

From Exegesis to Allegory: Ricœur's Challenge to Biblical Scholarship

For over five hundred years, two traditions of Bible-reading have been at war with each other: the historical and the allegorical. The conflict has produced a vast volume of polemical literature which continues to this day.¹ While Ricœur's name has been occasionally invoked in the course of the debate, there has so far been no systematic treatment of Ricœur's distinctive contribution. This is surprising if we consider that Ricœur is one of the best known hermeneutic philosophers of the twentieth century, and that he wrote a lot about both reading traditions. But what comes as no surprise, to anyone who knows Ricœur, is that he offers a mediating position that seeks to reconcile the two opposing parties.

I will use Ricœur constructively, not simply expounding his thought but extending it, to show how it offers a way to reconcile historical exegesis with allegory. I will begin with a look at Ricœur's ambiguous relationship to biblical studies. This ambiguity will reveal some features of biblical scholarship that are not necessary, but are a contingent result of its history. Next, a brief survey of that history will enable us to understand why biblical studies as a discipline became estranged from other reading traditions, such as dogmatic and allegorical readings of scripture. Once the reasons for the conflict are clear, we will be ready to see the unique power of Ricœur's hermeneutics to bring reconciliation.

An Ambiguous Relationship to Biblical Studies

Ricœur's relationship to biblical studies has all the features of a tempestuous love affair. His influence on the discourse is hard to overestimate, and countless scholars have found him an invaluable source of inspiration for new approaches to scripture.² But others have seen him as

¹ For two recent contributions on opposing sides, see Iain W. Provan, *The Reformation and the Right Reading of Scripture* (Waco, Texas: Baylor University Press, 2017); Craig Carter, *Interpreting Scripture with the Great Tradition: Recovering the Genius of Premodern Exegesis* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2018).

² While an exhaustive list of biblical works using Ricœurian methodology would be too long, a representative sampling across different fields includes: Sean Freyne, *Galilee, Jesus and the Gospels: Literary Approaches and Historical Investigations* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1988); Amos N. Wilder, *Jesus' Parables and the War of Myths: Essays on Imagination in the Scripture* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1982); Sandra M. Schneiders, *The Revelatory Text: Interpreting the New Testament as Sacred Scripture, Second Edition*, 2nd ed. (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1999); Loretta Dornisch, 'The Book of Job and Ricœur's Hermeneutics', *Semeia* 19 (1981): 3–21; Douglas S. Earl, *Reading Joshua as Christian Scripture* (Winona Lake: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2010); Tania Oldenhege, *Parables for Our Time: Rereading New Testament Scholarship after the Holocaust, Parables for Our Time* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002); Walter Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament: Testimony, Dispute, Advocacy* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997). Regarding the last, Richard Briggs calls Brueggemann's entire *œuvre* "the most persistent attempt to work out Ricœur's hermeneutic in biblical interpretation" ('What Does Hermeneutics Have to Do with Biblical Interpretation?', *The Heythrop Journal* 47, no. 1 [1 January 2006]: 69).

an unwelcome influence leading a younger generation astray.³ Ricœur's attitude also appears to vary wildly in return. On the one hand, he frequently states his preference for works of biblical scholarship over dogmatic or systematic forms of Christian reflection, referring to his own "biblical faith" as "nourished by exegesis more than by theology."⁴ He even goes beyond personal taste to a general principle, arguing that "the philosopher, when he reflects on religion, should have for his partner the exegete rather than the theologian."⁵ On the other hand, this famously irenic philosopher reserves some of his more surprisingly vicious remarks for biblical studies, calling it a "desert of criticism,"⁶ which turns the biblical text into a "cadaver handed over for autopsy."⁷

How can we explain these contrasting positions? Is Ricœur simply being inconsistent? The answer, I suggest, comes from a much-celebrated feature of Ricœurian thought: a resistance to totalising systems that claim exclusive access to the truth. Although modern biblical scholarship is crucially important to Ricœur, this does not prevent him from holding the view that it claims too much for itself at times. Ricœur's seemingly opposing attitudes simply show a desire to *keep exegesis where it belongs*: preventing dogmatic theologians from restricting its freedom, and at the same time preventing biblical scholars from giving it dominion over all. Exegesis is a "necessary but not sufficient" part of his larger goal, which is that of allowing the Bible to speak life-giving words of meaning to the present day. His mediating spirit leads him to seek a hermeneutic that can even reconcile the historical-critical method with its arch-enemies: allegorical and dogmatic interpretations of scripture.

Since its inception as an independent discipline, biblical studies has been practised using primarily the historical-critical method. This remains the case today in spite of the birth of numerous rival approaches over the last forty years (structuralism, feminist criticism, liberation theology, etc.), which have led to some rather hasty announcements of historical criticism's death.⁸ But in the majority of biblical studies departments the historical-critical method is still the default mode of biblical interpretation and seems likely to remain so.⁹ Some

³ For example, Brevard Childs sees Ricœur's hermeneutics as totally incompatible with his own approach, because it "shows little or no interest in the historical development of the biblical text . . . [and] fails to take seriously the essential function of the canon in grounding the biblical metaphors within the context of historic Israel" (Brevard S. Childs, *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture* [Fortress Press, 1979], 77). This is a misunderstanding. In fact, Childs' canonical approach is far closer to Ricœur than he seems to realise.

⁴ Paul Ricœur, 'Intellectual Autobiography', in *The Philosophy of Paul Ricœur*, ed. Lewis Hahn (Chicago: Open Court, 1995), 53.

⁵ Paul Ricœur, *The Conflict of Interpretations* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1974), 482.

⁶ Paul Ricœur, *The Symbolism of Evil*, trans. Emerson Buchanan (Boston: Beacon, 1969), 349. This comment is directed more broadly at the critical spirit of modernity. But in the context of the book, it is modernity's influence on ancient history, including biblical studies, that is at issue.

⁷ André LaCocque and Paul Ricœur, *Thinking Biblically: Exegetical and Hermeneutical Studies*, trans. David Pellauer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), xii.

⁸ See e.g., Gerhard Maier, *Das Ende der historisch-kritischen Methode* (Wuppertal: Brockhaus, 1974).

⁹ John Barton notes that "in spite of the pressure for new paradigms a great deal of historical-critical study continues to be undertaken" ('Historical-Critical Approaches', in *The Cambridge Companion to Biblical Interpretation*, ed. John Barton [Cambridge:

scholars now call their method ‘historical-grammatical’ rather than ‘historical-critical’.¹⁰ They typically give two reasons for this distinction. First, they are more concerned with scripture’s ‘literal meaning’, than with what lies ‘behind the text’. Second, historical criticism in its classic Troeltschian formulation excludes the possibility of supernatural causes (e.g. miracles) for historical events, whereas not all biblical scholars today want to be so constrained. Ricœur, however, does not make this distinction. For him, the terms ‘historical criticism’ and ‘the historical-critical method’ have a broad meaning that is not necessarily tied to a naturalist metaphysics. They denote all attempts to understand the biblical text by taking seriously its historical, cultural, and literary context, with the aim of recovering its originally intended meaning. Indeed, for Ricœur as for many people, the word ‘exegesis’ almost exclusively denotes historical-critical interpretation.¹¹

“No method is innocent,” writes Ricœur, meaning neutral or self-evident.¹² “The search for the original meaning independent of any engagement on the part of the reader is not some atemporal, ahistorical attitude, but itself stems from a history of reading.”¹³ It really is *historical* criticism, in that it *has* a history as well as being about history. Its history has given it features it might not otherwise have had, such as totalising tendencies and a dogmatic opposition to dogma and allegory. If we want to understand why historical criticism has these features, we need to know its history. Ricœur never wrote a history of historical criticism, so what follows is an attempt to tell that history in a way that best fits his understanding of it, to serve as the most helpful backdrop to understanding his evaluation of it. Brevity has required the omission of many figures whose influence on biblical studies was also crucial – such as Thomas Hobbes, Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, Leopold von Ranke, Ernst Troeltsch, Johann David Michaelis, Ferdinand Christian Baur, and David Friedrich Strauss.¹⁴ But although attention to these would enrich the picture, it would not substantially change it.

