

One Bible—Many Readings

AS WE HAVE ALREADY seen, there are actually several different forms of the Bible: Greek Bibles, Catholic Bibles, Protestant Bibles, Anglican Bibles—not to mention those from the Eastern churches. Actually, it can be argued that there are as many Bibles as there are readers—whether the “reader” is an individual or a community.

MANY WAYS OF READING

There are not only many readers, but also many ways of reading the Bible. The same reader may move between the various ways of reading, with subtle but significant changes in the nature of the reader-text event.

Apologetic

This is a way of reading the Bible that has a long pedigree, and it has its roots in the ancient debates between Christians and Jews, such as we find in Justin Martyr’s *Dialogue with Trypho*.¹ Earlier versions of this kind of reading can be found among the Dead Sea Scrolls from Qumran, as the biblical texts were exploited for the purpose of argument with the community’s opponents.

When the Bible is read in this way the focus is on the value of the text for a discourse that is happening somewhere else than in the reader-

1. Justin was martyred around 165 CE. This dialogue with the Jewish scholar Trypho is supposed to have taken place in Ephesus around the year 135. Even if the arguments have been refined in the intervening twenty years prior to Justin writing his account of the event, the *Dialogue* provides a window into Jewish-Christian relations around 140/150 CE, and demonstrates a developing anti-Jewish polemic among Christians. This is the time of Marcion, and perhaps also the writing of Luke-Acts, and is not long after the Bar Kokhba Revolt of 132–135 CE. The continuing tension between Jewish and Christian communities is clearly visible in the arguments of Justin.

text encounter. Closely related to the apologetic reading of Scripture is the use of biblical texts for evangelistic purposes. One modern equivalent of this way of reading Scripture is the roadside billboard with the injunction “Read your Bible!” Some contemporary church signs also engage in this way of reading the Bible.

Devotional

There is also a long history to the devotional reading of the Bible, whether by individuals or by religious communities. With the availability of cheap printed Bibles and increasing levels of literacy in the population, daily Bible reading schemes have proved very popular—especially in Protestant and Evangelical traditions. The spiritual discipline of *Lectio Divina* is increasingly being recovered among religious progressives as an appropriate way to read the Bible devotionally.²

When the Bible is read in this way there is an authentic engagement of reader and text in the quest for a religious experience. The goal is not so much to acquire information as to foster a relationship between the reader and God and to grow in personal wisdom for holy living.

Doctrinal

From at least NT times, and probably much earlier, the Bible has been read to deduce and validate the beliefs of the reader. The NT authors were clearly skilled in this way of reading the Greek Bible, even if some of their ways of reading the Scriptures fail to persuade today. Given the nature of the reader-text relationship, what one person finds cogent in their personal and historical situation will not necessarily resonate with someone from another context. Some modern theological texts still cite specific Bible passages prolifically, but in less conservative contexts the mere citation of a phrase or a paragraph from the Bible carries little weight. A critical reader of the Bible these days is more likely to focus on underlying themes, theological trajectories, and general thrust of the Scriptures. This is particularly so when dealing with questions not directly addressed in the Bible, or where the literal meaning of a biblical passage seems at odds with contemporary knowledge and values.

2. The Order of St. Benedict Web site (<http://www.osb.org/lectio>) offers a range of resources for people wishing to know more about this spiritual discipline, including texts recommended as suitable for reading in this manner.

Liturgical

The Bible is read in two distinct ways for liturgical purposes. The first and most obvious way is when passages are chosen for reading in the community gatherings. This practice has its roots in the synagogue of the Second Temple period, as Diaspora Jews gathered for prayers. Early Christians continued this practice, and at least some of the NT writings can be understood as being prepared for reading in these gatherings. This characteristic way of reading the Bible has directly assisted in the preservation of the Bible. As mentioned earlier, the majority of surviving biblical manuscripts are actually lectionaries—rather than complete copies of the Bible. The second and less obvious way that the Bible has been read for liturgical purposes has been for the creation of liturgical texts and in the development of the liturgical year.

Historical

Up until the Enlightenment it was widely assumed that the events and people described in the Bible were actual events and real historical persons. Partly in response to the criticism of religious authority, and partly as a reflection of the spirit of the times, Christian theologians increasingly began to read the Bible as a historical text. For instance, the idea that the Gospel of Mark was the first of the NT Gospels to have been written was welcomed because that seemed to suggest that Mark's simpler account of the Jesus story got us closer to the historical Jesus of ancient Galilee. Similarly, the earliest proposals for ancient written sources in the Pentateuch were partly inspired by a wish to demonstrate the antiquity and authenticity of the biblical traditions, not out of any desire to undermine confidence in the Bible.

