

To Teach the Text: The New Testament in a New Age

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Abstract: Modern critical biblical scholarship has long laboured under the belief that the object of teaching the biblical text was to communicate the original meaning of a traditional and canonical text. Contemporary criticism points more and more to the intertextuality of both text and reader in the interpretative process. The interpreter is inevitably inscribed in the act of interpretation. A reading of the Nicodemus material in the Fourth Gospel attempts to show that "autobiographical" readings need not abandon the achievements of more traditional forms of scholarship. Text, tradition, rhetoric and reader can combine to provide a reading of the text which continues and enriches Christian beliefs and practice.

MANY LAMENT THE FACT that contemporary New Testament scholarship is increasingly highlighted by an apparent shift away from its traditional focus upon the biblical text toward the worlds receiving the text. A recent volume, *The Postmodern Bible*, edited by a group calling itself The Culture and Bible Collective, provides an excellent summary of those "worlds": the reader, the readers, feminists, womanists, psychologists, psychoanalysts, postmodernists.¹ Almost all the scholars who make up "The Bible and Culture Collective" teach in Colleges and Universities which have their very existence because of the Christian Community and its Tradition. But that possible readership seems to have only a negative role to play in

1. The Bible and Culture Collective, *The Postmodern Bible* (London and New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996). Another collection worth viewing is E. S. Malbon and E. V. McKnight (eds.), *The New Literary Criticism and the New Testament* (Journal for the Study of the New Testament Supplement Series 109; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1994). For an initial appreciation of these volumes, see my reviews in *Pacifica* 9 (1996) 98-101 (*The Postmodern Bible*), and *Australian Biblical Review* 43 (1995) 91-92 (*The New Literary Criticism*). For an eloquent introduction to contemporary approaches to the Gospels, see S. D. Moore, *Literary Criticism and the Gospels: the Theoretical Challenge* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989).

their presentation of contemporary directions and developments in biblical interpretation.

It has now become commonplace to point out that there are at least three worlds which must be taken into account in any interpretation: the world behind the text, the world in the text and the world in front of the text.² Each of these worlds can be made up of a number of "worlds". The contemporary theological educator can understandably complain that the task of teaching the text has become a "worldly" business in a way our ecclesiastically aligned predecessors might have regarded with considerable suspicion.

1. A PRIVILEGED TEXT UNDER SIEGE?

None of us can claim to have educated generations of undergraduate and postgraduate theological students to an objective focus upon a privileged text. However much we have endorsed modern scholarly methods, we inherit a Christian hermeneutic deeply influenced by worlds outside the text. The Fathers of the Church, the first formally to interpret the New Testament as a normative text within the Christian tradition, shamelessly located interpretation within their understanding of the God, the Christ, and the Christian response which – in their opinion – the political, social, theological and ecclesial situation demanded. Augustine is always taken as the example which proves this affirmation. Thanks to C. H. Dodd's use of his allegorical interpretation of Jesus' parable of the Good Samaritan to open his epoch-making *The Parables of the Kingdom*, Augustine is regularly cited in these discussions. The man who went down from Jerusalem to Jericho is Adam who falls away from the peace and blessedness of Jerusalem. Jericho means the moon, which signifies mortality (born, waxing, waning and dying). Thieves are the devil and his angels who strip Adam of his immortality. He is half-dead as he is still able to understand and know God, but is oppressed by sin.³ There are many other parallel examples from across the patristic tradition, but we must be careful lest we cast out the baby with the bathwater. Despite the many flights of fancy which Augustine might have in his allegorical interpretations of the biblical text, there are times when a succinct Latin expression states more precisely what some contemporary biblical scholars take pages, and many footnotes,

2. On this, see my 1991 Melbourne College of Divinity Lectures: F. J. Moloney, *Beginning the Good News: a narrative approach* (Homebush: St Paul Publications, 1992) 29-42. These three "worlds" have been considered in more detail by S. M. Schneiders, *The Revelatory Text: Interpreting the New Testament as Sacred Scripture* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1991) 97-179.

3. See the treatment of Augustine's allegorical interpretation of Luke 10:25-37 in C. H. Dodd, *The Parables of the Kingdom* (Fontana Books: London: Collins, 1961) 13-14.

to say. For example, in describing the stages of faith of the Samaritan villagers at the end of John 4 (4:46-54), Augustine comments, "Primo per famam, postea per presentiam."⁴ He describes the relationship which exists between Jesus and the woman caught in adultery (7:53-8:11) at the end of the account (8:9): "Relicti sunt duo, misera et misericordia."⁵ His evaluation of Mary Magdalene's gesture, via Mark 5:31, in 20:17 has never been bettered: "Illa tangit, turba premit – Quid est tetigit, nisi credidit?"⁶

The patristic exegesis of the text of the Bible provided a rich resource for the Medieval Church, but something new was added as this era developed an awareness of the various levels of interpretation: literal, allegorical, moral and mystical. The biblical text was used to recall the foundational events of the Christian past, to give divine authority to Church Order, to nourish prayer and piety, and to inspire mysticism. But the stable, all-important world of the social, political and religious phenomenon of the Medieval Church Catholic both determined and authorised all interpretation.

Despite their almost exclusive focus upon the Bible, and especially upon the New Testament, the great figures of the Reformation continued patristic and medieval exegetical practices. What had changed was the setting within which the exegesis was done, not the method used to read the text. The Church Catholic, no longer a unifying force, provided the catalyst for exegetical debate. The great Lutheran insistence upon justification by faith alone, based upon a reading of Romans 3:21-26, is a profound and lasting insight which has irreversibly marked Western Christianity, Protestant and Roman Catholic. However much the Institution might demand right order and the performance of good deeds, Augustine and Luther correctly insisted that only God's gracious gifts ultimately matter. Perhaps the massive "unchurching" which we are all experiencing might teach us to appreciate this truth more. But was the Lutheran reading of Rom 3:21-26 an objective reading of a biblical text, or were there "worlds" outside the text which influenced Luther's reading of Romans 3? What of the Counter-Reformation, and, for example, the Roman Catholic insistence upon Petrine Primacy, dramatically highlighted at Vatican I, on the basis of Matthew 16:16-18?⁷ There is much that remains to be done, from the various sides of the ecumenical divides, to

4. "First by report, then by his presence." *In Joannis Evangelium* 15:33; CCSL 36:164.

5. "Two remained, the wretched woman and Mercy." *In Joannis Evangelium* 33:5; CCSL 36:309.

6. "That woman touched, the multitude pressed. What is 'touched' except 'believed'?" *In Joannis Evangelium* 26:3; CCSL 36:261.

