

Beihefte zur Zeitschrift für die  
alttestamentliche Wissenschaft

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## Grace in the Midst of Judgment

Herausgegeben von  
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Grappling with Genesis 1–11

Band 314



Walter de Gruyter · Berlin · New York  
2002



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2002

## Chapter 2

# Contemporary Hermeneutics

The starting point for any discussion on contemporary hermeneutics must begin with the Enlightenment. The discovery of a helio-centred universe (sun centred) where the earth and other planets revolved around the sun rather than a geocentric universe (earth centred) gradually led to the votaries of science and religion drifting into two separate camps.

Today, some of the key concepts of modernity such as truth, rationality, objectivity of knowledge, and values are called into question. The search for absolute and objective knowledge through some definable methods are currently challenged by postmodernists assisted by recent developments in the social and natural sciences. The loss of confidence in the assertions of objective science and theological orthodoxy has shattered the belief in a 'grand narrative'. The claim to objectivity, universality and hegemony of long established hermeneutical principles of previous generations has been challenged and attacked by critical literary and cultural theories.

Significant paradigmatic shifts have taken place leading to a titanic shift in theological, biblical and hermeneutical landscapes. There is a seismicological shift in the area of epistemology. The post modernity quake has ripped the veil of objectivity and reason in two. Post modernity is not interested in methods but in questions about questions. Its claim is that 'truth and rationality are always socially, linguistically and textually constructed and their validity and applicability are only limited to their own contexts' (Lindbeck 1989:94).

Contemporary hermeneutics has spawned numerous theories and methods. However, there are diversities and incompatibilities even within single movements like reader response criticism, feminist

hermeneutics and others. New issues like ideology, cultural contexts and social locations have come to the forefront. Contemporary hermeneutics has pointed out that the continual polarisation among various communities of readers (interpretive communities) makes it impossible for any one set of interpretive strategies to be ideologically acceptable to all. In the light of cultural pluralism, interpretive pluralism is said to be inevitable.

According to Thiselton (1997:535),

Contemporary hermeneutics has now given birth to a wide plurality of goals, methods, criteria and approaches. Even supposedly single named movements (e.g. feminist hermeneutics) cover a multitude of approaches, some incompatible with others. Some view this as positive liberation, others as negative anarchy. The latter see this trend as reducing biblical and Christian claims to truth to the status of textual forces, or worse, to bids for power by sub-traditions or guilds. A massive agenda has been set for theology which raises profound issues of language, meaning, truth, manipulation, domination and self-deception.

In recent years there seems to have been an increasing obsession with theories. So many theories have been spun resulting in 'theory of theory, all is theory'.<sup>48</sup> In literary theory there has been a move from the *text* to *context* (i.e. cultural, ideological and others). Literary theory whose methodologies are often borrowed from other sciences (linguistics, anthropology, psychology) is gaining popularity in institutional and academic settings. In literary theory there has been a move from 'text itself' to the recognition of context (defined as historical, cultural, ideological, and others). Other types include audience-oriented criticism: rhetorical, semiotics, structuralist, phenomenological and psychoanalytic.

Contemporary hermeneutists are in favour of leaving the text open to many possibilities of interpretation without seeking for a

<sup>48</sup> 'The role of theory is to coerce us to be aware of what we are doing and why we are doing it rather than to lay down ironclad rules. Practice without theory is blind; theory without practice is dumb' (Scholes 1989:88).

reference outside the text. This arbitrarily rules out the 'otherness' of the text. Each new generation of interpreters reads the text in terms of an agenda set by special circumstances. Contemporary hermeneutical theory places the accent on 'interpretation unlimited'. It argues that all reading is perspectival and contextual.<sup>49</sup> Therefore, all reading is (mis)reading. Hence it stands to reason that there is 'no one such thing as one reading is better than the other, and hence all readings, potentially infinite in number, are in the final analysis equally misinterpretations' (Said 1983:39).

