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The Ongoing Story of Biblical Interpretation

John Goldingay

1997 saw a double twenty-years' anniversary. It was in 1977 that the second National Evangelical Anglican Congress took place in Nottingham, and it was in 1977 that The Paternoster Press published the symposium by members of the Tyndale Fellowship, *New Testament Interpretation* (edited by I Howard Marshall).¹ The former event was significant for introducing the evangelical constituency to the word 'hermeneutics'; the second was significant as an indication that evangelical scholarship was in a position to join in debate on something nearer an equal footing with the rest of the scholarly world. At the same time, these events raised the questions 'What distinguishes Evangelicalism's involvement with Scripture from that of the rest of the Church?' and 'What distinguishes evangelical scholarship from the rest of scholarship?' James Barr in his *Fundamentalism*, also published in 1977,² could only see an unprincipled inclination to 'maximal conservatism'; that was hardly enough. If anything, in 1997 the answer to those questions was even less clear.

Since *Obeying Christ in a Changing World* (one of the preparatory documents for the congress, with a chapter on 'Understanding God's Word Today' by Anthony Thiselton) and *The Nottingham Statement* (a closing document from the congress),³ and *New Testament Interpretation*, what has happened to the issues they considered?

Is there a hermeneutical gap?

An anxiety at NEAC was the acceptance in the chapter on 'Understanding God's Word Today' that there was indeed a significant 'hermeneutical gap' between ourselves and the biblical text. It was not without sympathy that Anthony Thiselton referred to the emphasis in the 1976 Doctrine Commission report *Christian Believing* on 'the pastness of the past' with its questioning whether we can enter into the experiences of first-century

1 I Howard Marshall ed *New Testament Interpretation* (Exeter: Paternoster/Grand Rapids: Eerdmans 1977)

2 J Barr *Fundamentalism* (London: SCM/Philadelphia: Westminster 1977) see eg pp 85-9.

3 J Stott ed *Obeying Christ in a Changing World Volume 1: The Lord Christ* (London: Collins 1977); *The Nottingham Statement* issued by the Executive Committee of the second National Evangelical Anglican Congress) (London: CPAS 1977)

Jews who expected an imminent end to the present world order. “The whole difficulty of standing alongside the men and women of the past’, they urge, is “far more fundamental even than questions about the truth of the biblical writings” (Thiselton p 94). That is a worrying thought for us as people who presuppose that this standing alongside is possible as we read Scripture in the context of and as foundational to our day-by-day relationship with God. I recall a senior evangelical scholar gently asking for ‘not too much of this “gap” talk’.

Yet Mr Thiselton, as he then was (now, of course, many of the authors of these two volumes are doctors, deans, university professors, and even an archbishop), in effect pointed out that if we deny the issue that the Doctrine Commission was raising, we are hiding our heads in the sand, whereas if we acknowledge it, we are in a position to do something about it. We belong to the same humanity as the Bible writers, we are members of the same people of God, we are put right with God on the same basis as they were, and we are indwelt by the same Holy Spirit as the one who inspired them. We have quite enough in common with them for understanding to be possible. If we do not take understanding for granted, it can become actual.

As I write, I am preparing to leave my post in Britain to move to one in America. From time to time people are saying to me, ‘Oh, you must be feeling this-or-that’ (disoriented, in-between, excited, sad, apprehensive about moving after twenty-seven years in Nottingham...) Actually my predominant feeling is none of those things; because of my personal circumstances, anxiety about how the move will work out for my wife, Ann, who is disabled, overrides all those other feelings. If people did not assume that they knew how someone in my position would feel, then they could discover how I felt. If they recognized that there might be a gap, they and I could bridge it. If we will recognize that there is a gap between us and first-century Jews, then the Holy Spirit, the human authors, and we can bridge it.