7. See the definition from Vatican I (1869-70) in H. Denzinger and A. Schönmetzer, *Enchiridion Symbolorum Definitionum et Declarationum de Rebus Fidei et Morum* (Freiburg: Herder, 1965) para. 3074 (p. 601). For the use of Matt 16:16-18 in the argumentation used to support the definition, see para. 3066 (pp. 599-600).

appreciate better the role of Peter in the Early Church, the question of succession, and the place of a Petrine office within the Christian tradition. However, there is no basis in Matt 16:16-18, a passage which looks back to Isa 51:1-2; 22:22, and to the teaching authority vested in the post-war Rabbinic teachers within the Synagogue, for the Roman Catholic doctrine of Papal Infallibility. Like the Lutheran interpretation of Rom 3:21-26, the widely misunderstood notion of Papal Infallibility has a remarkable authority and influence among many Christians, but this doctrine has been shaped by, and articulated within, "worlds" which lie outside the text.⁸

The Enlightenment, and more specifically the sharp criticism of the English Deists and their successors, exposed the many non-sequiturs, repetitions, contradictions, and fables of the Bible. The text could not resist the heat of a fierce rationalist criticism. Although it had its predecessors, the Higher Criticism of the Bible, born in Germany in the nineteenth century, was fundamentally an attempt to raise biblical criticism to the same level of empirically verifiable scholarship as the other emerging sciences.⁹ It was greatly assisted by the discovery of keys to unlock previously undecipherable languages, some remarkable archaeological discoveries, and some gifted scholars working in the privileged situation of the German Universities. However, as Albert Schweitzer so eloquently argued in his survey of the first fifty years of critical Gospel scholarship, *Von Reimarus zu Wrede*, the movement was more a reflection of the vicissitudes of German University culture than an objective study of the biblical text:

The Jesus of Nazareth who came forward publicly as the Messiah, who preached the ethic of the Kingdom of God, who founded the Kingdom of Heaven upon earth, and died to give His work its final consecration, never had any existence. He is a figure designed by rationalism, endowed with life by liberalism, and clothed by modern theology in an historical garb.¹⁰

Worlds outside the text were still playing a determining role.

8. For an excellent survey of the exegetical practices of the patristic, medieval and reformation periods, see R. M. Grant and D. Tracy, *A Short History of the Interpretation of the Bible* (Second Edition; Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984) 39-99. See also the simpler but equally informative work of G. T. Montague, *Understanding the Bible: A Basic Introduction to Biblical Interpretation* (New York: Paulist Press, 1997) 29-79. Further references to more detailed and scholarly studies are found in these volumes.

9. See the recent study of W. Baird, *History of New Testament Research: From Deism to Tübingen* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992). This comprehensive first volume of a projected two-volume study covers the period down to the end of the nineteenth century. The second volume is eagerly awaited.

10. A. Schweitzer, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus* (Third Edition; London: A. & C. Black, 1954) 396. English Translation of *Von Reimarus zu Wrede*, originally published in German in 1906.

The History of Religions School, and its subsequent application to biblical scholarship in Form Criticism, provided the next large-scale attempt to approach the biblical text in an objective fashion. But further problems emerged. Detailed scholarship led to the identification of originally independent pericopes which could be located in a *Sitz im Leben* provided by the methods of the History of Religions School. But decades of assiduous scholarship failed to establish an objective body of knowledge. It provided a rich field of possible (although somewhat arid) further debate. The founders of New Testament Form Criticism, Schmidt, Dibelius and Bultmann, already disagreed strongly in their understanding of different literary forms and their application of these principles to the New Testament. The form critical location of the pericope within a situation in the life of Jesus or a situation in the life of the Church was often no more than an astute guess. The methods of the History of Religions School did not provide sufficient scientifically verifiable historical data to be sure about the social, political, historical and religious development of the communities which produced the New Testament. Factors outside the text, outstandingly obvious in the confessedly existentialist readings of Rudolf Bultmann, played a major role.¹¹

The same must be said of Redaction Criticism. Born of a desire to understand the whole utterance, rather than the component parts of a biblical book, the Redaction Critics still depended upon the work of the Form Critics. They suggested why Matthew, Mark and Luke gathered and added their own material to previously independent pericopes, thus establishing a narrative which betrayed an overall theological point of view. One of Redaction Criticism's founding figures, Hans Conzelmann, states their agenda well:

Our aim is to elucidate Luke's work in its present form, not to enquire into possible sources or into the historical facts which provide the material. A variety of sources does not necessarily imply a similar variety in the thought and composition of the author. How did it come about that he brought together these particular materials? Was he able to imprint on them his own views? It is here that the analysis of the sources renders the *necessary service* of helping to distinguish what comes from the source from what belongs to the author.¹²

11. For more detail, including references to the works of Schmidt, Dibelius and Bultmann and the response to the foundation of Form Criticism, see Moloney, *Beginning the Good News*, 21-24. On Bultmann, see A. Malet, *The Thought of Rudolf Bultmann* (New York: Doubleday, 1971), and J. Painter, *Theology as Hermeneutic: Rudolf Bultmann's Interpretation of the History of Jesus* (Historical Texts and Interpreters in Biblical Scholarship; Sheffield: The Almond Press, 1987).

12. H. Conzelmann, *The Theology of St Luke* (London: Faber & Faber, 1961) 9 (italics mine). This study, originally published in 1957 as *Die Mitte der Zeit*, along with W.

However brilliant, the original proposals of the founders of Redaction Criticism – Hans Conzelmann on Luke and Willi Marxsen on Mark – have been submerged under the ocean of redactional studies which have been produced since the 1950s.¹³ With good reason Morna Hooker has complained:

Redaction critics may fairly be said to have recreated the evangelists in their own image. For many of them it is axiomatic that the evangelists had no interest in history, but were creative theologians; their supposed creativity has surely met its match in the imaginative ability of many redaction critics!¹⁴

2. HISTORY, HERSTORY, AND MYSTORY

This state of affairs has led to newer approaches. Some insist that historical-critical scholarship has won the day, and that there is no need to develop new methods which focus upon the world in front of the text.¹⁵ But it is becoming increasingly clear that such work responds less and less to the demands of the contemporary Church and is out of contact with major developments in the world of literary criticism. The Bible's being the "book of the Church" does not permit its interpreters to ignore newer methods of interpretation. The relentless application of the criterion of *objectivity* seems to be dissipating as it is more widely accepted that something of the interpreter is inscribed in every interpretation. The patristic and reformation tradition focussed upon *the world in the text*, but unashamedly read their own worlds and their own texts into it. The Form Critics focussed upon *the world behind the text* and their reconstructions of that world are now seen to have been often

Marxsen, *Mark the Evangelist: Studies on the Redaction History of the Gospel* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1969), originally published as *Der Evangelist Markus* in 1956, provided the foundations of what came to be known as Redaction Criticism.

