Introduction

There are currently on offer any number of descriptions of the methodological “state of play” in the field of biblical studies. Even as the work of biblical scholarship is being pursued in the conventional forms of linguistic, historical, literary and theological investigation, producing innumerable articles, monographs, commentaries, and the like, the deeper questions to do with the nature, role and purpose of academic biblical study rumble under the surface. Anyone attuned to the nuance of the disciplines’ debates, tensions or conflicts will be able to feel the underlying friction that results from divergent and, in the view of many, incommensurate accounts of what biblical interpretation is and is for. Occasionally the surface breaks, and something of a mini-eruption takes place, as it has done recently within the Society for Biblical Literature. Professor Ronald Hendel’s decision to allow his membership of that scholarly society to lapse because of his perception that (for financial reasons) it now gives space and a platform to those “scholars” whose dogmatic convictions trump and render ineffective any appeal to rational argument, is the latest episode in a

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1 This article is a revised version of a Topic Keynote address given at the Centenary Conference of the Melbourne College of Divinity (now MCD University of Divinity) at Trinity College, University of Melbourne, July 2010.

narrative of conflict that, in many ways, shapes the history of the discipline.\(^3\) What is scholarly biblical interpretation? What philosophical, epistemological and theological commitments are consistent with the notion of “academic” biblical scholarship? What is the relationship between faith and reason, or the church and the academy? Such questions have a personal and vocational dimension: why am I a biblical scholar?; what is the scholarly task in which I find myself involved?; who is my scholarship for? When explored in dialogue with colleagues they may serve the wider end of discerning the place of biblical studies within a specialist University of Divinity, within the wider context of contemporary Australian higher education and society.\(^4\)

**Biblical Interpretation in Theological Perspective**

These questions might be answered in any number of ways. We might, for example look for empirical, quantitative and qualitative data about the realities of biblical scholarship in Australia: how many people are involved and in which institutions? what and how are we teaching? where is our research focussed?\(^5\) In this article, however, I take an unapologetically theological view of the interpretative task. Our questions about the nature and purpose of scholarly biblical interpretation must, at some level, be answered by a consideration of how the task of biblical interpretation itself is to be understood, theologically speaking. Whereas there are a number of

\(^3\) Ronald S. Hendel, ‘Farewell to SBL: Faith and Reason in Biblical Studies’, *BAR* 36 (2010), 28, 74: “So critical enquiry — that is to say, reason — has been deliberately deleted as a criterion for the SBL. The views of creationists, snake-handlers and faith-healers now count among the kinds of Biblical scholarship that the society seeks to foster.” (p.74).

\(^4\) Since the lecture on which this article is based was first delivered, the Melbourne College of Divinity has become MCD University of Divinity, a ‘specialised university’ within the Australian Higher Education sector. That development serves only to sharpen the point of the questions that I and my colleagues in that institution face as biblical scholars.

current attempts to do this work which draw significantly, and for obvious reasons, on the work of Karl Barth, I aim, in what follows, to utilize the reflections of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, not least those found in the recently re-translated *Letters and Papers from Prison*.\(^6\) I begin by outlining the shape of one possible theological account of biblical interpretation; one that might helpfully be understood as offering (to use a Bonhoefferian image) a melody to which Bonhoeffer’s prison theology provides something of a counterpoint.\(^7\) After presenting Bonhoeffer’s own call for the “non-religious interpretation of biblical concepts”, I turn to his critique of one particular performance of these key theological motifs, that of Barth himself, and explore why Bonhoeffer finds Barth’s rendition problematic. I suggest that recent calls for a return to a more theological kind of biblical hermeneutics are in danger of replicating the “revelation of positivism” that Bonhoeffer saw as a danger in Barth’s work. In turning to Bonhoeffer’s prison writings, I believe that his reflections on the issue of speaking about God in a world come of age have something to say to us as we wrestle with the nature, role and purpose of biblical interpretation in contemporary Australia.

