A text does more than produce meaning; it also possesses the power to transform. This is well recognised in modern hermeneutics (e.g., Thiselton 1992:355, 359). Reading texts may transform our very selves as well as our view of the world. Like meaning, however, the transformative power of a text can be ambiguous. We therefore need strategies of suspicion “in order to review the nature of the transformation affected during the act of reading” (Jeanrond 2002:111). Such strategies are discussed by Ricoeur, Habermas, Foucault and others, but “their discussion is restricted to possible structural and systematic distortions of reading” (Jeanrond 2002:111). Werner Jeanrond is thus correct when he calls for reflection on the ethical aspect of understanding (2002:111).

In the hermeneutical discussion concerning the transformative power of texts, philosophical and ethical issues tend to eclipse theological contributions to the discussion. Theology has traditionally been interested in the transformative aspects of texts. From a theological perspective, a text provides more than information concerning a state of affairs, a description of the status quo; it invites us to a new reality that transcends our biased everyday reality. It addresses the supererogatory aspect of the kingdom of life, love and grace in relation to the human condition of bondage and servitude. It shows that the human condition is old and fading away. It invites us to participate in the new reality.

Without devaluing the contributions of philosophy and ethics, we seek to address the often-overlooked theological aspect of the transformative power of text reading. We begin with an illustration of the problem, using a specific text as a paradigm. We show how narrative
plot and the possibility of transformative power are interconnected on a theological level. We then address what has happened with the narrative plot through years of analysis, subsequently discussing the possibility of transformative power in exegesis and art. Finally, we evaluate the theological contribution to the debate.

Our purposes require a specific text that combines three vital conditions. First, the text must provide excellent models for identification, as identification is a necessary condition for transformation. The ability to demonstrate the variety of mechanisms of cultural variability is a second important condition (cf. Hofstede 1994; 1995). Finally, the text must have a deep influence in our culture. The account in Mark 6:14–29 about the beheading of John the Baptist is an excellent option. This text has an interesting plot, and it is well represented in the history of exegesis. It has also ‘…inspired numerous works by painters, writers and musicians’ (Delorme 1998:115). We choose the version of Mark, as it is the oldest of the synoptic gospels.

Resurrection

Mark 6:14–29 is well known as the story of the death or beheading of John the Baptist—but is it really the story of his death? The story actually appears to be a digression that interrupts the story of the mission of the twelve disciples as an extension of Jesus’ own ministry (Mark 6:6b–13, 30). The story of John the Baptist is sandwiched between narratives about the mission of the Twelve.

Report

The story is divided in two parts: verses 14–16 and verses 17–29. It opens with King’s Herod’s perspective on Jesus. Herod has heard a number of differing accounts concerning Jesus. Some people have been saying, “John the Baptist has come back to life! That is why he

---

1 The cultural variability approach is for example criticised by Shadid (2003:113–20). Although I am aware of the limitations of this approach, it still seems to be valuable.
2 In reality, Herod was a tetrarch and not a king. The fact that Mark speaks of King Herod, however, is important to the narrative plot, as it places Jesus and Herod in opposition.