READING THE BIBLE TODAY*

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There are, it seems to me, broadly two ways of reading the Bible. One way is to read it as a collection of books written by different people at different times — for that matter, some of the books themselves are made up of parts written by different people at different times. We will be very much aware of the historical background against which we are reading the various books of the Bible, and this will enter into our understanding of them. Indeed, we will see the various books, as it were, in a chronological dimension related historically to one another and to ourselves.

This way of reading the Bible (or any book) can be called by borrowing terminology from the science of linguistics,1 ‘diachronic’ — proceeding through time and concentrating on the changes taking place during the book’s history and development. It is a typically modern way of reading, unthinkable in fact to any culture which is not conscious of history in the way in which European culture became aware of it only in the last 200 years: conscious of history, that is to say, not just as a record of the past — every culture is aware of history in that sense — but of the past as past, as not the present, as not like the present, as different; conscious of history, therefore, as an essential constituent of everything, of ways of thought and acting and expression, of choice of means and even of ends, in a word, of society2.

That, however, is not the only way of reading the Bible. The other way is to read it as a single book, between a pair of covers, beginning with Genesis and ending with Revelation. People reading the Bible in this way will see the various books as parts of a whole, related to one another and to the whole by theme or by some other non-temporal, and in that sense non-historical, factor. They will not necessarily be unaware of the historical dimension of what they are reading, but that will not be their main concern. The same sort of reading can, of course, be made of any of the individual books of Scripture. This way of reading the Bible (or any book) can be called ‘synchronic’ — taking a given point of time and concentrating on the possible patterns and relationships within the book as it stands.

* This article originated as a paper read to the Faculty Academic Seminar at Mount St Mary’s Seminary, Greenmeadows, Hawke’s Bay, where the author is a lecturer.

1. Terms ‘diachronic’ and ‘synchronic’ are basic to the foundational work of F. de Saussure, Cours de Linguistique Générale (Paris, 1916).

Until the Enlightenment, the synchronic was the only way in which the Bible was read; as a single book, whose parts, though written at different times, were intended by God to form a unified whole. The diachronic reading imposed itself with the advent of historical consciousness. It would, perhaps, be expected that the diachronic reading of the Bible will simply replace the synchronic. But this does not seem to be happening. Right now, the synchronic reading is making a comeback.

This is in part because of what have been felt to be the limitations of the diachronic reading. Perhaps the trouble has been that the diachronic reading of the Bible and the historical criticism which exemplifies it, have promoted the tendency (to which one might give the name 'historicism') to think that the 'right' questions to ask about a text are always historical — the sort that historians ask and try to answer, and principally, 'What actually happened?' With this goes the question, 'What did the author mean when he wrote this?' For it is assumed that the meaning of a text is the one its author intended it to have. The same tendency gives priority to the earliest layer of evidence, of understanding or of expression, as being of the greatest historical value and therefore of greatest real worth. So people talk about the Gospels in terms of the 'historical core' which has been 'overlaid' with the apostolic preaching, then 'overlaid' with the primitive catechesis, and then 'overlaid' with the evangelists' theologizing.

This is all very well until you start actually handling a text. Then, if you follow the sort of method implied above, you find yourself removing layer after layer in search of the 'real meaning', that is the 'historical core', only to find that in the end you have nothing left, or hardly anything. Too often, it seems, scriptural exegesis may be compared to a woman who was preparing a cabbage to cook and who peeled off one leaf after another in order to uncover the real cabbage. Or again, it may be compared to an archaeologist who stripped off one stratum after another in order to discover the real city.

Against methods which produce such meagre results, more and more voices are being raised in protest, even to the point of calling for 'the end of the historical-critical method'. They should not be summarily dismissed as fundamentalists. Some are, but not all. They will not be put down by mere vulgar abuse. I myself have for a long time felt unhappy with some of the things being done in the name of historical method and often thought I could not recognise there anything corresponding to my own training as a


4. The title of a book by Gerhard Maier (Concordia, 1977, from the German editions of 1974 and 1975.)
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student of history. More recently, in working with variants of a saying of Jesus, I have been led to have grave doubts about the prevalent ‘layer’ or ‘stratum’ model of the Gospel tradition and other parts of the Bible. The variant sayings I see rather as ‘variations on a theme’ — a theme which comes to us only in the variations, and can be attained only through them. And even if we are able to point to one of the variations as the earliest, we cannot without further ado identify that as the ‘real’ meaning. In the realm of ideas, the full significance of an utterance, especially one that is condensed and allusive, may only be realised and expressed with the passage of time. It is in listening carefully to the variations — all of them — that we will hear the theme.