Cambridge University Press, 1998], 18). Hays and Ansberry agree that “the reports of historical criticism’s demise have been greatly exaggerated. Historical criticism is not a passing craze; it is not going away” (Christopher M. Hays and Christopher B. Ansberry, ‘Faithful Criticism and a Critical Faith’, in *Evangelical Faith and the Challenge of Historical Criticism*, ed. Christopher B. Ansberry and Christopher M. Hays [Baker Academic, 2013], 204).

¹⁰ See e.g., Craig Blomberg, ‘The Historical-Critical/Grammatical View’, in *Biblical Hermeneutics: Five Views*, ed. Stanley E. Porter and Beth M. Stovell (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2012).

¹¹ See Ricœur’s stated assumption about “identif[y]ing exegesis with the historical-critical method” (Paul Ricœur, *Figuring the Sacred: Religion, Narrative, and Imagination*, ed. Mark I. Wallace, trans. David Pellauer [Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995], 148). Even when he tries to argue that “biblical exegesis” should not be considered a method itself, but rather the goal of all methods, he still treats the historical-critical method as a “backdrop” (*toile de fond*) for the other approaches (Paul Ricœur, ‘Du conflit à la convergence des méthodes en exégèse biblique’, in *Exégèse et herméneutique*, ed. Xavier Léon-Dufour [Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1971], 35).

¹² My translation: “Nulle méthode est innocente” (Ricœur, ‘Du conflit à la convergence des méthodes en exégèse biblique’, 36).

¹³ LaCocque and Ricœur, *Thinking Biblically*, 295.

¹⁴ For more on Hobbes’ contribution, see Scott Hahn and Benjamin Wiker, *Politicizing the Bible: The Roots of Historical Criticism and the Secularization of Scripture, 1300-1700* (Crossroad, 2013). On Michaelis, see Michael C. Legaspi, *The Death of Scripture and the Rise of Biblical Studies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010). On Lessing, Ranke, and Troeltsch, see Seth Heringer, *Uniting History*

I argue that four key drivers led to the formation of historical criticism as a totalising system that was and is antagonistic towards dogma and allegory. These four are: the Reformation,¹⁵ Baruch Spinoza,¹⁶ Friedrich Schleiermacher,¹⁷ and Wilhelm Dilthey.¹⁸

The Formation of the Historical-Critical Method

Prior to the Reformation, the Bible was understood to have multiple levels of meaning – the famous “four senses” of scripture, with the literal sense being the most foundational. The Bible’s primary purpose was not to be a weapon in doctrinal disputes. Rather, it was a rich resource of spiritual nourishment, not only from its literal sense, but through its allegorical, moral, and anagogical senses as well. The doctrinal boundaries drawn by the combined authority of scripture’s literal sense, the church’s tradition, and the magisterium created a safe space in which allegorical meanings could be freely and playfully explored.

When in the sixteenth century the Protestant Reformers rejected the Catholic magisterium, they shattered this consensus about how to interpret the Bible. Believing that if the Bible were only read on its own terms, its true meaning could be liberated from all the accretions of dogmatic history which had covered it over, they introduced the principle of *sola scriptura* and the doctrine of scripture’s clarity or perspicuity. This did not naïvely imply that anyone who could read would understand everything the Bible said. Nor did it mean that traditional interpretations of scripture could safely be ignored. It meant rather that the key to the Bible’s meaning was neither the privileged possession of the magisterium nor the result of special spiritual discernment; scripture was open to public scholarly inquiry.

Among the Reformers, however, no consensus emerged about the literal meaning of scripture. Protestants found it impossible to agree, not only on secondary details of doctrine,

and Theology: A Theological Critique of the Historical Method (Lanham: Fortress Academic, 2018). On Baur and Strauss, see Stephen Neill and Tom Wright, *The Interpretation of the New Testament, 1861-1986* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), 13–34.

¹⁵ Michael Legaspi writes that “historical criticism owes a great deal to the theological and hermeneutical impulses of the Reformation” (‘What Ever Happened to Historical Criticism?’, *Journal of Religion & Society* 9 [2007]: 5). John Barton agrees: “There is a tradition in German scholarship of tracing the origins of historical criticism not to the Enlightenment but to the Reformation” (Barton, ‘Historical-Critical Approaches’, 16). Robert Grant and David Tracy go further, stating that “modern historical study of the Bible could not have come into existence without the Reformation” (Robert M. Grant and David Tracy, *A Short History of the Interpretation of the Bible*, 2nd ed. [London: SCM Press, 1984], 92).

¹⁶ Jeffrey L. Morrow writes that “Spinoza ... created the methodological blueprint later biblical critics would follow” (‘The Acid of History: La Peyrère, Hobbes, Spinoza, and the Separation of Faith and Reason in Modern Biblical Studies’, *Heythrop Journal* 58, no. 2 [2017]: 169). Grant and Tracy agree that “Spinoza’s method is very much like that followed in modern introductions to the books of the Bible” (*A Short History of the Interpretation of the Bible*, 108).

¹⁷ Werner G. Jeanrond calls Schleiermacher the “father of modern hermeneutics” (*Theological Hermeneutics: Development and Significance* [London: SCM Press, 1994], 44). Ricœur also calls Schleiermacher the “founder of modern hermeneutics” (*Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences: Essays on Language, Action and Interpretation*, ed. and trans. John Thompson [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981], 47).

¹⁸ Jeanrond writes that “Dilthey’s hermeneutical thoughts are very important, because they provide the bridge between Schleiermacher and hermeneutical developments in the twentieth century” (Jeanrond, *Theological Hermeneutics*, 51).

but also on issues they considered central and were unwilling to compromise on. As Sheila Davaney puts it:

The turn to Scripture did not solve the problem of religious authority; the ecclesial authority of the clergy and the weight of church traditions were replaced not by a singular transparent Scripture but by multiple communal and individual voices all claiming the correct interpretation of the Bible. The appeal to *sola scriptura* resulted in the multiplication of authorities.¹⁹

The multiplication put pressure on each church to articulate why its own reading of scripture was the right one. “For each group,” Michael Legaspi writes, “the presence of the *other* Christian confession, which also claimed fidelity to the Bible, made it necessary for each group to defend its distinctive mode of biblical interpretation.”²⁰ The Bible became increasingly used as a weapon in doctrinal disagreements. The pressure to find a secure foundation for doctrine led to an insistence that the literal sense of scripture is the only sense. Allegory became associated with a way of reading scripture that was still under the captivity of the magisterium, even though there is no necessary link between the two.²¹ As Ricœur writes:

