

# **A pragmatic approach to Wirkungsgeschichte: reflections on the Blackwell Bible Commentary series and on the writing of its commentary on the Apocalypse**

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## **Part I: the Blackwell Bible Commentary series**

What I want to do in this paper is to write about some of the main aims of the commentary series (the most recent version of these aims has been circulated with this paper). I shall then amplify these with a discussion of the approach which Judith Kovacs and I took in our commentary on the Apocalypse which has just been published<sup>1</sup>. The second section of the paper concerns a distinguishing feature of a commentary which goes beyond an exegesis which focuses solely on grammatical, lexical and ancient historical explanation. In the context of the discussion of the Apocalypse this means taking seriously various forms of application of the text, and the kind of 'empathetic' engagements in which the underlying thrust of the text is reproduced whether in the form of new prophecy or vision or representations of the text in other mediums such as art or music.

### The BBC series

The inspiration for the BBC series did not come from immersion in the theoretical literature on reception history, most of which, I have not found too helpful in the task on which I have set out. Instead of beginning from a particular hermeneutical theory the series focuses on the task of exploring some of the many and various effects of biblical books. The main difference about our commentary series is that the historical-critical exegesis is included as part of Wirkungsgeschichte rather than as a primary datum to which matters of Wirkungsgeschichte can be added. This has proved methodologically complex not least because of the peculiarity of the history of the interpretation of the different books. Unlike other commentaries which have included history of interpretation (such as EKK, BNTC and NIGCNT) in our commentaries the quest for the origin and the original meaning of the texts and the effects on the original readers have not been given priority. What we have attempted to do is to do study biblical books through exegesis a representative sample of the different interpretations of the text, in a variety of media. In

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<sup>1</sup> Kovacs, J. and Rowland, C. 2004: Revelation: the Apocalypse of Jesus Christ Oxford: Blackwell.

this task there have been no obvious role models and one of the major challenges has been to find ways of organising a diffuse body of material. In the Blackwell series the introduction to each volume has an important role as a lens through which the different interpretations in the commentary as a whole are examined. While we started off hoping that a verse-by-verse commentary would be normative, we recognise that this may not suit every text (and this was certainly the case with the Apocalypse). It has become clear to us that one model will not suit the material in every book.

### BBC as a 'mapping exercise'

In this work we are at a stage of clearing the ground for the 'mapping exercise'. We are at present in a situation where two hundred years of biblical exegesis in the academy has created a dangerously artificial gap between the Bible as the church's text and the religious life of ordinary people. In retrospect, we can see that what was happening at the Enlightenment was a challenge to the nature of tradition and the painful articulation of ways of reading authoritative texts independent of received wisdom. That is the situation in which the practitioners of *Wirkungsgeschichte* find themselves, hopefully learning from the Enlightenment project while acknowledging ways of reading texts informed by tradition or imagination.<sup>2</sup>

### In pursuit of a true diachronicity

Interpretation in its totality, however, is a telling of a story about what the text means, and we need to find a way to tell a new story of the text and what it means which includes voices from the past and also non-dominant voice past and present. A major aim in the BBC series, is to find a way of telling the alternative story of interpretation in a way that sheds light on the text and on the history of interpretation, e.g. the rich tradition of women's appropriation of the Apocalypse. The methodological pattern is going to be different for each biblical text. Our task, however, is to make that idiosyncratic account one that can also embrace the reader as they craft their own story of interpretation from the volume.

There has been the gradual recognition that the history of the influence of the biblical text has a crucial part to play in the understanding of Christian exegesis of the Bible. The modern preoccupation with the original setting of the biblical

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<sup>2</sup> See the way the two coincide in the pre-modern period in Carruthers, M. *The Book of Memory* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1990.

text has always to be seen within the context of past interpretations which affect the present form of interpretation. A glance at most modern, historical, interpretation of biblical texts reveals how narrowly focused the attention to history actually is. Little attention is given to either the pre-Enlightenment interpretation of these texts or the wider cultural appropriation of the texts in literature and other media, which are less obviously conscious interpretations but exhibit an influence whose importance for exegesis should not be neglected because of the insight which the subtle mix of tradition and imagination offers. Wirkungsgeschichte is, I believe, a plea to be truly diachronic and appreciate the history of texts through time as a key to their interpretation and to see that exegesis should not be confined to written explication of texts or to the views of a few academic exegetes but should attend to other media of exegesis also. An openness to the varieties of effects of biblical texts puts exegesis in touch with wider intellectual currents in the humanities, so that literature, art and music become part of the modes of exegesis as well as the conventional explanatory writings of biblical texts within Christian theology.

