

# *The Reader and the Text*

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So Philip ran . . . and heard him reading the prophet Isaiah. He asked, 'Do you understand what you are reading?' He replied, 'How can I, unless someone guides me?'

The Acts of the Apostles 8: 30–31 (NRSV)

THE question posed by Philip to the unnamed Ethiopian official remains one of the great paradigmatic questions about any act of reading: 'Do you understand what you are reading?' The Ethiopian's answer succinctly expressed a common failure of the reading process and contributed to laying the foundation stone of any subsequent hermeneutics. Without somebody or something to guide the reader texts, in this case the prophetic scroll, are likely to remain obscure and beyond comprehension. There was no textual avenue into meaning for the Ethiopian reader in this story, but there was a desperate need for the kind of guided reading which would construct understanding for the reader of the obscure text. For the Ethiopian the page was dark, but for Philip, who knew what he expected, the scroll could be read because he already possessed a hermeneutic of reading which would construe the scroll (see Wallace Stevens's poem 'Phosphor Reading by His Own Light'). Here then is a paradigm for reading the Bible (or any text): text (scroll), reader, interpreter constituted a triad. As a leading question it allowed Philip, as a reader with a reading hermeneutic (or theory of reading), to read the text in accordance with his own prior hermeneutic. As a member of a reading community which had provided him with a hermeneutic for understanding such obscure texts, Philip was able to read the text to his own and the Ethiopian's satisfaction. A communal reading framework recontextualized his reading of Isaiah and grounded his interpretation in concrete specificity. Philip's reading of Isaiah made such sense to the Ethiopian that it persuaded him to act upon his new found understanding of Isaiah (and other unspecified texts) by being baptized when they came to a pool of water. In this delightful exchange between two *non-European* readers of a text, which is now part of the Bible, may be found a paradigm of hermeneutic praxis. From such a story a theory of reading may perhaps be extrapolated, not to mention

an example of the use of Scripture as propaganda, which will have to serve both as an introduction to the complexities of reading the Bible and to this volume on the contextualization of text and reader of the Bible.

### The Social Context of Reading

Any account of reading the Bible at the end of the twentieth century must include some consideration of a complex set of multitudinous, multivariate readings by many different readers of an ancient text which has been transmitted through history into a modern setting. Written in ancient languages and in cultures far removed from modernity and recontextualized constantly by translation, by canonization, by time, by history, by society and by modernity itself, reading the Bible today is a grand adventure of making new narratives from old metaphors—a process easily detected within the Bible itself, but now utterly transformed by paradigm shifts in knowledge and theory. In this essay I shall highlight certain features of the map of the new landscape of Bible readings and describe some of the contours of that territory as a way of plotting a reading itinerary of a certain focused kind. The most important features of this journey will consist of the text itself, in its very many translated forms (the importance of treating the Bible as a *work in translation* cannot be over-emphasized), the reading communities which have transmitted such a multivariate set of interpretations of the text(s) through time and the contemporary world of modernity (or postmodernity for readers who would insist on a distinction between postmodernity and modernity) in which those biblical texts are now read by members of so many different collectivities. Notions of text, reader, situation constitute a rather simplistic map, but shaped by many dimensions of sociocultural, time-laden theories and practices and frequently disrupted by ever-changing patterns of living and thinking, the processes of Bible reading are constantly changing. So although the text may be translated from ancient manuscripts copied by long-forgotten scribes and copyists, it exists in modern languages and is read by modern readers in contemporary cultures where different situations make for very different readings. In one sense, every encounter is a first-time experience of the text because, while the text in some sense may be said to remain 'the same'—a much disputed point given the stability or instability of translations of the text and the text as signifier—the readers react differently each time they encounter the text. Different readers, different situations, different reasons for reading the text, all yield different readings.

It may be true to say that as the century ends we are moving away from many of the older and old-fashioned ways of reading the Bible into a new world of changing ideological, sociocultural, strategic readings of the Bible, but the old ways of reading will, no doubt, continue to be

practised for some time to come. Traditional Jewish, Christian and post-Enlightenment modes of reading the Bible will survive, but always in terms shaped by modernity—whether reactively or positively is an open question. Yet major changes brought about by and in the twentieth century are making their presence felt and helping to change reading habits. Whereas scholarly Bible readers will continue to acquire reading skills in Aramaic, Greek and Hebrew in order to read the Bible in the original languages of the books of the Bible, because the Bible has always been read in translation by most readers, since the production of the Septuagint, ordinary readers will go on reading it in their own vernacular languages. Apart from a cursory recognizing of the existence of many different religious groups of people where men, women and children read the Bible for themselves for religious purposes, a state of affairs which has prevailed for at least some two centuries now, I shall concentrate on the more academic side of things because that is where the greatest changes are taking place.

One of the key elements in reviewing the history of the interpretation of the Bible is that of canon. The text as we now possess it—whatever its origins or original senses may have been—is constituted by arrangements into distinctive canons (Jewish and Christian—Catholic, Orthodox, Protestant) which represent transformations of original writings into highly structured forms by people other than the writers of the texts constituting each canon. The imposition of canon on a collection of writings inevitably interferes with, transforms and deforms meaning and signification by imposing on the gathered texts counter-textual signification.<sup>1</sup> Canon is counter-textual, so any account of the long history of the reading of the Bible, especially in relation to post-Enlightenment historical-critical readings of the text, will have to operate with a conflictual mode of representation involving canonizers versus 'plain' text readers.<sup>2</sup> Theological retrieval lies in the domain of the canonical where ecclesiastical readings are imposed on the text, whereas the larger 'open' canon of academic readings (Bible, Qumran, Mishna, Talmuds and/or pre- and post-biblical texts, commentaries) is much more text-orientated without any necessary privileging of specific aspects of the reception history of the text (other than a predilection for methodologies constrained by the Enlightenment insistence on the primacy of reason).

The religious groups will continue to maintain or claim monopolistic designs on the use of the Bible, but even among such gatherings there have been, and will continue to be, major changes. For example, where once among Jewish and Christian groups male voices and readers dominated, now female voices and readers are also to be heard. So traditional modes need to be modernized in order to recognize the newer cultural

<sup>1</sup> On this see Halbertal (1997); cf. Barton (1997); Blenkinsopp (1977); Bruns (1984).

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Carroll (1997a), 315–21.

realities prevailing in the larger world of reading strategies. Change governs the social reception of the Bible in contemporary society and everything is in flux now. Alongside traditional, conservative and conventional readings of the biblical text among Jewish, Christian, post-Enlightenment and fundamentalistic groups are to be found quite radically new appropriations of the Bible for and on behalf of different and discrete communities and pressure groups. Gay and lesbian people now demand that their readings of the Bible be respected in a plurality of readings in modern democratic society.<sup>3</sup> Yet many ecclesiastical groups refuse to bow to such modernistic pressures and persist with old-fashioned hermeneutics seeking to control the readings of the Bible judged to be permissible. But in a time of multiculturalism and a plurality of communities authoritarian monopolies can no longer impose their fiats on others not of their flock.

