

Arts, Linguistics, Literature and Language Research Journal

THE LITERARY STUDIES OF THE BIBLE AND THE HERMENEUTICAL APPROACH BETWEEN THE NARRATED WORLD AND THE WORLD OF THE LISTENER-READER

Petterson Brey

Ph.D. student and Master in Theology at PUC-SP; Specialist in Biblical Interpretation and BA in Theology from SALT; Degree in Philosophy from UNIÍTALO; Member of the Research Group TIAT (Translation and Interpretation of the Old Testament) CNPq at PUC-SP; Co-founder (pioneer) of the Research Group TCRC (Christian Theology and Contemporary Religion) at LABÔ – Politics, Behavior and Media Laboratory – at PUC-SP; Associate member of ABIB (Brazilian Association of Biblical Research); Professor at LABTEM – Laboratory of Theology, Spirituality, and Mysticism; Screenwriter and film critic
<http://lattes.cnpq.br/2803712017811113>

All content in this magazine is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution License. Attribution-Non-Commercial-Non-Derivatives 4.0 International (CC BY-NC-ND 4.0).



Abstract: If the popular reading of the Bible is not minimally guided by a hermeneutic method, it risks succumbing to the interpretive expedients of religious fundamentalism. The present text, therefore, proposes to demonstrate that the literary methods of studying the Bible are a promising methodological approach for the approximation between the *narrated world* and the *world of the listener-reader*. This enterprise intends to present the *narrated world* as an environment for the characters' experience and the *narrative discourse* as a place for the listener-reader's experience.

Keywords: Biblical exegesis; narrative analysis; popular reading of the Bible; Bible as literature.

INTRODUCTION

According to Northrop Frye,¹ "The Bible may be other things than a literary work, but it is certainly a literary work too." Still, according to him,² the Bible, literally speaking, is the founding myth of all Western civilization, being the ideological background that guides all human cognition and action because, from a structural perspective, all known narrative schemes, both in literature and art, are variations on biblical plots. In addition, Robert Alter asserts that:

One does not necessarily have to assume, as some scholars have plausibly proposed, that the biblical narratives derive from long-standing oral traditions; for in any case it is altogether likely that they were written chiefly for oral presentation. As several indications in the Bible itself suggest, the narratives would typically have been read out from a scroll to some sort of assembled audience (many of whom would presumably not have been literate) rather than passed around to be read in our sense. The unrolling scroll, then, was in one respect like the unrolling

spool of a film projector, for time and the sequence of events presented in it could not ordinarily be halted or altered, and the only convenient way of fixing a particular action or statement for special inspection was by repeating it.³

This is the theoretical starting point set out as a reference for the reflection that will be developed from now on. It is accepted, as a basic assumption, within the scope of this brief text, that the relationship between the Bible and its popular reading refers to the very time of the composition of its texts, as well as being able to be recognized throughout the history of its interpretation. One must consider, however, the coexistence, over time, of both a popular and theological reading of the Bible, more recently regarded as academic.

Here, the hypothesis arises that it is precisely at this historical crossroads, when academic studies of the Scriptures flourish, that the popular reading of the Bible ends up being on the margins of ecclesiastical theological interests. According to this assumption, such a scenario would have allowed biblical fundamentalisms to proliferate in the popular harvest. A brief look at the history of biblical interpretation can validate this diagnosis and shed light on possibilities for hermeneutical reconciliation between academic exegesis and popular reading of the Bible.

PHILOSOPHY AND THEOLOGY IN THE HISTORY OF BIBLICAL INTERPRETATION⁴

An approach to the history of theology with a view to biblical interpretation, having in perspective the course of the development of philosophy, can demonstrate that the Bible, as a *sacred book*, was fundamentally accessed, over time, to provide *proof texts*

1 FRYE. *The Educated Imagination*, p. 97. Cf. KUSCHEL. „Vielleicht hält Gott sich einige Dichter“ – Literarisch-theologische Poträts, p. 391.

