

### 3.

## Ways of Reading

This chapter explores some of the methods of interpretation that are applied to Shakespeare and the Bible. I have called it “ways of reading” to highlight the fact that these approaches to the texts may vary a great deal in their presuppositions, their processes and their results, but they are all carrying out the same task. A reader who picks apart references to women in the New Testament to reveal a story of female leadership half-buried in the text which subsequent Christians tried to erase, and a reader who searches Revelation to determine whether Iran is ushering in the end of the world have radically different agendas. They might be expected to disagree not only on what the Bible says, but on how we should even go about reading it, and what criteria we can use to determine whether our own individual impression is an accurate version of “what the Bible says”.

Nonetheless, they are both engaged in a close scrutiny of the text, and their reading techniques may have more in common than first appears. They are both concerned with the details of the text, believing that it is only by close attention to particulars that the true meaning will be made clear. They both approach the texts expecting them to hold a weight of significance that is not obvious on the surface (one of the factors that we saw John Barton ascribing to “sacred texts” in the introduction). They both assume that the texts have something important to say about the world beyond the page, and are not simply aesthetic patterns whose value lies in their formal complexity, or free-floating narratives which can refer only to the world within their own pages. They both believe that this “something important” is part of a powerful current which has run through the entirety of human history, having an impact on a global scale, and which holds a central importance in world events, affecting even those who don’t understand it or know it

exists. They both apply specialist strategies of reading in order to be alert to the nuances and details that will be important for their interpretation. They both work on the assumption that the most vital meaning of the text is somehow hidden or obscure, and can only be recovered by those who know hidden meanings exist and can search for them patiently.

These forms of interpretation thus share some presuppositions both about the text and about the way in which it needs to be read, even if they also differ drastically in their other presuppositions and in the process they carry out. To people who don't share their broader religious and social ideas – including many readers of this book, no doubt – their reading might look less like a search for meaning and more like the imposition of their own ideas. Yet deliberately applying methods of interpretation (or ways of reading) do seem to have been necessary over the centuries when dealing with these texts. History has demonstrated that people will disagree sincerely, and even violently, over what seems to them to be perfectly evident and obvious in the text. The Reformation's call to attend to the "plain sense" of the Bible, to reshape Christianity around the simple meaning of what was written, detonated a reaction that split Protestantism again and again. The proliferation of Protestant groups in Britain during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, from Anabaptists to Fifth-Monarchy Men, from Muggletonians to Calvinists, gives a pessimistic view of the chances for Christians reading the Bible and spontaneously agreeing what it means. Christian Smith has described this as "pervasive interpretative pluralism", a situation in which readers of the Bible have continually failed to find the same meaning within it, and he cites Vincent de Lerins in the fifth century remarking that

Owing to the depth of Holy Scripture, all do not accept it in one and the same sense, but one understands its words in one way, another in another, so that it seems capable of as many interpretations as there are interpreters.

(Smith, 21)

As Smith points out, even Luther, who had presumed that his own challenge to Roman Catholic doctrine was based upon the evident meaning of the Bible, came to believe that a system of interpretation was needed, since the other groups within the Reformation produced doctrines so different from his own. He commented, with typical acerbity, on their method:

I learn now that it is enough to throw many passages together helter-skelter, whether they fit or not. If this be the way then I can easily prove from Scripture that beer is better than wine.

(Smith, 21)

Smith himself has examined the variety of doctrines and interpretations that are discussed in one particular version of Christianity (American Evangelical Protestantism), and noted the popular books that present debates between Evangelical scholars, under the title of “Four Views On . . .” topics such as war, women in ministry, baptism and divorce. Having collated all the titles, and computed the number of doctrinal positions they represented, then multiplied them by each other to discover the number of separate combinations of doctrinal opinions they represent, Smith presents his results. The opinions on these issues identified by these books, within a relatively narrow theological spectrum, could result in more than five million different sets of beliefs. Clearly “what the Bible says” varies considerably depending upon the reader. This is most noticeable amongst the groups Smith investigates – Evangelical US Protestants – because of the central place they accord the Bible in their religious practice and view of the world, and the fact that they regard themselves as the heirs of the sixteenth-century Reformers. Contrasting their “Biblical” Christianity with the emphasis laid upon reading the Bible in the light of “tradition” (for more Roman Catholic Christians) and “reason” (within Liberal Christian groups), US Evangelicals centre their religious identity on their reading of the Bible. As Smith has suggested, this reading is not as stable as might be hoped, and has produced a plethora of different opinions, with a resulting galaxy of small denominations as groups split off from their original churches when they came to disagree on the “clear” meaning of Scripture.

