Digital Cultural-Scientific Exegesis/„Digitale Kulturwissenschaftliche Exegese"

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I Strategic Development of the chair for exegesis and biblical theology

When I took over the chair for exegesis and biblical theology at the University of Passau, it was part of the former (Catholic) faculty of theology and both research and teaching had the classical historical-critical focus. This was not surprising, for New Testament exegesis has largely remained a traditional field. The development of the historical-critical method granted German-speaking biblical scholarship the leading position in the international scientific community about a century ago and still adds to the guild's self-understanding. Not long after the end of World War II, however, and due to the *linguistic turn*, English-speaking scholarship caught up and has in the meantime taken the driver's seat. New methods and hermeneutics such as *narratology, new literary criticism, reader-response-criticism,* or *post-colonial studies* dominate the interdisciplinary discourse today, while the majority of German New Testament scholars still concentrates on historical-critical research. As an effect, a gap has opened: the international discourse in the field rarely discusses German-speaking publications and the German discourse is rather critical about hermeneutics that have been developed in the wake of the *cultural turn*.

My first step for a strategic development of the chair was consequently to establish cultural-scientific approaches to biblical texts as the basic hermeneutical frame for research and teaching. This approach offers connectivity not only with international biblical scholarship but allows for cooperation with different partners and projects within the University of Passau. However, the key breakthrough of cultural-scientific exegesis in biblical scholarship is still to come. Many colleagues still see cultural-scientific exegesis as the strange new tool unnecessary burdening their methodological toolkits. My goal is to alter this, and the modules I am planning to implement with the help of *Momentum* will allow easy access to cultural-scientific exegesis as the basic hermeneutical approach to biblical texts and provide tools for its application. My pioneer work will be to introduce these approaches and methods in innovative and easy-to-access formats like videos and digital animations to the international discourse, thus expanding my reputation as an expert for innovative research methods *and* research communication.

II Cultural-scientific exegesis as a new paradigm in research and teaching

The bible as a whole is a core part of the European *cultural memory*. The Western world, its culture and history cannot be adequately understood without knowledge of the bible and a basic understanding of its reception history. Biblical texts and their afterlives are deeper connected

with people's identities today than it may seem at first glance. It is crucial to make these connections visible again, and cultural-scientific approaches can contribute significantly in this area. From a cultural-scientific perspective, biblical texts can be read as *externalizations of collective memory*. The French sociologist Halbwachs coined the cultural-scientific concept of *collective memory* in the 1920s-1940s, paving the way for the recent theoretical conceptualization, as carried out by Egyptologist Jan Assmann and his wife Aleida, Anglicist and cultural scientist, who introduced the concepts *communicative* and *cultural memory* to the cultural-scientific discourse.

The necessary hermeneutical concepts and methodological tools for such readings have been developed in the last decades building on the research in cultural and literary studies, sociology, textual criticism and papyrology. The necessary next step is to introduce their innovative potential into biblical scholarship on a larger scale. This transfer, however, entails a fundamental shift of perspective, which is seen critical especially in conservative circles. One reason is that cultural-scientific exegesis no longer believes that authorized carriers like the apostles, evangelists or important eye-witnesses hand down eternal truths or objective stories but communities of commemoration are responsible for the text of the New Testament, who make sense of their experiences with Jesus and his message in the forms and pattern of their own cultural contexts. Reading New Testament texts as reality constructions of different groups of Jesus followers can help to achieve not only a more nuanced perception of a heterogeneous collection of different experiences and a historical growth of dogma but also allows later readers to connect their own experiences with the experiences processed in these texts.

Compared to other biblical hermeneutics, cultural-scientific exegesis focusses on both poles: on the one hand, – in an etic perspective – it investigates the conditions and contexts of the production of biblical texts. On the other hand, – in an emic perspective – it researches the conditions and contexts of the reception of these texts, which have become *canonical* for the Christian community in the course of their reception history. Cultural-scientific exegesis does neither try to go behind the texts and depict the historical development of different layers of the text (including the reconstruction of these layers) nor to reconstruct the historical events behind the texts. The goal is much humbler and aims at reading and evaluating the texts as contributions to (early) Christian identity discourses in their historical contexts. The question is no longer, *what has happened* but *what is narrated* and *why it is narrated in this particular way*. In cultural-scientific exegesis, the point is no longer *who Jesus was* but *who Jesus is for a particular group* and how this forms their identity.

In order to make this perspective accessible and applicable for the entire scientific community of biblical scholars and, in turn, facilitators in academic and pastoral contexts, cultural-scientific-exegesis has to do a lot of persuading and translating. This entails

a) reformulating the theories about the history of the biblical texts, based on the previous research of orality studies, social memory theory and of media history;

b) readjusting of exegetical methods based on cultural-scientific research, e.g. in the areas of intertextuality and text pragmatics;

c) making visible individual groups of Jesus followers and their specific profiles based on manuscript evidence and the findings of sociology.