The modern period has witnessed a significant shift with the rise of the historical method at the end of the eighteenth century and the rise of the historical method from the diachronic to the synchronic. Now I realise that this represents a use of these words which contrasts with what is current, but I would maintain that, although historical study of the Bible is usually linked with the diachronic, it is in fact more accurately linked with that which is strictly speaking synchronic. The words diachronic and synchronic arise out of the study of linguistics and social anthropology with the diachronic referring historical study of a subject whereas the synchronic concerns that which is found to exist in its totality at a particular, limited, time. Synchronic approaches do not ask whence an idea comes but rather concentrate on how it functions or is part of a belief system or social matrix at a particular time and place. If one examines post-Enlightenment hermeneutics, one way of viewing it is that a tradition of interpretation based on the received wisdom of the Christian tradition *through time* was replaced with a form of interpretation which either sat loose to that tradition of interpretation or rejected it completely. In its place there emerged an interpretation in which the exegesis of biblical texts was based on the relationship with texts which were contemporaneous with them rather than on the history of the way those texts had been interpreted within faith communities. In other words, it was a synchronic approach to the biblical texts as they were set in the context of that which was contemporary rather than which followed after them. Of course, the emergence of the historical method as a hegemonic mode of biblical interpretation in the academy and then the church meant that a new form of diachronicity had emerged in which the

antecedents of texts was minutely examined. But this meant that there was a significant caesura with earlier patterns of interpretation. Historical criticism in fact means the contextualization of biblical texts with other, contemporaneous (ancient), texts, rather than with a tradition of interpretation, which is determined by the rules of interpretation of the Christian church and rather than the way the text impacts on modern readers.

### Expanding the boundaries of the tradition

A plea for a comprehensive diachronicity is not an appeal to return to the authoritative received wisdom of the Christian (or Jewish) tradition as maintained by its orthodox exponents. Any one involved in the history of interpretation of biblical texts will soon be aware that this received wisdom represents a very narrow view of that which has been handed down. To ask theological questions, therefore, which merely use the models of the past, whether ecclesial or otherwise, risk using heuristic patterns which distort the evidence and skew it in favour of what we loosely call 'orthodoxy'. Theological reflection needs to eschew the judgements which theology as a tradition has left us. Or, put it another way, other understandings are needed of what constitutes the traditum, in order to be in a better position to reflect theologically on those which have hitherto not been part of the tradition by the dominant interpretative communities. Not only is this theologically appropriate, but, more importantly, is necessary for the intellectual health of theology as a discipline.

That is particularly true of the history of interpretation of the Apocalypse, for example, where the Augustinian hermeneutic has held sway for so long. Any reader of our commentary will see that Augustine and his great predecessor Tyconius have a significant part to play, but the commentary also shows the way in which the Tyconian hermeneutic in a rather different form influenced many others, not least those who applied the Apocalypse to the political and ecclesial realities of their own day and who did so from the margins of their own ecclesial communities.

### A pragmatic approach

The task of *Wirkungsgeschichte* at the present juncture requires, I think, that we refuse to move too quickly to hermeneutical models or theological syntheses. I'm really worried that we shall short-circuit the historical mapping exercise of the history of interpretation otherwise. In the Blackwell series what we set out to do is to find representative types of interpretation. Obviously

with a book like our commentary on the Apocalypse after five years of research one is only just scratching the surface of what might be read, never mind included in a one-volume study. One thing that has emerged, however, is that it has been necessary to offer a different kind of history of interpretation in which neglected voices also have their say. For example, Peter John Olivi a crucial figure in the history of the interpretation of the Apocalypse hardly merits a mention in de Lubac's book on medieval exegesis (nor for that matter does Joachim of Fiore)<sup>3</sup>. We recognize the need for a rationale for discerning the theological value of the various interpretations, but that is not our major task in the BBC series. We are eager not to make too high a claim. We are interested in seeing, through history, how the Bible has and does come alive. We do not want to try and tell readers which interpretations are 'true' nor to claim completeness, nor that we have a hermeneutical key that can tell us, once for all, which is the best interpretation.

