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Contents

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Editorial: P for Pentateuch, Patriarchs and Pagans

Just when we had started getting used to seeing CE and BCE (standing for Common Era and Before Common Era) in place of AD and BC respectively, as more neutral terms that can be used by Jewish and Christian scholars without the hidden affirmations about Jesus that the traditional letters make, along comes Walter Moberly proposing that we really need a further subdivision of biblical time itself. He does not actually tell us, in his recent book, *The Old Testament of the Old Testament: Patriarchal Narratives and Mosaic Yahwism* (Fortress 1992), what letters we might use to designate his two epochs within the Old Testament, but I hereby suggest for his consideration, BS and AS: Before Sinai and After Sinai (having rejected BM and AM, Before and After Moses, as too likely to get confused with times of the day!). For Sinai is indeed the turning point in Moberly's scheme, to which he does not hesitate to apply the terminology of 'dispensations'.

Moberly starts out from the old rugged crux of Exodus 6:3, which declares that the God Yahweh, at that point revealing himself to Moses, was indeed the same God who had made himself known to the patriarchs (or ancestors of Israel, as inclusive vocabulary prefers). But he had not made himself known by that name. To them he had been known as El Shaddai. Traditional critical source analysis assigned this passage to P, since, according to the documentary hypothesis, E and P knew that the name Yahweh had only been revealed at Sinai and in connection with the exodus, whereas the Yahwist (J) believed it had been known from the earliest period, and therefore used it freely in his narratives in Genesis. Moberly subjects this view to searching criticism, in the process treating us to some superb exegesis of Exodus 3 and 6, and concludes that the standard source critical theory at this point is highly improbable, in literary, historical and theological terms. In his view, the text means what it says—Yahweh had not been known to the patriarchs by that name, and all the authors of whatever sources are discernible in the text of Genesis were fully aware of the fact. Nevertheless, they chose to use the name in their narratives because, from their point of view within the fully matured, post-Mosaic Yahwistic faith, it was important to affirm that it was indeed Yahweh who had revealed himself to the patriarchs, who had made specific promises to them and to whom they responded in faith and varying degrees of obedience.[1]

This leads Moberly into an exploration of the contrasts and continuities between patriarchal religion (to the extent it is recoverable) and later 'official' Yahwism. What is

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[1] He thus dissents from the line of interpretation favoured by many conservative scholars that Ex. 6:3 means simply that the *meaning* of the name Yahweh was then being revealed. The name itself was familiar previously, but not its meaning; cf. JA Motyer, *The Revelation of the Divine Name* (Tyndale, 1959). His exegesis supports the view adopted by GJ Wenham, 'The Religion of the Patriarchs', in AR Millard and DJ Wiseman (eds), *Essays on the Patriarchal Narratives* (Leicester, IVP, 1980), pp. 157–188.

remarkable is that the later Israelite tradition has preserved a picture of patriarchal religion which in so many respects (especially as regards the demands of holiness) differed substantially from Mosaic Yahwism, without disapproving glosses or wholesale revision to a more compatible shape. This, says Moberly, is attributable to the awareness on the part of the redactors of the radical newness of the exodus redemption and the revelation received through Moses. This latter event and revelation on the one hand stood in continuity with, and affirmed the validity of, the patriarchal faith and religion in its own era, and yet on the other hand relativized and moved beyond it in key areas. And this transition in the tradition can in turn be helpfully understood by analogy with the way in which, from a Christian point of view, the newness of the redemption and revelation in Jesus Christ both endorses and yet moves beyond what we now call the Old Testament. And so Moberly arrives at his point: the patriarchal era is an Old Testament within the Old Testament, standing in the same 'dispensational' relation to Mosaic Yahwism as Mosaic Yahwism in turn stood to Messianic Christianity.

This book is written with vintage Moberly elegance and clarity and makes a most worthy addition to the rich fare generally offered in the series Overtures to Biblical Theology. Along the way it exposes serious weaknesses in the older form of source analysis of the Pentateuch and suggests a new paradigm for pentateuchal study. It also offers many stimulating theological reflections on the text, and indeed stoutly defends the integrity and justifiability of a genuinely theological approach to the materials in question.

Moberley's thesis, however, has implications for another area of current Christian reflection, namely the theology of religions. He does offer a chapter of reflections on the relevance of his argument to Christian-Jewish relations, but I would want to explore the matter further. As I read the book, I felt that Moberly was at last expressing with scholarly clarity what I have been feeling towards for some time, and one is always immensely grateful to authors who do that!

Among evangelicals who would affirm that human beings can be saved, in the fullest biblical sense, only by what God has done in and through Jesus Christ, there is still debate as to whether only those who hear about Jesus and put conscious faith in him will be saved, or whether God will save *through Christ* some (or many) who will not have heard of Jesus in their lifetime, but who in some way turn away from their sin and trust in God's grace, however understood.[2] Among the reasons given by those who take the latter view is the fact that the redeemed humanity of the new creation will undoubtedly include Old Testament believers who never heard about Jesus of Nazareth. And chief among these, of course, will be the patriarchs themselves, Abraham being the very prototype of those who are 'justified by faith'. Moberly's book suggests two further reflections on this observation.

First of all, it reinforces a point I hinted at in an article on the Christian approach to other religions in this journal years ago[3] (you heard it first in *Themelios*, folks!). The fact

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[2] For a well documented discussion of the various views on this matter, see Harold A Netland, *Dissonant Voices: Religious Pluralism and the Question of Truth* (Eerdmans, Apollos, 1991), ch. 7. See also Peter Cotterell, *Mission and Meaninglessness* (SPCK, 1990), chs. 4–6.

[3] 'The Christian and other religions: the biblical evidence', *Themelios* 9.2, Jan. 1984, pp. 4–15. This article is included as chapter 4 in my later book, *What's So Unique About Jesus?* (Monarch, 1990).

that Abraham became a follower of the true God, through faith and obedience, while still knowing that God by the name or names familiar to him in his Mesopotamian context does not mean, either that everybody else who worshipped the Mesopotamian-Canaanite gods was likewise 'saved' or that all the divine names or religious practices known to Abraham were acceptable for all time. A syncretistic or pluralist view of religions is sometimes given superficial biblical sanction by pointing to the alleged syncretistic origins of Israel's own faith. This 'openness' of the patriarchal era is then regarded as the model to be followed, in preference to a more sharp-edged loyalty to one creed, identified with the more exclusive post-Mosaic Yahwistic religion.[4]

However, once God's action in revelation and redemption had moved on, through exodus and Sinai, the earlier period is, as Moberly rightly points out, relativised. Yahweh is affirmed as the God who had interacted with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, but not everything they did was an option for those who had witnessed the later events and received the stipulations of the Sinai covenant. So, Joshua highlights the deliberate choice of serving Yahweh by *contrasting* it with the option (clearly negatived in the text) of worshipping the gods their fathers had worshipped either in Mesopotamia or in Egypt (Josh. 24:14f.). What was accepted BS was no longer legitimate AS. A fresh choice was required. This is similar in tone to Paul's 'lenient' word for those who in former times had lived without the knowledge of God's revelation of salvation and judgement in Christ (the 'informationally BC'), which has now been replaced with the command to all to repent and believe in the risen Jesus, once he has been preached (Acts 17:30f.). The 'dispensational' progress of history and redemptive revelation does change things. Those who knew God as Yahweh in the light of the exodus and within the demands of the Sinai covenant, could no longer live as though things were unchanged from patriarchal days. Those who know God through Jesus Christ in the light of the cross and resurrection can no longer adopt a religious stance that allows other faiths a comparable salvific value.

Secondly, however, the book stirred a reflection that may seem to move in the opposite direction to the point just made, though I do not think it is incompatible. The sharpness of choice referred to above is clearly for those who know of Christ, or who knew Yahweh—those whom we might call the informationally AD, and the informationally AS. But what about those who are neither, those who did not know of Yahweh, or do not or will not know of Christ? For in the discussion over whether it is possible to be saved without knowing about Jesus, it can be pointed out that, if Wenham, Moberly and others are right in taking Exodus 6:3 in its natural meaning and interpreting Genesis in the light of it, then Abraham was saved not only without knowing about Jesus but also without knowing about Yahweh. Informationally, he was not only BC but also BS. Now of course, we know, along with the later Israelite authors, that it was indeed Yahweh who 'credited Abraham with righteousness', and we know, from our NT perspective, that God did so on the basis of the sacrifice of Christ. But we know these things with a double dispensational hindsight unavailable at the time to Abraham.

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[4] The relevance and limitations of the patriarchal material to the issue of the plurality of religions is discussed further by John Goldingay and myself in ' "Yahweh our God Yahweh One": The Old Testament and Religious Pluralism', Andrew D Clarke and Bruce W Winter (eds.), *One God, One Lord in a World of Religious Pluralism* (Tyndale House, 1991), pp. 34–52.

The point is sharper still when we remember that it was not only the ancestors of Israel, the recipients of distinctive covenant promises and relationship with God, who appear to receive God's blessing in these narratives. The Old Testament provides quite a catalogue of non-Israelites who are declared righteous, saved or otherwise commended. The term 'holy pagans' has been used for such persons. 'Pagan' (not a word much in vogue these days, but I am not about to introduce a third vocabulary adjustment in one article) indicates that the persons concerned were not members of the covenant community of God's people. Clark Pinnock, in using the term, lists among them, Jethro, Rahab, the widow of Zarephath, Naaman, Nebuchadnezzar (in Dan. 4).[5] Some would describe these as, in a sense, converts to Yahweh, who turned to acknowledge him in the light of specific experiences. But there were others in the period before God's self-revelation as Yahweh through exodus and Sinai. Theo-perambulant Enoch, for example (Gen. 5:24, cf. Heb. 11:5). Or the enigmatic Melchizedek (Gen. 14:18–20). And the even more enigmatic trio of Noah, Job and Daniel, proverbially combined in Ezekiel 14:12–20. It is assumed by most commentators that all three were pre-patriarchal heroes, as Noah certainly was, and that this is a quite different Daniel from the exilic character of that name (the Hebrew spelling is slightly different). Ezekiel affirms that all were saved by their righteousness, but would not be able to save anybody else if they lived in a city that was otherwise under God's judgment. His description of them echoes the narrative of Genesis 6, where Noah was saved because he found grace in the eyes of the Lord as one who walked uprightly, and the similar description of Job in Job 1.

So how much did these persons know of God? They did not know Jesus, nor did they know Yahweh, nor can we be sure they knew the God of the biblical patriarchs—at least not in the way he was known to them through specific revelation and promise. They were not merely BC, and BS but even before the patriarchs (BP, Walter?). But the Bible tells us they found grace, exercised faith, lived righteously and were saved. They were, in other words, exactly as Hebrews 11:5–6 describes some of them—'commended as persons who pleased God. And without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him.' So do such persons exist today? Persons who never hear of Jesus Christ but who in some sense 'come to God' through faith and earnest seeking, as Hebrews describes? A case could be argued biblically, it seems to me, for the view that the criterion of salvation is not how much you know about God, but how you respond to what you do know. And equally, on the same grounds, that ultimately only God holds the key to that criterion—*i.e.* only God fully knows whom God will have saved. It is not a judgement we are called to make in advance, let alone to categorize and quantify it.

Some Christians adopt this viewpoint very tentatively, not wanting on the one hand to limit the grace and boundless generosity of God but fearing on the other hand any detraction from the saving necessity of Christ and his cross for all human salvation. In the

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[5] Clark Pinnock, *A Wideness in God's Mercy: The Finality of Jesus Christ in a World of Religions* (Zondervan, 1992). This book has stirred up considerable controversy. For many, Pinnock's suggestion of a possible post-mortem encounter with Christ for those who never heard of him in their lifetime is the least acceptable part of his case. But in many ways it is a superfluous suggestion, which should not blind the reader to the important issues Pinnock takes up in the earlier chapters.

present pluralistic climate their caution is understandably circumspect. Others, however, such as Clark Pinnock, wish to affirm it positively. That is, not merely is it a possibility (almost grudgingly conceded), that there may be some who will be saved by God's grace through Christ's atoning death who will never have heard of Jesus Christ in their lifetime, but rather that very many indeed will be so saved in the end. According to Pinnock, the idea that only a very few of the whole human race in history will be saved rests on dubious exegetical foundations and, when exalted into a 'control belief' (*i.e.* a dominant hermeneutical assumption which we bring to all texts on the subject) results in a serious distortion of the scriptural revelation about God's salvific purpose. Furthermore, in his view, this 'fewness' belief has in part been responsible for the rise and attractiveness of pluralism which draws at least some of its power from the alleged moral and emotional intolerability of a God who condemns the majority of humanity to destruction for not trusting in a Saviour they never heard of. But such 'restrictivism' of the number of the finally saved ought not to be identified with 'exclusivism', *i.e.* the theological insistence that the finality of God's revelation and redemption is exclusively in Christ. And Pinnock is most certainly exclusivist in this latter sense. He is as determined to maintain the uniqueness of Christ for revelation and salvation as he is to advocate an optimism regarding the scope of God's saving work in the world.

Certainly, the matter deserves deep reflection—deeper than many evangelicals have currently given it. Both Moberly and Pinnock, in very different ways, point us to unexplored subtleties in the texture of the biblical tapestry—stories, texts, affirmations, that we may have either ignored or tended to subordinate under other control beliefs.

In conclusion, and in order to forestall misunderstanding of the question being raised here, it should be understood what is *not* being implied by the above discussion. It is *not* being said that other religions in themselves are ways of salvation. The NT does not talk or salvation except in and through Christ. In any case, it is God who saves, not religions. It is *not* being said that God saves everybody, no matter what they may believe, so long as they are sincere in their faith. Universalism of this kind has been a longstanding deviation from biblical Christianity and has been answered thoroughly elsewhere. Finally, it is *not* being said that there is no need to evangelise. We know that the human race universally lives in the state of sin and under judgement, that God has provided the means of salvation in the cross and resurrection of Christ, and that we are commanded by Christ himself to make that known. We have no liberty to preach otherwise than that salvation is only through Christ and to call all whom we can to trust in him. Beyond that, let God be God.

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How far do readers make sense? Interpreting biblical narrative

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Over the past 30 years, the study of biblical narrative has kept changing its focus; as has often happened over the millenia, it has followed changing fashions in secular literary criticism, even if keeping a few years behind (though a decreasing few). During the 1960s, interpreting biblical narrative meant discovering who wrote it and what historical events it referred to. That study remains of fundamental significance because biblical narrative relates a gospel, and the factuality of the gospel is crucial to its being a story we can base our lives on. The historical 'having happened-ness' of the biblical story matters.

During the 1970s, however, many interpreters of narrative turned from questions about its origin and historical reference to renewed study of the narrative itself. What is its structure and plot? Who are its characters? From what points of view is it told? Anyone who believes that the actual text of these biblical narratives is 'given by inspiration of God' will be enthusiastic about the stimulus and the help we can receive from such renewed study of the text of Scripture itself, which is a powerful aid to our being grasped by its message.

During the 1980s, in turn, many of the interpreters who had enthused over the approaches of the 'new criticism' moved on from those questions, too, to the readers of the text. What audience is presupposed by it? How does it communicate with them? How do they go about making sense of it? Do texts have meaning at all, or are they only dots on paper which readers provide with their meaning?

Each of these three sorts of question promises a different set of insights as well as presenting a different set of questions for someone who believes that the Bible tells God's story and who wants to hear the biblical text speak in God's name. My concern here is with the last of these approaches, reader-centred ones, the developing current fashion in biblical interpretation.

The audience implied by the story

Stories themselves presuppose certain sorts of hearers, and sometimes indicate what sort of audience can hear them aright. Reader-oriented approaches to interpretation ask questions about the nature of the readers presupposed by a story and what a story is designed to do to them. It is appropriate to think at least as much in terms of audiences and hearers as of readers. In the ancient world, as far as we can tell, the normal way to attend to Scripture would not be reading it silently; few people would have access to a personal copy of a biblical scroll in order to read it for themselves. It would be hearing it read. For Jews, of course, even the private reading of the Torah is a spoken act. If scriptural authors had in mind a means of the dissemination of their work then, it would have been its reading to a congregation or a group. This has implications for the interpretation of it (see Moore, pp. 76-77, 84-88). 'In the beginning was the word', Martin Buber was fond of pointing out — the spoken word. The reading of a story is a speech-act (see Talmon, pp. 202-203).

Although the human authors of a story are all-important to its existence, the form of a story enables them to hide; we are invited to collude with them in acting as if the story came into existence of itself and is its own authority. In the same way, the audience of a story is not usually directly addressed by it, as it is in some other forms of speech, but it is thereby the more compellingly manipulated. Although formally absent from the story, the audience is substantially omnipresent insofar as stories are created not just for

their own sake but in order to do something to some people. A story has 'implied readers' — people who are in a position to make the proper response to it (Iser 1974; see also Booth). It is told in such a way as to work for an audience, *e.g.* by means of the order in which it relates events (commonly not the chronological one) and the rate at which it releases information. It tantalizes, teases, challenges, upsets, makes the audience think, forces it to come inside the story and involve itself with it if it is to understand (Keegan, pp. 84-85).

In Luke–Acts and John, the implied audience of the narrative sometimes becomes visible as the narrative addresses it directly, just as the narrators themselves also occasionally become visible and speak about their purpose. But the narratives indirectly offer further clues regarding the audience which they envisage and which will be able to 'make sense' of them. The language of all four gospels, for instance, identifies their audience as Greek-speaking and thus probably urban communities, people living in the theological space between Jesus' resurrection and his final appearing.

In the case of Matthew, J.D. Kingsbury collects references which suggest that his audience is a firmly established and well-to-do Christian community living after the fall of Jerusalem, one with a substantial Jewish element, though (to judge from the gospel's Gentile bias) also with a Gentile element. They stand outside the orbit of official Judaism but in close proximity to both Jews and Gentiles and under pressure from both. They are also under pressure from within, from miracle-working false prophets and from people who wish to impose a more hierarchical leadership pattern (see Kingsbury, pp. 120-133; *cf.* Culpepper, pp. 204-227, on the 'implied reader' in John). Matthew's audience thus differs quite markedly from that presupposed by Luke, with its famous stress on the poor. Such differences in slant hint at and reflect differences in audience. There is material here for consideration as interpreters seek to take account of Jesus' 'bias to the poor' and to discover what attitude he would take to the not-so-poor.

