

## **A. Foundational Issues in the Interpretation of the Hebrew Scriptures\***

1. Interpreting Ancient Near Eastern History and the Writing of History (Becking)
2. Interpreting the Hebrew Scriptures (Talstra, Noort)
3. Is it Possible to Write a Biblical Theology? (Noort)
4. Is it Possible to Write a Systematic Theology? (Kuitert)
5. Interpreting the New Testament

\* All five of these papers are closely related.

## **2. Interpreting the Hebrew Scriptures:**

### **“Reading the Hebrew Scriptures Backwards; the Old Bible is Dead, a New Scriptures is Emerging”**

Preface

Contents

#### **I. The Struggle with the Traditional View of the Scriptures: a Case Study**

1. The changes in Dutch society from 1950 till today
2. The crisis within the Christian community
3. Religious Studies at the Universities
4. The new emerging view of scripture

#### **II. Toward an Integral Method of Interpretation**

6. Introduction
7. The Many Approaches
8. Toward an Integral Method

#### **III. Talstra’s Exegetical Approach**

9. Introduction
10. The Linguistic Analysis
11. The Literary Analysis
12. The Historical Analysis
13. Address: First and New Readers
14. The Role of Tradition

#### **IV. Noort's Contribution**

15. History and History writing
16. Noort's View of Religious History Writing
17. Another Brief Example: the Book of Judges

#### **V. An Alternative Interpretative Framework**

18. The Many Overarching Perspectives
19. A Hermeneutic Key: a Phenomenological Frame of Reference

### **Bibliography**

#### **Preface**

The radical renewal of the Christian faith will require two things that are closely interrelated. First of all, it will require a new understanding of the scriptures. Secondly, of equal importance, it will involve a new experience of faith as a lived faith that is an integral part of daily life. This paper deals with another vision of the scriptures that speaks to us in our everyday experience. As a prophetic witness these scriptures can serve as a guide or touchstone in the ups and downs and perplexities of modern life and our global situation. The contemporary Accra confession of the ecumenical councils of the Reformed churches illustrates how closely the prophetic message, a lived faith and daily actions ought to be and can be intertwined. It is the opposite of a spiritualistic faith that can exist, to whatever degree, separate from daily life. It is striking that the socialist party in Holland both before the war, right after the war and presently has in actuality implemented the prophetic witness more clearly than the Christian political parties. Centuries of a more or less dualistic and moralistic vision and way of life takes its toll. Writing about these issues is a part of my own personal journey with the Christian faith and finding an alternative. The traditional Christian view no longer speaks to millions of people that have been alienated from the Christian church, including myself. My hope is that this alternative view and way of life can inspire others in finding a new direction for living.

Over a period of more than five years I have made a concerted effort to develop an overview of the field of Old Testament Exegesis and Old Testament Biblical Theology. The extensive bibliography at the end illustrates what is involved in such an effort. The articles and books on any specific text, bible book or theme is overwhelming. Any branch of Old Testament studies has become a highly specialized field of research, for example the study of Ancient Near Eastern and biblical archeology, or the history of the Ancient Near Eastern religions, or the so-called Deuteronomistic History, or the interpretation of a particular Bible book, or the Qumran studies, and so on. It would be impossible for any one person to master the field of Old Testament studies, or even, to become a specialist in more than a few of these areas. I have tried primarily to get a sufficient overview to present and test my main thesis. To do so, I had to consult many detailed studies without getting lost in all the technical points of interpretation and the many specialists' discussions about the history and religion of ancient Israel.

One thing that has become apparent to me during the course of this study is that, in the end, a scholar's basic viewpoint is decisive for the outcome of her or his research. These differences in perspective, rather than a barrier, can also be a gain. If the presuppositions and arguments are presented clearly, it can provide for an honest exchange, comparison, mutual growth and new discoveries. In modern scholarship a new kind of scripture is emerging that is radically different from the old one. Both orthodox scholars and more liberal ones have contributed to this new view. Although working within the parameters and conventions of modern historical, archaeological and exegetical research, orthodox scholars have often challenged unwarranted assumptions and unfounded theories. Their sensitivity to reductionistic approaches or to viewpoints that do not do justice to the nature of the scriptures have helped to clarify or correct many hypotheses. Dutch scholars like Talstra, Becking, Noort, Dijkstra, Spronk and many others have helped me to find my way among all the different points of view. I owe them a great debt of gratitude.

As a non-specialist theologian who studied practical theology and taught an Introduction to Biblical Studies for fourteen years, I was surprised by the more recent developments in OT scholarship. My first reaction after returning to the study of the OT was how I could have remained so unaware of the fundamental changes that have taken place during the last decades. During the 1960's and 1970's the main conflicts and debates seemed to be about the historicity of the bible stories. My understanding is that during the eighties and nineties the discussions came to a premature end, which is regrettable. Ongoing discussion might have shown that a radically different approach was needed. The following article, as well as the other essays, give an account of the development of this new understanding of the Hebrew scriptures.

## **1. The Struggle with the Traditional View of the Scriptures; a Case Study**

### **1. The Changes in Dutch Society from the 1960's till the Present**

The developments in the Netherlands from the 1960's on can serve as a good illustration of the radical changes that have taken place in the Western world. These changes have deeply affected the life of the churches and individual believers as well. Within a few decades millions of people left the church, both Protestant and Roman Catholic. From a deeply religious society Holland has become a "secular" society, in which Christianity now represents a minority along with other religions, particularly the Islamic faith because of the influx of foreign workers and immigrants.

Holland is a very small country. Geographically it can be tucked away in a corner of Ontario. Within three or four hours - depending on traffic jams - one can travel from one end of the country to the other. Moreover, Holland is one of the most densely populated countries of Europe (over 16 million people), with the majority of the people living in the western part of the country (that is roughly, between Rotterdam and Amsterdam). By comparison, this would be an area from Hamilton to Oshawa in Ontario. One implication of the size and density of Holland is that discussions tend to be very public and intense. Historically as well, political and theological debates were very much part of public life. What happens or is said in one part of the country is immediately reacted to or commented upon in every other part of the country, including religious news. In Canada, what a professor of religion says or writes in Toronto does not necessarily make front-line news in Vancouver. Many of the same changes that took place in Dutch society have happened in Canada as well, but they do not seem to be as much a part of our consciousness as in Europe. Moreover, the contrasts between orthodoxy and liberalism are much greater in Canada than

in Holland with its wide range of viewpoints. All in all, the country's size, the density of the population, the tradition of discussion and as a result, the close interaction makes for an interesting "case study".

The largest protestant church in Holland was the Reformed Church (Hervormde Kerk). It came into existence during the time of the reformation. During the great synod of Dordt in 1618-1619 three forms of unity were adopted that formally unified the churches. In 1834 and in 1886, two groups split off from the national protestant church in protest against its "liberalism" and "critical" view of the scriptures. In 1892 they came together and formed the Christian Reformed Churches (de Gereformeerde Kerken in Nederland). During the last fifty years a serious attempt was made to re-unite the reformational churches in Holland. In 2004 three denominations, the Reformed Church, the Christian Reformed Church and the Evangelical-Lutheran Church, finally were able to join together to form the Protestant Church in the Netherlands (de Protestantse Kerk in Nederland). This united church has about 1,800,000 members, which constitutes about 11% of the Dutch population. Meanwhile, many groups and individual congregations did not go along with the new united church. As a result there are still many smaller Reformed denominations and church groups in Holland. These divisions among the churches remained a life-long stumbling block for many. For them the Church did not exist, only an endless array of separate churches that disagree, excommunicate one another, or break formal ties with each other.

During those turbulent years of the 60's and 70's Dutch society was shaken to its roots. Fundamental changes took place in every aspect of society. People no longer "blindly" accepted the authority of the church and political leaders. They became independent and found their own voice. This new-found emancipation and independence, along with the new economic prosperity and the new social security led to fundamental changes. At the same time there was the post-war disillusionment with the past, the split within the (Christian) reformed churches during the war, the government policies with regard to the (former) Dutch colonies, the threat of a nuclear war, the peace movement, the public protests, the counter-culture, feminism and the new role of women. There was a radical change in morality with regard to sexuality, dancing, movies, Sunday observance, drugs, drinking, gambling, birth control, abortion, homosexuality, divorce, civil disobedience, as well as many other aspects. All these changes led to a wide-spread "secularization" process. Rather than "secularization", it is probably more helpful to see these changes in society in terms of emancipation, individualism and an emphasis on economic prosperity and consumption.

With these developments, the mindset and the worldview of people was transformed and changed drastically. T.V. images and news items from all over the world reached even the smallest villages in Holland that had been relatively isolated before the war. Issues and conflicts from every part of the globe, religious practices and local customs, space exploration and the expanding image of the universe, the rapid developments in the sciences, new archaeological discoveries, the increasing number of nature programs, etc., became part of the daily news and entered and changed peoples' consciousness. What the parents and the grandparents could not have imagined became the common awareness of the generation that came of age after the war. The world had changed forever, including people's worldview, and there was no going back.

Geert Mak, (1999), *De Eeuw van Mijn Vader*. Amsterdam: Atlas.

Geert Mak (1996), *Hoe God Verdween uit Jorwerd*. Amsterdam: Atlas.

See the references to the many sociological studies by G. Dekker in the bibliography of *The Gods in Whom They Trusted* (To be published in the fall of 2016).

Fifty years later, our situation is not much different than that of the 1960's and the following decades, except that we may have grown more numb to it. After the war Holland was flooded with the accounts and images of the Nazi extermination camps, in which more than six million Jewish people were murdered along with hundreds of thousands political prisoners, homosexuals, Gypsies, and Jehovah's Witnesses. After Auschwitz nothing could be the same, including theology and ethics. After Auschwitz the world vowed, never again. However, the genocides have continued unabated from the killing fields of Cambodia, the Congo, Rwanda, East Timor, Sarajevo, Srebrenica, Kosovo, Darfur, and many others. It is just a sampling. Wars have followed one another, from the cold war to the Korean War to Vietnam, to Iraq, to Afghanistan, to Syria and countless other conflicts, and with it, the on-going threat of terrorism and nuclear war. During this time, global capitalism with its consumerism and neo-liberal ideology of unlimited growth and the free market gained the day.

With the economic developments came the degradation of the environment: the pollution of the soil, water and air; deforestation; global warming; an increase in violent storms and natural disasters; droughts; increasing desertification; the erosion and salination of the soil; a decline in clean water; the disappearance of countless species of plants and animals; the pollution of the oceans; the declining fish stocks from overfishing; the threatening epidemics among chickens, pigs, goats, and cows, and now, humans; the list continues to grow. With global capitalism also came the growing gap between the rich and the poor, between the (over)developed countries and the (pillaged) impoverished countries with wide-spread corruption everywhere. One (small) part of the world's population struggles with obesity and diabetes, the other (large) part with hunger and death from preventable diseases (33.000 children a day). Child labour, garbage-dump picking children sorting discarded electronics with poisonous elements, increasing slums around overcrowded cities, homeless people, and a growing world population are well-documented. The mass media and communication technology of every kind bombard us daily with images of these events, but often in a sensationalized way that keeps the reality far from us. Democracy seems to be declining, even in the developed countries. The perplexing nature of this global situation has left many people with an overwhelming sense of powerlessness and pessimism. In contrast, to hear and see what millions of people are doing to create a different life for themselves, or just to make a difference, in big and small ways, we are mostly dependent on the alternative press, the internet and other sources. It takes a conscious effort to become aware what countless courageous people are doing to change their situation.

## 2. The Crisis within the Christian Community

The changes in worldview and self-awareness have deeply affected the Christian community in Holland as well as the rest of the Western world. Up to the present orthodox Christianity has hardly begun to incorporate these fundamental changes in their view of life. The increased understanding of the slow development of the earth over billions of years became an important part of the changing world view. As more and more information and images penetrated people's consciousness, it began to challenge the traditional view of creation as portrayed in the book of Genesis. It became evident that humans were latecomers – very late – in the development of the world. The appearance of the Hebrew people in the northern part of Palestine took place even much later. Many peoples and civilizations preceded them, both in the Ancient Near East and on other continents. Moreover, there were several “trial balloons” (human-like apes and ape-like humans) before a truly Homo sapiens people, our modern human species, became established. At the same time there were the Neanderthal people whose existence partly overlapped with the Homo sapiens before they became extinct. None of these givens could be harmonized with the creation story in Genesis, including the creation of the first humans, Adam and Eve.

This new knowledge and wide-spread awareness threw more and more doubt on the historicity of the bible stories. Did things really happen the way they are reported in the bible? Were Adam and Eve really the first humans? Did the snake in paradise really speak to Eve, tempting her to eat of the forbidden fruit? More delicate questions whether Cain and Abel had to sleep with their sisters in order to father children were usually not asked. Following these early stories, was there really a world-wide flood which only Noah and his family and all the animals survived? Were these just mythological stories like so many other creation and flood stories of the surrounding people? Was all of Genesis 1-11 a mythological account to provide an origin for the Hebrew people, tracing it right back to the beginning of time? Christians believing in the trustworthiness of the bible, started to wonder if the six days of creation should be understood as long periods of time. It was an attempt to harmonize the historicity of the bible with the new knowledge about the origin and development of the world and yet not hold to a literal interpretation of Genesis. Even today in some orthodox Reformed churches on this continent, this same kind of approach is followed. It is acceptable to believe that God used the evolutionary process to create the world including humans. However, each stage of development involved a distinctive creative act of God. To believe otherwise would not be acceptable.

As the many booklets published during the sixties and seventies indicate, the inspiration and authority of bible began to be doubted and questioned. To stem the tide and to bring the congregations up to date with what was happening in biblical research, both Roman Catholic and Protestant churches added their own official booklets to the stream of publications. Many specific questions were raised about errors and discrepancies as well as difficult to understand texts. How could Abraham have owned and be given camels when they were not domesticated till much later? What was the date of the exodus of the people of Israel from Egypt? Many biblical scholars today question whether there was even such a mass exodus and a forty year journey through the desert before they entered and settled in Palestine. Did they conquer the entire land under the leadership of Joshua, as it says in the book of Joshua, or was it more like the account in the book of Judges, that they occupied the land only piecemeal and over a (long) period of time? Did the sun actually stand still when Joshua commanded it, so that the people could continue to pursue the fleeing enemy? How could Jericho be captured, when the city did not exist at that time period?