#### Practicalities: Blackwell's and the commentary series

We are very glad that the series is being published by Blackwell. Committing ourselves to Blackwell has had certain consequences, most of which have concentrated our minds as we have sought to develop the series. This major international publisher has a respected reputation. Throughout our negotiations with them the balance between the scholarly and the pedagogic has always been an issue, as has cost. We are delighted that the volumes have been kept relatively inexpensive (under \$25 in the US) and therefore within the reach of ordinary readers. This has inevitably placed a limit on the size of the volumes, and a limitation of the illustrations in number and quality. This determined the choice of what we included, so that wherever we could we include black and white or half tone as no colour prints were allowed on account of cost. We know we could have made more of the exegetical character of the works of art.

#### Guidelines for authors

A criterion for inclusion is the actual importance of the passage in history, measured by the frequency of reference and the extensiveness of their effect of the various interpretations (though this is complemented by our determination to recover aspects of traditions of interpretation which are less prominent, about more will be said below). The chapters and verses that are storm centres are usually fairly obvious. We have set out to write an introduction to what we acknowledge is a broad field in a way that we hope will be useful to readers,

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<sup>3</sup> H. de Lubac Medieval Exegesis 2 vols. Edinburgh: T&T Clark 1998.

many of whom may be coming to such issues for the first time and from disciplines other than our own. The restriction on the length of the volumes demands selectivity and the highlights of reception/ influence of a biblical book. We aim to produce relatively brief, introductory books, rather than encyclopedic texts, as a stimulus to the very necessary, task of others who may spend decades producing a more definitive, probably, multi-volume book on the same biblical book. Authors aim to organise the material with sufficient coherence to give those approaching the issue of reception history, perhaps for the first time, some idea of the varying aspects within a verse by verse (or section by section) commentary genre. The perspective will not, we hope, be overly subjective (in any case we've assembled a panel of advisers who will help with different periods of interpretation), for any one working on the project will soon find the verses and chapters that have been often cited and argued over and used as weapons in controversy. Negative issues that have arisen for authors have tended to focus on selection of material for inclusion. There are two aspects to this. Firstly, there is the choice of texts to research and to include, and the task of telling their story in such a way that illuminates rather than obfuscates? Exhaustive enquiry has not been possible with this series. Consequently decisions always remain about dominant narratives: whether, for example, Martin Luther's views on a passage should be more important than a Quaker reading simply because he has been more influential in Christian history. Much of our work thus far, because of lack of space, has lacked context specificity in determining the character of the reading, though our glossary in our volume was a nod in the direction of recognising that need. There is an urgent need to take the task of understanding why particular readings emerge in particular cultural contexts further.

## **Part II: writing the commentary on the Apocalypse**

### Retrospect on writing the commentary

Because we were keen to demonstrate the way in which later authors have interacted with the text in the commentary on the Apocalypse we used a great deal of quotation rather than second hand report.

I would want to stress the importance, in retrospect, of the importance of highlighting in a commentary of this kind (perhaps more than Judith Kovacs and I actually achieved) the extent to which the later interpretation is triggered by the text itself rather than the text merely being a peg on which to hang a rendering or representation. The different kinds of interpretation, whether 'decoding' (see further below), using the apocalyptic imagery to help one understand one's own context, or the visionary appropriation can all claim to

be rooted in the Apocalypse itself. There are very occasional examples of 'decoding' in the text itself (e.g. 17:9, and in this regard, as Luther recognised, this sets the Apocalypse apart from Daniel) and the apparent claim to finality of the visionary text in Rev 22:18-19, which seems to suggest no possible repetition of its visionary inspiration. But, later visionaries like William Blake did not see a text like this as excluding *their* right to share the lot of John as one of the prophets (cf. his *Four Zoas*, Night VIII.600-3). So, other moments might occur when 'the spirit came on the Lord's Day' (as it did, for example, to Joachim of Fiore), to enable further visionary insight of which this book formed the basis just as Ezekiel's vision had been a crucial catalyst for John's own vision.

