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Reflections on Empirical Hermeneutics, Interculturality, and Holy Scripture
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Hans de Wit
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and all the memories we share
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Introduction

In 1985, some years before the debate on the multicultural society erupted in the Netherlands, the Colombian Nobel Prize-winning novelist, Gabriel García Márquez, published his novel Love in the Time of Cholera. This novel tells the story of the impossible love between a man and a woman, Florentino and Fermina. It is fascinating to read the novel from the perspective of culture. Almost everything that one should know about intercultural communication can be found in that novel. I will introduce the content of this lecture via a summary of this story.

Love in the Time of Cholera

The story takes place in Colombia, somewhere in the tropical northern region on the Caribbean coast. It is the beginning of the previous century. Florentino, an illegitimate son who has never been legally acknowledged by his father and the product of a fleeting encounter, is in his twenties when he has to deliver a telegram to the father of 13-year-old Fermina Daza. Florentino delivers the telegram and then sees through the window two women, the younger reading to the older. Fermina lifts her head briefly to see who is walking by: “[A]nd that casual glance,” Márquez writes, “was the beginning of a cataclysm of love that still had not ended half a century later” (García Márquez 1989: 55).

They fall in love, but unbridgeable sociocultural differences prevent them from marrying. She marries someone from her own social class and remains faithful to him for fifty years. She could never say if they loved each other.

Neither he (her husband), nor she could have said if their mutual dependence was based on love or convenience, but they had never asked the question with their hands on their hearts because both had always preferred not to know the answer. (1989: 26)

In the fifty years that Fermina was married, Florentino has exactly 622 affairs.

Fermina’s husband, Dr. Urbino, dies after fifty years, as the result of a fall from the mango tree where he was trying to catch his pet parrot that had been insulting him for hours from the tree. The passage is too nice not to be cited here:

No one realized in time that [the parrot’s] wings were too long, and they were about to clip them that morning when he es-
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caped to the top of the mango tree. And for three hours they had not been able to catch him. The servant girls, with the help of other maids in the neighborhood, had used all kinds of tricks to lure him down, but he insisted on staying where he was, laughing madly as he shouted long live the Liberal Party, long live the Liberal Party .... (1989: 24)

Finally, at a complete loss, Dr. Urbino climbs into the tree himself. The higher he climbs, the higher the parrot climbs as well. He finally manages to catch the parrot around the neck.

But he released him immediately because the ladder slipped from under his feet and for an instant he was suspended in air and then he realized that he had died without Communion, without time to repent of anything or to say goodbye to anyone, at seven minutes after four on Pentecost Sunday. (1989: 42)

While her husband’s body is still warm, Florentino declares his love again. “Fermina,’ he said, “I have waited for this opportunity for more than half a century, to repeat to you once again my vow of eternal fidelity and everlasting love” (1989: 50) He is thrown out of the house, but when Fermina wakes up the next day she understands that she had, while sobbing in her sleep, thought more about Florentino as she slept than about her husband (1989: 52). A deep correspondence ensues and, finally, after more than half a century, Florentino, who has in the meantime become the president of a shipping company, invites her to take a trip on one of his boats. On the New Fidelity (La Nueva Fidelidad), a kind of Mississippi paddle steamer, they travel to a new destiny. But, even though they are together on a ship, there is still no intimacy, no lasting relationship. For to achieve that, Florentino has to think of a trick and comes up with the idea of cholera. Upon arrival at their port, he has the captain have all the passengers disembark. The yellow flag is raised—a sign that cholera was on board (“The only thing that would allow them to bypass all that was a case of cholera on board “ (1989: 342))—and Florentino has the captain set course for the port from which they sailed. When they reach that port, the captain asks desperately:


... “And how long do you think we can keep up this goddamn coming and going?” [the captain] asked.

Florentino Ariza had kept his answer ready for fifty-three years, seven months, and eleven days and nights.

“Forever,” he said.
We will leave it at this. What do we see if we read the book as a metaphor for intercultural communication? Fermina represents the monoculture; she represents cultures imprisoned by their own rules. Only what happens in one’s own culture is good and acceptable. Not only does she obey these rules, but she is also their victim: she once fell in love with an outsider. The principle of eccentricity, i.e. that a human being is more than the culture or the morality he or she practices, is not respected. There is little willingness to interact with others, to learn from others, to make oneself vulnerable. Nonetheless, it is possible to love the other. How?—We still have to explore that.

Florentino’s life represents the multicultural pitfall, the multicultural fallacy, boutique multiculturalisme. Everything is permitted, as long it is different. That which is different is accepted as long as the differences are not deep and do not obligate me to change my way of life and perception of reality. People are thrilled by differences. They see only the many colours of the flower, while the weeds that grow rank at the roots remain hidden to them. Of the 622 affairs Florentino has had in fifty years—none has been satisfying, none has been stable, none has been nourished by actual concentration. The contacts were momentary, the conversations were fleeting, the interest in each other was superficial.

But how then is the relationship between these two old people, between these radically differing cultural patterns, turned into a love story? How does Fermina escape the loneliness and stagnation of the monoculture and Florentino the limitless transience of multicultural longing? The secret is the boat, the New Fidelity, the captain (Samaritano in the story) and cholera. These are the conditions. The boat is the Third Bank of the River—not your bank, not mine, but a bank in between, as anthropologists like to say. The boat, which sails back and forth – toda una vida – sails under the flag of cholera: they are condemned to each other and also want to be. “My God … ships drive me crazy,” Fermina says, looking back on the completely insane turn her future and life take and indicating that ships, this third place, can do strange things with people (1986/1989: 335). In addition to the place, we also find a number of things that, according to Márquez, are fundamental for a love that transcends boundaries. The masks must fall away: the new intimacy demands that the old bodies disrobe in front of each other. They do do that, with the lights on. The past—experiences of living and suffering—is not erased or wished away but placed within the perspective of new love: “She began to speak of her dead husband in the present tense, as if he were alive …” (1989: 329).Then there are the letters he writes to her after her husband dies. They are thoughts of such beauty and clarity that they guide her through the mourning process. She feels as if the letters are inspired by the Holy Spirit itself. The letters do not speak of domination, of power, of taking into possession or of conquering; rather, they speak of what sharing life, love, death could mean to people, to them. They show her love as a state of grace.

And there are also the small things: he dresses up for her and she notices it! She cries and he sees her tears. The endless vulnerability of both: “I smell like an old woman,” she says (1989: 329) and he smells it. When he walks away, he remembers that he himself smells like an old man and that she must have smelled
"My God," she said, "ships make me so crazy."

But this is the most important element in the story perhaps. Culture studies speak of the willingness to interact with others. In Márquez’ story, this is the small gesture of love. In the dark cabin on the ship they are together for the first time. It has to happen now – she is in her seventies and he in his eighties! He is extremely nervous and breaks out into a cold sweat. How do I begin? How do I approach this? Then one of the most beautiful scenes from the book follows. I quote:

Then he reached out with two icy fingers in the darkness, felt for the other hand in the darkness, and found it waiting for him. Both were lucid enough to realize, at the same fleeting instant, that the hand made of old bones were not the hands they had imagined before touching (1989: 329).

Reality and imagination make a covenant with love. We will leave our interpretation of Love in the Time of Cholera at this. We will see below that a number of elements affect the heart of the Hélder Câmara chair. The small gesture of love, the conversation about what sharing life and death can mean, the third bank of the river – these are all elements that also lead to him with whose name this chair is associated.

Dom da Paz

Dom Hélder Câmara—bishop of the poor, bishop of peace—was the archbishop of one of the poorest regions of Brazil, Olinda and Recife in the northeast. He was born in 1909 and died in 1999. Along with Pele, he was the most famous Brazilian in the world in the 1960s and 1970s. This was the heyday of the Second Vatican Council, and then of Liberation Theology. It was also the heyday of the numerous military dictatorships in Latin America.

Looking back on the life of Câmara, the question arises as to who in the churches actually resisted in these dark times of disappearances and torture? Câmara was one of those. His famous statement “If I give the poor food they call me a saint, if I ask why the poor have no food they
call me a communist” indicates where he stood. He was called the red bishop. His resistance was never bitter; he hated the violence of weapons. His weapons were texts from the Christian tradition, hope and a great deal of humor. Allow me to recount one of the many anecdotes circulating about Câmara. One evening a desperate family knocked on his door. One of them had been arrested and was being tortured at that moment in the police barracks. The bishop called the chief of police immediately and said: “This is Dom Hélder. You are holding my brother.” Surprised, the policeman stuttered: “Your brother, your Eminence?” “Yes, we have different names but we have the same father.” The commissioner then apologized and commanded that the man be released.

Câmara’s criticism of the military dictatorship, his choosing the side of the poor, the emphasis on social justice and his defense of human rights cost him a great deal. For thirteen years his name could not be mentioned in the press. Later, after his retirement as archbishop, his own church would proceed with dismantling the great deal of primarily social work that had begun with him.

The international significance and the historical effect of Câmara’s work have been enormous, also in the Netherlands. In 1975 the VU University Amsterdam granted him an honorary doctorate, and in 1985 the VU University and what is now Radboud University jointly set up the interuniversity chair for peace and justice Dom Hélder Câmara, which is being inaugurated again today and with a new dynamic—content.

Câmara did not come up with a new theology. The fundamental ideas of liberation theology were dear to him: the option for the poor—which was also visible in his personal life, first praxis and then reflection; selfless love as the basis for action, the importance of the Bible, the one history and the social as the place where revelation occurs, and hope as a source of resistance. What we find are not thick volumes but speeches, prophetic one-liners, pamphlets, poems, cries from the heart, intuitions, indignation, and a man very deeply affected by so many who had to die a premature death because there was no one to see their tears.

In retrospect, we can see not only dated statements or mistakes—he himself thought that he went constantly from mistake to mistake—there is also nuance. The blame for the inequality in the world is never laid solely at the West’s door. According to Câmara, the socialist regimes at the time were not to be viewed romantically (1969: 37ff). He was deeply affected not only by the situation of the poor but by the situation of all minority groups and those who were excluded. What one sees in the first place is a prophetic view, an anticipation of what will be slowly picked up in the decades following. One also sees a great openness for the world, for other churches and religions. In short, one sees a great deal that invites us to remain engaged with the heritage of Dom Hélder. Allow me to furnish a few quotes.

Already in 1971 Câmara emphasized the importance of fair trade. The mother of all violence, violence 1, is the inequality between the first and the third world, Câmara writes in his book The Spiral of Violence:
Aid is certainly useful, but it will always be insufficient. The core of the problem will not be reached if no one has the courage … to denounce the monstrous injustice according to which the present policy of international trade is organized. (Câmara 1971: 28)

During the same period he already addresses topics that preoccupy us so much now: the global village, the horror of the war of religions – the deepest tragedy of all:

War of religions! Is this not the tragedy to end all tragedies, a contradiction in terms, an absurdity! God is Love. Religion must gather men, draw them together. (1971: 62-63)

He also discusses interreligious dialogue in the perspective of liberation and justice, thus religion—all religions—as an instrument and catalyst for reconciliation, for peace.

Whatever your religion, try to demand that, instead of separating men, it helps to unite them. In the teachings of your faith, what are the principles, the directives which call for justice and peace?

... When will the great religions of the world decide to devote all their moral force to demanding justice as condition of peace? (1971: 73)

A beneficial ecumenical attitude was possible within the Roman Catholic Church:

I [sometimes] wonder how there can be people silly enough to believe that only Catholics will be saved. As though the Holy Spirit were up there, singling out the Catholics or possibly the Christians, to breathe on them and only them... No! Wherever in the world there are human creatures hungering and thirsting to love and help, trying to overcome self-centeredness, escaping from self, caring for their neighbors, listening to the voice of conscience, striving to do good, the Spirit of God is with them. I love the Lord’s words: “Many will come from the East and from the West ....” In the Father’s house we shall meet Buddhists and Jews, Moslems and Protestants - even a few Catholics too, I dare say.

The weight of the countervoice—the well-known Abrahamic minorities of
which he speaks so often and so full of hope:

Who belongs to these Abrahamic minorities?
All those who, like Abraham, hope against hope
and decide to work
to the point of sacrifice for a more just and humane world.
(1972: 69)

Câmara asks for change, for transformation, but does not link this to violence, to the revolt of the masses. Like García Márquez, he points to the power of the small gesture of love:

A look, a smile, gestures of peace and friendship, attention and delicacy, these are the universal language, capable of demonstrating that we are much closer to one another than we imagined. Everywhere kindness touches, injustice wounds, peace is an ideal. (1971: 62)

And, finally, there is the contribution of reading the Holy Scriptures together as a contribution to justice and peace:

Alongside the development of Action for Justice and Peace
It will one day be necessary to collect from the sacred books
Of all the religions the exhortations, precepts and prayers,
Which speak about peace and justice .... (1971: 58)

We will leave our brief discussion of the life and work of him with whose name this chair is associated at this.

A New Field of Research

Câmara was not an academic but merely provided impulses for research. The board of trustees of this chair has created space in which new, relevant and extremely topical research can be done. Câmara would have been very excited. Many of his wishes have been fulfilled: small groups—the Abrahamic minorities, if you will—the dialogue on the sacred texts, the perspective of liberation, justice and peace, the permanent interaction between North and South and the small gesture of love: the hand that lies ready for those who seek him.

This space is that of empirical hermeneutics in intercultural perspective. In short, it has to do with the question if reading the Bible stories jointly by groups from often radically different cultural and sociopolitical contexts can contribute to transformation and the exchange of perspectives. In what way can an intercultural dialogue on the meaning of fundamental narratives – Holy Scripture – contribute to justice and liberation? Can cultural differences, when ren-
dered hermeneutically operative, not give such depth to the dialogue on the meaning of these stories that faith becomes what it is ultimately meant to be, namely a searching and reaching for the truth?

The chair has a twofold focus. Shape is given to a new practice on the one hand and there is reflection on the formulation of theory on the other. The new practice will consist of bringing small groups together, on all continents, who read the same Bible story at the same time and discuss the meaning of these stories with each other. Groups of desplazados in Colombia read with groups of Christians from Indonesia, groups of dalits from India with Cuban groups, Korean students with Nicaraguan Pentecostals, and Dutch groups with Ghanian or Filipino groups. But groups can also read with each other within the same region or country. Thus, reading groups of Arabic or Ghanian Christians in the Netherlands can also be connected with groups from the Dutch mainline churches. The basic material of the formulation of theory is the reading experiences of these groups. The formulation of theory occurs in an area of which we actually know very little. In contrast to what is now asserted so pointedly about the relationship between Sacred Texts and human actions, we actually know almost nothing about that relationship.

Holy Scripture—not only the Qur’an!—is at this time often associated with terror and destruction. It is often suggested in this context that the relation between sacred texts and one’s actions is one to one. On the basis of the experiences that we have already had, about which I will speak shortly, there is reason to test the hypothesis that the intercultural reading of narratives from sacred texts – in our case, the Bible – can have a beneficial effect and can help readers to have more understanding for one another, to reconciliation and more justice. Herewith I have formulated the central question of the field of research: can the Bible also be a positive factor in processes of development and reconciliation? Can Bible stories also be places for transformation and repentance? Can Bible stories also be places for conversations on peace – even when they are what Phyllis Trible called texts of terror in her famous book of that name (Trible 1984)?
The Field of Research

I will now take you to the chair's field of research and will do so in a few steps. I will first show what challenges the chair will take up and will define a number of terms. I will then discuss some examples from practice and reflect on them. Finally, I will look at the possible relevance of intercultural hermeneutics for the institutions involved with the chair.

The Challenge

I will call the challenge that we want to take up the remarkable paradox of Holy Scripture. This paradox can be described as follows. In every discipline that is concerned with the understanding of texts, it is assumed that reading also has a consequence, a moment of appropriation, an effect. Sociolinguists speak of texts and narratives as bearers of potential behavior:

A text … does not have a single, closed meaning, but a “meaning potential,” or more appropriately in a functional framework, “behaviour potential.” The text, from this point of view, is a range of possibilities, an open-ended set of options in behaviour that are available to the individual interpreter. (Blount 1995: 17)

The Turn to the Reader

Since the last decades of the previous century, the discovery of the importance of the reader in the processes of interpretation has been translated into a true “turn to the reader.” In almost all disciplines that have to do with language and texts there has been a new orientation since the 1970s, one that is reader-centered rather than text-centered.¹

Objections

Two fundamental objections to these developments were introduced at the time. First, there was the objection that people spoke endlessly about the reader but actually engaged the reader very little in conversation, and little empirical research was done. The implied reader, the model reader, the ideal reader and the ideal reading community were often mentioned, but much of this was done on the abstract level of reading strategies in general, reading communities in general and general relationships between texts and readers.²

A second objection was that proper reading was very normatively formulated by hermeneuticians, philosophers and linguists, and that much was demanded of the ideal—often Western and well-educated—readers.³ In order to be able to
read, people had to know and be able to do so much that it was asked: But what do (ordinary) readers themselves do with texts?

The Turn to the Empirical Reader

The turn to the empirical reader truly began in the West only a few decades ago. We still often encounter statistical and quantitative research that is directed at the reading behavior of people—how much, when, why. It can deal with the question of the rise of a literary canon (for example, at schools), and what social interactions and actors (schools, teachers, politics, publishers, prize systems, etc.) in the cultural field (Bourdieu) preserve this canon. How does literary taste, preference, arise? Why do people buy the books they buy and who buys them? Why is it so difficult for women to be accepted into a literary canon (Vogel 2001)? Foundational for the empirical sociology of literature is the explaining of the interpretation of the text by a reader and the attention for the institutions surrounding it: the reputation of writers, the behavior of readers, mechanisms of the attribution of quality. Whatever use this chair can make of all these insights will, of course, be done to the full. At the same time it must be stated that it often has to do with research that is not our concern. A theologian, biblical scholar or hermeneutician who wants to investigate what happens when a group of Colombian desplazados reads the same biblical text with a Dutch group is dependent on a unique analytical tool.

The Reader in Religious Traditions

Regardless of the above, all hermeneutical traditions of all religions based on Sacred Texts argue a fortiori that texts do something with their readers. All theologians know that, if the text is cut off from a current, living community, it is reduced to a cadaver on which an autopsy is performed (Ricoeur 1998: xii). Reception, a response from the readers, is constitutive for the meaning of texts, that of the tradition – indeed, that of revelation itself.

In the reception history of Bible texts there has always been reflection on the relationship between text and reception, directed for the most part at the relationship between the status of the text and freedom of the reader. The whole Christian tradition sees the importance of reading as a response to the written text, but the relationship is not always understood in the same way (De Wit 2008). That which is viewed as self-evident is seen to give way to wrestling. Both partners are seen as going separate ways, and there are attempts to restore the situation to health again. A short overview can clarify the task that confronts us.

Story as Torah

In the Old Testament tradition, the relation between text and the living community is beautifully expressed. Here reception is not simply reading the text; no, it is a new word that is stated about and on the basis of the text: the written Torah has the oral Torah as its partner for life. There is no division between the two. The oral, the second Torah, is an expansion of the first, a sign of its vitality.
and ability to fill the horizon anew (Ricoeur 1998: xii).

**The Patristics**

In patristic hermeneutics there is a close relationship between text and response by later readers. The threefold and later fourfold meaning of Scripture in the Patristics can be seen primarily as a way of saying that Bible texts also have, in addition to a context-bound, historical meaning, an ethical and spiritual potential that is intended to be operationalized.7

**The Reformation**

However much the Reformers also placed the emphasis on the importance of the *sensus literalis* and were allergic to floating allegories, however much the dominant historical-critical research would emerge from this with its aquaphobia for what non-professional readers do with Bible texts, this does not mean that reception was not important. Rather, it means that there was an allergy to a certain kind of reception. Indeed, it can be said that precisely the emphasis on the *sensus literalis* expresses the longing that Bible texts be appropriated in a historical and sociopolitical way. Calvin adheres very much to the principle that would be reformulated later by Gadamer, namely that “application” is a very essential part and not merely an extra or third phase of the interpretation process. Hans Frei, in his well-known book *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative*, cites with approval Hans Joachim Kraus’ statement that, for Calvin, the Bible is not so much inspired but that it “communicates and informs” in the first instance. No doubt, Calvin would here have thought not only of the original hearers of the Bible texts but primarily of himself and his contemporaries.8 What happened with the Bible in Strasbourg, Geneva, Germany, the Netherlands and wherever at the time of the Reformation has everything to do with reception, with a response, with *relectura* in the sense of double transformation: a new reading by a new reader renews the meaning of the text. The rise of what G. Heitink calls a “biblical consciousness” (Heitink 2001: 59) is primarily a response by readers to a way of living with Bible texts.9

**The Enlightenment**

Indeed, something went very wrong in the Enlightenment between brother text and sister appropriation. The faults in the relationship begin to become visible in the late Renaissance, and a divorce occurred in the Enlightenment (De Wit 2008). Reason and (primarily Western) logic became the *arbiters of meaning* (Ricoeur). The variegated, exotic, arbitrary, bizarre and often narcissistic in the appropriation processes were viewed as problematic. In the Enlightenment, it is the contextual pole of the process of understanding – the response to the text – that is seen as suspect and superficial. The exegesis goes its own way, historically oriented, often arrogantly, filled with the idea that Bible texts are stable objects and that exploring the historical context exhausts the meaning potential of the texts. The exegete is now a *Vormund*, a guardian.

