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The Perception of the Contemporary by Means of Scriptural Interpretations

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IS IT TRUE? HERMENEUTICAL READING OF THE PRESENT

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1. Introduction

The ascription of truth to a sacred text seems on the surface to be a tautology. Are sacred scriptures not by definition true and hence both authoritative and normative for the faith and morals articulated on this foundational axiom? But questions begin to surface when the truth of scripture is held as the object of scrutiny. The question of scripture’s truth in an Enlightenment context is measured according to specific criteria of truth determining all texts, not exempting texts set apart as sacred by a religious tradition. The biblical text according to the Enlightenment paradigm is not to be treated with a special reverence unexamined by reason. Indeed the Bible is to be regarded as any other book might be; it is to be held up to the same type of rational and hermeneutical scrutiny determining the academic engagement with any text.

It was this critical conceptual paradigm that led to the eighteenth and nineteenth-century erosion of one of Protestant Christianity’s pillar doctrines. The doctrine of scripture was based on a theory of the personal, verbal, and real inspiration of the Bible and its authors, and on the attributes predicated of the text as such; its function was to guarantee the holiness of scripture—both Old and New Testaments in the Protestant canon—as an infallible source for theological knowledge that functioned as practical knowledge necessary for salvation. Such a doctrine did not fare well against the Enlightenment public inquiry into the features claimed for the Bible. Its truth as asserted was shaken by the storms of historical criticism that required proof and demonstration according to the criteria determined by scholarly consensus. The truth of scripture was contested

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by truths of history and science. Protestant theologians found themselves in increasingly uncomfortable positions. The stand-off position meant inevitable entrenchment against the rising hegemony of the real sciences. The accommodation stance varied by the degree to which scripture could be rendered acceptable to scientific (wisenschaftlich) criteria of knowledge. The resulting gap between scripture as privileged by intra-religious criteria and scripture as determined by the public truths of the Enlightenment was one that theology had no choice but to negotiate.

Some lamented the loss of doctrinal innocence, others welcomed the mature opportunity to engage the new sciences. The important question set in the dialogical context of modern public discourse, however, does not inevitably lead down the slippery slope of accommodation. If the Enlightenment paradigm presents theology with inevitable challenges of conceding to modernity, then the converse should also be entertained: how can theology explain the truth of the religious texts deemed significant in the history of a respective religious tradition? Rather than viewing the developments of modernity as a threat to doctrines safeguarding the privileged status of the Bible, the theological guild is challenged to raise the question of why the Bible has continued to exert the power of its truth throughout the life of a religious tradition. The truth question would address the reasons for scripture's enduring power. Rather than hiding behind a checklist of doctrinal technical terms, such as authority and normativity, theology would tease out the rational, doctrinal, and pious ways in which scripture is regarded by faithful adherents as a text to which the truth predicate is applied.

If scripture’s truth is to be a starting-point for inquiry, then the conceptual problem can be stated in the following terms. The truth of the Bible has oscillated since the Enlightenment between two claims. One claim is represented by the Enlightenment view captured by Benjamin Jowett in the nineteenth century: scripture is to be interpreted like any other book. The other claim is represented by a revental paradigm that regards the Bible as the “book of all books” (Buch der Bücher), the special instrument used by the Holy Spirit to convey the same spiritual truths to generations of believers. It is the aim of this chapter to show that this latter claim concerning biblical texts as constitutive in a significant way for religious faith and morals can be rendered according to various ascriptions of truth; as religious texts, they make certain claims that can be examined by scholarly and public scrutiny. Furthermore, the texts have a certain transhistorical persistence that can be explained by investigating the ways in which they articulate a unique understanding of specific dimensions of life. Sacred scripture has the status of a truth bearer in a maximal sense: it conveys the truth of a God who is faithful to a chosen and beloved people throughout the history of its wandering. As bearing the truth to new generations, the texts hermeneutically situate the truth question. “Is it true?” is related to the question, “Is it true for me and for us?”