What about the stoning of Achan along with his wife and children and all their animals because they had taken some of the spoil of the war that was dedicated to God? What about all the other “texts of terror” in the bible? What kind of God image does that present? Is God a war Lord and a God of vengeance or a God of love and mercy? Many people, even if they have gone to Sunday school, have little knowledge of the stories about Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, or Joseph and his brothers, or Moses and his successor, Joshua. All they might know about the Old Testament is that it is a book full of violent stories and myths. Then there are the many discrepancies and miracle stories. For example, the way in which David is described in the book of Kings is quite different from the picture of David in the book of Chronicles? What about the miracle stories? Did Elijah the prophet really bring a boy back to life after he had died? Did he really make bolts of fire come down from heaven to light his sacrifice on the altar to prove that his God was stronger than the god Baal? Did he really go up to heaven in a fiery chariot drawn by horses? Many other examples are listed in the booklets that appeared during those early decades after the war, including the discrepancies between the gospels. In view of these inconsistencies and difficulties, how can the scriptures still be considered trustworthy?

These problems illustrate that many passages and stories cannot be interpreted in a literal, historical way. Instead, many have asserted, that the bible must be interpreted according to its nature and intention as a religious book. However, how do we know what the religious intention is of a story that is presented as history? When did something really happen and when not and when is that crucial? It is one thing to say

that the bible is not an ordinary history book, yet, when does the Christian faith depend on the historicity of certain events? Today, with the increased knowledge of the scriptures, how can one still believe in the bible as the infallible and trustworthy Word of God? During the time of the Reformation the church confessed that: “The authority of scripture: we receive all these books and these only as holy and canonical, for the regulating, founding and establishing of our faith. And we believe without a doubt all things contained in them...because the Holy Spirit testifies in our hearts that they are from God...” (Article 5 of the Belgic Confession, one of the three historic confessions of the Reformed churches). How can people still affirm that confession in view of all the difficulties surrounding so many passages?

To most orthodox biblical scholars it had become evident during the last decades that the traditional doctrine of divine inspiration, whether “mechanical” and “literal” or more “organic” (by means of the personality and worldview of the various authors) could no longer account for the scriptures as divine revelation. More and more it was recognized that the scriptures were human documents. It became evident that they were totally embedded in the history and culture of the Ancient Near East. Every aspect of the scriptures, whether laws, genealogies, customs, proverbs, ancestral stories, miracles, and so on, had its parallels in the accounts of the neighbouring peoples. The historicity of many events turned out to be thoroughly “imbedded” in oral traditions, folk tales, mythological images, additions, different sources woven together, final compositions from a faith point of view, and so on. So how can one sort out what is historical and what not? As biblical scholarships advanced, it became more and more apparent that the various books of the bible went through a longer or shorter history of development and reflect the different sources and genres of their final composition. Although written from a faith point of view, they remain historical, human documents.

Some tried to find a solution by taking recourse to the central theme of the gospels: salvation in Jesus Christ. They considered that the core of the gospels and that the whole bible should be interpreted and evaluated in the light of that central message. The choice of a central theme, however, seemed arbitrary, since there are many themes in the scriptures. By focusing exclusively on the gospels, it also raised serious questions about the place and interpretation of the Old Testament. Even with regard to “salvation in Jesus Christ” there are different emphases and interpretations within the New Testament itself. The message of the gospel of Mathew is very different from that of John, and the emphasis in the letters of Paul is different from that of James, and so on. In relation to a central theme, it is interesting to see, how in 2000 the Protestant Church in the Netherlands, which was still in the process of uniting, published a statement of faith. It tried to join together a confession about Jesus Christ in which all the different viewpoints were combined. As many observed, it seemed like a missed opportunity. Historically, it seems that during times of crises and change and in the face of controversy, that the church developed new confessions of faith. This would have been such a time and opportunity, especially in view of the many questions that had been raised about the so-called “substitutionary atonement” and the traditional doctrine of “justification by faith in Jesus Christ” with its one-sided Pauline emphasis.

This uncertainty about any historical reliability of the bible has left many Christians, that is those who still feel a connection to the church, in a confused or doubtful place. This uncertainty does not only affect their view of the scriptures but also their view of God’s providence or his guidance of the course of history and, in the end, their God-image itself, as the many sociological surveys indicate. With what we know about causality today, including historical causality, how can God be present in the world and our individual lives, perhaps in our hearts, and if so, how? Many older Christians that were brought up in the traditional way have gone through a profound, personal change. No one lets go of their deepest convictions about life and the future without going through a soul searching change, or a crisis and a

sense of being adrift. All the old certainties can be slowly eroded leaving a person wondering and searching for a new anchor in life, or new answers.

When all these questions about the scriptures first arose, the church and theologians tried to find a solution in the distinction between an objective and a subjective side of the scriptures. Objectively there were many problems to be solved, but subjectively one could still hold to the bible as the trustworthy Word of God, who revealed himself in the history of the Hebrew people. Together with a relational view of truth rather than an eternal, absolute and objective view of truth, it seemed to provide an answer, but not for long. At present there seem to be three main orthodox ways of interpreting the scriptures. All three approaches present insoluble problems. The one solution is that we continually need to re-interpret and re-actualize the biblical texts just as was done in the different books of the bible and in the tradition of the church. The second solution is to take recourse to a 'narrative interpretation'. With regard to the first solution, there is no clear criterion for re-interpreting the texts for today. In practice this often means that the church's confessions and doctrines become the criteria. The problem is that the confessions suffer from the same difficulties as the scriptures; they are historically and culturally conditioned. Here too, Christians maintain some formulations and ignore others. The appeal to the confessions becomes just as arbitrary as the appeal to the bible. Moreover, the Christian community is deeply divided (as are most faith communities) and is often at odds with one another. Is God more present in the tradition of one community than others? Is one tradition more trustworthy than another? What about some of their outdated parts because of changed historical circumstances, do we ignore those in our re-interpreting? Generally the criterion for interpreting becomes the exegete's own particular confessional tradition.

The second solution is to embrace and endorse the narrative interpretation of the biblical stories, especially by means of the spoken word. It is understandable why this approach became so popular, since it promised to close the gap between the past and the present, the human and the divine. By means of our imagination the gap is breached by God's overpowering story addressing us in our life-story. In hearing a particular bible story we are to imagine how this story reveals our own life-story to us. On one version of this viewpoint, a more existentialist and neo-orthodox one, through hearing the story, God breaks into our existence and confronts and speaks to us in our human situation. A strange use is made of imagination in this context, as if imagining can miraculously close the historical gap between the OT and NT world and ours. It fails to account for the unique nature of the imagination of faith, which comes to expression in our ultimate vision of life. We envision an image of God and of the meaning of our existence based on our experience. Religious imagination also comes to expression in the songs and rituals of worship, in religious art and poetry. Imagination cannot close the historical gap. The third solution, 'existential' interpretation is closely related to this narrative reading of the biblical stories, in terms of what they reveal to us about the human condition.

In 2004 ten orthodox theologians came together to discuss the tension and relation between exegetical studies and systematic theology. The ten presentations of this symposium were collected together and published in a book entitled, *Tussen Leer en Lezen; de spanning tussen bijbelwetenschap en geloofsleer*. Translated freely, the title might read, *The Tension between Scriptural Interpretations and the Doctrines of the Church*. The one thing that stands out in this study is the great respect for the texts of the scriptures and the struggle with some of the doctrinal interpretations. In spite of the reductionistic approach of the positivistic historical-critical studies, this has not prevented orthodox OT and NT interpreters from paying close attention to the text in its historical and cultural setting.

One can admire this honesty and regard for the givens. In the words of Talstra (OT at the VU), "What we have are data: inscriptions, manuscripts, and textual traditions that were formed in generations of faith

communities who wrote, read, re-worked and preserved these texts.” (my translation), Even to say “sources” (bronnen) is saying too much, as if all we need to do is bring the ready-made sources to the surface. There is not even one specific basic text of any passage that is textually trustworthy. All we have are copies and text traditions. Each translation and copy shows the signs of the copyist’s interpretation. There are additions, emendations, corruptions, variations, etc. The same holds true for present-day translations. They too reflect the bias of the translator. Even the history of the establishment of the canon raises many questions. At times it seems it had more to do with the theological conflicts and preferences of that period, rather than applying a clear criterion. Sola scriptura. The scriptures only, but which scriptures and which texts? How do we deal with fifteen or more centuries of different kinds of manuscripts and traditions before the invention of printing and the Reformation? The hope and trust in an original manuscript and a clearly established canon has been replaced by a trust in the tradition, that God preserved his Word by his Spirit.

### 3. Religious Studies at the Universities

Anyone that tries to understand the Hebrew scriptures to see how they may be relevant for today immediately faces a number of formidable obstacles. There are countless introductions and commentaries on the Old Testament and even more specialized, technical studies in academic journals and books. Very little of that scholarship is available and accessible to anyone who wants to understand what these ancient, Near Eastern documents might mean for us today, if anything. Not only are these studies of a very technical nature, they also represent a bewildering array of viewpoints and presuppositions. Like most other disciplines, the exegesis of the scriptures has become a specialized academic discipline. Any branch of Old Testament studies has become a highly specialized field of research, for example, the study of Ancient Near Eastern and biblical archaeology, or the history of the Ancient Near Eastern religions, or the so-called Deuteronomistic History, or the interpretation of one particular Bible book, or the Qumran studies, and so on. It would be impossible for any one person to master the field of Old Testament studies, or even, to become a specialist in more than a few of these areas. Often the result is fragmentation and a lack of (re-)integration. The thousands and thousands of publications of the past decades in Old Testament exegesis and the study of the history and religion of ancient Israel are not readily publicly available or understandable.

In this way the study of religion and theology at the universities has become a part of the general academic enterprise in our culture. Increasingly, at least in North America, scientific investigations have to be useful for technical and economic development. If they benefit economic growth they are generously funded by government and industry, if not, they are starved of cash. As long as there are spin-offs for industry, government services and the armed forces, the natural sciences with the right focus tend to do well. In comparison, the humanities are less useful, except for advancements in social engineering, propaganda, PR departments and advertising. Since they have only limited use, the humanities do not fare as well. Their departments are diminishing in North America and enrolments are down with the result that there are fewer new academic appointments or expansions.

It is in this environment that the religious and theological faculties do their specialized research. As long as they share their results within special academic conferences and in scholarly journals, they are tolerated and given a limited place. From the dominant ideology point of view they are considered harmless – at most it is a price that has to be paid for the loyalty of certain religious interest groups. The religious right in North America tends to vote for conservative politicians committed to this dominant ideology. They lobby the politicians to vote against abortion, birth control, same-sex marriage, stem-cell research, universal medical care, public housing, increase in social assistance, needle exchange programs for

addicts, gun control, increase in taxes, and for longer jail terms, for re-considering the death penalty, for corporate self regulation, for genetically modified seeds, for calculated risk in health care and medications, for continuing the war in Afghanistan, and so on.

In view of this dilemma, short of a radical change in the dominant ideology, there are some things that theologians and other academics can still do to make their work relevant. To begin with, every professor could take time on a regular basis to make his or her results publicly available and understandable. A sabbatical to add another academic paper or book to the mountain of publications serves little public purpose. Academic insights are only meaningful if they serve the well-being of all people. In disclosing meaning, the various disciplines could be a part of a life-enhancing vision and way of life. Theory needs to serve praxis and practice needs to inform theory. There is nothing wrong with specialization as long as the results are re-integrated into a larger perspective.

“Practicality”, in the sense of daily serving praxis, ought to be a natural expectation of all academics. This would not only require the necessary time and support for every professor, but also the opportunity for a lot of interdisciplinary work. In today’s specialized situation, the exegete cannot do without the insights of modern linguistics, literary studies, archaeology, the history and phenomenology of religion, ethics, or developments in practical theology, and vice versa. No one can be up to date or have competence in all these areas. Such interdisciplinary studies would also require a more conscious development of a common phenomenological frame of reference if they are to lead to meaningful integration and communication. In spite of the ideological pressures on (and within) the universities, there is still some room, fortunately, to promote such approaches or to be sufficiently subversive. One can be both professional and practical.

The doctoral dissertation of Piet van Midden, Broederschap en Koningschap, 1998, (Brotherhood and Kingship) provides a good example of such a “practical” concern. In his study of the book of Judges (chapters 6-9; the story of Gideon) he first of all provides an excellent, more “literal”, translation in which he catches some of the drama of the original Hebrew narrative. Secondly, and perhaps most important, toward the end, to test his thesis, he presents his findings in the form of a Bible story for 10-12 year olds in which he conveys the radical nature and abiding challenge of the story. In an appendix he adds a brief survey of how the Bible Story books from 1948-1995 in the Netherlands treat this story. Most of them present Gideon as an example, a hero of faith, or draw a moral or doctrinal lesson from the story. Today’s Sunday school stories in the main denominations are still much the same as the ones he reviewed. The contrast is striking. The one leaves us with a strong challenge: a choice against idolatry and syncretism, that is, against the deification of a part of life, and for pursuing a redeeming way of life that finds its ground in an ultimate source that we cannot grasp and that is beyond us. The other way the stories are told as examples or lessons, can be dismissed easily and have little impact on the actual lives of the children.

All of this is particularly relevant for the study of the Christian religion. In a period of globalization, secularization, emancipation, post-modernism and the advance of the neo-liberal ideology, it has lost much of its relevance and is no longer a public force in our society. Historically, with its dualistic split between faith and life, it has often been in danger of compromise. Instead of being a prophetic voice in society, Christianity has always been in danger of accommodating or openly supporting the dominant structures and power relations. Now that the Christian faith has become primarily a private affair for a minority of the population, this question of the academic relevance of theology has become all the more important. Within half an hour radius of our home here in the country, there are approximately fifty churches of all stripes, many of them struggling to survive. For all practical purposes they have very little impact on the three small towns of our area and the rural population. At the same time, the many schools of theology (every denomination is represented) at the university in nearby Toronto, are generally

unknown and irrelevant to the life of these local churches. Within this context, what possible relevance could the academic study of the Old Testament have for these communities? There is little escape from the dominant ideology that is penetrating more and more aspects of public and private life, including individual awareness, thinking patterns, beliefs and sense of identity. There is a crying need for a radical change in life-direction. Meanwhile, the question remains, can the study of the Christian scriptures have any relevance for today's society and our environment?

