CHAPTER 2 The current debates

The intention in this chapter is to survey some of the current debates in biblical hermeneutics: any hermeneutic framework I propose will need to take a stance with regard to them.[1]

2.1 Christianity and Hermeneutics

One of the most fundamental sets of issues revolves around Christian commitment. That is to say, what is the relationship between Christian faith, or membership of the (or a) Christian community, and biblical hermeneutics?

2.1.1 Biblical hermeneutics and General hermeneutics

At an abstract level the question may be posed: is Biblical hermeneutics a special case of a more general hermeneutics, or is it a separate study requiring its own theory? Jeanrond, for example,[2] begins with a general hermeneutic, and then moves to Biblical hermeneutics.[3] Indeed, he takes the position that hermeneutics (that is, the study of how we understand anything) is the most general study of all, underlying all fields of human knowledge. Watson, on the other hand, takes the view[4] that biblical hermeneutics is not an exercise in general hermeneutics, and goes on to require membership of the Christian community in its practitioners, as does Webster.[5] The Bible, Watson

1 Vanhoozer : Is there a meaning in this text? (Apollos 1998) p 138 Vanhoozer suggests that all hermeneutical disputes are epistemological and ethical ; my survey would appear to confirm that.

2 Jeanrond: Text and Interpretation as Categories of Theological Thinking (Gill and Macmillan 1988)

3 Though he criticises those who move too quickly from a general hermeneutic to interpret the Bible, "thereby allowing the expected result of our interpretative efforts to structure the nature of interpretation itself." Jeanrond :Theological Hermeneutics (Macmillan 1991) p 161

4 F Watson: Text, Church and World (1994) p vii

5 "At its simplest, my proposal is that the Christian activity of reading the Bible is most properly (that is Christianly) understood as a spiritual affair, and accordingly as a matter for theological description. That is to say, a Christian description of the Christian reading of the Bible will be the kind of description which talks of God and therefore talks of all other realities *sub specie divinitatis*." Webster: "Hermeneutics in Modern Theology: Some Doctrinal Reflections" Scottish Journal of Theology vol 51 No 3 p 307 see also p 338

argues, makes claims about itself; to study it without attending to those claims is to make a nonsense of it.[6] Vanhoozer[7] even suggests that general hermeneutics (at least in its response to post-modernism) is dependent on (a subset of) Christian hermeneutics. He argues that the 'death of God' leads to the 'death of the author,' and so to the end of determinate meaning; that deconstruction is an attack on metaphysics: attempts to counter this must be truly theological in nature.

Clearly what is not in contention is that the Bible is both product, and producer, of the Christian community. Part of what is at stake in this abstract question (about the relation of Biblical hermeneutics to general hermeneutics) is rather the position of theological study in the academy. The story is well-known: insofar as Biblical studies has had to compete for status and resources within the academic community, there has been a tendency for it to operate like other disciplines studying ancient texts: it has eschewed faith questions and pursued historical-critical questions only. Perhaps even more importantly, it has needed to demonstrate its independence from the Church.[8] These have led to the equally well-discussed gap between biblical studies and other areas of theological study, many of which (doctrine, for example) would be difficult to do without a Christian commitment. There is also the gap between New Testament Biblical studies and Old Testament / Hebrew Bible studies: Watson blames this gap too on the marginalisation of theological concerns,[9] as does Bockmuehl.[10] (There is an irony here, of course, in that Theology, the Queen of Sciences, more or less gave birth to some of the 'literary' disciplines of the secular academy: textual criticism and the other historical critical methods, even hermeneutics itself.)

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6 Though Josipovici points out that the central paradox is that the Bible asks to be taken as historical truth, yet loses everything that is distinctive if we try to substitute history for its own mode of narration. Josipovici : The Book of God (Yale University Press 1988) p 14

7 Vanhoozer: Is there a meaning in this text? (Apollos 1998) p 414

8 Watson : Text, Church and World (T & T Clark 1994) p 7
Jeanrond : "After Hermeneutics" in ed Watson The Open Text (SCM 1993) pp 86 ff

9 Watson: Text and Truth (T & T Clark 1997) pp 5, 6

10 see Bockmuehl: 'To be or not to be': The possible futures of New Testament Scholarship" : in Scottish Journal of Theology 1998 vol 51 No 3 pp 271-275 for a description of the fragmentation of scholarship

Another way of putting this question at the heart of the hermeneutic debate is: Is the Bible a book like any other, or is it different?[11] If it is a book like any other, it can be studied like any other: its text can be dissected, its historical accuracy analysed, its literary merits assessed, its ethics judged. Clearly in some respects it has unique qualities: it is not a single book but a collection of quite disparate books bound together, each book probably having several editors and in some cases more than one author, being produced over a number of years – or even decades or longer, and coming out of, and itself playing a part in forming, a community. There are few enough books of which these things could be said, but in themselves they are not enough to set the Bible completely apart. Those hermeneuts who are unwilling to discuss the relationship between the Bible and God will inevitably treat the Bible as any other book. Watson argues for a middle way: "We must search for a conceptuality which mediates between ecclesial and non-ecclesial spheres and show how an understanding of the gospels as historiography neither assumes nor precludes acceptance of basic Christian truths."[12]

Incidentally, asserting that the Bible and the Christian community have an organic relationship does not imply that non-Christians cannot read the Bible, or ask questions about its interpretation. It does mean that faith commitment matters, that the answers of the faithful may be different. But it should be remembered that the non-Christian world has played a part in reviewing Christian interpretations, and reshaping them. The thinking of non-Christians can be recognised as valid by the Christian community. Would the ordination of women have happened without the feminist movement outside the Church? The Green movement and environmental / ecological concerns have been given energy both from within and without the Church.

Relating the maps of Chapter 1 to this area of debate (and to the debate on Authority) produces an interesting insight. Those who are arguing most strongly for the Bible to be read Christianly are actually focusing on the reader – that is to say they are behaving like reader-oriented theorists – when actually they had been hoping to emphasise the qualities within the Bible. However, no book has a character and authority which can impress themselves on an unwilling reader.

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11 Josipovici : The Book of God (Yale University Press 1988) argues that the difference between the Bible and other books is hard to articulate. see pp 6 f

12 Watson: Text and Truth (T & T Clark 1997) p 51

2.1.2 Authority

Consideration of the relationship between God and the Bible leads to questions about inspiration[13] and authority. Does doctrine have to be demonstrable from, or only compatible with, the Bible? To put it another way, is the Bible's authority negative – that is, it sets limits without prescribing within those limits, only marking what cannot be said; or positive – that is, it prescribes what can be said and no more;[14] or perhaps typical – that is, it suggests trends which are indicative for Christian doctrine and ethics? Are we really, as Barton puts it, and answers more or less negatively,[15] "People of the Book"? Watson, on the other hand, argues[16] for Christianity's reliance on written texts. The two views are not simple opposites: Watson is reacting to a marginalisation of the text, where Barton is arguing against over-reliance on it. Carroll even goes further than Barton, taking a pessimistic view about the possibility of 'Biblical Christianity': "The central problem of 'Biblical Christianity' as I see it is this: Christianity is a process to which parts of the Bible contributed, but is not itself the product of the Bible… What the phrase 'Biblical Christianity' actually describes is a fabulous beast – that is a kind of creature which never existed or could exist – and a grotesquery of the imagination." [17]

In Holy Scripture; Canon, Authority, Criticism[18] Barr observes that Christianity seems to need an authority which is beyond human tampering, and free from error,[19] but then seems to side-step the issue of authority: he writes: 'simply to magnify the authority of the Bible is not to improve in any way the chance that it is understood.'[20] He gives as an example the fact that Jews and Christians of

13 not in fact a subject much discussed by many biblical hermeneuts but see B B Warfield The Inspiration and Authority of the Bible, (Presbyterian and Reformed Press, Nutley, New Jersey 1948) p 422: "By a special supernatural influence of the Holy Ghost, the scared writers have been guided in their writing in such a way, as while their humanity was not superseded, it was so dominated that their words became at the same time the words of God, and thus, in every case and all alike, infallible."

