

How Far Do Readers Make Sense? Interpreting Biblical Narrative

John Goldingay

[p.5]

Over the past 30 years, the study of biblical narrative has kept changing its focus; as has often happened over the millenia, it has followed changing fashions in secular literary criticism, even if keeping a few years behind (though a decreasing few). During the 1960s, interpreting biblical narrative meant discovering who wrote it and what historical events it referred to. That study remains of fundamental significance because biblical narrative relates a gospel, and the factuality of the gospel is crucial to its being a story we can base our lives on. The historical 'having happened-ness' of the biblical story matters.

During the 1970s, however, many interpreters of narrative turned from questions about its origin and historical reference to renewed study of the narrative itself. What is its structure and plot?

Who are its characters? From what points of view is it told? Anyone who believes that the actual text of these biblical narratives is 'given by inspiration of God' will be enthusiastic about the stimulus and the help we can receive from such renewed study of the text of Scripture itself, which is a powerful aid to our being grasped by its message.

During the 1980s, in turn, many of the interpreters who had enthused over the approaches of the 'new criticism' moved on from those questions, too, to the readers of the text. What audience is presupposed by it? How does it communicate with them? How do they go about making sense of it? Do texts have meaning at all, or are they only dots on paper which readers provide with their meaning?

Each of these three sorts of question promises a different set of insights as well as presenting a different set of questions for someone who believes that the Bible tells God's story and who wants to hear the biblical text speak in God's name. My concern here is with the last of these approaches, reader-centred ones, the developing current fashion in biblical interpretation.

The audience implied by the story

Stories themselves presuppose certain sorts of hearers, and sometimes indicate what sort of audience can hear them aright. Reader-oriented approaches to interpretation ask questions about the nature of the readers presupposed by a story and what a story is designed to do to them. It is appropriate to think at least as much in terms of audiences and hearers as of readers. In the ancient world, as far as we can tell, the normal way to attend to Scripture would not be reading it silently; few people would have access to a personal copy of a biblical scroll in order to read it for themselves. It would be hearing it read. For Jews, of course, even the private reading of the Torah is a spoken act. If scriptural authors had in mind a means of the dissemination of their work then, it would have been its reading to a congregation or a group. This has implications for the interpretation of it (see Moore, pp. 76-77, 84-88). 'In the beginning was the word', Martin Buber was fond of pointing out—the spoken word. The reading of a story is a speech-act (see Talmon, pp. 202-203).

Although the human authors of a story are all-important to its existence, the form of a story enables them to hide; we are invited to collude with them in acting as if the story came into existence of itself and is its own authority. In the same way, the audience of a story is not usually directly addressed by it, as it is in some other forms of speech, but it is thereby the more compellingly manipulated. Although formally absent from the story, the audience is substantially omnipresent insofar as stories are created not just for their own sake but in order to do something to some people. A story has 'implied readers'—people who are in a position to make the proper response to it (Iser 1974; see also Booth). It is told in such a way as to work for an audience, *e.g.* by means of the order in which it relates events (commonly not the chronological one) and the rate at which it releases information. It tantalizes, teases, challenges, upsets, makes the audience think, forces it to come inside the story and involve itself with it if it is to understand (Keegan, pp. 84-85).

In Luke-Acts and John, the implied audience of the narrative sometimes becomes visible as the narrative addresses it directly, just as the narrators themselves also occasionally become visible and speak about their purpose. But the narratives indirectly offer further clues regarding the audience which they envisage and which will be able to 'make sense' of them. The language of all four gospels, for instance, identifies their audience as Greek-speaking and thus probably urban communities, people living in the theological space between Jesus' resurrection and his final appearing.

In the case of Matthew, J.D. Kingsbury collects references which suggest that his audience is a firmly established and well-to-do Christian community living after the fall of Jerusalem, one with a substantial Jewish element, though (to judge from the gospel's Gentile bias) also with a Gentile element. They stand outside the orbit of official Judaism but in close proximity to both Jews and Gentiles and under pressure from both. They are also under pressure from within, from miracle-working false prophets and from people who wish to impose a more hierarchical leadership pattern (see Kingsbury, pp. 120-133; *cf.* Culpepper, pp. 204-227, on the 'implied reader' in John). Matthew's audience thus differs quite markedly from that presupposed by Luke, with its famous stress on the poor. Such differences in slant hint at and reflect differences in audience. There is material here for consideration as interpreters seek to take account of Jesus' 'bias to the poor' and to discover what attitude he would take to the not-so-poor.

Given that we are not the originally envisaged audience of any biblical story, we are invited to an act of imagination which takes us inside the concerns of such an audience. The fact that we cannot precisely locate these hearers geographically or chronologically (the concern of the historical approach to the gospels) need not matter because it is the concerns that the stories themselves express that we seek to share. We are invited to listen to them as people for whom such stories were told, to listen to them from the inside. Interpretation of biblical stories is not a matter of untrammelled imagination but one which involves close attention to the particularities of this text. At the same time it is not merely an analytic and intellectual affair but one which involves being willing to be drawn into stories; with regard to their interpretation, 'a man without an imagination is more of an invalid than one who lacks a leg' (Barth, III/1, p. 91).

We cannot live our real lives inside these stories. We have to live them in our own context, confronted by its questions, needs and pressures. If the stories are to do to us what they were

designed to do to their original hearers, a further act of imagination is needed, one which sets some of our questions, needs and pressures alongside those which the stories directly addressed, in a way which is open to seeing how they address these, so that we may respond to them by telling our story in a way that links it onto the biblical stories—as Acts already does in adding the church's story onto Jesus'.

