1. Paper on Historical and Pneumatological Interpretation of Scripture

After two semesters in Tübingen, the eighteen-year-old Bonhoeffer returned to Berlin, his home since age six, to continue the study of theology. The 1925 summer semester at the Friedrich Wilhelm University (now the Humboldt University) was decisive. He worked closely with the renowned Luther scholar Karl Holl, writing one of his several papers on Luther and the Lutheran tradition. At the same time, he first seriously engaged with the work of Karl Barth and the new movement associated with him: dialectical theology.

In the following paper, which dates from that 1925 summer semester, Bonhoeffer examines the relationship between revelation and history, or, more broadly, the relationship between a pneumatological and a historical orientation toward scripture. More broadly still, this paper shows Bonhoeffer negotiating the often competing influences of Barth’s theology of the word of God and the historical-critical approach to theology favored by Holl and others at Berlin. Barthian tones resound as Bonhoeffer emphasizes the self-authenticating nature of revelation and the limits of the historical-critical approach. But Bonhoeffer shows himself to be more than a slavish disciple of Barth, raising questions about the danger of removing revelation entirely from history. Thus this paper shows Bonhoeffer at the beginning of a process to find his theological voice in conversation with his Berlin teachers and Karl Barth, a process that continued through his doctoral dissertation, Sanctorum Communio, and his postdoctoral dissertation, Act and Being.

1. [For historical background, biographical information, and a summary of texts from Bonhoeffer’s student years 1924–1927, see DBWE 9:1–11, editor’s introduction, and DB-ER, 45–96.]
2. [DBWE 9:572, editor’s afterword.]
3. [See DBWE 9, part 2.]
Can One Distinguish between a Historical and a Pneumatological Interpretation of Scripture, and How Does Dogmatics Relate to This Question?

Christian religion stands or falls with the belief in a historical and perceptibly real divine revelation, a revelation that those who have eyes to see can see and those who have ears to hear can hear. Consequently, in its innermost nature, it raises the question we take up here, namely, the relationship of history and the Spirit. With respect to the Bible this question refers to the letter and the Spirit, scripture and revelation, and human word and God’s word. Methodologically we should not proceed historically but philosophically.

The Bible, translated quite simply “the ultimate book,” narrates the most significant of events. They are more than just “accidental truths of history,” and do not intend to be “eternal truths of reason,” as rationalism wanted to see it. Certainly, one cannot prevent someone from considering this book as one book among others. Indeed, we all do this, for ordinary human beings wrote it. But it is the historian who expressly approaches the Bible with this sole presupposition that it is one book among others that has nonetheless gained a unique and incomparable significance above others. The 2000-year history of the Christian religion rests on this book as the foundation for this approach. Without a doubt it is one writing among others—and one of extraordinary historical significance. It is no wonder that historical criticism found here its first and most enduring issue; no wonder that it here learned sharply to refine its best tools.

Its general principles are based on a scientific-mechanistic worldview. Its epistemological methods are, for that reason, those of the natural sciences. Every dogmatic connection is eliminated. This is the basic pillar upon which all historical research is built and must be built. Its knowledge should be attainable for every reasonable person by separating, in principle, the knowing subject and known object. Like science, it should be “universally valid.” The growing interest in psychology, which brings with it new theories on the nature of understanding alien emotional life, could not bring about a decisive turning point in the understanding of the Bible. (One should mention in passing that when seen in relationship to the mechanistic method this is a powerful positive step beyond historical knowledge as such.)

Regarding the form of the Bible, with this approach the concept of the canon disintegrates and becomes meaningless. Textual and literary criticism are applied to the Bible. The sources are distinguished, and the meth-
ods of the history of religions and form criticism fragment the larger and even the remaining short textual units into little pieces. After this total disintegration of the texts, historical criticism leaves the field of battle. Debris and fragments are left behind. Its work is apparently finished.

The content of the Bible is leveled and made to match contemporary history. Parallels to the miracle stories are found. Yes, even the person of Jesus is stripped not only of the divine but also of human majesty. He disappears unrecognizably among various rabbis, teachers of wisdom, and religious visionaries. To be sure, even the critically reflective historian recognizes that this book is concerned with unique and extraordinarily profound things, that here one catches sight of things of enormous significance. But if one did not, one would truly be an unsound historian, just as unsound a historian as if one believed that one could use such statements to prove that the Bible is God’s word. One begins to see (recall Dibelius) that a certain final principle lies behind the synoptic tradition in spite of its fragmentation, as both Albert Schweitzer and Overbeck recognized. Yet our historical investigation stops here, and its work is completed. We will now continue our investigation.