14 A view taken by B B Warfield Revelation and Inspiration, (Oxford University Press 1927) and B B Warfield The Inspiration and Authority of the Bible, (Presbyterian and Reformed Press, Nutley, New Jersey 1948)

15 John Barton: People of the Book? (SPCK 1988)

16 Watson: Text and Truth (T & T Clark 1997) p 1: "For Christian faith and therefore for Christian theology, truth is textually mediated." See below section 2.1.3.3

17 R Carroll, The Wolf in the Sheepfold, (SPCK 1991) p 72

18 James Barr: Holy Scripture; Canon, Authority, Criticism (Oxford University Press 1983)

19 Barr: Holy Scripture (OUP 1983) p 22

20 Barr: Holy Scripture (OUP 1983) p 21

Biblical times had a different attitude to the authority of their (ie the Hebrew) Bible from that ***we*** now have. When we read their treatment of Biblical material, we read back our own attitude and not theirs; the effect is not that Biblical statements are denied, but that their meaning is misunderstood. He suggests too that a person's attitude to Biblical authority is not decisive for salvation[21] - again an argument along the lines of leaving the issue of Biblical authority somewhat undefined and unresolved. He argues for freedom and variety in looking at Scripture. He shows that the stronger the link between doctrine and Scripture, (for example that doctrine must be demonstrable from Scripture, or less strongly that doctrine must be compatible with Scripture) the more problems there will be in developing a truly consistent approach, since Scripture can support a variety of positions; on the other hand a weaker link between the two would need to employ other tests of orthodoxy as well, and would lead to a more coherent and unanimous (and therefore less problematic) exposition. He seems to leave the question of authority as a question of how Biblical material can act upon current theological thinking: the great hermeneutical question is not how to move from an understanding of the historical meaning to a meaning for today, but rather, given the Church's readiness to hear Scripture as the Word of God for today, how is that hearing, that meaning for today, to be modified, balanced, qualified and conditioned by an understanding of the historical meaning?[22]

Barton in People of the Book?[23] argues (along not dissimilar lines) for a diffuse authority for the Bible, and a space between it and the 'Christian faith'.[24] He also shows that problems for Biblical interpretation have come when there has been too close a link between the Bible and Christian doctrine: either the Bible has been made to say things it does not, in order to fit in with the Christian faith, or the Christian faith has lost its freshness and freedom and become legalistic by being tied to a book. Instead we are to see the Bible as a pointer beyond itself to Jesus,[25] as the testimony of a trusted friend, and as a fixed link back to the roots of Christianity. There has been a tendency to give it a final authority (as over against the final authority of the Pope). This should be avoided and we

21 Barr: Holy Scripture (OUP 1983) p 19

22 Barr: Holy Scripture (OUP 1983) p 46

23 John Barton: People of the Book? (SPCK 1988)

24 cf Ricoeur's idea of the distance which is a critical space between a text and its interpreters, a space which allows for interpretation.

25 John Barton: People of the Book? (SPCK 1988) p 85 'the Gospel exists before and apart from any instantiation in the words of the text'

should give to the Bible the negative role of saying what lies outside the authority of the gospel; we should expect there to be a tension between faith and Scripture,[26] for not all in faith will be in Scripture, and not all in Scripture will be part of faith. The Bible is about knowledge (and Barton defends a historical dimension to the Bible as an essential part of its (and the Christian faith's) rootedness), but it is also about challenge.[27] Barton also uses and builds on the idea of a 'classic text,'[28] and looks for example at the Bible as used liturgically to expound his views of its place as normative and authoritative without being finally authoritative in a way which he would call 'Bibliolatry'.

Carroll agrees about the positive tension between a fixed book and the attempt to cope with the different situation of the modern world,[29] although earlier he has suggested that the Bible's role is an auxiliary one, as a source of metaphors and images.[30]

Webster, on the other hand, argues that the text has authority, and judges and addresses us its readers,[31] and Bockmuehl gives it the authority of being our only access to Jesus (through its apostolic witness).[32] Vanhoozer's agenda – hermeneutic realism – is firmly linked to Biblical authority:

> "What is at stake in the debate over the reality and knowability of literal meaning is ultimately biblical authority and, indeed, the ability of any text to address and transform us……. The normativeness of the literal sense is once again under threat, and this in two ways: (1) by the assumption that the text is 'dark' and obscure, an endless labyrinth with no issue; (2) by the assumption that the process of interpretation sets up obstacles – schemes, screens, interests, ideologies – that keep textual meaning perpetually out of reach."[33]

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26 John Barton: People of the Book? (SPCK 1988) p 8

27 John Barton: People of the Book? (SPCK 1988) p 57

28 as developed by T S Eliot: see Barton: People of the Book? (SPCK 1988) pp 32f

29 R Carroll, The Wolf in the Sheepfold, (SPCK 1991) p 144

30 R Carroll, The Wolf in the Sheepfold, (SPCK 1991) p 62

31 Webster: "Hermeneutics in Modern Theology: Some Doctrinal Reflections" Scottish Journal of Theology 1998 vol 51 No 3 p 332

32 Bockmuehl: 'To be or not to be': The possible futures of New Testament Scholarship" : in Scottish Journal of Theology 1998 vol 51 No 3 p 283

33 Vanhoozer: Is there a meaning in this text? (Apollos 1998) p 314 see also eg p 104

2.1.3 Meaning: author, text, context, reader

Another set of vexed questions, central to the debates about hermeneutics, is the relationship of author, text, reader, context (of author and of readers past and present) and meaning. This section relates to the whole of the horizontal axis of the Map in Chapter 1. Although there was a general discussion there, there are some issues specific to the Bible which therefore need to be discussed here.

2.1.3.1 Meaning

Behind this lies a complex philosophical debate about the nature of meaning. One difficulty, for example, about the idea of meaning at all is that it cannot physically be the same thing in marks on paper or variations in air pressure, as it is in a person's head / mind. Another is the question of the relation between language and reality: post-modernists insist that there is no non-linguistic access to reality: every decoding is an encoding. It is therefore nonsense to ask if our language corresponds to reality. Whilst these debates are clearly fundamental, they are apparently irresolvable, and well beyond the scope of this thesis.

Discussions in these areas are related to the determinacy of meaning, which is significant for biblical hermeneutics because of the unique link between the Bible and Christianity. At its simplest (theologians like Vanhoozer and Watson have argued) if the meaning lies chiefly with the author of a text, it will be determinate because of the (usually single – though perhaps not in the case of the Bible) author's will; on the other hand, if it lies chiefly with the reader, it will be indeterminate, because there will be many readers. The dangers of relativism are perceived as the disappearance of meaning as an appropriate concept when the text cannot be abused, and the impossibility of using the Bible in any way as normative either for doctrine or ethics. Even allowing for the meaning to be multi-valued (ie several or even many meanings, but not an infinite number) would greatly weaken the Bible's status as definitive.

Vanhoozer analyses this point very thoroughly: he writes of interpretative dogmatism (claiming a God's eye view); interpretative atheism (disbelief in meaning: interpretation is play); interpretative polytheism (many legitimate views: no super theory attempting to unite them); interpretative

trinitarianism (God as author, message and power of reception, with limited plurality, harmony rather than conflict, realism in meaning and relative adequacy in interpretation).[34] To these may perhaps be added (from Fish's thinking[35]): interpretative consensus (the community determines).

