

Chapter 5

Hermeneutics and theology

Theology, as the German theologian Karl Barth once said, is a human word about God's word. Theology, in other words, interprets divine revelation. This is especially the case for the three major monotheistic or Abrahamic religions (Judaism, Christianity, and Islam), the so-called 'religions of the book'. For these faiths, religious identity and daily living depend on divine revelation as collected in a sacred text. The Jewish Torah, the Christian Bible, and the Qur'an are believed to be divine revelations, and therefore have binding authority and define communal life. In all three religions exists a natural kinship between divine and human law, since believers hold that God reveals laws for righteous living, some of which became part of modern civic law. Together with jurisprudence, theology is thus one of the classic hermeneutic disciplines that demonstrate the intrinsic practical dimension of interpretation: how does the law or God's revealed will apply to our present concerns? Neither the legal nor the theological interpreter is satisfied with a mere historical, descriptive understanding of the text. Only in application does the text do its work as law or proclamation.

Hermeneutics and divine inspiration

A central hermeneutic issue in theology is the relation of divine revelation to human understanding. All three Abrahamic religions

believe in a divinely inspired text. Does a divinely inspired text require interpretation? Interpretation, we have argued, entails the faithful translation of what someone has said about a certain matter into our own meaning context. The interpreter is essentially a mediator who relates the meaning of another's communication to present circumstances. Understanding what someone says to me cannot be merely the ability to repeat word for word a sentence or a text. Rather, when I have understood something, I can put its meaning into my own words.

Divine inspiration, however, seems contrary to hermeneutics. Does not inspiration ensure the absolute clarity of God's revelation by avoiding any human mediation? If indeed God dictates every word to a prophet or apostle, then we have the one place that is exempt from interpretation. If divine inspiration is indeed dictation, the original human recipient merely channels God's truth without any understanding. Such divine dictation, however, also affects how later readers approach the text. Belief in inspiration without mediation through human understanding encourages fundamentalism. If a sacred text itself is deemed perfect and unalterable, believers are prone to disregard the historical context of prophecies, or pay no attention to literary genres. The result is that only a strictly literalist reading counts as the straightforward and faithful access to revelation. Most importantly, if interpretation inescapably filters a text through the reader's own cultural horizon, fundamentalists' disregard for their own historical context will virtually ensure that they read their own predilections into the text. Consider, for example, the fundamentalist reading of the creation story in Genesis as literalist scientific account rather than as mythological narrative about the human condition. What, however does inspiration entail in the three religions?

Inspiration and Judaism

Ancient Jewish prophets were 'filled by God's Spirit', when speaking for God, and traditionalists hold that the first five books

of the Hebrew Bible, the *Torah* (or what English scholars call the *Pentateuch*, Greek for 'five books'), were dictated word for word by God to Moses, while the remaining sacred writings were more generally inspired. In a broader sense, *Torah* can also refer to the entire biblical narrative or even the totality of Jewish teaching, culture, and practice. At the same time, this view of verbal inspiration did not blind interpreters to historical inaccuracies in the text, but these were regarded as challenges to the human understanding rather than evidence against the trustworthiness of divine revelation.

Nor did respect for divine inspiration automatically require literal reading. Biblical scholars often read passages allegorically when they seemed to contradict human reason. Jewish hermeneutics thus always contained elements that allowed for the broadening of conceptions of inspiration from strict verbal dictation to the more general notion that emerged with reform movements in Judaism during the 19th century. This modern view of inspiration still accords the biblical text special divine status, but also recognizes the human mediation of God's revelation by acknowledging different authorial styles, composition of single texts from multiple source materials, internal contradictions, and anachronisms in the Bible.

Inspiration and Islam

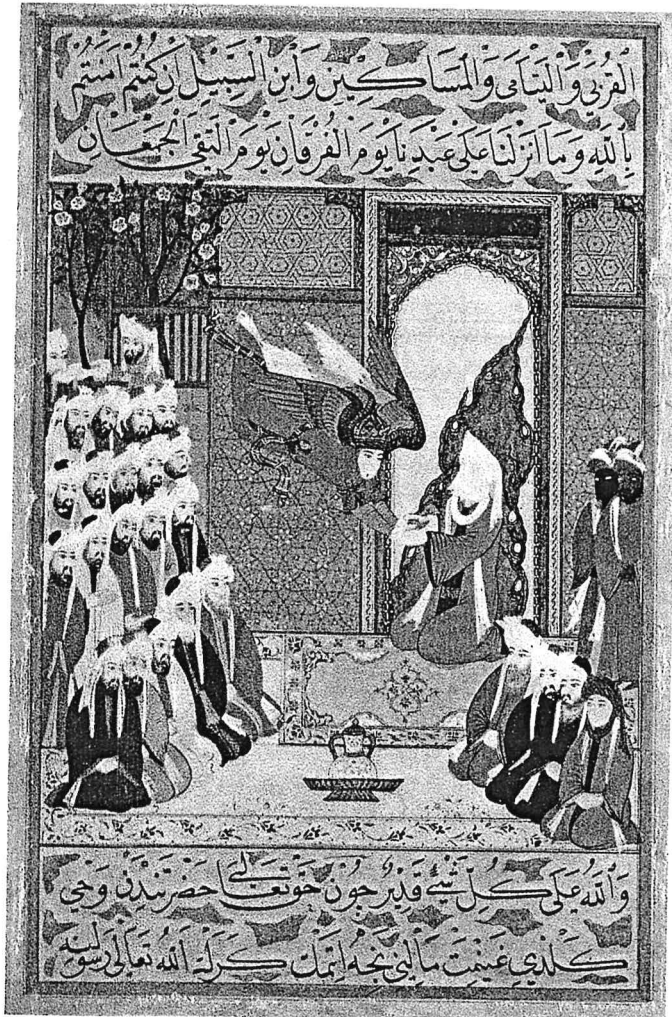
This transition to a more hermeneutic view of inspiration has been more difficult for Islam due to its unique view of the Quran as verbally inspired, divine incarnation. Similar to traditional Rabbinical views of the Pentateuch's inspiration, the vast majority of Muslims hold that the Quran 'is the speech of God, dictated without human editing'. According to Islamic tradition, captured in this medieval illustration, an Angel dictated the pre-existing Quran word for word to the prophet, who memorized Allah's revelation by recitation (the root meaning of the word 'Quran' is to recite). Flames depicting contact with the divine were also used in Judaism and Christianity to indicate

