Truth and Prejudice A Theological Reflection on Biblical Exegesis

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There is something exhausting about biblical exegesis. Anyone familiar with the historical-critical method will acknowledge that its demands are rigorous: text, source and redaction criticisms, just to name a few; not to mention knowledge of the primary language(s), familiarity with their grammar and syntax, and a careful examination of parallels to other sources in order to clarify the context of the passage(s) in question. That is not to say that I think such exercises are without merit. I firmly believe that historical-critical exegesis is necessary to elucidating the biblical texts. However, I wonder if we are not perhaps missing something when we engage in a merely scientific and historical analysis of a revelatory text. I can understand why such an analysis is alienating to many. Exegesis, it seems, has retreated into an historical discipline, telling us what a text could have meant in its time, but not what it might mean today. To make that link from past to present exegetes often leave the task to systematic theologians and this sparks a tension of its own. No less than Karl Rahner the Catholic theologian despaired,

I have the impression that you often work quite happily as pure philologists and ordinary historians. And then, when this leads to difficulties and problems in the field of dogmatic theology or in the consciousness of your young theologians or the laity, you are quite content to declare: – this has nothing to do with ‘us’ – this is a matter for the dogmatic theologians, let them work out how to deal with it¹.

Exegetes forget that they are theologians too, laments Rahner. While he recognises that a division of labour needs to exist between the various disciplines of theology, he wistfully longs for exegetes to make more attempts to dialogue with their counterparts.

I take Rahner’s comment as an invitation and a challenge. In the next three sections I shall be engaging in a hermeneutical (and ultimately, theological) reflection on historical-critical exegesis. In fact, I wish to demonstrate how exegesis is itself hermeneutics *in exercitu*. My argument is that

1. Karl RAHNER, *Exegesis and Dogmatic Theology*, in *Theological Investigations*, vol. 5, trans. K.-H. KRUGER, Baltimore, MD, Helicon Press; London, Darton, Longman & Todd, 1966, p. 70.

biblical exegesis equated with the historical-critical method inherits its presuppositions that truth is acquired by means of objective methods and requires keeping one's prejudices out of play. This results in an exegesis that is historical in nature, alienating to theological reflection, and blind to its own prejudices that unavoidably slip in through the back door. My question therefore is: can we think exegesis in a new way?

Section one commences by articulating the hermeneutical problem of pre-understandings in biblical studies. I shall then briefly consider two concrete examples that demonstrate how differing pre-understandings of the same passage lead to different conclusions. However, at the end of this I suggest that there is perhaps a more fundamental condition of "prejudice" at stake. This allows me to explore in section two Hans-Georg Gadamer's hermeneutical insights on prejudice in *Wahrheit und Methode (Truth and Method)*. Section three incorporates the insights from Gadamer and enters the plea for a "meaning-full" exegesis. This latter phenomenon locates the historical-critical method within a larger framework of exegesis as commentary and allows truth to be seen as unfolding itself in our prejudices. The aim is to see a biblical exegesis that is integral to, and integrated within, theology, one that is not afraid to be creative in its receptivity; not just a passive receiver of meanings but an active participant in the conversation we call revelation.

I. THE HERMENEUTICAL PROBLEM OF PRE-UNDERSTANDINGS IN BIBLICAL STUDIES

In a 1975 article², Geoffrey Turner articulated a dilemma in biblical studies, namely that the same rigorous exegetical methodology (the historical-critical method) could still somehow produce differing interpretations:

I want to understand why two exegetes may produce two quite different *types* of interpretation when they seem to share the same methodology and have more or less the same historical and philological evidence at their disposal³.

Turner contends that the problem lies at the level of "pre-understandings", something he argues exegesis neglects. His article is an investigation into the impact of pre-understandings on New Testament interpretation.

Turner begins by borrowing insights from philosophy on the hermeneutical circle (from Schleiermacher to Ricoeur), namely that the understanding of a text is preceded by a prior understanding which the reader brings

2. Geoffrey TURNER, *Pre-Understanding and New Testament Interpretation*, in *Scottish Journal of Theology* 28 (1975) 227-242.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 228.

to the text. This “pre-understanding” both affects and effects the understanding that occurs when encountering the text. The reason why exegetes do not share a common understanding is because they lack a common pre-understanding. However, to say this is a platitude. In order for the hermeneutical problem of pre-understandings not just to be an abstract concern, “we must analyse and specify precisely what it is that constitutes pre-understanding and the role it plays in New Testament exegesis”⁴. He isolates three aspects that are involved in understanding a text: (1) historical and philological method, (2) the conceptual matrix that constitutes a person’s pre-understanding, and (3) the cognitive interests that motivate the exegesis in the first place. He argues that it is these last two that account for differing interpretations since, in his view, historical and philological data remain constant.

It is Turner’s suggestion that there are two sets of concepts constituting an exegete’s conceptual matrix: the first set consists of concepts like history, revelation, resurrection, eschatology and miracle, which even if argued over, will nonetheless be familiar to Christian exegetes. The second set is more general and can be held in common with non-Christian scholars; among these: knowledge, human person, God, world, and spirit. In order to test his theory, Turner examines how Bultmann treats the occurrences of miracles in the Gospels. He discovers that Bultmann understands history to be a closed continuum of successive events of cause and effect. This “pre-understanding” precludes him from seeing miracles as supernatural events whose causes lie outside of history. Turner’s point is that “[a]nother exegete with a different, and perhaps more plausible, understanding of “miracle” would interpret those passages in a different way”⁵. It turns upon having different interests and expectations because, as he suggests, pre-understandings are also cognitive interests.

Jürgen Habermas demonstrated in *Erkenntnis und Interesse* (1968; ET: *Knowledge and Human Interests*, 1971) that knowledge is attained through motivation. Being confronted with a practical problem motivates one to acquire the knowledge to overcome it. Interests are basic orientations which either presuppose a need or produce such needs to preserve the life experience of a society. Their main characteristics are that they open a perspective and are practical in nature. Turner formulates the motivation behind theological knowledge as a “prior interest in the possibility of salvation deriving from a source outside human contingency”⁶. However, it is also possible to interpret the Bible with non-theological interests, thus leading to the different analyses (purely literary, Marxist, anthropological, etc.). The conceptual matrix of pre-understanding, then, is a first level and controls the meaning appropriated from a text, leading to either

4. *Ibid.*, p. 233.

5. *Ibid.*, p. 235.

6. *Ibid.*, p. 239.

true or false understanding depending on the adequacy of these concepts. The second level of cognitive interests, however, does not directly control meaning but instead opens up a perspective, allowing the possibility of newer forms of knowledge but also shutting off others. This is because cognitive interests are both revelatory and restrictive. Turner thus concludes that in addition to seeing how an exegete has assessed historical and philological data, one has the duty to uncover her/his pre-understanding of the hermeneutical concepts underlying that exegesis, as well as the prior cognitive interest which motivated the exegesis in the first place.

1. *Pre-Understandings at Work in Biblical Studies*

In order to see Turner's insights at work, I consider it useful to apply his analysis to biblical studies of a particular passage. For this I have chosen the pericope of 2 Cor 6,14–7,1, a passage known in New Testament exegetical circles as the "puzzling passage"⁷. It is puzzling to exegetes because, as reproduced below, it fits in rather awkwardly with its immediate context and, *prima facie*, with its removal, would allow a more smooth transition between 2 Cor 6,13 and 7,2. This has led to the unsolved question of whether the passage was indeed written by Paul or inserted by someone else into its present context. I will concentrate on two exegetes, Hans Dieter Betz and Jan Lambrecht who both use historical-critical methodology but arrive at two opposite conclusions on the passage's authenticity. Using Turner's insights on the conceptual matrix and cognitive interests, I will endeavour to see what they render in terms of Betz's and Lambrecht's respective pre-understandings.

2 Cor 6,14–7,1 in Its Immediate Context (New Revised Standard Version)

11 We have spoken frankly to you Corinthians; our heart is wide open to you. **12** There is no restriction in our affections, but only in yours. **13** In return – I speak as to children – open wide your hearts also.

14 Do not be mismatched with unbelievers. For what partnership is there between righteousness and lawlessness? Or what fellowship is there between light and darkness? **15** What agreement does Christ have with Beliar? Or what does a believer share with an unbeliever? **16** What agreement has the temple of God with idols? For we {*Other ancient authorities read: you*} are the temple of the living God; as God said, 'I will live in them and walk among them, and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. **17** Therefore come out from them, and be separate from them, says the Lord, and touch nothing unclean; then I will welcome you, **18** and I will be your father,

7. Joseph A. FITZMYER, *Qumran and the Interpolated Paragraph in 2 Cor 6:14–7:1*, in *CBQ* 23 (1961), p. 271.

and you shall be my sons and daughters, says the Lord Almighty.' 7,¹ Since we have these promises, beloved, let us cleanse ourselves from every defilement of body and of spirit, making holiness perfect in the fear of God.

2 Make room in your hearts {*Greek lacks*: in your hearts} for us; we have wronged no one, we have corrupted no one, we have taken advantage of no one. 3 I do not say this to condemn you, for I said before that you are in our hearts, to die together and to live together. 4 I often boast about you; I have great pride in you; I am filled with consolation; I am overjoyed in all our affliction.

An Anti-Pauline Fragment

Hans Dieter Betz advanced a rather controversial claim that the passage of 2 Cor 6,14–7,1 is similar, if not identical, to the ideas of Paul's opponents in Galatia⁸. He makes reference to the parallels discovered between the passage and Qumran literature. These parallels "and the frequency of non-Pauline concepts found in the passage"⁹ have led scholars to regard the passage as a non-Pauline interpolation. It should be noted that Betz does not question this assumption but, in fact, takes its non-Pauline status as a given, setting out to investigate what kind of (non-Pauline) theology lies behind the passage. He does this in two steps: first he engages in a literary and religio-historical analysis of the pericope and then he compares its theology with that in Paul's Letter to the Galatians.

It is not my purpose to enter into a detailed summary of Betz's arguments. What does become apparent, though, is that he sets up a diametrical opposition between 2 Cor 6,14–7,1 and Paul's Letter to the Galatians.

Since Paul developed his position in Galatians polemically, we can assume that his opponents must have held a theological conception diametrically opposed to Paul's. A careful comparison shows that such a conception is found in 2 Cor 6,14–7,1¹⁰.

Unfortunately, the reason why this diametrical opposition exists in the first place is because Betz has foreclosed from the outset on the possibility of 2 Cor 6,14–7,1 being Pauline (his "pre-understanding"). There remains, however, the problem of how the "fragment" ended up there. To this Betz provides a less than satisfactory answer:

it must be assumed that the redactor of the Pauline corpus, *for reasons unknown to us*, has transmitted a document among Paul's letters which in fact goes back to the movement to which Paul's opponents in Galatia belonged¹¹.

8. Hans Dieter BETZ, *2 Cor 6:14–7:1: An Anti-Pauline Fragment?*, in *JBL* 92 (1973) 88–108.

9. *Ibid.*, p. 88.

10. *Ibid.*, p. 103.

11. *Ibid.* Italics mine.

What is interesting here is the glimpse we catch of Betz's "pre-understanding" as to what constitutes authentically Pauline theology. I seem to discern Betz favouring a view of Paul's justification theology as primary. This perhaps owes itself to Betz's preoccupation with the Letter to the Galatians but also causes him to adopt an overly systematized conception of Paul's theology such that it cannot see 2 Cor 6,14–7,1 as Pauline. Recalling Turner's analysis of "pre-understandings", I would argue that in Betz's case, he has employed (1) a philological and religio-historical analysis that is in function of, (2) bolstering a pre-understanding of Pauline theology of justification that precludes seeing 2 Cor 6,14–7,1 as authentically Pauline, because (3) his cognitive interest is geared towards reconstructing the theology of Paul's opponents in the Letter of the Galatians from a New Testament source outside the Second Letter to the Corinthians. While I admire Betz's ingenuity in locating the parallel he was seeking in 2 Cor 6,14–7,1, he is unable to answer satisfactorily how such an "anti-Pauline fragment" eventually came to be placed in the otherwise Pauline letter of 2 Corinthians. It would thus be interesting to see how another exegete, Jan Lambrecht, deals with the same passage in his article.

