



In Pursuit of an Ethics of Biblical Interpretation: Assessing Cheryl Anderson's Evaluative Process through Interpretations of Romans 1:18-32.

Kimberly Walsh

Student No: 2019783

April 2025

This dissertation is being submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the
degree of Master of Theology: Christian Theology.

Word count: 16,390 (excluding front and back matter and footnotes).

Master's Degrees by Examination and Dissertation

Declaration Form

1. This work has not previously been accepted in substance for any degree and is not being concurrently submitted in candidature for any degree.

Name: Kimberly Walsh

Date: 26 April 2025

2. This dissertation is being submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Theology: Christian Theology

Name: Kimberly Walsh

Date: 26 April 2025

3. This dissertation is the result of my own independent work/investigation, except where otherwise stated.

Other sources are acknowledged by footnotes giving explicit references.

A bibliography is appended.

Name: Kimberly Walsh

Date: 26 April 2025

4. I hereby give consent for my dissertation, if accepted, to be available for photocopying, inter- library loan, and for deposit in the University's digital repository

Name: Kimberly Walsh

Date: 26 April 2025

Supervisor's Declaration.

I am satisfied that this work is the result of the student's own efforts.

Signed:

Date:

Acknowledgements

I would especially like to thank Dr Jessica Keady for her invaluable supervision throughout the writing of this dissertation. Her guidance, feedback and reassuring support have been deeply appreciated. I would also like to thank my friends, SA and CS, whose constant encouragement and gentle challenge helped to shape my thinking as I approached this important topic.

Contents

Acknowledgements.....	ii
Abstract.....	iv
Chapter 1 Introduction.....	1
Chapter 2 Literature Review.....	4
Chapter 3 Methodology	10
Chapter 4 Anderson’s Evaluative Process and Analysis of the Interpretations of Romans 1:18-32	13
Element 1: An Interpretation is Plausible	13
Element 2: Assessment of the Contemporary Context	22
Element 3: Critical Self-Awareness.....	32
Element 4: Analysis of Consequences.....	41
Chapter 5 Discussion.....	49
Chapter 6 Conclusion	61
Bibliography	64

Figures

Figure 1: Kimberly Walsh, <i>Relationship between the elements within Anderson’s evaluative process and the ‘others’ affected by an interpretation.</i>	59
---	----

Abstract

The purpose of this dissertation is to explore the possible elements of an ethics of biblical interpretation by critically examining an evaluative process proposed by Cheryl Anderson. The intention of an ethics of biblical interpretation is to ensure that interpreters take responsibility both to treat the biblical text justly and to ensure that those *others* who are potentially affected by their interpretations are not harmed. Anderson's evaluative process suggests that four elements are required for interpretations to be considered ethical. These include the plausibility of the interpretation, an assessment of the contemporary context, critical self-awareness exhibited by the interpreter and an analysis of the potential consequences of the interpretation, with harmful interpretations being dismissed. In this study these elements are explored in detail and their suitability as part of Anderson's evaluative process is analysed by applying them to six example biblical interpretations of Romans 1:18-32, to evaluate whether these interpretations can be considered ethical according to Anderson's elements. These elements are shown to correlate with the main categories of *others* that are affected by interpretations, that is, the text, the contemporary readers, the interpreter and those who are impacted by interpretations, and this relationship is examined. The controlling role of the interpreter and the potential for Anderson's evaluative process to safeguard the text, the contemporary readers and those affected by the interpretation, within the interpretive process is discussed. The dissertation identifies significant challenges to the implementation of two of Anderson's required elements, that is, critical self-awareness and the analysis of consequences, and suggests areas for further research. This dissertation concludes that, although Anderson's evaluative process contributes valuable insight into potential constituent elements of an ethics of biblical interpretation, its implementation cannot be considered feasible at this time.

Chapter 1 Introduction

Purpose of the dissertation

Throughout history, biblical interpretations have resulted in tragic consequences when they have been used to justify abuse, oppression and exploitation, for example with slavery, the holocaust, apartheid and violence against women.¹ This has led to a call for an ethics of biblical interpretation to prevent such harm, where interpreters not only take responsibility to treat the text fairly but where they also take responsibility for the consequences of their interpretations on others.² In her Society of Biblical Literature Presidential Address nearly forty years ago, Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza campaigned for this “double ethics” within biblical studies.³ In applying such an ethical approach, Schüssler Fiorenza envisaged biblical interpretations giving rise to justice and wellbeing outcomes rather than allowing them to be misused and result in harm.⁴ Although there does not appear to be any agreed approach to an ethics of biblical interpretation in the field of biblical studies, there are scholars such as Cheryl Anderson, Charles H. Cosgrove and Daniel Patte who have taken up the mantle from Schüssler Fiorenza, and have continued this pursuit for an ethics of biblical interpretation.⁵

Anderson, in her more recent biblical project to promote greater inclusive biblical interpretation, has designed an ethics of biblical interpretation as an elements-based evaluative process, with which she seeks to challenge what she perceives as the exclusive and controlling perspective of white, western, heterosexual men on

¹ See for example, Willard M. Swartley, *Slavery, Sabbath, War & Women: Case Issues In Biblical Interpretation*, (Scottsdale: Herald Press, 1983); Thatcher, Adrian. *The Savage Text: The Use And Abuse Of The Bible*. (Chichester: John Wiley & Sons, 2008).

² Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, ‘The Ethics Of Biblical Interpretation: Decentering Biblical Scholarship’, *Journal of Biblical Literature*, 107.1 (1988), pp. 3-17.

³ Schüssler Fiorenza, ‘The Ethics Of Biblical Interpretation’, p. 15.

⁴ Schüssler Fiorenza, ‘The Ethics Of Biblical Interpretation’, p. 17.

⁵ Cheryl Anderson, *Ancient Laws And Contemporary Controversies: The Need For Inclusive Biblical Interpretation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), p. 146; Charles H. Cosgrove, *The Meanings We Choose: Hermeneutical Ethics, Indeterminacy And The Conflict Of Interpretations* (London: T & T Clarke International, 2004); Daniel Patte, *Ethics of Biblical Interpretation: A Reevaluation* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1995), pp. 20-21.

accepted biblical interpretations.⁶ Her evaluative process considers not only how an interpretation is produced but why a particular meaning of a text is preferred.⁷

Anderson's evaluative process identifies four elements which she considers necessary for an interpretation to be determined as ethical. These elements are:

- 1) The interpretation is plausible, demonstrating that it is grounded in the textual features of the text;
- 2) The interpretation includes an assessment of the contemporary context, demonstrating its relevance to the current social location and culture of its readers;
- 3) The interpretation exhibits critical self-awareness, acknowledging that it has been influenced by many factors, including the interpreter's social location and presuppositions; and
- 4) The interpretation demonstrates that it has analysed its potential consequences on individuals and communities, and dismisses any harmful interpretations.⁸

The purpose of this dissertation is to critically examine Anderson's evaluative process and to assess its appropriateness and feasibility as an ethics of biblical interpretation. The individual elements (plausibility, assessment of contemporary context, critical self-awareness and analysis of consequences) are explored in detail to determine their relevance and purpose within Anderson's evaluative process. Each element is applied to six example biblical interpretations of Romans 1:18-32 to evaluate whether the interpretations can be considered ethical according to Anderson's evaluative process and to analyse each element's suitability within the overall process. The appropriateness of Anderson's evaluative process is discussed and its relationship to the main categories of *others* affected by an interpretation, that is, the text, the contemporary readers, the interpreter and those who are impacted by interpretations, is examined. The feasibility of implementing Anderson's evaluative

⁶ Anderson, *Ancient Laws And Contemporary Controversies*, pp. 145-154.

⁷ Anderson, *Ancient Laws And Contemporary Controversies*, p. 148.

⁸ Anderson, *Ancient Laws And Contemporary Controversies*, pp. 146, 148.

process is considered and suggestions are provided as to how some of the observed weaknesses of the evaluative process might be addressed.

Chapter analysis

The dissertation includes a brief Literature Review (Chapter 2) providing an overview as to why the development of an ethics of biblical interpretation is considered important. It highlights the main concerns levelled by its critics and outlines some of the approaches towards developing an ethics of biblical interpretation.

Chapter 3 outlines the methodology used in this dissertation. It describes Anderson's evaluative process and introduces the biblical interpretations of Romans 1:18-32 to be assessed against each element of the evaluative process.

Chapter 4 explores the purpose and relevance of the individual elements within Anderson's evaluative process. Each element is applied to the selected biblical interpretations and critically analysed to consider its value and suitability within the evaluative process.

The Discussion (Chapter 5) considers the main themes and observations from the previous element and interpretation analysis. It discusses the feasibility and appropriateness of Anderson's evaluative process as an ethics of biblical interpretation and considers issues and concerns that need to be addressed for its full implementation. The chapter concludes by proposing a model that reflects the relationship between the elements within Anderson's evaluative process and the *others* involved in any biblical interpretation.

The Conclusion (Chapter 6) summarises the findings of this dissertation and makes recommendations for further research in this important area.

Chapter 2 Literature Review

Why is an ethics of biblical interpretation important?

Schüssler Fiorenza, in her 1987 Society of Biblical Literature Presidential Address, called for the introduction of a “double ethics” within biblical studies.⁹ In this seminal address, Schüssler Fiorenza reaffirmed the need for an ethics of historical reading, to ensure that texts are treated justly within their historical context.¹⁰ Additionally, she called for a new “ethics of accountability”, insisting that interpreters take responsibility not only for their interpretive choices but also for the consequences of their interpretations.¹¹ Schüssler Fiorenza highlighted how biblical interpretations have historically been used to justify abuse, oppression and exploitation, including the support for wars, anti-Judaism, misogyny, slavery, and colonialism.¹² Her approach advocates that biblical interpretations should be used to increase justice and wellbeing outcomes rather than allowing them to result in harm.¹³ Although Schüssler Fiorenza is not the first theologian to consider the impact of biblical interpretations on others, her presidential address has been profoundly influential.¹⁴ For example, over the past forty years other scholars, such as Anderson, J. Botha, Cosgrove, Patte and Ken Stone, have also argued for a greater ethical obligation in the approach to biblical interpretation and citing Schüssler Fiorenza’s work.¹⁵ For some, the catalyst for this hermeneutical concern is in response to their encounter with others who have been affected by perceived harmful biblical interpretations.¹⁶

⁹ Schüssler Fiorenza, ‘The Ethics Of Biblical Interpretation’, p. 14.

¹⁰ Schüssler Fiorenza, ‘The Ethics Of Biblical Interpretation’, p. 14.

¹¹ Schüssler Fiorenza, ‘The Ethics Of Biblical Interpretation’, p. 15.

¹² Schüssler Fiorenza, ‘The Ethics Of Biblical Interpretation’, p. 15.

¹³ Schüssler Fiorenza, ‘The Ethics Of Biblical Interpretation’, p. 17.

¹⁴ St Augustine, in his work *On Christian Doctrine* 1:35-36, showed a similar concern when he emphasised that biblical interpretations should always result in an increase of love for God and for neighbour; Augustine, ‘On Christian Doctrine’ in *The Works Of Aurelius Augustine, Bishop of Hippo*, ed. Marcus Dodds, trans. J. F. Shaw, (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1892), pp.30-31.

¹⁵ Anderson, *Ancient Laws And Contemporary Controversies*, pp. 146-147; J. Botha, ‘The Ethics Of New Testament Interpretation’, *Neotestamentica*, 26.1 (1992), pp. 170-174; Charles H. Cosgrove, *The Meanings We Choose: Hermeneutical Ethics, Indeterminacy And The Conflict Of Interpretations* (London: T & T Clarke International, 2004), p. 2; Patte, *Ethics of Biblical Interpretation*, p. 21; Ken Stone, *Practicing Safer Texts: Food, Sex and Bible in Queer Perspective* (London/New York: T&T International, 2005), pp. 12-13.

¹⁶ Anderson, *Ancient Laws And Contemporary Controversies*, p. 3; Patte, *Ethics of Biblical Interpretation*, pp. 20-21.

Gary Philips and Danna Nolan Fewell's considerations on Emmanuel Levinas' influential work calling for "a responsibility for the Other,"¹⁷ led them to conclude that an interpreter has responsibility for the effects of their interpretation on all the *others* who may be affected by it.¹⁸ They suggest these *others* include the text itself, its authors, the readers of the text and those who are more widely affected by the interpretation.¹⁹ Although it is not explicitly stated, it is presumed that the interpreter is included as a reader of the text, as they too could be affected by an interpretation. Philips and Fewell suggest that each of these *others* needs to be given consideration within an ethical approach to interpretation.²⁰ However, they acknowledge that the process of interpretation is a balancing act between these various and, at times, conflicting interests.²¹ Volker Rabens shares a powerful illustration of this tension when he quotes from John Henry Hopkins, a nineteenth-century Episcopal bishop.²² Hopkins was personally opposed to the harm that slavery caused, yet he could not reconcile his personal conviction with the support for slavery that he saw within the Bible. His response was to defer to what he understood the Bible to say. He concluded that he was "compelled to submit my weak and erring intellect to the authority of the Almighty. For then only can I be safe in my conclusions."²³ This example demonstrates the internal conflict an interpreter may face between their personal values and their theological convictions regarding how the biblical text should be understood. Schüssler Fiorenza's unique contribution in bringing to the fore an "ethics of accountability" challenges the unquestioning acceptance of such biblical interpretations and their subsequent harm to those affected by them.

Criticism and concern

It is clear from the literature that this call to extend an ethics of biblical interpretation to include a focus on the potential impact of biblical interpretations has not been

¹⁷ Emmanuel Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity*, trans. Richard Cohen. (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1985), p. 115, cited in Gary A. Phillips and Danna Nolan Fewell, 'Ethics, Bible, Reading As If', *Semeia*, 77 (1997), p. 6.

¹⁸ Phillips and Fewell, 'Ethics, Bible, Reading As If', p. 7.

¹⁹ Phillips and Fewell, 'Ethics, Bible, Reading As If', p. 7.

²⁰ Phillips and Fewell, 'Ethics, Bible, Reading As If', p. 7.

²¹ Phillips and Fewell, 'Ethics, Bible, Reading As If', p. 7.

²² Volker Rabens, 'Inspiring Ethics: A Hermeneutical Model for the Dialogue between Biblical Texts and Contemporary Ethics', in *Key Approaches to Biblical Ethics*, (Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill, 2021) doi: https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004445727_006, p. 82.

²³ Rabens, 'Inspiring Ethics', p. 82.

universally welcomed.²⁴ Some scholars, such as Pieter Craffert, Bruce Malina and Kevin J. Vanhoozer, have voiced concern that this approach might result in disrespecting the biblical text and potentially lead to the misrepresentation of its meaning.²⁵ They argue that consideration of the impact of any interpretation must always be secondary to safeguarding the primacy of the text's historic meaning.²⁶ Underpinning this concern is often a theological conviction that a singular, author-intended, legitimate interpretation of biblical texts exists and, therefore, choosing to give significance to other factors, such as the text's potential impact on individuals and communities, may be seen as undermining this understanding.²⁷

However, although advocates of an ethics of biblical interpretation generally refute the insistence that texts have a single, fixed meaning, many are committed to interpreting the text within its historical context as Schüssler Fiorenza initially emphasised.²⁸ In contrast, though, they tend to maintain that texts may generate several critically plausible interpretations, reflecting unintended as well as author-intended meanings, all of which could be argued as doing justice to the biblical text.²⁹ They claim these legitimate interpretive variations are the result of inevitable influences on interpreters such as their own social locations, their interpretive interests and their preferred hermeneutical approaches. This means that an interpretation can never be entirely objective even if it is strived towards.³⁰ However, as Patte observes, interpretive subjectivity does not tend to be acknowledged,

²⁴ For a brief history of the development of an ethics of biblical interpretation see Daniel Patte, 'Ethics of Biblical Interpretation', in *The Oxford Encyclopedia Of The Bible And Ethics*. ed. Robert L. Brawley (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015). <https://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/acref/obso/9780199829910.001.0001/acref-9780199829910-e-89> [Date Accessed 24 January 2024].

²⁵ Pieter F. Craffert, 'From Apartheid Readings To Ordinary Readings Of The Bible - Has The Ethics Of Interpretation Changed?', *Scriptura*, 64 (1998), p. 67; Bruce J. Malina, 'The Bible: Witness Or Warrant: Reflections On Daniel Patte's Ethics Of Biblical Interpretation', *Biblical Theology Bulletin*, 26.2 (1996), p. 84; Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *Is There A Meaning In This Text?: The Bible, The reader, And The Morality Of Literary Knowledge* (Michigan: Zondervan, 1998), pp. 339-340.

²⁶ Craffert, 'From Apartheid Readings To Ordinary Readings Of The Bible', p. 72; Vanhoozer, *Is There A Meaning In This Text?*, p. 339.

²⁷ Craffert, 'From Apartheid Readings To Ordinary Readings Of The Bible', p. 72-74; Malina, 'The Bible: Witness Or Warrant', p. 84.

²⁸ Schüssler Fiorenza, 'The Ethics Of Biblical Interpretation', p. 14.

²⁹ Schüssler Fiorenza, 'The Ethics Of Biblical Interpretation', p. 14; Cosgrove, *The Meanings We Choose*, p. 39; Patte, *Romans*, pp. 23-28.