This chapter's study of scriptural truth proceeds in three steps, each focusing on a specific arrangement of the two perspectives of scripture highlighted above: the Bible is to be regarded as any other book and the Bible is to be esteemed as the paragon of books. The steps are organized according to different types of truth ascriptions. By focusing on these different ascriptions, I show that the Bible's truth can be determined by both perspectives from a substantive thesis proposed from the “Bible as paragon” perspective. The argument is structured in this way in order to demonstrate the contribution of this perspective to public inquiry, rather than its withdrawal from the judgment of reason. I begin with (1) the ascription to the Bible its historical truth value as the foundational document of particular religious traditions. Because my area of study is the Christian tradition, I will make my argument in terms of the Christian Bible composed of two testaments. Then I turn to (2) the ascription to the Bible, as text, its transparency both to an objective reality “behind” it that constitutes the religious tradition as such, and to subjective construals of that reality from diverse perspectives “in front of” the text. I conclude with (3) the ascription to the Bible its spiritual value that might best be described as the “mystical engagement with the spirit of the text.”

2. Ascription as Foundational Document

Protestantism at its Reformation origins upheld a particular canon of the biblical text as its critical tool against doctrinal consensus. The ensuing history of Protestantism grows from this ground. Whether in its Lutheran or Calvinist forms, the Protestant spirit highlights the normative function of scripture in theology. Seventeenth and eighteenth-century Protestant Orthodox doctrinal claims and the historical-critical approaches to scripture emerging in the eighteenth century, while critical of each other, showed an equally similar view of scripture. Both esteemed, from different perspectives, the foundational documents of (Protestant) Christianity as constitutive in a decisive way for the history and theology of the ensuing religious trajectory. In this section I answer

1. This question might also be designed to include the question concerning the cultural impact of the Bible, for example, its constitutive role in Western art, literature, and science. I am restricting the paper's range to solely the way in which theology might consider the truth of scripture in the historical and hermeneutical terms that can be recognized by those who reventally adhere to its truth.

the question, “Is it true?” by studying the ascription of foundational power to scripture from both a reverential and a critical position.

Protestant Orthodox theological and historical-critical approaches differ on the surface regarding their respective views of scripture. Orthodox dogmatic treaties articulated theologies of scripture that ascribed certain properties to the biblical text. The text, or, more precisely, the canon, had specific attributes that constituted its infallible capacity to guide believers to salvation. The Bible as the book of all books was venerated because of its soteriological infallibility and theological normativity. Historical approaches to the Bible, as Hans Frei argued in The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative, established historical referentiality as the text’s truth, thereby eroding the conceptual force of scripture to absorb phenomena into its frame of reference. The texts were to be regarded as documents of historical events and, as such, could be correlated with those historical events unearthened by historical and archaeological research. Historical study acquired the capacity to determine the referential truth or falsity of the text.

The difference between a theological and a historical understanding of the canon betrays an uncomfortable antithesis. Although the object seems to be the same, the two approaches to it are wildly disparate. What does the Jerusalem of soteriological necessity have to do with the Athens of empirical verifiability? And in this battle, history wins: according to scientific consensus, history is given the power to trump theological ascriptions of truth. It is this losing battle that Friedrich Schleiermacher laments in a letter to his friend Friedrich Lübeck. Schleiermacher reveals his fear that the truth of scripture might be discredited by developments in historical and natural sciences. If natural science proves that creation did not take place over six days and if the canon is shown to be the result of historical authorship rather than divine inspiration, then the consensus of reasoned inquiry Trumps the alleged historical and scientific assertions of the Bible. Once its scientific trustworthiness is undermined, its theological content is also rendered suspect. The Enlightenment privileging of claims established by scientific consensus falsifies the text’s claims. The burden is left to theology to accommodate its understanding of biblical claims to acceptable methods of inquiry or to risk antiquation in a rational age. Theology once the queen of the sciences now faces the very scientific discussion she bore.

This view represents, however, one early Enlightenment model of the relation between theology and history, formulated by Lessing and premised on the incommensurability between historical truths of fact and eternal truths of reason. Lessing presupposed the conceptual antithesis between time and eternity as well as the epistemological dualism of empirical and speculative reason. If an epistemological continuum is posited between the two sources of knowledge, however, and if a metaphysical paradigm is proposed that unites history and eternity in an essential way, then the gulf is not only bridged, but rendered moot. This nonistic framing of the conceptualizing of epistemological and metaphysical issues in biblical interpretation characterizes the post-Kantian search for system. Its novel solution is proposed by the theologian and philosopher, Friedrich Schleiermacher.

