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Article

Gandhi's Use of Scriptures: A Hermeneutic of Nonviolence against Letters That Kill

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Abstract: Against the background of differing opinions about Gandhi's views on the relationship between political action and religious inspiration, this paper examines his use of scriptures, if he made hermeneutical decisions and if so, what they were. The starting point is a letter from Gandhi in which he pleaded against reading the scriptures literally and named truth, *ahimsā*, and a living faith as criteria. Reason is most important, but with limitations; *ahimsā*, nonviolence, is never at stake, but the definition of what may be called *himsā*, or *ahimsā*, is dependent on place, time, and situation. Faith-based truth as Faith = God enabled the use of religious language and definitively bridged the religious and the secular. For an understanding of Gandhi's personal faith, his statements on Rama and Ramarajya as the Kingdom of God *on earth* are important. Gandhi found a leading principle in 2 Cor 3:6: "the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life," comparing it often with a literal vs. figurative reading. The connecting factor between Gandhi and Paul was their situation, which is more fully explained for Paul. Both tried from a different perspective to reformulate their religious heritages in a new way by claiming that their now-defended truth was already present in the scriptures. Both needed a hermeneutical key and found it in the killing letter and the life-giving Spirit. For Gandhi, it meant the right to expand the original meaning of texts to realise *ahimsā hic et nunc*. The last section of this paper offers examples of Gandhi's use of this principle in changing contexts: the opening of the temples of Travancore, his approaches to the Gita, his exegesis of Galatians, and his readings of the Hebrew Bible.

Keywords: Gandhi; religion; nonviolence; hermeneutics; scriptures; Bhagavad Gita; Bible; Paul; history of reception



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1. Introduction

Veena Howard's complaint that many studies tend to compartmentalise Gandhi's life and work by describing him as either an excellent politician, a nonviolent revolutionary, or a spiritual leader (Howard 2007, pp. 380, 394) is still relevant today. In recent years, however, even the more detailed Gandhi studies increasingly show a broader picture. On the chronological level, the decades-long failure to integrate the "African" and "Indian" Gandhi has opened new perspectives (Hofmeyr 2014; Guha 2013, 2019). In comparative studies, the weighing of possibilities and limitations of Gandhi's legacy and those of scholars from other traditions have proven fruitful for current issues concerning violence and political change (Du Toit and Vosloo 2021; Meir 2021a, 2021b; Palaver 2020, 2021). Nevertheless, the most controversial link between Howard's compartments is that of the relation between religion and politics or between faith and nonviolence. The often-used private (religion)/public (politics) or spiritual/temporal distinction is not sufficient. The search for the predominant factor in Gandhi's characterization as a hybrid thinker between East and West has admittedly resulted in the highlighting of important aspects (Parekh 1989; Parel 2006, 2009), but this question is still open to debate (Gray and Hughes 2015).

There is a need for approaches that do not frame Gandhi in advance, thereby strengthening the above-mentioned compartmentalisation.

These discussions underlie this paper's focus on Gandhi's use of religious scriptures, that is, his hermeneutics reading authoritative texts. Although this scriptural use is a relatively minor part in the literature on his life and work, authoritative texts play a major role in defining religious identity in *bonam* and in *malem partem*. In most religions, they function as "'Holy Writ', as sacred books, as spoken word, in public ritual, in devotional and spiritual life" (Graham 2005, pp. 8197–200). They serve to bring legitimation, continuation, and actualisation. However, their use as instruments for determining the validity of beliefs tends to produce a dark side of othering, drawing boundaries, and excluding people even within their own group-tied belief systems. This Janus-head-like character of scriptural use makes the focus on Gandhi's hermeneutics a magnifying glass for illuminating Cox's conclusion that Gandhi's "formation of religious identity is part of the formation of the ethico-political identity—and vice versa" (Cox 2010, p. 18). Religion is understood here as a process, not as an object separated from time and place, and references to scriptures will be made by considering together their origins and reception histories, which demands a contextual reading. This contextual reading means that the real question is not whether Gandhi's allegorical reading of the Gita is "right," but *why and in which situation* Gandhi preferred the allegorical meaning rather than the literal or historical one.

2. Reading Scriptures

Although "Gandhi did not set out to evolve a philosophy of life or formulate a system of beliefs or ideals" (Gandhi 1958–1994, vol. 1, p. V), he used the scriptures of Hinduism, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, and the writings of Plato, Goethe, Bunyan and others in several ways. In the biblical examples (Emilsen 2001; Smith-Christopher 1993), Daniel can be paired with Socrates; Jesus can be compared not only with Tolstoy, but also with the Oxford martyrs Cranmer and Latimer, when English readers were addressed; in the Indian context, Harischandra, Prahlad, and Mirabai, among others, came together. Gandhi advocated a Hinduism that is "no narrow creed," but that embraces the inspirations of Zoroaster, Moses, Christ, Mohammed, Nanak, and others. This colourful bunch of names reveals, in the first place, that Gandhi communicated very carefully with his audience or readers. He adjusted his views and examples, in many cases, according to situation, time, and place.

At the root of Gandhi's use of scriptures is his basic idea that "all religions [are] not only true, but equal." In his discussion with the American missionary Keithahn, he refined this thesis. Comparing religions by negative points does not make sense, because it is easy to ridicule another religion: "They are equally true and equally imperfect." All the prophets are equal; therefore, Moses (Law) and Jesus (Gospel) have to be held equal. For handling the scriptures, this means that "if you read the Koran, you must read it with the eye of the Muslim; if you read the Bible, you must read it with the eye of the Christian, if you read the Gita, you must read it with the eye of a Hindu" (Gandhi 1958–1994, vol. 64, p. 420). When asked which helpful readings were part of his spiritual life, Gandhi mentioned the Qur'an, the New Testament, Tulsidas' *Ramayana*, and the "pure religious discourse" of the Gita, which describes the progress of the pilgrim soul towards the Supreme Goal.

Scriptures served Gandhi as comforts in extreme situations, as examples for *satyagraha*, as a mirror for believers to be reminded of the true nature of their own religion, and as references to a universal truth behind the current religions.

The aim of the study of scriptures should to put them into practice. What Gandhi formulated in his discourses on the Gita also applied de facto for all authoritative religious texts. According to Gandhi, "We should understand the meaning of the words of the Gita not merely to satisfy our curiosity but with the aim of putting its teaching into practice . . . We should leave alone what we cannot put into practice. It is a misuse of our intellectual energy and a waste of time to go on reading what we cannot put into practice" (Gandhi 1958–1994, vol. 32, pp. 227–28).

In a letter to his secretary, Sonja Schlesin (Paxton 2006), Gandhi formulated a methodical approach for interpretation and stated his aversion to reading scriptures literally:

“In reading all religious works, I have learnt one thing. Never to take them literally, but understand the drift and catch the drift also by means of what is to me an infallible canon of interpretation, and reject those which cannot stand the test of Truth and Ahimsa. I know that even in spite of this canon of interpretation difficulties do arise; but they are solved if one has patience and if one has a living faith in God”. (Gandhi 1958–1994, vol. 33, p. 355)

Gandhi’s criteria, his “infallible canon of interpretation,” aimed at revealing the spirit of and behind the text and included truth, *ahimsā*, and a living faith. In the hermeneutical hierarchy, however, reason came first: “I cannot let a scriptural text supersede my reason” (Gandhi 1958–1994, vol. 64, p. 75).

2.1. Elements of the Letter to Schlesin

In his answer, Gandhi agreed with Sonja Schlesin’s argument that “karma and the cross” could go together and referred to his own reading of Jesus’ words in Mt 5:22: “But I say unto you, that whosoever is angry with his brother *without a cause* shall be in danger of the judgment” (KJV). Gandhi rejected the redundant part “without a cause” because it weakened the power of the saying, demonstrating the lens through which he read the Sermon on the Mount. He found his position confirmed by others’ translations.¹

After providing this example, Gandhi reflected generally on the approach of scriptures. The concepts of reason, *ahimsā*, and truth mentioned in the Schlesin letter have been widely described and analysed. Therefore, I highlight here only the elements important for Gandhi’s use of scriptures.

