



University of
St Andrews

St Andrews Encyclopaedia of Theology

Biblical Hermeneutics

Richard S. Briggs

First published: 2 November 2023

<https://www.saet.ac.uk/Christianity/BiblicalHermeneutics>

Citation

Briggs, Richard S. 2023. 'Biblical Hermeneutics', *St Andrews Encyclopaedia of Theology*. Edited by Brendan N. Wolfe et al. <https://www.saet.ac.uk/Christianity/BiblicalHermeneutics>
Accessed: 6 August 2026

Copyright information

Copyright © Richard S. Briggs [CC BY-NC](#)

ISSN 2753-3492

Biblical Hermeneutics

Richard S. Briggs

Biblical hermeneutics is the study and interpretation of biblical texts, encompassing a rich historical evolution influenced by various philosophical and theological perspectives. The changing shape of biblical hermeneutics in Christian theology over the centuries has encompassed an implicit premodern attention to interpretative possibility, an explicit modern response to interpretative disorder, and a postmodern willingness to explore interpretative options and commitments. Rather than trace these developments historically, this article seeks to explore some of the key concepts that recur in different formations throughout this history. First is the need to define ‘biblical hermeneutics’, in which the word ‘biblical’ can relate to either the object of attention (the biblical text) or the nature of the hermeneutical thinking itself. Secondly, the key concerns of biblical hermeneutics are explored by way of categories that have been most prominent in the modern philosophical tradition of hermeneutics. This includes attention to Hans-Georg Gadamer’s twin focus on method and truth, as well as scholarship’s extensive preoccupation with meaning, and more recently with readings and readers’ identities. In all these cases there is a question of whether hermeneutics is a descriptive project or includes a normative or evaluative element, resulting in options for singular or plural ‘meaning(s)’, ‘method(s)’, and so forth.

A third focus concerns the ‘scientific’ status of biblical hermeneutics, asking whether it is rightly understood as a subset of general hermeneutics or as the paradigm case of interpretative engagement. This latter option was an implicit premodern perspective, revived in a new way by the work of Paul Ricoeur. Ricoeur’s own dual focus on hermeneutics as being both a philosophical and a theological project leads to a fourth consideration on how biblical hermeneutics may best be understood as being present in the life of the church. In one sense it is everywhere, but in another it is foregrounded at moments of interpretative advocacy and, in particular, conflict. The article concludes with a reflection on the gains and losses of thinking about biblical hermeneutics in this ecclesially focused way.

Keywords: Bible, Interpretation, Epistemology, Hermeneutics, Theology, Ecclesiology, Identity, Doctrine

Table of contents

1 Conceptions of biblical hermeneutics

1.1 Defining hermeneutics

1.2 Hermeneutics as applied to the Bible – an etic approach

1.3 Hermeneutics as shaped by the Bible – an emic approach

2 Key concerns of biblical hermeneutics

2.1 The meaning(s) of the biblical text

2.2 The method(s) of biblical interpretation

2.3 The truth of the biblical witness(es)

2.4 The identity/ies of readers and their readings

3 Theology and biblical hermeneutics

3.1 Theology as queen of the sciences

3.2 Hermeneutics as queen of the social sciences

3.3 Scripture and text: the special and the general case

4 Biblical hermeneutics in the life of the church

4.1 An implicit presence

4.2 An explicit advocacy

4.3 The problems and potential of an ecclesiology of reading

4.4 Hermeneutics and interpretative conflict

1 Conceptions of biblical hermeneutics

1.1 Defining hermeneutics

An initial definition of ‘hermeneutics’ is usually ‘the science or art of interpretation’. The etymology of the word takes us back to the Greek verb *hermeneuō*: to interpret, in a range of senses. In a landmark modern overview of the topic, Richard Palmer surveyed three such senses of *hermeneuō*: to express aloud in words (as when one offers aloud a ‘reading’ of a text, ineluctably interpretative); to explain something; and to translate (as from one language to another, again irreducibly interpretative; Palmer 1969: 12–32). The middle one of these three options – to explain – is straightforwardly interpretative in that it requires the re-expression of ideas in new words. When the thing to be explained is a text, then it is the rendering of one set of words into another that explains (or interprets) it. On this broad and traditional understanding of hermeneutics, it is all about interpretation, and then by extension it is occupied with self-reflection on the nature and purposes of interpretation. It may also then extend to the evaluation of competing interpretations. This hinterland of the clarification and evaluation of interpretations justifies the discourse of hermeneutics as something over and above interpretation per se, even if in common usage the word ‘hermeneutics’ can often be used interchangeably with the simpler language of interpretation.

Another way to separate the two terms is to recognize that most writers on hermeneutics are drawing from its philosophical pedigree in their reflection on interpretation (Malpas 2015). John Caputo has this philosophical bent squarely in view when he opens his study with: ‘Hermeneutics is the theory of interpretation. It is the theory that everything is a matter of interpretation. [...] It is a *philosophical* theory’ (Caputo 2018: 5, 6, original emphasis).

1.2 Hermeneutics as applied to the Bible – an etic approach

If everything – including every text – can be interpreted, then one option for defining ‘biblical hermeneutics’ is to say that it is the general project of hermeneutical engagement as practised when the text in question happens to be the Bible. This works well for technical aspects of paying close attention to biblical texts. Philological precision, for example, helps readers to clarify which specific words are deployed in which specific ways in a text (Turner 2014). There is much common ground here between those engaged with reading Plato and those engaged with reading Paul, though as will become apparent these tasks are not hermeneutically identical. Likewise grammatical nuance, narrative analysis, and the attempt to place a text in the historical context of its conditions of production can all work in largely comparable ways across biblical and other texts. Even aspects of interpretation that move towards specific theological questions can be parsed as examples of being a disciplinary subspecialty. Thus ‘theological hermeneutics’ can be

seen as comparable to philosophical or literary or legal hermeneutics in that interpretative questions are brought into dialogue with the questions and perspectives of whichever discipline is in view (Wilson 2015). Section 3.3 below will take up some of the evaluative questions this raises regarding the relationship between biblical and general hermeneutics.

It may be helpful to adopt and adapt the social-scientific distinction between ‘emic’ and ‘etic’ analysis. The first refers to studies that operate within the conceptualities present to those being studied (the emic, or ‘internal’, approach), while the second refers to analysis that uses criteria and categories exterior to the situation being studied, such as modern scientific categories in the study of ancient peoples (this being the etic, or ‘external’, approach). It certainly aids interpretative clarity to know whether any given approach to a biblical text operates emically or etically (Brett 1990). In these terms, to bring the external and general discipline of hermeneutics to bear on the interpretation of the Bible locates interpretative procedure as ‘etic’ – i.e. operating with categories fashioned elsewhere and brought fully-formed to the text.

Etic hermeneutics might best be thought of as disrupting the potentially smooth progress of reading the Bible by way of self-conscious reflection on interpretative practice. It has many benefits over unreflective reading, whether the lack of reflection pertains to overenthusiastic assumptions that the Bible defends one’s preferred theological convictions, or to overconfident assumptions that only one critical interpretative framework counts as serious biblical scholarship (Briggs 2015).

1.3 Hermeneutics as shaped by the Bible – an emic approach

A second option is rather less developed in the literature: ‘biblical hermeneutics’ that uses the qualifier ‘biblical’ to describe interpretative procedure that is characterized in some way by its indebtedness to the vision and ethos of the biblical texts themselves. The work of Karl Barth points in this direction, although his ‘hermeneutics’ is largely worked out in terms of being a theology of interpretation (Wood 2007).

On this approach, one would not bring to the Bible a priori the fully formed conviction that – for example – *‘a text cannot mean what it never could have meant to its author or his or her readers’* (Fee and Stuart 2003: 74, original emphasis), regardless of the merits of such a hermeneutical conviction (on which see, for example, Lundin 1999: 35–38; Chapman 2006: 182–84). Instead, one would seek to assess whether biblical texts themselves model the conviction that the meaning of a text is delimited by what the author intended. It soon becomes apparent that the evidence here is equivocal at best (such as with Paul’s reading of the pentateuchal wilderness narratives in 1 Cor 10:1–13). Such a conviction will thus be unlikely to become an axiom of such a biblical hermeneutic, even if the author’s intention remains one matter of interest and guidance among others.

What would be the more constructive path that a biblical hermeneutics shaped by the Bible – the emic approach – might take? It might, for example, seek to deploy wisdom in ways that are consciously indebted to what the Bible says about wisdom (De Waal Dryden 2018). Such approaches may be charged with a hermeneutical circularity, in that they have to read the text that allows them to work out their mode of approach, but this need not be a vicious circularity. Further, if one accepts that multiple rereadings are appropriate to scriptural texts, then clearly one need not have the hermeneutical approach fully formed for a first read-through. Indeed, there is the chance of a virtuous circularity in letting the text shape the kind of reader engaging with the text, as the Bible's concerns with character may shape the character of the one reading (Briggs 2010).

