail Bakhtin. Discussing this array of competing theories is beyond the scope of this chapter. However, by drawing on the contribution of two twentieth-century hermeneutical philosophers, Hans-Georg Gadamer and Paul Ricoeur, I will attempt to supply a (not the only possible) workable hermeneutical framework for New Testament reader-centred interpretation.

A theory of text

Ricoeur's hermeneutical theory involves a nuanced analysis of text. He argues that a text is not simply a written form of oral discourse.⁸ The text is a different kind of being from speech. Rejecting the Platonic argument that discourse 'dies' in writing and must be 'revived' by oral proclamation, Ricoeur contends that writing is an enriched form of discourse. Inscription not only stabilizes and preserves meaning but also liberates discourse from its producer. The effects of this transformation are extremely important for the process of interpretation.

First, the encoding of discourse in writing creates a text which is *semantically autonomous*, which has a 'life of its own'. It can outlive its author and interact with audiences its author may never have envisioned. The meaning of written discourse – unlike that of oral speech, which is controlled by the intention of the speaker, who can correct misinterpretations in the actual experience of dialogue – is in the public forum, available to any competent reader, and meaning whatever it actually means no matter what might have been intended by the author.

Second, the autonomous text can be *re-contextualized*. The meaning is no longer completely conditioned by, nor restricted to, the socio-historical context and specific ostensible references of the original speaking event. A speaker speaks to one audience in one place and time, can indicate by pointing, physically or verbally, to what she or he intends, and can correct misunderstandings by the hearers if these are expressed. But the written

text can be read in entirely different situations which might profoundly alter its original meaning. A judicial verdict which originally applied to a single specific case, once it becomes written text, may serve as precedent in subsequent cases that have very little in common with the original one. Writing not only preserves the memory of the original case but creates a text which becomes a source of judicial wisdom for future situations which the original judge could not have imagined. In short, writing does not impoverish the meaning of discourse, but enhances it by both stabilizing it and endowing it with a certain degree of semantic autonomy in relation to its originator and to its situation of composition.

Gadamer contributed to a usable theory of text by his reflection on the nature of the *classic*.⁹ Some texts, because of the universality of their subject-matter, their compositional effectiveness and their stylistic beauty, transcend their own time and circumstances and address the human situation as such. They continue to be meaningful, within their own tradition and beyond, down through the ages. Because of both their semantic autonomy as written, and their intrinsic worth as classics, such texts have a 'surplus of meaning' that emerges as they are interpreted in new and different circumstances. Such texts, composed long ago but recognized as important in the present, raise the genuinely hermeneutical, as opposed to the purely historical, question. How can such texts be 'actualized', rendered contemporary with and meaningful to the present reader?

Gadamer evoked the analogy of the work of art to explain both the mode of existence of the classic and the role of interpretation in actualizing it in the present. Just as great art (e.g., the *Mona Lisa*) exists, even when it is not being aesthetically appreciated as an art object, but comes into the fullness of being as a work of art only when it is actually engaged by the viewer, so the classic text exists physically as potentially meaningful until it is actualized by a competent reading. The stability of the text as artefact grounds the continuity and family resemblance of subsequent interpretations, which will all be different because of the different circumstances, interests and capacities which individual interpreters bring to the task.

The eminent scholar of religions, Wilfred Cantwell Smith, came to a complementary conclusion about the nature of the Christian Bible as scripture.¹⁰ Comparing the Bible to the sacred texts of other world religions, he located their 'scriptural' character not in some ontological feature of the text as such but in their historically demonstrated role of mediating the engagement of their respective communities with the transcendent. In other words, the biblical text has a sacramental character arising from the

conjunction of the classic religious text with the interpretative practice of the community.

