

# Reading from above?

– Searching for meaningful readings of the Bible  
from a Western middle-class perspective



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## **Preamble**

This thesis has been written as my Special Thesis in Theology during the fall of 2009. After five years of theological education at the University of Oslo, this has been my chance to spend a whole term producing a text on the topic of my choice. I chose to write within the field of Biblical hermeneutics, more specifically Old Testament hermeneutics. Writing from the perspective of a Christian reader of the Old Testament, I wanted to address how to relate to these Holy, yet pre-Christian texts. Early on in the process, I defined two criteria that have served as checkpoints in my writing: I wanted to engage in the struggle of all human beings to live full and meaningful lives, and I wanted there to be a practical element at the center of the thesis. Therefore, this was never going to be a thesis primarily engaging in academic discussion on the possible meanings of Hebrew verbs or other topics that only biblical scholars have the capacity to relate to. Rather, this thesis aims at contributing to the continued search for meaningful readings of biblical texts that all readers of the Bible are engaged in. Hence, the centerpiece of this thesis is the presentation of a project in which three people actually sat down together and read in the Bible. The other parts of this thesis are either providing the foundation for the project or discussing the consequences of it. My hope is that this practical focus enables the thesis to be utilized as a resource for other readers of the Bible as well.

The thesis is divided into five chapters:

In Chapter 1, I present the problem this thesis has been generated to answer. I do so by both locating the problem within the field of biblical hermeneutics and by narrating how I have encountered this problem in my own experiences of reading the Bible. The concise formulation of the problem of the thesis is presented at the end of the chapter.

Chapter 2 provides the theoretical framework, the foundation, of the thesis. In it, I firstly attempt to answer *what we are doing when reading and interpreting narrative texts* by utilizing the narrative theory of Paul Ricoeur. Secondly, I present the method of the Bible reading project; *autobiographical hermeneutical method*. Thirdly, we will see how Ricoeur's concept of the three mimesis can be applied to reading biblical texts, and what role the method of autobiographical hermeneutics plays in that. Finally, I locate this thesis in the landscape of research within the field of autobiographical biblical hermeneutics.

In Chapter 3, the project that was arranged to answer the problem is presented, and three of the autobiographical interpretations that the project resulted in are presented. The chapter also includes short, commenting presentations of other readings and the participants' evaluation of the project.

Chapter 4 contains the discussion in the aftermath of the project. In dialogue with representatives of Liberation theology, I discuss how the project of this thesis relates to the theology 'from below' that has come to us from the context of Third World countries.

Finally, Chapter 5 is my attempt at summing up. In it, we go back to the problems presented in Chapter 1 to see how the thesis has answered them.

### ***Acknowledgements***

There are a few people to thank for helping me in making this thesis what it has become. First of all, the participants of the Bible reading project – here known as John, Jill and Julie. Without your commitment to open up your own stories to the texts, this would have been an impossible project. Thank you for allowing me to listen and make use of your interpretations. I am also deeply grateful to my counseling professor this fall, Dr. Helge S. Kvanvig. Your feedback has been essential for making this product as sound and solid as possible within the frame of just a few months of writing. Finally, a big thank you goes out to my housemates, who in the turbulent last weeks before the deadline have graciously overlooked my failure to complete my commitments to the collective. I will make it up.

### ***Definitions and terminology***

There are some terms used in the thesis that require clarification.

In writing about the history of hermeneutics, I make use of the terms *modernism* and *postmodernism*. There is today great debate in academic circles concerning whether it is correct to state that we have in fact moved on from modernism into postmodernism, or if a term such as *late modernism* would do the present better justice. It is my claim that the shift within academic sciences since World War II, especially in humanities, from universality to particularity, from objectivity towards subjectivity, including the ramifications of the linguistic turn, make up for a paradigm shift so extensive that the term *postmodernism* makes

sense – ‘after modernism’. The shift did not happen over night, but is a movement that is still happening. The adjective *postmodern* is thus applied in this paper to hermeneutics that have come to life as a result of this continuing movement.

Another term that is in need of some explication is *middle-class*. In this thesis, I refer to the members of the project’s Bible reading group as *middle-class youths*. In fact, it is an important point to the whole project that these are middle-class people. The term is used in dialogue with my reason for making the paper at all; namely the lack of meaning found in reading the Bible ‘from below’, using hermeneutics of liberation theology, due to the epistemological gap between the reality of poor people in a Third World country and myself and my friends in a Norwegian context. I will write more on why this was a problem in Chapter 1, but for now, it suffices to say that the term *middle-class* in this thesis refers to an economical identity marker that all the members of the group relate to as their own, and it distinguishes their reality from the reality of the communities which have produced hermeneutics of liberation.

Another key term that needs explanation is *autobiographical hermeneutical method*. Let me go word by word: *Autobiographical* – it could in this case be called an *auto-/biographical* method, since I will make use of the stories and interpretations of the members of the Bible reading group, and not my own. The method is biographical when it is another person’s story that is applied on the text. Still, the interpretations generated from this project were done by the members of the group themselves, and will be quoted in this thesis in the first person. Therefore, I term the method utilized in the project as *autobiographical hermeneutical method*. It should be noted that in the academic realm, there are many terms used to denote such a method. S.D. Moore at the University of Sheffield, England, mentions “personal criticism, autobiographical criticism, confessional criticism, new subjectivism or even *moi* criticism”<sup>1</sup> as names for the same method. *Hermeneutical* – hermeneutics is about understanding and interpreting texts. In this project, the hermeneutical lies in the specific way of reading texts that utilize the life story of the reader. The method is in itself a tool for creating interpretations. The particulars about the hermeneutical method are explained in Chapter 3. *Method* – I use the term *method* over *criticism* due to the connotations those terms bring. I hope this thesis can become a tool for congregations and Bible readers outside

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<sup>1</sup> Moore, S.D.: “True Confessions and Weird Obsessions: Autobiographical Interventions in Literary and Biblical Studies” in *Semeia – Taking it Personally: Autobiographical Biblical Criticism* (1995), p 19.



academic institutions, and I believe that *criticism* in the hermeneutical sense requires a preunderstanding of the term that is rarely found outside academia. *Method* is more commonly used, and therefore preferred. That being said, it should be pointed out that there is a paradox in naming the way the project was structured ‘a method’. This is because of the significance of the German scholar Hans-Georg Gadamer to postmodern hermeneutics. In his *Truth and Method*<sup>2</sup>, Gadamer presents a philosophical hermeneutics. His main point is that since we in the field of hermeneutics search for a truth that is not based in verifiable knowledge, we cannot utilize methods that have been developed within human- or natural sciences. In hermeneutics, truth is in the experience of the subject, and ‘truth’ therefore becomes the opposite of what can be found by ‘method’. However, his understanding of ‘method’ seems to be very much influenced by the idea of method as a structured way of researching to prove scientific statements as facts. Since *Truth and Method* was published in 1960, the field of hermeneutics has expanded, and several ways of intentionally reading texts from a specific standpoint have been produced. Such a way of reading was used in the project of this thesis. When orienting oneself in the modern day landscape of hermeneutics, it makes sense to call these different ways of reading ‘methods’, as they are clearly defined systems for reading texts. All in all, the term *autobiographical hermeneutical method* seems to be the most describing term for the process that occurred in the project group’s work.

With those clarifications, we move on the presentation of the problem that generated this thesis.

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<sup>2</sup> Gadamer, H.-G.: *Truth and Method* (1993).

## 1. Problem presentation:

### Reading the Bible as a middle-class Norwegian youth today

Reading the Bible can be both an intriguing and exhausting experience, depending on what you are looking for, how you search for it and eventually, what you find. It is fair to say that this thesis is by and large generated out of frustration over a Bible reading project that didn't turn out to provide the meaningful readings me and my friends had hoped for. The project that lies behind this thesis is an attempt to answer to the questions that materialized in the frustration. In this chapter, I investigate and present the problems this thesis aims to answer. I will firstly provide a short historical account of the developments within the fields of theology and hermeneutics. This is the academic 'landscape' in which this thesis is situated. Secondly, I will explain how my own experiences of navigating in this landscape have made me realize the problem of uncritically importing a *hermeneutics of liberation* to my own context. Finally in this chapter, the problem of the thesis will be formulated.

#### 1.1 Historical backdrop: A swift look

The shift from modernism to postmodernism that in the 20th century shook the world of arts and sciences, and in consequence the lives of people, was gradual and not done over night. It was a process that in itself contained many processes. One of the most considerable shifts that the postmodern paradigm represented across the disciplines of science can be termed as a shift from 'universality' to 'particularity'. In the late 1970s, J-F. Lyotard, in his book *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge (La Condition Postmoderne: Rapport sur le Savoir)*, defined the postmodern out of the decline of meta-narratives. He criticized the universalist claims of enlightenment, and instead professed his belief in knowledge as conditioned by context and instability.<sup>3</sup>

Within the field of theology, this shift meant that a conscience about the contextuality of all theology became important. Voices of groups that had been silenced and oppressed were growing stronger, and produced theologies that challenged the western-white-male dominated 'universal' theology that for a long time had been dominant both in churches and academic theology. Out of the struggle for a new economical order among Marxist-inspired theologians in South America grew Liberation Theology, out of the struggle against apartheid in South

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<sup>3</sup> Lyotard, J-F.: *Viden og det postmoderne samfunn* (1996), pp 7-8, 105-108.

Africa grew Contextual Theology<sup>4</sup>, and in India, outcasts known as *Dalits* (meaning 'oppressed'), constructed a Dalit Theology. All of these are examples of a greater movement that emphasized the immanent in theology, stating that the social and political realities that surround us shape our theologies. Furthermore, it was claimed that in order to live the Christian gospel, we need to fight the oppressing structures that hold some people down and push some people up. These two statements, resulting in a socially oriented theology from the perspective of the poor and marginalized, have become the credo of what is often referred to as *Liberation Theologies*. The aim of such theologies was, and still is, to respond to the struggle that the poor and the marginalized experience every day. Christopher Rowland, editor of *The Cambridge Companion to Liberation Theology*, explains by the use of an example:

“In a situation [in Brazil in the 1990s,] where hundreds of thousands of peasants were driven off the land their families have farmed for generations, because of international demand for economic growth to service foreign debt, and where many have drifted to the shanty towns which have sprung up on the periphery of large cities, liberation theology flourished. [...] Liberation theology is being worked out [...] wherever the rebuilding of shattered lives takes place.”<sup>5</sup>

Parallel with this, the shift from 'universality' to 'particularity' paved way for new findings in other fields, which later would affect the world of theology. Most important in our case were the developments in the field of hermeneutics. Thanks to F. Schleiermacher (1768-1834), a movement had been started around the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century that put the role of the interpreter more into focus in the interpretation of texts<sup>6</sup>. In the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, M. Heidegger (1889-1976) developed this further into a notion of interpretation as existential understanding; the interpreter does not only interpret a text or a message, but she does in fact interpret herself and her own existence in the process<sup>7</sup>. In 1960, Heidegger's former student Hans-Georg Gadamer (1900-2002) released what became his magnum opus, *Truth and Method (Wahrheit und Methode)*. In it, Gadamer claimed that objectivity in the hermeneutical process was both unachievable and pointless. Rather, he suggested an understanding of the hermeneutical process that resembles a meeting between the text and the interpreter, or if you

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<sup>4</sup> South African Liberation theology was named Contextual theology in order to avoid problems with the apartheid regime. However, Contextual theology is an unfortunate name, as it can give the impression that other theologies are not contextual. After the fall of apartheid, 'Liberation theology' has been used to describe South African Contextual theology.

<sup>5</sup> Rowland, C.: "Introduction: the theology of liberation" in Rowland, C. (Ed.): *The Cambridge Companion to Liberation Theology* (2<sup>nd</sup> edition, 2007), p 2.

<sup>6</sup> Conf. Jeanrond, W.G.: *Theological Hermeneutics: Development and Significance* (1991), p 44.

<sup>7</sup> Conf. Jeanrond (1991), pp 60-61.

may, a collision. He introduced the term *horizon of understanding*, meaning “the totality of all that can be realized or thought about by a person at a given time in history and in a particular culture”<sup>8</sup>. Gadamer claimed that when we read a text, our horizon is fused with the horizon of the text, and out of this fusion, our interpretation of the text occurs. And since our horizon is always changing, as we experience new things and culture around us changes, all interpretations are bound to their time and place. Thus, we are ourselves always responsible for producing new interpretations that correspond with our current situation. Later in the same decade (1964), Michel Foucault (1926-1984) wrote *The Order of Things (Les Mots et les choses)*, in which he launched his idea of *episteme*.<sup>9</sup> The term corresponds with Gadamer’s *horizon*, denoting that every period in history has its own set of conditions, paradigms and ‘truths’ that will both be formative of – and limit – what kind of interpretations we give. Thus, by the time we entered the 1970s, the idea of universal ideas had receded in favor of the school of particularity also in the field of hermeneutics – a movement that would consequently characterize biblical hermeneutics in the time that followed.

