

# I Hermeneutics and Theology

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In order to do justice to the issue of biblical hermeneutics, it is necessary to start with some observations on the *interpretandum*, i.e., the biblical texts. The Bible is a collection of writings in a number of distinct literary genres from almost ten centuries in antiquity. It therefore reflects a wide range of religious cultures in Israel as well as in Jewish and Christian diaspora communities throughout the ancient Roman Empire, and it displays a great variety of intellectual and scribal traditions which emerged more or less closely in relation to institutions of cultic ritual. At the same time, the Bible is a 'canonical,' an authoritative book through which a number of religious communities define their identity in terms of doctrine as well as practice. Whoever engages with the biblical texts in their original language is confronted with Hebrew – as well as, for a small number of texts, Aramaic – and Greek. While ancient Hebrew is mainly limited to the biblical texts themselves, related languages like Akkadian and Ugaritic have become accessible through archaeological discoveries in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The Greek language, which for Old Testament texts is the language of an ancient translation (the Septuagint), is the original language for the texts of the New Testament. In addition to the biblical texts, it is known through a substantial number of writings from ancient Greek and Hellenistic culture from many centuries so that linguistic features can be compared. Whereas the so-called Hebrew Bible or Old Testament was used as a sacred text in Judaism mainly in its original language, in Western Christianity the language of the Christian Bible, Old and New Testament, soon became Latin (the Vulgate). Thanks to the philological efforts of Jerome (c. 347–420 CE) and his followers, an almost standardized Latin version of the Bible had been

achieved by about 400 CE and was eventually declared the one and only “authentic” text by the Council of Trent in 1546, ironically at a time when humanistic scholars had already started to engage with the original Greek and Hebrew texts, and reformers of the Church had produced and popularized a considerable number of vernacular translations of the Bible.

A sample text from the book of Jeremiah in the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament may serve to illustrate what texts an interpreter of the Bible will seek to understand. The example is a prose text in Jeremiah 7.16–24 in the stylistic form of a direct divine address to the prophet himself, following on what is called Jeremiah’s ‘temple sermon’ in Jeremiah 7.1–15. Like this “sermon,” the text is normally assigned to a sixth-century scribal school which shaped the literary tradition of Jeremiah, who is himself remembered as a prophet in Jerusalem during the last decades of the Judaeen kingdom prior to the conquest of the city and destruction of the temple by the Babylonians in 587 BCE (see Jer 1.1–3 and 38.28).<sup>1</sup>

As for you, do not pray for this people, do not raise a cry or prayer on their behalf, and do not intercede with me, for I will not hear you.

Do you not see what they are doing in the towns of Judah and in the streets of Jerusalem? The children gather wood, the fathers kindle fire, and the women knead dough, to make cakes for the queen of heaven; and they pour out drink-offerings to other gods, to provoke me to anger. Is it I whom they provoke? says the Lord. Is it not themselves, to their own hurt?

Therefore thus says the Lord God: My anger and my wrath shall be poured out on this place, on human beings and animals, on the trees of the field and the fruit of the ground; it will burn and not be quenched.

*(Jer 7.16–20)*

With regard to the issue of biblical hermeneutics, the most significant challenge to a reader in this sample text will be the idea

of divine “anger and wrath.” The perception of God as threatening destruction may move a devout reader to ask himself or herself how he or she can possibly relate to a God who is thus characterized by the authoritative text, and further questions such as what is the cause of such divine “anger” or what ways are there to escape the divine punishment may be raised.<sup>2</sup> The text itself offers ideas about apostasy and about (prophetic) intercession as religious ideas to be considered in this context. A reader may, of course, also prefer simply to regard the text as reflecting some episode in some religious culture in antiquity or as expressing some scribal opinion or, paradoxically, even as an invitation to empathize with the ritual activities of those who confidently worship their “queen of heaven” within a polytheistic conceptual framework. In biblical studies, a number of approaches to the canonical text have been developed, and it is not easy to achieve a consensus about what criteria should be employed in order to distinguish between plausible and implausible, convincing and unconvincing, constructive and misleading, correct and erroneous interpretations.<sup>3</sup>

#### PERSPECTIVES ON THE BIBLICAL TEXT AS A CHALLENGE FOR INTERPRETATION

In the early modern period a methodological standard of interpretation had been developed according to which at least theoretically a number of aspects had to be considered in regular exegetical practice. For the Lutheran tradition, Salomon Glassius (1593–1656), the author of an encyclopedic *Philologia Sacra*, can be chosen as a representative of scholarly erudition in the field of biblical hermeneutics.<sup>4</sup> Glassius emphasizes the importance of a critical consideration of the language and rhetoric of the biblical texts and a circumspect comparison of any particular text with related texts in its immediate as well as wider literary context. He also advocates the study of the historical origin of a text – what in Latin is called the *circumstantiae* – and provides a set of seven criteria which should not be neglected in the process of interpretation: Who is the author or speaker (*quis*)?

What is the place of the author and his audience (*locus*)? What is the time of the author and his audience (*tempus*)? What is the occasion or motivation for a specific utterance (*impellens*)? What are the stylistic features of the utterance (*modus*)? To these five criteria, which are predominantly driven by a historical interest, two more criteria are added which are more directly related to investigating the meaning of a text. What exactly is the view that is advocated by a specific text (*scopus*)? And can the text serve as the basis for some formal doctrinal teaching (*sedes doctrinae*)? Whereas the first five aspects of a process of interpretation point toward a “historical critical” study of the Bible, the sixth and seventh aspects call for a philosophical and theological engagement with the texts. The *scopus*, the core idea of a text, can only be defined through sustained reflection, and judgment about the doctrinal significance of any particular text can only be justified through an evaluation of alternative possibilities.

