

Scripture between Identity and Creativity

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Scripture between Identity and Creativity

*A Hermeneutical Theory Building upon
Four Interpretations of Job*

by

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To Deliana, Adinda and István

“He said to them, Therefore every teacher of the law who has been instructed about the kingdom of heaven is like the owner of a house who brings out of his storeroom new treasures as well as old.”

(Matthew 13:52, NIV)

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Preface

For the author of a book, that book is not just some book on some topic. It is the representation of his intellectual journey up to a certain point in time. On such an intellectual journey, other persons, family, friends, and colleagues – in that order – play a crucial role. The role of these ‘associates’ along the way is at least as important as one’s individual intellectual capabilities. Therefore, it is a very good tradition to express one’s gratitude to all those who have contributed in various ways to one’s intellectual development *prior* to presenting the content of the work. The usual restrictions of space of course apply, so that those not mentioned here should not think that they are devoid of my gratitude.

When it comes to the particular form and presentation of the argument in this book, my primary expression of gratitude should go to my supervisor, Marcel Sarot. He was an excellent supervisor in every respect. He was always willing to discuss problems and, offer advices, often over lunch and mixed in with discussions about classic cars, computers, and family life. I do not exaggerate when I say that he taught me the art of writing. Unlike so many university professors, he was not a teacher in the sense of one who sets out to create dependents, pupils who explore uncritically the implications of his own brilliant ideas. On the contrary, he was always concerned with improving the internal credibility and, in my case, comprehensibility, of the argument. I would like to thank him for his warm friendship and help, and for his patience in correcting the ever returning errors that inevitably accompany a labour of this kind. I would like to thank my promotor Dirk-Martin Grube for being willing to participate in the final stage of the project. My gratitude goes also to David Brown from Durham University for his willingness to act as my other promotor. Although he could only comment on the manuscript in its near finished form, I have benefited from the reading of his publications in many ways.

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made of the members of the systematic theology section of the PhD discussion forum of the ‘Gereformeerde Bond in de Nederlands Hervormde Kerk’, who commented on an earlier version of chapter two.

In this book, expertise is borrowed from various academic disciplines—philosophy, theology and the arts. This could not have been done without the help of various scholars with an in-depth expertise in these fields. Piet van der Horst, one of the few real experts on the *Testament of Job*, offered valuable comments on the chapter dealing with that text. Willem J. van Asselt, a good friend and a renowned expert in the field of the history of the Reformation, put much of his scholarship into the chapter on John Calvin. Ignace Bossuyt and Eric Jas helped me in various stages of the research underlying the chapter on Orlando di Lasso.

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September 2003, Maarten Wisse

I

Stating the Problem

Introduction

George Frideric Handel's aria 'I know that my Redeemer liveth' in the Messiah is probably the most well known artistic transformation of a text from the Old Testament book of Job.¹ At the beginning of the third part of the Messiah, it marks the believer's response to the birth, death, and resurrection of Christ, the theme of part two. The aria starts with a quotation of Job 19:25–26, which reads "For I know that my redeemer liveth, and that he shall stand at the latter day upon the earth. And though after my skin worms destroy this body, yet in my flesh shall I see God" (AV). It links this Old Testament verse of hope with the New Testament faith in the resurrection: 1 Corinthians 15:20 "But now is Christ risen from the dead, and become the firstfruits of them that slept" (AV). The believer expresses a firm trust in the risen Lord who, as the "firstfruit of his resurrection", will "stand at the latter day upon the earth". The two texts are woven together in a masterful way. The melodic shape of the soprano voice is characterised by ascending intervals denoting the resurrection. The ascending intervals, initially accompanying: "And that He shall stand at the latter day upon the earth", gradually shift to the phrase "For now is Christ risen" from Corinthians. Thus, the hope of the believer 'coincides' with the resurrection of Christ.

But, was the Job quotation really about the resurrection, and about Christ, as Handel suggested? In other words: was Handel's interpretation *true*? This is one of the ever intriguing questions of *hermeneutics*. In the Western tradition, hermeneutics has always been dominated by questions of correctness and truth. Various answers have been given to these questions. In the view of the historical hermeneutics of the Enlightenment, a paradigm still widely influential, the book of Job is neither about the resurrection, nor about Christ. This means, in its *original context*, the book of Job did not deal with these things. Handel took the passage out of context and gave it a new meaning. Given what we can infer from the text and given what we know about the tradition in which it originated, it is highly unlikely that the author of Job wanted to express a belief in bodily resurrection. Likewise for the idea that the Go'el (Redeemer) referred to was the Messiah, let alone that it was Jesus Christ. From the perspective of historical hermeneutics, Handel's use of the text from Job is a typical example of 'pre-critical exegesis', a

¹ George Frideric Handel, *Messiah* (Grand Rapids, MI: Christian Classics Ethereal Library, 2000), ([URL: http://www.ccel.org/h/handel/messiah/](http://www.ccel.org/h/handel/messiah/)), pp. 204–209.

type of interpretation that one might pejoratively describe as: exegesis prior to its inception.²

Handel's interpretation of the text will not necessarily be seen as 'abuse' by contemporary adherents of historical hermeneutics, as long as it is not taken as a case of *interpretation* or *exegesis*. Rather, it should be seen as 'artistic transformation' or 'creative use'. Thus, forms of interpretation which do not fit into the requirements of proper historical methodology are marginalised into secondary forms of interpretation. This marginalisation of pre-critical exegesis is easily connected with the contemporary locus of art in the realm of spare time. In contemporary culture art predominantly functions outside the professional sphere. Hence, the primary function of art – especially classical art? – is to entertain. It should for a moment transport us into another world—whether that world exists or not. In the virtual world of the beautiful relaxing sound of Handel's, wherein the libretto plays a secondary role anyhow, it does not at all matter that the eighteenth century composer lacked our standards of academic scholarship.

There is another response to the fact that Handel's interpretation is at odds with the historical sense of the text from the book of Job. Whereas the former response was typically rooted in what we call 'modernity', this one is a typical exponent of 'postmodernity'. Postmodern hermeneutics asks questions like this: Does anything like the original meaning of the text exist? And, is it not the primary function of texts – and pieces of music – to be open to all kinds of interpretations rooted in all kinds of different reading situations? Who will ever know what a text means? The reluctance with regard to claiming to *know* what a text tells us is deeply rooted in postmodern culture.³ Hence, in relating the text from Job to the resurrection of Christ, Handel only followed the nature of the text. Whether the text from Job was about the resurrection of Christ or not does not matter.

In this book, I argue that while crucial elements of both responses to Handel's interpretation need to be retained, neither of them does justice to what Handel was in fact doing. Against the historical hermeneutics of modernity, I argue that there is no universal rule for determining what a text does or does not mean. The meaning of the text is not simply *given* with the text, but depends to a significant extent upon the aim and context of the reader. For example, the musical and theological context in which the text from the book of Job was taken up by Handel was completely unknown in the time when the book of Job was written. The author(s) of the book of Job could never have imagined that part of their text would be taken up into a piece of music, in conjunction with a part of another text that speaks about the resurrection of Jesus Christ as Messiah—provided that the author(s) knew what a 'Messiah' was. These aspects of Handel's aria influence the meaning of the text of Job in his interpretation. A general rule for what correct interpretation is ignores the diversity and complexity of an interpretation process. Many more factors play a role in the process than only the origin of the text.

I argue for the complexity and diversity of interpretation processes through an in-depth investigation of four examples of the interpretation of Job: (1) the *Testament of Job*, a Jewish haggadic retelling of the story of Job from the first

² The historical hermeneutics of the Enlightenment is the topic of chapter 9.

³ I discuss postmodern hermeneutics, especially Derrida, in chapter 7, section 7.4.

century CE.⁴ (2) the sermons on Job by the sixteenth century Protestant reformer John Calvin;⁵ (3) the music on Job by one of the masters of sixteenth century Flemish polyphony Orlando di Lasso;⁶ and (4) the book *On Job: God Talk and the Suffering of the Innocent* by the twentieth century ‘father’ of liberation theology Gustavo Gutiérrez.⁷ The four cases studied here are interpretations of the book in a real life religious context rather than academic studies of the original meaning of the text. I argue that in all four cases, an interest in the meaning of the text – which, as I will show, means different things in different cases – is intertwined with religious and artistic uses of it, so that the two cannot be separated. Hence, rather than viewing the historical interpretation of the text as the primary mode of interpretation, and all other interpretations as secondary, or mere ‘uses’ of the text, I would like to see the use of a text as the primary category, and conceive of a historical interpretation as one of these uses. To judge all interpretations against the norm of the meaning of the text in its original setting is to *decontextualise* interpretation.

The argument so far seems wholly to affirm the postmodern view that there is no fixed meaning, or that the meaning of texts does not depend upon the intentions of their authors. This is true insofar as I hold that texts are open works which can be treated in ways beyond their original meanings. That this is so is obvious, because *we do* treat texts beyond their original meanings all the time. This is clear from the example of Handel’s and the case studies discussed later in this book. However, while granting postmodern hermeneutics this point, I reject typically postmodern conceptions like the claim that texts do not have fixed meanings at all, that texts are ‘authorless’ and that an interpretation after the author’s intention is altogether impossible. I reject these popular maxims of postmodernism on precisely the same basis as that on which I admit the openness of texts: the analysis of the examples of the interpretation of Job. The analysis that enables me to see *that* readers do all kinds of things beyond the original meaning of the text rests upon the belief that I *can* know something – sometimes quite a lot – about the original meaning of the text, and that I *can* know something about the interpretations of the text in *distinction* to the original meaning of the text.⁸ Hence, my concession to postmodernism rests on the validity and success of the core of modernist hermeneutics: historical research. Accordingly, while granting the value of historical research, I deny that it is the exclusive point of entrance to the one and only true meaning of the text. We can retrieve information about what a text meant in its original context from the text itself and the background knowledge we have about it. The success of an interpretation in terms of the text’s original meaning depends upon how much information we have. This depends upon the state in which we receive the text, and the things we know about its author, time of origin and intended audience. Last but not least, our knowledge

⁴ Chapter 3.

⁵ Chapter 4.

⁶ Chapter 5.

⁷ Chapter 6.

⁸ I argue for this point in chapter 7, where I explain how my argument is related to the problem of so-called ‘hermeneutical realism/antirealism’. I accept neither of these positions because the realism question is undecidable by definition and therefore, in Wittgenstein’s terms “no question at all”.

about the original meaning of the text depends upon the level of knowledge we have of the original language in which the text was written.

Therefore, it makes sense for a historian to show that what Handel did with the text from Job, namely to put it in the context of faith in the Messiah and the resurrection, differed from the original meaning of the text, because it can be shown that the most likely meaning of the text originally was that God would save Job from his miserable condition *before* his death. At the same time, it made sense for Handel, given the interpretive tradition from which he operated and the aim of his interpretation, to deviate from the original meaning and interpret the text in the light of his faith in the resurrection and the Messiah. Both in the case of the historian and in the case of Handel, the context determines the rules for what counts as correct interpretation and what not. I will show that these rules can be discussed, modified, or rejected, depending on the context in which they function. For example: there is a lively debate in the historical sciences about methodologies to be employed in reconstructing the historical settings of texts. Likewise, there is a lively debate in the church about the proper interpretation of the Old Testament in the light of the Christian belief that Jesus Christ is the Messiah. In these debates, arguments can be exchanged and improvements proposed.

Thus far, I have ignored a crucial aspect of Handel's interpretation of the book of Job: the distinctly *religious* character of Handel's interpretation. Handel read the book of Job as a part of divine revelation, which was for instance one of the reasons why he could so easily link up the Old and New Testament texts. The connection between them presupposes a theological framework that explains how Jesus as the Messiah can be found in the Old Testament, and how Old Testament texts on surviving death can be interpreted in terms of New Testament references to the resurrection.

The distinctly religious character of Handel's interpretation of Scripture also counts against the approach to the from a conception of art as 'spare time' occupation. For Handel, the believer makes a profound response to the reality of the resurrection – both of Christ and the believer – by means of the text from Job. In doing so, the believer finds ultimate consolation for the contingencies of life: sin (aria no. 52), sorrow, and death (duet no. 50). In a time when the power of death, illness, economic, social and political instability, and not least the judgment of God were much more acutely felt than nowadays, the belief in the resurrection was not a relaxing step into a phantasy world, but the ultimate way to cope with everyday experience.

How does the religious character of Handel's interpretation bear upon the question of hermeneutics? Does the authoritative character of a holy Scripture have special implications for the way in which religious believers interpret the texts? I shall argue that this is the case, both in the sense that religious interpretations of a Scripture share certain aspects that non-religious interpretations of ordinary books do not, and in the sense that the religious character of the interpretation of a Scripture poses important limitations upon the viability of norms for correct interpretation in religious communities.

A Scripture is a text or collection of texts that is seen as constituting its identity by the religious community who acknowledges it. The community defines its religious identity in terms of its Scripture. Ideally, their religion is what their

Scripture says. At the same time, at least in the case of Christian Scripture, Scripture is a diverse collection of (very) ancient texts developed over a very long period of time. This means that it is internally diverse, inconsistent, and in many respects irrelevant to, inadequate for and sometimes deeply problematic with regard to the present situation in which the religious community finds itself. In my discussion of the four case studies, I will show how various aspects of the book of Job render it inadequate for later interpreters. For example, in the view of the Jewish community of the first century CE, the book of Job much too bluntly ascribed harmful actions against Job to God. Another example: for John Calvin, it was utterly unacceptable that Job could accuse God of injustice and arbitrariness. Finally, returning to the example of Handel's, it was completely outside the frame of reference of eighteenth-century Christianity to restrict God's deliverance from evil to this world rather than encompassing the world to come or life after death.

The function of Scripture as an identity constituting phenomenon and its roots in a specific ancient context lead to two incompatible needs in the religious community. On the one hand, the authority of Scripture needs to be retained. The identity of the community is at risk as soon as one admits that Scripture fails to be an "inexhaustible source of inspiration for the life of the Church" (Gutiérrez). It must be Scripture itself that continues to direct and justify the life of the religious community. On the other hand, precisely in order to live up to its task, the message of Scripture needs to be adapted to the needs of the present context of the believer, so that those aspects irrelevant to or problematic in the present context fade away and those aspects that fit into it better come to the fore. Hence, the identification with the message of Scripture as part of the identity of the community of believers presupposes a creative endeavour to bridge the gap between the text and the reader. But the reverse is also true. The creative endeavour to bridge the gap between the text and the reader is motivated by the identification of the community with the message of Scripture. I call this the *ideological contradiction of the authority of Scripture*. This phenomenon is evident in Handel's use of the text of Job. By juxtaposing it to the text from Corinthians, it is suggested that the text of Job is about the resurrection rather than about an innerworldly salvation. Thus, the authority of the text is retained, even reinforced, because the text becomes a powerful instrument in the hand of the composer to bring faith in the resurrection even closer to the believer. But at the same time, the meaning of the text has been implicitly changed to fit the new needs of a changed context and faith. Similarly, when Calvin is of the opinion that Job exaggerates his laments, he safeguards their authoritative character by interpreting them as negative examples: "Do not act like Job!" Calvin never suggests that the text was false, but at the very least, he goes beyond what the text itself suggests.

A crucial factor in mediating the ancient message of Scripture to a new context is *tradition*. It may rightly be asked whether Handel ever really *decided* to interpret Job christologically or as referring to the resurrection, because he belonged to a tradition that had been doing so for centuries. The christological interpretation of the text from Job may have been so common in Handel's time that he did not even realise that one could interpret otherwise. But the move from Scripture to one's own situation need not be given in the tradition, because traditions can hide the foreign ancient message of Scripture as well as they can mediate it. This is what the

cases of Calvin and Gutiérrez, both reformers in their own right, show. Gutiérrez provides a reading of Job from the perspective of the suffering of the innocent which aims to show that the message of the book of Job fits the context of the poor in Latin America surprisingly well, although the church's tradition helps to hide this rather than to reveal it. Calvin even holds that although Scripture has always been formally authoritative, it must be given back to ordinary believers because the religious tradition of his time withheld it from them. However, even in the case of the latter reformer, a renewed identification with the original message of Scripture does not rule out the need for a creative adaptation of that message to his context. I touched upon Calvin's 'inverted hermeneutic' already. As I will show in my analysis of Gutiérrez, the liberation theologian uses his own means to transform the book of Job into a book of the poor, even if there are various indications to the contrary.

What does the foregoing mean for the limitations posed upon viable rules for religious interpretations of Scripture? I argue that in order to be successful, rules for correct interpretation of Scripture in religious communities must conform to the parameters of the religious enterprise. Negatively formulated, it means that a hermeneutical proposal that aims either at ruling out any kind of creativity in the community to bring the biblical message into contact with the needs of the community's present context, or at a vindication of creativity in such a way as to render the identification with Scripture in the community impossible, is bound to fail. Positively formulated, it means that hermeneutical proposals for the religious reading of Scripture must be *critically engaged*. In critically contributing to the religious enterprise, hermeneutical ideals must build upon the identity constituting function of Scripture in the religious community.

In many respects, this is a rather unsatisfactory result of the quest for rules for correct interpretation in religious communities. A hermeneutics of critical engagement only provides a success condition, but not a material criterion for what counts as true interpretation and what not. Indeed, that is what I defend, because in my view, material criteria for correct interpretation are so much context dependent that they cannot be specified in a general way. Hence, if one wants to develop a criterion for true interpretation in a religious community, one must engage in a specific hermeneutical enterprise and discuss what, given the parameters of that community, would count as a correct interpretation. In the final chapter of this book, I investigate how a hermeneutics of critical engagement affects traditional historical biblical scholarship. I reformulate the criteria for true interpretation within this particular context to make historical biblical scholarship a more fruitful participant in religious interpretation processes. Furthermore, I try to improve the internal credibility of the criteria for historicity used in historical critical research. This discussion of historical criticism serves as an example of how one can be critically engaged within a particular hermeneutical context.

A final remark is in order. This book is mostly written from the perspective of the Christian tradition. Three out of four case studies have been chosen from the Christian tradition, and one case study comes from the Jewish tradition. Furthermore, I will rather uncritically use a typically Christian term like 'church' to denote the religious community. This is because most of my analysis is based on the investigation of Christian uses of Scripture. Nevertheless, it is my intention

that the arguments in this book should not be exclusively based upon Jewish or Christian convictions or presuppositions. This is a study in the philosophy of religion, and in line with my understanding of this branch of philosophy, I aim to elucidate the phenomenon of the religious interpretation of a 'holy book'. The phenomenon of a holy book is also found outside the Jewish and Christian traditions, probably most prominently in the tradition of Islam. However, rather than approaching the religious phenomenon in a comparative way, I would like to start from the tradition I am familiar with and committed to, inviting readers from other traditions to see whether and how my findings apply to their own tradition. Of course, this has the downside that I am unable to highlight the typically Jewish or Christian aspects of the religious interpretation of Scripture by comparing them to others. Hence, my analysis may take specifically Christian features of the phenomenon of Scripture for general characteristics. On the upside, by concentrating on one tradition rather than on many, I am able to avoid all the intricacies of the comparative study of religion, which is best left to specialists in that field. It is upon the reader to decide to what extent my strategy is successful.

Methodological Considerations

2.1 INTRODUCTION

In the previous chapter, the reader was introduced to the overall argument presented in this book. In the present chapter, I take various crucial preparatory steps towards this argument by clarifying a number of terms and concepts. At first sight, the idea to read a chapter full of terminological clarifications seems tiresome and annoying, but I hope to show that in many respects, terminological clarifications take one immediately to the heart of the matter. The question of what one means by a certain term shows how one uses it, and the way one uses it reveals much about the central issues at stake. Thus, one might read this chapter as an alternative, slightly more technical, introduction to the subject matter of the book.

The first step, taken in section 2.2, which was already to some extent found wanting in the previous chapter, is the presentation of various terminological clarifications of such slippery terms as ‘hermeneutics’, ‘interpretation’, and ‘meaning’. In the previous chapter, I did not want to mix up the overall presentation of my argument with terminological clarifications. These find their place in this section.

The second step, taken in section 2.3, is an investigation of my understanding of religion. In this study, my aim is to reflect upon the religious interpretation of Scripture from a philosophical perspective. I ask what happens when religious believers interpret Scripture and what the nature of such a reading implies for the possibility to develop criteria for correct interpretation. Of course, in such a case, much depends upon how one looks at religious processes. For example, much hinges upon the question whether one takes an ‘insider’ or an ‘outsider’ perspective on religion. I define religion as an identity constituting system of beliefs and practices, constituting one’s metaphysical, moral, and social identity.

The third step, to be taken in section 2.4, to inquire how, given this understanding of religion, one can perceive the identity constituting function of religion in religious interpretation processes. I borrow elements from so-called ideology critical methodology to develop instruments for investigating the identity related aspects of religious interpretations of Scripture. The use of ideology critique brings in another definitional issue, namely the question of what is meant by the term ‘ideology’, and how ideology is related to religion. Subsequently, the contribution of ideology critique to the interpretation of texts is investigated in

section 2.5. Finally, in section 2.6, I give an overview of part II, and give reasons for the selection of interpretations of the book of Job which make up part II.

2.2 HERMENEUTICS, MEANING, AND INTERPRETATION

Authors writing on ‘hermeneutics’ should clarify what is meant by the term from the very outset, because anything said about the subject already presupposes a certain meaning of the term. Nowadays, the term ‘hermeneutics’ and the adjective ‘hermeneutical’ have become widely used for different purposes. One can roughly distinguish three uses of the term ‘hermeneutics’. First, hermeneutics can, in the most general sense, mean ‘interpretation’. This is the original meaning of the word in Greek (ἐρμηνεία). Second, the term may mean ‘reflection upon interpretation’, usually in the sense of reflection upon rules of interpretation. Theories of hermeneutics as reflection upon interpretation are frequently named after their origins: feminist, ecumenical, etc. These reflections are still mainly concerned with the interpretation of *texts*. Historically speaking, one might relate this use of the term with the modernist period.¹ Finally, the term is often taken as ‘reflection upon understanding in general’. In hermeneutical philosophy, all perception and knowledge of the world is taken as interpretation, so that philosophy itself becomes concerned with the reflection upon that interpretation. This broadening of the term is typically associated with postmodern thought.

In this book, I am concerned with the ‘traditional’ kind of hermeneutics, reflection upon the rules readers use when interpreting texts, more specifically with the religious interpretation of canonical texts such as the Bible or the Quran. The starting point of my investigation will be the way in which Christianity, and to a lesser extent Judaism, read their canonical texts within religious communities.

When we take hermeneutics as reflection upon interpretation, this distinguishes it from interpretation as the ‘practice of reading’ on the one hand and from meta-hermeneutics as a discussion of ways of reflecting on interpretation practices on the other. To present this distinction graphically, one can draw a four level box as shown in figure 2.1.

It may prove helpful when reading this book to know that I will be dealing with the two top levels in particular. As an example of a text I will use the biblical book of Job, but I will offer my own interpretation of that book only in so far as this is required for distinguishing the original meaning of the text from its interpretations. I will concentrate on the readings of others, exemplified by, for instance, Calvin and Gutiérrez. My findings concerning others’ interpretations of the texts will be made fruitful for the development of theoretical reflections on the religious reading process—the hermeneutical level. In developing my theory about religious reading practices I will be moving back and forth between a meta-hermeneutical level in which I criticise other’s reflections, and a hermeneutical level in which I develop my own theory.

¹ For a valuable discussion of the intricacies of distinguishing modernist and postmodernist thought, see David Brown, *Tradition and Imagination: Revelation and Change* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), pp. 9–59.

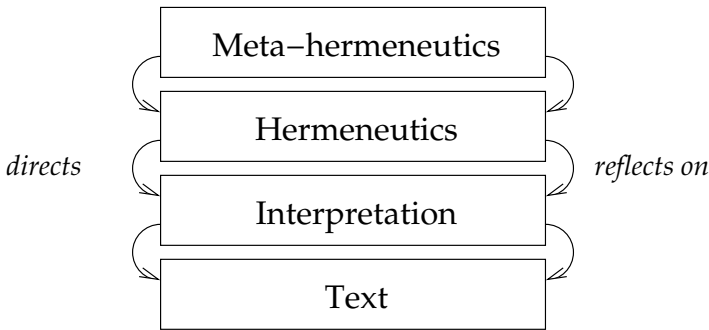


Figure 2.1: Hermeneutics as a four level enterprise

Hermeneutics as a reflection on rules for the interpretation of Scripture takes two forms: descriptive and normative hermeneutics. On the one hand, I *describe* the phenomenon of religious interpretation of Scripture. In ordinary language: I want to know what goes on when religious people read their Scripture. On the other hand, I deal with the question of how people *should* read their Scripture. That is, I discuss various theories of what the religious interpretation of Scripture should look like and confront them with interpretive practice. I criticise normative hermeneutical theories in so far as they are out of touch with interpretive practice and attempt to develop a normative hermeneutics of my own.

Now that I have explained my understanding of ‘hermeneutics’, it is time to turn to another tricky term which will return especially in part III: ‘meaning’. I will frequently use the even more controversial phrase ‘original meaning’. What do I mean by these terms? Let me start with the general term ‘meaning’. In the most general sense, I understand by the term ‘meaning’: *that which is said in the text*. But this is still deliberately ambiguous in a variety of ways.² The term ‘meaning’ is an umbrella term which is used to say various different things. First, the meaning of a text may denote what is said by the individual sentences, larger units, and the work as a whole. In the latter case, we will often speak about the ‘message’, or even the ‘significance’ of the work.³ Each of the individual sentences and larger units plays a role in the overall message of the work.

Second, by ‘meaning’, we will in many cases denote the communicative act of the author, performed by producing the text—popularly phrased as ‘authorial intention’.⁴ Some philosophers, whose view I will discuss in chapter 8, hold that all textual meaning is ultimately rooted in authorial intention, but I do not agree with them. An important reason not to follow these philosophers is that the idea

² Van Woudenberg argues that due to the ambiguity of the term ‘meaning’ when applied to texts, we should better refrain from using the term in connection with texts altogether. Unfortunately, most of his examples of the fundamental ambiguity of the term are dependent upon the peculiarities of the Dutch term ‘betekenis’, which is much more ambiguous than the English term ‘meaning’. Ren  van Woudenberg, *Filosofie van taal en tekst* (Budel: Damon, 2002), pp. 106–108.

³ Cf. *ibid.*, pp. 106–107.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 108.

of a text as the product of the intention of an individual author is relatively recent. Many classic texts, biblical texts and others, are 'authorless'. We do not know their authors, and most of the time, these texts are not treated as products of individual authors in their cultures of origin. Therefore, it seems pointless to suggest that the meaning of these texts consists of the intentions of their author(s). In these cases, the meaning of the text is not 'what the author wanted to say', but rather 'what is taken to be said as a matter of *convention* or *institution*'. Thus the fact that something is said by *someone* does not automatically make a theory of meaning into a theory of authorial intention. The decision to distinguish meaning from authorial intention has important philosophical implications. It means that what is taken to be said in a text depends to a significant extent upon the decisions the readers take on the nature of the text, or the communicator behind it. For this study, it means that I can study the meaning of the book of Job – or selections of it – in contexts relatively foreign to the world in which the text originated.

There are other aspects of 'meaning' which are related to, but nevertheless distinct from authorial intention. Rather often, we speak about the 'meaning' of the text when we refer to the characteristics of the language in which the text was written, or to the cultural, literary, economic, or social conventions common in the period when the text was written. For example, when an interpreter comes across the first sentence of the book of Job, "In the land of Uz there lived a man whose name was Job." (NIV) the reader naturally asks what the word 'Uz' meant in the time in which the text was written, more specifically, which geographical region was denoted by this word. We ask similar questions when we encounter traces of literary or social customs in texts. Most of the time, the 'meaning' we discover in these cases is not 'intended' at all by the author—at least not if we understand by 'intention' a conscious act of the will. We as readers need to reconstruct this 'meaning' because it was conventional at the time the author wrote the text. In many cases, these aspects of the 'meaning' of the text are more or less crucial to our understanding of what is said.

Given this explanation of the term 'meaning', I can now circumscribe what I mean by 'original meaning'. By 'original meaning' I mean *that which is said in the text in the light of what we know about its context of origin*. 'Original meaning' goes hand in hand with a 'historical interpretation'. A historical interpretation is an interpretation which aims at the investigation of the original meaning of the text. My view of meaning in general and original meaning in particular has various implications that are important to note. *First*, it follows from the above that in my view, 'original meaning' is not a tautological phrase. Although we frequently speak about the meaning of a text in terms of its original meaning, and various aspects of the meaning of a text outlined above are related to its origin, the meaning of a text does not coincide with its original meaning. As I have indicated in the previous chapter, there are various occasions when the meaning of a text is dependent upon a context different from the original. In our culture this is frequently the case in 'creative' interpretations of texts, such as in liturgy, art and music. *Second*, it follows from the above that the original meaning of a text does not coincide with its authorial intention. This is primarily due to the fact that the reader, approaching the text from a situation different from the original context, needs to reconstruct parts of the background of the text that were presupposed

by the author of the text but lost in later times.

Third, from my conception of meaning, it follows that texts do not 'have' an original meaning, because the original meaning of the text is the collection of information about the meaning of the text in the time of origin on the part of the reader. The information for this collection is only partly available in the text, and to a significant extent depends on other resources. For this reason too, I avoid the term 'reconstruction' in connection with the original meaning of the text. Readers looking for the original meaning of the text do not reconstruct something that is already available, but they *construct* something that they hope helps them to overcome the limits of what is available. As I will argue in chapter 7, this does not automatically place me in the antirealist camp, as if we can never know anything about the original meaning of a text. We can know about the original meaning of the text to a degree that depends on how much information we have, and how much we have depends upon the particular text we are dealing with.

Fourth, it follows that my concept of original meaning remains *flexible* in so far as the idea of the 'original context' of the text is a flexible concept. In many cases, especially with ancient texts, the original context of a text is not exactly clear. The book of Job is a typical example of such a text. We do not know when it was written. Dates range from the time of the patriarchs to the first century BCE. Furthermore, there is considerable debate about the unity of the text, so that it is also unclear whether the whole book was written around the same time. The dialogues may be decades or centuries older than the so-called mirror story. Therefore, it may be argued that in these cases, and according to some even in any case whatsoever, the use of a concept of original meaning makes no sense at all, because *the* original context of the book of Job does not exist. Critics of a so-called 'metaphysics of presence' like Derrida argue that a concept of 'original meaning' is a form of powerplay by which the interpreter claims a privileged access to the absolute truth. Since there is no such absolute truth, the concept of original meaning is only a form of rhetoric.⁵

I do not agree with this view. I think the concept of original meaning is useful as long as one recognises the active role of the interpreter and the contestability of claims about the original meaning of texts. *The one and only* original context and hence, *the one and only original meaning* of a text do not exist, but that does not render the concept redundant. The meaning of the phrase 'original meaning' will vary with the way in which it is used. For example, we speak about the 'original meaning' of the text if we receive more information about the original language in which the text was written. It frequently happens that a certain word or phrase in the book of Job has been wrongly translated in old translations such as the LXX, the Vulgate, or the King James Version. Nowadays, a more accurate translation may have become available due to a more extensive knowledge of Oriental wisdom literature. In such a case, we may say that we now know the original meaning of the term better than the translators of the LXX or the Vulgate. This need not mean that we know exactly what the author had in mind with the phrase, or that we know in an exhaustive sense what the phrase meant to its very first readers. It means that we compare the meaning of the phrase for later

⁵ For my discussion of Derrida, see chapter 7, section 7.4.

readers of the ancient translations with the meaning of the phrase for the readers who still understood the phrase in its language of origin. In this case, we take all those earlier understandings that share the linguistic context of the text together. Thus, the 'original context' of the text may encompass decades or even centuries. Paradoxically, however, it need not necessarily encompass the whole society of the time of origin of the text. The term in question might have been known only among a select group in that society. The original context might be synchronically limited, but diachronically extended, or the other way round.

The phrase 'original meaning' may be used differently in connection with the original form of the text. In historical critical research on the book of Job, it is quite common to attribute the dialogues with the friends and the speeches of God in the whirlwind to different sources. On these presuppositions, it is reasonable to suggest that the original meaning of the dialogues with the friends on their own is different from the meaning of the dialogues in the later canonical form of the text. Here, the term 'original meaning' refers to all those contexts in which the dialogues were still read on their own, in contradistinction to all those contexts where they were read in conjunction with God's speeches from the whirlwind.

Finally, from these examples, it has become clear that the concept of original meaning can never function in an absolute sense. It is always related to a specific aspect of the meaning of the text. What we mean by the term depends upon what sort of information we are dealing with in relation to the text, and the presuppositions we accept in relation to it. Therefore, a concept of original meaning is always a *relative* concept. A certain meaning of the text is original with respect to another because we believe that the way we now take what is said by the text is closer to what was originally said – in the sense of intended by the author and understood by the first readers – than another interpretation. If we understand the concept of original meaning in this way, it becomes clear that it is not so much a positive concept used to refer to a certain property of a text, but rather a *negative* and a *critical* concept which points to the difference we perceive between an interpretation of a text, and what we think we know about the original setting of the text. The concept of original meaning is critical in the sense that we use it when we challenge accepted interpretations of a text by confronting them with the distance between the meaning of the text in its context of origin, and later appropriations of it. A concept of original meaning is intended to renew existing interpretations in the light of the alienness of the text.⁶

2.3 RELIGION AS AN IDENTITY CONSTITUTING PHENOMENON

In this book, I present philosophical reflections upon the religious interpretation of Scripture. As far as these reflections aim to describe the religious process of interpreting Scripture, much depends upon how one views religious processes. Thus, my investigation will presuppose a certain understanding of religion. There is a major divide among scholars of religion about the description and explanation of religion. This divide appears in various forms under different labels, but the

⁶ See chapter 9, where I deal with this issue more extensively.

basic issue remains the same.⁷ There are two main ways of approaching religion. On the one hand, a purely descriptive (sometimes called phenomenological)⁸ approach to religion, which tries to give a reliable account of religion in the light of the phenomena we encounter in specific religions without trying to pin these phenomena down to a certain general religious *genus* which lies behind the concrete expressions analysed in research. This is the so-called *emic* approach in that it aims at a participant's perspective on religious phenomena. On the other hand, an explanatory approach to religion attempts, which, by studying concrete religious expressions, tries to grasp the transcultural – perhaps universal – traits that all particular religions share. It tries to understand the social and cultural conditions related to religious traditions, eventually aiming to understand the nature of human religiosity in a *theory of religion*. It is an *etic* approach in that it sometimes takes an outsider's perspective on religious expressions. It may call a certain development in a particular religion a social formation process, whereas participants themselves may call it a rediscovery of the essence of their faith.

This distinction has its origin in religious studies, but is relevant to hermeneutics too. One of the main lines of argument in this study is that a hermeneutics of the interpretation of canonical texts should take the religious function of canonical texts as its starting point, not in order to explain it away, but in order to provide a hermeneutical theory which serves the religious community by taking its religious function seriously. It is my conviction that for an adequate account of what interpretation of religious texts is, we need to go beyond a participant's perspective and ask how the religious interpretation of texts fits into the nature of religion.

Of course, to go 'beyond' an insider's perspective does not mean to ignore what insiders themselves think they are doing when interpreting their canonical Scripture. However, it does imply a *critical* attitude towards the insider's perspective. First, this critical attitude comes to the fore when I ask for the *internal coherence and consistency* of a certain interpretation of Scripture. For example, when dealing with Calvin, I ask how his hermeneutical principles are related to his interpretive practice. I will argue that Calvin's interpretation of Job does not conform to a strict interpretation of his own hermeneutical principles. Insiders will of course not readily admit that their theory and practice are not on par with one another. Second, a critical attitude is also important when it comes to the study of the *cultural and social embeddedness* of the religious interpretation of Scripture. Adherents to a religious tradition will commonly motivate their hermeneutical decisions from within their religious tradition, whereas I am particularly interested in how their claims fit into the context of the interpretation.

⁷ See, e.g. Jan G. Platvoet, 'To Define or Not to Define: The Problem of the Definition of Religion', in: Jan G. Platvoet and Arie L. Molendijk, editors, *The Pragmatics of Defining Religion: Contexts, Concepts and Contests*, Studies in the History of Religions: Numen Book Series 84 (Leiden: Brill, 1999), pp. 253–254; André F. Droogers, 'The Third Bank of the River: Play, Methodological Ludism and the Definition of Religion', in: Platvoet and Molendijk, *Pragmatics*, pp. 289–290; Peter Byrne, 'The Definition of Religion: Squaring the Circle', in: Platvoet and Molendijk, *Pragmatics*, pp. 380–381, 386; Meerten ter Borg, 'What is Religion?', in: Platvoet and Molendijk, *Pragmatics*, p. 402. For a recent application of the distinction to textual interpretation, see Van Woudenberg, pp. 119–122.

⁸ Rein Fernhout, *Canonical Texts Bearers of Absolute Authority*, trans. by Henry Jansen and Lucy Jansen-Hofland, *Currents of Encounter* 9 (Amsterdam - Atlanta: Rodopi, 1994), pp. 7–8.

Third, being critical towards religious claims is also evident from my attention to their *rhetorical aspects*. As we all know from everyday experience, the fact that someone strongly denies something or emphatically affirms it, may be ample evidence to the contrary. No matter how one looks at it, marketing is at the heart of contemporary culture. There is little reason to suppose that this is not the case in the religious realm. ‘Rhetoric’ need not necessarily be taken in a negative sense or be consciously employed by religious believers. Personally, I admire Gustavo Gutiérrez’s interpretation of Job. Nevertheless, the strong emphasis he lays on the book of Job as a book of the poor may be explained as an attempt – probably unconsciously – to ‘erase’ the evidence to the contrary. Finally, a critical attitude implies that for the sake of the argument I will *suspend judgement on the truth claims* made by religious believers. If religious believers hold that their interpretation of Scripture is the meaning given by the Holy Spirit, I will not automatically accept that claim—and sometimes even suggest that there may be other reasons for it. This is not to deny that God influences the interpretation of Scripture. It is only to refrain from taking God’s presumed influence at face value.

The question of what religion is, is of course a difficult question. Numerous definitions of religion have been given since the beginnings of religious studies in Western universities.⁹ Nowadays, several people even deny that an adequate definition of religion is possible.¹⁰ I do not need to go into these issues too deeply. For my argument, I only need a partial description of what religion is, namely *how it functions*. Several people more or less explicitly argue that a functional description of religion can count as an exhaustive account of what religion is,¹¹ but this view has been challenged by many others, and I think for good reasons. Of course, the function that religion fulfils in the lives of believers is important when I describe what religion is. However, a functional description of religion concentrates one-sidedly on what people do in religion. For example, a functional description of religion speaks of the *objects* of religion and the content of *belief systems* only in terms of their function, not in terms of their truth.

For my purposes, however, I shall concentrate on the function of religion, taking religion to be *a system of identity constituting symbols*. By symbols, I mean beliefs, narratives, practices, and rituals.¹² Scholars in religious studies mention

⁹ Two valuable collections of essays on the topic have recently appeared in the Brill series on the history of religions: Thomas A. Idinopulos and Brian C. Wilson, editors, *What is Religion? Origins, Definitions, and Explanations*, Studies in the History of Religions: Numen Book Series 81 (Leiden: Brill, 1998) and Platvoet and Molendijk, *Pragmatics*.

¹⁰ See, for instance Thomas A. Idinopulos, ‘The Difficulties of Understanding Religion’, in: Idinopulos and Wilson, *What is Religion?*, pp. 31–32; William E. Paden, ‘Religion, World, Plurality’, in: Idinopulos and Wilson, *What is Religion?*, pp. 91–93. For a brief introduction to the history of defining religion, see Brian C. Wilson, ‘From the Lexical to the Polythetic: A Brief History of the Definition of Religion’, in: Idinopulos and Wilson, *What is Religion?*, pp. 141–162; John F. Wilson and Thomas P. Slavens, *Research Guide to Religious Studies*, Sources of Information in the Humanities (Chicago: American Library Association, 1982), pp. 7–10. For a philosophical defence of the possibility to define religion, see Hendrik Johan Adriaanse, ‘On Defining Religion’, in: Platvoet and Molendijk, *Pragmatics*, pp. 227–244.

¹¹ See, for instance Russell T. McCutcheon, ‘Redescribing “Religion” as Social Formation: Toward a Social Theory of Religion’, in: Idinopulos and Wilson, *What is Religion?*, p. 57; E. Thomas Lawson, ‘Defining Religion. . . Going the Theoretical Way’, in: Idinopulos and Wilson, *What is Religion?*, pp. 43–49. For a criticism of these views, see Platvoet, pp. 257–260.

¹² Cf. Byrne, p. 385.

many different functions of religion, most of them having to do with some kind of identity constituting function. However, they differ considerably on what kind of identity shaping is involved. Some say that the main thing is “how one comes to terms with the ultimate significance of one’s place in the world”.¹³ Others, such as Wilfred Cantwell Smith, say that religion – in Smith’s view ‘faith’ – consists in a human being’s personal relation to the transcendent.¹⁴

Rather than choosing one particular aspect of religion and declaring that aspect to be the most important, I would like to view the identity constituting nature of religion from three closely related perspectives. First, religion constitutes what I would like to call one’s ‘metaphysical identity’. By nature, human beings have an inclination to ask questions about who they are, where they come from, and where they are going to.¹⁵ On the one hand, they do so by orientating themselves in the physical world. The ultimate manifestation of this physical orientation in contemporary culture is, of course, modern science and technology. It is important to note, in my view, that this physical orientation is not ‘identity neutral’. People do not only have some curious interest in having information about their surroundings – they certainly have – but they also need a certain amount of certainty and control over their lives. Part of this certainty and control they find in natural explanations of their experiences. These natural explanations may be scientifically sophisticated or – depending on one’s perspective – rather primitive. On the other hand, people find their place in the world by orienting themselves towards what James Cox calls an ‘alternative world’.¹⁶ Many things that we experience in life go beyond what physical explanations can account for or control. This is clearly the case in societies that are economically and politically unstable. One might think of illness, life and death, fertility, food, peace, but also less material things like feelings of guilt and shame. In a religious system, people try to find some kind of consolation for all these experiences in lots of different, but functionally coherent ways. Think of notions like providence, protection by spirits, forgiveness of sins, eschatological justice or reincarnation. It is, however, difficult to explain the human search for metaphysical identity completely with reference to the need for coping with experiences of finiteness or evil.¹⁷ Religion might well be evidence of the human capability effectively to communicate with the metaphysical in its own right. In other words, religion fulfils its metaphysical identity constituting function by providing people with sets of symbolic representations of the alternative world.¹⁸

¹³ Clayton Crockett, ‘On the Disorientation of the Study of Religion’, in: Idinopulos and Wilson, *What is Religion?*, p. 1, quoting Charles Long.

¹⁴ Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *The Meaning and End of Religion: A New Approach to the Religious Traditions of Mankind* (New York: Macmillan, 1963), pp. 170–192.

¹⁵ Robert A. Hinde, *Why Gods Persist: A Scientific Approach to Religion* (London & New York: Routledge, 1999), p. 33.

¹⁶ James L. Cox, ‘Intuiting Religion: A Case for Preliminary Definitions’, in: Platvoet and Molendijk, *Pragmatics*, p. 269. The advantage of Cox’s terminology is that it avoids introducing transcendental categories into a general definition of religion. One of the difficulties of defining religion is how to denote the ‘superhuman’ or ‘supernatural’ aspect of religion without introducing typically Western concepts like transcendence and immateriality. Cf. Platvoet, p. 262 and Ter Borg, pp. 401–403 who still do this.

¹⁷ Contra *ibid.*, pp. 397–408 and Byrne, pp. 379–396.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 385.

Believers' metaphysical identities are intimately connected with their *moral* identities. One of our main uncertainties in life is how to act in truthful ways. Religion helps people to conquer this uncertainty by providing standards of behaviour. In this way, religion frames the moral identity of believers. Clifford Geertz quite beautifully connects this notion of moral identity to religion as providing metaphysical identity:

The heart of the religious perspective is the conviction that the values one holds are grounded in the inherent structure of reality, that between the way one ought to live and the way things really are there is an unbreakable inner connection. What sacred symbols do for those to whom they are sacred is to formulate an image of the world's construction and a program for human conduct that are mere reflexes of one another.¹⁹

Just as moral identity is connected with metaphysical identity, metaphysical and moral identity are related to *social* identity. Morality says what I should do, but it also teaches who the good people are, and who the bad. It says who ultimately deserves eternal blessing, or who need not fear the gods, the ancestors or the like. Our moral identity gives us the assurance that we as a group, who live according to the rules prescribed by the gods, are in various respects superior to those outside who live a godless life. Phrased in Marxist terms, we can say that religion frames the social identity for both the *dominant class* and the working class in society; religion is socially significant for *bourgeoisie* and *proletariat*. The dominant class may justify its excluding behaviour by appeal to religious principles, whereas the oppressed may derive hope for eschatological justice and salvation from their faith, or rather justify their liberating praxis on the basis of it (although Marx himself could not envisage the latter). Thus, religion plays a role in processes of social formation, even though it cannot be reduced to its social function, as I have shown above.²⁰ For moral and social identity, not only the belief systems of religious groups are important, but also the enactments of these views in rituals and forms of standardised behaviour.

What does this functional description of religion imply for the truth claims of religions? Theologians may value the fact that I do not want to reduce religion to social formation processes, but they still might feel that I present religious truth claims as the products of human beings' search for certainty in life, thereby implicitly suggesting that religion is some kind of wishful thinking. Therefore, the question is appropriate whether and how a functional description of religion affects its truth.

It might be argued that a functional approach does not in any sense affect the truth claims of religions. One could argue that it is a category mistake to argue

¹⁹ Clifford Geertz, *Islam Observed: Religious Developments in Morocco and Indonesia*, The Terry Lectures 37 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1968), p. 97. For a defence of religion as almost exclusively providing moral identity, see Dan Merkur, 'The Exemplary Life', in: Idinopulos and Wilson, *What is Religion?*, pp. 73–89, and Byrne, 'Squaring the Circle', pp. 379–396.

²⁰ Contra McCutcheon, 'Religion as Social Formation', p. 57: "Therefore, for me, on the re-descriptive level what we usually term religion turns out to be but one sub-species of larger socio-historical, ideological systems. The challenge, then, is to develop a coherent, theoretically-based vocabulary capable of placing what we generally term religion firmly within the social world, with no leftover residue that prompts supernaturalistic speculations."

that *because* religious truth claims about, for instance, the existence of God, or the nature of salvation, are rooted in the human search for identity and certainty, they are false. In ordinary life, many things we believe are intimately connected with our identity, but that does not make them false beliefs. For example, the fact that my belief that my wife loves me is intimately connected with my feeling certain in life, and with my identity, does not necessarily make it a false or questionable belief. Similarly, the fact that religious claims about the existence of God function in an identity constituting framework does not automatically imply that they are false, or less probably true. One could even reverse the argument. Suppose that religious truth claims had no connection at all to the human search for identity? Would it make sense for anybody to accept these claims? It is by virtue of their relevance to our real life situations that believers accept certain religious world views. That does not automatically imply that religious world views are subjective and therefore false. Nowadays, it is quite generally accepted that scientific theories, like religious systems, are always to some extent rooted in certain subjective aims and motives of the researchers. That, however, does not necessarily devalue the results of such research.²¹

However, upon closer examination, it seems that at least in some cases, the claims of functional accounts of religion affect the participants' claims. This is particularly true of those functional approaches that view the capability of handling contradictory convictions as the core of the religious phenomenon, trying to show that the attempt to reconcile the irreconcilable is at the heart of any religious system. It is clear that such a view excludes the possibility of accepting any religious claim as true in a traditional sense of the term. Such a functional account could of course accept that participants of a religion make truth claims, but it could not acknowledge their epistemic success. Hence, a theory of religion might exclude the possibility of truth claims in religion. More modest accounts of religion might accept the possibility of truth claims, but from an insider's perspective, they may still seem to be in conflict with religious claims. This has to do with the fact that in many cases, religious systems display a strong interest in hiding the identity related aspects of their faith behind the religious claims they make. These identity related aspects are just what a functional approach highlights. When religious believers claim that their faith is the result of revelation or of divine acts in the history of the universe, a functional account of their faith asks how such a claim constitutes the believer's identity, not only the metaphysical, but also the moral and social identity, whereas the participants insist as strongly as possible on the divine origin of their convictions. Likewise, for many religious communities, it is part of the game that the social dimension behind their views remains hidden in favour of claims on the basis of revelation or religious tradition. They may consider an approach to their religion that concentrates on the social dimension behind it harmful and as not doing justice to their intentions. In conclusion, we can say there is a *deconstructive* element in a functional approach to religion, which looks behind the superficial appearance of the religious arguments and inquires into the identity constituting motives that direct them.

²¹ Wentzel van Huyssteen, *Theology and the Justification of Faith: Constructing Theories in Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids, Mich: Eerdmans, 1989), pp. 128–131.

This raises the question, of course, whether this kind of functional approach can be helpful when trying to *serve* religious communities' interpretation of their canonical texts. Although I will come back to this issue in later chapters, I would like to say in advance that I think it is. A proper view of religious processes will be of invaluable aid when developing a hermeneutical theory because it will remind us of the many factors that play a role in religious interpretation processes. It will help when bringing the role of the reader into the hermeneutical scene and it will preclude an all too easy academic solution to the problem of religious interpretation by pointing to the complexity of the struggle for life in which it is rooted.

A final issue should be addressed before we enter the hermeneutic scene. It might be argued that my functional description of religion leaves no room for religion as a special phenomenon, to be distinguished from all other phenomena in reality. It simply counts religion among all identity constituting systems. To some extent, this is true. In many important respects, I think that religion functions just like non-religious – whatever that may be – identity shaping systems. However, that does not mean that we cannot speak about the distinguishing features of religion over against other identity related phenomena. I have argued that one of the main functions of religion is to provide people with a metaphysical identity. This metaphysical identity involves, among other things, determining human beings' relation to metaphysical objects that are more or less specific to religious ways of conceiving reality.²² Likewise, one could say that religion's way of dealing with one's actions towards metaphysical objects is specific to religion as an identity related phenomenon. In any case, it is important to notice that when I say that identity framing phenomena are *of the same kind*, I do not automatically say that they *share the same content*, or that they constitute one's identity in the same way. Hence, to construe a theory of religion as an identity shaping and framing system does not necessarily explain its specific nature away.

2.4 THE SPECIAL ROLE OF IDEOLOGY CRITIQUE IN HERMENEUTICS

In the previous section, I have argued that in trying to achieve an adequate view on religious processes, I need to go beyond the surface of religious claims about what happens in religious activities, and get a grasp of what happens from a functional perspective. This is also important when it comes to religious interpretations of canonical texts. Religious believers may claim that what they do is simply to read the 'plain sense' of their Scriptures, but in practice, they might be involved in a whole web of psychological and social processes that guide their reading of the text. As I have argued above, this kind of approach to what happens in interpretation implies a certain *deconstructive* element in describing interpretative practices. However, it is rather difficult to say how such a deconstructive approach to interpretation should proceed. How do we go beyond what interpreters themselves say about what they do without ending in an endless regress of suspicion without reasonable evidence? The most extensive treatment of these questions has been given in what has been called the 'ideology-critical interpretation of texts'.

²² Ter Borg, p. 404.

What is ideology? Again, I need not delve too deeply into this issue, but two aspects of defining ideology are especially important for our discussion. First, I need to elaborate a little on the question whether the term 'ideology' is necessarily pejorative. Second, I need to clarify the relation between ideology, and religion as defined above.

As to the first question, Terry Eagleton distinguishes between two or three main groups of thinkers on the question of defining ideology. On the one hand, Marxist thinkers tend to define ideology in terms of the traditional idea of 'false consciousness'. Here, ideology is equivalent to illusion. On the other hand, one finds more generally sociological definitions of ideology speaking about it in terms of 'frameworks of ideas'.²³ There is also a third group of thinkers – for instance Michel Foucault – who argue that the term 'ideology' must be entirely abandoned, since all our actions and ideas are ideological in nature.²⁴

Although Eagleton himself is a well known Marxist critic, he does not accept the definition of ideology as false consciousness. He argues that, for an ideology to be successful, there must be something true in it:

Deeply persistent beliefs have to be supported to some extent, however meagrely, by the world our practical activity discloses to us; and to believe that immense numbers of people would live and sometimes die in the name of ideas which were absolutely vacuous and absurd is to take up an unpleasantly demeaning attitude towards ordinary men and women.²⁵

An alternative to the definition of ideology as false consciousness is 'world picture' or 'framework of belief' as offered by thinkers that try to give a value free sociological definition of ideology. The problem with these definitions lies in their broad sweep. From this perspective, all thinking becomes ideology. In order to narrow the definition while still retaining its value free character, ideology needs to be limited to those world pictures or frameworks of belief that play an important role in the identity of a group. Some – mainly Marxist – thinkers thus associate ideology with the ideas of the dominant class in society. Ideology is, then always equivalent to maintaining dominance, exclusivity, and legitimation of power. However, not all socially related bodies of ideas are the products of dominant classes in societies. On the contrary, many systems of ideas with strong social implications are employed by what Marxists call the 'working class'—the marginalised in society.²⁶ They can survive in their peripheral status through legitimating their group identity by a system of ideas with social implications. Therefore, we can best define ideology as *a system of ideas with implications for the identity of a group in society*.

Finally, I should stress the notion of 'system' in connection with ideology. As I noted above, some thinkers argue that all our beliefs and practices are somehow ideological in nature. These thinkers eventually abandon the term altogether.

²³ Terry Eagleton, *Ideology: An Introduction* (London: Verso, 1991), p. 2. For an example of the second group, see Christopher Butler, *Interpretation, Deconstruction and Ideology: An Introduction to Some Current Issues in Literary Theory* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984), p. 95.

²⁴ Eagleton, *Ideology: An Introduction*, pp. 7–8.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 12.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 6; Butler, p. 100.

Against these views, it can be argued that two characteristics of ideology distinguish the phenomenon from beliefs in general. First, we ordinarily call beliefs ideological when they constitute some kind of *coherent system* of reflection upon the processes in society. One single statement with social implications does not constitute an ideology, although we might call it an ideological statement. Second, we normally speak of the ideology of a group when we focus on the power struggles that are *central* to a certain form of social life.²⁷

After having clarified the concept of ideology, I can now relate ideology to religion. As we have seen, ideology is mainly concerned with bodies of ideas and their social implications. I have argued that one of the important characteristics of religion is to provide people with a social identity, and in this sense, we can quite confidently say that religion has ideological aspects. However, I have also stressed that the function of religion is much broader than its function in social formation processes. This has important consequences for the value of ideology critique as a tool for understanding the processes at work in religious interpretations of Scripture. Ideology critique will focus, rather onesidedly, on the social aspects of religious interpretations, whereas an adequate description of the religious interpretation process requires a much more elaborate approach to the phenomenon at hand. I will come back to these issues in due course, but here, I will first discuss the methodological aspects of ideology critique and its use for describing the religious interpretation process.

2.5 IDEOLOGY CRITIQUE AS A HERMENEUTICAL TOOL

Nowadays, many kinds of criticism are classified by the general term 'ideology critique'. For example: some branches of sociological criticism, feminist criticism and liberation theology are called ideology critical. The roots of ideology critique lie in Marxist and (post-)structuralist hermeneutics.²⁸

The origins of ideology critique are closely related to these two developments in the history of interpretation.²⁹ Ideology critique has its origin in Marxism, and was, as such, primarily interested in arriving at the historical process of class struggle *behind the text*. In being historically oriented, early Marxist approaches to interpretation were very much in line with the mainstream nineteenth century historical approach to interpretation. With the rise of Russian formalism and French structuralism a wholly different approach to interpretation emerged. Structuralist and formalist approaches to interpretation did not focus primarily on the historical referents of texts but on the textual structure as a key to its meaning. In structuralism itself, this not only led to a focus on the meaning of the text as a linguistic system, but also initiated a search for the meaning of the text in terms of what is left out of it.

²⁷ Eagleton, *Ideology: An Introduction*, p. 8.

²⁸ For a survey of ideology-critical approaches in biblical studies, see Tina Pippin, 'Ideology, Ideological Criticism, and the Bible', *Currents in Research: Biblical Studies* 4 (1996), pp. 51–78.

²⁹ For this paragraph, I am indebted to David Penchansky, *The Betrayal of God: Ideological Conflict in Job*, Literary currents in biblical interpretation (Louisville, Ky: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1990), pp. 11–17.

At this point, the connection was made by Neo-Marxist critics between traditional Marxist criticism and (post-)structuralist literary theory. Two things were especially attractive for them in the structuralist movement. First, structuralism's focus upon the *hidden* in the text appealed to Marxist thinkers. Ideological criticism picked up the structuralist idea of interpreting a text in the light of what is left out, so as to focus on the hidden in the text as a mirror of the hidden in society. Second, Marxism drew attention to the social implications of the post-structuralist focus on the *gaps and inconsistencies* in the structure of the text.

This small sketch of the history of ideology critique makes clear that it approaches its central notion of contradiction from different angles. To some extent, it comes close to post-structuralist interpretation which tries to exploit the text by analysing its structural gaps and inconsistencies. However, ideology critique – especially in its traditional Marxist form – does not share two of the most important strands of post-structuralism. First, Marxism criticises the profoundly ahistorical tendency in (post-)structuralism. Conceived against the background of structuralism, a methodology of ideological criticism includes a structural analysis of the text, but from its Marxist background, it also includes a historical approach aiming at the analysis of the processes of social formation that appear in the writing of texts.³⁰ In order to arrive at such a social interpretation of texts, ideological criticism needs to broaden the methodology of (post-)structuralism, since the structure (or the gaps in it) does not automatically reveal the underlying social mechanisms. Information about the society in which the text originates is indispensable.³¹ In addition, some kind of framework is needed for locating the status of the text in a society. Is it the product of the dominant or of the working class? That is not always easy to determine. In an ideological interpretation of Psalm 72, David Jobling remarks that with texts as old as the Old Testament psalms, it is very difficult to ascertain the social locus of the texts if one does not want to revert to mere guesswork.³²

The second important difference between Marxism and post-structuralism is the latter's notion of 'free play'. For Derrida, deconstruction is not a technique or a method for warranting truthful interpretation, but a fundamental thesis about all language and writing.³³ It is fundamental to writing that it deconstructs itself. Deconstruction is not a limited technique for analysing certain kinds of texts that contain hidden contradictions, but rather a perspective on texts contradicting themselves by virtue of their being texts.³⁴ Most of the time, authors try to fix the meaning of their texts by giving an unambiguous account of their intentions, but the nature of texts as linguistically open entities brings it about that ambiguity is always slipping in somewhere. Due to this fundamental ambiguity of writing, texts do not have fixed meanings and Derrida refutes any attempt to fix the meaning of a text as metaphysics. In the end, this leads the interpreter

³⁰ Terry Eagleton, *Literary Theory: An Introduction*, 2nd edition (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996), pp. 94–107; Butler, p. 88.

³¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 4–7.

³² David Jobling, 'Deconstruction and the Political Analysis of Biblical Texts: A Jamesonian Reading of Psalm 72', in: David Jobling and Tina Pippin, editors, *Ideological Criticism of Biblical Texts*, Semeia 59 (Atlanta, Ga.: Scholars Press, 1992), p. 98.

³³ For my critique of the ontological and epistemological aspects of deconstruction, see chapter 7.

³⁴ Cf. Butler, pp. 66–76, who defends the former use of deconstruction as a technique.

to interpretation as ‘free play’. This means that any text might be illuminating for the understanding of another. Such an assumption goes back to structuralist linguistics. In structuralist linguistics, the meaning of a word is determined by the ways in which it differs from other words. For example, the meaning of the word ‘bug’ is partly determined by its being different from the word ‘dog’. This boils down to the fundamental indeterminacy of meaning, because the differences of a word from all others are unlimited.³⁵

The consequence of post-structuralist linguistics and hermeneutics that Marxist thinkers like Terry Eagleton worry about is that it might lead to a profoundly apolitical hermeneutics. If all perspectives on the text are arbitrary, political action against the ideological systems the texts represent is useless, because the ideology-critical perspective is only one of an unlimited number of others and the ideology-critical perspective also needs to be deconstructed. For this reason, ideology-critical approaches like Marxism, feminist criticism and liberation theology usually accept deconstruction as a tool for revealing the ideological aspects of the text, but usually hesitate to accept the presuppositions about the nature of the text behind it.³⁶

So far, I have tried to clarify the multi-faceted character of ideology critique as it has been practised hitherto. Let me now illustrate and discuss ideological criticism by considering Fredric Jameson’s proposal offered in his *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act*, which has come to be widely used in theological ideology critique.³⁷ Jameson distinguishes between three steps or horizons in ideology critique.³⁸ In the first step, the interpreter concentrates on the text as literary object, investigating the literary structure of the text:

The starting point will be an immanent description of the formal and structural peculiarities of this body [of] art; yet it must be a description already prepared and oriented toward transcending the purely formalistic, a movement which is achieved not by abandoning the formal level for something extrinsic to it—such as some inertly social “content”—but rather immanently, by construing purely formal patterns as a symbolic enactment of the social within the formal and the aesthetic.³⁹

In this first move, particular attention should be paid to the contradictions in the text, which means that the formal and structural tensions, breaks and gaps in a work of art are analysed. The basic assumption behind this kind of interpretation is that, from the outset, any kind of writing is to be conceived as a socially symbolic act.⁴⁰

In the second move, the attention of the interpreter shifts from the structural embeddedness of the contradiction towards the process of social formation. For Jameson, a mere investigation of the social background of the text does not suffice. A text never has a simple one by one relationship to the social reality from which it

³⁵ Eagleton, *Literary Theory: An Introduction*, pp. 110–114.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 123–130; Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (London: Methuen, 1981), p. 82.

³⁷ Pippin, pp. 55–56.

³⁸ Jameson, pp. 74–76.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 77.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 79.

stems. Again, resolving the contradiction is the central task of the interpreter and it is even the litmus test for a successful interpretation from a Marxist perspective.⁴¹ What the ideology-critical reader should do is somehow to approach the process of social formation from its textual representation in the contradictions of the text. The idea is that although most of the time, the writing of texts is *intended* to hide its social roots, it nevertheless, by virtue of this hiding, reveals it.

For Jameson and many other Marxist thinkers, approaching the process of social formation is always approaching a fundamentally *dichotomous* relationship.⁴² In other words, the process of social formation that becomes apparent by analysing the contradiction of the text is always a bipolar process. The relationship in social formation is always a relation between the dominant and the working class. The Marxist interpreter rewrites the text in the second move as a product of the ideological confrontation of these classes. This act of rewriting requires a systematic undermining of the illusion of autonomy and isolation of the text. It asks for hearing the marginalised whose voices the hegemonic class tried to ignore when writing the text. By doing this, the interpreter is also able to reconstruct the text as a product of the hegemonic class in the light of its proper social context.⁴³

In her final move, the Marxist interpreter rewrites the text as part of what Marxism called the *mode of production*. The social process behind the text, and the text as symbolic act of that process, are examples of a meta-historical process of class struggle as modes of production.⁴⁴ In traditional Marxism, these modes of production were conceived as diachronic stages in history on the move towards communism. Jameson agrees with Marxism's critics by admitting that this all too Hegelian conception of history is untenable. He rather opts for an analysis of the text in the light of what he calls 'cultural revolutions'. It is to relate the text to the main cultural strands of the time which culminate in fundamental cultural revolutions. These cultural revolutions, in turn, introduce new processes of social formation.⁴⁵

I think the basic assumption behind Jameson's argument, i.e. the idea that texts are symbolic representations of historical processes, is important. Texts represent the personal, social, economic and political struggles in history and Jameson's hermeneutics offers methodological instruments to bring these struggles to the fore. It does so by its emphasis on the notion of contradiction. The idea that the conditions under which authors write come most prominently to the fore in the breaks and gaps in their texts is certainly worth considering. However, Jameson's approach nevertheless suffers from various problems.

First, Jameson overemphasises the exclusivity of the method. We have seen an example of it in his claim that for Marxism, interpretation only succeeds if it points out the contradictions in the text. Right at the start of his book, Jameson even goes as far as claiming that Marxism offers the final comprehensive method for interpretation.⁴⁶ Apart from the fact that such a contention will not

⁴¹ Jameson, pp. 80–81, 85.

⁴² *Ibid.*, pp. 83–84.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 85.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 89.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 90–95.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 19, 47.

persuade his critics, one may ask serious questions about its methodological value. As I have argued above, a merely social approach to religion does not suffice, and similarly, a merely social or political approach to interpretation does not suffice for an adequate account of religious interpretation of Scripture. This critique of Marxist hermeneutics is paralleled *inter alia* in, feminist hermeneutics. Feminist criticism objects to Marxism that it focuses only on political and economic processes of exclusion and dominance, but that, in doing so, it fails to see that there are many other dichotomous relationships of oppression in society, for example relationships of gender and race. For this reason, feminist criticism broadens the Marxist perspective by focusing on all kinds of social contradiction and processes of marginalisation in society.

Furthermore, we need to broaden Jameson's idea of symbolic representation of social processes to symbolic representation of identity related processes. Not only does an act of writing reflect the social conflicts, but it also reflects the search for metaphysical and moral identity, and it is very important for the interpreter to recognise these functional aspects of an act of writing. For example, in chapter 4 on Calvin's interpretation of Job, I show how Calvin's approach to the speeches of Job is ambiguous. On the one hand, he affirms many of Job's statements as expressions of a pious mind. On the other hand, he sometimes suddenly criticises Job's laments because they seem to accuse God of evil. This ambiguity in Calvin's sermons represents his struggle with the suffering of the righteous in his own life and context. On the one hand, Calvin takes evil and suffering completely serious. On the other hand, he must give the existence of evil a place in a universe where God never loses control. At the same time, the ambiguity in Calvin's interpretation of Job is closely related to moral and social identity, because his criticism of Job's laments is aimed to teach his audience patience and obedience in the midst of suffering, and plays a role in the creation and maintenance of a stable society. In chapter 6, I follow a similar line of argument in the case of Gutiérrez's view of Job. Gutiérrez's attempt to do justice to both the boisterous laments of Job and the exhortative speeches of God reflects his wrestling with the problem of suffering in his own context. On the one hand, an act of liberation is necessary to subvert the evil power structures of Latin American society. On the other hand, the ultimate way to cope with suffering lies in the faithful surrender to God's just government. The three identity constituting functions of religion are symbolically represented by the tensions in these interpretations of Job.

A *second* problem of Jameson's approach is the fact that his proposal is quite one-sidedly rooted in structuralist methodology. Jameson proposes to proceed from a formal structural analysis of the contradictions in the text to the processes of social formation behind it. This presupposes that a structural approach to the text is the one and only key to the social formation process. Thus, the value of structural criticism seems to be exaggerated. A structural approach may be a key to the meaning of a text if the text is well structured, for example in poetic texts, or literary texts, but it seems much less useful when the text lacks a clear structure. Moreover, a structural approach is of little value for non-textual interpretations. In chapter 5, I will deal with Lasso's musical interpretation of the book of Job. How does one proceed from the formal structural contradictions – whatever these may be in music – towards the social formation processes behind it? Although the

strictly structural approach to the notion of contradiction is certainly attractive, we need to broaden it for the sake of avoiding an oversimplification of the interpretive process.

Finally, the notion of contradiction itself is a problem in Jameson's approach. If it is more than merely a structural problem, as I have argued above, what exactly is it, and is it present in every text we read? As to the question of whether it is always present, David Penchansky, who follows Jameson in many respects in his ideology critical reading of Job, moderates precisely this claim of Jameson's. Whereas Jameson claims that interpretation is only successful when the interpreter arrives at the contradiction of the text, Penchansky says that "A more adequate approach⁴⁷ [to interpretation] would presume that there are *some texts* that resist any attempt at harmonisation."⁴⁸

As to how the notion of 'contradiction' might function in interpretive practice, I return to Jameson's distinction between the three interpretive horizons. Within the *textual* horizon, searching for contradictions means to investigate the formal but also the material aspects of the text in the light of their being symbolic acts of the human being in search of identity. By focusing on the breaks and gaps, the interpreter tries to get an idea of the different identity related aspects of the text. Hence, one may find breaks and gaps in the structure of the text, but one may also find that the content of the text is significantly inconsistent. The author may show in passing to be aware of an important counter-argument to his view, but dislikes discussing it and therefore pays little attention to it. All these kinds of 'contradictions' are hints to the effect that the text is a symbolic enactment of identity formation processes.

The notion of contradiction is more difficult to construe in relation to the *second* horizon, the process of social formation. This horizon should be broadened in the direction of identity formation processes. Gaps and breaks in the text cannot represent social formation processes only but also processes of coming to terms with one's place in the world, the structure of the universe, and the development of systems of correct behaviour. In this way, the whole Marxist concept of contradiction is blown up, but that need not be a problem. First, the Marxist concept is always concerned with a *social* contradiction, and secondly, this contradiction is always a *dichotomous relationship* between the dominant and the laboring class in society. I have already discussed broadening the social character of Marxist thinking, so let me consider the second consequence and ask whether the idea of contradiction as a dichotomous relationship is useful in connection with religion as an identity shaping and framing system of beliefs and practices. The idea of a dichotomous relation is useful in the sense that it provides the interpreter with the valuable insight that most of the time – if not always – a certain identity shaping and framing proposal is more or less explicitly directed *against* a competing proposal. If it is part of the author's strategy to present only his own view and underplay others, taking the other side of the dichotomy into account can reveal the identity related roots of the text.

It must be stressed, however, that one should not oversimplify reality by

⁴⁷ i.e.: than a harmonising approach, PMW.

⁴⁸ Penchansky, pp. 9–10, my italics.

suggesting that any social or identity related formation process is limited to only *two* options, which the term ‘dichotomous’ might suggest. In identity related formation processes—social identity included, various competing views are often available. In society, we have not only a dominant class and a laboring class, but also a middle class, or even a lower and an upper middle class etcetera. The notion of a dichotomous relationship may nevertheless function as a hermeneutical device that brings the ‘other’ of the text into focus.

Finally, we should ask what ‘contradiction’ could mean in connection with the great cultural revolutions in history about which Jameson speaks when dealing with the *third* horizon. As we have seen above, Jameson is well aware of the danger of the notion of contradiction in this connection. One would all too easily interpret the whole of human history in terms of one dichotomous relationship, while leaving out all the others. Three out of four of my case studies are rooted in great cultural revolutions. Calvin and Lasso have their origins in the Renaissance period, and Gutiérrez writes from the perspective of a rapidly developing Latin American context in the second half of the twentieth century. To begin with the latter, Gutiérrez most evidently and consciously writes in response to the cultural revolution of his time. The dichotomy mentioned above between a subversion of the oppressive structures of society on the one hand, and the faithful surrender to God’s just government on the other marks the fundamental dichotomy between subversion and persistence in Latin American society. In Calvin and Lasso, we see the dichotomy between freedom and constraint, between chaos and order, reflected in the way they create room for human individuality and freedom on the one hand, and submit the human soul to a completely sovereign God on the other.

2.6 FOLLOWING CHAPTERS

In the following chapters, I will explore the exegesis of Job through the centuries as an example of the interpretation of a sacred text amidst changing contexts. I will approach the book of Job by considering four case studies, rather than providing a more or less comprehensive survey of Joban exegesis. No doubt, such a comprehensive survey would exceed the scope of the present study.⁴⁹ As we have seen in the present chapter, by studying the exegesis of Job, I hope to arrive at an adequate view of various factors that influence the meaning acquired by a sacred text like the Bible in different contexts, and to explore the influences of the social and cultural contexts on the process of interpretation.

Several considerations are especially important for me in this respect. First, I want to study exegeses of Job *from multiple religious and cultural traditions*. This is quite obvious given the aim of my investigation. Therefore, the reader will find a Jewish case study, Western as well as non-Western, and Protestant as well as Roman Catholic perspectives on Job. Second, I want to study the history of Job on the basis of *different literary genres*. One could all too easily concentrate

⁴⁹ Cf. Clines’s bibliographical survey: David J.A. Clines, *Job 1–20*, Word Biblical Commentary 17 (Dallas, Texas: Word Books, 1989).

on what happens in academic commentaries, while neglecting other ways in which the interpretation of Job comes to expression. For this reason, the reader will find a musical case study besides the case studies from written theological sources. Finally, I want to pay significant attention to 'lay' perspectives on Job. Many histories of exegesis concentrate one-sidedly on interpretations of the sacred texts by what one could call the 'religious specialists'. In principle, this is a valuable thing to do, but the risk is that one forgets that most exegesis is carried out by ordinary people. Moreover, most of the time, specialists' interpretations are distanced from the basic religious commitment the interpreters have—and often for good reasons, as I will show in chapter 9. Consequently, academic exegesis is not representative of the way in which religious believers interpret their Scriptures. Of course, that phenomenon is itself interesting for the study of hermeneutics, but I prefer to concentrate on interpretations of Job that are more or less distant from the academy.

The first case study, described in the next chapter, is the *Testament of Job*, a pseudepigraph written somewhere in between 100 BCE and 100 CE. It is a Jewish text, which is, in fact, not a commentary, but rather a paraphrase of the story of Job. It contains many references to the Septuagint text of the book of Job and should, therefore be understood as an interpretation of it.

Subsequently, I skip a huge part of the history of Joban exegesis and move on to John Calvin's sixteenth century sermons on Job. Although Calvin might be seen as an academic theologian of his time, his sermons on Job are clearly part of his pastoral work. They appeared originally in French in the year 1563, followed by reprints in 1569 and 1611. In 1574, an English translation appeared which was reprinted in 1580 and 1584. Hence, one can confidently say that these sermons rapidly became popular among French and English protestants during the sixteenth century.

So far, both case studies are textual and theological. Two additional phenomena are added by the third case: Orlando di Lasso's *Sacrae lectiones ex propheta Job*, published in 1560. This interpretation is not only textual, but also liturgical and musical. Although he lived in strikingly different social and economic circumstances, Lasso was a contemporary of Calvin, and the first version of the *Lectiones* appeared only two years before the publication of the *Sermons*. Lasso's music is a precious example of late Renaissance polyphony which pays special attention to moving the audience's mind and emotions with the 'rhetoric' of the music.

The final example is from theology again. Gustavo Gutiérrez's liberation perspective on Job. Although of Latin American origin, Gutiérrez's study reflects a profound education in Western critical exegesis of Job, and it is therefore all the more interesting to see how his twentieth-century Western academic training was transformed into his liberation perspective.

II

Perspectives on Job

The Testament of Job

3.1 INTRODUCTION

In this first case study, I will investigate one of the earliest extensive interpretations of the canonical book of Job. It is a folkloristic retelling of the story of Job in the style of Jewish haggada.¹ The genre is that of the Jewish testament literature of the Second Temple period. All the figures of the canonical Job are there: Job, his wife, his children, and his friends, but all of them are portrayed from a new perspective. The text is fascinating in that it consists of a mixture of rather simplistic storytelling and beautiful narrative and poetic art. This makes the text entertaining and sometimes humorous.

3.2 STORY

Although the *Testament of Job* (*TJ*, below) is clearly an interpretation of the *Biblical book of Job* (*BJ*, below), it is so much a story of its own that it is worth telling that story before comparing it to *BJ*. Telling the story gives readers the opportunity to get a taste of the character of *TJ* over against that of *BJ*.

When the story opens, Job, having fallen ill, calls his sons and daughters to give them his final instructions and exhortations. He introduces himself, his wife and children in the following way:

I am your father Job, engaged in endurance. But you are a chosen and honored race from the seed of Jacob, the father of your mother. For I am *from the sons of Esau*, the brother of Jacob, of whom is your mother Dinah, from whom I begot you. (My former wife died with the other ten children in a bitter death.) (1, 5–6)²

Then, Job begins to tell the story of his suffering. Job is an Egyptian king who lives near a temple in which an idol is worshipped. He wonders whether the god venerated in the temple is the true God. One a night, a voice in a very bright

¹ For a recent survey of available literature, see A. Lehnardt, *Bibliographie zu den Jüdischen Schriften aus hellenistisch-römischer Zeit*, *Jüdische Schriften aus hellenistisch-römischer Zeit* 6.2 (Gütersloher: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 1999), pp. 275–278.

² All quotations from *TJ* have been taken from Rudolf P. Spittler, 'Testament of Job', in: J.H. Charlesworth, editor, *Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, volume I (Garden City, New York etc.: Doubleday, 1983), pp. 829–868.

light appears, telling Job that the idol worshipped in the temple is the devil, whereupon Job asks the voice whether God would give him authority to destroy the temple: "Who is there to forbid me, since I rule this region?" (III, 7) The Lord grants authority to Job, but the light warns him that destroying the temple of Satan would raise a battle with Satan. Satan will bring many plagues upon Job, although Satan will not be allowed to take his life. If Job endures, however, the light promises him that he will receive twice of all that he will have lost. Finally, Job will rise again in the resurrection.

"For you will be like a sparring athlete, both enduring pains and winning the crown. Then will you know that the Lord is just, true, and strong, giving strength to his elect ones." And I, my little children, replied to him, "Till death I will endure: I will not step back at all." After I had been sealed by the angel when he left me, my little children, then—having arisen the next night—I took fifty youths with me, struck off for the temple of the idol, and levelled it to the ground. And so I withdrew into my house, having ordered the doors to be secured. (IV, 10–V, 3)

Now, the battle between Job and Satan begins. First, Satan disguises himself as a beggar, saying to the doorman that he wants to meet Job, upon which Job answers that he has no time. Satan returns and asks the doorman for a piece of bread. Again, Job sees through Satan's trick and gives the doorman a burnt loaf of bread. Then, an episode follows which nicely illustrates the entertaining way in which the *Testament* is written:

Then the doorman, ashamed to give him the burnt and ashen loaf of bread (for she did not know he was Satan), took the good loaf of her own and gave it to him. And when he received it and knew what had occurred he said to the girl, "Off with you, evil servant. Bring the loaf of bread given you to be given to me." The girl wept with deep grief, saying, "Truly, you well say I am an evil servant. For if I were not, I would have done just as it was assigned to me by my master." And when she returned, she brought him the burnt loaf of bread, saying to him, "Thus says my lord, 'You shall no longer eat from my loaves at all, for I have been estranged from you. Yet I have given you this loaf of bread in order that I may not be accused of providing nothing to a begging enemy.'" When he heard these things, Satan sent the girl back to me saying, "As this loaf of bread is wholly burnt, so shall I do to your body also. For within the hour, I will depart and devastate you." And I replied to him, "Do what you will. For if you intend to bring anything on me, I am prepared to undergo whatever you inflict." (VII, 5–13)

The reader will have noticed the ambiguity of good and evil which is skillfully interwoven in this passage. Of course, Satan is eager to carry out his threat.

In the next chapters, an extensive description of Job's wealth follows, which is put entirely in terms of his benevolence to the poor. Job used his enormous amounts of cattle for serving the poor. He even lent his money to strange foreigners who promised to do business with it, aiming to give the money earned to the poor.

This description of Job's wealth, benevolence and piety is followed by Satan's depriving Job of his possessions, his children and, finally, his health. When Job sees the house with his children being destroyed, he gives an elaborate account

of his situation, which culminates in a quotation from *BJ* which is most fitting for the purpose of the author of the Testament:

I was unable to utter a thing; for I was exhausted—as a woman numbed in her pelvic region by the magnitude of birth pangs—remembering most of all the battle foretold by the Lord through his angel and the songs of victory which had been told to me. And I became as one wishing to enter a certain city to discover its wealth and gain a portion of its splendor, and as one embarked with cargo in a seagoing ship. Seeing at mid-ocean the third wave and the opposition of the wind, he threw the cargo into the sea, saying, “I am willing to lose everything in order to enter this city so that I might gain both the ship and things better than the payload.” Thus, I also considered my goods as nothing compared to the city about which the angel spoke to me. When the final messenger came and showed me the loss of my children, I was deeply disturbed. And I tore my garments, saying to the one who brought the report, “How were you spared?” And then when I understood what had happened I cried aloud, saying, “*The Lord gave, the Lord took away. As it seemed good to the Lord, so it has happened. Blessed be the name of the Lord!*” (xviii, 4–xix, 4)

A new scene then opens with Job’s first wife called Sitidos in the central role.³ As Job has lost all his possessions, his wife becomes the maidservant of a nobleman in order to bring bread to Job.⁴ When Sitidos goes to on the market for bread Satan disguises himself as one who sells bread. Satan asks for money, upon which Sitidos answers that she has none and begs for mercy because of all the evils that have befallen her. But Satan, says:

“Unless you deserved the evils, you would not have received them in return. Now then if you have no money at hand, offer me the hair of your head and take three loaves of bread. Perhaps you will be able to live for three more days.” Then she said to herself, “What good is the hair of my head compared to my hungry husband?” And so, showing disdain for her hair, she said to him, “Go ahead, take it.” Then he took scissors, sheared off the hair of her head, and gave her three loaves, while all were looking on. When she got the loaves, she came and brought them to me. Satan followed her along the road, walking stealthily, and leading her heart astray. (xxiii, 6–11)

Being in deep despair, Sitidos laments her lot in one of the laments that are characteristic of the *Testament*, followed by a lament *about* her which is considered by some scholars as a later addition. Job, however, does not show any weakness after this lament. He holds fast in the battle with Satan and calls him to stop hiding himself behind his wife: “Does a lion show his strength in a cage? Does a fledgling take flight when it is in a basket? Come out and fight!” (xxvii, 1) Satan comes out, but he is weeping, describing his defeat in the battle in an imaginative way:

³ Spittler translates the Greek Σιτίδος with ‘Sitis as a derivation of ‘Ausitis’, the LXX translation of biblical Job’s home city: Spittler, ‘Testament of Job’, p. 850. Van der Horst, however, argues convincingly that the original spelling is correct: Pieter W. van der Horst, ‘Images of Women in the Testament of Job’, in: Michael A. Knibb and Pieter W. van der Horst, editors, *Studies on the Testament of Job*, Monograph series / Society for New Testament Studies 66 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), pp. 96–97.

