A Short Introduction to Hermeneutics

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between the scientific critical spirit and the residual will to believe.

2. Friedrich Straus’s *Life of Jesus* dissect the Gospel narratives with the tools of modern philosophical investigation and with a pure skepticism.

3. In his quest for the historical Jesus, Renan portrays a Jesus who is a product of the late romantic mind.

4. Wilhelm Dilthey situates hermeneutics within the context of the social sciences. The secularization of hermeneutics is complete.

**Activities and Questions**

1. Do you think that the radical distinction made by Matthew Arnold between the *literary* (or poetic) and the *scientific* elements in hermeneutics is justified? How would you define these two terms?

2. Compare the hermeneutics of David Friedrich Strauss with those of Thomas Aquinas, and assess, in your own words, the differences between them.

3. Reflect on how far your image of the historical Jesus has been formed by the romantic imagination of a writer like Renan and his “followers” in twentieth-century film and literature. (The “Jesus” of Franco Zeffirelli’s hugely popular film *Jesus of Nazareth*, for instance, is directly descended from the “pale Galilean” of Renan’s *Life of Jesus.*) How, as a reader today, would you set about recovering the “historical Jesus”? Is this even a legitimate quest? What would be your purpose?

4. Wilhelm Dilthey, it has been said, stands between two worlds, the ancient and the modern. Itemize the ways you think that this is true in terms of the hermeneutical task.

5. Do you think that contemporary Christian theology and its hermeneutics have affected the kind of paradigm shifts which have been experienced in science from Newton to Einstein? Is it necessary that they should?

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**Chapter Six**

**The Twentieth Century**

1. **Introduction**

With the twentieth century, hermeneutics met the space age and new kinds of fundamentalism beyond the reason of the Enlightenment. It was an age of new mass media, the effect of which on the practice of reading is still hard to assess. It was also a century of unprecedented mass destruction and the fear of nuclear holocaust. Questions were being asked without any means available for providing answers or resolutions. It was an age not of romantic ruins but of jagged, broken fragments and the collapse of dreams, symbolized most poignantly, perhaps, in recent years by the destruction of the twin towers of the World Trade Center in New York—a primitive act effected by the tools of modern science with devastating efficiency.

All this has had its effect on the theory and practice of hermeneutics. Contemplating the work of the German philosopher Martin Heidegger, whom we shall consider briefly later in this chapter, the critic John Caputo now regards hermeneutics as merely an attempt to stick with the original difficulty and confusion of life without seeking resolution or meaning in the chaos. After the massive and systematic scholarly efforts of the nineteenth century, the new hermeneutics is fundamentally unacademic, representing a new approach to the task of understanding, which prefers to let questions hang in the air and resists all easy
solutions or answers. The age of reason was over, but this did not mean a return to the former glories of hermeneutics of faith of earlier Christian ages.

2 Karl Barth (1886–1968) and Rudolf Bultmann (1884–1976)

But we must begin the twentieth century with two Protestant theologians who in their different ways are clearly within the traditions that we have been largely following so far—Karl Barth and Rudolf Bultmann. These two near contemporaries dominate German-speaking theology and hermeneutics in the first half of the twentieth century. Karl Barth’s work and influence on modern thinking, especially through his massive discussion of Christian doctrine in the Church Dogmatics, which he began to publish in 1932 and worked on for most of the rest of his life, is so vast in its extent that we can barely scratch the surface of it here. Born in Basel, Barth spent the years of the First World War as a pastor in Safenwil, Switzerland, having been educated largely in Germany. His reaction to the terrible mass slaughter of the war, and not least the endorsement of the German war effort by his former teachers of theology, led to his first great book, perhaps the most significant for our purposes, his commentary on the Letter to the Romans, the Römerbrief. There Barth writes appreciatively but critically of the historical-critical tools of biblical criticism that had been so laboriously developed in the previous century, and finally brushes them aside for a more immediate approach to the Pauline text:

The Historical-critical Method of Biblical investigation has its rightful place: It is concerned with the preparation of the intelligence—and this can never be superfluous. But, were I driven to choose between it and the venerable doctrine of Inspiration, I should without hesitation adopt the latter, which has a broader, deeper, more important justification. The doctrine of Inspiration is concerned with the labour of apprehending, without which no technical equipment, how-

ever complete, is of any use whatever. (Barth, Epistle to the Romans)

It is easy to see here how Barth is a true son of Martin Luther. He sees the Bible as God’s freely given revelation, and our part as readers of the Letter to the Romans is to “listen” to the word of God and to respond to it obediently. Barth, like Luther, was above all a preacher. Hermeneutics is central to his theology, because to read the Bible was to open oneself to God’s revelation, and this leads to action—the living of the Christian life. In a sense, as we read the word of Scripture, God thereby reads and interprets us and uses us to do his will.

We have seen a certain clear anti-intellectualism in Barth’s hermeneutics. Some contemporary scholars, like the English theologian Graham Ward (in his book Barth, Derrida and the Language of Theology, 1995) and the American scholar Walter Lowe (in his book Theology and Difference, 1993), have seen Karl Barth as anticipating elements of a postmodern hermeneutics, and there is some truth in this, as we shall see later on, though his frame of mind is anything but postmodern. For in one way, paradoxically, there simply is no hermeneutic in Barth’s program, which admits only the “impossible possibility” of faith (reminding us of the man in Mark 9:24 who cried out to Jesus, “I believe; help my unbelief!”). After the elaborate philosophical interpretative programs and scientific definitions of scholars like Schleiermacher and Dilthey, Barth’s message is a preacher’s cry that radically disturbs all hermeneutics: Listen, against all reason, to the voice of God speaking to us through his Word. He is not all that far from the character in John Steinbeck’s novel East of Eden (1952) who insists that the Bible is not there to be understood, but to be read and listened to. Too much struggling to understand can actually prevent us from hearing what God is saying to us through its words as a call to action. What Barth is always emphasizing is the chasm that exists between the Word of God and the word of humankind, and thus he restores to the Bible its ancient authority bestriding all concerns of culture, ancient or modern.
And so, as we turn to the New Testament scholar Rudolf Bultmann, it is not very surprising to find that Bultmann seems to doubt if Barth has any hermeneutical program at all. If Barth sees our meeting with God as a meeting with the “wholly other,” beyond all possible human thought or reason, Bultmann insists on exploring this connecting point between the divine and the human as a meeting of God's self-revelation with our human capacity for understanding.

