



ChatGPT as a modern tool for Bible teaching in confessional religious education: a German view

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Abstract

Biblical didactics is an important element of confessional religious education. In traditional settings, it is primarily associated with working with the text, alone or in groups, in plenary discussion or pantomime. Nowadays, however, young people are increasingly acquiring their knowledge—including about the Bible—on the Internet, using new technologies such as conversational Artificial Intelligence (AI), of which ChatGPT (Generative Pre-trained Transformers) is perhaps the best-known example. In this context, the following article seeks to answer the question of whether, and if so to what extent, ChatGPT can be a helpful tool for teaching the Bible in the classroom. To answer this question, the authors present a theoretical framework that encompasses both foundational insights into conversational AI and ChatGPT, as well as their implications for religious education and biblical teaching in Germany. In the next step, based on J. Theis' five-step model of Bible didactics [(1) initial perception; (2) analysis of the text; (3) in-depth reflection; (4) critical interpretation; (5) creative assimilation], ways of using ChatGPT in biblical teaching in the classroom are presented and their potential limitations are discussed. The article concludes with six final theses that summarise the investigation findings and offer some suggestions for the future.

Keywords Bible teaching · Religious education · Artificial intelligence · ChatGPT

1 Introduction

Biblical didactics is an essential component of Christian religious teaching and learning processes in Germany (Porzelt, 2012; Rothgangel et al., 2024; Zimmermann & Zimmermann, 2018a). Particularly in German-speaking countries—due to the overwhelming (in the historical sense) influence of Protestantism in shaping methods of working with biblical texts (Greenslade, 1963)—many different concepts of biblical learning have been developed. Schambeck (2009, pp. 17–67, 2015, p. 1) includes among the most important

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of these the hermeneutic approach (Baldermann, 1996; Berg, 2009; Niehl, 2006); the deconstructivist approach (Kropač, 2003a); the biblical-theological approach (Schambeck, 2009) and the reception-aesthetic approach (Theis, 2001). In general, it can be said that, regardless of the specific, detailed approach, biblical didactics has as its main goal the development of biblical competence (Kropač, 2003b, p. 389; Weihs, 2021, pp. 194–198) by transmitting information about biblical history, culture, characters and customs, etc., strengthening problem-solving skills, critical thinking, a deeper life orientation or a better understanding of religious symbols and language (Zimmermann & Zimmermann, 2018b, p. 4). Such educational tasks are becoming increasingly important due to the decreasing familiarity of children and young people with the Bible itself and religious issues, as well as the declining religious socialisation and increasing pluralisation of beliefs (Chrostowski, 2024; Kropač & Schambeck, 2022), and, as statistics reports from various countries show (Hertlein, 2021; Pew Research Center, 2023), the Bible is caught between two extremes in the lives of students: fascination and disinterest (Schambeck, 2015, p. 2).

In this sense, if young people—including non-believers or members of other religions—want to understand or come closer to Christianity, they cannot do so without turning to the Bible. Scripture, as the foundation and source of faith, is inseparable from the Christian religion. The same holds for confessional religious education in schools, where it is difficult to imagine teaching without referencing and engaging with biblical texts (Kropač, 2021, p. 27). For this reason, biblical didactics should not only prepare students to discover the ‘world of the text’, the special character of the biblical writings as the Word of God and literary testimony, but also contribute to the actualisation of the biblical message, taking into account the ‘world of the readers’, that is, the significant contemporary and complex cultural, social and religious contexts that affect the daily lives of students and are the starting point of all educational processes. However, this is not the last word, as biblical teaching needs to work intensively on how these two ‘worlds’ can enter into a sustained dialogue with each other so that their interpenetration becomes educationally effective (Schambeck, 2015, pp. 1–2; Siquans et al., 2017, p. 104).

Nowadays, to enable this dialogue between the two ‘worlds’ and thus develop biblical competence in learners, many traditional methods of teaching Scripture are used in religion lessons, such as personal reading, plenary discussion, group work, biblical pantomime, theologizing, textbook exercises etc. In this article, however, we would like to draw attention to the new ways of ‘dealing’ with Sacred Texts enabled by conversational Artificial Intelligence (AI), with ChatGPT, introduced in 2022, being one of the most prominent examples.

Even a brief review of the literature makes it clear that there is a research gap in the treatment of ChatGPT as an auxiliary tool within biblical didactics in confessional religious education. Specifically about biblical studies, scholars from an international perspective focus, for example, on theological and ethical biases in Large Language Models (LLMs) (Elrod, 2024), biblical translation and the study of biblical languages (Elrod, 2023; Robie, 2024) or the enhancement of Holy Scripture with ChatGPT (Cheung & Cheung, 2023). Studies of conversational AI and Christian religious education mainly revolve around the various potentials and risks of these tools (Chrostowski, 2023; Condrey, 2023; Domicich, 2023; Ferguson, 2024; Heger, 2023; Toevs, 2023; Tran & Nguyen, 2021). In this context, the present article seeks to address the above-mentioned desideratum by taking the following three steps: First, the theoretical framework is outlined, presenting some basics about conversational AI and ChatGPT, and briefly discussing their implications for religious education and Bible teaching in Germany. Then, based on the five-step model of biblical didactics by J. Theis (2009, 2021), ways of using ChatGPT for biblical didactics in the classroom will be presented and their positive and negative aspects will be discussed.