³⁰ Anderson, *Ancient Laws And Contemporary Controversies*, p. 147; Daniel Patte, *Romans: Three Exegetical Interpretations And The History Of Reception: Volume 1: Romans 1: 1-32* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2018), pp. 30-32.

particularly within traditional exegetical practice.³¹ This appearance of objectivity has led to controlling dominant interpretations within biblical studies that actually represent the perspective of interpreters, who in general are those Audre Lorde refers to as the “mythical norm”, that is white, Western, heterosexual males.³² David Horrell admits that there is a tendency by white, New Testament Western scholars, like himself, to ignore the potential significant impact of social location, culture and ideology on their interpretations.³³ This interpretive dominance by these particular groups has the associated danger that they effectively control the meaning and thus, the possible applications of the text.³⁴ An ethics of biblical interpretation that allows for a diversity of plausible interpretations could in fact claim to better safeguard the meaning of the text, liberating it from such inappropriately singular control and ownership.³⁵

What is included in an ethics of biblical interpretation?

As shown above, over the past forty years, there has been considerable awareness within scholarly literature of the need to develop an ethics of biblical interpretation which both does justice to the text and aims to minimise any potential harm to *others* by insisting that interpreters take responsibility for the consequences of their interpretations. However, although there have been several attempts to describe what constitutes an ethics of biblical interpretation, there does not appear to be an agreed definition or process.

Schüssler Fiorenza proposed that this ethics of biblical interpretation should become a new interdisciplinary area that “seeks to articulate a professional ethics for biblical studies.”³⁶ She outlined thirteen theses to support this proposal and identified four categories of ethical inquiry that should be constituent: 1) “reading”; 2) “interpretive

³¹ Patte, *Romans*, p.340.

³² Patte, *Ethics Of Biblical Interpretation*, p. 25; Anderson, *Ancient Laws And Contemporary Controversies*, pp. 145-146; Audre Lorde, ‘Age, Race, Class, And Sex: Women Redefining Difference’, in *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (California: Crossing Press, 1984), p. 116.

³³ David G. Horrell, ‘Paul, Inclusion And Whiteness: Particularizing Interpretation.’ *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 40, no. 2 (2017), p. 124.

³⁴ Tony L. Moyers, ‘Reading And Writing With Eyes And Ears Toward The Other’, *The International Journal of Religion and Spirituality in Society*, 11.1 (2021), p. 271.

³⁵ Moyers, ‘Reading And Writing With Eyes’, p. 271.

³⁶ Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *Rhetoric And Ethic: The Politics Of Biblical Studies* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999), pp. 195-198.

practices” 3) “scholarship”; and 4) “scientific evaluation and judgement.”³⁷ Schüssler Fiorenza’s concern that biblical interpretation is never neutral but is inherently subjective, led her to argue for a critically reflexive evaluative approach that would enable adjudication between competing biblical interpretations.³⁸ In this way, she believed justice could be done to the text and to contemporary readers, especially those who would be more widely impacted by the interpretations.³⁹ There is no obvious evidence that an interdisciplinary approach such as Schüssler Fiorenza envisaged has ever been established.

Other scholars, such as Dale Martin and Cosgrove, suggest less encompassing and prescriptive approaches than that proposed by Schüssler Fiorenza.⁴⁰ They argue for a more general approach to evaluating interpretations and suggest a particular principle (such as “love”), or broad guidelines combined into a “rule of faith” (such as theological, moral, relevance or ecumenical considerations) be applied to interpretations.⁴¹ They do not claim these principles or guidelines are necessarily all that is needed in assessing the ethicality of an interpretation, or in adjudicating between interpretations, but rather they argue that these are valuable concepts to consider.⁴² The lack of prescription within these approaches may make them more attractive and easier to apply as an ethics of biblical interpretation than Schüssler Fiorenza’s offering; however, their acknowledged insufficiency may limit their effectiveness in evaluating whether an interpretation is ethical or not.

In contrast to Martin and Cosgrove, Anderson would tend to lean towards Schüssler Fiorenza’s conception of an ethics of biblical interpretation, and has proposed a more prescriptive evaluative process which she claims can ethically assess any plausible interpretation and enable ethical judgements between different plausible interpretations to be made.⁴³

³⁷ Schüssler Fiorenza, *Rhetoric And Ethic*, pp. 196-198.

³⁸ Schüssler Fiorenza, *Rhetoric And Ethic*, p. 197.

³⁹ Schüssler Fiorenza, *Rhetoric And Ethic*, p. 197.

⁴⁰ Dale Martin, *Sex And The Single Savior: Gender And Sexuality In Biblical Interpretation*, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006), pp. 165-169; Cosgrove, *The Meanings We Choose*, p. 44.

⁴¹ Martin, *Sex And The Single Savior*, p. 168; Cosgrove, *The Meanings We Choose*, p. 44.

⁴² Martin, *Sex And The Single Savior*, p. 168; Cosgrove, *The Meanings We Choose*, p. 44.

⁴³ Anderson, *Ancient Laws And Contemporary Controversies*, pp. 146-148.

Anderson explicitly identifies three elements that she considers essential for a plausible interpretation to be considered ethical.⁴⁴ However, as her process only considers plausible interpretations, in practice, plausibility is an additional element within her evaluative process.⁴⁵ Consequently, Anderson's ethics of biblical interpretation comprises an evaluative process involving four elements which she considers are essential for an interpretation to be determined as ethical. These elements include the plausibility of the interpretation, an assessment of the contemporary context, critical self-awareness exhibited by the interpreter and an analysis of the potential consequences of the interpretation, with harmful interpretations being dismissed.⁴⁶ These elements are outlined in more detail in the following chapter.

This dissertation aims to examine Anderson's evaluative process and its four elements, and the subsequent chapters will seek to critically describe, analyse and critique the evaluative process, taking into account the concerns raised by others in the literature regarding the appropriateness and feasibility of such an approach.

⁴⁴ Anderson, *Ancient Laws And Contemporary Controversies*, p. 148.

⁴⁵ Anderson, *Ancient Laws And Contemporary Controversies*, p. 146.

⁴⁶ Anderson, *Ancient Laws And Contemporary Controversies*, pp. 146, 148.

Chapter 3 Methodology

Anderson's ethics of biblical interpretation is an evaluative process that specifies four elements which she claims are essential for a biblical interpretation to be declared ethical:

- 1) The interpretation is plausible, demonstrating that it is grounded in the textual features of the text;
- 2) The interpretation includes an assessment of the contemporary context, demonstrating its relevance to the current social location and culture of its readers;
- 3) The interpretation exhibits critical self-awareness, acknowledging that it has been influenced by many factors, including the interpreter's social location and presuppositions; and
- 4) The interpretation demonstrates that it has analysed its potential consequences on individuals and communities, and dismisses any harmful interpretations.⁴⁷

Anderson argues that her evaluative process will enable an interpretation to be assessed as ethical and will enable ethical judgements to be made between competing plausible interpretations.⁴⁸

The elements in Anderson's evaluative process (plausibility, assessment of contemporary context, critical self-awareness and analysis of consequences) are examined individually to determine their relevance and importance in being included as part of Anderson's ethics of biblical interpretation.

Each element will be applied to six example written biblical interpretations of Romans 1:18-32, to evaluate whether the interpretations can be considered ethical and to examine each element's suitability within the evaluative process.

The passage, Romans 1:18-32, has been deliberately selected for this study because its interpretation is arguably one of the most contentiously debated within

⁴⁷ Anderson, *Ancient Laws And Contemporary Controversies*, pp. 146, 148.

⁴⁸ Anderson, *Ancient Laws And Contemporary Controversies*, pp. 146, 148.

the Western church today, as it is often identified as a key passage within the Church's debates relating to the inclusion of same-gender attracted people.⁴⁹ Interpretations of these verses potentially have significant consequences for those who are affected by them.⁵⁰ However, it is important to clarify that the aim of this dissertation is not to explicitly explore this passage. Rather, the focus of the dissertation is to use Romans 1:18-32 as a means of analysing the extent to which Anderson's evaluative process can be effectively applied to biblical interpretations.

There are many types of written interpretations including biblical commentaries, biblical translations, journal articles, Bible studies, sermons, homilies and thematic or issue-based books. Biblical commentaries have been chosen as the source of interpretations in this study because they are commonly recommended to help other Christian readers explore the meaning of the biblical texts and they are readily available to the dissertation's author.⁵¹

The call for an ethics of biblical interpretation appears to be a relatively recent concern, that is within the past 40 years (Schüssler Fiorenza gave her presidential address in 1987).⁵² Therefore, to allow for the biblical commentaries on the Letter to the Romans chosen for this study to have had the opportunity to engage with, and be influenced by, this consideration, they have all been published, approximately, within the past 20 years. Although the selection has been limited to English language versions, an attempt has been made to include commentaries with diverse emphases to provide some breadth in the material by which Anderson's evaluative approach is itself assessed. The commentaries identify themselves as: African; theological/pastoral; Catholic; expository; exegetical and socio-rhetorical. It is acknowledged that in restricting the interpretations being evaluated to those found in commentaries, the findings of this study may only be able to give qualified indications as to the appropriateness of Anderson's process generally. It would be

⁴⁹ Martin, *Sex And The Single Savior*, p. 51; Benjamin H. Dunning, 'Same-Sex Relations' in *The Oxford Handbook Of New Testament, Gender, and Sexuality*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019), p. 577.

⁵⁰ Dunning, 'Same-Sex Relations', p. 587.

⁵¹ Gordon D. Fee and Douglas Stuart, *How To Read The Bible For All Its Worth* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Academic, 2014), p. 275.

⁵² Schüssler Fiorenza, 'The Ethics Of Biblical Interpretation', p. 3.

necessary for other types of interpretations to be considered in a similar way to affirm any wider conclusions.

The six commentaries selected are:

- *Romans* by Solomon Andria (African);
- *Romans: A Theological And Pastoral Commentary* by Michael J. Gorman (theological/pastoral);
- *Romans (Catholic Commentary On Sacred Scripture)* by Scott W. Hahn (Catholic);
- *The Expositor's Bible Commentary: Romans* by E. F. Harrison and D.A. Hagner (expository);
- *Romans (Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament)* by Frank Thielman (exegetical); and
- *Paul's Letter To The Romans: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* by Ben Witherington III and Darlene Hyatt (socio-rhetorical).⁵³

In the next chapter the elements in Anderson's evaluative process (plausibility, assessment of contemporary context, critical self-awareness and analysis of consequences) will be individually examined and applied to the selected biblical interpretations of Romans 1:18-32. The findings from this analysis will form the basis of the discussion in Chapter 5, where the appropriateness and feasibility of Anderson's evaluative process as an ethics of biblical interpretation will be considered.

⁵³ Solomon Andria, *Romans* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012), EPUB ebook; Michael J. Gorman, *Romans: A Theological And Pastoral Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2022), EPUB ebook; Scott W. Hahn, *Romans (Catholic Commentary On Sacred Scripture)* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2017), EPUB ebook; E. F. Harrison and D. A. Hagner, 'Romans' in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary: Romans-Galatians* ed by T. Longman III and David E. Garland, Revised Edition, (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2008), EPUB ebook; Frank Thielman, *Romans (Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament)*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2018), EPUB ebook; Ben Witherington III and Darlene Hyatt, *Paul's Letter To The Romans: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2004).

Chapter 4 Anderson's Evaluative Process and Analysis of the Interpretations of Romans 1:18-32

Element 1: An Interpretation is Plausible

Defining plausibility

Foundational to Anderson's evaluative process of an ethics of biblical interpretation is the requirement that an interpretation must be judged as plausible before it can be further ethically assessed.⁵⁴ This suggests a hierarchy of criteria within Anderson's evaluative process and any interpretation that is not demonstrably plausible is effectively dismissed as unethical regardless of any other consideration.

A plausible interpretation seeks to hear the text's voice within its own historical, cultural and literary contexts and in doing so aims to respect the *otherness* of the text.⁵⁵ A plausible interpretation recognises that interpretation is an ethical act and that interpreters have a responsibility to handle a text fairly.⁵⁶ Consequently, interpreters should be mindful of deliberately, or accidentally, mistreating a text and avoid making the textual evidence say whatever the interpreter might desire. This approach might offer some comfort to those who may be concerned that the development of an ethics of biblical interpretation will lead to a complete disrespect of the biblical text.⁵⁷

It is clear that not every biblical interpretation should necessarily be considered plausible or ethical. Rather, a plausible interpretation is one that demonstrates a clear correlation between the textual evidence of a text and the meaning that is offered.⁵⁸ Biblical texts may exhibit different types of textual evidence that reflect a variety of textual features. These textual features are commonly divided into three categories:

⁵⁴ Anderson, *Ancient Laws And Contemporary Controversies*, p. 146.

⁵⁵ Vanhoozer, *Is There A Meaning In This Text?*, p. 339.

⁵⁶ Charles Larmore, 'The Ethics Of Reading,' in *Morality and Metaphysics*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), p. 73.

⁵⁷ Craffert, 'From Apartheid Readings To Ordinary Readings Of The Bible', p. 67; Malina, 'The Bible: Witness Or Warrant' p. 84; Vanhoozer, *Is There A Meaning In This Text?*, pp. 339-340.

⁵⁸ Patte, *Romans*, p. 31.

- 1) Historical features – these features are concerned with exploring what is going on “behind the text” (for example, consideration of the author’s intention, the people and institutions mentioned in the text, the social, political, economic and cultural background of the text, etc.);
- 2) Literary features – these features give insight into the understanding of the words of the final form “within the text” (for example, by considering the genre, structure, plot, symbols, metaphors, characters of the text, etc); and
- 3) Reader-centred, or “in front of the text”, features – these features consider how the text affects readers, past and present, in their contemporary contexts (for example, the use of rhetorical devices or the presence of characteristics in the text that affect specific groups, such as women, ethnic minorities, and marginalised peoples).⁵⁹

This descriptive typology does not attribute any value or hierarchical significance to the differing types of textual features. However, it is very likely that an interpreter will tend to privilege certain of these textual features and may exclude, or take less seriously, other textual evidence.⁶⁰ This interpretative choice, which is not always explicitly acknowledged, is usually influenced by the interests and theological assumptions of the interpreter.⁶¹ For example, an interpreter who prioritises discovering the author’s original intention of a text will privilege historical textual features, whereas an interpreter concerned with the effect of a text on a particular people group is more likely to take a reader-centred approach.

Many different critical methods have been developed to analyse these various textual features.⁶² As these methods not only focus on different textual features but also ask different questions of the text, their application may result in a breadth of interpretations that could all be determined as plausible.⁶³ It is also possible that, due to the different emphases of the various critical methods, some of the resulting plausible interpretations may actually be in conflict with one another, even though

⁵⁹ Daniel Patte, Monya A. Stubbs, Justin S. Ukpong, and Revelation E. Velunta, *The Gospel Of Matthew: A Contextual Introduction For Group Study*, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2003), pp. 51-57.

⁶⁰ Patte, *Romans*, p. 20.

⁶¹ Patte, *Romans*, p. 30; see also ‘Element 3: Critical Self-Awareness’ in this dissertation.

⁶² For examples of critical methods, see Paula Gooder, *Searching For Meaning: An Introduction To Interpreting The New Testament*, (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 2008).

⁶³ Patte, *Romans*, p. 25.

they may all be firmly grounded in the textual features of the text.⁶⁴ However, these different, yet plausible, interpretations will not necessarily have the same ethical value and relevance for a particular context, and, indeed, some may in fact be considered harmful.⁶⁵ Anderson is calling for an ethics of biblical interpretation that evaluates these different plausible interpretations and argues for the selection of the interpretation that is considered to be the most ethical, not causing harm within a particular context.⁶⁶

So, in summary, Anderson's evaluative process argues that a foundational element of an ethical interpretation is that it must be plausible: it must treat the text fairly and exhibit a demonstrable correlation between the meaning it offers and the textual features exhibited by the text.

Analysis of the interpretations of Romans 1:18-32

To assess whether an interpretation can be considered plausible will involve initially identifying the textual interpretative choices made by the interpreter. This will be followed by evaluating the extent to which the interpreter's chosen approach and critical methods, have resulted in a meaning that can be assessed as doing justice to the text. The remainder of this chapter considers these two factors and uses them to analyse the interpretations of Romans 1:18-32 within the six biblical commentaries selected for this study, to determine whether they can be considered plausible according to this element of Anderson's evaluative process.

Commentary approach

All the commentaries appear open about the methods or approaches they utilise. Phrases such as, undertaking a "grammatico-historical interpretation,"⁶⁷ or "social and rhetorical analysis;"⁶⁸ producing an "exegetical commentary;"⁶⁹ "careful

⁶⁴ Patte, *Romans*, p. 54.

⁶⁵ Patte, *Romans*, p. 2.

⁶⁶ Anderson, *Ancient Laws And Contemporary Controversies*, p. 146.

⁶⁷ Harrison and Hagner, *Romans*, Chapter: Preface, para. 5. As the accessed version of this commentary is an EPUB ebook with no page numbers, on the advice of an academic librarian, citations will state the paragraph location within an identified Chapter, Section and Subsection as appropriate.

⁶⁸ Witherington III, *Paul's Letter To The Romans*, p. xii.

⁶⁹ Thielman, *Romans*, Chapter: Series Introduction, Section: Explanation of the Text, para. 1. As the accessed version of this commentary is an EPUB ebook with no page numbers, on the advice of an academic

exposition of Paul's letter;"⁷⁰ using "historical and literary methods;"⁷¹ or discovering the "apostle's message,"⁷² indicate that all the commentators are primarily privileging the historical features of the text and are taking a behind-the-text approach. Their focus is on the historical context of the letter's writing, and they are attempting to uncover the author's original words and how they would have been understood by the first recipients.

Each commentary includes a section introducing the background of the Letter to the Romans prior to their actual commentary on its contents, further indicating that a historical approach is being taken.⁷³ This introduction is sometimes very lengthy and contains information on the likely author, the possible date and location of writing, concerns about the Letter's integrity, details of the first recipients and the potential reasons for its writing. This demonstrates the importance the commentators attach to uncovering the historical context, provenance and authenticity of the letter.

