

## Bible and ethics

### Use and Misuse of Biblical Texts in Moral Matters

By Frits de Lange

The Bible is a defenseless book. Time and again it has allowed itself to be misused in order to gloss over human evil and provide it with a religious sanction. Slavery, colonialism, apartheid, exploiting nature, the oppression of women, the death penalty, war – they have all been sanctioned as ‘willed by God’ using the Bible. What makes the Bible so susceptible to abuse and how can we resist this? Is it really a question of abuse, or does the Bible itself give rise to doubtful practices? Do we really need the Bible, when choices have to be made in contemporary matters? Why would we want to ‘appeal’ to Scripture? Can it be a guide in matters of good and evil?

#### *Confusion and abuse*

If one has no religious connection with the Bible, one could answer that last question in the negative and save oneself a lot of confusion. If one browses through the Bible ingenuously and superficially one cannot but notice that there is not only a great historical and cultural, but also a considerable moral divide between the values and standards that obtain in today’s society on the one hand and those of Israel and the early Christian community on the other. This divide is so considerable that it may seem unbridgeable.

Indeed, if one continues to adhere to and practice some elements of biblical morality today, one runs the risk of running afoul of contemporary criminal law. Regarding the position of women, e.g., biblical morality seems to contradict laws against discrimination. Thus adultery on the part of the woman is punished severely, while the husband escapes scot-free. Article 1 of the Dutch constitution rejects different treatment based on sex; but the Bible clearly posits a rank distinction between man and woman (1 Cor. 11:2ff Eph. 5:22ff.; Col. 3:18; 1 Tim. 2:9ff.; 1 Pet 3:1). The Bible clearly condemns homosexuality (Lev. 18:22; Rom. 1:26f.) and metes out a sentence beyond misunderstanding: the death penalty (Lev. 20: 13). That same penalty for that matter – Amnesty International is currently fighting it in the name of human rights – applies to another twenty odd violations of the Mosaic Law. For: "Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed; for in the image of God has God made man." (Gen. 9: 6, cf. Ex. 21: 12ff.) Thus if one would apply Israel’s (holy) laws of war literally, one could be indicted by the International Court at The Hague: 'However, in the cities of the nations the LORD your God is giving you as an inheritance, do not leave alive anything that breathes.' (Deut. 20:16, carried out literally in 1 Sam. 15). A final example: slavery, abolished as a social institution more than a century ago, is accepted and supported as a matter of course in the Bible. 'Slaves, obey your earthly masters in everything...' (Col. 3:22, cf. Rom. 6:16; Eph. 6: 5-8; 1 Tim.6:1 f.; Tit.2:9)).

Of course this is not the whole story. The Bible clearly strikes different chords as well. The equality of man and woman is at least suggested (Gen. 1: 26; Gal. 3: 28: in Christ 'there is male nor female'). And the fundamental commandment from the ten commandments 'Thou shalt not kill' (Ex. 20: 13; Deut.5: 17) belongs to the foundations of our civilization; a biblical commandment that apparently contradicts and drowns out even what the Bible itself teaches about holy war, blood feuds and capital punishment. Alongside the legitimization of war there is the radical call to peaceableness (Math. 5:9), to hospitality toward the stranger (Ex. 23: 9), to love toward one's enemy (Math. 5: 44). And the same Paul who sends Onesimus, the slave, back to his master (see the letter to Philemon), writes to the Galatians: 'It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery.' (Gal. 5: 1; cf. also 1 Cor. 7: 21-23; Gal. 3: 28))

Apparently the Bible does not speak with one voice and at the same pitch where morality is concerned. The Bible exhibits a plurality of moralities, and they have different specific weights. The books of the law breathe a different ethics than the prophets or wisdom literature. We don't pick up the radicality of the Sermon on the Mount in quite the same way with Paul. Even within the Bible itself we find charitable interpretations of the harsh apodeictic command, where the rule is not applied according to the letter but according to the spirit of equity. (Compare, e.g., 2 Sam.14 with Num. 35: 31.33; Jos. 2: 14, 18 with Deut. 20: 15 -18).<sup>[1]</sup> And the knowledge that many texts about violence in the Bible are to be regarded as later theological constructions serving proclamation, puts things in perspective.<sup>[2]</sup> In the Bible apparently the soup isn't quite eaten as hot as it is served either.

