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The Most Significant Book of the Netherlands — And Its Ordinary Readers

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Abstract: Although the Netherlands has become one of the most secular countries in the world, the Bible still plays an important role for many people as a source of cultural and spiritual inspiration. Despite extant empirical research, there remains a pressing gap of knowledge concerning the actual use of the Bible by “ordinary readers.” This makes it more difficult for organizations such as the Dutch Bible Society to engage the public with the distribution of Bible translations and inspirational products. This large-scale mixed-method (qualitative and quantitative) research project aims to provide both practical (or commercial) and academic insights on Bible reading practices and views on the Bible among Dutch “readers” in various ‘ideological’ contexts. One of the most significant results is that biographical factors appear more indicative for how the Bible is approached than more ‘conventional’ denominational factors such as church affiliation.

Keywords: biblical reception, contextual biblical interpretation, empirical hermeneutics, the Netherlands, ordinary readers

1 Introduction

1.1 Aims of Conducted Research and Research Question

The Netherlands may well be one of the most secularized countries of our global community. Consequently, literati and other commentators have found it hard to

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explain why the Bible (more precisely, the *Nieuwe Bijbelvertaling*, a new Dutch translation published in 2004) was voted the most significant book of the Netherlands in 2016. However, perceived importance does not automatically translate into *actual* significance: a deeper look reveals that churches and society at large seem to be somewhat at a loss as to how to actually use the Bible, either as a source of culture in general or as a source of religious and spiritual inspiration.¹ This helplessness is paired with a surprising scarcity of knowledge in the realms of academia, churches, and society at large concerning the actual use of the Bible by “ordinary readers” in the Netherlands.² This article addresses the gap in knowledge concerning the actual usage of the Bible by presenting a recent empirical research project on the topic.

In 2016 and 2017, the Dutch Bible Society (*Nederlands Bijbelgenootschap* [NBG]),³ in cooperation with market research agency Blauw Research,⁴ and the academic research center, Centre of Contextual Biblical Interpretation (CCBI),⁵

1 See the various contributions in the volume: Floor Barnhoorn, Sake Stoppels and Anne-Mareike Schol-Wetter, eds. *De Bijbel in Nederland: De plaats van de Bijbel in kerk en samenleving* (Haarlem: Nederlands Bijbelgenootschap, 2018); various perspectives are offered, but one returning question is: What will be the future of Bible use in the Netherlands (whether religious or secular)? The authors are grateful for the feedback of the anonymous reviewers of the *Journal of the Bible and its Reception* and to Dr. Alexander Stewart (Tyndale Theological Seminary, Badhoevedorp, The Netherlands) for correcting the article linguistically.

2 That is to say, as different from knowledge concerning other contexts of Bible use, as documented in research produced around the Dom Hélder Câmara Chair of Contextual Biblical Interpretation in the past. See for instance: Hans de Wit, Louis Jonker and Marleen Kool, eds., *Through the Eyes Of Another: Intercultural Reading of the Bible* (Elkhart: Institute of Mennonite Studies, 2004); Hans de Wit and Gerald O. West, eds., *African and European Readers of the Bible in Dialogue* (Leiden: Brill, 2008); Hans de Wit, *Empirical Hermeneutics, Interculturality, and Holy Scripture* (Amsterdam/Elkhart: Dom Hélder Câmara Chair, VU University Amsterdam/Institute for Mennonite Studies, 2012), and Daniel S. Schipani, Martien Brinkman and Hans Snoek, eds., *New Perspectives on Intercultural Reading of the Bible: Hermeneutical Explorations in Honor of Hans de Wit* (Amsterdam/Elkhurst: Dom Hélder Câmara Chair, VU University Amsterdam/Institute of Mennonite Studies, 2015).

3 In the Netherlands, the Dutch Bible Society is known as “Nederlands Bijbelgenootschap” (NBG). Its mission is to bring the Bible close to people, see <https://www.bijbelgenootschap.nl/>. Although the NBG was also the project’s largest financial partner, cooperation with an independent research agency and an academic partner, who could operate with complete freedom, ensured a sufficient standard of academic objectivity in the course of this research.

4 Blauw Research is specialized in both qualitative and quantitative market research, and is based in Rotterdam, the Netherlands. Within the research project, it played an advisory role and was responsible for the quantitative part of the research and the final report on Bible use. For more information on Blauw Research, see <https://www.blauw.com/en/>.

5 The Centre of Contextual Biblical Interpretation (CCBI) is an academic research centre based at the Protestant Theological University and the Faculty of Religion and Theology of the Vrije

conducted⁶ a large-scale mixed-method (qualitative and quantitative) research project into practices of “ordinary” Bible reading in the Netherlands, in which “ordinary” readers are readers who do not have formal training in Biblical exegesis and hermeneutics.⁷ The research had two main goals. The first was to generate up-to-date knowledge of the societal and denominational profiles of Bible readers and of current Bible-reading practices. Such insight into the current state of affairs is highly desirable to enable the NBG to continue to fulfill its mission to bring the Bible close to people and society, using a variety of formats and media. Questions asked in the research project included:

- What size is the group of Bible readers in the Netherlands?
- To what extent are Bible readers divided along church denominational lines?
- What significance do people attach to the Bible?
- What motives and occasions prompt people to read the Bible?
- What tools for reading the Bible are preferred by readers, and why?

The second, evaluative goal was to investigate whether it is still useful in a “de-pillarized”⁸ and church-hopping society to divide the Bible-reading (predominantly

Universiteit Amsterdam, the Netherlands. Within the research project on Bible use, the CCBI played an advisory role and was co-performer of the qualitative part of the research, see <https://www.godgeleerdheid.vu.nl/en/research/institutes-and-centres/centre-for-contextual-biblical-interpretation/index.aspx> for the CCBI homepage.

6 The project was initiated and financed by the NBG (*Nederlands Bijbelgenootschap*). The questionnaires were developed with input from CCBI and *Blauw Research*. The qualitative part of the study was conducted by CCBI in cooperation with *Blauw Research*, while the quantitative part was conducted by *Blauw Research* alone.

7 The term “ordinary” reader has its own complexities, see Hans de Wit, “Through the Eyes of Another. Objectives and Backgrounds,” in *Through the Eyes of Another: Intercultural Reading of the Bible*, eds. Wit, Hans de, Louis Jonker and Marleen Kool (Elkhart: Institute of Mennonite Studies, 2004): 3–53, 5–7. As it is used here, it has no normative overtones, nor is it restricted to a particular socio-economic segment of society, nor does it exclude “professional” readers, such as the authors of this study: when engaged in a “devotional” reading of Scripture or being moved or horrified by chanting a psalm, they are operating in the mode of the “ordinary” reader (perhaps with the difference that some “ordinary readers” are reading in, in Ricoeurian terminology, a first naivety and other “ordinary readers” are reading in a second naivety). On this concept, see Paul Ricoeur, *The Symbolism of Evil*, trans. Emerson Buchanan (New York: Harper & Row, 1967), 348: “a creative interpretation of meaning, faithful to the impulsion, to the gift of meaning from the symbol, and faithful also to the philosopher’s oath to seek understanding.”

