



Ralf K. Wüstenberg / Jens Zimmermann (eds.)

God Speaks to Us

Dietrich Bonhoeffer's Biblical Hermeneutics



PETER LANG
EDITION

God Speaks to Us

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Herausgegeben von
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Introduction

Hermeneutics examines the principles of reading and understanding texts, especially texts originating in times and cultures different from our own. Biblical hermeneutics investigates more specifically how we read, understand and respond to biblical texts. Yet biblical interpretation has always been influenced and shaped by knowledge gained from other disciplines such as philosophy, psychology, rhetoric, literary criticism, political theory and history. As a rule, these other disciplines have greatly enriched biblical hermeneutics, but their influence has not always been beneficial. Perhaps the greatest hermeneutical turning point in the history of biblical exegesis was the gradual emancipation of the Scriptures from the context of believing communities, and the consequent relocation of biblical criticism from the church into the secular academy. Recent scholarship has documented the central role of German academics and the German university in transposing the Bible from “the book of the church”, to use Bonhoeffer’s phrase, into a cultural and literary artifact examined in the newly founded discipline of biblical studies.¹ Laudible efforts by 18th and 19th century scholars to revive the Bible as an important document only legitimated and institutionalized this basic paradigm shift. Philologists and biblical scholars focussed increasingly on the meaning of the Bible in its historical context but they no longer sought to look *through* the biblical text in order to understand the world in its light.²

In our day, biblical interpretation is undergoing the reversal of the attitudes we have just described. Theological interpretation of the Bible and its role as book of the church are increasingly coming back into vogue, and for good reasons. Already in the early twentieth century, dissatisfaction with liberal theology and the social gospel issued in calls for separating historical-critical tools from the increasingly bankrupt scientific objectivism to which these tools had been bound. In Germany, it was mainly dialectic theology and Karl Barth, who spearheaded the separation of historical criticism from

¹ Cf. especially Michael C. Legaspi, *The Death of Scripture and the Rise of Biblical Studies*. Oxford: Oxford University Press 2010, and also Thomas A. Howard, *Protestant Theology and the Making of the Modern German University*. Oxford: Oxford University Press 2009.

² Legaspi, 26.

its original liberal theological presuppositions. Historical critical tools were retained but, once again, employed in the service of, rather than against, the Christian faith.³ In Germany, and elsewhere, seasoned biblical scholars began to declare the end of the historical-critical method. They did not, of course, mean to dismiss historical-critical tools, but they realized that these tools were not necessarily bound up with the rationalist worldview of the historical critical school. Biblical scholars began to argue for a hermeneutic that takes history seriously but does so within the basic parameters of orthodox Christianity.⁴ Catholic historians of theology, such as Henri de Lubac also contributed much to rehabilitating spiritual exegesis by drawing on patristic and medieval theology.⁵

Arguably the greatest philosophical influence on derailling liberal theology and the historical critical school was hermeneutic philosophy with its phenomenological approach to the text. By drawing attention to the positive role of fore-understanding, to the importance of tradition, and the crucial role that cultural-linguistic elements play in understanding of texts, philosophical hermeneutics exposed the limitations and distortions of supposedly neutral and dispassionate approaches to the Bible. By recognizing that objectivity and meaningful interpretations are achieved not from without but from within a tradition, philosophical hermeneutics discredited “functional atheism” and “secularism” as the most adequate stances for bib-

3 Cf. Alan Richardson, “The Rise of Modern Biblical Scholarship And Recent Discussion of the Authority of the Bible,” in: *The Cambridge History of the Bible. Vol. 3: The West from the Reformation to the Present Day*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1988, 294–338, 322–333.

4 A prominent voice for this movement was the Tübingen biblical scholar Gerhard Maier in his *The End of the Historical-Critical Method*. St. Louis: Concordia Pub. House 1977; idem, *Biblical Hermeneutics*. Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway Books 1994.

