

ETHICS, BIBLE, READING AS IF

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"We must read *as if*." —George Steiner

READING AS IF

We begin with two stories. The first we unabashedly borrow from Jonathan Magonet's *A Rabbi's Bible*. Magonet recounts the story of his encounter with a group of young Czech Jews attending a conference near Edinburgh in 1968 at the moment when Russian Army troops were marching on Prague. In the unnerving days immediately following the invasion, these young Jews, now refugees, stayed on to participate in an organized Bible study. Though never having studied the Bible before, they displayed a keen eye for textual nuances and a remarkable feel for the Bible's underlying concerns. When asked how they came to be such good readers they explained:

"It's easy . . . You see, in Czechoslovakia, when you read a newspaper, first you read what is written there. Then you say to yourself, 'If that is what they have written, what really happened? And if that is what really happened, what are they trying to make us think? And if that is what they are trying to make us think, what should we be thinking instead?' You learn to read between the lines and behind the lines. You learn to read a newspaper as if your life depended upon understanding it—because it does!" (25)

The second story, equally true, took place in an Interpretation to the Bible class (the basic introductory Bible course) at Perkins School of Theology. The class was studying the institution of the *lex talionis* in Genesis 9:5–6 and Jesus' variation on the law in Matthew 5:38–39. The question was posed: If the *lex talionis* were a law meant to constrain violence, was Jesus' admonition to turn the other cheek meant to function the same way? An affirmative answer led to the next question: Does "turning the other cheek" actually constrain violence? One after another some twenty students agreed, "Yes, by turning the other cheek, one refuses to respond to violence with more violence and thus violence is constrained." This refrain echoed around the room until finally a woman, who had in her C.P.E. training dealt with many battered women, spoke up and said, "You people are so naive. This text has killed more women than any of us here would care to count."

We juxtapose these stories in order to frame a number of concerns about ethics, Bible, and reading taken up in this volume. To begin, we offer three observations about reading. First, sometimes being a good reader of the Bible

has very little to do with specialized training and a lot more to do with an informed understanding of the world. "Ordinary readers," to use Daniel Patten's felicitous phrase, despite the lack of formal schooling, nevertheless bring powerful interpretive skill and rich experience to the reading of texts, biblical or otherwise. "Tacit knowledge" proves to be every bit as credible and important as the technical skills graduate programs privilege. Scholars should learn to pay greater attention to such readers and their readings.

Second, competent reading has to do with more than the application of knowledge (be it technical or tacit in nature) because the stakes can be high—with consequences for life and limb. To a great degree, reading well is a matter of responding to and being responsible for the world the text imaginatively projects and the concrete world wherein reading, often done under duress, takes place. Our ability to maintain focus on both of these worlds, our concern to help others survive, and our skill and cleverness in discerning what is at stake enables us to read "behind the lines" in both a textual and military sense.

Third, the ability to discern (*krinein*) moments of crisis (*krisis*) and to read responsibly in such settings is more likely to happen in community with others than alone. Reading has a collective, corporate character which modern readers have learned to minimize, if not altogether to suppress, under the pressure to privatize experience. The collective nature of the Czech and the Perkins classroom reading experiences is instructive: We read always against a horizon beyond our individual selves and interests. We would do well to remember how we as children first learned to read: by listening to, voicing with, and imitating others. Reading arises first and foremost in relation to some other or others.

At the same time these stories underscore important differences among texts and readings. Not all texts are equally thick or have the capacity to carry us beyond ourselves. Some texts prove less interesting, less compelling while others are more fecund, more disturbing. Texts like the Bible that exercise a hold on a community's imagination and world—in George Steiner's terms texts where readers are apt to encounter "real presence"—often defy ready-made efforts to read past them, not because they articulate a transparent imperative, but for precisely the opposite reason, namely because they are thick, "fraught with background," to use Auerbach's expression. There is too much at stake, too much meaning is possible. While the reading of a newspaper can have immediate life or death implications, few would argue that the Bible, a text to which readers return again and again, is not the more important—and indeed persistently troubling—text for the fundamental way it shapes Western ethos and ethics. The Bible has long provided the dominant meta- and micro-narratives of modern Western culture. Aesthetically, ethically, religiously, it continues to speak persuasively to us about the human condition and the mystery of the divine.

In this respect, the Bible lives on as a resource, albeit a mixed one, by which people make and unmake the worlds in which they live. To use Elaine Scarry's observations about material objects, the Bible serves a dual function as both tool and weapon. What differentiates the Bible-as-tool from the Bible-as-weapon is not so much the textual object *per se* as the surface on which the text is put to work:

What we call a 'weapon' when it acts on a sentient surface we call a 'tool' when it acts on a nonsentient surface. The hand that pounds the human face is a weapon and the hand that pounds the dough for bread or clay for a bowl is a tool. The knife that enters a cow or the horse is a weapon and the knife that cuts through the no longer alive meat at dinner is a tool. The ax that cuts through the back of a wolf is a weapon and the ax that cuts through a tree is a tool. The hammer that hammers a man to a cross is a weapon and the hammer used to construct the cross itself is a tool. (173)

Everything depends then upon what surface—or, in the case of Matthew's text, whose face—is struck. The Bible is a text that cultivates the best in us, *and* it is a text that exposes the worst side of our humanity. "The Bible, of all books, is the most dangerous one, the one endowed with the power to kill," Mieke Bal reminds us (1991:14). Even the most seemingly benign passages, meant to make their readers and hearers better people, meant to make the world a better place, have jagged edges which snag and injure. "But I say to you, Do not resist one who is evil. But if any one strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also" (Matt 5:39). "This text has killed more women than any of us here would care to count." Words of experience from behind the lines.

