

INTERPRETATION OF TEXTS

SACRED AND SECULAR

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Consider next very simple utterances that recur as, for instance, with common public notices. Some scholars have argued that notices such as “keep off the grass” do not have authors.²¹ Certainly we might allow that such notices often are created by machines: after all, there is something odd about the idea that they could be created by someone who never sees them nor touches them, such as, say, the person who first put up a notice saying “keep off the grass” or the person who programmed the relevant machine to produce a hundred such notices. Because printing machines can not ascribe meanings to objects, moreover, we might allow also that the creators of such notices can not be their authors. Nonetheless, we still need not conclude that such notices do not have authors. We can say instead that the author of such a notice is the person who first ascribes meaning to it. In this view, the notice might exist as an object for sometime before someone constitutes it as a meaningful object. The notice as an object is created by a machine. As a meaningful object, however, it is constituted by an author.

Consider finally the case of apparently accidental utterances such as the imagined example of the monkey who types *Hamlet*.²² Clearly such utterances are closely analogous to the notices just considered. We have the monkey who creates the *Hamlet* manuscript and Shakespeare who first made any such utterance, but neither seems suitable as an author of the particular manuscript being considered. Rather, we can say that the author is the person who first ascribes meaning to the monkey’s manuscript.

In most cases, the author of an utterance will be its creator. In some special cases, however, the creator does not ascribe any meaning to the utterance and so can not be its author. The author of the utterance in these cases is the person who first ascribes meaning to it. Such a conclusion will seem paradoxical only if we follow strong intentionalism in focusing on the conscious, prior purposes of authors. This focus sustains a rigid distinction between author and reader, and also equates authorship with creation. Procedural individualism, in contrast, allows us to see authors and readers as ascribing meaning to an utterance in much the same way, and also to distinguish this ascription of meaning from creation. In this view, therefore, there is nothing paradoxical in the idea that the author of an utterance might be, not its creator, but rather the first reader to ascribe meaning to it.

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²¹ For the claim that texts have authors only if they can be interpreted in numerous ways, see A. Nchamas, “What an Author Is”, *Journal of Philosophy* 83 (1986), 685.

²² Accidental utterances also would include the computer-generated ones invoked against intentionalism by G. Dickie, *Aesthetics: An Introduction* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1971), partic. p. 112.

LIKE A NET THROWN INTO THE SEA

ASPECTS OF BIBLICAL INTERPRETATION

István Czachesz

‘Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a net that was thrown into the sea and caught fish of every kind; when it was full, they drew it ashore, sat down, and put the good into baskets but threw out the bad.’¹

This is evidently an age of intense textualization and verbalization. The amount of verbal data recorded in various forms has changed the norms of education, science, and intelligence.² The growing pressure of information has led to a shrinking of the present,³ that is, we are becoming more and more superficial readers and listeners. We still maintain – there is no other choice – that texts (we use the word in the narrowest sense here) are faithful and objective guardians of our lives. Disciples of the Gutenberg tradition, we believe that our texts are the firm foundation of our society and culture. Two aspects of text are foremost for us readers today: the descriptive and prescriptive aspects of language.

This is also how we interpret Scripture: as a description of the past and a guide for the future. Jewish Torah piety, and – in its footprints – the Protestant tradition emphasized the verbal aspects of religion. From the interest only in the ‘historical’ sense of the written text the modern idea of history and the descriptive deformation of language originated.⁴ The modern understanding of history and language has been again applied to the biblical text: this is the origin

¹ Mt 13,47-48

² See among others J.-F. Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, tr. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Minneapolis, 1991)

³ As H. Lübke puts it, see “A felgyorsult műszaki evolúció kulturális és politikai következményei” p. 40 in K. Nyíri (ed), *Műveltség és kultúra a számítógépkorszakban* (Budapest, 1990) 40-61.