**A Theology of Biblical Hermeneutics and its Implications**

In order to understand how Bonhoeffer’s prison writings might offer resources for theological reflection on biblical hermeneutics, we begin by summarizing some of the basic claims that together make necessary a thoroughgoing, theologically informed

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\(^6\) Throughout what follows I am using the most recent English translations and editions of Bonhoeffer’s work. For the letters see Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, ed. John W. De Gruchy, trans. Isabel Best et al. (DBWE 8; Minneapolis: Fortress, 2010), cited hereafter as *DBWE 8*.

understanding of what biblical scholarship is and is for. A number of recent writers on the theology of Scripture have rightly emphasized that biblical interpretation and scholarship take their place within a wider framework in which claims made about the nature and purpose of the Bible and its interpretation are embedded in prior claims about the nature of God. As John Webster puts it: “theological assertions about Scripture are a function of Christian convictions about God making himself present as savior and his establishing of covenant fellowship.” Crucially for what follows, this is to make the God-world relationship constitutive of the Scripture-interpretation relationship. Biblical interpretation is shaped by and responds to God’s prior revelation in, to, and for the world. Furthermore, and in contrast to models of revelation that seek to protect and shield off divine activity from the creaturely reality of the world, the words of Scripture, in analogy to the humanity of Jesus Christ, bear witness to the fundamental humanity of the biblical text itself. That is, the humanity of the biblical text is not sacrificed, or rendered opaque by its “sanctification”. It is taken up by God as a part of God’s gracious self-communication. As Barth put it:

God himself now says what this text says. The work of God is done through this text. The miracle of God takes place in this text formed of human words.

This text in all its humanity, including all the fallibility which belongs to it, is

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8 Of course they are only persuasive for those who accept the initial truth of the claims being made. Other kinds of prior conviction will inevitably lead to different construals of the nature and purpose of biblical scholarship. See, for example Jacques Berlinerblau, The Secular Bible: Why Nonbelievers Must Take the Bible Seriously (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), Hector Avalos, The End of Biblical Studies (Amherst: Prometheus, 2007).

the object of this work and miracle. By the decision of God this text is now taken and used.⁠¹⁰

This means that biblical interpretation has the knowledge of God as its ultimate objective. Understood theologically, biblical interpretation must conform itself to the object of the Bible’s own testimony. The aim of interpretation is the creation, nurturing, and sustaining of participation in, and covenant relationship with, the God to whom these texts direct us. Put otherwise, the question of how we can speak of God is decisively answered by appeal to the practice of biblical interpretation. The work of biblical scholarship, as one particular form of the interpretative task, is therefore to be regarded as theological method, dogmatic content, a spiritual discipline, and even perhaps a form of prayer.

With these kinds of theological affirmations in mind, we can turn to the question of what biblical scholars actually do. A theological understanding of the nature and purpose of interpretation enables some critical purchase on interpretative practices, specifically the practices of biblical scholarship in the academy. The critique is often expressed in terms that suggest that much biblical scholarship is misdirected, misleading, irrelevant and, ultimately, bankrupt. When judged against the standards of a robust dogmatic account of the nature and purpose of Scripture and its interpretation, much contemporary biblical scholarship is found wanting. There are two aspects of this argument. In past generations the debate revolved around the validity of the historical-critical method in relation to convictions about the place of

Scripture within the divine economy. This suspicion of traditional forms of historical-critical interpretation continues in some quarters. However, the critique has now been widened to take into account forms of biblical scholarship that are less interested in the circumstances that lie behind the text and more obviously concerned with the role of the reader in the interpretative process itself. We can briefly consider each aspect.

The notion that Scripture points beyond itself to the reality of God’s gracious self-revelation in Jesus Christ should, it is argued, call into question the adequacy of the traditional scholarly focus on the historical circumstances surrounding the production of the biblical text. Angus Paddison makes the point clearly in a recent book:

To attest the texts of the Old and New Testament as “Scripture” is to make specific claims about this text: that it is drawn into the activity of the triune God of Israel, that its ultimate destination is the worshipping church and that it has a ministry in shaping Christian thinking and acting. Scripture is not first a source for historical enquiry, not a text that delights our literary sensitivities; calling these collected texts “Scripture”, points to its commissioned role in the saving purposes of God.

