TALKING WITH STRANGERS: TOWARDS A CHRISTIAN, POSTMODERN, ACADEMIC MODEL FOR BIBLICAL INTERPRETATION

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Talking with Strangers: Towards a Christian, Postmodern, Academic Model for Biblical Interpretation

Abstract

Postmodernism in Biblical Studies is characterised by proliferation of methodological and ideological interpretive perspectives, emphasis upon the ethics of interpretation and awareness of the role of interpretive communities. Following Stephen E. Fowl, the underlying motives of interpreters can be understood when approaches are analysed in terms of interpretive interests. The work of David J. A. Clines, J. Cheryl Exum and Stephen D. Moore reveals a strong de-confessional motive and a desire to exclude confessional concerns from academic interpretation. This position is ideologically driven and, in terms of liberal academic values, self-contradictory. The difficulties posed for Christian interpretation by the postmodern context are evident in the narrative criticism of Mark Allan Powell and R. Alan Culpepper, where unresolved conflict of theological, methodological and political interests threatens the coherence of the approach. Recent work by Powell addresses postmodern concerns, but fails adequately to engage theoretical and theological issues.

A postmodern understanding of the Bible as Christian scripture which affirms both the validity and legitimacy of multiple interpretive perspectives and a pneumatological understanding of the Bible as the Word of God can be framed using the work of Kevin J. Vanhoozer, Stephen E. Fowl, Roman Jakobson and Daniel Patte. Socio-pragmatic objections to the legitimacy and validity of Christian interpretation beyond the faith community can be resisted by asserting a dialogical relationship between the Bible, the church and the wider academic community, and by following Francis Watson's argument that the church's discourse is derived from that of the wider society in which it exists. Christian interpretation will seek to engage constructively with other interpretive approaches. A Christian ethics of interpretation characterised by openness, humility, repentance and forgiveness offers a positive contribution to the culture of postmodern academic interpretation. Jesus' encounter with the Syrophoenician woman in Mark 7 offers a paradigm for such interpretive practice.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

PART ONE: THE POSTMODERN CONTEXT IN BIBLICAL STUDIES

CHAPTER ONE: THE POSTMODERN CONTEXT OF BIBLICAL INTERPRETATION

"I'm a postmodern vegetarian. I eat meat, but I do it ironically."

- Bill Bailey

Over the last thirty years a sea-change has begun to work its way through academic Biblical Studies. At the start of the 1970s Biblical Studies was largely defined by a historical-critical approach which saw the purpose of study as the uncovering of the history of the biblical texts and the recovery of their original contexts of production and reception. By contrast, early twenty-first century Biblical Studies is increasingly multi-disciplinary, interested not only in the authors and histories of biblical texts, but in their literary forms and qualities, in their reception by readers in different times and places, in their cultural significance, and in their ethical and moral uses and consequences. Biblical Studies is no longer one thing but many, and this multiplication of interpretive approaches within biblical scholarship mirrors the growth of the movement known as postmodernism in the wider academic and general culture within which Biblical Studies operates.[1]

The postmodern context in Biblical Studies is characterised by a proliferation of interpretive voices and perspectives, each reflecting different methodological, ideological or theological interests. Some of these voices are self-consciously local and particular, others claim more universal validity. Some are motivated by theological or confessional concerns, others are openly hostile to an interpretive perspective motivated by faith interests. Some interpretive groups continue to draw upon traditional historical-critical

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[1] This is not to suggest that historical-critical scholarship is monolithic or static. For a survey of the development of historical-critical approaches in the last century and a half, see Neill & Wright 1988.

scholarship for their critical methodologies, whilst others have imported a headily eclectic mixture of new methods drawn from literary and cultural theory. The postmodern context presents a babel of interpretive voices, sometimes speaking together, but more often across or against one another. In some places historical-critical consensus has broken down, to be replaced by a sometimes bewildering array of competing and often conflicting methodological, ideological and theological approaches.

For confessional Christian scholars this emerging context offers both a challenge and an opportunity.[2] The opportunity arises out of a new openness within Biblical Studies to interpretation which advocates a particular ideological or theological perspective. Overt commitment to a religious interest in the Bible as scripture has not always been welcome within historical-critical scholarship, which has held disinterested enquiry and academic objectivity to be definitive scholarly virtues. The postmodern context, however, makes it possible (in theory at least) for Christian critics to interpret the Bible in such a way that their personal interests in the Bible as scripture and their academic interests in biblical texts as objects of study cohere. The challenge to Christian scholars is that not all of the new voices in Biblical Studies are sympathetic to an orthodox (or even unorthodox) Christian approach to the Bible. Some of the most interesting and exciting new approaches to biblical interpretation have been imported specifically with a view to resisting any attempt to posit orthodox Christian perspectives as

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[2]For the purposes of this thesis I propose to define "confessional" interpretation as interpretation in the interests of a specifically religious commitment to the biblical text as scripture. Confessional interpretation therefore includes Christian interpretation but is not restricted to it: many of the concerns expressed in this study would be shared by, for instance, confessing Jewish interpreters of the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament. References to Christian interpretive perspectives should be taken to refer to approaches consistent with the broad mainstream of orthodox historical Christian thought and doctrine, as expressed from time to time in commonly shared credal or doctrinal statements. My individual position within this mainstream is that of an ordained minister in the open evangelical tradition of the Church of England.

normative, or even valid, outside the boundaries of faith communities and their particular liturgical and devotional practices. Many of the new voices in Biblical Studies are not only strange because of their newness, but because they reflect the estranged perspective of interpreters whose relationship to the Bible is ambivalent or antagonistic.

In this thesis, I propose to examine both the opportunities and the challenges of the postmodern context in Biblical Studies for confessional Christian scholarship. I will seek to address the question of whether an academically credible and genuinely postmodern interpretive approach which reflects orthodox Christian confessional interests is a viable concept and, if so, how such an approach might position itself within the arena of academic debate in such a way as to engage constructively with other, sometimes hostile, interpretive approaches. How can Christian biblical scholarship establish itself within a field where religious commitment and academic integrity are often regarded as mutually exclusive, and in which many powerful new voices are openly hostile to Christian insights into the Bible? More positively, what might a distinctively Christian interpretive approach have to contribute to the practice of postmodern biblical scholarship? Put simply, how should Christian biblical scholars talk with strangers?

In order to answer these questions this thesis falls into two parts. In the first, we will attempt to gauge the nature and severity of the challenge posed to a confessional approach to academic biblical interpretation by the postmodern context. In the rest of this chapter the origins of postmodern biblical scholarship in the breakdown of consensus over historical-critical models will be considered, and the proliferation of methodological and ideological approaches within Biblical Studies will be traced. The pluralist context

produced by these trends poses both a challenge and an opportunity to confessional scholarship.

In chapter two we will consider how two key postmodern concepts, in the form of the ethics of interpretation and the interpretive community, have found expression in the work of David J. A. Clines, J. Cheryl Exum and Stephen D. Moore. Developing Stephen E. Fowl's concept of interpretive interests we will examine how methodological, ideological and political interests combine in the work of these scholars to produce an approach to biblical interpretation hostile both to the ideologies of biblical texts and to mainstream Christian academic interpretation. Attempts to exclude Christian concerns from the academy on ideological grounds will be considered, and the viability of a genuinely academic, postmodern Christian approach in Biblical Studies will be asserted.

In chapter three we will take narrative criticism as an example of a confessional approach which has fallen foul of the postmodern context by failing to consider the coherence of its methodological, ideological and political interests. Driven by a theological interest in the Bible as scripture, narrative criticism has projected itself as an objective formalist method when in reality its desire to interpret the Bible as the Word of God has driven it more in the direction of a reader response approach. By analysing inner tensions and conflicts of interest within narrative criticism we will demonstrate the requirements for an authentically postmodern Christian approach, and suggest that recent developments in narrative criticism offer the prospect of such an approach being viable.

In chapter four we will begin to build a framework for an authentically Christian, postmodern academic approach in Biblical Studies by attempting a

postmodern definition of the Bible as scripture. Drawing in particular on the work of Kevin J. Vanhoozer, Stephen E. Fowl and Roman Jakobson, we will attempt to establish a theoretical and theological understanding of the Bible as scripture which affirms its role in divine self-communication as the Word of God, but which also affirms the need for a pluralist and polyvalent approach to interpretation. This will have the effect of authenticating a range of interpretive approaches within Christian interpretation, but will also affirm Christian interpretation as one of a range of valid approaches to the Bible.

Chapter five will address the nature of the church and the academy as interpretive communities. We will respond to socio-pragmatic objections to Christian academic interpretation on the grounds that either the authority of the Christian community over the biblical texts renders the understanding of them as the Word of God illusory, or that the particularity of Christian discourse makes it impossible for Christian readings of the Bible to be shared meaningfully beyond the boundaries of the confessing community. In response to these challenges we will attempt to show that Christian commitment to the Bible as scripture is both internally coherent and consistent with the realities of Christian experience, and also a crucial motive in impelling Christian academics to engage constructively with other interpreters beyond their own community.

Finally, in chapter six we will seek to establish the principles of a distinctively Christian ethics of interpretation characterised by openness, constructive engagement with outside perspectives, humility and repentance. The benefits of such an approach will be contrasted with the fragmentation and faction which accompanies some postmodern scholarship, and a biblical paradigm for such an ethical approach will be sought in Jesus' encounter with the Syrophoenician woman in Mark 7.

This study will seek to make a fresh contribution in two key areas. First, the nature of the challenge posed to confessional Christian scholarship by the development of postmodern approaches in academic Biblical Studies will be examined in detail and some of its underlying motivations explored. Postmodernism has raised significant questions concerning the nature of biblical scholarship, and has in some areas given expression to deep hostility regarding the consideration of faith interests in academic interpretation. It is hoped that by better understanding the nature of such challenges (and especially where they are valid), Christian scholars will be better equipped to respond to them. Second, this study aims to offer the framework for an interpretive model in Biblical Studies which, by considering postmodern insights seriously and incorporating them when found to be valid, may offer confessional biblical scholars a way forward in operating with integrity when pursuing an interest in the Bible as scripture whilst simultaneously meeting their obligations to the broader academy within which they operate. It is hoped that such a model will enable Christian academics to offer confessional interpretations of biblical texts as academically valid in an increasingly pluralist context where support and sympathy for Christian interpretations cannot be taken for granted.

Before proceeding, however, it is worthwhile to ask how the challenge of the postmodern interpretive context has arisen, and to attempt to give a brief thumbnail sketch of postmodernism as it has impacted upon Biblical Studies. Three key developments have been crucial to the generation of a postmodern interpretive context: first, the breakdown of consensus over the appropriateness of historical-critical models for biblical interpretation; second, the importation of new critical methods and paradigms from literary and cultural theory; and, third, the growth of overtly ideological interpretive approaches, of which feminism has been the most significant.

The Breakdown of Historical-Critical Consensus

A key factor in the growth of postmodernism within Biblical Studies has been increased disenchantment with the dominant historical-critical paradigm. By the 1970s a number of critics were expressing dissatisfaction with the progress of historical criticism, which appeared to them to have run its course as a productive critical method. The historical approaches, it was argued, had failed to deliver what they promised. One indicator of this failure was a fundamental lack of agreement on foundational questions. What validity could be credited to a method which could not achieve consensus among its practitioners on even basic questions such as whether Jesus actually referred to himself as the Son of Man or whether Matthew used Mark and Q?[3] The proliferation of differing models of early Christianity and the formation of its texts were felt to be evidence that "the discipline has succeeded in generating a demand for what, apparently, it cannot produce",[4] or that it had "led us in search of a holy grail which cannot be recovered".[5] Further, the increased tendency of commentaries and scholarly works to devote most of their length to the review of existing scholarship rather than the fresh study of the biblical text was perceived as an indication that the historical-critical method was spent as a critical force.[6]

Walter Wink, in *The Bible and Human Transformation: Toward a New Paradigm for Biblical Study* (1973), argued that historical-critical scholarship was "bankrupt" because it was incapable of achieving its purpose of interpreting scripture so that "the past becomes alive and illumines our present

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[3]Keck 1980, 116.
[4]Keck 1980, 117.
[5]Culpepper 1984, 470.
[6]Keck 1980, 117-18. Francis Watson has observed that monographs, articles and papers multiply, but that "the proliferation of positions and the constant deferment of the hoped-for consensus may be indicative not of progress but of circularity" (Watson 1994, 47).

with new possibilities for personal and social transformation".[7] The main problem, Wink argued, was historical criticism's emphasis upon detachment and objectivity. In the first place, a detached, objective interpretive approach was inevitably inadequate when applied to texts written to and from a faith perspective. Indeed, the detached neutrality affected by many biblical scholars was in fact neither detached nor neutral, but a decision against responding to the rhetorical demands of the text.[8] The objective, a-historical values of historical scholarship were, in any case, an illusion, since they projected into critical practice the historically situated and fundamentally rationalistic values of the Enlightenment. The "objective standpoint", Wink concluded, is simply "the historically conditioned place where *we* happen to be standing, and possesses no neutrality or detachment at all".[9] Historical scholarship had developed a false consciousness, persuaded by its own objectivist rhetoric to suppress awareness of the high stakes its practitioners held in academic institutions, and blinded to the way in which scholarship unconsciously reflected the racial, sexual and class interests of the scholars who produced it.[10] Wink noted that biblical scholarship had cut itself off from the church which had given birth to it in favour of a narrow academic professionalism, and argued that the approach had developed to oppose conservative fideism in a historical context which had now changed, rendering historical-critical models obsolete in their current form.[11]

Gerhard Maier, in his book *The End of the Historical-Critical Method* (1977), similarly argued that historical criticism was fundamentally inappropriate for

[7]Wink 1973, 1-2.
[8]Wink 1973, 2. Robert M. Polzin has made the same point, arguing that the prioritisation of objectivity in academic study is itself a subjective value-judgement of the most profound kind. Polzin argues that the Bible, as a document of faith, is resistant to objectivist critical method, insisting that "*the biblical message that this misguided scholarship uncovers would reject the very method by which it is uncovered*" (Polzin 1980, 106, author's emphasis).
[9]Wink 1973, 3.
[10]Wink 1973, 6-7.
[11]Wink 1973, 10-15.

the study of the Bible because of the inner impossibility of the concept.[12] In particular, the insistence of Enlightenment scholarship of taking human reason as the yardstick of critical evaluation represented a prejudgement in the sense of an *a priori* decision concerning the outcome.[13] Crucially, historical-critical scholarship had failed to reach consensus in its attempt to differentiate the eternal and valuable from the superstitious and historically conditioned elements within the Bible. Failure in attempts to determine a "canon within the canon", or to discern a divine as opposed to a human scripture, suggested that the method was inappropriate to the object of study.[14] In any case, Maier argued, the assumption that it was necessary to distinguish between different elements within the Bible in the first place involved a massive prejudgement which inevitably coloured the results of the critical exercise.[15] Finally, historical criticism produced results which were of limited practicability, as was indicated by the fact that historical criticism had failed to generate significant support beyond the academic community, and that many of the most committed practitioners of historical approaches continued to use the Bible in pre-critical ways in their own devotional lives.[16] Maier concluded that historical criticism was ultimately theologically deficient in its approach to texts which the Church regarded as means of revelation:

> the correlative or counterpart to revelation is not critique but obedience; it is not correction - not even on the basis of a partially recognised and applied revelation - but it is a let-me-be-corrected. Like Job, man must here keep silence because God has something to say to him.[17]

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[12]A third influential voice alongside Maier and Wink was Brevard S. Childs (see e.g. Childs 1970).
[13]Maier 1977, 11.
[14]Maier 1977, 16-18.
[15]Maier 1977, 19-21.
[16]Maier 1977, 21-22.
[17]Maier 1977, 23.

According to Maier, the inner impossibility of the historical-critical method was that, as a theological approach, it meant "a procedure according to which the Bible is approached from an extra-Biblical position and with extra-Biblical standards, with the objective of discovering the Word of God in the process".[18]

Maier and Wink's analysis and criticism of historical-critical scholarship reflects the concerns of other critics of the 1970s. Not only had historical criticism failed to deliver the answers to its own questions, thus casting doubt on its efficacy as a method, it was also increasingly seen as the projection, under a screen of objectivity, of humanist and rationalistic values which were actually hostile to the character of the Bible as a theological text. This covert inner incoherence rendered historical criticism unsuitable as a vehicle for theological enquiry. What was needed was a new approach committed to a critical *engagement* with the biblical narrative, not a critical *distancing* from it. For many critics, the major failing of the historical approach, infused as it was with Enlightenment values of academic objectivity and empirical detachment, was that it had failed to address itself appropriately to the biblical texts as scripture written to and from a faith perspective. Historical criticism was unfitted to examine or evaluate these qualities, and had thus failed to engage with precisely the aspects of the biblical texts which were of most value.

A second major issue for many critics of the historical-critical method was that it had demonstrated some serious weaknesses in its treatment of biblical texts. The evolutionary model of textual development which underlay the historical approaches resulted in disintegrated, atomised and reductive interpretations of the Bible. Instead of being presented and studied as the unified works which their literary form and the history of their reception by the Church implied, the

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[18]Maier 1977, 24.

biblical text was treated as "a window on the history of its own composition" or "an effect, to be understood in light of its causes".[19] "All too often," R. Alan Culpepper argued, "the assumption has been made that we have understood the text when we see how logically it can be taken apart. Attention has thereby been diverted from the text as it stands".[20]

David Clines' influential work *The Theme of the Pentateuch* (1978) criticised historical scholarship both for its tendency towards atomism, concentrating on ever smaller aspects of detail and so missing the overall themes and thrust of biblical texts; and for its insistence upon geneticism, the argument that a text could only be properly understood in light of its origins. Clines eschewed both of these approaches in favour of a thematic approach to the entire Pentateuch, anticipating accusations that such an approach was "subjective" with the retort:

> It is ironic, is it not, that the soundest historical-critical scholar, who will find talk of themes and structures "subjective" in the extreme, will have no hesitation in expounding the significance of a (sometimes conjectural) document from a conjectural period for a hypothetical audience of which he has, even if he has defined the period correctly, only the most meagre knowledge, without any control over the all-important question of how representative of and how acceptable to the community the given document was.[21]

Norman Petersen, similarly, argued that historical-critical disassembling of biblical texts resulted in interpretations which failed to address their true nature:

> source and form criticism knocked our textual Humpty Dumpty off the wall and failed to reconstitute him with their evolutionary theory, since the latter produced only an anonymous community product, not Humpty Dumpty. Redaction criticism, on the other hand, has

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[19]Keck 1980, 116; Culpepper 1984, 469.
[20]Culpepper 1984, 469.
[21]Clines 1978, 14.

attempted to reconstruct from the seams between the fragmented pieces not Humpty Dumpty but his theology![22]

The failure of historical criticism to develop an interpretive approach which addressed the literary forms of biblical texts on their own terms, Petersen argued, had led to the creation of "a desert that is in literary matters doubly barren".[23]

For many, the opening of new possibilities for literary approaches in biblical interpretation was heralded by James Muilenburg, whose 1968 address to the Society of Biblical Literature, "Form Criticism and Beyond", was taken as an appeal for a new direction in Biblical Studies.[24] Beginning with a survey of the development of Form Criticism, Muilenburg declared that it had effectively exhausted itself and needed to be superseded by a new "Rhetorical Criticism", which would concentrate upon the rhetorical or persuasive qualities of biblical texts. Muilenburg's outline of his new approach bore strong similarities to New Criticism, the dominant literary theory of the day, in emphasising the need to recognise the unity of literary form and conceptual content, to focus on the unity of the text through close reading, and to appreciate how biblical literature plumbed the human condition. For the first time a major figure of the Biblical Studies establishment had actively promoted a literary approach as a serious alternative to conventional historical-critical models, and this encouraged a number of critics to seek beyond the boundaries of traditional historical-critical scholarship for interpretive models which might address their literary and theological interests in the biblical texts.

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[22]Petersen 1978, 19-20.
[23]Petersen 1980, 32.
[24]Muilenburg 1969. Other important attempts by biblical scholars to apply literary criticism to biblical texts before 1970 include the work of Amos Wilder (Wilder 1964), Edwin M. Good (Good 1965), and Dan O. Via (Via 1967).

Through the 1970s and into the 1980s historical criticism was increasingly seen by more and more critics to have comprehensively failed as a critical method.[25] It represented the imposition of a foreign ideology onto the biblical text, and produced results which were of little use either for theological enquiry or for the faith communities which largely supported it. Worse, historical criticism had failed to deliver on its own promises, succeeding only in producing a self-consuming scholarship which appeared more and more obscure to outside observers. Historical criticism asked questions of the biblical texts which they were not written to answer, and had failed to develop an appropriate methodology for addressing the texts on their own terms as theological and literary documents. A number of critics, therefore, set out to seek for more productive approaches to biblical interpretation, resulting in a proliferation of interpretive methods in Biblical Studies

The "Literary Turn" and the Proliferation of Methodologies

Having grown dissatisfied with historical-critical methods, a number of biblical scholars during the 1970s turned to literary theory as a source of interpretive approaches which might enable them more adequately to address the theological and literary aspects of the Bible which historical criticism had neglected.[26] One of the more important figures in placing literary approaches

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[25]It is important to say that historical criticism is alive and well, and continues to be the dominant approach in academic Biblical Studies. A recent positive evaluation of historical criticism in relation to other approaches is Collins 2005.

[26]There is not space here to give more than the briefest and most inadequate sketch of literary theory and its importation into Biblical Studies. The standard introduction to literary theory for many biblical critics has been Terry Eagleton's *Literary Theory: An Introduction* (Eagleton 1996), although Chris Baldick's *Criticism and Literary Theory 1890 to the Present* (Baldick 1996) is equally comprehensive and less biased towards a cultural materialist point of view. Numerous other introductions to critical and literary theory exist. The foremost survey of biblical literary criticism from a theoretical point of view continues to be Stephen D. Moore's *Literary Criticism and the Gospels: The Theoretical Challenge* (Moore 1989), but

on the Biblical Studies map was Hans Frei, whose book *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative* (1974) was highly influential.[27] Drawing upon the work of literary historian Erich Auerbach,[28] Frei advocated the recognition of biblical narratives as "realistic" or "history-like": like novels, biblical narratives were characterised by narrative forms which intended to create a realistic story-world into which the reader could be drawn. The important thing in interpreting such narratives was not to confuse their history-like quality with a claim to historicity. In an extended study of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century biblical scholarship, however, Frei demonstrated that the literary quality of biblical narratives had been largely ignored in favour of two alternative interpretive options: either to read the text literally as historically accurate, or to dismantle the text through a historical-critical process which relocated truth and meaning from the text itself to the context and history of its production. The result, Frei argued, was that biblical scholarship "lacked the distinctive category and the appropriate interpretative procedure for understanding what [...] has actually been recognised: the high significance of the literal, narrative shape of the stories for their meaning".[29] In response to this lack, Frei proposed an alternative critical method drawn from the literary approach of Anglo-American New Criticism as better suited to engage with the distinctively literary qualities of biblical texts.[30]

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good shorter surveys include those by Stanley E. Porter (Porter 1995), and by Robert Detweiler and Vernon K. Robbins (Detweiler and Robbins 1991). Comprehensive bibliographical surveys of literary-critical biblical scholarship to the mid-1990s have been compiled by Mark Minor (Minor 1992; Minor 1996) and Mark Allan Powell (Powell, Gray et al. 1992).

[27]For a sympathetic assessment of Frei's role in opening Biblical Studies to literary approaches, see David Lee's *Luke's Stories of Jesus: Theological Reading of Gospel Narrative and the Legacy of Hans Frei* (Lee 1999).

[28]Auerbach's *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature* (Auerbach 1953) was one of the first works to apply current literary theory to biblical narratives. Auerbach argues that the dominant influence upon European literary culture has been a "serious realism" derived ultimately not from Greco-Roman literature but from the Bible in general and the Gospels in particular (Auerbach 1953, 555).

[29]Frei 1974, 10.

[30]Finding its origins in the 1920s, New Criticism was largely unchallenged as the major approach to literary criticism for several decades. Its classic expression was René Wellek and

Following the lead of Muilenburg and Frei, an increasing number of literary interpretations of the Bible appeared through the 1970s and 1980s. Many, such as William A. Beardslee's *Literary Criticism of the New Testament* (1970), drew upon established literary-theoretical approaches such as New Criticism or Russian Formalism,[31] but at precisely the point at which many in Biblical Studies were adopting New-Critical insights and methods, New Criticism was itself being challenged and eventually supplanted as the dominant force in literary theory by a variety of vigorous new approaches, one of the most influential of which was structuralism.[32] The appeal of structuralism was varied, but rested largely upon its support for the fundamental integrity of the biblical texts as unified systems of signification, a supposedly objective concentration upon qualities of textual form, and a clearly defined and 'scientific' critical method.[33] Unsurprisingly, given the preponderance of narrative form within the Bible, narrative quickly became a major focus of literary interpretation, and pioneering work was done by scholars such as

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Austin Warren's *Theory of Literature*, which was first published in 1949, ran through three editions, and was still in print in the early 1990s.

[31]Beardslee 1970, x. Beardslee's sources included Erich Auerbach and Northrop Frye, René Wellek and Austin Warren's classic *Theory of Literature* (3rd edition 1963), and Russian Formalism.

[32]Structuralism is based upon the application to literary texts of methods developed for the analysis of language as a semiotic system. Standard introductions include Jonathan Culler's *Structuralist Poetics: Structuralism, Linguistics and the Study of Literature* (Culler 1975), and Terence Hawkes' *Structuralism and Semiotics* (Hawkes 1983).

[33]In the long term, structuralism failed to take as an enduring approach in Biblical Studies, becoming something of a cul-de-sac, or "a moribund sub-discipline" of Biblical Studies (Porter 1995, 83). One reason for this was structuralism's formidable and mystifying technical jargon, which many found off-putting compared to models drawn from Russian Formalism or New Criticism which were more easily grasped. Another was that it was not around long enough in Biblical Studies to establish itself before it was overtaken by newer literary-critical methods which were themselves both derived from and subversive of it, in the form of poststructuralism in general and deconstruction in particular, and a number of scholars, such as John Dominic Crossan, found themselves moving rapidly through structuralist criticism towards poststructuralism. Structuralism cannot, however, be said to have had no lasting impact on Biblical Studies. Indirectly, through the influence of structuralist narratologists such as Gerard Genette, Vladimir Propp, Tszvetan Todorov, Viktor Tomashevsky and Boris Uspensky, structuralism has been foundational for biblical narrative criticism in both Old and New Testaments (see e.g. Tomashevsky 1965; Propp 1968; Uspensky 1973; Todorov 1977; Genette 1980; Todorov 1981), whilst an enduring legacy of the structuralist approach within Biblical Studies is the journal *Semeia*, which devoted much of its early space to structuralist analysis of parables, and continues to be a major showcase for new approaches in the application of literary and cultural theory to biblical texts.

David J. A. Clines, David Jobling, Jan Fokkelman and David M. Gunn.[34] This early narrative study was to bear significant fruit in the 1980s in the form of robust narrative-theoretical approaches in both Old Testament/Hebrew Bible and New Testament studies.[35]

The impact of the new literary approaches in Biblical Studies was greater than simply the importation of new critical methods. New Criticism, structuralism and Russian Formalism were not, as Source, Form, Redaction and Composition Criticism had been, new methods for answering old historicist questions, but addressed crucially different interpretive concerns and interests. Instead of searching for meaning in the historical background of the texts, formalist approaches saw the meaning of the text as contained within itself, and the task of the interpreter as the unlocking of textual meaning through the interpretation of literary form. The significance of this perceptual shift was significantly to broaden the horizons of Biblical Studies, and was accentuated by the speed with which new literary approaches were able to establish themselves within the discipline.[36] One reason for this was that most of the new approaches were imported intact from the fields of literary theory and criticism where they had already undergone a long period of gestation and development, and brought with them academically-credible methodological

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[34]See e.g.: Fokkelman 1975; Clines 1978; Gunn 1978; Gunn 1980; Fokkelman 1981, 1986; Jobling 1986. Most of the analyses of whole books in the early phase of literary-biblical approaches are found in Old Testament/Hebrew Bible studies. Prior to the advent of narrative criticism in the 1980s, critical attention in New Testament studies had tended to focus on Gospel parables, which offered the prospect of smaller and simpler narrative units which were particularly conducive to structuralist analysis. Early issues of *Semeia* provide numerous examples of this interest.

[35]These developments will be examined in detail later, as a test case of the difficulties posed by the postmodern context for confessional approaches.

[36]The pace of change in literary Biblical Studies has been both a blessing and a curse. On the one hand, the fact that Biblical Studies has in thirty years covered the same ground that literary theory covered in almost a century has had a transforming effect. On the other hand, the pace of change has meant that biblical scholars have sometimes lacked the necessary depth of experience to apply their new critical tools appropriately, and that potentially helpful approaches have been dismissed as *passé* on the basis of their apparent supersession in literary theory before their prospects for biblical interpretation have been properly assessed.

tools honed and ready for immediate use. As well as challenging the hegemony of the historical-critical paradigm, therefore, literary approaches also began the process of transforming Biblical Studies from a closed, self-validating academic community into a postmodern interdisciplinary field of study. Biblical and literary critics were suddenly able to collaborate in an exciting and, for many, mutually beneficial manner, as both were able to speak about the Bible using the same critical language.[37]

It is also important to note that just as the disenchantment with historical-critical scholarship which prompted many critics to seek out new literary methods was motivated both by academic and confessional concerns, so these confessional interests were welded together with literary ones. The importation of literary approaches by many biblical scholars, therefore, should be viewed as a genuine combination of theological and literary interpretive interests. The express intention of William A. Beardslee's *Literary Criticism of the New Testament* is to use formalist literary criticism to engage the "religious functions of the narrative form",[38] and Mark Allan Powell has been careful to differentiate the "literary turn" in Biblical Studies from the study of "The Bible as Literature", which studied biblical texts from a purely literary and humanist perspective.[39] Whereas previous interpretation by literary

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[37]The importance of literary critics stepping across into biblical interpretation should not be underestimated: influential examples include Erich Auerbach (Auerbach 1953), Northrop Frye (Frye 1957; Frye 1982), Frank Kermode (Kermode 1979), Roland Barthes (Barthes 1974), Gabriel Josipovici (Josipovici 1988) and Mieke Bal (Bal 1987; Bal 1988b; Bal 1988a). Important examples of collaboration between literary and biblical scholars include the anthologies of narrative studies compiled by Kenneth R. R. Gros Louis (Gros Louis 1974; Gros Louis 1982), Robert Alter and Frank Kermode's *Literary Guide to the Bible* (Alter and Kermode 1987), and David Rhoads and Donald Michie's *Mark as Story* (Rhoads and Michie 1982).

[38]Beardslee 1970, ix.

[39] "The Bible as Literature" is a long-running strand of populist literary criticism. A classic example is Mary Ellen Chase's *The Bible and the Common Reader* (Chase 1946), which addresses itself to the Bible in the Authorised Version as *the* classic work of English prose, without which no truly liberal education is complete (Chase 1946, 20), and praises the poetry of the Old Testament as suggesting "the accents of the human voice as expressive of human emotions at their height and depth" (Chase 1946, 82). David Robertson praises the Bible, "taken as a single work of art", as a classic of world literature, on a par with Homer and

scholars tended to address the Bible as literature instead of as scripture, rendering aesthetic evaluation distinct from theological interpretation, Powell argues that the new convergence of literary and biblical criticism "destroys this dichotomy", so that "recent studies attempt to examine the Bible as literature and as scripture at the same time. Literary criticism becomes the means but theological interpretation remains the end".[40]

By the end of the 1970s, however, formalism was beginning to look somewhat *passé* in literary theory, overtaken by newer approaches which challenged its emphasis on the literary text. Poststructuralism, for instance, questioned the very concept of the text as a stable repository of meaning, extending structuralist analysis of language and literary form to interrogate the conceptual structure of thought itself. Rather than a stable, coherent system of concepts and linguistic signifiers, poststructuralism saw concepts (and therefore language, and therefore texts as linguistic structures) as unstable and indeterminate, constantly shifting and changing their meaning in an unending cycle of construction, deconstruction and reconstruction.[41] At the same time, radical reader response theory challenged the formalist emphasis upon the priority of the text in the interpretive process, arguing that readers, not texts, make meaning.[42] These developments were not long in making themselves

Shakespeare as part of "literature's grand symphony of imaginative speech that offers temporary order, insight and peace" (Robertson 1977, 15).

[40]Powell, Gray et al. 1992, 3.

[41]Poststructuralism is most simply defined as the application of structuralist theory not only to linguistic and literary vehicles of meaning, but to the structure of meaning itself. It therefore shares the reflexive quality of postmodernity, which relentlessly interrogates and calls into question its own presuppositions and foundational commitments. The writers of *The Postmodern Bible* observe that "If poststructuralism is the genus, then deconstruction is its best known species" (Bible and Culture Collective 1995, 119), making the point that poststructuralism is often identified with deconstruction and the work of Jacques Derrida, but is actually a broader movement whose major contributors include the cultural historian Michel Foucault, the literary and cultural theorist Roland Barthes, and the psychoanalytic theorist Jacques Lacan.

[42]Reader response is a broad and contested field in literary theory, ranging from formalism to radical socio-pragmatism. Comprehensive introductions to the breadth of reader response theory include Susan R. Suleiman and Inge Crosman's *The Reader in the Text: Essays on Audience and Interpretation* (Suleiman and Crosman 1980), Jane P. Tompkins' *Reader*

felt in biblical literary criticism:[43] as early as 1985 critiques of formalism were appearing within Biblical Studies,[44] and an increasing number of reader response and poststructuralist approaches to the Bible began to appear.[45] These new approaches further diversified the methodological options available to biblical critics, as well as opening the door to a variety of ideological positions whose voices had previously been marginalised or suppressed.

The "literary turn" was highly significant in the development of a postmodern context in Biblical Studies for three reasons. First, the importation of new interpretive approaches ready-formed from the fields of literary theory and criticism produced a rapid expansion in the critical alternatives open to biblical scholars, introducing a variety of new critical concepts, not all of which were mutually compatible. This inevitably resulted in a certain fragmentation of the discipline, as the relatively unified historical-critical terminology was replaced in some quarters by a babel of competing jargons and terminologies.

Response Criticism: From Formalism to Post-Structuralism (Tompkins 1980), and Elizabeth Freund's *The Return of the Reader: Reader-Response Criticism* (Freund 1987). The two most important reader response theorists for biblical interpretation have been Stanley Fish (especially Fish 1980a) and Wolfgang Iser (Iser 1974; Iser 1978). Fish and Iser have engaged in heated argument over the nature of reader interests in texts (see Kuenzli 1980; Fish 1981; Iser 1981). Fish will be discussed in more detail in chapter two, Iser in chapter three.

[43]A herald of this shift for many was Frank Kermode's *The Genesis of Secrecy* (1979): through examination of Mark's Gospel, Kermode argues that in the story world of the Gospel meaning is not susceptible to final determination. Rather, the text lends itself to multiple interpretations, and the meaning (if there is one) is obscured behind "structures of interpretation which come between us and the text [...] like some wall of wavy glass" (Kermode 1979, 125). The reader who wishes to discern the core of meaning in the Gospel is engaged on an illusory quest, since that core is overlaid by a potentially infinite number of interpretive layers. Although Kermode is not a poststructuralist, the tenor of his work has strong affinities with some poststructuralist thinking.

[44]See e.g. Poland 1985. Poland advocates a broad reader response hermeneutic based upon the theory of Paul Ricoeur.

[45]Advocates of reader response included Edgar V. McKnight (McKnight 1988), Jeffrey Lloyd Staley (Staley 1988) and Robert M. Fowler (Fowler 1991). John Dominic Crossan was an early advocate of poststructuralist indeterminacy in interpretation (Crossan 1980). Stephen D. Moore, arguably the most influential advocate of poststructuralism in Biblical Studies, will be studied in detail in the next chapter.

Second, literary approaches introduced not only new methods but new interpretive paradigms, addressing questions and interests which historical-critical scholarship had previously ignored or suppressed. Hence, text-centred formalist criticism challenged historicism's emphasis upon the intention of the author or the historical context of textual production, but was itself challenged and subverted by poststructuralist and reader response approaches which focussed their critical attention upon the reader's role in interpretation. By the 1990s, therefore, the integrity of Biblical Studies as a discipline could be seen to be under strain, as author-, text- and reader-centred approaches vied for attention in the critical arena.

A third consequence of the literary turn, however, was that it also opened the door to new ideological perspectives in biblical interpretation. Formalist biblical-literary critics reacted not only against historicist methods, but against the values of "objectivity" and "detachment" which were perceived as projections of Enlightenment values onto the biblical texts. The literary readings which they sought to produce through closer engagement with textual rhetoric often reflected the confessional interests of the interpreters concerned. Poststructuralism and radical reader response, however, introduced a hermeneutics of suspicion which suited the inclinations of other interpreters whose readings of the Bible were increasingly interrogatory or resistant. The challenge to historical-critical hegemony, therefore, was not only methodological but ideological.

The "Ideological Turn" and the Proliferation of Perspectives

Since the early 1970s Biblical Studies has diversified and expanded not only methodologically but ideologically. Alongside new critical methodologies, new ideological perspectives on the Bible have gained footholds and taken root within the discipline. Indeed, the advent of ideological criticism within Biblical Studies can be taken to mark the beginning of a genuinely postmodern context for interpretation. Biblical Studies is increasingly diverse, decentred and diffuse, as interpretive perspectives and methods proliferate.

"Ideological criticism" is a catch-all term which encompasses a wide range of interpretive approaches. Indeed, the writers of *The Postmodern Bible* regard the term "ideological criticism" as "a limited, reductionist term for a much larger context of cultural relations and processes".[46] Broadly speaking, ideological critics begin from the position that all interactions between readers and texts are affected by ideology - that is, by the values, beliefs and vested interests inscribed into texts and brought to the interpretive process by readers.[47] Ideological critics are therefore sensitive to the impact of beliefs, commitments and interests upon interpretation, especially where texts and their interpretation impact in turn upon the relationships between different groups of people within and between societies. Ideological criticism is frequently characterised by reading practices intended to uncover and resist the oppressive use of power in discourse. Tina Pippin has identified two main streams in ideological interpretation: one is the work of scholars within Western academia who have tended to apply Marxist insights to their analysis

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[46]Bible and Culture Collective 1995, 306. For overviews of ideological approaches see Bible and Culture Collective 1995, 272-308 and Pippin 1996.

[47]Bible and Culture Collective 1995, 302. There is debate among ideological critics over what ideology actually is and where it is located. Some, such as Meir Sternberg, see ideology as a property of texts (Sternberg 1985), whilst others, such as Stephen E. Fowl, argue that it is reader ideologies which fundamentally affect interpretation (Fowl 1995). Between these two poles there is a whole spectrum of other positions.

of texts and their reception;[48] the other consists of readings by groups on the cultural and academic margins, such as postcolonial and liberation-theological readings from the third world,[49] by African-Americans and other marginalised groups within the United States,[50] and by women.

As the first to establish itself firmly within Biblical Studies, feminist biblical criticism is arguably the archetypal ideological approach, and has been crucial in establishing a postmodern context within the discipline.[51] Feminist criticism is distinguished from historical and literary approaches primarily by being "neither a discipline nor a method but more a variety of approaches, informed not so much by the biblical texts themselves as by the interests and concerns of feminism as a world view and political enterprise".[52] The coherence of feminism is therefore to be found in a fundamental concern for issues of gender in the interpretation of biblical texts, rather than in the adoption of any particular critical method. Indeed, the methodological eclecticism of feminist biblical scholarship is one of its primary features, as feminist critics select methods which cohere with their fundamental commitments and further their project of revealing and combatting gender bias in both biblical texts and their interpretation. One consequence of this methodological breadth is that the impact of feminist criticism within Biblical Studies has been broad and cumulative, rather than narrowly focussed. Individual feminist scholars

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[48]Pippin identifies the main theoretical sources for this strand of scholarship as Frederick Jameson and Terry Eagleton, and cites Norman K. Gottwald's *The Tribes of Yahweh: A Sociology of Religion of Liberated Israel 1250-1050 B.C.E.* (Gottwald 1979) as an example of this kind of scholarship in Biblical Studies.

[49]See e.g. Sugirtharajah 1991; Segovia and Tolbert 1995a; Sugirtharajah 1998; Sugirtharajah 2001.

[50]See e.g. Felder 1991; Segovia and Tolbert 1995b.

[51]Feminist biblical criticism is now a large and well-established field. A very accessible general survey is offered by Cullen Murphy (Murphy 1999). Athalya Brenner (Brenner and Fontaine 1997) has edited a comprehensive collection of essays covering the range of feminist approaches, whilst Janice Capel Anderson has provided briefer general and bibliographical surveys of the field (Anderson 1991; Anderson 1992).

[52]Exum 1998a, 207. *The Postmodern Bible* describes feminism as "not a method of reading, but rather both a set of political positions and strategies and a contested intellectual terrain" (Bible and Culture Collective 1995, 234).

working in diverse areas and using various critical tools have produced a collective body of scholarship which poses a significant challenge to existing interpretation.[53] Janice Capel Anderson uses a striking image to describe this effect:

> Each feminist critic is a unique pearl with a unique colour and shape formed out of the variables of gender, race, class, sexual orientation, nationality, education, age, religion, and personal experience. Some of us use primarily literary, others historical or sociological methods. Together we form intertwining strands of pearls, pearls of great price.[54]

Feminism has been an important catalyst in introducing some of the newer critical methods into Biblical Studies, as feminist critics have been quick to seize upon approaches such as deconstruction, radical reader response and psychoanalysis, whose dominant hermeneutics of suspicion makes them useful in revealing gender bias in texts and interpretations. Hence, methodological and ideological proliferation within Biblical Studies can be seen to have gone together.

As well as broadening the ideological and methodological horizons of Biblical Studies, feminist and other ideological approaches have introduced a strong ethical concern into the discipline. A significant element in this development has been a broadening of critical focus to include not only texts but their

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[53]Some of the best-known feminist scholars demonstrate this methodological breadth. Phyllis Trible, one of the pioneers of feminist biblical interpretation, was a student of James Muilenburg and deploys a version of rhetorical criticism in her groundbreaking work (Trible 1978; Trible 1984). Cheryl J. Exum and Mieke Bal both pursue a narratological approach as the foundation of their work, but build on it using a mixture of psychoanalysis, anthropology, deconstruction and, in Exum's case, film and cultural criticism (Bal 1987; Bal 1988b; Bal 1988a; Exum 1992; Exum 1993a; Exum 1996). Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, meanwhile, has tended to use more conventional historical-critical methods in her work (Schüssler Fiorenza 1983; Schüssler Fiorenza 1984).

[54]Anderson 1992, 105. Collaboration and co-operation has been a notable feature of feminist scholarship, and some feminists have argued that feminist discourse itself needs to be superseded by an inclusive discipline of gender studies which include insights from masculinist as well as feminist scholars (Bach 1993, 192-93; Reinhartz 1997, 35; Exum 1998a, 224-25).

interpretations. Feminist scholars demand that interpreters be held accountable for the values and interests which are implicated in their interpretation of what feminists regard as highly ideological texts. The Bible and Culture Collective, for instance, conceive ideological criticism as a fundamentally ethical exercise, in the form of "a deliberate effort to read against the grain - of texts, of disciplinary norms, of traditions, of cultures. It is a disturbing way to read because ideological criticism demands a high level of self-consciousness and makes an explicit, unabashed appeal to justice. [...] It challenges readers to accept political responsibility for themselves and for the world in which they live".[55] Ideological interpretation, therefore, challenges both historicism and literary formalism to become self-aware, recognising the interests which they were created to serve and promote, and acknowledging where those interests render their interpretations problematic for other readers. Feminism in particular has led the way in breaking down the monolithic tendencies in much previous biblical scholarship and giving a voice to previously marginalised interpretive perspectives.

If feminism has helped to diversify Biblical Studies both methodologically and ideologically, it also demonstrates some of the issues which a postmodern Biblical Studies will have to face. A particular concern is the increasing fragmentation and dissonance produced by the proliferation of perspectives and approaches. Cullen Murphy, for instance, observes of feminist criticism that "the movement fractures and calves with an enthusiasm reminiscent of the left in the 1930s, and with the same sense of injury and righteousness and the same level of noise".[56] Pamela J. Milne, similarly, argues that the term "feminist" is no longer adequate to describe the range of concerns focussed around the issues of gender in biblical interpretation. One significant division

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[55]Bible and Culture Collective 1995, 275.
[56]Murphy 1999, xxiii.

within feminist interpretation is over the authority of the Bible: while some critics see their role as the recovery of positive biblical portrayals of women, the reinterpretation of biblical texts in ways that affirm women or the rediscovery of the place of women within the history of Judaism and Christianity, others reject both Bible and Christianity as irredeemably patriarchal.[57]

Another division has arisen over whom feminist scholarship actually represents. Some expositions of feminism, particularly in the United States, have assumed a self-evident commonality among women because they are women. This has in turn been challenged by African American and Latina critics on the basis that the feminist movement has, by and large, been predominantly white and middle-class, resulting in the relabelling of mainstream feminist scholarship by some black and Latina critics as "white feminism" and their own self-definition as "womanist" or "mujerista".[58] Adele Reinhartz has pointed out that exclusive concentration on the dynamics of male-female oppression can mask the collusion of some women in the oppression of others through racism or classism, and argued for a broader ideological critique of oppression within Biblical Studies.[59]

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[57]Alice Bach, for instance, has been critical of Phyllis Trible, among others, for attempting to rehabilitate the Bible and seeking to "make this patriarchal corpus safe and still authoritative for faithful readers with feminist sensibilities" (Bach 1993, 196). Bach praises feminists who have sought to interpret the Bible "without a theological lens", such as Cheryl J. Exum and Mieke Bal (Bach 1993). Pamela J. Milne has noted that one reason why feminist biblical scholarship is itself marginalised within feminist scholarship as a whole is the suspicion of other feminists that feminist biblical criticism seeks to defend the authority and spiritual value of the Bible no matter how sexist it appears to be, subordinating feminist ideological values to theological ones (Milne 1997, 45-46).

[58]For a survey of this debate see Bible and Culture Collective 1995, 234-44. Loraine MacKenzie Shepherd, for instance, has taken issue with Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza's depiction of women struggling for liberation from patriarchy within the church, arguing that "only a small minority of women, almost entirely white and middle-class, would identify themselves with Schüssler Fiorenza's definition of women-church" (Shepherd 1995, 155). Janice Capel Anderson confesses that "No one can speak for everyone. I can speak and read only as a white middle-class American heterosexual Christian feminist" (Anderson 1992, 112).

[59]Reinhartz 1997, 33. "The feminist battle itself must be seen as only one front in an all out war within Western intellectual thought" (Reinhartz 1997, 32).

A third area of argument relates to the academic politics of feminist scholarship, as some feminists see the acceptance of feminist insights within the academy as effectively neutering feminism's political agenda in favour of issues of philosophy and theory.[60] Some critics have worried that acceptance of feminist scholarship within the mainstream of Biblical Studies represents the co-option of feminist scholarship by the academy so as to neutralise the impact of its critique whilst leaving other perspectives marginalised. If feminism reveals something of the potential of new methodological and ideological approaches in Biblical Studies, it also demonstrates that the more perspectives attempt to co-exist within the discipline, the more competition and scope for disagreement there will be. How to address and resolve interpretive and ideological disputes is a key question which the postmodern context poses.

The Postmodern Context in Biblical Studies

How, then, can we characterise the postmodern context which has arisen out of the developments we have examined? Arguably the most important thing to say about postmodernism in Biblical Studies, as in Western culture in general, is that it is not one thing but many. Indeed, it is more appropriate to speak of postmodernisms in the plural than in the singular. Francis Watson has pointed

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[60]The argument arises from the perception by some prominent feminists that poststructuralist theory renders political and ethical activism problematic by rendering all ethical concepts unstable and therefore unsustainable, and by promoting a deterministic view of individuals as the products of impersonal cultural systems. The writers of *The Postmodern Bible*, for instance, respond to such suspicions in the work of Schüssler Fiorenza with an extended critique of her "anti-postmodern rhetoric" (Bible and Culture Collective 1995, 260-67). Their treatment of feminist scholarship has prompted a heated response by Alice Bach and Schüssler Fiorenza herself to *The Postmodern Bible's* "arrogance, if not downright impudence", "mean-spirited smugness", and "dismissive and condescending attitude" to previous feminist work which the Bible and Culture Collective had labelled "naive, quaint and imprecise" (Bible and Culture Collective 1995, 235; Bach 1997, 37-40; Bach, Glancy et al. 1997, 70-73).

out that postmodernism is a broadly-based cultural phenomenon rather than an academic trend,[61] and the increasing pervasiveness of postmodern insights and patterns of thought within Western culture and society means that rather than attempting to define postmodernism in terms of a particular philosophy or critical practice, it is more appropriate to think of it as the cultural context within which Biblical Studies operates, and which therefore exerts a defining and shaping influence over the nature and practice of the discipline. Hence, as postmodernism has grown in influence within the wider culture, so its impact upon Biblical Studies has increased.

Within this wider context, as A. K. M. Adam observes, there are as many varieties of postmodernism as there are people who want to talk about it.[62] Furthermore, not all varieties of postmodern thought and critical practice are mutually supportive or sympathetic: indeed, Adam further notes the "enduring capacity" of postmodernism to "start heated arguments under any circumstances".[63] The writers of *The Postmodern Bible* similarly reject the suggestion that the postmodern can be easily encapsulated in a single definition or restricted to a particular area of cultural or academic influence, arguing that instead of a unified critical position, postmodernism should be regarded as to do with "transformation in the local ways we understand ourselves in relation to modernity and to contemporary culture and history, the social and personal dimensions of that awareness, and the ethical and political decisions that it generates".[64]

The relationship of the postmodern and the modern is complex. On the one hand, postmodernism includes the modern in that it represents the application

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[61]Watson 1994, 86.
[62]Adam 1995, 1.
[63]Adam 1995, 1.
[64]Bible and Culture Collective 1995, 9.

of modernist critical attention to its own foundations, to the previously unquestioned presuppositions which inform and underpin modernist thought and critical practice.[65] Hence, as David J. A. Clines puts it, postmodernism can be understood as "the modern conscious of itself".[66] One influential exposition of this postmodern characteristic is that of Zygmunt Baumann:

> Postmodernity is no more (but no less either) than the modern mind taking a long, attentive and sober look at itself, at its conditions and its past works, not fully liking what it sees and sensing the urge to change. Postmodernity is modernity coming of age: modernity looking at itself at a distance rather than from inside, making a full inventory of its gains and losses, psychoanalysing itself, discovering the intentions it never before spelled out, finding them mutually cancelling and incongruous. Postmodernity is modernity coming to terms with its own impossibility: a self-monitoring modernity, one that consciously discards what it was once unconsciously doing.[67]

On the one hand, then, postmodernism is simply the self-reflexive extension of modernist critical enquiry to include modernist thought itself as an object of critical interrogation, so that Clines characterises the postmodern turn in Biblical Studies as "a turn from interpretation to critique, from understanding to evaluation, from hermeneutics to ethics".[68] In this sense postmodernism is the logical and natural successor of the modern, and thus includes the modern within itself.

In another way, however, postmodernism may be seen as a reaction against modernity, and it is in this guise that it has most often manifested itself within Biblical Studies. Adam notes that it is "almost always fair" to think of

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[65]Adam 1995, 12.
[66]Clines 1998c, 277.
[67]Baumann 1991, 272.
[68]Clines 1998c, 290.

postmodernism as a movement of resistance, which defines itself over against modernity:[69]

> Where modern criticism is absolute, postmodern criticism is relative; where modern knowledge is universal, unified, and total, postmodern knowledge is local and particular; where modern knowledge rests on a mystified account of intellectual discourse, postmodern knowledge acknowledges that various forces that are ostensibly external to intellectual discourse nonetheless impinge on the entire process of perceiving, thinking, and of reaching and communicating one's conclusions. Nothing is pure; nothing is absolute; nothing is total, unified, or individual.[70]

What postmodernism reacts against in particular is hegemony, whether cultural, intellectual or theological. Within Biblical Studies, and within Western culture generally, the key postmodern insight is that no single interpretive perspective can achieve an absolute monopoly of truth. Concepts and perspectives which were previously accepted as universal, unified and absolute are increasingly perceived to be anything but. Walter Brueggemann has characterised the fundamental postmodern insight as recognising that knowledge and interpretation is inherently *contextual*, in that "what one knows and sees depends upon where one stands or sits".[71] Furthermore, contexts are invariably *local*, so that whilst it is possible to propose that a local truth ought to apply beyond one's local context, it is not possible to proclaim a local truth as universally applicable. Finally, it follows for Brueggemann that knowledge is inherently *pluralistic*, "a cacophony of claims, each of which rings true to its own advocates".

The recognition that knowledge is context-specific, and that a variety of interpretations or perceptions of a text may therefore be equally legitimate or

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[69]Adam 1995, 1.
[70]Adam 1995, 16.
[71]Brueggemann 1993, 8-9.

valid, has led to the increasing dominance of a "hermeneutics of suspicion" within postmodern Biblical Studies, directed at interpretations and interpretive paradigms which claim to provide definitive readings of biblical texts. Postmodern critics recognise that interpreters are themselves conditioned and shaped by their interpretive contexts. Socio-political, institutional, gender-political, theological, racial and a host of other factors all combine to influence both the questions that interpreters ask of texts and the critical methods which they apply to them, and therefore to a large extent determine the results of interpretation. The result, as Robert Fowler points out, is that:

> reading and interpretation is always interested, never disinterested; always significantly subjective, never completely objective; always committed and therefore always political, never uncommitted and apolitical; always historically-bound, never ahistorical. The modernist dream of disinterested, objective, distanced, abstract truth is fading rapidly.[72]

One consequence of this recognition is that interpretations and interpretive approaches which claim to be objective and absolute now appear to be exercises in ideological projection. Objectivity, as Brueggemann puts it, "is in fact one more practice of ideology that presents interest in covert form as an established fact".[73] Postmodern readings of biblical texts which foreground their own contextuality and provisionality challenge traditional interpretations which claim universality, completeness and priority over other interpretations on the grounds that such interpretations "are themselves enactments of domination or, in simpler terms, power plays".[74] The key insight which motivates much postmodern biblical criticism is that there is no interpretation

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[72]Fowler 1989, 21.
[73]Brueggemann 1993, 9.
[74]Bible and Culture Collective 1995, 3.

which does not reflect the interests of the interpreter and the community of interpretation to which they belong.[75]

The trajectory of Biblical Studies since the 1970s and the growth of postmodernism offer both possibilities and challenges to confessional scholarship. The breakdown of historical-critical hegemony has meant that a wider range of questions and interests than ever before have become legitimate pursuits for biblical scholars, including the goal of producing theological and explicitly confessional readings. The "literary turn" has introduced exciting new methods which can unlock previously unexplored aspects of biblical texts and produce innovative new interpretations. Finally, the introduction of ideological criticism in the wake of feminist biblical scholarship means that the possibilities for an explicitly confessional and yet genuinely academic critical approach to biblical interpretation are, at least in theory, bright.

The challenges, however, are also significant. Confessional criticism needs to establish itself not only in relation to historical criticism, but in relation to a bewildering array of competing and overlapping ideological and methodological approaches, each with its own jargon and terminology, and each pursuing its own interests in the Bible. Some of these approaches are sympathetic, some are violently hostile. Some may be helpful, some will be totally disinterested. If a confessional approach to Biblical Studies is to establish itself within the postmodern academy, it must first understand the nature of the field in which it seeks to take its place. In the next chapter, therefore, we will examine in detail the work of three postmodern scholars, in order to work towards a definition of what might count as authentically postmodern academic scholarship at the beginning of the twenty-first century.

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[75]See e.g. Bible and Culture Collective 1995, 4; Brueggemann 1997, 63.

CHAPTER TWO: POSTMODERN BIBLICAL CRITICISM – THE

RULES OF THE GAME

I don't want you to worry 'bout me, 'cause I'm alright;
I don't want you to tell me it's time to come home;
I don't care what you say any more, this is my life;
Go ahead with your own life, leave me alone.
                                        - Billy Joel

In this chapter we will attempt to establish a more detailed picture of postmodern biblical criticism based upon the actual critical practice of scholars in the field. Through the analysis of critical practice we will attempt to discern what actually counts as academically valid postmodern biblical scholarship, and hence identify a number of key criteria which a confessional critic must consider in attempting to engage in postmodern scholarly discourse.

The three scholars with whom this chapter will engage are David J. A. Clines, Stephen D. Moore and J. Cheryl Exum. These three represent between them a range of postmodern critical methods, theoretical approaches and ideological motivations which reflects the diversity of postmodern biblical scholarship, and represent a coherent grouping in that during the 1990s they were all faculty members of the Department of Biblical Studies at the University of Sheffield.[1] Founded in 1947 as the Department of Biblical History and Literature under the professorship of F. F. Bruce, the Department has come to occupy an internationally dominant role at the cutting edge of new approaches, methods and theories in Biblical Studies. As well as establishing a strong

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[1]Clines joined the department in 1964, Exum in 1993 and Moore in 1996. Moore left Sheffield in 1999 to become Professor of New Testament at Drew University.

reputation for leading-edge and innovative scholarship the Department is also recognised as a leading and prodigious publisher of research through the Sheffield Academic Press, and this publishing output reflects a distinctively postmodern departmental ethos.[2] This ethos does not constitute a Sheffield "School" in the sense of a strong commitment to any particular theory, methodology or interest in the Bible, but coheres around a shared commitment to the study of the biblical texts as cultural artefacts, a recognition of the subjectivity of the interpretive enterprise, and the need to adopt an multidimensional approach to the practice of biblical interpretation.

Two key factors have contributed to the formation of a distinctive departmental ethos at Sheffield.[3] First is the fact that the Department was originally established as part of the Arts Faculty in a secular university rather than as a subdivision of a larger Theology department or Church training institution. This has meant that the Department has often felt free to operate independently of theological or ecclesiological constraints.[4] Second, the Department's establishment within Sheffield's Faculty of Arts has made it open to interdisciplinary cross-fertilisation. Sheffield scholars such as David

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[2]The Sheffield Academic Press was founded in 1975 as the JSOT Press, partly with the intention of making the results of newer approaches in Biblical Studies more widely available. This objective has been comprehensively achieved, largely through the publication of the *Journal for the Study of the New Testament*, the *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* and their associated supplement series. Members of the Department also serve as editors or members of editorial boards for a number of influential journals not published in Sheffield, such as the *Journal of Biblical Literature*, *Biblical Interpretation* and *Semeia*. Although Sheffield Academic Press has recently been absorbed into the Continuum publishing group and its journals sold off to another publisher, Clines, a champion of internet publishing, has made much of his own work available on his website and has championed the launch of the Sheffield Phoenix Press, which continues to publish innovative work in Biblical Studies.

[3]For an extended survey of the development of the Sheffield Department, see Clines 1998d. A briefer account of the Department's early phase is to be found in Bruce 1990. It is important to note that the Department is not uniform in its approach, and that historical-critical approaches continue to be practised there: at the same time, the conjunction of like-minded scholars described here has given the Department a key role in introducing postmodern approaches to a wider audience through its teaching and its publishing output.

[4]Clines 1998d, 59. A good example of this tendency is Philip R. Davies' controversial work *In Search of "Ancient Israel"* (Davies 1992), in which he challenges established scholarly consensus about the origins of Jewish identity, the Hebrew Bible, and Israelite history.

Clines and David Gunn were some of the first to import literary theory and critical practice across disciplinary boundaries during the 1970s, and this has come to be a distinctive feature of the Department's work and of its publishing output. Further engagement with hermeneutics, philosophy, gender, cultural and media studies have resulted in a distinctively postmodern self-consciousness, to the extent that Clines describes postmodernism as "the key intellectual concept in the Department" during the 1990s.

In this chapter we will use the work of these three scholars to identify some of the key features of postmodern academic discourse in Biblical Studies. The framework for this analysis will be provided by considering the development of ethics of interpretation in Biblical Studies, and the concept of interpretive communities and interests. We will then examine the way in which methodological, ideological and political interests shape the work of our subjects and define their approach as distinctively postmodern. Having outlined the salient features of postmodern critical practice as these scholars have established it, the challenges of their work to confessional biblical interpretation will be assessed.

Ethics of Interpretation

Although Clines, Moore and Exum are highly individual scholars, their work shares a common ideological concern for the ethics of interpretation, and this provides a useful lens to help focus discussion of their work and the issues which arise from it. The concept was first given major currency in Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza's seminal essay "The Ethics of Biblical Interpretation",

presented as the presidential address to the 1987 meeting of the SBL.[5] Schüssler Fiorenza has continued to develop and nuance her thinking through the 1990s, and continues to be a major figure in the debate over interpretive ethics.[6] Her work has had a notable effect in shaping the self-conception which Exum, Moore and Clines share as biblical critics.[7]

Schüssler Fiorenza's case begins with a critical analysis of the scientific-positivist ethos of mainstream (or, as she prefers, *malestream*) Biblical Studies which, she argues, prioritises interests which are both Eurocentric and androcentric. Biblical Studies' own objectivist rhetoric blinds scholars to this fact: the 'universal' facts and truths which they seek in their study are, in fact, supportive of their own ideological and socio-political commitments and exclusive of the interests of other interpretive communities. 'Objective' Biblical Studies is thus blind to its own complicity in the promotion of certain interests and the suppression of others, and incapable of engaging constructively with those from other socio-political locations who seek a voice within the arena of biblical interpretation.[8]

Schüssler Fiorenza draws upon hermeneutical and rhetorical theory to show that value-neutrality in scholarship is a chimera. Following Gadamer, she insists that "Our very ability to understand [is] defined by our preunderstandings, which we cannot simply cast off as we would a coat or a

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[5]Schüssler Fiorenza 1988.