First, we will compare unrelated types of pneumatological interpretation. Only one of these will pose a problem for us.

The first statement of spiritual interpretation is that the Bible is not only a word about God but God’s word itself. In some way the decisive concept of revelation must be introduced here. When revelation is found, the extraordinary enters and its power is self-evident. The past is made present or—better—the contemporaneity and trans-temporality of God’s word are recognized.

Let us review for a moment. Due to lack of insight into the relationship of revelation and scripture, nothing perplexed the early church more than the creation of the canon. With subjectively similar justification, orthodoxy and heresy quoted revealed passages in the discussion until the catholic church established a standard external to the Bible. This rule became the standard by which all catholic Christians were—and still are—supposed to interpret scripture. This was the regula fidei [rule of faith], i.e., the tradition, i.e., ultimately, the church.

This step was the first, most decisive, and yet most thorough misunderstanding of the concept of revelation. In principle, all attempts to objectify and to tie down revelation as scripture follow from this misunderstanding. This includes attempting to grab hold of revelation in scripture by applying humanly introduced means external to scripture. This method was implemented by the mystics, the Anabaptists, and other groups up to and
including the establishment of Orthodoxy. All seek to bring an external standard to bear upon scripture, which is used to locate and interpret positive revelation within scripture. One cannot find such a standard within the Bible itself. For the mystics and Anabaptists this might be found in the free spiritual experience that is considered to be barely subordinate to scripture. For the orthodox, it might be the principle of verbal inspiration; other groups would employ other approaches. In every case these methods sought to locate and to objectify revelation from outside of scripture and thereby to separate the source of truth and its verification. The difficulties that arise out of this for the necessity and significance of scripture are generally overlooked. (1) Does God actually impart personal revelation so that what God once clearly stated can still be confirmed? An example would be the Anabaptists’ spiritual experience. It ought to be confirmation enough that God speaks. “Deus solus de se doneus testis est in suo sermone” [God alone is a fit witness of himself in his Word] (Calvin). Is a double revelation needed? (2) Do incorrect consequences result for interpretation? When hermeneutical standards external to scripture are brought to bear, then abuses are unavoidable. In order to force the text, particular methods that permitted an incredible breadth of interpretation were in use for a considerable period of time. The method of allegorical interpretation completely ignored historical reality. It used speculative and rationalistic methods that could read into the text whatever one wished. Its history is as old as our chronology. Protests against its arbitrariness rang out again and again. Even the history of philosophy’s much more profound typological treatment of the Bible led to exaggerations.

The doctrine of the fourfold sense of scripture was authorized by the Catholic church in order to be able to satisfy its demands on the Bible. This is a principle that may be easier to justify sociologically than dogmatically. With it progress was certainly made with respect to detailed exegesis, but this is not significant for our principal question. Whether it is the enthusiasts’ principle of spirit or the psychological understanding of liberalism, in every case we find a humanization, i.e., a superficial reduction, of the con-
cept of revelation. The divine was conceived in terms of the human in that a strict distinction was not made; the old maxim finitum incapax infiniti [*the finite is incapable of the infinite*] was forgotten.⁶

An energetic counterblow had to take place for independence in the sense of the deepening of the concept of revelation in relation to scripture. Revelation for us can be found only in scripture. To the question why revelation is to be found precisely here the answer must simply be that this is where God speaks and this is where it pleases God to be personally revealed. Luther says, “If God gives me wooden apples and tells me to take and eat, I should not ask why.” God’s will cannot be given a basis but only experienced and proclaimed. Revelation is confirmed in scripture. Scripture uses the term “witnessed.” Scripture itself belongs to a great complex of revelation as a *document that gives witness*. For us, it is its only remnant. Consequently, scripture is not revelation. If it were, one would once again objectify scripture by rational means. Scripture is not experienced as revelation, but the matter that it deals with. One can discover nothing a priori except that revelation is present where individuals hear it, where the human word becomes God’s word, and where time becomes eternity. The single claim the scripture makes is that if it is to be understood it must be understood in the spirit of revelation. Where does this spirit come from? The paradoxical answer: it comes from scripture itself. We stand, therefore, before a circle. If we wish to understand and preserve the concept of revelation, one assertion cannot be true but both are necessary. There is only one revelation. A multiplication of revelations would amount to the humanization of revelation, and so revelation must be understood from itself.