8 In the period from 1850 to 1950, Dutch society came to be largely organized along lines of religion and worldview in a series of “parallel societies” (often referred to as “pillarization”), with a very high level of involvement and commitment of the people within a “pillar.” Although the term “pillarization” is not without its problems, it can still serve as an indication of a society with a very high intensity of religiosity here. For criticism, see, e.g. Peter van Dam, James Kennedy and Friso

Christian) segment of Dutch society along church denomination lines, or whether another means of categorization has become more appropriate.⁹

In this article, we will, in turn, outline the state of research regarding the use of the Bible in the Netherlands, present the research project on which this study is based (including a description of the qualitative and quantitative methodologies that were used) along with its results, and offer a conclusion which summarizes the main outcomes. In so doing, this article provides new, empirically-based, insight into the reception and usage of the Bible in the Netherlands among “ordinary readers.”

1.2 The Bible in the Netherlands: Extant Empirical Research

Before turning to extant empirical research, it should be acknowledged that other quantitative studies on the role of the Bible in the Netherlands exist.¹⁰ This literature often has a focus on either the (history of) production and (theological and ecclesial) reception of editions and translations of the Bible;¹¹ “high” culture and the Bible

Wielenga, eds., *Achter de zuilen. Op zoek naar religie in naoorlogs Nederland* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2014); Peter van Dam, *Staat van verzuiling: over een Nederlandse mythe* (Amsterdam: Wereldbibliotheek, 2011); Peter van Dam, “Sind die Säulen noch tragfähig? ‘Versäulung’ in der niederländischen Historiographie,” *Schweizerische Zeitschrift für Religions- und Kulturgeschichte* 102 (2008): 415–433.

⁹ See, on the Dutch religious context in relation to biblical interpretation, e.g. Eva van Urk and Peter-Ben Smit, “Less is More: Revisiting Classical Christian Texts in a ‘De-Churched’ Society – The Case of Philippians,” in *Uncommon Voices: Vernacular Biblical Hermeneutics*, eds. K.K. Yeo and Melanie Baffes (Eugene: y): 70–85.

¹⁰ That this is the case is evidenced not only by the Bible’s “election” as the most significant book in the Netherlands in 2016, but also by the substantial attention given to publications on the Bible by (post-Christian) cultural critics and novelists such as Guus Kuijer, *De Bijbel voor ongelovigen* 1–6 (Amsterdam: Athenaeum, 2012–2017) and Dimitri Verhulst, *Bloedboek* (Amsterdam: Atlas Contact, 2015), the popularity of Bible-based mass events such as *The Passion* as well as the popularity of J. S. Bach’s *Matthäuspassion* in the Netherlands; on both (and their relation), see Mirella Klomp, “Passio – Compassio. J.S. Bach’s Passions Transformed into a Passion Transcending Christianity,” in *Retrieving Compassion: Global Ethics, Human Dignity, and the Compassionate God*, eds. Frits de Lange and Julie Claassens (Eugene: Wipf and Stock 2018), 187–202.

¹¹ See publications such as A. Jaakke and E.W. Tuinstra, eds., *Om een verstaanbare bijbel: Nederlandse bijbelvertalingen na de Statenbijbel* (Haarlem: Nederlands Bijbelgenootschap/Brussel: Belgisch Bijbelgenootschap, 1990); Anne Jaap van den Berg, *Vertaald verleden: beknopte geschiedenis van Bijbelvertalen in Nederland* (Heerenveen: Jongbloed, 2006); Willem van der Meiden, “Zoo heerlijk eenvoudig”: *geschiedenis van de kinderbijbel in Nederland* (Hilversum: Verloren, 2009).

(mainly, authors of prose and poetry, composers, visual artists, and so forth),¹² and prominent figures (such as theologians,¹³ church leaders, and so forth) and their use, reception and interpretation of biblical texts. Popular (mass) culture “grassroots” interpretations are seldom studied,¹⁴ which results in a gap in scholarly knowledge and a skewed impression concerning the actual significance of the Bible in Dutch society. What is known can be learned from earlier empirical research, which will now be addressed.

The use and the significance attributed to the Bible in the Netherlands and the manner of its reception, is, of course, tightly bound up with the development of the Dutch religious landscape in general. One main source of insight into the development of this landscape is the periodically repeated survey, “*God in Nederland*” [“God in the Netherlands”], which has been conducted since 1966,¹⁵ and repeated approximately every 10 years (1966, 1979, 1996, 2006 and 2015). The last edition of the survey is from 2015 (published in 2016).¹⁶ The main social trend therein is characterized by a marked decrease in church membership, the number of people believing in God, either as a person or an impersonal power, and the significance attributed to the Bible.¹⁷ In sum, during the course of the 20th century, the religious

12 See, e.g., contributions on Dutch literature, such as W. Drop and J.W Steenbeek, eds., *Het boek achter de boeken: Bijbelse motieven in de Nederlandse literatuur sinds '80* (Groningen: Wolters-Noordhoff, 1971); Jaap Goedegebuure, “De Bijbel in de eigentijdse Nederlandse Literatuur,” *Ons Erfdeel* 37 (1994): 699–707; Geertruida Marijne Anna Gerling, “*Zo maakten zij, dat men het verstond in het lezen*”: Een intertekstueel onderzoek naar de Bijbel in Nederlandse en Vlaamse romans tussen 2000–2010 (PhD diss., Radboud Universiteit Nijmegen, 2018). See also the contributions in Marcel Barnard, ed., *De Bijbel cultureel. De Bijbel in de kunsten van de twintigste Eeuw* (Zoetermeer: Boekencentrum, 2010).

13 See, representatively, a study such as Dirk van Keulen, *Bijbel en dogmatiek, Schriftbeschuwing en Schriftgebruik in het dogmatisch werk van A. Kuyper, H. Bavinck en G. C. Berkouwer* (Kampen: Kok, 2003), dealing with three prominent theologians; also, the work of a painter like Rembrandt continues to attract attention in this respect as well, see for instance Verena Scholl, *Rembrandts Biblische Frauenporträts: Eine Begegnung Von Theologie Und Malerei* (Zürich: Theologischer Verlag, 2006); Jörg Zink, *In het licht: Rembrandt, schilder van de Bijbel* (Utrecht: Kok, 2015).

14 See, for an exception to the rule, Mart-Jan Luteyn, Mirella Klomp and Peter-Ben Smit, “Kan de schuldige opstaan? Een analyse van de rol van Judas en Pilatus in de evangeliën en in The Passion 2019,” *Kerk en Theologie* 71 (2020): 141–152, which focuses on the “popular” passion performance “The Passion.”

15 See Ton Bernts and Joantine Berghuijs, *God in Nederland, 1966–2015* (Utrecht: Ten Have, 2016). The publication is used here as a generic indication of the state of religion in the Netherlands, the study itself is not without its shortcoming, as, e.g., Dick Houtman, “God in Nederland 1996–2006 Enkele godsdienstsociologische routines ter discussie,” *Religie & samenleving* (2008): 17–35, has previously argued concerning an earlier edition.