Meaning of Romans 1:18-32

All the commentators present a detailed and methodical analysis of the individual verses in Romans 1:18-32. The highly structured approach of each commentary makes it possible to recognise and evaluate how their interpretation aims to be grounded in the text. They use various techniques and methods to support their behind-the-text analysis, including: i) referring to the original Greek text; ii) applying historical, cultural and theological understandings to key questions raised by the passage; iii) discussing possible intertextual influences on the author; and iv) considering the rhetorical nature of the passage:

librarian, citations will state the paragraph location within an identified Chapter, Section and Subsection as appropriate.

⁷⁰ Gorman, *Romans*, Chapter: Preface, para. 1. As the accessed version of this commentary is an EPUB ebook with no page numbers, on the advice of an academic librarian, citations will state the paragraph location within an identified Chapter, Section and Subsection as appropriate.

⁷¹ Hahn, *Romans*, Chapter: Editor's Preface, para. 3. As the accessed version of this commentary is an EPUB ebook with no page numbers, on the advice of an academic librarian, citations will state the paragraph location within an identified Chapter, Section and Subsection as appropriate.

⁷² Andria, *Romans*, Chapter: Foreword, para. 3. As the accessed version of this commentary is an EPUB ebook with no page numbers, on the advice of an academic librarian, citations will state the paragraph location within an identified Chapter, Section and Subsection as appropriate.

⁷³ Andria, *Romans*, Chapter: Introduction; Gorman, *Romans*, Chapter: Introducing Paul, Chapter: Introducing Romans; Hahn, *Romans*, Chapter: Introduction to Romans; Harrison and Hagner, *Romans*, Chapter: Introduction; Thielman, *Romans*, Chapter: Introduction; Witherington III, *Paul's Letter To The Romans*, pp. 1-16.

i) In referring to the original Greek, commentators indicate the priority they give to getting as close as possible to the original meaning of the words of the text. They are also acknowledging a potential concern that translations may unduly influence how a text is understood. Thielman included his own Greek rendering of the passage under consideration and gave significant space to discuss the potential meaning of the original Greek throughout his commentary.⁷⁴ Three other commentators (Gorman, Harrison and Hagner, and Witherington) were selective and referred to the Greek only to emphasise, or offer, an alternative meaning than an English translation might have allowed.⁷⁵ Two of the commentators, Andria and Hahn, did not refer to the Greek at all and appeared to accept that the English Bible translations they utilised were sufficient. These different approaches to the use of the Greek version of the text demonstrate that, although all the commentators are prioritising the importance of uncovering the author's original meaning, they actually make different interpretive choices to achieve this goal.

ii) In continuing their attempt to discover the original historical meaning of the passage all the commentators engaged with specific issues and questions that arose from within the text by exploring the possible original meanings and theological or cultural significance of words and phrases. These issues included:

- Examining the nature of God's wrath and whether it was the same or different from human anger (v. 18);⁷⁶
- Discussing the extent to which God can be known from creation (v. 19);⁷⁷
- Considering the implications and meaning of God's action to "give up to" or to "hand over" (vv. 24, 26, 28);⁷⁸

⁷⁴ Thielman, *Romans*, Chapter: Chapter 3: Romans 1:18-32, Section: Explanation of the Text.

⁷⁵ See for example, Gorman, *Romans*, Chapter: 1:18-32, Section: 1:18, paras. 3-5, and Harrison and Hagner, *Romans*, Chapter: Text and Exposition, Section 18, para. 3, both of which consider the Greek for understanding the words "unrighteousness/injustice" (v. 18); Witherington III, *Paul's Letter To The Romans*, p. 66 which examines the word "know" (v. 19).

⁷⁶ Gorman, *Romans*, Chapter: 1:18-32, para. 2; Hahn, *Romans*, Chapter: The Messiah and the Gospel of Salvation, Section: [1:18], para. 1; Harrison and Hagner, *Romans*, Chapter: Text and Exposition, Section: 18, para. 2; Witherington III, *Paul's Letter To The Romans*, pp. 64-65.

⁷⁷ Hahn, *Romans*, Chapter: The Messiah and the Gospel of Salvation, Section: [1:19-20], para. 1; Harrison and Hagner, *Romans*, Chapter: Text and Exposition, Section: 19-20, para. 1; Thielman, *Romans*, Chapter: Chapter 3: Romans 1:18-32, Section: 1:20, paras. 1-3; Witherington III, *Paul's Letter To The Romans*, pp. 67-68.

⁷⁸ Andria, *Romans*, Chapter: Unit 5, Section: 1:25-27, para. 1; Gorman, *Romans*, Chapter: 1:18-32, Section: 1:24-27, paras. 1-8; Hahn, *Romans*, Chapter: The Messiah and the Gospel of Salvation, Section: [1:26-27],

- Seeking to understand what phrases such as “natural” and “contrary to nature” meant within the culture and scientific understanding of the author, in reference to same-gender sexual behaviours (vv. 26, 27).⁷⁹

Although all the commentators were taking a historical-critical approach to this passage, it is worth noting that their findings were not identical, rather, they revealed differences of opinion and emphasis. For example, when considering the nature of God’s wrath (v. 18), Hahn, Harrison and Hagner, and Witherington, suggested that this was God’s appropriate, and likely unemotional, response to humanity’s sin and was not to be equated to any emotionally based rage as might describe human anger.⁸⁰ In contrast, Andria and Gorman leaned towards a more literal interpretation and associated their understanding of God’s wrath with the human emotion of anger.⁸¹ This difference of opinion is likely to be influenced by whether the commentator’s theology allows for God to demonstrate changing, human-like emotions.

In addition, Hahn, Harrison and Hagner, and Witherington each discussed whether God’s self-revelation in creation could lead people to salvation.⁸² They all concluded that the general revelation displayed within creation was limited and that salvation required a special revelation from God (as revealed in the “gospel”).⁸³ The text does not explicitly mention salvation and it is clear that broader theological assumptions regarding the nature of salvation underpin this concern and affect the meaning these commentators allow the text to have. These commentators seem to be keen to

text box: He “Handed Them Over”; Harrison and Hagner, *Romans*, Chapter: Text and Exposition, Section: 24, para. 2; Thielman, *Romans*, Chapter: Chapter 3: Romans 1:18-32, Section: 1:24, para. 2.

⁷⁹ Gorman, *Romans*, Chapter: 1:18-32, Section: 1:24-27, para. 10; Thielman, *Romans*, Chapter: Chapter 3: Romans 1:18-32, Section: 1:26 paras. 1-2, Section: 1:27 para. 1; Witherington III, *Paul's Letter To The Romans*, p. 69.

⁸⁰ Hahn, *Romans*, Chapter: The Messiah and the Gospel of Salvation, Section: [1:18], para. 1; Harrison and Hagner, *Romans*, Chapter: Text and Exposition, Section: 18, para. 2; Witherington III, *Paul's Letter To The Romans*, pp. 64-65.

⁸¹ Andria, *Romans*, Unit 4, Section: 1:18-19, para. 3; Gorman, *Romans*, Chapter: 1:18-32, para. 2.

⁸² Hahn, *Romans*, Chapter: The Messiah and the Gospel of Salvation, Section: [1:22-23], text box: The Natural Knowledge of God; Harrison and Hagner, *Romans*, Chapter: Text and Exposition, Section: 19-20, para. 1; Witherington III, *Paul's Letter To The Romans*, pp. 67-68.

⁸³ Hahn, *Romans*, Chapter: The Messiah and the Gospel of Salvation, Section: [1:22-23], text box: The Natural Knowledge of God; Harrison and Hagner, *Romans*, Chapter: Text and Exposition, Section: 19-20 para. 1; Witherington III, *Paul's Letter To The Romans*, pp. 67-68.

ensure that their readers did not derive from these verses what they may perceive to be an erroneous view of salvation.

These two examples highlight the effect an interpreter's theological assumptions can have on the meanings of a text they are willing to consider or are prepared to offer. (The role of an interpreter's theological assumptions will be explored further in "Element 3: Critical Self-Awareness").

iii) All the commentators suggested that the apostle Paul was the likely author⁸⁴ and in seeking to understand his intention, all the commentators, except Andria, gave consideration to the possible intertextual influences that may have affected his writing. For example:

- Gorman, Hahn, Harrison and Hagner, Thielman and Witherington all noted the similarities of this text with passages in the Wisdom of Solomon and argued that they may have influenced Paul's argument.⁸⁵
- In addition, Harrison and Hagner, and Thielman, suggested that this passage may also have echoes of Genesis 1-3.⁸⁶ However, Witherington strongly rejected this proposal and argued that any such meaning was being unhelpfully read into the text.⁸⁷
- Gorman, Hahn, Harrison and Hagner, and Thielman supported the view that Paul's criticism of people creating animal-like idols (v. 23) was a reminder to his Jewish Christian readers of the making of the golden calf within Israel's history.⁸⁸ Thielman suggests that this historical allusion may be hinting at the

⁸⁴ Andria, *Romans*, Chapter: Introduction, Section: Date and Authorship, para. 1; Gorman, *Romans*, Chapter: Introducing Paul, Section: Sources for Paul's Life and Theology, para. 1; Hahn, *Romans*, Chapter: Introduction to Romans, para. 3; Harrison and Hagner, *Romans*, Chapter: Introduction, Section: Authorship, Date And Place Of Origin, para. 1; Thielman, *Romans*, Chapter: Introduction, para. 1; Witherington III, *Paul's Letter To The Romans*, p. 4.

⁸⁵ Gorman, *Romans*, Chapter: 1:18-32, Section: 1:18, para. 8; Hahn, *Romans*, Chapter: The Messiah and the Gospel of Salvation, Section: [1:19-20], para. 1; Harrison and Hagner, *Romans*, Chapter: Text and Exposition, Section: 24, para. 4; Thielman, *Romans*, Chapter: Chapter 3: Romans 1:18-32, Section: 1:20, para. 3, Section: 1:23, para. 4; Witherington III *Paul's Letter To The Romans*, pp. 63-64, p.130.

⁸⁶ Harrison and Hagner, *Romans*, Chapter: Text and Exposition, Section: A. In the Pagan World (1:18-32), para.4; Thielman, *Romans*, Chapter: Chapter 3: Romans 1:18-32, Section: 1:23, para. 3.

⁸⁷ Witherington III, *Paul's Letter To The Romans*, p. 68.

⁸⁸ Gorman, *Romans*, Chapter: 1:18-32, Section: 1:19-23, para. 5; Hahn, *Romans*, Chapter: The Messiah and the Gospel of Salvation, Section: [1:22-23], para. 2; Harrison and Hagner, *Romans*, Chapter: Text and Exposition, Section: 23, para. 2; Thielman, *Romans*, Chapter: Chapter 3: Romans 1:18-32, Section 1:23, para. 4.

next stage of Paul's argument when he contends that Jews, as well as Gentiles, are also under God's just condemnation.⁸⁹

Although all these intertextual influences may be legitimately proposed (and argued over), they are ultimately speculative as the passage itself does not explicitly reference them. However, this attempt by commentators to discover the sources that may have influenced Paul, further illustrates their privileging of the historical behind-the-text approach to their interpretations.

iv) All the commentators noted that Paul used specific rhetorical devices in the text to emphasise his message. In particular, they noted that he used the three times repetition of God "handing over" people (vv. 24, 26, 28) as a key theme to this passage.⁹⁰ Observation of such rhetorical devices, and consideration of the way the author structures the passage, provide commentators with possible insight into the emphasis and effect the author may have intended for his readers.

All the examined commentaries aimed to present a thorough and convincing argument to demonstrate that their interpretations reflected an accurate meaning of the text. They tended not to offer any alternative interpretations, and this observation will be considered in the section "Element 3: Critical Self-Awareness". All the commentators took a primarily historical approach to analysing some of the textual features of Romans 1:18-32 and sought to uncover the author's original intention for the text. Their highly structured and detailed style makes it possible to observe how their interpretations are grounded in the text with a strong correlation between their proposed meanings and the historical textual evidence they focus upon. In terms of Anderson's evaluative process, all the commentaries in this study appear to offer plausible interpretations of Romans 1:18-32, even though, as mentioned above, these interpretations are not identical and reflect the varying emphases chosen by the commentators.

⁸⁹ Thielman, *Romans*, Chapter: Chapter 3: Romans 1:18-32, Section 1:23, para. 4.

⁹⁰ Andria, *Romans*, Chapter: Unit 5, Section: 1:25-27, para. 1; Gorman, *Romans*, Chapter: 1:18-32, Section: 1:24-27 para. 1; Hahn, *Romans*, Chapter: The Messiah and the Gospel of Salvation, Section: [1:26-27], text box: He "Handed Them Over"; Harrison and Hagner, *Romans*, Chapter: Text and Exposition, Section: 24, para. 2; Thielman, *Romans*, Chapter: Chapter 3: Romans 1:18-32, Section: 1:24, para. 3; Witherington III, *Paul's Letter To The Romans*, p. 68.

Conclusion

The assessment of these example interpretations concluded that they were all plausible. This is not surprising as the evaluated interpretations were all from the biblical commentary genre which generally seeks to present an accurate and evidenced explanation of what texts might mean.⁹¹ Obviously, this ambition, in and of itself, does not necessarily guarantee the quality or plausibility of an interpretation.

However, it is important to note that alternative forms of written interpretation, such as, sermons, journal articles, Bible studies, homilies or thematic or issue-based books, may not be as explicit as commentaries in providing such clear and detailed evidence to demonstrate the correlation between the text and their interpretation.⁹² Nonetheless, a lack of structured argument or supporting evidence, does not necessarily mean an interpretation will be any less plausible. However, it does mean that any assessment for plausibility may need to analyse these different types of interpretation much more attentively to uncover which textual features are being privileged by the interpreter and to identify the approach and methods utilised.⁹³

⁹¹ Fee and Stuart, *How to read the Bible for all its worth*, p. 275.

⁹² Patte and others, *The Gospel of Matthew*, p. 53.

⁹³ Patte and others, *The Gospel of Matthew*, p. 53.

Element 2: Assessment of the Contemporary Context

Why the assessment of the contemporary context is important?

For millions of Christians worldwide the Bible is valued as scripture and is considered to be a source of guidance and instruction, offering a Word-to-live-by, that affects their everyday lives and their relationships with others.⁹⁴ Biblical interpretations are relied upon to reveal how the Bible can be applied to their contemporary situations.⁹⁵ Consequently, interpreters who want to ensure their interpretation is relevant for these Christian believers could be expected to have an understanding of the contexts in which they are living and the particular questions, problems and challenges they are facing.

This knowledge of the contemporary context and awareness of the needs of their readers will inevitably influence the issues and concerns that an interpreter brings to the biblical text, when seeking to discern a relevant Word-to-live-by.⁹⁶ These issues and concerns will likely direct the methodologies an interpreter will choose to apply and the textual features they prioritise.⁹⁷ In turn, this will affect the content of the interpretations they develop.⁹⁸ Consequently, it seems fair to claim that interpretations will, to a lesser or greater extent, be affected by an interpreter's understanding and prioritisation of the contemporary context of their readers.

Different readers are affected by different contexts, and contexts inevitably change over time. Therefore, the relevance and importance of specific interpretations may also change.⁹⁹ Accordingly, interpretations need to be reconsidered, and potentially revised, to ensure they continue to be relevant and of value within new and different contemporary contexts.¹⁰⁰ Without this continuous evaluation, it is possible that

⁹⁴ Craffert, 'From apartheid readings to ordinary readings of the bible', p. 66; Patte, *Romans*, pp. 33-34.

⁹⁵ Patte, *Romans*, pp. 33-34, 338-339; Patte also notes how even interpreters who are not Christian believers are often mindful that their readers may understand the biblical text as Scripture and be seeking a Word-to-live-by, and could be influenced by their interpretations.

⁹⁶ Patte, *Romans*, p. 338.

⁹⁷ Patte, *Romans*, p. 25.

⁹⁸ Patte, *Romans*, p. 25.

⁹⁹ Patte and others, *The Gospel of Matthew*, p. 22.

¹⁰⁰ Ehrensperger, Kathy, 'Ethical Responsibility and the Necessity to Choose among a Plurality of Equally Legitimate and Plausible Interpretations.' In *Scholars Reading Romans 1 with Daniel Patte: Critique, Dialogue, and Pedagogy*. (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2023), p. 31.

interpretations could become irrelevant, misleading or even dangerous, causing harm to, or encouraging harm by, those who apply it as a Word-to-live-by.¹⁰¹

Acknowledging the contemporary context for which an interpretation has been developed in a transparent and intentional way is more likely to lead to an interpretation concentrating its claims of significance and relevance to a specific time and place, and to the needs of specific readers. Recognising that a particular interpretation is contextually framed implicitly allows for possible alternative interpretations and acknowledges that these alternatives may be more appropriate for different situations, locations and people.¹⁰² This hermeneutical practice constrains interpreters from claiming that their interpretations are timeless and universally applicable. Consequently, this suggests that interpretations should always be reconsidered for new contexts, even if the interpretation initially appears to be innocuous. This could help to discourage future misapplication of interpretations and potentially protect against possible harmful effects. The assessment and open acknowledgement of the context for which an interpretation is produced recognises the boundaries of its applicability and is why it is such an important ingredient within an ethics of biblical interpretation.