The form of Scripture itself

Referring to the human authors’ role in the overcoming of the gap partly reflects a development in scholarship over the past twenty years. It was also in about 1977 that Brevard Childs spent a sabbatical year in Cambridge working at his canonical approach to Scripture, work that would issue in his *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture*, to be followed by *The New Testament as Canon*.⁴ During that year he took part

4 B Childs *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture* (London: SCM/Philadelphia: Fortress 1979); B Childs *The New Testament as Canon* (London: SCM/Philadelphia: Fortress 1984)

in an informal seminar at Tyndale House. He was not actually so impressed by the evidence that British evangelical scholars were flocking to show themselves experts at the historical-critical enterprise, because he was moving in an almost opposite direction. Over twenty years he has resolutely pursued his project of studying Scripture as canon and has written a series of huge books, though somehow he has not set the world of scholarship alight with them. His work is more respected than seen as the way forward. Indeed, two recent, relatively conservative works by Evangelicals who work within the historical-critical paradigm promise to have at least as much impact on scholarly debate. These are N T Wright's multi-volume study of 'Christian Origins and the Question of God'⁵ and the essays on *The Gospels for All Christians* edited by Richard Bauckham.⁶

In those two big books of 1979 and 1984 Childs puts forward the thesis that the human authors of the individual books of the Bible as we have them have 'shaped' these books to give them a form which will enable them to 'function as canon'. The opening and closing paragraphs of Hosea and of Ecclesiastes, for instance, provide guides for the reading of these books. One characteristic of this canonical shaping was sometimes to remove historical particularities which could obscure the fact that these writings were designed to speak well beyond their original context. Thus Childs points out how few concrete references to exile in Babylon appear in Isaiah 40-55 despite the critical consensus that this setting is the chapters' origin.⁷ The historical focus of critical study misses the canonical focus of the books themselves.

Childs' point is not that critical readers must personally accept the books' shaping to function as canon, but they ought at least to recognize it. A parallel point has recently been made by the German Old Testament scholar Rolf Knierim in relation to the implication that there is something unprofessional or undisciplined about the theological exegesis of biblical texts, as if interpreters who discuss theological issues were imposing on the text an agenda of their own which was alien to it.

Since the substantive statements of the biblical texts are basically theological, the theology of a text belongs to its exegesis from the outset... Theological exegesis is not a separate method in addition to

5 The first two volumes are *The New Testament and the People of God* and *Jesus and the Victory of God* (London: SPCK/Philadelphia: Fortress 1992 and 1996)

6 R Bauckham *The Gospels for All Christians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans 1997)

7 Current interest in locating Second Isaiah in Palestine does something different with the data Childs notes. See eg P R Davies 'God of Cyrus, God of Israel' in J Davies *et al* edd *Words Remembered, Texts Renewed* (J F A Sawyer Festschrift) *JSOT* Sup 195 (Sheffield: SAP, 1995) pp 207-25; cf P R Davies *In Search of Ancient Israel* (Sheffield: JSOT 1992) pp 40-42

the other methods, or an appendix to them. It is not rooted in the theological interest of the exegete, but in the nature of the text.⁸

In the same way Childs notes a canonical concern as an interest of the text, not merely an interest of the Jewish or Christian interpreter. If one does personally allow one's reading of Scripture to be conformed to that shaping which Childs identifies (as Evangelicals are presumably committed to do), this contributes to the bridging of the alleged gap noted above. The books themselves are shaped to reach beyond that gap.

Childs' canonical approach has some similarities with two other significant approaches to interpretation which have aroused much interest over these twenty years, though it is important to keep in mind that their own background lacks the religious dimension of Childs' canonical criticism.

One approach is a more general interest in the final form of the biblical text of a work such as Isaiah. In an extraordinary development, the unity of Isaiah has become a focus of study. This is not to imply that scholars who have followed up this interest go back for a moment on the conviction that the book called Isaiah contains material from several authors who lived in several centuries. One basis for this, not shared by evangelical scholars, will be the assumption that it is simply impossible to refer to the events of the sixth century when you live in the eighth. It needs to be noted that the general trend of Old Testament study in 1997 is if anything more agnostic or atheistic or secular than was the case in 1977. I confess to being perpetually puzzled at the fact that a number of prominent Old and New Testament scholars are people who once believed and now do not – puzzled because if I were to stop believing, I could not imagine wanting to continue to invest time and interest in these texts once I had decided that they were not the word of God after all. But these scholars pursue the study of the Bible as others do the study of Latin or French literature, or study it as an important cultural artefact which cannot be ignored even if (perhaps especially if) its influence on our culture has been a bane as much as a blessing.