13. See Moloney, *Beginning the Good News*, 24-8.

14. M. D. Hooker, "In his own Image?", in M. D. Hooker and C. Hickling (eds.), *What About the New Testament? Studies in Honour of Christopher Evans* (London: SCM Press, 1975) 30.

15. One of the world's finest biblical scholars, J. A. Fitzmyer, is an example of this. Professor Fitzmyer has made a massive contribution to the study of the historical, linguistic and theological world behind the biblical text. He has also written outstanding major commentaries on the Gospel of Luke and Paul's Letter to the Romans in the Anchor Bible series. He insists that the contemporary shift away from the historical is a negative movement in biblical studies. My own impression of his massive commentaries upon Luke and Romans is that they provide a great deal of information concerning the world behind the text, which throws light upon the world in the text. Little or no attempt is made to address the world in front of the text. Such an approach pays too little attention to the hermeneutical question: why were the New Testament documents written, how have they maintained their readership over two thousand years, and are they still relevant? The contemporary biblical scholar must face these difficult questions.

influenced by their own worlds. The Redaction Critics claimed to have returned, in a more scientific fashion, to *the world in the text*. But their dependence upon form critical conclusions concerning the world behind the text,¹⁶ and the risk that they rendered the Evangelists in their own image, makes their work open to the criticism which has already been levelled against both Form Criticism and Patristic-Medieval exegesis.

Following the larger world of literary criticism, contemporary biblical scholars are focussing more and more upon *the world in front of the text*. But this shift of focus presents its own problems. There are many worlds in front of the text. It is not possible, within the limits of this paper, to address the applications of contemporary literary criticism to today's biblical criticism, and what follows is a caricature. The emergence of narrative critical and reader-response criticism in the late 1980s initiated a process in which more and more attention was given to the multiplicity of readers and cultures, and to an increasingly sophisticated critique of a fragile text.¹⁷ In an attempt to devote greater attention to *the world in the text*, narrative critics trace implied authors and readers within a text which maintains its classical status. Many of them claim that the only issue that deserves attention is the text itself, and that questions concerning *the world behind the text* are irrelevant.¹⁸ This detachment of the biblical text from its historical setting, along with an interest in the reader(s) of the text, has developed into increasingly subversive readings where the reader and her or his contexts are the determining factors in interpretation. Even in these more subversive readings, the text can be regarded as ideologically offensive, but still part of a normative tradition,¹⁹ or as irrelevant to the multiplicity of post-colonial, feminist, agnostic, postmodern readers.²⁰ Between these two extremes there is a multiplicity of other readings, produced by readers reading

16. See Conzelmann's admission: "The analysis of the sources renders the *necessary service* of helping distinguish what comes from the source from what belongs to the author" (*The Theology of St Luke*, 9).

17. See F. J. Moloney, "Narrative Criticism of the Gospels", *Pacifica* 4 (1991) 181-201.

18. This practice is still widespread among narrative critics. For example, in a recent fine study of "the Jews" in the Fourth Gospel (G. Caron, *Qui sont les "Juifs" de l'évangile de Jean?* [Recherches 35; Paris: Bellarmin, 1997]), the author argues from the narrative that "the Jews" represent a certain form of "Judaism" present among "the crowd", the Pharisees, and the Jewish leaders. Caron rejects any suggestion that this form of "Judaism" needs to be found somewhere in the broader phenomenon of a possible conflict between early Christianity and late first century Judaism. Unless some *Sitz im Leben* can be found for the proposed "Judaism", Caron's suggestion remains highly speculative.

19. See, for example, S. M. Schneiders, *The Revelatory Text*.

20. See The Bible and Culture Collective, *The Postmodern Bible*, for a systematic presentation of the increasing focus upon the readers and their context, leading to a relativising of the biblical text. See also S. D. Moore, *Poststructuralism and the New Testament: Derrida and Foucault at the Foot of the Cross* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990), and my review in *Pacifica* 7 (1994) 360-62.

“from their place”.²¹ To paraphrase a classical expression – “Quot interpretes, tot interpretationes” – there are as many interpretations as there are interpreters.

One of the most significant axioms behind these contemporary so-called postmodern methods of reading a biblical text can hardly be challenged: every interpreter inscribes his or herself in interpretation. On the basis of this axiom a wave of newer scholars suggests that we be honest at all times, admitting that the story I read into my interpretation is my story. Following the lead of the major study of Jeffrey Staley, *Reading with a Passion*, a number of scholars are developing what is known as autobiographical criticism.²² Feminist scholars have attempted to re-interpret HIS-story as HER-story. Postmodern readings have driven a wedge between a biblical text which is THEIR-story, and OUR-story, the product of an intertextuality with little understanding of time-honoured canonical Scriptures. The autobiographical critics argue that the most honest way to interpret a biblical text regarded as relevant is to read it as MY-story.

Where does the teacher of the text turn in the plethora of approaches to the biblical text which has emerged in recent years? One thing is certain: no interpretation can lay claim to ultimate authority. No single interpretation of any text, let alone an ancient canonical text, can claim to have exhausted all possible interpretations. I am aware that this suggestion might create difficulties in those centres of theological education which are governed by a particular Christian Church. One of the responses the official Churches are taking to the typically postmodern splintering of interpretations is to insist that a traditional interpretation, *and only that interpretation*, must be taught to potential ministerial candidates. To take such a stance is to bury one's head in the sand. There is no interpretative context which can claim to have understood all the possibilities of an ancient text, especially one which has remained alive in a reading public for two thousand years. Paul Ricoeur has done much to indicate that once the act of interpretation

21. I take this expression from two important volumes, edited by F. F. Segovia and M. A. Tolbert, which stress the importance of the socio-cultural location of the interpreter in interpretation: *Reading from This Place* (2 vols.: Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995-96). See the review of the first volume by Suzanne Boorer in *Pacifica* 9 (1996) 217-21.