Thus, coming back to the example from the book of Jeremiah, the issue of author and place and time and occasion, i.e., the question whether the strange religious ritual relating to a “queen of heaven” had been witnessed by the prophet or was only witnessed or imagined by some later scribe, may be left for historians to discuss. However, the issue of what is the “scope” of the text and whether some particular doctrine can potentially be anchored in the text (as the “seat” of the respective doctrine) remains for philosophers and theologians to discuss. This would include the question whether it makes sense, e.g., to speak of divine “anger” and reasons for it on the side of the believers, to speak of prophetic intercession and the conditions for such a ritualistic practice, or to relate the military success of a conqueror to problems of religious devotion among those who are defeated. An analysis of the literary form of the text and a comparison of related texts will be required in any case (see, e.g., Jer 31.27–34). For a Christian reader, a doctrinal theological interest in the notion of divine “anger and wrath” will not least be motivated by the opening of Paul’s letter to the Romans in the New Testament,

where Paul employs the notion of divine “wrath” in order to delineate the background for his proclamation of divine mercy.

For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and wickedness of those who by their wickedness suppress the truth. For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. Ever since the creation of the world his eternal power and divine nature, invisible though they are, have been understood and seen through the things he has made. (Rom 1.18–20)

Another aspect of the *interpretandum*, i.e., the biblical texts, can again be illustrated from the sample text in the book of Jeremiah. While the polemics against apostasy in the form of worship of the “queen of heaven” and “other gods,” quoted above, may be regarded as a purely internal religious controversy, in a successive polemics against religious ritual the relation between religion and ethics is addressed.

Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel: Add your burnt-offerings to your sacrifices, and eat the flesh. For on the day that I brought your ancestors out of the land of Egypt, I did not speak to them or command them concerning burnt-offerings and sacrifices. But this command I gave them, “Obey my voice, and I will be your God, and you shall be my people; and walk only in the way that I command you, so that it may be well with you.” Yet they did not obey or incline their ear, but, in the stubbornness of their evil will, they walked in their own counsels, and looked backward rather than forward. (Jer 7.21–4)

For an interpretation of this text, the two parallel or synonymous expressions “to obey God’s voice” and “to walk in the way that God commands” would deserve greater attention than the historicizing rhetoric concerning some foundational exodus from Egypt in the time of the “ancestors” or of a conditional covenant between God

and those “ancestors.”<sup>5</sup> The distinctive diction in which the scribe here refers to divine commandments may be compared, for example, with the notions of justice and solidarity and protection of human life in an exhortation in the immediate context (Jer 7.5–7). The text can again be juxtaposed with a section in Paul’s letter to the Romans where Paul admonishes his audience:

Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God – what is good and acceptable and perfect. (Rom 12.2)

As these examples may demonstrate, biblical hermeneutics is concerned with a wide range of texts which support religious attitudes as much as they are critical of religious attitudes, texts which offer different representations of God and challenge the imagination, texts which refer to history as well as to philosophy, be it by addressing the issue of knowledge of God through the works of the creation, be it by addressing the issue of what is morally right and therefore corresponds to the will of God. For a meaningful debate about the legacy of biblical hermeneutics it is important to be aware of the many dimensions of the *interpretandum*, i.e., the biblical texts.

#### BIBLICAL DISCOURSE AND ITS PLACE IN HISTORY

It is not easy to escape oversimplification when trying to outline the basic structures of the use of the Bible in pre-Enlightenment theology. Throughout the history of Jewish and Christian theology, a strand of fruitful interrelationship between theology and philosophy can be observed, and some biblical books, such as Job or Ecclesiastes, and also many biblical Psalms and a number of prophetic sayings (e.g., Jer 8.4–7) could be studied more or less independently of the biblical narrative framework. However, the most obvious and most significant transformation of the perspective on the biblical texts which characterizes an Enlightenment approach to the Bible is the rejection, or at least the decline in acceptance, of the overarching biblical

narrative. (1) The traditional assumption that the Bible offered an account of history from the beginning of the world (in Latin: *ab orbe condito*) through the history of the people of Israel and its ancestors to the rise and early flowering of the Christian Church came to be contrasted with the concept of a “natural history” of humankind, including a “natural history of religion.” The emergence of the biblical tradition had to be assigned a place within this new conceptualization of history. (2) For Christian readers of the Bible, a problem arose in that the traditional assumption which said that the biblical history of Israel referred to Christ in a prophetic as well as a typological sense came to be contrasted with the concept of a more narrow limitation of the meaning of the individual Old Testament texts in their original settings within the religious culture of ancient Israel during the time of the First (until 587 BCE) and Second Temple (until 70 CE). What used to be developed as “allegorical readings” was no longer accepted even if certain forms of allegory were continued in the shape of applicative readings. (3) Biblical miracles which had been used for ‘demonstrating’ the truth of the Bible came to be ascribed to a mythological imagination which a reader may only appreciate as such. (4) The religious significance of biblical history and biblical revelation could be questioned altogether while greater emphasis was put on reason and an assumedly rational “natural religion.” A short treatise *On the Proof of the Spirit and of Power* of 1777 by the German literary critic Gotthold Ephraim Lessing (1729–1781), for example, deserves mention at this point since the author addresses the epistemological status of historical traditions and declares:<sup>6</sup>

If no historical truth can be demonstrated, then nothing can be demonstrated *by means* of historical truths. That is, *contingent truths of history can never become the proof of necessary truths of reason.*

This line of critical reflection is continued by the German philosopher Immanuel Kant (1724–1804), not least in a treatise *The*

*Conflict of the Faculties* of 1798, where he contrasts what he calls a “historical faith” with a truly significant “religious faith”:<sup>7</sup>

But the Scriptures contain more than what is itself required for eternal life; part of their content is a matter of historical belief, and while this can indeed be useful to religious faith as its mere sensible vehicle (for certain people and certain eras), it is not an essential part of religious faith.