⁴ Notice that bread is an important theme in the *Testament*. Satan asks Job for bread, Job provides bread for the poor, Sitidos even allows her hair to be cut off so as to get a loaf of bread from Satan, who has disguised himself as someone selling bread.

“Look, Job, I am weary and I withdraw from you, even though you are flesh and I a spirit. You suffer a plague, but I am in deep distress. I became like one athlete wrestling another, and one pinned the other. The upper one silenced the lower one, by filling his mouth with sand and bruising his limbs. But because he showed endurance and did not grow weary, at the end the upper one cried out in defeat. So you also, Job, were the one below and in a plague, but you conquered my wrestling tactics which I brought on you.” (xxvii, 2–5)

One might think that after Satan’s loss of the battle, the story would be over, but the scene switches again to Job’s conversation with the friends, portrayed, following the LXX version of *BJ*, as three kings. These kings come to see Job, and the most important elements in their performance in *TJ* are, first, that they ask Job whether he really is Job and second, the fact that – unlike Job – they do not show any patience and endurance in the battle with suffering and evil; rather they think about how rich and virtuous Job had been before all the evils came upon him. This is immediately clear from Eliphaz’s speech, which is introduced by Eliphaz saying: “Let us approach him and question him carefully to see if it is really he himself or not.” (xxxi, 1) After three days, during which the kings used huge amounts of incense to enable themselves to draw near to Job, Eliphaz repeats his amazement about this man being the former king Job. He cries loudly and laments Job’s lot while the other kings sing in response. From the lament, it is clear that Eliphaz’ only concern is about Job’s past wealth; he fails to encourage Job in his present condition:

Are you the one who established the sixty tables set for the poor?
Now where is the splendor of your throne? (xxxii, 7)

Are you Job, the one who had vast splendor?
Now where is the splendor of your throne? (xxxii, 12)

In replying, Job shows his radically different attitude by answering:

My throne is in the upper world, and its splendor and majesty comes
from the right hand of the Father.

The whole world shall pass away and its splendor shall fade. And those
who heed it shall share in its overthrow.

But my throne is in the holy land, and its splendor is in the world of the
changeless one. (xxxiii, 3–5)

Eliphaz is annoyed by this response, and he proposes to the other kings that they leave. Bildad, however, reminds Eliphaz of how he felt when he was ill, and asks for patience with Job. He proceeds to investigate Job’s real condition. Bildad turns out to be primarily interested in the question whether Job is ‘emotionally disturbed’ and he inquires whether this is so by asking Job whether “his heart is untroubled”. Job repeats that his heart is fixed on heavenly concerns. Then, an interesting conversation follows:

So he [Bildad] said, “In whom is your hope?” And I said, “In the God who lives.” And again he said to me, “Who destroyed your goods or inflicted you with these plagues?” And I said, “God.” And again he replied and said, “Do

you hope upon God? Then how do you reckon him to be unfair by inflicting you with all these plagues or destroying your goods? If he were to give and then take away, it would actually be better for him not to have given anything. [...] Or who will ever understand the deep things of the Lord and his wisdom? Who dares to ascribe to the Lord an injustice? [...] And again I say to you, if you are sound of mind and have your wits about you, tell me why we see the sun on the one hand rising in the east and setting in the west, and again when we get up early we find it rising again in the east? Explain these things to me if you are the servant of God." (xxxvii, 1–8)

Job, however, has a tricky – and amusing – question for Bildad in order to show that his heart is sound:

Now then, so you may know that my heart is sound, here is my question for you: Food enters the mouth, then water is drunk through the same mouth and sent into the same throat. But whenever the two reach the latrine, they are separated from each other. Who divides them? (xxxviii, 3)

Sophar, the third king, does not say very much in *TJ*. He offers Job the physicians of the three kingdoms of his and the other two friends, upon which Job answers that he has his healing from the Lord.

After the appearance of the three friends, Sitidos makes her final entrance on the scene, weeping and asking the friends whether they remember her and her previous wealth. The friends make a great lament for her and Eliphaz seizes his purple robe and throws it about her. Sitidos asks the friends to order their soldiers to search for the corpses of her children in the ruins, so that they may be buried as a memorial to them. Job, however, forbids this because, he says, his children are in heaven. When the friends and his wife ask him how that is possible, he answers:

"Lift me up so I can stand erect." And they lifted me up, supporting my arms on each side. And then when I had stood up, I sang praises to the Father. And after the prayer I said to them, "Look up with your eyes to the east and see my children crowned with the splendor of the heavenly one." And when she saw that, Sitidos my wife fell to the ground worshipping and said, "Now I know that I have a memorial with the Lord. So I shall arise and return to the city and nap awhile and then refresh myself before the duties of my servitude." And when she left for the city she went to the cow shed of her oxen, which had been confiscated by the rulers whom she served. And she lay down near a certain manger and died in good spirits. (xxxix, 1–6)

When her master finds her in the fields, she is buried near the ruins of the house of her children, and the poor of the city make a special lament for her.

Up to this point in the story, one of the friends, Elihu has been absent. He is the only one in *TJ*, who is said to have spoken insulting words against Job, inspired by Satan. *TJ* avoids mentioning these insulting words by referring to "The Miscellanies of Eliphaz". Subsequently, the Lord appears to Job through a hurricane and clouds, showing Job that Elihu was not human but a beast. Furthermore, the Lord says to the other three friends that they have sinned because they have not spoken truly about his servant Job. The Lord orders the friends to bring sacrifices so that Job may offer these for them, upon which the Lord forgives

them their sins. A hymn follows in which Eliphaz sings about the lot of Elihu and, more generally, the lot of the godless.

The appearance of the Lord is immediately followed by Job's restoration. In *TJ*, this restoration is connected with Job's beneficial acts towards the poor. All his friends come to ask him what to do, whereupon he answers that they should do well to the poor: "Let each one give me a lamb for the clothing of the poor who are naked." (xxxiv, 4) Then, all his friends bring a lamb and a gold coin and the Lord blesses all the goods he owns, and doubles his estate.

After Job's restoration, we enter the final scene of the *Testament*, a scene that some scholars have considered a later (Montanist) addition because of the peculiar mysticist imagery found in it.⁵ Job opens the scene by addressing his children with a final exhortation:

And now, my children, behold I am dying. Above all, do not forget the Lord. Do good to the poor. Do not overlook the helpless. Do not take to yourselves wives from strangers. Look, my children, I am dividing among you everything that is mine, so each one may have unrestricted control over his own share. (xxxv, 1-4)

The estate is brought forth for distribution among the seven sons only, whereupon the three daughters are grieved:

"Our father, sir, are we not also your children? Why then did you not give us some of your goods?" But Job said to the females, "Do not be troubled, my daughters: I have not forgotten you. I have already designated for you an inheritance better than that of your seven brothers" (xxxvi, 2)

Job calls his daughter Hemera to bring three golden boxes. The three golden boxes contain three multicoloured cords:

And he opened them and brought out three multicolored cords whose appearance was such that no man could describe, since they were not from earth but from heaven, shimmering with fiery sparks like the rays of the sun. And he gave each one a cord, saying, "Place these about our breast, so it may go well with you all the days of your life." (xxxvi, 7-9)

The daughter Kassia, however, takes a rational approach. She asks: "Father, is this the inheritance which you said was better than that of our brothers? Who has any use for these unusual cords? We cannot gain a living from them, can we?" (xxxvii, 1). Job tells his daughters that they will not only live from them, but also be led into a better world, to live in the heavens. When the daughters wrap the cords around them, they receive a new heart that is no longer bound to earthly things, and they begin to sing hymns in the language of the angels.

After this, a completely new figure appears on the scene: Nereus, Job's brother, who records most of the hymns sung by the daughters. Job falls ill and after three days, he sees those coming for his soul. He gives musical instruments to his daughters so that they may welcome them. Finally, after Job's death, Nereus, the seven sons, along with all the poor, orphans and all the helpless lament the passing of Job in heartrending terms, and bury him after three days.

⁵ See below, section 3.3.

3.3 TEXT, COMPOSITION, AND ORIGIN

Only six copies of the text of *TJ* survived. Four are medieval copies written in Greek. One is an Old Slavonic copy. These copies contain – as far as we know – the full text of *TJ*. In addition, we have an incomplete copy of the text on a Coptic papyrus which is probably from the fifth century CE. Two critical editions have been prepared during the sixties and seventies of the twentieth century. Brock prepared an edition on the basis of the ‘P’ manuscript from the National Library in Paris.⁶ Kraft and others prepared an edition which primarily uses the ‘S’ (Sicilian) and ‘V’ (Vatican) manuscripts.⁷ A critical eclectic edition based upon all available witnesses is not yet available. Although the differences between the available witnesses are numerous, they are usually of rather minor relevance, and affect neither the main story line nor the central message of the Testament.⁸

TJ generally conforms to the characteristics of the testament genre of the Second Temple period. Spittler mentions the following characteristics of Jewish testament literature:

- (1) an ill father, (2) near death, (3) and on his bed, (4) calls his sons, (5) disposes of his goods and (6) issues a forecast of events to come. The father (7) dies and (8) a lamentation ensues.⁹

TJ contains all of these elements. Of the other Jewish testaments, *TJ* most closely resembles the *Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs*. Although *TJ* clearly embodies the characteristics of the testament genre, it also shows important deviations from it. The most important is that in *TJ*, story telling prevails over the ethical admonitions which usually make up the core of a testament. This places it somewhere between a testament and a haggada. Because of its strong emphasis on story-telling in an almost scenic way, Schaller suggests the dramatic genre of tragedy as a possible background of *TJ*, although he immediately adds that we have no certainty that the *Testament* was ever performed as a drama.¹⁰

One of the most debated questions about *TJ* is its literary unity. The text contains numerous minor and some major tensions and inconsistencies. A minor one, for instance, is that in 19:1, Job says that the final messenger, who will relate the death of his children, is coming. Talking about a last messenger (ἔσχατος ἄγγελος) presupposes that other messengers have come earlier in the story, but there is no mention of this.¹¹ The most important problem is the relation between chapters 46–53 and the rest of the *Testament*. In the final part of the story, the daughters of Job play a prominent role and the author makes extensive use of miraculous and magical imagery. As we will see when discussing the origin of *TJ*,

⁶ S.P. Brock, editor, *Testamentum Iobi*, Pseudepigrapha Veteris Testamenti graece 2 (Leiden: Brill, 1967).

⁷ Robert A. Kraft et al., editors, *The Testament of Job According to the SV Text*, Texts and Translations 5: Pseudepigrapha Series 4 (Missoula, Montana: Society of Biblical Literature & Scholars' Press, 1974).

⁸ Spittler, 'Testament of Job', pp. 829–830; Berndt Schaller, *Das Testament Hiobs*, Jüdische Schriften aus hellenistisch-römischer Zeit 3 (Gütersloh: Mohn, 1979), pp. 316–318.

⁹ Spittler, 'Testament of Job', p. 831.

¹⁰ Schaller, *Das Testament Hiobs*, p. 313.

¹¹ For a comprehensive list of problems, cf. Berndt Schaller, 'Zur Komposition und Konzeption des Testaments Hiobs', in: Knibb and Van der Horst, *Studies on the Testament of Job*, pp. 75–79.

some have argued that this part is of a later date, and possibly of Montanist origin. However, there is an emerging consensus in recent scholarship on the unity of the present form of the text, although most scholars accept different sources behind the final form of the *Testament*. J.J. Collins was the first scholar who insisted on the compositional unity of the final form.¹² He defends the unity and coherence of the Testament by focusing on the main leitmotifs that bind the different parts of the text together. The most extensive treatment of the composition of *TJ* is given by Nicholls.¹³ Nicholls tries to trace the tradition history of the text back to four distinct sources. Finally, Schaller adopted a strictly textual approach to the compositional problems of *TJ*.¹⁴ On the one hand, he shows that the different parts of the text must have been intentionally connected to each other by the author or editor of the text.¹⁵ On the other hand, Schaller gives a detailed account of the numerous errors and tensions in the text.¹⁶ Schaller concludes that these errors and tensions throw serious doubt on the skill of the editor of the final form of *TJ*. He criticises Nicholls's distinction between four sources, concluding that on the basis of the present text of *TJ*, it is virtually impossible to delineate the different sources behind it with precision.¹⁷

Finally, the origin of *TJ* has been a debated issue in recent scholarship. In the early research, several scholars assumed a (partly) Christian origin of the Testament.¹⁸ Others proposed an origin among the Jewish sects of the Essenes or the Therapeutae.¹⁹ Spittler, in the introduction to his translation of the *Testament*, accepted the Jewish origin, possibly among the Therapeutae, but added a new hypothesis. He argued that chapters 46–53 are a later addition that possibly originates from the second century Christian sect of the Montanists. In his view, the Montanists would have added this part of the *Testament* to have a scriptural example of ecstatic prophecy.²⁰

Van der Horst argues, however, that we have no proof of either the origin among the Therapeutae or the addition of the last part of the Testament by the Montanists.²¹ Among his arguments against Spittler's are that Tertullian's familiarity with the *Testament* – one of the reasons why Spittler thinks of the Montanist sect as a possible origin – does not imply anything about Montanist origins. Furthermore, Spittler's main argument does not apply, because if it were correct, *TJ* would never have been considered a part of Scripture by the Montanists' contemporaries.²² Against the widespread hypothesis of an origin among the Therapeutae, he argues that the similarities between the *Testament's* contents

¹² J.J. Collins, 'Structure and Meaning in the Testament of Job', in: G. MacRae, editor, *Society of Biblical Literature: 1974 Seminar Papers* (Cambridge, Mass.: Society of Biblical Literature, 1974), pp. 35–52.

¹³ Peter H. Nicholls, *The Structure and Purpose of the Testament of Job* (1982).

¹⁴ Schaller, 'Zur Komposition und Konzeption', pp. 46–92.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 52–71.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 75–79.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 81–87.

¹⁸ Rudolf P. Spittler, 'The Testament of Job: A History of Research and Interpretation', in: Knibb and Van der Horst, *Studies on the Testament of Job*, pp. 12, 17.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 17–18.

²⁰ Spittler, 'Testament of Job', p. 834.

²¹ Cf. also Schaller, *Das Testament Hiobs*, pp. 308–309.

²² Van der Horst, pp. 107–109.

and Philo's description of the Therapeutae are too insignificant to base a theory about a Therapeutic origin on.²³ Van der Horst's conclusion is that we can be fairly certain about the Jewish character of *TJ*, but that we simply lack sufficient evidence to locate its origin more precisely.²⁴

3.4 MESSAGE AND RELATION TO THE BOOK OF JOB

I have summarised the contents of *TJ* almost completely without mentioning *BJ* because it is important to see that although *TJ* is a retelling of the canonical book of Job, it is a story in its own right. Once we have seen that, and have appreciated *TJ* on its own terms, we can go on to compare the two texts in order to see how *TJ* functions as an interpretation of *BJ*. An interesting way of comparing the two books has been offered by Christopher Begg in a recent article.²⁵ He investigates the relation between *TJ* and *BJ* by comparing the characters and their transformation in the two books.

Begg deals with God, Job, and Satan as an interconnected set of characters. Compared to *BJ*, God is much more in the background in the Testament. This is the case in many different respects. For example, in all cases where *BJ*'s God seems to harm Job in any way, the author of *TJ* replaces God with Satan. Furthermore, God does not speak to Job directly as in the whirlwind scene of *BJ* 38–41.²⁶ This shift from God's opposition to Job to Satan's battle with Job leads to a completely different portrayal of Job himself. In fact *TJ* elaborates only on the patient, wealthy and virtuous Job of the first chapters of *BJ*, leaving out all the later doubt and anger which might harm Job's image as a hero. The portrayal of Job as a hero is strengthened by letting him know why and on behalf of whom he suffers. He is, in fact, allowed to choose whether or not he will suffer, and he is given the promise of eternal recompense if he endures. Thus, it is much easier to endure for the Job of the *Testament* than for the Job of *BJ*.²⁷ As we have noticed already, Satan is much more important in *TJ* than in *BJ*. Nevertheless, the position of Satan before God in *TJ* is the same as in *BJ*, because he has to ask permission for all the evils he wants to do to Job. We could even say that his position in *TJ* is weaker than in *BJ*, because Job is portrayed as someone who sees through all Satan's tricks and eventually wins the battle with him.²⁸ By contrast, in *BJ* Job does not gain real insight into the nature of his predicament.

One of the aspects of *TJ* that has attracted quite a lot of attention is the role of women in it.²⁹ *TJ* extends the role of Job's first wife Sitidos and the daughters of

²³ Van der Horst, pp. 114–115.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 116.

²⁵ Christopher Begg, 'Comparing Characters: The Book of Job and the *Testament of Job*', in: W.A.M. Beuken, editor, *The Book of Job*, Bibliotheca ephemeridum theologiarum lovaniensium 114 (Leuven: Leuven University Press/Peeters, 1994), pp. 435–445.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 436.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 437–438.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 439–440.

²⁹ See, for instance, Van der Horst, 'Images', pp. 93–116; Susan R. Garrett, 'The "Weaker Sex" in the Testament of Job', *Journal of Biblical Literature* 112 (1993), pp. 55–70; Peter Machinist, 'Job's Daughters and Their Inheritance in the Testament of Job and Its Biblical Congeners', in: William G.

his second wife Dinah. Whereas *BJ* talks about Job's first wife in a negative way, in *TJ* she appears as a virtuous woman who does all she can to help Job in his miserable condition.³⁰ Nevertheless, in confrontation with Satan, she is shown to be easily deceivable, having little insight into the real nature of things.³¹ This is the main difference from the picture we get of the three daughters after Job's restoration. They are given garments through which they receive the heavenly insight that enabled Job to endure in his suffering. With this insight, they prove superior to Job's brother Nereus and his new sons, who all remain attached to the worldly regret about Job's death.³²

Finally, in comparing the characters in *BJ* and *TJ*, we find that, due to the thoroughly positive portrayal of Job's endurance in the latter, the position of the friends needed to be changed. In *TJ*, they receive quite a dull portrayal as somewhat stupid people who are only interested in worldly things. Only Elihu is an exception to this common picture of the friends. Whereas in *BJ*, it seems that Elihu's contribution is evaluated neutrally, in *TJ* he is explicitly described as one inspired by Satan.³³

One of the most obvious differences between the two accounts of the suffering of Job is, of course, the total absence of the discussion about theodicy in *TJ*. This moved Schaller to remark: "Das Theodizeeproblem wird gar nicht berührt."³⁴ This is true in the sense that the dialogues with the friends about the reason why Job is suffering are absent in *TJ*. In another sense, however, I would question whether the problem of evil is really absent from the *Testament*. The way in which the *Testament* deals with the problem of evil and the solution that it offers, is radically different from *BJ*. In *BJ*, the main topic of the book is the question of why Job suffers, a question that is given a series of answers of which, ultimately, none is wholly conclusive and satisfying—at least to modern readers. In *TJ*, however, no doubt is left concerning the reason for Job's suffering. The author does not simply leave out the dialogues, thus making the biblical Job fit better into the narrative form of the testament. Rather, by making clear for what purpose Job suffered, the *Testament* offers a popularised but coherent alternative to the intellectual and ambiguous approach to evil in *BJ*. The reason behind this might be that the author and the audience of *TJ* felt uneasy with the uncertainty about the cause of suffering suggested in *BJ*. Therefore, the author of *TJ* makes unambiguously clear who lets people suffer: Satan, who is ultimately under the control of God and of *people who suffer well*.

What suffering well amounts to is what the *Testament* wishes to show, thereby filling an important gap in *BJ*: how to live with suffering. The central theme of the *Testament* is Job's repeated admonition of endurance. This central theme of endurance is described in the *Testament* by three Greek terms (ὕπομονή, καρτερία, and μακροθυμία) that are all more or less synonyms for endurance. Although

Dever and J. Edward Wright, editors, *The Echoes of Many Texts: Reflections on Jewish and Christian Traditions*, Essays in Honor of Lou H. Silberman, Brown Judaic Studies 313 (Atlanta, Georgia: Scholars Press, 1997), pp. 67–80.

³⁰ Begg, pp. 440–441.

³¹ Van der Horst, pp. 99–101.

³² *Ibid.*, pp. 101–105.

³³ Begg, pp. 442–444.

³⁴ Schaller, *Das Testament Hiobs*, p. 315.

the terms are largely synonymous, Haas (1989) has tried to isolate the specific semantic fields in which each of the terms are used in the Testament.³⁵ He argues that the terms stand for three different aspects of enduring in suffering. Where ὑπομονή is used, endurance means to stand firm in the battle with Satan. The semantic field of ὑπομονή is a battle.³⁶ Where καρτερία is used, the semantic field is that of a *pancratation*, which is a specific kind of man-to-man fight in the arena. Here, endurance as καρτερία denotes the “tirelessness, stamina, stubbornness or toughness by which Job as an athlete takes the blows etc. of his opponent Satan in order to hold out against him.” The term καρτερία specifies the way in which one stands firm in the battle (ὑπομονή).³⁷ Finally, endurance as μακροθυμία denotes the patience by which one endures. This word is used, for instance, in the LXX for God’s long suffering in delaying his wrath or judgement.³⁸ Haas describes the Job of the *Testament* as a proselyte and interprets the three terms used for endurance as pointing to various aspects of the struggle of a proselyte in a hostile society.

If we compare this main theme of *TJ* with *BJ*, two issues come to the fore. First, we find that the *Testament* promotes a radically different attitude towards evil by personalising it in terms of the devil. Although the prologue of *BJ* shows that both God and Satan have their role in the suffering of Job, it evidently does not advise people to fight against them to get rid of evil. By shifting the responsibility for evil entirely onto the devil, *TJ* presents evil as something one can do battle against, and even conquer by standing firm. Therefore, the *Testament’s* admonition to persevere and be patient in suffering does not end up supporting a passive attitude towards evil.³⁹

Second, as we saw above, *TJ* removes much of the ambiguity of *BJ* by pointing out why Job had to suffer and how he had to cope with it from the very outset. On the one hand, we might see this is as an advantage of the *Testament* over the biblical account. On the other hand, it also makes *TJ* less open to fresh interpretations of evil and suffering than its biblical counterpart. *BJ* can be appreciated from a wide variety of perspectives precisely because its meaning is so ambiguous. This ambiguity gives readers the opportunity to read the text in a way fits their own interest. *TJ* resolves many of the ambiguities of *BJ*. Because of this, it was probably able to serve the religious community better in its own time. For other communities in different situations, however, the clearly demarcated message of the *Testament* might make it more difficult to apply this message to their own context.

Finally, a significant difference between both accounts of the story of Job is that in the biblical account suffering is, so to speak, a possibility. It is something that is not normal but can happen, and when it happens it should be possible to

³⁵ For another – disputable – interpretation of the three terms, see James Arthur Dumke, ‘The Suffering of the Righteous in Jewish Apocryphal Literature’, Ph.D thesis, Duke University (1980), p. 313.

³⁶ Cees Haas, ‘Job’s Perseverance in the Testament of Job’, in: Knibb and Van der Horst, *Studies on the Testament of Job*, pp. 118–119.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 125–128.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 128–129.

³⁹ Contra J.G. Schenderling and L. Cozijnsen, *I. Het testament van Job: een document van joodse vroomheid uit het begin van onze jaartelling. II. Het testament van Salomo: een document van joodse magie uit de eerste eeuwen van onze jaartelling*, Na de schriften 6 (Kampen: Kok, 1990), pp. 14–15.

give obvious reasons for it. The main problem of the biblical Job, then, is that in his case, he cannot see what these reasons are. One might say that the setting of Job is a context of privilege, in which evil is expected to be an exception to an otherwise happy life. This is radically different in the *Testament's* account of Job. The *Testament* takes the experience of evil for granted, and shows no surprise at the suffering of the righteous Job. Therefore, the *Testament* does not speculate about possible reasons for evil, but it suggests ways for dealing with it. If we look at the messages of the two Job narratives from this perspective, it might reveal something concerning the social setting of the documents. In the previous chapter, I argued that one of the tasks of hermeneutics is to locate the religious identity related aspects of interpretation, social identity being one of them. Although it is extremely difficult to locate the social positions of the texts because we know so little of the times and places of their origins, the comparison of their approaches to evil may give us some indication of their settings.

3.5 HERMENEUTICAL REFLECTION

The final question I need to discuss is this: How does *TJ* function as an interpretation of *BJ*? The first impression might be that it is a typical example of the fact that in many cases, readers are not at all interested in the historical meaning of a text. They do with the text, whatever they want to. However, on closer examination, this is not a fair judgement. In several respects, *TJ* is an ideal case for reflecting on the nature of religious interpretations of Scripture. It is too much of a story to allow the modern interpreter to project his own post-Enlightenment perspective onto it. We simply cannot say that *TJ* is meant as some sort of primitive pre-critical exegesis. Yet, *TJ* is in so many respects dependent on *BJ* that it challenges the reader to investigate in what sense it is an interpretation of the latter.

An important step in elucidating the hermeneutical mechanisms behind *TJ* is to recognise its 'midrashic' nature.⁴⁰ Peter Machinist has drawn attention to the midrashic character of the final chapters 46–53.⁴¹ According to Machinist, we should not read this part of *TJ* as a piece of sheer fantasy, but as a serious attempt to interpret a problem in biblical Job in the light of the whole of Scripture. The problem that the interpreter of *BJ* is faced with, is why the daughters of Job share the inheritance with the sons, which is very unusual in the Bible. On the one hand, the author of *TJ* solves this problem by alluding to another part of Scripture, the Pentateuch, which mentions the case of the daughters of Zelophahad, who came to Moses to ask whether they may receive the inheritance of their father so that their family's goods may not be lost. In a similar way, the author of *TJ* lets the daughters of Job ask for an inheritance.⁴² On the other hand, the author of *TJ*

⁴⁰ There is much debate in Jewish studies about the term 'midrash'. In recent studies – Boyarin's work for example – the term denotes a certain way of dealing with biblical texts. Others have rejected this loose way of using the term and propose to restrict it to one particular genre of Jewish exegesis. For an elaborate discussion of this problem, see Godelieve Teugels, *Midrasj in de bijbel of midrasj op de bijbel? Een exemplarische studie van "de verloving van Rebekka" (Gn 24) in de bijbel en de rabbijnse midrasj* (Leuven: Katholieke Universiteit Leuven, 1994).

⁴¹ Machinist, 'Job's Daughters', pp. 67–80.

⁴² *Ibid.*, pp. 70–75.

confirms existing social structures by not giving the daughters a material part of the inheritance. Rather, *TJ* gives the daughters a more desirable inheritance – in the eyes of its readers – namely, the possession of heavenly goods. The author tries to show that there is a biblical basis for this solution too, by referring to God’s command to Job in Job 38 and 40: “Arise, gird your loins like a man.”⁴³

Whether or not we agree with Machinist’s analysis, his work on the final chapters of *TJ* supplies several valuable insights into the hermeneutical principles behind the *Testament*. First, in the midrashic approach to Scripture, the interpreter concentrates on the gaps in the text. The haggada offered in *TJ* rests partly upon the fact that in the text of *BJ*, many things are ambiguous or left open and therefore require the readers’ interpretative activity to fill in the gaps. The midrashic interpreter is very sensitive to this need to fill. One can easily add more examples from other parts of *TJ*, such as the fact that in biblical Job almost nothing is said about what righteous actions Job performed to justify the reference to his piety, which gives the reader the opportunity to tell in more detail what these actions were. We could take the *Testament*’s extensive treatment of Job’s benevolence to the poor as a solution meant to fill this gap. Another example is the attention of the *Testament* to the figure of Sitidos. It tells us in detail in what respects she did well in helping her husband, and in what respects she failed under the trials of Satan. This might be seen as an answer to the ambiguous character of the references to Job’s wife in biblical Job.

The second valuable insight that Machinist’s analysis offers is that, in the case of the inheritance of the daughters, the author of *TJ* uses Scriptural material – inside or outside *BJ* – to fill in the gap. This is a common feature of midrashic exegesis. In *TJ*, however, it is not so prominent as in some forms of later rabbinical midrash. Jacob Neusner makes a distinction between two kinds of rabbinical haggadic midrash.⁴⁴ One deals with scriptural heroes; the other with sages. He argues that one of the main differences between the two is that those that deal with a scriptural hero make extensive use of scriptural material throughout the narrative, whereas those that deal with sages quite naturally do not.⁴⁵ Neusner also discusses midrashim that seem to fall somewhere between stories about a scriptural hero and those that deal with a sage, such as midrashim about Moses.⁴⁶ *TJ* seems to fit into this category. Sometimes, we discern allusions to biblical stories behind a case of gap filling. *TJ*, for instance, seems to fill in the gap on what the word ‘God fearing’ of biblical Job 1:1 could mean. It tells us how Job destroyed the temple of an idol near his home. There is a biblical parallel to this story in Judges 6, where the judge Gideon destroys a sanctuary of Baal after an angel of the Lord visited him and told him to do so.⁴⁷

⁴³ Machinist, p. 76.

⁴⁴ Jacob Neusner, *Invitation to Midrash: The Workings of Rabbinic Bible Interpretation* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1989), p. 191.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 211–212, 222.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 215.

⁴⁷ Allusions are always hard to prove. This one is no exception. There is a similar story in Jewish traditions about Abraham: Louis Ginzberg, *The Legends of the Jews*, trans. from the German by Henrietta Szold, 7 vols., 3rd edition (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1967–1969), I, pp. 213–214; Spittler, ‘Testament of Job’, p. 840; Schaller, *Das Testament Hiobs*, p. 327. Hence, it is uncertain whether the Gideon story directly influenced *TJ*, or whether the story was derived from

It is clear that to modern readers of Jewish midrash, this kind of gap filling may appear as a rather free floating way of dealing with the biblical texts. Boyarin, however, shows how these interpretive strategies are essential for maintaining the identity of the religious community based on the authority of their Scripture:

Studying the Torah – interpretation – is the dominant cultural practice of rabbinic Judaism. As such it does the work that alternate cultural practices do in other societies. One of the tasks of a successful culture is to preserve the old while making it nevertheless new—to maintain continuity with a tradition without freezing it. Intertextuality is a powerful instrument in the hands of culture for accomplishing this task. As Julia Kristeva has written, “every text builds itself as a mosaic of quotations, every text is absorption and transformation of another text.” By absorbing and transforming, the textual system both establishes continuity with the past and renews itself for the future. The simultaneous rejection and preservation of tradition in midrash is shown in the all pervasive quotation which forms its very warp and woof.⁴⁸

According to Boyarin, Scripture functions in the process of actualising itself as an *intertext*. In renewing the meaning of tradition for his own time, the midrashist weaves a web of scriptural material into a new story that retains its authoritative status by consisting of the old material. The scriptural associations function as a text in between the old and the new story – hence the term ‘intertext’ – the old material being taken out of its old context and arranged in such a way that it fits into the new.⁴⁹

If my suggestion about the allusion to the Gideon story in *TJ* is correct, it provides a fascinating example of an intertextual process. As we saw above, the religious community of *TJ* may have experienced problems in living with the ambiguous and speculative character of *BJ*. Therefore, the author of *TJ* interprets the figure of Job in the light of another scriptural hero, Gideon, who fits better in the solution *TJ* offers to evil: fight against the evil powers in the world. The angel appearing to Gideon greets him with the words: “The LORD is with you, mighty warrior.” (Judges 6: 12, NIV) At first, Gideon is very much like the biblical Job, asking why Israel is experiencing so much suffering due to the oppression of the Midianites. Yet, the Lord answers Gideon in the same way as *TJ* answers all the ambiguity and speculation of *BJ*. The angel says to Gideon: “Go in the strength you have and save Israel out of Midian’s hand. Am I not sending you?” (Judges 6: 14, NIV). Thus, Gideon goes out and destroys the sanctuary of Baal and Asherah, followed by a battle with the Midianites, while the God fearing Job of *TJ* destroys the temple of the idol, followed by the battle with Satan.

The Gideon story, if indeed alluded to in the *Testament*, functions as a text in between *BJ* and the early Jewish interpreters. It helps the interpreters to overcome the difficulties they experience with the original text, and eventually enables the religious community to maintain the authority of *both* their interpretation *and* the original text.

the Abraham traditions, or both.

⁴⁸ Daniel Boyarin, *Intertextuality and the Reading of Midrash*, Indiana Studies in Biblical Literature (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), p. 22.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 24.

Overall, however, although interpretive strategies for maintaining authority are present in the *Testament*, it is not so much concerned with making truth claims. Therefore, the question whether it interprets the biblical original *correctly* seems somewhat out of place. There are two reasons, however, why it is nevertheless interesting to deal with the question. First, it is hermeneutically relevant to observe that, in spite of all our hermeneutical interest in true interpretation, many religious interpreters are not at all concerned with true interpretation—and trivially so! What the author of the *Testament* is interested in is an insightful, delightful, attractive story that people enjoy and that might help them to persevere in the struggles of life. If this is (an important) part of the religious interpretation of Scripture, and no doubt it is, then it is highly relevant for hermeneutics to realise this and to think about the implications of it for its focus on true interpretation. What *TJ* shows is that there is a connection between what we could call an ‘aesthetic mode of interpretation’ of Scripture and questions of truth. The author of the *Testament* presents a certain picture of the way the world is and the way in which we should live, but these claims are taken up into a narrative framework that keeps them within an aesthetic context. In a later chapter, we will investigate what this means for the status of these truth claims.

Finally, it is worth asking whether *TJ* interprets *BJ* truthfully because, as a matter of fact, history shows us that both the Jewish and the Christian tradition clearly placed this text outside their accepted religious traditions. Apparently, the tradition denied that it is a ‘true’ interpretation of Scripture.⁵⁰ We should not jump to this conclusion though. Although the text was not included in the Jewish and Christian canons, we do not know of any dispute about its authenticity, truth or appropriateness as part of Scripture. Therefore, I would like to suggest another reason why *TJ* did not make it as part of canonical Scripture. One might compare the relation between *TJ* and *BJ* to the relation between a historical novel and an academic book about a certain period. Both a historical novel and an academic work will – it may be hoped – share a certain amount of information. As an *historical* novel, the novel will accurately describe the situation during the period. If the novel has been skillfully written, it will contain an aesthetic surplus which will normally be somewhat parasitic upon the historical accuracy of the plot. When it comes to our final point of reference for information on the period, however, we will rely upon the academic work, rather than the novel.

In a similar fashion, we might say that *TJ* was appreciated at various levels in the tradition of the synagogue and the church as an aesthetic transformation of *BJ*. Yet it was not accepted as a definitive point of reference for the faithful—perhaps not primarily because it contained specific heterodox or erroneous views, but because it was simply considered as not intended for building one’s faith upon. This way of looking at the non-canonical status of the text corresponds to what I said earlier about the aesthetic orientation of the text.

⁵⁰ Schaller, *Das Testament Hiobs*, pp. 318–321; Spittler, ‘Testament of Job’, pp. 834, 836.

4

John Calvin

4.1 INTRODUCTION

With Calvin's sermons on Job, we enter a completely different world. Instead of the world of story, we enter a world of truth. Instead of a haggadic paraphrase of the text, we encounter the monument of sixteenth century Protestantism: the sermon. In a running exposition of 159 sermons, John Calvin explains the meaning and use of the book of Job to the people of Geneva during weekdays of the years 1554–55. A work filled with consolation and encouragement, but filled even more with criticism and polemics.

4.2 AN IMPRESSION

Calvin's sermons are a good example of the lay orientation of Reformation spirituality.¹ In his sermons, Calvin leaves out all the academic issues that can be found in his theological works like the *Institutes of the Christian Religion* and the commentaries.² Simplicity is the most important characteristic of his preaching. The main structure of the sermons exemplifies this. It consists of a running lecture on the whole book of Job, usually divided into sets of about six verses per sermon. Each set is introduced by a summary of the teaching of the text, followed by a running exposition that breaks the pericope up into phrases or at most a couple of verses. Each phrase in turn is explained by some usually very brief exegetical notes – sometimes even left out completely – followed by an exposition of the 'lesson', 'doctrine', 'admonition' or 'encouragement' that Calvin derives from the text.

Before going on to explore Calvin's view of Job in a more systematic and abstract way, I would like to give the reader a taste of Calvin's style of preaching by summarising two sermons on Job in some detail. There is a danger in describing

¹ For a traditional introduction to Calvin's preaching, see: T.H.L. Parker, *Calvin's Preaching* (Edinburgh: T& T Clark, 1992). An in-depth account of Calvin's sermons on Acts is provided by Wilhelmus H.Th. Moehn, *The Relation between God and his Audience in Calvin's Sermons on Acts, Travaux d'Humanisme et Renaissance* 345 (Genève: Droz, 2001).

² Contra Bernard Cottret, *Calvin: A Biography*, trans. from the French by M. Wallace McDonald (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), p. 158.

the thought expressed in a sermon in that one can easily concentrate on the theological content while bypassing the rhetorical form. In order to avoid this danger, I will sometimes give rather lengthy quotations which should serve as an entrance to the lively rhetorical event that happened when Calvin preached to his congregation. The two sermons make for interesting examples because they show the two main hermeneutic strategies Calvin employed towards the text of Job. The first is an example of what I call the 'positive hermeneutic'. In this sermon, Calvin affirms what Job says and argues that the audience should believe and act like Job. The second is an example of Calvin's 'inverted hermeneutic'. Here, Calvin applies the text to the audience by arguing that Scripture shows us the example of Job to teach us *not* to follow it. Both sermons are about Job's first answer to Eliphaz, which is narrated in Job 6 and 7. They discuss the seven final verses of Job 6 and the first six verses of Job 7.

Calvin's translation of Job 6: 24–30 runs as follows:

Teach me and I will keep silent, show me in what I have erred. How powerful are the righteous words, what faults will the faultfinder among you find in them? Develop your case so that you can reverse it, and let the words of the afflicted go into the wind. You mislead the orphan, you dig a hole for your friend. Return and consider, and mark my reasoning, whether I lie. Return again and there will be no iniquity. Return once more and my righteousness will appear in that behalf. There is no wickedness in my tongue, and does not my mouth feel bitterness?³

As outlined above, Calvin opens the sermon by explaining the main teaching of the text:

It is a great virtue to render oneself teachable, that is to say, to submit oneself to reason: for without that, people will overreach themselves, as it were, in spite of God; therefore, the chief honour that God requires of us is that whatsoever we know to proceed from him, be received without any gainsaying, that it be held for good and rightful, and that people give assent to it. [...] And this is the matter that Job treats in this passage. [...] No doubt but Job does here in his own person give a common rule to all the children of God. This rule is, that when it will be shown to us that we have erred, we must no more open our mouths to put forward trifling excuses, [...] but we must give ear to that which will be told us.⁴

³ Quotations from Calvin's sermons have been taken from the 1574 English translation by Arthur Golding. This text has been updated to modern English and corrected so as to render the original French more accurately. The original text is given in the footnotes. I would like to thank Marcel Sarot and Rev. T. Ouwerkerk for helping me update the English translation against the French original. John Calvin, *Sermons on Job*, trans. from the French by Arthur Golding (London, 1574; Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1993), p. 117; John Calvin, 'Sermons sur le livre de Job', in: Guilelmus Baum, Eduardus Cunitz, and Eduardus Reuss, editors, *Ioannis Calvini opera quae supersunt omnia*, Corpus Reformatorum 33, 2nd edition (Brunsvigae, 1887; 1964), p. 319: "Enseignez moy, et ie me tairay : monstrez moy en quoy i'ay failli. Combien les paroles droites sont elles fermes : qu'est-ce que le repreneur d'entre vous y reprendra? Bastissez vos argumens pour renverser les propos, et que les paroles de l'affligé s'en aillent en vent. Vous circonvenez l'orphelin, vous fouissez une fosse pour vostre amy. Retournez-vous, et considerez, et regardez mes raisons si ie mens. Retournez, et il n'y aura point d'iniquité : retournez encore, et ma justice apparoistra en cest endroit. Il n'y a point d'iniquité en ma langue, et mon palais ne sent-il pas l'amertume?"

⁴ Calvin, *SoJ (EE)*, p. 117; Calvin, 'SsJ (FE)', p. 319: "C'est une grande vertu que se rendre docile,

A common feature of Calvin's preaching is that after having presented a certain moral, teaching or doctrine, he goes on to describe what people make of it in practice—usually in negative terms. This happens here too:

For Job deals with this issue in particular: And it is against the foolish arrogance that is in people: for when they are convicted to have done amiss, and to have been ill-advised, they are not ashamed to cast themselves into a thousand absurdities, and to be carried away by them, so that they become like brute beasts, fading out the matter as it were in spite of God, and all their glory is in being obstinate, and never giving up.⁵

These kinds of descriptions are followed by a repetition of the value of the virtue presented, usually with some further elaborations on the topic. Here, Calvin takes the opportunity to elaborate on various aspects of being teachable. He admonishes the people to be primarily teachable towards God; to receive his grace with a soft and humble mind. In addition, Calvin shows psychological insight by going into several forms of seeming teachability that fail to live up to their appearance:

For someone may teach us, and we might well say: "It is true." We might even always say: "Amen." But yet there will be some that will hold their tongue, and yet continue to remain stubborn in their own fancies whatever happens. When one speaks to a man that is fully determined not to answer, he will be mum, he will not utter a word; one will not be able to draw a single word from him. However, this silence is never found unaccompanied by rebellion.⁶

Although Calvin holds out Job's attitude as an example before us, he is not unaware of the critical undertone in Job's speech. However, he exploits this critical value in his own typical way:

And otherwise, he says: "Teach me and show me in what I have erred." By this he means that however much God's children ought to be meek to receive correction and good doctrine, that does not mean that they should be without wisdom and discretion. For we see what has happened in the papacy under the guise of being simple. People say there: "O we must walk in simplicity." It is true, but they want people to suffer, being like brute beasts, without discerning between white and black. But it is not for nothing that our Lord promises his

c'est à dire de s'assubietir à raison : car sans cela il faut que les hommes se desbordent comme en despit de Dieu. Qu'ainsi soit, c'est le principal honneur que Dieu demande de nous, que ce que nous cognoissons estre de luy soit receu sans aucune replique, qu'il soit tenu bon et iuste, et qu'on s'y accorde. [...] Et c'est ce que Iob traite en ce passage. [...] Il n'y a nulle doute qu'ici Iob en sa personne ne donne une regle commune à tous enfans de Dieu : c'est que quand il nous sera monstré que nous avons failli, il ne faut plus que nous ayons la bouche ouverte pour amener des excuses frivoles, [...] mais que nous escoutions ce qui nous sera dit."

⁵ Calvin, *SoJ (EE)*, p. 118; Calvin, 'SsJ (FE)', p. 320: "Or Iob traite cela par especial. Et c'est contre la folle outrecuidance qui est aux hommes : car estans conveincus d'avoir failli, et avoir esté mal advisez, ils n'ont point honte de se ietter en mille absurditez qui les transportent, qu'ils sont comme bestes brutes, qu'ils s'esgayent comme en despit de Dieu, et font toute leur gloire d'estre opiniastres, et de n'estre iamais vaincus."

⁶ Calvin, *SoJ (EE)*, p. 118; Calvin, 'SsJ (FE)', p. 321: "Car on pourra enseigner, et nous pourrons bien dire, Il est vray, et mesmes nous pourrons tousiours respondre Amen : mais il y en aura bien qui se tairont, et cependant demeurent tousiours obstinez en leur fantasie, quoy qu'il en soit. Quand on aura parlé à un homme lequel aura deliberé de ne se point renger, il sera là morne, il ne sonnera mot, on n'en pourra point arracher une seule parole : ce taire-la n'est pas sans rebellion toutefois."

faithful the spirit of discretion. It is to the intent that they should not be led here and there to dance to every man's tune, nor be led about like poor blind men. What is to be done then? We must be taught, and we must have the knowledge and certainty of God's truth, to follow and obey it, and when any man will have shown us our faults, we must really take heed to follow the good and eschew evil.⁷

By identifying teachability with the willingness to obey *God*, Calvin is able to remain critical towards the teachers of his time, who try to stop the Reformation movement by arguing that one has to obey the authority of the church in the name of God. Calvin rejects the identification of the interest of the church with God's will by saying that although believers must be willing to accept the truth, they should sort out for themselves whether what the church says is in accordance with God's truth.

You see how the Papists make unfounded allegations against us to make it seem we are not worthy that the ground should bear us. Meanwhile there is no talk of showing why. It is enough for them that they have prejudiced the ears of the ignorant, that we speak against the holy church and that we will not be subject to all the traditions which they have made. Yea, but it is said that it is God's Word that must be received. And therefore whoever speaks must not advance himself to bring fancies, but must speak in such a way that we may know that what he says is from God.⁸

Calvin continues with a very characteristic lament about the general state of morality in his time when he says:

Today, it does not help to find fault with the evil and to condemn it, for it is publicly supported. Today, we come to such an abyss, that if something wicked happens, everyone covers it, and even justifies it. And if something good happens, o, it must be condemned. And why? Do not people fear this horrible curse which God has uttered by his prophet: "Cursed be you that call evil good, and good evil!"⁹

⁷ Calvin, *SoJ (EE)*, pp. 118–119; Calvin, 'SsIJ (FE)', p. 322: "Or au reste il dit : *Enseignez moy et monstrez moy en quoy i'ay failli*. Par cela il signifie, que les enfans de Dieu combien qu'ils doivent estre benins à recevoir correction, et bonne doctrine : toutesfois ce n'est pas à dire qu'ils n'ayent prudence et discretion. Car nous voyons ce qui est advenu en la Papauté sous ombre d'estre simple : on dira là, O il faut cheminer en simplicité : il est vray, mais ils voudroyent que les hommes se laissassent mener comme bestes brutes, sans discerner entre le blanc et le noir. Or ce n'est point sans cause, que nostre Seigneur promet à ses fideles esprit de discretion : c'est afin qu'ils ne soient point menez à la pippée çà et là, ou qu'on les traîne comme povres aveugles. Que faut-il donc ? que nous soyons enseignez, et que nous ayons cognoissance et certitude de la verité de Dieu, pour la suivre et y obeyr : et quand on nous aura remonstré nos fautes, que nous en soyons vrayement advertis afin de suivre le bien, et fuir le mal."

⁸ Calvin, *SoJ (EE)*, p. 119; Calvin, 'SsIJ (FE)', p. 323: "Voila les Papistes qui usent de grosses iniures contre nous, tellement qu'il semble que nous ne soyons pas dignes que la terre nous soustienne. Cependant il n'est pas question de monstrier dequoy, c'est assez qu'ils ayent preoccupé les oreilles des ignorans, que nous contredisons à la sainte Eglise, que nous ne voulons point estre subiets à toutes les traditions qu'ils ont faites. Voire ; mais il est dit, Que la parole de Dieu est celle qu'on doit recevoir : et pourtant quiconques parle, qu'il faut que celuy là ne s'avance point pour amener ces phantasies, mais qu'il parle tellement qu'on cognoisse que c'est de Dieu qu'il tient ce qu'il prononce."

⁹ Calvin, *SoJ (EE)*, p. 119; Calvin, 'SsIJ (FE)', p. 324: "Il n'est point question aujourdhuy d'accuser le mal, et de le condamner : car on le supporte tout manifestement. Atuiourd'huy nous sommes venus iusques à ceste abysme, que quand il y aura une chose mauvaise, on la couvre, et que mesmes on

He adds an example from ordinary life—which is highly characteristic of his preaching:

It is as if some servant in a house has conspired with the children to drink wine and to overeat in some corner, and to do all sorts of wrong, and yet when the fault is discovered, the children do as if they say: "You have done amiss," whereas notwithstanding, they have all unanimously conspired to commit such dissipation and gluttony.¹⁰

When commenting on the next phrase "that the words of the righteous are strong, and what faultfinder can find any fault in them?", Calvin interprets these words positively as an admonition to live a sincere life before God and other people. The righteous will have a difficult life given the situation in which they live. However, God is on their side, and the eventual victory will be theirs. Calvin adds:

And what causes such inconstancy [of the righteous]? It is because the rightness that is spoken of here is not well rooted in their hearts. Behold (I say) what is the cause why we see so many wavering men, who are not sure of the truth of the Gospel, so that they are like weathercocks that turn with every wind, or as reeds that bow every way? And why is that? Because they never knew the power of Gods word and of his truth.¹¹

This talk about the struggle of the righteous against their enemies, and the victory that God will eventually give them, is continued for some time. Then, the topic of the sermon changes somewhat with the explanation of verse 26: "Frame your reasons to overthrow matters, and let the words of the afflicted go into the wind."

Here, Job accuses of extreme malice those who proceed so eagerly against him. And we should well mark this point. For there is no doubt that the Holy Ghost shows us here what we have to beware of, if we do not want to displease God and to conduct, as it were, an open war against him. Behold (I say) a vice that is hateful before God: when we will be cunning to overthrow a good matter, and especially when it happens that we advance ourselves against those who are afflicted by the worldly. When there is such arrogance in us, so that we will provoke them to cast themselves into despair; there is no vice as common as this.¹²

la justifie : et s'il y a du bien, ô il faut qu'il soit condamné. Et comment ? Et ne craint-on point ceste horrible malediction que Dieu a prononcee par son Prophete ? (Isa. 5, 20) Malheur sur vous qui dites le mal estre le bien, et le bien estre le mal."

¹⁰ Calvin, *SoJ (EE)*, p. 119; Calvin, 'SslJ (FE)', p. 324: "C'est comme si quelque valet en une maison avoit complotté avec les enfans pour boire le vin, et pour gourmander en derriere, et faire tout mal : et bien quand on apercevra la faute, les enfans feront bien semblant de dire, Tu as failli : mais cependant si est-ce que tous d'un accord ont complotté à faire telles dissolutions et chatteries."

¹¹ Calvin, *SoJ (EE)*, p. 120; Calvin, 'SslJ (FE)', p. 326: "Et d'où vient une telle inconstance ? C'est d'autant qu'ils n'ont point ceste droiciture dont il est ici parlé bien enracinee en leur coeur. Voila (di-ie) qui est cause que nous voyons beaucoup de gens volages, qui ne sont point asseurez en la verité de l'Evangile, en sorte qu'ils sont comme des viroirs qui tournent à tous vents ou comme des roseaux qui plient. Et comment cela ? Pource que iamais n'ont cognu la vertu de la parole de Dieu et de sa verité."

¹² Calvin, *SoJ (EE)*, p. 121; Calvin, 'SslJ (FE)', p. 328: "Ici Iob accuse d'une malice extreme ceux qui procedoyent ainsi aigrement contre luy. Et nous faut bien noter ce poinct : car il n'y a nulle doute que le S. Esprit ne nous monstre ici dequoy nous avons à nous garder si nous ne voulons desplaire à Dieu, et luy faire comme la guerre ouverte. Voila (di-ie) un vice qui est detestable devant Dieu, quand nous voudrions estre subtils pour renverser les bons propos : et sur tout quand il nous advient de nous eslever contre ceux qui sont affligez selon le monde : quand il y a ceste arrogance, que nous les voulons inciter à se mettre comme en desespoir, et toutesfois c'est un vice par trop ordinaire que cestui ci."

In the sermons as a whole, bringing suffering people to despair is one of the main themes, and it is presented as one of the most serious evils. It is sometimes characterised as the main work of the devil.¹³ Although Calvin is, as we shall see in the next section, rather positive about the speeches of the friends, he is very critical about their idea that whoever suffers, must have sinned. We cannot make such a conclusion, because Scripture and experience teach us that the righteous and the godless suffer alike. The big danger Calvin sees when people conclude from suffering to sin, is that even righteous sufferers will come to believe that God has left them completely, which will bring them to despair. Therefore, a sharp warning is given to all who see people suffer:

You see, then, what we have to bear in mind after all: that is to wit, that when someone speaks to us, we should delay our answer until we know what the matter is. Something comes to our ears. What is to be done? Let us listen, and mark whether it is from God and true or not. And let us pray God to give us the spirit of discretion, that we may understand what the truth is. And when we have found it, let us not reply against it.¹⁴

This warning is in turn followed by a lengthy lament about how people, especially in court, pervert justice, thereby offending righteous people.

At the beginning of the next sermon, Calvin gives his translation of the opening verses of Job 7, and opens with a kind of summary of the things to be addressed in the sermon:

Is there not a time appointed to man who is upon earth, and are not his days as the days of a day-labourer? As a serf longs for the shadow, and as a day-labourer longs for the end of his labour: So have I; the vain months and painful days are appointed unto me. In lying down I say, when shall I rise, and being in my bed, I am satiated with bitterness until the evening. My flesh is clothed with worms and with dust of the earth: my skin is all chapped and infected. My days fade away like a weaver's shuttle, and waste away without hope.¹⁵

We know well that as long as we live in this world we must endure many miseries, but yet we wished that God should deal with us by our own measure. And we are so tender and fragile, that as soon as he lays his hand upon us, we think it to be too much; yea, and even the most patient of all have come to that. But when God proceeds with afflicting us, you shall see our faintness come to light and increasingly disclosed. And this is what we have to discuss now. For

¹³ Sermon 41, 52, and 64.

¹⁴ Calvin, *SoJ (EE)*, p. 121; Calvin, 'SslJ (FE)', p. 329: "Voilà donc en somme ce que nous avons à retenir, c'est assavoir, que quand on parle, nous soyons là comme en suspens iusques à ce que nous ayons cognu que c'est de la chose. Voilà un propos qui se tiendra : que faut-il ? Escoutons, et entendons s'il est de Dieu ou non, s'il est veritable : et prions Dieu qu'il nous donne esprit de discretion, afin que nous entendions que c'est de la verité. Avons-nous entendu cela ? qu'il n'y ait point de replique."

¹⁵ Calvin, *SoJ (EE)*, p. 123; Calvin, 'SslJ (FE)', p. 333: "N'y a-il point temps determiné à l'homme qui est sur la terre, et ses iours ne sont-ils pas comme les iours du mercenaire ? Comme le serf regarde à l'ombre, comme un mercenaire attend la fin de son labeur. Ainsi ay-ie les mois vains, et les nuits de travail me sont constituees. En me couchant ie di, quand me leveray-ie ? et estant en mon lict ie suis saoulé d'amertume iusques au vespre. Ma chair est vestue de vers, et de la poussiere de la terre : ma peau est toute rompue et corrompue. Mes iours s'enfuyent comme la navette d'un tisserant, et defaillent sans esperance."

Job complaining that his misery endures too long, says that a man ought to have had a time set to him beforehand, as if he would say, God should not set us upon the earth in such disquiet as we are, but that there should be some time to bring our miseries to an end. But I am in such a plight, that I have no relief nor rest night nor day. It seems then that my case is worse than all that of other people, and that God intends to afflict me beyond that which the ordinary condition of human life brings with it. Such is his purpose.¹⁶

Hereafter, Calvin proposes to follow the order of the text, starting with the phrase: “that a time is appointed to man upon the earth”. At this point, Calvin’s inverted hermeneutic starts:

True it is that Job misapplied this sentence, but yet of itself it is good and holy, and (as I have said already) it ought to serve us for a very profitable instruction. [...] Then we may well profit ourselves by this sentence, when it is said that there is a time appointed to man upon earth. And also, what use would it be if our life should be prolonged without end, and we would continue to be in such a condition? For there is no rest for human beings.¹⁷

The phrase “It is true that Job misapplied this sentence, but in itself it is good and holy,” and similar formulas are typical for Calvin’s approach to the speeches of Job. Calvin derives instruction from these speeches by interpreting them in an inverted way. He denies what Job intends to say, rephrases the utterance in such a way that it fits his purpose and finally claims that what the text ‘really’ or ‘taken on its own’, says, is true. In this case, the teaching that Calvin derives from Job’s words is exactly the opposite of what Job wants to say. Whereas Job complains about the lack of boundaries God sets to his suffering, the lesson upon which Calvin insists in this sermon is that God *does indeed* set such boundaries in the lives of believers. Calvin corroborates this teaching by giving a number of biblical examples in which God puts limits on the suffering of the righteous. Calvin returns to what we might call his ‘doctrine of suffering’ all over again when he deals with Job’s laments:

And here this doctrine is even more useful for us, when God tells us that if we must pass through many miseries while we live in this world, we ought to consider that our life is transitory, and it shall not grieve us to be in such a

¹⁶ Calvin, *SoJ (EE)*, p. 123; Calvin, ‘SslJ (FE)’, p. 333: “Nous cognoissons bien que, vivans au monde, il nous faut endurer beaucoup de maux : mais cependant nous voudrions que Dieu nous traitant à nostre mesure. Et nous sommes si tendres et delicats, que si tost qu’il a mis la main sur nous, il nous semble que c’est trop : et mesmes les plus patiens en sont là. Mais quand Dieu poursuit à nous affliger, voila où nostre fascherie se declare, et se descouvre plus. Et c’est ce que nous avons maintenant à traiter. Car Iob se plaignant que son mal dure trop loguement, dit qu’il y devoit bien avoir temps prefix à l’homme : comme s’il disoit, Dieu ne nous a point mis sur la terre en telle inquietude que nous y sommes, qu’il n’y ait quelque temps pour mettre fin à nos misereres. Or est-il ainsi que ie n’ay nulles treves, ny repos, nuict, ne iour : il semble donc que ma condition soit pire, que celle des autres, et que Dieu me vueille affliger outre ce que porte la condition de la vie humaine. Voila quel est son propos.”

¹⁷ Calvin, *SoJ (EE)*, p. 123; Calvin, ‘SslJ (FE)’, pp. 334–335: “Il es vray que Iob applique mal ceste sentence : mais si est-ce qe de soy elle est bonne et sainte et (comme i’ay desia dit) elle nous doit servir d’un instruction bien utile, [...] Nous pouvons donc bien fair nostre profit de ceste sentence, quand il est dit, qu’il y a temps determiné à l’homme qui est sur la terre. Et aussi que seroit-ce s’il falloit que nostre vie fust prolongee sans fin, et que nous fussions en telle condition ? Car il n’y a nul repos pour les hommes.”

condition, because the end of it is appointed beforehand. For that matter, if God chastises us, if he sends us any afflictions, well, he presses us now, but it will not last forever. It is certain that we are not able to hold out in the end, but he keeps measure, because he knows what is convenient for us. So then let us abide patiently until he delivers us, and we shall not be disappointed of such hope. Verily if everyone of us has an eye on himself, we shall find ourselves to have very great need to be reminded of this.¹⁸

When discussing the previous sermon, we saw that bringing the topic of the sermon down to everyday experience is a common feature of Calvin's preaching. Calvin is a realist in the sense that he has a sharp eye for the experience of his audience, and the difficulties they have to cope with. Although not all readers will appreciate the kind of consolation he offers to his hearers, he did certainly try to help his audience by drawing their attention to God's mercy and care. This sermon is no exception:

And therefore let us have recourse to that which is said here, namely that God has appointed the time, and that it is in him to dispose of us. Thus we must content ourselves with the measure that he has given us, bearing in mind that he knows what is proper and suitable for our feebleness. And yet notwithstanding, it is not forever that we shall be bound to languish here. There will be an end at which time God shall take us out of this earthly pilgrimage, yea even to call us to his everlasting rest, and there shall be no end, there shall be no time set.¹⁹

Yet, immediately after this passage, he continues with an even more severe criticism of Job:

See how we ought to apply this lesson to our own use. But in the meanwhile we see that Job has ill profited from it. And therefore we must beware even more, that we do not abuse a sentence when God puts it into our mind, to instruct us, by applying it to the clear contrary. And yet it is an ordinary matter with us to do so. When we read the holy Scripture, if any comfort is given us there, or if it serves to assuage our grief, what do we? "O you see here is a comfort that God gives to his children, but I am utterly bereft of it. It seems that God would cheer up his faithful ones, to cast me into despair. Seeing the case stands so, what can I think but that I am utterly barred from all hope of his grace?" Thus you see how we deal commonly in that behalf. Whereas God allures us as gently as can be, and whereas he sweetens all our miseries and sorrows, we throw it all from us,

¹⁸ Calvin, *SoJ* (EE), p. 124; Calvin, 'SsIJ' (FE)', p. 336: "Et tant plus ceste doctrine ici nous est elle utile, quand Dieu nous declare que s'il nous faut passer par beaucoup de maux en vivant en ce monde, nous considerions que nostre vie est transitoire : et il ne nous fera point mal d'estre subiets à telle condition, puis que nous avons temps determiné. Et puis quand nous serons chastiez de luy, quand il nous enuoyera quelques afflictions : et bien, Dieu maintenant nous presse, et ce ne sera point pour tousiours. Il est certain que nous ne pouvons pas subsister à la longue : mais il tiendra mesure, il cognoist ce qui nous est propre. Ainsi donc attendons patiemment qu'il nous delivre, et nous ne serons point frustrez d'un tel espoir. Mesmes quand chacun aura regardé à soy, nous trouverons qu'il est bien mestier que ceci nous soit reduit en memoire."

¹⁹ Calvin, *SoJ* (EE), p. 124; Calvin, 'SsIJ' (FE)', pp. 337-338: "Et pourtant recourons à ce qui est ici dit, c'est assavoir, que Dieu nous a determiné le temps, et c'est à luy aussi de disposer de nous. Il faut donc que nous-nous contentions de la mesure qu'il nous a donnee, sachans bien qu'il cognoist ce qui nous est propre et expedient pour nostre foiblesse. Tant y a que ce n'est point tousiours qu'il nous faudra ici languir : il y aura issue quand Dieu nous retirera de ce pelerinage terrien, voire pour nous appeler en son repos eternel, là il n'y aura point de fin, là il n'y aura point de temps determiné."

and seek nothing else but to nourish the malady within us, and to bar ourselves quite from Gods favour, and to cast it a great way off.²⁰

Calvin elaborates on Job's errors by arguing that to deny the limits that God sets to our suffering is to show arrogance towards God. When we deny these limits we try to bereave God of his power. We need to be patient, relying on God's willingness to help us in the end.

Somewhere in the middle of the sermon, the topic changes towards Calvin's favourite theme of despair, when he goes on to deal with the comparisons Job makes to illustrate his lot. Calvin pays particular attention to verses 5 and 6, where Job says: "My flesh is clothed with worms, and with dust of the earth; my skin is also broken and corrupted. My days glide away like a weaver's shuttle, and waste away without hope." At first sight, it seems that Job talks about his bodily circumstances, but Calvin is of another opinion:

But although Job was afflicted in his body, yet the temptation of feeling God to be as his judge and to hold him (as one would say) upon the rack, was far more grievous to him than all the martyrdom that he felt in his body. Here you see also why he tormented himself so much, We ought to mark this point well. For very few folks have been exercised in these spiritual battles and therefore they know not what it means. It is an unknown language to them and when God visits them in that manner, you shall see them utterly dismayed, because they have not tasted this doctrine in time and place. [...] For in all our miseries, if God gives us leave to return unto him, so that we may call upon him with hope that he will pity us in the end, it is certain that we can cast all our cares and troubles upon him as the scripture says. So then, our afflictions will be sweet and amiable to us when we can go forth unto God afterwards. But if we feel despair, which closes the door on us, so that we imagine God to be our enemy, and that he persecutes us, so that it is but lost time and a vain thing to call upon him, it is as if we were already in the abyss of hell. And to this point Job had almost come, but not altogether, although he had experience of it.²¹

²⁰ Calvin, *SoJ (EE)*, pp. 124–125; Calvin, 'SsJ (FE)', p. 338: "Voila comme il nous faut appliquer ceste doctrine à nostre usage. Or cependant nous voyons comme Iob en a mal fait son profit : et d'autant plus devons-nous estre attentifs, afin que nous n'abusions point d'une sentence quand Dieu nous l'a mise en avant pour nous instruire, que nous ne l'appliquions point tout au rebours. Et toutesfois cela nous est ordinaire, quand nous lirons l'Escriture sainte, s'il y a quelque consolation qui nous soit là donnee, et que ce soit pour nous soulager en nos tourments, que ferons-nous? O voila une consolation que Dieu donne à ses enfans, mais i'en suis du tout privé : il semble que Dieu resiouysse ses fideles, afin de me mettre en descspoir. Puis qu'ainsi est donc, que puis-ie penser, sinon qu ie suis forclos de toute esperance de sa grace? Voila donc comme nous en ferons tous les coups, là où Dieu nous convie tant doucement que rien plus, là où il nous adoucit tous nos maux, et toutes nos douleurs : nous repoussons tout cela, et ne demandons sinon de nourrir le mal en nous, et de nous forclorre de la grace de Dieu et la reietter bien loin."

²¹ Calvin, *SoJ (EE)*, pp. 125–126; Calvin, 'SsJ (FE)', p. 341: "Or combien que Iob fust affligé en son corps, si est-ce que ceste tentation qu'il a de sentir Dieu comme son luge, et qu'il le tenoit là comme à la torture, luy estoit plus grieve beaucoup, que tous les tourmens qu'il enduroit en son corps. Et voila pourquoy aussi il se tourmente tant. Et c'est un point que nous devons bien noter. Car bien peu de gens sont exercez en ces combats spirituels, et pourtant ils ne savent que c'est : ce leur est un langage incognu : mais quand Dieu les visite en telle sorte, les voila tous esperdus, pource qu'ils n'ont point gousté en temps et en lieu ceste doctrine. [...] Car en tous nos maux si Dieu nous donne licence de retourner à luy, que nous puissions l'invoquer en ceste fiance qu'il aura à la fin pitie de nous : il est certain que nous pouvons descharger nos sollicitudes et toutes nos fasherics sur luy, comme l'Escriture en parle. Ainsi donc les afflictions nous seront douces et amiables, quand nous

Calvin warns his audience that they must be grateful to God that he did not forsake them so far as he forsook Job. He admonishes them to be alert, so that if it might happen that God brought them in similar circumstances, they would not lose their faith in God's care for his servants. He supplies them again with resources of consolation:

Therefore, let us understand that whenever we shall enter into such gulfs, if the hand of God sustains us, we shall be drawn out again in the end. Thus you see how we need to be prepared to battle, so that we should not despair when such temptations come upon us. And although it seems we should be beaten down at every stroke, yet notwithstanding we must expect God to help us at the opportune moment, as he has done to his servant Job.²²

4.3 A RENAISSANCE PERSPECTIVE

The preacher of these sermons was born on July 10th, 1509 to an upper middle class family in Noyon, a small town in Picardy, one of the northern provinces of France.²³ His father, who worked for the chapter of Noyon, destined him for the priesthood and, for this reason, sent Jehan – his French name – to the university of Paris when he was approximately twelve years old. In Paris, Calvin studied arts with – among others – the eminent teacher of Latin Maturin Cordier – possibly at the Collège de la Marche – and at the Collège de Montaigu.²⁴ In 1528, his father urged him to leave his studies of the arts in Paris in preparation for his theological studies, and instead, to proceed with the study of law, probably because of problems his father had with his employer, the chapter of Noyon. Subsequently, Calvin studied law, first in Orleans with Pierre de l'Estoile and then in Bourges with the Italian humanist Alciati and the Lutheran Melchior Wolmar.²⁵

Then follows the period in Calvin's biography that is most difficult to reconstruct. We know very little about the process that eventually led to Calvin's shift to the Reformation somewhere between 1527 and 1534. What we do know is that throughout his studies in Paris and especially in Orleans and Bourges,²⁶ Calvin was strongly engaged in the French humanist movement with its Erasmian

pourrons aller ainsi à Dieu : mais si nous concevons un desespoir, qui nous ferme la porte, et que nous imaginions que Dieu soit nostre ennemi, et qu'il nous persecute, que c'est temps perdu et chose frustratoire de l'invoquer, c'est comme si desia nous estions aux abysmes d'enfer. Et voila où Job s'est trouvé en partie, et non pas du tout : mais si l'a-il expérimenté."

²² Calvin, *SoJ (EE)*, p. 126; Calvin, 'SslJ (FE)', p. 342: "Cognoissons donc, quand nous entrerons en tels gouffres, que moyennant que nous soyons soustenus de la main de Dieu, encores en la fin nous en serons retirez. Voila comme il nous faut estre preparez aux combats, à ce que nous ne soyons point esperdus quand ceste tentation surviendra : et combien qu'il semble que nous devons estre abbatuz à chacun coup, que neantmoins nous attendions que Dieu nous assiste, ce qu'il fera en temps opportun, comme il a fait à son serviteur Job."

²³ Many biographies of Calvin exist. Two recent accounts of his life are: Alister E. McGrath, *A Life of John Calvin: A Study in the Shaping of Western Culture* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990), and Cottret, *Calvin: A Biography*.

²⁴ As McGrath convincingly suggests: McGrath, pp. 21–27, and contra Cottret, who simply follows traditional biographies: Cottret, p. 13.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 20–24.

²⁶ McGrath, pp. 51ff.

focus on the study of languages and its criticism of the church in favour of a biblical devotion that was called the *philosophia Christi*. For a long time, however, notwithstanding its critical stance, this evangelical humanism remained inside the bounds of the Catholic church, and this changed only when certain placates with relatively radical criticisms of the sacrament of the Mass move the otherwise tolerant French king Francis I to political action.²⁷ Calvin became part of the Protestant party when his friend Nicolas Cop delivered his rectorial address to the university at the start of the academic year of 1533. This address, although it was quite modest in its claims, was taken by the audience as a plea for Lutheran ideas and consequently, resulted in severe political action.²⁸ This event forced Calvin to leave Paris and eventually to leave France altogether. Somewhere in 1534, he dropped his last formal connections with the Roman Catholic church and began to identify with the Reformation movement.²⁹ The first place where Calvin took refuge was Basle. In Basle, Calvin formulated the contours of his thought for the first time, when writing the first edition of the *Institutes of the Christian Religion*.

However, the main part of Calvin's career as a Reformer starts when he visits Geneva on a journey towards France in 1536. The French reformer of the town, Guillaume Farèl, urges Calvin to stay in the city and help him, very much against his will. This resulted in Calvin and Farèl's first attempt to establish a truly Reformed church and piety in the politically independent and even somewhat anti-French city state. It caused a lot of trouble between the more or less liberal regents of the city and the two reformers, which led to their expulsion from the city in 1538. Calvin moved to Strassbourg where he joined Martin Bucer and became the minister of the congregation of French refugees. This was the most pleasant period in Calvin's life. Here, he married Idelette de Bure, a widow and former Anabaptist. Furthermore, in Strassbourg, Calvin published his commentary on the book of Romans, seen by Cottret as the first watershed in the independence of Calvin's reformation.³⁰

After several attempts, the Genevan government succeeded – again, much against Calvin's will – to get him and Farèl to return to the city in 1541.³¹ Calvin stayed there until his death in 1564. This second period in Geneva was the most fruitful from the perspective of theological production. During this period, Calvin developed the framework of a Protestant church order, was engaged in daily preaching, wrote the final edition of his *Institutes*, wrote a number of theological treatises about the major topics of the time, and finally, instituted the Academy of Geneva, an academy in which people from all over Europe received a theological

²⁷ Cottret succeeds in making this change comprehensible in his account of these affairs: Cottret, pp. 71–77, 82–88.

²⁸ For all details and nuances, see *ibid.*, pp. 73–77; McGrath, pp. 62–67.

²⁹ There is much debate about the precise nature, time and theological significance of this *subita conversio*—as Calvin himself calls it in the preface of his Commentary on the Psalms; see William J. Bouwsma, *John Calvin: A Sixteenth-Century Portrait* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), pp. 10–18; McGrath, pp. 69–78; Heiko A. Oberman, *Initia Calvinii: The Matrix of Calvin's Reformation*, Mededelingen van de Afdeling Letterkunde, Nieuwe Reeks 54.4 (Amsterdam: KNAW, 1991), pp. 30–43; Cottret, pp. 65–70, 101–104.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 143–146.

³¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 146–151.

education. The sermons on Job stem from this final period in Calvin's career. They were delivered during the years 1554–55, most probably on week days, but only published in 1563, one year before Calvin's death.³² The reformer himself did not like to publish his sermons. Almost all sermons that survived were taken down in shorthand by Denis Raguenier and subsequently published by Jean Girard.

We know a lot about Calvin's public activities, but about his personality we know very little. Who was this man, and how did he fit into his time? One of the most remarkable achievements in this area is the research by the Renaissance scholar William J. Bouwsma in his book *John Calvin: A Sixteenth-Century Portrait*.³³ Bouwsma tries to draw a portrait of Calvin that does full justice to his personality and his place in a troubled age: the late Renaissance. Bouwsma is not content to describe Calvin's ideas or his activities, but rather links them to the Renaissance quest for certainty. In his most recent book *The Waning of the Renaissance: 1550–1640*, Bouwsma moves from Calvin as a particular figure to a general description of the Renaissance. Together, these two books provide a portrait of a man and his time that will prove indispensable for my investigation.

In *Waning of the Renaissance*, Bouwsma describes the Renaissance in the following way:

In the earlier Renaissance many thinkers were hopeful. The new monarchies were bringing order to Spain, France, and England. Recently discovered new worlds and the development of new seaways promised both wealth and, with artillery and the printing press, the triumph of European culture and Christianity around the globe. Humanists and reformers foresaw the onset of a golden age ushered in by the new learning, which, under the auspices of the ancient poets and rhetoricians, promised new freedoms. Yet by the second half of the sixteenth century when, paradoxically, the idea of progress was beginning to emerge, many cultivated Europeans were increasingly anxious and unhappy, even among those we have cited to illustrate the more positive side of the age. Until well into the seventeenth century, the mood of most people who contemplated the current scene was grim. The exhilarating freedom apparent in many aspects of human experience was gradually dissolving. Hope was increasingly rare, despair on the rise; God himself seemed more and more indifferent to the world.³⁴

Bouwsma conceives of the Renaissance as a movement in which two opposing trends can be discerned, one of freedom and one of constraint and a quest for

³² Cottret, pp. 289ff, 354.

³³ Although one might criticise the sometimes too psychological approach, Bouwsma's analysis of Calvin in terms of Renaissance thought has received much approval from various scholars in the field; cf. Oberman, *Initia Calvinii: The Matrix of Calvin's Reformation*, pp. 19–20; Cottret, p. xiv; Herman J. Selderhuis, *God in het midden: Calvijns theologie van de Psalmen* (Kampen: Kok, 2000), p. 29. For critique, see Richard A. Muller, *The Unaccommodated Calvin: Studies in the Foundation of a Theological Tradition*, Oxford studies in historical theology (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp. 79–98. Unfortunately, Muller assesses Bouwsma's portrait of Calvin only in terms of Bouwsma's analysis of 'abyss' and 'labyrinth'. He does not ask whether this really affects the overall portrait drawn by Bouwsma, namely the portrayal of Calvin as a Renaissance man of freedom and constraint. I do not deny the methodological problems of Bouwsma's study, but, it seems to me, these do not render his overall picture of Calvin inaccurate.

³⁴ William J. Bouwsma, *The Waning of the Renaissance: 1550–1640*, The Yale Intellectual History of the West (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2000), p. 112.

certainty. The origin of these contradictory trends must, be sought, according to Bouwsma, in the movement itself:

This book argues that a major explanation for this shift in the cultural atmosphere lies in the culture itself, precisely because of the freedoms it promoted. These, to be sure, satisfied fundamental human needs, but at the same time they eroded traditional patterns of order that were equally necessary.³⁵

This was Calvin's world, and hence, it is not surprising that with these opposing trends, we come to the heart of Calvin's personality. On the one hand, Calvin participated fully in the quest for freedom that was so typical of French humanism and Reformation thought. Various forms of liberation – Bouwsma discusses six forms in his recent book – can be found in Calvin's life and thought. Obviously, Calvin embraced the liberation of religion inherent to the Reformation movement, which refuted the hierarchical structure and the normative traditions of the church by appealing critically to the Bible.³⁶ Trained in the humanist studies of letters during his legal studies in Orleans and Bourges, he participated in the liberation of time and knowledge, manifested by the rise of historical consciousness. Past authors were now read for their own sake, rather than being used as sources of eternal truth.³⁷ As a humanist, Calvin also shared their interest in rhetoric, accompanied by positive attention to the passions over against the traditional rationalist anthropology. This, Bouwsma labels the liberation of the self.³⁸ He also played a role in the liberation of politics by serving the city state of Geneva, a town that had detached itself from the hierarchical political structure of the Middle Ages³⁹ and, more substantially, by being very critical of power structures in general.⁴⁰ Finally, Calvin underwent – without welcoming it – the liberation of space, which meant a shift from the conception of the universe as a hierarchical God centred order towards a secular space of natural objects.⁴¹

On the other hand, the opposing trend of constraint and the quest for order was at least as typical of Calvin's personality and actions as was the liberating trend. Bouwsma shows how deeply anxious Calvin was about the risks of chaos resulting from the liberation trend. He analyses two key terms in Calvin's thought, namely the labyrinth and the abyss, from which the following emerges:

If "abyss" brought into focus his dread of disintegration and nonbeing, "labyrinth" suggested the anxiety implicit in the powerlessness of human beings to extricate themselves from a self-centered alienation from God. [...] A labyrinth as a kind of dark prison in which human beings grope frantically for an exit they cannot find. [...] But the presence of these two kinds of anxiety in Calvin, the anxiety of the void and the anxiety of constriction, of nothing

³⁵ Bouwsma, *Waning of the Renaissance*, p. 112.

³⁶ Bouwsma, *John Calvin*, pp. 2–5, 98; Cottret, pp. 71ff; Bouwsma, *Waning of the Renaissance*, pp. 100–111. Bouwsma [1988, 156–157] stresses the anti-scholastic tendencies as very much part of Calvin's religious liberation program. Others have stressed the continuity between Calvin's theological thought and medieval scholasticism, e.g. Muller, *Unaccommodated Calvin*.

³⁷ Bouwsma, *John Calvin*, pp. 113–127; Bouwsma, *Waning of the Renaissance*, pp. 35–66.

³⁸ Bouwsma, *John Calvin*, pp. 131–149; Bouwsma, *Waning of the Renaissance*, pp. 20–34.

³⁹ Cottret, pp. 114–118.

⁴⁰ McGrath, pp. 175–193; Sermon 2, 72, and 130.

⁴¹ Bouwsma, *John Calvin*, pp. 69–85; Bouwsma, *Waning of the Renaissance*, pp. 67–85.

at all and too much, of freedom and oppression, the abyss and the labyrinth, also impelled him toward two rather different modes of relief. The analysis of Calvin's anxiety thus provides a key for identifying opposing impulses in his thought, and also for identifying its conflicts and contradictions.⁴²

As we saw above, one of these modes of relief is found in Calvin's humanism which enables him to break out of the labyrinth of constraint. The other mode of relief of his anxiety is his quest for order, which becomes manifest in many aspects of his work. Firstly, it made him cling to the traditional pre-Copernican cosmology stressing divine providence over this world over against a nominalist and upcoming deistic scientific view of the universe. Calvin's quest for order is also evident in his political, social, and – especially – his ethical views. Although he was quite critical of the rulers of the day, he nevertheless insisted strongly on obedience to legal authorities. In the personal realm, his quest for order made Calvin a true moralist. One of the very central notions of his thought is the idea of virtue as a mean between extremes, connected with his typical term 'bridle'. One can never do without a bridle. Any kind of excess is dangerous, if not sinful. From this idea follow positive notions like moderation and humility, and negative notions like pride, wealth, and worldliness.⁴³

Finally, Calvin sought order in religious matters. He was not entirely free from ideological concerns in stressing the necessity of obedience on the part of the congregation to the Gospel—as preached by himself, of course. Moreover, the religious quest for order can be seen in the consolidation of Reformed theology in his confession and the *Institutes*, where he refuted ideas that he considered heretical or alien to the Christian faith.⁴⁴

4.4 CALVIN'S RELATION TO THE BOOK OF JOB

Given this perspective on Calvin's time and personality, it becomes all the more interesting to see how Calvin found his way through the Book of Job, whose main characters tend so much towards extremes. To a certain extent, Calvin states his approach right at the beginning when he gives a brief account of his view of the book in the first sermon. It opens with the following passage:

To better profit by that which is contained in this book, we should first and foremost understand the sum of it. For the story written here shows us how we are in God's hand, and that it is up to him to determine our life, and to dispose of it according to his good pleasure. And it is our duty to submit ourselves to him with all humbleness and obedience. And it stands to reason, that we should be wholly his, both to live and die. Even when it pleases him to raise his hand against us, although we perceive not why he does it, yet we should glorify him continually, acknowledging him to be just and upright. We should not grudge against him, nor begin a lawsuit against him, knowing that we shall always be vanquished in pleading against him.⁴⁵

⁴² Bouwsma, *John Calvin*, pp. 46–47.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, pp. 86–97, 162–176; Cottret, pp. 289, 303–308.

