



The Old Testament and its Readers

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Although I am a son of the manse, indeed a grandson and a great-grandson of the manse, brought up on jokes about the prophet Nahum and Bildad the Shuhite, I actually knew next to nothing about the Bible when I came to New College in 1959 and even less about the Old Testament. So I begin my tribute to Norman with the simple acknowledgement of the fact that it was largely due to him that I became an *Alttestamentler*. Of course there were other influences. James Barr infected me with a passion for semantics from which I have never recovered, and for that I am eternally grateful. But it was undoubtedly Norman's enthusiasm that inspired me to go in the direction of Old Testament Studies rather than any other. And there is another thing I owe to Norman, rather less obvious. It was with him that I first began to study Judaism, in particular the rabbinic literature. We read Yoma together and I have very happy memories of his enthusiastic exegesis of the rabbis' description of Yom Kippur as it was in Jerusalem in the time of Christ – and what it must have felt like to be the scapegoat. It was not long before I was studying Talmud and Midrash in Jerusalem.

My enjoyment of his lectures on the Old Testament was not shared, I may say, by all of my fellow students: only three of us specialized in Old Testament studies, Calum Carmichael, Stuart Leyden and me - and Stuart probably only because he was student assistant at Morningside Parish Church where the Porteous family worshipped. Calum, now a renowned expert on Biblical Law, could not be here but he sent me his own tribute to Norman:

What is significant about Norman is the kind of thing Robert Frost referred to when he said that the 'three most important things in the world are science, religion and – gossip.' Frost refers to the quality of imagination in gossip that ties it to, for example, the writing of history. The many stories that Norman loved to tell remind us that conversational fragments are immensely

revealing about how scholars view themselves and how they want others to see them. Norman had a genius for conveying that the world of scholarship was about real and interesting people. He could, in an anecdote, evoke the quaintness of times past as when he recalled how he attended the lectures of a Moral Philosopher in Tübingen who told the students that dancing was only fit for married couples in their bedroom.

Or he could make a scholarly name in a book come alive by telling a minor detail about the person. He recalled how the distinguished Old Testament scholar H. Wheeler Robinson was very fond of the Green Penguins books. Once, in a railway bookstall, Robinson picked up, one after the other, four Green Penguins books and told the salesgirl that he had already read them. She gave him a dirty look and said, ‘Do you not think you should read something more serious?’ One of Norman’s most memorable traits was an infectious gleeful response to something he really liked. He loved to tell jokes. I recall his one about the chimpanzee, with the Bible in one hand and Darwin’s Origin of Species in the other, saying ‘Am I my keeper’s brother?’

One of my last memories of Norman was his delight when I read out to him something David Daube had penned. Each was very fond of the other. Daube had been to a conference where the priority of Mark’s gospel as the first literary composition among the four gospels had been much discussed. After the event Daube sent the following rhyme to another New Testament scholar. Daube prefaced his rhyme with ‘Why make many words when one will do? Why press into service even a single monosyllable if a question mark or an exclamation mark expresses your meaning?’ Anyhow, here’s ‘In Defence of the Question-mark.’

Some say the world is made of fire,
 Some say it’s naught but quark,
 Faced by alternatives so dire,
 I choose the question-mark.

Was Jonah's fish a whale?
 A gyre, a dolphin, or a shark?
 I'd rather grope than be a liar,
 I'll put a question-mark.
 What was the height of Babel's spire?
 The width of Noah's ark?
 What kinds of strings had David's lyre?
 Give me the question-mark.
 Why do the priests wear white attire?
 Why is the devil dark?
 How many kids did Solomon sire?
 Hail to the question-mark.
 Some say that Matthew's work is prior.
 Some Luke's (just for a lark).
 But I know one whose claim is higher,
 Beyond all question—Mark.

Needless to say, Norman had his response. He recalled how Victor Hugo had sent a telegram to his Paris publisher with but a single question mark by way of enquiring how his latest book was selling. The publisher replied by telegram. It, in turn, contained but a single exclamation mark.

