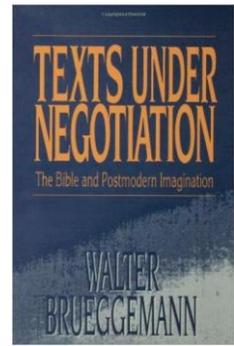


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Texts Under Negotiation - The Bible and Postmodern Imagination

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Notes Alison Morgan



Preface

Book concerned with the liberation of the biblical text for the church in a new situation, for interpretation, proclamation, teaching, and practice. Postmodern situation seen as threat to church; suggests it is in fact a positive opportunity to which we can respond with eagerness.

1. Funding Postmodern Interpretation

We are in a new interpretive situation which constitutes something of an emergency. Have been used to historical criticism which developed in the culture formed by the Enlightenment. But scientific positivism now breaking down, and our modes of interpretation are less workable.

Cultural background.

C17, after Reformation, the intellectual-cultural underpinnings of W Europe shifted; medieval synthesis with its coherent system of meaning and power collapsed into chaos, with resulting loss of certitude and domination. Into this vacuum stepped Descartes, then Hobbes, Locke and Rousseau, to build a new certainty based on inner world, the only reliable place to turn. They created a new separated individual consciousness that had no reference point outside itself.

Toulmin, *Cosmopolis*, identifies 4 movements into modernity:

- move from oral to written; what is reliable is what is written
- move from particular to universal, so real truth is what is true everywhere
- move from local to general, so that real truth had to be the same from locality to locality
- move from timely to timeless, so the real is the unchanging

Created new system of certitude controlled from the centre, which was supremely white and masculine. Theological interpretation followed behind.

Argues, with others, that we are now seeing the reversal of the process of modernity, as we move from written to oral, universal to particular, general to local, and timeless to timely; we increasingly accept the second as what is valid.

Michael Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge*, argues all knowledge has a decisive fiduciary element.

New postmodern situation. Our knowing is now contextual; what you know and see depends on where you stand or sit. Contexts are local. It follows that knowledge is pluralistic, a cacophony of claims each ringing true to its advocates; pluralism is the only alternative to objectivism once the dominant centre is gone. So practice of Christian interpretation in preaching is contextual, local and pluralistic. Our pastoral situation is also contextual and local. Collapse of unchallenged authority of white male Western world reaches into patterns of employment and retirement, home and domestic authority in families, systems of management and control; often produces greed and brutality. Also touches our theology; tensions over God's sovereignty,

sovereignty of Church, inclusive language demonstrate this. End of modernity requires a critique of method in scripture study. We used to make the text fit our modes of knowledge and control; need now to find new methods of reading.

Enormous opportunity for Christian ministry. Knowing now consists not in settled certitudes but in the actual work of imagination - ie the capacity to picture, portray, receive and practice the world in ways other than it appears to be at first glance when seen through a dominant, habitual, unexamined lens. See Warnock, *Imagination*, Garrett Green, *Imagining God* (states that the canon of scripture provides the paradigm through which the faithful practice imagination), David Bryant, *Faith and the Play of Imagination*, and others. Reality is no longer a fixed arrangement but an ongoing, creative, constitutive task in which imagination of a specific kind has a crucial role to play. The imagination of modernity is being displaced by postmodern imagination, which is less sure and less ambitious and which more modestly makes a local claim. Not our work as preachers to construct a full alternative world, but to provide the pieces materials and resources out of which a new world can be imagined. Our role now to voice scripture material, without excessive accommodating (ie to what is politically acceptable or morally conventional etc); to utter the voice of the text boldly, as it seems to present itself, even if it does not seem to connect to anything.

'So consider the meeting where the minister presides. Everyone arrives there with a presumed, take-for-granted world, perhaps not recognized or consciously valued, but operative, a world with assumptions about money and sex, about Communists and daughters-in-law, about a new lawn mower, about Vietnamese boat people, about college basketball and a birthday gift and the famine in Ethiopia. It is a world unexamined, but passionately held.

The action of the meeting begins - music, word, prayer, theatre. At its centre, the minister reads (or has read) these very old words, remote, archaic, something of a threat, something of yearning. In the listening, one hears another world proposed. It is an odd world of 'no male or female', of condemned harlots and welcomed women, of sheep and goats judged, of wheat and tares tolerated, of heavy commandments and free grace, of food given only for work, and widows and orphans valued in their nonproductivity. If one listens long and hard, what emerges is a different world...

