

# CAN THE CHASMS BE BRIDGED? DIFFERENT APPROACHES TO BIBLE READING

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## ABSTRACT

Reality confronts theologians with the fact that they themselves and believers across the world read and interpret the Bible in diverse ways. Understanding the reason for this is part of the solution. The essence of the problem is that the quest for meaning is an unending journey with frequent ravines to cross. Invariably, a linguistic, historical, cultural and social chasm opens up between current readers of Biblical texts and the cultural, as well as historically layered, settings in which the documents originated. This review article is a discussion of the ways in which several authors approach the Bible from their different theological vantage points and from different fields of application. It assesses the way in which they understand this problem and how they see a solution. An assessment is made from the historical-literary and social-scientific approach to biblical texts, as practiced in the Netherdutch Reformed Church in Africa. Solutions suggested and applied in this situation are compared to solutions proposed by various authors. There may be a positive outcome: the chasms might be bridged, but only when certain criteria are met and when all parties concerned are willing to work with patience, trust and fearless diligence.

## INTRODUCTION

### The chasms and the choices

Hikers who find that the bridge spanning a deep ravine they have to cross has long ago fallen into the abyss have few choices. They can vent their anger and frustration and find emotional reprieve, but that will not change the situation. They may decide to turn back and give up on completing the hike, thereby conceding defeat. Or they might decide to find other ways of crossing to the other side of the ravine. They could consider descending into the ravine and ascending the other side or they could reconnoitre the edge of the ravine to find the narrowest chasm and try to bridge it by tying their ropes together. In each case there is no easy way out. All of these options have risks, frustrations and a quota of hard work – be it walking back and facing embarrassment, or controlling their fear of the abyss and daring to cross it in any workable way. The other option, of course, is neither crossing nor turning back, but camping at the edge of the ravine, content with seeing the other side from afar. This option requires neither hard work nor courage, for it means turning away from the challenge. It only requires acceptable explanations of why the challenge is not met. As it implies a leap of faith that is not taken, it means loss of face if sufficient reasons for not crossing cannot be supplied.

Readers of the Bible, be it theologians or lay people, are in much the same position with many of the same options. The quest for a meaningful life through reading Biblical texts can be compared to an endless journey. Venturing on this journey is not as simple or as easy as some may think. Along the way, frightening ravines appear that need to be crossed when reading and interpreting Biblical texts. In essence, such a chasm is a linguistic, social, cultural and historical divide between the world of the text and the current readers. This problem is further complicated by the layers of redaction found in most documents, which represent further instances of reinterpretation of the documents in different historical settings, thereby presenting further challenges to Bible readers.

When some take these challenges to heart and dare to find ways to cross the chasm successfully, the chasm separates them from others not making the crossing. Trying to find ways to cross the divide and then applying these ways takes courage, conviction and hard work. It takes a willingness to question personal, methodological, theological and dogmatic constructs by asking whether the chasm has indeed been successfully bridged.

For theologians, crossing the divide can never be only for their own benefit. Crossing also means finding a way for others to follow and enter the world of the text and then journey further, enriched by new nuances and meaningful insights as more ravines are crossed. Only after engagement with the text and its world can they continue the journey on their quest for meaning. Some do indeed follow such theologians with the resultant increase in self-understanding as the world of the text bears its fruit. They have the courage to question the old ways and conquer their own fear of the recurrent abyss. Others turn away, clinging to their old patterns of thought, frightened that faith and salvation will disappear into the depths. This leaves Christianity with three groups of believers on different sides of such a ravine. One group is camping on the edge, fearful of the abyss, trying to convince others not to dare the crossing that seems insane to them. Another group is turning back to the past for answers, not willing to find their own way across. The other group is moving on towards the future by trying to cross the chasm. Some of them are trying to convince and help others to make the crossing. But in reality, the gap between the three groups is steadily growing. For some, the journey continues, for others it has ended and this could result in their turning back.

Sometimes such a ravine appears between theologians and lay people. Sometimes it lies between theologians from different trains of thought, or between lay people from different churches or perhaps

it even lies within the same church, for sometimes such a chasm may even present itself between theologians from the same church. Certain situations might be easier to resolve than others: churches within the same tradition might find the chasm narrow enough for theologians and lay people to find an easy way to cross it and thus work out their differences.

Sometimes the chasm appears too deep, so that both sides fear that crossing is too dangerous for the campers on the edge to attempt. That leaves them with a high level of frustration, which is usually vented towards the party on the other side. Lay people accuse theologians of distorting the Bible, theologians accuse lay people of being too lazy or afraid to study the Bible properly and theologians from different points of view label one another as liberals or fundamentalists. Venting frustration might bring short-term emotional relief, but still, a decision has to be made between crossing, turning back or camping on the edge. I fear that, for too long, some parties (especially those not crossing the historical chasm between them and the text) have given up and were only venting their frustration and anger on the other side in order for themselves to save face. Some are still applying this formula, not understanding that it actually means giving up and conceding defeat, thereby demonstrating an unwillingness to make the leap of faith. The journey ends and the quest for meaning is abandoned.

It is fortunate that some theologians and lay people are willing to try to bridge these chasms in order to continue their journey. They are not willing to accept defeat or to be controlled by fear. They dare to try and make the crossing and are working hard to realise it. Most of the time, they are not rewarded with medals and awards and receive no special honours. To the contrary: they are still accused by those unwilling to face their fear of the chasm. But those who have crossed the chasm and have helped others cross never look back; they follow the road to the future without fear, via the history of the texts. For them, making the leap of faith and helping others to do so is, in itself, a very special reward. Their journey continues and the meaning of life is ever enriched.

In this review article, I assess the ways in which some authors understand these chasms and the choices they make in order to cross it or not. My assessment is made on the basis of my own crossing and the efforts I have made to help other cross as well.

The approaches of the following authors are considered: John Webster (from the perspective of systematic theology), N.T. Wright (New Testament studies), Walther Brueggemann and William M. Schniedewind (from Old Testament perspectives) and Andrew Village (an empirical approach to hermeneutics). These approaches are assessed and discussed within the framework of the metaphor of crossing a chasm. They will also be evaluated from the viewpoint of the Netherdutch Reformed Church's approach to scripture, which my point of departure.

## UNDERSTANDING THE CHASMS AND FINDING EQUIPMENT TO CROSS THEM

The approach one has to scripture depends on whether the chasms between modern-day readers and the texts are recognised, evaluated and regarded as challenges to be met. In essence, this entails coming to grips with the results of historical and literary criticism and the social worlds of the biblical texts.

Village (2007:79–82) takes note of the chasms that the scouts from historical and literary criticism, sociology and cultural anthropology have reported. He understands that readers and texts each have their horizon and that understanding is a process of closing the gap between these horizons. But his focus is on the different ways that *lay people* within the Anglican Church in Britain read the Bible. He approaches the problem with an *empirical study* that highlights these differences. A part of the

study examines the degree to which lay readers think that they can apply texts to their lives (Village 2007:81–89). To what degree do they understand the difference between their own horizon and that of the text, or do they read the text solely as though it was written for them, or do they do both and if so, to what degree?