While hopefully Czech Jews will never have to face the threat of Soviet tanks again, many more of us, statistics reveal, are likely to know first- or second-hand forms of social and domestic violence inspired by someone's reading of the Bible. The two stories should remind those of us who read the Bible professionally that reading the Bible *as if* lives depended on it is something that many readers do routinely. Indeed, for some this is the default reading condition. Here again we are invited to learn from our students, our parishioners, or departmental colleagues even. "[S]ometimes we just have to learn how to read [the Bible]" *as if* lives depended upon understanding it (Magonet: 25, italics ours)—not just our own lives but other lives as well. "We must read *as if*, Steiner tells us (229). To read the Bible with such intention means that we must face up to our habits of reading that have been shaped by the ethos and ethics of ordinary and academic life.

But homiletics aside, and in practical terms, how does reading *as if* life or death hangs in the balance help us better understand, represent, and cope with the host of historical and interpretive problems that the Bible presents? How does reading *as if* enable more responsible readings and readers? These are important questions for those of us concerned with teaching critical read-

ing: How do we relate the ethical to the critical?¹ The Bible offers many texts with discernible moral content, some explicitly with life or death implications. Numerous books on New Testament, Old Testament, or Biblical Ethics catalogue such texts, often arranged topically for convenience of comprehension and quick retrieval. One could single out Matthew 5 and 6 with their extravagant moral injunctions, or Genesis 22 and Abraham's controversial model of "faithfulness" in the near-murder of Isaac, or a host of other examples. But how does "as if life or death" reading, if this is more than hyperbole, help explain the literary appropriation of M or Q source material, or identify the social and political forces at work behind the Priestly account of creation? How do ethical concerns advance literary and historical understandings? Perhaps this puts the question the wrong way. Rather, the question asked should be: How does the literary appropriation of the M source material help us better to understand the matters of ultimate importance at stake in reading Matthew's Gospel? How do the historical forces at work that give rise to the Priestly account of creation speak to the question of human survival and justice? In other words, to turn matters around, how do literary and historical questions advance our understanding of what's at stake ethically in the reading and writing of the Bible?

In asking the question about critical reading and ethics this way, we take our lead from the Jewish philosopher Emmanuel Levinas who has argued quite powerfully that Western philosophy habitually subordinates ethical to ontological concerns: Epistemology has traditionally served as the horizon against which ethics is to be thought. By contrast, Levinas recalibrates matters in such a way as to ground knowing in an original experience of obligation: obligation to the "other" orients knowledge; ethics serves as the horizon for making sense of criticism. In arguing for "ethics as first philosophy" (1989), Levinas claims ethics is not "a doctrine about the moral norms, principles, obligations or interdictions that rule human behavior" but a radical obligation which precedes and infuses every act of critical thinking, one that outstrips our every effort to get an exhaustive conceptual hold on it. Traditional deontic and ontic approaches from Aristotle to Kant give way to the pragmatic or, in terms of our two stories, technical knowledge yields to a tacit understanding that is not "informational" exclusively. Ethics proceeds not from theoretical categories but from the sentient experience of the *face* of the other. Levinas says,

The approach to the face is the most basic mode of responsibility. As such, the face of the other is not in front of me but above me . . . In the relation to the face I am exposed as a usurper of the place of the other. (Levinas, 1986:23–24; cited in Newton: 13)

¹ Schüssler Fiorenza's 1988 SBL Presidential Address has given this question important public visibility. Her call for a "paradigm shift" as a "hermeneutic-evaluative discursive practice" (16) offers one way of conceiving the task.

From Levinas's Jewish-phenomenological perspective, the primary experience of everyday life is the sober and exacting fact that we are obligated—before we think, before we critically analyze or conceptualize—to something/someone other than ourselves. And it is in the face of the Other (the one who escapes any horizon or conceptual scheme I might wish to impose upon it) that the experience of this obligation to be responsible for the other is concretely and practically discovered. In the face, the look of the eye, we meet responsibility. This “other way” of putting things is not a simple reversal of practical before theoretical concerns, or a substituting of some powerful affective experience for rigorous thinking; it is a much more extreme reformulation of the ethical. Adriaan Peperzak summarizes Levinas's position this way:

[E]thics as first philosophy' points to something more radical and originary: it indicates a 'point' where the ethical and the theoretical cannot yet be opposed—or even distinguished—a 'point' where the opposition between 'is' and 'ought' is neither valid nor even possible. (xi)

Thinking and acting are thus reoriented in a way that enables us to imagine ethical obligation as both pretheoretical and prepragmatic. “The face obligates me; it reveals that I am already devoted to the one who looks at me; I am responsible for you.” For Levinas ethics is not the name for some special critical or practical moment but a disruptive summons to an originary responsibility for the other that demands my saying “Here I am.” Pre-reflective, this obligation is in every way outrageous and excessive because it comes upon me not of my own choosing.

For those who identify biblical ethics with a certain biblical content, Levinas's position is perturbing. *The very act of reading is an obligated act.* But how is this so? Even if the Bible is sometimes read in a situation of crisis where this summons to responsibility may be heard, isn't it just as true that many other times, in fact most of the time, such a summons is not so clear and commanding? After all, what conceivable “obligation” speaks to us in the listing of Adam's generations in Genesis 5 or the visions of the plague of demonic locusts in Revelation 9? And even if Matt 5:38–39 and the Church's inconsiderate preaching of it may have encouraged some women to stay in abusive relationships “even unto death,” isn't it just as true that many other readers have found this text to provide a vital norm for Christian living, and the world is the better for it? By suggesting a different relationship of ethics to critical reading, don't we risk wholesaling important differences by mixing prescriptive with descriptive concerns? Are we not undervaluing, if not blurring, essential distinctions—between content and form, analysis and application, history and hermeneutics, description and prescription, epistemology and ethics—distinctions that modern biblical scholarship has labored hard to establish and preserve? J. Hillis Miller (1) summarizes the worry this way: “Should not reading be thought of as primarily cognitive, as a matter of

understanding what is said, after which some ethical use of that reading might or might not be made, but in any case as something extraneous to the primary act of reading as such?"