In approaching the Bible as readers it is no longer considered adequate just to ask what a text means in terms of philology or local community tradition. The philological type of question may remain at some level of basic enquiry, but to such second-order questions have been added demands for investigation into the text's reception history and understanding through time, examination of the current dynamics of socio-cultural, political life as lived today and questions about the relevance of such texts in contemporary social contexts. Since the Enlightenment and with the emergence of postmodernist beliefs and practices the Bible has become a free-floating book belonging to everybody and to nobody. It temporarily belongs to whoever and whichever groups can take and use it. In a sense it is out of copyright. While it never was in copyright in the technical sense of that word, ecclesiastical communities would want to put forward the claim that they own the Bible, in some sense for having created it in the first place and thereafter preserved it, and that for readers, especially non-believing biblical scholars, to claim to be able to understand the Bible without themselves belonging to such ecclesiastical groups is nonsense. It is, as it were, the crime or malpractice of 'reading other people's mail'.<sup>4</sup> In my judgement, however, part of the real achievement of the Enlightenment has been the making available of the Bible to all readers, irrespective of sectarian commitment. Under the conditions of modernity the Bible may be freely used by all-comers, its meanings and significations negotiated under a thousand different reading schemes and available to whatever groups wish to use it.

Traditionalist ecclesiastical groups (not to mention Jewish groups for the Hebrew Bible) will dispute some of these claims, preferring to think of the Bible as their own property and rejecting the Enlightenment project of reading the Bible in the light of reason alone. Space will not permit an

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Brawley (1996); Raiser (1998).

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Jones and Buckley (1998), 223. The phrase is Paul van Buren's but I owe my appropriation of it to Kathryn Greene-McCreight's discussion in Jones & Buckley (1998), 213–24.

examination of the conflicts such Christian supersessionist claims may give rise to or of the highly charged current debates among and between Jews, Christians and secular critics over competing interpretations of the Bible.<sup>5</sup> Such constructions of meaning arise from and flow out of so many different communal (and some individual) reading strategies that no community's reading processes, however antique or venerable, can claim pole position in a hierarchy of readings. On the theological and ecclesiastical side of things there are of course many voices which demand the right to reclaim the Bible for the churches as if in modern culture older ecclesiastical monopolies could still insist on privileged powers of copyright.<sup>6</sup> So the changes do not necessarily entail uniformity but seem inevitably to engender conflict. Many voices making different and competing claims reading the 'same' collection of writings, not to mention cultural factors of a secular nature, make for a very confusing, conflictual scene of biblical interpretation at the end of the second millennium.

### Worlds of Bible Readers

There are, at least, three major areas and commitments for those who take the Bible seriously and read it intently: Jewish groups, Christian groups and all those who read the Bible but without commitment to either of the religious systems which own the Bible as originating myth or as part of their foundational myths. This third group may be divided into religious and cultural. That is, members of other religions may read the Bible religiously or to find out about a neighbouring religion—as Jews, Christians or secularists might read the Qur'an for similar purposes. Then there are the secularists<sup>7</sup> who read the Bible at schools, in the universities (especially in departments of English and Comparative Literature) and generally in cultures where it is recognized as being part of the shaping influences of modern culture in the West. While I shall not attempt to provide an adequate account of these different approaches, or their respected traditions, throughout this chapter I do want the distinctions to be recognized and held as a necessary background contextualization of all Bible reading in the modern world. There is no unitary way of reading the Bible and

<sup>5</sup> See Levenson (1990).

<sup>6</sup> See Braatan and Jenson (1996); Watson (1994); (1997); cf. Levenson (1990). Some of the discussions in the above listed works are quite bad-tempered and the swingeing attacks on secular criticism (e.g., Levenson (1990) and McGrath in Braaten & Jenson (1996), 63–88) remind one of all the bad old medieval ways so effectively critiqued by the Enlightenment. Such authoritarian bad tempers should have no place in a genuinely critical and rational discussion of the matter. See Houlden (1995) for a discussion of recent Catholic promulgations about the interpretation of the Bible.

<sup>7</sup> I really do not know a better term for describing this third group because it contains such a discrete and disparate collection of people which, while lacking a common outlook, would accept the basic principles of the Enlightenment and would profess to follow current forms of rational enquiry. They would be typified by many readers of the Bible from Baruch Spinoza and Thomas Paine to Gabriel Josipovici and George Steiner.

even a glance at all the receiving communities, including those in the secular world, would demonstrate the necessity of a plurality of viewpoints and reading strategies. Such a pluralistic approach will be respected throughout this chapter.

Two of the great systems of reading the Bible which may be said to have constituted the kinds of reading of the Bible inherited as background but also challenged by the Enlightenment have been the millennia-long Jewish and Christian readings of the Bible. In spite of sharing 'in some sense' the same collection of books—the addition of the New Testament to the Hebrew Bible (in translated form) very seriously transforms the Jewish Scriptures into a quite different book—Jews and Christians have always had very different relations to and readings of their 'shared' book. Given their origins among Jewish society subsequent Christian communities have chosen neither to escape those origins by refusing to incorporate Jewish Scriptures into their Christian Bible nor to challenge the very notion of 'Scripture' itself.<sup>8</sup> Yet the entanglement of Christian communities in the retention of the sacred Scriptures of other communities, not to mention their production of further sacred Scriptures of their own, represents a very strange situation because there appear to be no other major world religions which share their sacred writings with rival or oppositional groups. But then historically Christian communities were a very strange admixture of Jewish and heathen (non-Jewish) beliefs and practices and traces of those origins remain inscribed in all subsequent developments of the churches. The languages of Jewish and Christian Scriptures are of course different: Jews inherited writings in Hebrew and Aramaic, translated into Greek as their Scriptures (Septuagint), with subsequent Aramaic translations (Targums), whereas Christians started with those Greek translations of Scriptures (the Septuagint) and the Greek writings known as the New Testament. With time those Christian Scriptures were translated into Latin and, in the West, the great Bible of Western Christendom has been the variety of versions of Jerome's Latin translation known as The Vulgate (the authorized edition of which was not fixed until the Council of Trent in the mid-sixteenth century). In the East, of course, Greek continued to be the language of worship, life and the Bible for Christians. Jews and Christians read their different Bibles differently.