The historical-critical method that flourished in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries encouraged scholars and clergy to read the Bible with at least one eye on the historical context and the literary history of the text. When the Bible is read in this way the focus again moves away from the reader-text event to another external reality—perhaps the ancient world of Palestine in the thirteenth century BCE, or maybe the religious situation in Galilee around 25 CE. While historians will quite properly find the Bible to be a major historical artifact, a historical reading of the Bible is not so much a religious activity as an academic research project.

Aesthetic

It is also possible to read the Bible as fine literature and to appreciate its contribution to the fine arts. Some knowledge of the Bible is essential to appreciate the great Western literary and artistic works. Quite apart from its religious value, the Bible has a literary afterlife whose effect continues to be felt in the arts, in literature, and in everyday speech. Being a “good Samaritan”—or even just a “Samaritan”—has a positive meaning in our increasingly secular society even if its biblical origins are no longer appreciated.³

MAJOR BARRIERS TO READING THE BIBLE

Apart from the chronic shortage of discretionary time for reading by “time poor” westerners in two-income households, or the cultural shift from the printed page to digital information, there are a number of major barriers for anyone wishing to read the Bible. Four of them will be considered briefly here.

Time

One of the most significant barriers to reading the Bible is the time gap between reader and composition of texts. Around 2,000 years separates the contemporary reader from the time when the NT texts were composed, and as much as another 1,000 years must be allowed for the OT texts.⁴ After such an extended passage of time, almost any text would become partly or wholly incomprehensible to a reader. Given how difficult we find it to read texts from as recent a time as the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, or Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales* from the fourteenth century, it is clear that the simple passage of time is itself a major barrier to reading the Bible. Neither profit nor delight is to be expected when the time gap is so large.⁵

3. For a fascinating example of the literary afterlife of a biblical book, see Sherwood, *Biblical Text and Its Afterlives*.

4. On more conservative estimates, another 500 years is required to accommodate Moses writing the Pentateuch (Torah) and even longer would be required if the formation of the patriarchal traditions are seen as taking shape prior to Moses—even if only in oral form.

5. The motif of “profit with delight” derives from Horace, *Ars poetica*, 343–44, and was used in the title of Pervo, *Profit with Delight*. The original lines from Horace are, “The one who combines profit with delight / equally pleasing and admonishing the reader, captures all the plaudits.”

Location

One problem that is exacerbated by our chronological distance from the ancient texts is the social and cultural location of modern readers. This includes our physical distance, since people from outside the Holy Land will simply not appreciate the nuances of distance, physical relations, and geographical variation that may be embedded in the biblical texts. However, the larger problem is our social and cultural location in the modern West.

Our society is simply not organized in the same way as the societies in which the Bible took shape.⁶ Our cultural norms are significantly different, and becoming more so as biblical knowledge in the general population drops. In addition to the decline in biblical literacy, there has been a parallel loss of classical knowledge. This further limits our capacity to engage with the literary art of the biblical writers, since *mimesis*—imitation of the Greek classics such as Homer through intentional intertextual references⁷—was such an important part of ancient literature, including the New Testament.

The knowledge that we now possess about everything from cosmology to psychology, not to mention health sciences and digital technology, puts us in a very different “space” from the authors and their earlier generations of readers. While these factors do not prevent us from reading the Bible, they complicate the process by generating a kind of hermeneutical static that disrupts and distorts the reader-text event.

Language

One of the more obvious barriers is the simple fact that the Bible was written in ancient languages: mostly Hebrew, but with some Aramaic, in the case of the Old Testament; and Koine (common) Greek in the case of the New Testament. When we consider the NT material attributed to Jesus there is a further complication since he presumably spoke mostly in Aramaic, and yet his sayings were preserved only in Greek.⁸ Between

6. For a helpful introduction to these issues as they relate to Palestinian society in the time of Jesus, see Hanson and Oakman, *Palestine*.

7. For an accessible introduction to mimesis, see MacDonald, *Does the NT Imitate Homer?*

8. In some cases, sayings attributed to Jesus survive only in translations from the Greek into a third language. For example, the 114 sayings (*logia*) that comprise the *Gospel of Thomas* were preserved in Coptic, although some fragments of an earlier Greek version have also been found.

the earliest extant biblical manuscripts and our modern Bibles stands a series of copyists and translators, some of whom had limited skills with ancient Hebrew and Greek. Even when the language skills were not lacking, it remains the case that no translation can do full justice to the original text. The Italian proverb—*traduttore, traditore*, “the translator is a traitor”—aptly captures this problematic dimension to reading the Bible in any language other than Hebrew/Aramaic and Greek.⁹