In midrashic, somewhat parabolic, fashion our leading stories complicate the binary or polar thinking that would cleanly distinguish the ethical from the critical, the analytical from the applied, weapon from tool—the kind of thinking that comfortably relies upon pure distinctions and categories. Levinas's provocation is that we think about the Bible and about biblical criticism as an ethics of reading and writing *otherwise*:

I am convinced that the Bible is the outcome of prophecies and that in it ethical testimony—I do not say 'experience'—is deposited in the form of writings. But this perfectly agrees with the humanity of man [*sic*] as responsibility for the Other. . . . That modern historical criticism has shown that the Bible had multiple authors spread over very different periods, contrary to what was believed several centuries ago, changes nothing of this conviction, to the contrary. For I have always thought that the great miracle of the Bible lies not at all in the common literary origin, but inversely, *in the confluence of different literatures toward the same essential content*. The miracle of the confluence is greater than the miracle of the unique author. Now the pole of *this confluence is the ethical*, which incontestably dominates this whole book. (1985:115, emphasis ours)

The Bible as ethical confluence explains something important about its literary and historical development. Now *this* is an *other* way to proceed.

In short, our lead stories and our foray into Levinas's thought invite us as scholarly readers to reimagine differently the relationship of ethic, ethos, and techné. They picture for us the density and situatedness of our reading and writing experiences, be they of the newspaper or the Bible, of reading's life-setting and implications, and of responsibility and where it originates and takes us. What would happen, for example (and assuming it possible), were we to refuse to distinguish "ethical reading of Bible" from "critical reading of Bible"? What would it mean were we to suggest that the most astounding feature of the Bible is that, from the start, it is obligated writing and that ethical confluence gives unity to its many literary and historical differences? Furthermore, what if we were to imagine *critical reading* of the Bible from the start as obligated reading in Levinas's sense? How would it be to reorient the relationship of the lived to the learned, the practical to the analytic, the tacit to the technical? To repeat, this would not mean simply inverting standard procedures by putting application ahead of description—that would be still to think of ethics framed against an epistemological horizon. Rather it would mean reading "as if" the ethical and the theoretical were not yet opposed or even distinguished. Such might lead to a wholesale reconsideration of the ethos and ethics of reading and writing the Bible. Reading would then be "an ethical act, a performance, part of the conduct of life, with its own measurable effects and consequent responsibilities" (Miller: 101–2).

Writing and reading as if obliged. We would be brought face to face with reading's Other.

THE BIBLE AND THE FACE OF THE OTHER: "It's *JUST* READING"

Thoughtful readers realize that the critical reading of the Bible as "interested reading" never stands outside of the orbit of ethical concern. As scholars we accept the fact that criticism is accountable to disciplinary rules and expectations. But in what sense is criticism responsible to more than the institution of scholarly discourse? The answer depends upon how we understand the way the Bible signifies. Levinas comments:

The Holy Scriptures do not signify through the dogmatic tale of their supernatural or sacred origin, but through the expression of the face of the other man [*sic*] that they illuminate, before he gives himself a countenance or a pose. It is an expression as irrecusable as are imperious the worries of the everyday world of the historical beings that we are. (1985:117)

What Levinas suggests here is that it is not the mythical, historical or even religious significance of the Bible that is of first importance, but the *Ethical*, the face of the other that we encounter here. When we read the Bible, the Other as face is already present, in the Bible, behind the Bible, in front of the Bible, and forever in the Bible's shadow, signifying. We can read (and write our reading of) the Bible as myth, history, or sacred scripture, but if we have not seen the face of the other we have not understood what we have read. This notion of reading conceives of reading and writing as a perpetual openness to, recognition of, and responsibility to this Other—the otherness of the text itself, the other-ness of its writers, the otherness of its readers, and above all the otherness of those individuals who are caught up in the Bible's signifying power as it is deployed both as weapon and tool. In this respect, to say "an ethics of reading is just reading" has it exactly right: Reading and writing is precisely about what is "just." Hélène Cixous describes powerfully and poetically reading and writing's face:

This face is not a metaphor . . . How many faces to the face? More than one. Three, four, but always the only one, and the only one always more than one.

I *read* it: the face signified. And each sign pointed out a new path. To follow, in order to come closer to its meaning. The face whispered something to me, it spoke and called on me to speak, to uncode all the names surrounding it, evoking it, touching on it, making it appear. It made things visible and legible, as if it were understood that even if the light were to fade away, the things it had illuminated would not disappear, what it had fallen on would stay, not cease to be here, to glow, to offer itself up to the act of naming again.

. . . . I saw death at work and guessed its constancy, the jealousy that wouldn't let anything escape it alive. I watched it wound, disfigure, para-

lyze, and massacre from the moment my eyes opened to seeing. I discovered that the Face was mortal, and I would have to snatch it back at every moment from Nothingness. (Cixous: 2; italics hers)

Reading with such a disposition summons criticism to face up to a weighty responsibility. Not only are we as critical readers called upon to consider what's at stake in our own reading, we also are summoned to consider what is/was at stake in the very writing of the Bible itself. We would be concerned with all facets (*facies*) of the Bible's production and reception. If Cixous is right, that writing is "a way of leaving no space for death, of pushing back forgetfulness, of never letting oneself be surprised by the abyss" (3), then we must routinely ask what matters of life and death have given us the texts of the Bible? This way of framing matters means that critical questioning is indeed about "just" reading.