⁴⁴ Bouwsma, *John Calvin*, pp. 98–109.

⁴⁵ Calvin, *SoJ (EE)*, p. 1; Calvin, 'SsJ (FE)', p. 21: "Pour bien faire nostre profit de ce qui est

Calvin works out this view of Job in two directions. He develops a double-sided key for interpreting the book of Job. On the one hand, he offers the following perspective on the figure of Job:

But meanwhile, we should also notice that in all this dispute, Job maintains a good case, and his adversaries maintain a bad case. Moreover, Job, maintaining a good case, did handle it ill, and that the others, setting forth a bad case, handled it well. The understanding of this will be as a key to open the whole book to us. How is it that Job maintains the good case? It is in that he knows that God does not always punish man according to the measure of their sins, but has his secret judgements, whereof he makes no mention to us, and therefore we should wait until he reveals to us for what cause he does this or that.⁴⁶

This view of Job's words gives Calvin the opportunity to deny the truth of many claims in the speeches of Job, which he sees as belonging to the bad presentation of Job's otherwise good case, and to affirm others as part of the good case. In his view of the friends, he offers a similar approach:

But on the other side, they that undertake the evil case (that is to say, that God does always punish people according to the measure of their sins), have good and holy sentences, and there is nothing in their whole talk which we should not receive as if the Holy Ghost himself had uttered it. For it is plain truth, these are the foundations of religion. They treat of God's providence, they treat of his justice, they treat of the sin of man. Thus, we see a doctrine which we must receive without gainsaying, and yet the drift of it is evil, namely because these men attempt to bring Job to despair, and to drown him altogether.⁴⁷

This approach to the friends enables Calvin to accept much of what the friends say, but also to criticise them when he finds their statements too bold or one-sided. In so doing, he is able to retain the canonical judgement about them at the end of the book of Job (Job 42: 7).

contenu au present livre : il nous faut en premier lieu savoir quel en est le sommaire. Or l'histoire qui est ici escrite nous monstre, comme nous sommes en la main de Dieu, et que c'est à luy d'ordonner de nostre vie, et d'en disposer selon son bon plaisir, et que nostre office est, de nous rendre subiets à luy en toute humilité, et obeissance, que c'est bien raison que nous soyons du tout siens et à vivre, et à mourir : et mesmes quand il luy plaira de lever sa main sur nous, encores que nous n'appercevions point pour quelle cause il le fait, neantmoins que nous le glorifions tousiours, confessans qu'il est iuste, et equitable, que nous ne murmurions point contre luy, que nous n'entriions point en proces, sachans bien que nous demurerons tousiours vaincus, contestans avec luy."

⁴⁶ Calvin, *SoJ (EE)*, p. 1; Calvin, 'SslJ (FE)', p. 23: "Mais cependant nous avons aussi à noter, qu'en toute la dispute Job maintient une bonne cause, et son adverse partie en maintient une mauvaise. Or il y a plus, que Job maintenant une bonnen cause la deduit mal, et les autres menans une mauvaise cause la deduisent bien. Quand nous aurons entendu cela, ce nous sera comme une clef pour nous donner ouverture à tout le livre. Comment est-ce que Job maintient une cause qui est bonne ? c'est qu'il cognoist que Dieu n'afflige pas tousiours les hommes selon la mesure de leurs pechez : mais qu'il a ses iugemens secrets, desquels il ne nous rend pas conte, et cependant qu'il faut que nous attendions iusques à ce qu'il nous revele pourquoi il fait ceci, ou cela."

⁴⁷ Calvin, *SoJ (EE)*, p. 1; Calvin, 'SslJ (FE)', p. 23: "Or au contraire ceux qui soustiennent ceste mauvaise cause, que Dieu punit tousiours les hommes selon la mesure de leurs pechez, ont de belles sentences, et saintes, il n'y a rien en leurs propos qu'il ne nous faille recevoir, comme si le Saint Esprit l'avoit prononcé : car c'est pure verité, ce sont les fondemens de la religion, ils traittent de la Providence de Dieu, ils traittent de sa iustice, ils traittent des peschez des hommes. Voila donc une doctrine, laquelle nous avons à recevoir sans contredict, et toutesfois le but est mauvais, que ces gens icy taschent à mettre Job en desespoir, et l'abysmer du tout."

Although Calvin's outline of his approach is fairly accurate as far as his actual exposition of Job in subsequent sermons is concerned, more needs to be said. When we analyse the massive amount of material, it turns out that Calvin takes many liberties in handling his own hermeneutical key. Sometimes – primarily during the so called 'first round' – Calvin is most critical of Job and less critical of the friends. At other times, he shows much sympathy for Job's opinions. It is hard to find a straightforward rationale behind these moves, but it seems that Calvin's reading of Job is rooted in two competing drives: first, the glorification of God's sovereignty, and secondly, the reality of suffering. As far as the former is concerned, for Calvin, the main aim of a truly human life is the glorification of God. This zeal for the honour of God is accompanied by a very negative view of what human beings make of it. This negative view is all-pervasive in the sermons. Calvin constantly criticises his audience for their self-love, carnal desires, luxury, materialism, injustice and hypocrisy. The very way of salvation out of self-centredness is self-knowledge, humiliation, repentance and, as the ultimate aim, the glorification of God. Paraphrasing the title of a study of Calvin's theology: for Calvin, the honour of God is the salvation of mankind.⁴⁸

However, there is also a second all-pervasive strand in Calvin's sermons on Job: the reality of evil and suffering. This is, as it were, a presupposition of all the interpretative steps that he takes in dealing with the texts. In the previous chapter about the *Testament of Job*, we saw that one of the differences between the canonical book of Job and the *Testament* is that in *BJ*, suffering is a mere possibility in an otherwise favourable world whereas in the *Testament*, suffering is an inevitable fact of life. Calvin's experience is in line with that of the *Testament*. Although Calvin often criticises his audience, he never passes lightly over the reality of their suffering. At most, Calvin reminds them of the fact that it could have been worse. Calvin also suffers himself, and he knows that his audience suffer too. Equally in line with the *Testament*, is therefore, Calvin's stress on learning *how to suffer*, rather than looking for reasons why people suffer, although, as we shall see, reasons for suffering play a larger role in Calvin than in the *Testament*.

Calvin's main answer to the suffering that he and his hearers are confronted with is: keep trust in God. Again and again Calvin stresses that even all the evil we experience should move us to God, as we saw in section 4.2 and in the first quotation of the current section. This idea of trust in God as the one and only appropriate answer to suffering is connected with a whole web of positive notions about God. It is strongly connected, for example, with the fatherhood of God, his care and love:

Therefore if we do not want to fall in despair, let us have an eye on that which is able to alleviate all our anguish. As for example: [...] although our life is miserable, yet nevertheless, God gives us a taste of his goodness in so many ways that we may well conclude that we are rightly happy, because he makes us partakers of his benefits. Our life is short, but it is not so short but God gives us respite enough to know him to be our Father and Saviour, and to taste what his power is in us, and calls us unto him. If we had this benefit for a quarter of

⁴⁸ Marijn de Kroon, *The Honour of God and Human Salvation: A Contribution of an Understanding of Calvin's Theology According to his Institutes* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2001).

an hour only, and did not enjoy it for a moment longer, I ask you: ought we not to value such a benefit?⁴⁹

Another strong connection is that between the afterlife and suffering. God will get us out:

It is true that we are subject to many miseries, insomuch that he who knows his own state ought to sigh and groan continually so long as he is in this world. But God has put an end to it, and when he calls us to himself, then there is a good and sure rest. This does not mean that we will have a life that is equal to this life in length of time, but God makes us participants in his own life, which is immortal. And therefore, let it be a consolation to us when we have cause for joy in our brief lives, and cause for patience, and for not being too angry.⁵⁰

Finally, the admonition to keep trust in God is connected with God's offer of forgiveness of sins in Jesus Christ.⁵¹

It can easily be understood that from this perspective, Calvin is very positive about Job's reactions to his misfortune in chapters 1 and 2. Calvin reacts favourably again to Job's 'repentance' after the whirlwind scene in chapter 40. He is critical of Job's cursing the day of his birth in chapter 3 and of many of Job's laments in later chapters. As we saw in section 4.2, Calvin is very selective in his criticism of Job. Our examples from his sermons on Job 6 and 7 show that he sometimes switches from the positive to the inverted hermeneutic right in the middle of one of Job's speeches. This can even happen in the middle of a sermon. One could almost say that, as soon as he sees an opportunity to derive some kind of positive message from Job's words, he seizes that opportunity, but if the text seems somehow to criticise God's way of dealing with humans, Calvin will condemn those criticisms as sinful and out of order.

From the quotations given above, it seems that Calvin is confident that God will eventually deliver us from all evil. Sometimes, however, he seems to be so overwhelmed by the reality of suffering that taking refuge in God becomes a desperate choice, a last option. In these instances, for Calvin, God seems no longer someone whom we can unconditionally rely upon.⁵² The 'narrow escape' character of holding fast to God becomes particularly clear in Calvin's recurring advice to believers to 'expect more'. Regardless of whether believers complain

⁴⁹ Calvin, *SoJ (EE)*, p. 249; Calvin, 'SsJ (FE)', p. 662: "Si donc nous ne voulons tomber en desespoir, regardons à ce qui nous peut adoucir toutes nos angoisses. Pour exemple : [...] combien que nostre vie soit miserable, si est-ce neantmoins que Dieu nous y fait gouster sa bonté en tant de sortes, que nous pouvons conclure que nous sommes bien-heureuz, d'autant qu'il nous fait participans de ses benefices. Nostre vie est briefve : mais elle n'est pas si briefve, que Dieu ne nous donne le loisir de cognoistre qu'il est nostre Pere et Sauveur, et de gouster quelle est sa vertu en nous, et qu'il nous appelle à soy. Quand nous n'aurions ce bien-la que pour un quart d'heure, et que la iouissance n'en dureroit point plus : ie vous prie, ne devons-nous pas priser un tel bien?"

⁵⁰ Calvin, *SoJ (EE)*, p. 250; Calvin, 'SsJ (FE)', p. 664: "Il est vrai que nous y sommes suiets à beaucoup de povretez, en sorte que celui qui cognoist bien sa condition, doit tousiours gemir et souspirer cependant qu'il est au monde : mais Dieu y a mis fin, et quand il nous appelle à soy, voila un bon repos et seur. Il n'est point question là que nous ayons une vie egale à ceste-ci en longueur de temps : mais Dieu nous fait participans de sa vie propre, qui est immortelle. Et pourtant consolons-nous quand nous avons dequoi nous resioir en la briefveté de nostre vie, que nous avons matiere d'estre patiens, et de ne nous point fascher par trop." See also sermon 41, 53, 55, 65, 66, 72, and 79.

⁵¹ Sermon 41–43, 52, 64, and 71.

⁵² Sermon 40, 51, 66.

about the amount of suffering that they have to endure, or whether they are relatively well off, Calvin warns them that they should be prepared for more suffering:

We should notice here, that when God has withdrawn his hand from us, we should prepare ourselves to suffer much greater miseries than we have escaped. For we see after what manner God proceeds, when he afflicts his servants. If they are novices, so that they are not acquainted with the suffering of adversity, he spares them, like we would not lay so great a burden upon a little child as we do upon a grown up person. God then has an eye on our ability to bear, and according to the measure in which we have practiced the endurance of afflictions, he sends them to us smaller or greater. But when we are once as it were inured to them, then he may well place a heavier burden upon us, because he has also given us the ability to bear it.⁵³

On the one hand, this warning to expect more is grounded theologically in Calvin's conviction that God strengthens our faith by putting it to the test through suffering, as we will see below. On the other hand, his advice draws on the psychological insight that it is much harder to cope with suffering when it overcomes us unexpectedly.

The somewhat ambiguous nature of Calvin's message that in suffering, the believer must keep trust in God, makes clear that trust in God is under threat, a threat that is sometimes, notably in Job's case, not far from the faithful believer. We have already encountered the main threat as 'great despair'.⁵⁴ For Calvin, despair means to believe that God has left us alone. That, according to Calvin, is the main thing that Satan wants us to believe. He tries to convince us that the eye of God is not upon us. Job had quite a bit of this despair that Calvin feared so much. Nevertheless, Calvin always maintains that Job never entirely lost his basic trust in God. As we have seen above, Calvin accuses the friends of stimulating feelings of despair in Job. Elsewhere in the sermons, he warns people – especially those propounding a retributive view of suffering – not to increase the suffering of the righteous by bringing them to despair.

When we consider Calvin's view of the reasons why people suffer, the first thing to notice, by way of contrast with the canonical Job, is that Calvin talks about evil and suffering as coming almost exclusively from the hands of God. Whereas the *Testament of Job* was at pains to attribute the evils that the canonical Job had ascribed to God, to Satan instead, Calvin does not hesitate to attribute the experience of evil and suffering to God. The only substantial role that Satan plays in Calvin's sermons is in bringing believers to despair, but for the rest, Calvin was

⁵³ Calvin, *SoJ* (EE), p. 38; Calvin, 'SsJ (FE)', pp. 115–116: "Nous avons ici à noter, que quand Dieu a retiré sa main de nous, il nous faut apprester à souffrir de plus grans maux, que ceux desquels nous serons eschappez. Car voila comme Dieu procede quand il afflige les siens : s'ils sont encores novices, qu'ils ne soyent point accoustumez à endurer mal, il les espargne, comme on ne chargera point un petit enfant ainsi qu'on feroit un homme. Dieu donc regarde nostre portee, et selon que nous sommes exercez à endurer les afflictions, il nous les envoie petites ou moyennes : mais quand nous y sommes, comme endurcis, alors il nous peut bien charges d'avantage : car il nous a donné aussi dequoi le porter." See also sermon 41.

⁵⁴ Sermon 41, 52, 64, 79.

not at all reluctant to say that God brings evil and suffering upon us.⁵⁵ That does not, however, mean that God can be blamed for suffering, or that he can be called the cause of sin. On the contrary, Calvin's God is entirely immune from criticism.

Again, within Calvin's sermons, this monist view of evil has a double face. On the one hand, it positively guarantees that evil and suffering will never get out of God's hands. On the other hand, Calvin talks about it in terms of "What if even God had no control?" "What if the devil had real power over us?"⁵⁶ This confirms the impression that the idea of God sending us evil and suffering is as much driven by a psychological desire to know whom it is who hurts us for some reason, as it is motivated by theological convictions about divine sovereignty.

Given this exclusively monist view of evil, and a God who is immune from criticism, it is obvious that the reasons given by Calvin why people suffer are not so much knock-down theoretical arguments – he does not need that in his theology – but rather practical ways of making God's actions in human life comprehensible to the faithful. We must add that most of the time, Calvin affirms the text of the book of Job in its arguments about reasons for suffering, except for two qualifications. The first is that God can never be blamed. As soon as the text seems to blame God, Calvin will take recourse to his inverted hermeneutic. The second is that the principle of retribution that the friends use, should not be used to argue that whoever suffers, must have sinned. In so far as the friends' arguments come down to this, Calvin criticises them for being out of step with the rest of Scripture and everyday experience.⁵⁷ The first qualification applies mainly to Job when he accuses God all too blatantly of bringing evil upon him without good reason. The second restriction applies to some parts of the speeches of the friends.

Roughly following these rules, Calvin takes up much of what the friends say about retribution into his own preaching.⁵⁸ When the friends deal with the lot of the godless, he elaborates on the eventual punishment of all enemies of the Gospel. Calvin even grants that much of what the righteous experience is due to their pride, self-love, and weakness of faith. Therefore, we can say quite confidently say that the first important reason for suffering is sin.

Quite close to this is the idea of suffering as teaching. God sends evil to the godless and the righteous alike to bring them to conversion.⁵⁹ He lets the righteous in particular suffer in order to strengthen their faith. Their faith is deepened and strengthened by growing self-knowledge, humility and trust in God.

However, suffering, punishment, and teaching are not sufficient for Calvin as an explanation why people suffer. Calvin appears to be aware of the fact that

⁵⁵ This view is consistent with Calvin's view of providence in the *Institutes*, where he argues against the idea of *permissio* with regard to evil, but rather defends that God's will is involved in good and evil alike. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (1559), I, chapter 16 and 17.

⁵⁶ Sermon 4, 54, and 55.

⁵⁷ Cf. Susan E. Schreiner, *Where Shall Wisdom Be Found? Calvin's Exegesis of Job from Medieval and Modern Perspectives* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1994), pp. 99–100; Schreiner goes too far when she says that Calvin fully accepts the principle of retribution, see sermon 45, 49, 66, 67, 78, and 79.

⁵⁸ Sermon 30–32, 59, 67, 68, and 73–77.

⁵⁹ The idea of the beneficial function of suffering is a traditional theme in Christian theology, for instance, Gregory the Great's *Moralia*, as Schreiner shows: *Ibid.*, pp. 27–39.

in some cases, the righteous despite their willingness to trust that God has good reasons, will find themselves in such misery that they can no longer see what good intentions God might actualise through it. In that case, Calvin falls back on a rather drastic appeal to God's sovereignty. He develops what Susan Schreiner calls a doctrine of 'double justice'.⁶⁰

In Calvin's view, we should speak about divine justice in two ways, namely, of revealed and hidden justice. God is just in the sense of revealed justice because he punishes those who violate his commandments and he blesses those who fear them. Evil and suffering come upon the godless according to revealed justice and these are therefore comprehensible to us as human beings. However, God is also just in the sense that whatever exists apart from God himself is less perfect than God, and therefore God as supreme justice may deal with it as he sees fit.

The justice whereby we must be ruled and whereto we must be subject is above us, but God's will is above that, according to what I have shown already that there is a double justice of God. One is that which he has shown us in his law, by which he will have the world to be ruled. The other justice is incomprehensible, insofar as now and then we must close our eyes when God works, and be content to know neither how nor why he does it. Hence, when the reason of any of God's works is not revealed to us, let us understand that it is a mark of the justice that is in his secret will, which surmounts the rule that is manifest and known to us.⁶¹

This doctrine of double justice is strongly reminiscent of the nominalist idea of an absolute power of God, who might do whatever he wants in spite of the revealed order of nature.⁶² Because of this idea of double justice, Calvin is able to say that, although human beings might consider themselves righteous according to revealed justice, as Job does, they can never appeal to their own righteousness before God because they always fail to conform to God's hidden justice. Although it must be stressed that this does not make God's justice completely arbitrary – even when it is hidden justice, it remains the *justice* of our heavenly Father – it adds a sense of hiddenness and darkness to Calvin's otherwise positive trust in God. We can think of it as the price Calvin pays for wanting to reconcile complete submission to God's sovereignty on the one hand, and being true to the reality of suffering on the other. In the end, the notion of divine sovereignty prevails. Thus, we can say that Calvin rejects all elements in the book of Job that support attitudes of rebellion and affirms all perspectives that point to retributive, educational and, finally, hidden reasons for suffering.

⁶⁰ Schreiner, pp. 105–116.

⁶¹ Calvin, *SoJ (EE)*, p. 222; Calvin, 'SsJ (FE)', p. 590: "La justice à laquelle nous devons estre reglez et suiets, est par dessus nous : mais la volonté de Dieu est encores par dessus : ainsi que nous avons desia traité, qu'il y a double iustice de Dieu : l'une est celle qu'il nous a declaree en sa Loy, selon laquelle il veut que le monde se gouverne : l'autre c'est une iustice incomprehensible, tellement qu'il faut par fois que nous fermions les yeux quand Dieu besongne, et que nous ne sachions point comment ne pourquoi. Et ainsi quand la raison d'un fait de Dieu ne nous est point revelee, sachons que c'est une iustice qui est en sa volonté secrette, laquelle surmonte ceste regle qui nous est manifeste et cogneue."

⁶² Cf. Gijsbert van den Brink, 'Gods absolute en geordineerde macht: Opmerkingen bij de ontwikkeling van een onderscheid', *Nederlands Theologisch Tijdschrift* 45 (1991), pp. 204–222. Calvin himself, however, repeatedly insists upon the difference between his doctrine of double justice and the nominalist idea of *potentia absoluta*. See sermon 43, 47, and 79.

One important question for our research is: what role did the context play in Calvin's approach to the book of Job? The term 'context' can be understood in several ways. The primary way in which context played a role for Calvin was, undoubtedly, the whole Christian canon of Scripture. Calvin interprets Job in the light of other parts of the Bible. Schreiner rightly points to the figure of David as an important point of reference for Calvin.⁶³ In fact, Calvin frequently appeals to David's humble and repentant attitude before God in criticising Job's protesting speeches.⁶⁴ In addition, within the framework of Calvin's theology, Paul's negative anthropology plays a role in the background.⁶⁵

If we broaden the notion of context to the post-biblical Christian tradition, we find important influences in Augustinianism and the *Devotio Moderna*. Both shared a strong emphasis on divine sovereignty and a negative anthropology, and both emphasised otherworldliness and a christocentric spirituality of the Word of God.

If, finally, we broaden the notion of context to include Calvin's own time and culture, we encounter a wide range of connections between Calvin's reading of Job and his position within late Renaissance culture. First and foremost, we see how well Calvin's approach to the book of Job fits Bouwsma's picture of late Renaissance thought. Cottret's remark confirms the latter:

Undoubtedly Calvin was never so much a man of his time as in his sermons. In them he spoke of men, of women, of animals, of the sea, of the mountains—and of God, of course; of a conservative God, the enemy of change and social subversion. In short, Calvin the preacher in many ways contradicted the "progressive" view of Protestantism. He was a man of order in a world swept along by change.⁶⁶

The quest for constraint and order in a chaotic world of change in particular is abundantly clear from Calvin's struggle with Job's exaggerated laments. The strong moralist tendency throughout the sermons shows how much Calvin was concerned with the restoration of order in a troubled age. His strong emphasis on proper behaviour on the part of his audience can even be said to override christological notions in the sermons.⁶⁷ In preaching about Job, Calvin does not aim primarily at proclaiming the Gospel of God's forgiveness and reconciliation to the congregation, as standard accounts of Reformation theology might lead us

⁶³ Schreiner, pp. 97–104. For a general account of the Calvin's identification with David, see Selderhuis, pp. 33–41.

⁶⁴ See, for instance, sermon 12, 15, and 29.

⁶⁵ According to Taylor, negative anthropology was a common feature of all late medieval preaching, Catholic and Protestant alike. Reformation thought had a particularly strong emphasis upon the human incapacity to do good, in contrast to the Catholic insistence upon free will. Larissa Taylor, *Soldiers of Christ: Preaching in Late Medieval and Reformation France* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), pp. 84–86.

⁶⁶ Cottret, p. 289.

⁶⁷ Although it would be an overstatement to say that Christ is entirely absent in the sermons on Job, we can confidently say that christological and, more generally, soteriological notions are *very much* in the background. For some examples where christological notions play a role, see sermon 41–43, 52, 64, and 71. Sermon 41 is actually the *first* sermon where salvation in Christ plays a serious role.

to expect. Rather, his interest lies in changing their behaviour, and this is very much in line with his late medieval predecessors and contemporaries.⁶⁸

The picture of Calvin as the sustainer of political and religious order in the city state of Geneva must be complemented with a picture of him as the reformer of the refugees. Heiko Oberman has called Calvin's Reformation the 'reformation of the refugees'.⁶⁹ Oberman argues that three stages must be distinguished in the Reformation movement. The first is Luther's Reformation, which is basically a monastic movement.⁷⁰ The second is the urban Reformation of various Swiss towns like Zurich and Basle, instigated by city Reformers like Zwingli and Bucer. The third is the Reformation of the Refugees, which emerges as soon as persecution of the Protestant movement becomes standard practice in many European countries like France, England and The Netherlands.

According to Oberman, Calvin's view of providence must be seen in the light of his position as a refugee. Calvin, like so many fellow refugees in sixteenth century Europe survived in this critical situation by putting his trust in God without complaining. God lets them experience much evil and suffering, but nevertheless remains their heavenly Father who will one day really bring them home. This perspective of the refugee is beautifully illustrated in a prayer accompanying a lecture on Jeremiah 22:27:

Grant, Almighty God, that as thou promisest to us rest nowhere except in thy celestial kingdom, we may never suffer ourselves, while travelling on the earth, to be allured and driven here and there; but may we in the meantime call on thee with resigned minds, and thus carry on our warfare, that; how much soever thou mayest be pleased by various contests to try and prove us, we may still continue to be thy faithful soldiers, until we shall enjoy that rest which has been obtained for us by the blood of thine only-begotten Son. – Amen.⁷¹

Against this background, it is understandable that Calvin feels uneasy with Job's far from 'resigned mind' in enduring his suffering. For the refugee, there are no rights to claim, neither from the king of France, nor from the King of heaven. The only thing one can do is to pray for grace.⁷²

In my view, we need not choose between Bouwsma's or Oberman's explanations of Calvin's views. Both accounts of Calvin's context show us aspects of the way in which the thought of the Reformer must have been related to his time.

⁶⁸ Taylor, pp. 86–92.

⁶⁹ See especially Heiko A. Oberman, *De erfenis van Calvijn: grootheid en grenzen: drie lezingen*, Kuyper-voordrachten (Kampen: Kok, 1988), pp. 32ff, 41ff. For a general description of the theory of a threefold Reformation, of which the Reformation of the Refugees is the third: Heiko A. Oberman, 'Die Reformation als theologische Revolution', in: Peter Blickle, Andreas Lindt, and Alfred Schindler, editors, *Zwingli und Europa*, Referate und Protokoll des Internationalen Kongresses aus Anlaß des 500. Geburtstages von Huldrych Zwingli vom 26. bis 30. März 1984 (Zürich: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1985), pp. 11–26, and Heiko A. Oberman, 'Europa afflicta: The Reformation of the Refugees', *Archiv für Reformationsgeschichte* 83 (1992), pp. 91–111.

⁷⁰ Oberman argued this point in Heiko A. Oberman, *Luther: Man between God and the Devil*, trans. from the German by Eileen Walliser-Schwarzbart (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989).

⁷¹ John Calvin, *Lectures on Jeremiah*, trans. John Owen, lecture 83.

⁷² One example is Calvin's prefatory address to the Institution of the Christian Religion: "to his most mighty and illustrious monarch, Francis, King of the French, his sovereign, John Calvin prays peace and salvation in Christ." His attitude before God in suffering is similar.

4.5 HERMENEUTICAL REFLECTION

The first thing to notice about the hermeneutical aspects of Calvin's sermons on Job is the central role that notions of truth play in them. In the previous chapter, we saw that the *Testament of Job* rather than prescribing how the book of Job *ought* to be read, merely presented a narrative framework in the light of which the figure of Job *could* be seen.

Not so for Calvin. It is clear that the main thing Calvin aims to achieve in his sermons is to 'tell the truth'. What concerns him is true behaviour, first and foremost, but also true beliefs and appropriate attitudes. Truth in Calvin's sermons is not so much truth in the sense of correspondence with the authorial intention behind the text, but rather, so to speak, a practical truth, setting boundaries to kinds of applications that readers might want to draw from the text. This remark is not intended as a value judgement about whether or not Calvin interpreted Job correctly—we will come back to that later on. Rather, it is simply a statement about the concrete type of interpretation Calvin was engaged in when preaching. The number of exegetical remarks in these sermons is much smaller than in his commentaries, for instance.

The most probable reason for this is the practical aim of Calvin's preaching. This raises the question of the role of the liturgical setting in Calvin's approach to the interpretation of Job. The way in which Calvin approaches his audience when preaching shows that he did not see the liturgical setting as a very open environment. As we will see in the next chapter about Lasso's music on Job, certain parts of a liturgy – especially the 'standard' parts – can function as an open environment in which participant can 'step in' without necessarily having to accept a given pattern of behaviour or set of beliefs. The strong orientation to truth in Calvin's preaching results in a liturgical function of the sermon that concentrates on transmitting appropriate behaviour and beliefs to the audience.⁷³ This view of the sermon is intimately related to the identification of the sermon with the Word of God. Although Calvin – in a typically Protestant move – allowed for the possibility that the preacher did not interpret Scripture appropriately and, hence, could not claim divine status for the sermon,⁷⁴ his primary posture is to advocate an attitude in his audience that assumes an identification between the sermon and the Word of God itself.⁷⁵

In our time, we might think of the focus on truth as a negative aspect of Calvin's preaching. Historically speaking, however, this would involve a serious misunderstanding of the function of Calvin's sermons for his audience. In the city of Geneva, Calvin's stress on proper behaviour and views provided a structure of order that was vital for the survival of the city state. Soon after publication, the sermons became popular among the French Huguenots and English Protestants, both in a situation of persecution. These people found consolation

⁷³ In my view, this is not necessarily a consequence of the Reformation stress on the preaching of the Gospel. First, in their sermons, Reformed preachers might aim to create an open narrative framework and, second, Contra-Reformation preachers of Calvin's time shared his focus on right behaviour and belief. See Taylor, pp. 86–92.

⁷⁴ Moehn, pp. 245–250.

⁷⁵ See, for instance, sermon 15, 16, 57, and 78. Cf. Parker, pp. 17–32.

and encouragement in Calvin's doctrines about suffering. They found their hope for salvation reestablished in Calvin's call to wait patiently for God's final act of deliverance. They found their trust in God strengthened by his talk of God's mercy, love and care. Not least, they were confirmed in their conviction that their oppressors would experience God's wrath in the end, although that end might be far away in the afterlife or the eschaton.

There *is* a downside to Calvin's approach, of course. Although all those who shared his view benefited greatly from it, all others who, for whatever reason, did not share Calvin's view, were immediately consigned to the category of sinners and godless so frequently invoked in the sermons. Already in Calvin's time, there were many such people, which makes clear how Calvin's approach to Job inevitably has political implications, namely, the exclusion of all those who do not accept the Calvinist way of life.

The closed nature of Calvin's interpretation of Job is re-enforced by what I have called his inverted hermeneutic. As we saw above, Calvin deals with the canonical text in a remarkable way in that he affirms and denies parts of the text selectively in order to bring the message of the text for his own day in line with his interests. Although Calvin formally affirms that the whole of the Bible should be taken as the Word of God, he deviates from that principle materially by criticising parts of Scripture, even when, strictly speaking, the text as such does not provide an occasion for it. As we saw in the previous section, the main motives for affirming some passages and rejecting others are Calvin's religious view and the context in which he lived. In addition, Calvin's view of the message of Scripture as a whole plays a role in this critical strategy, yet ultimately, this notion of canonical interpretation can, in turn, be traced back to his own religious identity. The choice to read Scripture as a whole with the hermeneutical key of Pauline soteriology is profoundly embedded in the Western theological tradition. His attempt to overcome the nominalist concept of God in which sovereignty equals arbitrariness is also motivated by the questions of his time. Calvin's work makes it amply clear that, while he tried to overcome nominalism, he was nevertheless deeply influenced by it.

Again, however, in spite of the possibly regrettable effects of Calvin's inverted hermeneutic, the primary goals behind it should be evaluated positively as a strategy for actualising the biblical text for the context of the day. In the previous chapter, we paid attention to midrash as a strategy to bridge the gap between an ancient text and a new context that the old text no longer fits. In midrash, the gap is bridged by reinterpreting the text in the light of other scriptural material. Thus, the text is sometimes tacitly criticised without its authoritative status being given up. Although Calvin's interpretation is not a midrash in the formal sense of the term and his insistence upon the literal sense of the text seems at odds with midrashic exegesis, the hermeneutical strategy behind his inverted hermeneutic is the same, namely, to retain the authority of the text by criticising it in a selective fashion in the light of other parts of Scripture or accepted frames of reference. Although one might dislike the political aspects of the way in which Calvin accomplished the actualisation of the text for his day, he basically had no other choice than to reinterpret the text. The attitude of protest in suffering, exemplified by the figure of Job, was not only politically incorrect, but also out of the question

for many in his audience, because most of them were not in a life situation in which revolution was a live option. They were much more encouraged by a message that supported their patience and trust in a sovereign God than by an uncertain and chaotic revolution, which would threaten the very basis of their society and religion.

Finally, we must address the question how Calvin's approach relates to criteria for truthful interpretation of Scripture. Did his Reformation principle of *scriptura sola* stimulate a faithful encounter between his audience and the text? Again, just as saw in the previous chapter, this is usually a difficult issue to assess. Although, unlike the *Testament of Job*, Calvin's sermons are very much concerned with the 'true meaning' of the text, this 'true meaning' is not always easy to connect with the historical meaning of the text. The problem is that many applications that Calvin draws from the text are so far removed from the original context of the text that it becomes almost useless to ask whether or not such an application was rightly derived from it or not. The connection between Calvin's willingness to accept criticism in the beginning of Job 7, for instance, and its polemical connection with the 'Papists', is very difficult to assess in hermeneutical terms. The element of criticism is there, although it is embedded in a rhetorical encounter with the friends, but it is all too obvious that the particular application to the contemporary conflict with the Roman Catholic church is made by Calvin. It is also clear that Calvin has ideological reasons for this application. However, that in itself does not disqualify his application. This is just one example, but it makes clear that, in many cases, it is hardly meaningful to ask whether or not Calvin's interpretation of the text is justified.

At a general level, however, we can state quite confidently that Calvin's actual way of interpreting the book of Job does not match a strict *scriptura sola*. As we saw in previous sections, the reader has a major role to play. As I have argued above, we need not necessarily object to this major role assigned to the reader, for it makes the text relevant to the context in which the reader lives. Bouwsma's general statement that "The Reformation slogan *scriptura sola* was intrinsically naive"⁷⁶ applies also to the sermons on Job, but it should be asked whether the Reformers ever intended the maxim as a strict hermeneutical rule. If we look at the way in which the slogan figures in Calvin's work, we see that it fulfilled various functions in his theology. First of all, it certainly contained a 'liberation' aspect, which was aimed at abandoning the paternalism of the clerics over the reading of Scripture. Secondly, the *sola scriptura* maxim, partly rooted as it was in the rise of historical consciousness connected with Renaissance humanism, also involved a quest for the true historical sense of Scripture. This is evident from the sermons and commentaries, where Calvin freely criticises accepted interpretations of the texts because they "do not fit" into what the author of the text wanted to say.

No doubt these aspects are there, as the standard accounts of Reformation theology tell us, but in my view, it is only half of the story.⁷⁷ Thirdly, then, as we saw in our analysis of the sermons, the principle that liberates people from

⁷⁶ Bouwsma, *John Calvin*, p. 98.

⁷⁷ See, for instance, Thomas F. Torrance, *The Hermeneutics of John Calvin*, Monograph Supplements to the *Scottish Journal of Theology* (Edinburgh: Scottish Academic Press, 1988), pp. 62–72; Parker, pp. 1–7; Moehn, pp. 220–225, 245–250.

the abuse of power structures functions, at the same time, as a legitimisation of a new group identity, including a new hierarchical order. It is precisely the idea of *sola scriptura* that justifies Calvin in maintaining that Reformed theology is the one and only right interpretation of Scripture, and should therefore be accepted by everyone on penalty of being excluded from the political and spiritual order. This political aspect of the maxim eventually caused the principle's self-critical character, which was such an important aspect of it originally, to collapse.⁷⁸

⁷⁸ The question one may ask oneself is, of course, whether Calvin and his fellow Reformers actually had a choice. Could they have developed a kind of theology that was more open and self-critical than they actually did? In one sense, they probably could not. Given the time in which they lived, the complete democratisation of religion and politics was out of order. Crudely formulated: if they had done it – as some of their contemporaries actually *did*, e.g. Servet and Montaigne – someone else would have taken their job of serving a community in search of certainty with a relatively absolutist system. On the other hand, apart from this sociological point of view, and given the time in which they lived, the personal choice was nevertheless available, as is clear from thinkers like Erasmus, Montaigne, Servet, and other intellectuals of their day.

Orlando di Lasso

5.1 INTRODUCTION

Theodore Beza wrote an introduction to the Latin edition of Calvin's sermons on Job. In this introduction, he remarks that in spite of the little attention that has been paid to the book of Job in the past, "also in Christian funerals, contaminated in a horrible way later on, lections as they call it were taken from this our book of Job for a long time already"¹ These *lectiones*,² set to music by the sixteenth century composer Orlando di Lasso, are the topic of this chapter. We will remain in the Renaissance era, but turn our attention from Protestant theology in Geneva to Roman Catholic music at the court of the Duke of Bavaria, Germany. In Calvin, we encountered primarily a theological interpretation of the text; in Lasso we find music aiming to move the heart of the listener.

Among the interpretations of Job discussed in this book, that of Lasso has a special place. It is an interpretation in music rather than in words. Therefore, I will attempt to excavate Lasso's interpretation by means of musicological analyses, giving this study an interdisciplinary twist. The central question of this book is not simply: How are the theological views people derive from the book of Job related to the context in which the interpreters live? The question is much broader: What 'happens' when interpreters from many different contexts read the book of Job? The way in which the book of Job has been interpreted in the visual arts has been researched before.³ In this chapter, the question is what happens when the text of the book of Job is used in a piece of music. Much of 'what happens' in this case will not be of special interest for the theologian as far as content is concerned. That is to say: much of what happens in this interpretation of Job does not directly express a certain theological view. Rather, it shows something about the interaction between a biblical text and its musical context. The analysis of

¹ Theodore Beza, 'Preface to the Latin Edition', in: Baum et al., *Ioannis Calvini opera quae supersunt omnia*: "atque adeo in christianis exsequiis, postea horrendum in modum contaminatis, lectiones quas vocant iam pridem fuerunt ex hoc nostro lobo depromptae".

² In this chapter, when I refer to the liturgical texts from the book of Job in distinction from Lasso's setting of them, I use a non-capitalised version of 'lectiones'. For Lasso's motet cycles based on these *lectiones*, I use either *Lectiones* for the first motet cycle, or *Lectiones novae* for the second.

³ Samuel Terrien, *The Iconography of Job through the Centuries: Artists as Biblical Interpreters* (University Park, Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1996).

this interaction will prove to be significant for understanding the hermeneutical process—the central issue to be addressed in part III

There are various material results on the theological level as well. First of all, it will turn out that in this extraordinary case, we in fact encounter the form of the book of Job that was most commonly known among the general public for centuries. The selection of texts that makes up the *lectiones* was widely used for private devotion in the Middle Ages. Furthermore, in this particular interpretation of Job, the phenomenon of *selection* proves to be particularly significant. The *lectiones* are all taken from the speeches of Job, the part of the book that, as we saw in the previous chapter, Calvin interpreted in an implicitly critical way. Lasso sets these *lectiones* to music, but as I will show in due course, the theology behind his music is not as far removed from Calvin as his choice of texts to be set to music might suggest. Finally, the technical analysis of Lasso's music has interesting theological implications. It reveals a sovereign God, approached by a humble and submissive believer.

The theological aspects of Lasso's music are discussed primarily in sections 5.5, 5.7, and 5.8. The musicological analysis is presented in the next section and in section 5.6. The musicological sections can be skipped if these prove too difficult for those without a basic musical training.

5.2 AN IMPRESSION

The *Lectioes*, the topic of this chapter, is the first motet cycle Lasso composed on these liturgical texts. This first cycle, with the full title *Sacrae lectiones ex Propheta Iob*, was composed around 1560 for the private use of the Bavarian duke Albrecht V. It was published in 1565. It is a typical example of Lasso's style of composing in his earlier years. The second musical setting of the *lectiones* appeared much later in his career. It appeared in 1582 under the title *Lectioes sacrae novem, ex libris Hiob excerptae*. In this chapter, I restrict myself to the first cycle.

It is difficult to provide an impression of a piece of music in writing. Music must be heard, not read about.⁴ Nevertheless, I will give an in-depth discussion of one of the *Lectioes* in order to convey an impression of the compositional techniques Lasso used to elucidate the meaning of the text. I discuss the first *Lectio*, because its text well represents the whole of the cycle, and the means of text expression used in it adequately reflect the musical style of the cycle as a whole. Wherever possible, I will try to explain the properties of the music in such a way that it is accessible even to readers with little or no musical training. I apologise to readers with a more thorough musical education, for whom some explanations of musical figures will be redundant or oversimplified.

The text of the first *lectio* not only represents the compositional style of the music which Lasso wrote on the text adequately, but also provides an fair sample of the content of the *lectiones* as a whole:

⁴ As far as I know, there is one recent compact disc recording of only the first cycle, published on the Chamade label (CHCD 5656) by the vocal ensemble Cori Spezzati, under the direction of Olivier Opdebeeck. On this recording, each *Lectio* is followed by the corresponding *responsorium*. This is a viable arrangement, and the artistic effect is certainly beautiful, but as I will show below, it suggests a liturgical context of the *Lectioes* which, historically speaking, is rather unlikely.

Spare me, Lord, for my days are nothing. What is a man that thou shouldst magnify him? or why dost thou set thy heart upon him? Thou visitest him early in the morning, and thou provest him suddenly. How long wilt thou not spare me, nor suffer me to swallow down my spittle? I have sinned: what shall I do to thee, O keeper of men? Why hast thou set me opposite to thee, and I am become burdensome to myself? Why dost thou not remove my sin, and why dost thou not take away my iniquity? Behold now I shall sleep in the dust: and if thou seek me in the morning, I shall not be. (Job 7: 16–21)⁵

The opening of the first *Lectio* is impressive. All voices start together with long note values on the words “Parce mihi, Domine” (Spare me, Lord). The dramatic effect of these words is enhanced in various ways. First, Lasso introduces a note e-flat ‘foreign to the mode’⁶ in the tenor and bass (‘A’ in figure 5.1), which gives the third chord on ‘mi-’ special force. The e-flat returns in the melisma⁷ on ‘Do-’ in the tenor (‘B’ in figure 5.1). The melismas on ‘-hi’ and ‘Do-’ in the soprano and tenor re-emphasise the dramatic character of the text. Finally, Lasso achieves an alienating effect through a very irregular cadence⁸ at the end of the phrase. The melismas on ‘Do-’ in soprano and tenor, and the g in the bass (‘C’ in figure 5.1) strongly suggest a resolution of the cadence into a C major chord. A cadence on C would have been perfectly apt given the mode of the *Lectio*. However, Lasso resolves the cadence into F, the finalis of the *Lectio*, instead, thus evoking a feeling of alienation in the audience.

The next phrase on “nihil enim sunt dies mei” (for my days are nothing) borrows its dramatic effect from being the exact counterpart of the previous one. Here, we find strictly syllabic text expression, short note values, combined with a low register in the soprano. The phrase is preceded by a rest (‘D’ in figure 5.1), further emphasising the ‘nothingness’ of the text. Finally, exactly opposite to the irregular and henceforth striking cadence at the end of the first phrase, the second phrase hardly has a cadence.⁹ The cadence is apparently on F again, but this note is deliberately left out in the soprano (‘E’ in figure 5.1), and in the tenor, the next phrase starts already before the final note sounds (‘F’ in figure 5.1).

The next phrase “Quid est homo, quia magnificas eum?” (What is a man that thou shouldst magnify him?) offers less startling effects. Lasso mimics

⁵ In this chapter, I follow Bergquist in taking all English quotations from the book of Job or the *lectiones* from the Douai-Rheims Bible. This English translation of the Bible was prepared in the sixteenth century and thus most accurately reflects the sixteenth century interpretation of the Vulgate text.

⁶ The concept of ‘mode’ in sixteenth century music is rather difficult to explain. At first, it may seem some sort of equivalent to the modern concept of tonality. However, in sixteenth century polyphony, it encompasses many other aspects, for example the range (*ambitus*) of the melody, its beginning and end, and a secondary note playing a central role (the *repercussio*). The still definitive guide to modality in sixteenth century music is Bernhard Meier, *The Modes of Classical Vocal Polyphony: Described According to the Sources*, trans. from the German by Ellen S. Beebe, with revisions by the author (New York: Broude Brothers, 1988).

⁷ ‘Melisma’ means that more than one note accompanies one syllable. Accordingly, one speaks about melismatic and syllabic rendering of a text in music.

⁸ The term ‘cadence’ has various meanings in musicology. In Renaissance music, it means the stereotype ending of a musical phrase—mostly corresponding to a cesura in the text. For an extensive treatment of cadences in sixteenth century music, see *ibid.*, pp. 89–122.

⁹ The technical term for this phenomenon is *cadenza fuggita*, *ibid.*, pp. 100–101.

Par- ce mi- hi Do- - mi- ne:

Par- ce mi- hi Do- - mi- ne:

Par- ce mi- hi Do- - mi- ne:

Par- ce mi- hi Do- - mi- ne:

ni- hil e- nim sunt di- es me- i. Quid

ni- hil e- nim sunt di- es me- i. Quid

ni- hil e- nim sunt di- es me- i. Quid est

ni- hil e- nim sunt di- es me- i. Quid

Detailed description: The image shows a musical score for a Latin text. It consists of two systems of four staves each. The first system contains the text 'Par- ce mi- hi Do- - mi- ne:'. The second system contains the text 'ni- hil e- nim sunt di- es me- i. Quid'. The music is written in a single melodic line across four staves, with various accidentals and dynamics. Chords are labeled with letters A, B, C, D, E, and F. The text is written in a Gothic-style font, with hyphens indicating syllable placement across notes. The score is set in a key with one flat (B-flat) and a common time signature (C).

Figure 5.1: The Opening Phrases of Lectio 1

‘magnification’ by as it were piling up the voices on top of each other. He interprets the phrase in a positive way, expressed in the polyphonic rendering of the phrase with short notes in a high register. This is, again, in sharp contradistinction to “aut quid apponis erga eum cor tuum?” (or why dost thou set thy heart upon him?). Here, there is little or no motion due to repetition of notes and chords (‘apponis!’).¹⁰

With “Visitas eum diluculo” (Thou visitest him early in the morning) and “et subito probas illum” (and thou provest him suddenly), we enter in a positive

¹⁰ Cf. Meier, pp. 244–245.

hi, _____ nec _____ di- mit- tis me,

hi, nec _____ di- mit- tis me, nec _____ di- mit- tis me, nec di- - mit- tis me, nec

hi, nec di- mit- tis me, nec _____ di- mit- tis me, nec di- mit- tis me,

hi, nec di- mit- tis me, nec _____ di- mit- tis me, nec di- mit- tis me,

nec di- mit- tis me, nec _____ di- mit- tis me, _____

_____ di- mit- tis _____ me, nec _____ di- mit- tis me, _____

nec _____ di- mit- tis me, ut glu - ti- am

nec di- mit- tis me, nec _____ di- mit- tis me, ut glu- ti-

Figure 5.2: Fauxbourdon figure on “nec dimittis me”

mood once again. The light of dawn is illustrated by the lack of a bass voice, and the general character of the music is joyful, with short notes in a high register. On ‘subito probas’ short notes are used and the voices are shifted a little, notes strung closely together, so that the audience hears many ‘subito’s in quick succession. On “Usquequo non parcis mihi” (How long wilt thou not spare me), especially the high register on ‘mihi’ catches the ear. The soprano and tenor reach a g², the soprano’s highest note in this Lectio. This g², is again part of an E-flat major chord, which can hardly be an accident, given the parallel with the opening phrase “Parce mihi”.

The words that follow “nec dimittis me” (nor depart from me), provide the

The image shows a musical score for the text "Peccavi". It consists of four staves. The first staff is a vocal line with lyrics "Pec- ca- - vi- - - quid" and is divided into sections A, B, and C. The second staff continues the lyrics "Pec- - ca- - vi, pec- - ca- - vi,". The third staff continues "Pec- - ca- - vi, pec- - ca- - vi,". The fourth staff is a bass line with lyrics "Pec- ca- - vi,". The music is in a key with one flat and common time.

Figure 5.3: Commixtio tonorum on “Peccavi”

first instance of a recurring musical figure in the *Lectiones*, the so-called ‘fauxbourdon’ (see figure 5.2).¹¹ This is a sequence of (descending) parallel sixths or tenths, usually with a third voice in between. In the *Lectiones* it usually has a negative connotation due to the lack of *diversitas* in the flow of the different voices, an important requirement of the Flemish polyphonic style. It seems that Lasso illustrates the text through a play on one of the essential features of a fauxbourdon. One of the theoretically interesting features of a fauxbourdon is that it can be left at any time. Any of the major sixths in the sequence can be the basis of a cadence into the octave. However, each time the fauxbourdon cadences into the octave – on ‘me’ of course – Lasso already starts a new fauxbourdon-like figure. The fauxbourdon is ‘left’, but it gains a sense of inevitability in Lasso’s setting.

The first part of the first *Lectio* ends on the words “ut glutiam salivam meam” (to swallow down my spittle). The high register on ‘meam’ is striking again. Here, the tenor reaches his highest note on a’, and the soprano ascends to g”. It seems that the composer wants to put the subject of suffering into the very centre of the music. I will deal with the meaning of this below, when I discuss the implicit theology of Lasso’s music.

The second part of the first *Lectio* opens with an exposition of “Peccavi” (I have sinned). For sixteenth century composers, the word ‘sin’ is often an occasion to violate compositional rules. We saw such a ‘sin’ already on “nec dimittis me”. The rule of *diversitas* was violated by the sequence of sixths in the fauxbourdon. The sin committed on “Peccavi” is of a rather complicated kind. Meier, in his ground-breaking work *The Modes of Classical Vocal Polyphony: Described According*

¹¹ Further examples include *Lectio* two, “in amaritudine”, “opus manuum tuarum”, and *Lectio* seven “et in amaritudinibus”. On the fauxbourdon figure, see Clemens Kühn, *Analyse lernen*, Bärenreiter Studienbücher Musik 4 (Kassel: Bärenreiter, 1992), pp. 45–47; Meier, p. 246.

to the Sources explains how composers deliberately violated the theoretical rules of classical polyphonic music by explicitly introducing the parameters of a foreign mode into the melodic flow of a motive.¹² The setting of “Peccavi” provides an almost standard example of this technique.¹³ The first *Lectio* is in mode five. The central notes in mode five are *f'*, *c''*, and *f''*. The two *f*'s are the marking boundaries of the range within which the music will move (soprano and tenor, with an octave in between off course), and the *c''* in between is what Meier calls the *repercussio*.¹⁴ Here, however, Lasso deliberately starts the soprano on *g'* ('A' in figure 5.3), the note above the final, lets it ascend to *b-flat'* ('B' in figure 5.3) and returns to *g'* ('C' in figure 5.3). This minor third is the defining characteristic of mode two, transposed to *g*, one fifth downwards.¹⁵

On “quid faciam tibi, o custos hominum?” (what shall I do to thee, O keeper of men?), few exceptional things happen. The high register of both the soprano and the tenor are significant on ‘ti-’, and so is the E-flat major chord on ‘cu-’. The latter suggests that Lasso was at least ambiguous about God’s care, consistent of course with the context of the phrase. The most prominent feature of “Quare me posuisti” (Why hast thou set me) is the wide range of the motive. The bass, who opens the polyphonic setting of this phrase, starts on *c'*, ascends to *d'*, and subsequently descends stepwise – with one exception – to *d*, one octave lower:



Qua- re me po- - su- i- - sti

The range of the soprano is even slightly wider. The soprano starts on *f''*, rises to *g''*, and with big leaps, descends to *f'*:



Qua- re me po- su- i- sti,

In the light of the remainder of the *Lectio*, and perhaps the whole cycle, it is significant that the motive begins in the high register, on “quare me”. As we have seen, Lasso had a strong preference for a high register on ‘me’. The subject of the sufferer has a high range, and God who places – “posuisti” – receives a low range. This is significant, as I will explain in section 5.7.

The musical expression of “contrarium tibi” (opposite to thee) is unambiguously clear. The word ‘contrarium’ is illustrated by ascending versus descending movement in different voices. The soprano opens with a descending figure, accompanied halfway by the tenor with an ascending figure. Soprano and bass follow with the descending figure, accompanied halfway by the alto with an

¹² The technical term Meier uses for this phenomenon is *commixtio tonorum*, or in English, a ‘commixture of the mode’. Meier, pp. 286–289.

¹³ Cf. *ibid.*, pp. 317–318.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 39–41. For some readers, it might help to think of the *repercussio* as a precursor of what in modern musical theory is called the *dominant*, although the *repercussio* is by far not always the fifth above the final and fulfils other functions in classical polyphony than the dominant in tonal theory.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 41.

et factus sum mihi metipsum gravis? Cur

tibi, et factus sum mihi metipsum gravis? Cur

tibi, et factus sum mihi metipsum gravis? Cur

tibi, et factus sum mihi metipsum gravis?

non tollis peccatum meum, et

non tollis, cur non tollis peccatum meum, et

non tollis, cur non tollis peccatum meum,

Cur non tollis peccatum meum, et

Figure 5.4: Commixtio tonorum on “cur non tollis”

ascending figure and so on. After this polyphonic passage, “et factus sum mihi metipsum gravis?” (and I am become burdensome to myself?) is almost note against note, with little motion and long note values on ‘gravis’. The use of an E-flat chord wholly fits into the bleak atmosphere of this passage. Against this background, the huge leaps of the bass, two fifths and an octave, are all the more significant, although it is difficult to see why they are used to illustrate being ‘burdensome to oneself’. One might interpret it as a kind of ‘musical stumbling’—see figure 5.4.

The phrase “Cur non tollis peccatum meum” (Why dost thou not remove my sin) is again reason for Lasso to play with the rules of the mode. The words “cur non tollis” are repeated twice. The first time, the tenor introduces the

phrase starting on d' ('A' in figure 5.4), descends a half tone to c-sharp' ('B' in figure 5.4), returns to d' and moves to f' ('C' in figure 5.4). In fact, this is again an introduction of mode two, this time in untransposed form. The introduction of mode two is established by the use of c-sharp, the leading tone to the final d of mode two, and the ambitus of the motive d'-f'.¹⁶ Perhaps this is a musical illustration of the temporary 'removal' (tollere) of the b-flat key signature of mode five or simply of the temporary removal of mode five as a whole. Interestingly, the first presentation ends on b-flat ('D' in figure 5.4), bringing the music immediately back to the original mode. The temporary character of the 'removal' of the mode proves significant. God does *not* remove the sin of the sufferer. The motive initially presented by the tenor is then presented a fifth lower by the bass, thereby presenting mode two transposed to g ('E' to 'F' in figure 5.4). However, the last note of the motive, b-flat in the initial presentation, is now e-flat in the bass, introducing a new violation of the mode on the word 'peccatum'.

Lasso's setting of "et quare non auferis iniquitatem meam?" (and why do you not take away my iniquity?) uses a musical device that we have already encountered: the fauxbourdon. Here, it is clearly used as an 'iniquity' against the rule of the *diversitas*.

"Ecce nunc in pulvere dormiam" (Behold now I shall sleep in the dust:) starts in slightly polyphonic style, with the effect that the audience hears "Ecce nunc" four times, rather than only once. From "in pulvere" until the end of the Lectio, the text is expressed in strict note against note style. On 'pul-', an E-flat chord is used; slow movement, little motion, and a low register are used to depict the dust and sleep. The 'dormiam' is most emphatically expressed, however, by an interruption of the musical flow: a rest closes the phrase, even at a moment when one would normally expect the C chord of '-am' to cadence into the final F.

A typically alienating effect is realised on "et si mane me quaesieris" (and if thou seek me in the morning). In slightly quicker movement various accidentals create a strange chord progression. On the first 'e-ris', Lasso places an accidental before the b-flat ('A' in figure 5.5), changing the g minor chord to G major. Immediately after it, on the second 'si', the tenor has an e-flat ('B' in figure 5.5), changing the C major chord to c minor, followed by a D major chord due to a fis in the alto ('C' in figure 5.5). On "non subsistam" (I shall not be.), finally, 'non' has an E-flat chord, stressing the negative affective connotation of the text.

5.3 FRANCO-FLEMISH POLYPHONY

Lasso's music is one of the late examples of what is known in musicological literature as 'Franco-Flemish polyphony'.¹⁷ In this section, I will introduce the most important aspects of this phenomenon from the perspective of the history

¹⁶ In technical – solmised – form: the interval re-fa.

¹⁷ There are two recent and excellent introductions to it: Willem Elders, *Composers of the Low Countries*, trans. from the Dutch by Graham Dixon (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991), and Ignace Bossuyt, *De Vlaamse polyfonie* (Leuven: Davidsfonds, 1994). The latter has been translated into all main European languages. References in this text are to the original Dutch edition.

The image displays a musical score for the Latin phrase "et si mane me quaesieris". It consists of two systems of four staves each. The first system includes vocal parts (Soprano, Alto, Tenor) and a Bass line. The second system continues the vocal parts and Bass line. The lyrics are: "et si ma- - ne me quae- si- e- ris, et si ma- ne me quae- si- e- ris, non sub- si- - stam." The score features irregular chord progressions, with specific chords labeled A, B, and C. The key signature is one flat (B-flat), and the time signature is common time (C). The lyrics are written below the staves, with hyphens indicating syllables that span across multiple notes.

Figure 5.5: Irregular chord progression on “et si mane me quaesieris”

of music. Before I explore Franco-Flemish polyphony in historical perspective, I should briefly explain both parts of the term.

The first part ‘Franco-Flemish’ designates the geographical region where this kind of music originated. Although few people know this, from the 14th to the 16th century, polyphonic music was dominated by musicians coming from the low countries,¹⁸ nowadays roughly coinciding with the Flemish speaking part of Belgium—the reason why some researchers of the period prefer to speak about

¹⁸ Elders.

'Flemish polyphony'.¹⁹ Most of the leading musicians during this period were born in Flanders, where they received their musical education at one of the cathedral schools of such cities as Antwerp, Bruges, Liège, Cambrai, Tournai, etc. From Flanders, they spread over the whole of Europe with important concentrations in Italy (Venice), Spain (court of Charles V, Phillips II), and Bavaria in Germany (court of the duke).²⁰ There was a real race among the rulers of the day to have the best *fiamminghi* in their court choirs.²¹

For the explanation of the second term, 'polyphony', we must go back to the 9th century, when multiple voices come to be added to gregorian chant. Until the 12th century, these added voices remain largely parallel – in distance and measure – to the gregorian melody, so that we cannot really speak of polyphonic music prior to that period.²² From then onwards, however, the additional voices become more and more independent from the gregorian original, which leads to the development of what is known as the 'cantus-firmus Mass' in the 14th and 15th century. This specific type of composition for the Mass consists of a musical setting of all five parts of the Mass ceremony – Kyrie, Gloria, Credo, Sanctus, and Agnus Dei – on a tenor melody. This melody is called the 'cantus firmus'; it is derived from gregorian chant or a secular source. The other voices of the composition are freely composed by the musician and remain secondary to the cantus firmus. This development occurs mainly in the 15th century and is especially connected with the name of the Flemish composer Guillaume Dufay. The further development of the Mass composition consists of the other voices' becoming more and more independent from the cantus firmus by taking over thematic material from it and eventually gaining equal rank over against the tenor voice.²³

Having its roots in the religious realm, the Mass remains the locus of polyphonic art par excellence, but it is increasingly accompanied by sacred – albeit less strictly liturgical – genres and purely secular ones. Throughout the 15th and 16th century, the various genres begin mutually to influence each another. For example, when the Flemish composers begin to write in secular genres, the genre of the French chanson, originally rooted in folk music, is influenced by the polyphonic techniques as developed in Mass compositions. On the other hand – and this is particularly significant for our case – the mainly sacred genre of the motet is heavily influenced by the secular genre of the Italian madrigal during the 16th century.²⁴

Because the madrigal played a crucial role in the development of Lasso's style, I need to pay some attention to it, but it is embedded in a much broader earlier development which we might call the 'humanisation' of polyphonic music.

¹⁹ Cf. Bossuyt, p. 19.

²⁰ Elders, pp. 6–15.

²¹ These remarks show already that the increasing popularity of the Franco-Flemish polyphonists went hand in hand with the secularisation of the musical sphere. This is in line with our general remarks about the development of intellectual life outside the sacred sphere of the church during the Renaissance period. See also *Ibid.*, pp. 127–136.

²² Bossuyt, p. 22.

²³ *Ibid.*, pp. 39–43; Elders, pp. 16–23, 27–48.

²⁴ Bossuyt, pp. 47–48, 53–54.

This development is particularly connected with the person of Josquin des Prez (approx. 1440–1521). The discussion of Lasso's *Lectio* in section 5.2 has made clear that the construction of a polyphonic piece of music is a highly technical undertaking. Anyone who has listened to J.S. Bach's *The Art of Fugue*, his various fugues for organ or parts of his Brandenburg concertos will acknowledge this. This was all the more so for the Franco-Flemish polyphonists, because they submitted themselves to a set of rigid rules that their counterpoint needed to obey. These rules included the way melodies had to be written (i.e. the flow of individual voices), which intervals between voices were allowed, how musical sentences needed to end, and so on. The aim of these rules was to give polyphonic music its gracefully flowing character and sonorous sound.²⁵

However, with Josquin, composing around the turn of the century, this technical view of music became supplemented by the typically Renaissance focus on the human and the rhetorical in text and music. This stimulated a groundbreaking new interest in, first, the way in which the text used in a piece of music was formally expressed and, second, the way in which the content of the text – whether psychological or material – was communicated by the musical expression of it. With regard to the more formal word-tone relationships, this humanist perspective led to a strongly syllabic approach to melody writing—one syllable to one tone. Furthermore, a very strong relationship between word and musical accentuation was developed. Finally, Josquin introduced homophonic parts – all voices simultaneously sing the same text, also called 'note against note' – into the polyphonic textures in order to emphasise certain elements of the texts. Apart from these more formal additions to the toolkit of the writers of polyphonic music, more creative ways were developed to effectively communicate the text through the music. Examples include lower tones for darkness and sorrow, and higher tones for light and joy, falling musical lines for mourning and climbing lines for expressions of joy.²⁶

The new developments mentioned above eventually transformed the large technical polyphonic structures into much more down to earth instruments of musical rhetoric, aimed not only at the mind of the listener but also at the heart and affections. This holds especially for the less strict genres like the motet in the sacred sphere and the chanson in the secular realm. The humanist genre *par excellence*, however, was to be the Italian madrigal. Originally a folklorist genre associated with carnival, it developed during the first half of the 16th century into the most experimental intellectual genre of the day. The two composers who brought the madrigal its great fame were the choirmasters of the Venetian San Marco cathedral Adrian Willaert (approx. 1490–1562) and Cipriano de Rore (1515/16–1565). The composers of the madrigal favoured the typical Renaissance love poems of Petrarca as the basis of their compositions. Willaert and De Rore employed all the word-tone techniques introduced by Josquin in their madrigals and in addition, they invented chromatic techniques in order to symbolise various aspects of the text.²⁷

²⁵ Bossuyt, pp. 24–28.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 93–97.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 120–121.

When Lasso began to publish his music around the middle of the 16th century, he positioned himself firmly in the Venetian tradition of Willaert and De Rore. The experimental techniques for the musical expression of the text invented in the madrigal found their way into all the other genres, such as the motet and the chanson.

5.4 LIFE AND WORK

Nowadays, Lasso no longer enjoys much popularity, neither among musicologists nor among performers of Renaissance music, although he is formally recognised as one of the most important composers of his time. A complete, critical edition of his about three thousand works does not yet exist. This situation stands in sharp contrast to the fame and popularity he enjoyed in his own time. His works, which comprised all the genres of his time, were printed time and again by the major publishers. Lasso wrote a great number of Masses, Magnificats, motets, madrigals, chansons and villanellas (light weight secular genre) and showed himself a master in all.

Due to the fact that in spite of his greatness, Lasso received little attention in later times, we know relatively little about his life.²⁸ Uncertainty starts with his name.²⁹ Lasso is most widely known as 'Orlando di Lasso', which is a form of his name which occurs only rarely in his own time. It seems to be a contraction of his two Italian names: 'Orlando di Lassus' and 'Orlando Lasso'. The most probable form of his original French name was 'Orlande de Lassus', which makes clear that, contrary to appearance, the form 'Lassus' was not a Latinisation of his name, but the original form. The next uncertainty is his birthyear. Scholarly consensus takes 1530/32 as his year of birth in the Flemish town Bergen—now known as Mons in Belgium.³⁰ About his family and boyhood we know very little. His first biographer tells us that he received his early education in Mons and that he was abducted three times because of his beautiful voice, not uncommon practice at the time.

The third time was definitive. Lasso was snatched by agents of the viceroy of Sicily, Italy, who was a commander in the army of Charles V. Lasso was taken to his master Ferdinand I de Gonzaga. He probably served as a choirboy in De Gonzaga's chapel until his 18th year. From 1549–1554, Lasso served as a household musician in Naples and Rome. After having spent so many years in Italy, Lasso returned to his home country in 1554, initially for visiting his parents who were terminally ill and actually died before he arrived. Then, Lasso moved to Antwerp where he lived as a free person teaching music to the upper class of

²⁸ The definitive guide is still: Horst Leuchtman, *Orlando di Lasso* (Wiesbaden: Breitkopf und Härtel, 1976–1977). An English translation of the main biographical data as found in Leuchtman (1976–1977) is provided by James Erb, *Orlando di Lasso: A Guide to Research*, Garland Composer Resource Manuals 25 (New York & London: Garland, 1990), pp. 4–31. Other interesting biographical works are Franzpeter Messmer, *Orlando di Lasso: Ein Leben in der Renaissance* (München: Edition Wissenschaft & Literatur, 1982) and the older Charles van den Borren, *Roland de Lassus*, Notre passé. 2me série 5 (Bruxelles: Renaissance du livre, 1943).

²⁹ Leuchtman, *Orlando di Lasso*, pp. 62–72.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 61–62, 72–81.

the city. During the Antwerp period he started publishing his compositions. His international orientation is immediately evident from his earliest publications. They appeared in Antwerp – with the famous music printer Tilman Susato – Venice, and Rome, and encompassed the major genres of the time, including madrigals, villanellas, chansons, and motets.

The definitive step in Lasso's career followed soon after. Probably in 1556, he was invited to Munich as a tenor of the chapel of the duke of Bavaria, Germany. At that time, his salary already exceeded that of the current choirmaster at the Bavarian court. Lasso remained in Munich, first as a singer in the choir, later as choirmaster, until his death in 1594. Although an employee of the duke, he had an close relationship with his master's family, first with Albrecht V and later on with his son, Wilhelm V. Leuchtman writes:

True, Lasso is an employee; he belongs among the court's household staff. But he stands out as a fine gentleman, a cosmopolitan who through his sophistication impresses the Bavarian Duke. Elevated above the host of his "fellows" or "consorts" as the official language of the time expresses it, he soon commands the compensation of an educated bourgeois councillor, a class for which he lacks the juristic education as well as the family origin and the financial means that he has yet to earn. But soon he will be raised to nobility by Emperor and Pope. Lasso is the Renaissance Composer absolute.³¹

Lasso's close friendship with Wilhelm – already before Wilhelm succeeded his father as duke – is well documented in a preserved correspondence between them.

The remainder of Lasso's life consisted essentially of publishing a massive amount of music, becoming ever more famous throughout the European Continent, making various trips outside Germany, some to the Netherlands for recruiting new members for the chapel's choir, others with the duke to provide music during his journeys. During the earlier years in Munich, various important works were composed, among which are the first series of *Lectiones* (published in 1565), the *Prophetiae Sybillarum* (published only posthumously) and the *Psalms Poenitentiales* (published only in 1584). Later remarkable publications are the second series of *Lectiones* on Job (1582, probably composed in earlier years), the *Lamentationes Jeremiae* (most well known five voices edition; lesser known four voices version: both 1585) and finally his swan song: the *Lagime di San Petro*, a collection of so-called 'madrigali spirituali' for seven voices.

Of course, the works mentioned are only the longer motet cycles on mostly biblical texts that are most well known nowadays. They are only a fraction of a continuously flowing stream of chansons, motets, madrigals, Masses and Magnificats appearing under such titles as 'Cantiones sacrae' (1562, 1582, 1585) and 'Patrocinium musices' (1574, 1586, 1589).³²

When I portrayed Calvin as a man of his time, I described the Renaissance as a time of rapid change, where the old stable structure of the church, rooted in a hierarchical divine order began to be broken up in favour of the worldly categories of the empirical, the emotional and the individual. We saw that these

³¹ Horst Leuchtman, 'Orlando di Lasso or: Inspired Madness: Humanistic Music in and out of Season', in: Erb, *Orlando di Lasso*, p. xxii.

³² For a chronological list of works, see Erb, pp. 33–151.

disturbing tendencies in Western culture evoked a counter movement that tried to re-establish a new stable culture and society. I argued that Calvin participated in both movements, the liberation and the consolidation, but eventually ended up in the latter. Lasso, although in a very different way, is as much a man of the Renaissance as Calvin. In his personality as well as his work, a profound ambivalence can be discerned between his pious adherence to the teachings of the church on the one hand, and his whole-hearted participation in an evolving secular sphere on the other. On the one hand, Lasso wrote magnificent settings of the Mass, of the Magnificat and, more especially, of the *Psalmos Poenitentiales*, the *Lectiones* on the book of Job, and the *Lamentationes Jeremiae*, all full of devotion and the sadness that is so typical of Renaissance piety. On the other hand, he set to music very obscene and sometimes truly blasphemous texts. Probably, his best known song 'Matona mia cara' is a good example of the obscene sort, and the chanson 'Il estoit un religieuse' of the blasphemous.³³ This combination of deep devotion and sheer worldliness was not uncommon in the period. The sixteenth century French poet Clement Marot is another example. He links up Lasso and Calvin by the fact that Lasso wrote chansons on his secular – sometimes rather obscene – texts, whereas Calvin used his psalm translation in his Geneva Psalter. The ambivalence of faith and worldliness was exactly where Calvin directed his pastoral activity to, as we have seen in the previous chapter.

On a more technical level, however, the typical Renaissance shift from the divine to the human, from the timeless to the timebound, is particularly evident in Lasso's music. We have already seen how humanism influenced polyphonic music by increasing attention to word-tone relationships in, for example, Willaert and De Rore. In Lasso, word-tone relationships completely determine both the motet and the madrigal. With strong attention to the human and the emotional, Lasso employs the whole power of his music to reach the heart of the listener. In the motet and the madrigal, this is done in a highly technical way, as we saw in section 5.2, and will see again in the next section. In the more popular genres it is done in a more directly appreciative way. The highly technical character of much of Lasso's music may paradoxically account for his unpopularity nowadays. A symbolism originally intended to reach the heart of the audience now disturbs their ears, which are so accustomed to the later standards of key, mode, and complete modulation.³⁴ Lasso's extravagant style makes for what Erb calls a 'restless' music. The close attention to word-tone relationships causes the flow of the music to change rapidly and frequently. But it makes for extremely beautiful and heart-moving moments if one understands the musical devices implicit in the music.

The ambivalence of gladness and sadness finally characterises Lasso's personality. On the one hand, he was a man full of energy and humour. On the other hand, he experienced moments of deep melancholy. Leuchtman beautifully illustrates Lasso's personality by reference to a play on his name:

Melancholy and irony—two essential components in the picture of Lasso's character. Even the form of his name commands attention. Born as Roland or

³³ Bossuyt, pp. 140–141.

³⁴ Cf. Erb, pp. xvii–xviii.

Orlande de Lassus, in Italy he styles himself Orlando di Lasso. This is more than merely the Italianating of a name that can also be interpreted in French and Latin. Roland is the name of a saint especially beloved in Belgium—and at the same time it is probably the most celebrated hero of the time. One can see in Lasso's self-styling a connection to Ariosto, to the Raging Roland. Ariosto had proceeded from Bioardo's verse epic *Orlando in Love* [*Orlando Innamorato*, c. 1526–31]. Now three Rolands succeed each other: Orlando Innamorato, Orlando Ruioso, and Orlando Lasso. Lasso and his friends and acquaintances never tired of playing over and over upon one sense of his professional name: the tired Orlando. That can only be understood as irony: Hardly a composer of his time was more diligent and hard-working than the man who teased with this adjective. Above all, however, his art is the exact opposite of what one understands by 'tired'. But *lasso* has a second meaning that made it fashionable in contemporary poetry: unhappy. Orlando Lasso = Orlando the Melancholy. In reality he is – transposed from the martial to the poetic – all three together: the melancholic Orlando, Orlando in love, and most especially the Raging Orlando. For the third element in his character is ravishment, that which since the eighteenth century has been called inspiration. [...] In studying Lasso's music it is just this that strikes us, that it does not present itself as a quiet flow, but as abrupt shifts of inspiration, as the unpredictable.³⁵

Towards the end of his life, the melancholic Orlando prevailed and he began to regret his earlier sometimes all too frivolous behaviour. His later music more strictly obeys the rules of the Council of Trent's reform of the liturgy and the majority of his publications are of sacred character.

5.5 ORIGIN OF THE LECTIONES

The title of the motet cycle *Sacrae lectiones ex propheta Iob* connects these pieces of music primarily with a specific part of the Roman Catholic liturgy: the Office of the Dead. The reading of the book of Job as part of the Office of the Dead is based on a very old practice, going back at least to old Roman funeral rituals from the seventh century CE.³⁶ However, in later times, the liturgy for the Office of the Dead was not only used during funeral services. Winemiller summarises: "In many monastic uses the Office of the Dead was recited daily, in addition to or sometimes in place of the usual recitation of the Divine Office. Outside of monasteries the Office of the Dead was customarily said prior to a Requiem Mass and burial, as well as on certain commemorative feast days."³⁷ As Besserman makes clear, the text of the Matins for the Dead gradually came to play a key role in lay piety. This had some unintended consequences: "By the fourteenth century, and in England in particular, with outbreaks of plague in 1349 and periodically thereafter

³⁵ Leuchtman, 'Orlando di Lasso', p. xxiv.

³⁶ Philippe Rouillard, 'The Figure of Job in the Liturgy: Indignation, Resignation or Silence?', in: Christian Duquoc and Casiano Floristán, editors, *Job and the Silence of God*, Concilium 169 (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1983), p. 14.

³⁷ John T. Winemiller, 'Lasso, Albrecht V, and the Figure of Job: Speculation on the History and Function of Lasso's *Sacrae lectiones ex propheta Iob* and Vienna Mus. ms. 18.744', *Journal of Musicological Research* 12 (1993), p. 277. See also Lawrence L. Besserman, *The Legend of Job in the Middle Ages* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1979), pp. 56–57.

throughout the century, there was no shortage of opportunities for a cleric to supplement his income by reciting the Office of the Dead or other memorial services."³⁸ Its main consequence certainly was a widespread – Besserman says “daily” – experience of what became known in France and England as ‘le petit Job’ or ‘Pety Job’, among both the clergy and laity. In addition, this ‘little’ Job was frequently paraphrased in the vernacular. Thus, the selection of texts from the book of Job originating in the liturgy for the Office of the Dead came to represent the whole book of Job during the Middle Ages, where access to the book as a whole was restricted to the very few.

The texts of the *lectiones* follow the Vulgate translation of the book of Job— with only a few exceptions.³⁹ As indicated above, each of the *lectiones* has been taken from Job’s speeches to the friends, mostly from the first round of the discussion.⁴⁰ This might easily lead to the conclusion that the *lectiones* represent the boldly critical parts of the book of Job, where Job accuses God of injustice and arbitrariness.⁴¹ Yet, this would be an all too superficial conclusion. Expressions of Job’s protests against God are certainly not absent, but the boldest accusations have been omitted. As Besserman remarks:

Overall, the movement in the lessons is one of oscillation from repentance to protest and back to repentance. As the compilers of the office intended, the lessons elicit that movement from grief to resignation to repentance and, finally, to hope which those who recite the office are meant to experience.⁴²

In this regard, it is significant that chapter 10 of the book of Job is quoted almost in entirety in the *lectiones*, with the exception of the most critical part (10: 13–17), where Job accuses God of having created him (lectio two, Job 10: 8–12) only to torment him severely afterwards.

From the above, a picture emerges of a small though rather representative selection from Job’s speeches in the book of Job. This selection originated in the liturgy for the Office of the Dead, but developed into a particular vehicle of personal devotion. The question that arises is why Lasso wrote a motet cycle on these texts. Diverse reasons have been proposed. For example, it has been suggested that Lasso composed the motet cycle to the memory of his mother, who died shortly before Lasso returned to Flanders.⁴³ Part of the question of what motivated Lasso to compose this motet cycle is whether it was intended for liturgical use, as the choice of liturgical material suggests. As I said above, the first cycle was composed for the private use of the Bavarian duke Albrecht

³⁸ Besserman, p. 57.

³⁹ Bergquist (Peter Bergquist, ‘Preface’, in: Orlando di Lasso, *Two Motet Cycles for Matins for the Dead*, edited by Peter Bergquist, Recent Researches in the Music of the Renaissance 55 (Madison: A-R Editions, 1983), pp. xix–xxi) mentions a small number of cases where Lasso’s text differs from either the Vulgate or the *Liber usualis*, but all these differences can most probably be traced back to the modern version of the *Liber usualis* he used for his comparison. This is evident from Besserman’s integral quotation of a fifteenth century English version of the *lectiones*, which reflects the same Latin text as Lasso used in the *Lectiones* (Besserman, pp. 59–62).

⁴⁰ The quotations, preceded by the number of the *lectio*, are: (1) 7:16–21; (2) 10:1–7; (3) 10:8–12; (4) 13:22–28; (5) 14:1–6; (6) 14:13–16; (7) 17:1–3 and 11–15; (8) 19:20–27; (9) 10: 18–22.

⁴¹ Rouillard, p. 9; David Brown, *Discipleship and Imagination: Revelation and Truth* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 207.

⁴² Besserman, p. 63.

⁴³ Winemiller, p. 274.

V, probably even upon explicit commission by the duke himself. John T. Winemiller's defence of this origin brings various important historical aspects of the *Lectiones* to light. First of all, Winemiller points to the fact that the *Lectiones* did not appear in print immediately after their publication, but were prepared in manuscript for the duke in "elegantly prepared" partbook format,⁴⁴ together with the – more well known – *Sibyline Prophecies*. The duke's initials 'A.H.' appear on the metalwork binding them, which makes it reasonable that they were specially prepared for him. Elegant initials appear on each opening line of the *Lectiones* and twelve sibyls accompany the twelve Sibylline Prophecies. Additional evidence for Albrecht's commission of *Lectiones* and *Sibyline Prophecies* is, on the one hand, the parallel between the manuscript in which both cycles appear, and, on the other, the manuscript of the *Psalmos poenitentiales*, of which we are certain that it had been prepared upon the explicit commission of the duke. This manuscript was prepared by the same artists and published a couple of years later.⁴⁵

The publication of a large composition of nine mostly long motets on the *lectiones* was unique in various respects. First of all, this was the first time that Lasso wrote a piece of this size in the genre of the motet. He had written various major motets already, but not yet a series of motets with a common theme. Second, the cycle was unique because no composer had written a musical setting of all the lections from the book of Job for the Office of the Dead. Various composers had written motets on individual lections, but not on all in a unified work. Finally, the cycle was unique in that it provided a polyphonic setting of the *lectiones*, and this again speaks against the idea that the cycle was intended for liturgical use. In liturgical services this was very unusual. The lections were generally performed in homophonic chant, and followed by polyphonic settings of the accompanying responsoria.⁴⁶ Add to this everything that has been said above about the role of the *lectiones* in lay devotional practice, and the most natural conclusion is that the cycle was probably not composed with a liturgical purpose in mind, but primarily intended for the private devotion of the duke.

In line with the observations described above, Winemiller argues for the *Lectiones* as an example of 'connoisseurs' music'; in the terminology of the time: *musica reservata*.⁴⁷ *Musica reservata* was explicitly intended by the composers of the time as music for the learned upper class, trained to appreciate the complex musical rhetorics employed to express all textual details in the music. Whether or not the experts can agree with the designation of the motet cycle as *musica reservata*, it has become amply clear from my analysis of the first Lectio presented above, that close attention to the text is the distinguishing feature of Lasso's music. That this sort of music can only flourish among the well educated and musically trained, is even evident from the incomprehensibility of this chapter to readers without sufficient musical training. Of course, given the cultural, social, and economic setting of this music, it *was* a phenomenon for the happy few. In this respect, it typically represents the emergence of an independent secular sphere in

⁴⁴ Winemiller, p. 275. The original manuscript is currently conserved by the Österreichische nationalbibliothek. Partbook format means an edition where each voice is printed separately.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 275–276.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 277–278.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 288–296.

society as described in the previous chapter. No longer was music only written for the church, and by composers who essentially belonged to the clergy. A secular ruler commissioned the preparation of a sacred work for his own private use, composed by a secular individual in service of the ruler.

5.6 JOB ACCORDING TO LASSO: MUSICOLOGICAL ASPECTS

In section 5.2, I presented various techniques used by Lasso for the musical expression of the text. In this section, I will first present some techniques that occur in later *Lectiones*. I start with the more easily comprehensible and gradually introduce the more complicated means of text expression. Subsequently, I address the question of what Lasso's music reveals about the way in which he interpreted the book of Job.