Village uses the term 'horizon separation' to describe the degree of strangeness or 'otherness' perceived by someone reading scripture. Then, according to Village, 'applicability' refers to the extent to which readers find a text to be relevant to their lives, and can vary from no bearing at all to total transparency. The third term he uses in his study is 'horizon preference'. The question considered in this regard is to what degree ordinary readers are interested in the worlds of the author, text and reader. When they read scripture, do they see it as pointing mainly back to the world of the original human author, do they remain within the world created by the text, or do they bring the text into their world and relate it in some way to what they do or believe? Or do they do two or three of these things in combination? If they were forced to attend to only one of these, which would they choose?

The results from testing the different readings of Mark 9:14–29 is enlightening. With regard to 'horizon separation', Village (2007) remarks the following:

*Around a quarter of participants found the story hard to relate to their lives or could not imagine it happening today. Around two thirds found the story to be self-explanatory or a straightforward account. This implies a general tendency to fuse, rather than separate horizons. However, around half also thought the story had some aspects that were difficult to understand or that it showed how differently people thought in those days. This suggests that the story was not wholly transparent to everyone and that the overall perception of the story was somewhat mixed.*

(Village 2007:83)

As for 'applicability', nearly everyone sampled thought that they could learn something from the story and very few thought it had no relevance. Around three-quarters understood the passage in terms of God speaking to them or teaching them to pray and act in faith, pointing to a high degree of applicability for most people in this sample. As expected, there was a strong negative association between 'horizon separation' and 'applicability', so people who perceived a separation of horizons tended to be less likely to see the story as having anything to say about their lives.

Avoidance of the author's horizon in favour of the text or the reader horizons shows 'horizon preference' in line with the idea that lay people are less interested in the historical background or origins of biblical texts and more interested in the meaning of the text or its application (Village 2007:85).

Village's study shows that he is aware of the recurring chasms between readers and biblical texts and wanted to test how lay readers perceive these chasms. I will show in the section 'Understanding but not crossing the chasms' that Village chooses to camp on the edge of the chasm and not to help others to cross.

Someone who clearly takes note of the huge chasms between present-day readers and the biblical texts is Walther Brueggemann (2003:22, 120–121). He calls the Bible a 'strange book of odd literature with obscure images from alien cultures very different from our own' (Brueggemann 2003:120). Yet to him, the Bible is precious because it offers us a way of understanding the world in a fresh perspective, a perspective that leads to life, joy and wholeness (Brueggemann 2003:9). As the life-world of the Bible differs from our own, it makes us 'outsiders' to it. Responsible participants should try to read the Bible as 'insiders', and that is not easy, as '[w]e are outsiders to the language and thought patterns, to the cultural and historical assumptions' (Brueggemann 2003:25). Nevertheless, Brueggemann does see the ravine as potentially crossable and

proposes a process by which we outsiders may read the Bible as insiders. This proposal will be dealt with later under the heading 'Crossing the chasms'.

Important to note under this heading are Brueggemann's hermeneutical points of departure, which can be found in the closing chapter of his work (Brueggemann 2003:119–125). He lists the following presuppositions implicit in his perspective. Firstly, the Bible is a present resource for faith and not a historical curiosity. By this he means that the Bible is a book 'in and for the believing community' (Brueggemann 2003:120). He sees this premise not as an external, formal judgement, but as a confessional statement kept alive in a confessing community. He thereby rejects mere historical curiosity but accepts and underscores that serious Bible study requires the best tools of historical and literary analysis, including archaeological and linguistic tools of a very technical kind. But he insists that the intent of such work is not to recover a museum piece but to get inside the confessions and traditions that can still be energising to the church. The use of scholarly tools should assist this process and not impede it.

Secondly, the Bible is to be discerned as much as a set of questions posed to the church as a set of answers (Brueggemann 2003:121). To him, the answer to the deepest questions of life is found in the Bible's central affirmation that in God, self-giving graciousness and undoubted sovereignty are identical. He sees the use of the Bible as an answer book or security blanket and asserts that it is treated as a good luck charm, a holy relic upon which to swear, a resolver of moral dilemmas, a code for proper conduct, or a collection of right doctrine that only needs to be believed without discerning its historical character as perversions. Such approaches attribute to the Bible a kind of static absoluteness that presumes fixity of what is proper. These are attempts to establish a norm beyond the demands and pressures of historical existence. The end result is to attribute to the Bible an absolute, unchanging quality that denies freedom to God and that denies our own historical responsibility (Brueggemann 2003:121). The Bible is not concerned with right morality but with faithful relationships, which cannot be reduced to formulae but live in the free-risking exchange that is the stuff of biblical faith. The quality of certitude offered by the Bible is never that of a correct answer but of a trusted memory, a dynamic image, a restless journey, a faithful voice. Such assurances leave us restless and tentative in the relation and always needing to decide afresh. The central thrust of the Bible, then, is to raise new questions; to press exploration of new dimensions of fidelity, new spheres of trusting serving as invitations to bolder, richer faithfulness. It therefore questions our easy resolution, our faithless posturing and our self-deception. For that reason, the faithful community is never fully comfortable with the Bible and has never finally exhausted its gifts or honoured its claims (Brueggemann 2003:122).

Thirdly, the Bible is not a statement of conclusions but a statement of presuppositions (Brueggemann 2003:122). It is a misunderstanding to treat the Bible as though it 'proves' things. It is, in effect, a judgement of the Bible by alien processes, as proof belongs to the realm of scientific verification and is not characteristic of the Bible, which is confessional and assertive and not argumentative.

Fourthly, he presumes that the Bible is not an 'object' of study but a partner with whom we may engage in dialogue (Brueggemann 2003:123). It is not to be regarded as a thing that will yield its secrets if we are diligent and discerning. It is not passively acted upon in a unilateral way, which violates the character of both parties. Reading the Bible requires that we abandon the subject-object way of perceiving things and be open to a dialogue partner that will continue to surprise us as we discover that not only do we interpret the text but we, in turn, are interpreted by the text (Brueggemann 2003:124).

Fifthly, Brueggemann (2003:124) states the premise that the Bible has both a central direction and a rich diversity. It holds the treasure of many people in many times and places trying to live and believe faithfully. This richness must not be reduced to our best categories but should leave us staggering. On the other hand, we must not fragmentise and thus trivialise it into many things. He stresses the singularity of the Bible as 'one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all' (Eph 4:5–6). Given certain differences, that oneness is characteristic of both the Hebrew Scriptures and the Christian Testament (Brueggemann 2003:124).

Lastly, the Bible is a lens through which all of life is to be discerned (Brueggemann 2003:125). The Bible is a special lens in that it is radically different from every other perspective and claims our perception at the most elemental levels. It calls into question every other way of seeing life. Thus, the Bible invites us to a very different way of knowing, discerning and deciding.

