


# The role of theology in the interpretation of the Bible: Towards a synergy between theological and historical approaches to biblical studies

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This article evaluates the origins, nature and role of historical criticism in biblical studies as a discipline and its relationship with spiritual or theological readings of biblical texts. It firstly analyses the roots, origins and nature of historical criticism that dominated biblical studies as a discipline in modernity. It then investigates a critical response to historical criticism in the recent renaissance of theological and spiritual readings of the Bible. In this investigation, it discusses how recent hermeneutical developments confirm that the two approaches, though clearly different, can function in a meaningful synergy to come to a more authentic and adequate interpretation of the Bible. The article concludes with an evaluation of this synergy, which is not about simply joining the two, but reflects a fixed pattern in which each one has a particular role to play.

**Keywords:** Historical criticism; Hermeneutics; Spirituality; Biblical Spirituality.

## Introduction

Modern biblical scholarship has been characterised by its extensive engagement with textual, philological, historical, literary, cultural and social dimensions of the Bible.<sup>1</sup> Among these, 'historical criticism' figured prominently, often used to indicate various methods in the interpretation of biblical texts.<sup>2</sup> The proponents of historical criticism required that these texts should be interpreted historically, especially in terms of their original communication setting. They argued that the understanding of these texts is decisively determined by the identity of their authors, their addressees or audiences and the function of their contents. Historical criticism, as the designation implies, tended to neglect the theological and spiritual meaning of its objects of research, preferring to focus on the original time and context of the biblical texts.

Gradually, historical criticism became the norm for academic scholarship in most of 20th century biblical research. Its 'canonical' status is best illustrated by the remarks of Hengel (1994:337) that the only appropriate way to understand a biblical text is to determine what an author wanted to express with his text to an audience in a particular time and place. Such a historical approach became so matter of fact in research that Brown (1997:35) remarked that it represents 'the common sense observation that readers of any book of Scripture will want to know what the author of that book tried to convey'. Biblical interpretation increasingly became a matter of tracing and determining historical information that would generate literal, contextual readings, rather than an understanding that inspired or illuminated the spiritual journey of believers. Such a focus on the historical interpretation of the bible is remarkable, if not ironical, when one considers how earliest readers of the Bible regarded the interpretive process incomplete without illuminating the spiritual meaning of biblical texts. Even though these early traditions carefully studied philological, literary and historical dimensions of texts, their relationship with the text by far exceeded a mostly literal approach as in historical criticism. They were predominantly involved in an existential, transformative relationship with the Bible and in appropriating its meaning.

1. Since the Renaissance and, especially the Enlightenment, the study of the bible included textual criticism that sought to recover the most reliable text from all the variants in manuscript traditions. It further encompassed source criticism as the study of sources used by biblical authors, form criticism as the investigation of forms and genres of texts and text parts, redaction criticism as the study of how authors interpreted their sources, canonical criticism as the study of the meaning of biblical texts in terms of their place in the canon, literary analysis as the study of the form of biblical texts, rhetorical criticism as the study of communication strategies of authors, social analysis as the investigation of the interaction between text and context and, more recently, contextual studies that analysed the power games in text interpretation. For a more detailed analysis, cf. Brown (1997:20-32).

2. There is no historical critical 'method'. It is rather an approach that includes many different methodologies.

**Note:** The collection entitled 'Christina Landman Festschrift', sub-edited by Wessel Bentley (University of South Africa) and Victor S. Molobi (University of South Africa).

Decock (2015) notes the following about the interpretation of biblical texts that established itself since the times of early Christianity:

Instead of the modern approach to go back to the meaning at the origins, the aim of the early Christian readers was to let the text become part of their context and so to let God speak through the text to the present. In those early centuries, theology had not yet been organised into separate disciplines, like biblical studies, systematic theology and spirituality. Furthermore, letting the texts speak to the present was not meant as merely imparting information or doctrines, but was understood as bringing about a transformation of the readers (cf. Jn 20:30–31). (p. 1)

## An anti-ecclesiastical position

Historical criticism developed as a response to the interpretation of the Bible within ecclesiastical contexts and to pre-modern exegesis of the Bible in the Middle Ages. It was critical of manipulative attempts to legitimise or authorise particular belief systems through the selective use of biblical texts in order to promote specific ecclesiastical interests.<sup>3</sup> Historical critical scholarship was especially hostile to allegorical or spiritualising readings of biblical texts. It sided with the Antiochian tradition that, from the earliest times, promoted a literal reading of the biblical text *vis-à-vis* the allegorical Alexandrian reading strategy of which Clement of Alexandria and Origen were major representatives. This hostility also resonated with the criticism of allegory by the Reformation.<sup>4</sup> Allegorical readings were regarded as arbitrary, fanciful interpretations that imposed highly subjective and irrelevant readings on texts.

