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Triplex Usus Lectionis or On Reading the Bible Theologically, Philologically, and Spiritually[1]

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Abstract: This survey, reflecting two and a half centuries of biblical criticism, proposes three distinct modes of reading the Bible, each determined by the reader's role: theological reading, practiced by conscious members of faith communities whose group and personal identities are shaped by the Bible and tradition; philological reading, employed by scholars using biblical criticism to analyze the Bible as literature; and spiritual reading, undertaken by individuals seeking personal guidance. The varied strategies inherent in these modes, and their interrelationships, are explored.

Keywords: Biblical criticism; historical criticism; literary criticism; biblical theology; theology of the Old Testament, lectio divina; allegorical exegesis

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Introduction

This paper deals with the question of how we, descendants of the Western Christian tradition and particularly the Reformation, grandchildren of the European Enlightenment, and children of global Postmodernism, read the Bible today. The "we" referred in this paper represents the perspective of a Christian of Protestant background who engages in the debates of recent biblical scholarship.

This question becomes increasingly urgent at the intersection of the church and academia. Outside this intersection, within either church or academia, Bible reading often occurs under the respective rules of each of these two realms, without paying much attention to the rules of the other realm, because each realm asks different questions of the biblical text. Yet if mainline churches in Europe and America, with their tradition of academically trained ministers, navigate their students to just this intersection,

1 This study is a result of the research funded by the Czech Science Foundation as the project GAČR 24-13045S "Cult and Law in the Book of Exodus: A Contribution to the Literary History of the Pentateuch."

they have to take some effort to endure and perhaps make positive use of its inherent tensions.[2]

As it is the case in other areas of human thinking, each of the previous epochs has left a certain lens of hermeneutical decisions through which the Bible was to be read, and these lenses, acting together, determine our present understanding of it. The Reformation of 16th century elevated the status of the Bible, set up in opposition to the Catholic attention to the tradition and the authority of the Church.[3] During the Enlightenment, though, it were predominantly Protestant scholars (with glorious exceptions of Richard Simon, Alfred Loisy and others) who pioneered the path of the so called higher or historical criticism,[4] an approach that I call philological (see below). This is sometimes being explained as a form of the confessionally motivated attention to the Bible,[5] but resulted in the dethronement of it as the supreme norm in the life of a Christian. The alliance with modernity became often more characteristic of Protestants than their alliance with the Bible. This enabled them to be better tuned in to questions of their time. Yet, at the same time, it also brought an identity crisis, as Karl Barth and other recognized.[6] It was

2 A not very large group of works devoted to this topic represent e.g. David H. Kelsey, *The Uses of Scripture in Recent Theology* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1975); Christof Landmesser, Hartmut Zweigle and Ernst M. Dörrfuß (eds.), *Allein die Schrift!? Die Bedeutung der Bibel für Theologie und Pfarramt* (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2013). Recently, authors involved in so called theological interpretation of the Scripture pay attention to these questions, see 1.6 bellow.

3 See Martin Luther in his Diet of Worms in 1521, fulltext in Henry Bettenson and Chris Maunder, *Documents of the Christian Church* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 4th edn, 2011), 212. In Czech context see the *Iudex Egrensis*, a "hermeneutical agreement" between the Hussites and the representatives of the council in Basel about the norm of the forthcoming dispiue. According to the *Iudex*, it is going to be *lex divina, praxis Christi, apostolica et ecclesiae primitivae una cum conciliis doctoribusque, fundantibus se veraciter in eadem pro veracissimo et indefferenti iudice*, in *Monumenta conciliorum generalium seculi decimi quinti. Concilium Basileense. Scriptorum, Tomus I* (Wien, 1857), 220, digitalized at https://www.digitale-sammlungen.de/en/view/bsb10483602 (accessed 7. 2. 2025).

4 Jan Rohls, "Historical, Cultural and Philosophical Aspects of the Nineteenth Century with Special Regard to Biblical Interpretation," in Magne Sæbø et al. (eds.), *Hebrew Bible / Old Testament III. The History of Its Interpretation from Modernism to Post-Modernism. The Nineteenth Century and Twentieth Centuries* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2013), 31ff.

5 Jéan Zumstein, *Le protestantisme et les premiers chrétiens: Entre Jésus et Paul* (Géneve: Labor et fides, 2002).

6 Programatically in Karl Barth, *Der Römerbrief* (München: Chr.Kaiser Verlag, 2nd edn, 1922) and later in Karl Barth *Kirchliche Dogmatik I/2* (Zollikon-Zürich: Evangelischer

then taken as a kind of relief for the religiously affiliated part of the academy when reader-oriented approaches gained their place in biblical scholarship, emphasizing the active, creative role of the reader, the strategies of reception and application.[7] An exegete, like an observer in a physical experiment, is an intrinsic part of the analysis. The observer's standpoint, or in other words, the questions he or she brings to the Bible, necessarily influence the outcome of the endeavour.

This paper aims to contribute to this debate by suggesting three possible reader's positions from which the Bible can be read, namely the theological, philological, and spiritual one. The distinction draws on the hermeneutical tradition that has accompanied the church from its very inception. In this tradition strategies have been developed to deal with discrepancies between biblical texts and dogmatic or ethical assertions of believing communities. This tradition is rooted in the Jewish practice of continuous adaptation, revision, and rewriting its normative text, alongside a parallel movement to fix and delineate its content.[8] One cannot go around Alexandria, which was the birthplace of allegory, reading strategy that considers a text to denote something else (*allos* means other) than just the plain or literal meaning.[9] Both Philo around the turn of Christian era, and a series of later Christian

Verlag, 1945), 71. In Czech context and essentially refusing the legacy of historical-critical scholarship this position is formulated by Jaroslav Vokoun in his *Číst Bibli zase jako Bibli: Úvod do teologické interpretace Písma [Reading the Bible Again as Scripture: An Introduction to Theological Interpretation of Scripture]* (Prague: Česká biblická společnost, 2011).

7 Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1953); Wolfgang Iser, *Theorie der Literatur: Eine Zeitperspektive* (Konstanz: Universitätsverlag, 1992); John Barton, "The Legacy of the Literary-critical School and the Growing Opposition to Historico-critical Bible Studies. The Concept of 'History' Revisited – *Wirkungsgeschichte* and Reception History," in Magne Sæbø (ed.), *Hebrew Bible / Old Testament. The History of Its Interpretation III/2* (2015), 96–124.

8 On the process of adaptation and re-writing see the classical works of e.g. Wilfried Thiel, *Die deuteronomistische Redaktion von Jeremia 26–45 mit einer Gesamtbeurteilung der deuteronomistischen Redaktion des Buches Jeremia* (Neukirchen: Neukirchener, 1981). In broader terms about the practice of re-writing see Michael Fishbane, *Biblical Interpretation in Ancient Israel* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985); Michael Fishbane, "Inner-Biblical Exegesis," in Sæbø, *HBOT I/1* (1996), 33–48; and recently, blurring the clear border between literary and textual criticism, Nathan MacDonald, *The Making of the Tabernacle and the Construction of Priestly Hegemony* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2023).