A recurring and easily understandable musical figure is the use of triple meter. On particularly sad phrases, three notes take the time of two.⁴⁸ This occurs in *Lectio* four, six, seven, and nine. The style of these passages is always the same. There is little motion and long note values – usually in a low register – decorated with strange chord progressions. For example, triple meter is used to set the text “qui quasi putredo consumendus sum,” (who am to be consumed as rottenness) in *Lectio* four. Another example is *Lectio* nine, where the end of the *Lectio* is set in triple meter: “terram miseriae et tenebrarum, ubi umbra mortis, et nullus ordo, sed sempiternus horror inhabitat.” (A land of misery and darkness, where the shadow of death, and no order, but everlasting horror dwelleth.)

The latter passage is also the prime example of another means of text expression: completely disordered music. In terms of sixteenth century musical theory, disordered music means the absence of cadences – the standard closures that provide the music with its rational structure – the absence of recognisable melodic shapes, and no recognisable order in the attacks of the different voices. These elements are all characteristic of Lasso's setting of the end of the cycle: “nullus ordo, sed sempiternus horror inhabitans”. A similar figure is found in *Lectio* five, on “et numquam in eodem statu permanet” (and never continueth in the same state).

A recurring figure present in the other *Lectiones* is the use of two part fragments. In one case, its meaning is rather obvious. In the final *Lectio*, the sufferer says “Fuissem quasi non essem,” (I should have been as if I had not been), which is expressed by Lasso by ‘almost no music’. The text is sung three times, the first time with only soprano and alto, the second time with only the tenor and bass voice, and the third time with soprano and alto again. One might of course ask why Lasso did not assign this phrase to only one voice. The most probable reason is that for the polyphonists of the sixteenth century, a one part piece of music lacked the minimal requirement of polyphonic music, the presence of one voice against another.

More two part settings of phrases occur, though, and not all can be easily explained as an expression of ‘minimalism’. Some may still be seen as related to

⁴⁸ Contra Meier, p. 241, who mentions the use of triple meter for expressing joy only.

Fu- is- sem qua- si non es- sem,

de- ret! Fu- is- sem qua- si non es- sem,

de- ret! Fu- is- sem qua- si

de- ret! Fu- is- sem qua- si

fu- is- sem qua- si non es- sem, de- u- te ro trans- la-

fu- is- sem qua- si non es- sem, de u- te- ro trans- la- tus ad tu- mu-

non es- sem, de u- te- ro trans- la- tus ad tu- mu- lum,

non es- sem, de u- te- ro trans-

Figure 5.6: Lectio 9 “Fuissem quasi non essem”

notions of ‘absence’. For example, in Lectio five, the sufferer asks God to “Recede ergo paululum ab eo” (Depart a little from him), which might be expressed by the music slightly ‘receding’ into the background due to the smaller number of voices. Still along the same lines may be cases in Lectio five, six, and seven. In Lectio five, the sufferer asks “Quis facere mundum,” (Who can make him clean). The rhetorical nature of the question – nobody can bring forth the clean from the unclean – may have been expressed by the small number of voices. Likewise Lectio six, which opens with the question “Quis hoc tribuat,” (Who will grant me this), is also a rhetorical question. In Lectio seven, a two part setting is found on “si sustinero” (If I wait). The ‘withdrawal’ of the text is expressed by the

withdrawal of the music.

A clear example of a rather different use of two part setting is the opening of the prima and secunda pars of Lectio four. On the text, "Responde mihi" (Do thou answer me), the two part setting is clearly used to suggest a dialogue between the soprano and alto on the one hand, and the tenor and bass on the other. The tenor and bass voices 'respond' to soprano and alto voices. Although less obvious, the two part fragment on "Scribis enim contra me" (For thou writest against me), could be interpreted as a musical expression of the opposition between God and the sufferer. Alternatively, one might see the specific use of two part counterpoint as a musical expression of the word 'contra'. All 'contra'-point rests upon the setting of two voices against one another.

Two two part fragments in Lectio eight and one in Lectio three are still unexplained by the discussion offered so far. Two part text expressions occur precisely in the settings of "scio enim [quod redemptor meus vivit,]" (For I know that my Redeemer liveth) and "Quem visurus ego ipse," (Whom I myself shall see). In the first case, "scio enim" is sung once by the tenor and bass voices. In the second case, "Quem visurus ego ipse," is sung twice, the first time by the tenor and bass voices, and the second time by the soprano and alto voices. It is hard to see why Lasso employs such a 'thin' setting of these texts because they seem emphatic expressions of the assurance of God's help on the part of the sufferer. The only explanation I see of these settings is that they fit the overall theology behind Lasso's music to which I will turn shortly. Similarly theologically motivated seems the two part setting of the opening phrase of Lectio three: "Manus tuae Domine [fecerunt me]" (Thy hands, Lord, have made me). The two part setting of this phrase is accompanied by irregular progressions on "fecerunt me" and a violation of the mode in the whole part of the Lectio.

Until now, the musical devices Lasso used for text expression were reasonably easy to follow. Things become more difficult when one proceeds to the various ways in which Lasso employed techniques related to the modes for expressing the text. In section 5.2, I have already introduced two ways in which violations of the mode are used for text expression. First, I showed that Lasso used accidentals foreign to the mode – in Lectio one, primarily e-flat – to lend certain chords particular force, usually for the sake of emphasising the sad affective characteristics of the text. Second, I provided some cases where Lasso deliberately introduced certain melodic motifs foreign to the mode to emphasise aspects of the text, for instance a violation of the mode on the word 'sin'.

Violations of the mode of the first kind abound in the *Lectiones*. Some of the most extravagant occur somewhat surprisingly in mode eight. On the phrase "et in novissimo die de terra surrecturus sum" (and in the last day I shall rise out of the earth) Lasso sets 'die' on an f-sharp minor chord, although the mode is in the third/fourth mode.⁴⁹ A little further, on "et in carne mea videbo Deum Salvatorem meum" (and in my flesh I shall see God my Saviour), 'Deum' has a B-flat major chord. On "et oculi mei conspecturi sunt, et non alius" (and my eyes shall behold, and not another), 'alius' is set on a B major chord.

Cases where pieces of melodic material foreign to the mode are introduced,

⁴⁹ For the difficulties of assessing the third and fourth mode, see Meier, pp. 165–170.

occur less frequently. There are some striking examples, however. In the second Lectio, the bass introduces the text “dimittam adversum me” (I will let go my speech against myself) with a motif starting on b-flat, deliberately ‘speaking against’ the overall mode of the Lectio, which is in mode seven—Mixolydian:

di- mit- tam ad- ver- sum me,

Melodic material in violation of the mode need not always be used to illustrate notions of violation in the text. The most extensive violation of the mode is found in Lectio three. The second part of the Lectio is clearly in mode two transposed to *g*, with a b-flat key signature, defined by the range *d'*-*d''*, the final *g*, and repercussion b-flat. However, the whole first part of the Lectio is dominated by the defining notes *a'* and *d''*, so that the listener hears something like mode one untransposed, but with a b-flat key signature. This violation of the mode reinforces the otherwise negative mood in which Lasso sets a part of one of the most positive texts of the book of Job: “Manus tuae Domine fecerunt me, et plasmaverunt me totum in circuitu” (Thy hands, Lord, have made me, and fashioned me wholly round about). I referred to the two part fragment on “Manus tuae Domine” already. On “plasmaverunt me”, a capricious figure illustrates God’s act of creation.

An aspect of sixteenth century music that I have not touched on until now is the phenomenon of ‘irregular cadences’. These too are a forceful means for text expression in the *Lectiones*.⁵⁰ As I said in section 5.2 already, a mode is, apart from other things, defined by two notes: the final, which is the final note of the work, and the *repercussio*, the second most important note in the mode. One of the primary consequences of the mode is that it determines the nature of the cadences in classical polyphonic music. For example, when a work is in the fifth mode, also known as Ionian, cadences are expected to be on *f*, the final, and *c*, the repercussion. When a piece of music is in the second mode, also known as Hypodorian – mostly transposed one fifth downwards to *g* – one expects cadences on *g*, the final, and b-flat, the repercussion. In mode two, cadences are also possible on *d*, the top of the range of the second mode—Lasso seems to have a particular preference for this.⁵¹

Cadences on notes other than the defining notes of the mode are powerful means of text expression in the view of sixteenth century composers. Lasso is no exception. In Lectio one, all cadences are on *f* or *c*,⁵² except three. One is on *a-mi*, a very special case that I will discuss shortly, one is on *g*, and one is on b-flat. Not surprisingly, all three close the phrase “[et quaere non] aufers iniquitatem meam” (and why dost thou not take away my iniquity?), which, as described above, is set with a fauxbourdon figure repeated four times. A ‘correct’ cadence on *c* comes in between. Thus, in addition to the fauxbourdon figure used here

⁵⁰ Meier, pp. 248–285.

⁵¹ In fact, cadences on the *repercussio* b-flat of mode two are rare in the *Lectiones*, whereas cadences on *d* above the final abound.

⁵² Only cadences at the end of a phrase are counted. Full repetitions of the phrase ending with a cadence are counted twice, or as many times as the full phrase is repeated.

The image displays a musical score for the opening phrases of Lectio three, consisting of two systems of four staves each. The first system includes the following lyrics: "Ma-nus tu-ae Do-mi-ne", "Ma-nus tu-ae Do-mi-ne", "Ma-nus tu-ae Do-", and "Ma-nus tu-". The second system includes: "fe-ce-runt me,", "fe-ce-runt me, et", "- mi-ne fe-ce-runt me, et plas-ma-", and "ae Do-mi-ne fe-ce-runt me,". The score is written in a single system with a common time signature and a key signature of one flat (B-flat). The lyrics are distributed across the staves, with some lines containing multiple staves of music.

Figure 5.7: Opening phrases of Lectio three

to illustrate ‘iniquitatem’, an ‘iniquity’ against the mode occurs in the form of irregular cadences.

Similar things happen in other Lectiones. In Lectio four, irregular cadences occur on ‘abscondare’ (hide) – the mode is ‘hidden’ – and ‘amaritudo’ (bitterness)—the negative connotation of an irregular cadence. In Lectio six, an irregular cadence appears on ‘immutatio’ (change) – literally a ‘change’ of the rules of the mode. Remarkable irregular cadences appear in Lectio two, In Lectio nine, on the two part phrase “fuissem quasi non essem” (I should have been as if I had not been), a cadence on a makes the mode of the Lectio – mode two with g and b-flat as characteristic notes – literally ‘invisible’. A remarkable cadence appears

in Lectio two. An irregular cadence appears on “opus manuum tuarum” (the work of thy own hands) which is already decorated with a fauxbourdon figure. The phrase occurs in this sentence: “Numquid bonum tibi videtur si calumnieris et opprimas me *opus manuum tuarum* et consilium impiorum adiuves?” (Doth it seem good to thee that thou shouldst calumniate me, and oppress me, the work of thy own hands, and help the counsel of the wicked?) A similar phrase is found in Lectio six: “operi manuum tuarum” (to the work of thy hands) on which a fauxbourdon figure and an irregular cadence – this time, a so-called *clausula in mi* – also occur. It is difficult to explain why a phrase with an apparently positive reference to God’s creative power ends with an irregular cadence. As I will suggest below, this fits the overall view of God in the *Lectiones*.

Let me conclude this overview of musical devices in Lasso’s music with a discussion of the cadence mentioned at the end of the previous paragraph, the so-called *clausula in mi*.⁵³ One need not know the details of cadence theory to have a basic understanding of this type of cadence. In technical terms: normally, in the case of a ‘perfect’ cadence, the bass is one fifth above the final on the penultimate note of the cadence (‘A’ in figure 5.8), returning to the final on the ultimate note (‘B’ in figure 5.8).

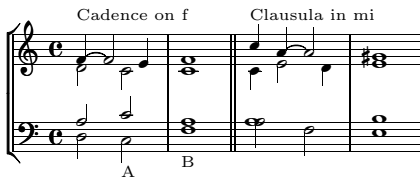


Figure 5.8: An ordinary cadence and a cadence in mi

However, given the nature of the musical scale – popularly phrased: given the ordering of white and black keys on the keyboard – this causes a problem in one case, namely a cadence on e—mi in technical terms. In a perfect cadence on e, the fifth above the final is b. In the perfect cadence, the penultimate note of the tenor would be f, one note above the final. In all modes, the penultimate notes of the bass and the tenor form a perfect fifth, except for the mode with final e, where the penultimate note of tenor and bass form an imperfect diminished fifth—popularly phrased, a dissonant. In classical music theory, this interval was forbidden – it was even called the *diabolus in musica* – and therefore, a cadence on e could not be formed in the usual way.

As one might expect, this irregularity of the cadence on e was assigned a special role for the expression of the text by Renaissance composers. *Clausulae in mi* become bearers of special meaning. Apart from the negative connotations that, as we have seen, are always typical for irregular cadences, *clausulae in mi* are especially used to express the affections of servitude, humility, fright and also prayer. In addition, *clausulae in mi* can be used to express affections of love, especially unhappy love, holiness, and piety.⁵⁴

⁵³ Meier, pp. 96–99.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 273–277.

In the *Lectiones*, cadences on e occur in two ways, namely in *Lectiones* that are written in the modes with final e – mode three and four – and *Lectiones* based on other modes. *Lectio* six and eight are in mode three/four.⁵⁵ How much the *clausula in mi* is dominated by its role in text expression becomes clear from these two *Lectiones*. In *Lectio* eight, four cadences on e occur. Two in the first part, the first and the last cadence of the part, and two in the third part, again the first and the last cadence of the *Lectio*. The final cadence is more or less inevitable, because it would be very unusual to close a work in mode three/four on a note other than the final of these modes, note e. However, both at the end of the work and the end of part one, Lasso avoids a strict *clausula in mi*, apparently because there is no occasion for it in the text. Part one and part three of the *Lectio* end without a formal cadence. The other two cadences on e are real *clausulae in mi*. The first one occurs on “Peli meae consumptis carnibus [adhaesit os meum]” (The flesh being consumed, [my bone hath cleaved to my skin]). Here, the cadence on mi seems to reflect the generally sad affect expressed by the text. The second one closes the setting of “[Scio enim] quod redemptor meus vivit” (For I know that my Redeemer liveth). It seems that in the latter case, the expression of humility and holiness prevails.

In the other *Lectiones*, *clausulae in mi* occur too, always clearly prompted by the text. For example, in *Lectio* three, one occurs on the phrase “Memento quaeso” (Remember, I beseech thee) emphasising the petitionary character of the phrase. In *Lectio* seven, a *clausula in mi* occurs on “Spiritus meus [attenuabitur dies mei]” (My spirit shall be wasted), reflecting the negative mood of the text. Further on, one closes “[cogitationes meae dissipatae sunt,] torquentes cor meum” (my thoughts are dissipated, tormenting my heart). One might say that in the cases where Lasso uses a *clausula in mi* in the *Lectiones* to emphasise the sadness of the text, he does so to stress the subjectivity of the sufferer: “carnibus”, “spiritus meus”, and “cor meum”. At the end of *Lectio* seven, a clear example of a *clausula in mi* expressing humility and holiness is found once more on “Deus meus” (my God).

5.7 JOB ACCORDING TO LASSO: THEOLOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

Many of the theological implications of this case do not so much concern Lasso’s involvement in the interpretation process, but rather the process of ‘selection’ that the text of Job underwent by being included in the liturgy for the Office of the Dead. Much of this selection process remained ‘invisible’ to the interpreter and the audience of the interpretation alike. For them, ‘little Job’ came to represent the book of Job as a whole. All that was available to the majority of the audience was the selection, not the book as a whole.

As various authors have indicated, the selection was remarkable,⁵⁶ because it was restricted to Job’s laments, completely ignoring the narrative, the speeches

⁵⁵ Bergquist, p. viii. Bergquist assigns both *Lectiones* to mode three, probably mainly on the basis of the ambitus. The dominant role of the repercussio of mode four, a above the final, however, goes against this suggestion. Thus, *Lectiones* six and eight confirm Meier’s view that mode three and four are difficult to distinguish in sixteenth century music.

⁵⁶ Brown, *Discipleship and Imagination*, p. 207; Rouillard, p. 9.

of the friends, and most surprisingly, the divine response. This has enormous consequences for the sort of 'Job' that results from this selection, of course. It means that the narrative dimension in the story is completely absent, including the role of Satan, the idea of the wager, and the question whether it is God or Satan who is responsible for the suffering of Job. In fact, one could argue that, in the *lectiones*, the book of Job is completely 'depersonalised'. In the *lectiones*, it is no longer clear for what reason Job spoke the laments taken up in the liturgy, and who responded to these laments. The question of why Job suffered has entirely disappeared. By omitting all these aspects of the book of Job in the *lectiones*, the *lectiones* was made into an ideal instrument in the hands of believers to express their grief, worries and protest about the suffering they experienced. Through the 'anonymous' character of the texts, the audience of the *lectiones* were invited, as it were, to fill in their own name, and make Job's words their own.

Of course, the one-sidedness of the selection also meant that, as far as the *lectiones* from the book of Job is concerned, Job's laments were not balanced against the other parts of the book. It depends on one's theological views whether one considers this a virtue or a vice, but at least two factors can be mentioned that alleviate this problem. In the context of the liturgy for the Office of the Dead, the problem is alleviated by other lections, primarily from the Psalms, in which God's goodness and care are more elaborately confirmed. As I will discuss below, the boldness of Job's complaint is alleviated, in Lasso's setting, by the theology of humility and submission implicit in the music.

As to the question whether the old form of the Office of the Dead lacks balance, it is significant that in the new liturgy for the Office of the Dead of the Second Vatican Council, all lections from the book of Job have been replaced by strong affirmations of faith from the letters of Paul. Only two responsoria save something of the original role of the book of Job. As might be expected, one of these responsoria quotes, "I know that my Redeemer lives."⁵⁷ whereas the other is in a sadder mood. In her book about the interpretation of Job through the centuries, Susan Schreiner argues that the Job of protest, doubt, and despair became particularly favoured in the twentieth century, whereas in the pre-modern period, Job's laments were always moderated or even criticised in one way or another—allegory (Gregory) or explicit criticism (Calvin).⁵⁸ In the liturgical realm, we see exactly the opposite: the Job of protest was in fact the Job of almost the whole second millennium, until it was replaced by affirmative expressions of faith in the twentieth century.

There is yet another theological aspect of the *lectiones* that precedes Lasso's setting of them, namely the important role of the Vulgate translation. The role of the translation is unique in this particular interpretation of the book of Job, because it matters not only in the sense of transmitting the content of the book of Job to the interpreter, but also in that it determines the form of the interpretation in many respects. The melody, rhythm, and sound of the interpretation were determined by the Latin text of the *lectiones*.

In terms of content, the Vulgate translation is responsible for the faith in the

⁵⁷ Rouillard, p. 10.

⁵⁸ Schreiner, pp. 156–190.

resurrection in the translation of Job 19:25, where “I know that my Redeemer lives, and at last, he will stand upon the earth” is rendered in Latin as “Scio enim quod redemptor meus vivit, et in novissimo die de terre surrecturus sum” (I know that my Redeemer liveth, and on the last day, I shall rise out of the earth). As I have indicated above, Lasso’s text of the *lectiones* differed from the Vulgate text in several respects. The most important difference between the liturgical text and the Vulgate is found at the end of lectio seven. In the Vulgate, the last phrase runs as follows: “Ubi est ergo nunc praestolatio mea, et patientiam meam quis considerat?” (Where is now then my expectation, and who considereth my patience?). This expression of despair on the part of the sufferer is changed in the liturgical text to: “Ubi est ergo praestolatio mea, et patientia mea? Tu es Domine, Deus meus.” (Where is now then my expectation, and my patience? It is thou, oh Lord my God).

So far, all theological aspects of the *lectiones* were beyond Lasso’s control; they were given with the form of the text as Lasso received it. In addition to these, various theological aspects of Lasso’s setting of the *lectiones* can be discerned. Generally speaking, Lasso’s music is characterised by a strong emphasis on the emotional and moral aspects of the text. The aspects of the text that have some relation to emotional categories – sadness, joy, humility, love – or moral categories – right/wrong, sin, violation – usually receive an elaborate musical expression, whereas other aspects receive relatively little attention. Accordingly, one finds that Renaissance composers had a particular preference for the musical setting of biblical texts with strong emotional and moral overtones, for instance, the Lamentations of Jeremiah, and the penitential Psalms. On the other hand, one should not take this judgement to imply that Lasso’s art reduces the biblical text to its emotional and moral elements. The devices available to the Renaissance composer were flexible enough to handle a great variety of content. This was due both to the variety of devices developed for text expression and the flexibility of each of these devices to express a wide spectrum of things. For example, the interruption of the musical flow by inserting a rest can be used to express many different things. In Lectio two, it is used to express ‘nihil’ (nothing) as well as ‘dormiam’ (sleep). In Lectio five, it expresses ‘quiescat’ (rest) and in Lectio six, it expresses ‘abscondas’ (hide). Similarly, as we saw above, violations of the mode can be used to express many different things.

On a more specific level, a fascinating by-product of the rhetorics of Lasso’s music is that sometimes, what we would probably consider key phrases receive a minimal treatment in Lasso’s music. An excellent example is the phrase “nihil enim sunt dies mei” (for my days are nothing), in Lectio one. The first sentence “Parce mihi, Domine: nihil enim sunt dies mei” (Spare me, Lord, for my days are nothing) seems to be the key statement of the sufferer, and the remainder of Job 7: 6–12 a further elaboration of it. However, due to the rhetorics of Lasso’s setting, the phrase “nihil enim sunt dies mei” receives a very minimal setting. Of course, precisely due to this minimal treatment, the music may catch the attention of the listeners, but it could also be that it simply escapes their attention.

The reverse of the phenomenon described is of course also true. In a number of cases, Lasso treats certain passages that the majority of today’s interpreters would consider of only secondary importance quite elaborately. This impression

is sometimes strengthened by an interpretive practice that Lasso's music shares with most of so-called pre-critical exegesis: disregard of the Hebrew *paralellismus membrorum*. For example: modern exegesis interprets "Cur non tollis peccatum meum, et quare non auferis iniquitatem meam?" (Why dost thou not remove my sin, and why dost thou not take away my iniquity?) in *Lectio* one as a parallelism, that is as two ways of saying the same thing. Lasso, however, treats both passages separately, and repeats the phrase "iniquitatem meam" four times. The ignorance of Hebrew parallelism is sometimes also evident from the fact that Lasso takes one part of the parallelism positively, while the other negatively. An example, again from *Lectio* one, is "Quid est homo, quia magnificas eum? aut quid apponis erga eum cor tuum?" (What is a man that thou shouldst magnify him? or why dost thou set thy heart upon him?) As we have seen, Lasso interprets the first positively and the second negatively.

Of course these aspects of Lasso's interpretation do not detract from the quality of the music. I merely want to illustrate how the music reflects the framework of interpretation behind it, and the cultural and theological interests directing the interpretation. The theological interests implicit in Lasso's *Lectio*nes is the final topic of this section. Throughout my analysis of the music, I have pointed to several phrases that bear in various ways upon the sufferer's relation to God. It is striking how many 'rule violating' devices Lasso uses to illustrate these parts of the biblical texts. Let me provide a quick overview of them so as to gain a clearer view of the problem at stake. First of all, there are two cases where direct calls upon God are accompanied by irregularities in the music: "o custos hominum" (*Lectio* one, E-flat chord), "Domine Deus" (*Lectio* seven, E-flat chord), and "Deum" (*Lectio* eight, B-flat chord). Furthermore, there are three references to God's creation of man where irregularities in the music occur: "opus manuum tuarum" (*Lectio* two, fauxbourdon figure and an irregular cadence), "operi manuum tuarum" (*Lectio* six, fauxbourdon-like figure and *clausula in mi*), and "Manus tuae Domine fecerunt me" (*Lectio* three, various violations of the mode). A different case, but still in the same sphere, is offered by *Lectio* three, where the *Lectio* ends with the phrase: "et visitatio tua custodivit spiritum meum" (and thy visitation hath preserved my spirit). Here, this apparently positive affirmation of God's care is set by Lasso with very little motion, a minimal fauxbourdon figure, and a *clausula in mi*. Finally, there are two cases where references to God are accompanied by a *clausula in mi*: "Deus meus" (*Lectio* seven), and "redemptor meus vivit" (*Lectio* eight).

The difficult question, of course, is how to interpret these results. Some of the examples might be explained away by arguing that Lasso simply interpreted these phrases in an overall negative way. This might be the case for "o custos hominum", which indeed seems to have a generally negative connotation. The same might go for "Manus tuae Domine fecerunt me", which in spite of its interpretation in positive terms by modern commentators, seems to be taken in a negative way by Lasso. However, more is at stake in the other cases, where references to God usually fit into a positive context. This is apparently the case with "Domine Deus" – which points to God as the only source of patience and perseverance – "redemptor meus vivit", and "Deum [salvatorem meam]"—which expresses the hope of the sufferer for God's act of redemption. The references to creation and

God's *visitatio* too can hardly be interpreted in a negative way. Therefore, the only viable explanation of these fragments is an explanation in terms of an attitude of humility and submission towards God which, as I have already indicated above, was typically connected with the *clausula in mi*. Starting from the widely attested role of the *clausula in mi* for expressing an act of humiliation and submission to God in music, the fauxbourdon figure and two part settings can be added to this as being typically connected with these affections.

This leads to an interesting observation when we compare Lasso's music with Calvin's sermons. Initially, the impression was that the theology of Calvin contrasted sharply with Lasso's setting of the *Lectiones*, because Lasso set those parts of the book of Job to music that Calvin so eagerly criticised. The reason why Calvin sometimes criticised the speeches of Job was precisely for their lack of submission to God's sovereign dealings with mankind. Although Lasso sets the speeches of Job to music, his view of God is not really different from Calvin's. In Lasso too, we find a sovereign God who deserves an attitude of humility, awe, and total submission. References to God's work of creation, care and presence takes the form of 'minimal music' – little motion, two part fragments – where the sufferer, as it were, bows down before God—the fauxbourdon figures are always downwards. This even goes for the passage where the sufferer most emphatically expresses his faith in redemption and salvation: "scio enim quod redemptor meus vivit", and "et in carne mea videbo Deum Salvatorem meum." Handel's believer triumphantly shouts "I know that my Redeemer liveth", and "in my flesh, I shall see God", whereas Lasso's sufferer comes no further than a faithful stumbling, full of awe and humility.

The comparison with Calvin is not only useful for a better understanding of Lasso's case, but also for Calvin's. Now that we know how central a role the selection from the book of Job in the *lectiones* played in devotional practice, and henceforth, the widespread knowledge of 'little Job' among lay believers, various aspects of Calvin's interpretation are illuminated. *First*, the consequences of the new role of Scripture come all the more clearly to the fore. Calvin's audience – which for the major part had only recently adopted the Reformed faith – was now confronted with the book of Job as a whole instead of 'little Job'. Instead of reciting the small selection as part of private devotion, they encountered the text in the form of a detailed explanation of the book in daily sermons. In addition, reciting the text as part of private devotion was probably discouraged as belonging to papal superstitions. *Second*, given the widespread acquaintance with the liturgical selection from the book of Job among lay believers, it is remarkable that in his sermons, Calvin seems not at all to presuppose any knowledge of the book of Job on the part of his audience. As far as I have able to notice, he never refers to the *lectiones*, not even in the sermons which have the texts of the *lectiones* as their topic. *Finally*, given the positive role that the speeches of Job played in liturgy and devotional practice, it is all the more surprising that Calvin, who must also have been well acquainted with the traditional function of Job, was so critical about the speeches of Job in his sermons. All in all, we see that Calvin's exposition of the book of Job, viewed in connection with its historical background, marks a radical break in the use of Scripture by lay believers, a break that even seems deliberately to do away with the old practices altogether.

5.8 HERMENEUTICAL REFLECTION

In the previous section, I already paid attention to various theological implications of the nature of the *lectiones* as a ‘selection’ from the book of Job. In this section, I would like to discuss the hermeneutical implications of the phenomenon of ‘selection’. The notion of ‘selection’ or ‘quotation’ immediately brings to mind Derrida’s analysis of ‘quotation’ in written communication. In chapter 3, the *Testament of Job* was a typical example of what Derrida and his followers have called ‘intertextuality’. Texts are taken out of their original context and woven together into a new one together with other bits of text. In this chapter, we have a typical example of a text from which a small selection is taken, which comes to represent the whole.

For Derrida, the possibility of ‘being quoted’ and ‘representing the whole’ is not an accidental feature of only some texts, but rather a fundamental characteristic of all written communication. When we use a piece of text in a quotation, allusion or citation, the reference to the original creates an illusion of the presence of the original. At the same time, the very nature of the reference *as* reference implies the absence of the original.⁵⁹ We see this phenomenon of the ‘written’ beautifully illustrated in the *lectiones*—the ‘little Job’ of the Middle Ages. *On the one hand*, the *lectiones*’ being a quotation of Scripture safeguards its authoritative nature. By virtue of the authoritative status of the text, the medieval readers or those who recite it as part of their private devotion, are fully justified in making Job’s expressions of protest and suffering their own. *On the other hand*, the *lectiones*’ being a quotation underlines the difference between the book of Job as a whole and the selection that represented the whole during the medieval period.

While being an interesting way of looking at the *lectiones*, Derrida’s ‘deconstruction’ of the phenomenon of selection may also be seen as an artificial and anachronistic way of construing the relationship between the book of Job as a whole and its selection in the *lectiones*. After all, it seems artificial to interpret the *lectiones* in terms of a selection because, most of the time, its interpreters were not aware of its relation to the original book at all. The selection gradually received an authoritative status of its own, based upon its liturgical function, and, last but not least, its suitability for the concrete needs of the community.

Accordingly, it is important to notice that the idea that the meaning of a text is determined by being brought into being by its first author – a position I will discuss in chapter 8 – is in fact a very modern conception. Until the late fifteenth century, it was very uncommon for people, especially lay people, to read books in their entirety, simply because they were unavailable as such. Thus, a ‘hermeneutics of authorial intention’, in the sense of a hermeneutics according to which what the text means is what its first author had in mind, could only be developed after mechanical book printing had become widely used. An important issue for the history of the interpretation of Scripture follows from this. Modern histories of pre-critical exegesis – Schreiner’s study, cited in this and the previous

⁵⁹ Jacques Derrida, *Limited Inc*, trans. from the French by Samuel Weber and Jeffrey Mehlman (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1988), pp. 29–31; Jacques Derrida, ‘Signature Event Context’, in: Jacques Derrida, *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. from the French by Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), pp. 325–327.

chapter, is a good example of this⁶⁰ – often write a history of the interpretation of a biblical book by concentrating on those rare cases in which a medieval interpreter discussed the whole or a large part of the biblical book under consideration. Thus, Schreiner describes the interpretation of the Book of Job in the medieval period by discussing Gregory the Great's *Moralia*, Maimonides *Guide of the Perplexed* and Aquinas' *Expositio super Iob ad litteram*. It may well be, however, that in spite of its name, Besserman's study *The Legend of Job in the Middle Ages* tells us more about the *interpretation* of the book of Job in the Middle Ages than Schreiner's study of those cases in which few intellectuals interpreted the book as a whole.

Taking these various aspects of the selection process behind Lasso's interpretation of Job together, it is clear that the role of context in Lasso's interpretation is not limited to the role of the interpreter, but is extended to the form, status, and function of the text. Hermeneutical questions easily presuppose a stable text that moves through different contexts of interpretation, with questions being raised as to whether or not the interpreters read the text in different ways, or whether or not they know the 'real' meaning. However, in Lasso's *Lectiones*, we have a clear example of a situation in which not only the role of the interpreter is determined by the context of the interpretation, but in which the text itself is also determined by the context. One cannot properly understand what happens in Lasso's interpretation of Job if one does not take into account what text he used, and what role this text played in his context.

Finally, the analysis of Lasso's *Lectiones* provides further material for reflection upon what I called an *aesthetic mode of interpretation* in chapter 3. In my discussion of the *Testament of Job*, I argued that the narrative form of the *Testament* made for a particularly 'open' interpretation of the book of Job, enabling readers to go along with the *Testament's* analysis of evil and suffering when they wish to, while departing from it in other cases. In the *Lectiones*, we have another case of an aesthetic transformation of the book of Job. The question is whether the *Lectiones* are as open to different appropriations as the *Testament* is. At first sight, this seems to be the case. A piece of music like the *Lectiones* is appreciated by listeners in many different ways. If one attends a concert performance of Renaissance music, one will see that listeners enjoy the music in a variety of ways. Many will merely enjoy the beautiful sound without even knowing the content of the text. Others attentively watch the incredible capabilities of the performers, and yet other listeners read their programmes carefully while listening to the music. This enumeration of different listening attitudes still leaves the different levels of religious commitment accompanying the listening experience out of consideration.

In spite of these very different ways of listening to Renaissance music that we find in today's concert halls, I would like to defend the view that Lasso's music is not as open as it seems. For today's listeners, Renaissance music is open to different appropriations precisely because the listeners lack information about it in many areas. First, very few people nowadays read Latin, whereas in Lasso's context, the majority of the listeners to his music had a profound passive and active proficiency in that language. Lasso's listeners did not need to follow the text of the music in a textbook, translate it, and possibly investigate the relationship

⁶⁰ Schreiner, *Where Shall Wisdom be Found?*.

between text and music. They understood the meaning of the text immediately in the original language. It is much less easy to ignore a text being spoken in a language one is familiar with than to ignore a text in a foreign tongue. This explains much of the ignorance of the text on the part of today's listeners.

Furthermore, today's listeners have almost completely lost the sensitivity to the musical language employed in this music, for example the use of modal techniques. To us, or at least to me, many aspects of Lasso's techniques of composition appear as techniques – or, negatively formulated: as 'tricks' – that even need to be reconstructed in terms of rather fragmentary knowledge we have of the theories used by Renaissance composers. Especially our understanding of modal techniques is hindered by the fact that our current experience of music, whether we are familiar with classical or popular music, is wholly determined by the principles of post-Renaissance tonality, a way of thinking about tone, scale and mode which is radically different from the modal system practiced before. This makes it very difficult for us to 'feel at home' in this kind of music. Nevertheless, we should realise that many elements of this music that count for us as 'artifice', belonged to the, perhaps even implicit, cultural heritage of the time.⁶¹ We must carefully scrutinise the melodic flow and the nature of the cadences to discover the irregularities that make up a major part of Lasso's means of expressing the text. However, Lasso's contemporaries probably had such a natural sensitivity to the properties of the mode, the (ir)regularities of melody and cadence that they were able to relate text and music to each other as a matter of course.

The *Lectiones* are not only less open to different appropriations than the *Testament* for accidental reasons. The hermeneutics intrinsic in these two different sorts of aesthetic interpretations of the book of Job makes for a particularly open interpretation in the *Testament* on the one hand, but a rather focused interpretation on the other. One could describe the interpretation of Job in the *Testament* as a creative retelling of the book of Job. Rather than aiming at an interpretation that keeps as close to the original book as possible, the *Testament* focuses on those aspects of the book of Job which evoke further reflection, for example the role of Job's wife, the reason why Job had to suffer. The *Testament* is *not* intended to mimic the book of Job. Quite the contrary. This kind of creative interpretation is frequently found in aesthetic transformations. Naturally so, because there is always a major role for imagination in art.

Without denying the major role played by imagination in Lasso's *Lectiones*, it could be said that what we have here is an aesthetic interpretation of the text of Job with the explicit aim to keep as close to the text as possible. Lasso does not aim to fill gaps, or do interesting things of which it does not matter whether or not they are true. The aim of the musical rendering of the text is to express the meaning and message of the text as accurately as possible. This is what the theorists of the time – Zarlino for example – called the *imitazione della parola*.⁶² What is intended is, as it were, a magnifying of the text in the music.

⁶¹ This makes me hesitate about Winemiller's argument that the *Lectiones* were written for the private devotion of the Duke because there is so much "artifice" in them. What counts as 'artifice' is influenced considerably by one's cultural background. Winemiller, pp. 290–296.

⁶² Walther Dürr, *Sprache und Musik: Geschichte – Gattungen – Analysemodelle*, Bärenreiter Studienbücher Musik 7 (Kassel: Bärenreiter, 1994), p. 53.

For an appropriate understanding of what is at stake, it might help to contrast Lasso's 'imitation' of text in music with the so-called 'program music' at the end of the nineteenth century, for example well-known works like the *Pictures at an exhibition* by Modest Mousorgsky or the *Carnaval des Animaux* by Camille Saint-Saens. What is at stake is not simply the portrayal of what is said in the text in the music. One might find some instances of text expression in Lasso that resemble the imaginary portrayal of the words of the text, for example, quick movement on the phrase "[Contra folium,] quod vento rapitur, [ostendis potentiam tuam]" ([Against a leaf,] that is carried away with the wind, [thou shewest thy power]) in *Lectio* four. However, this is not the heart of the matter. What happens in Lasso's – and other Renaissance composers' – music is in fact the elevation of traditional rhetorics of speech to the level of a rhetorics of music. Classical rhetoric as it was taught to every well-educated person in the late Middle Ages is an elaborate method, system, and toolkit for the art of speaking and writing well.⁶³ It contains a structured method for ordering one's thought (*inventio*), ordering one's speech or text (*dispositio*), and decorating one's speech or writing (*elocutio*) with the language appropriate to an effective communication of the message, building upon the works of such great rhetoricians as Aristotle, Cicero, and Quintillian. The firm theoretical basis of the polyphonic music of the Renaissance period, with its beautiful sonorous sound, its 'relaxing' harmonies, the stable structure of the imitative counterpoint – briefly: the art of 'sounding well' in all the details – is to be attributed to the conscious development of a rhetorics of music parallel to the rhetorics of speech. A detailed system of exercises, advices and requirements was developed to ensure the effective communication of the musical and textual message of the composition. Therefore, Lasso's music is not simply a creative transformation of the texts of Job, but rather a profoundly rule-based rendering of the rhetorics of the text in terms of the rhetorics of music.

Let me go into some detail to make a bit clearer what I have in mind. Classical rhetorics taught how one should choose one's words in such a way as to reflect the message one intends to convey most accurately. If the mood of the text is sad, one needs to speak slowly, with a low register. If one is expressing one's anger, one must speak loudly.⁶⁴ If one wants to catch the attention of the audience, one might deliberately violate the rules of politeness, so that the audience wonder what the speaker means with the violation of the rules.⁶⁵ Also, a speaker might catch the attention of the audience by suggesting a certain course of the speech – for example: announce that the lecture is going to be finished – and change the course of the lecture afterwards—e.g. go on for another quarter of an hour.⁶⁶ Lasso's music works in a similar fashion. In the fauxbourdon figure which we

⁶³ What I am describing below are very much the default components of classical rhetoric that one easily comes across in recent introductions to classical rhetorics, or in the well known works on rhetoric by Aristotle, Cicero and Quintillian. These works were still the basis of the rhetorical training in the medieval study of the arts. For a very fascinating introduction to classical rhetoric, I would recommend Cicero's *De oratore*, which is easily available in translation. This work from Cicero is interesting because the rhetoric which is being taught to the student is practiced at the same time.

⁶⁴ Cicero, *De Oratore libri tres*, 3, 210–212.

⁶⁵ Heinrich F. Plett, *Einführung in die rhetorische Textanalyse*, 5th edition (Hamburg: Buske, 1983), p. 25.

⁶⁶ Cicero, 3, 200–209.

encountered a number of times, Lasso draws attention to the sad or humble mood of the text by violating the rules of a 'polite' flow of the music. The chords in the music do not differ pleasantly, as in a well written piece of music, but are in a parallel position. Something similar happens with the irregular cadences. Well trained listeners expect cadences to have a stereotypical form on particular notes of the mode. The attention of the listener is caught through the violation of the rule. As we have seen, even these violations of the rule are again rule based most of the time, such as is the case with the *clausula in mi*, and the fauxbourdon figure.

Of course, I do not suggest that the rule-based character of Lasso's music leaves no room for creativity, or that it makes for a closed listening experience which allows only one appropriation. What I want to show is that in Lasso's music, we have a clear example of an aesthetic mode of interpretation which is not, as in the *Testament of Job*, aimed at creating room for readers to enter or leave at will, but rather at moving the listener to the heart of the text and letting him or her experience the truth of the text as effectively as possible. If I am not mistaken, we are nowadays most familiar with the 'open' character of artistic interpretations of reality. Art is generally seen as providing 'interesting insights' or something like that. For this reason, some contemporary theologians favour 'narrative theology' or theologies in which the 'imagination' plays a major role, above theologies that adhere explicitly to certain doctrinal positions.⁶⁷ It is important, however, to see that art need not be particularly open to different appropriations at all. Aesthetic transformations of a message may serve equally to narrow down the message to its bare essentials, focusing rather than relativising it.

⁶⁷ Two notable examples are the 'school' of Hans Frei, for example George Lindbeck and Garrett Green, and an older classic: Dennis Nineham, *The Use and Abuse of the Bible: A Study of the Bible in an Age of Rapid Cultural Change*, Library of Philosophy and Religion (London and Basingstroke: Macmillan, 1976).

6

Gustavo Gutiérrez

6.1 INTRODUCTION

With Gustavo Gutiérrez's *On Job: God Talk and the Suffering of the Innocent*, we finally enter 'our time'. One might think that it is easy for Westerners to understand the context in which this particular reading of the book of Job originated. It will turn out, however, that the indigenous context of the Andes is much more alien to 'us' than we might expect. We will encounter a context of extraordinary oppression and exploitation in a rapidly changing cultural, social and economic situation. Western society is involved in this process while being largely unaware of it. Amidst all this suffering, we meet the stubborn faithful mind of Latin American Christian believers, who put their trust in the Lord by the language of prophecy and contemplation, that is, the language of justice and protest against oppression on the one hand, and the language of faithful surrender to God on the other.

6.2 AN IMPRESSION

Gutiérrez's work on Job is not a running commentary on each verse of Job. Gutiérrez deals with the texts in a thematic way by dividing his book in three parts. The first part, entitled "The Wager", deals primarily with the prologue and Job's first monologue. The main topics are God's wager with Satan, the possibility of disinterested faith and the question whether Job "spoke rightly" of God. The second part, entitled "The Language of Prophecy", discusses primarily the dialogues with the friends. The perspective chosen in addressing the dialogues is Job's protest against the unjust suffering of the innocent—initially his own suffering, but gradually also the suffering of the poor. In the final part of the book, entitled "The Language of Contemplation", Gutiérrez addresses those aspects of the book of Job that point to what he calls the 'language of contemplation'. He pays attention to those texts in the dialogues where Job begins to put his trust in the Lord, notwithstanding his protest against him. The remainder of the third part is devoted to a discussion of the speeches of God from the whirlwind, followed by Job's faithful surrender to God. In the conclusion of the book, Gutiérrez attempts to connect the two types of language with each other by showing how both are

indispensable for talking faithfully about God in the midst of suffering.

In many respects, the genre of Gutiérrez's interpretation of Job is familiar to Western readers. A lengthy summary of a whole chapter would therefore not be the best way to convey an impression of the distinctive flavour of Gutiérrez's encounter with Job. Instead, I would like to discuss four passages from the Introduction, Chapter Two and Chapter Three. In all four passages, Gutiérrez refers to famous writers, artists and a philosopher, to explain the central theme of the book, the question of how to speak about God in the midst of unjust suffering. Two of them, José María Arguedas and César Vallejo, are Latin Americans, and the other two, Albert Camus and Blaise Pascal, are Europeans. This exemplifies to what extent, in his theological writings, Gutiérrez always moves back and forth between the Western and Latin American contexts. Most of his writings are oriented towards the Western context, and reflect the fact that this is the context in which Gutiérrez received a major part of his theological education. Nevertheless, he calls attention to the problems of Latin America, where he lives, works and feels at home.

Throughout this chapter, I will repeatedly use the work of the Peruvian prose writer, ethnologist and musicologist José María Arguedas to elucidate the Latin American roots of Gutiérrez's views.¹ In doing so, I follow Gutiérrez's own practice. In many of his works, Gutiérrez quotes passages from the novels of his friend. Arguedas figures prominently in the Introduction to *On Job*.² Gutiérrez quotes Arguedas right at the beginning of the Introduction, where he introduces the central theme of the book: God-talk. In the first two paragraphs of the book, Gutiérrez brings the reader immediately to the heart of his theology. Let me quote these two paragraphs in full:

Theology is talk about God. According to the Bible, however, God is a mystery, and at the beginning of his *Summa Theologiae* Thomas Aquinas states as a basic principle governing all theological reflection that "we cannot know what God is but only what God is not." Must we not think, then, that theology sets itself an impossible task?

No, the task is not impossible. But it is important to keep in mind from the very outset that theological thought about God is *thought about a mystery*. I

¹ Various authors have pointed to the relationship between Gutiérrez's liberation theology and the work of José María Arguedas, but few have used Arguedas' work to elucidate the context of Gutiérrez's theology. On the relationship between the two, see Stephen Judd, 'Gustavo Gutiérrez and the Originality of the Peruvian Experience', in: Marc H. Ellis and Otto Maduro, editors, *The Future of Liberation Theology: Essays in Honor of Gustavo Gutiérrez* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1989), pp. 65–76; James B. Nickoloff, 'Introduction', in: Gustavo Gutiérrez, *Essential Writings*, edited by James B. Nickoloff (London: SCM, 1996), pp. 15–18. See also Gutiérrez's own essay on Arguedas which unfortunately never appeared in translation: Gustavo Gutiérrez, *Entre las calandrias: un ensayo sobre José María Arguedas* (Lima: Instituto Bartolomé de Las Casas, 1990). For a more extensive treatment of Arguedas and liberation theology, see Stephen B. Wall-Smith, 'Jose Maria Arguedas: Godfather of Liberationism', *Christian Century* (november 1987), (URL: http://www.religion-online.org/cgi-bin/researchd.dll/showarticle?item_id=1072) – visited on 2002-05-30, p. 1034.

² The main reference to Arguedas is to his novel *Deep Rivers* at the end of section two, used to illustrate the difficulty of God-talk in the midst of suffering. It is difficult for those unfamiliar with the novel really to understand the details of Gutiérrez's quotations, because they presuppose much of the overall context of the novel. Gustavo Gutiérrez, *On Job: God Talk and the Suffering of the Innocent*, trans. from the Spanish by Matthew J. O'Connell (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1987), pp. xv–xvii.

mention this here because it influences an attitude to be adopted in the effort to talk about God. I mean an attitude of respect that is incompatible with the kind of God-talk that is sure, at times arrogantly sure, that it knows everything there is to know about God. José María Arguedas poses the question: "Is not what we know far less than the great hope we feel?"³ This question will bring an unhesitating, humble yes from those who believe in the God of Jesus Christ.⁴

At first sight, this quotation seems a fairly standard affirmation of the mystery of God, illustrated with quotations from Aquinas and Arguedas. In fact, much more is at stake. The phrases that sound like affirmations of traditional church doctrine are already interpreted in terms of liberation theology. By quoting Arguedas's question immediately after Aquinas, Gutiérrez employs Arguedas to interpret Aquinas. The mystery of God is drawn into the context of "the great hope we feel", that is, the hope for the liberation of the poor and the oppressed. A theology of liberation is a negative theology in the sense that it opts for the nameless, the outcast, the 'little children'.⁵ Thus, Aquinas and Arguedas are interpreted as making the same point, namely that theology is not so much knowledge, rational reflection or self-satisfied conviction of truth, but an eye for the poor, the humble, and the silent contemplation of God in the midst of suffering.

The mysterious nature of faith does not only mean a negative theology in terms of an option for the nameless. Faith is also truly mysterious in the sense of seemingly impossible in face of the overwhelming experience of suffering:

How are we to talk about a God who is revealed as love in a situation characterized by poverty and oppression? How are we to proclaim the God of life to men and women who die prematurely and unjustly? How are we to acknowledge that God makes us a free gift of love and justice when we have before us the suffering of the innocent? What words are we to use in telling those who are not even regarded as persons that they are the daughters and sons of God?⁶

Throughout the book, Gutiérrez illustrates the clash between faith in the God of love and the experience of suffering in various ways. In Chapter Three, for instance, he draws upon Camus's works *The Plague* and *The Misunderstanding* to describe the way in which Camus confronted faith in God with the inexplicable experience of innocent suffering. This leads Camus to his final "No" at the end of *The Misunderstanding*. Gutiérrez adds:

This no is the final word of the play; it symbolizes God's deafness, God's silence in the face of human suffering. More accurately, it is a no to the existence of a God who can permit this suffering. Camus returns over and over to the theme of innocent suffering. He encounters dilemmas and self-criticisms in his search, but the problem remains, a source of suffering and a challenge to everyone.⁷

³ Gutiérrez quotes Arguedas loosely: "Does what we know amount to much less than the great hope we feel, Gustavo?". In fact, the quoted passage is a question of the desparate Arguedas who, shortly before he committed suicide, posed this question to Gutiérrez in his 'Last Diary?'. See José María Arguedas, *The Fox from Up Above and the Fox from Down Below*, The Pittsburgh editions of Latin American Literature (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2000), p. 258.

⁴ Gutiérrez, *On Job*, p. xi.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. xii.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. xiv.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 14.

These comments by Gutiérrez do not criticise Camus's answer. This is highly characteristic of Gutiérrez's deep respect for the reality of human experience and his conviction that any cheap straightforward theological response to it is misguided.

Nevertheless, a final "no" is not the Latin American answer to a world full of suffering, poverty and oppression. In spite of the few things Latin American believers know, they feel a great hope. The paradoxical connection between suffering and hope is a cornerstone of liberation theology. At the end of chapter one, Gutiérrez illustrates this paradox with a quotation from the Latin American poet César Vallejo:

"My pain is so deep that it never had a cause, and has no need of a cause. What could its cause have been? Where is that thing so important that it stopped being its cause? Why has this pain been born all on its own?"⁸

Gutiérrez remarks in response to this quotation:

To a superficial reader, the paradoxical thing about this poem is the surprising title Vallejo gives it: "I am going to talk about hope." The hope is doubtless one that does not travel beaten paths, but it is not therefore any less firm; it is a hope that is unaccompanied by any boastful rational grasp of things and yet is clear-eyed. Vallejo's poem, like the poet's own life, expresses the deep, inexplicable suffering of the Latin American poor. In this case, the historical bewilderments and sadness of the indigenes as they saw the vital framework of their world collapsing is accompanied today by the exploitation and despoliation of the ordinary people. But the poem also shows the stubborn hope that gives heart to this poor, believing people.⁹

In the book of Job, the question whether faith is possible in a condition of suffering is the subject of a wager. The main question of the book of Job is whether 'disinterested faith' is possible. Can one fear the Lord for nothing? God and Satan 'wager' on this question. Satan suggests no; God invites Satan to try it out on Job. Gutiérrez places the wager in Job in a universal context:

If the answer [to the wager] is yes, then it will be a priori possible to do the same [namely fear the Lord] in other human situations. But if the answer is no, then it will be irrelevant that persons living in less profound and challenging situations "appear" to accept the gratuitousness of God's love and claim to practice a disinterested religion. Human suffering is the harsh, demanding ground on which the wager about talk of God is made; it is also that which ensures that the wager has universal applicability.¹⁰

Gutiérrez relates the wager about disinterested faith to a second French thinker: Blaise Pascal. In the *Pensées*, Pascal develops an argument for the existence of God in the form of a wager.¹¹ Pascal argues that theoretical proofs for the existence of God do not work, but that one should simply bet on the existence of God, taking into account what benefits one most:

⁸ Gutiérrez, *On Job*, p. 10.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 15.

¹¹ For an introduction to Pascal's Wager, see Alan Hájek, 'Pascal's Wager', in: Edward N. Zalta, editor, *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (2001).

“God is, or He is not.” But to which side shall we incline? Reason can decide nothing here. There is an infinite chaos which separated us. A game is being played at the extremity of this infinite distance where heads or tails will turn up. What will you wager? According to reason, you can do neither the one thing nor the other; according to reason, you can defend neither of the propositions. [...] Your reason is no more shocked in choosing one rather than the other, since you must of necessity choose. This is one point settled. But your happiness? Let us weigh the gain and the loss in wagering that God is. Let us estimate these two chances. If you gain, you gain all; if you lose, you lose nothing. Wager, then, without hesitation that He is.¹²

The theme of the wager in both Job and Pascal moves Gutiérrez towards a comparison, with profoundly negative implications for the Pascalian. Here, Gutiérrez’s biting critique of a rationalist theology comes to the fore:

In Job the choice is between a religion based on the rights and obligations of human beings as moral agents, and a disinterested belief based on the gratuitousness of God’s love. Pascal employs a crystal-clear, almost mathematical logic in responding to the questionings of the modern mind and the first manifestations of unbelief.¹³

The comparison is not only between existential faith in God and rationalist argument. Pascal’s wager is placed in the context of retributive faith, in the context of the winners. Here, the real difference between Gutiérrez and Pascal comes to the fore. In his Latin American context, Gutiérrez has ample evidence that if you believe in God, you lose everything instead of nothing:

As Pascal sees it, modern men and women have to understand that belief in God is to their advantage. [...] In the Book of Job, to be a believer means sharing human suffering, especially that of the most destitute, enduring a spiritual struggle, and finally accepting the fact that God cannot be pigeonholed in human categories. In Pascal’s wager, he addresses human beings who are proud of their reasoning powers, and he tries to make them see how limited these powers are and how great is their need of God. [...] Pascal issues his shrewd and subtle wager to unbelievers; the wager in Job thrusts with beautiful radicality into the world of nonpersons. Pascal incisively confronts the winners of history; with tender compassion, the Book of Job seeks out its losers. Pascal’s wager is the first step in a fruitful theological line that even today meets the challenges of modernity; the wager in Job starts on the “garbage heap” (see 2:10) of the city to look for a suitable language for talking of God. Situated as we are on the underside of history here in Latin America, it is the second wager that is ours; to speak of God from the standpoint of the poor of the earth.¹⁴

The references to these four writers, Latin American and Western, in fact illustrate the major themes of Gutiérrez’s theology. First, the paradoxical, but for Gutiérrez essential combination of faith as action on behalf of those in need of liberation on the one hand, and faith as contemplation of the mystery of God on the other. For the Western mind, these are two; for Gutiérrez, they are one. Second,

¹² Blaise Pascal, *Thoughts*, trans. from the French by W.F. Trotter, The Harvard Classics 48 (New York: Collier & Son, 1910), <URL: <http://www.ccel.org/p/pascal/pensees/pensees.htm>>, § 233.

¹³ Gutiérrez, *On Job*, p. 15.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 16.

the enormous compassion with the suffering of his people and the willingness to participate in this suffering, recognising that it apparently conflicts with faith in the God of life. Third, the paradoxical connection between suffering and hope. Finally, the biting critique of a rationalist theology, either presenting faith as to the believer's advantage, or ignoring the suffering of the righteous by reasoning their suffering away.

6.3 THE MAN AND HIS COUNTRY

It is somewhat against Gutiérrez's own habits to start an academic discussion of his work with biographical comments. Therefore, these will be kept brief, as they usually are in the secondary literature about him.¹⁵ Gutiérrez was born in 1928 in Lima, the capital city of Peru. In Peruvian society, there are three main social groups, the *indigenes* (native Indians), the *mestizos* (people of mixed origin), and the *mistis* (upper class, mostly white but also of mixed origin). These groups do not coincide completely with the socio-economic categories of lower, middle, and upper classes, although most of the white people belong to the upper class and most of the indigenous people to the lower class.¹⁶ Gutiérrez is of mestizo origin and grew up in a poor family. A crucial period in his childhood was a six year illness (*osteomyelitis*) from which he suffered from the ages of twelve to eighteen. Influenced by this experience, Gutiérrez went to study medicine at San Marco University in his hometown Lima. After three years of medical studies, he decided to enter the seminary to become a Catholic priest. During his studies for the priesthood, his brilliance was recognised and, following widespread custom in Latin America, he was sent to Western Europe for further studies from 1951 to 1959. He studied philosophy, psychology and theology in Louvain, Lyon, and Rome. After returning to Peru, he began pastoral work in the poor Rimac area in Lima. He has continued to live among the poor of the city up to the present day. At the same time, he became a lecturer in social sciences at the theological faculty of the Catholic University of Lima.¹⁷

Back in Lima, Gutiérrez became rapidly involved in the rise of liberation theology. As a theological adviser to the Chilean bishop Manuel Larraín, he visited one of the sessions of the Second Vatican Council. The Second Vatican Council was crucial to the development of liberation theology, because it brought a new focus on the message of the Catholic Church for the whole of society, and on the relation between salvation and human well-being. At this time, Gutiérrez joined the emerging liberation movement, and gradually acquired a key role in the development of that movement. Two conferences of Latin American bishops marked milestones in the rise of liberation theology: the conferences of Medellín

¹⁵ Robert McAfee Brown, *Gustavo Gutiérrez, Makers of Contemporary Theology* (Atlanta, GA: John Knox, 1980), pp. 21–22; Gutiérrez, *Essential Writings*, pp. 2–5; Jacques Van Nieuwenhove, *Bronnen van bevrijding: Varianten in de theologie van Gustavo Gutiérrez*, *Kerk en theologie in context* 12 (Kampen: Kok, 1991), pp. 13–23.

¹⁶ Frances Horning Barraclough, 'Translator's Note', in: José María Arguedas, *Yawar Fiesta*, trans. from the Spanish by Frances Horning Barraclough (Austin, Texas: University of Texas Press, 1965), pp. vii–ix.

¹⁷ Van Nieuwenhove, p. 15.

(1968) and Puebla (1979). At these conferences, Gutiérrez provided important input as an adviser to the participants, so that many of the documents of these conferences reflect his influence. Medellín recognised liberation as the beginning of a new era in Latin America, free from exclusion and oppression. Puebla explicitly described the task of the Church as a 'preferential option for the poor'.

Besides his participation in the Latin American movement, Gutiérrez was simultaneously engaged in intercontinental discussions about liberation and the role of the Church in it. In 1973, the English translation of his ground breaking work *Theology of Liberation* appeared, and received widespread attention in the Western world and elsewhere. During the seventies and eighties, he was a visiting professor at numerous North American and European universities, and received honorary doctorates from the universities of Nijmegen, Tübingen, Wilkes-Barre, and Freiburg im Breisgau. He published various books such as *The Power of the Poor in History* and *We Drink from Our Own Wells: The Spiritual Journey of a People*.

Apart from widespread acclaim for his work, increasing resistance emerged when in 1983, the Roman Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith questioned his allegedly Marxist interpretation of the Gospel. It was argued that Gutiérrez had mistakenly interpreted the Biblical notion of the 'poor' in terms of the Marxist concept of the proletariat, thus transforming the message of the Church into a revolutionary program. Without giving up his solidarity with the Church, Gutiérrez has used various opportunities to explain the principles of liberation theology in view of these objections. He maintains the central elements of his theology, but readily admits that the presentation of it may not have been sufficiently balanced.¹⁸ The sharp confrontation with the Roman Catholic magisterium influenced his later works.¹⁹ In *We Drink from Our Own Wells, On Job and Las Casas: In Search of the Poor of Jesus Christ*, the necessity of a social revolution, which figured so prominently in the *Theology of Liberation*, is not totally absent, but has receded into the background in comparison with the earlier works.

Little is known about the history of Gutiérrez's home country before the time of the Incas.²⁰ Peru was the centre from which the Incas ruled a major part of Latin America from the beginning of the second millennium until the fifteenth century, when Spanish soldiers and adventurers took over the empire. During the next 200 years, the Spanish government ruled the country through a viceroy and a subordinate Indian government which dealt with the indigenous people. From the end of the eighteenth century onwards, various revolts against the Spanish hegemony resulted in the country's independence in 1821. A turbulent time followed, in which various rulers governed the country. As of the middle of the nineteenth century, industrial exploitation of the natural deposits began. Increasing foreign investments during the first half of the twentieth century gave rise to broad nationalist tendencies (notably the so-called APRA party). After World War II, these nationalist tendencies resulted in various – sometimes dictatorial – governments that tried to nationalise the industries and carry out land reforms.

¹⁸ Gustavo Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics, and Salvation*, trans. from the Spanish by Sister Caridad Inda and John Eagleson, 2nd revised edition (London: SCM, 1988), p. xviii.

¹⁹ For a detailed analysis of the development of Gutiérrez's thought, see Van Nieuwenhove.

²⁰ For an excellent gentle introduction to Peru, see 'Virtual Peru.Net' (URL: <http://www.virtualperu.net>) – visited on 2002-05-03.

In 1980, Peru had democratic presidential elections, which resulted in a stable democratic political system.

This historical introduction is probably less significant than the deeply conflictual nature of Peruvian society. The three main groups mentioned above go back to the Spanish invasion in the sixteenth century. From that time on, the white ruling class gradually acquired control, frequently by violent means, of almost all the country's natural goods, land, and agricultural and industrial production systems.²¹ Agriculture was dominated by white landowners who, in many cases, had complete control over their Indian slaves, cooperating with a deeply corrupt government that justified their oppressive actions. Add to this the broad international exploitation of the country from the first half of the twentieth century onwards, and it is easily understood that the poor of Peru (and the whole of Latin America) became deeply suspicious of foreign elements in their society. This was in fact the breeding ground for the nationalist and communist guerrilla movements that attracted so much attention from Western news agencies, and that were severely suppressed, primarily by North-American military influence in the United States' 'backyard'.²²

A final note on the Latin American context. The history of Latin America shows a mixture of dictatorial and democratic governments, accompanied by a wide range of guerrilla movements. This disturbs the Western mind with its – mostly tacitly presupposed – preference for capitalism and democracy as the obvious guarantees of freedom and well-being. This combination of capitalism and democracy is not so attractive to the Latin American people, however, because behind capitalist democracy lies a liberal conception of private property. As soon as such a conception is confronted with the history of Latin America, where a small, wealthy elite have gained control of the whole economic system simply by declaring it their property, we begin to understand why Marxism, including its non-democratic means for establishing a just society, was such a natural option for the proletariat of that continent. This striking difference in context between Western and Latin American society also explains why suspicion and protest against current neo-liberal democracy are still widespread and vital among the Latin American people, and why so many Westerners fail to understand this.

6.4 LIBERATION THEOLOGY

The term 'liberation theology' is confusing in two ways. First, since a liberation perspective became popular in the 1960s, many theologians have adopted the term 'liberation theology' as a description of their way of doing theology, including South-African, Black American, and feminist theologians. As a result, the term lacks precision. In this chapter, I will only be interested in movements similar to the Latin American in so far as they help us to understand the Latin American version, and, most importantly, Gutiérrez's contribution to it. Secondly, the term

²¹ For a literary and engaged description of these developments, see Arguedas, *Yawar Fiesta*, pp. 10–18.

²² John Charles Chasteen, *Born in Blood and Fire: A Concise History of Latin America* (New York: Norton & Co., 2001), pp. 275–301.

'liberation theology' is a difficult one because Western readers easily understand theology as a purely intellectual enterprise. In the second half of the twentieth century, Western theology was dominated by the great intellectual projects of individual theologians like Karl Barth, Paul Tillich, Rudolf Bultmann, and Jürgen Moltmann. Theology in the Western sense of the term may be somewhat sweepingly described as 'a theoretical construct of the individual intellect'. Ironically, Gutiérrez's contribution to liberation theology has frequently been interpreted in typically Western categories as his personal 'invention' of a new type of theology. As we will see in more detail below, Gutiérrez's and others' way of doing theology aims at exactly the opposite of what the term 'liberation *theology*' might suggest. They advocate most radically a theology of the people, and if 'theology' is taken in the modern, Western sense, perhaps even the end of theology itself.

This second misunderstanding of the movement is probably facilitated by the fact that in Gutiérrez's ground breaking work – again: a typically Western category – *A Theology of Liberation*, he is most extensively engaged in fairly theoretical discussions with Western theology and political thought. However, for Gutiérrez, even that work was already fully rooted in the Latin American experience. This context of Latin America, however, was largely unknown to Western readers, who incorporated Gutiérrez's revolutionary insights in their own post-Enlightenment progressive theology. In my analysis, I will try to locate Gutiérrez's view in his own Latin American context. This is not an easy task, however, because Gutiérrez in fact does not describe his own world in much detail. In this regard, the novels of Arguedas will prove helpful. There, we find a magnificent retelling of the Latin American experience filled with descriptions of nature, local Indian culture and Western oppression and exploitation.

The best entrance to liberation theology is its account of the theological task itself. In his *A Theology of Liberation*, Gutiérrez defines theology as "the critical reflection on praxis in the light of the Word of God".²³ It is not entirely obvious what this reformulation of the theological task amounts to, but within Gutiérrez's work, it has a wide range of meanings, of which I will discuss three.

First, it means a critique of any kind of theology that does not take human experience sufficiently into account, especially the experience of the poor. In that sense, it is a defence of an anti-intellectualist theology. Theology does not find out what is or is not the case. In Gutiérrez's frequently recurring phrase: theology is a 'second act'.²⁴ It is a second-order reflection on liberating praxis.²⁵ In *A Theology of Liberation*, Gutiérrez rejects the idea that faith and theology can step outside political reality and inhabit a completely separate spiritual domain. This would amount to the Church actually supporting the status quo. Both pastoral and theological activities should be rooted in the Church's actual participation in the poor's struggle for liberation.²⁶

If theology is conceived in this way as a critical reflection on the liberating praxis of the Church, this also involves a critique of the ways in which theological reflection may support structures of oppression and exploitation. Liberation

²³ Gutiérrez, *Theology of Liberation*, pp. xxix, 11.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. xxxiii–xxxiv; Gutiérrez, *On Job*, p. xiii.

²⁵ Gutiérrez, *Theology of Liberation*, p. 3.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 29–46.

theology not only criticises the overly intellectual nature of Western theology, but also attacks it for supporting and strengthening the oppressive structures of Western society and imperialism.²⁷ At this point, we encounter one of the key insights of Gutiérrez's own move towards a liberation perspective. Gutiérrez gradually became aware of the fact that the fate of the poor is not an inexplicable brute fact, but is actually due to a system of dependence which the rich create in order to maintain their position. This is a phenomenon that occurs at the national, but even more, at the international level. The rich countries maintain the structure of dependence by their development projects, which leave the power structures essentially unchanged. Poverty is not an accident, but the inherent consequence of the political system of capitalism. A Church and a theology that avoid the political arena or, even worse, actively justify capitalist ideology, help to maintain the dominance of the rich over the poor. Any superficial service to the poor that leaves the system as it is, will fail substantially to improve the situation of the poor. In this regard, Gutiérrez was influenced by Marxist thought; he repeatedly advocated socialism as the best socio-economic system.²⁸ However, we should note that, in the Latin American situation, Marxism finds a natural ally in the historical context of the continent. At the international level, the socio-economic situation is characterised by massive foreign exploitation by Western companies. At the national level, private property is owned almost exclusively by few a large landowners of Spanish origin who, as we saw in the previous section, acquired this ownership by highly suspect means.²⁹

All of this is acceptable to, and much in line with Western progressive theology of the second half of the twentieth century. Theology should be relevant to the poor, in support of the poor, and critical of the oppressors. At the heart of liberation theology, however, is a theology *of* the people. The poor are the *subject* of theology, not an object. As long as theology remains outside the world of the poor, it remains a foreign perspective that is, at most, projected onto it. Therefore, Gutiérrez's aim is to let the poor themselves articulate their understanding of God, salvation and the world. Of course, liberation theologians are well aware that, in many respects, the poor are not in a position to express their own theological concerns because even their basic needs are unsatisfied, and they lack education. For this reason, one of the primary interests of liberation theology is the education of the people and their organisation in so called 'base communities'. *Comunidades de base* are small groups initiated by the local churches, where people meet for learning, reading the Bible and dealing with their practical problems.

The idea of a church and a theology *of* the people remains somewhat theoretical and dry, but we are in fact dealing with a phenomenon that is deeply rooted in the native culture of the Andes. Gutiérrez repeatedly builds on these roots and, especially in his later works, it even becomes part of his style of writing through the frequently recurring phrase "In Latin America, people begin to . . .".³⁰ What

²⁷ Gutiérrez, *Theology of Liberation*, pp. 58–67.

²⁸ Cf. Judd, pp. 68–70.

²⁹ Gutiérrez, *Theology of Liberation*, pp. 13–24.

³⁰ See, for example Gustavo Gutiérrez, *We Drink from Our Own Wells: The Spiritual Journey of a People*, trans. from the Spanish by Matthew J. O'Connell, Foreword by Henry J.M. Nouwen (London: SCM, 1984), pp. 1–5, 16, 19, 20, 24, etc.

he aims at is not a new theological construct that, again, glosses over the true interests of the poor, but rather a theology that originates in the Latin American poor's own experience of faith.

First of all, then, liberation theology as a theology *of* the people is a theology with firm and stubborn trust in the God of life. The poor of Latin America began to see that the God whom they believe in is not the God of death – which is what their suffering ultimately is – but the liberating God of creation and exodus, and the Father of Jesus Christ who rose from death. This faith in the liberating God as the starting point of liberation theology should put aside the widespread notion that liberation theology propounds a view of salvation according to which people have to realise their own salvation. Gutiérrez repeatedly insists that the vision of a new future in which there is peace and justice for all is firmly rooted in the conviction that God is active in history to realise the heavenly kingdom.³¹

Secondly, the faith of the people brings a new understanding of salvation to the world. God as a liberating God brings salvation to the poor and the oppressed. Similarly, the church and its individual members should bring salvation to the people by 'opting for the poor'. This view of salvation includes a view of the Kingdom of God that is not wholly other-worldly but begins to create symbols of the Kingdom in the earthly reality of the present. This way of doing reinforces the Church's proclamation of the Gospel as a proclamation of justice and peace for all, and especially for those who are oppressed.

Finally, liberation theology emphasises a strong feeling for the faithful as a community. In opting for the poor and turning towards others, the Church becomes a true body of Christ together with all who do likewise. This implies a truly open church which proclaims salvation not only to its members, but to all who seek justice and peace.³²

A stubborn trust in the Lord of justice and a strong communitarianism characterise the picture of liberation drawn by Arguedas in his major novel *Todas las sangres* (All the Bloods, henceforth: TLS).³³ In this book, which, compared to his other works, reflects most clearly certain strands of what would be called 'liberation theology' some years after its publication,³⁴ Arguedas presents what he sees as the unique contribution of the native Latin American people of the Andes to the problem of liberation. Arguedas draws a picture of the Indian communities under increasing pressure from large landowners and foreign multinationals. In the face

³¹ Gutiérrez, *Theology of Liberation*, pp. 79–120; Gutiérrez, *On Job*, pp. 53–55, 87ff.

³² Gutiérrez, *Theology of Liberation*, pp. 9–10.

³³ At present, there is no English translation of this book available in print, although one will probably appear in the near future (Cf. Arguedas, *Fox from Up Above and Down Below*, p. vii). I have used the Dutch translation: José María Arguedas, *De wegen van het bloed*, trans. from the Dutch by Marjolein Sabarte Belacortu, 2nd edition (Amsterdam: Meulenhoff, 1988).

³⁴ José María Arguedas, *Todas las sangres*, *Novelistas de nuestra época* (Buenos Aires, 1964). There is direct connection between TLS and *Theology of Liberation*. The quotation of TLS in *Theology of Liberation* is referred to by Arguedas in his 'Last Diary', as being read by him to 'Gustavo'. Arguedas writes: "To be sure, in Lima I had read you those pages from *All the Bloods* in which the sexton and singer from San Pedro de Lahuaymarca, whose church had already burnt down and who had taken refuge among the members of a highland community, replies to a priest of the Inquisitor God; he replies with arguments quite similar to those of your lucid and deeply moving lectures, given a short while before in Chimbote." Arguedas, *Fox from Up Above and Down Below*, p. 258. These "lucid and deeply moving lectures" were the basis of *Theology of Liberation*.

of these problems, the indigenous people do not start revolutionary programs, kill their masters, or anything like that. They just keep in place, seizing every opportunity to improve their situation, but always within the bounds of justice. A strong communitarianism protects them against the influence of Western individualism and ambition ('the coast' in Arguedas's terminology). Liberation by the indigenous people is no revolution at all, neither is there any policy governing the process.

One of the things that make *TLS* such a magnificent novel is that, in a sense, nobody is in control of the process of liberation, although the Indians and one of their masters actively participate in it. It just emerges by a web of seemingly coincidental factors—the name of the hacienda that the novel circles around is 'La Providentia'. The theology of the book has been subtly and skillfully woven into every detail of the plot. In this regard, the end of the book is particularly significant. At the end of the story, the main supporters of liberation have been imprisoned or killed. The book ends with the executives of the ruling foreign multinational discussing their success in suppressing liberation. One of the executives, however, hears the swelling sound of the river and begins to tremble.³⁵ Here, Arguedas finally shows the power of liberation in a manner highly characteristic of his art. In Arguedas' art, Indian culture undergoes a fusion of horizons with Christian faith and Marxist ideology. The swelling sound of the river symbolises the liberating power of God, but 'God' as he is experienced by the Indian people, that is God as present in the Church, nature and the people. Hence, even when the champions of liberation die or are imprisoned, liberation goes on, at once directed by the Christian God (Christianity), the gods of nature (Indian Culture), and the inevitable process of history (Marxism).

We see that in his later work, the book on Job included, Gutiérrez moves increasingly in the direction of Arguedas's type of liberation. The language of prophecy remains, but it loses most of its political aspects and becomes embedded in a more profound sense of God's sovereignty, the language of contemplation.³⁶

6.5 GUTIÉRREZ'S ENGAGEMENT WITH JOB

Unlike many commentators of the twentieth century, Gutiérrez interprets the Book of Job as an "integrated literary and theological work". In his view, the *Leitmotiv* of talk about God from the perspective of a 'disinterested faith' provides a strong connection between the mirror story and the poetic part of the book.³⁷ He sees the book as a literary construct, over against a report of historical events, although, as we have seen, he is convinced that the author must have shared something like Job's experiences of suffering. The endnotes to Gutiérrez's book show that he

³⁵ Arguedas, *Todas las sangres*, pp. 470–471; Arguedas, *De wegen van het bloed*, p. 675.

³⁶ Van Nieuwenhove, p. 5.

³⁷ Gutiérrez refers to the work of Habel for a similar focus on the final version of the text. Gutiérrez, *On Job*, pp. 1, 5, 109.

is well informed about contemporary Job research.³⁸ When it comes to detailed exegetical issues, Gutiérrez is most interested in philological explanations.³⁹

Gutiérrez interprets the book, not only as a literary, but also as a thematic unity. Job 42: 6–7, where God justifies Job and criticises the friends, is the hermeneutical key to Gutiérrez's understanding of Job. This means that in his view, God – both in the story and by inspiring Scripture – as well as the author are entirely in favour of Job and critical of the friends. Hence, Gutiérrez's interpretation is the exact opposite of Calvin's view that what the friends said is to be received as the "very words of the Holy Spirit". Within Gutiérrez's view of the book of Job as a whole, God's answer in the whirlwind should be seen as a real 'solution' to the problem of the book. God does not provide a knock-down rational response to Job's questions, but he teaches Job a different way of looking at them, thereby enabling a real encounter between Job and the Lord.

It is difficult to do justice to the richness of Gutiérrez's interpretation of Job when summarising his view. In this chapter, I will approach Gutiérrez's work from three different angles, linked to three central notions in his interpretation: first, the topic of disinterested faith; second, the language of prophecy; and finally, the language of contemplation. It will become clear that these three angles open up a wide spectrum of interconnected aspects of Gutiérrez's engagement with the book of Job.

Disinterested faith is a concept that is at the heart of the problem posed by the Book of Job: how can we talk of God in the midst of unjust suffering?

Are human beings capable, in the midst of unjust suffering, of continuing to assert their faith in God and speak of God without expecting a return? Satan, and with him all those who have a barter conception of religion, deny the possibility. The author, on the contrary, believes it to be possible, although he undoubtedly knew the difficulty that human suffering, one's own and that of others, raises against authentic faith in God. Job, whom he makes the vehicle of his own experiences, will be his spokesman.⁴⁰

The question of disinterested faith is the challenge Satan poses to God in the prologue. Although the challenge is about Job in the first place, it has universal implications:

The innocence of Job makes it historically possible that there may be other innocent human beings. The injustice of his suffering points to the possibility that other human beings may also suffer unjustly, and his disinterested outlook points to the possibility that others too may practice a disinterested religion. Here we have the potential universality of the figure of Job; it is in fact clear that the poet intends to make a paradigm of him.⁴¹

³⁸ He uses over ten commentaries, including well known ones by Habel, Terrien, Alonso Schökel, Lévêque, and Westermann.

³⁹ Important examples are his discussions of 'living Avenger' (*gō'ēl*, Job 19:25, Gutiérrez, *On Job*, p. 64) and "I retract and repent in dust and ashes" (see below, Job 42:6, *ibid.*, pp. 86–87). For other examples, see also *ibid.*, pp. 3–4, 12, 40, 86–87.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 1.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 4.

Already here, Gutiérrez's own situation in Peru is strongly present in the background. The indigenous people of Latin America fear the Lord for nothing. Their lords constantly justify their cruelties in terms of faith. Arguedas's novel provides a good example here. One of the recurring themes in the book is honesty. The oppressors are so entangled in a web of opportunism that they question each other's intentions all the time. "Why did he do it?" "What might be his hidden agenda behind this?"⁴² This fate particularly befalls Rendon Willka,⁴³ the figure who most explicitly struggles for the liberation of his people. His masters constantly ask what the hidden plan might be behind his otherwise correct behaviour, even to such an extent that throughout the story, the reader begins to doubt his good intentions as well. The indigenous people, Rendon included, reply in these cases: "We fear God."⁴⁴

Gutiérrez further develops the topic of disinterested faith by connecting it with the dialogues. Here, the difference is not between God and Satan, but between Job as practising disinterested faith, and the friends who favour retributive views of suffering. Job practices disinterested faith in various ways. First, he practices it by stubbornly holding fast to God and his innocence in spite of all his suffering. Secondly, he displays disinterested faith by defending a disinterested view of suffering against the friends. Hence, in addition to the context of the wager, in which disinterested faith has to do with the question whether the faith of the righteous is based on the expectation of reward, a disinterested view of suffering means the denial of the 'mechanism' of retribution, in which suffering is conceived as the inevitable consequence of sin. Practising disinterested faith gains a third dimension when, during the dialogues, Job gradually broadens his attention to the situation of the poor. Finally, disinterested faith is connected with the theme of divine and human freedom in the language of contemplation. To practice disinterested faith means to enter into a mutual relationship of love with God, in which both partners recognise each other's freedom.

Like the topic of disinterested faith, the theme of the *language of prophecy* opens up a range of topics. The theme is built upon the dialogues with the friends. In confrontation with the friends, Job gradually discovers his inability to fit his own experience into the common retributive explanation of suffering. During the first round of the dialogue, this clash between theory and experience is primarily oriented towards Job's own suffering. In Gutiérrez's view, the friends typically represent a theology out of touch with experience, a theology that has come under severe attack from the liberation perspective.⁴⁵

The talk about the friends as 'friendly theologians' makes clear how close Gutiérrez finds himself to Job's situation.⁴⁶ The ironical designation of 'friendly' people reinforces the impression that Gutiérrez has encountered this type of people as those who defend an ideological system with a kind of deceptive friendliness:

⁴² Arguedas, *Todas las sangres*, pp. 42–49, 72, 80, 84–85, 154–173; Arguedas, *De wegen van het bloed*, pp. 55–66, 99, 111, 118, 220–247.

⁴³ This figure is also called 'Demetrio'; the use of aliases is a common – sometimes disturbing – feature of Arguedas's novels.

⁴⁴ Arguedas, *Todas las sangres*, pp. 189, 392; Arguedas, *De wegen van het bloed*, pp. 270, 564.

⁴⁵ Gutiérrez, *On Job*, pp. 28–29.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 21.