This scholarly interpretation of biblical texts has roots in earlier times, especially, for example, in the Renaissance and in Early Modern criticism.<sup>5</sup> It can be traced to an academic study of biblical times that was increasingly informed by new data that became available to researchers since the time of the Renaissance. Investigation of the data by academic researchers was not given a warm welcome in both ecclesiastical and some theological contexts. This was, for example, evident from the response to textual studies of Renaissance scholars.

These scholars were accused of compromising the high authority of the Vulgate as the Latin translation of the Greek originals, with their *ad fontes* movement, even though Renaissance authors pointed out that the earliest biblical texts were written in Greek and Hebrew, and that the Bible should therefore be read in its original languages rather than in a Latin version. Renaissance authors also tried to promote knowledge of these languages, which facilitated the reading of biblical manuscripts in their original Greek and Hebrew versions. Also influential was their interest in and study of

3. See Aune (2010:1–2): ‘This largely unconscious way of manipulating a text provides divine authorization of the belief system that is read into it’.

4. Thompson (1998:32) noted that Luther did not oppose allegory completely, but a facile use of allegory that affected a responsible reading of the text negatively. He also notes that criticism of allegorical exegesis was not entirely new. It was debated in earlier centuries because of the trend to neglect literal readings of texts before their spiritual meaning was outlined.

5. See, for example, De Villiers (2003:19–46) for a complete discussion, and also the more polemical remarks of Linnemann (2001:23–43).

other early Jewish and Christian sources that were written by early commentators on biblical texts in antiquity. This included previously unknown or neglected apocryphal and pseudepigraphical texts. Renaissance scholars sought to reintroduce these texts in the interpretation of the Bible because of their historical value as sacred texts of various Jewish and Christian groups. Sociopolitical conditions favoured this academic ideal: with the colonisation of countries by colonial powers, travellers discovered ancient manuscripts in them that were closely linked with biblical names, places and texts and brought them back to Western Europe where they gradually became objects of academic research.

Despite criticism, the opening up of the new world and the subsequent discoveries of long forgotten or neglected texts since Renaissance times in it began a dynamic process of research that would stand in serious tension with existing dogmatic and ecclesiastical presuppositions and positions.

The process of collecting and interpreting these texts was challenging. When the new data were studied and published, church folk was taken aback to discover that the texts strongly influenced early faith communities and, in some instances, were even regarded as inspired and canonical. Religious leaders were unnerved by this negative impact of the new findings and academic research on their members. Tensions increased as these leaders and some of the conservative academics defended the churches against accusations that they neglected these traditions because of their prejudices or kept the information about significant spiritual resources in the early Church from their members. To overcome these tensions, church leaders defended the traditional positions of the church by depicting the newly discovered texts as heretical writings that were rightfully excluded because they deviated from the authoritative, canonical collection of Christianity. As a result, attempts were made to prevent scholars from publishing editions of these texts.

This was the earlier context in which the development of historical criticism should be understood. Historical criticism was concerned not only about the allegorical exegesis of earlier times that aimed at protecting church authority, but also about the ecclesiastical power games that were then used to succour tenuous exegesis and to vilify academic research that developed new insights. Researchers pointed out the hostile, anti-intellectual mindset of faith communities and their leaders who compromised the integrity of their scientific work. Historical criticism was for them not only about a consistent historical perspective on the Bible. It is also about a critical, academic stance and a rational approach to interpreting the Bible.<sup>6</sup>

An early example of this situation is to be seen in responses of religious leaders to Richard Laurence’s translation of 1 Enoch in 1821. The discovery of the long-lost text of 1 Enoch, cited in Jude, excited the scholarly world and drew much attention.

6. Aune (2010) notes that: The term “criticism” or “critical” (derived from the Greek verb *krinein*, “to decide, judge, evaluate”), refers to the use of independent reason in investigating the origins, text, composition, history, content, and claims of books of the Bible and to the ability to make informed decisions about authenticity and inauthenticity, truth and falsehood (p. 101).

The edition was so popular that it was reprinted several times. The third edition was introduced by an author who preferred to remain anonymous, ostensibly because of the controversial nature of the work. His anonymity is an indication of the hostile response to the publication of this pseudepigraphical work, even though it was then common knowledge that it had special significance for the author of the biblical Jude, who quoted from it in 11–14.