Given that we are not the originally envisaged audience of any biblical story, we are invited to an act of imagination which takes us inside the concerns of such an audience. The fact that we cannot precisely locate these hearers geographically or chronologically (the concern of the historical approach to the gospels) need not matter because it is the concerns that the stories themselves express that we seek to share. We are invited to listen to them as people for whom such stories were told, to listen to them from the inside. Interpretation of biblical stories is not a matter of untrammeled imagination but one which involves close attention to the particularities of *this* text. At the same time it is not merely an analytic and intellectual affair but one which involves being willing to be drawn into stories; with regard to their interpretation, 'a man without an imagination is more of an invalid than one who lacks a leg' (Barth, III/ℎ, p. 91).

We cannot live our real lives inside these stories. We have to live them in our own context, confronted by its questions, needs and pressures. If the stories are to do to us what they were designed to do to their original hearers, a further act of imagination is needed, one which sets some of our questions, needs and pressures alongside those which the stories directly addressed, in a way which is open to seeing how they address these, so that we may respond to them by telling our story in a way that links it onto the biblical stories — as Acts already does in adding the church's story onto Jesus'.

These two acts of imagination can be clearly distinguished conceptually. In their operation they are likely to interpenetrate each other. Grasping the biblical stories' significance may enable

us to see how to tell our story; bringing our story to the biblical stories may also fill out our grasp of their own significance. Interpretation involves the whole person — feelings, attitudes and wills, as well as minds; it also involves *us*, not merely people 2,500 years ago.

Specifically, there are religious and person-involving aspects to biblical stories, and in themselves literary methods are no more designed to handle these than are historical approaches. They, too, can encourage interpreters to distance themselves from the text. To avoid imposing our own questions on it is not yet to let it press its questions on us, only to overhear it talking to itself. Interpreting biblical narratives involves more than merely understanding a text as an object over against me of which I seek to gain a rational, objective grasp. The stories were written to do something to people, and our interpretative approach needs to be able to handle — or to be handled by — this aspect of them. It involves the possibility of there happening to us that which the story had the power to make happen to its audience.

The role of ambiguity and openness in stories

One of the ways in which stories do things to an audience is by leaving questions and ambiguities for their audience to answer or to resolve. We have to recognize and accept the presence of such ambiguity in texts rather than work on the assumption that if only we had all the right information, everything would be clear. Sometimes authors do not make themselves clear, either by accident or on purpose. Whichever is the case, ambiguity is then a fact to be acknowledged and made the most of. It can be creatively provocative, evidently part of God's purpose.

Beyond this kind of special deliberate or accidental ambiguity, no story can tell us everything that happens in the course of the events it relates, or everything about its characters. 'There is something more to the reception of the meaning of a literary work than simply its decoding by means of universally held, deep structures. What is in need of decoding by the reader is not entirely determined. . . . The structure itself involves potentialities. Gaps that occur in the text are deliberate and essential.' As a result, the same story can be actualized in a variety of ways by different readers (Keegan, pp. 80, 103-104, summarizing Iser).

Traditional biblical interpretation has difficulty tolerating ambiguity and openness; it assumes that the author aimed at clarity and precision, and it brings all the resources of historical and linguistic scholarship to bear on the elucidating of the text's clear meaning. If texts seem ambiguous, we assume this derives from our not sharing the conventions and assumptions that author and first audience shared. Literary interpretation, too, seeks by means of its close study of the objective data provided by a biblical text to discover its inherent meaning and provide a check on our intuitions as to its meaning. But there are aspects of the intrinsic meaning of biblical stories on which such data seem to be missing. An audience-oriented approach to interpretation presupposes that ambiguity may be inherent in a story and asks what its opennesses do to an audience, or what it does with them, aware that it is precisely in its ambiguity at such points that the story can challenge an audience regarding its own attitude. We have to 'fill in the blanks' in the story (so *e.g.* Miscall). We do not do that once and for all; the openness of the story means we have to keep coming back to it, 'brooding over gaps in the information provided' (Alter, p. 12). In this sense, the meaning of a story is something which its audience provides; 'readers make sense' (McKnight, p. 133 and often).

There are irresolvable ambiguities in the portraits of characters such as Moses or Saul or David, which prohibit simple understandings of their stories. Is David raised up by God to be Israel's king, or does he emerge as an epic hero? Is he the man who does the right thing and the man with God's blessing, or is he the man with an eye to the main chance and the man who always manages to fall on his feet? What are we to make of the two accounts of his introduction to Saul (see Alter, pp. 147-153)? When Moses strikes out at the sight of an Egyptian beating an Israelite (Ex. 2:11-15), is he using the wrong method to reach the right end, or manifesting the qualities of spirit worthy of one who is to be the means of Yahweh's smiting Pharaoh? There are hints in the passage pointing both ways, so that it brings out rather than resolves the ambiguities in the act of violence (so Childs, p. 46).

Alter suggests that the 'indeterminacy of meaning' characteristic of much biblical narrative, with its 'complex moral and psychological realism', reflects an implicit theology. 'God's

purposes are always entrammeled in history, dependent on the acts of individual men and women for their continuing realization. To scrutinize biblical personages as fictional characters is to see them more sharply in the multi-faceted, contradictory aspects of their human individuality, which is the biblical God's chosen medium for his experiment with Israel and history' (Alter, p. 12, cf. pp. 22, 33; also pp. 114-130 on David). This links with the disinclination of biblical narrative to pronounce on people's inner thoughts: leaving the gaps leaves room for the 'conjectures of grace' and 'the mystery of God-with-us' (Buttrick, p. 334). To seek to understand them in the way we seek to understand the fictional characters in a novel, of course, is not to presuppose that they *are* merely fictional characters, but rather to use approaches appropriate to fictional narrative as heuristic tools.

Pannenberg (1, p. 79) makes a parallel point when he urges the historian to focus on the particularities of history and not to rush into speculating about God's providence, because it is through human activity that God works in the world — indirectly, though as its Lord. Allusiveness regarding the character of human actors both honours them and highlights the importance of the divine director of the story. It offers an indirect witness to the God who is the story's ultimate subject. It invites an act of faith in God, not in God's human agents, on whom the narrative is content to be unclear. The story of Job implies that allusiveness and ambiguity in portraying biblical characters does not stop short of the character of God. That means that the stories offer true witness to the complexity and mystery of God's character; it also highlights the fact that 'a coherent reading of the biblical narratives' is as much an act of faith as a ground for faith (Thiemann, p. 30).

What we bring to stories

If understanding stories inevitably involves *us* as whole people, it involves us hearing them with the advantages and disadvantages of our background, experience and commitments. Historical and literary approaches are often treated as if they were objective and positivist rather than hermeneutical in their own nature. They are not.

Literary interpretative methods that claim to be objective and analytical can be very fruitful in enabling a modern audience to be drawn into the text itself and addressed by it. On the other hand, they do not always bear this fruit; they can seem to be a matter of dry word-count. In having these two capacities, they parallel other methods of exegesis, and illustrate how exegetical method and hermeneutics may not be as separate in practice as we may assume they are in theory. This phenomenon is not confined to the application of literary critical methods to *biblical* material. Literary criticism itself is both a would-be objective, scientific affair, *and* an enterprise which hopes to discover and unveil truth about the world and about what it means to be human. Even literary reading of stories will be influenced in what it looks for, or limited in what it perceives, by the historical and social position of its practitioners. Paying close attention to the text does not in itself solve the question of how stories in their foreignness are grasped by people and grasp them (Poland; *cf.* Gerhart, pp. 23-24).

Many stories are rich in theme and defy simple analysis in terms of their 'intention' or 'message'; different audiences (or the same audience at different times) perceive different aspects of this richness. These differences do not indicate that only one or another theme belongs to the story; they reflect the differences among the audiences and the different ways in which the story of their own life resonates with that of the story they are listening to, at the point it has at a given moment reached. It is sometimes asked whether there is point in the continuing production of new works of interpretation (*cf.* Culler 1981, p. ix). One aspect of its rationale is that interpretations in their variety give testimony to the richness of their texts as they are read out of different contexts.

Liberation and feminist hermeneutics illustrate the way in which audiences with particular backgrounds are able to perceive, articulate, and respond to aspects of texts which audiences with other backgrounds may miss and be missed by, even though they also illustrate how the same audiences (like all audiences) are also by virtue of their background liable to mishear the text in other respects. Both can be seen as instances of reader-response approaches to Scripture, ones which use their particular initial horizons or pre-understandings as their ways into the text's concerns, and both make it clear that what we are able to see reflects not merely our intellectual pre-understanding but our practical pre-commitment. Interpretation is shaped by the way we live. This

has been so with slavism, racism, sexism, homophobia and capitalism (which has discounted the Hebrew Bible's proscription on usury) (Cannon, p. 18). It has also been so with their antonyms (see Swartley).

In practice, some of the most interesting or suggestive or illuminating or life-changing exercises in narrative interpretation integrate one of the more text-centred approaches with one of the more self-consciously committed approaches. Liberation or feminist approaches may combine with deconstructive criticism (Jobling, pp. 81, 93-94). Materialist understandings may combine a structuralist approach to understanding the actual text with Marxist insights into the relationship between literature (and our interpretation of it) on the one hand and social contexts on the other. There is no necessary implication that the aesthetic and the socially functional aspects of the text are reducible to one another (see Füssel, p. 23). Russian formalism and Marxism might seem a natural pairing (Vladimir Propp was actually a student at the time of the 1917 revolution), though the Russian formalists of the 1920s were too interested in literary study for its own sake for the liking of Marxist critics; this fact lies behind the neglect of Propp's work until after the Second World War (see Milne, pp. 19-32).

Alongside liberationist interpretation, feminist interpretation also illustrates the way in which illuminating or life-transforming exercises in narrative interpretation may combine a self-consciously committed approach with one of the more text-centred literary methods. This is so with Phyllis Trible's work on some agreeable texts in the opening chapters of Genesis, Ruth and the Song of Songs, and some more terrifying ones later in Genesis, Judges and 2 Samuel, with Mieke Bal's deconstructionist work, and with Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza's historical-critical study.

The admission that one is using historical-critical method with a 'bias' may seem scandalous, but it is becoming clear that historical-critical history regularly functions ideologically in respect of the concerns and presuppositions which it allows to determine what counts as history (see *e.g.* Brueggemann, pp. 37-46). Since historical-critical exegesis is the ruling method in professional biblical study, one purpose of its exercise is now to legitimate the scholarly guild in their position of power (Füssel, p. 15). Thus there is a feminist challenge to the 'objectivist-factual' pretension of traditional critical scholarship and its failure to acknowledge the (*e.g.* male) 'interests' it serves, which urges that recognition of bias and enthusiasm about looking at questions in the light of a different set of biases will lead to new historical discoveries (Schüssler Fiorenza 1984/1990, pp. 141-147; *cf.* Bal).

Of course, no prior commitment is immune from leading to misreadings or incomplete readings. Feminist interpreters have found Trible too unequivocal in her reading of Genesis 2-3, the Song of Songs and Ruth (Nolan Fewell 1987, pp. 80-82; Fuchs, pp. 137-144; Lanser, p. 79). David Clines regards the whole enterprise of a feminist reading of a passage such as the Genesis creation story anachronistic if it pretends to be exegesis and sees it as rather an (in principle) entirely appropriate readerly approach to the text; as such it is no more anachronistic than nineteenth-century concern to relate Genesis 1-11 to scientific study or to Middle Eastern creation and flood stories (Clines, pp. 25-48; Rogerson, pp. 11-17). Those who pretend to be objective and critical and who then find their own concerns in the texts they study — whether these be Enlightenment or existentialist or feminist or Reformed concerns — need to take a dose of self-suspicion (Lundin, p. 23).

Every audience comes to a story with different prior commitments. Our hearing of it is never exclusively objective. Both historical and literary study is undertaken by interpreters who belong in particular contexts and do their work out of particular commitments. That is ground for (self-)suspicion and a longing to test my reading of stories by readings from other commitments.

What we read into stories

There is another sense in which the objectivity of literary interpretation may be questioned. It might seem that analyses of the structure of texts were objective and easy to agree on, but this does not seem to be so. The theory was that literary approaches should enable us to discover something of the stories' own burden. By taking their own structural, rhetorical and linguistic features as the key to identifying their central concerns, we should be able to concentrate attention on questions raised by the chapters themselves rather than ones extrinsic to them.

The conviction that there is some objectivity about these matters is subverted by the fact that reports of chiasms, for instance, have a habit of appearing more objective than they may seem when one subsequently checks them by the text (*cf.* Kugel, pp. 224-225, and the debate between Wenham and Emerton on Gn. 6-8). Even the process of 'positing various structures' in works may be seen as part of 'the activity of the reader' in interpretation (Culler 1981, p. 121, summarizing Stanley Fish). Chiasms apart, different scholars often give different accounts of the structure of a story. While some stories give objective markers regarding their structure, many do not. The structure of a story may thus be difficult to identify and interpreters may differ in the way they understand it, as is the case with the gospels and with Genesis (for contrasting opinions, see Amihai *et al.*, pp. 31-50; Goldingay, 1980). This may mean that no one analysis is exclusively 'right' and that different aspects of the story's meaning emerge from various analyses of its structure. Perhaps structure lies in the eyes of the beholder — it is something we as readers of a narrative find helpful. Even the analytic aspect to interpretation cannot be claimed to be wholly objective.

There is a real distinction between literary-critical approaches which focus on the text itself and approaches which focus more on the process of reading and the contribution of the reader; but it is readers who undertake readings. Like fact and interpretation (of which they are actually a version), questions about the text and questions about readers can be distinguished but not ultimately kept apart. Structuralism, indeed, is often described as a theory of reading rather than a theory about writing (so *e.g.* Barton, p. 126). To emphasize this interweaving is not to collapse the distinction; it perhaps makes it more important. The fact that we read with the advantages and disadvantages of our background and commitments is reason for doing so reflectively and self-critically rather than unthinkingly, if we want to have a chance of seeing what is actually there in the text. 'No close reading of a work is ever close enough', in that it involves trying to make sense of it, and thus 'inevitably, we ignore, leave out, suppress' elements from it in the light of our background and prejudices (Nolan Fewell 1987, pp. 79, 80, paraphrasing P. de Man). There is always more to discover.

Is it audiences who make sense of stories?

When we move away from objective-looking questions such as structures to questions regarding the broader meanings of works, the question whether stories have objective meaning becomes yet more difficult. Does Jonah tell a story to bring home the love of God for all peoples, or to dramatize how not to be a prophet, or to invite Israel itself to return to Yahweh? According to the Genesis creation story, do men and women have equal authority and responsibility, or are men given authority over women? Are Ruth, Naomi and Boaz all selfless, enlightened and honourable people, or self-centred and ambiguous like the rest of us? If the very nature of narrative works such as the gospels is to have many meanings and to be open to many understandings (Kermode, *e.g.* p. 145), do such questions have answers, or does everything depend on the hearers of the stories? Do texts have determinate meaning at all? The observation that 'readers make sense' (McKnight, p. 133; *cf.* Gunn 1987, pp. 68-69) can be understood more radically than we have allowed above; the meaning of a story is always provided by its audience. A text is only a matter of marks on a piece of paper. Despite exegetes' continuing attempts to state the objective meaning of texts, 'criticism is an inelectably creative activity. Prior to the interpretive act, there is nothing definitive in the text to be discovered' (Moore, p. 121).

There are a number of difficulties with this view. When we speak of 'making sense' of a statement, we usually mean 'discovering the sense which must somehow be there', not creating sense in something which lacks it. We presume that the statement was an attempt at communication, and we wish to receive the communication. Thus in general authors, too, surely write to say something of determinate meaning, readers read (or audiences listen) reckoning to discover what that is, and then share their understanding of this with other people in the expectation that they can be understood and can carry conviction; and the same is surely true with regard to Scripture (Abrams 1977, p. 426; Keegan, p. 10). A standard introduction to audience-oriented criticism begins by discussing the literary text as a form of communication between author and reader (Suleiman, p. 7). And without the assumption that texts have determinate meaning, interpretation as a cognitive activity becomes logically impossible (Lentricchia, p. 190). If the meaning of texts is created by their readers, no readerly-inclined interpreter could talk of misreading the text; but Nolan Fewell, at least, does (1988, pp. 17-18).

The view that narratives have different meanings in different contexts or for different audiences offers openness and scope to interpreters, but it does threaten arbitrariness and relativism. It perhaps reflects and shares the strengths and the dangers of cultural and moral pluralism in society (Thiemann, pp. 22-24). An emphasis on objective meaning can admittedly conversely be an ideological concern designed to support the status quo and can be self-deceived regarding its own subjectivity (Craig and Kristjansson, pp. 121-122). But to abandon it may be to submit oneself to something just as ideological.

Stanley Fish, a key theorist of this approach to interpretation, suggests that right interpretation is interpretation which accords with the conventions of a particular interpretative community, and sees this as the safeguard of objectivity in interpretation (Fish, p. 14). But such a way of attempting to handle this question only serves to underline the problem. An interpretative community may be a safeguard against individual oddity, but otherwise it merely replaces individual subjectivism by communal subjectivism or relativism (Jeanrond, p. 113). Perhaps it rather institutionalizes an already existent communal subjectivism, for readers inevitably read out of the corporate context in which they are embedded, not as independent, individual selves (Keegan, p. 88).

It is often the case that 'arguments over method are fundamentally differences in assumptions or beliefs' (Greenstein, p. 90, as quoted by Polzin, p. 305). It is for this reason that Christians have taken a long time to come to terms with historical-critical method. Ironically, when that venture may be largely over, another replaces it. 'As the challenge was once to come to terms with the modernist Bible, so now the challenge is to come to terms with its postmodern successor' (Moore, pp. 129-130). As with the older challenge, we have to live through a period in which we do not yet entirely know how to come to terms with it — but in the light of the earlier experience we may live through that period reckoning that we will eventually do so.

