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# AN INTERPRETATION MAP: FINDING PATHS TO READING PROCESSES

The illusion is endlessly reborn that the text is a structure in itself and for itself and that reading happens to the text as some extrinsic and contingent event. – Paul Ricoeur

## ABSTRACT

A consideration of the origins, development, and aftermath of Reader-Response theory helps place both possibilities and limits on the role of reading and interpretation of texts, biblical in particular. With its main tenets and representatives surveyed, it can be correlated with the historical-critical enterprise that it challenged and with the literary turn that preceded and paved the way for it. Finally, it offers us a context in which to place and appreciate pre-critical Jewish and Christian interpretations. The article closes with a set of suggestions for interpretation in view of its long history in biblical studies.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Within the lifetime of everyone who reads this article – at least when it first appears – the map of interpretive moves has changed dramatically. We are all familiar with archaic drawings of the known world as the ancients imagined it to be, based on what we now know was incredibly limited awareness of geography. Yet without much actual exploratory experience

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and lacking tools now considered necessary, our forebears drew maps.<sup>1</sup> Over centuries, even millennia, our capacity to chart the world has grown, until global imaging technologies seem almost too accurate for comfort or privacy. It may seem there is nothing left to learn, although that sort of arrogant assumption has been shown false many times! Realities shift, and we run alongside or behind them.

A similar change has accompanied the reading and interpretation process, and those engaged in the interpretation of biblical texts do well to ponder a mapping of hermeneutical moves. With a certain awareness of what we know and when we learned it, or what others supposed and why they thought it, we gain access to a trove of wonderful possibilities for consideration of biblical texts, including the hundreds of years of pre-critical reading, wisdom often sidelined because it seems archaic. The aim of this article is to correlate various processes in view of the recent emergence of what is called reader-response (hereafter RR) criticism in the late twentieth century.<sup>22</sup> The sub-issue for focus is the question of limits and possibilities for reading and interpretation. Put bluntly: “Can the Bible mean anything we want it to mean?” (Thiselton 2009:2). Does RR theory take responsibility for just about anything any reader wishes to claim? If “I am a reader,” and “this is how I feel about the text,” is that sufficient? If not, why not?

The challenge here is particularly acute for an ancient text like the Bible that has been for some twenty-five hundred years accepted as Scripture, normative and formative for the lives of (in this instance) Jewish and Christian readers (Smith 1993). Outcomes, strategies and their underlying assumptions have moved considerably during those hundreds of years, and many diverse and even contradictory claims have been and continue to be made for texts. Our challenge here is to study the map, know where we are and whence we have come, understand how to interpret faithfully and fruitfully. I assume that relevant to most readers of this piece will be the “You Are Here”-ness of committed interpreters. It is pitched to those who accept, granted along a broad and diverse continuum, the responsibility and privilege of interpreting the Bible as Scripture and as God’s self-disclosure to God’s people.

Though often chronological order works best, here I want to privilege the recent past – that is to locate where we are presently standing as (post) modern critical interpreters – and then look at where others have stood in

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1 For great samples, visit [www.old-maps.com](http://www.old-maps.com) (accessed 7/8/12). <http://www.old-maps.com>

2 For a companion piece to this article that manages some of the same data though from a different point of view, see Green (2006:72-83).

relation to that late phase. Consequently, after the reader-centered moves have been laid out, we will reconsider their immediate predecessors: historical-critical methods dominant since the sixteenth or seventeenth century and the newer literary moves rising from the turn to language characteristic of the twentieth century. From there we will glance back at the long pre-critical era, not to explore any of its methods in detail but to re-position them post-RR. The goal is that we, reading, have a firmer sense than before of where we stand and on whose shoulders, and why we interpret as we do – from one set of shoulders or others. We will conclude with a set of ten suggestions for reading that makes good use of the best that biblical scholars have been through.

## 2. READER-ORIENTED INTERPRETATION

RR is not a single method but a set of loosely correlated, even sometimes clashing, assumptions, strategies and practices that focus on the reader rather than on authorial processes or texts as autonomous. The basic claim of all reader-alert theory and practice is that meaning is not encoded and inserted *into* texts, not found and extracted *from* texts, but constructed and produced *with* texts (and appropriate consideration of other factors). RR problematizes the act of reading to show it a highly complex and unstable act, both in theory and practice. Readers are challenged to observe and articulate what it is they do and experience.

