



Reading the Bible through the ages? Historical and hermeneutical perspectives

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Abstract

In this contribution the seemingly straightforward slogan espoused by *Biblica*, namely, “Transforming lives through God’s Word” is complicated by placing it within the context of the rich, multi-layered and complex history of Bible-reading. Fully aware that it is an impossible task to construe the history of the reading of the Bible, offers a few broad strokes describing Biblical reception and interpretation, beginning with the complex genesis of the Bible, extending through the Early Church, the Middle Ages, The Renaissance and Reformation, the time of Enlightenment and rise of Modernity, the emergence of ecumenical hermeneutics in the 20th century, and the contemporary conflicts in hermeneutic perspectives. Throughout the essay, the question is asked – in various ways and with different responses – what “Transforming lives through God’s Word” could mean.

Keywords

Biblica; the Bible; reading; Biblical hermeneutics; Biblical reception history; transformation

1. “The Bible”?

Biblica’s seemingly straightforward slogan “Transforming lives through God’s Word” already involves several crucially important presuppositions and convictions.¹ After all, Bernard Lategan, the former Professor of New Testament and founder and first director of the Stellenbosch Institute of

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Advanced Studies (STIAS) famously argued that the first question when reading or interpreting any text is always about the nature of the text. This is certainly also true of the Bible. What makes it more complicated with regard to the Bible, of course, is the fact that the nature of this text – “the Bible” – is not self-evident. Readers and interpreters always regard the Bible in a certain way, they see the Bible as a certain kind of text, they view the Bible from a certain perspective, they construe the nature of the Bible in certain terms – and *then* they approach and value and regard and read and interpret and use the Bible according to their own presuppositions and convictions.

Calling the Bible “God’s Word,” trusting the Bible to touch “lives,” and expecting the nature of that encounter to be “transformative” are already three such presuppositions with far-reaching implications for the way people read and interpret the Bible. All three convictions can be contested and even denied – and all three in themselves can be and have been understood in many different ways.

The history of reading and interpretation of the Bible is an overwhelmingly rich, multi-layered and complex story of such different construals of what “the Bible” really is, of what readers could therefore expect from the Bible, and how readers should accordingly read the Bible. The history of reading the Bible through the ages is an enormously valuable reminder of the complexity of contemporary hermeneutical issues. Against the variegated and colourful backdrop of the history of interpretation, present-day hermeneutical questions and challenges find their fuller relief.

One only has to admire Christopher de Hamel’s fascinating picture book called *The Book. A History of The Bible* to come under the visual impression of the enormous richness of this history. He calls his book “the story of a literary artefact.”

“It is as if the same object has been moulded and reshaped in each age of history. The Bible has sometimes been a public symbol and sometimes a book of extremely private devotion. It has been remote and sacred; it has been aggressively popularized. The Bible has been used by emperors, nuns, professors, ploughboys and imperialists, *for hugely different purposes, all in the absolute belief that their use was the right one*” (my italics).

One could also study De Hamel's more general but equally amazing *A History of Illuminated Manuscripts* to come under the impression of the variety of ways in which the Bible was also appropriated in different social locations, in different material forms and for different cultural, scholarly, political and spiritual reasons. Simply the titles of his chapters tell the story, namely "Books for Missionaries" (the 7th-9th centuries, the written word as essential tool for early missionaries), "Books for Emperors" (the 8th-11th centuries, books as treasure, objects of display and diplomatic gifts), "Books for Monks" (the 12th century, the golden age of monastic books and libraries), "Books for Students" (the 13th century, the rise of universities with professional text books), "Books for Aristocrats" (the 14th century, a wealthy and newly literate aristocracy also become interested in other books, like secular romances), "Books for Everybody" (the 15th century, with devotional books for ordinary households, using the Bible), "Books for Priests" (the 13th-16th centuries, with missals, breviaries, psalters and other service books sustaining the life of the church), and "Books for Collectors" (the 15th-16th centuries, with revival of classical learning) – and this is only the relatively small, earlier part of the story, namely the time of illuminated manuscripts, before the revolutions caused by the printing press and all later and more recent inventions.

