KINDNESS, COURAGE, AND INTEGRITY IN BIBLICAL TEXTS AND IN THE POLITICS OF BIBLICAL INTERPRETATION

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GIVING THE BIBLE A FUTURE

AN ENCOUNTER BETWEEN BIBLICAL STUDIES AND MORAL THEOLOGY

It has been one of the great privileges of my academic career to work closely together for more than 25 years with Professor Reimund Bieringer at the Faculty of Theology and Religious Studies, KU Leuven. He is a scholar from Germany, not only specialised in technical exegesis but also in biblical theology. I am a Belgian scholar in Holocaust ethics and theology. The ethics of interpretation of biblical texts from a post-Holocaust perspective was one of our common concerns. We both became more and more aware of the dangerous and even potentially violent character of biblical texts in political contexts. Based on both our backgrounds, our interest was with difficult texts in Jewish-Christian dialogue, especially alleged anti-Jewish texts, as found in the Gospel of John and the letters of Paul[1]. Our concern was also fundamentally directed towards biblical "texts of terror" in general, especially concerning women, children, people with an "other" race, nationality, sexual identity, or religious belief.

There is enough historical evidence that biblical texts can function as a legitimation for tolerating or even motivating abuse of those who are "other" in a given social context, be it in the form of anti-Semitism, support for the death penalty, racism, nationalism, or homophobia. It has been no comfortable journey for us because traditional exegesis is not used to asking fundamental moral questions and moral theologians mostly do not go very deep into scholarly exegesis.

In this contribution, as a tribute to Reimund Bieringer, I will try to bridge once again the gap between biblical exegesis and moral theology. I hope to reveal in this way a unique quality of the academic work of Bieringer: how biblical studies can contribute to theology in general and show its relevance for the future of our churches and societies.

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1. R. BIERINGER – D. POLLEFEYT (eds.), *Paul and Judaism: Crosscurrents in Pauline Exegesis and the Study of Jewish-Christian Relations* (LNTS, 463), London – New York, Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2012; D. POLLEFEYT – R. BIERINGER, *Prologue: Wrestling with the Jewish Paul*, *ibid.*, 1-14; R. BIERINGER – E. NATHAN – D. POLLEFEYT – P.J. TOMSON (eds.), *Second Corinthians in the Perspective of Late Second Temple Judaism* (CRINT, 14), Leiden, Brill, 2014; D. POLLEFEYT – R. BIERINGER, *Open to Both Ways…? Anti-Judaism and the Johannine Christology*, in R. BIERINGER – M. ELSBERND (eds.), *Normativity of the Future: Reading Biblical and Other Authoritative Texts in an Eschatological Perspective* (ANL, 61), Leuven – Paris – Walpole, MA, Peeters, 2010, 121-134.

For this new reflection on the ethics of biblical interpretation, I will use – for the first time – the framework I developed myself of the different paradigms for understanding the dynamics of evil[2]. I hope this can explain in a new way how Bieringer deals with texts from a moral point of view. In my research on the Holocaust, I distinguished three ways to understand and interpret evil and evildoers. I call these "paradigms" (Kuhn) because they are consistent and conflicting ways of looking at the reality of the perpetrator or evil with different presuppositions and consequences[3]. I have called these respectively the "paradigm of diabolisation", the "paradigm of banalisation" and the "paradigm of ethisation"[4]. Even if each paradigm reveals aspects of the reality of the perpetrator – and of evil as such – in the end, I reject all three paradigms to come to my own understanding of the reality of the perpetrator. I use the concepts of fragmentation (evil as *privatio boni*) and self-deception (evil as *perversio boni*)[5]. I hope to show how this parallels the way in which Bieringer deals with the evil dimensions of texts, especially with his concept of the "normativity of the future" in biblical texts.

I. EVIL BIBLE

Many people, theologians included, feel embarrassed when the topic of evil in the Bible is addressed openly. The idea that biblical texts or biblical authors can be contaminated by human sin or can even "perpetrate" evil goes against the biblical education most of us have received. To children, in catechesis, the Bible is presented mostly as a "holy book" in which everything is perfect. Its message is coherent, transparent, evident and even pure and sweet. It offers a clear solution and direction for all ethical problems in our lives. Biblical catechesis for children (and adults) is often very moralising and romantic at the same time. If one is obedient to the text and its moral message, all will go well: one will be a good person and a good Christian. Religious people do not like to be disturbed in this experience of almost devotional biblical reading and like to trust the Bible as an absolute good. Therefore, believers prefer a full

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2. D. POLLEFEYT, *Ethics and Theology after the Holocaust*, Leuven – Paris – Bristol, CT, Peeters, 2018, pp. 39-68: "The Perpetrator: Devil, Machine or Idealist? Ethical Interpretation of the Holocaust".