In a general sense, writers and critics have always been concerned about pragmatics, the effect of words upon the reader. We can think of Aristotle and his descriptions of the cathartic impact of drama, of Greco-Roman rhetoric and its careful handbooks of persuasive procedures and effects, of Christian patristic writers avid for audience response. Scholars call our attention to reader-concern in the works of Augustine, Dante, Milton (Vander Weele 1991:126-130). But current RR interest emerged in the period of the 1920s and 1930s<sup>33</sup> to develop fruitfully from the late 1960s and 70s onward. An early highpoint came in the early 1980s with the publication of three major studies.<sup>44</sup> Though RR continued to be appropriated in biblical studies, it is generally agreed that by the turn of the past century RR had handed the baton to a contentious and productive set of offspring, dissolving among them.

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- 3 An early and somewhat underappreciated contribution by Louise Rosenblatt is credited as being one of the taproots of modern RR, according to Tompkins 1980: ix-xxvi.
  - 4 For useful overviews consult Tompkins ed. (1980); Suleiman and Crosman eds. (1980); Holub (1984).

Its heyday: RR theory in its particular modern sense rose in reaction to a set of critical theories that held sway earlier in the 20<sup>th</sup> century: Anglo-American formalist literary studies and New Criticism; Russian formalism; Czech and French structuralism; and the historical-positivist default of much biblical criticism.<sup>5</sup> Formalist thought assumes and insists upon the objectivity of the text, its independence from reader moves and from external reference. Formalism's guiding assumption is that whether the author's plan is evidenced in the text or not available there, language itself, rather than any external referent or reader viewpoint, is sufficient base for interpretation. Meaning can be determined and assessed for its correctness and universal applicability. The literary text is, in a sense, objective. Both historical positivism and structuralism, on the contrary, assume that external referents of the text can and must be queried, discovered in actual events or deeper structures, whether social or psychological. But positivist and structuralist theory, too, minimize the role that the reader plays in determining meaning.

Thus all RR theorists and practitioners stress (to a greater or lesser degree) the necessary and creative function of the reader.<sup>6</sup> Though some may accuse others of failing to exploit it sufficiently (see below for the controversy between Iser and Fish), compared to earlier phases of theory, the interpreter becomes key for all reader-centered interpretation. It is fair to say that RR developed a good deal of its theory with pedagogy in view, and that it de-emphasized questions of the aesthetic quality of texts. We can conveniently think of RR work as probing three sets of paired questions: First, what does the reader do, and how, specifically, does it work? Second, where does meaning reside, and to what extent is it controlled by the text or the interpreter? Third, who reads, and what difference do identities make? We might ask a fourth question which typically gets less attention but is nonetheless important: Why do readers read, and what is the purpose and effect of the process? It will be useful to spend a bit of time on the philosophical antecedents of RR, especially as they remain urgent in the offspring of RR. These roots also clarify points at issue between Iser and Fish, who are the most widely known to Anglo biblical scholars. To no small extent, the theory of one phase both extends and disputes its predecessors.

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5 For more information presented in a very readable study, see Thiselton (2009).

6 For some useful observations on the historically- and socially-constructed practice of reading itself, see Bennett (1995:5-9).

## 2.1 Reader response in relation to Anglo-American literary study

This pool of theory is generally familiar to many English-speaking scholars, arriving at RR via literary criticism. Rooting at least as far back as Romanticism, the interpretive emphasis of this powerful school has been on the literary work of art itself. Among exemplary practitioners are : I.A. Richards, whom Elizabeth Freund calls “the seminal reader-response critic”;<sup>7</sup> Wayne Booth (1983), who has worked in general literary theory and in rhetorics; E.D. Hirsch (1987), who has championed the role of the author to control meaning, if not significance; and René Wellek, whose work continues influential.<sup>8</sup> In addition to stressing the objective nature of the text and its isolation from influences of authorial intent, social context, or reader designs, these theorists provide the background that is more literary than specifically philosophical. Vander Weele characterizes the thought of this school as “an attempt to rule out both the conventional and the idiosyncratic, the historical and the personal,” citing the famous “affective fallacy,” which has become in some senses the hallmark of this school of thought:

The Affective Fallacy is a confusion between the poem and its *results* (what it *is* and what it *does*), a special case of epistemological skepticism ... [that] begins by trying to derive the standard of criticism from the psychological effect of the poem and ends in impressionism and relativism (Vander Weele 1991: 131-132).

The text itself is the object to be studied. The work of these English and North American scholars has also, typically, eschewed the realm of the socio-political to a greater extent than have continental scholars.

