

The Role of Reception Theory, Reader-Response Criticism and/or Impact History in the Study of the Bible: Definition and Evaluation

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The three terms in my title are all about reception: readers as opposed to authors, what happened to the texts after the authors had finished with them as opposed to what was in their mind or what was going on around them when they wrote them. Although the terms are relatively new, the importance of reception in the analysis of literary texts was appreciated already in ancient Greece. Rhetoric after all is the art of persuasion and is very much concerned with the effect a text has on its readers. It refers to all those literary devices designed to get the reader or listener to respond to a text in various ways. It involves psychology as Plato saw when he warned against letting people read literature that might arouse in them emotions that are difficult to control. Aristotle too saw the psychological effect that literature can have on people, although in his analysis of the cathartic effect of Greek tragedy on audiences, the effect was more benign: they feel calmer, more relaxed and satisfied at the end of the evening. Nor is this emphasis on reception restricted to the study of literature. Businesses spend millions on consumer research to analyse the effect marketing strategies have on their customers. The success of films is measured by box office returns, and television programmes are judged by their share of the potential viewing public.

So attention to the reception of a text is not new. What is new is the terminology. The term reception theory itself or *Rezeptionsaesthetik* goes back to the Sixties and to the Konstanz School of literary studies. It is more or less the German equivalent of the preferred American term "Reader-Response Criticism" and is particularly associated with the name of Hans Robert Jauss whose book *Towards an Aesthetic of Reception* appeared in 1982. I'll come back to Jauss later. What is also new is the notion that the reception of a text is more important than the text itself, and even that a text doesn't really exist until somebody reads it. "The bare text is mute". It is like the philosophers' old question: If a tree falls in the forest and no-one hears it, does it make a sound? A text without a reader has no meaning. It is the readers of a text that give it meaning. In a sense the reader creates the text as much as the author does. The role of the reader as creator was a new concept and that is one of the concepts underlying the Blackwells Series.

The radical notion that a text without a reader doesn't really exist was a reaction to formalism, to the idea that a text has a single meaning which it is our task as

literary critics or interpreters to discover. It was a swing from one extreme to another, a swing away from the single minded preoccupation with the text, however sacred, to a concentration on its readers. I need hardly point out how relevant this is to biblical studies which has been totally dominated for centuries by the historical critical assumption that research is about getting as near as possible to the one and only original meaning of the text. One of the pioneers in this field Stanley Fish, author of *Is there a Text in this Class?* put it this way: “meaning is what happens to readers during the reading process”. So to discover the meaning of a text, a new emphasis is required on the reading process and the interaction between reader and text.

Opponents of reception theory of course maintain that all this leads to complete subjectivity. But here again it has become increasingly evident to many, since Einstein’s theory of relativity, that there is no such thing as an objective fact. According to the philosopher Thomas Kuhn, for example, even so-called scientific facts depend on the observer’s frame of reference. The “spin” that politicians put on every thing, is just one more example of how it is virtually impossible to get anywhere near objective facts - let alone one single meaning of a text describing those facts. So these days it is very hard to argue that a text can have one single objective meaning. What the Church or biblical critics call the original meaning of the text is often arrived at by a route that has now been exposed, by feminist, postcolonial critics and others, to be as subjective as any other meaning. The quest for objective history has surely now been finally discredited. I was very encouraged to find, by the way, that Italian schoolchildren of my own son’s age, that is to say, 12, learn history from a book entitled *La Storia e il suo racconto* (“History and its Narration”).

There are obvious problems for traditional biblical scholars coming up against this part of the theory. The suggestion that there is no such thing as an autonomous text goes right against all that historical criticism has stood for for three or four centuries, though Bultmann’s famous essay went some way towards convincing them that “interpretation without presuppositions is impossible”. When we recognize that everyone comes to the text with presuppositions, even the most objective historical critic – I’m tempted to say *especially* the most objective historical critic - the emphasis immediately switches, partially at any rate, from the text to its reader. The theory that the text isn’t there if there is no-one reading it, does not really exist on its own, might also at first sight seem to be a problem for the doctrine of sola scriptura and reformation calls to go back to the Bible. What do they mean if the Bible does not really exist? Again a moment’s thought shows that both the orthodox Catholic doctrine of scripture which cannot be interpreted on its

own, without the Church, and Calvin's notion of the "inner testimony of the Holy Spirit", essential to the process of reading scripture, were early pieces of reception theory, motivated by a concern for authority.