These two acts of imagination can be clearly distinguished conceptually. In their operation they are likely to interpenetrate each other. Grasping the biblical stories' significance may enable

[p.6]

us to see how to tell our story; bringing our story to the biblical stories may also fill out our grasp of their own significance. Interpretation involves the whole person—feelings, attitudes and wills, as well as minds; it also involves us, not merely people 2,500 years ago.

Specifically, there are religious and person-involving aspects to biblical stories, and in themselves literary methods are no more designed to handle these than are historical approaches. They, too, can encourage interpreters to distance themselves from the text. To avoid imposing our own questions on it 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 interpretative approach needs to be able to handle—or to be handled by—this aspect of them. It involves the possibility of there happening to us that which the story had the power to make happen to its audience.

The role of ambiguity and openness in stories

One of the ways in which stories do things to an audience is by leaving questions and ambiguities for their audience to answer or to resolve. We have to recognize and accept the presence of such ambiguity in texts rather than work on the assumption that if only we had all the right information, everything would be clear. Sometimes authors do not make themselves clear, either by accident or on purpose. Whichever is the case, ambiguity is then a fact to be acknowledged and made the most of. It can be creatively provocative, evidently part of God's purpose.

Beyond this kind of special deliberate or accidental ambiguity, no story can tell us everything that happens in the course of the events it relates, or everything about its characters. 'There is something more to the reception of the meaning of a literary work than simply its decoding by means of universally held, deep structures. What is in need of decoding by the reader is not entirely determined.... The structure itself involves potentialities. Gaps that occur in the text are deliberate and essential.' As a result, the same story can be actualized in a variety of ways by different readers (Keegan, pp. 80, 103-104, summarizing Iser).

Traditional biblical interpretation has difficulty tolerating ambiguity and openness; it assumes that the author aimed at clarity and precision, and it brings all the resources of historical and linguistic scholarship to bear on the elucidating of the text's clear meaning. If texts seem ambiguous, we assume this derives from our not sharing the conventions and assumptions that author and first audience shared. Literary interpretation, too, seeks by means of its close study

of the objective data provided by a biblical text to discover its inherent meaning and provide a check on our intuitions as to its meaning. But there are aspects of the intrinsic meaning of biblical stories on which such data seem to be missing. An audience-oriented approach to interpretation presupposes that ambiguity may be inherent in a story and asks what its openesses do to an audience, or what it does with them, aware that it is precisely in its ambiguity at such points that the story can challenge an audience regarding its own attitude. We have to 'fill in the blanks' in the story (so *e.g.* Miscall). We do not do that once and for all; the openness of the story means we have to keep coming back to it, 'brooding over gaps in the information provided' (Alter, p.12). In this sense, the meaning of a story is something which its audience provides; 'readers make sense' (McKnight, p. 133 and often).

There are irresolvable ambiguities in the portraits of characters such as Moses or Saul or David, which prohibit simple understandings of their stories. Is David raised up by God to be Israel's king, or does he emerge as an epic hero? Is he the man who does the right thing and the man with God's blessing, or is he the man with an eye to the main chance and the man who always manages to fall on his feet? What are we to make of the two accounts of his introduction to Saul (see Alter, pp.147-153)? When Moses strikes out at the sight of an Egyptian beating an Israelite (Ex. 2:11-15), is he using the wrong method to reach the right end, or manifesting the qualities of spirit worthy of one who is to be the means of Yahweh's smiting Pharaoh? There are hints in the passage pointing both ways, so that it brings out rather than resolves the ambiguities in the act of violence (so Childs, p. 46).

Alter suggests that the 'indeterminacy of meaning' characteristic of much biblical narrative, with its 'complex moral and psychological realism', reflects an implicit theology. 'God's purposes are always entrained in history, dependent on the acts of individual men and women for their continuing realization. To scrutinize biblical personages as fictional characters is to see them more sharply in the multi-faceted, contradictory aspects of their human individuality, which is the biblical God's chosen medium for his experiment with Israel and history' (Alter, p.12, *cf.* pp. 22, 33; also pp. 114-130 on David). This links with the disinclination of biblical narrative to pronounce on people's inner thoughts: leaving the gaps leaves room for the 'conjectures of grace' and 'the mystery of God-with-us' (Buttrick, p. 334). To seek to understand them in the way we seek to understand the fictional characters in a novel, of course, is not to presuppose that they are merely fictional characters, but rather to use approaches appropriate to fictional narrative as heuristic tools.

Pannenberg (1, p. 79) makes a parallel point when he urges the historian to focus on the particularities of history and not to rush into speculating about God's providence, because it is through human activity that God works in the world—indirectly, though as its Lord. Allusiveness regarding the character of human actors both honours them and highlights the importance of the divine director of the story. It offers an indirect witness to the God who is the story's ultimate subject. It invites an act of faith in God, not in God's human agents, on whom the narrative is content to be unclear. The story of Job implies that allusiveness and ambiguity in portraying biblical characters does not stop short of the character of God. That means that the stories offer true witness to the complexity and mystery of God's character; it also highlights the fact that 'a coherent reading of the biblical narratives' is as much an act of faith as a ground for faith (Thiemann, p. 30).

What we bring to stories

If understanding stories inevitably involves us as whole people, it involves us hearing them with the advantages and disadvantages of our background, experience and commitments. Historical and literary approaches are often treated as if they were objective and positivist rather than hermeneutical in their own nature. They are not.