An Authentic Pauline Passage

In contrast to Betz, and indeed to a host of scholars who were predisposed against the Pauline authorship of 2 Cor 6,14–7,1 at the time, Jan Lambrecht entered the plea in 1978 to consider the passage as authentically Pauline¹². Once again, it is not my purpose in this contribution to reproduce the exegetical arguments. Lambrecht begins by acknowledging the scholarly opinion about the passage's difficulty; this much he shares in common with Betz and others who dismiss it as a non-Pauline interpolation. However, he is driven by a principle that cautions against too hastily accepting the pericope as non-Pauline¹³. This allows Lambrecht to engage in a thorough literary and philological analysis of context, structure, line of thought and content. His analysis leads him to the conclusion that little or nothing stands *necessarily* against assuming Pauline authorship, thus permitting him to remain cautious about accepting the non-Pauline interpolations theories. It is also clear that Lambrecht takes issue with Betz's assumptions on Pauline theology. Considering Betz's views to be "forced" and "biased", Lambrecht warns against reducing Pauline theology to a one-sided emphasis on justification. Lambrecht entertains a multidimensional

12. Jan LAMBRECHT, *The Fragment of 2 Corinthians 6,14–7,1: A Plea for Its Authenticity*, in R. BIERINGER – J. LAMBRECHT (eds.), *Studies on 2 Corinthians* (BETL, 112), Leuven, Leuven University Press, 1994, 531-549 (originally published in *Supplements to NT* 48 [1978] 143-161).

13. One could see this as the application of "Ockham's Razor" (*non sunt multiplicanda entia praeter necessitatem* – entities are not to be multiplied beyond necessity), namely the principle that one should not make more assumptions than are necessary.

view on Paul, one that is less prone to systematising his thought and thus open to accepting the passage as a possible “quirk”, or digression, in Paul’s writing.

Employing Turner’s three-step analysis on pre-understandings, I would argue that: (1) Lambrecht is confronted by the same historical and philological data as Betz except that he examines it more stringently because he is at pains to disprove the charge of “disruption” and is not motivated out of a desire to reconstruct a hypothetical argument that Paul’s opponents might have used. (2) Lambrecht’s pre-understanding of Pauline theology is broader than Betz’s, but remains concerned to view Paul as interested in moral integrity over against cultic purity (Lambrecht chooses not to read the cultic terminology in the passage as literal). (3) Finally, Lambrecht’s cognitive interest in arguing for Pauline authenticity of the passage is certainly to disprove Betz’s portrayal of it as anti-Pauline, but might also be part of a wider concern to see literary unity in the letter of 2 Corinthians¹⁴.

2. *Pre-Understanding or Prejudice?*

We have just witnessed a striking example of what Geoffrey Turner had highlighted, namely, two exegetes producing

two different *types* of interpretation while seeming to share the same methodology and with more or less the same historical and philological evidence at their disposal.

His analysis on pre-understandings was helpful in showing that Hans Dieter Betz and Jan Lambrecht employ two different pre-understandings regarding the passage of 2 Cor 6,14–7,1. This being said, I found it difficult to directly apply his two-tier conceptual matrix in the investigation of Betz’s and Lambrecht’s articles, mainly because they did not seem to surface (for instance, concepts like “miracle” or “world”) and were not sufficiently made explicit by the authors themselves. What did appear evident, though, is that Betz and Lambrecht have two very different pre-understandings of Pauline theology, and indeed of the person of Paul. Next, Turner’s characterisation of cognitive interests as basic orientations that “open up a perspective” and motivate one’s research was not directly helpful in seeing his formulation of theology’s cognitive interest as the

14. The debate on partition theories within the Corinthian correspondence would take me too far away from the focus of this essay. For an overview of these theories, see: Reimund BIERINGER, *Teilungshypothesen zum 2. Korintherbrief: Ein Forschungsüberblick*, in BIERINGER – LAMBRECHT (eds.), *Studies* (n. 12), 67–105. Some recent trends in scholarship argue for the unity of the Corinthian correspondence (1 and 2 Corinthians). For a representative study, see: David R. HALL, *The Unity of the Corinthian Correspondence* (JSNT SS, 251), London – New York, T&T Clark International, 2003.

“prior interest in the possibility of salvation deriving from a source outside human contingency”. However, what did seem evident was that Betz and Lambrecht had different orientations (agendas?) towards the passage of 2 Cor 6,14–7,1, the former in function of Paul’s Letter to the Galatians (and the reconstruction of the opponents’ arguments), the latter in service of the Pauline authorship and unity of the Second Letter to the Corinthians. What I am trying to point out here is that, helpful as Turner’s analysis is, the drawback in its application is that a survey of pre-understandings remains speculative in the absence of explicit reflection upon them by the authors themselves¹⁵. Turner does plead that exegetes should be more explicit about their pre-understandings¹⁶ but, given that his article post-dates Betz’s article by two years, and arrives just three years before Lambrecht’s, not to mention that Turner’s highlighting of the problem indicates that sufficient awareness of pre-understanding did not exist in exegetical research at the time, it does seem that Betz and Lambrecht were labouring under a previous paradigm.

In fact, it is this particular paradigm that I wish to focus more deeply on. Both Betz and Lambrecht share a fundamental presupposition towards the passage of 2 Cor 6,14–7,1, namely that its current placing is problematic to the flow of thought in its immediate context. Betz takes this presupposition as an indication that the passage has to be non-Pauline and builds his theory of an anti-Pauline fragment from there. Lambrecht similarly accepts the (historical-critical) problems with the passage but takes this as a challenge to argue for Pauline authenticity, using the negative argument that there is not sufficient evidence to prove the contrary. It almost seems that if someone could prove to Lambrecht, more convincingly than Betz has, that the passage *is* non-Pauline, be it in terms of new evidence (a lost manuscript perhaps) or an argument on strong methodological grounds, Lambrecht would concede the point. This is evident from Lambrecht’s own reserved conclusion. He considers his reservations to the non-Pauline interpolation argument as “hardly a positive and cogent proof”¹⁷. While this might just be modesty on his part given the rigour of his literary analysis in the article, it does display a high emphasis on proofs and methods, and seems to betray a fundamental belief that these methods are criteria to attain the “truth” behind the problem of 2 Cor 6,14–7,1. Betz, too, shares this regard for objectivity. While his article on the passage is in function of recreating the arguments of Paul’s opponents in Galatians, his search for objectivity in this regard is equal to Lambrecht’s. “By providing the

15. I also find that his distinction between “pre-understanding” and “cognitive interest” is not sufficiently worked out (for instance, is one a subset of the other?).

16. TURNER, *Pre-Understanding* (n. 2), p. 241: “On the part of the exegete, he must be explicit (in his own mind at least) of the conceptual matrix which constitutes his pre-understanding in addition to the prior practical interest he has in the text”.

17. LAMBRECHT, *The Fragment* (n. 12), p. 549.

background against which Paul argues, 2 Cor 6,14–7,1 makes it possible to interpret the Galatian letter *in a more objective way*”¹⁸.

It is this presumption of objective truth that seems to distinguish the “paradigm” both Betz and Lambrecht work under. Furthermore, it is their confidence in right methodology that obscures the need for them to explicate, or reflect upon, their pre-understandings. Betz builds on the presupposition that the passage is non-Pauline, a presupposition he holds to be self-evident given previous, scientifically objective, research on the matter. Lambrecht’s view of the passage as authentically Pauline is premised on “familiarity with Paul’s writings”, scholarly research that shows Paul is prone to abrupt digressions. The reason why Betz and Lambrecht seem to talk past one another is because each is convinced that the different starting points they commence their investigations from are based on scientific and objective exegesis that they see themselves as continuing. Hence, while they can adopt previous presuppositions, they do not see them as coloured by pre-understandings or, in turn, colouring their own pre-understandings. Their research is based on a fundamental presumption towards critical, objective exegesis that disregards one’s own pre-understandings in the matter. In this sense it is reminiscent of the exegete Oscar Cullmann’s negative account of pre-understanding listed by Turner¹⁹. I would consider this position a bias – more strongly, a prejudice – towards objectivity.

I view this phenomenon of “prejudice” as more fundamental than Turner’s analysis of pre-understanding. In fact, Turner himself harbours the prejudice towards objectivity. His threefold structure of data, pre-understanding and cognitive interest betrays a desire for a proper “method” to identify and isolate the problem of differing understandings (interpretations). An indication that this is so is given in his conclusion on the task of the exegete:

If the exegete senses that part of his work is for any reason unsatisfactory (i.e. *if his interpretation does not ring true*), he must make his intuitive understanding of the text reflect back upon and criticise the concepts of his pre-understanding, for the process of understanding always remains circular²⁰.

There is an underlying view that if somehow the pre-understanding or cognitive interest can be localised, identified and properly accounted for, it will render a “true” interpretation. This entertains a notion of truth as (mathematical) correspondence, namely that an interpretation has to

18. BETZ, *An Anti-Pauline Fragment?* (n. 8), p. 108. Italics mine.

19. TURNER, *Pre-Understanding* (n. 2), p. 232: “Cullmann admits that we cannot avoid bringing presuppositions to the text, but he regards this as regrettable. By presuppositions he presumably means those personal judgments which ought to be abandoned in the quest for objectivity. While we can never entirely succeed in this, he says, none the less we should try”.

20. *Ibid.*, p. 241. Italics mine.

“correspond” to the objective truth contained in the text, as signified by the clear and consistent historical and philological data it renders. The question, though, is whether understanding can be so easily “methodised”. Is understanding a matter of finding *the* correct understanding? I would argue that an “ontological difference” exists between understanding as “event” and understandings (plural) as graspable entities of interpretations, pre-understandings and cognitive interests. It seems to me that a certain *Sinnsvergessenheit* (akin to Martin Heidegger’s *Seinsvergessenheit*) occurs when different interpretations of a text are deemed problematic. This view ignores the disclosive element of truth (or *Sinn*/Meaning) in a text that is at once both revelatory and restrictive.

The articles of Hans Dieter Betz and Jan Lambrecht display a bias towards objectivity that ignores their own pre-understandings in studying 2 Cor 6,14–7,1. This bias is indicative of a “prejudice against prejudice” that haunts scientific method and, thus, the historical-critical method in exegesis too. However, in also critiquing Turner’s analysis of pre-understanding, I raise the further question whether differing interpretations should really be viewed as a “problem” to be solved. Does this misunderstand the phenomenon of understanding itself? In my next section, I engage the thoughts of Hans-Georg Gadamer on the fundamental condition of prejudice (*Vorurteil*) in understanding.

II. THE FUNDAMENTAL CONDITION OF PREJUDICE IN UNDERSTANDING

The philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer (1900–2002) has provided a very insightful examination of the notion of prejudice in Part II-II of his magnum opus, *Wahrheit und Methode (Truth and Method)*²¹. In this section I wish to demonstrate that Gadamer’s rehabilitation of prejudice as a fundamental condition of understanding implies that truth is to be seen as *disclosed* in prejudice rather than *deciphered* by means of method alone and that this has ramifications for biblical studies.

