

LIBERATING EXEGESIS?*

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Challenges from the Third World

Today the historical approach to the Bible is being challenged from various quarters. Along with psychological, social-scientific and literary methods, alternative approaches from the 'Third World' attract increasing interest even in the West. *Liberating exegesis*, a book about 'the challenge of liberation theology to biblical studies' by Christopher Rowland and Mark Corner¹ is one indication of this trend; Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza's commentary on Revelation² is another. The volume *Voices from the margin*, edited by R.S. Sugirtharajah,³ presents itself as a programme by biblical interpreters from the Third World. One of its hallmarks, especially conspicuous in the editor's contributions, is vehement criticism of Western exegesis which has subjected the Bible to 'abstract, individualized and "neutralized" reading', but has 'very rarely . . . focused on people's experience of hunger, sickness and exploitation'.⁴

Interpreters in the Third World (and not just there!) find that historical exegesis does not answer their questions, since 'the goal of biblical interpretation is not only understanding of the biblical text, but ultimately enacting it'.⁵ 'The concern of the liberation theologian is to ask what the text meant to the writer . . . only in order to ask what it means to us as readers'.⁶ High expectations are indeed directed to exegesis, if 'the quest for the historical Jesus lies not only in finding the truth about the man of Nazareth, but also in fighting for the truth that will liberate mankind'.⁷ This truth is a global one: 'The primary concern of an interpreter lies not only in

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¹ *Liberating exegesis* (London: S.P.C.K., 1990).

² *Revelation: Vision of a just world* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1993).

³ *Voices from the margin: interpreting the Bible in the Third World* (London: S.P.C.K., 1991). Cf. also R.S. Sugirtharajah, 'The Bible and its Asian readers', *Biblical Interpretation*, 1 (1993), 54–66.

⁴ Sugirtharajah, 'Introduction', in *Voices*, 1.

⁵ Sugirtharajah, 'Inter-Faith hermeneutics: an example and some implications', in *Voices*, 362–3.

⁶ Rowland and Corner, *Liberating exegesis*, 22.

⁷ Sugirtharajah, 'Postscript: achievements and items for a future agenda', in *Voices*, 436.

transforming social inequalities . . . , but also in bringing racial and religious harmony among peoples of different faiths'.⁸

Sugirtharajah polemically rejects the notion of a division of labour 'between biblical scholarship and theological enterprise'; 'this is the original sin of the historical-critical method'. The 'hermeneutical gap' between the biblical milieu and the present day is, he claims, a problem created by the historical-critical method.⁹ Ironically, Sugirtharajah here actually agrees with many such scholars who are fiercely criticized by him for individualizing the message, notably Bultmann. It is simply not true that "objectivity", "impartiality" and "academic detachment" have been 'the sacred words in the lexicon of Euro-American interpreters',¹⁰ for different interpreters have had different 'lexicons'.

Schüssler Fiorenza also turns herself against the 'prevailing "division of labour"', according to which exegesis elaborates what the text meant, while proclamation articulates what it means today.¹¹ It is interesting that she does this as 'Krisler Stendahl Professor of Divinity' at Harvard. For it was, of course, Stendahl who introduced the meant/means – terminology in his passionate plea for a two-stage strategy of interpretation.¹²

If this dichotomy be the original sin of the historical method, then I must plead the chief of sinners, having written a programmatic defence of that approach.¹³ I maintain, however, that a rather different assessment is called for. The proponent of division of labour should be recognized as a friend, rather than enemy, of contextual theology. Stendahl's intention, when he wished to distinguish 'what it meant' from 'what it means', should be recalled: where the stages 'become intermingled', he wrote, 'there is little hope for the Bible to exert the maximum of influence on theology, church life, and culture'.¹⁴ It is fair to say that Stendahl's hermeneutical concern is not far from that of 'liberationist' exegetes. This should give one pause before a wholesale condemnation of the interpretative strategy presented by him.

Exegesis of Revelation as a Test Case

Fiorenza's reading of Revelation can serve as a test case for sophisticated 'liberating exegesis'. Revelation is very popular 'with

⁸ In *Voices*, 363.

⁹ In *Voices*, 436; 'Asian Readers', 63–4. Rowland and Corner likewise complain that 'our historical preoccupations have left us with the feeling that the biblical world we have constructed is alien to us', *Liberating exegesis*, 35.