9 Otto Kaiser, *Zwischen Athen und Jerusalem Studien zur griechischen und biblischen Theologie, ihrer Eigenart und ihrem Verhältnis* (Berlin/New York: Walter de Gruyter,

authors like Barnabas, Origen or much later Gregory the Great reckoned with a higher (or deeper) but hidden meaning behind biblical text. A synthesis of medieval hermeneutics, the *quadriga* of Augustinus of Dacia, speaks of four senses of the Scripture: not just the literary and allegoric, but also moral and eschatological meaning are to be discovered in biblical text.[10] In the 20th century the literary informed biblical scholarship has categorised various approaches to the Bible according to their respective scopes. Drawing on models developed by Meyr Howard Abrams[11] and Umberto Eco[12] distinguishing between *intentio auctoris*, *intention operis* and *intentio lectoris*, John Barton and Manfred Oeming with small variations would use this variety of scopes, understood as a guiding question, as a criterion for categorizing the research of the 20th century.[13]

It is from this scopus-based method that I embark on an approach that focuses on the particular role of a reader. As will be argued, our perception of the Bible is determined by the role we play as readers. It is our role as readers that sets the rules of the game of interpretation. I can see essentially three roles in which one, a professional exegete and to lesser extent also a non-professional reader, can read the Bible. One can read it as a conscious member of believing community, interpreting the Bible within the broader context of its theology. Alternatively, one can read it as a critical scholar, using philological tools to analyse the text like any other piece of ancient literature, putting consciously aside personal biases.[14] Finally, one can read it as an individual, believer or unbeliever, seeking in the text a personal,

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2023); James N. B. Carleton Paget, "The Christian Exegesis of the Old Testament in the Alexandrian Tradition," in Sæbø, *HBOT I/1* (1996), 476–542.

10 Put in verses, it says: "Litera gesta docet, quid credas allegoria, moralis quod agas, quo tendas anagogia," in Augustinus de Dacia, "Rotulus pugillaris examinatus atque editus," *Angelicum* 5 and 6 (1928–29), 253–278 and 548–574.

11 Meyr Howard Abrams, *The Mirror and the Lamp: Romantic Theory and the Critical Traditio* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1953).

12 Umberto Eco, *The Role of the Reader: Exploration in the Semiotics of the Text* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1979).

13 John Barton, *Reading the Old Testament Method in Biblical Study* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 2nd edn, 1996), 237–236; and Manfred Oeming, *Biblische Hermeutik: Eine Einleitung* (Darmstadt: Primus Verlag, 1998).

14 An argument for a strict line between philological and theological approach, formulated in polemics with the idea of a biblical theology, has been provided by James Barr, *Comparative Philology and the Text of the Old Testament* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1968).

spiritual inspiration. The three statuses not only are not mutually exclusive; on the contrary, it will be argued for their mutual complementarity. Yet each one of them exhibits rules of their own, their particular *usus*. To understand the respective *usus*, its guiding question and the methods it employs, can help us to make use of reading the Bible in various contexts of today and avoid (or at least localize) the conflict that interpreting the Bible sometimes evokes.

As an appendix to each of the three chapters a sketch follows on how the respective approach interprets one and the same biblical passage.

1. Theological Reading of the Bible

By beginning with this approach to reading the Bible, I pay tribute to the longest period in history, where the Bible was read as a normative book (originally "The Books"[15]) with direct and often exclusive authority and relevance to the religious life of a believing community and its individual members. For centuries, this approach was unquestioningly taken for granted. The concept that not merely any text, but a deliberate set of texts, exhibits religious authority is described by the term canon, meaning "the measure." Its origin is explained in terms of *revelation*.[16] This term doesn't primarily mean ecstatic experiences. Rather, it claims an axiomatic status for certain set of texts within the believing community. In the Old Testament, the Torah given through Moses to the people of Israel epitomizes the external, not invented or developed character of this set. For Christians, the gospel of Jesus the Christ understood as the true embodiment of the God's will (eventually the will of the God of the Old Testament), recorded in epistles and other early Christian texts collected in the New Testament, became the very core of revelation, shedding new light on everything including the texts of the Bible of Israel, thus becoming the Old Testament of the Church. The theological reading of the Bible has therefore always been a biased enterprise, carried out under the following assumptions:

15 John Barton, *A History of the Bible. The Book and Its Faiths* (London: Penguin, 2020), 246.

16 See the obligatory chapters De revelatione in classical systematic theologies, summarized in Horst Georg Pöhlmann, *Abriß der Dogmatik* (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlaghaus Gerd Mohn, 6th edn, 1985).

1.1 It is understood to have a salvific effect. Both Judaism and Christianity are historical religions, rooted in events the Bible identifies as foundational for their respective communities. This historical anchoring in past events and future promises provides these communities with a distinctive framework and character. To be a member of such a community entails accepting this framework as a determinant for one's orientation in the world.[17] Besides, theological reading strengthens the collective memory and the social cohesion of believing community. The ultimate goal of theological reading of the Bible, though, is an encounter with the Word of God, a theological concept that involves the "fusion of horizons"[18] of the reader and the religious tradition implied in given biblical text. This is why the pragmatics of theological reading leans always towards worship.

1.2 To be used in this way, the Bible has to have – in spite of its inner plurality – a common denominator, that holds together its various disparate voices and invites the reader to perceive it as such. We can call this common denominator a theology or a *kerygma*. The plurality of Bible's voices is in itself not an obstacle to the claim of a kerygma behind the text. On the contrary, it can be seen as a reflection of the complexity of the world. The task of the theological interpretation would be to bring even the "naughtiest" texts of the Bible upon the common denominator of an overall kerygma. The theological reading resembles a holistic, *Gestalt* therapy approach, seeking to connect any particular passage to the whole. The "whole" of this endeavour is always more than just the sum of the Bible's individual voices. The meaning of a text arises from its engagement with questions posed to it from within a broader theological context. What might seem like circular reasoning in theological reading is actually a feature of its holistic approach, where the whole influences the parts and vice versa.

17 It was especially Gerhard von Rad who in his *Theologie des Alten Testaments I: Die Theologie der geschichtlichen Überlieferungen Israels* (München: Kaiser, 4th edn, 1963), 117–128, emphasized the historical character of the faith proposed in the Old Testament. See the debate about it in Erhard Blum, William Johnstone and Christoph Markschies (eds.), *Das Alte Testament – ein Geschichtsbuch?* (Münster: LIT Verlag, 2005) and its evaluation in Petr Sláma, *New Theologies of the Old Testament and History. The Function of History in Modern Biblical Scholarship* (Zürich: LIT Verlag, 2017).

18 Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode Grundzüge einer philosophischen Hermeneutik* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1960), 269.

