

Exegesis and Imagination

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In endowing this annual university lecture on the Bible, Mrs Ethel M. Wood revealed two motives: her concern for education and her love for the Bible. She knew her Bible in its classical English form, and her intentions may have had Bible translation primarily in view; but the list of past lecturers and their subjects mainly suggests that she wanted to create an opportunity for professional biblical scholars to communicate with a less specialized audience. One may guess that this was the reason for her wish that the lecture should not be theologically controversial; a gentle hint, perhaps, in favour of sharing some fruits of learning, rather than pursuing technical questions which the audience, however interested, might not find to be their own.

Thoughts such as these played some part in my choice of a subject for this lecture. Mrs Wood was interested in communication and in the Bible; communication is the concern of both the translator and the teacher. Both of them, like the translator and the teacher of any literature, must penetrate the Bible's meanings by hard study and acquisition of skill; then, in order to share the understanding thus gained with whatever students or readers are addressed, begin the tasks of communication: for the translator, the building of bridges from one language to another; for the teacher, the task of helping the text to release its meaning, its beauty, its power to enrich minds and awaken response, even across gulfs of time and chasms of cultural difference.

Here, then, are some ideas of a teacher about biblical interpretation, or exegesis, trying to present it not as an esoteric discipline but as a training for and practice of communication. I thought of great teachers of literature I have had, such as Eduard Fraenkel in Greek and Latin, and others whom I have only read but wish I had known. Then I thought (not without rueful reminiscences) about how exegetes, however competent and learned, can fail to make texts live and excite their hearers or readers. What makes the difference? It seems to me that it is imagination. This has not usually featured in professional discussions of exegetical method; we have all been brought up to look up to German *Wissenschaft* and the ideal of historical objectivity. Imagination, surely, opens the door to subjective associations and passages leading to irrelevant rose-gardens. More seriously, how can you listen to a distant speaker through an ancient text, if you are busy imagining what you would like it to mean? After all, it is infuriating to have someone do that to us who are alive, and we ought to have more respect for those who are unable to answer back. Yes, the dangers of letting imagination loose in

exegesis are evident and grave. And yet—can exegesis achieve its fullest excellence unless it is enlivened by some element of imagination, first in approaching the text, and then in communicating something of its beauty or power? The literary critic will be in no doubt about the answer; and it is precisely the influence of critics trained in other fields of literature which, in recent years, has come to have a highly stimulating effect on the exegesis of both Old and New Testaments. New aspects of familiar texts have come to be seen as important and interesting, and new questions have sprung to life. Accuracy of linguistic and historical scholarship is as essential as ever, but it has become questionable whether to be ‘scientific’ was ever the appropriate ideal for exegesis. (That was, in any case, a misleading rendering of *wissenschaftlich*.) Exegesis is a complex craft, which consists partly in technical competence, partly in art; and the latter part surely requires imagination, even though the scope for this lies primarily in insight, in

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choice of questions and hypotheses, and in interpretation that tries to realize the potentialities of the text, rather than in free creativity.

These ideas offer a personal view of what philosophers discuss under the name of hermeneutics, a somewhat opaque modern term developed from a Greek root; it means systematic reflexion on the processes and problems of interpretation, and how one person’s understanding of meaning (his own, or that of an author) is communicated to others. The subject is not in itself an arcane one; in analogous ways it acutely concerns every traveller abroad and, indeed, everyone who ever tries to understand anyone else, whether through word or writing. Biblical hermeneutics concerns both translation and interpretation. But, ironically, it has become one of the darkest thickets in the philosophical forest; its jargon is bewildering. And yet the thicket lets in glimmers of light and reveals pathways, and I have come to see imagination as both. Lights can be misleading and pathways ambiguous; so can imagination. But I have seen the alternatives, and for my part I would rather stay with imagination.

This position is not anti-philosophical, but can appeal to its own philosophical tradition, one which has been enriched and kept alive by poets and contemplatives. Not all to whom I shall appeal have formed a theory of imagination or even used the term; this is certainly true of the exegete and poet whose vision and imaginative method have impressed me most deeply, the fourth-century Syriac writer Ephrem, of whom I shall speak later. Of those who have expressly discussed imagination, John Henry Newman gave it a major place in his analysis of how the ‘illative sense’ works and ‘real assent’ is formed;¹ this analysis is presupposed by all his educational thought. But for my purposes I prefer to follow the more recent study of imagination by Mary Warnock,² who likewise both analyses its role in mental experience and emphasizes its importance in education. Content with the common idea of imagination as the power of creating mental images, she draws fruitfully on Wordsworth and others to trace its activity in perception and learning, in reflexion and creative expression, and its power to awaken other minds. ‘I have’, she says, ‘... come very strongly to believe that it is the

¹ *An Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Assent* (London, 1870); J. Coulson, *Religion and Imagination: In Aid of a Grammar of Assent* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1981), pp. 46-83; D. M. Hammond, ‘Imagination in Newman’s Phenomenology of Cognition’, *The Heythrop Journal* 29 (1988), 21-32.

² *Imagination* (London: Faber & Faber, 1976).

cultivation of imagination which should be the chief aim of education, and in which our present systems of education most conspicuously fail, where they do fail'.³

My plan this evening is to apply such a view of imagination to the biblical exegete's various tasks: the acquisition of technical competence; the choice of methods and models for reading texts; the practice of 'listening to the text' and finding the right questions to ask it; and then the work of exposition, so as to remain faithful to the nature of the text and yet to express and communicate as much as possible of its power and its possibilities, as the exegete has conceived these and feels entitled to represent them. We shall not only look at some ways and forms (especially in Jewish and patristic exegesis) which give a greater place to imagination than most modern exegetes would approve; we shall also bear in mind that examples of insight into biblical passages are to be found among the poets and other creative artists, even though these were not constrained by the professional exegete's responsibilities.

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I

Imagination in the Exegete's Task of Understanding

The Bible is a collection of very ancient writings. The Christian collection was completed by nearly nineteen centuries ago; the Jewish, by two or three centuries before that, bringing to completion processes of writing and revision which had lasted, perhaps, up to a thousand years, and which surely looked back on traditions and memory now undatable. This time-span makes it not easy, even for those of the two communities of faith which have treasured and transmitted the Bible, to take in the magnitude of the task we undertake when we try to understand these ancient writings. This in itself calls for imagination.