Paddison goes on to give an example: “The aim of reading a text written by a biblical author like Paul is not to seek out the putative historical circumstances behind this or

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that pronouncement, but to look towards the reality which so radically reorientated Paul’s life.”

Along with others, Paddison argues that distorted accounts of what Scripture is, as well as misdirected interpretative practices that are dependent on non-theological accounts of what constitutes the text’s meaning, are primarily the result of a failure to account for the reality of divine agency within biblical interpretation. Although there is much more that could be said, it is perhaps enough to point out that the search for the “putative historical circumstances” that gave rise to the biblical texts, or the quest for a more or less precise understanding of their literary sources, forms, genres, and tradition history, are not by definition antithetical to engagement with the Bible as Scripture (in the sense outlined by Paddison). On the contrary, Barth saw such historical critical work as essential to the task of theological exegesis and therefore insists that historical-critical method is an initial means by which the creaturely reality of the biblical text is to be taken seriously. Where Barth stood in opposition to the historical scholarship of his early theological education, related above all to the failure to press beyond historical discussion to discern the true object

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13 Paddison, Scripture, 2.

14 Paddison, Scripture, 7–8. In this emphasis Paddison is aligning himself in general terms with the work of John Webster and his students. See Webster, Holy Scripture, John Webster, 'The Dogmatic Location of the Canon', in Word and Church: Essays in Christian Dogmatics (Edinburgh / New York: T & T Clark, 2001), 9–46, Richard R. Topping, Revelation, Scripture and Church: Theological Hermeneutic Thought of James Barr, Paul Ricoeur and Hans Frei (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007), Donald Wood, Barth’s Theology of Interpretation (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007), Mark Alan Bowald, Rendering the Word in Theological Hermeneutics: Mapping Divine and Human Agency (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007). Nevertheless, Paddison is also aware of the dangers inherent in this emphasis, see Paddison, Scripture, 98, n.22.

15 See e.g. Barth, CD I/2 §19, 463–469. The classic discussion is Rudolf Smend, 'Nachkritische Schriftauslegung', in Eberhard Busch, Jürgen Fangmeier, and Max Geiger (eds.), Parrhesia: Karl Barth zum 80. Gerburstag am 10. Mai 1966 (Zurich: EVZ, 1966), 215–237 on which see now George Hunsinger, 'Postcritical Scriptural Interpretation: Rudolf Smend on Karl Barth', in George Hunsinger (ed.), Thy Word is Truth: Barth on Scripture (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012), 29–48. As Hunsinger summarizes “Barth believed in the necessity of historical criticism, because of Scripture’s full humanity” (p.32). Further information about this complex area can be found in Richard E. Burnett, Karl Barth’s Theological Exegesis (WUNT 2/145; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2001).
of the text’s witness. Therefore, even within an explicitly theological account of biblical interpretation, we should allow for the possibility that scholarly and academic attention to the circumstances of the text’s production is not obviously inimical to its capacity to speak God’s word to us.

However, current writing on theological hermeneutics goes further in its insistence that not only older forms of historical scholarship, but also newer forms of reader-oriented biblical interpretation, must be judged against dogmatic criteria. Here the focus of the critique is not the place accorded to history, but to hermeneutics. Given that contemporary biblical scholarship as it is practiced in the academy is no longer exclusively dominated by work that emphasises the former aspect, but offers multiple, almost limitless, examples of the latter concern, this adds an additional dimension to our enquiry. How, theologically speaking, are we to understand reader-response theory, contextual hermeneutics, post-colonial interpretation, and deconstructive readings of Scripture? How, in the light of the theological conviction that the purpose of the texts is to bear witness to God’s saving action, do we handle notions such as the reader’s involvement in the creation of meaning, the inherent ambiguity of all texts, the significance of any number of contextual factors for the interpretative task, and the inevitable interpretative pluralism that results from these emphases?\(^\text{16}\)

