

# READING THE BIBLE: AN INTERDISCIPLINARY EXPERIENCE

## AN INTRODUCTORY COMMENT:

### INTEGRATION, CULTURAL AND ACADEMIC

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There are, W.V. Quine wisecracked, two kinds of people who go in for philosophy; those interested in the history of philosophy and those interested in philosophy. The joke, of course, was thought to be told on the first kind by the second. It is not so easy for integrative studies, which admit of *no persona non integranda*, to dispose of the tradition-conscious humanist! And so the three of us were allowed to offer our session at Bowling Green on canon and criticism in the Biblical tradition, and to spread our Firm Belief that Bible study first raised, and still interestingly raises, the issue of integrative studies in the broader context of the integration of society, culture, and personality, if we did not, and do not, feel the need to offer a theory of Bible studies, it is probably because we find that they are integrative in practice. "There is no past so long as books shall live," it is written on the wall of the Yale Archives.... Historically, the need to define what texts shall be read and how they shall be interpreted has given rise to *interpretive communities* -- People of the Book, sacred and scientific cults and subcultures -- who describe, prescribe, proscribe, circumscribe their scriptures by writing about writing.

In this light, attempts to integrate the many cultures of the academy (it was an optimist who thought there were only two!) can be seen as part of the long history of *letters* that begins with the introduction of writing. Literacy may be defined as culture becoming conscious of itself. That culture can be *accumulated* is expressed in the myths of its *theft* found among many preliterate peoples. With the advent of writing, culture becomes even more consciously acquisitive, more imperialistic. (Gaur, 1984:16-17) Now it is not bits of culture, but the sacred tablets, which are stolen; the Anzu-bird stops the Sumerian cosmos dead in its tracks by flying off with the Tablet of Destiny (Pritchard, 1969:111-13), while the sex goddess Inanna more subtly charms Enki, "under the influence," into parting

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with the software that runs the machinery of city life: the list of a hundred-odd "divine decrees" stolen by Inanna has been called the "first recorded attempt at culture analysis." (Kramer, 1963:116, 160-2) The enabling and controlling force of writing, and its sacred force "in the right hands," are the real subject of these stories. Our scholarly stories continue the tradition, stealing from the Tree of Knowledge of another Near Eastern text, exploring the role of its study in Western thought and letters. While we're at it, let's make the relevance of Bible studies for integrative studies clearer by also stealing the ideas of one modern anthropologist, Jack Goody.

Goody cogently states the case for studying the transition to writing as a precondition for the understanding of the scientific enterprise in his essay *The domestication of the savage mind*. His third chapter, "Literacy, criticism and the growth of knowledge," is in the well-breathed tradition of Henry Sumner Maine, with, no doubt, a glance askance at the breathless pronouncements of McLuhan and Derrida. Goody argues that if we are to understand the emergence of science from pre-scientific thought, we need to look at the fact that "major steps in the development of what we now call 'science' followed the introduction of major changes in the channels of communication in Babylonia (writing), in Ancient Greece (the alphabet), and in Western Europe (printing)." (Goody, 1977:51) Goody's essay is mainly concerned with the first two of these changes. He argues:

Writing, and more especially alphabetic literacy, made it possible to scrutinize discourse in a different kind of way by giving oral communication a semi-permanent form; this scrutiny favored the increase in scope of critical activity, and hence of rationality, scepticism, and logic... It increased the potentialities of criticism because writing laid out discourse before one's eyes in a different kind of way; at the same time it increased the potentiality for cumulative knowledge, especially knowledge of an abstract kind, because it changed the nature of communication beyond that of face-to-face contact as well as the system for the storage of information; in this way, a wider range of 'thought' was made available to the reading public. No longer did the problem of memory storage dominate man's intellectual life; the human mind was freed to study static 'text' (rather than be limited by participation in the dynamic 'utterance'), a process that enabled man to stand back from his creation and examine it in a more abstract, generalised, and 'rational' way. By making it possible to scan the communications of mankind over a much wider time span, *literacy encouraged, at the very same time, criticism and commentary on the one hand and the orthodoxy of the book on the other* (our italics). (1977:37)

Here we are mindful of The Book, and indeed Goody's third chapter takes as its motto "The Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us" (John 1. 14). Codices and Books are the material outcome of the kind of writing one might call 'exponential,' which Goody discusses in his remaining chapters; lists, formulae, recipes, prescriptions, and so forth. (Both criticism and canon are exponential in the sense that they are 'writing about writing.')