A theory of textual meaning

Ricoeur devoted considerable attention to the meaning of meaning. Given that the meaning of the text is not reducible to the intention of the writer, how and what does a text mean? Ricoeur distinguished between meaning as *propositional content* and meaning as *event*. Our concern for the moment is the former. A text, said Ricoeur, is a dialectical reality in which sense and reference mutually interact to constitute meaning. The *sense* of discourse is established by the grammatical and syntactical integrity of the sentences and their relation to each other. 'A dog is a feline' makes sense. In fact, we can judge that it is false only because we can understand it. *Reference* is the sentence's intention to reach reality. The referent in this case is not properly accessed because dogs are not felines but canines. Of course, literary discourse is much more complex than this simple example, and the referent is often not mere fact but truth: about humanity, history or God. Furthermore, literary discourse often has a 'split reference', referring not only to extra-discursive reality but reflexively to the discourse itself. The gospel accounts of the resurrection of Jesus, for example, refer to the fate of Jesus after his death and the experience of that reality by the first disciples (i.e., to facts and events 'outside' the discourse), but they also refer to the theology of resurrection developing within the early Christian community precisely through and in the writing of these texts. Ricoeur's theory of textual meaning as a dialectic between sense and reference allows for focus either on what the text itself says (its sense), or on the reality about which it speaks (its reference), which may include its extratextual, intratextual and intertextual reference.

Gadamer's most important contribution to the theory of textual meaning is his conception of *effective history* and *effective historical consciousness*. History is not composed of stable events which, once they have occurred, remain frozen in their facticity in the past, able to be observed by the historian from some objective and a-historical point of view. An event, such as the Second World War, is part of the process of history, and not only continues to affect all subsequent history but continues to be affected by subsequent history. Thus, the 'meaning' of the war has changed as subsequent events have manifested, magnified or relativized its significance. The meaning of the war in 2006 is different from its meaning in 1945 because its effective history is now part of the meaning of the event itself.

Texts also have an effective history. The meaning of the crucifixion of Jesus today includes everything that that event unleashed in history: for example, theologies and spiritualities of redemptive suffering, the Eucharist as sacrament of the paschal mystery, and heroic self-sacrifice; but also controversies over its meaning, Jewish–Christian antagonism, and contemporary feminist repudiation of a God who is placated by the shedding of innocent blood, all of which is part of the effective history of the crucifixion and part of the meaning of the text which recounts it.

The interpreter who faces this text today does so, not with objective consciousness, but with a consciousness profoundly affected and shaped by all that the text has produced which is now part of its meaning. As the reader interprets, he or she will contribute to the history of interpretation of this text, further expanding its effective history. In other words, Gadamer brilliantly captured the dynamic character of meaning, not only as process or event but also as content. Textual meaning is never simply static, residing in an inert text. It is being constantly transformed by the incessant interaction of the text with its context, including the interpretative activity of readers.

A theory of interpretation

Ricoeur's ultimate purpose in establishing the nature and characteristics of texts as written discourse and of textual meaning as content was to ground a theory of interpretation that could account for both the similarity and the difference among interpretations of a single text and allow the development of criteria to adjudicate among interpretations. How does the potential meaning (the *ideal* meaning created by the dialectic of sense and reference in a text) emerge as *real* meaning? This occurs as event in the interaction between a reader and the text in the act of interpretation. Just as real music occurs only when a musician plays the score, so real meaning occurs only when a reader interprets the text. And just as the real music is normed by the score (the ideal music encoded in the notation) but not constrained by it to wooden repetition, so the interpretation of a text is normed by the text (the ideal meaning created by inscription) but can and must be original and fresh in the hands of each reader. The same score can be played beautifully by a virtually infinite number of talented performers, each of whom contributes with originality to the body of interpretation of the piece, which itself remains identical. Similarly, the integrity of the text is not threatened by the potentially infinite variety of interpretations by readers whose interpretations are creatively diverse but faithful to the text. And just as it is possible to grade musical performances as good or better,

flawed or totally inadequate, so it is possible to distinguish good textual interpretation from bad.

How does the event of meaning occur? According to Ricoeur, all interpretation begins with the educated guess, a provisional hypothesis about what the text might mean arising from whatever familiarity with the subject-matter or contextual clues might be available. This hypothesis must then be tested in a process of oscillating between *explanation* and *understanding* until the reader achieves a certain 'rest' or satisfaction in the meaning achieved. The text not only 'makes sense' in that one knows what it says (e.g., 'Jesus rose from the dead') and to what it refers (viz., that Jesus, who really died, is now alive), but has some understanding of what this means, not just notionally but really (i.e., that in the personal experience of Jesus the ultimate power of death over all humanity has been definitively broken). The reader, in short, has come to some understanding of the meaning of the text. Meaning has emerged as event in the experience of the reader.