1.3 The theological reading of the Bible is a sedimentary process. Previous exegetical decisions are remembered, re-evaluated and transmitted in light of new insights and perspectives.[19] As the sedimentary process of adaptation continues in the exegetical tradition of the church, the attested exegetical decisions become normative for the collective identity of Christianity – in a way, they become part of the canon. As mentioned above, the Bible itself provides numerous examples of both preservation and change.[20] These include e.g. the Deuteronomistic adaptations of the prophets[21] or the Priestly adaptation of Deuteronomy in the Holiness Code.[22] Far deeper adaptations of the Old Testament can be seen in the New Testament, as evidenced e.g. in Paul's letters or in most of the reflexive quotations in Matthew.[23]

19 This is how all church dogmata came to being, determining subsequent theological interpretation, see Henri de Lubac, *Medieval Exegesis, Vol. 1: The Four Senses of Scripture* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1998, originally 1959); John Barton, *Oracles of God Perceptions of Ancient Prophecy in Israel after the Exile* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986); Jaroslav Pelikán, *Whose Bible Is It? A History of the Scriptures Through the Ages* (New York: Viking Adult, 2005). On the Jewish side, a case study is provided in M. Krupp, *Den Sohn opfern? Die Isaak-Überlieferung bei Juden, Christen und Muslimen* (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 1995). A parallel treatise of the sedimentary character of exegetical traditions is in Christoph Dohmen and Günter Stemberger, *Hermeneutik der Jüdischen Bibel und des Alten Testaments* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1996).

20 See Michael Fishbane, *Biblical Interpretation in Ancient Israel* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985); R. Walter L. Moberly, *The Old Testament of the Old Testament: Patriarchal Narratives and Mosaic Yahwism* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1992); Konrad Schmid, *Schriftgelehrte Traditionsliteratur: Fallstudien zur innerbiblischen Schriftauslegung im Alten Testament* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck 2011); Walter Bührer (ed.), *Schriftgelehrte Fortschreibungs- und Auslegungsprozesse. Textarbeit im Pentateuch, in Qumran, Ägypten uns Mesopotamien*, FAT II/108 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2017); Michael Fishbane, Inner-Biblical Exegesis: Types and Strategies of Interretation in Ancient Israel, in Michael Fishbane, *Biblical Text and Exegetical Culture* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2022), 147–162.

21 E.g. John Barton, *Amos's Oracles Against the Nations. A Study of Amos 1,3–2,5* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980); Winfried Thiel, *Die deuteronomistische Redaktion von Jeremia 26–45 mit einer Gesamtbeurteilung der deuteronomistischen Redaktion des Buches Jeremia* (Neukirchen: Neukirchener Verlag, 1981); Jakob Wöhrle, *Die frühen Sammlungen des Zwölfprophetenbuches. Entstehung und Komposition* (Berlin: Walther de Gruyter, 2008).

22 Christoph Nihan, *From Priestly Torah to Pentateuch* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2007), 545–559; Mathias Hopf, *Recht, Ethos und Heiligkeit. Eine rechtsanthropologische und rechtstheoretische Studie zum Heiligkeitsgesetz (Lev 17–26)* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2024).

23 Petr Pokorný and Ulrich Heckel, *Einleitung in das Neue Testament Seine Literatur und Theologie im Überblick* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2007).

1.4 The Enlightenment and the advent of historical criticism in 18th and 19th centuries dealt a severe blow to important parts of the framework that had hitherto viewed the kerygma within an accepted intellectual framework. As a result, theological reading of the Bible lost its innocent commonplace (and its closest ally: the philological reading, see below) and had to ask its very *raison d'etre*. Not only was the Bible shown not to be a geographical or biological book, but some of its central claims about salvation history, the historicity of key events, as well as the uniqueness of biblical religion and literature were challenged or simply rejected.[24] At this point, theological and philological readings of the Bible began to diverge.

1.5 This has led to the emergence of a new genre in biblical studies: Old Testament/New Testament theology. This genre can be seen as a response to the challenges posed by modernity to biblical scholarship. It is an attempt to make – after all – sense of the Bible in light of the deconstruction that modernity has brought about.[25] All respectable theologies of the Old/New Testament have to take into consideration the recent state of critical research, yet at the same time they have to find both a common denominator of the Old/New Testament and its relevance for present day. The attempts to do so range from religious or intellectual history,[26] through attempted recurs to narrativity[27] up

24 Hans-Joachim Kraus, *Geschichte der historisch-kritischen Erforschung des Alten Testaments von der Reformation bis zur Gegenwart* (Neukirchen: Verlag der Buchhandlung des Erziehungsvereins, 1956).

25 Sláma, *New Theologies*, 79–96.

26 To mention just a few of the, we can start from the oldest title bearing this name, Georg Lorenz Bauer, *Theologie des Alten Testaments oder Abriß der religiösen Begriffe der alten Hebräer. Von den ältesten Zeiten bis auf den Anfang der christlichen Epoche. Zum Gebrauch akademischer Vorlesungen* (Leipzig: Weygandsche Buchhandlung, 1796); Bernhard Stade, *Biblische Theologie des Alten Testaments* (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1905) or recently Konrad Schmid, *Theologie des Alten Testaments* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2019) and Michaela Bauks, *Theologie des Alten Testaments Religionsgeschichtliche und bibelhermeneutische Perspektiven* (Böhlau: UTB, 2018). Prominent in this discussion is the suggestion by Rainer Albertz to relinquish the endeavour of Old Testament Theology and to explicitly confine scholarship to the religious history of Israelite belief, as advocated in Rainer Albertz, "Religionsgeschichte Israels statt Theologie des Alten Testaments! Plädoyer für eine forschungsgeschichtliche Umorientierung," *Jahrbuch für biblische Theologie* 10 (1995), 3–24.

27 Von Rad, *Theologie des Alten Testaments I*; Gerhard von Rad, *Theologie des Alten Testaments II: Die Theologie der prophetischen Überlieferungen Israels* (München: Kaiser, 4th edn, 1964); Rolf Rendtorff, *Theologie des Alten Testaments. Ein kanonischer Entwurf. Band 1: Kanonische Grundlegung* (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1999) and Rolf Rendtorff, *Theologie des Alten Testaments Ein kanonischer Entwurf. Band 2: The-*

to dogmatic tracts or structuralist models.[28] However, they all interpret the Bible according to a proposed underlying system of belief and practice that has to have some bearing for the present reader.

1.6 Beyond this relatively nascent genre of Old Testament theology, in the last three decades some scholars have begun to advocate for a distinctively theological reading of the Old Testament.[29] Programmatic efforts in this direction include, for example, the work of Walter Moberly.[30] Drawing on Patristic exegesis, as presented by Henri de Lubac, and the Reformation tradition's focus on the canonical shape of Scripture, as articulated in Europe by the Amsterdam school[31] and in the United States by Brevard S. Childs,[32] and often informed by literary theory and Ricoeur's notion of *second naïveté*,[33]

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matische Entfaltung (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 2001); Jörg Jeremias, *Theologie des Alten Testaments* (Göttingen: Vandenhoek & Ruprecht, 2016).

28 Walther Eichrodt, *Theologie des Alten Testaments I–III* (Leipzig: Heinrichs, 1933); Ludwig Köhler, *Theologie des Alten Testaments* (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr,1936); Walter Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament. Testimony, Dispute, Advocacy* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997).

29 See e.g. Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *Dictionary for Theological Interpretation f the Bible* (Grand Rapids, Baker Academics, 2005); John Goldingay, *Key Questions about Biblical Interpretation: Old Testament Answers* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2011).

