

Interpreting and Preaching the Gospel of John*

David L. Bartlett
Columbia Theological Seminary, USA
BartlettD@CTSnet.edu

Abstract

The method of interpretation affects the theological and homiletical conclusions of exegesis. With a view to preaching the Gospel of John, various exegetical methods are examined, some that stress the world behind the text, some the world in front of the text, and others the world we bring to the text. From the world of the text to the world we bring to it, the theological implications of each approach and for preaching the Gospel of John are important to consider.

I. Introduction

Since the middle of the twentieth century, the variety of strategies for interpreting the Bible has grown apace.¹ The confidence with which Krister Stendahl could write that the purpose of biblical theology was to say “what a text meant” and “what it now means” has been severely challenged, if not shattered.² In this article, I want to suggest that the scholarly method that we use to interpret a text affects the theological and homiletical conclusions we can draw from our exegesis. I will illustrate each method by attending to the work of one or more scholars. Because I most often think about theology by thinking about how to preach a text, I will suggest what kind of theological and homiletical implications each exegetical strategy might have.

To provide a template for discussion the various exegetical strategies, I will draw upon the work of Paul Ricoeur. Ricoeur has suggested that sometimes the way to read biblical texts is not to recreate the world

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¹ I am grateful to the students in the 2005 Exegesis of John course at Yale for their unwitting help in this paper, and to the members of the New Haven Theological Discussion Group for their witting help.

² Krister Stendahl, “Biblical Theology, Contemporary,” *IDB* 1:418-32.

behind the text but to interpret the world in front of the text, the world that the text makes between itself and its audience. In Ricoeur's words,

Ultimately, what I appropriate is a proposed world. The latter is not *behind* the text, as a hidden intention would be, but *in front of it*, as that which the work unfolds, discovers, reveals. Henceforth to understand is to *understand oneself in front of the text*. It is not a question of imposing on the text our finite capacity of understanding, but of exposing ourselves to the text. And receiving from it an enlarged self, which would be the proposed existence corresponding in the most suitable way to the world proposed.³

Borrowing from Ricoeur and expanding on his insight, I suggest that some exegetical methods stress the world behind the text, some the world in front of the text, and some the world we bring to the text.⁴

II. The World Behind the Text

The Text Behind Our Text: Source Criticism/Content Criticism

It will become painfully clear as this discussion progresses that I am a child of the twentieth century. When I began thinking about the New Testament as a student, I was almost immediately confronted with Rudolf Bultmann, and beneath the shadow of his throne I still dwell, insecure. We all know that he got a lot wrong, but in part that is because he had the courage and the intellect to try so much that some of it was bound to fall short. At least in the Anglo-American and European scholarly scene of the last half of the twentieth century much of our job was either to refine or to dispute his hypotheses.

When it comes to the Gospel of John, Bultmann made two major contributions that conveniently and probably not coincidentally reinforced each other. As a source critic, he tried to do for John what others had done for Matthew and Luke, namely to find the sources that underlay the final redaction of the Gospel. As a content critic, he tried to discover those themes that were central to John's theology—and to right Christian preaching—themes that could relativize and even critique

³ See Paul Ricoeur, "The Hermeneutical Function of Distanciation," in *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences* (ed. and trans. John B. Thompson; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 132-44. This passage is from p. 143. David Kelsey pointed out in conversation how closely this understanding of the function of interpretation corresponds to Bultmann's, but one can attend to the way a text works without necessarily making the hermeneutical move exclusively existential.

⁴ See David L. Bartlett, *Between the Bible and the Church: New Methods for Biblical Preaching* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1999).

other themes in this gospel. Nils Dahl provided the clearest account of this aspect of Bultmann's theological program.

Bultmann . . . pursues the kerygma that is grasped only in faith and the theological understanding that follows from it. Therefore, he must move from mere observation to putting questions to the texts: How do they understand the kerygma? What understanding of God, humankind, and the world does the kerygma provide? This constant questioning of the texts is not merely a hermeneutical means by which to establish what the Scriptures themselves say; the texts are also questioned as to how far the theology implicitly and explicitly present in them is a proper expression of the self-understanding of faith.⁵

In addition to Bultmann's theological concerns, he found good literary reasons for seeking sources behind the present Gospel of John. Chapters thirteen to seventeen of John's Gospel seemed to use, if not a different vocabulary, certainly a different style than chapters two to twelve. In the beginning was the prologue with its own integrity and odd asides; at the end was chapter 21, apparently anticlimactic, since something important came to a grand finale with John 20:31. The passion narrative looked structurally most like the other gospels and least like the rest of this gospel. And throughout were the famous aporias, odd seams in the text that looked as if a redactor had been at work.