This problem of consistent spiritual interpretation is one that the exegetes of the Catholic church and of the Anabaptists do not acknowledge. They both bring arbitrary standards external to scripture to bear on scripture. The *principle of interpretation* must derive from an already-understood scripture. Does God truly speak in scripture in such a way that only God and not humans can hear? The Spirit comes from the word and the word comes from the Spirit.

Is there a solution, or are we, along with the concept of revelation, plummeting further and further into darkness as we search for light and enlightenment? The solution lies in the fact God opens human eyes to receive revelation in certain indescribable and undetermined moments and words.

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⁶ [“... This Reformed maxim is intended to emphasize the transcendence of God. It is directed at the Lutheran maxim, *finitum capax infiniti*, ‘the finite is capable of the infinite,’ which has in mind the becoming human of God in Jesus Christ,” *DBWE* 9:289, n. 30.]
The object of understanding creates for its subject the means of recognizing in the act of knowledge. The object must become subject. God becomes the Holy Spirit.

This certainly occurs in the act which theologians might call “inspiration.” In this concept one can see an actual commingling of both apparently circular assertions. Theological methodology cannot describe this in any other way than as successive and reciprocally consecutive. Only in this way can one speak of an objective, i.e., necessary plainly literal, understanding of scripture. This is true only when one considers the subject not externally but internally. Luther writes, “scriptura sacra est sui ipsius interpretes” [holy scripture is its own interpreter]. Like can be understood only by like. God can be understood only by God. From this it can be concluded that the concept of revelation that emerges is to be conceived not substantially, but rather functionally. One does not encounter a being in scripture, but rather a judgment or God’s will.

For this new way of knowledge (in cognitione sita est fides [faith rests upon knowledge], Calvin, Institutes 3.2.2), the implementation of historical temporality into contemporary existence, of the past into the present, is applied to the Bible. Directly associated with this is the fact that spiritual exegesis can relate the circumstances of the past and the present only if they exist in the same “dialectical” relationship. This is the only way, for example, that Karl Barth can justify as a completely literal translation his rendering of the Pauline “Israel” in Romans 9–11 as “church.”

Let us also consider the issue of the so-called intuitive historical understanding. To be sure, it is difficult to interpret Goethe’s lyrical poetry or ancient Indian Vedic poetry. The process here is different. It is to be understood in purely psychological terms and in terms of a reaching outward and a returning from the alien “I” to the self. This is a persistent, never completely possible advance toward the object. The final renunciation of the “I” in the understanding can never be perfected in this way. Even the most ingenious interpreter understands things from the “I.” Faith, which is itself God’s will, understands things from the subject matter itself. Faith, in particular, must not leave out what historical and psychological exegesis must leave out. Everything depends on the final renunciation of the “I.” Here it is necessary to fend off another misunderstanding. Spiritual understanding is not to be identified with the a priori judgment of, for example, mathemati-

7. [“That like can be known only by like is a formula found in Aristotle’s philosophy . . . . It was taken up by dialectical theology and related to the knowledge of God . . . .”, DBWE 9:291, n. 45.]
8. [“Bonhoeffer falsely attributes this citation to Augustine. It comes from Pascal . . . ,” DBWE 9:292, n. 57.]
In the Bible, we have the designation of Christ as the “Word of God” (John 1:1; Heb. 1:2). From God’s perspective, for whom the terms “God spoke” and “it became so” are identical, Christ is the speaker and the doer of the word. Jesus existed in history. He was in the past and is not contemporaneous. Christ is the one who is born out of eternity through the Spirit of God. He is always living and present. In order, however, to be comprehended as Spirit, he must appear in verbal form. Jesus is one of the endless possibilities of God. Christ is the Spirit in personal form. If Christ is understood from the perspective of Jesus, then the past becomes present. This does not occur as a particular entity, a doctrine or a miracle, but rather through the particular as totality. The totality of Christ can be understood through one word. In this manner, every word is infinitely deep. It is not, however, flesh and blood that reveal the human Christ to be the Son of God. Instead it is the Spirit of the Father through the Holy Spirit.