A more long-standing example of emic biblical hermeneutics is to let the New Testament use of the Old shape the ways readers interpret biblical texts (Hays 2014). Here there is the advantage that we have both the original (Old Testament) text to be interpreted and the resultant (New Testament) interpretation, although complexities still abound. For example, when Acts 15:16–18 appeals to Amos 9:11–12, it does so by way of the Greek Septuagint (LXX) translation of Amos, drawing on details that are not apparent in its Hebrew version. Even so, it is still a reading of Amos 9, and can be evaluated as such. The hermeneutic that emerges from this New Testament use of the Old Testament may not be best characterized in terms of methodology. Readers do not find a programme (let alone a consistent programme) of engagement that shows them how to read. But they may find a portrait of characteristics of such reading relating to reader, theological context, and discernment. It remains possible to deduce patterns of such discernment in the reading of other texts, which relate more loosely to specific instances of inner-scriptural interpretation but which nevertheless model how to draw conclusions in the light of scriptural texts (Johnson 1996). The result can be a biblical hermeneutics in emic terms. It is, however, worth noting that studies that have sought to develop an understanding of hermeneutics indebted to Paul's own practice, for example, do not straightforwardly agree on what the resultant hermeneutical approach will look like (compare, for example, Watson 2004 with Mitchell 2010). This should not be an undue surprise. It is rather the case that the characteristic diversity of views in hermeneutical debate is being tied more explicitly to theological estimations of the ways in which scripture is being appealed to within scripture.

Pursuing this sort of approach leads to a recognition that core options in hermeneutics in the history of the church have not been determined primarily by textual criteria alone, but by the configuration of a particular set of texts (the canon of the Old and New Testaments) in relation to what has been received as the self-revelation of God. The God thus revealed has been known and worshipped as the God of Israel who, in and through the events of the life, death, and resurrection of Christ, is then understood by Christians to be the God and Father of Jesus Christ. One option for a hermeneutic shaped by an indebtedness to

the vision and ethos of the biblical texts themselves, then, is an explicitly Christian and indeed christological hermeneutic.

Biblical hermeneutics in this broader emic sense has been taken up in a whole range of ways as part of the wider nascent development of recent theological interpretation, an area of considerable interest and debate as prevailing modern consensus judgements have fractured in the early years of the twenty-first century (Vanhoozer et al. 2005; Davis and Hays 2003). Section 3 below will explore further the resultant questions of ‘theological hermeneutics’.

2 Key concerns of biblical hermeneutics

This section explores the key concerns of biblical hermeneutics by way of the categories that have been most prominent in the modern philosophical tradition of hermeneutics. This includes attention to Gadamer’s twin focus on method and truth, as well as extensive preoccupation with meaning, and more recently with readings and readers’ identities. In all these cases there is a question of whether hermeneutics is a descriptive project or includes a normative or evaluative element, resulting in options for singular or plural ‘meaning(s)’, ‘method(s)’, and so forth.

There have been different emphases at different times on how singular or plural the desired understandings of meaning(s), method(s), and truth should be. The changing shape of biblical hermeneutics over the centuries has encompassed an implicit premodern attention to multiple interpretative possibilities, an explicit modern singular response to interpretative disorder, and a postmodern willingness consciously to explore interpretative options and commitments. This section examines what this means with regard to select topics in hermeneutical discussion.

2.1 The meaning(s) of the biblical text

Premodern exegesis settled into an approach that pursued a fourfold sense of the text. In its archetypal formulation by Thomas Aquinas at the beginning of his *Summa Theologiae* (ST), this was governed by the literal sense, which was the sense intended by God (as author). However, there was considerable flexibility in how this sense governed the other senses, namely the three spiritual senses – which were the allegorical, the tropological (or moral), and the anagogical – with the result that one passage of scripture could have several senses, including several literal senses (Aquinas ST 1.1.10; cf. Fowl 2006). The literal sense in this scheme may best be thought of as the sense of the text according to the letter – it is a little like what modern scholars might call a literary reading, except that it was understood to be the plain sense with reference to God’s created world, and therefore truly descriptive. However, this was not the same as saying that the text was (or was not) making factual or historical claims. Despite long years in the modern era when this fourfold

approach was widely disdained (especially in the modernist tradition expounded by Farrar 1886), it has recently been rehabilitated as a serious option (or set of options) for biblical interpretation.

A turning point in this development was David Steinmetz's strongly phrased celebration of 'The Superiority of Pre-critical Exegesis' (1980), which reflected, albeit briefly and in broad-brush strokes, on the various relevant commitments that readers brought to biblical texts. Steinmetz's pointed conclusion was that

[t]he medieval theory of levels of meaning in the biblical text, with all its undoubted defects, flourished because it is true, while the modern theory of a single meaning, with all its demonstrable virtues, is false. (Steinmetz 1980: 38)

It is possible that this recovery of older approaches, including the fourfold one, has drawn some inspiration from the rise of a postmodern hospitality to multiple readings and meanings, but even so the premodern and especially the fourfold approach to scripture was different. It took its guiding reference points from explicit theological commitments to the revealing activity of God in and through the text, along with the centrality of Jesus Christ as a controlling focus for interpretative endeavour. Despite frequent modern complaints that this effectively prejudged matters of interpretation before allowing the necessary openness to hearing what the text had to say, medieval interpretation nevertheless does not look like merely the consistent exercise of moulding the text to fit theological assumptions. There is instead the sense that the multiple 'senses' of the interpreter engage with the 'senses' in the text and receive from it, rather than just project onto it (this ambiguity of 'senses' is exploited in particular by Froehlich and Burrows 2014). It is now widely accepted that premodern exegesis, if not 'superior' to other approaches, does at least bring potentially rich insight to the multiple tasks of biblical interpretation (Briggs 2023).

However, it is certainly true that the modern era saw an 'eclipse' of this multiple-sensed and theologically-engaged reading of biblical narrative, with a turn instead to the reconstruction of authorially intended communication understood in human terms: what did the human author of the biblical text intend to say and refer to, in his historical context? The core modern move is characterized by Michael Legaspi as follows:

Instead of looking *through* the Bible in order to understand *the truth about the world*, eighteenth-century scholars looked directly at the text, endeavouring to find new, ever more satisfactory frames of cultural and historical reference by which to understand *the meaning of the text*. (Legaspi 2010: 26, original emphasis)

In practice, though, such 'looking at' the text then slipped easily into a further step of looking *behind* the text. An increasingly common frame of reference, or focus of interpretation, was less the text itself and more consistently the putative historical referents of the text (Frei 1974). This factually-orientated approach to 'literal meaning' displaced (or eclipsed) the earlier 'sense according to the letter', and resulted in readings that engaged in serious historical work on understanding the originating contexts of biblical texts.

There were gains and losses in this newly historicized focus. It proved highly illuminating in cases where there was data at hand to allow a rich reconstruction of authorial agenda and original context (as with most Pauline epistles, for instance, of which 1 Corinthians may be the paradigm case for the benefits of such historical-critical reconstruction). It proved less useful in cases where almost nothing was known about either the author or the text's provenance, which remains the case for much of the Old Testament. Likewise, it does not reckon adequately with cases where part of the author's agenda may have been to write in a way that spoke deliberately to those outside the author's own context. This has been argued by Richard Bauckham regarding the four gospels, which he suggests are 'for all' and not for, or constrained by, specific 'gospel communities'. If Bauckham is right, the gospels thus raise different hermeneutical issues from epistles in this particular way (Bauckham 1998).

Difficulties such as these have done little to stem the flow of studies that prioritized historical-critical reconstruction of the original authorial communicative acts. But it was therefore of varying interest to arrive at a pronouncement of 'what the text meant' – constructive when historical context was recoverable (to whatever extent), and conjecture when it was not. Modern biblical scholarship settled into a comfortable familiarity with distinguishing between what the text *meant* and what the text *means* (Stendahl 1962). It tended to focus its energies on the former, and leave the latter either to homiletics or to the private interests of individuals understood as outside the scholarly sphere.

However, even when authorial intention was recoverable, there was no logical reason why it should be the only meaning of interest for interpreters today. General literary theory knows of no such logical requirement, and flourishes with a much wider sense of meaning and what counts as interesting investigation of texts (Eagleton 2008). There may be meanings regarding what a text inadvertently indicates about something other than its authorially-envisioned topic – a standard biblical example is where a text reflects a view of women that preoccupies today's readers whether or not the author meant consciously to say anything about women (for example, the monetary values associated with vows in Lev 27:2–8 show a higher valuation of men than women, which exercises modern commentators, but the author would likely have been surprised that this should strike a reader as the point worthy of comment). Also with specific regard to the Bible, there may be meanings pertaining to how a text echoes canonical intertexts regardless of what

the author was doing. This can occur on a small, local scale, as with the 'saw that he [it] was good' of Exod 2:2 in interesting juxtaposition to the 'saw that it was good' refrain of Genesis 1; or it can occur across large ranges of time and canon, as for example where strong echoes carry across from Old Testament texts to New Testament depictions of Jesus and vice versa.

Some have sought to defend a moral or ethical case for prioritizing the authorial communicative act, allied to theological concerns with the importance of hearing the voice or witness of past texts (Vanhoozer 1998). Others have spoken of a 'crisis of meaning' when the practices of scriptural interpretation are not suitably engaged with the authorial communicative horizons, albeit in subtle and sophisticated ways (Spinks 2007). But 'meaning' is a notoriously slippery term when pressed to be precise, and it has long been recognized that there are several worthwhile dimensions to the meaning(s) of biblical texts (Caird 1980: 37–84).