The anonymous author who introduced the third text edition of 1 Enoch did not hesitate to indicate that he was deeply impressed by the publication. He noted that the text of 1 Enoch gives more and better access to and insight into the historical situation in Early Christianity. He praised Laurence's edition for its important historical contribution to understand religion in this era. In tandem with his positive remarks were his concerns about the response to these texts. His concern, like his decision to remain anonymous, is a pointer to the firm grip of church leaders on academic research of the Bible. He regarded the negativity from religious leaders and orthodox academics not only as undermining the understanding of biblical times, but, more importantly, also as impacting negatively on the enterprise of theology as an academic and scientific activity. He lamented the threat to theology as a discipline, writing: 'how can theology be enrolled among the sciences when professors reason in ecclesiastical fetters?'<sup>7</sup> These fetters not only inhibited academic research but also withheld the faithful from understanding the true nature of faith.

In some further remarks, he indicated critical points about orthodox academics that supported religious leaders who tried to stifle research. He distinguishes between two types of theology. There are theologians who claim to 'seek Divine truth, weighted with a heritage of foregone conclusions, adverse to the admission of unorthodox facts'. In contrast, he added, those theologians who honestly engaged in authentic research sought to promote the pursuit of truth, needed to work differently. Whilst orthodox interpreters avoided data that did not fit existing dogma or that questioned doctrinal positions, the approach would be to collect even more data like 1 Enoch and other non-canonical texts. Implicit in this call for the study of more texts is the conviction that theology as a discipline will benefit greatly from more data.

In tandem with the quest for an openness towards previously unknown data is, as the anonymous author's comments show, the appeal to the rational nature of the theological enterprise. One notes the commitment to Enlightenment ideals when he reminds his readers that Protestants cannot disregard a book like 1 Enoch because the 'tenure of Christianity ... is continent on the appeal to reason'.<sup>8</sup> He points out that his understanding of the theological academic enterprise is in line with long-established scientific norms, and, specifically, in line with tenets of the Reformation. He notes (1883):

7. Laurence (1883:xlili–xv): 'There were several editions of this text, indicating the interest in its contents and in apocalypses.'

8. Laurence (1883:xliv–xlv): A rational quest is, on a deeper level, about 'the world for ancient manuscripts which may disclose the merely human origin of dogmas and mysteries ...'

It is important for readers of the Book of Enoch to recollect that we owe the Reformation to independent study of sacred literature, previously withdrawn from the people through the oblivion of dead and untranslated languages. The long neglected Book of Enoch now stands in analogous relationship with modern seekers after religious truth; and it remains for its readers to exercise that right of private judgment, to which Protestantism owes its existence, by impartially considering the inevitable modifications of faith involved in the discovery, that the language and ideas of alleged revelation are found in a pre-existent work accepted by Evangelists and Apostles as inspired, but classed by modern theologians among apocryphal productions. (pp. xliv–xlv)

This example of the reception of 1 Enoch indicates the hostility with which scholarly research on the Bible was regarded. This early remark further reflects a historical consciousness that takes recourse to the Protestant intellectual discourse. The anonymous author claims a historical legacy that legitimises a more open attitude and an inquisitive pursuit of data. The remark also shows how, in a rational way, arguments are provided for the need for an open, critical approach. Academic research should not only be rational but should also be conducted in an impartial manner for the sake of establishing the truth. The author refers to the 'human origin' of dogmas, by implication criticising his orthodox peers, ironically in terms of their own faith tradition that determines their aversion to the data. This observation reflects a rhetorical strategy: by claiming the ideals of an ecclesiastical tradition as authority for his theological enterprise, he was suggesting that those clergy who opposed it were engaged in censure and were, in fact, the ones who were unfaithful to their own faith tradition.

This early 19th century comment yields some significant insights. It indicates, firstly, the decisive importance of hard data in the form of newly discovered findings for the growth of scientific research. At an early stage, this confirms a key tenet of historical criticism that a text must be understood in terms of its own time and contexts, and therefore, should be interpreted in terms of all available historical data.

The above quotation, secondly, shows how this period of biblical interpretation is not merely about making these findings available for research. The remarks also point towards a scientific approach that included the development of critical research and reflection on the nature of academic research, but which also began to engage in conceptualisation about the nature and contents of the sources. One notes the need for the scientific enterprise to overcome established prejudices, to defend academic independence from dogmatic interference and to promote openness for new forms of knowledge. The underlying conviction is that this will also contribute to the transformative character and power of academic research.