[6]Other significant figures include Fernando F. Segovia (Segovia and Tolbert 1995b; Segovia and Tolbert 1995a), R. S. Sugirtharajah (Sugirtharajah 1991; Sugirtharajah 1998; Sugirtharajah 2001), and Brian K. Blount (Blount 1995).

[7]At a superficial level this influence can be shown in the way Clines and Exum in particular have drawn upon Schüssler Fiorenza's work. Clines, for instance, has taken her question, "What does the language of a biblical text 'do' to a reader who submits to its world of vision?" (Schüssler Fiorenza 1988, 15) as the basis for essay titles such as, "Why is there a Song of Songs and What Does It Do to You If You Read It?" (Clines 1995c, 94-121), and "Why Is There a Book of Job, and What Does It Do to You If You Read It?" (Clines 1995c, 122-44).

[8]Schüssler Fiorenza 1999, 41-2.

hat."[9] Presuppositions do not inhibit interpretation but enable it, providing a conceptual framework which facilitates engagement with the text. This being the case, Schüssler Fiorenza argues, the competing claims of different interpretations for attention in the critical arena must be negotiated in a new way.[10]

Schüssler Fiorenza calls for a twofold ethics of interpretation. First, she argues the need for an *ethics of historical reading* which emphasises the gap between the historical text and the contemporary interpreter, prevents uncritical assimilation of the biblical text and its ideology, and "allows us not only to relativise through contextualisation the values and authority claims of the biblical text but also to assess and critically evaluate them".[11]

Second, Schüssler Fiorenza insists upon the need for an *ethics of accountability* by which biblical scholars are held responsible for the ethical consequences of their readings of the biblical text. Both the ideologies of biblical texts and the interpretations derived from those texts should be available for evaluation and critique:

> If scriptural texts have served not only noble causes but also to legitimate war, to nurture anti-Judaism and misogynism, to justify the exploitation of slavery, and to promote colonial dehumanization, then biblical scholarship must take the responsibility not only to interpret biblical texts in their historical contexts but also to evaluate the construction of their historical worlds and symbolic universes in terms of a religious scale of values. [...] students of the Bible must learn how to examine both the rhetorical aims of biblical texts and the rhetorical interests emerging in the history of interpretation or in contemporary scholarship.[12]

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[9]Schüssler Fiorenza 1999, 59.
[10]Schüssler Fiorenza 1999, 60.
[11]Schüssler Fiorenza 1988, 14.
[12]Schüssler Fiorenza 1988, 15.

Schüssler Fiorenza has outlined a new paradigm for biblical interpretation, and promoted the metaphor of Biblical Studies as a dance with a number of "moves", "turns" or "steps".[13] These are not to be thought of as sequential or discrete methodological rules, but as interpretive moves or strategies which simultaneously interact, and which engage both the biblical text itself and the contemporary reader who attempts to interpret it.[14] First and most important, Schüssler Fiorenza advocates a *hermeneutics of experience and social location*, whereby the critic reflects upon how their experience with the biblical text is shaped by their sociopolitical context. This is linked with an *analytic of domination* by means of which the text's role in promoting or supporting social structures of domination and subordination can be systematically analysed.[15] A *hermeneutics of suspicion* questions the underlying presuppositions and ideologies both of interpreters and biblical texts by querying ideological or theological 'truths' which they might take for granted. A *hermeneutics of ethical and theological evaluation* assesses the values of texts and interpreters according to an external scale of values.[16] A *hermeneutics of remembrance and re-construction* attempts to recover both the victimization and accomplishments of those marginalized or repressed by the text or the history of its interpretation.[17] A *hermeneutics of imagination*

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[13]Schüssler Fiorenza also favours the metaphor of cooking: "one could [...] think of biblical interpretation as cooking a stew and utilizing different herbs and spices that season the potatoes, meats, and carrots equally and when stirred together combine into a new and different flavour" (Schüssler Fiorenza 1999, 428).

[14]For a more detailed summary of these moves see Schüssler Fiorenza 1999, 48-54 or Schüssler Fiorenza 2001, 165-90.

[15]Schüssler Fiorenza's feminism is a radically democratic one in which she advocates the freedom of all people (wo/men) from cultural or political oppression by kyriarchal structures and systems. Schüssler Fiorenza understands kyriarchy not simply as gender-based dualism but as "more comprehensive, interlocking, hierarchically ordered structures of domination, evident in a variety of oppressions, such as racism, poverty, heterosexism, and colonialism" (Schüssler Fiorenza 1999, ix).

[16]In Schüssler Fiorenza's case, a feminist scale of values which "may be inspired by, but is not necessarily derived from, the Bible" (Schüssler Fiorenza 1999, 51).

[17]Schüssler Fiorenza stresses that such reconstructions are as rhetorical as the interpretations they seek to correct, producing a retelling of the past which must itself be critically evaluated: "Historical understanding depends on analogy. It is narrative laden and amounts to a remaking and retelling of reality, but it is not reality itself" (Schüssler Fiorenza 1999, 52).

both inspires and complements such reconstruction, seeking "to generate utopian visions that have not yet been realized and to 'dream' a different world of justice and well-being".[18] Finally, Schüssler Fiorenza argues for a *hermeneutics of transformation and action for change* which not only analyses the past text and present context of interpretation, but articulates new visions of the future. The task of interpretation, she asserts, is not simply to describe the world of text and reader as it has been or as it is, but to use interpretation as a means of ideological and sociopolitical change in the interests of the oppressed and marginalised.

Two further significant points should be noted about Schüssler Fiorenza's ethical approach. First, although Schüssler Fiorenza sees the biblical texts as ideological products fundamentally bound up with the values and interests of kyriarchal social structures, she insists that the impact of a hermeneutics which involves suspicion and evaluation of the biblical text does not entail rejection and disengagement, but rather prompts continued grappling with the text as it is read in changing contexts. The temptation to label texts as oppressive or emancipatory should be resisted: instead, a "hermeneutics of evaluation" will seek "to adjudicate again and again how biblical texts function in particular situations".[19] Each biblical text must be engaged afresh each time it is read in a new context, and its power for good or ill assessed in an ongoing struggle over authority, values, and meaning.[20]

Second, Schüssler Fiorenza's pursuit of a radically democratic vision of biblical interpretation in which all interpreters engage with the Bible on a level

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[18]The mutual complimentary of Schüssler Fiorenza's "moves" is demonstrated by her insistence that the hermeneutics of imagination must itself be subject to a hermeneutics of suspicion, because the imagination engages kyriocentric texts and is itself culturally located: "our imagination and utopian visions *are always both informed and deformed by our present sociopolitical location*" (Schüssler Fiorenza 1999, 53, author's emphasis).
[19]Schüssler Fiorenza 1999, 51.
[20]Schüssler Fiorenza 1999, 45.

playing field, is a profoundly theological one. The relations of power and domination which she sees underpinning much biblical interpretation are, she argues, structural sin.[21] These should be replaced by a new paradigm which "has its roots in the *ekklesia* as the public assembly of free and equal citizens in the power of the Spirit"[22], exercising judgement and discernment in pursuit of gospel values of liberation and freedom:

> one needs to reconceptualise the traditional spiritual practice of discerning the spirits as a critical ethical-political practice. As interpreting subjects, biblical readers must learn to claim their spiritual authority to assess both the oppressive as well as the liberating imagination of particular biblical texts and their interpretations.[23]

The interpretive dance which Schüssler Fiorenza envisages is an ongoing hermeneutical spiral in which readers and texts constantly re-engage with one another as interpretive contexts change. The community of faith is shaped by its interaction with the Bible, but is an active partner in that shaping, exercising spiritual discernment and judgement as all whose experiences are affected by the text or its interpretation are heard, valued and weighed.

Schüssler Fiorenza's moves are subtle and mutually interactive, allowing no position to be taken for granted and permitting no ideological or theoretical interest to be universalised and thereby elevated to a dominant position. Her ethics of interpretation require that critics recognise both the subjectivity of their own interpretive perspective and the validity of others, and bring their differing interpretations into a relationship of mutual dialogue. The result, she suggests, is a hermeneutical dance in which interpreters and texts are in constant motion, engaging, disengaging and re-engaging:

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[21]Schüssler Fiorenza 1999, 64.
[22]Schüssler Fiorenza 1999, 89.
[23]Schüssler Fiorenza 1999, 47.

> It suggests an image of interpretation as forward movement and spiralling repetition, stepping in place, turning over and changing of venue in which discrete methodological approaches become moving steps and artful patterns. Clumsy participants in this dance that figures the complex enterprise of biblical criticism may frequently step on each others' toes and interrupt each others' turns, but they can still dance together as long as they acknowledge each other as equals who are conscious of dancing through a political minefield. Such a dance can have many partners; it is neither heterosexually overdetermined nor an expression of competition and takeover. It does not need landmarks and fixed points, but its conjunctions need space and minimal rules of engagement.[24]

Schüssler Fiorenza outlines a vision of Biblical Studies which is self-aware, honest and open in its interests and its methods, critically self-evaluating and accountable for the consequences of its interpretations and the uses to which they are put. Whilst still not mainstream within the broader horizons of Biblical Studies, the influence of Schüssler Fiorenza's new paradigm is evident in much postmodern scholarship, and especially that which has come from the University of Sheffield.

Interpretive Communities and Interpretive Interests

As well as drawing upon interpretive ethics it may also be helpful to see Sheffield postmodernism through the lens of Stanley Fish's concept of the interpretive community. Fish has been an influence on Clines and Moore in particular, and it is arguable that his understanding of interpretive communities has been fundamental to the development of a postmodern consciousness in the work of many biblical scholars.

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[24]Schüssler Fiorenza 1999, 101.

Fish's key contention is that it is readers, in the collective form of interpretive communities, and not texts which ultimately determine the results of interpretation. This assertion is based upon the epistemological argument that linguistic utterances are only intelligible when situated within a system of interpretive strategies and pre-understandings which provide hearers and readers with the means to make sense of them. Since we cannot make sense of the world without such interpretive frameworks, Fish argues, then:

> what anyone sees is not independent of his verbal and mental categories but is in fact a product of them; and it is because these categories, rather than being added to perception, are its content that the entities they bring into being seem to be a part of the world in the sense that they were there before there was anyone to perceive them.[25]

Applying this insight to literary interpretation, Fish rejects the conventional notion that texts exist conceptually prior to interpretation. If texts are intelligible only in the context of interpretive strategies, then it is the strategies applied to the text which give shape to the interpretation, with the result that textual meaning is not discovered but produced by the interpretive process.[26]

The key element in determining which strategies will be applied to a text in any given situation is the interpretive community, defined as a community of readers who share a common set of interpretive strategies which "exist prior to the act of reading and therefore determine the shape of what is read rather than, as is usually assumed, the other way around".[27] For Fish, the interpretive community is the locus of authority in interpretation. Communities predetermine the generic categories to which texts belong, and thus determine the interpretive strategies which will be applied to those texts. These agreed strategies further determine what interpretations will be acceptable, and which

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[25]Fish 1980a, 270.
[26]Fish 1980a, 168.
[27]Fish 1980a, 171.

will be ruled out of bounds.[28] Fish gives the example of a group of students who, when asked to interpret a list of theoretical linguists using conventions relating to seventeenth-century religious poetry, produced coherent and reasoned interpretations of the list as a poem, leading Fish to argue that it is in readers and not in texts that meaning resides: "Interpretation is not the art of construing but the art of constructing. Interpreters do not decode poems; they make them".[29]

Fish insists that all linguistic activity is concretely rooted in social and cultural contexts, and that communication is only intelligible within a contextually-specific interpretive framework or system of intelligibility provided by an interpretive community:

> communication occurs only *within* such a system (or context, or situation, or interpretive community) and [...] the understanding achieved by two or more persons is specific to that system and determinate only within its confines.[30]

Fish's understanding of the interpretive community therefore renders communication between communities problematic, as a shared framework for understanding is not in place between them. Fish argues that mutual understanding is only achievable intrasystemically, and that attempts to communicate across systemic boundaries are fraught with difficulty.

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[28]Fish's insistence on the authority of interpretive communities appears to offer a liberation of the reader from textual authority, but Fish's thought takes a determinist slant when he argues that since individual readers, like texts, operate within the context of interpretive communities, the community forms readers as well as texts: "while it is true to say that we create poetry (and assignments and lists), we create it through interpretive strategies that are finally not our own but have their source in a publicly available system of intelligibility. Insofar as the system (in this case a literary system) constrains us, it also fashions us, furnishing us with categories of understanding, with which we in turn fashion the entities to which we can then point. In short, to the list of made or constructed objects we must add ourselves, for we no less than the poems and assignments we see are the products of social and cultural patterns of thought" (Fish 1980a, 332).
[29]Fish 1980a, 327.
[30]Fish 1980a, 304.

In the light of Fish's model, it is possible to interpret the development of postmodern approaches to biblical interpretation at Sheffield and in other places as the birth of a new interpretive community within Biblical Studies. This community exerts its authority in the two vital areas identified by Fish, namely the definition of the texts it interprets, and the laying down of acceptable interpretive criteria and strategies. In contrast to the Bible which forms the object of study for historical-critical or confessional scholarship, the Bible which Clines, Exum and Moore interpret is neither a historical window onto its own composition history nor a vehicle of divine revelation, but an ideological artefact, a product and a tool of human culture which continues to have relevance in the contemporary context because of its pervasive historical influence upon art, ethics, gender roles and, indeed, the very concept of what it is to be human. The appropriate methods for studying this Bible are those dominated by a hermeneutics of suspicion which facilitates the uncovering and critique of harmful ideologies in the biblical texts and in the history of their interpretation.[31] In this respect, it can be argued that Sheffield scholarship as practised by Clines, Exum and Moore operates as a Fishian community of interpretation, determining both the conception of the biblical text as object of study and the critical methods which are appropriate to that study.

But what are the forces, motivations and presuppositions which shape the community to which Clines, Moore and Exum have contributed? A sharper focus and clearer image may be generated in light of a suggestion of Stephen E. Fowl.[32] Responding to Schüssler Fiorenza and to Fish, Fowl suggests that

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[31]It will be noticed that these two functions of the interpretive community form a closed hermeneutical circle. The predisposition to view the Bible as ideologically suspect determines the choice of hermeneutically suspicious critical methods, which in turn give rise to interpretations which confirm the initial preconception. Fish would argue that all interpretive communities operate in this manner, but it raises issues of how different communities can engage in dialogue with one another, as we shall see.

[32]Fowl 1990.

traditional definitions of interpretive approaches in terms of textual meaning should be redefined in terms of interpretive interests. In his essay "The Ethics of Interpretation, or What's Left Over After the Elimination of Meaning", Fowl argues that the problem with meaning as a critical term is that it is too broad. Different critical or theoretical approaches claim to locate meaning in different places (for instance, in authorial intention, in aspects of textual form or in the application of readers' concerns to the text), and thus claim priority over other approaches. Scholars agree about the importance of meaning, but disagree over where it is to be found or the basis on which such a judgement might be made. As a result, arguments over meaning become intractable, inconclusive and unhelpful because scholars are not actually debating the same thing.[33] In Fishian terms, different interpretive communities approach the Bible with different definitions of the text and, therefore, of what textual meaning is. Agreement that meaning is important hides fundamental differences in the way meaning is defined within the interpretive frameworks of different communities.

Following Jeffrey Stout, Fowl proposes that different interpretive approaches should be defined not in terms of meaning but in terms of their interpretive interests.[34] Fowl goes on to suggest two advantages of this move: first, defining one's interest in a particular aspect of the text will allow the defusing of some disagreements by showing that although disparate interests may not be compatible, they are not in conflict either; second, where disagreement persists, definition of interpretive interests may assist in clarifying the nature of the disagreement and thus facilitate a speedier resolution.[35]

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[33]Fowl 1990, 385.
[34]Stout 1982.
[35]Clines has noted Fowl's work as a major step forward in the development of ethically-aware biblical scholarship, arguing that he goes beyond Schüssler Fiorenza's suggestions in her 1987 SBL address (see Clines 1997, 24).

A third advantage of Fowl's proposal, I would argue, is that it provides a helpful diagnostic tool which allows for sharper definition of interpretive approaches not only in terms of their methodological or critical interests in biblical texts, but also in terms of their ideologies and underlying motivations. Defining approaches in terms of their interpretive interests allows for greater understanding not only of what critical questions different approaches ask of the Bible, but also of why they ask those questions in the first place. In relation to postmodern interpretation as practised by Clines, Moore and Exum, I would suggest that three key levels of interpretive interests can be discerned.

First, Clines, Exum and Moore have strong and clearly defined *methodological* interests which find expression in the application of interpretive strategies drawn from literary theory and criticism, characterised by an interest in digging beneath the surface meaning of the biblical text to uncover its underlying ideology so it can be examined and critiqued. As Fish has suggested, their critical tools provide a characteristic marker of the interpretive community to which these scholars belong. Drawing upon theoretical models which conceive the biblical texts as ideological constructs rather than as evolving traditions or as divine communications, these three critics produce interpretations which mark their own scholarship as distinct from other approaches within Biblical Studies.[36]

The critical methods which scholars choose to deploy, however, themselves reflect a deeper set of *ideological* interests, which motivate and find expression in their critical output. The work of Exum, Moore and Clines is

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[36]Fowl's argument for the abandonment of meaning as a definitive term in Biblical Studies arises at least in part from his awareness that "It is no secret that what counts as meaning in Sheffield most certainly does not count as meaning in every other university. This would not bother someone like me [...] if there were some way to show that Sheffield is right and those who do things differently are wrong. What is so distressing is that there do not seem to be any defensible criteria by which one could argue the case either for Sheffield or against" (Fowl 1990, 380).

marked by a strong hermeneutics of suspicion both in relation to the Bible and to its subsequent interpretation by historical and confessional scholarship. Their interpretations repeatedly hold biblical texts to the light of modern liberal humanist values only to find them wanting, and they criticise mainstream biblical scholarship for unthinkingly perpetuating harmful and outdated ideologies and cultural norms. For our three scholars it is a matter of personal ethics that their personal beliefs should be applied to their scholarship, and that their ideological commitments should be openly declared so that their impact upon the interpretive process can be discerned. Their ideological interests cause them to seek to render themselves accountable whilst at the same time holding others to account for the ideological impact of their interpretations.

From the point of view of seeking to establish constructive engagement between postmodernism and confessional interpretation of the Bible, however, the most significant level of interpretive interests is the *political*. Clines, Exum and Moore have arguably sought to establish a distinct interpretive community within Biblical Studies, one of whose major features being the deliberate exclusion of confessional and theological concerns. This reflects the presence within much postmodern biblical scholarship of tendencies which are strongly anti-authoritarian, anti-establishment and anti-ecclesiastical. The growth of literary approaches in general as a viable alternative to historical-critical orthodoxy, and of poststructuralist criticism in particular as a means of deconstructing and critiquing previously unchallenged theological positions, has provided an opportunity for the establishment of an interpretive community within Biblical Studies which finds itself at odds with the mainstream of the discipline, and which feels no need to seek validation within it.

Having constructed an analytical framework based upon the nature of interpretive communities, the ethics of interpretation and especially the concept of varying levels of interpretive interests, I now propose to apply this framework to the work of Clines, Moore and Exum. In doing so, the influence of these concepts upon their work will be made clear, and the nature of the underlying motives and interests which drive their study of the Bible will be clarified. This, in turn, will help us to understand the nature of the challenge to confessional scholarship posed by the kinds of approaches which these critics have sought to establish within Biblical Studies. Having understood the challenge better, we will then be in a position to consider how confessional critics might best respond to it.

David J. A. Clines

David Clines joined the Department of Biblical Studies at Sheffield in 1964, and has been a major figure in the world of Old Testament scholarship since the late 1970s. His principal contribution lies not only in his insightful and incisive interpretations of biblical texts, but in the role he has played at the forefront of postmodernism's incursions into the discipline of Biblical Studies. Over the forty years of his career Clines has developed from a formalist literary critic writing in a confessional mode to a champion of secular Biblical Studies as distinct from its confessional counterpart, and a fierce ideological critic not only of much biblical scholarship but of the biblical texts themselves.

Ideological Interests

Clines has given prominence to the role of ideology in interpretation.[37] By "ideology" he tends to mean a more or less coherent set of values and precommitments which may constitute a world-view. Such ideologies are often special to particular social groups or classes whose interests they serve, and are often assumed or held to be common sense rather than explicitly stated.[38] Ideologies often express the "will to power" of one group over and against others within society, and this makes the uncovering of implicit ideologies in both texts and interpretations an ethical imperative. Clines is deeply uneasy at the often unconscious role of hidden agendas and presuppositions in much biblical interpretation, and doubly uneasy at the impact these interpretations have in influencing or even controlling other readers.[39]

Clines advocates an interpretive shift from *understanding* to *critique*, contending that much biblical scholarship has been content to discern and to re-articulate, rather than to evaluate, ideological perspectives inscribed in biblical texts. To correct this error, Clines argues that interpreters should keep three factors in view: that the biblical text is an ideological production; that interpreters bring their own ideologies to the process of interpretation; and that biblical and modern ideological formations are separated by significant cultural and historical divides.[40] Clines insists that serious engagement with biblical ideology requires that the critic be prepared to grapple with biblical texts, unlocking and evaluating their ideological messages:

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[37] See especially Clines 1995c.
[38] Clines 1995c, 9-11.
[39] Clines 1995c, 11-12.
[40] Clines 1995c, 19.

> It is a measure of our commitment to our own standards and values that we register disappointment, dismay or disgust when we encounter in the texts of ancient Israel ideologies that we judge to be inferior to ours. And it is a measure of our open-mindedness and eagerness to learn and do better that we remark with pleasure, respect and envy values and ideologies within the biblical texts that we judge to be superior to our own.[41]

Much of Clines' work over the last decade has engaged in precisely this kind of critical and evaluative approach to the interpretation of biblical texts. One good example is his essay "Psalm 2 and the MLF (Moabite Liberation Front)".[42] Clines opens the essay by asserting that "every interpretation of and commentary on this psalm ever written adopts the viewpoint of the text, and, moreover, assumes that the readers addressed by the scholarly commentator share the ideology of the text and its author".[43] He then goes on to suggest that this assumption has allowed readers and scholars to ignore the ideological tensions and conflicts which the text of the psalm embodies. First, the psalm describes a situation of conflict in which a nation subject to Israelite overlordship has rebelled against what they consider to be their oppressors. The aspirations attributed to them in the psalm are those of any national liberation movement, "urging nothing but freedom from oppression".[44] The response of the psalmist is scornful and dismissive: the nations rage "in vain", and the psalm reiterates a statement by the Israelite king of his divinely sanctioned right to their submission. This prerogative is backed up by the threat of force: the Israelite king has been granted by God the right to rule with a rod of iron, with which he may destroy the opposition to his rule like a potter's vessel. Clines concludes his initial analysis by describing the Israelite

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[41]Clines 1995c, 20. Clines is careful to say that evaluation need not always be negative, but his body of work suggests that he rarely finds anything commendable in the Bible.
[42]An early version of this essay appeared as Clines 1995d. This discussion refers to a later version in Clines 1995c, 244-75.
[43]Clines 1995c, 244.
[44]Clines 1995c, 247.

response to the nations' aspirations to liberation as "unmistakably and smugly typical of an insensitive imperial despotism".[45]

Clines' concern with the ideology of the psalm is twofold: first, as a person living in a post-imperialist culture he finds himself uneasy at the imperialism which the psalm celebrates. Second, he finds the ideology of the psalm to be at odds with that of the rest of the Old Testament: as a liberated nation Israel places a high value on national freedom, yet this psalm appears to wish to deny precisely that freedom to others, with the result that it "seems to undermine the value Israel put on national freedom, and to render its attitude to freedom ambivalent and incoherent".[46]

Clines then goes on to show how subsequent scholarly interpretation of the psalm has tended uncritically to adopt the psalmist's perspective, and so ignore the reality of the conflict that the psalm describes.[47] Clines notes a tendency in commentators to evade the uncomfortable political character of the psalm by moralising or theologising the nature of the conflict which the psalm depicts, universalising the portrayal of God in the psalm so as to turn it into a metaphysical reflection upon God's transcendent rule, or idealising the psalm by positing a postexilic date of composition and rendering it an expression of hope in oppression rather than an expression of imperial dominance. Clines also outlines scholarly attempts to soften some of the more "astringent" elements in the psalm, and to ignore the ideological content of the psalm by focussing on its aesthetic qualities. Finally, Clines is heavily critical of modern Christian translations of the psalm which import the translators' own ideologies into the language of the poem, capitalising terms such as

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[45]Clines 1995c, 248.
[46]Clines 1995c, 269.
[47]Clines 1995c, 248-68.

"Anointed One", "King" and "Son" in such a way as to christianise what is essentially a political Israelite text.

Clines expresses concern at the ethics of interpreters who have failed (as he sees it) to critically evaluate the ideological content of the psalm. He finds it "shocking" that scholars should comment on the truth or insight of the text without ever critically evaluating it, and argues that "They compound the moral dubiety of the text by perpetuating its claims and by lending them their own moral authority".[48] Clines concludes the essay by calling for the liberation of the reader from "bondage either to the text or to the approved interpretations of the text", arguing that readers should be free to make up their own minds. Clines insists that such freedom does not mean denying or rejecting everything which the psalm or its scholarly interpreters have to say, but nevertheless reflects that "It is a sad day for theism if the only language its adherents can find to express their sense of the divine is the language of oriental despotism, with its scornful deity who offers comfort to petty kings in their grandiose ambitions and authorizes state violence and a regime of terror against those who want nothing more gross than self-determination".[49]

One implication of Clines' approach to interpretation, with its emphasis upon the dominant role of the reader and the importance of evaluating biblical ideologies, is that it automatically qualifies any claim for the Bible as a locus of authority. Clines clearly feels that authority is in the gift of the reader, not something to be demanded by the text (or, for that matter, by professional or confessional interpreters). Clines suggests that readers should "accept the authority of the Bible in matters to which the heart and mind can gladly give consent, and to reject it when it conflicts, not with our prejudices but with our

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[48]Clines 1995c, 270.
[49]Clines 1995c, 274.

deeply held convictions".[50] For Clines, the Bible is a functional text, a human construction, a cultural artefact which can be deployed, used and interpreted in any number of ways. The net effect of an ideological approach which emphasises the culturally-specific nature of the Bible, "is to relativise the biblical text and make it less malleable to theological reconstruction".[51] Such relativisation enables the reader to evaluate and resist (if necessary) attempts by various groups within society to use the Bible as a means of exerting ideological power through the universalisation of its ethical, theological or cultural world-view.

For Clines, integrity as a biblical critic involves not simply sitting at the feet of the biblical writers or their interpreters and receiving wisdom. Rather, it entails open acknowledgement of one's own ideological commitments and presuppositions and the bringing of those interests to bear on the interpretive process. The biblical text is to be interrogated as an ideological artefact using critical and evaluative methods consistent with a hermeneutics of suspicion. Further, the validity of other interpretive approaches needs to be recognised, with the result that debate over the ethics not only of biblical texts but also over their interpretation will be a feature of postmodern Biblical Studies.

Methodological Interests

Clines has claimed that although he is interested in literary theory, he tends in his own readings to adopt a pragmatic and eclectic approach.[52] That said, one

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[50]Clines 1990, 46-7. It would be interesting to ask what, hermeneutically speaking, the difference between a prejudice and a conviction might be. Both, in hermeneutical terms, might be defined as prejudgements, presuppositions or preunderstandings which, as has been argued above, are fundamental to the process of interpretation.

[51]Clines 1993, 85.

[52]Clines 1990, 12.Indeed, this eclecticism is a feature of the "new" literary approaches in biblical studies which Clines is inclined to celebrate (see e.g. Exum and Clines 1993, 13; Clines 1995e).

of the major influences upon Clines has been Stanley Fish's reader response criticism.[53] For Clines, a fundamental and essential step in achieving integrity in interpretation is to recognise the ideological interests which readers bring to texts as a shaping factor in interpretation. Reader interests, values and commitments are what make readers people with integrity and identity, and they should not be asked to hide or abandon their values in interpretation. Whilst it must be acknowledged that the text will have little interest in, say, the interests of "a feminist pacifist vegetarian", the fact that such interests are of importance to the reader means they can legitimately be placed on the agenda for interpretation. One result of this is that the text is then illuminated in unpredictable ways.[54]

For Clines, reader response insights mean that the scholarly search for a single determinate meaning in the text becomes questionable.[55] Instead, it is the roles of readers which should be a primary focus in Biblical Studies, on the basis that readers are the dominant players in the interpretive game:

> In any contest between texts and readers, readers are always going to win. For readers have in their hands the life of the text. If a text is going to be opened, it will be a reader who decides that. If it is to be shut, or ignored, or misapprehended, or read out of order or upside down, readers will do whatever they choose to do. Even if the readers do not really know what they are doing to their texts, they will be doing it all the same - and getting away with it. Such are the risks texts run by lying around on shelves and tables.[56]

In light of this recognition, Clines insists, the search for determinate meaning must be abandoned. Meaning is contextual, dependent upon many factors

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[53]Clines 1990, 21-2. Clines has acknowledged a particular indebtedness to Fish's concept of "affective stylistics", and Fish's concept of the interpretive community has come to feature large in Clines' work since the early 1990s.
[54]Clines 1990, 12. This point is clearly a programmatic one for Clines, being repeated more than once elsewhere in his work. See Clines 1989, xlvii; Clines 1997, 16.
[55]Clines 1990, 9.
[56]Clines 1990, 103.

among which the most important is the plurality of readers and readerly perspectives. Interpretations of the same text from differing interpretive approaches can therefore claim equal validity, and Clines has been enthusiastic about the possibilities of dialogue between different reader perspectives.[57]

Clines favours deconstruction as a critical approach which encourages ideological interrogation of the biblical text, but tempers his deployment of deconstructive methods with a healthy dose of pragmatism. Clines is suspicious of deconstructionists who believe that all texts are inevitably liable to an endless deconstructive spiral as each reading is itself in turn deconstructed by the same method that generated it. Real readers, Clines argues, who "cannot bear too much dizziness and nausea", will use a deconstructive reading as the basis for a *reconstruction* of the text which will take into account the questioning of the text's dominant ideological voice which deconstruction has highlighted.[58] Deconstruction, when used as a critical tool by real readers, has less the effect of causing readers to disengage from the text than of impelling them to re-engage, constructing new meanings and new interpretive positions.[59]

Deconstruction, in Clines' view, is a constructive approach to ethical interpretation, not robbing a text of its power to speak but calling into question and rendering equivocal the text's requirement that the reader submit to its ideology. Instead, Clines argues, deconstruction frees the reader to make their own choices, transferring both authority and responsibility for interpretation from the text to the individual interpreter. This transfer of power is to be

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[57]Clines and Eskenazi 1991. 62-3.
[58]Clines 1990, 121.
[59]Clines 1995c, 186.

affirmed, since "what the taking charge of one's own ethical decisions does is to make one more of an ethical person".[60]

Clines wishes readers to be free from the expectation that they will automatically subscribe to the values of the text (or another interpreter), but at the same time argues that the values of the text cannot be ignored or blithely over-written in the process of reading. Clines acknowledges that deconstruction is "the deconstruction of something", and that it is necessarily "parasitic" on the text whose structures of meaning it seeks to break down. The biblical text and its historical formulation of ideas is the "given" from which deconstruction works, and which the whole process necessarily respects as its object of study.[61]

It is evident that Clines has selected critical methods which cohere with his underlying motivations, particularly his desire to interrogate the ideology of biblical texts. A strong anti-authoritarian streak prompts Clines to argue for reader response as a means of liberating readers not only from the authority of the Bible but also of ecclesial and academic institutions, whilst deconstruction facilitates critique of the Bible and a strong ethics of interpretation, based upon secular liberal humanist values.

Personal/Political Interests

An important contextual factor in Clines' scholarship is the fact that most of his career has been spent in the Department of Biblical Studies at Sheffield, aligned firmly with the other humanities disciplines in a secular university.

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[60]Clines 1995b, 105.
[61]Clines 1995b, 105-6.

The academic values of the department have thus been shaped as much by the discourse of the secular humanities as by the more theologically-orientated language of Theology and Biblical Studies, and this has particularly sensitised Clines to the "impact of confessional standards upon biblical scholarship".[62] Clines also remarks that "some of my best friends and conversation-partners are atheists", a circumstance which makes him very aware of the need to adopt an inclusive academic discourse and of the "impoliteness or unfriendliness of making theological assumptions that may not be shared by the people I am speaking with".[63]

Second, as an Old Testament scholar Clines has from an early stage been sensitive to the perceived tendency of much confessional scholarship to read back into the Old Testament concepts derived either from the New Testament or from later Christian doctrine. Clines has argued that a Christian reading of the Old Testament is a reading from a perspective outside that of the texts themselves, and he is wary of confessional interpretations which attempt to smooth over the gaps between the differing ideological and theological horizons implicit in such readings.[64] A major issue for Clines, therefore, has been to address the question of what a secular or non-confessional Biblical Studies might look like, and what the consequences might be for those who practise it.

Clines' evident sense of discomfort with much of the Bible and with biblical scholarship appears to arise from a sense of personal dissonance with biblical ideologies which Clines finds offensive.[65] Arguing that the traditional

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[62]Clines 1993, 68-9.
[63]Clines 1993, 69.
[64]Clines 1989, lv.
[65]At an earlier stage of his life Clines was an active member of the Brethren, but appears to have left his faith commitment behind. I would wish to argue that his hostility to the Bible and its ideology reflects a dynamic common to converts, whereby one's former position must be utterly rejected and shown to be false in order to justify one's conversion to a new point of

requirement that biblical scholars suppress their personal beliefs and values in the interests of 'objective' scholarship is unethical, Clines insists that his own set of distinctive beliefs are what make him an individual. Since his beliefs and commitments constitute his identity, to suppress them in the interests of scholarship is to suffer a loss of personal integrity.[66] It therefore becomes a matter of principle that in engaging in biblical interpretation Clines should remain honest to his own sense of identity and values, refusing to sublimate them to the dictates of any higher authority:

> there is nothing wrong with using your own standards. Not only is there nothing wrong, nothing else would be right; for 'ethical' can only mean 'ethical according to me and people who think like me', and if I don't make judgements according to my own standards, according to whose standards shall I be making them, and in what sense could those judgements be *mine*?[67]

For Clines, identity and integrity are fundamentally personal and individual, and the ultimate moral authority in interpretation is the conscience of the reader.

For Clines, the goal of a postmodern Biblical Studies is a scholarship free from any externally imposed ideological constraints, recognising a plurality of interpretive interests and communities which will enable the Bible to remain influential within the wider culture. Such a pluralistic approach does not result in ethical or interpretive anarchy. Rather, it frees readers to engage seriously with the text without having to conform to the expectations of church or scholarly communities. Clines makes the point that validity is not an intrinsic quality in interpretation, but is granted by interpretive communities: valid

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view. In spite of his insistence that critique of the Bible need not always be negative, Clines increasingly engages with biblical texts which he wishes somehow to neuter as ideological sources.

[66]Clines 1993, 74.

[67]Clines 1997, 25.

readings are those which are accepted, invalid ones are not.[68] Readers should therefore be free to align themselves with communities whose ideologies they find convincing or appealing, and these communities will then set their own parameters for interpretation.

One advantage which Clines sees in the proliferation of interpretive communities is that an extending of the boundaries of valid interpretation beyond the limitations of the church and confessionally-committed academic scholarship ensures a future for Clines as a secular biblical scholar. By identifying the Bible as the property of the wider culture and not just an "ecclesiastical object",[69] Clines immediately expands the potential marketplace for his professional expertise, arguing that it is part of the responsibility of a professional academic biblical scholar to be able to move between interpretive communities and provide interpretations tailored to suit those communities:

> Like the "bespoke" tailor, who fashions from the roll of cloth a suit to the measurements and pocket of the customer, a suit individually ordered or bespoken, the bespoke interpreter has a professional skill in tailoring interpretations to the needs of the various communities who are in the market for interpretations. [...] As a bespoke interpreter responding to the needs of the market, I will be interested, not so much in the truth, not at all in universally acceptable meanings, but in identifying shoddy interpretations that are badly stitched together and have no durability, and I will be giving my energies to producing attractive interpretations that represent good value for money.[70]

The appeal of this development of the interpretive marketplace for Clines becomes clear when his context as a scholar in a secular institution is

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[68]Clines 1993, 79. The same argument can also be found in Clines 1995c, 178-82. Clines denies the existence of absolute categories in interpretation, insisting instead that facts are only mutually agreed perceptions, so that "if it is *your* fact and not mine, then it is not a fact *for me*, so I have no compunction about resisting and ignoring" (Clines 1995b, 105).

[69]Clines 1993, 78.

[70]Clines 1993, 80.

considered. Clines feels that in order to justify their place within secular universities, professional interpreters of the Bible will need to show the relevance of their work to the whole of society, not just to one faith community. Clines' response (and that of his department) to this has been to broaden the horizons of Biblical Studies: first through engaging with ideological approaches other than the confessional; second, by expanding their sphere of interest to include the uses to which the Bible is put within the wider culture. Confessional interpretation of the Bible is increasingly a niche market, albeit a well-established one, and what Clines and his colleagues have done is to seek to broaden the marketability of their department in the wider marketplace of higher education.[71]

J. Cheryl Exum

J. Cheryl Exum was involved from an early stage in the importation of literary approaches into Biblical Studies, much of her work being marked by the deployment of a variety of critical methods culled from the field of literary criticism and theory. At the same time, Exum has been very much involved since the early 1980s with the development of feminist interpretations of the Bible, and the gradual shaping of her approach over time has mirrored broader developments within feminist scholarship. Perhaps the most significant aspect of Exum's work for this study, however, is the fact that she is first and foremost a critic rather than a theorist, interested primarily in the interpretation of texts rather than the construction of theoretical systems. Exum deploys a range of methods in pursuit of her interpretive goals, and does so with

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[71] A number of commentators have remarked on the adoption of marketplace values within literary studies in recent years. Terry Eagleton observes that "Theory has been one symptom in our time of the commodifying of the intellectual life itself, as one conceptual fashion usurps another as shortwindedly as changes in hairstyle" (Eagleton 1996, 206).

discrimination and flexibility, but also demonstrates the pre-eminent requirement of a postmodern critic: scholarly competence and integrity combined with a self-aware ideological motivation. As such, alongside Clines and Moore she serves as a classic example of the breed of scholarship with which a confessional postmodern approach must engage.

Three main strands can be discerned within Exum's published work: a strong grounding in formalist literary criticism; an equally strong commitment to feminist interpretation of the Bible; and a growing and increasingly nuanced interest in the interdisciplinary field of cultural studies, specifically focussed on the interaction between Biblical Studies and interpretation of the visual arts. Exum's earliest work drew principally upon formalist rhetorical criticism, culminating in her 1992 book *Tragedy and Biblical Narrative: Arrows of the Almighty*.[72] Exum's published work then moved into developing a feminist approach to biblical narratives drawing on deconstruction and psychoanalytic literary criticism which she demonstrated in a number of articles and two books, *Fragmented Women: Feminist (Sub)versions of Biblical Narratives* (1993) and *Plotted, Shot, and Painted: Cultural Representations of Biblical Women* (1996).[73] *Plotted, Shot, and Painted* also revealed Exum's growing interest in the study of biblical texts through the lens of Cultural Studies and especially through the interpretation of the visual arts, and she has continued to develop this approach in subsequent articles, alongside her other methodological approaches.[74]

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[72]Exum 1992. See also Exum and Whedbee 1984; Exum 1989; Exum 1990.
[73]Exum 1993a; Exum 1996.
[74]Exum 1997; Exum 1998a; Exum 1998b; Exum and Moore 1998; Exum 2000a; Exum 2000b.

Ideological Interests

Exum's feminist stance rests upon the insight that from a feminist perspective the portrayal of women in the Bible, whether positive or negative, is located in a text which serves androcentric interests. Like Clines, Exum argues that a critical approach which deals only with the surface details of the text and remains within the textual horizon "limits us to describing, and thus to reinscribing, the text's gender ideology".[75] For Exum, the biblical texts in their original setting served as means of social control and, to the extent that modern women wish to identify with these models, still do.[76] A feminist critical approach therefore needs to recognise the differing experiences of male and female readers of biblical texts. If biblical literature was produced for androcentric societies, then the women portrayed within that literature are necessarily male constructs, created to serve androcentric interests. A feminist critique must, of necessity, read against the grain, since female readers of androcentric texts are often required to read against their own interests. To the extent that female readers accept the roles offered to them they collude with the gender ideology of the text and the androcentric community whose values it expresses. The key objective in interpretation, therefore, is to discern what sort of androcentrism the biblical text represents, and to evaluate it from a standpoint outside the text's own ideological horizon.[77]

Exum has illustrated this point with reference to the character of Bathsheba.[78] In 2 Samuel 11, the female reader is positioned by the narrative so as to gaze at the naked Bathsheba from the voyeuristic David's point of view, but this places the female reader in the role both of the gazer and the gazed-upon: the

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[75]Exum 1996, 88.
[76]Exum 1996, 88, n.18.
[77]Exum 1993a, 11.
[78]Exum 1996, 25-29. A similar argument is made in relation to Delilah in the same book, pp.232-37.

focalisation of the narrative invites the reader to identify with David's desire for Bathsheba, but a female reader instinctively identifies with Bathsheba as a female character, resulting in the collapse of the subject/object division.[79] The result of this collapse for the female reader, Exum argues, is a negative self-image, internalising male fear of women as a source of sexual temptation. This is an inevitable consequence of texts (and interpretations) which fail to account for the differing experiences of male and female readers when confronted by androcentric ideologies.

Exum observes the same dynamic operating in the prophetic use of infidelity as a metaphor for Israel's relationship with God in Hosea, Isaiah, Jeremiah and Ezekiel.[80] In these texts, sin is equated with female sexuality, so that 'bad' women are promiscuous, rapacious, and ultimately self-harming. This supports the textual argument that male control is both necessary and desirable, and that the appropriate means of exercising that control is sexualised violence. Exum is disturbed that the physical assaults which the prophets depict are seen within the texts as essential steps in the process of reconciliation, conflating love and abuse in a pattern that fatally undermines women's sense of worth and self-esteem.[81] The blame for the breakdown of relationship is placed entirely upon the woman to the extent that the woman is scapegoated, justifying violent, humiliating and sexually degrading retribution as God the husband's way of reasserting control. The texts assume an ideological perspective which sees the woman's body not as her own property but as that of her husband, and the woman's appropriate response to her experience is to submit totally and passively to the husband's authority, keeping her in the role of victim within the marriage relationship.[82] Ascribing

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[79]Exum 1996, 28-29.
[80]See e.g. Hosea 1-3; Isaiah 3:16-24; Jeremiah 13:20-27; Ezekiel 16:23-42; Ezekiel 23.
[81]Exum 1996, 114.
[82]Exum 1996, 112.

such behaviour and attitudes to God, Exum argues, is to give them divine sanction and to encourage other men to emulate them, with disastrous consequences for women. The ideology which informs the prophetic metaphor of Israel as adulterous wife, Exum insists, is one which victimises women and sanctions their abuse, and as such, should be resisted.

Turning to the history of interpretation of these texts, however, Exum notes with dismay that the majority of male biblical critics have not only adopted the texts' point of view, but have endorsed it. The explicit and sexual violence of the passages is skated over or ignored, the woman's point of view hardly addressed. Exum expresses deep misgivings over the impact of such commentary upon ordinary readers,[83] and insists that an ideological critique of the biblical text is essential for women readers if they are not to produce conflicted, self-harming or even self-abusive interpretations. Only when the reader steps outside the ideological horizon of the text, Exum argues, can she find a place of safety from which to evaluate and assess the impact of the Bible's gendered ideology upon her as a reading subject, deciding for herself whether or not to subscribe to the vision of woman which the biblical texts inscribe.

Exum is equivocal about the status of the Bible as an authoritative text, preferring to do away with notions of canon and authority altogether: "Because the Bible is an important part of our cultural heritage, it would be presumptuous to suggest that we can casually dispense with it. But I see no reason to privilege it".[84] Exum prefers a materialist approach to the Bible, in the sense that she perceives it only as the enscripted projection of human

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[83]Exum 1996, 117.
[84]Exum 1996, 122.

ideology. This being the case, she is reluctant to accord the text, or its portrayal of God, any divine authority in and of itself:

> I think it important to recognize that God is a character in the biblical narrative (as much a male construct as the women in biblical literature) and thus not to be confused with anyone's notion of a 'real' god. Increasingly, as investigations into the gender-determined nature of biblical discourse becomes more sophisticated, biblical interpreters will have to come to terms with this fact.[85]

For Exum, as we have seen, the establishment of alternative interpretations of biblical texts is a crucial step in resisting the patriarchal ideology either of the Bible or of its interpreters, because the construction of a viable alternative reading effectively denies patriarchal interpretation the ability to claim universal applicability. The relationship of these variant readings to the dominant ideology is, of necessity, adversarial, so that Exum fails to explore how readings produced by different interpretive communities or ideological positions might interact or engage in dialogue.

Methodological Interests

Exum's critical methods are deployed firmly in the service of her ideological commitment to feminist interpretation, her preferred tools being deconstruction and psychoanalytic criticism.[86] Exum sees a twofold value for feminist analysis in deconstruction: first, it uncovers the patriarchal ideology

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[85]Exum 1996, 122.
[86]Exum 1996, 87. Although Exum has moved on from her early formalism she has not abandoned it completely, arguing that the potential of the method is far from exhausted. Exum is still happy, on occasion, to operate in this or similar mode, as for instance in her 1997 essay "Harvesting the Biblical Narrator's Scanty Plot of Ground" (Exum 1997), in which she engages in a very tight formalist reading of Judges 16:4-22 using a narratological method developed by Moshe Greenberg (in whose honour the essay was written) and citing not only

of the text; and second, reveals the instabilities and inconsistencies which might enable a feminist critic to resist that ideology. Exum maintains that her aim is not to overthrow the text, but simply to create room for an alternative ideological perspective. By foregrounding repressed and sublimated elements of patriarchal texts, deconstruction draws attention to the woman's point of view, providing the material for a counter-reading which empowers women as reading subjects by enabling them to offer alternative interpretations which address their interests.[87]

Exum's deconstructive approach therefore works with the text, identifying its ideology and its inherent instability so as to create a hermeneutical space in which alternative interpretations can be offered. Exum observes that it is not possible to disengage from the text, since "reading against the grain involves first determining what I perceive the grain to be".[88] Like Jacob at the Jabbok river, the deconstructive critic must wrestle with that which she seeks to resist, grasping that which she would escape, engaging the inscribed ideology of the text in order to challenge it.

Exum's second critical tool in the service of feminist critique is psychoanalytic criticism. If deconstruction can identify the text's ideology and help to subvert it, psychoanalysis may help to uncover the motivation for such

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narratological scholars (Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan, Tzvetan Todorov and Meir Sternberg) but also Russian Formalism as methodological sources.

[87]Exum 1997, 128. This position has much in common with that of Mieke Bal. Exum's career and critical stance shares much with that of Bal, who has similar interests and emphases, including an early training in formalist analysis, an understanding of critical tools as heuristic, a recognition of deconstruction and psychoanalysis as potentially fruitful for feminist critique of Biblical texts, and an interest in the relationship of the visual arts and Biblical interpretation. Bal read early drafts of *Fragmented Women* (Exum 1993a, 14) and is frequently cited in Exum's work.

ideological portrayals of gender roles.[89] In particular, Exum uses psychoanalytic criticism to explore the role texts might play in the socialization of gender roles, asking what texts tell women about how to view themselves and how to behave, and what these messages in turn reveal about those who produced the text in the first place.[90] Exum uses psychoanalysis to show how the male narrators' portrayal of women in biblical stories is motivated by fear of female sexuality or by projecting unconscious male desires which in turn express the fears, fantasies and desires of the community whose ideology they voice.[91]

In the final chapter of *Plotted, Shot, and Painted*, "Why, Why, Why, Delilah?", Exum uses psychoanalysis to shed light on the gender ideology encoded in the narrative of Judges 16:4-21, describing what she labels the "Samson complex". Exum seeks to demonstrate that the figure of Delilah, encoded in the text as *femme fatale* and appropriated as such in subsequent depictions in art and film, expresses both male desire and fear of female sexuality. Samson (and with him, the androcentric narrator) is drawn to Delilah by her sexual allure and desires to surrender his mastery to her, but the desire is balanced by a fear (indeed, a knowledge by the end of the story) of what such surrender might mean - his emasculation and destruction. Exum draws upon the work of Karen Horney, who argues that male fear of female sexuality is based not (as in Freud) on castration anxiety but on a feeling of inadequacy which finds its root in the boy's desire for his mother but also his

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[88]Exum 1997, 90.
[89]Exum 1997, 92.
[90]Exum 1997, 92.

awareness that his penis is too small to satisfy an adult woman.[92] The woman thus comes to be a subconscious threat to male self-esteem, and the man's great fear is of rejection and derision by the woman, hence his desire for the woman in spite of his fear of her power over him.[93] Exum finds this analysis illuminating when applied to the Samson story in terms of explaining the portrayal of Delilah within the narrative of Judges 16, and for explaining why Samson reveals his secret to her even when he knows she will use that knowledge to betray him, an act which otherwise appears inexplicable.

Importantly, Exum is not a slave to the critical theories she deploys. Indeed, she has expressed serious reservations about theory in general. Exum refuses, for instance, to identify herself totally with psychoanalytic theory, largely because of feminist criticism of Freud's understanding of gender and sexuality, but also because of her perception that theoretical arguments are ultimately inconclusive.[94] This does not, however, prevent her from affirming the heuristic use of psychoanalysis as a tool of feminist criticism, claiming that psychoanalysis can be adopted as a useful approach "without necessarily accepting the validity of its claims".[95] For Exum, psychoanalysis is a critical tool, a possible illuminator of textual dynamics which is to be deployed when it can be useful, and which can be drawn upon without a commitment to

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[91]See for example: Exum 1993b(also printed as Exum 1993a); Exum 1996, 219-26. For a detailed setting-out of method, see Exum 2000a, 87-88.

[92]Horney 1967.

[93]Exum 2000a, 222.

[94]Exum 1993a, 160, n.24.

[95]Exum 2000a, 227, n.64. "The fact that a psychoanalytic reading makes sense of so many elements of the story alone invites its adoption. More important, psychoanalytic criticism is an important tool for the feminist critic because it allows analysis of the text to move beyond mere description to interrogation" (Exum 2000a, 223).

accept fully the theoretical base upon which the tool rests, or to become ensnared in theoretical controversy.[96]

If Exum's critical toolkit is eclectic, her stance in relation to the text she studies is consistent with a moderate reader response theory, based upon a conviction that "meaning resides in the interaction between reader and text".[97] Exum clearly wishes to resist the voice of the text when that voice drowns out the interests of the reader, especially when that reader is female. Indeed, more than once she deploys a quotation from Mieke Bal to sum up her approach: "Thanks for your text, and I'll decide how to read it".[98] At the same time, however, Exum is honest about the implications of a reader-orientated approach to textual interpretation, acknowledging that the subjective perspective of the reader inevitably necessitates the qualification of any reading. Exum freely accepts and, indeed, draws attention to, the conditional nature of her readings and the possibility of her own interests affecting her understanding of the text.[99]

Exum agrees with Clines that different reader perspectives will generate multiple valid interpretations of texts.[100] Readers will appropriate texts in various cultural contexts, not all of which might be anticipated or considered

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[96]Nor is Exum inclined to jump onto every passing theoretical bandwagon. In a comment on autobiographical criticism Exum queries the usefulness of some varieties of the approach, remarking that "I would distinguish autobiographical criticism in which the focus is on some unique, unrepeatable situation from what, in my opinion, is a more relevant sort of autobiographical criticism that discusses the reader's response in terms of wider issues of race, class, gender, and social location - things that might be shared by, and thus more meaningful for, other readers" (Exum 1998b, 410).

[97]Exum 1996, 90.

[98]Exum 1993a, 14; Exum 2000b, 35.

[99]Exum 1993a, 17; Exum 1996, 90.

[100]Exum 1996, 11.

appropriate by the text's authors or by professional interpreters, so that Bible stories will enter into the popular culture all the time with new meanings. As a result, "There is really no point for me, as a biblical scholar, to say, 'You can't do this; that's not what the text means'".[101] Because of the shifting cultural context within which biblical interpretation takes place, Exum is reluctant to set limits to the range of valid interests which might seek to engage in interpretation,[102] but argues strongly that an interpretive standpoint outside the horizons of the text may sometimes be necessary for ethical or ideological reasons, insisting that, "if the only way we can lay claim to our cultural heritage is to reinterpret or, indeed, misread it, then reinterpret and misread it we shall. For to allow notions of inviolate 'original meanings' or 'authentic contexts' to prevent us from doing so would leave us impoverished".[103]

Exum can thus be seen to be a critical pragmatist within the stream of postmodern approaches. Comfortable with a variety of critical methods, self-aware in terms of her ideological motivation and insistent on the futility of searching after objectively verifiable interpretations, she is nevertheless equally insistent that the biblical text must be allowed its own role and voice in the process of interpretation, even if the interpreter wishes to take a critical standpoint which resists the textual ideology. Equally importantly, Exum's methodological interests are clearly subordinate to her ideological concerns over issues of gender in the biblical texts and their interpretation.

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[101]Exum 1996, 12.
[102]Exum 1996, 12.
[103]Exum 1996, 173.

Personal/Political Interests

Exum's motivation in engaging with the Bible as she does is, in one sense, less individualised than Clines', though no less personal. As a feminist, Exum places herself in a tradition of scholarship which is now well established in Biblical Studies, and the politicised nature of her scholarship is both integral to her approach and openly declared from the start. The Bible, Exum argues, was written by men for men and, as such, demands that women readers read actively against their own interests. This lack of equality in interpretive status needs to be addressed, and Exum deploys her considerable critical skills in the service of this agenda. In doing so, Exum makes common cause with a significant body of work by many feminist scholars and, in this regard, her critical motivation is necessarily displayed both implicitly and explicitly throughout her work.

At the same time, however, Exum does not simply take a stand on a pre-existing political position. Rather, she is candid about the personal implications of her study and what motivates it. In the preface to *Plotted, Shot, and Painted* she declares her personal interest in feminist interpretation:

> As a woman and a feminist, I have something at stake in the cultural representations of biblical women I examine in this book. Voyeurism [...], the positioning of the female body as an object of male desire in literature, art, and film [...], and pornography [...] have an urgency about them for me because they relate to contemporary issues about women's rights, and they affect my life. In view of the past and ongoing influence of the Bible and its manifold cultural representations within Western culture, it seems to me especially important to examine the roots of these social problems here. The extent to which (male) commentators reinscribe the pornographic ideology of the prophetic texts [...] actually came as something of a shock to me. Their influence

> on Bible readers frightens me, and I hope my critique might increase critical awareness of the harmful ideology they are perpetuating.[104]

Exum makes no attempt to appear disinterested or objective about her scholarship. Rather, her interests in interpretation are openly displayed, and their role both in her selection of appropriate critical tools and in the interpretations she offers are transparently represented to the reader. For Exum, integrity as an ideological critic involves the willingness to admit her own ideological commitments as a factor in her own interpretation.

Stephen D. Moore

From one perspective (and certainly from his own), Stephen D. Moore occupies a marginal position in respect of mainstream Biblical Studies. From another, Moore has been one of the most significant figures in the movement beyond historical criticism since the 1980s, especially in his championing of the application of poststructuralist theory not only to the biblical text but to the practice of interpreting it. Moore first came to prominence in 1989 with the publication of *Literary Criticism and the Gospels: The Theoretical Challenge*, a work which remains the most comprehensive and insightful survey and critique of narrative and reader-response approaches in Biblical Studies, but which also sought to bring poststructuralist theory to bear on biblical interpretation. This train of thought was developed, applied and embellished by Moore's next two books, *Mark and Luke in Poststructuralist Perspectives: Jesus Begins to Write* (1992), and *Poststructuralism and the New Testament: Derrida and Foucault at the Foot of the Cross* (1994). More recently, Moore

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[104]Exum 1996, 12.

has broadened his theoretical base and emerged as a strongly ideological critic. In his most recent books, *God's Gym: Divine Male Bodies of the Bible* (1996) and *God's Beauty Parlour: And Other Queer Spaces in and Around the Bible* (2001) he has expanded beyond literary theory into the rich and heady interdisciplinarity of cultural theory and criticism, and in his introduction to *God's Beauty Parlour* cites queer theory, masculinity studies, cultural studies, postcolonial studies and autobiographical criticism alongside more mainstream Biblical Studies as his theoretical and methodological sources.[105] Moore's progression through the landscape of postmodern theory and criticism is linked to his own love-hate relationship with the biblical text he studies and the practices of the guild of biblical scholars to which he belongs, a relationship which he discusses with candour in the more autobiographical portions of his writings. Moore's work thus poses a challenge to more mainstream biblical critics, and especially those of a confessional persuasion - a challenge which is rendered formidable both by its fearsome theoretical knowledge and by its strongly motivated ideological character.

Ideological Interests

Moore has described his own approach as "a hermeneutics of suspicion, if not a hermeneutics of paranoia".[106] As his career as a biblical critic has progressed, Moore has become increasingly suspicious of the Bible and its ideology and heavily influenced by Foucault, who sees culture in terms of the concept of power within society, expressed in differential relationships between groups (and individuals) and manifested in relationships of influence,

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[105]Moore 1996b; Moore 2001. Moore has also flirted with New Historicism, although this has apparently not influenced his work in a significant way (Moore 1997).
[106]Moore 1994, 8.

control and even repression. Power is the fundamental principle behind all cultural action so that, as Moore puts it, "every proclamation of a truth is the expression of a will to power".[107]

Moore is deeply suspicious of the Bible and its subsequent interpretation as means of ideological control. One example of this is his analysis of the doctrine of the atonement.[108] Moore finds that in the development of the Christian doctrine of the atonement earlier concepts of retribution and punitive justice have been displaced by more refined doctrines of reform and discipline. But this distinction is undercut by what Moore finds in the New Testament texts which source the doctrine, and which rely upon strong conceptual hierarchies of power and subordination.[109] Contrasting the 'soft' transformational interpretation of the atonement (by which the believer is empowered by Christ's death to overcome sin in their own life through the renewing of their mind) with the 'hard' and punitive substitutionary model (whereby Jesus takes on himself the punishment for the believer's sin), Moore observes that the transformational interpretation masks the fundamental power relationship between God and the believer. The transformation of the believer is simply a more efficient exercise of power, "still exercised on the body but now reaching into the psyche as well to fashion acceptable thoughts and

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[107]Moore 1994, 89.

[108]Moore 1994, 98. Moore draws heavily upon Foucault's *Discipline and Punish* (Foucault 1977) *,* which traces the history of judicial punishment from the feudal concept of justice as retribution expressed through torture, through more refined concepts of justice as punishment through imprisonment, to modern notions of discipline and reform. Foucault contends that this transition reflects not a lessening of power under the humanizing influence of the Enlightenment, but a strengthening of state power as its exercise is extended from the physical to the psychological and even the spiritual, to the extent that nineteenth-century penal reform "concealed an iron fist of totalitarianism in a velvet glove of humanitarianism".

[109]This survey appears in *Poststructuralism and the New Testament*, where the focus is on the theologians' development of the doctrine rather than the biblical basis of the doctrine, and again in expanded form in *God's Gym*, where the biblical treatment of the atonement itself comes more into focus (Moore 1994, 95-112; Moore 1996b, 3-34). This discussion deals with the later version of the essay.

attitudes yielding acceptable behaviour, of power absolutised to a degree unimaginable even in a situation of extreme physical torture".[110]

Moore notes, moreover, that Paul's discussions of the atonement consistently fail to make a distinction between retribution and discipline as he "refuses to separate torture from reform".[111] The Cross thus becomes an instrument of power expressed both through physical torture and through psychological conditioning, and Moore's discussion of the role of the Holy Spirit in the life of the believer according to Paul reflects his unease:

> You are no longer regulated from without, as formerly, but from within [...]. No longer must you police your own thoughts, desires and emotions; they are now overseen by an inner sentinel [...] whose relationship to you is one of permanent penetration and absolute possession [...], closer than the most intimate act of love, closer than the most exquisite act of torture [...]. The Spirit is *in* you, filling your every orifice [...], insinuating itself between you and your self. Its fingers uncoil within you and extend outward until everything you once thought you were is but a tight glove adorning its open hand, always about to become a clenched fist [...].[112]

Moore's suspicions are heightened when he considers Paul's exhortation to his readers to imitate him in submission to Christ. Asking who stands to gain from such an imitation he concludes that the answer can only be Paul himself, and concludes that "To appeal to one's own exemplary subjection to a conveniently absent authority in order to legitimate the subjection of others [...] is a strategy as ancient as it is suspect".[113]

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[110]Moore 1996b, 24. Moore places great significance upon the crucifixion, seeing it mythically as the transformation of the man Jesus into transcendent text, the point at which Jesus ceases to be an autonomous subject and instead becomes an ideological/theological cipher (Moore 1992, 47-8; Moore 1996a, 37-9; Moore 2001, 90-92). The crucifixion of Jesus reveals for Moore a disturbing image of God as an abusive and sadistic heavenly father. The text into which the man Jesus is transformed is thus highly suspect in Moore's view, and the sense that the New Testament represents a distorted portrait of Jesus and an expression of the will to power, dominance and control is a consistent theme of Moore's work.
[111]Moore 1996b, 25.
[112]Moore 1996b, 29.
[113]Moore 1996b, 30.