#### 4. The new emerging understanding of the Hebrew scriptures

The interpretation or exegesis of the Old Testament is a part of the general study of the history, culture and religion of the Ancient Near Eastern peoples. The period most important for the study of the OT covers a time-span from the (late) Bronze Age (1500–1200 B.C.E.) and (early) Iron Age (1200–900 B.C.E.) to the end of the Persian empire (539–322 B.C.E.) and the rise of Hellenism (322 – 63 B.C.E.). The history of Ancient Israel, including the slow development of the Hebrew scriptures during the course of many centuries is a part and parcel of the study of the surrounding cultures. The Hebrew scriptures are part of the collection of inscriptions, tablets, and parchments of that time along with many artefacts and remnants of temples, palaces, houses, city gates, and so on. Every year countless archaeological findings are added to this collection, giving rise to new insights. At almost every point there are striking similarities between the ancient Israelites and the surrounding peoples. All aspects of the Hebrew bible are found in Ancient Near Eastern sources, whether laws, the divine origin of laws, covenants, prophecies, wisdom literature, love songs, holy wars, divine kingship, the practice of slavery, views of God, polygamy, history, atonement and sacrifices, etc. It illustrates how creaturely the Bible is and how much it is rooted in the history and the culture of its time. Moreover, the Canaanites, including the Israelites, lived at the crossroads between many nations, from Egypt to Syria, to Babylon and beyond. There were influences from the north, the far east and the south. Ancient Israel was deeply influenced and more often than not, dominated by these nations and their cultures, including their religions.

In spite of all the difficulties in interpretation, a new understanding of the scriptures is emerging. We could describe and summarize this change as follows. Rather than starting with Genesis 1, the creation story, followed by the stories of the patriarchs, of Abram, Isaac and Jacob, followed by the exodus from Egypt under the leadership of Moses and the entry into the promised land, and finally the kingship of David and Solomon, instead we need to start with the Exile. The deportation, first of the people of the Northern kingdom and the destruction of Samaria in 723/722 BCE by the Assyrians and later the exile of the people of Judah and the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple in 587/586 BCE by the Babylonians, these events had a profound and devastating impact upon the people. Looking back on their past they tried to understand why this catastrophic event had happened to them. They found these reasons in their "history". In Moses speeches in the last chapters of Deuteronomy the exile is already "predicted" as well as the failure of the kingship. The exile happened because of the unfaithfulness of the kings and the people. And in each of the following books (Joshua, Judges, Samuel, Kings) these reasons are repeated over and over again. It is the idolatry of the people, serving other gods, forsaking Yahweh and his life-giving word, the Torah, that is presented as the reason for the exile.

From an historical point of view, most of the stories did not happen the way they are told or they did not happen at all. The ancient scribes did make use of old myths, sagas, folk tales, exploits of heroes, genealogical lists, legal traditions, annals of the kings, allusions to names of ancient towns, geographical areas and rivers, and oral traditions that might have been passed on for many generations. But there is no record of any kind of the Exodus, or a so-journey through the desert for forty years, or the entry into the promised land under Joshua. There was no conquest of Jericho. During the course of many centuries, the

people of Israel came from the northern mountainous region of Palestine and slowly found their way to the southern parts. Perhaps a small band had migrated to Egypt during hard times and returned later on. There is no Moses of history, only the Moses of memory, as someone put it. The period of the Judges only filled in a time space between the account of the conquest of the land under Joshua and the reign of Saul and David. Historically the house of Omri and Ahab is better known than the reign of Solomon, and so on.

The pre-exilic and exilic prophets and scribes reconstructed a history of Israel from many sources and in accordance with the traditions of the nations around them. Almost every story and custom in the Hebrew scriptures has its parallels in the writings of the surrounding nations, Syria, Egypt, Babylon, and others. Like the tradition of other nations they reconstructed a beginning, a creation story; ancestors for their nation, the patriarchs; great epochs and events, the Exodus and the law-giving, the Torah; great kings, and conquests, David and Solomon. From these givens and these traditions, they reconstructed a history for the about-to-be-exiled or exiled people. However they did so in the light of their religious self-understanding and their profound religious convictions.

This means, first of all, that to understand the scriptures we need to read them “backwards”, starting with the pre-exilic, exilic and post-exilic times. Some core parts of Genesis through II Kings may have been written during the time of Josiah’s (639/638-609 BCE) reign and reforms, and all the various books may have undergone one or more redactions. Some parts that can no longer be re-constructed but that have left traces of older traditions that may go back even earlier. There may have existed separate court stories of David and Solomon and stories of prophets like those of Elijah and Elisha, and possibly others. There is a lot of debate about the sources and origins of each part and many changing theories and speculation. However, *the completed scriptures as we have them now were intended for the readers before, during or after the exile. They were the first readers.* Before that these scriptures in their completed form were unknown. Compared to the surrounding people, writing came relatively late to the ancient people of Israel. Even though there were scribes at David’s and Solomon’s court (somewhere between 1000 and 922 BCE) and later at the temple, writing was not yet widespread.

*This ‘backwards’ reading means that every ‘book’ and every story must be understood in light of their experience of the Exile and the return of a remnant to the Promised Land.* From that point of view Genesis 1 and 2 is not a story about the beginning of creation. It is first of all and foremost an affirmation that Yahweh who had promised to rescue them from exile (through the messages of the prophets) could do so because he was also the Creator god. He could turn the heart of Cyrus, the emperor, so that he would allow the people of Israel to return to the Promised Land. The story of the law-giving on Mount Sinai to Moses is not a report of an historical event. Rather it served primarily as a sharp reminder and promise to the first hearers that when they returned from Exile and followed the life-giving way of the Torah, it would go well with them and they would once more flourish. Likewise with the story of the worship of the Golden Calf at Mount Sinai; it was a warning that when they returned not to fall back in idolatry and deify the powers of nature. They are to remember that idolatry was the cause of the Exile. It is only from out of this overall perspective of the Exile, that we can do justice to the details of each story. It is the key to interpreting the Hebrew scriptures. The question with regard to each book is always, who were the first hearers, what was their situation, what was happening, and how does this particular story address them in those circumstances? This is a very simplified account of a complex development.

This new understanding means that the Hebrew scriptures do not contain “a history of redemption”. These books are not history books in the usual sense of the word. Some call them prophetic reflections on the past. In view of the destruction of Samaria and Jerusalem, the years in captivity, and the remnant that

returned many years later to join the rural population that had been left, how could this have happened? How was it possible that God's chosen people that were to be a blessing to all the nations of the world could be deported, lose their land and return to a small province (Yehud) of the Persian empire? To understand this devastating reality they looked back on their past to discern what had gone wrong. These stories about the past are first of all prophetic writings. In the Hebrew bible Joshua through Kings are called the Early Prophets, and they are immediately followed by the Later Prophets, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel and the Twelve smaller prophets. They formed one whole. The early prophets (Joshua through Kings) can only be read in the light of the message of the later prophets, Isaiah and all the other ones, and vice versa.

Hebrew "historiography" can be compared to a general, ancient near eastern genre called "history-like fiction" which gives the impression that they are historical accounts. But the stories are entirely written from an "ideological" point of view, in which historical givens are freely combined with fictional elements to convey a "theological" vision in the form of stories. This religious vision is like that of the later prophets and for that reason the name "prophetic reflection upon the past" seems appropriate for this genre (Smelik). However exact this may turn out to be, it is clear that the focus needs to be on the underlying religious conviction that is expressed through these stories. Even though many interpreters acknowledge this, too often the focus remains on the details of the story and its possible historical background. The "ideological" or "theological" interpretation is left to ministers, priests and others to elaborate upon. When this happens, its prophetic nature and the intended readers are not seen as an integral part of these stories and is lost again.

Some may wonder, once we know the main point, why bother with these stories at all? Others may consider this kind of reconstructed past, whatever its core historical validity may turn out to be, much too speculative to be of any value. There are two reasons why they are worth considering. First of all, the prophetic reflections that come to expression in these stories are an integral part of the language and composition of the accounts and *are not available separately as elucidations of our existence, without distortion*. Secondly, and more important, these prophetic reflections are a part of the entire Hebrew scriptures as a religious book with religious language.

See chapter 8 of *The Gods in Whom They Trusted* (to be published in the fall of 2016), for an elaboration of this last point.

Even though the Hebrew scriptures are totally imbedded in the ancient near eastern history and culture, they do present a unique perspective. They present a deep conviction about what makes life whole and flourishing and what is life-enhancing. Within the history and culture of their time they present the contours of a "lived faith", a faith embedded in the whole of life. They present this conviction in contrast to the idolatry of their times, the deification of the forces of nature and fertility. Such absolutizing leads to a distortion of life and ultimately to destruction. The Hebrew prophets discerned something of the mystery of life, namely that there is no resting place anywhere in this creation, that we cannot put our trust in some part of life without distorting all the rest. At the same time they had a deep sense of mercy and compassion, of our human frailty, and of making a new start.

Right from the beginning in Genesis 1, for example, the sun with its life-giving warmth and the moon indicating the cycles of fertility, are seen as creaturely, as an integral part of life on this earth and not as divine. Likewise with the seasons and the times of our lives, our fate is not written in the stars. The stars with their constellations that stir the imagination are creaturely like everything else, a part of the givens of life. And people in their co-humanity are seen as free, able to make choices and responsible. For the rest it does not speculate what was before anything came into being. It only points to a Presence behind and in

all things which the Hebrews called Yahweh. In this way the prophets, priests and sages expressed their deep conviction that nothing in life can be deified and that if we do all of life gets distorted and we become slaves to our idols. And when the ancient people of Israel failed, each time again, they had the choice to start over again and find life and well-being. Although they often repented and made a new beginning, they continually fell back in idolatry. Their story is a story to weep about. It is the story of a failed project. Later on we will see that the story of the Christian church is no different. It too is a story of continual failures, of new idolatries, of endless schisms and conflicts, of heresy hunting and expulsions, of torture and murder, of accommodation to the powers that be, and of new beginnings by small minorities.

It is important to highlight this fact because for many Christians, including myself in growing up, the Holy Scriptures seemed a timeless, a-historical, supernatural book. There was little general awareness of how deeply the scriptures are imbedded in the cultures of the Ancient Near East during a particular time in history. In this sense the bible is an ordinary, ancient, human book, or rather, a collection of scrolls that were gathered together over many centuries and given authoritative status. There are no original manuscripts, only many manuscript traditions, translations and hand-written copies of copies, along with mistakes, corruptions, inserted interpretations and so on. The study of these (later) manuscripts has become a science in itself.

For many Christians this awareness of the Hebrew scriptures as a historical, human book would still come as a shock today and be experienced as a threat to their faith. This is unfortunate, because rather than a shock it could be an occasion to find and highlight the uniqueness of these writings. The Holy Scriptures as the *Word of God with its eternal, doctrinal and moral truths is dead and gone forever*, even though it lives on in “frozen” form in small sectors of the church. Rather than hiding in orthodoxy and holding back in fear, (the leadership of) the church bears a great responsibility to close this gap between the old tradition and the new understanding of the Bible.

The Hebrew scriptures as a book of faith is alive and well and has a unique message. For now we could summarize that message as: (my children) do not continue with your idolatry that is destroying your lives; you cannot serve two masters, YHWH and Baal, God and Mammon, or God and the idols of today; instead follow the way of life and you will experience peace; and when you do lose the way, turn around and start over, make a new beginning, the way of life continues to beckon and guide you.... The story of ancient Israel and the Christian church is the story of two failed projects. It is a story to weep about – as we will see – but it is also a story of hope and new beginnings, for the call persists.

For a further elaboration of the contemporary relevance of the Hebrew scriptures, see my *The Gods in Whom They Trusted*, Chapter 8, “A Guideline for Ultimate Convictions: Believing Rightly”.

The response of many radical theologians and many others to all this fifty years ago is as relevant today as it was then. Our mind-set has changed forever. The need for a new basis for our faith and our theologizing has not changed from fifty years ago, if anything, it has increased. In view of our often agonizing world situation we need a new vision that will inspire and give rise to a new commitment and present a new call to faith and hope. Doing theology as usual and preserving as much of the old tradition as possible will not do. Whatever new direction we find, it needs to provide an alternative perspective that relates to our new global awareness, to our changed world picture, and the great challenges of our times. It needs to be relevant especially to the millions of Christians who have left the church. It needs to incorporate the changing view of the Christian scriptures and doctrines. I call it, the need for “a third alternative”, a new vision of life between orthodoxy and mythology. It is of crucial importance to develop

an alternative perspective that might speak to the millions of Christians that have left the church. From the many clients I have seen over the years I have listened to their deep sense of loss, their disillusionment, their search for a new home for their spirituality and a longing for a new kind of community. There still remains a wide-spread interest in spirituality and values.

## II. Toward an Integral Method of Interpretation

### 5. The Many Methods of Interpretation

The following two sections are about the *technique* or *craftsmanship* of deciphering and interpreting ancient texts. It is important to note that the various *methods* of interpretation do not say anything yet about the *overall interpretation or meaning* that is given to a text. Generally techniques, of whatever kind, serve a purpose and have a larger context. An artist's painting technique is only a part of the meaning of the portrait he has painted. His painting technique, the way he applies the paint to the canvas, may enhance the final impact of the painting or distract from what he attempted to convey. Likewise with regard to particular exegetical methods, do they help decipher the overall meaning of a text or do they stand in the way and distract? Are they one-sided and over-emphasize one aspect of a text or do they help bring out the total richness and meaning of a text? The final meaning we give to a text is not determined by our method(s) of interpretation but by our *ultimate vision of life or our general worldview*. Exegetical techniques can play an important role but they are not the decisive factor in the final interpretation. These two aspects, *the methods of interpretation* and *the final meaning that is given to a text* are often confused or separated. The methodology is often considered part of an objective academic discipline that can have its place in a public university. The final 'theological', subjective interpretations are left to theologians at denominational seminaries. We will come back to this issue when highlighting Talstra's approach.

