From the Word to the World

Author, Text and (post-modern) Reader in the task of Biblical Interpretation

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The transition from modernity to postmodernity is producing some fascinating effects in the world of biblical hermeneutics, which have knock-on effects in missiology, since so many missiological issues are essentially hermeneutical in essence. This is especially so for evangelicals, because of our commitment to attaining a theology of mission that can be defended as 'biblical'. Is the arrival of a postmodern perspective, then, to feared or welcomed in biblical hermeneutics? As so often, probably both in different respects.

Postmodernity : friend or foe?

Enlightenment modernity constrained biblical hermeneutics into the straitjacket of the historical-critical method and claimed to have forged a form of 'modern scientific exegesis' that excluded the transcendent from Scripture just as sharply as autonomous rationality excluded it from the natural sciences. But, as Brueggemann and others have pointedly made clear, the myth of neutrality, of scientific objectivity, concealed a western hegemony in biblical studies that tended to stifle all other voices or readings.[1]

Postmodernism, with its rejection of all hegemonies and deep suspicion of all claims to 'scientific objectivity', finality and universality, has challenged the critical hermeneutical consensus on Scripture as well. Postmodernism shatters the myth of some totally neutral, presupposition-free exegesis, innocent of all polluting bias that might arise from any personal belief that the scholar might hold (such as belief in God, for example). Instead, it has opened up a world of almost infinite plurality of readings and interpretations. At one level this has had the exhilarating effect of giving a place in the sun to a great variety of contextual readings of the Scripture which are not bound to the historical-critical method developed in the western academy. There is value in recognizing the *relativity* of all hermeneutics, since all interpreters read Scripture in relation to their own time and place in history and culture and cannot do otherwise. A positive benefit of the postmodern shift in biblical studies is that you don't have to submit your interpretation of scripture to a single accrediting agency – the western critical guild of scholarship. Postmodernism is in theory friendly to confessional interpretation of Scripture. We all adopt some stance in reading biblical texts. Why not adopt the faith stance of the text itself? Why not, indeed? shrugs a genuine postmodern.

On the other hand, the postmodern rejection of any foundation or grounds on which we might affirm a reading of the biblical text to be *right or wrong, valid or invalid,* or even just better or worse than another, opens up an uncontrolled *relativism.* The *de facto* plurality of contexts in which the text is read and heard becomes a *de jure* pluralism of approach that has no limits or controls in relation to the truth of the text. Indeed, a rigorously postmodern approach questions whether the very concept of 'the truth of the text' is meaningful at all. There is no such single 'truth' and any claim to affirm one to the exclusion of others is by nature oppressive. The text can have as many meanings as there are readers and contexts.

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[1] Brueggemann's prolific work as an Old Testament scholar and interpreter has moved consciously in an ever more postmodern direction. He provides a survey of the plurality of current approaches to Old Testament theological hermeneutics in his massive *Theology of the Old Testament: Testimony, Dispute, Advocacy* (Minneappolis, Augsburg, 1997), ch. 2, pp. 61-114. See also 'Biblical Theology Appropriately Postmodern', *Biblical Theology Bulletin*, 27 (1997), pp. 4-9.

However, whether positively or negatively, the impact of postmodernism has been seen in what Peter Hicks calls 'the quiet revolution' in hermeneutics – including evangelical hermeneutics.[2] In place of a settled list of somewhat abstract 'hermeneutical principles' to be applied to all texts with an assurance of standardized and rather predictable results, there is a greater recognition of the many-sidedness of texts themselves (they can be descriptive, prescriptive, performative, imaginative, etc.), and of the many-sidedness of truth in human personal experience (as distinct from Enlightenment reductionism of truth to rational propositions; truth in a holistic sense can be propositional, personal, moral, historical, emotional, mathematical, etc.)

I believe 21st missiology will have to wrestle with a *doctrine of scripture* that moves beyond the way evangelical scholarship has tended to defend the inspiration and authority of the Bible with the concepts and methods of modernity itself, towards a more dynamic understanding of the authority and role of the Bible in a postmodern world. And I think this will be one of the biggest challenges for Christian theology in the 21st century, since there is no mission without the authority of Christ himself, and our access to that authority depends upon the Scriptures. *So, a major missiological task for evangelical theology will be a fresh articulation of the authority of the Bible and its relation to Christ's authorization of our mission.*

Three focal points for the source of 'meaning' in the Bible

Faced with the basic hermeneutical question: "What does this biblical text mean?" scholars have tended to focus on one of three possible locations for the real source of "meaning" in texts: 1) the author(s); 2) the text itself; 3) the reader(s). I would like to look at each of these three focal points. First I will very briefly describe each one and evaluate some key strengths and weaknesses. Then I would like to explore the impact that each approach to hermeneutics will have on our understanding and communication of the Bible as truth in today's world.