30 R. Walter L. Moberly, *Old Testament Theology Reading the Hebrew Bible as Christian Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2013). In Czech context, Moberly's endeavour has been introduced and advocated by Viktor Ber, "Starý zákon a teologie: Interpretace Písma podle Waltera Moberlyho," [Old Testament and Theology: The Interpretation of the Scripture according to Walter Moberly] *Teologická reflexe* 22 (2016), 145–157. Following Moberly's approach, Ber provides Czech readers with an example of this approach in Viktor Ber, *O Hospodinu Bohu živém: Texty a témata k teologii Starého zákona [The Living God in the Old Testament: Texts and Themes in Old Testament Theology]* (Prague: Návrat domů, 2016). From a systematic-theological perspective, this approach has been applauded by Jaroslav Vokoun, a Czech herald of Radical Orthodoxy; see his Reading the Bible Again as the Bible.

31 See Martin Kessler (ed.), *Voices From Amsterdam: A Modern Tradition of Reading Biblical Narrative* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1994); Uwe F. W. Bauer, *All diese Worte. Impulse zur Schriftauslegung aus Amsterdam. Expliziert an Ex 13,17–14* (Frankfurt a. M.: Peter Lang, 1991); Kornelis Heiko Moskotte, *Bijbels ABC* (Nijkerk: Callenbach, 1941).

32 Brevard S. Childs, *Biblical Theology of the Old and New Testaments Theological Reflection on the Christian Bible* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993).

33 The notion of *second naïveté* was coined by Paul Ricoeur in *The Symbolism of Evil* (New York: Harper and Row, 1967), 351: "Does that mean that we could go back to a primitive *naïveté*? Not at all. In every way, something has been lost, irremediably lost: immediacy of belief. But if we can no longer live the great symbolisms of the sacred in accordance with the original belief in them, we can, we modern men, aim at a second *naïveté* in and through criticism. In short, it is by interpreting that we can hear again. Thus it is

these scholars attempt an interpretation of the Bible that proceeds from the two-part Christian canon, culminating in Jesus Christ. They are fully aware that reading Bible in this way inevitably alters the original meaning of numerous biblical passages. Yet, having caught biblical authors and redactors doing the same with previous traditions – and thus posing a justifiable question as to what the true original meaning of a text is – they feel fully justified in adopting this very interpretive method.

1.7 Finally, it should be mentioned, that what I call a theological reading can in essence occur outside the realm of specific denominations. In such cases, the holistic interpretation would relate the Bible to a different value system, such as e.g. humanism or Marxism. It may therefore be more appropriate to call the theological reading an ideological one. And it's also true other way round: from a non-confessional perspective, any theological reading is essentially ideological.

Excursus I: Exodus 3:1–4:17 read theologically

Theologically, the story of the commission of Moses is particularly significant due to its apparent explanation of God's name in Exodus 3:14. The elusive clause "I am who I am"[34] suggests the connection of the name *Yhwh* with the Hebrew verb *h-y-h*, "to be" o "to become". Yet the way the God's name is presented conceals more than in reveals. The language pun can be interpreted as the most artistic way of expressing God's invisibility and his transcendence. It can be disputed whether it really should be translated in present tense, as the RSV puts it, or rather in future tense, emphasizing God's eschatological character, or at least its progressive aspect. The fact that the verbal form *ehyeh* could possibly be both qal and hiphil enables ontological speculations about God as a primal cause of all being.[35] The Greek rendering of the clause, which says "I am the being" is in itself a parade example of how a general framework (in this case a discourse of popular Hellenistic philosophy) determines the interpretation.

in hermeneutics that the symbol's gift of meaning and the endeavor to understand by deciphering are knotted together."

34 Quoted according to RSV. MT: אֶהְיֶה אֲשֶׁר אֶהְיֶה; LXX ἐγώ εἰμι ὁ ὤν.

35 So Ludwig Köhler, *Theologie des Alten Testaments* (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr,1936), 264. Discussed in Brevard S. Childs, *Exodus. A Commentary* (London: SCM, 1987), 69ff; Rainer Albertz, *Exodus 1–18* (Zürich: TVZ, 2012), 84–87; Helmut Utzschneider and Wolfgang Oswald, *Exodus 1–15* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 2013), 125–135.

Beyond the ontology of God and his transcendence, a theological reading would focus on God's faithfulness ("I will be with you," 3:12), as already evidenced to the patriarchs in Genesis ("the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob," 3:6 and 15). It would elaborate on his compassion ("[…] I know their suffering and I have come down to deliver them […] the cry of the people of Israel has come to me and I have seen the oppression […]," 3:7, 8, 9) and his control over events.[36] This, in turn, raises a series of ethical dilemmas that a theological reading must address: the hardening of Pharaoh's heart,[37] the expulsion of the Canaanites from the promised land, or the plundering of Egyptian neighbours (3:21. 22).[38]

A theological reading could also elaborate on the most extensive part of the pericope: Moses' reluctance to obey God's commission. The repetition of his name in Exodus 3:4 is a literary device also used in the callings of Abraham (Genesis 22), Samuel (1Sam 3:10), and Saul/Paul (Acts 9:4) in the New Testament. His reluctance to accept the task echoes Gideon (Judges 6:11–22) and Jeremiah (Jeremiah 1:6). The scene can be understood as a paradigm for the exogenous character of biblical faith, which was not invented by humans (hence Moses' initial reluctance is understandable) but rather intersected the lives of the elect ones and transformed them. A theological reading could further note various intertextual allusions enriching the story, such as the burning bush (*sane* in Hebrew) reminiscent of Mount Sinai, and the dialectic between seeing and listening.

2. Philological reading of the Bible

Philology is in this paper understood as "the scientific analysis of written records and literary texts"[39] or, in a slightly broader definition as "the branch

36 Von Rad, *Theologie des Alten Testaments I*, 195–200; Brueggemann, *Testimony, Dispute, Advocacy*, 124; Jörg Jeremias, *Theologie des Alten Testaments* (Göttingen: Vandenhoek & Ruprecht, 2016), Michaela Bauks, *Theologie des Alten Testaments. Religionsgeschichtliche und bibelhermeneutische Perspektiven* (Böhlau: UTB, 2018), 338–352.

37 Edgar Kellenberger-Sassi, *Die Verstockung Pharaos. Exegetische und auslegungsgeschichtliche Untersuchungen zu Exodus 1–15* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 2006).

38 George W. Coats, "Despoiling the Egyptians," *VT XVIII* (1968), 450–458; Petr Sláma, "'Thus they despoiled the Egyptians' (Exod 12:36 and parallels): On the Scandal of Asking Silver and Gold from Innocent Neighbours," in Viktor Ber (ed.), *Nomos and Violence Dimensions in Bible and Theology* (Zürich: LIT Verlag, 2019), 37–44.