When all is said and done, if Job is not guilty, how is it possible to explain what has befallen him? His friends want to help him, but they cannot do so except on the basis of their own vision of things, their own theology. [. . .] He knows his words will seem harsh to Job, but he also knows that he must offer correct teaching.⁴⁷

The teaching is inevitable, although perhaps somewhat infelicitous for those who suffer. Gutiérrez, however, tries to reveal its real nature by arguing that it hides the reality of suffering, stems from a highly individualistic theology and, finally, justifies the position of the rich:

The ethical pattern they expound is a simple one that can be applied in a highly individualistic way. Its power flows precisely from its simplicity. It was the prevailing doctrine at the period when the author of the Book of Job was writing, and it has cropped up repeatedly wherever a particular religious mentality has been at work. It is, moreover, a convenient and soothing doctrine for those who have great worldly possessions, and it promotes resignation and a sense of guilt in those who lack such possessions.⁴⁸

The difference between the retributive faith of the rich and the disinterested faith of the poor becomes entirely clear: in the end, the religion of the rich is intended to let its proponents receive more at the expense of the poor. Although the discussion is about Job, in fact we are at home in Peru, where a highly exploitative political, economic, and religious system is justified by reference to the capitalist ethic of the individual:

In the course of the history of the Church certain tendencies in the Christian world have repeatedly given new life to the ethical doctrine that regards wealth as God's reward to the honest and the hard-working, and poverty as God's punishment to the sinful and the lazy. [. . .] On the other hand, as everyone knows, the capitalist ideology has historically made use of this doctrinal expedient—openly in the beginning; nowadays in more subtle forms—for its own religious justification. This manipulation of the doctrine distorts one point in it that continues to be important despite all criticisms of the teaching—namely that the Christian faith necessarily entails a personal and social ethic.⁴⁹

The neutral, theoretical doctrine of retribution is shattered by Job's experience of innocent suffering. The *first* aspect of the language of prophecy, then, is a language of protest against self-contained theological systems that lock up the gratuitous love of God into a system of reward and punishment. That Job shared the basis of such a retributive theology makes clear why, gradually breaking out of it, he attacked the 'retributive' God as well with his experience of innocent suffering. In Gutiérrez's view, however, this attack on God was not a blasphemy of God, but rather a faithful call upon the living God out of a situation of confusion.⁵⁰

There is a fascinating parallel between Gutiérrez's interpretation of the theology of the friends as a theology out of touch with reality and Arguedas's critique

⁴⁷ Gutiérrez, *On Job*, p. 21.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 22.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 22–23.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 23, 25–26.

of communism in his novel *El Sexto*.⁵¹ In *ES*, Gabriel (sic!), a partyless student, is imprisoned in the most notorious prison of Peru, the Sexto prison. There were many political prisoners at the time, divided into two parties, the communists and the aprists (followers of the APRA party). Political prisoners living on the third floor were in a relatively fortunate position – compared to other prisoners – in being strictly separated from criminal prisoners who lived on the ground and first floors.⁵² A condition of this situation, however, is that they must abstain from any aid to the people on the ground floor, who experience extreme forms of suffering. As soon as Gabriel enters the Sexto, he begins to break the prison laws by showing compassion with the fate of the criminals. This leads to severe disputes among the political prisoners – communists and aprists – who see their possibility of survival challenged by the young partyless student.⁵³ Arguedas makes clear what he sees as the principal difference between the communist view of liberation and the Indian view. Communism is a rigid theory that overlooks the particular.⁵⁴ True liberation means having a non-theoretical, non-programmatic eye for the suffering of one's neighbour.

The theology of the friends, having no connection to the real world, is a repetitive theology that does not make any progress during the dialogues, apart from an ever more biting tone towards Job's call for justice.⁵⁵ Job, however, due to his open eyes for the experience of innocent suffering, gradually discovers that he is not alone in his dreadful situation, but shares it with all poor and oppressed people:

An important point is reached in this progress when he realizes that he is not the only one to experience the pain of unjust suffering. The poor of this world are in the same boat as he: instead of living, they die by the roadside, deprived of the land that was meant to support them. Job discovers to his grief that he has many counterparts in adversity. The question he asks of God ceases to be a purely personal one and takes concrete form in the suffering of the poor of this world. The answer he seeks will not come except through commitment to them and by following the road—which God alone knows—that leads to wisdom. Job begins to free himself from an ethic centered on personal rewards and to pass to another focused on the needs of one's neighbor.⁵⁶

Job's discovery strengthens his case over against the friends, because he is now able to refute the claims they base on experience with clear examples of the opposite. After that, Job's understanding develops further:

Moreover, his line of argument will now change radically, as a result precisely of his realization that poverty and abandonment are not his lot alone. For he sees

⁵¹ Again, no English translation is available of this work. I have used the Dutch translation: José María Arguedas, *De gevangenen van de Sexto*, trans. from the Spanish by Marjolein Sabarte Belacortu (Amsterdam: Meulenhoff, 1992). *ES* is strongly autobiographical. In 1937–38, Arguedas was imprisoned in the Sexto prison for eight months.

⁵² José María Arguedas, *El Sexto* (Lima: Editorial Horizonte, 1969), p. 14; Arguedas, *De gevangenen van de Sexto*, p. 15.

⁵³ Arguedas, *El Sexto*, p. 71; Arguedas, *De gevangenen van de Sexto*, p. 72.

⁵⁴ Arguedas, *El Sexto*, pp. 101–102, 113–116, 125–126, 137–138; Arguedas, *De gevangenen van de Sexto*, pp. 103, 115–118, 127–128, 139–140. See also Arguedas, *Todas las sangres*, p. 432; Arguedas, *De wegen van het bloed*, p. 620.

⁵⁵ Gutiérrez, *On Job*, pp. 27–28.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 31.

now that this poverty and abandonment are not something fated but are caused by the wicked, who nonetheless live serene and satisfied lives. These are the same ones who tell the Lord, "Go away!" The wicked are both rejectors of God and enemies of the poor—two sides of the same coin. All this leads the author of the book to put into the mouth of Job the most radical and cruel description of the wretchedness of the poor that is to be found in the Bible, and also to have Job utter a harsh indictment of the powerful who rob and oppress the poor.⁵⁷

Then, Gutiérrez quotes Job 24: 2–14, a description of the suffering of the poor that is "full of detail" and displays "careful attention to the concrete situation of the poor". Gutiérrez admits that the friends utilise the language of prophecy as well, but they make it fit into their theology of retribution, thereby further oppressing the poor.⁵⁸ The *second* important aspect of the language of prophecy, then, is the prophetic critique of the wicked and the proclamation of the 'preferential option for the poor'.

Finally, however, the language of prophecy remains a language of justice. Even in Job's speeches, the clash between his experience of suffering, the conviction of his innocence and his cries to God rest upon the idea that the justice of God needs to be visible in this world, which it is not, from Job's perspective. For Job's insight in proper talk about God to develop further, a radical shift is needed. The language of prophecy needs to be complemented by the *language of contemplation*. The first step towards the language of contemplation is, surprisingly and "despite himself", the speech of the "lusive and boastful" Elihu.⁵⁹ By pointing to the transcendence of God, Elihu prepares for the revelation of God from the heart of the tempest, notwithstanding or "thanks to" the lacunae that his speech contains. Elihu qualifies the, in his view, oversimplistic view of justice that Job and the friends have worked with so far. He argues that God might have reasons human beings do not know. Suffering might be a way in which God reveals himself and it might have a place in God's plans. Furthermore, Elihu applies Job's language of prophecy and focus on the poor to God: God will eventually deliver them from oppression. However, Elihu sticks to the doctrine of retribution and therefore:

This explanation does not do away with the mystery of suffering in human life. The poet is using Elihu to convey one answer given in his day to the difficulty that the doctrine of retribution is at odds with human experience. It is clear, however, that the author is not satisfied with this answer; the best of his own thinking will be given in the speeches of God from the heart of the tempest.⁶⁰

The final perspective on Job provided by Gutiérrez is that of the language of contemplation or mysticism.⁶¹ Again, the phrase 'language of contemplation' functions as an umbrella term for a range of notions in Gutiérrez's interpretation of Job. Much in line with liberation theology's view of theology as a second order discourse, Gutiérrez starts the third part of the book with a chapter on the "faith of the people" entitled "Everything Comes from God". In this chapter, he goes back to the prologue of the book of Job, where Job speaks the famous words: "Yahweh

⁵⁷ Gutiérrez, *On Job*, p. 32.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 34–35.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 39.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 46.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, p. 51.

gave, Yahweh has taken back. Blessed be the name of Yahweh!"⁶² Gutiérrez takes this text as an expression of Job's "profound sense of the gratuitousness of God's love."

Everything comes from God and is God's gracious gift; no human being, therefore, has a right to make any demands. Contrary to what the satan has claimed, Job's religion is indeed disinterested—that is, given freely, "for nothing." He does not need material prosperity to sustain his trust in God.⁶³

Gutiérrez links this strong sense of the gratuitousness of God's love to his own context:

The language used by Job in these opening chapters is often found on the lips of the poor who are believers. How often we hear simple folk use the very words of Job at the loss of loved ones: "God gave them to me, God has taken them away from me." This faith is sometimes described as "the faith of a cleaning lady," but this seems inaccurate. There is something deeper here, something that more learned types find difficult to grasp. The faith of the people is characterized by a strong sense of the lordship of God.⁶⁴

This is one aspect of the language of contemplation: the acknowledgement of divine sovereignty. However, in line with the critical nature of liberation theology, Gutiérrez does not accept the faith of the people in an unconditional way. The language of contemplation needs the language of prophecy:

Job's language here is, in outline, the language of contemplation and contains all its values. At the same time, however, his language shares the limitations of the faith of the poor; if one remains at this level, one cannot withstand the onslaught of ideologized ways of talking about God. That is, the faith of simple folk can be manipulated by interpretations alien to their religious experience. Furthermore, as happens in Job's own case, unremitting poverty and suffering give rise to difficult questions. A quick acceptance of them can signify a resignation to evil and injustice that will later be an obstacle to faith in the God who liberates. The insights present in the faith of the people must therefore be deepened and vitalized, but this process requires certain separations.⁶⁵

Without fully explaining the significance of the gratuitousness of God's love in this chapter, Gutiérrez wants to show that it is the indispensable starting point of Job's journey to God, but that at the same time, a simple affirmation of it cannot suffice as an answer to the embarrassing experience of suffering. The faith of the people needs to be complemented by the language of prophecy and the transformation of faith in the real encounter with the Lord.

The deepening of Job's insight is continued in the dialogues. The dialogues bring a second aspect of the language of contemplation to light: the spiritual struggle of Job who is waiting for God to come forth and reveal himself to him.

⁶² Translation from the Jerusalem Bible, used in the English translation of *On Job*. Gutiérrez, *On Job*, p. 53.

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Ibid., p. 54.

⁶⁵ The meaning of the term 'separations' seems somewhat unclear, probably due to a defective translation of the original Spanish. From the wider context, it seems that Gutiérrez means something like 'changes of one's mind'. Ibid..

Gutiérrez highlights three moments in the dialogues where Job's paradoxical hope in the Lord becomes most prominently evident. These are Job 9:33, where Job calls for an arbiter to plea for him before God, Job 16:19, where Job calls for a witness to testify for him before the Lord, and 19:25, where Job speaks of his faith in a Go'el, an advocate or liberator who lives and will deliver him in the end.⁶⁶ These three moments in the dialogues share the same paradoxical nature in that they are preceded by Job's strongest accusations of God. Job wants to meet God himself and this desire gradually grows in strength. Gutiérrez shows that while experiences of protest and despair are not unique in the Bible (Lamentations, Asaph in Psalm 73 and 77), they are never as extreme as in Job. It shows that the language of contemplation in search for an encounter with the Lord in the midst of suffering must wrestle itself through confusion and despair. Seen in this light, cries of protest and despair of the suffering believer are not so much expressions of unbelief, but rather utterances of a profound trust in the Lord.

The paradoxical character of faith comes to the fore most prominently when Gutiérrez discusses Job's faith in his Go'el:

To whom is Job appealing? The subject is much debated, and rightly so, for the passage is one of the high points of the book and crucial for its interpretation. Is Job referring to God or to some third person? In my view, he is referring to God and not to an intermediary distinct from God. Job's cry expresses an anguished but sure hope that comes to him from a profound insight—namely, that God is not to be pigeonholed in the theological categories of his friends. It might almost be said that Job, as it were, splits God in two and produces a God who is judge and a God who will defend him at that supreme moment; a God whom he experiences as almost an enemy but whom he knows at the same time to be truly a friend. He has just now accused God of persecuting him, but at the same time he knows that God is just and does not want human beings to suffer. These are two sides of the one God. This painful, dialectical approach to God is one of the most profound messages of the Book of Job.⁶⁷

It becomes clear how much his own context is in the background when Gutiérrez explains this paradoxical nature of the language of contemplation by reference to the Latin American poet César Vallejo:

A similar splitting of God is seen in a passage of an author who had a keen awareness of human suffering and is representative in so many ways of the suffering peoples of Latin America. That is one reason we have already met him in these pages; I am referring to César Vallejo, whose witness has helped me to understand the Book of Job and relate it more fully to my own experience. Shortly before his death, Vallejo dictated these dramatic and trustfilled lines to his wife Georgette: "Whatever be the cause I must defend before God after death, I myself have a defender: God." In the language of the Bible, he had a goel. This was a God whose fleeting presence he had felt at certain moments in life; a God who had slipped by him clad in the rags of a lotteryticket seller and whom he therefore once described as a "bohemian God." At this final moment, in a decisive hour of his life, he sees this God at his side as he faces the judgement that his life has merited from the same God.⁶⁸

⁶⁶ Gutiérrez, *On Job*, p. 56.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 65.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

Finally, the language of contemplation culminates in the encounter with the Lord from the heart of the tempest. Against those interpreters who hold that God does not really answer Job's questions, Gutiérrez argues that although the answers are not what we might expect, they are nevertheless real answers. God is answering already by actually revealing himself to Job, instead of reproaching him in the way the friends predicted in the dialogues.⁶⁹

Job has fearfully anticipated the way in which God would speak to him: "He will crush me in the tempest and wound me over and over without cause" (9:17). [...] But the fear proves mistaken. God does not crush the addressee, but returns to the theme of God's own greatness. [...] The greatness of God is to be identified less with power than with freedom and gratuitous love—and with tenderness.⁷⁰

Gutiérrez is not content with the fact *that* God speaks. Everything in the speeches of God hinges upon the notion of freedom. Job as well as the friends tried to pigeonhole God into their own system of reward and punishment, which forced them to choose between either ignoring the reality of the suffering of the innocent, or accusing God of misgovernment. Job had been challenging two things in his speeches. First, he had been challenging God's plan with the world and secondly, God's just government. In God's two speeches, the first is concerned with the idea of God's plan (*'ēšāh*) with the world, and the second deals with God's just government (*mishpat*).

In his interpretation of the first speech of God, Gutiérrez stresses God's freedom as the ultimate cause of the creation of the world. The friends and Job thought of the good fortune of human beings as God's plan behind the creation of the world. This idea is challenged by God in the first speech:

The reason for believing "for nothing"—the theme set at the beginning of the book—is the free and gratuitous initiative taken by divine love. This is not something connected only indirectly with the work of creation or something added onto it; it is the very hinge on which the world turns. This is the only motive for creation that can lead to a communion of two freedoms. It must therefore be the point from which we always start in order to make all things new.⁷¹

The starting point of divine love implies that the simple calculus of the friends does not hold. In Gutiérrez's view, the divine critique of the doctrine of retribution becomes particularly clear by the fact that in God's speech the natural inanimate world plays a key role. Gutiérrez connects the doctrine of retribution with an anthropocentric view of the world:

God's speeches are a forceful rejection of a purely anthropocentric view of creation. Not everything that exists was made to be directly useful to human beings; therefore, they may not judge everything from their point of view. The world of nature expresses the freedom and delight of God in creating. It refuses to be limited to the narrow confines of the cause-effect relationship.⁷²

⁶⁹ Gutiérrez, *On Job*, p. 67.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 68.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 70–71.

⁷² *Ibid.*, p. 74.

Hence, the plan of God is not the mechanism of cause and effect, but the free creation of a world in which freedom rules.

Upon this speech of God, Job acknowledges his littleness, but in Gutiérrez's view, he is not really convinced and far from admitting his sin. Then, in the second speech, God deals with the just government of the world, actually by pointing to the second freedom, that of creatures. God wants justice, but not in the sense the friends and Job have in mind:

[T]he Lord is explaining, tenderly and, as it were, shyly, that the wicked cannot simply be destroyed with a glance. God wants justice indeed, and desires that divine judgement (*mishpat*) reign in the world; but God cannot impose it, for the nature of created beings must be respected. God's power is limited by human freedom; for without freedom God's justice would not be present within history. Furthermore, precisely because human beings are free, they have the power to change their course and be converted. The destruction of the wicked would put an end to that possibility. In other words, the all-powerful God is also a "weak" God. [...] The mystery of divine freedom leads to the mystery of human freedom and to respect for it. [...] God is manifest not in the mighty wind or the earthquake or the fire but very tactfully in the whisper of a gentle breeze that is incapable of crushing or burying anyone.⁷³

The respect of God for human freedom has important implications for the position of human beings as well. Nobody can ever be in a position of absolute wickedness in the sense that conversion is impossible. It means also that, although God wants justice, he involves human beings in his government of the world:

Human beings are insignificant in Job's judgement, but they are great enough for God, the almighty, to stop at the threshold of their freedom and ask for their collaboration in the building of the world and in its just governance.⁷⁴

Upon the second speech, Job changes his mind and faithfully surrenders to God. He does not give up his innocence, though. He did not need to do so, because God never questioned it. In this connection, Gutiérrez follows a translation that renders Job 42: 6 as "I repudiate and abandon (change my mind about) dust and ashes" instead of the regular translation "I retract and repent in dust and ashes",⁷⁵ emphasising that the change of mind in Job is not directed to his own person, but to his insight in God's just government of the world:

The phrase "dust and ashes" is an image for groaning and lamentation; in other words, it is an image befitting the situation of Job as described before the dialogues began. This, then, is the object of the retraction and change of mind of which this key verse speaks. Job is rejecting the attitude of lamentation that has been his until now. The speeches of God have shown him that this attitude is not justified. He does not retract or repent of what he has hitherto said, but he now sees clearly that he cannot go on complaining.⁷⁶

In the remainder of the book, Gutiérrez moves back and forth between the language of prophecy and contemplation, showing their mutual interdependence

⁷³ Gutiérrez, *On Job*, pp. 77–79.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 78.

⁷⁵ New Jerusalem Bible quoted in *ibid.*, p. 86.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

and presupposition. We might even say that he is at pains to show that, if properly conceived, they do not come into conflict with one another.⁷⁷ On the other hand, Gutiérrez admits that the insight that Job attained during his journey remains partial in nature and, hence, not all of his questions were answered.

6.6 HERMENEUTICAL REFLECTION

The most distinguishing feature over against the other case studies described in this book, is the explicit role Gutiérrez gives to his own reading context. We have seen that, in all the examples, the influence of the cultural, social and religious context plays a major role in the interpretation, but in none of the other examples was this role explicitly and positively valued. In the case of the *Testament* and *Lasso*, this comes as no surprise, because the genre of the work precluded it. In Calvin's case, however, we saw that, although the context was very important for understanding the why and how of his interpretation, the *Sola Scriptura* maxim rendered an explicit positive evaluation of the context impossible.

Not so for Gutiérrez, who brings in his own context on the theoretical as well as the practical level. In his theoretical reflection on the task of theology, the interaction between Scripture and context is already present in two ways. Given that theology is the reflection on praxis in the light of the Word of God, the very first place where the interaction between Scripture and context takes place is the community of faith. The community lives out its faith in dialogue with the Word of God. Only then, in a 'second act', does theology reflect on praxis in the light of the Word of God once more. It uses all scholarly means at its disposal to explain the meaning of the text, but it is ultimately intended to return to the world of faith. These theoretical considerations are substantiated by Gutiérrez's exegetical practice. We have seen that the Latin American background is always present, and guides the approach to the text in many respects. This does not make for a monologue on Gutiérrez's part in which the text has no role to play. In responding to those who wonder what the Book of Job can teach liberation theology, Gutiérrez sets out his view of Scripture:

In point of fact, however, if this surprise exists it shows an ignorance of the biblical orientation that has characterized the theology of liberation from the outset. Above all, it signals a failure to grasp the connection between Christian life and the word of God. Not only is it legitimate in principle to read the Bible from the standpoint of our deepest and most pressing concerns; this has also in fact been the practice of the Christian community throughout its history. But this principle and this fact must not make us forget something I have often said because I am deeply convinced of it: although it is true that we read the Bible, it is also true that the Bible reads us and speaks to us.⁷⁸

This is not an empty phrase in Gutiérrez's thought. The careful reader of *On Job* will notice that the further Gutiérrez proceeds in the book of Job, the more at odds the message of the Book becomes with clear cut liberation theology. The end of Gutiérrez's book clearly displays traces of the tension he experiences between the

⁷⁷ Gutiérrez, *On Job*, pp. 88–91, 94–97.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, p. xvii.

urgent need for the language of prophecy and the inevitability – first theologically and then, eventually, experientially – of the language of contemplation. Gutiérrez shares Job’s difficulty with a faithful surrender to the just government of the Lord.

What Gutiérrez aims at is a dialogue with the text in which the reader brings in the whole of his own context but at the same time opens up that context to have an encounter with the otherness of the text. From a theoretical perspective, Gutiérrez’s approach can be aptly described in terms of Gadamer’s hermeneutics. Gutiérrez’s positive appreciation of his own context is in line with Gadamer’s positive view of the ‘Vorverständnis’. The reader can only have a true encounter with the otherness of the text if she is aware of her own situation. Gutiérrez’s high esteem of the significance of the text for the community of faith finds an easy parallel in Gadamer’s notion of the ‘Vorgriff der Vollkommenheit’.⁷⁹ The aim of the hermeneutical process in both views is a fusion of horizons, whereby the otherness of the text becomes incorporated into the life of the believer. This fusion of horizons is fundamentally open in nature. In Gutiérrez’s view, the reading of Scripture is never exhausted as a source of inspiration for the life of the Church, just as the things we learn from it never become the final instruction for all places and times. In Gutiérrez’s hermeneutics, this contextuality of the reading of Scripture does not lead to hermeneutical relativism because, in the course of the dialogue with the text, the community of faith will have experiences of truth in relation to its specific context.

I would like to go one step further, however, and uncover the view of Scripture underlying Gutiérrez’s interpretation of Job. We have seen that, ‘although’ he takes his own context seriously, Gutiérrez succeeds in initiating a dialogue between text and the reader in which both partners have a constructive role. This should not mislead us to think that what happens here is some kind of encounter of the reader with the ‘text itself’—a dialogue in which the text appears in unmediated form. The hermeneutical process that we meet in Gutiérrez’s work is in fact a religiously mediated reading of the text of Job. There are influential presuppositions governing the reading process. The most fundamental presupposition seems to be the idea of the Bible as the Word of God. This idea forms the background of the *Vorgriff der Vollkommenheit*. It leads to what in typically Protestant terms could be called the idea of the unity and perfection of Scripture.⁸⁰ These presuppositions mediate the text in Gutiérrez’s reading, and prepare it for being applied to his own context, resulting in various hermeneutical consequences. On the one hand, Gutiérrez’s conviction of the unity and perfection of Scripture forces him not to split Job up into different incompatible sources – from which it would be hard to choose the authoritative one – but rather to resolve ambiguities into one coherent message of the book of Job. In realising such a level of coherence, Gutiérrez chooses to read the dialogues in the light of God’s final judgement over them, which prevents him from evaluating them positively. *If*, as various recent interpreters have argued, the Book of Job should be read as a ‘bricolage’ of various perspectives on the problem of innocent suffering, Gutiérrez’s high view

⁷⁹ For a more elaborate discussion of Gadamer, see chapter 9, section 9.3.

⁸⁰ Cf. Guido de Bres, ‘Belgic Confession’, in: Philip Schaff, editor, *The Creeds of Christendom with a History and Critical Notes*, volume III: *The Evangelical Protestant Creeds, with Translations*, Bibliotheca Symbolica Ecclesiae Universalis, 4th edition (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1966), vii.

of Scripture makes it rather unlikely that he adequately perceives this.⁸¹ On the other hand, the assumption of the unity and perfection of Scripture leads to the attempt to renew the life of the believer with the message of the speeches of the Lord from the whirlwind as much as with the prophetic speeches of Job.

Of course, not only Gutiérrez's view of Scripture plays a role in mediating the text to the audience. His own context does so as well. Gutiérrez's own context, combined with his unconditional trust in the relevance and suitability of the Word of God for his own context, naturally leads to the portrayal of Job as the proponent of liberation theology. Gutiérrez acknowledges some difficulties with this view, given the fact that Elifaz already mentions the poor in his first speech, and that Elihu shows a profound engagement with the lot of the poor as well.⁸² Nevertheless, Job exemplifies the position of the poor in history.

David Brown criticises Gutiérrez for portraying Job as having an eye for the poor. He draws attention to an isolated verse that Gutiérrez left out of consideration: Job 30:1, where Job says: "But now they mock me, men younger than I, whose fathers I would have disdained to put with my sheep dogs" (NIV).⁸³ Brown presupposes that Job is disdainful of the fathers of the 'men younger than I' because of their poverty, or, more generally formulated, their social or economic status. In defence of Job, it must be said that this is a rather artificial reading of the text, because in the remainder of chapter 30, Job gives a lengthy description of these 'men' as the godless rather than the poor.⁸⁴

This having been said, there is nevertheless additional reason to doubt the all too easy connection between Job and the poor. In chapter 3, where I discussed the *Testament of Job*, I suggested that the particular view of evil implicit in the book of Job might be seen as a 'perspective of the rich'. In Job, a rich man falls to poverty and begins to ask why *he*, the righteous man, has to suffer. Such a question is unreasonable for those who struggle through the difficulties of life every day. They ask *how* to suffer, instead of *why* they suffer. Hence, it can be argued that Gutiérrez's high view of Scripture, together with his own context of the poor of Latin America, made it inevitable for him to conceive of the book of Job as a book for the poor although it is far from certain that this was its original setting.

By way of conclusion, we can say that when it comes to the fundamental religious character of their reading, Calvin and Gutiérrez do not differ all that much. Both read the Book of Job as a source of divine inspiration and as a normative criterion for truth. However, the ways in which both readers value their own roles as readers differ considerably. On the one hand, Calvin tries to hide his own situation by claiming that his interpretation is completely based on the

⁸¹ See, for example: Penchansky; Ellen van Wolde, *Mr and Mrs Job* (London: scm Press, 1997).

⁸² Cf. Gutiérrez, *On Job*, pp. 34–35.

⁸³ Brown, *Discipleship and Imagination*, pp. 191–192.

⁸⁴ David Wolfers, *Deep Things out of Darkness: The Book of Job. Essays and a New English Translation* (Kampen/Grand Rapids, 1995), pp. 430–437. Wolfers draws attention to the parallel between chapter 30 and 24. In the latter, the godless stand in opposition to the poor. With regard to 30:1 and 2, Wolfers suggests that Job replies here to the friends: "Correctly read, this brutal slap is a direct riposte to 15:10 *Among us are both old and grey-haired men, weighted with more years than your own father*, involving a struggle for seniority which we would consider infantile! These two expressions, juxtaposed, reveal themselves, as ritual forms of insult, with no true implications regarding the ages of either speaker or addressee." (*ibid.*, pp. 431–432)

text itself, thereby suggesting a one to one relationship between his interpretation and the Word of God. On the other hand, Gutiérrez, by explicitly acknowledging the role of his own context, remains much more modest in his claims about his own interpretation, preserving an openness to criticism and renewal that – perhaps paradoxically – brings him closer to the idea that Scripture must speak for itself.

III

A Theory of Critical Engagement

From Case Study to Theory

7.1 INTRODUCTION

In part II of this study, I offered a close reading of four interpretations of the biblical book of Job. From now on, I will gradually shift from the historical to the systematic level. This step has already been prepared in the earlier chapters by devoting separate sections to hermeneutical reflection. In part III, and more specifically in this chapter, I will try to make the case studies fruitful for developing an analysis of the hermeneutical process, which is at once more general and more penetrating. First of all, I will give a brief summary of the hermeneutical reflections provided so far, complementing them with more general theoretical considerations regarding a descriptive hermeneutics. In dealing with the descriptive level, I will already be paving the way for the next chapter on normative hermeneutics, for I will indicate what limitations the descriptive level imposes on the normative aspects of hermeneutical theories.

7.2 OVERVIEW OF PREVIOUS CHAPTERS

My first case was the *Testament of Job*, a haggadic retelling of the biblical story. In my hermeneutical reflection, I focused on two issues. First, the function of haggadic interpretation techniques and second, the overall character of *TJ* as an aesthetic mode of interpretation of Job. The interpretation of Job in the *Testament* exemplifies the key problem of a religious interpretation of an authoritative text: how to make sense of the text in a new context while maintaining its authority on the one hand and adapting it to the requirements of the new context on the other. Boyarin in particular showed that, by means of what he and others call ‘intertextuality’, Jewish readers were able to make sense of the old texts by weaving a mediating web of Scriptural material in the light of which the original message of the text was reinterpreted. This process maintained the authority of the text, and even reinforced it by integrating the individual and diverse parts of Scripture into a more or less coherent canon. On the other hand, this process implicitly changed the meaning of the texts in crucial respects, such as the view of evil and the role of Satan in the book of Job.

The second important hermeneutical issue I addressed was what I called the

Testament's 'aesthetic mode of interpretation' of the book of Job. The *Testament of Job* does not explicitly problematise issues of truth in the book of Job, such as those regarding its conception of evil and the role of Satan in it. Rather, the *Testament's* transformation of the canonical text takes the form of a story, where elements of truth are not presented as abstract truth claims, but as implicit elements of the narrative. This is similar to what happens in the visual arts, for instance, where many works of art convey a certain message, but in an implicit way. An important feature of this aesthetic mode of interpretation, at least in *TJ*, is what I called the possibility of 'partial appropriation'. An abstract theological system tends to demand an affirmative response to the whole system, whereas a work of art invites the reader to step in somewhere, enabling readers to leave other aspects of the work aside.

With the second case study, Calvin's sermons on Job, I investigated a theological rather than an aesthetic interpretation of the book of Job. In Calvin, Scripture functioned as the primary norm of belief and morals. Hence, the body of his sermons on Job was devoted to explaining what the Book of Job taught his audience about what to think and how to live. Like the author(s) of *Testament of Job*, Calvin needed a procedure for adapting the old text to his new context without compromising its authoritative status. When he disagreed with the laments of Job, he switched from a positive to a negative appropriation. In this respect, I spoke of an 'inverted hermeneutic'. The switch occurred at rather arbitrary points in the sermons. However, this inverted hermeneutic – anachronistically we might call it a hermeneutics of suspicion – did not impinge on the authority of the text, because Calvin justified it by reference to other parts of Scripture and various theological opinions, such as his views concerning the sovereignty of God and his negative anthropology.

Calvin's interest in true belief and right behaviour made for a rather closed interpretation of the texts. The audience was not allowed a great measure of freedom to pick what they wanted from his sermons. Various mechanisms were built in to preclude that. Calvin made a strong identification between the sermon as interpretation of Scripture on the one hand, and the Bible itself as the Word of God on the other. This identification was rooted in the Reformed idea of Scripture as a self-contained *principium fidei* as exemplified by the *Scriptura sola* slogan. I concluded, however, that in spite of such claims, Calvin's own views and context played a major role in determining his approach to the texts.

The third case brought us to the world of art again. The text of Job underwent a 'fusion of horizons' with the classical system of vocal polyphony in Lasso's *Lectiones*. Like *TJ*, Lasso gave an aesthetic interpretation of the biblical text. This opened up an opportunity for further reflection on the phenomenon of an aesthetic mode of interpretation. In two ways, the *Lectiones* created an 'open' environment, in which the audience was invited to enter. First, the musical context in which the text was taken up enabled the listeners to participate in varying degrees in the musical performance. Some people will use the music as muzak, an audible wallpaper functioning as a background to the various activities in which they engage. Other people will consciously enjoy the smooth and pleasing harmonious transitions of this music in a concert hall, or even make a careful study of the music as expression of the text by repeatedly listening to their compact disc recordings.

However, even serious engagement with the music need not result in a religious encounter with the text. Secondly, the fact that the texts of the *Lectiones* deal almost exclusively with the existential parts of the book of Job strongly encourages the listener to identify with Job's experience of suffering.

However, notwithstanding these 'open' characteristics of the text, it could also be argued that the musical setting of the text helps to communicate the message of the text more effectively. When texts that plainly and boldly make a certain claim are set to music, the aesthetic mode of interpretation may increase its power to evoke an affirmative response rather than opening up the text to partial or ignorant interpretations. On the social level, Lasso's interpretation of Job was typically upper class. His highly intellectual transformation of the text required skills that were not available to the lower classes.

The final case studied here, that of Gutiérrez's book *On Job*, was aimed primarily at the lower classes. We met a twentieth century theological reading from the perspective of the poor of Latin America. Though rooted in a 'high view' of Scripture as an authoritative and inexhaustible source of inspiration for the life of the Church, Gutiérrez's interpretation approaches the book of Job in full awareness of its own context and social interests. This stimulates a profound attempt to integrate the more alien parts of the texts into the life world of the believer on the one hand, but also results in a controversial identification of Job with the poor on the other. Gutiérrez preserves the authority of the text, remains aware of the distance, and attempts to bridge the gap between the text and his own context without disrespecting the integrity of either text or context.

7.3 COMPLEXITY AND DIVERSITY

So far, the hermeneutical reflections that I offered were specific, and related to particular interpretations of the book of Job. One of the aims of this study is precisely to confront the general claims of hermeneutics with the particulars of interpretive practice in order to keep theory close to practice. It is important, therefore, that, in proceeding towards more general considerations, the general theory should not be given precedence over the particular findings. What is needed instead is a theory that borrows its richness and complexity from the particulars of the reading practice. Therefore, in this section, I start my theoretical reflection by investigating the implications of the complexity and diversity of religious reading processes. In this section, I will try to steer clear of the implications of my findings for a descriptive hermeneutics as such, such as the questions whether texts have 'meaning' or whether we can know what a text means. These ontological and epistemological questions will be the topic of the next section.

To some extent, the complexity and diversity of religious interpretations of Scripture appeared already in the individual case studies, but they appear even more clearly when all four case studies are viewed together. In the process of interpretation, many different factors are at work, and it is not easy to reduce all of these factors to one and the same phenomenon. The diversity of the case studies was no coincidence. I selected this particular set of cases *inter alia* because it provides us with a wide diversity of approaches to Job. The author(s) of the

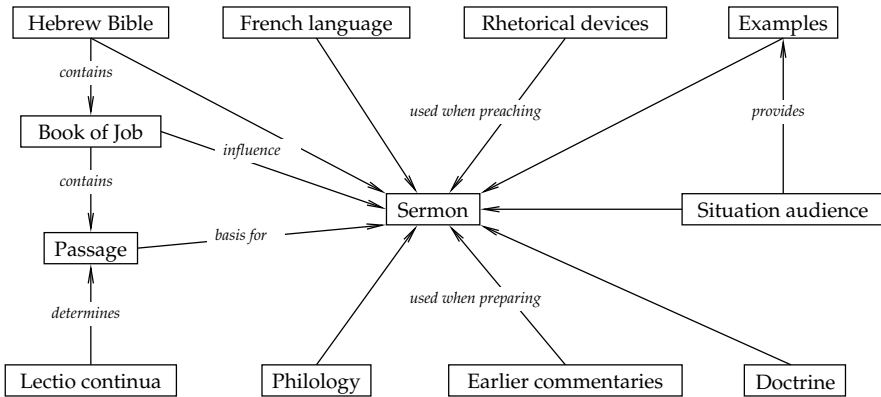


Figure 7.1: Structure of Calvin's interpretation of Job

Testament of Job were engaged in an enterprise quite different from that of Calvin, and the same is true of the others. There are similarities, like those between Calvin and Gutiérrez, who both dealt with the text of Job from a theological perspective. However, examination of Calvin and Gutiérrez's interpretations of Job shows that their interpretations also differ in many respects, such as the genre of their work – sermon versus book – and the theology of suffering behind their views.

In order to bring the complexity of the interpretation process more clearly into focus, I employ a graphical representation of two of the case studies.¹ The graphical representation consists of a figure that contains boxes representing various elements of the reading process. The boxes are associated with one another through a line with a description indicating the relation between the objects in the figure.² Figure 7.1 is a schematic representation of Calvin's sermons on Job and figure 7.2 presents a scheme of Lasso's music. The figures are by no means intended to provide exhaustive representations of the interpretation processes. That would be an impossible task, because one could in principle put together an infinite set of elements involved in a reading process. However, the figures are intended to give an indication of the complexity of the processes when considered on their own, and the variations between these processes when compared with each other.

Some explanation may help the reader to comprehend these complex webs of lines and boxes more easily. In both figures, four boxes on the left represent what we might call the 'selection' part of the process. In Calvin's case, this part contains the Hebrew Bible as the basis of Calvin's sermon, the Book of Job, and

¹ There seems to be a particular preference for graphics in hermeneutics. For example: D.H. Kelsey, *The Uses of Scripture in Recent Theology* (London, 1975), pp. 126ff. Notice also the spatial connotations of well known metaphors like 'hermeneutical circle' and 'fusion of horizons'.

² The method used to construct these figures was borrowed from problem domain analysis in computer science, see Maarten Wisse, 'Theory Design in Hermeneutics: A Meta-Hermeneutical Proposal Based on an Analogy from Computer Science', Paper presented at the BSPR Conference Oxford 2001 (2001), (URL: <http://home.wanadoo.nl/pmwise/pdf/bspr1.pdf>).

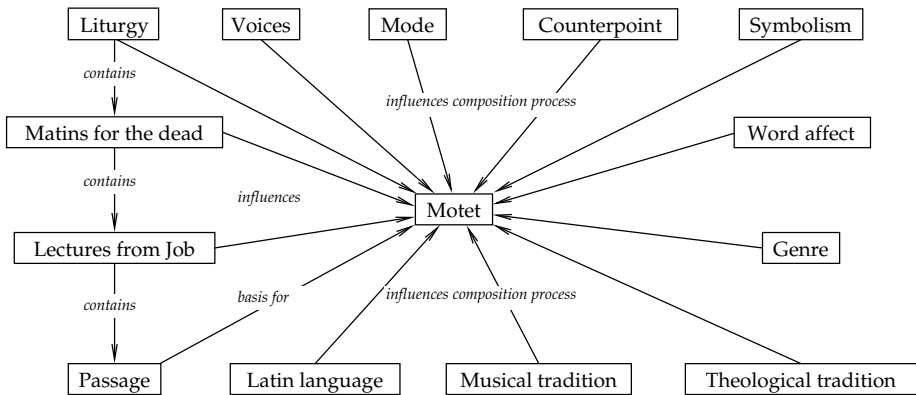


Figure 7.2: Structure of Lasso's interpretation of Job

the specific passage dealt with. In Lasso's case, the 'selection' part contains the liturgy, the specific liturgical service – the matins for the dead – the Book of Job used in this service, and the passage used for the particular motet. Then, in the lower right part, Calvin's figure contains the means used for preparing the sermon. The upper right part contains the means used during the performance of the sermon. Of course, these two aspects cannot always be separated sharply, but the distinction may serve a better reading of the figure. In Lasso's figure, the upper and lower right part contains various elements influencing the composition of the motet. The upper right part contains the more technical elements, such as the number of voices, the particular mode – comparable with the 'key' in later music – the rules of counterpoint and forms of symbolism. On the lower right side of the figure, we find the influence of the Latin musical and theological tradition.

What can we learn from these figures about the complexity and diversity of religious interpretation processes? *First of all*, these figures underline the *variety of elements* in the interpretation process, both when we take the case studies on their own, and when we compare them with one another. It becomes clear that, when religious believers interpret texts, many more factors are involved than simply the text and the reader. The text comes in a particular form, it goes through specific procedures of selection, and it is read in a particular version. The reader consults the text with certain goals in mind, uses particular means to discover what the text means, and presents his interpretation using elements from his own culture, language, education, and so on. As far as the individual cases are concerned, this makes for a reading process with very many variables and a rich dynamic. When comparing the two interpretations, it is striking to see that, while both are from the sixteenth century and deal with texts from the same biblical book, the two interpretations have very little in common—at least formally. In fact, Calvin and Lasso use different texts. The former uses his own translation of the Hebrew 'original', and views the book as a single composition by one human author. The latter uses a collection of quotations from a liturgical book, the quotations in turn

taken from the Vulgate translation of Job.

Second, we should notice that not only are there a great variety of elements involved in the religious interpretation process, but *these elements hang together* to no small extent. Traditionally, hermeneutics has distinguished between the ‘*expositio*’ and the ‘*applicatio*’ of the biblical texts, and nowadays this distinction is gaining new advocates.³ From my investigations, however, it follows that separating interpretation from application creates an artificially ‘clean’ environment of the reading process which is not in accordance with everyday practice. In some cases, such as Lasso’s, the scope for ‘*expositio*’ initially seems rather small and the ‘*applicatio*’ of the text to the musical purpose much more substantial. However, things may not be as they seem. In fact, ‘interpretive’ aspects are in many respects constitutive for the musical expression. As we saw in chapter 5, word tone relationships played an important role in late Renaissance music. This means that the text, albeit in the form of the Latin translation, determined a great deal of what Lasso could do in his music. He had to respect the stress of the Latin words by carefully relating them to emphasised notes in the music. Furthermore, he had to respect the affective value of the various words of the text by composing corresponding musical expressions on them. These are all aspects of the composition where the slightest change in the text would have major consequences for the flow of the music.

Calvin seems to satisfy the interests of so-called ‘hermeneutical realists’ more clearly than Lasso. He studies the text in the original language, provides exegetical remarks about the original meaning of the texts, and claims that the original meaning of the text is authoritative for the contemporary religious community. Yet, even in Calvin, there are elements outside the original meaning of the text that play a major role in the message eventually delivered to his audience. One might think of the examples he used to explain the meaning of the text, the French language used in his sermons, and the convictions he had about the situation of his audience. But as we have seen, perhaps the most influential factors determining Calvin’s view of Job were his theological convictions about what one is allowed to say to God in suffering, and what not.

Returning to the distinction between ‘*expositio*’ and ‘*applicatio*’, we have much reason to doubt the usefulness of such a distinction. What counts as ‘*expositio*’ is always related to the particular purpose of the interpretation. All four case studies show that the aim of *understanding* what the text means is intertwined with that of relating the text to one’s own situation. Sometimes the situation requires one to elaborate on the gaps in the text—the *Testament of Job*; sometimes it requires one to provide explanations of the surface meaning of the text in order to convey its alleged ‘literal sense’—the case of Calvin; sometimes it asks for an analysis of the stressed syllables so as to emphasise particular notes in the composition—the case of Lasso; at other times it requires one to focus on its view of God talk in the midst of innocent suffering—the case of Gutiérrez. The particular *expositio* that the reader asks for is determined by the context. The reverse is also true. The particular form of the *applicatio* depends on the nature

³ Umberto Eco, *The Limits of Interpretation*, *Advances in Semiotics* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), pp. 57–63; See also the discussion of the hermeneutics of communicative action in chapter 8.

of the text. Lasso could touch the melancholic mood of the late Renaissance mind very effectively with texts from Job, or Lamentations, or the penitential Psalms.

Third, complexity and diversity have important implications for hermeneutical theories that seek to reduce the many forms of interpretations to a single phenomenon, whether descriptively or normatively. From the perspective of a descriptive hermeneutics, complexity and diversity render useless any universalist theory about what happens when people read texts—generally or theologically. At the very least, such theories run the risk of oversimplification. Hence, any suggestion that, ultimately, the socio-economic context of the reader fully determines the interpretation, or that the literal sense of the text guides the interpretation in a decisive way, is mistaken.

However, Marxist or hermeneutical realists's theories are not the only ones that run the risk of oversimplification. Typically, postmodern hermeneutical theories are affected by it as well. Postmodern hermeneutics has been directed against the simplistic nature of the modernist hermeneutical ideal: to impose a single, objective historical perspective on the text. Over against this ideal, postmodern hermeneutics argued that the idea of a single perspective is mistaken because the reader is always significantly conditioned by context. In spite of this explicit vindication of the decisiveness of context, the arguments offered by postmodern hermeneutics may ultimately run counter to the project itself. A whole range of concepts has been offered, all of which point in various ways to the conditionedness of the reader. For example: Heidegger's notion of the hermeneutical circle, Gadamer's notions of the history of reception, the presumption of perfection⁴ and the fusion of horizons, and Derrida's notion of *différance*.⁵ In so far as these notions are used as a matrix for understanding all interpretive processes, these theories run the risk of becoming just as reductionist as the modernist view that they criticise. The postmodern hermeneutical notions rightly served to show that reading is contextually embedded, but they can hardly be useful in elucidating the particulars of interpretive processes. Though intended to reject universalist hermeneutics, postmodern theories remain in the universalist realm precisely because they try to show that context is involved in *all* interpretation. The paradoxical aspect of the argument is that, while arguing for complexity, the argument remains rather simplistic, and therefore serves the metaphysics of interpretation rather than concrete reading processes.

Does this imply the end of descriptive hermeneutics? Not necessarily. It merely shows that, the more general one's observations about interpretive processes, the less informative they become about individual cases, since they will necessarily overlook the differences that characterise the individual phenomena. Preparing the ground for my discussion of a normative hermeneutics in the next chapter, it may be said that complexity and diversity set limits to the viability of hermeneutical ideals. The decisive role of context, combined with the complexity and diversity of the reading process, suggests that hermeneutical critics may

⁴ I prefer this translation of 'Vorgriff der Vollkommenheit' above 'fore-conception of completeness', as the English translation of Gadamer has it. Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, trans. from the German by Joel Weinsheimer and Donald Marshall, 2nd edition (The Crossroad, 1989; New York: Continuum, 2002), pp. 293–294.

⁵ For my discussion of Derrida, see the next section.

have only a very modest role to play in reading processes. The idea that one could provide a hermeneutical ideal that is indeed *ideal* for all the many contexts around is mistaken. Such a hermeneutical ideal would be acceptable to only a small number of readers in the world, and would fit only some genres, purposes and social settings.

7.4 THE RIDDLE OF HERMENEUTICAL REALISM

I have argued for the contextuality of interpretation processes, that is, that we can isolate neither the text nor the reader from the context in which these are embedded. I am therefore obliged to respond to the charge of hermeneutical relativism or antirealism because, if both the text and the reader are inescapably bound by the context in which the interpretation takes place, it seems that there is no room left for the 'text itself', that is, its meaning independently of the reader. And, if there is, can we know it?

It may help the reader to have a brief outline of my position on these matters in advance of the detailed discussion of (anti)realism that is to follow. The issue of realism in philosophy and theology is a vast subject. Let me say in advance, therefore, that I will restrict my argument to hermeneutical realism, that is, the question whether texts have meanings independently of their readers and, if they do, whether we can know them. I will not draw upon the implications of my position for other theological and philosophical issues, such as the existence of God or the epistemological status of scientific theories. I will also abstain from relating my position in detail to other realist and antirealist positions found in the literature. In the footnotes, I will occasionally indicate positions that are similar to mine or to which I am indebted.

In this section, I shall try to avoid the hermeneutical (anti)realist conundrum by arguing that both hermeneutical realism and antirealism are mistaken. Both attempt to answer the question whether we can know anything about the 'text itself' in a very speculative way. In a sense, hermeneutical realists and antirealists postulate the existence of a 'real text', taken in isolation from any context of interpretation, and proceed to measure contextually determined interpretations against it, with either positive – in the realist case – or negative – in the antirealist case – results. I argue that this kind of (anti)realism debate is ultimately self-referentially incoherent, because it is attempted to answer a question that cannot be answered by definition. In this sense I may seem to belong to the antirealist, or, for that matter, the postmodernist camp, although, in my position, the term 'antirealist' no longer applies. I hold that nobody has direct unconditioned access to the text in itself. Interpreters cannot escape from their context and approach the text in itself. However, against the antirealist, I maintain that this does not imply that the meaning of a text is completely dependent upon the reader, or that, given the conditions obtaining by a particular context, the meaning of a text is arbitrary. Although readers are always conditioned by their context in various ways, aspects of the external referent of the interpretation, the 'text itself', will be highlighted by the contextual conditions of an interpretation. Within the specific context of a historical interpretation of a text, I argue that, given that the conditions of a

historical interpretation obtain, texts do indeed contain information about their origin and the intentions of their authors independently of their readers. Hence, one might characterise my position as *contextual hermeneutical realism*.

I develop my position by building upon the ideas of the hermeneutical antirealist *par excellence*: Jacques Derrida. In his works, Derrida draws heavily on insights from semiotic studies. A semiotic understanding of language starts from the idea that linguistic entities – speech and writing or, as Derrida understands it, writing and speech – are, so to speak, ‘signs’, or vehicles of communication. In this regard, linguistic entities are similar to other non-linguistic signs that we use in everyday life. For example, a red traffic light is the vehicle of the message “Stop!” Thus, in Derrida, the question whether texts have fixed meanings appears in the form of the question of how far linguistic signs are open to several interpretations. In semiotic terms, a realist hermeneutics argues for the ‘closed’ nature of the linguistic sign. A linguistic message allows for a limited number of correct interpretations only. The hermeneutical antirealist, like Derrida, thinks that linguistic entities are ‘open’ signs so that any interpretation of the message basically is possible. In Umberto Eco’s terminology, a postmodern hermeneutics of difference, like that of Derrida or Stanley Fish,⁶ favours ‘semiotic drift’, which challenges any kind of stability in communication.⁷

The instability of the sign is defended by Derrida in two main ways, namely in confrontation with structuralist linguistics⁸ – especially the work of Saussure – and by exploring the difference between ‘writing’ and spoken communication.⁹

At the linguistic level, Derrida follows Saussure’s critique of the distinction between the signifier and the signified. The sign is never ‘bound’ to the signified in such a way that its meaning is determined by the object to which it refers. The sign is arbitrary in that its meaning is determined by the linguistic system to which it belongs rather than by the reality to which it refers. Derrida radicalises Saussure’s notion of the arbitrariness of the sign by arguing that Saussure’s critique destroys the whole understanding of the sign in terms of a distinction between signifier and signified. There is no signifier that does not in turn refer to another signifier, and so on.¹⁰ There is no escape from language to reality unmediated by that very same sphere of language. This seems to imply a radical instability of the sign, because there is no longer a fixed point of reference to which the sign refers, which determines its meaning. The sign refers only to other signs that, in turn, depend on other signs, and so on, constituting an infinite regress.

⁶ Fish is not mentioned by Eco, but his *Is There a Text in This Class?* has become a classical formulation of the phenomenon of ‘semiotic drift’ in the English speaking world.

⁷ Eco, pp. 23–25.

⁸ Derrida’s critique of structuralism can be found in various places. An excellent point of entrance to the argument can be found in Kristeva’s interview with Derrida, published in Jacques Derrida, *Positions*, trans. from the French by Alan Bass (London: Athlone Press, 1981), pp. 15–36; see also Jacques Derrida, ‘Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences’, in: Jacques Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, trans. from the French by Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), pp. 278–293, and Jacques Derrida, ‘Différance’, in: Derrida, *Margins of Philosophy*, pp. 1–28.

⁹ Derrida, ‘Signature Event Context’, pp. 309–330; Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. from the French by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, 2nd edition (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1997), pp. 1–26.

¹⁰ Derrida, *Positions*, pp. 19–20; Derrida, ‘Différance’, pp. 10–11.

The fundamental instability of the sign is further elaborated in Derrida's critique of 'logocentrism'—the preference for the spoken word over the written sign. Building on various representatives of the Western philosophical tradition, Derrida argues that Western philosophy has been dominated by a 'metaphysics of presence': the idea that reality can be adequately represented in language. In this connection, spoken language has usually been preferred over written communication because the spoken word is closer to the reality from which it originates than is written communication.¹¹ Derrida challenges this tradition by taking his starting point in the notion of the written, bringing the distance between the text and the reality it represents to the heart of the discussion. In Derrida's view, the capacity to be understood and interpreted *independently* of the origin of the message – understood as either author or represented world – is the defining characteristic of the written and, after rethinking the spoken word from the perspective of the written, of all communication. Hence, in order to be communicatively successful, texts need to become independent of their origins, and become signifiers in their own right, separated from the signified.¹² This, in Derrida's view, has dramatic consequences for notions like context and authorship. In spite of common hermeneutical ideals which suggest that texts should be read in order to uncover the intentions of their authors, or in order to elucidate their original context, Derrida argues that their very nature as *texts* means that they are open to being interpreted in the light of any interpretive interest.¹³

Derrida's antirealist hermeneutics has been the subject of much criticism and debate,¹⁴ not least due to the peculiar ways in which he develops his ideas. For example, in a famous conversation with the godfather of speech act theory John R. Searle, Derrida replied to Searle's critique of his position with an extravagant and humorous discussion of the copyright statement at the bottom of Searle's article.¹⁵ Another example is Derrida's monograph *Glas*, where he writes his text in the form of notes in the margins of other bits of text in order to illustrate his idea that texts borrow their meaning from the other texts to which they refer.¹⁶

In the remainder, I take a mediate position towards Derrida's hermeneutics. On the one hand, I accept much of his insistence upon the instability of the sign. On the other hand, I criticise his antirealism as still too strongly rooted in the Enlightenment project. Eco outlines this two-sided evaluation of Derrida's thought very eloquently in *The Limits of Interpretation*:

¹¹ Derrida, 'Signature Event Context', pp. 312–313.

¹² *Ibid.*, pp. 314ff.

¹³ Derrida, *Margins of Philosophy*, pp. 327–329.

¹⁴ Butler; Eco, pp. 32–43, 53–54; Seán Burke, *The Death and Return of the Author: Criticism and Subjectivity in Barthes, Foucault and Derrida*, 2nd edition (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1998), pp. 116–171; Catherine Pickstock, *After Writing: On the Liturgical Consummation of Philosophy*, Challenges in Contemporary Theology (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998); Van Woudenberg, pp. 151–160. Van Woudenberg goes so far as to propose that we abstain from calling language a sign, which comes down to declaring all textual semiotics misguided!

¹⁵ The discussion between Derrida and Searle can be found in Derrida, *Limited Inc.* Unfortunately, the side-effects of Derrida's style of conversation resulted in Searle's refusal to have his contributions added to the book. Only summaries of his part of the discussion are included.

¹⁶ Jacques Derrida, *Glas*, trans. from the French by John P. Leavey and Richard Rand (Lincoln, Ne: University of Nebraska Press, 1986).

I do not agree with Searle when he says that “Derrida has a distressing penchant for saying things that are obviously false”. On the contrary, Derrida has a fascinating penchant for saying things that are nonobviously true, or true in a nonobvious way. When he says that the concept of communication cannot be reduced to the idea of transport of a unified meaning, that the notion of literal meaning is problematic, that the current concept of context risks being inequated; when he stresses, in a text, the absence of the sender, of the addressee, and of the referent and explores all the possibilities of a nonunivocal interpretability of it; when he reminds us that every sign can be *cited* and in so doing can break with every given context, engendering an infinity of new contexts in a manner which is absolutely illimitable—in these and in many other cases he says things that no semiotician can disregard. But frequently Derrida—in order to stress nonobvious truths—disregards very obvious truths that nobody can reasonably pass over in silence. Rorty would say that “he has no interest in bringing ‘his philosophy’ into accord with common sense”. I think rather that Derrida takes many of these obvious truths for granted—while frequently some of his followers do not.¹⁷

In order to evaluate Derrida’s defence of the instability of the sign, I would like to inquire what the detailed analysis of the case studies presented above shows about the instability of the sign. In a sense, the results of my investigations in earlier chapters confirm the instability of the sign. The *Testament of Job* interpreted the collection of signs that make up the book of Job primarily by filling the gaps in the story, such as the reason why Job had to suffer and the role of his wife. Whether Calvin preached negatively or positively about Job was entirely dependent on his interest as a reader. Lasso set a particular selection of the book of Job to music in a way that the author of the book – if it makes sense to talk about *the* author at all in this case – could not in any way have imagined. Finally, Gutiérrez read the book as a coherent whole, and viewed it as exemplifying the position of the poor in history. The text of Job allowed for all of these readings and, it may be argued, invited them to a certain extent by being an open and intrinsically unstable collection of signs.

However, the case studies show the instability of the sign only if we, as it were, view the sign in isolation from any contextually determined set of conditions. If we ask in a general way whether the book of Job is a stable collection of signs, we separate it for a moment from any reading context and, supposing that it once existed in a pure and independent form, and ask whether, in itself, it is open to one, few, many, or even any interpretation. If we look at the case studies in this way, they seem to confirm the radical instability of the sign.

This is, however, a rather *artificial* procedure for assessing the (in)stability of the sign. For example, one might look at the way in which the *Testament of Job* interprets the book of Job apart from any contextual considerations. That is to say, one supposes that the authors of the *Testament* were completely detached from whatever interpretive tradition they received the text in its pure form – the original Hebrew or whatever the pure form might be – and that they had no particular purpose with their interpretation. Then, indeed, the authors of the *Testament* had an almost unlimited freedom to choose how they would like to interpret

¹⁷ Eco, p. 36.

the text. Of course, this approach to the *Testament of Job* as an interpretation of the biblical book is far from the truth. Even if we take into consideration that the *Testament* represents an interpretation of the book of Job with a low claim to authority, the context of text and reader naturally leads the interpreters to a certain interpretation of the text. Whatever freedom the authors of the *Testament* had, they could not have interpreted the book of Job in the way twenty-first century academics do it. Neither could they have made Renaissance music of it. The form in which they received the text, the haggadic tradition they participated in, and the purpose and form of their interpretation provided the book of Job with its stability within this particular context. The readers behind the *Testament of Job* did not invent this interpretation out of the blue. In their interpretation, they followed many implicit and explicit rules and customs.

A similar point can be made about the other three case studies. Let me recall Lasso's case because it illustrates one of the key topics of Derrida's thought, the phenomenon of 'quotation'. The fact that, in the liturgical tradition of the Church only some nine quotations, from Job's moderate laments, were taken to represent the book of Job as a whole, shows the radical instability of the sign. As Derrida emphasises, texts can be 'quoted', that is, one can take a small part of a text and put it into another text.¹⁸ This creates a fundamental ambiguity and instability in the sign. On the one hand, the quotation still seems to represent the old text. On the other hand, by virtue of its being taken out of its original context, it acquires a new meaning, determined by the new context. This phenomenon of quotation illustrates the instability of the sign. The text breaks free from its original context. It also exemplifies what Derrida calls 'différance', the fact that interpretations refer to the interpretandum, but at the same time always differ from it.

Again, however, one should not overlook the artificiality and generality of the argument. Indeed, the text can break free from its original context. Indeed, an interpretation is always at least logically different from the interpretandum. However, this confirms the instability of the sign only if we leave all contextual considerations aside. If we consider the process of selection in the case of the Christian liturgy, we see that this was far from an arbitrary process. The selection had to be taken from the book of Job, because of its canonical status. It was also taken from the book of Job, because of the central role of the problem of suffering in it. The selection was taken from the speeches of Job, because the quotations were apparently intended to invite the audience to lament their suffering in the same terms as the saint Job. Finally, these specific selections from the speeches of Job were taken because they would serve well to express the grief of the audience without annulling their theological convictions. Each of these contextual considerations reflects both a characteristic of the community of readers and a characteristic of the text. The characteristic of the text determines the selection of the texts, for example which part of the speeches of Job to choose. At the same time, the community of readers determine the selection, for example because particular parts of the speeches of Job serve their interests better than others.

Hence, rather than suggest that we discover the characteristics of the text by *detaching* it from any context, I would like to argue that aspects of the 'text itself',

¹⁸ See, for example Derrida, *Limited Inc.*

the text independent of the reader, come to the fore in *contextualised* form.¹⁹ If we could detach ourselves not only from our own context, but from all contexts – a condition that is unlikely to be satisfied – we would not even be able to see that the book of Job is a text. We would not even perceive a mere collection of black dots on white paper, for even that is a contextualised way of looking at it. What the book of Job is ‘in itself’ escapes our perception by definition. Yet all kinds of aspects of it come to the fore under contextually determined conditions. If we take it as a Hebrew text, the stability of the sign is enormously increased – provided that we did not have the Vulgate translation in front of us – compared to a situation where we take it simply as a text in some language. The result of the decision to take the book of Job as a Hebrew text is not arbitrary. If the text were actually in Arabic, the interpretation of Job as a Hebrew text would be awkward.²⁰ The same goes for less basic contextual conditions. In chapter 3, I argued that we can understand why in the *Testament of Job*, we find elaborations on Job’s wife, namely because there is a gap in the biblical book in that regard. Even though our contextual conditions for reading the book of Job differ a lot from those who wrote the *Testament*, we can see how their way of interpreting was related to a characteristic of the text, namely, the lack of information about Job’s wife.

Obviously, proponents of a hermeneutics of difference might object to this by saying that I stressed only the positive role of context in bringing the nature of the text to light while ignoring the negative aspects. A contextual consideration *hides* as much as it *reveals*. This is so at various levels. The decision to read the book of Job as a Hebrew text rules out very basic interpretive options, such as reading it as an Arabic text. At a higher level, Calvin’s conviction that certain complaints against God, for example that God created people only to let them experience arbitrary forms of suffering, are inadmissible, rules out a positive application of these texts to his audience. This might seem a trivial point, but it is not, especially because most of the contextual conditions that we rely upon in interpreting a text are implicitly inherited from tradition, so that we apply them without knowing it.

One could respond to this objection in various ways. A primary response would be that, in many cases, focus is a good thing. It is not necessarily a bad thing when certain interpretive options of a text are ruled out while others are highlighted by contextual conditions. At the level of basic interpretive options, the decision to read the book of Job as a Hebrew text can hardly be seen as a focus with

¹⁹ In contextualising truth claims, my position comes close to what Hilary Putnam calls ‘internal realism’. My problem with this term is that it affirms the Enlightenment epistemological paradigm by suggesting that there is true, external knowledge, which we unfortunately do not possess, and that there is fallible, internal knowledge, which we have. This confirms the fundamental suspicion about the trustworthiness of our perception that is so typical of the Enlightenment tradition. My term ‘contextual realism’ is intended as a *positive* notion. It is the *contextual* form that provides true knowledge, not the contextless form. For a concise account of internal realism, see Eberhard Herrmann, ‘A Pragmatic Realist Philosophy of Religion’, *Ars Disputandi* 3 (2003), (URL: <http://www.arsdisputandi.org/publish/articles/000092/index.html>), section 5.

²⁰ Here, my argument is analogous to a pragmatic realist position which views a belief as a certain disposition to behave in certain ways. Pragmatists argue that the realist nature of a belief lies in the fact that upon experienced difficulties with behaving in accordance with my belief, the belief will change to develop new forms of behaviour more suitable to the demands of life. For a concise account of pragmatic realism, see *ibid.*, section 2.

negative implications. At the level of more specific interpretive options, a similar example might be given. The interpretive and musical tradition within which Lasso composed his music made it absolutely impossible to write a twentieth century type of music on the final phrase of the *Lectiones*: “et sempiternus horror inhabitans”. The musical tradition restricted the number of musical devices for expressing the ‘sempiternus horror’. On the other hand, precisely the contextual conditions of this tradition made Lasso’s music what it is. The Latin text determined the rhythm, and the rule of polyphonic music determined the flow, range, and the harmony of the music. Thus, in Lasso, the “sempiternus horror” was given expression through the absence of cadences and the elaborate, disordered flow of the individual voices, rather than in the type of disharmonious chaos common in twentieth century music.

Focus is a good thing in many cases, but not always. Lasso provides an example of this too. Because the original Hebrew version of the text was excluded by the contextual conditions of Lasso’s time, education, and religious tradition, his musical setting of the texts from Job was restricted to the Latin translation. This translation is defective in a number of respects. Therefore, various passages in the *Lectiones* are difficult to understand. This, of course, made it also difficult for Lasso to select musical devices for setting these passages to music. Had he had access to the original Hebrew, it might have been easier for him to find musical devices that adequately represented the meaning of the text. In chapter 5, I suggested that the interpretive problems caused by being confined to the Latin translation can be seen in Lasso’s music. It is important to note, however, that the conclusion that focus is unfortunate in this case, remains *internal* to Lasso’s interpretive context. That focus was a bad thing in this case depends on the conditions of this particular context, not on neutral or absolute conditions.

A further response to the objection that context hides as much as it reveals, is that conditions may change due to difficulties experienced in approaching a text under those conditions. A part of contextual realism is the claim that, even when the conditions under which the reader operates determine much of the interpretation process, the confrontation with the external reality of the text may nevertheless challenge those conditions, so that readers can decide to opt for others. This even happens in situations where certain contextual conditions are enforced in an absolute way. For example, in certain strictly orthodox Calvinist institutions, where the historical infallibility of the Bible is emphasised in every detail, historical questions crop up with even greater force than elsewhere, because students feel that the contextual conditions under which they are forced to read are challenged by the text itself.

So far I have left a very important aspect of the objection out of consideration: By pointing to the negative role of context, the hermeneutical antirealist does not simply mean that what a context reveals is only *part* of the true nature of the text. Had this been the case, one could counter the objection by asserting ‘partial realism’: we do not know everything, but what we know is reliable. This is not the antirealist challenge, at least not in the form Derrida *cum suis* put it. Building on the ideas of structuralist linguistics, Derrida’s understanding of language entails that the meaning of a sentence is theoretically determined by the whole of the linguistic system, which means that partial knowledge of the

meaning of a text is no knowledge at all. I will not go into the tenability of structuralist linguistics here. As I will argue in more detail below, the position of the antirealist is logically inconsistent because determining whether partial knowledge is unreliable presupposes access to the meaning of the text as a whole. I also have difficulties in seeing what the point amounts to in practice. I seem to know that the book of Job was written in Hebrew, with a number of relatively foreign words in it. Is the truth of my belief that this is the case affected by the partiality of my knowledge of the text? I do not see why. Of course, the partiality of my knowledge of the text implies the tentative nature of the knowledge claim. It is highly unlikely, but a library full of cuneiforms might be dug up from the sand of the Jordanic or Iraqi desert containing a cuneiform version of the book of Job in Accadic, apparently older than the Hebrew version we own. But this only means that my knowledge is *tentative*; not that it is *false*.

A final response to the antirealist position might be developed along strictly logical lines, typically resembling ways of reasoning in analytic philosophy. The argument goes like this: the antirealist contention is that my viewpoint reveals parts of reality, but in doing so, it also hides other parts, which precludes a realist conception of interpretation. The underlying assumption is that there are possible contextual conditions with completely incommensurable presuppositions that render the knowledge acquired under my current contextual conditions false. However, it may be argued that categories of truth and falsehood only make sense upon the application of a certain contextual condition, and not between incommensurable conditions.

Let me explain this by comparing two of the case studies with a historical-critical interpretation of Job. It is quite clear that Lasso's interpretation of the book of Job is strikingly different from historical-critical interpretations. Both operate from very different contextual conditions, although these are probably not completely incommensurable. These conditions determine what counts as true and false within these individual contexts. An answer to the question of how the mirror story relates to the dialogues, for example, is assessed in terms of the conditions of historical criticism. It does not make any sense to attempt to answer it in terms of the principles of Renaissance polyphony. The reverse is also true: the assessment of Lasso's music in terms of whether he grasped the authorial intention behind the book, for example, interpreted the Hebrew correctly, is simply absurd. The quality of Lasso's music should be interpreted in the light of the criteria of Renaissance music, for example the criteria of syllabic rendering of Latin and the accurate expression of the affective aspects of the text. The comparison of Calvin's and historical-critical interpretations is more difficult, because there are important points of contact between the two. Both aim at an interpretation in terms of the original meaning of the text, albeit in different ways. Within the context of a historical interpretation of Scripture, doubts can be raised about Calvin's sudden switch from a positive application of the laments of Job to a negative application whenever he sees the laments as exaggerated, as I have argued in chapter 4. This move is problematic because it is not warranted by what we know of the book of Job in historical terms. Calvin's interpretation of Job can to some extent be assessed in terms of historical critical scholarship because Calvin shares certain contextual conditions with historical critical scholarship. Yet, in

so far as the two contexts are different, it seems impossible that one context can show the falsity of a claim in the other.

Returning to the theoretical discussion, the upshot of this is that if a certain view of reality is really incommensurable with another, that is, if a certain view of reality completely escapes the point of view of another context, it will be impossible to prove the falsity in the one context from the context of the other, because it is only shown that there was *more* to be known of reality.

Now that I have outlined and defended my version of contextual hermeneutical realism, a special sort of contextual conditions deserves special attention, namely, the conditions of historical research. These are special conditions because, more than all others, they were developed to fulfil the purpose of Enlightenment philosophy, that is, to provide a clear and distinct foundation of interpretive knowledge. Historical methodology in all its various forms and stages of development was thought to free readers from their prejudices and bring them into contact with the text itself. Much of Derrida's and other postmodern thinkers' criticism is aimed at that contention. As Derrida insists time and again, the text has no meaning apart from the reader's involvement with it. As I have outlined above, I agree with this. Our historical interpretations do not coincide with some such thing – whatever it might be – as the original meaning of the text. What we discover are bits and pieces of what the text might originally have meant, depending on the conditions for what counts, in our view, as 'meaning', and what not.

However, I defend the tenability of the conditions of historical scholarship as a fruitful way to approach texts from the past. Neither the results of an interpretation under these conditions, nor the conditions themselves, are arbitrary. Our idea of the way in which a text was understood in its world and its time of origin is influenced by who the author of the text was. What the cultural and social background of the text was, like other such questions, is important for investigating aspects of the original meaning of the text. The conditions of historical criticism do of course close our eyes to many aspects of the text that also contribute to its meaning, such as its composition – at least in historical criticism as traditionally practiced – the gaps in it, and the mode of production it represents, but that does not mean that the information that it reveals is false, arbitrary, or worthless. Upon the application of historical methodology, the text will return certain information that is external to the methodology and the ideas and preferences of the reader. Anyone who accepts a historical methodology and suggests that Job was most likely a woman, has a problem. Anyone who comes up with a suggestion of the exact location of the land of Uz must provide some evidence.

The results of historical scholarship are not arbitrary, nor are the conditions. A rational discussion concerning which conditions serve to elucidate the original meaning, and which do not, is possible. As I will exemplify in chapter 9, some methodological instruments are better than others. Again, this is *not* to argue that the information we get from the text under the conditions of historical methodology is independent from contextual considerations, that it coincides with what the author originally had in mind or some other Enlightenment maxim. Historical methodology nevertheless fulfils a valuable role in many different contexts,

such as in museums, in historical novels, and in histories of politics, economics, and culture. Last but not least, it is an indispensable tool for distinguishing the original meaning of a text from its later interpretations, the purpose for which I use it in this book.

Finally, it is important to place Derrida's defence of the instability of the sign against the background of the Enlightenment project. As I have repeatedly argued above, Derrida's defence of the instability of the sign presupposes the postulate of a text in its pure form, detached from any contextual considerations. Derrida's anti-realism is a critique of Enlightenment hermeneutics, which attempts to develop a universal method for establishing the true meaning of the text independently of any context. Derrida criticises Enlightenment thought and, in his view, even the Western philosophical tradition as a whole, by arguing that a text 'in itself', detached from any involvement of the reader, can mean anything we like, or for that matter, nothing at all. The reader is involved in setting the boundaries of what a text does or does not mean.

However, it seems that, in criticising the Enlightenment idea of a single true meaning in the text itself, Derrida still remains within the epistemological paradigm of the Enlightenment, according to which knowledge means correspondence with the one true meaning of the text as independent from any contextual consideration. The Enlightenment idea is that such knowledge is possible, whereas Derrida holds that such knowledge is impossible. Consequently, Derrida pursues notions like *différance*, the non-referential character of language, and the notion of free play. In criticising Enlightenment epistemology, however, Derrida does not really call into question the underlying epistemological paradigm. In terms of my argument above, this paradigm belongs so much to the tacit presuppositions of Derrida's philosophical heritage that it seems to escape his argumentative rigour. Still, in spite of its deep roots in Western philosophy and culture, it is in fact a peculiar way of thinking about reality.

First, the Enlightenment epistemological paradigm is very *sceptical* about the everyday experience of reality. It is sceptical in a very peculiar way. One might say that the Enlightenment tradition *reduplicates* reality. In Kantian terms, reality is conceived of as *Jenseits*, reality in itself and beyond our experience by definition, and as *Diesseits*, reality as experienced by us. This presupposes a fundamental suspicion about our experience of reality. Not only might we be mistaken in some cases, but we are mistaken in any case until the contrary has been proven—as is exemplified by Descartes' famous methodical doubt. First, it is suggested that our experience is at odds with reality in itself. Subsequently, a method is developed (in the realist version) or rejected (in the antirealist version) to discriminate between clear and distinct ideas and our fallible experience.

Second, from the previous consideration it follows that the Enlightenment question is a very *speculative* one. By definition, the 'reality' beyond our experience as suggested by Enlightenment philosophy will never be perceived by us. Of course, we can discover that something we held to be the case turns out to be false, either because it proves false from within our own perspective, or because we learn to look at something from a perspective different from our own, and come to believe that the new perspective is better. This is how we normally handle issues of truth and falsehood in everyday life. Suppose that we provided

Calvin with the most recent edition of a Hebrew dictionary and a couple of recent commentaries on the book of Job. He would possibly revise his translation and change his mind on various exegetical issues—whether he would change his theological views is another matter. But this is not because of the ‘possibility to know what a text means independently of what we know about it’, which is what the Enlightenment project looked for.²¹ Calvin’s imaginary case is still a case of *relative independence*, that is, the possibility to come to know something he did not know under his previous state of experience. What Enlightenment philosophy aims at is the knowledge of reality independent of *any* fallible experience.

Finally, any realist or antirealist position is therefore *self-referentially incoherent*. Because we will always be bound by the limits of our own experience, we will never know anything apart from it. The question of Enlightenment philosophy might be rephrased somewhat uncharitably as: Can I know something I cannot know? To me, therefore, asking the question is as useless as attempting to answer it. In Wittgenstein’s phrase:

Scepticism is *not* irrefutable, but palpably senseless, if it would doubt where a question cannot be asked.

For doubt can only exist where there is a question; a question only where there is an answer, and this only where something *can be said*.²²

The reduplication of reality only makes sense as a question when put in the mouth of the sceptic: Perhaps reality as we perceive it is not reality at all. It might be different. Any attempt to meet the sceptic’s challenge is doomed to fail! The presence of the knowing subject in an act of knowledge is inescapable. Of course, the sceptic has as little reason for his methodical doubt as we have, because the sceptic also has no access to reality independently of his own subjectivity. Both realism and antirealism are incoherent positions insofar as they claim to know whether or not our perception of reality differs from reality in itself, because such claims presuppose access to reality itself in an unmediated way.

The contradictory character of both the realist and the antirealist position has important consequences for Derrida’s view of the instability of the sign. He succeeds in showing that the meaning of the text for a reader depends on the viewpoint of that reader, but he cannot show that this implies that the interpretation by the reader is not also determined by the text. He cannot do that because,

²¹ Cf. the argument against Moore in Ludwig Wittgenstein, *On Certainty*, edited by G.E.M. Anscombe and G.H. von Wright, trans. from the German by Denis Paul and G.E.M. Anscombe (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1969), 1–33. For a recent interpretation of Wittgenstein along these lines, see Felicity McCutcheon, *Religion Within the Limits of Language Alone: Wittgenstein on Philosophy and Religion*, Heythrop Studies in Contemporary Philosophy, Religion and Theology (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2001). For a critical discussion of this book, see Michael Scott, ‘Review of Religion Within the Limits of Language Alone: Wittgenstein on Philosophy and Religion’, *Ars Disputandi* 3 (2003), <URL: <http://www.arsdisputandi.org/publish/articles/000095/index.html>>. For a discussion of a similar argument in Carnap, see Michael Scott, ‘Framing the Realism Question’, *Religious Studies* 36 (2000), pp. 455–471. An similar argument in Reid is discussed by Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Thomas Reid and the Story of Epistemology*, Modern European Philosophy (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), pp. 185–214.

²² Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, trans. from the German by C.K. Ogden, bilingual edition with an introduction by Bertrand Russell, International library of psychology, philosophy and scientific method (London: Kegan Paul, 1922), <URL: <http://www.kfs.org/~jonathan/witt/tlph.html>> – visited on 2002-12-20, 6.51.

in seeking to prove that point, he presupposes that he has precisely that which he denies that can be had, namely, unconditioned access to the text itself.

But if this is so, why not simply return to an unqualifiedly realist position? What is the function of the term 'contextual' in 'contextual hermeneutical realism' if it no longer means 'bound by the contingencies of our subjectivity in opposition to unconditioned access to the truth'? Two interrelated issues are at stake here. First, the insistence on contextuality which I borrow from postmodern hermeneutics, is important because it highlights that realist positions all too easily become absolutist positions. 'I know that p' all too easily becomes 'I cannot be wrong that p'. The phrase 'I know that' has not only a constative, but also a performative²³ – and possibly ideological – function. The risk of absolutism is in fact the main motivation behind Derrida's antirealism. While the antirealism he develops might be questionable, the concern about absolutism is not. Second, contextuality highlights the connection between truth and value, between knowledge and morality. Contextuality highlights that truth is always truth for a particular purpose, and what makes a belief true is neither necessarily nor only that it corresponds to reality. This was the Enlightenment position. As soon as it is recognised that what makes a belief true depends on the context of its application, there is an intrinsic reason to connect knowledge with morality.

The purpose of the interpretation of Scripture in a religious community is the topic I will turn to in the next section. I will show that, in a religious context, Scripture functions as an identity constituting factor. I will argue that claims on the part of a religious community to know the true meaning of the text in particular function in such an identity constituting context.

7.5 AN IDEOLOGICAL CONTRADICTION

In chapter 2, I argued that a religion functions as an identity constituting system, identity being one's metaphysical, moral, and social identity. In the so-called 'religions of the book', Scripture functions as such an identity constituting factor. The question then becomes: What does this mean for the reading process? Complexity and diversity suggest that it means a number of different things in different cases. In spite of this complexity and diversity, I am now going to take possibly the most provocative step in my contribution to a descriptive hermeneutics by arguing that in all four case studies an 'ideological contradiction' is at work.²⁴ Let me introduce it by means of a brief review of the case studies in the light of the question of what function the authority of Scripture fulfils in each of them.

In the case of the *Testament of Job*, we saw that the authority of Scripture stimulated *creativity* for understanding the meaning of the book of Job in the situation of the reader. However, this creativity and change were located within,

²³ Vincent Brümmer, *Theology and Philosophical Inquiry: An Introduction* (London: Macmillan, 1981), pp. 176–181.

²⁴ My use of the term 'ideological contradiction' is derived from Marxist theory, where the term points to a fundamental ambiguity in the discourse of a certain community or individual which rests upon its identity as a group or person over against others. See chapter 2, sections 2.4 and 2.5, where I deal more extensively with ideological criticism.

and limited by, a web of authoritative Scripture, which was woven between the text of Job and the situation of the reader—Boyarin called it the ‘intertext’. Thus, the authoritative status of the text fosters the creativity required to make the text fit for the changed context but, at the same time, requires restraint because there is a need for sufficient continuity between the meaning of the text and its interpretation. In *TJ*, the stress is on the creative side at the expense of the resulting authority of its interpretation of Job in the later tradition.

In Calvin, all the emphasis is on the *continuity* side in the form of a claim of complete *correspondence* between the interpretation and the true meaning of the text. What the interpreter says, is what the text says—or, more precisely, what God says. This does not rule out creativity, though. On the contrary, it makes it all the more necessary because the stronger the claim of correspondence between the meaning of the text and the interpretation of the reader, the more creativity is required to bridge the gap in between and, most importantly in Calvin’s case, hide the creativity involved in the bridging. In Calvin, the *ideological* nature of the contradiction comes most clearly to the fore. Creativity and correspondence, though in conflict with each other, mutually require one another for maintaining the *identity of the group*.

In Lasso, we had yet another and more complicated case. The contradiction between creativity and correspondence plays a role at two levels. In the first place, it occurs in the liturgical development that led to the inclusion of the *lectiones* on Job in the liturgy for the dead. As we saw in chapter 5, the liturgical selection from Job was restricted to quotations from the relatively moderate laments of Job. Thus, the liturgical selection underlying Lasso’s music made the book of Job suitable for the existential experience of the individual typical of the Renaissance mindset, while at the same time fully maintaining the authoritative status of the text. For the audience, the fact that the *Lectiones* represented only a one-sided *selection* from the book of Job did not detract from the idea that it was Scripture *itself* that they encountered in liturgical form. It even reinforced the authority of Job’s lamentations by taking them out of the ambiguous context of the original book and placing them into the sacred sphere of the liturgy. The sacred sphere allowed the audience to appropriate Job’s laments more unambiguously than the original book had ever done. In the second place, creativity and correspondence play a role in Lasso’s appropriation of the liturgical selection from Job. Here of course, the creativity of the artist plays the major role, but this creativity was rooted in the status of the text as Scripture. The creative transformation of the text served its authoritative status and relied on it. The text’s origin in the divine realm gave it the appeal it had for both the composer and the listeners of the music, and the musical embedding only served to communicate its power more effectively.

Finally, we look at Gutiérrez’s case. We saw that, in one sense, Gutiérrez explicitly allowed for creativity in that he recognised the role of his own context in reading Scripture. Yet, on the other hand, he urgently needed some hidden creativity in the same sense that Calvin sense did, because his high view of Scripture made a ‘Job of the poor’ inevitable. Had the community of faith believed in Job as representing the rich, they would not be able to constitute their identity in terms of this Scripture.

Thus, in light of this recapitulation of the case studies in terms of the role of the authority of Scripture in them, I would argue that there appears in them an ideological contradiction between, on the one hand *creativity* in changing the meaning of Scripture due to the influence of the particular context, and, on the other, *identifying* the interpretation with the meaning of the text. The two poles of the contradiction presuppose one another, that is the creative endeavour presupposes the correspondence claim, and the correspondence claim likewise presupposes the creative endeavour.

