

**Zeitschrift:** Internationale kirchliche Zeitschrift : neue Folge der Revue internationale de théologie  
**Band:** 109 (2019)  
**Heft:** 2  
  
**Artikel:** Is There an old catholic exegesis? : A case for autobiographical biblical criticism  
**Autor:** Troost, Ari  
**DOI:** <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-939212>

### **Nutzungsbedingungen**

Die ETH-Bibliothek ist die Anbieterin der digitalisierten Zeitschriften auf E-Periodica. Sie besitzt keine Urheberrechte an den Zeitschriften und ist nicht verantwortlich für deren Inhalte. Die Rechte liegen in der Regel bei den Herausgebern beziehungsweise den externen Rechteinhabern. Das Veröffentlichen von Bildern in Print- und Online-Publikationen sowie auf Social Media-Kanälen oder Webseiten ist nur mit vorheriger Genehmigung der Rechteinhaber erlaubt. [Mehr erfahren](#)

### **Conditions d'utilisation**

L'ETH Library est le fournisseur des revues numérisées. Elle ne détient aucun droit d'auteur sur les revues et n'est pas responsable de leur contenu. En règle générale, les droits sont détenus par les éditeurs ou les détenteurs de droits externes. La reproduction d'images dans des publications imprimées ou en ligne ainsi que sur des canaux de médias sociaux ou des sites web n'est autorisée qu'avec l'accord préalable des détenteurs des droits. [En savoir plus](#)

### **Terms of use**

The ETH Library is the provider of the digitised journals. It does not own any copyrights to the journals and is not responsible for their content. The rights usually lie with the publishers or the external rights holders. Publishing images in print and online publications, as well as on social media channels or websites, is only permitted with the prior consent of the rights holders. [Find out more](#)

**Download PDF:** 05.08.2025

**ETH-Bibliothek Zürich, E-Periodica, <https://www.e-periodica.ch>**

---

# Is There an Old Catholic Exegesis? A Case for Autobiographical Biblical Criticism

Ari Troost

## 1. Introduction

In his *Persian Letters* from 1721, the French philosopher Montesquieu described the visit of a fictional Persian traveller to Paris. The Persian visitor was filled with wonder at what he saw. His visit to a library was a particularly amazing experience. The librarian, a benevolent priest, offered him a guided tour that proved to be too much for one day.

*I returned to this library the next day (...). "Father," I said to him, "what are these large volumes over there, covering the whole wall of the library?" "These are," he said, "the interpreters of Scripture." "There are so many," I replied; "Scripture must have been quite obscure at one time, but pretty clear by now. Are there any doubts left? Could there still be any points of debate?" "There are, good God, there are," he replied. "Almost as many as there are lines." "Really?" I said. "And what then have all these authors been doing?" "These authors," he replied, "have not searched Scripture for what we have to believe, but what they believe themselves."<sup>1</sup>*

The present contribution is about authors reading what *they* believe in Scripture. It is written partly in response to a paper by Peter-Ben Smit in this journal (2006) on the way biblical hermeneutics may be informed by personal and ecclesiastical identities.<sup>2</sup> Could belonging to a confession be regarded as an element of biblical interpretation? In short: is there an Old Catholic exegesis? Smit's answer is both "no, there is not" and "yes, there is." As long as there is agreement on the set of characteristics that make up an Old Catholic identity, an affirmative reply would seem obvious. In view of the role of the exegete in biblical criticism, however, things are more complicated. In the early 2000s, the role of personal convictions in exegesis was discussed within the emerging so-called autobiographical biblical criticism. As autobiographical biblical criticism remains poorly developed, a renewed assessment of its tenets may help to gain insights on the

---

<sup>1</sup> Montesquieu, *Lettres Persanes*, ed. Paul Vernière (s.l.: Garnier/Librairie Générale Française, 2006), 345–346 ('Lettre 134', my translation).

<sup>2</sup> Peter-Ben Smit, 'Biblische Hermeneutik im Spannungsfeld persönlicher und kirchlicher Identität', *Internationale Kirchliche Zeitschrift* 96 (2006) 135–151.

value of addressing personal convictions in biblical exegesis. This may then help to fine-tune Smit's reply.

In order to give an illustration of the methodological procedure that I have in mind, my critical evaluation of autobiographical biblical criticism will be followed by a heuristic personal reading of the narrative of the twelve-year-old Jesus in the temple (Luke 2:41–51). My reading will juxtapose some of my childhood memories with sections of Luke's account and let them illuminate each other. The comparison is inspired by the 1926 painting by Max Ernst, *The Blessed Virgin Chastising the Infant Jesus Before Three Witnesses*. This process will serve to define the words spoken by Jesus' mother as an expression of her deep sorrow and help me to understand my childhood experiences.