16 See Bernts and Berghuijs, *God*.

17 See Bernts and Berghuijs, *God*.

affiliation of the population of the Netherlands underwent a drastic change. From a society that is often described as intensively religious, especially in the period 1850–1950, Dutch society developed, at an increasingly rapid speed since the 1950s, to a situation in which more than half of the population is religiously unaffiliated.¹⁸ It is furthermore likely that this number (of religiously unaffiliated respondents) will increase, given demographic trends.¹⁹ Also, recent research has shown that not only is the number of people who affiliate themselves with a religious tradition declining, but also those who do believe less firmly in the doctrines that their parents or grandparents accepted unquestioningly.²⁰ Although these findings are not without limitations,²¹ it is nonetheless obvious that Dutch church attendance has decreased substantially.²²

As is to be expected, practices of Bible reading are impacted by the decline in church membership and the increasingly secularized, or rather, “dechurched,” Dutch culture. In addition to the “God in Nederland” report, this has been evidenced by two other research projects. One is a long-term project initiated by the Dutch Bible Society, *Bijbelbezit en Bijbelgebruik* [“Bible ownership and Bible use”], which has been conducted periodically in 1974, 1981, 1989, 1996 and 2004.²³ Another is a meta-study of the available relevant data and literature by research agency KASKI (*Katholiek Sociaal-Kerkelijk Instituut* [the Catholic Social-Ecclesiastical Institute]), also commissioned by the Dutch Bible Society, resulting in a report entitled *Godsdienst, kerk en Bijbel in Nederland* [“Religion, Church and Bible in the Netherlands”] in 2007.

The former survey, *Bijbelbezit en Bijbelgebruik* [“Bible ownership and Bible use”], presents a number of insights that are relevant for the current study, alongside general findings concerning a decrease in (institutional and Christian) religiosity in the Netherlands.²⁴ To begin with, Bible ownership has decreased across the board, throughout all age categories. Around a quarter of the Dutch population read the Bible in 2003, slightly fewer than in 1996. Also, compared to 1996, people who do

18 See Joep de Hart and Pepijn van Houwelingen, *Christenen in Nederland. Kerkelijke deelname en christelijke geloofsgedrag* (Den Haag: CBS, 2018).

19 See Hans Schmeets, *De religieuze kaart van Nederland, 2010–2015* (The Hague: CBS, 2016).

20 See the research report Bernts and Berghuijs, *God*.

21 See, with an eye to the Dutch context, Herman Paul, *Secularisatie: een kleine geschiedenis van een groot verhaal* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2017).

22 One hallmark was that in 2018, for the first time in recent history, less than 50% of the Dutch population aged 15 years and older described themselves as members of a church or other religious organization. See Hans Schmeets, *Wie is religieus, en wie niet?* (Den Haag: Centraal Bureau voor de Statistiek, 2018).

23 Latest version in Hijme Stoffels, “Bijbelgebruik en bijbelbezit in Nederland,” in *De bijbel opnieuw vertaald*, eds. Lodewijk Dros and Elma Drayer (Amsterdam: Trouw, 2004): 163–200.

24 For this and the following, see Stoffels, “Bijbelgebruik.”

possess a Bible read it less frequently in 2003, although younger age groups have begun to read the Bible a little more frequently, while the reverse is the case for older age groups. Furthermore, comparatively, women read the Bible more frequently than men do, and individuals with higher education read it more frequently than those with lower education. Among Protestants, the majority read the Bible, while in all other groups (from Roman Catholics to people who do not subscribe to any particular religious view, or secular worldview), a minority of people read the Bible. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the more frequently a person attends church, the higher the probability that she or he will read the Bible. In addition, the Bible has a clear image problem: only 18% of the participants in the survey considered the Bible to be an “up-to-date” or “current” book; negative views of the Bible are a contributory factor that prevent people from reading it. Nevertheless, one out of three Dutch people in the survey indicated that they would potentially be interested in film versions of Bible stories. There is a shift in the reasons given for reading the Bible, towards reading it for cultural reasons or as a reference work; while reading the Bible for reasons such as “sustaining the faith” has decreased in significance over time. Bible stories that appeal to people are particularly captivating narratives and texts concerning human experience. A more surprising finding is that some people who possess a Bible are either indifferent or even hostile towards it.

The meta-study conducted by KASKI, “*Godsdienst, kerk en Bijbel in Nederland*” [“Religion, Church and Bible in the Netherlands”], supports most of the conclusions of the aforementioned studies (*God in Nederland* and *Bijbelbezit en Bijbelgebruik*), while further nuancing others. In line with the studies mentioned earlier, the meta-study shows that the number of households owning a Bible has decreased, as has the number of people reading the Bible. There is, however, a (presumably short-lived) resurgence of both figures (Bible ownership and readership) around 2005, briefly after the introduction of the *Nieuwe Bijbelvertaling* (published in late 2004). In addition, contrary to popular perception, the most frequent and fervent Bible-readers are to be found among evangelical rather than orthodox Protestant Christians (i.e. conservative Calvinist). Moreover, the study shows that emotions that trigger individuals to read the Bible are more frequently negative (arising from sadness, anxiety, or struggling with problems) than positive, and specific occasions are more often a trigger for reading (or listening to) the Bible than personal emotions are. In the latter sense, the Bible still has a role even for non-members of a church, particularly around central life events such as weddings and funerals. In terms of attitudes towards the Bible, the researchers detect a “secularization of the Bible:” an increasing number of people value the Bible as work of literature or an important source of (Western/Dutch) culture, while a decreasing number refer to the Bible as the infallible Word of God. Although, notably, the latter conclusion is not supported by all studies covered by the KASKI

report. When considering these results, it is important to note that the trends reported by these various studies are not equally distributed across the country. In particular, in more “orthodox” Protestant communities, typically found in the Dutch “Bible belt,”²⁵ a strong tradition persists of reading the Bible regularly, even daily, in private settings, outside of formal worship. Daily Bible-reading after the evening meal continues to be a *sine qua non* for many families in these contexts.

Another interesting study concerning Bible usage in the Netherlands comes from a rather more specific context, namely Christian education, a setting in which the Bible still plays a significant role in both identity formation and daily practice. In 2017, the association for Catholic and Christian education, Verus, conducted a research into Bible usage in Protestant-Christian education.²⁶ Teachers and school principals from six primary and six secondary schools were interviewed regarding their perceptions on the position and use of the Bible in their school. The results reveal considerable diversity in Bible usage and the stated objectives between the participating schools and the teachers. Based on their research, Nagel-Herweijer and Visser-Vogel suggest a number of factors that are associated with such extensive diversity in Bible usage.²⁷ How schools respond to the changing attitudes and knowledge of teachers and students of the Bible appears, firstly, to be dependent on a school’s identity. Schools that stand within a specific Christian tradition make different choices compared to less pronounced and more religiously diverse schools. The more traditional schools, in this research called “type 1 schools,” often seek new ways to articulate the relevance of the Bible to their students, whereas schools with students and teachers from more diverse religious backgrounds choose to embody their Christian identity in new ways, in which the Bible plays a subordinate role. Secondly, a school’s formal identity as reflected in official school documents, for example stricter recruitment policies, seems to be an important factor in facilitating a more or less explicit role for the Bible in daily school life. Thirdly, the intensity of Bible usage in Christian schools appears, to a growing extent, dependent on the value assigned to the Bible by the individual teacher or school principal. A teacher for whom the Bible is an important book of faith will make different choices compared to a colleague who sees the Bible only as a book of wisdom. Fourthly, in line with this, the competences of the individual teachers also came up as either a facilitating or limiting factor in the way the Bible was communicated to the students.

