

Truth and Literature in Exodus 16

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Historical consciousness had led scholars in the past two centuries to interpret verses of scripture, not immediately in the context of the interpreter's theological questions, but rather in the textual context of the original pericope or source, and also in the wider context of history, i.e. the patterns of meaning and significance which shaped the culture (language in the broader sense) of the writer and first readers at the time of writing¹. Training scholars to this method has consisted of introducing them to the languages and literary procedures of biblical authors, but also to the archeology, the political history, and the history of thought of ancient Israel and its neighbours. This training was to enable them to read a biblical sentence, and to associate it with the images and logical connections which originally gave it meaning, and in this way to understand the originally intended meaning of the text. To achieve this an enormous self-denial is required, because the scholars must learn to free themselves, as far as possible, from their own world-visions and spontaneous thought- and image-associations, and all their prejudices and desires, in order to take on an alien psyche and truly discover a foreign world. This is the discipline of objectivity, which became the cardinal virtue of scholarship. And objectivity about the Bible is a religious virtue in so far as it is a selftranscending search for the historical Word-of-God made text.

This achievement must not be underestimated, and this discipline must be maintained, if theology is to continue to define itself as „fides quaerens intellectum.“ One can only regret that even recent Church documents too often undermine their credibility and authority by failing to meet what have become general standards of intellectual probity².

However, a problem arises. This formation tends to deal with ever more subtle and precise conceptualization, in which one pursues the thought of another. One pursues „meaning“ rather than „truth“; and in fact one does not easily introduce the question of truth, as this would

¹ Historical consciousness, with all the complications and difficulties it implies in the human quest for credible truth, seems to be an advance in human intelligence which is as irreversible as the discovery of systematic thinking in Ancient Greece. Its role in the study of Sacred Scripture was recognized officially and authoritatively in the Catholic Church by the Pius XII's encyclical *Divino Afflante Spiritu* (1943), and by Second Vatican Council's decree *Dei Verbum* (1965). Its implication have been extensively laid out in the recent declaration of the Pontifical Biblical Commission. *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church* (1993), especially in I, A; III, C and D.

² Cf. the Commission declaration (cited in note # 1), section IV, A.2.: „A notre époque, l'actualisation doit tenir compte de L'évolution des mentalités et du progrès des méthodes d'interprétation.“ Cf. also IV, A. 3: „Bien que toute lecture de la Bible soit forcément sélective, les lectures tendencieuses sont à écarter, c'est à dire celles qui, au lieu d'être dociles au texte, ne font qu'utiliser celui-ci à des fins étroites ...“

break out of the discipline of interpretation. For example, if one is pursuing the study of Macchiavelli, one becomes familiar with the military and political milieu of Florence in the 15th century in order to know what his work was a directive about, and one works very hard at discerning Macchiavelli's relation to medieval thought in order to show how his introduction of empirical methodology revolutionized irreversibly Western political theory. To ask whether his principles are true or false is uncongential to the scholar, in so far as it tends to introduce a critique on the basis of twentieth century concepts and beliefs, breaking away entirely from historical modes of objectivity. Questions about truth and falsehood in political theory are not asked by scholars whose training is historical, but rather by those whose training is in philosophy. Similarly, those trained in historical scholarship about the Bible do not easily turn to theology, and the products of their scholarship are directly useful to other historians of the ancient Near East, but often not directly useful to theologians, or to pastoral work.

A further problem arises in the case of Old Testament texts from the fact that the historical data we have is often uncertain, and seldom comprehensive. As a result, scholars cannot agree about historical contexts for interpretation. We do not have historical certainty about the dating of most texts, for example, and in fact we know very little about the history of Israel before David or during the time of the exile and restoration. Historical interpretation in this case must often be characterized as doubtful or at least as open to controversy. Such results of research are not easily made at home in a discourse which, by definition, begins with faith.

The following paper is an attempt to recommend an alternative approach. It draws upon some of contemporary debates among academics dealing with literary theory, in order to formulate applications to the Bible as read for theology³. It recognizes the absolute necessity that scholars, and all honest readers, begin with the attempt to get beyond their personal worlds through disciplines of objectivity. But it looks to the disciplines of literary criticism, rather than to those of history, for most of its guiding principles. Both are academically sound. To the nineteenth century, history seemed closer to science perhaps, but in our era literature seems closer to religious truth⁴.

³ The writer has followed these debates more in English-language publication than in German.

⁴ Cf. *T. R. Wright, Theology and Literature*, Oxford 1988. The word literature is used very generally here to include all writing which is not specifically in a „scientific“ mode, (i.e. ways of writing intend to exclude the perspective of the writer in order to portray accurately the relations between objects rather than the relations of objects to the writer or reader). It must be noted that even fiction, which begins being truthful by presenting itself as purely fiction, continues in truth by unmistakably implying important affirmations and value judgements which we either accept or repudiate. For further discussion, cf. *S. McEvenue, Interpretation and the Bible. Essays about Truth in Literature*, Collegeville 1994.