In our Western culture until the present century, those who were brought up on the Bible, like those who were brought up on the classics (and of course they overlapped) were so confident of the continuity of religious and cultural tradition, and of the essential intelligibility of the ancient writers, that they were not aware of any basic problem of understanding. The feasibility of translation was not doubted. Had not Aristotle assured us that, while the languages and scripts of humankind differ, the mental experiences of which they are the signs are universal?⁴ But this confidence has collapsed. The continuity of our cultural traditions is ever more precarious: few now study the classics, while even elementary knowledge of Bible stories can no longer be assumed among those who otherwise pass for educated. But not only do fewer people today know their Bible; of those who do, too many either cordon it off from their critical faculties by way of fundamentalism, or are easily overwhelmed by the strangeness and remoteness of the biblical world. Where the modern reader feels an initial confidence that at least some biblical figures—David or Jeremiah, or Peter in the gospels, live and speak as real people to whom they can react as such, this confidence can all too easily be shaken if it is shown that the reader's understanding is vitiated by ignorance of circumstances or by unrecognised modern assumptions and emotional attitudes. But worse, belief in the essential continuity of human nature has been eroded, giving rise to a relativism which

³ *Ibid.*, p.9.

⁴ *Peri Hermeneias* 1.

declares that there is no longer any valid basis for believing that we can have true mental contact with the biblical writers;⁵ translation is actually impossible.

Many have tried to answer this attack on the very possibility of our understanding either the Bible or other literatures remote from us; and many of the attempts in fact harm their own cause, as John Barton has shown.⁶ It is crucial for the Bible reader and scholar alike that their whole activity should not be left with its foundations apparently shaky. It is not too difficult to show that thoroughgoing relativism contains its own *reductio ad absurdum*; but a more positive defence of our power to understand past writers is needed. A model of human dialogue has been convincingly proposed by Barton in the article just referred to,⁷ and Nicholas Lash argues on similar lines in his essay 'Understanding the Stranger'.⁸ This too, I believe, is a way of imagination—not the creative function, but like the practical kind which reaches out towards another human being, or to a whole foreign cultural milieu, in the desire to understand and enter into dialogue: the ability to picture another person's basic human needs and concerns though they are not manifest, and to keep them in mind.

I believe that it is simply an extension of this practical human imagination which we try to deploy when we approach a literature that is remote from us in time and cultural conditions. It is simply not true

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that we are helpless. For example, we can distinguish (1) what convincingly seems psychologically transparent (for instance, the process by which Nathan's parable brings David to accuse himself and so come to repentance for his sin, in 2 Samuel 12); (2) what is problematic for us because of changed categories of religious thought (for instance, the range of connotations of *ḥaṭṭat*, 'sin' and '*asham*, 'guilt' in the instructions for sacrifice in Leviticus 4-7); (3) what remains forever mysterious, partly because of the elliptical way a story is told (for instance, the story of Abraham and Isaac in Genesis 22), and—to stop rather than to exhaust the list of these examples of difficulty)—(4) things we cannot understand because we have lost the necessary cultural clues (for instance, the purpose of the prohibition 'You shall not boil a kid in its mother's milk').⁹ In all these instances and in whatever others arise, the common reader and the scholarly exegete alike have to reach out towards the text with a kind of interested and inquiring imagination such as we try to extend to fellow human beings: listening, wondering what it was like for them; eager to ask, slow to judge.

I have started by representing the exegete's position in face of the texts to be studied as one of human relationship, not of mere study of data. But the discussion has already illustrated how much the exegete needs to acquire competence in the relevant languages and knowledge of the cultural and religious world in which the biblical writings arose. Indeed, such competence, as the fundamental prerequisite for serious exegetical study, is the logical starting-point for

⁵ Cf. D. E. Nineham, *The Use and Abuse of Holy Scripture* (London: MacMillan, 1976).

⁶ 'Reflections on Cultural Relativism', *Theology* 82 (1979), 103-109, 191-199.

⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 197-199, developing a point from George Steiner.

⁸ In N. Lash, *Theology on Dover Beach* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1979), pp. 60-76, especially pp. 71-76.

⁹ Ex 32:19; Ex 34:26 and Deut 14:21. Proposed explanations appealing to Ugaritic have not proved successful.

any discussion of method in bible reading.¹⁰ There is no substitute for knowledge of the languages of the Bible and of its ancient versions. In these a master exegete must acquire personal authority, but every serious student needs Hebrew and Greek, or should long to acquire them, like the pearl of great price. The fewer those become who have inherited the traditional classical foundation, the more essential it is for the future of biblical studies that sound knowledge of the biblical languages and of the ancient world—its geography, its history, its social and religious institutions and its literatures—should be fostered and eagerly pursued.

Does it seem paradoxical that in a lecture commending the role of imagination in exegesis I should so strongly emphasize the importance of acquiring competence? To me it is not. I am not commending speculative fantasy uncontrolled by sound linguistics and the other necessary disciplines; my whole argument presupposes accurate and responsible scholarship. Nevertheless in emphasizing competence I mean to urge that, within the very discipline that it imposes, qualities and attitudes are needed which can truly be called aspects of imagination, or akin to it. Plato's Socrates says that the experience of wonder belongs very much to the philosopher, and that philosophy has no other starting-point.¹¹ Surely the same is true of every humane discipline, and not least of the study that goes to make a good biblical exegete. Wonder awakens the imagination and a longing to discover more. It was the habit of travelling in the realms of gold which prepared John Keats so to be transported by Chapman's Homer as to find himself standing with stout Cortez, silent upon a peak in Darien. There must be something wrong with biblical study if the stories, the poetry and the languages which mould them ever fail to evoke that kind of excitement. The Bible calls for adventurers who will fall in love with Hebrew, as Jorge Luis Borges did with Anglo-Saxon. (What a response to a language, a poem entitled 'Embarking on the Study of Anglo-Saxon Grammar'! He knew that those barbaric, long-dead words 'manana volverán a vivir', 'tomorrow they will come alive again'.¹² Even as his eyesight perished, the power of his awakened imagination created half-a-dozen poems which enshrine an almost

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miraculous empathy with the life and poetry of those whom he saw as his ancestors, though totally remote from them in time and space.)