However variegated the development of Western biblical studies would be
for the rest, “Lady Appropriation” was increasingly ignored as irrelevant, as ballast, indeed as an assault on the original meaning of the text. It would not be until the middle of the twentieth century that the objections introduced from the fields of literary studies (fallacy of origins), modern hermeneutics (all understanding is contextual) and postmodern philosophy (dissemination, intertextuality, connection between interpretation and power) would gain any foothold and the limitation and onesidedness of the Enlightenment paradigm would begin to be seen. The price was high and the way back difficult.

Genitive Theologies

The way back, the rehabilitation of Lady Appropriation as an elementary component in the process of attributing meaning, has been travelled in recent years more intensively in the non-Western context than anywhere else. Whoever knows about the Bible movement in Latin America (De Wit 1991) and now in Africa (Ukpong 2000; West 1997; 1999a; 1999b; 2000; Dube 2001; West and Dube 1996) and Asia and has sampled the results will be deeply impressed by the opportunities that the dialogue between exegetes and ordinary, poor readers offers. For a vast number of exegetes working on these continents, the relationship between text and the response to the text is precious. It is a relationship that is fundamental for the hermeneutics of liberation. Reading the Bible in communities is good for people and helps change the world. But, in however nuanced a way Latin American biblical scholars like José Severino Croatto, Carlos Mesters, Milton Schwantes, Pablo Richard and many others talk about this connection between reading and the praxis of liberation, one hears too often about a longing, the hoped-for effect of reading the Bible for a praxis of liberation. Moreover, the relationship is formulated in an almost causal way as if everyone in Latin America reads the Bible10 and as if this leads automatically for all readers to what can be viewed as a praxis of liberation in the sociopolitical meaning of the word.11

Does the new praxis, reading the Bible “with” the people, not take the bite out of our paradox? Has the challenge we are addressing here not already been taken up? My answer is no—to the contrary! However fascinating the stories may be about how “the people, the poor,” read the Bible, not even a beginning has been made in Latin America—as far as I can see—with respect to a systematic analysis of the empirical material that the people have produced in abundance.12 Rather, it must be said that precisely the lack of empirical research leads to all kinds of romantic and essentialist statements about how the Bible is read among the poor. Sometimes, descriptions of the relationship between people and the Bible correspond more to the desires of the socially engaged exegete than to the reality. And here as well there are all kinds of demands that readers, good readers, must meet. In other words, a look at the Latin American and African situations accentuates precisely our paradox and makes the challenge all the more urgent: if it is claimed that Bible reading is good for people and contributes to liberation, let us see how that works.
Two Remarks

The relationship between reading and praxis is more complex than many, on both the left and the right, often want to have us believe. Allow me to make two remarks on the complexity of this relationship. First, an example from a recent American study and then something about the difference between the reading and use of texts.

First the example. In a study conducted in the US last year people were asked about their view of six miracle stories in the Bible—the resurrection, Daniel in the lion’s den, creation in six days, the crossing of the Red Sea, Jesus walking on water and the story of David and Goliath. The data indicates, according to the study, that the “the typical American has adopted these accounts as the foundation of a valued faith in God.” At least 75 percent of all those interviewed said that they believed in the literal meaning of the resurrection story; whether they thought the other stories had also happened literally or not depended very much on their politics, ethnic background and church affiliation. The final conclusion of the study is instructive. For a great majority of those interviewed it appears that belief in the literal meaning of these stories does not play any role in their lives, however foundational these stories are understood to be. This leads the researchers to make the following statement:

In fact, a minority of the people who believe these stories to be true consistently apply the principles imbedded in these stories within their own lives. It seems that millions of Americans believe the Bible content is true, but are not willing to translate those stories into action. Sadly, for many people, the Bible has become a respected but impersonal religious history lesson that stays removed from their life.13

The second comment concerns something that plays a role in all religions of the Book, namely the difference between the attentive and careful reading of texts and the use of those texts. The complexity of the relationship between reading and praxis becomes somewhat clearer when we discover the importance of this relationship.14 Holy Scripture invokes many reactions, but not all of them have to do with reading. Reading is not the same as using. All religious traditions have what Umberto Eco has called gastronomic reading.15 This does not have much to do with reading anymore, but with the use of the book to which the texts refer.16 This is a use that often occurs without any hermeneutical mediation, without the text being given the chance to do something with the reader, simply because of the status of the book. One can think here of the Book as a cultural legacy, as a product, as a fetish; one can think of the use of the ink, the paper, the cover, the pictures; the Book as book, the magic, its status, the Book as amulet; the use of the Book for healing, health, success, enchantment, war, domination, swearing an oath, repentance, prosperity, fertility, and so on and so forth. The well-known thumb method of reading is a good example of this: asking a question, placing one’s thumb on an arbitrary place in the Bible and,
voilà—an answer.

Both comments emphasize again the well-known insight that what people do with sacred texts is more than a product of an intrinsic quality of the Sacred Book; it is a possibility for using the book, a possibility that is also fed by all kinds of non-religious components that have to do primarily with social inequality and power. In that sense Camara’s statement about the inequality in the world as the mother or, rather, father of all violence, as violence 1, is relevant from a hermeneutical viewpoint as well.

The Challenge Again

In the meantime, the challenge that we want to take up has been articulated sufficiently. What has happened in literary studies in recent decades has not happened in theology: research into the insight held everywhere that texts do something with readers and readers do something with texts. But what is being investigated as a premise in literary studies is, in Christian theology, not only a longing, a hoped-for result. It is a demand, a condition for survival. Without readers, without a response, the Scripture ceases to be a source of revelation. Empirical research in this area is urgent.

Any attempt to survey this field of research—empirical research into the reception of Bible texts—will lead to dizziness. Great modesty is the only solution here. But we also have an advantage with respect to empirical literary studies that researches books that are published. The number of published titles are increasing spectacularly: just in Dutch-speaking areas alone there were 3000 new titles around the year 1900, and already 20,000 new titles around 2000. In the US 85,000 new titles appeared in 1947 and in 1998 that number had increased to 1.3 million. In our field of investigation, however, we are studying one book, the most sold book in the history of humanity. And there is still something else that makes this field of research so special. Apart from all the properties of content in the Bible as text, it is a fact that no single other book is being read at the same time by so many different people in such radically different contexts and situations. The discovery of the hermeneutical dimension of that fact and the possibilities that this offers for intercultural communication is staggering.

Before we move on to the fields of Africa and travel to the Bible readers in the Andes, I must first make good on a promise to define a number of terms. Empirical hermeneutics—directed at the reading of Bible texts—in an intercultural setting? That demands definition and clarity.
Empirical Hermeneutics in Intercultural Perspective

Hermeneutics refers to the theoretical practice that reflects on the question of how interpretation processes of texts occur. Hermeneutics is not the interpretation itself – for that one can better use the concept hermeneuse – but the academic reflection on how the processes work. What instruments and factors play a role? Where do the differences come from? Who are the players in the field and what are their roles? In the case of the hermeneutics of the Bible, we are concerned with the interpretation of Bible texts. The term interpretation process is intended to indicate that more is at stake in reading and understanding the Bible than simply an academic interpretation. There is no reason why hermeneutics should not look at the processes involved in making texts topical. Exegesis, directed at the question of what Bible texts could have meant in their historical setting, is one phase in a more comprehensive process, whereby making the text topical and the praxes of contemporary readers play a role.

The Descriptive Dimension

The addition empirical refers to the target group and to the descriptive dimension of this hermeneutics. It means the attempt to map, or at least define the contours of how flesh-and-blood readers deal with texts. It thus concerns a form of reception criticism, but now one that is directed not solely at the great men in the tradition, as was customary until recently, but concerns the question of how contemporary readers, professional but also and primarily ordinary readers, deal with texts. Empirical hermeneutics thus includes the analysis of the appropriation processes and is directed at the text in its relation to topical explanation and interpretation, its effect and use thereof by contemporary readers. Empirical hermeneutics thus wishes to explore the area where the behavior potential of the text becomes operational.

Sociologists often begin to tremble whenever a theologian uses the term “empirical.” That is unnecessary; there is no reason—apart from some extra training and that can never do any harm—why an empirical method like Grounded Theory – with its back-and-forth movement between the content of the empirical material and its own hypotheses (Glaser and Strauss 1967; Glaser 1993) – cannot be made fruitful hermeneutically and applied within biblical hermeneutics. Biblical hermeneutics has enough to commend it to enable it to explore this area with sensitivity and care and to develop an adequate code system that can study the reception of Bible stories on a meta-level.¹ The empirical material – reading reports – can be unfolded in text segments, in semantic units, to which labels, codes, can be attached.² Balance and care will be exercised between what people will find and what the empirical material offers.
The empirical material corrects and enriches the hypotheses; in the analysis of each reading report codes will be added until a saturation point is reached.

Simple data can thus be mapped in a number of main categories. A first such category can be the following: the socioeconomic and ethnic background of the readers, composition of the group, church affiliation, how they see their relationship to society, age, context, motivation, group dynamic aspects of the interpretive process and the cultural determination of that (are there traces of a collectivist culture, of an oral culture, and is it then a matter of listening readers?), the liturgical form of the meeting, the group dynamic, etc.

In a second main category, the more exegetical-hermeneutical aspects of the interpretation process can be coded: the reading attitude (open, questioning, academic, problematizing the text, dogmatic, pietistic, psychologizing, directed at liberation, etc. Here one would also look at the cultural determination of the reading attitude and the heuristic keys used), the status of the text for the readers, the explanation strategies – thus what means and strategies are used in explaining the text: aids such as commentaries, do people look primarily at the historical background of the text, at the text as text (as a literary, narrative and rhetorical unit), the foreground of the text, the text in its wider literary context, inter- and intratextuality (very much the case with Pentecostals). On what verses do people concentrate and why? How are the narrative gaps of the text filled in? How are the actants in the text perceived? With which of them do people identify and why? What is considered to be the central message of the text? Which translation is used, why and what is the effect of this translation on the interpretation of the text? We could go on.

A third main category can concentrate on the element of appropriation and application. If the text is made topical, i.e. fused with the reader’s own life story, is the original reference of the text replaced by a contemporary? How? What strategy is used for this – allegorical, more historical in the form of analogies, the tracing-paper model, the model of parallelism of terms (Pharaoh is Pinochet; we are the people of Israel), the parallelism of relationships (Pharaoh is Pinochet, we are the people of Israel, and just as Pharaoh oppressed Israel, so Pinochet oppresses us) or the Dialog der Verhältnisse?5

Subsequently, what is the content of the appropriation—eternal life, grace, reconciliation, liberation, redemption, “God’s promises are fulfilled in my life,” strength, etc. What is its relationship to the readers’ views—confirming, narcissistic, (self-)critical, problematizing, Biblical values must be overruled, etc.? Finally, one can ask what the actual, measurable praxeological effect of the appropriation is: there is no appropriation; it remains on the level of “we should ...,” a new lifestyle, altruism, conversion, involvement in resistance movements, new forms of sociopolitical action, diaconal work, missions, evangelization, transformation in the perception of the other, etc.

After the simple factors of the interpretation process have been thus mapped, one can search for significant correlations. These are found in the back and forth movement between one’s own hypotheses/research questions and the empirical material itself but now primarily via a comparative method: the hun-
dreds of reading reports are compared with one another via software specially developed for qualitative research and, on the basis of the results of this, significant correlations are formulated. In our case we will ask about the coherence between the effect of poverty and wealth on interpretation, the effect of the cultural context on it, the coherence between the direct sociopolitical context and the heuristic keys of the readers, the effect of dominant reading traditions, including those in the church, in their relation to the willingness to interact with others, and identification patterns, etc.

The Normative Dimension: Intercultural as an Ethical Concept

Hermeneutics can be directed at specific aspects of the process, specific readers or specific hoped-for results of the interpretation process. One can thus investigate the issue of how reading Bible texts can be placed in service to the processes of change.

Hermeneutics that are directed at that are given a label. They are given a name that differentiates them; a genitive is attached to them. There are thus Black Hermeneutics, Hermeneutics of Liberation, Feminist Hermeneutics, Dalit Hermeneutics, Calypso Hermeneutics. The label refers mainly to the interests of the new subject in the service of which one wants to use hermeneutical reflection: the woman, the black person, the poor, the outcast, the Rastafarian. The list is endless. The label has a critical dimension: it refers to groups whose interests are not defended in other hermeneutics. It also refers to a normative dimension: people want to lay down rules for how texts must actually be read. The label then receives a surplus value. Thus one sees, for example, how, among Latin American, African and Asian biblical scholars, the concept poor or black or outcast is not simply a descriptive and primarily socioeconomic and ethnic concept but has also become a normative category. “Among us the poor have become the best interpreters of the Scripture,” writes the Brazilian Milton Schwantes (1987: 3). I have elsewhere commented on this merging of the descriptive and normative and pointed to the trap of reduction (De Wit 1991; 2008). What I want to make clear is that if we attach the label intercultural to hermeneutics here, we are dealing with a normative dimension. Here intercultural is not only descriptive in the sense of a purely geographical way of reading the Bible that crosses boundaries but mainly an ethically loaded concept. I will clarify what I mean via two contributions. First, I will make Procees’s reflections on cultural differences fruitful for hermeneutics; I will then use core elements from what Levinas says about alterity in connection with the interpretation of texts.

Non-Exclusion and Willingness to Interact

The rules for proper reading are formulated and analyzed in hermeneutical schemes. But what is proper reading? Are there a few basic rules in the multiplicity of hermeneutical drafts that could apply to all drafts? Is there a normative minimum that is determinative for this? Thiselton has shown how there has been a development in modern hermeneutics in two directions in the multitude
of views and drafts (Thiselton 1992). There is a more contextual or sociopragmatic line of thinking and a more universalistic one. The same development can be seen in culture studies. There “universalism” and “relativism” have been of primary importance. Universalism is the system of unity: there is one reality, one method for gaining knowledge of that reality, there is one sound system of moral judgments. A coherence is sought in all the diversity that can serve as a guideline for human existence. The contextual, the variety is central in relativism: there are many realities, many ways of gaining insight into them, and there are divergent systems of morality (Procee 1991). The parallel with developments in culture studies is interesting for hermeneutics. Also there, in hermeneutics, one finds universalistic schemes over against ones that argue for a more contextually determined approach. Formulated rather sharply, one can say that socio-pragmatic or contextual hermeneutics holds that outside the context there is nothing one can say about an interpretation of the Bible, whereas the more universalistic holds that a universal framework is available that fits each situation and is the sole source of the legitimacy of each interpretation process. Thus Eurocentric hermeneutics have long had universal pretentions. Also strongly determined by the West are the demands made in literary studies and elsewhere of readers. We discussed this already. The more relativistic and contextually determined “genitive” hermeneutics have arisen as a protest against and evidence of their incompleteness.

In the current hermeneutical situation, which is sometimes described by means of the metaphor of a battlefield, each interpretation, each approach to Scripture seems to be of as much or as little value as any other. Where can the norms be found that can produce an independent judgment? After all, both ways, if formulated in extremes, are problematic. The contextual way pegs people down to cultural values, the social and political situation in which they simply find themselves. Sometimes, this produces a strong reductionism, because readers merge with their context. The universalistic way gives every interpretation, every reading, the right to speak if it keeps to the universally valid frameworks that universalism itself has established. Here one often finds groups of people excluded, “strange” forms of interpretation declared inferior and an idealism that ignores the pain of the historical moment.

How can intercultural hermeneutics offer a way out here? It can do so by taking up two central concepts in culture studies. It thus concerns the concepts of eccentricity and interactive diversity. Interactive diversity implies the willingness to make the factor of cultural diversity operative, in the context of our argument now, visible in the way in which people read the Bible. For growth and the exchange of perspectives confrontation is sometimes necessary. Confrontation can occur, can be “organized,” whenever diversity is involved in the discussion on the meaning of Bible texts. But a more profound question is why interaction, an intercultural dimension and practice can be described as a quality of the hermeneutical process. For that I have recourse to the concept eccentricity, as used by Procee in his study on transcultural morality. The (philosophical) concept of eccentricity has to do with something that is specific for the
structure of the human being. It refers to the “insight that the human being is not only a body but also has a body, is the master and plaything of his psyche, product and producer of his culture.” People are and are related to that “are.” People are never completely reducible to themselves. Eccentricity leads to the multiformity of human individuals, as well as to the great diversity of cultural patterns. Some cultures are strongly oriented to interaction, whereas others are concerned with stopping precisely that. On the basis of one and the same basic structure, it is possible both to be open to new influences and to close oneself off from them. Eccentricity as a general human characteristic means that interactions are essential for human beings. Procee develops two norms for transcultural morality: the principle of non-exclusion and the principle of promoting interaction.7

The given of eccentricity can also be made fruitful for hermeneutics. People are not only products of their interpretation of the Bible; they can also acquire knowledge of other interpretations. However closed or reproductive interpretations of the Scripture are, interpreters are never completely reducible to them. Readers can also objectify their own interpretation. The concept of eccentricity thus also leads in hermeneutics to the formulation of a minimal normative criterion: non-exclusion and the willingness to promote interaction. It is a criterion that is related critically to the permanent longing for differentiation in so much genitive hermeneutics, a desire that leads all too quickly to closedness and the non-willingness to interact, points on which universalistic approaches are reproached. It is a normative criterion, because it indicates that in which the quality of interpretation lies, namely in searching for a continuing dialogue and the insight cohering with that, i.e. that understanding is always incomplete and vulnerable, the willingness for non-exclusion and striving for consensus.

The most important observation of the above considerations is that if one investigates the much-cherished idea of “equality of interpretations”, one comes to an unexpected result: taking this value seriously has the consequence that interpretations are not equal. Interpretations differ in the degree to which they are willing to learn from “strange” interpretations. The more they do that, the more valuable they are.

*Ethics and Interpretation: The Eschatological Dimension of Understanding*

Our primary source in the ethical aspects of this final conclusion has been Levinas. Wherever exclusion occurs, wherever interaction with the strange is not sought, the ethics of interpretation come into play. The insights of Levinas and others on the importance of the strange in the interpretation processes are elementary for the practice of confrontation and interaction that we want to organize within the framework of this chair. We will look at this some more.

Levinas’ work can be characterized as thinking in terms of lasting difference. Respect for the strange is the foundation of this (Van Heijst 1995: 218; Cohn Eskenazi 2003: 145; Cohn Eskenazi and Phillips and Jobling 2003). The strange, which manifests itself *beyond my horizon*, must be welcomed. Why? Because the
strange, the other, is the only thing can keep me from my permanent longing for totality, for mastery. “It is not the insufficiency of the I that prevents totalization, but the Infinity of the Other,” Levinas writes in his *Totality and Infinity* (TI 8). Like his philosophy, Levinas’ theory of interpretation was dominated entirely by ethics: first the ethics, then the interpretation. The orientation to the other has biblical roots. The eschatological orientation of the Tanakh becomes manifest at crucial spots in it and are expressed in the orientation to “the other,” to “elsewhere” and to the “otherwise.” Already in Genesis 1 the relation between infinity and fecundity is laid: “Be fertile and increase.” In contrast to Odysseus, who returns home, Abraham is led somewhere else. The whole of the Pentateuch is governed by eschatology. Moses will not enter the promised land; others will. Thus, what Moses did, he did for others. The Tanakh ends midway through the sentence “and let him go up” (2 Chron. 36:23). The way in which the Hebrew Bible is conceived as such, open to the future, to what must still come, the beyond my time, emphasizes the importance of infinity. It resists totality and shows the birth of a new possibility – an otherwise – and thus of the responsibility for that.

Orientation to the other in interpretation processes implies the welcoming of the experiential fact of each exegete, namely that texts are polysemic, polyphonic and variegated. Totality is opposed to infinity as exclusion, as not welcoming the other. The other is the enemy. Totality is not only destructive and leads to war—there are only enemies on the battlefield—but is also untrue. Totality is not prepared to take texts’ reserve of meaning into consideration—totality dehumanizes by erasing the particular—and reduces these to its own, objective and ultimate meaning, however much the reality of the variegated nature of this possibility belies this. The variegated nature of the meaning of the text is continually sacrificed, always through an appeal to the objective meaning of texts.

Infinity is not a vague concept in Levinas, something without boundaries. To the contrary, it has to do primarily with boundaries and going beyond them. Infinity is produced “by bound and bonded persons.” “Infinity is produced in the relationship of the same with the other. It does not pre-exist” (TI 26). In other words, wealth and fertility in interpretation is not an a priori given but is produced where one’s own context-bound interpretation encounters the other’s. When the self and the other offer to cross the boundary and interaction occurs, when the striving for plenitude and the striving for transcendence and the variegated nature of the text cannot be reduced to purely one’s own. The other must be qualified: it is not so much the other in general; here too Levinas wants the Tanakh to have the deciding voice. The other is primarily the widow, the orphan and the stranger.

