ARIE W. ZWIEP

Biblical Hermeneutics between Text and Reader

Hermeneutische Untersuchungen zur Theologie
101

Mohr Siebeck

Hermeneutische Untersuchungen zur Theologie

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101



Arie W. Zwiep

Biblical Hermeneutics between Text and Reader

A History of Interpretation

Mohr Siebeck

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In memory of
Anthony C. Thiselton (1937–2023)

ὅσα γὰρ προεγράφη,
εἰς τὴν ἡμετέραν διδασκαλίαν ἐγράφη.
Paul, Rom 15:4.e

In hoc opera plura quaesita quam inventa sunt,
et eorum quae inventa sunt pauciora firmata,
cetera vero ita posito, velut adhuc requirenda sunt.
Augustine, *Retract.* 2.24.

A sentence is never not in a context.
We are never not in a situation.
A statute is never not read in the light of some purpose.
A set of interpretive assumptions is always in force.
A sentence that seems to need no interpretation
is already the product of one.
Stanley Fish, *Is There a Text in This Class?* 284.

One learns the game by watching how others play.
Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, § 54.

ἐκ μέρους γὰρ γινώσκομεν
καὶ ἐκ μέρους προφητεύομεν
Paul, 1 Cor 13:9.

De te fabula narratur.
Horace, *Sat.* 1.69.

Par-delà le désert de la critique,
nous voulons à nouveau être interpellés.
Paul Ricoeur, *La Symbolique du Mal*, 568.

that willing suspension of disbelief for the moment,
which constitutes poetic faith …
S.T. Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria*, 7.2:6.

Behold, now all hesitation is cast aside, and this reader – always nearby, always pressing in, always on the heels of the text – is placed within the text. A way of giving them credit, but at the same time, of limiting and controlling them.
Umberto Eco, *Lector in fabula* (1979) 11.

Preface

My fascination with biblical hermeneutics began in the mid-1980s, when, as a young theology student with more zeal than sense, I stumbled upon what was then enigmatically referred to as "the hermeneutical problem." Reading Bultmann, Gadamer, Thiselton, and others, I quickly fell under the spell of hermeneutics – a spell that has never quite been broken. From Schleiermacher and Gadamer I learned that interpretation is never complete; the historical study presented here is, I suspect, living proof of that seminal hermeneutical insight.

The work presented here to the English-speaking world is based on my two-volume *Tussen tekst en lezer: een historische inleiding in de bijbelse hermeneutiek*, published in Dutch in 2009 and 2013, with a sixth edition appearing in 2025.[1] It is a translation, an update, and the fruit of my continued research and teaching in the field of hermeneutics, now made available for a wider academic audience. The work has proven its worth in theological education and religious studies in the Netherlands – and far beyond. Readers from diverse scholarly disciplines and walks of life, including students, pastors, academics, both within and beyond theological and religious circles, have engaged fruitfully with its insights and I hope this will remain the case in the present work.

Unlike the common practice of sparing the main text from extensive notes or relegating them to some remote section of the book, I have chosen to make generous use of footnotes. The often-heard argument that footnotes compromise readability strikes me as a rather easy way out of taking responsibility for the claims being made. Readers are, of course, free to ignore the footnotes – except, of course, for those students for whom this work is required reading – but those who wish to follow the argument more closely or explore further literature will, I hope, find them useful. Wherever possible, I have quoted primary sources and provided translations where needed, drawing on existing versions whenever they were available and adequate, to avoid introducing my own interpretive bias through perhaps questionable translational choices. Where no translation existed, or where I judged an existing one insufficient, I have supplied my own.

A few words must be said in advance on the terminology I use. As a hermeneutician, I am keenly aware that certain expressions – such as scripture(s).

[1] Arie W. Zwiep, *Tussen tekst en lezer: Een historische inleiding in de bijbelse hermeneutiek*, 2 vols. (Amsterdam: VU University Press, 2009–2013, ^{6}2025).

Scripture(s), Bible, Hebrew Bible, Old and New Testament (or First and Second Testament), early church, early Christianity, Judaism, Jewish, Israel and many more – are contested, ambiguous, and often both value-laden and ideologically charged. I have made every effort to employ inclusive language throughout, though I cannot claim to have succeeded in every instance. Our existence is profoundly linguistic, and hermeneutics reminds us that interpretation is never free from the constraints of language – we are sometimes trapped by the very words through which we seek understanding. My apologies in advance.

I will not repeat the words of thanks expressed in the prefaces to the Dutch volumes but I remain deeply grateful to generations of students and colleagues at the Evangelische Theologische Hogeschool (Veenendaal) (1996–2004), the Christelijke Hogeschool Ede (2004–2012), and the Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam (2004–present) for the opportunity they gave me to sharpen my thinking and test ideas in dialogue. In the final stages of this project I profited greatly from a generous period of study leave (2025–2026), which enabled me to bring this long-term undertaking to completion. During this time, removed from (most of) the daily pressures of academic life, I rediscovered the joy of research *à longue durée* and found the intellectual space required for sustained, reflective scholarship that resists the temptations of academic fashion and short-term fixes. I hope the results will not disappoint.

I wish to thank the editors of the *Hermeneutische Untersuchungen zur Theologie* for kindly accepting this work into the series, and the staff of Mohr Siebeck, in particular Katharina Gutekunst, Julius Furthmüller, and Fabian Wahl, for their careful guidance and professional assistance throughout the publication process. I am also grateful to all those who have offered helpful comments and encouragement at various stages of this project; any remaining shortcomings are, of course, my own.

Needless to say, I cannot thank my wife, Cisca, and our children, Elze, Joël and Malou, enough for the freedom they have given me over the years to write this book. Without them, the project would undoubtedly have been completed many years earlier – but surely at the cost of my own hermeneutical experience. For the hermeneutical experience unfolds not in isolation, but within the texture of ordinary, lived life.