Explanation includes the use of whatever investigative tools of biblical criticism seem appropriate. Each methodological move increases the understanding of the interpreter, thus deepening and widening the basis and framework for the next methodological move. This back-and-forth between explanation and understanding, which could (and historically in the community does) continue indefinitely, will halt for the reader when she or he is satisfied that a certain level of understanding is adequate for the moment. This understanding is not total or exhaustive, and it will be supplemented, corrected, challenged, expanded in dialogue with other understandings, both those achieved by the same interpreter in subsequent encounters with the text and those of other interpreters approaching the text in other times, places, circumstances. Interpretation is a never-ending process of engagement and re-engagement with a text whose real meaning is always developing through the work of interpretation.

Gadamer's treatment of this ongoing process of interpretation of a classic text within a community of shared life experience highlighted the *role of tradition* in the process. This is an important contribution to understanding the interpretation of the New Testament in the Christian community because the biblical text arose within and from the ongoing experience (i.e., the living tradition) of the church. Tradition preceded the production of the biblical text and is enshrined within it. The eventual selection of the texts which make up the Bible (i.e., the process and product of canonization) was part of that lived experience of the faith. And tradition provides the normative context within which the text is interpreted in the church down through the centuries.

Nevertheless, as Gadamer's critics have pointed out, tradition is a potentially oppressive category. Not everything that has been thought, done, or taught in the history of the church is worthy of or even minimally faithful to the gospel. The church's establishment of the canon was a deliberate choice to norm its life and faith (i.e., its tradition) by this foundational text. Consequently, a unilateral appeal to tradition as authoritative in the interpretation of scripture is as wrong-headed as treating the text as if it emerged full-blown from the hand of God independently of human context. Tradition and scripture must mutually interpret each other, or, more exactly, function dialogically and dialectically in the work of interpretation.

A theory of understanding

Understanding, as both Ricoeur and Gadamer insisted, is not simply an epistemological process of arriving at new knowledge. Rather, in the ontological sense of the word understanding denotes the specifically human way of being-in-the-world. Understanding integrates us into reality. Consequently, to come to new understanding is to expand one's existential horizon (and thus to see not only more but also to see everything differently) and to deepen one's humanity. Gadamer talked about application and Ricoeur about appropriation, but essentially they both intended to designate the transformation of the subject that is effected by an enriched encounter with reality.

The interpreter of a gospel is not merely trying to grasp what happened in the first century or what the evangelist intended to say or what the text actually does say about what happened. The interpreter is undergoing the kind of transformative experience that the person listening to great music undergoes. One emerges from the experience somehow different. Gadamer called understanding a 'fusion of horizons' or an expansion of existential context. This metaphorical expression captures well the experiential character of understanding as well as its transformative effect. Through understanding one becomes understanding. This is a comment not on the quantity of a person's knowledge but on the quality of the person.

THE INTERACTION OF TEXT AND READER IN THE HERMENEUTICAL PROCESS

Text

Because the Christian reader of the gospels regards these texts as sacred scripture, as somehow 'authored' by God for the sake of our salvation and

therefore marked by such theological notes as inspiration, revelation and normativity, certain contemporary notions concerning texts, all clustered around *the issue of 'objectivity'*, raise serious questions. If all texts are relatively indeterminate, constructed by the reader, non-objective, and changing in and through the process of interpretation, how can the biblical text be considered authoritative for the believer and the community?

Although the Enlightenment notion of objectivity as the independent condition of the free-standing non-subject which confronts the knower as self-enclosed and non-negotiable is rightly rejected, the concept of objectivity itself cannot be simply abandoned if the New Testament reader's engagement with the text is not to be reduced to an exercise in pure projection. The text is not simply an object. The process of reading involves a co-constructing of the text by the reader. But that construction is a response to an 'other' which places demands on the reader. In other words, the text is not a subject in the same sense in which the reader is. The reader must come to terms with the reality of the text which is neither absolutely determined nor totally indeterminate.