One step in this direction had already been taken by Hugo Grotius (1583–1645), who had drawn a distinction between “prophetic” books of the Bible which, as he put it, had been written under an immediate divine inspiration (in Latin: *afflatus divinus*), and “historical” books which had been written by their authors on a pious impulse (in Latin: *pious motus*).<sup>8</sup> Thus a strong tension arose between scholarly ideas about a religious and scribal culture in Israel in antiquity and the doctrine of a divine inspiration of the biblical books.

It is at this point that due regard must be paid to what is normally considered the beginning of a “historical-critical” study of the Bible. Relying on a conceptually sharp distinction between what a particular word can mean and what it cannot mean, and how a particular word can be used and how it cannot be used, scholars condemned any forms of biblical interpretation which did not build on philological foundations as fictitious, misleading, and irresponsible.<sup>9</sup> To take again an example from the German academic tradition and ecclesiastical context, the renowned classical scholar Johann August Ernesti (1707–1781) transferred his expertise in the study of Greek and Roman authors into the field of New Testament exegesis and insisted on the precedence of philological competence over doctrinal declarations and pietist persuasions. In an influential textbook on hermeneutics and biblical commentary, the “instructions for an interpreter of the New Testament” of 1761, Ernesti claims:<sup>10</sup>

Since all that has been explained equally applies to divine and human books, it is clear that the meaning of words in the sacred

books can be sought and discovered in no other way, as far as human effort is involved, than is usually and necessarily done with regard to human books, and under no circumstances must fanatical enthusiasts be obeyed who, while holding the study of letters and doctrine in contempt, refer everything to the divine power of the Holy Ghost: although there is no doubt that pious readers longing for divine truth are supported by the Spirit of God in investigating the meaning of Scripture, notably in those points which genuinely refer to faith and morals.

While Ernesti acknowledges that the use of language and the character of a discourse depend on conditions such as time, structure of society, political constitution, religion and school tradition, his view of the biblical writers is still constrained by the framework of an oversacralization of the biblical text and the resulting apologetics concerning differences and tensions within as well as between the individual writings. A contemporary of his, Johann Salomo Semler (1725–1791), tried to shed new light on the historical conditions which informed the reception and production of texts in early Christianity by subjecting the development of the canonical collection of the biblical writings to critical scrutiny. The traditional “place (*locus*)/time (*tempus*)/occasion (*impellens*)”-argument developed into a more rigorous historical-critical evaluation of the religious as well as intellectual culture at the time of the biblical authors.<sup>11</sup> However, the aim is not to abandon the concept of the Bible as the “Word of God,” but to identify the significant religious ideas as a message for sustaining the faith of a believer – and in this sense as the “word of God” – within the biblical texts in all their diversity.<sup>12</sup> In his own particular way of understanding religion as a “human” concern, Johann Gottfried Herder (1744–1803) summarized these developments in an appeal to read the Bible “in a human way”:<sup>13</sup>

The Bible must be read in a human way, for it is a book written by human beings for human beings; its language is human; it has

been written and preserved by human means; finally, the mind whereby the Bible can be understood, every interpretative tool which elucidates it, and all the ends and uses to which it is to be applied are human.

Relying on the work of Robert Lowth (1710–1787) on biblical poetry and the sublime, Herder encouraged students of the Bible to pay particular attention to the religious “spirit” of Hebrew poetry as well as the representation of Jesus as teacher in the New Testament gospels.

#### PHILOSOPHY AND THE PLURALITY OF RELIGIOUS TEACHINGS

Beyond the challenge to do justice to the principles of philology and historiography, the Enlightenment perspective on the biblical texts is built on a philosophical foundation. Human reason, as understood in Enlightenment philosophy, aims at universal truths. Whatever is being communicated through a contingent historical tradition only cannot, therefore, by itself satisfy the standard of rationality. As far as religion is regarded as an issue in philosophy at all, religion can only be acknowledged as universal – or, in the terminology of the time, “natural” – religion and must be grounded on universal foundations. For Kant as for many philosophers before him, especially the so-called deists, this universal or “natural” religion is directly connected with a universalist ethics. Philosophy of religion is secondary to moral philosophy.<sup>14</sup> In Kant’s definition, religion must be understood as “the sum of all our duties regarded as divine commands (and, on the subject’s part, the maxim of fulfilling them as such).” Kant explains further:<sup>15</sup>

As far as its matter, i.e. object, is concerned, religion does not differ in any point from morality, for it is concerned with duties as such. Its distinction from morality is a merely formal one: that reason in its legislation uses the Idea of God, which is derived from morality itself, to give morality influence on man’s will

to fulfill all his duties. This is why there is only one religion. Although there are indeed different varieties of belief in divine revelation and its statutory teachings, which cannot spring from reason – that is, different forms in which the divine will is represented sensibly so as to give it influence on our minds – there are not different religions.

With this definition of “religion,” Kant proves himself heir to the philosophical concept of “natural law” which had been extended into a concept of “natural religion.” According to this concept, the world, as it originated in God’s creation, has been endowed with a moral order, i.e., a “natural law” which can be discovered by human reason and is enshrined in the human conscience. As Grotius had famously declared, the “natural law” cannot be altered even by God in a divine revelation (“the Law of Nature is so unalterable, that God himself cannot change it”).<sup>16</sup> The individual believer who accepts this religious dimension of a universalist ethics holds a truly “religious faith” (“Religionsglaube”) – and what else does he or she need?! What else could sacred scriptures tell him or her?!