5 Cf. here, Henri de Lubac, *Medieval Exegesis. The Four Senses of Scripture*. Translated by E.M. Macierowski. Ressourcement. 3 Vols. Grand Rapids, MI. 1998–2009. De Lubac argued that modern interpreters should abandon their “smirking condescension” in treating premodern exegetes and not view them as naïve children stuck in outmoded paradigms of reading (see Vol. 1 “Preface”, xvii).

lical interpretation.⁶ Hermeneutics emphasis on tradition and the reader's role were also encouraged by reader oriented interpretive approaches that emerged within postmodern literary theory. The power of metaphor and myth, and also the role of a reader's community for engaging the biblical texts became once again important for biblical studies.⁷ In addition, biblical scholars rediscovered the importance of canonical reading for biblical hermeneutics (Childs, Stuhlmacher).⁸

A clear indicator of reversing the isolation of biblical interpretation from the church is the increasing publication of books on theological interpretation.⁹ No doubt this phenomenon is partially due to years of ecumenical dialogues that resulted in the convergence of Protestant exegetical rigor and Catholic faithfulness to ecclesial reading. What becomes clear in the ongoing conversation on biblical hermeneutics is the importance of sifting the legacy of modernity to distinguish between those elements that hinder and those that further a deeper understanding of the Bible for the Christian

⁶ Cf. here Walter Wink's little known, early but clear sighted treatise on the "post-modern" paradigm shift: *The Bible in Human Transformation*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press 1973, 38ff. Wink argues persuasively that historical criticism got "stuck" in the moment of analysis and is bound by its own ideological shackles never to ask the very question of meaning that already informs even textual reconstruction.

⁷ Cf. Edgar V. McKnight, *Postmodern Use of the Bible: The Emergence of Reader Oriented Criticism*. Nashville: Abingdon Press 1988, 254.

⁸ Cf. Brevard S. Childs, *Biblical Theology of the Old and New Testaments*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press 1993. Childs, who can be seen as the founder of the canonical approach, attempts to interpret the Biblical texts in their canonical context. Thus, he proceeds from an historical-critical interpretation of the texts, but regards the final canonical version of the texts as the theologically authoritative version of the Biblical texts. Further literature on Childs "canonical approach" in: "Biblische Hermeneutik", *JBTh* (1997), 376–379, especially 377–378. In the context of the German theology, the so-called "Tübinger School" (Peter Stuhlmacher, Hartmut Gese et al.) have attempted to read the biblical texts in their entire biblical context. Cf. Peter Stuhlmacher, *Biblische Theologie des Neuen Testaments*. 2 Bde. Göttingen 1992/1993; idem, *How to do Biblical Theology*, PA: Pickwick 1995.

⁹ Cf. for example, Christopher R. Seitz, *Prophecy and Hermeneutics: Toward a New Introduction to the Prophets*. Studies in Theological Interpretation. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic 2007; Stephen E. Fowl, *Theological Interpretation of Scripture*. Cascade Companions. Eugene, Or.: Cascade Books 2009; Joel B. Green, *Practicing Theological Interpretation: Engaging Biblical Texts for Faith and Formation*. Theological Explorations for the Church Catholic. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic 2011, and many other similar publications.

life. As Matthew Levering has pointed out, for example, the recovery of a participatory worldview that does not exclude God from human experience is vital for our understanding of 1500 years of Christian exegesis and for the question of how God can speak to the church today.¹⁰ The present volume and the conference proceedings that furnished its content are the result of our conviction that Bonhoeffer's theology is extremely important for this ongoing hermeneutic conversation. The Bonhoeffer conference "God speaks to us," sponsored by the Fritz-Thyssen Stiftung, Germany, was held at the University of Flensburg in July 2011 in recognition of Bonhoeffer's central importance for the current discussion on biblical hermeneutics. The conference is the fifth so-called "International Bonhoeffer Colloquium," a conference series dedicated to examining the relevance of Bonhoeffer's work for contemporary issues in theology and culture.

Bonhoeffer himself was very concerned with the "theological interpretation" of the Bible, which he regarded as the "book of the church."¹¹ The weight he placed on theological exegesis is indicated by the emphases of his theological interests, such as his ecclesiology,¹² Christology¹³ or political ethics,¹⁴ all of which closely reflect seminal themes contained in the biblical canon, especially those in the Old Testament.¹⁵ Even Bonhoeffer's demand

¹⁰ Matthew Levering, *Participatory Biblical Exegesis. A Theology of Biblical Interpretation*. Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press 2008, 147–48.

¹¹ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Schöpfung und Fall. Theologische Auslegung von Genesis 1–3* (=Dietrich Bonhoeffer Werke 3). Gütersloh 1988, 22. (*Creation and Fall*, DBWE 3, 22). Cf. here Gottfried Claß, *Der verzweifelte Zugriff auf das Leben. Dietrich Bonhoeffers Sündenverständnis in "Schöpfung und Fall"*. Neukirchen 1994.