Moore's Foucauldian treatment of Paul is not that distant from conventional interpretations of Pauline doctrine in its depiction of the shape of Paul's argument and of his doctrine (indeed, it draws upon such treatments for support). What marks it out, however, is a deep suspicion, almost a fear of what Paul has to say about the Cross and its consequences for the believer.[114] Where a confessional critic would happily conform themselves and their reading to the rhetoric of a text which they already consider authoritative, Moore resists.

Moore's suspicion of the motivation of the biblical writers extends equally to subsequent biblical interpreters. Echoing Schüssler Fiorenza's criticism of 'objective' Biblical Studies, he has compared the development of biblical criticism with that of anatomy, reflecting upon its tendency to violate the object of study it claims to respect, and its cultivation of an attitude of clinical distance at the same time as it attempts to literally "get inside" its object.[115] The majority of biblical critics, he argues, are insufficiently emotionally detached from their subject to ask important questions about the ethical implications of the readings they produce, or to interrogate the ideology embedded in the biblical texts themselves. Non-confessional criticism, on the other hand, cuts deep in its dissection of the text and resists the Bible's appeals to be devoured, digested and internalised by its reader instead, precisely

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[114]Moore engages in a similar exercise in relation to Lukan rhetoric in Moore 1992, 129-44. Moore's analysis of Lukan rhetoric is essentially identical to that a conventional narrative critic might perform, focussing largely on the narrator's omniscience and omnipresence and the importance of point of view in facilitating the reader's access to the inner world of characters. As an exercise in analysing point of view in Luke the treatment is unremarkable (except for Moore's irrepressibly creative analogy of the Lukan narrative with a spy or detective training exercise). Where Moore differs is in his instinctive distrust of and resistance to the rhetorical force of the text, to which most narrative critics would be happy to submit.
[115]Moore 1996b, 40-50.

because it fears the object of its study will have "mind-altering effects that we will be unable to control".[116]

Moore is profoundly nervous of the God whom he sees portrayed in the pages of the Bible. In the third section of *God's Gym*, "Resurrection: Horrible Pain, Glorious Gain", Moore traces the corporeal depiction of God from Genesis to Revelation, drawing comparisons with the culture of body-building. The portrait of God which Moore paints is of a conflicted, narcissistic deity, fixated with proving his own hyper-masculinity and prone to bouts of steroid-induced apoplexy, finally depicted in Revelation enthroned amid all the fascistic trappings of Imperial Rome (the writer's subversion of imperial pretension itself contaminated by the imagery he seeks to undermine). *God's Gym* closes with a summary of the God Moore has found in the pages of the Bible: the biblical God is "the supreme embodiment of hegemonic hypermasculinity", his objective "total control", and the cross is "a surprisingly subtle and therefore effective instrument of subjection".[117] Moore's response is not positive:

> if what I have been arguing about the Bible is indeed the case - that its God is a singularly pure projection of the will to power - then the biblical critic might have no choice but to clutch his or her scalpel defensively, to brandish it threateningly, as the hypermasculine bulk that is the biblical God lumbers across the examining room, an imperious frown furrowing his perfectly handsome features, and a pair of handcuffs dangling ominously from his weight-lifting belt, which is cinched around his bloodstained butcher's apron, from the pocket of which a blindfold protrudes. "You do not believe because you have seen me," he intones. "Blessed are those who have not seen and therefore believe."[118]

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[116]Moore 1996b, 71-72.
[117]Moore 1996b, 139.
[118]Moore 1996b, 139-40.

For Moore, the task of the critic is urgent - to dissect, interrogate and evaluate the Bible so as to be able to resist the subtly invasive ideological claims which he finds so disturbing.

Methodological Interests

David Clines has remarked that Stephen Moore's works "have almost always been theoretically inspired".[119] Certainly, Moore is one of the most widely-read and insightful theoreticians in Biblical Studies, and it is theoretical rather than exegetical or critical issues which have provided the focus of much of his work. Put simply, Moore has often been less concerned with what the biblical text says than with how we read that text in the first place.

Moore's wide-ranging familiarity with the leading edge of cultural and literary theory has often led him to press for Biblical Studies as a discipline to engage with emerging approaches in literary and cultural studies at a serious level. A particular irritation for the theoretically-literate Moore is the time-lag which exists between secular theory and its counterpart in Biblical Studies, whereby "the arrival in biblical studies of a fledgling literary-critical methodology [...] generally signals its geriatric status, or utter exhaustion, if not its outright demise, in literary studies".[120] Moore is impatient that biblical literary criticism should remain preoccupied with issues of reader-response and narrative form which have been largely left behind in secular literary studies for over twenty years, and that much discussion of these methods within Biblical Studies declines to engage with literary theory on its own terms.[121]

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[119]Clines and Moore 1998, 81.
[120]Moore 1994, 279; Moore 2001, 8-9.
[121]Moore 1994, 5. Moore opines: "I wonder [...] whether I myself am not trying to tunnel under the fence in the opposite direction, to escape altogether from biblical studies, a

Moore insists that he is not wishing to suggest that Biblical Studies should blindly follow every critical or theoretical fad of literary studies, but rather that "I merely wish to suggest [...] that if we purport to do interdisciplinary literary work on the Bible without having any real clue as to what is currently going on in literary studies, we are engaged in something still more silly".[122]

A major drive in much of Moore's work has been to push biblical criticism beyond the focus upon authors and texts which characterise historicist and formalist criticism. The major challenge to biblical scholarship is "the reduction of disciplinary walls and the beginning of the end of the situation whereby biblical studies is something one does secure behind a door bearing that name, whereas sociology, anthropology, women's studies, literary criticism, and philosophy are other things someone else does down the hall".[123] The result of such a movement, Moore argues, will be the dawning of a postcritical era in biblical interpretation in which biblical criticism can be free from the need to defer to the authority of a text or to remain blind to the theological commitments which underpin so much of its methodology. Poststructuralist criticism, Moore asserts, is placed to address both of these defects. Ruthlessly self-aware and fundamentally questioning of the texts it analyses, poststructuralism offers an interpretive approach which is both methodologically and theoretically honest, working alongside established

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discipline that, despite the deep affection I still feel for it, insists on burying me alive every now and then."

[122]Moore 1998, 251n.. Clines has echoed this point in his essay "From Salamanca to Cracow: SBL International Meetings" (Clines 1998b), where he points out that biblical scholarship as represented by papers presented at the SBL to that point has failed to address a number of major areas of contemporary thought, among which he highlights the impact of French thinking (especially that of Derrida and Foucault); the impact of queer theory and the issues of gender and sexuality in secular literary and cultural criticism; postmodernism's questioning of the notion of disinterested scholarship; and the need to consider the ethical and social consequences of one's scholarship. It is notable that much of the work of the Sheffield Department of Biblical Studies has focussed on precisely these issues over recent years, and Clines himself has most recently been addressing the subject of gender construction in the Bible in a number of published and unpublished works (see Clines 1995a; Clines 1998a).

[123]Moore 1989, 151.

historical approaches to provide a Biblical Studies "unfettered at last from the ecclesiastical superego that has always compelled it to genuflect before the icons it had come to destroy".[124]

Moore's early criticism was heavily influenced by the work of Derridean deconstruction.[125] For him in the early 1990s the biblical text was a fluid entity in a never-ending linguistic play of meaning, constantly flexing and shifting through its interplay with its own elements, other texts, and the predispositions and subjective linguistic structures of readers themselves. Biblical texts - and interpretations of those texts - are subject to Derrida's concept of *différance*: not stable and whole but unstable and fractured, held together by differential relationships which creak under the strain. The presence of a concept automatically entails the differential presence of its opposite, suppressed and hidden by the textual voice but necessarily implied as a negative image of the text's affirmations. Any interpretation of the text, therefore, is always liable to be undermined and destabilised by a reading which takes what the text does not say as seriously as what it does. This realisation, in Moore's view, frees the critic from slavish subordination to the rhetoric of the text, enabling critic and text together to engage self-consciously in linguistic 'play'. Attempts to fix textual meaning do violence to texts, so that "at the moment when the critic, seeking to arrest the movement of its meanings, lays rough hands on the text, it exposes the truth of criticism as denuding, and denuding as a form of violence. Criticism (st)rips the page".[126]

Rather than trying to possess the text and force it to conform to a single meaning, the Derridean Moore prefers criticism which is self-consciously playful, dancing lightly across the surface of the text and deftly exploring the

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[124]Moore 1994, 117.
[125]For Moore's understanding of Derrida, see Moore 1989, 131-38; Moore 1994, 13-41.
[126]Moore 1992, 33.

intertwinings of its language. Moore skilfully uses puns to draw out the surplus of meaning in biblical texts as, for example, when he discusses the significance of the cross or chiasmus in Mark:

> Chiasmus comes from the Greek verb *chiazein*, "to mark with the letter X," or *chi*. And *chi* is an anagram of *Ich*, which is German for the personal pronoun *I* and the technical term in Freud that English translators render as *ego*. [...] And Jesus, who identifies himself to his terrified disciples in Mark 6:50 with the words *ego eimi* ("I am" or "it is I"), himself possesses a name that is an echo of the French *je suis* ("I am"), the single superfluous letter being the *I* (or ego), which is thus marked out for deletion: "Father, ... not what I (*ego*) want, but what you want" (14:36).[127]

Moore follows Derrida in seeking to uncover the "textual unconscious" through what amounts to an alternative epistemology not of rigid oppositional definition but of free association, an epistemology to which, Moore argues (with some success), the Gospels are conducive.[128]

Through the 1990s, however, Moore has moved away from Derrida in the direction of Foucault. One reason for this is Moore's awareness of the fundamental instability of Derrida's theoretical position: if the basic premise of Derridean deconstruction is that *all* texts and interpretations are unstable and internally conflicted, then the same premise must apply to any deconstructive position. Pronouncing the death of metaphysics, deconstruction sets itself up in place of that which it has deconstructed, only to find itself forced by its own logic to eat itself.[129]

Moore demonstrates this awareness in his deconstruction of Johannine irony in respect of Jesus' conversation with the Samaritan woman in John 4, in

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[127]Moore 1992, 55.
[128]Moore 1992, 61-73.
[129]Moore 1989, 145-46. See also Moore 1994, 17f..

Poststructuralism and the New Testament.[130] As an example of how Derridean deconstruction effectively dissolves the oppositions which support any interpretation of a text, Moore observes how the conventional reading of the conversation between Jesus and the Samaritan woman rests upon an opposition of the literal and the figurative: the woman fails to understand that Jesus' references to water are symbolic, and thus becomes the subject of irony in the episode. Moore goes on to point out that at Jesus' crucifixion, the quenching of his physical thirst becomes a precondition of his yielding up his/the Spirit (19:30), thus inverting the hierarchy of literal and figurative thirst/water that had been previously established. Furthermore, the outpouring of water and blood from Jesus' side dissolves the opposition altogether (19:34), since the physical flow of water becomes a metaphor for the figurative symbolism of the language of water, itself representing the Spirit. Hence, Moore concludes, the text is divided against itself, subverting by its own dynamics the attempts of critics and readers to provide a definitive interpretation which speaks on its behalf.[131]

This deconstruction of the water imagery of John also necessitates a reconsideration of the ironic structure of chapter 4: it is Jesus who maintains the superiority of the figurative over the physical and the Samaritan woman who insists on confusing the two, but the climax of the Gospel vindicates the Samaritan woman rather than Jesus by indicating that physical and figurative levels of meaning cannot, in the end, be segregated.[132] This rhetorical collapse, Moore concludes, shows how deconstructive interpretation can be deployed in the service of ideological approaches such as feminism.

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[130]Moore has visited this scene twice, first in Moore 1989, 159-70, then in Moore 1994, 43-64. We will focus on the latter visit here.
[131]Moore 1994, 48-9. See also Moore 1992, 28.
[132]Moore 1994, 59, 62.

Moore is aware, however, that the logic of his own theoretical position cannot allow him to rest on this conclusion, and he proceeds in a footnote to undercut the argument he has just made, observing that his deconstruction of the hierarchical opposition spiritual/material has resulted in an inversion of the opposition male/female, but that "This inverted opposition could, of course, be deconstructed in its turn, should space permit it or strategy require it".[133]

The inability of Derridean deconstruction to say anything concrete or firm about the text becomes, for Moore, an ethical dilemma as his resistance to the Bible and its ideology grows. If a feminist reading can be deconstructed as easily as the patriarchal interpretation it replaces, then what ethical force does it have? Very little, it would seem. And if one cannot say anything meaningful about anything without being run down by the logic of one's argument coming full circle and hitting one in the rear, then why say anything at all?[134] It is clear from Moore's writing that he regards the Bible as important, yet the logic of Derridean deconstruction prevents him from speaking authoritatively about it. This perhaps explains his increasing abandonment of Derrida after the mid-1990s in favour of the cultural historian and philosopher Michel Foucault, whose work is more conducive to a cultural and ethical approach to biblical interpretation.[135]

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[133]Moore 1994, 62.

[134]Terry Eagleton has remarked that one of the key features of Derridean deconstruction as a tool of ideological critique is "that it allows you to drive a coach and horses through everybody else's beliefs while not saddling you with the inconvenience of having to adopt any yourself. It is, in effect, an invulnerable position, and the fact that it is also purely empty is simply the price one has to pay for this" (Eagleton 1996, 125). Noting further that deconstructions are always vulnerable to further deconstruction, Eagleton observes that Derridean interpretation "is a power-game, a mirror-image of orthodox academic competition. It is just that now, in a religious twist to the old ideology, victory is achieved by *kenosis* or self-emptying: the winner is the one who has managed to get rid of all his cards and sit with empty hands" (Eagleton 1996, 127).

[135]It is important to note that this transition is phased rather than abrupt. Derrida and Foucault sit side by side in *Mark and Luke* (1992) and in *Poststructuralism and the New Testament* (1994). By the advent of *God's Gym* (1996), however, Derrida appears to have been supplanted by Foucault altogether. Foucault also provides the foundation for New Historicism, with which Moore flirted in the pages of *Biblical Interpretation* in 1997 (Graham and Moore

Of our three scholars Moore is arguably the most driven by theoretical concerns, but even so, his attitude to theory is not to be slavishly adherent to it. Moore evaluates his theoretical sources against his personal and political aims and objectives, and has moved from one theoretical base to another in order to develop his particular line of approach to the Bible, whilst remaining within the boundaries of poststructuralist thought. One thing which is very clear in Moore's work, however, is that any critic attempting to engage him in debate will need to demonstrate theoretical literacy in the discourse of poststructuralism. This, for many, will be a formidable and off-putting precondition of conversation.

Personal/Political Interests

Moore has been candid about his personal motives in interpretation, and his work has a strong autobiographical element. Tracing his own personal history from his strict Catholic upbringing in Limerick, through his conversion to Christianity, his involvement with charismatic renewal and his entry into a Cistercian monastery, Moore has laid bare the course of his increasing disenchantment with confessional criticism and with Christianity in general, beginning with a first encounter with historical criticism in his monastery library.[136] Moore has described his current position as agnosticism "(Or is it atheism? I'm never quite sure.)".[137] Moore's movement beyond the

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1997; Moore 1997), and he continues to peer over Moore's shoulder in *God's Beauty Parlour* (2001).

[136]See Moore 1994, 95, 112, 114-15; Moore 1995; Moore 1996b, xi; Moore 1999; Moore 2001, 174.

[137]Moore 1999, 183. Moore has apparently regretted letting that particular cat out of its bag: "I probably shouldn't have confessed it in the first place. And now it's out there, observing the progress of my career with malevolent interest, cleaning its weapons compulsively as it plans its next move" (Moore 2001, 174).

confessional position which still characterises much mainstream biblical criticism creates something of a dilemma for him as a critic. He reflects that much confessional criticism is written from faith to faith, "about a 'we' that doesn't include me", and raises "a persistent little problem of my own, an itch I can't seem to scratch: Why am I still in biblical studies?"[138]

Moore's own journey through and beyond faith is, I would argue, a crucial factor in his development as a critic and especially as a theorist. Moore's work is, as we will see, strongly theory-driven. But is his theoretical concern a cause or a symptom of his own personal journey? Moore has indicated that his research has had the effect of "validating, indeed precipitating, my own unbelief", and has stated that his reaction to strongly confessional exegesis has been "refashioned" by philosophical and psychoanalytic texts from Derrida to Freud.[139] But did theory drive him to agnosticism, or vice versa?

As Moore tells his own story, the answer is "both": an encounter with historical criticism raised a series of questions which he pursued into the arms of Derrida, Foucault, Lacan and Freud (among others). But the trajectory of Moore's theoretical and critical development indicates that he has also searched for theoretical positions conducive to his own confessional (or non-confessional position). Looking over Moore's work as a whole, it is possible to see that one objective of his criticism has been to escape from the constraints of a confessionally-dominated Biblical Studies which he finds less and less comfortable.

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[138]Moore 1995, 28.Moore 1992, 3. Moore later answers his own question: "Why am I still in biblical studies? Simple: because I'm stuck here. I do still love the Bible, but I'm no longer *in* love with it (much less with Him), and I haven't been for a very long time" (Moore 1995, 31). Moore continues to express love for the Bible, although the relationship appears to be becoming somewhat sadomasochistic. In the midst of a deconstruction of Revelation's violent masculinity, Moore remarks wistfully, "I love Revelation for its beauty. Its intricate lacework of lurid images has never ceased to thrill me. [...] Revelation seduces me no matter how much I resist it." (Moore 2001, 183, 203).

[139]Moore 1995, 31; Moore 1996b, 119.

Moore's nervousness of orthodox Christianity is motivated by a strong element of self-doubt and self-suspicion. Those aspects of God which Moore finds most repellent are those which he perceives as reflecting the darker aspects of his own character. Talking of the violence of God in Revelation he reflects that there is little of which Revelation's God is guilty which he himself would not be capable of, given certain extreme stimuli and "a dash of omnipotence". This, Moore reflects, "is why I fear this God as much as I do and resist him for all I am worth".[140]

Moore has a strong interest in sexuality which finds expression throughout his work, but it is the structures of dominance, control and power which he finds enshrined in the Bible and its confessional interpretation which remain the dominant focus of his attention.[141] The very existence of inequalities of power is something which troubles him and his stated aim is the deconstruction and replacement of the structures which perpetuate such inequalities. Indeed, it sometimes seems as if he believes that any inequality of power in a relationship must inevitably result in abuse. For Moore, the Bible is a human construction rather than a means of divine revelation, and the God depicted therein is merely a reflection of human interests, "a singularly pure projection of the will to power".[142] Moore looks forward to a time when he and others

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[140]Moore 2001, 182.Moore later remarks that the God of Revelation is "disturbingly like myself", and that reading Revelation is "uncannily like looking in a mirror - while having a psychotic episode" (Moore 2001, 199).

[141]Moore has been candid about his sexuality, although the resulting picture is ambiguous. He describes himself as "more than a little bent" and as having had relationships with a number of men, but is married with children. He has also hinted at an attraction to sado-masochism (Moore 2001, 17, 174, 29-30, 31). At the same time it should be stressed that Moore is a past master at the tongue in cheek comment and at revealing a tantalising glimpse of something fleeting which may or may not be "the real him".

[142]Moore 1996b, 140. At the end of *God's Beauty Parlour* Moore again muses, "this God who projects, who eternally projects a part of himself outward, is himself a mass projection (what else *could* he be?)" (Moore 2001, 203). Interestingly, in spite of his avowed atheism/agnosticism, Moore appears to hedge his bets about the existence of God, wishing God truly were a cultural phenomenon but not being able to bring himself explicitly to affirm it.

will be able to reconstruct a positive postmodern God, reconceived in the light of the constructed nature of concepts of sexuality and gender, but feels that the time will not be right for such a project while the old, unreconstructed God continues to stalk the pages of biblical scholarship:

> What other sacred spaces might be conjured out of his book? What other God might the go(o)d book yield up, so as to make it even better? [...] What other genders, if any, for this God? A God beyond gender? A God beyond God? A God beyond belief? Can we even begin to say or see what all of these Gods might be until we have made an end of saying what they should not be?[143]

Ethics, Politics, Rhetoric: Rules of Engagement for Confessional and De-Confessional Biblical Studies

It is clear that Clines, Exum and Moore have taken Schüssler Fiorenza's ethics of interpretation to heart, and have done much to establish the performance of her interpretive dance as a requirement of postmodern biblical criticism. Singly and collectively, they have addressed the impact of biblical texts and their interpretations upon readers using a hermeneutics of experience and social location; they have exposed what they perceive to be dynamics and rhetorical structures of domination and suppression in the biblical texts through rigorous ideological analysis; they have sought to uncover the hidden motives and ideological presuppositions of biblical texts and their interpreters through the application of a hermeneutics of suspicion; and they have sought to evaluate those motives and ideologies from the standpoint of contemporary liberal humanism.

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[143]Moore 2001, 202.

The strong ethical dimension of a postmodern approach makes a number of demands upon biblical scholars, not the least significant of which is the requirement for critics to be transparent about their underlying motivations and commitments in interpretation. Clines, Moore and Exum are each candid about the values and presuppositions which inform their work, and claim this as a fundamental mark of academic integrity. Only when the interests and commitments of scholars are openly on view can their impact upon interpretation be properly assessed. This represents a new factor in interpretation and a dramatic shift in academic culture.[144]

Integrity also demands congruence between underlying motivations and critical methods. The deep suspicion of the Bible felt by each of our three scholars leads them to adopt approaches characterised by a strong hermeneutics of suspicion, and this in turn produces evaluative readings which set biblical ideologies against the values of secular liberal humanism, often to find them wanting. Evaluation is not limited to biblical texts, however, but extends to the history of interpretation. Clines, Exum and Moore are not afraid to criticise other scholars whose work embodies values (whether derived from the texts they study or from their own ideological commitments) with which they disagree. The introduction of ethical critique into Biblical Studies thus introduces a strong element of intradisciplinary dissonance.

The ethics of interpretation embraced by our three scholars have also thrown into high relief the political nature of Biblical Studies. Seen from a Fishian standpoint, the postmodern proliferation of interests, methods and ideologies threatens the homogeneity of the community of academic biblical interpreters,

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[144]Clines himself has observed ironically the prevailing ethos in Biblical Studies: "we are objective scholars, and we prefer to keep hidden our personal preferences and our ethical and religious views about the subject matter of our study. Never ask a New Testament scholar for his or her own views on Christology, I long ago learned. It is bad form" (Clines 1997, 23).

amounting to an attempt to redefine it radically in terms of its core values. The approaches which Clines, Exum and Moore have developed arise not only from disenchantment with historical-critical and formalist methodologies, but from a deep ideological dissonance with the values and commitments of much mainstream biblical scholarship. The development of a strong departmental ethos at Sheffield can be interpreted as a deeply political act, an attempt to establish a new interpretive community which is attempting to remake Biblical Studies in its own image.

The identity of this community derives from the coherence of ideology and methodology. For Exum, Moore and Clines, the commitment to humanist values they bring with them to the act of interpretation determines both the ideological interrogation of texts and interpretations which dominates their work, and the hermeneutically suspicious methods they deploy in the service of their interpretive interests. At each level of interest, however - methodological, ideological and political - their work poses major challenges to other approaches (and especially those informed by confessional interests) which might seek to engage with them.

Issues of Method

At the methodological level, Clines has himself observed that a multiplication of methodologies within the academic community will result in a certain degree of fragmentation:

> I do not really want to talk with most redaction critics - about their work, that is - because I do not think what they are doing is very plausible. And I presume that they don't, for the most part, want to talk with me about deconstruction, let us say, for much the same reason. [...] I would be very happy to convince them that what I am doing is

worthwhile, but (to be honest) I do not particularly want to hear them try to convince me that what they are doing is worthwhile - partly because I think I know their reasoning and partly because I do not have very much confidence in it.[145]

Part of the difficulty arises from the fact that different methodological terminologies reflect crucial ideological and conceptual differences over the nature of the biblical text itself. The proliferation not only of critical methods but of their underlying text theories means that consensus over the object of study in Biblical Studies could be said to be on the brink of collapse. Intercourse between different approaches to the study of the Bible is no longer possible through a common critical terminology: if source critics want to talk to reader response critics or to feminists they must learn one another's' languages, and some critics have already decided that it is not worth the effort either of attempting to learn another critical terminology or of trying to teach one's own to others, either because the language is too difficult, or because the ideological or conceptual bases of the two approaches are incompatible.[146]

The danger of new critical terminologies which address very specific interpretive interests is that they rapidly become the language of those "in the know", operating as codes for the initiated rather than as means of explication and communication beyond the interpretive community. Moore's work illustrates this tendency, in that one criticism of his deconstructive work

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[145]Clines 1993, 72.

[146]Chris Baldick argues that the pluralist "bazaar" of interpretive methods has fragmented literary studies: "As each of these approaches has constructed self-confirming discourses which render it more or less deaf to critical challenge from its competitors, so the bazaar as a whole has tended to insulate itself from the corrective influences of a secular reading public outside the academy, thus exposing it instead to sudden vagaries of intellectual fashion and to the incrustations of jargon" (Baldick 1996, 204). Francis Watson has also noted this dynamic. Responding to Richard Rorty's assertion that the task of philosophy is to facilitate conversation between different stories, Watson argues that recognition of the particularity of different interpretive perspectives means that theologians "do not usually draw the conclusion that animated conversation with non-theological story-tellers is now their main task. On the contrary, the link between story and community, suggestive of a relatively closed social context, creates, if anything, a withdrawal from other discourses, a respectful abandonment of them to their otherness" (Watson 1994, 130).

during the early 1990s was that the degree of theoretical knowledge necessary to appreciate his virtuoso deconstructions of the Gospels fully was such as to render his work " a form of gnosis", hopelessly opaque to the uninitiated.[147] It is arguable that the language of deconstruction within Biblical Studies has become a *patois* of the hermeneutically suspicious, a Biblical Studies equivalent of Welsh, Basque or Catalan. The terminology of deconstruction serves as an identity marker and facilitates communication between members of a minority interpretive community, whilst simultaneously serving as a means of protecting that community by rendering their conversation opaque to the wider culture in which they exist, and whose influence they seek to resist and escape.

Issues of Ideology

A second issue identified by Clines is that of how conflicts of interest at the level of ideology should be addressed. Clines observes that one consequence of the abandonment of an objective quest for determinate meaning is the recognition that scholars' interests, locations, ideologies and personalities both determine their scholarship "and separate us from one another":

> Strip away the bonhomie that passes for scholarly interchange in the corridors of the international congresses, and we find that there is a lot we don't like, don't approve of, and will not stand for, in our colleagues, a lot that has yet to be brought into the light, taken the measure of, and fought over. Managing personal conflict within the academy may well be the new skill, harder still than Assyriology or deconstruction, that scholars will need to acquire in this decade.[148]

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[147]Upton 1993, 74.
[148]Clines 1995c, 92-3.

A major stumbling-block for confessional critics wishing to engage with Clines and his colleagues, however, is the fact that the version of postmodern scholarship which they have sought to establish is explicitly and deliberately de-confessional, which is to say that it deliberately excludes confessional or theological concerns from consideration.[149] The establishment of postmodern approaches within Biblical Studies has offered scholars such as Clines, Exum and Moore a means of escape not only from the authority of the Bible but from the authority of an academic discipline which they perceive as historically dominated by confessional and theological interests. Postmodern criticism has evaded those authorities by finding new methods and critical theories in the liberal humanities which, at least within the boundaries of Biblical Studies, it has claimed as its own, colonising a territory within Biblical Studies in which confessional critics must conform their interpretations to critical standards based upon an underlying secular liberal ideology which is hostile to the Bible and its orthodox Christian interpretation.[150] De-confessional criticism's self-identification relies upon a definition of its position in opposition to confessional interpretation, and this poses a major barrier to constructive engagement between confessional and de-confessional scholars.

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[149]I use the term "de-confessional", rather than "non-confessional", advisedly. The term "non-confessional" would imply simple disinterest as the reason for excluding theological concerns from interpretation. "De-confessional" scholarship, however, excludes such concerns deliberately for reasons of ideology, and defines itself in opposition to confessional approaches.

[150]It is arguable that this includes the colonising or ownership of particular biblical texts themselves. The quantity of, for instance, feminist criticism on texts such as the creation narrative in Genesis 1-3, the story of Jephthah in Judges 11 or of David and Bathsheba in 2 Samuel 11 makes it almost impossible to engage in academic literary study of these passages without showing that feminist scholarship has been considered.

It is arguable that this fragmentation results from a failure to follow through fully Schüssler Fiorenza's ethical model. Schüssler Fiorenza insists upon the need for a hermeneutics of suspicion, but also emphasises the importance of reconstruction, imagination and transformation. She is opposed to the reification of biblical texts as either good or bad, insisting that to do so is to close off the ongoing and constantly shifting interpretive movement as contexts change. This, however, is precisely what our three postmodern critics appear to have done.[151] They have failed to reclaim positive interpretations of the Bible, and as such have created a subdiscipline hostile to an interpretive perspective which seeks to work with, rather than against, the biblical text. This creates a major difficulty for Christian scholarship which, by definition, is predisposed to a more positive response to biblical ethics and ideologies.[152]

De-confessional postmodernism also fails to perform a second of Schüssler Fiorenza's steps in failing to engage theologically with the Bible. It is arguable that one reason postmodern critics have adopted a non-theological approach is to facilitate an ideological attack upon the Bible and its orthodox interpretation whilst simultaneously disabling reciprocal critique by declining to engage with orthodox biblical interpretation on its own ground. Ignoring theological questions of revelation or inspiration which arise from treating the Bible as a

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[151]Exum, to be fair, explicitly guards against her interpretations being taken as exclusive. Rather, they are offered as correctives to conventional androcentric interpretations. That said, her recent work tends to a negative view of biblical texts in general.

[152]It might be argued in their defence that this apparent failure on the part of de-confessional scholars is only because the dance is not yet complete: the dominance for so long of a hermeneutics of consent in Biblical Studies arguably means that the note of protest which Clines, Exum and Moore sound needs to continue until it finds acceptance in the mainstream of the discipline, and that only then can a mutual reassessment and re-evaluation of the biblical texts be undertaken on a level platform. But this is still to accept that the dance is not yet finished, that positive re-appropriation of the Bible is possible, and that the hermeneutics

vehicle of divine communication, postmodern critics instead limit their arguments to the level of the critical and the ethical, focussing solely on the Bible as a human construct. Postmodern critics have thus successfully occupied a position from which they can launch attacks on the cultural and social influence of the Bible whilst evading theological counterattack on the basis that theology does not fall within the scope of their declared interests. This attack is conducted primarily by emphasising contrasts between the ethical positions promoted in the Bible and those of modern liberal humanism, which are claimed to be superior.

The danger of such a posture is that the postmodernists risk falling into the same sin which they so strongly condemn in others. Liberal humanist values are taken as the benchmark for evaluation of biblical ideologies, yet those values are not themselves in turn opened up for debate, but rather taken for granted.[153] The elevation of modern liberal ideology over biblical ideology precludes the possibility of mutual critique: rather, liberal humanism stands in judgement upon the Bible. There is no suggestion by Clines, Exum or Moore that interaction with the Bible might necessitate not only the evaluation of biblical ideology but also of the interpreter's own ideological presuppositions.

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of suspicion is only one step in an ongoing dance. Of the three scholars we have examined, only Moore shows the beginning of such an awareness, and that almost as an afterthought.

[153]Clines, in a recent article attacking the ethics of the Book of Job, claims that since the standards by which he judges the text "consist only of elemental proscription of injustice and cruelty, I would suggest that they are not far from universal, and were surely principles of Job's own time" (Clines 2004, 234). Clines here comes perilously close to what he has argued to be a cardinal error: namely, collapsing the cultural distance between ancient text and modern reader, and claiming as universal values which by his own argument cannot be anything other than subjective.

Such a stance omits a fundamental aspect of biblical criticism as Schüssler Fiorenza envisages it, and opens one-way ethical critique of biblical ideologies to accusations of self-contradiction. If the logic of postmodernism requires that the ideologies not only of texts but also of interpreters be rendered available for scrutiny and critique, then the same standard applies to the values which inform such critique. In the postmodern context no ideology can be privileged as immune from examination, and this includes the liberal humanism which informs the work of Clines, Exum and Moore. Two consequences of this are: first, that postmodern biblical critics ought to be open to the possibility that the biblical ideologies they seek to critique might be capable of challenging the values by which they are themselves evaluated; and, second, that the ability to negotiate conflicts of interest at the ideological level needs to become a conventional academic skill in the same way as a knowledge of biblical languages.

Issues of Politics

De-confessional postmodernism's exclusion of faith interests from interpretation is not only an ideological move but a deeply political one. The increased politicisation of Biblical Studies is a direct result of the introduction of multiple competing ideological perspectives, and mirrors developments elsewhere in the humanities. Terry Eagleton, surveying the development of literary theory, has argued that questions of theory and of political ideology

are fundamentally linked.[154] Critical discourses, in common with other kinds

of social discourse, shape forms of consciousness and unconsciousness which

are closely related to the maintenance or transformation of existing systems of

power, and are thus closely linked to what it means to be a person.[155] In any

academic subject, Eagleton argues, the selection of objects and methods of

study is governed by "frames of interest deeply rooted in our practical forms

of social life".[156]

Eagleton emphasises the social and political function of departments of

literature in higher education. Their task is to act as custodians of a discourse,

"to preserve this discourse, extend and elaborate it as necessary, defend it from

other forms of discourse, initiate newcomers into it and determine whether or

not they have successfully mastered it".[157] In this way, the department

functions as part of the ideological apparatus of the state, and in performing

this role, academic communities exercise power: they police language so as to

exclude that which is not acceptably sayable; they police writing itself by

defining what counts as literature and what does not; they police who is to be

considered suitable for entry into the community of scholarship and, thus, who

is to be allowed to pronounce authoritatively on matters of interest to the

community. Such matters are ultimately "a question of the power-relations

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[154]Eagleton 1996, 169.

[155]Eagleton 1996, 183.

[156]Eagleton 1996, 184. Eagleton notes that radical critics are no different from conventional critics in this respect, but that they reflect a set of social values with which most people disagree. "This is why they are commonly dismissed as 'ideological', because 'ideology' is always a way of describing other people's interests rather than one's own" (Eagleton 1996, 184).

[157]Eagleton 1996, 175.

between the literary-academic institution, where all of this occurs, and the ruling power-interests of society at large".[158]

Seen in this light, the rise of postmodern approaches in Biblical Studies in general and at Sheffield in particular can be seen as a crucially political development, raising questions as to what Biblical Studies is, whose interests it serves, and what methods are appropriate or inappropriate within the community of biblical scholars. Most importantly from the point of view of confessional scholarship, some postmodern biblical criticism has attempted a redefinition of Biblical Studies as exclusive of confessional concerns. This is in part a reaction against a resurgence of confessional interests within the discipline.

In recent years a number of biblical theologians have made the point that traditional historical-critical Biblical Studies, by emphasising an objectivist interpretive paradigm, has institutionally excluded theological perspectives. Francis Watson has protested against what he sees as the unwarranted and arbitrary exclusion of theological interests from Biblical Studies, and argued for a redrawing of disciplinary boundaries.[159] Watson objects in particular to the belief that theological commitments distort scholarship, and the consequent insistence that such commitments be privatised and excluded from public and academic discourse.[160] Such privatisation is not a free choice, but is

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[158]Eagleton 1996, 177.
[159]See Watson 1993; Watson 1994; Watson 1996b; Watson 1997. Stephen E. Fowl makes a similar argument: see Fowl 1998, 13-30.
[160]Watson 1994, 13.

imposed as a condition of membership of academic institutions.[161] The academy has come to see itself as defending both the Bible and society from unthinking, unreflective ecclesial dogmatism, and posits itself as the primary location for socially responsible biblical interpretation.[162]

The very structure of academic disciplines, Watson argues, reflects this commitment. The division of Biblical Studies from Theology, and the internal division of Biblical Studies into Old and New Testament Studies, establishes lines of demarcation which serve to protect the vested and ideological interests of scholars in one discipline from trespass by members of another.[163] Watson claims that this division is ideologically motivated and has a "normative force" which "does not merely represent a convenient division of labour; it claims the right to exercise a veto".[164] As a result, the interests of Christians are institutionally excluded from academic study of the Bible:

> The claim that the role of the biblical texts within the Christian community is of positive hermeneutical significance is emphatically rejected: biblical interpretation is to be controlled by the university and by the universal criteria supposedly operative there. The possibility that Christian faith might still represent an ethically and intellectually defensible standpoint within the modern or postmodern world finds little or no acknowledgement here, at the very point where its foundational texts are subjected to the most intense scrutiny.[165]

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[161]Watson 1994, 228.

[162]It is interesting that postmodern de-confessionalism seeks to reject modernist objectivism in Biblical Studies whilst simultaneously maintaining the traditional hostility to overt faith interests in interpretation. The weakness of this position is that one cannot do both without appearing arbitrary.

[163]Watson 1997, 4.

[164]Watson 1997, 3. "They represent a collective decision of biblical scholarship that the biblical texts are to be construed as something other than Christian scripture. [...] 'Normal' biblical scholarship is founded upon this decision, and to reject this decision in practice as well as in principle is to be guilty of deviant behaviour" (Watson 1997, 6).

[165]Watson 1996b, 131.

The advent of postmodernism and a more pluralist climate in Biblical Studies, however, presents opportunities to revisit some of these academic predispositions. The breakdown of historical-critical hegemony leads Watson to propose that explicitly theological approaches can now be offered to the academic community with some confidence. One side-effect of the introduction of a literary paradigm for biblical interpretation into Biblical Studies, Watson argues, is that "an interpretative practice oriented explicitly towards theological concerns can now claim the right to exist".[166] Walter Brueggemann similarly reflects that theological thinkers are reluctant to accept "a muted position of marginality" assigned by positivistic science and politics, arguing that the postmodern context means that "all claims of reality, including those by theologians, are fully under negotiation. Theological discourse is prepared to and capable of participating in these negotiations, no longer pretending to be a privileged insider, no longer willing to be a trivialised outsider".[167]

Such claims have prompted the drawing of battle-lines within Biblical Studies, and major figures at Sheffield have responded with hostility to the suggestion that confessional or theological concerns should play any role within academic biblical scholarship. David Clines has expressed his disappointment that biblical scholarship has failed to establish its academic independence from institutions dominated by confessional concerns. Indeed, the measure of Clines' unease is indicated by the degree of language he uses to describe it: it is, for instance, "a bit of a scandal" that religious believers should set the tone for academic study of the Bible, and in a discussion of Haggai Clines observes

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[166]Watson 1996b, 132.

[167]Brueggemann 1993, 17. John Goldingay writes in similar vein: "Once criticism performed an iconoclastic function in relation to an ideological orthodoxy; now postcritical faith performs an iconoclastic function in relation to an ideological criticism that methodologically excludes commitment and considerations of ultimate truth, in a 'second naïveté'" (Goldingay 1995, 186).

that the failure of scholars to reflect critically upon the ideology of the text is an indication of "the depth of the corruption in our academic discipline that surrounds us".[168]

Clines is especially keen to resist any claims of the church's ownership of the Bible, claiming the Bible as an artefact of the general culture. Consequently, no one group within society has the right to tell any other group or individual how they may or may not use it, so that "If I use my copy of the Bible, for which I have paid my own money, to prop up a chair, that is my business, and no one has the right to tell me I should not do that or that that is not what the Bible is 'for'".[169] A major issue for Clines is that within Biblical Studies the ownership of the Bible by the church has often been assumed and that this has been a repressive influence. Clines states that "it is only the church that seriously threatens to encroach on the Academy's use of the Bible [...] and so it is the church that the Academy is resisting when it declares the Bible to be public property, to be an artefact of our culture".[170] Clines sees such resistance as a duty, insisting that "there is something wrong with the discipline of Hebrew Bible studies if the vast majority of its professionals are adherents to its religion. You don't need to be questioning the bona fides of any particular scholar to be alarmed at the fact that most people who research on the Hebrew Bible have an investment in it, in its 'truth' in the broadest sense, in its value".[171]

Similar objections have been voiced by Philip R. Davies, a prominent member of the Sheffield Department, who responds directly to Watson's arguments in his book *Whose Bible is it Anyway?* (1995). Davies argues for the formal

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[168]Clines 1995c, 75; Clines 1997, 17.
[169]Clines 1997, 22.
[170]Clines 1997, 23.
[171]Clines 2006.

separation of confessional and non-confessional Biblical Studies - or, as he terms them, 'scripture' and 'biblical studies'.[172] Contrasting the interests of church (devotional and liturgical) and academy (humanistic and non-confessional), Davies suggests that 'scripture' and its claim to represent the interests of both church and academy needs to be "outed". 'Scripture' and 'biblical studies' are not compatible, Davies argues, because they are based upon fundamentally different criteria and generate different discourses. The discourse of 'scripture' is *emic*, which is to say that it is only accessible and comprehensible to those who share its presuppositions, and therefore excludes those who do not.[173] Furthermore, it is invulnerable to external critique because its premises are accepted *a priori* and are therefore incontestable. Confessional discourse "belongs to a type of communication that in principle, in intent and in practice implies a set of beliefs that define a community between the discoursants, and at the same time reinforce barriers against outsiders".[174] Davies contrasts this emic discourse with *etic* academic discourse which aims to be inclusive and to invite and encourage criticism and evaluation of its foundations and practices. Confessional discourse is a "soft" currency with no intrinsic value and non-exchangeable between interpretive communities; non-confessional discourse, however, is "hard", and can traverse communal boundaries.[175]

Davies argues not just for a formal separation into separate disciplines within the academy, but for the exclusion of 'scripture' from the academy altogether. First, Davies argues that taxpayers should not pay for academic practices which only benefit small segments of society. Publicly funded academic

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[172]The terminology is important. By wanting to keep the name 'biblical studies' Davies is not proposing an amicable divorce. Rather, he wishes to evict 'scripture' from the family home but keep the house and the furniture.
[173]Davies 1995, 37-39.
[174]Davies 1995, 47.
[175]Davies 1995, 48.

departments should practice scholarship which benefits society as a whole, and this means it would be "unethical or unprofessional" to conduct confessional discourse at Sheffield.[176] Second, Davies claims that he feels excluded by "faithism", resenting the suggestion that his scholarship is in some way inappropriate and that "academic books can be written that explicitly exclude me".[177] Davies claims that he does not want anyone to be excluded from the kind of study *he* practises (unless they exclude themselves), but insists upon the usefulness of "universally agreed rules of evidence and argument so that we can genuinely seek to persuade or entertain one another".[178] Davies argues further that the interests of church and academy are so incompatible that academics who cannot sublimate their confessional interests in the service of the academy should resign on the basis that continuing to operate as academics would be unethical.

There are a number of responses which might be offered to Davies' attack on confessional scholarship,[179] but its interest for the purposes of this argument is that it clearly demonstrates the political nature of the kind of scholarship which scholars at Sheffield have done so much to develop and to promote. When examined using the insights of Fish, Fowl and Eagleton, it is clear that the introduction of postmodern approaches into Biblical Studies has served an ideological and political agenda whose aim is the establishment of a newly

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[176]Davies 1995, 52.
[177]Davies 1995, 53.
[178]Davies 1995, 53.
[179] One might be to point out that since a significant proportion of taxpayers are Christians, the suggestion that taxpayers' money be used to further research into the Bible is not quite as outrageous as Davies makes it appear, especially in a country where an established church takes an active role in many areas of society from social work on housing estates to the framing of legislation. Davies appears to see the church as a sectarian subset existing within society rather than integrated into it, a view which many parts of the church would contest. In any case, as Francis Watson points out, the argument that academic study should be severed from the vested interests of non-academic social groups is not applied in other disciplines for precisely the reason that the academic freedom of any discipline depends to a large extent on the existence of a group within wider society whose interests are served by that discipline and who will support its continued place within academia (Watson 1994,8).

defined discipline: within this discipline the Bible is to be conceived in purely humanistic and ideological terms, and confessional and theological interests are to be actively excluded.

In one sense, this exclusion is simply an attempt to perpetuate a state of affairs which, as Francis Watson has pointed out, has long pertained within historical-critical Biblical Studies, and within secular academia generally.[180] George M. Marsden, in his book *The Outrageous Idea of Christian Scholarship* (1997), aims to challenge the institutional exclusion of Christian interests from mainstream scholarship in the United States.[181] Marsden identifies a number of academic objections to the idea of Christian scholarship which closely parallel Davies'. In particular, it is commonly argued, first, that Christian approaches are non-empirical and therefore not liable to critical interrogation;[182] and second, that Christian scholarship seeks to impose itself as superior to and exclusive of other approaches, thus threatening multiculturalism and diversity.[183]

Marsden responds that the accusation of non-empiricism is inconsistently applied within the academy, where approaches such as Marxism and feminism, which take their motivation from similarly non-empirical foundations, are not only tolerated but welcomed. Marsden further points out that the exclusion of religious views as non-empirical is simply impossible,

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[180] The argument over the inclusion of faith perspectives within academic Biblical Studies continues to be fierce. See, for instance, a recent exchange at Bandy 2006, including scholars such as Philip Davies, Craig Blomberg, Scot McKnight and Marc Goodacre.

[181] Marsden 1997, 6. Marsden recounts a conversation with a professor of religion who argued that it was inappropriate for anyone who practised a particular religion to teach about that religion on the grounds that it would transgress standards of scientific detachment. Marsden ponders: "What if someone suggested that no feminist should teach the history of women, or no gay person teach gay studies, or no political liberal should teach American political history? Or - for those who see religion as mainly praxis - perhaps the analog should be that no musician should be allowed to teach an instrument that she herself plays" (Marsden 1997, 13).

[182] Marsden 1997, 25-31.

[183] Marsden 1997, 31-37.

since many academics are in fact Christians. The rule is not actually that religious beliefs should be excluded because they are irrelevant to scholarship, but that academics should *act* as though they are irrelevant. A negative consequence of this is that the unconscious impact of beliefs upon scholarship is not openly addressed.

Marsden notes that fears of Christian imperialism are expressed by groups such as feminists, gay scholars and Jews because of a history of oppression. These groups see traditional Christianity as one of the powers from which the world needs to be liberated, and oppose what they regard as the imperialist tendencies of Christian perspectives within the academy. In response to this, Marsden observes that the exclusion of Christian approaches is to endorse the imperialism of other groups and interests, and especially of secularism. Further, Marsden argues that fears of Christian imperialism are unfounded: most Christians are not imperialist anyway; and Christians are too divided amongst themselves to achieve the kind of dominance which their opponents fear.[184] The objection that Christians regard their views as superior to others is dismissed by Marsden as a red herring: everybody believes that their views are superior to alternative views. Even relativists treat other viewpoints as inferior to their relativism and try to convince others (sometimes rather dogmatically) of their viewpoint.[185]

The key weakness of the argument in favour of excluding confessional interests from academic scholarship, however, is that an academy which prides itself on diversity and freedom of enquiry cannot exclude a valid interest

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[184]Marsden 1997, 33-34.

[185]Marsden 1997, 10. Kevin Vanhoozer makes the same point: "Those who insist on inclusivity and pluralism as ethical goals in their own rights often coerce others to share their goals, or else exclude them! And pluralists are ironically inconsistent insofar as they themselves remain 'closed' to the possibility that there may indeed be a single correct interpretation. As an ideology, therefore, pluralism is as totalitarian as other forms of absolutism" (Vanhoozer 1998, 418).

without self-contradiction. Marsden makes this point in relation to scientific objections to Christian scholarship, arguing that the academy on its own terms has no consistent ground for excluding religious perspectives: "If postmodernists who denounce scientific objectivism as an illusion are well accepted in the contemporary academy, there is little justification for the same academy to continue to suppress religious perspectives because they are 'unscientific'".[186]

Stephen E. Fowl and L. Gregory Jones make a similar point, but identify an underlying reason for such apparent inconsistency. Acknowledging that a liberal institution has a limited stock of arguments to draw on in refusing to recognise and support a particular interpretive interest, they nevertheless recognise that the interpretation which is done in particular institutions is constrained by the demands and interests of that institution.[187] Interpretation is a social activity, subject to the political constraints within which people interpret, and academic pluralism is *not* open to all perspectives. Rather, academic pluralism is a limited pluralism within the boundaries of "the presumptions and ideologies of liberal thought and practice".[188] Liberal pluralism, in fact, is not disinterested but ideological.

This brings us back to Eagleton's point that academic institutions are profoundly political and exist to serve vested ideological interests. Francis Watson responds to Davies by offering the perceptive insight that simply appealing to academic pluralism for a hearing is not sufficient to guarantee Christian interpretation a seat at the table of Biblical Studies, because the pluralism which Davies seeks to defend rests upon a prior commitment by academics to define the biblical texts as objects of study in such a way as to

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[186]Marsden 1997, 30.
[187]Fowl and Jones 1991, 17-18.
[188]Fowl and Jones 1991, 18.

exclude their consideration as Christian scripture. Such pluralism has recourse to a "non-theological meta-perspective" which presupposes that the choice of interpretive approach is a matter of indifference and that "the text itself is simply a neutral site for the play of the various perspectives".[189] This presupposition, however, is not universally inclusive, because the decision to construe the text as a neutral site is already a decision *against* the text as Christian holy scripture.[190]

Davies' construal of academic discourse as *etic* as opposed to confessional *emic* discourse also falls foul of Fish's concept of the interpretive community. Academic pluralist discourse rests upon an *a priori* presupposition about what the Bible is and is not, just as confessional discourse does, and that presupposition defines the boundaries of academic discourse in such a manner as to include some perspectives and exclude others, rendering academic discourse equally emic. Fish and Eagleton agree that the academy is an interpretive community with selective rules of membership, as Robert M. Fowler has observed: "being a critic means being part of a guild [...]. Such a guild has a history, it has a language, and it has rules and rituals for entrance into its ranks, and for subsequent advancement, demotion, or excommunication".[191] Any debate over what counts as a valid approach within Biblical Studies is a debate over what Biblical Studies actually is, what rules will govern its discourse, whose interests those rules will serve and, conversely, whose interests they will exclude.

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[189]Watson 1996a, 11.

[190]Watson 1996a, 12. Davies has recently outlined his understanding of the Bible as "the outcome of an intellectual project" whose success has paradoxically been due to strong "misreadings - typographical, literalistic, mystical, cryptic" which have isolated it from other philosophical texts such as Plato. The task of secularising Biblical Studies "means also secularising the Bible for a secular world, just as it was once sanctified for a religious world" (Davies 2005). This conception bears small relation to anything an orthodox Christian would recognise.

[191] Fowler 1985. Stephen Fowl makes the same observation, and suggests that the interests of confessional and academic interpretive communities do not always (or often) cohere (Fowl 1998, 189).

Clines, Moore, Exum and Davies have sought to establish an interpretive community within which their interpretive interests, which have often been ignored within mainstream Biblical Studies, can be addressed. This is a legitimate goal, but the rhetoric of postmodern critics is constructed in such a way as to attempt to deny confessional criticism the power of speech in the postmodern critical arena, just as they have been denied a voice within conventional biblical scholarship. The danger of this is that it may do their cause more harm than good. The exclusion of confessional interests threatens to repeat the sins of the past, turning the victims of oppression into a lesser reflection of their oppressors. To draw a controversial political analogy, the psychology of some postmodern biblical scholarship is reminiscent of apartheid South Africa or post-war Israeli. A local majority, having carved out a territory within a wider hostile culture, seeks to maintain its integrity and, indeed, its identity by suppressing representatives of that wider culture within its borders. Whilst explicable and, to some extent, understandable, such behaviour is unhelpful in moving conflicts forward. Sooner or later, as the South Africans and Israelis have had to do, postmodern biblical critics will have to start talking constructively with other approaches whose ideologies they oppose. To fail to do so will ensure that postmodern criticism becomes a ghetto within Biblical Studies rather than the reforming force which some have hoped.

To draw another analogy, it is yet to be seen whether the rise of ideological postmodernism in Biblical Studies will be looked back upon as exodus or exile. Clines, Exum, Moore and others have sought to escape from bondage to historical-critical methods and confessional interests and to find an interpretive space of their own, where they will be free to pursue their own interests and develop their own critical methods. It is questionable, however,

whether they have yet succeeded in establishing a positive identity for their new interpretive community. Instead, they continue to define themselves over against existing scholarship in such a way that even as they resist it they are inextricably linked to it.[192]

An interpretive approach which defines itself only in terms of opposition to other scholarship or, indeed, to its object of study, is an approach which is ultimately parasitic on that which it resists. The scholarship which Clines, Exum and Moore practise has not yet managed to escape from this dynamic, and therefore at present looks less like a promised land and more like a dissident community whose identity is fundamentally bound up with that of the wider academic culture against which they struggle and from which they yearn to be free. It might be debated whether Sheffield postmodernism is in Egypt, in Babylon or in the wilderness, but it has not yet reached Canaan.

Challenge and Opportunity

A truly postmodern Biblical Studies must find a way of accommodating multiple valid interpretive approaches, and this includes the establishment of a *modus vivendi* which includes both confessional and de-confessional scholarship. A vital first step in this process will be the acceptance by both sides that the concerns and interests of the other are valid and legitimate. De-confessional criticism will need to move beyond its identity as a resistance

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[192]Stanley Fish, indeed, has argued that this is an inescapable dynamic of development in academic interpretation: "A new interpretive strategy always makes its way in some relationship of opposition to the old, which has often marked out a negative space (of things that aren't done) from which it can emerge into respectability. [...] Rhetorically the new position announces itself as a break from the old, but in fact it is radically dependent on the old, because it is only in the context of some differential relationship that it can be perceived as new or, for that matter, perceived at all" (Fish 1980a, 349).

movement and become a constructive voice within the discipline. Confessional criticism, meanwhile, will have to demonstrate that it is capable of operating in an authentically postmodern manner, embracing diversity and taking on board some of the things de-confessional scholarship has to say to it.

The postmodern context poses significant challenges to a confessional approach within Biblical Studies, but it also offers great opportunity. For one thing, ethical postmodernism means that confessional critics can (indeed, should) be more explicit in declaring their theological commitments. It can be legitimately asserted that Christian interpretive perspectives are no less valid or worthy of attention than those of other interest groups and ideological approaches, and that they should therefore be allowed to take their place within academic debate. This does not mean that they should be granted a privileged position, but that they should be able to state their case, make their arguments and offer their interpretations on a level playing field.

At the same time, Christian interpretive approaches must take account of the expectations of the interpretive communities with whom they wish to engage and be prepared to respond accordingly. In particular, confessional and de-confessional critics must be prepared to agree that, as Marsden puts it, "there will be room for explicit Christian points of view (just as there are explicit Marxist or feminist views) for those who will play by the other rules proper to the diverse academy".[193] A major factor in this will be in demonstrating that the Christian interpretive community is not closed but open to interrogation, debate and even attack in relation not only to its critical practice but also to its foundational commitments and principles.[194] Confessional criticism cannot

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[193]Marsden 1997, 52.

[194]Marsden observes that "A more mature version of ideologically oriented scholarship will include criticism of its own tradition, rather than a simple celebration of everyone and everything that is on one's side" (Marsden 1997, 54).

assume a privileged or protected place within the academy. A postmodern academic approach must not only be able to critique others, but to receive criticism and even to self-critique. If confessional critics wish to talk with other approaches they must be prepared to be changed by the encounter.

Confessional critics must also be sensitive to the climate within which they operate. We have noted that Christian approaches are viewed with nervousness or even fear by a number of other interpretive communities, and if they are to gain a hearing they must be careful in the rhetoric they deploy. Soft words and gentle approaches may be more productive than astringent attacks and polemic. The aim must be to talk *with* rather than to talk *at* or *to* others, and this means that confessional critics must pay attention to their critical rhetoric. How they operate within the academic arena will be just as important as what they think they are doing.

The development of an authentically postmodern, academic and Christian approach to the Bible will not be easy. One reason for this is the persistent dominance of historical-critical approaches within the discipline at large, whilst another is to be found in the hostility of many ideological postmodern approaches. It is not always easy for interpreters to balance their various commitments and interests easily, and internal conflicts of interest can be hugely damaging to the perceived viability of a new approach. Some of these issues are evident in the development of narrative criticism, a confessionally-based approach which has found the postmodern context particularly challenging.

CHAPTER THREE: THE TRIALS AND TRIBULATIONS OF

NARRATIVE CRITICISM

"One writes only half the book; the other half is with the reader."
- Joseph Conrad

Postmodern critical theory and practice has become firmly established within Biblical Studies as a place of refuge for those alienated by the practices and ethos of more conventional biblical scholarship. By adopting theories and methods from elsewhere in the humanities, postmodern scholars have been able to articulate their own interests in biblical texts, unhindered by the requirement to seek validation from a scholarly community by whom they feel marginalised and within whose boundaries they feel themselves to be oppressed. At the same time, however, these same scholars have created a territory on the margins of Biblical Studies which is overtly and explicitly hostile to a confessional approach to the Bible as Scripture. The insistence upon the priority of a hermeneutics of suspicion and the elevation of secular humanism as an ethical standard within those areas where postmodern approaches to the Bible are predominantly practised raises serious issues for Christian critics who might wish to avail themselves of the new methods. Is it possible to offer literary interpretations of the Bible which demonstrate both a confessional commitment to the text as Scripture and which meet the criteria of an academically credible postmodern Biblical Studies?

In order to answer that question I propose to use narrative criticism as an example of the possibilities and pitfalls of such an enterprise, concentrating on the work of Mark Allan Powell. Narrative criticism has generally been viewed as an approach defined primarily by methodological interests, but it rests upon strong ideological and theological commitments. Like the postmodern approaches we have examined, narrative criticism found its origins in a strong

ideological dissatisfaction with the prevailing culture of historical-critical Biblical Studies. This dissatisfaction led narrative critics to import methods and theoretical perspectives into Biblical Studies from the field of literary theory and criticism, establishing a methodological space within which they might pursue their own interests alongside the dominant academic culture. Narrative criticism has, however, largely failed to mature into a fully postmodern ideological approach of the kind practised by the likes of Clines, Moore and Exum. This is due to the conservative nature of narrative criticism's ideological interests (specifically, a confessional commitment to the Bible as scripture), and to the political interests of its relationship with mainstream Biblical Studies, which have caused narrative critics to downplay their confessional commitments. Conflicting impulses within narrative criticism have given rise to internal tensions which have remained unresolved, and which render the approach flawed from a postmodern perspective. Recently, however, narrative critics have demonstrated a new awareness of postmodern issues and have responded to earlier criticisms of their work. These developments raise the possibility of an authentically postmodern, confessional and academic approach to biblical narrative interpretation.

Mark Allan Powell and First-Generation Narrative Criticism

Narrative criticism in its inception was a product of New Testament Studies.[1] The term 'narrative criticism' was first coined by David Rhoads in 1980,[2] but

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[1] Parallel developments in the study of the Hebrew Bible (such as Alter 1981; Berlin 1983; Miscall 1983; Sternberg 1985; Bar-Efrat 1989) failed to cross-fertilise with early narrative criticism. This is due partly to the formal separation of New Testament and Hebrew Bible scholarship within Biblical Studies, and partly to the differing emphases of the two movements. Literary approaches to the Hebrew Bible during the 1980s tended to be exercises in applied poetics, drawing out general features and characteristics of biblical narratives in order to construct a theoretical poetics of narrative within the Hebrew Bible. New Testament narrative criticism, however, was more commonly an exegetical exercise, applying narrative

narrative critics built upon foundations laid during the 'literary turn' of the 1970s.[3] Narrative criticism came into its own during the 1980s, with the publication of a series of narrative-critical treatments of the Gospels: David Rhoads' and Donald Michie's *Mark as Story: An Introduction to the Narrative of a Gospel* (1982) was followed by R. Alan Culpepper's *Anatomy of the Fourth Gospel: A Study in Literary Design* (1983), by Jack Dean Kingsbury's *Matthew as Story* (1986), and by Robert C. Tannehill's two-volume *The Narrative Unity of Luke-Acts: A Literary Interpretation* (1986 and 1990).[4] The standard introduction to narrative criticism for many, however, has been Mark Allan Powell's *What is Narrative Criticism?* (1990).[5] Whilst the other narrative-critical pioneers had sought to demonstrate their method in relation to specific Gospel texts, Powell set out a systematic account of narrative criticism, attempting to define it in relation to literary theory and offering it as a coherent methodology for the study of New Testament narrative.[6] Powell's book has attracted a great deal of critical attention from both historical and postmodern critics, and thus serves as a helpful illustration not only of some of

theory in order to illuminate the structure of particular biblical texts. A second key difference is that many scholars involved with Hebrew Bible narrative study were not primarily biblical critics but academics from the field of literary studies, some of whom were associated with the Tel Aviv school of Poetics, whereas New Testament narrative criticism was developed by scholars from within Biblical Studies who imported critical tools across disciplinary boundaries. This gave the two approaches differing emphases and priorities. Interestingly, however, poetical studies of the Hebrew Bible have been criticised by postmodern and ideological critics on the same grounds as New Testament narrative criticism, namely that they support a similarly conservative and uncritical approach to biblical ideologies. Meir Sternberg's *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative* has been a particular target (see, for instance, Bal 1991, 59-72 and Bible and Culture Collective 1995, 112-13, 278-79).