\[^{16}\text{Numerous survey texts seek to do justice to the wide range of hermeneutical approaches that are currently employed within biblical scholarship. To give some examples: Fernando F. Segovia and Mary Ann Tolbert (eds.), }\textit{Reading From This Place, Volume 1: Social Location and Biblical Interpretation in the United States} (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995); Fernando F. Segovia and Mary Ann Tolbert (eds.), }\textit{Reading From This Place, Volume 2: Social Location and Biblical Interpretation in Global Perspective} (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995); Bible and Culture Collective, }\textit{The Postmodern Bible} (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 1995) and in relation to Paul the recent collection Joseph A. Marchal (ed.), }\textit{Studying Paul's Letters: Contemporary Perspectives and Methods} (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2012).\]
For John Webster, an undue emphasis on these aspects of the interpretative task constitutes a denial of Scripture’s primary function: “exegetical difficulties are, in the end, not the heart of the difficulty of reading Scripture. The problem lies elsewhere, in our defiance of grace.”

He argues that to construe the reader-text relationship in terms of interpretation, “tends to devote much more attention to immanent explication of the activity of the interpreting subject as that through which the text achieves its ‘realisation’”. Instead the term “reading” is to be preferred, for it is “less overlain with the complexities of hermeneutical theory, less patent of exposition by psychological or philosophical abstraction.”

Francis Watson puts the matter in the starkest terms:

The current hermeneutical dogma are to be rejected because they conflict with the dogmas held to be foundational to orthodox Christian faith, and because, in the light of that conflict, certain inherent problems and implausibilities rapidly come to light. … A Christian faith concerned to retain its own coherence cannot for a moment accept that the biblical texts …lack a single, determinate meaning, that their meanings are created by readers, or that theological interpretations must see themselves as non-privileged participants in an open-ended, pluralistic conversation.

It seems then, that one possible trajectory for the theological affirmations with which we began, arrives at a place where the typical concerns of academic biblical scholarship, with its focus on the biblical text in particular relation to its historical production and hermeneutical reception, are understood to be in tension with the concerns of the church and its focus on Scripture as divine revelation. One way of expressing this is to insist that while the text of the Bible and the lives of its interpreters are clearly human, creaturely, and worldly, nevertheless the value of scholarship for the church lies in its capacity to direct our attention beyond the worldly location of these words to the reality of Jesus Christ, God’s Word. But what

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17 Webster, *Holy Scripture*, 106.
18 Webster, *Holy Scripture*, 86.
is the “beyond” is in our midst? What if the quest for transcendence leads us fully into the reality of the world? To begin to describe the nature and purpose of biblical interpretation in these terms is, of course, to invite a consideration of Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s rendition of the relationship between God and the world and, by implication, Scripture and the work of biblical interpretation.

**Bonhoeffer and the Interpretation of Biblical Concepts**

As Stephen Plant, Brian Brock, John Webster and Philip Ziegler have shown, Bonhoeffer was in many ways a “biblical” theologian, especially so following the personal experiences that constituted his turn “from the phraseological to the real”, a transformation that Bonhoeffer connects with a rediscovery of the Bible, and identifies as a journey from being a theologian to becoming a Christian. Moreover, Bonhoeffer’s earliest writing on the Bible (an essay from 1925 on historical and pneumatic forms of exegesis) show a clear commitment to Barth’s theology of revelation and, as we shall see, Bonhoeffer’s relationship with Barth is an important backdrop for understanding the prison formulations. Those formulations have, of course, entered into the discourse not only of academic theology, but also wider