Given the many approaches and methods of interpreting the scriptures, this distinction will help us find our way with the great number of methodologies. Anyone that consults an introductory textbook will find a list and discussion of the most common methods used. They are often presented as two distinct groups: the historical methods and the literary methods, each with their own sub-groups and more current forms. McKenzie and Haynes (1999) in their *To Each Its Own Meaning* list 14 different methods each with an up-to-date discussion, an example of how to use the method, a critical evaluation and references. The historical-critical (or the diachronic) methods, like source criticism, form criticism, tradition-historical criticism and redaction criticism focus on the *background* and the *development* of the text through time. The literary (or the synchronic) methods, like structural criticism, narrative criticism, reader-response criticism, and post-structuralism focus more on the *text itself* in its final form. There is no attempt to integrate or even to inter-relate the various approaches, even though the editors decry the lack of dialogue and interdisciplinary study between the various schools of interpretation.

Manfred Oeming in his *Contemporary Biblical Hermeneutics; An Introduction* (1998/2006) uses four categories for organizing the various methods of interpretation: authors, texts, readers, reality. Each focus or emphasis has given rise to several methods or sub-methods. In total he discusses 17 approaches. According to him, each method highlights a particular aspect of the biblical text. This means that each method by itself is one-sided and has its blind spots. They all need to be supplemented by the others in order to provide a more complete interpretation. In the end Oeming pleads for a plurality of approaches (within certain limits to avoid a complete relativism). As the history of exegesis shows, all approaches are historically determined and limited. There can be no final, objective, authoritative interpretation. There is much in this approach that we can appreciate. At the same time, Oeming seems to hold that because each method has something important to contribute that therefore the possibility of integrating, or, at least,

inter-relating the various exegetical methods is very limited. It is illusionary to hope, according to him, that some day we will find an all-new, all-encompassing approach that will combine all the exegetical methods in one super method. With regard to at least inter-relating the many methods, he states that “the exact nature of the interaction between these methods is still in need of clarification” (p.141). Meanwhile he seems to favour an existential exegesis in combination with historical-critical exegesis, because it can provide a theological understanding of present issues (p.138); “Scripture illuminates our existence” (p.147).

Randolph Tate in his *Biblical Interpretation; An Integrated Approach* (1997, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed.) uses a somewhat similar framework as Oeming. He organizes the various methods according to the world behind the text (the author); the world within the text (the text); and the world in front of the text (the reader). The meaning of a text results from a conversation between all three of these worlds. *An author always conveys meaning through a text to a reader.* Exclusive emphasis on one of these three worlds leads to one-sidedness and a distortion of the interpreting process. In this communication model all three worlds need to be in conversation with each other. In Tate’s approach the historical dimension comes first (the world of the author). Surprisingly, he deals with the importance of language and the grammatical study and analysis of the text in this section. He calls this the natural language (grammar, syntax, etc.) of the text. Later on he will focus on the literary language and meaning of the text. Although he provides lots of information and good discussions, the end result is not very satisfactory. We are still left with the mandate to use a variety of approaches without much indication of how to develop such a composite of methods. Ultimately Tate, like so many others, assumes that the bible reveals God to us, rather than that the different authors express their deep and ultimate convictions about God and life – like all religious books. As he puts it: through the words of the scriptures – in some mysterious manner - we experience the Word (of God). In that light interpreting the scriptures becomes a continually life-changing and life-shaping experience; it becomes an experience of God. On the one hand exegetes search for an objective, true, neutral methodology, on the other hand they end up choosing for a overarching approach that fits their worldview or ultimate conviction.

There is one more model to consider, It is a rather formal model developed by L.C. Jonker in his book *Exclusivity and Variety; Perspectives On Multidimensional Exegesis* (1996). He calls it a communication model which provides a framework within which different methodologies can operate multi-dimensionally. He too starts from the premise that there are many viewpoints and that meaning is multi-dimensional and relational. A text has many meanings and each reading is complemented by the next reading. The communication goes from sender, via a medium (a text), to a sender and back again and it has a synchronic (the text as it presents itself) and a diachronic (the historical background) dimension. Within this model each exegetical methodology can operate according to its own presuppositions and approach. The plurality of methods becomes manageable if it is realized that each of the approaches describes one or more aspects of the communication process. It is difficult to see how this formal scheme adds anything more than what has been highlighted by Tate and others. Perhaps what it does do is emphasize again that exegesis is an “interactive” or communication process between author(s), text and reader(s), or simply, a reading strategy. Regardless of the advances in interrelating the different methods, the question about the final meaning that is given to a text is not taken into account or lost.

## 6. Toward An Integral Method

There have been a few attempts to develop a more integral approach to exegesis. None of them seem very successful, because the development of an integral method requires a broader or more overarching perspective. Just like the many schools and methods of psychotherapy require a broader framework, so

with regard to biblical exegetical methods. It is only within a phenomenological anthropology, that the contributions of each kind of psychotherapy can find an integral place. The range of exegetical methods and viewpoints require a similar, more overarching point of view that can do justice to the contributions of each method. This is not a question of developing a super-method or of developing a formal framework, but of giving each method its rightful place in the process of interpreting. It is a matter of establishing at which point in the exegetical process they are essential or need to be considered. We will come back to this point later on when considering Talstra's approach.

Barton's book, *Reading the Old Testament* (1984), as well as his many other writings, takes us a step further on the road to integration. Although he himself follows primarily a literary approach, he makes a couple of significant points. First of all he emphasizes that *there is no one correct method that gives us reliable, accurate, objective understanding of a text*. Instead, critical analysis is a descriptive pursuit of analyzing, explaining and codifying *questions* that perceptive readers can put to a text. It is not a prescription of how a text ought to be interpreted. Too often this is forgotten. Different methods can only yield a *proposal or hypothesis* about the meaning of a text. This description of exegesis highlights a second major point. Methods are intended to aid us in understanding and elucidating texts. All methods have some validity; they have their benefits and their limits. *Moreover, they hang together and cover the range of possible questions that can be asked of a text. Each kind of analysis asks a particular question*. Such a view begins to bring the different kinds of approaches closer together, which begs the question of their interrelation. With respect to an integral method, Barton only gets as far as presenting a triangle of *author* (or authors or community), *historical events* or theological ideas, and *reader* with the *text* at the centre of the triangle. It can do no more than set the stage for a truly integral method. However it does prompt us to ask, are all questions of the same value; does it matter in which order we deal with each question, and so on.

Although Barton does not take his starting point in a philosophical discussion of hermeneutics (theories of interpretation), he is aware that methods of interpretation need a broader frame of reference about the *nature of existence and reality*. Exegetes *start from a pre-understanding of scripture and a unifying perspective (a theory of religion and reality)*. At the same time they need to let the text speak for itself. This hermeneutic circle is unavoidable and acceptable as long as the one keeps informing and correcting the other. For Barton religion occupies the nodal position in biblical interpretation. *“Religion is the best category for constructing an interpretive framework because it can embrace both the religious meanings of the biblical text and also the beliefs of its religious readers*. It facilitates empirical description of the documents and connects this with the believer's appropriation of their religious subject-matter” (p.279 of R. Morgan with John Barton, *Biblical Interpretation* (1988), Or again, “theological interpretation needs a theory of religion and reality which embraces both the original meanings of the text and the self-understanding of contemporary religious readers“ (p.278). What I appreciate in their approach is that they start with the text, keep the analysis of the text central and turn to the larger hermeneutical questions last.

When we make up the balance of this brief introduction there are several things that stand out. The first thing is that all methods of interpretation have something valuable to add. Secondly, that different methods pose different questions to the text. Thirdly, that we have not found an approach that provides a way to integrate the various methods. Fourthly, that there is a growing recognition that the total process of interpretation must be kept in mind, the historical, the literary, and the contemporary, or the author, the text and the reader. And finally, that each exegete assumes or consciously makes use of a particular frame of reference with regard to religion (faith) and life, or what I call a phenomenological framework. How does one interpret a religious text and how does such a text relate to (today's) reality? With these points in mind we are ready to look at Talstra's exegetical approach.

As a footnote we might add here that there are several reasons for the great increase in exegetical methods during the last century: the changes in worldview and the influence of the natural sciences; the changed views of history; the historical and archaeological research with regard to the ancient near eastern world and religions; the changes in our understanding of (philosophical) hermeneutics; the influence of the postmodern era and the demise of the great stories and eternal truths; life after Auschwitz and the ongoing genocides since that time; the rapid rise of the global neo-liberal ideology, and so on.

### III. Talstra's Exegetical Approach

After studying the different books about exegetical methods, it is refreshing to read Talstra's study *Oude en Nieuwe Lezers* (2002) (Old and New Readers). His book is *very practical* in that it focuses on the *actual process* of interpreting the ancient Hebrew texts. Rather than providing yet another explanation of the various methods, he guides us step by step through the complex process of analyzing particular texts. By the end we have a good idea of what is involved in exegeting. At each step of the process he provides a specific example, like 1 Kings 21, which is one of the many passages he deals with in some detail (pp.123-200). His book is like watching a video of a master craftsman taking us through the process of making an exquisite bowl. Such videos start with showing us the workshop, the raw materials, the tools, each step in the process up till the final touches to the bowl. I am using this image because Talstra calls the first part of his book "a tour through his workshop" and he refers to the first part of analyzing a text as "the craftsmanship of exegesis" (de ambachtelijke zijde). The exegete is first of all a professional artisan.

He starts by *gathering* and taking an *inventory* of the raw data: the text that has been handed down to us over the ages in all its complexity and the various text traditions. In doing so he immediately breaks through the dilemma of following a more or less traditional historical *or* a newer literary approach (diachronic *or* synchronic), or of using a combination of relative independent methods. From the beginning he establishes a very *specific order*. Gathering the data and *interpreting the data in their own right as linguistic signals* is first; only on this basis and prompted by these givens he comes to the rhetorical or literary meaning of the text; then, again, prompted by the linguistic and rhetorical givens and his own provisional interpretation he considers the various historical questions; at this point he offers a more final suggestion for interpreting and reading the text; and, finally, he focuses on the interplay between the text and the first readers, how the text has been read and actualized through the ages and finally how it speaks to present-day readers. By insisting on this specific order Talstra has made a unique contribution to exegesis. It is a contribution I have not found anywhere else.

This order is crucial because it gives a specific place to all of the various questions that can be asked of a text by means of the different methods (Barton). The various historical and literary questions that all have their rightful place must be considered at the right time in the process, that is, after the linguistic givens have been analyzed. Secondly, and that is the most important reason for this order, is that phenomenologically language has its own unique and irreducible place and has a priority before any other specific function or interpretation. Language certainly has its historical, cultural, social, political, psychological, aesthetic, etc., sides, but it cannot be reduced to any of these dimensions of life. Talstra refers to this fact often when he asserts the *irreducible nature of religious language*, in which language plays *the basic role* and the "*religious*" *or* "*belief*" *aspect* gives it its final meaning or "colouring". Religious language is not ideological or political language, or the language representing a certain social class or power elite, etc., even though it can also be studied from any of these points of view. Rather, religious language is uniquely coloured or determined by a person's or a community's core beliefs or

convictions. His insistence on the irreducible nature of religious language is Talstra's second major contribution, that has far-reaching consequences.

One could compare religious language to "church music". To compose, play or sing religious music one must first of all be a good musician. One must know something about notes, pitch, rhythm, melody, harmony/dissonance, volume, speed, etc. to make a good composition. In turn, it is these basic *structural elements* that a composer *imaginatively uses* to give expression to religious feelings and experiences of hope, love, faith, sorrow, remorse, joy, renewal, fellowship, and so on. The music has to resonate deeply, bodily, and move us if it is to make an impact and give expression to our deepest convictions. Through music a composer imaginatively discloses something of the meaning of a lived faith and holding a deep conviction (Zuidervaart). The same is true for church or temple architecture, religious education of whatever kind, spiritual counselling, diaconal services, and so on. To engage in any of these activities, one must first of all be a good architect, educator, communicator, counsellor, social worker, etc.

Because of the long-standing dualistic tendencies (whether a hard or soft dualism) within the Christian religion, theologians often seem to be struggling to bring "faith" and "life" together again. There are countless articles about faith and art, faith and culture, faith and politics, faith and education, and usually even then the abstract word "theology" is used, like the theology of the environment, and so on. When faith is seen first of all as a "gift of God" – coming from outside of us - rather than an ultimate conviction we hold about life, then faith floats somewhere above life in a no-man's land. Starting from some kind of "super-natural" faith, no theologian ever succeeds in putting humpty-dumpty together again. In a "lived faith" in which convictions or beliefs are embedded in the whole of life as a natural part of our human experience, probably starting with the Neanderthal People, ultimate convictions naturally speak to all of life. This natural connection between a lived faith and life is also one of Talstra's concerns. All one needs to do is let scripture speak because as religious language it speaks to all of life. In that view one does not have to search for a connection between religion and experience, religion and culture, religion and society. Religion, in this sense of our deepest convictions about life, is an integral part of our experience, of our culture and society. This insistence on the integral connection between the religious language of the scriptures and life is Talstra's third contribution, perhaps his most important contribution, given the pervasive dualism.

Such an approach to the priority and irreducibility of language requires a more integral and total view of life, or a phenomenology of life's basic aspects. They are the functions and regularities that we all depend on each day. I take it that is what Barton refers to when he states that ultimately exegesis requires a view of religion and life. If he had had the benefit of such a phenomenological perspective, he might have developed a quite different approach to exegesis. James Barr, having distanced himself from a fundamentalist, evangelical viewpoint, struggled with the same issue in his Biblical Faith and Natural Theology (1993). In opposition to Karl Barth, he tried to establish, in different ways, the embeddedness of the scriptures in life. What he was searching for was an overarching, integral view of life in which the scriptures and convictions have a natural place.