One could for example follow the fascinating interpretive account by the North American historian Jaroslav Pelikan in his *Whose Bible is it? A History of the Scriptures through the Ages*, concluding with the spectacular growth of Biblical translations in the chapter "A Message for the Whole Human Race" and the widespread conviction that the Bible "is more" than a "surviving artefact" or a "piece of literature" in his final chapter called "The Strange New World within the Bible". One could for example follow the more popular historical yet also deliberately constructive theological account by the New Testament scholar NT Wright in *The Last Word. Beyond the Bible Wars to a New Understanding of the Authority of Scripture*. One could follow the fascinating historical account by the historian Karlfried Froelich's Warfield Lectures, recently published as *Sensing the Scriptures: Aminadab's Chariot and the Predicament of Biblical Interpretation*, in which he revisits the ways in which the Bible was interpreted over at least fifteen centuries according to several levels of meaning, which he links to the senses, in his chapters on smelling, touching, seeing, hearing and tasting. Or one could focus on the remarkable ways in which specific

translations of the Bible influenced history, language, education, culture, art, public life and the general moral imagination in many societies – for example the King James Version, as was done by David Lyle Jeffrey (as editor) in their *The King James Bible and the World it Made*; or Luther's famous *Luther Bible* of 1522 (NT) and 1534 (the whole Bible), which, thanks to Gutenberg's then recently invented printing press changed the world of German language, culture, society and politics; or the many translations on the continent of Africa with their unimaginable range and influence, power and empowerment, according to Lamin Sanneh, for example in his well-known *Translating the Message: The Missionary Impact on Culture*.

In short, the Bible has already been read, all over the world, through the ages, in a myriad of ways and according to a myriad of expectations and it has already formed and transformed, certainly also lives, yet not only lives, but in fact communities, societies, realities, worlds. What is there to be gained by way of hermeneutical perspectives from such a rich historical collage?

2. “Reading through the ages”?

Is it possible to reconstruct some kind of chronological account of this wide-ranging and complex history of reading the Bible through the ages? Many scholarly studies have of course already documented the story at great length and with instructive detail. Perhaps the picture becomes somewhat clearer by simply remembering – in broad strokes of generalization – some historical phases and developments concerning material changes affecting people's experiences of the Bible, differing views of its nature, changing expectations of what the Bible is good for and complementing, often however also competing and conflicting, ways of reading and interpreting the Bible.

Writing and gathering

The writing of the Biblical documents themselves, already the Old Testament documents, and then most certainly the New Testament documents, was of course in itself a major process of interpretative activities. New Testament writers were interpreting what happened in Jesus Christ and they were doing it against the background of what Christians now call the Old Testament. From the beginning, Christian worship became the social location where these documents were read and interpreted anew, following the synagogue pattern known to them, in reading, singing, prayers and sermons.

Gradually, these documents were increasingly accepted as forming one corpus, belonging together, as canon, with divine authority – and this process itself became another major interpretive process with enormous hermeneutical implications – these documents were accepted as belonging together (while others were excluded); they were seen as forming a closed canon (albeit in slightly different forms); they were regarded to have religious authority; in short, their status, role and function changed. As almost inevitable result, the documents from now on formed a context for one another, they were seen and therefore read as belonging together, as being one book, rather than merely an arbitrary collection of different books, and they were believed to somehow have an internal unity, a message, a focus or scope – so that the question of the key to this message would become a dominant hermeneutical question from now on. What does this book say, what does it mean, how should the church read this book, and who has the authority to determine its true sense, or perhaps senses?

Increasingly, the key to what the book really means was sought in the so-called *regula fidei*, the rule of what the church believes, confesses and teaches, in the form of doctrine, the *regula veritatis* or rule of truth, and whenever conflicts of interpretation arose believers looked to structures of authoritative teaching in the church to solve these conflicts by official interpretation and teaching, often leading to the official rejection of what was seen as false teaching and false teachers. The Bible became increasingly used as source for the official church to prove its authoritative doctrines and teaching.

The early Church

During the early centuries, moral instruction provided a major reason for reading the Biblical Scriptures. Appeals were practical and direct, and whenever needed, the methods of allegorical interpretation (finding hidden, spiritual meaning behind the literal and historical words) or typological interpretation (seeing the New Testament and the church foreshadowed in Old Testament figures, institutions and practices) were already available and at hand in Jewish practices and contemporary culture to be employed. The Catechetical School of Alexandria in Egypt, for example, became famous as home of the allegorical or spiritual interpretation by figures like Clement of Alexandria and Origen, while further to the east, the School of Antioch practised its more literal and historical exegesis.