The declaration that Scripture is its own interpreter had the consequence of discrediting allegorical interpretation in general, which was henceforth understood to be contingent and arbitrary. In this way, the properly exegetical argument [against allegory] links up with the anti-authoritarian one in such a way as to reinforce both of them, so that they become indiscernible from each other. In this sense, the Reformation paved the way for the major objections [to allegory] of contemporary critics.²²

In reality, the very existence of multiple churches claiming adherence to the Bible’s literal sense contradicted the principle that ‘scripture alone’ could be authoritative. Consequently, each new church came to replicate the magisterial authority in less visible ways. As James Simpson observes: “Since the literal sense alone turns out to be fragile, disagreements about its meaning inevitably arise. These disagreements need to be resolved somehow, and in the sixteenth century they could only be resolved by affirmations of institutional power, whether by conciliar decision or absolutist fiat. The need for authoritative mediation was true of evangelical culture no less than of the Catholic Church.”²³

¹⁹ Sheila Greeve Davaney, *Historicism: The Once and Future Challenge for Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2006), 2.

²⁰ Legaspi, *The Death of Scripture and the Rise of Biblical Studies*, 17.

²¹ For William Tyndale (1494-1536), for example, “Scripture ‘hath but one simple, literal sense, whose light the owls cannot abide.’ Promotion of that simple, literal sense required strenuous repudiation of its competitor, allegory” (cited in James Simpson, *Burning to Read: English Fundamentalism and Its Reformation Opponents* [Cambridge, Mass: Belknap, 2007], 111).

²² LaCocque and Ricœur, *Thinking Biblically*, 293–94.

²³ Simpson, *Burning to Read*, 107.

In the midst of this “crisis of authority”²⁴ one of the grandfathers of modern biblical criticism arose, the philosopher Baruch Spinoza (1632-1677). Spinoza knew first-hand of the traumatic effects of religious conflict, having not only grown up during the bloody Thirty Years War, but also suffering persecution and exile from his Jewish community due to his beliefs.²⁵ His 1670 *Theological-Political Treatise* aimed to establish a new method of interpretation that could command universal assent and bring peace to a war-torn Europe.

It was clear to Spinoza that Protestants, despite appealing to the plain sense of scripture, were reading it through a dogmatic lens just like Catholics. He did not distinguish: “Theologians,” for him, “have sought to extract their own thoughts and opinions from the Bible and thereby endow them with divine authority.”²⁶ The problem was not this or that dogmatic position but the holding of any dogma at all. Turning the *sola scriptura* principle against its creators, Spinoza claimed that *all* religious dispositions were an obstacle to the right reading of scripture. The Bible should be interpreted with a “free and unprejudiced mind” – where for him ‘dogma’ was identical with ‘prejudice’.²⁷

Spinoza proposed a new authority for biblical interpretation, which he believed all human beings have in common: the light of “natural reason.”²⁸ He writes: “As the highest authority to interpret Scripture rests with each individual, the rule of interpretation must be nothing other than the natural light of reason which is common to all men, and not some light above nature or any external authority.”²⁹ The Bible’s truth is only discernible to “the autonomous biblical critic free of dogmatic commitments.”³⁰ In this way Spinoza bequeathed to future biblical scholars the conviction that dogma is the enemy of exegesis.

When he applied his new method, Spinoza came up with precisely the results he hoped would bring peace to Europe. He managed to deny the Bible’s political relevance by appealing to its historically particular character. As Legaspi puts it, according to Spinoza,

careful philological study of the Bible shows that concerns with modern philosophical, political, legal, or scientific questions are alien to the Bible. The Bible contains the ancient historical record of a specific civilization, which is firmly embedded in the language and thought patterns of its time. Historical and textual investigation shows that it is neither

²⁴ See Allan Jenkins and Patrick Preston, *Biblical Scholarship and the Church: A Sixteenth Century Crisis of Authority*, Ashgate New Critical Thinking in Religion, Theology, and Biblical Studies (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007).

²⁵ See Roy Harrisville and Walter Sundberg, *The Bible in Modern Culture: Baruch Spinoza to Brevard Childs*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2002), 33–36.

²⁶ Benedict Spinoza, *Theological-Political Treatise*, ed. Jonathan Israel (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 97; Harrisville and Sundberg point out that here Spinoza is in continuity with the Reformation, for which “the suspicion of the dogmatic tradition was a chief interpretive principle” (Harrisville and Sundberg, *The Bible in Modern Culture*, 41).

²⁷ Spinoza, *Theological-Political Treatise*, 9.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 111.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 117.

³⁰ Harrisville and Sundberg, *The Bible in Modern Culture*, 39.

timeless nor universal. Attempts to use the Bible to address modern questions, especially political ones, are unwarranted.³¹

This is another aspect that has remained in biblical studies to this day: the ease with which the Bible's distance from our own time can be used to deny it political and moral relevance.³²

But while Spinozist rationalism left an indelible mark on biblical study, it is Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768-1834), the "father of modern hermeneutics," who made explicit the notion of *authorial intention* as the gold standard of interpretation. Schleiermacher's hermeneutics has often been misunderstood as placing the fullness of meaning in authorial intention. In fact, his brilliant notion of the "hermeneutical circle" includes an important role for the reader in appropriating the meaning of a text. Yet what is important here is that his notion of authorial intention was used in biblical study in a much more reductionistic way.³³

Spinoza blamed misinterpretations on the stubborn prejudice and wilful blindness of dogmatic theologians and insisted on historical distance as facilitating the right way to read the Bible. But for Schleiermacher, historical distance was the cause of innocent misinterpretations, which could lead people unwittingly to attribute a meaning that was not what the author had in mind. Hermeneutics is therefore the art of avoiding misunderstanding, and interpretation is all about overcoming that historical gap, putting oneself in the place of the first audience in order to understand what the author originally meant.³⁴ One must "establish the same relationship between oneself and the author as between him and his original addressees."³⁵ The goal of interpretation is a reproduction of the author's original intention.³⁶

Still, the principle of authorial intention had not yet reached the status of a total and final authority. It needed, next, to pass through the crucible of scientific positivism that gripped the Western world in the second half of the nineteenth century. For the positivist, all knowledge is scientific in nature, discoverable by empirical methods; therefore, the only valid kind of knowledge is that which comprises objectively and universally verifiable facts. The rise of positivism put enormous pressure on the humanities disciplines to come up with equally objective, universally verifiable criteria and results. As Ricœur puts it, "It seemed that the only way of rendering justice to historical knowledge was to give it a scientific dimension,

³¹ Legaspi, *The Death of Scripture and the Rise of Biblical Studies*, 24.

³² Below we will consider an example of this moral and political distancing in the case of the commandment "thou shalt not kill."

³³ "[One] aspect of Schleiermacher's hermeneutics (his emphasis on developing methodical controls to avoid misunderstanding) tended to encourage the development of strictly methodological interests – first historico-critical, then formalist" (Grant and Tracy, *A Short History of the Interpretation of the Bible*, 154).

³⁴ He writes, "Hermeneutics rests on the fact of the non-understanding of discourse: taken in its most general sense, including misunderstanding in the mother tongue and in everyday life" (Friedrich Schleiermacher, *Hermeneutics and Criticism*, trans. Andrew Bowie [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998], 227).