Hirsch argues that it is worth betting on the reality of determinate meaning because — as with Pascal's wager — if it is indeed real, we have gained, whereas if it is not, we have lost nothing (Hirsch 1982, pp. 243-244). Further, the wager is, like Pascal's, at least open to verification at the End (Boone, pp. 67-68). If our discussion takes place within the context of the view that God is there, the odds in the wager may seem stacked Pascal's way. As we may believe that it is more likely that God would have ensured that an adequate witness to the Christ event would have survived than that it would have been allowed to disappear, so we may believe that the texts' witness to that event has meaning of its own rather than only having meaning when we provide it.

Theological and philosophical, as well as personal, factors thus enter into the judgment whether determinate meaning is possible or important (cf. Boone, p. 67). It is perhaps for this reason that the acrimony and contentiousness of literary-critical debate sometimes appears also in biblical studies (see Culler 1982/3, p. 17; for examples, see Nolan Fewell and Gunn; Barr). In my view, all three factors just noted (theological, philosophical, personal) point to attempting to hold on to a both-and rather than submit to an either-or. Audiences contribute to the identification of meaning but their contributions are subject to the meaning of the text, not creative of it.

Textual criticism proceeds as if it were possible to reach a 100%-correct version of the text. This is only theoretically possible — indeed, perhaps not even theoretically possible. Yet as an aim it fulfils an important function. In a parallel way we will never attain a 100%-correct understanding of a text, or of anything else. Yet the impossibility of total understanding does not negate the worth of attempting whatever degree of understanding will turn out to be possible. The attempt is likely to be more successful if we behave as if total understanding were possible. If you aim at the moon, you may hit the lamp-post. The notion of determinate meaning has functional efficacy (against Adam, p. 179).

Why is there diversity in the way people understand texts?

Works on biblical interpretation have often given the impression that the central question in hermeneutics is how we decide between conflicting interpretations of texts, how we avoid misinterpretation (cf. Hirsch 1967). The more dominant recent view is that this misconceives the central concern of hermeneutics. That concern is

how interpretation can happen at all, how our eyes and ears can be opened to what texts have to say. Nevertheless, it may be argued that 'the diversity of readings is *the* fact to be explained by any literary theory' (Burnett, p. 59). If we resist the idea that there is no such thing as determinate meaning, what explanation do we offer?

The question might first be countered by another. If meaning is indeterminate, why is there so much overlap between interpretations? Our concentration on differences and disagreements on interpretation may mask the degree of commonality. Why does no-one take up the theoretical possibility of understanding as adverbs all words which have henceforth been taken as verbs? Formally, the answer may be that the interpretative community has a tacit agreement on grammar, but that agreement surely includes a presupposition that this understanding of grammar corresponds to something inherent in the text, which establishes objective constraints within which anything which is to count as interpretation takes place. It is difficult to know whether Genesis begins 'In the beginning God created . . .' or 'In the beginning when God created . . .', but there is no doubt that it excludes 'In the beginning the world came into being by accident or by the activity of Marduk'. The ways in which a text can be understood are finite in number, and some understandings of them can be said to be wrong.

Interpretation has traditionally sought to safeguard the importance of objectivity in interpretation by seeing its goal as the ascertaining of the original meaning of the text, its meaning in the context in which it was written. One may affirm this principle but still recognize that different people can come to different interpretations of a story. There is in fact a variety of explanations of diversity in readings, some already hinted at in this article; different ones will apply to different texts.

First, all texts have some degree of openness; if every point in them were to be made explicit, the story would never finish. Our assumption in writing and reading, in speaking and hearing, is that enough is said to make communication possible, but their inevitable allusiveness means that more than one understanding of aspects of them can co-exist.

Second, there are texts which achieve part of their effect by leaving an extra degree of ambiguity and openness. The fact that the stories of Saul and David attract widely varying interpretations (*cf.* Gunn 1990, pp. 62-63) is an indication that they are texts of this kind, not that all texts are.

Third, many stories are rich and complex. We do not have to argue about whether the stories in Daniel are really about the significance of imperial kingship as opposed to the possibility of being a successful but faithful Jewish politician — really about the kings or the Jewish sages — because both can be true. The reason why different people may offer varying legitimate interpretations of some stories is that a story's meaning may have a number of facets (Hirsch 1967, p. 128). Its meaning is an objective matter, something there in the text, but it may nevertheless be a quite complex matter. Part of the greatness of some stories is a richness that cannot be encapsulated in a simple formula ('this story is about *x*'). It is in this sense that the question which is the right interpretation of the text is as inappropriate to the Bible as it is to Shakespeare: the question about interpreting Hamlet is how we can feed on such a rich work (Josipovici, p. 5).

This is not to imply that there is no such thing as a wrong understanding of a work such as Hamlet, only that concern with this possibility misses the point. Missing right understanding is a more threatening danger than arriving at a wrong understanding. Reading from the perspective of the oppressed uncovers in the parable about the workers in the vineyard a message about human solidarity to add to its message about the grace of God (L. Schottroff). Polyvalency involves a story having many facets; it does not mean that questions about meaning are inherently arbitrary, or even that such analytic models 'provide meaning *to* the text rather than discovering meaning *in* the text' (against Wittig, p. 90). One can grant that there are many aspects to a story's meaning but still reckon that there are limits to what can be read out of a story, and it may be that interpreters can agree on meanings which do not belong to a story — not so much because author or audience could or would not have envisaged them but because they are not a natural understanding of this actual story.

Indeed, one aspect of the problem in this discussion is the very notion of the meaning of a story. The meaning of a story cannot really be abstracted from the story itself, as if a summary of the

principles it illustrates could adequately represent the story itself. In the case of Hamlet, or Ruth, or a parable, the story *is* the meaning or the message. An author only discovers what to say through saying it, and an audience only understands it through hearing it (Moore, pp. 64-65). What it says in a detailed and concrete way by means of a portrayal of events, characters and conversations, achieves something for both parties which an abstract cannot. It may not convey new information, but it may convey new knowledge (Bambrough, pp. 119-125; *cf.* Ford, p. 48).

Fourth, texts may have one intrinsic meaning (even a complex and rich one) but many significances or applications, or one sense but many references. Many diversities of interpretation are differences over the way the story applies to different people or in different contexts rather than differences about its inherent meaning (so Hirsch 1967, pp. 8, 140). It is this which makes it of inexhaustible significance and needing to be grasped by every age in its own terms, which may be different from those of its authors (so Gadamer, *e.g.* pp. 265-266, 280). Statements of the text's significance may also be mutually incompatible in a way that statements of the text's actual meaning may not (Hirsch 1967, pp. 227-230).

When an account of an event is put into writing, there is a sense in which this definitively determines the event's meaning; yet paradoxically the narrative's coming into being as an independent object simultaneously opens it up to a multiplicity of new readings (Croatto, pp. 16-20, 41, following Ricoeur). When a person speaks, what they mean by their words largely dominates the way their words are heard; words in written form can more easily be heard independently of their author's purpose and meaning. 'Writing is central to the hermeneutical phenomenon, insofar as its detachment both from the writer or author and from a specifically addressed recipient or reader has given it a life of its own' (Gadamer, p. 353). The ironic reading of biblical stories instances this difficulty. L.R. Klein's interpretation of Judges, for instance, sees it as a systematically ironic book. On what basis can we evaluate that understanding? We cannot ask the authors whether they intended the book ironically. We can only ask ourselves whether that understanding corresponds best to the nature of the book that we have, or whether an ironic understanding of the book, starting from our inability to take seriously a more straightforward understanding of it, is the only way we can 'make sense' of it. We may be unconsciously finding *significance* in it rather than its own *meaning*. Similar questions arise from David Gunn's ironic reading of 1 Kings's comment on Solomon, its 'innocuous "only"' (he obeyed God *except for* sacrificing at the high places, 1 Ki. 3:3; *cf.* the 'only' in 15:5; 2 Ki. 14:4; 15:4), and his identifying an irony in the portrayal of David in 2 Samuel 21-24 (Gunn 1987, pp. 70-72).

Howard Marshall began the symposium *New Testament Interpretation* with a consideration of John 4 and noted that the story has been seen as an example of Jesus' pastoral dealings with people which provides an example for his followers. That understanding is hardly at the centre of its intrinsic significance. It might be a secondary aspect of the story's own meaning, part of its richness as a story; it might be an implication of the story, given the gospel's conviction that Jesus' disciples are sent by the Father as he was (Jn. 20:21); it might be not part of the story's meaning but an aspect of its significance for hearers involved in pastoral ministry, justified by the general NT assumption that Jesus is a model for ministry. Which is correct makes little difference, as is often the case with arguments about right and wrong interpretations, though there is a point of more importance in the reminder that whichever is right, the story centrally concerns how Jesus revealed himself rather than what disciples should be.

One might draw a parallel with the grassroots communities' Bible study such as that collected by E. Cardenal in *Love in Practice: The Gospel in Solentiname* (*e.g.* pp. 1-2, 238-239). This begins, for instance, with a transcript of a discussion of John 1:1 which understands the declaration that Christ is the Word to signify that God expresses himself through Christ to denounce oppression. That is hardly an example of 'liberating *exegesis*', the title of a book on the Bible study of the grassroots communities by Christopher Rowland and Mark Corner, but it is indeed an example of liberating exposition. It discerns not the meaning of the text, but its significance for these audiences. *Love in Practice*'s subsequent discussion of throwing pearls to pigs further illustrates the application of the text to a context rather than insight into the inherent meaning of the text out of a context. That difference remains worth preserving. On the other hand, the fact that 50 preachers might produce a dozen different sermon angles from the same text

(Buttrick, pp. 242-243) is not necessarily cause for concern. The opposite phenomenon might be more worrying.

What readers discover from Scripture is that its being God's inspired word makes it a rich treasure whose potential we have hardly begun to mine.

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Poems for people in distress: The Apocalypse of John and the contemplative life

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The Apocalypse of John (Revelation) ushers us into a world of dragons, beasts, angels, cosmic catastrophies and martyrs chanting hymns. We are swept from one riveting vision to the next as we are transported from heaven to earth and back again, in an upstairs–downstairs drama. Bowls of judgment are poured out on the earth while cringing multitudes call on hills to cover them from the wrath of the Lamb. There is a final battle, a wonderful wedding supper, and an exquisite garden city. It is not hard to see why The Apocalypse and contemplation are seldom joined in Christian spirituality.

Contemplation denotes the kind of prayer in which the mind 'does not function discursively but is arrested in a simple attention and one-pointedness'.[1] The goal of such contemplation, as expounded by such classical authors as John Cassian, St John of the Cross, St Teresa of Avila and St Francis of Sales, is union with God, sometimes described as a spiritual marriage. While there is no general agreement on whether the senses and rational thought may be involved in the contemplative experience, it is agreed that contemplation normally concerns dwelling in the presence of God. But can we experience God first-hand while being inundated with visions of complex creatures, cosmic catastrophes, stylized presentations of Jesus that defy literal interpretation (Rev. 1:12-18), and ghastly, though victorious, battles against a demonized culture and world system? Certainly not, if contemplation is defined as it is by John of the Cross as a way of total negation through which one transcends objects of attention in a kind of living death to this finite realm of existence.[2] 'The poor man', says John of the Cross, 'who is naked of desires and whims will be clothed by God with his purity, satisfaction, and will' (Maxim 91).

Contemplation normally requires withdrawal from culture and politics, dehabituation from the media, including Christian media. Contemplation makes us think of stillness; apocalypse makes us think of earth-shattering thunder and blinding light. Contemplation is closet-work; apocalypse is cosmos-work. Contemplation is located in the desert, while apocalypse pushes our nose in the earthiness of the marketplace, and compels us to explore the spirituality of buying and selling (13:17), casting votes (13:7) and turning on the television (13:15). So The Apocalypse of John and contemplation seem to be an incompatible couple.

The marriage of this odd couple is complicated by the fact that apocalypse is a lost literary genre to the modern western Christian. Apocalypse was to the first century what science fiction is to the twentieth. Imagine trying to explain science fiction to a first-century tentmaker in Ephesus, or apocalypse to a cab-driver in Boston or Toronto. Comparisons may, however, be made. The Revelation of John can be compared with a dissolve–fade slide show (the Lion dissolves into a Lamb standing as though slain), a drama (organized in dramatic form with overlapping sequences of seven seals, trumpets and bowls, with the major pastoral messages offered at the moments of maximum dramatic intensity) or a symphony (it has more songs than all the rest of the NT. But none of these comparisons does justice to the unique form of literature that flourished between 200 BC and AD 100. While there is no general agreement on the exact nature of an apocalypse,[3] the Apocalypse Group of the Society of Biblical Literature crafted a useful definition: '"Apocalypse" is a genre of revelatory literature with a narrative framework, in which a revelation is mediated by an otherworldly being to a human recipient, disclosing a transcendent reality which is both temporal, insofar as it envisages eschatalogical salvation, and spatial insofar as it involves another, supernatural, world.'[4] John is unquestionably an apocalyptist. But is he a contemplative?

The desert experiences of John

Each time John is 'in the Spirit' he is transported to a location conducive to a direct awareness of God: *on Patmos* (1:9) — in exile waiting, like Ezekiel, for God to act; *in heaven* (4:2) — in a transcendent reality, like Paul in the third heaven; *in the desert* (17:3) — stripped of the stimulation of culture, like John the Baptist; and *on a mountain great and high* (21:10) — in a place of revelation like Peter, James and John on the Mount of Transfiguration. John received the vision while in exile for Jesus on the island of Patmos, in the Spirit on the Lord's Day (1:9-10). He was exactly where the contemplative way places a person: in the desert, dehabituated from Christian service, alone with God in the Spirit and experiencing the *kairos* time of Christian sabbath.

While 'desert' has only a secondary place in The Apocalypse, it is presented with a unique twist. In chapter 12 the radiant woman gives birth to the Christ-child, and according to one interpretation, the woman, who represents the believing messianic community (which now includes John's readers), is whisked off to the desert to be protected from the dragon's onslaught for a period of distress (12:6). Mounce shows that John's readers would have read the word 'desert' not as a demon-infested wasteland but as a place of spiritual refuge.[5] Kiddle[6] argues that the desert experience of the Christ-bearing community describes a state of spiritual detachment from normal civilized life. Either way, John is encouraging his readers with the vision that God would meet them protectively *where they were*. The desert is the experience of ordinary believers in the thick of life in a pagan empire. This is especially apparent in chapter 17 where the Spirit opens his eyes to the great harlot *cum* Babylon, who represents the reality of the surrounding pagan culture, social, intellectual, commercial and intellectual,[7] all articulated by the beast and the dragon. John views the world system as colonized by Satan and therefore his desert experiences direct his attention (and ours) to the spiritual realities of life *in the world*.

John presents a thoroughly 'lay' spirituality, intended for ordinary Christians compelled to worship Caesar in Pergamum[8] and Christian bronze-workers in Thyatira struggling with the orgies and idol feasts of the pagan guilds to which they were forced to belong (3:20). Lay spirituality must deal not only with the ecclesiastical life (Rev. 2–3) but with power, politics, economics, marketing, and social responsibilities in secular or religious society. This John does. The stillness he seeks is not quietude but the triumphant voice of God spoken by God himself in Psalm 46:10 in the context of our conflict-ridden life in this world. God commands all the powers of evil: 'Be still, and know that I am God'. In this case, desert-stillness and contemplative-stillness are discovered right in the centre of life rather than at its circumference.

John accomplishes this by pulling back the curtain of 'normal' perception to let us see a transcendent reality that is actually present in our everyday existence, to see *through* the eye, as Blake proposed, not merely with it. The Lamb has triumphed even though the harlot appears to reign supreme. Heaven, for John, is not up there, or later, but bursting into the here and now. He shows us how the world looks to a person in the Spirit. Its 'otherworldly'

atmosphere is precisely what makes it so relevant when the church is facing persecution from a hostile culture or is being seduced by a friendly culture. It tells us that behind either hostility or seduction is a sinister personage called the beast that is really Satan's puppet. Behind that is the plan and purpose of God, who is already overruling (13:7; 17:17) and will eventually be seen to rule everything (19:1).

Revelation is much more than a book of predictions. Rather than tell us what will take place, it gets right inside history to see what H.H. Rowley described as a 'unique divine initiative at the end of history . . . when God would act in a way as solely his own as his act of creation had been'.[9] The world, according to John the apocalyptist, is both more tragic and more hopeful than is immediately apparent. 'Apocalyptic', James Moffatt concludes, 'always spread its gorgeous pinions in the dusk of the national fortunes, but it strained to the near dawn of relief.'[10] Without this contemplative perspective, believers in the seven churches of Asia would be drowning in a sea of godless political authority, diabolical supernaturalism, debased mysticism and paganized culture. But how will throwing poems to such drowning people save them? What has the exotic imagery of The Apocalypse to do with the contemplative hunger to know God directly and personally?

The convergence of apocalyptic and contemplation
A justifiable and useful distinction can be made between meditation and contemplation: meditation is the act of turning our attention from the things of the world to the things of God, but contemplation involves turning our attention from the things of God to attend to God himself. It is this writer's conviction that the apocalyptic form of Revelation is a vital path for first- and twentieth-century Christians to attend to God himself.

First, both Revelation and contemplation are concerned to cultivate direct *experience* of God and not merely to talk *about* God. This is the highest ministry of words. Christians frequently undervalue words, considering words as mere representations, bits of information that can be processed and digitized in order to reduce the knowledge of God to doctrine over which we have rational control. But the poet and the apocalyptist use words and word-pictures to empower us to experience the God whose presence cannot be controlled. They view each word as a *logos*, a literary creation that brings into being, albeit in a limited way, the reality it signifies. Robert Siegel, a poet-novelist, agrees with Tolkien's line: 'We make by the same law by which we're made.'[11]

Revelation was intended to be read aloud (1:3) and inwardly digested through listening with the heart,[12] not to be studied and analysed. It has what Swete calls an auditory logic[13] through which John invites his reader-hearers to share his contemplation through their own heart responsiveness: 'He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches' (2:7,11,17,29; 3:6,13,22). Paul Barnett shows that, along with many other NT books, Revelation was written to be read *aloud*. It is fundamentally aural and dramatic in character. Speaking to this, one scholar observed that 'a written text was essentially a transcription which, like modern musical notation, became an intelligible message only when it was performed *orally* to others or to oneself'.[14] When read aloud, Revelation would have the effect of a symphony performed, which is real when heard rather than seen.