visions or revelations of the divine. The prophet's reception of a written text from the Archangel, however, emphasize this idea of verbal inspiration (see Figure 5).

For most Muslims, the Quran is 'the eternal, uncreated, literal word of God (*kalam Allah*) sent down from heaven, revealed one final time to the Prophet Muhammad as a guide for humankind'. As 'uncreated', the Quran is divine, an extension of God himself. Muslims often liken the Quran to Jesus as God's incarnation. Just as Jesus is God's eternal word made flesh, so the Quran embodies 'the eternal divine word'. In common with its sister religions, Islam had to wrestle with the relation of reason to divine revelation, but, as scholars have pointed out, the notion of an eternal text raises particular hermeneutical issues. For example, while Christians hold the gospels to be accounts written by inspired authors as witnesses to Jesus as God's self-revelation, the Quranic text in its specific form *is* God's word. For Muslims, the Quran *as* Quran exists only in its original Arabic transcription. Any translation of it is no longer the Quran but 'an interpretation of its meaning'.

Scholars of religion have drawn attention to another hermeneutic consequence of the Quran's theological status. An eternal text implicitly 'negates the very idea of it having a historical context'. How can one reconcile the notion of an uncreated text with the fundamental hermeneutic insight that all truth is mediated historically? How do principles of historical textual criticism widely accepted by modern scholarship apply to the Quran? This question pits traditionalists who lean towards ahistorical, literalist readings of the Quran against modern Islamic reformers such as Tariq Ramadan, who emphasize '*ijtihad*', the hermeneutic application of original Quranic statements to later historical contexts.

Indeed, Muslim scholars throughout the centuries, have operated on the assumption that while the text is infallible, its interpreters are not. Most main schools of Islamic interpretation have rejected



5. A medieval depiction of the prophet Muhammad receiving the revelations of the Quran from the Archangel Gabriel.

simplistic literalist readings of the text, and scholars have long debated allegorical interpretation and the role of reason in understanding divine revelation. The most famous Muslim attempt to reconcile Quranic inspiration with human reason was made by the great medieval Muslim philosopher Ibn Rushd (Averroës; 1126–98) who argued for two levels of truth. ‘The divine law’, he believed, ‘is divided into two parts, the external sense and the interpretation.’ Common folk should read literally, adhering to the external sense as expressed in pictures and allegories, lest they fall into unbelief. Unlike ‘the multitude’, interpretation is reserved for ‘the learned’, philosophers whose erudition enables them to see the unity between divine and human reason. Averroës’ elitism may be irritating to modern ears, but his effort to unite faith and reason remains an important hermeneutical issue in theology.

Inspiration and Christianity

Like its sister religions, Christianity features various views of inspiration, ranging from a general sense of divine illumination that includes human mediation to a narrow doctrine of dictation. This narrow doctrine is called ‘verbal inspiration’, the claim that God showed the human author exactly what words to use. The concept of verbal inspiration emerged relatively late in Christian history after the Protestant Reformation. Verbal inspiration became necessary to establish a stand-alone, self-interpreting Bible, by which an individual reader could attain certain truth divorced from tradition and ecclesial authority.

Originally, however, Christian interpreters worked with a broader sense of inspiration. New Testament writers refer to the scriptures as ‘God-breathed’ (2 Timothy 3:16), and Christianity generally understood this term to mean that human authors act as scribes who mediate God’s word through writing in their own cultural idiom, as depicted in Caravaggio’s classic portrayal of St Matthew’s inspiration (see Figure 6). Note that the picture shows



6. The Inspiration of St Matthew (1602) by Caravaggio.

no sign of direct transmission such as a beam of light; on the contrary, the angel speaks from a dark background, and the saint listens carefully as he notes down the received revelation.