I dedicate this work to the memory of Anthony Thiselton, thereby expressing my profound gratitude for the inspiration he has given to me and to generations of students of theology and religion as well as to biblical interpreters and theologians. It is my hope that this study may, in some measure, reflect the intellectual rigour, hermeneutical depth, and faith commitment that so distinctively characterised his scholarship.

Oudewater, October 2026 *Arie Zwiep*

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List of Abbreviations

Where possible, abbreviations of biblical writings, ancient sources, journals, series etc. follow the conventions of the *SBL Handbook of Style for Biblical Studies and Related Disciplines* (Atlanta: SBL Press, [2]2014), supplemented by Siegfried M. Schwertner, *IATG*[3] – *Internationales Abkürzungsverzeichnis für Theologie und Grenzgebiete* (Berlin: de Gruyter, [3]2014).

A. Bible and Apocrypha

Gen	Genesis	Prov	Proverbs
Exod	Exodus	Eccl	Ecclesiastes
Lev	Leviticus	Song	Song of Solomon
Num	Numbers	Wis	Wisdom of Solomon
Deut	Deuteronomy	Sir	Sirach (Ecclesiasticus)
Josh	Joshua	Isa	Isaiah
Judg	Judges	Jer	Jeremiah
Ruth	Ruth	Lam	Lamentations
1 Sam	1 Samuel	Bar	Baruch
		Ezek	Ezekiel
2 Sam	2 Samuel	Dan	Daniel
1 Kgs	1 Kings	Hos	Hosea
2 Kgs	2 Kings	Joel	Joel
1 Chr	1 Chronicles	Am	Amos
2 Chr	2 Chronicles	Obad	Obadiah
Ezra	Ezra	Jonah	Jonah
Neh	Nehemiah	Mic	Michah
Tob	Tobit	Nah	Nahum
Jdt	Judith	Hab	Habakkuk
Esth	Esther	Zeph	Zephaniah
1 Macc	1 Maccabees	Hag	Haggai
2 Macc	2 Maccabees	Zech	Zechariah
Job	Job	Mal	Malachi
Ps	Psalms		
Matt	Matthew	Rom	Romans
Mark	Mark	1 Cor	1 Corinthians
Luke	Luke	2 Cor	2 Corinthians
John	John	Gal	Galatians
Acts	Acts of the Apostles	Eph	Ephesians

Phil	Philippians	Jas	James
Col	Colossians	1 Pet	1 Peter
1 Thess	1 Thessalonians	2 Pet	2 Peter
2 Thess	2 Thessalonians	1 John	1 John
1 Tim	1 Timothy	2 John	2 John
2 Tim	2 Timothy	3 John	3 John
Titus	Titus	Jude	Jude
Phlm	Philemon	Rev	Revelation
Heb	Hebrews		

B. General (Technical) Abbreviations

Technical abbreviations follow the conventions outlined in *SBL Handbook of Style*, 118–121. In addition, the following abbreviations have been used:

ET	English translation
FS	Festschrift
GA	Gesamtausgabe *or* Gesammelte Aufsätze
GS	Gesammelte Schriften
GW	Gesammelte Werke
SW	Sämmtliche Werke
KGA	Kritische Gesamtausgabe
KSA	Kritische Studienausgabe
NBG	Nieuwe Vertaling Nederlands Bijbelgenootschap, 1951
NBV	Nieuwe Bijbelvertaling, 2004
NBV21	Nieuwe Bijbelvertaling, 2021
NF	Neue Folge
NRD	Naardense Bijbel, ^{2}2014
NRSVue	New Revised Standard Version. Updated Edition
NR	Neue Reihe
OED	Oxford English Dictionary (online)
WV	Herziene Willibrordvertaling, 1995
z.j.	zonder jaar (no date)

C. Journals and Series

In addition to the abbreviations used in *SBL Handbook of Style* and Schwertner's *Internationales Abkürzungsverzeichnis*, the following abbreviations have been used:

ACTRCW	Ashgate Contemporary Thinkers on Religion. Collected Works
ADSup	Ars Disputandi. Supplement Series
AdvSem	Advances in Semiotics
AGNTS	Accessible German New Testament Scholarship
A*m*ST*a*R	Amsterdam Studies in Theology and Religion

APhR	Ancient Philosophy and Religion
Atlantis	Atlantis
AulS	Aularian Series
BCPh	Blackwell Companions to Philosophy
BCR	Blackwell Companions to Religion
BCum.SM	Bibliotheca Cumontiana. Scripta maiora
BEEC	Brill's Encyclopedia of Early Christianity
BENT	Beiträge zur Einleitung in das Neue Testament, A. Harnack
BEuph/ZLG	Beihefte zum Euphorion/Zeitschrift für Literaturgeschichte
BHMRG	Beiheft zu Historische Mitteilungen der Ranke-Gesellschaft
BJHPh	British Journal for the History of Philosophy
BMMLA	Bulletin of the Midwest Modern Language Association
BMW	Bible in the Modern World
BPC	Biblical Performance Criticism
BRS	The Biblical Resource Series
BSEU	Bibliotheca Symbolica Ecclesiæ Universalis
BsR	Beck'sche Reihe
BST	Basel Studies of Theology
BuRB	Budapest Review of Books
BVB	Beiträge zum Verstehen der Bibel
CCPh	Cambridge Companions to Philosophy
ChPC	The Church and Postmodern Culture
CI	Critical Inquiry
CLCLS	Cambridge Library Collection. Literary Studies
COQG	Christian Origins and the Question of God, N.T. Wright
CSBPh	Continuum Studies in British Philosophy
CSCP	Continuum Studies in Contemporary Philosophy
CTHPh	Cambridge Texts in the History of Philosophy
CTHPT	Cambridge Texts in the History of Political Thought
DDCT	Distinguished Dissertations in Christian Theology
DHSt	Dogmahistorische studies
DIBRAP	Dissertationes inaugurales batavae ad res antiqua pertinentes
DMBI	Dictionary of Major Biblical Interpreters. Edited by Donald D.K. McKim. 2nd ed. Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 2007
DNTB	Dictionary of New Testament Background. Edited by Craig A. Evans and Stanley E. Porter. Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 2007
DOML	Dumbarton Oaks Medieval Library
DoMo	Dogmatik in der Moderne
DS	Enchiridion Symbolorum, ed. H. Denzinger and P. Hünermann
DSt	Dogmatische Studiën
DSTh	Duckworth Studies in Theology
EAL	Early American Literature
EvangTh	Evangelicale Theologie
FCC	Foundations of Communication and Cognition
FemEnc	Feminist Encounters
FH Edition	First Harcourt Edition
FHAbh	Frankfurter Historische Abhandlungen
FMB	First Midland Book