The text pre-exists the reader and it has a certain form and content united according to the demands of a particular genre and within the style of a particular 'author' (individual or collective). Nevertheless, it remains somewhat indeterminate. It speaks in its own voice but, like any speaker, it cannot say everything. There are 'gaps', areas of indeterminacy, which the reader must resolve and which can be resolved in a number of different ways. The concepts borrowed from narrative theory of 'implied author' and 'implied reader' are an attempt to acknowledge both the claim of the text on the reader and the reader's relative autonomy in responding to that claim.

The implied author and implied reader are distinguished from the real author and reader as constructs of the text rather than actual actors. The point of view, convictions and intentions encoded in the text (which are not necessarily those of the real author) are implicit in the way it treats the subject-matter. And the text encourages the reader to respond in certain ways, to identify with certain characters, to care about certain outcomes, to struggle with certain issues, to arrive at certain conclusions, and so on. In other words, the text attempts to construct its reader, to guide the reader's responses. Although these rhetorical strategies have always been operative in texts, the contemporary reader is explicitly conscious of them and therefore in a position to respond more freely to this subtle manipulation by the text. The real reader may choose to respond as the text suggests but may also choose to resist or to transgress this textual programme.¹¹ Consequently, the interaction between reader and text becomes not simply

a passive acquiescence of the reader but an active engagement in which the text may be welcomed, challenged, questioned, even rejected. The text, like real speech, often says what it means (both positively and negatively) rather than what its author meant to say. For example, a feminist reader may refuse the textual invitation of the gospels to see women as auxiliary or marginal to the Jesus story and may, through the interpretative process, 'force' the text to yield more of the submerged history of women in early Christianity than the evangelists intended to recount.¹² The liberationist reader may call into question the inevitability of having the poor always with us (cf. Mk 14.7).

Such an understanding of reading requires a revision of simplistic notions of the *authority* and *normativity* of the text as scripture. Scripture is not purely declarative or prescriptive. Its authority is not that of apodictic statements which demand unquestioning submission. Rather, the authority of scripture (like any real authority) arises from the recognition of truth. As Gadamer pointed out, interpretation is a dialogical process in which the reader attempts to discern the question that gave rise to the text as 'answer'. If the question (e.g., of slavery) is properly discerned, then the answer a particular text (e.g., Eph. 5.5–8) offers might be questioned, modified, or even rejected in terms of the truth about the subject-matter (slavery) as it has become increasingly clear over the centuries of Christian experience (i.e., that slavery is never acceptable). The reader who resists Paul's support of slavery as an institution is not rejecting the authority of scripture. She or he is identifying the question raised by the text but recognizing that the text can play a different role (e.g., showing how uncritical acceptance of cultural realities can betray the gospel) in answering that question today than it did when it was written. If the text were not authoritative the reader would not take seriously either the question itself or the responsibility to help shape a genuinely Christian answer in the current situation. Thus the normativity of the text has more to do with the *questions* the Christian must engage and the *co-ordinates of appropriate responses* that the text offers (e.g., that masters have no right to lord it over slaves because both master and slave have one master, God) than with apodictic prescriptions that would lock Christian experience into the past.

Such an approach, of course, raises the question of whether the biblical text 'changes' as it goes through history. The preservation of the New Testament text in its original language in the most critically correct version possible is vital. It is equivalent to preserving the original manuscript of a Beethoven sonata even though the instruments for which he composed are no longer played today and a vast body of arrangements and interpretations

has modified what was originally considered the optimal performance. The art object must remain stable in order that the work of art, that is, the subsequent performances of the sonata, may be faithfully and creatively realized.

The New Testament text is the unchanging 'art object'. But, as performed text, as 'work of art', it changes and develops. The narrative content, structures and dynamics of the text continue to norm every valid reading and thus maintain an organic continuity in the effective history of interpretation. But what a text like Jn 20.11–18 (the appearance to Mary Magdalene) means today, especially in respect to the apostolic vocation of women in the early and contemporary church, has certainly changed dramatically since the modern period, in which it was read as a purely private, ecclesially insignificant story of Jesus consoling a woman.

