

THE NEW TESTAMENT AS HOLY GROUND

Nicholas King

FOR A GOOD MANY YEARS NOW, perhaps for as long as two centuries (depending on how you do your calculations), the historical-critical method has ruled the roost in Scripture scholarship. It is, however, misleading to refer to it in the singular, as if it were just one method. The term refers, rather, to a whole hatful of techniques used in the scientific and academic reading of Scripture, including at least the following:

- *text criticism*, which tries to establish as nearly as possible, on the basis of the existing manuscripts, the original text of the New Testament documents;
- *source criticism*, which tries, for instance, to establish the relations between the Gospels of Mark, Matthew and Luke;
- *form criticism*, which takes individual episodes (in the Gospels, for example) and tries to determine their literary form so as to locate them in the original setting that might have produced them;
- *redaction criticism*, which seeks to isolate the individual genius of the different evangelists.

These different methods have done yeoman service, and they have still a great deal to offer. They originated in the Enlightenment, and in the desire, especially perhaps among scholars of the Reformed tradition of Christianity, to defend the Bible against its assailants. Clear out all that is 'unhistorical', the argument ran, and what is left will be 'the real thing', of which you can be sure. In the sixty years since Pius XII's

encyclical *Divino afflante Spiritu*, Roman Catholic scholars have also joined in the fun, with distinguished contributions from such figures as the Sulpician, Raymond E. Brown, and the Jesuit, Joseph A. Fitzmyer.

However, the historical-critical paradigm (if we can call it that), for all its dominance, has never gone completely unchallenged. One problem, especially for Catholics, is that it tends to set up the Bible as an authority as against subsequent tradition. My Jesuit colleague George Tyrrell devotes a chapter to 'The Christ of Liberal Protestantism' in the last book he ever wrote, one that is still worth reading today. The writing is a model of careful argument, studded with some memorable phrases. Tyrrell characterizes the view of Harnack, champion of the Liberal Protestants in the nineteenth century, as follows:

... between Christ and early Catholicism there is not a bridge but a chasm. Christianity did not cross the bridge; it fell into the chasm and remained there, stunned, for nineteen centuries.¹

Note the contrast here between what is really authentic and 'early Catholicism'—one that has been quite seriously adopted, even within New Testament studies, by later and respected Protestant figures such as Ernst Käsemann.²

A second criticism is that historical critics are, often unconsciously, dependent on the conventions and fashions of their own time. Again, Tyrrell made the point tellingly:

The Christ that Harnack sees, looking back through nineteen centuries of Catholic darkness, is only the reflection of a Liberal Protestant face, seen at the bottom of a deep well.³

Alongside Tyrrell we may place the great Protestant polymath and doctor, Albert Schweitzer, for whom there was 'nothing more negative than the result of the critical study of the Life of Jesus', and for whom the Jesus of Nazareth emerging from such work was merely,

¹ *Christianity at the Crossroads* (London: Longmans Green, 1909), 41. Tyrrell deserved better than to be attacked by power politicians in Rome, obsessed and paranoid about 'Modernism'.

² See his classic 1963 essay, 'Paul and Early Catholicism', in *New Testament Questions of Today*, translated by W.J. Montague (London: SCM, 1969), 236-251.

³ *Christianity at the Crossroads*, 44.

... a figure designed by rationalism, endowed with life by liberalism, and clothed by modern theology in a historical garb.⁴

Thirdly, the historical-critical paradigm appears too reductive to be of use for theology. It treats the Bible like any other ancient text; it reduces the living reality of the biblical text to the mere sum of its parts; and it marginalises—partly in the hope of demonstrating to our non-believing contemporaries that Christianity is intellectually responsible—the element of faith and commitment. The distinguished Swiss Protestant exegete, Ulrich Luz, speaks of ‘the methodological atheism of the historico-critical method’; such an approach is ‘in principle atheist ... it finds itself in tension with the biblical texts’; and he quotes a sharp observation by Ernst Fuchs:

The academic exegete goes about his or her task like a vet, who, in order to find out what is wrong with the cow, has to start off by killing it.⁵

Add to all this a dose of postmodernism and deconstruction, and it becomes easy to see why many are happy to echo the opening phrase of Walter Wink’s *The Bible in Human Transformation*: ‘historical biblical criticism is bankrupt’.⁶ Paul Joyce, an Old Testament scholar at Oxford University, speaks for many when he suggests in a recent article that the guild of Old Testament scholars may have made the Bible ‘just another historical text, a relic of a bygone age’, so that non-experts ‘come to feel de-skilled’ and biblical students feel ‘alienated’.