Thus, in a late essay of 1950 entitled “The Problem of Hermeneutics” (see Klemm, vol. 1), Bultmann situates himself firmly in the intellectual and hermeneutical tradition of Schleiermacher and Dilthey, though with one major difference. Bultmann was deeply influenced also by the German philosopher Martin Heidegger, whose work we will consider briefly in a moment, and by the mode of philosophical thought known as existentialist. As a result, his hermeneutics is not so much a program of reconstructing the origins of the text (recall how Schleiermacher requires the reader to “enter into the mind of the author”) as it is a delving into the subject matter of the text as it relates to our lives here and now. Bultmann is not really interested in the mind of the apostle Paul! We can put this in another way: for Bultmann the focus of reading is not a reconstructed moment at the very first instant of the text’s life (to understand the text is to try and understand what was going on in the mind of Paul or Shakespeare), but rather the present moment of encounter between the text and the reader. The question is, what does the text mean now as I read?

There are two important things to be said about this.

1. The process of demythologizing. We have already encountered this term in our survey of David Friedrich Strauss (chapter 5). Bultmann does not underestimate the power of myth—indeed, quite the contrary. For him, myths are anything but old legends or mere stories and fables. Myths, rather, are expressions of human “being” in the world. We all live within their terms, and they are changing all the time as culture and society changes. But the ancient mythical world of the New Testament needs to be translated for our time, in a word, demythologized, so that its nonmythological intention becomes apparent for us, “existentially.” Bultmann might say that most of us no longer live, for example, in a world in which illness is perceived as demon possession. In order to understand what is actually being said in the healing miracles of the Gospels, therefore, we need to translate them into terms that are more culturally accessible to us. This is not at all, it should be stressed, to dismiss the importance of what is being said about Jesus in these narratives. It is a process not actually that different from that of Strauss in Das Leben Jesu.

2. Through his focus on the subject matter of the text, Bultmann is concerned to unveil what it says to us regarding the manner of our self-understanding. Hermeneutics, in other words, is about discovering who we are and how we understand ourselves—in short, about exploring the meaning of human existence.

It has sometimes been said that Bultmann is ultimately not all that interested in the biblical text, but only in what it says. His approach is the precise opposite of Barth in this respect. Barth keeps our attention on the text in front of us. Bultmann moves through the text to the subject matter that lies, in a sense, behind it.

Learning from Heidegger, Bultmann defines two modes of human existence, the authentic and the inauthentic. Authentically we gain ourselves within our understanding of “being” (Dasein). This is a German term from Heidegger, which we will look at in a moment. Inauthentically, we lose ourselves. What has all this got to do with reading the Bible? Bultmann would direct us back immediately to Mark 8:35–36:

For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it. For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life?

This is a perfect statement of authentic existence, translated (or demythologized) by Bultmann into the existential philosophy of Martin Heidegger.
3 Martin Heidegger (1889–1976)

Heidegger is one of the most difficult, controversial, and important thinkers of the twentieth century, but a survey of hermeneutics cannot avoid an acknowledgment of his central place in hermeneutical theory and understanding. With him we move on, now, from the world of theologians and biblical critics like Barth and Bultmann into the wider world of philosophical and literary reflection. Heidegger is difficult, because his German language is highly idiosyncratic, an instrument used to delve behind thinking and concepts of thought into their very origins. He tends to avoid the technical language of philosophy, but uses words in an idiosyncratic way that makes translation extremely difficult. Heidegger is controversial because he was, as rector of Freiburg University, a member of the Nazi party, and the debate about this has continued to rage through the years. The point is, how seriously can we take the thought of a man who is ethically so problematic? Yet he is important, because no thinker in the West in the twentieth century can finally avoid the implications of what he said and wrote. We have noted how important he was for Rudolf Bultmann. Here I will confine myself to two further points—but don't imagine for one moment that this sums up "Heidegger." That would require at least another book, and Heidegger's philosophy lies far beyond our present scope!

1. So far we have been assuming that the fundamental question in hermeneutics is something like "How do we come to understand texts?" Largely speaking, the varieties of hermeneutics we looked at have all tried to offer some kind of answer to this question. Heidegger goes back one step farther to the question of "being" itself. The crucial word in his early masterwork Being and Time (1927) is the German Dasein, usually left untranslated because it is, essentially, untranslatable. Dasein refers not to my being or any specific "being." Dasein is simply "being there" in the universe. It is, indeed, a word on the very edge of linguistic possibility itself. This is Heidegger's intention, since his concern is with "the ontological foundation of modern hermeneutical theory" (Klemm), that is, its very origins. And so he goes behind the question, to "being" itself. With Heidegger, hermeneutics moves far beyond the business of textual interpretation. It returns in a curious way (another hermeneutic circle?), via philosophy and, by implication, to the most profound questions of theology—hermeneutics and theology are met again. Heidegger, however, would never have described himself as a theologian. As a good hermeneut he was more interested in breaking down the limitations of disciplines, beyond theology or philosophy. Behind him lies another thinker, Edmund Husserl, who sought to free philosophical thinking from all systems and speculations in a return to "things in themselves." The shift is in a sense away from epistemology (a term we have encountered frequently since our look at Kant) and toward ontology.

2. In his later writings Heidegger adopts a poetic, even mystical, tone. More than in texts he is profoundly interested in language itself, so that one commentator, Joseph Kockelmans, has rather cryptically commented that "[l]anguage is no longer just a tool, but it itself speaks" (Kockelmans, On the Truth of Being). Heidegger almost seems to suggest that language has a divine rather than a human origin, but he is not here speaking of Scripture. Rather, language expresses "being" itself, far beyond the limits of human intentions, so that hermeneutics or "interpretation is the meditative, even poetic, process of listening and giving voice to the linguistic (and hence finite) appearance of being" (Klemm, Hermeneutical Inquiry, vol. 1).

Heidegger is, curiously, at once both very difficult and very simple to understand. With him we find ourselves on the very edge of language and thought—hence his rather mystical tone. He transforms the nature of philosophical inquiry in the twentieth century, but then moves beyond philosophy to an interplay with text (he was a great reader of poetry, especially the German romantic poet Friedrich Hölderlin) and language that remains
rooted in history and yet allows “conversations” with matters of infinite concern, with Being itself.

4 Hans-Georg Gadamer (1900–2002)

In a world that is perpetually being threatened with disintegration and fragmentation, one of the obsessions of the modern mind since romanticism has been with wholeness and the recovery of a vision of life that embraces all things, rather as Christianity had done in the Christendom of the Middle Ages. In a way, Heidegger’s whole life was devoted to exploring the coherence of “Being” and the connectedness of all things. With Hans-Georg Gadamer we have a hermeneut par excellence, whose long working life (he was still lecturing at one hundred years old!) was devoted to emphasizing the universality of hermeneutics, a theme we have been pursuing since we looked at Schleiermacher’s work.