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 27.

³⁶ "One has only understood what one has reconstructed in all its relationships and in its context" (*ibid.*, 228).

comparable to that which the natural sciences had attained.”³⁷ So the German historian and philosopher Wilhelm Dilthey (1833–1911) undertook “to endow the human sciences with a methodology and an epistemology which would be as respectable as those of the sciences of nature.”³⁸

Dilthey was Schleiermacher’s “intellectual successor in hermeneutics.”³⁹ He built on Schleiermacher’s idea that authorial intention is the key to the meaning of a text and that interpretation is reproduction of this original meaning.⁴⁰ But he did not think that hermeneutics began with Schleiermacher. Seeing its initial impulse in the Reformation, he “credited Protestantism with the founding of both historical criticism and the science of hermeneutics.”⁴¹ Hermeneutics took a decidedly positivist turn with Dilthey. He gave a new language to hermeneutics borrowed from the sciences, speaking about “certainty” and “objectivity” in interpretation. As Merold Westphal puts it:

[For Dilthey] interpretation must be ‘scientific’ by being raised to the level of ‘objectivity’ and ‘universal validity’. This suggests that differences of interpretation due to differences of context (subjectivity) should be eliminated so that everyone comes up with the same interpretation, relative to no particular context (universal validity). This is to be done by means of method, just as in the natural sciences. ... For Dilthey interpretation is to be guided by rules, and hermeneutics is the theory of those rules.⁴²

Dilthey defined interpretation as “rule-guided understanding of fixed and relatively permanent objectifications of life.”⁴³ Its goal was “to preserve the universal validity of historical interpretation against the inroads of romantic caprice and sceptical subjectivity, and to give a theoretical justification for such validity, upon which all the certainty of historical knowledge is founded.”⁴⁴

³⁷ Ricœur, *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences: Essays on Language, Action and Interpretation*, 49.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ Anthony C. Thiselton, ‘Biblical Studies and Theoretical Hermeneutics’, in *The Cambridge Companion to Biblical Interpretation*, ed. John Barton (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 99.

⁴⁰ See Ricœur, *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences: Essays on Language, Action and Interpretation*, 152; Paul Ricœur, *Interpretation Theory: Discourse and the Surplus of Meaning* (Fort Worth: Texas Christian University Press, 1976), 22.

⁴¹ Jens Zimmermann, *Recovering Theological Hermeneutics: An Incarnational-Trinitarian Theory of Interpretation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004), 81.

⁴² Merold Westphal, ‘The Philosophical/Theological View’, in *Biblical Hermeneutics: Five Views*, ed. Stanley E. Porter and Beth M. Stovell (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2012), 81–82.

⁴³ Wilhelm Dilthey, *Hermeneutics and the Study of History*, ed. Rudolf Makkreel and Frithjof Rodi, Selected Works 4 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), 237.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 250.

William Wrede as an Exemplary Historical Critic

This brief survey of the genesis of the historical-critical method has given us the following four characteristics of historical criticism. First, it was rooted in a Reformation context in which the clarity and sufficiency of the Bible was being asserted for the first time, which yet at the same time was proving an untenable doctrine in light of violent doctrinal disagreements, leading to a crisis of authority. Second, it arose out of Spinoza's attempt to reject all dogma in favour of a historicising reading that claimed total authority for itself and denied contemporary relevance to scripture. Third, it was refined by Schleiermacher into a methodological focus on overcoming historical distance to grasp the author's intention. Fourth, it was transformed by Diltheyan positivism into a scientific discipline that aims at objectively provable and universally verifiable facts.

Let us now see how all these hermeneutical threads come together in the work of a biblical scholar whose influence on biblical studies is still strongly felt, and who will serve as an illuminating contrast to Ricœur.

William Wrede (1859-1906) is a paradigmatic example of historical criticism in its purest and most totalising form, someone for whom the historical-critical method is the only way to arrive at the certain and universal truth of the Bible. He sees biblical studies as a "real, genuine science," which has to "ignore all that has to do with the theological passions." A biblical scholar must single-mindedly "aim at one end only – namely, to get right down to the bottom of the facts."⁴⁵ Theology has no place whatsoever in the pursuit of scientific knowledge:

Biblical theology ... tries to grasp [the New Testament] objectively [*objektiv*], correctly and sharply as possible. Like every other real science, New Testament theology has its goal simply in itself, and is totally indifferent to all dogma and systematic theology. What could dogmatics offer it? Could dogmatics teach New Testament theology to see facts [*Thatsachen*] correctly? At most it could colour them. Could it correct the facts that were found? To correct facts is absurd. Could it legitimize them? Facts need no legitimation.⁴⁶

In Wrede we find the positivist dichotomy between objective and subjective applied to biblical studies with powerful effect: any theological treatment of the Bible is relegated to the realm of subjective opinion, of which biblical scholarship has no need.

The point is to ascertain the facts of the case in regard to a long-past event. How, then, can subjective opinions, personal theological convictions, possibly contribute to its elucidation? They can only be a continual source of disturbance. Knowledge of what once was and what

⁴⁵ William Wrede, *The Origin of the New Testament*, trans. James Hill (London: Harper & Brothers, 1909), 2–3.

⁴⁶ William Wrede, 'The Tasks and Methods of New Testament Theology', in *The Nature of New Testament Theology: The Contribution of William Wrede and Adolf Schlatter*, trans. Robert Morgan (London: SCM. Press, 1973), 69–70. See William Wrede, *Über Aufgabe und Methode der sogenannten Neutestamentlichen Theologie* (1897; repr., Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 2009).

once happened can never be settled by subjective considerations, but only from existing historical documents and sources.⁴⁷

Theological doctrines are for Wrede pure subjectivity and nothing but an obstacle to true knowledge of the Bible. Worse, even to approach the Bible with theological interests disqualifies the scholarship automatically: a biblical scholar, Wrede says,

must be guided by a pure disinterested concern for knowledge He must be able to distinguish between the alien modern ideas of his own thought and those of the past. He must be able to keep his own viewpoint, however precious, quite separate from the object of his research and hold it in suspense. Then he will indeed know only what really was [*was wirklich gewesen ist*].⁴⁸

So, what makes New Testament theology ‘theological’? Nothing, in Wrede’s view.⁴⁹ “This account of New Testament theology,” he admits, “entirely surrenders its specifically theological character. It is no longer treated any differently from any other branch of intellectual history in general or the history of religion in particular.”⁵⁰ This is because any “theological type of treatment ... would always result in a mixture which included the personal theological viewpoint of the scholar, and that,” he concludes, “could only obscure things.”⁵¹

Ricœur’s Evaluation of the Historical-Critical Method

A lot has happened in biblical studies since Wrede, and many scholars today practice varieties of historical criticism that are more open to dogmatic theology and other ways of reading scripture (as a consequence of Ricœur’s influence, in some cases).⁵² But the above depiction still has relevance for two reasons: it remains the model used by a large contingent of biblical scholars around the world, and – more pertinently for this article – it is an approximation of Ricœur’s own understanding of historical criticism.

Ricœur saw his own approach to the Bible as “an expansion of the historical-critical method,” affirming it as indispensable while at the same time denying it the totality it has so

⁴⁷ Wrede, *The Origin of the New Testament*, 4.