Some categories of interpretation, such as sermons, Bible studies, homilies or thematic and issue-based books, are generally more open about their intention to provide Christian believers with a Word-to-live-by.¹⁰³ As they tend to explore specific questions or issues that they consider pertinent to their anticipated readers, they ordinarily acknowledge their awareness of their readers' contemporary context.¹⁰⁴ In contrast, other categories of interpretation, including commentaries and Bible translations, claim to offer a more technical and objective meaning of biblical texts.¹⁰⁵ They typically don't explicitly admit that their interpretations are also influenced by their readers' (and their own) social location and cultural context.¹⁰⁶ However, these interpretations may still include observations about the relevance of the text for

¹⁰¹ Ehrensperger, "Ethical Responsibility", p. 31.

¹⁰² Patte, *Romans*, p. 39.

¹⁰³ Patte and others, *The Gospel of Matthew*, p. 53.

¹⁰⁴ Patte, *Romans*, p. 338.

¹⁰⁵ Patte, *Romans*, p. 338.

¹⁰⁶ Patte, *Romans*, pp. 30; Cosgrove, *The Meanings We Choose*, p. 3.

contemporary Christian believers, and this inclusion demonstrates that particular contexts, with specific issues, have, in fact, been considered, even if they are not openly acknowledged.¹⁰⁷ This will be further explored in the examples below.

To evidence that interpreters have intentionally carried out an assessment of the contemporary context, it is likely that their interpretations will offer the following information:

1. Details of their intended audience, that is, those for whom they expect their interpretation to be relevant. This includes their social location and relevant significant characteristics such as geography, language, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, economic status etc.; and
2. The purpose of their interpretation, acknowledging the specific questions, issues and concerns within the context that their interpretation refers to or is attempting to address for their intended audience.¹⁰⁸

If this evidence is not present, it is likely that interpreters have not intentionally assessed their readers' contemporary context and do not necessarily see it as having a bearing on their interpretations. However, as mentioned earlier, it is important to note that a lack of intentional assessment does not necessarily mean that the contemporary context has no influence on the interpretation, rather it is more likely that its influence has been left unrecognised.¹⁰⁹

Analysis of the interpretations of Romans 1:18-32

In the following section the six commentaries in this study, and specifically their commentary on the verses in Romans 1:18-32, will be reviewed to determine the extent to which they demonstrate that they have intentionally assessed and acknowledged the contemporary context for which they were produced. The analysis will examine whether the commentaries identify their target audience and

¹⁰⁷ Patte, *Romans*, pp. 338-339.

¹⁰⁸ Patte and others, *The Gospel of Matthew*, p. 24.

¹⁰⁹ Patte, *Romans*, pp. 339.

whether they are explicit about the issues and concerns in the context they seek to address.

Audience acknowledgement

Andria, Gorman, Hahn, Harrison and Hagner and Thielman's commentaries explicitly articulated their anticipated audiences.¹¹⁰ Their identified primary audiences were very similar and tended to be those who are, or are training to be, Christian pastors, preachers and teachers. In contrast, Witherington's commentary did not explicitly state his expected audience. However, there are significant indicators such as his continual use of the word "scripture" to describe the biblical content, the inclusion of an extensive academic bibliography and the review comments on the back cover of the commentary which suggest his implied audience may be similar to the other commentaries.¹¹¹

Andria provides more detail about his target audience than any of the other commentators; he overtly states that his focus is on those who minister within the African evangelical church, and his commentary is specifically designed as a series of preaching units to support them.¹¹² The other commentators provide no further specific information about their implied readers. This lack of detail about their anticipated audience suggests that the commentators of the other five commentaries consider their writings to have relevance to all Christian ministers and students, regardless of their social locations or particular characteristics. This may reflect a prevailing view that commentaries are often regarded as authoritative, objective and neutral, rather than acknowledging that, like any other type of interpretation, they have been written with consideration of a specific context with its own particular concerns and challenges.¹¹³ It is also possible that the commentators recognise their commentaries could have a multi-cultural or global readership and that being

¹¹⁰ Andria, *Romans*, Chapter: Introduction To Africa Bible Commentary Series, para. 5; Gorman, *Romans*, Chapter: Preface, para. 1; Hahn, *Romans*, Chapter: Editor's Preface, para. 4; Harrison and Hagner, *Romans*, Chapter: Preface, para. 1; Thielman, *Romans*, Chapter: Series Introduction, Section: Theology in Application, para. 2.

¹¹¹ Witherington III, *Paul's Letter To The Romans*, pp. 29, 59, 60 (Example references to 'Scripture'); pp. xvi-xxxiii (Bibliography); back cover.

¹¹² Andria, *Romans*, Chapter: Introduction To Africa Bible Commentary Series, para. 4.

¹¹³ Patte, *Romans*, p. 393. However, there are books on biblical interpretation acknowledging that Commentaries are not neutral see, for example, Klein, William W., Craig L. Blomberg, and Robert L. Hubbard Jr. Introduction to biblical interpretation. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Academic, 2017), p. 1033.

specific about a particular audience may be considered unrealistic and limiting. However, this risks some of their readers adopting interpretations concerning the issues and questions the commentary addresses that are not appropriate, or may even be harmful, for their specific contexts.

Contextual questions, issues and concerns

All the commentators appear to have selected particular questions and concerns to consider in their analysis of the passage Romans 1:18-32. Although they appear to have a similar target audience in mind (Christian ministers and students), they do not all focus on the same issues or address them in the same way. This difference in emphasis suggests that each commentator has given some consideration as to what they believe is the best interpretation of this passage for the specific context and needs of their audience, even if they have not openly identified this context.

Examples of these issues are given below.

Same-gender sexual activity

All the commentators significantly remark on Paul's condemnation of specific sexual activities, and in particular same-gender sexual activity (vv. 26-27).¹¹⁴ However, their differing emphases regarding this area would suggest that there has been a degree of prioritisation made considering the concerns of their audience.

The commentaries by Andria, Hahn, and Harrison and Hagner, specifically and unequivocally support the traditional understanding of this passage, that is, that Paul is condemning all those who take part in any same-gender sexual activity. This determined emphasis may imply that the intended audiences of these commentaries are living within a context where these (considered to be) unbiblical behaviours are being increasingly accommodated. These commentators appear to believe an unambiguous message of condemnation is deemed necessary to ensure traditional biblical teaching is maintained. Andria openly reinforces the purpose of his

¹¹⁴ Andria, *Romans*, Chapter: Unit 5, Section: 1:25-27, paras. 6-9; Gorman, *Romans*, Chapter: 1:18-32, Section 1:24-27, para. 10-16; Hahn, *Romans*, Chapter: The Messiah and the Gospel of Salvation, Section: [1:26-27], paras. 1-2; Harrison and Hagner, *Romans*, Chapter: Text and Exposition, Section: 26-27, para. 2; Thielman, *Romans*, Chapter: Chapter 3: Romans 1:18-32, Section: 1:26, paras. 1-3, Section: 1:27, paras. 1-5; Witherington III, *Paul's Letter To The Romans*, p. 69.

commentary for an African context, acknowledging same-gender marriage as a particular concern.¹¹⁵

Interestingly, Harrison and Hagner indicate an awareness that the context in which they are writing has changed and is now more sympathetic to those who participate in same-gender relationships.¹¹⁶ Consequently, they propose that the church should begin to show a more compassionate attitude, rather than the exclusionary approach that its previous interpretation of Romans 1 would have advocated.¹¹⁷ This is an example of how the influence of a changing context (even though the context is not explicitly identified) can affect how interpretations are presented and potentially acted upon. However, there is no indication that Harrison and Hagner's commentary allows for any change to the traditional condemnatory meaning of the text itself.

Witherington also reinforces the belief that this passage provides a clear condemnation of homosexual practice but admits that it is a "difficult subject," suggesting it is an area of concern and challenge within his contemporary context.¹¹⁸ However, he provides no further explanation to his audience, leaving them to reflect on it for themselves.

Thielman's exegetical commentary on these verses appears to stress what the author, Paul, might have meant in his context. However, Thielman appears to be deliberately silent regarding the potential effect of these verses on his readers' contemporary context.¹¹⁹ Although Thielman comments on other verses of concern (see below his remarks regarding God's judgment of all people), it is surprising that the contemporary relevance of these verses is not discussed given the current concern about same-gender relationships within the wider church. Thielman has effectively left his readers to decide whether there is any contemporary significance to consider.

¹¹⁵ Andria, *Romans*, Chapter: Unit 5, Section: 1:25-27, para. 6.

¹¹⁶ Harrison and Hagner, *Romans*, Chapter: Text and Exposition, Section: 26-27, para. 2.

¹¹⁷ Harrison & Hagner, *Romans*, Chapter: Text and Exposition, Section: 26-27, para. 2.

¹¹⁸ Witherington III, *Paul's Letter To The Romans*, p. 69 and footnote, 24.

¹¹⁹ Thielman, *Romans*, Chapter: Chapter 3: Romans 1:18-32, Section: 1:26, paras. 1-3, Section: 1:27, paras. 1-5.

In contrast to the other commentators, Gorman singularly acknowledges that there are alternative Christian viewpoints to the traditional conservative understanding of this passage.¹²⁰ He suggests that the challenge to the traditional view, which universally condemns same-gender relations, is in response to the increasing opposition and rejection of these more conservative perspectives within the general population in the West.¹²¹ The development of these new interpretations indicates the potentially powerful influence of the contemporary context on a passage's recognised meaning. Gorman lists several alternative understandings from "recent interpreters"; however, he interestingly does not cite any of these other interpreters or include any individual works that explicitly support these differing viewpoints in his "For Further Reading" section.¹²² He implies these alternative interpretations are not widely accepted amongst most Christians, and it appears he does not want to promote their credibility.¹²³ This omission may be out of concern for his audience, to ensure he is seen to be upholding the traditional understanding of these verses, or it might also be to avoid drawing criticism to his own commentary for giving perceived legitimacy to alternative biblical interpretations.

It is clear from the observations above that the question of same-gender sexual activity has been identified as a particular cause for concern within the contexts for which the majority of the commentators are writing. Andria acknowledges he is intentionally focused on the African context. However, the other commentators make only brief, incidental mention of their contexts.¹²⁴ This may be because they believe their comments have a universal relevance, something that is implied rather than explicitly stated, or that some form of prioritisation and assessment of their cultural context has taken place but has not been openly acknowledged and may not even be recognised. The lack of evidence acknowledging broad or specific contexts suggests that these other commentators have not intentionally carried out any

¹²⁰ Gorman, *Romans*, Chapter: 1:18-32, Section 1:24-27, para. 12-16, Section: Reflections and Questions for 1:18-32, points 5-6.

¹²¹ Gorman, *Romans*, Chapter: 1:18-32, Section 1:24-27, para. 14.

¹²² Gorman does list one book which allows for a dialogue between two contrasting views: "Sprinkle, Preston, ed. *Two Views on Homosexuality, the Bible, and the Church*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2016", Chapter: 1:18-32, Section: For Further Reading.

¹²³ Gorman, *Romans*, Chapter: 1:18-32, Section 1:24-27, para. 14-16.

¹²⁴ Both Gorman and, Harrison and Hagner, briefly mention the "Western" context: Gorman, *Romans*, Chapter: 1:18-32, Section 1:24-27, para. 14; Harrison & Hagner, *Romans*, Chapter: Text and Exposition, Section: 23, para. 1.

assessment of the contemporary context, although it appears their contemporary culture is influencing their interpretations.

Idolatry

Andria, Gorman and, Harrison and Hagner, overtly refer to the issue of idolatry.¹²⁵ However, their descriptions of idolatry vary considerably, probably reflecting the different contexts about which they are concerned. Andria asserts that idolatry is being practised in Africa, both in traditional religions, with nature-based worship, and increasingly with the new idols of “computers, the Internet and television, and the almighty dollar or euro.”¹²⁶ Harrison and Hagner specifically refer to the “Western world” and identify concerns about idolatry in terms of humanism and other religions.¹²⁷ Gorman generalises the definition of idolatry by stating that it refers to individuals focusing their devotion and allegiance on something, or someone, other than God.¹²⁸ Gorman does not offer particular examples or remark on other religions or beliefs. This lack of comment may be a deliberate choice to avoid criticising any multicultural contexts or interfaith interactions in which his readers may be involved.

Clearly, within the contexts of these commentators there are concerns about the practice of idolatry. Their differing descriptions likely indicate the varying contexts they consider their readers to be facing. Andria refers to Africa and Harrison and Hagner refer to the “Western world,” whereas Gorman does not comment on the context he is referring to. These observations again likely demonstrate a contextual awareness by these commentators, but only Andria and Harrison and Hagner indicate that any form of assessment has taken place by noting the relevance to a particular geography. Interestingly, Hahn, Thielman and Witherington do not identify idolatry as a concern. However, it is impossible to know if this is result of an intentional analysis of their readers’ contexts and the issue is not considered relevant, or whether it is due to no such assessment being made.

¹²⁵ Andria, *Romans*, Chapter: Unit 4, Section: 1:22-23, para. 5; Gorman, *Romans*, Chapter: 1:18-32, Section: 1:19-23; Harrison and Hagner, *Romans*, Chapter: Text and Exposition, Section: 23, paras. 1-2.

¹²⁶ Andria, *Romans*, Chapter: Unit 4, Section: 1:22-23, para. 5.

¹²⁷ Harrison and Hagner, *Romans*, Chapter: Text and Exposition, Section: 23, paras. 1-2.

¹²⁸ Gorman, *Romans*, Chapter: 1:18-32, Section: 1:19-23, para. 6.

Reasonableness of God's wrath

Thielman is the only commentator who focuses on what he sees as a key theological question for Christians in this passage. He discusses whether it is fair for God to condemn everyone regardless of any specific behaviour.¹²⁹ In selecting to address this question, Thielman may be suggesting that his readers are in a context where questions about God's just character and right to rule (authority) are being raised. Thielman's explanation may be an attempt to provide a convincing answer to this question and to give confidence to Christian believers whose context may be challenging it. This issue was not raised by any of the other commentators, and although it may have been derived from a particular context, Thielman makes no reference to it. This suggests he is unlikely to have undertaken an intentional assessment of the context or that he possibly believes addressing this issue is relevant for all readers.

Conclusion

The discussion above demonstrates that each commentator appears to have identified specific issues that they think are relevant for their anticipated audience. This decision to focus on specific concerns undoubtedly reflects some form of contextual assessment which the commentators have carried out, even though they have not been consistently transparent about it. With the exception of Andria, the other commentators have only occasionally identified a geographical location. This lack of explicit acknowledgment may confirm Patte's opinion that commentaries generally tend to hide their contextual nature in an attempt to be seen as objective.¹³⁰ However, it could also be, as mentioned above, that commentators do not want to restrict their wider potential audience, even though this potentially allows their interpretation to be misapplied within a context they had not considered.

Anderson argues that for a biblical interpretation to be considered ethical, it must include an assessment of the contemporary context, demonstrating its relevance and significance to the current social location and culture of its readers.¹³¹ It would appear from this requirement that out of the six commentaries being examined, only

¹²⁹ Thielman, *Romans*, Chapter: Chapter 3: Romans 1:18-32, Section: The Reasonableness of God's Wrath.

¹³⁰ Patte, *Romans*, p. 63.

¹³¹ Anderson, *Ancient Laws And Contemporary Controversies*, p. 148.

Andria's commentary can in any way appear to meet the requirement of this element. Andria is explicit about his geographical audience (Africa) and makes continual references to relevant examples and specific concerns throughout his commentary. The other commentators also appear to have been influenced by what they consider to be their anticipated readers' contexts, and at times they do briefly acknowledge that the issues they raise from this passage are important to certain geographies, usually the West.¹³² However, there is a general lack of any specificity about their readers and their issues. This absence of an intentional assessment of their readers' context results in them appearing to claim that their interpretations are universally applicable rather than contextually framed. Consequently, in applying this element of Anderson's evaluative process, these five commentaries cannot be considered ethical.

¹³² Gorman, *Romans*, Chapter: 1:18-32, Section: 1:19-23, para. 6; Harrison and Hagner, *Romans*, Chapter: Text and Exposition, Section: 23, para. 1.

Element 3: Critical Self-Awareness

Why is critical self-awareness important?

A significant outcome of the Enlightenment for biblical interpretation was the development of the historical-critical approach.¹³³ The principal intention of this approach is to reveal the accurate meaning of texts by trying to uncover what the original author intended by the text and what the original hearers, or readers, understood by it.¹³⁴ One of its key tenets is the claim that interpreters are able to lay aside their presuppositions and approach the text with objective detachment.¹³⁵ This claim has been challenged by many scholars; even as far back as 1957, Rudolf Bultmann argued that interpretive objectivity was actually impossible.¹³⁶ However, there is still a continuing commitment to the historical-critical method and a valuing of the ideal of objectivity (even though many accept that interpretations can never fully attain it).¹³⁷

The extensive adoption of this approach has resulted in the acceptance of dominant normative interpretations within biblical studies. It has been widely recognised, and criticised, that a particular group, variously described as Western, white, male, heterosexual, has been responsible for developing and maintaining this controlling status quo.¹³⁸ As a consequence, interpretations have emerged which claim to represent the objective, universal meaning of biblical texts whilst failing to recognise that they may, in fact, be subjective and reflect the particularity of this group.¹³⁹ This dominant univocal approach has created a hierarchy within biblical interpretation and has tended to ignore or dismiss alternative perspectives and exclude the voices of

¹³³ John Barton, "Historical-Critical Approaches" in *The Cambridge Companion to Biblical Interpretation*, ed. J. Barton (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. 12.

¹³⁴ For a brief overview of the historical development of historical-criticism see Paul Michael Kurtz, "A Historical, Critical Retrospective on Historical Criticism" in *The New Cambridge Companion to Biblical Interpretation*, ed. Ian Boxall and Bradley C. Gregory (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023), pp. 15-36.