In 1966, Gadamer wrote an essay entitled “The Universality of the Hermeneutical Problem” (reprinted in Klemm, vol. 1), but his chief claim to fame rests on his massive book Wahrheit und Methode (Truth and Method), published in 1960 and deeply influenced by Heidegger. An essentially conservative thinker, Gadamer offers us here perhaps the most systematic survey of hermeneutics in the twentieth century, its title indicating his dialogue between the claims of “truth” on the one hand and the processes of “method” on the other—a return to what should by now be to you a familiar pattern in hermeneutical thinking as it exists between an absolute demand (whether of God or Dasein) and the relentless, systematic application of methods and processes. In short, Gadamer returns us to the question of the hermeneutics of faith and the hermeneutics of suspicion, and he suggests that, ultimately, in our reading we have to decide between one and the other. Indeed, it has often been remarked that his book ought more properly to have been entitled “Truth or Method.” For him, the final word is always with “truth.”

Like Dilthey before him, Gadamer cannot be contained within any one academic discipline. His hermeneutics voyage across the seas of philosophy, theology, classics, literary criticism, and even legal theory. A student of Heidegger (who supervised his Habilitationsschrift on the philosophy of Plato), and influenced also by Bultmann, Gadamer exhibits many of the traits of his teacher. Above all, his suspicion is primarily of the modern age itself, with its division of learning and understanding into separate and often discrete categories or disciplines (we sometimes say, “I am a theologian, not a philosopher,” or, “I am a literary critic, not a New Testament critic,” for example), at the danger of losing our sense of the whole of life. Gadamer tries to see things from all perspectives. It is a classic hermeneutic move, another “circle,” to remind us to see the particular from the perspective of the whole, and to articulate the whole by the careful examination of particulars.

The mythologies of specific disciplines, and we should include biblical criticism among them, become distorted and myopic in their relation to the world unless they are seen within wider, more universal claims. Thus, the true hermeneut is faced with the impossible task of mastering all “disciplines” (and not all of us are blessed with Gadamer’s extraordinary, and intellectually productive, longevity!). Yet at the same time Gadamer is no pedant making impossible demands on his students. Early on in Truth and Method he introduces the concept of “play” as central to the experience of truth. His discussion is rather complex, but it may be boiled down to three points that can quite easily be understood. (Think of any game you might be involved in, either as a child or as a member of a college team.)

1. The purpose of play is fulfilled only when the player “loses” himself or herself utterly in the game. The game has to become a “world.”
2. To be effective, play has to be taken absolutely seriously. We all know what it is like to play a game, whether of football or cards, in which another player does not “play seriously.” It takes all the real fun out of it!
3. When we are playing a game properly, and are wholly absorbed in it, it may become a “sphere of disclosure” in
which we realize and learn something new, or see it in a new way. That is why games are so important—and they work only when we play by the rules.

These three points maybe transferred quite easily to the experience of reading a book. When we are reading “seriously” we “lose ourselves” in the book, we take its world absolutely seriously (even though we “know” it is fictitious), and serious disclosures do often take place. This might be true of a novel, or it might be true of the Gospels, which one eminent New Testament scholar has recently described as “true fiction” (Douglas A. Templeton, The New Testament as True Fiction, 1999). If one needed further assurance of the seriousness of the business we are engaged in as “play,” we might also recall Hamlet’s strategy to “catch the conscience” of Claudius by means of a play within the play—“The Mousetrap.”

Finally, Gadamer warns us, when reading hermeneutics like Schleiermacher or Dilthey, of the danger of assuming that we read back “historically” in texts like the Bible from a position of objectivity. That is, we tend to assume that our position is a stable and clear one, and that any instability lies either in the text or in the processes of understanding. But Gadamer reminds us that we ourselves live and read from within the flux of history, and our vantage point of today is no more absolute or objective in its assumptions than any other. We are, in a way, no better (or worse) than earlier readers, and like them we have our strengths and weaknesses, our strong points and our naïvetés. Gadamer, then, is highly suspicious of any claim to know the mind of the author better than the author does himself or herself. What a presumption! Rather, any act of historical understanding is itself historical, and all our interpretations are themselves part of the stream of history itself. We can have no privileged perspectives.

5 Paul Ricoeur (1913–)

The prodigious output of the French philosopher and critic Paul Ricoeur remains still unfinished, as he continues to write and pub-lish. If Gadamer and Ricoeur are anything to go by, hermeneutics are very good for health and a productive long life! Ricoeur, whose academic career has been split between France and the U.S.A., has described himself as “a philosopher who identifies himself with the so-called hermeneutic school of thought” (LaCocque and Ricoeur, Thinking Biblically). Self-consciously working in the great tradition of nineteenth-century hermeneutics, Ricoeur, like Gadamer, is a scholar who ranges across many intellectual disciplines in his hermeneutical inquiries.

In an early book entitled The Symbolism of Evil (1960), Ricoeur establishes that evil is not directly accessible, but is perceived only in its expressions and their effects. In other words the very notion of “evil” itself requires a process of interpretation, a hermeneutics, for us to identify it. Yet, if Ricoeur is a hermeneut through and through, and interpretation is a universal necessity in the absence of “direct access” to, say, the absolute fact of evil, there is another side to him, which is summed up in a famous sentence that appears toward the end of The Symbolism of Evil: “Beyond the desert of criticism we wish to be called again.”

Yet the desert of intellectual travails must be journeyed through and crossed if we are to hear the voice calling us back: again suspicion and faith. Throughout his work Ricoeur respects both the philosophical text, in all its rigor, and the poetic text, with its melody and intuition. They stand apart, and only in their differences do they speak to one another. Having crossed the desert, with the hard labor that that requires, we may expect to enter into what Ricoeur names as a “second naïveté”—a simplicity of understanding born of wisdom and hard work.

Many of Ricoeur’s books deal directly with the business of biblical interpretation, addressing directly such fundamental issues as revelation, authority, and the nature of the “sacred text.” For example, he distinguishes between the Qur’an as the sacred text for Muslims, and the Bible, wherein “it is not the text that is sacred but the one about which is spoken” (Figuring the Sacred). Then, after his initial investment in the sacred subject matter of the biblical text, Ricoeur is free to apply rigorous procedures of interpretation in the reading of it. In a sense, he is like the hermeneutics
This is a delicate and nuanced summation of the task of the contemporary Christian hermeneut. Ricoeur admits his "biblical faith" and the rooted convictions that lie at its heart. At the same time, "textual interpretation" demands a rigorous discipline, which involves, as far as possible, the suspension of the prejudices and preconceptions inherent in any uncritical "faith." *Oneself as Another*, as a rigorous investigation into philosophical questions, must "bracket out" the requirements of his convictions about the Bible and indeed his discussion of God, while at the same time these convictions actually lie at the secret heart of his whole endeavor. (Indeed, Ricoeur's argument is rather similar to that of Coleridge in his *Confessions of an Inquiring Spirit*, and it may be helpful to go back again and remind ourselves of that work, which we discussed in chapter 4, before going any farther.)

