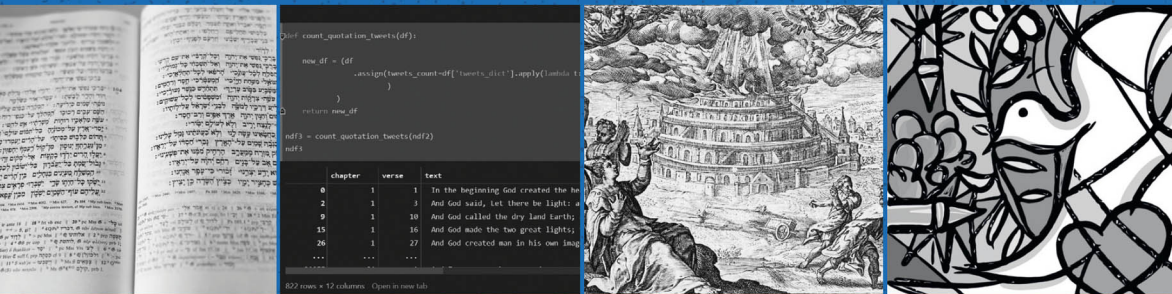


Phillip A. Davis, Jr. | Daniel Lanzinger | Matthew Ryan Robinson (Eds.)

What Does Theology Do, Actually?



Vol. 2: Exegeting Exegesis



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Edited by Phillip A. Davis, Jr., Daniel Lanzinger
and Matthew Ryan Robinson



EVANGELISCHE VERLAGSANSTALT
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Note on the Cover Photographs

The cover of this book features four photographs. Choosing the photographs prompted some discussion concerning the nature and purpose of cover artwork. What does it say? Who or what does it represent, and who has a say in this? How can method and interpretational diversity be accounted for or responsibly reflected? Art does not trade in the syllogistic logics of linear argumentation. As such, works of art remain open to interpretation. And yet, the curatorial choice for these photographs, once made, is final. There is no opportunity, in the case of cover artwork, to develop a critical discussion; ongoing dialogue is silenced. What is an appropriate balance, then, between saying too much and not enough? Recognizing that, while they invoke associations, the images are not self-interpreting, the following notes are meant to stimulate reflection on their meanings individually and corporately. Positioned under the title, being the statement of the question, “What does theology do, actually?”, the photographs presented, viewed from left to right, might be seen as providing four reflections on things exegesis has done, does, and might do.

Masoretic Text of the Hebrew Bible. The first image fulfills stereotypical expectations concerning what exegesis does. Exegetes read and interpret the Bible in its original languages, study its history of reception, produce critical-textual editions, and the like.

The Digital as Exegetical Space? The second image experiments with the idea of scholarship, biblical languages, and programming languages. The image thus queries what kind of things exegesis will do, what questions it will ask, how knowledge will relate to data, and how much knowledge production will depend on access to technological resources in the future.

The Tower of Babel. The third image problematizes the layering of pasts and presents in biblical exegesis by layering the world of the historical text with the history of the text in the world. Babel can be regarded as a multilayered exegetical metaphor. Babel is in one sense an etiology of hermeneutics as starting with

6 Note on the Cover Photographs

miscommunication. Babel is also a byword for state totalitarianism, cultural hegemony, and colonization. Babel combines history and philosophy, critical theory and political commentary. To what extent can exegesis do the same?

A Just and Lasting Peace. The fourth image combines the stained-glass motif of liturgical space with themes of modern war and violence. The image constitutes yet another form of exegetical practice – namely, protest – serving as a reminder that this volume, too, has been produced in an age of religious and political contest and calling for ever-new critical attention to what responsible scholarship looks like.

The What Does Theology Do, Actually? Project

The What Does Theology Do, Actually? project aims not to do theology, but to observe what theologies do, around the world today, in and for the communities in which they circulate and hold meaning. How is theology understood and practiced as a semantics of global society? What kinds of problems do theologies solve and how? These questions are pursued, moreover, with specific attention given to the “transcultural”. Much might be learned both about the role of Christian religion in public life and about evolving trends in theological understanding or praxis by examining comparatively the ways Christian communities encode transcultural experiences of irritation coming from the social environment (for example, climate change, protest movements, digitalization, mass migration, or global pandemics) into their self-understanding (for example, in engagement with received tradition) and self-formation (for example, in liturgy and community ethics).