Schleiermacher advocates a theological position that is radically historical in its understanding of its subject matter. Theology studies religion, and religion is an empirical, historical phenomenon. Although it is a phenomenon distinct from other human activities, such as political organization and academic study, religion represents a necessary element of what it is to be human. The same historicity characterizing human existence constitutes religion, moreover. Religion is essentially historical, suspended between an original and identifiable terminus a quo and an eschatological terminus ad quem. According to Schleiermacher’s theory of history, the origin of a historical sequence is of decisive significance to what ensues; history’s final cause is subordinate to its efficient cause. The determinative “inner” unity at the origin is simultaneously set with a crucial “outer” event. The appearance of such an original point cannot be explained from the preceding; its novelty is identified with the new appearance of an inner unifying perspective and an outer historical event. This new appearance is determined by a unique set of properties that sets the historical and conceptual parameters for

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3. For the Protestant Orthodox doctrine of Scripture, see Heinrich Schmid, ed., Dogmatic Theology of the Evangelical Lutheran Church (trans. C. A. Hay and H. E. Jacobs; 3rd ed.; Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1961), 38–91 (§§6–12) and Heinrich Huppe, Reformed Dogmatics: Set Out and Illustrated from the Sources (rev. ed.; ed. Ernst Bizer; trans. G. T. Thomson; London: Allen & Unwin, 1950; repr.; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1978), loci II–III. Lutheran Orthodox numbers four attributes that account for why the Bible is the “only source of truth” and “as the Word of the God, the only means by which we can attain unto faith” (Huppe, Reformed Dogmatics, §7 [50]: authority, perfection (or sufficiency), perspicacity, and efficacy [§57–11 [50–80]).


the ensuing series. The origin of a historical trajectory is constitutive for what follows in a way that any other moment continuous with it does not. Hence the questions regarding the founder of a movement, the foundational religious idea and how it took shape, and the early context of its reception become key historiographical questions.

This historical claim concerning religion implies a specific understanding of the religion's foundational texts. The canon—in Schleiermacher's case, the Christian canon—is privileged as the literary fixing of ideas generated by a foundational experience. The canon is seen as a historical (in a nonontological sense) document that fixes, in literary form, an experience that is foundational to the respective religion it funds. The text thus captures the identity between the religion's original outer moment and its inner unity. The New Testament articulates the experience of Jesus Christ as a unique person from many authoritative perspectives, yet those perspectives agree as to the transformative effect that Christ has on individual persons. The Old Testament as contained within the Christian Bible identifies Yhwh's covenant as the object of Israel's witness, thereby establishing the New Testament witness to Christ as one of its possible historical and theological outcomes. The identifiable appearance of Jesus on the religious stage and the transformative effect of his person that continues to shape Christian identity through history are the religion's distinct outer and inner traits textually fixed in historical proximity to their historical source. The Christian canonical criterion of apostolicity can be understood both to make the historical point that the foundational experience of the Christian religion is tied to the real presence of Christ and to make the theological point that the experience of redemption is attributed solely to this one source. The canon is not privileged in the sense that it contains infallible knowledge concerning Christ's person and work. Rather as a historical record of early individual experiences of Christ, the Christian canon establishes the chiastic and soteriological parameters concerning the historical significance of the foundational moment in the Christian religion.

The ascription of foundational historical and conceptual-theological status to the Bible does not imply a diminution or rejection of a reverential attitude toward this text. Rather, the example from Schleiermacher's thought shows the delightful fit between the inquiry into historical and religious knowledge, on the one hand, and the privileged, unique place that Christianity assigns to the Bible, on the other hand. Categorical knowledge concerning the constituent elements of history in general and historical religion in particular is used to tease out features embedded in the Bible's own records of its subject matter. Scripture's truth as a historical document rests on the understanding of its historical origin as religiously significant for the rest of the historical series. The Bible can be read in this sense as "the first member in the series" on both its own terms and in the terms of methodologically controlled and critical inquiry. Schleiermacher is a paradigmatic thinker who conceptualized the complementarity of different accesses to scripture on the basis of a historical theory of religion. The historical embeddedness of religion is worked into the New Testament's claim concerning an original relation between experiences essential to Christianity's transhistorical character and the texts expressing those experiences. So a text's religious significance is taken seriously on its own terms as well as on the terms of categorical knowledge explaining the historical significance of origins for religion. The truth of these historically foundational texts is established for today by the fact that they set the historical-experiential and conceptual-metaphysical parameters for the rest of the religious tradition.

The possibility of agreement between historical experience and metaphysics will now be shown in a second ascription to the Bible: the Bible's transparency to an objective truth that is constituted at diverse points along the religion's historical trajectory by many subjective perspectives.