39 "Philology," *Dictionary.com*. Source: https://www.dictionary.com/browse/philology (accessed 24. 11. 2024).

of knowledge that deals with the historical development of languages, esp. as displayed in literary texts; literary or textual criticism."[40] As indicated above, I use the term philology applied to biblical scholarship as a synonym for historical criticism as developed in continental theology in the aftermath of Johann Philipp Gabler, who attributes biblical scholarship unanimously to "historical modus".[41] The roots of philology reach – similarly to theological reading – to Alexandria as well as to Pergamon in Asia Minor, where the heritage of classical Greek literature outside Greece was cultivated. The interest in historical and literary aspects of the Bible accompanied the Church from its very beginning, marked by the names of Origen,[42] Jerome,[43] or later the Parisian school of Saint Victor,[44] or even later Erasmus[45] or Johannes Buxdorf.[46] But it was only during the Enlightenment in Europe that the philological approach put the assumptions of Christian theological reading of the Bible aside. Series of "criticisms", methods of inquiry, emerged during the 19th and 20th centuries (be it the historical, the literary, the form or tradition, or the redaction criticism),[47] led by the question coined by Leopold von Ranke of "how was it really":[48] How was it really with the events narrated in the Bible, how was it with the assumed sources of Penta- or as the case may be Hexateuch and other larger units, how was it really with the fixed forms that would correspond with recurrent social events on a pre-literary stage of biblical texts, how was it with the editorial intentions of those who have united the existing pieces of texts to higher units. Each of the criticisms

40 "Philology," *Oxford English Dictionary*. Source: https://www.oed.com/search/dictionary/?scope=Entries&q=philology (accessed 6. 2. 2025).

41 Johann P. Galbler, "De iusto discrimine theologiae biblicae et dogmaticae regundisque recte utriusque finibus," in Karl-Wilhelm Niebuhr and Christfried Böttrich, *Johann Philipp Gabler 1753–1862* (Leipzig: EVA, 2004), 15–41.

42 James N. B. Carleton Paget, "The Christian Exegesis of the Old Testament in the Alexandrian Tradition," in Sæbø, *HBOT I/1* (1996), 478–542.

43 René Kieffer, "Jerome: His Exegesis and Hermeneutics," in Sæbø, *HBOT I/1* (1996), 663–681.

44 G. R. Evans, "The Victorines at Paris," in Sæbø, *HBOT I/2* (2000), 257–260.

45 Erika Rummel, "The Textual and Hermeneutic Work of Desederius Erasmus of Rotterdam," in Sæbø, *HBOT II* (2008), 215–230.

46 Stephen G. Burnett, "Later Christian Hebraists," in Sæbø, *HBOT II* (2008), 785–801.

47 For details see last two volumes of Magne Sæbø, *HBOT III/1. The History of Its Interpretation from Modernism to Post-Modernism. The Nineteenth Century and Twentieth Centuries* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2013), and *III/2. From Modernism to Post-Modernism* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2015).

48 See Sláma, *New Theologies*, 59.

was promising to enable better understanding of the Bible by elucidating a particular aspect of its emergence – and in many ways it really did.

The assumptions and goals of the philological approach can be therefore put together as follows:

2.1 The philological approach is oriented historically. It seeks, to make use of Krister Stendahl's distinction, what the text meant, rather than – or as an inevitable prerequisite of – what it means.[49] It sees its task in reconstructing the communication situation(s) in which a text, as a part of this communication, came to being, i.e., was conceived as a plot or a poem, was put down in script, modified and accepted into larger unit(s).

2.2 The philological approach primarily involves comparing events and literary processes in cultures neighbouring biblical Israel. Historical and textual hypotheses are inferred by analogy with similar phenomena in these cultures. This approach hinges on the assumption that the Bible, the events it narrates, the poems and admonitions it proclaims, and the laws it stipulates are subject to the same historical and literary rules that run in other literary texts. Bible is therefore understood as any other piece of world literature.

2.3. Given the historical character of the Bible and the beliefs based on it, as it was discussed in the paragraph 1.1, it is no surprise that the subgenre of a "history of Israel" played a prominent role in philologically operating biblical scholarship. It provided, to use Marxist terminology, the material infrastructure upon which (and only thus) any literary superstructure was conceivable. Despite the variety of models of Israel's past (including the question of Israel's name and what exactly this name originally denoted), the minimal scholarly consensus of recent decades, informed by the rapid advancement of archaeology, recognizes two kingdoms of uneven size that emerged at the outset of the Iron Age, with the decline of Egyptian dominance in the region. Later, after the Assyrian conquest at the end of the 8th century BCE, the dominant northern kingdom declined, leaving the southern kingdom to carry on. But it was only after the shock of the Babylonian conquest of Jerusalem that the exiled elites of the southern state, probably in some connection with the attempts to restore the national life under

49 Krister Stendahl, "Biblical Theology, Contemporary," *IBD I* (1962), 418–432, further elaborated in Krister Stendahl, *Meanings: The Bible as Document and as Guide* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984), 11–44.

Persians, started to shape the inherited traditions into a concise historical narrative reflecting its newly acquired monotheistic belief.[50]

2.4 It follows that the philological reading of the Bible is itself an atheistic enterprise. This does not, of course, imply that those who engage in this approach are necessarily atheists themselves. But in terms of method, the phenomena it explains are taken within the natural course of things. The category of revelation, that I spoke of above in connection with the theological reading, does not play a role in analysing the texts in this way.

2.5 On the other hand though, influenced by the linguistic turn in human sciences,[51] some proponents of the philological reading, especially those interested in the history of tradition (*Überlieferungsgeschichte*) or criticism of redaction, have learnt to appreciate the deliberate shape of the final form of text and the endeavour of composition and redaction that lingers behind it.[52] As we have already mentioned above (in paragraph 1.6), the process of continuous reinterpretation of older materials became the orientation for them to understand the complexity and inner plurality of the Bible. The final form of the text or more importantly the direction of its literary development bears some theological quality[53] – or at least presents a datum that has theological bearing. For some of them the model of intellectual history provides a model for explaining how the New Testament could be connected with the Old Testament.[54]

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50 I follow here the well informed and balanced summary of debate of archaeology and biblical scholarship as provided by Bernd U. Schipper in his Geschichte Israels in der Antike (München: C. H. Beck, 2023), and by Christian Frevel in the English update of his previous German monograph published as *History of Israel* (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2023). See also Filip Čapek, *Temples in Transformation: Iron Age Interactions and Continuity in Material Culture and in Textual Traditions* (Zürich: LIT Verlag, 2023).

51 In the aftermath of Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode. Grundzüge einer philosophischen Hermeneutik* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1960), see especially Richard Rorty, *The Linguistic Turn Essays in Philosophical Method* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1967).

52 It is here that canonical criticism emerges, see James A. Sanders, *Torah and Canon* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1972); Brevard S. Childs, *Old Testament Theology in a Canonical Context* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986). For a critique of this approach, see e.g. James Barr, *Holy Scripture: Canon, Authority, Criticism* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983).

53 Von Rad, *Theologie des Alten Testaments I*, 117–142; Rolf Rendtorff, "Die Hermeneutik einer Kanonischen Theologie des Alten Testaments Prolegomena," *JhBT* 10 (1995), 35–44.