Revelation is intended to foster first-hand experience of God. John accomplishes this not by describing the spiritual life but by evoking it through visions. He empowers us to attend to God by envisioning a God who attends to us: God keeps a half-hour silence in heaven to receive the prayers of the saints (8:1-4). As a further link with the focus of contemplation on union with God, John envisions the consummation of the spiritual life and human history as a marriage (19:7-9; 21:2), a marriage so glorious that all direct experiences of God in this life are mere betrothal exchanges and assurances. Both The Apocalypse and contemplation converge on the supremacy of knowing God over merely knowing about him.

Second, both The Apocalypse of John and the act of contemplation *call for a life of radical discipleship*. One either worships Jesus by laying down one's life, or one destroys oneself by worshipping the beast. So while John transmits the heavenly call to 'come out of [Babylon], my people, so that you will not share in her sins' (18:4), these people must be rescued while *in* Babylon. For until they are martyred, there is nowhere else they can serve God. John invites his friends to find God in the centre of life, not in its circumference.

This is precisely one of the distinguishing marks of a *Christian* apocalypse. As Mounce says, 'Revelation differs from standard apocalyptic in its view of history. . . . For the apocalyptists the present age is evil and without meaning. It is only a passing interlude on the way to that all-important final period preceding the end. In contrast, the book of Revelation takes as its starting point the redemptive activity of God in history'.[15]

Neither contemplation nor The Apocalypse of John makes room for nominal Christianity. Both presuppose that those who meet God directly will become God-intoxicated persons. Revelation has more colour than any other book of the NT — jasper, carnelian, emerald, sapphire — but discipleship is presented in stark black and white. Eugene Peterson says, 'Apocalypse is arson — it secretly sets a fire in the imagination that boils the fat out of an obese culture-religion and renders a clear gospel love, a pure gospel hope, a purged gospel faith.'[16]

Third, both the Apocalypse of John and contemplation *move us beyond normal rational understanding*. In a careful article on 'contemplation', Neville Ward notes that meditation on the truth of Christ has an important role to play in keeping contemplation from drifting into non-Christian experience.[17] It is important to note that the appeal of Revelation is neither mindless nor careless about truth. For example, John has deliberately crafted his message around the exodus symbols and liberation theme[18] to impress us with the truth that God has chosen to side with a people that are suffering oppression and seduction. Seduced people are persecuted people and John knows they will need an empowering vision of our all-powerful God *(pantokrater)* and the coming kingdom to be more than survivors. Revelation is a pastoral letter written to believers who need to understand that God is embracing their present and personal history triumphantly. As Eugene Boring suggests, 'Revelation is the prophetic/pastoral response to two questions, which are the same question: the question of God ("Who, if anyone, rules this world?") and the question of history ("What, if any, is the meaning of the tragic events which comprise our history?")'.[19] Using a number of existing traditional elements, both canonical and non-canonical, John has crafted a document that functioned 'as a kind of pictorial narrative theodicy which acknowledged the legitimacy of the question . . . "If there is a good God who is in control of things, why doesn't he do something about present evil?" The apocalyptists' response: "He *will*, for history is a unified story which is not over yet." '[20] John does this not by teaching and instructing, but by envisioning and empowering. But there is more to The Apocalypse than a guided visual meditation on the truth of God and his coming kingdom in Jesus.

Contemplation involves the hunger to move beyond the mere progressing of ideas and words used in a logical pattern to the experiences of attending to God himself. Revelation accomplishes this partly by foiling our attempts to understand as mere doctrine the second coming of Christ and the realities associated with it. Sometimes Revelation challenges and offends our rationality. For example, among the disturbing features of this book are the following: the overlapping sequences of judgments (chs 6–19) defy consistent interpretation as a series of 21 events in linear time; the book successfully eludes every attempt to be mined as a book of predictions; as in the book of Job, Satan has access to heaven (12:7); the earthly career of Jesus appears to be completely discounted (12:5); it is uncertain when, in the scheme of things, Jesus comes, as he always seems to be 'coming' (11:15; 19:7); when Jesus does come more definitively, he presides at a funeral wake (19:11-21); the only Christians on earth are martyrs; Satan's work is far from over, even though Jesus has already accomplished his saving work; our final destiny is not in heaven but in a new heaven and a new earth; the new heaven and new earth appear to be incomplete, with work, healing and human creativity still continuing (21:24; 22:2). All of this is upsetting to the exegete and theologian but thrilling to the contemplative. Revelation is not irrational but supra-rational; it dethrones but does not destroy reason and therefore satisfies the spiritual hunger to move beyond mind-control to the simple awareness of God as King.

The apocalyptic contemplative
Having explored the convergence of The Apocalypse of John and the contemplative experience, we can anticipate some of the fruits of this unlikely marriage.

First, *we will pray imaginatively*. Revelation is to the second coming of Jesus what the Ignatian exercises are to the first coming of Jesus: it involves an imaginative presentation of the affective and spiritual meaning of the coming of Jesus in a way designed to evoke a deep and personal encounter with the Lord himself. This

cannot be done without imagination. Indeed, Cheryl Forbes says 'we cannot have faith (belief in what is unseen) unless we have imagination; imagination is the vehicle through which faith is expressed'.[21] Our prayers are often fitful and half-hearted because we cannot 'see' the One to whom we pray, and we cannot envision what we are praying about.

Since the Renaissance, the Industrial Revolution and the advent of high-tech society, our lives have been de-imaged and stripped of imagination. But imagination relates to our essential dignity as made in the 'image' of God (Gn. 1:27), a visual and social metaphor of God himself. Human beings are God's imagination incarnated, icons of God, just as Christ was his word incarnated. God expressed his glory in creation not primarily through propositions but persons with imaginations. Mystery can be understood only through imagination. Jesus, who is God's perfect image, used metaphors and images to express the deepest truths about God, himself and the kingdom.

Fiorenza suggests that 'the strength of Revelation's language and images lies not in the theological argumentation or historical information but in their evocative power inviting imaginative participation'.[22] With marvellous reserve John describes the throne of God and the effects of God's presence without actually describing the indescribable, thereby enlarging our faith without seducing us into idolatry (4:1-5). 'Come, Lord Jesus' (22:20) is the epicentre of prayer in this book, but the prayer is evoked not by persuasion or instruction but by an imaginative presentation of all the realities associated with the second coming of Jesus. James Moffatt describes John's visions as 'poetic coefficients rather than logical definitions of the author's faith'.[23] Eugene Peterson develops the same idea: 'Revelation is, in large part, a provisioning of the imagination to take seriously the dangers at the same time it receives exuberantly the securities, and so stand in the midst of and against evil'.[24] The repeated exhortation, 'He who has an ear, hear', is a call to converse with God imaginatively.

Second, *we will live the metaphors and symbols of the Christian life.* The word 'symbol' derives from a Greek word that means 'to draw together'. In contrast, the word 'diabolical' suggests 'to tear apart'. By using symbols, John intends to get his readers connected with another level of understanding and meaning: the spiritual and the divine. He is cultivating kingdom-consciousness, another world view that would empower us to live triumphantly in this world even when we appear to be losing battles. John does this through symbols. The Lamb, dragon, harlot, Babylon, pregnant woman, witness and martyr are like the symbolic language of Orthodox icons. Speaking of the symbolism of the icons, Baggley says, 'The icons are not simply illustrations of Biblical themes or stories; rather they are an embodiment of a long tradition of meditation on these themes and incidents and their significance for man's soul. . . So we who approach icons must be aware of the variety of levels of truth and significance which have been brought together in any one iconographic theme or individual icon.'[25] Similarly, John's Apocalpyse is the fruit of inspired meditation on hundreds of symbolic OT ideas, words, places and people in the light of Christ's first and second comings, though without a single quotation. Swete suggests that Revelation is a 'Christian rereading of the whole Jewish heritage'.[26] But John's interest in a metaphorical interpretation of the OT is pastoral, not merely intellectual.

This pastoral interest is especially apparent in his choice of the central metaphor of the spiritual life in Revelation: the martyr. In John's 22 chapters we do not meet a single living Christian left on earth; all the Christians one meets, in vision after vision, are martyrs. The Greek word 'witness' *(martyr)* is invested with its second meaning: the Christian is simply one who loses his life in order to find another life in Jesus. It is irrelevant whether one does this on the instalment plan, stage by stage, or in one extravagant act. The challenge of living this metaphor is simply this: either overcome with Jesus, or be overcome by the red dragon, beast, harlot and Babylon. Overcomers are not super-saints but mere Christians.[27] Both apocalyptic and contemplation dissolve nominalism in the furnace of transformation. But how can one live the martyr metaphor?

A Celtic text, an Irish homily of the seventh century, takes up the idea that martyrdom was the normal spiritual outlook of the early Christians and expresses some of the options in a society less hostile though more seductive: red martyrdom consists in death for Jesus' sake. Green martyrdom consists of fasting and labour through which the believer flees from his evil desires and lives a life of repentance. White martyrdom consists of abandoning every-

thing one loves for the sake of God.[28] Eugene Peterson shows that by cultivating the praying imagination, John helps us *see* enough to live the martyr metaphor, whether red, green or white: 'The contribution of the Revelation to the work of witness is not instruction, telling us how to make a coherent apology of the faith, but imagination, strengthening the spirit with images that keep us "steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord" (1 Cor. 15:58). Instruction in witness is important, but courage is critical, for it takes place in the pitched battle.'[29]

Third, *we will worship God in the complexity of life in the world.* Martyr-candidates are invited to look into heaven (4:1) and to join in concentric circles of heavenly creatures enthralled with the glory of God. Before one encounters eschatological drama, one is invited to worship the God who is both creator and redeemer.[30] In the last two chapters, when Christ makes all things new, John envisions an endless environment of worship in which the greatest gift is to see God's face (22:4). God is beautiful, so worship is the dominating atmosphere of Revelation. Every chapter directs us Godward instead of towards the pretentious and false worship of the emperor.[31] John's business as a pastor is to keep his people dealing with God and worship does this better than anything.

Indeed, in this book *everyone* worships. Unless we worship God we shall inevitably worship the evil trinity: the beast, the harlot and the false prophet, joining those who choose to be sent to hell singing pseudo-hymns: 'Who is like the beast?' According to John it is impossible not to worship. Behind this choice, for John's parishioners, stood the imperial cult which had worship centres located in each of the seven cities/towns in Asia where churches had been planted.[32] Whether to worship Christ or Caesar amounts to choosing between the Lamb or the harlot.

Faced with the temptations of idolatry and apostasy, we must worship God (22:9). The best time and place to do this is in the thick of life, not in our leisure-time. Eugene Peterson sums up the crucial role of worship to the challenges of everyday life in these words: 'Failure in worship consigns us to a life of spasms and jerks, at the mercy of every advertisement, every seduction, every siren. Without worship we live manipulated and manipulating lives. We move in either frightened panic or deluded lethargy as we are, in turn, alarmed by spectres and soothed by placebos.'[33]

Finally, *we will live with kingdom consciousness.* Speaking for a generation without hope, Lesslie Newbigin says: 'We are without conviction about any worthwhile end to which the travail of history might lead. . . . The gospel is vastly more than an offer to men who care to accept it of a meaning for their personal lives. It is the declaration of God's cosmic purpose by which the whole public history of mankind is sustained and overruled, and by which men without exception will be judged.'[34] Unfortunately, evidences of hopelessness are not restricted to those without faith in Jesus. Among Christians one finds both short- and long-range despair about the world (with a prayer for a speedy evacuation) as well as pathetic need to squeeze everything one can get out of this life (as if there were no other life and no other world). John invites a different approach.

In Revelation we are invited to live with an open heaven. If we 'see' heaven, we will see earth the way it really is. Kingdom-consciousness is another way of speaking of this: living hopefully within the tension of the 'here' and 'not-yet-but-coming' kingdom of Jesus. This heavenly-mindedness is conspicuously lacking in Western Christians today. Muggeridge speaks prophetically in words which fall on largely deafened ears: 'The only ultimate disaster that can befall us, I have come to realize, is to feel ourselves to be at home here on earth.'[35] C.S. Lewis made a similar judgment: 'The Christians who did most for the present world were just those who thought most about the next. . . . It is since Christians have largely ceased to think of the other world that they have become so ineffective in this. Aim at heaven and you will get earth 'thrown in': aim at earth and you will get neither.'[36] Kingdom-consciousness delivers us from false messianism (that our work, social action, mission and compassionate ministry will save society) and from false pessimism (that our work in this world has to be successful and 'religious' to be meaningful). Like all contemplatives, apocalyptic Christians will seem a little bit irrelevant to the worldlings around.

The Apocalypse of John and the contemplative life belong together. Revelation insists that being aware of God (the goal of contemplation) is indissolubly linked with the prayer 'Come, Lord Jesus' (the burden of the Apocalypse). Final and full God-

consciousness comes with kingdom-consciousness. To pray 'Come, Lord Jesus' (22:20) is not a request to be evacuated from this life, but rather to pray imaginatively, to live the martyr metaphor, to worship while working in Babylon and to cultivate kingdom-consciousness until Christ introduces us to a better world by his second coming, whether that is sooner or later. The apocalyptic contemplative prays 'Come, Lord Jesus' and therefore lives in the light of heaven's triumphant cry: 'The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and he will reign for ever and ever' (11:15). 'Come, Lord Jesus' is simultaneously the deepest prayer of both the apocalyptic Christian and the contemplative one.

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JUST PUBLISHED — RTSF BOOKLET

Marx and Jesus in a Post-Communist World

David Smith

Institutional Marxism in Europe appears to have collapsed. However, as David Smith argues very persuasively in this booklet, that does not mean we can ignore what Karl Marx had to say. In fact according to D. Smith, we are now in a position to hear the full weight of Marx's critique of religion — warnings that the Church at the end of the twentieth century cannot afford to ignore.
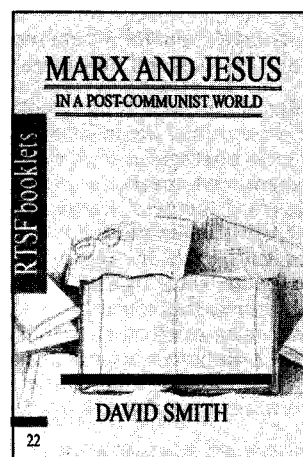
Biblical ethics: a survey of the last decade

Chris Wright

This article was originally commissioned by the journal Transformation, *but in the hope that it will be of interest to* Themelios *readers also, it is co-published here with kind permission of the editors of* Transformation. *It should be made clear that this is a personal selection of what I have found helpful and significant, and does not pretend to be an exhaustive listing of everything in the field.*

There was a renewed interest in the field of biblical ethics in the 1980s after a rather barren decade which coincided with the apparent collapse of the Biblical Theology movement and the knock-on effects in biblical ethics. 1983 saw the American publication of Thomas Ogletree's stimulating book *The Use of the Bible in Christian Ethics* (Minneapolis: Fortress/Oxford: Blackwell, 1984). As the title suggests, Ogletree does not aim to write a comprehensive or descriptive biblical ethics, but to open up a dialogue between the biblical text and modern understandings of the moral life. He surveys consequentialist, deontological and perfectionist conceptions of ethics, and concludes that none is sufficient by itself to account for the complexity of human ethical awareness. He proposes a synthesis grounded in historical contextualizing. He finds this synthesis supported by a re-presentation of classic biblical themes from both Testaments. Following a traditio-historical approach, he confines his biblical survey to the Pentateuch and eighth-century prophets in the OT and the synoptic gospels and Paul in the NT. Without underestimating the rich diversity of the biblical materials, he finds a broad thematic unity in the Bible, a unity which resides in the unfolding identity of the people of God. This enables him to work from the particularity of their historical context to the particularity of our own, since 'the significance of the biblical texts cannot be confined to the past, to the original intentions of their authors, or to the initial contexts of their production' (p. 9).

The early issues of *Transformation* included several articles on biblical ethics, some of which have extended their shelf life by moonlighting as Grove Booklets as well. Christopher J.H. Wright, 'The Use of the Bible in Social Ethics', *Transformation* 1.1 (1984), pp. 11-20, was an overview of method in using the canonical span of the Bible in approaching ethical issues, but concentrated mainly on the OT. It is still in print as Grove Booklet on Ethics No. 51 (Nottingham: Grove Books, 1983). This was followed by Stephen Mott, 'The Use of the New Testament', *Transformation* 1.2 (1984), pp. 21-26, and 1.3 (1984), pp. 19-26, which shattered the idea that Jesus was uninterested in politics and has nothing to offer to contemporary social conflicts. This became *Jesus and Social Ethics*, Grove Booklet on Ethics No. 55 (Nottingham: Grove Books, 1984). A more detailed study of social ethics in the OT followed in Christopher J.H. Wright, 'The Ethical Relevance of Israel as a Society', *Transformation* 1.4 (1984), pp. 11-21. This took up some of the insights of the then burgeoning field of sociological study of ancient Israel, particularly by Norman Gottwald, and asked how they impacted our understanding of the social relevance of Israel itself as a community, and how that in turn affected our Christian, ecclesial, ethics. By that stage, Grove Booklets had had enough of *Transformation* hand-me-downs, so it has not been reprinted!

Old Testament ethics

In 1983 two books came out on OT ethics, the authors and their work at that time unknown to each other: Walter C. Kaiser Jr., *Toward Old Testament Ethics* (Grand Rapids: Academie, 1983), which concentrated on the Decalogue and centred OT ethics around the concept and implications of holiness; and Christopher J.H. Wright, *Living as the People of God: The Relevance of Old Testament Ethics* (in the USA this was entitled *An Eye for an Eye: The Place of Old Testament Ethics Today*) (Leicester/Downers Grove: IVP, 1983), which provided an overview of the topic and an illustrated paradigmatic method of how the OT could be handled ethically and applied to a variety of social and economic areas.