A constructive analysis of these issues is Stephen Fowl's proposal that meaning is underdetermined in general, and that one needs to specify particular interpretative contexts and interests in order to focus on whatever the core issues are at hand. Whether one then calls them 'the meaning(s)' of the text is a terminological matter of little substantive interest. The result is a hermeneutic that opens up to a wide range of theological and other enquiries the multiple questions of serious attention to the text, and especially to the subject matter of the text (Fowl 1998). In effect, Fowl takes the creative openness of the postmodern turn in general literary study and harnesses it to the traditional openness of multiple senses of the biblical text, alongside critical discipline and scholarly rigour. As a result, he advocates for a generous framework for biblical hermeneutics, within which many scholarly interests may bear fruit. His approach allows attention to authorial intention to remain as one item of potential interest among others in cases where it is possible to make progress in discerning what it is, without unduly prioritizing or ignoring it. Fowl's approach has not been without its critics. Useful interactions that interrogate his work with helpful clarifying questions include Spinks (2007: 41–67) from the philosophical side, and Andrews (2012: 159–208) from the theological side, entering into a dialogue between Fowl and Augustine and arguing that Fowl's approach needs a robust ecclesial sense of community if it is to find sufficient criteria to let the communal approach work in practice. On a pragmatic level, as the philosopher J. L. Austin demonstrated long ago, specific questions about the meaning of a particular word or phrase in a particular context remain perfectly comprehensible even while a general account of what meaning is or how to determine it remains elusive and probably unattainable (Briggs 2011).

In the long run, therefore, the old fourfold sense of the text has been able to be repristinated in a postmodern context to serve as one helpful exemplar among others of

how biblical texts can be read in multiple but disciplined ways. Over the centuries the focus has fallen on different aspects of the combination of critical yet creative close reading of the text, but the core practice of interpreting a biblical text is enriched by learning from all those aspects.

2.2 The method(s) of biblical interpretation

Methods can bring order to chaos, and methodical procedure can be better than no procedure at all. Method in interpretation can therefore illuminate helpfully how to proceed to insights regarding the text. It is worth rehearsing some of the benefits of good method first, before probing more deeply to see some of the hermeneutical cautions about the role of method in biblical interpretation.

To anticipate the broader conclusion here: methods are excellent for producing good order in the pursuit of agreed-upon goals. Guides to method in biblical interpretation typically therefore encompass a series of approaches to the text, each of which delivers insights in the specified area (e.g. Dell and Joyce 2013). Social-scientific criticism illuminates how the text may derive from social-scientific aspects of its conditions of production (such as whether it is written in an honour-shame culture and therefore handles certain questions in certain ways), and in turn it illuminates the social implications of the text for a range of social settings and perspectives today. Likewise, psychological criticism explores matters of the psychological perspectives and assumptions of biblical author(s), or how the various topics of modern psychological discourse are handled by – or illuminated by – the text (e.g. what we can learn about guilt, whether we find our notion of guilt operative in the text, and whether or not biblical writers had a conception of guilt). Literary criticism offers a different kind of example of method. Here critics deploy the tools of close narrative or poetic analysis to look at how texts achieve their effects or reveal their emphases. In biblical studies the label ‘literary criticism’ also became waylaid and attached to the examination of proposed levels of literary sources and redactions that lay behind the final biblical text. The paradigm example of such a method of biblical ‘literary criticism’ was the four-source analysis of the Pentateuch into J, E, D, and P, each source being characterized and dated in a certain way. For example, P was understood as being the ‘priestly’ source, redolent of priestly perspectives and theological convictions, and dated later than the other sources, in a key move by Julius Wellhausen that shaped modern pentateuchal criticism in profound ways (Baden 2012).

Depending on the perspective of the scholar involved, two different moves may be made. One is to add another criticism to the list – ‘historical criticism’, which is occupied with historical matters, such as locating the provenance of the text being studied or its setting in a wider historical context (e.g. the Persian period, the Roman empire). The other is to argue that all the methods being canvassed, and more, operate under an overarching

rubric of historical criticism, which is seen as an approach or stance that comprises many methods, where the label 'historical criticism' then characterizes all (or most of) these critical and analytical tools. Historical-critical method(s) may then be one or many things, depending on which path is taken.

It seems best to say that detailed scholarly work on the biblical text must inevitably have historical and critical dimensions. How far this adds up to a method is a matter of some debate. John Barton suggests labelling the resultant practice(s) 'biblical criticism', and sees the roots of such an approach in the Reformation's determination to turn afresh and in detail to scripture (Barton 2007). Others see historical criticism, as a large-scale enterprise, unhelpfully beholden rather to the Enlightenment and certain secular ideals (Hahn and Wiker 2013). Brevard S. Childs pioneered a way of saying that historical and critical work is essential, but that it is best understood as serving a bigger rubric in turn. He labelled this rubric a canonical approach to scripture, seeking to engage with substantive questions of how biblical texts were brought into a significant wider context of the canon, and looking at the role that this has played in their ongoing interpretation (Childs 1979; Driver 2010). Childs' aim is to encourage engagement with the broader hermeneutical question about the goals and purposes for which any given methods are deployed. This in turn is not to be confused with 'canonical criticism', which is indeed a method, illuminatingly explored by James Sanders in looking at how texts are shaped into ongoing inner-biblical debates over the right perspectives on God or life before God (Sanders 1984).

In short: if the goals of enquiry are fixed (e.g. 'we want to know what the author thought about the Roman empire'), then certain methods – historical, critical, political, postcolonial, etc. – may serve well to lead the reader to insights. If the goals are not fixed (e.g. 'we wonder what this text is about?') then those same methods might chance upon the substantive issues of interest but could equally lead the reader away from them.

The classic twentieth-century articulation of this broader hermeneutical dynamic was Gadamer's *Truth and Method* (1989, originally published 1960). The book uses the appreciation of a work of art as part of its paradigm for hermeneutics, but this applies well to texts and their own impact upon readers' horizons. Gadamer argued that in effect one prioritizes either truth or method. To fix a method is to predetermine what sort of truth about the text one will have access to, which is the example of predetermining that one will ask psychological or feminist or spiritual questions in one's reading and thereby circumscribing the kinds of interpretations one will be able to offer. To fix one's focus instead on the truth of the text, however that is understood, requires that the enquirer holds interpretative method lightly. How Gadamer understands the process of understanding truth is a little underdetermined – he seems to envisage a patient dwelling with the text that results in finally receiving it appropriately, whereas his mentor Martin

Heidegger preferred a more dramatic 'a-ha!' manner of existential encounter where the text disclosed itself upon the reader (Dostal 1994). This latter found its way into biblical studies through the deeply engaged work of Rudolf Bultmann, especially with regard to how Paul's or John's understandings seize the reader.

Gadamer does *not* provide a method for biblical studies, however. He provides a framework for thinking about methods. The main value of his work for biblical hermeneutics is to promote a critical self-reflective sifting of the reasons why certain methods would or would not be adopted, since such approaches are intricately implicated in what sorts of truth the interpreter may encounter (Thiselton 1980: 293–326; though see also Pearson 2001).

A rather underappreciated role for method in biblical study, in a post-Gadamerian perspective, is that of clarifying in retrospect how an interpretation has been arrived at. If methods do not *generate* interpretative insights (except in the delimiting sense of predetermining the questions and answers explored), they can at least be appealed to for the purpose of analysing a proposed insight into a text once that insight has been articulated. In this more modest sense it will indeed be true that a method can bring order to chaos, and that the judgements interpreters make can be articulated and clarified, the better to be understood and evaluated (see [section 4](#) below, which explores examples of this).

2.3 The truth of the biblical witness(es)

In a 1965 supplement to *Truth and Method*, Gadamer points to Karl Barth's work on Paul's letter to the Romans as 'the first revolutionary eruption' of a full-blown attention to the hermeneutical problem in theological discussion (1989: 509). He is responding to Barth's attempt to dwell with the biblical text to let it disclose its truth, which in part I of *Truth and Method* is described as 'the truth of the work of art'. What kind of truth is this? It is the content, or *Sache*, of the text: what it is about, which inevitably exceeds what its author could intend or control. With reference to Barth's *Church Dogmatics*, Gadamer writes that it 'contributes to the hermeneutical program explicitly nowhere and indirectly everywhere' (1989: 521). The task is the quintessential Gadamerian hermeneutical task of rendering anew the truth of the text/work of art.

Given Gadamer's analysis of truth as distinct from method, the evaluation of the truthfulness of the biblical text has been easily confused. If interpreters prejudge what counts as the right way to evaluate the text, then whether the Bible is true or not devolves into a simple and largely unilluminating question of whether the Bible fits the predetermined framework. This is a problem both among those who would defend the Bible and those who would critique it. Thus for example we have seen how the 'literal sense' of scripture was transformed into being understood as a question of factual

reference in the modern ‘eclipse’ of biblical narrative. Defenders and critics of the Bible in this modern paradigm have debated then whether the Bible is historically accurate in its claims: some defenders insist that it not only is but must always and everywhere be so (even ‘inerrantly’, i.e. without any error), while some critics argue that it is not, and can be shown to be not so in multiple ways. This is a coherent debate, and appears at first sight to make sense of the specific question ‘is the Bible historically accurate?’, though even here there remain lengthy hermeneutical detours into whether a given text is making a particular historical claim or not.