Of course, the debate here is really about a question of the balance between author, text, and reader. After all, the authors / editors of the Biblical texts, whoever they were, are accorded great status within Christianity (and Judaism) – evangelists and prophets are figures in stained glass windows, evangelists have their own saints' days. The Bible too has great status – it is a book upon which people swear oaths; although no literary critic would suggest doing away with any text altogether, it would be inconceivable to describe a Bible-less Christianity. But for Christians, the reader's response is vital – so that the Bible is appropriated for today, and is not only read but heard.[36]

2.1.3.2 Author

In recent times, the position of the author in some Biblical criticism has perhaps tended to be somewhat marginal. Critics had been warned of the intentional fallacy,[37] and in any case for many (most? all?) Biblical texts it was and is far from clear exactly who the author was or even if such a concept had any meaning; the date and location of composition were equally difficult. In historical-

34 Vanhoozer: Is there a meaning in this text? (Apollos 1998) pp 160 ff see also pp294 ff

35 Stanley Fish : Is There A Text In This Class? The Authority of Interpretive Communities (Harvard University Press, Massachusetts 1980) See above Chapter 1 section 1.4

36 see Bultman: Existence and Faith: Exegesis without presuppositions? (Fontana 1964) pp 350 f "because the text speaks to existence it is never understood in a definitive way. The *existentiell* decision out of which the interpretation emerges cannot be passed on but must be realised anew. This does not mean, of course, that there cannot be continuity in the exegesis of Scripture..... every genuine exegesis that offers itself as a guide is at the same time a question that must always be answered anew and independently. Since the exegete exists historically and must hear the word of Scripture as spoken in his special historical situation, he will always understand the old word anew. Always anew it will tell him who he, man, is and who God is, and he will always have to express this word in a new conceptuality. Thus it is true also of Scripture that it only is what it is with its history and its future."

37 The intentional fallacy was a significant objection to the idea of authorial intent, which argued that it was a category mistake to confuse author and meaning: the value and meaning of each literary work resided in the text itself: questions about the author were distractions. W K Wimsatt and M Beardsley: "The Intentional Fallacy" in Wimsatt : The Verbal Icon: Studies in the Meaning of Poetry (University of Kentucky Press 1954)
Vanhoozer analyses and dismantles the intentional fallacy into four distinct fallacies: (i) that the author's intention is a psychological question and, like his/her biography, irrelevant; (ii) that the author's intention is at least partly unconscious or subconscious; (iii) that author's intention is a mental phenomenon which cannot be identified with the meaning of the text which is a verbal phenomenon; (iv) that the author's meaning is only one among many meanings. see: Vanhoozer: Is there a meaning in this text? (Apollos 1998) pp 82-85

critical methods the pericope is quite a large unit of meaning: at this level of fragmentation the author begins to disappear.

Even if the position of post-modern critics - that discussion of the author's intention is indeterminate, since it is speculative, and also irrelevant, since the text is detached from the author – is rejected, there are some further objections to authorial intent which relate particularly to the Bible. What happens to the concept of authorial intent when there is more than one author, or an author and several editors, or perhaps a whole community? What about the problem of a text which does not preserve the author's final intent – perhaps because the text is corrupt, or because the author changed his/her mind? What if the author 'spoke more truly than s/he knew' because of divine inspiration? What about when the author's intended meaning is demonstrably wrong?[38] None of these problems is insurmountable, but they do suggest areas of debate.

It has therefore been a new trend for writers like Watson[39] and Vanhoozer to look at authorial intent as essential to guarantee determinate meaning.

Thisleton, Watson, and Vanhoozer, all rely on speech-act theory[40] which, to over-simplify it, takes the apparently pragmatic view that if someone says something, they must mean something: that meaning is present in their words and is apprehendable by others.[41] Speech-act theory, rooted in the examination of ordinary language in use, begins with the observation that people do things through and with words: the words of a promise are the promise; when a couple standing in front of a priest say, "I, N take you M… " they marry each other. Searle suggests five different basic kinds of acts: "we tell people things, we try to get them to do things, we commit ourselves to doing things, we express our feelings and attitudes, and we bring about changes through our utterances. Often we do more than one of these at once in the same utterance.."[42] We are able to do these things because

38 A classic example here might be William Golding, in Lord of the Flies: (Faber & Faber 1954), where Piggy's glasses, which correct for short sight, could not be used to start a fire – so would not have been fought over! A Biblical example might relate to descriptions of madness as demon possession – though of course not everyone would agree.

39 Watson: Text and Truth (T & T Clark 1997) p 112

40 as enunciated, for example, by Searle Expression and Meaning : Studies in the Theory of Speech Acts (Cambridge University Press 1979) and J L Austin : How to Do Things with Words (Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts 1975)

41 A possible minor weakness is that Austin's development of it looks only at serious, well-intentioned utterances: it is Derrida who looks at non-serious utterances! see Vanhoozer : Is there a meaning in this text? (Apollos 1998) p 211

42 Searle: Expression and Meaning : Studies in the Theory of Speech Acts (Cambridge University Press 1979) p 29

language is governed by rules; we learn these rules, and the contexts in which they operate. Communication is seen as the primary purpose of language – and so Thisleton is able to point out that speech-act theory re-instates personal agency.[43]

Derrida attacked speech-act theory by pointing out that it privileged speech (presence) over writing (absence):[44] that is, it only works if the communicative agent is present and able to exercise control, but authors cannot control their texts. Searle counters these attacks by arguing that although there cannot be certainty, there can still be knowledge. Vanhoozer counters them with the theological claim that language is God-designed; God guarantees it.[45]

Then, authors are communicative agents, and text is the result (fixed in writing) of a communicative action;[46] it embodies communicative intent. Texts have meaning because behind them stand the intentions of their authors to communicate something.[47] One implication of this is that authors must write in good faith – they must stand by their words. Vanhoozer seems in places to allow a distinction between what the author intended, and what the text means – but argues that the fact that the author meant something implies that the text means something: authorial intent guarantees hermeneutic realism.

A nuance to the concept of authorial intent, suggested, for example by Bauckham,[48] is that of a competent contemporary (generalised) reader – of whom it could be asked, 'what would such a person have understood from this text?' Then again, the element of speculation in answers to this question might be less than post-modernists would argue, and some would argue that a consensus of scholarship could emerge. A yet further nuance lies in the idea of the "inferred author" – a plausible

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43 Thiselton : "Speech Act Theory and the claim that God speaks" in Scottish Journal of Theology vol 50 No 1 : p 97
Vanhoozer also points out that it rehabilitates ordinary language : Is there a meaning in this text? (Apollos 1998) pp 205 ff

44 Derrida: "Signature Event Context" : in Glyph 1 (1977) pp 172 – 197 quoted by Vanhoozer: Is there a meaning in this text? (Apollos 1998) p 211
Perhaps a Theological critique, looking at the spoken and written word, in relation to the living Word, would be fruitful.

45 Vanhoozer: Is there a meaning in this text? (Apollos 1998) p 205-214 and p 456: Vanhoozer attributes these ideas to Plantinga and Steiner.

46 Vanhoozer: Is there a meaning in this text? (Apollos 1998) p 225

47 Vanhoozer relies on Hirsch's "magisterial defence" of authorial intent: Is there a meaning in this text? (Apollos 1998) pp 74 ff

48 Richard Baukcham : The Bible in Politics (SPCK 1989) Chapter 1 esp pp 13 – 15

historical reconstruction, linked with the questions, "***who could*** have written this?" and "***what could*** the writer have meant?"[49]

2.1.3.3 Text

We enter here, on the one hand, debates about what a text is, and on the other hand, the complex history of the component texts of the Bible, and of the Bible as a whole; some views focus on a text's final form.