However, such attempts to present systematized or diachronically unified accounts of the subject matter of OT ethics have been criticized on methodological grounds. John Barton, in 'Approaches to Ethics in the Old Testament', in J. Rogerson (ed.), *Beginning Old Testament Study* (SPCK, 1983), pp. 113-130 (which developed ideas earlier set out in 'Understanding Old Testament Ethics', *JSOT* 9 (1978), pp. 44-64), argues that, in contrast with the systematic, diachronic approach, we can only make satisfactory progress in the discipline if we take into account all the sociological, chronological and traditio-critical depths and nuances of the material. We need to distinguish between what some Israelites believed and did at various times, what certain OT authors and traditions held regarding what Israelites should believe or do, and what kinds of behaviour the OT as a whole may be said to condemn or endorse. We cannot assume that our construction of the last of these would have coincided with popular ethics in Israel — in theory or practice — at any given time. Yet neither can we reduce OT ethics merely to a descriptive history of Israel's behaviour, any more than OT theology can be reduced to a history of Israel's religion. We can discern an 'ethos' or 'general drift' of the moral world view of ancient Israel. There was a pattern of life lived in the presence of God and pleasing to him which has a number of constant factors through the whole period. 'The [OT] law affords an insight into the contours of God's own ideal will for his people and for all mankind' (p. 128). Barton lists at least three fundamental elements in this 'ethos': (i) obedience to the divine will; (ii) conformity to a pattern of natural order; (iii) imitation of God.

R.E. Clements, 'Christian ethics and the Old Testament', *The Modern Churchman* 26 (1984), pp. 13-26, also recognizes the historically contextual limits on the ethical material of the OT and observes how even phrases which have passed into the fundamentals of the Christian ethical tradition (such as 'Love your neighbour as yourself') come in contexts which are 'occasional' and sometimes syntactically incidental. It is questionable, in his view, whether the OT gives us, in its own words and by its own intention, any timeless moral principles. Nevertheless, Clements is impressed with the breadth and durability of OT moral insights. 'Overall, the Old Testament literature appears to be feeling its way towards the formulation of universal principles of morality' (p. 17). Certain moral priorities and demands are so repeatedly apparent that they achieve a 'sense of "primacy"' as regards importance [which] readily lends itself to a sense of "principle", as regards universal applicability' (p. 17). Clements also observes how the long history of Israel in the OT period gave ample opportunity for the fundamental insights and values of their society to be tested and refined in an amazing variety of historical situations. Since Israel had to adapt and yet preserve essentials, the norms and values they expressed through law, prophecy, narrative, worship and wisdom likewise manifest that quality of adaptability. 'Societies of dramatically different economic, political and cultural types have found within the Old Testament a richly viable source of social and moral teaching' (p. 22).

R.E. Clements is also the editor of a major symposium of essays on the Old Testament, *The World of Ancient Israel: Sociological, Anthropological and Political Perspectives* (Cambridge: University Press, 1989), which, while not directly addressing ethical questions, includes plenty of raw material for the (stout-hearted) student of OT ethics. It is also a rich quarry for bibliographical resources.

Another critic of the attempt to derive absolute moral norms from the OT material is R.R. Wilson, 'Approaches to Old Testament Ethics', in G.M. Tucker, D.L. Petersen and R.R. Wilson (eds), *Canon, Theology and Old Testament Interpretation: Essays in Honour of Brevard S. Childs* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1988), pp. 62-74. He points out how the narratives of the Deuteronomic historians appear quite inconsistent in applying Torah norms to some of the central characters in Israel's history. So if Pentateuchal laws did not exclusively govern the ethical evaluation even of biblical authors, why should they be considered binding on us in any direct way?

In the same *Festshrift* (Tucker, Petersen and Wilson), Bruce Birch, 'Old Testament Narrative and Moral Address' (*op. cit.*, pp. 75-91), takes a rather more positive line. He emphasizes particularly the power of biblical narrative to shape moral identity and character. This builds on his earlier work with Larry Rasmussen, *Bible and Ethics in the Christian Life* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1976) — a helpful book which it is good to see back in print in a revised and expanded edition (1989). Birch, in the earlier book, argued that while the OT cannot be prescriptive or normative for Christians, it shares in the primacy of the whole Bible in functioning as a moral resource for Christian decision-making and the church's moral response to the world. In this *Festschrift* article, he argues that the OT narratives have moral power in exposing reality, shattering or transforming world views and challenging the reader to practical response. They therefore have to be read as wholes within their canonical context, and not just by the methods of historical criticism.

The canonical approach also underlies Birch's most recent book, *Let Justice Roll Down: The Old Testament, Ethics and the Christian Life* (Louisville, Westminster: John Knox, 1991), in which he seeks to apply the broad themes of the OT, arranged in the historical pattern of the canon, to the ethical task facing the Christian and the church in the modern world. The bulk of this excellent book is devoted to surveying each major period and section of the OT, exposing the major theological themes in them, and suggesting ways in which they may be used as resources for Christian moral reflection. In the process, Birch's ample footnotes provide a valuable 'Who's Who' of up-to-date mainline scholarship on most parts of the OT, which is helpful in itself. However, while all this is welcome (and it is very evident that Birch has a great enthusiasm for the Hebrew Scriptures and their challenging relevance), it is not finally clear what actual moral authority the OT bears for the Christian. The text has *power*, but not *authority*. 'Authority is not a property inherent in the Bible itself. It is the recognition of the Christian community over the centuries of experience that the Scripture is a source of empowerment for its moral life in the world. . . . Often the authority of Scripture is as much in its modelling of a process as in its mediating of a content. In attending to the discernment of God's will by the biblical communities we become sensitized to God's will in our own time' (p. 34). One wishes Birch had spent longer on the opening two chapters of the book which take up the question of the authority and use of the OT for Christians. It does not seem to add greatly to the position of the earlier book (*Bible and Ethics in the Christian Life*), where the emphasis is on the *functional* uniqueness of the Bible in the wake of the alleged collapse of traditional views of biblical inspiration under the impact of historical-critical method on the one hand and liberation-feminist 'hermeneutics of suspicion' on the other.

Another helpful survey of the field is provided by John Goldingay, 'The Old Testament as a way of life', in *idem, Approaches to Old Testament Interpretation*, pp. 38-65. This enormously wide-ranging book first came out in 1981 (Leicester: IVP) and has been re-issued in an updated edition (Leicester: Apollos, 1991) which includes a survey of the last decade and fresh bibliography. Goldingay examines how biblical law functions in shaping the Christian way of life, and how we can cope with the specificness, diversity and 'limitations' of OT commands and standards.

John Goldingay's later book, *Theological Diversity and the Authority of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), has three chapters in which, in order to model the different approaches he suggests to handling the diversity of the OT, he focuses on specific case studies, each of which offers a rich diet of insights relevant to OT ethics. Chapter 3 is 'A Contextualizing Study of "the People of God" in the Old Testament', which traces the nature of Israel through its OT history and draws out a number of ethical agendas which shine through each period and have enduring relevance for the Christian church. Chapter 5 is 'An Evaluative Study of the Teaching of Deuteronomy', exploring its behavioural

values, theological perspective and pastoral strategy in the struggle to enable Israel to be what God wanted them to be, while having to start where they actually were in reality — a perpetual tension in any ethical programme. Chapter 7 explores the creative tension between the themes of creation and salvation in the OT, particularly focusing on how the Wisdom traditions relate to the salvation-history tradition, and how both have a part to play in our understanding of ethical responsibility in God's created, fallen and redeemed world. Backed up with exhaustive bibliographical referencing, these chapters are immensely stimulating and rewarding.

Turning from the grand overview to concentration on a single theme, a superb example of the genre and a model of what can be done in fresh explorations of what may seem like well-worn paths is John G. Gammie, *Holiness in Israel* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1989). Gammie's thesis is that holiness for Israel fundamentally meant 'cleanness', but he shows how that concept was interpreted and applied to Israel's life in three distinct forms. For the priests, holiness meant the demand for separation and ritual purity (which was not lacking in ethical demand, as Gammie's study of Leviticus shows). For the prophets, holiness meant the demand for social cleanness, through justice and equality in human relationships. For the wisdom writers, holiness required the cleanness of individual morality. In each category Gammie explores representative texts in depth and produces a rich and suggestive study of the faith of Israel and its interweaving of these three major strands. The book is not directly a work of biblical ethics in the sense that he does not go on to spell out how his work intersects with contemporary life, but any reader who is concerned to work at the relevance of the Bible to ethical issues is here provided with an invaluable resource kit, full of stimulating insights into the practical demands of holiness as Israel experienced and expressed them.

Gammie's book is part of the Fortress series 'Overtures to Biblical Theology', which, under the editorship of Walter Brueggemann (author of the first in the series, his own brilliant study *The Land: Place as Gift, Promise and Challenge in Biblical Faith*, 1977), has produced some fine monographs that bear on biblical ethics, directly or indirectly. There is no space for reviewing all of them, but the following are particularly worth noting: Phyllis Trible, *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality* (1978); *idem, Texts of Terror* (1984); Walter Harrelson, *The Ten Commandments and Human Rights* (1980); Terence E. Fretheim, *The Suffering of God* (1984); Sharon H. Ringe, *Jesus, Liberation and the Biblical Jubilee* (1985); J.P.M. Walsh, *The Mighty from Their Thrones: Power in the Biblical Tradition* (1987).

On the issue of economic ethics in the OT, several works are worth mentioning, again without space for individual comment. Robert Gnuse, *You Shall Not Steal: Community and Property in the Biblical Tradition* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1985); Robert Gnuse, 'Jubilee Legislation in Leviticus: Israel's Vision of Social Reform', *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 15 (1985), pp. 43-48; John Andrew Dearman, *Property Rights in the Eighth-Century Prophets: The Conflict and its Background* (Atlanta: Scholars, 1988); Christopher J.H. Wright, *God's People in God's Land: Family, Land and Property in the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans/Exeter: Paternoster, 1990). The 1987 volume of *Transformation* was particularly rich for economic ethics, with some first-rate biblical and especially OT articles, including: John Mason, 'Biblical Teaching and Assisting the Poor', *Transformation* 4.2 (1987), pp. 1-14; and Stephen Mott, 'The Contribution of the Bible to Economic Thought', *Transformation* 4.3-4 (1987), pp. 25-34. In 1987 also, *Interpretation* devoted a whole issue to questions of wealth and poverty. The following articles, with page numbers, are to be found in *Interp.* 41 (1987): D.E. Gowan, 'Wealth and Poverty in the Old Testament: The Case of the Widow, the Orphan and the Sojourner', pp. 341-353; B.J. Malina, 'Wealth and Poverty in the New Testament and its World', pp. 354-367; R.H. Weaver, 'Wealth and Poverty in the Early Church', pp. 368-381; M.L. Stackhouse, 'What Then Shall We Do? On Using Scripture in Economic Ethics', pp. 382-397.

The question of how the OT law is to be understood and applied by Christians is one of the perennial problems of biblical ethics, and has been since NT days. Dale Patrick, *Old Testament Law* (Louisville: Knox, 1985/London: SCM, 1986), provides a clearly written survey of both the texts themselves and of current scholarship on them. He adopts the standard critical viewpoints on the analysis and dating of the different sections of the Pentateuch without much discussion of alternative viewpoints, but apart from that, his overview is clearly written and a useful orientation. After initial comments on source, form and tradition-critical issues in

each section of law (Decalogue, Book of the Covenant, Deuteronomy and the Holiness and Priestly Codes), he gives concise commentary on significant portions of each. He has chapters addressing the issue of how the law functioned in ancient Israel itself, and also how it can function for Christians, by seeing God's 'unwritten law' behind the written law. There is also a discussion of how the NT love commandment relates to and surpasses OT law.

P.D. Miller, Jr., 'The Place of the Decalogue in the Old Testament and Its Law', *Interp.* 43 (1989), pp. 229-242, reflects on the constitutional or foundational nature of the ten commandments in Israel. He sees a clear order and structure, and observes how the commandments are collectively *summarized* in other parts of the OT, and also individually *elaborated* right through into the NT. The same issue of *Interpretation* has an article by R.H. Fuller, 'The Decalogue in the New Testament', *Interp.* 43 (1989), pp. 243-255. Exploring both the gospels and Pauline traditions, Fuller argues that for the NT the primary part of the law was the second table of the decalogue plus the double love commandment. The importance of the decalogue in both Testaments makes Fuller wish that it could be restored to its rightful place again in Christian liturgy and catechism.

Terence E. Fretheim, 'The Reclamation of Creation: Redemption and Law in Exodus', *Interp.* 45 (1991), pp. 354-365, wishes to challenge and reverse the traditional habit of reading Genesis in the light of Exodus (*i.e.* on the understanding that the creation traditions in Genesis emerged in an Israel that had already experienced God through their exodus history). He argues for the canonical and theological importance of the fact that Genesis comes first in affirming the priority of God's work in the world and among the nations *before* the emergence of Israel. This means that the intention of God's redemptive work is not finally confined to Israel but has universal impact. The Song of Moses in Exodus 15 celebrates God's redemption in history overcoming anti-creational forces of chaos which are historically symbolized in Egypt. He stresses the missiological integration of the Abraham and Sinai covenants. Sinai is meant to enable Israel to fulfil its vocation as the people of God in the service and restoration of creation. The law, therefore, has its roots in creation faith, not merely in the exodus, though it is obviously motivated and empowered by that historical redemption. 'Israel now joins God in seeking to keep right what God has put right and to extend that rightness into every sphere of daily life.... Sinai reiterates for those redeemed the demands of creation' (pp. 362f.).

Personally, I warmly welcome Fretheim's combination of missiological and ethical understanding of the thrust of the OT which pays equal attention to the universality of the creation theme and the particularity of Israel's election, redemption and vocation in the midst of the nations. I think it is a key that will unlock many more fresh and challenging ethical applications of the text in our world. The same rationale underlies Fretheim's comments on relevant parts of the book of Exodus in his commentary in the 'Interpretation' series, *Exodus* (Louisville: Knox, 1991). At a much more popular level, my own book of adult group Bible studies operates according to the same principles: Chris Wright, *Understanding Old Testament Law Today* (Jigsaw Series, Swindon: Bible Society, 1990). The eight studies lead the group (though it could be used by an individual also) through eight hermeneutical steps to understanding and applying OT law, which include setting the law in the context of God's created world, his universal mission, his redemptive grace and his concrete model (Israel), and then going on to explore the different categories of law, the fundamental values and social objectives, and the means of transposing these from the ancient to the modern context.

The question of how the OT law applies to Christians or to society at large is given the most starkly contrasting answers by dispensationalist and theonomist (also known as reconstructionist and dominion theology) groups respectively. The arguments on both sides are complex and the writings (particularly of the latter group) are prolific. At the very simplest, the positions could be summarized thus: dispensationalists hold that *none* of the OT law applies to the Christian (or to any society in the present era) unless specifically *re-endorsed* by a NT imperative; theonomists hold that *the whole* OT law continues to be valid both for Christians and as God's law for all human society, unless specifically *abrogated* in the NT. The dispensational position is linked to a severance of the historical dispensations of God's redemptive work, of Israel from the church, of law from grace and of the present age from a coming millenium. It thus stresses radical discontinuity between the Testaments and is also strongly pre-millenialist. The theonomist

position is linked to a brand of covenant theology which stresses the unity and continuity between the Testaments and is equally strongly post-millenialist. *Transformation* rendered a useful service by publishing a representative article from each camp. Greg Bahnsen, one of the earliest and leading lights of the movement, sets out the theonomist stall in 'Christ and the Role of Civil Government: The Theonomic Perspective' Part I, *Transformation* 5.2 (1988), pp. 24-31; Part II, 5.3 (1988), pp. 24-28. This is a useful starting block for wider exploration of theonomist literature, some of which is much more extreme in its prescriptiveness than Bahnsen, at least the Bahnsen of this article. This was followed by a dispensationalist perspective from Norman L. Geisler, 'Dispensationalism and Ethics', *Transformation* 6.1 (1989), pp. 7-14.

I find myself unconvinced by either wing of the argument, and note that neither is wholly consistent in working out the implications of how the OT laws do or do not apply. Theonomists, for example, are curiously reluctant to apply the full weight of the economic laws of the OT, saying that they do not fall within the remit of the civil authorities — a view which may have rather more than a little to do with the generally free-market, right-wing political stance of the movement. Geisler, on the other hand, while saying that no OT laws are binding on contemporary Christian ethics, makes quite extensive and sometimes fairly prescriptive use of OT material in his survey of ethical issues, *Christian Ethics: Options and Issues* (Baker: 1989/Leicester: IVP, 1990).

This is not the place for a full analysis and critique of these two influential movements. I have tried to give a slightly fuller assessment in a longer article surveying the ethical use of the OT at different major periods of the church, in Christopher J.H. Wright, 'The Ethical Authority of the Old Testament: A Survey of Approaches', Part I, *Tyndale Bulletin* 43.1 (1992), pp. 101-120; Part II, 43.2 (1992). This article samples the approaches to the OT in the early church, the Reformation period (comparing Luther, Calvin and the Anabaptists), and in recent years. An earlier and very thorough study of both dispensational and covenant theology, which is not directly about the ethical systems of dispensationalism or theonomism but explores some of the roots of both, is Daniel P. Fuller, *Gospel and Law, Contrast or Continuum? The Hermeneutics of Dispensational and Covenant Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980).

Two very useful critiques of the theonomist movement have recently emerged from very different stables. H. Wayne House and Thomas Ice, *Dominion Theology: Blessing or Curse?* (Portland: Multnomah, 1988), is from the pre-millenialist dispensationalist camp and so is in head-on opposition to the whole theonomist, reconstructionist agenda. A subsidiary benefit of the book is that it provides a comprehensive, classified and (dispensationally!) annotated bibliography of theonomist writings and of some other works that are critical of theonomy. A more substantial, and in my own view more theologically satisfying, critique is provided by the multi-authored work, William S. Barker and W. Robert Godfrey (eds), *Theonomy: A Reformed Critique* (Grand Rapids: Academie, 1990). What makes this a challenging book is that it is more of an attack on theonomism from the wings than from the front. The contributors are all members of Westminster Theological Seminary, flagship of Reformed theology. They therefore have much in common theologically with theonomism, which undoubtedly claims to be a legitimate heir of the Reformed tradition. Nevertheless, the critique is strong and at some points devastating. In 16 well-argued chapters it ranges through issues of biblical exegesis, especially of course the question of OT law, of biblical and systematic theology, of contemporary concerns, and historical connections — especially the question of whether theonomism is right to claim Calvin as a founding father (the answer is negative).