And is our contemporary 'enlightened' morality really that much more principled than the Bible's 'primitive' morality, that we should sniff at biblical ethics? On the contrary, it seems. Often the Bible asks more even than we are able to do. For us charity (Deut.6: 4f. Lev. 19: 18, Mark 12:28-31 and parallels) is a lofty, usually unattainable ethical principle. Some parts of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount appeal to our moral perfection to such an extent that they seem to be far beyond our abilities. Now, who really loves his enemies? (Cf. Math. 5: 44, 48). Who will turn the left cheek, when he receives a wallop on the right? The relationship between our morality and that of the Bible is complex, to say the least.

In any case, this knowledge that when it comes to morality, the Bible is far from clear, leads to a certain restraint in referring to the Bible, when we face choices in present-day moral issues. Indeed, on closer inspection a detour via the Bible often seems to cause more confusion than it provides direction. Why should we want to consult the Bible for our morality anyway? This skepticism with regard to the use of the Bible in ethics grows, when we see how the book has been used in history to justify evil practices. Even if a careful reading of the texts left little room for this, they turned out to be defenseless against ideological abuse. The submission of citizens to totalitarian

dictatorships was legitimized with an appeal to Rom. 13. ('Everyone must submit himself to the governing authorities...') The exploitation of nature went hand in hand with the word of Genesis ('Fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air and over every living creature that moves on the ground.' Gen. 1: 28). Colonialism and imperialism were justified using the great commission in Math. 28: 19: 'Therefore go and make disciples of all nations...' Racism and apartheid were supported with a biblical text dealing with the curse of Ham, from which it was argued that God wanted blacks to be slaves. (Gen. 9: 25) The subordination of women was justified with Col.3: 18: 'Wives, submit to your husbands, as is fitting in the Lord.' (Cf. Eph.5: 22-24; Tit. 2:5).

*Unity and authority (the Bible as canon)*

When looking at it all in this way, one could conclude that the Bible doesn't help us much when making choices regarding good and evil today. Within the covers of that one book we merely find a deposit of more than a thousand years of morality-history from the Middle East, from Semitic nomads and farmers to Roman citizens and city dwellers. They have left us a multicolored variety of laws, stories, prophecies, hymns and wisdom texts that vary considerably among each other. But we will have to read these texts in the historical and cultural context in which they arose. We have left that world far behind us by now, in our highly developed, complex, democratic, individualized and secularized society. Let's just leave the Bible for what it is. That's possible. An English biblical scholar only recently defended this view in a Christian ethics journal. David Parker determined that the New Testament is indeed a very interesting book, but that it is no longer relevant for us. By its very strangeness it can then still surprise us. 'I suggest that one of the prime functions of the New Testament for ethical discussion is not its relevance but its uselessness. Here is a set of writings produced in another place, culture and age, whose understanding of human experience and of decisions was different from ours in ways that we can only guess at. Its value is this uselessness. If we try to read it for its own sake rather than to find answers to our own questions, it becomes a genuine voice from beyond, which can surprise our presuppositions and reveal new freedoms.'[\[3\]](#)