Literary interpretative methods that claim to be objective and analytical can be very fruitful in enabling a modern audience to be drawn into the text itself and addressed by it. On the other hand, they do not always bear this fruit; they can seem to be a matter of dry word-count. In having these two capacities, they parallel other methods of exegesis, and illustrate how exegetical method and hermeneutics may not be as separate in practice as we may assume they are in theory. This phenomenon is not confined to the application of literary critical methods to biblical material. Literary criticism itself is both a would-be objective, scientific affair, and an enterprise which hopes to discover and unveil truth about the world and about what it means to be human. Even literary reading of stories will be influenced in what it looks for, or limited in what it perceives, by the historical and social position of its practitioners. Paying close attention to the text does not in itself solve the question of how stories in their foreignness are grasped by people and grasp them (Poland; *cf.* Gerhart, pp. 23-24).

Many stories are rich in theme and defy simple analysis in terms of their 'intention' or 'message'; different audiences (or the same audience at different times) perceive different aspects of this richness. These differences do not indicate that only one or another theme belongs to the story; they reflect the differences among the audiences and the different ways in which the story of their own life resonates with that of the story they are listening to, at the point it has at a given moment reached. It is sometimes asked whether there is point in the continuing production of new works of interpretation (*cf.* Culler 1981, p. ix). One aspect of its rationale is that interpretations in their variety give testimony to the richness of their texts as they are read out of different contexts.

Liberation and feminist hermeneutics illustrate the way in which audiences with particular backgrounds are able to perceive, articulate, and respond to aspects of texts which audiences with other backgrounds may miss and be missed by, even though they also illustrate how the same audiences (like all audiences) are also by virtue of their background liable to mishear the text in other respects. Both can be seen as instances of reader-response approaches to Scripture, ones which use their particular initial horizons or pre-understandings as their ways into the text's concerns, and both make it clear that what we are able to see reflects not merely our intellectual pre-understanding but our practical pre-commitment. Interpretation is shaped by the way we live. This

[p.7]

has been so with slavism, racism, sexism, homophobia and capitalism (which has discounted the Hebrew Bible's proscription on usury) (Cannon, p.18). It has also been so with their antonyms (see Swartley).

In practice, some of the most interesting or suggestive or illuminating or life-changing exercises in narrative interpretation integrate one of the more text-centred approaches with one of the more self-consciously committed approaches. Liberation or feminist approaches may combine with deconstructive criticism (Jobling, pp. 81, 93-94). Materialist

understandings may combine a structuralist approach to understanding the actual text with Marxist insights into the relationship between literature (and our interpretation of it) on the one hand and social contexts on the other. There is no necessary implication that the aesthetic and the socially functional aspects of the text are reducible to one another (see Füssel, p. 23). Russian formalism and Marxism might seem a natural pairing (Vladimir Propp was actually a student at the time of the 1917 revolution), though the Russian formalists of the 1920s were too interested in literary study for its own sake for the liking of Marxist critics; this fact lies behind the neglect of Propp's work until after the Second World War (see Milne, pp. 19-32).

Alongside liberationist interpretation, feminist interpretation also illustrates the way in which illuminating or life-transforming exercises in narrative interpretation may combine a self-consciously committed approach with one of the more textcentred literary methods. This is so with Phyllis Trible's work on some agreeable texts in the opening chapters of Genesis, Ruth and the Song of Songs, and some more terrifying ones later in Genesis, Judges and 2 Samuel, with Mieke Bal's deconstructionist work, and with Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza's historical-critical study.

The admission that one is using historical-critical method with a 'bias' may seem scandalous, but it is becoming clear that historical-critical history regularly functions ideologically in respect of the concerns and presuppositions which it allows to determine what counts as history (see *e.g.* Brueggemann, pp. 37-46). Since historical-critical exegesis is the ruling method in professional biblical study, one purpose of its exercise is now to legitimate the scholarly guild in their position of power (Füssel, p. 15). Thus there is a feminist challenge to the 'objectivity-factual' pretension of traditional critical scholarship and its failure to acknowledge the (*e.g.* male) 'interests' it serves, which urges that recognition of bias and enthusiasm about looking at questions in the light of a different set of biases will lead to new historical discoveries (Schüssler Fiorenza 1984/1990, pp. 141-147; *cf.* Bal).

Of course, no prior commitment is immune from leading to misreadings or incomplete readings. Feminist interpreters have found Trible too unequivocal in her reading of Genesis 2-3, the Song of Songs and Ruth (Nolan Fewell 1987, pp. 80-82; Fuchs, pp. 137-144; Lanser, p. 79). David Clines regards the whole enterprise of a feminist reading of a passage such as the Genesis creation story anachronistic if it pretends to be exegesis and sees it as rather an (in principle) entirely appropriate readerly approach to the text; as such it is no more anachronistic than nineteenth-century concern to relate Genesis 1-11 to scientific study or to Middle Eastern creation and flood stories (Clines, pp. 25-48; Rogerson, pp. 11-17). Those who pretend to be objective and critical and who then find their own concerns in the texts they study—whether these be Enlightenment or existentialist or feminist or Reformed concerns—need to take a dose of self-suspicion (Lundin, p. 23).

Every audience comes to a story with different prior commitments. Our hearing of it is never exclusively objective. Both historical and literary study is undertaken by interpreters who belong in particular contexts and do their work out of particular commitments. That is ground for (self-) suspicion and a longing to test my reading of stories by readings from other commitments.