[2]Rhoads 1982. The article, published in 1982, was first given as an address to the Markan seminar of the SBL in 1980.

[3]Two influential books in this movement were Petersen 1978 and Spencer 1980, both of which can be traced as discernible sources in the work of R. Alan Culpepper, himself a major influence on subsequent narrative critics. David Lee has correctly identified three phases in the development of narrative criticism to date: an initial period of gestation in the 1970s; a first generation period of fruition in the 1980s; and a more critically reflective phase in the 1990s. See Lee 1999, 120.

[4]Rhoads and Michie 1982; Culpepper 1983; Kingsbury 1986; Tannehill 1986; Tannehill 1990.

[5]Powell 1993c. This work was published in the United States in 1990 and in the United Kingdom in 1993.

[6]Shorter introductions to narrative criticism can be found in Malbon 1992; Bowman 1995; Powell 1995. Other substantial introductions to narrative criticism (both Old and New Testament) are Fokkelman 1999; Marguerat and Bourquin 1999; Resseguie 2005. Powell continues to be the standard introduction with whom other scholars interact.

the major features of narrative criticism, but also of the pitfalls which await unwary narrative critics in the jungle of postmodern biblical scholarship.

What is Narrative Criticism? has arguably done more to establish narrative criticism as a credible approach in the field than any other single work.[7] The version of narrative criticism expounded there rests firmly upon the foundation of Rhoads and Michie, Culpepper, Kinsgbury and Tannehill. At the same time, however, being a methodological introduction rather than a study of a particular text, Powell's book presents narrative criticism in the broader context of both literary theory and biblical studies. Powell's exposition of narrative criticism rests upon four key assertions about biblical narratives as literary texts. First, Powell insists that literary criticism focuses on the *final form* of the text. This differentiates it from source, form and redaction criticism and their observations on the history of the text, which narrative criticism does not deny but does ignore.[8] Second, Powell emphasises the *unity of the text* as a coherent whole, advocating a critical analysis which "does not dissect the text but discerns the connecting threads that hold it together".[9] Third, Powell argues, literary criticism views the text *as an end in itself*: using a metaphor of Murray Krieger, Powell compares historical criticism which uses the text as window onto the history of its composition with literary criticism which uses the text as a mirror: the literary critic seeks to look at the text and not through it, gaining insight through the encounter of reader and

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[7] Powell's wider body of work in narrative criticism reveals him to be a rigorous and theoretically literate critic. See e.g.: Poland 1985; Powell 1990; Powell 1991; Powell 1992a; Powell 1992b; Powell, Gray et al. 1992; Powell 1993a; Powell 1993b; Powell 1995.

[8] "Ultimately it makes no difference for a literary interpretation whether certain portions of the text once existed elsewhere in some other form. The goal of literary criticism is to interpret the current text, in its finished form" (Powell 1993c, 7).

[9] Powell 1993c, 7. Richard G. Bowman claims that narrative criticism seeks to establish those elements of textual form which unify meaning, emphasising "the constructive continuities of sense rather than the deconstructive discontinuities of nonsense" (Bowman 1995, 18). Other first-generation narrative critics also stressed the importance of literary unity. See e.g.: Culpepper 1983, 5-6; Kingsbury 1986, 1-2.

text.[10] Where historical criticism addresses the referential function of biblical narratives, narrative criticism addresses the poetic aspects of texts. Literary critics do not deny the validity of historical enquiry, but do bracket out historical questions in order to focus upon literary ones. Fourth, Powell argues that literary criticism is based upon *communication models of speech-act theory*, citing Roman Jakobson's text-as-communication model, in which every literary text involves communication from an author to a reader via the medium of the text. All theories of literature, Powell claims, understand the literary text in this way.[11]

Powell then discusses the literary-theoretical sources for narrative criticism. Comparing narrative criticism with structuralism, rhetorical criticism and reader-response approaches, he argues that narrative criticism has no exact literary counterpart.[12] Like structuralism, narrative criticism is text-centred and therefore objective, but is more interested in the linear progression of the narrative than in the establishment of elaborate structural principles.[13] Like rhetorical criticism, narrative criticism is interested in the impact of the text on the reader, but conceives of the reader as a text-centred and idealised *implied reader* who is "presupposed by and constructed from the text itself".[14] Narrative criticism is also distinct from reader-response approaches which attempt to examine how readers determine meaning, preferring to discern how

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[10]Powell 1993c, 8. For the source of this metaphor see Krieger 1964, 3. This image gained wide currency among narrative critics, its most famous deployment being in Culpepper's *Anatomy of the Fourth Gospel* (Culpepper 1983, 3-5). Although Culpepper is widely credited with the introduction of the window/mirror contrast into biblical criticism it had, in fact, been used by Norman R. Petersen a few years before (Petersen 1978, 19).

[11]Powell 1993c, 8-9. This sweeping generalisation is unsound. What is true is that Jakobson's communication model has been recognised as "the bridge linking Formalism and Structuralism, and as the theoretical foundation of both" (Hawkes 1983, 87), and therefore as fundamental to the development of narrative theory. Terry Eagleton observes that Jakobson's influence "can be detected everywhere within Formalism, Czech structuralism and modern linguistics" (Eagleton 1996, 85). For Jakobson's original text-as-communication model see Jakobson 1960.

[12]Powell 1993c, 19.

[13]Powell 1993c, 14.

[14]Powell 1993c, 15.

the text determines the reader's response and viewing the reader as being "*in the text*", encoded or presupposed by it.[15] Powell claims narrative criticism as a creation of Biblical Studies, "an independent, parallel movement in its own right", although it might be viewed as "a subspecies of the new rhetorical criticism or as a variety of the reader-response movement".[16] It is important to note, however, that Powell takes care to define narrative criticism as a formalist, text-centred, objective critical method, in which the focus of attention is squarely upon the text rather than upon the author or reader.[17] Powell defines the central focus of narrative criticism as an attempt to delineate the role of the *implied reader*.[18]

The implied reader is "presupposed by the narrative itself", and is reconstructed by the critic from "clues within the narrative that indicate an anticipated response from the implied reader".[19] This is to say that the implied reader is a text-immanent construct, a reader-role defined and determined by the text itself as the ideal recipient of its meaning. Powell carefully distinguishes the implied reader from real readers, whose responses are

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[15]Powell 1993c, 18 (author's emphasis). It is significant that Powell distinguishes narrative criticism not only from Derridean deconstruction and Fishian socio-pragmatism, but also from Iser's phenomenological reader-response theory. As we shall see, this distinction breaks down in much first-generation narrative criticism.

[16]Powell 1993c, 19.

[17] Richard G. Bowman argues that a narrative-critical emphasis upon final form renders the approach more objective than other alternatives: "Interpretations are based on empirically observable data within the text, not on the speculated intentions of the author, the hypothetical reconstructions of the historian, or the ideological agenda of the reader" (Bowman 1995, 18).

[18]The term "implied reader" was coined by Wolfgang Iser, whose work will be examined later (Iser 1974; Iser 1978), as a counterpart to Wayne Booth's "implied author" (Booth 1983, 66-77). Powell's understanding of the implied reader, however, is drawn from Seymour Chatman's *Story and Discourse: Narrative Structure in Fiction and Film* (1978), which has been said to have achieved "almost canonical status as the predominant source through which the communication model and narratological theory generally have been introduced into Gospel criticism" (Bible and Culture Collective 1995, 35). For discussion of Chatman's importance for the development of narrative criticism see Moore 1989, 43-51; Bible and Culture Collective 1995, 85-89; Lee 1999, 122, 138, 336-41.

[19]Powell 1993c, 19.

unpredictable.[20] Using Seymour Chatman's development of Jakobson's text-as-communication model, Powell argues that the act of literary communication is self-contained, and that the concerns of real authors and readers are extrinsic to the communicative act that transpires within the text. The concept of the implied reader as the reader "in the text", therefore, again marks narrative criticism out as a text-centred, objective approach.[21] The goal of narrative criticism is to read the text as the implied reader, to know everything the text assumes the reader knows and to "forget", or bracket out, everything the text assumes the implied reader does not know.[22] The result is a critical process which addresses the text on its own terms, which constantly asks "Is there anything *in the text* that indicates the reader is expected to respond in this way?"[23] Powell is careful to point out that insofar as the implied reader is a "hypothetical concept" and "idealised abstraction", the goal of reading as the implied reader may be unattainable, but that the goal is nevertheless worthy, since "the concept is actually a principle that sets criteria for interpretation".[24]

Much of the rest of *What is Narrative Criticism?* consists of explanations of various aspects of narrative theory as applied to the Gospels.[25] Powell draws again upon Seymour Chatman to distinguish between *story* (the content of the narrative, or what the story is about) and *discourse* (the rhetoric of the

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[20]For Powell the implied reader is "a heuristic construct that allows critics to limit the subjectivity of their analysis by distinguishing between their own responses to a narrative and those that the text appears to invite" (Powell 1995, 241).

[21]Powell 1993c, 20. Powell later characterises narrative criticism as "a text-centred approach which holds that the text sets parameters on interpretation" (Powell 1993c, 95).

[22]Powell 1993c, 20. Powell argues elsewhere that narrative criticism pursues a "normative process of reading" by means of which the critic "interprets stories from the perspective of implied readers who may be assumed to accept the value system that undergirds the stories they read" (Powell 1995, 242-44).

[23]Powell 1993c, 21 (author's emphasis).

[24]Powell 1993c, 21.

[25] I have chosen not to examine Powell's critical tools in detail, for reasons of space. For the purposes of this thesis the methodological, theological/ideological and political interests which inform his choice of critical methods are more important than the methods themselves. Where a particular methodological tool reveals an underlying motive in Powell's narrative approach, however, it will be discussed.

narrative, or how the story is told).[26] Narrative criticism is interested primarily in the discourse by which the narrative guides the implied reader in understanding. Powell discusses various devices including point of view, narration, symbolism and irony, with reference to a number of literary-theoretical sources. In examining narrative events Powell draws upon Roland Barthes to distinguish between essential elements of plot ("kernels") and non-essential elements ("satellites").[27] He also draws upon Gerard Genette [28] for categories of order, duration and frequency, then upon E. M. Forster and, again, Chatman for issues of causation and conflict,[29] with a worked application to Matthew's Gospel.[30] Powell then goes on to look at characters, with particular attention to their rhetorical function in the narrative and including a case study on the portrayal of religious leaders in the synoptic Gospels, in which he concludes that the function of the religious leaders is to act as an unsympathetic foil to Jesus.[31] A brief discussion of the importance and function of settings (temporal, spatial and social) follows with application to the Gospel of Mark, where Powell highlights the metaphorical and connotative value settings receive within the world of the narrative.[32] Throughout the book, Powell draws upon scholarship from within the mainstream of structuralist narratology, Russian formalism and Anglo-American narrative theory, and is consistently concerned to demonstrate that narrative criticism is a text-centred critical approach whose attention is focussed squarely upon issues of literary form, structure and rhetoric.

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[26]Powell 1993c, 23. See Chatman 1978, 19-21. This distinction is to be found in both Structuralist and Russian Formalist thought, which Chatman synthesizes. Both stress the importance of distinguishing between what the story is about (*histoire/fabula*) and how the story is told (*discours/sjuzhet*). A helpful comparison of different terminologies is found in Martin 1986, 107-09.

[27]Powell 1993c, 36. Powell's view of Barthes is filtered through Chatman (Chatman 1978, 53-6).

[28]Powell 1993c, 36-40. Genette, especially in his *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method* (Genette 1980), is a major figure in structuralist narratology.

[29]Powell 1993c, 40-4.

[30]Powell 1993c, 44-50.

[31]Powell 1993c, 51-67.

[32]Powell 1993c, 69-83.

Powell concludes the book with an evaluation of the benefits of narrative criticism for biblical scholarship, suggestively entitled "Story as Scripture".[33] Many of these are perceived advantages over traditional historical criticism, such as the ability to spend more time reading the Bible rather than reading about it; the prospect of bypassing some intractable disputes in historical scholarship; the demystification of biblical interpretation; and the possibility that narrative criticism offers a check against historical criticism, in that if narrative and historical interpretations are radically divergent, then both methods must reassess their evaluation of evidence.[34]

Significantly, however, some strengths of the narrative approach identified by Powell relate not to the academic but to the believing community. Powell argues that narrative criticism "stands in a close relationship to the believing community", enabling the community to engage otherwise problematic material such as mythological, supernatural or anti-semitic elements in the narratives in a constructive way.[35] By working with the text's final form, narrative criticism also "seeks to interpret Scripture at its canonical level", in that the text which is studied is that which believing communities identify as their authoritative Scripture. Furthermore, Powell suggests that narrative criticism emphasises a Christian doctrine of the Spirit: since revelation happens in the present, in the interaction of reader and text, an active role for the Spirit is crucial to the process of interpretation.

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[33]Powell 1993c, 85-91.

[34] Powell is also at pains to defend narrative approaches against historical-critical objections, such as the argument that narrative critics treat Gospels as coherent when they are actually collections of disparate material; that concepts drawn from modern literature are inappropriate for the study of ancient texts; that methods devised for the study of fiction are generically inappropriate to the Gospels; that narrative criticism lacks objective criteria for the study of biblical texts; and that narrative approaches ignore the historical witness of the Gospels (Powell 1993c, 91-98).

[35]Powell 1993c, 88.

Most importantly, Powell argues that narrative criticism "unlocks the power of biblical stories for personal and social transformation".[36] Stories have the power to shape us through their ability to engage us with a world view different from that which we encounter in our daily lives. By entering into the world of the biblical story, the reader's own world-view can be challenged and shaped, so that when the story is left behind they perceive the world differently. Powell argues that a parallel recognition of the importance of narratives in theology and pastoral care offers possibilities that narrative criticism may provide a means of integration with these other disciplines.[37]

Powell further offers narrative criticism as an essential element in an "expanded hermeneutic" for the interpretation of the Bible as the Word of God.[38] For the Bible to function as the Word of God it must be read and interpreted in the present and not simply as a witness to past events, and a literary engagement with the Gospels facilitates a movement away from historicist concerns and towards questions of present meaning. Similarly, the moment of inspiration and textually-mediated revelation is the moment of reading rather than the moment of composition, so that "A better formulation than saying, The Bible is the Word of God, would be to say, The Bible becomes the Word of God in those who receive it".[39] The value of narrative criticism to the church is that "it enables scholars to complete the full task of interpretation in a way that does not limit revelation to events that happened in the past".[40]

Powell suggests that for a believing reader committed to the scriptural status of the Bible, engagement with the text through narrative criticism is to hear the

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[36]Powell 1993c, 90.
[37]Powell 1993c, 91.
[38]Powell 1993c, 98-101.
[39]Powell 1993c, 98.
[40]Powell 1993c, 99.

word of God expressed through the voice of the reliable implied author, to receive that word as the implied reader and to be transformed through a hermeneutics of reception.[41] He goes further, however, by arguing that "by interpreting texts from the point of view of their own implied readers, narrative criticism offers exegesis that is *inevitably* from a faith perspective".[42] Powell's evaluation of his method reveals that his motive is not only to offer an objective, academic narrative model for biblical interpretation, but to offer a critical approach which can serve the interests of a confessional hermeneutics of scripture.

Powell's exposition of narrative criticism has been very influential in establishing the approach as a viable alternative to traditional historical-critical Biblical Studies. Powell offers his reader an approach which addresses some of the major weaknesses and inadequacies of historical-critical scholarship; which safeguards scholarly objectivity by means of a text-centred critical methodology drawn from academically credible sources in literary theory; and which promises academic and confessional interpretation through the application of a single critical method. Powell's commitment to the literary unity of biblical texts and to formalist methods of interpretation, however, as well as his confessional motivation, has drawn severe criticism from a number of quarters, and the nature of the criticisms reveals some of the difficulties of establishing an academically-credible confessional interpretative approach in the postmodern context.

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[41]Powell 1993c, 98.
[42]Powell 1993c, 88-9 (my emphasis).

Objections to Narrative Criticism

Postmodern and ideological critics have attacked narrative criticism on a number of fronts, with particular points of contention being narrative criticism's theoretical coherence, its ethical consequences for interpretation, and the covert nature of its underlying confessional commitment. These criticisms relate, therefore, to the three levels of interest which we identified in chapter two as implicated in postmodern critical approaches: methodological, ideological and political.

Methodological Interests and Theoretical Issues

Stanley Porter has questioned Powell's assertion that narrative criticism is an "independent, parallel movement in its own right", without exact counterpart in literary theory.[43] Whereas Powell seeks to identify narrative criticism with rhetorical or reader response approaches, Porter argues that Powell fails to account for New Criticism in identifying his literary sources.[44] The major features of narrative criticism which Powell identifies (final form, textual unity and the text as an end in itself) are characteristic New-Critical concepts, causing Porter to conclude that "it is evident that this so-called narrative criticism is only a sub-category of the New Criticism".[45]

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[43]Powell 1993c, 19; Porter 1995.

[44] This is not quite true. Powell features New Criticism prominently, along with Wayne Booth's rhetorical criticism, in his survey of the development of literary theory (Powell 1993c, 4-6). Powell does not, however, make his debt to New Criticism explicit, and does not include it alongside structuralism, rhetorical criticism and reader response when attempting to define the nature of narrative criticism as a literary approach.

[45]Porter 1995, 103.

New Criticism had its origins in the 1920s and the writings of F.R. Leavis, I.A. Richards, William Empson and T.S. Eliot, and was formulated into a comprehensive approach to literary interpretation by the 1940s, finding its classic expression in René Wellek and Austin Warren's *Theory of Literature* (1949).[46] The goal of literary study was "the interpretation and analysis of the works of literature themselves", rather than recovery of the context and external circumstances of textual production or considerations of reader reception.[47] New Criticism stressed the autonomy and unity of the literary work, rigorously bracketing out questions of authorial intent or affective reader response (the so-called "intentional" and "affective" fallacies).[48] Meaning was to be found in the form of the text itself, and the practice of New Criticism was dominated by intrinsic textual analysis which paid close attention to textual form and "the words on the page". New Critics also asserted that the form and content of literary works were inseparable and that the meaning of a work could not be identified with its paraphraseable sense, so that the only means of accessing that meaning was engagement with the text itself and not with the attempts of critics to paraphrase or explicate it.[49] New Criticism also took a high moral view of literature as a repository of human values, and actively engaged with issues of morality in the literature it scrutinized.

It is clear that Powell's foundational emphases upon textual unity, study of the final form and an understanding of the text as an end in itself are all deeply New-Critical. Objections to this dependence have come from a number of critics, suspicious of narrative criticism's links to New Criticism on theoretical

[46]Wellek and Warren 1973.
[47]Wellek and Warren 1973, 139.
[48]The classic New-Critical treatment of these is in the work of W. K. Wimsatt and Monroe Beardsley. See Wimsatt and Beardsley 1954.
[49]This view is most clearly argued in Brooks 1947, but see also Wellek and Warren 1973, 141-2.

and ideological grounds. One challenge is that New-Critical text theories appear outmoded in the light of poststructuralist theory. Stephen D. Moore has been particularly critical of the tendency in Biblical Studies to lag behind the forefront of literary theory, and narrative criticism's reliance upon New Criticism serves as a good example. According to Moore, narrative criticism backed the wrong horse in the literary-theoretical race by aligning itself with New Criticism, putting its money on a commitment to textual unity and formalist methodology when these were being overtaken in literary theory by more up-to-date approaches such as reader response and deconstruction.[50] The result, Moore argues, is that narrative criticism became burdened with a text theory which was, in fact, "the legacy of a particular movement whose golden age is now long past".[51] A consequence of this, Moore suggests, is that compared to mainstream literary scholarship, biblical literary criticism often appears retarded, obsessed with concerns which have long ceased to trouble literary critics.[52]

One major issue with narrative criticism's New-Critical emphasis on textual unity is that this is presented as an *a priori* assumption rather than something to be proven and argued for, and both historical and postmodern critics have taken issue with this.[53] Petri Merenlahti, for instance, accepts that an *a priori* assumption of unity may be useful as the basis for a critical approach, opening up new interpretative possibilities and potentially revealing previously unrecognised patterns of unity in the text. At the same time, however, he insists that the unity of particular texts ought not to be assumed but discovered

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[50]Moore has been one of narrative criticism's fiercest critics for a number of reasons, not least of which is its confessional commitment to the Bible as Scripture.

[51]Moore 1989, 11.

[52]Stanley Porter has similarly characterised much biblical literary criticism as "brutally and simplistically naive" (Porter 1995, 87). Porter criticises biblical literary critics for failing to address or develop theoretical or methodological issues, uncritically combining incompatible approaches, and for failing to fully appreciate the implications of some of the methods they adopt (Porter 1995, 94-7, 116-20).

[53]See for instance Moore 1987; de Boer 1992, 43; Ashton 1994, 144; Lee 1999, 136-37.

through critical analysis, and that failure to question textual unity threatens to render the unified readings produced from the assumption of unity self-validating and uncritical.[54]

Moore has also sounded a note of ideological caution over narrative criticism's New-Critical roots, observing that many first-generation narrative critics failed to acknowledge their debt to New Criticism.[55] For postmodern critics such as Moore, such failure appears suspicious because literary theories are rarely ideologically neutral, and failure to acknowledge one's theoretical source may indicate an attempt to mask a hidden ideological agenda. This is significant in light of the fact that New Criticism rests upon a strong ideological foundation. The founders of New Criticism were strongly aligned with conservative political forces within British society during the 1920s and 1930s. Reacting against what they saw as the decline of religion as a source of social values in the face of the degenerative forces of modern industrialism, New Criticism sought to assert the importance of literature as a repository of human values. Texts were scrutinised and evaluated, and those not found wanting were incorporated into a canon of literature which included the deepest and truest expressions of human life. The values expressed in this canon, of course, reflected those of the critics themselves: Terry Eagleton has characterised New Criticism as "the ideology of an uprooted, defensive

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[54]Merenlahti 2002, 23-4. David Lee has similarly argued that literary unity must be empirically established rather than assumed. Lee further argues that a literary approach which insists at all times upon the unity of the text before study actually begins will be methodologically incapable of addressing textual elements which threaten or question that unity, and identifies this as a weakness of New Criticism which narrative criticism has inherited from its parent (Lee 1999, 136-38).

[55]Moore 1989, 11. See also Bible and Culture Collective 1995, 86-7. This concern has been addressed by narrative critics such as Elizabeth Struthers Malbon and David Rhoads, who have unapologetically acknowledged their New-Critical debts (Malbon 1992, 24-6; Rhoads 1999, 269).

intelligentsia who reinvented in literature what they could not locate in reality".[56]

Aware of this ideological underpinning, Moore among others has expressed his suspicion of the motives of narrative critics who adopt New Criticism as their text theory, and regards his suspicions as well-founded in the light of Powell's assertion that one of the strengths of narrative criticism is its coherence with the concerns of believing communities.[57] Moore notes a suggestion by Powell that an emphasis upon the unity of the Gospel narratives is "especially attractive to those who have been uncomfortable with the challenges posed by historical criticism".[58] Just as New Criticism represented a conservative impulse to shy away from questions which threatened certain values and vested interests, so narrative criticism in the light of Powell's statement appears to represent a similar retrograde step, a disengagement from historical scholarship to protect narrative critics' confessional commitment to the biblical text as Scripture.[59] Moore is further worried by Powell's assertion that the attempt to read the Gospels from the point of view of their implied reader "offers exegesis that is inevitably from a faith perspective",[60] responding that, "At this point, poststructuralism begins to back away nervously from narrative criticism, alarmed at the evangelical glint that has abruptly appeared in its eye".[61]

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[56]Eagleton 1996, 40. Chris Baldick has similarly described New Criticism as maintaining "a Romantic tradition of social and cultural criticism in their common defence of aesthetic values against the degradations of modern industrial capitalism and in their nostalgic attitudes to traditional rural societies or 'organic communities'" (Baldick 1996, 77).
[57]Moore 1994, 115-16.
[58]Powell 1993c, 88.
[59]Stanley Porter has also questioned whether one reason why a number of New Testament critics have adopted literary methodologies is to "avoid dealing with critical questions that might run contrary to their theologies" (Porter 1995, 119).
[60]Powell 1993c, 88-9.
[61]Moore 1994, 116.

Moore's concern is not that Powell is motivated by an underlying confessional commitment, but that this commitment is largely covert. Throughout *What is Narrative Criticism?*, narrative criticism is presented as an objective, text-centred critical method until the revelation of Powell's "expanded hermeneutic" in the last chapter. The use of formalist objectivism as a stalking horse to sneak a confessional hermeneutic into the academic arena concerns Moore, who sees this as a dishonest move.

The theoretical coherence of narrative criticism has also been challenged, largely on the basis of its eclectic culling of methodologies from literary theory. Biblical critics, it is argued, regularly present as straightforward and uncomplicated issues of theory which are far from unanimously accepted by literary critics, and lack a clear and informed understanding of the theories and methods they adopt based upon a first-hand encounter with the primary theoretical sources.[62] Further, they are accused of adopting theoretical models which appear to suit their own presuppositions without engaging in serious thought as to the appropriateness or viability of their theoretical base.[63]

Moore, for instance, has argued that narrative criticism's New-Critical text theory is incompatible with its methodology, which is derived primarily from the discipline of Narratology.[64] The two approaches, he argues, are about very different things:

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[62]Porter 1990, 278-83.

[63]See especially Porter 1995, 94-97 for a comprehensive attack upon biblical literary approaches from a theoretical point of view.

[64]Moore 1987, 452. Stanley Porter has noted the remark of Terry Eagleton that attempts to combine critical approaches are "more likely to lead to a nervous breakdown than to a brilliant literary career" (Porter 1995, 95 n.43, citing Eagleton 1983, 198). Taken in context, however, Eagleton's remark refers more to the attempt to combine theories with disparate philosophical bases. Narrative criticism, on the other hand, draws its critical terminology from a range of sources which cohere around Jakobson's text-as-communication model. David Lee has attempted to demonstrate that narrative theory is theoretically incoherent by tracing that incoherence to its primary source, Seymour Chatman's *Story and Discourse*. Lee is highly critical of Chatman, arguing that his eclectic fusion of different narrative theories results in a theoretically incoherent and "essentially uncritical" practice which has, in turn, fatally

> Narratology is about theory, narrative criticism is about exegesis. Narratologists analyse texts mainly to develop theories. Narrative critics utilize theory mainly to explicate texts.[65]

Narratology, Moore observes, "does not privilege or emphasize the unity of individual narrative works", instead sampling many works to produce a coherent theory.[66] Narrative criticism ignores this, exposing itself to the accusation levelled by Stanley Porter that "criticism is simply a functional tool, to be used as long as it is useful or in contexts where it seems to promise results, rather than as a way of seeing and understanding textual reality".[67] Petri Merenlahti and Raimo Hakola have also detected a disjunction between New Critical and Narratological elements in narrative criticism, arguing that whilst New Criticism takes an *evaluative* approach to the text, Narratology is more concerned with *interpretation* and *description*, and that narrative criticism's blending of the two approaches renders it somehow incoherent.[68]

It is necessary to point out that these objections to narrative criticism rest upon two assumptions commonly held by poststructuralist literary theorists: first, that theory is necessarily a higher-order discipline than criticism and that theoretical concerns should take priority over critical practice; and second, that older theories are inevitably superseded and rendered redundant by newer ones. Both of these assumptions are highly questionable.

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undermined the biblical narrative criticism derived from his work (Lee 1999, 138). Lee argues that Chatman ignores poststructuralist developments in theory and fails to generate new theoretical insights (Lee 1999, 340). I hope to show that these accusations are insufficient to undermine the viability either of Chatman's model or of narrative criticism.

[65]Moore 1989, 51

[66]Moore 1989, 52-3. Moore uses Genette's *Narrative Discourse* (Genette 1980) to make the latter point. I believe that Moore stretches the evidence a little far - throughout *Narrative Discourse* Genette points out that his text (Proust's *Récherche à la Temps Perdu*) often provides the exception which proves the theoretical rule.

[67]Porter 1995, 96.

[68]Merenlahti and Hakola 1999, 19-21.

Theory and criticism have long been recognised by literary critics as differing but mutually informing enterprises. Seymour Chatman, for instance, argues that criticism and theory must engage in ongoing dialogue, and states that part of his role as theorist is to provide critics with "terms that will meet their requirements [...] so that they can genuinely trust them for their proper work, the elucidation and evaluation of texts".[69] Mieke Bal, a highly respected postmodern critic and herself no theoretical lightweight, similarly rejects the priority of theory over practice:

> I never lost the need to work with a text when elaborating a theoretical discussion, and to examine a theoretical question while engaged with a text. I guess this taste for an integration of theoretical and literary practice comes from the assumption that the two are not fundamentally different, let alone hierarchically ordered.[70]

A healthy tradition of methodological and theoretical eclecticism is also apparent in narratology itself. Chatman, regarded as "almost canonical" as a theoretical source in narrative criticism, makes a point of synthesising insights from Booth's rhetorical criticism, New Criticism, Russian Formalism and European Structuralism.[71] Another major source, Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan, expresses explicit indebtedness to a similar mixture of approaches with the addition of Tel Aviv Poetics and Wolfgang Iser.[72] These sources, whilst eclectic, cohere around a shared basis in Jakobson's text as communication model, and therefore represent a coherent methodological grouping. Porter's accusation that narrative critics treat critical methods as functional tools to be selected only on the basis of their usefulness can therefore be accepted as a description but not as a criticism.

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[69]Chatman 1978, 266
[70]Bal 1991, 8.
[71]Chatman 1978; Bible and Culture Collective 1995, 35
[72]Rimmon-Kenan 1983, 5

The notion that older methodologies are automatically rendered obsolete by newer ones is also dubious. In his comprehensive overview of the development of literary criticism, Chris Baldick has argued that:

> if there is 'progress' in this sphere, it is not of the scientific but the political kind, in which hitherto unrepresented interest-groups and constituencies assert their values alongside and against (but never finally in place of) the rest. New arrivals in the critical arena, then, should not, without strong evidence, be assumed to have superseded their older competitors.[73]

Similarly, Mieke Bal has acknowledged the need to follow developments in literary theory whilst arguing that new work which challenges the assumptions of earlier approaches does not automatically render those approaches futile:

> assuming that the "new" is new at all is a linearist fallacy; assuming that the "new" is automatically superior is an evolutionist fallacy [...] I am arguing to expose the reactionary scenario of a simplistic plea for academic progressivity, and claiming that there may be more progressivity in *not* rejecting the past *en bloc*.[74]

Powell has consistently rejected the "Darwinian" model of critical progress offered by his critics, arguing instead that different approaches engage with different aspects of the process of communication from author through text to reader.[75] He notes ironically the frustration of reader-response critics with narrative critics "who have not understood that text-orientation is supposed to be a vehicle for carrying author-oriented scholars into the realm of reader orientation".[76] Powell argues instead that a recognition that different critical

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[73]Baldick 1996, 8-9.
[74]Bal 1991, 23.
[75]Powell 1992b, 45-6. In a footnote on the same page Powell is critical of the way in which Stephen Moore's *Literary Criticism and the Gospels* presents the development of literary theory as a narrative of linear progression which inevitably culminates with deconstruction.
[76]Powell 1992b, 46. More recently Powell has exchanged testy comments with David Lee. Lee is critical of Powell's retention of E.M. Forster's "crude and now obsolete" concept of "flat" and "round" characters (Lee 1999, 129 n.35). Powell ripostes by stating that "I do not shun what scholars deem 'crude' for that reason alone. Nor do I judge the usefulness of concepts by the date when they were proposed" (Powell 2001, 218 n.182).

methods ask different questions and occupy different positions along the *author-text-reader* axis should diminish "the value judgements that legitimise some approaches at the expense of others".[77]

It is ultimately unsurprising that first-generation narrative criticism sought to base itself upon New Criticism and narrative theory. The challenge to narrative criticism at the time was to establish itself as academically credible in a discipline which did not necessarily share an interest in the final form of the biblical texts, or in an interpretive model which enabled the Gospel narratives to function as scripture. Narrative criticism had a pressing need to find a methodology which would help to define the approach as both academically valid and distinct from existing historical-critical methods and found it in New Criticism, an approach which was well established and therefore highly credible as a theoretical and methodological source.[78] New Criticism offered total respect for the unity of the text in its canonical form as well as a well-established method for reading that text in detail. Its utter rejection of a historicist approach sat well with narrative critics' disenchantment with historical biblical criticism, whilst the simultaneous rejection of any consideration of readers' reaction to the text safeguarded narrative critics from accusations of subjectivity and non-verifiability. The academic credibility of narrative critics who adopted New Criticism was also bolstered by the fact that, although New Criticism was beginning to be challenged by newer approaches by the 1970s, it was still the dominant approach to literary criticism within higher education. New Criticism thus

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[77]Powell 1992b, 46.

[78] Powell has pointed out that the literary schools to which narrative criticism turned such as structuralism, Russian formalism, narratology and New Criticism had all been established in literary studies for over thirty years, adding that "Biblical critics were understandably more interested in drawing from the tried and true than in sampling what might just be the latest fads" (Powell 2001, 67).

offered both ideological compatibility and academic credibility, and early narrative critics siezed upon it as their basic text-theory.

A second major source in the form of narratology provided narrative criticism with a rigorous formalist methodology for literary analysis of biblical narratives.[79] The adoption of these approaches focussed narrative criticism's interest on the literary rhetoric of the narrative, but also provided narrative critics with an academically credible analytical method derived largely from a structuralist background itself modelled on the natural sciences. Seymour Chatman's interpretation of the text as communication model and the concept of the implied reader were the most important gains of narrative criticism's adoption of narrative theory, representing an advance on New Criticism's theory of text. Instead of a static aesthetic model of the text as a timeless literary work, Chatman offered a model of the text as rhetorical. This had obvious appeal to critics who wished to respond confessionally to the Bible as the Word of God. At the same time, however, Chatman's approach was still firmly text-centred, acknowledging the existential reality of author and reader but bracketing them for the purposes of literary analysis which was still firmly formalist, focussed through the text-immanent construct of the implied reader.

Narrative criticism in the 1980s was forged from an amalgam of theories and approaches selected on the basis of their suitability for the narrative-critical programme. Theoretical coherence based upon the formalist text-as-communication model was underpinned by ideological coherence based upon a confessional commitment to the Bible as scripture, but unfortunately this coherence has not always been perceived by its opponents. One important reason for this is that narrative critics have not always devoted sufficient

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[79] Other influential works include Uspensky 1973; Todorov 1977; Genette 1980; Todorov 1981; Booth 1983; Rimmon-Kenan 1983; Bal 1997.

attention to the theoretical underpinnings of their critical practice, causing their approach to appear theoretically weak. This renders narrative criticism vulnerable to attack by theoretically-literate postmodern scholars such as Moore. If narrative criticism is to emerge as a fully-fledged postmodern approach it will need to ensure that both its theory of text and its critical practice are transparently robust and coherent.

Ethical and Theological Issues with Narrative-Critical Formalism

As well as strong challenges over its theoretical base, its text theory and its theoretical coherence, narrative criticism following Powell's model has also faced attack on ethical and theological grounds. The major issue has been narrative criticism's insistence on bracketing out any consideration of textual referentiality in favour of an analysis of the story-world of Gospel narratives. This has led, it is argued, to unfortunate consequences with regard to the ethics of interpretation.

Unsurprisingly, narrative criticism's rejection of referential concerns has been greeted with bewilderment, bemusement and no small amount of scorn by historical critics,[80] but a postmodern challenge has been mounted by Petri Merenlahti and Raimo Hakola, who take issue with Powell's treatment of the characterisation of Jewish leaders in the synoptic Gospels.[81] Powell stresses the role of Jewish leaders in the narrative structure and their function as foils

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[80]John Ashton, for instance, argues that "narrative criticism is more of a fad than a fashion, and that since it misconceives the true nature of the Gospels the results it yields are trifling, if not altogether illusory" (Ashton 1994, 141). Ashton is highly critical of Culpepper's *Anatomy of the Fourth Gospel* which, he suggests, "evokes the image of a pathologist who, after a close inspection of a corpse that has earlier undergone major surgery, makes no reference to this in his report, and is even reluctant to mention the fact that the body has recently been fitted with a sizeable prosthesis" (Ashton 1994, 147).

[81]Powell 1993c, 58ff.. See also Powell 1990.

for Jesus both in their spoken dialogue and in the character traits they exhibit, such as lack of authority, self-righteousness, lack of love, selfishness or downright evil. Powell agrees that this depiction is overwhelmingly negative, but then goes on to argue that historical approaches to the Jewish leaders in the Gospels which criticise their portrayal as historically inaccurate are misguided. In particular, he defends Matthew's Gospel against the accusation of anti-semitism, claiming that "such a reading represents a gross example of the referential fallacy and completely misses the point of the story" by failing to recognize that "Regardless of whether they were modelled after real people known to the real author, their current function as characters in a story is not referential but poetic".[82] From a narrative-critical point of view the historical accuracy of the characterisation is irrelevant: what is important is the impact of that characterisation on the way the implied readers understands the role of the Jewish leaders within the world of the Gospel story.

Merenlahti and Hakola take issue with this bracketing of referential ethical considerations, objecting that Powell ignores the fact that the Gospels frequently make truth-claims which refer outside the boundaries of their story worlds.[83] The narrative rhetoric of the Gospels makes clear that readers are expected to respond not just aesthetically but ideologically to the story they are reading, and that the ideology of the story has direct bearing upon the real reader's real life. Agreeing that Powell's intrinsic analysis of Matthew is sound *per se*, Merenlahti and Hakola take issue with his interpretation of the narrative as purely literary, insisting that Powell is "grossly misreading" the Gospel by treating it as a fictional narrative.[84] If Jesus is not to be regarded as

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[82]Powell 1993c, 66.
[83]Merenlahti and Hakola 1999, 34.
[84]Merenlahti and Hakola 1999, 41.

a character whose relevance is limited within the boundaries of the story, why should the Jewish leaders be?[85] The problem with Powell's approach is that:

> Powell's idea of textual analysis can only reckon with two levels of meaning, namely literary and real-world. What should properly be the level of ideology is replaced with a blind-spot. As a consequence, the ideology reflected in the text is seen as a mere literary device.[86]

Merenlahti and Hakola insist that an essential element of any critical interpretive approach is an ideological-critical awareness which allows textual ideology to be examined and evaluated.[87] Narrative criticism lacks such awareness, and is therefore deficient.

Significantly, however, Merenlahti and Hakola go on to identify a theological motive in Powell's bracketing of historical, ethical and ideological issues. The aesthetic emphasis of narrative criticism has strong appeal to a confessional critic, especially "the promise to centre on the poetic aspects of the Gospels and leave aside all conclusions that might concern the history, doctrine or policies of the church. [...] the very promise to ignore every ideological aspect might make the approach useful ideologically".[88] In short, narrative criticism's interest in issues of literary aesthetics and literary form is neither literary nor aesthetic but theological.

We have noted that theological interests play a large part in motivating narrative critics. Ironically, however, the insistence of Powell and others upon nailing their colours to a formalist critical methodology has drawn the

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[85]Merenlahti and Hakola 1999, 42.
[86]Merenlahti and Hakola 1999, 41n..
[87]Merenlahti and Hakola 1999, 43.
[88]Merenlahti and Hakola 1999, 45. Merenlahti and Hakola identify the same tendencies in Mark Stibbe's narrative-critical work on John. Interestingly, Stibbe has also attempted to rehabilitate the portrayal of Jews in John's Gospel, laying the blame for anti-semitic interpretations on the shoulders of "those who have interpreted John with a prior commitment to anti-semitism" (Stibbe 1993, 19).

accusation that narrative criticism is actually *inadequate* as a theological approach to the Bible. Francis Watson has welcomed the contribution of literary approaches in breaking down monolithic historical-critical scholarship, noting that the importation of the literary paradigm into Biblical Studies has eroded historical-critical consensus, and that "an unintended side effect of this is that an interpretative practice oriented explicitly towards theological concerns can now claim the right to exist".[89] Watson is deeply uneasy, however, about the notion of biblical narratives as self-contained, and the bracketing of textual truth claims. Watson notes that literary emphasis on the text as an end in itself can serve a theological agenda, but argues that the exclusion of the text's referential function from consideration results in "failure adequately to address the church's proper concern with the fundamental truth of the biblical story of salvation: for if, and only if, this story is true, then all worldly reality must be understood in the light of it".[90]

Issues of referential truth cannot be bracketed out in a properly theological interpretation of the Bible, Watson claims, because the power of the text to transform its reader depends upon its truth claims. Hence, Jesus considered only as a character in the biblical narrative "is theologically uninteresting; for the Word became *flesh* and not text, even though the enfleshed Word is textually mediated".[91] The reader of the Gospels "reads these texts in order to discover again that, outside and prior to these texts, Jesus is the Christ. The possibility of this discovery is dependent on their claim to be truthful to the prior reality they seek to render".[92] Narrative criticism's methodological failure to address textual truth claims thus renders it deficient as a theological approach.

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[89]Watson 1996b, 132.
[90]Watson 1994, 29.
[91]Watson 1997, 34 (author's emphasis).
[92]Watson 1997, 36.

Like Merenlahti and Hakola, Watson is also suspicious of Powell's use of literary formalism to defuse ethical difficulties in interpretation. The concept of Gospel texts as self-contained literary worlds ignores the fact that these texts function within a broader socio-political domain in which Scripture is "a blessing and a curse", both "the vehicle of the life-giving Spirit of truth" and also "the letter that kills", and in seeking to ignore this, final form criticism "fails to discharge its ethical responsibilities".[93] As an example of this failure, Watson engages Powell's assertion in *What is Narrative Criticism?* that readers must suspend their own judgement during the act of reading on the basis that initial acceptance of the textual point of view is an essential preliminary to any criticism of it.[94] Watson responds that this is "poor phenomenology of reading", since readers cannot help but evaluate narrative point of view *as* they read, but is also suspicious of what he sees as an underlying desire in Powell to evade serious engagement with biblical narratives which pose ethical problems to the contemporary interpreter:[95]

> Underlying this refusal to engage in serious critical analysis of the rhetoric of oppression is not only the methodological self-limitation proper to any interpretative paradigm, but also an unquestioning faith in the revelatory power and positive innocence of *stories*. The reader of a story is magically transported back to the Garden of Eden, and a reader tactless enough to criticise the story that is told there will immediately be expelled.[96]

The history of biblical interpretation, Watson argues, is one in which liberating and oppressive uses of texts are intertwined. These uses persist into the present, so that "an analysis of the texts in the light of this broader context is a theological imperative".[97] Canonical texts should not be abstracted from

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[93]Watson 1994, 60.
[94]Powell 1993c, 24.
[95]Watson 1994, 60.
[96]Watson 1994, 61.
[97]Watson 1994, 74.

the contemporary context within which they operate, but should be interpreted in relation to that context if they are to function as Scripture. This renders a purely formalist literary approach which seeks to interpret biblical narratives only in terms of their closed story worlds inadequate, since "the theological task is to understand not only the text but reality in the light of the text".[98]

Within the postmodern context, the above criticisms are highly significant. In an academic community where ethics of interpretation are taken seriously, for narrative criticism explicitly to bracket such considerations is a highly suspect move and raises questions about the self-awareness of narrative critics as interpreters. Watson's arguments, however, raise a more disturbing possibility, namely that narrative criticism's confessional interests and formalist methodology are profoundly at odds. If Watson is correct, then a narrative-critical understanding of the Gospel text as a self-contained story world renders the text incapable of functioning as Scripture in the way that Powell claims to support. Why, then, did narrative critics select a critical methodology which actually works against their underlying interpretive motive?

From Formalism to Reader Response: Conflicts of Interest in Narrative Criticism

As we have seen, Mark Allan Powell and other narrative critics developed their approach in the context of a breakdown of confidence in historical-critical scholarship during the 1970s and 1980s. Turning to literary theory for an alternative method, they found it in New Criticism and narrative theory, which appeared to suit their confessional commitment to the Bible as scripture. Powell in particular, however, has attracted sharp criticism both in

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[98]Watson 1994, 75.

terms of his theoretical foundations and his ethics of interpretation from postmodern critics. A further perceived weakness of narrative criticism is that the integrity of its commitment to formalist analysis of biblical texts is actually threatened by a strong confessional motivation. We will now proceed to consider how this conflict of interests arises and what its consequences for the viability of narrative criticism as a postmodern approach might be.

First generation narrative criticism presented itself as an objective, text-centred critical approach drawn from narrative theory. Narrative critics sought to define their position in the middle ground between the "intentional fallacy" of authorial interests and the "affective fallacy" of subjective reader response: the object of study was the text itself and the only reader in which narrative criticism professed to be interested was the implied reader assumed and inscribed in and by the text itself.

In practice, however, this position proved impossible to maintain, due to tensions between narrative criticism's formalist methodology and its confessional motives. The conflict between narrative criticism's methodological and ideological interests is evident in *What is Narrative Criticism?* when, having clearly and repeatedly emphasised that narrative criticism is objective and text-focussed, Powell departs from this position towards the end of the book in setting out his "expanded hermeneutic", asserting that narrative criticism "unleashes the power of biblical stories for personal and social transformation".[99] Keeping his distance from historical criticism by denying that the transforming power of story derives from its referential function, Powell abruptly shifts his reader perspective from the implied reader to the real reader:

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[99]Powell 1993c, 90.

the narrative form itself corresponds in some profound way to reality and thus enables us to translate our experience of the story world into our own situation. Entering the story world of a narrative may be likened to attendance at a modern-day motion picture. Once inside the theatre, we may find ourselves involved with a view of reality distinct from that of the world in which we actually live. Nevertheless it is possible for our encounter with this simplified and perhaps outlandish view of reality to have an effect on us, an effect that may continue to make itself felt long after we leave the theatre and return to the real world.[100]

The process of attempting to read as the implied reader thus becomes, for Powell, a step on the way to faith. If, in the process of reading, the real reader must take on the role of the implied reader of the Gospel narrative, and if that implied perspective is necessarily a faith perspective, then the experience of reading the story of Jesus through the eyes of faith may remain with the reader after their encounter with the story ends. The interaction of reader and text may so shape the reader's consciousness as to produce faith where none existed before.

It is clear that at this point what was presented as a formalist reading strategy has been transformed into a confessional hermeneutic. It is also clear that, in theoretical terms, Powell has gone beyond formalism and stepped over into reader response. To be fair, Powell has himself flagged up this possibility earlier in the book, where he observes that "in recent years narrative criticism and reader-response criticism have been coming closer together", and that the two "may eventually become indistinguishable".[101] Even so, Powell is at pains in *What is Narrative Criticism?* to distinguish his approach from reader response, and his movement in that direction at the very point in his argument at which he seeks to set out the advantages of narrative criticism as a

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[100]Powell 1993c, 90.
[101]Powell 1993c, 21. Powell has remarked that at this point in his original manuscript his editor, Dan O. Via, wrote "They should!" (Powell 2001, 67).

confessional interpretive approach raises the suggestion that his methodological slippage is ideologically motivated.

Powell's understanding of the way in which the Gospel narrative impacts on the real reader conforms to a "soft" reader response or rhetorical hermeneutic of the kind proposed by Wayne Booth or Wolfgang Iser. For both Booth and Iser the implied reader is not a purely text-immanent construct, but a role which the real reader must adopt in order to experience the rhetoric of the text. For Booth, the implied author of a narrative shapes not only the formal features of the narrative but the moral framework by which the narrative is to be evaluated. The implied author "will never be neutral toward all values. Our reactions to his various commitments, secret or overt, will help to determine our response to the work".[102] The interaction between reader and text, for Booth, is profoundly ethical, involving the communication of the implied author's value-system to the reader through the act of interpretation as the text "must fill with its rhetoric the gap made by the suspension of my own beliefs":[103]

> It is only as I read that I become the self whose beliefs must coincide with the author's. Regardless of my real beliefs and practices, I must subordinate my mind and heart to the book if I am to enjoy it to the full. The author creates, in short, an image of himself and another image of his reader; he makes his reader, as he makes his second self, and the most successful reading is one in which the created selves, author and reader, can find complete agreement.[104]

The success or failure of a literary work for Booth depends ultimately upon the conjunction of belief between author and reader, and enduring success

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[102]Booth 1983, 71.
[103]Booth 1983, 112.
[104]Booth 1983, 138. Powell's understanding of the transformative power of biblical texts appears to owe much to Booth, although he does not make this debt explicit.

comes when the reader retains the values of the implied reader after the reading process is complete.[105]

For Iser, who coined the term, the implied reader is similarly a role which straddles the boundary between real reader and textually-inscribed role.[106] Iser argues that the literary work is a collaborative interplay between text and reader: the literary text only takes on life when "concretised" or "actualised" through the application of the reader's perception, which is itself channelled and structured by the formal qualities of the text. Hence, the literary work is "something like an arena in which reader and author participate in a game of the imagination".[107] Literary texts are structured so as to engage the reader's mind and imagination actively, involving them in constantly forming and reforming interpretive perspectives on the text in a quest for coherent meaning.[108] Most significant in this process are "gaps" or "indeterminacies" in the text, breaks or discontinuities in the smooth flow of information which must be filled by the reader for meaning to be established. These gaps force the reader to participate actively in the creation of meaning, applying their own interpretive resources rather than relying passively upon the text to reveal itself.

The implied reader is not to be confused with any specific reader.[109] For Iser the implied reader is a construct, a *potential* reader, encompassing the entire

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[105]Booth is insistent that interpretation must engage with subjective issues of belief: "The question is whether the enjoyment of literature as literature, and not as propaganda, inevitably involves our beliefs, and I think that the answer is inescapable. [...] our convictions even about the most purely intellectual matters cannot help fundamentally affecting our literary responses" (Booth 1983, 139-40). Later he continues, "to claim that we can make ourselves into objective, dispassionate, thoroughly tolerant readers is in the final analysis nonsense" (Booth 1983, 147).

[106]Iser's implied reader is the counterpart to Booth's implied author. Booth himself adopts the term in his *Rhetoric of Irony* (1974) (see Booth 1974, 126).

[107]Iser 1974, 275.

[108]Iser 1974, 288.

[109]Iser 1978, 34.

range of possible reader responses to the text. The implied reader can therefore never be realised in a single reading: rather, "each actualisation [...] represents a selective realisation of the implied reader, whose own structure provides a frame of reference within which individual responses to a text can be communicated to others".[110] The implied reader is therefore an heuristic tool, "a transcendental model which makes it possible for the structured effects of literary texts to be discerned".[111] Any individual reading of any text can be set against the conceptual implied reader just as, for example, an individual actor's performance of Hamlet can be evaluated against the whole range of possible responses to the script which he might have adopted, and which have been adopted by other actors before him.

The parameters of valid interpretation are, however, at all times set by the written text in its formal patterns, structures, devices and gaps. Crucially, the formal quality of the text and the subjective perspective of the reader mutually inform to produce an interpretive dynamic in which the reader's experience and self-understanding are ultimately expanded. The acts of conception involved in the reading process "are possible and successful to the degree that they lead to something being formulated in us [...] someone else's thoughts can only take a form in our consciousness if, in the process, our unformulated faculty for deciphering these thoughts comes into play".[112] The reader's encounter with unfamiliar world-views in the process of reading causes them to think and to experience thoughts and feelings which could not have been generated by themselves alone, bringing to consciousness aspects of their own awareness which were previously latent. Hence, the experience of reading proves genuinely transformative for the reader as their interpretive horizons

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[110]Iser 1978, 37.
[111]Iser 1978, 38.
[112]Iser 1974, 294.

are constantly challenged and expanded through their encounter with the "otherness" of the text.[113]

It is apparent that Powell's "expanded hermeneutic" has strong affinities with the moderate reader response theories of Booth and Iser. This, however, creates difficulties for Powell when he has sought to define narrative criticism as an objective, formalist critical method which deliberately brackets out considerations of authorial intention and reader response. The methodological slippage revealed in the closing section of *What is Narrative Criticism?* has rendered Powell's narrative criticism vulnerable to accusations from postmodern critics that it is actually a reader response approach which lacks the self-awareness or intellectual honesty to declare itself as such.

The slippage between overt objective formalism and covert subjective reader response is characteristic not only of Powell but of other important figures in first generation narrative criticism. R. Alan Culpepper's *Anatomy of the Fourth Gospel: A Study in Literary Design* (1983), for instance, displays similar internal tensions.[114] Like Powell, Culpepper uses Murray Krieger's metaphor to contrast the historical-critical use of the Gospel text as a "window" onto its own history with a literary reading of the text as "mirror".[115] The role of the critic is to *look at* the Gospel narrative rather than

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[113]Wallace Martin has characterised Iser's concept of the reader as "not the fictitious figure addressed by the implied author, the real person reading, or some combination of the two; rather, the reader is a transcendental possibility, not yet realised, that exists and changes only in the process of reading" (Martin 1986, 162). Terry Eagleton has pointed out the influence upon Iser of Gadamer's hermeneutics of the expansion of horizons through encounter with the unfamiliar, and draws a parallel with Russian Formalism, whose key concept of "defamiliarisation" similarly sees the role of the literary text as to present reality to the reader in an unfamiliar way so as to stimulate the reader to perceive reality afresh (Eagleton 1996, 68-69).

[114]I would argue that Powell and Culpepper are the two most important first-generation narrative critics. This is reflected to some extent by the amount of attention paid to them by hostile postmodern opponents.

[115]Culpepper 1983, 3-5.

looking through it in order to *look for* historical data.[116] The appropriate approach to the Gospel narratives, Culpepper concludes, is a formalist analysis of their literary rhetoric, based upon an enhanced version of the model of text as communication given by Chatman.[117]

The bulk of *Anatomy of the Fourth Gospel* is an impressive and rigorous application of narratology to the Gospel.[118] Culpepper is careful to distance his analysis from historical interests, insisting that "understanding the interests and theology of the real author is not our primary concern", but that the object of the exercise is "to understand the gospel itself more clearly" through examination of the implied author and reader.[119] In his treatment of the implied reader, however, Culpepper shows that he is unable to remain within the formalist boundaries he has set for his method. It is increasingly apparent as his discussion develops that Culpepper is interested not simply in a description of the formal properties of the narrative but in an evaluation of the literary rhetoric of the Gospel, and the impact of that rhetoric upon real readers. Drawing upon Peter J. Rabinowitz, Culpepper identifies the narratees of the Gospel (the audience implied by the narrative) with the author's intended audience (the audience the real author had in mind when writing).[120] Building upon this identification, Culpepper then examines the narratees of the Gospel in detail on the basis of their implied knowledge of characters, places, language, Judaism and events in the narrative, concluding that "it appears that the intended readers are not Jewish, but their prior knowledge of many parts of

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[116]In a published address from the same period, "Story and History in the Gospels", Culpepper puts the metaphor slightly differently: "If the Gospels are windows, they are stained glass windows. Light shines through from the other side, but the figures are on the surface of the window, fashioned there by the literary artist" (Culpepper 1984, 471).

[117]Culpepper 1983, 6.

[118]As well as Chatman, Culpepper draws upon work by Gerard Genette, Boris Uspensky, Gerald Prince and Meir Sternberg among others. It is clear that Culpepper is well versed in narrative theory as practised in a number of schools, so that at least as regards his narratological method his approach is theoretically literate.

[119]Culpepper 1983, 15.

[120]Culpepper 1983, 206-11.

the Gospel story shows that the intended audience is either Christian or at least is familiar with the Gospel story".[121] The Gospel, Culpepper concludes, provides its readers with a definitive interpretation of Jesus as the divine *logos* and a paradigm of faith in the person of the Beloved Disciple, and thus functions as a rhetorical source of communal identity for the Johannine community:

> Readers found their identity in the Gospel story and through it they could rise from their present struggles to hear their values and views reaffirmed, to hear again reassuring words from Jesus, to glimpse the mystery of the world above, and find themselves, or at least their ideal, in the figure of the Beloved Disciple, whose witness was true and whose 'place' was the bosom of the Lord.[122]

It is important to note at this stage that Culpepper's treatment of the reader has stepped beyond the text-immanent construct of the implied reader to overlap the real first-century readers of the Gospel. This is significant because running through *Anatomy of the Fourth Gospel* is an underlying assumption that the modern reader can also be affected by the literary rhetoric of the narrative in the same way as its intended historical audience. Throughout his analysis Culpepper emphasises the rhetorical nature of the narrative. His discussion of plot, for instance, concentrating on the conflict between faith and unbelief, suggests that the effect of the Gospel's narrative structure "is to enclose the reader in the community of faith" through thematic development and rhetorical strategies.[123]

This emphasis becomes most clear in a chapter on implicit commentary, where Culpepper summarises the role of irony in the Gospel. Commenting on the "silent communication" through which the reader is encouraged by the

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[121]Culpepper 1983, 224.
[122]Culpepper 1983, 227.
[123]Culpepper 1983, 98.

narrator to enter imaginatively into the Gospel's ironic structure, he argues that:

> author and reader are drawn together in a shared perception of meaning and reverence before mystery [...] united in the transformation effected by an experience of encounter with transcendental majesty. [...] the reader is called to no less than the conviction that man and God can be united and that from this union new life is born in man, and specifically in the reader.[124]

It is clear that Culpepper believes that to read fully as the implied reader requires the adoption of the Gospel's understanding of Jesus as incarnate Word of God, and this conclusion is made explicit in what he describes as "a churchman's postscript", where he argues that the cultural gap between historical text and contemporary reader emphasised by historical approaches makes it difficult for the modern reader to interpret the Gospel. The Fourth Gospel retains its place in the canon, however, because it offers "a refuge from all the unreliable narrators of modern life and literature", an alternative view of reality which Christian readers find conducive.[125] Culpepper calls for a re-evaluation of the modernist view that truth must of necessity be literal rather than literary, and argues that "The future role of the Gospel in the life of the Church will depend upon the Church's ability to relate both story and history to truth in such a way that neither has an exclusive claim to truth and one is not incompatible with the other".[126] If such a reconciliation is achieved, Culpepper concludes, "we will again be able to read the Gospel as the author's original audience read it".[127]

Underneath Culpepper's apparently rigorous and objective formalist approach to the Gospel narrative lies a fundamentally theological reader response

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[124]Culpepper 1983, 202.
[125]Culpepper 1983, 235.
[126]Culpepper 1983, 236.
[127]Culpepper 1983, 237.

hermeneutics which informs and affects his approach to the Gospel text.[128] The fact that, as with Powell, this affiliation remains implicit rather than explicit until what amounts to a long footnote at the very end of the book has drawn criticism from a number of postmodern scholars including (unsurprisingly) Stephen Moore.[129] Culpepper's confessional hermeneutics is sublimated in *Anatomy of the Fourth Gospel*, a work aimed at a general academic audience, in favour of a strong text-centred formalism. Ultimately, however, Culpepper is unable to maintain the exclusion of historical or real-world reader perspectives from consideration, because his confessional commitment to the Gospel text requires him to address issues of faith which are intrinsic to his interest in the text's rhetoric.

The work of Culpepper and Powell reveals that narrative criticism as a strictly formalist critical approach is unable to operate within its self-defined boundaries. On the one hand, the fact that the implied reader of the biblical

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[128]Culpepper has set out this commitment elsewhere: "The experience of the narrative world of the Gospels, the experience of Jesus, when we read openly and sensitively draws us into that world and challenges us to view our world as the narrator views the narrative world, from a stance of faith. [...] we rehearse the response of faith and commitment in reading and in successive readings of the Gospels until we find in them a place to stand, an experience of Jesus, a knowledge of God, and a view of the world in which we live that is for us true, authentic and real. The Gospels, therefore, mediate and effect in us subjectively the redemptive work of Christ which was accomplished objectively in history by Jesus of Nazareth" (Culpepper 1984, 476).