Scripture is to be understood and interpreted on the basis of pneumatological interpretation in the sense that it was written by those to whom the Spirit had disclosed that revelation could be found precisely in this historical person, Jesus—fully human, appearing completely in the framework of ordinary events. Therefore, the biblical authors do not interest us as individuals but instead as apostles, prophets, and persons inspired by God. That is, it is not Paul whom we hear speaking but God. It is not we who hear but again it is God who hears in us. Still, the Bible remains a paradox. It will always remain the words individuals spoke to one person or to another. In order to transmit this realization they needed the proclaimed word, first as “good tidings and report,” as Luther said, and then as a written record. Each of these written words of the Spirit, which mediate the understanding of the facts, is an incarnate image of the person of Jesus Christ himself. These are contained in a fully historical, insignificant, and unimposing husk, but behind that there is the other, what “inculcates Christ,” where Christ is truly alive and present. For Catholics this occurs in the sacrifice of the Mass. In the word Christ is present—not as a substance, however, but as revelation, judgment, and will.

Such a view of the relationship between the letter and the Spirit, scripture and revelation, paves the way for a completely proper incorporation of historical exegesis into the general area of interpretation. We must say a priori that it is unacceptable for a pneumatological, faith-based interpretation to be dependent on historical methods of reading scripture with their shifting results. The difficulty rises from the fact that belief cannot free itself from the δ λόγος σώματος ἐγένετο [the Word became flesh], nor does it want to. On the other hand, the historian’s sense of truth cannot tolerate any patronizing by
foreign methods. None of us can return to a pre-critical time. Both methods are used side by side by any pneumatological interpreter.\(^9\)

Now, historical criticism is properly limited when it is placed in relation to the pneumatological method. For a long time, liberal dogmatics was founded upon the leftovers of historical criticism. One was comforted by the thought that in the final analysis it really could not become dangerous. We have seen above where the historical-critical method can and must necessarily lead and—of course, not simply because of this negative reason—how it must follow another path.

For both the historical and the pneumatological methods the Bible is, first of all, writing, text, and the words of human beings. Both examine each context of meaning for its pure, external relationship to reality, i.e., its literal meaning. If there are problems here, then, after a precise reading of the manuscript’s text, textual criticism plays a role. After the original text has been established, each of them goes its own way. If the contents are being examined, then the tradition at hand will be interpreted. We must pay attention to this. An examination of the contents can never be anything other than an interpretation of the tradition.

We will leave aside the consequences for a moment and turn to the analysis of the form of the tradition, which is sharply separated in principle from the results. That is, we remind ourselves of the field of ruins described above, bestowed on us by the critic. Insofar as the conclusions are true, they are fully recognized by pneumatological interpretation. Only when we are looking at these ruins do we see something else as well, something that holds everything together as a whole. To put it more precisely, it is not we who see, but instead our eyes are opened for us so that we can see what has been hidden, namely, the revelation to which the texts lay claim. The question of genesis can never touch the other question—of the thing itself. Therefore, there is no difficulty whatsoever in combining the two methods.

At first glance, it seems more difficult to take a position on the critique of the contents. We may not forbid the historical method to search for the actual events that lie behind the text and to examine them as sources. It must, however, investigate the uniqueness of the tradition, which is essentially not historical but cultic. If the results happen to be negative and even the person of Jesus slips out of reliable hands and disappears into the darkness, then one can assert that the pneumatological method seems to be completely at an end. We counter this statement: (1) If one remembers what

\(^9\) One thinks particularly of Calvin.
was established above, observing the content is interpreting the tradition. In our case this means that the person of Jesus in the Holy Scriptures can, at most, be interpreted as a free composition of the author. A conclusion regarding historicity is disallowed in principle. (2) Completely immersing oneself in the contemporary period in order to attain a pure historical perspective is symptomatic of the Christian concept of revelation. The God who entered history made God unrecognizable to the children of the world, from the manger to the cross. In extreme cases, the critic can contest the image of Jesus as a leader or a religious genius but never as God's Son. (3) It can be positively stated that the pneumatological interpretation has its own plausibility for comprehending actual historical events. Because God speaks to people by means of the authentic witness of historical revelation through the Bible, God must personally also have spoken in historical events. This is, of course, true only of important historical events that are embedded in faith, such as those of the prophets and the historical person of Jesus Christ and his death on the cross for us. Individual accounts like the miracle stories, etc., are naturally not included here. Instead, they are included only insofar as the totality of faith directly depends on the factual truth of the historical events.