2.1.1. Reason

Though the use of the historically heavily loaded concept of “reason” asks for a clear definition, it did not work for Gandhi in this way. Asked once about his authority to use scriptures from various religions, he pointed to his breast, saying, “it lies here.” Reason accompanied by morality and conscience is not an abstract concept above time and place. Its clarifying and correctional function can only be demonstrated in concrete situations where religions employ their scriptures to establish and sanction practices that have been used for social abuse. Consequently, he argued that the Vedas ought not to be employed to legitimise untouchability (Gandhi 1958–1994, vol. 19, p. 243), the Qur’an to legitimise stoning (Gandhi 1958–1994, vol. 26, p. 202), and the *Manusmriti* to legitimise the subordinate role of women in relation to their husbands (Gandhi 1958–1994, vol. 64, p. 85). In the first case, Gandhi used key concepts of the Vedas, such as purity, truth, innocence, chastity, and humility, as counterarguments. In the second case, he observed that the supposed crime and the Quranic stipulations did not match and, even more important, that the historical distance between the time of the Prophet and the present called for reconsideration: “reason and heart refuse to reconcile themselves to torture.” When scriptures ask for general assent, they should be submitted “to the acid test of reason and universal justice” (Gandhi 1958–1994, vol. 26, p. 202). In the third case, Gandhi argued that the *Smritis* also contain texts “which give woman her due place and regard her with deep veneration.” He admitted that there were conflicting texts indeed and proposed, like a 20th-century Marcion, a cleansing of scriptures to expurgate “all the texts that have no moral value or are contrary to the fundamentals of religions and morality” (Gandhi 1958–1994, vol. 64, p. 85).

Nevertheless, even in combination with morality and conscience, reason was not Gandhi’s ultimate criterion. He was aware of its limitations. Reason turned into rationalism “is a hideous monster when it claims for itself omnipotence” (Gandhi 1958–1994, vol. 31, p. 496). Therefore, directly after his statement that scripture cannot supersede reason, Gandhi delivered the following caveat: “There are things in faith where reason has no place, e.g., the existence of God” (Gandhi 1958–1994, vol. 64, p. 75). Faith as “the Rock of Ages” transcends reason. Temptation, e.g., is an area for which reason does not apply. Neither

is there an absolute morality above time and place. However, there is a relative morality for knowing what to do in the present situation (Gandhi 1958–1994, vol. 71, p. 46). The role of reason was important to Gandhi, who faced so much unreason in society, politics, scriptures, rituals, traditions, and doctrines. One criterion could be that reason prevails when scriptures, rituals, and traditions harm people. In these cases, they should be ignored or contested. In other cases, where there is no harm, they may be tolerated. In his insightful overview about the practice of Gandhi's use of reason and the interaction between faith and intuition, Nauriya concluded rightly that practice in time and context was the real issue for Gandhi (Nauriya 2020, pp. 98–103).

2.1.2. Ahimsā

Gandhi transformed the practice and theory of *ahimsā* in a decisive way. He turned the traditional negative and passive conception of it (non-injury) into a concept of active love by connecting *ahimsā* with compassion and love as “a root and the tree which sprouts from it” (Gandhi 1958–1994, vol. 40, pp. 191–92). *Ahimsā* is not only a guideline for the individual, but a “rule of conduct for society” as well (Gandhi 1958–1994, vol. 77, p. 145). Parekh rightly noticed the strong influence of Tolstoy on Gandhi's new concept of *ahimsā*, but criticised the latter for his defence of this concept as the real meaning of *ahimsā* in Hindu scriptures and traditions (Parekh 1999, pp. 126–30). For Gandhi, however, this was a political and religious necessity. He wanted to unite all Hindus, regardless of caste and religion. His ideas about the equality of all religions concerned not only the so-called world religions, but also implied that even the diversity in popular Hinduism had to be accepted insofar as there were no harmful effects of the religious practices and rituals. Therefore, he needed a common ground and stated that he only renewed the old truth by presenting the real spirit of scripture and tradition. For himself, he claimed to be an orthodox, *Sanatani* Hindu, being well aware of the fact that following his own path meant, for many orthodox Hindus, a transgression of the boundaries of specific religious traditions (Mishra 2019, p. 74).

If nonviolence meant that active love was the practised form of *ahimsā*, he defined the concept itself as uttermost selflessness, meaning complete freedom from the regard for one's own body. Underpinning this definition are Gandhi's thoughts about body, soul, and *mokṣa*: “The sin of *himsa* consists . . . in taking life for the sake of one's perishable body” (Gandhi 1958–1994, vol. 31, p. 545). The loss of the intertwining of this bodily aspect and the transference of the concept of *ahimsā* was one of the concerns of Veena Howard, mentioned above. Gandhi's nonviolent resistance was unthinkable without his own personal detachment and asceticism. At the same time, Gandhi warned against principles above time and space. The ideal of total selflessness cannot be reached, because living means to destroy some life for the sustaining one's own body or protecting those for whom one is responsible. In extreme situations, killing might be *ahimsā* (in case of one running amok) and not killing *himsā* (in the case of failing a necessarily surgical intervention). There may be *yogis*, who are an exception in that they face the one who is running amok with conscious self-sacrifice. For ordinary, erring human beings, however, *himsā* is unavoidable. Therefore, one has to strive for as little *himsā* as possible. Each case should be considered very carefully, and all other means must be exhausted (Gandhi 1958–1994, vol. 31, p. 546). Not only the cases Gandhi referred to, but also his own statements should be weighed carefully, depending on time, situation, and addressees. “I am not a visionary. I claim to be a practical idealist. The religion of non-violence is not meant merely for the *rishis* and the saints. It is meant for the common people as well. Non-violence is the law of our species as violence is the law of the brute. The spirit lies dormant in the brute and he knows no law but that of physical might. The dignity of man requires obedience to a higher law—to the strength of the spirit.” (Gandhi 1958–1994, vol. 18, p. 133 = Young India 11.8.1920). These reflections on the “Doctrine of the Sword” mirror the drama of the *satyagraha* against the Rowlatt Act, the massacre by British General Dyer at Amritsar (April 1919), and the violence that followed. It is precisely in that context that Gandhi's

statement gains extra weight. The religion of nonviolence is never at stake; it is not only for extraordinary people, but with the strength of the spirit, all humans—common people—are involved. However, what can be called *hiṃsā* or *ahiṃsā* can vary depending on time, place and situation.²

2.1.3. Truth

“Truth is the sovereign principle,” Gandhi wrote in the introduction of his autobiography, “the Absolute Truth, the Eternal Principal, that is God . . . I worship God as Truth only” (Gandhi 1958–1994, vol. 39, p. 4). Looking back at the end of his biography, he hoped that his efforts had brought “Faith in Truth and *ahimsa*”, because “a perfect vision of Truth can only follow a complete realisation of *ahimsa*” (Gandhi 1958–1994, vol. 39, p. 401). “Truth and non-violence are my God. They are the obverse and reverse of the same coin” (Gandhi 1958–1994, vol. 72, p. 31, cf. vol. 22, pp. 209, 271).³ After the coining of *satyagraha* as the better definition of the earlier used “passive resistance,” Gandhi emphasised that *satyagraha* did not mean that success would be guaranteed. On the other hand, it could never bring defeat, because serving the Truth was the only way of doing His will (Gandhi 1958–1994, vol. 8, p. 61).⁴ In his article “Triumph of Truth,” he underlined these points using Gita 2:38: “With an even mind face happiness and unhappiness, gain and loss, victory and defeat, and so join battle, thou son of Prithu (Arjuna); thou shalt incur no sin thereby.” Perseverance and the righteousness of the struggle are necessary.

By the explicit reversal of “God is Truth” into “Truth is God,” (Gandhi 1958–1994, vol. 48, pp. 404–5) Gandhi found an even clearer formula for intertwining religious inspiration and social and political struggle. In 1931, he explained to a Western public⁵ why he chose “Truth is God.” He would not oppose seeing God as love, but love has so many meanings, which makes it multi-interpretable (Gandhi 1958–1994, vol. 48, p. 404). Gandhi stated that the variety of the interpretations of love did not apply to the concept of truth through the meaning of *ahiṃsā* if seeking the truth occurred by listening to the inner voice, in a sense of humility, and by being bound to several vows as guiding principles for *satyagrahis*. The “diligent search after Truth/God” cannot be done without “the vows of speaking/thinking truth, *brahmacharya* (chastity), non-violence, poverty and non-possession” (Gandhi 1958–1994, vol. 48, p. 406).⁶ On one side, the search for truth was constricted by the demands placed on *satyagrahis*; on the other side, the reversal of God = Truth to Truth = God and seeking truth as the highest aim in life might widen the circles of the participants in the social-political struggle⁷ (Nauriya 2020, p. 103).