What does infinity imply for the attribution of meaning to texts? Levinas will argue that, in principle, there are at least as many readings as there are readers, for every reader brings his or her concerns, insights, perspectives, experiences to the text and can read the text like a letter addressed to him or her. What a text can say depends on the multiplicity of readers and readings. If one
wants to do justice to the striving for *plenitude*, if one wants to take seriously the eschatological – i.e. reading and interpretation “by the other,” “elsewhere” and “otherwise”13 – as a quality of the interpretation processes, then each reader is irreplaceable. No reader can be missed. The truth of the text, the revelation of its mystery, lies therefore precisely in

the contributions of a multiplicity of people: the uniqueness of each act of listening carries the secret of the text; the voice of Revelation, in precisely the inflection lent by each person’s ear, is necessary for the truth of the Whole .... The multiplicity of people, each one of them indispensable, is necessary to produce all the dimensions of meaning; the multiplicity of meanings is due to the multiplicity of people.14

We repeat: ethics is the concept that determines proper reading for Levinas. That can be seen in the four standards that he employs for what he calls *ethical exegesis*: (1) concrete and productive integration of spirit and letter; (2) pluralism of readers and readings; (3) virtue and existential self-transformative wisdom; (4) sensitivity to authority in its sense that people, when reading the Hebrew Bible for example, understand themselves to be busy with in reading and thus in making an *ethical*-religious tradition of contemporary interest (Cohen 2001: 248ff).

In the event of non-*integration*, reading can thus become such a game that it leads to “angelic dreaminess” and a complete neglect of historical situations of suffering and exclusion. The ethical has priority in the integration of letter and spirit. What traces of suffering, of human experience, are seen in or behind the text? What traces are now visible in the light of the text?

*Multiplicity* is therefore not a defect, as suggested by those who claim to employ epistemological laws that actually only appear in mathematics and not even there completely. No, the variegated nature of the readings and diversity are a tribute to the continuing revelation and, hermeneutically stated, to the continuing unfolding of the texts’ potential for meaning.

The dialogical dimension of interpretation, of listening to others, to old and new readers, prevents the interpreter from not dirtying his hands and standing on the sidelines. The statement in the Talmud that using sacred texts makes clean hands dirty should also be understood in that sense. Proper reading produces, according to Levinas, transformation, engagement, passion for the concern of the texts in the interpreter: “[E]xegesis lives,” Levinas writes, “because it engages the lives of those who engage in it.” Thus, for Levinas, exegesis is more than historically oriented, critical reflection on what texts could have meant in their original setting. No, he is speaking about *ethical exegesis* and defines the work of the exegete in line with what South African and Latin American exeges call *socially engaged biblical scholars*.15 “This exegesis,” he writes, “makes the text speak; while critical philology speaks of the text. The one takes the text to be a source of teaching, the other treats it as a thing.”

To read texts from the Hebrew Bible is to enter an old house, an old tradi-
tion. People connect themselves to a tradition “as old as the world,” i.e. “as old as the humanity of the human” (Hand 1989: 255). However variegated and diverse this tradition is, it is an ethical-religious tradition with a past that is oriented to the future, to peace. What is continually at stake in this tradition is the future of the earth and the humanity of being human. Reading these texts, in conjunction with old and new readers, this also implies responsibility for making this ethical tradition current, for keeping alive this tradition that is realized in the discussion on law (in its sense as Torah), justice and peace (Hand 1989: 196). The miracle of the Bible and—as Cohen supplements Levinas—of all religious texts does not lie in a common literary origin of the texts but in the fact that these texts merge together in the same fundamental content, namely the ethical. How then, from a hermeneutical view, can one speak about peace in the light of irreducible diversity and variegation? Peace, Levinas would say, is not universal sameness but an ethical answer to otherness; justice consists in recognizing that the other is always other than what we see of him or her.

Organize Confrontation

We will now leave our attempt to make use of Levinas for the topic that occupies us here at that. Procee and Levinas, and many others with them, each emphasize in his own way the fundamental importance of non-exclusion, respect for others and the importance of interaction. The interpretation process of Bible texts becomes richer to the extent that its irreducible eschatological dimension is honored and other readers who read elsewhere and do so in another way are involved in the discussion on the ethical implications of these texts.

But are its readers prepared to do so just like that? When we ask Western exegetes how the orientation to the elsewhere, the other and the otherwise is given shape in their exegesis, the answer is a meagre one. Hardly anything has come of a systematic interaction with, for example, colleagues from Latin America or Africa, where the elsewhere and the otherwise are often given (De Wit 2008; Huning 2005: 102f). The same is true, for that matter, of the mutual interaction between African and Latin American exegetes and so many other groups. It is difficult to escape from dominant reading traditions and to be filled with a permanent responsibility for reading “with” others. Nonetheless, interaction and confrontation are necessary for a transforming Bible reading. Here we stumble on one of the challenges that the research organized by this chair will take up. Cultural diversity will be introduced as a hermeneutical factor and confrontation will be organized. In practice, this means that groups of Bible readers from radically different situations will be connected and brought into discussion on the meaning of the Bible text that they read together. Intercultural thus here stands for interaction. The concept “cultural” is used because of the fundamental meaning of culture in the mental programming of people. This is therefore not interreligious hermeneutics but intercultural hermeneutics in a religious perspective, for it concerns Bible texts, i.e. texts that many people experience as fundamental for their existence and view of the world.
Further Empirical Research

Before we finally move on the Andes or the rice paddies of Asia, we should return for a moment to the question of empirical research. We sketched above the contours of the code system for the first phase of the reading process. That is the phase in which groups read in their own situation, without any confrontation with others. In the second phase, groups are connected and interaction, the intercultural discussion on the religious text, can occur. This interaction is fundamental. We have seen that we consider that to be a quality, a normative minimum criterion for proper reading. But how does the formulation of theory occur? Can it also be established empirically if this normative minimum criterion is not met? Our answer is affirmative. Just as in the first phase, a code system can be developed that is sensitive to this. In the code system already developed there are all kinds of theological-hermeneutical components; those familiar with the material here will discover how much we have consulted culture studies, sociology, anthropology and empirical research into intercultural communication (De Wit 2004: 395-436).

Central questions that are asked of the empirical material are: Has there been development and growth or stagnation and freezing? The code system is very much directed at the analysis of the interaction with the partner group. How do the readers deal with the partner group as such? What is the effect of the interaction? The code system is divided here, again, into three main categories.

The First Main Category. Supplementary information is collected about the group and the partner group. A varied composition can be established. Motivation, intercultural experience and expectations are looked at again. All of this is constantly brought into relation with the partner group, which is now known, and of which the givens are also coded. There will be strong reliance here on the results and information from the first phase.

The Second Main Category. This is an extremely important category. Here dealing with the partner group is mapped. Do people acquire any knowledge of the partner group’s context? Do they address the partner group directly (“Dear Partner Group”)? Or do people continue to objectify and to think in essentialisms? Is there a “culture/co-culture” (poor/rich) communication pattern as described and analyzed by Paulo Freire? What role do power and asymmetry play in the communication? Is there interest in the profile of the partner group? Are certain features of the partner group striking (vulnerability, experiences of suffering, ethnic background, openness)? What attitude do people themselves take – critical, “mindful,” “non-judgmental,” open, vulnerable? Is there tolerance for ambiguity in the belief system of the partner group or do people only want something in the partner group that they themselves cannot supply, namely absolute coherence and logic? Do people want to convert?

At the same time, the hermeneutical-exegetical aspect of the interaction is coded: What differences or similarities does the group itself (and then also the
researcher) discover with regard to method, focalization, identification patterns, appropriation and the way the text is made relevant by the partner group and embedded in their own lives? How do people deal with these similarities and differences? Do the similarities and differences lead to an “ecumenical honeymoon”? Do people deal with differences in the way that is called “graceful fighting” in anthropology?18 Are differences “blunted” through, for example, an appeal to “religious universals” – we are, after all, brothers and sisters and there is one God – or do they lead to a break and rejection?

The Third Main Category. In the third main category, the code system is directed toward the analyzing and establishing of the effect of the interaction. We will explore what factors are influential in the freezing and thawing of faith insights. In the code system “freezing” is also called, to use a term employed by Droogers and others, a “return to one’s own repertoire”; “thawing” is also called “growth.” The codes that are valid here are, for example, the following. Is there a process that Bar-Tal has called the transition from cognitive discrepancy to cognitive consensus? Which of the four factors cited by Bar-Tal play or do not play a role in this process: Recognition of Relativism; Satisfaction of Needs; Salient and Significant Information; Third Party Intervention (Bar Tal 1990)? What has then happened to one’s own view of the text? Is there growth? Why and on the basis on which factors? Is there rejection of the reading of the partner group? Why and on the basis of which factors? Is there an increase in intercultural competence (insight into the cultural determination of their own values and those of the partner group), a relativization of one’s own insights, a development of a so-called “third culture perspective”? Or has there been a “culture shock” and a return to one’s own repertoire?

Because our research is concerned with intercultural communication in religious perspective, in the analysis we will pay attention primarily to what this communication does with the belief of those involved. Here we will look not only at how the relation between Gospel and culture develops in this process19 but primarily at growth and stagnation in faith insights. The terms used here are derived for a large part from manuals and studies on intercultural communication. In our research religious variants of the terms are used and we will attempt to make the special role of faith in processes of intercultural communication visible. Here is an example. Where culture studies speaks of a Third Culture Perspective, we will use this term in a hermeneutical-religious sense and then analyze if the learning process has been enriching for the group or has broadened its horizon. Has their faith become deeper? Are people freer with respect to their own faith tradition? Is there a richer, more creative, liberation way of reading and reflecting on one’s own faith? Has a new perspective developed, nourished by the interaction with the partner group and the longing for a new “third” look at the text and the praxes that are manifested in the text? When sociologists speak about the Third Culture Perspective, they do so in optimistic terms and the contours of the new person become visible. The Third Culture Man/Woman is “open-minded toward new ideas and experiences,” feels “empa-
thy toward people from other cultures,” has a “more accurate perception of differences and similarities between the host culture and our own,” he/she is sooner able “to describe behavior we don’t understand than evaluate unfamiliar behavior as bad, nonsensical, or meaningless,” one is better able “to detect role behaviors,” one is better equipped “to establish meaningful relationships with people from the other cultures,” one is “less ethnocentric” (Gudykunst and Kim 2003). Here we encounter the new, mature world citizen. He or she is able to deal with cultural differences and is not ethnocentric. The special content of our analysis is delineated over against this. If central texts of the Christian tradition are involved in the intercultural discussion in a religious perspective, concepts other than autonomy, cultural sensitivity, independent and critical thinking also appear to play a fundamental role. The Third Perspective becomes immediately ethically charged, becomes a Third Faith Perspective that is nourished by the longing for the Kingdom. It is a perspective that is also eschatologically loaded and within which asymmetry, premature death and oppression are determinative. Concepts like justice, guilt, love, one’s neighbor, liberation and redemption carry the discussion on the differences.

A profile can be constructed from the reading reports and be displayed on a graph. I will give a few examples of this.

The illustration below shows the coding process. The researcher looks at the material from different perspectives because a text segment (quotation) can be given different codes since it contains several components.
The profile of one group can be determined on the basis of specific aspects of the interpretation process and compared with that of another group. The explanation strategies of the text are coded for both groups below. How have the groups dealt with the explanation of the text, with its historical background, the original language, the literary and theological aspects of the text, the narrative and rhetorical structure of the text, the further literary context, etc.? The illustrations below show the profile of two partner groups, a Dutch ecumenical group and a Nicaraguan group, members of a Pentecostal church. The scores diverge greatly. The Dutch group is very occupied with exegesis and scores much higher on this part than its partner group. Both reports can be compared, for they are about the same size and have a similar number of coded quotations. A so-called network view shows the differences immediately. The illustration below indicates how much the Dutch group is occupied with understanding the text and how much less that is the case with the Nicaraguan partner group (illustration on next page).
If we look at making the text relevant for the present, the situation is precisely the opposite. It is now the Nicaraguan group that scores high here. It is then interesting and impressive how the groups approach and show great appreciation for each other in the phase of interaction. Looking through the eyes of the other, the groups become aware of their own way of reading and discover that the method and interpretation of the partner group complements their own.

We will leave our short description of the analysis of the empirical material at that. It constitutes part of our attempt to contribute to theory formation and the development of a new method of reading the Bible.
Hans de Wit | “My God,” she said, “ships make me so crazy.”
Ordinary Readers

We must now make the trips we promised we would. All the foregoing remarks on the effect of texts on the actions of human beings, interaction as a quality of interpretation, empirical research and the ethical dimension of understanding lead us to an area that is essential for our study, namely the world of the ordinary reader of Bible stories. That is the space in which the connection between culture, context, tradition and reading becomes visible—more so than it does in the world of the professional reader. Here we encounter a concept—referred to in Spanish as lectores comunes—that is used a great deal but is not easy to define. I will return to that shortly. Let us first look at who populates the space in which we are so interested. I will provide a few portraits.

This is Maruge from Kenya, the oldest pupil in the world, in his school uniform, with shorts on.

The caption of the newspaper article reads: “When President Kibaki introduced free primary education in 2003, the illiterate great-grandfather Maruge seized his chance. His reason for starting school at this age was: ‘I suspected that a preacher did not understand the Bible very well. Therefore, I wanted to learn to read myself.’”
“My God,” she said, “ships make me so crazy.”

A group from the Netherlands

A group from Ghana
A group from Bolivia, with gifts from the Dutch partner group (note the yellow bag “Blijvend Scherpe Prijzen” (“Permanent Low Prices”)) [Photo: Victor Huacani]

A group of Aymara women from Bolivia [Photos: Photo caroline]
“My God,” she said, “ships make me so crazy.”

A group of Korean students
A group from El Salvador: Carlos (the Samaritan woman) is touched by Francisco (Jesus). The others laugh and make jokes.

There they are: the ordinary readers who populate our area of research. Most of the photos come from a major project, *Through the Eyes of Another: Intercultural Reading of the Bible* (2001-2004), that is now being continued through the Dom Hélder Câmara Chair. Small groups of Bible readers read a Bible story together, first in their own situation, then communally, as a small group, and then, finally, they are brought into contact with a partner group (far away or close by) and begin discussing the meaning of the text with that partner group. They attempt to look at the text again through the eyes of another.
“My God,” she said, “ships make me so crazy.”
The Reserve of Meaning

Knowing about the hermeneutical situation of the diversity of Christianity on the theoretical level is one thing; seeing how it works in practice is another. If one wants to see Levinas’ concept of infinity at work and wants to understand the postmodern emphasis on fluidity and the reserve of meaning in texts, if one wants to be aware of the ethical implications of interpretation, if one wants to discover what the function of Holy Scripture can be, then one must set up a project like this. Why are we so delighted? Because we have seldom enjoyed our discipline as much as we did when the first reading reports arrived and we discovered that each reading report brought new insights, new questions and a different way of looking at the text. We were delighted because while all those concerns about asymmetry, premature death and poverty press upon one so much in the practice of intercultural reading and affect one in relation to the enormous challenges, the possibilities of something like reading the Bible together do so as well. We are delighted because we are cheered by the possibilities that Holy Scripture offers for a discussion on peace and justice. Entering this space is like entering holy ground. Latin American and African biblical theologians are right when they speak of a certain mysticism in such forms of communal Bible reading. It is, in a word, fantastic!

This should be sampled. I will organize the empirical material—the 3000 pages of “peoples’ commentary”—around a few key concepts that we have just looked at and show how they work in practice. In the end I will come back to who and what ordinary readers are.

Alterity and Infinity in Hermeneutical Perspective

We will look at the story that was read by all participants, the story in John 4, i.e. the meeting between Jesus and the Samaritan woman at Jacob’s well. We will look at what readers from these radically different contexts do with this story.

But first the story. A tired man sits alone next to a well, at the foot of the hills. It is hot and he is thirsty; he needs help. There is water available—he is sitting next to a well—but he has no jar and the well is deep. A woman from the village comes, alone, to draw water; we never learn her name. She is thirsty as well. The man and the woman have never seen each other before. What they share is their thirst and a common past. There are great differences between them: he is a man and she is a woman; they come from different peoples. The man has crossed the border to get to the well; his people do not usually come to where he is now sitting. Her people are despised by his people. The man speaks to her and asks for water. She can help quench his thirst because she has a jar
with her. But she does not. Instead, she asks him, “Why are you speaking to me? Your people do not speak to us!” That changes everything. A conversation ensues about thirst and water, about who they actually are and the tradition from which they come, about wholeness and healing. Something fundamental happens to both. He interrupts his journey and goes to her home and her people. She changes her life; she does not have to flee from her past. She begins to sow. They will never forget each other.
Roland Barthes once wrote that the stories of the world are innumerable. How people arrange and apply narrative patterns in stories also seems to be infinite. This is infinite because the series of factors that mediate in the process of attributing meaning is so large. Infinity is not only a philosophical concept that evokes what Levinas calls ethical exegesis; it is also a technical concept. Between the hard, grammatical details of the ancient text and the contemporary understanding of it is a permanent process that generates differences. Such differences arise because of new exegetical insights and methods but have to do primarily with the capacity of texts to illuminate situations that have not been seen by the author, which are then projected back on to the text and result in a new understanding of its meaning. The greatest differences, alterity in its most radical form, are manifested in the understanding of the reference of the text and making it relevant to today. First of all, the references of Bible texts are often vague, incomplete and fragmentary and, viewed from the perspective of the contemporary reader, refer primarily to absence. Every text has its narrative gaps, simply because not everything can be said. Variation thus appears primarily in what is not said by the text. In that sense it can be said that texts do nothing else than ask for completion, activity by the reader, imagination. That completion is always an adventure, simply because the ancient text never says whether that completion is allowed or not. This is also making it relevant for the present.

But when made relevant to today, the original reference of the text, the linking of the text to its own sociohistorical reality is replaced by a new one – ours. It is primarily the fact that processes of making the text relevant to today are context-bound that generates radical alterity. Appealing to cognitive psychology, which studies the comprehension of texts, Bruce Malina referred to the importance of the so-called scenario model for hermeneutics (Sanford and Garrod 1981). The understanding of texts develops primarily via searching for recognizable domains of reference – scenarios – in which the text wants to place the reader and assumes a position. “This domain of reference will be rooted in some model of society and of social interaction,” according to Malina. The domain of reference is thus always social and historical and invites the reader to recognition, to the construction of an analogy.¹ The point here is that the interpreter’s set of domains of reference is not unlimited and is always also strongly influenced by his or her own context.² In other words, the analogy that one constructs or is able to construct between contemporary domains of reference and those of the text depends very much on the situation of the contemporary interpreter. The combination of the narrative gaps and the contextually determined handling of the reference of the text is a primary source of differences.
Ality

We will look at the different domains of reference that readers of Bible stories have and the traces that this leaves in the empirical material. We will look at alterity and its hermeneutical effect—infinity.

Difference is manifested on all levels and in all phases of the interpretation process. Some groups are very sober with respect to the liturgical setting, while others use all kinds of symbolic objects and compose their own songs. We read in a report from Nigeria:

The group members bring along with them such symbolic objects like bottled water, cross, candle and pieces of white cloth. The group considers these objects symbolic to life, purity and light, which Christ radiates in the life of Christians etc. In addition symbolic objects such as the “Ikenga” or “Ofo,” cowries, clay pots, fowl feathers, and other objects of worship believed to be accepted by the ancestors in the African cultural setting were brought by the members of the group.

A Dutch group brings “a lump of clay, a wedding ring and a marriage certificate, a statue of two women, a wine glass, a weigh scale, binoculars, a swan, a pocket calendar, a nameplate.”

The composition of the groups, the origin, social status and church background of the participants, the place where people meet—all of that differs radically. The groups come from more than a hundred different denominations and more than 25 countries. So many different occupations are represented that we could have built a whole new world. Shoemakers and masons took part, truck drivers and concrete workers, teachers of theology, ministers and priests, managers and cleaners, secretaries and artists, nurses and musicians. There were also unemployed and retired people. One of the Cuban groups reported the participation of a number of deaf-mute individuals. The places where people met were very diverse. They met in large historical churches, in the open air under palm trees, in the slums, on university campuses.

Both the group dynamic and the method that is used in reading are culture-specific. “Meetings always begin with a hymn, after members had the opportunity to greet and inform about their health. One of the members led in prayer and asked the blessing of the Lord on the procedures,” the reporter of the women’s group in Kwazulu Natal, South Africa writes. The Cuban group writes: “All meetings started with a liturgical time: chants, hymns, dynamics, prayers.” A Dutch group begins as follows:

The chairwoman begins by reading a poem by African women. She then explains the intention of the meeting once again. Then, the participants, who do not all know one another, introduce themselves.

There was a remarkable difference between groups in the northern hemi-
sphere and those in the southern hemisphere with regard to their willingness to
go on the adventure of making a text relevant to today. Northern groups hesitate,
wrestle, are restrained, aloof; southern groups jump at the story and often iden-
tity immediately with a character in it. We saw an example of this difference in
the graphs above. Hans Snoek has explored this difference in the degree of ap-
propriating the text and has also shown that there are significant differences in focalization. “Whereas the ‘Third World’ groups pay relatively much attention to
John 4:7-15, in the Netherlands only two groups looked extensively at the meta-
phor [of living water]” (Snoek 2004: 189ff.). A good example of the relationship
between context and focalization can be found in the report of a Nigerian group:

The reading of the text (Jn 4) evoked interesting thoughts, memories and experiences in the individual lives of the mem-
ers of this group. The verses remind the members of diverse aspects of African cultural values and practices namely ances-
tor hood, the problem of “Osu” system in Igboland, polygamy, hospitality and womanhood/motherhood. Though the group
read all the verses of the chapter, it however carefully studied the verse that relate to each of the above African values and
practices.