Reader

As the role of the reader in co-creating textual meaning has achieved greater prominence, the once simple question of who the reader is and how he or she functions has been problematized. Protestants since the Reformation and Catholics since Vatican II have recognized that official ecclesiastical authority cannot, either in theory or in practice, reserve to itself the role of legitimate reader. The church as community, the individual believer and the well-disposed outsider are all legitimate readers of the New Testament text who have genuine and complementary, if not equal, contributions to make to the task of ongoing interpretation. And the trained biblical specialist has a unique, although limited, contribution to make not only to interpretation itself but to the reading of all the others.

The *church as community of faith*, as Spirit-empowered subject of tradition, is the primary reader of the New Testament text as sacred scripture. This community 'reads' not only by actually proclaiming the text but by enacting it in liturgy, incarnating it in the spiritualities of its members, and living the gospel in the world. Church authority, whether pastoral or academic, plays a significant role in this ongoing process in virtue of both leadership and learning, but history testifies eloquently that unless the community as a whole appropriates the interpretation of the gospel, official definitions of the meaning of the text are ineffectual.

Individual believers, both scholars and lay, are also readers of the text. Although they read within the context of the church as community, it is precisely as individuals studying, praying and living the gospel that they

contribute to the ongoing task of interpretation. Several factors have changed the role of the individual reader in recent history. Printing and widespread literacy have made possible not only personal reading of the text but also a different kind of engagement with the text. The person reading a written text can reread, read intertextually, read in various orders, read selectively, compare translations, and otherwise move about in the text in a way that is not possible when one hears the text chosen and segmented by another, in relation to certain other texts, and so on. The potential for new connections and insights, different perspectives and original interpretation is greatly increased, as is, of course, the potential for aberrations in interpretation.

However, contemporary readers are more self-aware about their reading activity than were their predecessors. They know that there is no such thing as presuppositionless reading or purely objective interpretation. All reading, no matter how highly placed or well-endowed the reader, is done from some 'place', from some particular and circumscribed social location that is influenced by cultural situation, gender, race, age, ethnicity, education, religious tradition and social class. Acknowledging the situated character of all reading has both subverted the claims of the elites (ecclesiastical, academic, economic or political – and virtually always male) to control of the process of interpretation, and has greatly enriched the interpretative enterprise with the perspectives and insights of those whose voices have heretofore seldom been heard.

The New Testament text is also read by *well-intentioned outsiders*, those who are neither believers nor opponents. By 'well-intentioned' is meant the reader who does not share the faith of the Christian community but is not antagonistic to it. Just as a Christian can read with profit the *Bhagavad Gita* or the Qur'an, so the prepared non-Christian can competently read the New Testament. Its role in the pacifist commitment of Mahatma Gandhi, for example, is well known. Furthermore, such readers sometimes bring forward a fresh perspective, new questions, the unexpected insight or even the serious challenge, which long habituation to the text might have obscured for the community itself.

This possibility raises the question of the *role of faith* in the reader and the reading of the New Testament as scripture. Is Christian faith indispensable, an obstacle, or irrelevant to valid interpretation of the biblical text? If it were indispensable, then the non-Christian, no matter how well disposed, could not be a competent reader, and this is plainly contrary to experience. And if faith were an obstacle, then only the non-believers, or scholars who agreed to bracket their Christian commitments while working on the text,

could achieve valid interpretations. Again, this is clearly contrary to the community's experience as articulated by some of its more eminent interpreters from Origen to Bultmann and beyond. But it is also counter-intuitive to hold that in reading a text written from faith for faith, the faith of the reader is irrelevant. This is equivalent to maintaining that experience as an actor is irrelevant to the appreciation of Shakespeare.