2 FRYE. *The Great Code*, pp. xi-xxiii.

3 ALTER. *The Art of Biblical Narrative*, pp. 113-114.

4 A more extensive version of this approach can be seen at BREY. *Filosofia e exegese biblica*, pp. 71-96.

for assumptions theological questions that, in turn, intended to solve philosophical questions. Therefore, a three-dimensional interaction involving philosophy, theology, and the Bible is conjectured. Since according to Eryl W. Davies,⁵ although theology finds its axiomatic foment in philosophy, it is the biblical texts that are resorted to in search of dogmatic foundations.

New Testament writers often used rabbinic methods of interpretation of the Old Testament;⁶ however, the new terminology in the New Testament refers to a theologically dissimilar reading about the Jewish understanding of the time.⁷ However, regarding interpretive reasoning, both traditional Jewish interpretation and the authors of the New Testament no longer reflected the mentality of the religion of Ancient Israel, as narrated in the Old Testament texts.⁸ Thus, the reading process is divergent between Judaism and New Testament Christianity, only concerning theological propositions⁹ since both exceed the narrative method of understanding reality, characteristic of the literature of Ancient Israel, starting with abstract analysis, typical of Greek thought.¹⁰

Due to the transformations caused by the constitution of the Hellenic world,¹¹ from the conquests of Alexander the Great (356 BC – 323 BC), the history of biblical interpretation establishes relationships with philosophy.¹²

During Hellenism, philosophical schools emerged. Due to their poignancy, they influenced the Jewish way of thinking, also giving rise to the rabbinic schools of interpretation of the Holy Scriptures,¹³ among which Hillel and Shammai stand out.¹⁴

According to Agnaldo C. Portugal,¹⁵ the rationality of Greek philosophy metamorphosed the concrete nature of mythical religions into abstract doctrinal systems so that the absorption of principles was now established through doctrines rationalized by processes of speculative argument. According to Gregory K. Beale,¹⁶ “When New Testament authors, basing themselves on the Old Testament, make direct statements, it is assumed that their speech carries a range of meanings that expands the concepts extracted from their locus. Original”, thus configuring new lenses for interpreting the Scriptures.

Faced with the need to argumentatively defend their beliefs against philosophical objections arising from different schools of thought,¹⁷ Christians needed to master Greek philosophy, either to refute it or to absorb it into their theology.¹⁸ The age of the church fathers, due to the various philosophical currents that competed in the theological dispute processes, became known as the Hellenic-Patristic philosophical period.¹⁹

At that time, Augustine (354 AD – 430 AD),

5 DAVIES. *The Bible in Ethics*, p. 732.

6 BRAY. *História da teologia cristã*, p. 50.

7 DUNN. *New Testament Theology*, p. 700.

8 BRAY. *História da teologia cristã*, pp. 56-58.

9 TREVIJANO. *A Bíblia no cristianismo antigo*, pp. 73,78-79.

10 DUNN. *New Testament Theology*, pp. 705-714.

11 RUSSELL. *História da filosofia ocidental – Livro 1*, pp. 275-285.

12 GREENSPOON. *Hebrew into Greek: Interpretation In, By, and Of the Septuagint*, pp. 106-108.

13 SCHIFFMAN. *From Text to Tradition*, pp. 60-79.

14 KUGEL/GREER. *Early Biblical Interpretation*, pp. 67-72.

15 PORTUGAL. *Filosofia da religião*, pp. 216-219.

16 BEALE. *O uso do Antigo Testamento no Novo Testamento e suas implicações hermenêuticas*, p. 55.

17 OLSON. *História da teologia cristã*, p. 29.

18 KELLY. *Patrística*, pp. 3-5.

19 BOEHNER/GILSON. *História da filosofia cristã*, p. 25.

through Neoplatonic categories, established the thought that, through an allegorical approach to the Scriptures, it was possible for the human intellect to perceive the Christian ideal, that is, the doctrines of God, from the meaning of the words in the text.²⁰ Therefore, this period's biblical interpretation was a supporting factor in adapting theological premises to Greek philosophical paradigms.²¹ Philosophy, considered "the most profound religion of most people of intelligence"²² of the Greco-Roman world, became the most critical intellectual framework for Christian theologians to expose their thoughts.²³