If the minister does not trim the text down too much, but voices its angular words, clearly some of this ill fits me. The proposed world offered in the text runs dead against my presumed world that seems to function less and less effectively. On occasion, I am upset, awed, angry, forlorn, attracted. On my side is more than one world, some presumed, some proposed, and then comes music, liminality, and adjudication. The minister has respected me... has not come too close, has given me room, but has been unflinching, unaccommodating, uncompromising in showing me texts that do not fit, dreams that expose my skewed ego-structure and invite me to run beyond myself, that is to say, my old self... The preacher must take care not to compromise but to stay very close to the odd text that is the source of this proposed alternative.... The purpose of preaching and of worship is transformation.'

So how do people change? Not through doctrinal argument or sheer cognitive appeal; not because of moral appeal; but by the offer of new models, images, and pictures of how the pieces of life fit together - often carried in narrative. Church situation in preaching is a new one; collapse of modernity provides new freedom for the text of Scripture and for our own construal of the world through what we take to be the live word of God.

2. The Counterworld of Evangelical (gospel) Imagination

Preacher's chance in postmodern world is to construct an infrastructure that makes a different communal life possible. If he doesn't do it, the congregation will rely on the dominant infrastructure of consumerism.

Take concept of creation. It is problematic in the world of modernity (questions of creation and science, creation and evolution, big bang, creation ex nihilo etc); not in the world of postmodernity. Creation as understood by the Bible seeks to explain nothing; creation faith is a response to the wonder that we/the world exist; it is about mystery.

Take concept of future. We affirm that the future is not yet finished. The unfinished self (psalms 51,73,17), the unfinished world (Romans 8, Isaiah 65), the unfinished church.

If we yield our past to a memory of generous origins in God's good power, and our future to the intentionality of God's promises, we will live differently in the present. With collapse of modernity, we now have an opportunity to imagine a counterworld that lives in and through the text; and to subvert the dominant perspective so powerful among us.

3. Inside the counterdrama

Our proper subject is the specific text, without any necessary relation to other texts or any coherent pattern read out of or into the text; let each text speak its own claim. Focus on the 'little story' not the 'great story'.

We therefore need to be free of systematic theology; have learned to read the Bible in terms of a system of thought, either orthodox or liberal; this permits one text to eliminate another. Need to take seriously the little story that does not fit.

Need to be willing to violate historical criticism, which operates with the hidden criteria of rationalism and has devised strategies (eg labelling of literary genre, source criticism) for disposing of what is unacceptable to modern consciousness. Let the whole lot speak. Often recover the most interesting, poignant and disclosing parts of the text in this way.

Rationalistic approach, imposition of modern critical or systematic theological categories on the text, has led us to read it according to Hellenistic modes of rationality, at the expense of what is Jewish in the text. Jewish reading honours texts that are disjointed, irrational, contradictory, paradoxical, ironic and scandalous. So we should honour the ambiguity, complexity and affront of the text without worrying about making it palatable to religious orthodoxy or critical rationality.

So we now avoid repressing the text. Athens and Geneva have conspired to suppress, and Jerusalem has been a willing accomplice. It has been done so that the rationalistic hegemony of modernity could prevail, or the domination of church orthodoxy could control.

3 metaphors. Bible as compost pile that provides material for new life; it isn't itself the place of new growth, but it sprouts and ferments and enriches. Us as possessing a zone of imagination standing between text and outcome of attitude, belief, behaviour. This zone is shaped by the community in part, but is personal and private too. It is not empty, but contains my vested interests, my fears, my hurts; no one has access or control. And metaphor of exile. OT text was generated by exile; perhaps the collapse of modernity puts us into exile, and so the text can speak afresh to us. What is required is an evocative, originary assertion that seeks to gather, order, and congeal human reality into a quite new configuration. Israel must leave garden, Er, Egypt, Sinai, Babylon. Western church must leave the old flesh pots.

So we need a mode of scripture interpretation unlike that which we have practised before.

Can see reality as drama.

Sermon as therapeutic conversation in which the unutterableness of the text may be uttered, rather than in university lecture hall with careful, protective footnotes.

We can handle 'objectionable' texts.

We thus come closer to the rabbis who offered reality only one text at a time.

Conclusions

One text at a time.

Interpretation requires a minimum of historical-critical work.

Texts subvert our usually assumed world.

Treat text as an army of metaphors; requires listener to share in work.

We are between an old, unexamined world and a new world voiced in the text; liminality.