One detects, therefore, a budding historical consciousness since the time of the Renaissance. The historical critical researcher is part of a particular intellectual tradition, which has deep roots in earlier religious discourse and which

should not be allowed to stagnate because of ecclesiastical prejudices and criticism. The highest priority is that academic research is about finding truth without being fettered in any way by external interference and considerations.

At the same time, the Bible as an object of research is integrated into a historical context. This historical context of canonical texts should be investigated comprehensively, without excluding relevant material (such as the pseudepigrapha) that related to the canonical texts. In this particular case, the ideal of biblical research is to illuminate and interpret all non-canonical sources that provide an understanding of Early Jewish and Christian religious discourses.

The focus on historical knowledge has therefore a different form of transformative power. Through such knowledge skew, dated and wrong insights into the Bible could be corrected and replaced by more adequate interpretations.

One also recognises in these remarks indications of another key feature of historical criticism. A key component in this scholarship was the demand for a distanced, neutral methodology that would do research objectively with a critical, rational mindset. This feature shares basic assumptions of a positivist paradigm of thought that was so prevalent later on in the first half of the 20th century: it was argued that exegesis should be free of prejudiced research and that claimed to avoid prejudices and presuppositions that would affect outcomes of research negatively, especially those that stemmed from ecclesiastical control and censure.

In summary, then, from an early phase, the academic study of texts from Early Jewish and Christian contexts was affected negatively by ecclesiastical needs and concerns, creating the space for historical criticism as a new approach by those who regarded these needs and concerns as a threat to critical thinking and, consequently, to truth. From early on, researchers began to distance themselves from attempts to subject their work to external controls and censure.

## An anti-theological position

Attention is necessary, however, for another, more intricate aspect of historical criticism that relates to its consistent historical nature. During the time of historical critical research, some scholars continued to engage in theological analyses, interpreting the faith implications of biblical texts. Over time, though, questions were being raised by historical critics about what was then known as 'biblical theology'<sup>9</sup> as an approach that wished to account for biblical texts as the revealed and inspired canon of Jewish and Christian faith communities.<sup>10</sup> Biblical theologians were criticised by these critics especially because their readings of the Bible ultimately mirrored their belief systems and often bypassed or

9. See, for example, Frey (2007:22–24) for a thorough discussion of the earlier forms of biblical theology that were decisively determined by dogmatic considerations.

10. As early as 1787, Gabler, one of the first proponents of biblical theology and a critical scholar, gave a lecture on 'the proper distinction between biblical and dogmatic theology and the specific objectives of each' (cf. Hasel 1972:21).

ignored textual and historical reality to which texts related. Their theological readings were criticised as ahistorical, harmonising impositions of subjective views on biblical texts.

The growing awareness that these interpretations of the Bible reflected more of the beliefs and ideological contexts of later readers than that of the Bible's original setting is eminently illustrated by the groundbreaking essay of Stendahl (1963). He argued that mainstream exegesis of Pauline texts was often determined by traditional Lutheran-Augustinian perspectives. He also pointed out the devastating consequences of such a theology through his discussion of the skew, prejudiced, if not dangerous, readings of the Law and of Hebrew Scriptures.

The racist nature of Western Christianity in Europe is often connected with such readings. Stendahl's essay inaugurated a new understanding of the law that would later be developed more fully in the New Perspective on Paul that offered creative and fresh readings of Paul's relationship with his Jewish traditions. As a result of this subjectivist nature of theological readings, some of the most influential researchers of the 20th century questioned basic tenets of biblical theologies and distanced themselves from them. So consistent was the growing opposition to theological readings that Barr (2005), one of the prominent authors in this regard, insisted that biblical interpretation must be fully liberated from theological control.

This apprehension about theological readings of religious texts can be illuminated in a new way from recent Jewish scholarship on mystical texts. Research on mystical texts has been influenced by the groundbreaking work of Gershom Scholem, the Jewish scholar, who radically renewed the study of Jewish mysticism. In a recent publication in his honour, the editors, Schäfer and Dan (1993:2), describe him as 'the greatest scholar in Jewish Studies of the century, and the only one who made a considerable impact outside the discipline of Jewish Studies', adding that he has increasingly become regarded even 'as one of the most important contributors to 20th century culture'. Known for his extensive historical work on ancient Jewish mystical sources,<sup>11</sup> he argued that they shared the same mystical experience, though this experience presented differently over a long period of time. In his historical overview, he described how mystical texts began with esoteric, apocalyptic texts in the Second Temple Period, are succeeded by the Merkabah speculation of the Mishnaic teachers in rabbinic documents and then also in later Hekhalot texts.