Bultmann's solution was complicated. He posited a variety of sources brought together by a wise evangelist and then confused by an unreliable reactor, who not only added chapter twenty-one and messed up the order of the gospel, but also added unmistakable signs of ecclesiastical (read early catholic) redaction in the Eucharistic material of John 6:53-57 and the apocalyptic material of John 5:25-29.

Bultmann's hero was the evangelist, who wove together the true gospel, very nearly the True Gospel, and whose intentions could be inferred if we would just dig behind the ecclesiastical redactor's revisions, additions, and errors.⁶

⁵ Nils Dahl, "Rudolf Bultmann's *Theology of the New Testament*," in *Jesus the Christ* (ed. Donald H. Juel; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991), 189-90. For Bultmann's own discussion of content criticism, see *Theology of the New Testament* (2 vols.; trans. Kendrick Grobel; New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1955), 2:249-51.

⁶ An introduction to the source theory is found in Rudolf Bultmann, *The Gospel of John* (trans. G. W. Beasley-Murray, R. W. N. Hoare and J. K. Riches; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1971), 10-12, but the theory is worked out throughout the commentary. The clearest summary of the (theological) content of the Gospel as Bultmann understands it is found in Bultmann, *Theology*, 2:3-92.

Using the tools of source criticism, Bultmann was able to excavate a putative text whose main themes provided just the theology his content criticism had sought to find. In at least three ways the evangelist gave Bultmann the themes for his own theology. Methodologically, the evangelist demythologizes so that, for instance, apocalyptic eschatology is demythologized to become the ever-present possibility of the future, called “eternal life.” Ecclesiastically, a pure doctrine of the word is not diluted by sacramentalism. It is Christ himself, or his words, that are bread of life, not what believers eat at the Lord’s table. Philosophically, John provides a model for existential Christianity that stresses individual decision, openness to the future, and the quest for authentic existence.⁷ Hermeneutically, content criticism allows the critic to test the claims of any particular passage against the larger claims of the kerygma.

While there has been considerable criticism of the details of Bultmann’s source hypotheses, there has been remarkable consensus that the fourth gospel as we have it represents the end product of a complicated and perhaps not always smooth redactional process.

This raises a question for preaching and for theology. How far are we bound to base our theological claims and our homiletical entreaties on the canonical text of the fourth gospel, and how far are we free to build a theology or a sermon on a hypothetical precursor of the text we now have? Can we build a theology of the word on John 6, simply omitting the more Eucharistic elements of that complicated text? Can we preach on the presence of eschatology in John 11 without noting the more traditional eschatology of John 5:25-29?

When it comes to the other side of the Bultmannian project, the attempt to do content criticism, what can we say theologically and homiletically? We can confess that we all do it. We find in any text, including the Fourth Gospel, those themes that we claim are central to the theological enterprise or central to the faith we preach, or at least central to the sermon for that day. We often find an historical or literary or redactional central moment in that gospel and reconstruct John’s theology or our own in large measure on the basis of that decision. Exegesis is always a constructive as well as a descriptive task. Bultmann may have sinned more boldly than most of us in this respect, but sin we all do—sometimes with the result that grace abounds.⁸

⁷ Bultmann thought that the theology involved in part a Christianizing of earlier Gnostic texts, and did not think that its genealogy diminished its worth. His hypothesis of pre-Christian Redeemer Myth has not found as much evidential support as he might have hoped. See Bultmann, *Theology* 2:6; idem, *The Gospel of John*, 7-9.

⁸ For the best study of Bultmann as a resource for a theology of preaching, see James F. Kay, *Christus Praesens: A Reconsideration of Rudolf Bultmann’s Christol-*

The Community Behind the Text

I think I am not alone when I say that while Bultmann was the first scholar to reshape my thinking about the Fourth Gospel, J. Louis Martyn was the second. Like Bultmann, Martyn provides a theory of the development of the text.⁹ And, like Bultmann, Martyn centers his interpretation not so much on the final stage of the Gospel's redaction as on the earlier stage represented most clearly in the healing of the man born blind in chapter 9. Martyn's claim in his influential book *History and Theology in the Fourth Gospel* is that chapter 9 represents the central historical moment in the development of the Johannine community. The title of his book gives away what I think is his evident conviction that in this case, at least, historical centrality implies theological centrality as well. In his discussion of the healing of the beggar and John's use of that material, Martyn makes a central claim.

In what follows, therefore, we will have to keep constantly in mind that the text presents its witness on two levels: (1) It is a witness to an *einmalig* event during Jesus' earthly lifetime. Though we cannot a priori limit this witness entirely to vv. 1-7, it will be safe to assume the original healing story as its major locus. (2) The text is also a witness to Jesus' powerful presence in actual events experienced by the Johannine church.¹⁰

Therefore for Martyn to read the text of John 9 rightly is not only to read what is there in the text and certainly not just to read it for historical hints about the healing ministry of Jesus. To read John 9 rightly is always to read it at two levels: at the level of its narrative world and at the level of the history of the community reflected in that narrative.