Recently there has also been a flurry of interest in a reader's social location. Readers and their interpretive communities have also come to play prominent roles in today's discourse on hermeneutics. The hallmark of current critical theory of reading is on the reader with an emphasis on the interactive dynamics of reading and social setting. Another key concern is the location of authority in the act of reading, which is to be found in the reader. Every reader brings an interpretive framework to the text. To that extent every reader generates a new meaning and thus creates a new text.

In the hermeneutical enterprise, contexts are taken seriously. Every reader reads from a particular social location and underpinning every reading is an ideological agenda. A reader's social location affects and influences his or her reading strategies. Everything we know is inherently contextual. What a reader knows and sees depends upon where he or she stands or sits. Hence all our interpretation is 'context-conditioned'. Contextualism argues that all contexts are *local*. The implication is far reaching. To understand a text an interpreter needs to position it not within its 'historical context', but in his or her own 'personal context'. Therefore there is no such thing as 'the

<sup>49</sup> '...a text is not a line of words, releasing a single "theological" meaning (the "message" of the Author-God) but a multi dimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash. The text is a tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centres of culture' (Barthes 1977:146).

truth' (global), only 'truths' (local). Because both meaning and understanding are matters of perspective, there is no such thing as inconsistencies, contradiction or superfluous words.

Texts are viewed as full of gaps that must be filled before their potential meanings can be actualised. In other words, texts are not seen as containers for meaning but as frameworks for varieties of meaning to be realised by readers. What a reader extracts from a text depends on what he or she injects into the text. Hence a reader's prior knowledge of different subjects (e.g. literary, social, religious, etc.) can help him or her to recognise genres, tropes, topoi, etc. Our ability to discern genres or to process meaningfully diverse texts like novels or fairy tales depends on antecedent information ('extra textual repertoire') and acquired reading skills. In the end the goal of reading is to engender meaning, values and greater self understanding.

Some contemporary hermeneutics theorists go so far as to insist that, in reading, the right question to ask is not whether it is *true* but rather is the reading *interesting*? To be interesting a reading does not have to be true or to be justified. Hence there is no need for any hermeneutical methods. This means lines between theory and practice have become blurred. It is the reader's interest that creates meanings out of the text. Hence different interests result in different meanings. There is no need to discuss meaning at all because it serves no essential purpose and it is variable. Hence the most important thing in reading is the reader's interest and purpose. Instead of saying texts possess inexhaustible meaning, we should say that texts 'never manage to exhaust our interest' (Stout 1982:9). Stout does not deny that meanings exist but he calls for their elimination in any hermeneutical discussion. He sees reading a text to discover meaning as problematic.

Another distinguishing mark of contemporary hermeneutics is not historical concern or textual concern but personal concern. It calls for celebration of diverse and multiple voices. It takes seriously the different orientation to the practice of biblical scholarship. Instead of preoccupation with the past, it focuses on the present; instead of undue concern with interpretation of texts, it calls for interpretation of religious life. The attempt appears to move the interpretive agenda

from the so called stagnant text to a dynamic contemporary cultural landscape.

Contemporary hermeneutics regards postmodernism as inevitable and inescapable (that is debatable), and emphasises the rights of the reader over the rights of the text. It argues that in reading the reader is not a passive agent but rather an active participant in the production of meaning. A reader's relationship to the text is dialectic and dynamic. Meaning is not inherent in the text but emerges as the reader enters into dialogue with the text. Hence the rights and prerogatives of the reader are emphasised.

The dismissal/demise of the author is another contemporary hermeneutical strategy in today's scholastic discussion. The classic statement of Barthes makes this point. He says,

Another paradigmatic shift that has taken place has to do with decentering and freeing the text. Two of the current hermeneutical fashions in vogue are ideological criticism<sup>51</sup> and deconstructionism.<sup>52</sup> Ideological critics argue that in their production

<sup>50</sup> The word 'theological' used by Barthes is a metaphor for *any* externally imposed reading (Prickett 1986:27).

<sup>51</sup> See Clines (1995:9-11) for different definitions of ideology.

