

The Bible in the Age of AI: Rethinking Interpretation, Authority and the Human

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Abstract— Artificial intelligence is transforming how people read, interpret, and engage with Scripture. Machine translation tools now produce biblical translations in dozens of languages, large language models generate sermons and exegetical commentary, and AI-powered study apps deliver instant interpretations to millions of users. This paper examines the hermeneutical, theological, and ethical implications of these developments. It argues that while AI can serve as a valuable tool for certain interpretive tasks, it cannot function as a genuine subject of interpretation. Drawing on philosophical hermeneutics, particularly the work of Gadamer and Ricoeur, the paper contends that biblical interpretation is a dialogical, situated, and transformative event that cannot be reduced to algorithmic processing. It further argues that the authority of Scripture is not threatened by AI per se but by the uncritical delegation of interpretive responsibility to non-human agents. The paper proposes a hermeneutics of responsible human agency that reclaims the indispensability of readerly judgment, communal discernment, and ethical accountability in an age of algorithmic mediation. It concludes by outlining a framework for ethical AI use in biblical studies that prioritises transparency, human oversight, and the formation of the reader.

Keywords: biblical interpretation; artificial intelligence; hermeneutics; scriptural authority; Gadamer; Ricoeur.

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INTRODUCTION

The relationship between technology and biblical interpretation is not new. From the invention of the printing press to the development of digital concordances, technological innovations have repeatedly reshaped how people engage with sacred texts (Papakostas, 2025). What distinguishes the present moment is the emergence of artificial intelligence systems that do not merely assist interpretation but increasingly perform it. Large language models can generate exegetical commentary, propose novel readings of difficult passages, and produce sermons that are indistinguishable from those written by human pastors. AI-powered Bible apps deliver instant interpretations to millions of users, often without any indication of the theological assumptions or interpretive traditions embedded in the algorithms that generate them.

This development raises urgent questions for biblical studies, theology, and the philosophy of interpretation. What happens to the authority of Scripture when its interpretation is mediated by opaque algorithms that users cannot examine or evaluate? Can AI systems be genuine subjects of interpretation, or are they merely sophisticated tools? What are the ethical responsibilities of human interpreters who use AI to generate theological content? And what does it mean for the Bible to be read by machines that have no faith, no community, and no stake in the transformative claims of the text?

These questions are not merely academic. They have practical implications for how churches teach, how pastors prepare sermons, how scholars conduct research, and how ordinary believers engage with Scripture. As AI tools become more sophisticated and more widely available, the need for critical theological and hermeneutical reflection becomes more urgent. The church must not simply react to technological developments after they have already reshaped interpretive practices; it must proactively develop a theology and ethics of interpretation that can guide the responsible use of AI.

This paper addresses these questions by examining the hermeneutical, theological, and ethical dimensions of AI-assisted biblical interpretation. It argues that while AI can serve as a valuable tool for certain tasks, it cannot function as a genuine subject of interpretation. Biblical interpretation is a dialogical, situated, and transformative event that involves the whole person, including their embodied experience, communal location, and ethical commitments. AI systems, which lack these dimensions, cannot replicate the depth of human interpretive practice. The authority of Scripture, moreover, is not threatened by AI *per se* but by the uncritical delegation of interpretive responsibility to non-human agents. What is at stake is not the text itself but the human community that reads it and the ethical obligations that reading entails.

The paper proceeds in six parts. First, it examines the nature of biblical interpretation as a hermeneutical event, drawing on the work of Gadamer and Ricoeur. Second, it analyses the various ways AI is currently being used in biblical

interpretation, from machine translation to large language models. Third, it assesses the epistemological and theological challenges posed by algorithmic interpretation, including issues of bias, opacity, and authority. Fourth, it argues for the indispensability of human agency in interpretation, drawing on the concept of responsible reading. Fifth, it proposes a framework for ethical AI use in biblical studies that prioritises transparency, accountability, and human oversight. Finally, it concludes by considering the implications of this analysis for the future of biblical interpretation.

BIBLICAL INTERPRETATION AS HERMENEUTICAL EVENT

To understand what is at stake in AI-assisted interpretation, it is necessary first to understand what interpretation is. In contemporary philosophical hermeneutics, interpretation is not a matter of extracting a fixed meaning from a text but a dialogical event in which the interpreter and the text engage in a transformative encounter. This understanding of interpretation has profound implications for the evaluation of AI as an interpretive agent.