It struck me for the first time in writing this article that there is a kind of parallel between the kind of reading Martyn does and the reading we usually call allegorical. In an allegorical reading the meaning of the text depends not only on the words on the page but on the realities that the words signify. In traditional allegory the word on the page signifies a spiritual reality "above" the narrative. In Martyn's analysis, the action on the page signifies a communal reality "behind" the narrative. Almost every act of the drama in John 9 corresponds to an event in the life of the Johannine community. So every true reading is a kind of double reading, world in text, world(s) behind text.

ogy (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994).

⁹ This is nicely summarized in "Glimpses into the History of the Johannine Community," in *History and Theology in the Fourth Gospel* (3d ed.; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2003), 145-67. See also Dwight Moody Smith's helpful introduction to that volume.

¹⁰ Martyn, *History and Theology in the Fourth Gospel*, 40.

Not only did Martyn help us rethink how we read the Johannine text, he also largely reshaped the North American and European scholarly conversation about the milieu out of which John's Gospel arose. If the central historical and theological moment of the Johannine community (and for the text of the gospel) is the story in John 9, then the central issue behind John's gospel is the relationship between believers in Christ and the synagogue, as the situation is illuminated by the Parable. When Martyn develops the history of the Johannine community, he makes his conviction clear: "if the quadrilateral picture of social and theological relationships which I have just sketched is accurate, and if the earlier glimpses I have offered are generally valid, then the history of the Johannine community from its origin through the period of its life in which the Fourth Gospel was composed forms to no small extent a chapter in the history of Jewish Christianity."¹¹

The theological implications of this picture of the social situation of John's Gospel as a conflict within a Jewish community are many, varied, and sometimes painful. We shall discuss them at some length when we come to the discussion of the world we bring to the text, below.

Martyn draws the appropriate hermeneutical conclusions from his overall historical task:

The two-level drama makes clear that the Word's dwelling among us and our beholding his glory are not events which transpired only in the past. They do not constitute an ideal period when the Kingdom of God was on earth, a period to which one looks back with the knowledge that it has now drawn to a close with Jesus' ascension to heaven as the Son of Man. These events to which John bears witness transpire on both the *einmalig* and the contemporary levels of the drama, or they do not transpire at all. In John's view, their transpiring on both levels of the drama is, to a large extent, the good news itself.¹²

It is not hard for a preacher to draw the appropriate hermeneutical conclusions. The story of Jesus is not simply the recitation of an *einmalig* story recollected in tranquility, the story of the Johannine community and its struggle with continuity and discontinuity. The intra-Jewish agony out of which Johannine Christianity was born also becomes the occasion for the theologian or preacher to tell the story of the old and new in our communities—the struggle between sight and unsight, birth from above which is just as painful as being born again. This exegetical

¹¹ Martyn, *History and Theology in the Fourth Gospel*, 167. Raymond Brown traces a fairly similar view of the community's history but with more emphasis on interaction with Samaritans and Gentiles. See R. Brown, *The Community of the Beloved Disciple* (New York: Paulist, 1979).

¹² Martyn, *History and Theology in the Fourth Gospel*, 143.

strategy leads to the theological conclusion that festivals honoring the old are not simply the rote repetition of the habits of our ecclesiastical ancestors. Exegesis becomes theology when it exegetes our community as well as John's. It becomes Christian theology when it exegetes communities of faith and not just the spiritual autobiographies of the individual faithful.

The Social Dynamic Behind the Text

Other scholars took what Martyn said about the development of this particular community and asked what exegetes could learn from more general descriptions of the ways in which communities develop. Wayne Meeks, for example, draws on theories about the nature of sectarian societies to provide a description of the social dynamic within John's community. In his article, "The Man from Heaven in Johannine Sectarianism," Meeks agrees with Martyn that John's Gospel reflects a history of separation but further argues that in this separation the myth or symbol of the descending and ascending Son of Man provides the conceptual framework that allows the community to understand what has happened to it and to affirm its own distinctiveness.¹³

Thus, despite the absence of "ecclesiology" from the Fourth Gospel, this book could be called an etiology of the Johannine group. In telling the story of the Son of Man who came down from heaven and then re-ascended after choosing a few of his own out of the world, the book defines and vindicates the existence of the community that evidently sees itself as unique, alien from its world, under attack, but living in unity with Christ and through him with God.¹⁴

Meeks further makes clear that it is not simply that ideology (or theology) is a projection of the sectarian status of the community:

I do not mean to say that the symbolic universe suggested by the Johannine literature is only the reflex or projection of the group's social situation. On the contrary, the Johannine dialogues suggest quite clearly that the order of development must have been dialectical: the christological claims of the Johannine Christians resulted in their becoming alienated, and finally expelled, from the synagogue; that alienation, in turn, is "explained" by a further development of the Christological motifs (i.e., the fate of the community projected onto the story of Jesus); these developed Christological motifs in turn drive the group into further isolation. It is

¹³ *JBL* 91 (1972): 44-72. Reprinted in Wayne A. Meeks, *In Search of the Early Christians* (ed. Allen R. Hilton and H. Gregory Snyder; New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002), 55-90.