The strength of this set of theory, perduring for some one hundred years, is shown insofar as it has accounted well for certain of the formal features of literature, in fact, contributing much valuable aesthetic insight to interpreters of biblical texts. Freund notes (1987:18) that the “promiscuous instability of literary meaning” is not a discovery of deconstruction but is part of the literary heritage. The weakness of Anglo-American scholarship shows up in its assumption that its own reading results were universal, which is to say, that reading and interpretation are natural and the results inevitable, if the reader is sufficiently well-educated. The biblical counterpart is the well-respected if somewhat obsolescent literary theory explicated by the early work of Mark Allan Powell (1990). Many biblical

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7 Richards (1936); Freund (1987) reviews Richards’ contribution in her ch. 1, with the quote on p. 15.

8 Wellek (1987:71-84). This article takes explicit issue with key tenets of RR.

interpreters trained in and appreciative of literary theory and turning to the reader have simply widened the field, so that more viable readings are possible. That is, a dollop of readers' contributions have been added to literary theory without substantially changing the formula.

## 2.2 Reader response in relation to continental postmodern hermeneutics

The other salient parent for RR is continental language philosophy, most usefully Hans Georg Gadamer and Paul Ricoeur and their forebears, Friedrich Nietzsche and Martin Heidegger. This brief section can only suggest a few of the ways in which this school of thought offers a path both into and out of RR.

Richard Palmer (1983:64-65) suggests Nietzsche as, in some senses, the taproot of this whole set of intellectual history (including Heidegger, Gadamer and Ricoeur on the one hand, and Derrida and Foucault on the other).<sup>9</sup> Palmer credits Nietzsche with establishing three crucial things: First, he critiques the assumption that a stable subject looks out on an objective world and interprets it. For Nietzsche, there is neither a simple subject nor an objective world to view but a fragmented and warring interpreter and a polysemous world. Second, he stresses that interpretation is fictive – constructed rather than excavated. Third, this Master of Suspicion holds that interpretations are interested rather than neutral or objective. Interpretation, or reading, is not retrieval in a Platonic sense but is rather oriented toward the present or future of the reader in some basic way. It addresses the reader's self-understanding rather than questing for the original understanding of the author and is thus transformative of the reader. This line of thought is developed in a particular way by Heidegger, Gadamer, and Ricoeur, and supplemented by a generous measure of what Ricoeur calls explanation.<sup>10</sup> It remains useful in much biblical interpretation (as well as in legal hermeneutics). Its more deconstructive arm, less eager for stable meaning, develops to accompany ideological and cultural studies of various sorts.

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9 Palmer makes at least three distinctions in his study of hermeneutics, distinguishing the long early phase in which the word referred primarily to modes of studying biblical texts, to philosophical or postmodern hermeneutics associated with Gadamer and Ricoeur, and to poststructuralist or deconstructive thought, associated with Derrida and Foucault. It is philosophical hermeneutics that is relevant to RR (Palmer 1983:57-58). Thiselton reviews the material in his chs. VIII through XII.

10 For Ricoeur and most who rely on him in biblical studies, the effort to explain the many contingent circumstances of a given text is a vitally necessary part of the eventual act of appropriation.

Though Gadamer and Ricoeur are distinguishable in various ways, for present purposes they collaborate. Gadamer contributes the sense of understanding as circular, active, participative, and rooted in tradition (though not uncritically so). He offers for the general process of interpretation the analogy of the game (in the sense of playing a sport): The participant must be seriously engaged, respectful of the rules of play, not simply frivolous or claiming easy mastery. She or he will bring certain skills to the engagement which are challenged and honed by playing. What the reader/player accomplishes and gains is understanding, a sort of experiential truth. Ricoeur, similarly, brings a respectful and skilled reader into relationship with a work of art or culture. He offers the analogy of the musician, performing a composer's score. By attending to many aspects of the "world of the score," the musician performs in such a way as also to gain insight into self, self-knowledge (Palmer 1983:60-61; Long 1996:79-89).

Both theorists root in the belief that language bears meaning and that readers make meaning when interpreting, a point not always so obvious as it may now appear. The reader/text engagement is powerfully creative, opening new worlds of meaning and participation for proficient readers and allowing more experience to be made available from the text than previously. Text and reader share a vast freedom to offer and explore meaning collaboratively, with neither made servant of the other. The process is respectful and dialogical. At least in theory, the process of the reader's interrogating the text will involve investigation into numerous facets of the text that we can call authorial, historical, and literary. But Palmer stresses as of key significance that such study must also probe the implications of language as event. Reading does not take place in a void but in a context. Not simply historical, though, that situation is deeply philosophical:

The act/event of reading has been construed differently in different historical epochs and within those epochs differently with respect to different kinds of texts. Thus the study of hermeneutics seems necessarily ... to involve seeking to understand the ways in which interpretation has been practiced in previous eras... (Palmer 1983:70).