Indeed, the Bible itself contains several mentions of perplexity and the difficulty of finding the correct reading. The book of Acts relates the story of Philip meeting an official of the Ethiopian queen, who was busy reading the Scriptures:

So Philip . . . heard him reading the prophet Isaiah. He asked, “Do you understand what you are reading?” He replied, “How can I, unless someone guides me?”

(Acts 8:30-1)

Differences in the interpretation of Shakespeare have been less dramatic in their effect on the lives of those involved, but they are nonetheless capable of evoking strong disagreement on the meaning of the same text. This does not always stay as a difference of opinion over a particular passage of poetry, and often involves the clashing of opposed views of the world. The radical theatre director Charles Marowitz once commented that he actively disliked having to “share” Shakespeare with those whose political and moral opinions differed from his:

I have to say, quite frankly, that some of the most contemptible people I have ever known have loved Shakespeare, and I have found that very hard to take. It's like sharing your bed with bigots and junkies. For many of them, Shakespeare is a confirmation of their world view. The Christian Universe is memorialized in his work, and, from his sentiments, they can easily justify their bourgeois smugness, their conventionality, and their pompous morality. For them, it is as if Shakespeare wrote only so that they could quote his aphorisms on their calendars.

(17)

For Marowitz, and for many others, the central place Shakespeare occupies in the cultural canon means that disagreeing about what Shakespeare means is tantamount to disagreeing about how society should be run, about how people should live, about what is natural, about what is worthwhile, and even what constitutes reality. The history of Shakespeare criticism has produced a radical Shakespeare who reveals the contradictions in the military-monarchy complex, a capitalist Shakespeare who encourages the reader to work hard and act prudently, and a feminist Shakespeare who depicts the horrific choices forced on women by an oppressive male society, to pick only a few from a massive spectrum of readings. As with the Bible, there is apparently no chance of simply reading the text and agreeing on what it means, let alone coming to a consensus on how that meaning should affect the way we act.

So interpretation seems a necessity. Robert Morgan and John Barton provide a definition of this term at the opening of their book on *Biblical Interpretation*:

Interpretation is an intermediary task performed by rational human beings to make human communication possible in difficult cases. In interpreting we first understand the human utterance and then elucidate it for ourselves or someone else.

Whereas mechanical transmitters pass on messages by relaying sounds or transcribing them into a more permanent form, interpreters often say something quite different in order to get across the *meaning* of an utterance. Unlike the proverbial horse and mule, or the products of modern technology (artificial intelligence is a borderline case), interpreters have *understanding*.

Their definition brings out a number of themes that will be useful to keep in mind as I examine the various methods of interpretations that are used to explore Shakespeare and the Bible. They stress the difficulty involved in cases of interpretation. Simply hearing someone speaking and understanding them does not count as interpretation, even very briefly and easily, for Barton and Morgan. This means that the activity always involves a recognition that “interpretation” comes into play during a snag or a knot in the processes of communication on which we rely in our everyday lives. It also implies that the interpreter should acknowledge the possibility of other solutions to the “difficult case” they are faced with.

In the second part of the definition they deliberately stress the element of paraphrase or explanation involved. Merely repeating the message loudly and clearly does not count as interpretation (despite the valiant efforts in this direction familiar to anyone who has found themselves amongst British tourists abroad). Interpretation might require saying “something quite different” in order for the listener or reader to appreciate the true meaning of the message (or passage of text) that has caused the difficulty. In order to do this, they need to have understood the meaning themselves – or to believe they have – beyond the original form in which it was phrased. In the example I rather unfairly gave about my fellow Brits on holiday, someone who was sent to the bar by a friend to get “Two pints of Foster’s” and was met with incomprehension might try “Two beers – large beers – lagers – Australian – Amber Nectar? – same as we had yesterday – two from that blue tap there, please?” But if they did not themselves know what the order meant, though they had memorised the words, they could only continue repeating “Two pints of Foster’s” in a state of increasing thirst.