This requires theoretical open mindedness and methodological agility. The project therefore follows a two-step logic. First, the project seeks to observe theological work as itself a set of social discourses or objects contingently particular to certain contexts. A focus on answering the question “What is theology?” privileges those who already possess the resources and power to shape what counts as being “really” theology or not. By contrast, the descriptive approach preferred by the question “What does theology do?” objectifies “theologies” as a kind of social artifact and recognizes a variety of reflected religious communications as communicating theology. Second, in this way, the project aims to disrupt dominant paradigms in academic theological research, to expand the category of theological work(s) beyond textual formats and classroom or conference situations to include a variety of spaces, symbols, practices, and artifacts that function as transmitters of reflected religious communications, and to contribute to work diversifying theological methodologies to include empirical, qualitative, and quantitative research methods.

The What Does Theology Do, Actually? project consists of symposia and a limited book series. An international, interdisciplinary community of scholars

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and practitioners, from widely differing contexts, and at all career stages are invited to disruptive dialogue with one another in the context of symposia devoted to comparative study of theological production and communication systems. The inaugural symposium called into question such basic issues as what a context is, what counts as a theological work, and what publics theologies inevitably address and how. It addressed these questions with Protestant, Pentecostal, and Roman Catholic theological interventions from Ethiopia, Nigeria, the Philippines, Argentina, Hong Kong, the USA, and Germany. Subsequent symposia and volumes in the series continue to apply this same approach, each with a focus on a theological sub-discipline.

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Acknowledgements

This volume grows out of work done at a conference of the same title held from 9-10 July 2021, hosted by the What Does Theology Do, Actually? Project at the University of Bonn and conducted digitally. The last couple of years have presented all of us with new challenges. One ongoing consequence of the Covid-19 pandemic seems to be that the pace and volume of work not only did *not* decrease and slow down, but, to the contrary, increased and sped up. How much more thankful are we then, as an editorial team, for the many hands who have carried the load in bringing this second volume of the WDTD series across the finish line.

We would like to thank the University of Bonn and the Catholic and Protestant Theological Faculties, in particular, for providing the infrastructure and logistical support necessary for holding a digital conference in a professional manner. Further thanks are due to “Transdisciplinary Research Area 4: Individuals, Institutions and Societies” and to the Federal Ministry of Education and Research (BMBF) and the Ministry of Culture and Science of the State of North Rhine-Westphalia (MKW) within the framework of the Excellence Strategy of the Federal and State Governments for financial support.

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Finally, we would also like to thank the publisher, specifically, Tilman Meckel and Christina Wollesky, who patiently and supportively accompanied this project all the way to publication.

Bonn, December 2022

Phillip Andrew Davis, Jr.
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Matthew Ryan Robinson (USA / Germany)

Introduction

The WDTD Project

Central to the purposes of the What Does Theology Do, Actually? (hereafter, WDTD) project is to observe, document, describe, and compare the functions of theological knowledge production and communication as that knowledge and those communications are experienced, cultivated, and used around the world today. Additionally, the project is interested in the ways the cultivation of theological practice is routinized and normativized by means of organizing and institutionalization, whether in theological faculties at universities, in confessional and ecumenical seminaries, in church offices and denominations, and also in forms of church-society transfer such as institutes and think tanks but no less NGOs or even protest movements. WDTD seeks not to *do theology* but to observe what *theology does*.

In its Introduction, the first volume of WDTD situated the work of WDTD within a transcultural framework. The focus lay on the “flows” of theological language as this language is deployed from and for local places, by particular Christian churches and groups, but in their efforts to address themselves to locality-transcending, indeed, global challenges. And in this interaction of the local and the global, the question arises to what extent global discourses using the language of Christian theology influence the interpretation and self-understanding of Christian churches and groups in particular places, and to what extent particular interpretive appropriations of the language of Christian theology, in speaking to the world via addressing global challenges, influence context-overarching usage and understandings of that very language. This focus remains central to the project overall. It is a driving interest of the project to look for any patterns or trends that might be identifiable in the use of Christian-theological language world-wide. How might such language be involved in the transcultural dynamic of particular communities and traditions negotiating the encounter with problems that they face in common? The questions are, what do Christian theologies do in helping conduct these negotiations, and what changes in Christian

theological practices, on a more or less global scale, might be observed to be taking place along the way?

As one practical logic for structuring the approach to this set of questions, WDTD is organized as a series of symposia and accompanying volumes devoted to the “traditional” theological subdisciplines: the exegetical disciplines, the history of Christianity, and systematic and practical theology. After the inaugural symposium was held in 2019, the second symposium, “Exegeting Exegesis” was held in 2021, while the third, devoted to the work of church history, “The Unity of the Church and its Histories”, was held in 2022.