Few, however, for whom the Bible has religious value, would want to qualify the ethics of the Bible to the extent that this scholar does here. After all, a believer views the Bible differently than a scholar does. For believers the Bible is a book that is different from the others. Not primarily an object of research, but above all, Holy Scripture, Word of God. A book with authority, for faith as well as for life. The Jewish and later the Christian community of faith never read the Bible as a random collection of writings but as a coherent whole, a unity. That's how it came into our culture and that's how it deeply influenced the realm of the imagination of western morality for two thousand years.[\[4\]](#) This authority and this unity of the Bible were expressed together in this one little word, canon (standard). From roughly the 4<sup>th</sup> century onward the Bible – in the shape in which we have it now – gradually came to be

considered the canon, the standard and guideline for faith and life. Christianity read the Bible as the normative story of the God of Israel that experienced its plot and climax in Jesus of Nazareth. Without this holy thread the Bible is another ancient document from the East. Interesting to research, but no longer relevant for who we are and what we do. Within the community of faith, however, the Bible does have authority, because the God, who reveals himself in it, manifests himself as an authority and his Kingdom is proclaimed with power. Ideally in this community the story of the God of Israel speaks to people personally and from it they expect salvation for themselves and the world to come. And salvation at least entails the good for people. Therefore they neither can nor want to ignore the trail that this story has left in the history of morality.

So the authority of the Bible is not intrinsic but relational and contingent. The words and writings are not holy in and of themselves, but only if and to the extent they are recognized as holy by people. Likewise the unity of the Bible is not an objective unity that can be determined from the outside. It is believed, celebrated, and confessed rather than that it can be ascertained in actuality. Nor is it based on an obvious intrinsic harmony among the biblical writings, but on the religious conviction that these writings together tell the story of the one God, who revealed himself in Israel and in Jesus. As long as the faith community can impart coherence to this story, can distinguish and give expression to a beginning, end, and middle, the Bible will remain a unity for it.

### *Three bridge railings*

Modern Bible readers, however, experience a large gap between their moral world and that of the Bible writers, even though they believe that the same God connects both worlds with each other. Not only is the content of biblical morality different from ours, the way in which we deal with our morality and come to establish its content has also drastically changed in the past centuries. While morality was closely connected with religion until modernity, since the 16<sup>th</sup>/17<sup>th</sup> century it has gradually become an autonomous domain, independent of the domain of religion. The spheres of the 'credenda' and the 'agenda', what must be believed and what must be done, have moved further and further apart, also in the experience of believers. Modern morality has become autonomous since the Enlightenment. It stands on its own legs. Not only does ethics function independently of the authority of religion and church, it can only be legitimized using moral reasons. An emancipated morality is independent, also from the authority of the Bible. For this reason there are modern believers today, who, while still accepting the Bible as the story of God, only want to read it for the story and not for the morality. They cut the knot between the two and no longer consult the Bible for their ethics.[\[5\]](#)

Earlier readers of the Bible seems to have had less of a problem with the gap between their own horizon of understanding and the social world of the Bible writers. In the West the Bible wasn't only read as a key to the divine world until modernity, but also to the terrestrial world. In Western Civilization the Bible was the Great Code, the symbolic unlocking of reality (N. Frye). Reality in its entirety was read through the lens of the world of

biblical symbols. No world could be imagined beyond the large scheme of creation, fall, and redemption in Christ. The Bible was a house to live in and there was no other.<sup>[6]</sup>

Then too, however, the question of how the Bible should be read with regard to good and evil was not simple and settled in advance. Even someone that lives in the world of the Bible as in a house realizes that the house has many rooms and floors. The Bible speaks with several voices at the same time, and they don't all sound equally loud or high. And suppose one has heard a particular voice come through loudly and clearly in Scripture, even then the issues encountered in actual life cannot 'im-mediate-ly' be solved using the letter of Scripture. Real life is too complex and ambiguous for that.

The church, however, was convinced that the Bible speaks a word with authority, not only about eternal salvation, but also about life on earth. But if one didn't want to have an accident en route from Scripture to life, that route did need to be secured. The church has therefore provided a number of 'bridge railings', reading rules which it has employed in the course of its history to try to make it possible to walk the bridge between Bible and life. I will mention three such reading rules here. They are still useful even today.