²⁵ See Jan Dirk Snel, “Waarom daar? De Refoband of Refogordel als onderdeel van de Protestantenband,” in *Refogeschiedenis in perspectief. Opstellen over de bevindelijke traditie*, ed. Fred van Lieburg (Heerenveen: Groen, 2007), 51–91.

²⁶ Corina Nagel-Herweijer and Elsbeth Visser-Vogel, *De Bijbel op school. Een onderzoek naar bijbelgebruik in het Protestant-Christelijke onderwijs* (Woerden: Verus, 2017).

²⁷ Nagel-Herweijer and Visser-Vogel, *De Bijbel op school*, 82.

Teachers with sufficient knowledge of the Bible seemed more inclined to let students work with independently the Bible and, subsequently, they appear to have a more positive influence on Bible usage. Lastly, the position of the Bible and the ways it was used in Christian education seemed to a large degree to be dependent on the student population of that specific school.

Informed by research as described above, attempts are being made to review, reconsider, and renew the use of the Bible in the Netherlands; a good overview of current concerns, perspectives, and initiatives can be found in the volume *De Bijbel in Nederland*, published in 2018.²⁸ However, most contributors focus on qualitative perspectives rather than quantitative data, which is typical for a great deal of research on the Bible in the Netherlands, which, in addition, privileges professional, academic, and culturally elitist voices over others.

Having outlined both the scholarly significance of the research project that this study focuses on at large and having positioned it within extant research, it is now possible to turn to the project proper, its methods and results, and thereby also outline how it moves beyond extant research.

2 The Research Project: Methodology and Results

The research project that this contribution is based on, consisted of both a qualitative and a quantitative part. The qualitative part of the study had an exploratory character. Its main goal was to map the vocabulary (that is, specific words and concepts) that readers from divergent societal and denominational backgrounds use with respect to the Bible, their Bible-reading practices, and experiences with the Dutch Bible Society.²⁹ On the basis of this mapped vocabulary range, customized and relevant questions for the quantitative survey were developed. The quantitative part of the study was conducted in cooperation with the research agency Blauw Research, in February 2017. Since the aim was not to create an overview of Bible usage in the Netherlands in general, but rather to collect more in-depth knowledge of actual reading practices, only respondents who attached at least some measure of relevance to the Bible as a source of personal inspiration were included. In addition

²⁸ See Barnhoorn, Stoppels and Schol-Wetter, eds. *Bijbel*.

²⁹ The Dutch Bible Society is an interconfessional organization, supported by a diverse group of Christians in the Netherlands, including Roman Catholics. There is also a Catholic Bible Foundation in the Netherlands, which publishes, among other things, the (Roman-) Catholic *Willibrordvertaling*. As the NBG is currently the most active distributor of Bibles in the Netherlands (the Catholic Bible Foundation has entered into a somewhat dormant existence), investigating people's experiences with the NBG is a good way of researching their interaction with biblical materials, while at the same time gaining insight into the impact (or lack thereof) of the NBG.

to more technical questions about reading frequency and preferred translations, respondents were also asked to reflect on drives and barriers influencing their reading habits, and on the way in which reading the Bible affects them.

2.1 Qualitative Research

2.1.1 Methodology

2.1.1.1 Sample

In November and December 2016, a total of six focus group sessions were organized in the Dutch cities of Dordrecht, Ede and Amsterdam, on the topics of participants' views of the Bible, Bible-reading practices, and experiences with the Dutch Bible Society. Each focus group consisted of four to five participants, of various ages and sexes, belonging to either liberal,³⁰ mainline Protestant, orthodox Protestant, evangelical, or Catholic church communities. Nominal members (persons not currently active in a religious community, but members nonetheless) were also included in the pool of participants. Two researchers were present in each focus group meeting. One lead and facilitated the conversation, whereas the other took notes and had no other active role. An overview of the composition of the six focus groups can be found in Table 1 (Descriptive data of the participants of the six panels).

2.1.1.2 Procedure

Participants for the focus groups were recruited through an online survey program (Qualtrics³¹). A link to this survey was sent to a large variety of churches in the cities Dordrecht, Ede, and Amsterdam. Based on their religious backgrounds and characteristics, people were selected and invited to attend one of the focus groups in their city. The actual focus groups were structured as follows. First, there was a short introduction in which more information was provided on the research goals, methods, and issues of confidentiality, and the participants were invited to introduce themselves to each other. In the second part, two creative assignments were given. For the first assignment, participants received a white paper with the word "Bible" in the centre, as well as a couple of post-it notes. They were asked to write down, by means of free association, some catchwords that they associated with the word Bible. The participants could then stick the post-it notes to the sheet.

30 Concerning the liberal participants in Amsterdam, the Christian Community does not identify itself with any Church denomination, whereas the Mennonites and Remonstrants have a Protestant identity.

31 Qualtrics is software suitable for building and conducting surveys, available online at <https://www.qualtrics.com/education/>.

Table 1: Descriptive data of the participants of the six panels.

Location	Focus group (by religious affiliation)	Number of Participants (N)		Age (years)		Denominational affiliation*
		Male	Female	Total	Mean age	Age- range
Dordrecht	Orthodox – mainline	4	1	5	54.2	29–77
	protestant					PKN ^a (2), NGK (1), GKV (1), CGK (1)
	Catholic – nominal	0	3	3	46.3	17–71
Ede	Evangelical – mainline	3	2	5	55.4	18–69
	protestant					OKK (1), Unaffiliated (2)
	Evangelical – orthodox	2	3	5	48.2	29–64
Amsterdam	protestant					PKN (2), Baptist Church (1), VEG (1), GKV (1).
	Liberal – nominal	3	3	6	52.0	23–74
						The Christian Community (2), Remonstrant Brotherhood (1), Mennonite Church (1), Unaffiliated (2)
Total	Catholic – liberal	2	3	5	58.4	48–70
		14	15	29	52.8	17–77
						Remonstrant Brotherhood (2), RKK (3).

*Key: Protestant Church of the Netherlands (PKN); Dutch Reformed Churches (NGK); Reformed Churches in the Netherlands (Liberated; GKV); Christian Reformed Churches (CGK); Old-Catholic Church (OKK); Free Evangelical Churches (VEG); Roman Catholic Church (RKK). ^aThe Protestant Church in the Netherlands (PKN) “houses” both mainline and orthodox Protestants. Thus, depended on the particular focus group, “PKN” may refer to either group of believers.