Furthermore, based on Aristotle, Thomas Aquinas organized the whole of Christian theology through a model of inquiries organized in the following way: an initial proposition, followed by two or three rhetorically prepared objections, and, finally, a referenced positive answer through interpreting biblical texts.²⁴ In this way, philosophy became the foundation of theology.²⁵ Biblical exegesis, in turn, played a role as a theoretical framework read from a philosophical perspective.²⁶

Within the scope of the Protestant Reformation, the process of returning to the sources of the Scriptures, Greek and Hebrew, in distrust of the Latin translations of the Catholic Church²⁷ – influenced by Renaissance Humanism and its rejection of the medieval reading of philosophy Greek, choosing to reread the philosophers of antiquity and build

their intellectual foundation –,²⁸ erected the Lutheran statement of SOLA SCRIPTURA, according to which all men should have free and personal access to the Scriptures.²⁹ However, even having the Bible in its language, like in the patristic period, Protestantism would have significant problems if it did not institute theological cohesion.³⁰ Thus, although Luther claims to reject the Greek philosophical bias when establishing doctrines, he continued to do theology in an abstract Greek category; it was not about exegesis but theology.

Under the strong influence of the philosopher Baruch Spinoza (1632 – 1677), and due to the Enlightenment philosophical transformation that interfered in theology and biblical exegesis,³¹ *historical-critical methods* progressively gained more importance in the academic scope. This diachronic category exegesis, which seeks to unravel the founding context (*Sitz im Leben*) of the biblical texts,³² dominated the leading academic centers for about two hundred years. However, according to Félix García López,³³ *diachronic* studies have fragmented the biblical text, leaving little theological content that dialogues with issues in the world of the listener-reader.

LITERARY STUDIES OF THE BIBLE IN CONTEMPORARY TIMES

Even though, throughout the history of the Christian tradition, especially after the

20 YARCHIN. *History of Biblical Interpretation*, pp. 61-62.

21 KELLY. *Patrística*, pp. 21-37.

22 KELLY. *Patrística*, p.11.

23 BOEHNER/GILSON. *História da filosofia cristã*, p. 11.

24 YARCHIN. *History of Biblical Interpretation*, p. 95.

25 ALLEN/SPRINGSTED. *Filosofia para entender Teologia*, p. 136.

26 BRAY. *História da interpretação bíblica*, p. 152.

27 YARCHIN. *History of Biblical Interpretation*, p. 171.

28 RUMMEL. *The Renaissance Humanists*, p. 280.

29 MATHESON. *The Language of the Common Folk*, pp. 260-267.

30 BRAY. *História da interpretação bíblica*, p. 199.

31 FRAMPTON. *Spinoza, and His Influence on Biblical Interpretation*, pp. 120-124.

32 WELLHAUSEN. *Israelitische und Jüdische Geschichte*, pp. 1-9.

33 GARCIA LÓPEZ. *Pentateuco*, pp. 71-75.

development of academic studies, biblical interpretation has distanced itself from a more experiential process of reading the Scriptures, changing to methodologies primarily concerned with conceptual aspects,³⁴ the poignancy of popular reading of the Bible has never been replaced. However, contrary to the idea employed by the term *method*, which is associated with biblical interpretation, and certainly evokes scientific rigor,³⁵ in the sphere of certain religious institutions, especially Protestants, there was the limitation of not being able to deal with more radical critical aspects, for example, the question of how the analyzed text itself had arisen.³⁶ This hostility to theological-philosophical scientism was the birthplace of the fundamentalist reading of the Bible.