GMT	Great Medieval Thinkers
HBInt	History of Biblical Interpretation
HCA	Historical & Cultural Astronomy
HCTh	History of Christian Theology
HCTW	History of the Church in the Third World
HdTh	Handbücher Theologie
HEI	History of European Ideas
Hered	Hereditas: Studien zur Alten Kirchengeschichte
Hermeneia	Hermeneia. A Critical and Historical Commentary on the Bible
HGMod	Historische Grundlagen der Moderne
HHMBI	Historical Handbook of Major Biblical Interpreters. Edited by Donald K. McKim. Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 1998
HHSS	Historia Hermeneutica Series Studia
HistHS	Historia Hermeneutica Sacra
IHRev	Intellectual History Review
ITRL	The I Tatti Renaissance Library
JAS	Journal of Anglican Studies
JLT	Journal of Literature and Theology
JMEMS	Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies
KCTh	Key Contemporary Thinkers
KTFS	Kleine Texte der Franckeschen Stiftungen
LCJP	Library of Contemporary Jewish Philosophers
LLL	Longman Linguistics Library
LLT	Library of Latin Texts (Brepols)
MASer	Middle Ages Series
MBSt	McMaster Biblical Studies
MEGA	Karl Marx Friedrich Engels Gesamtausgabe
MMAS	Münstersche Mittelalter-Schriften
Monist	Monist
MSPh	Modern Studies in Philosophy
Narrat.	Narratologia
NCHB	The New Cambridge History of the Bible
NewAcc	New Accents
OpTh	Open Theology
OrTrad	Oral Tradition
Patrchr	Patrimoines: christianisme
PHBI	Pillars in the History of Biblical Interpretation
Phaen	Phaenomenologica
PLL	Princeton Legacy Library
RHAW	Routledge History of the Ancient World
RPhen	Research in Phenomenology
RPhG	Routledge Philosophy Guidebook
RPMS	Routledge Philosophical Mind Series
RRRCT	Retrieval & Renewal Ressourcement in Catholic Thought
RTS	Renaissance Text Series
SBCT	Studies in the Believers Church Tradition
SBLCPS	Society of Biblical Literature Confessional Perspective
SBLSS	Society of Biblical Literature Semeia Studies
SBLTT	Society of Biblical Literature Texts and Translations

Schrift	Schrift. Tijdschrift over de bijbel
SCGST	Studies in Contemporary German Social Thought
SCRR	Studies in Critical Research on Religion
SCT	Studies in Continental Thought
SDSSRL	Studies in the Dead Sea Scrolls and Related Literature
SECT	Sources of Early Christian Thought
SEMEC	Studies in Early Modern European Culture
SHR	Studies in the Histories of Religion
SHS	Scripture and Hermeneutics Series
Soteria	Soteria
SPip	Serie Piper
SR/C	Studies in Rhetoric/Communication
StBL	Studies in Biblical Literature
StRB	Studies in Rewritten Bible
STRS	Studien und Texte zur Religionsgeschichtlichen Schule
SUNYIPCT	SUNY Series Intersections Philosophy and Critical Theory
TBomp	Tascabili Bompiani. Milan
UNCSGLL	UNC Studies in the Germanic Languages and Literatures
VAWJ.P	Veröffentlichungen der Akademie für die Wissenschaft des Judentums. Philosophische Sektion
Vivarium	Vivarium
VMPIG	Veröffentlichungen des Max-Planck-Instituts für Geschichte
VPT	Voices in Performance and Text
WStPhL	Warwick Studies in Philosophy and Literature
WW	Wort und Wissen

Introduction

1. The Bible as a Contested Text: Setting the Stage

In a world saturated with signs, slogans, and social media messages, the most powerful statements are sometimes those that say nothing at all. In Moscow's Red Square in early March 2022 shortly after Russia invaded Ukraine on 24 February of that year, anti-war protesters held signs boldly declaring "No War." But once the Kremlin began its crackdown on dissent – and as that repression intensified – these messages were replaced – first by cryptic strings of asterisks like *** ******, a veiled reference to "нет войне" ("no to war") – and eventually by entirely blank posters.[1] To the uninitiated, these gestures might have seemed absurd or pointless. Yet for those who understood the context, the message was unmistakable. The silence screamed. The protest persisted. This moment powerfully underscores a simple truth: *context is everything*. Without it, signs are empty; with it, they speak volumes. This work on the history of biblical hermeneutics will demonstrate, I hope, that same point on each and every page.

The Bible is a fascinating book, one that repeatedly evokes strong emotions among both its most devoted supporters and its fiercest critics. For some, it is a sacred text – the infallible Word of God and the ultimate, undisputed standard for doctrine and life, to which every other authority must yield, whatever the circumstances. Among them are the familiar "Bible-thumpers" and charismatic sectarian leaders who skilfully bend Scripture to their own ends, moulding the text to serve their authority or agenda. For others, the Bible is a purely human collection of ancient documents, a relic of the distant past filled with implausible stories and questionable ethical views, responsible for immense harm throughout history and for curtailing individual freedom. A growing group, especially in our modern times, find it incomprehensible, not to say unacceptable, that people seek guidance from a book written thousands of years ago, shape their lives by its rules and regulations, leave their homes and families for it, or even sacrifice their careers – and sometimes their lives – for its sake.

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[1] Source: Associated Press, "Kremlin Crackdown Silences War Protests from Benign to Bold," *ClickOnDetroit*, April 14, 2022, https://www.clickondetroit.com/news/politics/2022/04/14/kremlin-crackdown-silences-war-protests-from-benign-to-bold/.