Hermeneutics does not preach; nor do Ricoeur's texts. The reader must be free to make a judgment one way or another. The "asceticism" of his argument lies precisely in not allowing religious beliefs to skew the text of the reading. But the unspoken implication of the final sentence must be that God, or indeed the Bible, is never very far away in Ricoeur's work, and proper hermeneutical inquiry will lead us back to the unspoken word that lies at its heart.

6 Toward the Postmodern: Jacques Derrida (1930–)

What follows will be little more than a note or an addendum to this chapter, as it looks forward to the discussion of contemporary hermeneutics in the next chapter. However, the contemporary interpreter needs at least some sense of what the term "postmodern" implies (I will not say "means") and how it affects, or possibly even invalidates, the project of hermeneutics as we have followed it up to the still-ongoing work of Paul Ricoeur. At the
same time, the term “postmodern” is itself now becoming rather outdated since its heyday in the 1970s and 1980s, and the fear and disapproval that its youthful proponents then instilled in more conservative critics has been replaced by an almost staid seniority that is rather unwilling to admit that it is no longer young, and hermeneutics, as always, has begun to move on in different directions.

Though employed in various, often rather vague, ways and in many fields (it was first used as a term in architecture), the word “postmodern” is basically employed to describe the cultural emergence, or perhaps decline, from the “modern” age of Enlightenment and post-Enlightenment thought. Like hermeneutics itself, it is entirely interdisciplinary, being used in rather different ways in architecture, music, literature, and even theology. It acknowledges the breakdown of essentialist categories—that is, that we can ever reach or speak of the essence of anything, whether that is God or merely language itself. Nothing can be spoken of in itself. Postmodernity is characterized by notions of relativity and a suspicion of paradox. Jacques Derrida, the French thinker who more than anyone else seems to epitomize the term (it can hardly be described as a movement), delights in coining words that are not real dictionary words but rather exist between words, deconstructing what we assume to be the structures of language and reference. The best-known example of this is his “word” différence, which is not a word you will find in any French dictionary. It is a word suspended between two actual words, to “differ” and to “defer.” All meaning is in difference; all meaning is deferred.

A hugely important figure in the gallery of postmodernism is the rather enigmatic Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure (1857–1913). A brief look at his work is important for our work in hermeneutics, as he is perhaps the single most important modern figure in the field of understanding the nature of language and how we use it.

In a course of lectures delivered in 1911, which he himself never published, Saussure revolutionized how we understand the workings of language, and therefore, by extension, how we understand texts. The story has been told often, and I do not intend to repeat it at length here. (You might follow it up in Jonathan Culler’s excellent brief study simply entitled Saussure, 1976.) At its heart is the understanding of language simply as a play of differences. The word “dog” is understood as referring to my furry little friend with four legs only because it is not a “cat.” (Remember that in postmodernity there are no essences, and that includes language.) Words do not actually refer to anything except by mutual agreement and because they are different from other words. There is no intrinsic link between the letters and sound “dog” and Rover over there in the garden, and you could just as well say “chien” (if you were French), or whatever you say if you are Chinese or Hungarian. In the end, as long as we understand each other any word will do.

I have labored this point a bit because it is important to appreciate how Saussure’s rather academic researches in linguistics feed into the traumatic events of so-called deconstruction, that is, the critical overturning of all the structures and hierarchies on which we have built beliefs and belief systems in culture. The Frankfurt philosopher Jürgen Habermas has expressed it in this way; read the following passage carefully:

The rebellious labour of deconstruction aims indeed at dismantling smuggled-in basic conceptual hierarchies, at overthrowing foundational relationships and conceptual relations of domination, such as those between speech and writing, the intelligible and the sensible, nature and culture, inner and outer, mind and matter, male and female. Logic and rhetoric constitute one of these conceptual pairs. Derrida is particularly interested in standing the primacy of logic over rhetoric, canonized since Aristotle, on its head. (Habermas, The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity)

Postmodernism, it seems, is the final abandonment of logic and reason and their long reign in the ordered world of hermeneutics. Like Gadamer, Derrida refers to the concept of play, but it is far
from the sedate, well-ruled game of Gadamer. Derrida's post-modern play is full of jouissance, tricks and blind alleys. Two things need to be borne in mind at this point.

1. If Derrida is more concerned with rhetoric than the demands of logic (and reason), we need to remind ourselves that Plato, for one, deeply distrusted rhetoric and explains why at some length in his dialogue called the Phaedrus. For the rhetorician is not ultimately concerned with the truth of anything, but only with persuading you that something is true. Rhetoric is the art of persuasion. If I can persuade you to believe that the moon is made of cheese, then I am a successful rhetorician, and the actual constitution of the moon is irrelevant! Think for a moment what the prioritizing of rhetoric means for the status of texts and their truth claims. In short, are we just being conned by texts all the time?

2. Deconstruction is not something that you consciously do. People sometimes talk about a deconstructive reading of a text (say a Gospel) as an alternative to a historical reading, or a formalist reading. But Derrida's point is that texts themselves are inherently deconstructive of the very meanings that they might seem to promote and embody. Words and texts will play with any meanings that you might seek to impose on them. Deconstruction is the ultimate acknowledgment of the age-old adage that we encountered in chapter 1 in our discussion of Humpty Dumpty. We never quite say what we mean and we never quite mean what we say.

For some people all this means a wonderful new freedom. Powerful texts like the Bible have a history of readings that may be marvelous for some folk, but for others they may have meant repression and subordination. Feminist hermeneutics, for example, flourished in its release from the patriarchal structures—men dominating women—inherent in biblical culture and the long history of male-dominated biblical interpretation. If you think about it, there has not been one woman hermeneut mentioned in this book until now. Well, don't blame me personally. It has not been

for the want of looking! There just aren't any, or at least any who have been allowed to be heard through publication or public position, until the postmodern and deconstructive turn began to allow them to speak. The result has been such works as the Dutch critic Mieke Bal's searing rereadings of the book of Judges, which deconstruct their narratives of patriarchal male power through a counteroherence perceived in hitherto neglected female voices in the text.