We will see that my interpretation cannot be regarded as an instance of Old Catholic exegesis when this means describing and classifying a specific reading using a set of formal characteristics. Though the particular type of Old Catholicism I was brought up with fuels the narrative plot of my interpretation, I will argue that this alone does not make it an Old Catholic reading. Instead, it is the reader's willingness to inscribe herself – at least partially – into an interpretive community, thereby contributing to this interpretive community that enables us to call a reading Old Catholic. I will conclude that the question of an Old Catholic exegesis does not call for a descriptive answer. Instead, we should regard the question as an expression of concern for bestowing meaning to our identity.

## **2. Hermeneutical-critical positioning**

Briefly spoken, there are three positions in the hermeneutical debate. In an author-oriented approach the author is held responsible for the meaning of a text. A competent reader is one who successfully decodes the text and touches upon the author's intentions. From this point of view, an Old Catholic exegesis understood as a text in itself, is an explanation produced by someone who belongs to an Old Catholic tradition. According to text-oriented approaches, however, we do not know, and cannot know the author's intentions. We only have the document, in this case, a book or a paper on a biblical text. The question, then, is whether this piece of writing contains an Old Catholic exegesis. In line with structuralist and semiotic methods, concomitant with this approach, we have to decide on characteristics of an Old Catholic interpretation, such as, for instance, a frequent referral to Early Church sources or a critical reflection based on one's sense of moral

responsibility. The question is, then, whether one is willing and able to recognise specific characteristics as belonging explicitly to an Old Catholic tradition. After all, the reader is responsible for their reading.

The third hermeneutical position is the priority of the reader in the process of interpretation. According to this position, the reader gives meaning to a text in the process of reading in which he is completely connected to his context. A reader's context is influenced by educational and scholarly interpretive communities, specific societal positions signified by ethnicity, class, sex or gender, confessional or ideological affiliations, or, most likely, a combination of these. The result is a rather indiscriminate whole of mixed and merging identities. Given this, how would we ever hope to speak of an Old Catholic exegesis? Do we need an Old Catholic reader to constitute such an interpretation? What then is an Old Catholic reader? Is he, for instance, someone who subscribes to formal Old Catholic tenets? Whatever point of view we start with, be it author, text, or reader, it is clear that the famous hermeneutical circle is hard to tackle, and we will always run the risk of taking self-evident positions, such as: this exegesis is Old Catholic because it demonstrates Old Catholic tenets.

This is not only an unsatisfying argument, but it also does not add to our knowledge of Old Catholic exegesis – provided such an exegesis exists at all. It would be easy to dismiss the notion of an Old Catholic interpretation, arguing that in the present rather ecumenical setting of higher education and church life any differences that might have existed between various sources of exegesis have become obsolete. Smit rightly rejects this position.<sup>3</sup> It is, indeed, not acceptable to dispose of the particular interests of a specific group, much less smaller or marginalized groups, as this inevitably takes away, not only this group's means of emancipation, but first and foremost its means of self-understanding and identity formation.<sup>4</sup> The discussion about whether or not there is an Old Catholic exegesis is, therefore, still relevant and must continue.

---

<sup>3</sup> Smit, 'Biblische Hermeneutik' (as note 2), 135–136.

<sup>4</sup> The experience of marginalisation is, of course, manifest in emancipatory movements such as feminist and womanist, ethnic, and gender-based movements, but it may also be recognised within smaller confessional groups such as Old Catholics *vis-à-vis* the worldwide *Catholica*. On this subject, see Angela Berlis, 'Desiderate und Aufgaben heutiger Altkatholizismusforschung', in: Hans Gerny et al. (eds), *Die Wurzel aller Theologie: Sentire cum Ecclesia*. FS Urs von Arx (Bern: Stämpfli, 2003), 208–229, quoted by Smit, 'Biblische Hermeneutik' (as note 2), 135, note 3.

Starting from this preliminary critical consideration, one must work through the hermeneutical circle. Smit touched on the necessary hermeneutical choices. Given the readerly community, he is prepared to accept a specific Old Catholic exegesis in which each interpretive group tends to become aware of its specific interests.<sup>5</sup> Likewise, in the field of formal characteristics, Smit accepts the existence of an Old Catholic interpretation, for it is undeniable that a range of specific interests developed over time.<sup>6</sup> From the perspective of authorship, Smit is equally prepared to accept the existence of an Old Catholic exegesis, taking biography, life experience, family history, and the like into consideration.<sup>7</sup>

An examination of the three hermeneutical choices – readerly community, formal characteristics, and authorship – lead Smit to affirm that there is an Old Catholic exegesis. However, with a view to methodology, he thinks “not” because methods used in exegesis do by and large not differ in various ecclesiastical contexts.<sup>8</sup> His observations may be true; although methods may be the same, their usage can be different. For instance, literary criticism performed with a keen gender awareness will undoubtedly lead to results quite different from results produced by literary criticism within hegemonic discourse that is satisfied with its claim to objectivity. The same may count for the use of a method within differing ecclesiastical contexts. Whether one is a member of a worldwide church that has exercised power in society and education for centuries or one identifies with a community on the margins that continues to evoke question marks in the eyes of most matters indeed.<sup>9</sup> It seems, therefore, that Smit’s notion of method runs the risk of bypassing the interconnectivity between method and life. It is, however, encouraging that Smit highlights the role church history plays in the interpretive community. Church history, according to Smit, may be regarded as a collective autobiography that interacts with individual participants.<sup>10</sup> This remark highlights the role of autobiography for Bible reading.