¹³⁵ Barton, "Historical-Critical Approaches", p. 12.

¹³⁶ Rudolf Bultmann, "Is Exegesis without Presupposition Possible?" In *Existence and Faith: Shorter Writings of Rudolf Bultmann*. (Cleveland, OH: The World Publishing Company, 1960), pp. 290-91;

¹³⁷ Kurtz, "A Historical, Critical Retrospective", p. 35; Wan, Wei Hsien. "Re-examining the Master's Tools: Considerations on Biblical Studies' Race Problem." In *Ethnicity, Race, Religion: Identities and Ideologies in Early Jewish and Christian Texts and in Modern Biblical Scholarship* (London/New York: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2018), p. 225.

¹³⁸ Anderson, *Ancient Laws And Contemporary Controversies*, p. 135

¹³⁹ Anderson, *Ancient Laws And Contemporary Controversies*, p. 145

others, especially from those on the margin.¹⁴⁰ Although this particularity is not necessarily to be criticised, the apparent acceptance that this one group, with a specific particularity, is able to claim objectivity and dictate what should be normative for everyone else, is rightly challenged.¹⁴¹

Horrell notes that by acknowledging their particularity, an interpreter may recognise the limits of their understanding and appreciate the insights others could bring, potentially leading to a richer and more expansive understanding of biblical texts.¹⁴² Horrell's observations support Anderson's contention that the influences on interpreters need to be exposed to prevent a singular dominance by a particular group and to allow for a more inclusive and ethical approach to biblical interpretation.¹⁴³

What is critical self-awareness?

Horrell and Anderson both agree that interpreters require an attitude of critical self-awareness to identify and acknowledge how these influences affect them and their interpretations.¹⁴⁴ The many factors which may affect the subjectivity, predispositions and biases in interpreters include:

- The social location of the interpreter, such as their personal history and identity, geography, language, culture, and political, social and economic circumstances;
- The interpreter's presuppositions, beliefs, values and interests, in particular their moral, ecclesial and theological commitments (especially concerning the nature and authority of the Bible);
- The interpreter's pre-understandings and previous experience of a text.¹⁴⁵

¹⁴⁰ Sugirtharajah, R.S., 'Muddling along at the Margins', in R.S. Sugirtharajah (ed.), *Still at the Margins: Biblical Scholarship Fifteen Years after the Voices from the Margin* (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2008), p. 8.

¹⁴¹ Anderson, *Ancient Laws And Contemporary Controversies*, p. 146.

¹⁴² Horrell, "Paul, inclusion and whiteness", p. 124.

¹⁴³ Anderson, *Ancient Laws And Contemporary Controversies*, p. 146.

¹⁴⁴ Horrell, "Paul, inclusion and whiteness", p. 140; Anderson, *Ancient Laws And Contemporary Controversies*, pp. 145-146.

¹⁴⁵ Cosgrove, *The Meanings We Choose*, p. 3; Patte, *Romans*, p. 30; Bultmann, "Is Exegesis without Presupposition Possible?", pp. 290-291; Chalmers, Aaron, "The influence of cognitive biases on biblical

This is not to claim that all these factors necessarily affect interpreters in the same way or to the same extent. However, the essential point is that interpreters never attend to a text from a neutral standpoint, and they should not pretend to do so.¹⁴⁶

Integrating the practice of critical self-reflection within the interpretive process will enable these influences to be recognised and their significance examined. It may also help to identify their source and to assess their possible impact on an interpretation.¹⁴⁷ This practice could lead to what Stephen Brookfield refers to as a healthy “reflective scepticism”, where universal truth claims are questioned and where alternatives can be explored.¹⁴⁸ A commitment to the “interpretive virtues” of humility, honesty and openness is required where an interpreter is honest about the effects of their social location, presuppositions and preunderstandings on their interpretation and is willing to consider alternative understandings of a text, with an openness to change their own view.¹⁴⁹

Unlike some other disciplines, such as social work, psychology and education, there does not appear to be any specific method tailored specifically for biblical interpreters to support critical self-reflection. This suggests an ambivalence about its importance within the field of biblical studies. However, even by applying critical self-reflection, it cannot be guaranteed that all relevant influences will be detected, as it is likely that unarticulated or unconscious assumptions within the interpreter will continue to remain uncovered. This reinforces the value of involving the thinking and perspective of diverse interpretive communities within the interpretation process, allowing others to challenge and enrich biblical interpretations.¹⁵⁰ This may not always be practical to do in person, but with the increasing availability of online text, audio and visual communications, there is arguably greater access than ever before

interpretation.”, *Bulletin for biblical research* 26, no. 4 (2016), pp. 467-480; Moyers, “Reading & Writing With Eyes”, p. 268.

¹⁴⁶ Darrell L. Bock and Buist M. Fanning, *Interpreting the New Testament text: introduction to the art and science of exegesis*. (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 2006), p. 29.

¹⁴⁷ The application of Transformative Learning may provide some guidance, see Jack Mezirow, “An overview on transformative learning.” In Illeris, K. ed., 2009. *Contemporary Theories of Learning: Learning Theorists... In Their Own Words*. (Abingdon: Routledge, 2009), pp. 90-94

¹⁴⁸ Stephen D. Brookfield, *Developing critical thinkers Challenging adults to explore alternative ways of thinking and acting*, (Buckingham: Open University Press, 1987), p. 9.

¹⁴⁹ Vanhoozer, *Is There A Meaning In This Text?*, pp. 332-334.

¹⁵⁰ Horrell, “Paul, inclusion and whiteness”, p. 140; Anderson, *Ancient Laws And Contemporary Controversies*, p. 148.

to alternative perspectives. However, even with this greater availability, there is no guarantee that all relevant voices are available to be heard, and interpreters may need to consider which voices continue to be missing and how to address this.

Taking into account the observations above, it is proposed that there are two aspects that need to be detailed within an interpretation to evidence that an interpreter demonstrates they are critically self-aware:

1. The interpreter will openly acknowledge the factors, such as social location, presuppositions, previous experience etc., that they believe have influenced their interpretation and will outline how these have affected their approach and understanding of the text. Anderson's requirement that interpreters give an explanation for the interpretation they select will tend to reveal these influences.¹⁵¹
2. There will be an explicit recognition that this interpretation is not the definitive interpretation of this text. Rather, it will be acknowledged that it may be one of potentially several plausible interpretations. An interpreter will recognise their interpretation cannot be exhaustive and that there may yet be further meaning to be discovered from within the text. Acknowledging this will mean an interpreter cannot claim to have produced the true and universal interpretation of this biblical text.

These two considerations will be used to explore the extent to which the six commentaries being examined in this study demonstrate critical self-awareness.

Analysis of the interpretations of Romans 1:18-32

Recognising and attending to the effects of influential factors

Theological presuppositions and ecclesial commitments

Five of the six commentators (Andria, Gorman, Hahn, Harrison and Hagner, and Thielman) demonstrate a degree of self-awareness by stating clearly their primary theological presuppositions within their commentary.¹⁵² Specifically, these

¹⁵¹ Anderson, *Ancient Laws And Contemporary Controversies*, p. 148.

¹⁵² Andria, *Romans*, Chapter: Introduction To Africa Bible Commentary Series, para. 3; Gorman, *Romans*, Chapter: Preface, paras. 1-3; Hahn, *Romans*, Chapter: Editor's Preface, para. 1; Harrison and Hagner,

statements include beliefs regarding the nature of the Bible and the commentators' ecclesial commitments.¹⁵³ Each of these five commentaries overtly refers to the Bible as scripture and acknowledges its importance as the Word of God, which provides a relevant message for Christians today.¹⁵⁴ For example, Harrison and Hagner describe their theological presuppositions by stating “the authors are committed to the divine inspiration, complete trustworthiness, and full authority of the Bible”, revealing openly their perspective of the Bible's nature.¹⁵⁵

These five commentators all identify that their main purpose is to help their readers (who are anticipated to be mainly Christian ministers or students) understand and apply the Bible's message within their own context.¹⁵⁶ As Harrison and Hagner asserted, “The Bible was not written for our information but for our transformation”¹⁵⁷ and Hahn summarised “the ultimate aim of biblical interpretation is to discover what God has revealed and is still speaking through the sacred text.”¹⁵⁸ These comments display an unambiguous understanding that these commentators view the Bible's message as being supremely important for their readers today.

In these five commentaries, the commentators also identify themselves with a particular ecclesial teaching or tradition: Andria, Harrison and Hagner, and Thielman identify as “evangelical”¹⁵⁹, Hahn as “Catholic”¹⁶⁰ and Gorman as “Protestant Christian”.¹⁶¹ In stating these associations, the commentators indicate they are important, although there are no detailed explanations of the terms used. They are

Romans, Chapter: Preface, paras. 2-7; Thielman, *Romans*, Chapter: Series Introduction, Section: Theology in Application and Chapter: Author's Preface, para. 5.

¹⁵³ Andria, *Romans*, Chapter: Introduction To Africa Bible Commentary Series, paras. 4-6; Gorman, *Romans*, Chapter: Preface, para. 2; Hahn, *Romans*, Chapter: Editor's Preface, para. 3; Harrison and Hagner, *Romans*, Chapter: Preface, para. 6; Thielman, *Romans*, Chapter: Series Introduction, para. 2 point 5.

¹⁵⁴ Andria, *Romans*, Chapter: Introduction To Africa Bible Commentary Series, paras. 5; Gorman, *Romans*, Chapter: Preface, para. 5; Hahn, *Romans*, Chapter: Editor's Preface, para. 5; Harrison and Hagner, *Romans*, Chapter: Preface, para. 6; Thielman, *Romans*, Chapter: Series Introduction, Section: Theology In Application, para. 1.

¹⁵⁵ Harrison and Hagner, *Romans*, Chapter: Preface, para. 4.

¹⁵⁶ Andria, *Romans*, Chapter: Introduction To Africa Bible Commentary Series, para. 3; Gorman, *Romans*, Chapter: Preface, paras. 1; Hahn, *Romans*, Chapter: Editor's Preface, para. 5; Harrison and Hagner, *Romans*, Chapter: Preface, para. 6; Thielman, *Romans*, Chapter: Series Introduction, Section: Theology In Application, para. 1.

¹⁵⁷ Harrison and Hagner, *Romans* Chapter: Preface, para. 6.

¹⁵⁸ Hahn, *Romans*, Chapter: Editor's Preface, para. 3.

¹⁵⁹ Andria, *Romans*, Chapter: Introduction To Africa Bible Commentary Series, para. 3; Harrison and Hagner, *Romans*, Chapter: Preface, para. 3; Thielman, *Romans*, Chapter: Series Introduction, para. 2, bullet point 5.

¹⁶⁰ Hahn, *Romans*, Chapter: Editor's Preface, para. 4.

¹⁶¹ Gorman, *Romans*, Chapter: Preface, para. 2.

aligning themselves with the beliefs of the stated interpretive communities, and there is an implicit expectation that their target readers will understand what these terms represent.

Unlike the three evangelical commentators, the other two commentators were keen to admit to the influence of other traditions. For example, Hahn notes that although he is writing as a Catholic, the interpretation series considers scholars from a Protestant and Orthodox perspective.¹⁶² Similarly, Gorman, who states openly that he is from the Protestant tradition, overtly mentions that he has had significant experience teaching in Catholic, Methodist and ecumenical settings.¹⁶³ It appears to be important for these two commentators that their commentary is seen to recognise that other perspectives exist and have value.

In contrast to the five commentaries mentioned above, Witherington appears to suggest that his commentary is an attempt to interpret the Letter to the Romans without presuppositions. He also does not make any explicit claim to ecclesial adherence. He states that “Exegesis should precede, not follow, theological commitments and readings”.¹⁶⁴ However, although he makes no statement about his view on the nature of the Bible, the word “scripture” is used extensively in reference to biblical passages throughout his commentary, indicating he values the Bible as a sacred text.¹⁶⁵ In addition, sections in the commentary titled “Bridging the Horizons” offer comments on how the text can be applied to contemporary Christians.¹⁶⁶ These examples suggest that Witherington does indeed hold certain theological presuppositions regarding the nature of the Bible and that these have affected the way his commentary has been written. Consequently, regardless of any ambition of objectivity or desire for the absence of presuppositions, Witherington’s commentary clearly demonstrates the contrary. This is a good illustration as to why Anderson’s critical self-awareness element is important.

¹⁶² Hahn, *Romans*, Chapter: Editor’s Preface, para. 4.

¹⁶³ Gorman, *Romans*, Chapter: Preface, para. 2.

¹⁶⁴ Witherington III, *Paul’s Letter To The Romans*, p. xii.

¹⁶⁵ Witherington III, *Paul’s Letter To The Romans*, pp. 29, 59, 60, etc. (example references to ‘Scripture’).

¹⁶⁶ Witherington III, *Paul’s Letter To The Romans*, pp. 39, 45, 46, etc. (‘Bridging the Horizon’ example sections).

Social location

Excluding the previously stated ecclesial commitments, only Andria provided any information about how social location influenced his commentary. Andria, an African evangelical, openly states that his commentary came from, and was directed towards, an African evangelical perspective.¹⁶⁷ This is evidenced by multiple references to African culture, understanding and practice, throughout the commentary generally and specifically within Romans 1:18-32.¹⁶⁸ However, neither this commentary, nor any of the other commentaries, described additional social location considerations that may have had an influence on their interpretations of this passage. For example, there was no reflection on how characteristics, such as gender or sexual orientation, may have affected their understandings of Romans 1:18-32. All the commentators are male, and no commentator referred to their sexual orientation, although it is likely they are all heterosexual given the strength of condemnation of same-gender sexual relations communicated within their commentaries. The implication is that the commentators do not believe that their own gender or sexual orientation will have influenced their interpretation. However, contrary to this, scholars such as Dale Martin and Bernadette Brooten would specifically argue that it is very likely that the commentators' gender and sexual orientation will have influenced their perspective and thus their interpretations.¹⁶⁹

Acknowledge the existence of, or potential for, other plausible interpretations.

All commentators asserted the central importance of identifying the original authorial meaning of the text within its historical context.¹⁷⁰ However, there was no obvious reflection on the strengths and weaknesses of this approach and no recognition that there could be alternative primary approaches to find the text's meaning (such as literary or reader-response approaches). Rather, it appears to be taken for granted

¹⁶⁷ Andria, *Romans*, Chapter: Introduction To Africa Bible Commentary Series, para. 3.

¹⁶⁸ For example, Andria, *Romans*, Chapter: Unit 4, Section: 1:20-23, para. 3, Unit 5, Section: 1:25-27, para. 9; Sin and Guilt, paras. 1-2.

¹⁶⁹ Martin, "Sex and the single saviour", pp. 60-61; "Edouard Fontenot Talks with a Biblical Scholar: Of Love Spells and Lesbians in Ancient Rome; Bernadette Brooten.", *The Harvard Gay & Lesbian Review*, Apr 30, 11. 1994 [<https://www.proquest.com/magazines/edouard-fontenot-talks-with-biblical-scholar-love/docview/198664280/se-2>].

¹⁷⁰ See Chapter 'Element 1: An Interpretation is Plausible'

that the approach applied by these commentators was the appropriate way to do biblical interpretation.

Some of the commentators did acknowledge occasional alternative interpretations of individual verses within Romans 1:18-32. However, this was usually to demonstrate how these other interpretations had misunderstood the text or were otherwise unlikely readings. For example, Witherington provides a section titled “A Closer Look: Two Ways to Misread 1.18-32”, critiquing and dismissing two alternative interpretations of Romans 1:18-32.¹⁷¹ Gorman outlines some alternative views of what the apostle Paul may have been referring to when he writes about same-gender behaviours. However, he is clear that this is not what he believes and suggests these alternatives are being put forward because of the contemporary culture’s accommodation of same-gender relationships.¹⁷² In general each of the commentaries proposed a single understanding of the text with no acknowledgement that there might be equally plausible, alternative interpretations.

Conclusion

From the analysis of the commentaries, the majority of the commentators (with the exception of Witherington) demonstrate a limited self-awareness, in that they are open about their ecclesial commitments and present the theological assumptions they consider essential for biblical interpretation, including understanding the Bible as scripture and the importance of discovering the original author’s meaning. Witherington similarly evidences theological assumptions regarding the Bible but does not openly acknowledge these.

There is no evidence that any of the commentators question their presuppositions or explore the effect of these on their interpretations. Instead, it is implied that their assumptions are those required to discern the true meaning of the text. In addition, the commentaries do not demonstrate a genuine attempt to consider alternative perspectives or acknowledge that there may be additional truth yet to be discovered.

¹⁷¹ Witherington III, *Paul's Letter To The Romans*, pp. 68.

¹⁷² Gorman, *Romans*, Chapter: 1:18-32, Section: 1:24-27, paras. 12-13.

Rather, they present their own interpretation as authoritative and implicitly claim universality.

Effectively, there is little evidence that any of the commentaries demonstrated the element of critical self-awareness as defined earlier (as recognising and attending to the effect of influences on their interpretation; avoiding the implicit or explicit claim of universality; and acknowledging that there is further meaning to be discovered within a text). Consequently, according to this element of Anderson's evaluative process all the interpretations examined would be assessed as unethical as they do not demonstrate a critical self-awareness by the interpreter. The commentators have essentially failed to acknowledge and recognise how their own social location, presuppositions and preunderstandings may have affected the interpretations they present in their commentaries.