It is easy to find myself at ease with Brueggemann's six hermeneutical presuppositions, as they form the basis of my own approach to biblical texts (Malan 2008:2–24, 34–55, 67–75). Thus far I have found nothing unacceptable in his stance towards interpreting the texts.

To my mind, the hermeneutical approach of N.T. Wright (2005:23–30) is somewhat more problematic. He clearly understands the reality and depth of the chasms between readers today and the worlds of biblical texts. He therefore sees them as challenges that urgently need to be addressed.

He takes serious note of the contemporary culture in which the biblical documents are used today, which makes conclusions from scripture rather problematic (2005:6–16). He recognises that late modernism and postmodernism challenge previous notions of truth and deconstruct the older stories that were used to form Christian as well as personal identity, which leaves present-day Christians with an anxious eagerness for certainty. This uncertainty is further apparent in the relationship of scripture to politics, philosophy and ethics. To his mind, the shallowness of the current debate on scripture does not help to solve these problems. He tries to make a contribution by reasoning (in a typically modernistic way) from the point of authority of scripture, which he immediately describes as shorthand for the authority of God exercised through scripture (Wright 2005:23–30). By this he means the story of God's Kingdom or sovereignty that is presented in the biblical documents in dialectic way – God has always been sovereign over the world but, in another sense, this sovereignty must break afresh into this world of corruption with the goal of the renewal of creation. Scripture takes an active part in this ongoing purpose, not only as God speaking through scripture and its proclamation, but also by transforming people by renewing their minds through his power. Here it seems that Wright is oversimplifying and narrowing the rich diversity of *kerugma* found in biblical texts by imposing certain concepts as if they are central themes.

These themes, for instance the 'Kingdom of God', are approached in a generalised and dogmatic way and filled with nuances of meaning not characteristically found in the texts – leading the way to overreaching conclusions forming an overarching system imposed on the texts, thereby implying a unity of thought that is not there. Whether these oversimplifications are the result of naivety, the urge to control, or traditional thought patterns, or a combination of them all, is not clear. For example, central to Wright's understanding of the meaning of the Kingdom of God is the presence of 'radical evil' within creation and God's people (Wright 2005:35–38). The meaning of the Kingdom is, therefore, to invoke God as the sovereign one with the right, duty and power to deal appropriately with evil by remaking the world and humanity by covenant renewal. The role of scripture in this regard is to equip God's people to serve God's purposes. This is possible because scripture is inspired, which he understands

as shorthand for the Spirit of God guiding the authors and editors so that the books they produced were the books God intended them to have. This does not make the idea of 'God's Word' synonymous with the written scripture, but he explains it as a strange personal presence, creating, judging, healing and recreating.

He understands this presence as one that was challenged by the Enlightenment, which demanded an historical reading of the biblical documents, thereby often undermining central Christian claims with rationalistic historiography (Wright 2005:84–89). The Enlightenment, according to Wright, also offered its own eschatology by establishing a new era in which everything is different and progressive. Evil is thus redefined as people not thinking or acting rationally. He states that the Enlightenment's useful legacy is historical critical exegesis, which Wright seemingly regards as basic to understanding scripture (2005:94–113), but his distrust is revealed as he sees the need for historical criticism to be tempered in the sense that there is no guarantee of modernism's 'assured results'. In a similar vein, he regards postmodernism's challenge to modernity appropriate and deems it a necessary corrective, but, at the same time, regards deconstruction as nihilistic, which renders postmodernism impotent in important aspects.

It is therefore doubtful to what extent Wright regards 'genuine historical scholarship' as 'still the appropriate tool with which to work at discovering what the biblical authors intended to say' (Wright 2005:112). It seems that tradition plays a very important role in his approach as he advocates a living dialogue with the previous readings of biblical documents (Wright 2005:117–119). By dialogue he means listening to the tradition in a critical manner, understanding and accepting that the tradition can indeed be wrong and that the church today may be in need of another and different formulation. Critical dialogue with the biblical documents, as well as tradition, is accomplished by the use of reason at work in lexical, contextual and historical considerations (Wright 2005:119–120). He states that reason does not replace tradition, but is a necessary tool to ensure that we listen to scripture and tradition and not the echo of our own voices. He proposes a five-act hermeneutic reasoning from five stages in the Biblical story, (1) creation, (2) the 'fall', (3) Israel, (4) Jesus and the church on their way to the final destination of the new creation and (5) God's immediate presence and love, to which scripture is a map. He accepts the difference in our relationship with the Old and New Testaments regarding the Old as crucially part of scripture but the New as 'foundation charter of the fifth act' (Wright 2005:121–126).

William M. Schniedewind (2004:vii–viii) focuses on the transition of ancient Israel from an oral to a literate culture. From this view, he looks at the beginnings of the making of the Hebrew Bible. His point of departure is the study of important periods of textualisation alongside new ideas about the development of writing and literacy in ancient Israel. He admits to having oversimplified complex issues such as the development and nature of literacy as well as not emphasising all the issues of biblical criticism in order to address a broader audience. Regardless of these self-professed limitations, Schniedewind's approach recognises the chasms between the texts of the First Testament and today's readers and steps up to meet these challenges in a meaningful way.

The question about when the texts of the First Testament were written is more important than the question about who wrote the texts, as it leads to the next series of important questions: How did an oral culture like that of ancient Israel come to express its identity through a written text? How does the basic orality of early Israel shape the written text? How does the authority of the written word come to supplant the living voice of the teacher and the community? What were the particular circumstances under which the First Testament became a text and then scripture? Why was the First Testament written at all? Why was

it written if few people could read? Why was it written if scrolls were expensive and had limited circulation? (Schniedewind 2004:2, 11) These questions reveal Schniedewind's seriousness about crossing the chasms between the ancient texts and today's readers from a very specific angle.

An important remark made by Schniedewind (2004:13) is that oral and written texts represented competing centres of authority. While they may exist on a continuum, orality and textuality compete with each other as different modes of authority. When a culture moves from an oral tradition to written texts as a basis of authority, this is a radical shift in the centre of education. Ultimately, written texts would supplant oral tradition – a transformation not taken lightly by those with an invested interest in the oral tradition. In studying the formation of biblical literature, both the diachronic movement from orality to literacy and the competition between oral tradition and written texts must be considered.

The challenges of crossing these chasms are met by using the tools of historical, literary and social enquiry. In this way, Schniedewind (2004:17) comes to the following conclusions: The texts of the First Testament were largely written down in the 8th century BC through to the 6th century BC, therefore between the days of the prophets Isaiah and Jeremiah. The writing of these biblical texts was closely tied to the urbanisation of Jerusalem, to a growing government bureaucracy, to the development of a more complex global economy and then to the spread of literacy. The two critical figures in the flourishing of First Testament texts were the kings Hezekiah (r. 715–687 BC) and Josiah (r. 640–609 BC). With this thesis, Schniedewind challenges the trend of scholars who argue that First Testament texts were not composed until late in the Persian and Hellenistic periods; that is, between the 4th and 2nd centuries BC.