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church and culture: “a world come of age”; “who is Jesus Christ for us today?”; “religionless Christianity”. However, in relation to the specific task of biblical interpretation, their significance lies relatively unexplored. Webster’s account of Bonhoeffer’s biblical interpretation focuses exclusively on the explicit works of biblical exposition from the 1930s and thereby emphasizes the attentive, meditative aspects of Bonhoeffer’s engagement, which arguably fails to take on board the significance of Bonhoeffer’s “turn” to the world. A collection of Bonhoeffer’s writings on the Bible offers limited space to the prisonletters. When they are cited it is by way of illustration of Bonhoeffer’s practice of Bible reading and his understanding of the relationship between the Old and New Testaments. Yet the place of the Bible, as a key aspect of God’s self-revelation to the world, is, I contest, at the heart of Bonhoeffer’s concerns throughout the crucial correspondence with Bethge that began in April 1944. It is important to remember that the ideas about religionlessness that


23 See Webster, Holy Scripture, 78–85. The same limitation besets Ernest Georg Wendel, Studien zur Homiletik Dietrich Bonhoeffers (Hermeneutischen Untersuchungen zur Theologie 21; Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr (Paul Siebeck), 1985). This is not an illegitimate reading of the thrust of those earlier works, of course. But Webster is explicit in his view that “the prison texts do not contain the most important or interesting things that Bonhoeffer had to say”. Thus he eschews attention to the questions about revelation and its relation to the world that dominate Bonhoeffer’s later thought. See Webster, ‘Reading the Bible’, 87. I happen to think that these later formulations are of substantive importance and interest.


25 The relationship between biblical interpretation and the situation of ‘religionlessness’ is raised earlier by Bonhoeffer in a letter to Bethge of 25 June, 1942: “I am amazed that I am living, and can live, for days without the Bible … When I then open my Bible again, it is new and delightful to me as never before, and I only wish I could preach again … I sense how an opposition to all that is ‘religious’ is growing in me … I am not religious by nature. But I must constantly think of God, of Christ: authenticity, life, freedom, and mercy mean a great deal to me. It is only that the religious clothes they wear make me so uncomfortable. Do you
find expression in the letters come at a time when Bonhoeffer was reading his Bible more than ever. Furthermore, in connecting notions of “religionlessness” explicitly to the question of revelation, by calling into question both Barth and Bultmann’s thinking about that connection, and by going on to think explicitly about the “non-religious interpretation of biblical concepts”, Bonhoeffer offers a distinctive voice into the debate about how biblical interpretation itself should be understood. Bonhoeffer becomes, implicitly at least, a “hermeneutician” precisely at these points.²⁶

The following quotations can be offered as supportive evidence for an insistence that Bonhoeffer had the question of the nature of Scripture as divine revelation at the forefront of his mind in the period April–July 1944.

[W]hat then is religionless Christianity? Barth, who is the only one to have begun thinking along these lines, nevertheless did think them through, but ended up with a positivism of revelation, which in the end essentially remained a restoration. (Letter of April 30, 1944)²⁷

What matters is not the beyond but this world, how it is created and preserved, is given laws, reconciled and renewed. What is beyond this world is meant, in the gospel, to be there for this world … Barth was the first theologian to his


²⁶ For a sustained argument in support of reading Bonhoeffer as a “hermeneutician” see Steve M. Bezner, 'Understanding the World Better than it Understands Itself: The Theological Hermeneutics of Dietrich Bonhoeffer', (PhD Baylor University, 2008)

²⁷ Bonhoeffer, DBWE 8, 364.
great and lasting credit to begin the critique of religion, but then he put in its place a positivist doctrine of revelation that says, in effect, “like it or lump it”.

… That’s not biblical. (Letter of May 5, 1944)²⁸

My view, however, is that the full content [of Christianity], including the “mythological” concepts must remain the New Testament is not a mythological dressing up of a universal truth, but this mythology (resurrection and so forth) is the thing itself! but that these concepts must now be interpreted in a way that does not make religion the condition for faith.”