The nature of textuality is such that a text is distant from both author and reader. This distance gives the text autonomy.[50] Critics like Ricoeur have argued that this distance is a necessary critical space for interpretation; critics like Gadamer have argued in the opposite direction that it is unhelpful: readers need to get close to the text.[51] Vanhoozer sees the distance as both weakness and strength, and warns against the substitution of an interpretation for the text itself: we must always go back to it.[52] Bockmuehl writes: "Does New Testament scholarship seek to gain some accountable sense (however vague) of what the texts intend and refer to, or is it sufficient to offer post-modern 'readings' which reflect an individual's or small group's contemporary experience?" [53]

2.1.3.3.1 Canon

As we have already observed, historical criticism has operated, as it were, by dissection in order to go back to the history behind the text; it has been a diachronic study. Pericopes were detached from

49 Vanhoozer: Is there a meaning in this text? (Apollos 1998) p 239

50 see Jeanrond : Theological Hermeneutics : Development and Significance (Macmillan 1991) p 71

51 see Jeanrond : Text and Interpretation (Gill and Macmillan 1988) p 44

52 Vanhoozer : Is there a meaning in this text? (Apollos 1998) p 132
Barr points out that unless one can "appeal to the text against the dictates of the hermeneutical method, there is no use speaking of scriptural authority and the Protestant appeal to Scripture cannot be maintained." Barr : Holy Scripture (OUP 1983) p 32

53 M Bockmuehl : "To be or not to be': The possible futures of New Testament Scholarship" : in Scottish Journal of Theology 1998 vol 51 No 3 p 279 He continues : "Thinking about the wider goal or purpose of New Testament study, is it finally concerned with questions of theology and truth, or with biblical interpretation as an instrument in the exercise of power? Does it, or does it not, imply a relationship with the living communities of faith – either in terms of a mutual accountability to Christian truth or in terms of ideological subversion?"

their current context, assigned to different layers of the process of production, and studied over against each other.[54] Recent developments have taken a different direction. One view of Canon Criticism (which considers, in looking at a text, the effect on it from other texts in the canon[55] and therefore the whole text's relation to the community which established its boundaries) is that it is a synchronic study rather than diachronic, that it studies the whole text. Childs,[56] in particular, argues that it is the final canonical form alone which bears witness to the full history of divine revelation to Israel, (though he argues that it has (two) distinctive voices, each of which retains its integrity).[57] Watson, too, seems to argue for looking at the final form of the text;[58] difficult texts can be set in context against other texts[59] and the whole canon has the capacity for self-criticism.[60] Rowlands finds himself in sympathy, ("there is too often an implicit subservience to the absent author which may at times lead to neglect of the structure and pattern of the text itself") but wants to retain some of the gains of historical criticism.[61]

Bockmuehl also agrees about the rightness of the 'final form' but finds Watson vague both about the shape of that final form text, and about how to deal with the particularities of the four Gospels without recourse to historical methods.[62] Watson might well be vague about the final form of the text, for this raises questions about textual criticism, which in themselves may beg further

54 cf Barth's famous criticism of historical criticism in his "Preface" in Barth : The Epistle to the Romans (the second, 1922 edn)

55 so, for example, Watson claims that reading the Old Testament as part of the Christian Canon, is the relative privileging of the prophets over the Torah, as compared to Jewish readings of the same texts. see Watson Text and Truth (T & T Clark 1997) pp 158-160, and p 308

For Watson's more general comments about canonical context, see Text and Truth (T & T Clark 1997) p 242

56 Brevard Childs: Biblical Theology of the Old and New Testaments (SCM 1992)

57 Though Sanders focuses on the function of canon in believing communities irrespective of the final form. See Sanders : From Sacred Story to Sacred Text (Fortress Press, Philadelphia 1987)

58 Watson: Text, Church and World (T & T Clark 1992) p 71

59 Watson: Text, Church and World (T & T Clark 1992) p pp 166 – 171 see also p 132

60 Watson: Text, Church and World (T & T Clark 1992) p 190

61 Rowlands: "An Open Letter to Francis Watson on Text, Church and World" in Scottish Journal of Theology 1995 Vol 48 No 4 pp 507 - 517

62 Bockmuehl: "To be or not to be': The possible futures of New Testament Scholarship" : in Scottish Journal of Theology 1998 vol 51 No 3 p 290

hermeneutical questions. He himself points out some problems in Text, Church and World,[63] and resolves the issue by arguing that relative stability is reached: that is, the uncertainties are minor.[64]

As a further dimension, given also the Church's reliance on tradition, the history of a text's reception, its part in the tradition of the Church, will be important for consideration of it ***now*** – in a way which other texts will not share.

2.1.3.4 Reader

Clearly texts have to have readers: indeed some critics have looked at the idea of the implied or ideal reader, contained as it were in the text. The question is, how much does the real reader bring to the text? How far does the reader create meaning in the act of reading? How far does the text itself control meaning? Again we are looking at the balance between two poles;[65] meaning and reception have to meet, or reception itself has no meaning. Vanhoozer puts the need for the two very clearly: "Every version of hermeneutic realism demands some such distinction as that which Hirsch draws between meaning and significance – between a stable object and a series of attempts to perceive it."[66]

Part of the problem in understanding the range of answers to these questions is that terminology varies from writer to writer. So, for example, Brett distinguishes interpretation from use,[67] and Webster distinguishes understanding from use,[68] whereas Gadamer says that to understand is to apply

63 Watson: Text, Church and World (T & T Clark 1992) pp 15 – 1 7
see also David Parker, "Jesus' sayings on divorce", Theology Sept/Oct 1993 Parker shows that the handling of the textual variants concerned with the issue of Divorce was very much tending in a single direction, and to that extent ignored the basic ambiguity present in the Bible.

64 Watson's hopes for relative stability may be premature: see A Handbook of Approaches to Literature (4th edn) (Oxford 1999) pp 18-21, where it is pointed out that the final forms of Dicken's Great Expectations, and Hardy's Return of the Native are debatable.

65 see Jeanrond: Text and Interpretation (Gill and Macmillan 1988) p 106 where he gives reasons for excluding the extreme positions.

66 Vanhoozer: Is there a meaning in this text? (Apollos 1998) p 84 see also p 259

67 Mark Brett : "The Future of Reader Criticisms" : in ed Francis Watson : The Open Text (SCM 1993) p 26

68 Webster: "Hermeneutics in Modern Theology: Some Doctrinal Reflections" Scottish Journal of Theology 1998 vol 51 No 3 p 317

the texts to ourselves;[69] Vanhoozer quotes Rorty and Fish as seeing no distinction between understanding and use,[70] whereas Watson describes meaning as constant, but significance (then and now) as changing.[71] In fact, Watson and Vanhoozer both make the distinction between meaning and significance,[72] and also both use the terms illocutionary act (or force) (intended results – eg understanding) and perlocutionary effect (foreseen or desired consequences).[73]

Of those arguing from a stance nearer[74] to reader-response, we may take Jeanrond as an exemplar: "… texts only become real when we read them. Unread texts remain no more than possibilities";[75] "…text understanding always demands our active participation in recreating the text in question. It demands that we lend of our reality to the text so that it can become real for us."[76]

Of those arguing against a radical reader-response position, we may take Webster: "… the text is self-interpreting and perspicuous [though] this is not a claim that God's Word can be read off from the text unproblematically, as if the text were entirely transparent, and the act of reading were a matter of pure receptivity without interests or perspectives."[77]

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69 Gadamer: Truth and Method : trans Barden & Cumming (2nd edn Seabury 1965) quoted by Jeanrond: Text and Interpretation (Gill and Macmillan 1988) p 12; see p 58 & p 71