⁴ ‘Descriptive’ (as opposed to ‘metaphorical’ and ‘metonymic’) is the modern use of language according to N. Frye, *The Great Code* (New York, 1982), esp. 13-15.

of historical criticism and fundamentalism. In the meantime it turned out that the Bible does not meet the expectations of the modern reader. Its reading as a scientific or as a legal text showed it only to be historically untrue and ethically outdated.

Fortunately, the constant flow of verbal information, and also the limited success of historical and fundamentalist readings of the sacred texts, provoked new approaches, which oriented themselves, for example, toward literary theory, linguistics, psychology, or sociology. Instead of clinging to one or another of these new ways, in this study we will survey multiple aspects of these methods. We will locate four important nodes on the network of textual interpretation, where we think the main interests of biblical hermeneutics lie: the text, the reader, the text-self and the context.⁵

THERE IS A TEXT IN THIS CLASS

Let us begin with the text. The text enjoys primacy in our model, over against approaches whose starting point is either the history of the text, its historical or literary background, dogmatic constructions, assumed authorial intentions, or even the reader. In opposition to all these extra-textual perspectives, we claim that biblical interpretation must proceed from the biblical passages.

Biblical texts are available to us in the textual editions. We possess no text apart from those the editors and translators provide. All the texts we hold in our hands are already products of an intense reading and interpretation. It is only the consensus of a group of readers which creates any *textus receptus*. Moreover, the 'original reading' which textual criticism originally set out to reconstruct has probably never existed. Where was the dividing line, we should ask, between the last redaction and the first corruption of a text? The concept of the 'original text' still remains a useful hypothesis. Had we no textual editions which (re-)construct a privileged level of textual development, we would not have a Bible to talk about any more.

There is more than one way to pursue text-centered hermeneutics. We may call these approaches 'synchronic' in the sense that they are not interested in the historical development of the text but consider only a given form of it.⁶ They concentrate on intra-textual phenomena, that is, patterns of language on

⁵ We should document our indebtedness to many critics here. Among others we were certainly inspired by V.K. Robbins, who described four or five 'arenas' or 'textures' of interpretation in his two recent books: 'inner texture', 'intertexture', 'social and cultural texture', and 'ideological texture' in *The Tapestry of Early Christian Discourse* (London and New York, 1996) and 'sacred texture' as a fifth arena in *Exploring the Texture of Texts. A Guide to Socio-Rhetorical Interpretation* (Valley Forge, Pennsylvania, 1996).

⁶ Some critics use the terms 'synchronic' and 'diachronic' also to differentiate between a synoptic and a sequential reading of narratives.

the level of words, sentences, and larger units of thoughts. Texts have their style and atmosphere, they exhibit rhetorical figures, metrical structures and imagery. Narrative texts invite us to examine, among others, the acting characters and their interaction, the development and the driving forces of the plot, the narrative points of view and focalization.⁷

It was the rhetorical approach that raised the question about the author and reader being incorporated within the text, and proposed the notion of the 'implied author' and 'implied reader': 'The author creates, in short, an image of himself and another image of his reader; he makes his reader, as he makes his second self, and the most successful reading is one in which the created selves, author and reader, can find complete agreement'.⁸ From every text we gain some knowledge of an author, his/her aims, spirit, and set of values. But the person we get to know this way is not fully identical with the person who once composed the text. Flesh and blood authors do not let their readers know everything about themselves, and they would not be able to do that even if they wanted. In fact, they often try to create an implied author different from their 'real' selves, maybe as a compensation for their real lives. The implied author thus stands in a complex relation with the 'real author'. Moreover, if a text has a collective author, like folk tales and myths, even then we can conveniently talk about its implied author.