Subsequently, each person was invited to comment on his or her catchwords. For the second creative assignment, participants were assigned the task of picking out three cards featuring a picture (from a bigger collection that was spread out on the table) that for them best depicted the associations they had with the Bible. Each participant was asked to explain why he or she chose their three particular cards. A general conversation was then instigated to clarify and share similar and/or different associations and experiences with the Bible. In the third and final part, three semi-structured conversation rounds were held. In the first round, participants talked about why they read the Bible or not (in their personal lives) and how their attitudes and opinions towards the Bible had changed over the course of their lives. In the second round, participants discussed their Bible-reading habits. How many Bibles did they possess/use, and which translations and editions? How often did they read their Bible, and on what occasions? What kind of digital or “physical” reading tools did they prefer, if any, and why? In the third round, participants also shared their knowledge and experiences of the Dutch Bible Society (NBG). How familiar were they with the NBG, and what were their attitudes and expectations *vis-à-vis* the organization? At the end of each focus group, the conversation leader thanked the participants for their contributions, repeated how the research data would be processed, and opened up the room to any final questions from participants.

2.1.2 Results

The data collected during the six focus groups was analyzed during a joint meeting with Blauw Research. The data were analyzed using the Pyramid Principle by Barbara Minto,³² which builds on the idea that information transfer is simplified by organizing thinking through the creation of pyramids of ideas. This can be done through grouping together low-level facts that are seen as similar, drawing insights based on similarity and forming new groups based on related insights.³³ For the current analysis this implied grouping together participants’ views on the Bible that were similar and reading practices that were shared by multiple participants, as well as extracting and drawing new insights from these shared views, ideas and practices.

The results of the six focus groups can be divided into two categories: views of the Bible and Bible-reading practices. In what follows, the results of each

³² Barbara Minto, *The Minto Pyramid Principle: Logical in Writing, Thinking and Problem Solving* (London: Minto International, 2010).

³³ “The Minto Pyramid Principle concept,” Minto Books International, accessed July 22, 2019, <http://www.barbaraminto.com/concept.html>.

“denominational group” will be presented. A summary of the overall results, as based on the totality of the focus groups, is taken up in Section 3.³⁴

2.1.2.1 Denominational Groups In-Depth

2.1.2.1.1 Nominal Participants (N = 4)

Views of the Bible. Nominal participants (four in total) indicated that they considered the Bible to be a quite thick and difficult book, one that is not always easily applicable in present times. If one, for example, does not possess sufficient background knowledge then one could easily get lost. Furthermore, they tended to see the Bible as a time-bound collection of beautiful, interesting, but also troublesome, ancient stories. The idea of the Bible as inspired by God was rather difficult for them to believe. Aspects that they considered to be a burden were the norms, values, and dogmas that people take from the Bible. Another perceived obstacle was the considerable number of Bible translations available, which means that anyone can distill from the biblical text what he or she likes and, consequently, arbitrariness is introduced.

Bible-Reading Practices. Nominal participants reported sporadic, incidental use of the Bible. If they took up the Bible at all, it was for checking factual information (for example in reaction to a news item). Mostly, the Bible was considered something from the past and/or their own childhood period. Obstacles to reading the Bible were the length and thickness of the Bible (where to start?) and also its complicated language. Furthermore, the thought was expressed that a lot of background knowledge is needed to be able to comprehend the Bible; therefore, a lack of such knowledge was considered to be a burden to start reading (parts of) the Bible.

2.1.2.1.2 Liberal Participants (N = 6)

Views of the Bible. The six liberal participants did not view the Bible as a holy/divine book, in the sense that it would be inspired by God. Rather, they saw it as being written in human language and “through” human minds. Therefore, the Bible, containing a variety of religious experiences, was viewed as a source of inspiration rather than presenting “truths” that one should believe literally. Furthermore, liberals tended to speak of the Bible as a collection of books (a “library”) that arose in various historical contexts, rather than as “one book”. In the same vein, the Bible would lend itself to many different interpretations — although this was not necessarily perceived as negative, but rather as added value. Liberals were inclined to position the Bible in the context of other “wisdom literature,” such as Buddhist writings.

34 The third category is left out as it is less relevant within the scope of this article.

Bible-Reading Practices. Liberal participants preferred historical-critical interpretative approaches towards reading the Bible, approaches that have eye for contextuality. They derived intellectual challenge from using various Bible translations simultaneously and studying external (non-dogmatic) literature on the Bible. In this respect, multivalence and ambiguity were experienced as enriching. More literary Biblical translations were favored over more simple and straightforward (“ordinary”) translations aimed at broader audiences. With regard to one’s personal religious/spiritual life, the Bible was used to obtain inspiration and wisdom, alongside other “holy writings.” Biblical stories and genres in which people develop themselves psychologically and spiritually were the most appreciated aspects, like Job, Psalms, Proverbs, and Parables. Liberals like to read the Bible while alone, as well as with others in literature and study groups.

2.1.2.1.3 Mainline Protestant Participants (N = 5)

Views of the Bible. Mainline protestant participants (five in total) described the Bible both as the “Word of God” and the “story of God and humans.” They believed the Bible to be divinely inspired but not necessarily divine in and of itself: they allowed for human influence (next to divine inspiration) as to the contents of the stories. In that respect, they distil various layers within the biblical texts. The Bible was considered to be a guide in life and source of support; its stories (potentially) relate to one’s own experiences. Also, reading the Bible together with other believers engenders feelings of connectedness for these participants. However, the Bible is not always experienced as easy to understand: there are, for example, a lot of violent passages and a thorough study of passages is needed to be able to understand and “contextualize” such violence.

Bible-Reading Practices. Mainline Protestant participants listed various Bible-reading practices. They often make use of various Bible translations to understand difficult passages. Furthermore, they frequently used biblical resources on the internet to find texts on certain topics more easily, and to search inspiration for personal notes on postcards. They especially looked for central themes throughout the Bible and tried to distill biblical meanings relevant “then” and relevant “now;” a central question that was explored was how does the Bible speaks to human life circumstances?

2.1.2.1.4 Orthodox Protestant Participants (N = 6)

Views of the Bible. The six orthodox Protestant participants described the Bible as the “Word of God” and the most important book that exists. These participants reported that the Bible contains timeless truths and God’s message to humans. However, in order to be able to properly grasp its message, it must be read carefully while guided by God’s spirit. Bible reading was seen as a necessary and fundamental

aspect of one's faith, and as nourishing and strengthening the personal relationship with God. Through reading the Bible, one obtains knowledge of God and God's plans for the world. Furthermore, the Bible shows how a "decent" Christian life, as based on the Bible, should be lived.

Bible-Reading Practices. For orthodox Protestant participants, Bible reading belongs to the heart of the Christian faith. Ideally, it is a fixed daily habit. If such a daily or frequent routine is for some reason (temporarily) lost, feelings of guilt arise. Through the Bible, one's faith is strengthened. Therefore, alongside regular Bible-reading habits, the Bible was also "opened" in search of comfort, support, encouragement, admonition, and so forth. Bible reading for orthodox Protestants often goes hand in hand with prayer. They frequently made use of daily Bible-reading plans (with or without added commentaries) and various kinds of devotional writings on the Bible. Although printed Bibles were highly valued, internet resources and mobile apps were also used to read the Bible and search for topics and/or particular verses.