### *Christ as the middle*

In the first place the relationship between the different parts of the Bible, especially the Old and the New Testament, must be sorted out. How does the Christian church interpret the Hebrew Bible? This is of fundamental importance for ethics. After all much of the Old Testament consists of legal texts for the people of Israel. Judaism does not only see the law as the core of the Hebrew Bible but as the heart of the entire Jewish tradition. In the Talmud it is interpreted in greater detail and applied to actual life. Consequently shouldn't the Christian church also observe the Law of Moses? There is a movement in the U.S. called Christian Reconstruction that argues for this. 'Idolatry, sorcery, blasphemy, apostasy, adultery, homosexuality, defiance of children toward their parents should be punished with death again in our time',<sup>[7]</sup> one finds there. Or should one argue the contrary with libertine Christians that the law has been fulfilled by Christ, also in the sense of being superseded? In that case living the Christian life means bidding farewell to the yoke of the law, a life of total freedom.

The rule of interpretation the Old Church has employed for the entire Bible since Augustin proves to be useful for ethics in this connection too: 'The Old Testament is implied in the New Testament; in the New Testament the Old Testament is revealed.' In this way both testaments are not played out against each other but seen as mirrors of each other. The Old is seen as foreshadowing the New. Both relate to each other as prophecy to fulfillment. There is progression in the story of God with humanity, which shows its true sense in Christ. What lies behind cannot be seen as superceded, however. It remains valid as something that points to what is to come. In this so-called *typological* reading of the Bible the ceremonial and food laws that had been specifically imposed on Israel, were no longer considered binding for

Christians, but interpreted as allegories of the spiritual truths of the gospel. Did not Paul himself already read the Hebrew Bible using allegory? (Gal. 4:24) In this way the Church could avoid following the law literally, yet let it remain valid in its entirety.

Today such a 'spiritual' reading of the Old Testament rightly gets a lot of criticism. After all it doesn't let the Hebrew Bible speak for itself. But the intention behind this is still valid: the realization that whoever reads the Bible simply makes selective choices based on (what one considers essential to) their faith. As he is reading the reader gives the Bible a center and a margin. The specific weight of Bible passages is not the same everywhere. The Christian church is that community of believers that choose for an interpretation in which the figure of Jesus Christ is central. So the church was reading the Bible using a canon within the canon, an internal standard which in turn can test the standard of Scripture itself: the person and work of Jesus Christ. According to the church Israel's ethics, but also the ethics of Paul and the apostolic letters can only be correctly interpreted and recognized if they have found a place within the story of God in Jesus. Depending on the significance one attaches to Jesus, one can again take this story into many directions, as can be seen from the varied world of church history and 'oikoumene'. But anyway, the church has always read the Bible Christologically: the morality of the Bible stories has been read with an eye to and tested in light of Christ as the middle of Scripture.

*Certainly the arbitrariness of an atomistic use of the Bible, in which individual texts are no longer read in their context and their weight is no longer weighed within the whole of Scripture must then be rejected – not only on hermeneutical but also – on theological grounds. After all in that case Scripture is not compared with Scripture. The practice of this so-called Biblicism is ancient and widespread. A powerful example of it can already be seen with the church father Tertullian [De cultu feminarum II, 7], when he deduced from Math.6: 27 (Which of you by taking thought can add one cubit unto his stature?) that women couldn't make buns using the hair of others. Another bizarre example: at the end of the previous century employers appealed to John 9: 4a ('As long as it is day, we must do work') and John 11: 9 ('Are there not twelve hours in a day?') against the demand of the trade unions for a shorter work day. The command 'In six day you shall do all your work' (Ex. 20:9) was used to argue against a five day workweek. Nationalization of the land was rejected with an appeal to Ahab taking possession of Naboth's vineyard (1 Kgs 21).[8]*