It is important to place the word “traditional” in quotation marks when referring to the “traditional” theological subdisciplines because the present conceptual and institutionalized division of theological subdisciplines is of course a modern development. Moreover, it is a product of the modern West, and the reproduction and further reiterations of current disciplinary divisions in theological institutions throughout the majority world must be viewed through a post-colonial lens. That is not to call into question the agency and self-determination of any churches or theological schools in the majority world who find this conjugation of disciplines suitable for their own situation. Rather, it is simply taken, within the context of WDTD, as a sober reminder that the forms of theological work, as reflection upon and communication about the Christian religion, are historically contingent and mutable. They have continuously evolved over the centuries, and they will continue to do so.

WDTD pursues an expressly descriptive and non-normative interest in theological work. But it is not an attempt to do theology from nowhere. The project is descriptive, but this should not be taken to imply that it aims to be neutral, objective, or disinterested. If the WDTD series were a series of single-author monographs that attempted such a description, the risk would be greater that the resulting descriptions were portending to take on the posture of a view from nowhere, even if unintentionally and even if the presentations took pains to be reasonably representative.

In order to counteract, or at least to cultivate awareness of this risk, the symposia instead bring together scholars in those disciplines from different global regions and national contexts, diverse Christian (and, in the case of this volume, also Jewish) religious perspectives, and different institutional or organizational locations that combine research and practice in various ways. In this way, experts with a depth of experience and knowledge of both particular regional-religious-institutional settings and of context-overarching discussions in the subdiscipline in question can gather in true symposium style to describe the ways that discipline is understood and practiced by and for whom and why in the settings where they are active. By means of a reciprocal exchange of perspectives and responses, underwritten by commitments to mutuality and voluntariness in participation, and with no other purpose than the exchange itself, emerging trends in theological communication might be observed and trajectories for research identified.

1. The Many Contours of Exegetical Work and its Institutionalizations

The fields of “Exegesis” have long been characterized by broad disciplinary diversity, but also ambiguity, combining biblical studies, exegesis, early Jewish studies, early Christian studies, Ancient Near Eastern studies, and classical studies in various ways. This is to say nothing of the development of contextual and engaged exegesis informed by critical-theoretical insights in the twentieth and twenty-first century as reflected, for example, in feminist, liberation, postcolonial, and queer Biblical exegesis. How and why scholars study the Bible varies, not only across confessional or cultural contexts, but across institutional-academic contexts. Given the overarching interest of the WDTD project in observing theology sociologically in the various global contexts in which it is practiced, how can the diversity of understandings and practices of exegetical work be organized in a way that is helpful for prompting critical self-reflection on the field as a whole?

A few options were discussed in designing the present contribution to the series. The work could have started by asking about the relationship of exegesis to the other theological disciplines. However, not only is this question one that has been much discussed and for a long time – one thinks, for example, of Johann Philipp Gabler’s 1787 lecture, “*De justo discrimine theologiae biblicae et dogmaticae regundisque recte utriusque finibus*” – but it is also narrow in its scope, for the interpretation of the Bible often takes place far from the contexts of academic theology with its various subdivisions.

A second possibility would have been to focus on methodological considerations in more detail. After all, critical reflection on one’s own methods is part of everyday exegetical life. But this very fact spoke against it, because methodological plurality is already a regular topic at meetings and conferences and increasingly in classrooms as well. Moreover, focusing the volume on methods would have run the risk of creating a conversation that remained at a distance from the overarching question, namely, what does exegesis do, actually?

Therefore, a different approach seemed advisable, one that scrapes a bit deeper at the foundations of what “exegesis” is, without ignoring the above debates, but positioning them in relation to the different “places” in which biblical interpretation actually takes place. This volume seeks not to evaluate or resolve the ambiguities that persist throughout the field, but to approach them diagonally via sociological questions about the ways in which context, institutions, and knowledge production are interrelated and the significance of these interrelationships for scholarship, for religious communities, and for society. The conference from which the chapters of the present volume were brought together was thus structured around six thematic clusters, which were so designed as to encourage reflection on a certain aspect or a certain combination of aspects of what exegesis does vis-à-vis three social fields of practice: science and the academy, religious communities, and the civic or public sphere.

A first thematization of the task at hand concerned cultivation of an understanding of Christianity – and thus of exegesis in relation to academy, religious community and the public sphere – as a geographically and socially polycentric phenomenon, with multiple “centers” globally. It belongs to the architecture of WDTD to bring together theologians from different geographical regions and socio-political contexts where Christianity has a significant history and / or where the Christian faith holds ongoing significance. It is with this understanding that the volume’s authors take up the questions, each with respect to his or her own settings: Why do we study the Bible academically? How does this help us? What challenges, tensions, or problems does academic study of the Bible create ecclesiologically, socially, or academically in my situation?