The text I've chosen from Norman's table talk, not unrelated to Calum's, is 'Read the big men'. No doubt he would use a more inclusive expression if he were alive today to acknowledge the existence of many great women scholars. But these were the words of a humble man, a man who saw himself on the shoulders of giants, like the evangelists in the windows of Chartres Cathedral, St Luke on the shoulders of Jeremiah, St Matthew on the shoulders of Isaiah and so on. 'Read the big men' meant 'respect the work of established scholars'. For Norman 'the big men' were mostly Germans, and he recommended them to his students because he knew them personally and enjoyed their company. It reminds me of something Jo Blenkinsopp once confided in me: 'How on earth can you read everything published these days, even on the smallest topic? What I do now is read only books written by my friends!' Now of course Jo, like Norman, has an enormous circle of friends, but

that's not the point. Both are saying that to appreciate an argument, to understand a theory or a particular interpretation, you need to know something about the person who is responsible for it – something about their background and their presuppositions.

That is why I chose reader response as the subject of my tribute to Norman. I don't know how he would have answered the philosophers' old question: If a tree falls in the forest and no-one hears it, does it make a sound? But I do believe he would have understood the point of the question: does a text have any meaning when no-one is reading it? Is it not the readers of a text that give it meaning? 'Meaning is what happens to readers during the reading process' (Stanley Fish). The notion that we can discover one true objective original meaning of a text, divorced from its readers, has been challenged from many different directions. The 'spin' that politicians put on everything, is an all too familiar example of how it is virtually impossible to get anywhere near objective facts - let alone one single meaning of a text describing those facts. What the Church or biblical critics call the original meaning of the text is often arrived at by a route that has now been exposed, by feminist, postcolonial critics and others, to be as subjective as any other meaning. The same goes for the quest for objective history. A colleague of mine in the History Department at Newcastle told me how when he reread his doctoral dissertation on Napoleon written in the 1930s, it seemed to be more about Nazi Europe than Napoleon. I was also very encouraged to find, by the way, that Italian schoolchildren of my own son's age (12) learn history from a book entitled *La Storia e il suo racconto* ('History and its Narration') where there seems to be almost as much about the historians as about what actually happened.

If there is any sense in this approach to biblical interpretation, then to discover the meaning of a text a new emphasis is required on the readers, and the role of the reader in the process of understanding it. In reading a commentary on Isaiah, do we not hear the voices of Isaiah's readers (including the author of the commentary) more clearly than the voice of Isaiah? In fact many of the early mediaeval commentaries were collections of what previous authorities had said, what the 'big men' had said the text meant. In many ways recent interest in reader

response is not new. But what is new is the interest being shown these days in ordinary readers.

It has often been pointed out that what ordinary people believe a text means is sometimes more interesting and more important, historically, ethically, aesthetically than what the ‘big men’ say, what the scholars and archaeologists come up with as the ‘true’ or ‘original’ meaning. The tradition that Moses wrote the Pentateuch, for example, is more interesting than the fact that he probably did not. In the case of the Church, it must be said that the Church is a community made up of only a minority of specialist scholars, and a vast majority of ordinary people who read the biblical text, or at any rate regularly listen to it being read to them during the liturgy, and what they make of the text is often as interesting as what the scholars are saying.

Till now this kind of material has been largely neglected. Now however the situation is changing. Numerous publications over the last few decades have begun to take this kind of material into account. There was the publication in Spanish and Portuguese of readings collected from base communities in Latin America and taken very seriously by scholars like Gustavo Gutierrez, Jon Sobrino and Jose Porfirio Miranda. Much of that work was subsequently translated into other European languages and widely read. More recently there have appeared volumes like Sugirtharajah’s *Voices from the Margin* and *The Bible in Africa* by Gerald West and Musa Dube.