3. T. KUHN, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, Chicago, IL, University of Chicago Press, 1970.

4. POLLEFEYT, *Ethics and Theology after the Holocaust* (n. 2), pp. 185-216: "Ethics and the Unforgivable after Auschwitz".

5. *Ibid.*, pp. 223-251: "Eclipsing God".

compliant relationship with the book and avoid asking critical questions of the text and its authors. But to find support for this conviction of a spotless ethical message of the text, Bible didactics has no choice but to make selective use of the Bible. Children's Bibles are frequently put together in a way that leads to such an ethically "corrected", i.e., "more idealised", version of the Bible. The tendency is to select biblical texts which support a moralising presentation of the Jewish and the Christian messages. Such selective treatment of the Bible (a "canon within the canon") leads not only to a moral instrumentalisation of the text but also to Bible fatigue, because time and again the same stories are told at the expense of viewing the Bible as a complex and rich religious book of books[6].

When (young) people then discover at a certain moment that some Bible texts are not completely in line with the preconceived moral norms they learned in biblical instruction, they can be so shocked that they reject the Bible completely and forever. This process we call diabolisation. This is a spontaneous human mechanism which occurs when confronted with evil: the total rejection of the evil other as absolute evil based on a pre-supposed evil intention. We see this happening often in biblical education with teenagers. If the Bible is held up to them as a spotless moral mirror, one may not be surprised if they in turn capitalise on the moral failures they discover in the Bible in an attempt to deflect attention from their own. They can be merciless in highlighting the morally objectionable and sometimes contradictory statements and practices in the Bible. Apologetic efforts to save the text or its authors by means of complex exegetical strategies will fail because they are in contradiction with the evident violence in the text or its effective history.

In a very provocative book on the Bible, *Bloedboek* (in English: *Blood Book*), the Flemish author Dimitri Verhulst criticises mercilessly this apologetic approach to the Bible[7]. In an interview with the Dutch Catholic newspaper *Trouw* he says: "It would be dishonest to walk around the genocides, the racism, the intolerance – as was done in Catholic education. In catechesis, they wanted to bring me the word of God. But they didn't give me the word of God, they gave me those words of God that they had chosen. Not the full story"[8]. For Verhulst, a convinced atheist, there is no

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6. D. POLLEFEYT – R. BIERINGER, *The Role of the Bible in Religious Education Reconsidered: Risks and Challenges in Teaching the Bible*, in BIERINGER – ELSBERND (eds.), *Normativity of the Future* (n. 1), 377-402.

7. D. VERHULST, *Bloedboek*, Amsterdam, Atlas Contact, 2015.

8. S. AKKERMAN, *De gruwelijke Bijbel van Dimitri Verhulst*, in *Trouw* (2015), at https://www.trouw.nl/nieuws/de-gruwelijke-bijbel-van-dimitri-verhulst~b37a1f37/?referrer=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.google.com%2F (accessed 7 October 2021).

other conclusion possible than this cynical one: "That's not just intel-
lectually dishonest: it [a selective presentation] would make me a bad
believer, because I'm not doing what God asks of me, which is hating
gays. Or hate and exterminate Canaanites". His conclusion is a shocking,
complete moral rejection of the Bible: "It is remarkable that the Bible
with all its stories about genocide can be found in hotel rooms whereas
Hitler's *Mein Kampf* is forbidden"[9]. The Bible is here completely diab-
olised. The Bible as a holy book is turned into a book of terror.

One can identify two important characteristics in a diabolising presenta-
tion of evil(doers). Mostly, this approach starts from a "selective compac-
tion" of the (evil) facts and a theory of intentionalism. One selects in the
personality or the life of the perpetrator the most shocking acts or events
and turns them into the total presentation of that person. Moreover, all
these acts or events are explained unilaterally from the evil intention of
the perpetrator. Even things that seem to be good are interpreted as being
malicious acts of evil. If we apply this to the ethics of interpretation of
biblical texts, in this approach, all evil aspects to be found in the Bible
will be gathered, concentrated and presented as "the" image of the Bible.
There is suddenly nothing good to be found in the Bible anymore. The
book and even its authors coincide with its evil aspects. Another atheist,
Richard Dawkins, argues for example that all children should read the
King James Bible to learn that it is not a moral book and how bad religion
is. The demonisation of the Bible is used to demonise religion as such[10].
One can be so horrified by these problematic texts in the Bible, that one
easily and uncritically accepts this presentation of the Bible. Mostly, the
presentation of the selected passages is accurate: the Bible does indeed
contain violence. But the question is the following: how relevant and
representative is this compilation of evil passages for the totality of the
Bible and its message? The moral indignation is in itself not an argument
or a guarantee for a correct presentation of the Bible as a whole. On the
contrary, the ethical dualism that is at work in this diabolisation prevents
a more nuanced evaluation of the complex moral nature of the Bible and
its effective history. The issue is reduced to a simplistic "evil" versus
"good". In fact, this approach of the Bible is as problematic as the pres-
entation of the Bible as a spotless holy book. It turns the argument upside
down, but the presupposition is the same: there is an ethical dualism at
the cost of an integral presentation and appreciation of the Bible as a
book in all its dimensions.