Scholem's influential and consistently historical overview of the various forms of mystical experience was later on criticised by Moshe Idel, another key figure in mystical research.<sup>12</sup> Other than Scholem, Idel insisted that a historical interpretation of mystical texts does not account adequately

11. Scholem (1954, 1965). For an appraisal of Scholem's position in research on Jewish mysticism, Orlov (2005:1–2).

12. Margolin (2007:41) claims that Idel's research innovated mystical research. For examples of Idel's publications on Jewish mysticism, see Idel (1996:27–57) and (2005).

for their mystical nature and praxis, and thus has limited value. One needs to complement such an approach with a synchronic and phenomenological reading. A comprehensive comparison of Jewish mystical texts with that of mystical texts in other traditions reveals that they share a spiritual message<sup>13</sup> about seeking 'contact, and even unification, with God, in an experiential and subjective manner'.<sup>14</sup> He specifically embraced the notion of *unio mystica* as unitive factor and regarded it as central in mystical texts. Idel's research thus transcends Scholem's historical interpretation of mystical texts. He wanted to illuminate the mystical contents and praxis of mystical texts, pointing out its transformative effects on their readers. In this way, he developed the spiritual or theological implications and contents of mystical texts. Other than the case with biblical theologies, his analysis did not assume canonical status of texts, or ignored careful historical specificity. At the same time, his approach did not lapse into mere historical investigations of biblical texts.

The controversial nature of Idel's approach to mystical research, and, by implication, of theological readings of religious texts, is further illuminated by the hostile response it elicited from other scholars in the contemporary religious discourse. Schäfer (2011:26), one of the renowned specialists in the field, attacked Idel's interpretation of Jewish mystical texts because of its theologising nature. His criticism illustrates not only his own consistently historical approach to mystical texts, but also his apprehension of theological readings. A historical approach requires, in the eyes of Schäfer, a non-partisan, objective and distanced investigation of the data that are being researched.

For Schäfer, a focus on the spiritual message of all mystical texts is ahistorical and, therefore, a generalising and tendentious reading. It represents a partisan, sectional approach to the data, which, he argues, seeks to promote the practice of, rather than reflection on, mysticism. He claims that researchers like Idel and his students reconstruct universal features of the mystical experience to serve their theological interest and to produce a new theology. Such a spiritual reading furthermore excludes those who do not share their perspective and do not want to engage in theologising about mystical texts. For Schäfer, researchers are first and foremost required to 'stick to secular academic research'.<sup>15</sup> Practically, this means a careful, close and historical reading of the data, which are, in the case of mystical research, individual mystical texts.

Schäfer left the door open for a unifying approach, even though he stressed that mystical texts developed over a

13. Margolin (2007:43) noted that Scholem emphasised the uniqueness of Jewish mysticism, in comparison with other forms of mysticism, whilst Idel's approach suggests that despite the uniqueness of certain mystical collections, there are phenomenological parallels with other traditions, including Christian mysticism.

14. Margolin (2007:44–45). Idel's research focussed mainly on the Kabbalah, but he argued that his own work was relevant for an understanding of Jewish mysticism in general.

15. Schäfer's (2011:26) quotes refer to other critics who rejected the spiritualising psychological interpretation of mystical texts by students of Idel that is grounded in a contemplative-meditative experience.

protracted period of time in many places in a non-linear, non-progressive way as a 'polymorphic web or network of ideas'.<sup>16</sup> Although he reiterates that there is still no consensus about a common denominator for these diverse ideas, he does not exclude the possibility that there ultimately may be such a unifying trend. That will have to be established only after a close reading of the diverse mystical texts. For him, a sound methodology requires that an ideal construct should not be posited at the beginning of mystical research because the researcher will then be proving what has been established from the beginning.

This debate reflects a general trend in historical criticism of the modern era, especially as it was being pursued within the context of institutions of higher learning where theological or faith-based approaches were suspended, removed from academic contexts and sidelined to practical and theological training in church institutions. In universities, it is claimed, scholars are required to stick to secular, non-theological academic research, whilst church institutions were expected to take over and 'apply' such foundational, academic research in their theologising activity. There has been therefore, within biblical scholarship, still a strong trend towards a consistent historical approach that needed to be liberated from theological readings of the Bible.