These include the prevailing view of reality, the view of what knowing is, a sense of what can be known, the concept of truth, a view of what literature is, and so forth. It is a vast challenge (Palmer 1983:70).<sup>11</sup> Implicit in the thought of Gadamer and Ricoeur, though also underdeveloped, is

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11 The paragraph offers a very formidable agenda to any who seek to understand texts.

the importance of actual readers.<sup>12</sup> But what they also insist upon is that responsible reading does not disregard the other issues as it is exercising its distinctive viewpoint and making a fresh contribution. The point and the challenge is to do it all, and competently.

## 2.3 Two familiar practitioners and their contributions

With general background in place, we can look in more detail at RR theorists most familiar to biblical scholars, Iser (representing European phenomenology and the German school at Constance) and Fish (representing the more literary-derived US thought). To study each of them briefly, noting their early, middle and later phases and exploring their clash and differences will be useful.

### 2.3.1 Wolfgang Iser<sup>13</sup>

Iser, a German but with broad exposure in English, was trained as a phenomenologist and thus seeks to describe what happens as readers engage texts. He assigns a significant role to both text (even author, on occasion) and reader, showing them mutually interactive, each pole partially constituting the other.<sup>14</sup> The text offers a set of options, from which the reader selects; and the reader activates a particular set of choices, making fresh meaning. Iser's most famous contribution to RR is the concept "indeterminacy" (gaps or blanks). Such *aporiai* emerge throughout complex literary texts – generated as viewpoints collide and intersect at points of plot, narrator, characters and reader – though of course in another sense they are not "there," being gaps. Each reader negotiates these multiple sites, not once but repeatedly, anticipating, retrospectively, revising, rejecting. Readers, each distinctive, have particular repertoires with which they read; and texts, also highly dense, have conventions that demand attention. A reader cannot consult a text to ascertain from it whether its cue is being well-construed, nor can a text intervene to prevent a reader from a poor choice or praise a good one. Readers will tend toward coherence and consistency, Iser holds, but readings will also be particular and distinctive. Readers will likely identify with characters. The effect of reading is the appropriation of meaning, specifically including self-knowledge.

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12 Long (1996:82-83) calls specific attention to the impact of great thinkers neglecting the impact of privileged reading, citing South African hermeneutics as an example.

13 Iser's basic and early writings include 1978, 1989, and in Tompkins ed. 1980.

14 Iser's implied reader is thus substantially textual, little prone to historical-social particularity.

Iser is famous for his analogy of our “reading” of the starry splatter of the night sky, where one might see a plough, another a dipper. But ultimately, he holds that it is the sky that determines our choices (Suleiman & Crosman 1980:21). That is, when pushed to choose, Iser accords primacy to the text rather than to the reader, thus skating closer to formalism than he might sometimes sound and certainly shying away from the notion that there are no constraints on a reader from a text. But he insists that a text can cue a reader to fresh insight, can activate the reader’s imagination in unanticipated ways. His reader of interest is abstract and theoretical rather than particular and real.

Though Iser’s shortcomings are not difficult to demonstrate (see below, where he clashes with Fish), RR scholar Robert Holub nonetheless points out several achievements for which Iser can take credit: He theorizes about the actual reading process in some detail – notably the negotiation of gaps, drawing attention to a process more complex than a simple negotiation of the meanings of individual words. He makes clear that readers must engage their own understandings if they are to interpret literature, not simply seek the accumulation of what others have said. Texts proffer constructs for negotiation rather than insisting upon dogmatic strictures. And Iser, holding an appointment at a U.S. university, helped make the philosophical antecedents of his work more familiar to U.S. readers (Holub 1984:106). It is not difficult to see his appeal for many biblical readers, for whom textual constraints are not optional.

As Iser has continued to write, he has elaborated his basic insight of indeterminacies, referring to additional structures: the hermeneutical circle, the recursive loop, the traveling differential.<sup>15</sup> It is not clear to me that he has advanced the conversation in a particularly helpful way, though he has sought to elucidate the context for his theory and to dialogue with other participants in the field. But for all practical purposes, his contribution to RR dead-ends, as reader-oriented ventures move beyond him.

### 2.3.2 Stanley Fish<sup>16</sup>

Fish is labeled by Vincent Leitch as “the point man” for RR in the U.S., which was likely true at one time (Leitch 1995:38). Early Stanley Fish as a literary scholar seems to find basic agreement with what Iser says on a number of points: meaning as event; reception as constituting the work; reading process that anticipates, reviews, modifies; the text as the dominant

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15 Iser’s later material is found in 2000: Ch. 6 summarizes without demonstrating the gain. His latest book, 2006:57-69, reviews the work of various theorists (no mention of Fish), including himself.