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1. Author-centred focus

This hermeneutical approach, which is common to evangelical as well as more critical interpretation, assumes that the meaning of any biblical text is to be found by going back to **the origins** of the text. **Exegesis** is fundamentally based on recovering the **author's intent**. This then involves the g**rammatico-historical method**. By means of textual criticism, lexical and semantic study of the words, syntax and grammar, the exegete seeks to answer the question, 'What did this author actually say; and what did the words mean at the time?' The focus is very much on the past: the original meaning of the text in its original context. A vital step in this process is to 'Set the text in its context', or rather, its **contexts,** which will include canonical, historical, social and cultural contexts. Then, further, all the tools of critical study, sometimes collectively described as the historico-critical method, will be employed to explore the origins of the text before us. These include, source criticism, form criticism, redaction criticism etc. The common aim is to get as close as possible to understanding what the original author(s) of the text meant to communicate through its production, collection and preservation.

There are several obvious ***strengths*** in such an approach:

- It seems to be the 'common sense' approach. It assumes that meaning starts in the mind of the author; when somebody speaks or writes they intend to communicate some meaning which they wish to be understood. This approach respects the priority of author-intent.

- It tries to take an objective approach, arguing for some core of stable meaning in each text which is in principle recoverable by the exegete. That objective core of meaning is assumed to be 'what the author meant to say' – or as near as we can get to it, assuming we can never

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[2] Peter Hicks, *Evangelicals and Truth: A Creative Proposal for a Postmodern Age* (Leicester: IVP, 1998), ch. 12, pp. 111-123.

be 100% certain.

- It offers some control over the hermeneutical process by setting limits/boundaries to possible meanings. It enables some adjudication of legitimate and illegitimate interpretations. We may agree that a text could have several possible meanings, but also agree that some meanings are impossible. This does not guarantee 'certainty' – there is always room for disagreement among readers. But there is an assumption that we *can* know enough to get a reasonably close approximation to what the author probably meant to say.

- The importance of paying attention to the authors of biblical texts also lies in their character as *witnesses* (directly or indirectly) to the *story* of salvation. It is assumed that biblical texts are *referential.* That is, they actually refer to real events in the real world - events in which God has acted for our salvation. The world of the biblical authors is the world where things happened that constitute the Gospel. The biblical text is like a ***window*** to that world. What we mean by 'the truth of the Bible', therefore, is that it give us reliable information about those things that happened through which God has acted to save us.

But there are also some ***dangers*** if we focus exclusively on the search for the original author's intent.

- Obsession with origins can obscure the *purpose* of the text. The expression 'modern *scientific* criticism' reveals the fact that the rise of the critical approach to the text went hand in hand with Enlightenment-modernity's preference for explaining everything by finding causes at the expense of teleology (i.e. seeking the purpose of something). Science explains by *reducing* phenomena to their smallest parts, and by seeking *causes* of how things have become what they are. Natural science explores causation, but not design or purpose. It does not ask 'what is this *for?'* Similarly some critical exegesis of the bible breaks it up into ever smaller sources, and then explores the origins, history, and structure of the smallest possible units of the text. But so often 'scientific criticism' stops there and does not go on to answer the question, 'Yes, but what is this book as a whole actually *saying*? What is this text *for*? What does it *do?* What was the *purpose* of the person who produced or collected this text?'

- Author-centred focus, as we have noted, treats the text as a ***window***, through which we can gain access to the authors' own world. However, exclusive attention to that world ('the world behind the text') can obscure the fact that the purpose of a window is also to let the light shine into the room of the observer from that outside world. It is possible to become obsessed by the world of the text and to overlook (or exclude) the *revelatory* function of the biblical text as Scripture. The Bible is not there simply to shed light on the world of ancient Israel or the early church, but to be 'a light to *my* path'. In other words, an evangelical approach to the Bible recognizes that 'author-intent' is not confined to the human author, but must also include the intent of the divine Author whose message addresses every human context through these inspired texts.