22. Autobiographical criticism is not unique to biblical studies, but the first full-scale autobiographical New Testament study comes from J. L. Staley, *Reading with a Passion. Rhetoric, Autobiography, and the American West in the Gospel of John* (New York: Continuum, 1995). An initial description of this form of criticism and some interesting examples of it can be found in *Semeia* 72 (1995), edited by J. Capel Anderson and J. L. Staley, entitled *Taking it Personally*. A collection of autobiographical studies, edited by I.-R. Kitzberger, is to be published in London by Routledge during 1998, entitled *The Personal Voice in Biblical Studies*.

has come to its conclusion, there is always a significant “remainder” which lies beyond the limits of the completed interpretation, “the residue of the literal interpretation”.²³ However, this same philosopher has also insisted that *many* interpretations are possible, but not *any* interpretation.²⁴

It is this issue which concerns us. How does contemporary theological education “teach the text”? I wish I had a theoretical answer to that question, or a short list of “rules of thumb”.²⁵ As I share my experience with one of my favourite characters from the pages of the Fourth Gospel, I wish to pass from the theoretical to the practical. I am working out of a principle dear to me, and fundamental to my years of teaching the text: the acquisitions of 150 years of modern biblical scholarship must not be pitted one against the other.²⁶ The contemporary teacher of the biblical text must create a horizon where the worlds behind, within and in front of the text meet. The student must be given a reading of the text which acknowledges the past, but recognises the challenge of relating the givenness of the past to the exhilarating – even if at times confusing – experience of the present.²⁷

3. AN ADVENTURE WITH NICODEMUS

The following reading of John 3:1-11, 7:50-52, and 19:38-42 attempts to show that there is something of value in all that we have received from 150 years of critical New Testament scholarship.²⁸ My reading of

23. P. Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory: Discourse and the Surplus of Meaning* (Fort Worth: Texas Christian University Press, 1976) 55. See also P. Ricoeur, *Essays on Biblical Interpretation* (edited by L. S. Mudge; London: SPCK, 1981) 73-154. Ricoeur rejects “the absolute claim to self-consciousness” (p. 110) and advocates a “hermeneutics of testimony”.

24. See, for example, P. Ricoeur, *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences* (edited by J. B. Thompson; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981) 210-213. See his conclusion: “If it is true that there is always more than one way of construing a text, it is not true that all interpretations are equal and may be assimilated to so-called ‘rules of thumb’. The text is a limited field of possible constructions.”

25. I recall the list of eight steps which I was given when I was “taught to do exegesis”, guided by G. Adam, O. Kaiser and W. G. Kümmel, *Einführung in die exegetischen Methoden* (Fifth Edition; München/Mainz: Kaiser/Grünwald, 1975). These steps were immensely helpful, and no doubt still form the grid against which I read any passage. However, they must nowadays be supplemented with other elements that cannot be listed in this fashion.

26. See also Montague, *Understanding the Bible*, 159-80.

27. See Hooker, “In his own Image?”, 41.

28. The following reading of the Nicodemus passages borrows heavily from my full-scale autobiographical study entitled “An Adventure with Nicodemus”, to be published in Kitzberger, *The Personal Voice in Biblical Studies* (see above, note 21). I am grateful to the editor for permission to use the material in this context. I will not make detailed reference to the scholarship behind the following reading. It can be found in F. J. Moloney, *Belief in the Word: Reading John 1-4* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993); *Signs and Shadows: Reading John 5-12* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996); *Glory not Dishonor: Reading John 13-21*

the Nicodemus passages will overtly use the many techniques of traditional and more contemporary exegetical practices. Such an overt use of "methods" is not called for in the day-to-day teaching of the text. It is presupposed, however, that the expert teacher of the text is able to take hold of the passage being taught with an open mind and heart. She or he thus delivers it to students in such a manner that no one method is denigrated, and the significance of the worlds behind, within, and in front of the text are all given their due importance, even if they are never explicitly mentioned.

3.1 Are you the teacher of Israel? (John 3:10)

Many years ago, I went to a university to do an undergraduate degree, followed by a post-graduate diploma in education, that I might become a secondary school teacher. There was chalk in my blood, and the urge to be a first-rate teacher was strong. I had been brought up a practising Catholic, and the social and cultural setting of my life, the 1950-60s in Australia, was steady as a rock. There was no need for the Bible, as I had the Pope, the Bishop, the Priest, and weekly Mass. My belief system came from the family and a Catholic schooling, reinforced by the weekly sermon, the Sacraments of the Catholic Church, and various devotions. They were happy days, weeks, months and years, full of as little study as possible, great friends, sport, movies, and dancing to rock-and-roll music. The Catholic culture of the 1950s devoted scarce attention to the Bible.

But the Bible was soon to become a *problem*. The Johannine account of Jesus' meeting with a man who came from the darkness into the light in John 3:1-21, an example of the many who "believed in his name when they saw the signs which he did" (2:23), was one passage among many which generated a crisis in my days as a theological student. The healthy crisis persists to this day.²⁹ Even then, I had emerged as a "leader" (see John 3:1), and I knew who Jesus was: a teacher from God who had given the Catholic Church an authoritative teaching and a divinely appointed hierarchical structure (see 3:2). I *knew* what was to be known, and I did my best to live accordingly. But the Jesus of the Fourth Gospel used a double-meaning word to insist that I, a reader of the Fourth Gospel, be born again from above (v. 3) if I wished to see the Kingdom of God. I was, like Nicodemus, satisfied with only one of the two possible meanings of *born again*. I had been born again (v. 4) in the waters of Baptism (see v. 5), and the Catholic community was the Kingdom of God. I had full sight of the Kingdom within the structures and the sacramental

(Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998); *The Gospel of John* (Sacra Pagina Series 4; Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1998).

29. See Moloney, *Belief in the Word*, 106-21; *The Gospel of John*, 88-103.

system of the one true Church. But the Johannine Jesus insisted that this was insufficient: I must be born of water *and also of the Spirit* (v. 5), if I wished to enter the Kingdom. The double-meaning of *born again* (v. 3) had been unpacked in v. 5. To “see” (v. 3) and to “enter” (v. 5) the Kingdom of God, called me to leave my established ways and my closed system of truth (see v. 2). The external rite of Baptism retained its importance, but it was to be coupled with another more radical transformation reaching beyond the formality of a water ritual. I was OK on the former (v. 3), but had I really “entered” the Kingdom (v. 5)?

The “water” rebirth had been part of my experience – although I had no recollection of it. It was something I accepted on the basis of the Roman Catholic Church and my family traditions, something which had been handed down to me by people who, in their own time, had received it from other generations who believed that it had come from the Lord (see 1 Cor 11:23; 15:3). But this same tradition had said little to me about “the Spirit”, except some vague notions concerning the third person of the Trinity, called in those days the Holy Ghost. I had been taught that he (male, like everything else associated with God) was a part of the Mystery of the Trinity, and that it would be both arrogant and foolish to wonder further about a Mystery of Religion. I was happy to leave “mystery” alone. “(Un)”fortunately I was able to read on into the Johannine text to find Jesus’ clarification of what was meant by being born of the Spirit (see vv. 6-8), and I found especially “(un)”helpful the little parable in John 3:8:

The wind blows where it wills, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know whence it comes or whither it goes; so it is with every one who is born of the Spirit.

But why the “un” qualifying what one would expect to be quite positive reading experiences? Because my convictions of the 1950-60s began to crumble when I discovered that to be born of the Spirit meant to be caught up in an experience of life – in all its dimensions – which matched the experience of standing in the wind.