<sup>52</sup> A feminist reading may be included here too. Note that the feminist movement is a broad spectrum. Within the feminist movement, there are rejectionists, revisionists, liberationists, etc.

ideology. Biblical texts in particular are tied up in a particular set of human struggles because of their authoritative status, and the careful exposition of their use is a necessary part of the interpretive enterprise (Rowland 1995:172).

According to ideology critics, all the writings of biblical authors and editors, comprising the intellectual and economic elite, have ideological agendas (expressed or unexpressed).<sup>53</sup> Even what may originally have been oral 'folk' tales and sayings have most likely come into written form through such a filter (Fewell and Gunn 1993: 190-193).<sup>54</sup>

Therefore, according to Fewell and Gunn (1993:203), when the biblical texts are read in terms of social class, the text's ideology keeps two classes of people. If we read the texts in terms of gender, the texts explain why women are and should be subordinate to men. If texts were read in terms of theology, they promote the frailty of humanity over against the sovereignty of God. This means that while on the surface the texts suggest status quo, in reality they put people in their place in a social or theological structure. In other words, texts are actually doing something very different from their intended purposes when their ideologies are exposed. In fact, 'the Bible shows us not merely patriarchy, elitism and nationalism, but also the fragility of these ideologies through irony and counter-voices' (204).

Hence there is a call to read against the grain of the text. The reason is that the texts may be doing something very different and need to be exposed by the ideological critics. Such reading helps us 'see how texts and their interpretations oppress people—to expose domination in order to bring about change' (ibid.). Reading against the grain is a correct way to read and such reading can help transform us according to ideological critics.

53 This means that everyone has ideologies whether he or she is conscious of them or not. Ideology affects what we do and how we think. Even in our most scientific and apparently objective endeavours, our ideologies colour and shape our research and conclusions.

54 Cf. also Tina Pippin, 'Ideology, Ideological Criticism, and the Bible', *CRBS* 4 (1996), 51-78.

The other prevailing model in contemporary hermeneutics is deconstruction. Deconstruction denies the existence of a textual governing 'centre' which authorises a single system of meaning. To deconstruct a text is to show there is no privileged centre for its meanings. There is no fixed or final goal; no interpretation has a final destination. The implication is that there can be no privileged authority that favours some interpretation and rules out the rest. Hence, a decentered text excludes any 'referent' or 'transcendental signified' (Derridian phrase).

Deconstructionists seek to overturn entrenched authority, and hierarchies. Their aim is not to destroy the text but to free its trappings. Deconstruction does not mean destruction. It means 'breaking down' to analyse something into its separate parts (especially words) in order to discover true self which is almost never what the author intended. Anything can be deconstructed.

Deconstruction is a theory about the character of all texts. It claims that every text undermines itself because that is the very nature of writing. Somehow there is a fascination with the text's multiple possibilities and inconsistencies. To read a text is to play with the text. It takes pleasure in indeterminacy and the open text.

Deconstruction delights in debunking serious beliefs. It shows that even an accidental gathering of words can be as good as a planned composition. For postmodernists there are no overarching theories of anything; human culture is fragmentary or empty; all theories are valid for a time being and in a given context all are under erasure.

In its radical form, deconstruction embodies a 'radical incoherence' in which not only the authoritative interpretation of texts, but the texts themselves are dissolved (Neuhaus 1989:xi). It also rejects 'the metaphysics of presence' because language is a shifting cloud of elusive meaning and ambiguous codes. Charged with cultural bias there can be no truth, only an endless shifting scene of interpretation. Hence it is impossible to establish any theme story.

All interpretation is not to be trusted because it is imposed by people. Ashron (1994:203-204) is correct when he says that deconstruction 'is no bogey; it is rather a demon or a jinnee, and one

suspects that a few of those who invoke its aid—at any rate from within the ranks of biblical scholarship—are likely to be genuine voters or prepared to watch it ravaged undismayed.

On a positive note, contemporary hermeneutics can help to facilitate dialogues within biblical studies to explore the normative and formative contours of scripture in relation to reading communities both ancient and modern. It can also promote interdisciplinary conversation and research that is mutually critical and constructive, enriching the practice of both disciplines. Contemporary hermeneutics has helped us to see the importance of the role of the reader in reading. Contemporary hermeneutics with its postmodern undecidability has helped to engender humility.