3. Ascription as Objective and Subjective Truth

The Bible is a collection of texts that at one level of ascription sets the parameters for a respective religious tradition by historical proximity to found-

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10. Friedrich Schleiermacher, Brief Outline of Theology as a Field of Study (trans. T. N. Tice; Schleiermacher Studies and Translations 1; Lewiston, N.Y.: Mellen, 1990), 547 (28).


12. The Hebrew Bible/Old Testament has rabbinic Judaism and Christianity as its two possible outcomes. On the "double outcome" of this text, see Bernd Janowski, "The One God of the Two Testaments: Basic Questions of a Biblical Theology" (trans. C. Helmer), JBBS 57 (2000): 297-324.

13. This is Schleiermacher's term in Christian Faith, §125, proposition (594).

dational events. The texts render events significant for the ensuing history of the religion through interpretation. But interpretative access to the past as one ascription of truth requires another ascription in order to provide criteria for testing the truth of these records. Such a testing is already constitutive of religious experience as such: if a religion is to be truly living, the experiences "of something" invite reflection on the intentionality (content and referent) of that experience as well as on the unique ways in which it is experienced. In this section, I address a second ascription to the Bible in terms of its "objective and subjective truth."15 A determination of the Bible's objective truth gives reasons for why this book's articulation of particular experiences remains transhistorically powerful. An exploration of the Bible's "subjective truth" conversely shows why these experiences are only available as interpreted through different individual and communal lens.

The Bible is said to be true in a transhistorical sense. It not only records the past but is open to future experiences that are deemed to be in some type of continuity with the past. It is this transhistorical potential for experience that a reduction of the Bible to mere text cannot explain. If the text is only a record of the past, then why is it consistently used as a document for testing and confirming extrabiblical experiences "of something"? The Bible discloses transhistorical potential for experiencing the self/world/God relations precisely in its intentionality in order that these experiences can be tested as to how they dovetail with, conform to, or agree with some description of those relations as set in the Bible. As text, the Bible is itself the product of human engagement with reality. And its use throughout a religious tradition witnesses to the faithful endurance of specific ways of engaging reality and the contours of that reality. The text witnesses to something beyond itself.

At this juncture, the distinction between text and subject matter, as Brevard S. Childs has noted, is helpful.16 "The biblical texts offer a particular grasp of the world to be experienced and known. As religious texts, they give something of the self/world/God relations to be known, and by this, they open up a range of experiences that is contextually translatable. The ascriptions of particular experiences to a deity, for example, the Trinity in Christianity, and the subsequent walk of life in relation to this God, point beyond the text to a subject "behind it." This is not a metaphysical reification "of something" that can be construed independently of the text; the text is itself composed in view of prior experiences of this reality. What is prior continues to be the source of inspira-


17. On a similar point in the book of Isaiah, see Armin Lange's essay, "Reading the Decline of Prophecy," in this volume.
The fact that fresh experiences of a subject matter behind the text perpetually arise in the history of the Christian church requires a metaphysics that accounts for God's continued action in history. Divine faithfulness is a biblical-theological theme that is addressed theoretically in terms of a metaphysics of being and becoming. A strict appropriation of the Greek apathy axiom will render God's involvement with historical messiness in a nonliteral way, whereas a view more keenly attuned to the biblical God who changes with and in history will not have difficulty in attributing anthropomorphisms to the deity. Christian theology, furthermore, has tended to conceptualize the God behind the text in metaphysical-trinitarian terms. Hegel appealed to a trinitarian metaphysics in terms of an objective theory of self-consciousness, for example, in order to determine the historical working of the God of Israel through priest and cult, through Christ and cross, through the Holy Spirit and the church, in the speculative-trinitarian concept of divine self-alienation and return. Nevertheless, metaphysics is not "the thing itself" (die Sache selbst) but an explanation concerning the reality to which the Bible attests. The metaphysical concern with the reality behind the text that has the potential for continued experiences of precisely this reality explains why a religious trajectory constantly refers back to its original texts. The Bible's objective truth lies precisely in this metaphysical explanation. The Bible is objectively true, not by virtue of some property that the text might have, but by virtue of its capacity to refer to a subject matter that continues to be accessible to the immediacy of experience regardless at which historical point, or in which language, or in which culture that text is read.