#### *The church as an interpreting community*

The second 'bridge railing' the church constructed on the bridge between Bible and reality is the church community itself. The church came about through the Bible; the Bible is the book of the church. The church saw itself

as administering the power of the apostolic key and as the interpreter of Scripture authorized by God. In the course of church history the Church has invested its hermeneutic authority with institutional power. The exclusive ecclesiastical doctrinal authority did not only cover doctrine but also morality (*fides et morum*). In the Middle Ages the church magisterium developed into an intricate system of morality, arranged around the practice of confession and penance. The final piece of this development was Vatican I (1870) when the doctrinal authority of the church was declared infallible both in doctrine and morals.<sup>[9]</sup> Some, also within the Roman Catholic Church, have regretted this development. The church should not act as if it, 'the pillar and foundation of the truth' (1 Tim. 3: 15), has sole access to the truth, and when trying to find moral truth should also listen to the voice of outsiders.<sup>[10]</sup>

Protestantism from the 16<sup>th</sup> century onward resisted any ecclesiastical mediation of the Bible. 'The Bible alone', was the slogan of the Reformation, *sola scriptura*. And: 'the Bible interprets itself', *scriptura sui ipsius interpret*. That principle embodies a legitimate resistance against the attempt to make the direct relationship between God and the believer depend on a third, priestly authority over conscience. With this Protestantism shifted the center of religion's moral authority to the conscience of the individual.<sup>[11]</sup>

In its one-sided focus on Scripture Protestantism forgot that not only the church is the product of Scripture, but also vice versa, that the Bible is made into Scripture, read in the church. These days, however, the traditions in the 'oikoumene' are increasingly moving in each other's direction. Since Vatican II the Roman Catholic Church and its theology are putting more emphasis on the church as a people of God in transit, and placing greater stress on a biblical grounding and verification of its natural law moral doctrine. Conversely the conviction is growing in Protestant ethics that the interpretation of the Bible requires a committed community which puts the Bible into practice. In the practical exercise of this community the church acquires expertise and authority in its exegesis. It then embodies the Bible, as it were. It implements the Bible like a musician brings a score to life. Thus the Methodist ethicist Stanley Hauerwas started his book *Unleashing Scripture* (1993) with a most unusual sentence for Protestants so far: 'Most North American Christians assume that they have the right, if not an obligation, to read the Bible. I challenge this assumption. No task is more important than for the church to take the Bible out of the hands of Christians in North America. Let us no longer give the Bible to all children when they enter the third grade or whenever their assumed rise to Christian maturity is marked, such as eighth grade commencement. Let us rather tell them and their parents that they are possessed by habits far too corrupt for them to be encouraged to read the Bible on their own.'<sup>[12]</sup> It is Hauerwas' opinion that the Bible can only be interpreted and understood by people that open themselves up to, better still, that want to be part of its message with their entire being. They are willing not only to let the Bible speak for them, but also to read it against themselves (D. Bonhoeffer).<sup>[13]</sup> They are willing to repent. Only then do we understand the Bible. So the practical 'application' is not a sequel to understanding, but its cornerstone, a vital component.

This perhaps explains the fact that the history of Christianity has been characterized by violence and inhumanity for so long, people all the while

piously reading their Bibles. When in the 18<sup>th</sup> century John Woolman (1720 - 1772), a Quaker leader, is trying very hard to convince the members of his Society of Friends of the evil of the slave trade he enters a debate with them about the correct interpretation of the curse of Ham (Gen. 9: 25)[14] But his exegesis seems to be fruitless. It is as if he is plowing rocks and he experiences it that way too. He then notes in his travel journal that he is going to change tack. He calls his fellow believers to account on their selfishness that prevents them from understanding Scripture. 'I said that because we believe that the Holy Scriptures were revealed by holy men, when the Holy Spirit came over them, (...) it is my opinion that if we were liberated from all selfish notions, the same good Spirit that revealed them, would induce us to also read them so that they would benefit from it.' A call to repentance is more profitable than an exegetical disputation. Apparently what hinders understanding is not in the texts but in the reader himself. Woolman is confirmed in this conclusion: 'And I noticed that some of them then felt they should pay more attention to their slaves and give them better education.'[15]