Beliefs

Finally, we need to note the way that our own beliefs interfere with our capacity to read the Bible. There are two major ways that this happens. First of all, our beliefs—including our worldview—can act as a filter and prevent us from noticing some aspects of the text. I may not notice that the Bible has an anthropocentric bias that privileges human beings over other life forms, including the Earth herself. I may not see the sustained discrimination against women, if my theological value system has accepted this as simply the ways things are. I may not be concerned at the violence visited upon the Egyptians (or the Canaanites or unfaithful Jews), if my worldview accepts such “mighty acts of God” as normal or even desirable.¹⁰

The second way that our beliefs may interfere with our capacity to read the Bible is our capacity to project our beliefs and practices onto the Bible. Someone who understands Jesus to have been the incarnation of the Second Person of the Trinity may find it hard to avoid attributing to Jesus the knowledge and power usually thought to be attributes of God.¹¹

9. This axiom is sometimes attributed to no less a figure than Jerome, the patron saint of translators. See Metzger, “Theories of the Translation Process.”

10. Despite the numbing effect of our unexamined worldviews, we can sometimes find ourselves jolted out of our comfort zones so that we notice the blazingly obvious. For me, one such event happened as I participated in the celebration of a Eucharist in the corner of a hotel lobby on the shores of the Suez Canal. Not surprisingly, whoever was responsible for the selection of readings for that service chose the account of crossing of the Red Sea by Moses and the Israelites in Exodus 14. We were to make a similar journey later that morning, although we would travel in a bus and cross the sea by a tunnel. As I listened to the Bible passage with its account of the dead bodies of the Egyptians strewn on the shore, I became aware of our context—an Egyptian hotel, staffed by Egyptians. Suddenly, “Thus the Lord saved Israel that day from the Egyptians; and Israel saw the Egyptians dead on the seashore” (Exod 14:30) seemed grossly inappropriate, and it has remained so for me ever since.

11. This instinct is partly responsible for the veneration of the “words of Jesus” within the NT Gospels. While the entire text is canonical and of equal biblical authority,

The Old Testament is especially susceptible to spiritual hijacking, as Christians find references to Christ (and to the Trinity) in so many places.¹² Christians from liturgical churches will see references to sacraments and other liturgical practices in the NT writings, while Evangelicals will find passages that reflect and reinforce their own focus on personal conversion. Naturally Pentecostals will focus on passages that fit with their own practices and beliefs, while those Christians with a commitment to social justice will find their own priorities writ large in Scripture.

Over the centuries, Christian scholars have developed an array of intentional strategies to resolve these complications. We briefly reviewed some of these in the previous chapter, but will now consider in more detail the range of hermeneutical methods that have been developed, including some of the more recent trends that privilege the reader over the text or the world of the text.

THE THREE “WORLDS” OF THE BIBLE

Sandra Schneiders has proposed the helpful metaphor of three biblical “worlds”—the world *behind* the text, the world *of* the text, and the world *before* the text.¹³ I have found those three categories a very helpful way to introduce people to the various critical approaches to biblical interpretation. In what follows, the major hermeneutical methods are related to one or other of these three worlds.¹⁴

the words of Jesus are sometime printed in red as if they had some special status. The Jesus Seminar adopted and modified this pious practice for its own purposes, choosing to rate the authenticity of the sayings and deeds attributed to Jesus on a four-point scale: Red, Pink, Grey, and Black.

12. This practice is already seen in Paul, writing just twenty or thirty years after Easter. In 1 Corinthians 10 Paul claims that Christ was the miraculous rock that followed the Israelites for forty years in the wilderness, supplying their needs for copious quantities of pure drinking water: “For they drank from the spiritual rock that followed them, and the rock was Christ” (1 Cor 10:4). Paul is actually citing a Jewish midrash rather than the OT books of Exodus, Leviticus, or Numbers; but his instinct was to recognize the presence of Christ in OT stories. We find Luke doing a similar thing when he has Peter citing the Psalms in the Pentecost sermon in Acts 2.

13. Schneiders, *Revelatory Text*.

14. For an excellent introduction to these different methods, see Hayes and Holladay, *Biblical Exegesis*.

The World behind the Bible

These are hermeneutical methods that focus on the people, events, and issues that created the text. This includes what we know about the community that created the traditions in the books, questions of historicity, as well as the wider historical context of the texts, their authors, and their readers.

TEXTUAL CRITICISM

The focus of this hermeneutical method is the reliability of those ancient versions of the Bible from which our modern critical texts are created. “Reliability” in this context involves the extent to which we can be confident that the underlying texts are accurate, complete, and have not been distorted by accidental or intentional changes, including additions or omissions.