III New ways in research and presentation: *Digital* cultural-scientific exegesis

It is time to go one step further: Cultural-scientific exegesis no longer subscribes to the traditional assumption of a homogenous "History of Early Christianity". Such a perspective is often biased by dogmatic presuppositions and thus prone to both *confirmation* and *hindsight bias.* In addition, it tends to concentrate only on fractions of the available data material for reasons of practicability. Using computerized processing, digital cultural-scientific exegesis, in contrast, can process large and diverging amounts of data and thus uncover groups, profiles and trends that go unnoticed in conventional approaches. The connection of innovative hermeneutics and digital processing and representation allows digital cultural-scientific exegesis to go beyond the discipline's limits of imagination caused by limits of representation to meet all of the above mentioned goals. This key obstacle to the final breakthrough of cultural-scientific exegesis is best illustrated with an example. My test case also demonstrates how I envision the complementary format of research communication (https://vimeo.com/423170755/d3c2f79ad0).

This type of presentation allows for a quick introduction into the field by providing the hermeneutical key facts and connecting them with a particular problem. Introductory videos will complement the conventional print media and provide quick and easy-to-access introductions to the theoretical key concepts of social memory theory, cultural scientific exegesis and their application. The individual sequences will be pitched at an introductory level in order to allow a diverse academic audience not only of biblical scholars but also those of neighboring disciplines like e.g. theologians and ancient historians to catch up with the research, theoretical foundation and applicability in this area in a relatively short time. These introductory sequences, as basic as they might seem, might well be the missing link for the breakthrough of the approach on a larger scale, adding to goals a) and b). In the past, I often experienced the lack of knowledge and imagination to be the greatest obstacle for getting off the ground and showing the potential

of the approach in scholarly discourses in the exegetical guild. This is the rationale for keeping the entrance barrier low: compared to reading a thirty-page introduction to a theory you are rather critical about, investing five to ten minutes during the morning coffee break for watching a video to arrive at the same level of information seems to be a good deal.

This approach to research and scientific communication is nothing short of a new start. It requires both a local team with professional, technical and didactical qualifications to develop the different components and conversation partners from the field. In the course of five years, we will create a database and develop a portfolio of different formats to demonstrate the strengths and potential of digital cultural-scientific exegesis to research colleagues in biblical studies and facilitators in teaching and ministry to support the fruitful application of this approach to their contexts. While the research workshops will generate new ideas and new data, the local team will take care of the presentations and make sure to use synergy effects and connect the different components in order to provide the audiences with balanced portfolio of high-quality presentations.

IV Components

My concept for a restart of research, communication and the strategic development of the chair in for exegesis and biblical theology in Passau consists of three intertlocked components. Their aims are a) collecting and storing the available data about early Christian texts, manuscripts and traditions, b) exploring the potential of cultural-scientific exegesis for modelling complex problems using these large bodies of data and c) introducing the foundations of this approach and present the outcomes in innovative scholarly ways to meet the goals defined in II.

Component A: Collecting and accessing the data (Databases)

Biblical scholars usually present their research outcomes and theoretical models in traditional formats like tables and static diagrams. These formats and the underlying storage system are largely incapable of depicting larger amounts of data or capturing complex processes. Blind spots of the traditional models thus often go unnoticed. Insights from sociology, social memory theory, orality studies, media and manuscript history, offer new ways to evaluate the existing material on a much larger scale than it is usually the case. Their application requires the use of databases capable of storing different types of information e.g. *location, date, genre* and *manuscript evidence* of a particular text apart from its *references to the Old Testament*. The databases will access texts, manuscripts and communities in the first three centuries, allowing for productive exchange of New Testament and Patristic research.

Component B: Exploring new ideas and research questions (Research Workshops)

Experts around the globe attempt to rework their material and insights, thus joining forces in research collaboration is a logical step. Matching the right research partners and bringing them together in concentrated working spaces is crucial for success in this area. Component B thus organizes four annual research workshops of 14 days each. The workshops will take place in Passau, connecting the local team and two international guest scholars for collaborative work on a particular field. They will also offer connectivity to other experts in the field in the form of open sessions and lectures. The international guests bring their own expertise in the areas of *intertextuality in social memory perspective*, *mapping early Christian manuscripts, mapping early Christian communities,* and *modelling early Christian tradition.* I will use my research stays in Vancouver, Princeton and Yale to prepare the workshops with my colleagues (define research questions, material and collaborators), present results and deepen research networks.

Component C: Sharing Results (Digital representation/research communication)

Due to traditional research communication in biblical scholarship, it is still necessary to attend conferences or study texts to learn about new hermeneutical approaches and research concepts. Both is time-consuming and often not very attractive for first impressions. As digital presentation is an innovative way to deal with this problem, this component will complement the different formats of research communication by short videos (5-10 minutes). These videos will a) introduce biblical scholars and facilitators to the basic hermeneutical concepts and methods of cultural-scientific exegesis and b) document the insights of the research workshops. The introduction to basic concepts of cultural-scientific exegesis will require 10-12 videos and cover areas like *collective and cultural memory, collective memory in the course of time,* or *media changes in antiquity.* The documentation of the workshops will consist of the same numbers of videos. The team in Passau will script and develop the videos in cooperation with the university's own studio, organize post-production and imbed the final products for test runs in the universities digital environments, before they will subsequently be made accessible to other researchers as open access on suitable online repositories. Presentations of the outcomes at conferences and in traditional forms will supplement the research communication in this module, explore ways how the new formats can be used for teaching at university level as well as in teaching and ministry, hoping to inspire other scholars to join the effort to promote the digital and cultural-scientific work the field of biblical exegesis.