I know when the wind is swirling around me (v. 8a), and I can have the physical experience of its power to penetrate even the warmest of clothing. But, as Jesus’ parable so rightly remarks, I have no idea where this wind has its origins, nor do I know where it is going (v. 8b). Jesus adds a disturbing comment to the end of the parable: so it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit (v. 8c). The biblical text tells me that I must experience the Spirit swirling around me in the confusion of *not knowing* where I had come from and where I was going. My true origins and my true destiny, both in terms of my future history and my final resting-place, here and on the other side of death, are shrouded in mystery. Living in this *mystery* is a fundamental aspect of life in

the Kingdom of God. Here was the word that had been used to describe something that I should not bother my head about: mystery! I could only join with Nicodemus and ask "How can this be?" (v. 9).

But it is Jesus' response to my question which cuts deepest: "Are you the teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand this?" (v. 10). Not only are my former certainties questioned by the Johannine Jesus; my very status in the community of faith is at stake. Jesus seems to suggest that I *should have known* all that he was telling me about rebirth in water and the Spirit. My sight of and entry into the Kingdom of God depends upon my preparedness to let go of what my traditional Catholic culture had given me. I was "the teacher of Israel". But the Johannine Jesus was telling me that I was a fake, that my understanding of life in the Kingdom had little to do with the swirling winds of the Spirit leading me from I know not where into a destiny beyond my knowledge and control (v. 8).

I laid claim to be "the teacher of Israel" but I was only at the half-way house, having been born again of water. I was discovering that without the second half of the equation, rebirth in the Spirit, my achievements were irrelevant in the Kingdom. My obvious identification with Nicodemus lined me up with the "many who believed in his name when they saw the signs which he did" (2:23). This meant that "Jesus did not trust himself to them (me), because he knew everyone and needed no one to bear witness of man (me); for he himself knew what was in man (me). Now there was a man (me) named Nicodemus" (2:24-25; 3:1).³⁰ I will never forget the anxiety generated by my first serious encounters with the text as I honed the skills of Gospel criticism. The product of a community of faith and a culture which articulated that faith in a very clear fashion, I had taken all the right steps to become "the teacher of Israel". But all had been undermined as I gasped, "How can this be?" (3:9). I had to cope with the now obvious fact that the Gospels do not provide a record of the events from the life and teaching, death and resurrection of Jesus. They are narrative proclamations of the belief of the early Church.

This only led to a further problem, as the last sentence is partially correct. The more I acquainted myself with the Gospels and scholarly reflection upon them, I found they did not record *the belief* of the early Church, but *the beliefs* of the early Church. Not only did the early Christian churches produce a four-fold Gospel tradition (and many others which did not make final selection), but the Gospels told the story of Jesus in ways which demonstrated that *different* Christian communities proclaimed *different versions* of the significance of the person and message of Jesus. There is hardly a page

30. See Moloney, *Belief in the Word*, 104-6.

in the Gospels which does not profoundly question the earlier certainties of my life. I began to come to grips with an idea expressed by the Fathers of the Desert: to go forward it is necessary, momentarily, to lose the balance one had in the previously acquired situation. It is necessary to keep putting one's foot forward and in this way to regain the balance that was briefly lost.³¹

3.2 Earthly things – heavenly things (John 3:12)

But the Johannine Jesus continues to address my presumption. He makes it clear that my difficulty comes from my being content with those traditions which come to me from culturally conditioned understandings of God, the Christ, the Church and the Spirit. I should transform (not deny!) these understandings – so he said – in the light of the authentic Christian traditions which had been handed on to me. The Johannine Jesus warned me: “If I have told you earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you heavenly things” (v. 11). I found it hard to imagine that I should have done better, accepting all that Jesus had told Nicodemus in vv. 1-10 as “earthly things”. I thought (and so did many others) that I had done rather well, but the biblical text insisted that I had never fully understood the best and the most significant truths of my own Christian tradition.

I began to see that I had unwittingly worked from the comfortable assumption (belief?) that a number of agents in the Catholic Church's hierarchy had access to the secrets of heaven, and I had accepted uncritically what these agents “revealed” to me. But the Johannine Jesus declares that no one has ever gone up to heaven. There is only one person in the human story who can lay claim to having unveiled the mystery of God, Jesus the Son of Man who, given the cosmology the Fourth Gospel shared with early Gnosticism, had come down from heaven (v. 13). Against all who might lay claim to have ascended to heaven that they might make known the things of God, Jesus states that only the Son of Man has come down from heaven.³² But it is not enough to affirm *that* Jesus is the only authentic revelation of God; *how* does this revelation take place? Jesus draws a comparison between the serpent lifted up in the desert which healed the ailments of all who gazed upon it, and the Son of Man who must be lifted up on a Cross to make sense of life, both here and hereafter for all who accept what he has told of the unseen God (vv. 14-15. See 1:18).

31. See F. J. Moloney, *A Body Broken for a Broken People: Eucharist in the New Testament* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1997) xv.

32. For a full discussion of the Jewish and Gnostic background to the “ascent-descent” motif in 3:13, see F. J. Moloney, *The Johannine Son of Man* (Biblioteca di Scienze Religiose 14; Rome: LAS, 1978) 53-59.

Jesus' mini-discourse (vv. 11-21) does not inform me of the *nature* of the Johannine God, but of the way God *acts*. The presence of Jesus in the human story is the result of an act of love (v. 16); God does not condemn, but saves. What is at stake is not so much what *God* might do, but how *I* might respond to the mysterious presence of a loving God in my life. I could go on reaching into this mystery by believing in what the Johannine Jesus was telling me, or I could condemn myself to lostness by rejecting it, in favour of my long-held and well-established beliefs. I am the one responsible for my own actions, my own present and future, the rightness or wrongness of the way I respond to my world and the people and situations of that world. There is no fixed agenda; just a request to gaze upon the loving gift of God (v. 16), lifted up on a Cross. Herein lay the challenge: to recognise in the Cross the symbol of the Son of Man lifted up from the earth (see 12:32). This event-symbol is presented by other early Christian story-tellers as the most horrific of human experiences, only overcome by the action of God in the resurrection.³³ For the Johannine narrative it is the most exquisite way of telling me of the immensity of God's love. "No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends. You are my friends if you do my commandments" (15:13-14). "This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you" (15:12. See 13:34-35; 15:17).

Jesus' words to Nicodemus are no longer a threat but a challenge. They draw me beyond "earthly things" and express concern over my ability to understand "earthly things" (v. 12), but they also challenge me to be responsible for the recognition of love where it can be found, and for the rejection of love made known (vv. 16-17). The Johannine Jesus concludes his words to Nicodemus (me) by further spelling out that the choice is mine: I can choose light or darkness, goodness or evil. I can walk along the established ways which lead me where I wish to go (see John 21:18), but that will leave me in darkness, afraid to come into the light of truth, for fear that my sinfulness might be seen. On the other hand, I can live in the Spirit, allowing myself to seek the freedom of responding responsibly to the reality of love in my life (see v. 8). This is the way which leads into light. Whichever way I decide to go, I judge myself (vv. 19-21).