The whole discussion will culminate in a concluding thesis, summarising the findings of this article and offering suggestions for the future.

2 Theoretical framework

The theoretical framework presented below is necessary both for terminological accuracy and to outline the epistemological context for this research. In particular, the second section will present some preliminary information, taking into account the results of educational research on the spread of conversational AI, and a brief characterization of the assumptions of German confessional religious education and related biblical didactics in this context.

2.1 Conversational AI and ChatGPT: some basics

“Conversational AI is a ‘sub-domain of Artificial Intelligence that deals with speech-based or text-based AI agents and can simulate and automate conversations and verbal interactions’.” (Saka et al., 2023, p. 1) The concept of conversational AI as chatbots is not new and dates back to the 1950s. It was pioneered by A. Turing, who laid the foundations for the development of computer programs that enable human–machine conversations based on text messaging or audio methods, among others, in the context of customer service, by automatically answering questions (Taecharungroj, 2023, p. 1; Czerski, 2023, p. 56). An example of such a chatbot is ChatGPT (Generative Pre-trained Transformer), built by OpenAI. This tool is based on an autoregressive language model that uses deep learning algorithms to stimulate human dialogue (Chrostowski, 2023, p. 83). As pointed out by W. M. Czerski (2023, 56–58), several milestones in the development of ChatGPT can be distinguished concerning the growth of its capabilities: (a) In 2018, Generative Pre-trained Transformers (GPTs) were created using 4.5 GB of input data—data from 7,000 unpublished books from the BookCorps database; (b) In 2019, a second generation of GPTs was released, based on 40 GB of input data from 45 million web pages and 8 million documents, allowing translation of the input text and answering questions; (c) in 2020, the third generation of the GPT model was created, based on approximately 570 GB of input data, which allowed the generation of word sequences that deceptively resembled human-written words; (d) in 2022, the third generation GPT was refined (model 3.5 based on 800 GB of input data; Meyer, 2022) and provided a chatbot that not only generated text but also engaged in conversation with the user. The ChatGPT answered additional questions, challenged false premises, acknowledged errors and rejected inappropriate questions or those for which it did not know the answer; (e) In 2023, the fourth generation of GPT was developed and released, which is “a large multimodal model capable of processing image and text inputs and producing text outputs” (OpenAI, 2023a, p. 1). In this sense, the latest version of GPT chat is an LLM that is much more efficient than its predecessors and can respond to user requests faster and with greater precision: “GPT-4 is 82% less likely to respond to requests for disallowed content and 40% more likely to produce factual responses than GPT-3.5” (OpenAI, 2023b). It is also more creative and collaborative with the user, being able to learn a person’s writing style and generate multimedia, which has led to its integration with Microsoft’s Bing search engine (Czerski, 2023, p. 58).

ChatGPT also has some limitations, despite the progressive improvement of LLMs. One of these is that the quality of such models depends on the data on which they are trained—the higher the quality of the data input, the higher the quality of the models. It follows that

data of questionable quality will not only compromise the integrity of the data and thus provide incorrect answers but may also violate ethical standards and consequently lead to plagiarism, copyright infringement or ghostwriting. It is also worth noting that this model does not understand human intentions and emotions and lacks common sense and critical thinking, which can lead to the generation of answers that may sound plausible but do not make sense. The issue of security and privacy is also highly controversial (van den Berg & du Plessis, 2023, p. 3; Kasneci et al., 2023, pp. 6–8).

In particular, what counts as knowledge for AI, the validity of the answers it provides and problems of bias, as well as the very reliance on AI as a tool for hermeneutics, raise very important ethical questions, especially for religious believers, since new technologies may regard certain theological traditions or methods of interpretation as authoritative. In this respect, from a socio-theological perspective, LMMs can be said to exhibit biases that are primarily in line with the concept of a “moderate form of Liberal Humanism” (Elrod, 2024, p. 24). On the one hand, ChatGPT has the advantage of steering users away from various extreme views, but on the other hand, it has the disadvantage of completely excluding minority or unconventional views. This should be considered an important issue as AI continues to develop and improve, and plays an increasing role in shaping the worldviews of people who may uncritically adopt the biases generated by the chatbot (Tzeng, 2024, p. 5).