### A heuristic taxonomy of apocalyptic interpretation

The Apocalypse, no less than the Bible as a whole, hardly offers an unambiguous message. William Blake's witty aphorism 'Both read the Bible day and night But thou readst black where I read white' (The Everlasting Gospel, notebook section, lines 13-14) was a salutary reminder to us as we embark on a study of the reception history of the Apocalypse, which has served many different positions, the revolutionaries and radicals as well as the quietists and the supporters of the status quo.

As will be apparent from the commentary, we tried to offer a taxonomy of the interpretative approaches. In interpretations of the Apocalypse there is chronological interpretative axis : does the image relate to past, present or future? In classifying interpretations of the Apocalypse we found two basic types of hermeneutical approach to the text (in conversation, Michael Wolter has told me that Otto Böcher has suggested a very similar typology). The first is what we describe in the commentary as 'Decoding'. This involves presenting the meaning of the text in another, less allusive, form, showing what the text *really* means, usually with great attention to the details of the text and their meaning. The interpreter renders the images of the Apocalypse in another form, usually relating to historical events or persons. The Apocalypse only occasionally prompts the reader to 'decode' the meaning of the apocalyptic mysteries (17:9; cf. 1:20 and 4.3). In this respect it is different from its Old Testament counterpart, the book of Daniel, which is replete with detailed elucidation of its visions. Nonetheless, some have sought precise equivalence between every image in the book and figures and events in history, resulting in a long tradition of 'decoding' interpretation. An image is seen to have one particular meaning, and the interpreter assumes that if the code is understood in its entirety the whole Apocalypse can be rendered in another form and its

inner meaning laid bare. Meaning is confined as the details of images and actions are fixed on some historical personage or event. There is a peculiar form of 'decoding' in which individuals 'act out' details of the text, in effect decoding the text once and for all in that person.

A different form of interpretation refuses to translate the images but instead uses them metaphorically, so that the image is applied to another situation or person, not by way of equating the two but, by a process of juxtaposition to cast light on that to which the image has been applied. So, the imagery of the Apocalypse is juxtaposed with the interpreter's own circumstances, whether personal or social, so as to allow the images to inform understanding of contemporary persons and events and to serve as a guide for action. Such interpretation has deep roots in the Christian tradition, going back at least to the time of Tyconius and Augustine. In contrast with 'decoding', it preserves the integrity of the textual pole and does not allow the image or passage from the Apocalypse to be identified solely with one particular historical personage or circumstance. The text is not prevented from being actualized in different ways over and over again. This is crucial. The book becomes a resource not just for the generation of the last days but a resource for the religious life in every generation. Then there is the appropriation by visionaries where the words of the Apocalypse either offer the opportunity to 'see again' things similar to what had appeared to John or prompt new visions related to it. So in the visions of Hildegard of Bingen, for example, many details of John's text reappear.

Giving space to the different modes of exegesis

While our volume aims to give a representative sampling of different types of interpretation of the Apocalypse, allowing different interpreters to speak for themselves without being subjected to editorial judgement, it has a distinctive point of view. In a time when the most prominent interpretations of the book emphasize its meaning for the past (historical criticism) or the future (prognosticators of the eschaton), we aim to round out the picture by calling attention to interpreters who seek to articulate the book's meaning for the present. Thus alongside well-known examples of decoding interpretations, we present less known interpreters (church fathers, prophets, and poets) who respond to the visionary character of the Apocalypse through actualizing interpretations.

No book in the Bible raises the question of the nature of the exegetical task more acutely than the Apocalypse. The assumption that a detailed, verse by verse, explanation of a biblical text is what is required and expected already

weights the answer in a particular direction. If one compares such detailed expositions of the text with the poetic and imaginative appropriations of it, there may at first sight seem to be no contest. When we started out on our project we thought that what we would be offering in our commentary would be varieties of interpretation of verses from different periods in history with ancient and modern commentators jostling with one another about the meaning of words and phrases. It quickly became apparent that to use the typical form of the modern commentary would subtly skew the presentation in one direction and favour the detailed interpreters rather than those who are affected by the text in a more impressionistic way and inspired in art, music, or poetry, to re-present in a new genre to communicate its message. The visionaries, poets, and artists, however, represent an altogether more oblique relationship with the text. The biblical text is a springboard for other revelations or a creative frame of reference for understanding the world. If we view exegesis as the close reading of the text, then theirs cannot be counted as exegesis. But the question is whether the Apocalypse is a text to be interpreted and deciphered or a text to be used and actualized.