70 Vanhoozer: Is there a meaning in this text? (Apollos 1998) pp 55, 56 "Rorty [suggests] that philosophy is more like literary or cultural criticism….. Concepts do not mirror nature or represent how the world really is; they are simply tools humans use for certain purposes…. Rorty thus replaces the pursuit of knowledge with the art of conversation, that is to say, rhetoric….. Like Rorty, Fish eliminates the distinction between interpreting texts and using them." In fact, Vanhoozer elsewhere (p 119) quotes Fish arguing that there is no such thing as meaning. "There is no such thing as literal meaning, if by literal meaning one means a meaning that is perspicuous no matter what the context and no matter what is in the speaker's or hearer's mind, a meaning that because it is prior to interpretation can act as a constraint on interpretation." Fish : Doing What Comes Naturally (Clarendon Press, Oxford 1989) p 4

71 Watons: Text and Truth (T & T Clark 1998) p 104,

72 see above note Error: Reference source not found page 37

73 Watson: Text and Truth (T & T Clark 1997) p 106 Vanhoozer Is there a meaning in this text? p 218, 255 etc

74 see note Error: Reference source not foundError: Reference source not found 37

75 Jeanrond : Text and Interpretation (Gill and Macmillan 1988) p 73 see also p 102

76 Jeanrond: Theological Hermeneutics (Macmillan 1991) p 1

77 Webster: "Hermeneutics in Modern Theology" in Scottish Journal of Theology 1998 Vol 51 No 3 p 333 see also Watson: Text and Truth (T & T Clark 1997) pp 11 f

Newbigin characteristically takes a slightly different line. Knowledge involves risk. "Both objectivism and subjectivism are ways of evading personal responsibility for knowing the truth."[78] Relying on Polanyi's theory of meaning[79] he argues that you cannot relegate the Gospel's claims to private opinion: it is truth, which must live in the public domain.[80]

2.1.3.4.1 Interpretative Community

It is a possible danger that the reader's response is seen as an individualistic response, but it could be understood as determined (both in the sense of what it is possible to think, and in the sense of what it is legitimate to think) by the community to which the reader belongs: this is Fish's idea of interpretative communities which 'share interpretative strategies for writing texts, for constituting their properties and assigning their intentions'.[81] Given the Bible's role within the Christian community, the concept of the interpretative community has had a particular resonance for Biblical hermeneuts.[82] Further questions yet remain: Where could new ideas originate, especially ideas which could challenge a community?[83] What happens when an entire community gets it wrong?[84] Two examples come easily to mind: the Nazis; and the Dutch Reformed Church with its support for apartheid: it has never been a tenet of Christianity that *vox populi, vox dei*. Vanhoozer looks further[85] at the conflict of interpretative communities: examples are Christians versus Jews, heretics versus the

78 Newbigin: Truth to Tell (SPCK 1991) p 59

79 in Polanyi: Personal Knowledge quoted in Newbigin: Truth to Tell (SPCK 1991) p 52

80 Dr Anne Richards, Secretary, General Synod Board of Mission, in a letter to me writes: "The resurrection is therefore a starting point for Christology to become the foundation of an epistemology that is totally transcendent. Therefore people who do not live as if, and only as if, the resurrection is true, only have access to a partial epistemology (which may for them be entirely satisfactory). Another way of saying this is that there is an 'absolute truth' but it only becomes absolute truth by accession to it. This is different from the assertion that there is an absolute and objective 'public truth'."

81 See: ed D Lodge: Modern Criticism and Theory: A Reader (Longman1988) p 328; pp 311-329 are the text of Fish's 'Interpreting the Variorum'. see also below at note Error: Reference source not found.

82 see for example Fowl and Jones: Readings in Communion (SPCK 1991)

83 This is Jeanrond's point : Text and Interpretation (Gill and Macmillan 1988) p 112

84 see Vanhoozer Is there a meaning in this text? (Apollos 1998) p 298, 299

85 Vanhoozer Is there a meaning in this text? (Apollos 1998) pp 171 – 174 Vanhoozer thinks Hauerwas has a more consistent version of interpretative community (in Hauerwas: Unleashing the Scripture (Abingdon 1993)) and that Lindbeck's view that Scripture constitutes the community (in Lindbeck : "Scripture, Consensus, Community" in ed Neuhaus : Biblical Interpretation in Crisis (Eerdmans 1981)) may escape that relativity.

orthodox, Protestants versus Catholics, scholars versus priests: interpretative communities are infected with relativity too. Vanhoozer wants us, on occasion, to be able to read the text against the traditions of the community of interpretation.[86]

Nevertheless Tracy, for example, suggests that we can assess the coherence or incoherence of all claims by judging them in relationship to the most relatively adequate consensual knowledge we possess.[87]

2.1.4 Orthodoxy and pluralism

We have been looking at the determinacy or indeterminacy of the Bible; but we have also noted that the Bible is linked with doctrine. There is therefore a possible[88] debate here about the nature of orthodoxy. How far is it determinate or, alternatively, pluralist? Does a determinate orthodoxy need determinate texts? If Christian orthodoxy is pluralist, does Christianity have (can it still have) an identity? Sykes[89] has some interesting and important comments here. "…we are already, in the first decades after Jesus' life and death, embroiled in the problems of conflicting interpretations of his teaching…. There is no primitive period of immediate and unambiguous clarity."[90] "Internal conflict inheres in the Christian tradition, even in its earliest forms."[91] Sykes goes on to quote Schleiermacher who, in On Religion[92], says Christianity is polemical through and through because, Schleiermacher

86 Vanhoozer : Is there a meaning in this text? (Apollos 1998) p 409

87 Tracy : Plurality and Ambiguity (SCM 1987) p 91 His note here refers to C S Peirce's communities of inquiry.

88 I say possible, because many of those writing in the field of biblical scholarship have, not surprisingly, avoided venturing far in this direction.

89 Stephen Sykes: The Identity of Christianity (SPCK 1984)

90 Stephen Sykes: The Identity of Christianity (SPCK 1984) p 15

91 Stephen Sykes: The Identity of Christianity (SPCK 1984) p 21

92 Schleiermacher: On Religion: Speeches to its cultured despisers (editor & translator: John Oman) (Harper, New York 1958) pp 242-5

thinks, Christianity is continually to be unmasking corrupt thinking and impoverished religion. Sykes, however, claims that this disagreement is inseparable from the form and content of Christianity, and is actually desirable.

Lindbeck, in his book The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age[93] identifies a large number of different ways in which it might be said that something is true. He argues that doctrine in particular could be seen as propositional, making claims about objective realities; or as experiential and expressive, that is, articulating symbols of inner feelings; or as some combination of these two; or, as he himself proposes, as cultural and linguistic, that is, analogous to a set of rules in a language game. For example, rugby and hockey have different rules, and one must stick to the rules of the game being played, without attempting to turn hockey into rugby or vice versa. He argues that this last view could be a way of advancing ecumenical and indeed inter-faith dialogue. He deals with a number of problems which (more traditional) exponents of the other views might have with this view.

He looks at the possibility of assessing different religions, as one might assess different games, a possibility which some of the other views of truth would of course exclude: 'basic religious positions, like Kuhn's scientific paradigms, are invulnerable to definitive refutation (as well as confirmation) but can nevertheless be tested and argued about in various ways, and these tests and arguments in the long run make a difference.'[94] In the course of the book he suggests[95] the test of coherence: is the religion internally consistent and coherent? If not, then some work needs to be done. Being coherent is one kind of truth he identifies, different from, though not exclusive of, correspondence with objective reality; coherence is something one would expect of a set of rules, where correspondence to objective reality is not.

Another test Lindbeck suggests, not so much between religions (though he suggests it could be applied there) as between different theological positions, is that of whether a particular theological

93 George Lindbeck: The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age (SPCK 1984)

94 George Lindbeck: The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age (SPCK 1984) p 130

95 George Lindbeck: The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age (SPCK 1984) p 63 He uses the word 'intra-systematic'

understanding works. "The ultimate test in this as in other areas is performance."[96] Interestingly, though, he is clearly worried and unhappy about the commodity view of religion, which has only the test of sincerity or authenticity,[97] and poses against it the idea of belonging to a community; this gives him another yardstick by which to compare theological paradigms.