Berkouwer too in his contribution to De Herleving van de Natuurlijke Theologie (1974) (The Resurgence of Natural Theology) and his dogmatic studies of general revelation, providence and scripture never found his way out of this dilemma and as a result this tension between faith and human experience colours his systematic theology. It is not surprising that when Talstra looked for a more *integral* view of "providence", "history" and "general revelation" in relation to Psalm 67 he could not find any Dutch theologian (neither Berkouwer, Berkhof, and he could have added, Schillebeekx, or any other theologian) that presented a different view. He is very gracious in the way he describes this hesitancy to

speak about the natural way in which the language of the scriptures relates to our human experience. Yet he notes that as a result of this tension, there is a growing distance between faith and life (pp. 68-71).

This has been a long excursion in order to highlight the uniqueness of Talstra's starting point and presuppositions. Let us return to some of the details of his exegetical approach, because it is through considering these linguistic details that he is able to let the text speak for itself and not impose a premature literary or historical interpretation or a doctrinal or theological interpretation on the text. All such premature interpretations leave the text far behind. For this reason, according to Talstra, we must start with the analysis of the *linguistic foundation* of a text. Because it is on this level that *the basic cues about the meaning of a text are established*. And it is these cues that need to be honoured and taken into account at each step of the interpretive process. In the following section I will closely follow and summarize Talstra's exegetical approach.

## 7. Linguistic analysis

Before we can look at the linguistic givens of a text, however, we need to know what kind of texts and materials are on the table. What kind of data are there? This is important because there is no one, original text that can serve as an authoritative basis for analysis. The originals are gone. All we have is later manuscript traditions and later translations. In the Western theological tradition the Masoretic text of the Hebrew scriptures is generally taken as the starting point, even though there are older fragments, texts and translations that are of earlier origin. Right from the beginning, therefore, the exegete has to make choices with regard to the data to be considered: the Masoretic text tradition; other manuscript traditions; translations like the Septuagint (the Greek translation); or others when relevant, like the Samaritanian Pentateuch, the Peshitta (the Syrian translation), the Targumim (the Aramaic translation), the Qumran manuscripts, the Apographa; as well as old Hebrew inscriptions and similar accounts from the surrounding peoples; relevant material from the Jewish tradition (Mishnah, Talmud) and the Christian tradition. Besides these sources, other, similar texts within the same bible book as well as in the rest of the Hebrew scriptures need to be considered. This brief overview of the possible sources that one needs to consider, which Talstra illustrates by means of a concrete passage (Numbers 6:22-27), gives a first impression of the complexity of interpreting a particular text and the many choices an exegete has to make.

After the inventory, the next step in the process is to analyse the linguistic structure of the text. Language has its own *general structure or regularity* (grammar, syntax, semantics, rhetorical effects, etc.), that comes to expression in the *actual* language used. There is a distinction, therefore, between the *general linguistic connections and built-up or architecture* of a text and the *specific (historically and culturally determined) way* in which a people express themselves through their language, their typical way of thinking and speaking.

There are several mechanisms that work together to help us make sense of a text, like the indication of the person(s) speaking (number, gender) and the changes in speaker(s); the type of verb forms (a crucial part of Hebrew grammar); the type of sentences (main, subordinate); lexical givens for interpreting the specific use of words and terms; etc. There are other technical details. What I found particularly helpful was the diagramming of the sentences (main, subordinate), and the underscoring of the changes in players, which gives one an immediate, visual picture of the flow of the argument or discourse. Such an analysis requires the use of lexicons, grammars, dictionaries, theological concordances, an electronic data base, and I would like to add, lots of patience, an inquisitive mind, a love of language, imagination and enjoyment of the process. These are some of the tools of the trade. Talstra certainly succeeds in creating

interest and a sense of excitement in the exegetical work. It also becomes clear, as he reminds us at several places, that there is no way around this careful kind of linguistic analysis if one is to do justice to the text and to let the text speak for itself.

Another thing that stood out to me that deserves separate attention is the significance of the *difficulties and breaks* in the text. They can give insight into how a text is constructed or built up and alert the reader to take note of a change. This can be done for rhetorical effect or it can be an indication and raise questions about possible redactions and the complex development of a text. Does the regularity and change in the flow of the text, which may jar or disturb the reader, indicate a redaction from a later time, reflecting a change in circumstances? Or is the change or break to alert the reader to take special note that something new or unexpected is about to happen. The crucial point is that the question of later redactions and the consequent reconstruction of a text *needs to rise from the linguistic analysis and not from a preconceived notion about the historical background, form, or use of a text*. These historical questions are legitimate and have their place, but they need to be answered at the right time in the exegetical process and on the basis of the linguistic givens.

## 8. The Literary Analysis

Language has a lot of regularity and routine, but reading a religious text is not just a process of decoding by means of certain rules. If it were, we would be dealing with mere information without any further meaning. Reading requires a lot of regularity to make sense, but part of the use of the linguistic signals is *creative*. Unexpected turns in the story, associations, repetitions, introduction of new players or changes in players, allusions, rhythm, fine nuances, use of irony, and so on; they all have a *rhetorical effect and make the reader take note*. They make for the drama of the story. For the narrative sections it is helpful to think of a stage with its stage settings, the different players and to note the changes in players as the drama unfolds. Each genre in the scriptures, whether narrative accounts, prophetic literature, poetry, instructions and laws, or wisdom literature, they each have their own literary form.

It raises the question about what belongs to the general literary skill of the author(s) and what makes this text a unique religious composition. In the end it is not the artistry of the author(s) that counts, but how *the rhetorical devices help to convey the religious meaning of the text and guide the reading process*. *Religious* texts are not primarily literary texts, no matter how beautiful the poetry or the rhetoric. This also means that not all linguistic signals have a literary purpose. The book of Judges, for example, is full of literary turns, jokes and irony, but they all serve to highlight the *religious* meaning of the texts. To mention one more example, the way king David's adultery with Bathsheba and the murder of her husband is introduced is a phrase full of irony. "*In the spring, the time of the year when kings are in the habit of going to battle...*" (2 Samuel 11:1) In spite of the irony and all the moral implications of this story, the adultery and the murder of Bathsheba's husband, and even though things did not go well with David's family after that, the emphasis is not on his immorality and the injustice of the situation, or the arbitrary power of kings, or the sexual violation of women, and so on. Rather the emphasis is on the *religious* meaning of David's actions: "why have you despised the word of the Lord, to do what is evil..." (12:9). The rhetorical features of this story highlight its *religious* meaning. When the life-giving word is violated, life becomes distorted. It is not a moral tale for our edification or a warning against the misuse of power or sexual abuse, or a subtle criticism of the monarchy, and so on, rather it is a call to follow a life-giving way.

Every symbol or text assumes a certain familiarity with the surrounding culture and the social conventions within which a statement makes sense. Like the symbol for "no smoking" in a public place,

or the words “this is a smoke-free area”, as a member of our society we immediately know the meaning of that symbol and those words. Likewise in the scriptures, does a particular text assume knowledge of a particular culture or does it presuppose knowledge of other texts in the same book or other parts of the Hebrew scriptures? What is the assumed context and familiarity? The same is true with regard to the literary strategy that is used. As a story unfolds it already begins to force the reader to take a position with regard to the events presented and the players involved. We are moved to sympathise or react negatively. In the story about king Ahab and Naboth in 1 Kings 21, Jezebel, Ahab’s wife, has Naboth murdered by the city officials because Ahab wanted Naboth’s vineyard. He had been pouting like a spoiled child because he could not have the vineyard. Naboth would not sell it to him because it was his father’s inheritance. Jezebel told him she would take care of it. So she did, without telling him how she did it. She told the elders and the nobles of the city to hire two scoundrels to testify against Naboth and have him stoned. It is a cold-blooded, almost cynical account of a juridical murder. It arouses our indignation and outrage, but the story is left open-ended. We expect a strong condemnation, but there is none.

In the second half of the account (verses 17-29) there is a drastic change, which raises questions about possible insertions or redaction(s). The prophet Elijah appears on the scene and in the name of Yahweh pronounces judgment on both king Ahab and Jezebel. Surprisingly the judgment is not first of all, as we would expect, about the murder but about their idolatry, about leading Israel astray and serve other idols. In the end this is not a moral story about the arbitrary power of kings and their scheming wives, or about absolute power that corrupts, nor just about the conflicts within Israel between kings and prophets. Instead the juridical murder is seen as the result of “whoring after other gods”, and thus leading the people to do “what was evil in the eyes of Lord”. It is not a story of a juridical murder (verses 1-16) with a theological commentary (verses 17-29), nor a theological treatise about history with some added exemplary stories. Although there are strong differences between the two parts, the story is presented to us as one account and invites us to change and enlarge our perspective. The second half places the first part in a much larger perspective. It becomes an account of a much broader and deeper decline and disintegration.

There are many more compositional details that add to the drama, but this is sufficient to feel the impact of the story. We are engaged by the story teller and become both witness and participant in this long-standing conflict between Yahweh and Israel. It is a painful reminder that the nation is divided, a Northern and a Southern kingdom, and that the Northern kingdom will soon be destroyed because of its idolatry. Is this where things will end, also for the Southern kingdom, the destruction of Jerusalem, with the powerful and the nobles being led captive to Babylon, leaving the poor in the wasted countryside? The exile, is this where it all will end?

## 9. The Historical Analysis

The various historical-critical methods ask a range of questions about original sources, social contexts, later versions, theological traditions reflected in the texts, and so on. The answer to these kind of questions allow us to determine for whom this story, 1 Kings 21 for example, was intended. If the text shows that there were various redactions, who were the later readers and how was their situation different? The Septuagint changes and adjusts this story somewhat. In their translation they interpret the text in such a way that it could speak to the readers of that time in a new situation. Such changes highlight how a text evolved in order to address its first and later readers. This concern is not about inadequacies of the text or an attempt to reconstruct the text. The historical questions are important to determine in what context 1 Kings 21 came about. For what generation of readers and in what situation was this story

(probably in different versions) intended? Can we reconstruct the phases in which this text most likely was composed and revised?

Once more the linguistic givens need to be reviewed in order to provide the basis for the historical questions. In the passage of 1 Kings 21 there are changes in the structure between the two parts and the idiom of the second part is different, which gives rise to the question whether the word usage and grammatical construction is perhaps more characteristic of other parts of the Hebrew scriptures. There are indeed parallel constructions in other parts of Kings and elsewhere (Deuteronomy, Judges, and especially Chronicles). The stories about the prophets can also be compared to other ones about prophets in the book of Kings. A comparison with earlier stories shows that this story presents a climax. This raises the question of how this particular story about Ahab and Naboth relates to the general history of the religion of Israel. In that historical light, what is unique about this particular climatic story? Such comparisons provide the general setting or stage of this story. Given other translations, it turns out that there may be more than one setting and that there was more than one redaction at a later time under different circumstances.

Once these givens and differences have been gathered and analysed, a preliminary interpretation can be suggested and compared to those of other exegetes. What becomes clear is that the book of Kings did not get its final form until during or after the exile. On the basis of the various linguistic and rhetorical givens Talstra hypothesises that there have been two redactions to give Kings its final form. This attempt at reconstruction is crucial, because it helps to determine who the first readers might have been and how they are addressed by the text. In their new situation of exile and captivity or their return to a land without a Davidic king and without a centre of worship, how will they hear and respond to this story? This shifts these stories about faithless kings and people and prophetic warnings and judgments from a general “history of redemption” (how the people sinned and God punished and restored them), *to a dialogue between the past (the text) and the present (their new situation)*.

A mere historical account can provide interesting information about the history of Israel. Likewise with regard to a mere literary account, it can present us with good story telling and drama. *A story with a religious meaning, however, confronts, challenges, invites, encourages, comforts, provides hope, and so on.* The encounter with this text presented the first readers and now us, as present-day readers, with a choice: whom will we serve, the idols of the day or following a life-giving way? *Religious texts can only present an existential choice.* It can go no further. We have the freedom to choose; we can reject or accept the challenge. *This is of the very nature of religious language.* Although Talstra does not make use of this phenomenological given, it is implied and I believe his account would have been strengthened if he had drawn the consequences of his many references to religious language and its uniqueness.

After his first suggestion for interpreting the text, Talstra turns to other interpreters that use the historical-critical analysis to compare notes and enter into dialogue with them. In doing so he gives each of the questions posed by the historical analysis their rightful place within the exegetical process. He considers five main historical methods: the literary-critical, the form-critical, the redaction-critical, the compositional-critical, and the tradition-critical methods. He examines each one to see what they are able to contribute to our understanding of 1 Kings 21. We do not need to follow the details of his comparison at this point. By asking what basic question each method poses to the text he is able to find the “gold” each approach contains, in spite of distorting or limiting presuppositions or viewpoints.

It also illustrates what happens when different ideological, historical, political, sociological exegetical approaches are absolutized. Exegetes seldom agree about the origin, reconstruction, dating, or historical

setting of any particular text. Original stories underlying the text usually cannot be reconstructed. A particular genre cannot always be established and different genres are often connected with each other in larger compositions. Arguments for the composite character of a text can become too general to be helpful. The self interest of a specific group to legitimize its power cannot always be established. If the historical methods are not given their rightful place within a specific, limited linguistic and rhetorical context, they are often confusing, contradictory, or too hypothetical and as a result of limited value.

The importance of the historical approach is that the texts themselves present us with historical questions, which cannot be ignored. They force us to reflect on the relation between the text and the actual historical situation and the situation of the people addressed. The world of the (language of the) text does not exist apart from the world of the experience of the people. There is always an interaction between text and experience. Historical and archaeological research keeps us aware of that relation between the text and the situations it refers to. The remains of a particular city gate reminds us that this is where people lived and experienced life. In this way, Talstra affirms once more that religious texts express convictions about life; they are the reflections of a lived faith.