While, on a popular level, reading the Bible seemed to be relegated to religious fundamentalism, in the academic sphere, around the 1940s, Umberto Cassuto³⁷ suggests that biblical exegesis should open up to the literary dimensions because, according to him, this could attribute unprecedented meanings to textual problems that are insoluble in the *diachronic* view of *historical-critical methods*. This appeal, however, took little time to be answered. A few decades later, scholars such as Northrop Frye and Robert Alter, quoted in the introduction to this text, participated in the exegetical shift of *synchronic studies* of the Scriptures.

According to Shimon Bar-Efrat,³⁸ the

narrative analysis draws the listener-reader into the *narrated world*. Thus, when Jean L. Ska³⁹ says that “biblical narratives sleep until the reader wakes them from their sleep,” it is proposed that from the decoupage of the *narrated world* comes a pearl of wisdom capable of finding meaning in the *reader’s world*. Therefore, according to Danna N. Fewell,⁴⁰ *narrative analysis* decodes the *narrated world*.

According to Paul Ricoeur,⁴¹ the message only becomes a message when the listener-reader responds to the invitation to dive into the *narrated world* and allow himself to interact with it actively. As a literary art, biblical narratives impress their listener-reader through their composition.⁴² Thus, according to Adele Berlin,⁴³ the message of a narrative is, at the same time, both the form and the narrated content; that is, form and content are inseparable.

Therefore, the aesthetic arrangement, which shapes the content, constitutes the rhetorical strategy that integrates the *narrative discourse*, designed to impress the narratee concerning the *point of view* of the *thematic unit* that drives the plot.⁴⁴ This is in line with the thinking of Vilém Flusser⁴⁵ on the fusion of philosophical abstraction and aesthetic fruition as a manifestation of the highest theological level that no religion in history has reached alone. According to him, theology, as completing a sensory experience with an underlying wisdom, should spring from the

34 LEGASPI. *The Death of Scripture and the Rise of Biblical Studies*, pp. 10-26.

35 LEGASPI. *The Death of Scripture and the Rise of Biblical Studies*, p. 73.

36 BRAY. *História da interpretação bíblica*, p. 358.

37 CASSUTO. *The Documentary Hypothesis and the composition of the Pentateuch*, pp. 6-17, 117-126.

38 BAR-EFRAT. *Narrative Art in the Bible*, p. 197.

39 SKA. *Sincronia: L’Analisi Narrativa*, p. 139.

40 FEWELL. *The Work of Biblical Narrative*, pp. 3-26.

41 RICOEUR. *Tempo e narrativa – vol. 3*, pp. 267-309. Cf. RICOEUR. *Stellung und Funktion der Metapher in der biblischen Sprache*, pp. 45-70; RICOEUR. *La métaphore vive*, pp. 384-399

42 MARGUERAT/BOURQUIN. *Pour Lire les Récits Bibliques*, p. 32.

43 BERLIN. *Reading Biblical Poetry*, pp. 2184-2191.

44 FOKKELMAN. *Reading Biblical Narrative*, pp. 73-78.

45 FLUSSER. *Vom Stand der Dinge: Eine kleine Philosophie des Designs*, pp. 26-31.

encounter between the listener-reader and the knowledge that flows from the text.

Thus, from the perspective of literary studies of the Bible in an academic context, it is reasonable to consider the *narrated world* as the environment of the characters' experience and the *narrative discourse* as the place of the listener-reader's experience. That is, the *narrative discourse*, constituted by the rhetorical way in which the characters' plot is narrated, works as a mediator between the experience of God played out in the plot and the experience of God of the listener-reader.⁴⁶ The rapprochement between the *narrated world* and the *listener-reader's world*, therefore, mediated by *narrative analysis*, constitutes an appropriate method of interpretation so that the popular reading of the Bible is not at the mercy of religious fundamentalism.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

The present text worked with the premise that if the popular reading of the Bible is not minimally guided by a hermeneutic method, it risks succumbing to the interpretative expedients of religious fundamentalism. It has been proposed that the literary methods of studying the Bible constitute a methodological approach conducive to bringing together the *narrated world* and the *world of the listener-reader*. In this way, it was demonstrated that the *narrated world*, as an environment of the characters' experience, and the narrative discourse, as a place of the listener-reader's experience, constitute fundamental elements of interpretation so that the popular reading of the Bible does not become attached to the fundamentalist premises of meaning of the biblical message.