The main problem for biblical scholars, however, is the idea that readers are more important than the text. There are plenty of examples of biblical interpreters seeing their work as a dialogue with the text, an encounter with the text, a bipolar process, or in the case of the SBL Romans consultation a tripolar activity – text, believers' life, believers' faith. Commentaries of all types, from every part of the denominational spectrum, focus on the text, whereas according to reception theory the focus must rather be on the readers and what they make or have made of the text. In reading a commentary on a text, we hear the voices of its readers (including the author of the commentary) far more clearly than the voice of its author. That is what biblical critics have found hard to swallow. But if there are any merits in reception theory – and I hope I have already shown there are – then we must at least look carefully at the following questions: (1) who is reading the text? (2) what kind of baggage are they carrying when they come to the text – what presuppositions? (3) what do they make of the text? and (4) what effect does the text have on them?

(1) **Who are the readers?** Wolfgang Iser, best known for his books *The Implied Reader* (1974) and *The Act of Reading* (1978), had in mind a fairly sophisticated literary audience who contribute to the understanding of the text by, for example, filling in gaps left by the author and explaining things that are not clear. He is talking about the readers of English prose fiction from Bunyan (17c) to Becket (20c). If we translated this into biblical research, we would probably be thinking of the professional guild of biblical scholars. Stanley Fish coined the term "interpretive community" for this phenomenon. In practice texts for the most part have a fairly clearly defined readership. Publishers usually ask authors to predict who will read their book, not as individuals of course, but as "interpretive communities", biblical scholars, students of English literature, theologians or the like, and then authors write with a particular "implied reader" or "interpretive community" in mind.

Another important set of readers or interpretive community is the Church. I mentioned the SBL "Romans through History" Consultation which defines its readership in terms of Christian faith and visualises a believing interpretive community, distinct from the professional guild of NT scholars, which I suppose is more or less coterminous with the SNTS. In fact most members of the guild are also members of a faith community though by no means all.

There are notable NT scholars who are not members of a Christian faith community, like Ed Sanders, Geza Vermes and the present secretary of SNTS, Bill Telford: they make up a definable interpretive community, smaller than the others, but one which, in its interaction with the text, has discovered just as much meaning as the larger community.

Iser, Fish and others have been criticised, in the same way as most specialist biblical scholars, for excluding implicitly or explicitly the ordinary flesh and blood non-specialist reader of the text. For commercial purposes it is the ordinary reader that matters most because there are always going to be more of them than there are members of any specialist group, and there are nowadays hundreds of surveys of what ordinary people think or believe about everything from George Bush to soap powder. One of the striking things about biblical research over the last two or three decades is the interest being shown in ordinary people. There was the publication in Spanish and Portuguese of readings collected from base communities in Latin America and taken very seriously by scholars like Gustavo Gutierrez and Jan Sobrino. Much of that work was subsequently translated into other European languages and widely read. More recently there have appeared volumes like Sugirtharajah's *Voices from the Margin* and *The Bible in Africa* by Gerald West and Musa Dube. In the case of the Church, it must be said that the Church is a community made up of only a minority of specialist scholars, and a vast majority of ordinary people who read the biblical text, or at any rate regularly listen to it being read to them during the liturgy. What they make of the text is often as interesting as what the scholars are saying, but till now almost totally neglected.