In his venture to cross these historical divides, Schniedewind (2004:21–34) does not underestimate the chasms. He views the Bible as having a diachronic richness and complexity that in part is the result of its composition over a long period of time. For this reason he starts at the very beginning of writing by exploring the nature of writing itself in early societies and then writing in early Israel. He reiterates that writing had a divine character and numinous power in the ancient world and that its secrets were guarded by scribal guilds within the closed circles of temples and palaces.

It is clear to him that the development of writing is closely associated with the rise of the state and urbanisation (Schniedewind 2004:35–47). Nowhere did writing flourish in the ancient Near East without the auspices of the state. Writing became part of the self-definition of these early civilisations as it was pivotal to the administration and high culture, even though the public was initially largely illiterate. Even though the alphabet, as one of the critical developments leading to the spread of writing, was invented at the beginning of the second millennium BC, it did not immediately result in a surge in literacy throughout the ancient world. The flourishing of writing in antiquity would have required state support as well as favourable political and economic conditions.

In the early Israelite kingdoms writing had a limited role. Early Israel was an oral society of semi-nomadic wanderers finally settling in Canaan, who followed a pastoral and later an increasingly agrarian lifestyle. This was not a setting in which writing could flourish. The 'literature' of ancient Israel – the songs, stories, proverbs and folktales – was the oral literature of a traditional society. The rather limited scribal culture in Syria-Palestine in the late second millennium BC seems to have continued into the first millennium BC and influenced the scribal institutions of the early Israelite state. In this instance, writing was merely an extension of kingship, a tool for mundane record keeping and a means of diplomatic communication. For these functions, scribes were employed by the early Israelite monarchs (Schniedewind 2004:48–63).

It would have taken a major social upheaval in ancient Israel for writing to spread to the popular culture. The exile of the northern kingdom by Assyria and the subsequent urbanisation of the rural south were the catalysts for literary activity that resulted in the composition of extended portions of the Hebrew Bible. The exile of the north also gave rise to the prophetic works of Amos, Hosea, Micah and Isaiah of Jerusalem, to the priestly liturgies and to ritual texts, as well as to the pre-Deuteronomic historical work. The idealisation of the golden age of David and Solomon also inspired the collection of wisdom, traditions and poetry ascribed to these venerable kings. The pivotal figure in the early formation of these examples of First Testament literature was King Hezekiah. His father survived the incursions of local enemies by becoming a loyal surrogate of the Assyrian Empire. Hezekiah presided over the exponential growth of Jerusalem and put into place a strong central government to oversee the urbanisation of Jerusalem and the organisation of its military. A new system of taxation was implemented, which provided funds for vigorous building projects throughout Judah. Central to Hezekiah's political agenda was the recreation of the golden age of Israel under David and Solomon by codifying nostalgia into literature. One example is the collection of Proverbs ascribed to King Solomon. Another is the historical composition of the book of Kings, followed by its redaction during the exile (Schniedewind 2004:64–90).

The flourishing of writing and the spread of literacy took place in the 8th and 7th centuries BC. A textual revolution arose in the days of King Josiah (Schniedewind 2004:91–117). This was one of the most profound cultural revolutions in human history: the assertion of the orthodoxy of texts. As writing spread throughout Judean society, literacy broke out of the confines of the closed scribal schools, the royal court and the lofty temples. Basic literacy became commonplace, so much so that the illiterate could be socially stigmatised. The spread of literacy enabled a central feature of the religious revolution of Josiah: the religious authority of the written text. Social tensions arose in Judah because urbanisation and centralisation led to individualisation, the breakdown of community values and the undermining of the community as vehicle for the transmission of oral traditions. Social reaction climaxed in the assassination of Hezekiah's son Amon and the successful efforts of the group 'Am Ha'aretz to insure a succession that would favour reform after the Josianic coup. The Biblical book that forms the blueprint for the Josianic Reforms is the book of Deuteronomy. In this way, the written word authorised the religious reforms of the rural elders and leaders who have been disenfranchised by urbanisation and centralisation.

Once writing had made a place for itself in the religious culture, as is demonstrated by the treatment of the Torah in biblical literature, the transition from orality to literacy moves to the next phase: the concept of scripture. For example, the revelation of the Covenant Code in the book of Exodus was originally depicted as an oral revelation and, as such, reflected the orality of ancient Israel. The book of Deuteronomy would make textuality central to the revelation and would also have to address the apparent tension between this newly introduced text that Moses wrote down and the tablets of stone 'written by the finger of God'. When the Exodus and Sinai traditions were incorporated into the Pentateuch and connected with the Deuteronomistic history (Deuteronomy to Kings), an account of the writing of the 'book of the covenant' was introduced by the interpretative repetition of Exodus 24:4–8. This textualisation of the Torah and subsequent formation of the Pentateuch as we know it must have begun in the late 7th century BC, as the 'scroll of the covenant' was central to the Josianic religious reforms (Schniedewind 2004:118–138).

The Babylonian exile was a crisis for both text and oral tradition. The 6th century BC was probably not one of the more creative periods for Israel, as some scholars describe it. Archaeological and literary evidence reveal the destructive fury of the Babylonian annihilation of Jerusalem, Judah and the rest of the Levant. Judah was depopulated and all its cultural institutions

changed – there were no more Davidic kings and no temple, the scribal infrastructure was exiled and even the language of the people changed from Hebrew to Aramaic. The region had little to make it economically viable outside of pastoralism and marginal agriculture and could not even sustain its 7th-century population. Deportations were compounded by economic flight to Egypt, where large Jewish communities suddenly appeared. The Babylonian period in Judah was not suitable for intense and creative literary activity as, in antiquity, writing needed a prosperous urban economy in order to thrive. Throughout the exile, however, the Judean royal family lived in comfort at the royal citadel of Babylon. The scribal infrastructure of the royal family remained intact. In the troubled days following the Babylonian invasions, writing returned to state control under the exiled royal family in Babylon. It was writing by and for the royal family. The biblical literature of the pre-exilic times was likely preserved by the royal family in Babylon and returned to Jerusalem with the royal heir Zerubbabel. However, the biblical literature produced during the 6th century BC reflects the interests of the Judean royal family in Babylon (Schniedewind 2004:139–164).

The darkest hour for biblical literature was the poverty of the Persian Yehud, with the retrenchment and preservation of biblical literature. But biblical literature has its renaissance in the 3rd century BC in the wake of Hellenism and its interest in the written word and the creation of libraries (Schniedewind 2004:165–194).

After the Great War with Rome and the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple, the aristocratic leadership of the temple was also destroyed. The Sadducees and the religious sect at Qumran, both representatives and guardians of the religious authority of the text, were wiped out. With their demise, traditional orality reasserted itself. Both Christianity and Rabbinic Judaism, which grew out of the lay classes, struggled with the tension between the sacred text and the authority of the oral tradition in the aftermath of the destruction of the temple. Although they acknowledged the authority of the written scriptures, they also reasserted the authority of oral tradition and the living voice of the teacher. Christianity quickly adopted the codex and was quite innovative in doing so. This fact probably encouraged the authority of the written scriptures in the early church. Judaism, in contrast, was quite slow in adopting the codex and, even today, it is a Torah scroll that we find in a synagogue ark. Eventually, Judaism too would cloak its oral tradition in written garb as oral and written Torah tablets were merged into one pre-existent Torah that was with God at the very creation of the world (Schniedewind 2004:195–213).