A number of questions immediately arise, the most pressing being whether this contradiction can be resolved or avoided. But let me first deal with two other questions. Firstly: What exactly is meant here by 'contradiction'? I do not mean mere logical contradiction in the sense of two propositions that contradict one another. Some sort of logical contradiction is of course involved, because the discourse of religious communities about the authority of their Scriptures in fact rests upon two incompatible claims, namely, the claim that the views of the community are identical with the teaching of Scripture, and the implicit requirement of change influencing the communities' interpretations. However, ideological contradictions are usually more about *saying* one thing and *doing* another. The religious community claims that their views correspond to the teaching of Scripture, but in fact they constantly adapt what they take that teaching to be to the needs of the community. The concept of authority is *ideologically* contradictory in that, when it is applied to Scripture as constitutive for the identity of a religious community, it leads to two contradictory drives in that community, namely, the drive to change the meaning of Scripture into something fitting in its own context on the one hand, and the drive to claim correspondence of interpretation with the original meaning of the text on the other. This does not mean that the religious community's claim of the authority of Scripture is meaningless,²⁵ but rather that it is ambiguous, so that the community will need to move back and forth between the two poles of the contradiction and that, in seeking to maintain their identity, they will be tempted to hide their creative efforts.

A further question that arises is whether I have not overstated the contradiction by suggesting that the function of Scripture as an identity constituting factor involves a *correspondence* claim between text and interpretation on the part of religious communities. Nowadays, many religious believers would claim that their views are in significant *continuity* with the teaching of their Scriptures, but they would hesitate to claim that they correspond completely with it. This is true, but I still think that I have not overstated my point. First of all, while it is true that widespread scepticism about identity claims in the Western world makes many religious believers hesitate about making such claims about their use of Scripture, religious communities in the rest of the world seem much more inclined to claim correspondence between their views and the teaching of Scripture—and these may well make up the majority of religious interpreters of canonical texts today.²⁶ Secondly, I hold that claiming absolute certainty for one's interpretation of Scripture is, so to speak a 'natural option' in religion because as a religion it

²⁵ Cf. Brümmer, *Theology and Philosophical Inquiry*, p. 173.

²⁶ Cf. Brown, *Discipleship and Imagination*, p. 197.

typically deals with issues with regard to which absoluteness is demanded—such as eternal bliss or punishment, the will of God for today, and the forgiveness of sins. I do not think that claims to absoluteness are necessary or unavoidable in any religious context, but I do think that they come naturally to the religious realm, especially in culturally, socially and economically unstable societies. Thirdly, if we take a closer look at Scripture as an identity constituting factor, we see that, as soon as a community claims that *what it is*, is what Scripture teaches, that is, when they define their identity in terms of the teaching of Scripture, they are making some sort of claim that there is a correspondence between their identity and the teaching of Scripture. The more their identity is challenged, the stronger the need for such a correspondence claim will become.

Finally, even in a Western context, the claim to correspondence may play a role more frequently than it seems to. One must keep in mind that a correspondence claim with regard to one's interpretation of Scripture need not be explicitly made; it may well be institutionally embedded. Generally speaking, individual Western Roman Catholics with a critical mindset will not make strong correspondence claims about their views and the teaching of Scripture. Many will reject the infallibility of the Bible. Furthermore, the authority of tradition as an interpreter of Scripture already indicates some awareness of the need for creativity at the institutional level as well. Hence, the explicit claim to correspondence is toned down. However, when the Roman Catholic church claims that it does not have the liberty to ordain women, it refers ultimately to the teaching of Scripture in justifying this position. In such situations, any moderation of the claim of correspondence between the meaning of the text and its interpretation has drastic consequences because, *if* there is any room for dispute about the Church's claim, the question immediately arises whether it should not take a different position.

It is important to stress that I do not think of the ideological contradiction of the authority of Scripture as a conscious act of each believing individual in the community. The contradiction highlighted here is meant to point to an aspect of the phenomenon of Scripture. Individual believers rarely *choose* whether and how they stand over against Scripture and how they want to substantiate this stance. Most of the time, they inherit a certain way of dealing with Scripture from the community within which they participate and grow up. *Tradition* generally provides a religious community with a stable frame of reference in which creativity and correspondence have been balanced out against one another. This is particularly clear in the cases of the *Testament of Job* and Lasso. In the case of the *Testament*, the Jewish haggadic tradition provided Jewish communities with a natural balance between retaining the authoritative status of the text and adapting it to the needs of the reading community. In the case of Lasso, the process of creativity and correspondence was embedded almost entirely in the liturgical tradition of the Western Catholic Church and the principles of late Renaissance polyphony.

In the cases where an authoritative tradition mediates the creativity involved in the religious interpretation process, believers will often hardly notice that there is creativity involved, because their way of dealing with Scripture belongs to the tacit presuppositions of their faith. This is not always the case, however. We had particular examples of a different situation in the cases of Calvin and

Gutiérrez. Calvin and Gutiérrez represent cases where believers are no longer satisfied with the balance between creativity and correspondence handed down by tradition. Both in their own right challenge the status quo by arguing that the creativity hidden in the tradition obscures rather than reveals the true message of Scripture. Gutiérrez provides a reading of Job from the perspective of the suffering of the innocent which aims to show that the message of the book of Job fits the context of the poor in Latin America surprisingly well, although the Church's tradition helps to hide this rather than to reveal it. Calvin even holds that although Scripture has always been formally authoritative, it must be given back to ordinary believers because the religious tradition of his time withheld it from them. However, even in the case of the reformer, a renewed appeal to the original message of Scripture does not rule out the need for a creative adaptation of that message to the reformer's context. As I have shown, Calvin needs an 'inverted hermeneutic' to cope with those elements in Job that do not, to his mind, fit his context. Gutiérrez uses his own means to transform the book of Job into a book of the poor, even if there are various indications to the contrary.

Now that I have clarified the nature of the contradiction, we can ask whether it might be avoided. It should be stressed that, in spite of the strong normative inclinations people may have in asking this question, I would like to answer it here at the descriptive level. Thus, it comes down to the question of how universally bound up with and inseparable from the concept of authority it is. First of all, although I insist on the fundamental nature of the ideological contradiction of the authority of Scripture, I think that a claim to universality does not add much to our understanding of the phenomenon. After all, inducing a universal phenomenon from only four case studies comes down to a *non sequitur*. What concerns me is how the contradiction works in concrete cases and how various cases differ. Therefore, the question of inseparability is of more interest because it asks for cases where a concept of authoritative scripture is at work, but where the contradiction remains absent.

The desire to resolve the contradiction might instigate a toning down of the claim to correspondence between Scripture and religious identity in such a way that the contradictory elements disappear in favour of a more free-floating creativity. Of course, given the fact that many liberal Christian communities hold such a view nowadays, one can hardly deny the possibility of employing a 'low view' of the authority of Scripture in the church. I will come back to the normative aspects of such a proposal in the next chapter. Liberal Christianity, however, is not a very insightful case in point here because, as a reaction to the problem I am dealing with, it remains within the same frame of reference by criticising or denying the strong correspondence claim of the traditional concept of Scripture. A more illuminating case would be one outside the religious realm, for example the authority of a legal text in contemporary jurisprudence. Such a text is authoritative for a community and, henceforth, needs to be applied in ever new situations. Does the contradiction play a role here?

It seems to me, that it plays a much lesser than in the religious case.²⁷ This

²⁷ For a different approach to the similarity of legal and theological hermeneutics, see Gadamer, pp. 308–341. I am afraid that my analysis is more congenial to the view Gadamer rejects than to his

has to do with a variety of factors. At the root of the various differences lies a wholly different conception of the status of the authority in question. In Western democratic society, a canon of law is seen as ultimately the product of that society, a set of rules the community imposes upon itself, so to speak. In one way or another, however, the religious community conceives of its authoritative Scripture as a way in which the transcendent world communicates with the mundane. This makes for a difference in status between the authorities at stake in the sphere of law and religion respectively. Canons of law in democratic societies are never seen as immutable, infallible points of reference. On the contrary, at the heart of democracy is the idea that whenever changed circumstances require a modification of the law, the community is free to do so. Hence, canons of law are constantly changing, a factor that, at least theoretically, lessens the role of creativity in bridging the gap between a new context and an old text.

Changing the law does not result in a one to one correspondence between the law and the context in which it is read, of course. In many cases, changing the law is a painstaking process affected by such problems as finding consensus among political parties, achieving consistency between various articles, and making room for exceptions. Hence, the law will always be out of touch with reality to a certain degree, if only because every individual case is unique and different from any precise juridical description. Yet, unlike interpreters of the authoritative texts of religions, lawyers remain explicitly aware of this aspect by virtue of the phenomenon of jurisprudence. Each application of the law to a new case is officially taken up into the canonical authority by serving as jurisprudence for new and related cases. This implies explicit recognition of the gap to be bridged and vindication of the creativity involved in doing so.

Of course, it might be added that the two cases are so different because their functions differ dramatically as well. This is true, for people will not turn to a canon of law to find forgiveness of sins, or to foster their hope for eschatological justice. Canons of law define only a part of the moral identity of a community, whereas religious canons usually do much more. The more comprehensive function of religious authority might make the immutability and infallibility of the authority inevitable for many (traditional) religious communities. Whatever one may think about this, the comparison shows that the ideological contradiction is related in a special way to religious convictions, such as the belief that Scripture somehow reveals something about divine actions and the divine will, notions traditionally connected with infallibility and universal validity.

Finally, with regard to avoidability, complexity and diversity preclude any

own analysis. In this part of his work, Gadamer is at pains to show that application is inseparable from *any* kind of interpretation. My view of the interpretation process as a whole is much more critical than Gadamer's, so it will be evident that I disagree with such remarks as "To interpret the law's will or the promises of God is clearly not a form of domination but of service." (311) Still, our assessment of the difference between the legal and the theological sphere is analogous: "Unlike the legal verdict, preaching is not a creative supplement to the text it is interpreting. Hence the gospel acquires no new content in being preached that could be compared with the power of the judge's verdict to supplement the law." (330) I understand this in such a way that Gadamer means that the preacher is not *allowed* the level of freedom and authority the judge has. If the preacher's not adding anything is taken as a statement of facts, I disagree with Gadamer, as will be evident from the text below. For my assessment of Gadamer's critique of historicism, see chapter 9.

straightforward application of the contradiction to all individual cases. That it will play a role somewhere in many religious communities, does not mean that it appears in all cases in the same way, to the same extent, or, more importantly, to the same level of contradiction. There are differences of kind and of degree. As regards kind, one may distinguish between an individual and an institutional level, as I have suggested above. As to different degrees, the contradiction may appear stronger or weaker. For example: a Christian community who read the New Testament as saying that they should love one another as they love themselves, obviously does not need the same level of creativity as a Christian who claims that the real message of the Old Testament laws is that they are fulfilled in Christ's sacrifice on the cross. Here, the authority claim connected with these interpretations is respectively less and more strongly influenced by the ideological contradiction. The more difficult it is to bridge the gap, and the stronger the authority claim for one's interpretation is, the more pressing the ideological contradiction will appear.

This, then, brings in the normative contention that, in any particular case, the best view of Scripture is always the one with the weakest correspondence claim. This strong tendency to resolve the contradiction is easily understood because, although I have stated the contradiction as part of a descriptive enterprise – showing 'what happens' rather than what 'should happen' – in the nature of the case it implies a serious deconstruction of the phenomenon of a religious interpretation of Scripture. It basically means that I have argued that a *genuine* undistorted transmission of the one and only *true message* to the religious community is mistaken because it hides the gap between text and reader.

It is useful to see that the deconstructive element that I find here in dealing with the ideological contradiction corresponds to the deconstructive element in my discussion of the definition of religion. The way insiders perceive 'what happens' when they read their texts may differ from the way the critic thinks the religious interpretation process actually functions. The way canonical texts function in religious communities can exemplify that claim.

If I am right in stating the ideological contradiction of the authority of Scripture in the way that I did, scholars of religious hermeneutics basically have two options when moving towards a normative theory of hermeneutics. First, they could argue that the notion of the authority of Scripture is ultimately contradictory and, therefore, should be entirely abandoned. Scripture might function as a source of inspiration, and creativity, but its identity constituting function is not rationally defensible and should therefore be dropped. Secondly – and that is the position that I shall defend in the next chapter – they could argue that the only thing the scholar of hermeneutics can do, is to accept the contradictory nature of the authority of Scripture and to propose hermeneutical ideals that build constructively upon it. This involves, among other things, that the hermeneutical critic should be engaged sufficiently in the religious enterprise of claiming Scripture for today to influence that process fruitfully through criticism.

At this point, a strange paradox arises, which is also the reason why I must anticipate my argument in the next chapter already at this stage. On the one hand, the awareness of the need for 'stepping into the religious process' is to a large extent motivated by drawing the implications of the ideological contradiction of

the authority of Scripture. My argument will be that, *if* we want the normative proposals of hermeneutics to be fruitful for what religious interpreters of Scripture *actually do*, we should accept the basic assumptions of the religious enterprise. The penalty for not doing so is alienation from the religious community, with little or zero impact on it as a consequence. On the other hand, the mere *seeing* of the ideological contradiction in fact already means that one regards the religious community from the outside and, perhaps more significantly, that one declares the notion of the authority of Scripture to be irrational.

Here, we are pushing descriptive hermeneutics to its very limits. Stating a contradiction is a descriptive judgement in that we simply *see* the contradiction, but in declaring a phenomenon highly problematic we issue a value judgement as well. Therefore, it seems that, at this stage of our argument, we should move from the descriptive to the normative level.

From Descriptive to Normative Theory

8.1 INTRODUCTION

In the previous chapter, I have moved gradually from the case studies of interpretations of Job to a discussion of the significance of these case studies for a descriptive hermeneutics. The discussion culminated in my statement of the ideological contradiction with regard to the authority of Scripture. The statement of this contradiction had strong normative overtones because it came down to a value judgement about the rationality of treating Scripture as an identity constituting factor. This is an appropriate point at which to consider explicitly the normative aspect of a theory of hermeneutics, which is the topic of the present chapter.

Before I present an in-depth discussion of two recent proposals for a normative hermeneutics, let me summarise briefly the main topics of the previous chapter. These provided three 'reference points' that a normative hermeneutical theory could be tested against in order to assess whether it matches the characteristics of concrete reading processes. The first reference point induced from the case studies was the dual topic of complexity and diversity. As far as its implications for a normative hermeneutics are concerned, I stressed in particular the importance of dealing effectively with the complexity of reading processes and avoiding monolithic solutions to hermeneutical problems.

The second reference point I discussed was the decisive role of context in the interpretation process. The position of the reader influences the interpretation to such an extent that we cannot reduce the reading process to a decodification of the text itself. I argued that context determines the religious interpretation of the text in such a way that the very intention to rule it out reflects the reader's interest. For a normative hermeneutics, this means that hermeneutical ideals always need to be situated positively in a certain context. The unavoidable consequence of the contextuality of a normative hermeneutics is that no hermeneutical proposal will be adequate for all interpretive communities. The final reference point I proposed was the ideological contradiction of the authority of Scripture. The religious interpretation of Scripture constantly moves between the mutually dependent

poles of correspondence and creativity. As we saw in the previous chapter, there is a strong normative tendency to resolve the contradiction of the two poles but, as I will argue in this chapter, hermeneutical ideals that resolve the contradiction to either side run the risk of losing touch with the reality of religious interpretation processes.

In this chapter, I will return to the pressing issues of the rationality of the authority of Scripture only in section 8.4, where I develop my own view of a normative hermeneutics. In sections 8.2 and 8.3, I take two preparatory steps towards my own view by discussing two major strands in contemporary normative theories of hermeneutics. In section 8.2, I will discuss what I call a hermeneutics of communicative action. The hermeneutics of communicative action marks the return of the concept of authorial intention into the hermeneutical landscape, which has been falling out of favour for several decades under the influence of postmodernism. A hermeneutics of communicative action is advocated primarily by more conservative Christian theologians and philosophers. However, as I will attempt to show, it exemplifies a broader range of hermeneutical theories which in spite of the postmodern emphasis on the instability of the sign, try to pinpoint the stability of the meaning of a text with reference to its origin. In section 8.3, I will discuss David Brown's recent defence of a hermeneutics of tradition. Brown's hermeneutics of tradition lies at on the other end of the hermeneutical spectrum from conservative approaches. Rather than limiting the significance of the biblical texts to their original meanings, Brown's hermeneutics exemplifies hermeneutical ideals that value explicitly the contributions of later interpretations of the Bible where they differ from the original meaning of the texts.

Both the hermeneutics of authorial intention and that of tradition have strong pedigrees in the history of Western thought. The hermeneutics of communicative action has strong precursors in the hermeneutics of the Reformation and the Enlightenment. The hermeneutics of tradition has its roots in the allegorical exegesis of the Early Church and the Roman Catholic tradition, as well as in the imaginative use of the Bible in the history of art. Both proposals for a normative hermeneutics offer important insights which I will try to use as building blocks for my own theoretical reflections. At the same time, neither of these theories can serve as an overarching framework for all reading communities. Therefore, in section 8.4, I take them up into a new framework for normative hermeneutics, which I call a hermeneutics of 'critical engagement'. It will become clear that, in fact, this is not a hermeneutical, but a *meta*-hermeneutical framework, which leaves the development of hermeneutical proposals to the specific contexts for which they are intended, and keeps a general philosophical hermeneutics restricted to reflection on the success conditions of hermeneutical proposals.

8.2 HERMENEUTICS OF COMMUNICATIVE ACTION

Towards the end of the twentieth century, we can discern a significant return to hermeneutical theories that view authorial intention as the key to textual meaning. By the umbrella term 'hermeneutics of communicative action', I understand a hermeneutics that sees the text as a piece of communicative action on the part

of the author and reader, and takes this as the key to the interpretation of the text. To a considerable extent, the revival of interpretation as a quest for the author's intention is a reaction against the postmodern delight in the free-floating character of the sign. In this regard, the arguments of Wolterstorff, Vanhoozer, Watson, and Van Woudenberg are similar. All four make use of the speech act theory of language. In doing so, they elaborate on the well known attack on the free-floating character of the sign by one of the godfathers of speech act theory, John R. Searle.¹ In this section, I will draw mainly on the arguments of Francis Watson in his recent book *Text and Truth*, and those of Kevin Vanhoozer in his book *Is There a Meaning in This Text?*

Watson opens his argument with a concise account of the postmodern view of interpretation:

(1) It is said that we must now abandon the dogma of the single sense of the biblical texts, characterized by an emphasis on verbal meaning, authorial intention and historical circumstances of origin. (2) It is said that meaning is determined not by authors but by readers, located in their respective contexts or interpretative communities. Interpretation is therefore necessarily pluralistic. Any claim to present a normative, definitive interpretation would simply express the will-to-power of one interpretative community over all others. (3) It is said that this new pluralism has the advantage of comprehensiveness. In particular, explicitly religious or theological interpretative practices need no longer be excluded, since the 'value-free neutrality' that the exclusion was intended to protect has ceased to seem desirable or plausible. If all readings are committed readings, then theological readings are no less but also no more legitimate than any others. Theological readings must, however, learn not to 'absolutize' themselves, and must acknowledge the right of different readers to pursue different interests.²

In the previous chapter, I defended various claims mentioned in this quotation, but I will neglect this for the moment. It is clear that Watson has serious difficulties with the postmodern approach to interpretation:

A Christian faith concerned to retain its own coherence cannot for a moment accept that the biblical texts (individually and as a whole) lack a single, determinate meaning, that their meanings are created by their readers, or that theological interpretations must see themselves as non-privileged participants in an open-ended, pluralistic conversation.³

Defenders of a hermeneutics of communicative action attack the postmodern view of interpretation by presenting an alternative view of the written sign. Their central thesis is that writing is *communicative action*.⁴ From conceiving of writing as communicative action, it follows – at least in a hermeneutics of communicative action – that “Like speech, writing bears within it an essential reference to its origin in human action, and without this it cannot be understood.”⁵ Contrary

¹ For the discussion between Searle and Derrida, see Derrida, *Limited Inc.*

² Francis Watson, *Text and Truth: Redefining Biblical Theology* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1997), pp. 95–96.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 97.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 98; Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning in This Text? The Bible, The Reader, and the Morality of Literary Knowledge* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998), pp. 228–229.

⁵ Watson, p. 98.

to Derrida, Watson sees speech as the paradigmatic instance of communicative action, and writing as an extension of it.

Proponents of a hermeneutics of communicative action explain their view with the aid of the well known theory of *speech acts*.⁶ This theory, though presented in various forms, basically conceives of discourse in a threefold (or in some versions, fourfold) way. First, the discourses produces sounds conforming to the grammatical rules of a certain language, the so-called *locutionary act*. Second, the discourses refers to certain objects in the world, the so-called *propositional act*.⁷ Third, the discourses puts some performative force into her act of discourse, the so-called *illocutionary force* of the speech act. Finally, the discourses aims at achieving certain effects by performing the speech act, the so-called *perlocutionary act* of discourse.

Defenders of a hermeneutics of communicative action hold that, by conceiving of texts as devices of communicative action, interpretation cannot but aim at a search for the propositional, illocutionary, and perlocutionary acts that the author of the text wanted to perform in the speech act. Because the text is the result of a speech act, someone trying to understand it cannot simply treat it as an object on its own, but should rather see it as the result of a communicative act on the part of the author. In Vanhoozer's words:

My thesis is twofold: that texts have determinate natures, and that authors determine what these are. [...] The author is not only the cause of the text, but also the agent who determines what the text counts as. In other words, the author is responsible both for the existence of the text (*that* it is) and for its specific nature (*what* it is). Nevertheless, the text remains what it is even in the absence of the author. A "last will and testament," for example, comes into its own *especially* in the author's absence. When an author pens a last will and testament, he or she puts a legal as well as a linguistic system into motion and lays an obligation on the reader not to ignore his or her intentions. How much more obliged are readers of the New Testament when, in the closing lines, the reader is enjoined neither to add to nor to take away any words (Rev. 22: 18–19).⁸

This leads to a reappraisal of interpretation as the quest for the intentions of the author, not in the sense that interpretation tries to grasp the psychological states of the author when writing the text, but in the sense that the reader focuses on the traces of the author's intention that the text bears witness to.⁹

Central to the understanding of writing as communicative action is the institutional embeddedness of a speech act. Authors are capable of expressing their intentions because saying certain things *counts as* expressing certain intentions in certain institutional contexts. Therefore, the institutional context of the reader is

⁶ For an excellent discussion of speech act theory, see Richard S. Briggs, *Words in Action: Speech Act Theory and Biblical Interpretation* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2001), pp. 31–72.

⁷ This view of the propositional act is the distinguishing feature of the Searlian version of the theory, developed in John R. Searle, 'Austin on Locutionary Acts and Illocutionary Acts', *The Philosophical Review* 77 (1968), pp. 405–424. Watson and Vanhoozer follow the Searlian version of the theory. Accordingly, they pay hardly any attention to the *locutionary* aspect of the speech act.

⁸ Vanhoozer, pp. 228–229. Notice that the reference to Revelation does precisely what Vanhoozer rejects: It adds something beyond the author's intention. The text from Revelation certainly did not originally point to the whole of the New Testament canon!

⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 215, 230; Van Woudenberg, p. 134.

in some way a success condition for the speech act. This claim can be illustrated by the way in which Watson applies this insight to the hermeneutics of Scripture:

The speech-act of proclaiming the gospel, with the intention of creating or confirming faith, presupposes – like any other speech act – an institutional context. [...] Marks' illocutionary act of proclaiming the gospel in writing may therefore be said to remain in force so long as there is an institutional context in which the intended perlocutionary effect of his speech-act continues to be felt. Where an institutional context changes so fundamentally that a text's intended perlocutionary effect ceases to operate, interpreters have the freedom to assess its continuing significance and interest as they will (provided they grasp its verbal meaning). Yet to claim such a freedom in the case of the Gospel of Mark would be an aggressive action directed against the life of the community in which the intended illocutionary and perlocutionary force of this canonical text remains intact. Understood in this light, it can be said that true 'significance' is to be found *in the single, verbal meaning itself*, that is, in its enduring illocutionary and perlocutionary force. The notion of a secondary, ephemeral 'contextual significance' is therefore dependent on and subordinate to the primary, universal significance this text claims by virtue of its role as 'gospel'.¹⁰

As it appears from this quote, only a theological interpretation can really grasp the true meaning of the gospel because, as communicative action, its true meaning includes the intended illocutionary and perlocutionary force of the speech act embodied in it.¹¹ The notion of the institutional embeddedness of a speech act is also the key to the way in which a hermeneutics of communicative action aims to overcome the problem of a historical investigation into the origins of the text on the one hand, and its continuing significance and validity on the other. Watson can freely criticise historical critical scholarship for pursuing a 'disinterested' approach to the reading of the Bible, while at the same time defending the notion of authorial intention as central to his hermeneutics. From the perspective of the text as communicative action, the historical background, the historicity of the events behind the text, and the psychology of the author are only relevant insofar as they elucidate *what the author wanted to say in the text*. What the author wanted to say is, then, what needs to be accepted by a community in continuity with the text's original readership. Thus, a hermeneutics of communicative action can follow the postmodern critique of historicism in its Enlightenment and Romantic versions in favour of what Watson calls a 'theological interpretation' of Scripture. At the same time, it retains a historical orientation towards the original author and the original meaning of the text against postmodern hermeneutics. As will become clear below, I do not think that defenders of a hermeneutics of communicative action can bridge the gap between theology and history that easily, but it must be admitted that their view of the text as a communicative action provides a helpful matrix for integrating theological and historical interests.

Vanhoozer develops a hermeneutics of communicative action at three levels: of the author, the text, and the reader. At the level of the author, Vanhoozer

¹⁰ Watson, p. 106.

¹¹ Vanhoozer (relying on Searle) makes clear that the illocutionary act need not play a serious role in this argument, because an illocutionary act is successful if the reader *understands* what illocutionary act the author wanted to perform. The reader need not share the author's opinion, because that is the perlocutionary effect of the speech act. Cf. Vanhoozer, p. 243.

argues for the author as a communicative agent. "Interpreters search not for the thinking subject or mind behind the text, but for the communicative agent implied in and by the text."¹² This search for the communicative agent implied in and by the text calls for linguistic, literary, and historical research into the linguistic system the author was using, the aesthetic devices the author employed, and the theological point the author wanted to make.¹³ At the level of the text, Vanhoozer argues for what he calls 'hermeneutical realism'. The fact that the nature of a text is determined by the communicative act of the author means that there *is* something determinate in the text. Textual meaning is not merely the product of the individual reader or the interpretive community. Meaning exists independently of the reader.¹⁴ Accordingly, Vanhoozer argues that the literal meaning of the text coincides with the intention of the author.¹⁵ At the level of the reader, Vanhoozer argues that the text as communicative action asks for a reading community that puts itself totally at the service of the author of the text. Readers need interpretive humility in order constantly to question the validity of their judgements about the meaning of texts. At the same time, they can trust their literary knowledge in the sense that a real encounter with the text is possible, although always tentative in nature.¹⁶

Having provided a concise version of a hermeneutics of communicative action, it is now time to evaluate it as a normative theory of hermeneutics. If correct, the theory would solve the ideological contradiction that I presented in the previous chapter, because the need for creativity could be removed in favour of complete correspondence between the community of authors on the one hand, and the community of readers on the other. The community of readers would simply need to subject itself consciously to the intended illocutionary and perlocutionary forces of the biblical texts. It is a typical feature of a hermeneutics of communicative action that it builds upon the suggestion that *this is simply what texts are*. The frequent occurrence of 'is'-sentences is striking: "Writing, like speaking, is a communicative action." "A text is a story (or a history, or a poem, or a parable) just because of what the author has done, just because of what the author has wrought in words."¹⁷ The declarative nature of these sentences hides the normative nature of the view expressed. It suggests a kind of inevitability in the theory which, in my view, should be challenged.

In the previous chapter, I discussed Derrida's view of the instability of the sign in some detail. I argued that, in spite of all the instability in written communication, there is also, in most cases, sufficient stability for an interpretive strategy that tries to build on it to be possible. One such interpretive strategy is authorial discourse interpretation. Hence, I accept the defence of a hermeneutics of communicative action insofar as it claims the *possibility* to read texts in the light of what the author wanted to communicate through them. However, the question is whether this is the one and only correct way, which is what a hermeneutics of

¹² Vanhoozer, p. 232.

¹³ *Ibid.*, pp. 233–234.

¹⁴ Cf. Van Woudenberg, pp. 112–113.

¹⁵ Vanhoozer, pp. 299–313.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 431–441, 455–467.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 228.

communicative action suggests. In the previous chapter, I argued that although such a strategy is *possible*, it is by no means *obligatory* or inevitably connected with the text itself. Texts are open in the sense that readers can deviate from the intention of the author implied by them in various ways. The decision to read the text in the light of the intention of its author is always the reader's. This is what defenders of a hermeneutics of communicative action try to deny by inferring a normative view of authorial discourse interpretation from an alleged 'nature of the text'.

The open character of texts comes clearly to the fore when we confront a hermeneutics of communicative action with our case studies. Did the four different readers of the book of Job interpret it as communicative action? This is a complex question. In the case of the *Testament of Job*, one would probably say no, because it offers a strikingly different story of Job. However, this does not mean that it did not take the text of Job seriously. It focused primarily on the gaps in the text, proposing ways to fill them. One might conceive of the authors of the *Testament of Job* as readers of the book of Job who understood what it says, but were left with a number of puzzles as to what it means exactly and whether it is entirely correct. Therefore, they decided to write it anew and to elaborate on certain aspects so as to remove the problems that they experienced. Do readers who extend the text they read treat it as communicative action? I think they do, but that does not mean that they stick to everything the author wanted to say. And sometimes they fail to understand what the author tried to communicate.

In the case of Calvin, the question is even more difficult to answer. Calvin certainly claimed that what he aimed at was an exposition of the literal sense of the text, even in terms of the intention of its author. However, his reading was so much dominated by theological and pastoral interests that it can hardly count as a quest for the intention of its original author. At best, we can call it a reading somewhere in between authorial intention and theological application.

Lasso offers yet another perspective. Did he opt for the authorial intention of the text? We should first ask whether he could do so, since the selection of texts prescribed for the liturgical service was already such a determining factor in his interpretation that the original context of the text remained largely beyond his grasp. Yet, on the other hand, Lasso provided a fairly literal interpretation of the texts at his disposal. The musical framework in which the text was placed served as a reinforcement of the literal sense of that text as understood by Lasso.

In some respects, Gutiérrez's interpretation of Job comes closest to what the defenders of a hermeneutics of communicative action may have in mind. Gutiérrez makes extensive use of modern historical biblical scholarship and draws on philological studies in elucidating the meaning of the original Hebrew. Surprisingly, however, Gutiérrez is most explicit in indicating that his interpretive aims go beyond the mere authorial intention of the texts. What he aims at is a reading of Job in which the text and his own Latin American context mutually elucidate one another. Such an exchange clearly goes beyond the aims of a hermeneutics of communicative action.

Formulated concisely, a hermeneutics of communicative action overstates the defence of the *possibility* of authorial discourse interpretation so that it is turned into a universal norm for all readers. In the light of our reference point

of complexity and diversity, a hermeneutics of communicative action proposes a typically monolithic solution to the problem of hermeneutics. In fact, a single answer is provided to many different questions. This answer seems appropriate for an academic historical interest in the original meaning of the biblical texts, but it cannot satisfy many other interests. Composers may be interested in the literal sense of the text, but they need not be; poets likewise. Yet, even in theological contexts, Scripture plays so many different roles in the lives of believers that we can hardly assess all these diverse roles in terms of the original meaning of the texts. It would be rather unhelpful to view a liturgical service in terms of the original meaning of the biblical material used in it. In line with the declarative style of the hermeneutics of communicative action, we might say: this is simply not what believers do when they read the biblical texts in a liturgical context.

The second reference point presented in the previous chapter was that context is decisive for the religious interpretation of canonical texts. This is exactly what defenders of a hermeneutics of communicative action want to challenge. In their view, the fact that the interpreter can appeal to the intention of the author means that there is an anchor point beyond the reader's own context upon which true interpretation can be based. As I argued above, 'can' need not imply 'must'. The 'can' is guaranteed by a degree of stability in the sign. This means that establishing the original meaning of the text will be more or less successful depending on how much a text – or our background knowledge about it – reveals about its origin. The 'must', however, is rooted in the reader's choice. Hence, it should be questioned whether an appeal to the intention of the author is a way out of the limitations of one's own context. Precisely the fact *that* a hermeneutics of communicative action restricts true interpretation to the analysis of authorial intention reflects its context in twentieth century Western thought. In the previous chapter, I argued that the decisive role of context in interpretation challenges the alleged 'value-neutral' character of academic hermeneutics. A hermeneutics of communicative action suggests that there is a realm of objectivity where the experts uncover the true nature of the texts. Or formulated more positively: being aware of the religious drives of the readers of Scripture, they point to the ultimate purpose of all interpretation, namely, the original meaning of the text. But, as I suggested in the previous chapter, a 'value-free' interpretation – that is, one unconnected with the life of the reader – only adds an abstract view of the text to the ocean of readings. Though perhaps closely reflecting the original meaning of the text, it might be useless for most readers. As I will argue in the remainder of this section, an exclusive focus on the original authorial intention behind the text as distinct from the present interests of readers, will only serve to distance the text from its readers.

Finally, we need to reflect on the hermeneutics of communicative action in the light of the ideological contradiction of the authority of Scripture. As I indicated above, the hermeneutics of communicative action ultimately aims at resolving it by opting for correspondence. If my theoretical reflection presented in the previous chapter is correct, an option for correspondence evokes an equally strong requirement for creativity to bridge the gap between the original meaning of the texts and the religious interests of the readers. There are various aspects of a hermeneutics of communicative action that highlight that creativity. *First,*

the quest for authorial intention is itself a form of creativity because it overlooks the – not merely coincidental – fact that the Scriptures are full of ‘authorless’ materials. The major part of the Old Testament writings (the Pentateuch, Samuel, Kings, etc.) and various books of the New Testament (Matthew, Mark) were written and compiled as ‘authorless’ texts. One might argue that, even in these cases, the process of reading relies on the idea of an ‘implied author’, but this would be to neglect the hermeneutical significance of the authorless texts in the Bible.¹⁸ Scripture provides little or no information about the authors of the various books. New Testament interpretations of Old Testament texts rarely build upon the authorial intention of the text and this has only become a real problem since the Enlightenment period, when biblical scholarship became particularly preoccupied with questions of authorship. The hermeneutics of communicative action has been developed partly to attack Enlightenment hermeneutics, but it may be asked whether it really overcomes its basic orientation.

Second, the extreme diversity of form and content within the Christian canon invites creativity. A hermeneutics of communicative action, aiming at the exposition of Scripture in terms of the intentions of the authors, seems only to reinforce these problems, rather than alleviating them. Christianity accepts as the major part of its canon the Scriptures of its predecessor, Judaism. If, for example, the only valid interpretation of Old Testament laws is to understand *and* accept the illocutionary and perlocutionary forces of these texts, it can hardly be understood how these laws can be integrated into the Christian canon. Bluntly stated, Christianity cannot rely on a hermeneutics of the literal sense alone because that would be to reject the message of a major part of its Scripture.

The various proponents of a hermeneutics of communicative action are well aware of this, but they do not see it as a proof of failure of their argument. Rather, they try to solve the problem by adding to their stress on authorial intention notions like ‘significance’, ‘relation to the central message of the Gospel’, or even the ‘meaning of the text as divine discourse’. Watson argues that the ‘single determinate meaning’ of the biblical texts consists of their (1) verbal meaning, (2) their illocutionary and perlocutionary forces, and (3) their relation to ‘the centre’.¹⁹ The third point Watson mentions serves to restrict the abiding authority of certain texts of Scripture that do not cohere with the central Christian message evident from the whole of the Christian canon. A similar point is made by Vanhoozer, who, in spite of his insistence on the literal sense and the determinate nature of texts, distinguishes between the meaning and the ‘significance’ of a text, and also relies extensively on the idea that the meaning of the biblical texts changes when the latter are considered in their canonical context.²⁰ Finally, Wolterstorff argues for the interpretation of biblical texts as a quest for what the author of the text wanted to say, but at the same time allows for a significantly different meaning when the text is interpreted as divine discourse.²¹

¹⁸ For a fascinating analysis of the narrative function of authorlessness in the Hebrew Bible, see Meir Sternberg, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative: Ideological Literature and the Drama of Reading*, Indiana studies in Biblical literature (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), pp. 58–83.

¹⁹ Watson, pp. 119–124.

²⁰ Vanhoozer, pp. 228, 260–263.

²¹ Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Divine Discourse: Philosophical Reflections on the Claim that God Speaks*

In my view, such moves are in contradiction with the central tenets of the hermeneutics of communicative action. To argue that the ‘significance’ of Old Testament sacrifice lies in its prefiguration of Christ’s sacrifice on the Cross cannot reasonably be seen as an authorial discourse interpretation of the Old Testament texts. So-called typological, allegorical, or metaphorical interpretations of Old Testament law are motivated by disagreement with the message of the text as communicative action. Otherwise there would be no reason at all to reinterpret in these ways. It is hard to see why the illocutionary act embodied in the text is an insufficient clue to the significance of the text, because the illocutionary act is what the author wanted to communicate. If one argues that the meaning of the Old Testament texts, conceived as communicative action, consists in their illocutionary and perlocutionary force, it seems that the meaning of these texts does not really change when placed into the context of the Christian canon. The Old Testament laws will still contain their statement “This is a lasting ordinance for the generations to come . . . (NIV)”²² Most Christians will interpret the New Testament as saying that Christians need not obey these commandments any more, but that does not change their illocutionary or perlocutionary force. At least one would have to explain what their new force is. If it is: believe in Jesus as Christ, it should be taken, at least in Watson’s terms, as “an aggressive action directed against the life of the community in which the intended illocutionary and perlocutionary force of this canonical text remains intact”: contemporary Judaism.²³

In fact, in my view, the hermeneutics of communicative action in its recent appearance, typically builds upon the two competing drives that I identified in the previous chapter. In insisting on the authorial intention of the text as the norm for the interpretation of Scripture, it sets a correspondence between one’s interpretation and the original meaning of the text as the ultimate goal and sure foundation of the authority of Scripture. In insisting on the distinctions mentioned between meaning (authorial intention) and significance (reader’s own context), divine (in the reader’s own context) over against human discourse (authorial intention), and the center of the Christian canon as opposed to more peripheral texts, it attempts to cater for, and hide, the enormous amount of creativity needed to justify the correspondence claim. This is perfectly comprehensible. In my view, authorial intention is a ‘distancing’ concept. It focuses on the meaning of the text *as distinct from* the way we would read it initially from our own context. In reconstructing the original authorial intention behind the text, it distances the text from its reader. Therefore, my impression is that the more a hermeneutics of communicative action stresses authorial intention, the more it will move in the direction of no ‘significance’ for today at all, because there will always be a fundamental ‘difference’ between the text and the reader. The movement towards the original meaning of the text is then in principle a movement *away* from the

(Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), pp. 202–222; For my critique of this aspect of Wolterstorff’s book, see Maarten Wisse, ‘From Cover to Cover? A Critique of Wolterstorff’s View of the Bible as Divine Discourse’, *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 52:3 (2002), pp. 159–173.

²² See, e.g. Ex. 12:14, 17, 24; 27:21; 28:43; 29:9; 30:21; Lev. 16:34; 17:7; 23:14; 21, 31, 41; 24:3; Nu. 10:8; 15:15; 18:23; 19:10, 21. Note that it does not appear in Deuteronomium.

²³ Watson, p. 106.

reader. Linked to a correspondence claim, it culminates in an infinite regress.

For this reason, I would like to propose that the hermeneutics of communicative action be taken up into what I will present as a hermeneutics of critical engagement. The 'distancing' role that it plays in the interpretation by religious communities makes it a suitable tool for critical participation in the religious interpretation process. Thus, it is explicitly acknowledged that the hermeneutics of communicative action functions at the same ideological level as any other interpretive strategy. It cannot claim an exclusive right upon the true meaning of the text. At the same time, in confronting readers with the differences between their current context and the original one, it may function successfully as a critical device in the hands of readers who want to challenge religious interpretations of Scripture. An appeal to the authorial intention of the biblical texts highlights the strangeness of the text, so that readers do not only read their own views into the text, but may also discover something by which they may renew their views.²⁴ In Gadamerian terms, an appeal to the original meaning of the text stimulates the dialogue with it in the sense that it brings the 'in-between' between the interests of authors and readers to the fore—not in the sense of prescribing to religious believers that they revert to the original meaning of the texts, or rather: not necessarily so, but in the sense of making them aware of their own context and opening up perspectives for broadening their context, or changing their views.

8.3 HERMENEUTICS OF TRADITION

So far, I have argued that an appeal to the original meaning of Scripture can function as a critical device to renew the interpretation of Scripture in a religious community. On this view, as it stands, there are only two partners in the religious interpretation process: the text and the reader. The idea that there are only two partners in the process, is criticised by David Brown. In his two recent volumes *Tradition and Imagination* and *Discipleship and Imagination*, he accepts Gadamer's view of hermeneutics as a focus on the 'in-between', but challenges the view that only two partners are involved in the process of fusing horizons:

All this is excellent; so too is his explanation of how change occurs, through the 'fusion of horizons', with our inherited prejudices, through confrontation with the text, producing a modified tradition which continues to be subject to subsequent developments. But one looks in vain for adequate recognition of the fact that there are in fact potentially (and certainly legitimately) far more than just two dialogue partners, the present community and its prejudices and the past text. For, in so far as we are aware of its history, each stage of the transmission of the tradition, including those aspects that were jettisoned, has the potential to act as a critique of our own present concerns and obsessions.²⁵

This is what Brown's hermeneutics of tradition amounts to. Religious interpretations of Scripture may be criticised not only in the light of the original meaning

²⁴ Vincent Brümmer, *Speaking of a Personal God: An Essay in Philosophical Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), pp. 14–16; David Brown, 'Tradition as a Dynamic Force for Positive Change', in: Marcel Sarot and Gijsbert van den Brink, editors, *Identity and Change in the Christian Tradition*, Contributions to Philosophical Theology 2 (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 1999), p. 203.

²⁵ Brown, *Tradition and Imagination*, p. 51.

of the texts, but also in the light of subsequent interpretations of the texts. Brown goes a decisive step further by arguing that this is so because, in a number of cases, subsequent interpretations *improve* on the original meaning of the texts:

My aim is to show that tradition, so far from being something secondary or reactionary, is the motor that sustains revelation both within Scripture and beyond. Indeed, so much is this so that Christians must disabuse themselves of the habit of contrasting biblical revelation and later tradition, and instead see the hand of God in a continuing process that encompasses both. In order to establish that contention, there is much in what follows about the limitations of biblical insights. Such remarks could easily be misread. So let me say at the outset that this is done, not to disparage Scripture, but rather to extricate it from a burden which in my view it cannot possibly bear. The incarnation reveals a God who took with maximum seriousness the limitations of a specific cultural context, and so we only do that revelation a disservice if we posit as always present in Scripture the viewpoints now taken by the contemporary Church. Instead, we need to hear how the story develops, and thus of a God continuously involved in the history of the community of faith.²⁶

From this paradigmatic formulation of Brown's programme, it is evident that his hermeneutics of tradition presupposes a distinct view of revelation. On the positive side, it means that revelation is not restricted to the biblical period, but that God continues to reveal himself in the process of subsequent interpretations of the Bible. On the negative side, it means that both in Scripture and beyond, fallibility and truth are interwoven in such a way that one cannot use the one as an exclusive criterion for the other.²⁷ In revelation, God's involvement with people like ourselves resulted in "a fallible Bible and a fallible Church interacting with a no less fallible wider world."²⁸ For Brown, however, this is not really a negative aspect of revelation, because it was precisely by virtue of so deeply condescending into the human condition that God allowed human beings to know him in their very own situation. The subsequent tradition consists largely of attempts to face the limitations of previous understandings of revelation on the one hand, and to make previous understandings suitable for one's own condition on the other. This leads to what Brown calls 'trajectories' of biblical interpretation. Gaps and problems in earlier interpretations evoke new perspectives in the later tradition.²⁹

The normative task of hermeneutics consists, then, of participating in the tradition of interpretation by spelling out the trajectories of the text and judging them in the light of one's present condition. In this process, historical criticism (in a broad sense) plays a major role. Brown accepts the postmodern critique of historical criticism to the effect that the latter cannot provide a single, context-free and value-neutral picture of reality.³⁰ Rather, in his view, historical criticism functions as part of the Church's continuing involvement with revelation. In that regard, the task of historical criticism is twofold:

The first concerns the importance of locating how the text has in fact functioned both in relation to its point of origin, and with every significant new application.

²⁶ Brown, *Tradition and Imagination*, p. 1.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 5.

²⁸ Brown, *Discipleship and Imagination*, p. 405.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 396–400.

³⁰ Brown, *Tradition and Imagination*, pp. 55–56, 275–276.

[. . .] Secondly, in addition to establishing how revelation in fact worked, there must remain core historical questions which cannot be discounted by any religion that claims a decisive revelation at a certain point in time. [. . .] Thus for anything like orthodox Christianity to survive, it would seem to me indispensable that the incarnation occurred.³¹

Brown's endorsement of the later interpretive tradition is intimately related to his positive evaluation of imagination as a key to revelation. If not only the historical origins of the texts, but also the interpretations of later generations matter, then this implies that a later interpretation, which misses the original sense of the text, or neglects the historical events that the texts refer to, need not necessarily be less true than the historical sense. Brown sees primary evidence for this idea in the Bible itself, where the writers of the Gospels, for example, deliberately include fictional elements in the stories about Jesus to render a theological point about his mission more accurately.³² As soon as room has been created for a notion of truth different from 'correspondence with the original meaning' of the biblical texts, the role of imagination in interpretation can be evaluated much more positively. If fictional stories in the Bible contribute to our understanding of God's revelation, then imaginative interpretations of the biblical texts in the subsequent tradition may also do this.³³

So far, I have presented Brown's hermeneutics of tradition in a theoretical way, but for Brown, theory is not the heart of the matter. The major part of Brown's books is not devoted to the exposition of a hermeneutical theory, but consists of elaborate accounts of trajectories of biblical texts through the history of theology, culture and the visual arts. Therefore, let me finish my presentation of Brown's hermeneutics of tradition with two examples of how following the trajectory of a text can be said to enhance our understanding of revelation. The first example is Brown's view of the incarnation presented in the final part of the first volume, and the second is the history of exegesis of the book of Job, discussed in the second volume.

In Brown's view, following the trajectory of the story of Jesus does not mean starting with the surface meaning of the Gospels, but requires that we look through them to what we know about the historical Jesus behind the stories of the evangelists.³⁴ In spite of recent scepticism about our ability to reach behind the Gospels' accounts of Jesus, Brown follows historical Jesus research to inquire "what sort of incarnation it was" whereby God related himself so intimately with the created order.³⁵ He is well aware of the major disagreements among New Testament scholars about the historical figure of Jesus, but takes advantage of this by showing how even a very high degree of accommodation on God's part may well remain compatible with the Church's later view of the incarnation.³⁶ This view of divine accommodation in the incarnation is based upon Brown's conviction that:

³¹ Brown, *Discipleship and Imagination*, pp. 390–392.

³² Brown, *Tradition and Imagination*, pp. 6–7.

³³ Brown, *Discipleship and Imagination*, pp. 343–384.

³⁴ For my own view of historical critical scholarship, particularly historical Jesus research, see chapter 9.

³⁵ Brown, *Tradition and Imagination*, p. 275.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 276.

[I]t is one of the great glories of the incarnation that God chose to identify so completely with the human condition that he was willing even to incorporate into himself all the limitations inherent in our mortal nature.³⁷

This complete identification includes the assumption that:

[I]t is impossible for someone who is truly human sanely to believe himself divine. This is because being human implies a range of predicates which are necessarily not true of the divine, as for example being tempted, having limited knowledge, thinking sequentially, and so forth. Accordingly, however it was achieved, if God wanted to identify completely with the human condition, he had to accept such characteristic human limitations, at least in so far as they came to expression in the humanity of Jesus. So, rather than Jesus making any explicit claim to divinity, what Jesus said and did could have at most implied as much.³⁸

On the basis of these assumptions, Brown sets out to explore his view of revelation as a developing tradition:

What I will suggest is that what God in effect did in the incarnation was commit himself to a developing tradition. Not only did he expose himself to the vagaries of being human, he also submitted himself to the uncertainties of human comprehension in abandoning himself to humanity's most characteristic way of thinking: gradual perception through creative retelling of the story of his identification with us in Jesus.³⁹

At the historical level, Brown argues that the various defences of Jesus awareness of his own divinity either rely on persuasive definition, for example by arguing that Jesus' performance of miracles showed his 'transcendent' nature, or exaggerate those passages in the Synoptics that suggest a 'high christology'.⁴⁰ Brown argues that none of these strategies is successful, so that we can only properly understand why the later Church concluded to the divinity of Jesus if we consider a notion of truth beyond the merely factual. 'Significance' is a notion that highlights such a broader conception of imaginative truth:

Jesus in the vividness of his parables and in the dramatic character of his actions initiated a trend which continued as later tradition rewrote his life to bring out his full significance, as the community of faith now saw it. The parables invite us to imagine ourselves one of the participants in the drama. [...] His actions functioned no differently.⁴¹

For the most part, historical fact and imaginative truth are so much intertwined that it is difficult to separate them. This intertwining of history and imagination leads to a defence of what Brown sees as the natural development from the Gospels' accounts of Jesus to the ontological formulations of the creeds. Brown follows E.P. Sanders who holds that although Jesus did not think of himself as

³⁷ Brown, *Tradition and Imagination*, p. 278.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 278–279.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 279–282.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 283. For the theoretical discussion of truth as significance, see Brown, *Discipleship and Imagination*, pp. 359–366.

divine, he nevertheless thought of himself as having a unique role in inaugurating a new age.⁴² Furthermore, although the New Testament does not make explicit ontological claims about the divinity of Christ, its language of Christ functioning in the place of God might have ontological implications. Thus, in reflecting on the implications of Jesus' sayings in connection with the events surrounding him, his followers almost inevitably had to conclude to his divine status. On the basis of a variety of arguments, Brown holds this to have happened early in the history of the Church.⁴³

Brown's view of the incarnation shows clearly how his view of revelation as a developing tradition works, what role historical criticism plays in it and how historical questions can harmoniously coexist – at least in Brown's view – with the later doctrinal reflections of the Church. With regard to the incarnation, Brown's argument is intended to show that between the acts and sayings of the historical Jesus and the Christ of faith, there is a natural *continuum*. The history of the interpretation of Job – the second example which I would now like to turn to – is intended to show that later interpretations *improved* on the original meaning of the text.⁴⁴

Brown's first step in approaching Job is to look at various recent interpretations. On the basis of these, he argues – rightly in my view – that the 'original' Job invited further development in three respects. *First*, he argues that rather than providing a clear-cut answer to questions of suffering, the book presents a very ambiguous view of suffering which can best be seen as the opening of a debate about, rather than an ultimate resolution of the problem of suffering.⁴⁵ *Second*, Brown argues that the morality of the main figures in the book, notably God and Job, is much more disputable than commonly accepted. Various scholars suggest that the central tenet of God's speeches is that his justice is superior to the mundane categories of justice.⁴⁶ However, the unfortunate implication is a demeaning of God, because it seems to become unclear why he is worthy of worship. Human beings can only enter into a personal relationship with God if he proves to a considerable extent morally responsible. Although God's speeches might be expanded in some way such that they refer to God's moral responsibility, any explicit reference to this is in fact absent.⁴⁷ Not only the morality of God, but Job's too, seems questionable. Despite the seeming "unimpeachable" innocence of Job, the story provides a number of hints to the contrary. Sometimes (9: 20–22), Job seems to doubt his own innocence. More importantly, his attitude to his wife is one of disrespect rather than compassion with her lot, and, as we saw in the chapter on Gutiérrez, there is something to be criticised in Job's relationship with the poor too.⁴⁸

⁴² Brown, *Tradition and Imagination*, p. 289; E.P. Sanders, *The Historical Figure of Jesus* (London: Allen Lane, The Penguin Press, 1993), pp. 238–248.

⁴³ Brown, *Tradition and Imagination*, pp. 290–297.

⁴⁴ Brown, *Discipleship and Imagination*, p. 177.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 183–187.

⁴⁶ In chapter 4, we saw that this insight was central to Calvin's interpretation of Job as well. It can also be found in Gutiérrez.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 188–189.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 189–191.

Finally, Brown deals with the question whether God's speeches provided a real answer to Job's concerns. One of the most common affirmative answers to this question is to propose that Job's questions are answered by the mere experience of God's presence.⁴⁹ Allegedly, it is not the content of God's speech that matters, but the fact that God appears. However, here too, Brown disagrees:

But despite the undoubted distinction of the scholars who support such a line, this just will not do. For the insuperable objection remains that nowhere are we told that the experience of the speech, as distinct from its content, is integral to the argument. Rather, it seems to function, like Satan, as no more than a literary device, a mere vehicle for conveying a point. Were it otherwise, one would have expected the author to dwell on Job's participation in the experience, or at the very least to allude to it, but in the six verses allotted to his response this finds no mention.⁵⁰

In the remainder of his discussion of the book of Job, Brown shows how later Jewish and Christian interpretations took up these three problems in the original book. The *Testament of Job* which I discussed in chapter 3, is Brown's primary example from the Jewish tradition. The *Testament* offers a modified picture of the suffering of Job. It portrays his suffering as his own choice rather than a fate that makes him wonder why it befell him. This improves the moral status of God because he is no longer responsible for the suffering of Job. Furthermore, by dealing much more extensively with the beneficial actions of Job towards the poor and his wife, the *Testament* improves the moral character of Job. Finally, the experience of God at the end of the book is substantiated in the *Testament* by placing the encounter with the Lord in the context of a mystical experience.⁵¹

In Brown's view, the contribution of the Christian tradition to the interpretation of Job hinges especially on two aspects, one positive and one negative. The positive is what Brown calls 'internalisation'. The negative is a too narrow understanding of providence. The initiator of the development of *internalisation* was Gregory the Great, whose *Moralia* were the most powerful instigator of the legendary figure of the patient Job. In spite of its many peculiar allegorical interpretations of the text, Brown nevertheless argues that the *Moralia* represented a major advancement over earlier works:

If the Septuagint and the *Testament* succeeded in personalizing Job's ethics, Gregory succeeded in internalizing them. That was no small achievement because it ensured that facing suffering could now be viewed not as something purely external that had to be confronted alone (the Hebrew version), but something whose final resolution was a matter of internal attitude.⁵²

This internalisation influences further interpretations such as those offered by Aquinas and Calvin.

The *narrow view of providence* is strengthened by the continuing connection between sin and punishment, now – in contrast to the message of the canonical book – connected with the belief in the resurrection. Gregory holds that "every

⁴⁹ In chapter 6, we saw that Gutiérrez followed this line of argument.

⁵⁰ Brown, *Discipleship and Imagination*, p. 193.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 195–196.

⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 209.

fault necessitates its corresponding punishment and so, if not rectified in this life, it will be in the next."⁵³ This rigid view of sin and punishment, connected with the idea that every experience of suffering was planned by God as test, purgation or punishment, dominated much of the medieval and later pre-modern period. It was also the main point to be challenged in the modern period by, for instance, Immanuel Kant, who argued that it was up to the human being to respond freely to suffering and, in so doing, to perceive divine grace. The increasing attention to the particularity of human experience led to the collapse of the rigid view of providence because, though relating God's plan to each individual experience of suffering, it did so by reducing all cases of suffering to a few standard types.⁵⁴

The two examples of the incarnation and the interpretation of Job are typical of the way Brown's hermeneutics of tradition works in practice. Support for my own project can be drawn from Brown's theory in two respects. At the descriptive level, Brown's view is in line with the view I developed in the previous chapter, namely, that, in order to understand the religious interpretation process properly, we need to go beyond the biblical texts to consider their encounter with the particular needs and problems of the community of readers. Readers do all kinds of things that depart from the original texts, and that cannot simply be traced back to the texts themselves. In this sense, the biblical texts are open-ended and evoke further reflection on the part of the community of readers. As we saw in the previous chapter, the open character of the text confirms the postmodern insistence on the instability of the sign. However, parallel to my own argument in the previous chapter, Brown also notices the negative side of the postmodern preference for the instability of the sign:

The positive value in such claims is the recognition that texts can indeed break free of their authors and acquire different forms of significance that are not only intelligible in relation to the narrative as a whole but sometimes more illuminating than the intended meaning. [...] On my view there are no shortage of cases where this is also true of Scripture. [...] Even so, we need also to protest against the negative side of the more extreme versions of such 'postmodernist' readings. For the fact that the intentions of the author are not necessarily relevant in determining an acceptable meaning should not be taken to imply that questions of authorship have no relevance.⁵⁵

Briefly formulated, I would say that I accept Brown's balanced appropriation of a hermeneutics of difference in insisting on the possibility of breaking free from the authorial intention behind the text on the one hand, and the equally valuable possibility of holding fast to it on the other. Brown substantiates the possibility of authorial discourse interpretation by relying extensively on historical research in following the trajectories of the text, both in relation to the original biblical texts and as regards their interpretations in later times.

However, questions begin to crop up when we reflect further on Brown's use of historical methodology. As we have seen above, historical criticism has a twofold aim in Brown's project. First, it serves 'to show what happened' in the trajectory of the biblical text through the history of its interpretation. Second,

⁵³ Brown, *Discipleship and Imagination*, pp. 212–213.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 215–225.

⁵⁵ Brown, *Tradition and Imagination*, p. 42.

it functions in assessing the truth of the historical claims of Christianity. The first function became particularly clear in Brown's analysis of the history of the interpretation of Job. Historical methodology functions to trace the history of the text's reception. The second function figures prominently in Brown's view of the incarnation. It is the second function in particular that raises further questions.

It is clear that Brown's use of historical Jesus research should be placed in the context of the second function. As I have quoted him above, he says that "for anything like orthodox Christianity to survive, it would seem to me indispensable that the incarnation occurred."⁵⁶ Of course, the question arises as to how exactly the indispensability of the incarnation as a historical event is related to historical methodology. Brown is not completely clear on this matter. On the one hand, he suggests that as a historical religion, Christianity cannot ignore the critical questions that historical scholarship poses to it:

In discussing the patriarchal narratives, I observed that, even though I still thought it quite likely that they had some basis in fact, nothing much seemed to hang on whether they were historical or not. At most, the story of the developing tradition would then need to begin later, whenever such legends were first invented. *Matters are quite otherwise, though on some other matters.*⁵⁷

After this follows the remark that I quoted above: "Thus for anything like orthodox Christianity . . ." In this passage, the relation between faith and historical criticism seems to be construed along the lines of some such principle as the following: *If historical criticism shows that the historical claims central to Christianity are false, orthodox Christianity fails.*

However, there are other aspects of Brown's view of the incarnation that suggest a stronger connection between faith and historical criticism. In Brown's account of the incarnation, he develops a view of the incarnation that is explicitly in line with a historical critical reconstruction of the life of Jesus, even a rather sceptical one.⁵⁸ In facing the objection that by doing so, he makes faith dependent upon the contingencies of historical scholarship, Brown replies as follows:

Bultmann and Tillich thought that only the preached Christ mattered. I cannot agree. One factor which motivated them in this view was a desire for certainty, but the fact that historical understandings of Jesus will require periodic revision surely need in principle be no more undermining of faith than any of the numerous other changes in the Church's understanding of him that have occurred across the centuries. The only difference now is that in our own more historically conscious age we tend to make such changes explicit to ourselves, and herein surely lies an advantage.⁵⁹

These remarks suggest a much stronger connection between faith and historical scholarship. This suggests that Christianity must fashion its historical claims after the available historical evidence. In this case, historical criticism functions not only as – in Alvin Plantinga's words – a possible 'defeater' of Christianity,⁶⁰ but in fact becomes the exclusive point of entry to the historical aspects of faith.

⁵⁶ Brown, *Discipleship and Imagination*, pp. 391–392.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 391, emphasis mine.

⁵⁸ Brown, *Tradition and Imagination*, pp. 275–276.

⁵⁹ Brown, *Discipleship and Imagination*, pp. 392–393.

⁶⁰ Alvin Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp. 357–

I have much appreciation for the way in which Brown succeeds in showing that, even on the presuppositions of a critical reconstruction of the life of Jesus, including a very low christology on the part of Jesus himself and his immediate followers, the Christian belief in the incarnation can still be maintained, and even deepened by more profoundly exemplifying the nature of divine accommodation to the human condition. Nevertheless, both of the functions of historical criticism suggested by Brown may be challenged in various respects. First of all, Brown's view is affected by several general problems of historical methodology. These general problems are the subject of the next chapter, and therefore, I will only mention them in passing here. In the next chapter (section 9.6), I will argue that, as far as the role of historical criticism as a defeater of Christianity is concerned, historical methodology – in its current state – lacks a criterion for establishing the inauthenticity of traditions about Jesus. Furthermore, I will argue that, as far as the role of historical criticism as an exclusive point of entry to the historical aspects of Christian faith is concerned, it is difficult to see why religious believers are obliged to accept the historicity of only those traditions about Jesus of which the plausibility has been proved by historical critical research. I will show that, in its current state, historical research lacks criteria for establishing authenticity. At best, critical reconstructions of the life of Jesus may add to the plausibility of certain traditions but they cannot prove anything (section 9.6). In the next chapter, I will also explain that the idea of historical criticism as an exclusive point of entry to the history of Christianity presupposes a particular type of evidentialist epistemology, which has come under heavy criticism in recent years (section 9.7).

However, these are not the only problems concerning the role of historical criticism in Brown's argument. For example, it may be asked whether historical methodology is capable of providing evidence for or against a metaphysical notion like the incarnation to begin with. It might be argued that historical evidence by definition cannot tell us whether or not someone had a divine nature, because it lacks the tools for assessing such aspects of reality.⁶¹ It becomes clear from Brown's own argument that historical research could at best inquire whether someone regarded himself as divine, or whether followers regarded the person in that way, because this is what historical sources might provide evidence for. However, if Brown's assumption about being truly human is correct, evidence for the idea that a person regards himself divine would only count against the psychological sanity of that person, and so, people might argue, would the divinity claim on the part of his followers.

Leaving aside the general problems of historical criticism, I would like to consider the question of how the role of historical research is related to Brown's explicit vindication of later developments in the history of interpretation. Why does Brown place such a high value on knowing whether the incarnation occurred when, in other cases, he argues that the historicity of the original text does not infringe on the truth of the textual witness. Brown argues that orthodox Christianity would fail if the incarnation did not occur as a historical event,

⁶¹ In the next chapter, section 9.5, I will deal more elaborately with the ability of historical research to assess metaphysical aspects of reality.

but that seems a modernist assumption at odds with the actual development of Christianity. From the very outset, the Christian belief in the incarnation was embedded in the imaginative stories of the gospel traditions. One might even say that the idea of the 'incarnation' itself is heavily influenced by imagination. Brown is insistent in showing that the imaginative form of later interpretations of the incarnation is no less true than the 'brute facts'. In fact, the imaginative form of the belief in the incarnation that we find from the Gospels onwards is much more successful in conveying the truth about Jesus than dry descriptions of the faith could ever be. Why then, I would ask, is there any need for a historical reconstruction of the original events, a peeling off of all imaginative and fictional elements, added by the later tradition? Why not simply stick to the imaginative forms? Or phrased even more radically: Why is the imagination of the sceptical historian of the twentieth century a better one than the faithful imagination of the first century believer? This suggests that there is an ambiguity in Brown's view of a developing tradition. On the one hand, Brown attempts truly to value the later imaginative traditions of the Church, yet on the other, this attempt can be played off against his desire to build the truth of the faith upon the historicity of God's intervention in history.

This ambiguity can be elaborated further by asking what effect Brown's hermeneutics of tradition has on the further development of that tradition. Phrased differently: What is the effect of applying Brown's hermeneutics of tradition to itself? It shows how imagination is the motor of a revelatory Scripture and tradition and proposes a method to investigate that process, but what are the consequences of the methodology for the future of the process? The central tenet of Brown's thesis is that Scripture initiated and evoked a developing tradition which continued the process of revelation in the history of the Church. Brown's analysis shows how the later tradition differed from the original text, and more importantly, how in many cases the later tradition corrected the lacunae in the earlier text and interpretation. In this way, he makes explicit many aspects of the history of interpretation that earlier interpreters – in many cases deliberately – kept implicit.

In a sense, one might call Brown's following of the trajectories of the text a positively formulated deconstruction of the interpretations of earlier readers. In terms of the ideological contradiction formulated in the previous chapter, the creativity involved in the interpretation of the texts is brought to the fore by Brown's procedure. As a consequence, however, the claim of correspondence between the meaning of the text and its interpretation is explicitly rendered impossible. If my argument in the previous chapter was correct, namely, that the authority of Scripture builds upon both the creativity and the correspondence claim, it might well be that the explicit recognition of the creativity claim at the expense of the parallel correspondence claim stops the process of creativity that Brown himself sees as the source of ongoing revelation. That is to say, for the largest part of the tradition, the creativity involved in the interpretation of Scripture was acceptable only because it was believed not to infringe on the truth of the text. Brown shows that what in fact happened was that the meaning of Scripture was changed into something better, fitting the needs of the times, or even truer than the text itself. But, supposing that the interpretation really changed the meaning of Scripture,

this makes the creative interpretations of the tradition immediately unacceptable to – at least some – believers, because it is now seen that what seemed to be a true interpretation of Scripture was ultimately sheer fantasy! The question is whether, for creative interpretations of Scripture to work effectively in a religious context, they need not be covered by the idea that what is read *into* the text is the very meaning of the text *itself*.

This problem indicates Brown's lack of attention to the ideological function of the authority of Scripture. Such attention to ideological processes is rather sparse in his description of the trajectories. For example, Brown argues that the high christology formulated in the creeds was a *natural if not inevitable development* from the low christology in the gospels or the development behind it, but he fails to indicate that to describe this development as 'natural' or 'inevitable' is to completely ignore the fact that the question whether or not high christology really *followed*, was the subject of the fierce dispute between the Arians and Athanasius. It appears even more surprising, given the fact that Brown himself admits that the Gospels are more 'Arian' than orthodox, that the Church should not have stuck to the Arian view. What is so natural about the orthodox view? Here, Brown apparently overlooks the fact that the development of the christological dogma was to no small extent a political conflict rather than an academic theological dispute. The lack of attention to ideological issues is also evident in Brown's discussion of conflict at the end of the second volume, where he argues that balancing out disagreements is the way in which the Church finds the truth. This might be true in some cases, but it must be admitted that exclusion of those who disagree is another way in which the Church often maintains its authority.

This lack of attention to the identity constituting aspects of the interpretation of Scripture in religious communities touches the heart of Brown's hermeneutics. The main problem is that Brown explicitly denies the formal authority of the text by arguing that the later tradition *improves* on the truth of the text. Brown opts for a radically fallible Bible and tradition. His reply might be that the Church has been doing so all along by subtly adapting the message of Scripture to the requirements of the context, yet the crucial difference is that Brown acknowledges this, whereas the mainstream of the tradition did not. In this respect, Brown's discussion of Judaism and Islam in the first volume is striking.⁶² Brown suggests that, in Judaism and Islam, we find a much more positive role of tradition than in Christianity. This may well be true – although I wonder whether a similar vindication of tradition cannot be found in the Roman Catholic (and perhaps Eastern Orthodox) tradition – but still, my problem is that in none of these religious traditions does one find a denial of the formal authority of Scripture, which is so typical of Brown's approach. As he indicates in other places, Islam is especially resistant to a secular interpretation of its canonical texts, and the same goes for major parts of the Jewish and Christian traditions. Explicit recognition of the fallibility of Scripture will make Brown's proposal unacceptable to traditional Christians, Jews, and Muslims. On the other hand, when it comes to contextual fit, Brown's proposal will be all the more suitable for Western intellectual believers who have difficulties with an infallible Bible and seek to be religious without

⁶² Brown, *Tradition and Imagination*, pp. 106–167.

compromising their intellectual integrity.

The lack of attention to the ideological aspects of the authority of Scripture also comes to the fore in Brown's view of the role of imagination. In the introduction to the first volume, he says:

The word 'imagination' occurs in the title of both this work and its sequel: *Discipleship and Imagination*. This is not because I do not take doctrinal issues seriously, but because I regard them as secondary and parasitic on the stories and images that give religious belief its shape and vitality.⁶³

My argument in the previous chapter already indicated that my view of the relationship between the doctrinal and the aesthetic differs from Brown's. In Brown's view, the doctrinal issues are 'secondary' to, and even 'parasitic' upon the stories and images of religious belief. My first objection to this view is: not always. Brown himself is well aware that in many cases, doctrinal or more broadly theological views can be at the root of magnificent aesthetic expressions of faith. Homophonic elements in Lasso's masses are influenced by a more adequate rhetoric of the music, but also by the requirement of the Tridentine council, which required church music to render the text more adequately and comprehensively. Likewise, whatever one might think of Calvin's liturgical views, his radical transformation of the liturgy resulted in a new musical setting of the Psalms which was to evoke a massive amount of aesthetic expression in later centuries. These are musical examples, but similar cases could be added from the visual arts. The history of art shows that imagination always finds a way out of the most rigid theological requirements. Sometimes, this even leads to the most powerful aesthetic expressions. As many artists will acknowledge, the imagination flourishes especially under restraint.

Yet, I would like to go one step further by arguing that, rather than being secondary to, or parasitic upon the aesthetic, the doctrinal and the imaginative mutually presuppose one another. Brown is right in insisting on the indispensable role of the imagination in the development of a religious tradition but, as I have argued in relation to Lasso's music, the imagination derives its power from its connection with the authoritative aspects of the tradition and vice versa. The authoritative elements in Lasso's music on Job, that is, the latter's being taken from Scripture and placed into the context of the liturgy, provide the religious community the ultimate license to share Job's experience of suffering, yet at the same time, the authoritative is brought home to the experience of the believer by being placed in the context of sixteenth century polyphonic music. For Brown's view of the imagination, this means that one cannot treat the role of imagination in isolation from the community's quest for restriction and authority. As I indicated above, Brown focuses so much on the creative side of the religious interpretation process that he seems to overlook the role of doctrinal constraint in the process.

Brown's preference for the imagination is intimately related to the problem of truth in his hermeneutics of tradition. The idea of a developing tradition where

⁶³ Brown, *Tradition and Imagination*, p. 2. There is a similarity here with the view of Stephen Fowl, who refuses even more insistently to take doctrinal and ideological issues into account: Stephen E. Fowl, *Engaging Scripture: A Model for Theological Interpretation*, *Challenges in Contemporary Theology* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1998), pp. 2–10, 62–75. The main difference between their positions is Fowl's profoundly negative versus Brown's positive evaluation of traditional biblical scholarship.

both Scripture and tradition are viewed as fundamentally fallible leads to the question of who or what is going to determine the truth of a particular view. Brown argues that later interpretations of Scripture *improve* on earlier views, but what is to count as 'better', and why? First, one may ask: 'better' for whom? For example, Brown argues that the narrow view of providence he found in Christian interpretations of Job was a bad development. Yet, as we saw in chapter 4, the idea that God directed every single detail of his life was precisely what made Calvin survive in a frightening world.⁶⁴

Yet, a more fundamental problem is at stake. The denial of a *Scriptura sola* principle suggests that criteria for truth in a religious community become completely arbitrary, because it is now explicitly recognised that the reader decides what is true, and what not. There is a knock down reply to this objection to the effect that the arbitrariness of the truth criterion applies to the *Scriptura sola* principle as much as to Brown's hermeneutics of tradition. In both cases, the *reading community* decides what counts as true and what not. The difference is that, in Brown's hermeneutics of tradition, the role of the reader is more explicitly recognised because the reader is expected to judge the revelatory status of a text from case to case whereas, in traditional infallibility concepts of biblical authority, the reading community hides its decision about the infallibility of its canonical text by declaring that it simply accepts it as is. Nevertheless, the need for a decision is present here too.

However, this counter-attack is not likely to convince the religious believer adhering to the function of Scripture as a sure foundation of her religious identity. Brown is well aware of the problem of truth and devotes the final chapter of the second volume to it. He is most hesitant about the contention that it is finally the human reader who is to decide what counts as God's revelation, and what not:

Although I have spoken of 'trajectories' from the biblical text and of the deposit of faith turning back on itself to 'correct' earlier misunderstandings, the fact that I suggested that such changes arise through interaction with specific social and cultural contexts might easily be taken by a hostile critic to imply the recognition of no authority beyond my own reflections. Nothing could be further from the truth. Ultimately, behind that process I would wish to see the hand of God continuing to involve himself intimately with humanity and our desire to understand the divine purpose. More immediately, however, there seems to me an indispensable role for the community of faith in helping the individual believer determine where that process of revelation has now reached.⁶⁵

The obvious question follows whether we can supply some clear cut criteria that rescue the hermeneutical process from complete arbitrariness. Brown mentions no less than nine criteria at work in his hermeneutics. The list of criteria is: historical, empirical, conceptual, and moral criteria, criteria of continuity, christological

⁶⁴ Similarly, the Heidelberg Catechism (1563) mentions a narrow view of providence as part of the 'single consolation' of the believer: Zacharias Ursinus, 'Heidelberg Catechism', in: Schaff, *Creeds of Christendom III*, question 1. For an extensive treatment of the doctrine of providence in the Heidelberg Catechism, see G. den Hartogh, *Voorzienigheid in donker licht: Herkomst en gebruik van het begrip 'Providentia Dei' in de reformatorische theologie, in het bijzonder bij Zacharias Ursinus*, Ph.D. dissertation Utrecht University (Heerenveen: Groen, 1999).

⁶⁵ Brown, *Discipleship and Imagination*, p. 291.

criteria, degree of imaginative engagement, effectiveness of analogical construct and, finally, ecclesial criteria.⁶⁶ Brown is honest enough to admit that it is hard to sort out how each of these criteria worked in his argument.⁶⁷ The number and diversity of these criteria indicate the seriousness of Brown's problem.

8.4 HERMENEUTICS AS CRITICAL ENGAGEMENT

For a proper understanding of my overall argument, it is important to note that I argue for a contextual hermeneutics – both in the descriptive and the normative sense – for two sorts of reasons: *factual* and *pragmatic*. First, I argue that interpretation practices and the hermeneutical rules behind them are contextually embedded. In the previous chapter, I argued that a text is so much embedded in a particular context that one cannot separate the one from the other. A text is always read as it appears in its context of interpretation, and there is no 'pure' context in which the text is read 'as it is'. Of course, this does not mean that one could not create a context in which one attempts to read texts in terms of everything one knows of its context of origin. This is done in most Western universities. Yet such a context does not read the text 'as it is', but rather approaches it with a specific purpose, determined by its very specific reading context.

Second, I argue for the contextuality of hermeneutical ideals – hermeneutics in the normative sense – for pragmatic reasons. Because interpretation processes are always contextually embedded, hermeneutical ideals can only be successful if they are contextually embedded as well. This is so in the general sense that a hermeneutical ideal that prescribes how to interpret once and for all fits only one particular reading situation and not all at once. However, the pragmatic reason for the contextual embedding of a hermeneutical ideal is particularly significant in face of the identity constituting aspects of religious interpretation processes. As I argued in the previous chapter, faced with the ideological contradiction of the authority of Scripture, the hermeneutical critic has three options. The first option is to *resolve* the contradiction. In section 8.2 and 8.3 of this chapter, I discussed two hermeneutical ideals that do this, either to the correspondence or to the creativity side. On the correspondence side, I argued that the attempt to resolve the contradiction fails because it denies the contextuality of religious interpretation practices. On the creativity side, I argued that, although Brown's view is rationally tenable, it vindicates creativity so much that the authority of Scripture seems to disappear in favour of the authority of the reader. This shows how any attempt to resolve the contradiction to either side, complete correspondence or free floating creativity, is bound to fail. That is to say, it fails as a *general solution* to the problem of the authority of Scripture. Both proposals for a normative hermeneutics may be very successful to their respective adherents in

⁶⁶ Brown, *Discipleship and Imagination*, pp. 390–406.

⁶⁷ This is an unfortunate aspect of the two otherwise magnificent books. It would have strengthened Brown's argument if he had interwoven his reflections on the criteria with the whole of his historical argument, rather than listing them at the end of the work. Now the reader is left with the puzzle to sort out how this complex list of criteria actually worked in the analysis of the trajectories of the texts.

providing a suitable balance between correspondence and creativity. Adherents of a hermeneutics of communicative action – traditional Christians for example – will judge the price of Brown’s fallible Bible and tradition much too high—probably even as heresy. They will prefer to see later developments in the interpretation of Scripture as ‘reflections on the significance’ of an infallible Scripture or something along those lines. Adherents of Brown’s view – Western intellectuals for example – will probably refuse to pay the price of intellectual compromise and opt for a low view of Scripture.

The second option is to *abandon* the identity constituting function of Scripture altogether. A Scripture is an interesting collection of texts, but cannot determine the identity of a religious community. As far as rational truth is concerned, this option seems attractive. If the concept of an identity constituting Scripture is irrational because it rests upon incompatible drives, it must be rejected. In pragmatic terms, however, this option is of little interest. As far as I can see, Scripture fulfils such an important function in constituting the identity of the religious community that it cannot easily be rejected. If a hermeneutical critic rejects it, this will only result in her being excluded from the religious community, with little or zero influence on the religious interpretation of Scripture as a consequence. Yet, that is precisely what a hermeneutical ideal aims at: to stimulate fruitful interpretation of Scripture within a religious community. The upshot of the foregoing is that only a hermeneutical ideal that builds positively upon the identity constituting function of Scripture has a chance of success within a religious community.

Various issues deserve further reflection. *First of all*, it is important to notice that, during my analysis of the normative question as to how religious people should read their canonical texts, the attention shifted from the sphere of *truth* to the sphere of *politics*. With ‘politics’ I do not mean ‘issues related to statecraft’, but rather ‘the process of decision making as related to the identity of a certain group’, in this case the religious community. In the long run, the question of what should count as *correct* interpretation of Scripture in a religious community is a *political* decision. This does not mean that truth in a more neutral sense does not matter, but rather that the political decision is the primary one because if a hermeneutical ideal were true but unacceptable to the community, it would not even be considered because of its being at odds with the identity of the group. Being acceptable to the community is a success condition of a hermeneutical ideal. And an ideal that is acceptable to one community may not be so to another.

Second, if it is a fact that academic hermeneutics is part of the politics of hermeneutics, this means that the space for a *general* normative hermeneutics, that is to say, a hermeneutical ideal that prescribes what *true* interpretation of a canonical text in any religious community *should be*, is *empty*. What an academic hermeneutics in the sense of a universal, context-free theory is left with, is the isolation of the success conditions of any hermeneutical ideal: *successful criticism of a religious interpretation of Scripture depends on a sufficient degree of engagement with the religious community of interpreters*—nothing more and nothing less. The shift from the development of a universal hermeneutical ideal to the description of success conditions is a shift from hermeneutics to meta-hermeneutics. A general and hence universal view of what interpretation should be, can at best tell us something about which sets of rules for religious interpretation have a chance of

success, and which probably do not – the meta-hermeneutical level – but it cannot provide a universally valid set of its own—the hermeneutical level. Hence, a philosophical hermeneutics is left with what we might call an ‘empty case’. It can only reflect on the conditions and presuppositions of hermeneutical proposals and the conditions and presuppositions of interpretation processes, but it cannot prescribe what true interpretation is, or provide the best set of rules for a religious (or any other) reading process.

The conclusion that the space for a general, value-neutral, objective hermeneutical ideal applicable to all interpretive processes is empty highlights the peculiar nature of the procedure followed in this study. In chapter 2, I deliberately chose a functional, that is, an outsider’s perspective to religious interpretation processes, among other reasons in order to be able to reckon with ideological elements in religion. Now, after having established that identity related problems indeed play a major role in the religious interpretation process, I end up with the conclusion that the space for a general response to the quest for a hermeneutical ideal is empty and, hence, that a general orientation to the problem of hermeneutics has only very limited value. There is an analogy to this procedure in Wittgenstein’s remark at the end of the *Tractatus*. Wittgenstein says:

My propositions are elucidatory in this way: he who understands me finally recognizes them as senseless, when he has climbed out through them, on them, over them. (*He must so to speak throw away the ladder, after he has climbed up on it.*) He must surmount these propositions; then he sees the world rightly.⁶⁸

We need to climb the ladder of a general hermeneutics to see that the general perspective fails.

The empty space left for a general hermeneutics is not merely a problem of the present study, because the quest for value-neutrality and objectivity is deeply rooted in the Enlightenment tradition of Western academia. Not only is the space for a value-neutral hermeneutics empty, but the meta-hermeneutical principle of critical engagement runs counter to the common approach to religion found in the secular university. In fact, my investigation implies a reorientation of the academic study of religion as far as its normative aspects are concerned. If theologians or scholars of religion want to be successful in contributing to religious interpretation processes, they cannot simply present their critical reconstruction of the religious process, but they should ideally become participants in the religious realm, or at least build to a sufficient extent upon the presuppositions of the religious enterprise. The implications of this need for a reorientation are numerous. First, it means a reorientation of theological hermeneutics.⁶⁹ The normative question of theological hermeneutics can no longer be ‘How should readers interpret canonical texts?’ but rather ‘How can an academic theologian develop innovative proposals that contribute most effectively to religious interpretation processes?’ This marks a shift from the general to the contextual, and a shift from

⁶⁸ Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, 6.54, emphasis mine.