Finally we come to one of the most important aspects of reception, its historical dimension. The same interpretive community, e.g. professional guild, in one century may clearly be very different from its equivalent in another: the biblical scholars of the 4th century CE very different from those of the 20th century. If we are to take the reception of the text as the key to its meaning, then we must take account of its reception in many contexts not just in our own time but in other historical periods. The term *contextualization* from Firthian linguistics is a useful one in that it stresses the need to be aware of the fact that texts, especially for obvious reasons, sacred texts, have been read, interpreted and applied, that is, contextualized, in countless different social, religious, political situations down through history. Another term incidentally that focuses on the historical dimension of reception, though keeping the text in the centre of the picture rather than the reader, is "afterlife". Yvonne Sherwood's wonderful study of Jonah has the title *A Biblical Text and its*

Afterlives. The Survival of Jonah in Western Culture (2000). The historical dimension was especially important for Jauss to whom, as I mentioned above, we owe the term *Receptionsaesthetik* itself. He was a student of Gadamer at Heidelberg and it was from him that Jauss learned the importance of history, as well as his appreciation of the relationship between self-enclosed literary structures and their effect or impact (*Wirkung*) on society. Gadamer's famous term *Wirkungsgeschichte*, which a Church Historian friend of mine translated as "impact" history, was taken very seriously by Jauss. Gadamer himself did not want the term to be applied to a new branch of literary criticism, though in biblical research it has become one - as Chris for one demonstrates in his title. However that may be, Jauss saw the need to compare the critical responses of readers of one period with those of another. He examined examples of how the same text could be hailed as great literature in one period and rejected as sentimental rubbish in another. To explain this historical phenomenon he introduced the notion of a "horizon of expectation" *Erwartungshorizont*, which varies from one period and, we might add, from one interpretive community to another.

(2) **Their Presuppositions.** This brings me to the second question we must ask if we want to focus on the reception of a text: what kind of baggage do readers bring with them when they approach the text? What kind of presuppositions, what kind of "horizons of expectation" do they have? Jauss analysed the responses to a number of English literary works over a period of 300 years and tried to use what he found to establish the meaning of the text. His conclusion was, predictably, that no text has any one single meaning, though he suggests that some kind of dialogue between past and present, some kind of fusing of the horizons might be possible.

When it comes to analysing reader's presuppositions in greater detail, whether as individuals or as a group as an interpretive community, there are various approaches. I mentioned already the SBL Romans through History Consultation method. For them the main issue was a theological or confessional one: for them the readers bring with them a religious faith, their "horizon of expectation" in other words is a Christian one. I remember very vividly hearing the great Srilankan missionary – missionary to England that is to say - Daniel T.Niles, saying that when you meet someone for the first time, whether in Muslim Africa or Buddhist Tibet or pagan England, you should expect to find Christ there already, you should expect to hear his voice in the language of the people. In an ancient parallel to this, early Christian commentators, to the embarrassment of their Jewish contemporaries, expected to find Christ in the Hebrew Bible, or at any rate, in its Greek and Latin

versions. Mediaeval examples abound: in art and literature the woman with her heel on the serpent's head in Genesis 3 is identified with the Virgin Mary stamping out sin and the Servant of the Lord in Isaiah 40-55 is almost universally identified with Christ. And this is not only an ancient and mediaeval phenomenon: George A. F. Knight sought to do the same thing in books like *A Christian Theology of the Old Testament* (1959) and *Ruth and Jonah. The Gospel in the Old Testament* (1966). They are good illustrations of Jauss's concept of "horizons of expectation", essential to his reception theory. Another set of presuppositions which operates in almost all the early Jewish literature, including the Dead Sea Scrolls and the New Testament, was the conviction that sacred scripture must speak to the present and encouraged the use of Hellenistic methods (e.g. allegory, etymology, gematria) to achieve this.