¹⁰ Thus Sugirtharajah, in *Voices*, 438. Rowland and Corner, *Liberating exegesis*, 69–74, rightly contend that liberation theology is 'a completion rather than a rebuttal of Bultmannian hermeneutics' (72).

¹¹ Fiorenza, *Revelation*, 1.

¹² K. Stendahl, 'Biblical theology: a program', in *Meanings: the Bible as document and as guide* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984), 11–44. (First published as 'Biblical theology, contemporary' in *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, 1 (1962)).

¹³ H. Räisänen, *Beyond New Testament theology* (London: SCM Press, 1990).

¹⁴ Stendahl, 'Biblical theology', 21.

peasants and the poor', 'because it speaks in graphic terms about the kinds of conflicts which are so real to the poor and oppressed'. Rowland and Corner count it to what could be called the 'canon within the canon' of liberation exegesis.¹⁵

Fiorenza rejects 'detached value-neutrality'; in making sense of a text, one 'inevitably privileges' some of its elements and neglects others.¹⁶ In her 'liberationist reading of Revelation's rhetoric', Fiorenza intentionally 'subordinates the book's depiction of cosmic destruction and holy war to its desire for justice'. She chooses to privilege those features that aim at moving the audience to struggle for God's new world. A reading which stresses the outcries for revenge would lead to a quite different perception; such a reading is therefore rejected. Interpretations which attributed the destruction of the world to God are dangerous in our time (I agree!); in contrast, liberationist interpretation underscores that 'John does not call for the destruction of the earth'.¹⁷

According to Fiorenza, different interpretations 'must be assessed in the terms of the theo-ethical values and visions they engender in their sociopolitical contexts of reading'.¹⁸ This makes usefulness the decisive criterion for interpretation, even for historical interpretation.

For Fiorenza, Revelation's world of vision is not sectarian but 'cosmopolitan'.¹⁹ Its ultimate goal is 'the liberation of all humanity' from oppressive and destructive powers.²⁰ Fiorenza believes that the salvation envisioned does not belong to Christians alone. But it is daring to suggest, among other things, that the multitude of those who stand before God, 'having washed their robes in the blood of the Lamb' (Rev. 7:9–17), could consist of all those, Christian or non-Christian, who have suffered violence.²¹ The liberationist reading requires a very particular exegesis of a number of passages.²²

Fiorenza can appeal to Rev. 18:24 which she takes as the key to the whole series of judgements: Rome is destroyed not just because it has persecuted Christians but also because 'in her was found the blood of all who have been slain on earth'.²³ But it is very questionable whether the total picture in Revelation supports the contention that its 'outcries for judgment and justice' (6:9, 15:4,

¹⁵ Rowland and Corner, *Liberating exegesis*, 87.

¹⁶ Fiorenza, *Revelation*, 117.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 122.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 126.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 122.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 79–80.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 68.

²² Cf. Fiorenza's exegesis of 11:13, 15:3–4 and 21:17–21 (*Revelation*, 79, 91–2, 112).

²³ *Revelation*, 95.

18:20) 'rise up not only on behalf of Christians but also on behalf of the whole earth'.²⁴ How would this fit with the thoroughgoing use of the expression 'the dwellers on the earth' as a disparaging phrase in Revelation? The souls of the martyrs cry out, 'How long before you will . . . avenge our blood on those who dwell upon the earth?' (6:10) 'All dwellers on earth' will worship the Beast (13:8,12,14). They are those whose names have not been written in the book of life (13:8; 17:8).²⁵ The nations are attracted to the Beast and have voluntarily 'given over their royal power' to him (17:17); their kings have willingly fornicated with the harlot Rome.

John's animosity can hardly be explained simply on the basis of the situation of the oppressed. He thirsts for vengeance on all 'dwellers on earth' (6:10), for slaves no less than for kings and generals (6:15). All non-Christians seem demonized. John expects that eventually those who keep their faith intact will receive 'power over the Gentiles' and 'rule them with an iron rod' (2:26).