---

<sup>5</sup> Smit, ‘Biblische Hermeneutik’ (as note 2), 141–144 and 148–149.

<sup>6</sup> Characteristics of an Old Catholic identity are discussed by Smit, ‘Biblische Hermeneutik’ (as note 3), 145–146 and 149.

<sup>7</sup> Smit, ‘Biblische Hermeneutik’ (as note 2), 146–148 and 149–150.

<sup>8</sup> Smit, ‘Biblische Hermeneutik’ (as note 2), 135–136 and 149.

<sup>9</sup> See Berlis, ‘Desiderate und Aufgaben’ (as note 4).

<sup>10</sup> Smit, ‘Biblische Hermeneutik’ (as note 2), 149–150: “(...) dass auf der Ebene einer kirchlichen Gemeinschaft (...) die Kirchengeschichte (...) eine Dimension quasi (auto)biographischer Reflexion hat (...).”

In 2006, Smit was aware that a clear method to address the question of autobiography in biblical criticism was missing.<sup>11</sup> In the past ten years, there have been methodological developments as well as a good deal of confusion. An assessment of the current state of autobiographical biblical criticism may help to clarify the relationship between reader and method and answer the question of what makes an exegesis an Old Catholic interpretation. In the following, I will explore recent developments in autobiographical biblical criticism.

### 3. Autobiographical biblical criticism

To starting with the reader is a hazardous enterprise. Postmodernist and deconstructionist criticism have jeopardized ‘the reader’. Is the reader an ‘I’ or are they a multiple – fragmented – subject? In response to the fragmentation of the subject, we see the continuing and persistent development of positioned criticism. Scholarship is increasingly aware of the way readers depend on various contexts, such as schools, universities, and churches but also gender expectations, ethnic diversity, and sexual preferences. Positioned criticism is a powerful weapon in the struggle for emancipation and equal treatment of marginalised groups. In this respect, personal convictions continue to be political.

Since the 1980s, there has been another response to the postmodern fragmented subject. Second-wave feminist criticism developed the notion of the reader’s self being relatively stable because the ‘I’ resides in the body to which the ‘I’ is inextricably connected. Nancy K. Miller was among the first to promote the awareness of the ‘I’ as an embodied person.<sup>12</sup> Miller built on the famous essay by Jane Tompkins, “Me and My Shadow”, published in a volume edited by Linda Kauffman. The volume also included papers dedicated to the critical anchoring of the mind in the body, according to the notion first formulated by Adrienne Rich that “every mind resides in a body.”<sup>13</sup>

---

<sup>11</sup> Smit, ‘Biblische Hermeneutik’ (as note 2), 139 and 139, note 12.

<sup>12</sup> Nancy K. Miller, *Subject to Change: Reading Feminist Writing* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988); eadem, *Getting Personal: Feminist Occasions and Other Autobiographical Acts* (New York: Routledge, 1991).

<sup>13</sup> Jane P. Tompkins, ‘Me and My Shadow’, in: Linda Kauffman (ed.), *Gender and Theory: Dialogues on Feminist Criticism* (Oxford – New York: Basil Blackwell, 1989), 121–139. Adrienne Rich, ‘Taking Women Students Seriously’, in: *The Radical Teacher: No. 11, The Academic Profession, 1968–1978* (1979), 40–43.

The self depends to a large extent on how the body is perceived. Having a woman's body, a black person's body or being otherwise different from a white man's self-image means you have been taught how to experience, feel, reflect, and respond as someone who is different in the first place. In this case, autobiography might be the key to awareness and recovery of the suppressed self. The question is whether it is possible to give account of life events, experiences, and the like in a self-critical, trustworthy way.

Biblical studies did not embrace the autobiographical approach advocated by Miller. However, at the end of the 1990s, the personal approach in biblical criticism popped up again as autobiographical biblical criticism. Jeffrey L. Staley's *Reading with a Passion* and the *Semeia* volume *Taking it Personally* edited by Janice Capel Anderson and Staley inaugurated the movement.<sup>14</sup> The autobiographical turn stimulated autobiographical approaches in both classical studies and philosophy.<sup>15</sup> The *Semeia* volume was followed by two collections of essays on autobiographical biblical criticism edited by Rosa Kitzberger, a volume edited by Eve-Marie Becker consisting of autobiographical essays written mainly by Protestant New Testament scholars working in Germany, and a theoretical assessment of personal convictions in biblical exegesis by Becker in a volume edited by Oda Wischmeyer.<sup>16</sup>

The term autobiographical proves to be highly problematic. Many of the collected essays, mainly in the Becker volume, contain what formal

---

<sup>14</sup> Jeffrey L. Staley, *Reading with a Passion: Rhetoric, Autobiography, and the American West in the Gospel of John* (New York: Continuum, 1995); Janice Capel Anderson/Jeffrey L. Staley (eds), *Taking it Personally: Autobiographical Biblical Criticism – Semeia* 72 (1995).