¹⁴ Meeks, *In Search of Early Christianity*, 77.

a case of continual, harmonic, reinforcement between social experience and ideology.¹⁵

Implicit in this analysis is the suggestion that communities develop their own symbols, their own language, their own stories to reinforce their identity. The more separated, anxious, and persecuted the group, the more cryptic, coded, and secret the language may be. John's gospel provides a myth to validate difference and a language to reinforce that difference.

Jerome Neyrey relies more heavily on particular sociological models to justify his reading of the dynamic behind the Johannine community's history. Neyrey explicitly builds on (or works against) Meeks and the article we have discussed. He says, "I propose to use an explicit social-science model from the works of anthropologist Mary Douglas as a coherent and extensive device for assessing the social location of John, a model that offers greater precision than the elusive definition of a 'sect' employed in Meeks' essay."¹⁶

The model Neyrey uses is that of "group" and "grid." The more secure a group is in its own identity, the stronger the "group." The more a group's worth is affirmed by the world around it, the stronger the "grid." "*Group* refers to the degree of societal pressure at work in a given social unit to conform to the society's definitions, classifications, and evaluations," Neyrey explains, "*Grid* refers to the degree of socially constrained adherence normally given by members of a society to the prevailing symbol system . . . through which the society enables its members to bring order and intelligibility to their experience."¹⁷ The early history of the Johannine community moves toward a diminishing sense of group (as the group loses its own cohesion) and a diminishing sense of grid (as the group moves farther and farther from the norms of the larger community). As the community drifts toward grouplessness and gridlessness, its self-justification becomes ever more fervent and even fierce. At the end, in Neyrey's stage three, the community's fragile sense of self is countered by a robust sense of their savior: high Christology abounds.¹⁸

A detailed assessment of the homiletical and theological implications of these more sociological exegetical strategies would require more sociological savvy than I can claim. However, I find myself enticed and challenged by the dialectical relationship between theological commit-

¹⁵ Ibid., 78.

¹⁶ Jerome Neyrey, S. J., *An Ideology of Revolt: John's Christology in Social-Science Perspective* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988), 117.

¹⁷ Ibid., 119.

¹⁸ Ibid., 142.

ments and social situation. We cope with our social situation by turning to ideologies that justify our communities; but the ideologies drive us deeper and deeper into the isolating actions that require justification. In many ways Christian theologians and pastors debate whether we are in a public or a private business. Are we to teach our own language, practice our own rites, reinforce our own boundaries, and thus find our identities as believers or as communities of faith? Or, are we somehow to make our case as part of a larger society, willing to have our theological and ethical claims tested in the larger arena? My suspicion is that most of us and most of our churches work both ways, depending on such variables as the nature of the claims at stake, our confidence in them, or our sense that what is most deeply precious is usually most profoundly private. But there may be a cautionary note in Johannine theology. The prouder we are of our distinctiveness, the more distinctive we become. The line between fidelity and eccentricity is thin and zigzags wonderfully.¹⁹

Overall, Christian theology is inextricably linked with history and with community. Attention to history comes with the incarnation. Attention to community comes with the church. We all know how difficult it is to talk of God acting in history, but it is a counsel of despair always to describe history godlessly. Despair is not an appropriate strategy for Christian theology or Christian preaching.

Moreover, there is an honorable theological claim that the church behind the Fourth Gospel and Oakhurst Baptist Church in Decatur, Georgia, for instance, are part of the same church. Jesus tells us in John's Gospel that we are and ought to remain one flock, and that means not just across geographical and ethnic lines, but across chronological lines as well. We owe it to our forebears in the faith to understand them as best we can; they, too, are part of the communion of saints, and attention must be paid.

III. The World in Front of the Text

Ricoeur described his reading of biblical narratives not simply as reading the world of the text, but as reading the world in front of the text. The parable not only contains a world, it also creates a world. This insight provides background for developments in literary criticism of John. Narrative criticism attempts to discover the structure of the Gospel itself and to see what resources narrative analysis can provide for theology and preaching.

¹⁹ See the comparison between Johannine and Branch Davidian exegesis in Jaime Clark-Soles, *Scripture Cannot Be Broken: The Social Function of the Use of Scripture in the Fourth Gospel* (Boston: Brill Academic, 2003).