Scholarly literature is full of assertions that Revelation was composed during a time of severe persecution. It is this picture which makes the book resonate so well with the experiences of oppressed people today of "death squads" and the "disappeared".²⁶ Recently, however, several scholars have pointed out that there is really no evidence for a widespread persecution during Domitian.²⁷ Even John knows only one martyr (Antipas of Pergamum, 2:13). This seems an individual case; executions were not the rule.²⁸ Some disturbances had taken place, but on the whole, as John Sweet notes, 'Revelation was written at a time of comparative peace for the Christians'.²⁹ Leonard Thompson concludes that 'the attempt to link the Book of Revelation with upheaval and crisis is wrongheaded'.³⁰

Fiorenza does not deny any of this. Her answer is that John's interpretation of the situation was not shared by everyone, John's perception is that of the suffering majority.³¹ It was 'only the provincial elite and the Italian immigrants' who were 'reaping the

²⁴ Ibid., 119–20.

²⁵ Cf. also 8:13, 11:10, 17:2.

²⁶ Cf. Fiorenza, *Revelation*, 11.

²⁷ Cf. A.Y. Collins, 'Persecution and vengeance in the Book of Revelation', in *Apocalypticism in the Mediterranean world and the Near East*, ed. D. Hellholm (Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr, 1989), 746; J. Ulrichsen, *Das eschatologische Zeitschema der Offenbarung des Johannes* (Oslo, 1988), 44–7 (with references); H.-J. Klauck, 'Das Sendschreiben nach Pergamon und der Kaiserkult in der Johannesoffenbarung', *Biblica* 73 (1992), 153–6, 160–4.

²⁸ Klauck, 'Sendschreiben', 163–4.

²⁹ J. Sweet, *Revelation* (London: SCM Press, 1979), 27.

³⁰ *Revelation: apocalypse and Empire* (Oxford: O.U.P., 1990), 197. He shows that the portrait of Domitian in standard post-Domitianic sources (Pliny, Tacitus, Suetonius) cannot be trusted, for it 'does not square with literary, epigraphic, numismatic and prosopographical evidence from the Domitianic period' (171).

³¹ Fiorenza, *Revelation*, 125–7.

wealth of the empire's prosperity'.³² Most people 'were suffering from the widening gap between rich and poor'. If Revelation stresses the exploitation and oppression perpetrated by Rome's imperialist power, then it expresses an assessment that was not shared even by all Christians.³³

Actually, according to Fiorenza, John belongs to 'a cognitive minority within the Christian community of Asia'.³⁴ What the outlook of the majority of Christians was can be studied in the Pastoral letters, 1 Peter or Luke-Acts where a peaceful *modus vivendi* with the pagan environment, including state authorities, is set up as an ideal. Obviously the opponents fiercely attacked by John, the 'Nicolaitans' and the group around the prophetess 'Jezebel', shared this attitude of the Christian majority, though they seem to have gone further than most in not shying away from eating sacrificial meat at social meals.³⁵

However, the correct observation that John belongs to a 'cognitive minority' among Christians renders the overall picture drawn by Fiorenza quite incoherent. For how can one who is in the minority among Christians side 'with the poor and oppressed majority' of people in the Roman empire?³⁶ Are we to conclude that the majority of Asian Christians belonged to the small privileged elite? The attempt to make John a cosmopolitan spokesman for the vast majority of people is doomed to fail.

Contrary to Fiorenza, it does seem helpful to distinguish between the historical meaning of the texts and their potential for contemporary application. Historically, John may well attribute the destruction of the world to God. The interpreter has to face this; the dangers of such a vision in today's world are to be exposed, the vision has to be critically assessed and transformed. Fiorenza does something like this on another occasion in her book, in dealing with John's 'militarist-patriarchal' God-language; this, she insists, must be changed!³⁷ But why not, then, go all the way and admit that there are other points too where changes are necessary, if the texts are to be applied to-day: visions of vengeance and cosmic destruction, expressions of narrow-mindedness and resentment (for example). These features can be suppressed in responsible applications, but they should not be removed from an historical reconstruction of Revelation's thought world. It should be admitted that John's thirst for vindication took forms which we had better avoid, while joining the struggle for justice.

³² Ibid., 100.

³³ Ibid., 127.

³⁴ Ibid., 138.

³⁵ Cf. H. Räisänen, 'The Nicolaitans: Apoc. 2; Acta 6', in *Aufstieg und Niedergang der römischen Welt II*, 26, part 2 (1995), 1602-44.

³⁶ Fiorenza, *Revelation*, 100.