What impact, then, does an author-centred approach to hermeneutics have on our understanding and communication of the Bible as truth? Fundamentally, it reminds us that truth is inseparably bound up with what the author of a given text wanted to communicate through it. Hermeneutics then is the skill of trying to determine as accurately as possible what that author intention was, and at the same time to exclude alleged meanings of the text which it is impossible or highly unlikely that the author intended.

Sometimes this task is relatively straightforward (though never totally problem-free), when a simple statement or affirmation is made. When someone writes, 'Yahweh is God in heaven above and on the earth beneath and there is no other', or 'After this Paul left Athens and went to Corinth', it is not too difficult to discern their intended meaning, though the truth of each statement is on rather different levels of significance. It is, of course, much more subtle when we are dealing with other kinds of texts, using poetic imagery, metaphor, and a wide range of accepted conventions of literary art.

However, even when we ask about the truth of a straightforward historical narrative the matter is not so simple. If by the question, 'Is it true?' we mean, 'Did it actually happen?', and we find convincing reasons for answering 'Yes', that only touches one level (though a fundamental level) of the truth of such a text. For its truth as Scripture also lies in the 'so what?' questions that it generates. What is the truth of this narrative that must be responded to by those who read it? What is the truth that is to be trusted, to be lived out in my own life, to be proclaimed, to shape the community of those who inherit the story?

Take the resurrection narratives, for example. Obviously, if they are not true at a historical level (i.e. if they are not 'referential', describing something that actually happened), then as Paul says our whole faith is futile. But even when we have accepted their historicity that only gets us to the foundation level of their truth claim. What matters for the Christian (and for all human beings) is what else is true because this narrative is true. If Jesus is risen (historically true), then what now is the truth about Jesus of Nazareth, about the God of Israel, about the creation, about death, about the future, etc? The story of the resurrection not only is a window on the world of what it describes, it also sheds light on the world in which we now still live – and indeed on the world to come.

Thus, author-centred approaches to biblical hermeneutics, by treating the text as a window, both gives us access to the world of God's historical action for our salvation, and also allows the light of God's truth to shine into our own world now.

2. Text-centred focus

This approach believes that meaning is to be found in the text itself, regarded as an **artefact,** that is, a piece of human construction – i.e. like a painting, or piece of music, or sculpture, which can be appreciated for itself, no matter who produced it or why. We should not use the text merely as a means of getting inside the mind of its author, but treat it as an entity in its own right warranting our attention. The text is not so much a window that we *look through* to some world beyond itself, as **a painting** that we *look at*. A painting could even be made to look exactly like a window – giving the illusion of some objective reality outside itself, but still be merely a painting – a work of human artistry. So, as applied to biblical texts, this approach pays little attention to the author and his or her intentions (which we cannot know for certain anyway). The text now has an existence and a meaning of its own, to be appreciated for its own sake as a work of **literary art and craft –** which of course it certainly is**.**

This approach has developed many helpful tools of **literary** analysis and tends to engage in **close reading** of texts, paying careful attention to all the fine detail of a narrative or poem, in the same way that an art connoisseur will appreciate every brush stroke of a master painter. Literary appreciation of biblical literature will include, for example:

Genre identification – what kind of literature is this and how is it to be read?
Literary conventions – how do stories, poems, etc. actually work? How do they engage and affect us when we read them?
Narrative art – e.g. setting, plot, characters, suspense, irony, perspective, gapping, patterning, word-play, etc.
Poetic art – e.g. economy of words, imagery, metaphor, parallelism, poetic figures, chiasmus/concentricity, climax, contrast, symbolism, etc.

Such literary approaches to the biblical text often bring out all sorts of layers of meaning and significance that have been put in there by the skill and the thought and the art and the craft of the human author to whom God was entrusting the message that was to be conveyed by the medium of literature.

In evaluating this text-focused, literary approach to biblical hermeneutics, we may observe several ***strengths*** and values:

- The Bible *is* great literature: it can and should be appreciated at that level. There is no necessary conflict between believing in divine inspiration and appreciating human artistry.

- Literary approaches tend to be more holistic (that is, they tend to treat passages or books as a whole), and yet at the same time pay very close attention to the fine details of the text. This is consonant with an evangelical commitment to verbal inspiration; the choice of words matters. Part of the value of the literary approach to biblical texts is that it values precisely the words and phrases that the author has chosen to use, repeat, arrange, play with, emphasize, etc. Thus, from an evangelical perspective, such an approach fully respects the humanity of Scripture as well as its divinity.