Seeking truth will always be unfinalised, according to Gandhi. Truth = God is the vantage point on the horizon where the parallel lines of *satyagraha* and *ahiṃsā* converge.

2.1.4. Living Faith

From his own religious background, Gandhi was familiar with the plurality of God-images expressed by the “thousand names for God”⁸ in Vaishnavism, and he found it confirmed in Islam⁹. His basic assumption, however, was that “God alone is and nothing else exists.” Connected with the reversed Truth = God, he was able to use a colourful, figurative language: “We are not, He alone Is. And if we will be, we must eternally sing His praise and do His will. Let us dance to the tune of his *bansi*, and all would be well” (Gandhi 1958–1994, vol. 26, p. 225). Praise and the music of the lute are the vision, but only by “doing His will.” Imagery is the language of faith.¹⁰ When Mirabeau stated that fear is the result of a lack of faith, Gandhi answered that the eradication of fear and senses will happen “only by seeing God face to face. When we meet Him, we will dance in the joy of His Presence and there will be neither fear of snakes nor of the death of dear ones. For there is no death and no snake-bites in His Presence. The fact is that the most living faith, too, falls short of the perfect” (Gandhi 1958–1994, vol. 52, pp. 257–58). Only God is fearlessness (Gandhi 1958–1994, vol. 26, p. 225); humans have to live with fear and must face fear with trust and faith. Gandhi emphasised this eschatological seeing of God face to

face with two scriptural references: Mt 6:33: “But strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well,” together with Gita 2:59: “For an embodied man who does not eat, the sense objects fade away, except his taste for them; his taste, too, fades when he has seen the highest.”¹¹ The New Testament and the Gita follow here a different path—“all things needed for daily life will be given to you” according to the Gospel, and the disappearance of senses, according to the Gita—but both have in common the striving for eschatological bliss: the Kingdom of God and seeing the Highest.

Because the faith-based search for truth enabled the use of religious language and bridged the gap between the religious and the secular, as well as between the diversity among religious groups, Gandhi defended in Congress his use of religious notions: “To me God is truth and love; God is ethics and morality; God is fearlessness. God is the source of light and life and yet He is above and beyond all these. God is conscience. He is even the atheism of the atheist” (Gandhi 1958–1994, vol. 26, p. 224, cf. vol. 25, pp. 52–53).

The last criterion Gandhi mentioned in his Schlesin Letter was “a living faith in God.” From Gandhi’s own statements about his personal faith and the vast literature on this theme (Bilgrami 2011; Chatterjee 1983; Fischer 1997; Majmudar 2005; Mishra 2019; Nauriya 2020; Parekh 1989; Tidrick 2006), I refer to four exemplary statements that highlight the ups and downs of his religious life.

Reproached for using the more informal appellation “Rama,” instead of the official title “Shri Ramachandra Prabhu” for the Vishnu avatar, Gandhi answered with a nearly mystical explanation:

“I myself am a Vaishnava . . . There was a time in my life when I knew Rama as Shri Ramachandra. But that time has now passed. Rama has now come into my home . . . To me, an orphan without mother, father, brother, Rama is all in all. My mother, my father, my brother—He is everything to me. My life is His. In Him I live. I see Him in all women, and so regard every one of them as mother or sister. I see Him in all men and, therefore, look on everyone as father, brother or son according to his age . . . Even now, although Rama is near, He is not near enough to me; . . . He is mine now and I [am] His slave. Hence, I beg Vaishnavas not to force me to stay at some distance from Him. The love that must be supported by formal courtesy, does it deserve the name of love?”. (Gandhi 1958–1994, vol. 24, pp. 196–97)

The intertwining of a living faith, as stated above, and the realisation of his political program may be illustrated with Gandhi’s ultimate ideal of *Ramarajya*, the kingdom or the rule of Rama.¹² Time and again Gandhi used this concept in connection with *swaraj*, “self-rule” (Gandhi 2009) as a condition for *Ramarajya*. He universalised *Ramarajya* by stating that for a Muslim audience, he would call it *Khudai Raj* and for a Christian audience, the Kingdom of God on Earth (Gandhi 1958–1994, vol. 85, p. 137). *Ramarajya* did not mean *Hindu Raj*, but *Divine Raj*, because Rama and Rahim (Allah, the Merciful) were one and the same deity for Gandhi (Gandhi 1958–1994, vol. 41, p. 374). Several times he added to the Kingdom of God “on earth,” because both the biblical concept and the way Tolstoy (Tolstoy 1894) understood it differed from the concreteness of Gandhi’s imagery of Rama rule. Rama rule meant for him an era of truth or the people’s *raj* (democracy). In it, the ruler should be the protector; there should be pure air and water for everybody, as well as sufficient food, clothing, and equality in education (Gandhi 1958–1994, vol. 45, p. 328). Even the distinction between *Brahmin* and *Maharaja*, between *Brahmin* and *Banghi* (Dalit caste) would disappear when their usefulness to society, and not their descent, would be the criterion for judgment (Gandhi 1958–1994, vol. 64, p. 163).

His living faith and his experience of the nearness of Rama did not make Gandhi invulnerable. His faith and trust were on trial many times. Frustrated about the divisions in Congress and the tensions between Muslims and Hindus, Gandhi wrote in the same year, 1924, about Goethe’s *Faust* and the famous scene of Gretchen (Margareth) at the spinning-wheel¹³:

“You may paraphrase them a little and the verses almost represent my condition. I seem to have lost my Love too and feel distracted. I feel the abiding presence of my Lover and yet he seems to be away from me. For he refuses to guide me and give clear-cut injunctions. On the contrary, like Krishna, the arch mischief-maker to the Gopis, he exasperates me by appearing, disappearing, and reappearing.” (Gandhi 1958–1994, vol. 25, p. 77)

Twenty-three years later, Gandhi’s *satyagraha* and his mission of keeping Hindus and Muslims together as one nation in one state failed. It was the tragedy of reaching independence, but losing unity.¹⁴ The partition between India and Pakistan on 14–15 August 1947 and the end of British rule led to an explosion of violence between Hindus and Muslims: massacres, migration waves, riots, and rapes. Gandhi spent the day of independence in fasting and prayer. He described his state not as depressed, but as helpless:

“Mine must be a state of complete resignation to the Divine Will . . . All we can do is to make as near an approach to it as possible . . . I invoke the aid of the all-embracing Power to take me away from this ‘vale of tears’ rather than make me a helpless witness of the butchery by man become savage, whether he dares to call himself a Muslim or a Hindu or what not. Yet I cry—‘Not my will but Thine alone shall prevail’. If He wants me, He will keep me here on this earth yet awhile”. (Gandhi 1958–1994, vol. 89, pp. 285–86; Luke 22:42)

There is still trust in divine guidance, and Gandhi is aware of the limits of his work. The questions of how and whether to live on he expressed with the strongest words he could find, quoting Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane before his imprisonment and execution.

Gandhi started his last and fifteenth fast on 13 January 1948, hoping to be so pure that he would be able to use the ultimate means of *satyagraha*, a fast until death. Because the “rot has set in in beloved India,” he had taken this step

“with God as my supreme and sole counsellor . . . I do so because I must. Hence I urge everybody dispassionately to examine the purpose and let me die, if I must, in peace, which I hope is ensured. Death for me would be a glorious deliverance rather than that I should be a helpless witness of the destruction of India, Hinduism, Sikhism and Islam. That destruction is certain if Pakistan does not ensure equality of status and security of life and property for all professing the various faiths of the world and if India copies her”. (Gandhi 1958–1994, vol. 90, pp. 409–10; Prayer meeting 12 January 1948)

This last fast met with such a resonance that he was able to break it five days later. Two weeks later, on 30 January 1948, he was killed by the Hindu nationalist Nathuram Godse.