The World Barely in Front of the Text: R. Alan Culpepper

In *The Anatomy of the Fourth Gospel*, R. Alan Culpepper describes his task in terms that explicitly contrast his work to Robert Kysar's, but implicitly also contrast his work to that of Bultmann, Martyn, and Meeks.

The implicit purpose of the gospel narrative is to alter irrevocably the reader's perception of the real world. The narrative world of the gospel is therefore neither a window on the ministry of Jesus nor a window on the history of the Johannine community. Primarily at least, it is the literary creation of the evangelist, which is crafted with the purpose of leading readers to "see" the world as the evangelist sees it so that in reading the gospel they will be forced to test their perceptions and beliefs about the "real" world against the evangelist's perspective on the world they have encountered in the gospel. . . . The text is therefore a mirror in which reader can "see" the world in which they live. Its meaning is produced in the experience of reading the gospel and lies on this side of the text, between the reader and the text.²⁰

Culpepper reads the Fourth Gospel in many ways as E. M. Forster or Wayne Booth might read a novel.²¹ He attends to the role of the narrator, the use of time in the narrative, the place of the characters, and rhetorical strategies, especially the use of irony. In his conclusion, he helps bring together the place of narrator, character, and of irony in the strategy of the Fourth Gospel:

The gospel achieves its most subtle effects, however, through its implicit commentary, that is, the devices and passages in which the author communicates with the reader by implication and indirection. Here the gospel says more than it ever makes explicit. The extensive use of misunderstanding in the narrative teaches the reader how to interpret what Jesus says and warns the reader always to listen for overtones and double meanings. Through its irony, the gospel lifts the reader to the vantage point of the narrator so that we know what others in the story have not yet discovered and can feel the humor and bite of meanings they miss.²²

Note two of John's authorial devices. Both have implications for using exegesis theologically. First, there is the issue of identification. Part

²⁰ R. Alan Culpepper, *Anatomy of the Fourth Gospel: A Study in Literary Design* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983), 4-5.

²¹ Forster has been especially significant in helping us think about character in *Aspects of a Novel* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1927). Booth wrote the deservedly influential *A Rhetoric of Irony* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974).

²² Culpepper, *Anatomy of the Fourth Gospel*, 233.

of the power of John's narrative strategy (as with many novels) is that the reader is invited to identify with different ones of the characters. This is perhaps most obvious in the case of the woman at the well in chapter 4, the man born blind in chapter 9, and Mary and Martha in chapter 11. George Stroup in his book, *The Promise of Narrative Theology*, draws heavily on Stephen Crites and suggests that our experience as human beings has a narrative shape.²³ Narrative theology proceeds by finding the ways that the stories of believers or would-be believers are reflected and refracted by the stories in scripture. The best theology and the best preaching is often a matter of finding the ways in which, for instance, Jesus' story, the story of the Samaritan woman, and the story of the reader or congregation, can enrich and illumine each other.

Irony depends on the possibility of double meanings. So does theology. If water is always and only H₂O, and the only important thing to understand about light is quantum theory, then we might as well face the fact that theology is a relatively harmless anachronism. If multivalent meaning helps us read and participate in a multivalent universe, utterly real if not entirely quantifiable, then there is still room for irony, pun, John's Gospel, theology, and preaching.²⁴

The World Between the Text and the Reader: Jeffrey Staley

Jeffrey Staley's monograph *The Print's First Kiss* gives much of its attention to providing a useful and thorough description of reader response criticism, a form of literary criticism that acknowledges that the world in front of the text is a world that is always read from some standpoint, in this case the standpoint of the reader. Exegesis for such a model is always conversation, and needs to pay attention to both conversation partners (the text, the reader) and to the new reality they construct between them.

When it comes to his own conversation with John's Gospel, the world Staley finds and constructs provides stimulation suggestions. Most interesting to me is the discussion of what he calls "The Victimization of the Implied Reader." What Bultmann and many others have thought was evidence of bad editing, Staley sees as evidence of clever authorship. All those places where John seems to change his mind in mid-paragraph are not clues to sloppiness, but clues to a deliberate device of "victimization," causing the implied reader, by implication at least, to rethink

²³ George W. Stroup, *The Promise of Narrative Theology: Recovering the Gospel in the Church* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1981), 75-6.