¹² Compare from the monographs, research such as that by Joachim von Soosten, *Die Sozialität der Kirche. Theologie und Theorie der Kirche in Sanctorum Communio*. Gütersloh 1992; Rainer Ebeling, *Dietrich Bonhoeffers Ringen um die Kirche. Eine Ekklesiologie im Kontext freikirchlicher Theologie*. Gießen 2006.

¹³ Compare for example Hans Joachim Abromeit, *Das Geheimnis Christi. Dietrich Bonhoeffers erfahrungsbezogene Christologie* (=NBST 8). Neukirchen 1991; Hans-Friedrich Daub, *Die Stellvertretung Jesu Christi. Ein Aspekt des Gott-Mensch-Verhältnisses bei Dietrich Bonhoeffer*. Münster 2006.

¹⁴ Most relevant to this are the documents from the preceding conference in the series of International Bonhoeffer Colloquia (IBC 4): *Bonhoeffer, Religion and Politics*, ed. by Christiane Tietz, Jens Zimmerman (=IBI 4), Frankfurt a.M.: Peter Lang 2012.

¹⁵ Cf. mainly Martin Kuske, *Das Alte Testament als Buch von Christus. Dietrich Bonhoeffers Wertung und Auslegung des Alten Testament*. Göttingen 1971.

for a “non-religious interpretation of biblical concepts”¹⁶ did not imply a rejection of the Bible as the book of the church. Rather, as Ralf Wüstenberg has shown, Bonhoeffer rejects any merely theoretical construct of religion in order to promote a Christ-centered interpretation of the Scriptures that expounds the relevance of Christ for the church in the midst of the world and its concrete problems.¹⁷ Obviously, this connection between life and biblical interpretation is what makes Bonhoeffer’s hermeneutics especially attractive and relevant. Bonhoeffer was theologian and a resistance fighter, political dissident, and martyr. His life thus testifies to an exemplary connection between *reading the Scriptures* and *living according to the Scriptures*. This fascinating convergence of biblical hermeneutics and political action will be explored in this essay collection.¹⁸

By approaching Bonhoeffer’s theology from a number of different hermeneutical angles, the contributions in this volume throw new light both on his more general hermeneutical framework and on specific theological issues concerning his reading of the Bible. Among the general questions raised in this book are the following: Taken as a whole, was Bonhoeffer’s theology a “theological interpretation” of the Bible? Is it possible to detect

¹⁶ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Widerstand and Ergebung*, DBW 8. Gütersloh 1998, 509, 529, 651 (Letters and Papers from Prison, DBWE 8 (stressed by RW). Cf. to this also my study, Ralf K. Wüstenberg, *A Theology of Life: Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s Religionless Christianity*. Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans 1998, in: German Leipzig 2006, where two examples have been used to develop the biblical hermeneutic of a non-religious interpretation of the biblical concepts “confession” (as “final discourse”) and “promise” (as “meaning”).

¹⁷ Wüstenberg, Ralf K, *A Theology of Life: Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s Religionless Christianity*. Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans 1998, 159–60.

¹⁸ Cf. to the interdependence of the reader and the life of the biblical texts recent biographical works, such as Ferdinand Schlingensiepen’s *Dietrich Bonhoeffer, 1906–1945. Eine Biographie*. Munich 2007, esp. 11–114 and 195–226, or Renate Wind, *Dem Rad in the Speichen fallen. Die Lebensgeschichte des Dietrich Bonhoeffer*. Gütersloh 2005, esp. 125–141, 142–157, 190–209. A foundational work – also on this theme – is still the epic work of Eberhard Bethge, Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s friend and biographer, titled *Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Theologe, Christ, Zeitgenosse; eine Biographie*. Gütersloh 2005, esp. 246–250, 490–493, 504–508, 515–526.

a specific *program for biblical hermeneutics* in his works?¹⁹ Can we attribute to Bonhoeffer any direct linkages between the formulation of specific theological positions (e.g., obedience, discipleship, responsibility, guilt, representation) and a particular direction in his biblical hermeneutic? If we are able to determine direct linkages, then how were they made in light of the dominance of the historical-critical school of the time, which considered Bonhoeffer to be a “complete outsider” when he undertook his “theological interpretation?”²⁰