But Joyce speaks for many when he nevertheless insists that the rigour associated with the historical-critical method has brought gains, even at the spiritual level, that we must not simply abandon:

... it is not only for academic reasons that I wish to champion the historical-critical method. There is even a spiritual dimension for me in being confronted by the ‘other’ of the text as laid bare by historical criticism. The text is not me, it is not my projection or an

⁴ Albert Schweitzer, *The Quest for the Historical Jesus*, translated by various hands (London: SCM, 2000 [1913]), 478.

⁵ *La Bible: une pomme de discorde* (Geneva: Labor et Fides, 1992), 37. I am grateful to Dr Mark Elliot of St Andrews for having drawn my attention to this striking passage.

⁶ (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1973), 1.

extension of my own psychology; rather it challenges me from beyond myself in a way that commands humility.⁷

In what follows, I want to look at various ways in which some contemporary theologians and readers of the Bible are trying to read the text today—thinkers who are glad to have learnt from the historical-critical paradigm, but who are also seeking to move beyond its limitations.

Liberationist Exegesis

Liberation theology shares with the historical-critical method a reluctance to take texts at face value. But whereas historical method in its classical form may seem to be arid, and to remove the life from the biblical text, the liberationists suggest that life is to be found in Scripture in so far as people are inspired by it to change society. Thus Gerald West, professor of Old Testament at the University of Natal, begins a book on biblical interpretation:

I dedicate this study to ordinary readers, who will probably not read it, but who will, I hope, teach me how to serve them with it.⁸

West was quite consciously writing from within ‘the South African situation of struggle ... the struggle of the poor and oppressed in South Africa for liberation from apartheid’ (p.2). His unease about the historical-critical method, even as he still wants to draw on it, arises partly from the widespread sense of ‘the demise of the objective object’ (p.12) in contemporary scholarly enquiry, leading to his perception that ‘the text and the reader will never be the same again’ (p.29). But his primary and abiding concern is for what he calls ‘active and transformative solidarity with the poor and oppressed’ as a way out of the crisis, not simply in South African political life as it was in the early 1990s, but also in South African biblical studies. The crisis is simply that of irrelevance: in South Africa, one section of the professional guild, on the whole Afrikaans-speaking, ‘never took the historical-

⁷ ‘Proverbs 8 in Interpretation (1)’ in *Reading Texts, Seeking Wisdom: Scripture and Theology*, edited by David F. Ford and Graham Stanton (London: SCM Press, 2003), 89-101, here 96, 95.

⁸ Gerald O. West, *Biblical Hermeneutics of Liberation* (Pietermaritzburg: Cluster Publications, 1991), 1.



Chateau apartheid vs Cabernet globalisation

critical paradigm fully seriously', while the other section, on the whole English-speaking, made it appear,

... in the mantle of science, thereby keeping actual power relations inaccessible to analysis and to public consciousness.

The problem is that the Bible has been perceived within the black community in South Africa as both oppressor and liberator. West examines the work of several black exegetes, in particular Allan Boesak and Itumeleng Motsala, and argues for the importance of having a hermeneutics that is not only theoretically well-grounded but also, and at the same time, accountable to the poor. Scripture scholars shift uncomfortably when they hear this sort of talk, but they need to take it seriously if they are to persuade the rest of the world that their trade is one that is worth pursuing.

Another work in the same vein is *Liberating Exegesis*, by Christopher Rowland and Mark Corner, a book to which far too little attention has been paid. The authors raise the fundamental and deeply

⁹W. R. Herzog, quoted in West, *Biblical Hermeneutics of Liberation*, 33.

unsettling question, 'whose side should one be on?'¹⁰ They ask whether it is really possible to understand Jesus without sharing the vision that the Hebrew Scriptures had given him (p.98). In their liberationist exegesis of the Matthean parable of the sheep and the goats at the last judgment, they assert that 'bible study is above all understanding what God is saying *today*' (p.12). Like many others, they stress they are not seeking to outlaw or abolish the historical-critical method. But they insist that it needs to be supplemented:

... a prime task of the exegete is to watch the way in which the biblical material is being and has been *used*. (p.5)

In Latin American base communities, they argue, the text,

... becomes a catalyst in the exploration of pressing contemporary issues relevant to the community; it offers a language so that the voice of the voiceless may be heard

And the point stands, even if 'to those of us brought up on the historical-critical method the interpretations may often appear cavalier' (p.45).