In order to do justice to the empirical reality of traditional religions and distinctive religious communities with their respective teachings, Kant suggests a distinction between this “religious faith” (“Religionsglaube”) and an “ecclesiastical faith” (“Kirchenglaube”) which is shaped by the doctrines, rituals, and institutional structures of a particular religious tradition. An “ecclesiastical faith” is based on some historically contingent revelation, transmitted through authoritative texts, and therefore comprises a certain amount of “historical belief” (“Geschichtsglaube”) or “belief in scriptural teachings” (“Schriftglaube”).

Kant’s view implies a programmatic acceptance of the plurality of ecclesiastical institutions and doctrines. In this respect he continues a tradition which can be found, for example, in a popular treatise in verse by Alexander Pope (1688–1744), who states in his *Essay on Man* of 1733:<sup>17</sup>

For modes of faith let graceless zealots fight,  
 His can't be wrong whose life is in the right: [...]
 All must be false that thwart this one great end,  
 And all of God, that bless mankind or mend.

As far as biblical hermeneutics is concerned, the critical philosophical understanding of the diversity of modes of faith or of the limited significance of any ecclesiastical faith means a transposition of the traditional and highly contested question of the clarity of scripture onto a new level. The disagreement in theology about countless doctrinal points which all of them are understood to be firmly grounded in biblical proof-texts (in Latin: the respective *sedes doctrinae*) made it only too obvious for a philosophical observer that there is no hermeneutical path toward establishing a full consensus about the interpretation of any biblical text whatsoever. The controversy between the followers of Martin Luther and those of Jean Calvin about the correct doctrine of the eucharist could serve as an example of an interpretative conundrum. If this issue is not considered an element of religious faith, but just of an ecclesiastical faith, it no longer calls for an either-or type of decision but allows for a pluralisation of ecclesiastical communities. This stance also implies that exclusive theological claims about the relevance of the correct doctrine for salvation are dismissed. Confessionalist convictions are set into perspective by an emphasis on the practical side of the life of a believer.

In his *The Conflict of the Faculties* Kant stages a kind of dialogue between a philosopher and a theologian. It reads like a rejection of elaborate theological assertions when he writes:<sup>18</sup>

With regard to scriptural teachings that we can know only by revelation, faith is not in itself *meritorious*, and lack of such faith, and even doubt opposed to it, in itself involves no *guilt*.

Persecution for reasons of accepting or rejecting particular ecclesiastical doctrines which are claimed to be authentically scriptural

doctrines thus becomes inconceivable. In terms of biblical hermeneutics, it is left to the individual believer to determine what understanding should be derived from biblical texts which do not directly refer to the essential religious faith.

#### PHILOSOPHY AND BIBLICAL HERMENEUTICS

The biblical historical narrative as well as the biblical mythological imagination may generate more or less inspiring examples of scriptural interpretation for particular communities of believers. However, there are two concerns for philosophers to address: (1) ecclesiastical teachings soon turn into a moral issue if they are imposed on a believer in such a way that this believer's sincerity (*Aufrichtigkeit*) is violated, and (2) if such teachings are regarded as "superior to morally good works" and therefore undermine the religious faith. If we assume that in a dialogue the theologian put the question to the philosopher of what scriptural, revelational doctrines in ecclesiastical faith are in view, the answer would be that believers will be deluded about religious faith if the idea of divine forgiveness of sins, and in Christian doctrine especially the idea of Christ's atonement for human sins, is proclaimed in such a way that it does not corroborate the moral energy of religious faith. Kant draws up the following hermeneutical rule:<sup>19</sup>

if certain texts seem to regard faith in revealed doctrine as [...] superior to morally good works, we must interpret them as referring only to moral faith, which improves and elevates the soul by reason [...]

Surprising as this hermeneutical directive may sound, it is not original since a theologian would be familiar with the concept of a guiding "analogy of faith" (derived from Rom 12.6) and some overarching general message of the Bible (in Latin: *unicus scopus*, according to seventeenth-century textbooks on hermeneutics). In Christian theology, this message would have been the message of salvation through faith in Christ, i.e., a more or less exclusive emphasis

on divine mercy, forgiveness, atonement, satisfaction, and reconciliation. However, theologians would also be aware of a tension between this emphasis and the challenge to translate faith into charity, i.e., acts of practical piety. Paul, for example, in his letters to early Christian communities in Galatia in Asia Minor coins the expression of “faith working through love” (Gal 5.6). In his first letter to the Christians in Corinth, he summarizes his exaltation of “love” or “charity” in a statement: “And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love” (1 Cor 13.13).

Kant seems to be designing a hermeneutical rule which would drive the interpreter openly to manipulate the text which he or she is studying. When he states that “the only thing which matters in religion is *deeds*” and claims that “this final aim and, accordingly, a meaning appropriate to it, must be attributed to every biblical dogma,”<sup>20</sup> the theological interpreter is challenged by the philosopher to enforce a coherent message on all biblical texts. Problematic as this may sound, there is an obvious rationale behind this rule: any religious doctrine would to some extent inform the believer about how to conduct his or her life, and from a moral point of view neither neglecting moral duties nor violating moral standards can be plausible options, so that some affirmation of moral duties must follow from religious sentiments in their conceivable diversity (e.g., admiration of the universe and miracles in it, self-dedication to Christ as savior, celebrating religious worship and festivals, imagining a storyline in a historical vein, feeling close to angelic beings, translating divine blessings into the human world, etc.).