Modern examples would include feminism, liberation theology, postcolonialism and black theology, which in many ways have transformed biblical studies. Within this group are readers who read "against the grain", or *Resisting Readers*, as Judith Fetterley called them in her important book on feminist approaches to literature, whose presuppositions are strong enough to do something to the text that had not been done before. Hence the enormous heuristic value of much feminist criticism. Less overtly acknowledged are personal experiences which undoubtedly shape the way people read texts. I mentioned the influence of Gadamer on Jauss: there are plenty of other examples of students reacting one way or another to their teachers. Commentators with the experience of the excitement of hands-on archeological experience belong to another category, in the case of Hebrew Bible commentaries a very large and influential category. As an example of a slightly different kind I would like to mention the Scottish scholar John Gray, author of many books including *Archaeology and the Old Testament World* (1962), *The Canaanites* (1964), and commentaries on *Joshua, Judges and Ruth* (1967) and *1 and 2 Kings* (1970, 1977). All of these are peppered with references to the languages, cultures and topography of modern Palestine, where he served in the British Police Force: decisions on which of various interpretations he prefers are often quite obviously influenced by his war-time experiences. I also remember G.R.Driver explaining a crux in the Book of Job by reference to an incident he witnessed once in Syria.

A very important distinction has to be drawn between such examples of the influence of personal experience on readers of the text, and the more political presuppositions just mentioned. Thanks to the influence of feminism, liberation theology, postcolonialism and other ideologies, it has become normal practice for writers at the beginning to declare their bias. This means of course that the reader can put the book down if he doesn't agree. But it also

means that the author is free to say the text means whatever she wants it to mean, provided no claim is made that the meaning is the original meaning or the only meaning or anything other than the meaning arrived at by a reader with her particular presuppositions. It would be interesting to imagine how Gerhard von Rad or William Foxwell Albright or G. R. Driver or John Gray would have handled such a requirement: not that they would ever have thought it necessary or even desirable.

Finally among modern analysts of reader response perhaps none is more fully worked out than the psycho-analytical approach of Norman Holland in *The dynamics of literary response* (1968) and *Readers Reading* (1975). Individual interpretations are shaped by each person's "identity theme", a constant, invariant, which in ego psychology is what defines a person's character. All of us, as we read, use the literary work to replicate ourselves, he says, and he identifies four modalities contained in the acronym DEFT: defense mechanisms (to avoid anxiety for example), expectations (like Jauss's), fantasies (on the text) and transformations (transforming the various parts of the reading experience into a meaningful whole). Thus the process creates a satisfying unity in the mind of the reader, in tune with his personality, a unity not in the text but created by the reader in his response to it. Holland has been criticised for being too dogmatic, for example, about the unchanging constant nature of every person's identity theme. For my part I'm not entirely sure that I understand him. But I do think his DEFT analysis of individual reader-response could be of some use, for instance, in explaining where a particular interpretation comes from. It might be interesting, for example, to apply his analysis to some of the more eccentric suggestions of scholars like Robert Eisler or C.C.Torrey.

(3) **The Meaning.** What do the readers make of the text? It is fundamental to reception theory that readers contribute something to the meaning of the text. They have a creative role in the process, parallel to that of the author, some say, more important than that of the author because in the case of most literature, including the Bible, we do not have access to the author's mind except through the text which can only be perceived by its readers. I hope I have illustrated already how, even the most professional, scientific, objective, scholarly, critical commentator on the text is none the less a reader like any other reader, part of the reception process, carrying all kinds of baggage with him and creating the text's meaning in a way fundamentally no different from other readers.

How is meaning created then? Iser's *Implied Reader* faces certain challenges

when reading a text and has to work out strategies to cope with them, thereby creating meaning. Faced with gaps in the narrative, *Leerstellen*, for example, the reader instinctively seeks to fill them in. Who is God talking to in Genesis 1 when he says, “Now let us create humankind”? Who is he talking to in Isaiah 40 when he says (using a plural imperative): “Comfort my people!”? Why is Isaac not mentioned after the sacrifice in Genesis 22 (He doesn’t appear again for two chapters)? Jewish midrash answers these questions creatively, and provides a marvellous example of the creative reader - so what’s new? What reception critics want to emphasize is that the creative responses of ancient Jewish readers are no more and no less important than the responses of modern critical readers, although of course rejected as unscholarly, naïve and altogether too creative by the professionals. Filling in the gaps in this way, they say, creates a new text, different from the original. But what we must remember is that so do the historical critical methods used by the professionals. They ask different questions, find challenges in different places, but in their interaction with the text, they too create something new that wasn’t there before.