- It helps us to understand how meaning is carried by the *form* of a text and not just by its *content*. We need to look not only at *what* is written, but also at *how* it has been written.

- Paradoxically also, a text-centred approach respects the author, not so much on the assumption that we can confidently recover the author's intended meaning, but that we can admire the author's artistry.

- Such an approach can go along with the conviction that, strictly speaking (e.g. 2 Tim. 3:16), inspiration is a property of the *texts* of Scripture, not of the authors, or of the pre-canonical sources, etc. Therefore, indirectly, a close literary reading of the biblical texts is a compliment to the divine author as well (on an evangelical understanding). It is consonant with evangelical commitment to the dual authorship of the Bible.

- It treats the great variety of biblical texts with integrity by genuinely listening to their *plurivocality* – i.e. the internal dialectic of views and perspectives, which often seem in uncomfortable opposition to one another. It resists flattening everything out or squeezing everything into a univocal system. This is a major emphasis in recent postmodern hermeneutics. [3]

But there are also, of course, ***dangers*** in a literary approach which focuses exclusively on the text itself without concern for the identity or the world of the author.
Literary study of the text *can* proceed without reference to the historical value of the text. ('Never mind the history, feel the art').

- Literary approaches to the text can sometimes totally *ignore history*. If the fascination with literary art leads us to dismiss the historical question: "Did it really happen?" then we have problems with the Biblical faith which is actually rooted in history. Now we may make allowances for 'narrative liberty' – that is, we may be willing to accept that not every single detail in the way a story has been told mirrors precisely 'what actually happened if you'd been there.' But it is possible for real history to be told as a good story, and for a good story to be grounded in real history. The 'having-happenedness' of the Biblical story is very important and should not be lost sight of when we look at the art by which that story was written.

- A purely literary approach can lead to texts being read without reference to their place in the *canon* and therefore in the *story* of Scripture as a whole. One can focus on a text and appreciate its literary qualities and even be moved by it, yet remain untouched by its significance as part of the whole word of God to humanity. The meaning and purpose of any

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[3] Cf. Especially the later work of Brueggemann, who rightly highlights how the Bible itself has counter-pointing voices and traditions (exodus and exile; covenant and judgement; hymn and lament; etc.), which need to be given their full expression, and not explained, excused or excluded. See, e.g., 'Biblical Theology Appropriately Postmodern', *Biblical Theological Bulletin* 127 (1997), pp. 4-9; and, *Theology of the Old Testament: Testimony, Dispute, Advocacy*, Minneapolis, Fortress, 1997.

biblical text cannot be separated from its place in the overall purpose of the Bible. A literary approach to individual narratives or poems may exclude that wider canonical context. Thus one may appreciate a text as literature but ignore its significance as Scripture.

- Unbalanced commitment to unresolved *plurivocality* of the texts (favoured by postmodern interpretation), results in the loss of any real finality or normativity. All we have is a constant oscillation of perspectives. This seems to me an abuse of the plurality of the Bible's texts. It is the opposite danger to the tendency to flatten the whole Bible out into a single monotone message. This is the tendency never to allow the Bible to say anything with finality at all.

What impact, then, does a text-centred approach to hermeneutics have on our understanding and communication of the Bible as truth? If we approach the text as we would a great work of art, or literature, how will it affect our grasp of its truth? Among the major features of great literature is that it speaks from and to human experience, it moves our feelings and emotions, and it engages our imagination. The Bible certainly also does all of these things. Indeed, some of the great Psalms invoke all of these in expressing their worship, thanksgiving, lament, praise and prayer. Psalm 119 is greatly exercised by the truth of God's word and professes deep intellectual commitment to it, but it does so in the language of the heart as well as the head and against a background of profound emotional and experiential struggle. And it does so with a quite deliberately structured poetic art.

A text-centred literary approach to the Bible, consonant with a more postmodern perspective, appreciates those aspects of the Bible which tend to be submerged by a systematic theological approach – the elements of story, imagination, emotion, relationship, different voices, etc. It is possible, of course, to allow our response to these elements of the text to run wild into merely subjective imaginings. But on the other hand, these are undoubtedly legitimate dimensions of the whole biblical truth, and they are often sadly neglected by evangelical scholasticism which tends to subordinate experience, suspect emotions and stifle imagination.