Part II-II of *Truth and Method* (hereafter *TM*) is entitled “Elements of a theory of hermeneutic experience” and forms the second half of Gadamer’s examination of how the question of truth is understood in the human sciences. It consists of three main headings: (1) the elevation of

21. Hans-Georg GADAMER, *Wahrheit und Methode*, Tübingen, Mohr Siebeck, 1960. In this contribution I rely upon the standard English translation of his work, *Truth and Method*, 2nd rev. ed., trans. and rev. Joel WEINSHEIMER – Donald G. MARSHALL, New York – London, Continuum, 2003. This translation has benefited from Gadamer’s own input. See Translators’ Preface, p. XIX: “Gadamer himself has kindly answered our questions about a number of particularly difficult passages”. Page references from the English edition will be cited in the main body of the essay. Texts in italics are as they appear in the translated edition unless otherwise indicated.

the historicity of understanding to the status of a hermeneutic principle (265-307); (2) the recovery of the fundamental hermeneutic problem (307-341); (3) analysis of historically effected consciousness (341-379). I shall briefly summarise each part and then highlight four issues of relevance to biblical studies.

(1) Gadamer elevates the historicity of understanding to a hermeneutic principle (265-307). He begins by exposing the Enlightenment's negative evaluation of prejudice (or, pre-judgements; German *Vorurteil*, French *préjugé*, Latin *praejudicium*) as an instance of its own "prejudice against prejudice" (275), which has to do with the fact that authority and tradition fell foul of the Enlightenment's suspicion of (religious) dogma. In rehabilitating authority and tradition as positive (or at least neutral) aspects in the hermeneutical task of understanding, Gadamer proceeds to strip prejudice of its negative connotations and in fact to elevate it to a fundamental condition of understanding. "*That is why the prejudices of the individual, far more than his judgments, constitute the historical reality of his being*" (277). Prejudices, as constitutive pre-judgments, bespeak the historicity of our understanding, revealing our own situatedness, our horizon, in the history of effect (*Wirkungsgeschichte*) that tradition has on us. Our prejudices are elements of "thrown projection" not unlike Heidegger's *Dasein* and "enable" us to engage with a past text, providing the motivating interests to approach it in the first place. In his commentary on *TM*, Joel C. Weinsheimer employs a helpful illustration. He cites the 18th century British historian Edward Gibbon's *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, which from our vantage point is now certainly coloured with presuppositions we no longer hold.

Can it be right to say that Gibbon would have been a better historian had he been less a man of his time, less prejudiced by the Enlightenment suspicion of Christianity, or less motivated by that prejudice in writing the *Decline and Fall*? It seems rather that if he had been completely objective, he would have been entirely unmotivated to undertake such a project, and he would have written not a better history but no history at all²².

Quite similar to his concept of "play" in Part I of *TM* ("Play as the clue to ontological explanation", *TM* I-II-1, 101-134), Gadamer views our historicity as partaking in an "event" of tradition, in which the encounter with a traditionary text addresses us to put our prejudices at risk and play. Temporal distance is thus productive of meaning, a continuous process of

22. Joel C. WEINSHEIMER, *Gadamer's Hermeneutics: A Reading of Truth and Method*, New Haven, CT – London, Yale University Press, 1985, p. 173. In my opinion, Gadamer's development of prejudice as conditions of understanding is therefore quite akin to the way Geoffrey Turner understands the "cognitive interests" developed by Jürgen HABERMAS in *Erkenntnis und Interesse*, 1968.

arriving at different understandings of the same text, understandings not necessarily better than before. "It is enough to say that we understand in a *different way, if we understand at all*" (297). One must bear in mind that Gadamer critiques both Enlightenment and Romanticist²³ notions of an immediate access, or transposition, to a past document, either in terms of the right Cartesian methods found in the natural sciences, or in a psychologistic access to the mind of the author and her/his original intentions in writing a text. What in fact happens is "rising to a higher universality that overcomes not only our own particularity but also that of the other" (305). This is the by-now famous concept of Gadamer's *Horizontverschmelzung* ("fusion of horizons"). The engagement with the past means that the ensuing "fused" horizon of present-and-past is not an uninvolved detached transposition. Instead, the two are implicated in one another. Just as the present is "thrown" from the past and would not have come into being without past events leading up to it, so too our access to the past is made possible from our present standpoint, "horizon" and prejudices. Georgia Warnke has succinctly put it as follows:

The way in which we anticipate the future defines the meaning the past can have for us, just as the way in which we have understood the past and the way in which our ancestors have projected the future determines our own range of possibilities²⁴.

It must be conceded that Gadamer retains an idealism that sees temporal distance as separating true prejudices from false ones, coupled with an optimism that a text contains within itself the "fore-conception", or anticipation, of completeness (*Vorgriff der Vollkommenheit*) concerning the truth of its subject matter (293-294). However, to critique him on his lack of criteria is to miss the point of Gadamer's own critical insight, namely, that ever since the advent of scientific method in Modernity truth has been equated with this method and we fail to see that, in the human sciences at least, truth is larger than merely the scientific attempts to grasp it. Gadamer's point that "we understand differently if we understand at all" is meant to address the hermeneutical question of how we mediate givenness and creativity in a traditionary text. His insights into the "fusion of horizons" as an aspect of *Wirkungsgeschichte* signifies that we are in dialogue, from our present situatedness in time, with a past that has itself

23. Even though Romanticism favours the past over the present by introducing a longing for the days of yore and antiquity, it retains the Enlightenment's suspicion of prejudices and thus "the romantic critique of the Enlightenment [*mythos* over *logos*] itself ends in Enlightenment, for it evolves as historical science and draws everything into the orbit of historicism. The basic discreditation of all prejudices, which unites the experimental fervor of the new natural sciences during the Enlightenment, is universalized in the historical Enlightenment" (TM 275-276).

24. Georgia WARNKE, *Gadamer: Hermeneutics, Tradition and Reason*, Cambridge, Polity Press; Oxford, Basil Blackwell, 1987, p. 39.

projected us and in turn allows us to project towards it. The past that we uncover is different in every age, coloured as it will be by our present projecting prejudices that are shaped as much by today's concerns as by the tradition that has effected even the formulation of the questions we ask towards it. While there is a very serious concern that Gadamer is blissfully ignorant of the ideological distortions that might creep into the text, I do not think that Gadamer is advocating an uncritical surrender to tradition and its authority. Our simultaneous acknowledgement and knowledge of tradition are very much in our own hands; we access it with a reason free from dogmatic constraints. At the same time, Gadamer maintains (rightly in my view) that not everything in our tradition is ideologically distorted or suspect. Rather, it is in the conversational interplay between past and present, where tradition "risks" itself in addressing us, just as we risk our prejudices towards it, that a fusion of supposedly closed horizons takes place.

(2) In *TM* 307-341 Gadamer revives a (Pietist) tripartite structure to hermeneutics: (a) understanding, (b) interpretation and (c) application. He chooses to focus on the last of these, application. Following upon his principle that the task of understanding is never finished and, furthermore, different all the time, the concept of application is the motor that generates different understandings. Drawing upon an analysis of Aristotle's *phronesis* and *epieikeia* (312-324), Gadamer shows how application defies viewing morality or law as rule-books supplying mathematical or ready-made answers. Instead, application is the recognition that principles are concretized into specific time-bound circumstances. Gadamer next brings this insight to bear on legal and theological hermeneutics (324-335), arguing that each discipline carries this out paradigmatically. Laws are made to apply to present situations, and it is the present requirements of the hour that make us seek access to laws laid down in the past. In so doing laws are "enacted". Similarly, theology eludes reducing itself to mere scientific method. It carries with it a lived dimension, certainly with regard to Scripture as the word of God. Rudolf Bultmann's notion of "fore-understandings" (*Vorverständnis*) ties in nicely with Gadamer's own concept of prejudices, even though Gadamer discerns Bultmann's obvious Christian bias in this, something Gadamer will maintain needs to be put at risk in the confrontation with the scriptural text, regardless of denomination or (non-)belief²⁵.

Lastly, Gadamer reclaims philology (335-341) as an element of literary criticism and divests it of an historical objectivism that allowed it to be

25. Consider too that Bultmann's account of *Vorverständnis* maintains a negative view on prejudice: "It as little involves prejudices as does the choice of a perspective" (Rudolf BULTMANN, *Is Exegesis Without Presuppositions Possible?* [1957], in *Existence and Faith: Shorter Writings of Rudolf Bultmann*. Selected, translated and introduced by Schubert M. OGDEN, London, Hodder and Stoughton, 1960, p. 294).

co-opted as a sub-discipline of the historical sciences. However, this leads Gadamer to question historical study itself and, ironically turning things on their head, advances the reverse claim that history should in fact be viewed as a subset of literary criticism, since it ignores the facet of application that historians themselves employ when accessing the meaning of the past. He advocates viewing history as a large readable book. Away from the objectivism that has plagued historical study, Gadamer wishes to impress that all reading, including the reading of history, involves application,

so that a person reading a text is himself part of the meaning he apprehends. He belongs to the text that he is reading. The line of meaning that the text manifests to him as he reads it always and necessarily breaks off in an open indeterminacy. He can, indeed he must, accept the fact that future generations will understand differently what he has read in the text (340).

Once again we encounter the consistent theme in Gadamer's thought: we understand differently all the time, thus making possible the discovery of newer meanings. Tying this in with prejudice, we might consider application as the engagement of our prejudices in the "event" of tradition, allowing us to weave "a little further on the great tapestry of tradition that supports us" (338).

(3) *TM* 341-379 sees Gadamer analyse historically effected consciousness (*wirkungsgeschichtliches Bewußtsein*) as a corrective to the historical consciousness that he had critiqued for detaching itself from engaging in the event of tradition. In investigating how knowledge and effect belong together, Gadamer employs the concept of *Erfahrung* ("experience"), a dynamic concept²⁶ that Gadamer divests of connotations of "repeatability" as in scientific experiments; instead, he chooses to view *Erfahrung* as a readiness and openness to new experiences, based on the recognition of our finitude and temporality. This openness expresses itself in the ability to ask questions. With this Gadamer makes a turn to language and posits tradition as a dialogue partner in a living I-Thou relationship with us²⁷. Being in relationship means that neither partner seeks to assert their right over the other's wrong but instead comes to an acceptance of the partner's otherness. Reminiscent of his earlier discussion on the knowledge and acknowledgement of tradition, Gadamer states that historically effected consciousness

26. In Part *TM* I-I-2B (51-81), Gadamer analyses the concept of *Erlebnis* (also translated as "experience") in the context of aesthetics. Cf. the translators' note on Gadamer's distinction between the two German terms: "*Erlebnis* is something you have, and thus is connected with a subject and with the subjectivization of aesthetics. *Erfahrung* is something you undergo, so that subjectivity is overcome and drawn into an 'event' (*Geschehen*) of meaning. Gadamer typically uses the term *Erlebnis* with a critical overtone, and the term *Erfahrung* with a positive one" (Translators' Preface, XIII-XIV).

27. It is perhaps curious that Gadamer nowhere refers to the philosopher Martin Buber (*Ich und Du*, 1923) when expanding on this section.

is able to recognise the truth claims of tradition, without advocating an uncritical surrender to it. That is why he bases himself on the model of human relationships.

In human relations the important thing is, as we have seen, to experience the Thou as truly Thou – i.e., not to overlook his claim but to let him really say something to us. Here is where openness begins (361).

By virtue of one's openness to the other, one is able to accept things one does not necessarily agree with, without being forced to. It is a new way of understanding obedience, understood now as recognition of the other. Historical consciousness lacks such an openness because it detaches itself in the name of a neutral objectivity and thus fails to risk itself into relationship with the "other" of tradition. Historically effected consciousness, on the other hand, lets itself experience tradition and remains open to the truth claims encountered in it. This is not to fall prey to blind "dogmatism" as critics might fear. *Erfahrung* understood as openness for new experiences refutes such a claim and it is this readiness that distinguishes historically effected consciousness from mere historical consciousness.