Next to competence in language, the exegete needs a wide knowledge of literature, not only that of the Bible but also of other cultures, so as to recognize and appreciate the various literary genres, forms and figures and how they work: metaphor, parable, irony and all the skills of rhetoric. Today we are enjoying a recovery of literary values too long neglected in biblical scholarship. It hardly needs to be said that imagination is both a factor to be taken into account here and a very necessary qualification for recognizing 'what is happening' in a text. This recognition will constantly suggest comparisons and analogies, both within the biblical literature and beyond it. Comparison is the daily exercise of exegesis; without it we could not realize that some particular biblical passage goes with others of similar structure and content to form a regular genre (for instance, the various kinds of psalms, some of which are

¹⁰ Cf. J. Barton, *Reading the Old Testament* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1984), pp. 8-19.

¹¹ *Theaetetus* 155d.

¹² Borges, *Selected Poems 1923-1967*, ed. N. T. di Giovanni (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1985), pp.152-53.

paralleled in other neighbouring literatures), or observe the different ways in which the same theme is handled as the biblical tradition develops (for instance, the manna in the desert, from Exodus through Deuteronomy and the Psalms to the Wisdom of Solomon, Jewish targum and midrash, and John's Gospel).¹³ Once the student has begun to acquire knowledge of the biblical and other relevant literatures, imagination, guided by memory, darts from a text under study to other places which may illustrate it.

This may be called a flash of insight or a heuristic leap, but it seems to be essentially imagination which powers the mental act. Plato said that it is the student who can see things together, with their relationships, who is capable of philosophical argument.¹⁴ The same is certainly true of exegesis. Doubtless, Plato was not thinking of imagination at that point in the *Republic*; but what else is it that enables us to go beyond what we see before us, so as to posit further links and see what is there though hidden? Of course, imagination remains responsible to the data and to the factors making for reasonable probability.

Since the rapid expansion in our knowledge of the cultures neighbouring on ancient Israel, and the deciphering and translation of texts in their languages, we have an abundance of potential parallels which might illustrate passages in the Bible and even solve some problems to which we seemed to have lost the key. Some parallels are so convincing, both in themselves and in their circumstances, that they have been universally recognized: for example, the Mesopotamian Flood stories and ancient law codes, or the messages from prophets to kings in Mari and elsewhere. Other cases are far less firmly based and are proposed with speculative reconstructions beyond what the evidence can justify. For instance, theories that a 'sacred marriage' and other fertility rituals were practised in the temple cults of Israel and Judah have been proposed on the basis of evidence from Mesopotamia, but with no adequate evidence from nearer in space and time. Such speculations tend to create prejudice against even serious attempts to reconstruct the lost rituals of ancient Israel, and are the sort of thing that gives imagination a bad name; but *abusus non tollit usum*.

Potential parallels must, of course, be carefully tested for similarities and dissimilarities, in the light of all relevant criteria, and the various alternative solutions must be weighed. When all possible relationships between two phenomena have been considered, the best conclusion may sometimes be that they simply illustrate the fact that

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humans are likely to respond to similar circumstances in similar ways; an honest scholar may have to give up with a sigh a quest that has been pursued long and lovingly.

Each stage of this process, which calls for such delicate and skilful evaluation of probabilities, seems to me to involve the function of imagination—once again, not the free creative kind, but the practical human imagination which tries to picture realistically how it is or was for other people, what they could have known, or what their motives probably were. Indeed, what is in play is not unlike the curiosity which we bring to solving a detective mystery, except that

¹³ In detail, Ex 16:12-36; Deut 8:3; Ps 78:23-25; 105:40; Wis Sol. 16:20-21; John 6:30-58. For Jewish developments see e.g. *Midrash Rabbah*, Exodus, tr. S. M. Lehman (London: Soncino Press, 1939), pp. 301-16.

¹⁴ *Republic* 537b-c.

in the study of ancient literature, and certainly of the Bible, there is not going to be a solution such as Agatha Christie eventually grants us. Our reward will be in the seeking, and mystery will remain after us.

So far we have been thinking especially about the basic skills an exegete must acquire and develop. Of course, these all exist to help, not inhibit, the task of reading: a watchful, expectant reading which listens and wonders, postponing judgement but keeping various possibilities open; eager to savour every feature of a text and to penetrate its possible meanings. In what way are we going to approach a text, and what questions are we going to put to it? Let us consider these two questions in turn and see how they interact. Both involve imaginative sensitivity; both are loaded with presuppositions which the exegete must recognize in order not to be manipulated by them.

The first question is about the choice of ways of reading a biblical text. It is due especially to the interaction of biblical exegetes and literary critics that I can say this today. Down the centuries, since the Bible in its Jewish and Christian forms was established with the status of 'holy Scripture', students of both faiths have generally been trained in fairly fixed traditions about how to read and what 'senses' they might legitimately seek in Scripture. In modern times (especially in the past century) new interests have arisen among Christians, the centre of development being in Protestant Germany. Old orthodoxies gave way to new, but hardly to freedom to choose a way of reading. Scholars of great stature and authority arose, who in effect dictated the ways of reading they thought most important; students were trained in those ways and given answers to questions they perhaps had not asked, rather than encouraged to try various ways of reading and to find their own questions. The 'right way' to read was seeking what would cast light on the historical development of ancient Israel and its religion, and then of Judaism and Christianity; or the 'right way' was to learn to classify passages or books by their form and genre; and try to identify their original contexts and use in life and worship, employing canons and categories worked out by modern scholars; or the 'right way' was to search the text for signs of redactional activity, so as to argue back to a putative original form of the text, to reconstruct a history of the text's development, and to treat the final text as reflecting the interests of redactors.