Although accessible in the immediacy of experience, the objective truth, however, is not exhausted by expression. If such was the case, then subsequent generations would cling to literal formulas as the embodiment of that objective truth without seeking the immediacy of its experience for themselves. Objective truth is metaphysically "incarnate" in expressions of experience without ever fully being exhausted by them. Subjective truth is the interpretative construal of experiences of a distinct reality. That truth is not exhausted by one expression. It is expressed in the thoughts and actions of one individual life, in the thoughts and actions of individual believers throughout the history of a religion, and in the thoughts and actions of various communities constituting the religious community as a whole. Objective truth as transhistorical faithfulness is related to subjective truth as the diversity of interpretations capturing glimpses and facets of an objective truth that continuously lures towards novelty.

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not only established at a foundational moment; its longevity requires that a common experience unite those generations rising up long after the original protagonists have died. In the christological terms of the Christian canon, this is known as the equivalence in redemptive efficacy between Jesus’ bodily presence and his spiritual presence in the community.20 According to Schleiermacher who argued this claim, there is no soteriological difference in the effect of Christ’s person before and after his (alleged, for Schleiermacher) resurrection. The same person is experienced as effecting redemption by those who saw him in the flesh and by those to whom he is “circulated” in the Christian church. The subjective schematization of this experience ascribes soteriological efficacy to Christ in individuated ways. Expressions of experience are contextualized and individuated in the particular languages, concepts, and cultural coefficients of those articulating these experiences. Beautiful, infinite variety characterizes the life of a religion, not flattened, uniform conformity. Both the formation of the New Testament and its transhistorical power can be explained by Schleiermacher’s understanding of the relation between experience and expression. Diverse sightings of Christ are individually schematized in the Gospels and in post–New Testament history, yet there is one Christ to which all schematizations point.

The relation between the objective and subjective truth of the Bible explains why the Bible continues to be revered for its transhistorical power and why it is “open” to critical reflection of its truth claims. Lovers of scripture are not necrophiliacs. Lovers of scripture are captured by its living truth. What Protestant Orthodox theologians explained in terms of the text’s properties can be understood as the text’s being caught up by the action of the spirit in order to permeate the life of the religion. The text is inert; yet as a document endowing life to the tradition, it is to be conceived as the literary witness to a transhistorical reality that is experienced subjectively in “many and various ways” (Heb 1:1). The love of knowledge, moreover, has its own methods, criteria, and concepts that are applied to the testing of truth. Both the objective and subjective truth of the biblical texts is available for critical study precisely because these texts continue to be hermeneutically relevant in the present. Historical reflection presupposes, at least at a minimal level, the relevance “for us” of the documents it studies. Reading the past in light of the present assumes a hermeneutically minimal requirement that initial concepts and questions be used to “open” the text for dialogue with its authors about its subject matter. Study of the text then applies a refined interpretative apparatus to investigate the truth of its claims, to compare expressions with other accounts of the same reality, and to give a complex picture of the subject. Critical biblical interpretation can read the present precisely by investigating the past with hermeneutical seriousness and moral accountability. The critical study of the Bible’s objective and subjective truth can correct present views, add diverse perspectives to present topics of discussion, and improve the sophistication of biblical arguments. By its contributions to the study of the past, biblical interpretation actually participates in the liveliness of reflective engagement with the Bible’s truth.

The second claim, as discussed in this section, ascribes objective and subjective truth to the Bible. This ascription intends to overcome a reduction of the Bible to a mere text by expanding an understanding of it in terms of its subject matter. The transhistorical faithfulness of a God “behind” the text and the multifarious experiences of this reality “in front of” the text capture the text in its transparency to reality. The metaphysical and hermeneutical determinations of the text’s transhistorical power open up the text to its truth that is to be both enjoyed and studied. The Bible’s truth is not eternal, captured in one formula once and for all. Rather, its transhistorical power opens up possibilities of exploring its truth from experience of and reflection on its objective and subjective dimensions.

4. Ascription of Transformation by Oral Embodiment

The Bible as a written text is a document caught at the living intersections of those who read it in light of their own experiences of its referent. The experience of a subject “behind” the text conveys to the respective religion its status as a living tradition. Yet the Hebrew Bible and New Testament report another way of experiencing “the text.” It is this unusual and distinct experience that discloses the way the Bible accounts for a unique understanding of its reality. This is the experience of “eating the scroll.” The third ascription to the Bible is the truth of transformation that occurs when the written word is physically ingested and digested. The physical intimacy experienced by eating the scroll discloses something about scripture’s truth. A theological reflection on the physically embodied relation to the Bible will explain this relation in terms of its transformative effect on the present.