The various forms of exegesis of the Apocalypse (in literature, art music and in the lives of individuals and groups) echo the use of exegesato John 1:18 where a life lived is regarded as the means of explanation or exposition. John 1:18 points in the direction of meaning as including something more than mere verbal paraphrase or grammatical explanation, as it suggests that practical demonstration of meaning in the living out of the meaning of the biblical words, is as, if not more, important. Thus, later visionaries who make use of the Apocalypse may be attuned to something important in the text. An understanding of biblical texts may be particularly available to the person who has an affinity with [the essential drift or underlying character of the text on the basis of experience. So, the biblical texts may be best understood by those who seek to engage with their 'performative way', to quote Tony Thiselton's words<sup>4</sup>. The importance of a 'lived affinity' between the interpreter and the biblical text has always been an important part of the interpretation of sacred scripture<sup>5</sup>.

If what we have in John's Apocalypse is the written account of a vision or visions which came to John, even at different times, it becomes very difficult to

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<sup>4</sup> A. Thiselton New Horizons in Hermeneutics, London: Harper Collins 1992, 616

<sup>5</sup> See J. L. Houlden The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church London: SPCK 1984.

describe any intention of the author, other than at most the ordering of the visions and their dissemination. John did not set out to write a literary work in an apocalyptic genre. Whatever the origin of the book's various components may have been, their function and juxtaposition are not the product of the visionary's conscious intention. And if the focus of interpretation is shifted away from the intention of the author, then reception history turns out to have particular importance, for then John's place is similar to that of the one who receives his visionary text. Both visionary and reader are in the position of interpreters. *So, the 'after-life' of the text, its reception by those who found in this visionary text an inspiration for their own visions or who have pored over it, seeking to use their interpretative skills to unlock its mysteries, is an integral part of its exegesis, as important as what the recipient of the vision and the original bearers may have understood it to mean.*

An exposition of the Apocalypse that concentrates exclusively on the question 'what did this verse mean' may miss the distinctive insight offered by later visionaries, who are inspired by the text to new imaginative insights or prophetic pronouncements. So, while Judith and I have tried to represent the important place historical study has had in the history of interpretation (though it has less place in our volume than in the volume on the Gospel of John written by Mark Edwards, largely because we considered that most of the main interpretative moves with regard to the Apocalypse had already been made before the rise of modern criticism), we have been reluctant to give this pride of place.

The visionary, artistic and musical appropriations of the Apocalypse texts go beyond the historical, literal meaning, to essential points of the message which is then recast and represented in another genre. I have become convinced that what we have in many works of art offer an attempt to present in another medium the total meaning of the text is thereby they offer a reading of a text in which the essential subject matter is re-presented in visual form. It is thus a different kind of exegesis, not just loosely related to the text but an expression of the meaning of the text which cannot simply be described in words. Later artists saw the Apocalypse as an inspiration for their own art as they sought to represent in their own artistic works its prophetic images. Depictions inspired by the Apocalypse often illustrate the way in which artistic interpretations exemplify the differing exegetical approaches to the Apocalypse. For example, artistic depictions offer the opportunity to present the visions synchronically in a way which is difficult in a text. In addition, the Apocalypse the artistic representations convey the emotive power of the imagination and offer something which extends what is available in literary interpretations.

'Rouzing the faculties to act: reflecting on the effects of texts

There is an important letter from William Blake to a learned enquirer about his art, who demanded of him explanation of that which was obscure and allusive:

You say that I want somebody to Elucidate my Ideas. But you ought to know that what is Grand is necessarily obscure to Weak men. That which can be made Explicit to the Idiot is not worth my care. The wisest of the Ancients consider'd what is not too Explicit as the fittest for Instruction, because it rouzes the faculties to act. I name Moses, Solomon, Esop, Homer, Plato.