The Enlightenment contribution to biblical hermeneutics can thus far be summarized by the concluding statement in Kant’s *The Conflict of the Faculties* where he makes two points, first:<sup>21</sup>

It is in this way, according to the principle of the morality which revelation has in view, that we must interpret the Scriptures *insofar as they have to do with religion* [i.e. other aspects are abandoned to ecclesiastical faith] –

Kant emphasizes this first point by considering the alternative of a form of scriptural interpretation in the field of religious faith that does not strengthen morality:

– otherwise our interpretations are either empty of practical content or even obstacles to the good.

The second point is that Kant claims such an interpretation in the sphere of religious faith to be the only possible “authentic” interpretation, i.e., the only possible interpretation which makes an act of religious communication a successful act of communication for the human addressee:<sup>22</sup>

Only a moral interpretation [...] is really an *authentic* one – that is, one given by the God within us; for since we cannot understand anyone unless he speaks to us through our own understanding and reason, it is only by concepts of *our* reason, insofar as they are pure moral concepts and hence infallible, that we can recognize the divinity of a teaching promulgated to us.

Although the philosopher does not depend on a cooperation with the theologian and does not rely on any references to the Bible in order to arrive at a philosophical understanding of religion, the philosopher is still interested in seeing whether what is essential to religion can also be detected in the biblical writings. This is the Enlightenment challenge to biblical hermeneutics. Kant calls this essential part of religion the “canon” of religion. This canon, he claims, is also there in the Bible which otherwise functions as an “organon” of religion. The Bible may even be considered to be a “supernatural revelation” as long as it serves as a “vehicle” (or “organon”) of religion and “promotes moral precepts of religion.”<sup>23</sup> It can be mentioned at this point that Grotius referred to the Ten Commandments (Ex 20.2–17; Deut. 5.6–21; see also Rom 13.9) in order to point out that “natural law” and the corresponding religion were also anchored in Israel’s sacred texts.<sup>24</sup>

A problem with Kant’s view is that he does not offer an analysis of the edifying narratives and doctrines and beliefs of ecclesiastical

faith. He does not have to do this, since this task can properly be assigned to the theologians. However, the impression is created that Kant considers all those scriptural traditions as insignificant. On the side of theology, opposition to Kant has therefore in general been more dominant – including Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768–1834) in his *On Religion: Speeches to its Cultured Despisers* of 1799 – than engagement with his concept of religious faith and morality.<sup>25</sup>

The legacy of the biblical hermeneutics of the Enlightenment must be seen in the challenge to offer a rich account of religious attitudes which are expressed in the biblical writings, while at the same time relating them to a *scopus* which is informed by the universal moral law.

Kant's understanding of religious faith and his claim that this faith as the canon of religion can also be discovered in the biblical writings themselves can be seen as a re-assertion of the philosophical view which Baruch Spinoza (1632–1677) had developed in his *Theological-Political Treatise* of 1670.<sup>26</sup> What matters for Spinoza is the divine law in so far as it stands for eternal truths, and Spinoza like Kant relies on the relevant concept of natural law. There may be some change of emphasis when Kant puts the idea of morality and practical reason at the center of his concept, while Spinoza is in a strikingly energetic manner orientated toward the notion of love of God. However, for both these philosophers, the underlying idea of a natural light as the source of human understanding has the same function. At the same time, Spinoza seems to honor the biblical idea in Deut. 6.4–5, i.e., the opening of the *Shema* 'Israel, where religious faith as love of God is the subject of an exhortation:

you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might.

Spinoza then provides a list of biblical texts from the book of Jeremiah, chapters 9 and 22, from the book of Exodus, chapter 34, and from the First Letter of John, chapter 4, as biblical sources to support his claim that:<sup>27</sup>

the only knowledge of Himself God requires of men, via the prophets, is knowledge of His divine justice and love, that is, those attributes of God that men may emulate by a sound rationale of life.

The side of religion which Kant calls “ecclesiastical faith” is also clearly distinguished from “religion” by Spinoza. In his discussion of the divine law in chapter 4 of his *Treatise*, Spinoza writes:<sup>28</sup>

If we now consider the character of the natural divine law, as we have just explained it, we shall see: (1) that it is universal or common to all men, for we have deduced it from universal human nature, and (2) that it does not require belief in any kind of historical narrative [...] Belief in a historical narrative, however reliable it may be, can give us no knowledge of God nor consequently love of God either. For love of God arises from knowledge of him; and knowledge of him has to be drawn from universal notions which are certain in themselves and well-known, and so it is by no means the case that belief in a historical narrative is a necessary requirement for us to reach our highest goal.

Spinoza concludes his argument with the statement:<sup>29</sup>

Thus the Bible fully endorses the natural light of reason and the natural divine law.

In other words, Spinoza, like Kant, identifies what he regards as the essence of religion, Kant’s “canon” of religion, as one component of the scriptural tradition itself and in this sense emphatically directs biblical hermeneutics toward the respective texts. In his discussion of the issue, he refers directly to the “wise” king Solomon and several of the pronouncements ascribed to this more or less legendary king in the biblical book of Proverbs, and to Paul’s letter to the Romans, especially the statement in Rom 1.20 which has been quoted above as an example of the biblical *interpretandum*.