This motif of mediation becomes even more emphasized through the central Christian doctrine of the incarnation, the teaching that God revealed himself most clearly through the actions and words of Jesus. The New Testament *Letter to the Hebrews* includes a classic expression of this view: 'In many and various ways God spoke of old to our fathers by the prophets; but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son, whom he appointed the heir of all things, through whom also he created the world. He reflects the glory of God and bears the very stamp of his nature, upholding the universe by his word of power' (Hebrews 1:1-3). The Christian doctrine of the incarnation teaches that God entered history and time by becoming a human being, and thus also becoming subject to interpretation. John's gospel offers Jesus's self-designation as interpreting God: 'no one has ever seen God; the only son who is in the bosom of the father *interpreted* him' (John 1:18). The Greek word for 'interpreted' is *exēgēsato*, the word from which we get our English word exegesis, another term for interpretation. Thus central to Christian hermeneutics is the idea that Jesus is the 'exegete' of God, who interprets him through his own life.

In principle, the idea of the incarnation as the final self-revelation of God establishes interpretation at the very centre of the Christian faith. According to Christian belief, in Christ the eternal word of God expresses itself through human words and thus becomes subject to interpretation. As a modern Catholic theologian, Hans-Urs von Balthasar (1905-88), put it, Jesus is the perfect interpretation of God whom we have to interpret in turn. We only know God through the incarnate Christ and Christ only through our interpretations of him, which themselves are always in the 'flesh' of history. The incarnational pattern of God's self-revelation presents the Christian with the double hermeneutic challenge that Hans-Georg Gadamer, as previously mentioned, labelled the

'fusion of horizons'. Not only does the Christian interpreter have to reconstruct God's own self-interpretation *within* 1st-century Middle Eastern culture and history, but he also has to translate what the text says into his own life context determined by modern preconceptions and concerns. Awareness of both contexts is necessary for a faithful interpretation.

The importance of tradition

Hermeneutic philosophy insists on the importance of tradition for understanding. Hans-Georg Gadamer, as noted, emphasized tradition as the medium that shapes our consciousness and thus connects us to the past. The interpretation of religious texts puts historical flesh on this hermeneutic claim. Even adherents of verbal inspiration will have to admit the indispensable role of community and tradition for interpretation. As we shall see, the Quran itself, though held to be unmediated dictation, still requires interpretation through tradition. Similarly, the framework of meaning within which the collection of biblical writings is read is based on the religious community's beliefs and expectations about God's relation with them. This framework itself is based on the history of interpretation within this community and its collective religious experience as it developed over time. In short, what the Bible means is inseparable from the interpreters, who over time and as members of a community canonized the texts and contributed to their definite contours of meaning. Just as the Hebrew Bible is only what it is based on tradition, so the Christian Bible is read *as* Bible only within the tradition of the church. This, of course, is precisely Gadamer's point about historically effected consciousness and tradition being positive forces for understanding.

Tradition and the Hebrew Bible

Many scholars agree that what we hold in our hands today as the Hebrew Bible is the result of a dynamic process of recording and

interpreting narratives by scribes who collected oral or written accounts, compiled them, and wove them into coherent narratives; this dynamic process, called *redaction*, means that interpretation played an intrinsic role in the very origin of the Bible. This process was intensified in 587 BCE, when Israel was conquered by the Babylonian empire, the temple at Jerusalem destroyed, and the majority of Israelites deported to Babylon. Without the temple, the Torah, consisting of the essential historical narratives and laws together with their interpretations mostly by teachers called 'rabbis', became central to the identity and life of the Jewish community. Even after the restoration of Jerusalem and the temple, following Israel's return half a century later, the lasting shock of the Babylonian captivity was likely responsible for the increasing codification of the Hebrew Bible or *Tanakh* (completed between 3rd and 2nd century BCE) and of the long tradition of rabbinic oral commentary on the Bible, called the Talmud. Most biblical scholars agree that during this post-exilic period, the biblical narrative was consciously reshaped to answer Israel's gnawing questions in light of the exile: 'why did this happen to us?' and 'are we still the chosen people of God?'

A typical example of redactive re-interpretations of biblical texts within an ongoing tradition occurs in the book of Chronicles. In an earlier narrative, the prophet Nathan assured King David that his dynasty would last: '*your* house and *your* kingdom shall be made sure forever before me' (2 Sam. 7:16). Post-exilic writers staring at the rather meager replacement of Solomon's (David's son's) temple knew for a fact that Nathan's prediction had not come about. The redactor of Chronicles solves that problem by shifting the emphasis from David's house to God's house: 'I will confirm him in *my* house and in *my* kingdom forever, and his throne will be established forever' (1 Chron. 7-14). God, in other words, has not forsaken Israel, because David's kingdom was merely a symbol for what God would ultimately accomplish through the Davidic line; God will put his man on the throne in good time and vindicate Israel. The old text thereby gains a new and forward-looking aspect.

Such internal reinterpretations of the Hebrew Bible did not mean that scribes simply invented new narratives, but that they engaged in the fundamental hermeneutic activity of interpreting existing texts in light of their own cultural horizon, especially since they believed themselves to be part of God's ongoing story with Israel. Through this interpretive collating and handing down of texts, a certain set of sacred writings became the defining core of Israel's identity as God's people. These texts merged into the biblical 'canon', the Greek word for a plumb-line or measure. For Jewish interpreters, the texts within this collection shed light on each other and they cross-reference topically related texts, reading passages within the context of the entire Bible to understand God's will for the believer.