But the return to a synchronic reading of the Bible has been motivated not only by dissatisfaction with a purely diachronic reading. There have been positive reasons too. Thus people brought up in literary criticism as this is understood outside the circle of biblical exegetes, will want to approach a particular book of the Bible, and even the Bible itself, as a book, i.e. a text. After all, most of them are familiar with the idea that books ‘have a past’, that they were written in particular historical circumstances perhaps quite remote from ours, or even that the books themselves may be the end products of a long process of composition, and that such considerations have to be taken into account when trying to understand the book. All the same, they say, a book is a book. However it came into being, it now is. It has a beginning, a middle, and an end. There is sense in reading it as a whole and in seeing its parts precisely as that, as parts of it, and not simply as moments in a process of development. The historical, diachronic way is not, after all, the only way of reading a text, even in a culture which is historically conscious. One should not let oneself be browbeaten by historians.

Among those who have recently advocated a synchronic reading of the Bible are the structuralists. They seek to apply to scriptural texts the structural analysis which was developed especially in France since the Second World War. At its base is the cultural anthropology of Claude Lévi-

5. I have in mind in particular the adoption of a species of Cartesian methodic doubt in a way which leads to an excessive scepticism and even makes historical knowledge well nigh impossible; see the critique of such procedure by Humphrey Palmer, The Logic of Gospel Criticism (London, 1968) pp.185-188.

6. Compare the remark on Pascal by H.-I. Marrou, De la Connaissance Historique (Paris, 4th ed. 1959) p.49f.: ‘le contenu d’un instant d’illumination mystique est plus exactement connu, parce que plus profondément compris, par les considérations qu’à dix ans de distance le héros, éclairé par tout l’enrichissement ultérieur de son expérience spirituelle, développe à ce propos que par le mémorial griffonné pendant la Nuit fameuse.’

7. Perhaps the best way of becoming acquainted with structuralist exegesis is through the journal Semeia, published since 1974 by the Society of Biblical Literature.
Strauss, with its principle that stories which have the same social or cultural functions will have the same structure, even if on the face of it the stories are quite different. The applicability of structural analysis to the Bible is limited — it can be applied only to narratives or to material that can be treated as a narrative. In the New Testament most work along structuralist lines has so far been done on the parables of Jesus. It seems to me to have only limited value. Indeed, the complexity of structuralist schemata can often seem repellent, and their results hardly worth the labour of their production. Perhaps, however, I am not doing the structuralists justice.

A synchronic reading of the Bible or of any biblical book, will allow connections to be made on the basis of considerations other than historical ones such as the influence exerted by one writer on another. Thus, the ‘good shepherd’ of John 10:14 might be connected not only with the ‘shepherd’ of Psalms 23 and 80 — which St John presumably had in mind, but also with the ‘shepherds’ of the Song of Songs 1:8 — which cannot be shown to have had any influence upon the Johannine text. Or, to take another example, Origen commenting on Genesis Ch. 22 (the ‘Aqedah’ or ‘Binding’ of Isaac) sees Isaac as both victim and priest of the sacrifice and in both capacities a ‘figure’ of Christ. Not only that, he sees the ram as also ‘bearing the form’ of Christ. Such connections were, of course, made constantly by the Fathers of the Church and the Medieval writers, to the great scandal of those who have been brought up on the historico-critical method of exegesis.

If you find the Christian Fathers bewildering, you should keep well clear of the Jewish Rabbis. From them you would learn that a word can be interpreted in a sense other than its normal or obvious meaning, by substituting another meaning out of the usually wide range which most Hebrew words seem to have; if necessary, by going back to its root verb and striking out from there in a different direction. Or, an alternative interpretation can be provided by substituting another word with the same consonants but different vowels, or by substituting a word whose consonants have the same sum total of numerical value, or even by substituting letters of the alphabet according to the scheme (giving equivalents in our alphabet) a = z, b = y, c = x, etc. (Readers of Chaim Potok’s The Chosen will recall in Ch. 7 an exercise in this ‘gematria’, as it is called, in a Hasidic Synagogue in New York).