Goody's insistence that canon and criticism are alternating, conflicting, but mutually necessary possibilities is perhaps the original and central insight of his essay. It enables him to see that the Sumerian lists of kings, professions, cultural artifacts, etc., manifest the beginnings both of "hierarchy and canonization" (1977:97) and of the sort of grammatical and critical grouping which retains the potential for text-criticism and historical scholarship. After all, the Sumerian king lists are also the beginning of recorded history.

Goody's essay includes a running commentary on the Kuhn-Popper debate over the 'closed' or 'open' nature of the scientific enterprise. We shall not attempt to summarize this part of his argument. It may well have been prompted by Kuhn's insistence that agreement on an authoritative text is characteristic of full-fledged "normal science", with criticism entering only in periods of crisis. Kuhn's own revision of his earlier positions, in response to close textual analysis of the ways in which he employs the key term *paradigm*, is wittily adduced by Goody as further evidence of the role of the *written record* in the growth of scientific awareness! (1977:48-50)

That the link between textual interpretation and the philosophy of science was not discovered yesterday is obvious from our use, in the first and third of our essays (those on canon and on Origen) of the older but currently fashionable concept of "the interpretive community." "The community of interpretation" was Josiah Royce's idealistic adaptation, in *The problem of Christianity*, of ideas put forward half a century earlier by the pragmatist Charles Peirce. Among Royce's students, in the 1913-14 Harvard seminar where these ideas were revived, was the young T.S. Eliot, through whose critical writings they began to make their way into literary criticism. (Michael) Peirce himself had thought of them more or less as a rehabilitation of the scholastic epistemology on which modern philosophers of science, beginning with Descartes, had turned their backs:

...And what do we mean by the real? It is a conception which we must first have had when we discovered that there was an unreal, an illusion; that is, when we first corrected ourselves. Now, the distinction for which alone this fact logically called, was between [a being] relative to private inward determinations, to the determinations beginning with idiosyncrasy, and [a being] such as would stand in the long run. The real, then, is that which, sooner

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or later, information and reasoning would finally result in, and which is therefore independent of the vagaries of me and you. Thus the very origin of the conception of reality shows that this conception essentially involves the notion of a COMMUNITY, without definite limits, and capable of a definite increase of knowledge. And so those two series of cognition – the real and the unreal – consist of those which, at a time sufficiently future, the community will always continue to reaffirm; and of those which, under the same conditions, will ever after be denied. (Peirce, 1934:186-7)

Peirce's ideal of a community "without definite limits", which will know the real "at a time sufficiently future," is of a future-oriented invisible and Triumphant Church of Integrated Studies (with no suggestion of eventual eschatological Disintegration) which would, one imagines, give little comfort to William Bennet. It bears a distinct resemblance to Origen's vision, in his Commentary on Matthew, of the disciples under the tutelage of the Holy Ghost still as a little child! Origen, writing before a firm rule of faith had been cast in writing, was much concerned to preserve the scholar's freedom of interpretation as over against the church hierarchy. This line goes through Peirce to Karl Popper's 'critical rationalism.' (Bernstein, 1971:191)

Royce, on the other hand, seems to want to establish the community of interpretation as a conservative moral *presence*. He rejects the classical ideal of culture as self-cultivation (wrongly extending it to the Jews) in favor of the ideal of loyalty which, in his view characterizes Christianity. Divested of moralizing, this contrast seems to parallel Kuhn's reply to Popper that the critical spirit of the pre-Socratics, "the tradition of claims, counterclaims, and debates over fundamentals which ... have characterized philosophy and much of social science ever since," has nothing in common with science, the transition to which is marked by "the abandonment of critical discourse." (cited in Goody, 1977:47) Does Kuhn's own abandonment of the history of science perhaps (sadly) reflect a pessimism that it has nothing to do with science?