<sup>15</sup> Judith P. Hallet/Thomas Van Nortwick (eds) *Compromising Traditions: The Personal Voice in Classical Scholarship* (London – New York: Routledge, 1997); Diana Tietjens Meyers (ed.), *Feminists Rethink the Self* (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 1997).

<sup>16</sup> Ingrid Rosa Kitzberger (ed.), *The Personal Voice in Biblical Interpretation* (London: Routledge, 1999); Ingrid Rosa Kitzberger (ed.), *Autobiographical Biblical Criticism: Learning to Read Between Text and Self* (Leiden: Deo, 2002); Eve-Marie Becker (ed.), *Neutestamentliche Wissenschaft. Autobiographische Essays aus der Evangelischen Theologie* (Tübingen: UTB – Basel: Francke, 2003); Eve-Marie Becker, "Autobiographie" als Herausforderung an die neutestamentliche Wissenschaft', in: Becker, *Neutestamentliche Wissenschaft*, 1–6; Eve-Marie Becker, 'Die Person des Exegeten. Überlegungen zu einem vernachlässigten Thema,' in: Oda Wischmeyer (ed.), *Herkunft und Zukunft der neutestamentlichen Wissenschaft* (Tübingen – Basel: Francke, 2003), 207–243.

data generic biographies are usually made of, without becoming personal. They seem to be narrativised biographies. More disappointing is that the autobiographies in the Becker volume are usually deficiently critical. From a gender-critical perspective, for instance, many of these essays are quite revealing. Their male authors have arranged their biographical data within the framework of the narrative plot, which is normative for the academic quest with its ups and downs, setbacks and good luck, resulting at last in tenure. These essays remind of the feminist critique, according to which men tend to tell their story as a heroic quest like that of Ulysses, while women turn to the difficulties of child-raising, love, and the experience of being rejected. This type of autobiography still haunts twenty-first century critical biblical studies.

On the whole, the term is used rather vaguely in that quite a few approaches such as contextual or deconstructionist readings are brought under the umbrella of autobiography. Sometimes a surprising interplay between personal experience and biblical text is enacted so as to evoke new insights in the self and the text; this is a heuristic approach. At other times, personal experience works to make the reader aware of their involvement in the text; it is explanatory. Though an explanatory approach is necessary to clarify a reader's embeddedness, a heuristic approach appears more fruitful for exploring the interrelation between method and personal convictions.

With a heuristic approach in mind, the following definition of autobiographical biblical criticism seems reasonable: *Autobiographical biblical criticism is a way of reading a biblical text in which a reader searches for the similarities and differences between the way they read the text on the one hand and the way they understand their life experiences on the other so as to give account of one's interpretation in terms of intersubjectivity and ethics and at the same time to increase self-understanding.*

I will put this definition to the test with my reading of the narrative of the twelve-year-old Jesus in the temple (Luke 2:41–51). We shall see that this narrative is closely connected to my personal memories in which my youth in the Old Catholic community of The Hague plays an important role.

#### **4. “Child, why have you treated us like this?”**

“Child, why have you treated us like this?” (Luke 2:48) These are Mary's words when, after a three day search, she and Joseph find Jesus in the temple where he is listening to and questioning the teachers.

*These words in Luke evoke old and painful memories. I remember my mother speaking these words, I imagine how she stood, how she spoke, her voice still resounds. My mother was important to me; she gave me her religious tradition. She was much of an erudite too, knowing everything about plants, grasses, mushrooms, stones and stars, literature, history, art, physics and more. Was I interested? Yes, I suppose, but I was inadequate. I knew I was loved but also that I had to achieve the highest standards. My brother was brilliant; they said he was a genius. My father was a technician, who I felt was in command of everything mechanical. The title of a popular book in the Netherlands, "A child prodigy or a total loss," was my mother's watchword over me.<sup>17</sup> I was afraid of being a total loss, rejected, unloved. My mother seemed quite desperate when she cried out more than once, "Child, why have you treated us like this?"*

This memory came to mind as I examined the narrative of the twelve-year-old Jesus in the temple. I recalled the famous 1926 painting by Max Ernst of *The Blessed Virgin Chastising the Infant Jesus Before Three Witnesses*. The German surrealist painted this canvas in 1926 during his First French period while residing in Paris. The painting shows the Virgin Mary, traditionally clad in red and blue, spanking Jesus when he was a child. She is sitting in an otherwise empty room with three men visible outside the window.<sup>18</sup> These men are the painter Max Ernst and his friends André Breton and Paul Éluard, who were all surrealists. The painting is often interpreted as a satire. Ernst loathed the church of his day. He painted Mary slapping Jesus' buttocks; whereby, Jesus' halo falls off. The painting was considered a sacrilegious provocation and elicited much criticism. When I look at this painting nearly a century later, it does not seem provocative. Blasphemous representations of Jesus abound today so that this painting does not shock me; it seems playful. On the other hand, the portrayal is not funny either. There is something uncanny about it that makes me feel uneasy – and this is definitely not because of a supposed sacrilege.