3. Reader-centred focus

Let us move on finally then, to the third main focus - a reader-centred focus. A more recent kind of approach, this, in which people are bringing into the foreground the role of the reader (or readers) in active interpretation of the Bible.

If so far we have looked under 'author-centred' at the text as a **window** (through which you have access to the other world - the world of the ancient author), and then, second, under a text-centred approach, we looked at the text as a **painting** (that is, as a product of human art and skill which needs to be appreciated and understood for its own sake), here we are thinking more of **the text as a mirror.** What can be seen in a mirror depends on who is standing in front of it. The 'contents' of the mirror, in a sense, reflects who is looking into it or what objects are before it. And so, on this view, the *meaning* in the text is not something fixed and final in the text itself - some sort of objective reality. The meaning of the text actually only arises, only happens, in the act of reading. It is when the reader *reads* that the text *means*, just as it is only when you look in a mirror that the mirror reflects you. So, meaning is the interaction then between text and reader.

Now this approach also reflects the shift from a modernity paradigm of exegesis to **a post-modernity paradigm**. Under modernity the reader, rather like the scientist, was simply the neutral observer of a fixed reality (the text and its meaning) which was external to himself or herself. An objective 'real meaning', like 'the real world', was assumed to exist, and the task of the interpreter, like the scientist, was merely to uncover it. The more post-modern view is that, even in science, the subjective observer is part of the reality under observation and, indeed, what is observed may be changed by the very fact of being observed. So there is a blurring between subjective and objective. And so the myth of the 'objective neutral observer' has been somewhat demoted in newer forms of science and is similarly also being lost in hermeneutics. The *reader* as

subject also is a significant part in the whole process. There is no independent, final, fixed meaning independent of any reader. And of course the readers of the biblical text must include not just ourselves, but the **original readers** to whom it was first addressed, the **later Biblical readers** who collected these texts and edited them into books, and built the books into collections, and built the collections into a canon, the whole long chain of **Jewish and Christian readers** down through the centuries since the Bible reached its final form, and finally **modern readers** in multiple global contexts around our world today.

So, a reader-centred focus urges us to take all these 'readers' seriously. We need to recognise that the meaning of the texts does relate to and cannot ignore, *who* is doing the reading and *what* they bring to their reading from their own cultural background, world view and assumptions (nobody reads just as a blank sheet - you always read with something else in your mind), and *where* they are reading, that is, what is their position, both geographically (where they live), their culture, their position within the culture (whether at the top or the bottom of it), their social, economic, political interests, and so on. All of those aspects of the readers' contexts will affect the way in which the meaning is articulated and applied. There is no such thing as 'contextless, presuppositionless' exegesis or interpretation.

How do we evaluate this reader-centred approach? As before, let us first of all appreciate some of its *strengths.*

- There is no doubt, I think, that focusing on the reader has facilitated fresh ways of discovering the relevance of the text in many modern contexts. The reality of ***'contextualised theology'*** has now become taken for granted, provided we recognise that we are *all* interpreting contextually, because all of us interpret in a particular context! Western biblical interpretation has no right to assume that all its insights are 'the standard', while those from other continents are 'contextualized'. The West is also a context – and not necessarily a better or a worse context for understanding and interpreting the text of the Scriptures than anywhere else on the planet.

- Recognizing this is leading to ***the demise of western hegemony*** over exegesis and hermeneutics. We recognise the relativity of all hermeneutics, that we all need one another and that, in fact, for westerners to hear the Bible interpreted and understood and preached by African, Latin,or Asian brothers and sisters in Christ, and *vice versa*, and then to see perspectives that others are bringing, is often a very enriching thing.

- Attention to the context of the reader(s) has unleashed ***the power of the biblical text*** into contexts of human need, conflict or injustice e.g. in liberationist, feminist, and other 'advocacy' hermeneutics. We may not always agree with where such readers want to take us, but we cannot deny the validity of reading the text within and into such contexts and issues. Meaning *is* affected by who you are and what agenda you have. As Anthony Billington once put it, 'If you are a feminist, pacifist, vegetarian, the text may show up different meanings as *you* read it, than if you are a male-chauvinist, war-mongering, carnivore.'