(Letter of June 8, 1944)²⁹

In the letter of July 8, 1944 the full and most precise version of Bonhoeffer’s enquiry is expressed as follows: “I owe you something about interpreting biblical concepts nonreligiously”.³⁰ After reflecting on the notion that God is not to be smuggled in to the world in the “last, secret place that is left”, rejecting models of Christian witness that might be tempted to soften up worldly people through some form of psychotherapy or existentialism, and insisting that the Word of God “reigns”, Bonhoeffer states that this is the appropriate moment for him to “speak concretely about the worldly interpretation of biblical concepts”. Regrettably for his later interpreters, Bonhoeffer notes that “it’s just too hot today!”³¹ On July 16, 1944 Bonhoeffer states that “I’m just working gradually toward the nonreligious

²⁸ Bonhoeffer, *DBWE 8*, 373.
²⁹ Bonhoeffer, *DBWE 8*, 430.
³¹ Bonhoeffer, *DBWE 8*, 457. The notion of smuggling God in connects strongly, of course, to earlier statements about appealing to a “deus ex machina” see Bonhoeffer, *DBWE 8*, 366, 450, 479.
interpretation of biblical concepts. I am more able to see what needs to be done than how I can actually do it.”\(^{32}\) A lengthy reflection on the world’s autonomy and coming of age follows, which reaches a climax in the assertion that:

God consents to be pushed out of the world and onto the cross; God is weak and powerless in the world and in precisely this way, and only so, is at our side and helps us … The Bible directs people towards the powerlessness and suffering of God; only the suffering God can help … [T]he world’s coming of age … frees us to see the God of the Bible, who gains ground and power in the world by being powerless. This will probably be the starting point for our “worldly interpretation”.\(^{33}\)

This is perhaps the clearest statement that Bonhoeffer makes about nonreligious interpretation of the Bible. In a coda to the initial letter, penned on July 18, Bonhoeffer then expands on the notion that being Christian is about being “the human being Christ creates in us … sharing in God’s suffering in the worldly life” by means of a catena of biblical references and examples: Isaiah 53; Mark 1:15; John 1:29; Matthew 9:11; Luke 19:1–8; Luke 7:37–38, 44–46; Matthew 8:17; Mark 10:14–16; Luke 2:15–16; Matthew 2:1–12; Matthew 8:5–13 and parallel; Matthew 9:18–26 and parallel; Mark 10:21; Acts 8:26–40; Mark 15:42–46 and parallels; Matthew 27:61 and parallels, are all explicitly mentioned or alluded to.\(^{34}\) (pages 481–482). It seems that the work of nonreligious biblical interpretation per se had begun. Two days later, the assassination attempt on Hitler’s life failed. The crisis that followed for Bonhoeffer and Bethge meant that further letters, in which the initial suggestions of the April–

\(^{32}\) Bonhoeffer, DBWE 8, 475.

\(^{33}\) Bonhoeffer, DBWE 8, 479–480.

\(^{34}\) Bonhoeffer, DBWE 8, 481–482.
July 1944 correspondence were developed, have not survived. The “Outline for a Book” which accompanied the letter of August 3, provides a further statement, to the effect that “the interpretation of biblical concepts” should be based on the principle of “‘the human being for others’ … The human being living out of the transcendent’.

Given that Bonhoeffer’s developed reflections on these topics are not available to us, we are left with no option by to try and think with and from them towards the issue of the nature and purpose of biblical interpretation itself. Here, I make two suggestions. The first is that Bonhoeffer’s formulations are not, as usually interpreted, only a call for a re-articulation of the central doctrines of Christian theology. They also constitute a provocation to reconsider interpretative work itself; how it might be pursued and to what ends. Secondly, the key phrases when read in context are best understood as theological statements that support forms of biblical interpretation that give full significance to the matter of the Bible’s reception in the world. The best way of seeing this point is to briefly consider Bonhoeffer’s criticism of Barth’s so-called “positivism of revelation”.