There are resources for students studying Shakespeare that highlight this element of interpretation by printing entire line-by-line paraphrases of Shakespearean plays. For example, Hamlet’s most famous soliloquy begins with these lines:

To be, or not to be? That is the question –  
 Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer  
 The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune,  
 Or to take arms against a sea of troubles,  
 And, by opposing, end them? To die, to sleep –  
 No more – and by a sleep to say we end  
 The heartache and the thousand natural shocks  
 That flesh is heir to – 'tis a consummation  
 Devoutly to be wished!

(III: i: 58-64)

In the version of the play offered by *No Fear Shakespeare*, this becomes:

The question is: is it better to be alive or dead? Is it nobler to put up with all the nasty things that luck throws your way, or to fight against all those troubles by simply putting an end to them once and for all? Dying, sleeping – that's all dying is – a sleep that ends all the heartache and shocks that life on earth gives us – that's an achievement to wish for.

This is where interpretation becomes more obviously contentious, since interpreting the text involves a claim to have understood it (and perhaps an implication that the interpreter has understood it better than those to whom they are speaking). English teachers might object that “luck” is not an exact equivalent of “fortune” in Hamlet’s words, and the aside “no more” has a richer resonance in a speech about death than can be explained by “that’s all dying is”. They might object that this paraphrase is reductionist, and thins down Shakespeare’s meanings into an easily-digestible form that misses the complexity and poetic nuance of the original. This accusation can be levelled against all interpretation that explains difficult words by substituting others in their place, from the simplest notes in the margin to explain unfamiliar vocabulary, to the most abstruse and contentious theological interpretation. The more involved the interpretation becomes, and the more words are involved in elucidating the original text, the more likely it is that the interpreter will be accused of over-reading, of finding meanings that were not present in the text when they came to it. As this chapter will show, there is no neutral or objective ground from which such judgements can be made. Everyone involved in interpretation believes that they are accurately and effectively

reproducing the real meanings of the text, and suspects others of importing irrelevant or unsuitable material connected to their own agenda and worldview.

In this chapter, I will be examining a series of ways of reading. I will not be able to offer a complete survey of the ways Shakespeare and the Bible have been read and interpreted; even if I had space to do so, there are other scholars who have already provided in-depth and thorough accounts. Instead I will be juxtaposing and contrasting radically different approaches to how these texts should be read, comparing character criticism with stage-centred criticism, and placing allegory next to literal readings. As elsewhere in this book, I will provide various quotations from earlier authors, in order to show not only what they thought but the ways in which they expressed it. (This will also give readers the opportunity to disagree with my interpretations and paraphrases of the passages I have quoted.) I will not cover the schools of critical theory that have become such an influence on contemporary readings of these texts, such as Marxism, feminism and structuralism. This is not because I think these critical frameworks are unimportant or trivial (on the contrary, I find feminist scholarship probably the most productive way of reading both texts in modern culture). It is simply because these critical approaches would take the chapter beyond its scope as a sampling of the modes in which the texts have been read, and into an examination of the ideological agendas those readings support and serve. Mode and ideology cannot be entirely separated, as will become clear below, but I have attempted to keep the focus on the processes involved in reading, within the space available.

### *The Bible and Allegory (Two-Fold, Four-Fold and Manifold)*

The interpretation of the Bible found a focus in two major traditions in the ancient world, which became attached to the names of Antioch and Alexandria.<sup>1</sup> The Antiochene school stressed the more literal and historical meaning of the text, whilst the Alexandrian school, whose most famous exponent was Origen, was much more engaged with allegorical and symbolic readings. The Christian works of the Alexandrian interpreters were influenced by Philo, a Jewish scholar who employed allegory to explain the Hebrew Scriptures in the light

---

1. A clear and concise account of various tendencies in the history of Biblical interpretation is provided by David Grant and Robert Tracey in *A Short History of the Interpretation of the Bible*, as quoted in this chapter.

of Greek philosophy. Thus for Philo the image of the seven-branched candelabrum, so strongly present in rabbinic Judaism, represents the seven planets of the universe, and in the narratives of the patriarchs, Abraham and Sara represent the ethical values of Mind and Virtue (Grant and Tracy, 53). This approach was developed in a specifically Christian way by Clement and Origen, whose work searched the Scriptures for hidden connections and spiritual implications. Not only did they find philosophical and ethical meanings in the texts revered by Christians, but they found Christian meanings in the narratives and prophecies of the Hebrew Scriptures. In Origen's work, this developed into a theory about the connection of history and Scripture with the ultimate meaning of things, as revealed through Christ:

Because the principal aim was to announce the connection that exists between spiritual events, those that have already happened and those that are yet to come to pass, whenever the Word [or Christ] found that things which had happened in history could be harmonized with these mystical events he used them, concealing from the multitude their deeper meaning.