I look at Mary's face. Her expression is dark. Who is she, and what is she going through? And those men outside? Only one is looking through the window while the other is looking in the opposite direction. The third

---

<sup>17</sup> Willem Frederik Hermans, *Een wonderkind of een total loss* (Amsterdam: De Bezige Bij, 1967).

<sup>18</sup> Max Ernst, *The Blessed Virgin Chastising the Infant Jesus before Three Witnesses: A.B., P.E., and the Artist*, 1926. Oil on canvas, 196 cm x 130 cm, Museum Ludwig, Cologne, Germany.

man, the painter, has closed eyes, apparently unaffected, his nose high in disdain.<sup>19</sup> This is not a scene from either Matthew's or Luke's birth and childhood narratives, nor is it present in the apocrypha such as the *Proto-evangelium of James* or early legend. Could it represent the painter's conception of an existing passage in Matthew or Luke? Could the critics be right, and there is real anger in Ernst's work? Did he want us to think differently about a holy family – a notion that was in vogue at the time? The canvas was painted only six years after Pope Benedict XV constituted the feast of the Holy Family in the Roman-Catholic Church. The feast was an attempt to set the example of a holy family in a society increasingly marked by domestic violence and broken families. Luke's narrative of the twelve-year-old Jesus in the temple is the Gospel lecture of the feast. Perhaps the painter wanted viewers to see the holy family differently. Where and when else could Mary possibly have chastised Jesus?

*Suddenly, I feel like it is me lying there being slapped by my mother, me crying and wondering why my father and brother are not there. Were they unaffected, unwilling, unable to intervene? My mother who introduced me to the great religious thinkers, Augustine, Pascal and Teilhard de Chardin. The mother who made me read the lives of the saints and Bible stories, who taught me to appreciate liturgy and connected me with a long religious family tradition. Did she feel pain? Did she appear as a Mary-like character to me? After all, her name was Mary. Indeed, she repeated the words uttered by Mary more than once, "Child, why have you treated us like this." This was before I found a home in our local parish church, the Old Catholic church in The Hague, doing my schoolwork in the old library or in the eighteenth-century Bishop's Room. I had a second home, a new home, with Bishop Jans and his wife my alternate parents.<sup>20</sup>*

---

<sup>19</sup> This painting reflects elements traditionally connected with the 'Virgin with Child' genre in many ways such as the three magi now converted into the three painters and the future passion of Christ at the hand of the soldiers reflected in Mary's spanking. It might even be argued that it is a type of inverted pietà representation, that is, the Mother weeping for her dead son lying on her lap as a Mother slapping her son.

<sup>20</sup> Petrus Josephus Jans (1909–1994), from 1959 to 1979 bishop of Deventer in the Old Catholic Church of the Netherlands, parish priest of The Hague from 1971 to 1979, and his wife Agnes Theodora Jans-Hijzen (1909–1993). I cherish the memory of the way Bishop Jans presented me with his family Bible, [Andreas van der Schuur and Hendrick van Rhijn], *Biblia Sacra, dat is, de H. Schriftuer* (...) (Utrecht: le Febvre, 1732), a copy of the renowned Van der Schuur Bible, for a long time the default Bible translation of the Dutch Old Catholic Church.

When I came to realise this, I investigated the connection made through association between the Max Ernst painting, my own memories, and the scene of the twelve-year-old Jesus listening to and questioning the teachers in the temple. When Mary and Joseph discovered that Jesus was not with them on their way home, they returned to look for Jesus in Jerusalem.

*After three days, they found him in the temple, sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions; and all who heard him were amazed at his understanding and his answers. And when they saw him they were astonished; and his mother said to him, "Child, why have you treated us like this? Behold, your father and I have been looking for you anxiously" (Luke 2:46–48).*<sup>21</sup>

The words spoken by Mary, "Child, why have you treated us like this?" (Τέκνον, τί ἐποίησας ἡμῖν οὕτως), seem ambiguous to a contemporary reader. Interpreters, however, do recognize sternness in these words. Yet, it is difficult to accept that a quarrel could occur in a 'happy holy family', to quote Adele Reinhartz.<sup>22</sup> Mary's words remind of similar reproaches in *Tanakh* and in the *Protoevangelium of James*.<sup>23</sup> The words were considered a reproach by the fifth-century Greek Theodoret of Cyrus,<sup>24</sup> Maximus the Confessor in the seventh century,<sup>25</sup> Simeon Metaphrastes during

---

<sup>21</sup> Biblical quotations are from the *Revised Standard Version* of the Bible. Only for the words "Child, why have you treated us like this?" I prefer to stick to my own rendering.

<sup>22</sup> Adele Reinhartz, 'The Happy Holy Family in the Jesus Film Genre', in: Jane Schaberg et al. (eds), *On the Cutting Edge: The Study of Women in Biblical Worlds*, FS Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza (New York – London: Continuum, 2004), 123–142.