More specifically, the articles presented in this volume address three key questions: How significant are Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s understanding of canon and his roots in the Reformed-Lutheran principle of *sola scriptura* for the current discussion of biblical hermeneutics? Can we derive central ideas or criteria for a theological interpretation of the Bible from an analysis of Bonhoeffer’s individual works, and do these central ideas or criteria stand in a constructive and critical relationship to modern and post-modern exegetical research? Do the results from the various scholarly analyses of Bonhoeffer’s hermeneutic allow for the construction of a coherent theological program that may, in turn, help to organize the discussion of Bonhoeffer’s interpretive practices? These three questions determine the subdivision of our volume into three main sections. First, we present contributions that situate Bonhoeffer’s hermeneutic within a broader cultural or intellectual context. Johannes Woyke’s overview places Bonhoeffer’s interpretive practice within present hermeneutic concerns. Stephen Plant explains Bonhoeffer’s use of the Bible with its historical and social context. Robert Steiner employs the postmodern ethical concern of “otherness” to highlight the basic contours of Bonhoeffer’s reading practice. Jens Zimmermann concludes the first section by highlighting the importance of Bonhoeffer’s hermeneutic for postmodern efforts to retrieve God-talk after secularism.

The second cluster of texts addresses more specific aspects in Bonhoeffer’s biblical hermeneutics. Edward van’t Slot deals with canonicity, Karina Kande with biblical metaphors in Bonhoeffer’s reading of Scripture, and

¹⁹ Gottfried Claß has raised this question for Bonhoeffer research in *Der verzweifelte Zugriff auf das Leben Dietrich Bonhoeffers Sündenverständnis in ‘Schöpfung und Fall’* (=NBST 15), Neukirchen 1994, 47. Claß asks whether and to what extent Bonhoeffer’s ‘theological interpretation’ of the Bible is connected with ‘a theological program’ of biblical hermeneutics.

²⁰ Gottfried Claß, *Der verzweifelte Zugriff*, 65.

Marie Theres Igrec with the theological concerns that drive Bonhoeffer's biblical hermeneutic. Florian Schmitz concludes this section by examining the important ethical connection between obedience and exegesis as it emerges in Bonhoeffer's work *Discipleship*.

The third and final group of texts are, so to speak, meta-hermeneutical, because they concern the interpretation of some of Bonhoeffer's theological concepts. Paul Hinlicky examines the role of Word theology and the Bible in the Bethel Confession; Nikola Wilke investigates Bonhoeffer's understanding of confession in light of his interpretation of Sin and the Fall; and, finally, Anne Reichhold draws parallels between Bonhoeffer's view of language and post-metaphysical, postmodern philosophies. As always, we, the organizers and editors are grateful for the excellent contributions. We also thank the Canada Research Chair for Interpretation, Religion and Culture (Jens Zimmermann), who helped fund the publication of this volume, and we are grateful for Herrn Alischs tireless and exact copyediting and indexing for this volume.

Jens Zimmermann, Langley, B.C.
Ralf Wüstenberg, Flensburg
October 2012

1. Bonhoeffer's Hermeneutics in socio-cultural Context

Johannes Woyke

Contemporary Biblical Hermeneutics and Bonhoeffer's "Theological Exposition" of Scripture

A comparative Overview

As one who specializes in the fields of biblical studies and, what we call in Germany "the pedagogy of religion," to give the opening lecture of a conference on Dietrich Bonhoeffer is quite a delicate endeavor – especially if the topic is Bonhoeffer's biblical hermeneutics. I am neither a Bonhoeffer specialist, nor do I consider myself an expert on hermeneutics. Nevertheless, my foray into Bonhoeffer in preparation for this presentation has convinced me that his hermeneutics are important for contemporary approaches to the interpretation and teaching of the Bible.

In order to examine Bonhoeffer's approach to the Bible in light of contemporary biblical hermeneutics, I will first present an overview of the current debate on biblical hermeneutics. In the Anglophone context, which is, arguably, more open to experimenting and less encumbered by ideological trench warfare, the work of Anthony Thiselton¹ will be the center of the discussion. However, within our introductory thoughts here I take as a basis a book by the Heidelberg Old Testament scholar Manfred Oeming, who especially represents the German discussion. Secondly, we will have an initial look at some of Bonhoeffer's basic hermeneutical principles in his exposition of biblical texts. Eventually this will lead us, in final, third step, to ask whether the current hermeneutical standard can shed new light on Bonhoeffer's biblical hermeneutics on the one hand, and on the other,

¹ See esp. Anthony C. Thiselton, *New Horizons in Hermeneutics. The Theory and Practice of Transforming Biblical Reading*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1992; idem, *Hermeneutics. An Introduction*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans 2009.

whether we can draw from Bonhoeffer decisive impulses for our contemporary challenge of understanding the Bible.