This debate between scholars of Jewish mystical texts illustrates the chasm that has been developing between historical criticism as a dominant scholarly paradigm and theological approaches to religious texts in the discipline of biblical studies. One example of the critique of theological readings that were determined by an understanding of the biblical text as a collection of inspired, revelatory texts is a remark of Stowers (1994). By the end of the 20th century, he commented on the results of his historical critical research as follows:

The more one learns and understands about the world of the Roman Empire and the Jews in the Greek East, the more difficult it becomes to imagine the Paul known from modern scholarship in that world. The Paul of traditional theological scholarship seems to have dropped directly out of heaven. (p. 6)

One recognises in this comment the resistance against an implicit reference to the role of revelation in biblical studies ('traditional theological scholarship') and the tension between human and divine perspectives that was also evident in the remarks of the anonymous author who introduced Laurence's edition of 1 Enoch. Stowers's 'modern scholarship' is in his case a reference to historical critical work. Such 'human' research is seen as providing true and informed knowledge of Paul within the context of the Roman Empire and Early Judaism.

It contrasts with readings of traditional interpreters that integrate Pauline texts in a theological, spiritual sense of

16. Schäfer (2011:23), once again affirming Scholem's analysis of various phases of Jewish mysticism (early, Mishnaic and late post-Talmudic).

the word. Stowers (1994) goes so far as to make a theoretical distinction between historical and theological research:

If I challenge the historical accuracy of some standard interpretations of the letter [*Romans*], it does not mean that I intend to denigrate the contributions of its great commentators. But my purposes as a *historian* of early Christian literature differ from the purposes of the *theologians and churchmen*. (p. 4, [*author's own italics*])

Key terms in his remark reveal the self-identification of scholars in the field by the end of the 20th century. Biblical scholars have become 'historians' rather than theologians and church people. They target 'early Christian literature' rather than the biblical canon as object of research. This quotation shows how some biblical scholars now consistently associate a theological reading of the Bible with ecclesiastical concerns and interests. Historical criticism is being regarded by them as a non-theological and non-ecclesiastical enterprise.

The validity of this position lies in its criticism of imposing ideologies of readers on texts. The critical issue, however, is that attempts to interpret the theological significance of texts that claim theological contents are criticised as illegitimate because of the institutional context and censure in which critical research functions.

Importantly, however, the strong claim is made that the significance of a text can be determined solely on a historical level. Historical scholarship is embraced to the extent that historical criticism is regarded as sufficient enough to explain the significance of the Bible. Johnson (2008) remarked that scholars of the letter to the Romans display:

... a confidence in the ability of historical-criticism to explain every aspect of the letter in such fashion that it not only is intelligible within its first context (something everyone acknowledges is important), but is restricted in its significance only to that first context. (p. 36)

Johnson (2008) refers as example to research on biblical texts by Jewett:

Jewett's massive volume will certainly be consulted (not necessarily read in its entirety) by members of the New Testament professional guild. His book will receive respectful but limited attention. This is not simply because its daunting length and complexity resist entry by ordinary readers, but because Jewett's relentless application of current preoccupations flattens one of the world's most powerful religious writings to the level of the banal and reveals how little theological passion and insight are to be found among contemporary New Testament interpreters. (p. 36)

These strong remarks are an indication of the difference of opinion that exists between those who want to approach the study of biblical texts exclusively from a historical approach and those who wish to interpret them theologically. For people like Schäfer, the difference is a matter of institutional location: the academic enterprise within a university requires a secular non-theological approach. In cases like that of

Stowers, historical approaches are sufficient to explain the texts, whilst theological readings obfuscate the meaning of texts and reveal sectional concerns and interests.

## A renaissance of theological readings

Despite this dispute, there has been a growing interest in the theological significance of biblical texts. Recent research confirms this trend, which is of special relevance for the relationship of historical criticism with theological readings of the Bible. A large number of theologies began to be published in biblical studies towards the end of the 20th century after decades of historical research. These theologies have little, if at all, to do with 'biblical theologies' of earlier times. They are, rather, characterised by their extensive use of historical critical insights. Initially, this trend was at work especially within German institutions of higher learning (Wolter 2008:426–427), but it is also notable in other geographical contexts.