## REDUCTIONIST HERMENEUTICS?

With regard to Spinoza as well as Kant it is easy to polemicize against what is often called a reductionist and deficient concept of biblical hermeneutics. To their opponents, these philosophers simply seem to conflate, if not even equate, religion with morality, thereby defining guidelines of hermeneutics which would not allow justice to be done to biblical texts, neither as historical nor as religious texts. Although neither Spinoza nor Kant advocates anything like a trivial understanding of religion, it may be worth expanding the debate and looking at Lessing as one representative Enlightenment author who is seriously concerned with the relation between natural religion and the Christian religion or, as he puts it, with a revelation which does in fact “reveal” something that goes beyond the comprehension of reason.<sup>30</sup> Lessing devoted a treatise with the slightly ironic title *Axioms* to the issue of hermeneutics and religious persuasions.

In the first of his axioms Lessing draws a distinction between the Bible as a textual unit and the “religion” which it contains:<sup>31</sup>

The Bible obviously contains more than what pertains to religion.

According to this axiom, the starting-point for biblical hermeneutics cannot be the unity of the sacred text, but only the quest for religion. Using a mercantile idiom, Lessing speaks of the “gross” and the “net” of the Bible, thus undermining an influential current in traditional Lutheran orthodoxy, which he accuses of “bibliolatry.” In his artful reply to an apologetic admission on the side of doctrinal theology that a differentiation between “what pertains essentially to religion” and “what pertains to the elucidation and confirmation of the central principles which actually constitute the essence of religion” could be allowed, Lessing asks:<sup>32</sup>

But what if [the *gross*] were also to include completely unnecessary *packaging*? – What if there were a good deal of

material in the Bible which simply does not serve to elucidate or confirm even the least significant religious principle?

[...] the proposition "The Bible contains more than what pertains to religion" is true without qualification. Its proper use can also be infinitely more advantageous to religion than its misuse can be harmful.

However, in terms of biblical hermeneutics the most interesting question is how to decide which are the texts that communicate "what pertains to religion." Employing the terminology of revelation, Lessing asks:<sup>33</sup>

Would [...] no revealed truths whatsoever be distinguishable from human additions? For does a revealed truth have no internal distinguishing marks at all? Has its direct divine origin left no trace in and upon it other than that historical truth which it shares with so many absurdities?

The interesting hermeneutical problem of such "internal marks" can also be approached from the other side: what impact does historical certainty have on the status of any religious doctrine? This aporetic question brings Lessing to introduce the concept of the "inner truth" of religious doctrines:<sup>34</sup>

Let us take it as given that the books of the Bible furnish proof of all the facts on which the Christian doctrines are in part based; books can furnish proof of facts, and why should these books not do so? It is enough that not all of the Christian doctrines are based on facts. The rest are based, as already conceded, on their inner truth; and how can the inner truth of any proposition depend on the authority of the book in which it is put forward?

With this turn of his polemics against the Lutheran dogmatist, Lessing arrives at a point where the hermeneutical issue can be identified more clearly: in what way can the inner truth of a religious doctrine be recognized in a reader's encounter with scripture? In studying biblical texts, Lessing claims, the inner truth must become the "test"

of “hermeneutic truth.” How does the reader become aware of such inner truth? Lessing rejects a hypothetical model according to which a reader would have an understanding of the inner truth at hand prior to his or her encounter with a biblical text. For a debate about the relation between natural religion and the Christian religion such a model of understanding could not be helpful since the Christian message cannot be given prior to a full involvement in an act of communication of this message. Lessing therefore dismisses the assumption that the reader would know “beforehand” about the inner truth.<sup>35</sup>

*Beforehand?* Why beforehand? Whoever does the one [i.e. explain the biblical text], also does the other [i.e. show a conception of the inner truth]. If someone explains to me the inner truth of a revealed proposition (I say explains, not *seeks* to explain), he surely proves quite adequately that he has a correct conception of this inner truth himself.

This statement must be regarded as the pivot of the debate about axioms in Lessing’s hermeneutical treatise. The idea is that the reader, if he or she achieves an explanation of the inner truth of some religious teaching, becomes himself or herself aware, in the very process, of this inner truth at some level of individual insight or experience which can, however, be communicated to another person. Unfortunately, Lessing does not offer any examples at this point. One probably has to assume that such an act of explanation fails if a reader is prevented by some other convictions – which would possibly even be the teachings of a philosophical natural religion – from achieving an explanation.

In this sense three aspects are relevant for an explanation or evaluation of religious “doctrines” which are qualified as such by their inner truth. Lessing in his rhetoric contrasts the biblical scholar and the honest layman and speaks of doctrines which have been “extracted” from the Bible and which a believer, he claims,<sup>36</sup>

does not regard [...] as true because they were extracted from the Bible, but because he realises that they are more worthy of

God and more beneficial to the human race than the doctrines of any other religion – and because he *feels* that these Christian doctrines give him comfort.

The first two of these three aspects (“worthy of God,” “beneficial to the human race”) are related to natural religion: while the existence and attributes of God are conceptualized at a philosophical level, Lessing opens up a space for other ideas which would not contradict the divine attributes in natural religion, but go beyond them, and while the moral law belongs to the essence of natural religion and would again not be jeopardized, he opens up a space for even “more beneficial” ideas – and obviously not “more beneficial” for some sectarian community only, but within the same dimension of universality as the moral law.<sup>37</sup> The third aspect – referring to religious consolation – allows a criterion of *feeling* to enter the hermeneutical process, and Lessing advocates the individuality of the believer who experiences some sort of immediacy in the encounter with a religious idea and is also able to express this experience in *explaining* a relevant scriptural text.<sup>38</sup>

Is Lessing’s view of biblical hermeneutics as developed in his *Axioms* a part of theology or only a part of Enlightenment thought? Does he shield from criticism an experience in the engagement with biblical texts which Kant ignores? The legacy of Enlightenment biblical hermeneutics would certainly include the emphasis on natural religion and a universalist ethics. However, a slight irritation remains about components of the biblical (or indeed any other scriptural) religious tradition which might not be fully absorbed into the concept of natural religion, and Lessing represents a voice that has not abandoned a theological engagement with the biblical texts with a view toward such components. “Intercession” may be one such idea to be encountered in the biblical *interpretandum*. It is clear that a theological reception of these components – whether or not one calls them elements of an “ecclesiastical faith” – must not violate the moral boundaries of religion. However, believers in the wide

plurality of religious communities are invited to search for them and to respond to them in their subjective and individual attempts at carving pious selves.