I intentionally did not include the “historical fact” of the resurrection. In my opinion, given all that has been said, it is senseless and clumsy to construe it as a naked historical fact. God wished to become manifest in history. The resurrection takes place within the realm of faith and revelation. All other interpretations seek to remove the decisive characteristic of God within history. In respect to the question of miracles, we can say with certainty that the laws of nature are not absolutely valid. They are, instead, statements about experience. However, to conclude from this that miracles are not break-throughs but are instead unknown forms of the laws of nature is also historically incorrect. We must accept them for what they claim to be in the Bible—true miracles. Neither history nor spiritual interpretation can give us information about the facticity of particular miracles. This is true because belief in Jesus Christ and historical revelation is not linked to the veracity of this or that miracle. Therefore, our concern with pneumatological interpretation is not, “Did the miracle in fact take place?” but rather, “What role does it play in the context of witness to revelation?” This is the case throughout. Scripture is only a source for history. For spiritual interpretation, scripture is a witness. In the final instance, this is based on the assertion that the inspiration of the biblical authors can never extend to the events. Instead, it can only extend to interpretation and knowledge. The question concerning the spiritual meaning of miracles and their abil-
ity to contain meaning, in spite of the complete immersing of the divine in history, belongs to exegesis itself.

Therefore, it is within this framework that historical criticism is put into play. The resulting tension is the necessary characteristic of pneumatological interpretation. At one point it is absolutely necessary that the noncontemporaneous, the historical, and the contingent be known and recognized. At the same time, however, the contemporaneous always emerges as the essential element. With this tension we find ourselves with our interpretation in exactly the same place as the writers of the Holy Scriptures themselves (cf. Luke 1:1ff.). It is absolutely necessary that we assure ourselves of the fallibility of these texts so that we can recognize the miracle that we really do hear God’s words in human words.

The interpretation of the Synoptic Gospels has been compared to crossing a river on a thousand blocks of ice. One has to get across, but one cannot stop at any one point. One has to keep the whole picture in view. Yet we can be comforted by someone to whom we seldom go for advice. We have a model in the same tradition, who is a greater interpreter than we are. It is the apostle Paul himself.

The standard that must be preserved in the exegesis of scripture is handed to us along with the word that is the revelation and foundation of the Bible. This standard is taken from the Bible itself and is, as Luther noted, “what drives toward Christ.” What the content of revelation does not have is not canonical.10

However, as far as the pneumatological method is concerned, the canon comprises only the highly striking evidence of the deep insight by which the significant writings were chosen from the great amount of literature of that time. Conversely, the canon can never be a proof of revelation. In principle, it must be acknowledged as open.

In principle, the Old Testament does not have a different status from the New Testament, although the Old Testament relates to the New as promise does to fulfillment, and Law does to Gospel. In both, the word of God is heard. “The same yesterday as today” (Barth).

Christian dogmatics, which has divine revelation in history as its subject matter, must hold upright the characteristic relationship of revelation and scripture as the representation of the entire complex of revelatory expe-

10. Here we are criticizing Calvin’s Reformed principle of Scripture and its repristination by Barth, which places the concept of the canon above Luther’s individual statement. We know that Luther is taking a very bold step, but we also know that it is in the interest of Protestant faith for us to take it with him.
11. The famous objection of Bellarmine, in *De verbo Dei*, that the Reformers are dependent upon tradition simply through the reference to the Bible is blatant sophistry.  
13. [. . . the Pentecost hymn attributed to Hrabanus Maurus, although there is some debate about his authorship . . . Cf. also the collection of sermons by Barth and by Eduard Thurneysen, *Come Holy Spirit*. Moreover, Adolf von Harnack’s tombstone bears the inscription *veni creator spiritus* (Zahn-Harnack, *Adolf von Harnack*, 566),” DBWE 11:233, n. 288.]

The empirical representation of religion in the form of the church and congregation has the λόγος τοῦ θεοῦ [the word of God] as its source of truth and its norm. There is no independent church-community or church, as there is in Catholicism. The sermon is the gift of grace for the proclamation of what has been made known.\footnote{14} Ανάγκη γάρ μοι ἐπίκειται ὑσία γάρ μοὶ ἐστιν έδιν μὴ εὐαγγέλιζωμαι [and woe to me if I do not proclaim the Gospel], 1 Cor. 9:16, cf. WA 53:252.

Its fate is the fate of interpretation and the fate of the scripture itself. It is the attempt to speak God’s word with human words. This attempt will never go beyond the stage of experiment if God does not assent to it. Here we are at the very end, the most profound point. It lies buried in everything that had been said before. Every attempt at pneumatological interpretation is a prayer, a plea for the Holy Spirit, who alone determines, according to its pleasure, the hearing and understanding without which the most spiritual exegesis will come to naught. Scriptural understanding, interpretation, preaching, i.e., the knowledge of God begins and ends with the plea: “Veni creator spiritus” [Come, Creator Spirit].\footnote{15}