3. A Key for the Interpretation of Scriptures (2 Cor 3:6)

3.1. Gandhi and 2 Cor 3:6

Gandhi argued that scriptures never have a directly divine origin. The principal books might be inspired, but they “suffer from a double distillation,” because they were “transmitted by a human prophet” and needed to bridge the distance between then and now with the help of commentaries and various interpreters. Such a time gap and the hands and voices that transmitted, (re)wrote, and remembered the texts might cause abuse and misunderstandings. The idea of Holy Writ as directly inspired by the deity and therefore, authoritative and beyond reproach, had to be denied, according to Gandhi. In the background of his arguments may be the distinction between *śruti* (“what is heard”) as the most holy parts of sacred literature, and the less-revered *smṛti* (“what is remembered”) scriptures in Hindu traditions, but Gandhi underlined his argument with a quote from the New Testament: “And above all, ‘the letter killeth, the spirit giveth life’” (2 Cor 3:6).¹⁵ This became his leading principle for the interpretation of scriptures and traditions. Though

Gandhi “did not like [everything in...] Paul’s letters,” the principle of the killing letter and the life-giving spirit functioned as a basic mantra for his exegesis (Gandhi 1958–1994, vol. 64, p. 75). Gandhi repeated this principle in debates when he was challenged by others using scriptural arguments.

One of these situations was in discussing the role of Jesus with Christian missionaries. Gandhi understood Jesus as one of the greatest teachers of the world, but denied his exclusivity. He stated that Jesus “no doubt, said: ‘I am the way,’ (‘and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me’ (John 14:6)), but he also said: ‘The letter killeth,’” and Gandhi added: “These things are to be taken figuratively and not literally” (Gandhi 1958–1994, vol. 40, p. 315). Two points are remarkable here. The killing letter and the life-giving spirit were understood as a discrepancy between a literal and a figurative reading. Secondly, Gandhi ascribed the quote from 2 Cor 3:6 to the *viva voce* of Jesus and not to Paul.

Asked whether his civil disobedience was not going against Mt 22:21: “Render unto Caesar that which is Caesar’s,” Gandhi paraphrased the text by demonstrating that the Pharisees already possessed the “coins for taxes,” used the benefits of Roman rule, and therefore practised what they formulated now as a question. His own assumption was that Jesus “would not have hesitated to defy the might of emperors had he found it necessary.” With a clear warning against the trap of literalism, Gandhi referred to 2 Cor 3:6 and to the message of a whole book instead of one single verse (Gandhi 1958–1994, vol. 43, pp. 131–32).

The killing letter and the life-giving spirit from the New Testament were not limited to the debates between Gandhi and Christians. He used this principle to defend a decision of Congress that called untouchability a sin against the arguments that untouchability belonged to Hinduism: “. . . untouchability is not a sanction of religion, it is a device of Satan. The devil has always quoted scriptures. But scriptures cannot transcend reason and truth. They are intended to purify reason and illuminate truth . . . ‘the letter killeth.’ It is the spirit that giveth the light” (Gandhi 1958–1994, vol. 19, p. 243). According to Gandhi, scriptures have a subordinate function in purifying the possibilities and limits of reason and illuminating truth, limiting the first and helping the latter to shine brighter. Again, he brought up the case of the single sentence against the message of the whole. Notions of the Vedas, such as purity, truth, innocence, chastity, humility, simplicity, forgiveness, and godliness, are instruments to overcome the letter that kills. These notions, not a literal reading of a single verse or commandment, shaped the spirit of the Vedas. A literal reading may be ignored with the help of leading principles.

No golden rule above time and space may be derived from this. In several cases, Gandhi defended a literal reading, e.g., of the Sermon on the Mount. For literal readings, he argued that the golden rule from Mt 7:12: “So whatever you wish that others would do to you, do also to them, for this is the Law and the Prophets” should be the criterion (Gandhi 1958–1994, vol. 19, p. 243).

In the context of the explicit quoting of 2 Cor 3:6, Gandhi equalised the killing letter and the life-giving spirit with literal and figurative readings. In other cases, he contrasted the supposed meaning of a whole book or the central thoughts of a textual corpus against the one-sided meaning of a single sentence or expression.

3.2. *The Killing Letter and the Life-Giving Spirit According to Paul in Early Christian Judaism and in the History of Reception*

Gandhi’s use of 2 Cor 3:6¹⁶ as a hermeneutic principle raises the following concerns in the context of this paper:

1. A possible meaning of this “proverb-like” statement in its immediate context after the paradigm shift in Pauline studies.¹⁷
2. The heavily loaded reception history in which parts of Paul’s concepts were used as weapons against Jews and Judaism and its repercussion on Gandhi.

3.2.1. Paul

Paul's Statement "The letter kills, but the Spirit gives life" connects two parts: His defence of being a minister (*diakonos*) of the new covenant (vv. 1–6) and the comparison with the *diakonia* of Moses (vv. 7–11; Duff 2015, pp. 132–35; Cover 2015; Hellholm 2008). It functions as a pivot point between the two parts. Scholars have often assumed that the life-giving Spirit refers to the "new covenant" and the "killing letter" to the "old covenant" (Thrall 2004, pp. 232–37, esp. p. 234, n. 306). However, there are strong arguments to relate it not to the covenant, but to the *diakonia* of Paul, because it points both back to the letter of recommendation for his ministry (vv. 1–3) and forward to his comparison with the *diakonia* of Moses (vv. 7–11). The antithesis letter-Spirit in this context refers to the ministry, not to the covenant (Duff 2015, pp. 132–35.169.212). Nevertheless, Paul claims to be a minister of a *new covenant*.¹⁸ Previously in the Hebrew Bible, an eschatological "new covenant" (Jeremiah) and a "heart of flesh" (Ezekiel) tried to bridge the gap between divine ethical stipulation and human violation. In this "new covenant," according to Jer 38:31–33 LXX, the laws (*nomoi*) will be written in the heart by divine intervention, resulting in an "automatic" observance of the Law in a flawless reciprocity. Ez 36:26 aimed for a purification of Israel, followed by the removal of the "heart of stone" and its replacement by a "new heart of flesh" (*lēb ḥādāš*) and "a new spirit" (*rūaḥ ḥādāšā*). With his allusions to Jer 38 LXX and Ez 36:26 in 2 Cor 3:2–3, Paul connected these two related concepts with the keyword "new." "New" in relation to covenant does not mean a fundamental contrast to the previous or abrogated one (Rüterswörden 2006), but emphasises "the dynamic movement of continuity rather than replacement" (North, Botterweck et al. 1977, TDOT 4, p. 240). The concept of covenant is one of continuation and renewal, of eschatological hope and concepts of realisation.¹⁹ In the vision of Jeremiah, it is not the Torah which disappears, but the possibility to breach the covenant. For Paul, these prophetic visions had been realised in the death and resurrection of Christ.

In the second section (2 Cor 3:7–11), Paul describes the relationship between his own *diakonia* and that of Moses (Duff 2004, pp. 313–47). First, there is the connecting factor: in both ministries is *doxa* (glory). However, the *diakonia* of Moses is "a ministry of death," (v. 7) and of "condemnation" (v. 9), but Paul's ministry is one of the life-giving Spirit (v. 8) and righteousness (v. 9b). With a *qal va-ḥomer* (from the lesser to the greater) argument, Paul claims that there is more glory in his than in Moses' *diakonia*. How is it possible that Paul connects Moses with death and condemnation? Duff makes here his second point by arguing that Moses' ministry concerned the situation of the Corinthians as gentiles. For them in their previous existence, Torah brought death.²⁰ "Paul believed that from following the delivery of the Torah to Moses- all humanity (gentiles included!) would be accountable to its requirements" (Duff 2015, pp. 161–62).

The next step in Paul's argument is his own rewriting of Ex 34:29–35. The original narrative reports Moses' return from Sinai carrying the new tablets with a radiant face, due to the meeting with the *doxa* of God, and wearing a veil. Paul claims that this veil is taken away for the Corinthians. Through Christ, they see God with an unveiled face (2 Cor 3:18), while those who still read Moses²¹ without turning to the *kyrios* have their faces veiled.