³⁷ Ibid., 123-4.

Interestingly, there is a palpable tension between Fiorenza's liberationist and feminist concerns. She notes that 'Jezebel' of Thyatira is the first Christian woman who has fallen victim to 'vilifying intra-Christian rhetoric',³⁸ and yet her idealization of John's perspective prevents her from fully rehabilitating this remarkable woman leader.

Fiorenza fully recognizes that John represses other views 'by vilifying their advocates and by demonizing them'. 'Revelation's rhetoric thus shares in a potentially dangerous feature of early Christian rhetoric that cultivates a highly polemical stance towards outsiders and dissenters and thereby establishes Christian identity over against "the other"'. Interpreters reinscribe this rhetorical gesture of . . . 'repression when they characterize John's opponents as gnostic heretics or unfaithful Jews'.³⁹ What Fiorenza fails to see is that similar demonizing takes place in John's attacks on the 'dwellers on earth'; this gesture of vituperation is reaffirmed whenever their religious practice is characterized as 'idolatry'. This brings us to the issue of inter-faith harmony.

Dialogue of Religions and the Bible

Recall the following sentence in Sugirtharajah's critique of the inadequacy of Western exegesis: 'The primary concern of an interpreter lies not only in transforming social inequalities . . . but also in bringing racial and religious harmony among peoples of different faiths'.⁴⁰ The problem is that it is very hard to find any of this religious harmony in the Bible which is rather militant with regard to other faiths.

In the same volume another Asian theologian, Stanley J. Samartha, makes a strong plea for inter-faith dialogue. He, however, criticizes attempts to establish a direct correspondence between our situation and those of biblical writers speaking of other religions. Such attempts forget the gap between past and present.⁴¹ This criticism is interesting, for it runs counter to Sugirtharajah's claim that the assumption of such a gap is the original sin of historical method.⁴² Here it is a Third World theologian who points out the gap and in effect relativizes the biblical message which seems, on this point, to be based on too limited experience. 'Is the limited and narrow experience of Israel with the surrounding nations, for example, or just one sermon by Paul to the Athenians, sufficient ground to pass heavily negative

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 134.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 132.

⁴⁰ In *Voices*, 363 (above, note 8).

⁴¹ 'The Asian context: sources and trends', in *Voices*, 43.

⁴² In *Voices*, 436; cf. above, note 9.

theological judgments on neighbours of other faiths in Asia today?’⁴³

Here it would seem quite helpful to distinguish between exegesis and contemporary dialogue.⁴⁴ A critical attitude to the biblical record is demanded on the level of application, if one engages in earnest inter-faith dialogue which seems a moral necessity in our global situation.

Historical study shows that the biblical authors regarded their own faith as the only true one; other alternatives amounted to idolatry. It is just the unattainable but nevertheless real ideal of fairness and (relative) objectivity which may help a scholar to do greater justice to a foreign tradition.

Contrary to Fiorenza’s ‘cosmopolitan’ reading, Revelation represents an extreme version of the biblical intolerance toward the ‘idolaters’, the ‘dwellers on earth’ – including the pagan next-door neighbours of the Christians. Wilfred Cantwell Smith notes, in the context of present-day dialogue, that ‘the distorted and distorting interpretation of the place of forms and images in human religious life, and specifically the forms and images of other communities than one’s own, is integral to both the Jewish and the Christian religious traditions, and has done untold damage on the human scene through the centuries’.⁴⁵ People do not worship images; they worship deities represented through images.

Thompson shows that, in John’s Asia Minor, ‘opposition to Christianity came primarily from local people, not from the imperial machinery’.⁴⁶ It was not the Roman authorities who were mainly interested in searching out Christians, but the local pagan population; the authorities only became active after a denunciation from their side. ‘The Pliny correspondence confirms that the imperial cult was not a central issue in either official or unofficial attitudes toward Christians’.⁴⁷ Even the sacrifices in connection with

⁴³ In *Voices*, 43.