The theonomist/reconstructionist debate does not feature so prominently on the British scene, though there is a British organization, The Foundation for Christian Reconstruction, directed by Stephen Perks in Whitby, North Yorkshire, which publishes occasional papers and critiques from a moderately theonomic position. More influential is the Jubilee Centre in Cambridge, whose work in bringing a biblical perspective in the public arena of social policy and reform has been recognized even by the secular media. Its Director, Michael Schluter, leans heavily on a paradigmatic understanding of the relevance of OT socio-economic laws and institutions to subsequent cultures and societies, including our own. In 1990, *The Evangelical Quarterly* devoted an issue to the question of biblical social ethics and in it

Schluter, with Roy Clements, sets out an explanation of their hermeneutic: M. Schluter and R. Clements, 'Jubilee Institutional Norms: A Middle Way between Creation Ethics and Kingdom Ethics as the Basis for Christian Political Action', *EQ* 62 (1990), pp. 37-62. In the same issue, two other articles explore divergent viewpoints among evangelicals on the issue of social ethics: O.R. Barclay and C. Sugden, 'Biblical Social Ethics in a Mixed Society', pp. 5-18; and O.R. Barclay, 'The Theology of Social Ethics: A Survey of Current Positions', pp. 63-86. This would probably be the best context in which to mention also Ronald L. Sider, 'Toward a Biblical Perspective on Equality: Steps on the Way Toward Christian Political Engagement', *Interp.* 43 (1989), pp. 156-169; and also the excellent and stimulating hermeneutical case study, Richard Bauckham, *The Bible in Politics* (London: SPCK, 1989).

Walter Kaiser continues his work on OT ethics with two recent articles which are apologetic in two opposite directions. In 'God's Promise Plan and His Gracious Law', *JETS* 33 (1990), pp. 289-302, his target is mainly the theonomist/reconstructionist camp and their use (in Kaiser's view, distortion) of the OT law. He argues for a careful reinstatement of the classic, but in modern times much maligned, threefold distinction between moral, civil and ceremonial categories in the law. Only thus can we avoid the 'all-or-nothing' dilemma that we are faced with if we must follow either theonomy or dispensationalism. In 'New Approaches to Old Testament Ethics', *JETS* 34 (1991), Kaiser surveys the wider field of OT ethics and laments the erosion of any sense of biblical authority in recent writing — much of which can be appreciated for other reasons. He lays some of the blame on the lingering effects of critical method, some on the newer hermeneutics of suspicion practised in certain kinds of feminist and liberation stances, and some on the new literary criticism with its emphasis on reader-response hermeneutic. He hopes that evangelicals will work harder at finding ways through these fields to consolidating a more fruitful approach that enables the church and the world to hear again the ethically authoritative voice of God through the Hebrew scriptures. Amen to that, but it is an enormous task and challenge.

To finish this OT section on a fitting eschatological note, I may be allowed to include a forthcoming article of my own, 'Ethical Decisions in the Old Testament', *European Journal of Theology* 1 (forthcoming). It explores different dimensions of ethics in ancient Israel under the sub-headings 'Responding to the God of created order', 'Responding to the God of covenant purpose' and 'Responding to the God of redemptive action'. Among other things, it touches on the balance between consequentialism and deontology in the OT, and points out the eschatological and missiological nature of Israel's ethical challenge.

New Testament ethics

In 1984 two books on NT ethics appeared. Allen Verhey, *The Great Reversal: Ethics and the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984), begins with a concise but comprehensive survey of the ethical material in all the NT books. He then goes on to discuss the ethical authority of the NT within what he calls a 'Chalcedonian' view of the Bible, *i.e.* that it is fully Word of God and also words of men and women. He seeks to avoid both fundamentalism and liberalism, arguing that God's Word is neither identified nor contrasted with the human words of Scripture. One is left wondering, then, exactly what and where is it? Verhey proposes a more functional kind of ethical authority, which is becoming increasingly popular as a way of understanding biblical authority and has a lot to offer, but can be very flawed if it is not related to some ontological understanding of the nature of Scripture as the Word of God. Nevertheless, Verhey rightly warns us against asking the wrong questions of the Bible in ethics (as in history or science) and then rejecting it because it doesn't give us the answers we want. The ultimate agenda of the NT is to engender loyal obedience to the God who raised Jesus from the dead. Given that centre, 'God's word is no less purposeful and intentional than human words, and God's intention . . . is to transform and sanctify human identity, to bring it and the whole creation into coherence with his reign' (p. 181).

Richard Longenecker, *New Testament Social Ethics for Today* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984), begins with a survey of different ways of using the NT for ethics, and concludes that the right approach is to discern and apply those prescriptive principles which can be seen to flow from the heart of the gospel itself. Rather than deal with the NT comprehensively, he focuses on what he regards as a definitive statement of NT social ethics, namely Galatians 3:28. Here he finds a cultural mandate ('neither Jew nor

Greek'), a social mandate ('neither slave nor free') and a sexual mandate ('neither male nor female'). These must not be spiritualized but must be worked out in terms of their social implications. The tensions involved in such outworking are clear in the rest of Paul's own writings, particularly as regards the gender issues, which Longenecker explores at length.

The most significant monograph of the decade on NT ethics, however, had already appeared in German in 1982, and was available in English in 1988 — Wolfgang Schrage, *The Ethics of the New Testament* (trans. by D.E. Green, Philadelphia: Fortress/ Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1988). Schrage undertakes to examine 'the question of how life was lived in the earliest Christian communities: what were the foundations, the support for, the criteria and principles for this way of acting and living' (p. 1). He goes on comprehensively to survey Jesus' eschatological ethics, Paul's christological ethics, and the ethical dimensions of each gospel and epistle. It is a very detailed resource text, helpfully subdivided, rich in scriptural insight, and filled out with thorough bibliographies for each section. It is relatively middle-of-the-road as regards the contentious issues of NT interpretation, although it lacks significant interaction with the latest paradigm shifts in studies of Jesus' and Paul's relation to Judaism and thus has a rather dated feel.

Since Schrage's book is primarily a work of theological ethics — that is, exploring the ethical teaching of the different strands of the NT in the light of their theological underpinnings — it lacks discussion of the social, economic, political and cultural dimensions of the historical context of the NT. Yet these must be considered if we are to appreciate the full flavour of the ethical distinctiveness of the early Christian communities. Fortunately, this need is met by Wayne Meeks, *The Moral World of the First Christians* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1986/London: SPCK, 1987). In this fascinating and enlightening book, Meeks examines, not the internal ethics of the NT (*i.e.* he has no sections on 'the ethics of Jesus', or 'what the NT teaches about specific ethical issues'), but the external influences and contexts of early Christianity. He introduces the reader to the world of Roman, Greek and Jewish history and culture — 'the world in which the biblical words worked' — helping us to understand the symbolic and social world that early Christians shared with other people in their villages and cities. He is concerned with the *ethos* that helped to shape and define the *ethics*, and to understand the identity of the early Christian churches as self-conscious communities of moral discourse in constant interaction with the world around them.

The increased understanding of ethics as a community matter, both in biblical times and in modern outworking, is the focus also of L.S. Cahill, 'The New Testament and Ethics: Communities of Social Change', *Interp.* 44 (1990), pp. 383-395. 'There is a consensus', Cahill argues, taking his cue from the work of Birch and Rasmussen, 'that moral norms are justified not as transcriptions of biblical rules, or even as references to key narrative themes, but as coherent social embodiments of a community formed by Scripture' (p. 393). Accordingly, we need a socially conscious understanding at both ends of the ethical task — in biblical exegesis and in application to our own situation. He thus advocates the value of recent historical, sociological, economic and political research on the biblical world for our understanding of biblical ethics. I would agree on this, but with the caveat that it calls for a lot of hard thinking on the part of the reader who wants to move from these primary resources to more direct applicability to contemporary ethical issues. It's more like drilling for oil than filling your tank at the gas station. I have already referred above to the survey of such work in the OT field in the Clements symposium, with its bibliographical resources for this growing section of biblical study. Cahill mentions two books in the NT area: Halvor Moxnes, *The Economy of the Kingdom: Social Conflict and Economic Relations in Luke's Gospel* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988); and Ched Myers, *Binding the Strong Man: A Political Reading of Mark's Story of Jesus* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1988). I have not yet seen these two myself, but would add a couple that I have read and found very illuminating in understanding the economic and political context in which the ethical stance and agenda of Jesus comes into sharper focus: M. Borg, *Conflict, Holiness and Politics in the Teaching of Jesus* (New York: Edwin Mellin, 1984); and D.E. Oakman, *Jesus and the Economic Questions of His Day* (New York: Edwin Mellin, 1986). I found them particularly informative for the last chapter of my own recent book, *Knowing Jesus through the Old Testament* (London: Marshall-Pickering, 1992), 'Jesus and his Old Testament Values', in which I endeavour to see the ethical challenge of Jesus as a

recapturing of the authentic thrust of the Hebrew scriptures in the midst of the conflicts and struggles of contemporary Jewish life.

The same issue of *Interpretation* that carried Cahill's article has another by R.B. Mays, 'Scripture-shaped Community: the Problem of Method in New Testament Ethics', *Interp.* 44 (1990), pp. 42-55. The major 'problem' that Mays defines is the fact of divergent Christian moral stances derived from the same texts. He offers 'a preliminary list of normative methodological proposals for a church that seeks to be a Scripture-shaped community'. These give an encouragingly high priority to the Bible itself as the norm that relativizes all else, though I would question his too-ready acceptance that tensions in the text have to be left as simply irreconcilable contradictions. The article is, however, a sensible essay in practical hermeneutics for morally concerned Christians and churches.

Turning to the ethics of Jesus himself, Bruce Chilton and J.I.H. McDonald have produced a scholarly survey of the relationship between Jesus' proclamation of the kingdom of God and his ethical challenge, in *Jesus and the Ethics of the Kingdom* (London: SPCK, 1987). They focus especially on the parables, helpfully setting Jesus in the context of the literary and symbolic world of early Judaism and exploring how such modes of communication actually worked in fostering ethical response by sharpening the hearers' images of God and providing new models of behaviour.

At a more popular, but still demanding, level, A.E. Harvey, *Strenuous Commands: The Ethic of Jesus* (London: SCM, 1990), laments the fact that so much Christian ethical reflection and prescription down through the centuries has actually neglected the sharpness of Jesus' moral challenge, domesticating it as literally impractical and opting for a bland dependence on natural law. Harvey argues that Jesus radically challenged 'normal' life with a bold project of moral persuasion that quite deliberately used exaggeration, paradox, extremes and forms of address reminiscent even of Ecclesiastes. In the course of his book he compares Jesus with roughly contemporary Greek and Jewish moralists, discussing, for example, their varied responses to the problem of property and wealth. Jesus challenges us, says Harvey, to take the risk of 'living as if . . .', in the light of the inbreaking kingdom of God.

More popular still as a survey and guide, which, in spite of its title, ranges through most of the NT, is David Cook, *Living in the Kingdom: The Ethics of Jesus* (London, *etc.*: Hodder & Stoughton, 1992). Intended for the general reader, in a broad agenda it expounds the Sermon on the Mount, offers guidance on how to understand and apply biblical texts, critiques moral relativism and tackles common questions and objections.

The impact of the so-called 'Third Quest' in Jesus research is to be felt in Ben Wiebe, 'Messianic Ethics: Response to the Kingdom of God', *Interp.* 45 (1991), pp. 29-42. He surveys the work of scholars such as Ben Meyer and E.P. Sanders on the aims of Jesus, agreeing with them that Jesus' strongest sense of self-identity and purpose came from his mission in relation to the restoration of Israel. His ethics were therefore not merely individual, but fundamentally aimed at creating a community of response to the new work of God in establishing his reign in a repentant and restored Israel. He also points to recent scholarship on the conflict between Jesus and the Pharisees over their basic paradigms of holiness. In

this light, Jesus' teaching on the law was not so much negative as transcending. Wiebe also contests the idea that the eschatological dimension of Jesus' ethics makes them either failed or irrelevant.

Alister McGrath asks the question 'In What Way Can Jesus Be a Moral Example for Christians?', *JETS* 34 (1991), pp. 289-298, and answers by denying the adequacy of the liberal moral example theory. This deficient view of the imitation of Christ accorded moral authority to Jesus only because he was a witness to higher moral universals which were established by other rational criteria. Rather, argues McGrath, we must start with the doctrinal truth of the incarnation in order to realize that the moral authority and exemplarity of Jesus derive from who he *is*. Imitation of Christ is therefore not the essence of the gospel itself but rather the fruit of faith and a saving experience of Christ. He would prefer to use the term 'being conformed to Christ'.

Pauline studies are still in the throes of adjusting to the post-Sanders revolution. One recent work on the ethics of Paul which interacts fully with the new approaches is John Barclay, *Obeying the Truth: A Study of Paul's Ethics in Galatians* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1988). This is primarily an exegetical study of Galatians 5:13–6:10 — the ethical exhortations which to some traditional exegetes had seemed embarrassingly contradictory to Paul's assertions earlier in the epistle that Christians were free from such apparent moral burdens. Barclay carefully shows how Paul's ethics in this section flow naturally (both logically and theologically) from his previous argument, and in the process he illuminates other areas of Paul's ethical thinking, particularly concerning the status of Gentile believers in relation to Judaism and the moral obedience required of all believers — Jew or Gentile — in Christ.

A more broad-ranging essay on Paul's ethics is J.F. Kilner, 'A Pauline Approach to Ethical Decision-Making', *Interp.* 43 (1989), pp. 366-379, in which he summarizes Paul's approach as 'God-centred, reality-bounded and love-impelled'.

Since most studies of NT ethics are dominated by Jesus and Paul, it is refreshing to read an article on the ethics of 1 Peter which, equally refreshingly, examines its OT roots — Gene L. Green, 'The Use of the Old Testament for Christian Ethics in 1 Peter', *Tyndale Bulletin* 41.2 (1990), pp. 276-289. Green observes how the author has sought to match the situation and needs of his readers to a text of the OT which arose in a similar context (Ps. 34) and then draw words of both encouragement and moral exhortation from it. The author thus assumes that the teaching of the OT has normative value for the Christian community which stands in organic continuity with the OT people of God. This is an interesting case study. It would be fascinating to apply a similar method to other sections of NT moral teaching where appeal is made to OT texts.

Finally, with editor's privilege, I conclude with two *Themelios* articles, one OT and one NT, which explore the ethical relevance of the Bible for Christian political understanding and relating to 'secular' authorities: Christopher J.H. Wright, 'The People of God and the State in the Old Testament', *Themelios* 16.1 (1990), pp. 4-10 (which has also managed the metamorphosis into a Grove Ethical Study, No. 77, Nottingham, 1990); and my namesake (but no relation!), N.T. Wright, 'The New Testament and the "State" ', *Themelios* 16.1 (1990), pp. 11-17.

The gospel as public truth: a conference report

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Introduction

An ecumenical gathering at Swanwick, England, in June 1992 brought together a cross-section of church leaders, academics and representatives from the arts, education, science and other fields, for a consultation aimed at testing the thesis that the 'gospel is public truth'. This article reports on the Consultation, gives a brief overview of its theological basis, and comments briefly on its implications.

There was a strong representation at Swanwick from those who would describe themselves as evangelical, as well as a good number of Roman Catholics. The conference was the culmination of a process of discussion which began eight years ago after Bishop Lesslie Newbigin had written *The Other Side of 1984*.[1] His passionate concern was to restore the Christian faith and its values to a central role in western culture, since an increasingly pluralistic and secular society had marginalized all Christian truth claims. It was believed that the church had lost confidence in the gospel as 'public truth', that is, as truth universally relevant to all areas of life. It was felt that Christians needed to engage in an informed and positive critique of western culture, while at the same time seeking to re-establish Christian faith as the basis of the unity and coherence of society.

So the 'Gospel and Culture' movement was born. It is seen as more than a missionary endeavour to western culture—it is an attempt to reverse 300 years of development in Enlightenment thinking which has provided modern culture with its present world view in which God and the Bible have little relevance. It involves questioning the assumptions and beliefs of western culture in the light of the Christian gospel. It lays claim to a new paradigm for public life and values based on the Christian affirmation that 'Jesus Christ is Lord'. The church, says Newbigin, should affirm its right to proclaim this, and to propose 'gospel truth' as a new starting point for western thought. The process of engagement with western culture which the Gospel and Culture movement represents set in motion what has been called 'the radical Christianizing of social and scientific culture'.

The challenge therefore which Newbigin presents to the church is to engage with contemporary culture in serious and informed debate about the implications of the gospel for all areas of public life. A series of introductory essays on some of these areas paved the way for discussion in the conference.[2] Delegates were divided into eight sub-groups

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[1] L. Newbigin, *The Other Side of 1984* (Geneva: WCC, 1983).

[2] H. Montefiore (ed.), *The Gospel and Contemporary Culture* (Mowbray, 1992).

which met on 11 separate occasions to discuss the relevance of the thesis that 'The Gospel is Public Truth'. These groups dealt with: Epistemology, Arts, Science, Media, Economics, Healing, Education and History. In 1993, a book summarizing the conclusions of these groups will be launched by Laurence Osborn. It was hoped that the Consultation at Swanwick would inject new momentum into the process already begun, and that the church would be given new confidence as it enters the public arenas of debate.

Newbigin's thesis

Let us look briefly at the argument which forms the theological basis of the movement.[3] Newbigin traces the development of the scientific world view from the Enlightenment onwards, and exposes the false distinction between 'facts' and 'values' which characterized the Age of Reason.[4] 'Facts' refer to what is objectively true and capable of 'proof'; they give us access to universal knowledge which becomes generally accepted as public truth. 'Values' refer to what can only be said to be true by faith from a subjective standpoint. Values have no universal objectivity and they can only be considered to have validity within a personal, private realm of knowledge. As the Enlightenment progressed, religious truth was relegated to the status of values, and therefore not considered to be objectively true, but only knowable by faith.

Newbigin then points out that the entire scientific world view rests on certain assumptions which are themselves accepted by 'faith', and therefore science is not as objective as it has been claimed. The fact remains that it is impossible to separate facts from values. The whole Enlightenment enterprise which Descartes initiated was based on a false search for an indubitable objectivity which was always heading for a blind alley.[5] There is no final basis for certainty in 'pure objectivity'since all knowledge has a knowing subject.[6] The subject is the human being, who is fallible and who has values, cultures and intuitions which influence his/her perspective on the truth. It is impossible to define any truth, scientific, historical or theological, in an exclusively objective way— even science must recognize this and abandon any claim to give us independent access to objective reality.