Contemporary Biblical Hermeneutics: Sketching a Systematic Overview

“The Bible is the book of life, one foundation of the church and of all Christian faith – so it is stated in the tradition of the church. The Bible is a confusing and obscure book, closed by seven seals, a mere historical document with no relation to current issues – so it is stated by many today. Many today are at a loss to combine how they experience these texts with the immense claim that the Bible is the ‘Word of God’.” With this diagnosis, Manfred Oeming starts out his comprehensive “Introduction to Biblical Hermeneutics.”² As a remedy, Oeming attempts to offer “a model of understanding that is universally applicable, not only for understanding the Bible,”³ since each text has to deal with four different aspects: “the author, the text, the reader, and the subject matter contained in the text.” As each aspect calls for “its own discourse and set of rules,” there is “a need for a ‘multiplicity of approaches’ and a continually intensifying discussion between them [...]”.⁴

The architecture of Oeming’s introduction to contemporary biblical hermeneutics builds on the foundational conviction that in its task to understand the Bible, biblical interpretation has interacted closely with philosophical hermeneutics (e.g. Dilthey, Heidegger, Gadamer, Saussure, Eco).⁵ With this necessary interaction between philosophical hermeneutics and biblical interpretation in view, current influential methodological approaches to the Bible are grouped within a hermeneutical square with the four factors already mentioned:

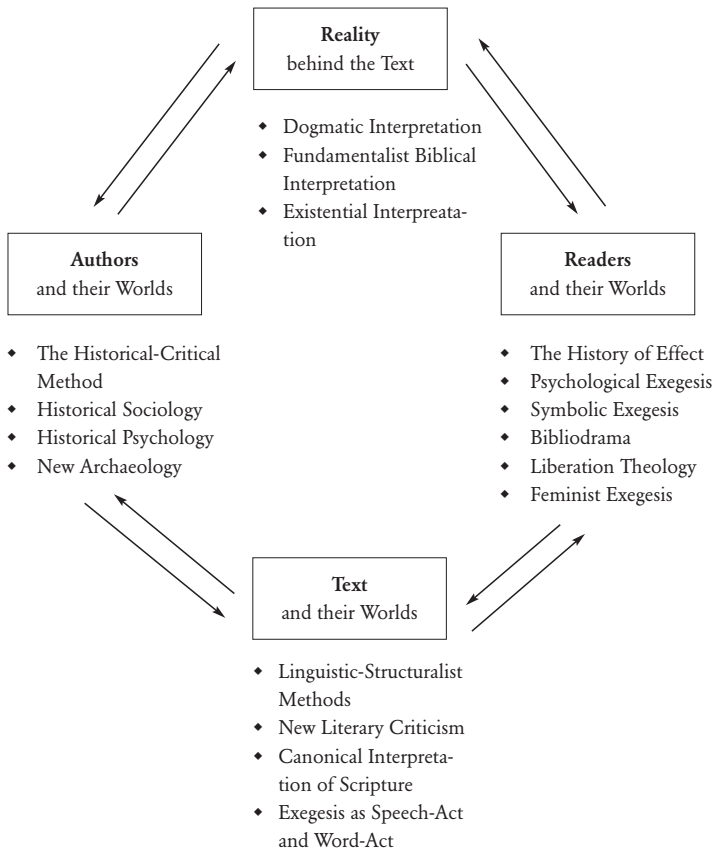
² Manfred Oeming, *Contemporary Biblical Hermeneutics. An Introduction*. Cornwall: Ashgate 2006, x. (German original: idem, *Biblische Hermeneutik. Eine Einführung*. Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft 2007).

³ Ibid., ix.

⁴ Ibid., ix.

⁵ Ibid., 9–29.

(1) The *author*, who aims to communicate an insight or an experience from his world; (2) the *text* which, at least partially, contains what the author intended to communicate; (3) the *reader*, who initiates contact with the author and his world by dealing with the text and its worlds (it remains to be seen whether modern readers of an ancient text are capable of re-actualizing the intention of the author at all, or whether they are doomed by the 'abyss of history' to mistake the written intention within the context of their own interests); (4) the *subject matter* which connects author, text and reader.⁶



⁶ Ibid., 7 (emphasis in the original). See the figure above which is adapted from ibid., 142.