<sup>23</sup> On the reproach, contained in Mary's words, see René Laurentin, *Jésus au temple. Mystère de Pâques et foi de Marie en Luc 2*, 48–50 (Paris: Gabalda, 1966), 35–36, notes 8 and 9.

<sup>24</sup> Theodoret, *De incarnatione Domini* 24 in: PG 75, 1461 D. See also PG 84, 73A and the discussion in Laurentin, *Jésus au temple* (as note 25), 203–204. In Theodoret, Jesus is reproached (ἐγκαλεῖται) by his mother to which Jesus defends (ἀπολογεῖται) himself.

<sup>25</sup> Originally ascribed to John Geometres, *The Life of Mary*, by Antoine Wenger, *L'Assomption de la T.S. Vierge dans la tradition byzantine du VII<sup>e</sup> au X<sup>e</sup> siècle* (Paris: Institut français d'études byzantines, 1955), 185–189, in which Jesus reproaches his parents (αὐτοῖς ἐγκλητέον μάλλον), discussed by Laurentin, *Jésus au temple* (as note 23), 209–211. Afterwards attributed to Maximus the Confessor (Georgian text) by Michel-Jean van Esbroeck (ed.), *Maxime le Confesseur. Vie de la Vierge* (Leuven: Peeters, 1986).

the second half of the tenth century,<sup>26</sup> as well as the twelfth-century Latin thinker Aelred of Rievaulx.<sup>27</sup> Modern interpreters, however, prefer gentler reading of Mary's words. As John Martin Creed remarks, "[t]he parents are struck with amazement. The mother first finds words of enquiry and gentle rebuke."<sup>28</sup> René Laurentin maintains that the tone is one of deferential affection.<sup>29</sup> Are these verses just another instance of the happy holy family? I doubt it.

The text informs us that "when they saw him they were astonished" (καὶ ἰδόντες αὐτὸν ἐξεπλάγησαν, Luke 2:48). Were his parents simply "astonished", or "amazed" as Raymond Brown and Joseph Fitzmyer hold (though Fitzmyer recognizes that ἐκπλήσσομαι has a strong connotation)?<sup>30</sup> Or is there "perhaps even joy in the present case," as I. Howard Marshall suggests?<sup>31</sup> In Luke-Acts, we encounter the same verb three more times, each instance is a response to Jesus' teaching.<sup>32</sup> Apparently what Jesus is doing here should be interpreted as teaching. The interpretation offered by Marshall seems, therefore, quite probable: Mary and Joseph "wonder at finding Jesus in the company of teachers in the temple."<sup>33</sup>

Jesus' parents were also "anxious" (ὀδυνώμενοι, Luke 2:28). The verb ὀδυνάομαι, "to sorrow, suffer torment," occurs four times in the NT, only in Luke-Acts. In the story of The Rich Man and Lazarus (Luke

<sup>26</sup> Simeon Metaphrastes, *Menologion: On the Theotokos*, 24 in: Vasilii Vasilevitch Latychev, *Menologii anonymi byzantini*, 2 (Petrograd: Tip. Academiae, 1912), where his mother addresses Jesus by way of reproach (ὡς ἐγκαλοῦσα).

<sup>27</sup> Aelred of Rievaulx, *De institutione inclusarum* 31, in: Charles Dumont (ed.), *Aelredus Rievallensis, La vie de recluse / La prière pastorale* (Paris: Cerf, 1961), 123, comments "*Cum audieris matrem dulci quadam increpatione filium verberantem*", the word *dulci* hardly counterbalancing the rather strong *increpatione verberantem*.

<sup>28</sup> John Martin Creed, *The Gospel According to St. Luke* (London: MacMillan, 1957), 45.

<sup>29</sup> "[L]e ton est celui d'une déferente affection." Laurentin, *Jésus au temple* (as note 23), 36.

<sup>30</sup> Raymond E. Brown, *The Birth of the Messiah: A Commentary on the Infancy Narratives in Matthew and Luke* (New York: Doubleday, 1977), 475; Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *The Gospel According to Luke (I–IX)* (New York: Doubleday, 1981), 442. See also Laurentin, *Jésus au Temple* (as note 23), 33–34.

<sup>31</sup> I. Howard Marshall, *The Gospel of Luke: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978), 128.

<sup>32</sup> Luke 4:32; 9:43; Acts 13:12. On the use of the aorist here, see Joachim Jeremiás, *Die Sprache des Lukasevangeliums. Redaktion und Tradition im Nicht-Markus-stoff des dritten Evangeliums* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1980), 101.

<sup>33</sup> Marshall, *The Gospel of Luke* (as note 31), 128.