⁴⁴ In her contribution to *Voices*, the Chinese theologian Kwok Pui Lan appropriately aims at renewing hermeneutics rather than exegesis. Biblical interpretation requires ‘dialogical imagination’: ‘we have to imagine how the biblical tradition which was formulated in another time and culture can address our burning questions today . . . we have to critically judge both the text and the experience underlying it’. (‘Discovering the Bible in the non-biblical world’, 304–5). Kwok Pui Lan also speaks of ‘liberating the Bible’ from the chains of being the truth (309–13). ‘We should be able to see that the whole biblical text represents one form of human construction to talk about God . . . once we liberate ourselves from viewing the biblical text as sacred, we can then feel free to test and reappropriate it in other contexts’ (310). The Bible in itself cannot provide us with norms; ‘we must claim back the power to look at the Bible with our own eyes’ (311). This approach seems readily compatible with the methodological demand of a division of labour between exegesis and hermeneutics.

⁴⁵ ‘Idolatry in comparative perspective’, in *The myth of Christian uniqueness*, eds J. Hick and P.F. Knitter (London: SCM Press, 1987), 55.

⁴⁶ Thompson, *Revelation*, 130.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 131.

imperial images were, like most sacrifices related to the emperor, 'for the most part made on behalf of the image of the emperor, not to it'.⁴⁸ The problem was that Christians 'could not sacrifice to any god on behalf of the emperor. That put Christians on a collision course with local religious activity'.⁴⁹

Thompson's description of John and of John's opponents, the Nicolaitans, is apt: on one hand we have 'a Christian community that sets up high boundaries between itself and the rest of the world and that holds to a concomitant "separatist" definition of the church', seeing 'both Judaism and Greco-Roman society as demonic'; on the other hand there is 'a Christian community that is less concerned with sharp boundaries and exclusive self-definition and seems to have little conflict with either Judaism or Greco-Roman urban institutions'.⁵⁰

No doubt the stance of the Nicolaitans who did not shun social contacts which involved eating sacrificial meat would make a better basis for inter-religious dialogue than John's standpoint. John's radicalism, on the other hand, remains a critical corrective to bourgeois Christianity; John's visions of Babylon and of the Beast are excellent weapons in resisting oppressive regimes today. But the Roman regime should not be too quickly identified with modern dictatorships. Its vices and virtues should be assessed on their own, apart from modern issues on one hand and from John's partisan perspective on the other, for John's attitude differs markedly from other contemporary Christian attitudes to the very same state.

One additional point. In trying to demonstrate the liberating character of Jesus's mission, Third World theologians constantly fall into the old trap of Christian triumphalism (which they in principle abhor): they paint the Jewish society of Jesus's time in very dark colours as the oppressive 'background' against which the liberating message shines forth. To mention just one example, Leonardo Boff writes that in Jesus's environment 'the real oppression did not consist in the presence of an alien, pagan power. The real oppression lay in a legalistic interpretation of religion and the will of God. In post-exilic Judaism careful cultivation of the law became the very essence of Jewish life . . . It degenerated into a terrible and impossible form of bondage proclaimed in God's name'.⁵¹

⁴⁸ Ibid., 163, with reference to S.R.F. Price.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 131.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 125.

⁵¹ Quoted by J.K. Riches, 'Biblical theology and the pressing concerns of the Church', in *The kingdom of God and human society*, ed. R. Barbour (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1993), 257. Cf. Sugirtharajah in *Voices*, 358; J.L. Segundo, *The historical Jesus of the Synoptics* (London: Orbis, 1985), 99 and elsewhere.

The historical consequences of this tradition of interpretation should by now ring a warning bell.

Danger of False 'Biblicism'

It is my contention that a division of labour between exegesis and application actually facilitates the task of contextual theology. Then why is it so strongly opposed? In part it is surely a question of a justified protest against Western hegemony which has reached even into the realm of theology. The protest seems somewhat misguided, though, since Sugirtharajah actually shares the point of view of many Europeans criticized by him (such as Bultmann or Käsemann).

I can think of another possible motive which is more problematic. Could it be that in the background lurks the desire to back one's own stance with the authority of 'the Bible', a method with which historical Christianity is thoroughly familiar? Those in power have always stressed that 'the Bible' demands obedience and a stable order. There is a measure of truth in this claim; it is supported by large parts of the Bible. Liberation theology turns the claim upside down: 'the Bible' is on the side of the poor and oppressed. It is easy to prefer this latter position for moral reasons, but methodologically both are based on partial truths – which is more than can be said in support of the claim that the Bible advocates inter-faith harmony.