(cited in Grant and Tracey, 57)

The real interest for Origen and the Alexandrians was not the truths of history but the larger spiritual implications that were spelled out in hidden and mystical ways through historical events. Indeed, Origen used this to account for the fact that the Scriptures did not always seem to relate the literal truth:

But wherever in the narrative the accomplishment of some particular deeds, which had been previously recorded for the sake of their more mystical meanings, did not correspond with the sequence of the intellectual truths, the scripture wove into the story something which did not happen, occasionally something which could not happen, and occasionally something which might have happened but in fact did not.

(cited in Grant and Tracy, 57)

Here Origen takes the allegorical and mystical method (and the theory explaining it) so far that the world itself seems to become rather irrelevant. It can sometimes be used to explain the deeper "intellectual truths" that must be communicated, but sometimes it is not even capable of that. Given this attitude to the universe and the "real" spiritual world beyond it, Origen's thought has a lot in



common with the Gnostics discussed in a previous chapter, who rigidly separated the material and spiritual worlds and believed that religion was a way of escaping the debased sphere of the physical.

Medieval interpretation in the Western church developed various “senses”, or types of meaning that could be sought in the Scriptures. Though there were various systems and accounts of how these senses worked, the most famous summing up is the “four-fold exegesis”, or four-part interpretation, which appears in the work of Thomas Aquinas. These senses, or ways a text can mean something, are as follows:

- the literal sense, or the historical or factual meaning to which the passage refers;
- the allegorical, which expresses under symbolic or cryptic images certain religious truths;
- the moral, which provides ethical instruction about how one should live and relate to others now;
- and the anagogical, which refers forward to heavenly or eschatological matters after the end of this world as we know it.<sup>1</sup>

These may seem very abstruse, so it is worth focusing on a particular example that demonstrates the way in which they can all apply in various ways (and perhaps at various times) to the same term, drawing on the monastic writer John Cassian’s discussion of the significance of “Jerusalem” in the Bible, and relating the senses to meanings and associations which a modern reader could find in the word. Cassian states that

One and the same Jerusalem can be taken in four senses: historically as the city of the Jews, allegorically as the Church of Christ, anagogically as the heavenly city of God . . . tropologically as the soul of man, which is frequently subject to praise and blame from the Lord under this title.

(cited in van Liere, 122)

These categories can also sit within a contemporary Christian reading of the image. In the literal sense, Jerusalem is a historical location, the capital city of the Jewish people, in which the Temple was located and to which people made journeys at certain religious festivals. It was threatened, besieged, captured and destroyed at various points, as referred to in the documents of Christianity and other sources.

---

1. Frans van Liere gives an absorbing and readable account of medieval exegesis and its various aspects in *An Introduction to the Medieval Bible*.

In the moral sense, Jerusalem is an image of the human soul, a city surrounded by dangers and subject to praise and blame by God. It contains the capacity for human life to fully flourish and to develop all the potential for arts, culture and sociability that clustered around cities in the ancient world (and which are still present in cities today, so long as the Wi-Fi doesn't cut out). However, it is also subject to being taken over by destructive impulses, by the tendencies towards harm and vice every human personality also contains, and which can overpower the positive aspects or even twist them towards a negative purpose.

In the allegorical sense, Jerusalem is the Church of Christ, the holy city recreated and renewed in the community of believers. The access to holiness and transcendence represented by the Temple within Jerusalem are understood as available to all who follow Christ. Their identity is centred upon something that took place in Jerusalem: the crucifixion and resurrection of the Incarnate God, who was condemned there and sent out of the city to be killed, but appeared miraculously amongst his followers as they mourned him, and whose spirit descended upon them at Pentecost in Jerusalem forty days later. Every day, all over the world, a ritual meal is held by members of this body to remember or re-enact a meal which took place in that city.