[129]Moore has attacked Culpepper more than once, concentrating each time on the theoretical underpinning of what he regards as Culpepper's reader-response dynamic and arguing that unacknowledged ideological commitments inevitably lead to an unconscious contamination of what is presented as an objective approach to the study of the Gospel (Moore 1994, 78-80; Moore 1996b, 50-72). Moore objects to the "text as mirror" metaphor, arguing in the light of Lacanian psychoanalysis that a mirror only reflects the viewer back to themselves, making the unified text discerned by narrative criticism a reassuring confirmation of narrative critics' own ideological investment in the text (Moore 1994, 79-80). Moore further criticises Culpepper and other confessional critics for blinding themselves to challenging questions posed by historical or poststructuralist criticism because of their emotional involvement with the body of work they propose to anatomize. Extending the metaphor suggested by the title of Culpepper's *Anatomy of the Fourth Gospel*, Moore argues that confessional critics "have failed to dig beneath the surface, to extract the historical core of the passion narrative - its spinal cord, so to speak - from its fleshy, fictional housing. [...] And why? Because they have felt too emotionally attached to the literary corpus laid out on the slab, or rather to the person whose body that corpus has become" (Moore 1996b, 67). Some of Moore's attacks on Culpepper were previously directed against Elizabeth Struthers Malbon: see Malbon 1993; Moore 1993.

texts it studies is historically situated and possessed of knowledge which contemporary readers do not have means that narrative critics cannot bracket out historical questions. On the other hand, the confessional motivation which inspired narrative criticism in the first place drives narrative critics towards engagement with issues of reader response which they claim to want to avoid. The result, according to the authors of *The Postmodern Bible* (1995), is that "the unreflective grafting of readerly terminology onto historical-critical scholarship has produced an ideological mutation that is blind to both the oppressive and liberating power of its critical discourses".[130]

The search for the historically situated implied reader, combined with a strong theological agenda, results in a reader response approach which bears little relation to that practised by literary critics.[131] Further, the lack of self-awareness in such approaches means that narrative critics fail to recognise the extent to which their theological commitments affect their interpretation, since "if any theory (such as Iser's) is adopted uncritically, then the theory will serve primarily to reinforce the existing ideological ends of that community's reading strategies".[132] Crucially, first-generation narrative critics have failed to recognise that "the implied reader for whom they are reading is themselves, and that the implied readers whom they construct are reading strategies by which to verify their own readings".[133]

It seems clear that first-generation narrative criticism is compromised as a coherent interpretive approach by a crucial disjunction between its objective,

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[130]Bible and Culture Collective 1995, 40.
[131]Bible and Culture Collective 1995, 39. "The biblical reader-response criticism being created in the laboratories of the Society of Biblical Literature is an ideological mutant of historical criticism and biblical narrative criticism. Although to most biblical critics it appears to be a normal scion, it would astound the villagers if it ever stumbled down the mountain to fraternise with secular reader-response critics" (Bible and Culture Collective 1995, 44).
[132]Bible and Culture Collective 1995, 59.
[133]Bible and Culture Collective 1995, 54.

formalist methodology and the subjective, reader response hermeneutic to which its practitioners are drawn by their confessional commitment to the Bible as scripture. Returning again to our development of Stephen E. Fowl's concept of interpretive interests, we might argue that narrative criticism's *methodological* interests in features of textual form, focussed through the text-immanent construct of the implied reader, are in tension or even conflict with its *ideological* interests in the ways in which textual rhetoric impacts upon the consciousness of real readers. But why should narrative critics choose a critical method which fails to address their theological interests in biblical texts? Why did narrative criticism not declare itself as a reader response approach from the outset?

One answer, perhaps, is that narrative critics' failure openly to embrace reader response reflects a more significant conflict of *political* interests. Like de-confessional postmodern biblical criticism, narrative criticism grew out of the reaction in the 1970s against historical-critical interpretive paradigms. Unlike de-confessional criticism, however, narrative criticism had no interest in detaching itself from historical-critical scholarship altogether. One reason for this was that whereas de-confessional scholarship found itself at odds both with traditional scholarship's methodological and ideological interests (including a strong but sublimated confessional interest in the Bible as scripture), narrative criticism rejected historical criticism as a method but retained its ideological interest in the underlying value of biblical study. Narrative critics were not seeking to escape from the mainstream of biblical scholarship, but to broaden it. Hence, at the same time as they justified their new approach by contrasting it with the perceived failures of historical criticism, they were careful not to reject mainstream Biblical Studies altogether. Culpepper, for instance, is careful in setting out his formalist approach at the beginning of *Anatomy of the Fourth Gospel* not to portray

historical criticism as an enemy. The objective, Culpepper argues, is not to replace historical scholarship but to offer an alternative by means of which new data may be gathered and new perspectives on the text perceived.[134] Culpepper denies that literary and historical criticism are opposed, arguing that "Once the effort has been made to understand the narrative character of the gospels, some rapprochement with the traditional, historical issues will be necessary".[135] This rapprochement has, in fact, been attempted by second-generation narrative critics such as Mark Stibbe, who acknowledges a particular debt to Culpepper's *Anatomy*, to which he claims all subsequent work has been "footnotes".[136]

Powell, similarly, is careful to make clear, even as he contrasts historical and literary approaches to biblical texts, that an assertion of literary interests does not question the legitimacy of historical inquiry. Literary critics bracket out questions of historicity so as to concentrate upon the literary aspects of the texts, but this is not to deny that biblical narratives may also serve a referential function or that "it may be rewarding to study them in that regard as well".[137] Powell stresses that historical criticism should not be disparaged simply because it raises questions that are difficult for people of faith. Employment of narrative criticism to evade difficult or controversial issues is a "misuse" of the method, since mature theological reflection requires both literary-critical

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[134]Culpepper 1983, 5.

[135]Culpepper 1983, 11. Norman Petersen, in his *Literary Criticism for New Testament Critics* (1978), similarly warns of the danger of defining historical and literary approaches in opposition to one another. Petersen reminds his readers of the "cultural lag" between literary theory and Biblical Studies, and points out that literary theory has moved beyond the polarisation of historical and literary methods towards a "bifocal" approach. Warning that "we cannot ignore our apparently inevitable return to a bifocal approach to our texts", Petersen concludes that "If we learn our lessons well, we will not once again suffer from cultural lag by absolutising the metaphor of mirrors as we did the metaphor of windows" (Petersen 1978, 24-5).

[136]Stibbe 1992, 10. Stibbe's published doctoral thesis *John as Storyteller: Narrative Criticism and the Fourth Gospel* (Stibbe 1992) proposes "an integrated narrative hermeneutic" (Stibbe 1992, 13) which combines literary and historical methods.

[137]Powell 1993c, 8.

appreciation and historical-critical scepticism.[138] Powell closes *What is Narrative Criticism?* with a telling analogy:

> Different methodological approaches to exegetical study may be likened to a set of keys on a ring. The various keys open different doors and grant access to different types of insight. Narrative criticism has been able to open some doors that had previously been closed to scholars. It provides answers to questions that people of faith ask about the Bible and about the meaning of biblical material. But it will not open all the doors.[139]

First-generation narrative criticism thus had to square the circle of establishing itself as methodologically distinct from traditional biblical scholarship without going so far that the two approaches became completely estranged. This was complicated by the fact that historical-critical scholarship, dominated by positivist interpretive paradigms, emphasised the value of scholarly objectivity to the extent that overt confessional commitments were frequently underplayed or even suppressed altogether within mainstream Biblical Studies.

In this context, a declaration of narrative criticism as an overtly reader response approach motivated by confessional interests would have made it difficult, if not impossible, to establish it as an accepted interpretive method within Biblical Studies. This explains why first-generation narrative critics embraced literary methodologies such as New Criticism and narratology, both of which were well-established in the mainstream of literary studies, and which offered critical methods which could be defended as "objective" and empirical. Put in terms of the text-as-communication model, narrative criticism was a step along the axis *author-text-reader* from author to text. This was as far as narrative critics felt able to go whilst remaining in touch with

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[138]Powell 1993c, 89.
[139]Powell 1993c, 101.

mainstream scholarship, to which they looked for validation. To take the further step of explicitly engaging reader interests would have been one step too far for most mainstream biblical scholars, who had enough trouble with literary paradigms as it was.[140] Thus, although narrative critics' theological motivation drew them to methodological considerations of reader interests from the very beginning, their political interests prevented them either from openly declaring their motives, as we have seen, or from embracing reader response methods which would have better served their purposes. One result of this was that, from a postmodern viewpoint informed by the ethics of interpretation, narrative criticism looks highly suspect: its declared methodological interests are at odds with its covert theological motives, hidden because of a political interest in gaining acceptance within mainstream academic and theological institutions. From this point of view, narrative criticism lacks ethical awareness and accountability, and has been heavily criticised by postmodern scholars as a result.[141]

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[140]Stanley Porter, asking the question "Why Hasn't Reader-Response Criticism Caught on in New Testament Studies?" (Porter 1990), argues that a number of factors militated against its acceptance into mainstream biblical scholarship. These include lack of consensus within literary theory as to what reader response is and lack of understanding of the theory by New Testament scholars, but also an unwillingness of biblical scholars to move beyond historical concerns, since "New Testament Studies appears to have very little use for an interpretative model which is not concerned in some direct way with history" (Porter 1990, 284). Porter's argument that reader response should be taken more seriously by New Testament scholars and that historical concerns must be bracketed for reader response to function helpfully led to a tetchy exchange with Anthony Thiselton, who accuses Porter of advocating a socio-pragmatic approach on the lines of Stanley Fish, a charge which Porter denies (see Thiselton 1992, 548-50; Porter 1994; Thiselton 1999, 154-62).

[141]It is important to be fair. Narrative criticism has been violently attacked for failing to engage with, for instance, poststructuralist theory. Whilst the failure is undeniable, it is explicable when narrative criticism is seen in the context of mainstream scholarship during the 1970s and 1980s, when the cloud of postmodernism was no bigger than a man's hand. If narrative critics were interested in establishing themselves within the mainstream, it is not surprising that they showed little interest in engaging the small number of postmodern scholars whose voices were, at that time, very much in the wilderness. The rapid growth of poststructuralist, reader response and ideological criticism within de-confessional Biblical Studies took both historical and narrative critics by surprise, with the result that narrative critics found themselves under concerted attack before they were aware that any threat existed.

Towards a Postmodern Narrative Criticism

We have seen that first-generation narrative criticism of the kind set out by Mark Allan Powell in *What is Narrative Criticism?* is highly vulnerable to postmodern critique: its formalist methodology appears outmoded; its bracketing of historical and referential concerns creates problems for its ethics of interpretation; and, most worryingly, narrative criticism's proclamation of itself as an objective formalist method is undermined by a confessionally-motivated reader response impulse which has been masked and denied in the interests of acceptance of the approach within the academy. Although not all of these objections are equally valid, as we have seen, they have been sufficiently established in postmodern critique of narrative criticism to threaten the viability of the approach in a postmodern context. We must therefore consider whether narrative criticism can evolve beyond its formalist first-generation form into a mature approach, capable of standing up to the demands of a postmodern Biblical Studies.

Narrative criticism has not stood still since the early 1990s. Narrative critics have continued to wrestle with their conflicting interests, seeking on the one hand to achieve the rapprochement between historical and literary interests which Culpepper advocated, whilst also engaging more seriously with reader response theory and responding to challenges from poststructuralism and ethically-aware postmodern critics.[142] Whilst many narrative critics remain wedded to a thoroughgoing formalism, some have moved beyond this to engage postmodernism more closely. Mark Allan Powell has continued to be a leading figure in narrative criticism, and his most recent book, *Chasing the*

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[142]The work of Mark Stibbe offers a good example of such development. Stibbe attempts to combine historical and formalist literary approaches to the Gospel of John, whilst also exploring the prospects of reader response. See e.g. Stibbe 1992; Stibbe 1993; Stibbe 1994. Stibbe has also expressed interest in issues relating to charismatic hermeneutics (see Stibbe 1998).

Eastern Star: Adventures in Biblical Reader-Response Criticism (2001), represents a major step forward in the direction of an authentically postmodern narrative approach. Powell responds to many of his critics by proclaiming narrative criticism as "the first truly postmodern approach to biblical texts, a method that was self-conscious of its methodological assumptions and of the implications of these".[143] Whilst some might question the appropriateness of this statement in relation to earlier formulations of narrative criticism, *Chasing the Eastern Star* is clearly a work which seeks to respond confidently and assertively to earlier criticism, and to establish narrative criticism as a viable interpretive approach in relation to the new postmodern context.

Powell's purpose in *Chasing the Eastern Star* is to offer "a somewhat amateurish *postmodern phenomenology of reading*".[144] Powell unpacks this term by explaining that his approach is phenomenological in that it is "not offered as a description of how people *should* read but as a tool that may enable us to understand better how people actually *do* read"; postmodern in that he recognises that there is no intrinsically correct way to read texts or any ideologically neutral way of analysing them; and amateurish in that Powell is not attempting to establish "solid philosophical underpinnings" for his critical method or seeking to account for everything.[145] Powell then declares his own ideological agenda in interpretation by stating that "I guess that I am ultimately interested in developing a postmodern phenomenology of reading texts *as scripture*".[146] This new formulation of narrative criticism thus serves as a major step forward, at least in theory, in that it openly declares itself as a confessional approach which seeks to engage seriously with the postmodern context and with issues of reader response.

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[143]Powell 2001, 6.
[144]Powell 2001, 131 (author's emphasis).
[145]Powell 2001, 131-32.
[146]Powell 2001, 132 (author's emphasis).

Powell bases his approach upon interpretive polyvalence, the fact that "Texts can and do mean different things to different people, and at least some of the time people can and do find multiple meanings of texts to be acceptable".[147] This "reality confirmed by daily experience" must be the starting point for contemporary hermeneutical reflection,[148] and Powell therefore expresses his intention to sketch a hermeneutics "that works in real life [...] that has *existential cash value*".[149] The interpretive model which Powell seeks to construct is therefore built not on the basis of literary theory, but on the experience of readers in interpretation.[150] Powell advocates the adoption of a reader response hermeneutic as the basis for his interpretive model, and identifies narrative criticism as a subset within reader response approaches.[151] Powell is clear that such an approach should be descriptive of practice rather than theoretically prescriptive,[152] the goal of such analysis being self-awareness in interpretation, which "can only be assisted by recognition of interpretive moves that readers make".[153]

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[147]Powell 2001, 14. Powell seeks to establish the reality of polyvalence not by philosophical or hermeneutical discussion, but by means of a survey of responses to two biblical passages by 50 clergy and 50 laity, the results of which clearly show that the two groups differed significantly in their responses, depending on a variety of factors (Powell 2001, 28-56). Throughout *Chasing the Eastern Star* Powell is anxious to root his approach in the reality of reading practice, rather than on an abstract theoretical or philosophical base.

[148]Powell 2001, 11-12.

[149]Powell 2001, 59.

[150] "[R]eaders are not constrained by authorial intent. Readers can and will elevate minor points and sublimate major ones. This, in my view, does not constitute misinterpretation. If it does, we're all in trouble - and not just with this text" (Powell 2001, 22). Concern for the interpretations of "ordinary" readers has featured significantly in the debate over ethics of interpretation, the concerns of which clearly inform Powell's recent work. His approach in this regard is similar to that of Daniel Patte (see e.g.: Patte 1995b; Patte 1999).

[151]This shift has been made by a number of narrative critics in recent years. David Rhoads, for instance, suggests that narrative criticism seeks to recover the final story the author has created "for the reader", and deals with how the reader experiences that story (Rhoads 1999, 267). The goal of narrative criticism is thus "not so much to discern the unity of a text as it is to assess its *impact* - to see in what ways a narrative coheres adequately to give a satisfying reading experience" (Rhoads 1999, 270).

[152]Powell 2001, 59.

[153]Powell 2001, 65.

In discerning such readerly moves, Powell seeks to establish a fundamental distinction between *expected* and *unexpected readings*. Biblical narratives, like all narratives, anticipate certain responses from their readers, but the reality of reading is that real readers (and especially those removed from the cultural or historical context of the text's implied readers) frequently produce interpretations which are not anticipated by the narrative and are therefore unexpected. The specific function of narrative criticism, Powell argues, is to define strategies by means of which interpreters may distinguish expected readings from unexpected ones.[154] Detailed formal analysis of the text enables the role of the implied reader to be discerned as the expected reading. This analysis can then serve as a "base reading" against which the responses of real readers might be compared and contrasted, so that unexpected readings may be identified.[155] The narrative critics will then seek to account for these unexpected readings and, finally, decide through evaluative critique whether the unexpected reading is to be adopted or rejected.[156] Narrative criticism is thus a heuristic interpretive approach which seeks to "establish a common language for discussion of variant interpretations",[157] and which "does not limit interpretive options; it allows choices to be made advisedly".[158]

Powell is careful in defining the limits and parameters of his approach. Crucially, he insists that the distinction between expected and unexpected

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[154]Powell 2001, 64.

[155]Powell 2001, 65. Powell points out that the establishment of a "base reading" is a key step in many ideological and deconstructionist approaches, necessary to establish the dominant ideology of the text which is then deconstructed or otherwise subverted.

[156]Powell 2001, 7-9.

[157]Powell 2001, 7.

[158]Powell 2001, 66. Mieke Bal has argued along similar lines, suggesting that the contribution of narratology in Biblical Studies is to produce interpretations based upon the formal qualities of texts which can then be intersubjectively discussed and evaluated on the basis of a common method. The interpretations produced are transparent and thus accountable to critical scrutiny (Bal 1988a, 239; Bal 1997, 11). David Rhoads has similarly argued that narrative criticism's emphasis upon textual unity is "*a working hypothesis, a heuristic device*" to discern patterns of storytelling on the surface level of the narrative (Rhoads 1999, 267).

readings is not evaluative but descriptive.[159] Expected readings are not to be described in foundational, totalising or mystifying ways, but regarded as simply one interpretation against which other readings may be measured.[160] Expected readings, therefore, are not to be privileged over unexpected readings simply because they are expected.[161] From a Christian point of view, Powell indicates that a commitment to biblical authority might suggest that expected readings would be preferable to unexpected ones, but nevertheless maintains that unexpected readings of scripture can add new dimensions of insight, and that an understanding of scripture as *living* word requires acknowledgement of a "fluidity of interpretation", whereby static texts are capable of addressing changing contexts.[162]

Powell seeks to account for unexpected readings by distinguishing three horizons in interpretation: the story setting is the narrative world of the Gospel, inhabited by the characters and described by the voice of the narrator; the discourse setting is the late first-century context of the intended readers of the Gospel; whilst the third setting is that of the modern reader.[163] The expected reading of the narrative is one in which readers limit their knowledge and belief to that implied by the narrative: the implied reader knows and believes what the narrative expects them to know and believe, and does not know or believe anything the narrative does not expect.[164] When, however, knowledge or belief proper to either the discourse or modern setting is read

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[159]Powell 2001, 59-60.
[160]Powell 2001, 65-66.
[161]Powell 2001, 60-63. Powell gives the example of a racist joke which he found one day on a piece of paper in his church. His reaction of embarrassment and anger was not the expected reading of amusement anticipated by the text, but neither was it based upon misinterpretation. Rather, the unexpected reading derived from an ideological difference between the text and Powell as the reader, and Powell considers his unexpected reading ethically preferable to the expected amusement which the joke intended to provoke.
[162]Powell 2001, 174.
[163]Powell 2001, 83-106.
[164]Powell 2001, 76.

into the story setting, or when real readers do not know or believe something the text assumes they do, then unexpected readings can result.

Powell is clear that the goal of identifying the implied reader of a Gospel text cannot be definitively achieved, largely because the historical distance between the original context of composition for the Gospel text and the context of the contemporary interpreter makes discernment of expected readings an imprecise science. Powell accepts that even a well-trained biblical scholar lacks the linguistic competence of a native speaker of *koiné* Greek, and that a modern reader lacks some (or, indeed, much) of the general knowledge which the biblical texts assume of their readers. Powell argues that this may mean that we are sometimes unable to distinguish between expected and unexpected readings because of our lack of knowledge, and that frank admission of such failure "is necessary for hermeneutical integrity".[165] Powell is critical of what he regards as the attempts of some approaches to obscure their own limitations in this regard, especially reader response critics who maintain that interpretive ambiguities are inherent within or encouraged by the Gospel narrative itself. Powell is scathing about such critical positions, which he believes to be fundamentally dishonest:

> If we are unable to achieve the goal of reading Mark's narrative in the manner expected of its implied readers, so be it. Let us at least admit this, and not take the easy way out by claiming that readers are *supposed* to find the text ambiguous.[166]

Powell thus turns an admission of the limitations of his method into a moral strength. Further, however, he argues that recognising that the objective of his method may not be totally realised does not invalidate the exercise: if narrative criticism enables us to come closer to identifying how biblical stories are

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[165]Powell 2001, 105.
[166]Powell 2001, 93.

expected to be experienced by their implied readers then "That has to be enough".[167]

Powell's reformulation of narrative criticism has not abandoned the formalist method of the 1980s and 1990s, but has broadened the scope of the approach in two crucial directions. First, Powell acknowledges the difficulties posed by modern attempts to read as a historically situated implied reader, and is open about the limitations of this exercise. Second, Powell has embraced an authentic reader response hermeneutic which takes seriously the realities of readers' experience with texts and the ethical consequences of their interpretations, and which allows him to be explicit about his confessional commitments. Powell is still careful, however, not to identify narrative criticism either with historicism or with poststructuralism, seeking a middle way between the two.

Powell continues to distance narrative criticism from the work of historical critics, whose focus upon authorial intention appears to Powell "unnecessarily reductionist" or even "myopic" in attempting to reconstruct the cognitive content of the writers' theologies at the expense of recognising that in selecting narrative as their genre the writers indicated a concern for the affective impact of their works.[168] In this regard Powell's concern is a literary one, but he is also concerned about the impact of historical criticism as a confessional approach, expressing concern about a hermeneutic that "privileges an educated elite, empowering them to determine the meaning of scripture that is to be authoritative not only for them but for everyone else as well".[169] From his Christian perspective, Powell argues that excessive concentration on authorial intent actually prevents the biblical texts from

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[167]Powell 2001, 85.
[168]Powell 2001, 25.
[169]Powell 2001, 4.

operating as the living word of scripture, so that "The task of biblical interpretation becomes discernment of what God said to other people a long time ago in a faraway place. The Holy Spirit becomes obsolete and the character of scripture as a *living* word is lost".[170]

Powell is careful, however, not to write historical criticism off altogether. Both authorially-focussed historical criticism and reader-focussed literary criticism are "intrinsically legitimate": what concerns Powell is when one approach fails to pursue its goals with integrity, or to impose its interpretive interests upon the other.[171] Rather, Powell urges that diversity of interpretive goals need not lead to conflict, since "There is no integrity in condemning one approach because it does not meet the goals of a different approach".[172]

A pragmatic approach and theological concerns also lead Powell to distance himself from more theoretically based postmodern approaches, especially poststructuralism and radical reader response criticism which, he argues, occupy an academic never-never land of theory which bears little or no relation to the everyday activity of biblical interpretation by real readers. He wryly describes Ricoeur, Derrida and Foucault as "brilliant scholars, at least according to one common definition of brilliance, that is, 'capable of writing things that nobody understands'".[173] Powell indicates that the epistemological and hermeneutical indeterminacy of academic scholarship is out of step with ordinary readers of the Bible and their concerns, and argues that "it seems to

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[170]Powell 2001, 177.
[171]Powell 2001, 5.
[172]Powell 2001, 120.
[173]Powell 2001, 23. Powell acknowledges that deconstruction may make a positive contribution within Biblical Studies, but likens the presence of deconstructionists to that of "an agnostic at a prayer meeting": "Their presence is indeed useful to those who are discerning and patient enough to hear them out, but that helpfulness would cease the moment they are converted" (Powell 2001, 206 n.84).

me that we have two options: enroll the world or learn to speak in terms that relate to how people actually think".[174]

Powell is careful, therefore, to define a clear space for his postmodern phenomenology of reading between historical-critical objectivism and radical poststructuralist indeterminacy. The reason for this is his overt theological interest in interpretation of the Bible as scripture. Recognising polyvalency does not necessarily lead to total relativism, and evaluation of interpretations remains necessary, since some are right and some wrong. Powell recognises that this entails the imposition of his value system upon both texts and interpreters, but maintains that "as arrogant as such imposition may seem, the only alternative is a bland ethical neutrality - which would itself reflect imposition of a value system, indeed of one that I reject. Interpretations *can* be wrong - not only stupidly wrong, but dangerously so".[175] Powell is unapologetic for evaluating readings of the Bible from a Christian perspective, arguing that he fails to see the logic in the position adopted in some academic contexts where diversity of ideological readings is welcomed except for those from a broad evangelical Christian perspective. "Why", Powell demands, "should the Gospel of Christ be the only unacceptable philosophy?"[176]

In setting out what the basis of a Christian evaluative standard might be, Powell is careful to rule out a purely subjective hermeneutic whereby readings are selected on the basis of their appeal to the reader's sensibilities, arguing that such an approach is ultimately self-affirming, and insulates readers from the possibility of being transformed by texts.[177] At the same time, however,

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[174]Powell 2001, 69.
[175]Powell 2001, 8.
[176]Powell 2001, 235 n.352). Powell's question is directed at Stephen D. Moore's suspicious reaction to confessional elements in Powell's *What is Narrative Criticism?* Moore 1994, 115-16).
[177]Powell 2001, 176.

Powell rejects fundamentalist or "timeless" readings on the grounds that such readings elevate "the implicit, contextually derived assumptions of biblical literature to the level of divinely revealed truth".[178] Powell concludes that:

> There is no pure exegetical standard through which an objective method can discover timeless truth. Thus, the standard for truth is not the Bible per se but the gospel of Jesus Christ, and all interpretations of the Bible (expected readings and unexpected ones) must be evaluated in light of this. The Bible remains authoritative because the gospel itself is derived from the Bible.[179]

This is a crucial step for Powell's interpretive model as a postmodern interpretive approach. As we have seen, a key move in the development of postmodern biblical criticism has been that from commentary to critique, and a necessary component of this development is the adoption of an evaluative standpoint outside the perspective of the biblical text. By taking his evaluative standard not from the text of scripture but from a scripturally-derived understanding of the Christian gospel, Powell enables himself to evaluate not only unexpected readings of scripture but the expected readings which the Bible itself anticipates. Expected readings are preferred, largely because they are congruent with a biblically-derived gospel, but are not uncritically privileged over unexpected readings.[180]

Nor does evaluation by means of the gospel produce a closed hermeneutic circle. Powell admits that theological evaluation is necessarily autobiographical and subjective, because ultimately for Powell it is he himself who determines what he thinks the gospel is.[181] At the same time, however,

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[178]Powell 2001, 180.

[179]Powell 2001, 180. Powell takes the gospel as the basis for any evaluation of interpretations, and in this sense it operates as an interpretive 'rule of faith'. The importance of such rules for confessional interpretation is explored later (see p.253).

[180]This dynamic can be seen to operate already in the New Testament, where many readings of prophetic texts in particular are, by Powell's standards, unexpected readings legitimised by the reinterpretation of those texts in light of the Christian understanding of the gospel.

[181]Powell 2001, 180.

Powell attempts to apply the standards of the gospel to himself as well as other people, thus rendering his own understanding open to critique and development. Powell also acknowledges the postmodern insight that all interpretation is to some extent skewed by the point of view of the interpreter, accepting that the implied reader of any narrative is an interpretive construct, and therefore "infected by the subjective input of those who do the constructing", so that a completely objective and disinterested interpretation is impossible.[182] At the same time, however, such admissions do not invalidate the narrative-critical process, but enable it to avoid delusions as to the authoritative scope of its conclusions and render it open to external critique.[183]

Powell suggests that an ideologically-aware narrative criticism may be valuable for Biblical Studies not only in identifying expected readings of biblical texts, but also in revealing the interests and ideologies which motivate unexpected readings:

> Reader-response recognises that interpretation is not ideologically neutral. [...] I suggest that unexpected readings provide an index to the intents of readers. They provide a mirror that reflects the priorities of readers. So, regardless of whether such readings help us to discover anything about the text, they will often help us to discover something about ourselves.[184]

Identification of differing interpretive ideologies facilitates their evaluation from a Christian perspective but this does not, in Powell's view, automatically lead to the rejection of non-Christian perspectives. Powell distinguishes between anti-semitic and feminist readings of Matthew's Gospel, both of

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[182]Powell 2001, 71.

[183]Powell 2001, 71. David Rhoads has similarly argued that: "every interpretation will be only one interpretation in a range of faithful interpretations. Given the multivalent nature of stories and the limitations of reader perspectives, it is not possible (or even desirable) to provide one correct and objective understanding of a story. The goal is to be faithful to the narrative and to learn from other interpretations as well" (Rhoads 1999, 284).

[184]Powell 2001, 134.

which are unexpected in terms of the narrative's anticipated reader response, but which can and must be accepted or rejected on the basis of their ethical implications in light of Christian faith. The result of this evaluation is that Powell embraces feminism whilst rejecting anti-semitism. This evaluation is conducted "self-consciously and publicly *as a Christian*, and if postmodernists have trouble with what seems to be (at this final stage) a totalising appeal to some foundational truth...well, so be it!"[185] He recognises that there are those who will not share his convictions, but argues that this simply reflects the fact that they "do not belong to my community of interpreters, and both they and I must recognise this. Respectfully, of course".[186]

Chasing the Eastern Star represents a major step forward for narrative criticism. Powell has successfully resolved many of the conflicts of interest which rendered earlier versions of narrative criticism vulnerable to postmodern attack by taking seriously previous criticism of his work. By broadening from narrow formalism to broad reader response, Powell has moved narrative criticism forward methodologically, ideologically and politically. In terms of methodology, narrative criticism no longer relies upon an outmoded and idealistic New-Critical text theory, but is based instead upon a pragmatic reader response approach which takes seriously the reality of modern readers' experiences, whilst at the same time addressing legitimate historicist concerns. Ideologically, reader response also frees Powell to address issues of reader ideology and the impact of texts on readers in a manner consistent with his confessional interests in the Bible. Finally, Powell has made a political gain in carving out a firm base for narrative criticism within the academy which is not in the shade of historicist or poststructuralist approaches.

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[185]Powell 2001, 9.
[186]Powell 2001, 182.

Whilst Powell's critical model is coherent and workable, however, he leaves a number of things undone. First, the insistence on building his model on the basis of pragmatism means that he avoids engagement in any depth with issues of literary or hermeneutical theory. Powell is openly antagonistic towards theory and philosophy, addressing them only to reject them as hopelessly obscure and unhelpful. Whilst this is consistent with the tendencies of narrative critics to prefer critical practicalities to theoretical speculation, further development of the implications of Powell's insights in the context of a broader theory of interpretation will be needed if this new incarnation of narrative criticism is to engage postmodern theory more constructively. Engagement with literary or hermeneutical theory need not be regarded as a bad thing: rather, it forms part of the ongoing dialogue between criticism and theory which has always been a part of literary studies, and which needs to become part of the discourse of biblical literary approaches if the discipline is to move beyond a divisive polarisation.

Second, Powell's open declaration of narrative criticism as a theological interpretive approach begs a number of theological questions. By invoking an extratextual theological formulation such as the Christian gospel as a key element in his interpretive model, Powell straddles the boundary between Biblical Studies and Theology, and makes mutual dialogue between the disciplines an essential feature of the ongoing development of narrative criticism. A particular area of concern is the question of interpretive authority. Powell indicates that he regards the Bible as authoritative within the Christian community, but argues that this authority derives from its function as the source of the extrabiblical "gospel of Jesus Christ" which sets norms for Christian interpretation. It is arguable, therefore, that Powell locates scriptural authority not in the Bible itself but in the believing community, but this is in

turn questioned by his assertion that, ultimately, *he decides for himself* what the gospel is. Powell's understanding of the relationship between biblical text, individual interpreter and believing community is unformed, and can only be clarified in the light of a coherent understanding of how the Bible functions as scripture. Further dialogue and development is therefore essential if Powell's model is to function effectively within a broader theological framework.

Third, Powell sets his narrative-critical approach in the context of a broader hermeneutical enterprise which takes seriously the competing interests of different interpretive communities and is informed by an ethics of interpretation. Powell is able to acknowledge the legitimacy of other interpretive perspectives whilst at the same time asserting the validity of his own Christian viewpoint, but fails to engage fully with the question of how interpretive differences should be negotiated. Powell's acknowledgement that those who do not share his Christian faith do not belong to his community of interpreters amounts effectively to an agreement to differ.[187] But what if other interpreters are not content with interpretive *détente*? How are conflicts to be resolved? Or how might different, even opposing, interpretive perspectives engage one another constructively? Powell's Christian interpretive approach is confident and assertive, but further consideration needs to be given to the question of how such an approach will operate in dialogue with other competing and sometimes hostile interpretive communities. Again, this issue returns partly to questions of interpretive authority. Powell fails to address the question of how individual interpreters operate within interpretive communities, both in terms of the relationship of the individual believer to the believing community, and in terms of whether academic biblical interpreters who wish to pursue confessional interests might have to negotiate between the

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[187]"You can think I'm wrong, and I will think you're wrong. You can pity me, and I will pity you" (Powell 2001, 182).

simultaneous but conflicting interests of two interpretive communities in the forms of the church and the academy.

Through the course of its development narrative criticism has illustrated both the pitfalls and the prospects for a confessional, critical approach to biblical interpretation within academic Biblical Studies. Having at times struggled to find its way in the multidisciplinary wilderness, narrative criticism is now beginning to appear as a coherent, viable postmodern confessional approach with sound academic credentials. At the same time, it is clear that narrative criticism itself needs to be seen within a broader theological and academic context. In an academic arena increasingly divided by conflicts of ideology, how is a confessional interpretive approach to make its voice heard? Further, how can an approach defined by its theological commitment to the Bible as scripture engage in responsible dialogue with other, sometimes hostile, interpretive communities? How can Christian interpreters talk with strangers, remaining true to themselves whilst respecting and learning from the strangeness of others? In the next chapter, therefore, we will begin to examine the question of how a Christian interpretive approach can establish a coherent theoretical base which safeguards both a Christian understanding of the Bible as the Word of God and at the same time enables such an approach to operate in a pluralist academic environment.

PART TWO: TOWARDS A CHRISTIAN, POSTMODERN, ACADEMIC MODEL IN BIBLICAL STUDIES

CHAPTER FOUR: RECONCILING INTERESTS – THEOLOGY AND THEORY IN CHRISTIAN INTERPRETATION

The yarns of seamen have a direct simplicity, the whole meaning of which lies within the shell of a cracked nut. But Marlow was not typical (if his propensity to spin yarns be excepted), and to him the meaning of an episode was not inside like a kernel but outside, enveloping the tale which brought it out only as a glow brings out a haze, in the likeness of one of those misty halos that sometimes are made visible by the spectral illumination of moonshine.

-Joseph Conrad, "Heart of Darkness"

The postmodern context in Biblical Studies represents an opportunity for confessional interpreters of the Bible. The breakdown of the historical-critical consensus and its objectivist interpretive paradigm has led to a proliferation of different methodological approaches following the "literary turn" of the 1970s. The rise of ideological approaches, spearheaded by feminist scholarship, has also established the legitimacy of advocacy perspectives within the academy, and this means that Christian interpreters are now faced with the possibility of establishing a legitimate and authentically Christian approach to academic biblical interpretation. Confessional critics now have greater freedom to select critical tools consonant with their interpretive aims, and to offer confessional interpretations which do not have to defend themselves against accusations of irrationality or subjectivism.

At the same time, however, the postmodern context is also challenging. Not all of the new approaches are sympathetic to Christian interpretation. Critical methods and interpretive ideologies hostile to totalising theories of truth or to concepts of biblical authority have become embedded in some university departments. Prominent de-confessional scholars have sought to set the parameters for what counts as a valid postmodern interpretation in such a way as to exclude confessional perspectives from the academy, and confessional

approaches which have failed to play the game by their rules have been strongly attacked, as we saw in the case of narrative criticism.

Having examined the challenge of the postmodern context, therefore, we turn to the question of how confessional scholars might constructively respond to it. I wish to argue that three essential steps are required if a confessional approach to the Bible is to establish itself as academically credible whilst retaining its motivational integrity, and these will be addressed in the second part of this thesis. First, any such approach must ensure that its interpretive interests are not in conflict, paying serious attention to the coherence of its interpretive aims, theoretical base, and critical method. The self-awareness resulting from such attention is a crucial factor in demonstrating to other interpreters that a confessional approach possesses both internal coherence and integrity. In terms of methodological interests, therefore, confessional critics will need to establish that their critical methods are coherent with their confessional commitments, and that those methods are appropriate to the study of the Bible *as scripture*. In a pluralist academic environment, this requires some reassessment of what the Bible *is*, since the selection of critical method necessarily rests upon a foundational pre-understanding of the object of study. The development of postmodern confessional-critical approaches, therefore, entails the conceptualisation of a postmodern model for scripture. This chapter will therefore attempt to frame such a model in such a way that the Christian church's experience of the Bible as a means of divine self-communication is reflected whilst multivalent interpretation is simultaneously affirmed.

A second key step in forming a credible postmodern Christian approach is the construction of a coherent identity for the interpretive community whose interests it represents. Clear definition of the community in terms of its interpretive aims and interests will provide clarity on a number of key issues,

such as the relationship of individual critics to the texts under study, and the interpretive authority to which those critics appeal for the validation of their readings. One part of this process for Christian academics will be the negotiation of academic and ecclesial interests and priorities in interpretation. Christian critics will need to consider how the needs and interests of the faith and academic communities might constrain both the critical questions they will want to ask of biblical texts and the methods which will be acceptable in pursuit of those questions. A clear identity for the interpretive community is also essential in relating to other communities: it is only when confessional academics are able to be authentically themselves that open communication and debate is possible. Confessional critics may also want to ask, therefore, whether the Christian interpretive community is closed or open, and whether they will want or need to engage with other interpretive approaches. Chapter five will engage with these issues.

Finally, a confessional postmodern academic approach within Biblical Studies must attend to the ethics of interpretation. This will relate in part to the ways in which Christian academics render themselves accountable for their readings, and how they attempt to promote their own interpretive interests without unthinkingly compromising the legitimate interests of other readers. In addition, however, some attention will need to be paid to the question of what ethical principles ought to apply in biblical interpretation. Not all of the values espoused by prominent de-confessional critics are necessarily compatible with Christian ethics, and a confessional approach will need to ask itself the question of whose values will determine its *modus operandi* within a postmodern academy. How can Christian academic biblical scholars engage constructively with other interpreters who are hostile to their scripture and, sometimes, their very presence in the field? More importantly, how should Christian biblical interpreters present themselves to the wider academy? The

answer to these questions will need to cohere with their other methodological and theological commitments, and, I suggest, needs to find expression in a distinctively Christian ethics of interpretation. Indeed, such an ethics may be the greatest contribution Christian biblical scholarship can make to the discipline at the present time. This contribution will be considered in chapter six.

In the remainder of this chapter we will seek to set out a postmodern description of the Bible as scripture. This description will need to take into account two distinct perceptions, both rooted in pragmatic experience. On the one hand, the experience of the Christian church through the centuries has been that the Bible has served as a means of divine communication, functioning as the Word of God. A description of the Bible which seeks to be authentically Christian must take this into account. On the other hand, as we have seen in the first part of this thesis, postmodern insights into the nature of interpretive communities and the ethics of interpretation suggest that the confessing community cannot necessarily claim a monopoly of interpretive truth. We therefore face the need for a postmodern Christian description of the Bible which affirms both that biblical texts can serve as vehicles of communication between God and human beings, and that at the same time multiple interpretive approaches and even interpretations unanticipated by the biblical texts themselves can be affirmed as valid. Such a model must, therefore, be both theological and thoroughly critical. The notion of a theological-critical model of the Bible in academic Biblical Studies, however, is a contested notion. Why should such a description be necessary, and how viable is it?

Theology and Theory in Interpretation

As we have seen in relation to de-confessional postmodern scholarship and to confessional narrative criticism, critical methods in Biblical Studies tend to be selected on the basis of a preunderstanding of the Bible which in turn reflects the underlying ideological commitments and motivations of interpreters. Failure to be honest about one's commitments can, as we have seen, be damaging to the prospects of interpretive approaches in the postmodern context. Approaches which fail to acknowledge or even recognise their ideological or theological motives can be self-defeating or self-deluding, in that failure to declare one's true motive in interpretation might actually lead to an approach not meeting its interpretive goals. We have seen this in relation to first-generation narrative criticism: seeking to operate under the aegis of a discipline dominated by scientific objectivism, narrative critics were led to adopt a strong formalist approach which bracketed out questions of the text's transformative impact upon the reader, when it was precisely this interaction which prompted many narrative critics to move away from historical-critical scholarship in the first place. Inability to declare that interest for fear of academic exclusion, however, meant that first-generation narrative criticism was methodologically unable to achieve its interpretive goal of understanding how biblical narratives worked in communicating and sustaining faith in readers.

Second, approaches which lack self-awareness can impact negatively upon other readers of the text. Not to declare one's interest risks covertly imposing an ideological perspective upon both one's text and one's readers. This may distort the reading offered and cause others to read against their own interests. One of the key requirements of postmodern criticism is a self-awareness in interpretation which enables the critic to be sensitive to the ideological and

ethical implications both of the text they are reading and of the interpretation of the text that they are offering.

Failure openly to declare motivations and interests can backfire on approaches in the postmodern pluralist academy in two key ways as we have seen with narrative criticism: narrative critics' failure to acknowledge their confessional commitments openly and incorporate them into their critical self-awareness unnecessarily restricted narrative criticism's choice of critical methods, leading to failure to achieve interpretive objectives; further, it made narrative criticism highly suspect to ideologically-aware postmodern critics who saw it as an example of precisely the kind of covert theologising of Biblical Studies against which they were reacting. If confessional criticism is fully to achieve its interpretive aims and be able to function freely within a pluralist academic context, therefore, it must declare itself openly as a Christian interpretive approach with both critical and theological interests in the Bible and its interpretations.

Two possible objections to this declaration need to be anticipated. First, must critical and theological interests be bound up with one another in this way? Can the critical tools of, say, narrative criticism - narratology, Anglo-American rhetorical criticism, etc. - not be seen as neutral tools which can then be put to theological use? In terms of narrative criticism's self-understanding and positioning as a discrete approach within Biblical Studies the answer must be "no". The postmodern context has demonstrated that all critical approaches reflect certain interests, as John Goldingay has pointed out:

> Approaches to interpretation presuppose and support value systems and systems of power. For the most part they do so unconsciously, but

they do so none the less for that. Sociocritical hermeneutics requires an awareness of the ideological factors that shape academic work.[1]

Further, as we have seen in the cases of David Clines, Stephen Moore and Cheryl Exum, critics select their critical tools to suit their interpretive ends. The manner in which those tools are combined inevitably affects the manner of their deployment and the interpretive results they produce. Furthermore, the development of critical tools is not itself ideologically neutral, so that critical methods cannot be simply abstracted from the ideological and political interests of the interpretive communities which develop them. Ideological and critical interests may operate at different levels, but they are fundamentally bound up with one another and should not be separated if that separation obscures the ideological or theological commitment which underpins an interpretive approach.

A second objection to a theological formulation of narrative criticism might be to ask whether it unneccesarily excludes non-confessional critics. Surely one can use the same critical tools - derived, after all, from non-confessional critical theory - on the same texts, without necessarily having a faith-commitment to those texts? The answer is, of course, "of course". In a pluralist academic context interpretive methods are not the exclusive preserve of any particular approach. Non-believing scholars can certainly deploy the same critical methods as narrative critics and will probably produce very similar results, but the fact remains that their interest in the text will be different, the uses to which they wish to put their interpretations may well be different, and their work will thus have a different emphasis. Most feminist critics would want to classify themselves as feminists first and psychoanalytic, structuralist or deconstructionist critics second. In the same way, confessional

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[1]Goldingay 1995, 43.

critics will want their critical practice to be transparently consonant with their commitment to the biblical texts as scripture, and that means both that those commitments need to form part of their self-understanding and that their partners in scholarly dialogue should be aware of them. Confessional and non-confessional approaches using the same methods will have large areas of overlap but will also have significant areas of divergence, and the integrity of confessional criticism as an approach requires that equal attention is paid to both from the outset.

Defining the Object of Study: the Bible as Scripture in a Postmodern Context

It is necessary for any confessional approach to offer a preliminary description of the Bible which will form the object of its study. This description will in turn determine its interpretive aims, its critical methods, and provide criteria for evaluating whether or not any particular reading has achieved its interpretive goals. The objective in offering a preliminary description of the Bible ought not to be to impose a rigid doctrinal perspective upon the text, but to offer a preunderstanding or working model of the Bible. The relationship of the model and the critical practice of the approach will be necessarily dialectic: a preunderstanding of the nature of the biblical texts will determine the questions asked and the methods deployed to (hopefully) provide answers, whilst those answers in turn lead to revision of the preunderstanding.

In this respect it is necessary to emphasise the difference between a biblical criticism which seeks to engage with particular biblical texts and a Systematic Theology which seeks to draw together into a unified exposition the theological insights of the Bible as a whole, or to provide a coherent account

of God and his dealings with humanity. That is to say, confessional criticism is a critical, rather than a theoretical approach, standing in relation to Systematic Theology as structuralism does to Saussurian linguistic theory or (to extend the structuralist analogy further) as *parole* does to *langue*. Criticism may draw upon Theology for its understanding of biblical texts as scripture within the wider context of Christian doctrine, and may contribute to the ongoing development of Theology by offering new interpretations of biblical texts which biblical theologians may need to incorporate into their wider understanding, but the fact remains that criticism and Theology operate at different levels of study and should not be confused. This in turn means that any critical model for scripture which confessional criticism might put forward as a justification for its methodological approach is not to be taken as an absolute and total understanding of scripture in all its aspects. A critical model will be heuristic, offered as a necessary preunderstanding which facilitates critical interpretation of the Bible, but which is open to criticism and revision in the light of that interpretation.

Kevin J. Vanhoozer: Scripture as God's Communicative Act

A good place to start to build a postmodern model for Scripture is the work of Kevin J. Vanhoozer. Vanhoozer's work is of value for the theological development of confessional criticism for two reasons: first, he seeks to build a hermeneutical model for biblical interpretation based on a Christian theological commitment to God as Trinity; and second, his model for scripture takes account of the postmodern context, expecially in responding to the work of Jacques Derrida and Stanley Fish. At first sight, therefore, Vanhoozer offers

the prospect of a constructive contribution to confessional criticism's self-understanding.

Vanhoozer's hermeneutical approach is overtly theological, but he insists that it is not an approach restricted only to the Bible. Vanhoozer's intention is not to develop a *hermeneutica sacra*, applicable only to Christian scripture within the boundaries of the church. Instead, Vanhoozer proposes that his model is capable of serving as a general hermeneutic within a Christian worldview. His starting point is that all communication takes place within the context of God's own self-communication:

> In the light of the Christian confession of God as creator, redeemer, and sanctifier, we may say that God is the one who communicates himself - Father, Son, and Spirit - to others. God's self-communicative activity results in creation, Christ, and church. *The triune God is communicative agent (Father/author), action (Word/text), and result (Spirit/power of reception).* I propose that we take God's trinitarian self-communication as the paradigm of what is involved in all true communication.[2]

Vanhoozer draws upon Wittgenstein, Habermas, J. L. Austin and John Searle to define the Bible as a meaningful communicative action or speech act. Using the categories of speech act theory, Vanhoozer distinguishes between the biblical texts' *locutionary* force (i.e. their referential or propositional content), their *illocutionary* force (i.e. what the texts are intended to do), and their *perlocutionary* force (i.e. the effect or impact of the texts upon readers). Vanhoozer argues that the meaning of texts is to be found in their nature as illocutionary acts: that is to say, in the intentions of their authors in writing them. The text embodies an intended action on the part of the author, so that "The reality to which interpreters are accountable and to which their

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[2]Vanhoozer 1998, 199 (author's emphasis).

descriptions must correspond if they seek to be true is grounded in the author's embodied and enacted intention".[3]

Vanhoozer stresses the importance of distinguishing between what authors intend (illocution) and what readers make of their texts (perlocution), and follows E. D. Hirsch in arguing for the separation of meaning and significance.[4] Meaning is peculiar to illocution and significance to perlocution: the reader's task is to understand the author's communicative intent and to respond accordingly, but the response is secondary to the act of understanding, so that illocution takes priority over perlocution.[5] The proper activity of interpretation, therefore, is to concentrate on the text's illocutionary force, since "If the author's intention is embodied in the text, then the ultimate criterion for right or wrong interpretation will be the text itself, considered as a literary act".[6] The author's intention in writing is expressed in the "literal sense" of the text, and according to Vanhoozer it is the literal sense which is the proper object of interpretation.

Vanhoozer's understanding of the text's literal sense is by no means simplistic. Rather, Vanhoozer sees the text as operating on multiple levels, each of which must be apprehended if the meaning of the text is to be fully understood.[7] First, it is necessary to discern the text's *propositional reference* (i.e. what the text is about). Vanhoozer is careful to distinguish propositional from historical reference, as he is aware that not all referents are susceptible to empirical verification, and some can only be apprehended as mediated through

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[3]Vanhoozer 1998, 253.
[4]Hirsch 1967; Hirsch 1976.
[5]Vanhoozer 1998, 259-62. "When authors successfully enact their intentions, we can say *meaning accomplished*; when these meanings are brought to bear on other texts and contexts and so achieve perlocutionary effects, we should say *meaning applied*" (Vanhoozer 1998, 262).
[6]Vanhoozer 1998, 303.
[7]Vanhoozer 1998, 312-13.

the text. Second, the *poetic form* requires attention: different literary acts are expressed in different literary forms, and "our main access to what a text is about is the text itself, the form in which the matter is described". At the same time, however, to affirm that certain realities (such as Christ himself) are mediated through texts is not to claim that those realities have no actual existence beyond the text, but simply to accept that certain referents are available only under their textual description.[8] Third, Vanhoozer argues that scripture must be read with its *pedagogical nature and function* in view: in other words, the Bible needs to be read as scripture, as a collection of texts whose intended function is as a guidebook for the believing community. Finally, the text must be read in its canonical context as *a testimony to Jesus Christ*: the realisation that biblical texts all point to the centrality of Christ reveals the "fuller sense" which is the divine intention expressed in the Bible as canon.[9]

Vanhoozer argues that these different levels of meaning cannot all be described by a single interpretive approach. Instead, he calls for "thick description" which recognises the need for a number of complementary interpretive frameworks, each representing a valid insight into a common text.[10] Vanhoozer calls for a "Pentecostal plurality", whereby "the one true interpretation is best approximated by a diversity of particular methods and contexts of reading. [...] Just as many members make up the one body, *so many readings may make up the single correct interpretation*".[11]

As well as functioning as the complex communicative literary acts of their human authors, Vanhoozer argues that biblical texts operate as means of

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[8]Vanhoozer 1998, 313.
[9]Vanhoozer 1998, 263-65.
[10]Vanhoozer 1998, 321-22.
[11]Vanhoozer 1998, 419-20 (author's emphasis).

divine self-communication in two important ways. First, God as "divine author" can intend a fuller meaning than the human authors.[12] This *sensus plenior* or "fuller sense" of biblical texts is discernible by setting them within their canonical context, which taken as "a unified communicative act" represents the embodiment of divine authorial intention:

> to say that the Bible has a "fuller meaning" is to focus on the (divine) author's intended meaning at the level of the *canonical* act. Better said, *the canon as a whole becomes the unified act for which the divine intention serves as the unifying principle*. The divine intention *supervenes* on the intention of the human authors.[13]

Second, Vanhoozer gives the Holy Spirit a crucial role in interpretation. The particular sphere of the Spirit's activity is in the text's perlocutionary effect on readers, and Vanhoozer links this to the theological concept of the Spirit's procession from the other persons of the Trinity: as the Spirit proceeds from the Father and the Son, so the literary act proceeds from its author and perlocution proceeds from illocution.[14] The Spirit's role is to witness to what is other than himself (meaning accomplished) and to bring its significance to bear on the reader (meaning applied).[15]

The Spirit has three particular tasks in relation to individual readers: first, to act as an internal witness that convicts the reader that the Bible is divine as well as human communication; second, to illumine the letter of the text by helping the reader to discern what kind of speech act it is; third, to sanctify the reader, transforming their heart and mind, purging "hermeneutic sin" and conforming their interests to those of the Word.[16] Within the Christian

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[12]Vanhoozer uses the example of Isaiah 53, interpreted as a reference to Christ, to illustrate his point. The "fuller sense" of this passage as having a Christological referent is only discernible when set in the overall context of the Christian canon.

[13]Vanhoozer 1998, 265 (author's emphasis).

[14]Vanhoozer 1998, 410.

[15]Vanhoozer 1998, 413.

[16]Vanhoozer 1998, 413.

community, the Spirit acts as minister of the Word, leading the community into a unified understanding of the literal sense. Vanhoozer stresses that this unified understanding is not, however, uniform but plural, in accord with his call for "Pentecostal plurality":

> Yes, the Spirit is the Spirit of unity, but this unity is both a gift and a task. It is a *vital* union, a harmonious union of many voices, not a unity of unison. It is a dialogical rather than a monological unity. It is, in short, an ethical unity - a unity of love - that welcomes legitimate differences without seeking to reduce them to uniformity.[17]

Vanhoozer's approach is aligned closely with critical realism: he maintains that theories describe things that exist (hence, "realism") and that such theories can be either true or false (hence "critical"). At the same time, however, Vanhoozer insists that theories need not be absolutely correct. Rather, it is enough to say that *some* descriptive frameworks may yield *some* knowledge. Vanhoozer rejects Derridean poststructuralism's argument that language systems are constitutive of reality rather than descriptive of it:

> It is not that our descriptive frameworks *construct* reality, then, but rather that certain aspects of reality only emerge or come to light under particular descriptions. [...] While we inevitably come to the text with an interpretive scheme, it may nevertheless be the text's meaning that comes to us, and not only our own reflection. Our knowledge of what is there - in the world, in the text - though partial, can still be true.[18]

At the same time, however, Vanhoozer sees deconstruction as having a helpful role to play in undermining what he describes as "the idolatry of literary knowledge", that is, the "real danger of mistaking one's interpretation, which is always secondary, contextual, and never ultimate, for the text itself".[19]

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[17]Vanhoozer 1998, 421.
[18]Vanhoozer 1998, 323.
[19]Vanhoozer 1998, 184. Vanhoozer goes so far as to commend Derrida's work as "a standing challenge to interpretive pride" (Vanhoozer 1998, 184).

Vanhoozer's motive in locating meaning in the author's intention and arguing for its determinate nature is to defend the Bible from claims that texts are radically indeterminate or subject to the socio-pragmatic constraints of interpretive communities. Vanhoozer's reliance on speech act theory to define the biblical texts as purposeful, communicative acts mirrors similar attempts by Francis Watson and Anthony Thiselton to bolster the authority of the Bible to challenge and transform its readers.[20] Against the social pragmatism of Stanley Fish, Vanhoozer follows Thiselton in rejecting Fish's assertion that interpretive communities make meaning from texts by both defining textual genres and by imposing rules for their interpretation. Such an argument, Vanhoozer insists, renders the interpretive community immune from textual critique and robs biblical texts of their power to speak, replacing the voice of the text with the reflected voice of the community and leaving the text incapable of functioning as the Word of God *to* the community.[21] The same consequence, Vanhoozer argues, comes from following Derrida's argument that linguistic meaning is intrasystemic and thus fundamentally unstable, indeterminate and dislocated from any external reality:

> The Undoers effectively strip the Bible of any stable meaning so that it cannot state a fact, issue a command, or make a promise. Furthermore, without the author to serve as touchstone of the distinction between meaning and significance, every interpretation becomes just as authorised a version as another. A text that cannot be set over against its commentary is no authority at all. Finally, biblical authority is undermined by the instability of meaning because, if nothing specific is said, the text cannot call for any specific response. Interpreters can give neither obedience nor belief to texts that lack specificity. If there is no meaning in the text, then there is nothing to which the reader can be held accountable.[22]

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[20]See e.g. Thiselton 1992, 272-307; Watson 1997, 71-93. See also Thiselton 1999. Speech act theory has been criticised by both Derrida and Fish (see Derrida 1972; Fish 1980a, 97-111, 197-245), and has generally failed to make much headway as an approach in literary studies, largely because of a perceived inability to deal with the complexities of literary texts (see e.g. Magnusson 1993; Eagleton 1996, 102-04).

[21]Vanhoozer 1998, 170, 182. See also Thiselton 1992, 537-55.

[22]Vanhoozer 1998, 86.

Vanhoozer's model for scripture is potentially very helpful for a confessional critical approach, as may be illustrated by reference to our earlier consideration of narrative criticism. First, Vanhoozer offers a strong model of the biblical text as communication which coheres with narrative criticism's existing text-as-communication model, inherited from Seymour Chatman. Potentially, Vanhoozer provides the theological context and framework which Chatman's model lacked, thus bolstering narrative criticism as a confessional approach. Second, although Vanhoozer insists upon the priority of authorial intention, something which narrative critics have tended to bracket out of their approaches, he accepts that some realities to which biblical texts point are mediated solely by the text, and that therefore a focus upon their poetic form is indispensible. Third, Vanhoozer's call for methodological pluralism validates narrative criticism's role alongside existing historical-critical approaches within a confessional approach to Biblical Studies. Fourth, Vanhoozer resists the implications of radical reader response and deconstruction without disengaging from debate altogether, offering the prospect of a model by means of which confessional interpretive approaches might engage constructively with de-confessional academic interpreters. On the face of it, Vanhoozer would appear to offer narrative criticism exactly the theological and hermeneutical framework it needs to establish itself as a valid confessional-critical interpretive approach.

There are, however, weaknesses in Vanhoozer's model which make it inadequate as a sole resource for a broader confessional approach in postmodern Biblical Studies. First, it is clear that Vanhoozer's prioritisation of the author's intention necessarily subordinates the concerns of the reader to those of the author and this is a major stumbling block for postmodern ethics of interpretation. Whilst Vanhoozer does not make it impossible for readers to

interrogate or to bring their own contextual interests to the text, he does consider such responses inappropriate, given his insistence that proper interpretation lies in discerning the illocutionary force of a text and responding appropriately. For Vanhoozer, the only real meaning is the meaning which the author (divine or human) puts in a text, and every other consideration is secondary. This leads to some problematic ethical reasoning. For instance, Vanhoozer responds to feminist concerns over the apparent misogyny of some biblical texts by seeking to defend the biblical authors from "ethical consequentialism".[23] Vanhoozer argues the need to distinguish between the intended purpose of communication (illocution), the foreseen or desired consequences of communication (perlocution), and unintended or unforseen consequences (accidents):

> The author's communicative act is never the sole causal factor in bringing about a perlocutionary effect. Only the illocutionary, therefore, refers to something intrinsic to the action. Strictly speaking, then, consequences should not be considered part of the internal structure of the action. [...] If the biblical narratives have come to be read as promoting sexism (or racism, for that matter), this should be seen as an unintended consequence of the author's communicative action for which they ought not be held responsible.[24]

Vanhoozer attempts to illustrate his point by analogy. If, for instance, he breaks a glass whilst washing up and is asked what he is doing, the response will not be "breaking glasses". The washing of dishes is the intended result, whilst the breaking of the glass is an unintended consequence. The difference between the two can only be established by establishing the intention of the act. Consequently, Vanhoozer claims, "the best way to avoid interpretive accidents is to attend to authorial intention".[25]

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[23]Vanhoozer 1998, 255.
[24]Vanhoozer 1998, 255.
[25]Vanhoozer 1998, 255.

It seems clear that Vanhoozer is here engaged in special pleading. To use his analogy, he did not mean to break the glass but to wash the dishes, and so should not be held responsible for something he did not intend to do. The act should be judged by its intention and not by its consequences. But this is unreasonable. The glass was not intentionally broken, but it was broken and remains so, and Vanhoozer is the responsible agent. Vanhoozer's claim that only his intention counts in evaluating his action is to evade responsibility for it. By the same token, Vanhoozer attempts to shift the responsibility for readings of the Bible as sexist away from biblical authors and onto feminist interpreters. Vanhoozer accuses them of misreading, blaming the biblical authors for meanings they did not intend and for which they should not be held accountable. "The biblical authors did not intend these texts as sexist," Vanhoozer says, "If you read them as such, then that is your fault for not paying proper attention to what they really meant to say."

The problem with this argument is that, as feminists and ideological critics have pointed out, sexist, racist and other ideologies are generally endemic and, therefore, rarely conscious or intended. A writer may not intend to produce a racist or sexist text but may still do so because the text reflects his or her unthinking prejudices. Sexism and racism are, in effect, structural or cultural sins which are no less sinful because they are unconscious or so prevalent in a community that they are taken for granted. It is not Vanhoozer's insistence that the intention of biblical authors ought to weigh more in the balance of critical evaluation than the unintended consequences of their acts that weakens his argument so much as the necessity, forced on him by his stress of authorial intent as the *only* locus of textual meaning, of dismissing feminist concern as a secondary interest which generates misreadings of the text.

A further weakness of Vanhoozer's argument at this point is that he falls foul of the classic literary-theoretical argument of the "intentional fallacy", which insists that authors' intentions cannot be accessed directly, but only through the medium of the text. Since the text is the outcome of the intention, it is not always possible to judge whether a textual consequence was consciously intended by the author or not. Evaluation of interpretations as perlocutionary effects in light of the author's illocutionary intention is therefore not possible in the absence of external evidence as to what that intention might have been. In the case of most biblical texts our only access to illocutionary intent is through perlocutionary effect, and it is not always possible to distinguish this from interpretive accident or the results of unconscious communication by authors. This renders illocutionary force unreliable as a means of evaluating interpretations.