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9. *Ibid.*
10. R. DAWKINS, *Why I Want All Our Children to Read the King James Bible*, in *The
Guardian* (2012), at https://www.theguardian.com/science/2012/may/19/richard-dawkins-
king-james-Bible (accessed 4 October 2021).

A second characteristic of diabolisation is intentionalism. All evil consequences of the Bible as a book are explained by referring to the intention of its authors. The Bible "wants" this evil *vis-à-vis* the other and this evil intention was the driving force of the biblical authors who should be condemned for it. Of course, this approach is problematic on many levels. The traditional critique to this approach is that it evaluates old texts with contemporary ethical criteria and it makes abstraction of the moral, cultural, political and social context in which these texts were first formulated. This context can offer an explanation or at least a historicisation of certain biblical passages. Another objection against intentionalism is that it denies the distinction between the intentions that govern an author or a text and the effect it may have on its readers. Sometimes, an author may not be self-consciously aware of the intentionality of the text when speaking or writing. Moreover, one's discourses (whether spoken or written) can have "unintended effects" on its readers in new times and contexts. As Bieringer has repeatedly stated, if a person's rhetoric does in fact have an "unexpected effect" upon the reader(s), then that person tends to complain that they have been "misunderstood" since people are often satisfied that their "discourses express (good) intentions".

The comparison between *Mein Kampf* and the Bible shows how careful we should be using the intentionalistic argument in the ethical debate. The genres, the authors, the contexts and the intentions of both books are completely different. *Mein Kampf* is a political-ideological text written by one person. The Bible is a book of many books written by many authors in different contexts as testimonies of faith in a God who reveals Godself progressively to humanity. *Mein Kampf* inspired the most horrific genocide of modern history. On the contrary, the Bible inspired the moral traditions of Judaism and Christianity, which are recognised foundations of Western civilisation, and violence and genocide were never normative in these religious traditions.

Diabolisation ends in a paradox. It rejects the intolerance in the Bible but becomes itself intolerant in its rejection of the Bible. It leaves no room for a more nuanced moral approach; it denies all the good that the texts hold and have generated through their effective history. In its fight against the Bible as a "holy book" it reproduces the moral presuppositions it rejects; something is absolutely good or something is absolutely bad. In both cases, there is no room for complexity, contextuality and hermeneutics.

Nevertheless, overcoming diabolisation in dealing with the Bible will start by accepting that biblical texts indeed can lead to intolerance and violence, cripple human freedom, be at great odds with scientific findings, disregard gender equality and can be very oppressive. This is an element

of contemporary adult biblical literacy. It is one of the reasons why Bieringer is convinced that the Bible is not a book for children. But at the same time, he also refuses the diabolisation of the text and its authors as such. In his work, he searches for a much more complex approach that at the same time recognises the problematic aspects of biblical texts without rejecting and demonising the Bible in its totality, but on the contrary, that enables one to show, as a theologian, how God reveals Godself in spite of and even through these texts.

II. SAVING THE BIBLE

A second approach to evil is the banalisation of the perpetrator, inspired by the Jewish philosopher Hannah Arendt and her work on Eichmann on the "banality of evil"[11]. In this paradigm for understanding evil, one is not identifying the evildoer with evil, as in diabolisation, but on the contrary, one tries to understand the (psychological, social or cultural) context in which an evildoer came to do evil. The perpetrator is not a monster, but someone who is under the influence of external powers that can "explain" his evil acts. This results in the idea of the banality, not of evil, but of the evildoer, who is "just" the expression, or even the victim of this context. A consequence is that evil is often "explained away" or reduced to underlying mechanisms. Often, the intention to do evil in diabolisation is replaced by social powers that "excuse" to some degree the evildoer. If we apply this to the ethics of interpretations of texts, biblical scholars (implicitly) often use this paradigm to "excuse" the text of the Bible and its authors of any responsibility for its evil potential or reality by relying on socio-cultural, but also linguistic, archaeological, historical arguments that take the "evil" out of the text. Often, these exegetical techniques are very sophisticated and critics will say these are simply ways to attempt to save the text from its obvious and inescapable evil dimensions.