What we read into stories

There is another sense in which the objectivity of literary interpretation may be questioned. It might seem that analyses of the structure of texts were objective and easy to agree on, but this

does not seem to be so. The theory was that literary approaches should enable us to discover something of the stories' own burden. By taking their own structural, rhetorical and linguistic features as the key to identifying their central concerns, we should be able to concentrate attention on questions raised by the chapters themselves rather than ones extrinsic to them.

The conviction that there is some objectivity about these matters is subverted by the fact that reports of chiasms, for instance, have a habit of appearing more objective than they may seem when one subsequently checks them by the text (*cf.* Kugel, pp. 224-225, and the debate between Wenham and Emerton on Gn. 6-8). Even the process of 'positing various structures' in works may be seen as part of 'the activity of the reader' in interpretation (Culler 1981, p. 121, summarizing Stanley Fish). Chiasms apart, different scholars often give different accounts of the structure of a story. While some stories give objective markers regarding their structure, many do not. The structure of a story may thus be difficult to identify and interpreters may differ in the way they understand it, as is the case with the gospels and with Genesis (for contrasting opinions, see Amihai *et al.*, pp. 31-50; Goldingay, 1980). This may mean that no one analysis is exclusively 'right' and that different aspects of the story's meaning emerge from various analyses of its structure. Perhaps structure lies in the eyes of the beholder—it is something we as readers of a narrative find helpful. Even the analytic aspect to interpretation cannot be claimed to be wholly objective.

There is a real distinction between literary-critical approaches which focus on the text itself and approaches which focus more on the process of reading and the contribution of the reader; but it is readers who undertake readings. Like fact and interpretation (of which they are actually a version), questions about the text and questions about readers can be distinguished but not ultimately kept apart. Structuralism, indeed, is often described as a theory of reading rather than a theory about writing (so *e.g.* Barton, p. 126). To emphasize this interweaving is not to collapse the distinction; it perhaps makes it more important. The fact that we read with the advantages and disadvantages of our background and commitments is reason for doing so reflectively and self-critically rather than unthinkingly, if we want to have a chance of seeing what is actually there in the text. 'No close reading of a work is ever close enough', in that it involves trying to make sense of it, and thus 'inevitably, we ignore, leave out, suppress' elements from it in the light of our background and prejudices (Nolan Fewell 1987, pp. 79, 80, paraphrasing P. de Man). There is always more to discover.

Is it audiences who make sense of stories?

When we move away from objective-looking questions such as structures to questions regarding the broader meanings of works, the question whether stories have objective meaning becomes yet more difficult. Does Jonah tell a story to bring home the love of God for all peoples, or to dramatize how not to be a prophet, or to invite Israel itself to return to Yahweh? According to the Genesis creation story, do men and women have equal authority and responsibility, or are men given authority over women? Are Ruth, Naomi and Boaz all selfless, enlightened and honourable people, or self-centred and ambiguous like the rest of us? If the very nature of narrative works such as the gospels is to have many meanings and to be open to many understandings (Kermode, *e.g.* p.145), do such questions have answers, or does everything depend on the hearers of the stories? Do texts have determinate meaning at all? The observation that 'readers make sense' (McKnight, p. 133; *cf.* Gunn 1987, pp. 68-69) can be understood more radically than we have allowed above; the meaning of a story is always provided by its audience. A text is only a matter of marks on a piece of paper. Despite exegetes' continuing attempts to state the objective meaning of texts, 'criticism is an

inelectably creative activity. Prior to the interpretive act, there is nothing definitive in the text to be discovered' (Moore, p. 121).

There are a number of difficulties with this view. When we speak of 'making sense' of a statement, we usually mean 'discovering the sense which must somehow be there', not creating sense in something which lacks it. We presume that the statement was an attempt at communication, and we wish to receive the communication. Thus in general authors, too, surely write to say something of determinate meaning, readers read (or audiences listen) reckoning to discover what that is, and then share their understanding of this with other people in the expectation that they can be understood and can carry conviction; and the same is surely true with regard to Scripture (Abrams 1977, p. 426; Keegan, p. 10). A standard introduction to audience-oriented criticism begins by discussing the literary text as a form of communication between author and reader (Suleiman, p. 7). And without the assumption that texts have determinate meaning, interpretation as a cognitive activity becomes logically impossible (Lentricchia, p. 190). If the meaning of texts is created by their readers, no readerly-inclined interpreter could talk of misreading the text; but Nolan Fewell, at least, does (1988, pp. 17-18).

[p.8]

The view that narratives have different meanings in different contexts or for different audiences offers openness and scope to interpreters, but it does threaten arbitrariness and relativism. It perhaps reflects and shares the strengths and the dangers of cultural and moral pluralism in society (Thiemann, pp. 22-24). An emphasis on objective meaning can admittedly conversely be an ideological concern designed to support the status quo and can be self-deceived regarding its own subjectivity (Craig and Kristjansson, pp. 121-122). But to abandon it may be to submit oneself to something just as ideological.

Stanley Fish, a key theorist of this approach to interpretation, suggests that right interpretation is interpretation which accords with the conventions of a particular interpretative community, and sees this as the safeguard of objectivity in interpretation (Fish, p. 14). But such a way of attempting to handle this question only serves to underline the problem. An interpretative community may be a safeguard against individual oddity, but otherwise it merely replaces individual subjectivism by communal subjectivism or relativism (Jeanron, p. 113). Perhaps it rather institutionalizes an already existent communal subjectivism, for readers inevitably read out of the corporate context in which they are embedded, not as independent, individual selves (Keegan, p. 88).