Furthermore, drawing on the model of the Platonic dialectic (362-369), Gadamer comes to view us as being in conversation with tradition, through a logic of question and answer (369-379). It presupposes our fundamental openness to being addressed by tradition, even if it means that we are going to pose critical questions towards it. However, we remain in dialogue with it nonetheless, given that we "belong" to a tradition (recalling the crucial insight of "thrown projection"). All of this prepares Gadamer to advance the claim that the fusion of horizons is really the achievement of language. Viewing tradition as linguistic, as a dialogue partner in a conversation, Gadamer finally reaches the conclusion that we come to create a common language through this conversation with tradition. In fact, away from the "problems" of words (and the scientific methods to study them), the "mystery" of language uncovers the conversation that we ourselves are.

In other words we are endeavoring to approach the mystery of language from the conversation that we ourselves are. ... To reach an understanding in a dialogue is not merely a matter of putting oneself forward and successfully asserting one's point of view, but being transformed into a communion in which we do not remain what we were (378-379).

From this rather brief summary of Gadamer's insights into prejudice (*TM* 265-379) there are four key items worth highlighting that are of relevance to biblical studies: (1) the rehabilitation of tradition and authority, (2) the concept of *Wirkungsgeschichte*, (3) the problem of application, and (4) the model of conversation.

(1) While Gadamer does not explicitly refer to it in this part of *TM*, his rehabilitation of tradition and authority is in function of advocating the

thesis that tradition is *verbal*. He goes on to develop the linguisticity of understanding in Part III of *TM* but it is useful to see his comments in Part II as preparatory towards that end. Thus tradition has first to be divested of its objectivization by historical method. This is the main point of Gadamer's critique on scientific method, namely that it objectifies and, so doing, denies the dynamic qualities of what it studies. With respect to tradition, he wishes to see it as a living partner with whom we are in conversation to understand a common subject matter (*die Sache*). In addition, it is necessary to realise that we "belong" to tradition, having ourselves come to be through the continuing "history of effect" that tradition exerts on us. Thus it is that tradition continues to retain a valid truth claim, something we remain in dialogue with towards uncovering.

(2) The "history of effect" (*Wirkungsgeschichte*) is the trace that tradition leaves behind on us. This means that when we access the past we do so from our own situatedness in the present but, at the same time, have been motivated towards approaching that past by the influence it exerts on us. That is why relating to the past is not a case of simple transposition into another time, or a deciphering of past objects by virtue of the right method. Instead, we participate in an "event" of tradition. But this is not all. If we are to take Gadamer's dictum seriously that "we understand differently if we understand at all", then this signifies that the history of effect is a dynamism that remains in a constant process of unconcealment (somewhat akin to Heidegger's notion of truth as *Unverborgenheit*). This would mean that in every age truth discloses itself to us in various manifestations. That is why we understand differently all the time. It also explains why the "fusion of horizons" is not a simple assimilation of two horizons but rather a Hegelian *Aufhebung*, superseding both the past that is being accessed and the present from which we are accessing it. Temporal distance thus remains a necessary component of the "history of effect" because it continues to remain productive of meaning. An apt example of *Wirkungsgeschichte* is given by Jean Grondin:

In 1992, in the quinquennial celebrations of the discovery of America, we no longer always saw, as had been the case in previous commemorations, the glories of European civilization being spread to barbarians, but instead, in reaction to this history of conquest, the discovery of America was interpreted as the beginning of the annihilation of non-European civilizations. Every event and every work is thus submitted to the context of reception, which goes beyond and enriches the original meaning, and bears witness to an ineradicable fertility of temporal distance and of the addition of understanding to a given constellation²⁸.

28. Jean GRONDIN, *The Philosophy of Gadamer*, transl. Kathryn PLANT (Continental European Philosophy), Bucks, UK, Acumen, 2003, p. 91.

(3) As we have seen, Gadamer views hermeneutics as involving a tripartite structure of understanding, interpretation and application. He borrowed insights from Aristotle and examined closely the workings of legal and theological hermeneutics in order to advance the argument that application is a necessary component of this tripartite structure. All reading involves application, thus making it an integral part of hermeneutics. But application, as signifying our engagement with the text, means that our understandings will remain indeterminate and open-ended; it ensures that we will continue to discover newer meanings and understand differently all the time. I consider application as the participation of our prejudices in the “event” of tradition, what Gadamer calls “weaving a little further on the great tapestry of tradition that supports us” (cf. *TM* 338). This “weaving” is also a direct example of the principle of *Wirkungsgeschichte*.

(4) Finally, Gadamer’s insights on dialogue and the art of conversation take us into the linguistic realm of understanding. Recognising tradition not just as verbal but as a personified Thou with whom we converse via our prejudices that are both thrown and projecting, moves us away from subject-object categories. In previous sections of *TM*, Gadamer developed the concepts of “play” and “event”. “Conversation” can similarly be placed within this same category of inter-subjective exchange, the true focus of Gadamer’s work. His analysis of the logic of question and answer, with emphasis on the hermeneutical priority of the question, signal to us that partners in a dialogue relinquish selfish autonomies within the communal “we” that occurs in the “event of conversation”, thereby creating a common language that signifies the greater conversation that we are.

While Gadamer certainly critiques the pitfalls of objectivization that can occur in an obsession with scientific method, I do not take Gadamer to be relinquishing method altogether²⁹. His point as a philosopher, though, seems to be that truth *is* larger than method and that we should come to consider truth away from a scientific view of “truth as mathematical correspondence” (recall the Cartesian requirement for “clear and distinct” criteria). Truth seen as unconcealment reveals itself to us in the conversation we have with the tradition we both belong to and call forward by our application of it to present circumstances. In this way we achieve “a fusion of horizons supposedly existing on their own previously” (cf. *TM* 306). His rehabilitation of prejudice as a fundamental condition of understanding signifies that truth is no longer to be seen as decipherable by means of the right scientific method but should now be seen as continually disclosing itself in our prejudices. This has ramifications for biblical

29. To me that is why his work is entitled *Truth and Method* and not *Truth or Method*.

studies and radically reshapes the consideration of “pre-understanding” that was employed in the first section of this essay. In my next and final section, I would like to examine what Gadamer’s insights on prejudice might contribute to biblical studies³⁰.

III. PREJUDICE IN BIBLICAL STUDIES: THE POSSIBILITY FOR A “MEANING-FULL” EXEGESIS?

I now wish to return to Geoffrey Turner’s dilemma of being confronted by differing interpretations of the same biblical text even when using the same methodology. A concrete example of this was the opposite conclusions Hans Dieter Betz and Jan Lambrecht arrived at regarding the status of 2 Cor 6,14–7,1. As I have argued, though, Turner’s question betrays a desire to find one true interpretation to a biblical text, and his analysis of pre-understandings seems really an attempt to neutralise the problem of different interpretations. However, I raised the question at the end of section one whether Turner’s dilemma is really a problem to be solved. Having seen with Hans-Georg Gadamer in section two how “prejudices” are fundamental and inextricable conditions of understanding means that understanding is more an event to be *experienced* than a result to be *achieved*. My question in this section, therefore, is: what would exegesis look like from a Gadamerian perspective that incorporates prejudices into our biblical studies? How, in such a perspective, would we view the “problem” of interpreting 2 Cor 6,14–7,1 for instance? For a start, I believe I have discovered the workings of such an exegesis in an article by Gershom Scholem³¹. In an analysis of revelation and tradition as religious categories in Judaism, Scholem reaches conclusions that are strikingly similar to that of *Truth and Method*³². His article allows me to make the transition back from hermeneutics to biblical studies and to view exegesis in a different way, as commentary instead of method.

30. For the sake of clarity, I shall be maintaining a didactic distinction between the terms “prejudice” and “pre-understanding” in order to distinguish between the Gadamerian sense of prejudice (*Vorurteil*) as a fundamental (and hence inextricable) condition of understanding and the more general phenomenon of pre-understanding (*Vorverständnis*) as prefatory to, and thus easily isolated from, understanding.

31. Gershom SCHOLEM, *Revelation and Tradition as Religious Categories in Judaism*, in *The Messianic Idea in Judaism and Other Essays on Jewish Spirituality*, London, George Allen & Unwin, 1971, 282–303. Originally published as *Tradition und Kommentar als religiöse Kategorien im Judentum*, in *Eranos Jahrbuch* 31 (1962) 19–48.

32. There is nothing in the article to immediately suggest that Scholem would have been familiar with Gadamer’s *Truth and Method* at the time that his article was written in its original German (a mere two years after Gadamer’s own work was published).

1. *Exegesis as Commentary*

While specific in nature, Scholem's article can be summarised in general terms as a study on the mediation of creativity and givenness; in other words, how does innovation function in relation to something that is given? In Judaism this is the question of reconciling revelation (enshrined in Scripture) with tradition (the application of Scripture to ever changing historical conditions). The solution, argues Scholem, came with the concepts of the Written and Oral Torah respectively. In the beginning it seemed that the Oral Torah was a parallel source of authority to the Written, both being equally given in revelation. However, as the concepts developed, the Oral Torah came to be seen as the elaboration upon the Written. The Written Torah became the object of exegetical probing by the Oral, whose function was now the "unfolding of truths, statements, and circumstances that are given in or accompany revelation"³³. Its primary exponents were biblical scholars (in time, the Rabbis) who introduced a new genre into the religious tradition: commentary.

Revelation needs commentary in order to be rightly understood and applied – this is the far from self-evident religious doctrine out of which grew both the phenomenon of biblical exegesis and the Jewish tradition which it created³⁴.

What is more, the achievement of the Rabbis was to establish a tradition that was both rooted in Torah and growing out of it, "a prime example of spontaneity in receptivity"³⁵. I call attention to the similarity of this phenomenon to Gadamer's use of "thrown projection" in *Truth and Method*. The Hebrew term for this kind of exegesis as commentary is *midrash*, a decidedly creative process for it allows the revelation to be constantly translated anew. Even more intriguing is a rabbinic principle that views revelation as having included within itself the later commentary concerning its own meaning.

The achievement of every generation, its contribution to tradition, was projected back into the eternal present of the revelation at Sinai. ... According to this new doctrine, revelation comprises everything that will ever be legitimately offered to interpret its meaning³⁶.

It is not unlike Gadamer's "fore-conception of completeness" (or *Vorgriff der Vollkommenheit*, *TM* 293f.), namely a basic openness (trust) to a text's ability to completely express its meaning and reveal the truth of its

33. SCHOLEM, *Revelation and Tradition* (n. 31), p. 287.

34. *Ibid.*

35. *Ibid.*

36. *Ibid.*, p. 289.

subject matter. As we have seen, this allows Gadamer to remain optimistic about temporal distance sifting through the true and false prejudices by which we either understand or misunderstand a text. This, in turn, is made possible because Gadamer views truth as a constant unfolding of itself through the process of *Wirkungsgeschichte*. A strikingly similar process occurs in rabbinic thought:

They make absolute the concept of tradition in which the meaning of revelation unfolds in the course of historical time – but only because everything that can come to be known has already been deposited in a timeless substratum³⁷.

This ensures the spontaneity in receptivity mentioned above. On the one hand, truth merely needs to be “uncovered” given that it has already been revealed. On the other, truth is being continually unfolded and leads to the discovery of new meanings. Once again, “[n]ot system but *commentary* is the legitimate form through which truth is approached. ... Truth must be laid bare in a text in which it already pre-exists”³⁸.