⁴⁸ Wrede, ‘The Tasks and Methods of New Testament Theology’, 70. This last phrase echoes Leopold von Ranke (1785-1886), who defined the goal of the historian as that of establishing “*wie es eigentlich gewesen*.”

⁴⁹ The original German title of his famous essay on method makes this clearer: “Über Aufgabe und Methode der *sogenannten* [so-called] Neutestamentlichen Theologie.”

⁵⁰ Wrede, ‘The Tasks and Methods of New Testament Theology’, 70.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

⁵² See, for example, Richard B. Hays, *Reading Backwards: Figural Christology and the Fourfold Gospel Witness* (London: SPCK, 2015); Francis Watson, *Text, Church and World: Biblical Interpretation in Theological Perspective* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1994); Francis Watson, *Text and Truth: Redefining Biblical Theology* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1997); R. W. L. Moberly, *The Bible, Theology, and Faith: A Study of Abraham and Jesus* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000); Markus Bockmuehl, *Seeing the Word: Refocusing New Testament Study* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006); Schneiders, *The Revelatory Text*.

often claimed for itself.⁵³ It is “irreplaceable” (*irremplaçable*) but it must be “corrected” (*rectifiée*).⁵⁴ According to Sandra Schneiders, one of the scholars influenced by Ricœur, historical criticism is “necessary but not sufficient.”⁵⁵ The text’s meaning is not *less* than its author’s intention but it is *more*. On this model, to think historical criticism sufficient is like thinking the foundations of a house are the whole house, or the engine of a car is a car (foundations will not keep the rain out, and you cannot drive a car engine). That is why the key insights of historical criticism, especially the focus on authorial intention, are “not to be excluded from hermeneutics, but instead are to be released from the oneness of a non-dialectical concept of discourse.”⁵⁶

Why is historical criticism irreplaceable? For three reasons. First, because every text has an author. “For my part,” Ricœur writes, “I cannot conceive a text without an author, a text which would not have been written by anybody.”⁵⁷ Every sentence spoken or written refers to its utterer in indelible ways, some obvious (e.g., the use of the first person), some hidden (the choice of language and vocabulary that reveals the text to emanate from a singular perspective).⁵⁸ Every sentence is also addressed *to* someone, the implied audience that the author had in view when writing it.⁵⁹ These are indispensable aspects of the meaning of every text that cannot be abolished.⁶⁰

Second, historical criticism of the Bible is indispensable because we do not belong to the same period of history as its authors. Historical distance is an undeniable fact with which all interpretation must grapple. Ricœur writes:

The Gospel itself has become a text, a letter. As a text, it expresses a difference and a distance, however minimal, from the event that it proclaims. This distance, always increasing with time, is what separates the first witness from the entire line of those who hear the witness. Our modernity means only that the distance is now considerable between the place I myself occupy at the center of a culture and the original site of the first witness.⁶¹

⁵³ LaCocque and Ricœur, *Thinking Biblically*, xiii.

⁵⁴ Ricœur, ‘Du conflit à la convergence des méthodes en exégèse biblique’, 36; Paul Ricœur, ‘Esquisse de conclusion’, in *Exégèse et herméneutique*, ed. Xavier Léon-Dufour (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1971), 291.

⁵⁵ “Traditional historical critical exegesis ... is necessary but not sufficient for integral interpretation” (Schneiders, *The Revelatory Text*, 3).

⁵⁶ Ricœur, *Interpretation Theory*, 23.

⁵⁷ My translation: “Pour ma part, je ne concevais pas ce que pourrait être un texte sans auteur, un texte qui n’aurait été écrit par personne” (Ricœur, ‘Esquisse de conclusion’, 292–93).

⁵⁸ Ricœur, *Interpretation Theory*, 12–13.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 14–15.

⁶⁰ This is why I think Gregory Laughery mistaken when he says that Ricœur “downplays” authorial intention too much (*Paul Ricœur & Living Hermeneutics: Exploring Ricœur’s Contribution to Biblical Interpretation* [Milton Keynes: Destinée, 2016], 205).

⁶¹ Paul Ricœur, *The Conflict of Interpretations* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1974), 387.

Third, historical criticism has a legitimate claim to the status of an objective science, says Ricœur, provided science itself is understood correctly.⁶² To be truly scientific we must escape the positivist “fetishism of facts,” which is “by now regarded as false in physics where self-evident facts are not to be found either.”⁶³ The idea of an “objective fact” is ambiguous, because the term “objective” (in both English and French) has two meanings, one ontological and one epistemological.⁶⁴ German has two different words for these things. *Gegenständlich* refers to an object in the world, whose “factual” nature simply means that it exists regardless of whether you know or want it to exist: its reality is ontologically independent of the perceiving subject. *Objektiv* (the term Wrede uses) refers, says Ricœur, to “knowledge ... which claims rigour and universality.”⁶⁵ It denotes the epistemological idea of verifiable certainty that is the heart of positivism. Nobody questions whether science deals with objects in the sense of *Gegenstände*. But science departs from its own method when it claims objective (*objektiv*) certainty, because that would preclude any possible future revision in light of new evidence. Therefore, if historical criticism is to remain faithful to its own scientific nature, it can never come to any final, unchanging conclusions about the meaning of a biblical text. Its “assured results” must be forever open to revision or overturning by future research.⁶⁶

For these three reasons, then, it is impossible to do without historical criticism: because (1) every text has an author, (2) every text is written in a particular historical-cultural situation, and (3) one can be right or wrong about the author’s intention; the “logic of validation,” where evidence is provided for different possible meanings, gives historical criticism the dignity of a science.⁶⁷

“However, although the historical-critical method is irreplaceable, it can and must be corrected,” says Ricœur.⁶⁸ The first and most important problem is that it “tends to claim a univocal status for the meaning of the text.”⁶⁹ When it claims sole rights to the text’s whole

⁶² Historical criticism’s “desire for objectivity ... is of the same nature as that of modern physics, and in this respect there is no reason for history to have an inferiority complex” (Paul Ricœur, *History and Truth*, trans. Charles Kelbley [Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1965], 25). Also: “The historical-critical method makes precise demands that one might even qualify as scientific without abusing the term” (LaCocque and Ricœur, *Thinking Biblically*, ix).

⁶³ Ricœur, *History and Truth*, 30.

⁶⁴ “Objectivity designates both the being of the object immanent to the subject and the objective character of the knowledge of that object” (my translation: “l’objectivité désigne aussi bien l’être de l’objet immanent au sujet et le caractère objectif de la connaissance de cet objet” [Mikel Dufrenne and Paul Ricœur, *Karl Jaspers et la philosophie de l’existence* (Paris: Seuil, 1947), 34]).

⁶⁵ My translation: “une connaissance objective, c’est-à-dire qui prétend à la rigueur et à l’universalité” (ibid.).

⁶⁶ This point is also made by Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger (Pope Benedict XVI): “At the heart of the historical-critical method lies the effort to establish in the field of history a level of methodological precision which would yield conclusions of the same certainty as in the field of the natural sciences. But what one exegete takes as definite can only be called into question by other exegetes. This is a practical rule which is presupposed as plainly and self-evidently valid” (‘Biblical Interpretation in Crisis’, *First Things*, 1988, <https://www.firstthings.com/web-exclusives/2008/04/biblical-interpretation-in-crisis>).