The developments towards contextuality in theology and particularity in hermeneutics need to be seen as part of the same postmodern movement. And as theologians started reading biblical texts with the outspoken agenda of reading from the perspectives of different marginalized groups, new hermeneutical methods were created, such as feminist hermeneutics, transgender hermeneutics and the one concerned here; *hermeneutics of liberation*. In *Contextual Bible Reading – African Perspectives*, South African scholar G. West writes:

“The poor and oppressed are those who are socially, politically, economically, or culturally marginalized and exploited. We have made this choice [to read from their perspective] because we believe God is particularly concerned for the poor and the oppressed.”<sup>10</sup>

A *hermeneutics of liberation* is based in a belief that the gospel Christ is the gospel of the poor and the marginalized, and that we should read the Bible from the perspective of the outcasts of society. Often, this notion is based in a focus on Jesus’ words about the poor, especially his proclamation of the prophet Isaiah in Luke 4:18f: “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor...” Explicitly making the choice to read ‘from below’ is thus a result of the cries of the poor being heard in

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<sup>8</sup> Gadamer, H.-G.: *Truth and Method* (1993), p 302.

<sup>9</sup> Foucault, M.: *The Order of Things* (1989), p 30.

<sup>10</sup> West, G.: “Contextual Bible Study”, in (misc.): *Contextual Bible Reading – African Perspectives* (1998), p 7.

the church, and the will to respond to their cries among those who themselves were not poor. Ultimately, the aims of such a hermeneutics are to bring empowerment and liberation to the poor through constructing meaningful readings that can inform a praxis of social equality and change.

## **1.2 When reading ‘from below’ becomes a problem**

As we have seen, reading biblical texts ‘from below’ is a project that has been constructed with the best intentions; empowerment and liberation of those who for different reasons find themselves struggling in society. These are intentions that even the most cold-hearted biblical scholar would find noble. It is a method made possible by developments within postmodern theology and hermeneutics, and it is thus not a surprise that also the academic theological institution where I receive my education in Norway, wanting to keep up with trends in its field, have emphasized *hermeneutics of liberation* in its syllabuses in hermeneutics. Studying at the Faculty of Theology at the University of Oslo, I have been influenced by reading books and articles by theologians such as G. West, J. Cone, J. Sobrino and S. Stålsett. And let me state clearly: I support the struggle of liberation theologians to bring empowerment to the poor and oppressed through theologically founded social change in communities. I have personally spent six months in India studying *Dalit Theology*, and found it deeply meaningful. I even believe that Liberation Theology has much to offer to contexts in Norway as well, such as in the case of the work done by Mr. Stålsett and his colleagues at the Church City Mission in Oslo.

However, this thesis has its starting point in an experience of how reading the Bible utilizing hermeneutics of liberation did not work out well. For the past few years, three friends of mine and me have been meeting every other week to read and discuss texts from the Bible. We are all between the age of 26 and 28 years, and we all have a middle-class background. All come from rural areas close to cities, all have grown up with parents working fulltime in professions such as architect, teacher, social worker and in private business. Early on in our group meetings, we realized that we needed a tool to help us handle the texts – a hermeneutical method that would clarify how to go about interpreting the texts. Inspired as I was with the *hermeneutics of liberation* I had read about in University, I suggested that we should try ‘reading from below’. In the summer of 2007, three of the four members in the group attended

the Norwegian festival Crossroads<sup>11</sup>, where the already mentioned Gerald West held inspiring Bible classes. In the year that followed, the group read numerous texts from both the Old – and the New Testament, utilizing, among other resources, Gerald West's *A Resource Manual for Contextual Bible Study*, which was given to us by the Crossroads Foundation. It is a manual based on West's readings with HIV/AIDS infected women in South Africa. The method challenged us to find the oppressed and marginalized in our context – a context of living as students or employed young adults in Norway's capital city. Time after time, we fell back on the same conclusions; we needed to do something for the homeless drug-addicts, the prostitutes, the people who are visibly poor in Oslo. From time to time we found the texts addressing other suffering in our contexts, but in the social democratic Norway, social oppression is a marginal phenomenon and the people living on the streets are clearly the easiest group to identify. We tried to sort out how our readings should inspire social action in our own spheres and at times we involved ourselves in different campaigns. But even though we as empathic people were able to understand the importance of these readings, a frustration grew steadily the more we tried: Since we ourselves are not poor beggars in Oslo, Dalits or HIV-infected women, our own lives and experiences as Norwegian middle-class youths were left out of the hermeneutical process, as completely irrelevant for our readings of the Bible. We identified ourselves with characters such as 'the rich, young man' in Matthew 19, but sort of wished we were 'the poor widow' in Luke 21. Reading 'from below' had become a problem.

Slightly disillusioned, the group decided to put aside the Bible for a while, so that we could have time to share and discuss the processes of our own lives in the group. However, I have all along had in mind that there must be a way for us to read the holy texts light of our own experiences, without that meaning that we have abandoned or forsaken our poor friends in the streets. And the more we worked with our own processes in the group, the more we insisted that for us, our own experiences and existential thoughts must be seen as valid resources for interpreting texts.

It was while studying in India during the spring term of 2009, that I for the first time encountered the use of autobiographical hermeneutical method in readings of biblical texts.

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<sup>11</sup> The festival is called *Korsvei* in Norwegian.

An article written by a female Dalit theologian, Surekha Nelavala<sup>12</sup>, showed me both how autobiography as a hermeneutical tool allowed personal experiences to enter into dialogue with the texts, and at the same time that it was a method applicable to all kinds of contexts. What you need are readers that are in touch with themselves, who dare to share from their own personal and vulnerable lives in order to find meaning in reading the Bible. The result of my encounter with Nelavala's article is this thesis.

### **1.3 The problem formulated concisely**

To sum up and concretize the problem concerned in the story of this chapter, it is necessary to put into as few words as possible the questions this thesis aims to answer. The problems formulated are:

- **In what way can autobiographical hermeneutical method become a resource for the not poor, not marginalized, not oppressed reader of the Bible?**
- **In what way can a method explicitly facilitating and making heard the interpretations of middle-class people relate to the hermeneutics of liberation that has been produced in Third World contexts?**

The first question will be addressed in theory in Chapter 2 and in practice in the project presented in Chapter 3. The second question is the starting point and center of the discussions in Chapter 4.

And with those formulations, we will now take a look at the theoretical foundation of this thesis.

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<sup>12</sup> Nelavala, S.: "'My' Story is 'Our' Story: An Auto/biographical Feminist Reading of the Hemorrhaging Woman" in *Gurukul Journal of Theological Studies*, vol. XX. Chennai 2009: Gurukul Lutheran Theological College and Research Institute, pp 3-17.

## **2. Theoretical framework:**

### **A presentation of the narrative theory of Paul Ricoeur and autobiographical hermeneutical method**

In this chapter, I will present the method of autobiographical hermeneutics, as we have utilized it in the project's Bible reading group. But in order to get a grip of what we are doing when actively applying our own stories on the biblical narratives, we first need a theoretical framework, including a terminology, which can serve as a fundament for understanding the hermeneutical process of the project. In what now follows, I will therefore firstly present important traits of the narrative theory of Paul Ricoeur (1913-2005). His theories of textual narratives as imitations of life and our own life narratives as existential life interpretation serves as the basis for understanding what this whole project and thesis is about. Secondly, I will present the method of autobiographical hermeneutics in greater detail; a definition, its strengths, pitfalls and aims. Thirdly, I will unite the theory and the method, and address how Ricoeur's notion of *mimesis* works out when applied on biblical narratives. Finally in the chapter, I will in short discuss how this thesis relates other research on autobiographical biblical hermeneutics and the discourse of subjectivity in interpreting the Bible.

#### **2.1 The contributions of Paul Ricoeur to understanding narratives**

We have earlier seen, in short, how the shift from modernism to postmodernism paved way for auto-/biography as a resource for making theology and interpreting the Bible. Still, we need to take a closer look at one philosopher from that period, whose contributions to the field of philosophy and hermeneutics is especially important to this thesis; Paul Ricoeur. Ricoeur was concerned with narratives, which in more than one way is the subject matter of the project of reading biblical texts using an auto-/biographical hermeneutical method.

##### **2.1.1 Narratives as existential life interpretation**

Ricoeur was, as several before him, concerned with *phenomenology*, that is, philosophy about things *as they are experienced*. In opposition to those more concerned with *epistemology*, Ricoeur would not separate the subject experiencing from the object experienced. They are bound together in a mysterious way, and this mystery is the *phenomena* that Ricoeur wanted to shed light on. Inspired by Heidegger's existentialism, he expanded the field of hermeneutics to be concerned not only with the interpretation of written texts, but of *life as a*



*text* we need to interpret. This points to the fact that the way we create interpretations of our lives is through telling stories. In other words, the mysteries binding together the subjects and objects in our lives are the stories we create about them. We create narratives about our lives, with plots that connect different actions and events to each other to explain why people act like they do. We make sense of our existence through narratives.

### 2.1.2 The three mimesis

However, Ricoeur points to that we don't understand our lives merely through telling our own stories; we do it by telling and listening to historical and fictional stories as well. These are stories that resemble our own lives to such an extent that we can relate to them. They are *mimesis*, imitations of life. The term 'mimesis' is used by Aristotle in his writings on Greek tragedies, how they are similar to life. Ricoeur expands the term to be valid for all stories, and claims that there are three mimesis to every story – three levels in which every story imitates life.

*Mimesis*<sub>1</sub> (*M*<sub>1</sub>) concerns the way stories play on the reader's pre-acquired skills on how to understand and relate to the actions, events and time of a story. Ricoeur writes:

“[...] the composition of the plot is grounded in a pre-understanding of the world of action, its meaningful structures, its symbolic resources, and its temporal character.”<sup>13</sup>

*M*<sub>1</sub> thus draws on the common ground of human experiences in three ways. Firstly, all stories are built on what Ricoeur calls a “conceptual network of action”<sup>14</sup>. That is, a structure in which actions find meaning in relation to terms such as ‘goals’, ‘motives’, ‘agents’, ‘means’, ‘circumstances’ and the ordering of those terms. This is possible to relate to because we ourselves tend to understand our own actions according to goals and circumstances, and ourselves as agents using justifiable means. Secondly, the text requires of us to understand the symbolism of actions. E.g., most stories will not explain the meaning of someone waving a white flag during a battle; it will simply convey that someone waved a white flag. It is taken for granted that we are able to interpret the symbolism of the action ourselves. Thus, such an interpretation requires understanding the conditions under which the symbolic action takes place, such as the socio-political context of a narrative. Thirdly, we need to understand the relationship between time and actions in a narrative. Stories are always placed within a frame

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<sup>13</sup> Ricoeur, P.: *Time and Narrative I* (1984), p 54.

<sup>14</sup> Ricoeur (1984), p 55.

of time – they have a start and an end. In between these, there is a ‘now’, a ‘past’ and a ‘future’, according to where we are in reading the story. In our lives, we act according to what we want the future be like, but at the same time according to how we have experienced the consequences of our actions in the past. Still, the moment we act, is always ‘now’. Thus actions are always highly temporal; they point to a future, a past, and a now. This temporality consequently requires actions to be put into a larger structure – a narrative. Actions call for narration, and as readers, we need to be able to orientate ourselves in the time of the story. In conclusion,  $M_1$  points to how we are able to understand narratives on the grounds of how we narrate our own lives. The mimetic elements of narratives as structural, symbolic and temporal precede the reading of the text itself; they are conditions that lie ‘behind’ the text, and make us able to read and understand narratives at all. In Ricoeur’s words,  $M_1$  is therefore a *prefiguration*, an already existing structure.