The predication of life to the divine word’s agency is inscribed into the many layers of the biblical text.21 The Psalter, for example, places pivotal emphasis on a life lived in taking delight in God’s law (Ps 1:1, 6). At the beginning of this book, at a key introductory place, the life enjoyed by this life-time preoccupation is likened to a tree, whose leaves never wither (Ps 1:3). The book of


21. The questions concerning the precise meaning of the term “word of God” with all of its differentiations is a vast theological question that cannot be answered here. For the purpose of this chapter, I appeal to the term only to draw the connection between the spoken and written word in view of its determination as life-giving power.
Jeremiah proclaims the prophetic word of God, the life-giving promise of a new covenant (Jer 31:31), while Deutero-Isaiah issues words of comfort and good tidings (Isa 40:1). In John's Gospel, Peter exclaims when Christ asks his disciples if they too will abandon him, "Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life" (John 6:68). The work as the power of God is determined by those features characterizing God's faithful identity through time. The work is the instrumental cause of creation (Ps 33:9; John 1:3) and the promise of life continuing in times of exile (Jer 29:5–7). By relating the word to God, whether the law in Ps 119, the prophetic word in the prophets, wisdom in St 24:1–34, or the word that has become incarnate (John 1:14), the life-creating power that is constitutive of the divine essence is ascribed to it.

An important theological task is to recover this biblical connection between the word and God in terms of its determination as the commitment to “abundant life” (cf. Ps 23). The biblical connection between word and its particular agency as life-giving power has tended to be understood in a neo-Kantian paradigm in exclusively epistemological terms. In Canon and Criterion in Christian Theology, William Abraham criticizes the post-Enlightenment epistemologization of scripture as a collection of the self-evident axioms of faith, guaranteeing (Protestant Orthodox) theology’s truth. The literal identification of the word with the text and the resulting reduction of spiritual power to text play into a type of sacramentality that privileges the cognitive apparatus in receiving and understanding the word. If a religion limits its understanding of the Bible in this way, it results in an identification of experience with a cognitive understanding of the text. By reducing the dynamic biblical concept of the word to the written text, scripture becomes a source of knowledge rather than a source of life.

In order to break open this epistemological interpretative restriction, biblical theology and systematic theology require a new conceptual paradigm for determining the relation between the word and life. An idiosyncratic resource for such a conceptualization is the account of “eating the scroll.” The command to consume the written word is a rare occurrence in the Bible. Ezekiel is told to eat the scroll inscribed on the front and back with “words of lamentations and mourning and woe” (Ezek 2:10), and its taste is sweet as honey (Ezek 3:3). John is commanded by the angel to eat a little scroll that tastes sweet as honey at first, but then turns bitter in the stomach (Rev 10:10). Other biblical passages allude to the nourishing function of the word. Jeremiah, for example, exclaims that the word he ate “became a joy and the delight of my heart” (Jer 15:16).

22. All scripture quotations are from the New Revised Standard Version.

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descriptions of command to physically ingest the written word of God offer a unique and unexpected glimpse into the way in which the word as text is related to a particular form of prophetic life.

Rather than being read or heard, the text is eaten. Analogous to physical sustenance by food, it is ascribed a nourishing quality of a distinct kind. Just as physical eating and drinking sustain life, so too the physical ingestion of the word conveys life to its recipient. That the transfer of this power occurs through physical unity with the consumed material points to a truth about the relation between word, text, and flesh. The communication of spiritual power through the physical text and its inscription into the flesh disclose the reality that the word seeks its substantialization in the flesh. Spirit seeks its embodiment in the physical realm. It was Friedrich Christoph Oetinger, the eighteenth-century Swabian mystic, who made this truth his life's quest: “The telos of divinity is corporeality.” Eating the scroll discloses a fundamental inseparability between spirit and flesh, as the apostle Paul or the Absolute Idealist philosophers admitted. The latter built metaphysical systems on the basis of the principle of the identity between nature and spirit; both poles were understood to be strung out on a continuum with a point of indifference at the center at which the one pole of nature merged with its opposite, spirit, and vice versa. As inseparable from the body, spirit is disclosed to have reality only when substantialized as a physical reality. Spirit seeks out corporeality in order to inscribe it with its life; by doing so, it conveys the truth of embodied life.