Scholem now reaches Turner’s dilemma, namely that the revelation that is continually unfolding itself in tradition produces a wealth of differing views, some contradicting the other. However, unlike Turner’s demand for “system”, the rabbinic employment of “commentary” precludes from seeing this as a problem.

There were many possibilities of interpreting the Torah, and tradition claimed to comprise them all. It maintains the contradictory views with astounding seriousness and intrepidity, as if to say that one can never know whether a view at one time rejected may not one day become the cornerstone of an entirely new edifice³⁹.

It is Scholem’s argument that in Judaism there is no unmediated access to the divine word. In fact, it only becomes a comprehensible communication when it is mediated. This is because of a mystical (kabbalistic) concept that views the Written Torah as already within the sphere of interpretation. This mystical view maintains that a pre-existent “Ur-Torah” (*torah kelulah*) resided as pure revelation within the Wisdom of God. It then articulated itself into signs, the consonants of the Written Torah, which as mediations of that divine revelation were already an interpretation⁴⁰. This

37. *Ibid.*

38. *Ibid.*, pp. 289-290.

39. *Ibid.*, p. 290.

40. Looking at it another way, as human narratives of a community’s founding experiences, the biblical texts in their written forms are already interpretations, and therefore hermeneutics *in exercitu*. There is not first text and then hermeneutics, since the text itself is already a very specific kind of interpretation, and this is precisely the reason why the text is succeeded by endless interpretations. See Roger BURGRAEVE, *Biblical Thinking as the*

interpretation is continued by tradition as the Oral Torah and remains an infinite process: “the word of God carries infinite meaning, however it may be defined. ... God’s word is infinitely interpretable; indeed, it is *the* object of interpretation par excellence”⁴¹. No one commentary can therefore be the final word on the Written Torah for that would be to petrify its constantly unfolding meaning and forget that the revelation is, in fact, already an interpretation. The Oral Torah in its written form as commentary is therefore a contradiction in terms (and this is why, originally, the Oral Torah was prohibited to be written down. It only came to be written when exile threatened its being lost to memory). In order for the Oral Torah not to “forget” that it should be oral, i.e., a spoken word, it must engage in an endless interpretation and discovery of new meanings. Each commentary that is written specifies (concretizes) a meaning for its particular circumstance in time. However, because it remains infinitely unfolding,

the Torah turns a special face to every Jew, meant only for him, and apprehensible only by him, and a Jew therefore fulfils his true purpose only when he comes to see this face and is able to incorporate it into the tradition. The “chain of tradition” is never broken; it is the translation of the inexhaustible word of God into the human and attainable sphere⁴².

Coupled with the awareness of this communitarian involvement in tradition is the affirmation that

tradition is living creativity in the context of revelation. Precisely because tradition perceives, receives, and unfolds that which lives in the word, it is the force within which contradictions and tensions are not destructive but rather stimulating and creative⁴³.

Scholem’s analysis of tradition in Judaism is very similar to Gadamer’s analysis in *TM*⁴⁴. Aspects of the “event” nature of tradition, an active reception to the past, a phenomenon of being both “thrown” and “projecting”, as well as the notion of application as concretization, are certainly evident in Scholem’s portrayal of rabbinic (and kabbalistic) Judaism. Of particular interest to me is the insight of exegesis as commentary, specifically

Wisdom of Love, in R. BIERINGER – D. POLLEFEY – F. VANDECASTEELE-VANNEUVILLE (eds.), *Anti-Judaism and the Fourth Gospel: Papers of the Leuven Colloquium, 2000* (Jewish Christian Heritage, 1), Assen, Van Gorcum, 2001, 202-225, p. 213: “There can never be a founding word of revelation which is not at the same time also an understood and thus interpreted word, and which precisely on that account also lends itself to further interpretation”.

41. *Ibid.*, p. 295.

42. *Ibid.*, p. 297.

43. *Ibid.*

44. It is also conducive to the Catholic position on “Scripture and Tradition”, which I shall shortly demonstrate.

unending commentary, each commentary divulging an aspect of meaning that on the one hand is already revealed and, on the other, continually unfolds itself. It is such a view as this that makes differing interpretations cease to be a problem. It equals the insight of truth as unconcealment in the unending process of *Wirkungsgeschichte* that Gadamer propounds. More importantly, it is beneficial to the field of biblical studies because its object of study is after all a revelatory text and viewing exegesis as commentary moves us away from the preoccupation in historical-critical exegesis with right methods. Emboldened by this, let us see what this perhaps can mean for the interpretation of our test-case biblical passage, 2 Cor 6,14–7,1.

2. *The “Problem” of Interpreting 2 Cor 6,14–7,1*

The problem that confronts us when reading 2 Cor 6,14–7,1 is that we cannot summon the author of the text, whether Paul or someone else, to once and for all settle our queries as to its awkward setting. The text as a work stands on its own. Does this mean that a dialogue is therefore impossible? As we have seen, Gadamer construes us as being in conversation through a logic of question and answer with the past. He notes elsewhere:

It seems here the dialectic of question and answer, in so far as it has any place at all, is only available in one direction, which means from the side of the one seeking to understand that work of art, who questions it and who is called into question by it, and who tries to listen for the answer of the work. As the person one is, one may, just like anyone thinking, be the inquirer and responder at once, in the same manner as happens in a real conversation between two people. But this dialogue of the understanding reader with himself surely does not seem to be a dialogue with the text, which is fixed and to that extent is finished. Or is this really how it is? Or is there an already finished text given at all?

In this case the dialectic of question and answer does not come to a standstill. ... The reception of a poetic work, whether it be by our outer ear or by that inner ear that listens attentively when we are reading, presents itself as a circular movement in which answers rebound into further questions and provoke new answers. This motivates our abiding with the work of art, of whatever kind it may be. Abiding is obviously the authentic characteristic in the experience of art. A work of art is never exhausted⁴⁵.

Bearing this in mind, I would like to advance the argument that the image of Paul is a construction continually being made. I will now briefly

45. Cited in Fred LAWRENCE, *Gadamer, the Hermeneutic Problem and Theology*, in Robert J. DOSTAL (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Gadamer*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2002, pp. 187–188. The original German reference is to be found in Hans-Georg GADAMER, *Zwischen Phänomenologie und Dialektik: Versuch einer Selbstkritik* (1985), in *Gesammelte Werke 2: Hermeneutik II*, Tübingen, Mohr Siebeck, 1986, p. 7.

sample a few works that support this view in order to make the case that a similar phenomenon is at work in the arguments behind the authenticity of 2 Cor 6,14–7,1.

In a 1963 article⁴⁶, Krister Stendahl alerted scholars to Luther's introspective soul-searching on sinfulness that had been retrojected back into the mind of Paul, something Stendahl argued was unfair and not true to Paul's original intent.

We may have wasted too much time in trying to demonstrate a fact well known in history – and especially in the history of religions: that sayings which originally meant one thing later on were interpreted to mean something else, something which was felt to be more relevant to human conditions of later times. ... We should venture to suggest that the West for centuries has wrongly surmised that the biblical writers were grappling with problems which no doubt are ours, but which never entered their consciousness⁴⁷.

Stendahl's contribution can be seen as an early awareness that pre-understandings influence the image of Paul one has. This being said, he retains a belief that these pre-understandings can be clearly distinguished from the original understanding (hence my ascription of the term "pre-understanding" instead of the more fundamental and inextricable "prejudice"). "Few things are more liberating and creative in modern theology than a clear distinction between the "original" and the "translation" in any age, our own included"⁴⁸. However, having already studied the more fundamental phenomenon of prejudice with Gadamer, I am seriously left to wonder whether such a clear distinction between the "original" and the "translation" can be made. In his book on Paul⁴⁹, Daniel Boyarin displays greater sensitivity to the various constructions of Pauline portraiture. He borrows an analogy of the kaleidoscope, which is

neither mirror nor window. Each turn of the glass produces a new view and constructs the object; the view is never true and undistorted, but it does construct an object and not merely reproduce the eye of the beholder. Viewing Paul through the lens of Galatians, and especially through Galatians 3,28-29, the baptismal declaration of the new humanity of no difference, constructs a particular Pauline object, a different Paul from the one constructed by reading Paul through 1 Corinthians, Romans, or 1 Thessalonians⁵⁰.

46. Krister STENDAHL, *The Apostle Paul and the Introspective Conscience of the West*, in *Harvard Theological Review* 56 (1963) 199-215, reprinted in ID., *Paul Among Jews and Gentiles and Other Essays*, Philadelphia, PA, Fortress, 1976, 78-96.

47. *Ibid.*, pp. 94-95.

48. *Ibid.*, p. 96.

49. Daniel BOYARIN, *A Radical Jew: Paul and the Politics of Identity*, Berkeley, CA – Los Angeles, CA – London, University of California Press, 1994.

50. *Ibid.*, p. 5.

Margaret Mitchell reaches a similar conclusion in her examination of the art of Pauline interpretation: “There is a Paul for everyone to be had, or rather carefully constructed here. And each Paul governs certain types of readings of his letters”⁵¹. That is why for her the fourth century “Doctor of the Church”, Saint John Chrysostom, is so fascinating because through

Chrysostom’s penchant for painting portraits of Paul by selecting elements from out of the existing plethora of data within the letters and the Acts of the Apostles and recombining them in novel ways, the criterion of *the right portrait* or *the accurate portrait* of Paul is utterly elusive and ultimately useless⁵²

and her intention is to bring this awareness into conversation with contemporary Pauline scholarship.

I submit that we witness a similar phenomenon in studies of 2 Cor 6,14–7,1. Each study not only reaches a different interpretation of the passage but at the same time constructs a different portrait of Paul. If the passage is deemed an anti-Pauline interpolation, as with Betz, it is not just that he reconstructs the arguments of Paul’s opponents in Galatians; he also constructs an image of Paul that is diametrically opposed to the “theology” contained in 2 Cor 6,14–7,1. As I have argued in section one, an image of Paul as “justification theologian” (not unlike the projection of Reformation/Lutheran categories that Stendahl highlighted) comes to the fore. Similarly, Lambrecht’s plea for the passage’s authenticity fashions a Paul who insists on moral integrity but is uninterested in cultic purity. Both (in fact, all) authors, regardless of whose portrait of Paul is the more accurate, are responsible for a *Fortschreibung* – a reinscription – of the passage, the epistle it is found in, the image of Paul behind it, and indeed the canon it is a part of. There is no such thing as an uninvolved exegesis. Each is a clear instance of what Gadamer has termed application, the very engagement of our prejudices in the event of tradition. As Scholem showed, here lies a prime example of creativity in receptivity.

If Paul (or his image) is therefore a construction continually being made, summoning him to account for the strangeness of 2 Cor 6,14–7,1 in its current setting will almost certainly prove elusive and perhaps even useless. I would argue that the real benefit of the “new trend” in studies of the passage is not so much its restoration of authenticity (*was this written by Paul?*) but, more importantly, its integrity (*how does this passage function in its present place?*). It allows us to wrestle with the *meaning* of the passage, away from the debate on how it ended up there. Once again, Gadamer is worth quoting here:

51. Margaret M. MITCHELL, *The Heavenly Trumpet: John Chrysostom and the Art of Pauline Interpretation*, Tübingen, Mohr Siebeck, 2000, p. 432.

52. *Ibid.*, p. 20.

If by the meaning of a text we understand the *mens auctoris*, that is, the 'actual' horizon of understanding of the original Christian writers, then we do the New Testament authors a false honor. Their honor should lie precisely in the fact that they proclaim something that surpasses their own horizon of understanding – even if they are named John or Paul⁵³.