2.2 Impact of Conversational AI and ChatGPT on (religious) education and biblical teaching

Statistical research by Bitkom e.V. (2023) in Germany shows that by 2023, more than half of students between the ages of 14 and 19 will use ChatGPT to get information or do their homework. This state of affairs poses new challenges for the education system, as can be seen from the growing number of interdisciplinary publications in this area: in Google Scholar, after entering the keyword ‘ChatGPT and education’, about 12,100 results appear in 0.18 seconds on 27 February 2024, while for the German-language version of ‘ChatGPT und Bildung’, about 1,250 results appear in 0.52 seconds since 2023. Chung K. Lo, in his “Rapid Review of the Literature” (2023), points out from an analysis of 50 articles that ChatGPT, according to the researchers, has (1) ChatGPT has the potential to enhance the teaching and learning process: It can be a valuable tool for teachers by providing a starting point for creating lesson plans or teaching materials, as well as for students themselves when used for ‘flipped teaching’, where students are required to prepare for class by studying materials at home and the knowledge gained provides a starting point for random discussions in class. ChatGPT can also help students learn online on their own and answer their questions, or improve group dynamics by suggesting a structure for discussion; (2) ChatGPT poses several pedagogical challenges and threats: The chatbot may be biased or contain inaccuracies, its responses may not always be accurate and reliable, especially in the case of specialised topics and current events, and its use may encourage the production of plagiarism; (3) The availability of ChatGPT requires immediate action in education, both at the policy level and in educational practice: for example, grading students based on oral presentations, establishing anti-plagiarism policies, and increasing student awareness of the veracity of chatbot-generated information (Lo, 2023, pp. 9–11). Other studies also highlight the fact that students can become overly reliant on conversational AI, which can lead to a decline in memory retention and critical thinking skills (Bai et al., 2023).

Similar conclusions are drawn by scholars in the field of pedagogy of religion concerning religious education in Germany in the age of the ‘digital revolution’ (Nord & Ziperovszky, 2017; Palkowitsch-Kühl, 2019; Gojny, 2019/2020; Platow, 2022; Heger, 2023; Chrostowski, 2023). Above all, however, attention is drawn to the fact that confessional—or increasingly, in the face of growing irreligiosity, confessional-cooperative (Baumert & Teschmer, 2024)¹—religious education as a school subject at all levels of education has specific goals to fulfil. These include promoting the ability to engage in religious dialogue and to judge, imparting a structured and life-relevant basic knowledge of the Church’s faith, and familiarising pupils with forms of living faith (Chrostowski, 2023, pp. 82–87; Church Office of the EKD, 2022, p. 35; Secretariat of the German Bishops’ Conference, 2016, pp. 12–13). In the pursuit of the above goals, conversational AI and ChatGPT can be used on the one hand as an educational object (‘Lerngegenstand’) with regards to fundamental theological and ethical questions, and on the other hand as an instrument to support various religious teaching and learning processes, e.g. by helping students to clarify ambiguities (Heger, 2023, pp. 29–34). Furthermore, it is emphasised that teaching and learning processes in religious education cannot be replaced by AI without loss, i.e. religious education benefits from personal and interpersonal interactions, taking into account all authenticity and emotionality between the students themselves as well as between the students and the teacher as a witness of faith (Chrostowski, 2023, p. 87).

The realisation of the above-mentioned aims of religious education in the face of the changes associated with Conversational AI also presupposes didactic work with the Holy Scripture, the basic premise of which was outlined in the introduction. At this point, it should be underlined that biblical didactics in religious education cannot be equated with scientific biblical interpretation. They are, in fact, two areas of work with the biblical text which, although related, are distinct. For example, knowledge of the method of historical–critical interpretation of the biblical text and its application is one of the prerequisites of biblical didactics and should therefore be considered essential for religious education teachers as experts in the field of theology. This does not mean, however, that the purpose of religious education itself is to teach children and young people, for example, historical–critical methodology in all its complexity. Rather, the didactic approach to working with the biblical text is to arouse young people’s interest and deepen their understanding of the Bible. To achieve this, biblical didactics need both cognitive-reflective approaches, such as historical–critical or problem- and development-oriented, and more affective, i.e. experience-based approaches, e.g. bibliodrama, narrative didactics, etc. (Adam, 2006, pp. 253, 263). Naturally, ChatGPT seems to be mainly helpful for the former.

In this context, it should also be noted, following M. Schambeck (2015, pp. 4–5), that traditions, and especially Christian traditions, play an increasingly minor role in the everyday life of students, making both biblical linguistic forms, rituals, symbols, etc., uncommunicative and often simply incomprehensible. Indeed, this process of de-traditionalisation has enormous consequences for biblical teaching, the aim of which is to bring students closer to a particular tradition in terms of content and form. For these traditions to be credible, it is therefore important that children and young people, on the one hand, are aware of the contextuality of the biblical texts and have a sound basic knowledge of them and, on the other hand, can understand their content, to distinguish between facts and symbols and

¹ Information on the profile and conditions of religious education in Germany is well documented in the literature and will not be presented here. The following publications can be used for further information: Schweitzer and Boschki 2004; Schmäzle 2013; Wittmer & Waldhoff 2019.

metaphors in the context of modern knowledge (e.g. the natural sciences concerning the creation of the world and the biblical description of it in Gen 1 and 2). It is also important to take into account the context of the biblical texts and to avoid treating them as fragmented “independent miniatures” (Schambeck, 2015, p. 5).

3 Ways to use ChatGPT for biblical teaching in the classroom

Initiating successful work with the Bible in the classroom is neither an easy nor an obvious task. For this reason—also about the use of ChatGPT in biblical didactics—certain fixed points must be observed which must underlie the drama of the learning processes. In addition to the age-appropriate design of the tasks and their clarity and appropriateness, aspects such as the focus on central (elementary) aspects of the biblical text, the individual assimilation of the meaning of the text and the discovery of its deeper meaning, the reference to the ‘worlds’ of the young people’s lives, etc. play an important role (Theis, 2021, p. 305). Given the above factors, the possible course of biblical didactics with partial use of ChatGPT can be systematised into the following process, which in its structure resembles the biblical *Lectio Divina* (Robertson, 2011) and consists of the following stages: (1) initial perception, (2) analysis of the text, (3) in-depth reflection, (4) critical interpretation and (5) creative assimilation (Theis, 2021, pp. 305–306, 2009, pp. 248–253).