In summary: The letter and the spirit do not refer to the covenant, but to the *diakonia* of Moses and Paul. For Paul, the visions of Jeremiah and Ezekiel had been realised in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The ministry of death and condemnation ascribed to Moses refers to the idea that the Torah has been neglected by the gentiles because all humans, including Jews and gentiles, had to keep the commandments. Therefore, the ministry of Moses meant death and condemnation for the Corinthians in their previous life. In a bold reversal of the original function of the veil as a sign of protection, Paul describes its role as an obstacle for facing the *kyrios*, now taken away for the Corinthians.

The killing letter and the life-giving Spirit do not denote a literal interpretation of the Torah against a spiritual one. For the *pneuma* of V.6 refers back to the "*pneuma* of the living God," (V.3) "where the Spirit is not the true meaning of Scripture but a divine agency at work in human life" (Thrall 2004, pp. 234–35). The life-giving Spirit refers to Paul's ministry

of Spirit and righteousness and the killing letter to Moses' ministry of condemnation in the sense of Duff's proposal above. The Torah itself, in its function to make humans aware of their actions, is holy and spiritual (*pneumatikos*), according to Paul (Rom 7:12.14; [Hafemann 1995](#), pp. 438–44).

3.2.2. Elements from the History of Reception

In the first half of the second century CE, 2 Cor 3:6 was an important text for Marcion and his dualistic teaching of the benevolent God of the Gospel and the malevolent Demiurge of the Old Testament (LXX). It was clear to him that “the letter that kills” was the Hebrew Bible, and that “the Spirit that gives life” referred to a Gospel that was originally based on Paul's antithesis ([Dunn 2016](#), p. 115). Marcion's *Antitheses*, a list of passages from the Hebrew Bible that contradicted New Testament texts ([von Harnack 1924](#), pp. 89–92; *256–*313), demonstrated his view.

Tertullian (155–220 CE)—one of the most powerful adversaries of Marcion—maintained the negative role of the Law and the positive one of the Gospel, but defended the one God of the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament.²² At the same time however, he stated that the Torah admittedly was a bad law—and with a dangerous shift from theory to living people—the Jews needed such laws.²³

From here on, the antithesis between Law and Gospel, the letter and the Spirit, as equivalent to old and new covenant, became a dominant element in reception history. Paula Fredriksen stated succinctly that in the second-century gentile setting, the older *intra*-Jewish polemic mutated into an *anti*-Jewish polemic ([Fredriksen 2017b](#), p. 1). From here on, Christianity stood against Judaism.²⁴ It resulted in the *Contra-Iudaeos* literature ([Schreckenberg 1995](#); [Krauss and Horbury 1995](#); [Fredriksen and Irshai 2006](#)), with the sermons of Chrysostom (386 CE) marking an oft-quoted all-time low ([Meir 2019](#), p. 258). Of course, 2 Cor 3:6 was not the only text that contributed to the *Contra-Iudaeos* literature, but when Paul's other antithesis *sarx* (“flesh”) vs. *pneuma* (Spirit) was integrated, it became a weapon in the anti-Jewish literature as well. For Augustine, the Jews belonged to carnal Israel (1 Cor 10:18) as opposed to spiritual, life-giving Christianity.²⁵ Supersessionism was long-time part of Christian doctrine.

The big leap from antiquity to Gandhi cannot be made without mentioning Luther's name in this context. His concept of Law vs. Gospel—based on Paul's antithesis—may have been shaped primarily by and for the conflict with the Roman-Catholic Church; it also negatively impacted the relationship between Judaism and Christianity²⁶ and, because of its profound influence on Western culture, was open to abuse with catastrophic consequences.

Finally, in Judaism itself, the letter-Spirit antithesis plays a more important role than often assumed. Huss, criticising Gershom Sholem, defends that behind the assumed dichotomy between “spiritual, vital Kabbalah and dogmatic, petrified Halakha,” a Jewish adaptation of Paul's antithesis of the killing letter and the life-giving Spirit becomes visible ([Huss 2021](#), p. 2).

3.2.3. Gandhi and Paul

Was Gandhi aware of the context and the history behind his own use of 2 Cor 3:6? Probably not. If concepts of the covenant between deity and believers had emphasised the religious exclusivity for one group or another, he would surely have opposed this. On the other hand, the basic concept of a mutual, conditional covenant, with the law as a guide for the practice of human behaviour and as an answer to the love of God, may well have been attractive to him.²⁷ However, this concept forms no substantial part of Gandhi's reflections. His studies of the Bible focused mainly on the Gospels, and his readings of Pauline texts are, whether deliberately or not, coloured by later Christian reception history, including supersessionism and an antithetic theology of Torah and Gospel.

Gandhi borrowed from Paul a mantra about the killing letter and the life-giving Spirit without knowledge of the complex reasoning behind it. The similarity between the two was their situation. Both tried to reformulate their own religious heritage in a new way by

claiming that the now-defended truth was already present in the scriptures. In need of a hermeneutical key, both found it in the killing letter and the life-giving Spirit. For Gandhi, it was an instrument for free faith-based and context-bound interpretation. For Paul, it was a cornerstone in the apology of his ministry as an invitation to the Corinthians to trust his *diakonia* of the Spirit.

4. Gandhi, the Killing Letter and the Life-Giving Spirit: Some Examples

How did Gandhi use the principle of the killing letter and the life-giving Spirit? He emphasised the freedom of the interpreter to distinguish between the original meaning and the later reception. For the benefit of his audience, he tried to reconcile Vedic practices with a fitting exegesis of the Gita; for himself, this was not necessary: “The teacher of the Gita did not lay down that those who came after him should always read in it only the meaning which he himself had in mind” (Gandhi 1958–1994, vol. 32, p. 212). Even in the case where Gandhi is aware that his reinterpretation of the animal sacrifice (*yajna*) as an offering with the mind differed from the original meaning, “we shall do no injustice to Vyasa²⁸ by expanding the meaning of his words. Sons should enrich the legacy of their fathers,” (Gandhi 1958–1994, vol. 32, p. 154) with Gandhi further stating “I interpret the Gita to mean that, if its central theme is *anasakti*, it also teaches *ahimsa*. Whilst we are in the flesh and tread the solid earth, we have to practise *ahimsa*. In the life beyond there is no *himsa* or *ahimsa*” (Gandhi 1958–1994, vol. 72, p. 393).

This freedom stressed the need to live in the present, practicing *ahimsā* hic et nunc, not in the life beyond. History was, for Gandhi, not the dry search for “how it really was” (Ranke); it should serve the community as an instrument for the interpretation of the present and as a guideline for the future. This reconstruction is not without facts, but the facts serve a higher aim. “Moral truth,” in Gandhi’s case, “was higher than historical truth” (Parekh 1989, p. 164). Gandhi demonstrated this in different ways. In some cases, e.g., the message exceeded the person and history: “if one should prove that Jesus never existed, the Sermon on the Mount would still be true.” In a Christmas talk, he even stated that as long as there is no peace on earth, Christ has not been born (Gandhi 1958–1994, vol. 48, pp. 438–39).

4.1. A Key for the Gita

There is no doubt that the Gita was the most important source of inspiration for Gandhi (Gandhi 1958–1994, vol. 27, p. 435, vol. 64, pp. 74–75). The recitation of the eighteen chapters of the Gita was completed within one week during morning prayers. However, in 1936, a situation emerged in which a simple key for Hinduism and the Gita was needed. Gandhi’s response was that all other scriptures could be lost, but if the first mantra of the *Isha Upanishad* remained, Hinduism would be saved (Gandhi 1958–1994, vol. 64, p. 259). In his own translation, the verse reads:

“1. All this that we see in this great Universe is pervaded by God. 2. Renounce it
3. and enjoy it (or: Enjoy what He gives you) 4. Do not covet anybody’s wealth
or possession.” (*īśā vāsyamidam*, *Isha Upanishad*)