### *Experience as a source of morality*

A third 'bridge railing' the church applied to the transition from biblical text to current situation is found in the qualifying experience that the Bible is an important, but not the only source of Christian morality. There is also human experience – laid down and proven in traditions, conventions and practices. There are two sources from which we derive our moral knowledge according to classical ecclesiastical tradition: revelation in Scripture and human reason or nature.[16] Since they both have their origin in God there can be no conflict. In the medieval theology of Thomas Aquinas this notion receives an impressive synthesis and apotheosis. In it Greek philosophy and Christian theology harmonically coexist. With Aristotle Thomas sees every living being predisposed to its own development; with Augustin he confesses that this development finds its fulfillment in God. Grace does not destroy nature but perfects it. As the doctrine of natural law this view receives its own place in the history – also the protestant history - of the church, which cannot be imagined without it. Does not the very Bible say that the Gentiles 'do by nature things required by the law', that 'the requirements of the law are written on their hearts'? (Rom. 2: 14f.) Does not Paul himself appeal to reason when he confronts the Corinthians with: ' Does not even nature itself teach you....' (1 Cor.11: 14)?

The Protestant tradition harbors greater mistrust toward nature, because it considers the scope of sin to be greater than the Roman Catholic tradition does. The former more sharply than the latter ranks the moral authority of the two sources: Scripture as *norma normans* (establishing standard) carries the highest weight, and after that comes tradition as *norma normata* (established standard). But even in Protestantism the conviction was never absent that there is continuity between the law God reveals in Scripture and the moral judgement that every person naturally possesses.[17] With regard to ethics *Sola Scriptura* turns out to be untenable in its exclusivity.



### *A dialogue*

Thus the church constructed three ‘bridge railings’ that had to prevent people from failing in their moral appeal to the Bible. Christ as the center of Scripture (1), the church as a devoted interpreting community (2) and rational experience as the source of moral knowledge (3). The reading guides are classical in the sense of old and proven. They can continue to serve today. But are they sufficient even for modernity? The distance between the world of the reader and that of the Bible has grown. The Bible no longer serves, as it did for mankind in the Middle Ages, as a pair of glasses through which to read the world, but the other way around, modern man now reads the Bible using the knowledge that is supplied by a scientific world view.[\[18\]](#)

With that the self-evident moral authority of the Bible has disappeared. One can say: the contemporary person no longer lives in (the world of symbols of) the Bible, but time and again must go on a journey to it. Sometimes the Bible has become radically strange to us. The realization that we live in a secular, liberal democracy and a highly developed technological culture is the cause for this. Ethics too is increasingly becoming a matter of rational reasoning. But clearly the historical-critical biblical sciences have also contributed to this alienating experience. They have clearly charted the specific context in which these text (their *Sitz im Leben*) and their tradition history have arisen and consequently increased the distance between us on the one hand and the original authors on the other.

This also changes the way the Bible is handled in ethics. It doesn’t mean the end of using the Bible, but it does mean a change in that use. Present day hermeneutics provides a suitable image to describe the way in which we deal with the Bible today. According to the philosopher H. G. Gadamer, reading texts like the Bible is like a dialogue between two autonomous partners.[\[19\]](#) The reader’s dialogue with the Bible is not without engagement. It is entered into because readers expect something from it, something from God. They hope to receive direction for their lives, an answer to the question of their identity (who am I, who can I be, who should I be?), help with ordering their existence, a salutary perspective. For this they consult biblical texts that present them with a colorful aggregate of rules, principles, exemplary stories, and sketches of a symbolical world. As they read, the Bible grips them, and they experience this as an appeal to their moral imagination. By a process of continued oscillation, a back-and-forth between the symbolical world of the text on the one hand and the world of their own imagination on the other, the Bible acts on its readers like drops of water on sandstone. It makes them into different people. However, the texts only have this challenging sense for those who truly want to be called to account by them and hear ‘the Word of God’ in them. In this respect the Bible is and remains a defenseless book. It can only wield the weak supremacy of the word.