The status of the text varies a great deal per group. While some groups begin
to deconstruct the text immediately, to approach the text with suspicion and
critical questions, other groups approach the text in trust, with respect.

The life stories of the participants display profound differences: “I am 38
years old,” a participant from Ghana says, “I have 8 children and my husband
divorced me away.” The Indian group writes, “All the members of the group are Dalits, the socially depressed classes of India. They have been deprived of digni-
ity for over 1000s of years.” A group of transsexuals in India also took part:

This group of transsexuals are not Christians. Bible studies, prayers, retreats, etc., are conducted for them by a Christian
priest .... They are not allowed entry into schools and col-
leges which is also one of the important reasons to why 80%
of transsexuals in India are engaged in the flesh trade.

The South African Group made the following portrait of their group: ‘The
average age of the group is 60+. Most of the members are married, and have
children who are independent grown-ups already. All members of the group,
except J., who lives on a wine farm, live in upper middle-class residential areas
in S.’

Infinity
Where does alterity lead if people read the same Bible story? The empirical
material shows how infinity is given form. The narrative and rhetorical structure
of the story elicits an unlimited number of answers. While some groups discover
syntactic and literary connections, these are not noticed by other groups. The answer to the internal reading dynamic of the text is extremely variegated. However much semioticians like Umberto Eco emphasize that the texts have an internal dynamic and a primary meaning, the ability of texts to lead readers along a defined, fixed path appears to be limited. The readers do not always read the whole text. What people find striking in the text varies per group.

The encounter with infinity is overwhelming. Almost every reading report shows how aspects of the text are illuminated, matters discussed and connections seen that other groups do not see. The different groups do not only reflect on entirely different sections of the text than other groups, they also differ fundamentally with regard to what is in the text: with regard to the morality of the Samaritan woman (whore, sinner, victim), with regard to Jesus’ attitude (paternalistic, loving, strict), on the function of the well (meeting place, place where prostitutes can legally have sex with their clients, sacred ground) and the time of the meeting (is the woman looking for an affair – and is Jesus also looking for an affair)? Does she want to avoid other people? They differ on everything.

Janet Dyk investigated the reading reports from 16 countries and 57 groups and raised the question as to what meaning the groups gave to “living water.” She found no less than 50 different meanings (Dyk 2004: 377-94; Dyk 2004: 218-42). Living water as message, as Gospel, as Word of God, as the Holy Spirit, as an image of personal faith, as redemption, as Jesus himself, as the Kingdom. But the literal, physical meaning also appeared: water moving and flowing.3

Aukje Hoekema analyzed what meaning the groups gave to John 4:22 (“for salvation is from the Jews”). Here as well fundamental differences appear. For some, salvation is rescue from sins, for others it is rescue from a dire situation, whereas for yet others Jesus himself is salvation. Are these differences regionally determined? No, the researcher concludes—the greatest differences emerge from the theological and church background of the readers (Hoekema 2004: 171-88).

The actant, the Samaritan woman, is characterized in more than twenty different ways (whore, victim, feminist, evangelist, sinner, ostracized/outcast, widow, seductress, etc.).

Culture is an important factor in interpretation. If the text is successful in leading the reader to an analogous sociocultural domain depends indeed very much on the context of the reader. The Nigerian group reflects on the figure of Jacob and here sees an ancestor. This discovery is hardly shared by Western groups. That the sixth hour – the hottest part of the day – plays an important role in the story is not noted by all groups. What the meaning of the question “Will you give me a drink”? In Brazil it is said that “You cannot refuse anyone water,” but in the Netherlands the response is: “Jesus does not have any right to ask her this.” Does Jesus’ brusque command “Go, call your husband” mean that the woman “must first tell the truth – only then would she be free,” as the group of Filipino ex-prostitutes read the story? Or is the Ghanaian reading correct, i.e. that Jesus wants to say to her: “The one you are married to has not performed the marriage rites”? 
Just like a number of other groups, an Indian group felt that the fact that Jesus and the Samaritan woman were alone at the well was very special. What makes it extra special, according to this Indian group, is that it concerns someone from a high caste and a woman from a low caste or perhaps a casteless person. It is completely unusual in India for two people from different groups to speak privately with each other—without shouting, without giving orders!

For some groups, Jesus is primarily the Son of God, whereas for other groups he is primarily a thirsty, helpless man. Some groups see problems that cannot be solved—words, concepts, narrative sequences that do not fit with their own logic: What does it say in the original? Other groups solve all problems by means of pregiven, Christian—for example christological—schemas. All mysteries of the texts are unveiled via one basic concept, such as predestination, or God’s omnipotence or omniscience. Whereas many groups spend a great deal of time on the question why Jesus actually had to go to Samaria (“wasn’t that actually cowardly?” someone in a reading group remarked!), the answer here is immediately divine providence: “He had (God arranged it) to go to Samaria; that was predestined because there was a people thirsting for God ....” The text is flattened into the echo of one’s own dogmatic understanding. The story becomes one-dimensional.

One can easily become lost in the examples and in a microscopic analysis of factors that determine differences. That is a useful exercise: it is possible to map a number of central factors such as culture, church affiliation, faith tradition and biography. However, because the combination of mediating factors is complex and in almost every case unique, one can ask about the extent to which one can and wishes to go with the empirical research. The task of intercultural hermeneutics is primarily to offer insight into the degree to which people are prisoners of dominant reading traditions. It offers them the possibility of objectifying those traditions and making them capable of offering a salutary answer to the differences. It is important that the differences not be reduced to factors that are responsible for the differences but to see the differences in their hermeneutical significance, namely as a long series of reading possibilities of one and the same text and as contributions to its meaning, as a tribute by readers to the text.
Hans de Wit | "My God," she said, "ships make me so crazy."
The Ethical Dimension of Intercultural Hermeneutics: Asymmetry

The Eschatological Caveat. The encounter with infinity leads to the above-mentioned insight that texts are inexhaustible. Even if repetitions can be seen throughout the centuries in dealing with narrative patterns, with the central message(s) of the text, each process of attributing meaning receives its own unique form via the particularity of the individual life of the reader who wants to appropriate the text. We have called this the eschatological dimension of the process of understanding. On the one hand, each reader appropriates the text in his or her own, unique way. That is the gift of the text to the reader. On the other hand, all kinds of elements in the textuality of the text escape closure. They simply cannot be arranged in a scheme or resolved through historical or literary research. In that sense one can agree with Derrida that each reader builds up a debt with regard to the text and with Levinas that the text is truly the Other. The text is always more than the reader. The particular, concrete text always contains a surprise for the reader. Every time that readers “log on” to the text they confirm their dependence and debt with respect to the text (Phillips 1994: 283-325). It is also for that reason that philosophers like Gadamer emphasize so much the character of interpretation as play. Play is opposed here to seizures of power, to the utilitarian use of texts: the proper meaning is the one that serves. Texts are never the property of one reader. Interpretation is not the interrogation of a prisoner but the play of the double gift, what we earlier called double transformation. Something happens to the text and to the reader. The text gives the reader a unique gift, namely a new moment of self-understanding. The gift of the reader to the text is the recognition of his vitality, infinity and of the fact that the text is experienced as fundamental for one’s own existence.

For readers who want to be responsible for the text, the eschatological dimension of understanding also has a deep ethical meaning. If it is clear that the ultimate meaning of the text will be revealed only at the end, when all readers have spoken and no one has been excluded, then this means that every process of closure, of reading the text that claims to be the only legitimate reading and to have exhausted the text is premature. Whenever a praxis is based on such a premature fixing of the meaning of the text that leads to terror, destruction, colonization and exclusion, the ethical dimension of each process of understanding emerges in a dramatic way.

Asymmetry. Intercultural hermeneutics emphasizes the ethical dimension of reading in yet another way. A minimum normative criterion for good reading is the willingness to interact, the encounter with the other, as we argued. Because the
discussion concerns Bible texts, depth dimensions emerge in the interaction with the other. These texts are experienced as fundamental for one’s own life. Life meets life on a depth level in the light of the text. But it is precisely in that encounter that the most dramatic differences are manifested between rich and poor, long life and premature death, a respected existence and exclusion, life in a situation of relative rest and persecution. Intercultural Bible reading functions as a mirror of tremendous asymmetry and inequality in the world. A few examples will make clear what I mean.

One of the Bolivian groups reported: “All participants come from the slums of El Alto and La Paz. They are poor and belong to Indian groups. These districts lack the fundamental conditions for a normal life.” One Brazilian group said about the participants: “With one exception, all participants have only an elementary school education.”

In Colombia a group reported that most of the participants had work only sporadically: “No one has a steady job; most work as salespeople in small neighborhood stores; others babysit their neighbors’ children; still others are housewives and depend on the support of their children.”

A Dutch group writes:

> We live in a free country where freedom of speech is very important. Privacy is highly esteemed. We are rich; can go on vacation often and also have the time for that. We have very good social services: if you are sick, lose your job or are too old to work, there is always an allowance through which you can make ends meet. It is also not necessary for parents to live with their children when they get old. They now have the financial means themselves to live independently or in homes. People are continually growing older: for them to reach the age of 85 or 90 is no longer exceptional. The development level is quite high and everyone can receive a study grant to study.

A Nigerian group formulated the relationship between its own social position and the political power as follows: “As most of the members are either church leaders, military chaplains, teachers or businessmen, or are in civil job positions, they consider themselves more as people in power with indirect political say in the society.”

Another Dutch group writes: “In the social and political area there are hardly any tensions in our immediate environment. We live in a peaceful village.”

Finally, a Ghanaian group reported the following: “The average income of the people forming the Bible Study groups is around US$ 32 a month, which is not enough to buy food for a family, let alone to pay school fees or buy new clothes.”

The examples make clear what I mean. Where alterity—now in the socio-economic sense—becomes manifest as asymmetry, the ethical dimension of reading religious texts in intercultural perspective is dramatically underscored.
The Face of the Other. The intercultural discussion on Bible texts leads to dialogue on the depth dimensions of existence. In making this religious-ethical tradition relevant to the present, it is practically impossible that asymmetry and the ethical implications of that do not come up. But there is still an element that reinforces the call to responsibility in this form of reading religious texts. In intercultural Bible reading the other does not remain a vague, objectifiable category. No, the asymmetry is perceptible, tangible. People meet one another—literally as well—people hear life stories, they begin to say one another’s names: “We are curious,” a group from Salvador writes to their Dutch partner group, “as to how you pronounce our Spanish names. We pronounce your names precisely as they are written.”

Hidden Transcript, Social Memory and Trauma Processing

A group of South African women writes about their experience with intercultural Bible reading:

We come to the Bible study to gain more knowledge of the Bible and God’s purpose for our lives, to share our ideas and to understand that people have different points of view, but most of all we share a lot of that what is good and honest within us …. This is not only a learning process, but also a healing process — spiritually and physically. (italics mine)

It is an impressive quotation. Experiences of suffering are shared; people learn from one another and there is a reference to healing. In this quotation perhaps lies one of the most important values of communal Bible reading in small groups. I am referring here to what follows below.

The Space of the Hidden Transcript. In the empirical material a significant correlation can be found between “small group/intimacy”—“trust”—healing. “We thus began a process of intercultural Bible reading. Carefully and enthusiastically. In search of trust and intimacy,” Marianne Paas writes (2004: 89). Another Dutch group writes: “The discussion was sometimes very personal and that was possible because we felt very safe.” “All the members spontaneously participated in the discussion freely,” a group from Chennai (India) says. A group from Ghana remarks: “In sum, the group had an interesting time during the number of times we met. At every session, members freely expressed their opinions.” A group from Cuba states: “They also felt comfortable with this method because it gives them the opportunity of expressing themselves in confidence and brotherhood, in their humble or cultured way of saying things, without false theories …. ” “The cohesion in the group created a reading environment where everybody felt free to participate,” a group from Stellenbosch (South Africa) reported (the italics in these quotes are mine).

Latin American liberation theology, as well as other theologies, always emphasizes the importance of the small group. Hélder Câmara once wrote about this as follows:
A particularly effective way of helping the poor
To right the situation
Is to encourage them to set up grass-roots communities.
For in these we find a community spirit
That lives on the gospel and draws its strength from Christ.
It is important that these communities should spring up
And get together in unity,
Not in order to trample on the rights of others,
But to prevent others from trampling on their rights.
Experience shows that it is easy for the powerful
To crush, one, five or even ten people.
But no human force can crush a coherent community,
For it is a living Gad who dwells there
And listens to the outcry of his people.¹

Much has been written about these small communities—in the Latin American region the so-called CEBs—as places where resistance to church hierarchy occurs and alternative faith communities arise. Much less has been written about the fact that these communities are also primarily places of healing.

The hidden transcript is given shape in these small communities. This concept, derived from the sociologist Scott, has been made fruitful for biblical hermeneutics by the South African biblical theologian Gerald West (Scott 1990; West 1996: 34ff.). In addition to or over against what can be said officially and as what can obtain as true officially (public transcript), the hidden transcript can be articulated in the small group. Ordinary readers can say to one another what they themselves now hear in the biblical story. Sometimes a true counterculture arises. This process is delicate and fragile and people come to know one another differently. A new strategy of encounter and reading receives shape. This is related critically and complementarily not only to the academic reading but also to the petrified, faded readings from church traditions. What cannot be said emerges; what cannot be thought or felt is expressed; people doubt where doubt is not permitted. In the safe space of the small group, the longing for liberation, healing, redemption and radical change appear to be stronger than all pregiven “Christian” schemas.²

Social Memory, Visceral Memories. The stories, often horrifying, staggering and full of “memory,” emerge in the intimacy of the small group. These stories and the interpretations by readers, primarily by those who live on the periphery, can be understood sociologically and labeled by Halbwachs’ concept of social memory. Social memory theory can be considered to be a branch of the sociology of knowledge that arises in a situation in which shared orientations, norms and worldviews break down and collapse because of deep differences. Social memory theory is nourished by situations in which truth claims are viewed with suspicion and investigated with respect to the interests of those who advance them. They arise within a culture of suspicion, of ideological critique and the breaking through
of the understanding that interpretation, also of the past, and power are closely connected. Social memory theory focuses primarily on the question of the way in which memories of earlier communities are constitutive for current communities. The sociologist Maurice Halbwachs (1877- Buchenwald 1945) is considered to be father of social memory theory. His book Mémoire Collective (published posthumously) was a pioneering study (Halbwachs 1950/1980).

The starting point of the social memory theory is that memory is a social phenomenon and constitutive for a community (Kirk 2005: 2; Keightley 2005: 133). Halbwachs was interested in the social aspects of memory. He argued that memory is not, as is often thought, the most individual possession of the individual; rather, memory cannot be separated from the social world in which it is given shape. Memory is always formed within a certain social environment. Halbwachs analyzes how the structure and internal dynamic of groups influences the memory of people who belong to the group. The social environment is indispensable for the possibility of remembering itself, for it always gives coherence to the memories. Memory and remembering is always embedded in a contemporary moment and thus transcends the individual experience. The group to which people belong is determinative for the memory that people wish to cherish.

Memory is a source of group identity, and in the constant retelling and celebration of its past, memory serves the community’s cohesion by strengthening the bonds between its members. (Kirk 2005: 20f.)

Remembering is nourished, kept alive, by the group to which one belongs. If this group is abandoned, a process of “forgetting” is often set in motion. “Forgetting” is thus not only a mental, individual question but the result of a change in social place.

Community and memory are mutually determinative. Living communities are communities of memory. Whenever an individual enters a community, he or she shares the memories of the community. Certain experiences from the past are considered by the community to be fundamental. They become a master narrative, a master memory. The relation between these master memories and the community that cherishes these is dynamic. Social memory has a formative and normative aspect. The formative aspect is that it invites us to praxis, it incorporates and instructs new members, it keeps the community together. It is normative because the memory is exemplary for the group that remembers the past in this way. Memory is thus the basis for a unique whole of meanings and values. In the stories about the beginning, about the deeds of the heroes, the original experiences of the ancestors, one finds what defines the community and what the community will be. “In truth, memory’s framework provides the community’s overarching view of reality; it sets forth reality’s fundamental order, character, and significance” (Keightley 2005: 133). Memories are always ethically laden. An important aspect of the effect of memories on the present is therefore their ability to mobilize communities. Particularly in situations of oppression the memory of liberation is not only cherished by oppressed communities but can also lead...
This is not the place to reflect further on social memory theory and its significance for biblical studies (De Wit 2006: 283-314). What concerns us now is that a part of our empirical material mirrors a process that has begun in recent years in Latin America and elsewhere. This is a process that can be compared to what happens with survivors of the concentration camps. Gérard Namer describes how the survivors of the camps were able to construct a coherent whole of memories only after groups of survivors were formed. Via these groups the fragmented, inexpressible traumatic experience of the camps became a coherent whole that could be put into words (Namer 1987: 140-57). Something similar seems to be occurring in the Latin American, African and Asian Bible movements. Fragmented experiences of oppression and disappearances have become a coherent collective memory. The type of memory that we are talking about here is called visceral memory. In the small Bible reading groups a similar process of “remembering” has also, in my view, been set in motion.

Visceral memory has to do with why this event, this person means so much to us and proves to be determinative for our corporate existence (Irwin-Zarecka 1994). Visceral memories are memories of profound suffering, of innocents who have been afflicted by evil: the bishop who is killed for his prophetic indictment, the loved one who disappears because he or she asked why the poor have no bread. It is the memory of suffering that makes people speechless, furious – suffering that overcomes people, suffering that can be explained by nothing else than pure human wickedness. It is suffering whose memory is constitutive for the community that has made the sacrifices.

Many traces of visceral memories can be found in our empirical material: traces of age-old suffering, poverty and exclusion caused by colonialism, apartheid, the caste system, the exclusion of women. The list goes on.

“Without culture we are dead,” an Aymara participant from Bolivia says.

The Aymaras have a splendid culture .... There is always a duality; every person has part of a man and part of a woman in him or her. The conquest by the Spanish soldiers changed our culture. If that had not happened, then our culture would have been friendly and beautiful ....

A Brazilian group reports as a special event in the life of the group that in 1999 – at the time when the group had come together four years prior – it was remembered that it was 500 years ago that Latin America was occupied. “These were times of reflection and fraternization [foram momentos de reflexão e confraternização].”

A Colombian group says: “One of the problems that we are wrestling with is the fact that many families live in crowded conditions: 2 or 3 families have to live in a small house, a whole family lives in one room. The people have no access to social security, education and health.”

The visceral memories of groups from India speak of the unimaginable suffering that the caste system has caused. A group of casteless participants says:
In most of the villages and hamlets in our country, India, we find the colonies of the downtrodden to be the borders (or) ending area of the village. In some cases this is far away from the main village. Some of the colonies are adjacent to the grave yards. It can be easily eluded that these colonies are forced to be located and constructed such that these places will under no circumstance be touching point to the top-group. In case there is a situation where the privileged people have to pass along the road of the Dalits, these unfortunate people have to walk down the road and regard them. Nevertheless, Dalit women should remain indoors.

In a Korean reading report, as in many other reading reports, a basic element of the social memory is the exclusion of women:

I feel so small under the present church structure because women have no proper position within church. Church members have a bias about women ministers that they think women are inferior to men. They do not want to have women as their leaders but as their servants.

In South African groups the race question and apartheid are elements that cannot be erased from memory. A group of white participants writes:

The majority of the members are admitting their role in the sad past of the country, and are dedicated to contributing to the future of the country with all its peoples.”

The reporter for a group of Xhosa participants writes:

The angle from which the text was approached was introduced by the first speaker. He introduced the issue of racism as an issue in the text as well and as a problem current in the community.

Discrimination also plays a fundamental role in the memory of a group of Mexican immigrants in the US:

Immigrant families struggle to feel at home in a foreign context, raising their children up in English-speaking schools, surrounded by the dominant White culture. Many immigrants complain of being discriminated against.

A final example is from El Salvador. The visceral memories of the group are profoundly marked by the question of impunity (impunidad). The story in Luke 18 of the woman who appeals in vain to the judge is also read from this perspective:

This widow does the same as we do when we ask that justice
be done to us for our sons who have been killed and lie dispersed throughout these hills and of whom the judges know nothing ....

These examples will suffice. What I want to show with these examples is that the joint reading of Bible texts can be a catalyst for the articulation of *visceral memories* (Aalbersberg-van Loon 2003). That this happens lies in the encounter between one’s own life story and the Bible text. The discussion on the text mobilizes the *visceral memories* of the group. What lay hidden and enclosed in the memory – unarticulated, for there were no words for it and there was no one listening—is now mobilized by the Bible text in the safe space of the small group.4

If I underscore the healing power of the encounter between one’s own *visceral memories* and those from the Bible text, I am then linking up with the experience of Latin American and African biblical theologians. Since the 1980s biblical scholars in those areas as well as elsewhere have been deeply moved by the *lectura popular de la Biblia*, by what the poor do with Bible texts. The Bible becomes a new book in the hands of the poor. The old patristic adage that the Bible is *liber et speculum*, book and mirror, is found often in the literature: that is how the contemporary poor read the Bible. Pablo Richard’s often quoted statement that the whole Bible was made by the poor and contains the *memoria histórica*, the *social memory*, of the poor refers to that special alliance between the Bible and people (Richard 1982; 1984). However much this sweeping statement can be criticized (De Wit 2005), its importance is that it refers to the character of the encounter between Bible texts and the poor, and that people are thus sensitive to the Scripture containing far more *visceral memories* than was thought.5

**The Processing of Trauma.** Another element emerges from the foregoing that very much underscores the value of joint Bible reading, namely that joint Bible reading can contribute to the processing of trauma. I hold that what obtains for all contextual theologies, namely that an important element of these schemes is the processing of trauma6—an analytical perspective that is much too absent from Western approaches—also obtains for contextual Bible reading. In the examples given above of *visceral memories*, trauma is almost always present. The empirical material contains many references to the *processing* of trauma. Here are some examples.