Finally, in the anagogical sense, Jerusalem is the heavenly city, the focus of Christian hope and longing for a world that will be remade at the end of human time, resembling this world in ways which will reveal the most profound and transcendent truths that have been immanent in the world we have experienced, but which have only been glimpsed obscurely and confusedly. The work of redemption and salvation that was visible at various points in Jerusalem – from its seat as the royal house of David to the arrival of a Messiah in the city who was understood as the rightful descendant of David – will be completed in the new Jerusalem, described by religious poets as a shining city.

These various meanings could seem rather strained or tenuous when simply listed like that, or assigned one by one to a mention of Jerusalem in a Biblical passage. However, we can recognise a plethora of “senses” in which Jerusalem is used in literature and politics beyond the medieval exegesis of the Bible. It stands as a potent political and national symbol for many people in the Middle East and simply using the name embroils their discourse in such a powerful system of symbols and principles. As I was writing this book, the US Supreme Court heard the case known as *Zivotofsky v. Kerry*, which technically ruled on a point of law over the President's control over

foreign affairs, but which was sparked by a family who wanted their son's passport to specify that being born in Jerusalem meant he had been born in Israel. At the same time, a serious and heated debate was being carried on in Britain about the welfare state, particularly the National Health Service. These institutions were created in the late 1940s, under Britain's first majority Labour government, who explicitly set out to create a socialist "New Jerusalem" for the nation. Somewhat further back in history, Augustine of Hippo used the image of Jerusalem in his *City of God*, in the aftermath of the sack of Rome, to sketch a trajectory of history in which the triumph of Christ did not depend upon the success of the Roman Empire. In the face of the apparent defeat of a Christian empire, Augustine looked to a heavenly city in which the hopes of the people of God would be fulfilled. (Though it originates in a phrase from the Sermon on the Mount, it is probable that the longevity of the image of a "city on a hill", which has resounded through American politics ever since John Winthrop used it in a sermon in the 1630s, owes something to the holy city of Jesus' own time.)

These scattered instances suggest that we are still attuned to symbolic and metaphorical resonances clustering around a term that is apparently literal and descriptive, even if not all modern readers find the four-fold exegesis a comfortable way to read. Indeed, given the wide range of the meanings I have just outlined, it is significant that part of the function of the exegetical structure was to constrain interpretation as well as expand its possibilities. A single term might be assigned four meanings – where a casual or literal reader might register only one – but those meanings are part of an explicitly Christian reading of the text. The luxuriance of the range of meanings released by the medieval exegetes is paralleled by an insistence that this is a Christian book that should be explored in a particular spiritual and religious direction.

### *Literal Reading (and Being Literally Wrong)*

The most obvious contrast to an allegorical method of reading is the literal, which focuses attention upon the surface meaning of the text rather than seeking a symbolic or hidden meaning. Ancient interpretation had included a literal tendency, which was associated with Antioch just as the allegorical strain of thought was more connected with Alexandria. The reading methods that emerged during the European Reformation often emphasised the literal sense

as a way to liberate the text from the over-determined and obscure results of medieval exegesis. An outright critique of the medieval system of interpretation is given in William Tyndale's *Obedience of a Christian Man*, a classic of the English Reformation:

They divide the scripture into four senses, the literal, tropological, allegorical and anagogical. The literal sense is become nothing at all. For the Pope hath taken it clean away and hath made it his possession. He hath partly locked it up with the false and counterfeited keys of his traditions, ceremonies, and feigned lies, and partly driveth me from it with violence of the sword.

(in King, 41)

He goes on to object to the method by which the four-fold exegesis separates out the meanings, but the main thrust of his objection is clear here: such sophisticated systems of reading obscure the plain and simple meaning of the text. The message of a Biblical passage, according to Tyndale, is swallowed up in an elaborate set of “traditions” and “feigned lies”, ensuring that no-one who reads the Bible can see how it challenges Roman Catholic doctrine and practice. The system determines the meanings that can come out of the Bible in advance, channelling everything the text appears to say in pre-approved directions. The effect is not entirely seamless, however, as he emphasises the way that the Pope has to apply coercion to keep everyone agreeing with the official interpretation “with violence of the sword”. Tyndale instructs his reader not to be bamboozled by these ways of reading:

Thou shalt understand therefore that the scripture hath but one sense which is the literal sense. And that literal sense is the root and ground of all and the anchor that never faileth where unto if thou cleave, thou canst never err or go out of the way. And if thou leave the literal sense, thou canst not but go out of the way.