Put simply, the issue is this: can we admit that we have to make our own decisions with criteria external to the Bible? We have to opt for some trends in the Bible against others; sometimes we have to opt for justice and love against the whole biblical tradition. It is only on some such basis that credible theologies can be built today. In this work historical-critical exegesis could be an ally, as long as the expectations are realistic. By definition, exegesis cannot liberate the world any more than can church history ('Liberating Church History' would sound a bit odd, wouldn't it?). Instead, the texts can be used by way of reinterpretation and application in the service of liberating processes (alas, they can be used for other purposes too).

Exegesis Versus Application

Recently Francis Watson has made a fresh attempt to 'liberate the reader' to an exegetical practice with an open 'orientation towards the political-theological task'. Discussing the parable of the sheep and the goats (Matt. 25:31–46) he records a striking difference between the treatment of this text in liberation theology and in historical exegesis. Liberation theology finds in the text the demand of universal love of one's neighbour; the 'least brothers' of Jesus denote any poor and oppressed people in the world. Historical exegesis tends to identify these least brothers with

Christian missionaries, whereby the text ‘becomes theologically worthless’.⁵²

Watson writes, ‘In its self-appointed role as historical conscience⁵³ exegesis informs theology that the real meaning of the parable . . . is more or less the opposite of what it had supposed: the allegedly universal criterion turns out to be thoroughly particularist’.⁵⁴ Incidentally, the particularist reading is not an invention of historical critics. It has always predominated in the history of interpretation; only in the twentieth century has the universal interpretation of the brothers become common.⁵⁵

More to the point, it is not my view that ‘original’ meaning equals ‘real’ meaning. I do not think that exegetes should act as new popes who determine which application is right and which is wrong. Watson is quite correct in stating that in so far as the historical (particularist) reading attempts to exclude the theological (universalist) one ‘by representing itself as what the text “really” means, it oversteps the limits of its own competence’.⁵⁶

Watson tries to ‘practise the theological and the exegetical tasks simultaneously’.⁵⁷ He makes ‘eclectic use of a number of the hermeneutical and exegetical strategies currently available’;⁵⁸ for instance he stresses the freedom ‘to actualize certain potential connections and not others, the freedom to emphasize and de-emphasize in accordance with one’s own criteria of relevance’,⁵⁹ i.e. with ethical criteria⁶⁰ – a procedure which reminds one of Fiorenza’s privileging certain features in the texts at the cost of others.⁶¹ But Watson properly characterizes this task as ‘a theological appropriation of a text’.⁶² I have no quarrel with this, as long as the meaning so discovered is not called ‘the real’ meaning of the text (and from this Watson refrains). While it is very hard to tell exactly when an application becomes artificial, I would certainly not regard a ‘universalist’ interpretation of the ‘least brothers’ in Matthew 25 as ‘overly strained’ – especially as the case for a ‘restricted’ reading is not wholly conclusive on the historical level either.⁶³

⁵² F. Watson, ‘Liberating the reader: a theological-exegetical study of the parable of the sheep and goats (Matt. 25: 31–46)’, in *The open text*, ed. F. Watson (London: SCM Press, 1993), 63–4.

⁵³ A phrase used by myself in *Beyond*, 137.

⁵⁴ Watson, ‘Liberating the reader’, 65.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 81, n. 10 with reference to S.W. Gray.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 66.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 65.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 79.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 70.

⁶⁰ Cf. *ibid.*, 80: ‘Our increasing sense of the multiplicity of interpretative possibilities must be tempered by a willingness to articulate ethically defensible interpretative goals’.

⁶¹ See above, notes 16 and 17.

⁶² Watson, ‘Liberating the reader’, 67.

⁶³ Watson can here rightly appeal to ‘what appears to be the literal sense of the parable’ (over against an authorial intention which ‘remains a hypothetical entity insufficiently externalized in the actual wording of the text’): *ibid.*, 65.

Watson, however, is using the text for a purpose (a very worthwhile purpose for that matter), not just trying to understand it. These are, I insist, two different tasks, both legitimate. Historical exegesis employs the texts as guides to lost worlds. As Wayne Meeks puts it, it belongs to the job of an historian 'to try to protect the integrity of the past, and that often has the effect of emphasizing its strangeness'.⁶⁴ It would be helpful to distinguish between two different questions which demand different kinds of answers and presuppose different needs or interests in the audiences. First, there is the intellectual question 'how can we understand ancient people and their world through these texts?' and secondly, the very practical question 'how can we help modern people with the aid of these texts?'