When interpreting the Hebrew Bible, Jewish scholars also draw on the Bible's history of interpretation. The three main sources for this tradition are the Mishnah (rabbinic commentary on the Torah delineating legal application for social mores), the Talmud (scholarly commentaries on the Mishnah), and Midrash (rabbinic explanation of biblical texts concerning legal application and spiritual meaning). Drawing on these sources, a Jewish scholar never reads individualistically but always in conversation with the interpretive tradition.

Tradition and Christian interpretation

Tradition also plays a central role in the Christian religion, not least because Christianity is a conscious re-interpretation of Israel's biblical narrative. Christianity began as a Jewish messianic movement grounded in the same biblical narrative that presents Israel as symbolic of humanity's fall and ultimate redemption by God. Early Christian theologians continued the Judaic tradition of reading the Hebrew Bible as an evolving story of God's dealings with Israel, and identified Jesus as the Messiah who realized the story's climax. The apostle Paul expresses this sense of continuity with Israel's narrative when he interprets the Christian message as

'promised beforehand through [God's] prophets in the holy scriptures, the gospel concerning his Son, who was descended from David according to the flesh, and designated Son of God in power according to the Spirit of holiness by his resurrection from the dead, Jesus Christ our Lord' (Romans 1:1-4). We have to keep in mind that Paul develops his theology before the Christian Bible with its division into Old and New Testament existed. The 'holy scriptures' that provide the imagery and interpretive categories for Paul and early Christian theology is the Hebrew Bible.

The gospel narratives of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John follow the apostle Paul's lead by interpreting Jesus's life and work with reference to these scriptures. Indeed, they present Jesus himself as framing his own actions in light of the scriptures' narrative. According to John, Jesus tells people 'If you believed Moses, you would believe me, for he wrote about me' (5:46). Following Jesus's own claim to be Israel's promised Messiah (in Greek the *Christos* or 'anointed one'), early Christians fundamentally changed the Jewish interpretive framework. As the promised Messiah, Jesus had fulfilled God's ancient promise of a new covenant, according to which God would be immediately present among his people, his very word written in their hearts. Therefore, his disciples' writings about him become known as the new covenant, or 'New Testament', and the Hebrew Bible became the 'Old Testament'. The writings that eventually formed the New Testament were canonized through use and circulation among Christian assemblies, with a recognizable core set of writings extant (including epistles by the apostle Paul and the four gospels) as early as the late 2nd century. Both in the Hebrew and Christian traditions, formal canonization of biblical writings recognized a core set of texts already established as central by communal practice.

Clearly, tradition is as important for Christian interpretation as it was in Judaism. Both religions read their scriptures in light of an ongoing tradition that provides the hermeneutic framework or whole within which texts are read. For Christian interpreters,

Christ and his redemptive work for humanity constitute the hermeneutic whole to which each interpretation ultimately points. From the beginning, this theological key determined the interpretive relation of Old and New Testaments. As the church father Augustine expressed it in the 4th century, the New Testament is *latent* (contained in seed) in the Old and the Old, *patent* (its meaning made obvious) in the New.

Early theologians employed two hermeneutic principles to read the Bible in light of the life and teachings of Christ. The first is called *typology* and was meant to show how important events in Israel's narrative anticipated the Christian faith. The word *typos* meant 'imprint' or 'pattern', and indicated an Old Testament event or person pointing to a future reality. The apostle Paul saw in Adam a 'type' whose original purpose of life with God was fulfilled in Christ (Rom. 5:14). Similarly, other events in the history of Israel are *typoi* or examples that reveal God's will for the Christian church.

The second interpretive principle was *allegorical* reading (from *allos*, other and *agoreuein*, to speak). Allegorical interpretation showed how a historical event or biblical statement becomes a symbol pointing to another meaning. For example, Paul interpreted the story about Abraham's two wives allegorically, thereby revealing the Christian reinterpretation of Judaism, whereby not Torah but Jesus provides access to communion with God (*Galatians* 4:21-7). In Paul's reading, Hagar a slave represents the 'old' Mosaic covenant and Sarah, a freewoman, points towards the new covenant of promise as fulfilled in Christ.

Spiritual interpretation

Ancient Christian interpreters practised typological and allegorical readings to uncover the spiritual meaning of biblical texts in order to deepen their understanding of God. They did not consider such readings fanciful or arbitrary because they had a

different view of reality from us moderns (see Chapter 2). Ancient interpreters assumed a connection between mind and a higher order of reality. For them, sacred texts were windows to divine realities. Theologians call this the 'sacramental' quality of language and texts, that is, their ability to mediate transcendent, divine truths. Already in the Greek philosophical use of Homer or in rabbinic interpretation of the Bible, the text was not read in a strictly literal or historical sense. In contrast to modern literalism, texts were treated as cryptic, containing hidden spiritual insights. Even historical events were means of conveying spiritual truths.

Christians continued this tradition in their own way: if indeed Christ was the incarnation of God's creative wisdom and power, and if indeed his life was the climactic fulfilment of the biblical narrative, then the spiritual meaning of biblical histories, prophecies and proverbs must ultimately refer to him. For this reason, early Christian readers had no problem adopting interpretive strategies common to the ancient world, such as typological and allegorical readings, in trying to unveil the deeper, spiritual meaning of the text. For example, when God told Moses to remove his sandals before the burning bush, Gregory of Nyssa (335-94) found in this event the moral principle that just as Moses removed his leather sandals to approach God, we must put off immoral behaviour when interpreting the Bible. Gregory believed that we cannot comprehend the light of divine truth unless the 'dead and earthly covering of skins' is removed from the 'feet of our soul'.