The other approach looks at the biblical narratives as narratives, using the techniques that one might apply to fiction and considering how the narrative uses plot, character, and point of view. Much of this study deliberately ignores questions of historicity, and conservative-evangelical scholars have thus been able to work on the same basis as liberal or secular scholars and publish books with similar-sounding titles on 'literary approaches to the Bible'.

8 R Knierim *The Task of Old Testament Theology* (Grand Rapids/Cambridge: Eerdmans 1995) pp 60-61

A significant stimulus to this movement was Hans Frei's *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative*,⁹ a historical study of the way approaches to biblical narrative have fallen apart since the Reformation. Calvin, for instance, Frei points out, assumes a unity between the biblical narrative and the events that actually happened in the Middle East in Old and New Testament times. He also assumes a unity between that story and the story being played out in his own day, or assumes that there should be such a unity. The normativeness of Scripture means we tell our story in the light of that story, we fit our story into that story, we evaluate our story in the light of that story.

Since Calvin's day, both unities have collapsed. Perceiving a gap between the biblical events and the biblical story, mainstream (liberal) theology originally chose to attribute authority to actual history rather than to biblical story, though the more recent interest in narrative interpretation jumps in the other direction. It also chose to reverse the authority between biblical history/story and ours. Instead of interpreting and evaluating our thinking and experience by Scripture, it evaluated Scripture by our thinking and experience. Instead of fitting us into Scripture, it fitted Scripture into us.

These are moves which require more than mere disavowal by Evangelicals. With regard to the first fractured unity, we ought to recognize that one motivation for the critical study which gave priority to history rather than text was a desire to escape the authority of ecclesiastical dogma. The text was in bondage to the Church and its tradition; historical-critical work sought to study Scripture free of that bondage. On the other hand, the general dominance of history in secular thinking meant that history became the locus of revelation for theologians; and Evangelicals joined others in working within this framework. William Foxwell Albright, who became a hero for many Evangelicals, was overtly pursuing a project which actually has the appearance of being in tension with Evangelicals' own gospel. B O Long describes him as 'transposing traditional theological claims for the uniqueness and truth of biblical revelation into the idiom of objectivist historical narrative'.¹⁰

The importance of historical interpretation

If taking history too seriously is Scilla, coming to despise history is Charibdis. At present a vocal movement of Old Testament scholars,

9 H Frei *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative* (New Haven/London: Yale UP 1974)

10 B O Long *Planting and Reaping Albright* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State UP 1997) p 134. See Albright's *From the Stone Age to Christianity* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins 1940, 2nd ed 1946 reprinted Garden City, NY: Doubleday 1957); *History, Archaeology and Christian Humanism* (London: Black 1965)

forcefully represented in Britain by Professor Philip Davies at Sheffield University, urges the view that the whole Old Testament was written in the post-exilic or Second Temple period. All the so-called 'histories' of the pre-exilic or First Temple period are actually fictions. There is no clear historical knowledge to be had not only of Abraham or Moses but even of David or Hezekiah – whose supposed building of a famous tunnel to safeguard Jerusalem's water supply Davies re-dates to the Hellenistic period.¹¹

This development is in a position to make common cause with the emphasis on reading Scripture as narrative which can represent an anti-historical strand within biblical study, and that in two senses. First, in reading a work such as a Gospel as a narrative, with techniques developed in the interpretation of fiction, it prefers to ignore the question of any reference to realities outside the story, such as the figure of Jesus. From an orthodox Christian angle that is inadequate; it is incompatible with our convictions about the nature of the gospel, which refers to such an objective person. Indeed, its inadequacy may be argued on broader grounds. To judge from passages such as Luke's opening (Luke 1:1-4) and John's conclusions (John 20:30-1; 21:24-5), the Gospels present themselves not as fictions but as narrative works whose point depends on their historicity. If interpreters choose to interpret them as fictions, they must at least acknowledge that they are reading them against the grain, reading them allegorically.