Gadamer and the Fusion of Horizons

Hans-Georg Gadamer's *Truth and Method* is arguably the most influential work in philosophical hermeneutics of the twentieth century. Gadamer argues that understanding is not a method that the interpreter applies to a text but an event that happens in the encounter between the interpreter and the text. Understanding, for Gadamer, is not a matter of reconstructing the original intention of the author but of achieving a "fusion of horizons" in which the horizon of the text and the horizon of the interpreter are brought into dialogue (Gadamer, 2004, p. 306).

The concept of the fusion of horizons is crucial for understanding what AI cannot do. A horizon, for Gadamer, is not a fixed perspective but a dynamic and situated way of seeing that is shaped by tradition, language, and historical location. The interpreter comes to the text with prejudices and presuppositions that are not obstacles to understanding but conditions of it. Understanding occurs when the interpreter allows the text to challenge and transform these presuppositions, not when the interpreter imposes their own framework on the text.

This dialogical and transformative understanding of interpretation is fundamentally at odds with the algorithmic processing that characterises AI systems. An AI system does not have a horizon in Gadamer's sense. It does not come to the text with a tradition, a language, or a historical location that shapes its understanding. It processes text according to patterns and probabilities derived from training data. It does not allow the text to challenge its presuppositions because it has no presuppositions in the relevant sense. It does not engage in dialogue because it does not have a self that can be transformed by the encounter.

Gadamer's emphasis on the linguisticity of understanding is also relevant here. For Gadamer, "being that can be understood is language" (Gadamer, 2004, p. 474). Understanding is not a private mental event but a linguistic happening that occurs in and through language. AI systems, however sophisticated, do not participate in language in the way that human interpreters do. They manipulate symbols but do not inhabit the linguistic world that gives those symbols meaning. As one recent study of large language models and hermeneutics concludes, current LLMs are incapable of replicating the depth of human interpretive practice because they lack the situated, embodied, and dialogical dimensions that characterise genuine understanding (Mihálik & Šoltés, 2025, p. 45).

Gadamer's work has been extended and critiqued by subsequent hermeneutical thinkers, but his central insight remains foundational for understanding what is at stake in AI interpretation. Interpretation is not an algorithm to be executed but a conversation to be entered into, and conversations require participants who can be addressed, challenged, and changed.

Ricoeur and the Surplus of Meaning

Paul Ricoeur's hermeneutics offers a complementary perspective on what is involved in interpretation. Ricoeur argues that texts have a "surplus of meaning" that exceeds the intention of the author and the expectations of the reader (Ricoeur, 1976, p. 45). The meaning of a text is not exhausted by any single interpretation but is disclosed in the encounter between text and reader, an encounter that is always mediated by language, tradition, and community.

Ricoeur's concept of the hermeneutical arc is particularly relevant for understanding the interpretive process. Interpretation, for Ricoeur, involves a movement from understanding to explanation and back to understanding. The interpreter begins with a pre-reflective understanding of the text, moves to explanation through the analysis of its linguistic and historical dimensions, and returns to a deeper understanding that has been enriched by the explanatory process (Ricoeur, 1981, p. 161). This dialectical movement is not a method that can be automated but a skilled practice that requires judgment, imagination, and ethical sensitivity.

Ricoeur also emphasises the transformative dimension of interpretation. To interpret a text is not merely to understand it but to be changed by it. The text addresses the reader with a claim that demands a response. This is particularly true of biblical texts, which are read not merely for information but for formation. Ricoeur argues that the Bible functions as a "poetic" text that discloses a world of possibility and invites the reader to inhabit that world (Ricoeur, 1981, p. 289). This transformative dimension of

interpretation is one that AI systems, which have no capacity for response or transformation, cannot replicate.

Ricoeur's work reminds us that interpretation is not a matter of extracting information from a text but of entering into a relationship with it. The text has something to say to us, and we must be willing to listen, to be challenged, and to change. This is a fundamentally human activity, one that requires a self that can be addressed and transformed.