### *Jewish worlds of reading*

For Jews the Hebrew Bible (Torah or Tanak) told the story of their own past and how they had come to be where and how they were. Other writings filled the gap between the past of the Bible and the present of Jewish communities (especially the Babylonian and Jerusalem Talmuds). The meganarrative of the Jewish Bible, Genesis–Chronicles, told the story of

<sup>8</sup> Cf. Evans (1971), 21–36.

the past from the creation of the world by God to the commandment to rebuild the temple given by the Persian emperor Cyrus. So the story of Jewish life from creation to Cyrus provided Jews with their overarching myth of origins (functioning as a kind of metanarrative perhaps). Subsequent developments after the various destructions of Jerusalem allowed for the construction of home life, and the presence of synagogues in the community provided pious Jews with the means for continuing the life they had always practised. The Torah had been given to Moses from heaven by God on Mount Sinai—in Harold Bloom's wonderful trope 'picnic on Sinai'<sup>9</sup>—and its continuous updating was governed by the oral traditions which had come down from Moses on Sinai. To this reading of the Bible has been added a messianic consciousness which characterized the communities as living in expectation of a coming messiah and reading the Scriptures accordingly. Beyond these developments room should be allowed for further rabbinic refinements and kabbalistic readings of Jewish texts. The brevity of that summary should not conceal the complex transformations introduced into Jewish communities by the halachic readings of biblical texts metamorphosed by different cultural developments in Hellenistic and Roman times. Space does not permit to tell of Akiba and Hillel, of Maimonides and Ibn Ezra, of Rashi and Qimhi or of the great Talmudic scrutinies of Scripture which have made the overarching biblical hermeneutics and halachic rulings so constitutive of orthodox Judaism. A further book could be written tracing these reading techniques to the development of such complex skeins of rabbinic argumentative writings into the roots of modern literary theory, especially in its postmodernist and Derridean forms.<sup>10</sup>

In modern literary analysis of the Bible Jewish writers have been to the fore in the treatment of biblical poetics (e.g., Robert Alter, Adele Berlin, Herbert Brichto, Harold Fisch; cf. Meir Weiss for a somewhat different approach) and beyond poetics to a consideration of the dynamics of biblical narrative (David Damrosch). It would be impossible to overlook the huge contribution made to modern biblical studies by such a wide-ranging group of Jewish writers who have produced some very sophisticated readings of the Bible (e.g., Michael Fishbane, Gabriel Josipovici, Emanuel Levinas, Regina Schwartz, George Steiner, Meir Sternberg, and others too numerous to name). A galaxy of first-class writers have kept the scrutiny and its vision alive in our time. Beyond all these writers, whose literary approaches to the Bible have yielded such a magnificent harvest, there is also the more sombre engagement with the Bible in the light of the post-Shoah experience of Jewish reading.<sup>11</sup> How is this ancient text to be read in the light of the fires of Auschwitz? What about Rachel's children, the children of Job—to use Emil Fackenheim's biblical tropes—and all the children of the shtetls? Jeremiah's lament about Rachel weep-

<sup>9</sup> McConnell (1986), 35.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. Handelman (1982).

<sup>11</sup> Cf. Fackenheim (1990).

ing for her children (Jer. 31: 15) is recontextualized in the twentieth century and becomes 'a word in season' and 'a word from the past' applied to a terrifying reality. The ancient trope feeds into a new narrative because the children of the camps 'are not'. While the eminent Jewish philosopher Fackenheim's answer may raise questions of its own when he writes 'Hope, murdered at Auschwitz, was resurrected in Jerusalem',<sup>12</sup> I shall not raise them here. The children of Auschwitz are beyond criticism, but the task of reading the Bible after Auschwitz remains for all readers—be they Jewish, Christian, secularist or of any other religious persuasion.

*Christian worlds of reading*

Christian understandings of the Bible have been very different from Jewish readings of it. Much more given to reading the Hebrew Bible, in its Greek translation, as the Old Testament of a two-testament volume and as being predictive of the coming of the messiah, a messiah identified with Jesus of Nazareth, Christians have seen in the Jewish biblical story (mega-narrative) the foundation and beginning of their own story, but a story now taken over from the Jews who had themselves been abandoned by God for their repeated rejection of the divine invitation to conform to Torah (a view which helped to form part of a Christian metanarrative). The churches came to regard themselves as being the replacement of the Jews as the people of God (supersessionism). One of the least edifying consequences of this belief in being a replacement for the Jews in the purposes of God has been the development of a most cruel and catastrophic treatment of the Jews by Christian authorities wherever Jews found themselves under the power of Christian polities. The long history of anti-Judaism (one form of anti-Semitism) from a Christian perspective started in the New Testament with the development of an anti-Jewish rhetoric which was transformed into practice when Christians came to power and then was consolidated throughout Christian history. The reinterpretation of the Jewish Bible from the point of view of the New Testament provided Christian communities with a biblical meganarrative and the beginnings of a grand narrative of its own (see Luke and the Acts of the Apostles). The long history of Jewish-Christian controversies and conflicts provides a number of windows into the history of the interpretation of Scripture in the differing communities, raising important questions about reading strategies and the practices which are legitimated by them.

It is characteristic of the problematic of Jewish-Christian relations that my first attempt at summarizing the Christian reading of Scripture should be taken up with a focus on the Christian maltreatment of Jews.<sup>13</sup> Beyond such a reading of Christian history there is of course a much richer history of Christian readings of the Bible, far too rich and multi-layered to be

<sup>12</sup> Fackenheim (1990), 99.

<sup>13</sup> Cf. Carroll (1997b), 89–116.



summarized succinctly here. Within the New Testament is to be found a very deep and fascinating reading of the Greek Jewish Scriptures.<sup>14</sup> Subsequently there is a great line of Scripture readers stretching from Origen and Augustine through Aquinas and Dante, Luther, and Calvin to Karl Barth, Rudolf Bultmann, Walther Eichrodt, Gerhard von Rad, and the many other Christian readers of the twentieth century which has put at the disposal of modern readers a reception history of the Bible beyond their powers to master it.<sup>15</sup>

### The Enlightenment

#### *The Enlightenment and post-Enlightenment critical readings*

Between the Renaissance and the Enlightenment the Western world was changed fundamentally by discoveries of new lands, the emergence of print culture, early capitalism and the scientific revolution. Such socio-cultural and geophysical changes radicalized the ways in which the Bible came to be read.<sup>16</sup> There emerged in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries the Enlightenment approach to the Bible which insisted on reason, without benefit of clergy or dogma, as the only way to read the biblical text. As Spinoza says:

As I pondered over the facts that the light of reason is not only despised, but by many even execrated as a source of impiety, that human commentaries are accepted as divine records, and that credulity is extolled as faith; as I marked the fierce controversies of philosophers raging in Church and State, the source of bitter hatred and dissension, the ready instruments of sedition and other ills innumerable, I determined to examine the Bible afresh in a careful, impartial, and unfettered spirit, making no assumptions concerning it, and attributing to it no doctrines, which I do not find clearly therein set down.<sup>17</sup>

It is characteristic of so many of the readers of the Bible in terms of the critical rationality which is so much the mark of the Enlightenment that the warring factions of previous dogmatic reading communities should have been eschewed in favour of a fresh start. Somewhat later than Spinoza Thomas Paine had also remarked on the competing interpretations which had rendered the reading of the Bible so unclear:

It has been the practise of all Christian commentators on the Bible, and of all Christian priests and preachers, to impose the Bible on the world as a mass of truth and as the Word of God; they have disputed and wrangled, and anathematized each other about the supposeable meaning of particular parts and passages therein; one has said and insisted that such a passage meant such a thing; another

<sup>14</sup> Cf. Hays (1989); Josipovici (1988), 210–94.