The volume then turns to reflect on the fields of academy, religious community, and the public sphere, each in their turn. The second thematic focus of the volume is on the systemic and institutional contexts in which exegetical work is conducted. Scholarly exegesis of the Bible takes place in a variety of such contexts – from research universities to denominational seminaries to pastoral letters and confessional statements, to name but a few – each of which operates on the basis of presuppositions that affect the way the biblical texts are handled. The chapters gathered here seek to make these implicit, often impervious backgrounds explicit in order to understand the socio-institutional conditions in which exegesis is undertaken in academic systems around the world. More concretely it is asked, in what sorts of institutions is exegesis practiced and taught? How do these institutions relate to other academic institutions or disciplines? Is exegesis practiced and taught at religious or secular institutions? If religious, which religious confessions are represented, and how do they interact? How are these institutions regulated legally, and how is the academic-cultural position of exegesis negotiated politically? What is the historical background to the socio-political and institutional position of exegesis in that context? And finally, in what concrete ways have exegetical debates or exegetical questions been influenced by this contextualization?

Third, the chapters of this volume engage with the confessional construction of the biblical texts in relation to settings with a more explicit self-understanding as being religiously oriented and practicing. Exegesis deals with the Bible. But what exactly is a Bible? How does our concept of “Bible” impact our way of reading and interpreting it? It seems obvious that answers to these questions will vary according to ecclesial or denominational context. There is no consensus on what is meant by canonicity and how this concept is best negotiated, no agreement on the extent of the canon among Jewish, Catholic, Protestant, and Orthodox readers, and no end in sight of discussions concerning what it means theologically for the texts to be “sacred” or “Scripture”. This lack of finality may lead one to wonder how “Jewish”, “Catholic”, “Protestant”, or “Orthodox” exegesis might be described. On the other hand, it is worth asking to what extent these respective approaches to the biblical texts also depend on ethno-linguistic and socio-political backgrounds: If we ask how, when, by whom, and with what inten-

tions the Bible is read, the answers might differ significantly from one context (however demographically demarcated) to another. But then, again, they might coincide to a much greater extent than expected, too. Referring recursively to the previous paragraph, it can also be asked from within explicitly confessional contexts in what ways exegesis is understood to be an academic discipline or not. To what extent are academic and spiritual reading practices thought to stand in tension with one another, and to what extent are they regarded as mutually enriching?

Fourth, exegesis in public and civic spaces is a topic that receives rather extensive attention in several chapters. Reflecting on the interaction of academic research and social change raises a number of challenging questions, especially when it comes to religious themes. Biblical exegesis in particular may encounter various receptions in church and society, whether it is given pride of place in doing theology, its historical claims are received as harmful to faith, its contemporary societal relevance is doubted, or whether biblical interpretation is put to political use. Biblical exegesis is situated in relation to academia and religious community in different societies in different ways, and what it communicates, to whom, and how vary accordingly. This attention to exegesis in relation to public and civic settings is approached from a variety of angles, including with a focus on inner-theological discourses, the spaces and methods of communication, on the ways the Bible permeates society implicitly and explicitly, and who communicates this knowledge and in what contexts.

Fifth, there is the question of method. From academy to religious community to public and civic settings, in all of these places the use of both well-established as well as emerging methods of research, study, and presentation may be observed. It is a truism to say that there is a wide range of methods in exegesis: The “classical” canon of historical-critical methods is nowadays joined by many engaged and context-oriented approaches such as African, post-colonial, feminist, queer, or ecological hermeneutics. The overall impression created has sometimes been that these approaches rather coexist than really cooperate. Probing why and to what extent this is actually the case leads the authors gathered here to address a number of questions such as: To what extent are methods culturally bound and / or products of specific socio-historical developments? Or, more concretely, if historical-critical methods are a European invention, how are they and how ought they to be received in non-Western cultures, or is it even necessary at all? What is the status of contextual and post-colonial interpretations within the field of exegesis, and what exactly can historical-critical perspectives learn from them? In a kind of meta-reflection on this phenomenon, several of the chapters in this volume, on the one hand, consider the reasons why this may be the case and what we can do about it, while, on the other hand, other authors also argue that this tension is much less pronounced nowadays, seeing instead potential for, again, mutual enrichment in the combination of historical-critical and critical-theoretical methodological approaches.

Finally, sixth, it is a core concern of this volume, as of the whole WDTD project, to look toward the possible futures of work in the fields associated with biblical exegesis. The volume thus features a number of future-oriented reflections in the chapters of both senior and early-career scholars. Two basic questions – namely, concerning why scholars continue to conduct research on the Bible today, and why they might do so in the future – yield in their turn more specific questions: Will scholars who conduct research on the Bible be interested in the Bible in and of itself (and if so, on what kind of understanding of the Bible’s importance is this interest based)? Or will scholars increasingly become more interested in the Bible because of how the Bible refers to or reflects on other issues. If the latter, then what are those other issues? Are they most helpfully described as cultural, societal, ethical, existential, or perhaps philosophical? How are those categories constructed and “found” in the ancient texts of the Bible?