Let us look another of Iser’s challenges posed by texts to their readers, *Unbestimmtheitsstellen* places where things are unclear. Here the Bible like any other ancient text has innumerable examples, for one thing because it was written long ago, in a world very different from our own, and in languages or language varieties which are no longer spoken today. It was written with readers in mind who were very different, in almost every respect, from people like ourselves, living in the modern world. In such circumstances, every reader or interpretive community involved in the reading process, devises their own strategy for handling these obscurities or difficulties. An example I worked on myself a long time ago was the variation in the word used to describe Jonah’s big fish: it appears three times as masc. *dag* and once as feminine *dagah*. Modern critical readers ignore the variation, or explain it as a scribal error. The rabbis found two separate fishes in the text, one male and one female, which makes an even more interesting story. Another option was to find in the feminine, not a distinction of gender, but of style or nuance: it was the same fish but in the verse introducing Jonah’s Psalm, where he is described as praying in its belly, the feminine form was selected to highlight the miraculous or legendary nature of the fish. To deal with the variation, these three reader-responses devise strategies - three very different ones based on, respectively, textual criticism, fantasy and stylistics.

What has been extraordinarily interesting in the last decade or two is the way in which parallels are found between modern readers of the biblical text -

including the commentators - and the pre-critical readers such as the authors of Jewish midrash. Robert Alter is a good example of how sensitive literary critical insights can combine with a good knowledge of ancient and mediaeval readings of the text to produce rich and convincing modern critical readings. Christian scholars have tended to be far less informed about patristic, rabbinic and mediaeval literature, both Jewish and Christian, than their Jewish colleagues. For example, Phyllis Tribble's condemnation of Jephthah for sacrificing his daughter to fulfil a vow, could have been strengthened in an interesting way if she had been able to refer to the long history of Jewish condemnations of the man. Needless to say the Blackwells series is specifically designed to rectify that situation by presenting as many readings of each text, both Jewish and Christian, ancient, mediaeval and modern, as space will allow.

(4) **The Impact.** We come to the last of the questions reception theorists ask about readers: what effect does the text have on them? This is what the term *Wirkungsgeschichte* is about, the history of the impact of the text on people. I would like to make three points about this to conclude the first and longest part of my paper. (a) *Wirkungsgeschichte* was the theme of a conference on "The Sociology of Sacred Texts" held at my old university (also Chris's by the way), the University of Newcastle upon Tyne in 1991. It focused on the notion that what texts do is often more important than what they say or mean and that therefore methods and strategies have to be designed to collect and analyse data on the effect of texts on their readers. Perhaps the aim of the conference might have been better expressed if this opposition between what texts do and what they mean had been played down: where the emphasis is on the interaction between text and reader, as we have seen, what a text does is the same thing as what it means. However that may be, the conference nicely epitomized a shift from literary criticism to the social sciences, from the study of texts to the study of social history, and from the study of ancient history as the one and only relevant context of the texts, to the study of their innumerable other contextualizations in history right down to the present.

(b) Another way into the topic is through the insights of rhetoric. We already referred to the teaching of ancient Greek rhetoric as an example of a system that places the emphasis on the effect texts (or speeches) have on their readers (or listeners). Wayne Booth would not describe himself as a reader-response critic but his most influential book *The Rhetoric of Fiction* (1963) is undoubtedly an excellent example of an audience-orientated approach to understanding literature, and indeed as early as 1975 Frank Kermode described him as the father of much reader-orientated criticism. He has been particularly popular

among biblical, especially NT scholars, for some of whom *The Rhetoric of Fiction* and also his subsequent *Rhetoric of Irony* (1974) have almost become sacred texts. Like Plato he appreciated the ethical dimension of the effect texts have on their readers and this has become a major theme in biblical studies. Ethical issues raised by particular readings of the Bible are a central concern, for example, in ideological criticism, liberation theology, feminism, womanism, black theology, postcolonialism and so on. Some readings have a benign effect on their readers, others encourage racism or colonial oppression or the like, and there are countless examples of each down through history. Awareness of this fact, obvious as it is, came as something entirely new to many biblical scholars, and indeed to many unacceptable as a subject for serious study.