I would like to read Ex 16 in the light of 5 principles, which I have formulated on the basis of a selection of elements currently debated about interpretation theory:

1. Literary meaning is controlled by the literary unit read as an organic whole.
 2. A reader will understand a text in so far as he correctly identifies the „thing“ about which the text speaks, and successfully negotiates an illumination of the „thing“ by the text and of the text by the „thing“.
 3. The meaning of a literary text cannot be expressed by any abstract paraphrase.
 4. The meaning of a text cannot be expressed by an historically limited kerygma.
 5. The meaning of a text will transcend its historical frame in so far as it implies a reader who transcends that limit.
1. The first principle then reads as follows: *Literary meaning is controlled by the literary unit read as an organic whole.*

This principle was the main doctrine what has been called the „New Criticism“ since 1930. It has, in fact, been overlooked and constantly violated by countless excellent biblical scholars who worked so brilliantly to isolate and identify „original“ phrases and sentences. They did this out of a concern for authenticity and a peculiarly Protestant desire to get behind the human contamination and community corruption of written texts to recover a more pure moment of oral tradition, or better still an original experience of direct revelation. Form critics such as Westermann, for example, sought the original oral forms which had progressively been complicated and corrupted as they became written in literature. Historical research looked for the earliest form of a law, or the *ipsissima verba* of Jeremiah, or particularly of Jesus. Thus biblical scholars continued to follow a critical historical method which led to ever greater precision in this direction, at a time when the academic discipline of interpretation was following a very different path.

For the past 70 years now, a period which I would define as stretching from the late F. R. Leavis at Oxford University to the late Northrop Frye at Toronto University, academic literary scholars have condemned interpretation which was based on „centrifugal meaning“, i. e. the historical referent of a single word, phrase, sentence, or paragraph, and have insisted on „centripetal meaning“ which begins with the single act of meaning expressed by the literary unit as a whole⁵. The meaning of each word is given precise definition by its relation to all the other words in the literary unit. Interpretation is a spiral activity, moving from element to

⁵ For a clear statement of this principle cf. *Northrop Frye, The Great Code the Bible and Literature*, Toronto 1982, 59–64.

whole and from whole to element, but never moving to a historical reality outside the literary work itself.

Such a principle becomes absurd in the hands of fanatics and fools, but clearly it recommends an important discipline which we should all respect: the discipline of carefully considering all the data of a complete text in order to recover its meaning. Anyone who has written a poem knows how a writer agonizes about the choice of a word, or the order of a sentence, or the use of a metaphor, often without knowing explicitly why it makes such a difference, but always sure that each smallest change modifies the meaning of the whole, making it a better (or worse) discovery and expression of the unified insight one is trying to formulate for oneself and for others.

It follows that the first step in literary reading is to establish the exact extent of a text. In reading Exodus 16, it is easy to recognize an epilogue in 16:35 and a gloss in 16:36. There is, moreover, a very visible frame in 16:1 and 17:1. These literary markers set out a narrative unity, which we can tentatively name the Manna Story. Of course it is a literary unit which is part of the larger unit of the book of Exodus, which is part of the Pentateuch, which is part of the Bible. The Pentateuch is a unified literary unit, and many theologians also consider the bible as a whole to be, not an anthology, but a literary unity. Canonical criticism will demand that the spiral of interpretation move from these larger units down to the smaller and then back to the larger. This paper will attempt to break into the spiral very cautiously, by reading Exodus 16 as a small literary unit, and will add some observations which will provide a critical first step toward a larger challenge of canonical criticism.

2. The second principle aims at saving the first from any philosophical position of idealism within which it might find a home. As a result it runs counter to some implications of the first principle, and certainly is intended to oppose any distorted application of the first principle. The second principle is as follows: *a reader will understand a text in so far as he correctly identifies the „thing“ about which the text speaks, and successfully negotiates a reciprocal illumination of the „thing“ by the text, and of the text by the „thing“.*⁶

The „thing“ is used here, rather than „subject matter“ or „object“, in order to emphasize the reality of what may be non-material objects of many texts, such as love or a divine Person, in order to affirm that texts are not about an idea or a word only, and finally in order to recall the

⁶ This principle can be traced back to Martin Luther, and it can be found clearly laid out in Bernard Lonergan's analysis of the act of interpretation in „Method in Theology“, London, 1971, 156–158. Cf. also Ben F. Meyer, „The Primacy of the Intended Sense of Texts“, in B. Meyer and S. McEvenue (eds.). Lonergan's Hermeneutics, Its Development and Application. Washington, 1989, 81–119, esp. 85.

„locus classicus“ in Thomas Aquinas, where he points out that „voces significant res“, but „res ipsae alias res significant“ (words mean things, but the things themselves mean other things)⁷. The word thing militates against that notion of typology in which the Old Testament provides a series of signs which terminate in the reality of fulfillment in Christ, (which one might take to be the perspective of the Fathers and of the Council of Trent), in favour of more complex perspective, based on the cognitional theory and hermeneutical theory of the late methodologist Bernard Lonergan, and also its direct application to biblical interpretation by the New Testament scholar Ben Meyer⁸. The Old Testament too was speaking of things, not just signs, and of things which are eternal. Where there was fulfillment in Christ, the fulfillment was sometimes a fulfillment of the thing through a new reality, but often it was only an increase in our understanding of reality.