With the mention of self-cultivation, we touch on the broader subject of Stephen Gottlieb's paper; the way in which the interpreter's self and the text, in his words, "configure each other." The establishment of an authoritative text constrains and limits the interpreter. How misapplied is the term "subjective" to the pious reader's search for allegory! Precisely in the most apparently whimsical of his interpretations he is, in Kuhn's words, "puzzle-solving," discovering the orthodox meaning of a particular phrase or text with the aid of the Holy Spirit which in good Aristotelian fashion, never contradicts itself. In the process the puzzle-bit that is *himself* takes its place among the rest. What we might call "textual idealism" (the search for *hidden* meaning) is as inevitable in his interpretive community as the Victorian doctor's "medical materialism" in his.

One listener to the Herbert and Origen papers at the AIS conference asked whether we weren't making them sound like nice versions of our selves? The Peircean answer to that would be that such a proceeding need not be "subjective"; that good reading of Good Books may be constitutive of self. "Christian allegory," John Freccero writes, "is identical with the phenomenology of confession, for both involve a comprehension of the self in history within a retrospective literary structure" (Freccero, 1986:120). But this is also an allegory which "prefigures" the future, and as such is also forward-looking, prospective. (Here again we encounter alternative and usually conflicting ways of achieving personal or societal identity - retrospective or prospective?, – which may shed light on the Peirce/Royce and Popper/Kuhn polarities. Mary Savage's discussion of Sanders' and Schussler Fiorenza's articulations of the ways in which canon and community configure each other offers some interesting parallels.)

The ultimate source of Peirce's idea that "the word or sign that man uses is the man himself" is of course the medieval notion that the *lectio divina*, if successful, is (as a reception of the Logos) also an *imitatio Christi*, one more small step toward perfect humanity. The concluding section "Man: A Sign" of Peirce's 1868 paper ends with the lines by the medieval moralist who wrote *Measure for Measure* reminding "proud man" of his "glassy essence." In this "mirroring" perspective, the scholar, as a creature of writing, is untrue to himself if he does not believe, as we do, in some sort of cultural progression (not to be confused with linear progress!) of which he too is a part.

Of course such glib conjuring up of our "higher selves" raises all the uneasy questions about the societal role of the interpreter. "Specialist literacy," Goody writes, "may lead to a turning inwards which confines literate communication to the select few and which therefore raises problems about the cultural status of its products, and the relation between the 'two cultures,' the oral and the literate." Mary Savage directly confronts the exclusionary bias of 'mature' canon, and the inclusionary agenda of its "outsider" critics, in her paper. Origen and Herbert, as preachers and teachers of the Word to the unlettered, uninitiated, and potentially heretical, had reassuring answers at hand to the question "How dare I presume to teach?" The great divide that, we used to think, separated these logocrats from us, was the widely presumed and asserted literacy of *our* students, whom we "welcomed to the republic of learning." Yet of late most of us, whatever our subject, find that we too somehow seem to have ended up teaching reading and writing to cultural outsiders! Paradoxically, the modern presumption of universal literacy, of belonging to a post-Protestant People of the Book, may have encouraged a kind of interpretive exhibitionism – from which, however, those of us who do not teach at the likes of Yale (and even some, like Goody, who do) are spared. But the story of Jonah is forever there to remind us that, however the

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actor turned director seeks to twist the script and "open it up for the screen," the Original Author's straight word will forever play well in the upstart interpretive community of Nineveh U., just down the road.

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