Tracy's view of pluralism is that it is inescapable, because everything is subject to interpretation[98] – there is no un-interpreted reality out there. Our response to that pluralism must not just be a passive response, but a decision (which we could call existential, although Tracy doesn't use this word) – a person must decide where to stand.[99] But this does not mean arrogance or blinkers towards other ideas: "anyone who can converse can learn to appropriate another possibility." [100]

Vanhoozer too, surprisingly perhaps, is positive about plurality – though not the same plurality as Tracy: "I believe that the concept of plural unity is compatible with the critical realism and the Trinitarian theology defended in these pages. To anticipate: the biblical text can have diverse, even inexhaustible significance, and yet have determined meaning. The alternative to absolutist or arbitrary readings of Scripture, in other words, is one that celebrates its abundance."[101]

On the other hand Watson, looking at the dialogue between Justin Martyr and Trypho the Jew, attacks pluralism: "The proposal of a pluralistic hermeneutic intends not to resolve the differences between Justin and Trypho, but to persuade them to abandon the model of difference that the dialogue normally presupposes. Pluralism seeks to annex difference, converting it into an aestheticised diversity in the name of an underlying identity."[102] He made a similar point earlier: "…

96 George Lindbeck: The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age (SPCK 1984) p 134

97 George Lindbeck: The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age (SPCK 1984) p 77 and p 126

98 David Tracy: Pluralism and Ambiguity (SCM 1987) pp 47-65, and eg 78, 79 see also Werner Jeanrond: Theological Hermeneutics (Macmillan 1991) p 174, where he argues that a pluralism of contexts will produce a pluralism of results

99 David Tracy: Pluralism and Ambiguity (SCM 1987) p 90

100 David Tracy: Pluralism and Ambiguity (SCM 1987) p 93

101 Vanhoozer: Is there a meaning in this text? (Apollos 1998) p 416

102 Watson: Text and Truth (T & T Clark 1997) p 317; see also the helpful note 14, p 328: "The dialogue that takes as its premise the possibility of difference and therefore of truth and falsehood, contrasts with the contemporary view of dialogue which assumes that many voices are coalescing around a single known object… Against this John Milbank [The End of Dialogue in G Costa ed Christian Uniqueness Reconsidered : The Myth of a Pluralistic Theology of Religion (Orbis 1990) pp 183-184] argues that there is nothing in principle objectionable … in claiming that a particular culture is crucially in error at some point, even though this claim can only be made from the perspective of another, non-neutrally justifiable cultural reading."

there is much to be said for a critique of deconstruction that contrasts the monomania that makes every text say the same thing with a respect for particularity."[103]

Should we attempt to relate this area of debate to the Map in Chapter 1 by locating it with Structuralist criticism? Interestingly, those who reject pluralism here are, as it were, rejecting the post-modern critique of structuralism which turns its orderly system of differences into endlessly deferred signifiers.

2.1.5 Ethics

There are two sets of ethical responsibilities for a reader. The first is a responsibility towards the text itself, and here we may think, for example, of Young's insistence[104] on faithful performance: an unfaithful performance, one which took liberties with the text, would not just be a poor performance, but an unethical one. The subtitle of Vanhoozer's "Is there a meaning in this text?" – "The Bible, the reader and the morality of literary knowledge" – is about exactly this point. In the book he argues for the importance of the author, and of the author's communicative intention embodied in the text; he is, amongst other things, stressing the responsibility of a reader to that author: a wanton or reckless interpretation would be an affront to the author.[105] It is for the same reason that he argues that not to be interested in the agents who produce texts (ie authors) would be unethical.[106]

Having said this, the more significant area for most critics is that of the ethics of reading considered in relation to the world. Many members of the community of the Bible's readers see it as offering some norms for their actions: its ethical power is obviously considerable. What is surprising then is not that some writers stress ethical considerations, but that some do not ("the interpreter was cast in a role which was supposed to be objective and neutral, uncommitted to any value except the service

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103 Watson: Text, Church and World (T & T Clark 1994) p 103

104 Frances Young : The Art of Performance (DLT 1990) see Chapter 4 section 4.4 See also Young: "Allegory and the Ethics of Reading" in ed Watson : The Open Text (SCM 1993) pp 108-110

105 Vanhoozer: Is there a meaning in this text? (Apollos 1998) see pp 395 ff.

106 Vanhoozer: Is there a meaning in this text? (Apollos 1998) see p 220

of truth, however unpopular that truth might prove"[107]) and that those who do are doing so against this background. Perhaps Tracy and Watson, coming from different ends of the interpretative spectrum, can speak for all those[108] who do require ethical questions to be asked of interpretations:

> "Every discourse expresses conscious and unconscious ideologies, whether the someone who speaks or writes is aware of them or not…. To acknowledge that language is discourse is to admit the need for ethical and political criticism of the hidden, even repressed, social and historical ideologies in all texts, in all language as discourse, and above all in all interpretations."[109]

> "Any worthy affirmation of plurality [is] the beginning, but never the end, of a responsibly pluralistic attitude. There must be other criteria beside those of possibility and openness. There must be criteria to assess … coherence or incoherence….. There must be ethical-political criteria on what the religious option will mean for both individual and society."[110]

> "… it is at least arguable that the entire history of biblical interpretation should be read as a history in which oppressive and liberating uses of the texts are ambiguously intertwined. If that is the case, and if this situation persists into the present, then an analysis of the texts in the light of this broader context is a theological imperative. It is not necessary to show that a particular text is directly and causally responsible for a still-current attitude or practice; only that, in an interconnected world, the rhetoric of the canonical text of a dominant religious community should not be abstracted from the contemporary context in which it still operates, but should be brought to light in such a way as to disclose, indirectly, certain of the realities of this context. The function of religion in the concealment of oppression is a reality that unfortunately cannot be confined to the Joseph story, and to disclose its workings here is to contribute towards the broader analytical task."[111]

Some further issues arise. First, it is the view of these writers that the Bible itself contains unethical and oppressive parts: not just the obvious texts dealing with the invasion of Canaan and the Negeb by the Israelites and the destruction of, for example, Hazor (Joshua ch 11), but also the narrative dealing with Joseph in Exodus chapters 1 and 2 can be seen in this light. This means that not just the interpretation, but also the texts themselves must be viewed with suspicion. Some critics have

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107 Watson ed The Open Text (SCM 1993) Watson's Introduction p 4

108 eg Rowland and Corner: Liberating Exegesis (SPCK 1990);
Dumas: Political Theology and the Life of the Church (SCM 1978);
Jeanrond : Theological Hermeneutics (Macmillan 1991) p 108, where Jeanrond reflects on the demands made on hermeneutics by feminist theology and Marxist theoreticians;
Webster: "Hermeneutics in Modern Theology: Some Doctrinal Reflections" in Scottish Journal of Theology 1998 Vol 51 No 3 p 318, where he argues that understanding cannot be detached from use.

109 Tracy: Plurality and Ambiguity (SCM 1987) p 61

110 Tracy: Plurality and Ambiguity (SCM 1987) p 91

111 Watson: Text, Church and World (T & T Clark 1994) p 74 see also Watson in ed Watson : The Open Text (SCM 1993) p 63 p 80

suggested that a resisting reading is appropriate in these cases – that is, a reading against the oppressive tendencies of the text. However, the example[112] of the Exodus story, liberating for slaves in North America, and for the poor in South America, is closely related to the current oppression of Palestinians in Israel and its borders today.

In fact it will often be the case, as I argue in the chapter on Cone, that one person's liberation may be another's bondage. Interpretation – even when done from the best of motives – is going to be a dangerous, and not a neutral, act.