How would this lead us to read differently or otherwise? To return to the example of Matt 5:38–39, if writing is a pushing back of forgetfulness, we might ask, what element, idea, face threatening to be forgotten, drives Matthew's narrative? What exactly is the Gospel writer protecting by opposing Moses (the Law) to Jesus throughout chapters 5–6? Just what is Matthew afraid of? It becomes all the more urgent then to attend to the complicated nature of the text, to possible social locations, to attend to the textual details, to what the text mirrors and distorts, plays back and rerecords, constructs and fissures. What is other is at stake, maybe even at risk: Just whose face is being snatched back from Nothingness in Matt 5:38–39? Is it the face of the one admonished to "turn the other cheek"? Who exactly is that person? Jesus does not address all his followers, only his disciples (see Matt 5:1–2). The admonition to "turn the other cheek" is thus not presented as a universal norm but intended for some particular face. As Cixous says, this face is not a metaphor; it is a particular face who whispers something to us.

Our responsibility as critical readers is to uncode all of the text's mortal faces that plead for us to snatch them back from the Nothingness. We are called to uncode those concrete situations that would evoke the "turned Face," to expose what is unsaid for the sake of those wounded, for the sake ultimately and originarily of justice. What was at stake for the early Christian community that could lead to this injunction not to cause trouble with political authorities? Was it not, indeed, a matter literally of life and death? By admonishing Christian leaders to turn the other cheek, was Matthew not snatching the Christian community back from the brink of political abyss? The face of the woman battered by her partner is a very different face. It, too, speaks and calls on us to speak, to uncode all the names surrounding it, evoking it, touching on it, making it appear, including the children who are so often at risk along with her. (Do these children share the same fate as the nameless, faceless, murdered innocents of Matthew 2, the children for whom

Rachel cries out because they are no more?) So many unnamed faces in Matthew. And among the surrounding names we are called upon to uncode (however unwilling their participation) are Herod, Matthew, Jesus, and the Church. It becomes all the more urgent then to focus upon particularity, upon the particular lives that hang in the balance of the Bible's writing past and in the balance of our reading present.

Similarly, returning to our earlier questions regarding the appropriation of the M or Q sources and the historical forces behind the Priestly creation account, we might begin to imagine how writing as a matter of life and death helps us reconstrue our understandings of what's at stake in those texts. In the case of the creation account, we might see this text arising out of the chaotic anxiety of the Exile not simply as an attempt to instill orthodoxy in the face of competing religious claims, but as an attempt to give suffering and fearful people hope. Beneath the face of the Deep are the nameless who have lost their homes and their loved ones. They are being evoked and remembered. They are being encouraged to focus on the Face of a God who can bring forth an orderly creation out of primeval chaos. Surely this God can also bring order and justice for his people out of historical chaos. Such a way of reading highlights a story more about redemption—a snatching the Face away from the brink of Nothingness—than about creating a world out of chaos. But to do justice to this life and death issue we ourselves must read as if lives and deaths hang in the balance. We must peer beneath the surface of the deep, reading like the young Czechs, between and behind the lines. Who would need to tell a story like this? What abyss inspired it? What is being called so passionately to memory? How does its writing "leave no space for death"?

We might frame source criticism of the New Testament in this way as an ethical concern. The face of Jesus within the folds of the text speaks and calls on us to speak, to uncode all the names surrounding it, evoking it, touching on it, making it appear. The quest for "original" sources and the "historical" Jesus would draw its first breath not from its status foremost as a distanced historical exercise that uncovers layers and facts of textual history, as important as that may be, but from the desire to preserve the face of Jesus, to keep it from becoming a metaphor or, better, a mere mirror of our own particular religious, ideological, or cultural interests. Why search for the illusive, original source? As John Dominic Crossan has argued, historical analysis has a responsibility to keep us from obliterating the faces of the various and many writers of the gospel texts so that we don't gaze down the well into our own reflection. The "sarcophylic" tradition of the canonical Gospel writing was intent on "pushing back forgetfulness," of "leaving no space" for the death of Jesus. Unlike the "sarcophobic" tradition of noncanonical gospel writing, which was content to let the body be swallowed up and no longer a concern, the former needed that somatic resurrection to survive. What drives history

of Jesus research then, if not an ethics of reading that attempts to preserve, respect, understand the particularity of the Face, to snatch the Face back from Nothingness, to keep the Face from becoming our own face, or just any other face we might simply want it to be?

There is something authentic about imagining criticism and ethics going hand-in-hand rather than hand-over-hand. The urgent question of life and death never leaves the context of the reading and writing of and about the Bible. To reflect upon the urgency of writing in ancient times leads us then to ask the question about ourselves today and the purpose of this volume. If ancient writers were reading and writing with this type of ethical urgency, do we, should we, read and write in similar ways, like the Czech Jew and the woman student from the Texas Bible Belt?

THE ETHOS OF ETHICS-TALK

Let us open up the frame of reference and consider the issue of ethics of reading Bible from a different direction. What is it about the present ethos that makes the issue of ethics and reading a pressing concern? Is it simply the long-awaited "paradigm shift" that Schüssler Fiorenza announced a decade ago (Schüssler Fiorenza: 16)? "Bible and Ethics of Reading" may be regarded as an instance of what Vincent Pecora calls the widespread phenomenon of "ethics-talk" whose revival he associates quite directly with the development of poststructuralist thought and the emergence of postmodern society (203). Ethics-talk is ubiquitous: It saturates literary studies (Miller, Booth), post-structuralist theory (Baker, May, Siebers), sociology (Bauman), philosophy (Scott, Levinas, Irigaray, Derrida), even medical, law and business studies. It hardly comes as a surprise that biblical critics and religionists find themselves engaged in "morally inflected" discourse (Newton: 23). Volumes that sport the title "Ethics of" the "Bible" (by which is mostly meant the "New" Testament), or "Paul" or text-specific books of the Bible fill the library and bookstore shelves (see Hays, Schrage, Lohse, Meeks, Patte). In commenting on this general situation, moral philosopher Jeffrey Stout, evoking images of chaos and confusion, likens the talk about ethics and morality to the Biblical Tower of Babel. The situation is one of profound disagreements and conceptual incompatibilities; or to draw upon an image in a neighboring Genesis story, we are awash in a flood of "languages of morals and their discontents" (Stout: 3).