In summary, with its focus on exegesis in relation to science and the academy, religious communities, and the civic or public sphere, the volume concentrates, in a way, on one end of the global-local spectrum of the transcultural described at the outset: WDTD volume two aims to attend to localness, the particularity, the contextuality, the situational specificity of all of the exegetical work.

2. Chapter Previews

The volume’s attention to the institutionalization and particularity of exegetical work is reflected by the various scholars and practitioners who constitute the volume’s authors. From the volume’s several contributors several unique and, perhaps just as interestingly, many overlapping concerns emerge. In keeping with the WDTD program priorities, the work presented in this volume showcases the insights of an interreligious and ecumenical group of scholars, at various career stages, from twelve different countries, and standing in various relations to academic and lived-religious settings on exegetical institutionalization and practice.

Tahina Rahandrifenosoa (Madagascar), a pastor of a Reformed Protestant church in Madagascar, opens the volume with a short dispatch from the fields of exegetical practice, in particular describing his experience combining exegetical work and pastoral guidance in Facebook videos for his large Malagasy audience. Rahandrifenosoa writes as a pastor, in a pastor’s voice and with a pastor’s concerns. As such, he is not primarily interested in biblical exegesis as a field for its own sake. And yet, not despite but precisely from this pastoral location, he argues for the helpfulness of careful historical-critical study of the biblical texts – for the individual life of faith, for church leadership, and even for community formation. Similar dynamics come to the forefront in Anja Block’s (Germany)

chapter. Starting from her academic institutional setting, but like Rahandrifenosoa, she regards rigorous training in historical-critical exegetical methods as of vital importance for engaging constructively with articulations of Christian religion in her contemporary German context. She is specifically interested in the relevance of biblical exegesis for the field of Christian religious education in schools at a time when both biblical illiteracy and biblical literalisms – and both of these all over the political landscape – are on the rise.

Already in these opening chapters, then, several key questions and tensions come to the forefront: What does it mean to do historical-critical research “for its own sake”? How theological and how connected to a church or denomination is, can, and should exegetical work be? What are appropriate and helpful ways of positioning the Bible in civic and public discourses in relation to social values and norms?

A concern reappears again and again in the following chapters for an exegesis that speaks into the present of religious persons and communities with their respective contextual challenges and perspectives. Dogara Ishaya Manomi (Nigeria), a Protestant New Testament scholar, notes that biblical exegesis that does not connect interpretation of the biblical texts to the situations of Christian individuals, communities, churches, and leaders is unthinkable in his context. This conviction is echoed by Sharon Padilla (Mexico), a Roman Catholic New Testament scholar who similarly writes about the necessity of addressing contextual social challenges in interpretation of the Bible in Latin America.

Their point, however, is not simply that present-day needs and interests should always take priority in determining whether and to what extent the Bible is worth reading and interpreting. Rather, the point is, on the one hand, *descriptive*: Trends in contemporary discourse, combined with institutionalized concentrations of power, simply *do* determine what is determined by contemporary readers to count as knowledge about the Bible or to be worth knowing about the biblical texts – including those who understand themselves to be interested merely in historical scholarship as well as those whose interests in the past are more guided by present-day social challenges. Moritz Gräper (Germany), C. I. David Joy (India), and Mirjam Jekel (Germany) all discuss this in their chapters in relation to the ways that perceptions of legitimacy in exegetical work worldwide are institutionalized. Gräper examines the ways that the structures of participation, for example, in academic societies and conference culture, in effect give strong preference to western scholars working in wealthy institutions. Joy engages in a postcolonial analysis, not of the biblical texts themselves, for which is more well-known, but of publishing practices and the eclipse of majority world publications by the systemic preference for English-language research published by large European and North Atlantic corporations. Jekel makes a critical but constructive approach to these issues: On the one hand, she asks who is doing exegesis and looks within but also beyond familiar academic settings; on the other, she asks for whom exegetical work is done and why, and here, too, she

seeks to highlight and thematize connections between academia and fields of practice that have often been overlooked.