⁶⁹ By the term ‘theological hermeneutics’, I do not mean a hermeneutics which makes normative theological statements, but rather the study of hermeneutics as practiced in the academic study of theology and religious studies.

truth to pragmatics. Furthermore, it means a need for reconsideration of the quest for the universal validity of various methodologies currently ruling contemporary theology. As I will show and criticise in the next chapter (section 9.7), the idea that historical critical methodology is of universal validity for any interpreter of the biblical texts is still widespread in academic circles. It should be admitted that although it is a valid methodology for posing and answering certain historical questions, it is of limited theological significance.

Finally, with regard to academic theology in general, an orientation towards critical engagement would seem to affect recent developments in many Western universities, namely, the shift from a Christianity centered theology towards a pluralistic multi-religious study of religion.⁷⁰ This development is a natural one, given the parallel development in Western society from a primarily Christian culture to a multi-cultural society. It seems that theology can only reflect adequately on the development of a multi-cultural society if it broadens its scope to various religions rather than Christianity alone. However, the principle of critical engagement highlights a problem here, because there is a danger that precisely the multi-religious orientation of the academic study of theology makes it useless to adherents of the many religions contemporary theology wants to engage with. Several of these religions, notably traditional Christianity and Islam, have exclusivist convictions at the roots of their religious systems, and the attempt to bring these systems together in a common multi-religious study of religion may lead to the disqualification of academic theology as a trusted partner of the religious community.

Once we have made the shift towards a political hermeneutics, the question of truth returns with even greater force, because what I noted as the problem in Brown's hermeneutics of tradition is an equally urgent problem for a hermeneutics of critical engagement. Both recognise that neither the text itself nor its interpretations in the tradition can provide a sufficient criterion for the truth of one's interpretation. In a hermeneutics of critical engagement in particular, this raises the question of what the direction of criticism should be if there is no universal criterion of truth that every interpretive community should conform to. I would like to develop a multi-layered response to meet this challenge.

In the first place, paradoxically, the lack of a distinct criterion of truth is an advantage for the academic hermeneutician. The stronger the conviction of the critic in approaching the religious community, the more difficult it will be to engage adequately with the religious perspective. A distinct criterion of truth will usually belong to the core of the religious identity of the community. Therefore, the critic will be obliged to accept at least provisionally the criterion of the community in order to achieve a sufficient degree of engagement. Hence, the community will usually set the agenda for the critic to no small extent. The critic needs only to step into the religious enterprise, its criteria for truth included, there to find puzzles and problems to be resolved. This response is all the more appropriate when one

⁷⁰ A recent contribution to this debate in Dutch is Johannes A. van der Ven, 'Theologie beoefenen in een faculteit voor religiewetenschappen', *Tijdschrift voor Theologie* 42 (2002), pp. 244–267. In the English speaking world, see Russell T. McCutcheon, *Manufacturing Religion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997); Russell T. McCutcheon, *Critics Not Caretakers: Redefining the Public Study of Religion* (New York: SUNY Press, 2001).

realises that, in many cases, academic hermeneutical critics are also adherents of the religious tradition that they are critically engaged with. In such cases, the hermeneutical critic will accept the internal criteria of the religious community, and contribute to the religious tradition involved in accordance with its internal criterion of truth.

However, this is still a very general response, for it suggests that within a particular religious tradition, there is only one criterion of truth that determines what counts as true for any interpretation in that tradition. This is most likely incorrect. The four case studies presented in part II exemplify this. Three out of four were taken from the Christian tradition. These represented three different ways of interpreting the Christian Scripture: a sermon, a piece of music, and a theological book. It will be readily admitted by the majority of Christian interpreters of Scripture that the preparation of a sermon imposes different requirements on the interpreter than does the composition of a piece of music. Similarly, even those who adhere to a hermeneutics of communicative action – evangelical Christians for example – will readily admit that the truth criterion of the original meaning of the text imposes different requirements on a lay reader of the text than on an academic biblical scholar. Hence, even when the direction in which true interpretation should go is clear, the means to arrive at true interpretation, and the standards by which interpretation should be judged, will differ. One way of stimulating correct interpretation by lay readers is to supply them with an accurate and accessible translation. For the academic biblical scholar, a thorough knowledge of the original languages, combined with training in exegetical methodology, will be required.

Consequently, the direction in which a fruitful contribution to the religious interpretation process needs to go is for a major part contextually determined in such a way that no general criterion for determining it can be given. Yet, this does not mean that any talk about criteria is impossible, that all interpretation is arbitrary, or that a rational discussion about which criterion fits which purpose is impossible. It only means that a rational discussion about the direction of true interpretation in a certain context depends on the conditions imposed by the particular practice in which these criteria are embedded. A rational discussion about the appropriateness of the conditions commonly accepted in a certain practice is, of course, also possible.⁷¹ For example, in the Roman Catholic tradition, it was long believed unnecessary for lay believers to read the Bible in the vernacular languages themselves. Later, when confronted with the challenge of the Protestant Reformation, the Roman Catholics also began to translate the Bible, but still from the canonical Vulgate version rather than the Hebrew and Greek of the original—as is evident from the Douai-Rheims version used in chapter 5 of this book. Only in the twentieth century, Roman Catholics began to prepare editions of the Bible in the vernacular based on the original languages. This example shows how the

⁷¹ Here, my argument runs parallel to Alasdair MacIntyre's defence of the rationality of traditions. MacIntyre also rejects the Enlightenment ideal of a single tradition independent rationality but, at the same time, attempts to escape the postmodern 'conundrum' of what he calls the 'relativist' and 'perspectivist' challenge. He maintains that, although standards of rationality are internal to traditions, these standards can be understood from outside those traditions and can change over time. See Alisdair MacIntyre, *Whose Virtue? Which Rationality?* (London: Duckworth, 1988), pp. 349–369.

conditions for true interpretation of the Bible by lay believers changed over time, but also that this process was governed by rational considerations. It was also influenced to a considerable extent by considerations in a related but nevertheless different context, namely the academic study of the Bible, where a historical approach to the biblical texts was increasingly followed.

In the previous chapter, I rejected the allegedly obvious connection between contextuality and antirealism. I argued that hermeneutical antirealism and realism are both incoherent positions that postulate some sort of reality independent of our perception or interpretation that we can or cannot have real knowledge about. As I argued, this is a very artificial, and indeed incoherent, way to discuss the question of whether we can know anything about the world or morality. It tries to answer the question in a general and 'absolute' way whereas, in our daily life, we usually ask it in a particular and relative way. If we bring this discussion to bear on the topic of the possibility of a normative hermeneutics, we can say again that, at a general level, we cannot give a rule as to how our interpretation should correspond with the real meaning of the text. Probably, that 'real meaning' will vary depending on what particular question we pose to the text, and on the state in which we receive it. Yet, similarly, if we move from the general to the particular question of how, in a particular context, we could stimulate a fruitful encounter with the text, much can be said. Hence, a hermeneutics of critical engagement should stick to a meta-hermeneutical principle of critical engagement at the general level, while pursuing its own principle and developing concrete hermeneutical ideals according to it at the contextual level. In the next chapter, I will offer an extensive discussion of the context of historical biblical scholarship. I will show that, within the realm of historical scholarship, much can be said about criteria for a proper methodology, both in relation to improving the role of historical criticism in (traditional) religious communities, and in relation to problems internal to the work of a historian.

Before doing so, I would like to close this chapter by addressing two outstanding issues with regard to a critical engagement with religious interpretation processes. In the foregoing, I ended up with an academy in an impasse—its neutral and critical stance towards religion seemingly precluding a successful critical engagement with it. Given my argument in favour of the contextuality of hermeneutical ideals, it may seem that the secular university is now wholly handed over to the ideological concerns of religious communities. It may seem that the university cannot contribute to the religious process from a perspective of its own. Furthermore, Brown's argument left us with a church devoid of any criterion of truth due to the fallibility of Scripture and tradition. This raises the question whether it is possible to develop a criterion of truth within a religious community that builds upon the authoritative status of Scripture, while at the same time recognising the creativity involved in applying Scripture to the demands of communities of readers.

A way out of the impasse of the academy is to regard the outsider's perspective of the academy as a virtue rather than a vice. Rather than viewing an outsider's perspective as a universal value-neutral perspective, one could position it in the context of the interests of a pluralist society. In an increasing number of cases, the criteria for truth and their application in religious communities are

experienced by outsiders as in conflict with fundamental human rights. This is particularly true where religious doctrines and practices lead to the exclusion of certain people from offices and rituals. Here, the outsider's perspective of the academic might prove helpful in bringing oppressive elements of religious interpretations of Scripture to the fore and developing creative proposals to correct these abuses of religious power. Seen in this way, the academy can retain its secular, relatively non-committal stance towards the many worldviews making up our contemporary society, maintaining a rational basis for its public role and funding. Furthermore, notwithstanding its public funding, it can take a profoundly ideology-critical stance towards oppressive structures in the public sphere. This is in fact how universities already function in many societies, notably societies in developing countries, where universities are places of refuge for free thinkers, and where the collapse of a totalitarian regime is frequently initiated by movements linked to the university.

Naturally, because of the profoundly ideology-critical function given with this contextualisation of the secular university, it will always have to balance on the cutting edge of criticism and engagement. Criticism needs to be accompanied by engagement, for otherwise the net effect of the critical perspective of the academic will be zero. For example, a feminist plea for the ordination of women in the Protestant tradition would have much more force if it built upon Scripture as the criterion of faith and morals rather than that it declared Paul's remarks about women simply mistaken. In the Netherlands, the most powerful, if not the only, argument for the exclusion of women from church offices in conservative Protestant congregations is that supporters of women in the ministry have a 'relational concept of truth' or a 'postmodern hermeneutics'.⁷² Likewise, an argument against the exclusion of homosexuals will benefit more from insisting on the differences between homosexuality in contemporary and ancient culture than from an explicit reference to human rights.⁷³ The former fits into the identity constituting role of the authority of Scripture, whereas the latter does not.

A solution to the lack of criteria for truth in the church could be found in a rather different area, although it shares its ideology-critical character with the proposal of a contextualised university. As far as I can see, if an appeal to the Bible or the tradition as an infallible criterion of truth is bound to fail, a solution in line with Brown's argument should be sought in the direction of the person to which any Christian believer is ultimately responsible: God. In traditional theology, the authority of the Bible in the church is of course always rooted in the authority of God. Phrased in terms of ontology and epistemology, God is the proper ontological truth criterion of the church, but since God is transcendent, God's truth must be mediated by an immanent criterion, the epistemological criterion of Scripture. In traditional theology, Scripture functions as both the ontological and the epistemological truth criterion for the church, because Scripture mediates God's truth *infallibly*. Thus, the idea of infallibility sustains the ideological contradiction of Scripture. To break free of the ideological contradiction, God as the

⁷² See A.N. Hendriks et al., *Vrouwen, ambt en dienst: gesprek tussen verschillende visies op basis van de Schrift* (Heerenveen: Barnabas, 1998).

⁷³ See, for example, the articles by David Fredrickson and Rober Jewett in David L. Balch, editor, *Homosexuality, Science, and the "Plain Sense" of Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000).

ontological truth criterion must be distinguished from Scripture as an epistemological criterion. This means that there is no infallible truth criterion available to the religious community. The ultimate truth is transcendent and always fallibly mediated. Naturally, the religious community will find God's truth primarily mediated by Scripture and the tradition of faith. But God's truth may also be found in nature, culture and philosophy.

In practice, separating the ontological and the epistemological truth criterion means that, for every identity related decision in a community of faith, an appeal to Scripture or tradition alone is insufficient. Imagine any such a situation in traditional religious communities. Any claim to the effect that, 'this is what Scripture says on the topic' will miss its regular force. On the other hand – and now I take the perspective of the believer – a fundamental recognition of God's own presence in the interpretation process would reflect a profound act of faith on the part of the community. If God's will alone were the criterion for the life of the community, the interpretation of Scripture and tradition would become fundamentally embedded in a spiritual process of understanding God's will and acts for today. Not only the past would count – which makes for a closed process of decision making – but the present would also have a real openness towards the creative role of God—or, formulated in specifically Christian terms: the role of the Holy Spirit.

At the same time, the lack of any ultimate truth criterion for the community of faith may serve to bring an end to all kinds of power play with biblical texts or tradition on the part of community leaders. What counts is whether one can make a case for one's view in the eye of the Transcendent. None can claim to be on the right side beforehand. The arguments would need to be weighed, and responsibilities accepted. The decision to disagree with the teachings of Scripture, or to let one teaching prevail over others, would need to be justified by argument, but so would the claim that a certain teaching of Scripture contains a universally valid truth. Scripture and tradition would retain their role in the process, for they would provide the natural environment in which the church must make its decisions. Yet, they would no longer be used – or should I say *abused*? – as knock-down criteria for establishing what counts as truth in the present.

Of course, I am well aware that, given the current state of Christianity and Islam in particular, this is not an entirely reasonable proposal. Is it reasonable to ask of Protestant churches that they explicitly state in their confessions or church orders that neither Scripture nor tradition can provide a definitive claim to authority on matters of faith and morals? Not really, given that it implies rather a radical subversion of the principle of *Scriptura Sola*. Thus God as the only criterion for theology cannot serve as a universal criterion to be proclaimed by any religious community. Rather, it could function as a guiding principle for a hermeneutical critic when engaging critically with a particular religious interpretation process. It provides a way out of the problem of the irrationality of the authority of Scripture which, at least theoretically, could leave the religious identity of the community intact.

Historical Critical Engagement

9.1 INTRODUCTION

In the previous chapter, I developed what I call a ‘hermeneutics of critical engagement’. I already noted that this is a kind of meta-hermeneutical ideal because it prescribes formal characteristics of hermeneutical ideals rather than offering material rules for the religious interpretation of canonical texts. In this chapter, I explore the consequences of the meta-hermeneutical proposal developed in the previous chapter by applying it to a concrete hermeneutical ideal: the ideal of investigating the meaning of texts in general, and the meaning of the Bible in particular, in the light of their origins in history: historical criticism, for short.

The central question I will address is what critical engagement implies for the way in which historical scholarship may contribute to the religious interpretation of Scripture. The way in which I relate historical critical scholarship to the principle of critical engagement is twofold. First, I ask how historical criticism could be engaged in a critical way with religious interpretation processes. It will be asked how criticism fares when confronted with engagement and the other way around. Second, I relate historical criticism to critical engagement by viewing it as a contextually determined reading practice on its own, with which I engage critically in order to criticise its internal methodological structure.

There are two reasons for choosing this particular hermeneutical ideal. First, historical criticism has been among the most influential critiques of Christian faith since the Enlightenment period. It has radically challenged the traditional authority of the Bible by criticising its unity, infallibility and historical reliability. It has positioned the Bible firmly among other texts from the past, equally distant and hardly suiting the interests of religious readers of the present. Second, historical criticism is worth discussing because, in recent times, it has come under vigorous criticism from various angles, from both secular and theological perspectives. Moreover, as I will attempt to show, historical criticism itself is nowadays changing rapidly, partly in response to these criticisms. Therefore, it may be interesting to see what the implications of a hermeneutics of critical engagement for the debate about historical criticism in recent decades are.

In section 9.2, I start my discussion by elucidating the term ‘historical critical scholarship’, and showing how different sorts of methodological questions, which have different implications for a critical engagement with religious interpretations

of Scripture, go under this umbrella term. In section 9.3, I proceed with a review of various recent criticisms of historical criticism. I argue that each of them makes an important point, yet fails to ultimately rebut all forms of historical interpretation of texts. I conclude my review of recent criticisms by isolating three problems in historical criticism that especially deserve further methodological reflection, both in their own right and in relation to an effective encounter with a religious perspective on Scripture. These three problems are the topic of the remainder of the chapter. I place these problems in the context of an analogy introduced in section 9.4: the analogy between the historian and the prosecuting attorney. In sections 9.5, 9.6, and 9.7, I investigate methodological atheism, the criterion of dissimilarity in historical Jesus research, and the connection between historical criticism and evidentialist epistemology respectively.

9.2 WHAT IS HISTORICAL CRITICISM?

Much has been written about what people call ‘historical criticism’. Mainstream introductions to biblical studies usually explain what is meant by it in terms of an exposition of the main instruments of the historical scholar of the Bible, namely ‘source criticism’, ‘form criticism’, and ‘redaction criticism’. In recent studies, there is an increasing awareness that a plurality of questions go under the common name of ‘historical criticism’.¹ The different questions historical criticism asks are also increasingly problematise as incompatible – or at least not always compatible – with one another. In this section, I will argue that it is important to be aware of the different presuppositions and implications of various historical methodologies because of their different relations to a principle of critical engagement. As I will argue, some historical methodologies can make a critical contribution to the interpretation of Scripture in a religious community *without* calling the fundamental presuppositions of the community into question. Others are critical in the sense that their use implies the suspension or even rejection of basic commitments of religious communities. I will make my point by reviewing the position of a New Testament and an Old Testament scholar respectively on the purpose of ‘historical criticism’: Henk Jan de Jonge and John Barton.

Henk Jan de Jonge is a New Testament scholar from the Netherlands, well known because of his critical views regarding the historical reliability of the biblical texts. In the article on which my presentation of his view is based, De Jonge explains the function of historical critical exegesis to the readership of a low profile Dutch journal in the field of practical theology.² Despite, or perhaps due to the loose way in which it is written, the article provides a good illustration of a widely held view of historical criticism. De Jonge places his description of historical criticism squarely within the context of the reader’s interest in the *meaning* of the text:

¹ John Barton, *Reading the Old Testament: Method in Biblical Study*, 2nd edition (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996), pp. 1–2; Walter Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament: Testimony, Dispute, Advocacy* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997), p. 103; Eep Talstra, *Oude en nieuwe lezers: Een inleiding in de methoden van uitleg van het Oude Testament*, Ontwerpen 2 (Kampen: Kok, 2002).

² H.J. de Jonge, ‘De historisch-kritische exegeese’, *Praktische Theologie* 25 (1998), pp. 446–456.

What is the goal of historical critical exegesis? It tries to answer the question of what the author wanted to say to his first addressees with this book or passage. The question is a historical one: what matters is what the author wanted to accomplish with his readership or audience at that time. The result is descriptive, not normative.³

Subsequently, De Jonge describes various elements of historical exegesis, and it turns out that, in his view, there are widely divergent methodologies that may serve to elucidate what the author of the text wanted to say to his or her original audience. It naturally encompasses an enquiry into the composition of the text, its author and traces of the use of earlier sources in the text but, according to De Jonge, the task of “tracing pre-literary theological traditions that played their role in the written literature” also belongs to historical critical exegesis. And what to think of the following?

Biblical exegesis will also consider as its task reconstructing the history of Israel, early Judaism and early Christianity, from Jesus up to the second century. This is because the main sources for this history are the domain of biblical exegesis. Accordingly, the exegete is responsible for the reconstruction of this history from these sources. To this history belongs also the sociology of early Christianity.⁴

De Jonge’s view of historical critical exegesis is an adequate description of the common practice in historical scholarship. True as it is, it masks the differences between the various methodological instruments used in historical criticism. It places all historical exegetical questions in the context of the question as to what the author of the text wanted to communicate to his first audience. However, for various reasons, this can hardly be maintained. *First*, to begin with a minor issue, De Jonge formulates the purpose of historical criticism in terms of authorial intention, whereas in practice historical criticism is often more interested in what I have called the original meaning of the text in chapter 2. In many cases, the efforts of the historical scholar are not so much aimed at a reconstruction of what the author wanted to say, but rather at a reconstruction of parts of the historical, cultural and social context in which the author wrote the text. Granted, the historical, cultural and social context contributes to the meaning of the text, and our knowledge of that context helps us to understand the intention of the author. Nevertheless, authorial intention is not what historical criticism is primarily concerned with. For example, historical critical studies on the Gospel of John are not so much interested in knowing what the author of the book intended with the Gospel. Rather, the historical scholar wants to know from which community the text originated, in what time it was written, how its christology compares to that in the other Gospels and why this is so and, whether the traditions delivered are historically reliable. Many of the things mentioned here contribute to our understanding of the author’s intention but, in this case, the intention itself is not what the historian is primarily concerned with.

Second, even if we were to broaden the purpose of historical criticism from a quest for the authorial intention to a quest for the original meaning of the text, such a portrayal would remain unconvincing. Historically speaking, historical

³ De Jonge, p. 446, my translation.

⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 447–448, my translation.

criticism has not only been interested in the original *meaning* of the biblical texts, but also and probably even more, in their *truth*. By truth, I mean here *correspondence between the events reported in the text and the events of history*. The various historical methodologies reflect a widespread concern with questions of authenticity. For example, historical reconstructions of the history of Israel or Israelite religion or reconstructions of the life of the historical Jesus ask primarily which elements from the biblical sources can be accepted as historically reliable and which not. These parts of contemporary biblical studies do not inquire primarily into the meaning of the text. Taking the historical meaning of the text for granted, it is asked whether the texts are authentic witnesses to historical events.

The distance between a quest for the original meaning and a quest for truth is all the more evident when we take into account that, often, historians operate quite explicitly on the basis of methodological presuppositions apparently in conflict with the frame of reference of the author or the first readers of the text. De Jonge himself is well aware of this, because he explicitly notes that the reconstruction of the history of Israel, early Judaism and Christianity should start from methodological atheism.⁵ Whatever we think of methodological atheism, an issue to which I will return in section 9.5, it is clear that, when a certain author reports a miracle, methodological atheism will necessarily go beyond the author's intention, with the provision that it is at least possible that the author in question sincerely believed in miracles.

All in all, it is important to see that in the background of De Jonge's view of historical criticism, methodologies with conflicting presuppositions are at work. Some aim at an interpretation in terms of the original meaning, while others aim at a critical examination in terms of the truth of the text.

That De Jonge blurs the distinction between the interpretive and critical aim of historical scholarship is also clear from the fact that many traditional believers have no difficulties with the results of historical scholarship as long as it does not question the truth of what is said in the text—whether it concerns historical, doctrinal, or moral truth. Anything that elucidates the truth – on the assumption that what is said is true – is mostly welcomed by traditional believers. However, traditional believers object vigorously as soon as the exegete offers an interpretation of the text, or a reconstruction of the history behind it, that affects the truth of the text. If the whole of historical critical scholarship was aimed simply at elucidating the meaning of the biblical texts while assuming their truth, no traditional believer would have any problem with so-called 'Bible criticism'.

At this point, John Barton's view of historical criticism becomes relevant to our discussion because he tries to show that there is indeed a link between the interpretive and critical aspects of historical criticism. In order to explain this, he builds upon a notion from literary studies, namely that of 'literary competence'. Literary competence means that when we read a text, our assumptions about the nature of the text determine to a great extent how we read it; we read a text *as* something.⁶ Barton applies this insight to the development of historical criticism – primarily source criticism – by arguing that early Pentateuchal criticism arose out of puzzlement about the nature of the first five books of the Old Testament:

⁵ De Jonge, p. 455.

⁶ Barton, pp. 8–19.

[W]e may say that once scholars raised the question what *kind* or *genre* of writing the Pentateuch was, they were forced to see that it was, from a literary point of view, 'ambiguous'. A work which consists of narrative mixed with poems and hymns and laws, which contains two or even three versions of the same story set down with no apparent awareness that they are the same, and which changes style so drastically from paragraph to paragraph and from verse to verse, cannot in a certain sense be read at all: you simply don't know where you are with it. [. . .] It was therefore suggested that the Pentateuch was not one work at all, but an amalgamation of several smaller works.⁷

In rooting the critical questions of the biblical scholar in the notion of literary competence, Barton shows that interpretive and critical questions are interlinked. Biblical scholars did not come to discern different sources, traditions and theologies out of the blue. The argument from literary competence could be supported by reference to the notable differences in style, and in the historical and theological statements between various books in the Bible, for instance between the four gospels. A reader of these different materials naturally raises questions about the historical relationships of these books.

Nevertheless, Barton's description of historical methodology in fact explains only the starting point or certain aspects of historical methodology. Like De Jonge, Barton places the purpose of historical criticism wholly in the context of *meaning* whereas, as I have argued above, historical criticism has always shown a particular interest in issues of *truth* as well. In terms of Barton's own example of the distinction of sources in the Pentateuch: the interpretation of the Pentateuch as an amalgam of different sources is indeed directed by the question of meaning. However, many other aspects of historical research of the Pentateuch, like the idea that the major part of the texts date from the post-exilic period, the question whether the exodus really occurred, or the question whether the rise of Deuteronomistic monotheism was a late development. are not so much questions concerning the meaning of the text, but rather of its authenticity and the reconstruction of the history behind it.

Naturally, our views about the history behind the text influence what we think it means, yet the question of the authenticity of the tradition handed down by the text is only loosely connected with its meaning. For example, if anyone told me to investigate the meaning of the stories of the patriarchs by asking whether they really lived or not, I would reply that this is irrelevant to the meaning of the texts. Of course, one can imagine more difficult cases, for instance the resurrection narratives in the New Testament. But even in the case of the resurrection, one may ask: Does our belief or our failure to believe that Jesus rose bodily from the dead make a difference to the *meaning* of the narratives? Of course, whether Jesus rose bodily from the dead *matters* in terms of truth, but the question is whether it matters in terms of the meaning of the texts. Since hardly anybody will sincerely believe that the authors of the Gospels deliberately and consciously faked the resurrection of Jesus – bodily or not, depending upon how one reads the Gospels – the texts witness to the risen Christ as a historical reality. Even the question of exactly what kind of event the Gospel writers had in mind is still a question of *meaning*, and not of truth.

⁷ Barton, p. 22.

What we end up with, then, is not only an amalgam of sources in the Bible, but also an amalgam of methodologies with which to approach it. It seems very difficult to determine when exactly a methodology is directed to an elucidation of the meaning of the text, and when exactly it takes a critical stance towards the text. Some areas of biblical research are of course more sensitive to critical questions than others. In general, linguistic and so-called 'Umwelt' research is least sensitive, whereas reconstructions of the history and religion of Israel and historical Jesus research are most sensitive. Despite the difficulty in telling when exactly critical questions arise, it is important to be aware of the distinction between interpretive and critical questions because the difference between them indicates a different interest on the part of the reader. The need to make a proper distinction between the interpretive and critical aims of historical criticism is also relevant to the principle of critical engagement as formulated in the previous chapter. In the remainder of the present chapter, I will address primarily the critical aspects of historical criticism, and analyse their internal problems and their ability to initiate an encounter between the religious reading community and the original setting of the text. However, before doing so, it should be noted that the interpretive methodologies of historical criticism have in fact always, and with much success and little resistance, had a critical influence on the religious interpretation process. The quest for the original meaning of the text is to a major extent perfectly compatible with, or even required by, the authoritative status of the text and, hence, methodologies that help to elucidate the historical setting of the text are normally welcomed by religious communities as long as they do not infringe on the text's authority. A peculiar consequence follows from this: The main instrument of critically engaged historical scholarship receives least attention in this chapter; almost the entire chapter is devoted to the critical aspects that are problematic. The only alleviation for this problem consists in noting explicitly that this is due to the problematic nature of the critical aspects, and not because they have a more important role than the interpretive aspects in influencing religious interpretation processes.

9.3 HISTORY MATTERS

Historical criticism has had to contend with criticism ever since it took the form of a rational critique of the infallibility of the Bible. Reimarus and Spinoza, for example, were severely criticised for their secular perspectives on the biblical texts, and this religious response to historical criticism has continued up to the twentieth century.⁸ From the 1960s onwards, this criticism of historical methodology was intensified. It was now propounded by philosophers and literary theorists rather than conservative theologians. Among the philosophers, Gadamer's major work *Truth and Method* became a landmark in the criticism of historicism. Therefore, I shall start my review of various critiques of historical criticism with a discussion of Gadamer.

⁸ E.g. Leo XIII, 'Encyclical Letter of Pope Leo XIII Providentissimus Deus: On the Study of Holy Scripture' (1893), (URL: <ftp://monica.cin.org/pub/docs/L1393110.ZIP>); 'Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy' (URL: <http://www.reformed.org/documents/icbi.html>).

In the two previous chapters, I have already introduced and accepted Gadamer's critique of historicism in its strict sense, that is, as a philosophy of history rather than a methodology. There, I argued that historical methodology, with its characteristic focus on the original meaning of the text, can never function as an exclusive point of entry to the one and only correct meaning of the text. A historical perspective on the text is always one perspective among others. Rather than liberating the readers from their interests and prejudices, it reflects their interests.⁹ This is not to say that the intentional interpretation of a text is unimportant, for it can function as an instrument to underline the distance between the text and the reader—in Gadamer's terms: the 'in-between'. In this way, historical methodology can sometimes provide important criticisms of the received interpretations of texts.

However, in arguing along these lines, I interpreted Gadamer's hermeneutics rather loosely. Upon closer examination, Gadamer's critique of historical hermeneutics cuts deeper than the mere denial of its claim to universality. Gadamer criticises historical hermeneutics because of its *methodological nature*, and the attempt to *separate understanding from application*. I will discuss both criticisms in order to see what they mean and whether they are successful.

At various points in *Truth and Method*, Gadamer criticises the methodological nature of historical criticism.¹⁰ One such reference to the methodological nature comes immediately after the passage where Gadamer remarks that "*The true locus of hermeneutics is this in-between*".¹¹ Gadamer adds:

Given the intermediate position in which hermeneutics operates, it follows that its work is not to develop a procedure of understanding, but to clarify the conditions in which understanding takes place. But these conditions do not amount to a "procedure" or method which the interpreter must of himself bring to bear on the text; rather, they must be given. The prejudices and fore-meanings that occupy the interpreter's consciousness are not at his free disposal. He cannot separate in advance the productive prejudices that enable understanding from the prejudices that hinder it and lead to misunderstandings.¹²

Gadamer seems to suggest that historical methodology can have no place in the hermeneutical process. The background to this suggestion is Gadamer's critique of the Enlightenment assumption that a certain methodology could lead us to the text itself by separating us from our prejudices. Yet even if we grant this criticism, as I have done in the previous chapter, Gadamer's rejection of a procedure as part of the hermeneutical process still stands. The underlying rationale of the critique is that Gadamer develops the notion of the in-between on the basis of the presumption of perfection.¹³ The idea is that every understanding of a text starts from the presumption of a common world of text and reader. People reading a text assume that the terms used in it correspond to their understanding of them. Only later on, when they are confronted with alien elements in the texts, do readers begin to perceive the strangeness of the text or, in Gadamer's

⁹ Gadamer, p. 276.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 277, 293, 295.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 295.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ *Ibid.*, pp. 293–294.

metaphor, do they become aware of their own horizon over against the horizon of the text.

This is not only the case at the linguistic level, but also at the level of the text's subject matter:

So when we read a text we always assume its completeness, and only when this assumption proves mistaken—i.e., the text is not intelligible—do we begin to suspect the text and try to discover how it can be remedied. [...] Not only does the reader assume an immanent unity of meaning, but his understanding is likewise guided by the constant transcendent expectations of meaning that proceed from the relation to the truth of what is being said. [...] [W]e see that understanding means, primarily, to understand the content of what is said, and only secondarily to isolate and understand another's meaning as such.¹⁴

Given this view of the hermeneutical process, we can now see more clearly that Gadamer views this process as *autonomous*. Hermeneutics cannot influence that process by providing some procedure that prescribes how the exchange between the text and the reader should take place. It can only observe and describe the conditions under which the process takes place.

Although I grasp the import of Gadamer's critique, I do not fully accept his argument. Indeed, hermeneutics cannot prescribe a universal method for becoming contemporary with the text of the author, but it is hard to see why hermeneutics could not offer critical methodologies that stimulate the reader's awareness of the strangeness of the text.¹⁵ Historical methodologies may fulfil this function, and a methodological enquiry into the composition of the text, or an ideology-critical analysis may function similarly.

Gadamer's main critique of historical hermeneutics, though related to the previous one, still needs to be considered. In his view, historical hermeneutics tried to *separate understanding from application*. Gadamer proposes to rework the whole of hermeneutical theory from the perspective of a legal and theological hermeneutics:

[W]e have the task of *redefining the hermeneutics of the human sciences in terms of legal and theological hermeneutics*. For this we must remember the insight gained from our investigation into romantic hermeneutics, namely that both it and its culmination in psychological interpretation—i.e., deciphering and explaining the individuality of the other—treat the problem of understanding in a way that is far too one-sided. [...] To distinguish between a normative function and a cognitive one is to separate what clearly belongs together. The meaning of a law that emerges in its normative application is fundamentally no different from the meaning reached in understanding a text. It is quite mistaken to base the possibility of understanding a text on the postulate of a "con-geniality" that supposedly unites the creator and the interpreter of a work.¹⁶

To some extent, this argument for the unity of understanding and application in the hermeneutical process follows from Gadamer's positive evaluation of prejudice. Understanding a text cannot rid the interpreter of the pursuit of the subject

¹⁴ Gadamer, p. 294.

¹⁵ There are other places in Gadamer that suggest that he accepts historical methodology as long as it functions in the context of an encounter with the subject matter (Sache) of the text, for example in his discussion of Bultmann in the Supplement to *Truth and Method*: Ibid., pp. 521–532.

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 310.

matter of the text. On the contrary, the pre-understanding of the text is the driving force of the interpretation process. But Gadamer's critique of historicism is even more radical. This becomes especially clear when Gadamer discusses historical methodology in connection with the interpretation of Christian Scripture:

Even as the scholarly interpretation of the theologian, it must never forget that Scripture is the divine proclamation of salvation. Understanding it, therefore, cannot simply be a scientific or scholarly exploration of its meaning. Bultmann once wrote, "The interpretation of the biblical writings is subject to exactly the same conditions as any other literature." But the meaning of this statement is ambiguous, for the question is whether all literature is not subject to conditions of understanding other than those formal general ones that have to be fulfilled in regard to every text.¹⁷

Here, Gadamer suggests that an interpretation of Scripture that does not aim at an existential response to the subject matter ('Sache') of the text, is no interpretation at all. In suggesting this, he seems to argue that some pre-understandings are better than others. Yet it is to be seen whether the argument makes sense. Gadamer's point is that no interpretive ideal is neutral, since it is interconnected with the drives of the interpreter. That should be granted but, as such, this is a rather trivial point. It says merely *that* the scholarly exploration of the meaning of Scripture is as prejudiced as the existential religious interpretation. Yet it is hard to see why a prejudice tending towards an existential encounter with the text is to be preferred over a prejudice towards a purely scientific or scholarly exploration of the meaning of the text. Gadamer fails to show why, provided that its conditioned character has been accepted, historical methodology could not survive as a hermeneutical ideal that starts from the desire – which is precisely the historical pre-understanding – to interpret the text in the light of its original meaning and context, rather than the desire to have an existential encounter with the subject matter of the text.¹⁸ The issue at stake here is whether an interpreter is allowed to have a 'disinterested' aim with a historical reading of the text, or whether one may only approach the text from an existential point of view. Every interpretation *has* a link to the existential position of the reader in the sense that there is no reading that is not somehow connected with the context of the reader. Yet these connections with the context of the reader can vary greatly, and one of them is that the historian wants to know what the text meant in its original context rather than what it could mean for oneself.

There is a common problem behind both these criticisms of historical scholarship. On the one hand, Gadamer argues for a dual descriptive aspect of the hermeneutical process: first, the claim that any understanding of a text starts from a presumed common world of text and reader, which leads only gradually to an awareness of the distance between the two; second, the idea that there is no understanding that does not also apply its findings in some way or another to the situation of the interpreter. On the other hand, Gadamer uses these elements of a descriptive hermeneutics to make a normative point. He wants to show that interpreters should not interfere with the exchange between text and reader

¹⁷ Gadamer, p. 331.

¹⁸ Brümmer, *Speaking of a Personal God*, pp. 9–17.

with certain 'neutral' exegetical procedures, and he wants to show that readers should not approach texts with purely academic interests. However, building the normative claims upon the descriptive brings the argumentative fallacy that lurks behind this procedure to light. If the descriptive claims are true, that is, if readers always do what Gadamer claims they do, then the normative claims make no sense, because it is superfluous to prescribe something that readers do all the time anyhow. Hence, either the descriptive claims are true, and readers do what Gadamer claims they do – even in cases he wants to exclude – in which case his normative claims lose their force; or Gadamer's descriptive claims are false, and the normative claims reflect his own interests rather than what happens all the time. Perhaps both are true, as seems to be the case. Gadamer exaggerates the descriptive claims so that they seem to imply the normative ones.

In the foregoing, I showed that while Gadamer successfully rebutted historicism as the idea that there is a general methodology that makes the reader contemporary with the author, he did not succeed in doing away with historical criticism as an instrument that brings the distance between text and reader into focus. Having seen this, we can now proceed to another criticism of historical scholarship, coming from the perspective of the so-called literary methods in biblical studies. During the twentieth century, various new methodologies were developed in the field of literary theory, all of which led, in various ways, to an emphasis on the compositional form of the text rather than its relation to its origin. Major movements were structuralism in France, formalism in Russia and New Criticism in the Anglo-Saxon world.¹⁹ This stress on the structure, composition, or aesthetic qualities of the text was largely a reaction against the romantic interest in the psychological state of the author behind the text. It was also a more general critique of the earlier preoccupation with the world of the text rather than the text itself. The new interest in the formal characteristics of the text as a key to its meaning enjoyed much attention and adherence in biblical studies.²⁰

A first well known aspect of the literary critique of historical scholarship is the so-called 'intentional fallacy'. The argument is that the meaning of a text is not determined by the intention of its author, but by its composition.²¹ Composition is meant here as an umbrella term for many different qualities of the text, because the various movements that are nowadays seen as 'literary approaches' in fact offer quite divergent interpretive methodologies. Some structuralist interpreters, for example, studied binary oppositions operative in the text that contribute to its meaning. Other approaches, for example New Criticism, studied the use of figures and word plays. Connected with the critique of the intentional fallacy is the idea that texts are 'self-contained artifacts', that is, that the meaning of a text is entirely determined by itself, and not dependent on its historical origin, or the

¹⁹ For a general introduction to these methodologies, see Eagleton, *Literary Theory: An Introduction*.

²⁰ An extensive and critical discussion of the influence of literary theory on biblical studies is provided by Barton, *Reading the Old Testament*. See also Mark G. Brett, *Biblical Criticism in Crisis? The Impact of the Canonical Approach on Old Testament Studies* (Cambridge, 1991).

²¹ I hesitate to use the term 'structure' in this connection. It is quite common to call the literary methods in biblical studies 'structuralist' but this 'structuralism' in biblical studies has only a very loose connection with structuralism in literary studies, from which it was derived. Cf. Barton, pp. 121–122.

psychological state of the author.

The rise of so-called synchronous approaches to literary criticism, both in general and in connection with the Bible, has made an important contribution to the interpretation of texts. Although the results of literary methodologies are as contested as their historical counterparts, in general the focus upon the compositional aspects of a text rather than its roots in history provided a welcome addition to the hermeneutical scene. In certain respects, it offers a helpful correction of a one-sided concentration on the historical background of the text – whether in the sense of culture or in the sense of reported events – found in many historical studies. However, this focus should be seen as *additional* for literary methods cannot take the place of traditional historical approaches.²² Various things should be noted in this regard.

First of all, it is not true that historical methodologies by definition have no eye for the composition of the texts. Many questions about the history of the text originate in problems with the text's present composition.²³ This is an important point, because it highlights a sometimes overly simplistic tendency among critics of historical scholarship. As I argued in the previous section, what we call 'historical scholarship' is a complex web of various methodologies which includes many different perspectives on the text. Insofar as historical scholarship is concerned with the historical environment of the text, such as the cultural, economic and social conditions under which the text was written, such questions do not necessarily involve psychological interests. Nor do they necessarily include the question whether the events narrated in the text actually occurred in history or not. All in all, historical scholars ask many different questions about the texts, some of which are and some of which are not in conflict with the questions posed in literary methodologies.

Of course, this is not to deny the distinctive contribution made by literary methods concerning the composition of the text. Rather than deriving the composition of the text from its content, literary methods build on formal indicators of the text's composition. Moreover, literary methods investigate the literary character of the work by asking how the text interacts with its projected audience. What is important, though, is that there is no watertight distinction between literary methods that focus on the present meaning of the text on the one hand, and historical methods that focus on the historical background on the other. Therefore, I have deliberately avoided the misleading distinction between 'synchronous' and 'diachronic' methods in my description of literary methods. Historical scholarship asks both sorts of questions, whereas, it must be admitted, literary methods usually focus mainly on the synchronous aspects of a text.

Second, just as it is misleading to suppose that historical scholarship is not interested in the present form of the text, it is equally misleading to suppose that literary methods necessarily conceive of their investigations into the compositional form of the text as completely separate from the text's origin in history. Some questions posed in historical scholarship – questions about the historicity of reported events, for example – are clearly difficult to answer by literary methods.

²² See the excellent discussion of these matters in Sternberg, pp. 1–57.

²³ Barton, pp. 20–29.

Yet the analysis of the compositional structure of a biblical text, or an enquiry into the text's intended effects upon its readers, easily leads to the inference that these aspects of the text were deliberately put into it by the author as a historical agent. In this way, information about the author may add to the literary critic's ability to analyse the formal characteristics of the text.

I would like to illustrate this point by giving a concrete example from biblical scholarship which shows how an enquiry into the literary composition of a text, divested of its ahistorical presuppositions, and historical investigation can mutually reinforce one another. At the Theological University of Kampen, Johannes de Moor developed a particular method for analysing the structure of Old Testament poetics. This methodology is intended to provide a more solid basis for verse and canticle divisions in Old Testament poetry. In the study of Old Testament poetry, divisions are often based on the content of the text, rather than on formal characteristics. De Moor and other members of the so-called 'Kampen school' opt for a more firmly grounded solution. As a rule of thumb, they start from the masoretic cantillation marks, like Sof Pasuq, Atnach and Segol, which are then combined with the parallelistic nature of Hebrew poetry to establish verse boundaries. Subsequently, they pursue word parallelisms between the outer and inner parts of various verses to determine the boundaries of larger text sections like strophes or canticles.²⁴ So far, the method already includes a combination of historical and structural perspectives, since the masoretic cantillation marks are used because of their roots in ancient tradition. However, in recent publications by the Kampen group, their method of structural analysis is extended further by an investigation into text delimitations in archaeological material, combining the results of the structural analysis with the 'hard-coded' text divisions found on cuneiforms and papyri.²⁵ Whatever we may think of the suitability of this method for determining the boundaries in Hebrew poetry, 'delimitation criticism', as they now call it, is a clear example of how an investigation into the composition of biblical texts can coexist peacefully with, and even be reinforced by historical investigation.

Third, there is even a 'knock-down' argument that refutes a watertight division between literary and historical methodologies. The idea of the text as a self-contained artifact that derives its meaning entirely from itself, is mistaken. It can be conclusively shown that all of these methodologies are in fact parasitic upon historical investigation. This is because no methodology can ignore the fact that, before we can start a structural analysis of the text, we have already translated it in terms of what we know of its context of origin. Only then can we investigate how the structure of the linguistic code contributes to its meaning. Translation is, by nature, a historical enterprise.

In so far as literary methods add to our understanding of the original meaning of the text as rooted in the intention of the author, they are part of a historical methodology that confronts readers with the distance between their interpreta-

²⁴ Major applications of the method can be found in Johan Renkema, *Lamentations*, Historical commentary on the Old Testament (Leuven: Peeters, 1998), and Marjo C.A. Korpel and Johannes C. de Moor, *The Structure of Classical Hebrew Poetry: Isaiah 40–55*, Oudtestamentische studiën 41 (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1998).

²⁵ Marjo C.A. Korpel and Josef M. Oesch, editors, *Delimitation Criticism: A New Tool in Biblical Scholarship*, Pericope 1 (Assen: Van Gorcum, 2000).

tion in the present and the roots of the text in the past. Literary methodologies belong largely to the interpretive rather than the critical aspects of historical criticism. Therefore, they are not very problematic in relation to a principle of critical engagement. Thus, they can easily be incorporated into religious interpretation processes, although I will not pay much attention to them here.

The narrative turn in biblical studies has its parallels in other theological disciplines, primarily in systematic theology. Historical criticism has always been to some extent in contact with systematic theology. Gerhard von Rad's central idea of 'salvation history', for example, had a major impact on systematic theology, and Rudolf Bultmann was both a leading New Testament scholar and a systematic theologian. Yet there was, and still is, also a widespread uneasiness with the results of historical scholarship in systematic theology. In what follows, I will discuss various critiques of historical criticism from the perspective of systematic theology.

A common criticism among systematic theologians is that historical scholarship isolates historical questions from the broader narrative embeddedness of the biblical texts so that the reader is directed to the question of the historicity of the biblical texts rather than to other aspects of the biblical message. The implication of this one-sided attention to the historicity of the biblical texts is that, when a text is shown to be late, secondary or ahistorical, its message loses its force. Formulated differently: historical scholarship views the text as a document from the past without taking account of the fact that the function of the Bible in the church entails an interest in its meaning for the present.²⁶ In response to these problems, various systematic theologians opt for a more encompassing approach to the biblical text, which views its claims to historicity in relation to its broader message.

This 'theological interpretation of Scripture' results in various proposals for the theological use of Scripture. Sometimes, it takes the form of a focus on the final form of the biblical texts rather than their earlier stages of origin. This attention to the final form is accompanied by renewed interest in so-called 'pre-critical' exegesis.²⁷ Historical scholarship ignored much of the Christian exegetical tradition because of its lack of interest in the original meaning of the text. This ignorance

²⁶ Notice that, from the perspective of a typically Protestant hermeneutics, this critique of historical scholarship poses a false dilemma. What much of the Protestant tradition claimed was that precisely the historical sense of the text is the message for the present. Hence, the Enlightenment tradition, albeit in a particular way and based upon its own assumptions about what exactly constitutes the historical sense of the text, built upon an essentially Protestant hermeneutics.

²⁷ Many publications with some connection to this strand in recent theology have appeared recently. The work of Brevard H. Childs is one of the primary examples of a focus on the 'final form' of the text: E.g. Brevard S. Childs, *An Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture* (Philadelphia, 1980); Brevard S. Childs, *Biblical Theology of the Old and New Testaments: Theological Reflection on the Christian Bible* (London, 1996). The 'school of Hans Frei' with authors like Garrett Green and George Lindbeck also plays its role in this movement, see the classic: Hans W. Frei, *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative* (New Haven/London, 1974), and e.g. Garrett Green, *Theology, Hermeneutics, and Imagination: The Crisis of Interpretation at the End of Modernity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000); in the same tradition, but from the field of Old Testament biblical theology: Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament*. Various biblical and systematic theologians have recently contributed to this field: Watson; see also the important collection of essays with contributions from many different authors: Stephen E. Fowl, editor, *The Theological Interpretation of Scripture* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997). A recent contribution from philosophy of religion is Wessel Stoker and Henk Vroom, *Verhulde waarheid: Over*

of the exegetical tradition is now criticised as misguided, and new attention is paid to exegetical classics from the Early Church, the Middle Ages and the Reformation period.²⁸ The renewed interest in pre-critical exegesis also leads to a reconsideration of allegorical interpretation.²⁹

The first thing to note in assessing this criticism of historical scholarship is that, as the proponents of this criticism generally acknowledge, it affects mainly those aspects of historical scholarship that are commonly known as 'higher criticism' or, more specifically for NT scholarship, the 'quest for the historical Jesus'. As such, it is not a critique of historical scholarship as a whole, but only of those methodologies that aim at a critical reconstruction of historical events behind the texts.

Even on this understanding, however, the statement of the problem seems more convincing than the various solutions offered to resolve it. Indeed, the critical elements of historical scholarship have sometimes made it difficult for systematic theologians as well as ordinary believers to enter into an unreserved theological engagement with the biblical texts. However, I doubt whether we can solve this problem by merely shifting our attention to a narrative framework where we 'enter the biblical world' (Frei), or following a 'canonical approach' (Childs). The problem here is that theological interpretation as practised nowadays enters the theological world of the text *after* having been dissatisfied with the historical reconstruction of its original meaning. This is the main difference between pre-critical exegesis as practised before the Enlightenment and its theological reappropriation as more recently proposed. Rather than focusing on the final form of the text because of dissatisfaction with the historical sense of the text, pre-critical exegesis employed all its creative interpretations of the text on the presupposition of its infallibility. That the notion of infallibility was only operative in a loose sense, and perhaps even implicitly compromised, must be recognised, yet it was always the formal guarantee for the authority of the text. It is that sacred world of the text that was lost due to the suspicious questions of historical methodology. A simple, unqualified, generic return to pre-critical exegesis will not, or will only partly compensate for this loss, because it ignores the problem rather than resolving it.

The return to pre-critical exegesis will of course become easier to the degree that the critical claims of historical scholarship prove unjustified, for instance because of problems intrinsic to historical methodology, or in so far as the presuppositions of historical scholarship make its outcomes irrelevant from a theological

het begrijpen van religieuze teksten (Zoetermeer: Meinema, 2000). A new 'schoolmaker' may be Robert W. Jenson. His major publication is Robert W. Jenson, *Systematic Theology*, 2 vols. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997–1999); for his view of Scripture, see Robert W. Jenson, 'The Religious Power of Scripture', *The Scottish Journal of Theology* 52 (1999), pp. 89–105, followed by, for example Herwi Rikhof, 'Invention of Tradition? Trinity as Test', in: Jan Willem van Henten and Anton Houtepen, editors, *Religious Identity and the Invention of Tradition*, Papers read at a Noster Conference in Soesterberg, January 4–6, 1999, STAR 3 (Assen: Van Gorcum, 2001), pp. 97–110.

²⁸ See the paradigmatic David C. Steinmetz, 'The Superiority of Pre-Critical Exegesis', in: Fowl, *Theological Interpretation*, pp. 26–38.

²⁹ See the classic Henri de Lubac S.J., 'Spiritual Understanding', in: Fowl, *Theological Interpretation*, pp. 3–25.

perspective. However, one needs to *argue* that this is the case, rather than simply departing from the historical frame of reference. These are the two issues to which I will be attending in the remainder of this chapter. I will now introduce them via two objections that have been raised by, among others, Alvin Plantinga against historical biblical criticism—‘HBC’, as he calls it. My personal judgement is that even a radically reconstructed historical methodology, though it may moderate the critical implications of the rise of historical consciousness, cannot do away with them completely.

In theological circles, a common objection to historical criticism is the lack of agreement between scholars, and the very tentative character of the results. Again, this objection primarily attacks primarily the critical aspects, that is, historical criticism in so far as it aims at reconstructing the history of the redaction of a biblical text, or tries to assess the historicity of certain events, acts, or sayings. Dealing with the reasons ordinary believers might have for ignoring the results of HBC, Plantinga remarks:

Well, one reason might be that skeptical scripture scholars display vast disagreement among themselves. There is also the fact that quite a number of arguments they propose seem at best wholly inconclusive.³⁰

The complaint about the lack of agreement and the inconclusiveness of the results is widespread, and is not only raised by conservative Christians. It seems justified, because examples abound. We should notice, however, that this criticism is, again, not aimed at historical scholarship as a whole, but only against those parts that offer critical reconstructions of events or histories of the development of religion, or that distinguish between various layers in the transmission of the text through time. In these areas, there is considerable disagreement and a large number of sometimes rather peculiar hypotheses are proposed. For example, a number of scholars in the area of historical Jesus research now basically agree on the picture of Jesus as an apocalyptic prophet.³¹ Yet, at the same time, the scholars behind the popular ‘Jesus Seminar’ argue vigorously against it and in favour of a – in my view at least – highly speculative picture of Jesus as a cynical philosopher.³²

Nevertheless, I am still unsatisfied with this critique of historical criticism as it stands. The main reason is that it provides hardly any substantial hint as to how the situation can be improved. Plantinga simply declares that a vast number of scholars who, to the best of their knowledge, develop plausible reconstructions of the past, are mistaken because they disagree too much and their arguments are based on inconclusive reasoning. First of all, if this is to be the measure for the relevance of academic scholarship, the whole of theology and philosophy may well fall under the same judgement. Outsiders – especially scientists – will generally view theological and philosophical arguments as very loose kinds

³⁰ Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief*, p. 402.

³¹ For example Dale C. Allison, *Jesus of Nazareth: Millenarian Prophet* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998), and Bart D. Ehrman, *Jesus: Apocalyptic Prophet of the New Millennium* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999).

³² Notably John Dominic Crossan, *Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1994).

of reasoning, even when viewed apart from the level of disagreement in many areas. Furthermore, concerning the issue of disagreement, individual scholars can hardly change anything about that, apart from uncritically adhering to some popular consensus—which is not generally regarded as a proper academic attitude. Concerning loose forms of reasoning, it should be admitted that historical research is rarely a matter of deductive reasoning.³³ Rather, it is a matter of carefully comparing various sources and building up a cumulative argument on the evidence available in these sources. Historical scholars nowadays admit readily that their work is only concerned with probability and plausibility, and not with knock-down reasoning.³⁴

In order to substantiate a critique of historical scholarship as prone to excessive disagreements and loose reasoning, the critic must go into detail and isolate concrete aspects that render it particularly open to such problems, so that historical scholarship can profit from these criticisms and improve itself. In line with this requirement, I will argue in sections 9.5 and 9.6 that circularity plays a major part in some forms of historical criticism, which makes it possible to defend any hypothesis without being able to test it. A HBC that removes these circular forms of reasoning will improve itself and become more compelling to religious believers.

Plantinga's main worry about HBC is not its inconclusiveness or its many disagreements. For him, these aspects are only good reasons to ignore the critical claims of HBC altogether. Briefly stated, Plantinga's main worry is the rationalistic, and as it turns out later, atheistic nature of HBC:

HBC is fundamentally an Enlightenment project; it is an effort to look at and understand biblical books from a standpoint that relies on reason alone; that is, it is an effort to determine from the standpoint of reason alone what the scriptural teachings are and whether they are true. Thus HBC eschews the authority and guidance of tradition, magisterium, creed, or any kind of ecclesial or "external" epistemic authority.³⁵

Plantinga is well aware of the fact that the standpoint of reason could lead to different methodologies. He distinguishes between three kinds of HBC: Troeltschian, Duhemian and Spinozistic HBC. the central tenet of Troeltschian HBC is this:

Troeltsch's principles have platitudinous interpretations; but these are not, in fact, the interpretations given to them in the community of HBC. Within that community, those principles are understood in such a way as to preclude *direct divine action* in the world. [...] So taken, these principles imply that God has

³³ Consider a remark by the Dutch New Testament scholar Piet van der Horst in a personal conversation: "In our discipline, we can never prove anything."

³⁴ John P. Meier, *A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus*, volume I: *The Roots of the Problem and the Person*, Anchor Bible Reference Library (New York, London, etc.: Doubleday, 1991), pp. 167–168; Sanders, pp. xiii–xiv; Stanley E. Porter, *The Criteria for Authenticity in Historical-Jesus Research: Previous Discussion and New Proposals*, Journal for the Study of the New Testament Supplement Series 191 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000), p. 126; Bart D. Ehrman, *The New Testament: A Historical Introduction to the Early Christian Writings*, 2nd edition (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 207. Sometimes, one cannot avoid the impression that historical critical scholars all too readily admit all to readily to the tentative nature of their judgements in order to evade more penetrating attacks on their methodology.

³⁵ Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief*, p. 386.

not, in fact, specially inspired any human authors in such a way that what they write is really divine speech addressed to us; nor has he raised Jesus from the dead, turned water into wine, or performed miracles of any other sorts.³⁶

By ‘Duhemian scripture scholarship’, Plantinga understands the following: “Suppose we say that *Duhemian* scripture scholarship is scripture scholarship that doesn’t involve any theological, religious, or metaphysical assumptions that aren’t accepted by everyone in the relevant community.”³⁷ Spinozistic HBC denies Troeltschian principles as alien to reason and rejects the Duhemian requirement of acceptance by everyone, but Spinozistic HBC plays no further role in Plantinga’s argument.³⁸

If we take Troeltschian and Duhemian HBC together, we get a HBC that interprets acceptability to everyone in such a way that it must abstain from any religious claim and, hence excludes all references to divine actions in historical processes. This interpretation of HBC guides Plantinga’s further evaluation of it: he suggests that, because Christian believers do not accept these presuppositions, they are not affected by the critical outcome of historical scholarship either. Plantinga’s evaluation of HBC rests upon a simple binary distinction between traditional biblical scholarship on the one hand, and HBC on the other. Traditional scholarship starts from the assumption that the Bible is divinely inspired and sufficiently clear to be interpreted by anyone:

Scripture is *perspicuous*: the main line of its teaching—creation, sin, incarnation, atonement, resurrection, eternal life—can be understood and grasped and properly accepted by anyone of normal intelligence and ordinary training.³⁹

Of course this is not to deny that there are interpretive problems in the Christian community,⁴⁰ but these problems do not constitute possible ‘defeaters’ for the truth of the biblical message—naturally so, given that Scripture is assumed to be divinely inspired. On the other hand, HBC starts from an allegedly neutral standpoint and, by virtue of its overly sceptical and misguided presuppositions, finds all kinds of errors and problems in the texts. This need not bother believers because it is due to misguided presuppositions.⁴¹

In section 9.5, I will argue that Plantinga is correct on the problematic nature of certain presuppositions of historical scholarship, because they are overly rationalistic and reductionist: Rather than opening up investigation into the reality of history, they bar the investigator from a possible part of that world, namely, the ‘supernatural’ part. I will argue that there is good reason to reject these presuppositions. Furthermore, Plantinga is correct that the allegedly neutral standpoint of HBC makes it unacceptable to religious believers because they see their most important presuppositions denied by the historical scholar. It remains to be seen whether this must necessarily bother HBC, but the problem is real.

³⁶ Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief*, p. 393.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 397.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 398–399.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 374.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 381–385.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 412–420.

The problem with Plantinga's discussion of historical biblical criticism, however, is that he seems to deny that historical questions are problems *internal* to the perspective of faith. He suggests that doubts arise only when one starts from false presuppositions, and not within a faithful encounter with the text. I am not so sure of that.⁴² First, this suggests mistakenly that questions of historicity and meaning are completely disconnected, when in fact they are not. If the faithful reader of the Bible is going to ask what the divinely inspired text means, she needs at least to balance the diverse materials in the Bible against one another, and decide, for example, how the teachings of Jesus are to be related to those of Paul or, to mention a classic example, how Moses could recount his own death and burial, as is implied by the view that he is the author of the Pentateuch. Even if we accept that many of HBC's 'defeaters' of traditional Christianity are due to problematic presuppositions, questions internal to the perspective of faith remain. These questions may well become the breeding ground of critical questions. Various authors on the history of critical exegesis have suggested that in the early days of historical critical scholarship, the critical questioning of the traditional interpretation of Scripture arose gradually out of a faithful commitment to the texts rather than an atheistic rejection of them.⁴³

Let me summarise my discussion of various criticisms of historical scholarship. I have argued that many of the attacks against it hit the mark in some way or another. At the same time, none of the criticisms succeeds in ultimately rebutting a historical perspective on the biblical texts. In the remainder of this chapter, I will pursue what I see as the most important criticisms, namely the allegedly atheistic nature of historical criticism and the inconclusive nature of its arguments. I will concentrate on examples from New Testament exegesis, partly because of restrictions of time and space, and partly because I have the impression that, in the area of New Testament research, the suspicion of the historian is more acutely felt than in the field of Old Testament scholarship.⁴⁴ This is no surprise given the central role which certain historical events narrated in the New Testament play in the community of Christian believers.

⁴² Cf. Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief*, p. 379. The problem is evident from Plantinga's quotations from the Belgic Confession, which takes a twofold approach to the divine inspiration of Scripture. First, the believer accepts Scripture as divinely inspired due to the testimony of the Holy Spirit, but second, they also "prove themselves to be from God". With the reference to the self-testifying nature of Scripture, the Protestant tradition created room for a rational enquiry into the truth of Scripture.

⁴³ See, for example Richard A. Muller, *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics*, volume 2: *Holy Scripture: the Cognitive Foundation of Theology* (Grand Rapids, 1993), pp. 465–467; Brown, *Tradition and Imagination*, pp. 14–18.

⁴⁴ It seems that in Old Testament scholarship, a shift of attention has occurred from the traditional historical questions – Did it happen? or What is the oldest version of the text? – to sociological and literary methodologies. See, for example, the widely influential Rainer Albertz, *A History of Israelite Religion in the Old Testament Period*, 2 vols. (London: SCM Press, 1994), and Karel van der Toorn, *Family Religion in Babylonia, Syria and Israel: Continuity and Change in the Forms of Religious Life*, Studies in the history and culture of the ancient Near East 7 (Leiden: Brill, 1996). For a discussion between the latter two, see Van Henten and Houtepen, pp. 113–143. A recent example that traces the Old Testament historical books back to the work of Herodotus is Jan-Wim Wesselijs, *The Origin of the History of Israel: Herodotus's Histories as Blueprint for the First Books of the Bible*, Journal for the study of the Old Testament. Supplement series 345 (London: Sheffield Academic Press, 2002). This work hardly builds upon the traditional source critical methods.

9.4 THE HISTORIAN AS A PROSECUTING ATTORNEY

As we saw in the previous section, one of the major criticisms of historical critical scholarship is aimed against its ‘methodological atheism’, as it is sometimes called—rather loosely, as I will show in the next section. This is the idea that a historical perspective cannot take religious convictions about the actions of a supernatural being into account, because that would infringe on its value-neutral character. In his recent introduction to the New Testament, Bart Ehrman describes it as follows:

Historians deal with past events that are matters of the public record. The public record consists of human actions and world events—things that anyone can see or experience. Historians try to reconstruct what probably happened in the past on the basis of data that can be examined and evaluated by every interested observer of every persuasion. Access to these data does not depend on presuppositions or beliefs about God. This means that historians, as historians, have no privileged access to what happens in the supernatural realm; they have access only to what happens in this, our natural world. The historian’s conclusions should, in theory, be accessible and acceptable to everyone, whether the person is a Hindu, a Buddhist, a Muslim, a Jew, a Christian, an atheist, a pagan, or anything else.⁴⁵

Similar claims can be found in other works on historical criticism.⁴⁶ When dealing with Plantinga, we already had a glimpse of the unavoidably paradoxical character of this aim of historical scholarship which consists in the fact that, precisely by looking for a viewpoint on which everyone can agree, it makes itself ultimately unacceptable to religious adherents of the tradition under investigation and, hence, falls short of the ideal of general acceptance.

One might ask whether this matters. The answer is: yes and no. It matters insofar as historical research is intended to influence, if not ‘improve’ the religious view of Scripture. The normative aims of historical scholarship are hindered by the fact that religious believers tend to ignore its results because of disagreement with the neutral standpoint of the historical scholar. Yet, in another sense, we might argue that it does not matter much that the religious believer cannot accept the presuppositions of the historical scholar. An analogy proposed by Ehrman might help in this regard:

In many respects, the historian is like a prosecuting attorney. He or she is trying to make a case and is expected to bear the burden of proof. As in a court of law, certain kinds of evidence are acknowledged as admissible, and witnesses must be carefully scrutinized.⁴⁷

This analogy between the historian and the attorney is helpful because it explains three things.⁴⁸ First, it explains what is meant by the value-neutral standpoint of historical scholarship. What is meant is a critical standpoint that suspends the insider’s view of religious claims and investigates them in the light

⁴⁵ Ehrman, *Historical Introduction*, p. 13.

⁴⁶ E.g. Meier, *Marginal Jew I*, pp. 1–2.

⁴⁷ Ehrman, *Historical Introduction*, p. 202.

⁴⁸ Ehrman may be unaware of the significance of his analogy, which he uses only in passing, before introducing his criteria for historicity.

of independent evidence. Second, it is now clear why the historical standpoint cannot include the truth claim of the religious believer, because that would mean that the prosecuting attorney has to accept everything the suspect says in his own defence. Finally, the analogy shows what is meant by the claim to 'general acceptability' on the part of historical critical scholars. It does not mean 'acceptability to everyone', but rather 'acceptability on the basis of independent evidence'. The prosecutor will make a case for the guilt of a suspect on the basis of independent evidence, available and acceptable to everyone, including the suspect. But of course, if the suspect is convinced of his innocence, for instance because from privately accessible experience he knows that he did not commit the crime, or because a psychological disorder prevents him from realising that he did it, the independent evidence will not be accepted by the suspect. In fact, the historian's perspective on faith, rather than being everyman's friend, is much more properly viewed as suspicious about the reliability of religious claims.

One might ask, of course, whether historical criticism as formulated in this way is a viable enterprise. Some, especially religious believers, might think that it is not. In my view, it should be admitted that, insofar as it corresponds to the function of the prosecuting attorney, historical critical scholarship is of limited interest for the *interpretation* of religious texts. It will involve interpretations of these texts, but only in order to assess their historical reliability, whereas a religious interpretation of religious texts will typically take into account a variety of other perspectives on the texts which the prosecuting attorney will probably not be interested in. Having said that, I find it hard to see what could count against a critical attitude towards the Bible. We live in a critical age where we constantly question the truth of business reports or government decisions in the light of the interests of their producers. Hence it follows naturally that we tend to do the same with religious texts. However, as much for the attorney as for the historical scholar, certain restrictions apply. As noted already, one such restriction is the objectivity demanded of the attorney. Likewise, the historical scholar should use methodological presuppositions that are open to the truth, rather than deciding the case beforehand.

9.5 A CRITIQUE OF METHODOLOGICAL ATHEISM

This is where the presupposition of methodological atheism becomes problematic. The historian inquires whether the events reported in religious Scriptures really occurred or not. In fact, as we will see below, the picture is somewhat more complicated, but this is what, traditionally, historians viewed as the core of their task. Religious texts typically contain references to divine intervention, frequently described as 'miracles'. An event can be called a miracle (1) if what happens runs counter to the ordinary course of events in the natural world,⁴⁹ yet we often also talk of a miracle (1a) if we experience that the contingencies of life

⁴⁹ The reference to 'natural laws' is now widely rejected due to the replacement of Newtonian by Einsteinian physics. E.g. John P. Meier, *A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus*, volume II: *Mentor, Message, and Miracles*, Anchor Bible Reference Library (New York, London, etc.: Doubleday, 1994), pp. 512, 518–520; Ehrman, *Historical Introduction*, p. 208, and numerous others.

coincide in a rather fortunate manner so that we begin to wonder how this could happen by accident. In both cases, for an event to be properly called a miracle, it is necessary (2) that one attributes the particular course of events to divine government—however one understands such a claim.

Since the Enlightenment period, biblical scholarship has wrestled especially with the first kind of ‘miracle’ (1 + 2). A neutral standpoint on the part of the historian has traditionally been construed as excluding the possibility that the report of a miracle could be true. In what I call ‘methodological atheism’ in the strict sense, the historical disciplines operate on the assumption that both events counter to the ordinary course of the universe and instances of divine intervention are impossible.⁵⁰ Hence, any reference to a miracle is interpreted by mainstream historical criticism as an indication of something other than a miracle. That is to say, the impossibility of supernatural action in the world is presupposed in historical methodology so that any reference to a miracle is automatically taken as inauthentic.

The influence of such methodological atheism on the claims of historical scholarship is enormous, and goes far beyond scepticism about the miracles of Elijah or Jesus. The dating of the Gospel of Mark, for example, depends largely on the fact that, in it, Jesus talks about the destruction of the temple, which we know to have occurred in 70 CE. Hence, the argument goes, Mark cannot have been written before 70 CE because in that case, the author would not have known about this event. The dating of Daniel, to mention an Old Testament example, depends largely on the fact that it gives an account of Palestine during the Maccabean period, but then in the form of a prophecy. Because of its presuppositions, historical scholarship takes the visions in Daniel as reflections on past events rather than as prophecies about the future—a so-called *vaticinium ex eventu*: a prophecy after the event has occurred. Similarly, the division of the book of Isaiah into Proto- and Deutero-Isaiahs is influenced to a considerable extent by – among other reasons – the fact that Deutero-Isaiah presupposes the exile, whereas (the major part of) Proto-Isaiah does not. Again, in historical Jesus research, methodological atheism led to an almost complete neglect of the ‘miraculous’ aspects of the Jesus story, despite the fact that, as recent scholarship shows, the miracle traditions are among the best attested in the New Testament.⁵¹

The roots of methodological atheism lie in a combination of Newtonian physics and Troeltschian historicism. In Newtonian physics, miracles were seen as ‘violations of the laws of nature’.⁵² These were commonly held to be impossible because of the lawlike appearance of the ordinary course of the natural world. Newtonian physics was combined with Ernst Troeltsch’s principle of analogy, the idea that the historian must – in Troeltsch’s own context, we probably have to say: cannot but – start from a fundamental analogy between the world of her own

⁵⁰ Of course, the latter (2) is not really relevant in traditional methodological atheism, because it simply follows from the first (1). However, it will turn out that, in what I call ‘methodological agnosticism’, the reference to divine intervention is seen as beyond the scope of the historian’s perspective.

⁵¹ Meier, *Marginal Jew II*, pp. 617–631.

⁵² For a critique of this view, see e.g. R.F. Holland, ‘The Miraculous’, *American Philosophical Quarterly* 2:1 (1965), pp. 43–51.

time and the world of the past.⁵³ Hence, if miracles as violations of the laws of nature do not occur in one's own time, they could not have occurred in the past either.

The Newtonian view of miracles has now become obsolete because the idea of a law governed universe has been abandoned in contemporary physics. Among Western intellectuals, though, scepticism about miracles has remained. Many biblical scholars still maintain that the neutral academic position of the historian implies the conviction that miracles cannot occur. However, there is also an important strand in contemporary research that seems to point in another direction. In historical critical research, the problem of miracles is increasingly divided into a *philosophical* and a *historical* problem. The philosophical problem concerning miracles is, briefly stated, the question whether miracles can possibly occur; this is a question of ontology, of what can happen in the world. The historical problem is that of how a historian can know whether a certain miracle in fact occurred or not; this is an epistemological problem, the problem of how we can know whether a certain state of affairs in fact obtained. I will now explore this recent view, and show that the concentration of historical critical scholarship on the *historical* problem of miracles and the way this problem is handled in recent scholarship, have significant implications for methodological atheism.

Meier provides a clear articulation of the distinction between a historical and a philosophical approach to miracles:

[T]he historian can ascertain whether an extraordinary event has taken place in a religious setting, whether someone has claimed it to be a miracle, and—if there is enough evidence—whether a human action, physical forces in the universe, misperception, illusion, or fraud can explain the event. If all these explanations are excluded, the historian may conclude that an event claimed by some people to be miraculous has no reasonable explanation or adequate cause in any human activity or physical force. To go beyond that judgement and to affirm *either* that God has directly acted to bring about this startling event *or* that God has not done so is to go beyond what any historian can affirm in his or her capacity as a historian and to enter the domain of philosophy or theology.⁵⁴

Ehrman's introduction to the New Testament is also a good example of this new approach to miracles in historical scholarship. Unlike so many historians before him, who simply followed Troeltsch's principle of analogy to argue that miracles cannot happen, Ehrman basically allows for the possibility of a miracle occurring: "For the sake of the argument, I'm willing to grant that miracles—that is, events that we cannot explain within our concepts of how 'nature' normally works—can and do happen."⁵⁵ Perhaps we should say that, in doing so, he simply applies the principle of analogy from the perspective of his own time because the possibility of events beyond our rational grasp is increasingly popular in contemporary Western culture.⁵⁶

⁵³ Ernst Troeltsch, 'Über historische und dogmatische Methode in der Theologie', in: *Gesammelte Schriften*, volume II: *Zur religiösen Lage, Religionsphilosophie und Ethik* (Tübingen, 1922), pp. 729–753; English translation in Ernst Troeltsch, *Religion in History*, trans. by J.L. Adams and W.F. Bense (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991).

⁵⁴ Meier, *Marginal Jew II*, pp. 514–515.

⁵⁵ Ehrman, *Historical Introduction*, p. 208.

⁵⁶ Meier, *Marginal Jew II*, pp. 520–521.

In Meier, we find the same rejection of an a priori judgement that miracles cannot happen:

To judge a priori, before an examination of a particular case, that no matter what the evidence may be, a particular action of Jesus could not possibly have been a miracle is a philosophical judgement, not a historical one. And the agnostic has no more right to impose his or her philosophical worldview [...] than does a believing Catholic or Protestant.⁵⁷

Given that the historian abstains from dealing with the question of whether miracles can happen, questions remain about what exactly the historian can know about a miracle. First, there is a problem with the definition of a miracle. Above, I defined a miracle as (1) an event counter to the ordinary course of nature and (2) related to divine intervention. Ehrman sees the reference to divine intervention as a:

major stumbling block for a historical demonstration of miracles, since the historian has no access to supernatural forces but only to the public record, that is, to events that can be observed and interpreted by any reasonable person, of any religious persuasion. If accepting the occurrence of a miracle requires belief in the supernatural realm, and historians by the very nature of their craft can speak only about events of the natural world (which are accessible to observers of every kind) how can they ever certify that an event *outside* the natural order—i.e., a miracle—occurred?⁵⁸

As we saw in the previous quotation, Meier solves this problem by restricting the scope of the historical methods to assessing the probability of an extraordinary event having taken place, and leaving the decision whether the event was caused by supernatural intervention to the philosopher and theologian.

So far, it has become clear that Ehrman and Meier have dropped methodological atheism in favour of what we might call 'methodological agnosticism'. Rather than approaching history from the axiom that miracles cannot happen because laws of nature must always have obtained in the past as they appear to do in the present, Ehrman and Meier opt for the view that the historian cannot say anything about whether God intervened or not. However, the historian can assess the absence of a natural explanation of a certain historical event.

In terms of the principle of critical engagement, Ehrman and Meier's methodological agnosticism will of course not convince the religious believer, because it is still too far removed from the believer's commitment to the claim that God can and does intervene. However, I would argue that, in practice, the methodological agnosticism in Ehrman and Meier comes closer to the believer's perspective than it might seem, and presumably even closer than Ehrman and Meier would acknowledge. I will argue, then, that, in its practical application, Ehrman and

⁵⁷ Meier, *Marginal Jew II*, pp. 517–518.

⁵⁸ Ehrman, *Historical Introduction*, pp. 208–209; Ehrman discusses Hume's argument against miracle (Cf. David Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* (1748), [URL: http://www.infidels.org/library/historical/david_hume/human_understanding.html](http://www.infidels.org/library/historical/david_hume/human_understanding.html) – visited on 2002-12-27, section X, 90) as an additional argument for the historical problem of miracles (Ehrman, *Historical Introduction*, pp. 210–212). I do not explore it here because it falls outside the scope of my argument against methodological atheism, and because I judge Hume's argument to be sufficiently refuted by others, e.g. Holland, pp. 43–51.

Meier's historical methodology is in fact independent of methodological agnosticism and hence, methodologically compatible with the believer's perspective.

In presenting his picture of the historical Jesus, Ehrman comes back to the problem of miracles, but now in a rather different manner. After having repeated the neutral standpoint of the historian as outlined in earlier chapters, Ehrman remarks:

To acknowledge that a miracle occurred requires belief in a supernatural realm to which the historian, as a historian, has no direct access (although a historian may feel that he or she has access to it as a believer). This does *not* mean, though, that the historian cannot talk about the *reports* of miracles that have been handed down from the past. These are a matter of public record, and when it comes to the historical Jesus, of course, there are numerous such reports. In particular, he is said to have performed exorcisms (i.e., cast out demons) and to have healed the sick.⁵⁹

In Meier, we find the same emphasis on the historian as an investigator of *reports* about miracles. This is already evident from the fact that, for Meier, the "single most important criterion in the investigation of Jesus' miracles is the criterion of *multiple attestation of sources and forms*."⁶⁰ It comes most prominently to the fore in Meier's discussions of individual traditions about Jesus. All Meier can do when assessing these traditions is to offer considerations concerning the relative independence – according to the criterion of multiple attestation – and reliability – mostly according to the criterion of dissimilarity, see the next section – of the textual witnesses to the tradition. The definite judgement about the historicity of the tradition remains miles away from the historian of the biblical texts because of the limitations that the sources impose.

On the basis of their criteria for authenticity, Ehrman and Meier cannot but argue that many of the miracles attributed to Jesus are multiply attested and contextually credible – two main criteria for authenticity – so that the historian, though incapable of determining conclusively whether they happened or not, has evidence for the credibility of these reports. In Meier's words:

In short, multiple sources intertwine with multiple forms to give abundant testimony that the historical Jesus performed deeds deemed by himself and others to be miracles. If the multiple attestation of sources and forms does not produce reliable results *here*, it should be dropped as a criterion of historicity. For hardly any other type of Gospel material enjoys greater multiple attestation than do Jesus' miracles.⁶¹

The historian emerges from these discussions as one who assesses sources rather than the historicity of events. This means that a historian is not so much interested in answering the question: 'Did the event reported in this text occur,

⁵⁹ Ehrman, *Historical Introduction*, p. 240.

⁶⁰ Meier, *Marginal Jew II*, p. 619. In spite of this claim (see also *ibid.*, p. 630), it seems to me that when actually assessing the evidence for the individual miracle traditions, the criteria of embarrassment and discontinuity – Meier's versions of the dissimilarity criterion (see below) – play a very dominant role in his arguments. See, for example, his discussions of the raisings of the dead (*ibid.*, pp. 784–787, 797, 800–801). The decisive arguments in favour of the historicity of the raising of the daughter of Jairus are all related to the criteria of embarrassment and discontinuity.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, p. 622, see also 630–631.

and, if so, was it the result of divine intervention?’ as he is in asking: ‘What can be said about the interdependence and authenticity of the reports about a certain event?’. This is more significant in the case of ancient material than in the case of recent reports. In the case of a recent event reported by many independent witnesses, the historian will, under pressure of an overwhelming amount of evidence, come to make a decision about the occurrence and precise nature of the event. In the case of a text as old as the Bible, the historian’s options will be much more limited. In this case, the historical scholar will have very little evidence and no direct access to eye witnesses to the event. Hence, an assessment of the occurrence and precise nature of the event will be restricted to an investigation of the interdependence and authenticity of the sources.

The question is whether, given that the historian is interested in the occurrence and precise nature of an event only in terms of an assessment of the reliability of the source, it makes any difference whether the historian adopts an agnostic rather than a believer’s perspective about the nature of a miracle. Let me, for the sake of the argument, adopt ‘methodological theism’ as a presupposition of historical scholarship. This is the belief that (1) events contrary to the ordinary course of the natural world and (2) caused by divine intervention *may happen*. In what sense would this change the task of the historian in assessing the probability of Jesus’ miracles? Or in assessing the probability of miracles at Lourdes?

It clearly makes a difference when compared to the position of the the methodological *atheist*. The methodological atheist will declare, *without investigating the reliability of the sources*, that no miracles occurred. When comparing the methodological theist and the methodological agnostic, the case becomes more difficult. I would argue that, in the case of the miracles of Jesus, the methodological agnostic and the methodological theist will find themselves on common ground. The nature of the sources will preclude any definite judgement about the historicity of either an extraordinary event or divine intervention. The task of the historian is limited to an assessment of the relative independence – given a number of reservations and presuppositions – of the sources, and a consideration of aspects of the text that add to, or throw doubt upon the reliability of the sources. That is all one can do. True history remains out of sight. Therefore, in the historical assessment of the biblical texts, the ways of the methodological agnostic and the methodological theist do not part. This is because the presuppositions of both methodological agnosticism and theism are, in practice, unrelated to the historical assessment of sources. Both sets of presuppositions *enable* an historical investigation in the sense that they do not, like the methodological atheist’s position, make it impossible, yet they do not add anything to it in terms of content.

In the case of a very well documented miraculous event, e.g. some cures at Lourdes, the theist and the agnostic will ultimately differ in their overall evaluation of the event, provided that the evidence is clearly in favour of the occurrence of a miracle—in the sense of 1 + 2.⁶² Suppose that there is an overwhelming amount of independent testimony to the effect that an event beyond natural explanation in fact occurred, and this event took place in an explicitly religious context. The cure took place after intense prayer by many believers and

⁶² See the interesting discussion in Meier, *Marginal Jew II*, pp. 515–518.

other such things. For the most part, the methodological agnostic and the theist will approach this case in the same way, namely, by assessing the credibility of the reports about the extraordinary occurrence in a specific part of the natural world—essentially a medical investigation coupled with scrutiny of the context of faith in which the miracle occurred.⁶³

The difference will appear at the end of the investigation. The agnostic, by virtue of her presuppositions, will stick to an attitude of doubt. To be sure, there is no counter-evidence in favour of a natural explanation and, hence, for the conclusion that God did not intervene, but as a historian, the agnostic cannot say anything about whether God did intervene. The methodological theist may come to the conclusion that, given that various people have independently witnessed the occurrence of an extraordinary event, and given that this event was attributed by believers to divine intervention, the event can properly be called a miracle.