Stout's explanation for present-day discontent and conceptual confusion is that late twentieth-century discourse about ethics (and he includes philosophy, religion, and Western social institutions here as well) is haunted by the spectres of skepticism, nihilism, and relativism. We are in a posture of constantly looking back over our shoulders as if Kant, Marx, Freud, and Derrida were breathing down our necks. Indeed, at the end of this tragic century and, to use Adorno's memorable phrase, "after Auschwitz," that abyss of un-

imaginable proportions, whatever verities and assurances previously held secure now seem shaky, if not hollow. This is a time not only of intellectual confusion but of wholesale social and cultural perturbation and transformation that leaves nothing in the public or private spheres unaffected. As a consequence ours is a conflicted age weighed down by

the comforts of false unity and transcendence; the cynicism and demoralization often lurking behind brave refusals of consolation; the urge to lose oneself in playful aestheticism or the rigor of professional technique; the tendency to either denigrate or romanticize one's fellow citizens, one's ancestors, or members of distant cultures; the evasions implicit in self congratulation or revolutionary exaltation; the wishful thinking of utopian proposals and wistful thoughts of days gone by. (Stout: 9)

In describing this age Stout doesn't use the term "postmodern" but that is exactly what he means by seeking to "mov[e] beyond modernism in all of its forms" (261).

Label it what you will, postmodernism or "beyond modernism," Stout pictures a profoundly disrupted social world as the setting in which Babelian ethics-talk now thrives. It is a fragmented setting in which modern moral discourse and its Enlightenment-inspired metaphors (including the truths they once signified) are uprooted and displaced. Rational language especially has become a target. Take the example of the "talk" associated with the Persian Gulf War. The very word "war" has had a make-over, a face-lift if you will. The violent connotations associated with the "Persian Gulf War" have been replaced with the more wholesome "Coalition Action"; our "smart weapons" are imputed with the sagacity to "know" how to discriminate between "good and bad" targets. On the surface an exercise of democratic values and principles, a between- and behind-the-lines examination reveals the "Coalition Action" to be, at the very least, a grand media event, a prime time made-for-TV-movie, a virtual reality virtually casualty free (except, unfortunately, for the 100,000 deaths on the "other" side and the "friendly fire" casualties on "our side"). National debate in the United States Congress over the wisdom and ethical purpose of U.S. involvement in the Persian Gulf War was little more than scripted exchange staged for C-Span, the content more jingoistic sound bite than thoughtful grappling with principle and reality. In short a commodity event, the "War" and much of the moral debate surrounding it, took on the character of what Baudrillard calls the "hyperreal," a product of media illusion and saturation TV coverage to match saturation cruise-missile bombardment and anti-aircraft flack. Ethical reflection gives way to visual representation, disputation to display, to the point where it becomes hard to distinguish one from the other. Against this backdrop, Babelian ethics-talk makes a bizarre sort of sense: a postmodern reflex to a pervasive uncertainty about what is real or Memorex that leaves us wondering whether, as the sociologist Zygmunt Bauman put it, we are "in the twilight, or the renaissance, of morality" (3).

Against this postmodern backdrop it is instructive to assess recent efforts to address the "ethics" of reading that have emerged within biblical and literary studies. Two recent and contrasting contributions to the current ethics-talk include Richard Hays's, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament: Community, Cross, New Creation*, and J. Hillis Miller's *The Ethics of Reading: Kant, de Man, Eliot, Trollope, James, and Benjamin*. A biblical critic, Hays approaches the issue as a hermeneutical problem to be resolved with methodological rigor. Miller, a deconstructive literary critic who has also published on the Bible, comes at the issue from the side of language (i.e. rhetoric). If, for Hays, the ethics of reading (he does not use this phrase) amounts to an operational description of the New Testament's "moral vision" followed by prescription of specific behavior in response, for Miller the ethics of reading means an encounter in the very language of the text with the "Law" wherein he locates the experience of hearing "I must." Miller's reading points to an encounter with something radically other to me in language, which presumably shapes my way of responding and of being responsible. Hence, his valuing of the rhetorical analyses of texts. A brief discussion of these two approaches gives a sense of the range of expressions, concerns, and limitations of biblical ethics-talk and, we hope, serves as background to the arguments made by contributors to this volume.

BIBLICAL ETHICS: ETHICS AS MORAL VISION OF THE NEW TESTAMENT

Hays's book is a very recent entry in the genre of ethics-of-the-New Testament-texts (for Hays it is not "Bible" but "New Testament," contrast Patte). His aim is to "facilitate a clearer discussion about how to read the New Testament and how to live in imaginative obedience to its moral vision" (xi). He is troubled by the contentious debates over the use of the Bible as it gets applied to moral problem-solving with respect to issues such as war, homosexuality, anti-Judaism, and abortion. The solution, he argues, is to bring the New Testament's distinctive, authoritative "moral vision" to bear on such moral dilemmas. The means for eliminating fragmentation and discord is to construct "a compelling unified picture" (466) using a four-fold set of critical operations (description, synthesis, hermeneutics, and pragmatics).

Hays approaches ethics as a "task" (cf. the opening chapter title is "Task of New Testament Ethics") and reading, similarly, as a series of integrated (just how so he does not explain) operational "tasks." The nature and purpose of "ethics" is disclosed in the tasks or projects it undertakes. Hays thereby artfully blurs the distinction between his own critical, constructive effort and the content of the moral vision which is said to be the task of New Testament ethics itself. The Bible's moral vision becomes virtually indistinguishable then from Hays's critical operations; the authority of his moral vision is underwritten by the Bible itself.