54 Manfred Oeming, *Gesamtbiblische Theologien der Gegenwart das Verhaltnis von AT und NT in der hermeneutischen Diskussion seit Gerhard von Rad. Zweite, verbesserte und mit einem Nachwort versehene Auflage* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1988).

Excursus II: Exodus 3:1–4:17 read philologically

A comprehensive discussion of the philological and historical-critical interpretation of this passage since the Enlightenment is beyond the scope of this survey. The following remarks will only hint the way the philological reading proceeds.

Within continental biblical criticism, the philological reading involves the debate on the composition of the Pentateuch (or Hexateuch).[55] A recurring questions of Pentateuchal studies concerns the existence and relationship of two distinct commissions of Moses: the initial call in Exodus 3 and 4, and a second commission in Exodus 6 and 7, whereby the latter shows several motifs that also appear in the former.[56] On the narrative level, the second commission is to be understood as a response to Pharaoh's refusal to listen to Moses and the subsequent intensification of hardships for the enslaved people. This puts the entire project under the question and makes a second commission to reassure the faltering leader necessary. From a literary critical perspective though, Exodus 6 and 7 present a priestly version of the commission, while the account in Exodus 3 and 4 exhibits characteristics typical of non-priestly literature.[57] Additionally, some scholars identify distinct ele-

55 The debate has been marked by the seminal works of Julius Wellhausen, *Die Composition des Hexateuchs und der historischen Bücher des Alten Testaments* (Berlin: G. Reimer, 1899); John Van Seters, *In Search of History Historiography in the Ancient World and the Origins of Biblical History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983); Erhard Blum, *Studien zur Komposition des Pentateuchs* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1990); Konrad Schmid, *Erzväter und Exodus: Untersuchungen zur doppelten Begründung der Ursprünge Israels innerhalb der Geschichtsbücher des Alten Testaments* (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener, 1999); and Jan C. Gertz et al. (eds.), *The Formation of the Pentateuch* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2016).

56 The parallels between the two accounts suggest some kind of mutual dependence. As Martin Noth observes: "Daß hier der Erzählungsgegenstand der Berufung des Mose, der den Inhalt schon des Abschnittes 3,1–4,16 bildete, sich wiederholt, ist mit Händen zu greifen." In Martin Noth, *Exodus* (Berlin: EVA, 1958), 42. These parallels range from the motif of God's anthropomorphic compassion (3:7–8 // 6:5) and the reminiscence of the patriarchs (3:6, 15, 16; 4:5 // 7:3, 8) to the command for Moses to lead the Israelites out of slavery (3:10, 17 // 6:6–7) and the promise of land (3:8, 17 // 6:4, 8). Notably, the name *Yhwh* is prominent in both passages. However, while Exodus 3:12, 14 features an intricate pun on God's name, emphasizing God's presence ("I am with you," 12; "I am has sent me," 14b) and playing with ontology ("I am who I am," 14a), Exodus 6:3 creates a historical scheme distinguishing two epochs of divine revelation ("I appeared to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, as *el Shadday*, but by my name *Yhwh* I did not make myself fully known to them").

57 So recognized by Wellhausen, *Composition*, 61 ff and repeated ever since.

ments of Yahwistic and Elohistic traditions within the passage of Exodus 3 and 4.[58] Proponents of tradition-criticism believe that these elements may have merged already at the level of oral transmission before being recorded in writing.[59] According to the priestly version, Moses was commissioned in Egypt, contrary to the non-priestly account which places the commission in Midian. Considering this dichotomy, the question arises: which version exhibits literary dependence on the other? Traditionally, the priestly version has been viewed as a later reworking of "earlier narratives, even in their interweaving with each other and in their supplementation by secondary additions."[60] However, some scholars argue for the primacy of the priestly version,[61] particularly in its treatment of the name *Yhwh*. While the priestly version proposes a gradual revelation of the deity ("I appeared to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, as *El Shaddai*, but by my name *Yhwh* I did not make myself known to them," Exodus 6:3), the non-priestly version makes use of the name *Yhwh* to create a pun, connecting God's proper name with the verb *h-y-h* ("to be" or "to become"), which can have both qal and hiphil forms, which results in a subtle ontological reflection, an idea wholeheartedly embraced by the Septuagint. Priestly authors would likely not have omitted such an important ontological reflection, if they were aware of it.

Another example of a motif with dual interpretations is Moses' reluctance to accept the mission. In the priestly narration, Moses' objections resemble those of later prophets (in Exodus 6:12 and 30 Moses speaks of his "uncircumcised lips," see Jeremiah 1:6 or 17:16). In contrast, the non-priestly account, which is itself an elaborated composition, reports on Moses' fourfold refusal to accept the call, which culminates in his statement "send, I pray, some other person" (Exodus 4:13), which provokes real anger from *Yhwh* and explains the origin of the priesthood's dominance. From the non-priestly point of view, the dominance of priests is an emergency measure caused by

58 Wellhausen, *Composition*, 70; Axel Graupner, *Der Elohist. Gegenwart und Wirksamkeit des transzendenten Gottes in der Geschichte* (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 2002).

59 Helmut Utzschneider and Wolfgang Oswald, *Exodus 1–15* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 2013), 36.

60 Noth, *Exodus*, 44.

61 E.g. Konrad Schmid, *Genesis and the Moses Story* (Pennsylvania: Eisenbrauns, 2010), 66. Thomas Römer summarizes the debate in Thomas Römer, "Exodus 3–4 und die aktuelle Pentateuchdiskussion," in Riemer Roukema, *The Interpretation of Exodus. Studies in Honour of Cornelis Houtman* (Leuven: Peeters, 2006).

Moses' reluctance. It is an aetiology of this dominance from the perspective of non-priestly circles that have to come to terms with the second temple hierocracy during the Persian period.[62]

3. Spiritual reading of the Bible

Spiritual reading of the Bible is an approach that relates to the text – admittedly and programmatically – from within one's own context. Our own situation, problems, and questions set the horizon of our perception when encountering the text. This reading presupposes that God speaks to individuals, plans and guides their lives – and does so primarily through Scripture.[63] Since the main effort in spiritual reading consists in finding relevance of the text to the reader's situation, it can – and often does – disregard the literary and historical context of the text, leading to what can be called atomized or a-contextual reading. The danger of this way of reading is obvious: it can end up in mere subjectivism, and one can easily indulge in delusion. The text, torn out of its context, can serve various purposes, including the ones entirely remote from its original meanings.

Regardless of these dangers, there has been a long tradition of practising just this way of reading throughout the history, both among Jews and Christians. In the Second Temple Judaism, the *peseher* as attested in Qumran, is an example of expounding Bible in relation to sectarians' contemporary agenda. Anachronic usage of the biblical verses are characteristic for both the Gospel of Matthew with its fulfilment quotations[64] legitimizing aspects of Jesus' appearance as a fulfilment of Old Testament prophecies, and for Rabbinic *midrashim*, based on the assumption of dual Torah and its creative interpretation, legitimizing existing *halakhah*.[65] Original and surprising as these individual interpretations initially may have been, once remembered

62 Elaborated in Petr Sláma, *Exodus 1–15: Jak jsem zatočil s Egyptem* [*Exodus 1–15: How I Screwed Egypt*, a commentary in Czech] (Praha: ČBS, 2018).