In his work on the Bible, Reimund Bieringer has often described and criticised such approaches that try to save the text and its author by using complex contextual arguments. I have always been surprised how little this aspect of his work has resonated in the scholarly world. Exegetes often do not like to reflect on their own "hidden agendas" or to question the underlying ethical presuppositions and concerns of their methodological

11. H. ARENDT, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*, New York, Viking Press, 1963.

approaches. That could explain why implicitly there is a preference to keep exegesis and moral theology as separate disciplines. Some will even say that doing exegesis with a consciousness of the (implicit) ethics of interpretation makes exegesis subjective and non-academic. The uniqueness of the work of Reimund Bieringer is that he masters both the technical aspects of exegesis and the broader horizon of theology – including moral theology – and has never separated them.

A textbook example of such a technique of the banalisation of the text is limiting or expanding the referent of certain morally problematic expressions in the Bible. For example, when "Jews" are referred to in a negative and hostile way, scholars in this paradigm will argue – mostly based on linguistic arguments – that biblical authors in such cases are only referring to certain Jews, e.g., Judean Jews, and not to all Jews non-restrictively. For that reason, the text or author cannot be held responsible for violence against Jews in other contexts which is based on these texts. These scholars will find grammatical arguments for such limitations at certain points in the biblical texts but then easily overlook other passages that are unrestricted in nature and have a supra-temporal tone. There is also an opposite methodological strategy, not limiting but expanding the referent of dangerous concepts. Applied to anti-Jewish expressions in biblical texts, scholars will argue – mostly with theological arguments – that authors do not target specific "Jews" but that this expression is used to refer *in abstracto* to hostility against God in general rather than to any specific Jewish group or people[12]. It is only when this expansion of the referent is overlooked that people can use this text to legitimise violence, because they (unwillingly) overlook this theological dimension of the text. This approach is problematic from an ethical point of view because it portrays (in this case) Jews as the archetype for evil in humanity, an example of collective guilt with a very dangerous potential. It is surprising that biblical scholars often do not question the moral implications of their exegetical strategies. That is why an ethics of interpretations is an essential component of any exegetical endeavour.

Another strategy that fits in this banalisation paradigm is placing the violent text in the original socio-cultural context of the time. Applying this to (alleged) anti-Jewish passages, biblical scholars will argue that we should understand negative statements about Jews as expressions of an intra-Jewish polemic. From an ethical point of view, the argument follows

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12. R. Bieringer – D. Pollefeyt – F. Vandecasteele-Vanneuville, *Wrestling with Johannine Anti-Judaism: A Hermeneutical Framework for the Analysis of the Current Debate*, in Iid. (eds.), *Anti-Judaism and the Fourth Gospel*, Louisville, KY, Westminster John Knox, 2001, 3-37.

that if these passages are seen as typical for intra-Jewish literature they should no longer be seen (or used) as anti-Jewish or anti-Semitic. The basic idea is that religious legitimation of violence has often been the standard in the past. Heated rhetoric in religious debates is seen as the norm in ancient times. For example, David Turner comments that "rhetoric was used in Jewish circles since the days of biblical prophets, and it continued to be used in the days of the Second Temple as various Jewish groups critiqued the religious establishment in Jerusalem"[13]. He even goes as far as to tell us that the use of such a motif was "a valid expression of authentic Jewish spirituality". From an ethical point of view, however, the context is not an excuse to legitimise violent expressions or actions. In any given context, the author remains ultimately responsible for their acts and even in situations of war, there exists an "ethics for enemies"[14].

In such a paradigm, evil is almost eliminated and reduced to an infra-human linguistic, social or cultural mechanism for which no one is responsible. Evil consequences are the effect of a wrong (de-contextualised) use of the text. Central from a moral perspective is the distinction that scholars using such paradigm make between the intention and the effect of the text. There is truth in this approach: there is a distinction to be made between the intentionality governing a text and the effect it may have on its (actual and future) readers. The author may or may not be self-consciously aware of his intentionality when speaking or writing, especially for the next generations. Moreover, one's discourse can have "unintended effects". In his classes, Bieringer compares this with writing a letter. At the moment a letter is written and has left the desk of its author, people can read all kinds of things in this letter and the original author has no control whatsoever on the future effects of their own creation. The letter starts to live a life of its own. If an author's text does in fact have "unexpected effects" upon the reader(s), then that person tends to complain that they have "been misunderstood" and their good intentions have been neglected.