The life of the spirit has its telos in the transformation of physical reality. Yet this transformation achieves special significance in those biblical characters who are asked to eat the scroll. By becoming embodied in a reality not unique to its own, the scroll inscribes its own content onto it: when Ezekiel eats the scroll, the written word becomes united with his own body. Its content is united with the body, determining the prophet's identity and mission. The scroll tastes sweet to him, in spite of the warning concerning the nature of his addressees (Ezek 3:7) and he is subsequently equipped with the protection of a fearless forehead "harder than flint" (Ezek 3:9). The body is caught at the intersection of the text's intentionality and its individual reception so that it becomes the place at which the text's reality is substantialized. Special persons, such as Ezekiel, become key signifiers of the text by their own witness in the body to an intentional sub-

ject "behind" it and by their own individual incarnation of the text "in front of" it. These are the "ambassadors of God," as Schleiermacher proclaims in his Speeches, chosen to mediate the infinite to the finite.26 These are the "seers" who keep open experiences of transcendent mystery because their own reality has been transformed by the object of their witness.

The ascription of life-transforming capacity to the oral ingestion of the text takes into account the marginal accounts in the Bible of unusual text handling. While marginal, these accounts offer a powerful dimension to the text's truth. Such accounts interpret the "hermeneutical reading of the present" to be an experience incarnate in the body. The location of the body in the present tense at a particular spatial point is a unique property of the body. Only in the flesh is there a present tense. Where the reality of the text is substantialized in embodied reality, there the body represents this reality in the present. The truth of the body rests on its spatio-temporal existence as that place where experience of the text is rendered in the present. The hermeneutical reading of the present is turned into the bodily presentation in the present of the reality that has transformed it. By eating, the present is read in such a way that it is given the life-sustaining property of the text's spirit. The truth of the text consists precisely in its transformation of the present by bringing the present to its living explication in the body.

5. Conclusion

The book called the Bible has been read, over and over again for a few millennia, in many languages and cultures. For what purpose? Is it to appease curiosity in a quaint monument of the past? Is it to justify current ethical, social, or political practices by historical texts? I have focused this chapter on a dissimilar pair of attitudes toward the Bible in order to show how both can help in working out three different ascriptions of the Bible's truth. By these ascriptions, I attempted to describe the Bible's unique and privileged role it enjoys in the Christian religion as well as its hermeneutical openness for methodologically controlled historical-critical and theological inquiry. The reverential attitude towards scripture can be opened to rational investigation in such a way that it presents its own transformation of rational categories. The testing, application, and honing of these categories can, in turn, deepen knowledge concerning that which has traditionally been ascribed to sacred texts. (1) The Bible, as the historically original and foundational document for the particular religion of Christianity, is valorized for the reason that it sets the conceptual parameters for subsequent experience in the religion. This capacity is related to its literary fixing of an experience (or set of experiences) that is foundational to a particular religion at a historical site as proximate as possible to the original experience(s). Hence as foundational document, the Bible's truth consists in its relevance for funding experiences that reflect unity among diversity. (2) I then discussed the Bible in terms of the objective truth of a transhistorical metaphysical reality behind the text and of the subjective truth of hermeneutical diversity in front of the text. By this twofold truth, scripture's uniqueness as a text was deemed in terms of its transparency to a reality that continues to be experienced, while a metaphysical and hermeneutical analysis attempted to explain why the subject of the text could be experienced as continuous through time, yet in many individual ways. (3) The Bible as written scroll showed the ascription of transformative truth to the movement of spirit's desire to be substantialized in the body. The "eating of the scroll" transforms the prophet's present reality by making the scroll's content its own reality. By its inscription onto the body, the prophet renders the text in a present tense that only the body can re-present. The word's truth, in these cases, is an incarnate truth. The body reads the present by presenting its truth in order to transform life.

26. Friedrich Schleiermacher, On Religion: Speeches to its Cultured Despisers (trans. R. Crouse; Cambridge Texts in the History of Philosophy; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 7 (speech 1). Also: "Such people are true priests of the Most High, for they bring noly closer to those who normally grasp only the finite and the trivial; they place the heavenly and eternal before them as an object of enjoyment and unification, as the sole inexhaustible source of that toward which their creative endeavors are directed" (ibid.).