Accordingly, the 'implied reader' is the reader 'built into' the text. He or she is the reader to whom the text addresses itself, whose reactions are taken into consideration, and whom the text wants to lead from an initial position to somewhere else through the act of reading. Though the formation of the implied reader may be influenced by the author's knowledge of the first actual readers, even texts that were not written for a certain group of persons have an implied reader. An ideal reader, on the other hand, is someone who completely identifies with the implied reader. In the rhetorical analysis we can also talk about the narrator, whose voice usually dominates the text and who is the confidential employee of the implied author. Even the word 'narratee' can be used for the person to whom the narrator addresses herself/himself.⁹

The inventory of intra-textual elements is far from complete by this. Though the enumerated factors are to be regarded as components contained

⁷ For a summary of these narrative critical notions see M.A. Powell, *What is Narrative Criticism?* (Minneapolis, 1990) and N.R. Petersen, *Literary Criticism for New Testament Critics* (Philadelphia, 1978).

⁸ W.C. Booth, *The Rhetoric of Fiction* (Chicago, 1963⁴) 173f, quoted in W. Iser, *Der Akt des Lesens* (München, 1984²), 64.

⁹ For the concept of narrator and narratee cf. Powell, *Literary Criticism*, 27. Powell places author, implied author, narrator, narratee, implied reader, and reader along a linear communication process, which, in our view, oversimplifies the case and provides a superfluous multiplication of author and reader. In our model they would be rather independent components of textual interpretation.

within the text, nevertheless, they are not independent of its historical background. Linguistic, literary, and rhetorical formations, as well as the characters, the plot, the implied author and reader, have strong connections with extra-textual reality. They have, so to say, filtered into the text out of a historical depth, and we are able to recognize them only because we consider them in the network of other textual realities. And this means we are not able to get rid of the burden of diachronic aspects.

We have touched already on the historicity of the biblical text. The hypothetical 'original form' of the text, wherever we situate it in the course of textual development, divides the timeline of the history of the text into two separate periods. In the first period the text emerged as a texture of historical, cultural and personal phenomena and received its – also hypothetical – final form. In the second period the biblical text has been handed down to us in a complex process of ancient and medieval textual tradition and through modern text-critical work. From our point of view, this is all behind the text, but also contained within it.

Let us take the Gospel of Matthew as a familiar example. Historical critical research pointed out that the author used sources to write the Gospel, and the commonest hypothesis divides these sources into three groups: Mark's Gospel (or some form of it), the so called Source Q containing Jesus' teachings, and Matthew's own tradition. Though we may not support this specific theory, we should not doubt, nevertheless, that Matthew drew on sources substantially, since it was the common practice of all ancient authors. The Latin word *inventio* was the rhetorical term of collecting material (followed by *dispositio*),¹⁰ to which also the stereotyped preface of Luke's Gospel refers (Lk 1.1-4).

The sources of Matthew, whichever they actually were, represented the thought world, theology, social status, and inner movements of Jesus and his disciples, Matthew and his churches, as well as other Christian groups of his time. These factors are subject to historical-critical investigation of various types: literary and source analysis, tradition and redaction criticism, ancient historical and sociological research, for example.

Historical criticism tends to define this enterprise as the search for the original meaning. It is obvious, however, that already within the historical critical paradigm we have to do not only with one original meaning but with a whole range of original meanings. Speaking of the Sermon on the Mount, which meaning is the 'original'? Is it the one which was, according to one or another interpreter, in the mind of Jesus, or the transmitting followers and Christians, or the collectors of the Source Q, or the author of the First Gospel? We had better regard all these possible meanings as parts of the text, being referred to or signified in it, and belonging to the synchronic aspects listed above.

¹⁰ Cf. Cicero, *De inventione* and Quintilian, *Institutio oratoria* III.