There is no mistaking, however, the light that radiates from such readings, as they bring together the oppressed and marginalised from the ancient world and from the contemporary scene. Rowland finds a perhaps unexpected ally in Bultmann, who had his own reservations about treating the Bible as 'only an historical document' instead of 'a means to hear the truth about our life and our soul' (p.72). They bring Fernando Belo¹¹ into the matter too; he is heavy going, but Rowland and Corner offer a challenging account of the implications of a 'materialist'¹² reading of the Gospel of Mark (pp.94-114).

¹⁰ Christopher Rowland and Mark Corner, *Liberating Exegesis: The Challenge of Liberation Theology to Biblical Studies* (London: SPCK, 1990), 11; it is worth noting our reactions to this question.

¹¹ Fernando Belo, *A Materialist Reading of the Gospel of Mark* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1981).

¹² A 'materialist' reading is a borrowing from Marxist literary criticism; it involves analysing a text as a 'product', whose 'producer' is part of a complex economic system, and therefore reveals a good deal about the writer's world, seen in terms of oppression and the struggle for power. Such a reading would have correspondingly less interest in reading Mark for information about the life of Jesus or the Markan community.

Rowland and Corner are perhaps at their most telling on the biblical book of Revelation as 'subversive memory' (pp.141-155). An important idea here is that of 'picture':

An attraction of the book of Revelation for those whose way of thinking is so different from the particularly rational theological discourses of the First World is that its discourse consists of picture and symbol rather than depending on systematic argument. (p.134)

At one point, they admirably express their central contention:

Once disconnected from a historical-critical approach which thinks only in terms of capturing the author's original intention, the liberation theologian is able to introduce the socio-political context of his or her own day into the process of exegesis. (p.195)

In other words, liberationist exegesis allows the biblical text to come alive because it connects the Word with the emancipation and liberation of those who hear and read it.

Holy Scripture

A more Barthian account is offered by John Webster, professor of systematic theology at Aberdeen. His *Holy Scripture* is an austere and difficult work, seeking to articulate the special character of Scripture, to name the theological status which it has and which other texts lack. Of this special character he is in absolutely no doubt. He describes his book as,

... an ontology of Holy Scripture: an account of what Holy Scripture *is* in the saving economy of God's loving and regenerative self-communication.¹³

As this sentence indicates, Webster is not afraid of bold answers, such as would make many biblical specialists want to change the subject. Webster speaks easily of a 'faithful reading of Holy Scripture in the economy of grace' and describes this as 'an episode in the history of sin

¹³ John Webster, *Holy Scripture: A Dogmatic Sketch* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2003), 2.

and its overcoming' (pp.86-87). He uses language that secular students of the Bible will scarcely be able to understand:

The act of reading Scripture is ... in the last analysis determined not out of its similarities to the acts of other agents who do not share the Christian confession, but by the formative economy of salvation in which it has its origin and end The act of reading Holy Scripture thus contains a certain self-negation.

Webster is suggesting that Scripture needs to be read in faith, in an unconditional acceptance that it represents the Word of God in some special sense. The scientific world of biblical exegesis can sometimes encourage a certain arrogance, and lead us to dominance and control of the text, rather than humility before it. Webster argues for a different attitude:

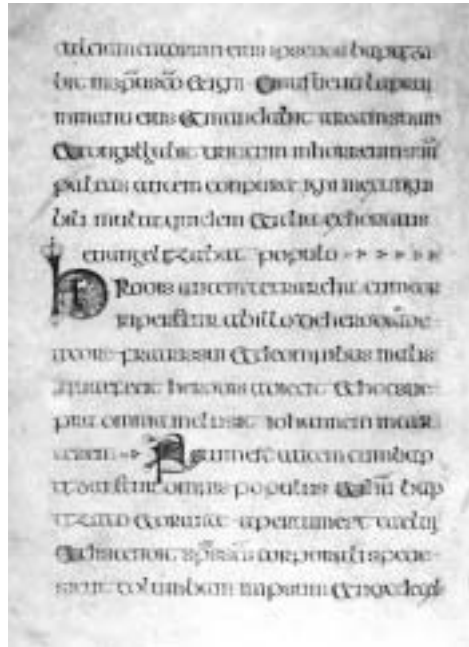
To read Scripture as one caught up by the reconciling work of God is to abandon mastery of the text, and, instead, to be schooled into docility. (p.101)

Let me make three observations on this gallant attempt to challenge the standard approaches. Firstly, Webster sees Scripture as a printed word that people read. This is after all his experience, and such a vision is closely linked to the Protestant Reformation, of which he is so valiant a champion. But for the greater part of the Church's history, and certainly in the time when the 27 texts of the New Testament were composed, the majority of its audience will have heard the texts proclaimed, rather than seeing them as marks on paper. Literacy was not widespread, nor was the written text widely accessible prior to the introduction of movable type.