Element 4: Analysis of Consequences

Assessing the consequences of an interpretation

At the heart of an ethics of biblical interpretation is a respectful responsibility to the text and a similar responsibility for the impact of an interpretation and its wider consequences on others.¹⁷³ Although doing justice to a text is often emphasised when developing written interpretations, the possible impact of an interpretation on others rarely seems to be considered.¹⁷⁴ However, as history demonstrates, there have been tragic consequences when biblical interpretations have been weaponised to undermine, harm and destroy individuals and communities.¹⁷⁵ This has led to some scholars, for example, Philips and Fewell, to insist there is an imperative for biblical readers to learn to interpret the Bible well, because lives may depend upon it.¹⁷⁶ To reduce the potential for interpretations to cause harm, Anderson's evaluative process includes an element that requires an interpreter to carry out an analysis of the possible consequences of their interpretations, and to reject any that may be considered harmful.¹⁷⁷

This element recognises that when an interpreter analyses the potential impact of their interpretation, they are acknowledging that their interpretation may have an effect, positively or negatively, on their readers and the contexts in which they are read.¹⁷⁸ This acknowledgement and rejection of harmful interpretations suggests that Anderson's evaluative process could offer a practical way to mitigate the development and influence of potentially damaging interpretations. However, there does not appear to be an obvious critical approach within biblical studies to assess the potential effects of an interpretation on human lives. Although there may be several reasons why an approach does not exist, there are at least two significant challenges that would need to be overcome to incorporate this practice into an interpretive process.

¹⁷³ Schüssler Fiorenza, 'The Ethics Of Biblical Interpretation', pp. 14, 17.

¹⁷⁴ Pieter F. Craffert, 'New Testament studies: Preventing or promoting a humane society?', *Religion & Theology*, 14(3/4), (2007), pp. 179-180.

¹⁷⁵ Schüssler Fiorenza, 'The Ethics Of Biblical Interpretation', p. 15.

¹⁷⁶ Phillips & Fewell, 'Ethics, Bible, Reading As If', p. 3.

¹⁷⁷ Anderson, *Ancient Laws And Contemporary Controversies*, p. 148.

¹⁷⁸ Patte, *Romans*, p. 38.

Firstly, there is a lack of clarity regarding definitions.¹⁷⁹ For example, what do “harmful” or “beneficial” consequences of biblical interpretations look like? These terms are not objective and need interpreting, and it is likely that any definitions may be affected by the interpreter’s understanding of the purpose and authority of the Bible and potentially how they prioritise different aspects of life. For example, spiritual wellbeing may be seen to be of higher importance than physical or social wellbeing; communities may be seen to be more important than individuals, etc. Currently, there appears to be little attention given to this concern within biblical studies. Even amongst those advocating for an ethics of biblical interpretation, very few seem to be seriously attempting to address the difficulty this lack of definition presents.¹⁸⁰ This is an area for further research in which biblical studies could potentially benefit from the contributions of other fields such as health, education and psychology, within an interdisciplinary approach.¹⁸¹

Secondly, even if these consequential outcomes can be defined, there are further challenges about how they could be measured. For example, what, or whose, measures should be used to assess the extent to which an interpretation is beneficial or harmful? Associated with this is a recognition that an interpretation may lead to differential impacts on different individuals or communities. How should an interpreter adjudicate if, regardless of which plausible interpretation is chosen, there are individuals or communities who are harmed to some extent?¹⁸² What consideration should be given to the potential of individual or community resilience in relation to the effect of an interpretation? As religious trauma therapist, Laura E. Anderson has noted, some forms of harm, such as individual trauma, lead to highly subjective experiences.¹⁸³ What causes harm to one person may not affect another person in the same way. As these questions demonstrate, the measurement of the effect of a biblical interpretation is likely to be highly involved and complex.

¹⁷⁹ Tat-siong Benny Liew, “Unending Interpretations: Continuing The Conversation” In *Scholars Reading Romans 1 with Daniel Patte: Critique, Dialogue, and Pedagogy*. (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2023), p. 36.

¹⁸⁰ Liew, “Unending Interpretations”, p.36.

¹⁸¹ A general interdisciplinary approach was suggested by Schüssler Fiorenza, *Rhetoric And Ethic*, pp. 195-198.

¹⁸² Regarding the effects of violence in the Bible and responding as a resistant or compliant reader, see a brief discussion in Moyers, “Reading & Writing With Eyes”, p. 272-276.

¹⁸³ Laura E. Anderson, *When religion hurts you: Healing from religious trauma and the impact of high-control religion*. (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2023), p. 27.

This difficulty in identifying and assessing consequences is not unique to biblical studies. Other fields have also grappled with this, perhaps most notably in health, where, for example, the World Health Organisation (WHO) has developed a Health Impact Assessment (HIA) process.¹⁸⁴ The HIA process encourages those who may be impacted by new projects or policies to participate in the process and help identify the potential positive and negative health effects. In a similar way, Anderson calls for the inclusion of diverse communities to participate in biblical interpretation conversations.¹⁸⁵ However, there are several challenges with this, such as how to convene people and the capacity of participants to be involved, as well as important concerns regarding the distribution of power and authority within such a process.¹⁸⁶ How decisions are made, such as which communities are to be included and the framework used for setting criteria and decision making, are critical.¹⁸⁷ As Martin warns, trust in such a process may be seriously undermined if the previous experience of participants with those who have the controlling power has been negative, and this may be difficult to overcome.¹⁸⁸ It is evident that community participation in biblical interpretation is not without complications.

These issues surrounding the analysis of the consequences of a biblical interpretation may have led some scholars, such as Cosgrove and Martin, to conclude that a more general approach based on the application of principles is a better way to encourage the development of constructive outcomes and prevent harm.¹⁸⁹ Drawing upon Augustine's contention that correctly understood biblical interpretations should always "increase love for God and love for neighbour", they recommend the "rule of love" as a guiding principle for biblical interpretations.¹⁹⁰ Martin, in particular, recognises that this approach requires an interpretation to have a positive outcome and places the emphasis on the interpreter to justify how a proposed interpretation is loving or does good to others.¹⁹¹ Although the simplicity of this approach may appear attractive, it faces similar challenges to Anderson's

¹⁸⁴ For details on HIA process see <https://www.who.int/tools/health-impact-assessments>

¹⁸⁵ Anderson, *Ancient Laws And Contemporary Controversies*, p. 146.

¹⁸⁶ Ehrensperger, "Ethical Responsibility", p. 31.

¹⁸⁷ Ehrensperger, "Ethical Responsibility", p. 31.

¹⁸⁸ Martin, "Sex and the single saviour", p. 167.

¹⁸⁹ Cosgrove, *The Meanings We Choose*, p. 47; Martin, "Sex and the single saviour", p. 168.

¹⁹⁰ Augustine, 'On Christian Doctrine', pp.30-31.

¹⁹¹ Martin, "Sex and the single saviour", p. 168.

analysis of consequences element, in that there is no objective definition of a loving outcome. Martin recognises that advocating for the love of the other (and explaining how an interpretation is loving) may not be sufficient or the end point of an interpretation¹⁹²; however, it could be an important ingredient to help ensure an ethical focus is given to an interpretation and constrain any potential harm to others.

Reflecting on the previous comments, it is clear that analysing the consequences of an interpretation as required by Anderson's evaluative process is neither simple nor straightforward. Further additional research is required to consider how any such method for analysing the consequences of interpretations may be developed, or whether a principle-based approach, such as proposed by Martin and Cosgrove would be more appropriate, or whether an integrated approach could be of value.

However, even though a comprehensive process to achieve an analysis of consequences is not available, this does not have to prevent interpreters from demonstrating that they have attempted to consider the consequences of their interpretations on others as required by this element of Anderson's evaluative process. This consideration could potentially be evidenced in two ways:

1. interpreters explicitly acknowledge and describe how their interpretation might affect individuals or communities, to demonstrate they recognise that their interpretations have actual consequences; and
2. interpreters offer a justification as to why their proposed interpretation could be considered good or beneficial.

In the next section, the six commentaries under consideration in this study will be examined to evaluate the extent to which they demonstrate these characteristics.

Analysis of the interpretations of Romans 1:18-32

As described in previous chapters, each of the six commentaries in this study included an exegesis of Romans 1:18-32 and highlighted specific areas considered to have particular relevance for their readers. One such focus was the passage's reference to same-gender sexual activity. The understanding of this passage and its

¹⁹² Martin, "Sex and the single saviour", p. 168.

contemporary relevance is causing significant debate and response, especially within Western churches but also increasingly, within global Christianity.¹⁹³

Therefore, it has been selected as an appropriate area to use to evaluate the extent to which the six commentaries have assessed the potential consequences of their interpretations.

All six commentaries understand Romans 1:18-32, and specifically verses 26-27, to unambiguously condemn ancient same-gender sexual activity. Five of the commentaries (Andria, Gorman, Hahn, Harrison and Hagner and Witherington) similarly, consider this passage to condemn contemporary same-gender sexual activity.¹⁹⁴ However, as mentioned previously, Thielman, rather surprisingly, selects not to comment about the contemporary relevance of these controversial verses.¹⁹⁵

Although their commentaries are fairly recent (less than twenty years old) Andria, Hahn, and Harrison and Hagner, use particularly derogative descriptions to denounce same-gender sexual activity, such as, “perversion”¹⁹⁶, “shameful”¹⁹⁷, “disordered”¹⁹⁸, “moral confusion and sexual addiction”¹⁹⁹, “abomination”²⁰⁰, “driven by animal desires”.²⁰¹ It is likely these commentators would expect their readers to similarly accept their traditional understanding of the text and potentially adopt these descriptions of same-gender attracted people. However, there is little acknowledgement of the effects this perspective might have on their readers or those they have dealings with. Some commentators are aware that this is a challenging area.²⁰² Harrison and Hagner’s commentary recognises that its (likely

¹⁹³ Martin, *Sex And The Single Savior*, p. 51; Dunning, ‘Same-Sex Relations’, p. 577.

¹⁹⁴ Andria, *Romans*, Chapter: Unit 5, Section: 1:25-27, paras. 6-9; Gorman, *Romans*, Chapter: 1:18-32, Section 1:24-27, paras. 14-16, Subsection: Reflections And Questions For 1:18-32, point 5; Hahn, *Romans*, Chapter: The Messiah and the Gospel of Salvation, Section: [1:26-27], paras. 1-3; Harrison and Hagner, *Romans*, Chapter: Text and Exposition, Section: 26-27, paras. 1-3; Witherington III, *Paul's Letter To The Romans*, p. 69.

¹⁹⁵ Thielman, *Romans*, Chapter: Chapter 3: Romans 1:18-32, Section: 1:26, paras. 1-3 and Section: 1:27, paras. 1-5.

¹⁹⁶ Harrison and Hagner, *Romans*, Chapter: Text and Exposition, Section: 26-27, para. 1.

¹⁹⁷ Hahn, *Romans*, Chapter: The Messiah and the Gospel of Salvation, Section: [1:26-27], para.2.

¹⁹⁸ Hahn, *Romans*, Chapter: The Messiah and the Gospel of Salvation, Section: [1:26-27], para.3.

¹⁹⁹ Hahn, *Romans*, Chapter: The Messiah and the Gospel of Salvation, Section: [1:26-27], para.3.

²⁰⁰ Hahn, *Romans*, Chapter: The Messiah and the Gospel of Salvation, Section: [1:26-27], para.1.

²⁰¹ Andria, *Romans*, Chapter: Unit 5, Section: 1:25-27, para. 8.

²⁰² Witherington III, *Paul's Letter To The Romans*, p. 69, footnote 24; Harrison and Hagner, *Romans*, Chapter: Text and Exposition, Section: 26-27, para. 2.

Western) culture has become more supportive of same-gender relationships.²⁰³ It consequently suggests the Church needs to acknowledge that its prior harsh exclusionary response to same-gender attracted people is no longer acceptable.²⁰⁴ However, the commentary's alternative approach that the church should rather be "getting to the root of their distinct behaviour, accepting them, and helping them" would probably still sound disturbing to the majority of gay or lesbian people.²⁰⁵

Only Gorman recognises the existence of alternative Christian interpretations of these verses, and he overtly advises a respectful and charitable approach by his readers towards those whose views differ from the traditional interpretation held by him and his anticipated readers.²⁰⁶ In a discussion section, he asks, "How should individuals and churches that agree with the interpretation of Paul presented here speak about their understanding of sexuality without communicating condemnation and rejection to those not living by this ethic?"²⁰⁷ Gorman implies that responses such as "condemnation and rejection" should be discarded and suggests that being considerate to those with differing opinions is important.²⁰⁸ However, the nature of his question suggests this attitude would not usually be the norm.

Andria appears to be less concerned about the potential negative perception of others and notes that "In some parts of Africa, people take homosexual behaviour very seriously; those who are guilty of it are driven from the village, signalling that they do not deserve to live in the community."²⁰⁹ Andria offers no reflection on this described indictment and reaction, and does not acknowledge the considerable harm that may have been perpetrated on those who are affected by this particular biblical interpretation. Rather, his notable lack of comment implies that he may agree with its sentiment and that this harmful action is an appropriate response to those participating in same-gender sexual behaviour. As an African evangelical Christian,

²⁰³ Harrison and Hagner, *Romans*, Chapter: Text and Exposition, Section: 26-27, para. 2.

²⁰⁴ Harrison and Hagner, *Romans*, Chapter: Text and Exposition, Section: 26-27, para. 2.

²⁰⁵ Harrison and Hagner, *Romans*, Chapter: Text and Exposition, Section: 26-27, para. 2.

²⁰⁶ Gorman, *Romans*, Chapter: 1:18-32, Section 1:24-27, paras. 14-16 and Chapter: 1:18-32, Section: Reflections And Questions For 1:18-32, point 5.

²⁰⁷ Gorman, *Romans*, Chapter: 1:18-32, Section: Questions for Those Who Read, Teach, and Preach, bullet point 5.

²⁰⁸ Gorman, *Romans*, Chapter: 1:18-32, Section: Questions for Those Who Read, Teach, and Preach, bullet point 5.

²⁰⁹ Andria, *Romans*, Chapter: Unit 5, Section: 1:25-27, para. 9..

Andria's reaction may not be totally surprising, since the church in many parts of Africa advocates (along with local governments) severe punishment, such as life imprisonment or even the death penalty, for those found to be involved in same-gender relationships.²¹⁰

Conclusion

Although the commentators of these commentaries all generally prioritise exegesis, it is clear from their considerations about same-gender sexual activity in Romans 1:18-32 that they do identify some of the impacts and consequences of their interpretations on their readers. However, in all the commentaries examined, there was no genuine attempt to analyse the benefit or harm of their interpretations on others who are same-gender attracted or how their readers might engage with people who are in same-gender relationships. With the exception of Gorman, there is no encouragement to acknowledge or respect alternative Christian viewpoints.²¹¹ There appears little, if any, concern for the consequences of stating categorically (and in what might be considered offensive language) that the Bible condemns all same-gender sexual activity. As Martin sombrely reflects, "There can be no debate about the fact that the church's stand on homosexuality has caused oppression, loneliness, self-hatred, violence, sickness and suicide for millions of people."²¹² What is of notable concern is that the interpreters examined here do not appear to have given any consideration to the fact that their interpretations could be applied to cause harm in these or other ways. Equally, there is no reflection on whether their interpretations demonstrated good or love to the other who is their neighbour; it was clearly not a consideration. In fact, it might be argued that these interpretations could be considered complicit in the harms identified by Martin.²¹³

Even though, as acknowledged earlier, it may be impossible to comprehensively analyse the consequences of an interpretation, these commentators evidence a

²¹⁰ 'LGBTQ rights in Africa', *Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopaedia*, 20 February 2025, 09:22 UTC, https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=LGBTQ_rights_in_Africa&oldid=1276707828 [accessed 27 February 2025]; 'Anti-homosexuality Bill, 2023', Parliament of Uganda, <https://www.parliament.go.ug/sites/default/files/The%20Anti-Homosexuality%20Act%2C%202023.pdf>; [Accessed 27 February 2025].

²¹¹ Gorman, *Romans*, Chapter: 1:18-32, Section: Questions for Those Who Read, Teach, and Preach, bullet point 5.

²¹² Martin, *Sex & the Single Saviour*, p. 50.

²¹³ Martin, *Sex & the Single Saviour*, p. 50.

distinct lack of analysis. This suggests they do not recognise that the potential consequences of their interpretations are relevant or important considerations in their interpretive process. Therefore, in applying this element of Anderson's evaluative process, the interpretations by these commentators of Romans 1:18-32 would all have been considered unethical.

Chapter 5 Discussion

Anderson presents an ethics of biblical interpretation as an evaluative process involving four elements, each of which she suggests is essential for an interpretation to be determined as ethical:

- 1) The interpretation is plausible, demonstrating that it is grounded in the textual features of the text;
- 2) The interpretation includes an assessment of the contemporary context, demonstrating its relevance to the current social location and culture of its readers;
- 3) The interpretation exhibits critical self-awareness, acknowledging that it has been influenced by many factors, including the interpreter's social location and presuppositions; and
- 4) The interpretation demonstrates that it has analysed its potential consequences on individuals and communities, and dismisses any harmful interpretations.²¹⁴

The individual elements (plausibility, assessment of contemporary context, critical self-awareness and analysis of consequences) have each been examined in the previous chapter to determine their relevance and purpose within Anderson's evaluative process. The elements were applied to six example written biblical interpretations of Romans 1:18-32 to evaluate whether these interpretations could be considered ethical and to analyse the suitability of each element within the overall evaluative process. This discussion chapter will briefly review these earlier findings before considering the feasibility and appropriateness of Anderson's evaluative process as an ethics of biblical interpretation.

Review of individual elements

An Interpretation is Plausible

Anderson's evaluative process requires an ethical interpretation to be a plausible interpretation.²¹⁵ That is, it respects the *otherness* of the text by grounding its

²¹⁴ Anderson, *Ancient Laws And Contemporary Controversies*, pp. 146, 148.