This argumentation is problematic from an ethical point of view however (as Bieringer would also say). Where diabolisation identifies the text with the (evil) intention of the author, banalisation separates the author too much from the effects of the text, whether the effects are intended or not. If an author writes a text with the idea that the text is divinely inspired, should they at least not be aware of the dangerous potential of

    13. D.L. TURNER, *Matthew 23 as a Prophetic Critique*, in *Journal of Biblical Studies* 4 (2004) 23-42, p. 24.
    14. F.M. KAMM, *Ethics for Enemies: Terror, Torture, and War*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2011.

their text in this context and in other contexts? For example, Martyn argues that the author of the gospel of John projected the conflict between the Jews of his time and the Johannine community onto the conflict between Jews and the Christian community at Jesus' time. However, this strategy of redaction is in no way a moral excuse for the violent potential in the gospel of John[15]. The author of John is and remains responsible for this projection and for the use and misuse of putting words in the mouth of Jesus to adjudge something in his own time. So, explaining from a historical perspective the "two levels" in the drama in the gospel of John does not relieve the author of the moral responsibility of dealing with the story of Jesus in such a way (as Martyn's approach seems to imply). Here we see the limits and the dangers of a banalisation strategy: erasing evil in an effort to try saving the text. Too often, exegetes think that by using this strategy all moral and theological issues of the text are solved. *Quod non.*

III. Cleaning the Bible

A possible counter reaction to diabolisation is the perpetrator trying to save his (moral) face. People who appreciate or stimulate this approach to evil and evildoers operate in a (third) "paradigm of ethisation"[16]. People do not want to be seen as evil, so perpetrators of evil will try to present themselves as ethical, good people. In the context of Holocaust studies, I have done a lot of work on the so-called "Nazi ethic", i.e., the efforts and strategies of Nazi leaders, including philosophers and theologians, to present National-Socialism as a movement oriented towards the good. People operating in this paradigm sought to show how promising, even utopian Nazism was. National-Socialism promised a new future for the German people, more living space, genetic health, more culture, sports, arts, a rebirth of the economy, work for all, etc., and these were based on values that we recognise from Western civilisation: order, discipline, respect for authority, "mercy" for the weak, etc. In their desire "to look good" at the end of the war, the Nazis tried to erase all traces of their crimes, thus the destruction of the extermination camps and crematoria, the burial of dead bodies in mass graves or the burning of the camp administrations. Another way to deal with the morally painful elements

15. J.L. MARTYN, *History and Theology in the Fourth Gospel*, Nashville, TN, Abingdon, 1979.

16. P.J. HAAS, *Morality after Auschwitz: The Radical Challenge of the Nazi Ethic*, Philadelphia, PA, Fortress, 1988; POLLEFEYT, *Ethics and Theology after the Holocaust* (n. 2), pp. 197-200.

in the Nazi ideology (e.g., the murder of Jewish children) was to present them as necessary for the greater good of the *Third Reich*, a kind of collateral damage, or a demand for emotional ascesis like all ethical systems demand from their adherents.

Of course, in no way can we compare the Nazi ideology with modern theology and exegesis. But in our daily life, and thus also in theological endeavours, we also see the same (ethisation) mechanisms in dealing with evil, namely to (re-)frame it ethically, to hide the difficult aspects of human facts, or to make them acceptable, even if they are painful and morally objectionable elements. The greater the threat of diabolisation, the more people will withdraw into ethisation. Applied to exegesis in particular, we see in such an approach to the Bible efforts to make it "better" in order to save the goodness of the book. In this way, the text becomes again morally "spotless" but not through the eyes of the naivety of the child as described above, but with the use of scientific arguments. There are many ways to do this, such as the use of archaeological findings to prove or reject certain points and the application of linguistic methods and theological arguments. I give here three examples that Bieringer and myself regularly met in dealing with alleged anti-Jewish passages in the New Testament that can be situated in the paradigm of ethisation.