<sup>15</sup> Much of the story of the Christian reception of the Bible may be found in the three-volume *Cambridge History of the Bible* (see Ackroyd and Evans, Lampe, Greenslade).

<sup>16</sup> Cf. Hill (1993); Scholder (1990); Reventlow (1984).

<sup>17</sup> Spinoza (1951), 8.

that it meant directly the contrary; and a third, that it meant neither one nor the other, but something different from both; and this they called *understanding* the Bible.<sup>18</sup>

History became the great focus of reading the Bible: interpreting the Bible came to mean whatever the text was judged to have meant when the words were first uttered or written down. The legacy of the Enlightenment was the historical-critical approach to reading the Bible, with a strong emphasis on the historical:

Thus we may say that by making the dogmatic unity of the Bible highly problematical and by destroying the rationalistic-dogmatic assumption of a scriptural 'doctrine', the criticism that historical-scriptural studies have exercised on the canon has set the theological task of recognizing biblical history *as history*.<sup>19</sup>

These new ways of reading such ancient documents became quite destructive of traditional dogmatic approaches to the Bible, undermining the historic Christian attachment of dogmas to the reading of the Bible. All traditional notions of the supernatural were rejected in favour of a radically different rational, historical approach to reading the text. Thus there came into being a third distinctive way of reading the Bible quite different from the traditional Jewish and Christian modes of reading which had been determined by pious traditions of biblical exegesis. Out of these new ways of reading came what we know now as the historical-critical method, a series of ways of reading which stressed the historical as the original sense of the Bible. Over two centuries these approaches to the Bible helped to forge a radical critique of more traditional pious readings, creating a new critical approach, which continued to prove inimical to conventional piety.

If the Enlightenment approaches of Spinoza, Kant, Paine, and others to reading the Bible radically altered and transformed traditional reading modes, it would have to be said too that after all the catastrophic wars and conflicts of the twentieth century there has been in recent years a considerable moving away from the critical approach to reading the Bible producing in these postmodern times a retreat from reason, criticality, and history. The Enlightenment's prejudice against all prejudices except reason has been itself criticized for being a prejudice: 'The overcoming of all prejudices, this global demand of the Enlightenment, will itself prove to be a prejudice.'<sup>20</sup> So postmodernity has enabled theological systems to reinstate prejudice (following Gadamer's rehabilitation of prejudice [*Vorurteilung*]) and tradition and the postmodern turn has made everything once more available for traditional religious bodies to return to a nostalgia for the past and even has legitimated fundamentalism as a form of postmodern religion.<sup>21</sup>

<sup>18</sup> Paine (1969), 517–18.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 276.

<sup>19</sup> Gadamer (1995), 523.

<sup>21</sup> Cf. Bauman (1997), 165–85.

Whether the Enlightenment project has failed or is still capable of being made to work may be an open question for readers to determine the answer for themselves, but much of the work now being done on the Bible is postmodern in the sense that it has rejected the Enlightenment's stress on reason and critique. Now it is possible to find the open advocacy of fundamentalism and the maintenance of the relative merit of every point of view, with absolutely no point of view being regarded as inferior to another. Every viewpoint is now available for incorporation, though there is a tendency among some postmodernist critics<sup>22</sup> to rule out of court the conventional post-Enlightenment point of view known as the historical-critical method.<sup>23</sup> Now some white male critics berate themselves in public, in the best Maoist fashion of self-criticism, bemoaning their sinfulness for being male and white,<sup>24</sup> demanding that white males develop an androcritical approach to the Bible rather than a historical-critical point of view. Whether this latest form of masochistic self-criticism will find favour with Western males remains to be seen, but it seems to argue a deep sense of self-deception and false consciousness among white males as if they were constituted as a species by such bad attitudes. If writers genuinely feel and think this way about themselves and their work it would be more honest and less rhetorical if they simply resigned their posts and thereby saved their students from being subjected to the kind of oppression white males *alone* apparently seem to bring to the study of the Bible. At the time of writing it is too early to be able to say whether this culture of blame, so characteristic of postmodernist breast-beating, will succeed or whether postmodernism has a big or small future in the discipline of biblical studies. Beyond *Kritik* (critique) and *Kerygma* (confessionalism) there may well be a bright future for postmodern readings of the Bible, but to this observer standing on the edge of the abyss of the future such developments look more like a return to an imagined medievalism than a serious (postmodern) repristination of the Enlightenment project of liberation through reason and critique.<sup>25</sup>

What is patently obvious about these developments in biblical scholarship is the overtly political nature of the agendas. In the past where biblical scholarship was concerned political programmes have tended to be concealed or not admitted to, whereas in this postmodernist time all such political agendas are deemed to be legitimated by being brought out into

<sup>22</sup> See Castelli (1995).

<sup>23</sup> In spite of the excellent introductions to postmodern methodologies for reading the Bible to be found in this book, there are many criticisms which can be made of it (cf. Carroll (1998)). See Barton (1996), 198–236 for a discussion of some of the methodologies usually associated with postmodern approaches to the Bible.

<sup>24</sup> Cf. Patte (1995).

<sup>25</sup> I am sceptical about Patte's demand for an androcritical approach to reading the Bible because I think it is a form of reverse racism (the stereotyping of white male readers) and because I think that every approach to reading the Bible needs to be critically reflective of what it is doing.

the open. One may be openly fascist and vicious, but one may not be covertly anything. The openness is to be welcomed, but I am not convinced that the practice of the principle 'anything goes' is a necessary good. Nor am I persuaded that any point of view is necessarily as good as any other point of view. No wonder Marxist critics denounce post-modernism as one more manifestation of the corruptions brought about by late capitalism.<sup>26</sup> I prefer a much more nuanced account of personal hermeneutics in which the personal and the political are represented but in terms of individual and collective allegiances and where there is a proper provision for the ethical in reading texts. We are all a multivariate amalgam of different relationships, values, allegiances and opinions. There is no agreed calculus for producing a grid map of these connections, so it becomes very difficult for readers to guess or to work out what may be the determinants of readers and their specific reading of texts.