16:24–25), the same verb is used to denote the pains of hell fire experienced by the rich man when after his death he perceives the unbridgeable gap between him and the poor Lazarus in Abraham's lap. The verb is also used to denote the feelings of the people in Miletus who said farewell to Paul, weeping and kissing him because they realised they would never see him again (Acts 20:38). The emotions of 'saying farewell forever' and 'really missing' seem preeminent in this word. As Brown remarks, "it implies mental and spiritual pain or sadness, and in Luke 16:24–25 and Acts 20:38 the anguish concerns life itself."<sup>34</sup> Likewise, especially the passive tense is used in classical literature to denote the feeling of suffering or pain.<sup>35</sup>

What type of loss would Jesus' parents have experienced when they found Jesus in the temple? I suggest that Mary experiences the loss of her child, who indeed responds that he must attend to "the things of his father" (Luke 2:49). Whether this means that his father is God or according to the common Jewish usage that his father is Abraham does not really matter in this context.<sup>36</sup> At this point it suffices that Mary seems to realise that she has lost her child.<sup>37</sup> When Jesus returns home with his parents he has chosen to be obedient. He has come of age. In the next verses, Jesus becomes the subject of the verbs.<sup>38</sup>

Returning to my own memories, I now understand that my mother must have felt she was losing me. Indeed, she confided to me more than once that she had prayed and dedicated me to God because I was beyond her reach. Digging deeper, it occurs to me that my mother and my father had good reason to do as they did. The fear of losing a child was the result

---

<sup>34</sup> Brown, *The Birth of the Messiah* (as note 30), 475.

<sup>35</sup> Already in Democritus the philosopher (fifth-century B.C.), in: H. Diels and W. Kranz, *Die Fragmente der Vorsokratiker* (Berlin: Weidmann, 1951), 433 nr. 159. See also for instance Hippocrates, *Epidemiae* 4.12; Sophocles, *Electra* 804; Aristophanes, *Vespae* 283 and *Ranae* 650; Plato, *Res publica* 583d.

<sup>36</sup> So Ben Hemelsoet/Dirk Monshouwer, *Lucas. Lezen naar de gewoonte van Pasen* (Zoetermeer: Boekencentrum, 1997), 45.

<sup>37</sup> Turid Karlsen Seim, *The Double Message: Patterns of Gender in Luke-Acts* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1994), 69, speaks of "Jesus' distancing from his parents." To call Mary "the main beneficiary of this lesson in home management" as Moore does, seems somewhat one-sided. See Stephen D. Moore, *Mark and Luke in Poststructuralist Perspectives: Jesus Begins to Write* (New Haven – London: Yale University Press, 1992), 123.

<sup>38</sup> For instance, Joel B. Green, *The Gospel of Luke* (NICNT; Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1997), 156.

of a trauma because they did lose a child a few days after his birth. Some of the first words spoken to me after my birth were, “You shall not go, you must stay with me.” My parent’s fear of losing another child was present in my childhood and early adolescent years. Through this understanding I feel more compassion for my parents and can accept their distress without feelings of guilt.

Thus far, autobiography has served as a heuristic method in the context of the Max Ernst painting that triggered my memories and impelled me to understand Luke’s text differently. I gained insight into both the text and what happened between my parents and me. There is also a therapeutic element as the exegesis helped me in my self-understanding.

## 5. An Old Catholic reading?

Although the narrative plot of my interpretation is clearly fuelled by elements of an Old Catholic tradition, it is not an Old Catholic reading of a biblical narrative. A reader well acquainted with Saint Augustine’s *Confessions*, who is aware of the prominent place Augustine has occupied in the various Old Catholic traditions since the Jansenist struggles, might have wondered at the narrative plot underlying my reading. Just as Augustine’s mother Monica wept for her son who was in danger of a wasted life, my mother wept for me because she feared I would become a total loss.<sup>39</sup> When I turned towards the Church and found in Bishop Jans and his wife alternate parents, this bishop tried to console my mother with the very words spoken by Bishop Ambrose to Monica: a son of so many tears cannot possibly be lost.<sup>40</sup> Like Bishop Ambrose and Monica, Bishop Jans dared to resist my mother, thereby offering me a kind of sacred canopy.<sup>41</sup> It can hardly be a coincidence that The Hague parish church was dedicated to Saint Augustine, while the parish women’s association, of which my mother was treasurer, was named after Monica. The room where the women’s association used to assemble was decorated with a steel engrav-

---

<sup>39</sup> “[C]um pro me fleret ad te mea mater, fidelis tua, amplius quam flent matres corporea funera.” Augustine, *Confessiones* 3, 11, 19, in: James J. O’Donnell, *Augustine: Confessions* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992).

<sup>40</sup> “[F]ieri non potest, ut filius istarum lacrimarum pereat.” Aug. *Conf.* 3, 12, 21 (as note 39).