A clear example is the question of the route of the Israelite exodus from Egypt, assuming simply for the sake of this example that some such exodus occurred (which is not the point here at issue). The biblical text describes the route as going through the *yam suph*, which is Hebrew for ‘sea of reeds’ (e.g. Exod 13:18). In the LXX this was translated as ‘Red Sea’, with apparent reference to the well-known body of water still today called the Red Sea, at the south of the Sinai peninsula. Is the text making a historical claim about a (or this) particular body of water? Some scholars suggest that the language refers mythically to ‘the sea at the end of the world’ in any case (Batto 2013: 158–174). So while in principle there would be a right answer to the question ‘did the Israelite exodus from Egypt traverse the Red Sea?’, even if we may never know it, it is not as clear as it looks at first sight as to whether the biblical text is claiming that this is historically what happened.

This kind of complexity leads on to the more interesting hermeneutical problem that arises here, which is what the truth of the biblical text would be if it were not predetermined to fit into questions of historical reference and reconstruction. One angle often considered to be constructive is that the truth of the text is that to which it witnesses (in the case of John’s gospel this appears to be a framework urged by the text itself; Lincoln 2000). The nature of the biblical text may be understood to be a claim on the nature of reality: not (for example) that God made the physical world in six days as we understand ‘days’, but that nevertheless God is rightly understood as the author of life in its ordered goodness, and the world around us is rightly understood as the ordered creation of a good God. To be clear, the question of whether what the biblical text claims is true or not remains a perfectly fair topic for investigation, but the point is that one does no service either to defenders or critics if one forecloses on the question of what the claim is by diverting it into a methodologically predetermined framework in order to measure it against a standard brought in from elsewhere.

One could then go on to consider other dimensions of truthful witness that may be germane to the task of assessing both what the biblical text is saying and how true it is. These might include questions of whether the biblical text is reliable or trustworthy (perhaps in comparable ways to those in which Jesus says he is the truth, as well as the way and the life, in John 14:6); whether it serves the purposes of peace, or justice,

recognizing that again one might have to detour through a careful consideration of what peace or justice is both in biblical terms and today, and for whom the justice is operative; or whether the biblical text inspires human flourishing, and so forth. Most of these kinds of question are self-involving, i.e. involve judgements that vary with the perspective of the enquirer. They represent a work of hermeneutical cross-examination that brings in questions of good character, good relationships, good understanding, and good living. (The virtue ethic approach to interpretation mentioned in [section 1.3](#) is relevant again here.) Hermeneutics does not adjudicate these matters, but it serves readers well in broadening out properly evaluative questions to these wider issues.

2.4 The identity/ies of readers and their readings

Concomitant with the broadening of perspectives regarding what counts as the right method for – or the truth of – the biblical text, the postmodern era has introduced far greater self-reflexive consideration of the role and identity of the reader doing the interpreting. For as long as one predominant approach characterized the academy, usually identified in short-hand as the historical-critical approach, the pursuits of biblical studies were in principle value neutral, or at least were thought to be so by many practitioners.

In practice, the experience of widespread agreement regarding the goals and methods of biblical studies was achieved, as we have seen, by predetermining what counted as proper goals and methods – rather than because there is only a small set of possible options. The increasingly diverse representation of people from different backgrounds, cultures, and experiences in the scholarly guild has brought with it a massive broadening of hermeneutical perspectives as people have asked different questions, pertaining to their own identities and reading locations. To reject such approaches simply because they do not conform to prior disciplinary assumptions about interpretation may now often be seen as something of a power-play by those seeking to control the discipline, rather than a reflection of the necessary truth regarding biblical interpretative practice.

Consensus fractured along multiple fault lines, notably over the rise of [feminist](#) scholarship captured in an influential presidential address to the Society of Biblical Literature by Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza (1988) in which she urged a ‘decentring’ of interpretative practice, and fresh attention to the ethics of the judgements made by and about the biblical text (see [Christian Feminist Theological Ethics](#)). Schüssler Fiorenza’s own concerns advocated for the liberating power of pursuing justice and representation for women’s voices, appealing to what she called ‘a critical interpretive praxis for liberation’ (1988: 9). Clearly this linked to the concerns of [liberation theology](#), whose hermeneutic likewise sought to ‘liberate exegesis’ from culturally determined Western norms (Rowland and Corner 1988). Gradually broadening out as an identifiably separate approach under the liberationist umbrella, postcolonial hermeneutics argued for the significance of reading

from the margins of power, particularly in contexts marked by the experience of empire (Sugirtharajah 2001: 259–265). In all these cases, the appeal was partly to readers' location(s) as irreducibly relevant to the interpretations offered, and also to the recovery of the key defining issues (gender, oppression, power, etc.) as witnessed to in the biblical texts themselves.

The wider cultural milieu in which biblical interpretation finds itself as the twenty-first century progresses brings ever-increasing diversity into the field of biblical studies. On one level, this is a simple but far-reaching matter of the scholarly disciplines of biblical studies embracing their global status. Majority world readings bring multiple new perspectives to bear by reading with all due attentiveness to their varied locations and cultural understandings. Sometimes this seems to broaden and complement more traditional Western disciplinary pursuits in constructive and illuminating ways (Gorman 2017). At other times the illumination consists in offering striking new angles that challenge the notion that the Western-orientated approaches of biblical studies were in good working order (Sugirtharajah 2006). Either way, this new global awareness is an enrichment of interpretative practice on many levels.

The advocacies now represented in biblical interpretation cover not just a very wide range of perspectives, but do so in ways that show how yet further reader-identifications will continue to arise. Feminist reading broadened into LGBT interpretation (regardless of how far some gay or trans perspectives are or are not compatible with feminist concerns), and the LGBT label, used as the baseline for example in 2006's *Queer Bible Commentary* (Guest et al. 2006) is now often seen as overly limiting as further sexual or gender identities are articulated, such as 'LGBTQIA2S+' (Exum 2022: 94; see [Queer Theology](#)). Likewise postcolonial reading broadens into 'minority criticism' (Bailey, Liew and Segovia 2009). Readers' self-identifications with respect to the physical world likewise generate multiple hermeneutical perspectives, such as ecological approaches (Horrell et al. 2010; see [Ecological Ethics](#)); and in turn each category – e.g. approaches that focus on questions of land and earth – can produce readings according to their kinds: an islands and islanders perspective on land narratives, for example (Havea, Aymer and Davidson 2015).

For some it is all to the good that a thousand hermeneutical flowers should bloom. For others, this is fine up to a point, but interpretative conflict arises as surely as identity politics highlights irreducible commitments, and who will adjudicate such conflicting perspectives? In principle, the resulting conversations are occasions for hermeneutical dialogue *par excellence*. In practice, the dialogue is not always deep. A modest proposal for making interpretative claims would be for interpreters to clarify their defining commitments and perspectives so that one can evaluate them according to the relevant goals and issues. This does not preclude making grand claims that a given perspective or

interpretation is appropriate for others who do not at first hold to it (whether those claims are spiritual, or ecological, or cultural, or gender-related, etc). But it does show that such claims always originate from some perspective or other. As a result, biblical hermeneutics maps and mirrors the increasing complexity of ways in which human society defines itself, and the interpretative options multiply accordingly.

It is worth distinguishing two different ways in which this fracturing of interests can work. On the one hand, the hermeneutical categories may be put to work in interrogating the text for its witness to the relevant questions. A postcolonial reading of Paul that uncovers aspects of colonial and/or postcolonial thought is to a large extent recovering interpretative insights lost to some degree in intervening centuries by the submerging of that reading perspective (Segovia and Sugirtharajah 2007). On the other hand, the hermeneutical categories may be used more to reflect back on the reader's own world: the text may be held to fail to engage with questions that are self-evident to the reader, but that do not seem to be operative in the language and logic of the text. In the first case the hermeneutical perspective seeks to open up the window of the text. In the second case it seems to let the text function more as a mirror. These two options may not be entirely separable or distinguishable in any given case, but the fuzzy boundary between them still demarcates a genuine difference. The former approach seems likely to sustain deeper and further-reaching forms of interpretative enquiry in the long run.

3 Theology and biblical hermeneutics

3.1 Theology as queen of the sciences

The idea of theology as 'queen of the sciences' is often traced back to Aquinas, though he appears never to have used the particular phrase. However, in the opening question of the *Summa Theologiae* he does discuss the nature of sacred doctrine, and says that it is a science in the sense of pursuing knowledge (*scientia*) of God and of God's ordering of the world (1.1.2) and that it is nobler than the other sciences because of the nobility of its subject matter (God), such that other sciences are handmaidens of this one (1.1.5). All the elements for saying that theology is queen of the sciences are there, and draw explicitly on Augustine. Augustine's work *De Doctrina Christiana* ('On Christian Teaching') explores how all human learning contributes to our understanding, but in particular how all the learned disciplines – ranging across music, zoology, astronomy, and many others – play their parts in the wider scheme of learning about God in and through scripture.