Recalling his earlier comment on the inexhaustibility of a work of art, the study of 2 Cor 6,14–7,1 remains similarly inexhaustible even when its authenticity and integrity are assumed⁵⁴. It is my contention that interpretations of 2 Cor 6,14–7,1 will continue to abound because of a simple phenomenon that until now has been viewed as problematic: the gap.

Mind the Gap

In his book on intertextuality and rabbinic *midrash*, Daniel Boyarin writes:

The concept of the gap is a very important one in theories which attend to the work of the reader in the processing of the narrative text. Any such text cannot but leave out much detail, including much that is vital to a construction of the story and the characters. The reader must fill in the gaps, forming hypotheses about what is left out of the text. This notion has been much elaborated in varying theoretical frameworks by several recent critics. The Bible is notorious for the paucity of detail of certain sorts within its narrative. Erich Auerbach described this as being 'fraught with background'. The gaps are those silences in the text which call for interpretation if the reader is to 'make sense' of what happened, to fill out the plot and the characters in a meaningful way⁵⁵.

Boyarin goes on to argue that this filling in of the gaps is precisely what is entailed in rabbinic *midrash*. Gaps generate meaning. They cry out to be interpreted anew. In encountering two completely opposing views on the same passage, rabbinic *midrash* affirms that "these and these are the

53. Hans-Georg GADAMER, *Martin Heidegger and Marburg Theology* (1964), in *Philosophical Hermeneutics*, transl. and ed. David E. LINGE, Berkeley, CA – Los Angeles, CA – London, University of California Press, 1976, p. 210.

54. Some representative works are: William J. WEBB, *Returning Home: New Covenant and Second Exodus as the Context for 2 Corinthians 6.14–7.1* (JSNT SS, 85), Sheffield, JSOT Press, 1993; Reimund BIERINGER, *2 Korinther 6,14–7,1 im Kontext des 2. Korintherbriefes. Forschungsüberblick und Versuch eines eigenen Zugangs*, in BIERINGER – LAMBRECHT (eds.), *Studies* (n. 12), 551–570; J. Ayodeji ADEWUYA, *Holiness and Community in 2 Cor 6:14–7:1: Paul's View of Communal Holiness in the Corinthian Correspondence* (Studies in Biblical Literature, 40), New York – Washington, DC – Baltimore, MD – Bern – Frankfurt am Main – Berlin – Brussels – Vienna – Oxford, Peter Lang, 2001.

55. Daniel BOYARIN, *Intertextuality and the Reading of Midrash* (Indiana Studies in Biblical Literature), Bloomington, IN – Indianapolis, IN, Indiana University Press, 1990 (paperback, 1994), p. 41. Boyarin credits Wolfgang Iser in particular for the concept of gaps. Wolfgang ISER, *The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response*, Baltimore, MD, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978, originally published in German, as *Der Akt des Lesens: Theorie ästhetischer Wirkung*, 1976.

words of the Living God”⁵⁶, the rabbinic expression for the paradoxical truth of two contradictory positions. Boyarin argues that such a viewpoint is completely opposite, and constitutes a challenge, to historical-critical method which automatically moves in to posit different “layers” and authors to explain, and neutralise, the contradiction. It displays, as he argues elsewhere⁵⁷, a rabbinic belief in the polysemy of the scriptural text, a kind of model for non-logocentric reading practices today.

Along similar lines, I suggest that the continual exegesis of 2 Cor 6,14–7,1 is facilitated precisely by the existence of such a gap. Since the introduction of the historical-critical method into exegesis, the passage itself was considered the gap and the “filling in” was very often achieved by its removal as a non-Pauline interpolation (or even, Pauline interpolation from another context), grafting 2 Cor 6,13 on to 7,2. Even Jan Lambrecht concedes the difficulty that 2 Cor 6,14–7,1 poses to its context and considers it a Pauline “digression”. To me this signals that the passage itself is not the gap but rather the two spaces between 2 Cor 6,13–14 and 7,1–2. These “gaps” have ensured a continuing exegesis of the “puzzling passage” without there being a final consensus. My argument is that these gaps, by the sheer fact that they are there, will continue to be filled with scholarly opinions (interpretations) on 2 Cor 6,14–7,1 and its function. In this sense, it no longer matters whether the passage was written by Paul. Each filling in of the gaps contributes to the various constructions of Pauline portraiture and performs a constant reinscription of his epistle, rewriting at the same time the canon within which it is found. What was once rejected, namely Pauline authenticity and contextual integrity, has become a cornerstone for newer trends in biblical studies of the passage.

Drawing from the above, Boyarin would argue that these exegetes, like the Rabbis, are involved in the construction of new meanings⁵⁸. It is a view shared by L. Gregory Bloomquist⁵⁹, who argues that exegesis is not just a passive hearing or reading, but in fact entails an active leading; consequently, exegetes are makers of meaning⁶⁰. This does raise another

56. BOYARIN, *Intertextuality* (n. 55), p. 48. Cf. also SCHOLEM, *Revelation and Tradition* (n. 31), p. 300. The statement is from the Babylonian Talmud, Tractate *Erubin* 13b.

57. Daniel BOYARIN, *Shattering the Logos: Hermeneutics Between a Hammer and a Hard Place* (The Blackwell Companion to Postmodern Theology), Oxford, Blackwell Publishers, 2001, pp. 311–323.

58. *Ibid.*, p. 321: “The image of a hammer striking sparks of a rock as the symbol of the process of interpretation is itself a striking representation of the *making* of meanings in the reading activity, as opposed to meaning being a given in the language itself”.

59. L. Gregory BLOOMQUIST, *A Contemporary Exegesis at the Edges of Chaos*, in *Religion and Theology* 11 (2004) 1–38.

60. *Ibid.*, p. 12: “For the specific group of exegetes of religious materials I believe that by publicly declaring ourselves as makers of meaning, not just parrots of the meanings of others, we will at least be encouraged, exhorted, urged to confront the reality of what we are already doing, though it is often being done in an unknowing way, namely by saying to our audiences: ‘Let’s go in this direction; are you with me?’”.

problem, though, namely the charge of relativism. Is there not the danger here that multivalence, the phenomenon of multiple meanings (and hence, interpretations), is being considered too optimistically? Does interpreting the text mean that “anything goes”? I therefore find Boyarin’s earlier use of the kaleidoscope somewhat problematic. In what way does each turn of the glass not signify a merely subjective construction of the object?

Windows, Mirrors and Prisms

First let me say that I agree with Boyarin that exegesis is neither window nor mirror. With Gadamer we have seen in section two that we do not have a direct window on to the past. *Truth and Method* critiques a naïve belief that we can keep ourselves out of play and “decipher” the past by simply reading “what is there” with the right scientific methodology. Rather, the past is very much coloured by our prejudices which motivate our interest in seeking out the past in the first place.

But what prevents our access to the past then from merely being a mirror, reflecting our own projections? Gadamer has answered this by saying that we are influenced by the past. We “project” only because we are “thrown”. Prejudices are fundamental and enabling to our understanding of the past through their participation in the “history of effect”, *Wirkungsgeschichte*. On the one hand, it is not a complete capitulation to the past for we access it only through a “fusion of horizons”, a *Horizontverschmelzung* that sublimates the previous two horizons of past and present supposedly existing on their own. On the other, we are not disembodied subjects. We are overcome by the past through the event nature of tradition. We are addressed by it and provoked to respond. “Anticipating an answer itself presupposes that the questioner is part of the tradition and regards himself as addressed by it” (*TM* 377). Our projections, therefore, are not merely subjective. They involve the calling forward of the past into our present.

I find it more useful therefore to view the text as a prism, giving rise to interpretations of different hues concerning the truth of its subject matter. In my opinion, a prism navigates more easily than the kaleidoscope the Scylla of objective window-gazing and the Charybdis of subjective mirrorings. While it is true that each turn of the kaleidoscope never quite simply reproduces the eye of the beholder, I wonder if its “producing and constructing a new object” is still not subjective in nature and hence liable to the charge of relativism. After all, we are the ones turning the kaleidoscope. A prism, on the other hand, refracts the light shining through it naturally. Similarly, a text’s truth, as the light that resides within it, cannot but be perceived through its many refractions that occur in the process of interpretation. As we have seen with both Gadamer and Scholem, all interpretation involves application, the engagement of our prejudices in the event of tradition. In this way the text turns a special face to every reader.

Yet this does not mean that we make free with the text. We are at the same time guided by the truth of its subject matter that serves as a beacon, shining its refracted light on to the path we must take⁶¹.

Icons and Idols

There is another possible way of looking at the scriptural text. The work of Louis-Marie Chauvet⁶² allows me to move from a till-now Jewish (rabbinic/kabbalistic) perspective on Scripture towards a Christian (Catholic) one. In his development of the sacramentality of Scripture, Chauvet employs Jean-Luc Marion's contribution of the "icon" (*L'idole et la distance*, 1977, p. 23).

The icon, by contrast [to the idol], 'conceals and discloses what it rests upon: the separation within it between the divine and its representation of the divine.' Instead of trying to eliminate the otherness of God, it 'preserves and emphasizes' the non-visibility of precisely what it presents to the eye⁶³.

It is necessary to point out that Chauvet's understanding of sacramentality rests on a Christian appropriation of Heidegger's "presence of absence", a development that would take me too far from the focus of this contribution, except to say that the icon's status as simultaneously revealing and concealing is conducive to his argument that Scripture is similarly "sacramental". Chauvet takes the iconic perspective on Scripture to mean that the concreteness of its letters are the mediation of God's revelation only to the extent that they form figures. "As figure, it is an *in-between*, a passage, a *transit toward something other than itself, something else which is the other side of itself*"⁶⁴. I think that two other arguments on the scriptural text as icon can also be made. Firstly, in a Catholic understanding, the text of the Bible is not the immediate and total presence of God's Word. Yet, at the same time, it is only *through* the visible and contingent

61. I am trying to articulate a phenomenon akin to that of consonants and (lack of) vowels in a Torah scroll. A 13th century kabbalist, Rabbi Bahya ben Asher of Saragossa (d.1340) wrote: "The Scroll of the Torah is [written] without vowels, in order to enable man to interpret it however he wishes – as the consonants without the vowels bear several interpretations and [may be] divided into several sparks. This is the reason why we do not write the vowels of the scroll of the Torah, for the significance of each word is in accordance with its vocalization, but when it is vocalized it has but one single significance; but without vowels man may interpret it [extrapolating from it] several different things, many, marvelous and sublime". Moshe IDEL, *Kabbalistic Hermeneutics*, in *Kabbalah: New Perspectives*, New Haven, CT – London, Yale University Press, 1988, p. 214. The "unchangeable letters" of the text act as an anchor yet are still able to give rise to new meanings.

62. Louis-Marie CHAUVET, *Symbol and Sacrament: A Sacramental Reinterpretation of Christian Existence*, trans. Patrick MADIGAN – Madeleine BEAUMONT, Collegeville, MN, The Liturgical Press, 1995 (French original: *Symbole et Sacrement: Une relecture sacramentelle de l'existence chrétienne*).

63. *Ibid.*, p. 217.

64. *Ibid.*, p. 218.

text (contextualised as it is in space and time) that we caress the meaning of the text. In this sense, the text not only reveals but also hides the revelation (and therefore a continual process of interpretation becomes necessary). Secondly, the icon is an interface of divine and human cooperation and the precise boundary blurs at what point the human artist surrenders to the Divine Artisan. This is similarly conducive to a Catholic understanding of Scripture as written by humans inspired by God. I shall return to this last comment a little later.