### New Reading Strategies

#### *Ideological criticism*

One of the spectres currently haunting the guild of biblical studies is that of ideological criticism (*Ideologiekritik*) as applied to the Bible.<sup>27</sup> Whether texts have ideologies or not is an interesting but disputed question<sup>28</sup> because ideology itself is as open to as many different definitions as is meaning in relation to texts. For some readers texts have meanings and possess ideologies, for other readers texts have neither meaning nor ideology. Readers construct meaning for or assign ideology to texts—so it is said. So the first decision to be made in this matter is about the kind of reader one imagines oneself to be or the reading community to which one belongs or with which one wishes to identify oneself. Then there are the ideological aspects of the traditions, communities and groups which read the Bible. For example, if the Bible is read by white Afrikaner groups committed to a separatist, *deuteronomistic* reading in support of an ideology of separation or apartheid, then that group is going to read the Bible very differently from one of Gerald West's contextual theology groups of poor black South Africans reading the Bible for and on behalf of the poor.<sup>29</sup> While everybody might favour reading with and on behalf of the poor against the powerful white Boers, in other countries and cultures the poor may be 'poor white trash' of a decidedly separatist, fascist spirit. No point of view or special interest group can be privileged in such approaches to reading the Bible because every position can be deconstructed or undermined by critical analysis. 'You shall not be partial to the poor in your reading of Scripture' (a *faux* or revised reading of Exod. 23: 3). Such con-

<sup>26</sup> See Harvey (1990); Jameson (1991).

<sup>28</sup> Cf. Fowl (1995).

<sup>27</sup> Cf. Jobling and Pippin (1992); Žižek (1989).

<sup>29</sup> Cf. Deist (1994); West (1993).

trasts could go on being made forever in a very wide-ranging analysis of the thousands of different and differing groups, communities, traditions and religions reading the Bible. Reading groups informed by Marxist, liberatory or post-colonial ideologies will read the Bible rather differently from groups in support of Tory politics or white separatist politics. Even individual politicians will have very different readings of the Bible: for example the English politicians Margaret Thatcher (Conservative) and Tony Benn (Labour) have in their time given theopolitical sermons based on their own readings of the Bible.<sup>30</sup>

All the same, it is to the eternal credit of the Enlightenment that it introduced the notion of critique into the study of the Bible, even if it did problematize religious readings of the text. As Kant put the matter:

Our age is, in especial degree, the age of criticism, and to criticism everything must submit. Religion through its sanctity, and law-giving, through its majesty, may seek to exempt themselves from it. But they then awaken just suspicion, and cannot claim the sincere respect which reason accords only to that which has been able to sustain the test of free and open examination.<sup>31</sup>

Before the emergence of such a radical rethinking of all traditional forces, the followers of the Bible reigned supreme over life and death among those who lacked the power to resist them.<sup>32</sup> From Socrates and Montaigne there is a line through the Enlightenment (especially with Spinoza, Hume and Kant) to modern historical-critical readings of the Bible.<sup>33</sup> Of course traditional theologies of biblical thought have suffered greatly at the hands of the post-Enlightenment critical scrutiny of the Bible and in these postmodern times there has been a very strong fight back from ecclesiastical and fundamentalist sources. Postmodernity has restored to the pre-moderns their entitlement to challenge the Enlightenment project and its scrutiny of traditional modes of thought and to reject the critique on the egalitarian grounds of equal opportunities for the representation of every point of view.

### *The postmodern Bible*

An excellent example of how the Bible can and should be read from post-modern perspectives is the volume by The Bible and Culture Collective entitled *The Postmodern Bible*.<sup>34</sup> This volume represents all the strengths

<sup>30</sup> Cf. Benn (1995); Raban (1989). The text of Margaret Thatcher's famous sermon can be found in Raban (1989); for a discussion of her 'Sermon on the Mound' see Carroll (1994).

<sup>31</sup> Kant (1929), 9. Kant appears to be a major *bête noire* for postmodernist biblical scholars; for a more positive assessment of Kant's potential contribution to biblical studies see Addinall (1991), esp. 217–96. On a Kantian view of the place and role of theology in the academy see Kant (1979).

<sup>32</sup> Cf. Ginzburg (1980); Trevor-Roper (1969).

<sup>33</sup> On the ways in which biblical interpretation responded to the Enlightenment see Frei (1974).

<sup>34</sup> Castelli (1995).

and weaknesses of postmodernism as a way of interpreting the Bible. Postmodernism is essentially an umbrella term for clusters of contemporary literary and cultural theories applied to texts or developed as strategies for reading texts. It gathers together a wide range of discrete and cognate theories about texts, reading techniques, sociocultural and political commitments allied to a commitment to ideologies of egalitarianism, race, and gender. Defining the postmodern in modern biblical studies is not an easy task because there are as many definitions of postmodernism as there are proponents of postmodernist practices. However, I shall settle for the following two defining accounts of the phenomenon of postmodernism:

. . . as an artistic, philosophical, and social phenomenon, postmodernism veers toward open, playful, optative, provisional (open in time as well as in structure or space), disjunctive, or indeterminate forms, a discourse of ironies and fragments, a 'white ideology' of absences and fractures, a desire of diffractions, an invocation of complex, articulate silences.<sup>35</sup>

To Ihab Hassan's highly nuanced account of the matter I would add Zygmunt Bauman's measured sociological assessment of it:

Postmodernity may be conceived of as modernity conscious of its true nature—*modernity for itself*. The most conspicuous features of the postmodern condition: institutionalized pluralism, variety, contingency and ambivalence—have been all turned out by modern society in ever increasing volumes; yet they were seen as signs of failure rather than success, as evidence of the insufficiency of efforts so far, at a time when the institutions of modernity, faithfully replicated by the modern mentality, struggled for *universality, homogeneity, monotony* and *clarity*. The postmodern condition can be therefore described, on the one hand, as modernity emancipated from false consciousness; on the other, as a new type of social condition marked by the overt institutionalization of the characteristics which modernity—in its designs and managerial practices—set about to eliminate and, failing that, tried to conceal.<sup>36</sup>

Of course the term *postmodern* may be given different emphases in the sense of the prefix *post*: either as *after* modernism (a chronological sense, that which comes after modernism) or as that which incorporates and transcends modernism. My own preferred sense of the term incorporates Hassan's definition of it as 'a discourse of ironies and fragments . . . of absences and fractures' and Bauman's sense of 'modernity conscious of its true nature'. But a close reading of *The Postmodern Bible* will provide much less of an impression of irony and fragmentariness and much more of a political scheme for taking power in the guild (of biblical studies) from the central group of positivistic historical-critical scholars in the mainstream academies of the West. Unfortunately this political programme is

<sup>35</sup> Hassan (1987), 93–4.

