Reading the Bible and the \textquoteleft\textquoteleft(Un)Official Interpretive Culture\textquoteright\textquoteleft

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\begin{abstract}
Our presuppositions about texts mediate our experience of these texts. However, we often do not consider these presuppositions as part of our scholarly enterprise. Drawing on ideas by Gerald Graff on the presence of an \textquoteleft\textquoteleft unofficial interpretive culture\textquoteright\textquoteleft in literary theory, by Robert Fowler on the fact that we never read the text itself, but only the history of the reading of the text, by Bernard Latane on the necessity to do \textquoteleft\textquoteleft empirical reader research\textquoteright\textquoteleft, and by Francis Schaeffer Porpora on the need to incorporate \textquoteleft\textquoteleft the \textquoteleft\textquoteleft de facto\textquotequoteright\textquotequoteright recognition of \textquoteleft\textquoteleft subjects\textquotequoteright\textquotequoteright inside their respective communities\textquotequoteright\textquotequoteright in the interpretive process of Biblical scholarship, the article argues for the deliberate consideration, specification and discussion of such presuppositions.
\end{abstract}

1 \textbf{ON READING AS A SOCIAL ACTIVITY}

What I call the unofficial interpretive culture has never been considered a respectable topic, and it is still risky to mention the subject among people with pretensions to culture. Among professionals, a kind of shame attaches to any suspicion that one\textquotesingle s familiarity with a text may derive from secondary sources \ldots (Graff)

While reading may be done in the privacy of one\textquotesingle s room or library carrel, it is nevertheless still a social activity, one influenced by the society beyond author and reader (Phelan)

Our presuppositions about a text mediate our experience of it. It is not necessary to agree with Stanley Fish\textquotesingle s strong version of this theory, that texts are actually created by the interpretive strategies we bring to them. A less extreme version of this theory can hardly be denied. It is an illusion to think that we simply read \textquoteleft the text\textquoteright as it is. It is an illusion to think that we are \textquoteleft innocent\textquoteright readers without presuppositions.

This is certainly also the case with Biblical texts. Our presuppositions about these texts mediate our experience of them. And our presuppositions have been formed by historical, social and cultural processes. We read these texts as members of particular socio-historical communities. We read these texts as people who participate in particular interpretive traditions.

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All of this may seem obvious, almost trivial. Hardly anyone will nowadays deny these claims. Yet in practice we often (try to) ignore the crucial implications of these obvious truths. In reality, we often prefer not to consider their implications seriously. They do not (necessarily) inform our scholarly enterprise, interests, conventions and teaching in a conscious way.

This is particularly the case with Biblical scholarship. We often prefer to ignore the consequences of these claims for our practices. We prefer to ignore the fact that both ‘the texts’ that we read and we, as ‘readers’, have been formed, produced by tradition-and-community. We prefer to forget that, even when we read the ‘original’ texts, both these texts and we as readers are the products of centuries of tradition, and our readings are social activities, fundamentally determined by our communities and societies.

In this paper, I intend to remind us briefly of four voices, from diverse backgrounds, who all argue that we do not take these obvious truths seriously enough: Gerald Graff from literary theory, Robert Fowler from reader-response criticism, Bernard Lategan from contextual hermeneutics, and Francis Schüssler Fiorenza from systematic theology. Taken together, these voices constitute an argument that we may benefit from a stronger awareness of these ‘obvious truths’ in our reading of the Bible.

2 GERALD GRAFF ON THE ‘UNOFFICIAL INTERPRETIVE CULTURE’

Graff is known for his criticism of Fish's views. Yet he admits:

(Despite its logical weaknesses, the theory of the all-determining reader has had considerable heuristic value. As often happens in the history of criticism, an extravagantly stated fallacy proves to be more illuminating than many sober truths....Theories like Fish's point up to the long-unnoticed extent to which a priori expectations, predispositions, and assumptions do determine the textual features which readers notice or fail to notice. Such theories make the salutary point—that reading is not simply a transparent decoding of what is on the page, but a process deeply influenced by historical, philosophical, and ideological perspectives (Graff 1989:4).