<sup>41</sup> The term ‘sacred canopy’ is used here as a reference to Peter L. Berger, *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1967).

ing of Monica and Augustine after a painting by the Dutch painter Ary Scheffer that depicts Augustine and his mother Monica discussing the Kingdom of Heaven. My mother saw this scene as a mirror of herself and her son.<sup>42</sup>

Augustine was present in my youth. Descending from a North-Holland family that adhered to the Jansenist cause from the early eighteenth century onwards, reading and discussing Augustine, Thomas à Kempis, and Pascal was part of our family routine. All this does not, however, make my reading of the twelve-year-old Jesus an Old Catholic exegesis. After all, Augustine is read in Pietist orthodoxy of the Second Reformation in the Netherlands too. Augustine is not the shibboleth of Old Catholicism. The point is that we do like to view Augustine as part of the Old Catholic legacy. Indeed, the Old Catholic parish church of The Hague is dedicated to St Augustine whose magnificent carved statue supports the pulpit as if the living Word rests on the shoulders of this man's testimony.

I recognised Old Catholic elements in my reading of Luke because I placed myself within this interpretive community out of a heart-felt concern to retrace my roots in order to make sense of my life. Informed by tradition, I contributed to tradition. I also took the presence of Augustine in our Hague parish for granted as something typical for this Old Catholic community. In other words, the self and the religious tradition mutually informed each other – just as Smit suggested self-understanding and church history as collective autobiography would do.

I reject the suggestion that the presence of formal characteristics such as the frequent occurrence of Augustine in my life makes for an Old Catholic exegesis. Instead, I claim the position that an interpretive community is the *locus* of Old Catholic exegesis. It must be noted that this is a shift in categories. My refusal to accept an Old Catholic exegesis on the basis of a set of formal characteristics concerns the domain of descriptive explanation. Whereby, an appeal to an interpretive community concerns the domain of meaning. Meaning, that is, of the course life has taken and who you want to be. Giving meaning is a personal affair always exercised within a community or in various communities at once. Choosing an Old Catholic exegesis does not come down to classifying or labelling but to expressing who you are or who you want to be.

---

<sup>42</sup> Original painting by Ary Scheffer (1795–1858), 'Saints Augustine and Monica', 1854, National Gallery, London. Steel engraving probably 1860, present location unknown. The subject is taken from Augustine, *Conf.* 9 (as note 39).

## 6. Conclusions

Is there an Old Catholic exegesis? According to Smit, the answer is “No, there is not” and “Yes, there is.” ‘No’, in view of the methods applied, ‘yes’ in view of authorship, formal characteristics and interpretive community. In my response, I argue that methods should be evaluated according to how they are used. In this sense, even the use of methods should be reckoned under “Yes, there is.” However, I followed a slightly different line of argument. I defended that you cannot decide on an Old Catholic exegesis on the basis of classifying or labelling formal characteristics or formal authorship. Deciding whether a specific exegesis is Old Catholic belongs to a different category; it is basically an act of meaning making. What is at stake is the search for personal identity within the identity of an interpretive community.

Smit and I concur, “No, there is not” an Old Catholic exegesis and “Yes, there is.” The difference is that my ‘no’ concerns the attempt to appropriate certain characteristics such as Augustine as typically Old Catholic, while my ‘yes’ concerns the attempt to give meaning to a life in terms of an interpretive community that one considers (partly) constitutive of one’s sense of identity. The value of autobiographical biblical criticism is that it offers a tool to consciously and knowingly connect the search for identity with reading Scripture.

*Ari Troost (\* 1959 The Hague NL), 1978–1988 study of theology at Utrecht University. Researcher in New Testament at the Catholic University Nijmegen from 1988 to 1993. Master at the Protestant Theological University in Utrecht 1997 and Minister in the Protestant Church. In 2014, Master in Classical Languages and Cultures, Groningen University. Currently teacher in Classical Languages and Ph.D. candidate at Utrecht University.*

*Address: Volmachtenlaan 27, NL-9451 HT Rolde, Netherlands  
E-mail: aritroost@gmail.com*

## *Zusammenfassung*

In seinem 2006 in der IKZ erschienenen Beitrag über persönliche und kirchliche Identitäten (IKZ 96 [2006] 135–151) behandelt Peter-Ben Smit die Frage, ob die Konfessionszugehörigkeit als Komponente biblischer Interpretation angesehen werden könne. Die Frage «Gibt es eine altkatholische Exegese?» verneint und bejaht er. Seine Antwort gründet auf Einsichten in die Rolle persönlicher Überzeugungen in der Bibelkritik. Jedoch war die autobiographische Bibelkritik im

Jahr 2006 nur wenig entwickelt. Der vorliegende Beitrag legt eine kritische Evaluation autobiographischer Bibelkritik und anschliessend eine persönliche Lektüre der Erzählung über den 12-jährigen Jesus im Tempel (Lk 2,41–51). Obwohl Elemente aus einer altkatholischen Tradition in diesem Leseprozess erkennbar sein mögen, macht dies eine Lektüre nicht einfach altkatholisch. Stattdessen ist es der Wille des Lesers oder der Leserin, sich selbst in eine Interpretationsgemeinschaft einzuschreiben und zu dieser Gemeinschaft in einer Weise beizutragen, dass es erlaubt, diese Lektüre als «altkatholisch» zu bezeichnen.

*Keywords – Schlüsselwörter*

New Testament Studies – Biblical Hermeneutics – Autobiographical Biblical Criticism – Autobiography – Old Catholicism