9. As suggested by St Gregory of Nyssa, Commentarium in Cantica Canticorum, cap. 2 (PG, 44, 802).
10. Origen, Hom. 8 in Genesim, 6-9 (PG, 12, 206-209).
We are a far cry from a system in which there is one ‘real meaning’, which is discoverable by historical criticism. We are in a world of a plurality of meanings, related, but not necessarily historically, or in any other way that is immediately apparent. Fundamentally, we have broken away from any supposition that the meaning of a text is exclusively or even principally constituted by the intention of the writer, a supposition that has often accompanied historical criticism of the Bible. A mad world, my masters? It is useful to recall that the biblical writers themselves operated in a thought world much more like that of the Church Fathers and the Rabbis than the world of post-Cartesian rationalism. They wrote books which they expected to be interpreted along lines not dissimilar to those just referred to\(^\text{11}\). In other words, such methods of interpretation are directly relevant to reading the Bible today, precisely in order to grasp the intention of the author.

It is well to remember, also, that such ways of approaching a text are not totally foreign to literary critics who are not biblical scholars. It would, I think, be a well recognised procedure to point out in a poem, novel, or play, connections or associations between images, symbols, significant words or structures, without necessarily being greatly concerned whether these associations had been intended or even noticed by the author. Indeed, I believe that many (though not all) critics would still see these as valid pointers to meaning in the text, even if it could be proved that the author did not intend them, perhaps even meant to exclude them.

At this point, we must take notice of some very understandable objections. Chaos, it seems, is come again, and anything can mean anything. It is very difficult to exclude this as a purely theoretical possibility. Logically, I suppose, one is forced to concede that if you break away from the author and his intention, anything can mean anything. But, in fact, that does not happen. Interpretation is not random or arbitrary. There is method in the apparent madness. In practice, the connections or associations between different parts of the text are suggested by some reason of fittingness — even if they have to be justified by means which are as far fetched to our way of thinking as adding up the numerical value of letters of the alphabet. At times the fittingness itself may escape us, but it is there, discerned by the watchful eyes of the fellowship of practitioners\(^\text{12}\). For the patristic or rab-

\(^{11}\) Thus in St John’s Gospel 21:11 the 153 fish caught in the Sea of Galilee at the behest of the Risen Jesus may signify the Dead Sea villages of En-Gedi and En-Eglaïm, mentioned in Ezekiel 47:10, whose names can have the numerical equivalent of 153. If so, this device is probably meant to indicate that the episode narrated in John 21:1–14 is a fulfilment of the prophecy in Ezekiel 47:1–12; see R. E. Brown, *The Gospel According to John*, vol. II (London, 1971) pp.1074–1076. There is also famous 666 of Revelation 13:18.

\(^{12}\) Gershom Scholem, *Kabbalah* (Jerusalem, 1974), pp.337–343, gives an instructive exposition of ‘gematria’ and also quotes Nachmanides (‘the Ramban’) as laying down a rule that
binical exegete was not interpreting to himself in isolation. He was interpreting for others, as part of a community of readers and in a tradition of reading. That tradition and his fellow readers taught him how to read texts. There was, after all, a difference between sense and non-sense. There was an interest of reason at work. The Fathers — both Christian and Jewish — were not talking gibberish. It is just that we have lost the key to understanding their language.

Where do we go from here? It seems to me that there are several moves which will get us nowhere. One is to try to turn our backs on the whole diachronic, historical critical reading of the Bible which has been developed in the last 200 years. We cannot do this. The attempt to do so is, I suppose, the real nature of fundamentalism — which is not to be confused with a naive pre-critical reading of the Bible: fundamentalism is an ‘ism’, a programme. That it cannot succeed is shown dramatically by the fact that the fundamentalists counter the sceptical conclusions of their opponents by insisting on the full historicity of everything in the Bible. They, no less than the most thoroughgoing historicist, proceed from the assumption that ‘truth’ equals ‘historical factualness’; that the right questions to be addressed to the Bible are those which approach it as a document purporting to provide historical information or evidence; that the real meaning of the Bible is that which is discoverable by historical inquiry13.