(in King, 41)

Tyndale's language here is saturated with Biblical imagery: even as he makes an argument about the best way to interpret the Bible, he positions himself and his antagonists within the narratives that the volume contains. The Pope keeps the real meaning of the Scriptures locked up with “false and counterfeited keys”, which disputes the Roman church's claim that the Pope has inherited

from St. Peter the “keys” to salvation given in Jesus’ declaration that “I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven” (Matthew 16:19). The literal sense is obscured by the “traditions” of Roman Catholic interpretation, echoing Jesus’ criticisms of the “traditions” that the Pharisees impose upon the Scriptures (in passages such as Matthew 15), and a true reader cannot leave “the way”, which Jesus declared himself to be in John 14:6: “I am the way, the truth and the life, and no-one comes to the Father except by me”. Thus, though Tyndale argues for a literal and plain approach, he still values the images and metaphors that his own writing appropriates from the Bible.

Literal interpretation of the Bible has often been associated with very conservative, even fundamentalist, forms of Christianity. Radical right-wing Christians in the US and UK are often assumed to be people who “take the Bible literally”, and they certainly accuse those from different traditions of not doing so. However, as James Barr has pointed out in his book *Fundamentalism*, such groups more often interpret the Bible both literally and non-literally at different times, in order to confirm their own attitudes to the Bible intact. A concern for the Bible’s absolute verbal inerrancy and lack of error on any point, for example, leads some to suggest that the “six days” in which Genesis declares that the world was created are in fact representative of six geological ages, six moments spaced widely apart in history, or six days which happened after a long period of preliminary development (Barr, 41-3). The literal meaning of the verses are clear, and the book of Genesis elsewhere shows a great concern for genealogy, time and the precise specifying of events, but many fundamentalists allow this passage to have a “symbolic” or non-literal meaning in order to preserve the idea of the Bible as entirely without any historical or geographical error. Other passages may be taken literally, in that efforts are taken to explain events in a way that guarantees that what is written in the Bible took place in history, but in a way which drains them of their significance within the story. For example, the stories of the manna in the wilderness or the crossing of the Red Sea have been subjected to elaborate explanation by particularly conservative interpreters, with reference to the peculiar meteorological and environmental conditions of the area (see Barr, 241-2). This saves the Bible from presenting stories that cannot be believed because they are impossible, and allows the fundamentalist readership to continue to credit the Bible with utter accuracy in every single

detail of its narratives. However, it does so at the expense of the meaning of the event within the narrative: the manna and the Red Sea are described as mighty and miraculous acts of God, not extremely unexpected but useful combinations of circumstance. A “literal” interpretation is made, in the sense that the words in the Bible are assumed to have a specific reference to an actual physical event in the world, but their broader meaning according to the book is distorted.

Indeed, it can be suggested that a literal reading of the Bible is the only basis upon which truly sceptical and critical work may be carried out. A straightforward reading, attending only to the literal meaning and discounting theological or other explanations, can be alert to discrepancies and problems that are ignored by a devotional reading. As Barr suggests, “if one passage gives . . . a mere three generations from Levi to Moses, while another puts the period at 430 years”, or if one version of the story of Hagar describes her child as a baby and another as a youth of about seventeen, “it might be considered possible that there were two different sources” which preserved “different traditions about the same set of historical relations” (46-7). Where one Gospel places the cleansing of the Temple at the beginning of Jesus’ ministry, and another at the end, a literal reading is forced to deal with the apparent discrepancy. The entire apparatus of historical-critical research depends upon taking the text literally, because only if it is taken literally – rather than taken in whatever sense preserves the inerrancy of the Bible – can the documents be recognised in their different outlines.

This is not to say that taking the text literally disproves the truth of the Bible or renders it insignificant: historical-critical readings are generally concerned with understanding the origins and meaning of the Biblical documents, not spotting “errors” that disprove “inerrancy”. In Barr’s phrase, it is possible to say that “the critical approach to biblical literature is the one in which it becomes . . . possible to understand the literature without having to use the category of ‘error’” (55). For the historical-critical scholar, the text says what it says, and explanations must be sought for that meaning, but this does not constitute hunting for “errors”, because the fundamentalist attitude towards the Bible’s meaning is not assumed in the first place. The literal way of reading is therefore not as closely aligned with a very conservative religious attitude as is often assumed.