The point is that literary texts are not escapes from reality, or alternatives to reality. Rather they are about realities, about real things, and that is why they are important. Even the most fictional genres, and the wildest fantasies, imply affirmations about social structures, for examples, as marxist interpreters and feminist interpreters so rightly demonstrate. And, even though literary texts are written by gifted communicators, it is astonishingly easy to miss the author's most general focus, and completely miss what the text is talking about. I would contend that the labour of exegesis consists principally in getting the reading started on the right foot, by identifying correctly what „thing“ the text is about.

It is surprisingly difficult to identify that thing. The authors themselves need to call on all the resources of their intelligence, and all of their genius with language, in order to finally know and formulate the experience which they wish to express. A leading American critic puts it very simply: „A poems says one thing and means another“⁹. And he develops a useful distinction between „meaning“ and „significance“. He restricts the word „meaning“ to the mimetic function of language in which words and sentences sequentially refer to different details of the complex realities they intend to represent. From the point of view of meaning, a text is „a string of successive information units.“ But a poem is essentially a unity, not a succession. And poetry uses language to draw away from represented reality again and again, by substituting meanings through metaphore, by distorting meaning through ambiguity or contradiction, by creating „semantic indirection“ by all sorts of tropes. The sum of all these withdrawals from „meaning“ constitute what Riffaterre calls „significance“. The unit of meaning is word and sentence. The unit of signifi-

⁷ Cf. the *Summa*, Quaestio 1a, Articulus 10.

⁸ Cf. *Bernard Lonergan*, *Insight, An Study of Human Understanding*, New York, 1956, especially Chapter 8; and *Meyer*, *Op. cit* in note # 6.

⁹ Cf. *Michael Riffaterre*, *Semiotics of Poetry*, Bloomington 1984, 1.

cance is the literary unit as a whole¹⁰. In this analysis, the „res alias“ of Thomas has become „significance“; but Riffaterre has made the whole poem (sum of literary tools) signify it, whereas Thomas has the „res“ signify it. At work here is a difference in cognitional theory, not a difference in literary theory. I suggest that both Thomas and Riffaterre would agree that the words and sentences carry on a line of meaning, but that the *poem as a whole* including both all references to reality and all withdrawals from simple reference, is about some „thing“ which may not be directly referred to or named by any one word or sentence in the poem. The unity of the poem corresponds to the unity of the „thing“ which the poem „signifies.“

It may be helpful to begin with an example of a short poem, „The Fog“, by the American poet Carl Sandburg:

The fog comes
on little cat feet

It sits looking
over harbour and city
on its haunches
and then moves on.

We must ask what the poem as a whole is about. Is it about fog? And does it say simply that the fog is like a cat? Or does it „say this and mean something else“? If it doesn't mean something else, we would have to wonder why these simple words are published and republished? Why is this poem in every anthology? Why is it taught in schools? Why does it make one's blood shiver when one reads it?

Certainly it is about fog, because that is the *res* which, as Aquinas says, the word signifies, but clearly the *res* signifies *res alias*, i. e. some other things. The fog is both a reality and a metaphor for other realities which are compared to a cat. What then is the poem about? In what realm of meaning does it move? Sandburg has another poem called „The Grass“ which presents the image of bodies piled up on various battlefields in the first world war, and has the grass boasting that it alone is victor because it gradually „covers all.“ Similarly the fog here is a sort of force of nature, which comes in, soundless and supreme, like a cat, and which invades a vast complex of human striving and civilization, namely the harbour and city of Chicago, and then leaves. In saying this, I have pointed to a realm of meaning, and pointed out something about the sense of the images. I have introduced the term „force of nature“, but I would not say the poem is about the force of nature or attempt to say in any single word or sentence what is the nature of that „thing“ the poem speaks of, or say what the poem says: only the *poem as a whole* can define the thing, and all the words of the whole poem are needed to say what the poem says¹¹. The

¹⁰ Cf. Idem. 2–3.

¹¹ Riffaterre does attempt to make the poem signify words or ideas rather than realities,

only way to know that thing is to read the poem again and again, listening attentively, until one knows what Sandburg knew.

Similarly if I ask what is the Gospel of Mark about, one might quickly answer that it is about Jesus Christ. If I further ask if that means Jesus as He was back in B. C., or Jesus as He is now, or Jesus as He will be at the last judgement, one can see right away that we will have to read that Gospel again, with care, in order to really identify the thing. And reading the Gospel once again will reveal that those questions are relevant, but that no single-sentence answer can be given to them. Or if I ask what Ex 16 is about, one might quickly answer „Manna“, but right away the *res* is seen to signify another thing as well, and we need to read the chapter again to find out what it is. So we shall do just that, and our question will be what real thing is spoken of.