The underlying convictions that lead to such a view are that the world is only properly comprehensible in the light of God and God's ordering of human life, including right human knowing. Thus every human enquiry is best pursued as investigating an aspect of God's well-ordered world, where all knowledge serves the ultimate goal of knowing God (*De Doctrina* 2.39.58). Evidently, this set of convictions did not survive modernity intact. It is not

hard to find later scholars making alternative claims, such as that mathematics was queen of the sciences, since it seems to describe core truths that underlie social or contextual variables. Here then one finds the drift towards an abstract idea of science that may then be locally applied. Whatever the merits of such a scheme, it undeniably reconfigures any scientific aspect of theological enquiry in far-reaching ways, and relocates theological enquiry as attempting to meet whatever passes for the standards of rational and scientific enquiry.

Some have attempted to resist these developments. The recognition of the negative impact of such a shift was at the heart of T. F. Torrance's call for a 'scientific theology', one which allowed its scientific nature to be determined by the self-revelation of the triune God in its scope and method (Torrance 1969). Torrance resisted the transformations involved in the reframing of the nature of human knowledge around abstracted standards and criteria. Much of Torrance's work represented a systematic attempt to bring scientific rigour (in this sense of 'science') to a working-out of the core doctrines of Christian faith, in a manner deeply indebted to Karl Barth's emphasis on divine self-revelation.

A more widespread response, however, was to accept that science had moved on. The study of 'divinity', as medieval universities had labelled the theological task, became reconfigured around seeing theology as a human enquiry: a *wissenschaftlich* enterprise. The sense of the German term *Wissenschaft* is a broader conception of science than is captured in English by 'scientific' language: it is a systematic pursuit of knowledge because it is in itself beneficial, regardless of any specific applicability to subdisciplines. To over-simplify: the focus is on the human pursuit, unlike in the Barth-Torrance tradition where it is on divine revelation. The reconceptualization of 'divinity' as 'theology', then, represented a transformation in perspective, captured in miniature in the decision of the newly-founded University of Berlin in 1810, under Friedrich Schleiermacher's influence, to locate theological study as a 'scientific' department (Frei 1992: 95–116; cf. Schleiermacher 2011). Theology was no longer queen of the sciences: it was one of them (see Theology and Science).

The premodern integrated picture, which in its most idealistic form envisaged all human knowing harmoniously in pursuit of truth under God, gave way to the contested pursuit of multiple perspectives characteristic of modernity. In hermeneutical terms, knowing how to read the Bible rightly was no longer the one (or supreme) task necessary in interpretative practice. The resultant shift was from a *hermeneutica sacra*, which sought to do justice to rightly receiving the written word of God, to a general discipline of hermeneutics that could be seen to apply to all disciplines and texts, of which theology (and the interpretation of the Bible) was one. (See sections 1.2 and 1.3 above, on etic and emic framings of the subject.)

This shift to a general hermeneutics is explicitly part of Schleiermacher's markedly New Testament-orientated presentation of hermeneutics, written over a period of time between 1805 and 1833 (see Schleiermacher 1998), which is often viewed as the first attempt to relocate biblical interpretation into the network of wider practices characteristic of what would now be called 'the humanities'. The concern, in a sense, is to demonstrate the coherence and plausibility of biblical interpretative practice in terms of the canons of 'scientific' enquiry, and not allow it to operate solely on its own terms, and thereby (potentially) be exempt from a wider accountability and scholarly rigour.

3.2 Hermeneutics as queen of the social sciences

Speaking in terms of historical development, then, an implicitly biblical hermeneutics gives birth to a general hermeneutics. One of the abiding concerns of subsequent philosophical discussion in hermeneutics is to broaden the canvas against which interpretation takes place to be as comprehensive as possible regarding all of human life. This is the specific focus of Wilhelm Dilthey's work, for instance, and becomes a major theme in Gadamer too. For the interpretation of texts, the presenting question becomes how a written text interacts with a living interpreter, across what Gadamer called the horizons of each, by which he means 'the range of vision that includes everything that can be seen from a particular vantage point' (1989: 302). Interpretation occurs by means of *Horizontverschmelzung*, or a 'fusion of horizons': 'In the process of understanding, a real fusing of horizons occurs – which means that as the historical horizon is projected, it is simultaneously superseded' (1989: 307).

Notice that this drive to universality, explicitly acknowledged by Gadamer as 'the universality of the hermeneutical problem' (1976), seeks to reinscribe what might be called a queen of the (social) sciences, but now it is human interpretation that is its cornerstone rather than divine revelation. The result is a biblical hermeneutics that is derivative upon general (philosophical) hermeneutical theory, marked by attention to matters of genre, context, perspective (or 'horizon'), syntax and grammar, philology, rhetorical tropes, historical and cultural reconstruction, and so forth. This is clearly the 'etic' kind of approach discussed in [section 1.2](#) above. One clear marker that the hermeneutic in question has become 'general' in this philosophical sense is that the kinds of interpretative question asked of a text are broadly the same whether it is a biblical or any other kind of written text, from Aristotle to Jane Austen.

If hermeneutics is the pursuit of the broadest possible canvas of understanding, then it does indeed become the queen of the social sciences. The potential pitfall is that in widening its scope to be as all-inclusive as possible, and letting each and every text proffer its moments of disclosive potential to patient readers, it becomes harder to see the grounds upon which critical judgement may be exercised in resisting the text, or

in exercising the rigours of suspicion in response to a text's claims once it has been understood in this rather gentle Gadamerian way. As a result, the appeal to Gadamer's hermeneutics in biblical interpretation has been of most profit in response to cases where critics rush too quickly to critique, prematurely fusing the horizons and finding the text to fall short of the uninterrogated reader's perspective. The need for a balancing hermeneutic of suspicion is one key aspect of the work of Paul Ricoeur.

3.3 Scripture and text: the special and the general case

Ricoeur's work on hermeneutics is given powerful early formulation in his 'essay on interpretation', *Freud and Philosophy*, where in his study of how to proceed after 'Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud [...the] three masters of suspicion' (1970: 33) he coins the elegant maxim: 'Hermeneutics seems to me to be animated by this double motivation: willingness to suspect, willingness to listen; vow of rigor, vow of obedience' (1970: 27). Articulating the resultant balancing act occupied Ricoeur through several lengthy studies over a lifetime. Three related key points are worth drawing out to explore the issue of how biblical hermeneutics relates to both theological and general philosophical concerns.

First, Ricoeur's hermeneutical conviction, that every text must be heard on its own terms and with respect to its own appropriate criteria of evaluation, played out in his own writing where his philosophical work was always presented in its own integrity without being mixed into his theological work, and vice versa. Ricoeur's work directly on biblical texts, or directly with regard to theological topics (collected in Ricoeur 1980; 1995; and also Ricoeur and Lacocque 1998), is clearly of a piece with his philosophical hermeneutics, but at no point does he seek to ground it in that discourse, and at no point does he seek to ground his philosophical hermeneutics in biblical or theological categories. Rather, Ricoeur's conviction is that each discourse, as it stretches towards comprehensiveness in its own terms, should be able to offer an account that makes sense of the other one. His theoretical account of this issue concerns navigating between a Gadamerian 'hermeneutics of tradition' and the *Ideologiekritik* (the evaluative criticism of ideological commitments) associated with thinkers like Jurgen Habermas and Karl-Otto Apel (Ricoeur 1991: 270–307). But it can be deployed more widely, and is instantiated in his own practice, with regard to biblical hermeneutics and other perspectives.

Secondly, and by way of illustration of the first point, one can learn many things about the interpretation of general texts from Ricoeur, such as with his masterly three-volume analysis of time and narrative, essentially an exercise in deploying Aristotelian poetics with respect to modern understandings of narrative (Ricoeur 1984). The temptation then is to apply these insights straightforwardly to biblical interpretation and produce Ricoeurian 'readings' of biblical narratives specifically indebted to the argument of *Time and Narrative*. Interestingly, Ricoeur himself barely does this, and in his relatively limited

work on biblical texts he frames the hermeneutical issues differently, attentive to the hermeneutical significance of the different genres of biblical texts, and how they go about naming God – to draw on his two Gifford lectures on the Bible that were (programmatically) excised from the published version of the lectures in *Oneself as Another* (Ricoeur 1992; cf. 1997 and 1995: 262–275). The reason is that the interpretative moves required of biblical interpretation must be equal to the framing hermeneutical tasks of handling scripture in its own integrity, and this brings Ricoeur to address revelation and (without calling it this) canonical cross-comparison, in ways that are specific to the nature of the Bible and not to texts more generally. ‘Time and biblical narrative’, in this sense, is not a subset of more general reflection on time and narrative but is configured differently.

This leads us, thirdly, to his specific discussion of the relationship between general (or ‘philosophical’) and biblical hermeneutics, in which the theoretical underpinning that makes sense of this careful disciplinary navigation is made explicit (1991: 89–101). For Ricoeur, readers are ‘refigured’ by texts, in the sense that their self is rendered in new ways in light of the world disclosed by the text. While there is a baseline sense in which one can say this of any text, everything interesting hangs on what sort of refiguring is effected by any given text. In effect, profound texts reconstitute the world profoundly, and lighter texts make fewer demands on the self, who may drift in and out of engagement with little if any refiguration of the self. These categories are very close to what Umberto Eco calls ‘open’ and ‘closed’ texts, in a much-misunderstood move to explore self-involvement in texts, or works of art more generally – an ‘open’ text is not a genre classification, but a text that makes demands on the reading self (Eco 1984: 3–43). If it is the Bible, at least as understood by Christians or by Jews, that summons the self to the most profound self-examination of all, then in that sense – on Ricoeur’s terms – biblical hermeneutics effects the most full and probing account of interpretive transformation imaginable. The refiguration achieved by less probing texts is correspondingly a subset of this full-orbed biblical refiguration. The result is a hermeneutical priority for the Bible, which nicely echoes its historical priority, with which we began this discussion of the relationship between biblical and general hermeneutics.

