



Anything New to Say?

Another group of essays on Amos and Hosea? After 2700 years, what can there possibly be left to say? It all depends, of course, on what counts as “new” discoveries worthy of publication.

Once upon a time I was a pharmaceutical chemist. It has been a while! That became crystal clear when I bought the current edition of the *CRC Handbook of Chemistry and Physics* for my stepson to use in his chemistry classes this year at St. Olaf. Mine was the 37th edition and the size of a large Bible; his is the 88th edition and the size of a small suitcase. Apparently, new things have come to light since I was last in a chemistry lab!

Can new things come to light in Bible and theology as well? I recall writing a paper as a first-year seminarian in which I bemoaned the fact that, whereas only a few months earlier I had been doing quite sophisticated scientific research, now (as a new seminarian) I felt like I was being fed canned learning. As a chemist I had been *seeking* the truth; now, I thought, I was consigned to *receiving* the truth. That experience has given me a strong sense of solidarity with other second-career students whose introduction to seminary seems similar.

Don't get me wrong, a certain amount of receiving learning is a good and necessary thing. Pastors and theologians need to know many things: the tradition and the teachings of the faith, the Bible and the history of the church, the practices of ministry and the culture in which we live. Not to know these things is to cheat congregations of the teaching and leadership they deserve and quite likely to lead them into heresy. But we don't teach and learn the tradition simply so students and pastors can parrot it back. Had I understood the task that way, I could not have remained in seminary. Truth couldn't be merely something written in the books or back there in the past; it had to be also something out there to be sought.

Happily, the teacher for whom I wrote the essay had a similar view. Never fear, Art Becker wrote on my paper, there is plenty of room in the theological enterprise for new research and new learning. His was a welcome voice; it helped me stay in seminary, and it has proven to be true—not least in the area of biblical studies. There are, in fact, new things to be learned, new methods to be employed, and new encounters to be experienced.

But there is also a different path to “new” discoveries. As believers, we don't read the Bible the same way we read newspapers and magazines—or even scientific treatises or critical biblical commentaries. Those things we read “extensively” in order to learn what they have to say, incorporate the new learnings into our

thought patterns, and then move on to the next item. But, as historians of reading point out, such extensive reading is a relatively recent phenomenon. Earlier in the history of reading, people read fewer texts but read them “intensively”—“over and over again, usually aloud and in groups, so that a narrow range of traditional literature became deeply impressed on their consciousness.”¹

This, says Sven Birkerts, is vertical reading rather than horizontal reading, “inscribing the words deeply on the slate of the attention.” “This is ferocious reading—prison or ‘desert island’ reading”—“not unlike what students of scripture practice upon their texts.”² And from this kind of reading, altogether “new” discoveries emerge: not providing new data (though that may sometimes happen), not even seeing what no one has ever seen before (though that, too, might happen), but seeing things in a new light, in a new place, in a new way, with new connections, by a new person, and for a new audience—and such discoveries are always worth publishing and worth reading. As Birkerts notes, these new readings derive not from new facts, but from new wisdom, new resonance, and they require deep time to develop: “No deep time, no resonance; no resonance, no wisdom. The only remaining oases [of deep time] are churches (for those who still worship) and the offices of therapists.”³ A gift we dare not squander!

So, two kinds of discovery: the discoveries of scholarship and research that still beckon, because, surprisingly, horizontal reading and research come up with new things to learn and report; and the discoveries of depth and wisdom that still lie open, because, equally surprisingly, vertical reading produces new insights from ancient texts despite the generations that lie between them and us. The discoveries of research make us say, “Aha!” and readjust our thinking; the discoveries of wisdom make us mute and readjust our lives. Both have their place in biblical scholarship, and both continue to produce new essays on old books. What a privilege to be involved in such an enterprise!

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¹Robert Darnton, “First Steps towards a History of Reading,” *Australian Journal of French Studies* 23 (1986) 5–30; cited in Sven Birkerts, *The Gutenberg Elegies: The Fate of Reading in an Electronic Age* (New York: Fawcett Columbine, 1994) 71.

²Birkerts, *Gutenberg Elegies*, 72.

³*Ibid.*, 75–76.