Even ‘object-centered theorists’—says Graff—like Hirsch (with his notion of ‘generic expectation’) and Wayne Booth (with his notion of ‘textual significance’ as distinct from textual meaning or authorial intention) ‘come close to meeting reader-centered theorists...half way, recognizing that readers’ historical situations precondition the questions they put to texts and thus the kinds of things they see in them’ (Graff 1989:4-5).

Graff therefore pleads for a ‘dialectical theory’ which would
insist, with the objectivists, that texts in themselves have a say in the way readers interpret them. But it would integrate more fully than the objectivists have done the ways that contingencies of context, history, and social practice precondition the agendas of interpretation that determine which objective aspects of a text are noticed or emphasized (1989:5).

He then makes an extremely important observation when he asks whether this dialectic, ‘these relations of determination vary with different historical reading conditions’. He explains:

Does the extent to which reading experiences are prestructured by interpretive models vary from culture to culture according to differences in the agencies of interpretive pre-understanding? To take the present period as an example, is it possible that our recent fascination with theories of the always-already-predetermined nature of interpretation has something to do with the unprecedented power of cultural mechanisms which precondition reading experience? That is, it figures that ‘texts in themselves’ would have become harder to distinguish from the interpretations made of them in a mass-communications culture in which texts do come to us ‘always already’ prescreened, so that we often know what texts mean before reading them (1989:5).

He gives a convincing description of the present state of affairs:

This mass-communications environment surrounds texts with a secondary interpretive text comprised of published reviews, publicity, rumor, gossip, and advertising hype. Most texts now come to us in an unauthorized secondary version created by the way they are packaged, advertised, and talked about. The secondary text often so delimits the agendas of reading that it becomes hard finally to distinguish it from the primary text...We unavoidably know so much about texts before we read them that often we do not need to read them at all in order to talk fluently about them and even to write about them (1989:5).

Many people will recognise themselves in the picture:

Perhaps never before has so much had to be digested by so many so quickly, with the result that what it means to say that one has ‘read’ something is more problematic than it used to be. You, too, may have noticed that nowadays the question, ‘Have you read X?’ often draws a quasi answer, such as, ‘I’ve looked at it’, or, ‘I’ve dipped into it.’ Instead of saying one has ‘read’ a book, one now often says one ‘knows’ it, ‘knowing’ being a state apparently somewhere between actual reading and the skimming of the dust jacket or one or two reviews (1989:5).

According to Graff, ‘plenty of people...wax moralistic about such a situation’. That is precisely what he does not want to do.
What I call the unofficial interpretive culture has never been considered a respectable
topic, and it is still risky to mention the subject among people with pretensions to culture.
Among professionals, a kind of shame attaches to any suspicion that one's familiarity
with a text may derive from secondary sources....But rather than fulminate against the
unofficial interpretive culture as a symptom of spiritual and cultural decline, we would do
better to try to understand it and see what kind of useful adaptation can be made to it

According to him, the fact is simply that such 'pseudoreading' is unavoidable in a
culture where there are too many books to read and too much to know. Pseudoreading,
says Graff, 'may cheapen the level of cultural discourse, but without it there
would hardly be cultural discourse at all' (1989:6).

He then distinguishes at length between two unofficial interpretive cultures,
namely a larger general one and 'an academic subculture which adds its own peculiar

It is not necessary to repeat his clear and convincing discussion of this
'unofficial academic interpretive culture' to appreciate his conclusion that, without
clues, without 'having the kind of context', without 'a handle', without 'a way of
doing something with a text, registering it in a mental inventory that lines it up with
our other contexts and interests', most of us would not be able to read with under-
standing and 'the immediate experience of the text could do nothing to make (us) see...' (1989:8). He therefore claims:

(G)etting a sense of the contexts of a text and the vocabularies for talking about them can
be a more important part of the process of learning to read than the experience of reading
the text (1989:8).