In practice, most biblical interpreters simply operate on one or the other side of the conceptual divide: either deploying general hermeneutical principles with theological add-ons as and when they wish to broaden their scope; or asserting (often quite insistently) that a theological agenda must set the terms for interpretative endeavour, sometimes with and sometimes without reference to broader critical concerns as and when they illuminate matters. The result is a stand-off between biblical critics (the former case) and self-described theological interpreters (the latter case). Ricoeur offers a way of understanding each approach as benefitting from the other, while remaining two distinguishable approaches (one might say that he thereby shows the benefits of both emic and etic approaches to biblical hermeneutics). In Ricoeurian terms, biblical hermeneutics that is

conceptualized as a local application of general hermeneutics will always limit itself with respect to its capacity to access the fullest account possible of the refigurative potential of any given biblical text. Ironically, while general hermeneutical approaches to the Bible will themselves be deeply enriched by taking advantage of Ricoeur's multiple insights into the general interpretative task, this will not add up to being a hermeneutic fundamentally characterized by being equal to the nature of the Bible as a uniquely configured (and refiguring) text.

4 Biblical hermeneutics in the life of the church

4.1 An implicit presence

If hermeneutics is everywhere, then of course there is no reading of the Bible in the life of the church without hermeneutics. But is this the most helpful way to characterize the nature and role of hermeneutics in the life of the church? As with so many hermeneutical questions, much depends on how one frames the precise question at issue, and what sorts of avenues of inquiry such framing opens up or closes (Adam et al. 2006).

For many in the church, much of the time, Bible reading where it is pursued at all is probably undertaken in a relatively unreflective way with regard to hermeneutical questions. To say that everyone reads from certain cultural assumptions – with regard to such matters as their race, gender, class, educational background, and so forth – is true, but does not in itself say anything about how far these assumptions (or horizons) interact with the horizons of the biblical text. Slave-owning Bible readers could, for long centuries, find little to trouble them in their reading of the Bible and its depiction of slaveries, Israelite or Graeco-Roman. It seems likely that it was not the reading of biblical texts on slavery that changed the minds of slave owning church members, but other and more wide-ranging societal changes, themselves standing in various complex relationships to biblical and Judaeo-Christian convictions. The hermeneutical issues involved with regard to the texts are complex in themselves (as explored in the classic study of Swartley 1983: 31–64; see also Barclay 2007 on the UK debates). The wider issues in nineteenth-century America demonstrate the further complexities in ways in which views of slavery were deeply interwoven with understandings of race, social order, and good citizenship, and the social functions of theological authority. This has led church historian Mark Noll to describe the US civil war 'as a theological crisis' (in the title of Noll 2006) – one with irreducibly hermeneutical elements.

Recall once more the Gadamerian insight regarding method discussed above (see [section 2.2](#)), where it was suggested that method serves a valuable post hoc function in assessing what interpretative moves have been made. In keeping with this, the value of hermeneutics in the life of the church is in offering clarity and clarification of what hermeneutical frameworks have been in play in the offering of certain interpretations, not

necessarily in accounting for how and why people read the way they do, and still less in predicting how they will read.

4.2 An explicit advocacy

Certain factors may trigger the hermeneutical discussion in practice in the life of the church, and render explicit what otherwise goes on implicitly. This implicit/explicit distinction corresponds in some ways to Schleiermacher's distinction between lax and strict hermeneutics, where Schleiermacher urged that we stop thinking of hermeneutics as only necessary for the fixing of interpretative disarray – the lax sense – and instead began to see it everywhere, as he pointed towards the universalising of hermeneutics (Schmidt 2006: 10–28). This section offers some reasons to be cautious about following Schleiermacher here with respect to biblical hermeneutics, where a distinction seems worth preserving between unreflective interpretation and explicit hermeneutical reflection. Three factors that trigger the hermeneutical discussion may be considered.

Firstly, some biblical texts are simply hard to understand. Secondly, some biblical texts appear to be in tension with core theological convictions – convictions that are held to be sufficiently key to the reader's Christian identity that they may not be given up without effort (comparable issues arise in Jewish tradition too). Thirdly, readers can become aware of other readers interpreting a text differently from themselves or their own church tradition. Broad and simple examples of the three cases for the vast majority of Bible readers in church might be: trying to understand the book of Revelation; trying to understand texts where God tells God's people to kill or in some way destroy the Canaanites; and such issues as (traditionally) whether the Bible supports a practice of infant baptism, or (more recently) whether the Bible offers grounds for the compatibility of same-sex marriage with traditional male-female marriage. Scholars may in turn be able to parse these examples into referring to the proper study of apocalyptic texts; of the nature of *herem* (and whether it basically means 'destroy' or 'ban' or some other option); and of questions of ancient understandings of initiation, or the appropriate way to balance specific and general texts on sex, love, and relationship. However, the point is that most Bible readers are not forewarned by awareness of such issues or debates. Such readers are forced to move to explicit hermeneutical discussion precisely because one of the complexities (difficulty, doctrine, disagreement) is in play. In contrast, hermeneutical reflection is not often triggered by texts concerned with matters such as God's love, or welcoming the outsider, or encouraging believers to sing praises to God – to pick examples loosely corresponding to the three categories – even if scholars might say that it would be beneficial to have some hermeneutical reflection on such topics.

Hermeneutics is a sleeping, or implicit, presence, until provoked. That such reading may subsequently be analysed with the full panoply of hermeneutical tools available should not

obscure the fact that these readings were not consciously generated or shaped by such concerns.

4.3 The problems and potential of an ecclesiology of reading

In practice, hermeneutics becomes operative in the life of the church in one of the three indicated contexts of interpretative conflict: via difficulty in understanding; via doctrinal conviction; or via disagreement with other readers. The first two will be discussed in this section, the third in the final section (4.4) below.

The first case may provoke relatively little concern in the church, though it leads to wide scope for learning in a constructive way about the significance of changing horizons of understanding. This is also the area where historical-critical insight most rapidly and straightforwardly comes into play, with the furnishing of historical, social, or cultural background often quickly enabling a reader to see ways of construing a text that was previously thought to be incapable of being understood.

The second kind of conflict, where a biblical text seems to stand in some tension with a Christian or doctrinal conviction, has loomed large in the history of interpretative debate in the church. Trinitarian debates about the pre-existent nature of the Son circled around Prov 8:22–31, including assessing the nuances of the LXX version (Young 2003). Warning about falling away from the faith in Heb 6:4–6 provoked considerable interpretative reflection on how to understand this passage among those for whom true faith cannot be lost. Statements in Pauline texts that seem in their plain sense to point towards a theology of universal salvation may provoke much hermeneutical reflection by readers resistant to universalism, such as debating what is meant by ‘all’ in Rom 5:18 or (though differently) in Col 1:15–20.

It is worth reflecting here that the church has been reading such texts for 2000 years, the impact of which plays a significant role in creating the conditions that permit the debate in the first place. Thus, for example, few individuals would read through the Bible from a standing start, deduce that the nature of God must be trinitarian, and then reread and reflect on points of tension between the text and the overall belief. While it is true to say that the doctrine of the Trinity emerged out of the church’s wrestling with scripture, and that its main architects would certainly have believed that the church believes in the nature of God as Trinity precisely because scripture has impressed its witness upon the church, this is not the achievement of lone readers, ancient or modern (Ayres 2004). The idea of an individual reader seeking to construct doctrinal sense out of the Bible in the early centuries of church history is largely an illusion, probably created by the significant but limited sense of being a (modern) individual reader of a privately owned Bible. While this is an important modern context for Bible reading it does not adequately represent the more complex social

and ecclesial realities of how Bible reading has been negotiated in dialogue with Christian tradition.

What this case seems to suggest is that hermeneutical discussion might benefit from factoring in a category of ‘an ecclesiology of reading’. This may work itself out differently in different traditions, with Roman Catholic positions being traceable to official documents (cf. Béchard 2002) in ways that many Protestant views are not, albeit that there are some significant and hermeneutically comparable confessional statements in some Protestant traditions (examples include the 1563 Heidelberg Catechism in Reformed traditions, or the 1978 Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy in conservative evangelical traditions). Sometimes the ecclesiological shaping of hermeneutical debate may only be accessed via informal but widely shared convictions that characterize a particular church or denomination. The debates may seem literally incomprehensible to those who do not share the assumptions of the given tradition. This is in fact a good example of the social nature of knowledge as it pertains to theology and church life, and is related to the discussion above of hermeneutics and its role in the social sciences (section 3.2). In short, the experience of knowing that ‘this is how our church reads this issue’ will be common to most if not all Christian churches, global or local.

The advantage of this line of reflection becomes apparent when we move to the third category of hermeneutical debate, where different readers read differently.