On the other hand, *Mimesis*<sub>2</sub> ( $M_2$ ) is a *configuration* – it is a complete composition.  $M_2$  is the narrative itself, it is the text. According to Ricoeur,  $M_2$  takes on the role of mediator between different elements in the text, in order to make the text become a complete unit. This is a process which is mirrored in our own existential strive to make configurations out of our lives. And again, it is in three ways this process occurs in narrative texts. Firstly, in  $M_2$ , events and incidents are ordered into a coherent story. In this way, the events of the story are given significance in how they relate to a bigger picture. The story is given a direction; it is driven forward by a plot. Secondly, the plot places elements that surround these events, which would otherwise not be connected, into a meaningful order in the story. These are elements such as agents, goals, means, sudden surprises, circumstances. A story may tell you that “It was a Tuesday afternoon, the sun was burning on his skin, and his girlfriend had just left town to kill a man”. These are events and characters that don’t necessarily have anything to do with each other, but in this story are brought together as parts of the same plot. This imitates how we hold together events in our own life stories to cope with existence. Still, the fact that the sun was burning really doesn’t have an obvious connection to the girlfriend leaving to kill someone, even if we put those pieces of information in the same story. It could even be destructive to the plot; the girl became so exhausted from walking under the burning sun, that she didn’t reach the man she wanted to kill. Such opposition to the meaningful plot of the story makes Ricoeur conclude that in the configuring of stories, the result will always be a

“*discordant concordance*”<sup>15</sup>: It will be a complete configuration pierced with incoherent information. Thirdly, there is mediation in  $M_2$  between the two aspects of time in the story – the episodic and configurative. Between an event that occurs seen as isolated from the rest of the story, and the same event understood as part of the sequence of events that constitutes the story. This mediation takes place in the ordering of events chronologically. By doing so, each event is given a drive forward in time, towards the end of the story. Thus, the episodic aspect of time in stories is always pointing forward – we act directed towards the future. On the other hand, the configurative aspect can be pointing backwards in time as well as forward. When we see the full picture at the endpoint of the story, we can go back in the story to understand why something happened. The text has one time span, from beginning to end, but within that span, there are two temporal dimensions. In  $M_2$  we become time travelers, forward in the time of the text, from episode to episode until we reach the configurative aspect at the end and are enabled to travel backwards again. To sum up the ways in which narratives imitate life at the level of  $M_2$ , we can say that it is the place where all the ingredients that make up a story are ordered into a configuration. We are presented with a narrative that is complete; still, elements that are incoherent with the intentions of the plot are present, threatening the whole concept of the narrative as existential interpretation. Narratives are thus *discordant concordances*. Finally, in  $M_2$ , we are allowed to reflect upon the story by going back and forward in the time of the text.  $M_2$  is thus the place where the structural, symbolic and temporal elements of  $M_1$  are put into concrete use, as we read the configuration that is the text.

Lastly, *Mimesis*<sub>3</sub> ( $M_3$ ) contains the potential of interpretations that arise in reading the text. When reading the text, the narrative of our own life and the narrative of the text meet, as described by the aforementioned “fusion of horizons” in Gadamer’s hermeneutics. The result of this meeting is the creation of a new figuration, a *refiguration*. Ricoeur writes:

“[...] I shall say that *mimesis*<sub>3</sub> marks the intersection of the world of the text and the world of the hearer or reader; the intersection, therefore, of the world configured by the poem and the world wherein real action occurs and unfolds its specific temporality.”<sup>16</sup>

When the world of my life’s narrative and the world of the text’s narrative intersect, the possibility occurs for them to interweave. In this way, the actions of the text become actions in my life; reading a story might change how I act. This place, where I act according to the

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<sup>15</sup> Ricoeur (1984), p 69.

<sup>16</sup> Ricoeur (1984), p 71.

experience of reading the text, is the *refiguration*. For Ricoeur, there are two features of the refiguration that are especially noteworthy. Firstly, refiguration is based on the belief that literary works “bring an experience to language and thus come into the world”.<sup>17</sup> This means that the episodes of a text do not only mean something semantically speaking, but they point to a reference in real life. If we want to understand the text, we must understand the reference of the text. It is not just a narrative, but a narrative about something. This “about something” harbors the potential of interpretations that is released through its application on our lives in the refiguration. Secondly, in the refiguration, time in the configured text and time in my life stand in a dialectic relationship. What happened “then” in the text becomes something that happens “now” in my life. Norwegian biblical scholar H.S. Kvanvig, when writing on Ricoeur’s hermeneutics, correctly suggests that the significance of reference in texts and the emphasis on a dialectic relationship between time in the text and time in our existence, point to a hermeneutical process in reading the texts: There is a movement back and forth between the narrative of the text and the narrative of own lives in the reading.<sup>18</sup> This movement is in sum what  $M_3$  is all about: The searching for meaning in the text on the background of one’s own experiences.

To sum up, it is important to state that Ricoeur’s three mimesis are *in* every narrative, not just in the process of reading them. They are mimetic aspects of life in texts, which in our readings pose the question: What does this plot say about my (the reader’s) life? We ask the texts to reveal our lives to us. Finally, the concept of the three *mimesis* can be illustrated in the following figure, inspired by a figure with Norwegian text found in Kvanvig’s book<sup>19</sup>:

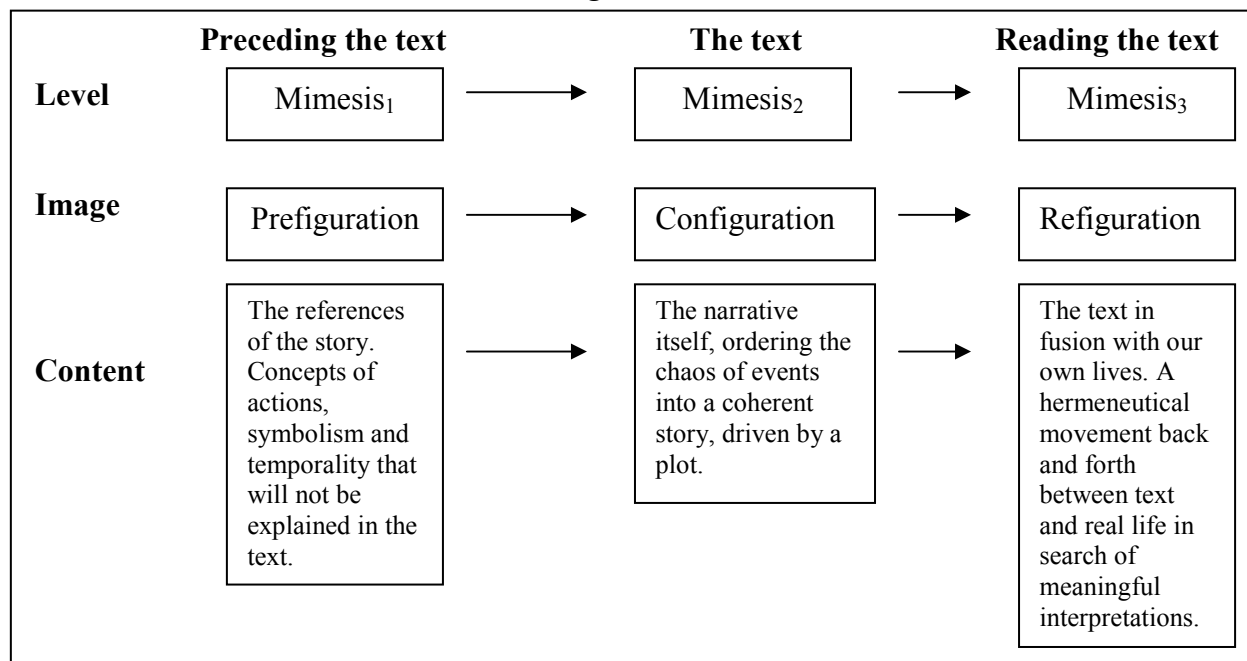
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<sup>17</sup> Ricoeur (1984), p 79.

<sup>18</sup> Kvanvig, H.S.: *Historisk Bibel og bibelsk historie* (1999), p 248.

<sup>19</sup> Kvanvig (1999), p 246.

Figure 1



## 2.2 Autobiographical hermeneutical method

Autobiographical hermeneutics stems from the postmodern notion of objectivity in the hermeneutical process as a ‘mission impossible’. It is a form of *reader response criticism*; “a pragmatic approach that emphasizes the role of the reader in determining meaning”<sup>20</sup>. The method of explicitly applying one’s own story on a text in the hermeneutical process grew popular in several environments parallelly in the decades after Gadamer and Foucault, but had its definite ‘breakthrough’ in the 1990s. In a 1995 theme issue of the Society of Biblical Literature’s journal *Semeia* on autobiographical biblical criticism, S.D. Moore stated that “now, an autobiographical flourish in a critical essay is a fashion statement”<sup>21</sup>. Feminist theologians were among the first to make use of the method, focusing on how modern hermeneutics were male-dominated in the attempts to separate theory from subjectivity, reflection from emotion and public from private. For feminists, autobiography has become a tool that allows them to construct a hermeneutics that is not based in a patriarchic worldview, but in their own experiences<sup>22</sup>. The different communities of Liberation Theology were also among the first to make use of autobiographical hermeneutics in their interpretations of biblical texts. The mentioned Surekha Nelavala, states that

<sup>20</sup> Powell, M.A: *What is narrative criticism? A new approach to the Bible* (1993), p 16.

<sup>21</sup> Moore (1995), p 19.

<sup>22</sup> Conf. e.g. Dube, M.: *Postcolonial feminist interpretation of the Bible* (2000).

“In the past, autobiographies were typically confined to lives of famous people and celebrities. Many marginalized groups [...] have embraced autobiographical narrations as a method and tool to present an alternative view of history”<sup>23</sup>.

For the marginalized Dalits, autobiographical hermeneutics has allowed them to bring the texts of the Bible closer to their suffering, and to be heard. Today, autobiographical hermeneutical method is becoming housebroken in the household of academic theology. And I guess one could say that this thesis is part of that process, as the ‘twist’ in this thesis is the utilization of autobiographical hermeneutical method by ordinary, Norwegian, middle-class youths.

### 2.2.1 Definition

The fact that autobiographical hermeneutics is a growing movement within biblical criticism is very much positive in the sense that much work is being done within the field. This has helped identify some pitfalls in using this method, and it has also resulted in clearer definitions of what the method is. In an important book on the subject from 2002, *Autobiographical Biblical Criticism – between text and self*, editor I.R. Kitzberger quotes M.A. Caws, who has explained autobiographical criticism as “outspoken involvement on the part of the critic with the subject matter”<sup>24</sup>. Autobiographical hermeneutics is thus subjective criticism – it does not attempt to cover up the traces of the reader in the hermeneutical process; rather it underlines them, and situates the work done within a clearly defined reality. It is a hermeneutical method which facilitates the meeting of *my story* and *the story of the text*. In an article on the context of narratives, H.S. Kvanvig points out that the elements in narrative texts are the same as in the stories we tell about our lives orally. With Ricoeur’s *Mimesis*<sub>2</sub>, he points to how we organize events and incidents into a meaningful plot. This goes to show that an important feature of autobiographical hermeneutics is self-narration. When we interpret autobiographically, we are at the same time reading the text of the story and the text of our lives<sup>25</sup>. For some scholars, however, autobiographical interpretation is something we do even when we are not aware of it. In Kitzberger’s aforementioned book, D. Patte suggests an understanding of all textual interpretation as autobiographical, supporting himself on Gadamer’s *fusion of horizons*: “Any interpretation of a biblical text, including the most rigorous technical understandings, is autobiographical – it is framed by

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<sup>23</sup> Nelavala (2009), p 3.

<sup>24</sup> Caws, M.A. in Kitzberger, I.R. “Preliminaries” in Kitzberger, I.R. (ed.): *Autobiographical Biblical Criticism – between text and self* (2002), p 3.

<sup>25</sup> Kvanvig, H.S.: “Narrativ kontekst”, p 8 – see note on this source in Chapter 6.3.

preunderstandings.”<sup>26</sup> One could agree with Patte in this, in saying that what autobiographical hermeneutical method is about, is making visible, enhancing and making use of mechanisms that already apply when interpreting texts. It is not a new creation, but the result of a discourse on how to speak truly about what is happening when we read texts.

The definitions given above are valid. However, in light of the application of the narrative theory of Ricoeur in this thesis, I have found it necessary to construct a definition that includes the narrative aspects of doing autobiographical readings. My definition of autobiographical hermeneutical method is thus: *Reading narratives with the explicit aim to facilitate a dialogical meeting between the narrative of the text and the narrative of the reader's own life.*

### **2.2.2 The pitfall of self-indulgence**

When using a method such as the one defined above, one needs to be aware of some mistakes that can undermine the whole project of such a reading. And criticism against biblical scholars professing the use of explicitly subjective readings has been made heard over the past decades. However, at this point, I will only concentrate on what I view as the most important issue in this debate. A more thorough discussion of the criticism of the method and the prospective weaknesses of the project will be given in Chapter 4, when the material of the project is available for discussion.

The most important pitfall to avoid when interpreting autobiographically is to become self-indulgent. There is a danger that the reader can ‘use’ the text only to confirm whatever she/he needs to confirm in her/his life. Biblical texts can be used to construct all kinds of theology, but usually an interpretation will be susceptible to criticism from other readers, either on how one has understood the *reference* of the text, or on how the text is applied in constructing a meaning for people today. The problem when using autobiographical hermeneutical method is that criticizing becomes hard, because it gets personal. As Robert Fowler writes, when summing up the articles in *Semeia*'s theme issue on autobiographical biblical criticism: “The real challenge is that these essays are so personal. It is one thing to comment on another person's scholarship; it is quite another thing to comment on another person's life.”<sup>27</sup> When the frame of reference is a person's own life, it is difficult to state that their interpretation is

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<sup>26</sup> Patte, D.: “Can One Be Critical without Being Autobiographical?” in Kitzberger (ed.)(2002), p 38.