⁶⁷ Ricœur, *Interpretation Theory*, 79.

⁶⁸ My translation: “Mais si la méthode historico-critique est irremplaçable, elle peut et doit être rectifiée” (Ricœur, ‘Esquisse de conclusion’, 292).

⁶⁹ LaCocque and Ricœur, *Thinking Biblically*, xv.

meaning, banishing all other interpretations, all other methods, all other meanings as illegitimate and false, then it becomes what Ricœur calls totalising, or an ideology. “I call ideology every hypostasis of the text which is forgetful of its own presuppositions.”⁷⁰ We need to expose as a “postulate” (i.e., an unfounded presupposition) that

there exists one true meaning of the text, namely, the one that was intended by its author, authors, or the last redactor, who are held to have somehow inscribed this meaning in the text, from which exegesis has subsequently to extract it, and, if possible, restore it to its originary meaning. Hence the true meaning, the meaning intended by the author, and the original meaning are taken as equivalent terms. And commentary thus consists in identifying this overall true, intended, and original meaning.⁷¹

Why does Ricœur think this postulate is misguided? The reason is that, although historical criticism may call itself a science, its method is different from that of the physical sciences. Historical criticism made authorial intention the exclusive domain of meaning because it had failed to understand how its ‘object’ was different from the objects dealt with in physics. An object of the kind that concerns physics is not trying to *communicate* anything, transmit thoughts from one mind to another. But historical criticism is dealing with texts, and a text is a unique kind of object. Ricœur defines a text as *discourse*, and for him “the first and fundamental feature of discourse [is] that it is constituted by a series of sentences whereby someone says something to someone about something.”⁷² We miss half the interpretive process if we focus on the first ‘someone’ (the author) and ignore what is happening when the second ‘someone’ (the reader) grasps hold of the meaning of the second ‘something’ (the external world shared by author and reader).

Let us pursue this line of thinking further. Ricœur teaches that the work of the historian is a continual dialectic between sameness and difference, mediated by analogy.⁷³ Historical criticism tends to focus all its attention on difference. Its indispensable insight (taken from Schleiermacher’s definition of hermeneutics as the art of ‘avoiding misunderstanding’) is that the cultural/historical distance between the Bible and the present day often leads to unwitting misinterpretations of its meaning. But it has a tendency to miss the other end of the dialectic: we can only understand things in the past by translating them analogically into the cultural categories and concepts of today. “History’s task,” says Ricœur, “is to specify what has changed, what has been done away with, what was *other*. [But] how can we designate and make

⁷⁰ My translation: “J’appelle idéologie toute hypostase du texte qui procède de l’oubli de ses propres présuppositions” (Ricœur, ‘Esquisse de conclusion’, 288).

⁷¹ LaCocque and Ricœur, *Thinking Biblically*, 266–67.

⁷² Ricœur, *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences: Essays on Language, Action and Interpretation*, 138.

⁷³ See Paul Ricœur, *The Reality of the Historical Past* (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 1984).

discarded institutions and situations understood in contemporary language ... if not by using functional likenesses which will be corrected later through differentiation?”⁷⁴

Let us consider an example to illustrate this point. When we read “thou shalt not kill” in Exodus 20:13 (KJV), the historical-critical method will tell us that the word ‘kill’ is translated from the Hebrew *ratsach* which is not identical to the English ‘kill’. Additionally, laws and legal frameworks functioned differently in the Ancient Near East than they do in contemporary nation-states, so we should not assume that this is a ‘commandment’ in the modern sense.⁷⁵ This is the dialectic of ‘distance’, which ‘avoids misunderstanding’ by denying false meanings. It teaches, rightly, that we cannot naïvely take this text as a prohibition of all kinds of killing for any reason. And it is crucially important to know what this injunction *does not* mean. But what, then, *does* it mean? What about the ‘sameness’ in the dialectic? Any attempt to offer a constructive meaning must draw parallels with contemporary categories. Peter Craigie, for example, suggests that *ratsach* “is normally used in the context of one Hebrew killing another Hebrew.... Thus, the preliminary meaning of the commandment seems to be: ‘You shall not kill a fellow Hebrew.’”⁷⁶ What, then, is today’s equivalent of the ‘fellow Hebrew’? Does this command mean that we should not kill people who hold the same passport as ourselves, or come from the same ethnic group, or live in the same nation-state? Perhaps this is too narrow an interpretation and we are justified, with André LaCocque, in taking this commandment more broadly to include “killing ‘out of enmity, deceit, or hatred,’” in other words, “murder.”⁷⁷ But does everyone agree today on what counts as murder? Does this category include abortion, euthanasia, and war? What about capital punishment? Ricœur even suggests that it might be expanded to include wrongful killing of animals.⁷⁸ Every attempt to give meaning to this commandment demands the use of a contemporary category of thought.⁷⁹ There are no exceptions to this demand; it cannot be avoided. That is what Ricœur means by saying that “if one could not identify or recognize the *same* function in *other* events there would be nothing to understand.”⁸⁰

Therefore, “within even the historical-critical method there is a problem of being meaningful FOR.”⁸¹ It is because biblical scholars have often failed to understand this that they

⁷⁴ Ricœur, *History and Truth*, 27. For more on the “dialectic of the similar and the dissimilar,” see Paul Ricœur, *Time and Narrative*, trans. David Pellauer, vol. 1 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 100.

⁷⁵ André LaCocque helpfully supplies the context and background of ancient laws and treaties in LaCocque and Ricœur, *Thinking Biblically*, 71–88.

⁷⁶ Peter Craigie, *The Problem of War in the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978), 58.

⁷⁷ LaCocque and Ricœur, *Thinking Biblically*, 89.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 137.

⁷⁹ As James Barr says, “The use of concepts and categories taken from ‘without’ the Bible is both natural and necessary” (cited in Anthony C. Thiselton, *Two Horizons: New Testament Hermeneutics and Philosophical Description* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980], 9).

⁸⁰ Ricœur, *History and Truth*, 24.

⁸¹ Ricœur, ‘Conversation’, in David Aune and John McCarthy, eds., *The Whole and Divided Self* (New York: Crossroad, 1997), 240. Emphasis in original.

have turned the text into a “cadaver handed over for autopsy,” as per Ricœur’s acerbic remark.⁸² By focusing only on one half of the dialectic, that of difference, they banish the text from contemporary relevance, turning it into nothing more than a museum piece for idle curiosity.⁸³ What Ricœur wants to recover is the moment at which the text’s meaning comes to life for the present day, the moment he calls *appropriation*, which is “not a contingent appendix added on to understanding and explanation, but an organic part of every hermeneutic project.”⁸⁴ The full meaning of the text is only actualised when it is appropriated by completing the dialectic from distance back to sameness through analogy. Appropriation means “to ‘make one’s own’ what was previously ‘foreign’,” and for Ricœur this is “the ultimate aim of all hermeneutics. Interpretation in its last stage wants to equalize, to render contemporaneous, to assimilate in the sense of making similar. This goal is achieved insofar as interpretation actualizes the meaning of the text for the present reader.”⁸⁵

Because appropriation is an inescapable part of exegesis (even if it is inevitably done more or less adequately), historical criticism has an ineradicable subjectivity at its core, or, as Ricœur puts it, “an incomplete objectivity by comparison with that which is attained, or at least approached, in the other sciences.”⁸⁶ This is only a *problem* if ‘subjective’ equals ‘false’, as we saw assumed in the example of Wrede. In fact, just as there are different kinds of objects, so also not all subjectivity is equal. An expert historian is not someone who has eliminated her subjectivity (“extinguished the individual” in Ranke’s famous phrase), but someone who has *trained* it as an expert wine taster trains his palette, not so that his personal opinion plays no role, but so that it plays the role demanded by their profession. “The historian goes to the men of the past with his own human experience,” writes Ricœur. The historian’s subjectivity takes on a striking prominence at the moment when, over and above all critical chronology, history makes the values of past men surge forth.”⁸⁷ Therefore, “the subjectivity brought into play is not just any subjectivity, but precisely the subjectivity of the historian.... Like every scientific subjectivity, the historian’s subjectivity represents the triumph of a good subjectivity over a bad one.”⁸⁸

⁸² LaCocque and Ricœur, *Thinking Biblically*, xii.