This is the point in the interpretative process, according to Talstra, where exegetical methods and theological interests touch each other. Hypotheses for reconstruction reflect differently oriented theological (hermeneutical) positions, namely, what each finds most important for understanding the text. It is essential, however, not to jump the gun and save these “theological” considerations for last. Exegesis needs to establish as much as possible the *actual interaction between the text and experience in ancient times, and, analogous to that, for today*. That does not mean that exegesis can be some neutral science that establishes objective facts. On the contrary, the exegete makes many choices all along the way, but there has to be room for independent linguistic, literary and historical investigation before any other considerations. Rather than “theological” considerations, I would say this is the point where personal and communal reflections start. The exegete has left us with a *religious* text, which is integral to life and which by its very nature addresses us.

Religious texts, of whatever kind, always address us personally. They convey deep convictions or ultimate beliefs and as such they confront, appeal, invite, direct, warn, encourage, comfort, and so on. That is the nature of religious texts. As a *lived faith* they involve *a way of living*, and as such they invite us to join in and do likewise. Of course we are free to say yes or no to the invitation. Core beliefs about life are not just some religious ideas that one can share or not. As basic convictions about life they want to be lived. We can make them our own or reject them, but we cannot avoid the encounter, in this case, with the religious text. It is like when two believers or witnesses come to our door and express their faith, we are “forced” to say “yes” or “no”. or “tell me more”, but we cannot ignore their appeal. Usually I say, “no thank you, I do not share your convictions and I don’t want to debate them”. It is not any different with religious texts. They want to be taken to heart and lived. It is up to us to ponder the message, to take it to heart, qualify it or to reject it. These authors of long ago remind us and point us back to that life-giving way that we too encounter each day. In this way the scriptures presents us with a prophetic conviction and witness.

#### 10. Address: First and New Readers

What was the situation and the religious world of the intended readers of the book of Kings? What was the address of the later redactions? Are there possible similarities between the not-intended but actual readers of today? To what extent is the situation of the original readers analogous with or different from today’s readers? Can we see this process of reinterpretation and actualization as an on-going dialogue

between the text and new readers? These are the kind of questions Talstra addresses in this last part of the exegetical process. Again, it is the most helpful way I have been able to find to integrate the different, sometimes one-sided and very subjectivistic, “reader-response” theories. In one way we hardly need this specific reference to old and new readers, because *religious* texts by their very nature address readers, then and now. They express basic convictions about life and seek to persuade others and have them join in.

At this point, Talstra insists, we need an *insider’s hermeneutical perspective*, that is, an approach by which we feel personally addressed by the text, rather than a so-called objective, academic or outside approach. Recent discussions within the phenomenology of religion and cultural anthropology have made this very clear. To understand a people’s religion and way of life, we need to empathetically be able to enter into their beliefs and customs. We need to take an “inside” approach. Religious texts, of whatever kind, always address us personally. They convey deep convictions or ultimate beliefs and as such they confront, appeal, invite, direct, warn, encourage, comfort, and so on. That is the nature of religious texts. As a *lived faith* they involve *a way of living*, and as such they invite us to join in and do likewise. Of course we are free to say yes or no to the invitation. Core beliefs about life are not just some religious ideas that one can share or not. As basic convictions about life they want to be lived. To take an insider’s or empathetic interpretative stance, therefore, is the right starting point.

As a result of the reconstruction and (trial) interpretation of the text the reader is now explicitly addressed by the text in his or her own way of living and convictions. It is a dialogue and encounter between the text and our own experience and understanding. Although the text reflects the social dynamics of the time, ultimately the text presents a *religious* point of view. In the case of 1 Kings 21 it is the issue of idolatry. Is that issue still relevant today? Can we identify with that position? At this juncture Talstra relates this text as part of the history of God and Israel to today’s faith community. Can we join in with the long tradition of readers and see ourselves as co-inheritors of this tradition? As a modern reader can we identify with and join in with the community of believers in this long process of interpretation and actualization in today’s society?

## 11. The role of tradition

In contrast to many commentaries and exegetical studies, Talstra sees the end of the interpretative process by leaving us with the text speaking for itself. It is at this point that his lack of an overarching worldview leads to a contradiction. If the religious language of a text is inherently connected to all of life, why is there a need for something more? If idolatry in a particular text is the issue, the deification of some aspect of creation, why can’t those same prophetic words speak to today’s idolatry? Talstra looked for an overarching theological view of creation, history and providence, but he could not find an ultimate viewpoint that integrally connects to all of life. He only found dualistic views in which the ‘doctrine’ or ‘theology’ of creation is not fundamentally interconnected with all aspects of creation. He looked for something similar as his view of religious language that he saw as structurally founded and connected to all types of language. He lacked a view of the multi-dimensional unity of life in which not only religious language could have its natural place, but all aspects of life. An interconnected multi-dimensional worldview of reality (creation) and the constant human form-giving during the centuries in response to the regularities of life (history, providence) would have provided him with such a frame of reference. Although such a (foundational) overarching perspective was available at his university, it was not easily accessible to theologians. Not having found such an integral worldview he looked for ‘tradition’ to fill the gap between the past and the present. Let’s follow what role he gave to ‘tradition’.

In a very practical way he makes it clear that the jump from the past to today needs something more, a channel as it were. He sees that connection in the role the tradition of a text plays. He consistently relates specific texts to later textual variations and interpretations, to the Jewish tradition, to the New Testament and then to present-day ((Reformed) theology. In my judgement this becomes the weak point in Talstra's presentation. The prophetic message can be seen as part of a *criterion* for 'believing rightly' (see my *The Gods in Whom They Trusted*, to be published). All later interpretations of these prophetic texts can be evaluated by these criteria. More often than not later interpretations were deeply influenced by the ideologies of the time and compromised or distorted the prophetic witness. It gives tradition an authority it does not have and cannot live up to.

If we look at the history of ancient Israel as a whole we can only conclude that it was a "failed project". Again and again the people worshipped the idols of the surrounding people. This idolatry is presented as the main reason for the exile, the destruction of the temple and Jerusalem and the end of the Davidic kingship. All that was left was the Torah. It was only for a short time that the people as a whole or, more often, a minority remained true to the Torah as a life-giving way. If someone would have asked us if we could identify ourselves with the faith community at the time of David or Salomon, or Ezra or Nehemiah, we would have had to say; that all depends. Do you mean the faith community of Israel or Judah as a whole or the small prophetic minority that gave rise to the Hebrew scriptures? I assume the answer would be, the small minority, the remnant.

The situation today and historically with regard to the Christian church is not any different. The Christian church too is a "failed project", even though through all the centuries there was always a minority of faithful people that remained true to the vision. Again and again the church compromised itself; identified itself and joined in with those in power; tried to serve two masters; became powerful itself at times, and as a result persecuted, excommunicated, tortured and killed "heretics"; it became divided in different traditions, denominations and little splinter groups that condemned each other, opposed life-giving and supported life-destroying ways; and so on. It is a long story of a failed project. It is a story to weep about. This is certainly not a judgment about individual faith communities or individual people. It is a statement about the disconnect between the prophetic message and the life of the church and the Christian community. The tradition of the church too is addressed and confronted by the prophetic convictions of the Hebrew scriptures, for good and for ill. Can we see ourselves as joint-inheritors of the "tradition of the church"? Again, that all depends.

In spite of these objections, it will be helpful to follow a few of Talstra's examples of the concrete steps in going from the past to the present. It is my conviction that the examples themselves point the way to an alternative way of following that line from the first readers to later ones to today. The first example is from (second) Isaiah, chapter 46. It is an illustration of the exegesis of one of the different genres in the Hebrew scriptures, in this case the prophetic writings. In looking at the reception of the text, he follows a certain order, depending on the inventory at the beginning. First he considers the Septuagint (LXX) and other textual traditions; in the case of Isaiah 46, the Targum. Both of these offer only small variations that lead to slight difference in emphasis. These variations are often based on a different reading or interpretation of a word or a lack of clarity in the text, but most of the time they stay within the boundaries of the passage. Sometimes the influence of a particular theological preference is notable in the translation.

After these textual variations, he considers the Jewish tradition. This step becomes quite a different matter. The Talmud offers a further exploration of Isaiah 46, elaborating upon its meaning. They are like small "sermonettes" or expositions. They are often beautiful, inspiring and to the point. Such reflections

signal a change from exegesis to interpretation. The only role left for exegesis is to evaluate whether such elaborations still do justice to the givens of the text. The same holds true for writings from the so-called intertestamentary period, the apocryphal books. It is interesting that Talstra does not hesitate to differ with such interpretations if necessary.

When it comes to drawing the line further to the New Testament it introduces a new issue. The New Testament has its own unique way of quoting or alluding to the Old Testament. It has its own way of “proving” a point or way of arguing and debating, ways that often seem strange to us and often does not do justice to the original text. For this reason it would seem much better if such references were interpreted *in the light of its own context in a gospel or a letter. Most of the time it does not really say anything about the quoted passage other than its function in the new context.* In the paper on the New Testament we will have to come back to this crucial issue.

Talstra’s reference to the gospel of John is a good illustration of this point. In John 13 verse 19 there is a small segment that alludes to Isaiah 46. “I tell you this now before it takes place...” in John 13:19 it is an allusion to “...declaring the end from the beginning and from ancient times things not yet done...” in Isaiah 46:10. It is a familiar argument in second Isaiah. Isaiah 41:26 expresses it very succinctly: “Who declared it from the beginning, that we might know, and beforetime, that we might say, ‘He is right’?”. It is a repeated argument about the idols that do not know anything, in contrast to YHWH whose council will stand and who will accomplish what he intends to do. He tells the people before it happens, the liberation and return from exile, lest they should say that their idols did it (48:5). He told them beforehand, so that they may know and believe that YHWH is their liberator (43:10). “Behold, I am doing a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?” (43:19). Bel and Nebo, the gods of the Babylonians shall be carried away on beast of burden and YHWH will send Cyrus, the great conqueror of the Persians, his anointed, the saviour, to set his people free.

The main difficulty with the reference to the gospel of John is that it misses the fundamental theme of Isaiah 46 and for that matter, of all of second Isaiah (40-55). We could summarize the central message to the second and later readers as follows: You will be liberated and allowed to return to your home-land to rebuild Jerusalem and the temple. Will you come to new insight now and change. Will you take all this to heart and not return to your idolatry? Will you now follow the life-giving way? Your old ways have been wiped out and forgotten and you have been able to make a new start. YHWH has done a new thing. And for later readers who have been hesitant and slow in re-building, will they come to awareness? There have been opponents and there has not been a lot of enthusiasm for re-building? How will it go now and what about the following generations?

The renewal of Israel, that is the central question for the liberated Jews after the exile. The remnant that has returned with all their questions about the future. They are encouraged by these writings to see God’s role in their history and his power over against the idols of Babylon. He called a bird of prey (Cyrus) from the east and he will put salvation in Zion, so don’t be stubborn and take heart (46:13). Although we have a very different understanding of history, different from all the ancient near eastern nations of that time, yet it is not hard to grasp the essence of Isaiah’s message. We have reason to trust the life-giving ways we encounter each day, even in the face of disintegration and ongoing violence. Some may recognize these life-giving ways as the presence of the God of the ancient Hebrews and others may give them a very different name or no name at all.

In referring to the gospel of John, Talstra is careful to point out that the analogy between Jesus and the prophet’s statement, and with it, the continuity between the Old and the New Testament is not based on

the strict analysis of these two texts but on the total meaning of the life of Jesus. He is the fulfillment of the promise to Zion and to all the nations. But in that case it would have been better if he had referred to all of Jesus' work and teachings instead of just the allusion in John 13. Without reference to Jesus teaching about the kingdom of God and the rule of the kingdom, re-proclaimed by Jesus, it invariably leads to a soteriological narrowing of the gospel. It is also the part that the Apostles' Creed skips: "I believe in Jesus Christ,...born of the virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, and buried..." A reference to Matthew 6 would have been more appropriate and would in its own way have caught something of the spirit of Isaiah 46. Without such a clear reference, the prophetic voice against idolatry becomes secondary again, or is lost. Then the life-giving way of the Torah and the Kingdom is obscured and narrowed to "Jesus saves us from our sins". Then later readers can feel at ease serving two masters, God and Mammon, as the history of the church illustrates. Once we come to understand what the Hebrew scriptures actually mean by "idolatry", we might join in with those throughout the ages who have opposed the deification and worship of some dimension of life, making it into a god. However, most of the time that was a minority. Both then and now the faith community often compromised itself and its prophetic voice went underground or was silenced.

A secondary problem in referring to the New Testament is that Talstra usually quotes a particular text or passage without taking into account the context and the genre of the text. With regard to the gospel of John with its own particular emphasis or "theology", written sixty or more years after Jesus' death in a very different historical context, such an elaboration would have been all the more important. Perhaps one person cannot cover everything, but then it would have been better to leave out the reference. Of course, from the point of view of religious language such a New Testament reference is not essential, since the text speaks for itself, then and now. We will come to a similar point in the second illustration.

The second illustration is from Talstra's exposition of the blessing of Aaron in Numbers 6 and as it is repeated in Psalm 67. He concludes that the blessing is not a magical formula nor just a wish. Instead he calls it an event, a "happening", something one experiences in worship. After many laws and regulations, Moses is commanded by YHWH to command Aaron and his sons to put YHWH's name on the people. "It is YHWH who blesses you and keeps you." In Leviticus 9 the same blessing has a liturgical setting and in Numbers 6 it comes after many commandments and just before the dedication of the tabernacle. In the Jewish tradition and the Christian tradition these words have become part of the worship service. For Protestants they come at the end of the service after the re-proclamation of the word. For many these were (are) comforting words, "The Lord bless you and keep you; the Lord make his face to shine upon you and be gracious to you; The Lord lift up his countenance upon you and give you peace" (Numbers 6:22-27). However, *these words cannot be had and appropriated apart from the doing of the word, apart from a lived faith.*

*In hearing and doing the words of life*, the people are to be blessed. The ten commandments and the many other laws, the Torah, is about a way of living. In following these life-enhancing ways, all people will be blessed. This does not mean they will prosper, but that in living their faith they will find meaning and fulfillment in spite of adversity, suffering, and opposition. These last sentences are an interpretation. Talstra is careful to distinguish between the givens of the text *and* how they have been interpreted by Christian theology within the protestant tradition. In relation to these words of God blessing his people (Numbers 6) and all the nations of the world (Psalm 67), Christian theologians have reflected (speculated) on God's presence in creation and history *in general* and its fulfillment at the end of time. In doing so they have left the words of these texts far behind.