Verse 2

„The whole congregation“ (kol hae'dah) – this is a religious act of the whole congregation. This phrase is characteristic of the Priestly Document, and the story before us appears to be a late exilic creation of the Priestly Writer. The Priestly Document tends to present the history of Israel in a series of almost liturgical cameos, in which the people like one person react to events. The Priestly Document has been accurately characterized as a „Bildersammlung. Sie kommt von der Geschichte her, doch sie tendiert auf Paradigmata“¹². In this „paradigma“, the people of Israel are represented as turning formally against Moses and Aaron, apparently indulging in a paranoid distrust of their divinely appointed leaders. One might ask if this is a story about sin?¹³

Verse 3 tells us what they said:

They would prefer to have died in the hands of the Lord. Everyone would prefer to die in the hands of the Lord. Apparently they think they are no longer in His Hands, and everyone experiences times of similar desolation. But it is interesting to note what they associate with the hands of the Lord: it is the land of Egypt, with meat and bread – the Lord is found in Paris, chez Maxim! . . . But now in the desert they believe Moses and Aaron want to kill them through starvation.

presumably because he follows Wittgenstein in imagining that understanding is born of language rather than language being created and modified in order to capture and communicate understanding, Cf., for example, *M. Riffaterre*, *Fictional Truth*, Baltimore 1990, 3–4, or 23–28.

¹² Cf. *Norbert Lohfink*, „Die Priesterschrift und die Geschichte“, *VT.S* 29, 1978, 189–225, esp 215.

¹³ The Priestly Writer suppresses most of the sinful aspects in Israel's history, but it does retain some specific paradigms of sin. Cf. *Norbert Lohfink*, „Die Urstünden in der priesterlichen Geschichtserzählung“, in *G. Bornkamm* and *K. Rabner* (eds.) *Die Zeit Jesu: Festschrift für H. Schlier*, Freiburg 1970, 38–57.

Verses 6–7

This complaint is directly answered in vv 6–7. We will return to vv 4–5 in a moment, but in vv 6–7 Moses and Aaron reply directly to the people. „Evening and Morning“ here simply means tomorrow. In context, the idea is that this is going to happen right away. In subsequent verses, the pair „evening“ and „morning“ will be divided in order to accommodate the quail tradition into the evening, and the manna tradition into the morning, and this vocabulary, along with the phrases of „seeing the glory of the Lord“, and also the Hebrew word *jada*‘ occurs down to the end of v 15, serving to unify this phase of the narrative.

The answer which Moses and Aaron give to the people in vv 6–7 is not to protest against these insults. Nor is it to proclaim the innocence of their intentions. Nor is it to promise that they will not die of hunger. Rather it is to say that the people have missed the whole point, in thinking their complaint was against Moses and Aaron, when in fact it was against God. They have thought of the exodus as of some minor adventure. They haven’t recognized that they are part of „The Exodus“, that God is leading it, that the kingdom of God is among them.

Surprisingly, Moses and Aaron do not blame them at all. On the contrary they start off by reassuring them, as one might reassure an anxious child, saying that everything is alright: „this very evening you will realize that it is the Lord“. Rather than refute them, or blame them, Moses and Aaron reassure them that faith will soon be given to them. They will see the glory. This answer is astonishing. It seems to run contrary to a reader’s instincts, to one’s spontaneous attitude to oneself and God. (This is a subjective reaction, but subjectivity is an important source of understanding. I confess that I find this text to be intolerably sweet). And, more astounding still, verse 7 tells them that they will see the glory because the Lord has heard their complaints against Himself! It is as a remedy for their paranoia that they will receive a revelation. This is God’s reaction to their negativity. The Lord is saving them in this Exodus, but because of their negativity they are going sour. The Lord’s reaction is that he will not only save, but will add revelation of his glory, providing a sort of special out-of-body experience, so that they might know the glory.

Verses 4–5:

Preceding this direct answer of Moses and Aaron in verses 6–7, vv 4–5 present a divine intervention. It does not quite fit into the context, and commentators have argued that it belongs to an earlier source, an earlier tradition in which this whole incident is a test of Israel which Israel fails. But whatever the earlier traditions, the Redactor, Rabbenu, who wrote Exodus 16, has placed it in the text here, creating the story which we can now read.

It doesn’t quite fit, because to start with the complaint was directed at

Moses and Aaron, not at God; secondly, because here God is shown speaking to Moses alone, apparently not noticing Aaron; thirdly, because the mention of a „test“ proves to be irrelevant to the rest of the story; and fourthly, because all the talk of „day by day“ and the mention of a „sixth day“ are not linked to the complaint God is supposed to be reacting to. On the other hand, by putting these verses here, the Redactor/Author has prepared the reader for the whole text as he has constructed it, by outlining here the following three sections, with „food from heaven“ corresponding to vv 9–15, the „day by day“ corresponding to vv 16–21, and the „sixth day“ corresponding to vv 22–31.

So much for diachronic concerns. But how does the story read in its present form? We see God breaking in here unasked. God is presented to us here as though He were out of control. He does not answer the people. He breaks in, as if he were speaking in Moses' ear. And He is so anxious to please, almost like an indulgent mother. She interjects in a panic because she is afraid that the father, Moses, might react negatively to these insults. „Look, there is going to be a great meal, and you are all going to have a great time, because I am taking care of you.“ This too is intolerably sweet. But one is drawn to understand that the „thing“ the story is about is not the sinfulness of Israel (which seems not to be an issue at all), or even the anxiety, or paranoia of Israel; rather it is about the pro-active love of God. It is about the gift of God. Verse 8 appears to be a repetitive and ungrammatical gloss which focuses on the insight that this is gift of God, not conflict between Israel and its leaders.