It is not only those who have never read the Bible, or have only taken incidental note of it, who share such sentiments. Even those deeply familiar with it – raised on its stories and shaped by its teachings from an early age – not infrequently suffer from Bible fatigue, or worse, turn away, finding its language obsolete and its norms outdated, and feeling either unable or unwilling to apply them in any meaningful way to the pressing issues of contemporary life. Consider, for instance, the Bible's seemingly uncritical acceptance of slavery, the subordinate position assigned to women, the harsh and inhumane penalties prescribed in its laws, its apparently simplistic worldview, or the terrifying apocalyptic visions of the end times in its final book. It is not without reason that the Bible is sometimes framed as a "text of terror,"[2] a "savage text,"[3] with a "troubling legacy,"[4] and its main character, YHWH, as "a moral monster."[5] There is indeed a vast chasm between the world of the Bible and the modern era. Can that chasm be bridged? And why would people today still make the effort to cross it in the first place?

There is no straightforward answer to these questions. As the well-worn cliché goes, much depends on how the biblical texts are *interpreted*. Interpretation is a complex process, shaped by a wide range of factors – some within the reader's control, others not. Text and context, author and audience, language and culture, character and upbringing – all of these, and more, influence how we read, understand, interpret, and use the Bible today.

The way people read the Bible has a long and complex history. Without an understanding of that history – a rich source of insight, experience, and wisdom but also a sobering record of how things can go fatally wrong – engaging meaningfully in today's theological and philosophical debates about religion, theology, and the Bible is futile. How has the Bible been read over the centuries? What philosophical and ideological frameworks have shaped its interpretation? How did historical and cultural contexts influence the way people understood its message? In what ways have presuppositions steered interpretation? How is it that different readers arrive at diametrically opposed conclusions from the same texts? Why has the Bible been read at all, in the past and still today? What guidelines or safeguards have been used to ensure responsible interpretation? And why do otherwise reasonable and rational in-

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[2] A term coined by Phillis Trible, *Texts of Terror: Literary-Feminist Readings of Biblical Narratives* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984). See Barbara Thiede and Johanna Stiebert, "Feminism, Bible, Texts and Terror: A Feminist Reflection," *FemEnc* 9 (2025): 08. https://doi.org/10.20897/femenc/16018, for an update of recent scholarship.

[3] Adrian Thatcher, *The Savage Text: The Use and Abuse of the Bible*, Blackwell Manifestos (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2008).

[4] Eric A. Seibert, *The Violence of Scripture: Overcoming the Old Testament's Troubling Legacy* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2012) (The Bible Should Never Be Used to Harm Others, 1–12).

[5] Hector Avalos, "Yahweh Is a Moral Monster," in *The Christian Delusion: Why Faith Fails*, ed. John W. Loftus, foreword Dan Barker (Amherst, NY: Prometheus, 2010), 209–236.

dividuals sometimes embrace the most absurd interpretations simply because they are in the Bible – or assumed to be? Is there such a thing as a definitive and authoritative interpretation of Scripture?

These and similar questions are explored in this overview of the history of biblical interpretation. This study does not examine how the Bible was composed or what its texts meant in their original historical contexts – those are the domains of introductory biblical studies and exegesis.[6] Instead, it focuses on how the Bible has been read and used: How did people come to interpret it in particular ways? What factors influenced that process? Where did conflicts emerge? What interests were at stake? What role does the reader play in the act of interpretation? And what actually happens between text and reader when the Bible is read? In contemporary discussions it has become increasingly clear that the interaction between text and reader cannot simply be taken for granted. Against the background of modern epistemology, René van Woudenberg, for instance, has proposed that reading itself constitutes a primary source of knowledge, distinct from interpretation.[7] This raises the

[6] Classic introductions to New Testament exegesis – that is, the process of establishing the meaning of the text within its historical context – include the following: Gordon D. Fee, *New Testament Exegesis: A Handbook for Students and Pastors* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1983, [3]2002); Dutch: *Exegese van het Nieuwe Testament: Een praktische handleiding*, trans. Marco Rotman and Arend Haverhoek, EvangTh 5 (Zoetermeer: Boekencentrum, 2001, [2]2007); Udo Schnelle, *Einführung in die neutestamentliche Exegese*, UTB 1253 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1983, [7]2008); Max-Alain Chevallier, *L'Exégèse du Nouveau Testament: Initiation à la méthode*, MoBi (Geneva: Labor et Fides, 1984, [2]1985); Wilhelm Egger, *Methodenlehre zum Neuen Testament: Einführung in linguistische und historisch-kritische Methoden* (Freiburg im Breisgau: Herder, 1987, [5]1999); ET *How to Read the New Testament: An Introduction to Linguistic and Historical-Critical Methodology*, ed. and introd. Hendrikus Boers, trans. Peter Heinegg (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1996); Frederick W. Danker, *Multipurpose Tools for Bible Study* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1993, [2]2003); Frans van Segbroeck, *Het Nieuwe Testament lezen: Achtergronden-methoden-hulpmiddelen* (Leuven: Acco, Vlaamse Bijbelstichting; 's Hertogenbosch: Katholieke Bijbelstichting, 1993); Joel B. Green, ed., *Hearing the New Testament: Strategies for Interpretation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans; Carlisle: Paternoster, 1995, [2]2010); Wim Weren, *Vensters op Jezus: Methoden in de uitleg van de evangeliën* (Zoetermeer: Meinema, 1998, [2]1999); ET *Mirrors on Jesus: Methods in Gospel Exegesis*, trans. John Bowden (London: SCM, 1999); Stanley E. Porter, ed., *A Handbook to the Exegesis of the New Testament*, NTTS 25 (Leiden: Brill, 1997; repr. Boston: Brill Academic, 2002); Martin Ebner and Bernhard Heininger, *Exegese des Neuen Testaments: Ein Arbeitsbuch für Lehre und Praxis*, UTB 2677 (Paderborn: Schöningh, 2005, [4]2018); David A. Holgate and Rachel Starr, *SCM Studyguide to Biblical Hermeneutics* (London: SCM, 2006); Christian Grappe, *Manuel d'exégèse du Nouveau Testament*, MoBi 79 (Geneva: Labor et Fides, 2023). For Old Testament exegesis, I refer to the work of Eep Talstra, *Oude en nieuwe lezers: Een inleiding in de methoden van uitleg van het Oude Testament*, Ontwerpen 2 (Kampen: Kok, 2002), and idem, *De Bijbel als biografie van God en mensen: Geschiedenis en hergebruik van teksten* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2024).