Under the first category, the first and foremost method to be named is historical criticism, with its well-known variety of sub methods. The historical-critical method, along with historical psychology, socio-historical exegesis and new archeology, is devoted to understanding the past *as a singular and peculiar past* and to uncovering the “real (hi)story” underneath the canonical texts, their confessional texture, and their dogmatic appropriation. The historical-critical exegete finds herself in the role of an “advocate of the author” and must “defend his ‘otherness’, his difference and non-identity with the present.”⁷ In order to achieve this, historical-critical interpreters are faced with the challenge to “rid themselves of all things that define their contemporary existence.”⁸ Furthermore, the Bible is to be interpreted as if it were “a product of human interest, need and psychological necessity,” i.e. reading, in effect “as if God does not exist.”⁹ This way of reading is historical criticism’s great achievement, but at the same time, this approach is also regarded as its greatest hermeneutical fault, because “by giving up the premise of the existence and the efficacy of God, agnostic research finds only what it has brought to the text in the first place.”¹⁰

Secondly, the methodological category pertaining to the subject matter aims at bridging the “abyss of history” by *interweaving elaborate historical analysis with theological understanding in light of the present*. Besides dogmatic and fundamentalist interpretations, Oeming names – and favors – the existential method of demythologizing. It allegedly “does justice both to the idiosyncrasies of the Bible as well as the idiosyncrasies of present recipients”¹¹ and unites both the Bible and present recipients in articulating an “understanding of human existence”¹² – and this means, according to Bultmann, “an understanding of human existence *sub specie dei*”¹³ – on the basis of a common existential relation to the subject matter conveyed in the text.¹⁴

⁷ Ibid., 31.

⁸ Ibid., 32.

⁹ Ibid., 41.

¹⁰ Ibid., 41.

¹¹ Ibid., 146.

¹² Ibid., 146.

¹³ Ibid., 20.

¹⁴ It is somehow peculiar that the English edition leaves out this important echo on Bultmann. The German original states (*Biblische Hermeneutik*, 181) that “Autoren

Both named categories —one concerned with authors and their world and another occupied with the reality behind the texts – try to reconstruct historical facts or to uncover theological truth as something more or less *hidden* in the texts and their particular language. In addition, Oeming identifies a number of methods in which *language and texts are considered as worlds of their own, as autonomous entities depending only on themselves and functioning within themselves as a whole*:¹⁵ (1) He lists linguistic-structuralistic methods with their detailed analyses of grammatical coherence and stylistic features alongside the new literary criticism, which considers a text as a work of art and investigates its esthetics. (2) Within biblical theology the so-called Canonical Approach (Childs) interprets biblical texts within their canonical setting. This approach includes interpreting, e.g., a certain Psalm and its position and function as part of the Book of Psalms, then making key word connections and attending to intertextuality, as well as examining the relation between the New Testament and the Old. For example, how does a Christian reading of the Book of Isaiah as part of the Old Testament differ from a Jewish reading of the same book as part of the Hebrew Bible? (3) Furthermore, Oeming mentions the so-called New Hermeneutics (Fuchs, Ebeling) with its notion that language literally begets being: "Far from just naming something which exists independently, language forges the path to being itself, which only exists in language. Language is thus elevated to almost sacramental status. Being, transcendence, and immanence occur in, with and under language."¹⁶ Representatives of the New Hermeneutic ground their theory of understanding biblical texts on Christology and a theology of the creative word of God which brings into being what it proclaims.¹⁷

in biblischen Texten ein Daseinsverständnis aussprechen, mit dem sie *auf der Grundlage eines gemeinsamen Lebensverhältnisses zur Sache* auch den modernen Leser ansprechen" (my emphasis), whereas the English translation phrases (*Contemporary Biblical Hermeneutics*, 146), "biblical authors articulate an understanding of human existence, with which they also speak to modern readers."

¹⁵ Ibid., 55.

¹⁶ Ibid., 70.