But Hays's contribution to ethics-talk amounts to an effort at ethics crisis-management that turns the discussion about the content of ethics essentially into a procedural problem. By tasking ethics this way Hays struggles to impose order upon a chaotic situation and to bring single-minded clarity where ambiguity or outright contention prevails. One could argue that Hays's response to postmodern uncertainty, at least as it concerns reading the Bible, is to strive for methodological coherence, define an overarching interpretive structure, and spell out a compelling unified picture.

But for all the importance attributed to method, Hays pays scant attention to the phenomenon of the reading and writing process itself, including the material effects of reading on what is read, who does the reading, and those who bear the consequences of the reading. (The Topic Index, for example, contains no entries for "Ethics," "Reading," or "Ethics of Reading"; and "ethics" is subsumed under "New Testament Ethics"). Except for the standard admission of circular hermeneutical interference, there is little sense of reading being anything like an "at risk" operation that would focus one's attention between or behind the lines in Magonet's sense. Tanks, troops, and faces seem very remote, the argument far removed from wrenching ethical issues of the sort that actually generated the writing of the Gospels or Paul's letters in the first place.

Nowhere is this problem more acutely felt than in his discussion of anti-Judaism and what can only be described at best as a nest of embarrassing (and damaging) scriptural problems. Chief among these is Matthew's vicious anti-Pharisaic portraiture and Paul's subordinationalist view of Jews in Romans 9–11. Hays's way of salvaging texts like Matt 27:25 ("His blood be on us and on our children") is to assign it to one kind of textual "paradigm" and Paul's less troublesome reading of the "Jewish problem" in Rom 9–11 to another. We are forced then to choose between reading paradigms: between Paul or Matthew. It would thus appear that on the Jewish issue, at least, the New Testament's Moral Vision is not so unified: It is afflicted with a permanent case of double or, if one factors in John's Gospel, triple vision. Like the current critical debates Stout describes, the New Testament's ethical focus is deeply marred, and all the hermeneutical "lenses" Hays would care to fit the reader with can do little to "reenvision" away these textual problems satisfactorily. Hays's drive for synthesis at the expense of difference and rupture, effectively enables outrages in Scripture to be bracketed safely until such time as a grand hermeneutical effort takes them up and reinscribes all the nasty elements into a coherent Hegelian-like whole. Thus the Matthean or Johannine "paradigm," inherent and deeply problematic parts of an already fissured and blighted "New Testament ethics" are lifted-up into a "compelling unified picture" (466) by appeal to the lived experience of a communal tradition. In this way the weapon of Christian anti-Judaism is thus beaten into a tool of critical scholarship.

But just whose experience is determinative here? Whose tool? Whose weapon? Christians'? Jews'? Jews who survived Auschwitz? Hays's own? In good Protestant fashion Hays turns the spotlight on his own moral culpability at the end of his book. But it remains far from clear how a four-fold reading strategy so committed to an epistemological solution can explain how such horrific gospel texts could ever be a part of a "compelling unified picture." The commitment to a categorical distinction here between analysis and application inhibits identification with the otherness of the text and suppresses the moment of ethical disruption Levinas forecasts. In other words, an approach to reading the Bible that is so heavily epistemological as Hays's is, so committed to reading as a tasking, cognitive operation, in spite of every good intention, inhibits reading Paul's letters or Matthew's or John's gospels in between and behind the lines, for the other. By preoccupying us with proper procedures, a unified vision, and his own face, Hays makes it all but impossible for Christians to read New Testament texts for the face of "the Jews" as if lives depended on it. This is safe reading, and readers are right to be suspicious.

In his discussion of the unsavory story of Abimalek in Judges 8–9, Magonet (in his chapter entitled "How a Donkey Reads the Bible") addresses the very phenomena of biblical unpleasantness and readers' experiences. In answer to the question "What's a nasty story like this doing in a nice book like the Bible?" he writes:

First, we should recognize what is actually in the Bible before we decide what kind of "book" or "library" it is. If donkeys only see stories about donkeys, perhaps nice people only see "nice" things in the Bible. Somehow if we are to take the Bible seriously in its own terms, we do need to acknowledge time and time again the limitations our own background sets upon our ability to read it, and learn to share the perspectives and understandings of past and present "readers" alike. To re-read Rabbi Ishmael, "Torah speaks in the language and to the reality of human beings." (72)

To read for the "unified moral vision of the New Testament," to read for our own face and interests, is to ignore the vast otherness of the Bible and the "reality of" those human faces who plead silently for us to push back forgetfulness.

ETHICS AND LITERARY THEORY: J. HILLIS MILLER'S ETHICS OF READING

Miller's short volume offers a set of brilliant readings of narratives by Kant, de Man, Eliot, Trollop, James, and Benjamin (see below Snyman, Heard, and Sicher on Miller). He sets for himself a double task: first, to show how ethics of reading is a moment "in writing in narrative novels, acting as a character within them, reading novels, writing about them" (8); and second,

to counter a spate of misreadings of deconstruction. Like Hays's, Miller's is a defensive reading. Miller takes aim at traditional critics who wantonly misconstrue deconstruction and vilify it as a nihilistic attack on all that is decent and good. He focuses specifically on responsibility: the fundamental responsibility that critics and readers have to texts (biblical and non-biblical) and the responsibility commentators have (or fail to honor) to the world of critical letters.