Conversely the dialogue between Bible and reader also implies that readers can contradict the Bible in the name of their own moral experience. E.g., if Scripture makes anti-Judaistic statements (e.g. John 8: 39ff.)[\[20\]](#), then readers living after Auschwitz have no choice but to protest based on their historical experience, even if they realize that this is probably a reflection of a conflict between rivaling groups of Jews. If the Bible condemns homosexuality, e.g., it

can be the readers' judgment, pointing to shifting values and advances in scientific insight, that "we're better informed now than Paul was" (A.A. van Ruler).

The imagery of the dialogue implies that the partners in the dialogue are autonomous and respect each other's dignity. This corresponds to the modern moral experience of autonomy and responsibility that has spread since the Enlightenment, also among believing Bible readers. When it comes to choosing good or evil no one can conveniently hide behind the authority of others any longer. One must be held personally responsible for the content of one's ethics. But in ethics there is a reason for entering into a dialogue, in this case with the Bible. One opens oneself up to (re)cognition, response, contradiction, a perspective of hope, guidance, even reprimand. In this way the Bible can function as a mirror, with which modern readers can represent their world, which they must design on their own responsibility. In the Bible they don't immediately read the will of God behind the text, they don't just conform to the biblical authors' intentions with the text, they see themselves 'before' in the sense of 'in light of' the text (P. Ricoeur). How do we keep this kind of use from degenerating into abuse? By way of summary we conclude with a kind of checklist compiled for the Bible reader by biblical scholar Richard B. Hays.<sup>[21]</sup> He distinguishes 4 different tasks any interpreter of the Bible must complete. He or she must

1. Describe the text as accurately as possible in its historical and literary context. A Bible reader must listen as carefully as possible and be aware of his/her presuppositions and be willing to suspend them (descriptive task)
2. Not just read one passage or a few passages selectively, but allow the broadest possible range from the entire canon of Scripture to resonate. Both Old and New Testament must be heard. Any possible tension or contradiction between passages should not be smoothed over (synthetic task);
3.
  - a. Try to discover what moral challenge the passage may be presenting. Does the passage set down moral rules or standards? Ethical principles? Models or paradigms? Or does it give a more general outline of the symbolic world in which the character of God (wrath, love, forgiveness, righteousness) and the human condition (sin, guilt, promise) are delineated as a horizon in which the moral action takes place? The Bible does not only provide standards (divorce is not allowed, Mark 10:2-12 and parallels, 1 Cor. 7:10-16) or principles ('love your neighbor as yourself' Mark 12:31; Lev. 19:18). It also gives examples of champions of the faith like Abraham, Job, or Christ, that show what the meaning of virtues like faith, hope, love, and perseverance can be. In addition there are stories like The Good Samaritan (Luke 10: 25-37) that express the basic moral attitude of a comprehensive mode of existence. Other texts, e.g. Paul's letters or the Book of Revelation, offer a cosmic perspective of sin and salvation in the world, and human life plays itself out in this context.
  - b. Recognize what other moral sources the interpreter is using. Is the Bible reader also relying on 1. tradition; 2. experience; 3.

(philosophical/ scientific) reason? And how much weight does he attach to them? Here integrative, creative, and imaginative abilities are expected from the reader, which relate the passage to the world of the reader (hermeneutic task);

4. Finally readers have the task to convert words into action. How does one translate the results of 1 (exegesis), 2 (synthesis) en 3 (hermeneutics) into practical actions? How does the community of Scripture readers that wants to take the appeal made to them seriously, actualize the moral vision that, according to them, is expressed in Scripture? Can the fruit of the Spirit of God be discerned? (Gal. 5: 22f.)? True understanding of Scripture shows up here, in the pragmatic task of Bible readers that take their reading seriously. (pragmatic task)

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[1] P. Ricoeur/A. LaCocque, *Penser la bible*, Paris 1998, 116f.

[2] Cf. E. Noort, *Geweld in het Oude Testament. Over woorden en verhalen aan de rand van de kerkelijke praktijk*, Zoetermeer 1985.

[3] David Parker, 'Ethics and the New Testament', in: *Studies in Christian Ethics*, 1997, (10, 2), 39 - 57, 57.