## NOTES

- 1 All biblical quotations are from the New Revised Standard Version (1989/1995). For introductory commentary on the texts see, e.g., John Barton and John Muddiman (eds.), *The Oxford Bible Commentary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001). In the New Testament, 1 Pet 4.1–3 with its polemics against idolatry or Eph 1.15–19 with its concept of prayer may be compared.
- 2 In the early modern history of biblical interpretation, Spinoza discussed the anthropomorphic representation of God as “jealous” or “angry” with reference to Deut. 4.24. See Baruch (Benedict de) Spinoza, *Theological-Political Treatise*, ed. J. Israel, trans. M. Silverthorne and J. Israel (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 100–1, 183; *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* (Latin and German), ed. G. Gawlick and F. Niewöhner (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1979), 236–8, 438.
- 3 For a highly polemical review of “approaches” to the Bible in modern biblical studies see Stephen D. Moore and Yvonne Sherwood, *The Invention of the Biblical Scholar: A Critical Manifesto* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2011). A survey of “lines of approach” is offered in John Barton (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Biblical Interpretation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).
- 4 Salomon Glassius, *Philologia Sacra* (Leipzig: J. F. Gleditschius, 1743), 493–506; the following paragraph builds on a treatise “De scripturae sensu eruendo” (“On Investigating the Meaning of Scripture”). The first edition of Glassius’s book was published in 1623–1636. The treatise is also mentioned in Christoph Bultmann, “Historical-Critical Inquiry,” in *The Hebrew Bible: A Critical Companion*, ed. J. Barton (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016), 431–54; on Glassius see Christoph Bultmann and Lutz Danneberg (eds.), *Hebraistik–Hermeneutik–Homiletik. Die “Philologia Sacra” im frühneuzeitlichen Bibelstudium* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2011).
- 5 It should be noticed that in the biblical tradition the age of the “ancestors” remains more or less historically unspecific; the first name

- of an Egyptian pharaoh occurs at 1 Kings 14.25 (Shishak/Shoshenk, about 945–924 BCE).
- 6 Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, *Philosophical and Theological Writings*, trans. and ed. H. B. Nisbet (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 83–8, esp. 85; see also Hugh Barr Nisbet, *Gotthold Ephraim Lessing: His Life, Works, and Thought* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 537–70.
  - 7 Immanuel Kant, *Religion and Rational Theology*, trans. and ed. A. W. Wood and G. di Giovanni (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 233–327, esp. 263.
  - 8 Bultmann, “Historical-Critical Inquiry,” 439–40.
  - 9 For a careful discussion of the “literal” and the “mystical” (“allegorical,” “typological”) sense of the Bible see Glassius, *Philologia Sacra*, 347–492. The pattern of reception of Old Testament texts in the writings of the New Testament proved a major obstacle for a critical perception of “biblical” authors as authors within the religious culture of their time who would have written texts just at the “literal” level.
  - 10 Johann August Ernesti, *Institutio Interpretis Novi Testamenti* (Leipzig: Weidmann, 1761), 11 (own trans.); *Elements of Interpretation*, trans. and ed. M. Stuart (Andover: Flag and Gould, 1822), 15; *Principles of Biblical Interpretation*, trans. C. H. Terrot (Edinburgh: Thomas Clark, 1832/1833), 30–1. The book was republished in several editions until 1809, and there are two English translations (with supplements) by Moses Stuart (1822) and Charles H. Terrot (1832/1833). On Ernesti see Constantin Plaul, “Johann August Ernesti. Institutio Interpretis Novi Testamenti (1761),” in *Handbuch der Bibelhermeneutiken. Von Origenes bis zur Gegenwart*, ed. O. Wischmeyer (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2016), 651–62 [=HdbB]; John Sandys-Wunsch, “Early Old Testament Critics on the Continent,” in *Hebrew Bible/Old Testament: The History of its Interpretation. Vol. 2: From the Renaissance to the Enlightenment*, ed. M. Sæbø (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2008), 976–80 [=HBOT]; William Baird, *History of New Testament Research. Vol. 1: From Deism to Tübingen* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992), 108–15; Werner Georg Kümmel, *Das Neue Testament. Geschichte der Erforschung seiner Probleme* (Freiburg: Alber, 1958), 67–70; on Moses Stuart see the entry in Donald K. McKim (ed.), *Dictionary of Major Biblical Interpreters* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2007), 952–6.