Faith may denote either that saving openness to revelation which Jesus often recognized in non-Jews as a sufficient disposition for healing, or a thematically articulated participation in a particular religious tradition. The former is certainly necessary for any fruitful engagement of the biblical text. Only a person open to the truth-claims of a text is properly disposed to understand it. On the other hand, thematized and active participation in the Christian tradition which produced the text and has lived it through the centuries familiarizes one with the underlying story, sensitizes one to its religious perspective and symbol system, enriches one with the history of its interpretation, and thus generally increases the reader's competence. Just as an American, other things being equal, is better equipped to understand the US Constitution than someone who has never lived in the United States but reads the document in school, so a participant in the Christian tradition has the immediate context for competent reading that the non-Christian must access vicariously. Of course, if faith is understood in fundamentalist terms as a blind submission of intellect to a literalistic reading of the biblical text as prescriptive, faith might indeed be an obstacle to interpretation, but intelligent and critical faith commitment is neither irrelevant nor an obstacle but an asset.

Finally, there is the special case of the reader who is a trained *biblical scholar*. The person who commands the languages in which the biblical text was written, who has studied the history of the subject-matter of the text as well as of the text itself, who is competent in the theology and spirituality that come to expression in the text, and who is equipped with an articulated hermeneutical framework within which to engage in the interpretative process in a critical way is obviously in a different relation to the work of interpretation than is the lay reader. The difference is neither hierarchical nor moral. It is a difference in competence. The professional biblical scholar has access to resources specific to the academic specialty not available to most readers, including many church officials.

Situating the biblical scholar in the reading community has often been a problem. In some traditions which have weak (or no) central authority and a limited sense of tradition, there can be a tendency to absolutize

biblical scholarship so that faith itself is tied to developments in the field, with either fundamentalistic or secularizing results. In other traditions which have strong (or even 'monarchical') central authority, biblical scholarship can be marginalized or ignored in the interests of ecclesiastical control.

Ordinary lay readers can be so overwhelmed by scholarly virtuosity that they feel totally incompetent to read the text and thus consign themselves to mere absorption of academic results. Others can arrogantly claim the competence of a faith that can dispense with learning and ignore developments in scholarship. Biblical scholars, on the other hand, can see themselves as the only competent readers, unanswerable to the church's office-holders, its pastors, or its lay members, and restrict themselves to conversation with other 'experts'. This usually leads to a practical agreement to bracket faith considerations while engaged in biblical work. Others can see themselves as mere employees of church authority, enlisting the text to promote hierarchical agendas or protecting the weak faith of the laity. This obviously subverts any real scholarly contribution to the church's understanding of the biblical text as well as the contribution of faith to scholarship and vice versa.

The attitudes of a culture towards expertise in any field are likely to influence how biblical scholars view themselves and are viewed and allowed to function in the community of the church. Only if biblical scholarship is seen as a special kind of competence in the reading of the normative texts of the community will the place of the biblical scholar in the community be properly discerned and valued. Like all the members of the community, the scholar is the servant, not the master of the word of God. But both pastoral leaders and lay believers need the contribution of trained and committed biblical scholarship if the community as a whole is to deepen its grasp of revelation.

Reading

From all that has been said, the question 'What is reading?' should suggest its own response. Reading is not blind submission to a text conceived as self-enclosed, objective and absolutely authoritative. The biblical text is not a divinely dictated tissue of assertions, declarations or prescriptions requiring unquestioning acceptance. On the other hand, reading, especially of a sacred text which functions as scripture in a believing community, cannot be a free-wheeling and cavalier, nihilistically deconstructive 'play' with

a totally indeterminate linguistic artefact. If the text and the reader have been well described in this chapter, reading must be understood as a disciplined engagement with a mediator of meaning that is neither 'objective' in the Enlightenment sense of that term nor a Rorschach inkblot that is susceptible to any and all projections. In the oscillation between *explanation*, carried out with all the competence to which the reader has direct or vicarious access, and an ever-expanding and deepening *understanding*, the reader actualizes the text in the transformative event of meaning.

Meaning, appropriated as and in understanding, is always *meaning for* someone, not some body of objective intellectual data. This means that it is located, limited and partial. Whether the scholar is interpreting to increase the understanding of the text, the pastor to foster the faith of the community, or the individual believer for personal growth in commitment, the reading process is a particular and limited engagement with transcendent reality through a mediating text susceptible of a wide range of valid interpretations. There is no one 'right' interpretation, although there may well be wrong ones. The ideal is not to achieve a dominant interpretation which will exclude all other possibilities but to achieve a valid interpretation which commands conviction by virtue of its explanatory power, its fidelity and/or healthy challenge to the tradition, and its potential for transformative influence in the world. No interpretation is final, definitive or irreformable, although the progress of the community in interpretation is, in some matters, irreversible (e.g., its realization that Eph 6.5–8 cannot be used as a justification for slavery).