There are also studies of the history of reception, or *Wirkungsgeschichte*, in which the emphasis is on the impact of the text on history, art, literature, music and so on down the centuries, rather than the original context: a fresh interest in the afterlife of the text rather than its prehistory in the ancient world; in other words, on the readers of the text rather than its author. My own book on Isaiah in the history of Christianity was one attempt to write the reception history of a whole book. Jeremy Cohen’s “*Be Fertile and Increase, Fill the Earth and Master It*”: *The Ancient and Medieval Career of a Biblical Text* (1989) is the history of how a single verse (Genesis 1:28) was read and used over many centuries. Two other wonderful examples are Margarita

Stocker's *Judith: Sexual Warrior: Women and Power in Western Culture* (1998), and Yvonne Sherwood's study of Jonah which has the title *A Biblical Text and its Afterlives: The Survival of Jonah in Western Culture* (2000).

In all these an obvious interest of the author is the background and presuppositions of the people whose readings or interpretations are being recorded. Many of them in some of the early collections lived in conditions of poverty and their readings were motivated by a concern for social justice. For others the main issue was a theological or confessional one: for them readers bring with them a religious faith and their 'horizon of expectation' is a Christian one. I remember very vividly hearing the great Sri Lankan missionary to Scotland, Daniel T. Niles, say in the 1950s that when you meet someone for the first time, whether in Muslim Africa or Buddhist Tibet or pagan Scotland, you should expect to find Christ there already, you should expect to hear his voice in the language of the people. In an ancient parallel to this, early Christian commentators, to the embarrassment of their Jewish contemporaries, expected to find Christ in the Hebrew Bible, or at any rate, in its Greek and Latin versions. Mediaeval examples abound: in art and literature the woman with her heel on the serpent's head in Genesis 3 is identified with the Virgin Mary stamping out sin and the Servant of the Lord in Isaiah 40-55 is almost universally identified with Christ. And this is not only an ancient and mediaeval phenomenon: George A. F. Knight sought to do the same thing in books like *A Christian Theology of the Old Testament* (1959) and *Ruth and Jonah: The Gospel in the Old Testament* (1966).

Another set of presuppositions which operated in almost all the early Jewish literature, including the Dead Sea Scrolls and the New Testament, was the conviction that sacred scripture must speak to the present and all kinds of Hellenistic methods (e.g. allegory, typology, etymology, gematria) were used to achieve this. Modern examples would include feminism, liberation theology, postcolonialism and black theology, which in many ways have transformed Biblical Studies. Within this group are readers who read 'against the grain', or *Resisting Readers*, as Judith Fetterley called them in her important

book on feminist approaches to literature, whose presuppositions are strong enough to do something to the text that had not been done before – hence the enormous heuristic value of much feminist criticism. Less overtly acknowledged are personal experiences which undoubtedly shape the way people read texts. There are plenty of examples of students reacting one way or another to their teachers. Commentators with the experience of the excitement of hands-on archaeological experience belong to another category, in the case of Hebrew Bible commentaries a very large and influential category.

As an example of a slightly different kind, I would like to mention John Gray of Aberdeen, author of many books including *Archaeology and the Old Testament World* (1962), *The Canaanites* (1964), and commentaries on *Joshua*, *Judges and Ruth* (1967) and *I & II Kings* (1964, 1970, 1977). All of these are peppered with references to the languages, cultures and topography of modern Palestine, where he served in the British police force. One wonders whether decisions on which of various interpretations he prefers may have been influenced by his personal experiences. I also remember G. R. Driver explaining a crux in the Book of Job by reference to an incident he witnessed once in Syria. Norman had a healthy anecdotal approach to ‘big men’ such as these.

A very important distinction has to be drawn, however, between such examples of the influence of personal experience on readers of the text, and the more political presuppositions just mentioned. Thanks to the influence of feminism, liberation theology, postcolonialism and other ideologies, it has become normal practice for writers at the beginning to declare their bias. This means of course that the reader can put the book down if he doesn’t agree. But it also means that the author is free to say the text means whatever she wants it to mean, provided no claim is made that the meaning is the original meaning or the only meaning or anything other than the meaning arrived at by a reader with her particular presuppositions. It would be interesting to imagine how Gerhard von Rad or William Foxwell Albright or G. R. Driver would have handled such a requirement: not that they would ever have thought it necessary or even desirable.