In John 4:20 the question is asked if God can be worshiped only in the temple. This is an immense problem primarily for *Dalit* women in *India* who are not allowed into the temple. “Why does the woman suddenly begin talking about worship?” someone from these untouchables asks. “The Samaritan woman did not fit into the existing forms of worship,” another answers. “Maybe because she, as an outcast, was not allowed in.” “But,” another woman answers, “where people who are in pain are excluded God cannot be found either. God cannot be where there is no place for us!”

A Bolivian women’s group writes:
The objective of the gatherings is to share God’s word, share needs and personal problems helping one another. Among the group they help and encourage when their members are not good spiritually, physically and morally talking.

A Brazilian group reports:

The resistance of our people in a permanent struggle to survive is strong, whereby people search for forms that can quench our thirst for better times. Religion is an important element in this resistance. And even if religion is used to justify the existing situation, religion will be used by a not insignificant part of the people as a form of relief, the strengthening of solidarity, of becoming conscious in the search for the transformation of this reality.

Here is another example from the Philippines. A Filipino group of ex-prostitutes read the story of the Samaritan woman together with a Dutch group. A discussion arises on the identity of the Samaritan woman and what she had done. The Dutch group sees her as a feminist: she asks questions; she does not do what Jesus asks. The Filipino group is convinced that the Samaritan woman is a prostitute. They say

We know what that is. If you have been a prostitute, you never want to speak about the experience. And you see that also in Jesus’ reaction. For Jesus heals her! He asks one question about her husbands; she says one sentence—I have no husband—and then Jesus fills in the rest of her story. She does not have to tell it; perhaps she is not able to. Jesus’ actions are therapeutic; they are the processing of trauma.

I will give one last example via a photo: a group from Colombia that reads the text of Luke 18 together with other groups on the continent.
Reading the Bible text has generated an entirely new text, full of the memory of and longing for justice. The text on the page has been given the form of the body of someone who has been murdered and reads:

Half a year ago four boys were murdered at a bus stop. One of them was Juan Carlos. He was wounded very seriously by the bullets and died three days later in the hospital at nine-thirty in the morning. People began talking immediately about “social housecleaning” [limpieza social] and accused the four of being thieves. Up to the present there has been no justice in connection with these four murders and nothing is known.

The examples allow one to draw the conclusion that communal Bible reading can be seen as a place where people process trauma. But we can go one step further. Joint Bible reading appears to contribute to posttraumatic growth, an important dimension of which is a new spirituality. Behavioral psychology and the psychology of religion have been aware for a long time already that trauma not only leads to pathological behaviour but can also contribute to the renewal of one’s self-image, to another view of the world, to more empathy and sensitivity. The lists with characteristics for posttraumatic growth are extensive, but there are some basic characteristics that can also be found in the reading reports. These have to do primarily with spirituality, with a social space in which memories and experiences are shared, and with the power of relectura, that is, the possibility of reading the original sources of the religious tradition from a new perspective. I will provide a few examples.

“I feel that in moments of pain, when reading the Bible, I find hope, and some options that generate life,” an Aymara participant in a Bolivian group says.

“We are members of three Bible groups of the Mental Health Hospital in M,” a German group writes.8

John 4:6 is important to us. Verse 6—Jesus sat down at the well because he was tired—corresponds to the reality of our lives. We are also often tired and need refreshment. One must believe in oneself, otherwise everything is lost …. The well is a place where one goes to quench one’s thirst. Where is our “well”? The place where we are encouraged to live perhaps! This can be the Bible Group ….

In Colombia, a conflict zone, the story of the widow and the judge in Luke 18 is read. “The text shows that the widow stubbornly keeps pushing the judge until the judge helps her. That teaches us not to lose heart for what we want to achieve ….”

A Salvadoran women’s group that was also reading Luke 18 was asked with whom they identified. The women were reading the text together with the other Latin American groups already cited. They are all victims of impunidad, of the fact that the most horrific crimes remain unpunished. “With the widow, for she
does not rest until justice is done … exactly like our committee [for human rights],
which everyone says should now stop .... But no justice has been done yet! How
can we stop?"

An Argentinian group that read John 4 says: “What we are doing here nour-
ishes our hope. Making the decision to want to be God’s instrument and to get
going.”

These examples will suffice. We lack the space here to look further at the
relationship between joint Bible reading and the processing of trauma. I hope
that I have made it plausible that there is a relationship and also how fruitful
this form of reading the Bible can be for healing.
“My God,” she said, “ships make me so crazy.”
On Board

I have attempted above to show the value of communal Bible reading. But is there a surplus value when that happens in intercultural perspective. How do ordinary readers escape what Bakthin has called dominant reading traditions? In short, how do ordinary readers do strange things with Bible texts if they are on board a boat with other readers?

Motivation

Culture studies refer to a whole cluster of conditions for the thawing of positions, for growth, for intercultural competence. They are grouped together in the great three: knowledge, skills, motivation. One of the most important is the right motivation. People distinguish between three kinds of motivations, to which we have already referred. The most fruitful for growth is motivation for validity, the willingness to be challenged or, following Procee, the willingness to interact, the result of which leaves traces in the self.

In our empirical material, not only a significant correlation between this type of motivation and growth emerged but also the fact that the overwhelming majority of participants thus entered the discussion with the willingness to be challenged. People do not want to meet exotic groups from a different world and to leave it at that. They want to learn, to change. The list of terms that people used for this is long. People speak expectantly of “mutual learning,” “learning about the world from another,” “dialogue as a new form of discussing faith,” “sharing life’s experiences,” “people want to go to the source together.” From the long list of examples I will give three that are representative of the motivation of the majority of the participants.

A participant from the US formulated his motivation as follows:

I will gain a deeper perspective by looking at other people's way of interpreting the Bible from many different cultural and economic backgrounds or social status. I hope that it would defiantly have a positive effect on my fair journey. I hope that it would not nearly be just “neat” or “cool” or something that just tickles my brain. I am really searching for a change in my own life, a real change. I desire to somehow connect scripture study with real life. That is what I hope for during this and all of the studies that we do together.

The reporter of a Scottish group writes about their motivation:
The group all agreed to come together for this project and to read John chapter four with open minds and a willingness to learn from, and be challenged by each other’s contribution and mutual participation. We also recognise that there are many aspects of learning and knowledge other than our own. We look forward to broadening our understanding of our common humanity through engaging with the project reading of John 4.

A “little old lady” from the US reveals:

My background is Presbyterian and … my heart longs to bring people into a Bible study. When you do a Bible study you are the one that is enriched, and I have done two. I have done Ephesians and last year I did Jeremiah. And the growth was with myself. I was excited to hear other people talk about what it means to them, but my perspective is that of an Anglo-, white, little old lady in orthopaedic shoes … and I want to change that.

**Scriptural Attitude**

Not all readers of religious texts want to go on board with other readers. But if they do, this is nourished by a certain attitude. With Wilfred Cantwell Smith, I call that attitude a *scriptural attitude* and consider it to be a quality of Scripture itself. I consider this *scriptural attitude* to be an answer to the almost incomprehensible combination of the elements that makes a collection of historical texts *Scripture*. This combination is responsible for the fact that a discussion of, in our case, a Bible text truly has a different status and content than a discussion of a secular text.

In his study into the importance of sacred texts in religions, *What is Scripture?*, Smith reassesses the concept of Scripture. Scripture is not merely a book or a collection of books having an exceptional status within a religious system, Smith says, but a *human activity* in the first place (Smith 1993). Scriptural attitude is thus a response to Scripture. It here concerns an attitude of respect, the feeling of standing on sacred ground. It is the attitude that we also continually meet in our empirical material. It was overwhelming that to see all those hundreds of readers across the world bowed over the texts in deep respect.

What makes the Bible special and invites a special response is not only its status or the narrative character or literary form of the texts or the combination of religious, fictional or historical. No, it is more. It also has to do with its development. Scripture has grown, many texts are the product of small communities; one sees the fingerprints of the disenfranchised and excluded. The Bible is a democratic product; there are different points of view. It is also the result of being continuously understood in conjunction with different cultures, of confrontation with colonial powers, with *empire*. The interaction between what
Fishbane has called the *traditum*—the transmitted text—and the *traditio*—the transmission dynamics, of making the text relevant to today—has determined the transmission dynamics of the Bible to a large degree and thus laid a claim on the content of the tradition: the tradition is made relevant, but this process used the tradition as source (Fishbane 1985). It can be said that the development of the canon prepared, as it were, a ready model for an attitude for a responsible answer to the texts. The *scriptural attitude* is reading as if one is walking on sacred ground, ground that one do not walk on as a conqueror, in full marching kit, but carefully, gropingly, with shoes removed. It is ground on which the other is welcome, for the simple reason that this ground is not one’s own but belongs to an Other.

Looking at Scripture interculturally attempts to be responsible for what Scripture is and to lead participants to a *scriptural attitude*. It is an attitude that is found among a great many participants.

**Strange Things …**

From the perspective of petrified faith traditions and fundamentalistic forms of readings, which are geared only to retaining power, one can say that readers who go on board the boat with very different readers do extremely strange things. They welcome the other as an epiphanic space. People write letters to complete strangers, send pictures, invite them to come over. They drop their masks, admire or criticize one another. They make themselves vulnerable and jump for joy when they receive a response from the partner group. They discover not only strange worlds but also that people have a great deal in common. They break through loneliness and sometimes comfort one another.

It is a space within which a new spirituality receives shape. Prejudices are adjusted, the situation of asymmetry is involved critically in the discussion, the powerless are recognized as equal. People attempt to discover a structure and origin in the differences; they relativize the differences and search for what serves life. They look critically at their own context. Mechanisms of exclusion in the partner group are criticized and people begin to notice their own mechanisms of exclusion.

A great deal also happens hermeneutically. The reading of the Bible text takes the form of a discussion, faith the form of a search. There is a reorientation to one’s own interpretation, a broadening of horizons. People discover their own blind spots, the power and sometimes paralysis of the dominant reading tradition of which they are a part.

In short, intercultural Bible reading brings a great deal of good to the surface in people. Here appears, on a microlevel and sometimes very briefly, what Schreiter describes as the contours of a new catholicity:

A new catholicity, then, is marked by a wholeness of inclusion and fullness of faith in a pattern of intercultural exchange and communication. To the extent that this catholicity can be realized, it may provide a paradigm for what a universal theology might look like today, *able to encompass both sameness*
“My God,” she said, “ships make me so crazy.”

and difference, rooted in an orthopaxis providing teloi for a globalized society. (Schreiter 1997: 133)

A Small Gesture of Love

There is still one intriguing question to answer. I hope that I have made clear that a great deal happens in the intercultural encounter, but how is that to be understood in terms of the relation between interpretation and praxis? This has been much discussed in contextual theologies. The Argentinian biblical theologian José Severino Croatto calls reflection on this relation one of the main tasks of Latin American hermeneutics and considers the praxis of the contemporary interpreter to be the fundamental orientation point of the understanding of the text. Severino wonders: How can the text become a message for praxis and the praxis a message for the understanding of the text?

The question is complex and challenging. Much depends on how praxis is defined. In the early years of liberation theology and the rise of the so-called Bible movement in Latin America, praxis becomes defined primarily in a sociopolitical way: “The Psalms in the Struggle of the People,” “The Bible in the Liberation of the People,” “The Bible, the Frente, and the Revolution,” to mention a few examples of articles published in those years (De Wit 1991: 42ff.). And a still very popular hermeneutical scheme in Latin America is the trio: ver, juzgar, actuar (seeing, judging, acting). This indicates how the relation with praxis was discussed in a carefree way and how close the relation between reading, interpretation and action was thought to be. The following statement from a Mexican reading community is an example of what people constantly encountered in the 1980s:

In the basic church communities we reflect on the Word of God on the basis of our concrete reality. We change that reality by the power of the Word .... All of this has been a long learning process in which we learned to listen to the Word of God from the perspective of the practice of liberation (De Wit 1991: 44; italics mine).

The start of the problem that I am now talking about becomes visible when one pays close attention to the use of the word praxis. Arthur McGovern already demonstrated in the 1990s that the concept of praxis had a wide spectrum of meanings in liberation theology as a whole but also in individual writers like Gustavo Gutiérrez (McGovern 1990: 32ff.; Van Nieuwenhove 1991). I discovered that this was also true of Severino Croatto (De Wit 1991: 210ff., 288ff.). For them, praxis extends from unselfish love up to and including sociopolitical revolutionary praxis that is intended to change society. Thus, we do not get very far with the heavily accentuated statements about this coherence between Bible reading and praxis. Of course, Bible texts are carried on placards in protest marches and used in all kinds of ways, but the relationship is unclear. It is unclear, for example, if the praxis of liberation is a product of the new, careful way
of Bible reading or if the text is already held hostage by an existing praxis.\textsuperscript{4} There is no analysis anywhere of how the process works. Fortunately, liberation theologians themselves have become quite a bit more modest in recent years in their claims and have discovered the importance of cotidianidad (the everyday) as sacramental space. In his very last publication José Míguez Bonino pointed to the reorientation of hope, to the importance of dialogue and small gestures (Míguez 2004: 42f.).

I come to my point. What do we see if we look at the empirical material in terms of praxeological effect? If we use the socio-political praxis concept found in liberation theology, we actually see very little. In all 3000 pages of empirical material only one example can be found of a group that goes directly into action after reading a text. That is a group of Ghanaian men who want to set up a committee against polygamy. Further, we did not see anything, in fact, of a one-to-one relationship between reading and praxis in liberation theology. We see a great deal on the level of “We should ...,” “We will now ...,” “We had to ...,” “We will soon ....”

What lessons does our research then yield with respect to the relation between reading Bible texts and their effect? I see the following.

In the first place, it shows that sacred texts do not need to be considered as an object or as the barrel of a gun directed at others. They can also be meeting places where people search together for peace, for salvation, for change. That is a fundamental observation that immediately relativizes all one-sided language about the relation between sacred texts and terror and prompts further research.

In the second place, the material shows that the relation between dominant reading traditions and the interpretation of the reader is extraordinarily close. This dominant tradition can overrule a reader’s social status or political affinity or make it operational. An Argentinean basic group read John 4 entirely in terms of the scheme just mentioned above, of \textit{ver, juzgar, actuar}, whereby \textit{actuar}, action, was not given any further content. At that same time a Nicaraguan Pentecostal group read John 4 entirely in terms of the sin—repentance—salvation scheme, without any reference to Nicaragua’s perplexing political and social situation at the time. The implication of this is that, if the power of dominant reading traditions is such that they can influence deeply a process of understanding and that two groups that read the same text at the same time come to very different conclusions, the text is, in fact, the great absent figure here. In other words, if images from texts in the Bible or the Qur’an are accompanied immediately by images of human actions (e.g. of terror, and destruction), then the relationship between sacred texts and human action is simplified in a very suggestive and improper way. What is in fact much more complex than the images reveal is reduced to a one-to-one relationship. In this type of process the text becomes simply a lackey of the convictions that the user already has. Can texts be condemned purely on the basis of bad users? If one wants to condemn users of texts from Holy Books, then one should look first at the dominant reading tradition, and not at the text. One should look first at the whole of the norms and values that orientates this dominant reading tradition. There are,
after all, other readers of the same texts who come to an entirely different praxis.

Dominant reading traditions derive their power from the social domain in which they are operative and which they legitimize. They are like blocks of ice to which people are frozen because they cannot or do not want to leave the social domain. Readers who want to be responsible for the text not only for themselves but also for others who live in a time beyond themselves must sometimes be chopped out of the dominant reading tradition. Confrontation is then necessary but – as we already said – must be organized for the most part. That is exactly the intention behind intercultural Bible reading. The interaction between the Argentinean and the Nicaraguan groups yields a spectacular change.

This already yields the third lesson we found: develop another view of liberation, think small and simply about liberation. A great deal happens, also very much that is liberating, when people read the Bible together, but mostly on a level other than that of the meta-level of politics. It is an effect that escapes us if we do not think otherwise about liberation. And that is what the empirical material asks of us: to see the small gesture—the hand that is ready—as a liberation praxis. The small gesture that is the beginning of something new, of which no one knows where it will end. The practice that we want to organize with the framework of this chair is modest and simple. It is located in the sphere of the transformation of thinking and feeling, of what the Bible calls conversion: first liberation to and then liberation from. It is a sequence of small movements. First, in the encounter with the elsewhere and otherwise of the other, there is the emptying, the distance from power, the vulnerability. Then there is an alliance or, as one participant called it, the “small bond of friendship.” Next, there is the discussion on the asymmetry to which the liberation of the other becomes a message. And then — perhaps, sometimes, who knows when?—change in society occurs.

From a small gesture of love to something else – is that in fact not the central theme of the story of the encounter between Jesus and the Samaritan woman at the well? Salvation comes to us from outside ourselves. It is an encounter that leads to radical changes but begins with a small, simple gesture “Will you give me a drink?”

The final lesson is this. The empirical material is unimaginably rich and variegated. But does that not lead to a hermeneutical impotence? Is the text still given a chance to speak? Is there still something shared in the intercultural practice of reading? The answer must be that diversity and polysemy of texts is not the same as paralysis and indifference. It is precisely the diversity that makes the text a gift for many. The diversity of ethical answers to the text is a tribute to the ability of the text to orient different communities in different ways. Levinas expresses it as follows:

[The irreducible multiplicity of readings is a reflection of lived ethics. Multiplicity or plurivocity is not a flaw, but a product of and tribute to that lived ethics. What constitutes the fundamental truth of meaning, then, is not a common denomi-]
nator, which would be reductive, but a unique service, the singularity of each one in the face of the other.

All groups discovered that the victory lies in the encounter and that the text cracks dominant cultural, social, political and religious codes in a radical way and is absolutely revelatory. Ethnicity, gender, exclusion, status, social difference, tradition and making that tradition relevant to today, sacred places, the teacher and his students—everything comes up in John 4. This points to the variegation of liberation as well, which can be worked out in the particular situation of each faith community in its own way, as a unique service of the text to this unique faith community. The community of the Indian Dalit women unique, as is its partner group in the Netherlands. the group of Korean students is unique and its partner group in Colombia in unique. The intercultural discussion on faith will therefore always be directed at the liberation of the other, liberation beyond my own liberation. What effects my liberation does not automatically include that which effects liberation for the other. It is precisely the discussion with the other that leads me to insight into this plurality and diversity of ethical answers. It liberates me from the obsession with my own liberation. It makes me sensitive to the fact that the text wants to provide a unique service precisely, and also to this other. Plurality is thus a result of different answers to a text. They can converge into an identical answer to difference, namely peace. We see that answer portrayed as a final result of the interaction between two unique groups, one in Hungary and one in the Netherlands.
Hans de Wit | “My God,” she said, “ships make me so crazy.”
The Crocodile Lives in the Water and Yet He Breathes Air

Intercultural hermeneutics is aimed at interaction. But Bible texts are not only meeting places for ordinary readers; they are also visited intensively by professional readers with their own interests and expertise. Here professional readers have their own responsibility; formulated classically, this responsibility is to contribute to the unfolding of the meanings that the text could have had in its historical setting. How can there be adequate reflection on what their involvement is with what ordinary readers do with texts? Before we formulate an answer, it must be stated first that attempts to capture contemporary Western exegesis in one definition—something often encountered in non-Western exegetes—are seldom anything more than reduction and trivialization. The diversity in the area of “Western” methods of exegesis that are used in abundance elsewhere is also great. But this does not mean that there are no dominant reading traditions in the West.

What can the meaning be of contact between, for example. Bultmann’s reading of John 4 and that of the divorced Ghanian mother of eight children? From the perspective of exegesis, interaction with ordinary readers means the willingness to be involved in some way in the processes of appropriation, in the effect of the text. We already stated that much has already been written on the latter—especially by biblical scholars in the southern hemisphere. An important reason for this is their situation: it is an urgent matter to evoke a word of salvation from Scripture in situations of obvious suffering and premature death. People who are so intensively involved with the text as professional Bible readers must also be willing to take responsibility for the text as message, many exegetes in the southern hemisphere argue. This was discussed for fifty numbers in the journal cited above, RIBLA: How can the exegete read and explain Bible texts in such a way that they become a message of liberation, of salvation, of space for contemporary ordinary readers—in this case often the poor. It is a central task that all genitive hermeneutics have set. That exegetes are unwilling to cooperate in this is incomprehensible for them.

