

**The Life of the Text:
A Response to Brennan Breed's Reception Theory Proposal**

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In Act II Scene I of the delightful play *Legacy of Light* by Karen Zacarías, Dr. Olivia Hasting Brown, a tenured astrophysicist, leads a group of Girl Scouts on a brief tour of the history of astronomy. She concludes with a playful description of Einstein's theory of relativity:

Suddenly you have a more chaotic, volatile universe; not a Puritan on a bicycle, but a Hells Angel on a Harley. Throw in the fact that the universe is still expanding and you have a complex, interconnected universe gunning on all cylinders and making one hell of a wheelie while barely respecting the dynamics of physical law.¹

The same could be said about biblical studies in recent history. It too has become more volatile and complex, gunning on all cylinders, as it were, and roaring forth in all directions. Professor Breed's essay (along with his recently published dissertation) marks a milestone in this dramatic hermeneutical turn. In it he argues for a perceptual shift in what we do as biblical interpreters. What was once considered merely the "afterlife" of biblical texts by those interested in the history of interpretation should now constitute, he argues, the very center of the discipline itself.

Brennan offers, in effect, a hermeneutical theory of relativity, a theory that affirms the text's dynamic interrelatedness to its readers. As the measurement of an object in space is always relative to the observer's velocity (Einstein's special theory of relativity), so the text is

¹ Karen Zacarías, *Legacy of Light* (2007), 65.

ever relative to the reader. Or to give it a more Kantian spin: the text can never be known apart from the reader. When a tree falls in the forest without anyone to hear it, does it make a sound?² When a book falls from the shelf and lands with its pages wide open but without anyone to read it, does it have meaning? No. In its materiality, a text is merely marks on a page, wedges on a tablet, or pixels on a screen. But as a meaningful document, the text does not exist without its readers. It comes alive, as it were, when it is read or heard, when it is interpreted and communicated. Brennan's "history of reception" theory offers a fresh way of re-conceptualizing biblical exegesis as a constructive enterprise, from text-criticism and translation to intercultural readings and artistic use, and in so doing enlivens the discipline as a whole.

Implications

Brennan's theory is the organic result of various insights and tendencies, conundrums and wonderments that have been at work for years in biblical studies, including 1) the explosion of methods beyond the "classical" (read German-based) exegetical approaches that have held sway in biblical scholarship; 2) the dismantling of the interpreter's "objective" position vis-à-vis the biblical text; 3) the decisive factor of the interpreter's cultural context in the act of interpretation; 4) the porous boundaries between the "world behind the text," "the world of the text," and "the world in front of the text"; and 5) the rising interest in studying the Bible as literature.

However radical Brennan's view on the primacy of reception history may seem in theory, it is really not so radical in practice. Taking reception history as the beginning point of biblical interpretation by no means undermines traditional, analytical modes of exegesis. To the

² Yes, but only if "sound" is defined as the vibration of air molecules without reference to a hearing subject.

contrary, such interpretive modes continue as integral hermeneutical tasks. The only difference is that they do not wield the kind of hegemony they once did in biblical studies. To view every act of exegetical analysis as an exercise in reception is to decentralize every act of interpretation but without making each one simply relative. One way of making sense of the text is no more central than another, at least in principle. Every reading of the text, indeed every form of the text, *is* an act of reception, much like every *traditum* is indelibly part of the process of *tradio*.³ They cannot be easily separated. The text is always an interpreted text, a received text. Although reception history, in Brennan's proposal, has a totalizing reach, it affirms the integrity of each particular attempt to "make sense" of the text. Radical, perhaps, but not deconstructively so.

In his book,⁴ Brennan presents a playful image that counters the still dominant concern among scholars to tie the meaning of the text to its "original" context.

Imagine biblical scholarship of this sort [i.e., scholarship focused exclusively on the text's "original" context] as a zoo in which all the textual animals keep escaping their contextual cages, and we scholarly zookeepers are kept very busy capturing and returning them. So busy, in fact, that we have not often asked why it is that the cages do not ever seem to fulfill their assumed function of containment.⁵

³ See Michael Fishbane, *Biblical Interpretation in Ancient Israel* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985), 13-14, 62-63.

⁴ Brennan W. Breed, *Nomadic Text: A Theory of Biblical Reception History* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2014).

⁵ Breed, *Nomadic Text*, 93.