63 See the discussion of Frank Buchman, one of the proponents of this approach, in Dietrich Meyer, "Bibellese und stille Zeit," in Peter Zimmerling (ed.), *Handbuch Evangelische Spiritualität Band 3: Praxis* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2020), 478.

64 See Petr Pokorný and Ulrich Heckel, *Einleitung in das NT*, 444.

65 Günter Stemberger, "Die Schriftauslegung der Rabbinen," in Christoph Dohmen and Günter Stemberger, *Hermeneutik der Jüdischen Bibel und des Alten Testaments* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 2nd revised edn, 2019), 82–119; Arnold M. Goldberg, "Die Schrift der rabbinischen Schriftausleger," in *Frankfurter Judaistische Beiträge* 15 (1987), 1–15.

and recorded by believing communities, they would push the limits of respective theological systems and become determinative for subsequent theological reading (as was described in 1.3).

In the Middle Ages, the individual existential reading of the Bible has been cultivated by Catholic orders. It was in the monastic milieu that *lectio divina*, meditative reading of prescribed biblical passages, emerged. According to the 12th century Carthuisan prior Guido II, *lectio divina* consists of 1) *lectio*, reading the biblical text, 2) *meditatio*, intellectual reflecting its meaning, 3) *oratio*, responding to God in personal prayer, and 4) *contemplatio,*[66] when the reader, submitting him- or herself to the God, experiences ecstasy of unity of creation and the Creator.[67] It is upon this distinction that Martin Luther builds his triadic model: reading, meditation, and temptation. In doing so, he substitutes contemplation – which leads to *unio mystica* – with its direct antithesis, thereby clearly defining humanity's stance before God.[68]

Among Protestants, the Moravians' Daily Watchwords (*Losungen*), originally introduced in the 1720s to strengthen the sense of belonging of the small missionary church,[69] can and often are used similarly: they are read oracularly – with the question of what message God is sending me today.[70]

66 "One day, when I was busy working with my hands I began to think about our spiritual work, and all at once four stages in spiritual exercise came into my mind reading, meditation, prayer and contemplation […]. Reading is the careful study of the Scripture, concentrating all one's power on it. Meditation is the busy application of the mind to seek with the help of one's own reason for knowledge of the truth. Prayer is the heart's devoted turning to God to drive away evil and obtain what is good. Contemplation is when the mind is in some sort lifted up to God and held above itself, so that it tastes the joys of everlasting sweetness." Guido II, *The Ladder of Monks* (Kalamazoo: Liturgical Press, 1981), 67ff.

67 Ulrich Köpf, "The Institutional Framework of Christian exegesis in the Middle Ages," in Sæbø, *HBOT I/2* (2000), 153.

68 Sabine Bobert, "Den Himmel überall finden. Die Rolle von Schweigen und Meditation," in Peter Zimmerling (ed.), *Handbuch Evangelische Spiritualität. Band 3 Praxis* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2020), 496.

69 Peter Vogt, "Aktuelles Reden Gottes: Die Herrnhuter Losungen," in Walter Klaiber and Wolfgang Thönissen, *Die Bible im Leben der Kirche. Freikirchliche und römisch-katholische Perspektiven* (Paderborn: Bonifatius Verlag, 2007), 185–198; and Dietrich Meyer, "Die Herrnhuter Losungen," in Zimmerling 3 (2020), 481–493.

70 It is made up of two biblical verses, one from Old Testament chosen by lot and the other from New Testament found deliberately on the base of theological reflection. The span between the two biblical verses and a dialogue between them invites the reader to join from his or her own situation.

Spiritual reading proposed in this paper should not be confused with the early medieval idea of *sensus spiritualis* that draws on Origenes. According to Gregory the Great's *Moralia in Iob,* the spiritual sense of a text – in contrast to its historical or literal sense – is a hidden but a deeper meaning of a text. This meaning has always been there, hidden *bellow the exterior* of the text. It is therefore a matter of proper exegetical tools to discover it. In essence, *sensus spiritualis* is just a particular form of allegory. The spiritual reading proposed in this paper, on the other hand, pertains to the way the text addresses the reader in his or her situation, as he or she stands – to use the spatial metaphor – in front of the text.

In the following paragraphs, a brief summary of its assumptions and goals is provided.

3.1 Spiritual reading exhibits elements of divination. A central assumption underlying this approach is that the text can be a medium of unique message from God for an individual reader. This message cannot be discovered solely through exegetical analysis, but through meditation: while oscillating between the text and his or her situation (*meditatio* and *oratio* in terms of Guido II), the reader starts to perceive the address intuitively, adjusting it to his or her own personal experiences and expectations.

3.2 The figure of a message communicated from God through the text to the individual reader creates a framework, where a prayer of the reader in connection with opening the Bible, asking for the assistance of Holy Spirit or, in other words, for God's illumination, makes sense.[71]

3.3 The goal of spiritual reading is to transform the reader's perspective. Initially, the text may be perceived as something alien to reader's world and the encounter with it may be rather uneasy. The reader tends to notice only the facets of the text that resonate with his or her own experience and they may not be many. Yet gradually, these facets may bring something of their own thrust to reader's thinking. The reader may glimpse in the text relational configurations that are analogous to his or her own situation.[72] Lured into the world of a text, the reader can experience reconfiguration of

71 Andreas Kusch, "Das evangelische Gebet: Sehnsuch, Vielfalt, Zugänge," *Zimmerling* 3 (2020), 440–441.

72 David Tracy, *Analogical Imagination. Christian Theology and the Culture of Pluralism* (New York: Crossroad, 1981).

his or her own perception of the situation.[73] It is only then that the closed world structures (to use Charles Taylor's phrase) can break down, allowing us to begin to rediscover what the key plot of both the Old and the New Testament really is.[74]

3.4 Spiritual reading of the Bible bears features of a premodern approach to the Bible. The text perceived as a given medium of revelation defies the reifying rules of Cartesian thinking. It is therefore of no surprise that spiritual reading tends to apply methods practised in the past, e.g. in the era of Patristics or in Baroque. Also, in some aspects it echoes the archaizing ethos of Romanticism. Yet unlike in the past, the spiritual reading proposed in this paper is a deliberate methodological decision, the above mentioned *second naïveté* of Paul Ricoeur. It has been informed about the historical and literary complexity of a text. It does not claim to be the sole way of reading the Bible and it is well aware of other possible approaches to the Bible. At the same time however, it knows about the job the reader has to perform – and is ready to do so.

3.5 Given the existential character of spiritual reading, the message derived from it is and has to remain individual and subjective. While this message may be shared within a supportive community, it cannot be universally imposed on others (unless one wants to take path of a prophet with all its risks).

Excursus III: Exodus 3:1–4:17 read spiritually

To provide a universally applicable spiritual interpretation of this passage would be an oxymoron, because it would be incompatible with the existential and situational nature of spiritual reading, which requires readers to engage with the text personally. As we have seen, the spiritual reading differs from the *sensus spiritualis*, which was primarily an allegorical interpretation dominant in patristic literature. Originally though, the particular patristic interpretations were spiritual readings carried out amidst their respective contexts. Later on, these interpretations became part of Church tradition, normative for theological reading.