(c) The last point on the impact of the text on its readers and users, concerns pedagogy. Wayne Booth already appreciated the pedagogical implications of his approach. Again his preference for the term rhetoric makes this clear. Unlike the Implied Reader of Iser and others, the readers envisaged by Wayne Booth, who was a committed teacher, included ordinary people, non-specialists whose opinions on the meaning of the text were as important as those of the literary experts. The ideological critics take this a step further. For them it is a political imperative, on the one hand, to ensure that readers of the Bible, including biblical scholars, are aware of what they are doing, and, on the other, to enable people, especially the marginalized and oppressed, to read the bible in a way that does not disadvantage them. One of the central aims of our series is to enable people to read the text with a new set of skills and a new appreciation of what they are doing.

Given that all I have been talking about is central to the new Blackwells Series, I want to end with a few comments on the value of the whole enterprise. I hope by now the value of reading other people's interpretations has become self-evident. Nevertheless there are still those who consider it a waste of time. It is still quite common to come across statements like "but that is a late interpretation" (i.e. not to be taken seriously by scholars). Others say we are hebraists or ancient historians or textual critics: how can we be expected to take an interest in, let alone try to handle in a scholarly way, the patristic literature or mediaeval iconography or reformation theology or 19th century music or 20th century politics or all of these? Leave it to the patristics people, art historians, theologians, etc. Another objection concerns the sheer scale of the operation. How on earth can you ever do justice to 2000 years of reception history?

What is the value of reception history? It is undoubtedly true that there has recently been a huge new interest in reception-history. Since 1990 there has been a veritable deluge of studies of the afterlives of biblical texts: from single passages like the Garden of Eden and the Flood story, to whole books like my own study of Isaiah, and Margarita's Stocker's study of *Judith, Sexual Warrior. Women and Power in Western Culture* (1998). There are also several reference works: as well as the *Dictionaries of Biblical Interpretation* mentioned above, there is David Jeffrey's *Dictionary of Biblical Tradition in English Literature* (1992). There are two major new series dedicated to publishing patristic interpretations of the Bible. Bill Farmer's recently published one volume *International Catholic Bible Commentary* (1998) states as one of its aims to include examples of the reception history of every text. So our new series is very much in tune with current developments and should provide an ideal vehicle in which to present the fruits of all this recent research in an accessible commentary format, closely related to the text.

Secondly, although it may seem almost too obvious to mention, the afterlife of the Bible has been infinitely more influential, in every way - theologically, politically, culturally and aesthetically - than its ancient near-eastern prehistory. In my college days, I worked in one part of the library, along side one group of students, while anyone with an interest in theology or church history or homiletics or liturgy or contemporary British society or the rest of the world, worked in another. There was really very little communication between Biblical scholarship and the rest of the curriculum. Rabbinic and patristic interpretations were considered "late" and therefore inferior and not taken seriously. We were not encouraged to quote Luther or Milton or Brahms or Karl Barth. Indeed we were encouraged to criticize theologians and preachers for their erroneous understanding of the Bible. We who were experts in Hebrew and Ugaritic and biblical archaeology always knew better. Mercifully that situation has changed, as we have seen, and an increasing number of biblical experts now take seriously the impact of the Bible on its readers down to the present day. What we want to do is to ensure that that change of emphasis is reflected in the commentaries, the basic tools by means of which readers of the Bible first study the text.

A third reason concerns the meaning of the text. When confronted with a difficult text, I was trained to go first to the 19th and 20th century commentaries: What do the big German scholars say? I later discovered that it is also possible, and indeed very productive, to start (like every Jewish schoolboy) by asking What does Rashi say? And going on to see how the

Reformers explained it, how Milton used it, what role it plays in hymns and sermons. Often, indeed usually, I found in those alternative sources, subtle insights into the dynamic of the text, its associations and overtones, entirely missed in the majority of standard commentaries and reference works. This follows directly from our previous discussion. Readings give meaning to texts. In Stanley Fish's words "meaning is what happens to readers during the reading process". You, as another reader, may not agree with a particular reading, but it seems to me to be absolutely clear that by listening to a variety of readings, from a variety of contexts, you are in a better position to evaluate each reading - whatever criterion you use, ethical, aesthetic, ideological, theological, historical critical. Some readings you may decide are more irresponsible, more unbiblical than others, and the heightened awareness of the many meanings that a text has when read by individuals and interpretive communities down the centuries, has great heuristic value in the process of establishing and evaluating a meaning.