This method has often worked on the dual assumptions that there was an original version of each text, and also that the original reading of every phrase has survived somewhere in the haystack of biblical manuscripts, lectionaries, and Scripture citations in other writings. However, as our appreciation of the nature of ancient written texts in antiquity becomes more nuanced, textual criticism can also be used to trace the reception history of the Bible—including the variant forms of different passages, that are now valued for their own sake rather than being traded like chips in an academic version of a futures market.

The major theological consequence of textual variation is that there can be no claim that any version of the Bible is free of error. For the average Bible reader the practical consequence is that the Hebrew and Greek texts used as the basis of almost all modern translations of the Bible are more reliable than those available at any earlier time in history. Most of the variants do not involve significant theological issues, although some do—and many are worth noting when we read the Bible.¹⁵

15. For instance, while drafting this chapter I attended a conference at which one of the speakers presented a complex interpretation of human nature and of the death of Jesus, centered around the saying found on the lips of Jesus in some ancient copies of Luke: “Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing” (Luke 23:34). However, that statement is not found in all ancient copies, and the best explanation of the discrepancy seems to be that the statement was added later in the history of Luke-Acts being accepted as a canonical work. In particular, Luke 23:34 seems to be a case of Jesus needing to be portrayed as at least as generous in his attitude to his tormentors as Stephen is in Acts: “Then he knelt down and cried out in a loud voice, ‘Lord, do not hold

Paying a modest level of attention to the information tucked away in the marginal notes of most modern Bibles will alert the reader to the more important textual variations. Another tactic to discern textual variations that have some importance for you as a reader is to compare more than one translation, especially translations from different theological perspectives. Having a set of reference Bibles—a Jewish translation for the Old Testament, as well as diverse Christian translations—can be most helpful in such cases.

SOURCE CRITICISM

In some parts of the Bible it seems that older traditions have been used to create the passage we are reading, or even that two or more authors have used the same earlier material. Source criticism is the careful study of the texts to identify when earlier sources may have been used, and it seeks to determine the extent of the recycled material as well as its origins.

Occasionally the presence of an older source is both clear and explicit, as happens in 1 Cor 11:23–26, where Paul begins, “For I received from the Lord what I also handed on to you, that . . .” As we have seen, the author of Luke and Acts begins by acknowledging that he has drawn on earlier accounts when preparing his own version of events.¹⁶ However, most of the time the presence of an older source is not accepted by everyone who studies the passage. Even when it is agreed that a source has been used, there may be disagreement about the character, extent, and origins of the source.

Source criticism was a very important tool for critical scholarship in the nineteenth century, but it has less influence within biblical scholarship these days.¹⁷ One area where it remains very important is

this sin against them.’ When he had said this, he died” (Acts 7:60). It is hard to imagine any scribe deleting the statement from the lips of Jesus in Luke 23 had it been there from the beginning, whereas it is easier to imagine a scribe adding the words to Luke’s account of the crucifixion in order to match the dying words of Jesus with those of Stephen. However that puzzle is resolved, the text of Luke 23:34 is sufficiently unreliable to make it most unsuitable as the basis for the complex theological arguments of the presenter at the conference I was attending. At the very least, a careful interpreter would acknowledge that the verse is suspected of being a later addition.

16. Luke 1:1–4.

17. The Documentary Hypothesis, with its four great sources—J, E, D, and P—is no longer seen as one of the “assured results of critical scholarship” when it comes to critical explanations for the origins of the Torah (also known as the Pentateuch). The more influential current explanations will be briefly considered in chapter 5.

study of the Gospel traditions, since Mark is widely agreed to have been a source used by both Matthew and Luke; and they may also have used another source—simply referred to as “Q.” More on all that when we get to chapter 9.

In the meantime, it may be worth noting that the possible use of older sources actually adds depth to the biblical accounts and also reminds us that these texts arise out of the shared experience of ancient religious communities rather than the creative imagination of a gifted individual. Of course, the focus of source criticism is to look behind the finished form of the Bible and to answer a different set of questions: Where did these ideas come from? Who first formed these ideas and what was their history prior to becoming part of the Bible? What can we learn from this that will help us engage better with the Bible, and listen more clearly for the whisper of the Spirit?

FORM CRITICISM

Form critics seek to go beyond the conclusions of source criticism, and they use the form (or genre) of the biblical texts to identify the original life setting of different traditions.¹⁸ Using the insights generated by this method, the form critic can assist us in understanding how a particular tradition was used in ancient Israel as well as how its use in the Bible serves to express the message of the author.

Once the opening chapters of the Bible are understood as sacred myth that presents the primeval stories of creation and human origins, we can appreciate them as Scripture without expecting them to be scientifically correct or historically accurate. The genealogies can be understood as ways of mapping relationships between nations, tribes, and clans—rather than being historical documents. Legends about the ancestors may have more to do with rival claims by competing sacred sites than with the travel itineraries of the ancestors.