One alternative response might have been to recognise that, as biblical texts find their way into new contexts, the limitations imposed upon them by their original contexts of production become apparent. As the Spirit leads the community of faith into a fuller realisation of the truth, it is sometimes necessary to recognise that the biblical texts were written in particular cultures, and that they will therefore sometimes reflect the endemic sins of those cultures. The response of the community should, therefore, be charitable but not uncritical: one can accept a text as well-meaning, judging it ultimately by its intention, at the same time as identifying and rejecting some of the cultural baggage which comes with it. Vanhoozer's emphasis on determinate meaning forces him into an either/or response when a both/and solution might have been more helpful. As it is, Vanhoozer's location of meaning in authorial intention poses a problem for his interpretive ethics and limits the usefulness of his approach in establishing constructive dialogue with de-confessional approaches.

A second problem with Vanhoozer's hermeneutics is his depiction of the role of the Holy Spirit in interpretation, which in trinitarian terms is arguably subordinationist. Vanhoozer sees the roles of Father and Son as bound up with the production of meaning, with the Father as author or motivating force, and the Son as the Word or the incarnate means of communication, but the Spirit is allowed only a secondary role in enabling the reader and the faith community to respond to the biblical text and understand its significance. This is not to suggest that Vanhoozer has misidentified the Spirit's role in interpretation, but rather that he has been led to undervalue it by his emphasis on the importance of authorial intent for biblical authority. If, on the other hand, a robust trinitarian theology would want to avoid any suggestion of subordinationism and insist that Father, Son and Spirit are co-equal in all things, it is arguable that the Spirit's activity in interpretation is equally as important, and that Vanhoozer's definition of meaning is therefore rendered deficient through ascribing the production of meaning to two persons of the Trinity rather than to the Trinity as a whole. If the production of meaning is the activity of the Godhead, then the creation of meaning in the mind of the reader by the Spirit must be considered an equal and integral part of that divine activity. Reader response to the biblical texts, therefore, must be given full consideration in any model of divine self-communication through scripture, rather than being seen as a secondary and derivative activity.[26]

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[26] Although it is beyond the scope of this thesis, it would be worth asking the question of the impact of Vanhoozer's understanding of the role of the Holy Spirit in interpretation on a doctrine of biblical inspiration. Vanhoozer identifies the role of the Spirit in relation to the reader, as enabling the reader to receive the perlocutionary force of the biblical text. A doctrine of inspiration must also, however, find some role for the Spirit in the creation of the text, and Vanhoozer appears not to address this.

Stephen E. Fowl: Scripture, Spirit and Community in Dialectic Relationship

A counterpoint to Vanhoozer is the work of Stephen E. Fowl, whose book *Engaging Scripture: A Model for Theological Interpretation* (1998) offers a corrective to Vanhoozer's model.[27] Fowl raises objections to the kind of determinate interpretation that Vanhoozer advocates. Locating meaning within the text is to see meaning as a property *of* the text, uncoverable through the application of particular interpretive procedures:

> On this view, the biblical text is seen as a relatively stable element in which an author inserts, hides or dissolves (choose your metaphor) meaning. The task of the interpreter, whether lay, clerical, or professional, is to dig out, uncover or distill the meaning of the text.[28]

The problem with the search for meaning, however, is that different approaches have different conceptions of what the meaning of a text might be. Historical criticism, for instance, argues that the meaning of the Bible lies primarily 'behind the text', either in the historical events to which the biblical narratives refer, or in the intention of the author or authors. Formalist criticism has tended to argue that meaning is 'in the text', encoded or embodied in the literary form of narratives which, whilst not necessarily referentially true, nevertheless present a true vision of human-divine relationships. Reader response critics, meanwhile, insist that meaning lies 'in front of the text', in the interaction of text and reader, where meaning is created when the text is brought to life in the reader's context in such a way as to illuminate the reader's situation. Disagreements over meaning and where it is to be found have, as we have seen, been a particular problem for first-generation narrative criticism, which carefully bracketed out issues behind and in front of the text, and which stressed the importance of meanings located within the text itself.

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[27]Fowl 1998.
[28]Fowl 1998, 34.

As a result, narrative criticism attracted sometimes vitriolic criticism from both historical and ideological critics, who insisted that narrative critics were looking for meaning in the wrong place.

Fowl's argument, which we noted in chapter two, is that in the postmodern pluralist context the term 'meaning' has become so indeterminate that it should be abandoned altogether in favour of the framing of interpretive approaches in terms of their interpretive interests. Fowl anticipates that such framing may help dissolve some interpretive issues, but does not anticipate that it will resolve disputes altogether.[29] Instead, he suggests that such disputes can be relocated and reframed so as to generate more positive results than have previously been achieved. In particular, the redefinition of interpretive approaches in terms of interests helps to avoid some otherwise problematic issues. For instance, a view of meaning as determinate forces interpreters into a view of the history of Christian interpretation as a history of failure: if a determinate meaning is available, and if we have not achieved consensus on what that meaning is, then attempts to define it to date must have been failures.[30]

Fowl rejects the suggestion that abandonment of meaning in favour of interests leads to interpretive anarchy or indeterminacy: indeed, he resists Derridean anti-determinate interpretation on ethical grounds, and proposes instead an "underdetermined" approach to interpretation framed in terms of interpretive interests. Such an approach will take into account vital contextual

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[29]Vanhoozer agrees with Fowl that "Much confusion could indeed be eliminated if interpreters would stop speaking of meaning and instead say what exactly they are describing (or prescribing) and why" (Vanhoozer 1998, 328), but sees this as operating within the context of his pluralist approach to the literal meaning of the text. To acknowledge a number of legitimate interests in anything other than the authorial intention of the text would, in Vanhoozer's view, threaten the authority of the Bible by taking a step too far in the direction of relativism.

[30]Fowl 1998, 33-40.

considerations in interpretation which text-centred approaches to biblical 'meaning' have overlooked:

> theological conviction, ecclesial practices, and communal and social concerns should shape and be shaped by biblical interpretation. [...] for Christians, at least, biblical interpretation will be the occasion of a complex interaction between the biblical text and the varieties of theological, moral, material, political, and ecclesial concerns that are part of the day-to-day lives of Christians struggling to live faithfully before God in the contexts in which they find themselves.[31]

Fowl anticipates the objection that to abandon determinate meaning and focus instead on contextual factors in interpretation reduces biblical interpretation to the socio-pragmatic exercise advocated by Fish, in which the Bible loses its power to transform readers and communities. Fowl notes the importance of resisting the temptation simply to use the Bible to underwrite sinful practices embedded in the reader's interpretive context, and suggests two key factors in avoiding such readings: first, the Christian community must be vigilant, reflective, aware of their own sinfulness and open to external critique;[32] and second, the Christian community must be able to interpret scripture in tune with the Holy Spirit, to whom he attributes a much more significant role than Vanhoozer.

Fowl argues on the basis of Jesus' farewell discourse in John 13-17, that the role of the Spirit is twofold: first, he will help the disciples remember what they have been taught (14:26); and second, he will guide the disciples into further truth (16:12-15).[33] Fowl argues with reference to John 2:22 and 12:16,

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[31]Fowl 1998, 60. Fowl has elsewhere argued that "The ways in which people read and write texts are decisively shaped by material circumstances and by the kinds of people they are and hope to become. Interpretation, like ethics, requires attention to particular conceptions of communities in which people learn to read and write texts and learn to become this or that sort of person" (Fowl and Jones 1991, 20-21).

[32]Fowl 1998, 62-96. Fowl's insights on the characteristics of virtuous reading communities are fundamental to the formation of a Christian ethics of interpretation, and we will return to them later.

[33]Fowl 1998, 99.

where the disciples remember and understand both scripture and Jesus' teaching after his death and resurrection, that the Spirit's role in reminding believers of what they have been taught is actually guidance in interpretation of scripture in the light of Jesus' death and resurrection. Changing circumstances lead to old words being understood in new ways, and Fowl sees this as the "more" that the Spirit speaks whilst simultaneously leading the disciples to "abide in the true vine". Hence, believers will interpret scripture in light of their experience and in tune with the Spirit, leading them to act in ways that are both new and, at the same time, in continuity with the past.[34]

Fowl develops his argument by means of an extended analysis of the Spirit's role and the church's use of scripture in Acts 10-15 and, later, in Paul's letter to the Galatians.[35] The process of discernment whereby Gentiles are admitted into the community of faith reveals, for Fowl, a complex and dialectical relationship between discernment of the activity of the Spirit in the church's experience and the guidance of the Spirit in relating that experience to scripture. Most importantly, and contrary to many modern interpretive presumptions which assume that scriptural interpretation precedes communal praxis, Fowl observes a pattern whereby "experience of the Spirit's work provides the lenses through which scripture is read rather than vice-versa".[36] Fowl warns, however, against taking this as an abstract hermeneutical rule. Rather, he suggests that the practice of interpretation depicted in Acts and Galatians is a complex one which takes place in the context of a community sensitive both to the Spirit's work in their own lives and in their wider context, and open to the guidance of the Spirit in their interpretation of scripture. Within that community, scripture and Spirit activity interpret one another:

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[34]Fowl 1998, 101.
[35]Fowl 1998, 101-13, 137-45.
[36]Fowl 1998, 114.

> Understanding and interpreting the Spirit's movement is a matter of communal debate and discernment over time. This debate and discernment is itself often shaped both by prior interpretations of scripture and by traditions of practice and belief. This means that in practice it is probably difficult, if not impossible, to separate and determine clearly whether a community's scriptural interpretation is prior to or dependent upon a community's experience of the Spirit. Experience of the Spirit shapes the reading of scripture, but scripture most often provides the lenses through which the Spirit's work is perceived and acted upon.[37]

The dynamic of interpretation within the Spirit-led community, Fowl suggests, is not one-way, such that interpretation of scripture is primary and application is secondary. Rather, scripture provides a conceptual framework for recognising the Spirit's activity, which is then in turn brought to bear upon the community's understanding of scripture in such a way as potentially to transform it. This means that close attention to the Spirit's action in the world and the community is essential if interpretation is to operate properly.[38] It is not sufficient, Fowl argues, to concentrate attention only on what God says in scripture. Rather, attention to the Word of God in scripture must go hand in hand with attention to what the Spirit of God is doing in the context of the reading community.[39]

Fowl's analysis of Acts 15 closely parallels a similar interpretation by John Christopher Thomas, whose interest is in using the passage to construct a

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[37]Fowl 1998, 114.

[38]Fowl 1998, 115.

[39] Vanhoozer has argued that Fowl's approach confuses the meaning of the text with textual effects (Vanhoozer 1998, 410). Vanhoozer queries whether effects which are unintended by the text should be considered to be textual meanings, wonders how Spirit-guided interpretive practice can be distinguished from mundane, and worries how Fowl's approach can avoid reducing "It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us" (Acts 15:28) to a Fishian "It seemed good to us". Fowl's suggestion, for Vanhoozer, provides too few checks on what counts as valid or legitimate interpretation, and undermines the authority of the biblical texts by emphasising the interpretive authority of the reading community (Vanhoozer 1998, 410-12).

model for Pentecostal hermeneutics.[40] Thomas finds in Acts 15 a number of interpretive factors and dynamics which resonate with the experience of Pentecostal interpreting communities, in particular the interpretive movement from experience to scripture rather than the other way around.[41] Thomas first notes the importance in Acts of the community as the context for interpretation. The community is both the place where the Spirit acts and where testimony regarding God's activity is offered, assessed, accepted or rejected. The community is also a check to interpretation, offering balance, accountability and support but also guarding against "rampant individualism and uncontrolled subjectivism".[42] Second, Thomas argues that the Spirit's role in interpretation in Acts 15 goes far beyond classic accounts of the Spirit's role in "illumination": the Spirit creates the context for interpretation through his actions and, consequently, guides the church in determining which texts are most relevant in a given situation and clarifies how they might best be approached.[43]

Thomas insists that the Spirit's role in interpretation is much greater than simply facilitating the communication of the text's literal meaning to the reader. Rather, through his activity in and through church and text, the Spirit enables scripture to function dynamically, "making necessary a more intensive engagement with the text in order to discover its truths in ways that transcend

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[40]Thomas 2000. This essay is based upon an earlier one in which Thomas applied his hermeneutic based upon Acts 15 to the question of the inclusion of women in the life of the church (Thomas 1994). Some Pentecostals have been quite enthusiastic about postmodernity as a hermeneutical context (see, for instance, Archer 1996). Fowl does not appear to be aware of Thomas' work, which makes the similarity of their analysis all the more suggestive.
[41]Thomas 2000, 113.
[42]Thomas 2000, 119.
[43]Thomas 2000, 119.

the mere cognitive".[44] Finally, however, Thomas insists that placing a higher emphasis upon contextual factors in interpretation does not undermine biblical authority because the text continues to exercise a normative function against which experience is measured and in the light of which practices or views can be evaluated.[45]

Fowl and Thomas together demonstrate that a model like Vanhoozer's, which focusses primarily upon meaning-in-the-text as the locus for understanding the Bible as scripture, does not do sufficient justice to the full range of divine activity in and through scripture. Ethical and contextual issues which Vanhoozer considers secondary are actually primary issues to many of those who seek to interpret the Bible in the context of believing communities, and Fowl and Thomas' emphasis on the interaction of scripture, Spirit and community seeks to correct that imbalance. At the same time, however, Vanhoozer's work provides a solid foundation both in stressing that any understanding of the Bible as scripture must be firmly rooted in a doctrine of God's trinitarian activity in and through the text, and also in pointing out that a confessional approach must be multi-faceted in order to do justice to the complex nature of the Bible as communicative text. Vanhoozer thus sets out the parameters for a strongly confessional approach which is nevertheless committed to operating in a pluralistic context.

The weaknesses of Vanhoozer's argument lie not in what he affirms but in what he denies or underemphasises, particularly the role of the Holy Spirit in

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[44]Thomas 2000, 119.

relation to readers and interpretive contexts. Fowl and Thomas' emphasis upon the importance of reading contexts and communities, and upon the dialectical nature of the relationship between Spirit-led experience and scriptural interpretation offers the potential for reframing and broadening Vanhoozer's model to include a wider range of interpretive interests, thus rendering it more capable of responding to de-confessional interpretive approaches. In doing so, however, it will be important to attempt to hold Fowl and Vanhoozer's distinct emphases in tension: if Fowl is helpful in preventing biblical interpretation from becoming a textual monologue, Vanhoozer is also right to resist suggestions that it should be readers who make all the conversation. A balanced but polyvalent model for scripture must attempt to hold both poles in tension.

Towards a Pluralist Model for Scriptural Interpretation

Having examined the approaches and differing emphases of Fowl and Vanhoozer, and having noted their respective strengths, is it possible to work with both in defining a theoretical/theological model for confessional biblical criticism? Such a model would meet the criteria for a postmodern Christian description of scripture which we set out at the beginning of this chapter: first, reflecting the church's experience of the Bible as a means by which God speaks to the community; and, second, acknowledging the pragmatic reality of multivalence in interpretation. On the face of it, Vanhoozer would seem to offer the first criterion and Fowl and Thomas the second.

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[45]Thomas 2000, 119-20.

Scott David Foutz has argued that the hermeneutics of Fowl and Vanhoozer are incompatible on the grounds that Vanhoozer bases his approach upon the nature of the text whilst Fowl begins from an understanding of the work of the Spirit in the context of reading.[46] These disparate foundations, Foutz argues, mean that it is not possible to hold to both hermeneutics simultaneously. I agree that Vanhoozer's definition of meaning as authorial and text-immanent is defined in opposition to a contextual emphasis such as Fowl advocates. I would suggest, however, that Fowl's model is capable of incorporating Vanhoozer's when Vanhoozer's definition of textual meaning is reframed in Fowl's terms of interpretive interests. When this is done, Vanhoozer's argument for the exclusive location of meaning in the text is revealed to be a bid for the prioritisation of text-centred interpretive interests. Such prioritisation is to be resisted in the interests of preserving the legitimacy of a wider range of interpretive approaches than Vanhoozer allows.

Confessional criticism, therefore, should follow Vanhoozer's argument that a multi-faceted model for scripture is required, but frame that model in broader terms than Vanhoozer concedes. This broader model will do fuller justice to the breadth and depth of the communicative activity for which the biblical texts provide a focus, but in which readers and contexts have significant roles to play. The broadening of Vanhoozer's model allows his distinctive insight to be affirmed, but not at the expense of other interests. Such reframing compensates for the weaknesses of Vanhoozer's approach whilst retaining its

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[46]Foutz 1999.

strengths, especially his insistence upon a strong theological foundation for confessional hermeneutics, and also better fits a confessional approach to the Bible as scripture for life in an academic environment where it will be forced to interact with de-confessional approaches.

Vanhoozer's model is valuable in acknowledging that the biblical text is a multivalent communicative act which needs to be interpreted using a number of interpretive frameworks, but the description is unhelpfully limited in its definition of meaning.[47] I would suggest that Vanhoozer's description of textual meaning as propositional, poetic, pedagogical and canonical needs to be supplemented and developed so as to include a broader range of interpretive interests than he allows. One way of doing this might be to draw upon a model framed by the Russian Formalist and structuralist theorist Roman Jakobson.[48] Jakobson argues that any linguistic act has six essential elements.[49] At the heart of the act is a *message* initiated by an *addresser* and directed to an *addressee*. In addition, however, the message requires a means of *contact* between addresser and addressee; a *code* which is comprehensible by both parties; and a *context* understood by both addresser and addressee, which enables the message to make sense (i.e. what the message is *about*). In

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[47] A. K. M. Adam has argued that the linking of the Holy Trinity to the interpretive triad of Author, Text and Reader which Vanhoozer attempts "in a sort of literary *vestigium trinitatis*" fails to account for the possibility that the constitutive elements of interpretation number more that three, and suggests that the contexts of author and reader ought to be included. Adam also points out that numbers other than three carry theological significance within Christian tradition, and suggests that the argument from triunity "should be granted ornamental, not probative, force" (Adam 2004, 36).

[48] Jakobson 1960. For overview and assessment of Jakobson's work see Culler 1975, 54-74; Hawkes 1983, 76-87; Kidder 1993. Against anticipated poststructuralist allegations that Jakobson's model is out of date, it should be stated that any model is helpful as long as its uses outweigh its limitations, and that those limitations are open to evaluation for as long as the model remains only a model and does not become an absolute paradigm.

[49] Jakobson 1960, 353.

the case of Paul's letter to the Galatians, for example, the *message* is the urging of Paul as *addresser* of the Galatians as *addressees* to remain in the grace of God and not revert to the constraints of the law; the *code* by means of which the message is communicated is Greek; the *contact* is the paper and ink of the letter itself; and the *context* is the church's ongoing struggle to discern the appropriate response to the inclusion of gentiles within the church.

Terence Hawkes makes two important observations about Jakobson's model.[50] First, he observes that the *message*, or propositional content of the communication, is not the whole meaning. All of the elements must be taken into account if the communicative act is to be understood as a whole. This suggests that Vanhoozer's model of textual meaning should be expanded to include aspects of Jakobson's model which Vanhoozer omits or subordinates as secondary concerns.

Second, Hawkes argues that meaning is "not a stable, predetermined entity which passes, untrammelled, from sender to receiver".[51] The reason for this is that the six elements of communication are never in perfect balance. In different contexts, one or other is likely to dominate, and this will affect the nature of the communication as a whole. Each element therefore performs a particular function: the elements *addresser, message, addressee, code, contact* and *context* correspond to the *emotive, poetic, conative, metalingual, phatic* and *referential* functions respectively. Hence, if the burden of the communication is to the effect that "I feel sad," the crucial element will be the

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[50]Hawkes 1983, 83-84.

emotional state of the addresser, and the emotive function will be dominant. Similarly, if the purpose of communicating is to ask "Can you read my handwriting?" then the orientation of the communication is towards the contact, and the dominant function will be phatic.

It is arguable that Jakobson's model provides a fuller account of the biblical text as communicative act than Vanhoozer's. In addition, however, although Jakobson's model was designed for the categorisation of different kinds of communicative acts, it also offers a helpful way of categorising interpretive interests.[52] Hence, biblical linguists attempting to compile dictionaries of biblical Hebrew and Greek may approach the text with a *metalingual* interest in its linguistic code. Similarly, a biblical historian interested in reconstructing the context of pre-exilic temple worship from the Books of Kings and Chronicles will pursue a *referential* interest in the context of the text's production.

Some approaches, of course, will address more than a single aspect of the Bible as a communicative act, and a confessional narrative criticism would fall into this category. Narrative critics are interested in the *poetic* function of biblical narratives in that they are interested in the way biblical narratives communicate through their literary form; they are also interested in the *conative* function of scripture as a communication which forms and transforms its readers; and as a confessional approach they are interested in the

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[51]Hawkes 1983, 84.

[52]Mark G. Brett has also offered a model for categorising interpretive interests (Brett 1990), but his model is addressed to, and operates almost entirely within, historical-critical scholarship.

referential function of biblical narratives which point beyond themselves and reveal the reality of divine-human relationships.

There is, however, one potential difficulty with Jakobson's model when applied to the Bible, and that is in relation to the *referential* function of biblical texts. The difficulty is that the context of the biblical authors as addressers and contemporary biblical readers as addressees do not coincide, either temporally or culturally. This has led to a fundamental disjunction in the minds of many interpreters between what the text *meant* and what the text *means*.[53] The absence of a common context for communication appears to threaten the viability of the communicative act, and it is precisely this contextual gap which many ideological critics have seized upon to deny the relevance or authority of the Bible for the contemporary situation. The biblical texts, it is argued, do not actually address us at all. Instead, they are 'dead letters', the echoes of conversations long past, decontextualised artefacts of culture which modern readers can do with as they will.[54]

This contextual disjunction arises in part because modern literary theory lacks any metaphysical context. As a result of presuppositions that the only facts capable of critical evaluation are those which can be empirically verified, or

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[53] See e.g. Stendahl 1962 for an influential argument on this basis.

[54] This is to say that modern readers are not the intended addressees of biblical texts, and that as such, modern readers should not feel bound by any sense of responsibility either to the text or to the author. Francis Watson has attempted to counter this argument by stressing a key aspect of texts as *written* communicative acts: namely, that "their effect may be indefinitely extended in space and in time", and that this continuation into an open future is intended in the act of writing itself (Watson 1997, 119-20). In other words, biblical texts are not dead letters but open ones, whose literary forms enable them to extend their horizons beyond those of their authors, even if such extension is beyond the author's control. Were this not the case, they would have nothing to say to readers in contexts other than those for which they were produced.

that truth can be understood exclusively in terms of human experience, literary models for textual meaning will tend to look for that meaning *within* the process of textual formation and communication. If, however, Jakobson's model is applied to the Bible as *scripture* and seen within the framework of a trinitarian theology, then the difficulty is potentially eased. Whilst it must be acknowledged that the cultural and historical contexts of biblical authors and readers are diverse, those separate contexts exist within the broader context of a world itself created, defined and sustained by the activity of God the Trinity. Vanhoozer's insistence upon a trinitarian hermeneutics thus comes into play: God facilitates communication by setting the parameters for it, and insofar as the Bible is a means of divine communication, such communication is not threatened by divergent cultural contexts *provided that* God is seen to be active by the Holy Spirit in both the context of textual production and the context of textual reception and interpretation. Neither the author nor the reader, both of whom are part of the process of communication, are the originators of meaning, nor is it inherent in the text. Rather, because the communicative act takes place within the wider context of a created order in which God is omnipresent and in which the Holy Spirit is constantly operative, then any and all aspects of the text as comunication may serve as loci of meaning or, better put, conveyors of truth, at different times and in different situations.

This is not to say that cultural and historical differences are not potential problems for communication, or to minimise the dangers of inadvertently or uncritically misreading or misappropriating ethical or theological concepts

because of cultural, historical or linguistic ignorance. Nor does it imply that study of ancient middle eastern culture and language is not essential if we are to understand anything of the Bible at all. Rather, it is to argue only that the divergence of authorial and reading contexts does not render the interpretation of scripture as the Word of God hopelessly problematic. A strong pneumatological doctrine of inspiration is essential here: the Spirit who inspires and enables the production of biblical texts is the same Spirit who indwells and inspires biblical readers, and enables them to interpret the biblical texts as the Word of God.

If Jakobson's model enhances Vanhoozer's, it also offers a helpful means of locating interpretive interests in the Bible as scripture within the range of confessional approaches. Fowl is, I believe, correct in his analysis of the breakdown of 'meaning' as a term with broad currency in Biblical Studies, and his assertion that it can no longer be assumed that all interpreters are in search of the same thing when they talk about meaning. In response to this, I would suggest that confessional criticism should reframe its interpretive goals not in terms of meaning but *in terms of interests in textual truth*. Ceasing to be able to say definitively "This is what the text means" is not the same as no longer being able to say things about the text which are true, or to resist assertions about the text which are untrue. On the contrary, definition of approach in terms of interpretive interest facilitates a fuller exploration and understanding of multi-faceted and polyvalent textual truth.[55] Hence,

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[55] This is to argue not for the abolition of meaning as a concept, but for a maximalised conception which sees meaning as the fullness of the complete communicative act. This encompasses not only authors, texts and readers, but also contexts of textual production and interpretation in which God is active, and to whose self-revealing activity both biblical authors

historical-critical scholarship seeks the truth of the events behind the biblical texts or the history of textual composition by focussing on the text's historical referential function or by specialised focus on metalingual aspects; formalist or literary-rhetorical approaches seek the truth of the texts' poetic form and their semantic and literary structure as communicative acts by engaging poetic and metalingual functions of the text; reader response critics seek to understand the truth of how the biblical texts interact with readers by examining the interaction of poetic and conative functions. In each of these areas there are truths to be discerned, but they are of different kinds and orders. As long as the whole model is kept in view, it is possible to assert an interest in particular kinds of textual truth and to put forward interpretations which reveal that truth more fully, without falling into the temptation to claim that one has come into exclusive possession of all truth about the text. Reframing the search for meaning as a search for textual truth frees interpretive approaches to be themselves, pursuing their own interests using the most appropriate methods, whilst at the same time affirming and valuing the interests and scholarship of others.

Interpretive interest offers a helpful tool for interpreters seeking to operate within a pluralist context. As Fowl suggests, defining one's interest may help to defuse interpretive dispute by revealing that certain interests are not as

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and readers bear witness through the functions of a biblical text which itself serves as a vehicle of God's self-communication. Put another way, this is to argue that meaning is not to be located exclusively within the communicative act, but in the act in context. The meaning of the Bible is not *in* the text but *through* the text: God chooses to use the Bible in order to reveal truths about his relationship with the world he has made, and with authors and readers who exist within that divinely-determined context. The meaning of scripture in a Christian context is that it bears witness to the activity of God outside itself, and it is that activity which provides the essential context for its inspiration and legitimate interpretation.

incompatible as might have been thought, but by the same token a clear definition and declaration of interest may reveal previously hidden tensions and conflicts of interest, enabling them to be addressed and, hopefully, resolved. It is possible, however, that categorising interests in different ways may be helpful. For instance, as suggested above, declaring that one's broad interest lies behind the text, in the text or in front of the text might helpfully define areas of interest within Biblical Studies and remove the need for intradisciplinary sniping and skirmishing between interpretive paradigms. If it is accepted that each interest is of value, then scholars can get on with pursuing their interpretive aims and not waste time and energy fighting one another for possession of the discipline.

Furthermore, talk of interests may help to adjudicate disputes between different interpretive interests. Daniel Patte has suggested that a key criterion in negotiating between differing interpretive perspectives is the distinction between *legitimacy* and *validity*. *Legitimacy* is a reflection on the extent to which a given reading engages with an aspect or feature of the text. Patte draws upon the work of Mieke Bal and A. J. Greimas to argue that any given text can be conceived of as a plurality of distinct "meaning-producing dimensions", any one of which can provide the basis for a coherent reading of the text. Texts are not simple and one-dimensional but complex multi-dimensional puzzles, whose pieces can be arranged into several different coherent meanings.[56] Different readers, with their differing interests and locations, will engage with different dimensions, and thus produce a wide

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[56]Patte 1995b, 98.

range of meanings, readings and interpretations, all of which are legitimate if they engage with a genuine dimension of the text.[57]

Many arguments about legitimacy in interpretation (i.e. the correct interpretation of the text) are, in fact, arguments about the *validity* of interpretations (i.e. interpretation of the text in the light of particular concerns or interests):

> many of our rejections of ordinary readings as illegitimate are actually rejections of the interests and concerns that govern those readings. This is not a judgement about legitimacy. This is a judgement about *validity*, that is, about the value of being interested in one meaning-producing dimension of the text rather than another.[58]

Validity, for Patte, reflects the "interested" character of exegesis and the contextual nature of interpretation. Readings have value in that they seek to address particular problems or affirm the particular interests of a community of interpreters.[59] Arguments about validity are therefore less arguments over the text and more disagreements about the concerns or interests which underpin a particular interpretation.

Patte's distinction is helpful in clarifying interpretive disputes and differences. It is possible, for instance, to acknowledge another person's reading as legitimate (that is, to recognise that it brings a reasonable concern, interest or

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[57]Patte 1995b, 28. Patte draws especially upon Bal 1988b, in which she demonstrates the applicability of different interpretative "codes" to the story of Sisera in Judges 4 and 5. Bal argues that the application of different codes produces different legitimate readings, and that this means that no one interpretation can claim a monopoly of interpretative truth in relation to that particular narrative. In his article "The Contextual Character of Male, European-American Critical Exegeses", Patte uses the analogy of the black-and-white picture commonly used in psychological studies which can be perceived either as a goblet or as two persons looking at each other. Both images are in the picture, but the pictures perceived by different viewers will be radically different (Patte 1995a, 52).

[58]Patte 1995b, 101.

question to the text and engages seriously and appropriately with the evidence of the text itself), without at the same time accepting the validity of the reading (that is, to accept the other reader's assessment of the importance or significance of their interpretation). Taking Jakobson's model as a framework, for instance, narrative critics may acknowledge the legitimacy of historical-criticism's referential interests in the biblical texts whilst at the same time rejecting the suggestion that historical-critical approaches are universally valid for understanding all functions of the text. It is possible to seek the factual truth of the historical events depicted in biblical narratives, to seek the truth of how the text depicts divine-human relationships in its literary form, and to seek the truth of whether the Exodus narrative or Jesus' advice to turn the other cheek provide helpful theological and ethical resources for communities living under oppression or persecution *at the same time*.

The gain of moving from talk of meaning to talk of interpretive interests is that the value of each interpretive interest can be appreciated without its necessarily being seen as in competition with the others. As we have seen with Vanhoozer, the problem with the use of 'meaning' as a definitive concept in defining critical approaches to the Bible is that by claiming to find the meaning of a text in one area of study one immediately makes a claim for the prioritisation of that approach at the expense of others.[60] A logical conclusion which might be drawn from Vanhoozer's emphasis upon illocutionary intention, for instance, is that if what the text means is what the author intends it to mean, then that is where most interpretive resources and energy should be

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[59]Patte 1995a, 47.

expended. Anyone interested in some other aspect of the text is not interested in what the text *means*, but in something secondary and therefore, by definition, less important.[61]

Stephen Fowl addresses this point by sketching the range of interpretive interests in the life of a twelfth-century French monk:

> As part of his daily prayer, both communal and personal, he reads (and interprets!) The Psalms. In the course of his daily work he lectures on Psalms at the university of Paris. Being a gifted artist, he is also illuminating a manuscript of the Psalms. On Sundays he preaches from Psalms. All of these activities involve interpretation, but they cannot all fit under a single determinate theory of interpretation. If one privileges the interpretation done in the university, for example, claiming that it provides "the meaning" of the text, what is one to say about these other interpretive activities?[62]

By contrast, Fowl argues, dealing with each activity in terms of interpretive interest allows each activity to be both clearly explained and evaluated without the differing activities competing.

In qualification of the foregoing, it is important to stress that reducing competition between interests does not mean that all interests are equal. In the case of the monk, Fowl argues, there was probably an order of interests based upon contextual factors such as doctrinal, moral, ecclesial and communal concerns, themselves contingent upon a specific time and place, and upon his

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[60] Patte describes the elevation of one interpretive interest over others as "idolatry", "taking as absolute what is not absolute" (Patte 1995b, 25).

[61] This is not to say that Vanhoozer thinks that secondary considerations are unimportant. As a Christian scholar, Vanhoozer would want to say that application of the text to the life situations of contemporary readers is an essential activity. The logic of his argument, however, requires the subordination of reader interests to authorial interests in such a way as to endanger the ability of some biblical texts to speak to contexts which their authorial horizons did not envisage.

[62] Fowl 1998, 37.

participation in a particular interpretive community. In the same way, it is reasonable that contemporary Christian interpretive communities will seek to order their interpretive interests according to their perceived needs.[63] It would be legitimate for the Christian community to regard some interests as less important, unimportant, unneccesary or even irrelevant. What would be unreasonable would be for Christians to attempt to impose their interpretive values and interests upon others. It is precisely this situation which has given rise to much of the hostility which Christian interpretation faces within the academy.[64]

It is also important to note that the validity of interpretive approaches need not be absolute or universal: an interest may be accepted as valid without being allowed to dominate interpretation. For instance, a confessional narrative critic might well affirm the legitimacy of a non-confessional feminist approach to Jesus' encounter with the Samaritan woman in John 4 in terms of the seriousness of the concern which the feminist brings to the text and the appropriateness of the critical analysis applied to produce a feminist interpretation. The narrative critic may also affirm the validity of the feminist

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[63] Charles H. Cosgrove has offered a fourfold model for guiding considerations in choosing between competing plausible interpretations of scripture (Cosgrove 2004b): theological considerations assess interpretations against the standard of accepted norms of faith; moral considerations set interpretations against ethical standards which rest upon Jesus' principle of double love in Matthew 22:34-40; correlational criteria seek to assess the profundity and relevance of an interpretation to the lives of Christians and their communities; and ecumenical considerations seek interpretations which can be as broadly inclusive as possible. These criteria would also serve as a working model for prioritisation and adjudication of interpretive interests within Christian communities and for approaches coming into the community from outside.

[64]This is not to say that Christians cannot attempt to convince others of the validity of their interpretive interests. Rather, it is unethical to attempt, either covertly or overtly, to place someone in a position whereby they adopt interpretive strategies which force them to read *against their own interests* - for instance, as many feminists such as Cheryl Exum report they have been forced to do (e.g. Exum 1996, 28, 89). This needs to be qualified from the Christian point of view by the observation that prevalent human sin means that what an interpreter may believe to be in their interests may in fact not be. This means that from a Christian perspective it is quite ethical to attempt to persuade another reader to adopt an interpretive approach on the grounds that it is *in their interest* to do so, provided that it is their interests and not only one's own that motivates the persuasion. The importance of negotiating interpretive interests will be addressed in detail in chapter six.

insight that the structure of the narrative places the woman in a subordinate position to Jesus, and that this might in some contexts be construed as an excuse to subordinate women to men within the church. The narrative critic may, however, reject this feminist reading as having a definitive significance for Christian interpretation, providing the dominant reading which defines the way in which the Christian community will respond to the narrative. Acknowledging the validity of the reading does not necessarily give it normative force.

Broadly speaking, the distinction between legitimacy and validity is also a distinction between *methodological* and *ideological* or *theological* interests. Interpreters with differing ideological interests may find agreement over critical method, if only temporarily. The confessional narrative critic, for instance, might agree that the non-confessional feminist critic's analysis of Jesus' encounter with the Samaritan woman provides a full account of the literary dynamics of the text, whilst adopting a completely opposing ideological stance in relation to the sexism which the feminist perceives to be embedded in the text. Again, defining interests in this way helps to clarify both points of agreement and disagreement without necessitating battles over what the text actually *means*.

Understanding the Bible as Authoritative Scripture in a Pluralist Context

Having established that a pluralist model for biblical interpretation is theoretically viable and serves the needs of Christian academics in a postmodern context, it is necessary to ask whether such a model also enables the Bible to function within the confessing community as scripture – that is, as

a means of divine communication and an authority for Christian belief and behaviour. One objection to a broad interpretive pluralism from a Christian point of view is that such a model may threaten to undermine the Bible's authoritative status. Fowl and Thomas, as we have seen, seek to place greater emphasis than Vanhoozer on the role of the Spirit and interpreting communities of readers, which Vanhoozer considers secondary to the priority of divine and authorial intention within the text. Vanhoozer's methodological stance, however, is fuelled by a theological desire to protect biblical authority: Vanhoozer needs to locate meaning in the text by means of authorial intention because he also locates *authority* within the text by virtue of that same intention, and identifies the meaning as the basis for the authority. For Vanhoozer, the meaning and authority of the text are logically prior to readings of the text in specific contexts, and therefore the primary focus of biblical interpretation should be on the text and not on readers. To elevate reader interests to the same level of priority as the literal sense of the text is to risk subordinating the text's interests to those of the reader.

On one level, Fowl appears to be open to this accusation. His insistence that meaning and ideology are not properties of the text appear to reflect an interpretive model in which the text is emptied of substance and prey to the whims of readers. But this is not what Fowl intends: rather, he seeks a model in which textual and contextual concerns *mutually* inform. For Fowl, scripture is a crucial outside voice which serves as a governing factor in the life of the church as interpreting community, potentially preventing the church from indulging in interpretive practices which simply reinforce its own interests and prejudices:

> to read Scripture over-against ourselves is to allow it to challenge our presuppositions and established interpretations. To allow Scripture to be an outsider is to recognise that this side of the Kingdom our

interpretations are provisional, always open to revision. The aim of treating Scripture as an outsider, however, is not interpretive paralysis. Rather, the goal of seeing Scripture as an outsider is the maintenance of interpretive humility and openness to hearing the voice of Scripture afresh.[65]

Fowl insists, though, that if scripture is to be allowed to speak into the life of the Christian community, then dialectical engagement between the text and the community's contextually-situated concerns must be allowed to happen. In an ongoing and never-foreclosed process of engagement, as the interests of readers and the biblical texts are seen to interact and mutually inform under the guidance of the Spirit, so Christian readers are formed into readers who are more able to hear the voice of God speaking through scripture into their interpretive context. It is the necessity of readerly formation which causes Fowl to stress the importance of reading the Bible theologically:

> The primary reason for this is that Scripture is the first of God's providentially ordered vehicles by which we learn of and are drawn into the economy of salvation. Indeed, there is a happy circular movement here: at its best, the reading of Scripture (under the Spirit's direction) teaches us both the contours and depths of God's drama of salvation. This increases our capacity for and habit of thinking, feeling, and acting in ways that enhance our communion with God and each other. Being thus formed, we are able to read Scripture in deeper and richer ways so that we become like Augustine's perfectly wise person who, "supported by faith, hope, and charity, with an unshaken hold upon them, does not need the Scriptures except for the instruction of others".[66]

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[65]Fowl and Jones 1991, 112. Fowl elsewhere continues to see the Bible as a vehicle for divine communication: "Commenting on scripture is a theological discipline in that one expects that by attention to the words of scripture one will hear the voice of God. Of course, listening to God's voice is the primary activity of prayer, too. Thus, commenting on scripture can be a form of prayer. [...] one of the aims of theological commentary must be to allow others to hear God's voice" (Fowl 2005, 5).

[66]Fowl 2005, 206-07. Fowl notes that he has never met one of these people, but comments that he is less worried about that than about what he sees as the failure of the church to perceive the close ties between readerly formation, scripture, and the church's ability to live and worship faithfully.

Fowl does not regard the Bible as an indeterminate text over which readers are free to write their own meanings: on the contrary, it is a vehicle for divine communication and an essential authority for the communal life of the believing community. At the same time, however, Fowl insists that interpretation is not a one-way monologue in which authoritative authorial intention is straightforwardly decoded from the text and applied to readers' lives, because readers are themselves contextually situated and must therefore bring their own concerns and interests into play when interpretation occurs. The key safeguard of biblical authority is not the text in itself, but a practice of confessional interpretation in the context of a believing community which places high value upon the biblical texts and seeks to interpret them in light of their contemporary situation *under the guidance of the Holy Spirit*.[67] For Fowl, it is the presence and activity of the Spirit in the interpretive process which safeguards biblical authority, not an authorial intention embedded within the text.

Fowl and Thomas are not alone in arguing that more emphasis needs to be placed upon the role of the Spirit and Spirit-led readers in interpretation. Terence J. Keegan, similarly, has suggested that one implication of the advent of postmodernism in biblical studies is that biblical scholars will have to deal with questions which objective modern methodologies allowed them to avoid, and that the question of inspiration is one of these: "What is it that allows the Bible to function as sacred literature? It is not the literalism of fundamentalism, nor the objective verification of modern methods of research, but only the Holy Spirit".[68] Keegan warns, however, that a comprehensive and

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[67] In other words, Fowl prefers to put his trust primarily in the creator-Spirit who enables interpretation rather than the created text which is interpreted. Fowl's model is more ambiguous, less determinate, infinitely less predictable and, in that sense, less "safe" than Vanhoozer's. But then, safety and predictability are questionable priorities for a community which seeks to model its corporate life on a crucified and resurrected Jesus.
[68] Keegan 1995, 11.

sharply defined definition of inspiration may prove elusive because of the nature of the Spirit himself:

> The Bible itself speaks of the Spirit in terms that are indeterminate, multivalent, and highly subjective. The Spirit is both a recurrent feature of the biblical text and one that resists every attempt to encapsulate it in a definition. It is both as pervasive and as ephemeral as one of its common metaphors, the wind. To use Kelber's terms, it is simultaneously logocentric and deconstructing.[69]

If, then, one attempts to define scriptural authority in terms of its inspiration rather than in terms of the location of its meaning, it is likely that the model for scripture which emerges will reflect the terms in which the activity of the Spirit who inspires it is described: multi-faceted, flexible, and polyvalent.

David R. Law argues that any concept of biblical authority is dependent upon the inspiration of scripture, and that inspiration is not only located in processes of textual composition, as Vanhoozer's model might suggest.[70] Inspiration can be both objective, in that God has input into the process of textual composition, and subjective, in that to accept the text as scripture the reader themselves must be inspired. Inspiration, Law argues, "cannot be reduced *exclusively* to a feature of the text. The acceptance of a text as inspired involves a subjective response on the part of the reader".[71] Law argues that the role of the Holy Spirit through the process of textual communication is important: the Spirit prompts and guides biblical authors, but also provides the inner testimony in the reader which enables the encounter with the Bible as God's authoritative Word.[72]

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[69]Keegan 1995, 11.
[70]Law 2001.
[71]Law 2001, 37.
[72]Law 2001, 39. John Goldingay also insists that "The inspiration of the writing of scripture needs to be complemented by the inspiration of the reading of scripture" (Goldingay 1995, 188).

Following Ulrich H. J. Körtner,[73] Law argues that the "implicit reader" of the biblical texts is an inspired reader and insists upon an existential approach to biblical interpretation. The relationship of readers to biblical texts should not be objective but participatory, since the meaning of the Bible is not conveyed merely by objective presentation of its content. Readers must interpret the Bible existentially, going beyond an objective-historical attitude to a consciousness of the existential demands that these texts make upon them.[74]

John Goldingay, similarly, argues that interpretation of scripture *as scripture* must involve more than the purely passive apprehension of meaning: rather, readers must bring their concerns and interests to the text if the text is to speak to them:

> To avoid imposing our own questions on the text is not yet to let it press its questions on us, only to overhear it talking to itself. Interpreting biblical narratives involves more than merely understanding a text as an object over against me, of which I seek to gain a rational, objective grasp. The stories were written to do something to people, and our approach to interpretation needs to be able to handle - or be handled by - this aspect of them. It involves the possibility that what the story had the power to make happen to its audience will happen to us.[75]

It is important to stress that Vanhoozer does not deny the importance of subjective involvement with the biblical texts. On the contrary, biblical texts create a space wherein readers lay themselves open to divine communicative action, so that "Interpreting scripture entails a personal encounter from which no responsive reader remains unchanged".[76] This encounter, however, comes from diligent attention to the illocutionary intent embedded in the text.

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[73]Körtner 1994. Körtner's approach has more than a touch of Wolfgang Iser about it.
[74]Law 2001, 188. Law's point has resonances of 2 Timothy 3:16, which stresses the role of scripture in teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness.
[75]Goldingay 1995, 39.
[76]Vanhoozer 1998, 406.

Vanhoozer resists postmodern calls to celebrate the birth of the reader, arguing instead that Christian biblical interpretation requires the reader's death through submission to the text's illocutionary force, and that "The desire to project oneself onto the text, so prevalent in the age of the reader, forestalls the possibility of genuine transformation".[77]

The difference between Vanhoozer's text-centred hermeneutics and Fowl's text-interactive pneumatological approach, then, is one of emphasis rather than fundamental difference. Vanhoozer, together with scholars such as Anthony C. Thiselton, does not deny the importance of existential engagement with the text, but sees the interaction more as a monologue than a dialogue, as the reader receives the meaning of the text and then applies it. Fowl, Thomas, Law, Goldingay and others see the interaction of text and reader as a dialectic relationship within a context defined by a Christian interpreting community and within which the Holy Spirit is active. Vanhoozer's concern to yield as little ground as possible to radical reader response theory leads him to adopt an either/or approach which is less than helpful in that it rules out legitimate perspectives and concerns, and subordinates others.

It is arguable that an understanding of scriptural authority which incorporates the roles of readers and the Spirit in the context of interpretation is valuable for a postmodern critical approach, if for no other reason than that it helps us understand scripture as the Christian community actually experiences it.[78] This marks a distinction between criticism and theology/theory. Theology, like theory, is often interested in arguing from first principles to logical conclusions, or from cause to effect: having understood what the Bible is, we

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[77]Vanhoozer 1998, 406-07.

[78]A pneumatological hermeneutics therefore offers the theological and theoretical underpinning which we previously noted as lacking in Mark Allan Powell's most recent reader-response approach, and provides a means of adjudicating between different "unexpected readings" of biblical texts.

are then able to interpret it appropriately.[79] Criticism, on the other hand, tracing the contours of scripture through engagement with specific texts, tends to work in the opposite direction, and consideration of the experiential aspect of texts is a major consideration in postmodern ideological criticism. A pneumatological hermeneutics which places value upon reader interests and contextual considerations in interpretation may, therefore, offer a more helpful validating model for a postmodern confessional practice of biblical interpretation than an abstract theology of scripture.

Logically, to be sure, the question of what scripture is is prior to that of how Scripture works, but as a critical approach confessional criticism will ask the second question first, and for good reason. R. H. Fuller, in his account of New Testament Christology, makes the point that Christian doctrine is a *response* to God's activity, and that it is therefore simply not possible to work from cause to effect. Christology (the doctrine of Christ's person) logically precedes soteriology (the doctrine of Christ's work), since it was "because he was who he was that Jesus Christ did what he did", but in the New Testament people are confronted first by the deeds and words of Jesus, to which they respond in terms of a Christological confession of faith. "Through what he does they come to see who he is".[80]

In the same way, the doctrine of what scripture is logically precedes the understanding of how scripture works, but we can only know the first through the second, as John Goldingay observes:

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[79] Terence Penelhum, for instance, criticises David R. Law's recent study of inspiration in terms of reader effects on this basis: "to centre one's interpretation of biblical inspiration on the role the Bible plays in the spiritual development of its readers is to abandon the task of offering a theological explanation of why the Bible is uniquely able to function in this way. It is to tell us how the Bible can inspire us, rather than how it itself is inspired" (Penelhum 2003, 458). My argument, with Law, is that we cannot understand what the Bible is apart from understanding its effects upon readers.

[80] Fuller 1965, 15.

> In practice, when people hold to the conviction that the Bible is the crucial resource and norm for belief and behaviour, this commonly has a background in a personal history of involvement with the Bible. If they come to have a theory as to how and why the Bible has such authority, this theory takes shape some time after they have known the Bible speaking to them, encouraging them, giving them a perspective on life, and challenging them. Biblical authority is a living reality before such people begin to theologise about it, try to explain it, or seek to defend it.[81]

David Law, similarly, argues that the problem with centering the inspiration (and hence the authority) of the Bible upon the inspiration of the writers is that their motivations are not directly accessible to readers, except as mediated by the text. Rather, it is only the text and the reader's reactions and interactions with the text which provide the basis for understanding of what scripture is and how it works, or for the understanding of God which results from the reading process. The Bible, for Law, is "only ever an expression of what God is for us. It is not an expression of what God is in himself but an expression of the reality of God in relation to human beings".[82]

This does not, however, mean that there is no objective truth in the biblical texts, or that the image of God which readers perceive through them is a creation of the reader: rather, it is to recognise that although God must already be present and active in the reading of scripture in order for it to impact upon the reader, the reader's only way of knowing this is through their experience of reading. Hence, the experience of reading generates knowledge of the reality which preceded it and made it possible. A focus on the role of readers

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[81]Goldingay 1994, 123.

[82]Law 2001, 196. Goldingay affirms this insight: "the scriptural documents that we seek to interpret are themselves exercises in understanding. Their authors had seen or heard something, which they then expressed in writing. Their writings are expressions of their author's understanding before they are the object of our understanding" (Goldingay 1994, 121). At the same time, however, Goldingay has stated that he feels Law's account of inspiration is too existentialist (Goldingay 2002).

in biblical interpretation is not to say that readers make meaning or that they create God, but to recognise the limitations imposed by human subjectivity:

> The Bible is written by human beings, but God is also active in these texts in so far as they become prisms through which he can be glimpsed. But we cannot view this agency from the divine perspective. Our acceptance of divine involvement in these texts is a leap of faith, but not a blind one. It is because of the ability of these texts to resonate in our being that we attribute them to divine initiative.[83]

For the church to call a biblical narrative the Word of God is a response to the church's having heard God speaking through it. Hence, to paraphrase Fuller, "Through what scripture does we come to see what it is." Confessional criticism's interest as a critical approach is primarily in what scripture does, but confessional critics will want to resist suggestions that this is a secondary concern.

Emphasis of contextual or reader roles in interpretation need not be at the expense of textual authority, as Vanhoozer fears. Daniel Patte, for instance, helpfully points out that the authority of biblical texts can be understood in two ways. First, authority can be *extrinsic:* that is, authority is ascribed to biblical texts as a response to the interpretation generated by the reading process, so that the authoritative text is the text-as-read. On this model, readers play a dominant role in bringing life to inert texts and attributing authority to them.[84] Alternatively, however, authority can be *intrinsic*: the text has authority within the text-reader relationship, if only because, being fixed in writing, it imposes constraints upon readers, but also because it is a semantic

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[83]Law 2001, 193-94. John Webster has criticised Law for being too immanentist, emphasising reader subjectivity; too docetic, limiting the sphere of the Spirit's work to readers so that "the text itself is not touched by the inspiring action of God"; and too reticent about divine activity through scripture so that "the gap left by the withdrawal of the self-communicative divine presence is filled by readerly activity" (Webster 2003, 34-35). This is unfair. Law is clear that inspiration operates in both authors and readers, and that God is ontologically prior to reader response, but seeks to be rigorous in recognising the limited horizons of human subjectivity.
[84]Patte 1995b, 95.

representation of a discourse (i.e. it is a motivated, purposeful communicative act) which plays an active role in generating meaning.[85]

Patte, adopting a strongly Iserian phenomenological approach, argues that both dynamics are operative in interpretation, but that the text's intrinsic authority exercises final control by setting the parameters and the tone of the encounter:

> Is it not our common experience that as soon as we truly interact with any text in a reading process, we are affected by this text? The text demands a response from us even as we read it, that is, before we have envisioned its meaning for us. Readers are forced to react to the text, positively or negatively, with passion or indifference, with fascination and excitement or with boredom and weariness, with consent and submission or with rejection and rebellion. By the very fact that we react to the text, we are transformed by the text.[86]

The sense that readers control the reading process is, Patte argues, an illusion of our subjective perspective: readers initiate the reading process and thus give life to the dead letter of the text, but once that life is given the text takes the initiative back, claiming attention and raising issues. "Because it is written," Patte continues, "fixed on pages, the text constantly remains in control, in a position of power; it keeps the initiative, it sets the subject matter of our dialogue".[87] The multiplicity of readings which readers produce may seem to support the view that it is readers who generate meaning, but the range of available readings is limited by the meaning-producing dimensions of the text, which ultimately defines the parameters of its own legitimate interpretation.[88]

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[85]Patte 1995b, 96.

[86]Patte 1995b, 97. Vanhoozer makes a similar point and argues for the importance of interpretive hospitality, whereby the reader extends to the text the courtesy of trying to fully understand it before evaluating it. For a fuller discussion of Vanhoozer's view see p.301.

[87]Patte 1995b, 98-99.

[88] The word "legitimate" is crucial. One could, of course, argue that a text says "black" when the word on the page is "white", but most readers would regard such an interpretation as illegitimate.

I would suggest at this point that the appropriate resolution to the tension between textual and reader authority in interpretation is not to subordinate one to the other, but to affirm the indispensibility of both for interpretation. As Patte points out, readers choose to read texts, and texts which are not being read cannot speak. At the same time, texts which are being read are not passive or inert: rather, they set the boundaries and establish the agendas for their interpretation. Most texts are capable of sustaining a number of conversations with their readers, but at the end of the day texts will only answer questions for which they can provide answers. Biblical authority, I would argue, like meaning and inspiration, is not exclusively a property of the text, but neither is it exclusively a property of readers.[89] Rather, as N. T. Wright points out, authority is the result of an active process which God initiates, so that "the phrase 'authority of scripture' can only make Christian sense if it is a shorthand for 'the authority of the triune God, exercised somehow *through* scripture'".[90]

Authority, like meaning and inspiration, is not exclusively a property of the text. Wright points to the Bible's own strong insistence that authority belongs to God, and specifically to Jesus Christ,[91] and offers his own model for biblical authority,[92] suggesting an analogy with a Shakespeare play whose fifth act has been lost. In order to stage the play a fifth act must be provided, but to write one would freeze the play into one form and permanently link Shakespeare to work which was not, in fact, his own. Instead, Wright argues, the fifth act should be improvised by highly trained actors who have immersed

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[89] "The authority of scripture [...] is not so much an invariant property of the biblical texts, as a way of ordering a set of textual relationships. To call scripture authoritative also establishes a particular relationship between that text and those people and communities who treat it as authoritative" (Fowl 1998, 6).
[90] Wright 2005, 17.
[91] See e.g. Romans 13:1; John 19:11; Matthew 28:18; Philippians 2:9-11; Hebrews 1:1-2. Wright notes that the prologue to John's Gospel does not end "and the word was written down", but "and the word became flesh" (Wright 2005, 17).
[92] Wright 1991. See also Wright 2005, 89-93.

themselves in the first four acts and in Shakespearian language and culture. The result would be a fifth act under the authority of the first four: the four acts would serve as the standard against which fifth-act characterisation and plot development could be evaluated, but the fifth act would not slavishly repeat the earlier four. Instead, it would represent an appropriate and innovative conclusion to the whole play. The actors would thus need to perform with full attention both to innovation and consistency.

Wright suggests that the Bible can be understood in the same way. The narrative of scripture falls into four existing acts: creation, fall, Israel, and Jesus. The fifth act is the work of the church, which stands in relation to the biblical story as the actors stand in relation to the four existing acts of the play. The first scene of the fifth act is the New Testament, which sets the tone and pattern for the rest of the play and also indicates in its more apocalyptic passages what the ending will be. The church's task is to work out the implications of the scripture in ways which are at one and the same time both new and in continuity with what has gone before.

Wright emphasises that his model is not a doorway to interpretive anarchy:

> As all musicians know, improvisation does not at all mean a free-for-all where 'anything goes', but precisely a disciplined and careful listening to all the other voices around us, and a constant attention to the themes, rhythms and harmonies of the complete performance so far, the performance which we are now called to continue. [...] The music so far, the voices around us, and the ultimate multi-part harmony of God's new world: these, taken together, form the parameters for appropriate improvisation in the reading of scripture and the announcement and living out of the gospel it contains. All Christians, all churches, are free to improvise their own variations designed to take the music forwards. No Christian, no church, is free to play out of tune.[93]

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[93]Wright 2005, 93.

If we apply Wright's fifth-act model to Christian academic Biblical Studies, it offers a helpful model which coheres with the insights we have already examined. Confessional biblical criticism is motivated primarily by the desire to understand the Bible as scripture in such a way that its continued relevance, authority and transformative power in the present context of scholarship is revealed and sustained. As such, biblical interpretation involves the production of readings which are demonstrably rooted in the biblical texts: such readings result from critical methods which can in turn be critically evaluated in such a way as to provide academic accountability. At the same time, however, self-consciously interested readings do something new by bringing the biblical texts into dialogue with the changing contexts and developing interpretive communities within which they are read. Just as contexts and communities will bring new light to bear on aspects of the biblical texts, so the texts will in turn illuminate aspects of contexts and communities.

The nature of the Bible as a communicative act is such that a multiplicity of interpretive approaches will be appropriate to different contexts and communities as they develop and pursue their interpretive interests. The danger of a pluralist approach, as we have seen, is that one or more approaches will succumb to the endemic human will to power and attempt to colonise the others, claiming exclusive rights over the biblical texts and dominance within the interpreting community. Within the confessional context, however, the disparate interests of interpreters are held together within a conception of the Bible which emphasises the biblical text as a locus of divine activity and authority through the work of the Holy Spirit.

The doctrine of the Spirit as one person of an inseparable trinity reminds confessional scholarship of the need to entertain diversity and co-equality within the boundaries of a confessional approach. The Spirit also suggests an

appropriate postmodern approach to biblical interpretation which does not subordinate readers to authors or to texts, but which sees both reader and text as caught up in the Spirit's work of communicating the truth of God in Christ through scripture.[94] The result is a flexible, polyvalent commitment to the Bible as a text through which God communicates with human beings, and through which human beings can encounter the divine.

The Benefits and Costs of a Pluralist Christian Approach

I have suggested that a self-consciously Christian approach to the Bible which seeks to interpret the text as scripture, and which seeks to interact constructively with a postmodern academic context, should redefine itself and its conception of the Bible. By moving away from disputed attempts to locate textual meaning and redefining itself in terms of interests in textual truth, Christian scholarship may reap benefits both in terms of the internal relationships between different critical methods and in terms of its external relationships with other approaches. An understanding of scripture as a multi-faceted communicative process, incorporating the activity not only of authors but of also of readers in the broader theological context of the Spirit's work of inspiration, both validates and legitimises a wide range of interpretive methods, affirming diversity within the Christian interpretive community whilst potentially defusing and reducing divisive arguments and conflicts.

At the same time, the adoption of methodological pluralism defines Christian Biblical Studies within the wider discipline as an ideological rather than a methodological approach along similar lines to feminist criticism. Like

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[94] I suggest that a working definition of scripture for the church is "the Bible interpreted in the Spirit".

feminism, Christian study of the Bible is motivated by strong theological, ideological, social and ethical commitments, but those commitments do not commit Christians to adopting only one critical method or interpretive paradigm. Instead, like feminists, Christian scholars can draw from a number of critical methods. Such eclecticism does not necessarily threaten the coherence of a Christian approach if the methods selected can be seen to cohere with the theological commitments which motivate Christian scholarship.

Finally, methodological pluralism frees Christian scholars to share methodological interests with interpreters from other interest groups, even when ideological differences exist: indeed, a fringe benefit of such interest-sharing is that discussion of methodological common ground also gives either party an opportunity to share something of its theological/ideological motivation, pursuing its motivating aims constructively rather than polemically. Methodological pluralism thus offers Christian biblical scholarship a methodological identity which is truer to the nature of the biblical texts, strengthens the distinctive identity of confessional as opposed to de-confessional approaches, and also facilitates constructive dialogue and engagement with other interpretive approaches, at least at the methodological level.

There are, however, costs involved in such a re-definition. First, a methodologically pluralist approach will necessarily sacrifice a certain amount of interpretive clarity in favour of interpretive breadth. A recognition that no one approach can provide a definitive interpretation of the text means that confessional scholars who are interested in more than one textual function must be prepared to change methodological focus on a regular basis, accepting that not all methodologies are equally or mutually compatible even when they

cohere within a wider theological framework. This means confessional criticism will have to forego attempts to produce definitive statements or pronouncements of what is true about the text. Although the unity of the approach is safeguarded by recognition of multiple interpretive interests cohering around a core set of confessional commitments and values, that unity cannot be expressed in unison. The findings of confessional interpretation will be expressed as a chorus of voices, and not all of those voices can be guaranteed always to be in perfect harmony.

A second cost of the pluralist approach is that followers of a particular interest will have to accept that they may not always have something to say about important interpretive issues, or that the Christian community may, from time to time, rank their contribution lower than that of another critical approach. This means that scholars may have to get used to being less competitive and yield the floor to other interpreters more frequently and willingly than they might previously have been inclined to do. This, however, may be a good thing, and may serve to promote some of the more distinctively Christian virtues (such as humility), which have not been generally regarded as characteristic of academic biblical interpreters.[95]

A third cost of pluralism is a permanent commitment to a degree of uncertainty and indeterminacy in interpretation. A model for scripture which affirms that no single interest has exclusive rights in interpretation, and which also acknowledges the importance of contextual interpretive factors, will necessarily require of interpreters a self-awareness that interpretations, however profound and convincing, are always provisional and contingent. I cannot be sure that my reading of the story of (for instance) Jesus and the

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[95] It may be helpful for Christian interpreters to bear in mind Paul's image of the church as a body of many parts, each of which has its particular function, but none of which can function as the whole body. For an application of this metaphor see later, p.293.

woman caught in adultery, which seems so powerful to me and so relevant to the situation in which my interpreting community finds itself, will not be called into question by the insights of a critic using a different critical method and who may require me to qualify some of my presuppositions or, indeed, conclusions. Nor can I guarantee that, as interpretive contexts change and my community's interests grow and develop in response to that change, my reading will retain the prominent and normative place I currently seek for it and which my community is prepared to grant it. The multidisciplinary model for Christian interpretation which I have sought to develop above reflects the multivalent nature of the Bible itself, and serves as a reminder that, like interpreters, interpretations are like grass and flourish like flowers of the field until the wind goes over them and they are gone, their places knowing them no more. Interpretations come and go, but the scripture remains, and it is only the word of the Lord that endures forever (Isaiah 40:6-8).