This brings us finally to the question of criteria. On what criteria, if any, can we describe some interpretations as correct and others as wrong? Till now the main criterion for most modern scholars was chronological priority – the more ancient the better, the nearer you get to the original, the nearer you are to the "truth", that objective goal about which we have already spoken at some length. But if chronological priority cannot be used, what other criteria are there? An alternative is the widespread hierarchical assumption that "valid" or "correct" interpretations are normally those of the experts, while those of the uneducated, marginalized, anarchic or eccentric are not to be taken seriously. Again if our aim is to listen to other voices, to let the texts and their readers speak for themselves, then important and influential, for example, mediaeval readings or contemporary, popular readings, have to be heard, and the standard academic historical critical criteria cannot be allowed to dominate or censor.

One possible criterion to which we give some prominence in the series, is a quantitative one: a glance at any index of biblical references shows which texts have had a particularly prominent role to play in a given context: e.g. Isaiah 53.8 in early christological controversy, 11.1 in mediaeval cathedral architecture, 6:9-11 in antisemitic polemic, 40.8 in the Reformation period, 27:12-13 in contemporary millenarianism, 45:15 in post-Holocaust theology, 42.14 in Christian feminism and 61.1 in liberation theology (Sawyer, *The Fifth Gospel* 1996). These deserve special attention insofar as they have played a significant role in history, and we owe it to the text, as well as to our colleagues in other disciplines, to acknowledge that role. Of course this makes no attempt to

evaluate particular readings: modern liberating readings are presented in their own right alongside ancient oppressive readings. Readers of the commentary are left to make up their own minds.

Hans Robert Jauss concluded that it is virtually impossible to arrive at one final critical evaluation of a text, given the multiplicity of readings, each dependent on the reader's own horizon of expectation. This may be an uncomfortable conclusion to reach, so accustomed are we to the modern assumptions that (a) the aim of biblical scholarship is to find one single correct or true meaning, and (b), with all our modern discoveries and techniques, we in the modern world are more likely to achieve that than anyone else in the past. But as we have seen, whether we like it or not, the objectivity of modern scholarship has been questioned, texts have more than one meaning, and different meanings are largely due to differences in the reader's hermeneutical stance or horizon of expectation – whether the reader is a trained hebraist, a renaissance artist or a Mexican peasant. Given the opportunity to consider a variety of different readings of a text, we may evaluate them using aesthetic, theological, ethical, ideological, academic or other criteria, reflecting our own hermeneutical stance. Furthermore, we are mostly members of an interpretive community of some kind where a consensus is reached on what is acceptable, academically and ethically, and what is not.

Let me end now with a quotation from *The Man who shot Liberty Valance*, a famous John Ford Western made in 1962, starring John Wayne, James Stewart and Lee Marvin. When a newspaper reporter finds out that what really happened is different from the legend, he says, “It ain’t news. This is the West. When the legend becomes the fact, print the legend.” This is not the west and we are not just talking about legends. Moreover, as Daniel Boyarin puts it, “the ground zero of reading, of theory is how many dead bodies are left at the other end of the hermeneutical process, how many spirits impoverished and how many filled”. Interpretation of the Bible always matters in a way that doesn’t apply to cowboy films. But there is a sense in which our series does take the advice of that reporter seriously. Modern biblical scholars till now have seen their role as a largely negative one. It was their role to say ‘That’s not what really happened....that’s not what the original Hebrew means...’ In so doing they have undervalued centuries of reception history, 2000 years of creative interaction between text and reader which has left us with a rich source of material on the meaning of the Bible. It is surely time to redress the balance and, even though we know quite well that it is different from the fact, “print the legend”.

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