It should be noted that, in the case of Lourdes, the rationality of the agnostic would eventually come under pressure. The more often occurrences of a similar kind take place, the more compelling it becomes for the agnostic to adopt the rival position. There is a common methodological realm in which adherents of both positions can confront their presuppositions with the outcome of the historical enterprise. Both essentially share the same procedure for assessing the historical evidence. The clear connection between the extraordinary event and its religious context makes a coincidence unlikely. Notice also that both share the same interest in inauthenticity. The methodological theist has no more interest than the agnostic in ignoring counterevidence. Both are in search of genuine reports of extraordinary events which believers interpret as instances of divine intervention.

In the case of Lourdes, where the historian might have sufficient evidence for an overall assessment of the occurrence and precise nature of the miracle, I think there are several reasons for preferring the methodologically theist over the methodologically agnostic position. In the first place, the methodologically theist position has an advantage in terms of the principle of critical engagement. The presupposition *that* God may intervene is more attractive and compelling to the religious community than an agnostic position on whether God may intervene or not. It might be objected that this is only a matter of politics, and that more substantial arguments need to be added.

In the second place, I think the theist position is to be preferred because the position of the agnostic suffers partly from the same problem as the methodological atheism which it criticised for deciding *a priori* on the historicity of miracles. In a similar fashion, the methodological agnostic shuts off a certain part of human experience from the perspective of the historian. The historian investigates witnesses to all kinds of events upon their independence and authenticity but, in the agnostic version, one type of witness is excluded: religious claims fall altogether outside the scope of the investigation. Although this is generally accepted, it is not beyond questioning. In assessing whether a miracle occurred, historians

⁶³ Here, my account differs considerably from Meier's, who suggests that the historian should not be interested at all in whether the event took place in a religious context. I cannot see why not, given that for the believer, the religious context of the extraordinary event is essential to a proper understanding of the event.

have no other means with which to carry out their task than they have when investigating any other historical event, namely, ordinary means for assessing the independence and authenticity of the witnesses.

One might object that, in the case of a miracle, it is impossible to find religiously independent witnesses. It needs to be shown why this is so, however, since this objection presupposes that nobody could witness the occurrence of a miracle unless that person accepts the belief system within which the claim to the miracle is made. Even if one grants such a type of religious relativism, the possibility of an independent witness remains, because believers themselves are often interested to know whether an alleged miracle really did happen or not. Furthermore, the lack of independent witnesses cannot be used as an argument for excluding divine interventions from the historical enterprise, because there is a lack of independent witnesses in many areas of historical research, for example, in political history, where the sources will frequently be biased by the political ideology of the author. At most, the lack of independent evidence in a certain case of historical research means that the historian needs to make more modest claims as to what can be known about the particular event.

The most pressing objection, however, is one that we may call the ‘which-God-argument’. If the conclusion that God intervened can be part of the historical realm, which God should it be—the Christian, Jewish, or Muslim God? The most straightforward reply to this question is, of course: the God to which the believers witnessing the occurrence of the miracle referred. Who else? This is all the more so because the historian can always only know something about the occurrence and nature of a certain event in so far as the available testimony provides information about it. The desire to know who caused the miracle, independently from what the sources declare, is as insoluble for the historian as the desire to know what happened in a regular historical event independently of any witnesses. From which source, apart from any religiously coloured testimony, could the historian possibly get the information needed to decide the ‘which-God-question’?

Yet the problem is a more profound one. As far as I can see, the ‘which-God-question’ is strongly motivated by typically Western Christian convictions surrounding miracles. In the Western world, miracles are generally viewed as highly unlikely events. If historians had to accept that they do happen, and that they are caused by a supernatural being, they would typically be seen as proofs of the existence of a God. Furthermore, in connection with a typically Western Christian post-Enlightenment frame of reference, it is generally believed that only the *one true* God could perform these miracles. Given these presuppositions, it is easy to see why historians commonly hold that the acknowledgement of a miracle would automatically place them within one particular belief system. However, the generally accepted web of beliefs about miracles in the Western world might easily be challenged. In many religious belief systems, especially outside the Western world, it is assumed that miracles can be performed by many different actors in the spiritual and natural realm, so that the occurrence of a miracle as such does not automatically lead to the conclusion that the God under consideration is the only true God of the only true belief system. Even in traditional Christianity, it was widely believed that miracles could be caused by the devil. Furthermore, the idea that the acknowledgement of a miracle proves the truth of the religion under

consideration leads to unsurmountable problems for the historian, because the acknowledgement of one miracle claimed by a particular religious community would automatically lead to an *a priori* rejection of all claims to miracles in other religions, their possible truth being excluded by the first religion.

Various things should be noticed about the ramifications of this argument. First, it should be realised that the adoption of methodological theism will not satisfy certain religious believers. The presupposition that God *can* intervene in the course of the natural world does not mean that God in fact did so in all cases where the Bible reports a miracle. Methodological theism leaves room for a critical investigation of the historical reliability of the biblical texts, much as it leaves room for a critical investigation of miracle reports at Lourdes. Therefore, methodological theism is still quite different from what we might call 'methodological infallibilism', that is, the idea that because God infallibly dictated every word in the Bible, every event reported in the Bible must be historically authentic. This is the position that some conservative Christian believers would like historians to adopt. It would, however, make their task completely redundant.

Furthermore, it is important to notice that, given the nature of historical research, methodological theism – like agnosticism – does not imply that a miraculous explanation could be given to any past event. It does not imply the belief *that* God intervened in the ordinary course of the universe at a certain time and place. It implies only that, methodologically, historians should allow for the *possibility* that God intervenes. My argument is precisely that *whether* we conclude that God intervenes should not rely on the metaphysical assumptions we make, but on our investigation of the sources. However, to adopt methodological atheism means that our methodological presuppositions prevent us from taking sources that point to divine intervention seriously. Therefore, our presuppositions need to allow for the possibility of divine intervention, and the investigation of the sources must determine whether we believe that God actually intervened or not.

Let me give a somewhat odd example to make this point clear. I am going to propose 'methodological automobilism', which means the methodological acceptance of the possibility that, at any point in time, an automobile may appear in history. As we all know, cars only appeared from the late nineteenth century onwards. The question to consider here whether, when writing a book on events in the sixteenth century, it does my historical enterprise any harm if I adopt methodological automobilism. Will it not be going to produce a picture where all kinds of cars appear in the sixteenth century? The answer is clearly negative. What methodological automobilism means is that, were I encounter a source that refers to what we now understand to be an automobile, I will not automatically declare the source unreliable or interpret its meaning in a metaphorical way, but I would take its testimony seriously and start balancing it out against the other evidence I have from the same period. It is, of course, extremely unlikely that I will encounter such sources from before the late nineteenth century. Were I to adopt 'methodological a-automobilism', however, my presuppositions would not allow me to accept that anything like an automobile ever appeared in history, even after the nineteenth century.

Finally, what does the foregoing imply for the methods and results of histor-

ical criticism? First, it means that any argument based on methodological atheism in the strict sense calls for reconsideration, at least if one accepts the critique of the *a priori* exclusion of the possibility of a miracle. Second, and more importantly, it requires a considerable modesty in making claims on the part of the historian of the biblical texts. The practical likelihood of a conclusive assessment of the biblical sources is very low, given that we have very little independent evidence. The testimonies to miracles available in the Bible are heavily coloured by theological concerns. This throws much doubt on the reliability of these sources, but it is impossible to formulate clear-cut criteria for separating the wheat from the chaff. In the next section, I will turn to one of the main criterion, if not the only one, that may be used to establish authenticity, and investigate whether it can live up to its task.

9.6 THE CRITERION OF DISSIMILARITY

In the previous section, I played the role of an advocate, defending the case of the suspected religion against the accusations of the prosecuting attorney. I have presented a case, not so much for the innocence of the suspect, but rather against the prosecutor's method. I argued that the prosecutor used a line of reasoning in which the guilt of the suspect was already implicitly assumed, so that a possible declaration of innocence was ruled out from the start. The prosecutor broke the rule of 'innocent until proven guilty'. In philosophical terms, I was arguing against a *petitio principii*, a form of circular reasoning. In this section, I will follow a similar procedure, but this time I will address the use of criteria for determining authenticity in historical-Jesus research. I will argue that the main criterion for authenticity in historical-Jesus research, namely the so-called 'criterion of (double) dissimilarity', either amounts to a *petitio principii*, or is of no use to the prosecuting attorney at all. The latter is to say that it cannot function as a criterion for determining the reliability of the sources. It can only function as a means of reinforcing the innocence of the suspect. Along the lines of my argument in the previous section, I will make my point by reviewing recent discussions on this criterion among New Testament scholars.

The criterion of (double) dissimilarity has a long tradition in New Testament scholarship. It has taken various forms and goes under different names.⁶⁴ The central idea is that a tradition about Jesus – whether it concerns acts or sayings – is likely to be authentic or historical *if (and, in some versions, only if) it differs from the tradition of early Christianity (the post-Resurrection community) and, in the 'double' version of the criterion, if it differs from the Judaism of Jesus's time.* Various qualifications can appear in this description of the criterion. These have to do with the different forms of the criterion took in the history of research.

⁶⁴ A history of the use of the criterion can be found in: Gerd Theissen and Dagmar Winter, *The Quest for the Plausible Jesus: The Question of Criteria* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002), pp. 27–171; Gerd Theissen and Dagmar Winter, *Die Kriterienfrage in der Jesusforschung: Vom Differenzkriterium zum Plausibilitätskriterium*, *Novum Testamentum et Orbis Antiquus* 34 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1997), pp. 28–174. Concerning different names, it should be noted that Meier speaks of the 'criterion of discontinuity', and employs a 'criterion of embarrassment' which relies on notions of dissimilarity: Meier, *Marginal Jew I*, pp. 168–174.

The first clear-cut formulation of the criterion is attributed to Rudolf Bultmann, who argued that we can be sure about the authenticity of the parables in so far as they differ from Jewish morality and later Christian ideas.⁶⁵ Yet its roots go much further back into the history of historical critical scholarship. As Theissen points out, the tendency to attribute authenticity to those aspects of the New Testament that *differ* from the later Christian tradition lies at the heart of the so-called ‘first quest’ for the historical Jesus during the nineteenth century.⁶⁶ Although the dissimilarity test was not really demarcated as a criterion, the quest for the historical Jesus in the nineteenth century was rooted in the rise of an independent academic theology, which distanced itself from the authority of the church and its doctrine. Here, the criterion of dissimilarity functioned primarily in its simple form, as difference from later Christianity,⁶⁷ whereas, in Bultmann, it already appears in its double form, as difference from both early Christianity and first century Judaism.

The double form of the criterion played a crucial role in what has been called the ‘second quest’ for the historical Jesus, initiated by a “clarion call to re-open investigation of the historical Jesus” in Ernst Käsemann’s lecture “Das Problem des Historischen Jesus”, delivered in 1953. For Käsemann, a tradition about Jesus can be seen as authentic if and only if it cannot be “derived from Judaism or be ascribed to primitive Christianity.”⁶⁸ Thus, the criterion becomes the exclusive point of entry to our knowledge about the historical Jesus. Naturally, this historical Jesus is as different as possible from Judaism and Christianity. This is so much the case that Vroom speaks ironically of an “empty set” of authentic traditions, were we so drastically to detach Jesus from his natural environment and the developments that he initiated.⁶⁹ The criterion is not only double, it is also largely *negative*, which means that it functions to determine, not only which traditions are authentic, but also which traditions are not—the ‘only if’ in the definition.

Although there is considerable controversy over the question whether it makes sense to talk of a ‘third’ quest in historical Jesus research, the nineties of the twentieth century are frequently seen as a new period in the quest for the Jesus of history. Whether or not this really is a new ‘quest’, the fact remains that publications from this period onwards showed an increased interest in the methodological problems associated with historical Jesus research. This resulted in various proposals for refining the methodological toolbox of the historian of Jesus, not least with regard to the criterion of dissimilarity.

One of the distinguishing features of the so-called ‘third quest’s’ lives of Jesus is the much more positive relationship that is recognised between Jesus and his Jewish background. Scholars representing the third quest prefer to speak of Jesus the Jew, so that it is not surprising to find that the criterion of double

⁶⁵ Porter, p. 71; see also Theissen and Winter, *Quest for the Plausible Jesus*, pp. 103–111; Theissen and Winter, *Kriterienfrage*, pp. 107–116.

⁶⁶ For a discussion of the distinction between three quests, see Porter, pp. 31–59.

⁶⁷ Theissen and Winter, *Quest for the Plausible Jesus*, pp. 1–3, 76–85; Theissen and Winter, *Kriterienfrage*, pp. 1–3, 79–87.

⁶⁸ Porter, p. 72.

⁶⁹ Stoker and Vroom, p. 22.

dissimilarity is now reduced to a criterion of single dissimilarity. Authenticity of a Jesus tradition increases to the extent that it differs from the alleged beliefs and practices of early Christianity.⁷⁰

Various criticisms have been advanced against the criterion of dissimilarity. A major objection is the practical problem that the criterion requires knowledge that we simply do not possess, namely, an extensive knowledge of Judaism at the time of Jesus, and of early Christianity after him.⁷¹ A more instructive problem noted by scholars is that the Jesus we reconstruct on the basis of this criterion is, by virtue of the nature of the criterion, detached from his cultural environment and the developments to which his person gave rise.⁷² This problem already highlights the fact that the criterion in fact offers a very reductionist perspective of the historical Jesus. The criterion relies less on the curiosity of the historian who wants to understand the background and role of the “historical figure of Jesus”, than on the interests of the epistemologist whose probabilistic reasoning suggests that the most dissimilar aspects of a Jesus tradition are most likely to be historically authentic. I will come back to these epistemological aspects of historical scholarship in the next section.

The origins of the criterion in probabilistic reasoning come even more clearly to the fore in another objection to the criterion. I consider this to be the most important objection, because it most clearly reveals the circular nature of the criterion. According to this objection, the criterion can only be used positively, i.e. to enhance the probability of authenticity, but not negatively, i.e. to prove inauthenticity. Let me explain why this objection reveals the circular nature of the criterion. The presupposition of all historical Jesus research is that, in the biblical sources, genuine traditions about the historical Jesus are mixed with traditions invented by the post-resurrection Christian community. The aim of the criteria for authenticity is to separate the genuine from the invented tradition. Phrased differently, the question posed by the historian this: When does the Christian tradition tell the historical truth about the historical Jesus? The answer of the dissimilarity criterion is simple: Insofar as it is Christian, it never does. The criterion says that a tradition about Jesus is authentic if and only if that tradition is dissimilar to the faith of the post-resurrection community. This implies that any explicitly Christian tradition about Jesus is necessarily inauthentic. However, this begs the question by deciding the issue to be assessed in advance, because it was precisely the question of *which* elements from the Christian tradition are to be accepted as genuine, and which not, that was at stake.

That is to say, this implication follows from the criterion if it is used to prove both authenticity *and* inauthenticity, as reflected in the characteristic phrase that a tradition about Jesus is “authentic if and *only if*” it is dissimilar from the Jewish or Christian tradition. Therefore, it is now commonly accepted that the criterion

⁷⁰ This reduction of the criterion is extensively argued for by Tom Holmén, ‘Doubts about Double Dissimilarity: Restructuring the Main Criterion of Jesus-of-History Research’, in: Bruce Chilton and Craig A. Evans, editors, *Authenticating the Words of Jesus*, New Testament Tools and Studies 28/1 (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1999), pp. 47–80, but is evident and affirmed in numerous other works, for example Meier, *Marginal Jew I*, pp. 168–171; Sanders, pp. 80–97; Porter, pp. 74–76.

⁷¹ Meier, *Marginal Jew I*, p. 172; Porter, p. 74.

⁷² Meier, *Marginal Jew I*, pp. 172–173; Holmén, pp. 50–51.

cannot be used to prove inauthenticity.⁷³ As one might guess, this has enormous consequences for the strength of the criterion and, as we will see below, for the project of historical Jesus research as a whole. Briefly stated, it is now agreed that, if a tradition passes the dissimilarity test, this can be viewed as an indication that the tradition most likely goes back to Jesus himself.

Upon closer examination, however, it will turn out that it is not as easy as it may seem to get rid of the question begging aspects of the criterion of dissimilarity. This is because the criterion goes hand in hand with others that build upon it. The main criteria to be mentioned in this regard are the criterion of coherence and, less commonly noted, the criterion of execution.⁷⁴ The rationale of the criterion of coherence is that, once a minimal set of authentic traditions about Jesus has been established on the basis of the criterion of dissimilarity, this set can be enlarged by adding traditions that are coherent with the authentic minimum. Whatever one might think of the validity of reasoning on the basis of coherence in the historical sciences – history seems full of rather incoherent phenomena – the issue I would like to raise here is another. As I have argued, the criterion of dissimilarity can only function to affirm the authenticity of certain traditions, and not their inauthenticity. The criterion of coherence can be used to confirm the authenticity of allegedly authentic traditions that are coherent with the results of the dissimilarity test. In this way, a more elaborate picture of the historical Jesus can be construed than the picture that results from the application of the dissimilarity test alone.

However, this more elaborate picture will only include those traditions that are coherent with the authentic minimum that resulted from the dissimilarity test. It will leave out all traditions that, for some reason, do not pass the dissimilarity test. Given that the dissimilarity test can only confirm the authenticity of a tradition, and not its inauthenticity, it is likely that among the traditions that are incoherent with the authentic minimum, there will be genuine traditions. However, insofar as a picture of the historical Jesus relies on an authentic minimum (the dissimilarity test) plus traditions coherent with it (criterion of coherence), traditions incoherent with the authentic minimum will not be taken into account. Theoretically, this means that the more one relies upon the criteria of dissimilarity and coherence for creating an overall picture of the historical Jesus, the more a negative application of the criterion of dissimilarity is presupposed, so that all traditions incoherent with the authentic minimum are left out and presumed to be inauthentic. Thus, although it is theoretically admitted that the criterion of dissimilarity cannot establish inauthenticity, its role in isolating an authentic minimum implies that it retains this function.

A similar point can be made with regard to the criterion of execution. This criterion is not intended to assess individual traditions about Jesus, but to assess the success of an overall account of Jesus in explaining his execution by Jewish and Roman officials.⁷⁵ The question is: Can an account of the life of Jesus successfully explain why he died on the cross? The more convincingly it can do so, the

⁷³ Theissen and Winter, *Quest for the Plausible Jesus*, p. 22; Theissen and Winter, *Kriterienfrage*, p. 23; Holmén, pp. 49–50; Porter, pp. 73–74.

⁷⁴ E.g. Meier, *Marginal Jew I*, p. 177.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

more authentic the account is. At first sight, this criterion seems to be quite independent of the dissimilarity criterion, but this is only seemingly so.⁷⁶ This is easy to see as soon as one realises that the New Testament offers a quite detailed account of why Jesus had to die. The NT account could perhaps be best described in terms of ‘unhappy coincidence’—apart from, of course, God’s providential direction. Whatever we might think about the overall historical reliability of various elements in the NT account, the criterion of execution makes clear how the dissimilarity test works in practice. The tradition hardly anyone wants to deny is that Jesus died on the cross around 30 CE. The question, then, is whether, on the supposition that everything in the NT account is inauthentic, we can create – naturally in conversation with the whole of the NT – a picture of Jesus that is coherent with the fact that he died as he did.⁷⁷ Here too, the authenticity of an overall account is based on its relation to a fact about Jesus that most evidently passes the dissimilarity test. Hence, insofar as an overall account of the life of Jesus derives its credibility from the criterion of execution, it presupposes a negative application of the criterion of dissimilarity in the sense that an explanation for the death of Jesus is sought on the presupposition that the explanation given in the Gospels is inauthentic.

Finally, I would like to address the question of what the collapse of the criterion of dissimilarity means for the project of historical Jesus research as a whole. A valuable contribution to this discussion was recently made by Theissen and Winter in their book *Kriterienfrage*.⁷⁸ First of all, Theissen argues that the criterion of dissimilarity is the *only* criterion available for establishing authenticity. All other criteria are either dependent on the dissimilarity test – the criterion of coherence is a case in point – or do not really affect the question of authenticity—such as in the case of the criterion of multiple attestation.⁷⁹ I do not agree with Theissen’s argument that the dissimilarity test is the only criterion for authenticity. This is only true in so far as it is the only *negative* criterion for authenticity, that is to say, it is the only criterion for *inauthenticity*. However, as we saw above, the negative application of the criterion has already been contested by many scholars. As a positive criterion, I cannot see why the dissimilarity test is systematically different from the criterion of multiple attestation. Both in their own way simply add to the idea that the tradition goes back to the historical Jesus, the first by suggesting that the tradition has been ‘overlooked’ by theological redaction, and the second by showing that the tradition is handed down by various independent sources.

Second, whether or not we agree with Theissen about the unique role of the dissimilarity test, the alternative to dissimilarity thinking that he presents is

⁷⁶ Meier, *Marginal Jew I*, p. 41.

⁷⁷ This approach to the historical Jesus has been defended especially by Craig A. Evans, *Jesus and his Contemporaries: Comparative Studies*, Arbeiten zur Geschichte des antiken Judentums und des Urchristentums 25 (Leiden: Brill, 1995).

⁷⁸ Theissen and Winter, *Kriterienfrage*. An English translation appeared recently: Gerd Theissen and Dagmar Winter, *The Quest for the Plausible Jesus: The Question of Criteria* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002). In this chapter, quotations will be taken from the English edition, and references will be given to both. The theoretical argument is from Theissen. Therefore, I will mention only Theissen’s name below.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 12–18; Theissen and Winter, *Kriterienfrage*, pp. 12–19.

important for future directions in historical Jesus research. Theissen develops a new paradigm for historical Jesus research, which he calls the criterion of historical plausibility. The historian, Theissen argues, is not so much interested in the *difference* of historical figures from their surroundings, but rather asks how the alleged role of historical figures fits into their context, and what developments follow upon them. Hence, rather than starting from the differences between Judaism and the historical Jesus, Theissen's plausibility criterion asks how Jesus fits into his own Jewish context, and what his individual role in this context was. Similarly, the plausibility criterion asks how a certain picture of Jesus can explain the subsequent development of the Early Church. This, I think, is a very important insight for future historical Jesus research. Rather than starting from what can be attributed to Jesus without any doubt, a picture of the historical Jesus should explain the role of Jesus in his cultural environment, along with providing an answer to the question of how this particular historical figure could initiate the movement now described as early Christianity.

Given the valuable contributions to methodological issues that Theissen and Winter's book contains, it is all the more surprising to find that, in spite of Theissen's positive appreciation of Jesus' relationship to Judaism, he still relies uncritically on notions of dissimilarity when it comes to early Christianity. In developing his criterion of historical plausibility, Theissen still relies heavily on the notion of dissimilarity – frequently even the negative variant⁸⁰ – and those of coherence and multiple attestation.⁸¹ Theissen still positions himself in the dissimilarity tradition by starting from a sceptical view of early Christianity:

[E]very historian will insist that justice be done to both sides of the criterion [of historical plausibility]: the determination of the relation of the Jesus tradition to Judaism as well as to early Christianity. In this process the latter is to be given a certain priority in matters of authenticity, since we have relevant Jesus tradition almost exclusively in the form of Christian traditions. We must always first 'substract' specifically Christian perspectives, clear post-Easter expressions of Christian faith, and material reflecting church tendencies in order to precipitate out those traditions that we can make the basis of a reconstruction of the historical Jesus.⁸²

Porter is right in remarking that many of the valuable criticisms that Theissen raised against the criterion of dissimilarity now apply equally against the criterion of plausibility.⁸³ Porter closes his discussion of Theissen's historical plausibility criterion with the following remark:

The final result is that it is clear that the criterion of dissimilarity has persisted in historical-Jesus research, and that other criteria, even that of historical plausibility, have yet to alter the fundamental shape of the criteria significantly.⁸⁴

⁸⁰ Theissen and Winter, *Quest for the Plausible Jesus*, pp. 174–177; Theissen and Winter, *Kriterienfrage*, pp. 177–180.

⁸¹ Theissen and Winter, *Quest for the Plausible Jesus*, pp. 173–174; Theissen and Winter, *Kriterienfrage*, pp. 176–177.

⁸² Theissen and Winter, *Quest for the Plausible Jesus*, p. 173; Theissen and Winter, *Kriterienfrage*, p. 176.

⁸³ Porter, pp. 121–122.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 122.

Hence, the move away from the many problems of the dissimilarity criterion is a difficult one, even if there is an explicit intention to see the relation between Jesus and subsequent Christianity in a more positive light.⁸⁵ What we are faced with is a steady collapse of the traditional methodological framework of historical critical scholarship, and the fact that alternatives are yet to be developed. In the meantime, due to the collapse of the dissimilarity criterion, the conclusion must be drawn that New Testament scholarship is in fact bereft of any general criterion for establishing inauthenticity. All that the traditional general criteria in their modified forms can achieve, is to affirm or increase the plausibility of the authenticity of certain traditions about the historical Jesus. This is rather a startling conclusion. Phrased in terms of our analogy of the trial, we must say that the prosecuting attorney is left with instruments of enquiry that can only serve to affirm the innocence of the suspect. This does not mean that the suspect is in fact innocent, of course. Some suspects are released because of a lack of evidence, even if the prosecutor has a strong hunch as to their guilt. The same holds for the historian of the New Testament. The conviction that, in the New Testament, genuine traditions about Jesus are intermingled with theological inventions about him will probably remain. However, given the current state of research, there is no general criterion available to separate the wheat from the chaff.⁸⁶

9.7 HISTORICAL CRITICISM AND EVIDENTIALIST EPISTEMOLOGY

As we saw above, the development of historical scholarship as an enquiry into the historicity of biblical traditions went hand in hand with the theological quest for a reliable historical basis for the faith of the church. This theological quest, in turn, originated in what we now call the 'evidentialist epistemology' of the Enlightenment. Evidentialist epistemology is *the belief that one is rational in holding a certain belief to the extent that one has sufficient evidence for it*. In its classical formulation by W.K. Clifford: "It is wrong in all cases to believe on insufficient evidence".⁸⁷

The criterion of dissimilarity discussed in the previous section is an excellent example of the link between historical methodology and evidentialist epistemology.⁸⁸ The criterion starts from the assumption that everything reported in the New Testament is historically unreliable and subsequently tries to harvest a core of historical material on the basis of indubitable criteria. This is exactly what

⁸⁵ Porter, pp. 123ff. I cannot go in detail about Porter's own proposals for new criteria on the basis of Jesus' use of Greek. Let me merely say that I hesitate about the inference of authenticity from linguistic features because it easily falls prey to *non sequiturs* in so far as linguistic features are very open to alternative explanations that may be very difficult to rule out. Anyhow, even this criterion can only function in a *positive* way.

⁸⁶ Of course, this does not mean that with regard to individual traditions, one could not make a case for their inauthenticity, but this cannot be done on the basis of general criteria.

⁸⁷ William K. Clifford, 'The Ethics of Belief', *Contemporary Review* (1877), (URL: http://www.infidels.org/library/historical/w_k_clifford/ethics_of_belief.html) – visited on 2002-12-27, section III.

⁸⁸ For a more general discussion of the link between biblical authority and evidentialist epistemology, see Maarten Wisse, 'The Meaning of the Authority of the Bible', *Religious Studies* 36 (2000), pp. 477–479.

evidentialist epistemology prescribes: that we conform our faith to the available evidence.

Interestingly, the demise of the criterion of dissimilarity took place in tandem with the collapse of evidentialist epistemology. Evidentialism was criticised for being self-referentially incoherent and overcritical. It is self-referentially incoherent because the evidentialist principle does not pass its own test.⁸⁹ Furthermore, it is overcritical because it requires that one should doubt everything one believes unless it has been proven correct. This is not what we normally do in everyday life.

A position now commonly held in epistemology is what is sometimes called 'presumptionism'.⁹⁰ This principle amounts to a reversal of the evidentialist principle. The presumptionist principle is that: *One is rational in holding a certain belief if and only if one does not have sufficient evidence that the belief is false.*

An interesting question is what this epistemological principle means for the criteria for historicity in the historical sciences. What would happen if one assumed that the Gospels are historically reliable unless we have sufficient evidence to the contrary? *Prima facie*, it might seem that this change of perspective would result in a rather fundamentalist view of the Bible, but that need not be the case. It certainly reinforces the need for criteria that indicate inauthenticity. What we need are indicators of the fact that something is really wrong with the sources, rather than to declare everything wrong, and then look for something that survives the severest form of scepticism. This strategy might be harder, but it has the obvious advantage that it directs the eye of the fundamentalist to those aspects of the biblical texts where biblical criticism really has a case, even from a positive starting point. For example, it would bring into focus the differences between various sources as evidence against the infallible reliability fundamentalists ascribe to the Bible.

However, critical historians of our time still breathe an evidentialist atmosphere. For example, Ehrman, apparently feeling the threat of the imminent collapse of historical methodology on the one hand, and the desire on the part of traditional Christians to return to pre-critical theology on the other, introduces his criteria for historicity in a way that clearly exhibits evidentialist tendencies. I quote him at some length to bring the reactionary undertone clearly into focus:

Over the course of the past century, historians have worked hard to develop methods for uncovering historically reliable information about the life of Jesus. In this hotly debated area of research, reputable and intelligent scholars have expressed divergent views concerning both the methods to be applied to the task and the conclusions to be drawn, even when there is a general agreement about method. I will sketch several of the methodological principles that have emerged from these debates in the pages that follow. As you will see, there is a logic behind each of them that is driven by the character of the sources. All of these principles can be applied to any tradition about Jesus, early or late, Christian or non-Christian, preserved in the new Testament Gospels or elsewhere. Anyone

⁸⁹ The classical formulation of this critique is offered by Alvin Plantinga, 'Reason and Belief in God', in: Alvin Plantinga and Nicolas Wolterstorff, editors, *Faith and Rationality: Reason and Belief in God* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983), pp. 16–93.

⁹⁰ For a detailed account of presumptionism, see Mikael Stenmark, *Rationality in Science, Religion, and Everyday Life: A Critical Evaluation of Four Models of Rationality* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1995), pp. 193–234.

who does not find these principles satisfactory must come up with others that are better; *in no case, however, can we simply ignore the problems of our sources and accept everything they say about Jesus' words and deeds as historically accurate. Once it is acknowledged that these Gospels are historically problematic, then the problems must be dealt with in a clear and systematic fashion.*⁹¹

The difficulty with this view is that the problems of New Testament historicity, which are indeed not imaginary, are used to suggest that one can no longer deal with the New Testament texts as they stand. Instead, one must accept the historical-critical method for determining what may be firmly believed and what not.⁹² What we have seen in our discussion in the previous section is that historical scholarship can hardly offer any methodological framework for separating the genuine from the invented, so that, at best, it can provide only further affirmation of what the believer already assumes, namely the reliability of some of the sources. To demand that believers restrict their theological commitment to only these reliable sources is either to suggest that the others are inauthentic, which is an unwarranted conclusion, or to force believers into an overly sceptical evidentialist epistemology, where one is only allowed to accept what has been conclusively proven.⁹³

The uncritical assumption that it is only through the paradigm of historical biblical scholarship that we can deal with the history of biblical texts is even more evident in Theissen's analysis of Lessing's ditch at the end of the *Quest for the Plausible Jesus*. At the end of Theissen and Winter's publication, Theissen moves from the methodological to the hermeneutical realm by addressing the implications of historical Jesus research for Christian theology and faith. He does so by investigating Friedrich Lessing's well known metaphor of the ditch that separates the contingent nature of historical claims from the absolute claims of faith.⁹⁴ How to bridge this gap? To make the question even more urgent, Theissen argues that the ditch between history and faith has become deeper,

⁹¹ Ehrman, *Historical Introduction*, pp. 200–201, emphasis mine.

⁹² Ehrman's requirement of a "clear and systematic" method is probably coincidentally similar to Descartes' quest for "clear and distinct" ideas, but the phrase exemplifies the Enlightenment background of Ehrman's argument.

⁹³ A similar argument can be found in Meier. After having anticipated the reader's bewilderment as to why we need such a problematic thing – from the perspective of the sources and criteria – as historical Jesus research, Meier goes on to argue that historical Jesus research serves the interests of faith in four ways. The first is this: "Against any attempt to reduce faith in Christ to a content-less cipher, a mythic symbol, or a timeless archetype, the quest for the historical Jesus reminds Christians that faith in Christ is not just a vague existential attitude or a way of being in the world. Christian faith is the affirmation of and adherence to a particular person who said and did particular things in a particular time and place in human history. The quest underlines the fact that there is specific content to Christian faith, content connected with specific persons and events in past history. While the quest cannot supply the essential content of faith, it can help theology give greater concrete depth and color to that content." (Meier, *Marginal Jew I*, p. 199). This overly modest affirmation of the use of historical Jesus research for Christian faith – overly modest, that is, when compared to the size of Meier's books – comes after a somewhat artificial affirmation of the doctrines of the Church, namely that "the Christ of faith cannot be the same as the Jesus of history" and the idea that "faith is seeking understanding" (*ibid.*, pp. 197–199). But what if certain presuppositions of traditional historical scholarship run counter to the presuppositions of faith? And why is it that only historical scholarship can show that faith has a historical component? This still presupposes that the assumptions of historical criticism are the only point of entry to history.

⁹⁴ Theissen and Winter, *Quest for the Plausible Jesus*, pp. 226–228; Theissen and Winter, *Kriterienfrage*, pp. 233–235.

longer and broader since it was outlined by Lessing in the 18th century. The ditch has become deeper because the radical stance of historical source criticism has increased; the ditch has become longer because we have become more aware of the interrelatedness of all historical phenomena; and it is broader the experience of the distance between the natural and cultural environment of the historical Jesus and that of our own has been intensified.⁹⁵

After having declared – in a strongly rhetorical vein⁹⁶ – having declared that all attempts to jump over Lessing’s ditch have failed, Theissen proposes that we do not try to jump over it, but rather to jump into it and swim to the other side. That is, materially speaking, the only solution to Lessing’s problem is to accept the parameters of historical scholarship and see what comes out of it:

We cannot arbitrarily declare that the axioms of historical consciousness are no longer in force and thus make it possible to postulate, against this modern historical consciousness, that there are infallible (inspired) sources, that there are events with no historical analogies, or that there are eternal truths. If we are to find any certainty in our studies of the historical Jesus, it cannot be against our axiomatic convictions but, instead, with them.⁹⁷

What strikes me in Theissen’s line of reasoning is the uncritical acceptance of the axioms of Enlightenment historicism, particularly the idea that our only way of dealing with the historicity of Jesus is by means of the principles of historical critical scholarship. As I have tried to show above, much of the traditional methodological framework of historical Jesus research has collapsed on the basis of the arguments of the historians themselves. Hence, it might well be asked whether Lessing’s ditch is a real ditch, or whether Theissen, to use his own terminology, ‘swimming in his own swimming pool’. Theissen’s ditch exists only in so far as we accept that faith needs to conform its beliefs to the evidence produced by historical scholarship. Historical scholarship in turn starts from the assumption that everything in the biblical texts is unreliable unless proven otherwise. Starting from this assumption, it tries to build an infallibly sure body of authentic material upon it. Indeed, an enormous gap between traditional faith and the results of historical scholarship will result. But that gap is produced by the overcritical axioms, rather than by an unassailable methodology.

Of course this is not to deny that there is a ditch between us and the past, but it should be asked whether this really is a ditch between our absolute convictions as believers and the tentative conclusions of historians. The question is whether we are dealing with a ‘probability ditch’ or a ‘hermeneutical ditch’. In the previous and the present chapter, I have argued that the central aim of a historical approach to the biblical text is to bring the distance between the text and the reader into focus. A historical hermeneutics is one that focuses on the horizon of the text in its own time and world of origin. In doing so, a historical hermeneutics is a way

⁹⁵ Theissen and Winter, *Quest for the Plausible Jesus*, pp. 228–229; Theissen and Winter, *Kriterienfrage*, pp. 235–236.

⁹⁶ Theissen and Winter, *Quest for the Plausible Jesus*, p. 229: “In this remarkable theological discipline in which we are engaged, no one so far has won what could be called the ‘Broad Jump over Lessing’s Ditch.’ Despite numerous attempts, so far all have failed. Even the best broad jumpers landed in the middle of the ditch.” Theissen and Winter, *Kriterienfrage*, p. 236.

⁹⁷ Theissen and Winter, *Quest for the Plausible Jesus*, pp. 230, see also 256–259; Theissen and Winter, *Kriterienfrage*, pp. 238, see also 266–269.

to perceive the hermeneutical ditch between the message of the text for its own time and the interests and opinions of the reader in the present.

However, we should ask whether, as Lessing and Theissen suggest, this is a ditch that has something to do with *certainty*. The quest for the historical horizon of the text will result in a location of the text in its cultural environment, but such a quest still remains within the boundaries of what the biblical author(s) wanted to say rather than what they wanted to hide. In this way, it will presuppose the historicity of many of the biblical texts, ideally in so far as the texts themselves suggest that it was their authors' intention to refer to historical events. In the meantime, as I argued above (page 214) against Plantinga, this kind of historical approach to the Bible will probably lead the attentive reader to some questions about, say, the relationship between the various canons of law in the Old Testament, or the relationship between Kings and Chronicles. Readers may also sometimes wonder about sudden transitions in biblical texts and ask themselves whether these might indicate different sources. Similar problems will emerge when dealing with the New Testament Gospels and their relationship to Paul.

Yet these considerations are still far removed from the idea that we can only accept as a material basis of our faith what has been assessed by historical critical scholarship. It is even further away from a 'no miracle' maxim, or the idea that whatever the Christian tradition thought of Jesus is most probably inauthentic. A historical approach to the biblical texts might force the believer to see that there are a number of incongruencies between the various historical books in the Bible, so that we cannot assume without contradiction that they are historically correct in every detail. This might affect the certainty of their faith to some extent but, as far as I can see, not to dramatic effect. This also has to do, of course, with the fact that in many cases, believers are not so much interested in the question *whether* the events recounted in the Bible really took place, but rather, presupposing that they took place, in their significance for their own life.

Hence, I would like to argue that the ditch between the contingent claims of historical critical scholarship and the certainty of faith is a ditch produced by the sceptical philosophical axioms accepted by certain historians. This is not to argue that those who see the ditch are irrational or mistaken in some way. It is simply to argue that the ditch is not absolute, but dependent on how sceptical one is about the historical reliability of the biblical canon *before* one starts to investigate it. Reading the Bible forces nobody to accept a 'no miracle' axiom, but some philosophies do. Likewise, no one is forced to accept a dissimilarity criterion when reading the Bible. A certain attitude towards the truth of Christianity, however, might force one to adopt it.

9.8 CONCLUSION

The end of the previous section is important for the understanding of my overall argument. As a proponent of a hermeneutics of critical engagement, I 'dived into' the paradigm of historical critical scholarship to see how it might function as a critically engaged hermeneutical enterprise. First, I argued that historical research into the meaning of biblical texts in their original contexts *can* have a critical function with regard to the religious enterprise. I rejected various attempts

to de-historise the religious use of the Bible. The critical function of historical scholarship *might* affect the historical authenticity or reliability of the biblical texts in so far as it succeeds in showing that historical material in the Bible is in conflict with itself (incompatibility of sources) or with other things that we know from extra-biblical sources. In that case it will affect the content of faith to a greater or lesser extent (contra Plantinga for example).

On the other hand, however, I maintained that various critical methodologies in historical critical scholarship suffer from a lack of engagement with the religious enterprise, and that this makes them unfit for playing their critical role. I argued that methodological atheism imprisons critical scholarship in a reductionist view of reality, which makes any criticism rooted in the reductionist worldview useless to anyone who denies that worldview. Likewise for the criterion of dissimilarity, which was developed to examine critically the reliability of the historical sources in the Christian tradition, but turned out to decide on the extent of that reliability beforehand. Henceforth, in order to be successful in its critical role, historical scholarship would have to avoid these and similar pitfalls. This will result in a Bible that is neither historically infallible nor completely fictitious. As we have seen, it is very hard for historians to prove inauthenticity, and complete infallibility is also incompatible with the state of the sources. The truth will be somewhere in the middle, depending on one's philosophical and theological convictions.

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Samenvatting

INLEIDING

Canonieke teksten zoals de Bijbel en de Koran vormen een steeds weerkerend referentiepunt voor de geloofsgemeenschappen die aan deze boeken gezag toekennen. De situatie van waaruit gelovigen een beroep doen op een canonieke tekst verschilt van moment tot moment van van plaats tot plaats. Vaak worden teksten in een verband gebruikt dat ver afstaat van de oorspronkelijke situatie waarin de teksten zijn ontstaan. Een voorbeeld daarvan is Händels gebruik van het citaat "Ik weet mijn Verlosser leeft. . ." in de *Messiah*. Händel verbindt de tekst uit Job met Jezus als de Messias en de opstanding uit de dood. Tevens neemt hij de tekst uit het boek Job op in een muzikaal werk.

In de hermeneutiek neemt de vraag van de juistheid van een interpretatie een belangrijke plaats in. In de hermeneutiek van de Verlichting die tot op heden invloedrijk is, is alleen een interpretatie die gericht is op de reconstructie van de oorspronkelijke betekenis van de tekst, een juiste interpretatie. Händels interpretatie is – hoezeer ook te waarderen vanuit esthetisch oogpunt – geen juiste interpretatie. In reactie op de hermeneutiek van de Verlichting problematiseert een postmoderne hermeneutiek elke notie van correctheid in een interpretatie. Teksten zijn fundamenteel open van aard en roepen dus allerlei verschillende interpretaties op. In dit boek bouw ik voort op inzichten uit zowel de moderne als de postmoderne hermeneutiek. Tegenover de moderne hermeneutiek verdedig ik dat er niet één juiste interpretatie is. Het resultaat van een historische interpretatie ligt niet 'verborgen' in de tekst, maar is verbonden met het doel dat de lezer zich bij het lezen stelt. Tegenover de postmoderne hermeneutiek echter verdedig ik dat er binnen een bepaalde interpretatiepraktijk wel degelijk regels voor correcte interpretatie kunnen worden gegeven en dat deze regels niet arbitrair zijn evenmin als de resultaten. Een historische interpretatie is een dergelijke praktijk waar op grond van vast te stellen interpretatieregels kennis over de oorspronkelijke betekenis wordt vergaard.

In de hermeneutiek van een canonieke tekst spelen echter niet alleen algemene factoren een rol. Het religieuze gezag dat aan de tekst wordt toegekend geeft het interpretatieproces een bijzonder karakter. Gelovigen formuleren hun identiteit in termen van hun heilige schrift. Aan de ene kant leidt dat ertoe dat gelovigen zich identificeren met de inhoud van de Schrift. Aan de andere kant

roept het een creatief proces op om dat wat niet bij de behoefte van de geloofsgemeenschap past, buiten beschouwing te laten. Ik noem dat de ideologische contradictie van het gezag van de Schrift. Het identiteitsbepalende karakter van de Schrift heeft belangrijke consequenties voor de praktische houdbaarheid van normatieve hermeneutische theorieën. Wat voor de ene geloofsgemeenschap aanvaardbaar of passend is, is dat niet voor de andere. Daarom is een algemene hermeneutische theorie die voorschrijft hoe gelovigen hun canonieke teksten zouden moeten lezen van weinig waarde. Een normatieve hermeneutische theorie moet, uitgaand van de veronderstellingen die constitutief zijn voor het religieuze discours, de kritische dialoog tussen tekst en lezers bevorderen. Hoe die kritische dialoog bevorderd kan worden hangt af van de concrete situatie waarin de geloofsgemeenschap zich bevindt.

PROLEGOMENA

Wie zich met hermeneutiek bezighoudt zal uiteen moeten zetten wat hij bedoelt met termen als 'hermeneutiek', 'interpretatie' en 'betekenis'. Met 'hermeneutiek' bedoel ik in dit boek de *reflectie* op interpretatiepraktijken. Daarbij beweeg ik mij in dit boek tussen hermeneutiek als reflectie op interpretatiepraktijken en meta-hermeneutiek als een reflectie op de de houdbaarheid van regels (hermeneutiek) voor de interpretatie van teksten. Ik onderscheid dus tussen vier niveaus in verband met de interpretatie van teksten: (1) de tekst, (2) de interpretatie(praktijk), (3) hermeneutiek, (4) meta-hermeneutiek. Een ander belangrijk onderscheid in verband met hermeneutiek is het onderscheid tussen *descriptieve* en *normatieve* hermeneutiek. Een descriptieve hermeneutiek houdt zich bezig met de reflectie op wat in interpretatiepraktijken *daadwerkelijk plaatsvindt*, terwijl een normatieve hermeneutiek gericht is op het ontwikkelen van normatieve regels voor de interpretatiepraktijk.

Naast 'hermeneutiek' is ook 'betekenis' en vooral de regelmatig door mij gebezigde term 'oorspronkelijke betekenis', een problematische term. Met 'betekenis' bedoel ik in de meest algemene zin 'wat gezegd wordt in de tekst'. Deze definitie van 'betekenis' is opzettelijk vaag omdat we er, afhankelijk van de context waarin de term gebruikt wordt, verschillende dingen mee bedoelen. Soms bedoelen we met de betekenis van een tekst de 'boodschap' of het 'belang' van de tekst. In andere gevallen gaat het om 'wat de auteur met de tekst bedoelde'. Vaak gebruiken we de term 'betekenis' terwijl we daarmee niet de auteursintentie op het oog hebben. Veel onderzoek naar de 'betekenis' van de tekst richt zich namelijk niet zozeer op wat de auteur bedoelde, als wel op de linguïstische, sociale en economische conventies die gangbaar waren ten tijde van het ontstaan van de tekst. In dit licht definieer ik de 'oorspronkelijke betekenis' van een tekst als 'wat gezegd wordt in de tekst in het licht van de informatie die we hebben over de tijd van ontstaan'. Met deze definitie is gegeven dat de oorspronkelijke betekenis van een tekst niet zozeer een eigenschap van de tekst is, maar het resultaat van een doelgerichte benadering van de tekst door de lezer, namelijk de reconstructie van de betekenis van de tekst in de tijd van ontstaan. Een historische interpretatie van een tekst is dientengevolge niet zozeer het onder het stof vandaan halen van de

enige juiste oorspronkelijke betekenis van de tekst, maar het onder kritiek stellen van gangbare interpretaties van een tekst met behulp van de informatie die we hebben over de tijd van het ontstaan.

Het onderwerp van dit boek is in het bijzonder de interpretatie van *religieuze gezaghebbende* teksten binnen religieuze gemeenschappen. Vandaar dat mijn betoog een bepaalde opvatting van religie veronderstelt. Godsdienstwetenschappers zijn verdeeld over de interpretatie van religie. Er wordt onderscheid gemaakt tussen een descriptieve visie op religie, die godsdienst benadert vanuit een binnenperspectief, en een verklarende visie op religie, waarin gepoogd wordt religieuze verschijnselen terug te brengen tot een omschrijving van het religieuze vanuit een buitenperspectief. Ik heb voor mijn onderzoek niet alleen een binnen- maar ook een buitenperspectief nodig, zodat ik niet alleen afa ga op wat gelovigen zelf zeggen te doen wanneer zij hun canonieke teksten interpreteren, maar religieuze processen ook kritisch kan bevragen op de identiteitsgebonden factoren die in hun interpretatie een rol spelen.

De vraag wat religie is, is complex, maar voor mijn onderzoek heb ik alleen een functionele definitie van religie nodig. Ik definieer religie als een 'systeem van identiteit constituerende symbolen', waarbij ik onderscheid maak tussen de metafysische, morele en sociale identiteitsconstituerende functie van religie. Deze drie functies zijn onderling verbonden en kunnen niet los van elkaar worden gezien. Religie constitueert de metafysische identiteit van gelovigen door hen in contact te brengen met een 'alternatieve' wereld en hen zekerheden te bieden voor de onzekerheden van het leven. Religie constitueert de morele identiteit van gelovigen door hen een ethisch kader te bieden. Zij constitueert de sociale identiteit van gelovigen door hen deel te maken van een groep.

Nu duidelijk is hoe ik religie zie, rest de vraag hoe men de indentiteitsgebonden functie van religie kan ontwaren in de interpretatie van canonieke teksten binnen religieuze gemeenschappen. Bij het beantwoorden van deze vraag ga ik te rade bij de zogenoemde 'ideologie-kritische methode'. Daarbij komt de vraag op wat onder 'ideologie' verstaan moet worden. Ik kies voor een zogenaamd 'waarde-vrije' definitie van ideologie, namelijk als 'een systeem van overtuigingen met sociale implicaties'. Uit deze definitie wordt duidelijk dat ideologie maar één aspect vertegenwoordigt van religieuze processen; ideologie-kritische methoden moeten diensengevolge worden aangepast aan de specifieke eisen van het religieuze domein om voor mijn onderzoek naar de religieuze functie van de interpretatie van canonieke teksten gebruikt te kunnen worden. Hiertoe introduceer ik Fredric Jameson's theorie van ideologie-kritische tekstlezing en laat zien hoe deze kan worden aangepast ten dienste van mijn onderzoek.

HET TESTAMENT VAN JOB

Het Testament van Job is het eerste voorbeeld van een interpretatie van het boek Job dat ik bespreek. Het is een joodse haggadische hervertelling van het boek Job uit de eerste eeuw van onze jaartelling. Alle actanten uit het bijbelse boek Job zijn aanwezig, maar allen verschijnen op een andere manier. Volgens de conventies van joodse testament-genre wordt het hele verhaal in de mond gelegd

van de op zijn sterfbed liggende Job, die zijn kinderen verhaalt over de verzoeking van Satan die hem ten deel viel. In deze parafrase van het boek Job worden op impliciete wijze verschillende belangrijke zaken anders voorgesteld dan in het bijbelse boek Job. Anders dan in de Bijbel kiest Job er zelf voor om door Satan verzocht te worden, als gevolg van zijn besluit om de afgodstempel naast zijn huis met de grond gelijk te maken. Daarmee lokt hij de toorn van Satan uit, die na een reeks van verzoeken met succes door Job wordt verslagen en huilend afdruipt. Daarop volgt een sterk gereduceerde versie van de dialoog met de vrienden waarin Job zijn onschuld staande houdt en daarin ook ten volle door God wordt bevestigd. Een opmerkelijk slot volgt waarin de dochters van Job een belangrijke rol spelen. In plaats van de materiële erfenis die hun broers ontvangen, krijgen de dochters ieder een ketting die hen een nieuw hart geeft dat op het hemelse gericht is. Daarop beginnen zij hemelse liederen te zingen.

De bespreking van het *Testament van Job* werpt licht op twee fenomenen die voor de hermeneutiek van belang zijn: (1) het verschijnsel midrash; (2) de 'esthetische wijze van interpreteren' die in het *Testament van Job* naar voren komt. Anders dan men bij oppervlakkige lezing zou kunnen denken berusten de creatieve herinterpretaties uit het *Testament van Job* niet op fantasie, maar zijn ze het resultaat van een poging het boek Job te begrijpen in het licht van het geheel van de Schrift. Lacunes in het bijbelse boek Job worden 'gevuld' met elementen uit andere bijbelboeken; de dochters van Job worden geïnterpreteerd met behulp van materiaal over de dochters van Zelafead en de tweede vrouw van Job wordt genoemd als de dochter van Jakob. Maar er is meer aan de hand dan het eenvoudigweg aanvullen van ontbrekende informatie. Boyarins theorie van intertekstualiteit in midrash laat zien dat door middel van het weven van een web van Schrift-materiaal het gezaghebbende karakter van de tekst – waarvan de gemeenschap afhankelijk was – werd behouden terwijl de boodschap van de teksten aan de behoeften van de interpreterende gemeenschap kon worden aangepast.

Wat betreft het *Testament van Job* als een 'esthetische wijze van interpreteren' merk ik op dat in deze interpretatie van het boek Job niet zozeer gepoogd wordt getrouw de oorspronkelijke bedoeling van het boek Job weer te geven, maar meer een creatieve lezing van het boek geboden wordt. De lezer van het *Testament van Job* kan zich deze creatieve lezing naar believen toeëigenen of laten voor wat ze is. Dat betekent overigens niet dat er in het geschrift niet allerlei impliciete opvattingen aanwezig zijn, maar deze worden niet als een geheel en op een dwingende manier aan de lezer gepresenteerd. Mogelijk is het esthetische karakter van het *Testament van Job* ook een verklaring voor het feit dat het geschrift nooit een canonieke of erkende status heeft gekregen in de traditie van de kerk. Het *Testament van Job* was eenvoudigweg nooit als gezaghebbende tekst bedoeld, zoals een historische roman niet de status heeft van een historische analyse.

JOHANNES CALVIJN

Het tweede voorbeeld van een interpretatie van het boek Job stamt uit de periode van de Renaissance, ofwel theologisch geformuleerd, de Reformatie. Johannes

Calvijn heeft in de jaren 1554–55 in 159 preken het gehele boek Job behandeld. Deze interpretatie van Job is opmerkelijk omdat zij typerend is voor de nieuwe reformatorische omgang met de Bijbel. Calvijns interpretatie van Job is vooral *theologisch* van aard. Hij concentreert zich bij de uitleg op leerstellige en ethische lessen die de tekst bevat. In principe houdt hij zich daarbij aan de letterlijke betekenis van de tekst. Desondanks ontwikkelt hij een manier om de soms extreme uitspraken van Job acceptabel te maken binnen zijn eigen leerstellige kaders. Hij maakt daarbij gebruik van wat ik noem een ‘inverted hermeneutic’. In een impressie laat ik zien dat wanneer Calvijn van oordeel is dat de tekst een te extreme beschuldiging van God bevat, hij de toepassing van de tekst naar de gemeente toe omdraait. In plaats van “Doe zoals Job deed!” hanteert hij dan de regel “Doe *niet* zoals hij!” Ook bij de vrienden gaat Calvijn zo lang mogelijk mee met hun betoog, totdat een theologische grens bereikt wordt, bijvoorbeeld wanneer de vrienden suggereren dat als iemand lijdt, men automatisch concluderen kan dat dat te wijten is aan de zonde van het slachtoffer.

In Calvijns interpretatie speelt de soevereiniteit van God een centrale rol. Het boek Job leert de mens zich aan God te onderwerpen, aangezien God met mensen doen kan naar zijn welbehagen. Calvijn is begrijpelijkerwijs zeer positief over de rede van Elihu. Met de nadruk op de soevereiniteit van God gaat een zeer negatieve antropologie gepaard. Calvijn is zelden positief over zijn gehoor. Traditionele thema’s zoals een retributieve en een zuiverende functie van lijden neemt hij gemakkelijk op in zijn eigen denken, maar altijd ingebed in het kader van God’s soeverein handelen. Ondanks de nadruk op de soevereiniteit van God blijft de goedheid van God voor Calvijn recht overeind staan. Voor Calvijn kan God soms hard met de mens omgaan – het is belangrijk te bedenken dat dat een *feit* is voor Calvijn; hij en zijn gehoor lijden voortdurend in allerlei opzichten – omdat God uiteindelijk de Vader is die zijn kinderen toebereidt tot het eeuwige leven. Dit vertrouwen in Gods vaderlijke zorg wordt echter voortdurend aangevochten door de realiteit van het lijden en krijgt daardoor soms welhaast het karakter van een wanhoopskeuze. De dubbelheid in Calvijns visie op God in de preken over Job komt het duidelijkst naar voren in wat hij noemt de gedachte van de “dubbele gerechtigheid”. Volgens Calvijn zijn er twee vormen van gerechtigheid in God. Eén geopenbaarde vorm van gerechtigheid waardoor hij mensen zijn wil kenbaar maakt en één verborgen gerechtigheid waardoor hij de wereld regeert.

Hermeneutisch gezien presenteert Calvijn een ‘gesloten’ uitleg van het boek Job. De hoorder van de preken van Calvijn wordt minimale ruimte gegund om zelf tot een oordeel over de tekst te komen. Het gesloten karakter van Calvijns uitleg wordt versterkt door de ‘inverted hermeneutic’ en de identificatie van de verkondiging met het Woord van God. Het is een vergissing het gesloten karakter van Calvijns uitleg louter negatief te duiden. Binnen de context van de late Renaissance konden de stabiele kaders van Calvijns theologie de gelovigen van Genève – waarvan een niet onaanzienlijk deel uit vluchtelingen bestond – rust en zekerheid bieden. De prijs die daarvoor moest worden betaald was de uitsluiting van alle andersdenkenden en het opgeven van het zelfkritische karakter van het *sola scriptura*-principe. Zo is ook Calvijns lezing van Job, hoewel vergezeld van de gedachte dat de Schrift alleen gezaghebbend is, geworteld in zijn context, de

context van de late Renaissance, waarin aan de mens zich aan de ene kant bevrijdt van de heerschappij van de kerk, maar aan de andere kant nieuwe kaders zoekt om geloof en maatschappij een vaste vorm te geven.

ORLANDO DI LASSO

Het derde voorbeeld van een interpretatie van het boek Job stamt uit dezelfde tijd als Calvijns preken, maar is van een andere orde. Het betreft Orlando di Lasso's vierstemmige motettencyclus over de lezingen voor de begrafenisliturgie. Lasso componeerde deze motettencyclus naar alle waarschijnlijkheid voor het privégebruik van de Beierse hertog Albrecht V. Lasso's *Lectiones* vormen een fraai specimen van de Vlaamse polyfonie van de zestiende eeuw. In deze motetkunst was de uitdrukking van de tekst onder invloed van het Italiaanse madrigaal in het centrum van de compositiekunst komen te staan. Door middel van het toepassen en bewust overtreden van compositieregels wordt de retorische lading van de tekst kracht bijgezet.

De *Lectiones* zijn niet alleen vanuit musicologisch perspectief interessant. Via Lasso's zetting van deze teksten komt men namelijk de vorm op het spoor waarin het boek Job eeuwenlang onder de gewone gelovigen bekend is geweest en intensief gebruikt werd als onderdeel van de persoonlijke vroomheid. De tekst van de begrafenisliturgie werd gaandeweg de Middeleeuwen bij allerlei gelegenheden gelezen of gereciteerd en de daarin opgenomen lezingen uit het boek Job waren bekend als de 'kleine Job'. Als zodanig waren de gelovigen eeuwenlang vertrouwd met een opmerkelijke selectie uit het boek Job, omdat de lezingen uitsluitend genomen zijn uit Jobs klachten. Anders dan in de theologische traditie (bijv. Gregorius' *Moralia*), waarin de klachten van Job sterk werden 'weggefilterd', speelden de klachten van Job in de begrafenisliturgie en de persoonlijke vroomheid een centrale rol.

Ook Lasso's muzikale zetting van de *Lectiones* biedt theologisch interessante inzichten. Uit de analyse van de muziek komt naar voren dat Lasso ondanks de verschillen in theologische, sociale, en economische context, Calvijns visie op God in verhouding tot de gelovige deelt. Anders dan de keuze van de *Lectiones* als keuze voor de klachten van Job zou doen vermoeden, legt Lasso via zijn gekozen muzikale uitdrukkingsvormen nadruk op de afstand tussen God en de gelovige en de onderwerping van de gelovige aan God. Bij die passages in de *Lectiones* bijvoorbeeld waarin de gelovige nadrukkelijk haar vertrouwen in God uitspreekt, kiest Lasso voor een minimale zetting van de tekst en verstoort de voortgang van de muziek door de introductie van allerlei onregelmatigheden.

Hermeneutisch gezien levert de case-study van Lasso's *Lectiones* twee belangrijke inzichten op. In de eerste plaats brengt het de hermeneutische aspecten van het verschijnsel 'selectie' duidelijk voor het voetlicht. Bij de *Lectiones* hebben we niet te maken met een stabiele tekst die onveranderd de eeuwen doorstaat, maar met een selectie van het boek Job die gedurende enkele eeuwen het boek als geheel representeert. Dit laat zien dat we in de hermeneutiek niet alleen rekening moeten houden met de context-bepaaldheid van de lezer, maar ook met die van de tekst. De tekst verschijnt in verschillende contexten op verschillende manieren.

In het geval van de *Lectioes* is de selectie zodanig ingebed in een traditie dat veel lezers zich niet eens van het excerpt-karakter van hun 'kleine Job' bewust zullen zijn geweest en de tekst als geheel waarschijnlijk veelal niet hebben gekend. In de tweede plaats werpt de bespreking van de *Lectioes* meer licht op het effect van een 'esthetische wijze van interpreteren'. Op het eerste gezicht lijkt Lasso's interpretatie van Job de indruk te bevestigen dat een esthetische interpretatie van een tekst een meer 'open' interpretatie oplevert dan een theologische zoals die van Calvijn. Echter, bij nader inzien berust dit op een misverstand. Lasso's muziek is voor hedendaagse luisteraars vooral poly-interpretabel door het ontbreken van achtergrondinformatie en talenkennis die voor Lasso's luisteraars gemeengoed waren. Lasso's muziek staat voor een esthetische verwerking van de tekst die niet zozeer bedoeld is als een creatieve reflectie op de tekst, maar juist gericht is op de versterking van de boodschap van de tekst met de middelen van een muzikale retorica. Deze retorica moet in klassieke zin verstaan worden als een op regels gebaseerde leer van de effectieve communicatie, vertaald in termen van compositietechnieken. Als zodanig zijn de *Lectioes* een goed voorbeeld van een esthetische verwerking van een tekst die gericht is op het effectiever communiceren van de boodschap van de tekst, in plaats van de lezer uit te nodigen tot willekeurige gedachtenspelsels daarover.

GUSTAVO GUTIÉRREZ

Het laatste voorbeeld van een interpretatie van het boek Job is Gustavo Gutiérrez' lezing vanuit het perspectief van de Latijns-Amerikaanse bevrijdingstheologie. Als voorbeeld van een twintigste eeuwse en door een Westerse opleiding beïnvloede lezing van Job lijkt Gutiérrez' interpretatie dicht bij de Westerse lezer te staan. Echter, bij nader inzien speelt de Latijns-Amerikaanse context toch een dominante rol in Gutiérrez' visie op Job. De Latijns-Amerikaanse context wordt in dit hoofdstuk verhelderd vanuit het werk van de Peruaanse romanschrijver José María Arguedas.

Als centraal thema van het boek Job ziet Gutiérrez de vraag hoe men in een situatie van intens onrechtvaardig lijden in God kan geloven. Het boek Job geeft op deze vraag geen sluitend antwoord, maar het tekent de route waarlangs Job gaandeweg God beter leert kennen. Bij het beter leren kennen van God spelen twee 'talen' een centrale rol: de taal van de profetie en de taal van de contemplatie. Beide zijn onmisbaar, hoewel ze tegelijkertijd op gespannen voet met elkaar staan. In de taal van de profetie roept Job God ter verantwoording over het ontbreken van gerechtigheid in zijn situatie en houdt hij tegelijkertijd zijn eigen onschuld vol tegenover de vrienden. De vrienden staan bij Gutiérrez model voor hen die vanuit een goedkoop rechtvaardigheidsmodel zichzelf bevoordelen. De taal van de profetie wordt verder verdiept als Job ontdekt dat hij in zijn onrechtvaardig lijden één is met alle armen van deze wereld. Toch blijft Job ook hiermee ongewild in het paradigma van de vrienden gevangen, een paradigma waarin Gods gerechtigheid rechtstreeks in de orde van de wereld te zien zou moeten zijn. De taal van de profetie heeft de taal van de contemplatie nodig. God laat in Zijn antwoord aan Job zien dat het niet zo eenvoudig in elkaar steekt als hij

denkt: Gods heerschappij over de wereld is niet een eenvoudige rekensom, maar een samenspel van de vrijheid van God en mens. God respecteert de handelingen van mensen en vraagt van mensen wederkerig respect voor Zijn vrijheid.

Hermeneutisch gezien is Gutiérrez een duidelijk voorbeeld van een interpreter die zich bewust is van de interesses en vooringenomenheden die hij met zich meebrengt. Gutiérrez probeert die vooringenomenheden niet te elimineren, maar juist positief in te zetten en met de tekst te confronteren. De openheid naar de tekst toe behoedt Gutiérrez ervoor zijn uitleg tot een propaganda voor zijn eigen bevrijdingstheologische standpunten te maken. Ook Gods antwoord aan Job, hoewel moeilijk te accepteren voor de lijdende rechtvaardige, probeert Gutiérrez volledig serieus te nemen. De hoge status van de Schrift in Gutiérrez' theologie impliceert tegelijkertijd de beperking van zijn perspectief. Het is voor Gutiérrez onmogelijk dat de Schrift niet bij de Latijns-Amerikaanse context past en dus is Job vanzelfsprekend de spreekbuis van de armen. Gutiérrez is niet in staat de mogelijkheid in ogenschouw te nemen dat Job het perspectief van de rijken vertegenwoordigt. Daarmee zou de Schrift haar gezaghebbend karakter verliezen.

VAN CASE-STUDY NAAR THEORIE

Nadat ik in de vier voorgaande hoofdstukken voorbeelden van Job-uitleg heb besproken, maak ik in dit hoofdstuk de beweging van case-study naar theorie. Daarbij is het de bedoeling enerzijds tot meer algemeen geldige observaties te komen over wat er omgaat in een religieus interpretatieproces, en anderzijds deze theoretische reflecties zo natuurlijk mogelijk uit de case-studies te laten voortvloeien. Vandaar dat ik eerst in algemene zin wijs op de complexiteit en diversiteit van religieuze interpretatieprocessen. In een interpretatieproces spelen zeer veel (complexiteit) en zeer verschillende (diversiteit) factoren een rol. Om dit te illustreren analyseer ik nogmaals de case-studies van Calvijn en Lasso en laat zien hoe daarin zeer veel en – in vergelijking met elkaar – zeer verschillende factoren de uitleg van de tekst bepalen. De tekst, het doel van de interpretatie, de instrumenten waarmee de tekst verwerkt wordt zijn verschillend etcetera. Twee interpretaties van Job uit dezelfde tijd verschillen in zeer veel opzichten. Factoren in een interpretatieproces staan ook niet los van elkaar, maar hangen samen zodat men bezwaarlijk een deel uit het interpretatieproces kan isoleren en dat 'interpretatie' (*expositio*) kan noemen en de rest tot 'toepassing' (*applicatio*) reduceren. Interpretatie is een vorm van toepassing. De complexiteit en diversiteit van interpretatieprocessen heeft ook belangrijke gevolgen voor hermeneutische theorieën waarin wordt gepoogd het verschijnsel interpretatie terug te brengen tot één fenomeen. Er gebeurt niet één ding in een interpretatieproces. Hoe generaliserender men spreekt over interpretatieprocessen, des te verder komen zulke omschrijvingen af te staan van concrete leespraktijken in de werkelijkheid.

De vraag die bij deze analyse naar voren komt is uiteraard hoe ik mijzelf kan verdedigen tegen de beschuldiging van hermeneutisch relativisme of antirealisme. Als alles context-bepaald is, kunnen we dan nog iets zeggen over 'de tekst

zelf', dat wil zeggen, de tekst onafhankelijk van onze interpretaties? Ik tracht aan deze problematiek te ontkomen door te betogen dat de vraag naar 'de tekst zelf' in feite een misleidende vraag is die geworteld is in de Verlichtingsvraag naar een vorm van objectiviteit die de rol van het kennende subject ontkent. Een hermeneutiek die de rol van het subject probeert te ontkennen is inconsistent en stelt bovendien een vraag – kunnen we iets weten over de tekst zoals die er is als wij er niet zijn? – waarop *per definitie* geen antwoord mogelijk is. Aan de ene kant accepteer ik dus de postmoderne kritiek op de gedachte dat we de tekst zouden kunnen kennen zoals die 'in zichzelf' is, los van onze betrokkenheid daarbij. Aan de andere kant wijs ik de gedachte af dat dit betekent dat we niets kunnen weten over de betekenis van teksten. De kennis van tekstbetekenis is echter nooit ongeconditioneerd. De lezer moet aannames maken en doelen stellen om überhaupt iets van de tekst te weten te komen. Op die manier is dus ook een historische benadering van teksten mogelijk, waarbij men zich ten doel stelt zoveel mogelijk informatie te verzamelen over de betekenis van de tekst in de tijd van ontstaan. Of een historische benadering van een tekst mogelijk is afhankelijk van de hoeveelheid informatie die we concreet over die tekst bezitten.

De slotstap op het terrein van de descriptieve hermeneutiek is de beschrijving van wat ik noem de 'ideologische contradictie van het gezag van de Schrift'. Als meest vergaande generalisatie verdedig ik dat in alle vier de voorbeelden een ideologische contradictie zichtbaar gemaakt kan worden tussen een identiteitsclaim van de gemeenschap op de Schrift – wij zijn wat de Schrift is – en de creativiteit die nodig is om deze identiteitsclaim staande te kunnen houden. De religieuze gemeenschap verwoordt haar identiteit in termen van de Schrift als religieus identiteitsbepalend document: wat hier staat is waar wij voor staan. Tegelijkertijd is de Schrift een bonte verzameling van oude teksten die op allerlei manieren haaks staat op de behoeften en overtuigingen van de religieuze gemeenschap. Daarom roept de identiteitsclaim een creatief proces op waarin gelovigen, vaak zonder dat expliciet te maken, de Schrift inpassen in hun behoeften, die mede door hun context bepaald zijn. Deze twee drives in de geloofsgemeenschap – correspondentie en creativiteit – veronderstellen elkaar, zijn van elkaar afhankelijk en spreken elkaar tegen. Deze finale stap binnen de descriptieve hermeneutiek laat de hermeneut twee keuzen op normatief niveau: ofwel men zet het gehele verschijnsel gezaghebbende Schrift als irrationeel overboord. Dit leidt overigens niet tot het einde van het proces, maar slechts tot uitsluiting van de hermeneut uit de religieuze gemeenschap. Ofwel men accepteert het religieuze proces en ontwikkelt normatieve hermeneutische theorieën conform de parameters ervan.

VAN DESCRIPTIEVE NAAR NORMATIEVE THEORIE

Op grond van de resultaten van de descriptieve hermeneutische reflectie onderwerp ik nu twee recent verdedigde normatieve hermeneutische theorieën aan een nader onderzoek. Ik vraag me daarbij af of deze voorstellen houdbaar zijn in het licht van de analyse van de case studies. De eerste positie die ik bespreek is de in de Angelsaksische wereld populaire visie op tekstbetekenis als het resultaat van

een communicatieve handeling. Dit is een in termen van een speech-act theorie geformuleerde verdediging van auteursintentionele betekenis. Wat een tekst betekent is wat de auteur ermee wilde zeggen. Ik acht deze theorie onhoudbaar als een *exclusieve* theorie over wat tekstbetekenis is. De analyse van de case-studies toont aan dat een auteursintentionele betekenis weliswaar mogelijk is als een poging de betekenis van de tekst in haar oorspronkelijke context te reconstrueren, maar dat er zeer veel gevallen zijn waarin interpreteren niet naar deze auteursintentionele betekenis op zoek zijn. Een hermeneutiek van de communicatieve handeling veronachtzaamt de complexiteit en diversiteit van het religieuze interpretatieproces.

Een hermeneutiek van de communicatieve handeling kan gezien worden als een poging om een complete correspondentie tussen tekst en lezer mogelijk te maken, waardoor de ideologische contradictie in de richting van een complete identificatie met de boodschap van de Schrift kan worden opgelost. De tweede positie die ik bespreek is de recentelijk door David Brown verdedigde hermeneutiek van de traditie. Brown lost de contradictie van het gezag van de Schrift naar de andere kant op, namelijk door de onfeilbaarheid van de Schrift radicaal op te geven. In Browns visie houdt de openbaring van God niet op bij de Schrift, maar gaat deze verder in de geschiedenis van de uitleg van de tekst. Het ontdekken van de waarheid is dan ook niet zozeer een kwestie van het reconstrueren van de oorspronkelijke betekenis van de tekst alleen, maar van het volgen van het spoor van de tekst door de geschiedenis heen, waarbij latere interpretaties vaak tot betere resultaten leiden dan eerdere. Mijn voornaamste bezwaar tegen Browns positie is dat zijn voorstel, hoewel voor sommigen acceptabel, voor veel traditionele gelovigen onaanvaardbaar is omdat het de identiteitsbepalende functie van canonieke teksten ter discussie stelt. Browns hermeneutiek van de traditie bouwt niet constructief voort op de ideologische contradictie van het gezag van de Schrift omdat hij één van de twee polen van die contradictie ontkent.

Nadat ik de bovengenoemde posities heb besproken, de positieve aspecten ervan heb gehonoreerd en de negatieve ervan heb aangewezen, presenteer ik tenslotte mijn eigen normatieve hermeneutische theorie, een hermenetiek van kritisch engagement. Ik verdedig dat er vanuit een generieke hermeneutiek – los van welke interpretatiepraktijk dan ook – geen criterium is te geven voor wat juiste interpretatie is. Wat rest is een succes-conditie voor hermeneutische theorieën, namelijk dat deze theorieën kritisch moeten voortbouwen op de parameters die binnen het religieuze discours worden gehanteerd, op straffe van te worden uitgesloten uit de gelovige interpreterende gemeenschap. Daarmee levert een theorie van kritisch engagement dus niet zozeer een materieel criterium voor correcte interpretatie, maar eerder een meta-hermeneutisch criterium voor de houdbaarheid van hermeneutische theorieën. Ik betoog echter dat dit niet het einde van de normatieve hermenetiek betekent. Het betekent slechts het einde van een generieke hermeneutiek die materiële criteria tracht te ontwikkelen voor elke mogelijk situatie. In plaats daarvan zal de hermeneutiek kritisch geëngageerd moeten zijn met concrete interpretatiepraktijken om gebaseerd op en in gesprek met de condities die gelden binnen deze praktijken, criteria voor een juiste interpretatie van teksten te ontwikkelen.

HISTORISCH-KRITISCH ENGAGEMENT

In het slothoofdstuk keer ik van een meta-hermeneutisch niveau terug naar het hermeneutische niveau, om het in het voorgaande hoofdstuk ontwikkelde succes criterium van kritisch engagement toe te passen op een concrete interpretatiepraktijk. Als voorbeeld van zo'n concrete praktijk kies ik een praktijk die in de recente geschiedenis van de theologie een dominante rol heeft gespeeld: de zogenaamde 'historisch-kritische methode'. De historische kritiek heeft bij uitstek de grenzen van een criterium van kritisch engagement verkend door de canonieke teksten uit de Bijbel vanuit een seculier perspectief te benaderen. In dit hoofdstuk probeer ik enerzijds de historisch-kritische methode tot een meer geëngageerde partner van de geloofsgemeenschap te maken en anderzijds de interne credibiliteit van de methode te vergroten.

Een eerste vraag die in verband met de historisch-kritische methode gesteld moet worden is wat exact met de term bedoeld wordt. Ik betoog dat omschrijving van de historisch-kritische methode in termen van de oorspronkelijke betekenis van de teksten niet weergeeft wat veel historisch-kritische exegeten in de praktijk doen. Veel methodische instrumenten die door historische onderzoekers van de Bijbel worden gebruikt veronderstellen of impliceren claims over de waarheid van de gebeurtenissen die in de teksten beschreven worden. Het is dan ook belangrijk bij de discussie over de historisch-kritische methode onderscheid te maken tussen die elementen van de methode die betekenis-georiënteerd zijn en die elementen die de vraag betreffen in hoeverre de in de teksten vermelde gebeurtenissen accuraat zijn weergegeven.

Hoewel de historische kritiek een enorme invloed heeft uitgeoefend op kerk en theologie en dat nog steeds doet, is de methode sinds de jaren zeventig van de twintigste eeuw ook onder kritiek gekomen van seculiere zijde. Ik bespreek verschillende bezwaren tegen de historisch-kritische methode en laat zien dat bepaalde aspecten van de methode terecht onder kritiek zijn gesteld, maar dat een historische benadering van teksten als geheel niet op grond van deze bezwaren kan worden verworpen.

In de discussie over de historisch-kritische methode speelt het vermeende 'neutrale' standpunt van de onderzoeker een cruciale rol. Een neutraal standpunt betekent volgens velen dat de onderzoeker claims die specifiek zijn voor een religieuze visie op de werkelijkheid niet zonder meer kan overnemen, het zgn. methodische atheïsme. Echter, daardoor betekent 'neutraal' niet hetzelfde als 'voor iedereen acceptabel', want door het accepteren van het methodisch atheïsme is de historisch-kritische methode voor veel religieuze gelovigen juist niet acceptabel. Ehrman gebruikt dan ook een verhelderend beeld als hij de historische onderzoeker vergelijkt met een officier van justitie. Deze behoort vrij van vooringenomenheden de schuldige van het misdrijf te zoeken, maar uiteraard niet zonder onafhankelijk bewijs de beweringen van de verdachte te accepteren.

Het beeld van de officier van justitie uitwerkend verdedig ik vervolgens dat het methodisch atheïsme in zijn traditionele vorm onhoudbaar is, omdat daarin niet op een afhankelijke manier onderzocht wordt of religieuze claims over wonderen juist zijn, maar de mogelijkheid dat er een wonder heeft plaatsgevonden,

op voorhand wordt uitgesloten. Ik betoog tevens dat ook wat ik een methodisch agnosme noem onhoudbaar is. Dit is de visie dat de historicus zich te allen tijde afzijdig moet houden van het beoordelen van de juistheid van religieuze claims in plaats van op voorhand de onjuistheid te accepteren. Ik betoog dat een methodisch agnosme in verband met het onderzoek van de Bijbel weliswaar houdbaar is, omdat bij het onderzoek van de Bijbel überhaupt geen doorslaggevend bewijs voorhanden is om over de historiciteit van gebeurtenissen te oordelen. Bij meer recente gebeurtenissen echter, waarbij er voldoende getuigenissen zijn om over de historiciteit van een aan God toegeschreven handeling te kunnen beslissen, leidt de positie van het methodisch agnosme tot een irrationele houding, waarbij de onderzoeker zich onthoudt van een oordeel in weerwil van voldoende bewijs voor de juistheid van het getuigenis.

Na op deze wijze een vorm van 'methodisch theïsme' te hebben verdedigd, bespreek ik vervolgens de interne houdbaarheid van het belangrijkste criterium voor authenticiteit in de Nieuwtestamentische wetenschap: het criterium van dissimilariteit. Met vele anderen betoog ik dat dit criterium in zijn traditionele vorm onhoudbaar is, maar ik laat tevens zien dat het ook in zijn meest gereviseerde vorm berust op een cirkelredenering, waarbij de inauthenticiteit van de te onderzoeken getuigenissen al bij voorbaat vaststaat. Dit heeft als uiterste consequentie dat het kritische onderzoek van het Nieuwe Testament in zijn huidige vorm over geen enkel criterium voor inauthenticiteit beschikt, aangezien alle andere criteria voor hun claim op inauthenticiteit afhankelijk zijn van het dissimilariteitscriterium. Dit betekent dat historisch onderzoek naar zijn huidige gedaante slechts in staat is de opvattingen van de gelovigen te bevestigen in plaats van die te testen op betrouwbaarheid. In termen van het beeld van de officier van justitie: de onderzoeker beschikt slechts over manieren om de schuld van de verdachte te beoordelen die zijn onschuld bevestigen.

In het licht van deze ontvullende conclusie bespreek ik tenslotte de heden ten dage nog steeds invloedrijke verbinding tussen historische kritiek en een evidentialistische epistemologie. Nog steeds menen veel historisch-kritische onderzoekers dat de gelovigen voor het gegronde aanvaarden van de getuigenissen uit de Schrift afhankelijk zijn van de resultaten van historisch-kritisch onderzoek. Ik betoog dat een dergelijke visie op de status van historisch onderzoek een evidentialistische epistemologie veronderstelt. Evidentialisme als epistemologische theorie is de laatste decennia op allerlei wijzen onder kritiek gesteld en wordt in toenemende mate als onhoudbaar beschouwd. Bovendien heb ik in het voorgaande aangetoond dat de historisch-kritische wetenschap criteriologisch bij lange na niet in staat is de rol te vervullen die haar vanuit een evidentialistische epistemologie wordt toebedeeld. Gezien de aard van de bijbelse overlevering kunnen historische onderzoekers op zijn best factoren aanwijzen die de waarschijnlijkheid van de juistheid van de berichtgeving vergroten of verkleinen, maar ze beschikken niet over de middelen om vast te stellen of gebeurtenissen die in bijbelverhalen worden genoemd werkelijk hebben plaats gevonden.

Curriculum Vitae

Maarten Wisse werd geboren op 13 juni 1973 te Middelburg. Hij volgde basisonderwijs te Aagtekerke. In 1991 behaalde hij het diploma Atheneum aan de Voetius Scholengemeenschap te Goes. Van 1991 tot 1998 studeerde hij theologie aan de Universiteit Utrecht. Vervolgens was hij van 1998 tot 2003 onderzoeker in opleiding in dienst van de Nederlandse Organisatie voor Wetenschappelijke onderzoek (NWO) en verbonden aan de vakgroep Godsdienstwijsbegeerte en Ethiek van de Faculteit Godgeleerdheid van de Universiteit Utrecht. Dit proefschrift is in het kader van deze laatste aanstelling tot stand gekomen. Momenteel is hij als docent ethiek en filosofie verbonden aan de opleiding Journalistiek en Communicatie van de Christelijk Hogeschool Ede.