From the divine pervasion of creation, the mantra derived two relationships: First, the relationship of humans to the whole creation, stating that humans should only take from it what they really need, enjoying that portion. Second, their relationship with their neighbours, in which the desire for other people’s possessions should not play any role (Palaver 2021, p. 17). For Gandhi, the Gita doctrine of uttermost detachment (Gandhi 1958–1994, vol. 84, p. 327) was revealed, for taking more from this creation than the minimum for a living meant theft. The whole Gita was, for Gandhi, a commentary on this mantra. From this verse, Hinduism in all its diverse forms took a short credo as a practical faith-based guide for everyday life (Gandhi 1958–1994, vol. 64, p. 260). The very specific context for Gandhi’s hermeneutical statement was the opening of the temples of Travancore to all Hindus, regardless of their origin and caste.²⁹ For Gandhi, it was “the great wonder of modern times.” However, now he had to apply his creed of the equality of

all religions to the deeply divided modalities of Hinduism itself, regardless of birth, caste or denomination. In this religious-political minefield, he claimed that the first mantra of the *Isha Upanishad* did unite all Hindus. According to Gandhi, the Gita itself could not function in this way because the Gita was “not a book that I can place before the whole of this audience. It requires a prayerful study before the *Kamadhenu* (the cow of plenty) yields the rich milk she holds in her udder” (Gandhi 1958–1994, vol. 64, p. 258). Therefore, the mantra of the *Isha Upanishad* united all Hindus, even the *literati* and the *illiterati*. The verse attracted legendary narratives to underline its importance.³⁰

4.2. Gandhi and the Gita in 1940

On 15 August 1940, Gandhi had an important conversation with Balasaheb Gangadhar Kher, the first chief minister of Bombay State, about questions on *ahimsā*. How would Gandhi nonviolently react in the case of a foreign invasion? In his reply, Gandhi stated that he would line up a non-violent army of about 2000 men between the two combatants, describing his army allegorically with a reference to Tulsidas’ *Ramayan* and the debate between Rama and Vibhishana on how to conquer a mighty enemy (Gandhi 1958–1994, vol. 72, p. 391). Gandhi concluded that in such a situation, faith would be needed, but that “the worst that can happen to us, is that we shall be crushed. Better to be crushed than to be vanquished”.

The next question of Ker was about the central teaching of the Gita. Is it *anasakti* (*detachment*) or *ahimsā*? Gandhi was sure. It must be *anasakti*. For that reason, he called his own translation and interpretation of the Gita “*Anasaktiyoga*,” because *anasakti* transcends *ahimsā*. To reach the state of detachment, one has to practise nonviolence. *Ahimsā* is included in *anasakti*. Gandhi admitted that the author of the Gita probably did not inculcate *ahimsā*, but he, Gandhi, did. Kher did not give up and quoted Arjuna, who was willing to practise *ahimsā*: “Better I deem it, if my kinsmen strike, to face them weaponless, and bare my breast to shaft and spear, than answer blow with blow” (BG 1:46). Krishna, however, urged Arjuna to answer “blow with blow,” and “that there is no greater good for a warrior than to fight in a righteous war” (BG 2:31). Gandhi denied that the focus in these passages was on *ahimsā*. Arjuna had to decide whether he was willing to kill his own kin, because Arjuna stated: “if my kinsmen strike” (Gandhi 1958–1994, vol. 72, p. 394). This was a classical debate on the use of scriptures, on meaning and drift, on the priority of concepts, but one that was overshadowed by a world war already started, a possible threat from Japan that would materialise a year later, and the question of how to act in an India still under the British Raj.

Gandhi’s answers demonstrated a shift in his reading of the Gita. In 1919, he published a short allegorical interpretation of the Gita (Satyagraha Leaflet no. 18), and contested a literal reading of Krishna’s advice to Arjuna to fight his kinsmen: “Now the Bhagavad Gita is not a historical work, it is a great religious book, summing up the teaching of all religions. The poet has seized the occasion of the war between the Pandavas and the Kauravas for drawing attention to the war going on in our bodies between the forces of Good (Pandavas) and the forces of Evil (Kauravas)” (Gandhi 1958–1994, vol. 15, pp. 288–89).³¹ The allegorical battle returned in his “Discourses on the Gita” (1926): “But here the physical battle is only an occasion for describing the battlefield of the human body. In this view the names mentioned are not of persons but of qualities which they represent. What is described is the conflict within the human body between opposing moral tendencies imagined as distinct figures (Gandhi 1958–1994, vol. 32, p. 96; Hutchins 2018, p. 36).

Parekh demonstrated how Gandhi could not maintain this allegorical reading of the Gita, and distinguished later between two levels. The philosophical level contained general, moral principles; the historical level applied the principles to a specific situation in time and place. Only at the second level could violence be sanctioned, under certain circumstances (Parekh 1999, p. 167). In his debate with Ker, Gandhi stated, therefore, that *anasakti* as non-attachment was the highest ideal of the Gita, attachment being the major obstacle to *moksha*. Even with his new reading of the Gita, Gandhi maintained that the Gita did not

favour violence; on the contrary, “the Gita’s doctrine of *anasakti* undercut the moral and psychological basis of violence” (Parekh 1999, p. 168).

Gandhi’s figurative interpretation of the most important scripture of Hinduism was already needed more than thirty years earlier in his contacts with the terrorist movement. The terrorists reinterpreted Hinduism and used the Gita too to allow violence through a literal reading. The first leader of the Indian Independence Movement and radical nationalist, Tilak (1856–1920), interpreted the dialogue between Krishna and Arjuna as divine encouragement to fight one’s enemies, even one’s own kin. *Karma-yoga* (action), not renunciation or devotion, is the main message of the Gita according to Tilak (Mackenzie Brown 1958; Tilak 1935). To give his nonviolent *satyagraha* a scriptural base, Gandhi introduced his allegorical reading, focusing on *anasakti* as the central teaching of the Gita.

4.3. Gandhi and Galatians

After the Gita, the New Testament is the second corpus of scriptures that plays a main role in the thought, speeches, discussions, and writings of Gandhi. It makes sense that author Margaret Chatterjee started with Gandhi’s religious thought in connection with Indian traditions, and followed this immediately with, “The Impact of Christianity on Gandhi” (Chatterjee 1983, pp. 41–57).

In a letter from Gandhi to his son Manilal in Phoenix on 12 April 1914 (Gandhi 1958–1994, vol. 12, pp. 405–7), he addressed a number of exegetical questions explaining some New Testament texts.

Gal 3:10 reads: “For all who rely on works of the law are under a curse; for it is written ‘Cursed be everyone who does not abide by all things written in the Book of the Torah’” (Dtn 27:26). Gandhi stated that, “mere bookish souls can never attain *moksha*,” which in this case means that a literal reading, and doing only what the *shastras* prescribe, is not enough. The hidden significance of them must be clear. According to Gandhi, Paul meant that the acts enjoined by scriptures should be performed, but, and this is going behind the action, faith is needed in Jesus’ teachings, as well as action according to these teachings; otherwise, the curse remains. With regard to Jesus’ teachings, Gandhi referred without doubt to the Sermon on the Mount and argued for his focus on action by joining Paul in the literal meaning of Dtn 27:26: “those who do (not) uphold the words of this Torah *by carrying them out*.” Gandhi compared Gal 3:10 with the Gita and paraphrased BG 2:45: “The Vedas keep on the plane of the three *gunas*, be thou, Arjuna beyond those *gunas*.”³² A subsequent exegesis aimed at the same opposite. Gandhi’s analysis turned on Gal 4:22–24: “For it is written that Abraham had two sons, one by a slave woman (Hagar) and one by a free woman (Sarah). But the son of the slave (Ishmael) was born according to the flesh, while the son of the free woman (Isaac) was born through promise. Now this may be interpreted allegorically: these women are two covenants.” The opposition Gandhi saw here is that literally understood scriptures belonged to the slave mother, but that faith (*bhakti*) is the free, heavenly mother (Gandhi 1958–1994, vol. 12, p. 406). In these and other passages, *nomos* meant to Gandhi “the dry knowledge of Scripture”, in contrast to *bhakti*, which meant knowing God’s grace.