3.3 Are you also led astray? (John 7:47)

A new sense of freedom floods into the life of anyone naïve enough to accept the authority of Jesus' words to Nicodemus. I was – and am –

33. The Pauline and the Markan understanding of the Cross come to mind. On these, see F. Pastor-Ramos, *La Salvación del Hombre en la Muerte y Resurrección de Cristo* (Institución San Jeronimo 24; Estella: Editorial Verbo Divino, 1991), and D. Senior, *The Passion of Jesus in the Gospel of Mark* (The Passion Series 2; Wilmington: Michael Glazier, 1984).

such a naïve person, rendered naïve by my belief in the ultimate significance of the God of the Bible, and the revelation of that God which Christians hold took place in and through Jesus Christ.³⁴ But it is one thing to have the principles clear, and another to put them into practice. Again, I am able to identify with Nicodemus, as he states the truth but falters when “the Institution” dares him to exercise his new-found freedom.

During the last day of the celebration of Tabernacles (John 7:37), Temple officers who had been sent out by the Pharisees “about the middle of the feast” (see 7:14) to arrest Jesus (7:32) return to the leaders of “the Jews”.³⁵ The officers have been listening and observing Jesus for several days, and are now impressed by the authority of his words (see v. 46). The Pharisees close ranks, accusing the officers of having been seduced by Jesus, claiming that none of the authorities or the Pharisees believed in him (v. 48). But Nicodemus, one of them (v. 50), had earlier been reduced to silence (3:1-10) and in his silence he had been promised the revelation of love and life (3:11-21). He now speaks up and makes a lie of their claim (7:51). Nicodemus was from among the Pharisees (3:1), a ruler of “the Jews” (3:1). I join him again as I look back across my own life story, recalling the times when I tried to stand tall for what I believed to be true. Nicodemus attempts to break ranks, and to insist that the opposition to the Jesus of the Fourth Gospel is not as unified as some might like to believe. The only people, insists Nicodemus *on the basis of his own experience* (see 3:1-21), who understand Jesus are those who hear his word in faith and recognise his works for what they are: the action of God in his Son.³⁶ But abuse and the fear that he (I) might be regarded as one of the fringe dwellers of his (my) social, cultural and religious context leads to silence. Nicodemus (I) has (have) no word in response to the

34. I am aware that sophisticated postmodern biblical criticism tends to ridicule such naïvety. The Johannine view, which I am accepting as having sufficient authority to question everything that I stood for in the 1960s, may only be the result of the speculations of a late first century pseudo-Gnostic Christian which cry out to be deconstructed. My adherence to a faith tradition and my belonging to a faith community are the reasons for my naïvety. On this, see S. Fish, *Is There a Text in This Class? The Authority of Interpretative Communities* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1980) 303-21. See also my “Conclusion” to this study, below.

35. See Moloney, *Signs and Shadows*, 84-93; *The Gospel of John*, 252-55. The use of the expression “the Jews” (οἱ Ἰουδαῖοι) demands that all who teach the text indicate (i) the historical-critical background to the use of the expression, (ii) the way in which it functions within the Johannine narrative, and (iii) how it should be used in contemporary readings of the Fourth Gospel. For a recent study which performs (ii) and (iii) very well, but largely ignores (i), see Caron, *Qui sont les “Juifs”?*

36. For this interpretation of 7:51, see S. Pancaro, *The Law in the Fourth Gospel: The Torah and the Gospel. Moses and Jesus, Judaism and Christianity according to John* (Supplements to Novum Testamentum 42; Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1975) 149-56. See also S. Pancaro, “The Metamorphosis of a Legal Principle in the Fourth Gospel. A Closer Look at 7,51”, *Biblica* 53 (1972) 340-61.

challenge from the approved hierarchy which has domesticated the approach to God into a system which they control (v. 52).

But there is more. As I (he) had come from the darkness into the light to approach Jesus in 3:2, I (he) now skulk (skulks) back into the darkness (see 3:2), probably aware that I (he) have (has) blotted my (his) copybook with the powers that be. This situation is further complicated by the fact that I (he) am (is) unable to cope with the challenge of the marginalisation which the accepted culture might impose upon me (him) if I (he) were to stick to my (his) guns.³⁷

3.4 Nicodemus came, bringing myrrh and aloes (John 19:39)

The story of Nicodemus comes to an end at the tomb of Jesus (19:38-42).³⁸ Scholarly opinion ranges from a claim that Nicodemus has not progressed beyond the limited faith he displayed in 3:1-11,³⁹ to a suggestion that Nicodemus' reception of the body of Jesus is a hint of the reception of the Eucharist.⁴⁰ Neither extreme reflects my adventure with Nicodemus. There is public recognition of Jesus in the association of two previously "hidden disciples" of Jesus (vv. 38-39: Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus) with the crucified Jesus.⁴¹ They request the body of Jesus from Pilate, the authority who handed him over to "the Jews" for execution (v. 38. See 19:16a), and they bury him with a massive mixture of myrrh and aloes (vv. 40-41). The quantity of fragrant oils suggests that the royal theme, which was present in the account of the story from 18:1-19:37, continues in v. 39. But what of Nicodemus? Is this a sign that he has finally overcome the hesitations and the fear of 7:51? Yes, but Nicodemus still has a long way to go. It cannot be said that Nicodemus has achieved the quality of faith of earlier characters in the story: the Mother of Jesus (2:5), John the Baptist (3:28-30), the Samaritan Villagers (4:42), the Royal

37. I am deliberately placing my experience in the main text and the *possibility* of Nicodemus' sharing that experience in parenthesis because I do not know of Nicodemus' inner response to the rebuff he receives in v. 51. Nothing is said in the Johannine text, but I do know my own experience. What *might* have been the case for a character in the text *is* the case for me, the reader of the text. Is this a valid reading of the text?

38. See F. J. Moloney, "The Johannine Passion and the Christian Community", *Salesianum* 57 (1995) 25-61; and Moloney, *The Gospel of John*, 510-13.

39. See, for example, P. D. Duke, *Irony in the Fourth Gospel* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1985) 110; D. Rensberger, *Johannine Faith and Liberating Community* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1988) 40; D. D. Sylva, "Nicodemus and His Spices", *New Testament Studies* 34 (1988) 148-51.

40. See, for example, J.-M. Auwers, "Le Nuit de Nicodème (Jean 3:2; 19:39) ou l'ombre du langage", *Revue Biblique* 97 (1990) 481-503; B. Hemelsoet, "L'ensevelissement selon Jean", in *Studies in John: Presented to Professor J. N. Sevenster on the Occasion of his Seventieth Birthday* (Supplements to Novum Testamentum 24; Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1970) 47-65.