Another bankrupt move is that of historical relativism, by which we would say that Patristic, Rabbinical or Medieval ways of reading the Bible were no doubt appropriate for those times, but are inaccessible to us: our mentality is too different. There are, no doubt, several criticisms that could be made of this view. I will dwell only on one — it supposes a view of cultures or historical periods as hermetically sealed units, complete in themselves, and incapable of contact with one another. On the contrary, different cultures — whether contemporaneous or separated in time — are constantly meeting and merging. Like the minds of individual persons, they turn out to be mutually permeable14.

‘no one may calculate a gematria in order to deduce from it something that occurs to him. Our rabbis, the holy Sages of the Talmud, had a tradition that definite gematriot were transmitted to Moses to serve as a mnemonic for something that had been handed down orally with the rest of the Oral Law’ (p.342).
13. Compare Bruce Chilton, A Galilean Rabbi and his Bible (London, 1984) p.73: ‘To claim without qualification that biblical documents attempt to provide historical records and must be treated as such . . ., places the Bible under an immense constraint, in that its authority or inspiration is held to reside only in its historicity, so that it is not permitted to be anything but historical.’
This works both ways. We moderns are the children of our fathers. They have had a part to play in making us what we are. Try as we might, we cannot deny our heritage. There is a connecting door through which we can enter their thought world, learn to follow their thinking, even if we do not agree or sympathise. We find, in fact, that their thought world centres on a very familiar object, the Bible — a book (not, for instance, a ritual dance.) They are saying a number of things about this book that sound quite unfamiliar. Some of them strike us as absurd, even perverse, many as pointless. It is difficult for us to catch hold of what is being said, though here and there something may strike us as true and relevant. We may be tempted to walk out and slam the door behind us. But patience and the respect that we would want to bring to any strange cultural phenomenon, from the Pacific Islands, for instance, will keep us there listening. It obviously means something to the people who are taking part in it.

Gradually we will find that we are getting the idea. Things will make more sense. We are picking up the language. We will, I think, be quicker to do so if we bring to the encounter not only openness, but also a certain mental preparation. In the latter I would include some awareness of the world of intuitive symbols; also some acquaintance with the procedures of 'synchronic' literary criticism (not necessarily structuralism or semiotics — traditional literary criticism will do quite well.) An appreciation of puns or an ability to do crossword puzzles may also help.

Of course, we cannot entirely share the thought world of our fathers. That would mean being them. I have already mentioned that we cannot, even if we want to, leave behind our historical, diachronic approach to the Bible. To attempt to do so would mean denying that we are the people we know ourselves to be. The picture we see is not flat and two-dimensional. It has the 'historical perspective', the third dimension which gives roundness to the figures we see and depth to their respective positions. We cannot and should not forget that we are reading a collection of books written by different people at different times, even when we are focussing our attention on the text as we have it and are addressing to it questions which are not those an historian would ask.

I began this paper by saying that there are two ways of reading the Bible. Now I am suggesting that the two ways meet and blend, not always evenly.

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15. Simon Tugwell, O. P., Prayer (Dublin, 1974) vol. I, p.11, writes: ' . . . a word in a passage we are reading may remind us of a totally different passage where the same word occurs; maybe the connexion is only by way of a pun, but punning is a very basic human activity, featuring even in our dreams. Provided there is not too much deliberate control, we may find ourselves getting tremendously involved, not in scientific exegesis, but in a living relationship with the living Word’. It is, of course, the whole drift of this paper to overcome the estrangement between ‘scientific exegesis’ and ‘a living relationship with the living Word.’
or predictably, but truly all the same. I hope I am doing more than offering a bromide, such as saying, 'You need both the diachronic and the synchronic reading'. I certainly do not have a formula for combining them. All I can do is point out the sort of things that can happen.