In the light of this, he criticises the normal practice of teaching literature in the
academy:

(S)urely literature programs as a whole make no coordinated effort to make the cultural
interpretation and appropriation of literature an integral part of the study of literature

He is critical of 'the commonsense theories of reading' which have been so 'dis-
abling' because they 'tend to discount the importance of all pre-interpretive con-
texts, official or unofficial':

The result is that, beyond a superficial level, the problem of contextualizing texts tends to
be left to take care of itself, which means in effect it is dumped on the student's lap to
deal with it as he or she may (1989:9).

In its most disabling form, he adds:
the commonsense view not only assumes it is unnecessary for students to acquire contexts for reading literature, it actually tends to see such contexts as alien intrusions... The fear that contexts can only intervene between texts and the experience of texts underlies the feeling that students... need to be protected from contamination... (1989:9-10).

The 'dogma of "the heresy of paraphrase"', the warnings against 'message hunting', the rejection of 'reductive clichés' are all widespread in literary circles. Accepting the (cultural and socio-historical) necessity of these warnings, Graff is of the following opinion:

It would have been better still to have accepted the need for message hunting as inevitable and asked how the quality and subtlety of the messages could have been improved. Instead of guarding against the possibility that literature would be reduced to clichés, it would have been better to assume that some such reduction is inherent in the process of talking about literature, that the real task of education should not be to eliminate clichés but to upgrade their quality (1989:10-11).

The alternative to students' speaking in clichés about literature, he says, is usually going to be students' having no vocabulary for speaking about literature at all. He concludes:

What I have called the unofficial interpretive culture should be part of the object of literary studies, as should the whole subworld of influences which preconditions students' reading of literature but is not acknowledged by the official ethics of interpretation. Admitting that the unofficial interpretive culture exists, looking at how it works, and foregrounding its influence in classroom discussion would help to dispel some of the atmosphere of hypocrisy and pretense that has been so deadly a feature of our trade (1989:11).

It is not necessary to argue the case that these comments may perhaps be even more applicable and important in theological education and Biblical scholarship than in the study of literature in general. But what would that mean, what would be some of the implications?

3 ROBERT FOWLER ON THE 'EXPERIENCE OF THE READER'

In order to see some of the possible implications almost taken to their extreme, let us therefore turn to the opposite side of the spectrum and listen to Robert Fowler, who strongly advocates reader-response criticism in New Testament scholarship. For our purpose we only listen to some of the basic claims in his Let the reader understand (1991), a practical implementation of his ideas on the experience of reading the Gospel of Mark.

The argument is intended as a polemic against New Testament scholarship. 'This book intends to hasten the metamorphosis of my critical guild', is the opening
statement (1991:1). How does he intend to achieve that? He wants to focus consciously and deliberately on ‘the experience of reading’ the text of Mark’s Gospel. And, according to him that implies:

My central move is to take up the critical comments made by generations of biblical critics as disguised reports of the critics’ own experience of reading biblical texts...I claim that we have always talked about our experience of reading Mark’s Gospel but have usually done so under the guise of talking about the intentions of the evangelist, the historical events or theological ideas...or literary structure... (1991:1).

Therefore:

We who know the history of the reception of the Gospel of Mark cannot help but read Mark within and by means of that weighty, accumulated legacy of reading experience, which extends all the way back to the first known readings of Mark....The world I explore...is the world that lies in front of the biblical texts - the world I live in and the world in which readers have always lived, the world of the reception of the Gospels (1991:1-2).

Or to put it even more clearly:

My expression ‘the experience of reading Mark’s Gospel’ should always be understood as shorthand for ‘the experience of reading Mark’s Gospel in and through the accumulated legacy of nineteen hundred years of reading history, stretching from the modern, academic criticism of the Gospels, back to the first known revisionary readings of Mark, the Gospels of Matthew, Luke, and John’ (1991:2).