Chauvet introduces the concept of the icon to combat an “idolatry of the letter”. In his view,

[t]he veneration of the letter swings toward idolatry whenever the writing is viewed as static, and no longer as a witness of a past and *different* era and as a representative of another, future, era, that is, whenever the present becomes everything, the immediate now encompassing everything. Whatever ‘God’ is discovered in the letter is thereby subordinated to the moral, socio-political, or ideological assumptions of the present. The so-called ‘Word of God’ is manipulated to serve as their transcendent justification⁶⁵.

Idolatry, argues Chauvet, occurs when we ignore the historical situatedness of the scriptural texts. God’s word has been deposited in an empirical “scriptural body” which should not be denied. To over-emphasise the “spirit of the letter” is to reduce the temporal reality of its letters and to deny their irreducible and socio-historical “otherness”. They constitute an attempt to rule the text and impose a meaning upon it from outside⁶⁶. From a somewhat different perspective (but still within the Catholic tradition), Roger Burggraave argues that a non-idolatrous relationship to Scripture implies a ceaseless exegesis and it should not surprise us that this has an affinity with rabbinic Judaism since he invokes Emmanuel Levinas’ caution against an “idolatry of the Torah”:

The Scripture texts are texts of and by people, and it is precisely in and through – and only in and through – these radically human texts that a ‘more than the text’ (*un au-delà du texte*) displays or reveals itself to us. The intriguing paradox is that the ‘more’ or ‘other’ can come to us only in and through the human text – in and through human words, images, stories, expressions. That is why a non-idolatrous relationship to Scripture exists in the interpretation itself, which takes the text as authoritative without, however, petrifying the meaning and locking it up definitively in the text. Only in relation to the reader who tries to understand and further narrate does the text relinquish its meaning, and this never all at once, for all or integrally. This means that without reading and explanation, thus without study and interpretation, the bible remains a dead thing, which is dead precisely because we lock it up in

65. *Ibid.*, p. 217.

66. *Ibid.*, p. 215.

its condition as a written and completed text. ... By means of a ceaseless exegesis – and an exegesis of this exegesis –, the reader blows on the apparently extinguished ashes of the ‘unchangeable letters’ until the fire of inspiration that smoulders underneath bursts once again into flame. To use another imagery, through exegesis God’s voice finds resonance once again in and through the voice of the interpreting person, which, in its own unique manner, resounds time and again. This is the liturgy of study⁶⁷!

3. *A Ceaseless Exegesis*

Burggraeve’s call for a ceaseless exegesis, as I see it, is complementary to and inextricably bound up with Chauvet’s understanding of an idolatry of the scriptural letter. Chauvet’s exhortation to always reckon with and not deny a text’s socio-historical otherness is a mandate to insist on the rigours of historical-critical exegesis. Indeed, his warning against the dangers of manipulating the text according to one’s agendas is the very origin of how historical-critical exegesis came to be.

[W]hen we look at the history of biblical interpretation, we can see that too often a theological pre-understanding has brought about a premature and uncritical understanding of the text, in which the text was forced to say only what was required by a given theological tradition. This was broadly true of the mediaeval period. ... It is against this theological and historical background that the Reformers sought a new objectivity in the interpretation of the Bible⁶⁸.

On the other hand, Burggraeve’s notion of a ceaseless exegesis warns against the dangers of historical-critical exegesis itself becoming idolatrous. The petrification of meaning deadens the text. Gadamer has shown that “not just occasionally but always, the meaning of a text goes beyond its author” (*TM* 296). Similarly, according to Scholem, the Oral Torah resists stabilization, “precisely because every stabilization in the text would hinder and destroy the infinitely moving, the constantly progressing and unfolding element within it, which would otherwise become petrified”⁶⁹. Chauvet reminds us that historical-critical exegesis remains a necessity to prevent ideological distortions of the text while Burggraeve recalls that it cannot become an end in itself. Exegesis is and must be larger than merely the application of historical-critical methods if we are to respect

67. Roger BURGGRAEVE, *Humans Created and Called in the Image of God*, in R. BURGGRAEVE et al. (eds.), *Desirable God? Our Fascination with Images, Idols and Deities*, Leuven – Dudley, MA, Peeters, 2003, pp. 67-68.

68. Anthony C. THISELTON, *The Two Horizons: New Testament Hermeneutics and Philosophical Description with Special Reference to Heidegger, Bultmann, Gadamer and Wittgenstein*, Exeter, The Paternoster Press, 1980, pp. 315-316.

69. SCHOLEM, *Revelation and Tradition* (n. 31), p. 296.

the transcendence of the text and allow it to come to life in the voice of the interpreting person⁷⁰.

Thus it is that I view the historical-critical method as a subset of the larger category of “exegesis as commentary” that encompasses it. In fact, to prove this is so, I need only point to the various scholarly articles and “commentaries” that dominate the scene of historical-critical biblical exegesis. What is important to bear in mind, though, is that “exegesis as commentary” belongs within a continuum of living tradition. The historical-critical method must therefore be seen as a “long detour” (in a Ricœurian sense)⁷¹ necessary, I would agree, to prevent distorting the text, but a detour all the same. The danger occurs if the detour spirals outwards into its own trajectory and forgets to return to the hermeneutical circle of which it is a part. It is this ever-present danger of dislocation that is particularly highlighted in an article by Reimund Bieringer⁷².

Revelation as Conversation

Bieringer begins by recognising that scientific exegesis alienates itself when it becomes too caught up in its own technical and frequently atomistic analysis of the historical and literary aspects of biblical texts. Many see this as diluting the dynamic power of the biblical message. As an exegete within the Catholic tradition, he undertakes an analysis of the Second Vatican Council’s Dogmatic Constitution *Dei Verbum* (DV), which not only endorsed the historical-critical method for interpreting Scripture, but also advocated a new theology of revelation that determines the relationship between Scripture and tradition in a new way. This theology, articulated in DV 1-6, presents dialogue as the essence of revelation. Revelation is no longer seen as merely the transmission of content, a finished product coming from one side, but as “an event in which God shares himself and changes human beings by making them sharers of the divine nature (DV 2)”⁷³. In other words, revelation is a process and God invites humans to participate actively in this process with him. Dialogue and encounter replace monologue and submission.

Bearing this in mind, Bieringer engages in a careful synchronic and diachronic analysis of DV 12, the conciliar statement on biblical interpretation. It is not my purpose to enter into the full details of his analysis

70. Again, there is great affinity in Burggraeve’s portrayal of the voice being the vehicle of interpretation and Scholem’s depiction of the Oral Torah being primarily a spoken medium. I would also like to point out that the same is true for Gadamer.

71. Cf. Roy A. HARRISVILLE – Walter SUNDBERG, *The Bible in Modern Culture: Baruch Spinoza to Brevard Childs*, Grand Rapids, MI – Cambridge, UK, Eerdmans, 1995 (2nd ed.: 2002), p. 296: “Ricœur will not leap to construct a ‘theology of the word’ in the manner of a Bultmann and his students that does not include a ‘long detour’ through structural analysis”.

72. Reimund BIERINGER, *Biblical Revelation and Exegetical Interpretation According to Dei Verbum 12*, in *SNTU* 27 (2002) 5-37.

73. *Ibid.*, p. 6.

here. Briefly summarised, the council accepts without hesitation the importance of the historical-critical method. This is because it takes seriously that the biblical texts were written by human authors within a particular historical setting. However, the council also recognises that these texts exceed the authorial intentions of their sacred writers and take on a new meaning in the context of Scripture as a whole and the Church's living Tradition⁷⁴. The biblical texts are therefore not just texts of the past.

By having been taken up into the canon, by being read over and over again in the living Tradition of the whole Church and by feeding the faith of the Church, the texts of the past have had an effective history (*Wirkungsgeschichte*) which the council considers to be of essential importance⁷⁵.

Certainly aware of Gadamer, Bieringer contends that this *Wirkungsgeschichte* is also responsible for shaping the pre-understandings of the exegetes.

'Preunderstanding' means that in the course of their upbringing and education the interpreters have received an understanding of the essence of Scripture as a whole and that their view of Scripture is always already shaped by the tradition and the doctrine of the community into which they were initiated⁷⁶.

This means that despite the striving for scientific objectivity, exegetes should not overlook

the inescapable *a priori* of a preunderstanding which is acquired by being part of a tradition. In the necessary distancing of the text to accept its otherness they may not get lost in a retrospective attitude⁷⁷.

The relationship between Scripture and Tradition, exegesis and theology, is therefore one of mutual conversation, in which one engages (and influences) the other in encounter, in the same way that revelation is a process of dialogue and encounter.

Bieringer next compares his reading against some of the major interpretations of DV 12 in the past thirty years by such authors as Grillmeier, Lohfink and Ratzinger. He notices that one-sided interpretations have, in direct contrast to DV's dialogical outlook, ironically led to monological patterns where exegesis and dogmatic theology have become entrenched in their own fields and frequently ignore one another.

[E]xegesis has been tempted more and more to turn in on itself while practicing its technical, historical and frequently atomistic work. On the other

74. *Ibid.*, p. 14.

75. *Ibid.*, p. 15.

76. *Ibid.*

77. *Ibid.*, p. 16.

hand, ... the results of exegetical work are frequently ignored. Official Church documents mostly use their own way of interpreting the biblical texts without the benefit of the studies of the exegetes⁷⁸.

Bieringer's own conviction is that a nuanced exegesis of DV 12, as he has undertaken in the article, shows the case can (and should) be otherwise.

God trusts human beings enough to make them partners in this encounter and to accept them as friends. This dialogical relationship is the model for our interpersonal communication. The Church community is invited to trust the exegetes and vice versa⁷⁹.

Hearing, Belonging, Responding

I have argued that "exegesis as commentary" needs to see itself as belonging to a continuum of living tradition in order to avoid dislocating itself and becoming its own discourse. Bieringer's article brings this issue to the fore. He makes explicit the community dimension within which exegesis should be carried out. I wish to point out that this stands in line with what we have seen so far in both Scholem and Gadamer. In Judaism, belonging to a tradition means to belong to a community of faithful that studies and lives the Torah. Similarly, Gadamer's analysis of understanding is not without an appreciation of the community dimension. "Coming to an understanding as such, rather, does not need any tools, in the proper sense of the word. It is a life process in which a community of life is lived out", he writes in Part III of *TM* (446). In addition, in order to hear the text we must first belong.

If we are to define the idea of belonging (*Zugehörigkeit*) as accurately as possible, we must take account of the particular dialectic implied in *hearing* (*hören*). It is not just that he who hears is also addressed, but also that he who is addressed must hear whether he wants to or not. When you look at something, you can also look away from it by looking in another direction, but you cannot 'hear away' (*TM* 462).

Gadamer views this hearing and belonging as openness to the claim tradition has upon us. "I must allow tradition's claim to validity, not in the sense of simply acknowledging the past in its otherness, but in such a way that it has something to say to me" (*TM* 361). This is a new way of understanding obedience (*der Gehorsam*) for, as we have also seen, being addressed by tradition is the first step to being able to respond to it in turn. "Anticipating an answer itself presupposes that the questioner is part of the tradition and regards himself as addressed by it" (*TM* 377).

78. *Ibid.*, p. 32.

79. *Ibid.*, pp. 32-33.

It is this active response to tradition that Bieringer concludes his article with. I have already shown how Chauvet sees historical-critical exegesis as necessary to prevent an ideological manipulation of the biblical texts. Bieringer too argues that this ideology critique needs to be constantly applied, and should also be applied to exegetes.

Through the rise of the liberation theology movement, ideology criticism has entered the arena of exegetical criticism. Since both the sacred writers, the members of the Church who have been shaping tradition and the exegetes are all under the consequences of human sin, ideology criticism is a clear necessity. We must keep asking the question whose power agenda a certain text, even a Scripture text is designed to serve. But ideology criticism must also be extended to the study of the Tradition of the Church and, of course, to the work of the exegetes⁸⁰.