More recently this has led to another 'right way'—to regard the final canon as a whole, so that this, rather than the intention of an original author or the earlier life of a text, sets up the terms on which any book or passage has its meaning. Then came the various forms of structuralism, focusing attention on the text itself and what can be deduced from its literary patterns or its 'deep structures' which reveal underlying social-anthropological factors. The most extreme structuralists forbid the reader to ask either about an author's interests and intentions or about the content of a text, together with

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what it might be thought to tell us about history or tradition. Finally came the theories which put everything—not only interpretation but even the meaning of a text—in the hands of the reader. Imagination would then seem to be left in uncontrolled tyranny, except that the reader is not allowed to waste time imagining what the author meant, what tradition he inherited, what can be deduced from the use of literary genres or forms, or any other questions which previous schools of interpretation have asked, fruitfully as many would think. Today we can

look back on all these ways of reading, as John Barton does in his book *Reading the Old Testament*,¹⁵ with freedom to choose whichever one we prefer, either as a general method, or for a particular text, or we can adopt aspects of all and apply them as seems appropriate to help us read a given book or passage: the story of Abraham, the Mosaic law codes, Psalm 89, the Book of Job, the Sermon on the Mount or the Letter to the Hebrews. In every such choice there is need for both skill and imaginative sensitivity.

To make this choice well, and to make good use of a method of reading, involves our second question: what questions should we put to a text? We are as free as we also are in choice of a method, but we need to see clearly why we are asking a particular question. We can ask the text questions supplied to us by the modern disciplines of history and sociology, and may extract some data which, at least after processing, seem to deliver some results. Historical inquiry is a valuable activity and there is no reason why the Bible should be exempt from it; but for too long it was simply assumed that historical questions were the primary concern of the exegete, whereas the historian is engaged in an enterprise distinct from that of the exegete, which is a dialogue with the text, listening to it and letting it question us. Or again, the Bible has often been required to deliver proof texts to establish theses of theological agenda: whether they were to help weave an argument of talmudic *halakhah* or to substantiate a dogmatic thesis of Catholic scholasticism, both kinds of demand were different from the patient listening of true exegesis.

There are other factors which too often impede the exegete in making good choices of method and asking good questions. Some are matters of fashion, such as a romantic and sentimental preoccupation with Hosea's marital vicissitudes, which indeed form the basis of an extended metaphor, but the point of the first three chapters of Hosea surely lies in the working-out of the metaphor, rather than in whatever we may reconstruct of events which gave rise to it. Another cause of trouble lies in too hasty assigning of texts to categories of modern origin such as 'apocalyptic' or 'eschatology', which, though they represent attempts to draw attention to real features of early Jewish and Christian literature, have misled many into too facile classifications and hasty judgements, which foreclose the processes of open and sensitive reading. I could add to this list of impeding factors; but let these stand as examples.

Familiar as the Bible text has been to millions down the ages in its original languages or in well-loved versions, some books or sections have always remained highly problematic: many readers have never been clear about how to 'listen', or what were the right questions to put, even of the most basic kind. What was 'going on' in all those psalms in which someone cries out to God in various kinds of distress, mostly described in stereotyped formulas? What exactly is Amos objecting to when he says 'a man and his father go to the girl, to profane my holy name' (Amos 2:7; I render the words baldly, without the varnish of attempts to interpret them).¹⁶ How do the visions in the Book of Revelation purport to relate

¹⁵ See n. 10 (p.19); also 'Classifying Biblical Criticism', *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 29 (1984), 19-35; 'Reading the Bible as Literature: Two Questions for Biblical Critics', *Journal of Literature and Theology* 1.2 (1987), 135-53.

¹⁶ Many translators insert 'the same' to help the text to say what they want. The most recent discussion of this text is by H. M. Barstad, *The Religious Polemics of Amos*, VT. Suppl. 34 (Leiden: Brill, 1984), ch. 2, pp. 11-36. Barstad shows how shaky are the foundations on which many commentators suggest a reference to temple prostitution or 'sacred marriage' rituals (cf. above, p.5).

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to events on earth, present or future? There are places in almost any of the biblical books when we feel that we have lost the key to what a text was about, or what was its purpose; yet we are sure that there was a key, and it might be discovered again. We cannot be content to let the doctrinaire structuralists rule questions of reference and intention out of order. Where our interest is frustrated by lack of knowledge, we begin to form and test hypotheses; once again, it is our imagination which plays with whatever data or probabilities we have.

Our situation in face of a baffling text is like that when we approach a painting which without any doubt has a narrative or symbolic subject, yet this cannot be identified. We can enjoy the picture's formal qualities, but are not content to stop there, for it evidently has something to say in terms of a story or a theme on which it is commenting. To appreciate the picture fully we want to know that, but are frustrated by lack of evidence to prove or even suggest an interpretation. For example, in the London National Gallery you can puzzle over a painting by Piero di Cosimo in which a young woman wounded in the throat is mourned by a satyr; the picture is lamely labelled 'A Mythological Subject', but this is only tentatively identified. Or the subject may be known but its function in its context may be quite uncertain: for example, the Hercules cycle in the catacomb on the Via Latina in Rome, where almost all the other frescoes are Christian. Is it likely, in default of literary evidence, that Hercules was allegorized by Christians, or has the cycle another explanation?¹⁷ These and other problems of interpretation in the visual arts can sometimes provide illuminating analogies for problems in literature. In both fields it is surely the imagination which springs to help us explore the possibilities, or indeed to extend them.

II

Imagination in the Exegete's Task of Exposition

In speaking of exposition, let me start like a preacher, with a text, or rather two texts, but not from the Bible. As a boy I first read the *Odyssey* in T. E. Lawrence's translation.¹⁸ The exordium is impressively set out like a monumental inscription, on a page of its own. It ends:

MAKE THE TALE LIVE FOR US
IN ALL ITS MANY BEARINGS
O MUSE

When I later read the Greek, I realized how much freedom Lawrence had used and was slightly disappointed. But Lawrence's version of Homer's invocation has stayed with me, both as reader and as one trying to help others to experience the power of literature, classical or biblical.

¹⁷ The catacomb was discovered in 1955 and published by A. Ferrua, *Le pitture della nuova catacomba di Via Latina* (Città del Vaticano, 1960). On the Hercules cycle see W. N. Schumacher, 'Reparatio Vitae: Zum Programm der neuen Katakomba an der Via Latina In Rom', *Römische Quartalschrift* 66 (1971), pp. 125-53 and plates 9-24).

¹⁸ *The Odyssey of Homer*, Translated by T. E. Shaw (Colonel T. E. Lawrence) (Oxford University Press, 1935).