But for others, postmodernism means just chaos, values lost in a sea of relativities (what would Einstein have thought?), readings in which anything goes, and, above all, confirmation of what the German thinker Friedrich Nietzsche proclaimed in the nineteenth century as the "death of God" (The Gay Science, 1882). If all readings are relative, how are we to prefer one above another, and who now arbitrates between what is right and what is wrong, between good and bad? In a famous essay entitled "Is There a Text in This Class?" (1980) the American critic Stanley Fish addressed the question as to whether in the postmodern sea of indeterminacy we could even speak of actual texts at all anymore, as they were drowned in the endless babble of claims and counterclaims. The question, Fish recounts, was asked by a student of literature, who went on, "I mean, in this class do we believe in poems and things, or is it just us?" His reply was that there certainly are texts, but they exist within interpretive communities, and their "meanings" emerge only within situations and are never absolute. Fish's argument for textual indeterminacy (or we might call it interpretive or hermeneutical freedom)—which is not at all the same as unintelligibility—is made in opposition to the position of a more conservative American hermeneut, E. D. Hirsch Jr., who defines a text in his book Validity in Interpretation (1967) as "an entity which always remains the same from one moment to the next." (The irony is, of course, that Fish's essay has remained pretty stable and authoritative in the classrooms of literature departments for over twenty years!)

But Nietzsche was, after all, quite mad, at least at the end of his life. Does this mean, then, that now we are all mad, or at least drowning in the bottomless seas of postmodernism? How can we
trust anything anymore—least of all that ancient text of power, the Bible? Derrida puts the matter before us rather ponderously in his early work Of Grammatology (1967; transl. into English, 1976):

Language itself is menaced in its very life, helpless, adrift in the threat of limitlessness brought back to its own finitude at the very moment when its limits seem to disappear, when it ceases to be self-assured, contained, and guaranteed by the infinite signified which seemed to exceed it. (Derrida, Of Grammatology)

For “infinite signified” we might here read “God.” In the hermeneutics of postmodernity there is no god to guarantee meaning (or at least no god as understood by the term theism), and there is no reason either. There are no essences and nothing essential. There is nothing but instability and play, a playtime without responsibility. There is, it seems, no point of reference outside the text by which to interpret it. There is, perhaps, nothing outside the text at all. The text is, at best, self-authenticating. Or perhaps language is menaced in its very life and seems doomed to implode into meaninglessness.

Postmodernity, it is sometimes said, aspires in an almost mystical way toward a state of pure consciousness, free from physical, linguistic constraints. But we need to be very careful to distinguish a proper or genuine mysticism from the terrifying condition that we seem to welcome on all sides and that we might call the realm of cyberspace. For in the cyberspace of “information technology,” a kingdom that is rapidly threatening to overwhelm the world of texts and books, we do not have to be responsible for our bodies, or even for who we are. There is no limit, no fixed identity (as long as you know your password), no god, and the cowboys run riot. No one rules in a game without rules.

But . . . but, even in the world of postmodernity, texts themselves have “bodies” and forms, which make their demands on us. Christianity, which has been our primary concern in this book, is an incarnational religion—a body lies at its very heart. And we ourselves do have bodies, and mutual responsibilities thereby. In the next chapter, then, we will return to the body of the text and the claims it makes on us and we on it.

If postmodernism poses the question to the interpreter of how to legitimate one text in preference to another, then, equally, it poses the problem, how to remain a responsible reader.

Summary

We might summarize the main points of this chapter as follows:

1. Karl Barth cuts through hermeneutical problems with his “dialectical theology” and restores authority to the biblical text.
2. Rudolf Bultmann joins his hermeneutics with an existentialist philosophy, which underlies his program of demythologizing.
3. Martin Heidegger addresses the question of Dasein, “being there,” and digs under the hermeneutical questions to the roots beneath, thereby reintroducing theology, as it were, by the back door.
4. The universality of hermeneutics is affirmed by Gadamer in this book Truth and Method.
5. Paul Ricoeur's contemporary hermeneutics return us to some of the basic issues in Christian interpretation of the Bible with which we began.
6. Postmodernity—the end or a new beginning?

Activities and Questions

1. Who is more relevant to us today, Barth or Bultmann?
2. In what sense do you think that Martin Heidegger was moving back to an earlier form of hermeneutics that celebrated the Bible as the immediate word of God? In what sense was he radically new?
3. Compare the hermeneutics of Gadamer regarding the reader and history with those of Eichhorn and Semler (chapter 4). Do you think that we now have special privileges as readers
over the more “primitive” peoples of the earlier culture of the eighteenth century? If so, what are they? (The point is, do hermeneutics develop, or do they merely change?)

4. Do you see “postmodernism,” as we have briefly looked at it in this chapter, as an end or as a new beginning for hermeneutics? How might a “postmodern reader” approach the Bible? (You might find *The Postmodern Bible Reader*, edited by David Jobling, Tina Pippin, and Ronald Schliefer, a very useful guide as you think about this question.)

5. In what ways do you think that computers, the Internet, and information technology are affecting the hermeneutical questions we have been wrestling with in this book? What are the positive and the negative aspects of this question? You might also consider how our writing as well as our reading habits have been affected by these technological developments.

This final chapter will address a number of hermeneutical issues that face us today. As was suggested in the last chapter, the time has probably now come to recognize that postmodernity itself has already become something of a historical term, and although its long shadow will be with us for some time to come, hermeneutics has already moved on in its restless search. We have seen how at the beginning of the twentieth century Karl Barth could seem to be anticipating certain characteristics of the postmodern, and in some respects this is the case, for both Barth and the postmodern constitute radical turns from the whole Enlightenment movement and a disregard for the elaborate structures and claims of historical criticism. On the other hand, nothing could be farther than Barth from the relativities of postmodern hermeneutics, and their similarities rest in their responding to the social and cultural upheavals of a century that was unprecedented in mechanized violence and bloodshed. As always, hermeneutics is sensitive to all forms of change and technological developments.

This book has been very focused on the interpretation of the Bible, although it has not attempted to offer a history of biblical hermeneutics as such. That can be found elsewhere, in the work of scholars like Robert Grant or Robert Morgan. (Their books are mentioned in the list of Recommended Reading on pp. 4–6). Nor has it offered a history of the development of literary criticism and
theory, especially as this became more self-conscious in the second half of the twentieth century. Both of these fields, however, have been ever present in our discussions. The Bible has been largely at the center of our attention because it has been by far the single most important text around which the issues of hermeneutics have revolved. Whether this will always be so is impossible to predict, and you will have noticed that the Bible was less in evidence in the previous chapter, which dealt with the twentieth century.