## NOT UNDERSTANDING OR NEGATING THE CHASMS

Some theologians heard about the chasms between them and the worlds of the texts from historical and literary criticism and social science and decided not to attempt a crossing. To their mind, answers to today's questions lie in the previous formulations given to questions asked in the past. They cannot even be described as people camping on the edge of this ravine – they have not yet reached the edge! They are still a long way from it, perhaps even 400 years away, as they are still repeating and elaborating the doctrines about scripture from the period of the Reformation. This is especially true of the systematic theologian John Webster (2003:1), who, in his book *Holy Scripture: A dogmatic sketch*, does not even mention the world of the texts and how problematic it is to cross into that world. In dogmatic terms and arguments he oversimplifies the understanding of the biblical texts. He offers no theory of textuality, but rather chooses to give 'an orderly dogmatic account of what Holy Scripture is' and deploys 'language of the triune God's saving and revelatory action' (Webster 2003:1).

He might have learned from the scouts ahead about the ravine but is not really interested in their reports, as is evident from the

following:

*This dogmatic depiction does not deny that Holy Scripture is also a field of cultural invention, since Scripture (the human text which God sanctifies for the service of his communicative presence) is still 'scripture' (human writings generated and used by religious communities). But dogmatics does not allow the particular concept of 'Holy Scripture' to be folded into the more general category of 'scripture', preferring to maximize the differences between the two and thereby to resist the subordination of Holy Scripture to cultural poetics. The result is a dogmatic ontology of Holy Scripture: an account of what Holy Scripture is in the saving economy of God's loving and regenerative self-communication.*

(Webster 2003:2)

It seems that the usual practices for interpreting texts are negatively viewed as 'cultural poetics' and that Holy Scripture should not be subjected to it.

Although he accepts that this dogmatic account has a modest role, is secondary to exegesis and should never replace or eclipse exegesis, he attributes to it a controlling role over exegesis, namely as articulating the exegete's understanding of the location, character and ends of exegetical labour. He regards his book as timely because in the present theological culture exegetical self-understanding is formed by other 'less fruitful' influences (Webster 2003:3). It seems that historical and literal exegesis might be the 'less fruitful' influences that need to be taught what the true nature and parameters of exegesis should actually be.

He seldom speaks of the texts or authors and redactors of biblical texts. He generally uses the term 'revelation' in the singular, as if there are no differences and discrepancies between either the documents or the two testaments. It is as if revelation is unitary and singular. He is not concerned with the many 'theologies' represented by the biblical texts or with their different nuances or contradictions. No, for Webster Webster (2003) it is much simpler. He defines revelation as:

*the self-presentation of the triune God, the free work of sovereign mercy in which God wills, establishes and perfects saving fellowship with himself in which humankind comes to know, love and fear him above all things.*

(Webster 2003:13)

Revelation is a way of talking about the acts of God in which God makes himself present, thus revelation is divine presence in that it reveals God's own proper reality and, because God is the revealing agent, eloquently 'speaking out' of himself (Webster 2003:14). When God speaks in this manner, as Webster understands it, it seems to me that authors, historical contexts and redactional processes become irrelevant.

Another reason for him not to speak about texts, authors or redaction is what he calls 'sanctification'. By this term he means 'the act of God the Holy Spirit in hallowing creaturely processes, employing them in the service of the taking form of revelation within the history of the creation' (Webster 2003:17–18). He defines 'sanctification' further as applicable to the whole range of processes in which the text is caught up from pre-textual tradition to interpretation. In its broadest sense, 'sanctification' refers to the work of the Spirit through which creaturely realities are elected, shaped and preserved to undertake the role in the economy of salvation: Creaturely realities are sanctified for divine use (Webster 2003:25–26). What he implies is that 'sanctification' renders the questions about the 'creaturely processes', or the historical quest for the world of the text, irrelevant or of much less importance. It is the sanctification and the divine 'self-communication' that counts, not the historical bedrock where it was formed. He states that 'sanctification is *making holy* . . . In this sense, the *sanctitas of sancta scriptura is infusa*' (Webster 2003:27). If this should be difficult to understand, Webster Webster (2003) explains that the reason is to be found in a

*convention which so often presents itself to us as self-evidently authoritative, namely the convention that all texts are simple*

*natural, historical entities, and that the Bible is to be read 'like any other text' because it is a text, and all kinds of texts are fundamentally the same kind of entity. But a general theory of texts has shown itself to have only scant theological utility.*

(Webster 2003:28–29)

Webster is neither bothered by the chasms between readers and the biblical texts, nor has he any true appreciation for methods for taking these chasms seriously and for trying to find a way across. They are not only of 'scant theological utility', but should be resisted!

He sees them as representing a deeper ontological problem, namely the assumption that a text's being is defined by reference to its occupation of a space in a natural field of communicative activity. To his mind, both modern critical biblical scholarship and modern philosophical-theological hermeneutics are largely predicated on this naturalist ontological assumption. This assumption should be resisted, as it is hermeneutically a

*ruinous, even ludicrous assumption, because it leads to the absurdity of developing a sophisticated critical apparatus to read biblical texts, not as what they are (texts which address the hearer in the name of God).*

(Webster 2003:29)

It seems to me that Webster is afraid to engage the ravines between the worlds of the texts and present-day readers because it will take a lot of hard and diligent work, and therefore the developing of a sophisticated critical apparatus for reading texts must be made to seem absurd, because, according to Webster, God's Spirit has already done most of the work. But this is where Webster has it wrong: explaining to Bible readers how to approach the texts in a historically, literary, socially and culturally sensitive way is neither sophisticated nor extremely critical. It takes work, yes, but it can be done in a way that leads readers across the divide and encourages them not to run away from it (Malan 2008:1–85). But it is always easier to make something seem absurd than to try to attempt what takes much effort.

As for this problem, Webster proposes an easy solution: reading the Bible in the 'right' way, (i.e. with faith), as a Christian and with self-negation (Webster 2003:70–72). He calls it 'faithful reading in the economy of grace', which is not interpretation but exegetical reason caught up in faith's abandonment of itself to the power of the divine Word to slay and to make alive. Such reading requires 'hermeneutical conversion'. He understands reading as an episode in the history of sin and its overcoming in Christ. Thus, the reader's will has to be reborn. Such reading is mortification and vivification of the reader, healed of instability and lack of exclusive concentration in order to read scripture well and with confidence (Webster 2003:86–91, 96).