Nevertheless, in my opinion, I find it difficult to accept the full implications of postmodernism because it denies access to transcendence to which theological hermeneutics is committed. It also lacks respect for the 'otherness' of the text. The dark side of postmodernity is 'all-deriding, all-eroding, all-dissolving destructiveness' according to Bauman (1993:vii). Speaking of deconstruction, Thomas (1999:48-49) says, 'Deconstruction is a black hole, swallowing up all possibility of intended meaning. A text which is intrinsically indeterminate, even self contradictory, cannot really exert authority over its reader'. Another critic puts it this way: 'the deconstructor emerges as a peculiar connoisseur who stops at the insignificant, gazes erotically at its surface, and lets exaggerated wonder become corrosive and ghostly such indolent and intimate hesitation comes corrosive and ghostly understanding' (253).<sup>55</sup> In the end, 'systematic anti-determinacy in interpretation will result in paralysis and instability in practice' (Fowl 1998:56). Moreover, 'a radical plurality of readings that is granted equal validity could never sustain and act as a resource for a community in the way the Bible has done through the church's history' (Hart 2000:186).

According to Barr (2000:156-158), the problem with postmodernism is that you have to learn a range of new exotic vocabulary (e.g.

'marginalized', 'totalizing', 'closure', 'reinscription', 'deconstruction', etc.) to speak or understand its language. Although it is fashionable to do so nowadays, the sacrifice of tradition and continuity is too big a prize to pay. He also questions whether scholars who are in favour of postmodernism have really worked through the philosophical underpinnings and critical theories of those philosophers whom they quote from approvingly. There is a great possibility that they have never faced up to the fact that postmodernist practices are simply wrong! Moreover, he argues that many of the postmodernist theories are simply assumed to be right without any serious discussion and they eventually become a 'dogma enforced not by church authority but by social and educational pressure' (2000:158). To augment his argument he quotes Barton:

Barr's final assessment is that,

Contemporary reading presses the point too far when it becomes intoxicated with theories, insists that truth is relative, that interpreta-

<sup>55</sup> Unfortunately, I have misplaced the source of this citation.

tion has no limits, reading against the grain is the correct or only way to read, and readers create meaning. If meaning is the reader's creation, then there is no correct interpretation. Carried to the extreme, everything is permissible and 'anything goes' can be dangerous and detrimental to a reader's psyche.

Such a philosophy will eventually lead to interpretive anarchy. Imagine if there were no criteria in courts of law, anarchy would reign supreme. Even proponents of contemporary hermeneutics concede that interpreting a musical score and changing the musical score are two different things. The Bible may be likened to a sheet of music: it needs to be performed. The score needs to be read and interpreted but does not need to change in order that one may appreciate the music!

One of great problems of contemporary theory is the attempt to make the Bible solely a contemporary book rather than accepting the fact it is an ancient book. As a result, the Bible is read anachronistically and fashionably through the lens of modern sophisticated literary theories which produce new readings. Whether they are valid, good or correct is another question that is not taken up.

Reading against the grain makes the reading of a text interesting and exciting because you can ask all kinds of (thought provoking?) questions. In other words there are, to use a wrestling match metaphor, 'no holds barred'. More often than not, such a reading produces novel insights. The best thing about this type of reading is that no one can say that it is a wrong, fanciful or idiosyncratic reading! However, the problem with such reading is that many of the questions that are asked of the text have no answers simply because the writer's agenda in writing the text is different from that of the reader. There is no end to the questions that can be asked. That means that many of the answers obtained are pure speculation and the reader has created the 'text in his/her own image'. The result of such reading makes the text more elusive, more mysterious and more complex than it already is.