It is often the case that 'arguments over method are fundamentally differences in assumptions or beliefs' (Greenstein, p. 90, as quoted by Polzin, p. 305). It is for this reason that Christians have taken a long time to come to terms with historical-critical method. Ironically, when that venture may be largely over, another replaces it. 'As the challenge was once to come to terms with the modernist Bible, so now the challenge is to come to terms with its postmodern successor' (Moore, pp. 129-130). As with the older challenge, we have to live through a period in which we do not yet entirely know how to come to terms with it—but in the light of the earlier experience we may live through that period reckoning that we will eventually do so.

Hirsch argues that it is worth betting on the reality of determinate meaning because—as with Pascal's wager—if it is indeed real, we have gained, whereas if it is not, we have lost nothing (Hirsch 1982, pp. 243-244). Further, the wager is, like Pascal's, at least open to verification at the End (Boone, pp. 67-68). If our discussion takes place within the context of the view that God is there, the odds in the wager may seem stacked Pascal's way. As we may believe that it is more likely that God would have ensured that an adequate witness to the Christ event would have survived than that it would have been allowed to disappear, so we may believe that the texts' witness to that event has meaning of its own rather than only having meaning when we provide it.

Theological and philosophical, as well as personal, factors thus enter into the judgment whether determinate meaning is possible or important (*cf.* Boone, p. 67). It is perhaps for this reason that the acrimony and contentiousness of literary-critical debate sometimes appears also in biblical studies (see Culler 1982, p.17; for examples, see Nolan Fewell and Gunn; Barr). In my view, all three factors just noted (theological, philosophical, personal) point to attempting to hold on to a both-and rather than submit to an either-or. Audiences contribute to the identification of meaning but their contributions are subject to the meaning of the text, not creative of it.

Textual criticism proceeds as if it were possible to reach a 100%-correct version of the text. This is only theoretically possible—indeed, perhaps not even theoretically possible. Yet as an aim it fulfils an important function. In a parallel way we will never attain a 100%-correct understanding of a text, or of anything else. Yet the impossibility of total understanding does not negate the worth of attempting whatever degree of understanding will turn out to be possible. The attempt is likely to be more successful if we behave as if total understanding were possible. If you aim at the moon, you may hit the lamp-post. The notion of determinate meaning has functional efficacy (against Adam, p. 179).

Why is there diversity in the way people understand texts?

Works on biblical interpretation have often given the impression that the central question in hermeneutics is how we decide between conflicting interpretations of texts, how we avoid misinterpretation (*cf.* Hirsch 1967). The more dominant recent view is that this misconceives the central concern of hermeneutics. That concern is how interpretation can happen at all, how our eyes and ears can be opened to what texts have to say. Nevertheless, it may be argued that 'the diversity of readings is the fact to be explained by any literary theory' (Burnett, p. 59). If we resist the idea that there is no such thing as determinate meaning, what explanation do we offer?

The question might first be countered by another. If meaning is indeterminate, why is there so much overlap between interpretations? Our concentration on differences and disagreements on interpretation may mask the degree of commonality. Why does no-one take up the theoretical possibility of understanding as adverbs all words which have henceforth been taken as verbs? Formally, the answer may be that the interpretative community has a tacit agreement on grammar, but that agreement surely includes a presupposition that this understanding of grammar corresponds to something inherent in the text, which establishes objective constraints within which anything which is to count as interpretation takes place. It is difficult to know whether Genesis begins 'In the beginning God created...' or 'In the beginning when God created...', but there is no doubt that it excludes 'In the beginning the world came into being by accident or by the activity of Marduk'. The ways in which a text

can be understood are finite in number, and some understandings of them can be said to be wrong.

Interpretation has traditionally sought to safeguard the importance of objectivity in interpretation by seeing its goal as the ascertaining of the original meaning of the text, its meaning in the context in which it was written. One may affirm this principle but still recognize that different people can come to different interpretations of a story. There is in fact a variety of explanations of diversity in readings, some already hinted at in this article; different ones will apply to different texts.

First, all texts have some degree of openness; if every point in them were to be made explicit, the story would never finish. Our assumption in writing and reading, in speaking and hearing, is that enough is said to make communication possible, but their inevitable allusiveness means that more than one understanding of aspects of them can co-exist.

Second, there are texts which achieve part of their effect by leaving an extra degree of ambiguity and openness. The fact that the stories of Saul and David attract widely varying interpretations (*cf.* Gunn 1990, pp. 62-63) is an indication that they are texts of this kind, not that all texts are.

Third, many stories are rich and complex. We do not have to argue about whether the stories in Daniel are really about the significance of imperial kingship as opposed to the possibility of being a successful but faithful Jewish politician—really about the kings or the Jewish sages—because both can be true. The reason why different people may offer varying legitimate interpretations of some stories is that a story's meaning may have a number of facets (Hirsch 1967, p. 128). Its meaning is an objective matter, something there in the text, but it may nevertheless be a quite complex matter. Part of the greatness of some stories is a richness that cannot be encapsulated in a simple formula ('this story is about x'). It is in this sense that the question which is the right interpretation of the text is as inappropriate to the Bible as it is to Shakespeare: the question about interpreting Hamlet is how we can feed on such a rich work (Josipovici, p. 5).