Although I am also aware of all the pitfalls that await the socially engaged exegete (De Wit 1991: 2008), I do agree with many of my colleagues from the south. What self-respecting biblical theologian would not want to go where his or her primary object has a healing effect? I do not see why professional readers would not want to go on board with ordinary readers—more than once in a while—in order to do strange but at the same time, viewed exegetically, extraordinarily relevant things with texts. A Ghanaian proverb states “The crocodile lives in the water and yet he breathes air.” That is what exegetes should want to be able to do.
I have some arguments for this. How exegetes deal with texts also has advantages with respect to the sometimes narcissistic behavior of ordinary readers. Without their thus becoming arbiters of meaning, exegetes can refer to the dangerous pathological characteristics of appropriation. Second, why should exegetes leave the fascinating area of relectura to others? The involvement of contemporary reception criticism and intercultural hermeneutics in a discipline that is quickly becoming the least popular would be good for it. Then there is again an ethical argument: If exegesis is striving for completeness and an attempt not to reduce the transcendence of texts, the overwhelmingly large group of ordinary readers cannot be excluded. Their experiences with the text will mean something for the text! Then the task of the exegete is to make these experiences fruitful for the text and as a gift to the text that makes it capable of unfolding its meaning potential.

But these arguments do not answer another question. With a variation on the well-known statement by Von Rad, one can formulate this question in the following way: How can an exegete who intends to establish the meaning of the text in terms of an academically supported minimum participate in the space where the text unfolds maximally as message, as kerygma? That brings me to a methodological question.

**Methodological Ludism and Hermeneutics**

I believe that the problem confronting us here is a hermeneutical variant of what is called methodological ludism in anthropology. With the insights of this theory I will attempt to construct a bridge between spontaneous reading and the systematic, critical approach to texts.

The problem for which a solution is sought in anthropology via methodological ludism is that of the relation between practitioners of a religion and the science that studies religion. “Those doing religious studies and believers are not pleasant bedfellows,” Droogers writes (2006). Academics do not accept any religious view of science and believers are shocked by what scientists say about religion. Scientists who investigate religion are usually either atheists or agnostics methodologically: they refrain from making judgments as to the “truth” of a religion and religious practices. The believer reproaches the scientist with the statement that people can observe but, will always be too thin. One can state, one can analyze, but the experience remains out of range. The problem is related to the opposition between emic and etic: roughly, the “insiders’” and “academic outsiders’” perspectives. What methodological ludism asks from the scholar in religious studies is that she work on the interface between observation and surrender.

The hermeneutical parallel can be formulated as follows. The tension exists between ordinary readers of Biblical texts and those who analyze the texts. Professional readers do not accept any religious view of exegesis or a view of its meaning from the perspective of the effect of the text. Since Spinoza, appropriation processes have been viewed with suspicion by professional readers. Readers who believe are often shocked by the detachment of the academic readers
and the results of academic research. They are shocked in two ways, namely in their views of faith and in the unwillingness of academics to include in their research that which is essential for ordinary readers. Professional Bible readers are, viewed technically, usually atheist or agnostic methodologically: they refrain from making judgments as to the “truth” of the text and its effect. They are accused of never understanding the actual depth of a text. They will never understand how a text works, precisely because they do not participate, are not able to participate—because of the epistemological rules of their discipline—in what is essential for the overwhelming majority of people who read the Bible, namely its effect. In the view of ordinary Bible readers, exegesis all too often plays the role of umpire, whereas it is, of course, merely one of the players, with its own rules and its own results.

Methodological ludism attempts to find a way out via the notion of play, a notion that also plays an important role in hermeneutics. Gadamer underscored the character of all understanding as play. Understanding is for the translator what a match is for a sportsman or sportswoman: it is play. In Gadamer, play has a few fundamental connotations: it does not represent freedom or non-committal as in some later postmodern hermeneutical schemes. In Gadamer it is not something that one does in one’s free time but a way of looking at how people handle things, reality or texts. It is a critical, deconstructivistic concept, for it humiliates power. Play breaks through the view that a subject–object relationship exists between reader and text but sees that relationship as an event. Something happens between the text and reader: both participate in the game and the game affects both. The notion of play relativizes approaches to the text that claim that they alone are valid, for it points to others who play by different rules with different results (Gadamer 1986: 301ff.; 1990: 108ff.).

Exegesis values its academic status highly. But a brief look at the results of exegetical research suffices to underscore its character as play. As long as two scholars can differ by as much as a thousand years on the question of when the book Judges was written, the book will be viewed by some as story of chaos and extreme violence, by others as a kind of utopian sociopolitical project (De Wit 2000; 2001: 71-96); as long as there is no consensus in biblical studies on hardly anything and the methods continue to expand, there is no reason to consider only the popular reading of the Bible as play. Exegesis is also play.

I believe that the tension between the popular reading of the Bible and exegesis can be overcome, even rendered fruitful, if we view both exegesis and the spontaneous understanding from the perspective of the game. Methodological ludism in the hermeneutical sense can then be defined as the ability to deal successively with radically different ways in which the meaning of a Bible text is construed, to understand which rules people use and to analyze how these can be complementary. Methodological ludism in hermeneutics can become operational by recognizing the limitations of the rules of play of methodological atheism or agnosticism as well.

The heart here is that the rules for dealing with the text as a historical object are very different from those for living in the text, the life of the text, the text as
ally, as traveling companion. When people have simply seen what effect Bible texts can have on people in situations of conflict, of persecution, of deep suffering, what meaning Bible texts receive when people carry them in protest marches, sing them in front of court buildings, mutter them in the morgue where they seek the bodies of those who have been tortured and disappeared, recite them on the African fields to gain fertility, healing and success, they will then understand that the effect is an element of texts that can never be understood from a distance and at the same time can be of a surprising exegetical importance. Methodological ludism asks methodological atheism and agnosticism about the rules of play for them. It asks what rules in its epistemological charter or the culture or context they want to serve prevent the exegetes from becoming insiders rather than outsiders and from listening carefully where the text has its effect. It asks if it is possible that its rules of play be “creolized.” On the other hand, play and the rules of appropriation processes, the “creolization” of the text in making it relevant to today are also studied.

The place of methodological ludism is thus indeed the boat, the Third Bank of the River, where the exegete has gone on board together with the spontaneous reader. The application of the concept of play in the area of competitive paradigms can mean that power mechanisms are relativized and reductionism becomes manifest. Methodological ludism in hermeneutical perspective wants to attempt to connect elements that are contradictory, conflicting, different. The concept of play is intended to make confrontation fruitful. Whoever sees the relation between spontaneous understanding and exegesis as non-hierarchical but as complementary understands that here, on the interface between observation and surrender, there can be a double gift, a gift to both sides of the river. The practice of the guild of professional readers is enriched by the gift from the bearers of the effect of the text as a message for the text. To ordinary readers, the gift is given that their reading strategies oriented to appropriation are taken seriously and are now presented to the text as an exegetical question.

On the Third Bank of the River

From the hundreds of examples from our empirical material that make clear how important the position on the Third Bank of the River is, I will only give a few. I am deeply convinced of the importance of exegesis for spontaneous understanding, but I choose here for the ordinary reader and am attempting to show the importance of reading strategies for exegesis. What positive things can happen on board boats if the ordinary and professional readers sit across from each other?

We already discussed the story of the widow and the judge in Luke 18, a story that was read at the same time by groups from Peru, Colombia, El Salvador and Guatemala, which subsequently discussed the story with one another. It is a sober story of not more than a few verses. It is moving to see how many visceral memories of the reading groups from the countries come to the surface. The number of reading possibilities of this story—extraordinarily relevant
homiletically—is expanded and they are also of special importance for exegesis.

The story reminds some people in Peru of the time that they were chased away from the market where they had a stall for years, because others had bought the land. The church did nothing. Someone else from the group thinks of the mother with a child who was infected with HIV via a blood transfusion because the nurses made a mistake. The hospital refuses to take responsibility for the child. Another woman thinks of all the family members of victims of political violence. “The text does not go into detail, but for us is full of experiences that touch us in the depths of our being and our deepest experiences.”

In El Salvador someone says:

This text is very difficult for me. It does not seem that short when you hear it, for someone who insists so much is full of grief, that no one treats her justly. I do not know what happened precisely, but I do know that she is terribly full of pain. Why is this text never read in our churches? I know indeed the story of the crippled woman or the story of the woman with the crumbs but not this story. When I see how much had to be given to the judge so that she could get some justice, I become terribly angry. Maybe the woman had to bribe him or who knows what she had to do so that he would give her justice .... People have no idea what mothers must do sometimes to receive justice.

In another group in El Salvador a participant says immediately:

The text is clear; it is about a woman who asks for justice for one of her sons who has fallen in the struggle and she is refused because these cases are dangerous ... not because they are widows but because they will tell and it is better that they die than that they begin to tell the terrible things that have happened.

Finally, another group from Peru finds it surprising that the widow continues to go alone, never taking anyone with her and that it is nowhere stated that she tried to bribe the judge, which is completely normal in their own culture.

What the third position yields is that the effect of the story can orient the exegete with respect to the question if the text fits in the social domain indicated by these experiences. The story grows enormously in significance if its effect is noted. The theological setting as well—the connection between praying and not giving up, the Father who will quickly provide justice – receives a new dimension. All kinds of cultural elements that were not yet discovered by the exegete herself such as public/private, male/female roles, and dealing with power can appear to be present in the story. Is this story the bearer of social memory? What can be learned for its translation? Does the judge yield out of fear that what continually happens to the woman (being hit in the face) will happen to him? Should the translation then be: “otherwise I’m going to end up beaten
black-and-blue by her pounding”4, “she will attack me”5, “later she will do something to me”6, “break my head”? “para que no venga continuamente a cansarme”8, “so that she won’t eventually wear me out with her coming!”9?

Let us look at a simple example from the interpretations of John 4. In John 4:4 we read: “[H]e had to go through Samaria,” Some groups look very closely at this verse.

A Dutch group thought it refers to a shortcut. “We think very quickly: it is the shortest way.”

A Indian Dalit women’s group feels that what occurs in John 4 is very close to them—“[T]he socio-cultural system in our local amits is the shadowing of the fourth chapter of the Gospel according to John!”—and read this verse very differently. For them, it is not a shortcut but Jesus’ choice for the poor. “Here the villages are the places where the downtrodden can be found,” the women say.

To me, this seems to be not only a good example of how culture works in interpretation but also something to present to the narrative structure, the cultural codes and theology of the text.

I will give a more penetrating example that has to do with the whole narrative and theological structure of John 4. In his fine dissertation, Piet van Veldhuizen shows how up until the 1980s one reading possibility of John 4 did not occur in the commentaries and exegesis.10 This was the possibility of reading the story as a betrothal type scene—in other words, John 4 as an engagement story. A type scene is a narrative pattern present in various forms in different stories. John 4 is a variant of the narrative pattern of Genesis 24. Only after 1981, when Robert Alter published his well-known study, *The Art of Biblical Narrative*, did the possible parallel with Genesis 24 appear clear and biblical scholars began to speak about John 4 as a comic romance, love story, betrothal story and about Jesus as lover. Seeing Van Veldhuizen’s exegesis of John 4 and discovering how fruitful the engagement scene or well story perspective is can end only in sighing: if only Bultmann, Schnackenburg and many, many other professional readers among whom this perspective was completely lacking11 had just got on board with all those groups of South African, Dutch, Indian, Brazilian ordinary readers who had discovered John 4 to be an engagement story at first glance! The empirical material shows that an actually significant number of groups read the story in such a key of intimacy and the erotic, love, betrothal or, in any case, a boy-meets-girl atmosphere. I will again give a few examples.

The group from *India* remarked:

Places, like wells, bore-pumps, are most possible and appropriate points where a man and a woman can exchange their views and thoughts, if required personally. Generally, these
are the public places where love affairs start and also decisions are made at these places by the love-pairs for their ply, from the kith and kin.

The group quickly added: “These merely are the images of the events during the days of our LORD JESUS CHRIST. Particularly, when our LORD came to Jacob’s well [John 4:6] to meet the Samaritan Woman, *but for a Holy purpose*” (italics mine).

A *South African* women’s group from Kwazulu Natal, South Africa, writes: “[S]he wants other men to see her and declare love to her, she wants to entice men.” Why was she at the well at that time? “[S]he was afraid to meet other women as they used to gossip about her, she was afraid they would beat her up for enticing their men, because she wanted men to notice her.” The commentary of the facilitator reads:

In the Zulu tradition the well was a place to fetch water but also served as a social place to meet friends and potential suitors. When a young woman goes to fetch water at an unconventional time it would be known that she is interested in a man.

The woman is thus looking for a man, but, the group adds, what is one to think about Jesus who is also alone there – have his disciples gone? “Jesus, they felt, was behaving suspiciously. Perhaps he waited at the well because he wanted to propose love to a woman (given that the well or river was a place for love proposals in their Zulu culture).”

The reporter of the group of transsexuals from *India* remarks: “The group found that Kannatha [the name the group gave to the Samaritan woman] was unnecessarily talking, probably, complete with flirtatious remarks—maybe to make a new customer out of Jesus!”

*Indonesia:* “In one group, the woman was even seen as a prostitute who tried to seduce Jesus or wanted him as her next husband!”

Like many other groups, a *Nicaraguan* group is surprised because the meeting occurs during the hottest part of the day:

It was a strange time to be drawing water. It is seems as if this woman had a bad name, i.e. she was seen as someone who lived sinfully. It seems that she did not fit within the world of the village. I believe that she was a depraved person: she struck a bargain with any man who came along and had sexual relations with him.

An *Indian* group wonders what can be discovered in the text if it is read from the perspective of a sex worker.

A sex worker’s point of view. The text in John 4:29 talks of the Samaritan woman’s willingness to accept that she was a
"My God," she said, "ships make me so crazy."

She is also curious about Jesus’ intentions and poses probing questions. Could it be possible that she met all her former lovers at Jacob’s well?

A Dutch group discusses the fact that Jesus meets the Samaritan woman at the well at that time alone and speaks to her: “But the servant of Abraham spoke to Rebecca at the well also? That is the same story” (italics mine).

Indonesia: “In one group, the woman was even seen as a prostitute who tried to seduce Jesus or wanted him as her next husband!”

And then perhaps the shortest and nicest reading key from a South African group of Pentecostals from the slum Kayelitsha near Capetown. “Believers are the bride of Christ.”

I provide so many examples of this perspective in order to do justice to these ordinary readers, to make clear how many groups discovered this narrative perspective, but also because they show so clearly what significance ordinary readers can have for exegesis. The boy-meets-girl perspective is an extraordinarily powerful perspective. If the best interpretation is that which does the most justice to most elements in the text, then it is as if the puzzle falls together with this perspective. It is determinative for the narrative structure, the dialogues, the cultural components of the story and not least the theological orientation of John 4 within the whole of the gospel. Many elements in John 4 are suddenly given meaning when one reads this story from the perspective of a betrothal type scene: the well, the unusual hour, a man and woman alone, the question of the husbands, the disciples who, as Jesus’ family, and the villagers who, as her family, “have to give their permission” for this new relationship. In short, it is a fruitful perspective that is presented to the text from the Third Bank.

If only Bultmann and Schnackenburg had gone on board with a few of the women’s groups from Ghana, Colombia, the Netherlands and the Philippines! The role of the Samaritan woman in their commentaries is completely subordinate. In their exegesis, she is a vague actant who serves only to put Jesus’ actions and self-revelation into relief. “The evangelist had no special interest in the woman.” If the reading perspective of a number of groups on this point is placed before the text, exegetes could come to a radically different conclusion, namely that the role of the woman is crucial. The Indian group sees in the “he had to go through Samaria” an expression of Jesus’ choice for the poor. An American group adds to this: “[She is the first woman to whom Jesus can reveal himself. It is as if Jesus can reveal who he is only to her, to this outcast person.” Schnackenburg introduces his commentary on John 4 with the title: “The Self-Revelation of Jesus in Samaria” (1972: 455ff). He forgets that there are two people whose masks fall away—not only Jesus’ but also the woman’s. A Dutch group remarks: “The Samaritan woman actually helped Jesus to recover who he actually was when she asked how he could ask her to give him some water.” A number of groups remark that it is precisely the woman who pushes the conversation forward. Instead of giving Jesus water, she asks a question and keeps asking. A group in Ghana says: “The story in John 4 of Jesus meeting the Samaritan woman
appeared to be an excerpt from the lives of the Ghanaian group.” They asked, “Can a woman just address a man, and is she allowed to do so? Are women in our society not discriminated against? What faith this woman shows!” The Samaritan woman throws the ball back to him; she will not be dismissed. She is the one who runs to the village and tells her story to the people and invites the people to meet Jesus face-to-face. She is the one without whom the self-revelation of Jesus would not have occurred. “It was clear to the Marburg group that Jesus revealed himself to the woman through their dialogue.” She is the one who sees who he is. No, the role of the Samaritan woman in the story is crucial. It is not for nothing that she has become Haya Photini in the Orthodox tradition, the first evangelist, the bearer of the Holy Light.

Genuine sensitivity for cultural codes as frequently found in Mediterranean cultures is sought in vain in Western exegetes. “Culture” is one of the most striking differences between how ordinary readers and professional readers approach the story of John 4. The list of examples is long and concerns elements like the strange meeting of a man and woman at that hour, at Jacob’s well in Joseph’s field (ancestors/tradition; is Jesus the proto-ancestor?), the relationship between the villagers and the woman, the social position of the woman, the public vs. the private sphere, dealing with power, collectivist elements in the story. To give a single example of the many, in v. 16 there is a remarkable narrative sequence. Jesus offers the woman an extremely tempting gift: living water, which she accepts immediately. She says “Sir, give me this water so that I won’t get thirsty and have to keep coming here to draw water.” Instead of handing over the gift, Jesus now gives her an order: “Go, call your husband.” Bultmann and many others say that this is merely a demonstration of Jesus’ supernatural knowledge – he knew about the five men in her life! The group of Bolivian women who read this comes up with a different answer: she had to call her husband to ask permission for Jesus to give her this gift! Such a discovery can be at the very least a gift to exegesis to see if this cultural code i.e. that one must first know if a woman is married before one may, as a bachelor, offer her a gift, is also contained in this story.

The following dialogue poses a nice question to exegesis regarding phonetic aspects of the story of John 4. Two groups discuss the meaning of “Will you give me a drink?” A Dutch group hears an arrogant, antifeminist macho tone in v. 7. The Indian partner group, which holds to a high Christology, disagrees with this entirely and gives two arguments. Jesus observes the conventions and does not ask any intimate questions. He could have started with the intimate question about her five partners but does not do that. Second, “This [request] is understood as a polite request in the South Indian culture. The way it is said is important. The way the woman responded also indicates that it was polite enough and not a harsh command.” From the Third Bank of the River the question is posed: Can the exegete mediate here?

Let me give one final example—again concerning the question with which it all begins: “Will you give me a drink?” Many groups and exegetes see the problematic relationship between the Jews and the Samaritans being raised in
this question of course, but do not see that it is of much special interest for the rest. Jesus is thirsty and asks here for a drink. Groups who have to deal with racism or the caste system are, however, immediately struck by the question. A Kwazulu Natal group says:

One member explored further the idea of tradition, commenting that if the woman had used her container to give water to Jesus she would have had to go back to her village without water, ‘because the container would have to be ritually cleansed.’ This participant also argued that, ironically, though the disciples had gone off to buy food that was ritually clean, but now that same food is being prepared for them by the Samaritans” (italics mine).

In another South African group a woman remarks:

I would like to begin with this event in Jesus’ life where He asked water from the Samaritan woman. We see that she responded by saying how could He ask water from her because the Jews do not practice fellowship with the Samaritans. He had no right to ask water. Here we see the problem which we still have today, namely racism. This is the old problem that people do not want to eat together (italics mine).

Another participant in the same group agrees immediately:

Even in old times it was there. This is what we see when Jesus asks for water—already then there was no fellowship, people did not use one another’s food. She says Jesus has no right to ask water from her as a Samaritan woman. I agree that this text speaks about racism.

In India a participant from a group of untouchables responded with a remark that touches not only this verse but the whole relationship between Jesus and the disciples who watch everything from a distance and are not pleased about anything: “In this well-advanced world, a high-class individual hardly dares to extend his hand of friendship to the downtrodden. Suppose, say, it is done, that individual has to confront many problems from his fellow-beings (his own people).” Finally, from that same India yet another commentator, one of the transsexuals, stated on v. 6: “She has very hostile air about her and flippantly, though sounding very concerned, asks how Christ would be able to get water because he didn’t even have buckets or jugs. There could have been two reasons for this—may be the Jews would rather go thirsty than touch the vessels of a Samaritan or she didn’t want to help” (italics mine).

This last example as well seems to me to be a beautiful gift from the Third Bank of the River to exegetes and translators. Can it be that the question with which this conversation begins is in fact a question that is extremely disconcert-
ing and transgresses boundaries? Does it place us in the sociocultural domain of racism and where class and caste differences are felt most profoundly, in their most degrading way, namely that the other is disgusting, dirty and impure? Can it be that Jesus says to her in fact: “If you want to accept from me that I am prepared to step across the boundary of impurity, are you prepared to meet me and will you give me your ‘impure’ jar?”

The task for the exegetes is clear. The translators should check if the translation of the verb *sunchraomai* in the commentary in v. 9, “For Jews do not associate with Samaritans” (NIV), should not be replaced by what is found, for instance, in the Naardense Bijbel and other (Dutch) versions have: “For Judeans/ Jews do not use anything together with Samaritans!”