Another extraordinarily interesting development in the last decade or two is the way in which parallels are found between modern readers of the biblical text - including the commentators - and the pre-critical readers such as the authors of Jewish midrash. Robert Alter is a good example of how sensitive literary critical insights can combine with a good knowledge of ancient and mediaeval readings of the text to produce rich and convincing modern critical readings. Christian scholars have tended to be far less informed about patristic, rabbinic and mediaeval literature, both Jewish and Christian, than their Jewish colleagues. For example, Phyllis Tribble's condemnation of Jephthah for sacrificing his daughter to fulfil a vow could have been strengthened in an interesting way if she had been able to refer to the long history of Jewish condemnations of the man. One way to rectify that situation would be to present as many readings of each text, both Jewish and Christian, ancient, mediaeval and modern, as space will allow.

I am fortunate to be involved in a new commentary series published by Blackwell's of Oxford, in which the emphasis is on the reception history of the text, rather than its original meaning. There have been some criticisms of the project. There are still those who consider it a waste of time to take 'late interpretation' seriously, on the historical critical assumption that 'late' means 'inferior'. Others say we are Hebraists or ancient historians or textual critics: how can we be expected to take an interest in, let alone try to handle in a scholarly way, the patristic literature or mediaeval iconography or reformation theology or 19th century music or 20th century politics or all of these? Leave it to the patristics people, art historians, theologians, etc. Another objection to the Blackwell's project concerns the sheer scale of the operation. How on earth can you ever do justice to 2000 years of reception history? Isn't it an impossible task? The late Robert Carroll's response was, 'Of course it is impossible, but that is no reason not to attempt it.'

This brings us to another the question, What is the value of reception history? First, although it may seem almost too obvious to mention, the afterlife of the Bible has been infinitely more influential, in every way - theologically, politically, culturally and aesthetically - than its ancient Near-Eastern prehistory. In my college days, I worked in one part of the

library, along side one group of students, while anyone with an interest in theology or church history or homiletics or liturgy or contemporary British society or the rest of the world, worked in another. There was really very little communication between Biblical scholarship and the rest of the curriculum. Rabbinic and patristic interpretations were considered ‘late’ and therefore inferior and not taken seriously. We were not encouraged to quote Luther or Milton or Brahms or Karl Barth. Indeed we were encouraged to criticize theologians and preachers for their erroneous understanding of the Bible. We who were experts in Hebrew and Ugaritic and biblical archaeology always knew better. Mercifully that situation has changed, as we have seen, and an increasing number of biblical experts now take seriously the impact of the Bible on its readers down to the present day.

Another advantage of reception history concerns the meaning of the text. When confronted with a difficult text, I was trained to go first to the 19th and 20th century commentaries. ‘Read the big men’ was Norman’s advice. What do the big men say? I later discovered that it is also possible, and indeed very productive, to start (like every Jewish schoolboy) by asking ‘What does Rashi say?’ And going on to see how the Reformers explained it, how Milton used it, what role it plays in hymns and sermons. Often, indeed usually, I found in those alternative sources, subtle insights into the dynamic of the text, its associations and overtones, entirely missed in the majority of standard commentaries and reference works. This follows directly from our previous discussion. Readings give meaning to texts: ‘meaning is what happens to readers during the reading process’. You, like any other reader, may or may not agree with a particular reading; some readings you may decide are more irresponsible, more unbiblical than others. But it seems to me to be absolutely clear that by listening to a variety of readings, from a variety of contexts, you are in a better position to evaluate each reading - whatever criterion you use, ethical, aesthetic, ideological, theological, historical critical. The heightened awareness of the many meanings that a text has had when read by individuals and communities down the centuries, has enormous heuristic value in the process of establishing and evaluating a meaning.

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

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

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

Whether or not Norman would agree with the half of what I’ve been saying, it is dedicated to his memory with gratitude, respect and affection. I would like to end with the following words in his memory sent me by Calum: *Behoshekh-beth-ha’asurim nathan ’or le’ehaw; torath-’emeth hayetha bephihu usephataw mele’ot hokhma wedha’ath weyir’ath hashshem*. Norman, like Joseph before him, ‘in the darkness of the prison, gave light to his fellows; instruction in truth was in his mouth and his lips were full of wisdom and knowledge and the fear of God.’

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