It should be emphasised that we are already talking about a partial use of ChatGPT since it seems unreasonable to carry out the entire teaching process with it and to limit the role of the learner to that of the person who asks the question to the chatbot. More detailed arguments in support of this position will be presented in the following discussion of the use of ChatGPT in the stages of J. Theis’ biblical didactic model. In order not to base the below analysis solely on general premises, it will be concretised with the use of ChatGPT in biblical didactics using the example of the first account of the creation of the world and human in the Old Testament (Gen 1:1–2:4a). This text is central to the didactics of the Christian religion (Rothgangel, 2018) and its understanding is problematic for many students as well as religion teachers themselves (Fricke, 2006). It is also important to note that the examples presented below do not form a homogeneous didactic sequence, even though they are content-related.

In terms of methodology, we first characterise each of the five stages of biblical didactics and ask to what extent it is possible to implement ChatGPT within them. Furthermore, our study—similar to the study by van den Berg and du Plessis (2023)—was conducted in an interpretative paradigm, i.e. focusing on the researcher’s interest in a given research topic and imbuing it with worldviews and beliefs. In addition, both the question we posed to the chatbot and the texts generated with ChatGPT on the official OpenAI website, which were used for the analysis, are included below.

3.1 Initial perception

At this stage, ChatGPT can only be introduced into the didactic process once the students are familiar with the description of the creation of the world and human as a ‘partner’ in the dialogue, which should lead to a combination of textual orientation and imaginative activity in the students, which are fundamental for understanding the text. In methodological terms, this means first scanning and reading the text (silently or aloud). Pupils should then share their first spontaneous and therefore uncensored thoughts. In the next step,

difficult words and unintelligible passages should be identified and clarified (Theis, 2021, p. 305)—this is where ChatGPT seems to be particularly helpful. One such difficult and incomprehensible passage, as reported by M. Fricke (2006, p. 234) in the pericope in question, is the statement Gen 1:6–7: And God said, “Let there be an expanse amid the waters, and let it separate the waters from the waters.” And God made the expanse and separated the waters that were under the expanse from the waters that were above the expanse. Following M. Chrostowski (2023, pp. 83–84), we asked ChatGPT to perform the below task, the result of which is shown in Textbox 1: *Write very briefly about how we can understand the biblical passage “God made the expanse and separated the waters that were under the expanse from the waters that were above the expanse” (Gen 1:6–7).*

It is noteworthy that the answer produced by ChatGPT clearly shows that this particular AI tool favours a metaphorical (allegorical) interpretation of the Genesis text, and although it acknowledges that “interpretations may vary”, it gives no examples of these alternative ones, such as literal, tropological or anagogical interpretations (Pearlman, 2014). In such situations, an additional comment from the religion teacher is needed to complement the answer generated by ChatGPT and to broaden the student’s horizon of knowledge. He/she can also encourage pupils to consult their textbooks for further information.

3.2 Analysis of the text

In the second stage, students are expected to distance themselves from the text to get to know it better and to work on the text, for example with tasks related to the analysis of the text in a historical–critical sense. It should be borne in mind that only a thorough knowledge of the elementary structures of the text can take into account its contexts: specific and general. Biblical expertise or interdisciplinary skills in, for example, history, literature, languages, etc., which help to show the multidimensionality of biblical texts, seem essential here. The didactic process at this stage can be based, for example, on a presentation by the teacher or on research tasks by the students, using textbooks, biblical commentaries, etc. (Theis, 2021, p. 305).

In either case, LLM can be used to enhance the effectiveness of biblical teaching and learning processes. At this point, however, we will concentrate on the student’s work on the example from Gen: A biblical account of creation is nothing more than a psalm expressing joy and delight in God’s creation (Ritter, 1999, 334). This understanding of Gen 1:1–2:4a by the students requires them to be able to analyse the structure of the text of the pericope and to seek an answer to the question: What proves that this text is a psalm? In this sense, we asked ChatGPT to carry out the following task—from a student’s perspective—the

The biblical passage from Genesis 1:6-7 describes the creation of the firmament or expanse, which separates the waters below from the waters above. This imagery is often interpreted metaphorically, with the firmament representing a boundary between the earthly and heavenly realms. Some view it as a poetic expression highlighting God's role as the creator and organizer of the universe, emphasizing the divine order in the process of creation. Interpretations may vary among different religious traditions and scholars.

Textbox 1 Explanation of Gen 1:6–7 (ChatGPT-generated text, prompted by M. Chrostowski, 13 January 2024)

solution to which is presented in Textbox 2: *Identify the textual structure of the biblical pericope Gen 1:1–2:4a and justify why it is understood as a psalm.*

ChatGPT has correctly identified both the textual structure of the biblical pericope and its understanding as a psalm. The quoted answer is informative, coherent and clear, and students at the secondary level I or II should have no difficulty understanding it.