For Miller, the ethics of reading denotes a "necessary ethical moment" that is distinguishable from anything cognitive, political, social, or interpersonal that might be attributed to an author or reader or particular text. Miller distances his discussion of ethics of reading from any and all forms of activist criticism on the grounds that, in his view, such approaches reduce ethics to a particular hermeneutical strategy. This reduction opens the door to a "measuring and ascertaining of the meaning of a text by something nontextual outside that text: God or some other transcendent power, society, history, economic conditions, the psychology of the author, the 'original' of the text in 'real life'" (6). Activist (or advocacy) criticism thereby misses something intrinsic about the ethical moment *per se*: first and foremost its linguistic and textual texture, and, second, the demanding work on the reader's part to understand. For Miller, the ethical act is never determined by what he calls social considerations or responsibilities. It is not a response to a certain thematic content that articulates a moral position, nor is it evoked, in Levinas's terms, by the "face of the other." Rather, the ethical act is a response to a deeper, impersonal "I must" to which the reader, teacher, and writer of criticism is responsible, responsive, and respectful. To think of ethics as determined by politics or social setting or the face of another is effectively to subordinate it to epistemological or ideological concerns (Miller: 5). And the very great danger of epistemological or "operational" approaches (such as Hays's represents), whether one reads the Bible or George Eliot, is that it masks the "lure of intellectual mastery."

In strong contrast to Hays, the last thing Miller cares to do is resolve textual ambiguities or to nail down how a text is to be employed for or against a cause or person. In Adam Zachary Newton's words, "Miller subscribes to an ethic of unreadability, a linguistic imperative from which readers cannot exempt themselves" (10). Miller has his sights set on more important matters—the Law that makes ethics possible in the first place. Miller desires to live with the undecidability of a text and its "I must" because that is the way language is. To think or to do otherwise is to not face up to the reality of language; it is to make ethics contingent on ideological forces. Miller wants to honor the radical otherness of a text understood first and foremost as a rhetorical event. Of primary importance is comprehension of the Law governing the ethics of reading (11). This Kantian-like law subjects, compels, and persuades reading; it is not a "principle" or "injunction" or a "written ascer-

tainable law" like the Law of Moses or Jesus' law of love. The productive force of this Law calls a text into being. As readers we can't fully articulate or express the Law outright; we are compelled to indirection (and hence so often to narrative). As readers we can only tell stories about the Law. This is why narrative texts like those of Homer or the biblical authors prove to be so powerful.

Miller's ethics of reading genuflects to language. But as multifaceted as language is, it remains unclear, finally, where any particular face is, or if it is. Even if he is right that a text's connection to history is always mediated through language, and that ethics points in the direction of some radical alterity that eludes description and cognition and subjects "me" as reader to "I must" (note it is not a "we" must), it remains far from clear in what sense Miller's "ethics of reading" has anything to do with reading "as if" life and death were hanging in the balance. Miller's "as if" is linguistic through and through. His "as if" translates political and social gestures into a series of linguistic terms (ideology is a species of "anaphorosis," context is "metonymy," etc., 6-7; cf. Steiner). But what is the rhetorical or linguistic equivalent of the "materiality of actual history" (a phrase he borrows from Paul de Man), such as the *lager*, or the burning oil fields of Kuwait, or the battered face of a woman? Vincent Pecora's criticism of Miller is on target: Miller's ethics "precedes" but his ethics can never be adequate because the "promise is exceedingly unlikely to have a chance to be tested in practice" (Pecora: 216, citing Miller). Miller's ethical antifoundationalism leads Pecora (217) to conclude that Miller can only be a spokesperson therefore for the status quo (and what for a poststructuralist is more status quo than language?). What is just, where is justice, in this ethics of reading? How am I to be held responsible to the impersonal and disembodied Other of a never-present Law? Who is it finally that holds me accountable? For Levinas the face of the widow, orphan, and the neighbor holds me accountable. For Miller, it is faceless language.

Despite serious, and we would argue fatal, limitations in dealing with the "materiality of actual history" and the intersubjective nature of the ethical summons, Miller does focus helpfully on one important point. To his credit (and like Levinas in a certain respect) Miller rightly wants to situate ethics of reading outside the framework of an epistemological model intent on resolving differences and arriving at a coherent picture. Where he is most lacking, in our judgment, is in making any kind of a case for the "as if" life or death reading and writing that inspires and enlivens narrative. Miller misses the intimate connection between ethics, narrative, and the face of the other. For it is in narrative, as in no other genre, that we "encounter the face." "[N]arrative situations," Newton argues, "create an immediacy and force, framing relations of provocation, call, and response that bind narrator and listener, author and character, or reader and text" (13). The very disruptive

ethical summons is "built into language use: vocative, interpellative, or dative impulses in utterance, we might say, which take narrative shape as address, command, plea, gift, and trust" (25). The problem with Miller's ethical law of "I must" is that this linguistic Law has no intersubjective purchase on me.

Contrast the way Magonet describes the Bible and the relationship to its reader:

The Hebrew Bible is rarely self-conscious. It does not explain why it came into being, its purpose or its significance. It is not portentous as in the way of other ancient literatures that proclaim themselves as the authentic, official revelation of a particular god to, or through, his earthly regent. The Hebrew Bible takes for granted its own worth by assuming the worth of the one who reads it. It exposes itself with its naivete and cunning, to a relationship, with the openness and concealment of a lover to the beloved. "I am my beloved's and my beloved is mine" (Song of Songs 6.3). (Magonet: 99–100)

Magonet assumes some kind of "relationship" to a transcendent Other, of which the text is a symbol or medium of communication signifying the other. Clearly this is extra-linguistic in ways that make Miller uncomfortable. As with Hays's unified moral vision, the particularities, especially the contradictions of a text pale in importance to the overriding Law. But with the Bible, we argue, those flaws, contradictions, embarrassments, and outrages are the very places where the disturbing excessiveness of language is to be encountered. Textual problems are not an invitation to fashion a unified theory of reading or of language but a summons to acknowledge the specific face that is not a metaphor:

[S]urely it is still a confirmation of the potency of a text that its apparent un-historicity or amorality can produce in us frustration or anger. For it points to and evokes a human quest for truth, integrity and purity. The scandal of a biblical passage's apparent failure to live up to the highest current qualities and values of a particular generation may become the trigger for their own self-transcendence. Such struggles to vindicate the text are all the more heroic in their intensity and consequences because they have to contradict what was previously regarded as the highest of human and religious values as enshrined in previous interpretations. The Bible continually subverts itself and sanctions self-criticism through its own overt content. "Take away from me your songs . . . rather let justice roll down like water" (Amos 5.23–24). (Magonet: 101–2).