Verses 9–10:

Is the story about manna? Is that the gift? Well manna has not been mentioned as yet. And even in verses 9–10 we find that the gift of God is still not manna, but rather glory.

Verses 11–12:

Of course it will eventually be a gift of quail and manna, but it begins by being a gift of faith: Israel must first know that it is about God's gift, and then it can receive material expressions of this gift. Then God goes on to point out that even when they behold the glory they won't believe. Belief will come through eating.

Verses 13–15:

Their eating brings them faith, and leads them to puzzle about it, and to ask a theological question (*fides quaerens intellectum*). The answer is given by Moses, who now exercises his „*magisterium ordinarium*“!

As we shall see in the next segments of the text, they still did not fully know the gift of God. In the gospel of John, chapter 6, Jesus interprets this text directly, and He uses a slightly different vocabulary to say that

they believed because their bellies were full, but not because they had seen signs. The Fathers in the desert all died because they failed to see the manna as a sign of glory: they failed to see the *res* as signifying „other things“. As Jesus put it, they thought it was Moses giving them bread, whereas it was God. And somehow they failed to know (*yada'*) that. Or, to use Paul's expression, they had eaten the heavenly bread unworthily, just as we can eat the Eucharist unworthily (1 Cor 11:27). Jesus has given his disciples another chance – we also receive a bread from heaven, and we also have the chance to believe in the gift of God and live for ever, or else to eat unworthily and die.

But the text of Ex 16 doesn't mention any of all that. It is *not* about sin, or Israel, or ourselves. It is about the gift of God as known in the appearance of glory, in nourishment, in the wonder of manna.

Verses 16–21:

The next three sections of this story are little torah vignettes. Each begins with Moses reporting a divine instruction about how Israel should deal with this manna, and continues with an account of how the instruction is carried out in fact. We will expect Israel to not follow orders very well, and they don't. We will also expect Israel to be punished for doing so, but they are not. That is not what happens.

Of course one tends to be happy to see Moses furious in v 20. But then, to report a subjective reaction, I am disappointed to find no punishment in v 21. This is the reaction of Jonah at Nineveh: I am angry when God is good. In so far as one feels that way, one must recognize that one does not yet know the gift of God. In so far as one feels that way, one eats the heavenly bread unworthily.

Verses 22–31:

There follows the instruction about manna on the Sabbath in vv 22–28. Good: in v 28, finally, God gets annoyed. But then the people simply conform to the rule in v 30, and they have a wonderful time like children with their candies in v 31 ...

Verses 32–34:

Finally we see Aaron back in the story as we get back to the Priestly Writer, and we realize that the events are being recalled from a perspective of hundreds of years later. There is a jar before the Holy of Holies which reminds Israel of that ancient experience of manna. When the Priestly Writer actually wrote this story, the Temple was gone, and the Holy of Holies, and most likely the memorial jar itself had likewise disappeared. It is just a memory. The biblical text recalls that jar which was a memorial of the experience of manna. The text invites its readers to relive that experience, and to open themselves to knowledge of the gift of God.

So if we return to the hard question with we began, namely what real

thing is this text about, we can point toward an answer by saying that it is about an object which signifies and causes belief in the unbearably sweet gift of God. Only by reading the text attentively can we hope to know what its author knew.

3. The third principle which I would like to consider at this point reads as follows: *The meaning of a literary text cannot be expressed by any abstract paraphrase.*

In German there is a good word which I often use in English as a technical word because it is so useful. I mean the word *Tendenz*. One can ask about the *Tendenz* of a story, and often there is one. Unfortunately the normal English translation for *Tendenz* is often „point“. One speaks of „the point of a story.“ More falsely still, one can suggest that the „whole point“ of a story is this or that lesson, expressed as an abstract paraphrase.

What is the whole point of this manna story? A Marxist might reveal his bias by discovering that the whole point of the story is in the power relations between the people and their leaders; a feminists might suggest an alternative point, by pointing to the total absence of women in this story; a Protestant would hit closer to home by noting the faith theme; and a Catholic might fasten on the memorial jar as a foreshadowing of sacramental signs. There would be some truth in all these observations, but still our third principle would be correct in repudiating any affirmation which was formulated as some abstract summary or some doctrine or teaching which would be „the whole point“ of the story. The third principle would suggest that, whereas it is most essential to use all means to discover the thing that a story is about, and whereas it may be helpful to indicate a *Tendenz* in some stories, still any attempt to state the meaning of a story in any abstract paraphrase is going to be simply false.

This principle has been most powerfully argued by Cleanth Brooks in a book published in 1947 in which he shows that paraphrase is the enemy of literature, in that it focusses, not on the literary structure and materials, but rather on an external scaffolding which we attach to it¹⁴. From another angle it has been argued in a very often cited article by Wimsatt and Beardsley in 1954, that to look for any authorial intention *behind* the text is to pursue what they called the „intentional fallacy.“¹⁵

The principle becomes very clear if one thinks of a song. Take, for example, a national anthem such as *La Marseillaise*, or perhaps the American national anthem, „The Star Spangled Banner“. If one were to say that „the whole point“ of „The Star Spangled Banner“ is that one should be

¹⁴ Cf. *Cleanth Brooks*, *The Well Wrought Urn. Studies in the Structure of Poetry*. New York and London 1947.