However, the concern for exegetical practices that speak from and into the present is not treated merely descriptively. It is also a concern for being aware of the frameworks within which one is reading and being able to embrace them insofar as they affirm life and faith. From different confessional contexts, Ludger Schwienhorst-Schönberger (Vienna) and Ivana Noble (Prague) outline hermeneutical approaches in Catholic and in Protestant and Eastern Orthodox theology, respectively, that understand the reading of the Bible as a spiritual encounter. While this presupposes in each case a theological understanding of Scripture, it at the same time recognizes that all reading practices are contextual and engaged, responding to present concerns and driven by contemporary values. In this way, more nuanced self-awareness can be cultivated of the ways that reading in the present is also always reading for the present. Søren Lorenzen (Denmark) writes about exegesis and its relevance in and for a largely secular society, and argues for the ongoing development of philosophical-hermeneutical interests in the field as a direction holding particular promise for the future. Lorenzen's suggestion could be a way forward, not only due to its potential to fill the sails with fresh wind, but also for the ways it can serve as a call to return to the over two thousand years of rich philosophical-exegetical tradition in Jewish and Christian thought. Questions of selfhood and community and what constitutes a good life in the world are no less historical and present in the biblical texts for reason of their also being philosophical in orientation. And, indeed, returning to the texts with such questions is deeply important as they help to overcome the idea that exegetical work seeks a single "real" meaning, or that, in order to understand the meaning(s) the biblical texts communicate, it would be sufficient to find out "what really happened".

This does not mean, however, that the volume overall holds a sour attitude toward historical-critical exegesis. To the contrary. The seminal insight that there are no non-historical readings of history is by now banal, though not for that reason any less consequential for science or society. More recent critical turns in social-scientific and historical scholarship are not to be seen as alternatives to or rejections of historical research, but in fact underscore its importance and help to refine and nuance both what kinds of questions scholars in the present direct toward the past and how the past can inform the present. As Amy-Jill Levine (USA) argues, a "denial of history" is catastrophic for affirmative faith in the present. Not only is it the case that "an a-historical Jesus is a malleable Jesus", but a-historical readings have been set in totalitarian service of colonialism, anti-Semitism, and anti-Judaism for centuries, with horrifying consequences, as Levine soberingly reminds. Neither scientific nor religious communities nor the public sphere have yet been able to liberate themselves from these tendencies, and a robust commitment to critical engagement with history is vital for scholarly and confessional practice as much today as ever. And this turns out to be a refrain that recurs in many chapters.

Several authors – from Block to Levine to Athalya Brenner-Idan (Israel / the Netherlands) – express concern about political, religious, and social fundamentalisms that creep in through irresponsible reading practices, illustrating yet another way in which historical-critical exegesis and present-day contextualization are seen as inseparable and, in fact, mutually important. Rahandrifenosoa, Padilla, Manomi, Wandusim, Joy, and Jeremy Punt (South Africa) do not disagree. One of the important accomplishments of the volume is the way it disrupts and complicates any unreflected equivocations in opposition between historical-critical exegesis and contextual exegesis, liberal West and fundamentalist rest.

Michael Wandusim (Ghana) argues forcefully that the Bible “will receive *increased critical* attention in the times ahead, not necessarily for its own sake, but due to its documented influence in both religious and secular contexts in Africa.” In other words, Wandusim predicts scientific historical-critical exegesis will continue to gain in importance precisely for the purposes of contextualization and application, not despite those pressures. For those who are interested, he also offers a short introduction to several key West African exegetes who represent the trajectories he is describing in his chapter.

The chapter from Athalya Brenner-Idan offers a particularly fascinating case study of the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic in Israel and responses from some Ultraorthodox communities. In so doing, she highlights the complex ways scholarship and religious traditionalism and politics interact as Brenner conducts a kind of masterclass in historical-critical, theological exegesis of the public square, while also being very upfront about her positionality and political leanings as a feminist, secular Jew. On the one hand, as a feminist exegetical scholar, she represents an approach to “engaged” exegesis; on the other hand, she does not resist the use of historical-critical methodologies, but rather builds her argument on historical-critical insights concerning “plagues” and pandemics in the Bible. Moreover, she seamlessly integrates her feminist lens and historical-critical insights into a sharp critique of contemporary Israeli politics, not rooted in but precisely opposing normative theological programs. And how does she perform this integrated critique? Via the incorporation of discussions of the Rabbinic period and later Jewish tradition. All of this combined becomes a fascinating reflection on how complicated and multi-layered are the kinds of things that exegesis and theology *do* – often without it being recognized that they are present, much less doing anything, at all.

Still, as Jeremy Punt argues, not every scholar will be able to acquire such expansive area and methodological expertise. Punt suggests therefore that methodological approaches should not be seen as tools that, properly applied, mechanically produce correct interpretations, but as “scientific homes” that influence both interpretations and interpreters. Exegetes thus face the task of orienting themselves intentionally and responsibly in their own scientific-(non)credal-civic “homes”. Irresponsible exegesis in reaction to a push for easy answers is an ever-present danger, as Jonathan W. Lo (Hong Kong / Canada) shows in his chapter on opposing interpretations among Christians in Hong

Kong of biblical characterizations concerning proper relationships between followers of Jesus and the ruling authorities. As an example of such responsibility, Andrea Pichelmeier's call for a kind of *akribeia*, or "precision", in correlating text to context via the fittingness of questions asked stands out; as she cautions, this "most important virtue of exegetes requires time and patience. Both have become rare in a society which demands instant results."