While form criticism can seek to prove too much, it can also be profoundly helpful. Simply to recognize that the Bible includes many different literary forms and that each of them needs to be read with sensitivity to its character and purpose is a major step forward in biblical literacy.

18. Writing around 1900, Hermann Gunkel (1862–1932) applied this new critical method to the study of Genesis. He was later to make an immense contribution to the study of the Psalms by his application of form criticism to those texts.

Form criticism is one of the ways that we can liberate the Bible from our expectations and allow the Bible to speak to us in its own terms.

REDACTION CRITICISM

As critical scholars absorbed the insights flowing from source criticism, and form criticism it became apparent that the person who gathered all these traditions together and chose material of particular genres to communicate their message actually exercised a very important role in the creation of the Bible. These were gifted authors, not simply mechanical editors combining traditions without any sense of the new work being created. These “redactors” had a message to convey and often gave the older sources and genres a particular spin.

As we shall see in chapter 6, the so-called Deuteronomistic redactor who compiled the great story of Israel that runs from Joshua, through Judges and 1 & 2 Samuel, to 1 & 2 Kings, was himself shaped by the theology of Deuteronomy. In telling the story, he assesses leaders by the criteria expressed in that book, and successfully conveys an interpretation of Israel’s history: it was a mistake to develop kingship, and Israel should always follow the prophets! In the New Testament, each of the Gospel writers was a redactor who reworked older traditions—both oral and written—to communicate their particular interpretation of Jesus, of discipleship, and of mission.

SOCIAL-SCIENTIFIC STUDIES

This term covers a number of disciplines, including anthropology, archaeology, history, literature, psychology, and sociology. In particular, the insights from all these disciplines are combined to create models of the ways in which things happened in ancient societies. In the case of Galilee around the time of Jesus, questions such as the following might be considered.

Why did Jesus spend so much time among the fishing villages around the northern edge of the Sea of Galilee? How did the fishing industry contribute to the economy of Galilee in the time of Herod Antipas? How well integrated with the temple program in Jerusalem were the towns and villages of Galilee? How “Jewish” were the Galilean villages, and how strong was the influence of Greco-Roman culture in that area at that time?¹⁹

19. For a helpful introduction to such an approach to the study of Jesus, see Hanson

The next chapter will explore some of the ways that a social-science approach can assist us as modern readers of these ancient texts. However, like the other methods already reviewed in this discussion, social-science studies also tend to draw attention away from the text and away from the reader. Fortunately those affects can be ameliorated by a judicious mix of methods to attain a better balance.

The World of the Bible

These hermeneutical methods focus on the literary form of the text and pay special attention to the symbolic universe that is created within the text.

LITERARY CRITICISM

In one sense this term can apply to most of the methods for reading the Bible critically, but it has a narrower sense that we shall consider here. The essence of literary criticism—sometimes called “New Literary Criticism” to distinguish it from the larger and more traditional sense of the term—is that it gives priority to the existing literary character of the Bible rather than the text’s prior history.

The text is to be read for its own sake, and not as a way to find out something about the past. Nor should the meaning of the text be identified with what the critic suggests as the historical sense of the text in its original context. When we adopt this method we want to appreciate the Bible as literature and to read it in the same way as we would any other significant piece of literature.

As literature, the Bible is both a classic text in its own right and also a text that has influenced many other books. Literature—whether a narrative, a play, or a film—can create a fictional world within which characters act in particular ways, certain things are possible, and particular values operate. The reader can enter the world of the text and experience herself identifying with one character or another, sharing their hopes and fears, adopting the values of the literary world for herself in the real world, and even coming to accept that certain things are possible (or impossible) in everyday life because of their role within the world of the story.

and Oakman, *Palestine*. An especially readable account of Jesus drawing on a social science approach is to be found in Theissen and Merz, *Historical Jesus*.

NARRATIVE CRITICISM

Within the larger set of literary critical approaches, narrative criticism especially pays attention to the narrative (or story) dimensions of the Bible. It privileges the narrative for its own sake rather than as a way of learning about the world behind the text—even in nonnarrative passages, as a narrative may be implicit in a text that belongs to a different genre.

For many people it is easier to see how narrative criticism works in the case of a parable or short story told within the Bible. As we hear the parable of the lost sheep we suspend judgment (not worrying about whether this is a true story about a real shepherd who actually did lose one of his hundred sheep), and we go along with the story for the time being. We imagine how the shepherd may have felt, along with others who were looking forward to him finishing the day's work and joining them for an evening's diversions around the fireplace. We recall the economic value of even a single sheep to such animal herders, and we may even have some empathy for the lost sheep. The values of the shepherd impress themselves on us, and we resolve to practice such values in our own everyday lives. We may even draw the connection between the compassion of the shepherd and the steadfast love that we attribute to God.