3.3 In-depth reflection

The third stage focuses on in-depth reflection, which should take the form of a preliminary summary. The students' associations and findings play an important role here, motivated by the following questions: What does this text mean to me? What questions arise for me concerning this text? This is nothing more than allowing students to relate their own experiences to the text and to trigger a kind of cognitive resonance in them (Theis, 2021, p. 306), which would be completely inhibited by ChatGPT's automatic generation of an answer that has nothing to do with the student's person and personal experience. Moreover, students can also show creativity at this stage if, in addition to the articulation of key aspects, action and production-oriented methods are used by the religion teacher, such as role-playing, inner monologue, writing a dialogue or letter to the author of the text (Theis, 2021, p. 306; Maisch-Zimmermann, 2018, p. 699).

At this level of working with the Bible, it is possible—starting from a moment of reflection on the 'logic' of ChatGPT and its 'production' of specific biblical content—to encourage students to engage in theologizing. In practice, this means that students can reflectively examine the content generated by ChatGPT, which might help them to recognise

The biblical pericope Genesis 1:1-2:4a is commonly known as the creation narrative or the account of the creation of the world. It is structurally organized in a poetic and rhythmic fashion, resembling the characteristics of Hebrew poetry found in the Psalms. The following are some textual features that support the understanding of Genesis 1:1-2:4a as a psalm:

1. **Repetition and Parallelism:** The text exhibits a pattern of repetition and parallelism, typical of Hebrew poetry. The phrases "And God said" and "And there was evening and there was morning" are repeated in a structured manner, contributing to the poetic flow of the passage.
2. **Numerical Progression:** The creation account unfolds in a systematic and numerical progression over the course of six days. This numerical pattern, with each day's activities presented in a similar format, adds to the poetic nature of the text.
3. **Elevated Language and Imagery:** The language used in the creation narrative is elevated and filled with powerful imagery. The descriptions of God's creative actions, such as "Let there be light" and "God saw that it was good," convey a sense of grandeur and majesty, characteristic of poetic expression.
4. **Theological Emphasis:** The passage places a strong emphasis on theological themes, such as the goodness of God's creation, the divine authority over the elements, and the idea of humanity being created in the image of God. These themes are often expressed in a poetic and contemplative manner, reminiscent of the Psalms.

Textbox 2 Gen 1:1–2:4a as a psalm (ChatGPT-generated text, prompted by M. Chrostowski, 13 January 2024)

differences between the interpretations of the chatbot and traditional theological teachings. Theologizing is understood as a specific form of communication with children and young people (Dieterich, 2012; Reiß & Freudenberger-Lötz, 2012; Schlag, 2023; Schlag Roose & Büttner, 2018), according to research on religious education in youth theology—which is analogous to children’s theology—can take three forms: “for”, “by” and “with” young people. The first form, theology “for” children and young people, refers to the materials and impulses that encourage them to reflect on their theological encounters with the content generated by ChatGPT. Theology “by” children and young people describes the learners’ thoughts and interpretations of theological themes, such as the creation of the world according to Gen 1:1–2:4a and ChatGPT’s interpretation of it. The third dimension, theology “with” children and young people, combines the impulses of theology “for” young people with the views of the learners in a dialogical exchange. It is important to consider all dimensions within the framework of biblical didactics to enhance the learning process and further develop religious identity (Brandtner, 2020, pp. 15–16). The teacher’s role in this process must be that of an equal interlocutor who, in symmetrically open communication, gives impulses for further reflection and, together with the students, searches for meaningful interpretations (Zimmermann, 2018, p. 452). In this approach, a systematic effort is made to create engaging learning environments and scenarios based on communication, relationship and dialogue-oriented methods (Schlag & Yadav, 2023). The goal is to leverage these methods to enhance theologically reflective language understanding, particularly concerning biblical themes and the content generated by conversational AI (Zimmermann, 2018, p. 452).

3.4 Critical interpretation

The fourth stage of the proposed scheme of biblical didactics involves a critical interpretation of the content of the text. The aim is to widen the field of vision and to clarify the context of the text as well as its often complex intertextuality. Both of these tasks, because of their complexity, can cause serious problems for students, so the teacher should formulate helpful questions, such as: What image of God, the world and humanity does the text deal with, or what image of reality does it present? How does the text relate to other passages or other sources? What is its place in the Bible as a whole or in a single book? Does the text confirm tradition or is it more innovative? In addition, it should be the students themselves who indicate both the aspects they will ‘examine’ and the criteria by which they will do so. In this way, individual elements of the text are not only critically interpreted, but also reconstructed and supplemented (Theis, 2021, p. 306). At this stage, it seems too simple and inadequate to allow students to generate complete answers in ChatGPT and, for example, only discuss them together in class. In the first place, the student must make the effort to attempt a critical interpretation of the biblical text, which will undoubtedly be an easier or more difficult task, depending on the difficulty of the text itself. In particular, it is much more difficult to explain the often complex intertextuality, and in this respect, the use of ChatGPT seems justified. The chatbot could give students hints about where to look for references to a particular text in the Bible itself or extra-Biblical sources, and the information it provides could be a starting point for their further work, such as comparing the meaning and context of the use of a particular passage in different books.