Newbigin traces the consequence of this task in modern thought to its logical outcome: that any claim to speak the 'truth' is untenable; Christian truth claims must be treated as optional; and revelation is irrelevant to public issues. With what right can we claim any access to the 'truth'? Indeed, our culture has largely lost the belief that there is

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[3] The two main recent works are: L. Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralistic Society* (SPCK, 1989); L. Newbigin, *Truth to Tell* (SPCK, 1991).

[4] *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, ch. 3.

[5] *Truth to Tell*, p. 33.

[6] This point is made by Polanyi, to whom Newbigin owes much of his thinking: M. Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge: Towards a Post-critical Philosophy* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1958).

any truth to be known. We have moved into a postmodern era in which belief has been substituted for knowledge: the only truth is what is true for me, and all knowledge, including scientific knowledge, is relativized.

Christians believe, however, that there is a gospel which is 'true' and, as such, makes claims on every human being and every human activity. Newbigin insists that the historical story of God's revelation in Christ challenges the reigning assumptions of postmodern western culture with a new starting point for thought. As we make this challenge we should not make the mistake which the church made in the 18th and 19th centuries when it sought to counter scepticism by trying to prove the existence of God. That was to abandon revelation as the Christian basis for truth. There is revealed truth in the gospel story, a truth which is proved in the living of it, and that is how it must be shown to be more adequate to the totality of human life than any other world view.

An agenda for change

Newbigin admits that we cannot expect the Christian voice to dominate the public square, even though we can insist that it should be heard. So the church must equip Christians to take their place in the arenas of debate, challenging assumptions and calling for conversion. The gospel must become a serious issue, not in a triumphalistic way, but as we engage with contemporary problems from the given historical story of Jesus Christ.

Newbigin has frequently pointed out that we cannot go back to a time when Christian truth was unquestioned. Once the critical principle had been introduced, it could never again be ignored. Nor do we want to work for a restoration of Christendom, a cosy alliance of church and state in which the gospel is generally accepted, but used in the service of political power. But we cannot stay where we are: we have to work with the pluralistic society in which we find ourselves. In this respect our situation is not that different from the early church: the apostles were proclaiming the gospel in a pluralistic cultural atmosphere. Indeed, was culture *ever* 'gospel-friendly'?

We find ourselves today in a situation in which we have inherited all the consequences of a 'plausibility structure' which has no room for religious values, let alone the claims of the Christian gospel. However, we cannot simply proclaim the gospel in dogmatic fashion; its truth has to be exposed to other claims for truth, so that mission becomes a process of dialogue rather than of proselytism. Newbigin therefore describes mission as an 'exegesis of the gospel'.[7]

Reactions to the thesis

In the event, the Consultation itself was a dialogue with one another across denominational and theological frontiers, with some widely different reactions, making it difficult to imagine how the church will ever be able to speak with one voice in public debate. Not all delegates accepted the thesis that the gospel is 'public truth'. What is the gospel? What do we mean by the 'public arena'? And how can we justify making a claim for 'truth'? In what sense can we take the biblical record as our authority? There were those who felt that the Enlightenment had brought many positive values to modern life,

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[7] *Truth to Tell*, p. 35.

and that culture should be affirmed and not criticized. We can learn from secular culture, it was said, and we must not use the Enlightenment as the scapegoat for all that we are ashamed of in the modern world. Some were relativists who could not accept that Christian truth is given and final but that it must remain vulnerable to other evidence. It is said that if we are serious about finding common ground in a pluralistic world, we cannot affirm any absolute truths.

So the Consultation was complicated by the fact that the delegates themselves came from different starting points, especially in their view of revelation and biblical authority. Many preferred to affirm humanity and the world as the places where we find God. An incarnational model of truth was often preferred to one that is propositional; and some wanted more reference to the living Christ and less to the historicity of the gospel. This raises important issues for epistemology, what can be said to be known from the revelation of God in Christ. The basic question is: how do we know that anything is true?

Evangelicals must confront this question in the postmodern, pluralistic context. The basis on which we make any claim for the gospel as public truth must be clarified. Newbigin is definite in saying that if it is true that God did come in the person of Jesus Christ, then that has to govern everything we say and do. We must affirm the demand of the gospel to acknowledge Jesus as Lord in every area of life: Jesus Christ is Lord! But many others today differentiate between the Jesus of history and subsequent interpretations of him, so that what matters for the search for truth is what God is doing by his Spirit in revealing himself in a whole variety of ways in history and even through other faiths. Others want to affirm that humanity is where we meet God, so that rather than confronting culture with the need for repentance, we should identify with the world in its search for truth and move together along a journey of discovery.

The Gospel and Culture movement challenges us to develop a missionary strategy which does not compromise our convictions about the inspiration and authority of God's final and unique revelation in Christ as the basis for all truth claims. It has to be said that a decisive, authoritative role for the Scriptures was not an outcome of this conference, even though Newbigin himself insists that 'there are no more reliable grounds than what are given to us in God's revelation'.[8]

The future of the movement

The key to the success of the Gospel and Culture movement lies in its ability to communicate its vision at two levels. First, at the level of influential public debate, in which Christians in different professions must combine informed expertise with a biblical, Christian perspective. Secondly, the movement needs to give new confidence to the whole church, giving every Christian the courage to affirm Christian truth in every area of life, and to challenge the commonly held assumptions.

No agreed statement came out of the Consultation, since the wide range of ecumenical viewpoints represented would have made that impossible. Some will see this as a weakness of the movement: if nothing can be agreed on what constitutes the 'gospel', how can it ever make progress? Others will recognize that Newbigin does have a prophetic role today in challenging the church to renew its confidence in the gospel, and

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[8] *Truth to Tell*, p. 33.

all Christians must be sympathetic to that overall aim.

For the local church level, a video has been produced for use in study groups called *It's No Good Shouting*. It comes with material which it is hoped will help churches to engage with the issues.[9]

Conclusions

We certainly need a missionary strategy for western culture, and like all mission, that means working out how to 'inculturate' the gospel in a way which will be both faithful to the apostolic tradition, and at the same time will speak the language of the culture. Many evangelical groups have been working on the relationship of the gospel to culture and contemporary issues for some time, so this is not a new commitment.[10] But it is always an unfinished agenda, and we need continually to learn to listen to and understand our culture as we seek ways of making the gospel public truth. It took something like 200 years to get to the point where the Enlightenment made an impact in public life, so we are not going to be able to change a whole world view overnight! But we must not be cynical; we should be able to support Newbigin's overall vision for the restoration of gospel truth to the marketplace of secular culture.

Nevertheless, some serious concerns remain, more especially in the area of epistemology, and how we maintain in a pluralistic context the uniqueness and authority of the revealed revelation of God in Jesus Christ to which the NT bears witness. Finally, to restore any kind of Christian perspective to social values is an immense task. When Newbigin was asked if he was optimistic, he replied, 'I have to be, I believe in the Holy Spirit!'

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[9] Available from 'The Gospel and our Culture', Selly Oak Colleges, Birmingham B29 6LQ, price £19.95 inclusive.

[10] Organizations include: Christian Impact, The Jubilee Centre, The Oxford Centre for Mission Studies. Books include: J.R.W. Stott, *Issues Facing Christians Today* (Marshalls, 1984); *idem, The Contemporary Christian* (IVP, 1992); M. Eden & D.F. Wells (eds), *The Gospel in the Modern World* (IVP, 1991); D.F. Wright (ed.). *Essays in Evangelical Social Ethics* (Paternoster, 1978); A. Storkey, *A Christian Social Perspective* (IVP, 1979); R.K. McCloughrey, *The Eye of the Needle* (IVP, 1990); *idem, Men and Masculinity* (Hodder, 1992); R. Elsdon, *Green House Theology* (Monarch, 1992); H.A. Netland, *Dissonant Voices: Religious Pluralism and the Question of Truth* (Apollos/Eerdmans, 1991); A. McGrath, *Bridge-Building: Effective Christian Apologetics* (IVP, 1992); J. Andrew Kirk, *Loosing the Chains: Religion as Opium and Liberation* (Hodder, 1992). See also *Third Way* magazine, and any of the *Third Way* books.

New horizons in hermeneutics: a review article

Richard S. Hess

Anthony C. Thiselton, *New Horizons in Hermeneutics* (London: Harper Collins, 1992), xii + 703 pp., £29.95.

Twelve years after the publication of *The Two Horizons*, which became a classic work in biblical hermeneutics, Thiselton has produced a major synthesis of the issues and people involved in the questions of interpreting texts. The importance of the work for readers of *Themelios* justifies a longer review, which can consider the content and some of the theses of the book.

Following an introduction which summarizes the contribution of the study, Thiselton investigates how texts function, both (1) to transform readers, as in speech-acts where texts carry the reader into their own world and may provide a reversal of expectations, and (2) to be transformed themselves through techniques such as intertextuality with changing language functions and pre-intentional backgrounds as well as through semiotics and deconstructionism. The difficulties of grasping an area of research so heavily laden with jargon should not be minimized (*i.e.* this is not a text for the beginner), but the discussion of its various usages and implications is one of the book's strengths.

The chapter 'What is a Text?' surveys the developments in hermeneutics following on the traditional 'classical-humanist' paradigm which emphasized the author's intention and its possibility of recovery through a study of the text and the context of its origins. The New Criticism challenged the recoverability of authorial intention and turned to a focus on the text itself. Northrop Frye introduced the post-modernist emphasis on the context of the reader or audience for understanding the text. The American development of reader-response theory suggested that the readers themselves create meaning from the text. Reader interests became dominant. In his application of these ideas to biblical studies, Thiselton considers the sense in which promises are given to Israel and to the church but it remains for the hearers to believe and to appropriate them. Further, he observes the Christian confession of the role of the Holy Spirit at work in the origin of the texts, in their transmission, and in the lives of the readers. The developments in hermeneutics imply that readers do their reading in the context of social communities, certainly the community of believers but others as well. Further, books such as Job and Ecclesiastes are written without a specific answer to the problems which they address. These texts invite the reader to participate in the problem, to wrestle with the issues. Thiselton argues that these approaches do not 'foreclose questions' about interpretations. However, he also affirms that the role of the authors and the biblical contexts must not be sacrificed in any reading and that these provide guidance to the interpreter.

In the chapter 'From Semiotics to Deconstruction and Post-Modernist Theories of Textuality', Thiselton provides a survey of the present landscape of how people deal with texts. Semiotics refers to the way in which texts presuppose a code or sign-system as a means to communicate. The ideas of Ferdinand de Saussure represent the foundation of semiotics, especially the principles that all signs are arbitrary in their value or meaning, that meaning is based on the differences or relations within the sign-system, and that concrete acts of speech *(parole)* are to be distinguished from the language system *(langue)* which is abstract and not found in the external world.

Thiselton goes on to trace the development of structuralism by Claude Lévi-Strauss and its Marxist application by Roland Barthes. He describes its successor, deconstructionism. However, Thiselton argues that deconstructionism is not a logically necessary consequence of semiotics.

Jacques Derrida argues for the absence of both signatory and referent in texts. The text is a mark of what has gone before and a trace of what is to come. However, the mark itself must be erased in an onward movement. Derrida suggests that writing has priority over speech. Even more, it has priority over the human psyche. At this point the discussion moves beyond a theory of textuality and into philosophy. Thiselton will allow for the use of deconstruction as a method in the interpretation of certain biblical texts, particularly those which are subversive, *i.e.* texts such as Job, Ecclesiastes, and the parables of Jesus, all of which challenge the accepted tradition. However, the method cannot function as an iconoclastic philosophy which denies any connection of self with the text and allows for any interpretation as equally valid. Thiselton comments (p. 122):

> . . . what would or could count as counter-examples or as falsification in the face of such a theory? Once again, when deconstructionist and post-modernist insights of iconoclastic method become inflated into some world view which is allegedly anti-metaphysical but in practice comes to function as a metaphysic, the whole system becomes self-defeating, a mere negative against someone else's positive. To set this up as a model of *textuality as such* is to imperialize all texts within a single system, while superficially rejecting any notion of system.

Thus deconstruction can be a useful method when applied to particular biblical texts, providing new insights and dispelling illusions that reading a text once provides mastery of it. However, it is a method and not a world view. As such it cannot lose contact with the speaking subject and the surrounding world of thought and life, which both reintroduces the possibility of misinterpretation and provides the social effect of its interpretation into life. Thiselton concludes the section with a caution regarding concepts of textual play. Again, it is important to recognize the purpose of a text. Some texts may serve such purposes but this is not an argument that all texts must. The multi-purpose nature of the biblical text must be recognized (pp. 131-132):

> . . . the biblical texts transcend any single goal: they teach, but they also invite us to celebrate with joy the deeds and reign of God. They make truth-claims about the world and reality; but they also make us uncomfortable recipients of judgment and comfortable recipients of grace. They subvert our idols, but they also address us, heal us, build us, and transform us. Any theory of textuality which cannot make room for these textual functions cannot be given a paradigmatic place in biblical interpretation.

After sections that helpfully explain the exegetical methods of the patristic and Reformation eras, Thiselton moves to the modern period, with Schleiermacher. He identifies the contributions of Friedrich Schleiermacher as being the first to set hermeneutics in the context of theories of knowledge, to ask how we know as part of the interpretive process. He brought questions of who the author was and what was the language-world in which the author wrote. However, his theories were more comprehensive than only concern for the 'genetic' aspects of hermeneutics. In addition to the author of the text, Schleiermacher took account of the original audience, the later reader, and the effects of the text upon each. His approach to the Bible was one which saw these hermeneutical questions as applicable to the Bible, just as they were to other texts. His distinction between grammatical and psychological interpretations argued that both are necessary and that the goal of hermeneutics is always an approximation of certain understanding. There is the whole context and the specific elements of it. Both inform one another, and together they constitute Schleiermacher's hermeneutical circle. He believed it was possible to understand a text as well and even better than the author. The first phase of interpretation implied a commitment to historical and grammatical inquiry. The second considered elements behind the text, which may not have been conscious to the author. Thiselton concludes that Schleiermacher's idea of background, like his other emphasis on psychology, is one aspect of hermeneutical theory, rather than a comprehensive theory.

Thiselton considers existentialist approaches to interpretation. He critiques them as inadequate in their lack of concern for the interpreting community and in their polarization between descriptive and proclaiming/ transforming functions of language. The existential categories limit the NT's confessions of 'Jesus is Lord' and of the kingdom of God. These have an element evoking personal response but they simultaneously point to someone who bears the title or a divine reign which is yet to come. Without the latter reality, the former would be meaningless or idolatrous. This leads to Thiselton's discussion of the speech-act theory of J.R. Searle and others. Rejecting a putative Hebraic power of words magically to perform actions, Thiselton recalls his previously published arguments that the irrevocability of blessings by Jacob and Balaam are grounded in generally recognized institutional functions of the world of the Bible. Just as

in Western Christendom there is no service of 'unbaptism', so in the biblical world there is no operation of 'unblessing'. Speech-act distinguishes between assertions in which the words match the world and promises or commands in which the world is made to match the word. Thiselton notes various biblical statements which operate in both directions. In the OT this is especially true of promise and covenant, *e.g.* in God's promises to the patriarchs and in the covenantal language of Hosea. Pre-eminently, it appears in the NT with the enfleshment of the divine Word and its ongoing reality through the mediation of the Holy Spirit.

Thiselton finds Pannenberg more satisfactory than Gadamer, and critiques both. He follows his student Luckmann in recognizing a third horizon of interpretation in Pannenberg, that of the eschatological. The text, and especially that of the NT, must be understood in the context of the future, as well as the past and the present. This distinction between the present and the future removes these texts from the arena of the mythological. Thiselton finds justification for this eschatological emphasis upon interpretation in the Epistle to the Hebrews and its hope for a city with foundations (4:1-11; 6:13ff.).

Paul Ricoeur's theory is the next one to fall beneath Thiselton's lens of examination. The symbols of the text have the power to produce thought but also to generate idols. There is a strong element of Bultmannian existentialism in Ricoeur's biblical interpretation, in which religious language is understood primarily to redescribe the human experience. Hermeneutics becomes a struggle against the idols of ideologies and other illusions at the same time as it is an act of listening to a language which we no longer hear.

Thiselton's analysis of liberation hermeneutics begins with a chapter which explores the theories of Habermas, Rorty and Apel. Habermas sought the foundations of social science in the theory of communication. In so doing he emphasized the social context of speech-acts. Rorty represents American liberal pluralism with its abandonment of any truth values outside of social contexts, other than a pragmatic universal of 'success'. However, Thiselton observes critiques of this approach in (1) a concealed authoritarianism in Rorty, which uses liberal rhetoric to define an authoritarian message of its own; and (2) the absence of any means to challenge the status quo on the basis of universals: as Rorty acknowledges, there is no answer to the question, 'Why not be cruel?' Apel follows Habermas in his recognition of transcendent rational norms.

Chapter 12, 'The Hermeneutics of Liberation', offers 60 pages of analysis and critique of hermeneutic approaches found in liberationist readings of Latin American, black and feminist theologies. The common elements which Thiselton finds in all of these are those which Gutiérrez outlined in his *The Theology of Liberation* — an empathetic understanding of the oppressed, a criticism of society, the centrality of scriptural themes of liberation such as the exodus, and the biblical language of promise and eschatology as a means of transformation of the world. Thiselton identifies three corresponding methods in these movements (pp. 410, 462): critiques of frameworks of interpretation found in the dominant traditions, reinterpretations of biblical texts from the standpoint of a particular context of experience, and the use of critical tools to unmask interpretations which serve social interests of domination and oppression. In all this, Thiselton constantly asks whether the critiques are socio-critical and

therefore part of a larger critique with universal significance, or whether they are socio-pragmatic, designed to serve the interests of the particular group concerned. A second key question is whether the method used is made into a universal philosophy or world view, or whether it remains controlled and employed only as a particular method. For example, Leonardo and Clodovis Boff affirm that they use Marxism purely as an instrument, submitting it to the judgment of the poor, rather than as a philosophical or political programme. A similar claim is noted by Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza in her feminist hermeneutic. However, Thiselton's examination of her leads him to challenge this and to charge her with (p. 445) 'clearly selective discussions of different explanatory hypotheses which might account for the same textual and historical data'.