RHETORICAL CRITICISM

In ancient times rhetoric was a set of disciplines relating to oral discourse. Together with studies in grammar and logic, training in rhetoric was designed to prepare the student to present oral arguments in ways that would be persuasive. Naturally these skills could also be transferred to written argument. Rhetorical criticism pays special attention to the ways in which ideas are arranged within a document in order to present a convincing argument to the reader. This requires some knowledge of ancient rhetoric, but the focus remains on the final form of the text as we have it in our hands.

One area where rhetorical criticism has been especially helpful has been in the study of Paul's letters. By studying how these letters reflect—and at times modify—the conventions of ancient rhetoric, we can better appreciate Paul's argument.

STRUCTURALIST CRITICISM

This is an example of a trend in wider literary and philosophical studies being adopted within theological studies and applied to critical study of the Bible. Certain structures can be identified in different kinds of literature, and it can sometimes assist in the interpretation if the reader focuses on the deep structures rather than the characters and other aspects by which the structures are expressed in a particular story.

For example, many complex stories can be analyzed to reveal a structure that involves a hero who is sent on a quest/journey by a sender. The mission on which the hero is sent may involve some good outcome for a third party beneficiary, but there may also be some reward for the hero on successful completion of the mission. In the course of the journey the hero will be assisted by various helpers and hindered by certain opponents. Such a structure can be found in many folk tales, and may also provide a way to interpret the Jesus story (sent by God, to save humankind; assisted by angels, disciples, etc.; but opposed by Satan, demons, and the religious authorities; achieving his heroic quest and being vindicated at the resurrection/ascension) or even a text as complex as the book of Revelation. In such cases, structuralist criticism may assist the reader to see the forest rather than be confused by the presence of so many trees.

CANONICAL CRITICISM

This is our final example of a hermeneutical method that directs its attention to the world within the text. The canonical critic gives priority to the final canonical form of the Bible. This involves respecting a level of unity and meaning beyond the limits of individual books and their constituent passages. This approach also takes the religious significance of the Bible very seriously. The Bible is not simply to be read as literature, but as sacred Scripture that exists as a canonical corpus, where intertextual relationships can establish a canonical meaning greater than the meaning of the separate books within its covers.

For example, there is a canonical figure of Paul, constructed from the various references to Paul within the NT corpus—irrespective of what historical value those traditions may have. This “Paul” is represented in the seven authentic letters of Paul, the disputed letters, and the

Pastorals, as well as non-Pauline texts such as Hebrews and Luke-Acts.²⁰ Whether or not Paul of Tarsus would recognize this figure as a valid representation of himself, it is this canonical Paul that has inspired and puzzled Christians over almost 2,000 years.

The World before the Bible

Finally we need to consider those hermeneutical methods that focus on the experiences, perspectives, and concerns that we bring to the Bible. In these methods, the focus is not on the Bible but on questions that we bring to the text—and that we expect it to address.

READER-RESPONSE CRITICISM

This is the most important of the hermeneutical methods that comprise this category. The core insight of reader-response theory is that meaning does not exist within the text (encoded there by the deliberate action of the author), but rather is created within the multifaceted relationship involving the author, the text, and the reader. In such an approach to the text, the Bible does not communicate anything by itself; but the act of reading the Bible can be an occasion of communication.

The actual reader (in our own time) is almost certainly not the intended reader that the actual author had in mind when the text was created. Equally, the implied author imagined by the actual reader may have very little in common with the actual author. This diminishes the significance of historical critical work to identify the actual author and the implied readers of a biblical book. Contrary to the literary critics, it also reduces the significance of the text in its own right as a literary artifact. Rather, the act of reading is privileged as the most important part in the communication event.

20. More on this when Paul is discussed in chapter 10. The seven authentic letters are 1 Thessalonians, Galatians, 1 & 2 Corinthians, Philippians, Philemon, and Romans. The disputed letters are Ephesians, Colossians, and 2 Thessalonians. The Pastoral Epistles are 1 & 2 Timothy and Titus. Together with Hebrews—that does not claim to be a Pauline text but was often attributed to Paul in the ancient church—and the pro-Pauline corpus of Luke-Acts, these books comprise a very large proportion of the New Testament. The “canonical Paul” is an amalgam of all these texts and has exercised a powerful influence over the church at different times in history.