[4] Northrop Frye, *The Great Code: the Bible and Literature*, Harvest Books, 2002.

[5] H.M. Kuitert, 'De rol van de bijbel in de protestantse ethiek', in *Gereformeerd Theologisch Tijdschrift*, 1981/2, 65 - 82.

[6] Cf. H.W. Frei, *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative. A Study in Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century Hermeneutics*, New Haven and London, 1974.

[7] See J. Douma, *Grondslagen van de christelijke ethiek*. Kampen 1999, 110.

[8] H.M. Kuitert, *Anders gezegd. Een verzameling theologische opstellen voor de welwillende lezer*, Kampen 1970, 75; Douma, op. cit. 93.

[9] *Catholic Catechism*, an. 891, 2023 w. Cf. J. Mahoney, *The Making of Moral Theology; A Study of the Roman Catholic Tradition*, Oxford 1987, 143.

[10] Called an essential condition for authoritative ecclesiastical reading of the Bible by Stephen E. Fowl/L. Gregory Jones, *Reading in Communion. Scripture and Ethics in Christian Life*, London 1991, 110 - 135 ('listening to the Voices of Outsiders: Challenges to our interpretive Practices').

[11] In an old joke a priest, having been asked about his opinion on a current moral issue, lets his answer start with: 'The Church teaches. . .'. The rabbi, asked the same question, commences with: 'Tradition teaches. . .'. The Protestant begins his answer with: Well, at this moment I think. . .'. Three opening sentences, three different kinds of religious authority. (J.M. Gustafson, *Protestant and Roman Catholic Ethics; Prospects for Rapprochement*, Chicago 1978, 4f.)

[12] S. Hauerwas, *Unleashing Scripture: Freeing the Bible from Captivity to America*, Nashville 1993, 15.

[13] D. Bonhoeffer, *A Testament for Freedom*, (ed. By Geoffrey B. Kelly and F. Burton Nelson, Harper San Francisco 1995) The whole Bible will, therefore, be the Word in which God will allow the divine self to be discovered by us. This is no place which is pleasing or *a priori* sensible to us, but a place strange to us in every way and which is entirely contrary to us. But it is the very place God has chosen to encounter us." (letter to R. Schleicher, April 8<sup>th</sup>, 1936)

[14] *The Journal and Major Essays of John Woolman*, ed. Phillips P. Moulton, New York Oxford University Press 1971.

[15] *ibid.* 65. The recent 're-discovery' of the church as an interpretive community in Protestantism is reinforced by the emphasis modern literary studies place on the decisive role the reader plays in the interpretation of the text (the so-called reader-response hermeneutics).

[16] Cf. The Belgic Confession, art. 2 (1562) about knowing God: 'We know Him by two means: First by the creation, preservation, and government of the universe; (...) Second, He makes Himself more clearly and fully known to us by His holy and divine Word,...'. In contemporary Christian ethics one speaks of the three or four sources of moral knowledge: tradition, experience, scientific reason and the Bible. Cf. R. B. Hays, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament. A Contemporary Introduction to New Testament Ethics*, New York 1993, 210ff.

[17] Cf. H.M. Kuitert, 'De rol van de bijbel in de protestantse ethiek', 67: "It [the Reformation] realized that humanity depends on nature for the knowledge of good and evil. Man gets the standards from nature, or, to use the Reformation's own terminology: Gods command comes through so clearly in his work of creation that even the blind can sense.' Cf. also Gustafson, *op. cit.* 26ff. Perhaps the theology of Karl Barth is an exception to this.

[18] Hans W. Frei, *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative: A Study in Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century Hermeneutics*, New Haven/London 1974.

[19] H.G. Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode. Grundzüge einer philosophischen Hermeneutik*, Tübingen 1960.

[20] Hays, *op. cit.* 426, calls the passage 'the most deeply disturbing outburst of anti-Jewish sentiment in the New Testament.'

[21] Hays, *op. cit.* 212f.; Cf. 309f.