The first technique is the use of the interpolation argument: the (violent) text is not original but a later addition. The general approach of viewing certain problematic biblical passages as the later work of, for example, anti-Jewish gentile authors is based on various considerations such at the polemical tone of the passage, the use of untypical terms for a specific author, unusual statements, and so on[17]. In short, this approach looks for textual, historical, form-critical and theological issues in the (added) texts. The treatment of 1 Thess 2,14-16 as an interpolation is a classic example of attempting to eliminate anti-Judaism from the New Testament. Such an approach seems "to offer the best of both worlds", for, according to John C. Hurd, "we are allowed to keep 1 Thessalonians as an authentic letter of Paul but the historical and theological difficulties posed by our passage are resolved by resigning it to a later period"[18]. This is a strategy that fits within the paradigm of ethisation: eliminating the problematic passages to save the text in its totality. In another contribution, we have discussed the arguments for the interpolation theory applied to 1 Thess 2,14-16. It is

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17. POLLEFEYT, *Ethics and Theology after the Holocaust* (n. 2), pp. 307-331: "Texts of Terror: Post-Holocaust Biblical Hermeneutics".

18. J.C. HURD, *Paul Ahead of His Time: 1 Thess. 2:13-16*, in P. RICHARDSON – D. GRANSKOU, *Anti-Judaism in Early Christianity*, Waterloo, Ont., Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1986, 21-36, p. 25.

clear that any form of the interpolation argument has the effect, either implicitly or explicitly, of saving Paul from being anti-Jewish, at least in this letter. Paul then can no longer be held responsible for what he did not write. Yet when we see that the collective evidence in favour of an interpolation is far from being clear-cut, one wonders whether such an outcome, in its potential desirability, has overly influenced the call to label this text as an interpolation. Cataloguing a text or passage as an interpolation should be a matter of last resort. Here, we simply raise the question, therefore, of whether the extreme polemical nature of this Pauline passage against the Jews has led to an overhasty categorisation by some as inauthentic, considering the ambiguity of the evidence.

A second strategy to save the text from moral blame and to restore its perfect moral image is to create a canon within the canon. That is overlooking or disregarding those parts of the Bible that one finds distasteful and emphasising only those passages that are acceptable in contemporary moral perspectives. This can happen whether one calls those unpleasant parts interpolations or not. J. Louis Martyn, for example, makes a good case for showing how the influential 1980 resolution of the *Landessynode der Evangelischen Kirche*, a document by German Protestants seeking to renovate their relationship with Jews, uses this strategy of ethisation[19]. In its confession, it puts ample weight on Romans 9–11 to the utter exclusion of 1 Thess 2,14-16 and other difficult passages for Jewish-Christian dialogue such as Gal 4,21–5,1 and 2 Cor 3,6.14-45. Martyn remarks that such "exclusion by silence" results in the creation of an "inner-canonical canon". He writes:

> Small wonder that a group of European Christians, living after the Holocaust, and admirably intent on rectifying some of the most grievous wrongs done to Jews by Christians, should concentrate their attention on certain parts of the Pauline corpus, to the practical exclusion of others. All exegetes work with an operative canon within the canon, their own context and thus their own history inevitably playing a significant role in their interpretive labours[20].

The marginalising of difficult texts in favour of universal ones raises several issues of its own. It is clear that selecting those texts that one thinks present Paul in the best light, for example, offers an incomplete portraiture at the very least. Moreover, the working assumption that the message in Romans 9–11 is primarily a positive one *vis-à-vis* the Jews is seriously open to question. The fallback position of a canon within

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19. J.L. MARTYN, *Theological Issues in the Letters of Paul*, Edinburgh, T&T Clark; New York: Continuum, 1997, pp. 192-193.
20. *Ibid*., p. 193.

the canon is also rejected by Bieringer. It creates too big a gap between biblical theology and pastoral theology, or it sacrifices careful and nuanced exegetical work for the sake of certain pastoral concerns. For Bieringer, exegesis, ethics and pastoral work go hand in hand but never one at the cost of the other, and this is true for ethics and pastoral work, but also for good biblical theology. Moreover, this approach of a canon within the canon ends in ethical relativism. It can lead to a very subjective and selective use of biblical texts as normative while rejecting other parts of the biblical corpus. Then there is a risk that one can do anything one wants with the Bible. It is a well-known historical fact that some influential theologians and biblical scholars functioned in service of the Nazi regime (even creating a so-called Aryan Bible). This helps us to understand how many intelligent, even well-meaning ("good") people supported Nazism or were silent about the excesses and evil that confronted them. In fact, it is not so difficult to find "support" in the Bible for anti-Semitism if you only make the right selection and use certain interpretations. The rest is history.