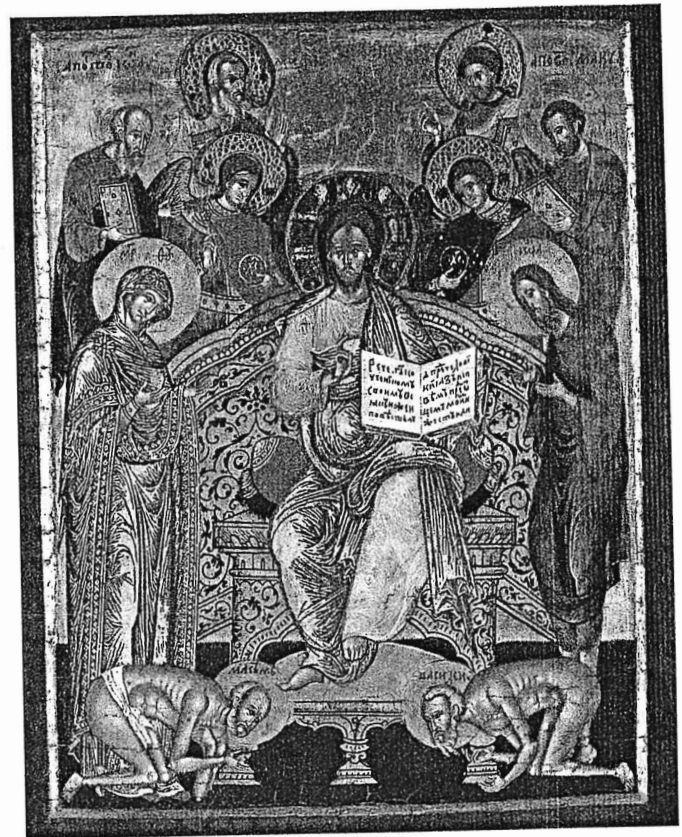
Medieval interpretation continued with the same basic theological hermeneutic. The text's ability to serve as window to spiritual realities was eventually captured in a well-known motto memorized by theology students: *Littera gesta docet, quid credas allegoria, moralis quid agas, quo tendas anagogia* (the letter teaches what happened; what you are to believe the allegory; the moral sense what you ought to do, and the anagogy where you're tending, i.e., a passage's eschatological meaning). This formula

was not a rigid method for squeezing every ounce of spiritual truth out of the biblical record, but simply acknowledged the possibility that a text could have more than one meaning. One of the greatest medieval theologians, Thomas Aquinas, showed us how this interpretive strategy worked for God's command, 'Let there be light', in the first chapter of Genesis: 'For when I say, "Let there be light", referring literally to corporeal light, it is the literal sense. But if it be taken to mean "Let Christ be born in the Church", it pertains to the allegorical sense. But if one says, "Let there be light", in other words, "Let us be conducted to glory through Christ", it pertains to the anagogical sense. Finally, if it is said "Let there be light", in other words, "Let us be illumined in mind and inflamed in heart through Christ", it pertains to the moral sense.'

The rule of faith

The Christian reading of the Bible is not immediately evident from the text itself but requires the guidance of tradition. To be sure, early Christian theologians did not think they imposed an interpretive grid on the text but were convinced that close reading justified their theological insights. Yet they also recognized that the biblical text itself does not automatically provide their theological perspective. The recognition and elaboration of the Christian hermeneutic circle thus depends on tradition, that is, on the interpretive patterns laid down by Jesus and his first followers. The apostle Paul, well trained in rabbinic exegesis, knew that the interpretation of the Bible required guidance from tradition. For this reason, he emphasized, along with other New Testament authors, the handing down of the tradition (the Greek word is *paradosis*) about Jesus.

As the icon to the right shows (see Figure 7), the set of ancient Christian interpreters after the New Testament writers, known as 'the church fathers' for their formative role in the development of theology, recognized the importance of tradition for understanding the Bible. The icon is dedicated to the importance of intercessory prayer, picturing the enthroned Christ, flanked by Mary and John



7. Icon depicting the importance of scripture and interpretive tradition.

the Baptist, who intercede in prayer along with other apostles and saints. The hermeneutical importance of this icon, however, lies in the centrality of the scriptures for the life of faith. Note that, in the middle of the image, Christ holds a book. Christ himself, whose life and work open up the meaning of the scriptures, points to the scriptures as the medium that illumines his mission and his teachings. Christ as the word made flesh and the written word thus

form an inseparable hermeneutical circle of whole and part that illumine each other.

The apostles and disciples, who also hold and study books, are depicted in the icon as interpreting the Bible in light of Christ's teaching, with the church as the communal centre for lives formed by reading and prayer. The church fathers referred to this interpretive tradition as 'the rule of faith', or, in the words of the 2nd-century church father, Irenaeus, as 'the canon of truth'. This canon of truth was a basic summary of Christian doctrine, handed down from the apostles, emphasizing Christ as the unifying 'mind of the scriptures' and stressing the redemptive work of Jesus as incarnation of God on behalf of human beings.