Ethics of reading the Bible is about more than method, rhetoric, and Law; it is about living and dying and justice. It is about discovering in the text that Face which is mortal, and learning to snatch it back at every moment from Nothingness (Cixous: 2).

CONTRIBUTIONS TO AND OF THIS VOLUME

For us, and ultimately for the contributors to this volume, the question remains, in spite of what we know to be constraints on these positions, just how are we to think about ethics and reading? How do we balance our responsibilities to the text, to readers, and to those who bear the marks of our reading? Is it the case that we are face-to-face with an "irrationality" or inconsistency at the root of things ethical expressive of postmodern ambiguity? In dealing with the problem of the Bible as weapon, which way of posing things is most helpful: Hays's epistemological desire for coherence? Miller's language-based preference for the undecidable? Or some Levinasian-type demand that we be responsible for the other—the widow, the orphan and the stranger—and even the one who might kill me?

We accept the fact any serious attempt to address "ethics of reading" is a balancing act. Still we must ask, what is at stake in posing this question to ourselves, to our professional colleagues, to our students or parishioners in one way rather than another? How are we to think of the materiality of reading, language, story? Is there a coherent theoretical model to be discovered? What are our resources? Do we just plow ahead? How are we to proceed?

We have chosen quite deliberately not to state the issue in our title as a definitive question ("The Question of Ethics of Reading the Bible," compare Scott) or a definitive assertion about ethics ("The Ethics of Reading the New Testament," compare Schrage). We fear this way of posing the issue too quickly overdetermines how otherwise we might begin to imagine reading, ethics, and what's at stake in reading and writing the Bible. For it might imply that there is but one question to be asked, or a single, identifiable ethical content to be discovered in the text; one set of principles guiding the action of reading (one right way to read), or "the" correct technique to be applied; or even, for that matter, one Bible. It seems to us, and in the spirit of our co-contributors' work, that these are very much open questions. By doing without articles ("the's" or "an's"), we've intentionally constructed an awkward, slightly off-putting title. We want to keep the key words—Bible, ethics, reading—from rolling automatically over the tongue; we want to disrupt the hearing and speaking. Our aim thereby is to encourage our readers to parse the language of the title: To think about what they have come to expect about reading, ethics, Bible. To think of ethics of reading as something more than any new or different paradigm that reinscribes familiar practices and assumptions. The last thing that can be said of the Czech Jews is that they read the newspaper automatically, without suspicion or careful attention to detail or awareness of impact. How much more so for those of us who read the Bible for a living?

Our two leading stories set a certain tone for and invite a different thinking about what follows and offer a graphic picture of what occupies the contributors to this Semeia volume. We have explored Levinas's reflection at

length in this introduction, not because it is the one subscribed to by all, but because of its provocative decentering character. Because it so explicitly encourages us to think about ethics differently, it sets a certain tone for what follows in this volume. All of the essays here struggle with reading as if it were a matter of life and death. They follow no prescribed path, and in this way they reflect the current ethos of ethics talk. They are heterogeneous and idiosyncratic in terms of form (some are purposefully autobiographical, others more formal essays), authorship (some are collaboratively written), argumentative style (some more philosophical, some more exegetical), social location (some are written from an outside or are marginally self-identified in terms of a culture, country, race and ethnicity), religious expression (some are Jews, some Christians), and texts of analysis (canonical and noncanonical, literary and visual).

Some authors come at the question of ethics of reading by focusing on the complicated relationship between what texts do and what they say. What gestures and counter-gestures do specific biblical texts make? How are readers implicated in their readings? What is hidden in and from their readings? And how do readers carry out their charge to expose what is obscured both on behalf of the Bible and of themselves as readers?

For some contributors ethics of reading Bible means taking responsibility for what is Other in the text and Other to the text in ways directly informed by Levinas's concerns. What does the Bible define, and what do we as readers recognize, as Other? What makes the Bible more than any one reading? What does the Bible hold back in surplus that neither ethicists nor theologians nor biblical critics can hope to disclose when they read the text? How can we read in ways that acknowledge and respect the untamable Otherness of this Book?

Other contributors approach ethics of reading by asking specifically about power and violence. The Bible exerts a tremendous hold on the imaginations and lives of its readers (and its non-readers alike). What are some of the ways in which this powerful text operates as a tool/weapon, the ways it molds and breaks, heals and wounds? What are we to do with a biblical text whose aesthetic power and whose history of scholarship is implicated in horrible crimes against nature and humanity? In a text that is so taken with stories of violence, how do readers protect themselves and their children from readings and from texts that enact violence toward a person or a people? Here ethics of reading becomes an ambivalent and resistant act that addresses issues of violence and reading for and by the marginal. In this vein, several essays explore the relationships among story (both personal and ethnic), story-telling, aesthetics, and ethics.

Several of the essays in this volume were first presented in a joint session of the Structuralism and Exegesis Section and Reading, Theory and Bible Section (Bowman and Swanson, Fewell and Phillips, Heard, Landy, Oldenbake, Snyman, and Stone) at the 1996 SBL/AAR meeting held in Philadelphia, PA. The essays by Kelley, Reinhartz, Sicher, and Smith were sub-

sequently solicited. We thank all of the authors for their labor. We also wish to thank Professors Brant and Patte too for their thoughtful engagements with these essays in the form of responses.

Ethics, Bible, Reading as if. We readily acknowledge that there is more to ethics of reading Bible than is offered here, but it is our belief that this volume offers encouragement, provocation, and reason to rethink the ways we read and write.

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