

Biblical Interpretation and Hermeneutical Presuppositions

For a tradition such as Christianity which is significantly based on a set of written texts, ways and means of relating to these Scriptures and interpreting them in the light of contemporary events has always been part of its religious life. Thus the art of reading Scriptures is not something which emerged only recently but has its roots in the early beginnings. It even shares this art with another tradition who partially relate themselves and shape their identity in relation to the same written texts, that is Judaism. The history of what emerged as two separate religions could also be described as the history of the respective interpretative traditions of the Jewish and Christian communities. The fact that an almost identical collection of sacred texts serves as an identity forming device for two different religious traditions indicates that factors other than the pure text shape their interpretation. This is not only true for these different religious traditions but for different interpretations within the same religious tradition throughout the centuries. Factors outside the text influence the readings of the text – our ways of reading are shaped by ‘hermeneutical presuppositions’ which we bring to the texts.

The word ‘hermeneutics’ is derived from the Greek word *hermeneuein* which means translate, interpret (the Greek god Hermes was the divine messenger transmitting and translating/explaining divine messages to humans). In some definitions the term hermeneutics is used almost as a synonym for methods of biblical interpretation (also referred to as exegetical methods). Taking into account the use of the term ‘hermeneutics’ especially since Schleiermacher, ‘hermeneutics’ as related to the task of biblical interpretation can be understood as the fundamental philosophical and theological assumptions ‘behind’ different methods of interpretation.

Especially since the late 1970s the necessity to clarify hermeneutical presuppositions in the process of biblical interpretation has been recognized more and more. The question is not whether or not a particular interpretation is influenced by specific presuppositions – but whether or not an interpreter is critically reflecting on them. Alongside a critical awareness and recognition of hermeneutical presuppositions in biblical interpretation goes the recognition of the limitation of any one single interpretation. As interpretations legitimately can be shaped by divergent presuppositions divergent interpretations of the same texts are the necessary result of this process.

The critical reflection of the hermeneutical presuppositions renders biblical interpretation an inspiring, never-ending, lively process.

Essential Readings:

Kathy Ehrensperger, 'Changing Perspectives' in *That We May Be Mutually Encouraged: Feminism and The New Perspective in Pauline Studies* (London, New York: T&T Clark International, 2004), pp. 5-27(42).

William P. Brown, 'Introduction' in W. P. Brown (ed.), *Engaging Biblical Authority: Perspectives on the Bible as Scripture* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press 2007), pp. ix-xvi.

David L. Dungan, 'What a "Canon" of Scripture Is – and is Not', in *Constantine's Bible: Politics and the Making of the New Testament* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007), pp. 1-7.

Esther Menn, 'Inner-Biblical Exegesis in the Tanak' in Alan J. Hauser and Duane F. Watson (eds), *A History of Biblical Interpretation Vol.1: The Ancient Period* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 2003), pp. 55-79.

David Jasper 'Texts and Readers: Reading and Writing' in *A Short Introduction to Hermeneutics* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004), pp. 7-24.

George W. E. Nickelsburg, 'Scripture and Tradition' in *Ancient Judaism and Christian Origins Diversity, Continuity and Transformation* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003), pp. 1-28.

John Barton, 'Introduction' in J. Barton (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Biblical Interpretation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), pp. 1-5.

Anthony Thiselton, 'Biblical Studies and Theoretical Hermeneutics' in J. Barton (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Biblical Interpretation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), pp. 95-113.

Further Readings:

Kathy Ehrensperger, *That We May Be Mutually Encouraged: Feminism and The New Perspective in Pauline Studies* (London, New York: T&T Clark International, 2004).

Alan J. Hauser and Duane F. Watson (eds), *A History of Biblical Interpretation Vol. 1: The Ancient Period* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 2003).

William Yarchin, *History of Biblical Interpretation: A Reader* (Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson, 2004), pp. 31-85.

Matthias Henze (ed.), *A Companion to Biblical Interpretation in Early Judaism* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 2012).

Soulen, R. N. and R. Kendall Soulen, *Handbook of Biblical Criticism* (Fourth Edition; Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011).

Activity

Why do you read the Bible?

What presuppositions do you bring to the biblical texts?

How do you respond to someone with a different interpretation to your own?

To what extent do different interpretations challenge the authority of the Bible?

With respect to what, if anything, is the Bible authoritative, and how do you determine this?