[7] René van Woudenberg, *The Epistemology of Reading and Interpretation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022). See my review of his work in *NedTT* 77/2 (2023): 127–128.

question whether the interaction between text and reader, so central to hermeneutics, should not be analysed at a more fundamental level. Such questions make it necessary, before proceeding further, to clarify what exactly is meant by "biblical hermeneutics" and how the term will be used in this study.[8]

2. Biblical Hermeneutics: Defining the Term

Before we proceed it is important to clarify both components of the term *biblical hermeneutics*. Let me begin with the word *biblical*. In theological and ecclesiastical discourse this term often carries more weight than a mere reference to something found in the Bible – much more than saying that something appears in a newspaper or is posted on a bulletin board. When something is described as biblical, it frequently implies a normative or evaluative claim – not merely that it appears in the Bible but that it carries authority, or at the very least, deserves to be taken seriously. In this context *biblical* stands in contrast to *unbiblical*, a label often used to dismiss or discredit alternative viewpoints.

For example, when someone says "Infant baptism is a completely unbiblical practice,"[9] a tone of disapproval is conveyed. The speaker in this particular case – a relative of the Dutch novelist Maarten 't Hart, who in the 1960s was rebaptised on biblical grounds in a swimming pool in Schiedam, the Netherlands – does not simply suggest that the Bible says nothing about the topic. Rather, it is implied that the practice of infant baptism contradicts biblical teachings, or even that it is condemnable.

Outside of church circles the term *biblical* often takes on a different meaning. It is sometimes associated with terms like old-fashioned, quaint, or outdated – each carrying its own particular connotations. Dutch parents who in earlier times wanted to provide their children with a solid Protestant upbringing would send them to the *School with the Bible*,[10] a term that still evokes

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[8] I am first and foremost concerned with the interaction between text and reader or, in the words of Paul Ricoeur, with understanding "in front of the text" (*devant le texte*). Cf. Paul Ricoeur, "De l'interprétation" (1983), in *Du texte à l'action: Essais d'herméneutique II*, Points 377 (Paris: Seuil, 1986), 36: "Se comprendre, c'est se comprendre *devant le texte* et recevoir de lui les conditions d'un soi autre que le moi qui vient à la lecture" [italics his]; ET *From Text to Action: Essays on Hermeneutics II*, NUSPhEPh, trans. Kathleen Blamey and John B. Thompson, Foreword by Richard Kearney (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1991, [2]2007), 17: "To understand oneself is to understand oneself as one confronts the text and to receive from it the conditions for a self other than that which first undertakes the reading"; idem, "La fonction herméneutique de la distanciation" (1975), in *Du texte à l'action*, 129–131 (Se comprendre devant l'oeuvre); ET 87–88 (Self-understanding in front of the Work).

[9] Maarten 't Hart, *Wie God verlaat heeft niets te vrezen: De Schrift betwist* (Amsterdam: Arbeiderspers, 1997), 148–149: "De babydoop is een volledig onbijbelse praktijk."

[10] See George Harinck and Gerrit Schutte, eds., *De school met de bijbel: Christelijk onderwijs in de negentiende eeuw*, JGNP 14 (Zoetermeer: Meinema, 2006).

associations with a bygone era, especially among Protestant churchgoers, ranging from positive to negative. When a major natural disaster occurs people often quickly refer to it as a disaster of biblical proportions, meaning an event that dramatically exceeds the normal course of events on an extreme scale. In all of these cases the term biblical evokes some kind of value judgement, whether positive, negative, or somewhere in between.

In other instances, however, the designation biblical is used in a more neutral sense, for example, when biblical history is compared to general history, or when biblical hermeneutics is contrasted with philosophical or legal hermeneutics. In these cases the term is descriptive rather than normative or evaluative, simply designating the specific field under investigation: the Bible. Of course, even then it is not a value-neutral, unequivocal term. For one person it refers to the Christian Bible. For another the Jewish Bible. And within the Christian tradition the number of books regarded as part of the biblical canon varies – with the Roman Catholic church accepting more writings than Protestant churches, and Coptic Christians maintaining a slightly different list of canonical books than both Protestants and Catholics. In other words, different communities work with different Bibles.[11]

Considering these differences and nuances of meaning this study adopts the second, descriptive sense of the word biblical as much as possible: biblical hermeneutics is hermeneutics concerned with the Bible. This approach does not exclude discussions about the authority and normativity of the Bible but the starting point remains the Bible in its concrete historical context.

Now, the term *hermeneutics*. Hermeneutics is derived from the Greek verb ἑρμηνεύω, which has at least three meanings. It can mean (1) "to formulate, to articulate," (2) "to translate" (from one language to another), and (3) "to explain or clarify," often regarding unclear passages in poetic literature.[12]

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[11] James A. Sanders, "The Stabilization of the Tanak," in *A History of Biblical Interpretation*, vol. 1: *The Ancient Period*, ed. Alan J. Hauser and Duane F. Watson (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 244: "Whenever one speaks of canon, one must state clearly which community's canon is being discussed, Jewish or Christian, and, within that community, which subgroup's canon one has in mind."