We will leave it at that with respect to our examples. I hope that I have made it clear how special the gift of the popular reading of the Bible to the exegete can be. And by gift I do mean gift. What is given by ordinary readers to professional readers is not only an idea, an insight into the text that must now be validated. No, a hierarchical relation would neglect too much the character of exegesis as play and continue to give the preference to only one way of playing. The gift that is given has to do with the importance of the strange, the introduction of experiences that are often foreign to exegetes in the Western world but are nevertheless found in the texts, if one looks for them. It is a gift that enriches exegesis, makes it less abstract and freer with respect to its own dominant reading traditions and the requirements of the fraternity. It enables her to assume her ethical responsibility.
“My God,” she said, “ships make me so crazy.”
The Ordinary Reader Revisited

Practice and the formation of theory of this chair are focused on the ordinary readers to whom we just listened. The “ordinary reader” is more than a flesh-and-blood reader—it is an attitude toward the text, defined by Ricoeur as the existential attitude. It is the space in which the effect of Holy Scripture is manifest. It is a dynamic playing field in which Bible texts are not soiled but called into new life; it is a field where a gigantic reservoir of experiences and memories, of social memory, becomes manifest, a space that reflects the asymmetry and challenges us to give an ethical answer. Viewed from the often closed world of the exegesis, it has to do here, in fact, with an elsewhere, an otherwise and the other. Exegetes who want to enter this space are boundary crossers. This space is one in which the value of the strange and the voices that have been shoved aside manifest themselves.

I hope I have indicated the importance of this space for biblical studies, theology and translators of the Bible. If the discussion on rights and justice, on asymmetry and on what faith has to do with all this is manifested in such a fundamental way in this space of intercultural Bible reading, then there is more than sufficient reason for churches, missions and even development organizations to enter this space.
Hans de Wit | “My God,” she said, “ships make me so crazy.”
In Hoedemaker’s book, *Met Anderen tot Christus: Zending in een postmissionair tijdperk* (With Others to Christ: Mission in a Postmissionary Age), I find arguments for seeing intercultural Bible reading as a new practice, as a missionary strategy that answers challenges to which missiology is to respond (Hoedemaker 2000). Hoedemaker attempts to look critically at missiological thinking in the last decennia. By the term *postmissionary* Hoedemaker means a new period marked by deep asymmetry on the one hand and worldwide secularization versus religious pluralism on the other. It is a period in which classical missionary thinking is faced with immense challenges. More evangelical views of missions especially have scarcely any answers to these challenges. According to Hoedemaker, all kinds of core concepts of mission must be fundamentally rethought. Classical Western thinking on missions has too often been exile missiology, a missiology of the lonely West. In contemporary missiological thinking globalization, pluralism and inequality must be a given a place. To that end Hoedemaker latches on to a classic core term of missiology, which also plays such an important role in our argument, namely its *eschatological character*. The problems of the postmissionary age have, according to Hoedemaker, an eschatological structure: pluralism, globalization, contextuality, culture. These are movements and phenomena that bear in themselves references to and longings for something else, something new: a redeemed and liberated humanity finally, a deep and complete mutual acknowledgement of people, a successful communication in which all of humankind is involved: “reconciled variety.” “Mission” by the Christian church has always meant that one reaches *in* the world from the “dangerous memory,” *across* the world to this *eschaton*. To speak about “reconciled difference” is to hold to the perspective that knows and transcends the loneliness of particular contexts, a unity that goes deeper than the façade of the unity of globalization and offsets the destructive sides of plurality.

As long as the difference could be perceived and named on the basis of the existing “unity” that was perceived as normative, it was much less necessary to speak about “reconciled difference,” according to Hoedemaker. But now Christians, and certainly Western Christians, can no longer survey in a normative way the difference from a helicopter. And precisely this fact has tremendous implications for thinking about missions. “Mission” must be convinced of the fact that Christians are found in the midst of other Christians and communities that, like themselves, make and maintain traditions around the “signals” that they receive with respect to salvation and redemption.

The fact that the normative “being right” of Christianity has become problematic implies a different look at faith and also at mission. “The Christian
faith,” according to Hoedemaker, “is not a ready system of meanings that only has to include the ‘world’ to the degree to which the believers bring their ‘worlds’ into it and thus arrange and rearrange the system.” The Christian faith and the Christian tradition are deeply hermeneutical and themselves a conversation, a permanent interaction directed at the “end,” at reconciliation and redemption. What happens “contextually” and “in dialogue” contributes content-wise to the formation of the tradition.

All of this means that the “other” is essential for the discussion on faith. This discussion must not be like interrogating a prisoner, to use Gadamer’s image again, as in some evangelical views of missions in which the importance of the discussion with the other is underestimated time and again. In any case, this discussion should have two components. On the one hand, the retrieval of the learning moments in one’s own tradition and Scripture and, on the other, the analysis of the “unity of humanity” problem, of keeping the critical questions open that must be asked in that analysis, of remaining focused on an eschaton that reaches further than what humanity can actually offer. Gauges for this can be: participation (in movements for change), prophetic criticism (being moved by the humanum), missions as service (listening) within the framework of reconciliation (plurality).

We will leave our discussion of Hoedemaker’s insights at that. If these insights are placed next to current missions practice, the question quickly arises if our thinking on mission is not unconsciously still and strongly directed at the “out there” where we ourselves and the organizational structure remain out of range. The remarkable paradox comes to light: the more we occupy ourselves with organizational structure, with validating the results of projects, with solutions to problems between church and church, the less time we have to be actually sensitive in a missionary sense and to initiate new mission practices, to supervise them and to learn from them. How much actual conversation occurs with the other elsewhere on the grassroots level of our churches? Do we have any idea of that? The African Musimbi Kanyoro finds that “Relations between church and church are much too oriented to solving problems and too little to dialogue, discussion and a joint process.” Instead of solving problems people should strengthen the hope that is present. For that she uses the image of the pregnant woman who climbs a tree during the floods in Mozambique, is forced to stay there for five days, and gives birth to a child high above the flood. Perhaps we should indeed begin to think about missionary relations in that way. Intercultural Bible reading can then be seen as a new missionary practice that is related critically to institutionalized practices and attempt to do justice to the eschatological dimension of missions. It is not functionaries who are the mediators of mission strategies but ordinary believers. Our empirical material shows that a new separate missionary agenda does not have to be conceived for this new practice but is itself an agenda. The empirical material convinces us of the fact that the intercultural discussion on the meaning of Bible stories does not lead to an aimless conversation but is constantly missiologically laden. As such, it is a fundamental source for missionary renewal. Perhaps then, high above both banks of the flooded river, the tree of which Musimbi Kanyaro speaks, our boat in the time of cholera can be the place where a child is born.
Intercultural Bible Reading as Development Strategy

That the joint and intercultural reading of the Bible could contribute as a development strategy will sound strange to many. We should therefore explain this, but I first want to say that it is surprising that this has never been done before. That the Bible has been involved so little in reflection on development is astonishing for two simple reasons. Despite processes of secularization in the Third World as well, religion is still very much a part of that world. For the (Christian) religious universe, the Bible is the most important compass.

What obtains for ordinary believers also obtains for development organizations that want to give (the Christian) religion a role in their search for their identity and policy, namely that they appeal to ethical-religious traditions. The ways they use those sources clarifies how the identity is articulated, operationalized and made relevant. But authentic and responsible making the sources relevant cannot be given shape in Christian oriented development organizations other than in discussion with the other in the Third World whom the organization wishes to serve. The other in the Third World, the particular epiphanic space, not only often lives and dies in circumstances that go beyond any Western ability to imagine but is at the same time often rooted in an—for a secularized Western perspective—unimaginably deep and immediate way with the same ethical-religious tradition. It is often this tradition that, more than any secular worldview, offers space to survive in a situation of contrast experiences. The price the development organizations pay for neglecting or ignoring what is of fundamental importance for the other is high. The other is instrumentalized and reduced to what the secularized, Western perspective will accept. Here we lack the room to look at this more closely. I believe that the space where the discussion on faith occurs can be fruitful for development policy. I am thinking here of some concrete matters.

The demonic dilemma of all development work can be eased. I am referring here to the dilemma that people from the south, the people whom development organizations wish to serve, must be reduced to only one aspect of their existence—their hunger, their disease, their poverty—in order to be able to help them. Such reduction ceases whenever stories from the immediate life situation become visible. These life stories do not offer a helicopter view but zoom in on the concrete experiences and contexts. It is a bottom-up mode; an insider perspective is offered. Formulated in terms that are relevant for development organizations: if one wants to have an insider perspective on the effects of underdevelopment and poverty, one should then look carefully at these life stories. And not simply the misery but also the dreams, power and hope that people derive from the Bible story, also in or precisely in situations of obvious suffering.
In the space of intercultural hermeneutics Western groups participate completely. Because of that, “the discussion with the poor” does not remain limited to the small circle of policy advisers. Not only do the rich talk with the poor; it can also appear that resistance, struggle and tears can be shared. According to the biblical scholar Jobling, “sites of struggle which are not only invisible to each other but which might not even be recognized by each other as sites of struggle” become mutually visible.

Resourcing is actively pursued in the space of intercultural hermeneutics. The small new interpretive communities can contribute through this process in a modest but at the same time fundamental way to the process of identity formation.

Thus, religious intercourse can also place dominant development paradigms under criticism. Religious insights and beliefs can also be felt out with respect to their capacity to function as criticism of development models.
When Love Again Has a Master

While the *Nueva Fidelidad*, the *New Fidelity* is sailing over the river and will shortly have no other destination than to nourish love, Florentino is in Fermina’s cabin. Apart from the ice-cold hand, there has been no other contact so far. Fermina felt untroubled and calm, as she had few times in her life: free of all blame. She would have remained there until dawn, silent, with his hand perspiring ice into hers, but she could not endure the torment in her ear …. [S]he realized that her pain was stronger than her desire to be with him. She knew that telling him about it would alleviate her suffering, but she did not because she did not want to worry him. For now it seemed to her that she knew him as well as if she had lived with him all her life, and she thought him capable of ordering the boat back to port if that would relieve her pain.

Florentino had foreseen how things would be that night, and he withdrew. At the door of her cabin he tried to kiss her good night, but she offered him her left cheek. He insisted, with labored breath, and she offered him her other cheek, with a coquettishness that he had not known when she was a schoolgirl. Then he insisted again, and she offered him her lips, she offered her lips with a profound trembling that she tried to suppress with the laugh she had forgotten after her wedding night.

“My God,” she said, “ships make me so crazy.”

(García Márquez 1989: 334-35)

On the final day of the return journey they wake up at six o’clock. The decision to make the destiny of the boat nothing else than to serve love has not yet been made. The idea that the trip is now at an end and that everyone must now return to his or her own bank of the river turns their stomachs.

“It’s going to be like dying,” she said.

Florentino Ariza was startled, because her words read a thought that had given him no peace since the beginning of the voyage home. Neither one could imagine being in any other home but the cabin, or eating in any other way but on the ship, or living any other life, for that would be alien to them forever. It was, indeed, like dying.

(García Márquez 1989: 346)
The story of the meeting on the boat and that of the meeting at the well show striking parallels. Jesus and the Samaritan woman do strange things as well. The disciples, who are not anywhere near or happy about anything – and do not accept her either – see it. They find Jesus’ behavior at the well very strange. When they come back from buying food, they “are surprised to find him talking with a woman. But no one asked, ‘What do you want?’ or ‘Why are you talking with her?’” (v. 27). But she also does strange things; she undergoes a radical transformation – she, who had gone to the well alone at that hour, avoided by everyone and avoiding everyone. It is as if she has lost it. She leaves her jar—many groups say her past—behind; she runs back to her family, the villagers and, like a bride who has just met her bridegroom, says to them, “Come, see a man who told me everything I ever did.”

A few factors are crucial, apparently, for profound encounters that transcend boundaries: vulnerability, the masks that fall away, a third place—we have discussed them extensively. But the most crucial is the small gesture of love: the understanding that there is no other place where our capacity for love can blossom than the other, ensuring that love once again has a master. The small gesture of love, the hand that lies ready, a question that is posed or, in the words of Câmara himself: “a glance, a gesture of peace and friendship, a smile.”

It is remarkable how little people laugh in our own debate on the multicultural society. Whether we want it or not, most of us are riding on the boat as well. I hope that the practice of reading sacred texts together will allow us to experience and to witness the power of such small gestures of love.
Notes

Introduction

1 For a definition of the double use of the term see, e.g. G. Huggan 2001: 124ff.


3 Márquez, ibid. p. 463 (orig.): “Pero volvió el mismo día, a la hora insólita de las once de la mañana, fresco y restaurado, y se desnudó frente a ella con una cierta ostentación. Ella se complació en verlo a plena luz tal como lo había imaginado en la oscuridad: un hombre sin edad, de piel oscura, lúcida y tensa como un paraguas abierto ....”

4 In his tribute to Dom Hélder, Míguez Bonino points out how much Dom Hélder emphasises an often overlooked but central element of Liberation Theology: selfless love (gratuitas, gratuidad). This is a committed love that searches for “awareness, understanding, commitment, cooperation, and efficacy” (Míguez 2002: 90).

5 Mark O’Connor fms, Dom Hélder: A Mystic in love with the Poor, writes in his unpublished eulogy at Câmara’s death: “Those who had the privilege of celebrating with Dom Hélder at a Eucharist will know what a poignant experience this was and how, quite naturally, Dom Hélder, at the moment of Consecration, would cry tears of hope and joy. A first reaction of ‘what’s happening here?’ soon passed over into a realization that what was happening was a privileged moment in one’s life. An old man who had suffered much on behalf of the outcast and poor for decades, defender of countless victims broken in body and soul was in touch with the real broken body of Jesus in the Eucharist. One could feel the linkage but I’m not sure any one present could really adequately describe the experience. It was a moment of Grace to be there.”

6 José Míguez Bonino 2002: 89.

7 His often quoted statement is famous: “The truth is this: without justice there will be no peace.” The complete quote reads: “Great injustices exist in poor countries, and great injustices exist in rich countries. But greater injustices exist in the relations between rich and poor countries.”

8 Every two years a visiting professor from the third world will hold the Hélder Câmara lecture and organize guest courses for students. In recent years the following scholars have acted in this capacity: Julio de Santa Ana (Brazil), Daniel Schipani (Argentine/USA), Bas Wielenga (India), Kamal Hossain (Bangladesh), Mercy Amba Oduyoye (Ghana), Tarek Mitri (Libanon), Mrs. Anna May Say Pa (Myanmar/Burma).

9 “The moral force of Action for Justice and Peace will be born of communication between the Abrahamic minorities from the different towns, different countries, different continents. When the Abrahamic minorities of the Third World feel themselves truly in solidarity and, above all, when they meet fraternal echoes coming to them from the developed countries, humanity will have taken a step towards peace. The Spirit breathes where it will. It is perfectly possible for Abrahamic minorities to emerge in North and South, East and West” (1971: 73).

10 Formulated precisely, the central tasks of the person occupying this chair are: giving courses and doing research in the area of empirical cultural and interreligious hermeneutics, in particular into the question of how the process of attributing meaning to religious texts is given shape in situations of exclusion, injustice and oppression, and how the intercultural and interreligious discussion on the meaning of these texts can be conducted in the perspective of justice and liberation.
The Field of Research

1 One can think here of speech act theories or of the research into the performative character of language (a death sentence, test results from the doctor). In the reader response theories coming out of literary studies, some go so far as to see the reader as the co-author of the text. Interpretive communities, with their own conventions and interests, are determinative for interpretation, according to Stanley Fish. There is nothing like a “correct” reading process. Interpretation is the source of texts, facts, authors and intentions – everything is the result of interpretation (Fish 1980). In his well-known book The Double Perspective David Bleich makes a vehement argument for more interaction between professional readers in the academy and ordinary readers. The perspective is theoretical and North American and does not cover the interaction, for example, between rich and poor or between Western and non-Western readers. Ideological critique, as formulated by Althusser (1972) and Eagleton (1976) is also concerned with the reader. Every reader goes to a text with expectations and interests. The engagement with the text is almost always conflictual: the expectations are not met, tension and a rift occurs. Ideological critique wants to trace this interaction. How is it explained? How is it modified? How is it eliminated? What criteria guide the process? Why is this element of the text privileged and that one silenced? But it also obtains for ideological critique that it was developed abstractly and was seldom in dialogue with ordinary readers.

2 The lack of empirical research within biblical studies led Jauss, Gadamer’s student, to sigh as late as 1982: “[I]n biblical studies (one) has not yet begun to attend seriously to the reception history of biblical texts. As long as biblical reader-response critics concentrate on the implied reader and narratee in the biblical texts, they will continue to neglect the reception of biblical texts by flesh-and-blood readers” (Jauss 1982). Jauss himself, with his esthetic reception, focused attention on the reader’s horizon of expectation. Each reader brings a certain point of view, a perspective to the text. This point of view is loaded with a reference framework, experiences and expectations. Jauss is moving cautiously toward the new field of an empirical hermeneutics. He develops a model for the analysis of identification patterns between readers and characters in a story (association, admiration and sympathy) but does not come any further than an analysis of motivation for the identification (Jauss 1982: passim).

3 The reader must respond to the invitation of the text, must follow the reading strategies of the text (Eco), be able to enjoy the pleasure of the text (Barthes), be capable of an aesthetic response (ästhetische Wirkung; Iser), be open to the transforming effect of reading the Bible (Thiselton), be able to formulate an interpretative hypothesis (Hirsch), be sensitive to the affective semantics of the text, i.e. be open to the power of the text to move (rhetorical criticism), be able to discover the ideological seizures of power that hide behind every text (ideological criticism), be able to connect with each other both intertextual (connecting of other texts with the one concerned) and extratextual relations (application of the text or connecting the meaning of the text to historical events) of a text (Pierce, communicative analysis). And we have still not addressed the question of how the reader should see the status of the text and which attitude he should take vis-à-vis the text: one of trust, one of suspicion, one of declaring the text invalid (annihilation; some black, feminist and postcolonial hermeneutics). Should the reading process be directed at retrieval, survival (liberation theologies) or resistance (Tracy)? The reading of the text should be connected with a (liberation) praxis (emancipation hermeneutics); the interpretation of the text should be in service to an analysis of the context (idem); the “knowing understanding,” in which the moment of appropriation occurs, has become acquainted with the results of exegesis (Ricoeur), etc.

4 In disciplines like the sociology of literature, empirical sociology of literature, empirical reception theory, reception esthetics, and empirical literary studies, but also cognitive psychology and experimental psychology.

5 In France the first reader survey occurred in 1955, according to Joëlle Bahloul (1998/2002).

6 In her study on reading behavior among so-called lecteurs faibles in France, Joëlle Bahloul...
expresses critique of the established sociology of literature in France. It is not how much
someone reads but the way in which reading is capitalized on in the social, emotional and active
life of a reader that is of importance.

The classic adage from the 13th century was: Littera gesta docet / quid credas allegoria / moralis
quid agat / quo tendas anagogia: praxis, faith, ethics and eschatology.

8 Frei writes, quoting Kraus approvingly: “The Bible is, for Calvin, not inspired and hence does
not itself in the first place inspire, but communicates and informs” (1974: 21).

9 It is peculiar to see how all kinds of Reformational views of Scripture have received new life in
the recent lay movements centered on the Bible in Latin America and now in Africa. In his
book *Ordinary Bible Reading*, Mark Labberton describes the use of the Bible in the Strasbourg
of the Reformation in a way that very much reminds one of Bible movements such as the one
taking shape at this time in the Third World. The communal, communitarian reading of the
Bible must be seen as a theological idea of the Reformation, Labberton writes. He shows how
the percentage of literate people arose enormously in Strasbourg after 1540. There was a new
interaction between the biblical text and ordinary readers (Labberton 1990: 290ff.).

10 A recent statistical study in Chili pointed out that among the Roman Catholics (65.5%) 53%
say that they never or almost never read the Bible. Cf. Aldunate 2008: 22 on this.

11 “Reading with” has just begun in Africa (end of the 1990s) and has produced intense debates
on who the ordinary African reader is and what a genuine African hermeneutics is. On this see
Adamo 1999.

12 In Spanish-speaking countries, including most countries in Latin America, hardly any research
has been done into the reading practices of readers, according to Goldin in the foreword to
Bahloul; on this see Bahloul 2002: 1-3.

13 A recent American study among Bible readers was presented under the heading: “Most
Americans Take Well-Known Bible Stories at Face Value.” The results of the study are
surprising: six “well-known Bible stories are accepted as literal truth by an average of two out of
three adults.” But for those who love the Bible and will be cheered by these results, the final
conclusion of the study is also surprising: “But Barna [the one conducting the study] also noted a
significant disconnection between faith and practice. ‘While the level of literal acceptance of
these Bible stories is nothing short of astonishing given our cultural context, the widespread
embrace of these accounts raises questions about the unmistakable gap between belief and
behavior. On the one hand we have tens of millions of people who view these narratives as
reflections of the reality, the authority and the involvement of God in our lives. On the other
hand, a majority of those same people harbor a stubborn indifference toward God and His desire
to have intimacy with them. In fact, a minority of the people who believe these stories to be true
consistently apply the principles imbedded in these stories within their own lives. It seems that
millions of Americans believe the Bible content is true, but are not willing to translate those
stories into action. Sadly, for many people, the Bible has become a respected but impersonal
religious history lesson that stays removed from their life’.”