It is such generalizing with its doctrinal interpretations and isolated quoting of scripture that has led to so much misunderstanding and distortion of the Christian faith. This kind of theologizing is no longer a reflection upon a lived faith as an integral part of experience. They are reifications that start to live a life of their own. In this way, as Talstra notes, the language of the bible is separated from its context and function in the liturgy and our actual religious experience. Then specific texts become general assertions and information about God, his providence, history and the future. Luther's trinitarian interpretation of the blessing of Aaron is another example of such generalizing and separating the text from its setting. It becomes a dogmatic interpretation which distorts its meaning.

Psalm 67 and its connection with the rebuilding after the return from exile, presents a different context of the blessing of Aaron. Here the blessing is connected with the new harvest after the exile. Now that they have been able to return after those long years of exile and after the loss of the land and its harvests, the new harvest is a signal that they can take courage. Their land has once more produced its grain. There is hope, renewal, a new beginning. After the harvest they can come together and sing again, now that the earth has yielded its fruit, "may YHWH bless us and continue to bless us". The harvest is a signal that YHWH will continue the journey with his people in the midst of all the nations of the earth and all people are invited to join in the thanksgiving. The exile was not the end, YHWH continues his history with Israel and with all who join in. The psalm challenges the people to understand the harvest not just as a sign of blessing, that YHWH has favoured them with a good harvest. Rather they are called to see the harvest as a sign that YHWH is continuing his journey with them and all people in spite of their past. There is truly a new beginning.

Talstra comments that in this psalm *creation and history touch one another* and that it may not be easy for present-day readers to see that connection. If creation is nothing more than matter and history nothing more than the result of chance, then there is no room for such connections. With the general ancient near eastern view of history that also forms the background of the Hebrew scriptures, that is indeed impossible. Every nation believed that their gods directly controlled what happened to them, both good and evil. The gods directly controlled the weather and the rains at the right times, and as a result fertility, but also droughts, flash storms and devastating hail storms. In times of disaster or the threat of war the gods had to be appeased, sacrifices had to be made, the omens had to be consulted, and if all was of no avail, the hardships and captivity or enslavement had to be endured as the punishment of their gods.

Such a view of history with its one to one correspondence between God's blessings and punishments and their actions is no longer tenable. It calls for another view of history, also other than pure chance, *for we are free and responsible people and we are aware of multiple and complex causations*. All the theology in the world about creation, providence, God's hand in history, etc. cannot provide such a new frame of reference and such a connection. As long as theology isolates itself in a special sphere of faith, a reified faith, it cannot provide an answer to these questions. For a radical renewal of the Christian faith we not only need a very different view of the scriptures but also a very different overarching frame of reference that can do justice to faith as a *lived faith that is embedded in the whole of life*. More examples from Talstra's book and his many articles could be given, but these two are sufficient to highlight the problems one encounters when drawing the line from the past to the present without a different way of relating the Old to the New Testament and without a different frame of reference to place the scriptures in a larger framework. At the same these two examples illustrate how the central meaning of each passage *can* be related to the New Testament and to today in spite of very different worldviews. Given such an overarching framework it is not hard to see how creation and history touch each other also today. Abundant harvests in our time are not a sign that God has favored and blessed us. Rather good harvests are a sign that as long as the earth endures, we can rely on the earth's productivity in spite of our

destructive agricultural practices. The earth has not abandoned us, we have abandoned the earth. There can be a truly new beginning if we change our distorting practices to a truly ecological way of growing food. We can count on it.

Talstra himself does not specifically address these problems of relating the past to the present by way of the long tradition of re-interpretation and actualization. There are two main difficulties that I can see, first of all, how do we evaluate the tradition at various points in time? Are all interpretations and all actualizations acceptable? If so, what about all the misinterpretations of scripture and the misguided and self-serving appeals to scripture with its destructive consequences for life? And if not, how do we distinguish? Is one tradition more reliable than another? What criteria are there? For an elaboration of the problems this approach presents, see my evaluation of C. Houtman's book, *De Schrift Wordt Geschreven*, 2006, (The Scriptures Are Being Written).

This leads to the second problem. There is not one, single, "Christian tradition" that we can join in with. "The Church" does not exist. We only have the Eastern Orthodox, the Roman Catholic and the Protestant traditions, all with their divisions, denominations and independent churches. There are 84 different Reformed denominations in Korea, 17 in Nigeria, and countless other ones in the U.S.A. The Netherlands, if I remember correctly, has over one hundred different denominations and independent churches. Given those numbers, it is not surprising that there are over fifty different churches in our immediate area within a radius of half an hour driving.

Even though the Christian churches have preserved the prophetic word, that has never been a guarantee that its interpretations and actualizations have been in keeping with that word. The "Church" has no built-in divine authority, in spite of the pronouncements of popes, cardinals, patriarchs, arch-bishops, synods, assemblies, etc. The fact that churches are religious institutions do not make them any less human. On the contrary, churches are fallible human organizations that have often strayed from, violated or compromised the prophetic convictions of the scriptures. The "tradition of the Church" in all its fallibility cannot serve as an alternative to the now out-dated view of the (literal or organic) divine inspiration of the Bible. There is no authoritative, eternal Word of God that we can rely on. All we have is a unique, prophetic voice from the past that challenges and confronts us and that can serve as part of a signpost or a touchstone for our lived faith and our actions and relationships.

#### **IV. Noort's Contribution**

##### 17. History and writing history, then and now

Dr. Noort is emeritus professor of the University of Groningen in the Netherlands. He has written a great number of articles and several books (see the bibliography). He made an important contribution to the exegesis of the Hebrew scriptures, especially the books of Judges and Joshua and a seminal article on biblical theology.

Noort comes to all these exegetical questions from a limited point of view and he does not draw any general conclusions from his understanding of the book of Joshua. Yet his view of *religious* history writing, *religious* topography and *religious* time in Joshua has radical implications. For one thing it means there are other kinds of history writing, geography and sense of time besides religious ones. There are many specialized disciplines dealing with physical topography, maps indicating the different kinds of vegetation and amount of rainfall, the distribution of peoples and settlements, economic centers and trade routes, political maps, and so on. The same is true with regard to different kinds of history writing.

Besides religious history, Ahlstrom, Drever and others distinguish between political, socio-economic, art, intellectual, natural, and technological history, as well as a more vague total or cultural history. Most authors recognize that the Hebrew scriptures are a religious book that contains religious history writing. Many call it “theological” historiography without meaning to imply that the scriptures contain theological concepts and theories. Some call it “confessional”, “faith” or “prophetic” history writing, and so on. Much more can be said about Ancient Near Eastern history writing, including time or duration (long or short view). Those discussions have dominated the discussions for many decades, up till today.

Before we go on to look at Noort’s views, it is interesting to see how Ahlstrom in his *History of Ancient Palestine* (1993) describes religious historiography. According to him, religious history writing in the scriptures is based on “religious zeal” and follows an “ideological pattern”. It has a special purpose, it wants “to proclaim”. To do so it “...can use literary patterns, make adaptations, corrections and sometimes fictional writings, as well as include exact events and exclude others...” (p. 43). And again, “...religious historiography does not *per se* need to build upon any reality, because religion makes its own reality...” (p. 44). Even though he uses such concepts as ‘ideology’, ‘propaganda’, ‘group identity’, which tend to distort the nature of religion, he rightly tries to understand and describe the difference between *religious* history writing and other special kinds of history (like political, sociological, economic, geographical histories), as well as a more integral, total history. His own attempt is more focussed on the latter kind, starting with the pre-history of Palestine. Such a more general, total history (even though his approach is quite limited) highlights the distinction between the different kinds of history writing. Religious history is primarily focused on proclamation, core beliefs and basic convictions and can use a wide variety of materials and references for that purpose.

Not many authors have tried to describe the nature of *religious* history in more detail. It highlights the difficulty with “religion” or “theology” and whether as an academic discipline it has a legitimate place at the university. Many of the “histories of ancient Israel” continually keep one eye on the historical or geographical references in the scriptures and the other eye on the historical and material sources apart from the bible. The words ‘ancient Israel’ serve as a religious distinction and not as an ethnic or historical one. Without clear awareness of the *religious* nature of the Hebrew scriptures, such studies tend to harmonize, disqualify, or separate out “theological” parts of a passage from “ideological”, “political propaganda”, or “group interests” parts. Perhaps such tendencies are a left-over from attempts to prove or disprove the historicity of the bible. One result is that many of these studies are neither good history nor good exegesis.

#### 18. Noort’s View of Religious History Writing

In view of this confusion and these limitations, Noort’s articles about the book of Joshua are all the more significant. Following is a summary of a few of his articles about Joshua. In his article, “The Traditions of Ebal and Gerizim; Theological Positions in the Book of Joshua” (1997) Noort describes the difference between *religious geography* and *physical geography*, and *religious time* and *physical time* in some detail. It reminds us of Talstra’s distinction between the linguistic foundation of a text and the religious meaning or color of a text. For Noort as well there is an inseparable relation between historical geography and time and religious geography and time. The first illustrations are from the book of Joshua.

As the story goes, after a long journey through the dessert, the people of Israel finally crossed the river Jordan close to Jericho to enter the Promised Land. The first thing they did under the leadership of Joshua and the priests was to rededicate themselves to Yahweh, their liberator. They were circumcised and

celebrated the Passover, remembering their escape from Egypt. After the waters of the Jordan parted, the priests with the Ark of the Covenant stood in the middle of the river until the people had passed by to the other shore, much like when the previous generation had crossed the Red Sea. The land they are entering is a gift of Yahweh.

The reading of the law written down by Moses and kept in the ark could have come at this point in the story (Joshua 4 and 5). They are not to be in the Promised Land for one moment without a reminder and re-affirmation of the blessings and curses of living or failing to live by the life-giving way of the Torah (Deut. 11:30; 27; 28). However, the ceremony is postponed until after the conquest of Jericho and the failure to capture the next city, Ai, because of the violation of the ban. Only then comes the account of the re-dedication to Yahweh in the new land, and before they make a covenant with the Jebusites, a Canaanite people, which will be “a snare” for the Israelites (Joshua 9).

Compared to Deuteronomy, *the time of the ceremony is changed till a later time to make a religious point*. They are to be wholly dedicated to Yahweh, and they are not to make any covenants with the Canaanites and be tempted to serve their idols; if they fail to do so, it will not go well with them. Not only the time but the geography is changed as well. The reading of the blessings and curses is to take place with the people standing at two opposite mountains and answering with “amen”. The two twin mountains, Ebal and Gerizim, were actually located 40 km north of where they were camped at Gilgal after crossing the Jordan.

The ceremony was elaborate. An altar had to be made of unhewn stones for burnt and peace offerings. The altar itself was to be plastered and Joshua had to write a copy of the law of Moses on the stones. The people stood on opposite sides of the ark carried by the Levitical priests; half of them in front of mount Gerizim and half in front of mount Ebal. After hearing the torah being read to them, the people made a solemn promise and were blessed. The law from mount Sinai is now transferred to the promised land itself, written on stone. Sinai has come home, as Noort put it. Israel now has everything they need to live peacefully in the land in the presence of Yahweh. Therefore there is to be no coalition with the Canaanites and serving their idols.

The Torah is a blueprint for a way of living that is life-enhancing and that brings peace, justice, care and wisdom. If the people follow its directions then everything will do what it is supposed to do, then the heavens will answer the earth, then the rains and the dew will provide the moisture for the olive trees, the vineyards, the barley and the grass for the flocks, then there will be abundance and shalom, peace. In both Deuteronomy and Joshua living by the guidelines of the Torah stands central. Without it there can be no rightful worship (the cult with its offerings, praise and thanksgiving). The book of Judges tells us what happens when the people forget the Torah and serve the idols instead of Yahweh (Judges 2). Serving the idols means death. Deifying and worshipping a part of life instead of the Creator of life, distorts life and enslaves people. Then everything gets wrenched out of place and there can be no shalom, only suffering and death. Living by the Torah, the promise of the land, the cultus, and the promise of many descendants are inseparably connected and in that order.

The patriarchs had already paved the way to the promised land. Abraham built an altar at Shechem, Bethel, and at Mamre near Hebron, after being promised the land and many descendants. Isaac built an altar at Beersheba and Jacob at Shechem. Beersheba and Hebron to the south and Bethel and Shechem more to the north, they are like so many beachheads in the promised land. After that comes the gift of the law at mount Sinai: “You shall have no other gods before me...” (Deut. 5). If they follow all the words of the law they will be blessed (Deut. 28:1-6). With the ceremony at mount Ebal and Gerizim, Sinai has

come home: all the words of the law are “very plainly” written on the stones of the altar in their new land. So far the summary of Noort’s article.

*In this whole religious context, physical geography and chronology must yield to the religious message, that is, to the proclamation and the deep convictions of the authors and redactors. Mountains can be moved freely and time sequences can be changed as needed. That is the nature of religious history writing. Geographical and chronological references are in the service of the message.*

One more point needs to be highlighted. Talstra uses the givens and indications of the linguistic, literary and historical analysis to make a provisional suggestion who the first and possible later readers might have been. With regard to the time Joshua might have been written, there are several indications that point to a period after the destruction of Samaria (723/722 BCE) and the exile of the ruling class to Assyria. Many people might have fled to the south and Jerusalem. The time of the reforms of king Josiah (around 620 BCE and following) is past. The conquest and destruction of Jerusalem (from 597 to 582 BCE) has not yet happened. The people might be frightened. Will the same thing happen to them as to the people from the northern kingdom? It is in this possible context that the first readers of the book of Joshua (a first edition?) can be found. The book served both as an encouragement and as a warning. There is still time to mend their ways, to put away their idols and to follow the Torah and in this way to keep their covenant with Yahweh. Yahweh will still keep all his promises if they repent and change and trust in him and not in alliances with foreign powers or their arms. A new beginning is possible.