16 To follow the evolving thought of Stanley Fish, consult H. Aram Veeseer, ed. (1999).

partner; reader specifics are not particularly important.<sup>17</sup> But during the 1970s 80s, Fish boldly labelled the “affective fallacy” as itself a fallacy (Fish 1980: 82). This position marked a substantial shift, and he took a much more anti-formalist stance, privileging the role of the reader and asserting that there is nothing prior to reading, to interpretation, and indeed nothing remaining after it. The reader’s experience comprises interpretation. In that sense, “response” is not so well named. If the indeterminate gap is Iser’s signature concept, interpretive communities fill that role for “middle Fish.” He maintains that readers respond not so much to texts as to the conventions which characterize the groups to which they belong. It is those which shape the reader, who then activates them when engaging the text. The conventions are not individually-determined but communal, and they are not necessarily explicitly chosen so much as they are imbibed or swum into. These communal constraints exist before the reader is shaped by them. Fish thus insists upon the importance of context and situation for all interpretation, though those moving in the direction of cultural studies (see below) find him seriously deficient in actually exploiting such particularity.

As his work has developed, Fish demonstrates greater interest in the general socio-political import of language than was true in his earlier writing, though he remains conversant with a vast range of classic material, literary and legal, on which he comments.<sup>18</sup> Instructive and entertaining to read, he is rarely cited now by biblical scholars struggling with issues in interpretation. So Fish, too, has ceased to be particularly useful to biblical studies. His trajectory has moved him elsewhere.

## 2.4 What is contentious between them

Fairly early in their careers, these two clashed and spent some effort to pinpoint, if not resolve, their differences (Fish 1981:2-13; Iser 1981: 82-87). They generally agree, if one thinks of the large continuum of possible interpreters, that all perception is mediated. But Fish basically negates Iser’s indeterminacy theory, suggesting that there is no real indeterminacy, since any reader is thoroughly immersed in and constituted by assumptions before any reading occurs; no reader can step out of these. And, Fish continues, there is nothing determined, since before a reader engages, even the text on the page – no to say gaps themselves – has no existence

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17 Leitch characterizes Fish’s thought in the early 1970s, in 1995:36-37. Freund (1987), ch. 4, spends considerable time on Fish, such as he had evolved into the middle 80s.

18 See Fish (2001:29-38). He calls for literary critics qua literary critics to find ways to speak out on the urgent political issues of the day.

outside of reader construction.<sup>19</sup> To talk about gaps “in” the text misses the point, for Fish. Readers are always already constrained and constraining. Iser is unwilling to concede that point, and is thus left arguing for or positing a text that does exist prior to a reader. Perhaps more to the point, or more simply and reductively, Iser reveals that he hands priority to the text in matters of constraint, whereas Fish locates it unambiguously in the reader. To some extent, they are talking on different levels. But the issue between them remains unresolved and requiring a different philosophical forum for successful resolution than classic RR has been able to provide.

## 2.5 Where the theory has gone since its heyday

It seems generally agreed that RR is no longer a helpful descriptor, its place taken by at least four sets of theory and study: First, empirical study, involving the particular reading moves of actual readers, is beginning to be studied and analyzed. This interest started rough and general and has gradually become more sophisticated and refined. A scholar like Gerald O. West has published his work with actual readers (his “ordinary readers”) in South Africa and has contributed some wonderful studies that are generally RR rooted (West & Dube 1996). A second offshoot of RR is the more general and historical study of reception, investigating how readers over time have received and understood a particular work. This diachronic reconstructive work is challenging, in that some of the information that can be ascertained from actual readers is difficult if not impossible to retrieve from bygone eras.<sup>20</sup> A third fresh direction has been cultural studies, which includes the ways in which particular sets of readers construe texts. This vast field includes ethnic studies, post-colonial work, feminist and other gendered studies, and various class or caste-particular interpretations (Segovia & Tolbert 1995). Finally, there is the more theoretical work of continuing to explore and explicate specifically how interpretation works philosophically, most famously poststructuralist deconstruction and its offspring.<sup>21</sup> All of these developments can be traced to RR, though of course in most instances they have other influences as well and are all hybrid in one way or another.

Though it petered out rather early in its career (compared with other major reading theories), RR nonetheless played an important role in the

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19 For more detail, see Holub (1984:102-106 and 1992: 25-28).

20 Thiselton comments briefly on this movement (2009:316-320), naming Robert Jauss, student of Gadamer, as its founder. Sample Sherwood (2000) and also volumes in the Blackwell series on reception of biblical texts.