²¹⁵ Anderson, *Ancient Laws And Contemporary Controversies*, p. 146.

meaning in the textual features of the text, and it does not mistreat the text by attempting to make it say something that cannot be derived from its textual evidence.²¹⁶ As many critical methods can be employed to explore the meaning of a text, it is recognised that the interpreter chooses which methods to use, and in doing so prioritises specific textual features to examine whilst also ignoring or paying less attention to others.²¹⁷ These various critical methods may lead to different interpretations of the text, which could be complementary, or even contradictory, to one another. However, each interpretation may, arguably, be doing justice to the text.²¹⁸ The existence of several possible plausible interpretations rejects the perspective that an individual interpretation can ever legitimately claim to reflect the singularly universal meaning of the text. Even interpreters who appear to argue that one particular critical method is the correct method to use (often those who highly value the historical-critical approach) are demonstrating a subjective interpretive choice which reflects their own theological assumptions regarding the nature and authority of the Bible.²¹⁹ The majority of the commentaries examined in this study utilised a historical-critical approach, seeking to determine the original author's intent. They developed plausible interpretations of the text under consideration (Romans 1:18-32).²²⁰ However, there was an implicit assumption by these commentators that this was the single correct approach required to determine the accurate meaning of the text. There was no recognition that this was an interpretive choice or that alternative critical methods were available. Only one commentator openly acknowledged that they had selected a particular approach and recognised, that in so doing, they were not attempting to produce a definitive interpretation.²²¹

A plausible interpretation is foundational to Anderson's ethics of biblical interpretation and demonstrates responsibility towards the *other* that is the text. However, an important point to note is that interpretations are produced using critical methods and that these are selected by the interpreter.

²¹⁶ Patte, *Romans*, p. 31; Vanhoozer, *Is There A Meaning In This Text?* P. 339.

²¹⁷ Patte, *Romans*, p. 20.

²¹⁸ Patte, *Romans*, p. 54.

²¹⁹ Patte, *Romans*, p. 27.

²²⁰ See Section 4.1 'Element 1: An Interpretation is Pluasibile'.

²²¹ Witherington III, *Paul's Letter To The Romans*, p. xi.

Assessment of the Contemporary Context

Anderson argues that an ethical interpretation will incorporate an acknowledged assessment of the contemporary context.²²² All interpreters who seek to make the Bible relevant and applicable for their audience will carry out, consciously or unconsciously, some form of assessment of the contemporary context in which their interpretation is to be presented.²²³ This is evidenced by the particular emphases interpreters tend to place on selected issues or concerns. For example, the commentaries examined in this study all identified specific contemporary issues that they sought to apply the meaning of the text to such as same-gender behaviours, idolatry and the fairness of God's judgement.

However, Anderson's evaluative process maintains that an ethical interpretation will carry out an intentional assessment of the context it is addressing. In so doing, it effectively admits that an interpretation is contextual and that it cannot necessarily be applied to other contexts or be claimed to be universal or definitive. This element demonstrates respect for the contemporary readers and acknowledges that their needs and concerns may change over time and vary in different contexts. It suggests that an assessment of the contemporary context should be carried out every time an interpretation is to be produced, to take account of any changes in the context.²²⁴

Each of the commentaries considered in this study, indicated that they were written for the same broad audience of Christian ministers or students. However, only Andria's commentary, which had a particular focus on Africa, made any admission that it was seeking to be relevant to an identified contemporary context and culture, indicating that there had been some form of intentional assessment.²²⁵ The other five commentaries rarely acknowledged the context for which they had been written. Rather, it was implied that their interpretation would be relevant for their audience in any and, potentially, every context. Yet, the fact that these commentaries did not consider exactly the same issues, or address the same specific questions, indicates

²²² Anderson, *Ancient Laws And Contemporary Controversies*, p. 146.

²²³ Patte, *Romans*, p. 25.

²²⁴ Ehrensperger, 'Ethical Responsibility', p. 31.

²²⁵ Andria, *Romans*, Chapter: Introduction To Africa Bible Commentary Series, paras. 1-3.

that some form of assessment of the contemporary context, and consideration of the needs of their readers, had been undertaken, even though this was not openly acknowledged and may not have been a conscious decision.

For an interpretation to be considered ethical in terms of this element, the interpreter is required to carry out an assessment of their context and be transparent about their contextual interpretive choices.²²⁶ They demonstrate that they are responsible for selecting which issues and concerns to bring to the text. In acknowledging this, the interpreter implicitly admits that the text may also speak to other issues and concerns that they have not chosen to focus upon. In applying this element of Anderson's evaluative process to the six commentaries examined, only one commentary (explicitly focused on the African context) demonstrated any degree of assessment and openness about their contextual interpretive choices and could potentially be considered ethical. The remaining five commentaries were considered unethical.

Critical Self-Awareness

Anderson's evaluative process argues that an ethical interpretation will demonstrate critical self-awareness and will be transparent about the factors that have influenced it.²²⁷ These factors include the social location of the interpreter, their theological and moral presuppositions, and their pre-understanding and previous experience of a text.²²⁸ Asserting that no interpreter can ever be fully objective, Anderson argues that it is essential for interpreters to be critically self-aware so that their particularity and subjectivity can be acknowledged as much as possible, rather than being denied or hidden.²²⁹ Integrating critical self-reflection in the interpretive process allows for these influences on an interpretation not only to be acknowledged, but for their significance to be examined and assessed. This recognition admits that the resulting interpretation cannot, with total confidence claim to be either universal or exhaustive.

²²⁶ Anderson, *Ancient Laws And Contemporary Controversies*, p. 148.

²²⁷ Anderson, *Ancient Laws And Contemporary Controversies*, p. 148.

²²⁸ Cosgrove, *The Meanings We Choose*, p. 3; Patte, *Romans*, p. 30; Bultmann, 'Is Exegesis without Presupposition Possible?', p290-91; Chalmers, 'The influence of cognitive biases on biblical interpretation.', pp. 467-480; Moyers, 'Reading And Writing With Eyes', p. 268.

²²⁹ Anderson, *Ancient Laws And Contemporary Controversies*, p. 146.

Rather, there is an acceptance that other potentially legitimate interpretations may exist, allowing for further meaning yet to be discovered within the text.

One of the challenges to implementing this element is that, although some practical books on interpretation (especially on preaching), do encourage and give some guidance on how interpreters can be critically self-aware, there does not appear to be any agreed method or approach in the literature that assists biblical interpreters in the practice of critical self-reflection regarding biblical interpretation.²³⁰ This might reflect the previous (flawed) dominant view that interpreters are able, in and of themselves, to treat a text objectively and thus don't necessarily need to consider their own subjectivity or particularity.²³¹ As a consequence, such guidance may have been considered superfluous.

Certainly, within the commentaries examined in this study, there was very little critical self-reflection demonstrated. Most commentators only provided statements of theological assumptions, and only one explicitly identified their geographical emphasis. The limited information and lack of critical comment suggest that the commentators were not aware, not concerned, or did not believe that other factors may have influenced their interpretation.

In contrast, within Anderson's evaluative process, an ethical interpretation not only acknowledges that an interpretation will always be affected by a range of influences (some of which may be unconscious), it will also be as open and transparent as possible about the nature of these influences and the extent to which they have affected the interpretation. Developing guidance to assist biblical interpreters in practicing self-reflective practice would likely be an invaluable help for future interpreters.

Analysis of consequences

Anderson argues that for an interpretation to be considered ethical, it must have analysed its potential consequences on others, and any interpretation considered harmful should be dismissed with reasons given as to why a particular interpretation

²³⁰ See for example, Martha Simmons, *Doing The Deed: The Mechanics of 21st Century Preaching*, (Atlanta: The African American Pulpit Inc, 2012), pp. 47-50.

²³¹ Barton, 'Historical-Critical Approaches', p. 12.

has been presented.²³² Central to an ethics of biblical interpretation is a fundamental claim that an interpreter is responsible for the impact of their interpretation on individuals and communities.²³³ Although it is unlikely that most interpreters would deliberately want to cause harm to others, history is littered with examples where biblical interpretations have resulted in tragic consequences.²³⁴ However, there does not appear to be any clear definition or agreed measurement framework to assess the harmful and beneficial outcomes that may result from biblical interpretations.²³⁵ Furthermore, there are complex factors, such as understanding why some individuals or groups appear to be more resilient than others to perceived harmful interpretations and how to attend to differential impacts amongst different groups, which need consideration. To mitigate these challenges, it has been proposed that potentially impacted individuals and groups participate in the interpretation process.²³⁶ However, although hearing the voices of these others would have value, there are many concerns with this proposal, not least of all the effect of the power imbalance between the interpreter and affected groups, the potential for distrust by affected groups due to their previous experiences, the differences in capabilities between groups to participate and, not insignificantly, the logistical practicality of this intervention.²³⁷

In potential response to these challenges, other scholars have offered alternative approaches in which an interpreter is required to justify how their interpretations do good or show love to people.²³⁸ However, these approaches similarly face challenges concerning the lack of agreed definitions about what is loving or good and uncertainties about the measurement of impact.

Although there is no agreed approach to analysing the potential consequences of an interpretation, it is still possible that interpreters can evidence they have considered the impact of their interpretations on others. They could explicitly acknowledge and describe how they consider their interpretation might affect individuals or

²³² Anderson, *Ancient Laws And Contemporary Controversies*, p. 148.

²³³ Schüssler Fiorenza, 'The Ethics Of Biblical Interpretation', p. 15.

²³⁴ Patte and others, *The Gospel of Matthew*, p. 20.

²³⁵ Liew, "Unending Interpretations: Continuing The Conversation", p. 36.

²³⁶ Anderson, *Ancient Laws And Contemporary Controversies*, p. 146.

²³⁷ Ehrensperger, "Ethical Responsibility", p. 31; Martin, "Sex and the single saviour", p. 167.

²³⁸ Cosgrove, *The Meanings We Choose*, p. 44; Martin, "Sex and the single saviour", p. 168.

communities, and they could offer a justification as to why it is a good or beneficial interpretation.

The evaluation of the six commentaries in this study demonstrated that the commentators may have had some awareness of the consequences of their interpretations. However, in the example chosen, which related to the passage's references to same-gender sexual activity, none of the commentators attempted any genuine analysis of these consequences on their readers and showed little consideration as to how their condemning interpretations may affect the relationships their readers had with others. This lack of analysis suggests that these commentators do not recognise that the potential consequences of their interpretation are relevant or important considerations in their interpretive process. Therefore, in applying this element of Anderson's evaluative process, the interpretations by these commentators of Romans 1:18-32 would all have been considered unethical.

The discussion above clearly demonstrates that, although the analysis of consequences of an interpretation and the reduction of harm to others are critically important in an ethics of biblical interpretation, there is significant work yet to be done to understand the complex aspects of this element.

Review of Anderson's evaluative process

Although not explicitly stated by Anderson, the four elements within her evaluative process appear to individually align with the four main categories of *others* affected by an interpretation, that is the text, the contemporary readers, the interpreter and those impacted by the interpretation.²³⁹ This means that Anderson's evaluative process has the potential to safeguard these *others* within the interpretive process by ensuring they are treated fairly and with respect:

- 1) Plausibility safeguards the text by ensuring it is not misread or mistreated; rather, its textual features are to be critically analysed to form the basis of the interpretation;

²³⁹ Anderson, *Ancient Laws And Contemporary Controversies*, pp. 146, 148.

- 2) Assessment of the contemporary context means that relevant questions and issues facing the contemporary readers in a particular context and culture, are not ignored or misunderstood; rather, they are accurately represented and addressed;
- 3) Critical self-awareness means the interpreter neither denies nor hides their particularity and subjectivity; rather, these are openly acknowledged and their influence on the interpretation is recognised;
- 4) Analysis of consequences aims to ensure that those who are impacted by an interpretation are not harmed; rather, their good is always sought.

This representation of each of the *others* affected by an interpretation gives weight to Anderson's claims that each element of her evaluative process must be present for an interpretation to be judged as ethical.²⁴⁰

The ambition of Anderson's evaluative process to deliver ethical interpretations is commendable, and, in principle, it could deliver these desired outcomes for written interpretations, such as those considered in this dissertation. In addition, Anderson's evaluative process may also be applicable to verbal interpretations, such as spoken sermons or lectures. However, it may be difficult to apply her evaluative process to alternative types of interpretations (such as music, art and some drama) where little explanation is usually provided within the interpretation itself, making it almost impossible to evaluate the constituent elements.

Of the four elements within Anderson's evaluative process, two are already widely practiced and could be successfully implemented within an ethics of biblical interpretation (that is, plausibility and assessment of the contemporary context). There are already many accepted critical methods within biblical studies that enable plausible interpretations to be produced, and new methods and approaches may be further developed.²⁴¹ This means Anderson's plausibility element could be, and probably is already being, widely implemented. In addition, there are many recognised methods available to help identify the issues and questions that individuals and communities face, which would enable an interpreter to accurately

²⁴⁰ Anderson, *Ancient Laws And Contemporary Controversies*, p. 148.

²⁴¹ See, for example, the list in Gooder, *Searching for Meaning*, pp. v-vi.

develop an understanding of the contemporary context of their audience. These methods include such practices as data analysis, situational analysis, surveys, audience participation and engagement, etc. The application of such methods, although perhaps not widely used within biblical studies, would assist an interpreter to undertake an assessment of the contemporary context and enable this element of Anderson's evaluative process to be implemented effectively.

However, as outlined above, the two remaining elements (critical self-awareness and analysis of consequences) are much more complex and underdeveloped. This study has identified issues that suggest their full implementation within an ethics of biblical interpretation is unlikely to be currently possible. However, as argued in the previous chapter, these issues and lack of development should not necessarily prevent interpreters from attempting to consider these elements within their interpretations.

Concerning critical self-awareness, although interpreters may be encouraged to consider the factors that influence their interpretations, the noted lack of resources and guidance on critical self-reflection for biblical interpreters demonstrates that this practice is not considered a priority or valued as an integral part of the interpretive process.²⁴² This would appear to be a significant blind spot in biblical studies given the fundamental importance of the interpreter's own role within the development of an interpretation and this is further discussed below. This is not to claim, that all interpreters are not critically self-aware; however, the implied lack of importance of this practice within biblical studies is not encouraging. Recognising critical self-awareness as an essential component of the interpretive process and seeking to develop such a practice would strengthen the implementation of Anderson's evaluative process. Development of resources for biblical interpreters, possibly by availing of learning from other disciplines, such as social care, psychology, etc., would be valuable.

The fourth element in Anderson's evaluative process is the analysis of the potential consequences of an interpretation. This element aims to prevent the promotion of harmful biblical interpretations, which is arguably of critical importance for an ethics of biblical interpretation. However, there are crucial underpinning aspects of this

²⁴² Horrell, "Paul, inclusion and whiteness", p. 124.

element that do not currently exist, which weaken this element's ability to deliver its purpose. These include the lack of agreed definitions about what constitutes beneficial and harmful outcomes and how they should be measured, as well as no agreed method on how to analyse the consequences of an interpretation. As discussed previously, this has led some scholars to question whether it is possible to develop an effective systematic and prescriptive ethics of biblical interpretation as proposed by Anderson. This dissertation recognises these concerns and acknowledges that these aspects need to be addressed if Anderson's evaluative approach is ever likely to be successfully implemented.

Relationship between the elements in Anderson's evaluative process

The analysis above indicates that the interpreter is the key determinant of an interpretation. They essentially decide the nature of their interpretation by choosing the methods with which to critically analyse the text and generate plausible interpretations. They select which contextual issues to address in their interpretations, and they present the potential applications, or relevance, of the text that may affect their readers and those with whom their readers relate.

As discussed in the section "Element 3: Critical Self-Awareness", the interpretive decisions made by an interpreter are potentially influenced by many factors. These factors include, but are not limited to, their social location, their presuppositions and their previous experience of the text. It is argued that these influences will inevitably affect the choices interpreters make regarding their interpretive process and indicate the importance for an interpreter to practise critical self-reflection. These interpretive choices generate the particular meaning and significance of a text that an interpreter proposes, demonstrating their controlling role and reinforcing why interpreters should be considered responsible for the impact of their interpretation (for good or for harm) on others.

Figure 1 diagrammatically represents this relationship between the interpreter, the elements of Anderson's evaluative process, the potential effects on the *others* they represent, and the interpretation itself. The figure demonstrates the determining role the interpreter plays within the development of any interpretation and thus the significant importance for an interpreter to appreciate the varying factors that

influence their decision making. It underscores the necessity for interpreters to be critically self-aware as they develop their interpretations. The figure also reflects how the elements in Anderson's evaluative process represent, and potentially protect, the interests of the *others* who are affected by an interpretation.