The Middle Ages

During the Middle Ages, in the Latin-speaking western Empire, developments took place in three different social locations, namely the monasteries, the cathedral schools and the medieval universities.

From the sixth into the twelfth centuries, it was in the *monasteries* where “the torch of learning was kept alight” because Biblical learning and reading was kept alive, while education and scholarship suffered neglect and even destruction, together with towns, libraries, books and culture. The monastic tradition of spiritual reading for the edification of the soul through contemplation and discipleship called *lectio divina* or *sacra pagina* developed, involving the rhythm of threefold spiritual practices of reading, contemplation and prayer. During these practices the notion of the four senses of Scripture came to full employ – offering literal (historical and literary), allegorical (doctrinal), moral (exemplary) and anagogical (salvific) meanings. The works of celebrated preachers and commentators (like Gregory the Great and the Venerable Bede) were collected to form an accumulative and authoritative tradition of exposition, informing these practices of spiritual reading. The love of learning and the desire for God became closely inter-related – and for those who could not read there was the teaching through liturgy and art, deeply shaping and nourishing the popular imagination.

Since the ninth century, however, education was also becoming more public, books were copied (with the help of a new form of handwriting) and became increasingly available, new copies of classical and pagan texts were commented upon and gradually the *cathedrals* in the larger towns and cities were challenged to open *schools* for the education of the clergy, to serve the growing public demand for reading and knowledge. Here a scholastic way of reading the Bible developed, different in purpose and method from the monasteries, so that by the twelfth century two kinds of schools co-existed in different social locations, each with its own traditions of reading and interpretation – monasteries for monks and cathedral schools for clerics. In the schools several material processes were at work that would fundamentally influence and in many ways change practices of interpretation – glosses in the margins of the manuscripts increasingly developed into commentaries and finally into a whole corpus of official comments and opinions from authoritative authors; a method of question

and answer, called *disputatio*, developed as way of instruction and learning in the schools, making possible the dialectical methodology employed by teachers like Peter Abelard and Peter Lombard, so that the three moments of the *lectio divina* were in these locations replaced by three different moments, namely the grammar, logic and rhetoric of the so-called *sacra doctrina*. The Vulgate (or Latin text of the Bible) was provided with numbered chapter divisions after which numbered verses also followed, making concordances and similar reference works possible, all serving more systematic study of the Bible.

Still, yet another social location was developing where centres of learning, founded by citizens of more independent cities, were established that would later become known as the first medieval *universities*, and again the Bible would be read and studied with different purposes in mind and therefore according to different ways of interpretation. By the end of the twelfth century it was possible for students to begin with a general study in the liberal arts, a *studium generale*, preparing them for theological studies, afterwards. Since the scholastic training was not producing the kind of skills regarded by some in the church as necessary for the work of the church, both the Dominican and Franciscan Orders were founded early in the thirteenth century, both concerned with preaching. Francis' resistance against many of the scholastic ideals and practices led to a situation where most popular preaching, often based on very literal understandings of especially the Gospels, was done by self-appointed and untrained preachers. The Dominican Order of Preachers was therefore set up to combat what they regarded as an uncontrolled spread of heresies. The different orders set up their own centres of training or houses of study in the vicinity of and sometimes even as part of the schools and the universities, a practice that would become increasingly popular after the Reformation. By that time Protestant denominations founded their own seminaries, either separate from or collaborating with, universities, but always with a double-vision understanding of doing theology – for the church but in the academy. This included study of the Bible according to changing scholarly climates, approaches and methodologies, but simultaneously intended to be in the service of the church and its ministry and life. With the focus now on preaching, a new genre of gloss also developed, namely comments and later commentaries for preachers, called *postilla* (or additions), providing

material useful for preachers as sources of interpretation of the Bible. At the same time, the Dominicans refused the translation of the Bible in the vernacular, thereby attempting to keep the Bible out of the hands of the common people, in order to prevent heresy, in the form of interpretation not officially approved by the church.