It is better, Brennan goes on to say, to “think of texts as tigers on the loose” than to think of them as “anchors” tied to one place.⁶ The text is an ever moving target, and each attempt to make sense of it is merely a snapshot of its ongoing life and movement. The text, in other words, has a “life,” but not a life of its own, for the reader herself actually participates *in* the ongoing life of the text. It’s about time that professional exegetes allow these texts to wander freely rather than trying to tame, let alone shackle and cage them. It’s our job to share where we think these texts have come and where they are going (or could go). First and foremost, exegetes should be keen observers of the “wildlife” of the text.

Such an awareness has the capacity to invigorate the practice of biblical exegesis. All too often, exegesis is regarded as a series of discrete analytical techniques or tools designed to help the interpreter unlock the meaning(s) of biblical texts. Taught and practiced in this way, biblical exegesis fails to account for how meaning is actually constructed (namely, by the interpreter) and, thereby, fails to be a sustaining discipline in the practice of ministry, itself a vocation of profound meaning making. There is nothing particularly sustaining about exegetical practices that are concerned primarily with explaining the biblical text (i.e., the “world behind the text”) while ignoring the text’s various capacities to engage diverse contexts in powerfully meaningful ways.

With regards to the plethora of interpretive methods, “reception history” theory is well suited to highlighting how each approach, even each analytical approach, views the text differently. Source and redaction critics, for example, see the text as something of a 3-D puzzle, whose parts can be carefully (and sometimes tediously) disassembled and reassembled. Structuralism treats the text as a self-organizing matrix, while narrative criticism views the text

⁶ Ibid., 109.

more as a flowing stream, and text-criticism as a multi-generational family (its “pluriformity”). Each method has its own lens through which the text is studied, and as the repertoire of methods expands, so the text becomes more variegated. As the exegete evolves in her understanding of the text, so also the text in what it communicates to the exegete. In other words, the text itself changes in the very process of interpretation. It is pluriform from start to finish, from its production to its interpretations.

This is what I consider to be the greatest benefit reception theory offers to the exegetical arts: it transforms exegesis from an exercise in application to a process of participation, of participation *in* the life of the text, enhancing it, diminishing it, enlarging it, or wounding it. Therein, I suspect, lies the key to adjudicating between competing interpretations. I suspect that even for reception theorists not every interpretation is considered equally correct or valid. But here I’d like to hear more from Brennan about how he might go about determining which interpretations are more correct, more life-giving perhaps, than others. Does his hermeneutical theory of relativity result in mere interpretive relativism? In other words, can one determine whether some interpretations do a better job of “making sense” of the text than others, with some even deemed “non-sense”? And what about the bad texts of the Bible—those texts that are inextricably linked to the justification of oppression and violence, the “texts of terror”? How does one counter these texts reception-wise?

Biblical Authority

Finally, what does a theory of reception history have to say about biblical authority? Perhaps it can help us revive an earlier, now lost sense of the term. Etymologically, “authority” is more richly nuanced than is commonly acknowledged in contemporary discourse. The Latin actually

connotes a creative sense. The word comes from *auctoritas*, meaning “origination,” from which the word “author” derives. It is also related to the verb *auctorare*, “to bind.” The Bible’s “authority” from a reception-history perspective would seem at home with the first, more generative sense of the term, one that connotes a creative capacity to provoke a response and, in so doing, helps to shape the conduct and even the identity of the reader or reading community. Scripture’s authority is dynamic and life shaping; it provokes a response that carries with it the acknowledgement, if not the conferral, of authority. Authority, after all, must be acknowledged in order for a text to be authoritative—so also meaning in order for the text to be meaningful.

If reception history is all about the capacious functionality of the text, namely what the text “does,” then perhaps biblical authority is fundamentally a *functional* authority, or better a *formative* authority. What makes the Bible the Word of God does not depend upon any particular theory of inspiration so much as testify to what the Bible has done and continues to do in the lives of people for good. To talk about the Bible as a normative document is to say a lot about what is formative about the Bible, of what it can *do* for “training in righteousness” and for equipping the community “for every good work” (2 Timothy 3:16-17). Scripture’s authority denotes the Bible’s capacity to shape and transform people into mature communities of faith, beloved communities. Biblical authority (along with biblical meaning) is evidenced in practice as it is lived out by readers of Scripture.

For me, the takeaway of Brennan’s essay is this: the text and its transmission, or the text and its interpretation, or the text and its reception—are inseparable. To hold the two at arm’s length, or worse, to pit them against each other, is to diminish the dynamic, sustaining, attentive, critical process of textual engagement that is exegesis.