Or:

(W)e can read a text with a long reading history only by means of criticism of the reception history of that text. If we do not peel away venerable reading grids, then we will be reading, not the ancient text itself, but its palimpsests. Even with the powers of criticism, we cannot magically work our way back through the centuries of reading history to recapture the experience of the first flesh-and-blood readers of the Gospels. To think that we can read Mark as it was first read is an delusion. We never read the text itself, only the history of the reading of the text. The choice is either to read the history of reading with sensitivity and imagination, which is the vocation of Steiner’s ‘critic’, or to be read by the history of reading, which is the fate of the ‘reader’ (1991:263).

Whether Fowler himself succeeds in achieving this in Let the reader understand, is another matter. The fact that he deliberately does not ‘point out at every juncture how my discussion of the reading of Mark’s Gospel is enmeshed in the history of reading Mark’ but leaves it to the readers, in fact, to ‘specialists’, to ‘detect these muted echoes of the voices of our common forebears’, who ‘remain unnamed’
makes the whole venture very problematical. The additional fact that he seems to limit his discussion of 'the history of reading Mark' to 'the relationship between Mark and the other canonical Gospels' (1991:228-260) and only discusses the influence of Tatian's Diatessaron, 'the best known and most beloved of all strong readings of Mark's Gospel' (1991:264-266), adds to the problem. In other words, 'the accumulated legacy of nineteen hundred years of reading' is still remarkably absent in the study.

However, the success of his own attempt does not concern the present argument. Of importance here is only his claim that we should take the reception history of the Biblical texts consciously into consideration, since they are in any case influencing who we are and what and why and how we read and respond to what we are reading. We never read the text itself, only the history of the reading of the text.

But how?

4 BERNARD LATEGAN ON 'EMPIRICAL READER RESEARCH'

How could we do this more consciously and deliberately? How can we listen to the voices of the mothers and the fathers, the brothers and the sisters who also read and still read these documents? How can we take a dialogue with the official and the unofficial interpretive culture seriously when it concerns the Biblical documents? In his introductory article, 'Coming to grips with the reader', in Reader perspectives on the New Testament, Semeia 48 (1989), Bernard Lategan points to one possible way forward. He first reminds us:

'It is not surprising that long before the rise of reception theory in literary studies, the reader did feature in various hermeneutical frameworks developed for the interpretation of biblical texts.... The existential hermeneutics of Bultmann takes as its point of departure the present-day reader who wants to make sense of the ancient text. The question of existentialia, which forms an integral part of this exegetical technique, presupposes a link with the self-understanding of the reader. In the New Hermeneutic, the concept of a Sprachereignis or a 'language event' is indicative of the involvement of the reader in the process of understanding.' (1989:4).

'Despite this long-standing (if diffuse) interest in the reader', however, continues Lategan, there has lately been a 'surge in reader-oriented work in biblical exegesis.' He then points to the distinction between 'the intratextual and the extratextual aspects of the reading-process' and says that both require special attention, 'the text-internal problems' and 'the interaction between text and context.'

Obviously, a study of actual reception is only possible where a record of such a reading or readings exists. Records of all kinds present themselves, both from the past and the present. This has led to a further distinction between historical and contemporary empirical research...’ (1989:5).
He then makes very helpful distinctions:

Empirical research...presupposes real readers, or rather: evidence of their reading in some form or another. An example would be the *first readers* of biblical texts....The problem is that very little evidence of these readings exists. Other examples are the *past readers* of the text, whose successive readings constitute the reception history of the text. By far the most accessible are *contemporary readers* of the Bible, who offer examples of a wide variety of readings... (1989:6).

But does this already take place sufficiently in Biblical studies? No, regrets Lategan:

At this stage, the contemporary empirical research of biblical material is still virtually unexplored territory... (1989:6).

So, how can this happen more adequately and consciously? A Catholic systematic theologian, Francis Schüssler Fiorenza, offers at least one suggestion.

