INTRODUCTION

DOING JUSTICE: The Practical and Critical Interpretation of Scripture

THE EXEGESIS of ancient Israel’s Scriptures is surely one of the strangest activities in which Christians and religiously committed Jews regularly engage. It is strange that thoughtful people in sizable numbers would pay close, sustained attention to writings from a distant millennium and culture. It is even more strange that many are open to receiving these ancient and alien texts as having direct bearing on their own lives—that is, to hearing and reading them as Scripture. Through my own work of studying and teaching Hebrew Bible/Old Testament, I have witnessed this phenomenon over and over again in many places, with diverse companions and audiences. Yet I still see it as a miracle, or at least a profound mystery. Experiencing ancient Israelite texts as a source of fresh insight and inspiration for our own lives is not something that can be mandated or guaranteed; it is beyond the control of anyone present, especially the teacher or preacher. Nonetheless, it is necessary for the ongoing life of church and synagogue, whose identities—and even existence as communities with a common story and language—depend on the recurrent experience of hearing these texts as speaking of and to contemporary lives. And while that experience is not predictable, it is contingent on the regular practice of exegesis by members of the communities of faith, generation to generation.

This volume seeks to model the sustained practice of contemporary theological exegesis. It is intended for use by both Jews and Christians, those who teach and study in academic and congregational settings, including those whose exegetical work is done chiefly in the pulpit. It is a work of practical theology—which is to say, it reflects my understanding that the Bible itself is unremitting in its practicality and honesty about human situations and dispositions, and unswerving in its attention to how experience of God defines and shapes our existence. The essays here demonstrate close readings of almost all the books of the Hebrew Bible, highlighting important passages in each. This approach derives from my further understanding that each book makes a distinctive contribution to the canon as it draws upon, complements, or challenges the perspectives of other parts of Scripture. Moreover, the value of the scriptural canon as a guide for those who regard it as authoritative—a term to which my own (Anglican) tradition does not give sharp definition—resides largely in the different and often divergent perspectives represented in the individual books, and even within a single book.

This is also a work of critical biblical interpretation for contemporary readers. Before the end of the nineteenth century, it would have been a rare biblical interpreter who bothered to say that what he or (in too few cases) she was doing was practical or theological. This would simply have been assumed, as the core reason for reading the Bible at all, or writing anything about it. During the last century, however, practical theology and critical biblical interpretation were pursued largely as separate operations, with some notable exceptions. Through several generations of exclusive focus on historical-critical methods, scholars aimed to identify the one (presumably) correct meaning of a given text, as that might be determined historically and “scientifically.” That work relied upon a vast amount of technical information and skill, but too rarely did the scholarly guild encourage its members to consider or demonstrate how the clarification of ancient contexts and meanings might benefit contemporary communities of faith. Further, theological questions of the sort raised by premodern interpreters played little or (often) no role in the work of professional biblical scholars. Thus, biblical interpretation gradually became an in-house enterprise, neither well understood by, nor of much interest to, those outside—that is, the vast majority of believers, as well as scholars in other fields. It may also be the case that outsiders too easily relinquished to “experts” the work of careful textual interpretation. Indeed, this happened in some circles long before the advent of historical criticism and may well have prepared the way for its nearly exclusive dominance. (In my own denominational and liturgical tradition, a sharp decline in exegetical preaching and exegetically grounded theology might be traced back to the middle of the seventeenth century!)1 When I began theological study in the last quarter of the twentieth century, it remained a commonplace among both clergy and my fellow seminarians that “exegetical sermons don’t work.” Exegesis was, for most, a classroom exercise that was abandoned upon graduation from seminary.

Yet in those same years, there began new developments in biblical studies that have served to counter both the narrowness of biblical scholarship and the lack of serious exegetical interest outside the academy. Now many biblical scholars and preachers are following the strong lead of such scholars as Robert Alter, Walter Brueggemann, Brevard Childs, Everett Fox, Tikva Frymer-Kensky, James Kugel, Jon Levenson, Carol Meyers, Jacob Milgrom, Phyllis Trible, and Renita Weems, who in various ways have pioneered readings of the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament that are literarily, linguistically, and culturally sensitive, exegetically rigorous, socially responsible, and therefore theologically fruitful. Some of them have helped integrate the history of interpretation into biblical scholarship, so that readers can benefit from the insights of Jews and Christians over the centuries. Moreover, we now have many strong examples of contemporary exegetical sermons, and the tradition of theologically rich commentary writing has been revived. The result of all this activity is a blurring of the disciplinary boundaries that for too long isolated interpreters working in different modes—translators from theologians from historical theologians from biblical scholars from preachers from teachers in congregational settings.