My other 'text' is one more recollection of Plato's Socrates: how, in the *Theaetetus*, he presents himself with teasing irony as not personally capable of bringing forth any fruit of wisdom, but only as a 'spiritual midwife' (as his mother had been a physical one), who could enable others to bring to live birth good conceptions with which they were pregnant in the mind, or alternatively help them to recognize an illusory pregnancy and be free of it.¹⁹

This is, of course, the language of imagination; Plato was a poet before he was a philosopher. His imagery of pregnancy and midwifery is feminine. Socrates actually handles the young mathematician Theaetetus

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by unrelentingly disciplined logic, which has him on the ropes; this might commonly be called 'masculine' behaviour (though Socrates is gentle at the end). Plato had no possible contact with Chinese philosophy, but the teaching method he sketches here could be said in Chinese terms to exemplify the harmony of *yin* and *yang*, the complementary principles in the whole cosmos, one example of which duality is that of female and male; this scheme underlies all the arts of China, and since its importation to the West, many find that it marries well with Western theory in both aesthetics and psychology (to say no more).²⁰

It will be obvious how the argument is going. Is not Socrates, the mental midwife, a model for the exegete too, in relation to both the text and the student or reader? The exegete is 'midwife' to the text to help it bring forth its wealth of meaning, and to the students to help them bring forth a fruitful response. And the process has its *yang* side and its *yin* side: the discipline of competence and the demands of the text's objective characteristics are *yang* elements, while imagination, with its freedom and eternal youth, is *yin*. The 'scientific' ideal is one-sided, as is any insistence on objective norms without a balancing respect for the claims of subjectivity and freedom. It is within this framework of ideas that I would like to discuss the role of imagination in the exegete's work of exposition.

Let me, however, delay for a moment longer. I wish to mention first a form of public interpretation of the Bible which is in a sense prior to exegetical exposition, yet can have an effect, in favourable circumstances, that formal exposition may desire in vain. I refer, of course, to public reading when it is done with real power and skill. Those who can remember such readings in the original languages of great literature often treasure the memory. For most of us the experience depends on reading in translation. Several times already I have mentioned this art, which calls for all the same skills as exegesis, and is really to be regarded as its elder sister. There is no translation without interpretation built into it; it is the translator's responsibility to try to avoid all tendentiousness or personal whims.

The public reader of the Bible also makes an interpretative contribution: probably many of us have experienced the power of Alec McCowen's recitations of St Mark's gospel, and can still remember the vividness he brought out. A professional exegete might well take this as a challenge and face it humbly. I feel the same about Stevie Smith's poem 'The Airy Christ',

¹⁹ *Theaetetus* 150b-c, 151b-e, 210b.

²⁰ For an introduction see S. Colegrave, *The Spirit of the Valley: Androgyny in Chinese Thought* (London: Virago, 1979).

²¹inspired by reading E. V. Rieu's translation of Mark. It is clear from many poems that her religion afforded her more burdens than consolations, but here she was swept into a vision of joy and freedom.

Who is this that comes in grandeur, coming from the blazing East?
This is he we had not thought of, this is he the Airy Christ.

Airy, in an airy manner in an airy parkland walking,
Others take him by the hand, lead him, do the talking.

She continues with characteristically wistful compassion, feeling for this stranger who has submitted to so much manipulation by those who have turned his words into laws and theological doctrines, while to her he only wants to sing. She ends provocatively, regarding even emphasis on Jesus' death as a manipulation:

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Heed it not. Whatever foolish men may do the song is cried
For those who hear, and the sweet singer does not care that he was crucified.

For he does not wish that men should love him more than anything
Because he died; he only wishes they would hear him sing.

This is not the place to judge Stevie Smith for impiety. She could, in fact, be given a point or two; she actually comes near to Chrysostom's doctrine of the 'condescension' (*synkatabasis*) of the divine word.²² My point is rather that such freshness of response to a translated text alone is a challenge to exegetes. Is it not the business of every expositor to help people 'hear the text sing'?

We must return from the airy parkland to more laborious tasks. The various ways of reading which we briefly surveyed above are all available to the exegete to adopt in exposition, and they can (within limits) be adopted in turn, as a skilled practitioner finds appropriate. The limits were also mentioned above; there are other scholarly ways of using the Bible, such as those of the historian and the archaeologist, which are not exegesis, although they may both overlap with it and contribute to it.

At the other end of the possible range of ways to 'play the midwife' for the Bible stands the free creativity of the novelist or the poet. They are not usually engaged in exegesis as such, but may have treasures to offer the exegete, sometimes by suggesting analogies and parallels, sometimes by actual illustration of some passage, sometimes by reminding us of the total biblical context, as George Herbert does in his second sonnet on 'The Holy Scriptures': "O that I knew how all thy lights combine..." Certainly, creative writers can help the exegete 'make

²¹ Stevie Smith, *Collected Poems* (London: Allen Lane, 1975; Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1985), p. 345. Quoted from the *Collected Poems of Stevie Smith* (Penguin Modern Classics) by permission of her executor, James MacGibbon.

²² Chrysostom has a vision of God's humility in submitting to the conditions of human discourse and to what humans would make of his word, analogous to which is the humility of Christ in submitting to all that was done to him. See B. de Margerie, *Introduction a L'histoire de l'Exégèse, I: Les Pères grecs et orientaux* (Paris: Cerf, 1979), ch. 8, 'Saint Jean Chrysostome, docteur de la condescendance divine'.

the tale live for us in all its many bearings'. To mention only one example: Browning's long poem 'A Death in the Desert' contains a wonderfully conceived dramatic reconstruction of what could have been the prehistory of the Fourth Gospel.

Among the ways of exposition which give a place to imagination it would be fair to give first place to Jewish midrash, followed by Ephrem the Syrian, the greatest representative of the heirs of early Jewish Christianity. But it may be easier if we start with something probably more generally familiar.