46 BREY. *Experiência de Deus no Pentateuco*, p. 194.

REFERENCES

- ALLEN, Diogenes; SPRINGSTED, Eric O. **Filosofia para entender Teologia**. 3. ed. Santo André: Academia Cristã; São Paulo: Paulus, 2010.
- ALTER, Robert. **The Art of Biblical Narrative**. New York: Basic Books, 2011.
- BAR-EFRAT, Shimon. **Narrative Art in the Bible**. New York: T&T Clark, 2008.
- BEALE, Gregory K. **O uso do Antigo Testamento no Novo Testamento e suas implicações hermenêuticas**. São Paulo: Vida Nova, 2014.
- BERLIN, Adele. *Reading Biblical Poetry*. In: BERLIN, Adele; BRETTTLER, M. Z. (Eds.). **The Jewish Study Bible**. New York: Oxford University Press, 2004, p. 2184-2191.
- BOEHNER, Philotheus; GILSON, Etienne. **História da filosofia cristã**. 13. ed. Petrópolis: Editora Vozes, 2012.
- BRAY, Gerald. **História da interpretação bíblica**. São Paulo: Vida Nova, 2017a.
- BRAY, Gerald. **História da teologia cristã**. São Paulo: Shedd Publicações, 2017b.
- BREY, Petterson. *Experiência de Deus no Pentateuco: existe mística na lei?* In: ANÉAS, André. (Org.). **Diálogos sobre experiência de Deus – volume II: questões sobre mística**. São Paulo: Editora Recriar, 2022, p. 169-203.
- BREY, Petterson. *Filosofia e exegese bíblica: uma abordagem ao pensamento filosófico como paradigma dos principais métodos de interpretação da Bíblia*. **Revista Contemplação**, n. 27, pp. 71-96 2022. Available in: <<https://revista.fajopa.com/index.php/contemplacao/article/view/328/369>>. Access at: May 10, 2023.
- CASSUTO, Umberto. **The Documentary Hypothesis and the composition of the Pentateuch**. Jerusalem: Shalem Press, 2014.
- DAVIES, Eryl W. *The Bible in Ethics*. In: ROGERSON, John. W; LIEU, Judith M. (Eds.). **The Oxford Handbook of Biblical Studies**. New York: Oxford University Press, 2010, p. 732-753.
- DUNN, James D. G. *New Testament Theology*. In: ROGERSON, John. W; LIEU, Judith M. (Eds.). **The Oxford Handbook of Biblical Studies**. New York: Oxford University Press, 2010, p. 698-715.
- FEEWELL, Danna N. *The Work of Biblical Narrative*. In: FEWELL, Danna N. (Ed.). **The Oxford Handbook of Biblical Narrative**. New York: Oxford University Press, 2016, p. 3-26.
- FLUSSER, Vilém. **Vom Stand der Dinge: Eine kleine Philosophie des Designs**. Gottingen: STEIDL, 2019.
- FOKKELMAN, Jan P. **Reading Biblical Narrative: an introductory guide**. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1999.
- FRAMPTON, Travis L. *Spinoza, and His Influence on Biblical Interpretation*. In: HAUSER, Alan J.; WATSON, Duane F. (Eds.). **A History of Biblical Interpretation – vol. 3: The Enlightenment through the Nineteenth Century**. Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2017, p. 120-150.
- FRYE, Northrop. **The Educated Imagination**. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994.
- FRYE, Northrop. **The Great Code: The Bible and Literature**. New York: Mariner Books, 2002.
- GARCIA LÓPEZ, Félix. **Pentateuco: introducción a la lectura de los cinco primeros libros de la Biblia**. Estella (Navarra): Editorial Verbo Divino, 2016.