There are also other elements to be considered in the first period of textual history. Sociologists, socio-psychologists, anthropologists, and ethnographers warn us that the biblical texts carry with them the imprint of human society and human interaction.¹¹ Jesus, Matthew and their contemporaries conceived of human personality, destiny, and social life in a way different from us. The text also contains numerous references to the culture and history of the Hebrew-Aramaic world, as well as to hellenized Judaism and Greco-Roman antiquity. We do not mean here the information of the history-books, but only the representations of these phenomena within the text itself.¹²

It is difficult to say which is the final form of the text. Actually, each modern edition modifies it, and this is a never ending process. As a result, we have many texts instead of a single one. By the final form we usually mean the text which the evangelist Matthew – if he ever existed – put down on the table when he finished writing his Gospel. We dealt with this problem earlier. Suffice it to say that everything that happened to the text up to the present day belongs to the text itself, and in a sense everything that will happen to it in the future also belongs to it.

In the first decades of its history, the text underwent a conscious and acknowledged activity of continuing redaction and correction. Let us remember the multiple ending of Mark's Gospel and the secondary redaction of the Pauline letters.¹³ Minor stylistic and theological corrections appeared in every text. Our earliest textual witnesses from the second century already display a great variety. By today the individual accomplishments of the great eighteenth-nineteenth century textual critics (Bengel, Wettstein, Tischendorf and many others) have been replaced by the method of discussion and democratic voting in the text editing committees (Greek New Testament, Nestle-Aland).¹⁴ But the decisions of these text editing panels are also influenced by personal and sociological factors, and the outcome is rather eclectic as compared to the editions prepared by single persons or traditional schools. In one word, the

¹¹ A special effort to address these factors is made by the 'Context Group of Biblical Scholars', cf. among others B.J. Malina, *The New Testament World* (Louisville, 1993) and B.J. Malina; R.I. Rohrbaugh, *Social Science Commentary on the Synoptic Gospels* (Minneapolis, 1992); J.H. Elliott, *What is Social-Science Criticism?* (Minneapolis, 1993).

¹² Similar to Robbins' 'cultural intertexture' and 'social intertexture', *The Tapestry*, 108-115 and 115-118, respectively.

¹³ A puzzling document of this activity is the text of the Acts of the Apostles in Codex D. For a recent evaluation of the problem see P. Head, 'Acts and the Problem of Its Texts', in B.W. Winter and A.D. Clarke (eds), *The Book of Acts in Its Ancient Literary Setting* (Grand Rapids, 1993) 415-444.

¹⁴ For the working method of such committees cf. B.M. Metzger, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament* (Stuttgart, 1971), for a sharp criticism of the 26th edition of Nestle-Aland see R. Borger, 'NA26 und die neutestamentliche Textkritik', *Theologische Rundschau (ThR)* 52 (1987) 1-21.

whole textual tradition with its correctors, copyist, editors and committees has become part of the text itself.

We began with text-centered approaches and ended up with historical critics. We can answer in the affirmative the question posed by S. Fish in the title his book:¹⁵ Yes, there is a text in this class. But this quick overview also showed that the biblical text is an extremely complex entity. It is interwoven with a wide range of extra-textual factors, and is not as securely available to us as earlier criticisms thought. Rather than an object held firmly in our hands, it is a node on the net of interpretation.

READERS ARE IMPLIED

Texts do not exist without readers. Without their readers, books are nothing but spots of ink on paper. We might even claim that the text is merely the product of the readers.¹⁶ Let us, therefore, focus on the reader in this section of our paper. Talking of the reader seems even more complicated than talking of the biblical text itself. The question of how we know ourselves, or other human beings, implies the reiteration of the whole hermeneutical project. We read ourselves and each other also as perplexing texts.

Let us begin with simple facts. We all have some experience of life and the world around us, some form of education, schooling, national and cultural identity. We all follow various rules of behavior and interaction. We usually have some professional calling, and pursue a set of main concerns and goals in our lives. We are also determined by elementary psychological drives, and want to satisfy them. We are equipped with a common set of symbols and mythological patterns, let us say, by our collective unconscious. These human factors are examined by social sciences, the history of religions, and psychology, but systematic theologians cannot avoid dealing with them, either, when they want to talk about sin, salvation and redemption.