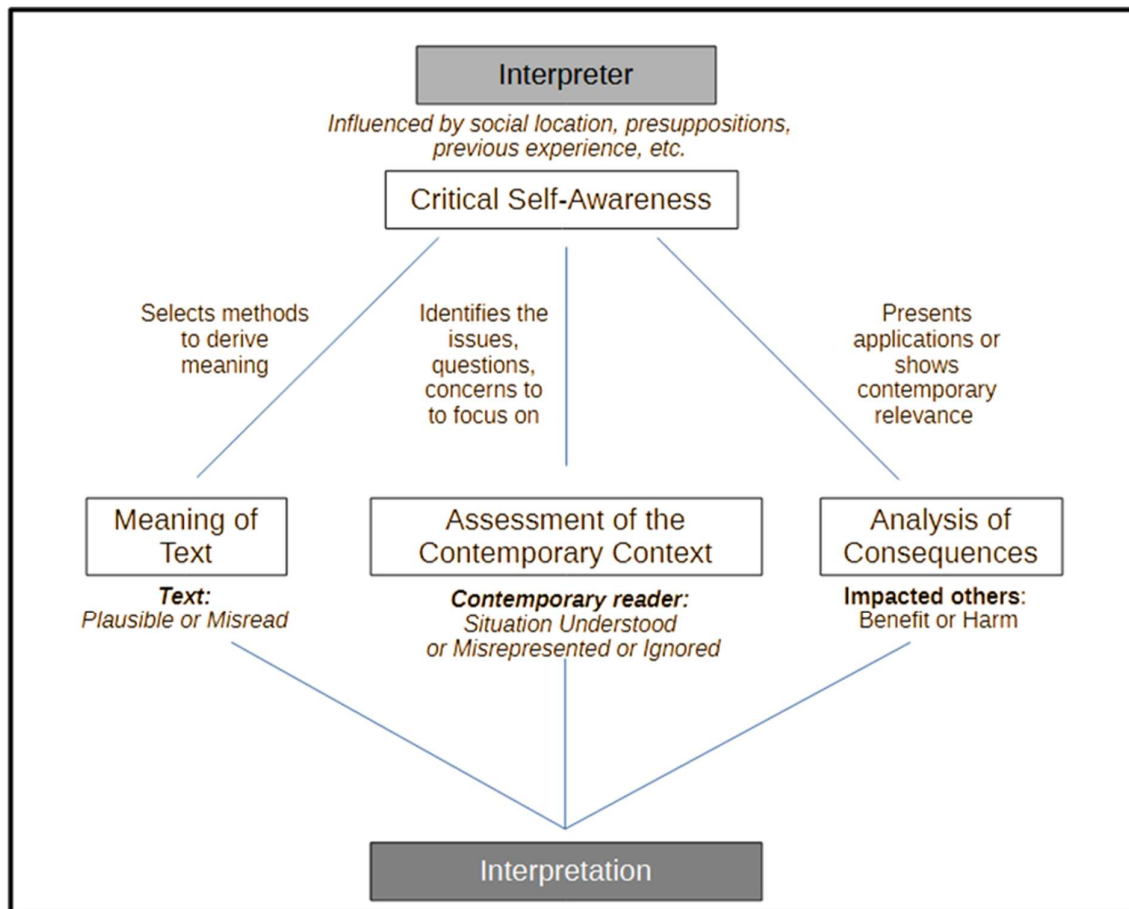


Figure 1: Kimberly Walsh, *Relationship between the elements within Anderson's evaluative process and the 'others' affected by an interpretation.*

Although it is the decisions made by the interpreter that essentially determine an interpretation, it is worth noting that the relationship between the interpreter and the elements in Anderson's evaluative process is not necessarily one way. If an interpreter is open to the biblical text saying different things to what is currently understood, it is possible that these other elements (plausibility, assessment of the contemporary context and analysis of consequences) may challenge the interpreter's

understanding and presuppositions, and result in different plausible interpretations being developed. For example:

- Selecting different critical methods than usually applied by an interpreter may lead to an interpreter having an alternative and broader understanding of the meaning of a text;²⁴³
- The contemporary context may give rise to questions or issues that have not been previously considered and when applied to a text, may expand the interpreter's understanding;²⁴⁴
- The lived experience of those impacted by interpretations may challenge long-held convictions about the meaning of texts.²⁴⁵

From the discussions above it is evident that the design of Anderson's ethics of biblical interpretation as an elements-based evaluative process has the potential to assist interpreters to develop ethical interpretations and to adjudicate between existing interpretations within written interpretations such as biblical commentaries. The constituent elements of her evaluative process act as a brake to potentially harmful interpretations and encourage the interpreter to take responsibility for the *others* affected by an interpretation (that is, the text, the contemporary readers and those impacted by the interpretation). However, as described above, there are considerable issues regarding the possible implementation of the elements of critical self-awareness and the analysis of consequences, which currently prevent the evaluative process from being effectively implemented.

²⁴³ Patte, *Romans*, p.27.

²⁴⁴ Patte, *Romans*, p.39.

²⁴⁵ See for example, Christopher B. Hays and Richard B. Hays, *The Widening of God's Mercy: Sexuality Within the Biblical Story*. (Padstow: Yale University Press, 2024), p. 8.

Chapter 6 Conclusion

The purpose of this dissertation has been to explore the possible elements of an ethics of biblical interpretation by critically examining an evaluative process proposed by Anderson.²⁴⁶

The intention of an ethics of biblical interpretation is to ensure that interpreters take responsibility to treat the biblical text justly and to take responsibility for those *others* who are potentially affected by their interpretation, ensuring that they are safeguarded and not harmed.²⁴⁷

Anderson's evaluative process suggests that there are four constituent elements to an ethics of biblical interpretation:

- 1) The interpretation is plausible, demonstrating that it is grounded in the textual features of the text;
- 2) The interpretation includes an assessment of the contemporary context, demonstrating its relevance to the current social location and culture of its readers;
- 3) The interpretation exhibits critical self-awareness, acknowledging that it has been influenced by many factors, including the interpreter's social location and presuppositions; and
- 4) The interpretation demonstrates that it has analysed its potential consequences on individuals and communities, and dismisses any harmful interpretations.²⁴⁸

In this dissertation, Anderson's four elements (plausibility, assessment of contemporary context, critical self-awareness and analysis of consequences) were examined to clarify their relevance and purpose in her evaluative process. Each element was tested and analysed by applying it to six example written biblical interpretations of Romans 1:18-32 to evaluate whether the interpretation can be considered ethical according to Anderson's evaluative process, and to analyse the

²⁴⁶ Anderson, *Ancient Laws And Contemporary Controversies*, p. 148.

²⁴⁷ Phillips & Fewell, 'Ethics, Bible, Reading As If', p. 7.

²⁴⁸ Anderson, *Ancient Laws And Contemporary Controversies*, pp. 146, 148.

suitability of the individual elements within the overall process. Romans 1:18-32 was deliberately selected for this study because its interpretation is arguably one of the most contentiously debated within the Western church today, as it is often identified as a key passage within the Church's debates relating to the inclusion of same-gender attracted people.²⁴⁹ In using this passage to analyse Anderson's evaluative process, the controversial nature of these verses allowed interpreters to reveal their presuppositions and the contextual choices they had made, and it offered an opportunity (although not taken) for interpreters to consider the potential impact of their interpretations on others.

From the analysis, each element of Anderson's evaluative process was identified as representing one of the *others* potentially affected by a biblical interpretation (the text, contemporary readers, interpreter and those affected by the interpretation). Anderson's evaluative process insists that each of these *others* is treated fairly and with respect, ensuring they are safeguarded within the interpretive process. This correlation between the elements of Anderson's evaluative process and the *others* potentially affected by a biblical interpretation supports Anderson's assertion that each element of her evaluative approach must be present for an interpretation to be judged as ethical.²⁵⁰

This dissertation acknowledges the ambition of Anderson's evaluative process and its theoretical potential to be an effective ethics of biblical interpretation for written interpretations. However, the analysis of the individual elements revealed that there are significant challenges to be overcome if the entire evaluative process is to be effectively implemented.

Two of the elements (plausibility and assessment of the contemporary context) are considered feasible as there are many established and available critical methods for analysing a biblical text and for identifying and assessing individual or community issues and concerns within a contemporary context.

²⁴⁹ Martin, *Sex And The Single Savior*, p. 51; Dunning, 'Same-Sex Relations', p. 577.

²⁵⁰ Anderson, *Ancient Laws And Contemporary Controversies*, p. 148.

However, the lack of any apparent method to assist interpreters to practice critical self-reflection, is seen as a significant weakness in achieving the requirement of the critical self-awareness element in Anderson's evaluative process. Acknowledging the necessity of critical self-awareness and seeking to develop such a practice in interpreters would support the implementation of Anderson's process.

A key tenet of an ethics of biblical interpretation is to prevent interpretations causing harm.²⁵¹ Anderson's evaluative process addresses this with an element that requires interpreters to analyse the potential consequences of their interpretations on others (and to dismiss any harmful interpretations). However, it was identified in this study that there are significant challenges preventing this element from being fully applied, including a lack of agreement as to what constitutes benefit or harm, and the uncertainty about how such outcomes could, or should, be measured.

The concerns surrounding these two elements (critical self-awareness and analysis of consequences) undermine Anderson's claim that her evaluative process can confidently determine ethical interpretations. It is possible that future developments in these important areas may help to address these observed weaknesses.

However, because of the issues stated above, this dissertation, although acknowledging the potential value of Anderson's evaluative process, has to conclude that it cannot be considered feasible as an ethics of biblical interpretation at this current time.

²⁵¹ Anderson, *Ancient Laws And Contemporary Controversies*, p. 146.

Bibliography

Anderson, Cheryl, *Ancient Laws And Contemporary Controversies: The need for inclusive biblical interpretation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009)

Anderson, Laura E., *When Religion Hurts You: Healing From Religious Trauma And The Impact Of High-Control Religion* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2023)

‘Anti-homosexuality Bill, 2023’, Parliament of Uganda,
<https://www.parliament.go.ug/sites/default/files/The%20Anti-Homosexuality%20Act%2C%202023.pdf>; [Accessed 27 February 2025].

Augustine, ‘On Christian Doctrine’ in *The Works Of Aurelius Augustine, Bishop of Hippo*, ed. by Marcus Dodds, trans. J. F. Shaw, (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1892), pp. 1-171

Barton, John, ‘Historical-Critical Approaches’ in *The Cambridge Companion to Biblical Interpretation*, ed. by J. Barton (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), pp. 9-21

Bock, Darrell L., and Buist M. Fanning, *Interpreting the New Testament text: introduction to the art and science of exegesis* (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 2006).

Botha, Jan, ‘The Ethics Of New Testament Interpretation’, *Neotestamentica*, 26.1 (1992), pp. 169-194

Bultmann, R. ‘Is Exegesis without Presupposition Possible?’ in *Existence and Faith: Shorter Writings of Rudolf Bultmann*. (Cleveland, OH: The World Publishing Company, 1960), pp. 289-296

Brookfield, Stephen D., *Developing Critical Thinkers Challenging Adults To Explore Alternative Ways Of Thinking And Acting* (Buckingham: Open University Press, 1987)

Chalmers, Aaron, ‘The influence of cognitive biases on biblical interpretation’, *Bulletin for biblical research* 26, no. 4 (2016), pp. 467-480

Cosgrove, Charles H., *The Meanings We Choose: Hermeneutical Ethics, Indeterminacy And The Conflict Of Interpretations* (London: T & T Clarke International, 2004)

Craffert, Pieter F., 'From Apartheid Readings To Ordinary Readings Of The Bible - Has The Ethics Of Interpretation Changed?', *Scriptura*, 64 (1998), pp. 65-79

Craffert, Pieter F., 'New Testament Studies: Preventing Or Promoting A Humane Society?', *Religion & Theology*, 14(3/4), (2007), pp. 161-205

Dunning, Benjamin H., 'Same-Sex Relations' in *The Oxford Handbook of New Testament, Gender, and Sexuality*, ed. by Benjamin H. Dunning (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019), pp. 573-592

"Edouard Fontenot Talks with a Biblical Scholar: Of Love Spells and Lesbians in Ancient Rome; Bernadette Brooten.', *The Harvard Gay & Lesbian Review*, Apr 30, 11. (1994) <<https://www.proquest.com/magazines/edouard-fontenot-talks-with-biblical-scholar-love/docview/198664280/se-2>> [03 February 2024]

Ehrensperger, Kathy, 'Ethical Responsibility And The Necessity To Choose Among A Plurality Of Equally Legitimate And Plausible Interpretations' in *Scholars Reading Romans 1 with Daniel Patte: Critique, Dialogue, and Pedagogy* ed by James P. Grimshaw, (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2023), pp. 27-32

Fee, Gordon D., and Douglas Stuart, *How to read the Bible for all its worth* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Academic, 2014)

Gooder, Paula, *Searching for Meaning: An introduction to interpreting the New Testament* (London: Society for Promoting Christina Knowledge, 2008)

Horrell, David G., 'Paul, inclusion and whiteness: Particularizing interpretation.' *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 40, no. 2 (2017), pp. 123-147.

Klein, William W., Craig L. Blomberg, and Robert L. Hubbard Jr. *Introduction To Biblical Interpretation* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Academic, 2017)

Kurtz, Paul Michael, 'Historical, Critical Retrospective on Historical Criticism' in *The New Cambridge Companion to Biblical Interpretation*, ed. by Ian Boxall and Bradley C. Gregory (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023), pp. 15-36

Larmore, Charles, 'The Ethics of Reading.' in *Morality and Metaphysics*, ed. by Charles Larmore (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), pp. 72–91

'LGBTQ rights in Africa', Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia,
<https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=LGBTQ_rights_in_Africa&oldid=1276707828> [accessed 27 February 2025]

Liew, Tat-siong Benny, 'Unending Interpretations: Continuing The Conversation' in *Scholars Reading Romans 1 With Daniel Patte: Critique, Dialogue, And Pedagogy*, ed by James P. Grimshaw (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2023), pp. 33-42

Lorde, Audre, 'Age, Race, Class, And Sex: Women Redefining Difference', in *Sister Outsider: Essays And Speeches* (California: Crossing Press, 1984), pp. 114-123

Malina, Bruce J., 'The Bible: Witness Or Warrant: Reflections On Daniel Patte's Ethics Of Biblical Interpretation', *Biblical Theology Bulletin*, 26.2 (1996), pp. 82-87

Martin, Dale B., *Sex And The Single Savior: Gender And Sexuality In Biblical Interpretation* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006)

Mezirow, Jack. 'An overview on transformative learning.' in *Contemporary Theories of Learning: Learning Theorists... In Their Own Words*, ed. by K. Illeris (Abingdon: Routledge, 2009) pp. 90-105

Moyers, Tony L., 'Reading And Writing With Eyes And Ears Toward The Other', *The International Journal of Religion and Spirituality in Society*, 11.1 (2021), pp. 265-278

Patte, Daniel, 'Ethics Of Biblical Interpretation', in *The Oxford Encyclopedia Of The Bible And Ethics*, ed. by Robert L. Brawley (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015),
<<https://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/acref:obso/9780199829910.001.0001/acref-9780199829910-e-89>> [Date Accessed 24 January 2024]

Patte, Daniel, *Ethics Of Biblical Interpretation: A Reevaluation* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1995)

- Patte, Daniel, *Romans: Three Exegetical Interpretations And The History Of Reception: Volume 1: Romans 1: 1-32* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2018)
- Patte, Daniel, Monya A. Stubbs, Justin S. Ukpog, and Revelation E. Velunta, *The Gospel Of Matthew: A Contextual Introduction For Group Study* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2003)
- Phillips, Gary A. and Danna Nolan Fewell, 'Ethics, Bible, Reading As If', *Semeia*, 77 (1997), pp. 1-21
- Rabens, Volker, 'Chapter 4 Inspiring Ethics: A Hermeneutical Model for the Dialogue between Biblical Texts and Contemporary Ethics' in *Key Approaches To Biblical Ethics*, (Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill, 2021) doi: https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004445727_006
- Schüssler Fiorenza, Elisabeth, *Rhetoric And Ethic: The Politics Of Biblical Studies* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999)
- Schüssler Fiorenza, Elisabeth, 'The Ethics Of Biblical Interpretation: Decentering Biblical Scholarship', *Journal of Biblical literature*, 107.1 (1988), pp. 3-17
- Simmons, Martha J., *Doing The Deed: The Mechanics of 21st Century Preaching*, (Atlanta: The African American Pulpit Inc, 2012)
- Stone, Ken, *Practicing Safer Texts: Food, Sex and Bible in Queer Perspective* (London/New York: T&T International, 2005)
- Sugirtharajah, R.S., 'Muddling along at the Margins', in *Still at the Margins: Biblical Scholarship Fifteen Years After The Voices From The Margin*, ed by R.S. Sugirtharajah (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2008), pp. 8-21
- Swartley, Willard M., *Slavery, Sabbath, War & Women: Case Issues in Biblical Interpretation* (Scottsdale: Herald Press, 1983)
- Thatcher, Adrian, *The Savage Text: The Use and Abuse of the Bible* (Chichester: John Wiley & Sons, 2008)

Vanhoozer, Kevin J., *Is There A Meaning In This Text?: The Bible, The reader, And The Morality Of Literary Knowledge* (Michigan: Zondervan, 1998)

Wan, Wei Hsien, 'Re-examining the Master's Tools: Considerations on Biblical Studies' Race Problem' in *Ethnicity, Race, Religion: Identities And Ideologies In Early Jewish And Christian Texts And In Modern Biblical Scholarship* (London/New York: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2018), pp. 219-30

WHO, Health Impact Assessments (HIA) Methods, <<https://www.who.int/tools/health-impact-assessments>> [Accessed 18 November 2024]

Bible Commentaries

Andria, Solomon, *Romans* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012), EPUB ebook

Gorman, Michael J., *Romans: A Theological And Pastoral Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2022), EPUB ebook

Hahn, Scott W., *Romans (Catholic Commentary On Sacred Scripture)* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2017), EPUB ebook

Harrison, E. F., & Hagner, D. A., "Romans." *The Expositor's Bible Commentary: Romans–Galatians* ed by T. Longman III and David E. Garland, Revised Edition, (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2008), EPUB ebook

Thielman, Frank, *Romans (Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament)* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2018), EPUB ebook

Witherington III, Ben and Darlene Hyatt, *Paul's Letter To The Romans: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2004)