This is not to imply that there is no such thing as a wrong understanding of a work such as Hamlet, only that concern with this possibility misses the point. Missing right understanding is a more threatening danger than arriving at a wrong understanding. Reading from the perspective of the oppressed uncovers in the parable about the workers in the vineyard a message about human solidarity to add to its message about the grace of God (L. Schottroff). Polyvalency involves a story having many facets; it does not mean that questions about meaning are inherently arbitrary, or even that such analytic models 'provide meaning to the text rather than discovering meaning in the text' (against Wittig, p. 90). One can grant that there are many aspects to a story's meaning but still reckon that there are limits to what can be read out of a story, and it may be that interpreters can agree on meanings which do not belong to a story—not so much because author or audience could or would not have envisaged them but because they are not a natural understanding of this actual story.

Indeed, one aspect of the problem in this discussion is the very notion of the meaning of a story. The meaning of a story cannot really be abstracted from the story itself, as if a summary of the

[p.9]

principles it illustrates could adequately represent the story itself. In the case of Hamlet, or Ruth, or a parable, the story is the meaning or the message. An author only discovers what to say through saying it, and an audience only understands it through hearing it (Moore, pp. 64-65). What it says in a detailed and concrete way by means of a portrayal of events, characters and conversations, achieves something for both parties which an abstract cannot. It may not convey new information, but it may convey new knowledge (Bambrough, pp. 119-125; *cf.* Ford, p. 48).

Fourth, texts may have one intrinsic meaning (even a complex and rich one) but many significances or applications, or one sense but many references. Many diversities of interpretation are differences over the way the story applies to different people or in different contexts rather than differences about its inherent meaning (so Hirsch 1967, pp. 8, 140). It is this which makes it of inexhaustible significance and needing to be grasped by every age in its own terms, which may be different from those of its authors (so Gadamer, *e.g.* pp. 265-266, 280). Statements of the text's significance may also be mutually incompatible in a way that statements of the text's actual meaning may not (Hirsch 1967, pp. 227-230).

When an account of an event is put into writing, there is a sense in which this definitively determines the event's meaning; yet paradoxically the narrative's coming into being as an independent object simultaneously opens it up to a multiplicity of new readings (Croatto, pp. 16-20, 41, following Ricoeur). When a person speaks, what they mean by their words largely dominates the way their words are heard; words in written form can more easily be heard independently of their author's purpose and meaning. 'Writing is central to the hermeneutical phenomenon, insofar as its detachment both from the writer or author and from a specifically addressed recipient or reader has given it a life of its own' (Gadamer, p. 353). The ironic reading of biblical stories instances this difficulty. L.R. Klein's interpretation of Judges, for instance, sees it as a systematically ironic book. On what basis can we evaluate that understanding? We cannot ask the authors whether they intended the book ironically. We can only ask ourselves whether that understanding corresponds best to the nature of the book that we have, or whether an ironic understanding of the book, starting from our inability to take seriously a more straightforward understanding of it, is the only way we can 'make sense' of it. We may be unconsciously finding significance in it rather than its own meaning. Similar questions arise from David Gunn's ironic reading of 1 Kings's comment on Solomon, its 'innocuous "only"' (he obeyed God except for sacrificing at the high places, 1 Ki. 3:3; *cf.* the 'only' in 15:5; 2 Ki. 14:4; 15:4), and his identifying an irony in the portrayal of David in 2 Samuel 21-24 (Gunn 1987, pp. 70-72).

Howard Marshall began the symposium *New Testament Interpretation* with a consideration of John 4 and noted that the story has been seen as an example of Jesus' pastoral dealings with people which provides an example for his followers. That understanding is hardly at the centre of its intrinsic significance. It might be a secondary aspect of the story's own meaning, part of its richness as a story; it might be an implication of the story, given the gospel's conviction that Jesus' disciples are sent by the Father as he was (Jn. 20:21); it might be not part of the story's meaning but an aspect of its significance for hearers involved in pastoral ministry, justified by the general NT assumption that Jesus is a model for ministry. Which is correct makes little difference, as is often the case with arguments about right and wrong interpretations, though there is a point of more importance in the reminder that whichever is

right, the story centrally concerns how Jesus revealed himself rather than what disciples should be.

One might draw a parallel with the grassroots communities' Bible study such as that collected by E. Cardenal in *Love in Practice: The Gospel in Solentiname* (e.g. pp. 1-2, 238-239). This begins, for instance, with a transcript of a discussion of John 1:1 which understands the declaration that Christ is the Word to signify that God expresses himself through Christ to denounce oppression. That is hardly an example of 'liberating exegesis', the title of a book on the Bible study of the grassroots communities by Christopher Rowland and Mark Corner, but it is indeed an example of liberating exposition. It discerns not the meaning of the text, but its significance for these audiences. *Love in Practice's* subsequent discussion of throwing pearls to pigs further illustrates the application of the text to a context rather than insight into the inherent meaning of the text out of a context. That difference remains worth preserving. On the other hand, the fact that 50 preachers might produce a dozen different sermon angles from the same text (Buttrick, pp. 242-243) is not necessarily cause for concern. The opposite phenomenon might be more worrying.

What readers discover from Scripture is that its being God's inspired word makes it a rich treasure whose potential we have hardly begun to mine.