Based on the above and the example given, we asked ChatGPT to carry out the following task—from a student’s viewpoint: *Give a brief answer as to how the text of Gen*

1:1–2:4a relates to other passages in the Bible and other non-biblical sources. The answer prompted by the chatbot is displayed in Textbox 3.

3.5 Creative assimilation

The fifth and final step is the creative assimilation stage, the aim of which is to conceptualise the individual meaning of the biblical text for the students. Both identification with and distancing from the text are possible. Answers are sought, particularly within the framework of theologizing, where students often offer insightful theological perspectives (Kollmann, 2018, p. 220), to questions like: How can I express in a new way the events described in the biblical text? How can I express the events described in the biblical text in a new way? Does a particular pericope lead to better self-understanding and self-transformation? The results obtained at this stage form the basis for further biblical learning, which can then be continued in both individual and group work (Theis, 2021, p. 306). Again, ChatGPT seems to be not applicable, since the aim is to develop the individual student's original position and to define his or her horizon of reference to the biblical text.

To summarise the above application of ChatGPT in the different stages of biblical didactics, it should be noted that it is not a tool that can be used indiscriminately at any stage of the process without compromising the students' biblical learning and the development of their biblical competence. Its use—as a supplement to conventional educational mediums and methods—must be thoughtful and precise in each case, so that it encompasses both the 'world of the text' and does not hinder the reading of a given biblical pericope about the individual 'world of the reader' (Schambeck, 2015, pp. 1–2). In this context, it is precisely concerning the former, the 'world of the text', that ChatGPT can prove helpful by enabling students to:—find information about the historical and cultural context of the biblical pericopes or specific historical persons, events and cultures mentioned in the Bible;—clarify difficult biblical passages, unintelligible phrases, symbolism or metaphor;—translate words in the original biblical languages;—define unfamiliar theological concepts and terms;—discover and explore common themes, stories and motifs in Scripture;—find scholarly books, commentaries or articles that may provide additional or more detailed information on a particular pericope,—search for links to other passages of Scripture that relate directly or indirectly to a particular verse or theme (Cheung & Cheung, 2023).

In addition, it should be noted that although ChatGPT is indeed an easily accessible source of information about the Bible and its answers in the adopted example are coherent, linguistically correct and in line with leading scholarly approaches in the field of biblical exegesis and theology (Najda, 2004), as Textbox 1 shows, this information may be one-sided and limited. It is also possible for the chatbot to generate incorrect or discriminatory

Genesis 1:1–2:4a, commonly known as the creation account, is foundational to many biblical themes. It establishes the monotheistic understanding of God as the Creator of the universe. The text is connected to other passages in the Bible, such as Psalm 104 and Job 38–41, which also explore God's creative power. Additionally, the theological concepts in Genesis 1 are referenced in the New Testament, for instance, in Colossians 1:15–17 and John 1:1–3. Non-biblical sources, such as ancient Near Eastern creation myths, also exhibit some thematic parallels, though the theological implications and emphasis on monotheism distinguish Genesis.

Textbox 3 Relations of Gen 1:1–2:4a to other passages in the Bible and to other non-biblical sources (ChatGPT-generated text, prompted by M. Chrostowski, 14 January 2024)

answers. In this regard, the role of the religion teacher as a theological expert is crucial (Chrostowski, 2023, p. 84), as is the critical thinking skills of the students themselves (Homayoonfarda & Sajjadib, 2012). This also raises the question of the time resources available to religious education teachers when working with large groups, for example, will the teacher be able to check and give feedback in real-time on all the responses generated by ChatGPT for a class of 25 people? Besides, ChatGPT cannot be used in every classroom due to the different development levels of the students and their digital media skills. It seems to be more suitable for classes in secondary level I or II than for classes in primary level of education.

The table below summarises the conclusions of the analysis in this paragraph (Table 1).

4 Concluding theses

Conversational AI such as ChatGPT has, as already mentioned, positive and negative sides that can also be identified in the context of biblical didactics. In this sense, it is worth outlining some concluding theses that discuss the results of this article and also offer suggestions for the future:

1. These: Since Conversational AI tools such as ChatGPT are already—directly and indirectly—changing the face of education, they need to be consciously and responsibly implemented in religious teaching and learning processes as well as in biblical didactics.

Conversational AI tools such as ChatGPT are becoming increasingly accessible and popular. They allow anyone to access information, and bring learning aids anywhere and anytime, thus changing education itself. Because of these changes, the implementation of these AI tools in the processes of religious education and biblical didactics should be intensified. In other words, “an ideal educational environment would involve the harmonious coexistence of ChatGPT alongside conventional textbooks and classroom lectures” (Ateeq et al., 2024, p. 1421) etc. This means that through Chat GPT, students and teachers can find answers to their questions and discover new areas of religious or biblical knowledge—including context, references, interpretation, theological concepts, historical background, exegesis, hermeneutics, translation comparisons, word studies, etc.—as well as asking for literature recommendations that provide deeper insights into specific biblical passages or themes (Cheung & Cheung, 2023). Interactive conversation tools can also be used for discussions about religion and the Bible, encouraging active learning and reflection on religious content. In addition, ChatGPT can remember context so that the learner can have an active conversation with it that is tailored to their individual needs. In this context, however, it is necessary to use these tools responsibly to avoid potential negative effects such as the promotion of misinterpretations or the lack of adequate control over religious content, which was not the case, for example, with the use of accredited textbooks. Religious educators also need to recognise the potential challenges of incorporating AI tools into the teaching process, as these shifts place new demands on the future training of religious education teachers.