**5 FRANCIS SCHÜSSLER FIORENZA ON THE ‘IDENTITY OF THE COMMUNITY’**

His point of departure (1990) is the widespread conviction that we are experiencing ‘a crisis of Scriptural authority.’ According to Fiorenza, these claims should force us to look at ourselves as well:

Descriptions of the demise of biblical authority are as much autobiographical statements as they are objective descriptions. They say as much about modern Christianity as they say about the value of the Scriptures (1990:354).

If we are serious about analysing the declining role of the Scriptures we should also analyse ourselves, we ‘should also analyze these very descriptions of such a demise of scriptural authority.’ Otherwise, we are not taking our own pretentions to do historical work seriously:

To take into account the historical, cultural, and political conditions of the Scriptures without at the same time taking into account the historical, cultural, and political conditions of the claims about the demise of biblical authority is to view the Scriptures historically, but to view unhistorically both ourselves and our views about Scriptures (1990:354).

So, how can we take our own ‘historical’ claims seriously and include ‘both ourselves and our views about Scriptures’ in our discussions and analyses?

In a first step, Fiorenza argues that the present crisis is not simply a crisis of the Scriptures, but a crisis of modernity. The increased complexity of modern society has led to different forms of alienation (e.g., expert culture from everyday practice;
and between different forms of specialised expert cultures themselves). The result, with regard to Scripture, is, amongst others, that:

Cultural modernity consists in an increasing professionalization...This professionalization has led to a growth of new disciplines—a growth which at the same time entailed a fragmentation of theology into diverse disciplines...

Such an increasing specialization within the disciplines is especially evident in regard to Scriptures....This increased professionalization and specialization has led to what could be called a technocratic rationality, an increased mastery of the material, and thus an increase in the dissemination of specialized knowledge' (1990:356).

In reading the Bible, we suffer the alienations so characteristic of modernity:

Because of this increased productivity of specialized knowledge, we know more about biblical times and texts than ever before; but such an increase in specialized knowledge has come at a price. The specialized knowledge has a means-ends rationality, associated with scientific objectivity and value neutrality. The analysis of the text is limited to the historical, linguistic, social, contextual meaning. For the sake of exactitude the historical method excludes seeking the meaning of the text for our contemporary situation or for our faith. As critical, this method seeks to investigate in a historicist fashion what the text meant in its original context by excluding consideration of any ecclesial or confessional tradition (1990:356).

It is this 'reduction of the study of Scripture to a particular rationality' that cuts it off from everyday life:

This...results in a reading of the Scriptures that is not directly translatable into concrete life and everyday practice...(It) has fostered a type of exegetical knowledge that leads to an increased distance between the expert cultures and the broader public (1990:357).

These developments have gone hand in hand with an emphasis on 'the singularity of the literal meaning' of the text, whether in Biblical fundamentalism as an emphasis on inerrancy or in critical scholarship on 'single contextual literal meaning', in contrast to the classical understanding of the plurality of the Scriptural senses, says Fiorenza (1990:357).

In a second step, he describes two contemporary approaches to the problem, which he calls 'functional' (starting from the contemporary use of the Scriptures pp 359-361) and 'canonical' (starting from the origin of the Scriptural texts and their canonical formation 1990:361-363).

In a third step, Fiorenza offers his own proposal in the form of an attempt to reconcile the differences between the functional and canonical approaches, by arguing for 'the integral identity of the community' as an essential element in reading the Scriptures:
(It seems more appropriate to suggest that the Scriptures function less as a classic than as a constitution—the constitution of an ongoing community (1990:363).

Firstly, ‘it is important that any function or de facto use of the Scriptures be related to the de jure status of the Scriptures.’ (1990:363). The canonical model emphasises the formation of Scriptural identity and the functional model emphasises the role of the Scriptures in the formation of present ecclesial identity. The two, argues Fiorenza, must be combined, and a constitutional model can do this:

The Scriptures come to form a constitutive element of the church in the sense that they are not simply one period of the church alongside of the other. Nor are the Scriptures simply one classic among many nor even a primary classic. Instead the Scriptures have a primacy as the beginning of the Christian community and as constitutive for the identity of the Christian community (1990:363).