Special note should be made of Thiselton's critique of the approaches of Fiorenza and of Phyllis Trible's depatriarchalizing method. In so doing, he reviews the feminist critiques of Elizabeth Achtemeier and of Susanne Heine. Thiselton's own recounting of his earlier analysis and critique of Bultmann's demythologization forms the basis for a similar critique of depatriarchalizing. Some feminist applications of Ugaritic and Canaanite goddess-systems to the OT and of Gnostic sexual symbolism to the NT and especially to the early church serve to critique 'androcentric' biblical language. But it is not clear that androcentric biblical language does not serve ontological purposes of describing the nature of God and of God's relation to creation which have nothing necessarily to do with human masculinity as opposed to the feminine. Such language is often androcentric only if conventional modern stereotypes of masculine and feminine are read into the text. Further, as Heine observes, the usage of feminine imagery for God in the prophets serves not to depatriarchalize the texts, but rather to affirm the God of Israel as all-sufficient and therefore to discount any need for a mother goddess in Israel.

Thiselton's introduction to the hermeneutics of reading is an attempt to justify its importance. On the one hand, he refers to Terry Eagleton's comment (p. 472), 'hostility to theory means an opposition to other people's theories and an oblivion of one's own'. On the other hand, he observes the sophisticated philosophies which lie behind many literary theories. He notes the tendency to replace meaning with rhetoric, as in Derrida and Fish. But Thiselton also finds some positive contributions in modern literary theories, including the restoration of the importance of the imagination in reading, the greater attention to metaphor, the role of ambiguity and indirectness, and the development of theories of narrative which can take into account items such as irony. He observes the manner in which these approaches have served 'to sharpen contrasts in hermeneutics with historical-critical and especially source-critical approaches' (p. 479):

As Alter, Moberly, and many others have pointed out, literary considerations may suggest that apparent doublets or duplications, for example, may be due not to clumsy editing in conflating dual sources, but to a narrative technique of juxtaposing two foci of vision which may even stand in tension, because the vision as a whole transcends either of the two single strands of narrative as flat statements.

Rising out of Roland Barthes' concerns with how the text is made, structuralism developed in biblical studies in the 1970s. However, Thiselton observes that this method was subject to critique from several directions: (1) it lacked the generally recognized require-

ment of a scientific theory, the possibility of falsifiability; (2) it took no account of socio-cultural factors; and (3) for all its efforts it was not very productive in terms of its results. The emergence of intertextuality reasserted the importance of the larger context; indeed, there was no clear means of designating where to draw boundaries in the search for other texts. This itself created a problem with intertextuality for it seemed to allow an infinite variety of interpretations with no criteria to judge one in relation to another. Indeed, the advent of the term 'reading' a text as a replacement for interpreting or understanding a text suggested a loss of communication and judgment in favour of semiotic effect. Texts become 'matrices' from which any of a variety of meanings can be developed. Thiselton argues that some biblical texts — poetry, for example — lend themselves more easily to a variety of readings, but other biblical texts, like modern traffic signs, do not so readily leave the matter of meaning with the reader.

Thiselton considers the work of Holland and of Bleich. Regarding Holland, who emphasizes the individual reader, he expresses concern over the possibility of creating an idolatry out of the text in which we project our own interests on it. Thiselton finds examples of this in the work of Bleich, whom he accuses of a socio-political agenda. In the end (p. 535), 'the most militant pressure-group actually carries the day about what satisfies their pragmatic criteria of "right" reading'. In Fish, there is the example of an interpreter who has carried socio-pragmatism to its final conclusion, that the community alone is the interpretative authority of a text. Therefore, there are no trans-cultural or trans-contextual meanings. Thiselton raises questions about language of pain, remorse, sincerity and lying, all of which he sees as having universal communicative power. Observing the implications of this in biblical studies, Thiselton goes on to identify some 'disastrous entailments' of Fish (pp. 549-550), of which three may be identified:

(i) If textual meaning is the product of a community of readers, as Fish concedes, texts cannot reform these readers 'from outside'. In this case the Reformation then becomes a dispute over alternative community life-styles.

(ii) Prophetic address as that which comes 'from beyond' virtually against human will is either illusory or to be explained in terms of pre-conscious inner conflict.

(iii) It would be impossible to determine what would count as a systematic mistake in the development of doctrine. Pragmatism allows only the view that what gave rise to our past and present must somehow have broadly been right. Social pragmatism accepts only social winners as criteria of truth.

The last 70 pages of Thiselton's text offer the reader a number of directions for the application of what has been surveyed throughout the book. This is the first place to which many who read this work will be likely to turn. Thiselton begins with a defence of reconstructing the original context of the text and its life-world. He accepts that many biblical texts express a form of address or goal, thus inviting examination of their original intention without committing the intentional fallacy. He reiterates Schleiermacher's emphasis to preserve both horizons of the text and of the reader. Thiselton moves through various models of reading, illustrating Kierkegaard's existentialist approach in his famous model of the interpretation of Genesis 22, *Fear and Trembling*. He suggests four sample areas in which narratives can address readers: in catching us off guard and reversing our expectations, in explaining personal identities (including that of the God who acts), in stimulation of the imagination to

explore new avenues, and in speech-acts of various sorts. Much of this, as well as the remainder of the book, was already considered in earlier chapters. However, there are new applications: for example, Jung's use of symbols and their identification can serve to integrate and to encourage further exploration of texts.

More importantly, Thiselton is concerned to affirm and to retain both the existence of universals in the interpretation of texts and the need for criteria to evaluate the success or failure of different methods as they are applied to texts. The concern for universal elements in interpretation leads him away from the reader-response theory of Fish toward a speech-act theory in which promises, confessions, and other types of texts move beyond the textual world alone and address commitments in the lives of authors, speakers and readers, *i.e.* readings of texts which call for self-involvement. The second major area of concern involves a distinction between what Thiselton calls socio-pragmatism and socio-criticism. Both address concerns of liberation and justice in specific communities. However, socio-pragmatism does not admit to universals and therefore concerns only a particular com-munity. By the same token, it cannot be judged or evaluated and thus runs the risk of setting up its own system of injustices. On the other hand, socio-criticism admits as valid only those principles and critiques which are capable of judgment and application in all contexts.

The search for the appropriate model leads Thiselton back to the cross with its manifest value of power-in-weakness. It is combined with a promise of what is to come, the universal eschatological judgments and salvation. Thiselton concludes (p. 619) that in this context 'the Spirit, the text, and the reader engage in a transforming process, which enlarges horizons and creates new horizons'.

There are two areas which could profit from further exploration, however. The first of these is the rapidly expanding areas of related study and their methods. For example, what role do methods such as modern linguistics have in interpretation? What role is played by ideological/sociological approaches, especially those which retain an author-centred hermeneutic but apply socio-criticism to the ancient contexts by examining the societies for which the texts were supposedly written? Whether this is still hermeneutics or whether it is something else, it is becoming an issue of increasing importance in OT studies. A second area of further exploration concerns Thiselton's appeal to the cross. Even if this is intended as a change to a Christian perspective, it would be helpful to have more elaboration as to the epistemological basis for an appeal to the cross and to the 'third horizon' of future judgment and salvation. Are these a basis for ranking and evaluating other hermeneutical theories? If so, how can they be justified? How does this avoid the criticism of being the product of one inter-pretive community?

Thiselton's study is vast in its scope and competent in its content. His criticisms will need to be considered by scholars who work in the field. However, his approach is irenic and appreciative, even where there is clear dis-agreement. There is much to learn from this book. It well serves his goals of providing biblical scholars with a first-hand acquaintance of hermeneutical theoreticians and with acquainting the reader with a diversity of hermeneutical models. It provides a contem-porary discussion of this constantly expanding field which is both critical and comprehensive.

BOOK
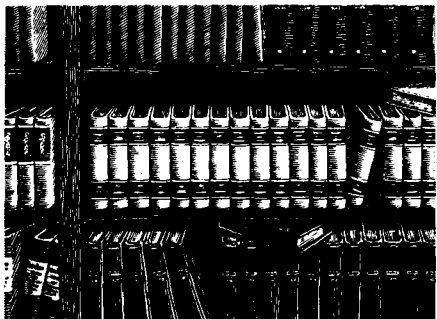
REVIEWS

Lemche proposes to explore the reasons for the antipathy toward the Canaanites found in the OT. His presuppositions include: (1) pre-exilic Israelites were culturally and ethnically indis-tinguishable from surrounding peoples; (2) the Pentateuch and Deuteronomistic History were post-exilic creations; and (3) these texts preserve no recoverable history and their con-tents must be interpreted in the light of post-exilic Israel. Therefore, he argues that negative impressions of Canaanites as unscrupulous traders in the post-exilic period were written into the accounts of early Israel.

Lemche argues that, unlike the biblical account, extra-biblical texts describe second-millennium-BC Canaan in vague terms and that, for some, the land itself could include areas as far north as Danuna in Cilicia. This interpreta-tion rests upon a single text in an Amarna letter from Abimilki, ruler of Tyre, to the pharaoh (EA 151 lines 49-63). In the text, Abimilki quotes the pharaoh as asking what he hears 'from Canaan'. As Lemche notes, scholars have followed A.F. Rainey in interpreting this text as a request of the leader of Tyre, who comes from Canaan, to provide information. This is a plausible inter-pretation of the preposition followed by a place name (*cf.* a similar usage by Abimilki in 149 line 4), but Lemche understands the text as asking Abimilki what news he hears about Canaan. Lemche provides no parallel examples to support this 'exegesis'.

This is important because the biblical des-criptions of Canaan's borders in Genesis 10:19, Numbers 34:3-6, Joshua 13-19 and Ezekiel 47-48 reflect, in the opinion of many scholars, a definition of the land of Canaan originally used when it was part of Egypt's New Kingdom empire (*cf.* studies by Y. Aharoni and Z. Kallai). Clearly defined borders of regions such as the land of Canaan were a concern, as attested by second-millennium treaties and contracts from Hattusas, Ugarit and Emar. Thus, Lemche's attempt to sever Pentateuchal and Deutero-nomistic descriptions of second-millennium-BC Canaan from the contemporary, extra-biblical textual evidence is not proven.

Since Lemche does not regard the Pentateuch as preserving any valid and recoverable pre-exilic historical traditions, it follows that its descriptions regarding Canaan must originate in the first millennium. This extends even to the lists of nations who composed pre-Israelite Canaan (pp. 83-90, 99-100). Lemche discredits any historical value to these lists because: (1) they do not consistently list the same names; (2) Ezra 9:1 includes Transjordanian nations and Egypt; (3) Hittites and Amorites never settled in Palestine to any large extent; and (4) names such as Hivites and Jebusites are unattested outside the Bible.

It should be pointed out that (1) is irrelevant since such consistency is not required where a list of some is intended to designate the whole. (2) is explicitly not a list of Canaan's inhabitants but of Israel's neighbours. (3) is wrong in the case of the Hittites who, as a term for northerners, have been increasingly identified as occupying the hill country, both in the personal names of the Amarna correspon-dence and in the material culture. As for the Amorites, they may have been identical to the Canaanites, so that the one term could be used to gloss or to replace the other term. Alternatively, the term may reflect specific regions, as Lemche notes regarding the Amurru kingdom in the 14th century. If this is the case, then the traditional distinction in these passages between Amorites in the hill country and Canaanites on the coastal plains may be preserved. (4) would have been true of the Hittites a little more than a century ago. Given the scarcity of evidence which exists, it is more surprising that so many names in these lists are attested outside the Bible. The lack of external attestation of names in a list where other names are attested is not normally an argument for finding that list lacking in historical worth.

The problematic nature of the arguments which characterize the book result in a final concluding chapter whose statements cannot be supported by the evidence. Leaving aside biblical references, the most precise information about second-millennium-BC Canaan does not come from Mesopotamia (p. 154), but from Egyptian Papyrus Anastasi I. Without clear evidence that ideology and literary form have distorted historical statements in the biblical text, arguments that the OT's portrayal of Canaanites has no historical value (p. 155) cannot be sustained. Contrary to Lemche, the ancient and modern distinction is not between scholarly histories and historical novels (pp. 158-160), as though the one is ideologically free and the other is biased beyond hope of finding historical worth. The real difference is between good history and bad history, whatever form it takes, whenever it is written, and whatever its purpose.

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My Pilgrimage in Theology

Tom Wright

Most theological students associate John Wenham with Greek grammar. Not me. I was in an undergraduate audience which he addressed in 1970. He urged Bible-loving Christians to consider theological study, and a ministry of teaching and writing. His model was that of the stream from which Christians drink. The stream is polluted by bad theology. Our task is to feed in good theology. 'Trickle-down' theories are risky, but I think this one works. I had been heading for parish ministry; from that day on, I knew God was calling me to an academic, though still very much church-related, vocation.

As so often, I attacked this vocation the wrong way. When I began theology, I assumed that all writers not published by the … Press, or perhaps the … of … Trust, were suspect. If I read the 'right' books I would find the 'answers'. Fortunately, after two years of soaking myself in the Bible itself, I was so gripped with the excitement of exegesis, and the new horizons it opened up, that I didn't worry so much about 'sound' answers. I continue to respect the Reformers, and men like Charles Simeon, of 200 years ago, John Stott, Jim Packer and Michael Green, at whose feet I was privileged to sit, and whose work in a variety of ways created space for me to do things differently. Where I disagree with them, it is because I have done what they told me to: to read Scripture and emerge with a *more* biblical theology. The evangelical tradition at its best encourages critique from within. It sends us back to the Scripture which stands over against all traditions, our own included.

Graduate work followed. I focused on Romans 9–11, hoping to sort out the predestinarian controversies that occupied many of us in student days. I quickly found that Paul's agenda was quite different. I grasped his question: What about Israel? and came up with a basically post-millenial answer to it, expounding it at Tyndale House in 1974. Alas, that night a wise friend gently but devastatingly questioned me. I struggled, but within two years I had changed my view: 'All Israel' in Romans 11:26 actually refers to the whole Jew-plus-Gentile people of God in Christ. So, too, with Romans 7. Having met 'sinless perfectionist' teaching as an undergraduate, I had believed (and taught vehemently) the Cranfield/Dunn line (Rom. 7:14ff. describes the Christian's struggle with sin). Once again I was forced to rethink. I worked on Romans 1–4, then on 9–11. Together they formed a pincer movement on my view of 5–8. I walked round Cambridge in the snow thinking it through. Yes, Christians still struggle with sin. Yes, the sinless perfectionists are wrong. But no, that's not what Paul is talking about. He is talking about Israel (*not* 'humans in general', as the mainline German view suggests) under the Torah.

Around the same time I became convinced that I should explore Davidic

'representative' Messiahship as a fundamental clue to Paul. This was, and is, unfashionable. I was often tempted to abandon it. I remember a sense of call, coupled with (I hope) a hard-headed academic conviction that I should proceed. I learned to live with unanswered questions: one of the keys to staying sane and Christian in a lifetime of studying theology is to say 'I don't know the answer to this just now, but I'm prepared to wait'. Often the answer comes by an unexpected route, in a form that one wouldn't have recognized at the original time of asking. Patience is a fruit of the Spirit much needed by theologians.

During this time I was ordained, and worked as a college chaplain. I organized (among other things) a Jewish—Christian discussion group, which sharpened up my awareness of a lot of contemporary issues that related directly to Paul and Romans.

I went to Canada in 1981 to teach NT studies at McGill, and to be involved with the Anglican College in Montreal. The combination was superb: out of the lecture room, into chapel. My view of the Eucharist, which had started at a rock-bottom low when I was an undergraduate, had received an upward jolt through reading Calvin (yes, try it and see), and had been nurtured through my early years as a chaplain. It finally came together and started to approach that of Paul.… Passages I'd not understood before came alive. So did the joy of participating in the richest of all Christian symbols. Alone, I continued to read the NT in Greek and the OT in Hebrew day by day, constantly finding a combination of personal address and intellectual stimulation which I have never been able to separate. (I was once advised to keep separate Bibles, one 'devotional' and one 'academic'. Fortunately I took no notice.)

During my second year at McGill, I plunged into the deepest depression I've ever known. I wrestled in prayer, searched the Scriptures, examined my conscience, and fell apart. I told my wife about it one night; the next morning, a letter arrived from a Christian psychotherapist who had felt an inexplicable but irresistible urge to write. I still have that letter. Over the next year I learned more about myself and my emotions than I had thought possible. If today I manage to function as a pastor, it is not least because I know something about pain. I know, too, that healing of memory and imagination is not just wishful thinking.

Six years later, as I prepared to teach a course on Jesus in his historical context, I realized what else had been happening. I combed through my notebooks for all my old jottings. All the most significant insights about Jesus I had ever had, particularly my deepest reflections on the crucifixion, were dated in that period of depression.

In 1983 I started work on my Colossians commentary. By the time I finished it in 1985 I had undergone probably the most significant change of my theological life. Until then I had been, basically, a dualist. The gospel belonged in one sphere, the world of creation and politics in another. Wrestling with Colossians 1:15–20 put paid to that. I am still working through the implications (and the resultant hostility in some quarters): my book *New Tasks for a Renewed Church* is a recent marker on this route.

Back in Oxford in 1986, the two halves of my professional life came together in a different way. I teach and write about the NT and early Judaism, and especially about Jesus and Paul. I work as a pastor in a college full of students from all backgrounds and in all disciplines. And I have the joy, during term, of a regular celebration of the Eucharist at which, again and again, everything else I do comes into focus. I find myself held within the love of the triune God, able to receive fresh grace for fresh tasks.

Privately, I have found to my surprise that at least sometimes prayer is becoming more of a delight than a discipline—perhaps because I have drawn on traditions other than my own (charismatic on one side, Orthodox on the other). Passages from Scripture still jump off the page and make me want to laugh and/or cry with the love, and the pain, of God.

Unanswered questions remain. So does the frailty of my human self, as I struggle to be obedient to my multiple callings, both professionally and, more important (though not all Christians see this point), domestically. Who is sufficient for these things? Certainly not this muddled and sinful Christian. The great thing about that is what it does for your theology. The more I appreciate my own laughable inadequacy, the more I celebrate the fact of the Trinity. Without the possibility of invoking the Spirit of Jesus, of the living God, for every single task, what would keep me going? Pride and fear, I guess. I know enough about both to recognize the better way.