[12] LSJ 690 + Suppl. 133; Johannes Behm, ἑρμηνεύω κτλ., *ThWNT* 2 (1935), 659–662 (*TDNT* 2:661–666); BDAG 393; Franco Montanari, *The Brill Dictionary of Ancient Greek*, ed. Madeleine Goh and Chad Schroeder, under the auspices of the Center for Hellenic Studies, Harvard University (Leiden: Brill, 2015), 821. The meaning "to formulate, to articulate" is found, among others, in Plato, *Leg.* 12.966b; LCL 192:558–559 (Bury): "(the laws must) be capable both of expounding it in word (λόγῳ τε ἱκανοὺς ἑρμηνεύειν εἶναι) and conforming to it in deed." The meaning "to translate" is found in Xenophon, *Anab.* 5.4.5; LCL 90:406–407 (Brownson and Dillery): ἔλεξε Ξενοφῶν, "Xenophon spoke as follows, Timesitheus acting as interpreter (ἡρμήνευε δὲ Τιμησίθεος)." The meaning "to explain, to clarify" is found in Sophocles, *Oed. Col.* 398; LCL 21:456–457 (Lloyd-Jones): "To do what, my daughter? Explain to me! (ἑρμήνευέ μοι)." For the complex history of words and concepts related to hermeneutics in classical antiquity, see Claus von Bormann, "Hermeneutik

What these meanings have in common is the idea of transferring something unfamiliar or strange into something familiar or known.[13] Hermeneutics is thus concerned with bridging a gap between two worlds: the world of the text and the world of the reader. This bridging task has long been associated with Hermes, the mythological messenger of the gods, who, with his winged sandals and magical staff, bridged the gap between the world of the gods on Mount Olympus and the earthly realm, making known the will of the gods to mortals on earth.[14] The first-century historian Diodorus of Sicily (ca. 90 BCE–ca. 30 CE) went even a few steps further and wrote that the Egyptian god Osiris had entrusted Hermes with the extraordinary task of organising social and civic life. Diodorus wrote:

> The one most highly honoured by him [= Osiris] was Hermes, who was endowed with unusual ingenuity for devising things capable of improving the social life of man. It was by Hermes, for instance, according to them [= the Egyptians], that the common language of mankind was first further articulated, and that many objects which were still nameless received an appellation, that the alphabet was invented, and that ordinances regarding the honours and offerings due to the gods were duly established; he was the first also to observe the orderly arrangement of the stars and the harmony of the musical sounds and their nature, to establish a wrestling school, and to give thought to the rhythmical movement of the human body and its proper development. He also made a lyre and gave it three strings, imitating the seasons of the year; for he adopted three tones, a high, a low, and a medium; the high from the summer, the low from the winter, and the medium from the spring.[15] The

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I: Philosophisch-theologisch," *TRE* 15 (1986), 108–112; Jean Grondin, *Einführung in die philosophische Hermeneutik* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1991, ²2001), 33–40, and for a broader historical overview of philosophical hermeneutics: Thomas M. Seebohm, *Hermeneutics: Method and Methodology*, CPhen 50 (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic, 2004), 5–92 (The Development of Hermeneutical Consciousness).

[13] James M. Robinson, "Hermeneutic Since Barth," in *The New Hermeneutic*, ed. James M. Robinson and John B. Cobb, NFT 2 (New York: Harper & Row, 1964), 6–10; Hans Weder, *Neutestamentliche Hermeneutik*, ZGB (Zurich: Theologischer Verlag, 1986), 13–46. Cf. Grondin, *Einführung in die philosophische Hermeneutik*, 39: "Immer geht es bei ihr (= ἑρμηνεία) um die verständlichmachende Wiedergabe von schon Gedachtem." It goes without saying that great caution is required to interpret the currently accepted concept of hermeneutics from its use in classical texts (the infamous "etymological fallacy").

[14] For complications of the alleged etymology, see Robert Beekes, with the assistance of Lucien van Beek, *Etymological Dictionary of Greek* (Leiden: Brill, 2016), 1:462; Montanari, *Brill Dictionary of Ancient Greek*, 821. For what follows, I draw from Arie W. Zwiep, "Een kwestie van hermeneutiek? *(Un)zeitgemäße* bespiegelingen over heilige teksten en hun lezers in het spoor van Gadamer, Betti en Thiselton," Rede uitgesproken bij de aanvaarding van het ambt van hoogleraar Hermeneutiek bij de Faculteit Religie en Theologie van de Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam op 10 maart 2022, 22–23.

[15] Diodorus follows here the ancient Egyptian division of the agricultural year in three seasons, following the annual flooding of the Nile, viz. *Akhet* (the inundation season, roughly mid-July to mid-November), *Peret* (the growing or emergence season, mid-November to mid-March), and *Shemu* (the harvest season, mid-March to mid-July). See on this Juan Antonio Belmonte and José Lull, "The Calendar of Ancient Egypt: A Gift of the

Greeks also were taught by him how to expound their thoughts (τὰ περὶ τὴν ἑρμηνείαν), and it was for this reason that he was given the name Hermes.[16]

If we are to believe Diodorus, Hermes was a genius. His talents are comparable to those attributed to Moses in Jewish tradition, credited with similarly impressive achievements.[17] Although the report contains many improbabilities and historical inaccuracies and mistakes, the underlying idea is intriguing and provides a useful framework for thought. In this account Hermes (the messenger of the gods) is portrayed as responsible for regulating and organising nearly all aspects of social, civic, cultural, and religious life. He devised a common language so that people could communicate, assigned names to previously unnamed objects (that is, he introduced definitions), and taught people to express their thoughts coherently. This aligns closely with our modern understanding of hermeneutics as a foundational discipline.

Building on this idea we might even say that hermeneutics is an inherently social discipline that enables and facilitates communication between people (and between people and the divine). Hermeneutics helps us understand one another and keeps communication flowing. As Hans-Georg Gadamer, Emilio Betti, Paul Ricoeur, and Anthony Thiselton – four major theorists in the field – suggest, hermeneutics is a discipline that can and should foster tolerance, mutual understanding, respect, and patience.[18] In this sense, it forms an indispensable bridge between interpretation and lived human interaction.