2.1.2.1.5 Evangelical Participants (N = 4)

Views of the Bible. In the opinion of the four evangelical participants, the Bible is explicitly considered to be the "Word of God." The Bible contains God's message to humans and through the Bible one can learn more about who God is. Moreover, the Bible shows how to live a Christian life. It is considered a (practical) guide and hence necessary to living a life of faith and maintaining a personal relationship with God. Although the Bible needs explanation, it contains timeless truths.

Bible-Reading Practices. The evangelical participants regarded Bible reading as a natural and evident aspect of a Christian life. It is one of the ways in which God speaks to believers. The Bible was, therefore, closely linked to their personal lives: they seek comfort, encouragement, confirmation, and so forth in the Bible depending on the specific situation at hand. Reading the Bible is often part of moments of worship: they will often create an atmosphere of quietness and silence and/or sing Christian songs to focus on God. In addition, other creative forms were used to contemplate or process the biblical texts, such as painting or drawing. Moreover, regularity was valued in personal Bible reading and this practice was often supported by the use of a faith journal, a reading calendar, or a Bible app, as this was experienced to be helpful for maintaining discipline. When an evangelical person is not able to read the Bible on a regular basis, he or she can feel guilty before God.

2.1.2.1.6 Catholic Participants (N = 4)

Views of the Bible. The Catholic view of the Bible was characterized by the idea that we get to know ourselves and our cultural traditions through the Bible. The

Bible is part of our cultural sources and also shapes our culture. Catholic participants, furthermore, indicated that the Bible helps them to reflect on their personal lives as it is a source of inspiration to them. The Bible was seen as the “Word of God” and it shares the (hi)story of God with people. Additionally, reading the Bible was considered to be a collective activity as it is part of the Catholic (Mass) liturgy and it plays an important role in creating a sense of togetherness; it binds people together (religiously).

Bible-Reading Practices. The Catholic participants shared that they do not consider reading the Bible to be an essential or indispensable part of their religious practice. They did not read the Bible regularly. Instead, the Catholic participants had a meditational approach towards the Bible. Reading the Bible was part of contemplation or meditation and done in the context of rituals such as prayer or the burning of candles. When they did read the Bible, they favored the New Testament over the Old Testament as the New Testament was experienced as more accessible and relevant, whereas the Old Testament was considered more difficult and distant. Different translations of the Bible were used, for example the Roman Catholic Willibrord Bible translation (of 1995; earlier edition: 1978). Faith journals, or other biblical journals, were scarcely used, because they were often evaluated as too “evangelical” or “Protestant.” On the other hand, ecumenical Bible-reading gatherings were regarded as enriching.

2.1.2.1.7 General Observations

Views of the Bible. During the focus groups, it became clear that the Bible is viewed and used differently by various individuals. As described above, this was predominantly dependent on denominational background. In a more orthodox context, individuals consider the Bible “the Word of God,” containing truths. In more liberal contexts, the Bible is foremost a human book in which religious experiences are depicted. This difference strongly influences people’s expectations and needs concerning the Bible. Orthodox individuals seek clarification or explanation when confronted with difficult texts or ambiguity, whereas liberals seem to appreciate the ambiguity and enjoy encountering different voices or viewpoints in the Bible. Furthermore, “age” also appeared to play a significant role. Younger participants appeared to be more pragmatic and practical concerning their views of the Bible. For them, the Bible should be accessible and easy to read. Older people, in contrast, do not mind investing some extra effort to understand a biblical text and read the Bible more in-depth.

Bible-Reading Practices. It is difficult to summarize people’s Bible reading practices as they are all so different. We did observe some opposing trends, however. Whereas some people like to read the Bible at given times using a reading schedule, others read the Bible more occasionally, dependent on their personal needs. Several

participants indicated that they mainly read the Bible in a group setting, while others preferred to read the Bible individually. While some people loved to hold on to an actual, paper Bible, others liked the convenience of a Bible-app or an online tool. An experience that was shared by participants was a feeling of unity and community when reading the Bible together. Many participants had positive experiences of reading the Bible in a group setting, as reading the Bible together generated a shared sense of its importance and/or spiritual value. Moreover, at the end of the focus groups, when people were leaving, participants conveyed a lot of positive reactions about our get-together. For several of the participants, it had also been a religious experience. They had appreciated talking about the Bible, and their experiences, views, and practices regarding it, with the other participants.

2.2 Quantitative Research

2.2.1 Methodology

The qualitative part of the study, which mapped the vocabulary, attitudes and Bible usage across different denominations, was followed by a 10-min online questionnaire, conducted in February and March 2017. The aim of this quantitative part was fivefold. The questionnaire was conducted:

- 1) To quantify drives and barriers involved in reading the Bible;
- 2) To describe and quantify various dimensions of Bible usage, such as attitudes towards the Bible, events or emotions triggering Bible reading, manners or methods of reading, the significance attached to reading, and the emotional or intellectual result of the reading experience;
- 3) To test the hypotheses concerning segmentation developed on the basis of the qualitative study;
- 4) To test the potential relevance of new Bible products;
- 5) To gain insight into trends, in comparison to former studies (as summarized above).

Since the aim was to investigate the way in which the Bible is read as a source of faith, potential participants had to affirm that they regarded themselves as Christians and attributed some measure of relevance of the Bible to their personal lives (as opposed to, for example, as exclusively a source of culture).³⁵ Of 1681

35 This distinction between faith and culture, which can easily be problematized (as faith and culture are often intertwined), has little to do with a dichotomy between the two in the research project's theoretical framework, or, even less with a higher or lower appreciation of faith or culture.

potential participants, 45% answered both questions affirmatively, resulting in a research sample of $N = 756$.

In the introductory questions, in addition to basic demographic data, participants were asked to provide information about the ways in which they give shape to, and experience, their faith, and the needs they experience with regard to their faith. The core of the questionnaire focused on Bible usage and attitudes towards the Bible.³⁶ Participants were asked about the frequency with which they read the Bible, in what sort of situations (alone, with family members, with a study group, and so on), what prompted a reading moment (habit, specific [life] events, certain emotions, and so on), what they hoped to gain from reading the Bible, how the reading actually affected them, whether they preferred print or digital media (both for reading the Bible itself and also for auxiliary media such as reading plans, devotionals, and so forth), and how they would describe the Bible (that is, “literally God’s Word,” “truth,” “culturally relevant,” “inspirational,” “dangerous,” “trustworthy,” “a book that teaches wisdom,” “a way to get to know Jesus”). Questions about specific product needs were also addressed, but since their relevance for this article is limited, we will comment on these only briefly; apart from being relevant for the NBG (as a project partner) for the development of new materials and publications, asking about the need for such products also provides insight into the desires of “ordinary readers.”