Tradition in Islam

In contrast to the Jewish and Christian Bibles, which attained their final form through a gradual interpretive process, the Quran is presented as an unedited, complete divine transmission, dictated to Muhammad by the Archangel Gabriel. Much scholarly debate surrounds the assemblage of these revelations that were gathered into the first standardized version of the Quran about twenty years after Muhammad's death (632 CE). Even the claim of the Quran's uncreated perfection, however, cannot circumvent the essential role of tradition for interpretation. Far from being self-explanatory, the Quran's own form as a collection of dictated revelations requires an interpretive framework from outside the text itself. Islam scholars have pointed out that unlike the Hebrew or the Christian Bibles, the Quran does not offer 'a continuous narrative' structure that provides a narrative framework for interpretation. Instead, this larger whole within which Muslims interpret God's particular revelations to Muhammad is provided by the history of interpretation, which begins with recorded events about the Prophet's own implementation of Islam during his lifetime. The *Hadiths* are first-hand reports about the Prophet's sayings

and actions, collected over a period of centuries, first passed down orally and later collected as written texts.

Muslims recognized that Hadiths possess varying degrees of reliability. They have, for example, designated two Hadith collections the *sahihain* or 'two sound ones', as possessing the highest authority to define Islam next to the Quran. Religion scholars have observed that the Hadiths contain a lot more material on legal and practical norms for the Muslim faith than does the Quran. This normative legacy is called the *Sunna*, and provides the framework of practical reasoning for interpreting the Quran. Hence the Quran will not be the best place to go for the curious reader who inquires about a particular issue in Islam. Islam scholars explain that the Quran 'is not a book of law, and main tenets of Islamic theology are never mentioned in the holy book'. Advice on dress codes, marriage laws, and the nature of jihad or education for women is not found in the Quran but in the Sunna.

Traditionally, Islamic legal scholars, the Imams or Muftis, are the interpretive authorities to whom an ordinary Muslim turns for legal advice concerning practical Muslim law or *Sharia*. In making his interpretive announcement, the legal scholar who has spent his life studying the Quran along with its interpretive tradition, draws on the Quran, on applicable Hadiths, and on preceding judgements by other scholars from various schools of interpretation. Islamic legal experts thus demonstrate the dependence of Islam on interpretation through tradition. Even while the Quran itself is regarded as direct revelation unmediated through history or human culture, understanding this sacred text requires its mediation through tradition. In short, just as in Judaism and Christianity, hermeneutics is central to the Islamic way of life.

In recent history, the importance of tradition for Islamic interpretation has been challenged by more individualistic interpretations of the Quran from two groups. The first group are radical Islamists, who circumvent interpretive tradition by

reading the Quran selectively to support their own political ends. The second group is a peaceful Reform movement within Islam somewhat analogous to the modern Protestant attempt in Christianity to understand the Bible based on individual reason alone. Referring to themselves as 'Quranists', reformers examine the Quran on its own terms, explicitly rejecting the authority of Hadith and Sunna. A recent reformist translation of the Quran (2007) appeals to those 'who prefer reason over blind faith', and 'who seek peace and ultimate freedom by submitting themselves to the Truth alone'. Again, just as Protestant Reformers sought to liberate the Bible from its hermeneutic confinement by church authority, Islamic reformers want to free the interpretation of the Quran from the clergy's authority and past traditions, entrusting 'salvation only to God's signs in nature and scripture'. They hope that freeing the Quran from tradition will unite believers and demonstrate the text's moral imperative of justice for every human being.

A game changer: the Protestant Reformation

In Western culture, the development of hermeneutics was closely connected to the interpretation of the Bible. The Protestant Reformation of the 16th century was a defining event in the history of hermeneutics because it brought about important hermeneutical changes. While Reformers continued the theological tradition of reading the Bible with reference to Christ, conscious reliance on tradition was eventually lost, as the slogan 'the Bible alone!' (*sola scriptura* in Latin) gradually divorced biblical exegesis from the interpretive tradition of the church. The Reformation thus prepared the way for the historical-critical study of the Bible and the modern view that the Bible is to be read like any other text.

The German priest Martin Luther (1483–1546), a central figure of the Protestant Reformation, asserted the Bible's interpretive independence and clarity. The Bible, he wrote, 'is through itself