21 To understand the way in which deconstruction is related to RR and for reading suggestions, consult Palmer (1983:62-69).

long process of interpretation. Several of its contributions can be noted. Basically, it remedied a lacuna in criticism, bringing the reader into better relationship with author and text. Many would claim that the turn to the reader was in fact a paradigm shift in the history of interpretation. At the very least, it made much clearer the complexity of the reading process and the need for precision when accounting for what readers do. Reading itself has been explored over time and across culture, so that it becomes undeniable that it is a socially constructed activity – not natural or universal, simply with diverse outcomes. Along these lines, RR differentiated readers of various types, lest we think that reading was always the same sort of activity: Critics have named an implied reader, an intended reader, a mock reader, a model reader, super-reader, an inscribed or encoded reader, an informed reader, an ideal reader, a virtual reader, an embedded reader, a resisting reader, an actual reader, a narratee.<sup>22</sup> RR theory has also called attention to the interests that inevitably attend reading, has challenged scholars to be more explicit and less naive about their reasons for reading, and has, in fact, made such interests productive. RR theory has helpfully drawn a closer relation between the acts of writing and reading and suggested that reading is a sort of re-writing process, at its best active and intentional. And not least, RR has produced a broad and diverse set of fresh readings of particular texts.

The limits have already been suggested or implied in the description of the offshoots of RR. The attention to actual readers, salutary in many ways, can easily become narcissistic and an exercise in ignorance when pursued outside constraints of theory and other relevant information. Anyone who has taught in the past twenty years or so will likely flinch at the announcement that a student is going to “do a RR paper,” since it is likely to be without warrants from any authority or body of information outside “the reader.” This decline into total subjectivity, individualism, and anarchy, though deviant from the best of RR, perdures. There may be as well limits to the productivity of trying to map the particular and specific moments of the reading process. Charts that once seemed helpful – are helpful to a point – also demonstrate by their simplicity how inadequate they are to map so complex and fast-happening a process as reading. Eventually the mapping enterprise ends in bickering and negating, rather than in offering a positive way forward. So far as I can track, there has been no satisfactory resolution to the issues that split Iser and Fish and little interest in pursuing them past the impasse where they stopped in the late 1980s. Though there was a glad embrace of RR by some biblical scholars,

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22 These are explained, situated, and attributed in Bennett (1995:2-3). They can all be specified additionally in terms of factors like gender, social location, class, and so forth.

a certain unease has accompanied it on the part of others, for a variety of reasons, including those worried about the major shift in the nature of biblical study when historical factors (and to some extent authorial ones) were excluded or severely limited and when multiple perspectives on meaning were tolerated, accepted, even sought.<sup>23</sup> This moment invites us to look back at processes dominant before the turn to the reader to see what they offer now.

### 3. HISTORICAL-CRITICAL WORK

Since this phase of work, at least in biblical studies, has had such a long run and received such substantial attention, there is no need to go over familiar ground.<sup>24</sup> Rising at the confluence of the Renaissance, Reformation and Enlightenment and reigning all but supreme from the 16th-17th centuries until the mid-20th, this tectonic movement correctly saw and claimed that a whole range of relevant and available historical matters had been neglected in earlier commentary. Excellent questions were asked, probing beneath the extant biblical text: What happened, and how can we investigate such events? Who wrote or produced the material we now call biblical? What compositional processes were involved? What material was borrowed from cognate or cousin cultures, and how was it re-shaped distinctively, over time, and in response to what general and particular sets of pressures and influences? How do we weight the contributions of old information, filtered as it is by subsequent perspectives?

But toward the end of the era that witnessed the explosion of wonderful historical data and the increasing sophistication of tools, confidence in the accuracy of such endeavors has diminished. The very RR insights just discussed have shown more dubious our ability to retrieve material separated from us by at least two millennia. Scholars recognize, now, that we are not retrieving and reconstructing so much as constructing. Historians, properly chastened or conscious, continue to search for the referents of the ancient material and other relevant data but with greater awareness of their own thumb in the results they offer, so to speak. Related is the pervasive role of ideology, difficult to discern in cultures, in texts, in interpreters, and so remaining somewhat a wild card. Many claims about past persons, events and processes are more properly concerns of the

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23 Three excellent studies on the biblical use of RR are Eryl W. Davies (2003:20-37); McKnight (1999:230-252); Brett (1993:13-33).