That anti-historical strand links with another. I have just presupposed that our interpretation of a text should correspond to its author's intention. It is now common to deny this. Reading in the light of an author's intention indeed raises theoretical and practical difficulties. We have no access to an author's intention except the text itself, and authors such as Luke and John who explicitly state their intention are the exception rather than the rule. Guesswork regarding intention may then subvert interpretation. My favourite example is the view that the intention of the authors of Ruth and Jonah was to oppose the nationalism of the Second Temple period. While openness to other peoples is one theme in these two books, the books contain other prominent themes which are obscured when the urging of that openness is privileged by its being identified univocally as the author's intention. To judge from the evidence of the books, their authors had several intentions, expressed in several themes.

11 See P R Davies *In Search of 'Ancient Israel'* (Sheffield: JSOT 1992); J Rogerson and P R Davies 'Was the Siloam Tunnel built by Hezekiah?' in *Biblical Archaeologist* 59 (1996); and broader discussion of the question *Can a 'History of Israel' Be Written?* in the volume of that name edited by L L Grabbe (Sheffield: SAP 1997). For critical (ie more conservative) discussion of the theses, see eg discussion in the *Biblical Archaeology Review* 23/2 (March 1997); 23/4 (July 1997); A Hurvitz, 'The historical quest for "ancient Israel" and the linguistic evidence of the Hebrew Bible', *Vetus Testamentum* 47 (1997), pp 301-15

Nevertheless the importance of the traditional emphasis on the author's intention is to affirm that the text does have a meaning of its own. It is not the case that texts are meaningless until someone reads them and responds to them. E V McKnight often repeats the tag that it is readers who 'make sense' of texts,¹² but in the process he changes the meaning of the tag. I hope that readers make sense of this article. By that I mean I hope they make *my* sense, that they understand what I intended to say. If they gain other insights which I did not intend, that is fine, but it does not count as 'making sense'. If the article is nonsense but they are nevertheless able to articulate something for themselves as a result of reading it, that is at least something, but it does not count as 'making sense'.

As with the question of historical reference of narratives noted above, one might defend this conviction that texts have meanings of their own on at least two grounds. The Christian one is the knowledge that the Scriptures are a body of writings which issued from God's speaking objectively and historically and intentionally. The more general one is the fact that they issued from human authors doing the same. We have seen that some make this explicit. To interpret them in a way which ignores the meaning their writers gave these writings and ignores what they were intending to do in writing is again to offer an allegorical interpretation. Interpreters cannot be forbidden this right, but the nature of the act should be acknowledged.

An openness to the whole of Scripture

Brevard Childs' first volume on interpretation, *Biblical Theology in Crisis*,¹³ had given the phrase 'canonical interpretation' a different significance from the ones which are prominent later. There he noted among other things the way in which different parts of Scripture treat individual themes in different ways. Recognizing Scripture as canon implied taking all Scripture seriously and suggested the need to move from diversity to synthesis in the study of biblical themes. In my view this is a move which still needs implementing in the study of biblical theology. Since the 1960s the stress has been on diversity in Scripture as different parts of Scripture bring a different message to different contexts. Postmodernism now encourages that affirmation and is disinclined to ask about how individual emphases might fit into a more comprehensive picture. I would expect one feature of an evangelical study to be a concern to make that move.

It is not surprising if Scripture has many complementary ways of

12 See eg V McKnight *The Bible and the Reader* (Philadelphia: Fortress 1985) p 12

13 B Childs *Biblical Theology in Crisis* (Philadelphia: Westminster 1970)

understanding the nature of sin (for instance as failure, as transgression, as rebellion, and as unfaithfulness) or salvation (for instance as justification, as healing, as regeneration, and as pardon), and indeed of understanding the nature of God (for instance as father, as creator, and as redeemer). God, sin, and salvation are deep and mysterious realities which may be illumined by a number of understandings. All the ones that Scripture uses will illumine some aspect of them. It is easy for these understandings to become dead metaphors, mere theological concepts, and one task of interpretation and preaching is to let them again be the living realities that they are within Scripture itself. That is facilitated by disentangling them and seeking to appreciate one metaphor at a time. We then have a collection of insights comparable to a collection of portraits, all different but none incompatible, like a collection of portraits of some often-painted person.