Such 'faithful' reading is possible because the Word is self-interpreting and perspicuous or clear, because, through the Spirit, the text serves God's self-presentation. The mere employment of technical exegetical skills is not enough. They may even 'mislead' the reader. Their effectiveness depends on the reader's 'Spirit-produced' disposition: humble dependence upon God and receptivity to the teaching of the gospel, moved above all else by the fear of God towards learning his will. Thereafter, it is necessary, through holiness, to become docile and not contradict scripture. In this way, the clarity of scripture and the reader's holiness belong together (Webster 2003:92–94). In this way, Bible readers are not encouraged to try to understand the world of the texts in order to understand the texts in their historical, social, cultural and literary contexts and thereby bring about a fusion of horizons. Readers should stay where he is: far off, never approaching the deep ravine, totally content with their 'faithful reading' of the Biblical texts because, according to Webster, there is no real ravine.

Why? It may be because Webster does not trust the reports from the scouts of historical literary and social exegesis. To

his mind, their reports represent a gross exaggeration, which are undeservedly given remarkable authority. He therefore insists that judgements about the appropriate exegetical methods should rest upon prior judgements about the ends of interpretation, the proper social and institutional location and, especially, the proper dispositions of interpreters. He thinks that critical methods can generate a false stance towards scripture as divine self-communication because at the heart of it lies a sense of the sublimity of reason, expressed as competence and adequacy, for which the term 'mastery' is hardly too strong. As he sees it, professional critical exegetes assume that they transcend the texts and thereby also transcend the event of God's self-communication. Webster does not advocate the wholesale abandonment of historical enquiry, but raises the question as to their usefulness by asking the question whether they can foster a *childlike* reading of the text (Webster 2003:103–105)!

With such a rather paranoid stance towards critical readings of the biblical texts, one can understand Webster's negation of the ravines and his contentment with 'faithful' and 'childlike' reading. But such paranoia represents fear of true engagement with the difficulties confronting critical readers. It also represents a genuine fear of what the results might be. It therefore represents an unwillingness to make this leap of faith and induces the same paranoia and fear in others.

### CROSSING THE CHASMS

Recognising the chasms between today's readers and the biblical texts is, in itself, an accomplishment that should not be negated. Not all theologians and Bible readers reach this point. But the chasm should not be the destination. The challenge lies in finding ways to make a successful crossing in such a way that others can follow and continue the journey.

Walther Brueggemann (2003:9–10) is not content with camping on the edge of the ravine. He attempts a crossing in such a way that it might lead others across as well. To his mind, people find the Bible as not very helpful because they expect wrong things of it. He sees the Bible not as an answer book or a good luck piece to bring God's blessing. To him, it is precious because it offers us a way of understanding the world in a fresh perspective that leads to life, joy and wholeness. It offers a model, a pattern through which we may think about, perceive and live life differently. The model he regards as central to the Bible is what he calls a 'covenantal-historical' way of understanding life and faith. By 'covenantal' he means an enduring commitment between God and God's people based on vows of loyalty and mutual obligation that radically affects and empowers both parties. By 'historical' he means that these covenant partners have a vast deposit of precious memories of decisive interactions. These interactions, which run the gamut of love and hate, affirm to us that our whole existence depends on staying seriously and faithfully involved with the covenant partner, even at some risk.

What Brueggemann proposes here is a hermeneutical approach, a presupposition for understanding biblical texts. It is not an exegetical method, but historical and literary exegesis is already presupposed. It is commendable that he sees the Bible as offering us a way of understanding the world that leads to life, joy and wholeness. In a way, this could be taken to coincide with what existential theologians call 'a new self understanding' (in German: *Selbsterständnis*), a hermeneutical term which I consider of the utmost importance (Malan 2008:53).

The problem I have with his approach is that he narrows this way of understanding to covenantal-historical, as if this way of understanding is found in each and every biblical document. I fear that 'covenantal' means a reduction of the diversity of *kerugma* found in the texts and that radical differences in viewpoints between documents are thereby negated (Malan 2008:4–611, 52–54). Even though he speaks of the differences

between the two testaments, it seems that he does not accept the radical discontinuity that exists between them (Malan 2008:3–6). In this regard, his approach is similar to that of the biblical theology movement with their insistence on continuity between the testaments. I am not convinced that 'covenant' or the 'vows of commitment' it is based on are central to the texts of the Second Testament or even all the documents of the First Testament, for example, the wisdom texts. Within both testaments there are different nuances of self-understanding and even radically different ones.

I am also not at ease with his understanding and use of the term 'historical' in this particular instance. He illuminates it as 'precious memories of decisive interactions' and claims these as 'precise historical memory' (Brueggemann 2003:17) that gives power and identity to people. He reduces this memory further to memories of the Exodus liberation, the empowerment of Israel through David, (God's) passionate caring-suffering in Jesus' crucifixion and the surprise of new life in the resurrection. To him, the Bible is the 'account' of this very special history (Brueggemann 2003:18). Historical studies have shown that we do not find history in our sense of the word in the biblical texts (Malan 2008:11–12, 34–35, 38–39, 40–43). It is not precise in the sense that it is accurately reported facts. As I have previously pointed out, the 'historical' narratives of both testaments contain *kerugma* and are not meant to be understood in a historical way (Malan 2008:42). This reduction to 'historical' (narrative) excludes many texts, as many biblical texts are not 'historical' narratives and most of the documents in the Second Testament are letters or pretend to be such. Furthermore, Brueggemann's idea of 'precise historical memory' does not account for the frequent instances of redaction of the texts, where changes are made (to this 'precise historical memory') in order to facilitate new *kerugma* by reinterpreting texts for new situations or new trains of thought (Malan 2008:42). In addition, he neither focuses on the developmental history of the texts, thereby excluding layers of contexts, nor on the history of the canon, which I find to be of the utmost importance (Malan 2008:9–31).

What I find disturbing is the lack of any reference to the mythological worldview and language of the Bible and how this problem should be addressed. Demythologising is the hermeneutical tool Bultmann (1965:179–195) gave us in order to translate the Bible's mythological worldview and language in an existential way to reveal the self-understanding latent in the texts (Malan 2008:54). Without this tool, the latent self-understanding escapes us.

Another related shortcoming of Brueggemann's approach is the absence of references to metaphors and how they function in relation to the socio-cultural world of the text and also how meaning is to be translated for present-day readers. This represents a failure to perceive that both talk about God and relationships between God and people are always metaphorical in language and not factual. In this instance, Brueggemann's own terms should be restated as that the relationship between God and people is 'sometimes likened to a covenant', from which certain deductions can be made.

Brueggemann should receive credit for trying to cross the chasms and his endeavours to lead others across as well. But it seems that he underestimates the steepness, depth and width of these ravines and, therefore, believes that the crossings will not be too difficult. He could be likened to an overly optimistic hiker who attempts to cross the ravine with insufficient gear. The crossing will not be completed and those following will not be led to the other side. There will be no fusion of horizons because the horizon of the text is underestimated and reduced to something it is not.