But the primary themes of this book have been the nature of text and textuality, and the nature of reading as a process. This investigation has been necessarily interdisciplinary, and has plunged from time to time into fairly demanding philosophical arguments, as well as theology, linguistics, poetics, and so on. Above all, I hope that it has become clear that for anyone who sets out to study the Christian tradition (although it is equally true of the Jewish and Islamic traditions, in different ways) we cannot imagine that hermeneutics is an optional extra. The business of "interpretation" lies at its very heart.

In this chapter we shall address a number of themes and issues that are especially pressing for hermeneutics at the present time. They do not pretend to be comprehensive, and within time some will need to be deleted and others added. Such is the restless nature of the hermeneutical enterprise.

1 The Bible as Literature/the Bible in Literature

The poet T. S. Eliot in his 1935 essay "Religion and Literature" stated that he did not believe that you could read the Bible purely as literature. It is a sacred text. Eliot makes his point very carefully:

The Bible has had a literary influence upon English Literature not because it has been considered as literature, but because it has been considered as the report of the word of God. And the fact that men of letters [sic] now discuss it as "literature" probably indicates the end of the its "literary" influence. (Eliot, Selected Essays)

It is nevertheless the case that there is wonderful literature in the Bible, in both prose and verse. At the same time, the Bible has permeated Western literature like no other text, so that even today it is, arguably, one of the most powerful cultural, if not religious, texts in our society. (Only think how Hollywood blockbuster films like Terminator II or Unforgiven are soaked in biblical images and even biblical language.)

The relationship between the Bible and the rest of literature remains a close, if often uncomfortable, one. Of course the Bible is literature, and yet at the same time, as we have seen, it is set apart in the Western tradition from all other literature, for better or for worse, and how we read it remains a problem. During the last thirty years of postmodern "theory," it has been notable how many of the leading postmodern thinkers—Derrida is the most obvious example—are returning to ancient hermeneutical ways in demonstrably rabbinic readings of texts, which seem to suggest a close connection between postmodern and ancient, often Jewish, hermeneutics of the kind that we briefly reviewed in chapter 2. But this only seems to serve to indicate that more or less all our insights into the process of reading arise, in some sense, from our encounters with the biblical texts of the Judaeo-Christian tradition.

And what now of the status of the Bible, and of its authority in an age when the power and authority of the churches and religious institutions seems to be perpetually declining? Was Coleridge right, that there are texts that somehow, mysteriously "find me at greater depths of my being"? Does this effect have to be something to do with theology or religion? It is certainly the case that the influence of the Bible on modern literature is as powerful as ever. For example, some of the greatest of twentieth-century novels, from the writings of Thomas Mann to D. H. Lawrence and John Steinbeck, have drawn directly from the great narratives in the book of Genesis, and it may well be that reading these works
of literature is now the best way of recovering a living Bible. In other words, we may now have moved beyond the great age of philosophical hermeneutics and historical criticism (from which we can still learn a great deal, as we have seen), and, after postmodernism, we may now need to have the courage to return to the great stories via contemporary poets and writers of fiction.

Here is an example of what I mean. John Steinbeck’s great novel *East of Eden* (1952) is an allegory that retells some of the stories of the early chapters of Genesis in the context of settlers in California in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Allegory has always been present in both Jewish and Christian reading of Scripture, and Steinbeck continues the midrashic tradition in his novel. Entering into the self-consuming world of his book is to reengage with the story of the fall and the ancient rivalries between the brothers Cain and Abel, and Jacob and Esau. Via the powerful drama of Steinbeck’s narrative we may be led back to a recovery of the pridal authority of the narratives of Genesis, schooled in a way of reading a fictional narrative that is every bit as valid in its understanding of the nature of the biblical text as the hermeneutics that require a more historical and overtly theological approach.

I would go so far as to say that *East of Eden* ought to be compulsory reading in the curriculum of every seminary and college class that studies the Old Testament.

2 Liberation and Responsibility

In the last chapter we looked briefly at an example of feminist hermeneutics in the work of Mieke Bal. There are also other forms of “liberation” hermeneutics linked to varieties of oppression—race, the poor, children, religious minorities, and so on. Indeed, we might refer back to Martin Luther in this regard, when he speaks of Holy Scripture as the best of books “abounding in comfort under all afflictions and trials.” But at the same time, what has often been brought to our attention when such oppressed groups read a powerful text like the Bible is that it can work just as easily for ill as for good. It can be an instrument of oppression as well as an instrument of liberation. This is true of other texts as well; *The Communist Manifesto*, by Marx and Engels, would be an example.

The point is made clearly in Margaret Atwood’s 1985 novel *The Handmaid’s Tale*, which presents us with a nightmare society of the future based on biblical themes from Genesis (or is it a kind of parable of the present?), in which women of childbearing age are kept as “handmaids” by powerful men in an attempt to provide them with children in a world threatened with sterility. The handmaids are allowed no access to dangerous reading matter (to read, after all, is to empower and encourage us to think for ourselves), and, above all, to the Bible, which is described as “an incendiary device.” For who knows what they would make of it if they got their hands on it? The women’s only access to Scripture is through readings from it by their male Commander. Atwood’s point is that this is exactly how most women through the ages have been given the Bible, under the control of a firm patriarchal direction that never allows them to check its interpretive voice against their own reading of the text. In one passage the women are read to during their mealtime from the Beatitudes of Matthew 5. The opening sentence is significant: “For lunch it was the Beatitudes.” They are “fed” the text by the reader on the record.

Blessed be this, blessed be that. They played it from a disc, the voice was a man’s. *Blessed be the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are the merciful. Blessed are the meek. Blessed are the silent.* I knew they made that up, I knew it was wrong, and they left things out too, but there was no way of checking. (Margaret Atwood, *The Handmaid’s Tale*)

We can see what a revolution it was when Luther gave each of his students a printed, standard Bible and told each of them to read it, verify, and check for themselves. Texts are dangerous (and especially this text), and to read is to be empowered, and therefore to become responsible.

What can hermeneutics, as we have been studying it, contribute to the *ethical* dilemmas posed when texts of power become texts of
terror? Can we stand neutral, as merely “academic” interpreters? Is hermeneutics necessarily a political activity? We need to be aware that such a pernicious political program as apartheid in South Africa had its beginnings in a particular biblical hermeneutics that saw all things created as distinct under God, their differences to be clearly acknowledged. This includes the color of our skin. Politics inevitably imposed a hierarchy on this—male above female, white above black, and so on. It is why also the voices of poets and writers continue to be so important in all “liberation” movements of the poor and oppressed. To be able to read is to begin to think and therefore to speak—and therefore how we read and relate to texts is crucial for our very human nature and its freedom.