The stories and memory of a time long ago can comfort the people in their present situation. The story of Joshua, the new leader after Moses, who led them into the promised land and who wrote down the whole Torah for the people to live by, are both a warning and an encouragement. These stories about Joshua who was blessed by Yahweh and endowed with cosmic powers (Joshua 10), who conquered all the land and who gave all the people their inheritance, could comfort the people of Judah, if they would take them to heart. Without going into all the exegetical questions, there are later redactions that reflect new situations, like the period of the exile and the restoration during the Persian occupation and beyond. Indications of new redactions may present different emphases and additions that would encourage and comfort the people in their new circumstances. Whatever the exact exegetical issues, these stories are written for the guidance, the confrontation, and the encouragement of the people at different times in their history.

When we read these stories they address us as well in our particular situation. If we do not immediately spiritualize the “land” and “Jerusalem” and jump to the letter to the Hebrews, or to the book of Revelation to the “new earth” and the “new Jerusalem” (Hebrews 13 and Revelation 21) but keep our feet on the ground, Joshua can inspire us as well. The many “political, economic and environmental theologies” show us what the land as a gift and the Torah as a blueprint for living might mean for us today.

It is only in this context that research in the historical background of the Hebrew scriptures and proposals for reconstructing the past (when possible) are meaningful. It allows the general or specialized historian to be an historian and not keep one eye on the ‘historical’ givens of the scriptures. At times the bible can serve as a secondary source, but only if there are at least two or more primary other sources (Becking). A historian that is focused on the period of history reflected in the scriptures can provide *a possible or plausible historical background* of certain stories or bible books. Becking in his many articles and books gives many helpful examples of this kind of historical setting. More often than not, such clarification emphasizes even more the basic difference between religious history and other kinds of history. So many fruitless debates could be avoided if this difference were recognized more clearly.

There is another telling example by Noort that is helpful for understanding the nature of religious history. This second example is from his article about the fall of the great city Jericho, (“De val van de grote stad Jericho; Kanttekeningen bij synchronische en diachronische benaderingen”, 2000). In religious history writing, one can not only move mountains and change time sequences from one account to another, but one can also invent cities and conquests. Here is a summary of his article.

In the “told time”, that is the time described in Joshua many centuries later, there was no Jericho. In spite of all the attempts to harmonize the account in Joshua with the archaeological findings, there was no Jericho during that time period. In the told time Jericho did not exist. It was in ruins. In a general historical sense the conquest of this particular city is irrelevant. It could have been any city. However, *religiously*, Jericho is the central orientation point. Geographically, after crossing the Jordan, Jericho is the most important city. Coming from the east, it is the entry point into the promised land. *From the point of view of religious history, there was no way around the conquest of Jericho.* From there the land is wide open to the west and from there to the north and the south. Given the lay of the land, the geography of the hills and valleys, it is the gateway to Canaan. But again, this is not physical geography but religious geography.

The whole story of the conquest of the city is cast in the form of a “miracle story”. The basic theme is about the gift of the land. It is not because of Joshua, the great new military leader or Israel’s military might, that they can take possession of the land, it is a gift from Yahweh to his people. For that reason possession of the land is dependent on serving Yahweh and not other gods. Possession is not a foregone conclusion. It can also be taken away again (as the first or second or third readers know so well). Keeping the Torah and possessing the land are inseparable connected. The failure to take the next city, Ai emphasizes this point.

This theme about the land and the Torah is presented in *story form*. Everything in the story emphasizes this theme: the rededication (circumcision and the Passover); the commander of the army of Yahweh that came to Joshua; the impenetrableness of the city (no one can go in or out); its mighty warriors; the presence of the ark and the priests; walking around the city seven times in silence and seven times on the seventh day; and then the miraculous crumbling of the walls. This is not an ordinary battle. The city is given in Joshua’s hand by Yahweh. It is Yahweh’s conquest and his city. For that reason too the “ban” is an absolute one. The city is completely dedicated to Yahweh (perhaps like a burnt offering). The city and all its inhabitants are to be destroyed.

In a later context we will come back to this issue of Yahweh as a warrior, violent warfare, the ban, and the stoning of Achan and his family after violating the ban. One thing we might know at this point is that *this is not an issue for moral or ethical evaluation. In this context it is clear that this absolute ban must be understood religiously.* The city and the land is dedicated (holy) to Yahweh. Therefore they must not make any treaty with the surrounding people, for that will lead to the worship of their gods and the distortion of life.

Immediately following the conquest of Jericho and the debacle and subsequent victory at Ai, the first thing that happens is that Israel made a treaty with the Gibeonites, and later on we read that many Canaanites remained in the land. In chapter 23 they are called a snare and a scourge that will tempt the Israelites to serve their idols. In the book of Judges all this becomes even more evident. The angel of Yahweh tells the people that they have made a covenant with the inhabitants of the land and not broken down their altars. Then we read, “What is this that you have done?” (Judges 2: 2). When the people heard

these words they lifted up their voices and wept. The place was called, Bochim, a place of weeping (Spronk).

The message to the people of Judah after the destruction of Samaria is clear, change your ways, there is still time. And later, after the destruction of Jerusalem and in exile, this is the reason why Yahweh has banished you from the promised land, your idolatry. Maybe there is still hope. Listen to the prophets. Maybe Yahweh will create a new beginning and let you return to your homeland (Second Isaiah 40-55). And later yet, after the return from Babylon, be mindful of what happened to you before (read Joshua and Judges and Samuel and Kings), make a new covenant and commit yourselves to live by the Torah, the blueprint for life, then it will go well with you in this new and precarious situation. Take heart!

The final text, as is often the case, has a complex structure and shows that it has grown over a over a long period of time and gone through many redactions. More could probably have been said by Noort about the linguistic and literary givens of these two accounts (the changes from singular to plural; the diagrammatic picture of the text according to who is speaking and who is being addressed as well as the narrative segments; etc.). However the key point is clear. Reading other commentaries on these passages, there is also a warning not to speculate and not to fragment the text. With his dry humour, Noort will say at times: “He know too much!” when with every change an exegete sees a new redaction or a new source. Later we will consider yet how a sociological-political interpretation (the self-interests of the dominant group, the king, the elite, the priests, the returnees, etc.) can elucidate or distort (in a reductionistic way) the religious meaning of these kinds of stories.

If the scriptures are read “backwards”, mindful when it was written and for whom and in what kind of circumstances, and if they are read as religious history, then they can be a powerful source of inspiration for today. To put it somewhat simplistically at this point, then the message is clear also for our lives in our circumstances: do not absolutize or deify any part of life; if you do, it will not go well, life will become distorted; and if you have, it is never too late to turn around and make a new beginning; you can count on it. Such was the insight and wisdom and the deep conviction of the ancient prophets, priests and scribes. The history of the people of Israel and the history of the Christian church (as well as that of Judaism and Islam), maybe a story to weep about, but these stories written by a small minority have a lasting significance, if we can learn to “translate” the central religious meaning of each story from the worldview of Ancient Israel to our modern worldview.

#### 19. Another brief example, the book of Judges

The ‘book’ (scroll) of Judges makes all this even more evident. Although Joshua relates that the whole land of Canaan was conquered, this appears not to be the case in Judges. Even in Joshua it appears that many of the non-Israelite people remained in the land. This is where Judges starts. Much of the land still needs to be conquered and the Philistines will not be driven back until the time of David according to the book of Samuel. The people had failed to take possessions of the land, which was seen as a gift of YHWH. They served both YHWH as well as the gods of the people along side whom they lived. As Judges repeats several times: In those days there was no king in Israel; every man did what was right in his own eyes. The brotherhood between the tribes was destroyed and their behaviour had become immoral. When the people are confronted by their faithlessness, they lift up their voices and weep. Later on king Josiah will also weep when he hears the words of the covenant, the words of life. And later yet, when the people hear the law read during the time of the rebuilding of the temple, the people again wept bitterly. The story of Israel is the story of a failed project, a story to weep about, that is the conclusion of these stories. Yet they speak of hope, of new beginnings.

In this context, by way of contrast, imagine for a moment that all the Christians in the world today could identify themselves with and see themselves as co-inheritors of the prophetic witness of the scriptures. Imagine if they all stood up tomorrow and gave voice to that prophetic conviction about idolatry. Imagine that they all stood up and declared with one voice that they would no longer support today's idolatry, the idolatry of the "neo-liberal ideology" that is destroying the environment and bringing untold suffering and death to millions of people. Regrettably it is only a fantasy, although...it is not far-off from any faith community to do so. The life-giving word is not far from us. As the ancient author wrote (written some time during and after the exile for the people that had come back to a destroyed city and temple and faced starting a new life): "For this commandment which I (Moses) command you this day is not too hard for you, neither is it far off. It is not in heaven that you should say, 'Who will go up for us to heaven, and bring it to us, that we may hear it and do it?' Neither is it beyond the sea, that you should say, 'Who will go over the sea for us, and bring it to us, that we may hear it and do it?' But the word is very near you; it is in your mouth and in your heart, so that you can do it..." (Deuteronomy 30: 11-14).

For an actual example of the wording of such a united voice and proclamation consider the statement of the World Communion of Reformed Churches in its report on "*Justice in the Economy, on the Earth and for all God's creation.*" (section 3), as well as the *Accra Confession* of 2004 at its meeting on June 18-28, 2010 in Grand Rapids, Michigan. Imagine if all the Christian churches, and all who want to join in, called for a day of 'mourning and weeping', and then make a commitment to a radical new way of living. Imagine, a commitment to a new, world-wide way of life supported by sustainable and caring local economic structures, taking radical steps to save the environment even at this late hour. Of course, this is a statement of just one of the dozen or more *ecumenical* councils. Such a change locally and globally would have to start with a new way of reading and understanding the scriptures and a radical new way of reflecting ('theologizing') on our convictions about a lived faith.

## **V. A hermeneutic key: a phenomenological frame of reference**

In his search for an anthropological foundation for systematic theology, Kuitert in his various writings laid the foundation within the Reformed tradition in the Netherlands for an alternative basis for theologizing (see my *Religious Faith and Visions of Life; a critical retrieval of Kuitert's anthropological foundation of faith and theology*, 2009). He called it a 'small anthropological foundation', but given his discussion and references to general revelation, he might have called it a '*general revelation*' foundation. He looked for a common, human foundation that could provide a (theoretical) basis for the study of all religions, including the Christian faith. He realized that the study of Christian faith and theology at the university could no longer claim a privileged position for itself based on revelation.

From these beginnings in Kuitert's search for an over-arching anthropological framework, Talstra's emphasis on the inseparable connection between sacred language, history and creation and Barton's insistence on the need for a comprehensive perspective ('a theory of religion and reality'), it is not far to the development of a *phenomenological interpretative frame of reference or worldview*. Such a phenomenological interpretative key represents the multi-dimensional unity and interconnectedness of reality, in which every dimension of life is integrally related to every other aspect. Within that perspective anthropology is inseparably connected to creation (cosmology), view of knowledge (epistemology), history, ultimate beliefs, social structures, human language (linguistics), and every other aspect of life. It is a phenomenology that is based on the conviction that there are common, abiding, unfolding 'structures' in life that come to expression and are actualized throughout history and in all cultures. Without this commonality no study of the past or other peoples would be possible. These basic 'givens' of life make it

possible to recognize exchanges of goods, family relationships, power structures, agricultural practices, and so on, wherever they take place and during whatever period of history. These abiding ‘structures within change’ are not ontological structures or basic categories in our mind, but phenomenological descriptions that can take account of historical changes and cultural variations.

We have consistently used such a phenomenological frame of reference, in the conviction that a phenomenological worldview provides the key to any holy scriptures. This means that we started with the question, *what human reality do these books refer to? What core features do they have in common with similar phenomena in other times and cultures? What ultimate convictions do they represent? What way of life do they advocate?* These questions are based on the assumption that ‘holy books’ are part and parcel of this creation, and that they are an integral part of human history and culture. They do not belong to some boundary realm between heaven and earth. They are fully creaturely phenomena. Likewise with regard to the beliefs they refer to, it is based on the assumption that holding to and living by an ultimate conviction or having a basic belief about life is a universal human phenomenon, and that being committed to a certain worldview is a normal part of life.

In interpreting the Hebrew scriptures as one particular collection of sacred writings we have followed such a *phenomenological worldview, which represents the multidimensional unity of life*. It is hard to find a good word for this interpretative key. It is on a par with and different from an overall Marxist interpretative framework, or a psychoanalytic, existential, feminist, Liberation theology, or other theological traditions whether Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, Lutheran, Reformed, evangelical, and so on. In the end it is these presuppositions or ultimate convictions about life that determine the final interpretation of any particular passage in the Hebrew scriptures. The same is true for Talstra, he is aware that at many points in the exegetical process he makes specific choices. Although he stays as close to the text as possible, in the end it is his orthodox, confessional, Reformed framework that determines his final interpretation. What I appreciate about his approach is that he freely acknowledges the different choices he makes at crucial points in his exegesis and in his final interpretation. It underscores that there is no objective, neutral, ‘scientific’ interpretation. They are all ‘slanted’ and limited historically and culturally. If acknowledged, it makes for challenging and fruitful dialogues. These different perspectives highlight the need for a guideline by which we can evaluate these alternative viewpoints. Chapter 8, “A guideline for ultimate convictions: believing rightly” of my *The Gods In Whom They Trusted* (to be published) presents such a criteria.

The Hebrew scriptures too present a vision of life that wants to be lived from day to day. Most important for our purposes, during their time of crisis, they *actualized two fundamental guidelines for ultimate beliefs*. One is that we ought not to deify or absolutize any aspect or part of life. If we do, we destroy the integral coherence of life and then life becomes distorted. The other guideline relates to the fundamental attitude and approach in our relation to our ‘neighbor’, that is, the other and the earth. The scriptures could summarize this attitude in the words of the great commandment (love your neighbor as you would love yourself), or as being for the other and with the other as true covenant keepers. Both of these guidelines are as relevant today as they were then. There are other guidelines or refinements and variations, but these two are essential. For a further elaboration of this viewpoint, see my *The Gods in Whom They Trusted* (to be published).

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