2.2.2 Research Sample

The survey was completed by 756 individuals, 388 participants identified as male (51%) and 368 as female (49%). The average age was 52 years old. 52% of the participants had attained a medium level of education, 23% had attained higher education, and 25% had a lower level of education. Regarding their living situation, 495 participants lived in one-or two-person households (respectively 21 and 45%), 203 participants (27%) were parents with children living at home, and 48 participants (6%) were young adults living with their parents (while 1% indicated “other” for living situation). The participants were distributed more or less evenly over three of the four regions of the Netherlands identified by Nielsen (from the West, East, and

Rather, the question is geared towards identifying the self-understanding of readers and their readerly motivation. Also, it reflects a longer discussion concerning the target audience of Bible translations in the Netherlands. For instance, the 2004 *Nieuwe Bijbelvertaling* was presented in the Netherlands as being a “Bible for church and culture” [*“Bijbel voor kerk en cultuur”*], thereby seeking to do justice to readers who approach the Bible as a source of spiritual nourishment, on the one hand, and those who view it as a culturally valuable document, on the other.

³⁶ The questionnaire is available upon request from the authors.

South, the proportion belonging to each group ranging from 25 to 30%); 12% of all participants lived in the Northern region, and 9% in the three largest cities (Amsterdam, Rotterdam, The Hague) and their suburbs.

2.2.3 Results

The collected data were checked for completeness and consistency and made suitable for statistical analysis. Initially, a representative sample survey was taken, which allowed us to determine the reference numbers for the relevant group (that is, Christians/Bible readers). The gross dataset was weighed in terms of these reference numbers (education, age, gender) by means of post-stratification. A MaxDiff analysis was used, with a level of significance determined at $p < 0.05$.

The survey provided a number of insights into Bible usage in the Netherlands. The most striking outcome was that denominational affiliation did not appear to be a distinguishing factor in Bible usage. The outcomes of the quantitative part of the research gave reason to introduce a new segmentation that was not based on church membership but on practices (active or passive) and attitudes (radical or liberal) concerning the Bible. Participants qualified as “active” when they read the Bible “at least once a month,” and as “passive” if they read “less than monthly,” “sporadically,” or “not at all.” In terms of their attitude towards the Bible, participants who chose “the Bible is literally God’s Word” as one of their three possible answers from a list of statements about the Bible were labelled “radical.” Participants who picked descriptions more in terms of “inspirational literature,” which allows the reader to form his or her own opinions were labelled “liberal.” The two axes of this segmentation resulted in four plus one segments: radical active (19%); radical passive (7%); liberal active (23%); liberal passive (34%), and lateral (17%), with the last group selecting descriptions of the Bible that related to its cultural rather than inspirational significance.

Using this segmentation, we saw the following patterns arise. Protestant participants qualified much more frequently as “active” and “radical” than Roman Catholics (53.9 vs. 14.8% and 54.0 vs. 14.6% respectively). The “radical passive” segment, was more or less evenly distributed over Roman Catholics, more mainstream Protestants, traditional Protestant churches, and evangelicals. Mainstream Protestants (31%) and Roman Catholics (26%) comprised the largest groups in the “liberal active” segment. However, more traditional Protestants were also represented in this segment. As to gender, active and radical readers were more often women (63%) than men (37%). The same was true for radical passive segment, with 65% of the passive readers being female versus 35% male. Among the liberal active readers there were more or less the same number of women and men, 53 and 47% respectively. Furthermore, the mean age of the two “active” segments was

considerably lower than that of the passive segments (indeed, remarkably so), meaning that younger participants were more likely to be active readers (approximately a mean age of 50 years old vs. 56 years). Moreover, the living situation or life stage of the participants also informed their practices and attitudes towards the Bible. Families with children still living at home were more represented in the “active” segments versus the “passive” segments (39 vs. 17%). In addition, the “liberal active” segment was found to be the highest educated group, with 54 of the individuals in this segment (39%) holding a college or university degree, and a further 83 liberal active readers (49%) having completed some other form of secondary education.

Concerning reading habits, the less frequently a participant reads, the more these moments of reading and the chosen texts are dependent on specific life situations or questions. According to participants’ answers on a multiple response item, 61 individuals (42%) in the “radical active” segment, and 70 individuals (44%) in the “liberal active” segment follow a reading plan. A similar percentage of these segments (47 and 48%) choose a text depending on their needs or questions at any given time. This percentage is higher for the “passive” and “lateral” segments. Here, about 75% ($N = 163$) of individuals let their personal questions guide their choice of text at any given time.

Participants have different motives for reading the Bible. In the “radical active” segment, 61.9% of the drives that were mentioned as most important centered around putting God first: “it brings me into contact with God,” “helps me to trust in God,” “helps me understand God,” and “helps me to worship God.” “Liberal active” was more diverse: the statements it “brings me into contact with God,” “teaches me important life lessons,” “helps me to trust in God,” and “I want my children to learn something about the Bible” each account for 10% of the motives that were mentioned. For the “passive” and “lateral” segments, bringing the next generation (of children or grandchildren) into contact with the Bible was the most important drive, accounting for 30.5% in the lateral segment and 11.1% in the “liberal passive” segment.

The most important barriers to reading the Bible for participants in the “radical active” and “radical passive” segments are the complicated language in which the Bible is written (31 and 18% respectively), and the confrontational character of the Bible (19 and 17% respectively). For individuals in the “liberal active” segment, the confrontational (as cited by 25% of participants) and sometimes contradictory (21%) character of the texts is more important than difficulties understanding the language of the text (18%). Across all segments, unpleasant memories associated with reading the Bible are reported by participants as the fourth important barrier for reading the Bible (10%).

Examining the material intended to stimulate Bible engagement, individuals who already qualify as active readers appear to be more interested in such materials than individuals in the “passive” segments do, for example 32–57% of the participants in the “passive” segments do not appear to be interested in reading guides, as opposed to 17–20% of the active readers. When asked about the preferred content of the material, across all segments, the majority favored “interesting perspectives” above an unambiguous statement about the meaning of the text.

3 Discussion

3.1 Outline of Study

As indicated, the research project that this article reports aimed to acquire more knowledge of contemporary practices of “ordinary” Bible reading in the Netherlands. The two main goals consisted of, firstly, generating current insight into societal and denominational profiles of Bible readers and the characteristics of their Bible-reading practices and, secondly, determining whether a categorization of this segment of Bible readers on the basis of church denominational lines is still representative in a Dutch society that has become more fluid and in which people tend to “church hop.”³⁷ In this section, the main findings of the qualitative and quantitative part of the research will be succinctly summarized, as well as those of the entire research study;³⁸ the leading questions that guided the overall project will be answered in the conclusion.

3.2 Main Qualitative Research Findings

The qualitative part of the research — based on six focus groups (nominal; liberal; mainline Protestant; orthodox Protestant; evangelical, and Catholic participants) — was concentrated on three explorative categories: views of the Bible: Bible-reading practices, and experiences with the Dutch Bible Society. The first two categories, as already mentioned, are of more direct relevance within the scope of his article, these results alone will be presented here, as they stem from broader analysis.

³⁷ See for example: Kees de Groot, “Religion in Liquid Modernity: Collective Manifestations of Religion in Secularizing Dutch Society,” in *Religion beyond its Private Role in Modern Society*, eds. W. Hofstee and A. Kooij (Leiden: Brill, 2013): 171–282, which follows the model of Zygmunt Baumann with regard to “liquid modernity.”

³⁸ For more detailed, elaborate findings, see Section 2, “Methodology and Results”.