Reading against the grain attempts to reconstruct/expose the ideology of a text and appears to fall into the same interpretive error as the historical critics. It is not based on evidence but on one's hypo-

thetical reconstruction. Both are involved in reconstructive work. Even proponents concede that ideological reading 'is a delicate process due to the complicated relationship between text and reader' (Fewell and Gunn 1993:193). Part of the complication is that 'readers not only bring their own ideologies to bear on the interpretations of texts, but they use texts to push their ideologies on to others' (*ibid.*). The criticism of Montague (1997:149) is that ideological critiques 'tend to see and hear very strongly those passages that address their situation; and they will tend to mute those passages that do not, or they tend to balance their urgent concerns with wider perspectives [leading to] deformation of the Bible into unrecognizable counterfeit' (*ibid.*).

The most cogent and convincing criticism against ideological criticism has come from Fowl (1995:15-34). According to him, it is difficult (impossible?) to read back from an ancient textual artifact to the ideological interests behind its production. Such interests can become muted, disguised or ironically displaced beyond recognition (29). As he points out, when we deal with texts that are composite we get into trouble when we ask who is the real author with the ideology to be exposed? Is the author(s) of Genesis the person(s) who produced the Abraham story in opposition to the stories of Isaac and Jacob? or is it the person(s) who melded the three stories together as a way of solidifying the Israelite tribal confederacy? (29) It is arbitrary to make such a claim. By doing so, one is privileged over the other. How does one account for diverse and incompatible ideologies? (29) His conclusion is that 'the less said about texts having ideologies the better' (32) because 'if one insists on talking as if texts have ideologies then one has to hold a range of other inelegant, awkward or incoherent positions' (16). By claiming texts have ideologies, we ideologize the text (29). I concur completely with his argument.

Barr (2000:82-85), a leading Old Testament scholar, has also joined in attacking ideological critics. According to him, too much weight has been given to ideology and there is no reason to believe that once an ideology is detected, the text has no historical 'value'. To Barr, the ideologist critics (revisionists) are 'biased to produce results that point towards ideology'. They are 'rich in generalities but thin in

factual substantiation'. To make matters worse, some of the theories about ideology that have begun to circulate are obviously absurd: e.g. 'history is written by victors' and the 'tendency to explain the uncertain by pushing it into the unknown'.

... It seems to me, it has been a mistake to suppose that ideology can or could initiate historical narrative. Ideology is a set of ideas. It can affect historical narrative and bias it, but it does not originate it. Ideology has characteristically *non-story* character. The story has to come from somewhere else—from memories, from traditions, from older books—and then ideology may build upon it, revise, embellish it... Excessive reliance on the concept of ideology in modern times has caused quite improbable credulity towards the notions of what it can accomplish. The idea that ideology could be transformed into complex narratives like the David story—at any time—seems absurd (Barr 2000:87).

The problem with ideology critics is that they assume they know a lot more about the social structure and background than is possible. Clines (1995:15) concedes that a detailed ideological analysis of a biblical text is difficult (impossible?) given the paucity of data. This tendency to claim to know too much of something for which we have scant information needs correction. For radical transformation to take place reading against the grain is not the only model. In fact it is the willingness of readers to listen to the text, to respect the horizon of the text, to be challenged by the text that leads to radical transformation.<sup>56</sup>

Eagleton's (1982:449) point concerning a reader response reading needs to be taken seriously when he says that contemporary hermeneutics is a 'reader's liberation movement'. It seeks to give 'power to the readers'. However, the dictum is also true that power corrupts but absolute power corrupts absolutely. The main strategy of a reader's liberation movement is to 'become an all-out putsch to topple the text altogether and install the victorious reading class in its place' (451). Thomas (1999:49) comments that those who advocate readers

<sup>56</sup> The reading community I belong to places emphasis on the role of the Holy Spirit in reading biblical texts.

'endow the text with meaning are guilty of an idolatrous position because they tend to say only what they want to say which will only confirm them in their own existing opinions'. Instead, he suggests a 'reader responsible reading' of the biblical text should be done by informed readers (theologically and biblically literate readers) with an informed interpretive community (49). Interaction between the reader and the text is not an end in itself but must lead to interaction between the reader and the universe (50).