However, and this brings us to a second point, if the text itself is ethically suspect, yet the text is ethically normative or authoritative, we have a problem which could only be solved with a prior ethical commitment, perhaps – to be sure – derived from other parts of the canon, but still, therefore, extra-textual. Deconstructionists have a different answer to this problem, of course: they would argue that only those readings which resist authoritative and totalising tendencies are moral.[113]

Watson himself sees yet another problem when, for example, texts are dissociated from their theological contexts in order to be interpreted as 'relevant'. He gives the particular example of the biblical texts relating to creation: these may be isolated from what he sees as their proper context as the beginning of the divine human history, and interpreted in relation to current ecological concerns.[114]

Even the idea of a hermeneutic of suspicion comes in for criticism: Bockmuehl writes:

> "..as Jean Baudrillard rightly points out, Michel Foucault's highly influential hermeneutic of deconstruction and suspicion of power is in the end another power-mechanism to advance the interests of a counter-cultural elite. The velvet gloves of the ideology of egalitarian inclusion ill conceal the claws of a hermeneutical world view that is far more totalising and prescriptive, and far more stifling of free criticism, than could have been foreseen in the more pragmatic and perhaps naïve era of C H Dodd's inaugural lecture. Hans Weder puts his finger on the fatal weakness of the hermeneutic of suspicion, which is its systemic inability to be self-critical. In its fanatical concern to hear what the texts are not saying, it cannot listen to what they are saying. A negative approach of this sort, however, will

112 used by Vanhoozer: Is there a meaning in this text? (Apollos 1998) p 179

113 see also Garrett Green : Theology, Hermeneutics and Imagination (CUP 2000) where he argues that theology has its own, more radical, source of suspicion.

114 Watson: Text and Truth (T & T Clark 1997) pp 242 ff

> inevitably focus on what is already politically familiar and emotionally domesticated rather than on what may be wild and fresh and scented with new life. It is one of the great ironies of the 1990s that the supposedly inclusive meta-critical stance of this hermeneutic exhibits a virtually fascist suppression of that which is irreducibly Other."[115]

It is Marxist theories on the Map in Chapter 1, and the (unplaced) feminist theories, particularly, which concern themselves with questions about ethics, and about the relationship of texts to society and the world; these debates are appropriately located there.

2.1.5.1 Canon

Without wishing prematurely to close this argument, perhaps it is worth noting that the canon itself, as has frequently been pointed out, ensures the presence of dissenting voices, even if muted.[116] That presence has allowed later interpreters (for example: slaves in America, Rastas in the Caribbean,[117] Diggers and Levellers, Muentzer and Winstanley[118]) to amplify these voices, so that they have not been silenced. As Barton[119] writes:

> "Theissen shows how parts of the New Testament reflect a compromise which undermines aspects of the faith which Jesus stood for. There are strains of thought in the Old Testament which deny the cause of the poor and helpless. Neither Judaism nor Christianity has been true at all points to Theissen's "Biblical faith". Indeed by

115 Markus Bockmuehl: "To Be Or Not To Be" in Scottish Journal of Theology 1998 Vol 51 No 3 pp286, 287

116 see above at footnote Error: Reference source not foundError: Reference source not found 36

117 Rastas rely heavily on one particular transaltion: the (King James) Authorised Version.
There are a number of scholarly books here, as well as material produced by Rastafarians themselves:
see: Rev Fr Joseph Owens: Dread, (Heinemann, 1979)
Horace Campbell: Rasta and Resistance, (Hansib, London, 1985)
Leonard Barrett: The Rastafarians, (Heinemann, 1977)
S Hall: "Religious ideologies and social movements in Jamaica" in Religion and Ideology ed Bocock & Thompson (OUP 1985)

Works produced by and for Rastafarians include:
Ras-j-Tesfa: The Living Testament of Rasta-for-I, (publ by Ras-j-Tesfa 1980, available through the Harriet Tubman Bookshop, Grove Lane, Handsworth, B'ham)
Brother Miguel, (full name Michael Anthony Lorne?): Rastaman Chant, (published 1983 by African Children Unlimited, P O BOX 1012 Castries, St. Lucia, W. I. also at Kingston, Jamaica)

One Rasta I spoke to used the Schofield Chain Reference edition of the Authorised Version of the Bible together with Charles Fillmore: The Metaphysical Bible Dictionary, (The Unity School of Christianity, 1901 NW Blue Parkway Unity Village, MO 64065-0001 1995)

118 see Christopher Rowland: Radical Christianity (Polity Press 1988) pp 89 ff and passim

119 Barton: People of the Book? (SPCK 1988) p 52

> establishing the canon of just these books as Holy Scripture, both religions ensured that alternative voices would be heard…"

2.1.6 The competent reader

Although Habermas doubted it, requiring a theory of communicative competence,[120] Gadamer believed that the meaning of texts would become apparent to any competent and good-willed reader.[121] Tracy also sets his face firmly against the idea "that only a scholarly elite can interpret the religious classics."[122] He goes on to describe a natural hermeneutical competence which belongs to all those who are prepared, in dealing with any classic, to risk their present understanding.

Alongside claims of natural competence go ideas of relative adequacy. The idea of relative adequacy is an important point, made several times by Tracy[123] and Vanhoozer:[124] we can accept the arguments of those who reject the possibility of absolute knowledge; they are right to point out the arrogance and dangers of thinking that such a thing were possible; however, this argument does not exclude the possibility of some knowledge, knowledge adequate for a situation. As Tracy puts it: "we can know when we know enough."[125]

Vanhoozer's claim:that "…. the Bible is sufficiently unambiguous in the main for any well-intentioned person with Christian faith to interpret each part with relative adequacy"[126] is perhaps the lowest requirement of all, and others have raised the threshold considerably. We have already

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120 Jurgen Habermas : Knowledge and Human Interests English Edn trans Jeremy Shapiro (Heinemann 1978) pp 120 – 159
see also Jeanrond : Text and Interpretation (Gill and Macmillan 1988) p 23
see also Vanhoozer : Is there a meaning in this text? (Apollos 1998) p 217
see also MacFadyen The Call to Personhood (CUP 1990) pp 175, 176

121 Gadamer : Truth and Method trans Glen-Doepel ed Cumming and Barden : (Sheed and Ward 1979) pp 5-10 see also Jeanrond : Theological Hermeneutics (Macmillan 1991) p 9

122 David Tracy: Pluralism and Ambiguity (SCM 1987) pp 102 ff

123 Tracy : Plurality and Ambiguity (SCM 1987) p 22 and p 61

124 Vanhoozer: Is there a meaning in this text? (Apollos 1998) pp 139, 140

125 Tracy : Plurality and Ambiguity (SCM 1987) p 61

126 Vanhoozer: Is there a meaning in this text? (Apollos 1998) p 315

referred[127] to the view that a proper reading of the Bible is a Christian one: Hauerwas,[128] for example, insists that the meaning of the biblical texts is not accessible to all on the basis of common sense interpretative procedures, but can only be had through participation in the life of the Christian community, and through submission to the guidance of its interpretative tradition. Webster puts it like this:

> "Faithful reading is not so much constructive or constitutive of what is heard, but *consent* – consent to the text as an instrument for the speaking of God, and therefore the self-presentation of God's will to save. Reading is an exercise in *conscientia*, not in the modern sense of reflexive moral awareness, but in the much larger sense of 'the response of the human consciousness to the divine judgement'[129] in which we are stripped of our efforts to impose a shape on the text and made capable of free and attentive listening. A Christian theological hermeneutic will thus give space to describing the formation of the soul of the reader, so that Christian skills of reading and Christian reader-roles can be learned and practised."[130]