The Implications for AI Interpretation

The hermeneutical account of interpretation developed by Gadamer and Ricoeur has profound implications for evaluating AI as an interpretive agent. If interpretation is a dialogical, situated, and transformative event, then AI systems cannot be interpreters in the full sense. They can process text, identify patterns, and generate outputs, but they cannot engage in dialogue, inhabit a tradition, or be transformed by the text. They can produce interpretations, but they cannot be interpreted by the text in the way that human readers are.

This is not to say that AI has no role in interpretation. AI can be a valuable tool for tasks such as textual criticism, linguistic analysis, and comparative study. It can help interpreters to identify patterns and connections that might otherwise be missed. But these are ancillary tasks that support rather than replace the interpretive work of the human reader. The essential dimensions of interpretation, including the fusion of horizons, the surplus of meaning, and the transformative encounter, remain the province of human interpreters who are situated in communities of faith and accountable for their readings.

Thiselton (2009) has argued that hermeneutics is not merely a set of techniques but a way of being in the world. Interpretation involves the whole person, including their pre-understandings, their commitments, and their hopes. AI systems, which lack these dimensions, cannot be interpreters in this full sense. They can provide tools that support interpretation, but they cannot be the subjects of interpretation. Vanhoozer (1998) makes a similar point when he argues that interpretation is a moral and spiritual activity that requires virtues such as humility, patience, and charity. These are virtues that AI systems, which have no moral or spiritual capacities, cannot possess.

AI IN BIBLICAL INTERPRETATION: CURRENT APPLICATIONS AND THEIR LIMITS

Artificial intelligence is already being used in biblical studies in a variety of ways. These applications can be categorised into three broad areas: textual analysis and criticism, translation and language study, and interpretation and commentary. Each of

these areas raises distinct questions about the role of AI and the limits of algorithmic processing.

Textual Analysis and Criticism

AI is increasingly used in textual criticism, the discipline concerned with reconstructing the original text of the Bible from the many manuscripts and versions that have survived. AI-assisted tools such as BibCrit integrate large language model analysis with structured corpus data to map allusions, parallels, and textual relationships across canonical and non-canonical texts (BibCrit, 2026). These tools can process vast amounts of textual data and identify patterns that would take human scholars years to analyse manually.

The use of AI in textual criticism has significant benefits. It can accelerate the process of collating manuscripts, identifying variant readings, and tracing the transmission history of texts. It can also help to overcome some of the biases that human scholars bring to their work by providing a systematic and comprehensive analysis of the data. As one systematic review of AI applications in biblical studies notes, AI can effectively assist with tasks such as authorship identification, part-of-speech tagging, semantic annotation, and clustering, tasks that are essential for textual analysis but are time-consuming and prone to human error (Agoha & Amadi, 2025, p. 591).

However, the use of AI in textual criticism also has limitations. Textual criticism is not merely a technical exercise in pattern recognition; it involves judgment about the relative value of different readings, the assessment of scribal tendencies, and the reconstruction of historical contexts. These judgments require not only linguistic and historical knowledge but also interpretive sensitivity and theological discernment. AI can provide data, but it cannot make the judgments that are essential to the discipline. The human scholar remains indispensable for the interpretive decisions that give meaning to the data.

Translation and Language Study

Machine translation is one of the most visible applications of AI in biblical studies. Tools such as Scripture Forge, developed by Wycliffe Bible Translators, use AI to draft translations of biblical texts into languages that have not yet received a translation (Wycliffe Australia, 2025). These tools have the potential to accelerate the translation process and make the Bible accessible to communities that have long been waiting for a translation in their own language.

The use of AI in Bible translation raises complex questions about accuracy, fidelity, and theological bias. Research on AI-assisted Bible translation has found that

while AI can produce translations with surprisingly good results in a short time, it sometimes falls short in consistency, natural phrasing, and contextual coherence (Voorwinden et al., 2025, p. 37). More troubling, AI translation tools tend to reproduce traditional readings marked by conservative theological agendas, especially in controversial passages (Gomes, 2026, p. 3). This bias is not accidental; it reflects the data on which the models were trained and the interpretive assumptions embedded in the training process.

The problem of bias in AI translation is a reminder that translation is never a neutral exercise. Every translation involves interpretive decisions about what the text means and how that meaning should be rendered in another language. These decisions are shaped by theological commitments, cultural assumptions, and the translator's own understanding of the text. AI systems, which are trained on existing translations and commentaries, inherit the biases of their training data. They do not bring a fresh perspective to the text but reproduce the perspectives embedded in the data they have been fed.