Renaissance and Reformation

The Reformation may be described as a next crucial period in the story of reading and interpreting the Bible, although it should be kept in mind that the Reformation itself was only, albeit an integral, part of a much larger cultural and historical process taking place. Already the Renaissance breathed the spirit of *ad fontes*, back to the sources, which involved a renewed interest in the original Biblical documents, as well as philological work, translations from the original languages, translations into the vernacular, and wider access to these documents for a broader public. Popular movements grew in which the Biblical documents were read, in spite of official prohibition, spiritually, meditatively, literally, psychologically and morally – for example the reform movement called the *devotia moderna* which produced Thomas a Kempis' *Imitation of Christ*. Almost inevitably, these widespread encounters with the original documents led to an increasing conflict between these popular readings searching for literal meaning on the one hand and the official readings of the church according to the authoritative and doctrinal rule of faith on the other. A conflict between Bible and Church was developing – with many incidents and episodes contributing to this growing tension, for example the fate of William of Ockham, John Huss and John Wycliffe. For obvious reasons, the invention of printing was a major game-changer. The Reformation was unthinkable without printing. As a result of the technology of printing and the industry of paper-production the world was changed. Printing conquered Europe and later the whole world, in the way Henri-Jean Martin in *The History and Power of Writing* describes this process, and in their own hands, in their vernacular, the Bible captured the imagination of many, it became the language they spoke, the lenses through which they saw the world, the strange new linguistic and imaginative world in which they lived. For the first time in history it really became meaningful to speak about “the Bible” in the singular, referring to one book in one physical format. It became possible to imagine a book with a single message, thrust or purpose, to

claim *sola Scriptura* over against the external authority of the church's teaching office and tradition.

The Reformers heard in this Book a message of salvation and they claimed the necessity, sufficiency, clarity and self-authenticating authority of this message. For them salvation was *ex auditu verbi*, received through listening to the promises of this living Word of the speaking God. The Bible was primarily a text for proclamation, the message of God's promises. In fact, their view of the church itself was based on preaching and the sacraments (as visible words) only, *satis est*, that was sufficient for the church to be church. For them the Bible was *viva vox Dei*, the living voice of Godself, the life-giving gospel of Jesus Christ. Biblical hermeneutics became something completely different from illustrating the doctrine of the church by using proof-texts and from finding a four-fold sense in obscure and difficult documents by means of spiritual keys obtained from elsewhere. For them, it rather became the existential reading of the grammatical-historical words themselves, hearing in them the clear and liberating message of salvation, for everyone to see in the central scope of this one Book.

For sure, there would be different emphases within the Reformation and even diverse hermeneutical keys serving as material understandings of the heart of this one message, but the radical implications for hermeneutics remained the same. A major break with the past was taking place. From now on, a heavy responsibility was placed on exegesis and Biblical interpretation itself. The Reformation marked the beginning of immense hermeneutical activity that would remain at the heart of post-Reformation church and theology.

Again, this would have major implications for the social locations where "the Bible" became read and interpreted. The major location was obviously the pulpits of local Protestant congregations. That is where the message was "preached and heard." In official theological studies and training, study of the Bible would also occupy pride of place, in universities, but also in the curricula and classes of the typically Protestant seminaries that would later become so widespread and popular. At the same time, however, the Bible was also from now on increasingly read "in and for the public sphere," so that princes, rulers, cities, regions, even countries could also hear – and hopefully obey – the "Word of God." Visionary interpretations, prophetic interpretations, covenantal interpretations all became popular as attempts

to show how public life could also be transformed in obedience to the authoritative message of God's Word, according to the self-understanding of the Reformation.

Enlightenment and modernity

With the Enlightenment and modernity the result was again inevitable. Once more broader cultural developments impacted dramatically on the way "the Bible" was seen and read. The rationalistic mind-set, historical consciousness and secularisation project would all radically challenge and also change perceptions of "the Bible" and hermeneutical approaches to its interpretation and use.

The *rationalistic mind-set* brought a flight from authority that would not leave traditional views of the Bible intact. Theological studies changed and different disciplines developed, each attempting to claim its rightful place in the academy based on scientific methodologies. Even forms of Protestant scholasticism developed, viewing and using the Bible as final foundation, as inspired, a-historical, timeless and even inerrant source of knowledge claims, propositions and fundamental truths. In some later forms of so-called Evangelicalism theories of verbal inspiration and even verbal inerrancy became popular denying any need for hermeneutics and interpretation.