Secondly, Webster combines an insistence on faith with a determined resistance, though he never quite expresses it, to a Catholic approach to revelation—one which depends on more than Scripture, and invokes the Church's tradition as a place of God's self-revelation.

Thirdly, Webster really needs a 'theology of canon' in order to substantiate his position: an explanation of why it is *these* texts, and not any others, that express the economy of grace.

One theologian who has treated Webster's work with the seriousness it deserves is Gavin D'Costa, a Roman Catholic who teaches in the Theology Faculty at Bristol University.¹⁴ While agreeing with Webster on many points, D'Costa raises more sharply the issues about Scripture and tradition. Webster rejects the nuanced sense of authority vested in a tradition that we find in writers such as the Dominican Yves Congar. Yet Reformed theology, for all its insistence on the priority of Scripture, requires creeds, a teaching office, and an authoritative liturgy.



From the Book of Kells

Unless theology invokes tradition, it becomes individualistic—and, for D'Costa, Webster does not in fact succeed in securing his defences against that charge. Moreover, D'Costa argues, Webster overlooks the very powerful defences that *Dei verbum*, the Second Vatican Council's decree on revelation, erects against the abuse of magisterial authority. Sharply, he observes that Webster is in danger of a kind of docetism, a failure to recognise that God's truth is always mediated through created reality.¹⁵ For D'Costa, the fact that revelation and Scripture are not identical means that you have to add tradition into the mix: revelation is the self-communication of the triune God; Scripture mediates that revelation, bears witness to it, serves, if you like, as its material principle.

¹⁴ See 'Revelation, Scripture and Tradition: Some Comments on John Webster's Conception of "Holy Scripture"', *International Journal of Systematic Theology*, 6 (2004), 337-350, especially 340-343.

¹⁵ D'Costa, 'Revelation, Scripture and Tradition', 347.

In a forthcoming book,¹⁶ D'Costa develops his position. Here, the reading of Scripture is situated within the diversity and pluralism of the postmodern academy. D'Costa calls for,

... a postliberal plurality of universities with different traditions of enquiry and, within such institutions, the renewal of tradition-specific ecclesial forms of theological enquiry. (p. 166)

Within such a setting, he argues more generally for 'the unity of theology with prayer and practice' (p.7). D'Costa also introduces what seems potentially an important notion, which he names, effectively if not very attractively, 'performativity': the 'cash value', so to say, of the text in real life. At this point, of course, he runs close to the insistence of feminist or liberationist exegetes that the text should make a difference. Moreover, for D'Costa, '... the meanings of Scripture are never exhausted Closure of meaning is precluded' (p. 160).

Luke Timothy Johnson is a fish from a similar kettle. In his recent book, *The Future of Catholic Biblical Scholarship*,¹⁷ he is arguing for a reintegration of biblical studies into the life of the Church, and for connections to be made between contemporary scripture scholarship and patristic and medieval traditions of biblical reading. At the end of an excellent chapter on Augustine's reading of Scripture, Johnson lays down a challenge to the guild of biblical exegetes:

Intellectual honesty and the need to account for the place that we claim in the world demand that Christians seriously engage the question of how the Bible is true, and how the Bible is truly read. A biblical scholarship that evades these questions through research into *arcana*, or through assembling learned opinions in ever larger compendia and commentaries, or by playing within the safe boundaries of convention without being willing to take on the truth or falsity of Scripture, has relinquished the right to be taken seriously. (pp. 117-118)

The strong and challenging language here carries a consequence:

¹⁶ *Theology: Queen of the Sciences, Servant of the Church, Prophet to the Nations* (Oxford: Blackwell, forthcoming).

¹⁷ (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002) co-authored with William S. Kurz SJ.