- 11 Johann Salomo Semler, *Abhandlung von freier Untersuchung des Canon* (Halle: C. H. Hemmerde, 1771), 1–113; Semler's insistence on the historically contingent character of the biblical writings is often impregnated with an unwarranted anti-Jewish tone. On Semler see Marianne Schröter, *Aufklärung durch Historisierung. Johann Salomo Semlers Hermeneutik des Christentums* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2012), esp. 100–21; also 'Johann Salomo Semler. Vorbereitung zur theologischen Hermeneutik (1760)' in *HdbB*, 729–42; 'Johann Salomo Semler. Neuer Versuch die gemeinnüt(z)ige Auslegung und Anwendung des Neuen Testaments zu befördern (1786)' in *HdbB*, 743–54; Henning Graf Reventlow, *History of Biblical Interpretation. Vol. 4: From the Enlightenment to the Twentieth Century* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2010), 175–90; John H. Hayes, "Historical Criticism of the Old Testament Canon" in *HBOT* 2: 995–1005; Baird, *History of New Testament Research*, 117–27; Kümmel, *Das Neue Testament*, 73–81.
- 12 Thus in his dedicatory letter of his "Abhandlung" of 1771, Semler refers to ideas of "moral advancement" (*Besserung*) and "consolation" (*Beruhigung*), relying on the theologian Johann Joachim Spalding (1714–1804). See also David Sorkin, *The Religious Enlightenment: Protestants, Jews, and Catholics from London to Vienna* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008), 113–63, for a study of Semler's academic teacher Siegmund Jacob Baumgarten. On an alternative view, Enlightenment biblical hermeneutics is considered to have been a transformation of the Bible from a religious resource into a "cultural" Bible; see, e.g., Jonathan Sheehan, *The Enlightenment Bible: Translation, Scholarship, Culture* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005).
- 13 Johann Gottfried Herder, *Against Pure Reason: Writings on Religion, Language, and History*, trans. and ed. M. Bunge (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), 218 (from: *Briefe, das Studium der Theologie betreffend*, 1780–1781, letter 1). On Herder see Christoph Bultmann, "Herder's Biblical Studies," in *A Companion to the Works of Johann Gottfried Herder*, ed. H. Adler and W. Koepke (Rochester: Camden House, 2009), 233–46; Markus Buntfuss et al., "Theologie," in *Herder Handbuch*, ed. S. Greif, M. Heinz, and H. Clairmont (Paderborn: Wilhelm Fink, 2016), 319–85, esp. 351–8.

- 14 On Enlightenment debates about religion and ethics see Peter Byrne, *Natural Religion and the Nature of Religion: The Legacy of Deism* (London: Routledge, 1989); *The Moral Interpretation of Religion* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1998); *Kant on God* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007).
- 15 Kant, *Religion and Rational Theology*, 262.
- 16 Hugo Grotius, *The Rights of War and Peace*, ed. R. Tuck (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 2005), I: 155 (bk. 1, ch. 1, sect. 10.5).
- 17 Alexander Pope, *The Major Works*, ed. P. Rogers (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 270–309, quote 298. In the edition of 1743, two lines with an allusion to 1 Cor 13.13 were added: “In faith and hope the world will disagree, / but all mankind’s concern is charity”; see Alexander Pope, *An Essay on Man*, ed. M. Mack (London: Routledge, 2002), 125.
- 18 Kant, *Religion and Rational Theology*, 267.
- 19 Kant, *Religion and Rational Theology*, 267.
- 20 Kant, *Religion and Rational Theology*, 267.
- 21 Kant, *Religion and Rational Theology*, 271.
- 22 Kant, *Religion and Rational Theology*, 271–2.
- 23 Kant, *Religion and Rational Theology*, 262, 269.
- 24 Grotius, *The Rights of War and Peace*, II. 1032 (bk. 2, ch. 20, sect. 14.1).
- 25 Friedrich Schleiermacher, *On Religion: Speeches to its Cultured Despisers*, trans. and ed. R. Crouter (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988); see also the relevant chapters in Jacqueline Mariña (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Friedrich Schleiermacher* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).
- 26 Spinoza, *Theological-Political Treatise; Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*. On Spinoza see Steven Nadler, *Spinoza: A Life* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999); also “The Bible Hermeneutics of Baruch de Spinoza,” in *HBOT* 2: 827–36.
- 27 Spinoza, *Theological-Political Treatise*, 176; *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*, 420/422.
- 28 Spinoza, *Theological-Political Treatise*, 61; *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*, 140/142.
- 29 Spinoza, *Theological-Political Treatise*, 67; *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*, 158.

- 30 Lessing, *Philosophical and Theological Writings*, 66 (“Counter-propositions of the editor,” 1777).
- 31 Lessing, *Philosophical and Theological Writings*, 120–47, quote 123 (“Axioms,” 1778).
- 32 Lessing, *Philosophical and Theological Writings*, 124.
- 33 Lessing, *Philosophical and Theological Writings*, 125–6.
- 34 Lessing, *Philosophical and Theological Writings*, 132.
- 35 Lessing, *Philosophical and Theological Writings*, 139.
- 36 Lessing, *Philosophical and Theological Writings*, 143.
- 37 It should be mentioned at this point that while the treatise *Axioms* is focused on a controversy with a Lutheran church official, Lessing reflects on the plurality of scriptural religions (esp. Judaism, Christianity, Islam) in his “philosophical drama” *Nathan the Wise* of 1779.
- 38 Friedrich Schleiermacher, *Hermeneutik*, ed. H. Kimmerle (Heidelberg: C. Winter, 1959), 55, may still be seen to continue this line of thinking which Lessing advocates in his *Axioms* when he states, in his lecture notes on hermeneutics from the 1810s, with regard to the sacredness of the books of sacred scripture: “You can only know that they are sacred once you have understood them” (“Dass sie heilig sind, weiss man nur dadurch, dass man sie verstanden hat”). For Schleiermacher’s extensive elaboration of the aspect of the potential and dynamics of language, on the one hand, and the (religious) personality of the human author of any biblical text, on the other, see his lectures on hermeneutics from the 1810s and 1820s, in *On Religion: Speeches to its Cultured Despisers* (1998); *Hermeneutik* (1959).