4.4 Hermeneutics and interpretative conflict

The third category of hermeneutical debate concerns tensions generated by different or even incompatible readings offered by different readers or church traditions. This is where most energy and anxiety is found today, as churches seek answers to questions on such controverted topics as the biblical understanding of sexuality or marriage, or justice and poverty (and the economy more widely), or on creation and the care of the physical world around us. It is also where most energy and anxiety was found in, for example, early modern debates regarding infant baptism or ecclesial polity – the issues change but the hermeneutical dynamics change little.

On such matters the full range of hermeneutical analysis is explicitly in play. Debates over sexuality, and for example the status of committed Christian same-sex relationships vis-a-vis marriage or parenthood or sexual intercourse, range widely and knowledgeably over a wide range of factors. What is often at stake is the relative weighting afforded to different factors. Among the hermeneutical debates in play are those concerning original meaning of the text(s), including philological arguments about Pauline vocabulary and how it relates to the LXX of Leviticus; the rhetorical function of ‘vice lists’ in Paul (and elsewhere); socio-cultural contexts against which the texts were written, including the nature and social significance of same-sex sexual activity as well as arguments about Jewish, Gentile, and

Christian self-understanding with respect to social norms; arguments about the reception and traditional church interpretation of such texts; questions about how to bring together (if it is indeed possible) the ancient horizons of the text and contemporary understandings of sexuality, sex, and gender; the theological and social significance of celibacy in the Bible, in tradition, and today; the nature and purpose of sex in wider biblical and theological understanding; and questions concerning how far biblical texts address such matters substantively or incidentally, and how significant such a distinction is. A range of views on such matters may be found among the essayists in Balch (2000). More recent books often tend more consistently towards one or the other overall view (see [Queer Theology](#)).

In light of the review of biblical hermeneutics in this article, it may be suggested that hermeneutical sophistication on all these matters is a good thing – but that what it will serve is clarity to help us understand the assumptions, arguments, and perspectives of those in the debate, not criteria for making particular judgements regarding them. Some will be disappointed that biblical hermeneutics cannot do more, especially if they are in a church tradition in which biblical authority is a strong or even overarching concern. Two things seem likely, however. One is that once an argument has become deeply controverted and conflicting positions are passionately held with integrity, then the role of biblical texts in the disagreement becomes increasingly circumscribed by other and wider allegiances – a repeating pattern in modern (and arguably earlier) church history. Secondly, the reasons why people evaluate arguments the way they do in cases like this are due to a whole network of understandings about much more than (though not less than) scripture. It follows that the social context of the argument and its participants is one key set of factors. Understanding the relevant social context theologically leads us back to the claim that an ‘ecclesiology of reading’ is desirable for reflecting on how to adjudicate the significance of biblical texts in such debates today.

The evidence of traditions with strong ecclesial claims determining the interpretation of scripture is not that this approach resolves interpretative conflict, or guarantees clarity. Rather the more modest claim is that it allows the actual issues that do determine interpretation to be discussed more clearly. The reasons why people will inhabit the set of interpretative judgements they do are probably best described in theological terms across a range of factors. In this sense, hermeneutical judgements about the Bible are subservient to theological judgements about God and the Christian life more broadly. It has been suggested above that biblical hermeneutics should not seek to position itself as an alternate queen of the social sciences. But if theology is indeed queen of the sciences, then biblical hermeneutics may still have a valuable calling to be handmaid to the queen of the sciences.

Attributions

Bibliography

• Further reading

- Adam, A. K. M., Stephen E. Fowl, Kevin J. Vanhoozer, and Francis Watson. 2006. *Reading Scripture with the Church: Toward a Hermeneutic for Theological Interpretation*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans.
- Barton, John. 2007. *The Nature of Biblical Criticism*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press.
- Briggs, Richard S. 2010. *The Virtuous Reader: Old Testament Narrative and Interpretive Virtue: Studies in Theological Interpretation*. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic.
- Davis, Ellen F., and Richard B. Hays (eds). 2003. *The Art of Reading Scripture*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans.
- Dell, Katharine J., and Paul M. Joyce (eds). 2013. *Biblical Interpretation and Method: Essays in Honour of John Barton*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Frei, Hans W. 1974. *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative: A Study in Eighteenth- and Nineteenth-Century Hermeneutics*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Froehlich, Karlfried, and Mark S. Burrows. 2014. *Sensing the Scriptures: Aminadab's Chariot and the Predicament of Biblical Interpretation*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans.
- Gadamer, Hans-Georg. 1989. *Truth and Method*. Translated by Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall. London: Sheed and Ward.
- Sarisky, Darren (ed.). 2015. *Theology, History, and Biblical Interpretation: Modern Readings*. London: Bloomsbury.
- Vanhoozer, Kevin J., Craig G. Bartholomew, Daniel J. Treier, and N. T. Wright (eds). 2005. *Dictionary for Theological Interpretation of the Bible*. London/Grand Rapids: Baker Academic/SPCK.

• Works cited

- Adam, A. K. M., Stephen E. Fowl, Kevin J. Vanhoozer, and Francis Watson. 2006. *Reading Scripture with the Church: Toward a Hermeneutic for Theological Interpretation*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans.
- Andrews, James A. 2012. *Hermeneutics and the Church in Dialogue with Augustine*. Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press.
- Aquinas, Thomas. [n.d.]. *Summa Theologiae*.
- Augustine. 1997. 'De Doctrina Christiana (On Christian Teaching)', Oxford World's Classics. Edited by R. P. H. Green. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Ayres, Lewis. 2004. *Nicaea and Its Legacy: An Approach to Fourth-Century Trinitarian Theology*. Oxford/New York: Oxford University Press.

- Baden, Joel S. 2012. *The Composition of the Pentateuch: Renewing the Documentary Hypothesis*. Anchor Bible Reference Library. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Bailey, Randall C., Tat-Siong Benny Liew, and Fernando F. Segovia (eds). 2009. *They Were All Together in One Place? Toward Minority Biblical Criticism*. Semeia Studies 57. Atlanta, GA: Society of Biblical Literature.
- Balch, David L. (ed.). 2000. *Homosexuality, Science, and the 'Plain Sense' of Scripture*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans.
- Barclay, J. M. G. 2007. "Am I Not a Man and a Brother?" The Bible and the British Anti-Slavery Campaign', *Expository Times* 119, no. 1: 3–14.
- Barton, John. 2007. *The Nature of Biblical Criticism*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press.
- Batto, Bernard F. 2013. *In the Beginning: Essays on Creation Myths in the Ancient Near East and the Bible*. Siphut 9. Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns.
- Bauckham, Richard (ed.). 1998. *The Gospels for All Christians: Rethinking the Gospel Audiences*. Edinburgh: T&T Clark.
- Béchard, Dean P. 2002. *The Scripture Documents: An Anthology of Official Catholic Teachings*. Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press.
- Brett, M. G. 1990. 'Four or Five Things to Do With Texts. A Taxonomy of Interpretative Interests', in *The Bible in Three Dimensions. Essays in Celebration of Forty Years of Biblical Studies in the University of Sheffield*. Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement Series 87. Edited by David J.A. Clines, Stanley E. Porter, and Stephen E. Fowl. Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 357–377.
- Briggs, Richard S. 2010. *The Virtuous Reader: Old Testament Narrative and Interpretive Virtue: Studies in Theological Interpretation*. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic.
- Briggs, Richard S. 2011. 'How to Do Things with Meaning in Biblical Interpretation', *Southeastern Theological Review* 2: 143–160.
- Briggs, Richard S. 2015. 'Hermeneutics and Interpretation', in *Vocabulary for the Study of Religion*. Volume 2. 3 vols. Edited by Robert A. Segal and Kocku von Stuckrad. Leiden: Brill, 159–166.
- Briggs, Richard S. 2023. 'Premodern Interpretation and Contemporary Exegesis', in *The New Cambridge Companion to Biblical Interpretation*. Edited by Ian Boxall and Bradley C. Gregory. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 301–317.
- Caird, G. B. 1980. *The Language and Imagery of the Bible*. London: Duckworth.
- Caputo, John D. 2018. *Hermeneutics: Facts and Interpretation in the Age of Information*. London: Pelican.
- Chapman, Stephen B. 2006. 'Reclaiming Inspiration for the Bible', in *Canon and Biblical Interpretation*. Scripture and Hermeneutics 7. Edited by Craig