⁸³ For biblical scholar Heikki Räisänen, this is the way things should be: “If we stop artificially maintaining the bond between exegesis and preaching, there is no reason why there should be a problem in presenting ‘negative’ results” (cited in Seth Heringer, ‘Forgetting the Power of Leaven: The Historical Method in Recent New Testament Theology’, *Scottish Journal of Theology* 67, no. 1 [February 2014]: 90).

⁸⁴ Paul Ricœur, *Time and Narrative*, trans. David Pellauer, vol. 3 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 158.

⁸⁵ Ricœur, *Interpretation Theory*, 92.

⁸⁶ Ricœur, *History and Truth*, 26.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 29.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 30. For more on the “dialectical nature of the correlation between objectivity and subjectivity,” see Paul Ricœur, *Memory, History, Forgetting*, trans. David Pellauer and Kathleen Blamey (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 339.

How Ricœur Reconciles Exegesis With Dogma

Once we recognise that subjectivity is neither avoidable nor something we might want to avoid, we are ready to re-evaluate the traditional opposition between biblical criticism and dogma. As we have seen, the latter was identical to subjectivity for Wrede. Ricœur, on the other hand, does not see subjectivity as an obstacle, clouding our vision and preventing us from seeing what the biblical text ‘really’ means. Rather, subjectivity is what enables us to make the biblical text speak meaningfully today. Using Ricœur constructively, we may recover a sense of dogma, not as an unwarranted constraint on interpretation, but as a legitimate lens to guide it. This next step has obstacles that are emotional as well as cognitive. The word ‘dogma’ has its own history, reaching contemporary ears only after its use to denounce clerics who stubbornly refuse to change their opinions when faced with counterevidence. But its original meaning derives from the Greek *dokein*, meaning ‘to appear’ or ‘to think’. It has the sense of the “way one looks at things” and is not far removed from the modern term ‘worldview’. Dogma may be a consciously held belief, but it can also be unconscious, as we all have many unconscious principles that guide the way we process information. But whether conscious or not, dogma is the *lens through which one interprets reality*, the fundamental principles about the “way things are,” which, at least for the moment, are not being questioned. “Every claim to truth fosters a degree of dogmatism,” says Ricœur.⁸⁹

Seen this way, it becomes clear that everyone is dogmatic. It is part of our human constitution to view the world in a particular way, through a particular lens, due to our contingent place in history. The blind spot of modernity (historical criticism’s birthplace) is to imagine that it depicts the plain and simple facts without interpretation, not realising that this stance is itself dogmatic. The irony of historical criticism is that even while dealing with history as an object ‘out there’, it takes no thought to history as affecting the subject. Wrede, for example, did not see himself as belonging to the flow of history at all. Either he was reading the Bible from an ahistorical vantage point, or (which amounts to the same thing) he was situated at the end of history, where nobody could come after him and place him at a particular moment within the history of interpretation, moved by the interests and prejudices of his own time. Against modernity, Ricœur observes that “we readers ... are not in a relation of subject to object, but of historical being to historical being.... The historical envelopment of the text and the reader is the very condition of the objectification and distancing used by every analytical and critical method.”⁹⁰ Against Wrede, we may hear these words of Ricœur:

⁸⁹ Ricœur, *History and Truth*, 42.

⁹⁰ My translation: “Nous lecteurs ... ne sommes donc pas dans une relation de sujet à objet, mais d’être historique à être historique.... L’enveloppement historique du texte et du lecteur est la condition même de l’objectivation et de la distanciation mises en œuvre par toute méthode analytique et critique” (Ricœur, ‘Esquisse de conclusion’, 291–92).

“Modern exegetes are like us. They work and think at the end of a history. In this sense, the one thing that would be criticizable would be the naive claim of an exegesis that held itself to be without a history, as though it were possible to coincide, without the mediation of a tradition of reading, with the original signification of a text, even with the presumed intention of its author.”⁹¹

What about dogma that is being authoritatively imposed by a magisterium? Surely, this must not be allowed to forbid some interpretations and encourage others, for reasons that have nothing to do with scientific freedom of enquiry?

To answer this question, we must take the lessons learned about subjectivity and historicity and add to them a third feature, the role played by *communities of interpretation*. Ricœur writes that “the meaning of a text is in each instance an event that is born at the intersection between [the authors’ intention and] the different expectations of a series of communities of reading and interpretation that the presumed authors of the text under consideration could not have anticipated.”⁹² Due to the “structuring role performed by the ecclesiastical community life,”⁹³ a religious community with authoritative texts has “rules of reading that are not at all the same as those that govern the manner in which philosophers read other philosophers.”⁹⁴ To belong to such a community means to belong to a *tradition of reading* that has shaped the way the Bible is interpreted in that community. As I have argued elsewhere, dogma can thus be seen as “*the ecclesial community’s decision to take Scriptural interpretation in a certain direction.*”⁹⁵

Does this mean no interpretation can be wrong if it is held by a community? Not at all. None of this means that an interpretation cannot be challenged or questioned, or that there is no such thing as a false interpretation. Ricœur is often suspected of relativism because of his appeal to a plurivocity of meanings, but he is actually very clear:

If it is true that there is always more than one way of construing a text, it is not true that all interpretations are equal. . . . It is always possible to argue for or against an interpretation, to confront interpretations, to arbitrate between them, and to seek for an agreement, even if this agreement remains beyond our reach.⁹⁶

What the communal setting *does* mean is that dogma, construed as the community’s traditional rules of interpretation, is not at a disadvantage compared with more purportedly ‘objective’ readings of scripture, precisely because there is no ahistorical, fully objective

⁹¹ LaCocque and Ricœur, *Thinking Biblically*, 332.

⁹² *Ibid.*, xi.

⁹³ Paul Ricœur, ‘Reply to David Stewart’, in *The Philosophy of Paul Ricœur*, ed. Lewis Hahn, vol. v. 22, The Library of Living Philosophers (Chicago: Open Court, 1995), 448.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 449.

⁹⁵ Barnabas Aspray, “‘Scripture Grows with Its Readers’: Doctrinal Development from a Ricœurian Perspective’, *Modern Theology* 35, no. 4 (2019): 757.

⁹⁶ Ricœur, *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences: Essays on Language, Action and Interpretation*, 213.