Klaus Berger belongs to those who operate on two separate levels. His recent *Theologieggeschichte des Urchristentums*⁶⁵ contains no applications. He does, however, pay great attention to application in his book on hermeneutics. The main question here is not how to make sense of certain texts but rather: given the human plight, what help could we possibly get from biblical texts by selecting and reinterpreting them in a particular context?⁶⁶ This approach fits perfectly with a contextual Third World theology.

An impressive early example of keeping the different tasks apart was provided by Johannes Weiss. He realized that the Kingdom of God as proclaimed by Jesus (a supernatural, though earthly future reality) was quite different from the 'Kingdom' as interpreted by Albrecht Ritschl (a community of morally acting people). Still, he found the notion as used by Ritschlians theologically helpful.⁶⁷ The point is that he knew what he was doing in using the concept (we might say: the symbol) in a different sense than it had been used in the beginning. This is what I mean by 'historical conscience':⁶⁸ you are free to reinterpret, but you should know and acknowledge what you are doing.

Study of religion must be distinguished from the acting out of religion. Historical biblical scholarship may be able to outline a (very sketchy) picture of 'how it all began'. Having an idea of where we come from may aid us in orienting ourselves to where we are now, but the yield is bound to be indirect.

We must take the responsibility for our choices in interpreting and using the Bible. The inevitable subjectivism may be reduced by

⁶⁴ W.A. Meeks, *The origins of Christian morality: the first two centuries* (New Haven: Yale U.P., 1993), 211.

⁶⁵ *Theologieggeschichte des Urchristentums: Theologie des Neuen Testaments* (Tübingen, 1994).

⁶⁶ K. Berger, *Hermeneutik des Neuen Testaments*, (Gütersloh, 1988), 18–25.

⁶⁷ J. Weiss, *Jesus's proclamation of the Kingdom of God* (Philadelphia, 1971), 57–60, 131–6.

⁶⁸ Cf. above, note 53.

paying attention to the rule that a tree will be known by its fruits. Here Fiorenza is right: 'If the Bible has become a classic of Western culture because of its normativity, then the responsibility of the biblical scholar cannot be restricted to giving readers clear access to the original intentions of the biblical writers. It must also include the elucidation of the ethical consequences and political functions of biblical texts . . .'⁶⁹

It is underscored by liberation theologians that 'life takes first place'; 'experience of life' is the 'primary text'.⁷⁰ This comes quite close to my own vision of the formation of the early Christian thought world in a process in which traditions were time and again interpreted in the light of new experiences, mostly social experiences, and vice versa: experiences were interpreted in the light of traditions.⁷¹ It is a logical continuation of this process if theologians engage in conscious reinterpretation of their traditions in the light of their experience.⁷² Juan Luis Segundo is right in making the provocative suggestion that 'we must keep . . . writing gospels'.⁷³ There should be no pressure to agree with this or that biblical strand; one should feel free to decide, for moral reasons (as in the case of inter-faith dialogue) even against all biblical options, if need be. In the words of liberation theologian Clodovis Boff, what biblical study can offer might be 'something like orientations, models, types, directives, principles, inspirations', 'not a what, but a how – a manner, a style, a spirit'.⁷⁴

The contribution of historical study to theology might well consist in suggesting this model of theology as a process of reinterpretation. Put differently, exegesis might serve to liberate readers and interpreters from false expectations concerning the Bible. This is the twist that I would like to give the slogan 'liberating exegesis'.

⁶⁹ Fiorenza, *Revelation*, 4.

⁷⁰ Rowland and Corner, *Liberating exegesis*, 41 (quoting C. Mesters), 45.

⁷¹ Räisänen, *Beyond*, 122–6.

⁷² Cf. J.L. Houlden, *Connections: the integration of theology and faith* (London: SCM Press, 1986), 90: 'Is there not then freedom for other Christians, receiving the impact of Jesus in their own time and place, to form their own identity by seeing past and future, and indeed the wider present, in terms drawn naturally from present circumstances?'

⁷³ Segundo, *Historical Jesus*, 7.

⁷⁴ 'Hermeneutics: constitution of theological pertinency', in *Voices*, 30.