¹⁷ In addition to Oeming, on a more pragmatic level one should also mention speech-act-theory (Austin, Searle) which takes into consideration the specific structure of language – question, imperative, statement – and how the formal setting or situation in which it is expressed decides on its effects, i.e. the reality it inaugurates. In the English version of his book, Oeming lists "speech-act" and

We recall that for the “classical” historical-critical method, meaning is tied to authorial intention which is *prior* to its textual expressions. Dogmatic methods of biblical interpretation focus on the subject matter *behind* the texts. Within linguistic-structuralist approaches to the Bible as well as for the New Hermeneutics, meaning resides *in* the texts themselves independent from the author’s intention and the reader’s understanding. In all these categories it is the exegete’s challenge to *re-construct* meaning. By contrast, Oeming characterizes a fourth hermeneutical category in which meaning does not ‘exist’ until the readers *construct* it creatively: “Interpretation is construction, production, re-reading. The political, social and cultural contexts of respective readers determine to a much greater degree what happens in the act of interpretation than the Bible itself.”¹⁸ Thus we have, besides the interpretation of the history of effect (“wirkungsgeschichtliche Exegese”), contextual approaches such as liberation theology, feminist exegesis, cultural exegesis. Moreover, didactic approaches of practical theology such as symbolic exegesis, psychological interpretation, bibliodrama and the like also have their say.

The four methodological categories named by Oeming – focusing on author, reader, text, and subject matter respectively – can be understood as alternatives which exclude each other and sometimes have been presented as such. Oeming himself, however, favors a diverse, holistic and critical approach to understanding as a regulative ideal: a “hermeneutical spiral” (instead of “circle”) as “continual movement from corner to corner” which “deepens our understanding”.¹⁹ “Biblical research must face the challenge of analyzing and describing the multiple effects and plurality of discourse and language games involving the Bible and contemporary society.”²⁰ On the one hand, Oeming does wish to retain distinctions between original meaning and history of effect as well as between different contexts in which, and purposes for which interpretation takes place. On the other hand, he asserts that

“word-act,” yet he contents himself with describing the concepts of Ernst Fuchs (“Sprachgeschehen”) and Gerhard Ebeling (“Wortereignis”). For a comprehensive discussion see Thiselton, *New Horizons in Hermeneutics* and idem, *Hermeneutics*.

¹⁸ Oeming, *Contemporary Biblical Hermeneutics*, 75.

¹⁹ Ibid., 8.

²⁰ Ibid., 144.

Without dealing with the Bible on an existential level and being at home in it, it is impossible to come to appropriate and fruitful observations of its content. We must thus be careful about placing too much faith in method. True understanding is not primarily dependent on the method chosen; it is rather dependent on the intensity dealing with the object under consideration.²¹

Unlike Anthony Thiselton, who has struggled with the issue of biblical hermeneutics for more than four decades and who is engaging intensively with non-theological approaches, Oeming's position with its emphasis on historical-critical exegesis and existential interpretation, despite his willingness to integrate other methods, comes off as quite conventional. This certain lack of innovation, however, may in our present discussion be of help, when in the following we will engage in a dialogue between contemporary biblical hermeneutics and Dietrich Bonhoeffer's approach to the bible.

Basic Principles in Dietrich Bonhoeffer's Exposition of the Bible

In the introduction to his theological exposition of Genesis 1–3 of 1933,²² Dietrich Bonhoeffer proclaims a *status confessionis* on the church's use of the Bible: with the confession that – no matter what the various finds of historical exegesis may be – the God who is spoken of in Holy Scripture is always the same "one and only God." According to Bonhoeffer, with this confession "the church and theological science stand or fall."²³ Consistent with this proclamation, Bonhoeffer insists on a *theological exposition* of the Bible. The Bible is to be taken as "the book of the church" and is to be interpreted as such. A theological reading, i.e. a reading "from the viewpoint of the church," will consider the Biblical text in its historical setting(s) and philological meaning(s). However, it finds itself at the same time in "a continual returning" from the historically and philologically established meaning to

²¹ Ibid., 147.

²² Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Creation and Fall. A theological Exposition of Genesis 1–3 (1933)*, transl. from the German ed. by M. Rüter / I. Tödt, English ed. by J.W. de Gruchy and transl. by D.St. Bax (Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works, Vol. 3). Minneapolis: Fortress 1996.