In the New Testament the verb ἑρμηνεύω and its derivatives appear seventeen times, most commonly in the sense of "to translate."[19] One interesting

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Nile," in idem, *Astronomy of Ancient Egypt: A Cultural Perspective*, with Contributions by Terry Mahoney, HCA (Cham: Springer, 2023), 307–376, esp. 325–329.

[16] Diodorus of Sicily, *Bibl. Hist*. 1.15.9–16.2; LCL 279:52–55 (Oldfather).

[17] See, e. g., Dewey M. Beegle, "Moses," *ABD* (1992), 4:916–918 (Post-biblical Portraits of Moses); Gabrielle Oberhänsli-Widmer, "Mose/Moselied/Mosesegen/Moseschriften," *TRE* 23 (1994), 349–352 (2. Hellenistisch-jüdischer Heros); Joel Elowsky, "Moses," *BEEC* 4:676–686.

[18] Anthony C. Thiselton, *Why Hermeneutics? An Appeal Culminating with Ricoeur* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2019).

[19] (1) ἑρμηνεύω (John 1:42; 9:7; Heb 7:2); (2) μεθερμηνεύω (Matt 1:23; Mark 5:41; 15:22, 34; John 1:38, 41; Acts 4:36; 13:8); (3) διερμηνεύω (Acts 9:36; 1 Cor 12:30; 14:5, 13, 27; Luke 24:27). See Johannes P. Louw and Eugene A. Nida, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament Based on Semantic Domains* (New York: United Bible Societies, 1988), 1:405. The first two forms (ἑρμηνεύω and μεθερμηνεύω) appear in the New Testament only in the sense of "translating," i. e., translating from Hebrew or Aramaic into Greek. And διερμηνεύω is also used as a rule in the sense of translation (Acts 9:36; cf. the texts mentioned in 1 Corinthians, where it is used as a technical term in the context of glossolalia: "to translate (from an unintelligible language into a language intelligible to the listener)." Anthony C. Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, NIGTC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans; Carlisle: Paternoster, 2000), 973–978, disputes, by the way, the idea that διερμηνεύω in 1 Cor 12–14 has the meaning "to translate" and opts for "the power to put something into articulate speech."

exception is in the passage about the disciples on the road to Emmaus, found in the last chapter of the Gospel of Luke (Luke 24:13–35). In this episode the verb διερμηνεύω is used in a hermeneutically significant context. The narrator tells how Jesus, after his resurrection, appears to two followers who are on their way home, discussing the recent tragic events in Jerusalem – their hopes for a messianic revolution had dashed, and the rumour had spread by some women that an angel had told them Jesus had risen from the dead. Jesus then joins them and enters their conversation. The relevant text reads:

> Then he said to them, "Oh, how foolish you are and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have declared! Was it not necessary that the Messiah should suffer these things and then enter into his glory?" Then beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted (διερμήνευσεν) to them the things about himself in all the scriptures (Luke 24:25–27 NRSVue).

This passage has attracted the attention of biblical exegetes, theologians, and hermeneutic philosophers for obvious reasons.[20] It contains many elements that remain central to the hermeneutical agenda today: there is a text ("all the scriptures"), there are readers/hearers (the two disciples); there is an interpreter (Jesus). A specific reading strategy is employed, and there is personal application: Jesus explains "the things about himself in all the scriptures."[21] There are also obstacles to understanding: "Oh, how foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe …" And there is an existential reader response: "Were not our hearts burning within us while he was talking to us on the road, while he was opening the scriptures to us?" (v. 32). In this passage interpretation and application blend seamlessly, giving the old texts new meaning as they are read in a new context.[22] While it does not offer a formal definition of her-

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[20] See, e. g., Richard E. Palmer, *Hermeneutics: Interpretation Theory in Schleiermacher, Dilthey, Heidegger, and Gadamer*, NUSPhEPh (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1969), 23–25; John D. Caputo, "Holy Hermeneutics versus Devilish Hermeneutics: Textuality and the Word of God" (1995), in *More Radical Hermeneutics: On Not Knowing Who We Are*, SCT (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000), 193–219.

[21] In Luke's narrative, this probably must be understood to mean that Jesus selected a number of messianic passages from the Old Testament and then claimed their fulfilment in his person (cf. 1 Cor 15:3, 4 "in accordance with the scriptures"). Cf. Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *The Gospel according to Luke X–XXVI: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, AB 28A (New York: Doubleday, 1985), 1567, who is very reluctant to identify specific texts; Joel B. Green, *The Gospel of Luke*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 848–849; François Bovon, *L'Évangile selon saint Luc*, vol. 4: *19,28–24,53*, CNT 3/4 (Geneva: Labor et Fides, 2009), 446–447: "Pour la foi, tout est clair: les Ecritures et le sort de Jésus. Pour la doute, tout reste obscur: le sense des Ecritures et le sense de la destinée de Jésus. Maintenant, le suspense: *l'auteur ne dit pas que Cléopas et la personne qui l'accompagne comprennent l'herméneutique du Ressucité.* Il sous-entend plutôt qu'ils continuent à être lents à croire" (446) [emphasis mine].

[22] Palmer, *Hermeneutics*, 24, rightly points out that there is an undeniably subjective element in the interpretation and that something from outside is brought in to open the text.

meneutics, it vividly illustrates the kinds of interpretive questions that hermeneutics seeks to address.

Another text that has been at least as constitutive of Christian hermeneutics is John 5:39: "You search the scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life, and it is they that testify on my behalf."[23] Whether an entire hermeneutical theory can be built around such passages is debatable, but the concentration of hermeneutical themes in these texts have made them popular and constructive building blocks for Christian biblical interpretation.