King David is not our contemporary, nor was he the contemporary of the writer of the Books of Chronicles, even if the Chronicler treats David as a contemporary. But we can enter into the Chronicler's view of King David. For the Chronicler is a link in the chain which connects us with David. The aim should not be to demolish that chain and return to 'the historical David' as recoverable by the correct critical method. The First Book of Chronicles offers us a variation on the theme of King David. There are others. It is by listening carefully to them all that we shall discover 'the real King David'. Historical research will have a part to play, but this will not be regarded as the only one that is to be taken seriously or regarded as valid.

Another line of attack. A synchronic reading of the text, perhaps with the aid of the Rabbis, the Church Fathers, poets, literary critics, or even structuralists, may alert one to possibilities that were unsuspected and that certainly had not been turned up by a purely historical reading, at least as that is usually understood and carried out. I see this, however, as a challenge to broaden one's notions of the historical. Then it may well be that the diachronic and the synchronic readings will be seen to converge. The writers of later books of the Bible (and the revisers of earlier books) belonged to a tradition which was in continuity with that which produced what had already been written. They wrote with everything that had gone before lying, as it were, in front of them. The alert reader of the Bible will catch resonances and assonances in many places where it is impossible to trace literary influences or conscious design. The web of historical connections turns out to be much wider and more complex and subtle, and unexpected, than might have been supposed.

To take up the examples given earlier. By the time the Song of Songs was written, and later the Fourth Gospel, the word 'shepherd' had gathered about it a cluster of associations. No Jew brought up on the sacred texts could read it anywhere in the Bible, whether in the Old Testament or eventually in the Gospels, without being reminded of them or feeling entitled to call on them in connection with the passage he was reading — and the writers of the Song and of the Fourth Gospel were aware of this.

With regard to the Aqedah, Origen's exegesis is in marked contrast to that of standard modern commentaries. These dwell on the pathos of the

E. A. Speiser, Genesis (Anchor Bible, New York, 1964,) pp.161-166;
narrative and on the faith of Abraham\textsuperscript{17} (as does Origen also), with, perhaps, a discussion of the story’s background in Canaanite child sacrifice. They have little or nothing to say about Isaac or the ram, and mention the patristic typology, if at all, as a curiosity.

However, a poem by a modern Israeli writer shifts the focus of attention in the story in a most revealing fashion. Yehuda Amichai writes:

\begin{quote}
The true hero of the \textit{aqedah} was the ram, 
unaware of the connivance of others. 
It seemingly volunteered to die in Isaac’s place\textsuperscript{18}.
\end{quote}

Jewish theology, at least as early as the first century AD, regarded the Binding of Isaac as a true sacrifice, indeed as the perfect sacrifice, in which Isaac offered himself willingly. The animal sacrifices in the Temple originated in the substitution of the ram and, since then, gained their value and merit from the sacrifice of Isaac and served as a perpetual reminder (to God) of the Aqedah\textsuperscript{19}.

It is against this background that we need to evaluate Origen’s exegesis of Genesis ch. 22 and also such elements in the New Testament as the much discussed ‘lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world’ of John 1:29 (a phrase which Origen in fact quotes.) Origen’s commentary on the Aqedah is seen then not as fanciful or eccentric, much less perverse, but as profound and telling, in touch with the tradition of Jewish exegesis and the sources of the New Testament, and with the real possibilities of meaning in the text.

I have heard it suggested that the next breakthrough in biblical studies will have to do with the Fathers of the Church. I believe that the sort of thing I have been describing could be more rewarding than a few more ponderous volumes on patristics.

\textsuperscript{17} The faith and obedience of Abraham are singled out by the writer of the Letter to the Hebrews 11:17–19.
\textsuperscript{18} Trans. Edna Amir Coffin, in \textit{Michigan Quarterly Review} (1983) p.445. I am grateful to Dr Cheryl Exum who introduced me to this poem in her own translation and then provided me with the version quoted.
\textsuperscript{19} See Geza Vermes, \textit{Scripture and Tradition in Judaism} (Leiden, 1983, from 2nd ed. 1973) pp.193–227. Vermes himself points out that the Jewish sources which we possess are either contemporaneous with or later than the rise of Christianity, but argues for the antiquity of these ideas in Judaism and for their essential independence of Christian influence — indeed for their influence upon the New Testament.