(partly objective, yes, but not completely) meaning of the text that would be independent of the subjective, historically situated individual *or community* who appropriates it for themselves. In short, it is perfectly possible for a biblical exegete to be a faithful adherent of a community of interpretation, i.e., a church or a synagogue, without the beliefs implied by such membership impairing her ability to practise historical-critical exegesis in full scientific rigour.

Finally, a magisterium is simply the living authority to which the community submits for the safekeeping of its dogmatic guidelines. And, says Ricœur, “we are not forbidden to salute the vow of confident adherence to an ongoing community of interpretation, up to and including submission to the external power of an ecclesial magisterium.”⁹⁷

How Ricœur Reconciles Exegesis With Allegory

We are now in a position, with the help of Ricœur, to bring about a reconciliation between exegesis, newly restored to its rightful place, and its ancient archenemy, namely, allegorical interpretations of scripture.

If, for biblical scholars, dogma has always been an example of authoritarian restrictions on the freedom of scientific enquiry (cast in the oft-used mould of Galileo’s persecution by the church), then allegory represents the opposite problem, that of *too much* freedom in the absence of proper restrictions (of a scientific, not ecclesial, kind). Allegory is biblical interpretation gone mad, making random free associations that have nothing to do with the text’s original meaning, so the accusation goes. The scientific approach to texts condemns both ecclesial prohibitions on the one hand and arbitrary speculations on the other, both of which are ‘unscientific’ – or rather ‘prescientific’ (according to the model of progress for which we moderns understand reality far more accurately than those who came before us). “For many commentators,” says Ricœur, “allegorical interpretations are only referred to in their introductions as examples of the prescientific antecedents of an investigation of the text that owes everything to the historical-critical method, which was unknown to the initiators of allegorical interpretation and even resisted by the last advocates of this approach.”⁹⁸ My own experience confirms this remark. I have more than once heard Augustine’s reading of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:30-35) used in classrooms as a perfect example of how *not* to do exegesis. Augustine says that the Samaritan represents Christ, the robbers are the devil and his angels, the inn is the Church, and the innkeeper is the Apostle Paul.⁹⁹ How do we know this is wrong? Simply, because nobody who first heard the parable could possibly have understood it that way.

⁹⁷ LaCocque and Ricœur, *Thinking Biblically*, 291.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 265.

⁹⁹ Augustine, *Quaestiones Evangeliorum*, II, 19

This rejection of allegory depends on an understanding of exegetical method that has not lost its totalising ambitions. It still claims there is only one true meaning to the text to which it alone has the key. If historical exegesis is the only valid way to interpret, then allegory can only be construed as bad exegesis that violates historical-critical principles. The reader is forced into an either/or dichotomy: if she accepts allegory, she must abandon history; if she accepts history, she must abandon allegory. “Today’s readers find themselves confronted with an alternative that in fact stems from the quasi unanimity among commentators,” observes Ricœur.¹⁰⁰ But “another outcome, built on ancient allegorical interpretation on the basis of a history of the reading and the reception of our text, is possible.”¹⁰¹

The exegesis/allegory alternative is a false one because allegory, as practised in patristic and medieval times, was never trying to be historical exegesis. “The allegorical exegesis of the Greek fathers,” says Ricœur, “is unaware of any claim to compete with an exegesis based on the historical-critical method.”¹⁰² To complain that allegory violates the rules of exegesis is like complaining that a rugby game violates the rules of football, or a chess match is an anarchic abandonment of the right way to play draughts.

How, then, can exegesis and allegory be rightly related? Only from a metaphysical framework that inhabits the world of scripture as a reality that impacts the method of interpretation itself. If the text of scripture is a series of signs pointing to a historical reality in the physical world, then for those who believe its message, that historical reality is itself a series of signs pointing to a spiritual and metaphysical reality beyond our vision. For example, the Song of Songs in its literal sense is nothing more than a celebration of erotic love between two human beings. But for the Jew and the Christian everything is created and is for that reason a sign pointing to the Creator. “It is the myth of creation as a whole that names God,” says Ricœur.¹⁰³ Erotic love is nothing less than a sign pointing beyond itself to the love between the Creator and the people he has chosen for himself. He then approvingly quotes the biblical scholar Paul Beauchamp: “If we say that there is allegory in these love poems, it is ... not because the words have to be decoded, but because the things of men signify those of God.”¹⁰⁴

This is also why allegory cannot be done without historical exegesis, indeed depends on exegesis as its preliminary and its foundation. Until we have rightly understood the history to which the text points, we have no hope of understanding the spiritual truths to which the

¹⁰⁰ LaCocque and Ricœur, *Thinking Biblically*, 267.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, 276.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, 299.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 299n38.

history points. “Hence [in interpreting Song of Songs] the spiritual sense is not substituted for the carnal sense. It is not substituted because it cannot be.”¹⁰⁵

In summary, for classical historical criticism, what we learn from the Bible cannot alter the hermeneutical method itself. Wrede is a perfect example of this principle. For him, the metaphysical structure of reality is already known in its completeness before we open the Bible. Reading the Bible can achieve nothing more than piling additional ‘facts’ onto our existing store of ‘objective knowledge’. Hermeneutics is not a circle but a line, proceeding from the unshakeable foundation of the historical method towards the facts it uncovers.

But for Ricoeur, hermeneutics is a (Schleiermacherian) circle in which our understanding of reality is altered by what we read. If we believe what the Bible says, this alters the metaphysical framework itself, which cannot fail to transform the way we read. When we interpret a Bible passage allegorically, we ascend to a higher level of interpretation, one that is based on the insights learnt from the Bible at the first level. At the first level (historical exegesis), we learn that the world is created and everything in it points to its Creator. At the second level (allegory), we apply this metaphysical insight to Song of Songs, for example. This allows us to see in sexual and romantic love a sign of the Creator’s love for creation.

Conclusion

Ricoeur is not an enemy of biblical studies – far from it. For him, its signature method – historical-critical exegesis – is indispensable, even preferable to doctrinal theology for the goal of bringing the biblical text to life. But he does insist that the historical-critical method needs putting back in its place. His hermeneutical theory aims to strip it of its totalising ambitions that it has picked up in the course of its historical formation, amid a vacuum of authority, violent disputes concerning the literal sense of scripture, the rise of scientific positivism, and the Romanticist turn to authorial intention. These totalising ambitions have led it to banish all other claims to the meaning of the biblical text – claims coming from church doctrine, or from allegorical interpretations, or anywhere else than itself when practiced with the purity and rigour of an objective science.

However, Ricoeur is no relativist, claiming that there is no such thing as a *mis*interpretation of scripture. “The text is a limited field of possible constructions,” Ricoeur says. The metaphor of a ‘field’ indicates a space that is properly bounded, yet that contains space in which more than one person may play. There are many possible meanings to be found in scripture, but all build on the foundation of historical exegesis, which is rightly understood as having its own form of scientific objectivity.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., 284.

Instead, Ricœur proposes a renewed, chastened historical criticism that does not see other approaches as threatening rivals, but rather as playmates in the rich field of meanings to be found in the Bible. As David Jasper puts it, Ricœur “stretches back beyond the Reformation, to earlier modes of Christian hermeneutics characteristic of Augustine, the church fathers, and the medieval theologians, who saw many levels of meaning in the biblical texts all working together.”¹⁰⁶

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