¹⁵ Cf. *W. K. Wimsatt and M. C. Beardsley*, „The Intentional Fallacy“, in *W. K. Wimsatt, The Verbal Icon: Studies in the Meaning of Poetry*. Lexington 1954, 2–18.

proud of one's flag, and proud of one's nation, or if one were to resumé the contents of each of the verses, that would be a radically inadequate statement about the meaning of that national anthem. It would be an abstract paraphrase, which necessarily leaves out the images, the sound of the words, the sound of the music, the appropriate tone of the voice, and the unity which lies behind all of that. If one heard Paul Robeson sing „The Spangled Banner“ at the inauguration of President Kennedy, and hears it again while watching Kennedy's funeral procession, or if one hears the Olympic orchestra play it as the flags unfurl and the athletes stand up with their medals on their chests, that is when one knows the whole point of The Star Spangled Banner.

Similarly one knows the whole point of the Manna story when one's eyes fill with tears at this affirmation of God's gift to us, and when we feel torn within at our failure to respond to that infinite voice. The whole point of a literary text always includes the power with which it addresses you the reader, and demands a personal and total response from you. Whatever the *Tendenz*, the whole point of a literary text is a personal encounter, in which an author challenges you the reader. When a new cat walks into a cat-filled room, every cat in the room freezes, and every hair on every back stands up, and a meeting occurs. Similarly, when a literary text walks into your mind, your whole soul stands up, and all its parts respond. Any abstract paraphrase of a literary text can only be like putting a stick-drawing of the cat in the room. It is an objectified essence of some kind, but most certainly it is not the whole point!

4. A fourth principle must be invoked at this point, which may be stated as follows: *The meaning of a text cannot be expressed by an historically limited kerygma.*

Many years ago, I had the pleasure of participating in the seminar of the late Professor Gerhard Von Rad in Heidelberg, and of hearing him explain historical-critical method. He did so in terms of asking the three-fold question: who? said what? to whom?

Progress in scholarship would be marked by obtaining an ever more precise answer to each of those questions: who wrote this text? what was the precise historical references of those words as that time? what precise mind set of the original hearers of this text helped shape its tone, form, and content. This kind of progress in scholarship has been brilliantly realized over the past two hundred years. Its product has been a set of refined statements which are an irreversible advance in our understanding of biblical texts.

Still this understanding has proven to be remote from theology, and remote from the needs of the faithful. Remote from theology because theology is defined as faith in search of understanding. It is remote from the needs of theology because the starting point of theology is belief, where-

as the starting point of this historical-critical approach is a *tabula rasa* in search for objectified ideas. That is why a New Testament scholar like the late Norman Perrin, at the University of Chicago, could seriously claim to lead his field in biblical studies, while denouncing faith as illusion or deception, and trumpeting his own atheism. And it is remote from the needs of the faithful because the faithful, whether they are simple sophisticated people, need to find God in their own lives, and in the world of today and tomorrow. If a scholar offers a precise account of the concerns, problems and solutions of a Jewish writer in the first half of the 8th century, or in the end of the 5th, that adds up to nothing more than a history of discarded ideas, ideas which were once important in another religious community. The more precise those ideas, and the more precisely defined the horizons and focus of the historical writers and of the first readers, and the more objectified the presentation of that kerygma, the less it nourishes Christian readers today. This is not because the faithful are lacking in some form of sophistication, but rather the fact is that that form of objective and precise historical discourse, in contrast with literary method, consciously excludes the always subjective, and always timeless, experience of the *tremendum* of God. Such strictly time-bound formulations of a kerygma are remote from literary meaning, and certainly remote from biblical meaning.

How then can we legitimately leap the gap from a past moment of writing to a present moment of reading?

5. The fifth and last principle may now be introduced. It reads as follows: *The meaning of a text will transcend its historical frame in so far as it implies a reader who transcends that limit*¹⁶.

The meaning of texts are often tied to historical realities. For example, we might consider the prophetic books. Each one of them is explicitly tied down to the real historical events circumscribed by the introductory verses. For example:

„The words of Amos, who was among the shepherds of Tekoa, which he saw concerning Israel, in the days of King Uzziah of Juda and in the days of King Jeroboam son of Joash of Israel, during two years before the earthquake.“ (Amos 1:1)

However there are two factors which inevitably and properly break through historical barriers, and cause the meaning of a text to grow over time. The first factor is one which much recent literary theory has focused upon, namely the reader. The second is the thing.