GREENSPOON, Leonard. *Hebrew into Greek: Interpretation In, By, and Of the Septuagint*. In: HAUSER, Alan J.; WATSON, Duane F. (Eds.). **A History of Biblical Interpretation – vol. 1: The Ancient Period**. Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1990, p. 80-113.

KELLY, John N. D. **Patrística: origem e desenvolvimento das doutrinas centrais da fé cristã**. São Paulo: Vida Nova, 2015.

KUGEL, James L.; GREER, Rowan A. **Early Biblical Interpretation**. Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1986.

KUSCHEL, Karl-Josef. „**Vielleicht hält Gott sich einige Dichter**“ – **Literarisch-theologische Poträts**. Mainz: Matthias Grünewald Verlag, 1991.

LAW, Stephen. **Filosofia: história, ideias, teorias, quem é quem, como pensar**. 3. ed. Rio de Janeiro: Zahar, 2011.

LEGASPI, Michael C. **The Death of Scripture and the Rise of Biblical Studies**. (Oxford Studies in Historical Theology). New York: Oxford University Press, 2011.

LEGASPI, Michael C. *The Term “Enlightenment” and Biblical Interpretation*. In: HAUSER, Alan J.; WATSON, Duane F. (Eds.). **A History of Biblical Interpretation – vol. 3: The Enlightenment through the Nineteenth Century**. Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2017, p. 73-95.

MARQUERAT, Daniel; BOURQUIN, Yvan. **Pour Lire les Récits Bibliques: initiation à l’analyse narrative**. Paris: Les Éditions Du CERF; Genève: Labor Et Fides, 2009.

MATHESON, Peter. *The Language of the Common Folk*. In: MATHESON, Peter. (Ed.). **Reformation Christianity**. (A People’s History of Christianity – volume 5). Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2010, p. 259-283.

OLSON, Roger. **História da teologia cristã: 2000 anos de tradições e reformas**. São Paulo: Editora Vida, 2014.

PORTUGAL, Agnaldo C. *Filosofia da religião*. In: GALVÃO, Pedro (Org.). **Filosofia: uma introdução por disciplinas**. Lisboa: Edições 70, 2012, p. 215-248.

RICOEUR, Paul. *Stellung und Funktion der Metapher in der biblischen Sprache*. In: RICOEUR, Paul; JÜNGEL, Eberhard (Hrsgs.). **Metapher. Zur Hermeneutik religiöser Sprache**. (Evangelische Theologie Sonderheft, 34 – Supplement). München: Chr. Kaiser Verlag, 1974, pp. 45-70.

RICOEUR, Paul. **La métaphore vive**. (L’ordre philosophique collection dirigée par François Wahl). Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1975.

RICOEUR, Paul. **Tempo e narrativa – vol. 3: o tempo narrado**. São Paulo: WMF Martins Fontes, 2019.

RUMMEL, Erika. *The Renaissance Humanists*. In: HAUSER, Alan J.; WATSON, Duane F. (Eds.). **A History of Biblical Interpretation – vol. 2: The Medieval through the Reformation Periods**. Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2009, p. 280-298.

RUSSELL, Bertrand. **História da filosofia ocidental – Livro 1: a filosofia antiga**. 1. ed. Rio de Janeiro: Nova Fronteira, 2015a.

SCHIFFMAN, Lawrence H. **From Text to Tradition: A History of Second Temple & Rabbinic Judaism**. Hoboken: Ktav Publishing House, Inc., 1991.

SKA, Jean L. *Sincronia: L’Analisi Narrativa*. In: SIMIAN-YAOFRE, Horacio. (Ed.). **Metodologia Dell’Antico Testamento**. (Studi Biblici – 25). Bologna: Edizione Dehoniane Bologna, 2009, p. 139-170.

TREVIJANO, Ramón. **A Bíblia no cristianismo antigo: pré-nicenos, gnósticos, apócrifos**. (Introdução ao Estudo da Bíblia – vol. 10). São Paulo: Editora Ave Maria, 2009.

WELLHAUSEN, Julius. **Israelitische und Jüdische Geschichte**. (de Gruyter Studienbuch). Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2004.