The new *historical consciousness* would raise particularly serious questions. The historical studies led to major advancements – regarding philology; the Jewish background; knowledge of ancient cultures and literature; archaeology; textual criticism; the history of religion; the authorship and editing of the Biblical documents; the history behind these documents; the growth and nature of the early faith communities; and in general, regarding an increasing awareness of and appreciation of the historical and cultural distance between contemporary readers and "the Bible." Taken together, the so-called historical-critical approach and its plurality of methods (for example form-criticism; source-criticism; redaction criticism; tradition-historical criticism; literary criticism; history of religions; socio-historical criticism) provided most valuable information regarding the past. For reading, interpreting and proclaiming the Biblical message in the church, however, these developments also raised many difficult issues. The Bible was increasingly regarded as only a collection of ancient documents,

cultural objects from a distant part, and disparate at that, a library much more than a book, an arbitrary collection of merely human sources, with fluid, no longer canonical boundaries, and without any message, thrust or scope, except for those projected onto it by communities of readers. According to many, “the Bible” lost not only its familiarity and its message, but also any internal continuity, coherence and relief as well as reliability and trustworthiness. To many it no longer offered divine promises of salvation, but merely historically unreliable information about a distant and not so innocent past. The religious value of “the Bible” was at stake, and in the eye of many, irrevocably lost. For some time in the late 18th and early 19th centuries, so-called Biblical theologies attempted to retrieve some of the Bible’s relevance by reconstructing some form of either Old or New Testament inner coherence, very deliberately at a distance from and over against any doctrinal and ecclesial claims, but soon all emphasis was on pluralities, discrepancies, discontinuities and accordingly scholarly specialization without any so-called hermeneutics of expectation or of trust.

To a large extent these developments, however, remained the preserve of scholars, so that a gulf of interpretation grew between the social locations of academy and church, respectively. Sometimes the same readers and interpreters lived in both these worlds at the same time, so that they had to deal with the conflicting assumptions and expectations of their own different life-worlds. The many Protestant seminaries since the 19th century, for example, would often be caught in this dilemma, the training took place according to the reigning methodologies of scholarship while those trained had to negotiate their own hermeneutical ways according to the confession and trust of their communities of faith.

The *project of secularisation* further contributed to the difficulties of modernity with “the Bible” of church and tradition. The immense authority and wide-ranging public influence of the Bible as the foundation of piety and religious practice but also of social organisation and life in state, society, community and culture came under fire from many sides. The plausibility structures that had once made this influence possible disappeared with increasingly secularity, in whatever way it was understood. Popular opinion changed, and from now on public opinion regarded religious ideas, convictions, values, claims and language with

scepticism and distrust, as inevitably leading to intolerance, conflict and violence. Appeals to “the Bible” no longer made sense or carried weight in public discourses, in fact, it was increasingly rejected as suspicious and deeply authoritarian, problematic and unacceptable. In short, joining forces with rationalism (thinking for oneself, distrusting authority) and historical consciousness (we no longer live in the times of Old Testament theocracy or New Testament empire) made secular democracy possible – and with that a radically changed understanding of the nature and status of the Biblical corpus. Its influence, if any, became increasingly limited to the private sphere of the private life of piety. Personal and spiritual study of the Bible continued and in churches the Bible was still read in worship and used in preaching and liturgy, but it widely lost its claims to being interpreted with a view to the public domain.

With that, some important roots of the contemporary hermeneutical scene are laid bare. In scholarly circles the collection of Biblical documents may be studied according to mainly historical and literary methods, like any other text from antiquity, with an impressive and valued cultural history-of-effects. In church circles “the Bible” may still mostly be read as a religious document with religious authority and function, albeit in widely different ways. In public life the Bible may sometimes, although not everywhere and always, be respected and appropriated as an important human, cultural and literary document – for example by authors, poets, artists, film-producers, moral leaders and public figures.

Ecumenical hermeneutics

One particular story from the 20th century could perhaps be instructive, namely a brief account how the Ecumenical Movement has tried to come to terms with the challenges of Biblical hermeneutics.

In many ways, the interpretation of Scripture was at the heart of the modern search for unity in the Ecumenical Movement. In the early years there was optimism that the one gospel that could potentially unify the divided church was available and clear in the Bible, if only read and understood rightly. They were therefore searching together for “guiding principles for right interpretation” (Wadham 1949). The influence of the so-called Biblical theology movement was strong. The expectation was that responsible historical-critical exegesis would lead to right interpretation.

Very soon, however, this optimism faded in the face of the diverse hermeneutical traditions within the ecumenical church. Many therefore regarded the report on “Scripture, Tradition and traditions” (Montreal 1963) as the most important ecumenical breakthrough. Scripture is the internal norm of Tradition, it said, but Tradition is the proper context for reading the Bible. This Tradition, moreover, was not a given or a possession, not a body of truths or decisions, but a living process, an ongoing event or history, consisting of a wide variety of activities.