In our century, the examination of literary texts, as well as the research of human mind and culture, lead to the insight that we extensively utilize narratives. I referred already to the perspectives of narrative analysis in connection with biblical texts. Not only explicitly narrative texts, but also psalms, Pauline epistles,¹⁷ or the whole of biblical canon may be examined with the help of this method.¹⁸

¹⁵ Stanley Fish, *Is There a Text in This Class?* (Cambridge, 1980)

¹⁶ In this direction lead, for example, Fish, *Is There a Text?* and Stephen D. Moore, *Poststructuralism and the New Testament* (Minneapolis, 1994).

¹⁷ Cf. B. III Witherington, *Paul's Narrative Thought World* (Louisville, 1994).

¹⁸ For the discussion of the canonical narrative see Frye, *The Great Code*.

Narrative is a basic organizing principle of mental life. We conceive of our lives, goals, history, and culture to a great extent in narratives, and establish a narrative order of things in our world. Narrative time helps us organize our experience, and the point of view of the narrative gives them perspective and direction. Narratives thus create coherence in our perception, memories and thought. Narratives establish coherence and perspective also for whole cultures and historical epochs. Overarching cultural narratives, or 'metanarratives', characterize the Enlightenment, Marxism, or even capitalism.¹⁹ Moreover, the very notion of history implies the existence of a 'metanarrative', in which we situate epochs, events, people, countries, and historical figures. The existence of the Church, and its place in the world, are most often expressed in narrative categories. The first such effort was probably the Book of Acts in the New Testament.

Narratives are not the only way to image the world and ourselves. There are at least two other dimensions of human existence that should be mentioned here. One of them is the language of metaphors, which is another way to relate images, thoughts and events. If narratives utilize a chain-like pattern to make sense of the world, metaphors, in turn, order data by establishing synchronic connections (A is B). The third pattern of thought to be mentioned here is typology. Typology connects distant points in time and space by discovering in persons, events, and other shapes, the presentation or fulfilment of given types of archetypes (A prefigures B, or B fulfils A).

Much more should be said about narrativity, metaphors and typology. For now, let us recognize the fact that the reader is not simply a data processing machine. Readers are highly complex structures, determined by a network of anthropological, social and cultural factors. Readers have sophisticated methods to gather and organize information, and use them to think about themselves, as well as about their world, including written texts and sacred books. The reader is an 'intertext' just like her/his passage, and she/he cannot be cut out of the net of interpretation, either.

THE HERMIT IN THE CAVE

We have come to a decisive point in our paper. We have given a short description of our text and reader, and they seem to stand now as two boxers in a ring, ready to clash in the act of reading. This picture, however, is oversimplified. The text and the reader cannot be so easily located. We realize that there is a field where they actually permeate each other inseparably, and we will call this area the 'text-self'.

¹⁹ See J.-F. Lyotard, 'Histoire universelle et différences culturelles', *Critique* 41 (1985), 559-568, Hungarian translation in I. Bujalos (ed), *A posztmodern állapot* (Budapest, 1993) 251-267

Let us think of such everyday examples as rhymes and poems which we learned by heart in our childhood. Memorizing long texts was still the basis of education in the time of our grandfathers, and it was almost the only goal of ancient and medieval rabbinical schooling. These poems and other texts undoubtedly contributed to the formation of our personalities - and this was actually the reason for learning them. The texts which we internalized so deeply already belong to our selves, while they also exist in the outer world independently of us.

Like the reader or the text, the 'text-self' is also a complex intertextual phenomenon. The 'text-self' emerged partly during our previous encounters with the text. The text became part of us and we became part of it. The same happens when a basic text defines a culture and thus presents itself in the thinking and identity of people belonging to that culture. Any kind of preliminary information may belong to the text-self, but we also have to consider that this information has come down to the reader with the mediation of other readers - and therefore, social interaction also plays an important role here. Exploring this level of complexity would surpass the limits of our paper.