Bieringer's understanding of human finitude means that a continual criticism is necessary flowing from, on the one hand, his belief that the scriptural text is able to transcend its historical context and, on the other, a conviction that corrections to Scripture are possible in light of the whole⁸¹. This allows him to venture that the canon is far from closed. Revelation understood as dialogue means that in any age people and communities are inspired to write their own "fifth gospel".

In continuity with the other gospels the writing of this new gospel will have to be open to the Spirit guiding us to new insights in response to the new challenges unprecedented in Scripture and Tradition⁸².

In Bieringer's article we not only witness a place for historical-critical exegesis (as officially recognised and endorsed by the Catholic Church) but also how it functions within the community dimension of the Church's living Tradition. It is quite conducive to Burggraeve's call for a ceaseless exegesis. In addition, Bieringer's translation of the need for ideology critique into a theological (Christian/Catholic) awareness of human finitude allows him to see this continual exegesis as a *Fortschreibung* (reinscription) of the canon into our day and age. This last comment reminds me of an anecdote. I was attending a course on 2 Corinthians in which we discussed the authorial intention at several difficult points in the text. Naturally we

80. *Ibid.*, p. 33.

81. This is developed in greater detail in his articles on "normativity of the future", something I can only make passing reference to here. See Reimund BIERINGER, *The Normativity of the Future: The Authority of the Bible for Theology*, in *ET Bulletin: Zeitschrift für Theologie in Europa* 8 (1997) 52-67 and *Id.*, 'Come and You Will See' (John 1,39): *Dialogical Authority and Normativity of the Future in the Fourth Gospel and in Religious Education*, in H. LOMBAERTS – D. POLLEFEYT (eds.), *Hermeneutics and Religious Education* (BETL, 180), Leuven – Paris – Dudley, MA, Leuven University Press – Peeters, 2004, 179-201.

82. BIERINGER, *Biblical Revelation* (n. 72), p. 34.

had to concede that such discussions would remain speculative. On the follow-up discussion that all exegesis of the text is a hypothetical reconstruction, a student in the seminar room, barely containing himself, piped up, “but surely, no matter how much we deconstruct 2 Corinthians, we are certainly not going to say it deals with *football*”! His point was that the text has a resistance and cannot simply become putty in our hands to mould it as we want. I would venture that he is right. Historical-critical exegesis is a reminder to respect the otherness of the text and therefore remains necessary to its elucidation. On the other hand, Bieringer is also right to point out the reinscribing nature of exegesis within the context of a living community. His portrayal of writing the fifth gospel for our age fits in nicely with the illustration of the chain novel highlighted by Ronald Dworkin⁸³. A chain novel is a work written by several authors serially instead of in collaboration. In order to maintain coherence and continuity of plot, each author has to pay careful attention to what has gone before as well as manage to enter into the frame of the novel as a whole. The original founding chapters remain a “leash” ensuring that subsequent authors do not go completely astray. At the same time, each writer is an author and retains the artistic license to “write forth” (*fortschreiben*) the novel as s/he imagines it. This is what Gadamer has termed “weaving a little further on the great tapestry of tradition that supports us”. It is also, from a rabbinic perspective, our way of carrying on the conversation God has with us:

So Jews studied it [the Torah] and wrote commentaries to it. In the *shtetl*, the small township of Eastern Europe, when Jews met, one would say to the other: ‘*Zog mir a shtickl Torah* – Tell me a little Torah.’ Its words were their intimations of infinity, its letters the solid shapes of mysteries to be decoded. They would stay up long into the night arguing over its meaning, each hoping to hear a *chiddush*, a ‘new’ interpretation, ‘new’ in inverted commas because all true interpretations had already been revealed to Moses at Mount Sinai. ... Those who study Torah become part of an unbroken conversation that has continued throughout the centuries in which all Israel’s prophets and sages participated. To become a sentence in that conversation, a letter in the scroll, is what we and our ancestors understood as everlasting life⁸⁴.

In this section I have incorporated insights from my examination of prejudice in section two towards answering the dilemma of differing interpretations articulated in section one. I first found it useful to develop the concept of “exegesis as commentary” relying on an analysis of the workings of rabbinic exegesis. Exegesis as commentary views the dilemma of differing interpretations no longer as a problem to be solved but as integral

83. Ronald A. DWORKIN, *Natural Law Revisited*, in *University of Florida Law Review* 34 (1982), p. 168, as utilised by Linell E. CADY in *Hermeneutics and Tradition: The Role of the Past in Jurisprudence and Theology*, in *HTR* 79 (1986) 439–463.

84. Jonathan SACKS, *Faith in the Future*, London, Darton, Longman & Todd, 1995, p. 149.

to the unfolding of revelation in tradition. Applying this to my test-case of 2 Cor 6,14–7,1, I explored its gaps that generate meaning, its continual reinscription of the portrait of Paul, and its prismatic nature as to the refractions of meaning it has and will continue to give rise to. In addition, a Christian view of Scripture is able to view the text as icon, both revealing and concealing at the same time the divine that is represented by it. As an icon it is not a direct access to the divine, and therefore God cannot be immediately seized in the words of the scriptural text. Instead the words need to be breathed upon by the voice of the interpreting person in order to engage in the *event* of revelation that God invites us to share in. Exegesis as commentary has to be ceaseless in order to prevent an idolatry of the text, idolatry understood first as manipulating the text according to our own agendas and deifying human projections onto it. It is also to prevent idolatry of the exegesis itself, an alienating discourse that becomes its own trajectory if it dislocates itself from the stream of living tradition found in community. We might ask though: does this turn exegesis into merely a denominational concern? Here I would recall Gadamer's comment when exposing the Christian bias behind Bultmann's notion of *Vorverständnis* (pre-understandings), namely that all prejudices need to be put at risk in the confrontation with the scriptural text, regardless of denomination or (non-)belief. "Only the person who allows himself to be addressed [by placing one's prejudices at risk] – whether he believes or doubts – understands" (TM 332). It is this allowing of oneself to be addressed – to be moved to risk one's prejudices – that constitutes a belonging, a willingness to hear, and to respond. In this way, a ceaseless exegesis makes possible a constant reinscription of the biblical text into our times.

CONCLUSION

I began with a dilemma in biblical studies, the existence of differing interpretations of a biblical text even when employing the same methodology. Geoffrey Turner discerned in this the problem of pre-understandings and a concrete example of this could be demonstrated in an examination of the positions of Hans Dieter Betz and Jan Lambrecht on 2 Cor 6,14–7,1. However, Turner's analysis proved difficult in the end because it seemed to treat the phenomenon of differing interpretations as a localisable problem. It betrayed a scientific need for "system", treatable through right methods. While this can be useful towards analysing the different pre-understandings operating behind various scholarly opinions, it does nothing to impede the continuing interpretation and re-interpretation of the passage, even when the paradigm has now shifted in favour of Pauline authenticity and integrity.

This led me to suspect that we were perhaps approaching the matter from a wrong angle. I therefore turned to the notion of "prejudice" in

the thought of Hans-Georg Gadamer. Different from pre-understandings, Gadamer's *Vorurteil* is a *fundamental* condition of understanding and therefore inextricable and non-localisable. In fact it is our prejudices, far more than our judgments, which constitute the historical reality of our being. That is because, stripped of their negative connotations inherited from the Enlightenment, prejudices signal our participation in the "event" of tradition through an unending process of *Wirkungsgeschichte*, or "history of effect", in which past and present are constantly being fused anew. That explains why we understand differently all the time since each participation involves application. Application is a concretization of meaning within a specific historical context and is therefore time-bound. Given that time is progressive we constantly apply the text each time we read, resulting in new interpretations.

As a scientific method, historical-critical exegesis harbours the Cartesian prejudice that truth is seen in terms of mathematical correspondence, namely that an interpretation has to "correspond" to the objective truth contained in the text, as signified by the clear and consistent historical and philological data it renders. It also resists a phenomenon of constantly unfolding interpretations because the scientific method demands repeatability, as can be seen in the natural sciences where conditions are kept the same in order that experiments can be successfully duplicated. By contrast, Gadamer inherits a Heideggerian insight of truth as unconcealment. This means that away from deciphering truth in terms of the right methods and simply "reading what is there" by keeping ourselves out of play, truth actually unfolds itself in our prejudices. The scientific pursuit of objectivity is therefore an elusive goal. What really needs doing is to risk one's prejudices and bring them into play with the text. While it may seem that Gadamer is too accommodating of tradition and blind to the ideological distortions that corrupt a text I have sought to defend the view that temporal distance should not so much be seen as a panacea to preventing misunderstanding but rather explains why understanding is different all the time (and consequently, why we arrive at different interpretations).

The workings of rabbinic exegesis showed how within Judaism multiple interpretations are not seen as problematic but are in fact embraced since they are considered as the continual unfolding of revelation within the stream of a living tradition. This was conducive to the dynamic aspect of tradition that Gadamer has argued for in *Truth and Method*. My excursion through rabbinic exegesis allowed me to see exegesis as an unending commentary and so I was able to posit that Turner's dilemma of differing interpretations ultimately turns out to be a false one and that therefore the problem of interpreting 2 Cor 6,14–7,1 correctly remains elusive. In every age there will be interpretations of the passage, whether that passage is seen as a non-Pauline interpolation or as authentically Pauline as it now increasingly is.

The historical-critical tradition has brought with it many advances to the elucidation of a text. In addition it carries with it a respect for the otherness

of a text, its otherness to us in time, which we should not seek to cover up or smother with our own agendas. This to me places historical-critical exegesis within the realm of ideology critique, allowing our prejudices to be put at risk and providing a critical dimension whenever we try to access the meaning of the text. At the same time, I do believe that the meaning of a text eludes all our attempts to grasp it, even with the scientific tools we use to discern its traces. At any one moment the text both reveals and conceals. In this sense the text remains iconic, never quite allowing direct access to the truth represented by it, but at the same time only through its visible letters providing a witness to its presence.

Our prejudices are inescapable and we cannot step outside of them. This means that truth can only be disclosed *in and through* our prejudices. On the other hand, we are never so far removed from truth that with our fallible prejudices we are unable to access the truth of a text's subject matter. What this then calls for is conversation within a community so that prejudices may be risked and truth be allowed to unfold. Within a Catholic perspective, the community of the faithful is the sacred space in which we partake in the conversation called revelation. Given that exegesis remains a continual task, I conclude that it also constitutes a reinscription of the biblical canon into our times and the consequences of this are hardly non-theological. Whether it can risk seeing itself as part of the theological task of writing forth on the great revelatory text that supports us is an invitation, I hope, a meaning-full exegesis will not shrink from.

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ABSTRACT. — Is biblical exegesis nothing more than the eliciting of meaning from historical texts, unobstructed by prejudices, unconcerned by influences to their reading or reception? At the same time, can theology ignore a careful exegesis? Section one of this article articulates the hermeneutical problem of pre-understandings in biblical studies. Two concrete examples are briefly considered to demonstrate how differing pre-understandings of the same passage lead to different conclusions. However, it is then suggested that there is perhaps a more fundamental condition of “prejudice” at stake. This allows for the exploration of Hans-Georg Gadamer’s hermeneutical insights on prejudice in section two. Section three incorporates these insights towards entering the plea for a “meaning-full” exegesis. This latter phenomenon locates historical-critical exegesis within a larger framework of exegesis as commentary and allows truth to be seen as unfolding itself in our prejudices. The aim is to see a biblical exegesis that is integral to, and integrated within, theology, one that is not afraid to be creative in its receptivity; not just a passive receiver of meanings but an active dialogue partner in the conversation of revelation.