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- A reader-centred approach can degenerate into pure subjectivism if it is not carefully watched. It reverses the priority of author intent as the determinant factor in a text's meaning. In fact, in some cases, reader response theory goes so far as virtually eliminating the author altogether - "It doesn't really matter who said this or what they meant by saying it; what matters is what it means to me. That's all that really counts." So the reader is prioritised over the author and the *authority*, therefore, lies not with the author or with the text but with the reader, the reader's self - and that, again, is very reflective of a postmodern kind of world

view. One has to say that it is not far removed either from some popular forms of evangelical Bible reading, which arrogantly exclude any tradition of scholarly study of the text and are content only to ask, 'What does this text mean for me?'

- This also means, of course, that you lose any sense of objective or external controls. If there is *no* assumption of some fixed or stable core of meaning in the text itself deriving ultimately from the author's intention, then pluralism rules: there is no such thing as a 'right' or a 'wrong' reading, a 'legitimate' or 'illegitimate' reading - some may be better than others but it is difficult to know who has the right to say so. Such a result is, of course, welcome to the genuine postmodern, but impossible to reconcile with the conviction that there is a universal truth and claim inherent in the biblical Gospel which addresses all human persons and cultures.

- The combination of reader-centred perspective with a strong advocacy approach can lead to the Bible itself being harnessed to whatever agenda the interpreter wants to pursue, rather than being allowed to confront and challenge in its own right. The idea that the text has some universal or objective meaning is assumed (by such interpreters) to be a tool of those who wield power – i.e. predominantly the white, male, Euro-American scholarly elite. Thus, for James Cone, biblical interpretation begins with his self-awareness that 'I am *black* first – and everything else comes after that. This means that I read the Bible through the lens of a black tradition of struggle and not as the objective Word of God.'[4] Or, writing from the perspective of the gay community, Gary David Comstock declares that he 'examines the Bible and Christianity not with the purpose of fitting in or finding a place in them, but of fitting them into and changing them according to the particular experiences of lesbian/bisexual/gay people.'[5] In such cases one is tempted to ask, Why read the Bible at all, in that case, if it will be heard to say only what the reader wants to advocate and is denied any kind of objective otherness to challenge one's own stance?

What impact, then, does a reader-centred approach to hermeneutics have on our understanding and communication of the Bible as truth?

First of all it reminds us of the importance of the subjective reader in any process of text-based communication. Of course it is true to affirm, as evangelicals do, that 'God has spoken and his Word is true.' But truth only 'happens' in personal reality when it is understood and acted upon. It is a perfectly biblical point that truth is not merely something you know (or read), but something you *do*. The postmodern idea that somehow there can be 'my truth and your truth' is of course massively flawed when it slides over into pure relativism. Truth is truth for all, or it is not truth at all in any meaningful sense for anybody. Nevertheless it is biblically right to insist that 'God's truth' has to become 'my truth', which happens when I am convinced of it in my intellect, delighting in it in my emotions, committed to it in my will and acting upon it in my behaviour. A reader-response hermeneutic is misleading if we think that the meaning of biblical texts is entirely *dependent* on the reader. But it is important in reminding us that the reader's response is an essential dimension of the meaning and significance of the text.

Secondly, if we return to the image of the text as a mirror, reflecting what stands before it, then this can of course be twisted to mean that I see in Scripture whatever I would like to see, including my posturing self in many guises. However, recognizing the power of the Holy Spirit, the biblical text can function as a mirror which is actually very uncomfortable. It tends to strip off the masks and the flamboyant costumes and expose the reality beneath. When that happens then I am indeed confronted by what the mirror reflects about myself, and about the human condition in general. And if I am tempted only to see the self-serving images, others who look in the mirror alongside me will soon puncture my delusions (unless, of course, we are colluding in a

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[4] James H. Cone, *God of the Oppressed*, rev. ed. (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1997), p. xi.

[5] Gary David Comstock, *Gay Theology Without Apology* (Cleveland, Oh.: The Pilgrim Press, 1993). P. 4.

collective act of self-deception or communal blindness – a not uncommon feature of some Christian interpretive communities down the centuries).

All this then calls for a greater humility before the text and between one another, a greater willingness to listen to the voices of other readers and to weigh their readings alongside our own. We should no longer accept the western patronizing attitude which regards 'contextual readings' as 'other people's strange ideas about the text, as distinct from what we know it *really* means'. Hermeneutics, like theology itself, is a team game in which we need one another as we explore the infinite riches of the text that God has entrusted to us all.