We know more about a text before we begin to read it than we would think. We know its title, its genre, its place and time of origin, and its author. We are reading it somewhere, some time in a specific context, and we have specific expectations about it. All this will determine how we read and understand it. While we read the text, it seeks to modify and refine our preliminary information, and we attempt to harmonize what we read with our previous knowledge. Only if this attempt fails are we ready to change radically our understanding of the text.²⁰

Another well-known aspect of the text-self appears within the reading process. The text is never completely smooth, it always exhibits 'gaps' (*Leerstellen*).²¹ These include not only the unevenness of redaction on which source-critical theories are based, also not the silences and tensions created by authorial technic or narrative skill. Even in the most fully written and most loquaciously told story, much information is missing behind each sentence and word. Readers bridge these gaps and ravines, most of the time without taking note of it. Thus reading becomes a creative process, in which the reader completes the gappy text into a unified whole that makes sense for her/him. The bridges are part of the text, as well as of the reader. The reader supplies these bridges to the text, so to say, out of her/his own self.

The text-self is the node where reader and text inseparably permeate each other, and where reading emerges from the above mentioned events. The

²⁰ This has been discussed at least since Schleiermacher. More recently cf. W. Iser, *Der Akt des Lesens*, 181f.

²¹ The term comes from Iser, *ibid.*, 284ff., based on R. Ingarden's notion of *Unbestimmtheitsstellen*.

text-self is even more difficult to locate than the reader or the text. It lies hidden, so to say, in the textual gaps, as a hermit in his cave. And our textual hermit does his best to escape curious eyes and reserve his secrecy.²²

Our hermeneutical model may answer some problems raised by the controversy of objectivist and subjectivist approaches. Objectivists claim that texts exist as lonely 'documents' independently of us, while the subjectivist perspective in an extreme form suggests that the text is created by the reader. To the first challenge we answer that the text can be discussed only in connection with its reader, because only the presence of a reader enables the text to be a text. As an answer to the opposite extreme we point to the textual elements which are interwoven in the historical and cultural context, and can be classified as synchronic and diachronic ones.

We still assure a certain priority to the subjectivist point of view when we conclude that none of the textual elements can ever be studied with the text-self excluded from the game. In other words - as we identified the text-self as the field of reading - we may state that though the text might be regarded as objectively given, it can be approached only by the way of reading. Reading, if we consider what has been said in our paper thus far, is to be understood mainly as the confirmation and modification of the reader's preliminary understanding (*Vorverständnis*), or as the filling in of textual gaps. But the text-self, however central a position it occupies in our model, is again just one node on the net.

READING IN CONTEXT

It is not only that reader and text do not face each other as two boxers, but also that the ring in our picture is far from being an empty or neutral space. The playground of reading is determined by at least two groups of elements. Using the same vocabulary which proved useful in the analysis of the textual elements, we may talk about anthropological or synchronic factors, on the one hand, and historical or diachronic ones, on the other hand. We can also differentiate between anthropological, cultural, social and historical levels.

The reading of any text is determined - and at the same time made possible - by the fact that it was written and is read by human beings. We can learn the languages of ancient or far-Eastern people, and read and understand their texts, first of all because human beings have similar basic needs and conditions now and then, here and there. In other words, we can assume to a great extent that those people were and are like us.²³ The authors of biblical

²² For the idea of texts hiding meanings see F. Kermode, *The Genesis of Secrecy* (Cambridge and London, 1979).