References and bibliography

- Abrams, M.H., *The Mirror and the Lamp* (New York: OUP, 1953).
— 'The deconstructive angel', in *Critical Inquiry* 3 (1977), pp. 425-438.
- Adam, A.K.M., 'The sign of Jonah', in *Poststructural Criticism and the Bible* (ed. Phillips), pp. 177-191.
- Alter, R., *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (New York: Basic / London: Allen and Unwin, 1981).
- Amihai, M., et al. (eds), *Narrative Research on the Hebrew Bible*, *Semeia* 46 (1989).
- Bal, M., *Lethal Love* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1987).
—, *Death and Dissymmetry* (Chicago / London: University of Chicago, 1988).
- Bambrough, R., *Reason, Truth and God* (London: Methuen / New York: Harper, 1969).
- Barr, J., *Fundamentalism* (London: SCM / Philadelphia: Westminster, 1977; rev. edn, 1981).
- Barth, K., *Church Dogmatics* (ET Edinburgh/New York: Clark / Scribner's, 1936-).
- Barton, J., *Reading the Old Testament* (London / Philadelphia: DLT / Westminster, 1984).
- Boone, K.C., *The Bible Tells Them So* (Albany, NY: SUNY, 1989 / London: SCM, 1990).
- Booth, W.C., *The Rhetoric of Fiction* (Chicago / London: University of Chicago, 1961; ²1983).
- Bruggemann, W., *Abiding Astonishment: Psalms, Modernity, and the Making of History* (Louisville: WJK, 1991).
- Burnett, F.W., 'Postmodern biblical exegesis', in *Poststructural Criticism and the Bible* (ed. Phillips), pp. 51-80.
- Buttrick, D., *Homiletic* (Philadelphia: Fortress/London: SCM, 1987).
- Cannon, K.G., and Schüssler Fiorenza, E. (eds), *Interpretation for Liberation*, *Semeia* 47 (1989).
- Cardenal, E., *Love in Practice: The Gospel in Solentiname* (ET Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1976 / London: Search, 1977).
- Childs, B.S., *The Book of Exodus* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1974) = *Exodus* (London: SCM, 1974).
- Clines, D.J.A., *What Does Eve Do to Help? and Other Readerly Questions to the Old Testament* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1990).
- Craig, K.M., and Kristjansson, M.A., 'Women reading as men / women reading as women', in *Poststructural Criticism and the Bible* (ed. Phillips), pp. 119-136.
- Croatto, J.S., *Biblical Hermeneutics* (ET Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1987).

- Culler, J., *The Pursuit of Signs* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP/London: Routledge, 1981).
- , *On Deconstruction* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP, 1982/London: Routledge, 1983).
- Culpepper, R.A., *Anatomy of the Fourth Gospel* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983).
- De Man, P., 'Introduction', *Studies in Romanticism* 18 (1979), pp. 495-499.
- Detweiler, R. (ed.), *Reader-Response Approaches to Biblical and Secular Texts*, *Semeia* 31 (1985).
- Emerton, J.A., 'An examination of some attempts to defend the unity of the flood narrative in Genesis', Part ii, *Vetus Testamentum* 38 (1988), pp. 1-21.
- Fish, S., *Is There a Text in This Class?* (Cambridge, MA/London: Harvard UP, 1980).
- Ford, D.F., *Barth and God's Story* (Frankfurt: Lang, 1981, '1985).
- Fuchs, E., 'Who is hiding the truth?', in A. Yarbro Collins (ed.), *Feminist Perspectives on Biblical Scholarship* (Chico, CA: Scholars 1985), pp. 117-136.
- Füssel, K., 'Materialist readings of the Bible', in Schottroff and Stegemann (eds), *God of the Lowly*, pp. 13-25.
- Gadamer, H.-G., *Truth and Method* (ET New York: Seabury / London: Sheed and Ward, 1975; rev. edn, New York: Crossroad, 1989).
- Gerhart, M., 'The restoration of biblical narrative', in Amihai *et al.* (eds), *Narrative Research on the Hebrew Bible*, pp. 13-29.
- Goldingay, J., 'The patriarchs in scripture and history', in A.R. Millard and D.J. Wiseman (eds), *Essays on the Patriarchal Narratives*, ch. 1 (Leicester: IVP, 1980 / Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1983). [http://www.biblicalstudies.org.uk/eptn_1_goldingay.html]
- , *Approaches to Old Testament Interpretation* (Leicester/Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1981; rev. edn, 1990).
- Greenstein, E.L., 'Theory and argument in biblical criticism', in *Hebrew Annual Review* 10 (1986), pp. 77-93.
- Gunn, D.M., 'New directions in the study of biblical Hebrew narrative', in *Journal for the Study of the OT* 39 (1987), pp. 65-75.
- , 'Reading right', in Clines *et al.* (eds), *The Bible in Three Dimensions* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1990).
- Hirsch, E.D., *Validity in Interpretation* (New Haven/London: Yale UP, 1967).
- , 'The politics of theories of interpretation', in *Critical Inquiry* 9 (1982), pp. 235-247.
- Iser, W.J., *The Implied Reader* (Baltimore/London: Johns Hopkins UP, 1974).
- , *The Act of Reading* (Baltimore/London: Johns Hopkins UP, 1978).
- Jeanrond, W.G., *Text and Interpretation* (ET Dublin: Gill & Macmillan, 1988 / New York: Crossroad, 1991).
- Jobling, D., 'Writing the wrongs of the world', in *Poststructural Criticism and the Bible* (ed. Phillips), pp. 81-118.
- Josipovici, G., *The Book of God* (New Haven/London: Yale UP, 1988).
- Keegan, T.J., *Interpreting the Bible* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist, 1985).
- Kermode, F., *The Genesis of Secrecy* (Cambridge, MA / London: Harvard UP, 1979).
- Kingsbury, J.D., *Matthew as Story* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1986).
- Klein, L., *The Triumph of Irony in the Book of Judges* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1988).
- Kugel, J.L., with response by A. Berlin, 'On the Bible and literary criticism', in *Prooftexts* 1 (1981), pp. 217-236; 2 (1982), pp. 323-332.
- Lanser, S.S., '(Feminist) criticism in the garden: inferring Genesis 2-3', in H.C. White (ed.), *Speech Act Theory and Biblical Criticism*, *Semeia* 41 (1988), pp. 67-84.
- Lentricchia, F., *After the New Criticism* (Chicago: University of Chicago / London: Athlone, 1980).
- Lundin, R., Thiselton, A.C., and Walhout, C., *The Responsibility of Hermeneutics* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans / Exeter: Paternoster, 1985).
- McKnight, E.V., *The Bible and the Reader* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985).
- Marshall, I.H. (ed.), *New Testament Interpretation* (Exeter: Paternoster / Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977).
- Milne, P.J., *Vladimir Propp and the Study of Structure in Hebrew Biblical Narrative* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1988).