Conclusion

What can exegetical scholars do, actually, to integrate their historical training with responsible ways of communicating their knowledge of the biblical texts and traditions in particular communities and in light of the certain circumstances and needs of those communities? This is a point on which the volume has not only descriptive but also constructive suggestions to make. Brenner-Idan, Levine, and Jekel all offer proposals in this direction, which serve also as fitting conclusions to this introduction. First, Brenner-Idan writes, "If, as a scholar, you wish to be relevant in times like this, leave behind notions of non-engagement. Mine your own knowledge, as I've tried to do in my own context [...]. Most religious traditions contain possibilities for action during emergencies; those possibilities have to be searched for and pointed out." Second, this critical mining of one's own contexts and traditions, can be paired with critical, but sympathetic listening to the traditions of others. Levine directs scholarly attention to a pedagogical posture of listening and representing the positions and concerns of others in recognizable, fair ways. Drawing on her decades of experience as a professor, Levine paints a picture of biblical scholarship as engaging in public forums for open dialogue and debate that can still today be structured by the mutual commitment of participants to standards of listening and reconstructing the arguments of others in ways they feel represent them fairly, as a baseline. Critique and evidence are not to be given short shrift, confessional disagreements can be maintained, and clear condemnations will at times be not only appropriate but necessary, even in the classroom. But there is rarely warrant for beginning with such exclusionary moves.

To conclude in Jekel's words: "There is a great need for exegetical knowledge, for the voices of biblical scholars to inform, to differentiate, to question simplistic claims. And, again, that means that we must be open to these communities, these questions, that we must be willing to communicate with people and groups outside of our academic enclosures. Specifically, exegetes must be public theologians (in a very broad sense of the term)." Surely there are many exegetical scholars who would not describe their work in those terms. But there are also very many who would. The formulation in any case encapsulates well both the debates of this volume and the challenges facing those who will be doing exegesis in the coming generations.

Part 1

The Bible between Academy,
Religious Communities, and Society

Online Exegetical Teaching

Responses Among Malagasy People and Churches

Introduction

It can be argued that Christianity began to maintain a presence in Madagascar after the arrival on August 18, 1818 of two young English men named David Jones and Thomas Bevan, who were missionaries of the London Missionary Society.¹ The way these men taught theology was so compelling that despite years of persecution of Christians by Queen Ranavalona I, Christianity began to flourish. William Ellis describes this progress and triumph:

We have reached the fiftieth year since Christianity first entered the capital of Madagascar, and the results of its progress during the intervening years demand our unfeigned thankfulness to God. Multitudes of the people have renounced their household idols. The national idols have been removed from the palace, the priests no longer form part of the court, and the astrologers and the diviners are no longer recognised: some of these have since found a place in the missionaries' Bible class, at the Christians' prayer meeting, or among the numbers who have, by baptism, publicly renounced heathenism and avowed their faith in Christ.²

Today, more than 200 years after the Gospel came to Madagascar, Christianity occupies an important place in the life of the Malagasy society.³ People receive the teaching of Scripture mostly in church, on the streets, or on radios and televisions. However, in the last five years, theological teachings transmitted on social media have begun to gain popularity alongside the usual means of communications. Facebook is the first among them, and I am one of those who use this tool to teach theology, through the Facebook page called “Marka 16:15 – Pst Tahina”.

¹ William Ellis, *History of Madagascar* (London: John Snow and CO, 1870), 207.

² William Ellis, *The Martyr Church: A Narrative of the Introduction, Progress, and Triumph of Christianity in Madagascar* (London: John Snow and CO., 1870), 399.

³ Daniel Ralibera, *Madagascar et le Christianisme* (Paris: Éditions Karthala, 1993), 7.

I am a pastor from the Church of Jesus Christ in Madagascar, a reformed church. In 2020, I completed the Master of Arts in Ecumenical Studies at the University of Bonn, Germany, and am currently pursuing a doctorate at the same university, conducting research on the “Comparison of Baptismal Practices between the Christian Religion and Traditional beliefs in Madagascar”. In 2018, I started the above-mentioned Facebook page “Marka 16:15 – Pst Tahina”. The reason why I created this page came from the conviction of the word of God which says, “Go into all the world and proclaim the good news to the whole creation” (Mark 16:15, NRSV).