CHAPTER FIVE: THE CHURCH IN THE ACADEMY AS

INTERPRETIVE COMMUNITY

You think the only people who are people
are the people who look and think like you,
but if you walk the footsteps of a stranger
you'll learn things you never knew you never knew.
                    - Stephen Schwartz, "Colours of the Wind"

In seeking to establish a Christian postmodern academic model for biblical interpretation it is important to pay some attention to the nature of the interpretive community whose interests such an approach would pursue. Two key issues are, first, how the interpretive community defines its relationship with its textual objects of study and, second, how the community defines itself in relation to other communities of interpreters with different interests. Both of these aspects of definition will have a profound impact upon the manner in which the community conducts itself in relation to texts and to other interpreters. Increasing pluralism in Biblical Studies has led to the formation of a number of different communities of scholarship, each with its own interests in the Bible. As we have seen in chapter two, these interests are not always compatible, and ideological conflict is an increasing reality in biblical scholarship. Clarity about the community to which one belongs is therefore important for scholarly self-awareness in the postmodern context. Failure to be clear about the nature and expectations of one's interpretive community can be damaging, as we have seen in the case of first-generation narrative criticism, especially in leading critics to adopt methodological positions which are incompatible with their underlying interpretive interests.

Interpretive communities perform two vital functions for scholars: first, they set agendas for interpretation by maintaining the importance of particular

interpretive interests; and second, they serve as a source of authority to whom individual scholars submit their interpretations for validation. Critical methods for biblical study are generally developed within the context of a specific interpretive community which has an interest in particular questions which the community wishes to address to the text. The critical methods, however, and the questions which they are designed to answer, arise from prior theological or ideological commitments to the value of particular interpretive interests, and to preconceptions of the text. To use Daniel Patte's terminology, the *legitimacy* of critical approaches is fundamentally tied up with the *validity* of the questions which those methods are designed to answer. Interpretive communities ask questions of texts because they think the questions, and the ideological commitments and agendas which lie behind them, are important. Hence, methodological interests are fundamentally bound up with, and dependent upon, ideological/theological interests.

This dependence helps to explain academic conflicts between different critical approaches. Historical-critical complaints that literary approaches bracket out questions of historical referentiality in biblical texts, for instance, are generally pitched as criticisms of inadequate critical method, but are in fact accusations that literary critics are asking the wrong questions. The conflict arises from strong precommitments to differing views of the nature of the Bible, but these commitments in turn reflect deep interests in whether biblical texts are documents which support or undermine faith, and in what ways they do so. Confessional historical-critical scholars are generally motivated by a desire to use the Bible as a means of discerning God's saving action through the history which the biblical texts narrate and, further, to affirm the value of the biblical account as a basis for faith; their secular colleagues, on the other hand, are

often interested in resisting the truth claims of the text and the Christian community.[1]

A Servant of Two Masters? Christian and Academic Communities.

It is important, therefore, that Christian biblical scholars should be clear about the interests and motives which underpin the critical methods supported by different interpretive communities. In particular, they must pay attention to the fact that they operate simultaneously within two overlapping communities: as *confessional* scholars they are accountable to the interests of the Christian interpreting community; as confessional *scholars* they are accountable to the academy. The interests of these two communities cannot be assumed to cohere. Indeed, as we have seen in the case of the Sheffield University Department of Biblical Studies, a major element in the academic self-definition of a number of its scholars is that academic and ecclesial interests are seen to be mutually exclusive. On the other hand, the academy defined as a pluralist community has little grounds for excluding Christian scholarship without undermining its own liberal values, or revealing those values as a front for more vested anti-ecclesial interests. A number of Christian academics have recently argued that overtly Christian biblical scholarship ought to be perfectly acceptable within the range of approaches allowed by the academy, provided that Christian scholars are prepared to play by academic rules and to render their interpretive methods critically accountable. Francis Watson, for instance, argues that whilst the church must remain faithful to its own tradition it must also relate to the wider world in which it exists, and that therefore:

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[1]One example of the latter kind of scholarship is Maurice Casey's *Is John's Gospel True?* (Casey 1996). Casey's argument that John's Gospel is factually inaccurate and anti-semitic to boot is a clear assault upon the credibility of the Gospel as a basis for faith.

> there seems no valid theoretical reason why one should not practise a mode of interpretation responsive both to the traditions of the ecclesial community and to the demands of the world beyond the community, for the church is itself related diachronically to its own past and synchronically to the wider world, and must be faithful to the requirements imposed by both dimensions of its location.[2]

Stephen Fowl similarly insists that confessional and academic interpretation are not incompatible. He notes that the formal inclusion of Christian interests within the plurality of the academy requires the bringing of theological concerns and convictions into discussion in a way that most biblical theologies either truncate or deliberately exclude,[3] but maintains that Christian and academic concerns are not mutually exclusive in the way that many have thought. Christians, by virtue of their identity, are required to read scripture theologically, but this practice, and the universal truth claims which arise from it, do not invalidate other reading practices, so that "Christian biblical scholars can in principle engage in the whole panoply of diverse, and irreducibly distinct, interpretive practices characteristic of the profession of biblical scholarship".[4]

At the same time, however, Fowl insists that the boundaries of Christian and academic communities cannot be assumed to coincide. Rather, they should be seen as overlapping, meaning that some Christian practices of biblical interpretation will not be acceptable within the academy, and that some academic interpretive practices will be unacceptable to the church. Fowl suggests that the church's use of professional biblical scholarship will be *ad hoc*, because not all professional biblical scholarship will be equally useful to the Christian community all the time.[5] Fowl acknowledges that biblical

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[2]Watson 1994, 229.
[3]Fowl 1998, 21.
[4]Fowl 1998, 30.
[5]Fowl 1998, 179. Some major figures within Evangelicalism have argued that the professional training of Christian ministers as biblical interpreters should be formally distanced from mainstream academic biblical scholarship, because the interests of the academy generally fail

scholarship may raise important issues for Christians, but thinks there are fewer instances of this than might be anticipated, largely on the grounds that scholarship is by nature an exclusive preserve of scholars. Academic Biblical Studies actively excludes non-academic Christian interpreters, and the specialisation of its discourse makes transmission of its insights beyond the boundaries of the academic community problematic.[6] Fowl suggests that whilst there might not be outright enmity between academic and confessional interests, there may not be much fruitful co-operation either, and notes the importance for confessional scholars of keeping the interests of both communities in view and evaluating those interests appropriately:

> the crucial issues will revolve around keeping the two sets of commitments, habits, and practices characteristic of both the profession and the church in some sort of appropriate order, recognising overlaps, distinctions, and incommensurabilities. On the one hand, there is no fixed or determined way in which these relationships must be ordered in the lives of particular scholars seeking to live faithfully before God. On the other hand, one should avoid a sort of schizophrenia, common in many Christians, in which one's professional life is hermetically sealed off from one's confessional commitments.[7]

One issue which confessional critics will have to negotiate is whether the interests of one interpretive community should be prioritised over another. Francis Watson has argued that as far as the reading of biblical texts as scripture is concerned, the church should be regarded as the primary

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to serve the interests of the church. See, for instance, Martyn Lloyd Jones' address at the opening of the London Theological Seminary, "A Protestant Evangelical College", in which he stresses the importance of theological training which does not require university validation (Lloyd Jones 1989, 356-75).

[6]Fowl 1998, 180.

[7]Fowl 1998, 187. Robert O. Baker, writing within a Pentecostal tradition, has argued on precisely these lines that academic biblical scholarship has adopted a schizophrenic approach to interpretation by emphasising the rational at the expense of the experiential. Baker suggests that Pentecostal models for interpretation which emphasise not just orthodoxy (right belief), but also orthopraxy (right action) and orthopathy (right feeling) are well placed "to deconstruct the Enlightenment myth and ideal of critical and passionless objectivity" (Baker

interpreting community.[8] Biblical texts are biblical by virtue of being included in a canon of sacred scripture which finds its origin and definition within the boundaries of the Christian community and its communal use of these texts. The designation "scripture", therefore, "is not an alien imposition upon texts whose essential being and meaning is to be found elsewhere, for texts do not give their essential being and meaning to be known apart from the process of their reception".[9] John Goldingay, similarly, insists that in taking the Bible into the pulpit Christians are not doing something alien to its nature but that, given the origins of the Bible as words addressed to the people of God, it is more at home there than in the university study.[10]

The argument of confessional scholarship is that the Christian community has not co-opted free-floating texts out of their original context into a confessional framework. The biblical texts were produced in, by and for faith communities, and the claims of faith communities as contexts for biblical interpretation are therefore prior to those of the academy. Indeed, the reasons which underpin academic interest in the Bible are fundamentally tied up with the history of the church's relationship with these texts and with the wider cultures in which it has existed. It is out of that history that the Bible's authority and continuing currency as a foundational artefact of western culture is derived. An approach to the Bible as scripture (that is, an approach characterised by theological and confessional interests) must, therefore, acknowledge that the claim of the

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1995, 35), and proposes Iser's reader response as the basis for a hermeneutical model for the formation of Christian affections.

[8] Watson asserts that this proposal is "not self-evidently wrong, and may at least serve as a working hypothesis" (Watson 1994, 4).

[9] Watson 1994, 4.

[10] Goldingay 1995, 8.

academy as an interpretive community is both secondary and derivative. The Bible is the church's gift to the academy, not vice versa.

This is not to say, however, that the church can thereby assert its ownership of the Bible in such a way as to demand the subordination of all other interests to its own.[11] Confessional biblical scholarship which operates within a pluralist environment will wish to assert both the legitimacy and the wider validity of its own concerns, but will be breaking the rules of the pluralist game if it attempts to exclude other interests. Christian scholars may argue, as Fowl does, that *as Christians* their approach to the Bible is necessarily theological, but that does not prevent other interpreters from coming to the text with different questions. The confessing community exists within a wider society in which the Bible's importance as a cultural icon and its cultural relevance extends beyond its devotional use within the boundaries of the church. As a part of that wider culture, Christian approaches to biblical scholarship must affirm the legitimacy of de-confessional interests and concerns related to the Bible, whilst not necessarily accepting their validity for the confessing community.

Christian academics who wish to function as members of the academic community must also be prepared to conform to academic standards of scholarship, and to be accountable to the values of the academy. Confessing scholars must therefore be comfortable with a "dual nationality", belonging simultaneously to two interpretive communities which, whilst they overlap in

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[11] See our earlier discussion in relation to Philip Davies' *Whose Bible is it Anyway?,* p.104.

terms of their focus of interest in the Bible, nevertheless have different interests and different discourses. Whilst confessional critics will want to try to integrate the interests of both communities, both for their own integrity and their ethical and academic accountability, they will have to remain aware that the two communities are distinct, and that their interests will not always be compatible. When conflicts arise, Christian academics will need to make choices about which community's interests are more important: are they Christian academics or academic Christians?

I would wish to argue that feminist scholarship offers a helpful model for a valid postmodern Christian interpretive approach. Feminist scholarship finds its distinctive identity in a core commitment to pursuing the interests of women in interpretation. The distinctive contribution of feminist scholarship has not been primarily methodological: there is no critical method which feminists can claim as exclusively or even originally theirs, and most feminists would wish to describe themselves as feminists first and narratologists, psychoanalytic or deconstructive critics second. Instead, feminism's contribution has been to demonstrate the viability, legitimacy and validity of an eclectic methodology which coheres around a core of ideological commitments and interests. Like Christianity, feminism possesses its own ideological framework and a specialist terminology to express that ideology, but the language of its criticism is the language of its critical methods, which it shares with a number of interest groups, rendering feminist interpretation transparent and heuristic. Feminists have not always found the academy a sympathetic or affirming environment, and have had to struggle with conflicts

between their political and academic interests, seeking often to resolve such conflicts by transforming the ethos and culture of the academic departments in which feminist academics have served. Feminism is also internally diverse rather than monolithic, cohering around a core set of beliefs but offering a diverse array of approaches in pursuing the interests generated by those beliefs. These qualities might therefore render feminism attractive as a model for a Christian church characterised by a diversity of theological positions, spiritual traditions, and patterns of corporate life, but which nevertheless coheres around a shared core of fundamental faith commitments, and which seeks to establish itself as a credible academic approach within an often unsympathetic academic environment.

A Christian approach to the interpretation of the Bible as scripture will, I suggest, cohere around two core commitments. First, the Bible is a means of divine self-communication, capable of revealing the truth of human relationships with God and providing a pattern for human relationships with one another. Second, being historically a missionary faith, Christian interpretation will want to assert not only the legitimacy of its interpretive practice within the boundaries of the Christian community, but the validity of much of that interpretation beyond the community. These two core commitments will drive the Christian interpretive community to find its identity in two relational aspects: first, the community will define itself in its relationship to the text it studies, expressed in an interest in textual truth in all its aspects; second, the community will wish to define itself in terms of its relationships with other communities and interpreters, whom Christian

interpreters will wish to convince of the validity of their readings. Understanding themselves in terms of their core commitments and interpretive interests will enable Christian academics to be confident in their ability to offer readings of the Bible which are distinctively and characteristically Christian, to respond assertively and confidently to ideological attack from other interpretive perspectives, and to engage constructively in dialogue with other approaches over both the legitimacy and validity of their interpretive practices.

The postmodern context, however, poses a significant challenge to both of these aspects of identity, in the form of socio-pragmatic understandings of the nature of interpretive communities. On the one hand, Stanley Fish's assertion that interpretive communities have absolute power over texts, determining issues of textual genre and setting the interpretive parameters within which texts are to be interpreted, implies that texts cannot challenge or transform interpretive communities because they can never speak in terms which lie outside the community's existing ideological framework, and this threatens a Christian commitment to the Bible as a means of divine communication.[12] The second problem with interpretive communities which follow Fish's model is that, when linked with postmodern concepts of the particularity of discourse, interpretive communities are rendered incapable of sharing their interpretive insights into texts with one another. The critical discourse of any given community will be specific to that community, reflecting its distinctive world-view and interpretive interests, and will therefore be opaque to outsiders. This

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[12] See earlier discussion of Fish, p.45.

threatens the ability of Christian interpreters to assert their interpretations as valid beyond their own community. As we have seen, postmodern critics such as Stephen D. Moore, David Clines and Philip Davies have used these assertions as political weapons in attempts to invalidate confessional interpretation as an academic approach and to exclude it from the academy altogether.

If confessional critics are to overcome these challenges it is incumbent upon them to demonstrate that Christian interpretation is not the self-validating closed interpretive circle that Fishian orthodoxy would understand. Some, such as Anthony Thiselton and Kevin Vanhoozer, have simply rejected Fish as incompatible with Christian models for scripture and church. If, however, confessional scholarship is to engage constructively with a wider secular academy within which Fish's model is well-established, then a middle way must be found between swallowing Fish whole (which might result in choking to death) and rejecting him outright. Rather, confessional scholarship must be prepared to approach Fish's concept charitably, prepared to affirm truth when present whilst resisting the more extreme claims of theory. One important step in this process is to begin with the understanding that Fish's concept is only a model and, like any model, it is derived from, rather than definitive of, the interpretive communities it describes. As such, if the Christian community can demonstrate that it does not conform to Fish's model, then it is arguably the model which is at fault and not the community.

Anthony Thiselton has suggested that one difference in character between British and American approaches is that British scholarship is less enamoured of sweeping theoretical models. Thiselton sees the American tradition as providing fertile soil for postmodern notions of the indeterminacy and socially-pragmatic nature of texts, but adds that this "intermixture of literary theory and philosophical world-view" encounters higher resistance in Britain, where a more empirical tradition "encourages the identification of stubborn counterexamples which, like jagged rocks, may puncture the pretensions of such sweeping theories".[13] The prospects for such a hope are encouraged by the recognition, even among committed postmodern critics, that some of Fish's more radical proposals about the unreality of the reader-text dichotomy are only sustainable at the theoretical level but incapable of being applied, possible "as long as he talks about criticism without actually doing it".[14]

A socio-pragmatic model for the church as interpretive community will seek to challenge the Christian commitment to the Bible as divine communication and to the extra-communal validity of Christian interpretation in a number of ways. First, the biblical texts which the church claims as authoritative were written by and for faith communities, and formed into a canon of scripture whose basis was, at least in part, that its contents conformed to the Christian faith as the church understood it.[15] Second, the church has provided

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[13]Thiselton 1992, 15. That is, some of Fish's theoretical models are only sustainable at the theoretical level but are incapable of being practically applied. If biblical criticism is not to be a hostage to the philosophical precommitments of theorists, then criticism and theory must mutually inform in such a way that one is not prioritised at the expense of the other.

[14]Bible and Culture Collective 1995, 34.

[15] For accounts of canon formation see, for instance, Kelly 1977; Patzia 1995; McDonald 1997. Four criteria generally accepted as crucial in the process of canon formation are apostolicity, orthodoxy, antiquity, and usage within the churches. Of these, orthodoxy and

parameters for interpretation in the form of credal statements and doctrines which provide a normative framework for the interpretation of canonical texts. A Fishian critic might note that some of these statements, such as the Apostles' Creed, predate the formation of the Christian canon. Hence, as well as defining what scripture *is*, the church has also determined the criteria by which acceptable interpretation is to be evaluated, demonstrating that Christian texts conform to Christian ideologies rather than the other way around.

Further, the church's discourse is characterised by a theological world-view and terminology which is neither shared nor easily understood by those outside the confessional community. Indeed, the church's self-definition has often emphasised the distinction between those who understand theological discourse and those who do not.[16] This reinforces the assertion that Christian biblical interpretation is an activity entirely internal to the church community and lacking in validity for those outside. The Christian interpretive community is, therefore, a community characterised by closed boundaries; by an

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usage can be seen to cohere with a view of canon formation as the church's selection of texts which conform with its existing theological commitments.

[16] The rhetoric of the Gospel of John operates on these lines by positing a series of interconnecting binary opposites which serve to define the Christian community of believers. Those who belong to God recognise Jesus for who he is and respond appropriately (John 1:12-23; 15:19; 17:6, 14). Those who are not of the Spirit cannot understand the truth of the incarnate Word, and it is precisely their failure to perceive correctly which reveals their true nature as belonging to the world and the devil rather than to the Word and the Spirit (8: 42-47). This is the thrust of the story of the man born blind in John 9, where it is the healed blind man who acknowledges the truth of who Jesus is, and the Pharisees who remain blind to that truth (9:39-41). The nature of Johannine polemic as the self-validating discourse of the Johannine community has been pointed out by Wayne Meeks and Mark Stibbe, who argues that the gospel is a "legitimating narrative" which vindicates the social identity of the community for which it is written (Meeks 1986; Stibbe 1991, 35). Meeks characterises the language of the gospel as "self-referring", a "closed system of metaphors" (Meeks 1986, 161). Johannine discourse is, in a real sense, a language for insiders, a marker of identity which distinguishes them from the wider community outside whilst rendering their discourse opaque to that wider community.

internally-focussed discourse designed to keep outsiders outside; and by a canon of sacred texts whose function is to provide the community with a means of self-affirmation.

Such a model challenges the practice of confessional scholarship not only in terms of its self-understanding but also in terms of its relationships with the wider academy. How, though, can the model be resisted and the church's self-understanding and external relations be safeguarded? I would suggest that an appropriate response is not to deny the truth of the model *in toto*, but rather to suggest that the model does not say all that there is to be said in those areas upon which it touches.

Community and Text: Who Makes Whom?

It is important to acknowledge the truth of a socio-pragmatic model where it exists. It is necessary to affirm, therefore, that the church's preconception of the Bible as scripture (that is, as a vehicle for divine communication and self-revelation) shapes and predisposes Christian biblical interpretation towards certain critical methods and away from others. Stephen Fowl has observed that granting a text authoritative status creates a particular relationship between the text and the community which treats it as an authoritative norm for faith and practice, and this relationship is characterised primarily by trust.[17] John Goldingay, similarly, argues that the confessional interpreter "studies scripture as a member of a church committed to and involved in a believing, expectant,

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[17]Fowl 1998, 3-6.

obedient approach to scripture and is drawn to share *its* faith, expectancy, and obedience".[18]

This fundamental commitment to the Bible as an authoritative norm for belief and practice means that the confessional critic's work will be characterised by a *hermeneutic of understanding* rather than a hermeneutic of suspicion. As Goldingay points out in reaction against what he regards as destructive historical-critical scholarship, for confessional interpreters biblical texts "deserve to be treated more like friends we should be able to trust than potential deceivers whom we need to suspect and torture".[19] Confessional critics will be less likely than their secular counterparts to have recourse to text-resistant methods such as deconstruction. This does not mean that confessional critics will be incapable of interrogating the text, nor of adopting text-resistant methods if those are considered appropriate. Rather, such hermeneutics and methods will not be the first recourse of confessional critics, whose interest is in understanding the text before they consider whether or not to resist it, and whose fundamental reason for approaching the text is because they believe there may be something useful to be gained from such an encounter.

It is also important to grant that, at various times in its history, the church has interpreted the Bible in self-affirming ways. The use of Old Testament conquest narratives and prohibitions on Jewish and Gentile intermarriage in postexilic texts, for instance, to support the injustice of apartheid in South

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[18]Goldingay 1995, 234.

Africa, or the appeal to the cursing of Ham in Genesis 9 to support the African slave trade, are undeniable instances of Christian communities reading scripture within a framework defined and dominated by their own political and economic interests. As Stephen Fowl has observed, a fundamental step in the formation of a distinctively Christian ethics of interpretation is the recognition that Christian readers are just as liable to commit hermeneutical sins as anyone else.[20] John Goldingay, too, has recognised that there is no interpretive method which can guarantee that a community will avoid reading practices which simply reflect its own interests:

> Scripture has an objective givenness over against us, and in theory thus has the capacity to protect us from ourselves. But it can only offer the *possibility* of escape from the limitations of our present convictions; it cannot stop us from continuing in self-deception if we are set on it.[21]

Acknowledgement that self-affirming readings are possible, however, is not the same as agreeing that they are inevitable. The goal of Christian biblical interpretation is not the affirmation of the reader but their transformation through textual encounter with a divine "other", so that "Scripture is not simply us in disguise; it should not be a mirror we use to reflect our prejudices back to us as the Word of God".[22] If a socio-pragmatic model can be demonstrably operative at various points in the history of Christian interpretation, eaxmples of the opposite tendency may also be noted. The British social reform movements of the nineteenth century, for instance, were driven at least in part by an evangelical faith which took the Bible's injunctions regarding social justice at their word, and which prompted a large

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[19]Goldingay 1994, 36.
[20]Fowl 1998, 62-96.
[21]Goldingay 1994, 91.
[22]Fowl and Jones 1991, 112.

number of wealthy and influential people to reform their practice against their own material interests.[23]

A Christian challenge to a Fishian understanding of the interpretive community rests upon two aspects of Christian experience with scriptural interpretation for which Fish's model does not sufficiently allow. First, Fish's model, like many other literary-theoretical models, pays insufficient attention to the diachronic aspect of literary texts. That is to say, Fish is concerned with the relationship between texts and interpretive communities in the literary present (i.e. in the contemporary context of interpretation). For Fish, literary texts are made in the image of their present interpreters because it is these interpreters who set the parameters for valid interpretation, and the text is encompassed within their ideological and epistemological horizons. A Christian approach, however, which sees the Bible as a communicative act which transcends the present, offers a more dynamic relationship between text and community.

John Goldingay argues that the Bible, coming into the present from the past with the status of "tradition", has the power to uncover the ideological predispositions of its interpreters without being bound by them. The Bible is a dialectical text: it offers its readers legitimation by reassuring them about God's involvement with them and providing a context of meaning for their experiences; but it also challenges its readers' commitment to God's

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[23] A collective example might be the millworkers of Lancashire who, during the American Civil War, supported the Union against the Confederacy because of its anti-slavery policy, even though this stance led to real hardship, disease and in some cases starvation because the Union's economic blockade of the Southern States prevented Lancastrian mills from importing the raw materials needed for the production of cloth. Strong interpretations of the Bible oriented to issues of social justice played a significant role in this episode, and offer an example of a community interpreting the Bible against its obvious interest.

purposes.[24] Goldingay argues that it is precisely the trans-historical nature of the Bible which enables it to challenge its readers, since the values and world-view it expresses cannot mesh completely with those of the communities in which it is read:

> When we find scripture speaking in terms that we find objectionable, that is where we are tempted to locate its ideological element. Actually the challenge we need to hear may lie there if we are to move on from our present limited perspectives. [...] Passages that seem to undermine the commitment we have already made will be those we hear especially attentively in the hope of opening ourselves to constructive criticism. They will not be passages that we seek to subvert by declaring them historically or ideologically conditioned and irrelevant.[25]

The ability of the Bible to challenge and transform comes in part from its trans-historical and trans-cultural aspects: that is, from its diachronic nature. As scripture, the Bible is interpreted in communities which stand in a continuity of tradition with those which produced the texts, but which are also discontinuous because they exist within differing social contexts which inevitably impinge upon their self-understanding and their interpretive interests.

Francis Watson draws upon Hans-Georg Gadamer's concept of the "classic" text to explain this aspect of scripture's function for the Christian community.[26] The classic comes into the present horizon of interpretation through the mediation of historical tradition. Its interpretation is not, however,

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[24]Goldingay 1995, 109. Goldingay draws upon Fish 1972, 1-2. This work comes from Fish's earlier period of "affective stylistics", in which he still attributed a role to the text in interpretation.
[25]Goldingay 1995, 110.
[26]Watson 1997, 49-50, drawing upon Gadamer 1975, 263, 265.

fixed by the textual context of production but at least partly by the historical situation of the interpreter as he or she stands in the stream of tradition. As classics biblical texts bear truth-claims, "and the primary task of interpretation is to come to terms with that truth-claim in a context which will always be different from past contexts in which the truth-claim has been heard, to struggle with the difficulties that it may pose, and to bring to light its disclosive possibilities for the present".[27]

The Bible is received trustingly by the Christian reader because it has achieved a place of authority within Christian tradition, but the process of textual interpretation is not simply one of straightforward appropriation. The otherness of the text can make the textual encounter uncomfortable, even traumatic, as Kevin Vanhoozer acknowledges:

> the struggle with the text is ultimately a *spiritual* struggle - with the text and with ourselves. Readers may have reasons for wishing not to encounter the meaning of the text; it may be too challenging, a threat to our lifestyle, if not to life itself. For the Gospels call us to die to self, to former practices, to previous self-understandings. The reader's struggle with the text, then, is sometimes a struggle to death. It is at the very least a wrestling match in which we may ask for a blessing but receive a dislocated hip.[28]

The trans-historical and trans-cultural character of both the Bible and the Christian community which interprets it offers a necessary corrective to a socio-pragmatic understanding of the confessional community as 'closed'. The

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[27]Watson 1997, 50.

[28]Vanhoozer 1998, 381. Walter Wink has described the process of textual engagement in similarly striking terms: "I listen intently to the Book. But I do not acquiesce in it. I rail at it. I make accusations. I censor it for endorsing patriarchalism, violence, anti-Judaism, homophobia, and slavery. It rails back at me, accusing me of greed, presumption, narcissism, cowardice, and an addiction to war. We wrestle. We roll on the ground, neither of us capitulating until it wounds my thigh with 'new-ancient' words. And the Holy Spirit is right there the whole time, strengthening us both" (Wink 2004, 3).

confessing community is open to otherness through its diachronic nature: Christians are open to a past which is different from their present, mediated through scripture and Christian tradition; and are open to a different future as they seek to be changed through encounter with the biblical texts in the light of their present context. The text is a fixed point to which the community returns again and again for affirmation of its identity and challenge to grow and change.

The validity of this insight can be seen in relation to precisely those features of Christian interpretive frameworks that a socio-pragmatic model emphasises. In relation to the recognition of biblical texts as scripture and their formation into canon, for instance, the testimony of Christian experience throughout the church's history has been that canonisation is a response to the reading of the Bible as the Word of God, not a precondition of it. John Goldingay has argued that the process of canon formation was complex and dialogical: the texts which found their way into the canon did not begin to have religious authority after the process of canonisation was complete, but rather went through the process because they already possessed authority within the church, and because "the community wanted them to be able to exercise it through changing circumstances, in new contexts, for new purposes".[29]

The canon is privileged within the confessing community, but not immune to question or critique: Stephen Fowl acknowledges that the process of canon formation was neither pristine nor simple, and that issues of theology, ethics, power and self-interest need to be accounted for.[30] Goldingay points to Jesus' treatment of the Mosaic law regarding divorce as evidence of an inner-biblical recognition that the holy scripture can still be contaminated by human sin,[31]

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[29]Goldingay 1994, 106.
[30]Fowl 1998, 5.
[31]Goldingay 1995, 106-07.

and cautions that the contents of the canon are part of the tradition passed down from generation to generation, having the right to be treated with respect, but not without question.[32]

An understanding of the Christian interpretive community as open to transformation needs to account for an ongoing dialectical relationship between text, community and context. The focal expression of this relationship is in the rule of faith which encapsulates the community's understanding of its core beliefs. The term "rule of faith" has been taken to mean a number of different things, but in this case I take it to refer to the core values and theological commitments which provide a community with its ideological/theological sense of coherence and identity. In other words, it is the set of beliefs which the community considers normative. The rule of faith may be summarised in credal or doctrinal statements, but these are expressions of the rule rather than the rule itself, which is the more abstract and inchoate system of beliefs which the community holds in common. Sociologically it conforms to Fish's characterisation of the sense of fellowship which confirms that two people belong to the same interpretive community: "The only 'proof' of membership is fellowship, the nod of recognition from someone in the same community, someone who says to you what neither of us could ever prove to a third party: 'we know'".[33]

On the face of it, the rule of faith in the form of doctrinal formulations and credal statements may appear to represent a means of communally-authoritative interpretive control.[34] Such formulations and statements act as

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[32]Goldingay 1994, 178.

[33] Fish 1980b, 173.

[34] Fish identifies Augustine's version of the rule of faith in *On Christian Doctrine* as just such an example of interpretive control. Augustine's stipulation that everything in scripture points to God's love for us and our reciprocal responsibility to love fellow creatures for His sake "is both a stipulation of what meaning there is and a set of directions for finding it, which is of course a set of directions - of interpretive strategies - for making it, that is, for the endless

doctrinal norms against which biblical interpretations can be evaluated, affirmed or rejected, and thus can serve to close down avenues of interpretation or suppress interpretive interests if these appear to threaten the community's self-understanding. In short, it might be argued that the rule of faith as applied to biblical interpretation predetermines the questions which may be addressed to the text and the answers which will be considered acceptable.

Again, although there are times when creeds and doctrines have been used to guillotine interpretive approaches, there is more to it than this. The rule of faith represents the community's self-understanding in relation both to their inherited tradition and to their contemporary context, for which the rule serves to explain the core values and commitments of the community in their current present. Francis Watson stresses that credal statements are not inflexible structures which impose dogmatic constraints upon biblical interpretation, claiming that the creed "is simply an outline which requires to be filled out by the far more varied content of holy scripture and by the interpretative reflection of preaching".[35] Stephen Fowl, similarly, argues that the rule of faith both shapes and is shaped by biblical interpretation, and emphasises the need for Christian interpretation to involve a complex interaction in which Christian convictions, practices and concerns are brought to bear on scripture in ways that mutually interact.[36] The rule of faith thus arises out of the interpretation of a scriptural tradition by a community sensitive to its contextual present: the *regula fidei* serves to define the boundaries of the interpretive community and provide norms by which interpretation within the

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reproduction of the same text" (Fish 1980b, 170). Fish notes that although any interpretive strategy could have similar success, few have been as "spectacularly successful as this one".

[35] Watson 1994, 6.

[36] Fowl 1998, 7-8.

community may be evaluated, but it is not an absolute, to be rigidly applied without equivocation in all circumstances.

Goldingay notes that tradition is by nature changing rather than static, and that passing on elements of tradition does not leave them unchanged. In the process of transmission from one context to another traditional elements are adapted to bring out their significance for the people to whom they are given.[37] At the same time, Christian tradition is accountable to the Bible it claims to interpret, providing a check but not a final norm for interpretation. Ultimately, "the text has to be its own norm".[38] The catholic creeds, for instance, are a guide for interpretation used by the community on the understanding that they crystallise scripture's own central thread, and should only continue to be used as such as long as it is seen that their representation of scripture is faithful:

> They provide us with [a] map for our theological exploration of scripture. As such they encourage such exploration, and we will hesitate to assume that their mapwork is mistaken, though it remains only mapwork. The map is answerable to the land, not the land to it, and is measured by it and not vice versa.[39]

The rule of faith is the expression of the church's interpretive tradition in the present context and, as the context changes, so may the rule. Put another way, the rule of faith exercises a normative function in relation to interpretive practice, but it is also answerable to that practice. The rule of faith is expressive of the Christian community's understanding of the Bible, not constitutive of it. As one example of this in the Anglican context it is helpful to call to mind Articles VI and XXI of the Articles of Religion appended to the

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[37]Goldingay 1994, 54.
[38]Goldingay 1995, 227.
[39]Goldingay 1994, 184-85.

Book of Common Prayer. Article VI makes clear that "Holy Scripture containeth all things necessary to salvation", and that nothing which is not contained therein should be expected to be believed, whilst Article XXI maintains that General Councils of the church can (and have) erred on the most fundamental matters, and that "things ordained by them as necessary to salvation have neither strength nor authority, unless it may be declared that they be taken out of holy scripture". Throughout the Thirty-Nine Articles it is consonance with scripture which forms the basis for the affirmation or rejection of belief and practice.[40]

Beyond Socio-Pragmatism to Critical Openness

Francis Watson has argued that one way of ensuring that biblical interpretation is able to transcend the socio-pragmatic horizons of self-affirming interpretive communities is to bring the biblical texts fully into dialogue with contemporary interpretive interests or "contemporary perceptions" from the wider society which the church inhabits. The value of such a dialectic is that contemporary perceptions enable readers to recognise previously overlooked aspects of the biblical texts whilst the texts simultaneously give a particular focus and shape to those perceptions.[41] Watson stresses that such interaction does not represent the readerly imposition of extra-textual agendas upon the text: rather, an approach to the Bible which addresses it in the light of a new interpretive perspective may result in the foregrounding of textual elements which the interpretive tradition has previously passed over, and which may be used to challenge oppressive or vested-interest readings. Such insights can

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[40] See e.g. articles VIII, XXII, XXIV and XXXIV.
[41] Watson 1994, 190.

thus act as an expression of the text's ability to self-critique, and even to challenge the history of its interpretation within the community.[42]

Watson takes the Pauline contrast between gospel and law as an indication that the Bible is not only capable of self-critique but invites it. If scripture offers the prospect of oppression through a law "that contravenes the divine intention", it also transcends itself by pointing towards an eschatological liberation and hope, "fulfilling what was promised in the beginning and already making its presence felt, in fragmentary and anticipatory form, in those inner-historical events and actions to which the future belongs".[43]

Watson argues that the designation of the Bible as scripture does not close off interpretive possibilities but opens them. Interpretation in the light of new perspectives may reveal previously unnoticed elements of hope and liberation within the Bible, which can then be applied to the contemporary context:

> The concept of holy scripture does not inevitably lead to a neo-conservative hermeneutic which denies the legitimacy of the exposure and critique of inner-biblical ideological constructions. It calls instead for an attempt, never completed and always provisional, to distinguish the biblical witness to the liberating gospel from its entanglement in the oppressive law, resisting the latter not for the sake of the satisfactions of negation but as a contribution to the appropriate contemporary expression of the gospel.[44]

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[42] To borrow Russian Formalist terminology, the process is one of *defamiliarisation*: by being brought into a new interpretive context or being approached with a new interpretive interest the text is defamiliarised or "made strange" so that it can be perceived and understood afresh; at the same time, the "otherness" of the biblical text serves to defamiliarise the preconceptions of the interpreter, calling them into the foreground of critical attention so they can be re-examined and re-evaluated in light of the textual encounter.

[43] Watson 1994, 199. Watson may at first sight appear to be arguing for a "canon within the canon", but the point he is making is more subtle than this. Watson is not arguing for the prioritisation of certain biblical texts over others, but making an observation on the nature of the Bible as a trans-historical canon, transmitted through history into different contexts. Oppressive or liberating readings depend not on the objective content of the Bible but also on the context of interpretation, proceeding not "from a contextless encounter between a hypersensitive reader and a pure, uninterpreted text, but from the contemporary interpretative context within which the reading takes place" (Watson 1994, 235). Logically, therefore, a text might function as oppressive in one context and as liberating in another.

[44] Watson 1994, 155.

Watson takes feminist approaches to the Bible as an example of this dynamic: the application of feminist interpretive interests to scripture has revealed a latent and previously underemphasised anti-patriarchal tradition within the biblical texts. Feminist readings which recognise this inner-biblical tradition cohere with the values of the gospel in such a way as to offer new insights into the text, and to issue a challenge to patriarchal practices and interpretive traditions in the interpretive community and the world which has the weight of biblical authority behind it. The "narratives of liberation" which feminist scholarship has revealed "can be seen as pointing beyond biblical or contemporary patriarchy towards the new future that divine Wisdom is preparing through her human agents, now, in the so-called 'secular' world which remains her creation, beyond the world of the sacred text".[45]

Watson's approach is significant for suggesting what a Christian model for biblical interpretation open to transformation of readers and contexts through textual encounter might offer. Watson's recognition of the importance of acknowledging inner-biblical tensions goes beyond the text-resistant deconstructionist destabilising of texts and interpretations.[46] Instead, Watson goes beyond a strategy of pure resistance to embrace what he describes as a "hermeneutics of hope", which conforms more fully to Schüssler Fiorenza's model for interpretive ethics than much de-confessional biblical criticism, which has tended to perform only the text-critical elements of Schüssler Fiorenza's ethical dance. The application of contemporary interpretive interests to the biblical texts in Watson's hermeneutics allows them and their

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[45]Watson 1994, 200.

[46] A major feature of J. Cheryl Exum's feminist critique is a deployment of deconstruction to offer alternative readings to dominant patriarchal traditions in texts and their interpretation, not with the intention of replacing those traditions but simply of rendering them equivocal (see e.g. Exum 1997, 92, 128). The limitation of this approach is that it ties the feminist interpreter to a parasitic, text-resistant approach in which the critic is incapable of escaping from the patriarchal ideology she seeks to resist.

history of interpretation to be interrogated so as to perform text-critical steps,[47] but the additional foregrounding of latent liberating elements of the biblical texts performs Schüssler Fiorenza's task of *remembrance and re-construction*; alignment of those elements with the eschatological hope of the gospel functions as a *hermeneutics of imagination*; and the application of the results of the interpretive process to the interpretive context gives rise to a *hermeneutics of transformation and action for change*. The paralysation and impotence of text-resistant interpretive approaches which we noted earlier is transcended by a self-consciously confessional approach which is open to the transformative power of the biblical text as scripture without denying the need for wariness and questioning.

It is worthwhile adopting a metaphor in the manner of Stephen D. Moore to underline the essential difference between confessional and de-confessional interpretation. In order to engage in interpretation, secular and confessional interpreters must first draw close to the text and lay hands upon it, becoming intimate with its detail, its nuances, its hidden depths and inner workings. In short, as they interpret biblical interpreters of both varieties are engaging in *textual intercourse*. From a distance, the wrestling and embracing of both activities might look very much the same, but there is a crucial difference. The secular or de-confessional critic is not making love: rather, s/he will have taken precautions (by means of a prophylactic preconception of the text as ideological or cultural object) to deny the possibility that textual intercourse might implant anything within him/her which might change his/her self-understanding, because to let the text do so would be a violation of the

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[47] A hermeneutics of experience and social location which affirms the legitimacy of women's experience as the basis for an interpretive approach; an analytic of domination which addresses the roles of biblical texts in supporting oppressive social structures; a hermeneutics of suspicion by means of which the texts are critically interrogated; and a hermeneutics of ethical and theological evaluation which assesses the values of texts and interpretations against a scale of values.

interpreter's exclusive rights over his/her own body of thought. Indeed, for de-confessional critics wrestling with the text might be less the throes of passion than a desperate attempt to fend off ideological rape.[48] The confessional critic, on the other hand, receives the embrace of the text as a lover, openly and trustingly if sometimes warily (because the intercourse is sometimes rough on either side), allowing it to merge its horizons with their own so that the two become one, and implanting within them something which will, if it comes to birth, transform them and, through them, the world into which it is born. If de-confessional criticism is sterile, confessional criticism offers the prospect of new birth and future hope.

Lost in Translation? Difficulties of Intercommunal Discourse

The second challenge posed by socio-pragmatic models for confessional scholarship is the argument that it is impossible for Christians to function within a pluralist academy, because the world-view which informs their interpretation is so specific to them that their readings have no validity for anyone who does not share their confessional commitments. Christian discourse is a language for insiders and excludes those who do not share Christian faith suppositions, whilst academic discourse depends upon the heuristic intersubjective sharing of interpretations so they can be critically evaluated. The highly subjective and non-empirical theological assumptions

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[48] The ideological criticism produced by some postmodern scholarship goes further than this. Graham Ward has recently questioned Stephen D. Moore's treatment of the Bible in his 2001 book *God's Beauty Parlour*, suggesting that one response to Moore's readings of biblical texts as bound to violence, domination, subjugation and oppression is to conclude that they should simply be put aside: "But that is not what Moore wants to do. He wants to stamp up and down and pulverize them. And that offers no hope to the millions of people who still draw comfort, joy, inspiration and sustenance from these texts. What I am suggesting here is that at some point iconoclasm has to give way to a constructive project, otherwise the critical gesture is simply anarchistic" (Ward 2003, 255).

which precondition Christian readings, it is argued, inevitably make Christian readings uncritical and, therefore, unacceptable in the academic arena. If Christian scholarship is to gain an equal hearing with other interpretive approaches, then it must be able to show that these reservations are unfounded.

One response is to argue the need to avoid what Kevin Vanhoozer describes as "nothing but" reductionism: that is, the description of one level of textual meaning in terms of another. Vanhoozer argues that both deconstruction and socio-pragmatism of the kind suggested by Stanley Fish are "socio-semiology", an approach which describes higher levels of textual function in terms of ideological sign systems and interpretive communities, with the result that the ensuing descriptions fail to do justice to the complexities of those levels and effectively eliminate communicative agency.[49] Fish, for instance, accurately observes that interpretive groups with common interests play an active role in shaping interpretive approaches by their ideological precommitments. This insight is then universalised and raised to the level of dogma, resulting in a model of interpretive communities closed off from external critique or enlightenment, and isolated from one another by the separation of their critical discourses and interpretive methods. Fish's assertion that the texts read by communities are actually nothing but projections of their own ideologies closes off any attempt to set the communities he describes in a broader context.[50] The contention of the

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[49]Vanhoozer 1998, 329.

[50] Stanley Fish's interpretive community bears a strong resemblance to Emile Durkheim's concept of the religious totem.The totem functions not as a mediator of transcendence but as a projection by the community of its own sense of social identity and values, so that the object of the community's worship is in fact itself. Whilst Durkheim and Fish are correct in identifying important social dynamics in religious practice and textual interpretation, both are also reductionist in reducing religious phenomena to purely sociological activities, and thus serve as good examples of "nothing but" reductionism. For Durkheim's theory see e.g. Durkheim 1915. Durkheim's theories are recognised by a number of modern sociologists as coloured by his own atheist commitments, which led him to refuse to accept the reality of human belief in unseen spiritual realities and to explain religion away as a purely social phenomenon (see e.g. Sharpe 1986, 82-86; Hughes 1996, 51-53).

Christian community, however, is that this model fails to do justice to the bigger picture, and allows for no interaction between human subjects and transcendent divinity. Much postmodern scholarship has taken valid insights into the workings of human subjectivity and elevated those to the level of a universal truth-claim that human subjectivity is all there is. Christian scholarship will want to challenge this view as having fatally restricted horizons, without denying the validity of the truths which postmodernism has helped to uncover.

A second response to the objection that Christian discourse is conceptually and terminologically closed to external critique is to point out that the same objection is not applied to other interpretive approaches within the academy. Many postmodern methods and approaches present exactly the same problem for scholars who do not share their philosophical presuppositions and technical terminologies. One example of this is the work of Mieke Bal, whose pioneering work of the late 1980s has been highly influential in the area of literary and ideological study of Old Testament narrative.

Trained originally as a structural narratologist in the tradition of French structuralism laid down by Genette, Greimas and Barthes, Bal has gone on to adopt insights from Derridean and Lacanian poststructuralism, Freudian psychoanalysis and American feminist criticism.[51] Bal thus brought to her study of the Bible a formidable arsenal of rigorous critical tools which she has deployed with precision in the service of a feminist interpretation of the Old Testament in general and of the book of Judges in particular.[52] Bal's persistence in paying close attention to the text, refusing to gloss over textual

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[51]See Bal 1991, 4-5.
[52]Bal has been described as "an adroit and ruthless reader, a picker-apart of texts, whose manner of close investigation rubs off to some degree on anyone who samples her work" (Murphy 1999, 119).

problems in pursuit of a 'coherent' interpretation and her insistence on an interdisciplinary approach which renders every interpretation open to critique from other disciplines has caused many to re-evaluate the very basis of their interpretative strategies.

At the same time, however, the unfamiliarity of Bal's critical methods and the challenging nature of her ideological and philosophical base has rendered the introduction of her approach into Biblical Studies problematic. Despite Bal's attempts to lay bare the theoretical and methodological underpinning of her work, scholars working within the boundaries of Biblical Studies have found her importation of not one but many foreign critical approaches at best daunting and at worst baffling. One reviewer of *Murder and Difference* found her technical terminology "difficult and sometimes impenetrable", and admitted "from the start to the possibility of having misunderstood or misrepresented what this book is all about".[53] Others have flatly stated that "Bal's works are difficult to read", and that passages "which use the technical jargon of semiotics without adequate explanation obscure the meaning of parts of the book".[54] Even Alice Bach, an enthusiastic supporter of Bal's approach, admits that "working through Bal's method can produce literary vertigo before one grows easy in its harness".[55]

The difficulties of reception encountered by Bal's work suggest that interdisciplinary dialogue between approaches which proceed from different philosophical and ideological bases, and which operate using different critical terminologies, can be problematic. This raises a major question mark over the

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[53]Greenspahn 1990, 104.
[54]Brettler 1990, 96-7.
[55]Bach 1991, 333. David Jobling has commentated extensively on the theoretical accessibility of Bal's work (Jobling 1991), noting that her explicitly theoretical work is more accessible but unknown to biblical scholars, and that heavily theoretical sections of her early works were removed in translation, ironically for fear of alienating her audience.

long-term prospects for the open and free dialogue which the pluralist postmodern academy proposes. As we have seen, a vital prerequisite of dialogue is a shared language, and one argument against the inclusion of overtly Christian biblical scholarship is that its confessional language and conceptual framework are not shared by all academics. But neither, by the same token, are the language and frameworks of Moore, Bal or, for that matter, any critic who seeks to deploy interdisciplinary approaches in their study of biblical texts.

It is questionable whether a Christian critical discourse which shapes its interests, its theological base and its critical method in relation to the biblical text which is itself the object of study, should be excluded from academic consideration when equally intrasystemic critical discourses drawn from existential philosophy, structural semiotics, psychoanalysis and a host of other ideologically and philosophically committed approaches have been welcomed. The answer common to both objectivist and ideological criticism is that confessional approaches are *too* interested in the biblical texts to stand over against them, to which the confessional response is to ask why *only* standing over against the text should necessarily result in a fuller and truer understanding of texts which are fundamentally rhetorical. Not to submit openly to the rhetoric of the text, even temporarily, precludes the possibility of full understanding.

The fact that not all interpreters share the conceptual framework which gives rise to an interpretation does not mean that the interpretation cannot be understood or critically evaluated. On the contrary, it is only through extrasystemic critique that theories and critical methods can evolve and develop rather than becoming circular arguments or dead ends. There is no

reason why confessional interpretation should be placed in a separate category to other approaches in this regard.

Finally, Francis Watson has argued that Christian discourse cannot be totally intrasystemic, since the church's broader context shapes its socio-linguistic formation. Christian understanding is expressed in a language which the church receives from the wider culture, so that "any correct apprehension of Christian truth or the praxis that must accompany it will occur only through the mediation of a discourse that is not in itself distinctively Christian".[56] This is to say, the language which the church uses to describe its understanding of God is not language which the church creates and which belongs to it alone. Rather, the church takes terms and concepts from the surrounding socio-linguistic culture and uses them to express its apprehension of spiritual truth. All religious language is metaphor, and the vehicles of that metaphor are drawn from the semiotic system which the church shares with its host culture.

This can be seen clearly, for instance, in the terms used by Paul to describe the work of Christ, and which subsequent generations of Christians have taken as paradigmatic. Paul's language of adoption, redemption and justification are not specifically religious terms, but are concepts with wide currency in the culture within which he lived. Indeed, it was precisely the currency of these concepts which made them useful in the formative missionary phase of the church's existence. Paul's metaphorical application of these concepts to truths about the effect of Christ's ministry gives the terms he chooses a new significance, but by the same token the church's understanding of its central doctrine has been fundamentally shaped by the socio-linguistic structures of the first-century context. Watson argues that the interaction of church and its wider context must be taken into account:

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[56]Watson 1994, 9.

> Language is not a transparent medium but shapes and forms the reality of which it speaks; for linguistic agents, there can be no encounter with a reality that is not already shaped and formed by language. The church may therefore not perceive itself as an enclosed, sealed sphere in which truth is preserved in pure form, untouched by the passing fashions of the age. The church too is permeated by contemporary discourse and its passing fashions, and this is the indispensable, inescapable medium through which truth is to be apprehended.[57]

If Watson's argument is a challenge to the church not to separate itself off from its wider context, it also serves to correct the argument that Christian frameworks cannot be translated into the academic arena. At least within English-speaking scholarship, both confessional and de-confessional discourse share a common linguistic framework which facilitates, rather than hinders, communication. If certain concepts are not shared, much more is held in common, making intersubjective and intercommunal dialogue possible. Differences between interpretive communities are not insuperable if a common linguistic base is shared.

In terms of Christian biblical criticism, however, Watson's point also holds good in that Christian interpretive approaches within academic Biblical Studies generally use the same critical methods as non-confessional scholarship. It is therefore important to be clear about the level at which perceived difficulties arising from differing ideological or theological discourses arise. Christian critical and methodological discourse is not distinctively or especially Christian. Rather, Christian scholarship deploys critical methods drawn from a range of disciplines in the service of specifically Christian interpretive goals. What distinguishes Christian from other kinds of biblical interpretation is the theological framework within which interpretation takes place, and into which the results of interpretation

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[57]Watson 1994, 9-10.

must be integrated. Differences of discourse at the theological/ideological level are not to be ignored or the difficulties of negotiation underestimated, but it is clear that communication between interest groups with divergent ideological frameworks is still possible at the level of, and in the discourse of, critical method. Kevin Vanhoozer, however, points out that even at the level of ideology "people with different conceptual schemes are often able to reach understanding, if not agreement; how else could Marxists and capitalists, structuralists and post-structuralists, Reformed and Arminians debate with one another?"[58]

Christian Interpretation and Other Approaches: Can We Talk?

In the preceding argument I have attempted to show that an explicitly Christian approach to biblical interpretation ought to be possible within a Biblical Studies which is committed to both methodological and ideological pluralism. By offering a model of the Bible as a multi-dimensional communicative act, Christian scholarship may retain its commitment to the Bible as scripture (that is, as a vehicle for divine communication) whilst simultaneously affirming the need for a multivalent and multidisciplinary approach which affirms the legitimacy and validity of a wider range of interpretive interests, including the de-confessional. Confessional interpreters will share many interests with non- or de-confessional colleagues at the level of methodology, and will wish to conform to standards of academic practice which are current within the academy.

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[58]Vanhoozer 1998, 319. Vanhoozer bases his argument on the work of Donald Davidson (Davidson 1984, 183-99).

The confessing community will wish to resist suggestions that its practice forms a closed hermeneutical circle.[59] On the contrary, an authentically Christian approach to biblical interpretation will seek to engage fully with the text and with the contemporary context of interpretation, both in order to reveal new insights into the Bible and to bring biblical insights to bear on the community's interpretive context. Confessional interpreters will not seek to close themselves off from other interpretive perspectives, but will wish to engage constructively with other interest groups. This last goal, however, requires further exploration. How should a confessional approach to academic biblical interpretation conduct itself in a postmodern context? In particular, how can interpretive and ideological conflict be negotiated? In responding to this challenge, confessional criticism must give thought to its own ethics of interpretation.

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[59] Possibly by pointing to examples from its own history when radical transformation has occurred as a result if scriptural interpretation, such as the Reformation or the evangelical rediscovery of social justice issues in the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s.

CHAPTER SIX: TALKING WITH STRANGERS – A CHRISTIAN ETHICS OF INTERPRETATION

> *Brother, sister, let me serve you,*
> *let me be as Christ to you;*
> *pray that I may have the grace*
> *to let you be my servant too.*
> *- The Iona Community*

As we have seen in our earlier treatment of Sheffield postmodernism, the ethics of interpretation have become a major consideration in postmodern biblical scholarship. If a distinctively Christian approach within Biblical Studies is to be credible in the emerging academic context, it will have to take ethical issues into account. These issues relate specifically to the political interests of the approach, expressed in the ways in which confessional scholars interact with other interpretive interests and communities. Interpretive ethics becomes particularly important when confessional critics seek to interact with interpretive approaches whose ideological base is unsympathetic or even overtly hostile to orthodox Christian interpretations of the Bible.

One preliminary objection to the notion of a Christian ethics of interpretation might be to question whether a distinctively Christian approach is necessary. Is it not sufficient to play the academic game by the rules everyone else uses? For self-consciously confessional critics the answer must be "no", for the same reasons which ought to drive a self-consciously confessional approach to biblical interpretation in general. Once the importance of ideological interests in interpretation is understood, it also becomes clear that fundamental interests are not shared by all interest groups. Further, it is clear from the foregoing argument that academic practices, interpretive paradigms and ethical approaches have often been co-opted by interests which seek to exclude or relativise Christian perspectives. It is important to note that the debate on

ethics of interpretation has been taken up most stridently (though not exclusively) by interested parties whose objective is at least in part to resist the inclusion of overtly confessional approaches within the discipline.

That being the case, it cannot be assumed that the ethical standards prevalent within academic Biblical Studies will be fully consonant with Christian interests, any more than the development of poststructuralist and socio-pragmatic interpretive communities within the discipline can be said to be. The formation of a distinctive Christian approach to ethical interpretation is therefore necessary for the maintenance of a distinctive Christian approach to interpretation. To play by someone else's rules may be to find that those rules exclude confessional concerns by ruling them unethical. At the same time, a Christian approach to interpretive ethics may have something to offer the wider discipline which can serve as a corrective to some of the difficulties that we have noted with postmodern scholarship, especially the fragmentation of the discipline into disparate interpretive interest groups who do not talk to one another. A Christian interpretive ethics which stresses the importance of dialogue and intercommunal communication may have something to say to this situation.

Why Talk With Strangers?

In what follows, my aim will be to sketch the outlines of a model for interpretive ethics within Biblical Studies which reflects Christian concerns and values. The proposed dialogue partners most clearly in view will be the scholars and interest groups whose work has been engaged elsewhere in this argument, especially those whose stance in relation to confessional criticism is

hostile. The reasons for this are primarily twofold: first, de-confessional scholarship of the kind we have addressed has done much to set the tone and direction of debate in relation to interpretive ethics, and therefore must be engaged if a credible Christian alternative is to be proposed; second, if it is possible to demonstrate that distinctively confessional interpretive ethics can overcome some of the difficulties which we have identified with more extreme interpretive positions, then the value of the approach for interaction with less difficult dialogue partners will be all the greater.

But why should confessional scholarship seek to talk with strangers in the first place? Preliminary objections to such conversation can be anticipated from both confessional and de-confessional perspectives. The Christian community might reasonably ask why it is necessary to engage in dialogue with scholars whose interests are often overtly hostile to confessional interests: why can we not simply let them get on with it and pursue our own interests in our own ways?[1] One of the attractions of a pluralist academic context which recognises the legitimacy of many interpretive interests is the prospect of being free to pursue one's interpretive goals without having to justify them to others who do not share an interest in those goals. But this is to ignore the continuing need for critical accountability to the wider academy, and to avoid the need to deal with real and serious conflicts of interest when they arise. Even in a pluralist environment, confessional and de-confessional scholarship will come into contact with one another within university departments, in the pages of journals and *Zeitschriften*, in seminars and at conferences. If it is not possible for confessional and de-confessional critics to avoid one another entirely, they

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[1] In the process of completing this thesis I have offered a number of papers to research seminars in a variety of confessional settings, including Christian training institutions. In almost every case, the first question posed by colleagues has tended to be, "Why bother?" The interests of de-confessional and confessional scholarship have seemed to be so disparate as to render attempts at engagement futile. I hope that I have by now made clear my reasons for believing that this is not the case.

must develop ways of talking with one another and negotiating interpretive differences and conflicts of interest which involves more than simply pretending the other party does not exist.

From the de-confessional point of view, the preliminary objection to conversation might well derive from a nervousness about the intentions of Christian criticism. Suspicion of Christian universal truth claims is deeply rooted in the academy, not only because of the liberal humanist foundations of many institutions of higher education, but also because of the experience of many emergent interest groups. If the experience of Christian interpretation and use of the Bible for some interpretive communities has been oppressive and damaging, then confessional scholars should not be surprised when those communities, having carved out a space within the academy where they are free to pursue their own interests without having to answer to ecclesial concerns, are reluctant to engage in civilised conversation.[2]

There are a number of reasons why Christian scholarship should seek to engage with perspectives beyond its own horizons, the first of which is that the Christian interpretive community exists within a wider context from which it cannot be separated. We have noted Francis Watson's argument that the discourse of the Church is drawn from the wider discourse of its socio-linguistic context: Watson also argues that the world in which the church exists is the focus of the church's mission. The confessing community takes from its study of scripture a number of truth-claims which it is called upon to communicate beyond its own boundaries:

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[2] Again, a personal anecdote may be helpful. On presenting a paper at a recent conference of the British New Testament Society in which I suggested the need for translation of confessional conceptual frameworks into terms with which, for instance, secular feminists could constructively engage, I was rebuffed by a feminist scholar who told me she could "take or leave" my confessional interests without the need for such translation.

> the biblical story itself refuses to permit its own enclosure and confinement within the walls of the church, but requires the community of faith to look outwards into the conflict-ridden sociopolitical sphere in which it is of course already located and implicated.[3]

At the same time, however, Watson notes that although the church's ecclesial claims about the Bible have relevance beyond the church, those claims are disputed in the wider culture within which the church exists and operates, and upon whose discourse the church depends in order to communicate. Hence, Watson argues, "the community of faith is entirely dependent on a language or discourse which is constantly developing ways of resisting and concealing its claims".[4] If the church is to fulfil its missiological purpose within the wider culture it must constantly engage with that culture in order to find the means of communicating its message.[5]

In the academic context, this means that engagement with postmodern and de-confessional scholarship and discourse is essential. Kevin Vanhoozer argues along similar lines to Watson, and offers several reasons why Christian scholarship should engage postmodern approaches. First, as scholars Christian academics have an obligation to be intellectually honest and even charitable, and that means taking the trouble to understand postmodernism before writing it off. Second, postmodernism as an interdisciplinary phenomenon has occasioned a crisis in scholarship which is changing the context of the academy: understanding of its context is essential for the church to perform its mission, making engagement with the wider academic context essential. Third, postmodern approaches such as deconstruction are already prevalent within

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[3]Watson 1994, 11.
[4]Watson 1994, 10.
[5] Although it lies beyond the scope of this thesis, it would be interesting to explore whether insights from the field of missiology could not be usefully deployed in engaging the emerging situation within Biblical Studies, drawing upon the work of, for instance, David J. Bosch or Lesslie Newbigin (see e.g. Newbigin 1986; Newbigin 1989; Bosch 1996).

the academy and therefore cannot be avoided. Fourth, approaches such as deconstruction "may have something to teach us".[6]

To engage with postmodern approaches is not simply to acquiesce in them, but seriously to evaluate them. This involves a process of dialogue in which the Christian scholar must be open to the possibility that non-confessional interpretation may have something to teach, at the same time as seeking to identify and resist elements of postmodern models for interpretation which might threaten the integrity of a Christian approach. John Goldingay suggests that:

> to keep up a conversation with the thinking of the day seems a good principle. These intellectual currents are unlikely to be totally wrong, even if they have been distorted, not least through their lack of relationship to the gospel. The ease with which we ourselves domesticate or otherwise distort the gospel makes such intellectual currents positive handmaids, by virtue of their facing issues that we may avoid.[7]

Goldingay argues that Derrida, for instance, "cannot be domesticated" because one aim of his approach is to destroy metaphysical theology by cutting away its philosophical and epistemological base, but affirms the value of deconstruction in revealing ideological factors in interpretation.[8] Vanhoozer similarly regards deconstruction as a valuable check to hermeneutical pride whilst at the same time resisting its demands for radical textual indeterminacy, whilst Watson makes a similar argument at the same time as insisting that the claims of postmodern theories must be negotiated and not simply succumbed to.[9]

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[6]Vanhoozer 1998, 174. Francis Watson argues that postmodernism should be regarded as "an important dialogue partner which will assist in the shaping of its form and substance even as it is resisted" Watson 1994, 86.
[7]Goldingay 1995, 29.
[8]Goldingay 1995, 27.
[9]Watson 1994, 84-85.