²³ The experiments with texts produced by machines in cognitive psychology and artificial intelligence research (the classics are the 'Turing test' and the 'Chinese room') prove that this assumption works excellently also when it is basically false.

texts were people much like us. We can well assume that they shared our feelings, concerns, needs, gestures and pains. We have already talked about archetypal mythological patterns and imagery, which present themselves primarily in dreams and visions, the literature and religion of various cultures.²⁴

It is important, however, to decide how far we can rely on this premise. How far do anthropological similarities continue, and where do cultural differences begin? While we emphasized the similarities from the anthropological point of view, we should call attention to otherness, as well as to continuity in the realm of culture. The societies of Abraham, Jesus or Paul functioned differently from ours. It would lead to fundamental misunderstandings if we read our modern view of the world and man back into that age, and assumed those people were *exactly* like us. The picture must be further refined, because there are enormous cultural differences between the countries and their social groups even today.

Finally, the closer historical and social setting should be considered even within a given historical epoch, culture, or country. Minute distinctions must be made down to the level of the local conditions and traditions, as successful applications of the 'Lokalkolorit' aspect prove.²⁵

In spite of these dissimilarities, or even within them, continuity must also be recognized and appreciated. Our way of thinking and life has to a great extent assimilated the heritage of the cultures of biblical times. Both text and reader are organic parts of this anthropological, cultural, and historical network. Both grew out of it and interact with it. Not only did the biblical text emerge from the history of Israel, the Roman Empire, and Europe, but it also exerted a fundamental influence on them. We are likewise not only nurtured by our cultures, nations, and churches, but also nurture them.

CONCLUSION

From our survey we may conclude that text and reader are embedded in a thick network of many-sided relations. Ultimately it could be possible to deconstruct them as pure intertext. Instead, we proposed a metaphor which allows us to maintain a more solid concept of 'person and text', 'reader and Bible' – simply because we need them to be able to talk about biblical interpretation.

Objectivism and subjectivism are false alternatives. The 'reader' is as beyond our reach and as difficult to grasp and describe as the author or the text. The notion of an objectively given text and an individual or collective author,

²⁴ The Jungian theory would be hard to prove for all cultures of past and present, but which still works as a useful hypothesis with the major known cultural traditions.

²⁵ Cf. the method of G. Theißen, *Lokalkolorit und Zeitgeschichte in den Evangelien: ein Beitrag zur Geschichte der synoptischen Tradition* (Freiburg und Göttingen, 1989).

on the other hand, is just as indispensable if we still want to talk about the reading and interpretation of *something*. To hold the Bible as a fossil in our hands is as unproductive and futile as an interpretation of a non-existent text. It is only the dynamics of the text-self, the vibration of objective and subjective, the not quite yet presence of the understanding, which is meaningful. We cannot spare ourselves casting out the whole net of interpretation.

We should also be aware that our verbal universe is interwoven with our social system, religious rites, down to the level of housing, clothing, eating, and body-language. Though rabbinical Judaism and the Protestant tradition granted a privileged status to verbal communication, non-verbal texts did not lose their importance for our life, however little we may care for them. If we are ready to appreciate Lévi-Strauss' observation that the settlement structure, hair-style, clothing and dances of Bororo indians contain their knowledge about themselves and their universe,²⁶ why should we insist then that our human condition can be accounted for exhaustively in the verbal media?

Therefore, we propose a hermeneutic of the net thrown into the sea, an interpretation of the complex texture of verbal and non-verbal relations of our sacred texts and of our human existence. We suggest that texts are not as alien to us as we critics often assume, and we are not alien to the texts, either. We are both embedded in a thick texture of anthropology, culture, and history. The words of Jesus apply well to the efforts of biblical criticism: 'Then if anyone says to you, "Look! Here is the Messiah!" or "There he is!" – do not believe it'.²⁷ Meaning eludes us if we want to locate it firmly in one or another point. It should be sought along the connecting lines of the network of interpretation, rather than individually in history, text, or reader. Only one task is left: 'Put out into the deep water and let down your nets for a catch'.²⁸ If we interpret ourselves in the net, ethical implications will follow easily.

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²⁶ C. Lévi-Strauss, *Tristes tropiques* (Paris, 1955), Hungarian translation by L. Örvös, Budapest, 1994

²⁷ Mt 24,23

²⁸ Lk 5,4