This trend suggests that historical criticism has reached some point of saturation. In the eyes of many observers, the huge amount of historical research has brought about a bewildering fragmentation of the discipline where endless historical observations are provided. There is a need to account for the significance and relevance of all these historical findings, not only within biblical studies as a discipline but also within the wider theological and religious discourse.<sup>17</sup> In this context, biblical scholars, for example, consciously seek to integrate their work in the inner theological discourse and make it relevant for colleagues from other theological disciplines.<sup>18</sup> The new phase of theological readings is partially also a response to increasing pressure on biblical scholars from other theological disciplines to make their research functional beyond the mere historical and to engage in the ongoing reflection on the significance of the Bible in the religious discourse generally and in Jewish-Christian contexts specifically. Ironically, new interpretive strategies questioned the way in which biblical studies seem to engage in ivory tower scholarship that has little transformative power. Liberation theological, feminist, womanist, gender and black theological reading strategies explicitly criticised the merely descriptive, historically distanced readings of biblical texts that had no 'efficacious', transformative effect and that effectively protected the power of the *status quo*. These developments underlined to biblical scholars that its 'results have appeared barren to readers looking for spiritual meaning applicable to their lives' (Brown 1997:35).

It has been a long journey for modern biblical scholarship: breaking the ecclesiastical fetters on the discipline, it

17. Many examples of such theologies from various traditions and countries can be mentioned. These include Barr (1999), Carson (1997), Childs (1993), Dunn (2006), Guthrie (1981), Hahn (2005a, 2005b), Levenson (1987), Wright (1991), Strecker (1996), Stuhlmacher (1991–1999), Gnllka (1994), Hübner (1990–1993), Schnelle (2001), Marshall (2004) and Dunn (1993). For other examples, see the discussions in Rowe (2006) and Carson (2010).

18. See Frey (2007:13–14) for a discussion of the canonical approach (e.g. of Brevard Childs).

managed to illuminate the world of and in the biblical text in a most remarkable and profound manner. It is after all a characteristic feature of recent theological readings of the Bible that it fully appreciates and utilises historical research on the Bible. There is no turning back to facile, naïve and pre-modern readings of the Bible that sought to defend or promote dogmatic positions and interests. At the same time, though, there is a growing need for more than historical readings of biblical texts.

There is, then, at least in some significant contexts, a shift away from a tense, oppositional relationship between theology and history towards a more symbiotic relationship, as requires more comments now.

## A synergy between approaches

The above analysis reveals how biblical studies as discipline sought to transform ecclesiastical readings to account for and reflect solid historical work. This quest for historical work faced major challenges, of which opposition to and distrust of faith communities was only one. Centuries-long neglect of historical work had to be overcome. The quest intensified after major archaeological and textual discoveries (e.g. Qumran and Nag Hammadi) and the incorporation of insights from new disciplines (e.g. anthropology, linguistics, sociology and psychology), which opened up further research and resulted in a proliferation of activities. Given these major challenges, exegetes could spend a lifetime working on texts exclusively in terms of their historical context and nature. It is therefore understandable that the theological appropriation of texts for later times hardly figured in their activities, was done in a haphazard manner or was consciously delegated to others.

However, as the historical approach began to dominate the discipline, criticism was raised that it was dry, ineffective and escapist, raising the question, as Frey (2007:17–18) noted, to address the ‘question of relevance’. The issue of relevance became a moot point. Scholars who began to express the need to overcome a predominant or even an exclusive historical approach emphasised the need for a theological explanation of historical work. Some argued that a theological reading was not an option or optional outcome of historical interpretation, but legitimate and even necessary. Johnson (2008), for example, noted about historical research on Romans:

To concede that Romans is not systematic theology does not in the least imply that Romans is not profoundly theological from beginning to end; the interpretive task is not to eliminate the theological register of the composition, but to engage it appropriately. Jewett is absolutely correct to emphasize Paul’s concern for Jew-gentile reconciliation and his appeal to Roman congregations to adopt attitudes of mutual acceptance. But he fails to show how this horizontal dimension does not exclude but rather depends on Paul’s sense of the vertical dimension – how God’s intervention in Christ has created the possibility for a new way of being human. (p. 36)<sup>19</sup>

19. For more theological discussions on Romans, see, for example, Guerra (2005:1-2, 125).

Such an observation is a matter of acknowledging the nature of biblical texts as religious communication that had a transformative nature and appeal. The discipline of hermeneutics consequently investigated the relationship between historical and theological readings of the Bible, taking cognisance of the debate in philosophical hermeneutics. The reflections of Ricoeur on meaning as reference and Gadamer on the fusion of horizons made biblical scholars aware of the inevitable intersection of the world of the text and the world of the reader (before the text) from which new interpretations emanated. It was argued, among others, that interpretive activity should account for the *sense* of a text within its original context, but also for the *meaning* as the interpreter engages with its relevance to later situations. In the case of the Bible, this would mean that one is confronted with the inevitable question about its far-reaching influence on faith communities of later times and its meaning for exegetes in contemporary society.