24 The methods are well represented, discussed and demonstrated in LeMon and Richards (2009); perhaps most useful in overview is the essay of Hayes (2009) in that volume:195-212.

present. So at the very frontier of new possibilities of research comes an appropriate humility.<sup>25</sup>

#### 4. MODERN LITERARY INTERPRETATION

Preceding the RR contribution, the first “push-back” to the dominance of historical-critical work was brought to bear by biblical scholars interested in insights from secular literature, theoretical and interpretive work accumulating throughout the twentieth century, blossoming in biblical studies from the 1970s on, as noted above. Objecting to the overweening influence of things historical on biblical texts (much as historical critics had deplored the exclusion of relevant historical data) and reminding historians that the Bible was, in fact, a literary text, these scholars sought to bring to prominence issues of language – from the generally philosophical to particular matters such as imagery, characterization, plot, structure, wordplay, and the like. An active appreciation of the incredible depth of language, its complex ability to offer worlds of meaning, was a much needed move. To imagine that literature can be adequately read without consideration of its linguistic features seems foolish in the extreme. And yet these scholars as well careened to one edge in their desire to remediate, supposing in some cases that historical information was either so dubious as to be useless or was not necessary.

More recently the need for it has been freshly recognized, with a scholar like F.W. Dobbs-Allsopp calling for “historicist literary study,”<sup>26</sup> aligning his ideas largely with what has been developed above to recognize both – and simultaneously – the importance of historical work and at the same time the urgency of owning that the past of the cultures that produced the Bible is so obscured from our efforts to know it that easy retrieval must not be counted on. His way is to suggest a balance between objectivist determinism and positivist naïveté, on the one hand, and subjectivist free-play and nihilism on the other (Dobbs-Allsopp 1999:251).

#### 5. PRE-CRITICAL INTERPRETATION

With this intense critical perspective in mind, we can ask afresh what the many scholars and commentators who lived before the Western

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25 For a more detailed, extensive study of these matters, consult Nissinen (2009:479-504).

26 Dobbs-Allsopp (1999:235-271) suggests that new historicism and its British counterpart, cultural materialism, offer a promising start. Good examples, in my opinion, remain few, but see Keefe (2001) and Hens-Piazza (2003).

Enlightenment were doing when they interpreted and what we can gain by consulting them. We may label them “pre-critical,” since they clearly did not make use of the post-Enlightenment lenses described here, though they were quite conscious of their own procedures, moves that were critical in their own way. The most obvious difference between these classic scholars and those described above is that the ancients were not much interested in retrieving historical information about the lives of biblical peoples or the processes by which the Bible took shape. That project, dominating biblical studies in recent centuries, simply lacked, even in those who asked the occasional historical question. Were they, then, interested in literary matters per se? Here, a qualified yes. The early Jewish commentators show themselves intensely aware of the verbal text, able to catch and exploit tiny details, to find meaningful echoes within the “language game” that is the Hebrew Bible. Early and medieval Christian commentators made vast use of details and imagery of the Bible, excelling at interpreting passages analogically, where one text is shown to resemble or echo another in multiple ways and to rich effect. But our modern literary questions of plotting, characterization, structure, symbolism, metaphor and the like do not feature in their work.

Strangely, perhaps, these “pre-criticals” most resemble RR critics, since they privilege themselves and their agendas as readers and move resolutely and consistently – even consciously – within those ideological/theological frameworks, attentive to their audiences as well. Avery Peck calls the rabbis “eisexegetical” and “polemical,” meaning that they read with clear purposes in mind. He names these for the Jewish scholars: They assume the Tanak was authored by God; that it was always meant to address present circumstances of its current readers rather than to provide information primarily about the past; that Scripture has anticipated the needs of present readers and can provide for them; that God’s prevenient truth is reliable and accessible from the words of Scripture. He also asserts that Jews all read the Bible with the lenses of experiencing chosenness, suffering, and confidence in redemption (Peck 2009:441-457). Jewish commentary evolves over time quasi-hermeneutical tools to assist with such reading.

Early Christian scholars stand closer to this set of descriptors than might seem likely (Thiselton 2009:60-62). They vary considerably among themselves in their particular moves (as do the Jewish scholars between the first century and the end of the medieval period), though such differentiation lies beyond the scope of this essay. Whether they used method based on allegory or that of typology, they read texts as layered, pointing the reader to deep realities often barely discernible at the surface or literal level. Christians were also consistent in correlating the language

of the Bible to affirm the identity of Jesus as God's son and as Messiah.<sup>27</sup> In a sense, it is a reductive agenda, since a single focus tends to exclude what lies outside its edges. But it is an ambitious and full project, fruitful in showing depth and continuity in God's dealings with human beings as well as suggesting the decisive break between the two traditions. Over time, the aims of the Christian writers become more systematic and theological, so that by the medieval period, biblical texts were serving the aims of dogma more obviously than they were interpreting texts as such.