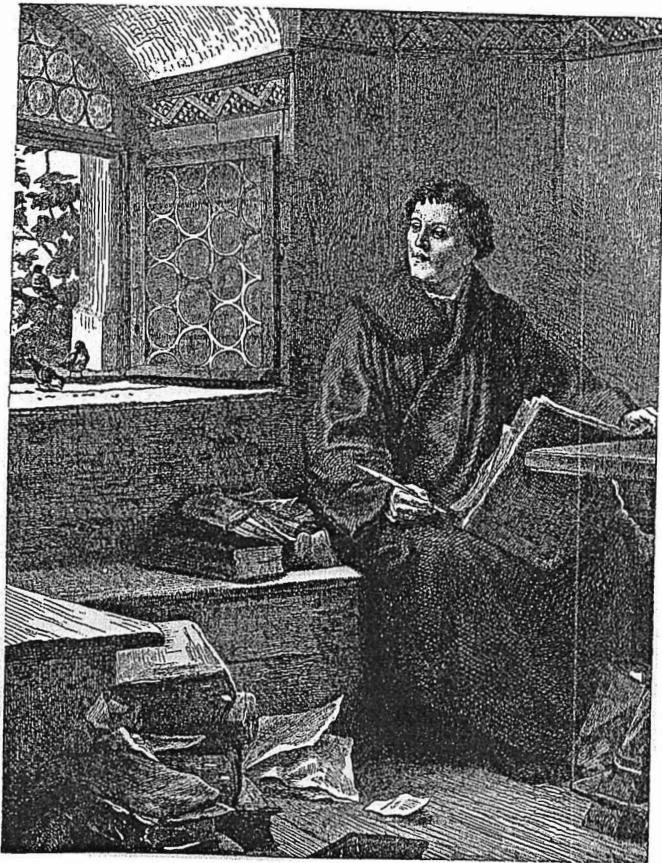
certain, easily accessed, and comprehensible, its own interpreter (*sui ipsius interpres*) that tests, judges and illumines everything'. Luther's view of the scripture's perspicuity eventually developed into views of the Bible for which Luther would have had very little sympathy, such as, for example, theories of verbal inspiration, or (at the other extreme) the kind of historical criticism that examines the Bible as historical source document or a literary artefact without reference to the church.

Luther's insistence on *sola scriptura* may have helped separate theology from exegesis, but his own exegetical practice demonstrates that he never envisioned a Bible separate and independent from the church. Our picture of Luther translating the Bible illustrates his reliance on tradition. Note that he is surrounded by books, which symbolizes his dependence on other interpreters (see Figure 8). Luther instinctively recognized that the Bible is always read through *some* interpretive lens, because he wrote numerous prefaces to the Bible as a whole, and to individual books, to offer 'those who are not familiar with it, instruction and guidance for reading [the Bible] profitably'.

Aside from providing interpretive guidelines for the reader, Luther constantly interacted with various church fathers in his exegesis, and also frequently asserted doctrines such as infant baptism and even the immaculate conception of Mary (born without sin) on the strength of church tradition and in the absence of convincing exegetical evidence. In short, even while asserting a self-interpreting Bible, Luther's biblical hermeneutic flowed from a deeper theological framework that provided a dogmatic orientation or 'rule of faith' for guiding biblical exegesis. The same may be said of the Reformation tradition in general.

The rise of modern historical criticism

Nonetheless, Reformation rhetoric had put a wedge between tradition and biblical interpretation, a separation that was further



8. Martin Luther, translating the Bible into German while hiding in the Wartburg. Original illustration from 'Martin Luther' by Gustav Freytag (1847).

encouraged as biblical interpretation increasingly became the professional activity of academics who were only loosely connected to religious communities. Through these developments, the Bible was transformed from a sacred book of the church into a foundational classic text of Western culture. This dislocation of biblical studies

from the church into research universities illustrates powerfully the influence of social changes and institutions on interpretive habits.

The divorce of biblical interpretation from the life of the church was accompanied by the changing view of truth discussed in Chapter 2. Now the meaning of religious texts had to match the intellectual horizon of interpreters disengaged from history and tradition. Objective truth was now defined by the disengaged mind of rationalist philosophy. According to the historical critic Samuel Reimarus (1694–1768), Christian revelation must be 'free from contradiction', and show the same evidential clarity as mathematic equations.

Biblical content was true, in other words, when it corresponded to modern epistemology. For example, miracles don't happen today; thus, biblical miracles were descriptions of natural occurrences by primitive minds unschooled in modern science. Moreover, if people didn't rise from the dead, and the walls of Jericho did not crumble at the blast of trumpets, how trustworthy was the biblical narrative as a whole? Armed with this suspicion, historical criticism departed radically from ancient interpretive practices by looking *behind* traditional interpretation to the *real* historical events and *real* people, making up the *real* Bible that lies obscured under the layers of traditional interpretation. 'Objectively real', in this case, meant whatever conformed to the historian's preferred rationalist construal of what may or may not have happened.

Today, influenced by hermeneutic philosophy, a large number of biblical scholars question the rationalist assumptions of historical criticism. They especially distrust its modernist view of history, according to which the disengaged self examines historical facts as scientific objects 'out there', completely separate from the historian's own evaluation of them. For hermeneutic theory, this division between neutral historical facts and their subsequent

evaluation is impossible because the historian selects facts based on some tacit belief about their relevance.

No doubt, biblical interpretation has benefited immensely from historical criticism. Archaeological finds, source criticism (discerning the socio-historical origin and compilation process of texts) and form criticism (determining literary conventions of form and meaning) have greatly enriched modern understanding of biblical material. At the same time, however, and all too often, the supposed objective historical interpretation read its own modern predilections into the text in the name of objective scholarship. Many historians and biblical interpreters today agree with the hermeneutic insight that the historical reconstruction of the past is never neutral, but depends necessarily on the web of significance within which the historian locates the facts.