If Scripture is ever again to be a living source for theology, those who practise theology must become less preoccupied with the world that produced the Scripture and learn again to live in the world that Scripture produces. (p. 119)

For Johnson, the historical-critical paradigm is in danger of driving ‘an implacable wedge between the world imagined by Scripture and the world view of the biblical critic’ (p. 127); moreover, it can often fail to ‘connect with experience’:

Part of contemporary theology’s impoverished sense of God’s presence is due to its inattention to the places where that presence is most obvious, namely, in the human drama of idolatry and sin, grace and faith. As that drama is played out in every human story it can become, if properly heard, revelatory. The same inattention to the human experience of God characterizes the reading of Scripture within the academic guild. Yet the experience of the Living God is the most obvious element in the construction of the imaginary world of Scripture. (p. 141)

Like many of the other authors discussed here, Johnson demands that we take the biblical text seriously at precisely the point where it has the capacity to give us energy.¹⁸

Performing the Scriptures

Before concluding this rather flighty survey of how modern theologians are trying to find life and energy in the biblical text, I should like to draw attention to the four essays by the Cambridge theologian Nicholas Lash on the use of Scripture that constitute Part II of his collection, *Theology on the Way to Emmaus*.¹⁹ The first, suggestively, is called ‘Performing the Scriptures’. Lash draws a parallel between the Scriptures on the one hand and a musical score or a dramatic script on the other. This enables Lash to suggest that the Scriptures have to be *performed*. The text of *King Lear* is written, fundamentally, for actors to

¹⁸ More recently, Johnson has given this view more accessible expression in his collection of articles, *The Living Gospel* (London: Continuum, 2004). See especially the opening chapter, ‘Theology and the Spiritual Life’.

¹⁹ (London: SCM Press, 1986). I am grateful to Professor Christopher Rowland for repeatedly insisting on the importance of these articles, entitled ‘Performing the Scriptures’; ‘What Authority Has Our Past?’; ‘How Do We Know Where We Are?’; and ‘What Might Martyrdom Mean?’ In what follows I focus especially on pp. 40-43.

present it on a stage. A good production, a good interpretation, will be performed by one group of people for another, by actors for audience. It will enable all concerned to discover new elements of truth, truth both about the text and about themselves. Something similar might be said about Scripture. The principal function of the Scriptures is to facilitate the re-enactment of Christ's story among his followers, in such a way as to foster 'the life, activity and organization of the believing community'. There remains a vital place for historical scholarship and critical reflection—but the model of scripture as text-for-performance to nourish the community of faith keeps 'the experts firmly in their place'. It is 'not, in the last analysis, written texts' that are central to Christian interpretation,

... but patterns of human action: what was said and done and suffered, then, by Jesus and his disciples, and what is said and done and suffered, now, by those who seek to share his obedience and his hope.

Lash's chapters are so richly allusive as to defy summary—my hope is that this account of a few paragraphs will drive readers to consult the book for themselves. We cannot, so it seems to me, find life and energy in our reading of the New Testament until we are prepared to treat it as 'holy ground', rather than with the analytic detachment proper to an archaeologist about to dig a site. And Lash's focus on personal responses to the performed history of Jesus provides a useful clue as to just what 'holy ground' might mean. The retelling of the Scriptures in performance stimulates ever new forms of holiness among Christian disciples here and now. The original history remains normative, and what the historical experts tell us may be vitally important in helping us use the Scriptures well—but the full meaning specifically of Scripture goes beyond mere history. It is something which we continue to play out.²⁰

Energy, Life and Meaning

I am suggesting, therefore, that the New Testament is most appropriately read from within the believing community, or at least

²⁰ Elsewhere in this number of *The Way*, Helmut Gabel offers some reflections on Ignatius that may serve to amplify and develop Lash's suggestions.

from a standpoint of openness to being changed by the text. Only so will it have life and energy. As the Pontifical Biblical Commission put the matter in their 1993 document, 'The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church':

United to the living tradition which preceded it, which accompanies it and is nourished by it ... the Bible is the privileged means which God uses yet again in our own day to shape the building up and the growth of the Church as the people of God.²¹

Such a view may draw on the historical-critical paradigm, but it goes beyond any exclusive concern with historical reconstruction. Scripture claims to give both life and meaning; any adequate study of Scripture has to ask how this might be so. We need to use Scripture contemplatively and imaginatively, considering at once the limits and constraints it puts on us, and also, more importantly, the ways in which its text invites us to 'perform' it.

Nicholas King SJ taught the New Testament in South Africa for many years, and now continues to do so at Oxford University. His translation of the New Testament has just appeared (Stowmarket: Kevin Mayhew, 2005).

²¹ n. 101. The document can be found in an edition by J.L. Houlden (London: SCM, 1995), and also on various websites, such as that of Felix Just at Loyola Marymount University: http://myweb.lmu.edu/fjust/Docs/PBC_Interp.htm.