41. They possibly represent what R. E. Brown has called "crypto-Christians". See his *The Community of the Beloved Disciple. The Lives, Loves, and Hates of an Individual Church in New Testament Times* (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1979) 71-3.

Official (4:50).⁴² Nor can it be said that he matches the faith of the Beloved Disciple, who does not see Jesus in the tomb, but believes when he sees God's victory over death in the empty burial cloths (19:8). We do not know how Nicodemus might respond to the last words of the risen Jesus in the story: "Blessed are those who have not seen, and yet believe" (20:29).⁴³ The Beloved Disciple believed without seeing, and all Johannine readers are exhorted to become beloved disciples, believing without seeing.⁴⁴ Just as Nicodemus at the tomb of Jesus cannot come under the rubric of the Beloved Disciple, nor can I. Neither Nicodemus at the tomb *in the story*, nor a Christian reader of *the story*, can lay ultimate claims to believing without seeing.

My journey with Nicodemus is open-ended. Both Nicodemus and I have come to recognise that God is made known in the loving self-gift of Jesus unto death, and thus deserves all honour and even royal respect. But that is not what the Johannine Jesus (see 20:29) or the Johannine author (see 20:30-31) demands of the readers of this story.⁴⁵ Nicodemus and I have come a long way, but more adventures lie ahead. The challenge to live in the Spirit (see 3:8), to recognise the revelation of God in loving self-gift (3:13-17), and to walk in the way of that same self-gift (3:19-21; 13:15, 34-35, 15:12, 17; 17:21-26) is still with me, in an Australian culture and society in which Christian faith and practice either are becoming increasingly irrelevant (except for State occasions and national disasters), or are surviving as the hope of those who think that some golden era of the past will return. In some ways, but not universally, my own tradition is attempting the restoration of my idealised 1950-60s. Too often its public face and magisterial pronouncements lack compassion, and they say very little to me. Indeed, they jar when read in conjunction with Mark 10:42-45:

You know that those who are supposed to rule over the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great men exercise authority over them. But it shall not be so among you; but whoever would be great

42. See Moloney, *Belief in the Word*, 192-9.

43. A further traditional critical question which cannot be bypassed emerges. Does John 21 belong to the narrative design of the original Gospel? Unlike most narrative critics, I maintain that John 21 was added to an already self-contained narrative which ended at 20:30-31. See Moloney, *The Gospel of John*, 562-68.

44. See B. J. Byrne, "The Faith of the Beloved Disciple and the Community in John 20", *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 23 (1985) 83-97. See also Moloney, *The Gospel of John*, 542-4.

45. Particularly helpful in this respect is J. M. Bassler, "Mixed Signals: Nicodemus in the Fourth Gospel", *Journal for Biblical Literature* 108 (1989) 635-46. She argues that Nicodemus is neither "in" nor "out" by the time the reader comes to the end of the story. He is a *tertium quid* whose ambiguity is never resolved. For a summary of scholarly discussion of the role of Nicodemus in the Fourth Gospel, see Sylva, "Nicodemus", 150-51, notes 7 and 12.

among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be slave of all. For the Son of Man also came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.⁴⁶

Along with Nicodemus, my fellow-reader of the biblical text, I cannot go back. At this moment, hopefully only beginning the latter half of my autobiography, I recognise Jesus at the tomb and wonder where my adventure with Nicodemus will lead me. But in the difficulties of this postmodern moment, which may obviously intensify, I journey on, attempting to cross the bridge constructed by the Johannine Jesus' final words: "Blessed are those who have not seen, yet believe" (20:29). In this I am armed with a prayer which comes from another Gospel tradition: "I believe, help my unbelief" (Mark 9:24).

4. CONCLUSION

The above reading of some Johannine passages is obviously a blending (some might say a mish-mash) of traditional and more contemporary approaches to the biblical text. Although, to the practitioner, my use of traditional methods in the above reading will be obvious, I wish to reaffirm the importance of historical-critical questions. Who are "the Jews" in the Fourth Gospel? Does John 21 belong to the Johannine narrative? What is the function of double-meaning words in the narrative (born again, spirit, etc.)? Where in 3:1-21 do Jesus' words to Nicodemus end and where does Jesus' mini-discourse begin? The Hebrew and Greek texts of the Bible were written a long time ago, in religious settings very different from our own, in languages (which reflect profound cultural differences) that most contemporary students are not able to read. Unless the critical questions are faced, however skilfully, and with however many modern "aids", the text will be lost.

But is that a "loss"? If all that matters is recognition that everything is "intertext", the product of a highly volatile number of possibilities which happened to come together in this way at a particular point in time, then why bother? Why freeze a cultural, historical and religious moment from the past to generate (and subsequently impose) a normative "canon"? All that matters is the reader. But every potential reader is also "intertext": the product of an infinite number of possibilities which have come together in one particular reading experience. In answer to my own question: yes, to lose the biblical text would be a tragic loss, as we would then be faced with the giddy prospect of spiralling through a never-ending

46. See the powerful statement of the same sentiments in the letter of the retiring Bishop of Innsbruck, Reinhold Stecher, "Challenge to the Church", *The Tablet* 20/27 December 1997, 1668-9.

whirlwind of interpretative possibilities, accepted today and discarded tomorrow. No human community, especially one inspired by the Christian Tradition, could survive in such a whirlwind.

Without *the text* of the adventures of Nicodemus I would not understand that the Christian Tradition was born within Judaism, and that it summoned those who wish to adhere to that Tradition to allow the impulse of the Spirit to draw them beyond rituals, accepting the divine origins of their beginning and their end. I would not know that, in both past and present times, many claim to speak authoritatively of God, but that there is only one who has come from God, and has made God known. Jesus of Nazareth, the Son of Man, has been lifted up on a cross to show in his flesh the love of God, so that all who gaze upon this unique revelation of a unique God will have life. In this God's love has been made known, that he sent Jesus, his Son, not to judge us but to give us life. Thus, despite our past and our present public face, Christianity is not about judgement, but about life.⁴⁷ But we are masters of our own destiny. Johannine realised eschatology is not just a technical term dear to Charles Harold Dodd and Rudolf Bultmann. It speaks to those of us who need to be taught that we are responsible for our words and deeds. A list of Christian "truth-claims" could go on but these, selected from my reading of John 3:1-21, will have to suffice.