3 Politics and Postcolonialism

The theme of political interpretation is continued with the growing literature and criticism from “postcolonial” voices in countries across the world emerging into independence after the collapse of the European empires of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Awareness of texts and the spread of education have placed hermeneutics at the center of dynamic explorations of the condition of peoples whose ancient cultures were traumatized by the imposition of European languages, culture, and literatures on them, and above all by the coming of the Bible in the hands of missionaries and administrators who saw it as the Word of God bringing the light of the text to the “heathen in their blindness.”

Novels such as Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o’s Devil on the Cross (1982), written behind the bars of a Kenyan political prison where the author was being held without trial, searingly overturn traditional Western assumptions about the biblical narratives from cultures where they have often (though not always) been the accompaniment of cultural and social oppression. In his parable of the experience of a young African girl, Ngũgĩ uses biblical narratives to expose the evils of capitalism and colonial oppression, which often work against traditional readings and associations in a society that has not been immersed for two thousand years in the Christian hermeneutical patterns that we have been studying. The novel opens with a searing apocalyptic image that serves to remind us that the powerful imagery of the book of Revelation can take on a whole new life when severed from the ancient Christian associations within which it was originally written. Revelation, after all, was itself, among other things, a grand political vision related to the Roman Empire. What does it mean for us to transfer this energy to the more recent British Empire (or perhaps the economic empire of the United States of America in even more recent history)?

Critical books such as R. S. Sugirtharajah’s recent Postcolonial Criticism and Biblical Interpretation (2002) have begun to explore biblical hermeneutics in the light of such postcolonial voices and literature. In his Introduction, Sugirtharajah recounts the story of how British colonial expansion was justified in its day in the light of the text from Genesis 28:14: “You shall spread abroad to the west and to the east and to the north and to the south.” In other words, the injunction given to Jacob by the Lord after his dream of the ladder is simply transferred to the British acquisition of lands in India, Africa, and elsewhere, with all the economic wealth that this implied, with the further assumption that “all the families of the earth shall be blessed in you and in your offspring” (Gen. 28:14). For the British conquerors the biblical text seemed to give unexceptionable approval to their action.

We might also recall that apartheid in South Africa arose, to some extent at least, from biblical criticism and interpretation. In the postcolonial era of the present day it is easy to see how a very different hermeneutic pertains, and how not only is the Bible to be read in a different way in the light of political and social experience, but the power of the new reader must be turned against old prejudices that were once regarded as unquestioned truths.

4 From Intertextuality to Film, Art, and the Body

We have seen how, from the earliest days of the Christian Bible, its status as a “sacred text” has set it apart from all other literature. At some times a hermeneut like Martin Luther would simply
modern critics have begun to speak of them as "true fiction," presenting us as readers with a seeming paradox that our critical terminology has set up. (In the nineteenth century many people equated the term "fiction" simply with something that was "not true.")

Increasingly hermeneutics has come to acknowledge that we need to take intertextuality seriously, and this places a whole new light on the contemporary study of the Bible and the study of literature. When, in the seventeenth century, John Milton wrote his great "biblical" epic Paradise Lost, a fellow poet, Andrew Marvell, feared that it would be the "ruin of sacred truths," for such truths were absolute and the sole property of the Bible. But is this the case, and what is the status and claim of the poet who continues to explore in literature the great mysteries that are the biblical subjects? Is it the truth that is sacred or the text?

We now need to be very careful about what we mean by the word "text." Throughout this book we have assumed that it is a written body of words, even though the precise definition of that has varied between the Greek and the Hebrew traditions, and recent hermeneutics, like those of Stanley Fish, which have given more emphasis to the reader rather than to the text itself, have opened up ever-new questions about stability of meaning and reference. Still, it has remained a word-centered discussion, relating to books on our shelves and in our libraries. But increasingly we live within a culture that is visual as much (or perhaps more) than it is verbal, and we can now speak of "reading" the texts of film, or paintings and sculptures, and even the text of the body itself.

Thus, one of the recent developments in hermeneutical reflection on texts has been to extend our understanding of that word from the written word on the page to the "reading" of the visual image. Hermeneutics is no longer just about "the word" or words, but seeks to interpret varieties of "texts," perhaps in the Word made flesh. Actually this shift is not as new as it might seem. In the Middle Ages, Christ's body was frequently seen as a "text" to be read, his blood as it flowed down him from his wounds on the cross as a kind of ink, which inscribed the "words" of our salvation
to be read as we contemplate the passion. A “hermeneutics of the body” is, in fact, ancient, as we think of the term as it was used by Paul in his letters, and this is now updated in the context of contemporary awareness of issues like gender, race, age, and so on. Furthermore if, reading the first chapter of the Fourth Gospel, we can speak of the Word made flesh, perhaps also we need to consider the hermeneutics of the flesh made word, a strategy with valuable deconstructive possibilities as we reflect on the stereotypes that we impress on the bodies of others in terms of their differences from us. People are defined by words like “masculine,” “feminine,” “mother,” “black,” and so on.

Increasingly I have found that the disciplinary barriers between literature and art are being broached, and nowhere more than in the study of the Bible. It has even been recently suggested that the painter Rembrandt is the greatest biblical critic ever to come out of the Netherlands. But how do we “read” a painting? Certainly it is not from beginning to end like a book—and so the principles of such reading must be quite different, and hermeneutics must adapt accordingly. Perhaps reading a painting or work of art is closer to what we have traditionally called meditation, but that suggestion is only just a start.

Furthermore, as we move ever farther into a predominately visual culture, in which films are often watched far more readily than books are read, hermeneutics is of necessity developing new skills in interpreting the textuality of the screen. Film is a textual medium distinct from the written narrative, with its own claims and its own authenticity. Let me give you just one simple example of why “reading” films as if they were just books (which is often the underlying assumption behind much of the current work on film and religion) is not hermeneutically good enough. The experience of seeing a film of a novel that we have read can often be odd, and frequently disappointing. The beautiful heroine who has bathed in the warm glow of our imagination as we read the book is simply not the actress who has been chosen to play the part on the screen, however beautiful she may be. In my experience she is just too much there, and has robbed my imagination of the luxury of seeing her in my mind from the few hints that the good novelist has given me. In short, watching a film can often be a disappointment to the imagination (which is a crucial element in our literary responses), and the harder the filmmaker tries by special effects or subtle lighting, the more disappointing it ultimately seems to be. But it is not that film cannot be enormously imaginative—it is just that you have to develop new interpretative skills of watching that are quite different from what goes on as you sit in your armchair with a good book. It is a different kind of text.