Contemporary hermeneutical theorists are fixated on the dogma of plurality of meanings as well as a call for a deregulation of meaning. This is understandable in light of cultural pluralism, open society and globalisation. The irony is that in spite of all the grandiose talk of the huge benefits of globalisation, where international borders are to be eliminated to give free access to people from different countries, this has not happened. The reason is that in practice it has been found to be unworkable and to have created more problems. The elimination of border controls invites lots of illegal immigrants which destabilise the country, create massive unemployment, social problems, etc. No country has ever advocated or will ever advocate the eradication of border controls. So also in hermeneutics without any textual controls there will be an influx of meanings (alien?) that will destabilise and anarchise the text. The call for the elimination of meaning is simply a mirage. Any attempt to do that will come very dangerously close to eliminating all meaning. Without meaning how does communication exist? Hence, I am not prepared to cross that hermeneutical red line.

Those hermeneutists who stop short of saying that a text can mean everything and anything also face a dilemma. Where and when do we draw the line? Who decides when enough is enough? Where is the boundary? How does one decide the boundary? One person's boundary may be another person's territory. Once a reader travels on a slippery slope, it is downhill all the way. The moment someone suggests criteria one is already suggesting by implication that there is a closure and there is a correct meaning according to the criteria that have been set. If meaning is in the eye of the beholder, then the reader becomes 'Lord of his own Hermeneutical Ring' (Vanhooser's phrase). Fowler's



(1991:26) point is that those who say readers make meaning are guilty of oversimplification and that those who say the reader is everything mislead?

Similarly, while the multiplication of theories has served to give more interpretive but dizzying options to readers, it, at the same time, makes interpretation more complex. From a pragmatic viewpoint, how can one master all the hermeneutical strategies let alone master one? Is reading a text as complicated as computer programming? Ultimately, most of the hermeneutical theories fail to pass the test of *Occam's Razor*: How useful many of the hermeneutical theories are in assisting interpretation is another matter.<sup>57</sup>

In recent years the academic circle has become so obsessed with theory that critics need to be reminded that theory is useful in so far as it serves the criticism of specific works. One of the real dangers of theory is that it replaces the study of literature itself which leads to 'literary ventriloquism'. In the end theory becomes the master instead of the servant. We must resist becoming servants to theories.

Many of the literary theories that have been created seem to raise more questions than provide solutions. While the potential benefits are promising, the extent of failure can also be alarming. There is also a tendency to claim too much merit for a literary theory which may result in failure to deliver what has been promised. Social linguistics and structuralism<sup>58</sup> etc., illustrate that from the past. In other words, 'Never have so few (scholars) produced so much (theories) for so many (the community) of which there is no agreement' (Lim 1997: 112). In the end readers are left with irresolvable situations of competing but equally confusing strategies.

57 A case in point is the concept of the *reader* in a reader response hermeneutics.

What reader are we talking about? Is it an ideal reader, an authorial reader, a historical reader, a hypothetical reader, an informed reader, an encoded reader, an actual reader, a competent reader or others?

58 Structuralism when it first appeared became popular and was hailed as the most exciting theory for biblical studies. However up to date its interest has waned and not much has been done with this theory in biblical studies.

To those who are adamant concerning the death of the author, Hirsch's reply is that when critics deliberately banish the original author, they themselves usurp his place, and this leads unerringly to some of our present-day theoretical confusion (Hirsch 1967:5-6). Hirsch's assumption is that a text can have only one meaning. No one has the greater right to meaning than the author. He eliminates the reader and text as foci of meaning. I differ with Hirsch on a few points. Hirsch emphasises authorial intention, while I emphasise textual intention. Meaning for Hirsch is located in the author and by understanding his or her psyche, a reader can obtain meaning. For me, meaning is located within the text. The author's intention is not available but the textual intention given to the text by an author is available. While I do not eliminate the author, I bracket him/her. I am not prepared to throw the baby out with the bath water. At its root, everyone has to agree that the text was written by someone for some purpose.