<sup>27</sup> Fowler, R.M.: “Taking It Personally: A Personal Response”, in *Semeia – Taking it Personally: Autobiographical Biblical Criticism*, vol. 72, Atlanta (1995): Society of Biblical Literature, p 231.

unacceptable. A ‘bad’ interpretation will at the most be labeled as a radical contribution to an epistemological discourse. Also, it may silence critique that an important aim of the method is to bring more voices into the polyphony of interpretations of the texts. Therefore, it is necessary for the interpreter to be his/her own hardest critic. To ask the difficult question of ‘Am I being honest to myself and open to the text, or do I come to this reading with the agenda of ‘bending’ my interpretation in a certain direction?’ In Ricoeur’s narrative theory, the term *discordant concordance* was introduced. It denotes the fact that all stories, including our own life stories, are composed out of elements that do not really have anything to do with each other. Therefore, all stories are threatening to dissolve. Or to put it in the words of Irish poet W.B. Yeats; “Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold”.<sup>28</sup> Because of this chronic state of our own existential stories, the temptation to create simplified interpretations both of our own lives and of the textual narratives can become heavy to resist. Here lies the pitfall of self-indulgence: Simplifying in order to avoid the difficult. Autobiographical hermeneutical method is not a method in which ‘anything goes’, but a method that requires a continuous critical assessment of oneself. This critical assessment again requires a frame of reference, a standard that tells the reader when an interpretation has gone wrong. We must therefore pose the question why do we read the Bible this way – what are we searching for?

### 2.2.3 What does the autobiographical critic want?

To answer this question, I will first return to Robert Fowler and his comment on the articles in the relevant theme issue of *Semeia*. After underlining the difficulties of criticizing autobiographical interpretations, Fowler does come up with a set of deeply interesting critical questions to pose, in his criticism of D. Hagner’s article in the same issue. I think Fowler’s questions reveal much of the intentions of autobiographical hermeneutics:

“To Donald Hagner: [...] Your story strikes me as more curriculum vitae than autobiography. And it’s hard to see how your autobiography impinges upon the passages in Matthew that you exegete. What difference does your personal experience make in your exegesis of Matthew? Where are you and your exegesis vulnerable? Where have you taken risks? Where is your exegesis “conflicted and ambiguous”?”<sup>29</sup>

In the Christian tradition, the Bible is viewed as a resource for meaningful life interpretation. People have come to the texts throughout centuries and found meaning in reading them. But

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<sup>28</sup> From the poem “The Second Coming”, first published in *The Dial* (1920). The poem is publicly available on WikiSource: [http://en.wikisource.org/wiki/The\\_Second\\_Coming](http://en.wikisource.org/wiki/The_Second_Coming)

<sup>29</sup> Fowler (1995), pp 236-237.



as Fowler's comment to Hagner shows, a reader utilizing autobiographical hermeneutics believe that the full capacity of meaning in the biblical texts is found only when we dear to involve ourselves in the reading process. When we dear to become vulnerable readers, opening up our lives to the impact of the text. When we open our stories to the characters of the narratives in the Scripture, and dear to challenge ourselves on how they mirror us. When we take risks, and know that every reading is a battle of conflicts and ambiguities. This is demanding, and as pointed out, the risk of becoming quasi-autobiographical, that is, telling your story without making yourself vulnerable, can be tempting. Fowler's questions address these issues and send us in the right direction.

At this point, it should also be mentioned that from the perspective of the Christian reader, the autobiographic critic locates the credibility of the texts in a new way. Traditionally, much Old Testament scholarship has read the Old Testament as *salvation history* or *faith history*.<sup>30</sup> These are readings in which the Old Testament is given credibility because it narrates the acts of God in human history, and thus serves as a background for understanding the New Testament. In these readings, the Old Testament is concerned with 'what happened then'. The autobiographical reader, on the other hand, anchors the credibility of the texts in his/her own life. In their readings the question is: *Is God somehow visible in the story of my life?* These readings are concerned with the Old Testament stories as mirrors to something that is happening now.

I conclusion, autobiographical critics want to involve their life experiences as critical voices and additions to the polyphony of interpretations of the narratives in the Bible. At the same time, they wish to make the voices of the text audible in their own lives. To the extent that this is achieved, these two aims and the dialectic relationship between them is what make autobiographical hermeneutical method a powerful instrument for finding meaningful readings of Biblical texts.

#### **2.2.4 Who am I – identity as a factor in autobiographical readings**

The two final, but important issues I will address in this segment is the question of identity in autobiographical readings. Or rather, identities. The first issue is about the many sides of an identity. The other is about how our identity is determined by who we are in relation to others, that is, me as part of a community. I will address the first mentioned first.

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<sup>30</sup> Conf. Kvanvig (1999), chapters 2 and 3.

In her article in *Autobiographical Biblical Criticism*, I.R. Kitzberger points to the fact that our identity is not made up of one part, but is a complex structure consisting of many images of how we perceive ourselves in different situations. On the one side, we do try to frame who we are into one concept of identity – me – but on the other side, we must acknowledge that our identity is made up by many identities; what she calls *personal plurals*. Jens the theological student and Jens the boyfriend are two different sides of the author of this thesis. In addition, we are socially located according to different qualities we possess, such as gender, race, nationality, class, sexual orientation or religious affiliation. In interpreting texts, we should therefore not only present our interpretation as an expression of our totality, but as shaped by parts of us that are especially affected by the text. In her reading of the Gospel of John in light of the tragic death of two children she cared for as priest at a hospital, Kitzberger confesses that her interpretation of the text is colored both by her identity as a biblical scholar and by her identity as clinic chaplain. She explains:

“Both selves belong to very different worlds, [...] yet these different selves became intersected and formed my self-text from which a reading was born that would not have been possible with a personal singular.”<sup>31</sup>

Kitzberger has an important point. In order to be able to realize the potential of the meeting of ‘my story’ and the story of the text, we need to open up the different sides of who we are to the text. Also, Kitzberger’s analysis makes evident that it is only through staying in touch with the fluid and shifting concept of identities we are able to grasp in what way our story criticizes the text. ‘Does this insult me, make me furious or curious because I am a man?’ ‘Or as a political socialist?’ Reading autobiographically thus makes it necessary for the reader to take time to take a deep breath and pose the questions of ‘Where am I in my life now?’, ‘Who am I now?’, ‘Who have I been?’ and ‘Which of the personal plurals in my identity are affected when I read the text?’

The other important aspect I wish to address in relation to identity in autobiographical readings is the communal side of our being. None of us live completely on our own – life is lived out in our relationships to what is around us. In communities. We are both part of communities based on geography and based on social, cultural or economical identity. In our lives, we tend to find comfort in several of such communities; a congregation, the local village, a football club or a choir. When we interpret autobiographically, the communities of

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<sup>31</sup> Kitzberger, R.I.: “Flowing Identities” in Kitzberger (ed.)(2002), p 90.

our lives always resonate in our interpretations. H.S. Kvanvig has termed this factor in our stories *narrative circles*.<sup>32</sup> All the stories we tell, read or are told are set in a context that is again part of a larger context. A story about my childhood is also a story about my family. It might also be a story about my neighborhood. Family and neighborhood are then two circles on the outside of me in the story. In this way, ‘my story’ is never just ‘mine’, it involves the communities that are the arenas of my life. In more traditional postmodern hermeneutics, the community has often been the location from which the text has been read. This was the case e.g. in my own work in India, where I studied ‘Dalit hermeneutics’; a way of working hermeneutically which American scholar S.D. Moore has termed *positional criticism*.<sup>33</sup> The danger of utilizing such a method is to become an essentializing. Emphasizing oneself as a part of a community can limit the interpretations we are able to give in meeting a text, because we define ourselves based on only one of the many positions and plurals in our identity. Therefore, the relationship between self and community must be a dialectic one when interpreting autobiographically. We interpret as our selves, and still as part of communities; we need to take responsibility for our own interpretations, but at the same time make them heard in the communities that play a role in shaping them. Also, sometimes the experiences we use to interpret stories are shared communal experiences. This should be reflected in our interpretations. An autobiographical interpretation of a text has to mirror the tension between ourselves as individuals and part of communities and our experiences as private or communal, simply because this is a tension with which we all live every day.

To sum up segment 2.2 on autobiographical hermeneutical method, we have seen that in this thesis, the definition of the method is *reading narratives with the explicit aim to facilitate a dialogical meeting between the narrative of the text and the narrative of the reader’s own life*. We have seen that this is a task that requires a great amount of reflection upon one’s own identity, social location and the aims of reading the texts. It also requires that we dare to be self critic and pose the right questions to our own readings. If we fail to reflect and criticize, we are faced with the risk of producing self-indulgent, meaningless nonsense. But if we succeed, the result can become deeply meaningful readings for people in all kinds of contexts and social locations.

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<sup>32</sup> Kvanvig (1999), pp 264-265.

<sup>33</sup> Moore (1995), p 25.

### **2.3 Applying the notion of mimesis on Biblical texts and reading them autobiographically**

We have now concentrated on the narrative theory of Ricoeur and autobiographical hermeneutical method separately – it is time to see how they come together in this thesis. We will now see how Ricoeur's concept of the three mimesis can be applied to reading biblical texts, and what role the method of autobiographical hermeneutics plays in that.

For this, we will turn to the work of the earlier mentioned H.S. Kvanvig, who in his book *Historisk Bibel og bibelsk historie (Historical Bible and biblical history)* addresses the use of Paul Ricoeur's hermeneutics in reading the Bible. Kvanvig does this in reference to Ricoeur's own discourse on the relationship between mimetic processes in historical narratives and in fiction narratives. This is important, because in the Bible, we encounter both narratives that are clearly fiction and those that claim to refer to historical events. Kvanvig concludes that there are differences that come into play when applying the notion of mimesis on historical contra fictional narratives<sup>34</sup>: In M1, it is important to note that while fiction stories make use of reflections upon human action, historical narratives point to actual human action. In M2, we see that in a fiction story, a plot is created by a narrator over an imagined past, while the plot in historical narratives consists of actual historical events, and is interpreted by a historian. In M3, we meet fictional texts with the understanding that they tell us something true about life, that we can relate to. Historical narratives, on the other hand, are expected to tell us something about our past that we can learn from. This last point is important to stress, because it denotes an ethical side of dealing with actual history. We owe it to the victims of atrocities in the past not only to state what happened, but to hear their stories and learn from that. The historian is thus responsible both stating that something actually happened, and for choosing an angle to tell what happened from. Still, historical narratives are similar to fiction narratives in the sense that the historian will always only have fragments of history as her raw material; configuring the pieces of the puzzle into a coherent history will always be a matter of *discordant concordance* – of constructing a whole out of pieces that are not really related.

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<sup>34</sup> See Kvanvig (1999), pp 248-251.

According to Kvanvig, some scholars have claimed that these differences instruct us to read historical narratives and fiction differently<sup>35</sup>, stating that in reading historical narratives, we have to start with understanding the event *behind* the text, then read the text and then reflect upon it. However, for Ricoeur, an important point in the discourse on reading historical narratives and fictional narratives was that the hermeneutical process of the three mimesis applies to both. Both types of stories are mimetic of life in the same ways. Thus, Kvanvig points out that when we read the narratives of the Old Testament, the same process applies to how we read all of them. The fact that some stories are presented as history, does not reject the idea that when reading, it is the text, and not what is behind the text, that is the subject matter. We may pose questions to the text and look for answers behind it, but those questions will always arise out of our reading of the text. It is mimesis<sub>2</sub>, the text itself, and not mimesis<sub>1</sub>, that is the starting point of the reading process. This is important; it means that our sources for understanding the theology of the Old Testament are the literary texts, and not the available research ‘behind’ them. That being said, we remember from the presentation of mimesis that there is no way to access m<sub>2</sub> except through m<sub>3</sub>. If the theology of the text is in m<sub>2</sub>, this theology is only accessible to us through the filter of our own experiences in m<sub>3</sub>. In this scheme of things, autobiographical method comes in as m<sub>3</sub>. The method itself is the tool we have to access the theology – and potential of meaning – in the narratives of the Old Testament.