Interpretation and Commentary

The most theologically significant use of AI in biblical studies is in the area of interpretation and commentary. Large language models can generate exegetical commentary on biblical passages, propose novel interpretations, and produce sermons and devotional materials. These tools are being used by pastors, teachers, and laypeople who may not have the theological training or linguistic expertise to engage in original exegesis.

The use of AI for interpretation raises profound questions about the nature of interpretive authority. If an AI system generates an interpretation of a biblical passage, on what basis should that interpretation be trusted? What are the criteria for evaluating its reliability? And what happens to the role of the human interpreter when the task of interpretation is delegated to a machine?

A recent study of AI and biblical hermeneutics argues that AI cannot serve as a true "subject of interpretation" because of its ontological limitations, including its lack of personhood, transcendence, and the inability to participate in the illuminating work of the Holy Spirit (Andrews University, 2026, p. 3). The study identifies three critical issues: algorithmic bias, the omission of the hermeneutical process, and technological reductionism. Each of these issues undermines the reliability of AI-generated interpretations and reinforces the need for human oversight.

The problem of algorithmic bias is particularly serious. Research on AI and theological bias has found that chatbots show a broadly conservative Evangelical bias while also offering pastoral responses (Bible Society, 2026). This bias reflects the

training data, which may overrepresent certain theological perspectives and underrepresent others. When AI systems present their interpretations as neutral or objective, they obscure the theological commitments embedded in their algorithms and make it difficult for users to evaluate their reliability.

The omission of the hermeneutical process is another critical issue. When AI generates an interpretation, it does not show its work. It does not explain the interpretive decisions it made, the traditions it drew on, or the assumptions it brought to the text. This opacity makes it impossible for users to evaluate the interpretation or to learn from the process. As one study on AI and Bible translation notes, the human translator remains essential for direction and final responsibility (Voorwinden et al., 2025, p. 45). The same is true for interpretation: the human interpreter must remain responsible for the interpretive decisions that give meaning to the text.

THE CHALLENGE TO SCRIPTURAL AUTHORITY

The use of AI in biblical interpretation raises a fundamental question about the authority of Scripture. In Protestant theology, the doctrine of *sola scriptura* holds that Scripture alone is the final authority for faith and practice. This doctrine does not mean that every individual interprets the Bible in isolation but that the Bible is the norm by which all other authorities, including tradition, reason, and experience, are judged. The question is whether AI-assisted interpretation threatens this doctrine.

Algorithmic Authority and the Redistribution of Interpretive Power

The concept of algorithmic authority is useful for understanding the challenge posed by AI to scriptural authority. Algorithmic authority refers to the capacity of algorithmic systems to define what is knowable, valid, and institutionally recognised (Coşgun Solak, 2025, p. 146). When AI systems generate interpretations of Scripture, they exercise a form of authority that shapes what users believe the Bible means and how they apply it to their lives.

This authority is not neutral. It is shaped by the data on which the systems are trained, the assumptions of their developers, and the institutional contexts in which they are deployed. When AI systems present their interpretations as authoritative, they redistribute interpretive power from human communities to algorithmic systems. What was once the province of prophets, priests, pastors, and teachers is increasingly mediated by algorithms that interpret Scripture without the accountability, transparency, or communal discernment that characterises human interpretation (Stanojevic, 2026, p. 7).

The redistribution of interpretive authority has significant implications for the doctrine of *sola scriptura*. If Scripture is the final authority, then the interpretation of

Scripture must be accountable to the text itself and to the community that reads it. AI systems, which are not part of that community and do not read the text in the context of faith, cannot be held accountable in the same way. Their interpretations are not subject to the communal discernment that ensures fidelity to the text and its transformative claims.

The Problem of Opacity

The opacity of AI systems is a further challenge to scriptural authority. Users of AI-generated interpretations often have no way of knowing how the system arrived at its conclusions. They cannot examine the training data, the interpretive assumptions, or the reasoning process. This opacity makes it impossible to evaluate the reliability of the interpretation or to hold the system accountable for its outputs.