FEMINIST HERMENEUTICS

As its name suggests, feminist readings of the Bible are related to the “women’s liberation” movement during the last third of the twentieth century. As women claimed a role in the academy and in the churches they brought new perspectives and new questions to biblical scholarship. These new perspectives and questions—rather than a distinctive method or some new findings about the Bible—are the most important aspects of feminist criticism. They also demonstrate why feminist hermeneutics belong in the third of the biblical “worlds,” rather than either of the two earlier worlds.

Reading the Bible from a feminist perspective is not limited to women, although it is probably easier for a woman than for a man. It involves reading with a sensitivity to women’s questions—whether they be contemporary women or women within the biblical narrative. Rather than approaching the text from the perspective of an ordained male academic, a feminist reading comes from the perspective of a woman—often excluded from ordination (and with less power in the public life of the churches), more connected to the biological and social realities of family responsibilities, and with a more holistic sense of knowledge (with less of a bias towards “scientific and objective” notions of truth).

While feminist scholars tend to focus on the world before the text, they have also been influential in the other domains of biblical scholarship. Feminists have deployed a “hermeneutic of suspicion” to probe the text for clues about the place of women in the communities that generated and first received the Bible. They have demonstrated how to read against the grain of the text and notice the presence (or absence) of women in the world of the Bible. In particular they have reclaimed the Bible as a text that speaks of women, to women, and for women.

POST-COLONIAL AND LIBERATIONIST READINGS

In reaction to the collapse of the European colonial period during the 1950s and 1960s, and in the context of the cultural and economic tensions during the Cold War period, the perspectives of the oppressed populations in the former colonies (including some parts of the Americas) gave rise to new ways of reading the Bible. How might the Bible be read by someone (or by a community) that has recently regained its independence after a lengthy period of foreign rule? And how might be the

Bible be read by an impoverished fringe dweller in Central America, or a Palestinian refugee in the Gaza strip?

Such readings are essentially postmodern engagements with the text, and they give considerable weight to the perspective (in this case, the social location) of the reader. They focus on what the Bible means for my own pressing questions now, rather than what the Bible meant to people in the past.

Palestinian liberationist readings of the Bible demonstrate this dynamic.²¹ For a Christian Palestinian, the Old Testament represents a very difficult sacred text. It is sacred to them, but also to the Israeli Jews, whose perspective on the same text results in a very different reading. Rather than reject the OT texts that celebrate exodus from Egypt and the promise of the land, Palestinian Christians reclaim these texts and read them from the perspective of the dispossessed and the poor. Reading the Bible from their own situation becomes an act of empowerment and a source of hope.²²

ECO-THEOLOGICAL READINGS

This is a very clear example of a contemporary social concern becoming a powerful influence on the reading of the Bible. When the Bible is read from an eco-theological perspective, attention is given to the way that the Bible deals with nature. In particular, an eco-theological reading will address the way that humans relate to the environment and our impact on the eco-system.

The Earth Bible project locates itself within postmodern approaches to the Bible with its self-description: “reading the Bible from

21. Palestinian Liberation Theology is especially associated with Naim Ateek, founder and director of the Sabeel Center in Jerusalem: <http://www.sabeel.org>.

22. Such liberationist readings of the Bible can also arouse fierce opposition. Some Jews and Christians have accused Naim Ateek of anti-Semitism and supersessionism because of his liberationist readings of the Easter story from a Palestinian perspective. In a Good Friday reflection in 2001 Naim Ateek related the Palestinian experience of suffering to the time that Jesus spent in the tomb, and encouraged his listeners to look forward to a future day of resurrection when they would emerge from the tomb to embrace life once again. In what strikes me as a serious failure to understand the metaphor at the heart of Ateek’s sermon, this was seized upon by Zionists—both Jewish and Christian—as an accusation that the Jews had killed Jesus, and a suggestion that modern Israelis are “Christ-killers.”

the perspective of the Earth.”²³ Their Web site describes the basic aims of the project:

develop ecojustice principles appropriate to an earth hermeneutic for interpreting the Bible and for promoting justice and healing of Earth; publish these interpretations as contributions to the current debate on ecology, ecoethics and ecotheology; provide a responsible forum within which the suppressed voice of Earth may be heard and impulses for healing Earth may be generated.

The process adopted by the Earth Bible team is to explore “text and tradition from the perspective of Earth.”²⁴ While using a set of “ecojustice principles developed in consultation with ecologists,” the project also adopts a hermeneutic of suspicion to identify where the Bible expresses “anthropocentric” rather than “geocentric” values.