For further details see: http://www.barna.org/FlexPage.aspx?Page=BarnaUpdate
Narrow&BarnaUpdateID=282) (22/10/2007). In this context one should also consult the study
by Hijme Stoffels into possession of the Bible and Bible usage in the Netherlands. The report
can be found on the internet.

14 Edwin Koster refers in his dissertation to the importance of Umberto Eco’s distinction (in:
Eco, Kant e l’ornitorinco) between reading/interpretation and the use of texts (Koster 2005:
225ff. and passim). The use of a text – action as result of a reading process – is not the same as a
rhetorical reading, which refers to the way texts persuade or convince readers by means of their
argumentative structure.

15 Cf. Eco 1997: 107ff. With this term Eco has in mind non-critical, consumptive reading. One
does not allow oneself to be carried along by the text; there is no interaction; the text is
consumed.

16 For this see the examples of the use of the psalms that Adamo gives in his essay on African hermeneutics (1999): “We should use Ps. 109 to resist strongly the power of our enemies. According to Chief Ogunfuye’s rule, we should go into the field in the middle of the night and light 3 candles, one to the North, one to the East, one to the West. We ourselves should stand in the middle and read this psalm with the name of God (El), the name of the enemy and our own name in mind. If we are suffering from a swollen stomach, we should pray one of the therapeutic psalms, Ps. 1, 2, 3, 20, or 40. Then we draw fresh water from the river, pour it into a new pot, cut up palm leaves in it, say the name Eli Safatan 62 times and light nine candles. We should bathe in this water for nine days. If we cannot, then we should recite these psalms with our head in a pot containing a mixture of fried oil, coconut oil and cow urine. That will get rid of our backache, toothache or headache. If our spouse is barren, we should ask her to drink a mixture of coconut milk and raw eggs; then she is to read Ps. 51, naked on the field, early in the morning after we have slept with her. Finally, if we had to write an exam, we should pray one of the success psalms. We should write the name of our school on a piece of parchment, burn it, mix it with water, drink that and then read Ps. 8.”

Whoever thinks that this African way of using the psalms, associated immediately with wholeness and healing, is unique should look at how the psalms have been used in Kabbalistic circles since the 17th century. The words, the letters, the vocalization, the accents – everything in the psalms were used to ask for known and unknown favors. They were used for a long life, for forgiveness, infertility, health, hostile governments, business, etc. Psalm snippets, single verses or even parts of them were taken completely out of their literary and historical context in the Jewish liturgies – very early on already – throughout the centuries until now, play a role in the liturgy and constitute as it were, a genuine part of a script for a sacred drama (Attridge and Fassler 2003: 33ff.). Such psalm snippets are found everywhere in the world. There is no taxi or bus in Latin America where Ps. 23 does not hang on the rearview mirror: “El señor es mi pastor.” The psalms were undoubtedly used in such a way in Israel as well.

17 Cf. Also the remark by Bert Vanheste (1981: 193): “The influence that goes out from literature comes into being in the encounter between the literary work and the reader. Unfortunately ... [this] field of research, the reading public, is still in a beginning phase of exploration. Moreover, it is to be feared that even the most advanced exploratory techniques will largely fail because the ground is too swampy. The researcher into the effect of literature on the reader has no firm ground to stand on. The swamp is uncommonly rich in composition but no one can get a grip on it. After all, literature does not have influence in isolation.”

Empirical Hermeneutics in Intercultural Perspective

1 For an extensive description of the way in which empirical material is coded, see De Wit 2004: 395-436.

2 De Wit 2004: 400: “The first phase of this type of qualitative analysis is characterized by reducing the overwhelming amount of text data by identifying the content of more or less encompassing text segments. Then, a ‘code’ as abbreviation or name is attached to this text segment. In the following, these codes are used as representants of text segments or ‘units of meaning’ in the text. Fundamentally, this is a process of categorization, where the categories may emerge during text interpretation or may be taken from an already existing category system depending on the researcher’s epistemological orientation. During the second phase researchers try to reconstruct the text producer’s subjective meaning system from the units of meaning in their text data. In the third phase finally researchers try to infer invariants or general communalities by comparing individual systems of meaning.”

3 Why have groups participated in the project and what does this imply for the course of the interaction with the partner group? What reasons led the group to participate? A distinction can be made between affective and cognitive motivation. Affective motivation leads groups to participate because they want to help, want to make a better world, decrease asymmetry, etc.
Much research has been done into the coherence between cognitive motivation and possibilities for changing beliefs, for example, into the interaction between Palestinian and Jewish groups.

“When a set of beliefs of one group is incompatible with a set of beliefs of the other group, this situation is defined as cognitive discrepancy”; “In a conflict situation, the cognitive discrepancy involves incompatibility of beliefs regarding solutions, incompatibility in the accounts of the background or the course of the conflict, and other contents)” (Bar-Tal 1990). A certain sort of motivation leads to the freezing of (faith) insights that are based on knowledge, another kind of motivation to thawing. The factors can be analyzed that lead to hardening (freezing) or to softening (thawing) in major differences in insights and convictions, in epistemic or cognitive discrepancy. A distinction is made between motivation for validity (1), motivation for structure (2), and motivation for specific content (3). The motivation for validity leads the most to the growth from discrepancy to consensus. The last motivation mentioned (motivation 3) leads the most to the freezing of convictions or faith insights (beliefs) that are based on knowledge. For this see Bar Tal 1990.

4 The central question here is how, via which strategy, the text is made topical. If by appropriation we understand the process by which the original reference of a text is replaced by a new one, then how does this process work with the reading groups? To categorize this, we use classical models from hermeneutics that are all found in the reading reports: allegorical, typological, model of the parallelism of terms (also called the tracing paper model), the correspondence of relationships model (C. Boff 1980), a Dialog der Verhältnisse model. This last model is described by Van der Ven and he relates it critically to the correspondence of relationships model used by C. Boff. The concept of correspondence proceeds too much from agreement; there must also be room for criticism, confrontation. “The concept of dialogue offers... this space, for dialogue is indeed directed toward agreement but does not proceed from it” (Van der Ven 1994).

5 By heuristic keys we mean the question of which elements from the reader’s own context/experience are constitutive for the interpretation process as a selection process.

6 By focalization we mean a variant of the theory offered by Mieke Bal: the relationship between the elements presented in the story and the view of the readers of those elements. Narrative theory, as this has developed in the course of this century, has different terms for the concept in mind here. The most usual term is perspective or narrative perspective. The following terms also occur: narrative situations, narrative standpoints, narrative methods, point of view, etc. But they are all unclear on one point: They do not make any distinction between the view on the basis of which the elements are presented and the identity of the body that operationalizes this view (Bal 1990: 113ff.). Primarily cultural components that also determine the interpretation process as selection process are studied under this category.

7 The norm for non-exclusion emerges from “the idea of ‘human dignity’ that is found on the abstract level of eccentricity where all people are equal in principle. It entails that people have the right to a minimum existence and to equal basic rights for their interactions. It also entails that, where power and making decisions are concerned, everyone can participate in principle. Exclusion from this on the basis of race, culture, gender, social position is not permitted.” The second norm is willingness to promote interaction and is “linked to the actual differences between people on the empirical level and has, as a supplement to the former, a character related to content – promotion of interaction. It qualifies interhuman relationships, policy measures, social processes, cultural convictions on the basis of their positive or negative contribution to the interactive possibilities of groups and individuals” (Procee 1991).

8 Odysseus’ return and homecoming represent the development of Western philosophy: “the identity, sameness, and egoism which is ultimately protected, not exiled, called outside, broken up."

9 Cf. also the numerous articles by José Severino Croatto on the Pentateuch as a book of unfulfilled promises; see De Wit 1991; Severino Croatto 1982; 1991; 1994; 1997.

10 Infinity is the English translation of the original French infini, which has a slightly different
meaning than the concept of infinity. Infini does not refer to a new system, now the opposite of totality, but means open, unfinished; there is still room for more and others.

11 Van Heijst also argues in this line: “In summary, I claim to have found two criteria for determining the value of the strange. The first criterion concerned breaking the monotone of culture, in which suppressed voices are coming to occupy positions for speaking .... The second criterion, tied to the first, was that the marginalized, who have no claims to power, have become authoritative. Levinas articulates this on the basis of his Jewish background by means of the biblical prototype of the other” (Van Heijst 1995: 233).

12 For the following see Cohen 2001: 249ff.

13 Levinas regauges the concept of eschatology – in his terms, metaphysics – in the biblical theological sense. Metaphysics, Levinas writes, “is that which is turned toward the ‘elsewhere’ and the ‘otherwise’ and the ‘other’” (TI: 33). He thus lists three central concepts in the Hebrew Bible. “The ‘elsewhere’ can describe the Hebrew Bible’s predominant shape as striving to reach elsewhere – the promised land, which is but a hope both at the end of the Torah and at the end of the entire Hebrew canon (see 2 Chr 36: 22-23); the ‘otherwise’ appears as the prophetic critique and its messianic aspirations; the ‘other’ leads to the otherness of God and fellow humans who must be encountered in the face-to-face meeting!”


15 Gerald West defines socially engaged biblical scholars as follows: “[It] is the participation of the biblical scholar in forms of social transformation. The biblical scholar who is called to interpret the Bible with ordinary poor and marginalised communities is usually one who is already involved in forms of social struggle, reconstruction, and development, and who already has taken sides with the poor and marginalised in their struggles for survival, liberation and life” (West 1997: 99ff.).

16 We lack the space here to take up the question of how the respect for the other, how radical alterity, is related to the possibility of encounter. It is a much discussed topic in Levinas’ philosophy. Ricoeur is critical, precisely on that point: “Levinas is guilty of treating a non-relation as a relation.” Levinas’ views on alterity should be read as a hyperbole, a deliberate exaggeration, according to Ricoeur. Cohen points out that there can be a certain encounter between the self and the other in Levinas. Ricoeur does not look enough at what Levinas says about the familial aspect of the self as created, born within the “family of men.” “The self is susceptible to radical alterity because it is a being that is born, born from and into a web of familial relations.” In part 4 of Totality and Infinity there are fine examples given by Levinas of the self’s “capacity of reception,” according to Cohen. “There the separated self – the self susceptible to moral relations – is determined as capable of moral encounter precisely because of its created rather than its caused or posited being.” Cf. Cohen 2001: 298ff. Following Ricoeur, Annelies van Heijst sees Levinas’ holding to radical alterity as ‘wishful thinking’: “I do not read Levinas’ work as a realistic description of what actually happens in the ethical situation: it is ‘wishful thinking’ or a metaphorical description that invites one to look and act differently” (Van Heijst 1995: 218).

17 At the end of the 1980s E.S. Gerstenberger concluded that the differences between what was discussed in the Zeitschrift für die Alttestamentliche Wissenschaft between 1965-1984 and the topics that Latin American exegetes discussed in those years were gigantic. Whereas the Latin Americans were very much occupied with topics such as oppression, poverty, exclusion, suffering, liberation, joy and gratitude, ZAW paid scarcely any attention to such topics. On this and the question of relevance in exegetical research see my Leerlingen van de Amen (1991: 161 and passim). If a similar investigation were conducted now, two decades later, the same conclusion would probably be reached. The well-known exegetical journal Revista de Interpretación Bíblica Latinoamericana (RIBLA) is a model for how a number of Latin American exegetes give shape to their engagement. A central theme – relevant for the Latin American
situation – is continually discussed from different perspectives, Bible texts and by different authors. Thus in the last ten years the following topics can be found: economy and the full life (economía y vida plena, 1998); the poor (1999); dignity (dignidad) (particularly of women), the year of jubilee and hope/utopia, rereading the prophets, asymmetry of power (asimetría de poderes), religion and erotica, utopia in everyday life, reading Luke from the perspective of the experience of the poor, the psalms and the poor, Jesus the Healer; empire (imperio), healing of the body, the Bible movement in Latin America (50th issue (2005)), etc. For a discussion and evaluation of difference between Latin American and European/North American biblical studies see also, for example, my article “Lezen met Jael” (De Wit 2001).

18 Graceful fighting is a certain way of handling differences and is nourished by the conviction that “If we can live together in community, then someday we shall be able to resolve our conflicts.” The view here is that conflict belongs to community. That is in line with Martin Buber who does not see community as a group in complete harmony but “community is a group that can handle conflict.”

19 Are, for example, culturally operative values overruled by faith insights that are introduced by partner groups? One could think here of Hofstede’s depth dimensions of culture clustered in: dealing with power, with tradition, with that which threatens and is new, with the perception of male/female roles, with collectivism/individualism, etc.

Ordinary Readers

1 Photo ANP, in the daily Trouw.

2 See Bruce Malina 1983: 11-25. The scenario model considers the text to be a sequence of explicit and implicit scenes or schemas “in which the mental representation evoked in the mind of the reader consists of a series of settings, episodes, or models deriving directly from the mind of the reader, coupled with appropriate alterations to these settings, episodes, or models as directed by the text.” The reader must carry out two tasks: identify via the text the appropriated reference domain (look at the appropriated scene, the scheme or model that is suggested by the text) and then, as far as possible, within this “domain of reference,” determine the position that the text wants to occupy in it; cf. Malina 1983: 13-14, with an appeal to Sanford and Garrot 1981). “The point to be underscored is that if interpretation of a written language of any sort takes place a domain of reference will be used by the reader. This domain of reference will be rooted in some model of society and of social interaction” (Malina 1983: 16).

3 In the nice volume Her Master’s Tools Caroline Vander Stichele points to the problems of analogy, as formulated and used by Troeltsch, Harnack and numerous other historical-critical biblical scholars, as an epistemological principle of history. History was to be known via analogy, but the analogy, as epistemological principle, was nourished by post-Enlightenment Germany and analogy can only be construed where in this context analogous experience with, for example, the biblical domains of reference is available. The number of scenarios that are available is limited and works as a filter, always leveling history out and adapting it to the present. Cf. Vander Stichele 2005: 10ff. In his The Reality of the Historical Past Ricoeur points emphatically to the fact that remembering always has the form of analogy and is thus never a copy of what it remembers but is always a reenactment of it. “Summing up the whole itinerary of the present study, I would say that the recourse to analogy acquires its full sense only against the backdrop of the dialectic of Same and Other: the past is re-enacted in the mode of the identical. But it is so only to the extent that it is also what is absent from all of our constructions. The analogue, precisely, holds within it the force of re-enactment and of distancing, to the extent that being as is both being and not being” (Ricoeur 1985: 35f.)

4 A Salvadoran group reads the story entirely in the erotic key and gives the “living water” that Jesus offers an erotic meaning as well. “Yo no soy de aquí, si usted quiere (en tono de confidencia, se acerca) le doy de un aguita que yo tengo. Después de que la pruebe, ya no va querer tomar de otra.” Cf. also what Dyk remarks on the erotic meaning of “living water” in Song of Songs 4:15 (Dyk 2004: 228).
The Ethical Dimension of Intercultural Hermeneutics: Asymmetry


2 “While the first response in many Bible study groups is often the ‘missionary response’ or the dogmatically ‘correct’ response – the public transcript – critical modes of reading enable ordinary people from poor and marginalized communities to begin to articulate their ‘working’ readings and theologies, what is incipient and usually deliberately hidden from public view. The latter is clearly dangerous; what is hidden from the dominant is hidden for good reason, and can and should only be openly owned in a context of trust and accountability. But within such a context, the intersection of community and critical resources enables the recognizing, recovering, and arousing of dangerous memories (Metz), subjugated knowledges (Foucault), and hidden transcripts” (West, ibid.).

3 Semeia Studies 52 is devoted entirely to this topic.

4 In this connection cf. also the following remarks by Catherine Kohler Riessman: “Despite the seeming universality of the discourse form, some experiences are extremely difficult to speak about. Political conditions restrain particular events from being narrated. The ordinary response to atrocities is to banish them from awareness. Survivors of political torture, war, and sexual crimes silence themselves and are silenced because it is too difficult to tell and to listen. Rape survivors, for example, may not be able to talk about what they experienced as terrorizing violations because others do not regard them as violations. Under these circumstances, women may have difficulty even naming their experience. If it is spoken about, the experience emerges as a kind of ‘prenarrative’: it does not develop or progress in time, and it does not reveal the storyteller’s feelings or interpretations of events”. Social movements aid individuals to name their injuries, connect with others, and engage in political action. Research interviewers can also bear witness” (Kohler Riessman 2002: 220).

5 What, for example, is one to think of a rereading of the resurrection narrative as a bearer of social memory and as a form of trauma processing by the disciples of Jesus of Nazareth?

6 One can think of a number of the following specific characteristics of liberation theologies, Dalit theology, Minjung theology, black theology, feminist theology, etc.: great creativity, specifying the images of the enemy and the accompanying construction of a new self-image, certainty about how the world works, emphasis on the gratuity principle, a new spirituality and liturgical forms, a new view of core symbols of Christianity, an entirely new understanding of Bible texts, emphasis on the importance of “remembering” and the reenactment of atrocities, the formation of communities (basic communities), the importance of praxis.

7 Ruard Ganzevoort lists a number of characteristics of posttraumatic growth that we frequently encounter in our empirical material. “The recognition and management of uncertainty, the integration of affect and cognition, and the recognition and acceptance of human limitation; increased empathy, compassion and connectedness; appreciation of the value and frailty of life, appreciation of new possibilities.” Very important are “social support, and communal motives in identity-construction.” Spiritual growth is strengthened by the “the offering of hope and encouragement, the satisfaction of important personal needs, and the relationship with others.” Cf. Ganzevoort 2005: 344-61.

8 This Mental Health Hospital offers facilities for people who have committed crimes and were ordered by the court to undergo therapy. On average, people must stay about 6 years; some remain longer than 10 years. Therefore, the search for prospects is one of the most important questions in life. This group has great interest in contacts with people who read the Bible outside the Mental Health Hospital.
On Board

1 Marianne Paas gives a nice example from a Dutch group: “Everyone already had his or her own conceptions with this story. It is noticeable in the group that the conceptions that are connected with the traditional history of exegesis sometimes clash with a desire to look differently at the story .... We exchanged our conceptions and feelings .... But there did not seem to be much movement here. The conceptions that we already had with this story seem to be quite fixed” (Paas 2004: 90).

2 “Bible stories combine the power of the religious, the fictional and the historical,” Edwin Koster writes: “The figurative language of narratives is able to transcend finite reality and can bring up the presupposed transcendent dimension of reality” (Koster 2005: 294).

3 “En vez de considerar el texto como un residuo del pasado, una hermenéutica latinoamericana de liberación deberá encontrar una nueva respuesta a la pregunta cómo las coordenadas texto y praxis actual pueden ser relacionadas de tal manera que el texto bíblico puede ser mensaje para la praxis y la actual praxis para la comprensión del texto bíblico. Esta es la tarea de la nueva hermenéutica latinoamericana.” (How can the coordinates of praxis and text be brought into connection with each other in such a way that the Bible text is a message for the praxis and the current praxis a message for the text?) On this cf. Severino Croatto 1994; De Wit 1991.

4 “You read what you are ready for; in other words, add something to what was already actually present in embryonic form” (Vanheste 1981: 193).

5 By regauging and nuancing the concept of liberation, I am attempting to find an answer to the protests that come immediately from hermeneutics that want to read “with” the poor as soon as alterity is welcomed. It will immediately be asked: Where does this emphasis on alterity, dialogue and diversity come from? People will quickly see the welcoming of alterity as a betrayal of the liberation project. What if the other is the oppressor? With this question on his tongue, Ricoeur asks Levinas: How do we distinguish the “master from the executioner, the master who calls for a disciple from the master who requires a slave”? Is the emphasis on the importance of alterity not a veiled neocolonial appeal to the victims of the rich and the conquistadores in this world to welcome these rich and conquistadores as friends in the end?

The Crocodile Lives in the Water and Yet He Breathes Air

6 A problem that plays an immense role in genitive hermeneutics. Cf. my dissertation on the relationship between relevance and pertinence in biblical studies (De Wit 1991).

7 For the following I am drawing on the many publications by André Droogers on methodological ludism. Methodological ludism is defined as follows: “[T]he capacity to deal simultaneously and subjunctively with two or more ways of classifying reality.” For this and what follows see Droogers 2006, where other literature can also be found.

8 A project carried out by the development organization Solidaridad under the supervision of Maria Berends.

9 So the Dutch translations: Lu (Lutherse Vertaling), Lei (Leidsche Vertaling), NBG51 (Nederlands Bijbelgenootschap 1951), GNB (Groot Nieuws Bijbel), De Naardense Bijbel.

10 So the Dutch translation NBV (The New Bible Translation).

11 So the Dutch translation Het Boek (The Book).

12 So the Dutch translation SV (Statenvertaling).

13 So the Spanish translation Reina de Valera Actualizada.

14 So the English New International Version.


16 Van Veldhuizen 2004: 26: “The correspondences between the well narratives as Origen
observed them also remained unnoticed in modern biblical scholarship on John 4 for a long time. Only in the 1960s did the fact of these correspondences become mentioned, but the discussion remained mostly on the level of observation, without the conclusions for the interpretation of John 4 being drawn.” After 1981 as well there were still many commentaries in which the reference to the Old Testament well stories were lacking; Van Veldhuizen 2004: 33.

17 A number of elements from John 4 return in the moving story of John 20 of the meeting between Jesus and another woman, Mary Magdalene.
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