²⁴ On the theological significance of word play in the Fourth Gospel see, in addition to Culpepper, David L. Bartlett, *What's Good About This News?* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2003), 122-23.

the way she reads the text. Most strikingly, Staley argues that John 21, which to many has seemed to be an addendum to a gospel that ended with chapter 20, is rather a device to destabilize and then reorient the reader. Just when the reader thinks the gospel is ended, the implied author starts all over again: "Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of the disciples which were not written in this book. But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that believing, you may have life in his name" (John 20:30-31). The reader is ready to close the book; the listener reaches for the hymnal to sing the next hymn, and then the implied author says, "Oh, there was at least one more sign I meant to mention. After these things, Jesus showed himself again to the disciples by the sea of Tiberias. . ." (John 21:1, REV). When the implied reader asks the understandable question, "What!?" the reader is put in the position of Peter who has spent much of the Gospel asking the wrong questions. Now the text asks of the implied reader yet another question. Given the fact that you misunderstood the gospel by thinking it ended at 20:31, can you, like Peter, transcend your limited knowledge, grow in love, and follow Jesus to the end?

Once a literary critic has decided that the Gospel of John is a literary unity, and indeed a fairly sophisticated work of literature, it is not a question whether one can make everything fit. The question is, "how?"²⁵

I will attend below to some of the theological and homiletical implications of the kind of literary readings employed by Culpepper and Staley. Here let two nagging questions from an archaic historical-critical perspective suffice. The implied reader, both for Culpepper and for Staley, is a kind of useful fiction, but largely a fiction nonetheless. For the most part, we can guess that the earliest audience for John's Gospel did not read the Gospel at all—they heard it. In our present time, the most regular audience for John's Gospel does not read it through, they hear it in snippets, or pericopes, a little at a time. Culpepper and Staley imagine an implied reader who looks a good deal like an undergraduate literature major, sitting before the text, pen and paper in hand, taking notes on the intricate interweaving of the symbolic structures and the ironic recapitulations in *Madame Bovary*. It is an interesting and often illuminating exercise, but it is not clear just how it relates to the question of how the text might evoke faith, either in the first century or the twenty-first.

²⁵ Jeffrey Lloyd Staley, *The Print's First Kiss: A Rhetorical Investigation of the Implied Reader in the Fourth Gospel* (SBLDS 82; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1988), 111-16.

The World of the Whole Text: Brevard Childs

Brevard Childs's reluctance to interpret the text by reference to the world behind the text represents not a literary-critical agenda but an explicitly theological one. Childs does not deny the insights that come from the historical critical enterprise, nor is he concerned about the issue of historical skepticism. Rather, he argues that to interpret the world behind the text is a mistake when we are trying to interpret the text as scripture, or more exactly, the text as canon.

In my opinion, this important history of (historical critical) research stands in a dialectical relationship to a canonical reading. Because of the nature of the questions raised and the answers given, historical critical scholarship can never be disregarded; however, seldom does it offer an adequate solution to the hermeneutical issues at stake. The issue is not that criticism is radical or skeptical in its assumptions. (I do not share this conservative apologetic.) Rather, a different relationship to the text is held from that usually assumed by the historical critical approach.²⁶

Childs's method of canonical interpretation is not easily reduced to a few hermeneutical rules.²⁷ In some ways Childs is more like Bultmann than like any of the other critics we have mentioned, because, like Bultmann, he tries to find the theological (for Childs canonical, for Bultmann kerygmatic) center of a text. However, while Bultmann uses historical-critical methods, and especially source criticism, to establish the kerygmatic center of John's Gospel, for Childs the center is the Gospel itself, as we have it. It is that text as a whole; it is that text read without any necessary linkage to theories about its sociological or authorial origins; it is that text that requires a canonical reading. Childs comments on the (first) ending of the gospel in John 20:31. Looking precisely at some of the Johannine scholars we have cited—Raymond Brown, J. Louis Martyn, Wayne Meeks—Childs says, "The various theories (of this gospel's social setting) seek to give to the passage an historical concreteness which it simply does not have. More importantly, the search for the author's intentionality has tended to flatten the theological dimension of the conclusion by failing to follow the direction which the ending has acquired in its larger canonical role."²⁸

Let one instance of Childs's canonical approach illustrate his hermeneutical strategy—his reading of John 20:31. "These are written so that

²⁶ Brevard S. Childs, *The New Testament as Canon: An Introduction* (2d ed.; Valley Forge: Trinity Press, 1994), 121.

²⁷ See my discussion in *Between the Bible and the Church*, pp. 64-72, and Childs' own comments there.

²⁸ Childs, *The New Testament as Canon*, 124.

you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.” Childs’s first move is similar to the move any narrative critic might want to make. He places the verse in its context in the story John tells.