A last variation on the paradigm of ethisation (and the relativism it always holds) is to say that some evil in a story is just inevitable and even necessary. In Nazism, the feelings and compassion one has for the victims were to be borne as a "sacrifice" in order to contribute to a world free of Jews and Judaism. Applying the paradigm of ethisation in the context of evil religious texts, the argument is that, e.g., exclusivism or rejection of Jews and Judaism is an intrinsic element of Christology, then and even now. It is just impossible to confess Jesus as the unique and universal mediator of salvation and at the same time accept people, e.g., Jews, who reject this idea. Intolerance is the prize for confessing Christ in full conviction. This should not *per se* end in violence and genocide, even if history shows that danger of such position: it is very difficult to explain Nazi anti-Semitism without the age-old biblical anti-Judaism. I share with Bieringer a lifelong theological mission to avoid this exact conclusion. If God is a God of salvation, and if the love of God is universal, theologians cannot accept that separation, exclusion and violence is at the heart of Judaism and Christianity and form the final perspective of history and humanity. Such a conclusion is neither random nor a naïve, subjective preference, but is in contradiction with what Bieringer calls along with the Protestant philosopher Paul Ricœur, the all-inclusive "horizon" of the Bible (cf. *infra*)[21].

21. P. RICŒUR, *Interpretation Theory: Discourse and Surplus of Meaning*, Fort Worth, TX, Texas Christian University Press, 1976, p. 30.

IV. NEUTRALISING THE BIBLE

How to understand evil beyond diabolisation (identifying evil with the evildoer, or violent biblical texts with the Bible), banalisation (separating evil from the evildoer, or individual texts from the full text, using contextual elements), and ethisation (trying to "apply makeup" to the narrative, and looking for apologies for evil)? In my study of the Holocaust, I have developed the concepts of fragmentation and self-deception to understand the perpetrator of evil. Fragmentation means that people do not want to be contaminated by evil even if they are involved in evil. To save their moral identity, they choose fragmentation (and self-deception when fragmentation fails). They close their eyes. In this way, they try to make themselves immune to the potential and real evil effects of their actions (fragmentation) even if they are aware of it (self-deception)[22].

In theological academia, we see how this fragmentation often happens in the separation between the different theological disciplines: biblical studies, theological ethics and pastoral theology. They all have their own professors, methods, courses, doctoral projects and financial resources. They operate often in different universes. Often, in biblical theology moral questions do not interrupt exegesis; and ethics often uses the Bible only as lip service for preconceived moral concepts. In an essay, authored together with Bieringer, we described such an attitude in exegesis – somewhat provocatively – as "scientific fundamentalism" in biblical studies. In such an approach, exegesis only concentrates on the original text in an effort to reconstruct its original context. The ideal is to discover – beyond doubt or discussion – the original meaning of the text[23]. The methods come from other sciences (linguistic, sociological, archaeological, etc.) and the outcomes of the research are "objective" and "scientific". And this work happens in total "independence" of dogmatic presuppositions or moral and ideological concerns. It is "value free". Such rigorous scholarship can go hand in hand with pious belief since science and faith in this view are two different things. What I have learned from the scholarly work of Bieringer is that the deeper one studies the exegetical tradition, the more one becomes aware of how few certainties can be found through biblical scholarship, how almost everything is open for debate, and how much the hand of the interpreter is always at work in the interpretation of the biblical texts, even when it is hidden or denied. It is

22. POLLEFEYT, *Ethics and Theology after the Holocaust* (n. 2), pp. 200-209: "Beyond Horror and Excuse: The Evildoer as Self-Deceiver and the Meaning of Forgiveness".

23. POLLEFEYT – BIERINGER, *The Role of the Bible in Religious Education Reconsidered* (n. 6).

an uneasy conclusion, but it is precisely the recognition of this reality which creates the necessity of reflection on the ethics of interpretation in dealing with the Bible, also in the academia. With a (self-deceptive) attitude that good exegesis is neutral and objective, there is little room for this. It is therefore a very courageous decision of the editors of this volume in dedication to Bieringer to include a part on the ethics of interpretation. It is based on a good understanding of one of the main concerns of the entire academic work of Bieringer: the Bible can never be disconnected from human and theological responsibility, and exegesis, theological ethics and pastoral theology belong together.

V. TALKING TOGETHER: A NEW BIBLICAL THEOLOGY

For Bieringer, this reflection on the ethics of interpretation translates itself methodologically into an approach to the Bible that is not only "compliant" but if necessary also "resistant"[24]. In such an approach, biblical theology and theological ethics talk to each other: it is not (always) good because it is in the Bible, it is in the Bible because it is good, *if* it is good (R. Burggraeve)[25]; a resistant reading implies that the Bible is not *a priori* good but needs to be questioned time and again. It is a consequence of an authentic, open approach that is aware not only of the work of interpretations in reading (biblical) texts, but also of the ethical dimension of such a hermeneutical enterprise. Fragmentation is never a solution or an acceptable way out when the alleged, potential or real violence of/in the text is revealed. For many theologians and students in theology, this approach creates (sometimes too much) uncertainty. If the text and its objective reconstruction is no longer a lifebuoy in a sea of relativism, how will we survive as Christians and not end up in relativism ourselves? How can we trust God if the text in which God reveals Godself is contaminated by evil? A fragmentation of the moral and exegetical, and all clever exegetical strategies to save the text give so much more trust and security. A recognition that ethics is at work in every interpretation is much more demanding and challenging. That is why such an approach often meets not only indifference in the world of scholarly exegesis, but also a lot of questions and even resistance in classrooms among students in theology.