²³ Ibid., 23.

the church's confession to God, which itself "is founded upon the witness of Holy Scripture."²⁴

Decisive for Bonhoeffer's view is a thoroughly Christological and eschatological reading of all of Scripture, echoing Rom 10:4, "Christ is [...] not the continuation, not the goal, the completion in line with the old, but the end and therefore the new." In the light of the new world which was inaugurated by Christ, the church speaks of the old world. Even more, it realizes the old world as old.²⁵

When Bonhoeffer claims the Bible as the book of the church and advocates its theological, that is, its Christological exposition, he by no means supports an uncritical, orthodox and biblicistic use of the Bible. In fact, in a homiletical lecture on "Christ in the Psalms" held in 1935,²⁶ he positions himself against a view that sets the doctrine of verbal inspiration over against the historical-critical finds of Old Testament exegesis. Bonhoeffer argues that faith should be grounded exclusively in the living God himself and not in a verbally inspired Bible. He thus welcomes and appreciates the critical method, but makes it subservient to theological exposition.²⁷ For Bonhoeffer, historical criticism characteristically levels the biblical word out into full historicity ("Geschichtlichkeit"). This characteristic trait is the historical method's strength but, at the same time, also prescribes its limits. The total historicity and worldliness ("Weltlichkeit") of the word of God covers it like a veil²⁸, so that *the method of historical-critical exegesis has brought back into consciousness the notion that Christ is concealed to the world*.²⁹ A theological exposition accepts the worldliness of the Bible, but sets Christ as qualifier ("Vorzeichen") in front of the results of critical exegesis.³⁰ As Christ incarnate is thus the real subject of all that is spoken of and told in Scripture – who even prays "crucify him" within the ungodly – a theologi-

²⁴ Ibid., 22f.

²⁵ Ibid., 21.

²⁶ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, "Christus in den Psalmen" (1935), in: idem, *Illegale Theologen-Ausbildung: Finkenwalde 1935–1937*, DBW 14. München: Kaiser 1996, 369–377. This is only in part the direct manuscript of Bonhoeffer's, and in part a student's notes.

²⁷ Ibid., 373f.

²⁸ This is, with all probability, an allusion to 2 Cor 3:12–18.

²⁹ Bonhoeffer, "Christus in den Psalmen," 374f.

³⁰ Ibid., 376.

cal exposition finds in the Bible the *duty to witness to Christ speaking today and not just to establish the facts as they were in biblical times*.³¹

In the same year, albeit with a different focus, Bonhoeffer protests against a form of "presencing" ("Vergegenwärtigung")³² the message of the New Testament in sermons³³ which tries to make the gospel useful ("brauchbares Christentum") to the present.³⁴ Drastically put, wherever "presencing" becomes the topic of theology, it is certain that the *matter or substance* has already been sold down the river.³⁵ If the "presencing" or *actualization of the biblical message as a methodological question* comes to the fore too prominently, this is equivalent to an admission of a dangerous decadence of faith.³⁶ Instead, we trust that the matter itself, where it truly has its say, is by itself the fullness of presence; in the subject matter itself the actualizing takes place.³⁷ True "presencing" does not happen in a *movement* from Scripture to the present, but *from the present backwards to Scripture*. Where Christ, and the Holy Spirit as Christ and God present, speaks, there is true presence.³⁸ Only an *untheological method* of a "presencing" interpretation claims to find, and to separate, within the past something which rises above the

³¹ Ibid., 377.

³² As a precise verbal translation of the German "Vergegenwärtigung" with all its connotations is difficult, I take up a suggestion by Jens Zimmermann to use the neologism "presencing."

³³ See Dietrich Bonhoeffer, "Vergegenwärtigung neutestamentlicher Texte" (1935), in: idem, *Illegale Theologen-Ausbildung: Finkenwalde 1935–1937*, DBW 14. München: Kaiser 1996, 399–421. Again, this is only in part the direct manuscript of Bonhoeffer's, and in part a student's notes.

³⁴ Ibid., 401.

³⁵ Ibid., 402: "Wo aber die Frage nach der Vergegenwärtigung zum *Thema der Theologie wird*, dort können wir gewiß sein, daß die Sache bereits verraten und verkauft ist" (emphasis in the original).

³⁶ Ibid., 403: "[...] es ist ein Eingeständnis einer gefährlichen Dekadenz des Glaubens, wenn die Frage nach der Vergegenwärtigung der Botschaft als methodische Frage zu laut wird."

³⁷ Ibid., 403f: "Es wird der *Sache selbst* zugetraut, daß dort, wo sie wirksam zu Wort kommt, sie in sich selbst das Gegenwärtigste sei; es bedarf darum gar keines besonderen Aktes der Vergegenwärtigung mehr, in der Sache selbst vollzieht sich die Vergegenwärtigung" (emphasis in the original). It is not quite clear whether, in Oeming's categories, Bonhoeffer sees "subject matter" as lying *behind*, and expressed by, the biblical texts or if he refers to the reality *in* and created *by* the texts.

³⁸ Ibid., 404.