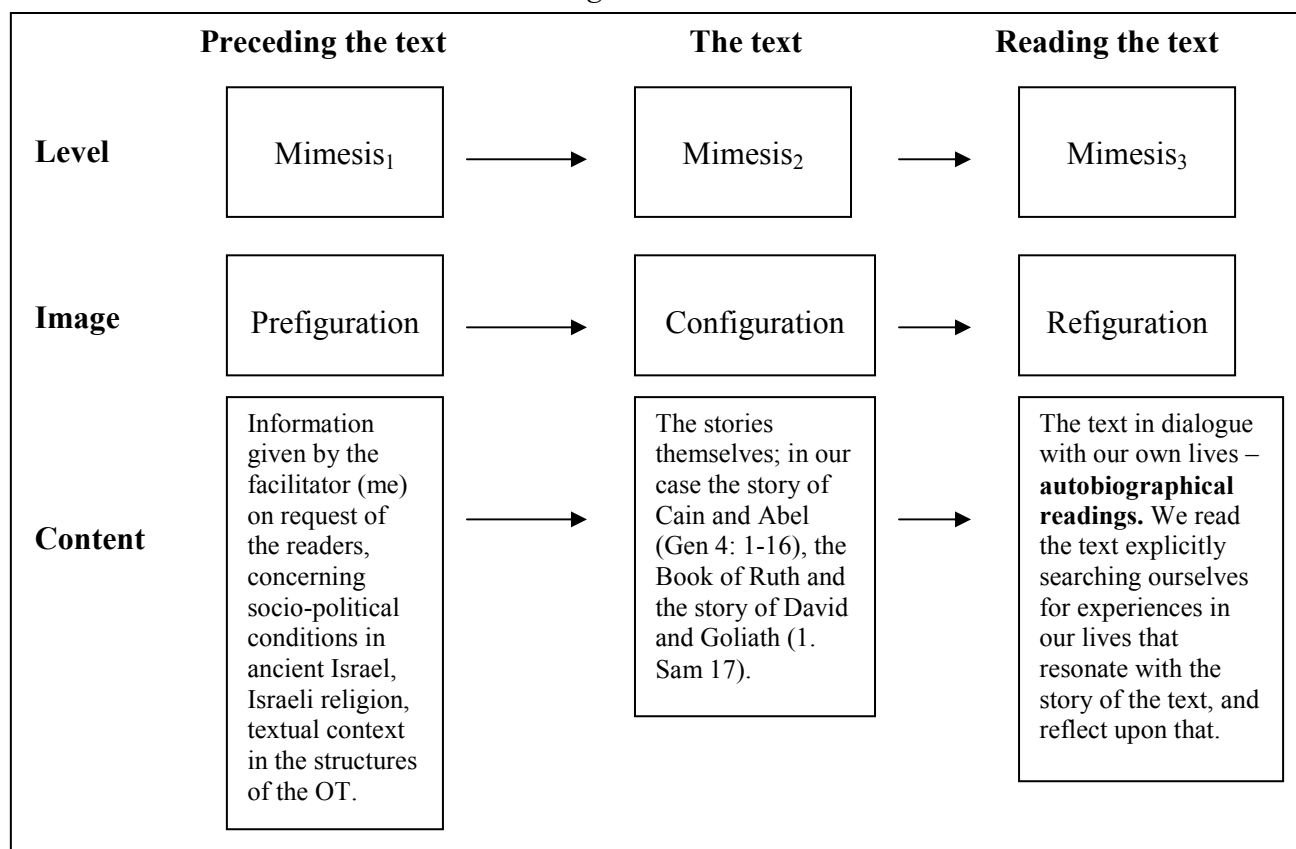
To conclude, I will quote Ingrid Rosa Kitzberger, in explaining about how she went about writing her autobiographical interpretation of the Gospel of John: “No method has been employed; or rather, the method was *in* the process”<sup>36</sup>. The process is described in the narrative theory of Ricoeur, and the method has been firmly presented. The following figure portrays how the method finds its natural place in the process, and concretizes how the three stages of Ricoeur’s theory work when reading Old Testament narratives:

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<sup>35</sup> Such as S. Croatto, see Kvanvig (1999), p 252.

<sup>36</sup> Kitzberger (2002), p 92.

Figure 2



## 2.4 Placing this thesis in a context of autobiographical hermeneutical research

While the field of autobiographical biblical hermeneutics has been evolving internationally for the past decades, little has happened in this field in Norway. While we in the footnotes of this thesis will find references to works such as *Autobiographical Biblical Criticism* by Kitzberger (Ed.), Surekha Nelavala's article "My story is *Our* story", and Semeia's theme edition *Taking it personally*, the only Norwegian works referred to in this thesis, are Helge Kvanvig's texts on biblical hermeneutics and Elisabeth Tveito Johnsen's "Even Confirmants read the Bible!" ("Selv konfirmanter leser Bibelen!")<sup>37 38</sup>; none of them engage directly in autobiographical readings. In the following, I will briefly explain how this thesis relates to the work already available.

<sup>37</sup> Tveito Johnsen, E.: "Selv konfirmanter leser Bibelen!" in Tveito Johnsen, E. (Ed.): *Barneteologi og kirkens ritualer* (2007), pp 231-248.

<sup>38</sup> Tveito Johnsen's article is written in the context of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Norway, in which all youth members go through the rite of *confirmation* at the age of 15. 'Confirmant' in the title thus refers to the persons being confirmed.

When looking at the available material on autobiography as a resource for reading the Bible, the most striking element that distinguishes my project from earlier work, is a combination of social location and contextual awareness. When it comes to social location, we see that much of the work that has been done internationally is based in experiences of oppression, marginalization and poverty. Examples of this are Nelavala's article in the Gurukul Journal of Theological Studies, which is situated in an Indian Dalit context, Lori Rowett's article "My Papa was called Bubba, but his real name was Leroy: Violence, social location, and Job" in *Autobiographical Biblical Criticism*<sup>39</sup>, which is situated in an African-American context, and R. D. Maldonado's "Reading Malinche Reading Ruth: Toward a Hermeneutics of Betrayal" in the mentioned edition of *Semeia*<sup>40</sup>, which is situated in the context of a Latin American *mestizaje*<sup>41</sup>. As we will see in Chapter 4, the epistemological gap between my project and projects of liberation in contexts of oppression make it necessary to discuss the relationship between them. Interestingly – and this is about contextual awareness – some of the articles in both *Semeia* and *Autobiographical Biblical Criticism* are written by Western scholars<sup>42</sup>; none of them shed light on the socio-political aspects of their contexts. My project is thus different from much of what has been written on autobiographical biblical hermeneutics, because its explicit goal is to find meaningful readings for middle-class people of a Western society and to enter into dialogue with Liberation theology about the theological ramifications of facilitating such readings.

Another thing that distinguishes this project from other research in the field is the theoretical framework of the narrative theory of Paul Ricoeur. None of the articles, books or projects I have encountered in my work on autobiographical biblical hermeneutics have shed light on the philosophical question: What is it that happens when we read narratives autobiographically? As one can see from my footnotes earlier in this chapter, one theologian that has worked on understanding the significance of Ricoeur's theories for readers of the Bible is Helge S. Kvanvig. It is safe to say that this thesis is greatly indebted to Kvanvig's work on relating Ricoeur to biblical hermeneutics. Still, Kvanvig's main contribution on Paul

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<sup>39</sup> Rowett, L.: "My Papa was called Bubba, but his real name was Leroy: Violence, social location, and Job" in Kitzberger (2002), pp 151-163.

<sup>40</sup> Maldonado, R.D.: "Reading Malinche Reading Ruth: Toward a Hermeneutics of Betrayal" in *Semeia – Taking it Personally: Autobiographical Biblical Criticism* (1995), pp 91-109. .

<sup>41</sup> *Mestizaje* means 'mixture'; it is used to denote people who are descendants of both colonial and indigenous people in Latin America.

<sup>42</sup> Such as Gruber, M.I.: "The Personal Voice and the Listening Heart" and Brett, M.G.: "Self Criticism, Cretan Liars, and the Sly Redactors of Genesis", both in Kitzberger (Ed.) (2002).

Ricoeur and narratives as existential life interpretation, found in the book *Historisk Bibel og Bibelsk Historie (Historical Bible and biblical history)*, is a philosophical and theoretical hermeneutical approach. It does not relate to any empirical research of actually reading biblical narratives on the background of Ricoeur's theories. That makes this project different from his.

The one that has come the closest of doing a similar project to this one in Norway is Elisabeth Tveito Johnsen. In her article, mentioned above, she presents a way of reading the Bible contextually with fifteen-year-old confirmants in the church. Her project attempts at constructing liberating readings for youths in a Norwegian context. She also addresses the need for a hermeneutics of liberation that can facilitate a discourse on who are given the status of subjects the readings that roam from the pulpits of Norwegian churches every Sunday. Thus, she engages in a dialogue with Liberation theology when reading biblical texts in Norway. However, as her project utilizes contextual Bible study as methodology, it allows less thorough readings on the part of the participants. The readings she facilitates opens up for the participants to share experiences, but does not make room for the existential dive into the story of each of them. It is therefore not quite a project on autobiographical hermeneutical method.

In conclusion, it seems that this thesis and project has its own place in the landscape of autobiographical biblical hermeneutics. It finds its location in relation to two needs that have been explicated above. Firstly, there is a need in the field internationally for more theological reflection concerning the facilitation of 'readings of the privileged'. And secondly, there is a need for more studies on autobiographical readings of biblical texts in Norwegian contexts.

That reflection concludes Chapter 2, on the theoretical framework of the project and how it relates to other research within the field. We will now move on to the presentation of the work done in the Bible reading group of the project, which constitutes Chapter 3.



### **3. Project presentation**

In this chapter I will present the readings of the texts that we read in the project group; the story of David and Goliath in 1 Sam 17, the Book of Ruth, and the story of Cain and Abel in Genesis 4:1-16. In presenting the story of David and Goliath, we will focus on the interpretation of “Julie”, while in the case of Cain and Abel, we take a closer look at “John’s” interpretation. Finally, it is “Jill’s” interpretation that will be presented as the main trajectory for our dealings with the Book of Ruth. Where significant, the readings of the other participants are presented in brief as complementary comments. The interpretations will be presented without wrapping; comments are given only in a separate paragraph towards the end of the chapter. Lastly in the chapter, the evaluations of the project from the participants in the group will be given. But before we look at the data, it is necessary to explain how the project was organized and accomplished.

#### **3.1 A qualitative research project**

The project this thesis is built on is a qualitative research project, meaning, it is based on non-numerical data. It does not seek to answer the question of how autobiographical hermeneutical method can become a resource for the not poor, not marginalized, not oppressed reader of the Bible by asking questions of *what, where and when*. Instead, it probes deeper into the subject matter and asks the questions of *how and why*. These are questions that require time and reflection to answer – and the answers will often be of great length. Thus, I have in this project worked with a small group of four persons reading the Bible, myself included. This has allowed me to listen to and read each participant’s autobiographical interpretation in great depth. The project is hence built on the analysis of a few carefully chosen samples rather than on a large number of random samples, which would be the quantitative methodology. In practice this means that I have chosen to go in-depth on selected interpretations given by people who fit the project’s target group, as opposed to collecting as many interpretations as possible and extracting common features. I try to answer the problem of the project by showing examples on how people dealt with the problem when faced by it. I will in no way claim that the results of this project are to viewed as descriptive of the readings of many; I will however claim that the results of this project contain data that should be viewed as resources by others who search for ways to read the Bible that bring meaning to their lives.

### **3.2 Organization of the project**

The project behind this paper was conducted in a group of four people, reading biblical narratives autobiographically. This group has existed since long before this project was ever conceived, but it had never before embarked on autobiographical readings. Using a Bible study group I was already a member of for this project seemed to me a matter of course, as it was the shared experiences of the group that helped me formulate the problems this thesis aims to answer. The group consisted of two women and one man in addition to me, all in their late twenties, all with middle-class backgrounds. Using an already existing group demanded a redefining of roles, since I in the project took on the role of the facilitator, and the other members of the group became participants in my project. It was no longer a group of equals, but a group in which I as a researcher was allowed to listen in and take notes as the others presented their autobiographical readings of Old Testament narratives I had selected.

Selecting the narratives was done completely by me as facilitator, to ensure diversity in the stories we read. The story of Cain and Abel was chosen because it deals with a family relationship, while the David and Goliath story was chosen because of its heroic plot, its dramatic build-up and climax. Finally, the story of Ruth was chosen because I wanted a story with a female lead character. I also wanted a story which was not centered on a killing. By choosing these three stories, we were able to mirror different sides of the readers' lives, as we will see in the following pages of this chapter.

The group met four times during the fall of 2009. At one meeting, the concept of reading autobiographically was presented, and in the three others, we concentrated on hearing and understanding each other's interpretations. Every time, all three participants were given time to present an interpretation that moved back and forth between the text and experiences in their own lives. In the last fifteen minutes of every meeting, the text for the next meeting was introduced. This gave the participants time to contemplate over the texts; meetings were a minimum of two weeks in between.