<sup>36</sup> Bauman (1992), 187–8.

itself fragmented by too many ironies to have any hope of being successful (for example, a group of privileged white academics, mostly male, denounce privileged white (male) academic study of the Bible!). Postmodernism in biblical studies is much more likely to polarize the guild into warring factions of centrists, radical leftists, and fundamentalists. Fundamentalists will be empowered by postmodern theory to dismiss the Enlightenment and return to premodern points of view in defence of antique ecclesiastical beliefs about the Bible.<sup>37</sup> More radical groups will find themselves fragmented by conflicting loyalties (e.g., white women against black women (womanist writers)<sup>38</sup>) or by imagining that somehow an ideology of egalitarianism must mean the same thing to different groups and that therefore different loyalties can be overcome on the grounds of having a common enemy in the white male establishment.

### *Feminist readings*

Within that cluster of ideologies bound together under the umbrella of postmodernism are to be found various forms of feminism.<sup>39</sup> One of the strongest reception-forms of biblical interpretation in the second half of the twentieth century has been the emergence of feminist voices as biblical scholars. The range is far too wide to describe adequately here<sup>40</sup> and among the different and differing feminisms available to women readers only some are appropriate for reading the Bible. Radical feminisms of the kind typified by Mary Daly and Andrea Dworkin are completely inappropriate for doing biblical studies, whereas feminisms of the kind characterized by the work of Alice Bach, Mieke Bal, Athalya Brenner, Cheryl Exum (and others too numerous to name here) have worked the Bible brilliantly for and on behalf of women readers. There is a huge subcategory of feminists and their male sympathizers who have put on the agenda of biblical studies the necessity of reading the text from feminist points of view. They raise many different issues about culture and sexual politics, both of the ancient times which produced the Bible and of contemporary institutions where the Bible is studied in collectivities once dominated by men. Questions about authority and textual constructions in the reading strategies of the community need to be asked: who reads this text and under what circumstances? What happens when women read these texts? The

<sup>37</sup> Cf. Steinmetz (1980). I must admit to having been stunned by the over-simplistic critique of Steinmetz's approach to historical-critical readings of the Bible: only Jowett is instanced as the paradigm of such critical readings, while many different and discrete medieval exegetes are summoned to demonstrate the superiority and wealth of such medieval readings.

<sup>38</sup> Castelli (1995), 237–44.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 225–71.

<sup>40</sup> See Bach (1993); Brenner (1991); Brenner and Fontaine (1997); Brenner and van Dijk-Hemmes (1993).

hostility towards women which may be apparent in the texts and more especially in the reading communities raises questions about how metaphor, metonym, trope, and representation are used in the biblical text and then appropriated by reading communities. The prophetic penchant for denouncing Israel as a whore, a faithless wife or a promiscuous bawd (e.g. Ezekiel 16,23; cf. Hosea 1,3) can no longer be tolerated in silence or internalized as a biblical value, but must be challenged, deconstructed, and opposed by modern readers and readings.

The emergence of women scholars in the academies will guarantee the fulfilment of this prediction, but the feminization of the guild of biblical studies will not necessarily prove to be the entirely beneficial development which so many feminists would like to imagine it will be. On the contrary, it will add to the warring factions within the guild not only because of the multiplicity of distinctive feminisms which have been developed in the West but because many of these feminist approaches to reading the Bible are in opposition to one another. For example, the white middle-class women who have been the beneficiaries of so much liberalization in the twentieth century belong to the bourgeoisie, often spoken against by many of the ideologies embraced under the umbrella of post-modernism, and are in conflict with womanist (that is, black women) approaches and the peasants of the non-Western world. The white Western bourgeois woman with her solitary token child has little in common with the illiterate non-Western mother of six or more children, who spends most of her day finding water, preparing food and avoiding predatory males. Class and race factors dominate this situation and gender politics is unable to overcome the problems of class and ethnicity. More radical solutions are called for than the Western feministic colonization of the rest of the world in the name of bourgeois egalitarianism.<sup>41</sup>

### *Ethnicity*

A fundamentally important factor in contemporary biblical interpretation is the notion of ethnicity because every ethnic group has a different story and brings to the biblical text different ways of reading it.<sup>42</sup> Here is where contextual theology has it over liberation theology in that the kind of Marxist liberation theology which attempts to impose a Western nineteenth-century bourgeois ideology constructed by Marx, Engels and their followers on cultures which have not themselves been through the kinds of social and intellectual evolution which created Western post-Enlightenment thought (of which Marx is such an exemplar) violates the integrity of such native cultures. Ethnicity is a complicating factor in

<sup>41</sup> See the writings of Renita Weems.

<sup>42</sup> Cf. Brett (1996); Donaldson (1996); Felder (1991); Smith-Christopher (1995); Sugirtharajah (1991).



current biblical interpretation because it is not always obvious what role it may have as a reading strategy. What does the notion of ethnicity contribute to any reading of the Bible? For example, as an Irishman, with mixed roots in the Protestant and Catholic communities of Dublin, I am tempted to read the Bible from the viewpoint of a political republicanism but with aspects of a liberal, historical-critical academic training informing my interpretation. Now the Bible will not yield much to this kind of reading, but as a republican I do find all those traditional biblical discourses about kings and kingdoms, leaders and messiahs, whether applied to peoples or gods, less than appetizing and definitely open to serious critique. That may be an anachronistic point of view but only the historical-critical approach allows me to pigeonhole the historical aspects of the Bible without blinding me to its literary merits. Personally I find all modern approaches to reading the Bible which make no allowance for the historical and antique dimensions of the Bible to be fairly useless because they confuse modernistic readings with wishful thinking and impose their own ideological holdings on the text while fondly imagining that they are doing nothing more than reading the text innocently. I am however aware that religious communities invariably read the Bible as if it were timeless and addressed to themselves and therefore the historical-critical scrutiny is regarded as being not only unnecessary but intrusive and wrongheaded. Between these two poles I imagine most Bible readers may well find themselves.

At this point the issue of ethnicity, along with various post-colonial interpretative approaches, may contribute something useful to the ways in which the Bible may be read. Theoretically speaking, as a republican Irishman I must be deemed (or certainly would deem myself) to have more in common with all those (post)colonial countries and cultures which have known in the past the tramp of the imperialist boot—whether that imperium has been English, German, French, Muslim, or even American—than perhaps do those exegetes who represent the imperial culture(s) now in this post-imperial period.<sup>43</sup> On the other hand, English-speaking voices which bow to Queen and Country will be much more at home in those bits of the Bible which present messianic, royal, God-as-King motifs. Anti-imperialist, post-colonized elements will appreciate those parts of the Bible which speak out against kings and privileges, overlords and the powerful (mostly the prophets). But in relation to individual Bible readers there may be no necessary connection between ethnicity, tribal past, and personal allegiances. There are sufficient strands of contrary and contradictory motifs and values in the Bible to fund most contemporary points of view. The canons of Scripture are like that tree which represented Nebuchadnezzar in the book of Daniel (4: 19–22), an entity under which ‘the beasts of the field found shade, and in whose

<sup>43</sup> See Prior (1997).

branches the birds of the air dwell' (v. 21). As such, every possible point of view is to be found there. What may differentiate between points of view and what may grade them into a hierarchical order of value or preference are the reading communities within which individual readers find themselves or to which they commit themselves. Communal habits of reading prioritize and privilege selective readings and a selection of preferred texts from the Bible in conjunction with specific readings of them. Hence reading communities may insist on reading the Bible in conjunction with their own creeds, councils, confessions, and catechisms which determine the meaning of texts, just as Philip the evangelist's reading of Isaiah 53 determined the Ethiopian official's understanding of Isaiah. To these approaches I would want to add all the further modern contextualizing categories of race, gender, ethnicity, class, and politics whereby people learn to find their way around maps of reading the Bible. Without such prior reading contexts the text may make no sense to the reader, but within such familiar reading contexts the biblical text may suddenly be illuminated for readers.