2. These: The biases that Conversational AI perpetuates can affect students’ understanding of the theological concepts that underpin biblical teaching.

Table 1 Proposals for using ChatGPT in the five-stage Biblical Teaching of J. Theis (2021)

Stage of Biblical didactics	Description	Can ChatGPT be used for this task?
<i>1st stage:</i> initial perception	Scanning and reading the text (silently or aloud), sharing initial spontaneous and therefore uncensored thoughts, and identifying and clarifying difficult words and unintelligible passages	Yes, as a supplement to conventional educational mediums to help clarify difficult words or biblical fragments, etc., e.g.: What is the meaning of the Hebrew word “Tohu wa-bohu” (Gen 1:2)?
<i>2nd stage:</i> analysis of the text	Distancing from the text to get to know it better and work on the text, e.g. tasks involving analysis of the text in a historical–critical sense	Yes, for example, in addition to textbooks and biblical commentaries, etc., to provide information about the structure of the text, the literary genre or its cultural–historical context, etc., e.g.: What is the textual structure of Gen 1:1–2:4a?
<i>3rd stage:</i> in-depth reflection	In-depth theological reflection, reflection, preliminary in nature, in which students’ associations play an important role	No, because this stage aims to evoke a kind of cognitive resonance in the students
<i>4th stage:</i> critical interpretation	Critical interpretation of the content of a text to clarify the context of the biblical pericope and its often complex intertextuality	Yes, but only partially, as a supporting medium to traditional teaching materials, also, among others, for exploring complex intertextuality, e.g.: What is the relationship of Gen 1:1–2:4a to other passages in the Bible and to other non-biblical sources?
<i>5th stage:</i> creative assimilation	Conceptualising the individual meaning of the biblical text in the context of individual identification with the text as well as argumentative distancing from it	No, because this stage is about the development of the student’s initial position and the definition of his or her horizon of reference to the biblical text

Conversational AI, including ChatGPT, relies on machine learning algorithms that can take into account biases in the training data. If this data contains cultural, religious or social biases, there is a risk that the algorithms will reproduce these biases in the responses they generate. This can affect the way students understand theological concepts such as the creation of humans in the image and likeness of God, the equality of all humans, original sin, etc., as these are presented through the prism of the biases present in the AI. Consequently, if the answers generated by AI are consistent with the biases or internal limitations of the algorithms, this may lead to the perpetuation of erroneous or one-sided views on these issues that do not reflect the full range of academic thought and discourse in the biblical field (Ferrara, 2023).

3. These: The use of ChatGPT in the classroom raises questions not only about the validity of the answers generated but also about the teacher's ability to verify them and the protection of the students' data itself.

ChatGPT, like other AI tools, may generate answers that are inaccurate, incomplete or even false, as briefly highlighted above. In the case of biblical teaching, where interpretation of texts is crucial, there is a risk that answers generated by ChatGPT may not be in line with theological traditions or interpretations. It is therefore important for teachers to be able to check these answers and correct any errors, which is not only time-consuming but also difficult to achieve in large classes. In addition, the students themselves, as their religious socialisation wanes, may not be in a position to identify inconsistent information generated by ChatGPT (Chrostowski, 2024, p. 76). Again, this highlights the need for a correlated use of traditional teaching methods (e.g. textbook-based, etc.) and conversational AI to ensure high-quality educational processes (Ateeq et al., 2024). Furthermore, the ChatGPT is not human and does not have the spiritual discernment that, for example, a religion teacher has, which is an important aspect of spiritual development as well as Bible work (Cheung & Cheung, 2023). Issues of privacy and student data protection are also questionable. In the case of ChatGPT, which uses natural language processing, there is a risk of collecting and storing students' personal information, such as their questions or answers. Putting in place appropriate safeguards and privacy policies is key to ensuring that student data is secure and protected (Kasneji et al., 2023, pp. 6–8).

4. These: The excessive use of ChatGPT in the context of biblical didactics can hurt interpersonal interactions and lead to disrupted development of students' cognitive processes, creativity and personal positionality.

An over-reliance on conversational AI tools like ChatGPT can lead to a reduction in interpersonal interaction between teacher and student and between students. Without face-to-face contact and discussion, students may be hindered in their development of communication and interpersonal skills, which are important not only for their understanding and interpretation of biblical content but also for deepening their knowledge (Chrostowski, 2023, p. 87). Furthermore, there is a legitimate concern that the uncontrolled use of ChatGPT by students may lead to negative consequences and inappropriate practices within the biblical learning process. Primarily, there is a risk that students will use the tool to cheat, for example in solving homework. As a result, the automatic generation of answers without active thinking can lead to insufficiently developed independent thinking, as well as deficiencies in problem-solving skills or the creation of argumentation schemes to justify one's

position, impaired cognitive abilities and minimal creativity, and limit the improvement of critical thinking on religious, theological and biblical issues (Chinonso et al., 2023 pp. 38–39). Ultimately, this will lead to increased passivity on the part of students who, instead of analysing biblical texts for themselves and formulating their interpretations, may rely on ready-made answers generated by AI.