If all interpretation thus depends on prior beliefs about reality, the historical critic's superior authority collapses together with his appeal to a purely scientific reading of the text. Theological readings of biblical texts can no longer be dismissed out of hand. Moreover, scholars now also realize that the rationalist premise of historical criticism can readily fall prey to the same literalism that characterizes fundamentalist readings. Unlike pre-modern belief in a multi-layered meaning of words and texts, Rationalism and Fundamentalism share the same non-hermeneutic view of truth, fuelled by their obsession for the one true interpretation.

Beyond historical criticism: Barth, Bultmann, and Bonhoeffer

Early in the 20th century, Karl Barth (1886–1968) called for a return to theological interpretation. In his famous commentary on the book of Romans (1918), Barth attacked historical criticism's philosophical assumptions and championed reading the Bible once again as God's direct address to humanity. Barth insisted that academic historical criticism had recast the Bible in the image of

accepted modern categories of meaning. This narrow interpretive grid prevented the text from conveying its divine message in freedom and with authority. Another important theological figure to wrestle with the question of how a modern mind can understand an ancient sacred text was the German Lutheran theologian Rudolf Bultmann (1884–1976).

Bultmann complained that Barth merely asserted the Bible as God's word, but failed to address the hermeneutic problem of mediating between ancient and modern worldviews. Ancients had believed in spirits, demons, miracles, and the cosmology of a pre-scientific age; moderns believed in empirical science and technology. Bultmann asked, what does the New Testament mean for us today quite independently of its mythological setting? Theology, he argued, must undertake the hermeneutic task of stripping biblical truth 'from its mythical framework, essentially "demythologizing" it'.

Yet Bultmann's own interpretation relied heavily on the existential philosophy of Martin Heidegger, and ended up reducing the gospel to an inner transformation marked by authentic living in freedom, by a 'self-commitment in faith and love'. The Lutheran theologian and Nazi-resister Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1906–45) agreed with Bultmann that Barth's theology avoided the hermeneutic mediation of past and present. Bonhoeffer disagreed, however, with Bultmann's reduction of the gospel to an 'inner self-commitment', because it obscured the Bible's comprehensive vision of this present world as belonging to God.

This vision required not mere inner piety but included political responsibility, and therefore denied what one particular group of Protestants calling themselves 'German Christians', then firmly believed, namely that one could be a good Christian and a good Nazi at the same time. Bonhoeffer who stood for the opposing 'confessing Church', recognized that how Christians interpret the Bible matters greatly for their understanding of political responsibility and their willingness to resist political tyranny.

Some recent hermeneutic trends

In the 20th century, hermeneutic philosophy has increasingly influenced Christian theology in particular. The British theologian Anthony Thiselton (1937–), for example, did much to introduce English speaking scholars to the philosophical hermeneutics described in Chapters 2 and 3. Phenomenology and hermeneutics also played a large role in Catholic thought, and Eastern Orthodox scholars such as Andrew Louth (1944–) have drawn extensively on Gadamer's hermeneutics to argue for a return to theological interpretation. Theological interpretation treats the Bible as the book of the church and therefore as more than a historical or literary document. A theological hermeneutics 'concerns the role of Scripture in the faith and formation of persons and church communities'.

In recent decades, greater awareness of interpretive presuppositions has led to three major hermeneutic models that respect the integrity of biblical texts and are more conducive to theological hermeneutics. The first is 'narrative theology', pioneered by the Yale theologian Hans Frei (1922–88). Inspired by Karl Barth, Frei wanted the text to speak with its own theological voice. This hermeneutic respects the plain and narrative presentations of the biblical texts as coherent wholes, and establishes their 'literal sense' with reference to the biblical narrative, before worrying about any other application to the present. For these reasons, Frei rejected Gadamer's insistence on applicatory reading (see Chapter 2), and believed we must first objectively establish the plain meaning of the text before evaluating its significance for us.

Historical criticism itself is also undergoing a shift away from a purely scientific to a more literary approach. The Old Testament scholar John Barton (1948–), for example, retooled traditional historical criticism by arguing against the caricature of historical

critics as scientists, who dissect the text dispassionately. Rather, biblical scholars are simply literary critics who, without any theological commitment to view the Bible as God's word, appreciate its literary quality and narrative unity. This updated historical criticism still dismisses, however, the hermeneutic claim that understanding a text entails its translation into the present by fusing past and present horizons. Rather, 'meaning before application' is the motto of the critical exegete, who understands first what the text meant and then applies that meaning to modern issues.

A third, more hermeneutic approach is canonical criticism advanced by Yale Old Testament scholar Brevard Childs (1923–2007). Fully aware that no object of investigation is simply 'given', canonical criticism consciously adopts the historically developed, received biblical canon and the apostolic rule of faith as the hermeneutic whole that determines the meaning of individual texts. Canonical criticism affirms the hermeneutic claim that neither authorial intent, nor a text's meaning for an original audience, is normative. Rather it looks to the communal intent that guided canon formation. Not unlike pre-modern readers, canonical interpreters take a broad view of divine inspiration. They reject the fundamentalist belief that every single word of the text is divinely inspired, and rather speak of general divine guidance in canon formation, allowing for the characteristic marks and frailties of human authorship. Aside from Canonical Criticism, interest in theological readings of the Bible in the context of the church has markedly increased among Catholic and Evangelical scholars in Britain and North America.