In Webster's view the "constellation of dispositions and skills"[131] required in the properly formed Christian reader (skills which cannot be acquired apart from the life of the Christian community) can never match "what is only achieved in the promise and gift of God."[132] Webster sees the Christian community as offering three guides: first, the conventions of the canon – which will shape reading by seeing the Bible as an "integrated, purposive, whole"; second, the conventions of the creed – which offers a guide (albeit minimal) to what the Bible yields; and third, the conventions of the tradition – which tests whether a reading belongs to the Christian family of readings. Incidentally, even this requirement (of Christianity) is not transparently clear:[133] does it mean an existential decision for

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127 see above at footnote Error: Reference source not found page 25

128 Hauerwas : Unleashing the Scripture (Abingdon, Nashville 1993)

129 Webster is here quoting Prof T F Torrance's definition (of Calvin's use of the term) in The Hermeneutics of John Calvin (Scottish Academic Press, Edinburgh 1988) p 163

130 Webster: "Hermeneutics in Modern Theology: Some Doctrinal Reflections" in Scottish Journal of Theology 1998 vol 51 No 3 p 338

131 Webster: "Hermeneutics in Modern Theology: Some Doctrinal Reflections" in Scottish Journal of Theology 1998 vol 51 No 3 pp 307 ff

132 see also Bockmuehl "To be or not to be': The possible futures of New Testament Scholarship" : in Scottish Journal of Theology 1998 vol 51 No 3 p 279 as quoted above at footnote Error: Reference source not foundError: Reference source not found 35

133 cf Jeanrond : Theological Hermeneutics (Macmillan 1991) p 33 where Jeanrond is writing about Luther's view of hermeneutics

Christ, or does it mean active membership of the faith community? Which faith community?[134] And how active a membership?

It is a commonplace that in the past the skills required of a reader of the Bible were historical-critical skills. One area of debate now is whether that reader should have literary-critical skills. Jeanrond, for example, talks about readers developing different reading genres for different writing genres;[135] (he goes on to suggest that the primary genre of biblical texts is theological). Moore's Literary Criticism and the Gospels,[136] argues that biblical historical-criticism is dependent on older literary-critical skills. Moore himself, taking a deconstructionist position, would certainly argue for acquiring the new literary-critical skills. On the other hand, as we have seen, writers like Webster, whilst not dismissing literary-critical skills, clearly give primacy to a quite different formation of the reader.

The relation between Biblical criticism and literary criticism is then complex: it is overstating the case to say that they operate as if they are two different worlds. But even the encyclopaedic studies of Thiselton: The Two Horizons[137] and New Horizons in Hermeneutics[138] do not mention some of the critical theorists known to literary theory (Showalter, Cixous, Butler, Mitchell, Said, Belsey – with only passing mention of Jauss, Bloom, Pratt) while those authors upon whom Thiselton actually concentrates (Gadamer, Ricoeur etc[139]) get only passing mention from literary theorists such as Lodge, Selden, Eagleton, Waugh and Rice, and the editors of A Handbook of Critical Approaches to Literature.[140] Another symptom of this divide is the use by Biblical criticism of the term 'hermeneutics'; in more general literary criticism it is now used sparingly to denote something like

134 cf Rowland's comment to Watson in "An Open Letter to Francis Watson" in Scottish Journal of Theology 1995 Vol 48 No 4 p 514 - that Watson should "come clean about his [ecclesial] allegiances."

135 Jeanrond: "After Hermeneutics" in ed Watson: The Open Text (SCM 1993) p 95

136 Stephen Moore: Literary Criticism and the Gospels (Yale University Press 1989) See the favourable review by Robert Carroll: Scottish Journal of Theology 1995 Vol 48 No 2 p 282

137 A Thiselton: The Two Horizons (Paternoster 1980)

138 A Thiselton: New Horizons in Hermeneutics (Harper Collins 1992)

139 also discussed in great detail by Jeanrond: Text and Interpretation as Categories of Theological Thinking (Gill and Macmillan 1988) and others e.g. Ferguson: Biblical Hermeneutics: An Introduction (SCM 1986)

140 Guerin, Labor, Morgan, Reesman, Willingham : A Handbook of Critical Approaches to Literature (OUP 1999)

'sympathetically understanding the meaning of the past.'[141] One possible reason for the divide between Biblical Literary Criticism and Literary Criticism is that those theorists favoured by the theologians are those who include a place for symbols in their theories.[142] It is perhaps ironic that as Biblical criticism begins to turn slightly away from historical-criticism, a recent trend in literary studies is the new-historicism, which concerns itself with extra-literary matters, seeking "surprising coincidences", looking at the embeddedness of cultural objects in the contingencies of history.[143]

2.2 Post-modernism

As I have surveyed these debates I have also described some of the links between them: indeed they are linked, not least because behind them all stands the challenge of post-modernism. Post-modernism has been described as incredulity towards meta-narratives – that is towards attempts to describe an over-arching, authoritative, world view;[144] this is why Vanhoozer[145] writes of deconstructionism's hostility to metaphysics. This potentially affects all disciplines, for even the sciences have had to reconsider their historical, social and cultural locations. But it is after all theology and religious studies which inescapably deal with meta-narratives. A few theologians have attempted a religion-less Christianity, notably Cupitt with his 'Sea of Faith' project, but as has been said in relation to the Bible: a close and serious look at the text takes one behind the text, because the text itself refers to that which is behind it.

An historian might be able to show that post-modernism was not just the contingent, chance, product of a few brilliant minds but also a natural result of an inevitable trend in thinking in the West. Indeed, the Map in Chapter 1 seems to support such a view. In that case the division described by Watson, Webster and Bockmuehl – between Christianity and academic study of Christianity, and

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141 T Eagleton: Literary Theory: An Introduction (Blackwell, 1983) p144

142 I am grateful here to Lewis Ayres for his (unpublished) paper given at a seminar in Birmingham, Spring 1993: "Is a Theological Hermeneutics possible?"
see also Jeanrond : Text and Interpretation (Gill and Macmillan 1988) p 39 for Ricoeur and symbols

143 see Modern Literary Theory: A Reader ed Rice and Waugh (Arnold 1996) pp 271-276; A Handbook of Critical Approaches to Literature ed Guerin, Labor, Morgan, Reesman, Willingham (4th Edn Oxford 1999) pp 247 – 253 etc

144 see eg Bockmuehl "To be or not to be" pp 271 ff in Scottish Journal of Theology 1998 Vol 51 No 3 p 286-287 for a useful survey of the position.

145 Vanhoozer : Is there a meaning in this text? (Apollos 1998) p 59-66

between Theology and Biblical Studies – would in some ways also be part of that trend: for although individual scholars would be faithful members of their Christian communities, this allegiance would be increasingly marginal from the point of view of the academic institution.

Each of the areas of debate which we have examined is touched by the post-modern critique: the whole debate between historical-critical methods and literary-critical methods parallels the debate between diachronic and synchronic outlooks which is an essential part of the post-modern debate; post-modernism would find ideas of authority, or of orthodoxy, utterly foreign; it would require readers to be less naïve, more suspicious, more skilled at playing amongst the texts.

This is therefore the context in which all our theologians are working. The thinking of those such as Watson, Webster, Bockmuehl, and Vanhoozer resists post-modernism by reasserting a completely different world-view; whereas the thinking of Moore or Tracy accepts at least some of its arguments, and tries to move on from those premises. What does not seem to be acceptable is to ignore it completely; it would seem to be inadequate to make a close study of texts as if they were rock-solid, and the theologian's presuppositions unimportant. Theology may be accused of allowing post-modernism to set the agenda[146] – but a coherent radical challenge from Christianity must have some answer for the questions put to it.

We now use this survey of the current debate to outline a set of requirements for a practical hermeneutic.

146 see Christopher Rowlands : "An Open Letter to Francis Watson on Text, Church and World" in Scottish Journal of Theology 1995 Vol 48 No 4 p 516 where he argues that we should guard against allowing the agenda to be set by post-modernity