### *Fundamentalism*

One of the few areas which current biblical scholarship tends to ignore or to avoid is that of fundamentalism.<sup>44</sup> Such caution is well justified because modern forms of religious fundamentalism tend to embody those very dogmatic approaches to religion which were ruled out of court by the Enlightenment, so fundamentalism and post-Enlightenment scholarship are inevitably inimical to one another. Fundamentalism probably represents the most widespread and popular mode of reading the Bible among traditional Christian communities in the world today and when it is combined with its overlapping evangelical constituencies then such approaches of a somewhat literalistic, fixed-term post-eighteenth-century reading of the Bible, allied to political and evangelistic lobbying movements and programmes, constitute the most formidable of political religious forces of reaction in contemporary society. Faced with the most universal and popular forms of reading the Bible academic scholarship on the Bible has tended to retreat into intellectualism or to become confrontational and argumentative. Biblical scholarship has not completely ignored fundamentalism,<sup>45</sup> but such readings of the Bible are not generally regarded as having sufficient scholarly or intellectual respectability and are themselves so preformed by selective readings of tradition and the text and are so predictable as not to represent intellectually coherent, interesting or challenging readings of the Bible from an academic point of view. Yet

<sup>44</sup> How I understand fundamentalism may be clarified by consulting Ammerman (1987); Barr (1981); Boone (1990); Boyer (1992); Lawrence (1990); Marty & Appleby (1991); Percy (1996); (1998); Strozier (1994).  
<sup>45</sup> Cf. Barr (1981).

they are what most pious Christian reading communities favour as approaches to reading the Bible.

Fundamentalistic readings of the Bible in which so many different approaches participate (especially, it seems to me, some aspects of liberation theology readings) are quite inimical to academic and historical-critical readings and have tended to be kept isolated from one another. One could posit a spectrum of readings which might be described as having post-Enlightenment critical readings at one end and all types of fundamentalistic uncritical readings at the other end of the spectrum. Somewhere along this imagined spectrum would then be found every other view, with critical readings on one half of the spectrum and pious uncritical readings on the other half of that spectrum. Many of these viewpoints will blend into one another somewhere towards the centre of the spectrum, but the spectrum ends will be very distinct and quite different. We might also view the critical half of the spectrum as participating in a hermeneutics of suspicion and the other half as tending towards a hermeneutics of trust.<sup>46</sup> But both halves of the spectrum would represent *serious* readings of the Bible and at a literary level the critical end of the spectrum would take the text very much more seriously than the uncritical end. The uncritical end might take more seriously some of the reception material, persisting in more traditional readings of the text, whereas the critical half would prioritize the post-Enlightenment readings of the Bible. Some of these readings might *transcend* the critical in order to pursue what Paul Ricoeur has called 'the second naiveté', that is a postcritical reading of the text which returns to the text incorporating a critical analysis.<sup>47</sup> This is a very complex area of highly disputed readings and of oppositional interpretative communities which seldom get together in order to exchange readings. While much of fundamentalism appears to be incapable of exchange, dialogue, and argument because it is committed to fixed traditional readings rather than exploratory readings, the future may well hold promise of a better integration of opposing and opposed readings of the biblical text if the academic, the critical, and the imaginative can somehow be combined and integrated into new readings in dialogue with other readers and their readings of the Bible. But given the hostility of so many critics towards one another, especially the post-modernists against the historical-critical academics, that future will desperately need to develop, what Daniel Boyarin has called for, 'a hermeneutics of critical generosity',<sup>48</sup> that is, reading and interpretative

<sup>46</sup> This is very rough brushstroke differentiation between two radically different approaches, but I think it has some analytical mileage to it. See Ricoeur (1970), 32–6, for the notion of a hermeneutics of suspicion and Hays (1997) for the alternative practice of a hermeneutics of trust. An equally useful approach would be Moshe Halbertal's 'charitable' and 'uncharitable' readings of the canon (Halbertal (1997), 27–44).

<sup>47</sup> Ricoeur (1967), 351.

<sup>48</sup> In Aichele and Phillips (1995), 293–7.

approaches that are both critical *and* generous to opposing voices and points of view.

I do not wish to over-emphasize that hoary old conflict of the Academy versus the Ecclesia, with its many mediating positions between these two institutional holding bodies on the interpretation of the Bible, but among the competing positions today in the interpretation of the Bible I do feel that these two old warhorses are still battling it out.<sup>49</sup> But we must also recognize the ecclesiastical loyalties of so many in the Academy, with dual citizenship for the majority of biblical scholars, so that it is not entirely a conflict between discrete sets of institutions. At the same time it must be recognized that there are many important voices in biblical studies which owe nothing to the readings of the Bible by multivarious Christian communities. Many academics belong to the civic universities without having any necessary church or religious affiliations. Also there are Jewish and Israeli biblical scholars who relate to Jewish religious traditions or to independent Jewish readings of the Bible. I also have in mind what may be called the Tel Aviv and Indiana voices among which are to be counted some of the most dynamic readers of the biblical text today (e.g., Alter, Nohrnberg, Sternberg, etc)—not to mention such gifted individual readers of the Bible as Harold Bloom, Gabriel Josipovici, Regina Schwartz, George Steiner. Each one of these writer-readers approaches the text with respect (Steiner's *cortesía*),<sup>50</sup> and reads it in the light of their own reading skills and in relation to comparative literature, providing first-class readings of the text. There is here a huge range of interpretations, traditional and innovative, which complicate the landscape of Bible readings much more than one might imagine and whose analysis is well beyond the scope of this chapter.<sup>51</sup>

I should also recognize a large number of individual writers who cross the spectrum of religious and non-religious commitments and who are producing first-class readings of the biblical text as we enter the twenty-first century. For guidance purposes I would instance individual works by the following: Alice Bach (1997), Mieke Bal (1988), Timothy Beal (1997), Hugh Pyper (1996), David Rutledge (1996), Regina Schwartz (1997), Yvonne Sherwood (1996), Hugh White (1991) which would inform and delight readers. My criteria for choosing examples of these writers' work are determined by the quality of their skilful readings of the text, their fully integrated uses of theory and text for the readings, and some sense of the necessity for the employment of an ethics of reading. However, there are also numerous areas of methodological approaches to reading

<sup>49</sup> Cf. Jones and Buckley (1998); Braaten and Jenson (1996); Watson (1994); (1997), for one side of the controversy; cf. Davies (1995) for the other side.