The problem of opacity is not merely technical but theological. In the Christian tradition, interpretation is understood as a spiritual exercise that involves prayer, study, and communal discernment. The interpreter is accountable not only to the text but also to the community of faith and to God. AI systems, which lack these dimensions of accountability, cannot be genuine interpreters in this sense. They can produce interpretations, but they cannot be held accountable for them in the way that human interpreters can.

The Need for Human Oversight

The challenges posed by algorithmic authority and opacity point to the need for human oversight in AI-assisted interpretation. Human interpreters must remain responsible for the interpretive decisions that give meaning to the text. This means that AI should be used as a tool to support human interpretation, not as a replacement for it. The human interpreter must evaluate the AI's output, test it against the text and the tradition, and take responsibility for the final interpretation.

This emphasis on human oversight is not a rejection of AI but a recognition of its proper role. AI can be a valuable tool for tasks such as textual analysis, translation, and the identification of interpretive options. It can help interpreters to consider perspectives they might otherwise have missed and to engage more deeply with the text. But it cannot replace the human interpreter who is accountable for the interpretation and who reads the text in the context of faith.

THE INDISPENSABILITY OF HUMAN AGENCY

The argument of this paper is not that AI has no role in biblical interpretation but that it cannot replace the human interpreter. Human agency is indispensable for

interpretation because interpretation involves dimensions that cannot be automated: judgment, responsibility, and transformation.

Judgment and the Ethical Dimension of Interpretation

Interpretation involves judgment, and judgment is an ethical activity. The interpreter must decide what the text means, how it applies to contemporary contexts, and what response it demands. These decisions are not merely technical but involve ethical considerations about the nature of the text, the needs of the community, and the purposes of interpretation.

AI systems can generate interpretations, but they do not make judgments in this ethical sense. They process data and produce outputs according to patterns and probabilities. They do not consider the ethical implications of their interpretations or take responsibility for the consequences. The human interpreter, by contrast, is accountable for the interpretations they endorse and the uses to which they are put.

The ethical dimension of interpretation is particularly important in the context of biblical studies, where interpretations have real-world consequences. Interpretations of Scripture have been used to justify slavery, to oppress women, and to legitimise violence. They have also been used to liberate the oppressed, to challenge injustice, and to inspire social change. The interpreter has an ethical responsibility to consider the consequences of their interpretations and to ensure that they are faithful to the text and its transformative claims.

Responsibility and the Communal Dimension of Interpretation

Interpretation is not a solitary activity but a communal one. The interpreter reads the text in the context of a community of faith that has its own traditions, practices, and expectations. This communal dimension of interpretation is essential for ensuring that interpretations are tested, corrected, and enriched by the insights of others.

AI systems do not participate in communities of faith. They do not have the relationships, the accountability structures, or the shared practices that characterise communal interpretation. Their interpretations are generated in isolation from the community and are not subject to the communal discernment that ensures fidelity to the text. The human interpreter, by contrast, is accountable to the community and participates in the ongoing conversation about what the text means and how it should be applied.

The communal dimension of interpretation also has implications for the use of AI. When AI is used to generate interpretations, the community must be involved in evaluating and appropriating those interpretations. The community must ask whether the AI's interpretation is faithful to the text, whether it is consistent with the tradition,

and whether it serves the community's mission. These are questions that only the community can answer, and they require the discernment that comes from shared faith and practice.

Transformation and the Spiritual Dimension of Interpretation

Finally, interpretation is a transformative activity. The purpose of reading Scripture is not merely to understand it but to be changed by it. The text addresses the reader with a claim that demands a response, and the reader is called to conform their life to the truth that the text discloses.

AI systems cannot be transformed by the text. They do not have a self that can be challenged and reshaped by the encounter with Scripture. They do not experience the conviction of sin, the comfort of grace, or the call to discipleship. The human interpreter, by contrast, is engaged in a process of spiritual formation in which the text becomes a means of grace and a guide for life.

The transformative dimension of interpretation is not a secondary feature but the heart of what it means to read Scripture. As one study of AI and Christian proclamation argues, AI-generated language may enter a genuinely human act of Christian witness when a responsible speaker verifies the content, assents to it, and accepts answerability for its public use (Keune, 2026, p. 12). The AI can provide the words, but it cannot perform the act of witness. That is the task of the human interpreter who has been transformed by the text and who bears witness to its truth.