It is not by chance that the conclusion follows closely the conversation of the risen Christ with Thomas. Thomas’ belief based on his encounter with the risen Christ is contrasted with those who are commended for their belief without having actually seen Christ is contrasted with those who are commended for their belief without having actually see Christ. The conclusion continues this same line of thought as it addresses an unspecified audience which is designated “you.”²⁹

Childs’s next approach, however, differs markedly from the approach both of more traditional historical critics and from narrative critics. The traditional historical critic wants to ask, What was the original audience for the evangelist’s claim? Who is the “you”? Does John write for believers or for non-believers, for Jews or for Jewish Christians or for Gentiles? The literary critic looks at the “you” as the implied reader and wonders what kind of belief the implied narrator is enjoining.

Childs asks what he understands to be the canonical question: What is the function of this passage in the ongoing life of the believing community?

The evangelist bears witness to Christ’s earthly life, lived in the presence of his disciples, yet the witness is directed to another audience different from those original disciples. The audience is not explicitly identified with the future generation of readers. However, by distinguishing the addressee from the original audience, and identifying it with the readership of the present book, the ending functions in effect as a canonical device for addressing every succeeding generation.

The ending has shaped the Gospel material in a canonical fashion by designating the book as the medium through which future generations who did not encounter the earthly Jesus are challenged to believe.³⁰

Two of Childs’s major concerns are evident here. (1) How does the passage function as it is now found in the canonical text, leaving aside for these purposes the question of sources? (2) How does the passage function in the ongoing life of the church, leaving aside for these purposes much concern about the original audience, its questions and quirks?

I shall note my appreciation of Childs’s project for preachers and theologians below. Let me simply confess here that for all its weaknesses,

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 124.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 124.

what Childs distrusts in more traditional interpretation, his claim that attention to intention and original context can “flatten” interpretation, is largely the opposite of my own experience as a preacher. General sermons about the faith of those who are not privileged to see the risen Jesus tend to fall flatter when I preach them than specific sermons about what it meant for first-century Christians to believe in the risen Jesus, even if it meant separation from the comforts of the synagogue. The concreteness pays off homiletically, because the challenge of contemporary Christians is not just to believe without having seen Jesus. It is also to believe despite the considerable discomfort that can come even in our society from a radical break with all those honorable commitments that can nonetheless prove idolatrous: intellectual prowess, financial security, and even our children seen not as gifts but as gods. Of course, Bultmann or Martyn may be wrong in their reconstruction of the earlier situations behind this text, but we may be wrong in our more abstract restatement of its theological implications, too. Most often I preach and do theology from the canon as canon. But sometimes I find my preaching enriched when out of the deeply held belief that God can be at work in communities and in histories as well as in the text, I dare to make some guesses about the communities and the histories behind the canon.

The World in Front of the Text: Theological Implications

I have already confessed my theological allegiances to historical reconstruction. But like so many interpreters, I am haunted and even inspired by the work of Hans Frei and his claim that the world of the text is the ground of our believing and our theologizing, or perhaps more accurately, that the distinction between the world of the text and the world behind it is our distinction and causes problems for modernity that the scripture writers and their earlier interpreters blessedly avoided. And I have confessed my indebtedness to Brevard Childs and his reminder that the church’s preaching and theology are based primarily not on the texts behind the text or on the communities behind the text, but on the text, read as it is and read whole in the church.³¹

Certainly it is the case that the Bible, the theologian, and the preacher are all in the story business, though that’s not the only business we are in. (There are prayers, letters, even laws—none without theological import.) Nonetheless, part of our job is to tell the story in such a way that it does its job of convicting, persuading, reforming, annoying, redeeming. We are not only the tellers of stories, we are also

³¹ Both of these debts are more fully described in Bartlett, *Between the Bible and the Church*, 15-16, 64-70.

often the protagonists of our own narratives. Right theology is partly the right placing of the reader, the hearer, and the congregation in the world before the text that can illumine the world we live in when we put down the book and the sermon is ended.

Brevard Childs reminds us for his part, powerfully and effectively, that the job of the Christian theologian is not to provide a reading of Ur-Mark or of Q or even to make a brief for what the Corinthians must have said in their letter to Paul. Theologians and preachers first of all preach the canon in its canonical form. Probably more than Childs, I rejoice in the ways in which the canon allows different preachers and theologians to say quite different things. But I also rejoice that we have the text to guide, correct, and challenge—in the forms that we have received it and preach it still.

IV. The World We Bring to the Text

The sense that there is one paradigm for exegesis is gone for good, a phrase with a deliberately Johannine double meaning. Like nearly all interpreters I know, I have had to rethink the readings I once thought were obvious. Perceptive readers have read the same text through different glasses and then helped me read the texts differently. Exegesis of John's Gospel provides excellent examples of such perspectival reading.

The Gospel for Outsiders: David Rensberger

In his study *Johannine Faith and Liberating Community*, David Rensberger draws heavily on the work of Martyn and Meeks to suggest that the Johannine community understands itself as a community of outsiders.³² Since we are discussing the world the interpreter brings to the text, I also note that Rensberger is himself a member of a relatively sectarian denomination, the Mennonites, and teaches at a seminary where almost all of the students come from groups that are minorities in the United States. He knows what to look for because of where he looks from.