4.4. Gandhi and the Hebrew Bible

Gandhi’s well-known ambivalent relationship with the Hebrew Bible highlights the problematics of reading the Bible “with Christian spectacles” (Gandhi 1958–1994, vol. 63, p. 92). The ambivalence originated from two sides. In the first place, he was influenced by Christian views that subordinated the Hebrew Bible under the New Testament, resulting in statements that the Hebrew Bible “did not deserve the same honour as the New Testament,” and that “the God of the Hebrews was quite different from the God of Jesus Christ” (Gandhi 1958–1994, vol. 25, p. 85; vol. 78, pp. 6–7). Secondly his own readings resulted in a view that “the Old Testament which is part of Christian teaching is full of blood and thunder” (Gandhi 1958–1994, vol. 33, p. 358). In *Satyagraha in South-Africa*, Gandhi admired the Boers as strong fighters in their battles against the British. The Boers being “religious

mindful Christians" know "the New Testament only by name. They read the Old Testament with devotion and know by heart the descriptions of battles it contains. They fully accept Moses' doctrine of 'an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth', and they act accordingly" (Gandhi 1958–1994, vol. 29, pp. 17–18). In his portrait, Gandhi maintained without any hesitation the *lex talionis* of Ex 21:23–25 as characteristic not only for the Boers, but for the Hebrew Bible as well.³³ When confronted with the explosive situation after the Chauri Chaura incident³⁴ Gandhi made a remarkable statement: "Indeed I am not sure that we do justice to Moses when we impute to him the doctrine of retaliation in the sense that he made it obligatory on his followers to exact tooth for a tooth...I do think that in an age when people were unrestrained in their appetite for the enemy's blood, Moses restricted retaliation to equal measure (Gandhi 1958–1994, vol. 22, p. 363). There is a *caveat*. This view could be his own wish, and he does not want to lead the reader into a religious discussion. However, due to the threatening situation of possible retaliation from both sides, imprisonments, and death sentences, he understands the *lex talionis* as a limitation of blood revenge. Fifteen years later, the name of Moses has now gained a place together with Jesus, Mohammed, and Zoroaster as representatives of the different religions, but branches of the same tree. They are equally true and equally imperfect because of their interpretation by humans (Gandhi 1958–1994, vol. 64, p. 326). In Hinduism, there is room for them, as there is for other prophets (Gandhi 1958–1994, vol. 75, p. 375). In light of Gandhi's ambivalent relationship with the Hebrew Bible, a question about the equality of Jesus and Moses is important. Gandhi confirmed: "all prophets are equal" (Gandhi 1958–1994, vol. 64, pp. 419–20). Finally, Moses appears in the claim that wisdom had come from the East to the West, not from the West to the East. Zoroaster, Buddha, Jesus, and Mohammed came from the East, as well as Moses, who—though born in Egypt—belonged to Palestine (Gandhi 1958–1994, vol. 87, p. 192). On the formal level of the equality of all religions, Moses, the Hebrew Bible, and Judaism are all present. However, as seen at the beginning of this paragraph, in the relationship between the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament, reception history has done its work.

Though Emilsen counted that, in his writings, Gandhi referred to nine books of the Hebrew Bible and later enjoyed the Prophets and the Psalms (Emilsen 2001, p. 81), there is no intensive engagement comparable with his work on the New Testament. There is one big exception: the book of Daniel (Smith-Christopher 1993). After Jesus, Daniel is probably the most important biblical character for Gandhi. Daniel is the exemplary *satyagrahi*, the civil servant who disobeys unjust laws. Gandhi's focus on Daniel is important for several reasons: 1. Gandhi has sought different practices and strategies to shape his nonviolent resistance. He found an example of this behaviour in Daniel. 2. Gandhi was deeply convinced that *ahimsā* as active love evoked something in the violent opponent. He finds this confirmed in the attitude of the king, who regrets the execution of his law. The exegetical literature dealing with biblical texts and the question of violence nearly always focuses on texts of violence, on the image of God, or on visions of peace. Daniel is not included. In his study of Daniel, Gandhi opened a topic that has gone largely unnoticed until today.

5. Conclusions

Gandhi's method of using scriptures displayed a remarkable freedom with one constant drive: transforming tradition for the practice of nonviolence. The aim of the study of scriptures should be to put their principles in practice in both personal and societal life and to illuminate the search for truth. Scriptures of all religions are equally perfect and imperfect. Therefore, a canon of interpretation including the tests of reason, truth, and *ahimsā* is required. *Ahimsā* means active love, and the reversal of God = Truth into Truth = God intertwines faith-based inspiration with social and political action. The interpretation of scriptures requires a living faith (*bhakti*). Principles that sustain the theme of a book overrule a single expression or sentence. Gandhi found a key for interpreting scriptures with the quote of 2 Cor 3:6: "The letter kills, the Spirit gives life." Paul interpreted the con-

cepts of a new covenant and a “heart of flesh” from the eschatological visions of Jeremiah and Ezekiel with a different focus, but in a similar way to the communities of the Qumran: living in the already-present new covenant. The killing letter in 2 Cor 3:6 does not mean the literal interpretation of the Torah against a spiritual reading. The life-giving Spirit refers to Paul’s ministry of Spirit and the killing letter to the ministry of Moses, according to Duff’s proposal. Elements from reception history demonstrate how an intra-Jewish polemic mutated into an anti-Jewish polemic, with catastrophic consequences for Jews and Judaism.

In practice, Gandhi often balanced 2 Cor 3:6 with a literal and figurative reading. A reader is free to add meanings different from those of the original author, tradition, or reception. History and its reconstruction serves as a guideline for the present and the future. The examples of the first mantra of the *Isha Upanishad* as a summary of the Gita, the allegorical reading of the Gita, and *anasakti* as the centre of the Gita demonstrate the need for a contextual interpretation. In the first case, the spiritual and political unity of all Hindus was at stake, and in the second, the reclaiming of the Gita using a nonviolent interpretation was used against the interpretation of the revolutionaries who read it as legitimising violence. The example of Galatians demonstrated how Gandhi mobilised Paul for an active interpretation of *doing* the teachings of Jesus. He even used Paul’s two covenants allegory for distinguishing between the “dry knowledge of scripture” and a living faith. The last section on Gandhi and the Hebrew Bible shows how reception history influenced Gandhi’s readings of the Hebrew Bible. At the same time, he found his own access with the character of Daniel as the ideal *satyagrahi*. From the view of Gandhi’s use of scriptures, the thesis may be upheld that “the formation of his religious identity was part of his ethico-political identity—and vice versa” (Cox 2010, p. 18), and that his political action was never without a devotional or *bhakti* focus (Gray and Hughes 2015).

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Notes

- ¹ In some translations Gandhi used, “without a cause” (εὐκρί [eikē] from the *textus receptus* has been deleted. The phrase is indeed a later addition and was omitted in the Greek New Testament (NA28) for text-critical reasons. It is a nice example of the merging of an intuitive reading and literary-critical/redaction-critical analysis.
- ² It may be noticed that *ahimsā* is only mentioned three times in the Gita. It appears, together with other qualities such as divine gifts (10:5), as part of knowledge in stead of ignorance (13:7), and as part of the divine heritage (16:2–3).
- ³ For an analysis of the influence of Tolstoy on Gandhi’s understanding of truth and its linkage with God and universal love, see (Gray and Hughes 2015, pp. 378–80).
- ⁴ In *Indian Opinion*, 8.2.1908, Gandhi celebrated the agreement with General Smuts concerning the Black Act (Gandhi 1958–1994, pp. 29: 86–96: Satyagraha in South-Africa, XII–XIII) and reflected on the ongoing struggle. “He (the *satyagrahi*) will give no thought to success or failure. He is pledged only to the great task of serving Truth, doing his duty in the name of God. The outcome itself is in the hands of the Lord.” (Gandhi 1958–1994, vol. 8, p. 61).
- ⁵ A meeting in Lausanne on 8 December 1931 after returning from the Second Round Table Conference in London.
- ⁶ Gandhi mentions here only five vows. In his ashrams, the framework of vows for practising *satyagraha* was more comprehensive (Chandel 2017, pp. 139–40; Gandhi 1958–1994, vol. 55, p. 301; vol. 61 p. 38; vol. 62, p. 202; vol. 82 p. 4; vol. 86, p. 155).
- ⁷ Reference to Charles Bradlaugh (1833–1891), the British atheist, freethinker, and founder of the National Secular Society (Gandhi 1958–1994, vol. 48, pp. 404–5; vol. 26, p. 224).
- ⁸ *Vishnu Sahasranāmam*, the song of a thousand names of the all-pervading Vishnu (*Mahābhārata* 13:135).
- ⁹ The tradition of the 99 names/attributes of God is taken from the Qur’an and the *Hadith*.