<sup>50</sup> A reference to Steiner's *Real Presences* book is obligatory today among theologians writing about the Bible, so I follow suit here by endorsing Steiner's demand for *cortesía* in the treatment of texts (cf. Steiner (1989), 146–65).

<sup>51</sup> Cf. for example, Miskotte (1967); Schneidau (1976).

the Bible for which there is space only for a brief mentioning: the intertextual, reception history approaches,<sup>52</sup> the political readings of Norman Gottwald, South African readings, approaches to biblical poetics,<sup>53</sup> Bakhtinian dialogical readings,<sup>54</sup> canon,<sup>55</sup> cultural studies and the Bible,<sup>56</sup> and theological readings,<sup>57</sup> post-colonial analyses<sup>58</sup> and the new historiographical approaches to reading the Bible as history.<sup>59</sup> If all these approaches were combined into a set of imagined 'ideal' readings and approaches to the Bible, then readers would have no time for reading the Bible itself because mastering the approach routes would cut off the possibility of their getting to the Bible in the first place.<sup>60</sup> Every one of these approaches is intrinsically interesting and potentially dialogical in its contribution to any redrawing of the map of reading the Bible in our time.

### Conclusion

Modern readers are therefore faced with a plethora of reading strategies, of hermeneutic possibilities and conflicting communicative systems in relation to communities of Bible reading, which embarrass them with the riches of what is on offer. What must also perplex modern readers however is the range of choice and the competing claims for attention and commitment. How is any one group to determine which strategies they should employ and which communities they should join? Of course many people are born into communities which have their own strategies, or may actively choose communities by conversion or persuasion to join one specific group, but many others are not so privileged by birth or decision-making eventualities. To the ordinary modern cultured despisers of organized religion, yet who value the Bible for many discrete and often unstatable reasons, what shall we say by way of recommending a reading strategy, if not a reading community? In conformity with the post-Enlightenment values of plurality, choice and ethical commitment, seasoned with a dash of postmodernist irony and fragmentedness, all I can say is 'shop around' and choose carefully how you read and, although

<sup>52</sup> Cf. Fewell (1992); Boyarin (1990); Sawyer (1996).

<sup>53</sup> Berlin (1983); Brichto (1992); Fisch (1988).

<sup>54</sup> Reed (1993).

<sup>55</sup> Altieri (1990); Barton (1996); (1997); Brett (1991); Childs (1979); (1984); (1985); (1992); Halbertal (1997).

<sup>56</sup> Beal and Gunn (1997); Exum and Moore (1998).

<sup>57</sup> Barr (1993); Brueggemann (1993); (1997); Frei (1974); (1986); (1992); Goldingay (1987); Hays (1989); (1997); Perdue (1994); Preuss (1995); (1996); Watson (1994); (1997); Wolterstorff (1995).

<sup>58</sup> Donaldson (1996); Prior (1997); Segovia and Tolbert (1995); Sugirtharajah (1991).

<sup>59</sup> Davies (1992); (1995); Dever (1995); Grabbe (1997); Provan (1995); (1997); Thompson (1994); Whitlam (1996). See Moore (1997) for an introduction to New Historicism and the Bible (cf. Carroll (1997a); (1998), 52–7).

<sup>60</sup> I have alluded to this possibility in an essay at writing on reception history of the Bible (Carroll (1992)). In a recent novel John Updike includes a section on the story of Mark and how he decided to write his Gospel (Updike (1997), 122–34).

you will need help from others, always go for a *plurality of readings*. If such a plurality of readings can be allied to a politics of liberation anchored to a democratic base of collective bargaining, then all the better (my reading prejudices uncloaked!). After the twentieth century, after Auschwitz, after the Gulag, after apartheid and Sharpeville, after too many Bloody Sundays, after Jonestown, and Waco, let no one infringe your liberty by oppressive readings. Let no one, wielding an ideology of 'the Bible says', tyrannize anybody's readings.

I would however not want to advocate too strongly a reader-response ideology for all reading strategies. Texts deserve greater distance, more respect and engagement than reader-response approaches would allow. Without some oppositional element provided by texts over against the reading self the text will be swamped by the overwhelming subjectivities of readers. There must be space for the text to contribute something to the hermeneutic process. 'The experience of being pulled up short by the text'<sup>61</sup> is something which can undermine the self-confidence of the reader-response approach, making readers attend to the text, and yet it is one of the most salutary experiences available to any reader. If only the reader's response constructions of meaning can be imposed on texts, then there will be no more such moments of 'being pulled up short by the text'. No readers will retreat from or advance towards texts which have arrested them or stopped them in their tracks. That would be a most substantial loss to the reading enterprise and not one which competent readers would want to envisage. The words of literature, including biblical literature, 'are the words which will not pass away'<sup>62</sup> and canonic literature insists on having attention paid to it:

In my view we do not want dialogue with texts; we want to encounter the full force of what the author imagined, in the terms in which the author chose to present it. We want to see how strongly it asserts claims on us, both as a model of behavior and as a possible audience figure in an ideal community.<sup>63</sup>

It is Ricoeur's second naiveté<sup>64</sup> in which the text has restored to it 'its ability to project itself outside itself in the representation of a world that I could inhabit'<sup>65</sup> and Grafton's sense of the 'continued power of texts . . . to inspire challenges to intellectual and political authority'.<sup>66</sup> Such a subversive reading of literature is liable to upset many conventional applectarts and disturb traditional reading communities, especially in relation to the communities which have for so long cherished reading the Bible, so I recommend it here with trepidation.<sup>67</sup> To anticipate a future of such read-

<sup>61</sup> Gadamer (1995), 268.

<sup>63</sup> Altieri (1990), 46.

<sup>65</sup> Ricoeur (1991), 18.

<sup>62</sup> Schneidau (1976), 305.

<sup>64</sup> (1967), 351.

<sup>66</sup> Grafton, Shelford and Siraisi (1992), 255.

<sup>67</sup> In Carroll (1997b) I have tried to represent some of the problematics of reading the Bible, and in Carroll and Prickett (1997), 321–441 I have practised what some would regard as a subversive reading of the whole Bible as a series of potential meganarratives.

ing where not only will the biblical text be a subversive force for readers but where every woman will read according to what is right in her own eyes I shall leave the last words on the matter to a woman's voice expatiating on the subject of reading the Bible:

We should read the Bible one more time. To interpret it, of course, but also to let it carve out a space for our own fantasies and interpretive delirium.<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>68</sup> Kristeva (1995), 126.

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