.... I feel that a Man may be happy in This World. And I know that This World Is a World of Imagination & Vision. I see everything that I paint in this world, but every body does not see alike. To the eyes of a Miser a Guinea is more beautiful than the Sun, and a bag worn with the use of Money has more beautiful proportions than a Vine filled with Grapes. The tree which moves some to tears of joy is in the eyes of others only a Green thing which moves some to tears of joy is in the eyes of others only a green thing that stands in the way. Some See Nature all Ridicule and Deformity, & by these I shall not regulate my proportions; & some Scarce see Nature at all. But to the Eyes of the Man of Imagination, Nature is Imagination itself. As a man is, So he Sees. As the Eye is formed, such are its Powers. You certainly Mistake, when you say that Visions of Fancy are not to be found in This World. To me This World is all One continued Vision of Fancy or Imagination, & I feel Flatter'd when I am told so. What is it sets Homer, Virgil & Milton in so high a rank of Art? Why is the Bible more Entertaining & Instructive than any other book? Is it not because they are addressed to the Imagination, which is Spiritual Sensation and but mediately to the Understanding or Reason....

But I am happy to find a Great Majority of Fellow Mortals who can Elucidate My Visions, and Particularly they have been Elucidated by Children, who have taken a greater delight in contemplating my Pictures than I even hoped. Neither Youth nor Childhood is Folly or Incapacity. Some Children are Fools & so are some Old Men. But There is a vast Majority on the side of Imagination or Spiritual Sensation.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Letter to Trusler in *Blake Complete Writings* Geoffrey Keynes (ed.) (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1966), pp. 793-4. Further C. Rowland, 'Blake and the Bible: Biblical Exegesis in the Work of William Blake', in J.M. Court ed. *Biblical Interpretation: The Meanings of Scripture – Past and Present* London: T&T Clark 2004, 168-184.

In this response Blake sets out his hermeneutical priorities, and, I believe, challenges those of us involved in the study of reception history to expand our horizons. Many biblical texts are allusive, to be set alongside similarly tantalisingly opaque texts from antiquity. That is their peculiar glory. The one wishing for precision, order and system in their exposition can run the risk of reducing those allusive texts to something they were never intended to be. In this letter Blake sets out a case of the central importance of the 'effective' history of texts, like the Bible, have prompted various insights as consequences of their impact on the interpreters because of their capacious allusiveness.

Blake bids us to embrace within the meaning of exegesis not only that attention to the letter which seeks to place the text in the context of historical processes and the sense which has been expressed directly by the inspired human authors but also their imaginative effects. Many biblical texts are not written expressions of a direct communication between author and reader (the Pauline letters are something of an exception to this). Much more typical of the Bible as a whole is the collection of narratives, oracles or sayings. Take the gospels. Modern New Testament study is characterized by a sophisticated and minutely detailed scrutiny of what is in fact a tiny corpus of literature, yet there is also room for an approach to these texts which does not necessarily depend on a minutely detailed exegesis. There is a hermeneutical reason for this. Many New Testament texts are highly allusive and frequently resist being confined to one meaning. One important function of 'exegesis' is the exposition of that which is enigmatic and capable of various meanings. Allusive texts which cannot be easily pinned down, and where there is room for difference within the 'play' of the text there is required a different kind of exegetical method, which is open to difference and facilitates the full use of the space offered by the text.<sup>7</sup> Most of the biblical writings are collections, whose discrete elements have been able to 'rouze the faculties to act' in ways which are without parallel in Western civilization. The kaleidoscopic effects of this process demand a central place in exegesis rather than as an occasional fanciful appendix once the exegetical task is done. For too long biblical scholarship has been determined by a synchronic perspective (whether in the form of a text-orientated approach or a concern to juxtapose the biblical texts, almost exclusively, with texts with which they are synchronous, in antiquity). A truly diachronic perspective would give as much attention to the whole gamut of the effects through history, in

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<sup>7</sup> This is suggested by Daniel Patte in Ethics of Biblical Interpretation: A Reevaluation (Louisville: WJK, 1995).

different media, and in non-dominant sources, in order better to appreciate the remarkably diverse forms and of exegesis which are too often neglected by the modern theological academy.