There must be a multiplicity of possible readings of the biblical text and a multiplicity of interpretations resulting from such readings. But those who teach the text of the New Testament in our new age in Australia do so because of its importance within a Community and a Tradition which recognises Jesus as Son of God, Son of Man, the unique revelation of God in the human story. The person of Jesus Christ gives the text authority, not the text itself. Christian Tradition pre-existed the text, and gave us the *biblia* of the New Testament to grant later generations access to the person of Jesus the Christ. We continue to read the story of Jesus within that Tradition.⁴⁸ Not only is there a narrative world behind, within and in front of the text; there is also a Christian Tradition which pre-dated the text, generated the text, and which continues to give it life within contemporary societies. The relationship between Tradition and Scripture, however, is never stable, much less "frozen". The Tradition gave birth to and continues

47. See the important recent pontifical statement of the need for the Catholic Church to "become more fully conscious of the sinfulness of her children, recalling all those times in history when they departed from the spirit of Christ and his Gospel and, instead of offering to the world the witness of a life inspired by the values of faith, indulged in ways of thinking and acting which were truly forms of counter-witness and scandal" in John Paul II, *Apostolic Letter Tertio Millennio Adveniente* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1994) paras. 33-36 (pp. 42-48). The citation comes from para 33 (p. 42).

48. Parallel affirmations could (and should) be made concerning the place of *Torah*, *Nebi'im* and *Ketubim* within the Jewish Tradition. It is beyond the scope of this paper to do so.

to enliven the Scriptures in a Christian community, but the Scriptures perform the prophetic role of keeping the Tradition honest when it falls to the temptation of absolutising, through accommodation, any age, culture or particular religious practice.⁴⁹ Not all will accept this view, and I ask, within a postmodern world, where “différance” is so important, that we Christians be allowed to affirm our “difference”.

The teacher of the text of the New Testament in a new age must do her or his best to achieve the impossible. He or she must work imaginatively within the Christian Tradition to create a horizon between the worlds behind the text, in the text, and in front of the text in an interpretation which respects all three, as well as telling something of the story of the interpreter. My insistence upon the need to create a horizon where all “worlds” meet is not new. It was an essential part of Gadamer’s hermeneutic in which true understanding does not take place without a *Horizontverschmelzung*, a fusion of horizons, past and present,⁵⁰ further articulated by the reception aesthetics and literary hermeneutics of Hans Robert Jauss.⁵¹ It has been exquisitely developed in Ricoeur’s large-scale *Time and Narrative*.⁵² Ricoeur insists that the act of reading produces a “refiguration of time”. Indeed, he rightly points out that all attempts, both past and present, to posit different “worlds” in the reading process misunderstand that process. All “worlds” disappear, and there remains only the complex relationship between the text and the reader, “the confrontation between the world of the text and the world of the reader at once a stasis and an impetus”.⁵³ Ricoeur uses the notion of “appropriation”, his translation of the German *Aneignung*. The verb *aneignen* means to make one’s own what was initially alien. Thus, he rightly comments, “even when we read a philosophical work, it is always a question of entering into an alien work, of divesting oneself of the earlier ‘me’ in order to receive...the self conferred by the work itself”.⁵⁴ In this playful, but challenging, process there is no place for the static focus of the interpreter’s attention upon one of the three “worlds”, or the privileging of any one

49. For further development of this important point, see F. J. Moloney, “Jesus Christ: The Question to Cultures”, *Pacifica* 1 (1988) 15-43; and Moloney, *A Body Broken for a Broken People*, 7-30, 191-201.

50. See, for example, H.-G. Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (New York: Seabury, 1975) 269-74. See p. 273: “Understanding...is always the fusion of these horizons which we imagine to exist by themselves” (my emphasis).

51. On this, see the impressive study by Ormond Rush, *The Reception Doctrine. An Appropriation of Hans Robert Jauss’ Reception Aesthetics and Literary Hermeneutics* (Tesi Gregoriani 19; Roma: Editrice Pontificia Università Gregoriana, 1007). On Jauss’s use of the word “horizon”, see pp. 65-124.

52. P. Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative* (3 vols.; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984-88).

53. Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, 2:179.

54. Ricoeur, *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences*, 190.

of those worlds. As Ricoeur comments at the close of one of his very few excursions into biblical scholarship: "Repetition means transfiguration".⁵⁵

I was reading Arundhati Roy's Booker Prize winning novel, *The God of Small Things*, as I was writing this paper. Within that context there was a passage from the narrator which struck me as true, and appropriate for this setting:

The Great Stories are the ones you have heard and want to hear again. The ones you can enter anywhere and inhabit comfortably. They don't deceive you with thrills and trick endings. They don't surprise you with the unforeseen. They are as familiar as the house you live in. Or the smell of your lover's skin. You know how they end, yet you listen as though you don't. In the way that although you know that one day you will die, you live as though you won't. In the Great Stories you know who lives, who dies, who finds love, who doesn't. And yet you want to know again.⁵⁶

It is important for Jews and Christians that there be Jewish and Christian communities where both the text of *the Bible* and certain interpretations of *the Bible* are treasured. For the Jewish and the Christian Tradition, the Bible is one of the ways God is made known, it is our own Great Story. It is the house we live in...the smell of our lover's skin. It has given us the fixed points which support the silken threads upon which the many possible tapestries of Jewish and Christian belief and Jewish and Christian responses to that belief can be woven.⁵⁷ We know and yet we want to know again. The task of teaching the text is not determined by dogmatics, itself interpretation of the text, but inspired by the beauty of the text and the Tradition giving it life. *Mutatis mutandis*, a contemporary assessment of the task of the literary critic could be applied to the teacher of the biblical text:

A great literary critic is like a great musician, who uses his knowledge of music to create beautiful interpretations. These interpretations, although they are called "interpretations of", are in fact interpretations *with* the music – they achieve what the art was made for in the first place.⁵⁸

55. P. Ricoeur, "The Golden Rule. Exegetical and Theological Perplexities", *New Testament Studies* 36 (1990) 397.

56. Arundhati Roy, *The God of Small Things* (London: Flamingo, 1997) 229.

57. On this process, see The Pontifical Biblical Commission, *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church* (Rome: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1993).

58. B. P. van Heusden, *Why Literature? An Inquiry into the Nature of Literary Semiosis* (Groningen: Krips Repro Meppel, 1994) 235. I thank my colleague at Australian Catholic University, Dr Dennis Rochford, M.S.C., who drew my attention to this stimulating work.

The birth, life-story and death of each one of us are more than autobiography. *For me*, there is a world beyond the text of “my story” which impinges upon the reading process. I trust that my account of my journey with Nicodemus – only one text among so many in our *biblia* – shows that this mysterious world does not freeze the Jew and Christian into an irrelevant past. As Ruldolf Bultmann said in 1957: “Ever anew it will make clear who we are and who God is, and the exegete will have to express this in an ever new conceptuality.”⁵⁹

59. R. Bultmann, “Is Exegesis Without Presuppositions Possible?”, in S. M. Ogden (ed.), *New Testament Mythology and Other Basic Writings* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984). The original German appeared in *Theologische Zeitschrift* 13 (1957) 409-17.