I grant that writers employ ambiguities and not all texts are clear. Hence texts are not clear, a reader needs to make informed guesses. Hence texts have a determinate meaning. Imagine the chaos and anarchy which would ensue if documents, and laws in courts did not have determinate meaning. When motorists or pedestrians come to a red light, it has only one determinate meaning, which is stop. This is also true of car manuals and electrical equipment. If they did not have determinate meanings people would have to spend endless hours of frustration in trying to get things fixed. Society is not run in such a way that all meanings are indeterminate.

Current hermeneutical theories are distrustful of anything that has a centre or is authoritative. Hence they seek to eliminate all centers of authority. However, as Cain (1984:14) has pointed out,

we cannot rid ourselves of the notion of an authoritative center or reject other kinds of authorities that hold sway over us in different contexts. And we should not delude ourselves that we enjoy complete freedom from responsibility—both to ourselves and to others—in interpretation. Interestingly, and ironically that with each effort to dislodge an authority/center we eventually end up re-instituting it in one form or another.

Several of the building blocks of contemporary hermeneutics' argument are correct. But taken as a whole it is badly amiss because it claims too much for too few. By insisting that texts must be freed, artificial problems have been created. The danger of contemporary hermeneutics is that it swings to both extremes. Either texts do not have determinate meaning or texts have no meaning at all. The over-emphasis on the rights of the readers lead to abuse and misuse of the text. The texts are either domesticated or freed from its moorings.

While it is laudable to take a middle course by steering between the Scylla of determinacy and Charybdis of indeterminacy, readers need to be aware that such a middle course is also fraught with dangers. There are jagged rocks jutting out that will destabilise and batter the ship leading to a shipwreck of meaning. On the other hand those who seek to combine different theories will be disappointed because all theories operate from different presuppositional platforms. Instead of hearing the drumbeat of a mating dance, one will hear the different drumbeat of a war dance.

Today's academia seems to be drowning in the pool of hermeneutical fads and theories. It seems to operate on the premise that anything that is new is better and anything old is to be changed or discarded. Anything that is novel always attracts lots of attention and is exciting, but the euphoric excitement seldom lasts long. As the saying goes: the person who marries the spirit of this age may soon become a widower.

In contemporary hermeneutics, not only the rules of the game have been changed but also the game itself. In other words the goals of reading have been shifted here and there. Personally, it is hard to conceive how contemporary hermeneutics (those that I have assessed) can help achieve a breakthrough in the hermeneutical gridlock in light of a wide hermeneutical divide between readers and theorists.

The bottom line for me is how much can those contemporary hermeneutical theories which I have critiqued assist me in understanding the text *better*? Unfortunately, not much. Having weighed them in the balance, I have found them wanting. They are inadequate and some inappropriate for use in theological reading. Theoretically,

many of the theories are workable but in practice they raise more questions than provide solutions.<sup>59</sup> More pointedly, those contemporary hermeneutical theories seem incompatible with the textual claims of the Bible.

My viewpoint of contemporary hermeneutical theories can be summed up by a Chinese idiom, 'loud thunder but little raindrops'. I do not deny that there are some occasional brilliant thunder flashes but they are not enough without rain. What we need in this modern hermeneutical desert is—more rain.

In this chapter I have painted with broad strokes concerning the current state of hermeneutical discussion. There are many hermeneutical theories that have been churned out. I have critiqued some of the them which I have found to be problematic, deficient and also inappropriate for reading the Bible. Perhaps my biggest reservation is that instead of assisting me to understand the text better, they undermine the text.

In the next chapter, I shall focus attention on some of the critical hermeneutical issues such as how the reader's location and belief system (rarely discussed) affect his/her reading; the importance of facing squarely one's hermeneutical allegiance and alliance; and the location of meaning.

<sup>59</sup> For another convincing and devastating critique of contemporary theories, see Kevin Vanhooser, *Is There Meaning in the Text? The Bible, the Reader, and the Morality of Literary Knowledge* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998) and Anthony C. Thiselton, *New Horizons in Hermeneutics: The Theory and Practice of Transforming Biblical Reading* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992).