5. These: The use of ChatGPT in the biblical teaching approach outlined above is highly reflective and text-based, which may lead to the exclusion of the vast majority of students—due to declining religious socialisation—in the classroom.

The weakening of religious socialisation contributes to the fact that a significant number of students struggle to understand the complexity of religious phenomena and issues. Consequently, they also face difficulties in understanding biblical texts, critically evaluating them, interpreting them and grasping their intertextuality (Chrostowski, 2024; Kropač & Schambeck, 2022; Schambeck, 2015). In light of this, it is worth openly questioning how effective and inclusive the currently applied teaching methods are for all students participating in religious lessons. It seems that alongside ‘reflective’ methods and the use of conversational AI, an approach based on ‘image generation’ could be considered. This involves using AI to visualise and generate multimedia materials that can help students better understand religious content, such as biblical parables, historical events or biblical symbolism (Termin, 2024). Furthermore, virtual reality (VR) and augmented reality (AR) technologies could enrich these experiences, allowing students to ‘immerse’ themselves in the world of religion more interactively and engagingly (Puzio, 2023, pp. 22–23). In this context, immersive art (Margolis, 2014) is becoming increasingly popular, offering new ways of engaging with religious works of art, for example through multimedia experiences using VR tools, sound and light effects, olfactory and tactile stimuli, video projections and more (Puzio, 2023, p. 23). Indeed, such an approach in biblical didactics is not new, as visualisation methods have been used for a long time (Bosold, 2018; Itze & Moers, 2018; Maisch-Zimmermann, 2018), but through the application of AI, they are now taken to a new dimension that has so far been poorly explored in religious education processes (Chrostowski, 2023, pp. 81–82).

6. These: In the future, the implementation of (conversational) AI and tools like ChatGPT in biblical didactics should be tested and evaluated through empirical research, focusing on specific applications and potential effects compared to traditional teaching methods.

As the esteemed German religious pedagogue Friedrich Schweitzer noted, the development of empirical approaches to biblical didactics still seems to be rather uncommon (Schweitzer, 2021, p. 287), despite research from recent decades in Germany indicating such a need (cf. Albrecht, 2019; Bee-Schroedter, 1998; Bröking-Bortfeldt, 1984; Freund, 2005; Fricke, 2005; Spiering-Schomborg, 2017; Theis, 2005a, 2005b). Currently, there is an emerging need for exploratory research on representative samples regarding the use of AI tools, such as ChatGPT or various image generators (e.g. DALL-E3), in biblical didactics. It is also important to empirically test the effectiveness of theoretically developed didactic approaches, such as the above-mentioned five-level model of biblical didactics by J. Theis (Theis, 2021), using both AI tools and traditional teaching methods. In this context, J. Theis’s model, for example, could be tested and evaluated through various empirical studies, such as (OpenAI, 2024):

- *Comparative studies with a control group*: Conducting an experiment in which one group of participants uses traditional biblical teaching methods, while another group uses a didactic model based on artificial intelligence. This would make it possible to compare the effectiveness of acquiring biblical knowledge and understanding of the text.
- *Assessment of understanding and interpretation*: To investigate whether participants using a model that integrates conversational AI tools have a better understanding and ability to interpret biblical texts compared to those using traditional teaching methods.
- *Knowledge retention*: To assess the long-term retention of biblical knowledge after a period of biblical training using AI compared to traditional methods.
- *Student satisfaction and engagement studies*: Empirical analysis to determine whether students are more engaged and satisfied with the biblical teaching process using AI compared to traditional methods.
- *Effectiveness across age groups and educational levels*: Testing whether the AI Bible teaching model is equally effective for different age groups and levels of education, such as primary and secondary schools.
- *Analyse the interaction and adaptability of a biblical teaching model using AI*: Investigate how the interaction of students within a given biblical teaching model with the help of AI tools influences its further adaptation and improvement.

Furthermore, when conducting empirical research in the field of biblical didactics, it is important to bear in mind that the Bible, unlike many other texts, should be understood not only in terms of its textual content but also in terms of its particular and spiritual message. In this respect, the reception of biblical texts ultimately touches upon faith, which, as is well known, cannot be empirically tested (Schweitzer, 2021, p. 298).

The aforementioned theses suggest that the use of Conversational AI and ChatGPT in religious and biblical teaching and learning is a complex issue that requires critical reflection on the part of both students and teachers. What is certain is that such tools cannot be demonised, nor can they be approached with uncritical optimism. Religious education and biblical didactics will have to deal more intensively with the development of AI in the future, both at the level of scientific reflection and in practice, i.e. in the classroom. Above all, however, it is important to remember that it is the human being and his or her well-being that must be at the centre of educational processes, not AI, however advanced it may be.

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