- Bartholomew, Al Wolters, Scott Hahn, Robin Parry, and Christopher Seitz. Carlisle: Paternoster, 167–206.
- Childs, Brevard S. 1979. *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture*. London: SCM Press.
 - Davis, Ellen F., and Richard B. Hays (eds). 2003. *The Art of Reading Scripture*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans.
 - De Waal Dryden, J. 2018. *A Hermeneutic of Wisdom: Recovering the Formative Agency of Scripture*. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic.
 - Dell, Katharine J., and Paul M. Joyce (eds). 2013. *Biblical Interpretation and Method: Essays in Honour of John Barton*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
 - Dostal, Robert J. 1994. 'The Experience of Truth for Gadamer and Heidegger: Taking Time and Sudden Lightning', in *Hermeneutics and Truth*. Northwestern University Studies in Phenomenology and Existential Philosophy. Edited by Brice R. Wachterhauser. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 47–67.
 - Driver, Daniel R. 2010. *Brevard Childs, Biblical Theologian*. Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck.
 - Eagleton, Terry. 2008. *Literary Theory: An Introduction*. Oxford: Blackwells. Anniversary.
 - Eco, Umberto. 1984. *The Role of the Reader: Explorations in the Semiotics of Texts*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
 - Exum, J. Cheryl. 2022. *Song of Songs: The Bible's Only Love Poem*. T&T Clark Study Guides to the Old Testament London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark.
 - Farrar, Frederic W. 1886. *History of Interpretation*. London: MacMillan and Co.
 - Fee, Gordon D., and Douglas Stuart. 2003. *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan. 3rd edition.
 - Fowl, Stephen E. 1998. *Engaging Scripture*. Oxford: Blackwell.
 - Fowl, Stephen E. 2006. 'The Importance of a Multivoiced Literal Sense of Scripture: The Example of Thomas Aquinas', in *Reading Scripture with the Church: Toward a Hermeneutic for Theological Interpretation*. Edited by A. K. M. Adam, Stephen E. Fowl, Kevin J. Vanhoozer, and Francis Watson. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 35–50.
 - Frei, Hans W. 1974. *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative: A Study in Eighteenth- and Nineteenth-Century Hermeneutics*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
 - Frei, Hans W. 1992. *Types of Christian Theology*. Edited by George Hunsinger and William C. Placher. New Haven/London: Yale University Press.
 - Froehlich, Karlfried, and Mark S. Burrows. 2014. *Sensing the Scriptures: Aminadab's Chariot and the Predicament of Biblical Interpretation*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans.

- Gadamer, Hans-Georg. 1976. 'The Universality of the Hermeneutical Problem', in *Philosophical Hermeneutics*. Edited by David E. Linge. Berkeley: University of California Press, 3–17.
- Gadamer, Hans-Georg. 1989. *Truth and Method*. Translated by Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall. London: Sheed and Ward.
- Gorman, Michael J. (ed.). 2017. *Scripture and Its Interpretation: A Global, Ecumenical Introduction to the Bible*. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic.
- Guest, Deryn, Robert E. Goss, Mona West, and Thomas Bohache (eds). 2006. *The Queer Bible Commentary*. London: SCM Press.
- Hahn, Scott W., and Benjamin Wiker. 2013. *Politicizing the Bible: The Roots of Historical Criticism and the Secularization of Scripture 1300–1700*. New York: Crossroad Herder and Herder.
- Havea, Jione, Margaret Aymer, and Steed Vernyl Davidson (eds). 2015. *Islands, Islanders, and the Bible: RumInations*. Atlanta, GA: SBL Press.
- Hays, Richard B. 2014. *Reading Backwards: Figural Christology and the Fourfold Gospel Witness*. Waco, TX: Baylor University Press.
- Horrell, David G., Cheryl Hunt, Christopher Southgate, and Francesca Stavrakopoulou (eds). 2010. *Ecological Hermeneutics: Biblical, Historical, and Theological Perspectives*. London: T&T Clark.
- Johnson, Luke Timothy. 1996. *Scripture and Discernment: Decision Making in the Church*. Nashville: Abingdon Press.
- Legaspi, Michael C. 2010. *The Death of Scripture and the Rise of Biblical Studies*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Lincoln, Andrew T. 2000. *Truth on Trial: The Lawsuit Motif in the Fourth Gospel*. Peabody, MA: Hendrickson.
- Lundin, Roger. 1999. 'Interpreting Orphans: Hermeneutics in the Cartesian Tradition', in *The Promise of Hermeneutics*. Edited by Roger Lundin, Anthony C. Thiselton, and Clarence Walhout. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1–64.
- Malpas, Jeff. 2015. 'Introduction: Hermeneutics and Philosophy', in *The Routledge Companion to Hermeneutics*. Edited by Jeff Malpas and Hans-Helmuth Gander. New York: Routledge, 1–9.
- Mitchell, Margaret M. 2010. *Paul, the Corinthians and the Birth of Christian Hermeneutics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Noll, Mark A. 2006. *The Civil War as a Theological Crisis*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press.
- Palmer, Richard E. 1969. *Hermeneutics*. Northwestern University Press Studies in Phenomenology and Existential Philosophy. Evanston: Northwestern University Press.
- Pearson, Brook. 2001. *Corresponding Sense: Paul, Dialectic and Gadamer*. Biblical Interpretation Series 58. Leiden: Brill.

- Ricoeur, Paul. 1970. *Freud and Philosophy: An Essay on Interpretation*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Ricoeur, Paul. 1980. *Essays on Biblical Interpretation*. Edited by Lewis S. Mudge. Philadelphia: Fortress Press.
- Ricoeur, Paul. 1984. *Time and Narrative*. 3 vols. Translated by Kathleen Blamey and David Pellauer. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Ricoeur, Paul. 1991. *From Text to Action: Essays in Hermeneutics II*. Translated by Kathleen Blamey and John B. Thompson. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press.
- Ricoeur, Paul. 1992. *Oneself as Another*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Ricoeur, Paul. 1995. *Figuring the Sacred: Religion, Narrative, and Imagination*. Edited by Mark I. Wallace. Minneapolis: Fortress Press.
- Ricoeur, Paul. 1997. 'The Self in the Mirror of the Scriptures', in *The Whole and Divided Self*. Edited by David E. Aune and John McCarthy. New York: Crossroad, 201–220.
- Ricoeur, Paul, and Andre Lacocque. 1998. *Thinking Biblically: Exegetical and Hermeneutical Studies*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Rowland, Christopher, and Mark Corner. 1988. *Liberating Exegesis: The Challenge of Liberation Theology to Biblical Studies*. Biblical Foundations in Theology London: SPCK.
- Sanders, James A. 1984. *Canon and Community: A Guide to Canonical Criticism*. Guides to Biblical Scholarship Philadelphia: Fortress Press.
- Sarisky, Darren (ed.). 2015. *Theology, History, and Biblical Interpretation: Modern Readings*. London: Bloomsbury.
- Schleiermacher, Friedrich. 1998. *Hermeneutics and Criticism and Other Writings*. Cambridge Texts in the History of Philosophy. Edited by Andrew Bowie. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Schleiermacher, Friedrich. 2011. *Brief Outline of Theology as a Field of Study: Translation of the 1811 and 1830 Editions*. Edited by Terrence N. Tice. Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press. 3rd edition.
- Schmidt, Lawrence K. 2006. *Understanding Hermeneutics*. Stocksfield: Acumen.
- Schüssler Fiorenza, Elisabeth. 1988. 'The Ethics of Biblical Interpretation: Decentering Biblical Scholarship', *Journal of Biblical Literature* 107, no. 1: 3–17.
- Segovia, Fernando F., and R. S. Sugirtharajah (eds). 2007. *A Postcolonial Commentary on the New Testament Writings*. The Bible and Postcolonialism 13. London: T&T Clark.
- Spinks, D. Christopher. 2007. *The Bible and the Crisis of Meaning: Debates on the Theological Interpretation of Scripture*. London/New York: T&T Clark.
- Steinmetz, David C. 1980. 'The Superiority of Pre-Critical Exegesis', *Theology Today* 37: 27–38.

- Stendahl, Krister. 1962. 'Biblical Theology, Contemporary', in *Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*. Volume 1. Edited by G. A. Buttrick. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 418–432.
- Sugirtharajah, R. S. 2001. *The Bible and the Third World: Precolonial, Colonial and Postcolonial Encounters*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Sugirtharajah, R. S (ed.). 2006. *Voices from the Margin. Interpreting the Bible in the Third World*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books. Revised and expanded third edition.
- Swartley, Willard. 1983. *Slavery, Sabbath, War and Women: Case Issues in Biblical Interpretation*. Scottdale, PA: Herald Press.
- Thiselton, Anthony C. 1980. *The Two Horizons: New Testament Hermeneutics and Philosophical Description*. Carlisle: Paternoster Press.
- Torrance, T. F. 1969. *Theological Science*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Turner, James. 2014. *Philology: The Forgotten Origins of the Modern Humanities*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Vanhoozer, Kevin J. 1998. *Is There a Meaning in This Text? The Bible, the Reader, and the Morality of Literary Knowledge*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans.
- Vanhoozer, Kevin J., Craig G. Bartholomew, Daniel J. Treier, and N. T. Wright (eds). 2005. *Dictionary for Theological Interpretation of the Bible*. London/Grand Rapids: Baker Academic/SPCK.
- Watson, Francis. 2004. *Paul and the Hermeneutics of Faith*. London: T&T Clark.
- Wilson, John E. 2015. 'Barth and Bultmann: Theological Hermeneutics', in *The Routledge Companion to Hermeneutics*. Edited by Jeff Malpas and Hans-Helmuth Gander. New York: Routledge, 98–106.
- Wood, Donald. 2007. *Barth's Theology of Interpretation*. Barth Studies Series Aldershot: Ashgate.
- Young, Frances. 2003. 'Proverbs 8 in Interpretation: Wisdom Personified', in *Reading Texts, Seeking Wisdom*. Edited by David F. Ford and Graham Stanton. London: SCM Press, 102–115.