CONFESSIONAL/THEOLOGICAL READINGS

These more familiar ways of using the Bible are also best included in this third world. When the principal reason for a particular reading of the Bible is to affirm, explore, or proclaim the beliefs of the reader, we have an example of confessional or theological reading of the Bible. This is actually the most common way of reading the Bible outside the academy. It is the reason most people would read the Bible, and it lies at the heart of the way the Bible is used in worship.

There can be tension between this way of reading the Bible and almost every other approach that we have outlined. This tension is often felt very keenly by people encountering critical biblical scholarship for the first time. The deconstruction of traditional faith that seems to be part and parcel of biblical criticism runs counter to the ways that the Bible is used and revered in the churches.

While a confessional reading can be informed by any or all of the other approaches, it is often assumed—even unconsciously—that a confessional reading has a controlling stake in the process. When a reader approaches the Bible with a prior set of beliefs (about God, Jesus, the church, or even the Bible itself) that necessarily affects what the reader finds in the Bible. When the beliefs are accorded a very high status, this

23. <http://www.webofcreation.org/Earthbible/earthbible.html>.

24. Norman Habel has been one of the most creative writers in the field of eco-theology. His more recent titles include *Ecological Hermeneutics* (with Peter Trudinger) and *Inconvenient Text*.

can establish parameters within which the Bible is permitted to speak, but beyond which the Bible is silenced.

CAMEO: “SCRIBES TRAINED FOR GOD’S DOMAIN”

One of my favorite Bible texts is the brief parable of the scribe trained for God’s domain. This item is only found in Matthew and almost certainly is not an authentic saying of Jesus, but it preserves an idea that was important to Matthew and his readers:

And he said to them, “Therefore every scribe who has been trained for the kingdom of heaven is like the master of a household who brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old.”
(Matt 13:52)

I especially like the way this verse is translated in the Scholars Version:

He said to them, “That’s why every scholar who is schooled in the empire of Heaven is like some proprietor who produces from his storeroom treasures old and new.” (Matt 13:52 sv)

This saying comes at the end of a series of parables gathered together in Matthew 13. It introduces the idea of the scribe or the religion scholar into a series of parables about the mysterious “kingdom of God” that seems to have been at the center of Jesus’s thought. Earlier parables in the series have used different occupational categories: a sower, a farmer and his slaves, a man planting mustard seeds, a woman kneading bread, someone finding buried treasure, a merchant, and fishermen.

The scribes usually appear in the tradition as opponents of Jesus. They are the religion graduates of their day, and mostly opposed the illiterate Galilean holy man who lacked any formal training or religious pedigree. But Matthew values traditional religious knowledge. To be capable of writing this Gospel, he must have enjoyed a scribal education himself. I like to think of this verse as a subtle signature by the author, as well as a challenging job description for myself as a modern “scribe” trained/schooled²⁵ to participate in the kingdom of God.

The phrase “kingdom of God” is also problematic. The usual English rendition of the underlying Greek words suggests a domain over which God rules (cf. the United Kingdom or the Hashemite Kingdom of

25. The Greek term means either “to become a disciple” or “trained as a disciple.”

Jordan). However, the emphasis is actually on the rule of God, the active authority exercised by God as ruler, rather than on the people or territory over which God has authority.

As a religion scholar reading this text, how am I to be prepared to participate in God's imperial rule? How will I be disciplined/disciplined?

Alongside the religion scholar (*grammateus* in the Greek), Jesus throws the metaphor of the householder, the master of the house (*oikodespotes*). The properly schooled scholar is like a householder who has a collection of "treasures" conserved from the past, and knows when to bring out something old and something new.

The implication seems to be that a scholar who only cites the ancient traditions is not schooled for God's domain, and not serving well the needs of his household. If all we have to offer are answers to yesterday's questions, how will we find wisdom for today's new questions? Where is the active rule of God in such an attachment to the past?

On the other hand, if we are seduced by novelty, our households will not be well served by our religion scholarship. Children who ask for an egg may be given a scorpion.²⁶ Matthew was the least inclined of all the Gospel writers to discard the old ways in favor of a new way of doing things.

Ancient wisdom and new insights need to go hand in hand. Neither has a default privilege over the other. The householder does not first bring out what is old and only look for a newer answer if the old ways do not work. Rather, the householder is attuned to the needs of the present and brings out whatever is best suited—either old or new.

Matthew was not offering a model for contemporary biblical scholarship, but his thumbnail sketch of religion scholarship disciplined by and for the reign of God seems to embody wisdom. We might paraphrase his words as follows:

So then, every religion scholar who has been properly trained for Heaven's domain is like the master of a household who knows when to bring out something that is new and when to recommend something that is old.

26. See Luke 11:11–13: "Is there anyone among you who, if your child asks for a fish, will give a snake instead of a fish? Or if the child asks for an egg, will give a scorpion? If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!"