- 10 For dealing with the abstractness of Truth on the one side, and with “idolatry embedded in human nature” on the other side, cf. (Gandhi 1958–1994, vol. 61, p. 81).
- 11 Translated by Van Buitenen (1981, p. 85). When Gandhi quotes his own translation from *Anasaktiyoga*, that version will be used (Desai 1946). Other references follow the more literal translation of Van Buitenen (1981).
- 12 (Gray and Hughes 2015, p. 388) emphasise correctly the religiously loaded concept of *Ramarajya*. Even as an ideal, Gandhi used an imagery with concrete examples. In contrast to Tolstoy’s *The Kingdom of God is Within You*, Gandhi formulated the Kingdom of God on Earth.
- 13 Goethe, Johann Wolfgang von, Faust I, Scene XV. Gretchen in her room, being seduced and abandoned by Faust:
 “My peace is gone, and my heart is sore. I have lost him, and lost him, for evermore! The place where he is not, to me is the tomb. The world is sadness and sorrow and gloom! My poor sick brain is crazed with pain; and my poor sick heart is torn in twain! My peace is gone and my heart is sore, for lost is my love for evermore!”
- 14 Hardiman described Gandhi’s actions after the partition as “Gandhi’s ‘Finest Hour’” and valued his personal courage and his “staying to truth.” He still tried to convince people to stay in their villages, rather than flee to a ‘safe’ place with a majority of their own religion (Hardiman 2003, pp. 184–91; Guha 2019, pp. 826–45; Hutchins 2018, pp. 192–202).
- 15 In the spelling of the KJV as quoted by Gandhi. In cases of other references, NRSV is used.
- 16 Here, 2 Cor 3 is exegetically qualified as “the Mount Everest of Pauline texts” (Hanson 1980, p. 19; Duff 2015, p. 13). The main concerns are the literary-historical problems of the letter, the conflicts within the community in Corinth, and the precise character of Paul’s opponents (Mitchell 2001, 2003, pp. 17–53).
- 17 The “New Perspective on Paul” (NPP), initiated by (Sanders 1977) and (Stendahl 1963), differs in its outcomes, but has in common that the Jewish background of Paul has been highlighted (Fredriksen 2017a), the diversity of Judaism has been stressed, and that Luther’s most influential scheme of the Law and the Gospel has been weakened.
- 18 The covenant as a concept of the relationship between deity and people took its defining shape in the crises of the collapsing world of Israel and Judah after the Assyrian and Babylonian conquests (722/586 BCE) (Perlitt 1969). The rethinking of the responsibility for the loss of the state of Israel (722 BCE), Judah, and the temple of Jerusalem (587 BCE) triggered a narrative of divine commitment and human failure and a relationship of breaks, renewal, and hope. In the founding story, Moses smashed the first tablets of stone at Mt Horeb in response to the creation of the bull statue (Ex 32:19). With the two new tablets of stone, the founding Sinai covenant was already the result of a broken covenant. Breach and renewal were the threads of the development of the deeper concepts of the covenant. Priestly circles reacted to the conditional character of this concept with an image of an unconditional promissory covenant (Gen 9, Noah; Gen 17, Abraham).
- 19 Paul was not the only one who tried to actualise the eschatological visions of Jeremiah and Ezekiel with a new covenant and a renewed relationship with God. Previous to Paul and in a different context, the Jewish communities behind the Dead Sea Scrolls did the same. For them, the prophetic new covenant had already been realised (Texts and translations: (García Martínez and Tigchelaar 1999; Parry and Tov 2004). The members of the group (*yaḥad*) “entered the new covenant (*b^e rīt l^h dāšā*)” (CD-A vi 19//4Q266 3ii). Living “in the last days” and expecting a final battle between “the sons of light” and the “sons of darkness,” not only did election and covenant play a role, but the Spirit as well. (1QHodayota 4:17; 20:11–12). The role of the (holy) spirit here as revelation of divine mysteries differs from the dualistic concept of the two spirits of truth and deceit in every human (1QS iii 13–iv 26, esp. iii 17–19). This Qumran community was one of the sects within Judaism (Josephus 1926a, II, pp. 119–66; 1965, XVIII, pp. 11–25; 1926b, pp. 10–12; Baumgarten 1997; Regev 2007) and according to the Groningen hypothesis, a split-off from the Essenes (García Martínez and van der Woude 1990; García Martínez and Trebolle Barrera 1995, pp. 77–96). The descriptions from Josephus and the New Testament, the congregations behind the Dead Sea Scrolls, and the Hellenistic communities demonstrate the pluriformity of the developments within Second Temple Period Judaism. The same can be said for emerging Christianity with its different views on the role of Jesus. In this fermenting world of political and economic tensions, from spectra from Hellenised Jewish communities to strictly halachic groups, and from apocalyptic traditions to wisdom and gnostic thought, Paul made his statement about the killing letter and the life-giving spirit. The terminology “Early Christian Judaism” following (Luttikhuisen 2012, ch. 5), indicates that different and competing Christian groups in this early phase can be considered as movements within Judaism. Paul’s letters to the gentile community of Corinth presuppose knowledge of the Hebrew Bible, the LXX, and its traditions, otherwise his arguments do not make any sense. It should be remembered that in this letter, his advocacy for admitting gentiles without circumcision, dietary, and Sabbath laws was part of a debate (Peter, James) before it became the mainstream in emerging Christianity.
- 20 Duff builds his case using Jewish texts from Hellenistic and Roman times (Duff 2015, pp. 155–58) and the use of the first person plural, “we all,” meaning Jews and gentiles, from Galatians 3:13–14, 23–25; 4:3–8.
- 21 Here understood as the written Torah, not the lawgiver as a person.
- 22 (Tertullian 1972, V 11).
- 23 (Tertullian 1972, II 19). Fredriksen (2017b, p. 1): “The problem was not the God of the Jews, nor the text of the Jews, asserted Tertullian: the problem was the people themselves.”

- ²⁴ For the problem of categorisation, see (Mason 2007). He defended the argument that there was no category of Judaism in the Graeco-Roman world, the *Ioudaioi/Judaeans* were understood as an *ethnic* group with their own customs. From the early Third Century, this changed due to the use of Iudaismus as a belief system, initiated by Tertullian (Mason 2007, p. 471).
- ²⁵ According to (Fredriksen 2017b, pp. 5–8), Augustine maintained the traditional and hostile rhetoric against the Jews in his sermons, but wrote amazingly positive texts about Jews and Judaism in his conflict with the Manichees.
- ²⁶ (Langton 2010, pp. 16, n. 40, 41; 165–66, 169).
- ²⁷ *Tertius usus legis*, (Calvin 1960, II.7.12).
- ²⁸ Vedavyasa: according to tradition, the composer of the Gita as part of the Mahabharata.
- ²⁹ Proclamation of Maharaja Chithira Thirunal of 12.11.1936.
- ³⁰ The narrative: Devendrath Tagore—the father of the poet—was depressed after the death of his father. A piece of printed paper was wafted by a passing breeze. He picked it up, but he could not read the Sanskrit. The family pundit translated: it was the first verse of the *Isha Upanishad* (Gandhi 1958–1994, vol. 84, p. 326).
- ³¹ For a critical view of Gandhi’s reading: (Tidrick 2006, pp. 142–43).
- ³² BG 2:45 “The domain of the Vedas is the world of the three *gunas*: transcend that domain, Arjuna, beyond the pair of opposites, always abiding in purity, beyond acquisition and conservation, the master of yourself” (Van Buitenen 1981, p. 84).
- ³³ The lex talionis is Marcion’s antithesis VIII (von Harnack 1924, p. 90) in which Ex 21:23–25 and Mat 5:38–39 are confronted.
- ³⁴ During the Chauri Chaura incident (2–5 February 1922), aggressive protesters torched a police station killing 22 police officers because they had fired on an advancing crowd, killing 3 and wounding many others. Gandhi went on a five-day fast and called the Non-Cooperation Movement off. The people were not ready for *satyagraha* and *ahimsā*, according to Gandhi. The British executed 19 men, and 110 men received life imprisonment. Confronted with the spiral of violence and the actual problem of retaliation, Gandhi changed his view about Moses and the doctrine of “an eye for an eye”. A few years later in his autobiography he returned to the uncritical old view mentioned above.

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