Far from leading biblical interpretation in an uncritical direction, such integrative work has opened up a conversation that is more fully critical, in biblical studies and beyond. A wide view of what constitutes critical interpretation of literary works, scriptural and otherwise, suggests that as readers we must do justice in two crucial ways. First, we must do justice to texts as complex, historically situated artifacts that have certain identifiable characteristics and a finite (though often broad and flexible) range of verifiable meanings. Second, we must do justice to other readers with whom we share texts, seeking to engage them in reasoned, often deeply argued conversations about particular texts and their possible meanings. In my own work of interpretation, the readers with whom I share texts include knowledgeable and deft interpreters, Jews and Christians, secularists and traditionalists of various kinds, my contemporaries as well as those who have preceded me through many generations. In the classroom, I now work most often with students of Christian theology in the North American South; I work regularly also with East African Christians. Through many years, I have frequently worked with teaching colleagues and study partners who are observant Jews and devout Muslims. All of them have shaped my reading habits and theological understandings.

Critical interpretation entails recognizing that any text worth studying will and should be read from different angles, with quite different results. The possibility and legitimacy of multiple meanings is not a postmodern invention; most premodern readers assumed this to be the case.2 Taking that multiplicity seriously confers on readers an obligation not simply to assert the aptness of a given interpretation but also to demonstrate why it is plausible—and, potentially, how it may be fruitful for or harmful to particular readers at a particular time. In sum, critical interpretation essentially demonstrates respect for the complexity of the text, for reasoned argumentation, and for other readers, including those who have preceded and will follow us.

The conscientious practice of critical interpretation involves at least these five movements:

1. Giving clear expression to the presuppositions and prior concerns with which the interpreter comes to the text. For biblical interpretation, these include the challenges—cultural, political, social—faced by the interpreter’s own faith community, as well as those of her neighbors. They include also the interpreter’s theological understandings, which derive in part from how her faith tradition has read biblical texts, including the one at hand, through centuries and millennia.

2. Identifying the literary data—features of a given text, as well as of other texts with which it might be compared—that are most pertinent for interpretation in the present context. It is also important to consider the interpretations of other readers, past and present, and their judgments about what kinds of evidence are most pertinent.

3. Identifying social and historical factors that may lie in the background of the text’s composition, while acknowledging that in many or most cases this goes beyond the literary evidence and thus involves speculation and historical reconstruction.

4. Offering a reasoned account of how the interpreter chooses to draw inferences and conclusions on the basis of the literary and historical data. This is the work of hermeneutics, the movement from data to interpretation. As noted above (#1), it entails the exercise of certain presuppositions and commitments, both philosophical and (within faith communities) theological. Interpreters should stand ready to articulate these presuppositions and commitments to interlocutors who may not understand, share, or value them, to acknowledge the choices made on the basis of them, and to acknowledge further that they are choices.

5. Remaining open to continual revision as the interpreter’s own further work, challenges from others, and the changing landscape of contemporary concerns (#1 above) disclose new problems and insights.

As this list implies, the critical interpretation of texts is provisional, open-ended, collaborative work. This may be especially true with respect to the Bible, because its primary subject is the nature of human experience in relation to God. Thus, it requires that interpreters reckon with the highest degree of human complexity, as represented through texts that are themselves complex in many and various ways. Human experience is rarely unique, but it comes afresh to each individual and generation. Therefore, readers must continually strive to bring the biblical text to bear on new, present situations; we must test the truth of the text under the pressure of human persons and biblical texts means speaking coherently about particular literary characteristics—poetic power, serious humor, emotional intensity, spiritual depth—that cannot be assessed fully in analytic terms. Such critical work is slow, difficult, and always to some extent uncertain. It cannot be done in splendid isolation from readers whose knowledge or experience differs from one’s own, including readers from earlier generations, other social contexts, other continents, or other traditions of interpretation. Theological exegesis is an art, and therefore both the style and the motivation of its practice are deeply personal though not private matters. Several stylistic features of my own approach in this study should be noted at the outset. First, this volume treats questions that in my judgment belong to the first level of graduate theological study of the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament. Many or most of the matters dealt with here have come to my attention through some thirty-five years of teaching students, most of them Christians, pursuing their first degrees in theology. If their questions are often basic, that is instructive for me, especially when they identify “the basics” in terms I had not previously considered. I continue to learn more from revisiting the questions asked by my first-year seminary students than from any other aspect of my teaching.

Second, my focus throughout is on the reading of each biblical book as a literary whole, a unified theological statement. This approach reflects a development that emerged in North American biblical scholarship in the last decades of the twentieth century. Most of the books were composed and shaped by multiple writers and editors and so have no single voice or point of view; nonetheless, each book evinces a high degree of polyphonic coherence. This focus on the book stands in some contrast to two tendencies common within biblical interpretation that can encourage oversimplification. At one extreme, interpreters may concentrate on a small unit—a verse or passage—because it seems to represent a point of view that they wish to endorse or oppose. However, as William Countryman observes, “fragments of texts are particularly vulnerable to victimization by the more powerful voices of the present”;3 this is the form of unjust reading known as proof-texting. At the other extreme, interpreters may seek to identify a single “grand narrative” that comprises every part of the Bible, as though it were possible or desirable to reduce the various tradition strands and perspectives to uniformity.4 A focus on books as complex literary wholes challenges the adequacy of such homogenization.