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73 The reader becomes – to use Brueggemann's words – "rescripted", see Walter Brueggemann, *Text under Negotiation. The Bible and postmodern Imagination* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), 22.

74 Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 2007), 728.

There are numerous allegorical interpretations of the burning bush in patristic texts. Some understand its thorns as a prefiguration of Christ's crown of thorns (Clement of Alexandria),[75] while others expound its fire as an admonition to serve God fervently (Ephrem the Syrian).[76] However, the striking resonance between a biblical text and the reader's personal quest, when a clause becomes a mantic oracle addressing an existing problem, is uncommon. An exception can be found in Augustine's *Confessions*. He recalls his younger self, inspired by "Platonic books to return to himself."[77] Yet, having done so, he realized how far he was from God, abiding instead "in the region of dissimilarity." He nearly gave up his quest, "but then you cried from far away: 'I am who I am' (Exod 3:14). I heard it inwardly, and all doubt left me. I would have found it easier to doubt my own existence than this truth…"[78] For Augustine, the verse of Exod 3:14, torn out of its biblical context, became a missing piece of the puzzle. Similarly, the decisive step of his conversion, according to Augustine's famous story in Confessions XII about a children's voice urging him from behind the wall to read randomly opened verse from the epistles, was brought about by Romans 13:14. Here again, received as a direct message from God, it pushed Augustine on his individual life-crossroad.[79]

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75 Clemens from Alexandria, "Christ the Educator," in Joseph T. Lienhard (ed.), *Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy. Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture OT 3* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2001).

76 Ephrem the Syrian, "Ephrem's commentary of Exodus," in Joseph T. Lienhard (ed.), *Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy. Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture OT 3* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2001).

77 Saint Augustine, *Confessions*, VIII, translated by H. Chadwick (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992).

78 Augustine, *Confessions*, VII/10.

79 Augustine, *Confessions*, VIII/12: "As I was saying this and weeping in the bitter agony of my heart, suddenly I heard a voice from the nearby house chanting as if it might be a boy or a girl (I do not know which), saying and repeating over and over again 'Pick up and read, pick up and read.' At once my countenance changed, and I began to think intently whether there might be some sort of children's game in which such a chant is used. But I could not remember having heard of one […] So I hurried back to the place where Alypius was sitting. There I had put down the book of the apostle when I got up. I seized it, opened it and in silence read the first passage on which my eyes lit: 'Not in riots and drunken parties, not in eroticism and indecencies, not in strife and rivalry, but put on the Lord Jesus Christ and make no provision for the flesh in its lusts' (Rom. 13: 13–14)."

4. How they interact

The three ways of reading rarely occur in isolation. Usually, when we operate within the agenda of one of the three, elements of the remaining two are present as well. We can, however, imagine efforts to adhere strictly to a single approach and eliminate the others – for example, when writing a text-critical scholarly treatise or, conversely, during a spiritual meditation on a verse.

The three ways of reading are not just three arbitrary games that we play according to our mood. Rather, in an analogy to a literary genre (*Gattung*) that would always pertain to certain social situation (*Sitz im Leben*), the three ways of reading pertain to various roles the reader plays when he or she reads it. One and the same person behaves differently according to the role he or she is just playing (e.g. as a partner in a couple, as colleague in a job, and as a patient visiting dentist…), yet he or she has to pay attention not to lose one's integrity. The same fits for reading the Bible: the three ways of reading should remain, to use the Chalcedonian formulation, unconfused – yet undivided. To close this paper, I shall evaluate each of the three ways in their relation to the two other ways.

4.1 Starting with the theological reading of Bible, where the Bible would be taken taken as a book given *pro nobis*, the initial assumption that the Bible is the sole criterion for the church's faith and practice has proven untenable. Present-day Protestants' faith and practice have, in many respects, diverged from the faith and practice found within the Bible itself. When they remain engaged with the Bible and grapple with its beliefs and practices, they do so not as if taking it as a set of definitive answers to be held. Rather, they view the Bible as a contingent network of religious and ethical questions that they are advised by their tradition to confront. The centuries of biblical critical approach have revealed Bible as made up of discussions, developments, and quarrels surrounding key thematic nodes. These discussions have generated a network of interconnected trajectories that just in their polyphonic nature constitute the true biblical foundation of contemporary theological thought. An exegete's personal engagement, including his or her own spiritual agenda, should be acknowledged as a driving force for this endeavour.

4.2 Philological reading remains an essential component of continental biblical studies. Taken on its own, philologically conceived biblical studies could – and according to some even should – be pursued at departments of Ancient Near Eastern Studies, rather than at theological schools. Since the

Humboldtian reform of the German universities in early 1800s,[80] cooperation between biblical studies and ANE studies has yielded numerous results, clearly demonstrating multi-layered continuity between the culture and religion expressed in the Old Testament and those found in other ANE literatures. But then indeed: if they are so close, why should biblical studies be pursued in any other way than as a subcategory of ANE studies?

So far, we find biblical studies situated within the standard curriculum of theological faculties and seminaries. The scrutiny of the vast majority of contemporary biblical scholars focuses on themes imposed, implied, or at least inspired by the Bible. Their research, subversive to classical contents of faith as it may be, would already by the selection of their themes be determined by a broadly conceived theological agenda. The questions it poses to the Bible are typically shaped by the centuries-long reception history of the Bible. The distinction between theological and philological reading of the Bible, as proposed in this paper, may help to illuminate this state of affairs. It allows us to claim: If biblical studies are to remain focused on the Bible for reasons beyond mere institutional inertia, then there must be compelling theological and even spiritual arguments to justify its continued pursuit.

4.3 As to spiritual reading, I have defined it as reading from within the reader's context, guided by the reader's contemporary questions. This inherently intuitive approach tends toward, and indeed creates, personal involvement (*Betroffenheit*), as it seeks advice and inspiration from the text for the reader's existential crossroads. This, in the long run, is a vital condition for any engagement with the Bible, regardless of whether that engagement is public or private. Without this existential involvement in the drama of Scripture, the engagement with it necessarily dries up. The eventual slump into mere subjectivism, which can rightly be feared in spiritual reading, should be controlled precisely by both theological and philological readings. The other two ways would always intermingle to some extent, since one can never forget one's existing theological system – and his or her historical-critical knowledge. The former will inevitably connect the text to a broader theological discourse for the reader, populating it in an associative way with other biblical heroes and directing the reader to update and revive his or her theological system. The latter, binding one's perception it to the earth and to

80 Heinz-Elmar Tenorth, *Wilhelm von Humboldt: Bildungspolitik und Universitätsreform* (Leiden: Brill, 2018).

the literature, will provide the reader with a foil against which to appreciate the feat of faith behind the text.

To read a biblical text spiritually could perhaps be compared to a classical pair dance: I ask the partner, embrace her and slowly start to move with her on the floor in a way that is respectful and reciprocal, not just observing or commenting, but engaging in an encounter that is both collective and yet individual, structured and yet creative. Last but not least: it is supposed to be a loving encounter.

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