Taking on the role of the facilitator, and opening up for sharing interpretations in the room of the group meetings, I changed the conditions that autobiographical hermeneutics are usually subjected to. The use of such a hermeneutical method invades one's private sphere and it is understandable if most people would refuse sharing their autobiographical interpretations with

others. But as the group of this project consisted of friends, and I as the facilitator guaranteed their anonymity, sharing the stories became acceptable for the members of the group. We were even allowed to pose difficult, personal questions to the one presenting an interpretation. As facilitator, I was allowed to take notes during every presentation, and in addition, the participants submitted abstracts of their presentations to me. The interpretations presented in this paper have thus not been produced by the participants in the project in their own private dwellings and sent to me – they are the result my work with the notes I took from the presentations and dialogues at the group meetings, and the abstracts sent to me by the same participants. I have configured the interpretations as they stand, but they have all been read through and approved as representing their own voice by the participants themselves.

### **3.3 Ethical considerations**

When working qualitatively, and especially autobiographically, the need for clear ethical guidelines is great. The participants of the project have exposed themselves and become vulnerable by sharing their stories in meeting the texts. When doing research using personal narratives, the most important way of protecting the participants would be make them anonymous in the presentation of the data. This I have done. Another requirement for such research is to destroy all data after the research project is finished. However, the participants in this project have given their consent to me storing of the material for the purpose of developing a book on the subject in the future. The material will be stored in a safe.

As a theologian working with a Bible reading group, an ethical clarification of a more theological kind has also been important. There is always a danger that the theologian is viewed as the one in possession of the ‘correct’ interpretation, and that the theologian should therefore educate the participants in how to interpret the biblical texts ‘correctly’. In the group’s first meeting this fall, I addressed this problem and made clear that there was no right or wrong interpretations in this project. There was your story and my story. My role has been to answer the questions the participants have had to the text, such as “Who were the Philistines?”, and to ask questions to their interpretations, such as “Can you tell us more about what in the text that made you associate it with this side of your life?” Through addressing this problem early on, I believe we managed to create a milieu in the group in which all were comfortable shearing their interpretations.

Finally, it should be mentioned that as this is a project we all knew would be publicized, it has been important for me to be careful about leaving out sensitive information that came up in the personal narratives that did not have a direct consequence for how the biblical narrative was interpreted. This paper is not a paper on pastoral care, and I have therefore chosen not to include all vulnerable details of the participants' stories.

Let us at this point move on to the presentation of the data of the project.

### **3.4 Interpreting the story of Cain and Abel**

The first text we read in the group was the narrative of Cain and Abel in Genesis 4:1-16. I chose to limit the periscope to verse 16, because of the shift in intensity from verse 16 to 17. From verse 3, the story of Cain and Abel covers a short span of time, while the story of what happens to Cain after settling in Nod, covers generations in just a few sentences. The choice of limiting the text to verse 16 was thus meant to conserve the intensity of the episode between the two brothers.

In interpreting this text, we will follow Julie. Now the age of 28, Julie works as a Media Advisor in a Norwegian NGO. This is her autobiographical reading of the story of Cain and Abel:

*“Reading the story of Cain and Abel awakened many feelings in me. It is a story that unfolds within the family sphere of the characters, and this made me think about my own family. My home didn't always provide the safe and loving environment a child needs when growing up. My parents fought a lot, and it was usually my father's fault. The consequences fell upon me and my little sister, the only children in the family.*

*In reading the story, I immediately recognized myself in Cain. To me, he is the neglected boy who is not given any feedback on his hard work. In my home, I was often the one to save the peace. I remember one time I interfered in my parents' quarrelling. I lied, and said I had done the things my father accused my mom for. In the text, we read that Cain was 'burning with anger and looked to the ground' (v 5). I know that feeling all too well. Blushing with emotions of shame and anger, but still looking to the ground and keeping the act up to save the family. I took a lot of responsibility at home, but my parents failed to recognize it.*

*To me, God is a father's figure in the text. He is the one who treats his children differently. At home, I was productive and strong, and looked after myself, while my little sister was given much attention. I had better know she was only a small child who needed help with things! The consequence was that I would feel unjustly treated. Just like Cain. However, God in the text is not completely alike my own father.*

*God is different because in the text, He gives Cain a choice I've had to give myself in my own life: When God puts his mark on Cain to protect him in his new life in Nod, it is as if he is giving him a new chance. He is giving him the choice of living a life that it is not governed by anger. A life in which he can do good in spite of all the difficulties and unjust treatment he has been submitted to and all the stupid things he has done.*

*I have always believed in our ability to turn things around. To change things. Cain moved on to build a city and have children. I have also moved on.*

*To me, the story of Cain and Abel is about the recognition of people in the situation of Cain. It's hard not be recognized for the work you do, and it is sad how your life can be shaped by the consequences of that lack of recognition. Still, the story tells us that we have the chance to turn things around and shape our lives ourselves. Sometimes, all we need is to be given a second chance."*

Interesting in relation to this text was the fact that Julie's reading resonated with the interpretation of John, the only male in the group. He also sympathized with Cain. But in addition, reading the text autobiographically raised other questions of higher importance. Growing up in a Pentecostal congregation, John was taught that the stories in the Bible all convey the grace and goodness of God. His autobiographical reading of the narrative of Cain and Abel challenged such a hermeneutics:

*"I have a degree as a Social Educator, and work as the leader of a department at a drug rehabilitation center. When I read the story of Cain and Abel, my thoughts go to how Cain is treated by God to begin with. I grew up in a congregation where the image of God as a father was commonly used. When God overlooks Cain's sacrifice, it reminds me of parental neglect of children. At work every day, I meet people like*

*Cain; people who have been treated badly so much their lives have become negative self-fulfilling prophecies. Because of this, I cannot recognize the God I believe in, in this narrative. And that makes me really uncertain about how to read the Bible. Can a text in the Bible contain a story that conveys something else than God's grace and goodness? Can I be critical to God? And does every story in the Bible have to be about God?"*

### **3.5 Interpreting the story of David and Goliath**

The second text we read in the group was the story of David and Goliath, found in The First Book of Samuel, chapter 17. The text is defined in both ends by a shift in scenery and characters, and chapter 17 appears as a textual unit. It starts with the information that “the Philistines gathered their armies together to battle” and it concludes with young David in front of King Saul holding the Philistine warrior’s head in his hands. In the following, we will concentrate on John’s interpretation of the text:

*“When reading the story of David and Goliath, I was at first struck by the courage of David. Though he is young, he dares to stand up for what he believes in. He certainly poses as an example for how to live a life fearlessly. Even as a shepherd, he fought against lions and bears to save his herd. With David as the main character in the story, courage and overcoming the impossible are obvious themes in the story. The problem is that David is too much of a hero to me. I cannot recognize myself in his story. For me the story has another theme.*

*Because on the other hand there is Goliath. A giant in the Philistine community. A guy trusted by his fellow soldiers, and a brave warrior. He is a resourceful man who, as opposed to David, does not have the sympathetic role of the underdog. He is strong and he knows it. But in the end, Goliath falls. And big heroes fall hard. I have been such a hero.*

*In my teens, I was a key player in the Christian youth work in the area I lived. I participated at Christian camps, preached at Christian meetings and had lots of friends. I was a guy people wanted to know. I was a leader, a hero. One that walked in front of the crowd and spoke bold words, just like Goliath.*

*Out of the blue one day, I received the news that my best friend had died in a car accident. It was, I guess, just like being hit with a stone to the head. I had been a hero the day before, but suddenly I felt like nothing. I fell hard. I started avoiding my old friends in the Christian youth work and dropped out of school. After a while, the first suicidal thoughts started to linger in the back of my head. I found myself planning my own suicide.*

*However, my story is not the story of Goliath. Instead of being beheaded, I was able to pick up my life bit by bit, and today I have long since gotten back on my feet. Still, when I read the story of David and Goliath now, I am reminded not only by the fact that I was once a hero that fell, but that I have once again become a successful person in my contexts. Will a stone hit my head again?"*

The group members read the story of David and Goliath very differently. Julie found recognition in the character of David in the story. She related it to her professional life:

*"Often at work, I am faced with challenges that seem to big to manage. The NGO I work for is an aid organization in third-world countries, and a lot of our projects need to achieve great things in a short span of time. At times, I feel like I don't have the capability to do what I'm asked to. But David chooses to go into battle without armor or sword; he trusts his own skills. Do I dare to do the same?"*

### **3.6 Interpreting the story of Ruth**

The final story we read in the group was the story of Ruth, found in the Book of Ruth. The text was easily limited as it is presented as a complete configuration defined by the borders that divide book from book. In the following, we will firstly be given Jill's interpretation. In addition, we will briefly take a look at Julie's interpretation, which is very much different from Jill's. Jill is a nurse, now studying for her Master's degree in Diaconal Studies.

*"The Book of Ruth contains a story that is less dramatic than the other narratives we have read in the group, which were murder stories. However, if you look closely, you'll see that a lot of drama has found place before the story starts. Ruth has become a widow. Also, her husband's brother has died, and the same has her father-in-law.*

*Left are Ruth, her sister-in-law Orpah and her mother-in-law Naomi, to fend for themselves.*

*The first thing that struck me about the text was how Ruth works hard when she is in Boaz' fields. One day in the field, she reportedly gathered one ephah of barley, which according to my Bible is about 40 litres! This tells me that even though she was in a tough position – widows without any men to take care of them were very poor and had little say in the communities – she rolled up her sleeves and worked through it.*

*In my own life, I have had to work with my ability to stand firm through difficulties. For me, one of the hardest things to manage in my life is to write papers. Too bad, since I am studying higher level classes at a respected academic institution. But something happens when I have major papers to write. I block them out, and try to wish them away. Suddenly, I have only two days left to write, and realize that I won't be able to finish it. It is like I am able to put up a wall inside myself that enables me to push away handling the task in front of me.*

*These difficulties in my life as a student are also connected to a way of thinking theologically that has.*

*I have 'always' had the idea that when you are a Christian, you can pray to God, and God will hear your prayer and take care of you. This belief, combined with the fear that makes me want to avoid writing papers, resulted in attempts from my part to "pray the problem away". I have prayed to be released from the agony having to write more papers. Not surprisingly, it hasn't worked.*

*This has led me to realize the fact that life is just as hard for followers of God as it is for anyone else. Interestingly, in the story of Ruth, the Bible maintains the same position. Ruth is a woman struck by disaster, but she never asks to be favoured in any way. Instead, she stands firm by her mother-in-law's side and battles through it. In the end, things start to look better for her, as she is remarried.*

*In reading Ruth, it becomes clear to me that being a Christian do not mean that the Lord will guide me away from difficulties in life, or that I can pray them away. As*



*Ruth, I have to lift up my head, and go through whatever lies ahead. This realization involves larger processes in my life. I have had the idea that Christian faith was about accepting certain truths. But now, I believe that theology has to be defined in relation to the experiences we accumulate in life. In meeting this story, my experiences of struggling to write papers became important. I am still not sure what it is in my story that makes this so difficult – it is something I am working hard to understand. What I do know is that I will not let those experiences define how I work on my papers anymore.”*

For Julie, it was Ruth’s decision to stay with Naomi that caught her attention:

*“The scene that grabs me in it is the scene in which Naomi reveals her plan to go back to her home country, and her daughter-in-laws have to decide to follow her or go to their own places. I feel challenged by this episode, because it is about making a choice about where to go in one of life’s difficult intersections. Ruth and Orpah probably knows a little about what would await them at home; the tough life a widow. And at the same time they probably don’t know what a life with Naomi in a new country will bring. Still, Ruth chooses to go with Naomi.*

*In my own life, I have always felt the need to plan my future. To control what will happen to me. I make choices from a most-likely-to-happen-scenario all the time. When me and my husband started considering having children, I mapped out my future as best as I could, to see when it would suit me to have children. Maybe all my planning made it more difficult for me to simply enjoy the moment?*

*Ruth knew all about that life doesn’t always follow our plans. She had loved and lost. Still, she dared to leap into the unexpected and follow Naomi. Her story questions my own decisions. Can I dear, like she did?”*

This concludes the presentations of the interpretations of texts that were shared in the group. To all three stories, one main interpretation and one shorter, commenting interpretation are given. But before we move on to discuss the question of the significance and ramifications of these results I will give some comments to the material from the standpoint of the researcher.