Bonhoeffer’s Critique of Barth

35 Brief comments can be found in the letters of July 21 (Bonhoeffer, DBWE 8, 485–487), July 28 (Bonhoeffer, DBWE 8, 491–493). Bethge destroyed letters from September 1944 in which Bonhoeffer had continued some of his theological reflection (see Bonhoeffer, DBWE 8, 17).


38 Ernst Feil notes that in the German reception of Bonhoeffer has been more obviously concerned with the notion of “non-religious interpretation”, in contrast to English speaking scholarship which very quickly landed on “religionless Christianity” as the key phrase., see Ernst Feil, The Theology of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, trans. Martin Rumscheidt (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985), 192. However, even this focus on hermeneutics in place of praxis is committedly doctrinal in its focus. It is the word “biblical” in Bonhoeffer that gets neglected.
Bonhoeffer was indebted to Barth’s theology of revelation and his critique of “religion”. But the quotations provided above also speak of a growing unease with Barth’s reluctance to consider the question of how revelation might be received. For Bonhoeffer, the sense that the world had “come of age” brought this issue to the fore. Bonhoeffer takes the world seriously precisely because it is the location of revelation. As such, the world’s reception of the Word is an unavoidable focus for theological reflection. By contrast, revelation remains merely “restoration” if it fails to take into account the religionless person, or to ask questions about how talk about God is to be understood from the perspective of religionlessness. Without these questions, “nothing decisive has been gained”. The “like it or lump it” aspects of Barth’s account of divine revelation is “too easygoing” and unbiblical because “[t]here are degrees of cognition and degrees of significance” and, in the light of the gift of the incarnation, it cannot be assumed that the church is the sole location for revelation. It is the world’s reception that is to be taken into account in any “worldly” reinterpretation of the Bible. Barth’s critique of religion is inadequate, for Bonhoeffer, because of a residual dualism between revelation and worldly reception that is the result of Barth’s rightful emphasis on the priority of the former aspect. Without an account of the world to counteract this emphasis, revelation becomes a “thing” which stands over against the world, when it should instead be received as that which comes into the midst of the world:


40 Bonhoeffer, *DBWE 8*, 364.

41 Bonhoeffer, *DBWE 8*, 373.
“God wants to be recognized in the midst of our lives, in life and not only in dying, in health and strength and not only in suffering, in action and not only in sin. The ground for this lies in the revelation of God in Jesus Christ. God is the centre of life”.

What Bonhoeffer calls for, as a counter to this dualism, is a recognition of the importance of interpretation of revelation. In the long letter of June 8 1944, the critique of Barth reappears, and leads Bonhoeffer to consider how, in the light of Barth’s failure to push on the to the logical consequences of his critique of religion, the Confessing Church had basically snapped back into a form of conservative restoration in which, formally speaking, elements of a genuine prophetic word, and worship could be found. However, any such potential for speaking a true word to God in worship, or a true word from God to the world, lay ultimately “undeveloped, remote, because they lack interpretation”.

Bonhoeffer’s critique of Barthian positivism and its less sophisticated ecclesial counterparts constitutes, therefore, an appeal for the interpretative task to be taken with the utmost seriousness. It must be emphasised that this is a position reached not on the basis of some form of social-cultural-historical diagnosis about the growing secularization of the world. For Bonhoeffer, the notion of the “world come of age” served to point to what was true all along: that Christ is Lord of the world and God is the “beyond in the midst of our lives.”

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42 Bonhoeffer, DBWE 8, 406.
43 Bonhoeffer, DBWE 8, 429–430 emphasis mine, cf. Bonhoeffer, DBW 8, 481: “bleibt unentfaltet, fern, weil ihnen die Interpretation fehlt”.
44 Bonhoeffer, DBWE 8, 364, 367. Gerhard Ebeling long ago made the observation that the theology of the prison letters was thoroughly Christological, see Gerhard Ebeling, 'The "Non-religious Interpretation of Biblical Concepts"', in Word and Faith (London: SCM, 1963), 98–161. Fuller reflections on the christology that led Bonhoeffer to this point in his thinking can
Conclusion and Implications