Here are two simple examples from the first chapter of St Mark's gospel which have struck me recently, merely from hearing them read. Mark's account of the temptations of Jesus (1:12-13) is bald compared with those of Matthew and Luke: he has no story of the three temptations as they have, but instead he says 'and he was with the wild beasts'. Then, like Matthew, he closes the episode with 'the angels ministered to him'. Now the unique words referring to the animals cannot be there for nothing. But what do they imply? The answer could be simply 'he was exposed to all the perils of the wild'. It can neither be proved that that is all, nor that we need look for more. But the other agents in the story are of great supernatural significance; is it likely that the wild beasts have none, when they so often do have in the biblical tradition? God brought the animals to Adam to enter into relationship with them by naming them

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(Gen 2:19-20). After the flood God made a covenant with both humankind and all the animals (Gen 9:9-17). In Isaiah 11:6-9 harmony between animals and with humans is pictured, to symbolize a coming reign of peace. Does Mark's phrase, then, invite us to contemplate Jesus as the new Adam, as well as heir to the messianic kingdom of peace? Imagination, encouraged by experience of how early Christian writers used their scriptures, emboldens me to answer 'yes'; but it remains a free choice.²³

My second example is later in the same chapter, Mark 1:40-45. A leper, who by the law (Lev 13:46) must stay 'outside the camp', comes to Jesus, who receives him, even touches him, heals him and sends him to be examined by the priests (cf. Lev 13, *passim*). The man returns into human society, but, as a result of his disregard for Jesus' command not to tell anyone, Jesus himself becomes unable to enter a town, but has to stay out 'in desert places'. The story is also in Matthew and Luke, and the latter also follows it by saying Jesus withdrew to the wilderness (Lk 5:16), but only in Mark is this the consequence of his healing the leper. This Markan story arouses, as it were spontaneously, thoughts of a 'structuralist' character, which could easily suggest one of those mystifying little diagrams the structuralists love:

²³ In the modern Roman Catholic lectionary Mk 1:12-13 is paired with the Genesis 9 covenant passage, so those who arranged the texts agree with me; but this reading of the Markan pericope will be sought in vain among the early fathers. The nearest thing I have found is in a Syriac poetic homily ascribed to Ephrem but probably of two centuries later, which says

'he went about with the animals,
who knelt and worshipped him'

(Ps.-Ephrem, *Sermons for Holy Week*, 1, 95-96). I discuss this and other themes of animals and humans symbolizing cosmic and social order in my book *The Cosmic Covenant*. (London: Sheed & Ward, 1992. Now o.p.)

Lev 13	Mk 1
Leper must be outcast. If healed, is inspected by priest. Leper can return to society.	Leper welcomed by Jesus. Jesus heals him, sends him to priests. Leper can return to society;
	but, as a result, JESUS MUST STAY OUTSIDE SOCIETY.

This structure seems to me to spring out of Mark's way of telling the story. But how much is implied by it? In all three accounts, till Mark's last touch, the story follows the pattern in Leviticus. But in Mark, the healer is forced to take the place of the outcast. Does Mark 'mean' us to deduce this, and if so, how much more? Matthew, two stories after his account of the leper, in a summary of Jesus' healing activity, adapts Isaiah 53 (which otherwise the New Testament writers saw as a vision of Christ's passion): 'He took our infirmities and bore our diseases' (Mt 8:17). Is Mark hinting at that? We are free to decide, letting imagination be guided by what we know of the Markan manner.

These are small examples of problems in exegesis which offer a place for imagination. But they already raise the question of how far texts can legitimately be held to contain implications beyond what is supported by clear evidence. Theaetetus, at the end of his gruelling bout with Socrates, says 'through you I have said far more than I had in me'.²⁴ It is not the purpose of this lecture to plead for making texts say what cannot be in them. But who defines what cannot be? Hamlet had to remind Horatio of the limits of his philosophy, and very often it is

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unrecognised philosophical or confessional presuppositions which put blinkers on exegetes. Of course, the living can explain what they mean or do not mean, as texts cannot. And yet it is not infrequently that poets, after a poem was finished and shown to others, have accepted with amazement that it could mean more than they had consciously had in mind.

Let us now return to Jewish midrash. In fact, my modest essays in exegesis of Mark have not been so far away from it; not surprisingly, for the gospels were all written by Jews about a Jew, and if they found him important, the natural way for them to express this was by relating him, explicitly or by allusion, to the scriptures. If examination of the text has invited an imaginative leap or inference, that is what happens in midrash. Of course the links that are made in midrash are governed by mastery of Hebrew and Aramaic and of the whole biblical text; what makes it strange to those trained in historical criticism of the Bible is that the biblical text is treated as a living whole, all of whose parts are related to each other, as if we were dealing with a coherent body of writings by a single author; yet it would be ignorant to describe the standpoint of midrash as fundamentalist, for it is instinctively aware of literary genres and of the multiple possibilities constantly facing the reader, always illustrated by

²⁴ *Theaetetus* 210b.

cross-references, parallels or stories, or even poems, as occur in the targums—not to mention the genre of *piyyuṭim* (liturgical poems) which, in their freer way, can also illustrate midrashic traditions.²⁵ The modern critic may ask whether the midrashic method is not given to producing meanings which are not there; but what is meant by ‘there’? The method is not bound by theories of what an individual author intended in his historical context, but rather by a sense of the Bible as a coherent body of revelation. Unfortunately time fails to do more than glance at an example or two. A very famous one is how the story of Abraham’s offering of Isaac in Genesis 22 grows in the targums and midrashim: this has been brilliantly traced by Shalom Spiegel.²⁶ This was the tenth test of Abraham; the summons *lekh lekha* (get you gone) recapitulates all Abraham’s life since he first heard it in Ur of the Chaldees. (This hint can be taken up by examination of the structure of the whole Abraham story, which generates remarkable results, as Jonathan Magonet has shown.)²⁷ The awesomely elliptic character of the story²⁸ has led midrashists to expand it in ways which neither evacuate its power nor import elements that are not legitimately generated by the bare text. Isaac shows willingness to be sacrificed, and the angelic witnesses weep for sheer wonder and compassion. A breathtaking leap alludes to mysterious angelic mourning in Isaiah 33:7. The promise which follows spells out the significance for all Israel’s future. But there, alas, I must leave this hurried sketch. It remains to note how contemporary Jewish exegetes fruitfully marry the old tradition with modern techniques: outstanding examples are Jonathan Magonet’s study of Jonah²⁹ and that by Francis Landy on the Song of Songs.³⁰

Judaism and Christianity evolved similar theories of the ‘senses’ of scripture; both gave primacy to non-allegorical ways of reading,³¹ but held it legitimate to find hidden senses,³² though with different aims. Here I will speak only of Christian messianic exegesis of the Old Testament. This largely used symbolic methods, viewing figures and events as presaging symbols (types) of Christ, or reading stories as allegories with Christian meanings. This was most characteristic of the Alexandrians, who turned Philo’s method to Christian ends. In contrast the Antiochenes insisted on the value of the Old Testament in its own right, and

²⁵ There are many examples in *The Penguin Book of Hebrew Verse*, ed. T. Carmi (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1981), especially between pp. 201 and 384. On *piyyuṭ* see Carmi’s Introduction, and R. J. Loewe, ‘The Bible in Medieval Hebrew Poetry’, in J. A. Emerton and S. C. Reif (eds.), *Interpreting the Bible: Essays in Honour of E. I. J. Rosenthal* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), pp.133-55.