TOWARDS AN ETHICAL FRAMEWORK FOR AI-ASSISTED INTERPRETATION

The analysis in this paper suggests that AI can be a valuable tool for biblical interpretation but that it must be used with care and accountability. What is needed is an ethical framework that guides the use of AI in ways that respect the nature of interpretation and the authority of Scripture. Such a framework should include the following elements.

Transparency and Accountability

AI systems used in biblical interpretation should be transparent about their training data, their interpretive assumptions, and the limitations of their outputs. Users should be able to know how the system arrived at its conclusions and to evaluate the reliability of those conclusions. Developers should be accountable for the biases embedded in their systems and should take steps to mitigate them.

Transparency is not merely a technical requirement but an ethical one. When AI systems present their interpretations as authoritative without disclosing their assumptions and limitations, they mislead users and undermine their ability to make

informed judgments. Transparency is essential for ensuring that users can evaluate the AI's output and take responsibility for the interpretations they endorse.

Human Oversight and Final Responsibility

AI should be used as a tool to support human interpretation, not as a replacement for it. Human interpreters must remain responsible for the interpretive decisions that give meaning to the text. They must evaluate the AI's output, test it against the text and the tradition, and take responsibility for the final interpretation.

This principle of human oversight is consistent with the hermeneutical account of interpretation developed in this paper. If interpretation is a dialogical, situated, and transformative event, then it cannot be delegated to a machine. The human interpreter must remain the subject of interpretation, accountable for their reading and open to the transformation that the text demands.

Communal Discernment and the Role of the Church

The interpretation of Scripture is a communal activity, and the community of faith has a responsibility to discern what the text means and how it should be applied. When AI is used in interpretation, the community must be involved in evaluating and appropriating the AI's output. The community must ask whether the interpretation is faithful to the text, whether it is consistent with the tradition, and whether it serves the community's mission.

The church has a particular responsibility to ensure that AI is used in ways that are consistent with its theological commitments. This means that the church must be involved in the development and deployment of AI tools for biblical interpretation, and it must hold developers accountable for the theological assumptions embedded in their systems. The church must also equip its members to use AI critically and to evaluate AI-generated interpretations in the light of Scripture and tradition.

Formation and the Purpose of Interpretation

Finally, any ethical framework for AI-assisted interpretation must be oriented toward the purpose of interpretation: the transformation of the reader and the community. The goal of reading Scripture is not merely to acquire information but to be formed in the likeness of Christ. AI can provide tools that support this formation, but it cannot replace the spiritual practices that are essential to it: prayer, study, communal worship, and service.

This means that the use of AI in interpretation should be evaluated by whether it serves the formation of the reader and the community. Does it help people to engage more deeply with the text? Does it illuminate aspects of the text that might otherwise be

missed? Does it support the practices of prayer, study, and service that are essential to Christian formation? These are the questions that should guide the use of AI in biblical interpretation.

CONCLUSION

This paper has examined the implications of artificial intelligence for biblical interpretation, focusing on questions of hermeneutics, authority, and human agency. It has argued that while AI can serve as a valuable tool for certain interpretive tasks, it cannot function as a genuine subject of interpretation. Biblical interpretation is a dialogical, situated, and transformative event that involves the whole person, including their embodied experience, communal location, and ethical commitments. AI systems, which lack these dimensions, cannot replicate the depth of human interpretive practice.

The paper has also argued that the authority of Scripture is not threatened by AI per se but by the uncritical delegation of interpretive responsibility to non-human agents. What is at stake is not the text itself but the human community that reads it and the ethical obligations that reading entails. The redistribution of interpretive authority from human communities to algorithmic systems is a theological and ethical problem that requires the church's attention.

The paper has proposed an ethical framework for AI-assisted interpretation that prioritises transparency, accountability, human oversight, communal discernment, and formation. This framework is intended to guide the use of AI in ways that respect the nature of interpretation and the authority of Scripture.

The challenges posed by AI are not insurmountable. They require the development of new theological and ethical resources, the cultivation of critical AI literacy among interpreters, and the willingness to hold developers accountable for the assumptions embedded in their systems. Above all, they require a renewed commitment to the practices of prayer, study, and communal discernment that have always characterised faithful interpretation. The Bible in the age of AI is still the Bible, and the task of interpreting it is still the task of the human community that reads it in faith.

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