How should we, as students of “traditional” hermeneutics, respond to these developments in textuality, recognizing, perhaps, their ethical implications (as we see, for example, “body” as “text”). I referred earlier and briefly to the concept of cyberspace, and I cannot even begin to explore the hermeneutical implications of that here. What is interesting, however, is the way in which our computers mimic traditional textual forms as we write and read on them (my computer, for example, tells me that I am on page 87 of this text as I write these words!), but we cannot turn over the pages in the same way, or have a pile of different books open on our desks all at the same time for simultaneous reference. Reading and writing with computers is becoming a new art, and it will demand new hermeneutical insights.

Are our traditional skills, developed in all the ways we have seen, adequate for these new tasks, or will we have to develop new skills to meet new challenges? Schleiermacher, after all, saw hermeneutics as an art. As new art forms develop, do we have to discover hermeneutical arts to interpret them?

When the American abstract expressionist painter Jackson Pollock first showed his great “drip” paintings about fifty years ago, art critics were rendered speechless. They had no language to interpret such “texts.” Now many would regard Pollock’s works as deeply religious works of art—as religious texts. The feeling, experienced by many people, that these paintings are somehow “spiritual” is beginning to be translated into a critical language that gives expression to their mystery. It is a process that must happen to all great texts as we encounter them for the first time.
Summary

We might summarize the main points of this chapter as follows:

1. Hermeneutics is sensitive to cultural and technological change. Interpretation of texts, even ancient texts, can never stand still.
2. Reading modern literature that has been influenced by the Bible is important for our understanding of the Bible today.
3. Contemporary "liberation" hermeneutics allow for new ways of reading—and new responsibilities.
4. Hermeneutics must be sensitive to political shifts in a world that, for the West at least, is now very clearly "postcolonial."
5. The idea of the "text" is more than simply words written on a page; it extends to the "textuality" of pictures, movies, and even the human body itself. The extension of the idea of the text must also affect the concepts and practice of reading and interpretation.

Activities and Questions

1. The English poet William Blake (1757–1827) wrote in "A Memorable Fancy": "The prophets Isaiah and Ezekiel dined with me, and I asked them how they dared so roundly to assert that God spake to them; and whether they did not think at the time that they would be misunderstood, and so be the cause of imposition."

   Analyze this passage carefully. What does it suggest about poetic/divine inspiration? Is Blake, as a poet, claiming equality with the biblical prophets, and if so, is he justified in doing this? Why should the prophets fear misunderstanding? What do you think is meant here by the word "imposition?"

2. Here is an extract from J. Cheryl Exum's book *Plotted, Shot and Painted: Cultural Representations of Biblical Women*. It is taken from a chapter on the book of Hosea entitled "Prophetic Pornography," and refers to passages such as Hosea 2:9–10, in which the Lord threatens Israel for her "whore-

   dom" in running after other gods, with nakedness to "uncover her shame in the sight of her lovers." Exum writes:

   I want to examine a particularly pernicious form of biblical violence against women where the perpetrator is not a collective, such as the army plundering cities, nor particular "evil men," but the deity himself: sexual violence where God appears as the subject and the object of his abuse is personified Israel/Judah/Jerusalem. The fact that this is metaphysical violence does not make it less criminal. (Exum, *Plotted, Shot and Painted*)

   How do you respond to this? Does it make you go back to the biblical text of Hosea defensively, or with an intention to read it again, perhaps critically, in a new light? Do you find Professor Exum's words threatening or liberating? What do you think about the writer herself?

3. The Devil, who would lead us into the blindness of the heart and into the deafness of the mind, should be crucified, and care should be taken that his acolytes do not lift him down from the Cross to pursue the task of building Hell for the people on earth. (Ngũgĩ, *Devil on the Cross*)

   Do you see any implied criticism of the passion narratives of the Gospels in this passage? Who do you think the Devil is here? How does this kind of literature (Ngũgĩ, remember, is a novelist) relate to the Bible?

4. Read this passage from the work of a modern scholar and biblical critic carefully, as a meditation on the body, and in particular the Christian concern with the body of Christ on the cross, as it lies at the very heart of Christianity as an incarnational (literally embodied) religion.

   My own father too was a butcher, and a lover of lamb with mint sauce. As a child, the inner geographical boundaries of my world extended from the massive granite bulk of the Redemptorist church squatting at one end of our street to the butcher shop guarding the other end. Redemption,
expiation, sacrifice, slaughter. ... There was no city abba-
toir in Limerick in those days; each butcher did his own
slaughtering. I recall the hooks, the knives, the cleavers;
the terror in the eyes of the victim; my own fear that I was
afraid to show; the crude stun-gun slick with grease; the
stunned victim collapsing to its knees; the slitting of the
throat; the filling of the basins with blood; the skinning and
evisceration of the carcass; the wooden barrels overflow-
ing with entrails; the crimson floor littered with hooves. I
also recall a Good Friday sermon by a Redemptorist
preacher that recounted at remarkable length the atrocious
agony felt by our sensitive Saviour as the spikes were
driven through his wrists and feet. Crucifixion, crucifixia-
tion, crucasphyxiation. ... Strange to say, it was this som-
bre recital, and not the other spectacle that finally caused
me to faint. Helped outside by my father, I vomited grate-
fully on the steps of the church. (Stephen D. Moore, God's
Gym: Divine Male Bodies of the Bible)

How do you respond to this passage? What is the writer
saying? What does this say about certain Christian attitudes
toward the human body?

5. Do you think that the figure of Jesus as portrayed in the
Gospels makes a good movie role? There have been many
"lives of Christ" on film, some of them profoundly religious,
others scandalous or scurrilous. What relationship do they
have to the texts of the four canonical Gospels?

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Conclusion

The Sacred Text and the Future of Writing

Most of this book has been concerned with ways of reading the
Bible. Jews and Christians, variously, read biblical texts and regard
them as in some sense special, set apart or even "sacred." Some of
the biblical stories are also to be found in the Qur'an, Islam being
the other great "Abrahamic" religion. And there are many other
sacred, or holy, texts in religious traditions, not to speak of those
texts like the Epic of Gilgamesh which have survived from ancient
cultures long after their religious traditions have perished and
become lost in the mists of time.

Such books, in their various ways, have a remarkable capacity
to survive and adapt. As we have seen with Luther and the inven-
tion of printing in Europe, they are often able to take advantage
of technological developments successfully.

But our concern has not just been with such texts. Other text-
books have followed the history of biblical interpretation in detail,
and our purpose has been rather different, though it has included
some of that story. Rather, it has been with the activity of reading
itself and how that has been perceived and engaged in across the
millennia. We could have restricted ourselves to a concern with
merely literary hermeneutics, but that would have been a narrower
venture than the one we have been engaged in. The story of how
texts like the epics of Homer, the great tragedies of Aeschylus and