²⁶ *The Last Trial*, translated with introduction by J. Goldin (New York: Schocken Books, 1969; now New York: Behrman House, 1979) from the Hebrew original, *Me’Aggadot Ha’aqedah*, in S. Liebermann (ed.), *Alexander Marx Jubilee Volume* (New York: Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1950).

²⁷ ‘Abraham and God’, *Judaism* 33 (1984), 160-170.

²⁸ Memorably remarked on by E. Auerbach, *Mimesis* [1946], tr. W. R. Trask (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1953, pbk. 1968), 7-11.

²⁹ *Form and Meaning: Studies in Literary Techniques in the Book of Jonah* (Bern: H. Lang, 1976; Second Edition, Sheffield: Almond Press, 1983).

³⁰ *Paradoxes of Paradise: Identity and Difference in the Song of Songs* (Sheffield: Almond Press, 1983; now T & Clark International, a Continuum reprint).

³¹ ‘Similar’ or analogous: Jewish *pshat* and the Christian *sensus litteralis* are not the same thing. On the former see R. J. Loewe, ‘The “Plain” Meaning of Scripture in Early Jewish Exegesis’, in J. G. Weiss (ed.), *Papers of the Institute of Jewish Studies London*, Vol. I (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1964): *pshat* should be understood as common or authoritative teaching. On the ‘senses’ of scripture in Christian theory a good summary is given by R. E. Brown, ‘Hermeneutics’, in *The Jerome Biblical Commentary* (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1969), II, pp. 605-23.

³² See the same articles, and F. Talmage, ‘Apples of Gold: The Inner Meaning of Sacred Texts in Medieval Judaism’, in A. Green (ed.), *Jewish Spirituality from the Bible through the Middle Ages* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1986), pp. 315-55.

resisted the use of allegory; but being equally committed to messianic interpretation, they justified it by another method which they called *theoria*, a sort of prophetic vision which the biblical writers had

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besides their conscious intent, so that the text really also had a meaning with reference to Christ.³³ If today we try to understand what sort of exegetical thinking was actually going on, surely we have to say that imagination was at work, not in free creativity but under pressure of messianic conviction.

Today the climate of critical exegesis is hostile to ideas of objective but hidden senses (with the exception, perhaps, of the structuralist doctrine that texts contain 'deep structures' which are discoverable), and above all to allegory. Of course, to turn a story into an allegory when it shows no sign of having been one in its own context, is likely to be mistaken exegesis; but modern taste can become prejudiced to the extent of failing to see the difference between a meditative reading which finds symbolic and universal elements in a story (say, the story of Samson, or some parables of Jesus) and abusive allegorization.³⁴ This is where modern exegetical theory can become too doctrinaire through failing to recognize the proper place of imagination in responding to symbolism. I believe there remains some value in the Antiochene doctrine of *theoria*, though not as most of that school seem to have held it, for it was a theory to justify symbolic exegesis while insisting on the primacy of the 'historical sense'; yet obviously, however much they maintained that *theoria* was an objective part of the text, the word means 'contemplation': if we ask 'on the part of whom?', the only answer can be the reader who has the insight, though ascribing it to the biblical writer.

I suggest, therefore, that the Antiochene doctrine of *theoria* was only waiting for an exegete of creative vision to make it the key to a world of biblical contemplation. If we cross the

³³ See briefly Brown (n.31 above), p.612, sec. 39; for a fuller discussion see B. de Margerie (n.22 above), ch.7, pp.188-213.

³⁴ The most essential basis for study of the Parables, besides good knowledge of the Jewish *meshal*, is some wider theory of metaphors and the ways they function. (a) Things, persons or situations can be contemplated in their potential evocative power as symbols. The hearer is free to move heuristically from symbol to possible applications. This is typical of Jesus' simpler images, but also, I maintain, of some of his stories, for they are not obliged to have only one point, as has been too simply maintained. (b) In allegory (as in riddles but in a more complex way) an answer is intended but is veiled under chosen symbols; the hearer is guided to discover the intended meaning. The parable of the Wicked Husbandmen would seem to be of this kind; consequently much modern opinion ascribes it, in whole or in part, to early Christians. (Does Jesus need protection from the imputation that he ever sank to making up allegories?) Many parables of Jesus are complex in their content and also in their possible applications which the imagination is invited to explore; these can include what looks like allegory, but must not be immediately consigned to the dustbin. C. H. Dodd began *The Parables of the Kingdom* (London, 1935) by holding up Augustine's treatment of the Good Samaritan for disapproval. Now Augustine did not invent the 'salvation history' reading of Lk 10: 30-37; it grows out of the parable's own rich possibilities. The story is one of highly universalizable symbolic power. An anonymous human being is in need; the representatives of religion fail him; an unexpected stranger meets his need and more. Inevitably, Christian meditation saw the Samaritan as an image of Christ (e.g. Irenaeus, *Adv. Haer.* III, 17, 3, two centuries before Augustine). Though in the Lukan context Jesus invites the lawyer to imitate the Samaritan, it is equally free for a hearer to 'identify' with the wounded man. Once that is done, the story has been symbolically universalized, but only because, as a story told by Jesus, it invites this among its possibilities. The eventual artificial elaboration of the parable as a full allegory has grown from the earlier free reading but has moved onto a new basis, to subordinate the story to a doctrinal purpose. The exegesis is no longer simply 'listening' but is rather imposed.