### **3.7 Comments to the material**

The autobiographical interpretations given above show the wide potential of interpretation of every text, as they fuse with the lives of new readers. From the data, we see that a key word to understanding why the interpretations end up like they do is *recognition*. It seems that when the readers apply their own stories to the texts, the text mirrors their lives in a way that enhances certain themes and episodes in their lives. For Julie, the Cain and Abel story mirrored growing up in her own family, while John related it to the stories of the people he meets through his work at the rehabilitation center. On the other hand, John could not relate to David, and presented an original reading of the David and Goliath story, in which Goliath served as the most important character. Goliath's story was also John's story. This time, it was Julie who interpreted the story in light of her experiences at work. Her interpretation related more to the narrative plot of the story, in which David plays the role of a brave hero. For Jill, the story of Ruth mirrored how she has struggled to deal with difficulties in her life, attempting to wish or pray them away. The character of Ruth set an example which made her look at both her life and her theology from a new angle. For Julie however, the story of Ruth was concentrated around daring to choose the unknown over what could seem as the safe choice, in those defining moments in life. All these examples go to show how our readings of narrative texts are guided by the way in which the story of the text reflects episodes, moments or processes in the story of our lives. This observation confirms the essence of the narrative theory of Ricoeur, which we have used to understand the process of reading and interpreting narratives in this thesis. Ricoeur's notion of narratives as *mimesis* points exactly to the concept of recognition as the key element in stories. We read stories because they are so similar to our experienced reality that they might say something about our own lives. Stories mirror our lives, and through reading and interpreting them, we are at the same time reading our own life narratives. Because of this element of recognition, reading and writing narratives is a matter of existential life interpretation – which is a good way of describing what we see in the data.

Having recognized recognition as a key to the process of reading autobiographically, it is interesting to ask the question of what it is in our lives that is reflected when we read the texts. From the data presented above, one thing stands out as especially interesting. If we look at John's reading of the Cain and Abel narrative, Julie's reading of the David and Goliath story and Jill's interpretation of the Book of Ruth, it is possible to observe the following: When the

middle-class readers of the project group made use of autobiographical hermeneutical method, their professional sphere became an important frame of reference for the interpretations. John interpreted in light of experiences as social educator, Julie in found meaning in relating a text to her job in an NGO, while Jill recognized a frustration from her life as a student in her reading. This finding is not very surprising, as these are people for whom work take up much time and serve as an important arena in their lives. Still, autobiographical readings that draw on different readers' professional experiences strike me as an unexplored area, which deserves more attention.

When it comes to the use of information that relates to *Mimesis*<sub>1</sub> – circumstances behind the text – it has been less asked for than what one might have expected. In addition, the pieces of information given have to a small degree influenced how the participants read the texts. When reading the Book of Ruth, information was given on topics such as immigration (with references to the books of Ezra and Nehemiah), marriage and the role of the kinsman-redeemer, and general info on the land of Moab. When reading Cain and Abel, the participants were informed, among other things, on the discussions on the Hebrew meanings of the names Cain and Abel (many pointing to “spear” and “elusive”, and “vanity”, respectively). In our readings on the David and Goliath story, questions about who the Philistines were, and the meaning of the name David were answered. However few of these pieces of information seem to have shaped the interpretations we have read. Most important seems to have been the information about the situation for widows in ancient Palestine, which gave perspective to the difficulties in the situation of Ruth.

Finally, it should be mentioned that the two first readings only consist of material from participants John and Julie. The third member of the group, Jill, was abroad for a longer period during the fall and lost out on the reading of the David and Goliath story. And when we read the story of Cain and Abel, she came unprepared to the group meeting. The result was that she gave an interpretation she did not manage to explain why she found meaningful. Her main points were that God can be present in the silence, and that God did not disappear even though Cain did not experience his recognition. This goes to show that often, our interpretations can be based on an instinctive feeling, a gut feeling; however, answering the question of why our instincts tell us to interpret like we do is a process that requires time and contemplation.

### 3.8 Evaluations of the project

After the project group was finished working with the three narratives, I invited the participants to give me short evaluations of the project in writing. These are essential, because as we have seen from Chapter 2, both according to the theory of narratives as existential life interpretation, and the aim of the autobiographical reader, the aim of the project has been to produce meaningful interpretations of the texts. Meaningful in the sense that they would give the readers hope, insight and understanding in dealing with life, as it were. The participants opened up their lives to the texts, and spent time and energy on understanding why they reacted like they did when they read the texts. What did they get out of it?

This is what they wrote:

John:

*“Working with the texts this way has been an exciting experience. It helped me put into words thoughts I’ve had in the back of my head. I could recognize my own fear of once again becoming the fallen hero in the story of Goliath. After having read that text, I understood that a fear I’d been feeling lately, that I’ve been doing ‘too fine’, could be linked to my previous experience of crashing into the darkness of depression.”*

Jill:

*“This has been an exciting and useful way of reading the Bible for me. I am generally not good at reading the Bible regularly. But for the last year, I have reflected a lot around my faith, the theology I have been exposed to throughout life, and the relationship between faith and life in general. In meeting the texts we read this fall, I have experienced that I can relate my reflections to reading the Bible. This has taken my reflections to a new level.”*

Julie:

*“This way of reading the Bible has made the texts much more relevant to me than what ‘traditional’ modes of reading have. Previously, I have read and interpreted the Bible with my head. The consequence was that the texts didn’t speak to me personally. As a matter of fact, it resulted in me not reading the Bible much at all. Now, I have*

*read the Bible with my heart, and I have gained much more from reading the texts. They offer me insight into my own life, and hint at how I should deal with the challenges I encounter on my way.”*

The evaluations speak for themselves. The project has been a positive experience for all the participants. And with that conclusion, it is necessary to move on to discuss the second part of the problem of this thesis; the theological implications what we did in the project.

## **4. Discussions in the aftermath of the project:**

### **This project and Liberation theology – a dialogue**

In this chapter I will discuss how to relate to the findings presented in Chapter 3. This discussion will take the form of a dialogue with some of the most significant biblical scholars in the world of liberation theology, most notably the South African Gerald West. Relating to Liberation theology in this discussion is crucial because of the role liberation theology plays in the formation of Norwegian theological students, and as a consequence, the role it played in shaping the problem of this thesis (see Chapter 1). The dialogue aims at addressing the main theological ramifications of reading autobiographically, being in a privileged socio-political position. In Chapter 1, we saw that a hermeneutics of liberation has three main concerns:

- (1) To read with and for the poor, oppressed and marginalized people of society*
- (2) To facilitate readings that can bring empowerment and liberation to these people*
- (3) To let the readings of the poor inform our praxis in everyday life*

Following these three concerns, the dialogue in this chapter will firstly focus on the question of who we are reading with and for in a Norwegian context. Secondly, it will address how readings of the Bible with people who are not poor or oppressed can result in empowerment and liberation for the readers. Finally, we will look into the question of in what way autobiographical readings of the Bible can inform and inspire praxis in a Norwegian reality.

Let us start by taking on the first part first.

#### **4.1 Who are we reading with and for?**

The historical account in Chapter 1 explains the background of how several kinds of Liberation theology came into existence in Third World societies. Their mission was to contribute to social transformation for the poor, oppressed and marginalized people of their societies.<sup>43</sup> That meant engaging in the battle against social, political and economical structures that pushed those people down. An important aspect of these theologies has been a new commitment to reading the Bible critically, informed by the experiences of struggling groups in society. Interestingly, the liberation theologies of Third World societies have a fundamental presupposition in common: They were constructed as theological responses to contexts in which the majority – or at least large groups of the population – could, and still

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<sup>43</sup> West, G.: *The Academy of the Poor* (2003), p 6.

can, be termed poor, oppressed and/or marginalized: In South Africa, the majority of the population consists of poor, black people. In India, the Dalits make up a group of some 200 million people (!)<sup>44</sup>, and according to Gustavo Gutierrez, Liberation theology in Latin America grew out of a recognition of “the longstanding, cruel poverty in which the great majority of Latin Americans live.”<sup>45</sup> Thus, the main motivation for reading the Bible in such contexts is to empower the struggling, or as Gerald West puts it, to use the Bible as a “resource in their [the poor people’s] struggle for survival, liberation and life”.<sup>46</sup> In short, reading the Bible utilizing a hermeneutics of liberation in Third World countries is connected to the liberation of large groups of materially poor and oppressed people. Behind this lie deep historical wounds of oppression, such as the Aryan oppression of the descendants of the Indus Valley people in India<sup>47</sup>, the colonists’ oppression of the indigenous peoples in South America and the colonists’ oppression of black peoples in South Africa. Gerald West explains the historical background that comes into play when reading the Bible with poor people in South Africa with the following anecdote:

“When the white man came to our country he had the Bible and we had the land. The white man said to us “let us pray”. After the prayer, the white man had the land and we had the Bible.”<sup>48</sup>

Clearly, both the history and the present day situation in India, Latin America, South Africa and other Third World contexts where Liberation theology has become influential, suggests that a socially committed theology of liberation which is critical of the existing is needed. The Church cannot overlook the cries of the many suffering. However, I am writing this from the perspective of a Norwegian middle-class man. And when studying this, it becomes clear that my context is very different from the ones of the Third World.

Norway is a First World country. It has a social-democratic structure of society, and a well functioning welfare system provided by the state, that extends a helping hand to all citizens with a social security number. It is fair to say that in Norway, social, political and economical oppression are marginal phenomena, as the ones struggling are in most cases offered extensive help through public services. On these grounds, it can be stated that a contextual theology in Norway necessarily would have to be a different theology than that of Third World societies. Furthermore, it can also be stated that when reading the Bible in a Norwegian context, the vast majority of the people involved will be not oppressed, not marginalized and

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<sup>44</sup> Vinaya Raj, Y.T.: *Re-imagining Dalit Theology* (2008), p 25.

<sup>45</sup> Gutierrez, G.: “The task and content of liberation theology” in Rowland. C. (Ed.) (2007), p 20.

<sup>46</sup> West (2003), p ix.

<sup>47</sup> Mukherjee, P.: *Beyond the Four Varnas* (1988), pp 18, 101-102.

<sup>48</sup> West (2003), p ix.

not poor. This affects the question of *who* we are reading with. In order to read with the poor and the marginalized in Norway, you must first do the demanding job of gathering enough people that would categorize themselves in such terms. The access to people who would do that would in many places in Norway be rather limited. Another important element which is different from the Norwegian and the Third World contexts is the relationship between the privileged and the oppressed groups in society. With exception of the treatment of the Sami and the Romani peoples, there is little in our historical background that make large groups of oppressed people blame the majority of privileged Norwegians for their situation today. All in all, my argument is that since vast majority of the people of Norway find themselves in the privileged position of being not oppressed, not marginalized and not poor, we must also find ways of reading the Bible *with* and *for* them.

However, it seems some liberation theologians will not accept such an answer. In his book *Academy of the Poor*, Gerald West argues that the poor, oppressed and marginalized must be given an epistemological precedence when interpreting the Bible:

“Theologies of liberation require that we [...] accept the epistemological privilege of the poor. This involves an epistemological paradigm shift in which the poor and marginalized are seen as the primary dialogue partners in reading the Bible.”<sup>49</sup>

The idea that the reality of the poor should be viewed as more important for how we read the Bible than the realities of other people, finds support in Gustavo Gutierrez’ expression “preferential option for the poor”<sup>50</sup>. For the both of them, this idea is not simply based an ethical consideration of the need for solidarity with those struggling in society. It is a necessity – it is the only way the Bible can speak to their contexts without confirming and cementing the structures that have made people poor and kept them poor for so long. Therefore, it is the only *Christian* reading possible. However, I don’t think we should read West and Gutierrez dogmatically; remember that the starting point of their theology is the acknowledgement of the contextuality of all theology. In attempting to relate Liberation theology to a Norwegian context, the following question arises: Would be just as big a sin to read consequently from the perspective of the poor in Norway as it would be to read from the perspective of the rich in South Africa? The point of the question is that if we were to read consequently from the perspective of the economically poor and the oppressed in Norwegian communities, we would be spending our time trying to make heard the voices of people who

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<sup>49</sup> West (2003), p xiv.

<sup>50</sup> Gutierrez (2007), p 27.



in many cases would be completely absent, and overlooking the needs and experiences of the majority of the people present. This points to the main problem of uncritically importing West's hermeneutics of liberation into a Norwegian context:

*If reading the Bible is about liberation and empowerment of the poor, then there is no point in reading the Bible if the poor are not there.*

The statement above goes to show that in a Norwegian context, we need to read the Bible with those who are actually willing to engage in reading biblical texts, whether poor, middle-class or upper-class. According to the United Nations Development Programme's *Human Development Report 2009*, Norway is the country in the world with the highest level of human development and living standards – in comparison, South Africa is number 129 on the list.<sup>51</sup> Those statistics does of course not reflect the economical situation of all Norwegians, but they do indicate that if we want to engage the average Norwegian in reading the Bible, we must find ways of reading that are meaningful also for people that don't have liberation from social, economical or political oppression as aims for their reading.

#### **4.2 Liberation and empowerment in a Norwegian context**

The second part of this dialogue will pick up where the first part left off; with the question of the relationship between the differences in contexts and the aims and reasons for reading the Bible. We have already stated that reading the Bible utilizing a hermeneutics of liberation aims at giving the reader an experience of *liberation* and *empowerment*. In Liberation theology, this has traditionally been interpreted to mean liberation and empowerment in the economical and socio-political senses of the word. But as Norwegian society is so different from the societies in which Liberation theology originated, it is necessary to discuss the content of 'liberation' and 'empowerment'. In what way can those terms make sense in a Norwegian context, where poverty and social oppression is almost abolished?