Understanding, as has been said, is both a *process* of coming to clearer perception of reality and the *existential condition* of the person as human-being-in-the-world. The former increases, deepens, broadens and enriches the latter. Biblical interpretation reaches its ultimate goal when it actually promotes and nourishes the transformation of the reader (whether the individual or the community) in relation to God, self, world and society. In other words, spirituality as the lived experience of the faith is the ultimate goal and final fruit of the engagement of the reader with the gospel message which is mediated by the gospel texts.

Notes

1. Edgar V. McKnight in *Post-Modern Use of the Bible: The Emergence of Reader-Oriented Criticism* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1988) provides a good history of these developments.
2. See Joel B. Green, ed., *Hearing the New Testament: Strategies for Interpretation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), for explanations and examples of most significant contemporary methods.

3. See Gerald West, *The Academy of the Poor: Towards a Dialogical Reading of the Bible* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999).
4. This term refers to the dividing of reality according to various dualistic schemes, e.g., humans/nature; whites/people of colour; young/old; clergy/laity; royalty/commoner; wealthy/poor, etc., and assigning superior value to one of the terms which implies its right to dominate the other.
5. See Richard B. Hays, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament: A Contemporary Introduction to New Testament Ethics* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1996), esp. part III, 'The hermeneutical task: the use of the New Testament in Christian ethics'; John R. Donahue, 'Biblical perspectives on justice', in *The Faith that Does Justice: Examining the Christian Sources for Social Change*, ed. John C. Haughey (New York: Paulist, 1977), 68–112, for attempts in this direction.
6. See the special issue of *Interpretation* 56 (April 2002), devoted to biblical spirituality which includes both Protestant and Catholic contributions on both Testaments with emphasis on both personal and social spirituality.
7. I have treated this subject at some length in *The Revelatory Text: Interpreting the New Testament as Sacred Scripture*, 2nd ed. (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1999), 157–79.
8. The following treatment of Ricoeur's thought is most readily available in Paul Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory: Discourse and the Surplus of Meaning* (Fort Worth: Texas Christian University Press, 1976).
9. The hermeneutical theory of Gadamer is set forth in his *Truth and Method*, 2nd, rev. ed., tr. by Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (New York: Crossroad, 1989).
10. Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *What is Scripture? A Comparative Approach* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993). See especially 212–42.
11. An excellent example of a real gospel-reader dealing consciously with the implied author and reader is Adele Reinhartz, *Befriending the Beloved Disciple: A Jewish Reading of the Gospel of John* (New York and London: Continuum, 2001).
12. This is the expressed agenda of Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza in *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins* (New York: Crossroad, 1983).

Further reading

- Adam, A. K. M., *What is Postmodern Biblical Criticism?* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995)
- Green, Joel B., ed., *Hearing the New Testament: Strategies for Interpretation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995)
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- McKnight, Edgar V., and Malbon, Elizabeth Struthers, eds., *The New Literary Criticism and the New Testament* (Valley Forge: Trinity Press International, 1994)
- Tompkins, Jane P., ed., *Reader-Response Criticism: From Formalism to Post-Structuralism* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980)
- Ricoeur, Paul, *Interpretation Theory: Discourse and the Surplus of Meaning* (Fort Worth: Texas Christian University Press, 1976)

- Schneiders, Sandra M., *The Revelatory Text: Interpreting the New Testament as Sacred Scripture*, (2nd ed. (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1999)
- Schüssler Fiorenza, Elisabeth, *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins* (New York: Crossroad, 1983)
- Smith, Wilfred Cantwell, *What is Scripture? A Comparative Approach* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993)
- Thiselton, Anthony C., *New Horizons in Hermeneutics* (London: HarperCollins, 1992)