- Miscall, P.D., *The Workings of Old Testament Narrative* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983).
- Moore, S.D., *Literary Criticism and the Gospels* (New Haven/London: Yale UP, 1989).
- Nolan Fewell, D., 'Feminist reading of the Hebrew Bible', in *Journal for the Study of the OT* 39 (1987), pp. 77-87.
- , *Circle of Sovereignty: A Story of Stories in Daniel 1-6* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1988).
- and Gunn, D., 'Is Coxon a scold?', in *Journal for the Study of the OT* 45 (1989), pp. 39-43.
- Pannenberg, W., *Basic Questions in Theology* (2 vols: ET London: SCM/Philadelphia: Westminster, 1970 and 1971).
- Phillips, G.A. (ed.), *Poststructural Criticism and the Bible*, *Semeia* 51 (1990).
- Poland, L.M., *Literary Criticism and Biblical Hermeneutics* (Chico, CA: Scholars, 1985).
- Polzin, R., '1 Samuel', in *Religious Studies Review* 15 (1989), pp. 297-306.
- Ricoeur, P., *Interpretation Theory* (Fort Worth: Texas Christian UP, 1976).
- Rogerson, J., *Genesis 1-11* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1991).
- Rowland, C., and Corner, M., *Liberating Exegesis* (London: SPCK / Louisville: WJK, 1990).
- Russell, L.M. (ed.), *Feminist Interpretation of the Bible* (Philadelphia: Westminster / Oxford: Blackwell, 1985).
- Schottroff, L., 'Human solidarity and the goodness of God', in Schottroff and Stegemann (eds), *God of the Lowly*, pp. 129-147.
- Schottroff, W., and Stegemann, W. (eds), *God of the Lowly* (ET Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1984).
- Schüssler Fiorenza, E., *In Memory of Her* (New York: Crossroad/ London: SCM, 1983).
- , *Bread Not Stone* (Boston: Beacon, 1984 / Edinburgh: Clark, 1990).
- Suleiman, S.R., and Crosman, I. (eds), *The Reader in the Text* (Princeton/Oxford: Princeton UP, 1980).
- Swartley, W.M., *Slavery, Sabbath, War, and Women* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald, 1983).
- Talmon, S., 'Martin Buber's ways of interpreting the Bible', in *Journal of Jewish Studies* 27 (1976), pp. 195-209.
- Thiemann, R.F., 'Radiance and obscurity in biblical narrative', in G. Green (ed.), *Scriptural Authority and Narrative Interpretation* (Hans Frei Festschrift, Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987), pp. 21-41.
- Tolbert, M.A. (ed.), *The Bible and Feminist Hermeneutics*, *Semeia* 28 (1983).
- Trible, P., *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1978 / London: SCM, 1991).
- , *Texts of Terror* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984 / London: SCM, 1991).
- Wenham, G.J., 'The coherence of the flood narrative', in *Vetus Testamentum* 28 (1978), pp. 336-348.
- Wittig, S., 'A theory of multiple meanings', in J.D. Crossan (ed.), *Polyvalent Narration*, *Semeia* 9 (1977), pp. 75-103.
- Wright, T.R., *Theology and Literature* (Oxford/New York: Blackwell, 1988).

© 1993 John Goldingay. Reproduced by kind permission of the author.

Prepared for the Web in November 2006 by Robert I. Bradshaw.

<http://www.biblicalstudies.org.uk/>

Volume 18 - Issue 2. How far do readers make sense? Interpreting biblical narrative. By John Goldingay. Abstract. Over the past 30 years, the study of biblical narrative has kept changing its focus; as has often happened over the millenia, it has followed changing fashions in secular literary criticism, even if keeping a few years behind (though a decreasing few). During the 1960s, interpreting biblical narrative meant discovering who wrote it and what historical events it referred to. That study remains of fundamental significance because biblical narrative relates a gospel, and the factuality General Principles of Biblical Interpretation. Principle 1: Interpretation must be based on the author's intention of meaning and not the reader. This means we must get into the author's context, historically, grammatically, culturally and the literary forms and conventions the author was working in. Far too often people try to interpret a verse by itself in isolation without looking at the context itself. For example, consider the verse Revelation 3:20 which is sometimes used as an illustration for evangelism. Take the plain meaning of the text at face value. When the literal does not make sense you probably have a figure of speech. For example, Isaiah 55:12 states the trees of the field will clap their hands. Since trees do not have hands or clap this must be a figure of speech.