Secondly, the views of the Scriptures as functionally relevant or as a classic, can both be individualistic, but

if we take the Scriptures as constitutive for the community, both in its formation and reception, then decisions about the interpretation of the Bible become decisions about the identity of the community (1990:364).

The (canonical) decisions in regard to which Scriptures came to be counted as the Scriptures, are tied to the identity of the community:

What is scriptural is what accorded with the ongoing communities' understanding of identity. It was not simply the alleged apostolicity of some writings or their temporal priority. Instead it was both de facto use of these writings throughout the early Christian communities and the conviction that these writings expressed the Christian identity (1990:364).

Thirdly, suggesting that the Scriptures be seen as a constitution, means that ‘the Scriptures be looked upon...as a set of interpretive practices that provide basic paradigms of Christian identity...The Scriptures...are most often used for discourse and conversation’ (1990:364-365).

The implication is important: ‘Interpretation needs to take into account not only the text or its original audience but also the transformations between the past and present horizons’ (1990:365).

He rejects the notion of a ‘superreader’ or ‘expert historian’ as ‘the ideal reader or ideal audience.’ These notions ‘minimize the temporal distance between the work and the interpreter.’ The historicist view of a ‘superreader’ incorrectly assumes an immediacy of a text to the expert philologist or professional historians’ (1990:365-366).
In contrast to such an approach, a reception hermeneutic must be developed which also 'makes the analysis of the reception of a text into a task of the study of the meaning of that text' (1990:366). The requirement must be that diverse receptions of the text, including present popular understanding of the text as concreteizations of its meaning, be included in the problem of the interpretation of the meaning of the text (1990:366).

This, says Fiorenza, will have implications for the modern split between expert historical and popular interpretation of the Scriptures:

The scholarly interpretation of scriptural texts would thereby not only be concerned with what the original writer intended or did not. but would have as its task also to explore the receptions, concreteizations, and interpretations of the text (1990:366).

Such an approach would include within the interpretive task the shift of horizons of diverse audiences and the transformations between past and present horizons of expectations with regard to the text.

It is his conviction that such an inclusion would 'challenge the historicist presupposition of a superreader and aid in overcoming the separation of the expert culture from everyday life-practice' (1990:366).

His proposal is therefore that contemporary theology and scholarship need to analyze the concreteizations of the meaning of the Scriptures and their normativeness. Such an analysis incorporates within the interpretive praxis...the de facto reception of the Scriptures within the Christian communities (1990:367).

Such an approach underscores that the authority of the Scriptures does not rest on a single meaning that is received and then interpreted, but rather that the meaning of the Scriptures is construed in relation to the integrity of the events and traditions expressed in the Scriptures along with the ongoing process of reception of these interpretations. It also emphasizes the interpretive practice of attending to shifts of horizons, with their retroductive warrants and background assumptions, in construing Christian identity and integrity (1990:367-368).

Obviously, such an approach, 'incorporating within the interpretive praxis the de facto reception of the Scriptures within the Christian communities' could make a major difference to the ways we read the Bible. It could bring practitioners of different theological disciplines into conversation with one another. It could make a major difference to the ways theological students experience theological education. It could bring academic theology closer to everyday Christianity. It could make us
more conscious of the fact that reading is a social activity, that we come to the Bible
with presuppositions that have been formed by historical, social and cultural proc­
esses. It could help us ‘find a vocabulary’ for talking about these presuppositions,
instead of merely denying them, unsuccessfully.

Indeed, amongst professional Biblical scholars this ‘unofficial interpretive cul­
ture’ is not always a respectable topic ... but somewhere we must admit its pervasive
influence and deliberately include it in our reflections and discussions.

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