A close historical reading of a text accounts for contextual issues in an original communication situation, which is a firm part of and prerequisite for the interpretive task. Such a focus would explain the function of texts in terms of their original cultural context. The process of understanding, however, involves more than uncovering the world of and behind a text. In their reflection on the meaning of texts, researchers have to consider their relevance for later readers, times and places.

This insight would illuminate the debate between Schäfer and Idel. Idel’s mystical approach has to do with the meaning and significance of mystical texts, whilst Schäfer’s historical approach relates to finding their sense in their many different historical contexts. The interpretive task insofar as it claims to understand a text, however, requires both of these approaches. The one relates to and even calls for the other. Given that so much historical and textual analyses have been performed during the 20th century, it is to be expected that the issue of relevance within broader contexts and their significance in the religious discourse will receive increasing attention. They are, after all, texts that had a major ongoing transformative influence on religion. This influence is explained adequately when their significance and meaning for later times is interpreted. There is therefore a synergy between a historical and theological approach.

The insight from contemporary hermeneutics helped to make researchers aware that a preoccupation with the historical, though necessary, is reductionistic. An important issue is at stake, namely, the genre of biblical texts. An exclusive historical approach may be quite valid within a context in which the aim is to determine a text’s historical meaning. Biblical texts, however historical in nature and contents, have been written and read not only because of their historical meaning. Biblical authors claimed a significance for their work that resonated with many later readers who read them for their religious claims and nature. They are integrated into

a world before the text for which they also have a meaning. Ritter (2005) stated succinctly that a preoccupation with the historical sense contributed to a devaluation of the texts, denying them any relevance for later times:

Wenn ich recht sehe, liegt ein Hautproblem historisch-kritischer Exegese heute darin, dass sie einen Text in seiner eigenen Zeit und seiner eigenen Ursprungssituation isoliert und ihn so daran hindert, zur Gegenwart etwas zu sagen (I, 109f.) [If I see it correctly, the main problem with historical critical exegesis is that it isolates a text in its own time and situation, thereby preventing it from saying something to the present]. (author's own translation)

This relevance and appeal of biblical texts mean that a theological reading of texts is a necessity. It does not imply abandoning historical analyses. A theological reading requires, in fact, that the text should also, and especially, be read from a historical perspective. Theological readings will, therefore, include and reflect on complex, interdisciplinary insights from disciplines such as linguistics, science of literature, anthropology and philosophy, narratology, rhetoric and intertextuality that relate to the original situation of a text.<sup>20</sup>

The challenge in such an approach is to account for strongly fragmented historical findings. Biblical texts reveal not only many different historical insights but also a vast number of scholarly readings. Wolter (2008) noted the essential affinity of Christianity towards pluralism, which is also true for scholarly work on biblical texts. He added that the quest for a theological reading of Christian texts can compensate for this fragmentation. A quest for meaning of these texts offers exciting opportunities for fresh and new interpretations of the Bible. Stendahl (1963:215) too refers to the difficulties of 'modernising' the biblical message but observes that there are few things that are more liberating and creative in modern theology than embarking on investigating their significance. Both the historical and theological are needed, and together they can innovate and promote the understanding of the Bible.

## A structured synergy

The previous remarks suggest that a reading of biblical texts that claim to reflect the communication strategy of biblical authors should by definition comprise a theological character. This is said without disputing the right of many other disciplines to interpret the texts in terms of other non-theological perspectives that are related to their own situation and needs. The postmodern religious and academic discourse inaugurated a dispensation that allows for the Bible to be researched like any other text from different perspectives and in terms of different power games. Rather than question the validity of some of these approaches, scholars are celebrating the way in which historical, social, political, literary and many other perspectives enriched and even invigorated the engagement with biblical texts. It should also be added that a theological reading should assume and build on historical analyses. The synergy between the historical and theological readings

<sup>20</sup>. See Johnson (2008:36) for examples of contrasting interpretations of Romans.

is structured in the sense that the theological aspect by necessity accompanies, follows on or develops the historical aspects of a text.

Ultimately, though, there is an important reason for the interaction of theological with other readings; the theological reading is required because of the self-identification of biblical texts. If one cannot ignore the historical condition of texts, it is also true that these texts have a religious, theological and spiritual nature and appeal that cannot be overlooked. There is good reason why its spiritual claims and nature should be part of the academic discourse. This means not only attention to its historical, 'human' face but also to the role and place of the divine, vertical and mystical. To engage with these texts adequately requires to acknowledge, understand and account for their own claims to be religious communication about religious matters. The spiritual nature of biblical texts requires that these texts should ultimately be read theologically or spiritually.

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