Such a collection of paintings might of course contain irreconcilable interpretations. Our knowledge that Scripture is God's inspired word means that we can be sure that its portraits belong together (at another level all reflect the work of one artist) and that all illumine their subject. They are not a collection from which we may pick and choose according to our preferences. They are a normative collection. None may be ignored; none which are peripheral may be made central; none from outside may be admitted to the collection itself (even if portraits outside the collection may indeed express true insights).

In practice our evangelical study of Scripture can easily impose unconscious constraints on itself which make us less biblical in substance than we are in name. An example is the study of a book such as Leviticus and its treatment of sacrifice. A number of New Testament writings, particularly Hebrews, take up this aspect of Leviticus as a key to understanding the significance of the death of Christ, and do so extremely fruitfully. It is difficult to see how the crucial doctrine of the substitutionary atonement of Christ would ever have been formulated without the aid of that strand of the Old Testament Scriptures. Hebrews thus illustrates for us the way in which those God-breathed Old Testament Scriptures are able to instruct us concerning salvation and faith in *Christ Jesus* (2 Tim 3:15-16).

But paradoxically, Hebrews' success in its interpretative work narrowed down the focus within which the Church has subsequently read Leviticus. There is actually much more to the significance of Leviticus for our understanding of Christian worship than we have noticed, because we have allowed the prism provided by Hebrews to restrict us to one aspect of Leviticus' significance. In Romans 15:16, Paul himself points to another aspect of its significance, for an understanding of evangelism. The New

Testament provides the explicit witness to Christ which enables us to see the Old in focus, as the Old provides us with the 'many and various' ways of God's speaking without which we could not understand Christ. Without the New, the Old might be an unfocused enigma, but it is possible for us to turn the New into something which narrows our vision. Its witness gives us our normative focus on Jesus as the centre of the Christian message and gives us one normative way of reading individual Old Testament passages, but not the only way of working out the implications of that focus for individual passages or books. Our belief in the God-breathed nature of Leviticus invites us into a commitment to the book itself in its historical and contextual meaning, including those aspects of it which are not taken up in Hebrews or in other parts of the New Testament. As it happens the study of this book has been remarkably fruitful over these past two decades, on the part of Jewish, secular, and Christian writers.

The involvement of a scholar such as Gordon Wenham in this study of Leviticus illustrates the way in which it is possible to be a 'conservative' Evangelical and not be confined to past insights and ways of thinking. The implications of that word 'conservative' do deserve some study. The phrase 'conservative Evangelical' came into use in the 1950s to distinguish people who wanted to be seen as neither 'fundamentalist' nor 'liberal Evangelical' and believed that there was a space in between. Fundamentalists seemed to have closed minds, but liberal Evangelicals seemed to have given too much away. Over the past twenty years many of the conservative Evangelicals of the 1960s have come to designate themselves 'open Evangelicals' without facing the question as to what distinguishes them from the liberal Evangelicals of an earlier decade. While many of the specific issues have changed I doubt whether there is any difference in the nature of the stances implied by the terms. The open Evangelicals of the 1990s are the liberal Evangelicals of the 1950s.

To be conservative implies a commitment to conserving truths and positions rather than surrendering them in the light of alleged new insights. To be liberal implies a freedom over against long-accepted positions. In principle these do not seem incompatible positions, and I would aspire to both. I am not unhappy when I am reviewed simultaneously by liberals as too inclined to see Scripture as God's revelation and by conservatives as making too many concessions to scholarly theories. Both positions have downsides. To be liberal often seems to imply an unprincipled willingness to follow the spirit of the age. To be conservative often seems to imply that one can only come to conclusions that have been reached before. Anything new must be wrong. The purpose of scholarship is to vindicate and support what we know already; there is no new insight to be gained. Paradoxically, as conservative Evangelicals we can be the group most bound to the Church's tradition of interpretation of Scripture rather than to Scripture itself.