Given what the ancients were doing – and what they thought they were doing – and granting that they were neither particularly steeped in language philosophy nor much interested in historical matters and were perhaps more confident in each word as salvific than many moderns will be – why would we read them? What will we learn? Put bluntly: Can they help us? Can we understand and appreciate them? At best – and readers will have to weigh claims – their insight is both ingenious and profound. A quick glance at their views on the biblical book of Jonah can serve as warrant for their worth.<sup>28</sup> It is no exaggeration to say that their creativity and insight is unsurpassed among commentators. If we neither demand that they be modern nor dismiss them when they are not, we may be surprised how good they are at being themselves!

## 6. MEANING AS MALLEABLE

We return to our initial query about responsible reading enlightened, chastened, and I hope stimulated by the complexity of the interpretive task. We can distill from the long practice of interpretation some caveats, positive and negative: what to do, what to avoid. Let me limit us here to ten. Readers will prefer to design their own list, or to customize this one. First, we must avoid literalism in all its forms, since reduction of most language to a univocal meaning eliminates too much that we need. Second, I also urge us to eschew too much triumphant righteousness, interpretation that claims “my side” right and the others wrong. There is plenty to critique, but an overload of self-serving denigration of others is a bad sign. Third, we do well not to limit our helpers to the Anglo-European. There is an abundance of insightful scholarship to consult. We might try to read with

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27 It is not an exaggeration to say that virtually all early (pre-modern) Christian interpreters are focused upon explicating the figure of Jesus, with the result that early texts are driven in that direction. That early Jewish interpreters are not challenged to or constrained by such a single focus frees them to do other things.

28 Green (2005:ch. 2) surveys, the views of select early commentators on that profound and enigmatic biblical book.

people different from ourselves in various ways, to reinforce a sense that no single culture group can claim the inside track. If we stray too far into assuming our kind is the only real authority, such co-readers will nudge us. Christians ought to try to read regularly with Jews, rich people with poor, women with men, and so forth.

Fourth, we need, often, to acknowledge as honestly as possible our base position: attainments (what we have been given and achieved), desires (what we deeply want), interests (how our interpretations work for us), agendas (what we propose is worth doing), commitments (where we are dedicated and hold fast), not to distance ourselves from them but to stay alert to their powerful influence on our readings. These biases are inevitable and can be helpful or harmful, but they must not be unknown to us. A fifth point: We will do well to name our methods, remaining alert to how influential tools we are not using. Basic exegesis should always have a place in our study, though not apart from the broader interpretive work suggested here. Paul Ricoeur's pairs: a willingness to suspect and also to listen, a vow of rigor and also of obedience (quoted in Thiselton 2009:229). Sixth, we want to be as clear as possible about where we are in the reading process, acknowledging honestly that we, like others, will tend to reach for what reinforces what we value and avoid what seems threatening to us. We need not "do it all," but it will be valuable to consider aspects of texts that do not suit our argument, to avoid absolute or blind selectivity as we are buttressing our position. We might recall how long Christian believers were convinced that Scripture condoned slavery, patriarchy and sexism, violence, and so forth – remembering why such claims went unquestioned by so many for so long. Seventh, it is always valuable to spend some time on the referentiality issue: historical circumstances of various sorts are germane at some level, even if they remain below the waterline. To excuse ourselves from knowing what century Amos preached in and who was the imperial foe is inexcusably sloppy, even if we do not choose to shape our preaching or writing explicitly around the socio-economics of the eighth century.

We can and must, eighth, exploit appreciatively the language play that is the biblical text, detail that never ceases to repay our efforts to understand ourselves, our fellows, our deity. Much meaning rides embedded with literary and poetic features of the text, contributing more than we imagine or afford to disregard. Ninth, we will do well to aim for interpretation that matches our "you are here-ness" of the map we have drawn. It may be tempting to want to interpret as though we were St. Augustine, or Thomas Aquinas or Catherine of Siena. But our readings, though appreciative of the past, should emerge from our own experience and world, not mimic an earlier one. Finally, tenth, perhaps the most challenging: We will do

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well to stay abreast of the hermeneutical discussion as it continues and complexifies, as it will do, is doing. Our map will change, grow, correct itself, take us to new places. And we want to know where we are, and why.

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**Keywords**

Reader-Response

Historical-Critical

Literary-Critical

Pre-Critical

Hermeneutics

**Trefwoorde**

Leser-respons

Histories-krities

Literêre-krities

Pre-krities

Hermeneutiek