Regarding views of the Bible, significant distinctions were found between participants differing in the degree of orthodoxy and age. More orthodox participants viewed the Bible as the “Word of God” and as a source of truths, whereas more liberal participants viewed the Bible as a “book of humans” that contains spiritual and/or transcendent experiences. More orthodox participants also expressed a need for clarity in the sense of uniform messages, whereas more liberal participants appreciated multivalence and ambiguity. Moreover, younger participants approached the Bible in concrete and pragmatic ways, valuing simplicity and direct applicability, whereas older participants dealt with the Bible in more abstract and theoretical ways, appreciating nuance and in-depth study. Elderly participants, for example, were of the opinion that understanding the Bible required some effort and considered this a positive challenge.

As far as Bible-reading practices are concerned, three opposing (although not mutually exclusive) practices stood out across the whole range of participants. The first was the practice of reading a print Bible versus reading the Bible on the internet or via digital apps. The second was the practice of reading the Bible due to historical and cultural interests versus reading the Bible in order to apply it to one’s personal life. The third and last practice was the use of brief thematic editions (“excerpts”) of the Bible, for example focused on “emotions,” versus the use of complete biblical editions with explanatory notes and included commentaries.

3.3 Main Quantitative Research Findings

The quantitative part of the research consisted of a 10-min online questionnaire on Bible usage and attitudes towards the Bible, with the aims of:

- 1) Quantifying drives and barriers in Bible reading;
- 2) Mapping various aspects of Bible usage;
- 3) Testing the hypotheses concerning denominational segmentation;
- 4) Exploring the popular reception of new Bible products;
- 5) Mapping trends in relation to former studies on Bible possession and Bible use.

In what follows, the main findings will be presented (more detailed and elaborate results — such as percentages — are presented in Section 2 “Methodology and Results,” as well as a description of the research sample).

Most significant in light of the research’s leading questions, was that Bible usage among Dutch Bible readers no longer appears to follow the traditional lines of denominational segmentation but is rather to be categorized according to active or passive reading habits (reading the Bible once a month versus less than monthly) and radical or liberal attitudes towards the Bible (viewing the Bible as

literally God's Word versus inspirational literature). Accordingly, five segments emerged from the quantitative survey: radical active (19% of the participants); radical passive (7% of the participants); liberal active (23% of the participants); liberal passive (34% of the participants), and lateral (denoting views of the Bible that related to its cultural rather than inspirational significance; 17% of the participants).

Concerning reading habits, it appears that participants who read their Bible less frequently are also more inclined to do so dependent on concrete life situations and personal questions. Participants are further to be divided into readers who more frequently stick to a Bible-reading plan and those who are led by momentary emotional needs. As to drives for reading the Bible, participants either refer to the Bible as helping them to focus more or less directly on God, or to more diverse personal or communal needs relating to spiritual growth. Frequently mentioned barriers to reading the Bible appear to consist of the perceived difficulty of the Bible's language (that is, in translation); the confrontational and/or contradictory character of the Bible, and unpleasant memories associated with Bible practices. Furthermore, active Bible readers are more interested in material intended to stimulate Bible engagement than passive readers are, and the majority, across all segments, prefer "interesting perspectives" to unambiguous statements about the text's meaning.

3.4 Main Findings of the Entire Study: The Bible in the Netherlands

When the main findings of both the qualitative and quantitative part of the research study are taken together, overall analysis reveals a number of characteristics and developments regarding practices of "ordinary" Bible reading in the Netherlands.

First, the way in which the Bible was approached by the survey's participants appeared to be more linked to biographical factors than to denominational factors, which suggests that the "pillarization" of Dutch society has also lost its grip on approaches to the Bible; in this regard, further reconsideration of this concept for describing Dutch religiosity, past and present, may therefore be called for.

Second, it is particularly noteworthy,³⁹ as perceived from a Dutch context of increasingly marginal churches and declining religious affiliations, that several participants from divergent traditions (in both the more liberal and orthodox spectrum) indicated that they experienced the Bible as something "tangible" that has the potential to positively unite people and create a sense of community. Many

39 For this, and the following, see also: Van Urk and Smit, "Less is More."

reported the desire to participate in some form of reading group or shared their positive experiences with such a group. Reading the Bible together, on the basis of a shared sense of its importance and/or spiritual value, seemed to represent something to fall back on in the midst of life's insecurities and societal changes. It could thus very well be the case that an awareness of being "marginalized" as a Christian believer, in a society in which church attendance and church life is less and less firmly structured and taken for granted, might coincide with a need to find or hold onto common religious grounds such as "a shared Bible," however these may be variously perceived.

Third, participants indicated that they would appreciate a variety of reading aids when it comes to understanding the Bible. However, the kind of "tools" that were requested varied: from more historical background information, to information concerning the cultural value of the Bible, to aids for connecting the Bible to everyday life. What this research project did not investigate (and nor did it aim to), is what kind of hermeneutics the current religious climate in the Netherlands gives rise to, or which opportunities it offers for rediscovering aspects of the biblical texts that have previously been ignored or underrepresented in biblical interpretation, be it scholarly or "popular."

4 Conclusion

By way of conclusion, some considerations of the broader scholarly and societal relevance of the kind of research (and its findings) presented and discussed in this article are now offered, which go beyond the main findings of the project that were presented in the previous section.

First, empirical research into the use of the Bible gives much needed content to the claim that the Bible is still an important book in Western societies, particularly in the Netherlands. Claiming that a book is a classic (culturally and religiously) without knowing how "ordinary" people use and appreciate the book and while only focusing on a work's formal status and its use in "high" culture is not sufficient to appreciate a work's impact. A society benefits from insight into the significance of its own sources for its members.

Second, such research gives insight into what the Bible "is" in terms of its use and functioning; insight into the use of the Bible by "ordinary" readers sheds light on what this book is in terms of its use, which thus surpasses descriptions of its contents, its historical emergence, or its discussion in theology – what books are is also determined by how they are used and, in order to appreciate that, insight into their use by their broadest readership is important. This is of significance in terms

of gaining insight into the functioning of a religion in a society, as well as for scholarship interested in the Bible.

Third, for forms of theological scholarship that wish to take into account the voice of the “church at large,” that is, the entire community of the faithful, for instance along the lines of the concept of the *sensus fidelium* in Catholic theology, insight into what such faithful do with one of the sources of their faith, and developing ways of listening to such faithful, are needed — the research presented here is one form of doing just this.

Fourth, as the “secularization” thesis is currently being revised, and a transformation of religion in a “post-secular” age seems to become a more realistic way of assessing religion in the “Global North” (or even just Western European) societies than to speak of its disappearance, insight into such processes can also be enhanced by knowledge of the manner in which the use of spiritual resources such as the Bible are subject to change through the practices of “ordinary readers.”

Fifth, and more practically, for biblical (and theological) scholarship that seeks to connect with societal developments, either to study them or to address them (or both), it is a considerable advantage to know how, where, and by whom the Bible is being used. This both helps to identify sites for research, for instance for those interested in empirical hermeneutics and biblical reception studies, and to find potential allies and audiences for research into the Bible and the reception of this research.

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