That classic passage in 2 Timothy on the nature and significance of the Old Testament Scriptures (which we may presumably also apply to the New Testament) emphasizes their role in connection with teaching, rebuking, correcting, and training. In *Obedying Christ in A Changing World* Anthony Thiselton implicitly questions the evangelical preoccupation with what Scripture 'teaches', and in his *Fundamentalism* (see p 76) James Barr also attacks this preoccupation. The clash with 2 Timothy 3:16 may be more apparent than real. There is more to 'teaching' than 'teaching'; that is, there is a narrow and a broad application of the word. In the narrow sense 'teaching' suggests the explicitly didactic, the kind of plain setting forth of the truth to which Paul refers in 2 Corinthians 4:2. There is much of that in Scripture, and it is the characteristic stuff of systematic theology or of statements of faith. Yet when Jesus tells a parable, he is concerned to teach, to fulfil the role described in 2 Timothy 3:16, but he does so by avoiding 'setting forth the truth plainly'. Elsewhere Scripture 'teaches' by asking questions or offering worship or writing poems or relating dreams. There is nothing wrong with the evangelical concern for Scripture's 'teaching' if we use the word in such a way that it can embrace the many approaches to teaching which Scripture embraces. Long before the reminding of that word 'hermeneutics', our forebears emphasized when they themselves used the word that poetry had to be understood as poetry, vision as vision, symbol as symbol.

A practical commitment to Scripture

With regard to the second aspect of Frei's 'eclipse', as Evangelicals we need to be aware that our dogmatic commitment to Scripture does not in itself guarantee such a substantial commitment. I continue to be frightened by James Barr's critique in *Fundamentalism* that our commitment to Scripture is merely a badge that we wear; the Bible is our supreme religious symbol (eg p 11). That may actually make it more difficult for us to read Scripture accurately, because we know we are committed to agreeing with what we find in it. We are therefore in ongoing danger of having to make it mean what we can accept, because we do not share the luxury enjoyed by liberals of being able simply to disagree with it. This is one reason why we should value the study of Scripture by people we know we disagree with, whether liberal or secular or Jewish, because they may be free to see in Scripture things from which we have to hide. To put it another way, we should be worried if there are no aspects of Scripture's teaching which we wish were not there and/or which we believe simply because they are there rather than because we like them and can make sense of them.

Let me give two personal examples. I am not fond of giving orders, of

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telling people what to do; it suits me better to help people think through in the light of Scripture what they should do, to help them come to a decision rather than tell them what to do. That no doubt reflects the influence of personality and of the spirit of the age, though neither of those in themselves make it wrong. I am therefore puzzled or sad (if I may put it that way) to find that Scripture portrays God as so fond of telling us what to do. It is not how I would go about being God if I were God, and I could wish it were otherwise. But that is how it is, and I am not God, and my submission to Scripture involves me in accepting that this is how God is and in seeking to come to terms with it.

I am also attracted to process theology's way of understanding God's sovereignty. It understands that sovereignty as guaranteeing to bring about the fulfilment of God's purpose but as not determining ahead of time how to do this. It emphasizes the interrelation between human acts and divine acts and is inclined to see God as responding to human acts and making them part of a pattern, more than to see God forming detailed plans and then sovereignly implementing them. Again personality factors and aspects of the spirit of the age incline me to this understanding, and again that does not in itself make this understanding wrong. On the contrary it is present in Scripture, and these influences thus enable me to do justice to an aspect of Scripture's understanding of how God's sovereignty is at work in the world. But if I want to let Scripture shape and not merely confirm my thinking, I also have to own Scripture's emphasis on the way God decides beforehand that certain things should happen (eg Acts 4:28).

Anyone who thinks that they are quite happy to affirm all of Scripture needs a dose of self-suspicion and needs to find where they are avoiding its thrust. As human beings who fall short of God's glory, all of us are reluctant conformers to God's word to one degree or another. But what distinguishes evangelical involvement with Scripture from that of the rest of the Church at this point, of course, is that we commit ourselves to conform anyway.

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