Rensberger's whole book is a fascinating re-interpretation of John's Gospel. It is not a radical rethinking but a careful nuancing of insights many interpreters would share. His hope is to show that this gospel, which has often seemed the most "spiritual" and divorced from issues of liberation and politics, can indeed provide a guide for people who find themselves at the margins and who hope for radical redemption. For

³² (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1988). See pp. 26-28 on the social reconstruction.

example, what he says about Nicodemus is not new, but it sheds new light on the old picture. We notice what we might have missed.

What Nicodemus stands in need of is not just a conviction, not just a transformed inner life, and certainly not just a rite or sacrament. He needs a transfer, a joining. Nicodemus is challenged to join the action of God in the unfamiliar and the improbable. To be born of God is to be born into a people, and (from Nicodemus' point of view) into the most improbable people, the rabble who know not the law, the radicals, the fanatics.³³

Because he stands outside John's community but also with it, Rensberger is able to see what the evangelist and his community may have seen less clearly, that the Johannine Christ calls believers not only into a new personal relationship with God but also into a newly constructed world.³⁴

Outside the Gospel: Adele Reinhartz

One of the most pervasive and perplexing features of John's Gospel is its treatment of "the Jews." No matter how carefully we reconstruct the history behind the text, we are bound to cringe when Jesus says "to the Jews who had believed in him," (!) "You are from your father the devil, and you choose to do your father's desires" (John 8:31, 44). Different contemporary readers will use different rationales, but of this we are sure. Our horror at these words is not just the horror of post-holocaust modernist liberals. We are appalled as Christians.

In her book *Befriending the Beloved Disciple: A Jewish Reading of the Gospel of John*, Adele Reinhartz refuses to let Christians off the hook.³⁵ In part, she wants to revisit and revise J. Louis Martyn's reconstruction of the history of the Johannine community. In part, she wants to say that no reconstruction diminishes the pain that our text has inflicted on history. She causes me to rethink strategies like the one I use most often in teaching John's Gospel to laypeople: "Everybody on both sides of this question was Jewish; this was a family feud." Who, Reinhartz might ask, would choose to be part of such a mean family? Who would find there a model of community or an image of faith?³⁶

Reinhartz in some ways models a perfect postmodern strategy: she reads John's Gospel from a variety of perspectives. But one thing in her

³³ *Ibid.*, 114.

³⁴ See the last chapter of the book.

³⁵ (New York: Continuum, 2003).

³⁶ See, for instance, p. 160 on the ongoing problem of anti-Judaism for anyone reading or hearing John's Gospel.

perspective does not change: she is outside, not just the gospel, but its faith. She is outside by her own convictions, but more than outside, she is banished by the author's convictions. Here is a perspectival reading that puts us to the test: a hermeneutics of hurt.

The World We Bring to the Text: Theological Implications

Theology and preaching are both in part communal endeavors. No good preacher preaches without an ongoing implicit conversation with her congregation. The sermon speaks not only out of a perspective but also to perspectives other than the preacher's own. The wisest preacher can often preach the faith of the congregation more explicitly and persuasively than the congregation itself can consciously articulate it.

No theologian ever wrote without conversation partners. Now we understand that the partners and their perspectives are more varied than we thought. Now we know that where we see from helps determine what we see. As with our attention to history, our attention to various perspectives is in part a function of our love of neighbor. I cannot come to this text we share unless I also ask how it works for you and in you.

The harder task is to attend to the interpreter who has a radically different interpretation. Freud and Marx write without much sympathy for the illusions they think we preach or the theology they think distorts the world. Adele Reinhartz, in contrast, writes with astonishing sympathy about a text that seems to show little sympathy for those who share her different but not unrelated faith.

There is a danger when doing theology and preaching that we will think that we are doing theology only in house and that we preach only to a choir more uniformly devout than any choir I have ever known.³⁷ It is not just that Freud and Marx and Reinhartz have interpreted our text and think we are wrong. We know something about their interpretations and we know they have a point. Exegesis as theology and proclamation knows a hermeneutics of suspicion as well as a hermeneutics of retrieval. We know that we preach to a world whose division between faith and unfaith is not nearly as neat as John's apparent division between the synagogue and conventicle, insider and outsider. The line that John draws down the middle of the world, we can draw down the middle of the soul, including our own.

³⁷ As I write this, I realize for the first time that often when I preach to the choir, I am preaching to the only people besides me who are paid to be there that morning, thumbing through the bulletin, skimming the magazine hidden in the music folder, worrying about something that seems altogether extraneous. Maybe we should try to preach to that choir more often.