Several other questions, however, like the diversity of traditions, referring to the different readings and interpretation within the Tradition, as well as the impact of cultural and contextual differences on reading and interpretation, were not addressed – and would stay on the agenda to haunt ecumenical efforts. A series of further consultations increasingly raised these hermeneutical challenges until the final report became known as “The significance of the hermeneutical problem for the ecumenical movement” (Bristol 1967).

Meanwhile, under the strong influence of Catholic and Orthodox thought, attempts were at work trying to solve the hermeneutical questions by means of authority – searching to locate instances and bodies of authority within the ecumenical church that could solve the issues raised by diversity, culture, context and conflict, in other words, also including what was now described as “non-theological factors.” Successive attempts were for example made to consider conciliar processes, the authority of the ordained ministry, the authority of teaching in the church, and the authority of the common apostolic faith (Accra 1974; Odessa 1977; Bangalore 1978).

Increasingly, “the authority of the Bible” itself became under serious discussion (Louvain 1971). The famous controversy at Montreal sparked by Raymond Brown and Ernst Käsemann on the unity and diversity within and between the Biblical documents themselves convinced many that “the Bible” was part of the problem, rather than the solution.

The hermeneutical reflection on authority therefore became hermeneutical concerns about unity – between the Testaments, between horizontal and vertical dimensions of the faith, between the church and the Jewish people, between Western and so-called non-Western churches. Was it indeed

possible to claim a unity in the message of “the Bible” and was the whole Bible useful and authoritative everywhere in the church?

As a result of two other major processes taking place in Faith and Order, namely the gradual development of the convergence document *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry* (Lima 1982) as well as the study project on *Confessing the Apostolic Faith Today*, a new and very practical need arose, namely to practise very concretely a form of “hermeneutics of ecclesiastical tradition” (Rome 1983) that could help address the immediate challenges of finding ecumenical consensus regarding these issues. These processes in themselves – and their far-reaching ecumenical fruits and remarkably positive reception – came to be regarded as hermeneutical breakthroughs.

Still, in the responses to these processes it also became clear that not everyone in the world church agreed with the hermeneutics that was at work here. The most interesting aspect of the critical responses was probably that it was no longer the (doctrinal and spiritual) differences within and between the traditions that divided the responses, but rather the so-called non-theological factors, namely the diversity of cultural, social and political contexts. Several churches in Asia, Africa and Latin America called for a new form of ecumenical hermeneutics, taking their voices more seriously.

From now on, cultural (or even better: inter-cultural) and contextual hermeneutics would dominate efforts at ecumenical hermeneutics. When the Fifth World Conference of Faith and Order (Santiago de Compostela 1993) called for a new and urgent study of ecumenical hermeneutics, the three main tasks were described as focusing on the many traditions, the various and sometimes conflicting contexts, cultures and locations, and the mutual accountability and discernment between diverse church communities. In the final report, published as *A Treasure in Earthen Vessels* (1998), the three sections accordingly dealt with a common understanding of the one Tradition, one gospel in many contexts, and the church as a hermeneutical community, or put differently, with tradition, context and reception as three integral aspects of ecumenical Bible reading and interpretation.

3. “Hermeneutical perspectives”?

It would be misleading to reconstruct this long history of reading “the Bible” in such a way that it creates the impression that these were successive phases that completely replaced the former ones. That would not be an accurate depiction at all. The reality is much rather that the earlier phases all still continued to exist alongside the newer ones. In different social locations, one could therefore still find earlier constellations present and at work, often even influential and dominant. In this sense, the story of the history of hermeneutics (like the history of theology) is different from the story of “the structure of scientific revolutions.”

It is however immediately obvious how these diverse views on the nature of “the Bible” gave rise to a diversity of conflicts of interpretation. One could claim that these hermeneutical conflicts were always at work – albeit in different ways – in and behind all these historical developments, phases and paradigms, although they received widely different solutions in the different social locations and the different epochs and traditions.

Perhaps the most fundamental conflict is the one with which this story started, the diverse and competing views concerning the nature of “the Bible” itself.

This leads to a conflict about the question who may (properly) read this Bible (are there privileged readers – for example an epistemological privilege of the poor? Privileged social locations or contexts? Privileged communities of interpretation? Does the Bible belong to the church? What about the many forms of contextual hermeneutics – Black, Feminist, Womanist, African? What about the criticism of empire, of different gender-criticisms, of post-colonial readings?).

