I am grateful to John Riches for the care he has taken in reading, summarizing and criticizing my book. I shall not attempt a full response here; the critical questions that he poses are legion, and an adequate response to each of them would no doubt be a tedious affair. Should I conclude that, despite Riches's general sympathy for the project of a “biblical interpretation in theological perspective,” my version of it represents for him something of a cul-de-sac? Is he trying to escort me back from some of my more “extreme” and indefensible claims to the safety of a set of currently “mainstream” positions on exegesis, history, hermeneutics and theology? My book is clearly somewhat provocative in tone and content (and was intended to be so), so I cannot complain that even broadly sympathetic reviewers often appear to find it provoking. What I can perhaps do is to clarify at some points just what the provocation is and why I believe it to be necessary.

(1) I am apparently proposing “a wholesale rejection of the historical-critical paradigm” (p. 210). To be more precise, I am arguing against the view that the primary interpretative task is the reconstruction of a text’s historical circumstances of origin, and that without this a text cannot adequately be understood. Thus, on p. 35 of Text, Church and World (hereafter TCW), I quote the claim of Barnabas Lindars that “the effort to get behind the Fourth Gospel is not simply a literary-critical game, but an inescapable task in the process of discovering the real meaning” (my italics). My objection to such claims is, in part, a pragmatic one. If the “real meaning” of the canonical texts is so closely bound to their circumstances of origin, then that “real meaning” will probably remain largely inaccessible. What chance do we really have of attaining a historical knowledge of the genesis of the Gospel of John or of the Pentateuch firmly grounded enough to generate a broad and enduring consensus? I do not accept that, in making this point, I am guilty of “a certain kind of rationalist impatience with the weighing of probabilities which is the historian’s stock in trade”
(p. 212). My criticisms are directed instead at the over-optimism which believes that answers (even if only tentative ones) will always be available to our historical questions, and at the assumption that attempting to answer these questions is obligatory for all biblical interpreters. These questions and answers are in fact required not by the texts themselves, but by the interpretative paradigm which historical-critical scholars bring to them and which generates the “problems” around which the interpretative debate circulates. As Gadamer nicely puts it, we “must destroy the illusion that there are problems as there are stars in the sky” (Truth and Method, p. 340).

Does that amount to “a wholesale rejection of the historical-critical paradigm”? I hope my position is more nuanced than that. First, my criticisms are directed against particular interpretative strategies (albeit very common ones), and not at the entire field of “conventional” or “mainstream” biblical scholarship. Second, this mainstream scholarship can and does practise its own forms of self-criticism. There is, for example, no reason why one should not advocate a sceptical attitude towards over-ambitious theories about Johannine or Pentateuchal origins from within mainstream scholarship itself. Third, to question the claim that certain kinds of historical scholarship are indispensable for interpretation need not commit one to the view that they should not be practised at all. My intention was to create space for explicitly theological modes of interpretation, and for that purpose the emphasis of current literary and canonical perspectives on the final form of the text seemed to be of most value. There are, of course, proper as well as improper historical questions which may be put to the texts; and if I did not acknowledge this, it was simply because my concerns lay elsewhere. It was never my intention to offer a comprehensive assessment of current biblical scholarship as a whole; I wished instead to practise a “biblical interpretation in theological perspective.”

(2) Riches complains that the notion of the “final form of the text” is hopelessly ambiguous. “What is the final form (singular!) of the Hebrew and Greek texts? Is there a definitive canonical list of books among the different lists proposed by different Christian communities? Where does the process of shaping and treasuring stop: with various churches’ attempts to define the canon, with translation, with interpretation?” (pp. 210-11). However incisive such objections may sound, they should not be taken too seriously.