Third, while many of the following essays treat the entirety of single biblical books, there are exceptions. The books of Torah are treated at greater length, with two or three essays each, because learning to read them well is such an important part of reading the Bible altogether. By contrast, certain closely related books (e.g., Proverbs and Ecclesiastes) are treated together within one essay. The essays appear roughly according to the order of the Hebrew Bible: Torah, Former and Latter Prophets, and Writings. I occasionally depart from this order so as to highlight an intracanonical conversation between books (e.g., I treat Ruth following Judges, as it appears in the Protestant canon, reflecting the narrative connection drawn in Ruth 1:1). Likewise, I group within some chapters essays on certain books (e.g., Job and the Song of Songs) that might fruitfully be read together. Instead of treating every major unit of a book, in the style of a commentary, I generally aim to consider the major literary genres found within the book. Genres are indispensable guides to certain lines of thinking—the kinds of theo-logic—that are central to the Bible. In the case of a few books I have treated elsewhere, either recently or at considerable length (e.g., Jeremiah, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes), I write quite briefly here, with a focus on just one aspect of the book. For the sake of economy of presentation, I omit some of the twelve Minor Prophets or treat them briefly in conjunction with other books.

And fourth, because the canon is a conversation, it is important to hear afresh the distinctive voices and words of the various contributors. Therefore, I frequently cite the words of the text, almost always in my own translations. Through the years, many of my students have commented that what first awakened their interest in exegesis was hearing me do “live translation.” Properly understood, translation is the beginning of a good exegetical argument—and a dimension of interpretation of which many monolingual North Americans (especially) are entirely unaware. Each of the translations offered here should be seen as a proposal about some aspect of meaning.

I conclude with a note on my motivation for writing this book at all. What keeps me returning to the Bible with some measure of hope is a sense that it evokes a more spacious world, vastly more expansive than the sphere of reality with which we ordinarily reckon. In my own denominational tradition, that sense of spaciousness is intimated through the affirmation made at every service of ordination, where the prospective deacon, priest, or bishop acknowledges that “the Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments . . . contain all things necessary to salvation.”5 That is a huge claim, which should prompt the question, How are we to think about the nature of the Scriptures in relation to “salvation”?

The Hebrew words most commonly rendered as “salvation” are yeshu’ah and teshu’ah, from a verbal root with a core meaning of “be capacious” or “make spacious.” Thus, the dynamic of salvation might be viewed as giving breadth for existence6—almost always human existence, although at least once, God is said to “save” animals alongside humans (Ps 36:7 Heb.; 36:6 Eng.). The image of salvation as spaciousness stands in contrast to the common noun for “distress,” tsar(ah), which derives from the root ts-r-r, “be restricted.” The state of salvation is thus the opposite of being “in straits,” in both senses of that English phrase. Taken together, these Hebrew antonyms suggest that, contrary to much popular religious wisdom, the “God-fearing” life is not a matter of walking the straight and narrow. Rather, the Scriptures invite us into a spacious world, into what Karl Barth famously called “the new world in the Bible [die neue Welt in der Bibel].”7 The main business of the Bible is to challenge our ordinary conceptions of how things “really” are—to call into question the necessity and even the reality of the limits we impose upon ourselves and others, and to show us that the cramped conditions of human existence are most often the result of misplaced fear or desire. But there is a kind of healthful desire that is the basis for reading Israel’s Scriptures well and that ultimately can draw us into a different mode of existence. I often begin lectures with these words of the torah student who composed the longest single poem in the Bible, expressing his desire to spend a lifetime in that new world:

Open my eyes that I may gaze on wonders from your teaching (torah).

I am a sojourner on earth; do not hide from me your commandments. (Ps 119:18–19)

Eagerness to be surprised by what Scripture reveals, and awareness of my human limitations, yet confidence that in poring over torah I will discover that my genuine needs are met—these may be the chief preconditions for the kind of living that yields good interpretation, as these words suggest:

I desire your salvation, YHWH,

and your teaching is my happy-occupation. (119:174)

Notes

1.See Ellen F. Davis, Imagination Shaped: Old Testament Preaching in the Anglican Tradition (Valley Forge, PA: Trinity Press International, 1995), 1–8.

2.See Ellen F. Davis, Wondrous Depth: Preaching the Old Testament (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2005), 63–84.

3.L. William Countryman, Interpreting the Truth: Changing the Paradigm of Biblical Studies (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 2003), 55.

4.For a critique of Kevin Vanhoozer’s identification of a biblical metanarrative, or “theodrama,” see Mark G. Brett, Political Trauma and Healing: Biblical Ethics for a Postcolonial World (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2016), 56–72.

5.The Book of Common Prayer of the Episcopal Church (1979), 513, 526, 538.

6.See Francis Brown, The Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1999; original, 1906), 446.

7.See Karl Barth, “The New World in the Bible” (1917), in The Word of God and Theology, trans. Amy Marga (London: T&T Clark, 2011), 15–29.