First then the reader. Texts often express implicitly something about

¹⁶ For a useful presentation of essays on reader-response criticism, ed. *J. P. Tomkins* (ed.), *Reader-Response Criticism from Formalism to Post-Structuralism*, Baltimore and London 1980. The Commission declaration cited in note # 1 above, especially uses concepts such as „sens spirituel“ or „sens plénier“ or „actualisation“ to cover most of the ground in this area. What follows here attempts to establish a grounding in hermeneutical concepts, and also an implied control of interpretation established by that grounding.

their readers: they identify, not so much the first readers, but rather the ideal or appropriate readers. And this implicit message itself determines something about the meaning of the texts. For example a travel guide implies a reader who is planning, or participating in, a trip. Other kinds of reader will not find the information they want, and will not be well served with the logic of presentation. Texts dealing with literary or film criticism sometimes, as in the case of newspaper articles, imply a reader who has not read the book or seen the film, whereas other more scholarly texts imply readers who are familiar with the works in question and even familiar with a tradition of scholarly criticism of the works. A very different kind of information is contained in those two kinds of texts, and a very different mode of reading and interpretation is required.

Some texts imply readers who are living in the future. For example those texts which have been put away in time capsules, to be opened and read only some centuries from now, demand an interpretation which both recovers the past as past and highlights its distance from the reader.

The biblical texts, certainly, imply important things about the appropriate reader. First, they are written in Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek. That implies readers who participate in a community which is capable of providing translations, and which has some ideology or faith which motivates their doing so. Moreover many biblical texts, like the Pentateuch, or the book of Isaiah, have been edited and put together over centuries of time, and they have left undisguised the evidence of these centuries. Such texts have meanings which require a certain way of thinking about continuity and analogy in history. All of this implies that the intended reader, the appropriate or ideal reader, of the Bible could well be something like a contemporary Christian who has come to fully understand that „Long ago God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son . . . through whom he also created the worlds . . .“ (Hebrews 1:2–3) And this implication about the reader implies a hermeneutic in the reading which transcends the limits of history.

Secondly, there is the factor of the thing. As was discussed above, interpretation is concerned with the difficult task of defining „the thing“ which is written about¹⁷, and negotiating an illumination of the thing by the text and of the text by the thing. It will not succeed unless the interpreter has some direct knowledge of the thing itself. But the „thing“ is often a reality which changes over time. Thus the thing of which „The Star Spangled Banner“ spoke, or of which „Deutschland über alles“ speaks, is a very complex subjective/objective reality of national history, experience, pride and courage and hope. Over the centuries that reality has gone through changes, through wars, victories and defeats, through ex-

¹⁷ Not the *res* of St. Thomas, but rather the „*res alias*“.

perience both of greatness and of decline, through changes of national horizon and aspiration. Over centuries, depth, complexity, breadth of perspective, and richness of feeling have been added to the thing. A true understanding of the National Anthem today is infinitely more rich than that of the original author or original singers or hearers. The thing itself has changed.

Similarly in the bible, the thing of Ex 16 was not only the manna, which has simply disappeared, but rather it was the gift of God, which has not disappeared. The gift of God has changed over the centuries. Moreover the implied appropriate reader has acquired new knowledge of the thing over the same centuries. As a result, the understanding of a reader today of Ex 16 *should* be different, radically different, from the understanding of the writer and first readers. The ideal reader of Exodus 16 today will understand Ex 16 as speaking of a memory of the intolerable sweetness of God whose gift is known to us in the manna, and in the promised land, and in Jesus and in the Holy Spirit.

Some Examples of the Implied Reader

It will be shown in what follows how the Church for centuries has read in this way, even though it did not possess contemporary categories of hermeneutical theory to explain its method.

The Bible

The epilogue in Ex 16:35 pointed out that the gift of manna terminated forty years later, when they finally entered the promised land. At that point the gift of God changed form, as was pointed out in Joshua 5:12:

And the manna ceased from the following day, upon their eating the produce of the land. And no more was there manna for the sons of Israel. This year they fed from the crops of the land of Canaan.

From then, for over 700 years, until Jerusalem was destroyed and the people deported in 587 B. C., the gift of God was expressed in the wealth of the land of Canaan. Instead of daily manna, God came to them in the form of daily bread, under the dispensation of the law of Deuteronomy. It is easy to imagine how a complete spirituality, and practise of faith, would develop on the basis of that revelation. Even today many forms of morning prayers and of grace before and after meals express that faith.

When Israel could no longer experience the land as God's gift, Jesus took over that tradition. In John 6 Jesus expressly affirmed that the gift of heavenly food, which carries with it eternal life, was from now on to be received by eating his body and drinking his blood. Jesus gave his body and blood as a new manna, and He similarly told his followers to „do this in memory“ of Him. Jesus is gone as the Temple and manna and its memorial jar are gone. When at the Eucharist Christians recall his gift of body and blood, they know it as heavenly food – it is the same „thing“,

the same „res“, which had been given to the Jews as the gift of God. In this, however, there is a difference: this is not just a memory of the past, because it is today that Jesus sits at the right hand of the Father, and in the future He will return in full glory.

The Liturgy

The liturgy has always expressed the „thing“ of Ex 16 in its own ways. The most pervasive example is the daily praying of the „Our Father“. In it, the phrase „Give us this day our daily bread“ literally recalls the gift of God as sustaining bread, and qualifies it as „daily“, a word which evokes the daily distribution of manna, but equally well suggests the regular support of nourishment from the land of Canaan. The Greek word translated by „daily“ (*epiousios*) is ambiguous: it could also be translated as „tomorrow“, i. e. the bread of the last day, or as „supersubstantial“, i. e. supernal. This one phrase, in the prayer which Jesus taught us to say, contains the whole content of this essay.