Syrian desert to the east of Antioch we come to the homeland of Ephrem, a deacon of the Syriac-speaking church of northern Mesopotamia. As a prose exegete he can be compared with his neighbours of the Antiochene school, but his greatest fame is as a theological poet and hymn writer. Though the formal beauties of Syriac poetry cannot be captured in translation, Ephrem's imaginative power comes over to some extent in the versions now available in western languages,³⁵ and his theological vision (though he never reduced it to a systematic exposition) has been admirably outlined by Sebastian Brock.³⁶

For Ephrem, God has revealed himself in two books, that of the world and that of scripture. The key to reading both is a vision which can see things as symbols, pointing to God as creator and Jesus as his Messiah. Biblical history is as intrinsically important for Ephrem as for the Antiochenes, but it is part of a total and unified symbolic vision, the standpoint of which is not in ordinary time but in what Brock calls 'sacred' time; here (as in liturgical commemoration) the contemplative mind can 'be there' in many times and places at once, and see the unity of all things in God. The unpardonable sins against vision, for Ephrem, are to try to 'pry' into the mysteries of God's own being, stripping off their veils by rationalistic analysis, and to deny that God has created us with freedom, which is the condition for a truly human response to the wonder of God and his world.

These principles, passionately enunciated in many hymns, also underlie Ephrem's prose exegesis, particularly in his commentary on the Gospel, which the Syriac-speaking churches at that time read in the *Diatessaron* or Fourfold Gospel of Tatian. Here Ephrem does outline his exegetical principles: his insistence on preserving the mystery and on human freedom is now worked out in his account of the right and wrong ways of reading. Among the latter we can see that he has recognized forms of rationalism,

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both fundamentalism and demythologization. These fail to recognize the functions of metaphor and parable, which have been given to us in order to evoke a heuristic experience and a free response. These passages are unequalled in the church fathers and can speak vividly to a modern reader:

If there only existed a single sense for the words of Scripture, then the first commentator who came along would discover it, and other hearers would experience neither the labour of searching, nor the joy of finding. Rather, each word of our Lord has its own form, and each form has its own members, and each member has its own character. Each individual understands according to his capacity and interprets as it is granted him.³⁷

Who is capable of comprehending the extent of what is to be discovered in a single utterance of Yours? For we leave behind in it far more than we take from it, like thirsty people drinking from a fountain.

³⁵ S. P. Brock, *The Harp of the Spirit* (Studies supplementary to Sobornost, 4: London: Fellowship of Saints Alban and Sergius; second, enlarged edition, 1983), gives eighteen hymns in English and lists other available versions.

³⁶ *The Luminous Eye: The Spiritual World Vision of St Ephrem* (Placid Lectures, 6, Bangalore and Rome, 1985; second revised edition, Kalamazoo, Michigan: Cistercian Publications, No. 124, 1992); more briefly, the introduction to Brock, *The Harp of the Spirit* (see n. 35).

³⁷ *Commentary on the Diatessaron* 7,22; tr. Brock, *The Luminous Eye* (see last note), p. 35.

The facets of His word are far more numerous than the faces of those who learn from it. God depicted His word with many beauties, so that each of those who learn from it can examine that aspect of it which he likes. And God has hidden within His word all sorts of treasures, so that each of us can be enriched by it from whatever aspect he meditates on. For God's word is the Tree of Life which proffers to you on all sides blessed fruits; it is like the Rock which was struck in the wilderness, which became a spiritual drink for everyone on all sides: 'They ate the food of the Spirit and they drank the draft of the Spirit.'

Anyone who encounters Scripture should not suppose that the single one of its riches that he has found is the only one to exist; rather, he should realize that he himself is only capable of discovering that one out of the many riches which existed in it. Nor, because Scripture has enriched him, should the reader impoverish it. Rather, if the reader is incapable of finding more, let him acknowledge Scripture's magnitude. Rejoice because you have found satisfaction, and do not be grieved that there has been something left over by you.³⁸

There are some who hang on the fringes of the truth, yet it by its power keeps them from falling. Do not (merely) ask the meaning of the words which taken in their outward sense can impede the (real) point; but search out their (true) sense and what they refer to. Do not take refuge in byways, but in the strength of the essential argument, the Testament where the Spirit has depicted the members of Christ, to reveal through manifest symbols his hidden form; for he has revealed great things by means of small, and by manifest things has made visible things that were hidden.³⁹

Anyone who is hearing of Ephrem as exegete for the first time might, perhaps, feel that he sounds a little like William Blake. I think that there are, indeed, some similarities in their mental characters, their understanding of inward vision, their insistence on freedom and their hatred of rationalism. Within the small range of my reading in modern hermeneutics, some of the earlier works of Paul Ricoeur have struck me in relation to Ephrem: his conviction of the primacy of symbols and how they

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give rise to reflexion; his analysis of how they are abused by demythologization or alien interpretation, for example by imposed allegorism, and his invitation to rediscover myth and symbol in a spirit of 'second naiveté'.⁴⁰ But there is room for a full-scale modern hermeneutical presentation of Ephrem's thought.

From this discursive survey of the kinds of exegesis in which imagination has a place, I hope that some impression will remain of the poetic *yin* as well as the solid *yang* of exegesis; of how it can try to 'make the tale live in all its many bearings', and exercise 'spiritual

³⁸ Ibid. 1, 18-19; Brock, pp. 35-36.

³⁹ Ibid. 22, 3; tr. R. Murray, 'The Theory of Symbolism in St Ephrem's Theology', *Parole de l'Orient* VI-VII (1975-76), [1-20], p.6. See now full translation, *Saint Ephrem's Commentary on Tatian's Diatessaron*, tr. Carmel McCarthy, *Journal of Semitic Studies Supplement* 2, Oxford University Press, 1993.

⁴⁰ See especially Ricoeur's *The Symbolism of Evil* [1960], tr. E. Buchanan (New York: Harper & Row, 1967) and 'The Hermeneutics of Symbols and Philosophical Reflection' in *The Conflict of Interpretations* [1969], tr. W. Domingo et al. (Evanston: North-western University Press, 1974).

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midwifery' both for the text and for the student by awakening wonder and a heuristic response. Throughout the lecture I have laid great stress on freedom in choice of methods and freedom in response. In this Ephrem is my master. Of course there are rules of scholarship, just as the religious tradition within which an exegete stands also makes its claims. But 'the word of God is not bound' (2 Tim 2:9), and its possibilities are infinite.

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