Again, this conflict is closely related to a further conflict about what we actually do when we read (what does competence mean? what is responsible or adequate hermeneutics? to what extent do readers produce meaning, complete the texts, provide associations? what is the contribution of the readers’ horizon of understanding? what about reading against the grain? what about so-called hermeneutics of suspicion, of ideology-criticism, or mistrust, or deconstruction? what about the so-called democratisation of reading? should the hermeneutical focus rather be on real or empirical

readers, on reader-criticism, on reception-history? what about rhetorical criticism, looking for effect rather than meaning?).

This again raises the classic conflict between explanation and understanding (what is the role of interpretive interests? what is the role of so-called life interests? what is the impact of reading in and for different publics – church, academy, public life?).

This relates finally to a conflict about the responsibility of reading this particular Book (what about questions of power – the power to read, to interpret, to choose texts, to determine literature and context? what about the ethics of reading, the politics of reading? what about the Bible as “a site of struggle”? what does it mean to respect otherness – of these texts, of this tradition, of other readers, of other contexts?).

There have of course been innumerable scholarly attempts to describe the complexities of Biblical hermeneutics in more systematic ways, also in South African scholarly circles. The papers that will follow on this introductory one will deal with many of these issues in more detail. To mention only two recent examples, one may refer to two Heidelberg scholars from Reformed background, the systematic theologian Michael Welker and New Testament scholar Gerd Theißen.

In his essay called “Sola Scriptura? The authority of the Bible in pluralistic environments” (2003), dedicated to the Old Testament scholar Patrick D Miller, Welker distinguishes between what he calls “the fourfold weight of Scripture,” namely its historical, cultural, canonical and theological weight. In yet another way, this distinction serves to show that the impact of the Bible, including the ways why, where and how it is read and interpreted, will be dependent on the ways in which it is seen by particular traditions and communities of interpretation. The authority of “the Bible” will necessarily function in different ways in what he describes as today’s “pluralistic environments.”

In his collection of essays called *Polyphones Verstehen. Entwürfe zur Bibelhermeneutik* (2014), Theißen offers his own “hermeneutical program” which he describes as “polyphonic understanding.” He begins with his own account of the history of interpretation, his own view of hermeneutics during the Reformation and his own suggestions regarding the powers of persuasion of the Bible in the modern world. Against this background,

he then develops five dimensions of Biblical hermeneutics, namely the canonical (addressing the question why the Bible is read), the critical (addressing questions of hermeneutics, truth and method), the ethical (addressing questions of hermeneutics, goodness, morality and politics), the aesthetic (addressing questions of hermeneutics, beauty, poetry and imagination), and the theological dimensions (addressing questions of hermeneutics, the holy, religious experience and evolution). Again, all the essays together demonstrate how the many conflicts of reading and interpretation – why, where, by whom, for whom, with which expectations, with which effects, how – depend on very fundamental assumptions about the nature and purpose of “the Bible,” assumptions found in ever-changing traditions, contexts and communities.

“Transforming”?

Finally, the conviction that reading the Bible “transforms lives” obviously also rests on such assumptions and can accordingly also have many different meanings in many different contexts for many different people and purposes.

It may in fact be instructive to remember that the Biblical documents themselves seem to use a wide variety of verbs and metaphors to describe their own functions and effects. What is more, the church in its variegated history added still many other verbs and metaphors to describe how they experienced the power of “the Bible” in their own lives. The Bible, for example, reveals and unmasks like a mirror, addresses and speaks like a voice, comforts and heals like balm, provides surprise, joy and richness like a treasure, guides, orientates and commands like law, mysteriously produces new life like seed, nourishes like bread, strengthens like a source of power, provides new perspective like lenses, overcomes darkness like light, gives direction and helps on one’s way like a lamp, divides and uncovers like a sword, protects and provides security like a dwelling and home, promises and assures of safety like an anchor – and many more.

It is therefore possible to use “transform” in a general sense, as umbrella term that covers all these (and other) functions of “the Bible,” but it is also possible to use “transform” in a more technical sense, like the Biblical documents indeed themselves also suggest, to describe only one of the many effects of this Book on readers and their life worlds. Whether taken

in a more general or more specific sense, the history of hermeneutics tells many stories of how the Bible transforms lives.

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