The implication (and again, it is one that Bonhoeffer never explicitly considers) is that in so far as any doctrine of Scripture takes its cue from prior conviction about the way in which God in Christ takes form in the world, biblical interpretation itself is necessarily “worldly” endeavour. This means that contemporary accounts of theological hermeneutics that take Barth as their only theological interlocutor, are always in danger of taking a wrong turn, or more specifically, of not going far enough. The theological affirmation that God makes use of creaturely realities in divine revelation should be extended to relate not only to factors associated with Scripture’s production, but also to include any and all aspects related to the reception of the Word in the world. Without this recognition, there is always the danger of suggesting that theological interpretation must of necessity involve a form of interpretation in which human interpretative agency is downplayed, contextuality is dismissed as irrelevant, the reality and promise of interpretative pluralism are denied, and the interpretative work of the church becomes increasingly sealed off from the challenges, questions, and insights of the academy.

be found in the Ethics. See e.g.: “There are not two realities, but only one reality, and that is God’s reality revealed in Christ in the reality of the world.” (Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Ethics, ed. Clifford Green, trans. Reinhard Krauss, Charles C. West, and Douglas W Stott (DBWE 6; Minneapolis: Fortress, 2005), 58.

By contrast, Bonhoeffer’s thought suggests a form of biblical hermeneutics that takes interpretation’s immersion in the reality of the world seriously.\textsuperscript{46} This view of the hermeneutical task will consistently strive to demonstrate how the hard, human work of interpretation does not result in a step away from the theological reality of God’s reconciliation of the world in Christ. In its explicit and honest consideration of the things that make interpretation a human and worldly activity, biblical interpretation in a world come of age will insist on taking with full seriousness such things as the various contextual factors (social, cultural, ideological, issues of race, class, and gender) that shape the interpretative task. We can note, as of special importance, the need to give privileged attention to those readings and interpretations of Scripture that emerge from the context of suffering and powerlessness. The rationale for this kind of interpretative commitment lies in the notion that “God is weak and powerless in this world and in precisely in this way, and only so, is at our side and helps us.”\textsuperscript{47} Bonhoeffer’s reflections on “polyphony” would suggest that there are appropriate dogmatic grounds to affirm the notion of interpretative plurality.\textsuperscript{48} The importance of the language of the “penultimate” for Bonhoeffer in the Ethics as well as in the prison letters, might prompt further attention among biblical scholars to the inevitable provisionality of their work.\textsuperscript{49} And given Bonhoeffer’s emphasis on the importance of


\textsuperscript{47} Bonhoeffer, DBWE 8, 479.


\textsuperscript{49} For the reappearance of the language of the penultimate in the letters, see Bonhoeffer, DBWE 8, 365.
responsible action, one might look for and give precedence to biblical interpretation that is explicitly oriented to *praxis* whether this be understood in liberationist, ecclesial or missional terms. In short, Dietrich Bonhoeffer offers a theological framework within which biblical scholars might legitimately focus on aspects of the hermeneutical situation that, when set within other kinds of theological parameters, might seem out of place, or be deemed inappropriate.

To affirm these aspects of the interpretative task—to foster a form of biblical scholarship in which such hermeneutical concerns have a central place—is not simply to give way to “secular” concerns, nor is it mere pandering to those who insist that scholarship should be inextricably concerned with the reality of human experience as the basis for theological reflection and biblical interpretation. In fact, Bonhoeffer’s theology provides hints to a way beyond various kinds of contemporary “positivisms of revelation” on the one hand, and accommodations to the secular, on the other.\(^5^0\) To affirm the place of the world for theology is, for Bonhoeffer, to affirm penultimate, the world’s utter dependence on the ultimate truth of God’s gracious promise and the reality of divine reconciliation. To interpret scripture in a “non-religious” way is therefore to recognize that all biblical interpretation is provisional, and Bonhoeffer’s theology serves the important task of affirming the humanity of all interpretative work.

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