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24. S. SCHNEIDERS, *The Study of Christian Spirituality: Contours and Dynamics of a Discipline*, in *Studies in Spirituality* 8 (1998) 38-57; and A. REINHARTZ, *Befriending the Beloved Disciple: A Jewish Reading of the Gospel of John*, New York – London, Continuum, 2001.

25. R. BURGGRAEVE, *De ongewenste bij uitstek*, in *De Standaard*, May 5, 2006.

A resilient reading of the biblical text starts from a deeper trust in the biblical revelation itself. It is impossible to understand Bieringer's ethical approach to the Bible without appreciating his understanding of how God reveals Godself through the text. In this theology of revelation, God does not show Godself automatically *in* the text, but more in the space that is opened between the reader and the text; in other words, in the dialogue between the text and the reader; not only as an individual reader, but also as a community of readers; and not only as a community of scholars, but also as a community of believers, and even as a community of prayer and liturgy. In such a community, one recognises that the biblical texts can have an alleged, potential and even real violence in themselves, but that these aspects can never overwhelm and destroy their, much more fundamental, good aspects. This is very much in line with the general Christian anthropological view that human beings can do evil, but that even evil deeds can never destroy the desire of God to call for the repentance of the perpetrator, and create a space of love where remembrance, forgiveness and reconciliation are possible.

In the work of Bieringer, this translates itself in the concept of the "normativity of the future", which he developed together with Mary Elsbernd of Loyola University in Chicago (1946-2010). I will not repeat here this theory, that is inspired by the French protestant philosopher Paul Ricœur (1913-2005)[26]. "Normativity of the future" is an implicit critique on the dominant position of those defending a "normativity of the past", as if the (religious) past would deliver clear, context-free and unmediated answers for problems of the present, for example: "Jesus did not smoke, so we are not allowed to smoke" (or more seriously: "Jesus did not call women as apostles, so women can never become priests"). "Normativity of the future" is looking for the horizon that appears in and through the biblical texts, at the desire of God that is developed, discovered, revealed, and sometimes also hidden and even perverted in the biblical texts. For Bieringer, this future for humanity as it is dreamed by God is an all-inclusive love and redemption for the whole of humanity. Of course, time and again, this horizon of the texts is obscured and betrayed, even in the way Godself is presented by their human authors. Even more, it is betrayed and violated mostly by those people who want to push this divine will and impose it on all. All kinds of exclusivism, which are also present in biblical texts, are mostly inspired by the desire to realise God's will, or a certain interpretation of God's will for all: the desire that all will or even "should"

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26. R. BIERINGER – M. ELSBERND, *When Love Is Not Enough: A Theo-Ethic of Justice*, Collegeville, MN, Liturgical Press, 2002.

be saved. But then, the dream of God is violated and the biblical texts become instruments for violating the human person, and thus the will of God. Here, Bieringer's biblical theology becomes "resistant", defending God even against God. I have never understood how this theological stance can be criticised as relativistic, since it is very close to the prophetic biblical tradition, and it delivers an exegetical and theological orientation in times where biblical scholarship becomes a "neutral" academic discipline in splendid isolation from the world, or even worse, meaningless and indifferent in a world disconnected from God. The "normativity of the future" makes it possible to see and to experience the Bible as an authentic source of divine revelation, not in the letter of the text, but in the space between text and reader. That is also the reason why *Dei Verbum* says that prayer should always accompany the reading of the sacred Scripture: "so that God and [hu]man may *talk together*; for 'we speak to Him when we pray; we hear Him when we read the divine saying'" (*Dei Verbum*, no. 5)[27] [our italics]. It is no accident that *Dei Verbum* is one of the most inspiring texts in the work of Bieringer. It is no exaggeration to say that his work is one of the most prominent ways in which the voice of the Second Vatican Council has found its way in biblical scholarship today.

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27. VATICAN II, *Dei Verbum: Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation*, Città del Vaticano, Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1965.