Wright's approach is, in a way, similar to that of Brueggemann, in that he uses the term 'covenant' frequently for explaining the relationship between God and God's people, be it Israel

or the church (Wright 2005:46–71). While he states the radical difference between the two testaments, he imposes the obsolete scheme of promise and fulfilment as the binding force between them (Wright 2005:42–46). He also forces the term 'Kingdom of God' to be another continuum, as if it was central to most of the biblical documents (Wright 2005:28–46). Another such oversimplification is the idea of renewal of creation as the purpose God has for this world, as well as clinging to a rather apocalyptic eschatology (Wright 2005:29, 59, 126). It seems Wright chooses to carry heavy baggage with him in his quest to cross the chasm and works hard in leading others across with the same baggage.

Sometimes Wright sounds a little paranoid, especially when speaking of postmodernism or the historical method of reading as developed in the Enlightenment (2005:6–14, 82–89, 95, 118–120). In such cases he seems to try to control the results of historical reading by speaking of the 'proper' and 'improper' tasks of historical exegesis, the latter described as 'trying to undermine Christian faith' (Wright 2005:119).

Nevertheless, he seems serious about crossing. It seems that Wright does not try to take shortcuts that would leave him stranded in the ravine (2005:128–130). He seems to accept the necessity of historical and literary exegesis in what he calls a totally contextual reading of the Bible. He seemingly understands correctly that contextual reading is never completed, as the various sciences applied here are always expanding their knowledge and methods and also because the readers themselves are constantly changing. To his mind, such reading leads to preaching of the liturgically read scripture in a fresh, new way (Wright 2005:130–142) as well as illuminating the private study of the Bible and assuring that clergy is appropriately trained by accredited leaders for the vitally important task of preaching ever afresh with resultant vibrant pulsating church life.

As is the case with Brueggemann, Wright makes a number of fundamental oversimplifications in the framework he imposes on the biblical texts. Within this framework, historical and literary exegesis has limited effect, as the boundaries of this framework cannot be overstepped. Therefore, on this topic Wright seems paranoid and controlling. His seemingly positive stance toward historical and literary exegesis may be nothing more than window dressing. I fear that, with this approach, Wright will neither make the crossing nor lead others across. It is not the other side that is reached but the mirage of oversimplifications that will disappear under the scrutiny of true historical and literary exegesis.

Yes, Wright also deserves credit for his attempt. He is certainly not content with camping on the edge of the ravine or turning back to the answers of yesteryear, where tradition leaves you. His view that the journey ahead is unending and should not be abandoned should also be commended. He accepts the necessary tools and is prepared to use them, albeit sometimes with suspicion. The problem is that his frame of mind inhibits his usage of the tools to such a degree that neither he nor his followers will reach the world of the text. Furthermore, a serious problem with this approach is that the issues of metaphorical and mythical language are not addressed.

To my mind, the only one of the selected scholars who successfully crosses the chasm between the ancient texts and current readers is Schniedewind. There can be critique against the fact that his approach is limited to the First Testament, as well as to the limited focus on circumstances conducive to intense ancient writing activity. But these apparent weaknesses are also the strong points in Schniedewind's approach. He does not try to impose a scheme on the texts and force a frame of thought or concepts to suggest some kind of unity in biblical literature. His approach is truly historical, socially sensitive and literary; the conclusions he makes are supported by archaeological, historical and literary evidence and arguments. In this way, Schniedewind successfully reaches the other side of the chasm – the world, or

rather, the different worlds where the texts of the First Testament and the subsequent layers of their redaction took place. He undertakes the journey in such a convincing manner that readers accompany him with curiosity to these worlds. As this happens, and those worlds become alive, a fusion of horizons takes place: the horizon of the reader is expanded as it meets the horizon of the text. In this way, a meaningful dialogue between text and reader can take place. Legitimate conclusions can be drawn from the texts and their application in their worlds in order to find answers for believers on their quest for meaningful life. This is only possible because Schniedewind does not underestimate the chasms between himself as reader and the ancient texts. What is more, his approach reveals his latent respect for the texts and the process through which they came to be.

## UNDERSTANDING, BUT NOT CROSSING THE CHASMS

Some theologians and lay people see the chasms between themselves and the worlds of the biblical texts. They fully understand the complexities and dangers of crossing these divides. What they underestimate, though, is the value of making such crossing. To them, it seems an impossible task, or one that is just not worth the effort. What they can glean from an uninformed reading of the biblical texts seems to be more than enough. This seems to be illustrated by the work of Andrew Village.

Village (2007:79–82) accepts Thiselton's description of the goal of biblical hermeneutics as bringing about meaningful engagement between interpreter and text in such a way that the interpreter's horizon is shaped and enlarged. He concurs that horizon is a fundamental aspect of any interpretive task (Village 2007:79). But he differs from Thiselton in the sense that he is not 'generally optimistic', like Thiselton, about the possibility of linking the horizons. Village assumes that there is no possibility of bringing the two horizons together and thus his interpretive task becomes something quite different. He sees himself as part of the 'general trend in biblical studies' that moves away from historical studies. From this perspective, historical studies are understood as having confidently accepted their created images of the world of the author. The new trend has moved on to postmodern methods that have abandoned even trying to enter that world. This he sees as a different way of understanding the 'otherness' of the biblical text (Village 2007:80).

Village sees the variability of interpretation in his study mostly as stemming from differences in personality types (2007:160–162). He underscores that there was good evidence for the importance of individual differences in shaping interpretation: what individuals bring to the act of reading has an important effect on how they understand the Bible, irrespective of where they worship. He sees his study as contributing to the discourse in hermeneutics, as it can move the discussion from anecdotal observation to 'real' readers and more dependable and rigorous analysis.

But does he even try to cross the linguistic, social, cultural and historical chasms between readers and texts? In short, he does not. His approach to biblical texts is reader-centred and by reading he means reading the translated texts and accepting the choices translators of the texts have made. He chooses not to cross the divide to the world of the author and text, but finds meaning brought to the text by readers. That is his foundation for understanding scripture. When applied to texts, Village's approach is easily identified as a peculiar form of 'foundationalism' (2007:165–168). Village is comfortable with camping on the edge of the ravine and not leading others across. He finds enough meaning on the readers' side of the chasm and sees the chasm as impossible to cross. For him, meaning is generated in the 'here and now' through the process of reading (translated texts). Each reader creates his or her own meaning on the basis of his or her personality type, education and whatever else he or she brings to the text.



To him, this considerable variability of interpretation is a healthy sign that points to inclusivity of different traditions, backgrounds, personalities and beliefs. He sees it as acceptable diversity illustrated by the metaphor of the church as the body of Christ.

This kind of approach abdicates the responsibility of theologians to lead lay readers of the Bible to understand that there are chasms between modern-day readers and the different layers of meaning to be found in the Biblical documents. These chasms are formed by huge differences in language, culture, society and the passing of history that moves the layers of meaning even further as time passes. With this reality comes the acceptance that meaning is never static. Meaning is always found anew by again and again crossing the ravines.