As well as the need to evaluate postmodern theory and criticism and the possibility of practical gain from an open engagement, there is a strong theological imperative which should drive a properly postmodern Christian academic approach to engage postmodernism with an open mind. We have noted Francis Watson's argument that the bringing to bear of "contemporary perspectives" on the biblical texts has the potential to bring to the fore and render operative liberating elements of the texts which have previously been ignored or suppressed.[10] The recognition of this dynamic directs the attention of confessional interpretation away from a primary focus upon the text alone and towards a recognition of what the Holy Spirit is doing in the wider world.[11] Watson argues that to regard the church as closed off from the world is "ecclesiological docetism", and urges that a recognition of the role of the Spirit beyond the boundaries of the confessing community can enable the church to recognise valuable insights into scripture which originate outside itself.[12] Watson draws upon biblical material which points to the role of the Holy Spirit in creation,[13] and points to the depiction of the Persian ruler Cyrus in Isaiah 45 as a paradigm of the Spirit's working beyond the boundaries of the community of faith. Although Cyrus does not know God, he is nevertheless God's "anointed" (45:1), and the instrument of divine purpose and policy. Cyrus thus presents to the covenant community a challenge to their ability and willingness to acknowledge the redemptive and disclosive action of the Spirit in this apparently secular figure.[14]

Watson concludes his survey of the Spirit's role by arguing that:

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[10]Watson 1994, 190.
[11]Watson 1994, 200-01.
[12]Watson 1994, 236.
[13] E.g. Romans 11:36; Psalms 104:30 and 139:7; Job 33:4.
[14]Watson 1994, 239.

> The sphere of creation-redemption encompasses the whole world, and the indwelling creator Spirit may also act as the redeemer Spirit, redemptively present in all goodness, justice and truth. To permit disclosures of goodness, justice and truth originating outside the community to impinge upon the interpretation of the sacred texts is not to contaminate them.[15]

Extra-ecclesial movements challenge and question the church's self-understanding and this, Watson claims, is one means by which the Spirit leads the church into all truth (John 16:13), and by which the difference between law and gospel may be discerned.

Stephen Fowl and L. Gregory Jones also argue the need for the confessing community to open itself to external perspectives. We have noted Fowl's stress upon the importance of maintaining a dialectical relationship between the text, the interpreting community and the interpretive context in which the Spirit is seen to be operative, and his assertion of Luke's account of the inclusion of Gentile believers in the church in Acts 15 as a paradigm of interpretive practice. Proper attention to the interpretive context, Fowl and Jones argue, entails the interpretive community producing readings or interpretations of the world, but also includes the need to allow the world to provide readings of the community.[16] This is particularly so in relation to ethical positions, in that when the church judges the ethical standards of the world it also judges itself. Extra-ecclesial perspectives may be able to reflect the church back to itself in such a way as to reveal persistent instances and practices of hypocrisy, for instance in relation to institutionalised racism or sexism. Fowl and Jones argue that the world has a right to judge the church by the church's own standards, and that such judgement may be more perceptive and incisive than the church's own. It is therefore incumbent upon the confessing community to be open to outsider perspectives which identify

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[15]Watson 1994, 240.
[16]Fowl and Jones 1991, 47-49.

instances of the Christian community failing to practise what it preaches. A further benefit of engagement with outsiders, they argue, is that understanding the context within which we operate may enable us to discern when the practice of the confessing community is being unhelpfully shaped by the material or social context in which it finds itself, and to find ways of resisting such constraints.

Fowl and Jones helpfully identify a number of outsiders with whose perspectives Christians may need to engage:[17] these include outsiders who regulate the community's common life in the form of scripture and the resurrected Christ; outsiders in the church's midst in the form of marginalised groups within the church such as homosexuals; and outsiders who bear a family resemblance, such as Jewish believers. Particularly important, however, are those outsiders who they class as "complete strangers". As interpreters of the Bible, outsiders can challenge and correct Christian interpretive practices, reminding confessional interpreters of the provisionality of their readings and encouraging them to live up to the values and principles they espouse.

Daniel Patte also affirms the importance of outsiders who are radically other than ourselves, but interprets their role Christologically:

> Those people that we marginalise, reject and/or oppress, because they are different from us, are precisely those who are Christ-for-us. When Christ enters our idolatrous world in order to free us from it, our first reaction is to crucify him, to reject her as a blasphemer, to marginalise and oppress her; liberation occurs for us when we acknowledge that the one we had rejected is Christ.[18]

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[17] Fowl and Jones 1991, 111-17.

[18] Patte 1995a, 40 n.14. Patte bases this conviction on his experience as a Protestant formed in the ecumenical movement in a secularised and Catholic France, and the memory of Jews hidden by the Protestant community in World War II.

Patte argues that traditional androcentric and Eurocentric practices in interpretation are idolatrous, because they take as absolute understandings of scripture which are in fact only partial. Such idolatry is a destructive bondage for interpreters because it turns them into oppressors who impose their perspectives upon others, to the harm of both oppressors and oppressed. Recognition of the idolatry, however, is not enough to enable us to escape it, as Patte argues with reference to Romans 7. Liberation from idolatry is only possible through the intervention of a Christlike person or group, who does not conform to the pattern of the idolatrous world. The response of the world is to reject and crucify the other, but liberation can occur when the other is recognised as a bearer of truth in their otherness:

> The Christlike person is then a sign of contradiction that breaks the power of bondage of our idol. In the process the partial revelation that was also in bondage is itself freed. We can then affirm the legitimacy and validity of this revelation *as partial revelation* (that is, as contextual truth) - rejecting it would be falling into another idolatry.[19]

The outsider who is unlike us, who challenges our preconceptions, our sense of self and our fundamental commitments, Patte argues, may not in fact be the enemy we perceive them to be, and we should be careful before we reject, marginalise or even crucify them: they may turn out to be Christ for us, offering us freedom from the bondage of our existing horizons and offering us a liberation and hope which we had not looked for.

Whilst Patte's argument is compelling, it must be taken with caution. Outsider perspectives should not be welcomed uncritically with open arms as bearers of messianic and liberating interpretive paradigms *just because* they are challenging and different. Patte's argument is that outsiders *may* be

instruments of gospel liberation, but some may simply be outsiders, and some may be enemies. In any case, as we shall see later, openness to outside perspectives does not mean simply surrendering one's own distinctive identity.

In light of these arguments it is possible to see that even some of the hostile interpretive approaches we have examined have things to say to Christian scholarship which confessional interpreters need to hear. Postmodern and ideological criticism has called for standards of intellectual and ideological honesty and integrity, and for consideration of the interpretive needs of others. It has challenged confessional scholars to become aware of the impact of their interpretations upon others and to acknowledge that this impact has not always been beneficial. It has called upon academics to ensure that their critical methods are transparently coherent with their ideological and theological aims. These calls, whilst challenging, are arguably consonant with Christian convictions about the importance of approaching others with respect and humility. If the sometimes vitriolic attacks upon confessional scholarship have revealed something of the truth of how Christian interpretation is perceived by those outside the Christian community, then that revelation can only be beneficial if Christian interpreters take it on board and adjust their critical practice appropriately.

There is, however, a final reason why Christian scholarship should seek to engage de-confessional approaches constructively within Biblical Studies. We have noted that one feature of de-confessional criticism is its frequent bracketing out of theological interests. We have also noted that this is often a means of self-defence against what are perceived to be overbearing ecclesial interests. Daniel Patte, however, has argued that acknowledgement of the

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[19]Patte 1995a, 45-46 n.27.

importance of ideological commitments in interpretation is also a *de facto* acknowledgement that the critical-exegetical task is a *theological* one, concerned not only with issues of empirical fact but also with issues of belief and value - in short, with issues of *faith*. The aim of critical practice is not just to reveal the meanings of texts, but to uncover the beliefs and values which motivate interpretation in the first place, bringing them out into the open where they can be examined, discussed and negotiated:

> a critical exegesis aims at bringing to critical understanding a precritical interpretation that belongs to the realm of faith, the realm of convictions felt as self-evidently true. Even though the ordinary readings that are brought to critical understanding by exegeses are often against traditional faith-interpretations by churches and religious groups, they nevertheless are the expression of convictions that belong to a faith (defined as a system of convictions), possibly a liberal or even a secular faith. Saying that these interpretations are precritical is the same as saying that they are convictional and thus belong to the realm of faith.[20]

It is important, however, to ask what kind of faith motivates the de-confessional scholarship we have been seeking to engage. We have seen in the cases of David Clines and Stephen Moore, at least, that their anti-ecclesial and anti-biblical rhetoric is in part a conversional stance from previously held confessional commitments. This leads to an *active* exclusion of confessional interests on the basis that such commitments *are a bad thing*. The post-Christian ideology of Clines and Moore conforms to a kind of faith which Francis Watson has identified as prevalent within the academy:

> especially in a university setting, 'faith' is far more likely to take a non- or anti-ecclesial form [...]. How is this faith to be characterised? As a certain sense of the mystery or wonder of existence, perhaps - a residue of a former religious commitment that has dwindled away

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[20]Patte 1995b, 120.

under the impact of critical scholarship, also leaving behind a settled dislike of what is perceived as the dogmatism of ecclesial religion.[21]

The recognition that some de-confessional scholars are post-Christian provides a further motivation for Christian scholars to engage with them, and that is that they are not completely outsiders to the confessing community, because they were once part of it. For that reason the confessing community cannot simply leave them to their own devices, because a major part of the church's understanding is that lost sheep ought not to be left to wander, but should be sought after (Matthew 18:12-14). If the process of seeking reveals that some reasons for these prodigals leaving the community were the community's fault and if this revelation prompts re-evaluation and reform of critical practice, then the continuing engagement with de-confessional biblical criticism will be worthwhile even if the lost sheep insist upon remaining lost.

"A Time to Keep Silence, and a Time to Speak"

A Christian ethics of interpretation is not necessarily to be found in particular interpretive practices, but in the exercise of particular interpretive virtues which characterise the Christian interpreter's relationships both with the biblical text and with other interpreters and interpretive approaches. Most importantly, as Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza and Daniel Patte have observed, the task of ethical interpretation is never complete: rather, the ethical interpreter commits him/herself to an ongoing dialogue which incorporates both challenge and affirmation.[22]

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[21]Watson 1994, 14. Watson is referring to historical-critical scholarship, but I would wish to argue that postmodern de-confessional scholarship also fits this description.

[22] "An ethics of biblical interpretation is never achieved: It is a process, through which we must continuously examine and reexamine our interpretations and how they affect others" (Patte 1995b, 12).

Dialogue is a two-way process. Francis Watson has argued, following Alistair McFadyen, that all genuine communication is dialogical rather than monological. In monologue, individuals are manipulated or manipulators, as one conversation-partner treats the other not as an autonomous subject but as a means to an end.[23] The domination of conversation by one party prevents the other from asserting their own interests or concerns. In dialogue, however, "space is conceded to the other so that he or she may become not only a respondent to my questions but also an initiator who calls me to respond as well as to initiate".[24] Dialogue thus entails allowing the other person space to be themselves, to express their concerns and interests, and to assert their identity independent of ourselves: in short, it commits each party to receptive silence as well as to speech. Watson stresses, however, that dialogue does not involve "a self-abnegation in which the other is intended as superior simply by virtue of his or her otherness. [...] Just as the other is to be ceded space within which to resist my communication if he or she so chooses, so I must retain for myself the space which makes resistance possible".[25]

Daniel Patte, similarly, affirms the need for interpretive dialogue, whereby each side affirms the legitimacy of the other whilst retaining its sense of self. Patte reflects upon the history of his own critical practice and notes that in addressing the interpretive needs of other groups than our own it is not sufficient either to attempt to incorporate their interests within our own discourse (to speak *for* them), or to conform our own discourse to theirs, overlaying our discourse with theirs (listening to them). Neither approach recognises the legitimate differences between socio-cultural or ideological

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[23]Watson 1994, 107f.. Watson draws upon McFadyen 1990. Watson applies McFadyen's ideas to a dialogical relationship between the Bible and the reader, but the application of the model to dialogue between interpretive perspectives seems equally valid.
[24]Watson 1994, 111.
[25]Watson 1994, 112.

horizons. Instead, Patte argues for the need to speak *with* others in dialogue which respects mutual difference.[26]

The problem with androcentric and Eurocentric perspectives is not that they are androcentric or Eurocentric, Patte argues, but that these perspectives have been absolutised within academic scholarship to the exclusion of others.[27] Dialogical engagement requires scholars to recognise the provisionality of their interpretive interests, not to renounce them altogether:

> we need to adopt a positive critical attitude toward our own distinctive perspective as male European Americans. We must not only acknowledge it but also *affirm its legitimacy and validity as a perspective*. This acknowledgment and affirmation are possible only insofar as we "speak *with* others" in a genuine dialogical relationship, that is, as we acknowledge and affirm the legitimacy and validity of the "otherness" of others.[28]

The key factors and interests which shape our corporate identities cannot be jettisoned, Patte argues, because they constitute our sense of self, and it is only as ourselves that we can offer a distinctive contribution in dialogue with others. Only when we recognise what makes us different from others can we acknowledge that which makes them different from us, and it is that which makes either party different from the other which provides each's distinctive contribution to dialogical conversation.

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[26]Patte 1995b, 25. Patte's emphasis on interpretive difference reflects his background in structuralist criticism, especially the structuralist insight that semiotic signifiers are defined primarily in terms of their paradigmatic relationships, that is, in terms of their differences from one another.

[27]Patte 1995b, 25.

[28]Patte 1995a, 46, author's emphasis. "[B]eing freed from our bondage to androcentrism and Eurocentrism does not involve rejecting our male and European perspectives. [...] our maleness and Europeanness are good gifts from God, so long as we do not transform them into destructive idols. It is the idolatry alone that needs to be rejected. [...] we must not only acknowledge but also claim our own "maleness" and "Europeanness," provided that we do so in a "critical" way that prevents their absolutisation. [...] Then, it is hoped, we can be ourselves" (Patte 1995b, 26).

"Do Not Think of Yourself More Highly Than You Ought"

It is arguable that the primary postmodern interpretive virtue is honesty. At the heart of postmodern and ideological criticism of traditional biblical scholarship is the accusation that biblical critics have too often allowed themselves to be blind to the interpretive impact of their ideological and theological commitments. The prevalent objectivist paradigm in Biblical Studies has obscured such concerns, rendering them no less potent but potentially more damaging for being allowed to operate covertly rather than transparently and accountably. The calls of Schüssler Fiorenza, Patte and others for biblical academics to acknowledge their personal commitments and their impact upon scholarly practice have been welcomed by many as a liberating call, as well as an ethical challenge. As we have seen, agreement that open declarations of interpretive interest are an ethical imperative has freed critics to openly declare interests which they had previously felt under pressure to hide and, as a result, a babel of new and sometimes conflicting interpretive voices, perspectives and communities have been allowed to take their places within the biblical academy. If honesty is a postmodern interpretive virtue, then it is accompanied by a perception that freedom of speech is an interpretive right: if I am not free to declare my interest, how can I be honest and open about it?

Alongside honesty and freedom of speech, however, a Christian interpretive ethics will want to assert the need for a corresponding virtue: *humility*. If methodological and ideological pluralism has released a babel of interpretive voices, then Christian interpretation might want to point out that if everyone talks at once, no-one is being listened to or being understood, and least of all

the biblical texts. The right to speak one's mind honestly and openly within the academy, and to offer interpretations which follow one's interpretive interests, is intrinsically linked to a reciprocal responsibility to listen to the interpretations of others, and to temper the assertion of one's own views with a recognition that if one has something to say to others, they also may have something to say to you. This assertion is further undergirded by a Christian awareness of the pervasiveness of sin in thinking as well as in action, so that even when I have opinions and interests which I want to assert, I need to be open to the possibility that those may be coloured by my unreformed patterns of thought and require correction.

We have seen that affirming the legitimacy or validity of other perspectives does not require the negation or invalidation of one's own. Instead, what is necessary in a pluralist context is the clear identification and acknowledgement of one's own interpretive interests as expressions of underlying theological/ideological commitments. Such interests and commitments are not things to be ashamed of, since as Daniel Patte has argued:

> Without interests, concerns, life-relations, preunderstandings, prejudgments, presuppositions, and indeed "prejudices," reading, as the interplay between text and reader through which meaning is produced, would not occur. [...] Having a preunderstanding of a text, that is, coming to the text with a vested interest, and thus a question or an expectation, does not in itself engender a misreading. In sum, preunderstandings motivate our readings, including our critical readings.[29]

At the same time as they facilitate our interpretations, however, our presuppositions limit our interpretive horizons. Patte argues that the application of a critical approach produces two linked effects, which he likens

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[29]Patte 1995b, 56. Patte here follows Gadamer (Gadamer 1975, 235-305).

to the use of binoculars. On the one hand, the method enables the critic to see more clearly the aspect of the text in which they are interested by focusing specifically upon it. At the same time, however, the clarity produced by a specific critical focus is only achieved by the exclusion of other questions and interests, so that "the more rigorously we practice a given interpretation of this method, the more our interpretations are governed by the narrower concerns and interests represented by it".[30] Patte goes on to argue that recognition of the subjectivity of one's own legitimate interest and critical method entails recognition of the legitimacy of other interpretive perspectives, accepting that critical theories which provide the basis for concrete and verifiable interpretations must be acknowledged as basically legitimate, even if they come from a different cultural or epistemological context.[31]

The corresponding sin to the virtue of interpretive humility, according to Patte, is interpretive idolatry, which is to be found in the absolutising of a particular perspective to the exclusion of all others. In the case of white, male, American scholarship, for instance, Patte argues that traditional biblical scholarship has unthinkingly elevated andro- and Eurocentric interests to the level of universal validity, so that in the face of feminist critique "We European-American males are thus accused of taking as absolute what is not absolute. We are accused of idolatry. Our sin is a twofold idolatry: androcentrism and Eurocentrism".[32] Kevin Vanhoozer, similarly, has emphasised the importance of avoiding the sin of interpretive pride which, he argues, is to be found in the belief that one interpretive perspective possesses exclusive rights to the true interpretation of a text.[33] The "idolatry of literary knowledge", however, is not the belief in a

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[30]Patte 1995b, 57.
[31]Patte 1995b, 58.
[32]Patte 1995b, 25.
[33]Vanhoozer 1998, 184.

correct interpretation, but the belief that one can possess that meaning exclusively:

> the claim that there is knowledge is not the same as the claim that one possesses it or that the possession of such knowledge allows one to impose one's opinion on others. There is always something more that can be said in an argument. Interpretations can always be questioned; few proofs (outside mathematics and geometry) are ever exhaustive.[34]

Interpretive humility does not necessitate denial of the legitimacy or validity of one's own perspective, but it does necessitate acknowledgement of the provisionality of one's interpretation and the need to render *both* one's interpretations *and* the commitments and interests which underpin them open for external critique and evaluation in dialogue with other interpretations and interests.

Interpretive humility also necessitates another characteristically Christian practice, namely that of *repentance*. Stephen Fowl roots the need for interpretive repentance in a reading of Luke 11:34-35, in which Jesus teaches that the eye is the lamp of the body, and that the health of the eye determines whether the body is full of light or darkness. Fowl interprets the verses to indicate that those who wish to perceive Jesus clearly must first pay attention to the state of their perceptive faculties, and that an essential part of such attention is "the ability to see oneself as a sinner whose only redemption is through a single-minded attention to Jesus".[35] In biblical interpretation, Fowl argues, recognition of the interpreter's own sinfulness is essential if blind, self-affirming interpretive practice is to be avoided. Being able to identify oneself as an interpretive sinner provides a crucial element of provisionality which stems from the recognition that there may be something wrong in the

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[34]Vanhoozer 1998, 302.
[35]Fowl 1998, 81.

ways interpreters and their communities practice.[36] Communities and individuals must, therefore, submit their interpretations to critique and scrutiny, and this may come from voices outside the community, who may be able to offer a truer picture of the community than it can provide for itself.[37]

Recognition of sinfulness is, however, only a first step for Fowl:

> Recognition of oneself as a sinner must lead one to become situated in a network of practices of forgiveness, repentance, and, ultimately, reconciliation, if sin is not to be the first and last word on one's life. The point of these practices is to help us unlearn the habits and escape the patterns of sin in which we have become complicit.[38]

Recognition of the sinfulness of one's interpretive practice is only a beginning. To acknowledge sin but be unable to do anything about it is to find oneself in a position whereby all one is, and all one will ever be, is a sinner. The final resolution of ethical failings involves work on both sides. Those who commit interpretive sin must be prepared to repent: this involves not merely acknowledging their mistakes but doing something to correct them. At the same time, inter-communal interpretive wounds cannot be healed unless those who bear grievances are prepared to move beyond them and practise forgiveness in the interests of reconciliation.

De-confessional biblical criticism has accused mainstream Biblical Studies of institutional interpretive sin: of oppressing some interpretive interests by marginalising them or ignoring them altogether on the grounds of a positivistic

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[36]Fowl 1998, 82.

[37] Fowl is careful to qualify his remarks by pointing out that not all criticism is equally important or even correct. Outsiders may offer a truer account of ourselves than we could produce, but may also lack sufficient familiarity with Christian conviction and practice to offer a correct diagnosis of a community's relationship with scripture. Crucially, however, criticism "must be attended to vigilantly because one cannot know exactly how to evaluate it in advance" (Fowl 1998, 82).

[38]Fowl 1998, 84.

objectivism which itself has masked powerful vested interests. Insofar as this is so, Biblical Studies must undertake some sober self-examination in light of the accusation and, where it has been in error, must take steps not only to acknowledge but to correct harmful practice. De-confessional criticism has also levelled a particular accusation against confessional scholarship: Christian interpreters have often acted as if they had exclusive rights to the Bible, and have dismissed or rejected out of hand extra-ecclesial perspectives (and, on occasion, intra-ecclesial perspectives) which appeared to conflict with their own vested theological interests. The interpretations produced by Christian scholarship have, often unthinkingly, impacted negatively upon readers who did not conform to a particular Christian self-image projected as a universal truth, causing them to read against their own interests. The fact that many of these sinful practices were institutional and unconscious does not make them any less sinful.

A Christian approach to biblical interpretation which takes Christian ethical imperatives seriously must be prepared to apologise when it is proved to have been in error, or when its interpretations can be seen to have harmed others. Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza's call for an ethics of accountability is in full accord with the foundational Christian conviction that individuals and communities are to be prepared to accept responsibility for their actions and their consequences. Christian biblical scholars must be prepared to say sorry if there is genuinely something to say sorry for, and this includes the unanticipated consequences of our interpretations.

What might interpretive repentance look like, and who should do it? Is it for individual interpreters to apologise for institutionalised practises and normative interpretations from the whole history of Christian interpretive traditions? Is it possible to ask for, and to receive, forgiveness when those who

were harmed by an interpretive practice are no longer alive? How, then, shall we live?

First, repentance means turning away from that which we know to be wrong. For individual scholars, this means engaging in some serious and sober self-examination, asking whether our interpretive practice has always measured up to standards of ethical accountability based on a Christian ethic such as Jesus' double rule in Matthew 22:37-40: in seeking to love God with heart, soul and mind, have we lost sight of the neighbours we should love as ourselves? Have doctrinal concerns caused confessional interpreters to neglect pastoral care in interpretation? In seeking the truth of the scripture, have we sometimes neglected to speak the truth (as we perceived it) in love?[39]

Part of this reflective process will involve listening to the voices of those outside the confessional community. If one of the sins of which biblical scholarship stands accused is that it has marginalised and suppressed the voices of minority interests, then part of the process of repentance for that sin is to give those voices room to speak, and to pay them proper attention while they do. This involves allowing them to come into the centre of debate, even if only temporarily, and allowing them to present to the confessional community an image of itself as outsiders see it. The truth of this image will then need to be assessed, and an appropriate response made in terms of adjustments to critical practice.[40] This assessment will need to happen both in the self-awareness of individual scholars, but also within the various instititions of Biblical Studies, whether departments, colleges, or professional societies. If one claim of ideological criticism is that Biblical Studies is in institutional

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[39]C.f. Ephesians 4:15.

[40] This is not to say that all criticism will be unquestioningly accepted as valid, but to say that the basis for the confessional community's evaluation of external critique must be an honest and open attention to the criticisms while they are being made.

bondage to interpretive idolatry, then some response will be necessary at the institutional level.

A second step in repentance will be the adoption of more ethically accountable critical practices. This means that individual scholars should take into account the foreseeable implications of their interpretations not only for their own interpretive interest group, but also for others within the wider academic (and, indeed, non-academic) community. One means of doing this might be to develop more collaborative and dialogical methods of interpretation, whereby scholars with complementary or even conflicting interests produce corporate interpretations which take into account their differing horizons.

A. K. M. Adam has offered one model for such a development by arguing the case for a shift within Biblical Studies from "integral" to "differential" hermeneutics.[41] Integral hermeneutics forms the self-understanding of traditional biblical scholarship, based upon a belief in the determinacy of meaning and the ability of scholarship to devise critical methods to uncover or reveal that meaning.[42] Adam points out that integral hermeneutics fails to fulfil its interpretive goal because scholars cannot agree on a determinate textual meaning, but also argues that an integral approach has unfortunate ethical consequences in that it lacks positive criteria for the evaluation of interpretive difference. Ultimately, "a proponent of integral hermeneutics can in the end offer no respectful account of why anyone would disagree with him or her".[43] Disagreement is usually accounted for by suggesting that one's

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[41]Adam 2004.

[42] "The interpreter bears an ethical obligation to respect the authorial intention of the text because the meaning resides there. An interpreter who treats the text as though it meant something other than its authorial intent distorts the truth about the text. Such interpretations are unjust to the author (who imbued the text with its meaning) and are capriciously inconsistent with the stability we expect of textual meaning in our everyday lives. A meaning inherent in texts demands our interpretive deference" (Adam 2004, 27).

[43]Adam 2004, 32.

opponents simply do not understand the matter as well as one does, but other, less charitable explanations (fundamentalism, radical scepticism, feminism, patriarchalism, racism, political correctness, traditionalism, etc., etc.) are also deployed. "At the end of a debate conducted under the auspices of integral hermeneutics," Adam argues:

> one is left only with the alternatives of saying that one's rival is either ignorant, less intelligent, misguided, perverse or insane. If she knew the relevant factors as well as the correct interpreter - me, or you - and if she understood the proper weight to ascribe to each bit of evidence, she, too, would assent to our interpretation.[44]

Integral hermeneutics sees interpretive difference as a problem to be overcome or explained away, usually by means of putting down other interpreters' work in favour of our own. Hence, Adam maintains, "The integral-hermeneutic quest for single textual meaning feeds on, and in turn itself feeds, theological conflicts".[45]

By contrast, Adam advocates a practice of "differential hermeneutics". This is not a commitment to radical pluralism, which sees the proliferation of interpretations as a good in and of itself. Rather, differential hermeneutics seeks to account for interpretive difference positively, by starting from the premise that different interpreters have good reasons for adopting different interpretations and interpretive practices.[46] This does not mean that these differing approaches cannot or should not be evaluated, because the possible reasons for the differences still include the possibility of ignorance, intellectual error, or unhelpful ideological agendas. Rather, differential hermeneutics begins by identifying the criteria by which an interpretation

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[44]Adam 2004, 33.
[45]Adam 2004, 29.
[46]Adam 2004, 33.

claims validity and then seeks to evaluate the soundness of that claim.[47] A differential approach recognises that all evaluative and interpretive criteria are local, in the sense that they apply only within certain contexts and communities of shared interests. Some of these contexts and communities are small and distinct, such as particular schools of biblical interpretation, whilst others may be very large indeed, but claims to universality can be resisted by a single dissenting voice. Interpretive agreement does not reveal the "true meaning" of the text, but the convergence of interpreters' priorities and sensibilities in a manner which can be celebrated without claiming normative force for all interpretive contexts.

Adam insists that a differential hermeneutics which seeks positive evaluations of interpretive difference does not commit Biblical Studies to a radically indeterminate and subjective pluralism. Judgements about correctness are not banished but put in perspective, so that "A differential hermeneutic can stipulate explicitly what counts as a good reason within a particular interpretive discourse without demanding that every interpretive discourse adhere to that criterion".[48] Adam links his understanding of positive difference to Paul's metaphor of the church as body (1 Corinthians 12:12-30). Differences in interpretation, like differences in human constitution and identity, "signal the human distinction from God and serve to give God glory precisely by the harmonious expression of their difference":[49]

> As parts of the body are not all eyes, feet, hands or nose, so interpretations of scripture are not all historically-warranted assertions about the original intent of a human (or divine) author; nor is interpretive differentiation any more a result of sin than is corporal differentiation. Again, the very existence of difference serves the positive purpose of enabling human beings, whose individual limitations cannot satisfactorily represent God, to begin to represent

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[47]Adam 2004, 34.
[48]Adam 2004, 35.
[49]Adam 2004, 36.

> truth by the harmonious ordering of differentiated bodies and interpretations.[50]

Adam's model for differential hermeneutics offers one example of what a positively repentant confessional Biblical Studies might look like. Without sacrificing its own integrity, it allows for positive evaluation and collaboration between different interpretive interests and approaches, and seeks to avoid the intra- and inter-disciplinary wars which have so often raged between biblical scholars. As a model it supports Christian ethical standards of humility, respect for others, and inclusivity, without submitting Christian interpretation to radical postmodern relativism or the tyranny of a liberal humanist "totalitolerance" by which any and all interpretive approaches must be equally valid. In short, it offers a model for a Christian pluralism which potentially combines interpretive identity with interpretive charity.

As a final observation on humility and repentance in confessional interpretive ethics it seems appropriate to make the point that, if interpretive repentance is essential for the redemption of hermeneutical sinners, it is also essential for the healing of those sinned against. In that respect, open acknowledgement of fault may go a long way to resolving some of the ideological conflicts currently flaring in Biblical Studies. The vitriolic tone of some de-confessional scholarship arises at least in part from feelings of hurt, injustice, and exclusion, and the adoption of socio-pragmatic, poststructuralist and ideologically critical methodologies within postmodern approaches marks them out as part of a movement of protest. One problem with this, however, is that an approach which defines itself in opposition to another can never escape that which it opposes: to assert oneself as part of an anti-ecclesial interpretive

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[50]Adam 2004, 36. It is important to note that the horizon of Adam's model is confessional, and is situated within a collection of essays whose stated perspectives are "multi-denominational Christian" (Cosgrove 2004a, ix). Adam is not arguing that all interpretations are fundamentally equal.

approach is to forever bind oneself to that ecclesial approach which one fights so hard to resist, because without the opposing perspective one's own approach would lack definition. This is not to suggest that de-confessional interpretation has nothing positive to say, but gently to offer the possibility that a sense of interpretive identity expressed more often than not in negative terms tends to produce negative results both for the interpreter and for the readers of their interpretations.

There is an argument, therefore, that confessional scholarship ought to model humility and repentance not only for its own good but for the good of those approaches which are opposed to it. It is possible that if confessional criticism is prepared to concede where it has been at fault in its interpretive practice, then this will open the door for more constructive engagement and dialogue between approaches. This cannot be guaranteed, nor should it necessarily be expected. It would not be surprising if de-confessional approaches, having (as they see it) escaped from the clutches of an oppressive interpretive context, were reluctant to re-engage with the very approaches from whose influence and interests they have fought so hard to sever themselves. It may not be possible to overcome old hurts, but the responsibility of confessional scholars in this regard is that, as far as it is in their power, they should do everything to make reconciliation possible.[51] In doing so they will render their own position more ethically accountable and secure, and their act of repentance may also serve as a call to de-confessional approaches to engage in some self-examination of their own. Ironically, a repentant confessional approach may be in a unique position to suggest to its de-confessional counterpart that unforgiveness, a refusal to accept repentance and apology where it is offered, can also be an interpretive sin which ultimately harms the victim, locking

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51 Cf. Romans 12:18.

them into a victimised self-image which will then work itself out in their external relations.[52]

One objection to the exercise of humility and repentance in academic interpretation is that such practices are more appropriate to the church than the academy.[53] Indeed, even the briefest survey of academic journals and scholarly books reveals that humility is not highly prized as an academic virtue. Key skills which academics have to develop in order to be able to operate within the academy include the ability to critique the work of other scholars and, conversely, the ability to engage in robust self-justification in response to such critique. These skills are especially necessary when particular approaches are associated with individual scholars or groups. In such instances, reputations are intrinsically linked with the success or failure of particular positions, with the result that scholars have on occasion argued more on the basis of their vested professional interest than on the strength of the position. This is not to say that academic consensus is impossible, or that academics do not genuinely believe in it: rather, it is to suggest that a prevailing adversarial culture within the academy, whereby positions are held over against others, hinders rather than builds consensus, because scholars are too often prevented from admitting their errors by the desire not to lose face in the sight of their peers. It is sometimes more acceptable to go down fighting than to admit to a mistake. In Christian terms, however, pride is a sin where humility is not, and an overtly Christian approach within Biblical Studies

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[52] Christian interpreters will be mindful, for instance, that the petition for forgiveness in the Lord's Prayer is conditional on the forgiveness of others by the petitioner (Matthew 6:12//Luke 11:4). See also Jesus' teaching in the parable of the unmerciful servant (Matthew 18:21-35), or the parable of the tax collector (Luke 18:9-14). De-confessional scholars are right to point out the hermeneutical sins of confessional scholarship, but they should be wary that emphasis upon the sins of others should not blind them to their own shortcomings (Matthew 7:3-5).

[53] Stephen Fowl applies his insight into the importance of repentance only within the boundaries of the Christian community. My argument is that the principles which Fowl correctly emphasises are applicable in the wider academic context.

which operated self-consciously on that basis might model a more helpful way of proceeding. Part of the distinctive contribution of Christian scholarship to the wider academy might be found not so much in its content, as in the manner in which it conducts itself.

"Do Not Neglect to Show Hospitality to Strangers, for by Doing that Some Have Entertained Angels without Knowing it."

Interpretive ethics is not only about being self-aware about our own interpretive interests and practices, it also affects the ways in which we interact with other interpreters. As we have seen, the ways in which confessional and de-confessional interpretation have engaged with one another have not always been constructive or mutually affirming. What might a Christian ethics of interpretation offer which might help the process of genuine dialogue?

A key step in genuine dialogue is an affirmation of the legitimacy of other people's interests in the biblical text. As we have seen, a pluralist Christian approach which sees the Bible as a multi-faceted text makes it more possible for Christian interpretation to affirm a range of approaches as valid. In the wider pluralism of the academy, however, Christian interpretation must also develop the skill of being able to affirm non-confessional approaches. Daniel Patte has argued that recognition of the distinctiveness of our own approach entails recognition of the distinctiveness of others:

> in order to be consistent with our own sense of vocation [...], we should also affirm the legitimacy and validity of other views of vocation of critical biblical scholars - for example, those of feminist and other advocacy biblical scholars - that are grounded in different views of the basic human predicament that reflect their different

contextual experiences and specific perceptions of what is problematic. In sum, our own sense of vocation requires that we affirm the *legitimacy* of the different views of vocation of most other interpreters of the Bible.[54]

In short, dialogue begins with an affirmation of the other person (and their interpretive perspective), and their right to exist. The important thing to note, however, is that the affirmation is not on the grounds of the similarity or coherence of different interpretive perspectives, but precisely because of their differences. It is what makes interpreters different from one another which marks the distinctiveness of what they might be able to offer one another, and it is the prospect of gaining a new and enhanced understanding which prompts engagement with horizons beyond one's own.

This understanding is affirmed by Stephen Fowl, who has argued for the practice of "charitable interpretation" within the Christian community. Charitable interpretation is found not in particular interpretive practices, but in the development of Christian virtues in interpreters. The need for charity is to be found in the recognition that in any ongoing tradition of biblical interpretation disagreements over texts will arise, and that such disagreements are actually indicative of the health of the tradition, demonstrating its continuing life and activity in interpreting texts in light of changing contexts.[55] The exercise of virtue in Christian interpretation is not primarily a way of minimising disagreements: "Rather, it provides part of the context in which disagreements can best be articulated, debated, and, at least provisionally, resolved, so that Christians can live and worship faithfully in the situations in which they find themselves".[56]

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[54]Patte 1995b, 78. Patte is careful to qualify this by stressing the need to contest the *validity* of vocations which claim to be the only legitimate and valid one.
[55]Fowl 1998, 87.
[56]Fowl 1998, 87.

An important first step in charitable interpretation is the honest recognition of interpretive differences, and resistance of the temptation to reduce or rationalise those differences away. This means that interpreters should avoid declaring prematurely that interpretive divides are unbridgeable, assuming that outsiders are completely alien, and that differences of ideology or language are insurmountable, or that differing interpretive perspectives are reducible to a single solution, attempting to reduce or smooth away differences by arguing that outsiders are actually like us.[57] Fowl and Jones identify strategies similar to those noted by Daniel Patte, such as attempting to show others that if they could only see things from our point of view they would think like us (engaging the other in a monologue aimed at conversion), or attempting to strip away differences to reveal a shared core of beliefs (denying the particularity of their position).[58] A basic premise of interpretive charity is to assume that the beliefs of outsiders have a consistency and integrity of their own, which ought not to be violated by the assumption that their view is either a less coherent version of our own or that if we strip away our particular differences we will discover that we believed the same things all along. Such an approach respects the integrity of neither side of the debate. A first step in interpretive charity, therefore, is to respect the otherness of the other and engage seriously with it in an attempt to understand them:

> Charitable interpreters will resist the move to close off this activity prematurely; they will always recognize the provisionality of their work. That is, interpretive charity entails both a willingness to listen to

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[57] Fowl and Jones 1991, 125-29.

[58] Fowl and Jones note that a Christian approach which attempts to reduce elements of particularity in difference endangers not only the distinctiveness of the other perspective but also its own. Christian faith is permeated with particularity which derives from the basis of that belief in a specific scriptural narrative, so that failure to recognize particularity on both sides will result in the distortion of Christian convictions into something else. The danger is that agreement is reached only in the form of "a hybrid system of belief and practice that faithfully represents neither party's views" (Fowl and Jones 1991, 124). As with Patte, dialogue entails openness to otherness without denial of one's own central convictions.

differences and a willingness to hear those differences in their fullness.[59]

Fowl observes that sometimes distinctive differences can only be brought into focus when interpreters also acknowledge what they have in common, recognising that "all differences, all agreements, are only intelligible against a background of similarity and agreement".[60] If interpreters begin by negotiating what they have in common, then the nature and type of disagreement may be clarified, and it may turn out that differing perspectives share certain assumptions which can be used to debate the disagreement. As we have seen, Fowl's suggestion that approaches be defined in terms of interpretive interests is useful here and, as we have also noted, agreement may be found to be operative at one level whilst disagreement is found at another. In relation to biblical interpretation, one thing which all interpreters share is an interest in a given text which forms the focus for discussion. Interpreters may also share methodological interests which can be constructively debated, whilst at the same time possess differing ideological/theological commitments which may give rise to disagreement about the merits of particular interpretive questions or the uses to which interpretations are put.

A further step of interpretive charity according to Fowl is that interpreters should, as far as possible, maximise the reasonableness of those with whom they differ. This is to say that one should avoid the assumption that another person's views are unreasonable or irrational simply because they conflict with one's own. By contrast, "the charitable interpreter presumes that those who differ hold their differing views for good reasons and tries to display what those reasons are or were".[61]

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[59]Fowl 1998, 89.
[60]Fowl 1998, 89.
[61]Fowl 1998, 91.

Fowl, as we have seen, maintains that a key motive in engaging with outsider perspectives is the prospect of encountering God the Holy Spirit, but emphasises that if the Christian engages with the perspectives of others in the hope of discerning something of the Holy Spirit's work in their wider context, then this requires the building and maintenance of relationships. Unless we know others and allow them to know us, we cannot hope to discern God's activity in their lives:

> no matter how acute our spiritual insight, we will not be able to detect the Spirit's work in the lives of others unless we know them in more than superficial ways.[62]

Within the context of the Christian community, Fowl offers a model for knowing others through relationships built within a context of hospitality, friendship and patience.[63] The gaining of understanding and the building of consensus takes time, and can only be achieved on the basis of mutual trust and respect.

Interestingly, Kevin Vanhoozer has adopted a similar ethical approach to Fowl, focussed upon the appropriate stance a reader should take in approaching the biblical texts. Vanhoozer claims that *the theological virtues are also epistemological virtues, in which case we should speak of faith, hope, and love seeking textual understanding*. And it may well be that the greatest of these is love".[64] Vanhoozer argues that the working out of these virtues is in the practice of *honesty*, whereby one acknowledges one's prior commitments and presunderstandings; *openness*, whereby the interpreter is willing to hear and consider the ideas of others without prejudice or malice, open to the

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[62]Fowl 1998, 117.
[63]Fowl 1998, 118.
[64]Vanhoozer 1998, 317, author's emphasis.

possibility that they may themselves be changed by the experience; *attention*, whereby the interpreter is not self-absorbed but focussed upon the text, paying careful and patient attention in order to gain understanding of the text as it is; and *obedience*, whereby the reader is prepared to follow the rhetorical directions of the text rather than follow their own inclination.[65] Like Fowl, Vanhoozer argues that the development of interpretive virtues is not a matter of specific rules and procedures, but of the acquisition of skills and good practice. The two-fold responsibility of readers is to understand the text and to respond appropriately, and this involves extending a certain hospitality to the text:

> our duty to receive the textual stranger as a welcome guest is an obligation implied in the covenant of discourse. Moreover, we can only judge the moral worth of a text after we get to know it. [...] The proactive reader is willing to make an initial step of faith and open himself or herself up to the effects of the text: "I believe in order to understand".[66]

The core of Vanhoozer's ethics of interpretation is "to guard the otherness of the text" against the fragmenting isolationism of socio-pragmatism and deconstructionism:

> to preserve its ability to say something to and affect the reader, thus creating the possibility of self-transcendence. [...] The postmodern suspicion of hermeneutics is also a suspicion of transcendence, that is, a suspicion of our ability as readers to be addressed by what is beyond us. It is the postmodern suspicion of hermeneutics that threatens to reduce the other (the author) to the selfsame, that is, to oneself.[67]

It is clear that although he does not say so explicitly, Vanhoozer understands his ethics of biblical interpretation as a valid model for general interpretive

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[65]Vanhoozer 1998, 377. Vanhoozer insists that obedience does not necessarily mean doing what the text says but does involve at least reading it in the way the author intended.
[66]Vanhoozer 1998, 397.
[67]Vanhoozer 1998, 384.

ethics, and that the virtuous approach he advocates in relation to the biblical text should also be adopted in relation to other interpretive voices. Vanhoozer suggests "not that we should read the Bible like any other book, but that we should read every other book as we have learned to read the Bible, namely, in a spirit of understanding that lets the text be what it is and do what it intends".[68] The applicability of this insight to inter-perspectival differences in Biblical Studies is clear when we bear in mind that the way in which most scholars encounter one another in the field is through the medium of the texts they produce in the form of journal articles, seminar papers, and books. That Vanhoozer thinks of his approach as a general ethics is clear, too, in his approach to Derrida, of whom he remarks:

> Before Christian readers pass judgement we must interpret Derrida as charitably as possible. To do so is risky; we may find our cherished beliefs challenged, perhaps overturned. But not to risk oneself in an attempt to understand the other is even more dangerous; to refuse to be honest is to risk losing one's integrity and hence to damage oneself.[69]

Whilst Vanhoozer sees the focus of Christian hermeneutical encounter as being the transformative encounter with the biblical texts, it is equally clear that he is open to the possibility of transformative encounters with other interpreters and their approaches in a way which suggests he is not so far from Fowl's position as might at first appear. Vanhoozer, like Fowl, emphasises the need for openness and hospitality in relation to the other. Indeed, Vanhoozer suggests that a potential source for Christian communicative ethics is the parable of the Good Samaritan, asking, "who is our neighbour? Anyone - speaker or author - who initiates a communication".[70] The interpreter's first response to a new communication should be a respectful listening, acknowledging it for what it is and respecting its aims as a communicative act.

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[68]Vanhoozer 1998, 379.
[69]Vanhoozer 1998, 182-83.
[70]Vanhoozer 1998, 402.

Subject to all and subject to none, the Christian interpreter must be open to insights from other interpreters and approaches, but must not become enslaved by a single intepretive method.[71]

Vanhoozer maintains that respect for the textual other does not automatically guarantee agreement, stating that it is possible to recognise and even respect otherness whilst simultaneously contesting it. Vanhoozer sees a Christian interpretive ethics as an ethics of engagement. Acknowledging that participants in conflictual discussions may come to believe there is no further point in talking, Vanhoozer labels this "a moral failure", insisting that a Christian morality of literary knowledge stresses virtues of self-criticism, clarity, consistency and patience, along with the faith and courage to follow the argument where it leads, in the hope of achieving "a provisional consensus, if not the truth itself".[72] Even if the process of dialogue ends in disengagement, however, it is only on the basis of a true knowledge of the other position:

> After keeping company with texts for a time, we may indeed feel that it is right to part, and we may even shake the dust from our feet as we do so. But one can only properly make such a judgement after accompanying texts for a time. In short, it is only legitimate to *overstand* a text once one has properly *understood* it.[73]

An ethics of interpretation based upon Christian commitments and values offers a constructive way forward for inter-perspectival interaction in a postmodern academic context. The key postmodern insight that there is always more than one legitimate interpretive perspective finds its ethical expression in the academically counter-cultural virtue of interpretive humility. This does not mean that Christian critics will suffer from low self-esteem or be diffident

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[71]Vanhoozer 1998, 402.
[72]Vanhoozer 1998, 302.
[73]Vanhoozer 1998, 403.

about offering their interpretations, but does require that they affirm the legitimacy and validity of other perspectives. Openness and willingness to learn will be characteristic features of such an approach. Awareness that the Holy Spirit is operative in the world beyond the boundaries of the faith community will drive Christian interpreters to engage with other perspectives, seeking to know and understand them fully before evaluating them, whilst not committing them to accepting their insights blindly simply because they are different.

Ethical Christian interpretation will also seek critical and ethical accountability, desiring to see itself through the eyes of others and incorporating practices of self-critique. Christian interpreters will be prepared to repent when their interpretations are shown to have been in error or to have had harmful consequences for other readers, acknowledging their fault and amending their interpretive practice. An interpretive approach which shows pastoral concern for academic neighbours may play a significant role in changing the sometimes adversarial and confrontational culture of academic debate.

Finally, however, a Christian interpretive approach will demonstrate a fundamental integrity in its interpretation, in that its critical methods and ethical interactions with other approaches will cohere fully with its ideological and theological commitments. Secure in their own identity, Christian interpreters will be able to venture out from the community of faith into the context of postmodern Biblical Studies, confident in what they have to offer and open to the new insights they might encounter. Free to be themselves, postmodern Christian interpreters will seek to show how the Bible continues to function as the Word of God in the fascinating and varied postmodern discipline of Biblical Studies, talking with strangers as they go.

Jesus and the Syrophoenician Woman: Strangers in Search of Transforming Encounter

What, then, will an encounter between an authentically postmodern, academic, Christian interpretive approach and secular scholarship look like? One answer is to say that there will be as many varieties of discourse as there will be strangers to talk with. In a pluralist interpretive environment it is not possible to be prescriptive about how interpretations should be shared and negotiated, nor would it be helpful to try. That said, a possible biblical paradigm for such communication across the boundaries of interpretive communities can be found in Jesus' encounter with the Syrophoenician woman in chapter 7 of the Gospel of Mark.[74] This unique episode offers an intriguing prospect of transforming encounter between mutual outsiders, and indicates a number of factors which are essential if such transformation is to take place.

The setting of this passage within the wider context of Mark's Gospel indicates that issues relating to boundaries and identities, and the transgressing of them, are at the heart of Jesus' encounter with the Syrophoenician woman. Following a period of intense ministry (6:30-56) and controversy with his pharisaic opponents over issues of purity and impurity (7:1-23), Jesus withdraws from public view and enters the Gentile region of Tyre (v24). The episode begins, therefore, by Jesus' crossing a significant boundary between "home" and "foreign" territory and, by doing so, highlights the issue of his relationship with those beyond the boundaries of the Jewish community. Jesus is entering an alien environment, and within that environment he himself is an outsider. Not that Jesus is entering Gentile territory because he wants to be in contact with Gentiles: Mark emphasises his desire for solitude by telling the

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[74]A parallel passage is found in Matt 15:21-28. I have chosen to engage with the Markan version because its simpler structure more clearly demonstrates the dynamics of Jesus' exchange with the woman.

reader that having entered a house he wished no-one to know he was there (v24). Unable to escape notice, however, Jesus finds himself confronted by a Syrophoenician woman who pleads with him to deliver her daughter of an unclean spirit (v25).

The woman is characterised (v26) not by name but by gender (gunh), by her Hellenistic culture (Ellhniv), and by her Syrophoenician ethnicity (Surofoinikissa tw/ genei). Her social standing in the eyes of the reader is also depressed by the fact that she appears to be a woman alone, and that the child on whose behalf she pleads is a daughter, a child of lower status than a son.[75] Mark thus emphasises that this is an encounter across boundaries which are significant to both Jesus and the woman. By any commonly accepted standard of behaviour within the Gospel's story world, the encounter between Jesus and the woman ought not to be taking place on grounds of gender, culture, religion, ethnicity, and social standing. Mark's characterisation of the woman and his setting of the encounter outside the boundary of the Jewish community emphasise that Jesus and the woman are complete outsiders to each other, separated by multiple barriers of culture. This separation appears to be upmost in Jesus' mind for, when asked to heal the woman's daughter, he replies harshly, "Let the children (ta; tekna) be satisfied first, for it is not right to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs (toi~ kunarivoi~)" (v27).

The harshness of Jesus' comparison of the woman and her daughter to dogs has offended commentators, who note that the comparison not only rejects the woman's request but insults her at the same time.[76] Nor does the use of a diminutive term for dogs (possibly referring to household pets rather than wild

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[75]Ringe 1985, 70.
[76]Witherington III 1984, 65; Ringe 1985, 66; Fowl and Jones 1991, 120.

dogs)[77] soften the force of the insult: as T. A. Burkill points out, to be called a "little bitch" is no less offensive than to be called "a bitch" without qualification.[78] The effect of the saying is to make Jesus appear harsh, unsympathetic and insensitive, and this has surprised interpreters, especially in light of the fact that the portrayal of Jesus earlier in the Gospel (as, for instance, in the case of the healing of the haemorrhaging woman and Jairus' daughter in Mark 5) indicates his willingness to heal in spite of cultural taboos.[79] In light of that earlier portrayal, and considering the controversy with the Pharisees over purity and impurity which immediately precedes this encounter and in which Jesus calls Jewish purity laws into question, the fact that Jesus not only refuses to heal the woman's daughter but rubs her nose in it as well creates a jarring impression.[80]

Jesus' response to the woman's request could be considered an act of interpretation. The woman's appeal for healing prompts Jesus to apply his understanding of himself and his role to the situation, a self-understanding framed in terms of his relationship to the Jewish community.[81] It is clear

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[77]Lane 1974, 262.

[78]Burkill 1967, 173.

[79]Fowl and Jones 1991, 119.

[80]Stephen Fowl and L. Gregory Jones point out that different cultural horizons mean that modern readers interpret this passage in ways which a first-century reader might find surprising. To the modern reader it is Jesus' refusal which shocks, whilst a first-century reader would be more likely to be shocked at Jesus' eventual acquiescing to the woman's request (Fowl and Jones 1991, 132 n.20). This reinforces Mark Allan Powell's point that modern readings may, from the point of view of textual rhetoric, be unexpected.

[81]Within the literary rhetoric of the Gospel, Jewish-Gentile relations appear to be the primary issue in this encounter. This is suggested by Mark's editorial placement of the story in the midst of other episodes which place Jesus in Gentile territory and in contact with Gentiles (6:45-8:26), and following a controversy over the key Jewish-Gentile issue of ritual defilement (7:1-23). Intertextual first-century evidence of use of the term "children" to refer to Israel and "dogs" to refer to Gentiles, plus the resonance of Jesus' reply with other early Christian expressions of the church's mission first to the Jews and then to the Gentiles (e.g. Rom 1:16; Acts 3:26), suggests a rhetorical context within which this passage foreshadows and authenticates the church's Gentile mission (for discussion see e.g. Lane 1974, 261-62; Ringe 1985, 68). Both Lane and Ringe suggest that the Jewish-Gentile emphasis of the passage is largely editorial and that Jesus' saying in the original tradition reflected the milieu of the household and addressed his own need for rest, but this is to seek meaning "behind the text" rather than in terms of the text's own literary rhetoric, in which it is the Jewish-Gentile tension which is foregrounded.

elsewhere in the Gospel that Jesus regards himself as the Jewish messiah, and that he understands this role both in relation to Jewish messianic expectations and to scripture.[82] His remark that it is for the children to be fed first before their bread is thrown to the dogs indicates his own sense that his mission is first to the children of Israel, and that they have first call on his healing power. The fact that Jesus and the woman come from different communities is a barrier between them which Jesus is not prepared to breach.

Framed in terms of interests, the exchange of Jesus and the woman can be seen as a debate over the legitimacy, validity and priority of Jewish and Gentile interests in Jesus' healing power. Jesus' own identity is fundamentally linked to that of the Jewish people, and their interests are therefore higher on his scale of priorities than those of Gentiles. It is important to note that Jesus does not deny the legitimacy of the woman's desire for healing, stating that the children should be fed *before* and not *instead of* the dogs, but that he does deny its validity when addressed to him. That said, however, the strength of his rejection of the woman's appeal through the insulting comparison of her and her daughter with dogs shows that Gentile claims on his attention rate so low on his scale of values as to be almost non-existent. In structuralist terms, Jesus' reply stresses the oppositional or paradigmatic aspect of Jewish-Gentile identity, rather than the relational or syntagmatic.

As an act of interpretation, Jesus' response to the woman reveals a hermeneutics shaped by the particularity of his community. Jesus sees himself in terms of Jewish values and priorities, and these colour not only his self-understanding and sense of identity, but also his relationships with those beyond the boundaries of that community. The Jesus who responds so harshly to the woman's legitimate appeal for help reflects the values of a self-

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[82]E.g. Mk 8:27-33; 9:2-12; 10:32-34; 12:1-12.

contained, introverted community which sees its interests as exclusive of the interests of outsiders. This is emphasised in the narrative by the clear statement that Jesus comes to Tyre seeking isolation, and the intrusion of an "uppity woman" causes him to attempt to close down their communication through emphasis of that which divides them.[83] Jesus is interested in being a Jewish messiah, not a Gentile one, and rejects as invalid any suggestion that he might see himself in any other way.

The woman's response to Jesus' insulting brush-off is striking not only for its wit, but for the way in which she takes the logic of Jesus' remark and transforms it in a way which is at one and the same time both deeply challenging and fundamentally affirming. Her first direct speech in the episode begins not with anger or hurt at his insult, but with respect, and even with deference: "Lord" (kurie), she answers (v28). The woman appears to understand and accept that, being a Jew, Jewish interests will outweigh Gentile ones in Jesus' priorities. At the same time, however, she rejects Jesus' oppositional definition of their mutual identities, instead suggesting that a more positive relationship is possible without undermining Jesus' own integrity, which she affirms but also qualifies. The significance of the small word kaiv is crucial for the effect of what she says next, in that it is not a confrontational or negatory "but", but rather an enhancing "and yet". She does not deny the legitimacy of what Jesus has said, but suggests that there is something more. What Jesus says is true, "and yet the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs" (v28). Prioritisation of Jewish interests does not necessitate the exclusion of Gentile ones. Jesus does not threaten his role as Jewish messiah by healing her daughter, but broadens it. Her needs and those of her daughter can be addressed without threatening Jesus' sense of who he

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[83]Ringe 1985, 65.

is. Jesus finds the argument persuasive: because of what she has said (διὰ τοῦτον τὸν λόγον, v29) she may go, for the demon has left her daughter.[84]

Seen in terms of interpretive ethics and interests, the conversation between Jesus and the Syrophoenician woman represents a shared interpretation and a debate over the interests which should determine the application of that interpretation. Jesus and the woman agree on a reading of him and his identity as Jewish messiah, but disagree initially over the validity of the woman's interest in that interpretation, which Jesus' initial refusal denies. The woman's response affirms Jesus' prioritising of Jewish interests but simultaneously argues for a raising of his estimation of the validity of her interest without giving it equal status. At the beginning of the encounter the woman's most pressing interest is Jesus' lowest priority: by the end of the episode it has moved up his scale of values sufficiently for him to grant her request and heal her daughter. Crucially, successful resolution of the exchange is enabled by the fact that neither totally denies the legitimacy of the other's interests, but only their relative validity.

Both Jesus and the woman risk status in their community and their own sense of self in this encounter across community boundaries, and the initial prospects for their exchange are not good. Both, however, come away from the encounter with their situations changed. The woman gets what she wants, and Jesus gains an enhanced understanding of himself and his role. Indeed, Sharon G. Ringe suggests that one of the most striking features of the encounter is the woman's ministry to Jesus by faith. The woman's faith is "an

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[84]Joanna Dewey points out that this is the only canonical instance of a character changing Jesus' mind (Dewey 1995, 486). Encounters such as this were not the mainstream of Jesus' experience, and this suggests that encounter across the boundary of interpretive communities ought not to be the mainstream experience of Christian biblical interpreters either. The presence of the episode within the canon, however, means that Christian interpreters ought not to be closed to the transforming potential of such encounters when they arise, and should not foreclose them prematurely.

act of trust, of engagement, risking everything", but by investing that trust in Jesus she enables him to see himself and his situation in a new way, becoming free "to respond, to heal, to become again the channel of God's healing presence in that situation". The woman's wit is her gift to Jesus, "her ministry that opened up the possibility of his". [85]

In spite of what at first sight appear to be insuperable difficulties, Jesus and the Syrophoenician woman are able to achieve a transforming and affirming encounter across barriers of faith, culture, ethnicity, gender and social class, and several crucial factors enable this. First, both are secure in their own identity: Jesus does not ask the woman to become a Jew, nor does she expect him to become a Gentile. Each asserts their interests in light of their own identity, and accepts the other's identity as a given. The object of the encounter is not that either of them should become the other, but that their distinctive differences should be acknowledged and negotiated so as to enable a constructive contact between mutual outsiders. Second, both parties agree a shared interpretation of Jesus and his role as a Jew and healer, and this shared understanding gives them a common basis from which to begin a negotiation of interests. Third, neither Jesus nor the woman denies the basic legitimacy of the other's interests. Jesus does not say that the woman ought not to request healing for her daughter, nor does the woman deny the priority of Jewish claims on Jesus' healing abilities. Instead, each is prepared to negotiate the level of priority which their differing interests should be given in order to achieve a practical resolution which benefits both parties. Fourth, both Jesus and the woman are prepared to overlook their divisions (and, in the woman's case, forego a legitimate sense of offence) in order to reach agreement. The woman exercises humility in putting her daughter's need for healing above her own hurt at Jesus' insult, whilst Jesus demonstrates repentance in changing his

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[85]Ringe 1985, 72.

mind and acceding to her request. The desire to pursue a common good ultimately enables both parties to transcend division and conflict. Finally, both Jesus and the woman take risks, both in relation to their status within their own communities and in relation to their own sense of identity. Being prepared to put aspects of their identity up for negotiation, they find those identities transformed and enhanced by encounter with a stranger.

Jesus' encounter with the Syrophoenician woman offers a paradigmatic parable for a Christian, academic postmodern approach to biblical interpretation. Christian interpreters can be confident in their own identity and interests in the Bible, and need not apologise for asserting those interests not only within the community of faith but beyond it. At the same time, they will need to recognise that other perspectives and interests are also legitimate, and be prepared to negotiate the validity of their own interests against others. Authentically postmodern Christian interpreters will seek to emphasise diversity rather than division and affirm difference as legitimate and constructive, accepting the identities of other interpreters as having legitimacy and integrity. They will also be prepared to engage with those outside the interpretive community, and to take risks in making their own interests available for negotiation. They will exercise humility and repentance, listening attentively to the voices of other interpreters and taking on board both criticism and affirmation. Above all, they will seek genuine encounter with outsiders in the shared arena of academic biblical interpretation, talking not at, to, or for them but *with* them, hopeful that somewhere in the conversation they will encounter God himself speaking to them by the Spirit through the voice of a stranger.

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