Social media attracts a lot of people nowadays, especially young people, and is a very effective way to educate; its existence should be taken advantage of. My main objectives are to teach the Bible, to build the Christian faith on solid foundations, and to create in people a biblical mindset and way of life. I produce two to three videos a week, and they numbered around 400 by the end of 2021. The page had over 123,000 official followers as of the end of January 2022.

All the videos are given in Malagasy, but thanks to the help of many volunteers, a quarter of the published videos are now subtitled in French and English. Some of the videos have also been translated into sign language for people with hearing impairment. The page is followed by a wide diversity of people, from Christian to non-Christian, Catholic or Protestant, and especially evangelical believers. According to Facebook statistics, those following the page are mostly between twenty-five and thirty-five years old and sixty percent of them are female.

I have selected below three videos to discuss, in order to illustrate the types of responses I have received from Malagasy followers of my page specifically to my exegetical content.

1. First Video: Is it a Sin to Drink Alcohol?⁴

This is a ten-minute exegetical video that was released on November 13, 2019. By the end of 2021, meaning two years later, the video has had 1,000 reactions, more than 450 comments, 3,000 shares just on Facebook, and more than 100,000 views.

This question does not even exist in Europe today, but why are Malagasy people interested in finding the answer to the question of whether it is a sin to drink alcohol? To understand why, let us go back in history.

At the end of the 19th century, Christian anti-drug organizations flourished throughout the world. In 1875, for example, an American named Francis Murphy created the first Christian anti-drug organization in the United States: “Blue

⁴ Marka 16: 15 – Pst Tahina, *Fahotana ve ny misotro toaka?* (Facebook, November 13, 2019), <https://www.facebook.com/336776300178729/videos/465689514048389>.

Ribbon”, or “Zioga Manga” in Malagasy. Also in 1877, Louis Lucien Rochat, founded the first anti-drug organization in Switzerland, called the “Blue Cross”.⁵ All these organizations adhere to the principle of “drinking in moderation”. In 1888, an American missionary named Mary Clement Leavitt arrived in Madagascar and led a great campaign against drugs, and in the early twentieth century, many Christian anti-drug organizations began to arise. In 1927, foreign missionaries, as well as government officials and pastors met to study the fight against drugs in Madagascar and decided that the organization should be called “Blue Cross” and that it should no longer support “moderate consumption” as in all other countries, but “total abstinence”⁶ which was seen as more suitable for the Malagasy people and which many churches have continued to this day.

But many do not know this story, and the Blue Cross is still going strong today. There are many Scriptures in the Bible that prohibit the use of alcohol, for example, “Wine is a mocker, strong drink a brawler, and whoever is led astray by it is not wise” (Proverbs 20:1 NRSV) and “Ah, you who are heroes in drinking wine and valiant at mixing drink” (Isaiah 5:22 NRSV). Also, “Drink no wine or strong drink, neither you nor your sons, when you enter the tent of meeting, that you may not die; it is a statute for ever throughout your generations” (Leviticus 10:9 NRSV). As a result, it has always been strongly emphasized that drinking alcohol is also a sin: “Do you not know that you are God’s temple and that God’s Spirit dwells in you? If anyone destroys God’s temple, God will destroy that person. For God’s temple is holy, and you are that temple” (1 Corinthians 3:16–17 NRSV).

Thus, I discussed alcohol in the Bible in this video, and the explanation was based primarily on the literary context, that is, what the entire Bible says about alcohol and not just one passage of Scripture. For example, I mentioned that there are so many biblical passages in the Old and the New Testaments which authorize people to consume wine, like: “spend the money for whatever you wish – oxen, sheep, wine, strong drink, or whatever you desire. And you shall eat there in the presence of the Lord your God, you and your household rejoicing together” (Deuteronomy 14:26 NRSV), or “No longer drink only water, but take a little wine for the sake of your stomach and your frequent ailments” (1 Timothy 5:23 NRSV). I also did a semantic study to consider the distinction between the forbidding of drunkenness and the prohibition on drinking at all. The latter concerns a few figures like the Nazirites, the descendants of the Rechabites, and Samson. The prohibition was not for all of Israel because even Jesus turned water

⁵ Sophie Rossier, “La Croix-Bleue et sa Lutte Anti-alcoolique en Suisse Romande, 1877-1910: Le Fonctionnement d’une Société de Tempérance Entre Idéaux Religieux et Aspirations Patriotiques” (license dissertation, University of Fribourg, 2005), 7.

⁶ Maurice Rasolomanana, “Ny Dian’ny Ady amin’ny Zava-pisotro Mahamamo sy ny Mahadomelina teto Madagasikara na ny Vokovoko Manga” (The Journey of the Fight Against Alcohol and Drugs in Madagascar or the Blue Cross) (end-of-study thesis, SETELA, Faculty of Theology Ambatonakanga, 1996), 9.