What, then, exactly is the task of biblical hermeneutics? In 1654 the Lutheran theologian and pastor Johann Conrad Dannhauer (1603–1666) published a work in which the term hermeneutics was probably used for the first time in modern times in the title of a book, *Hermeneutica sacra sive methodus exponendarum sacrarum litterarum*.[24] The title immediately reveals what Dannhauer understood by (biblical) hermeneutics, viz. "a method for explaining the Holy Scriptures." Following Dannhauer, theologians and biblical scholars have since defined hermeneutics as an auxiliary science that provides biblical exegetes and preachers with rules and guidelines for interpreting texts.[25] A science because it seeks to offer clear-cut guidelines that prevent the exegete from making incorrect interpretations; an auxiliary science because it is subservient to the task of exegesis. Frederik Willem Grosheide, professor of New Testament at the Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam in the first half of the twentieth century, defined hermeneutics accordingly as "the science that seeks, discovers, formulates, and systematises the rules by which all or

[23] On John 5:39, see George R. Beasley-Murray, *John*, WBC 36 (Waco, TX: Word, 1987), 81; Stefan Koch, "AI ΜΑΡΤΥΡΟΥΣΑΙ ΠΕΡΙ ΕΜΟΥ (Joh 5,39): Zur Funktion der Psalterzitate im vierten Evangelium," in *The Death of Jesus in the Fourth Gospel*, ed. Gilbert van Belle, BETL 200 (Leuven: Leuven University Press, Peeters, 2007), 421–429; Maarten J.J. Menken, *Studies in John's Gospel and Epistles: Collected Essays,* CBET 77 (Leuven: Peeters, 2015), 251–270 (Jesus and the Scriptures according to John 5:37–47, orig. 1980), and the commentaries.

[24] Johann Conrad Dannhauer, *Hermeneutica sacra sive methodus exponendarum sacrarum litterarum proposita et vindicata* (Strassburg: Argentorati, 1654). See Friedrich Wilhelm Bautz, "Dannhauer, Johann Konrad," *BBKL* 1 (1990), 1211–1212; Walter Sparn, "Johann Conrad Dannhauer (1603–1666), Allgemeine und Biblische Hermeneutik," in *Studienbuch Hermeneutik: Bibelauslegung durch die Jahrhunderte als Lernfeld der Textinterpretation. Portraits-Modelle-Quellentexte*, ed. Susanne Luther and Ruben Zimmermann (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 2014), 187–197. In antiquity, Aristotle wrote a work entitled Περὶ Ἑρμηνείας, which was translated into Latin as *De interpretatione*, LCL 325:112–179 (Cooke and Tredennick); ET John Lloyd Ackrill, "De Interpretatione" (1963), in vol. 1 of *The Complete Works of Aristotle: The Revised Oxford Translation*, ed. Jonathan Barnes, BollS 71/2 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), 25–38.

[25] See Bormann, "Hermeneutik," 112–113, who places Dannhauer's work in a broader humanities and historical context.

certain writings can and should be interpreted."[26] In this view hermeneutics plays a modest role in biblical interpretation: it provides the rules of the game and steps in only when the game begins to falter. Exegetical analysis takes precedence.

An even more modest view of hermeneutics arises when its task is reduced to determining the application of the text. This definition has also a long history. In the seventeenth century the Pietist pastor and lecturer Johann Jakob Rambach (1693–1735) distinguished three different aspects (or *subtilitates*, skills or competencies, as we might say today) involved in reading the Bible: understanding (*subtilitas intelligendi*), explaining (*subtilitas explicandi*), and applying (*subtilitas applicandi*).[27] Many who followed his lead saw the main task of hermeneutics as seeking the proper application (*applicatio*) of the text in the concrete situation of readers and listeners.[28] This view of hermeneutics is often based on the tacit assumption that there is a gap between the text of the past and the situation of today, making a one-to-one application of biblical principles to another cultural setting problematic if not impossible. For instance, according to older translations of the First Letter to Timothy, elders to be appointed to the office in the Christian community were required to be "the husband of one wife" (1 Tim 3:2 KJV, ESV, NASB, RSV), which was often taken as a prohibition against polygamy.[29] But how should this apply in

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[26] Frederik Willem Grosheide, *Hermeneutiek ten dienste van de bestudeering van het Nieuwe Testament* (Amsterdam: Bottenburg, 1929), 1: "de wetenschap, die de regels zoekt, vindt, formuleert en in systeem brengt, volgens welke alle of bepaalde geschriften kunnen en behooren te worden uitgelegd." So also Bernard Ramm, *Protestant Biblical Interpretation: A Textbook of Hermeneutics* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1950, [3]1970), 10–11; Henry A. Virkler and Karelynne G. Ayayo, *Hermeneutics: Principles and Processes of Biblical Interpretation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 1981, [2]2007), 15–20; Jakob van Bruggen, *Het kompas van het christendom: Ontstaan en betekenis van een omstreden bijbel* (Kampen: Kok, 2002).

[27] Johann Jakob Rambach, *Institutiones hermeneuticae sacrae variis observationibus copiosissimisque exemplis biblicis illustratae* (Jena: Hartung, 1723, [8]1764). See Klaus-Gunther Wesseling, "Rambach, Johann Jakob," *BBKL* 7 (1994), 1299–1307; Christoph Bizer, "Rambach, Johann Jakob," *TRE* 28 (1997), 125–129; Marianne Schröter, "Johann Jakob Rambach: *Institutiones Hermeneuticae Sacrae* (1723)," in Wischmeyer, *Handbuch der Bibelhermeneutiken*, 713–727. Not to be confused with the eponymous Lutheran theologian and poet of church hymns Johann Jakob Rambach, who lived from 1737 to 1818. Grondin, *Einführung in die philosophische Hermeneutik*, 93, points out, moreover, that the term *subtilitas applicandi* as such does not appear in Rambach's work, but has become established through Gadamer as a (correct) characterization of Rambach's view. See also László Kisbali, "In Pursuit of a Phantom Quotation: Gadamer and Pietist Hermeneutics," in *BuRB* 8/2 (1998): 50–56. On Rambach, see further below, Chapter 8: Between Reformation and Enlightenment.

[28] So Gordon D. Fee and Douglas Stuart, *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth: A Guide to Understanding the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1982, [2]1993), 29.

[29] It is more likely that the text aims at a ban on polygamy ("husband of one wife at a time") than a ban on remarriage after divorce. See for the exegetical issues of this

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