Not even trying to cross the chasms and, thereby, not leading others towards the future meanings the texts might have is not acceptable. But Village goes to the extreme: he proposes an empirical theology of scripture. His intention is to find ways for such a theology to do justice to both the importance of scripture for the Christian faith and the diversity of practice among ordinary readers. He sees the individual diversity of reading the texts as lenses similar to white light refracted by a prism, showing that in effect there is a collage of colour, a rainbow of meaning to be found in the texts (Village 2007:164–165). He sees this analogy as acceptable, as it links to the contextualism found in radical postmodern approaches where there is no ‘meta-narrative’, only the locally contingent manifestations of truth. In the analogy, there would be no white light, only coloured light that changes depending on where one stands. In effect, the prism creates its own light. Individual readings of the text are made to become the source of the message, not the text or its origins. Thus, ‘human diversity may shape the Word into words, but these words are not entirely of human making’ (Village 2007:165).

The problem with Village’s approach is not with a spectrum of possible meanings to be found in a text. This reality is already inherent in the multiple layers of meaning deposited in the redactional processes as well as the diverse uses found in the *Wirkungsgeschichte* (effective history) of each text. The problem lies with knowingly not trying to cross the divide. What it boils down to, is that the chasm is ignored. Those who ignore ravines tend to fall into them. The effect is never bringing the horizon of the text and reader together but making the readers’ horizon the norm. It relativises the layers of meaning already present in the text, as it disempowers the text by giving the reader the decisive power over the text. Ignoring the problem by turning away from the seemingly impossible may seem the easiest way of ‘solving’ it. It surely takes a lot less courage and even less work. Ignoring tactics is not the way of responsible theology. That is the way of the least resistance and the least work.

## CONCLUSION

The title of this article asks the question whether the chasms between current readers and biblical texts can be crossed. From the discussion of various approaches the following conclusion can be made: the chasms can be crossed, but only by those who acknowledge the reality of the chasms and understand the danger of not crossing as halting the journey of understanding the texts, content with not working towards the fusion of horizons. Those who regard the chasms in this way need to have courage, diligence and faith not only for confronting the journey and the very worlds of the texts, but especially for being themselves confronted and questioned by the texts. Only in this way can the unending journey of finding meaning proceed to the next of the endless number of ravines ahead. Finding meaning is never the end but the endless journey of finding it anew.

This was the formal choice of the Netherdutch Reformed Church of Africa (Malan 2008:88–93). At their 64th General Synod in

2004, a formulation was accepted, explaining the Church’s approach to scripture. This short formulation was followed by a broader explanation of the relevant themes intending to equip lay people to better understand the texts of scripture (Malan 2008:2–83).

In essence, the texts of the Bible are accepted as witnesses of faith in God from across a historical divide, through which today’s readers may come to believe or have their faith renewed or fortified (Malan 2008:2). Although the Bible appears to be one book, two libraries are contained within its covers. The diverse promises and different understandings of salvation found in the two testaments are stressed in order to explain why the Christian church understands salvation and the relationship with God primarily from the perspective of the Second Testament (Malan 2008:3–6).

Not only the historical but also the language and cultural divides are explained, as well as the diverse types of literature and language to be found in the biblical texts (Malan 2008:7–25). The process through which the texts came to be, from oral to written texts, as well as the redactional processes, are given attention, explaining the different layers of meaning to be found the same text. The history of canon formation and the insights from textual criticism concludes the initial part of the book about the origins of the biblical texts and the Bible as Book of Faith (Malan 2008:26–31). In this way, a historical-literary rationale prepares readers for understanding why the Netherdutch Reformed Church chooses this specific approach.

The second part explains the different approaches to scripture in order to highlight the approach of the Netherdutch Reformed Church as historical-literary and cultural-scientific, in contrast to fundamentalist or foundationalist, approaches (Malan 2008:34–35). The reasoning behind this approach is explained as the result of years of research, as well as the changing circumstances in which the Church finds itself today. As these circumstances differ to a large extent from circumstances in biblical times, as well as the circumstances during the Reformation, new questions need to be asked and old answers need to be reviewed (Malan 2008:36–39).

The texts are not understood as containing absolute truths, but *kerugmatik* truth. *Kerugma* entails that faith is the point of view from which certain events are understood and addressed in the texts. As such, a relationship of faith is presupposed in the different layers to be found during the origins of the different texts. Seen in this way, the texts are understood as containing relational truth, which can be explained as a combination of objective and subjective truth, which boils down to existential truth opening new possibilities of self-understanding (faith) (Malan 2008:40–43).

This means that the biblical texts themselves are not bearers of authority, but that they point to God’s authority, especially in the sense of God’s saving love through Jesus Christ. Authority is therefore not threatened by discrepancies between science and statements made in the texts, for instance about history, geography and creation. Inspiration is not understood as a static quality of the texts themselves, but as dynamic and implicit in the events of faithful *kerugma* and reading, through which new possibilities may be opened for faith, thus in effect continuing inspiration (Malan 2008:44–49).

The approach of the Netherdutch Reformed Church is to take the chasms between today’s readers and the biblical texts seriously and to interpret this as a challenge that should be met with responsibility. For this reason, the discipline of hermeneutics, which includes historical-literary and social exegesis, receives detailed attention (Malan 2008:50–55). This necessitates a continuing and lively dialogue between hermeneutics and dogmatics. Dogmatics, understood as the systematic reflection about the relationship with God, relies heavily on the results of historical-literary exegesis and hermeneutics. The implication is

that dogmatics cannot arrive at final answers, but is, together with exegesis and hermeneutics, on a voyage of discovery. Preaching forms the *kerugmatik* pauses along this road, feeding on the results from these disciplines. This is also true of the conclusions made by the discipline of Christian ethics (Malan 2008:56–60).

This approach is not only implemented with biblical texts, but with any and all texts. The texts of the Church's confessions of faith are therefore read and interpreted in the same historical-literary way. The result is that the Church does not stagnate by repeating the formulations of the past, but is formulating new answers to today's questions while in active dialogue with these historical documents of faith, thereby reinterpreting them for today (Malan 2008:61–66). In this way, the Church escapes the clutches of fundamentalism and foundationalism (Malan 2008:67–75), which would deter the voyage on the discovery of meaning.

With this approach, the Netherdutch Reformed Church shows the courage to brave the chasms between today's readers and the ancient Biblical texts. It comes to this challenge prepared with an array of equipment that will ensure the successful crossing of the chasm by various routes, thereby opening new horizons and possibilities of self-understanding. This approach accepts that any responsible attempt at understanding the meaning of texts needs to take both the worlds of text and reader seriously, as the relationship of faith is at stake. No shortcuts are taken, no energy is spared and the sometimes fearful task is undertaken with determination to lead followers to the other side of the ravines – the worlds of the texts. In this way, the worlds of the texts

and the worlds of the readers come together in dialogue that hopefully results in frequent fusions of horizons. This approach also accepts that the journey is never-ending, that the crossing of one ravine only leads to the next and that the search for meaning is ongoing. It is to be forever confronted and questioned by the texts, struggling anew through the ravines and making the leap of faith again and again.

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