To answer that question it is necessary to go to the starting point of the need for liberation and empowerment, which is *struggle*. Because even though the majority of people in Norway do not struggle with systematic oppression and poverty, we do struggle. We struggle with the same existential issues that all humans do, of understanding and making sense of life. Basing

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<sup>51</sup> Statistics found on the UN Human Development Report's official website: <http://hdr.undp.org/en/statistics/>

my argument on Chapters 2 and 3 in this thesis, I will claim that this is the struggle that should be the starting point of a liberating and empowering reading in a Norwegian context.

Clearly, understanding struggle, liberation and empowerment in light of existentialism is deeply rooted in the narrative theory of Ricoeur. It reflects the idea that all people are in a constant process of composing the narratives of our lives; of interpreting reality as we experience it. In this process we make use of stories as mirrors to our lives, so that we are able to view ourselves from another perspective and understand more. Sometimes, the stories of our lives don't make sense and we cannot find the words to explain them. This is when the discordant element in our lives – the meaningless – has become dominant. Other times, we experience things that make us feel something we don't understand why we feel. This is when we get in touch with the 'hidden stories' of our lives. In all these situations, we can come to the texts and find help to deconstruct and reconstruct the story of our lives, and work with our experiences to the point where reality once again makes sense. This is an empowering and liberating process! Remember John's statement in the evaluation of the project:

*“Working with the texts this way has been an exciting experience. It helped me put into words thoughts I've had in the back of my head. I could recognize my own fear of once again becoming the fallen hero in the story of Goliath. After having read that text, I understood that a fear I'd been feeling lately, that I've been doing 'too fine', could be linked to my previous experience of crashing into the darkness of depression.”*

Reading narratives autobiographically in the process of existential life interpretation empowers readers to live fuller lives, to understand the present by understanding the past. And it does so by liberating stories and reactions that would otherwise be hidden for them, as John's statement above goes to show.

My argument on how we can construct liberating and empowering readings in a Norwegian context is based in experiences from reading the Bible in Norway. However, it is necessary at this point to make clear that, according to Ricoeur (and I support this), existential struggle as the starting point for how we read stories is not valid only for how we read in Norway; it describes the process of reading narratives for all readers, whether in South Africa, India or somewhere in the West. The difference from my hermeneutics of existential autobiographical readings and the socio-politically focused hermeneutics of Liberation theologies, is simply that in their contexts, so many of the readers agree that addressing the issues of economical

and political oppression is urgent that they have created a hermeneutical model focusing specifically on those issues. Since that is not the case in a Norwegian context, it has been necessary here to focus on the issues of the individual, through reading autobiographically.

We have now discussed the questions of *who we read with and for* and *how readings in a Norwegian context can become liberating and empowering*. Now, it is time to look into the questions of the practical consequences of reading autobiographically. What are the arenas to which we bring our personal voices, and what kind of change can they inspire?

### **4.3 The impact of autobiographical readings on their context**

The question of the impact of autobiographical readings have on their readings is a question of what kind of practical change we expect our interpretations to lead to. In Liberation theology, the idea is that we are *doing* theology. As Gustavo Gutierrez puts it: “The starting point for all theology is to be found in the act of faith.”<sup>52</sup> And when theology is something we do, something that is reflected first and foremost in our praxis, then as Christians, it follows that we want our readings of our holy texts in the Bible to inform that praxis. This addresses the question of the arenas of autobiographical readings of the Bible. As it is an intimate and personal way of engaging with the biblical texts, it is obvious that smaller groups or even in private are settings that are suited for the method. Still, it is a fundamental feature of the theory of this thesis that we as humans find meaning in mirroring our lives in the stories others. In reflecting upon my interpretation, someone else might find new perspectives to their own lives. This resonates with the central ambition of Liberation theology to let the reality of the poor inform the praxis of the community. But as it is a reality that not all communities would accept readings of the Bible as informative of praxis, it becomes clear that the community involved here is the faith-based community of the Church. So then, how can autobiographical readings done by readers that are neither poor, oppressed or marginalized have an impact in their congregations?

As we have seen in Chapter 2 (section 2.4), Elisabeth Tveito Johnsen has done contextual Bible readings with Norwegian fifteen-year-olds. She expands the horizon for a hermeneutics of liberation by focusing on what she calls *contrast experiences* (*kontrasterfaringer*). Her point is that the youths she was reading with all had experiences in their lives they could relate to the texts they read in the group, but these experiences were never heard of in church.

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<sup>52</sup> Gutierrez (2007), p 29.

The youths were a silenced group in church; their voices were not represented in what was heard from the pulpit or in the liturgy.<sup>53</sup> Therefore, the experiences of the readers that Tveito Johnsen read with brought something new to the interpretations of the texts, and on the other side, the texts spoke to their lives. Hence, reading the Bible in light of their own experiences was valuable both to the readers themselves and to the community of the church. Tveito Johnsen's aim of empowering readers by making heard the voices of contrasting experiences in the church seems to be a constructive way of translating the epistemological discourse of liberation hermeneutics into a Norwegian context. However, in line with the material in Chapter 3 and the role of existential struggle in our readings of the Bible, it is my claim that not only fifteen-year-olds have experiences in their lives that would add to the polyphony of interpretations of biblical texts heard in Norwegian churches. We all do. Reading texts utilizing autobiographical hermeneutical method is a process so personal it will challenge existing epistemologies, simply because you are the only you. Even if our interpretations are not new, the reason for interpreting that way will be, as it is based on personal experiences. An example of a contrasting experience that resulted in an interpretation which contrasts the traditional ones is found in Julie's autobiographical reading of the story of Cain and Abel in Chapter 3. When reading the story in Genesis 4, we can get the feeling of a current that flows through the story; a direction in the narrative plot. The current flows against Cain, who kills his brother. Not surprisingly, traditional interpretations of this story have labelled Cain "a man who rejects his human responsibility in the most abominable matter", as West quotes Alan Boesak in saying.<sup>54</sup> Julie, on the other hand, identified with Cain when reading the story. Her interpretation tells the story of the overlooked child, who was angry at how differently she was treated from her sister. This example makes visible how we need to let more voices, more interpretations sound in our churches. And that involves us theologians and specifically, the clergy. Facilitating a meeting of a diversity of interpretations of biblical texts in our congregations should become a main task of the priests in our churches. This would make the Bible come to life as a resource for life interpretation, and it would open our eyes to each other. This last point is what in the end would make the most important practical change in our communities: Making heard each other's stories through sharing interpretations of biblical texts is a way creating a caring and loving environment in our congregations. It is the way to a Christian praxis informed by the dialogue between each other's and biblical texts.

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<sup>53</sup> Tveito Johnsen, E.: "Selv konfirmanter leser Bibelen!" in Tveito Johnsen, E. (Ed.): *Barneteologi og kirkens ritualer* (2007), p 237.

<sup>54</sup> West, G.: *Biblical Hermeneutics of Liberation* (1995), p 65.

#### **4.4 Summing up Chapter 4**

Chapter 4 has contained discussions in the aftermath of the project presented in Chapter 3. The discussions have taken the form of a dialogue, with liberation theologians as dialogue partners. The chapter has shown that since the contexts for reading the Bible are so different between Norway and countries of origin for Liberation theology, we need to contextualize and redefine the answers to the questions raised by those professing a hermeneutics of liberation. *Who do we read with? How can readings be liberating and empowering where poverty is nearly eradicated? And how do we translate the autobiographical readings of socio-economically privileged readers into praxis?* In short, the answers have been these:

We must always seek to read with and for those who participate in the reading, even if it means that in a Norwegian context, that will often mean reading with and for readers who are middle-class and above. Readings can be liberating and empowering when they help us in our everyday struggle of understanding, finding meaning and making sense of our lives. This is a struggle that involves all parts of our lives, including socio-economical aspects. Finally, the arena for praxis based on shared autobiographical readings of the Bible, is the faith-based community. This is the place where people have a common acceptance of readings of the Bible as authoritative and informing of praxis. Therefore, it is a huge challenge for priests and theologians, to facilitate such a sharing of lives and interpretations in our congregations.

## **5. Summary and conclusions**

This special thesis in theology has focused on finding meaningful readings of the Bible for readers that are in the privileged position of not being poor, oppressed or marginalized. Specifically, it has attempted to address two problems:

- *In what way can autobiographical hermeneutical method become a resource for the not poor, not marginalized, not oppressed reader of the Bible?*
- *In what way can a method explicitly facilitating and making heard the interpretations of middle-class people relate to the hermeneutics of liberation that has been produced in Third World contexts?*

In Chapter 1, both the historical and the personal background these two problems were presented. The main point of the chapter was that inspired by Liberation theology, it had been attempted to import a hermeneutics of liberation to Norwegian contexts, but in my own experience, this had resulted in alienation to the Bible, as the epistemological gap between the Third World countries from which Liberation theology originated and my Norwegian context is too big.

Chapter 2 and 3 attempted to answer the first of the two problems of the thesis. Chapter 2 supplied the theoretical foundation for a project of reading the Bible autobiographically with a group of Norwegian middle-class youths. In it, the narrative theory of Paul Ricoeur was firstly presented, to answer the question of *what it is we do when we read narrative texts*. With Ricoeur it was claimed that we read narratives as a resource for existential life interpretation. Stories are mimetic of life – they function as mirrors and dialogue partners in our narration of our own lives. Secondly in Chapter 2, autobiographical hermeneutical method was introduced. This is the hermeneutical method applied in the reading project, and it was presented as a hermeneutical extension of Ricoeur's narrative theory. Finally in the chapter, this thesis was placed into the landscape of research in the field of autobiographical biblical hermeneutics. In Chapter 3, the Bible reading project was presented. The project investigated how the use of autobiographical hermeneutical method could provide meaningful readings of the Bible in a Norwegian context. The readings presented were refreshingly original and showed how our interpretations can make visible new things both in the texts and in our own lives, when we are willing to open up our stories to the stories of the texts. One of the most interesting features of the interpretations was that for the middle-class readers of the project,

the sphere of their workplace became important. Several of the interpretations were based in experiences the readers had had in professional situations. Another interesting feature was the element of interpreting against the 'current' of the story, such as in John's interpretation of the David and Goliath story, where he identified himself with Goliath.

The evaluations included in the last section of the chapter showed that the participants had experienced the project as meaningful. Thus, Chapter 2 and 3 provided a theoretical and practical answer to how and why autobiographical readings of the Bible can become a resource for socio-political privileged readers of the Bible.

Finally, Chapter 4 attempted to answer the second problem of the thesis. In relation to Liberation theology, the Bible reading project was controversial because it involved facilitating – and emphasizing – the readings and interpretations of people who are not poor. Therefore, in dialogue with important contributors to Liberation theology, a discussion on epistemology, contextuality and how to relate to terms such as 'liberation' and 'empowerment' in a Norwegian context was executed. The discussion showed that there are ways in which the central elements of biblical hermeneutics of liberation could be translated to fit a Norwegian context, but it also underlined the need for such a translation. We cannot simply import a contextual hermeneutics from another context without critically adapting it to our context.

This thesis started with the experiences of a frustrated Bible study group of utilizing a hermeneutics of liberation in a Norwegian context. In response to this, I took a step back and posed the question of why we read narratives at all. The answer, found in the narrative theory of Paul Ricoeur, was then put to life in a project of reading Old Testament narratives using autobiographical hermeneutical method. After the project was completed, I used the data of the project as background information for a dialogue with liberation theologians on relationship between my project and a traditional hermeneutics of liberation. The result has become a thesis that both shows a way of reading texts in the Bible in practice, and engages in the theological problems connected with how we choose to read the Bible. Hopefully, it can serve as an inspiration to people who relate to the same problems, in the continued search for meaningful life interpretation and readings of the Bible.

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## 6.2 Sources on the internet

Visited November 20, 2009: <http://hdr.undp.org/en/statistics/>

This is the official website of UN Human Development Report.  
It displays the statistics referred to in the thesis.

Visited November 10, 2009: [http://en.wikisource.org/wiki/The\\_Second\\_Coming](http://en.wikisource.org/wiki/The_Second_Coming)

This is a webpage in Wikisource, Wikipedia’s bank of original texts. The page displays W.B. Yeats’ poem *The Second Coming*.

### **6.3 Note to sources**

There is one article referred to in the text which is not listed above. The article in question is

Kvanvig, H.S.       “Narrativ kontekst”

This article was written by Professor Kvanvig some ten years ago. I have been given a printed edition of the article from the author himself, who at the time could not find the exact publication which the article was printed in. Generously, he has accepted to let me use the article, and he is willing to send a copy to the professors grading this thesis.

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This thesis contains 20 636 words, footnotes excluded.

It is written in US English language and grammar.