Many other liturgical texts could be cited. One example is the Feast of Corpus Christi, for which the Roman Lectionary has us read the above texts together, and adds the hymn of Thomas Aquinas „Pange Lingua“, in which the gift of God („nobis datus“) is specifically described in terms of a change of the „res“ („et antiquum documentum novo cedat ritui“), and also the extraordinarily beautiful „Panis Angelicus“ celebrating the bread of Angels.

We might very briefly consider three other ways in which this „thing“ was known and believed in the Church.

The Holy Grail

The legend may be read in the 13th century *Queste del Saint Grail*, which was written in Medieval French, and which has been continuously republished in English translations right up to today¹⁸. This form of the legend originated in Celtic tribes in Brittany, Ireland, Wales and Cornwall, and eventually were connected with the stories about King Arthur whose popularity in the twelfth century was extraordinary. According to this account, Jesus Christ presided at the last Supper, and gave his followers the bread of heaven. This power was carried in the Holy Grail, i. e. the vessel in which the paschal lamb was eaten, the bread was broken, and the wine was drunk. Joseph of Arimathea came to England with 4000 followers, carrying the Grail with him, and he established a second holy banquet, the Table of the Holy Grail, where many miracles occurred. Three or four centuries later, Merlin established a third sacred banquet, the fabulous Round Table, whose knights under king Arthur

¹⁸ Cf. for example, *P. M. Matarasso* (transl.), *The Quest of the Holy Grail*, London 1969.

would set out to find the Holy Grail. The point of finding it was to receive its revelation. Eventually a chosen knight, a virgin, Galahad would succeed in finding the Holy Grail. He would be dressed, the legend tells us, in red armour like the flames of the Spirit at Pentecost through which Jesus visited his disciples „comforting them and banishing their misgivings.“

This story expresses a belief in the same „thing“ which Ex 16 wrote about, i. e. some historical objects now lost to us: the Grail itself, and three special tables (banquets) associated with it, through which we might receive a gift of God in continuity with the bread of heaven. What is newly connected in this story to the gift of God was, first a demand for sexual purity, and second the explicit mention of the Spirit of Pentecost. It is a tale powerfully told and its influence in Holland, France and England throughout the medieval period and up to the sixteenth century can hardly be imagined – one would have to compare it to the influence in contemporary Europe of American rock and roll. In the English-speaking world, the faith themes of the Grail story were reorganized and reinforced through the classical works of Thomas Mallory in the 15th century and Alfred Tennyson in the 19th.

The Holy Spirit

Thomas Aquinas took up the theme of the gift of God within the context of Trinitarian theology. He argued in Quæstio 1, Article 10 of the *Summa Theologica*, that every gift involves both an object which is given, and also an expression of love, which consists of the person, at least partially, giving himself or herself with the gift. A gift is always a gift of self. In the Trinity, it is *the Spirit* which is precisely the love, or gift, of the Father and the son and which is a divine Person. In this perspective we must understand the Manna, and the land of Canaan, and the Eucharist, when we appropriate them through memory and faith, as a receiving of the Holy Spirit, by whom we cry „Abba, Father.“

The notion of Transubstantiation

The theme of heavenly bread was also taken up by the deliberations of the Council of Trent concerning the Eucharist. The Council was concerned with „things“, and particularly with „things“, which signified „other things“. It used the word „substance“ to indicate that the things were real, and not just metaphors or signs¹⁹. And it used the word „transubstantiation“ to signify that the bread and wine were truly changed into the real thing of the gift of God in Christ’s body and blood. I would suggest that,

¹⁹ Cf. *J. Wohlmut*, *Realpräsenz und Transsubstantiation im Konzil von Trient*, Bern and Frankfurt 1992, 2 vols.

for Catholics, it was mostly this belief which carried with it the „thing“ of Ex 16 during the centuries from Trent until the Second Vatican Council. Those who are over 40 years of age will remember that powerful moment in the middle of each celebration of Mass, when the whole Church was silent, even the coughing ceased, only the bell and the sacred words of consecration were heard, and suddenly God was in our midst. But after the liturgical changes of Vatican Two, the intrusion of God became more diffused, and the Mass began to be focused more on aspects of the human community. Something was gained. But Ex 16 may have been lost.

Conclusion

If one looks around at beliefs and practices today, it is not easy to point out the material thing which helps recall the revelation of Ex 16. In fact the posture of many today would seem rather to be that of the „whole congregation of the children of Israel“ who turned on their leadership, turned against Moses and Aaron, and accused them of wanting to kill all of them in this desert. Ex 16 reminds us, as it did them, that it was not Moses and Aaron, and it is not our spiritual leaders, who have brought the Church to the hunger it feels. It is not they who control the life of Christian communities. The kingdom of God is among us.

Ex 16 invites trust that once again God will break in because of complaints and paranoia, and will once again display His pro-active love and gift. Those who read the Bible have special obligations. They should be the first to „draw near before the Lord“ and look to the desert and behold the glory of the Lord. They should be the first to find the manna for today among the dry sands of traditions.