

Catholic or catholic? Biblical Scholarship at the Center

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Sometime in the first decade of the second century, Ignatius, bishop of Antioch in Syria, was condemned to death *ad bestias*, that is, by wild animals in the amphitheater. He was sent under guard with other prisoners to Rome for the games there, probably in the Flavian Amphitheater, what today we call the Colosseum. As his party made its way up the western coast of Asia Minor, he wrote to a string of Christian communities there after he had received visits from their envoys. When writing to the Christians of Smyrna, he remarks that the Eucharist should be celebrated only by the bishop or someone he delegates, for “wherever the bishop appears, let the whole community be gathered, just as wherever Jesus Christ is, there is ἡ καθολικὴ ἐκκλησία (*Smyrn.* 8.2). A generation later, in the same city, old bishop Polycarp was about to be martyred in the amphitheater. But the narrator of his martyrdom reports that when the police came to arrest him in a country house where he had taken refuge, since it was dinnertime, he ordered food and drink to be set out for them, while he went aside and prayed aloud for two hours. In his prayer, he remembered everyone he had ever encountered and ἡ καθολικὴ ἐκκλησία throughout the world. The narrator finished the report of Polycarp’s martyrdom by concluding that now Polycarp is enjoying the glory of God and Jesus Christ, shepherd of ἡ καθολικὴ ἐκκλησία throughout the world (*Mart. Pol.* 8.1; 19.2).

The word καθολικός was in general use in Hellenistic Greek, meaning “general” or “universal.” Thus Iamblichus (*Life of Pythagoras* 15.65) speaks of “universal harmony” and Epictetus speaks of οἱ καθολικοὶ as general principles or standards (4.4.29; 2.12.7). Indeed, today we are accustomed to calling the NT Letters

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of James, Jude, 1–2 Peter and John the “catholic epistles,” mostly because we really do not have a clue whence they came or whither they were destined. Similarly, the fourth-century Christian historian Eusebius, quoting the anti-Montanist Apollonius, recalls a Montanist writer Themisto, who wrote an ἐπιστολή καθολική “in imitation of the apostle” (*Hist. eccl.* 5.18.5). By the fourth century, the word was taking on a more specific meaning of orthodox Christianity, as when Constantine, quoted in Eusebius, refers to the church represented by Eusebius as the καθολικὴ θρησκεία, perhaps best translated as the catholic religion (*Hist. eccl.* 10.6.1).

The *Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church* gives five definitions of the word “catholic”: (1) universal, not local; (2) orthodox, not heretical; (3) the undivided church before 1054; (4) from 1054 to the sixteenth century, not Orthodox; (5) Western, not Protestant. This is a handy resume of the mutations in meaning acquired by this simple little word over the centuries, and it is ironic to note that this word, meant to be all-inclusive, in every case but one (the undivided church before 1054) is defined over against something else. While Ignatius and Polycarp back in the second century sound as if they mean the whole church, in effect they probably really mean that network of many local churches that profess roughly the same faith and are in communion with each other. Ignatius had some harsh things to say about those who disagreed with him about how to live the Christian life. They would probably not be included when he thinks about his universal church.

So the irony is that a word and an idea meant to include everyone have historically been used most often to delineate some against others. Most of us when reciting the Apostles’ Creed say that we believe in the “holy catholic church,” with small *c* or capital *C*, depending on our situation, but in this context it is intended to be restored to its original meaning of “universal.” Yet the Catholic Church with capital *C*, more commonly known as the Roman Catholic Church, is in many respects universal and in some aspects quite particular. It is found in nearly every country in the world. With the changes of Vatican Council II, many Catholics lamented the loss of the Latin liturgy, which had become a universally recognized ritual, at least in the West. It was said that a Catholic could walk into a Catholic Church anywhere in the West and understand the progression of the ritual. Today the Roman Catholic Church is creeping slowly toward the particularity of truly indigenous liturgical traditions and practices, with the attendant losses and gains that this change implies.

It is the play on catholic with capital *C* and small *c* that forms the foundation for what I wish to explore this evening: biblical scholarship that arises from the traditions of the capital *C* but is at the service of the small *c*. Today, Roman Catholic biblical scholars are in a number of key posts in major university programs in biblical studies, in a position to influence significantly the next generations of biblical scholars. How will that influence play out? What contributions have been

made and are being made by Roman Catholic biblical scholars to the wider field of biblical scholarship? How does this work and how might it work in the future?

First of all, what makes biblical interpretation Catholic (with capital C)? That it is done by someone who professes adherence to the Roman Catholic Church? And its teachings? By someone who has grown up with a Catholic cultural heritage? By someone who expressly and consciously holds in mind the major church documents of the last two centuries on biblical interpretation? By someone who simply interprets out of one's own academic and religious identity, the unarticulated "pre-understanding"? Several attempts have been made recently to describe or characterize Catholic biblical interpretation, and we will consider them in due time. First, some background.

The quality of Roman Catholic biblical scholarship in the past and present generation needs no special pleading to those acquainted with names of past SBL presidents such as John L. McKenzie (1967), Raymond E. Brown (1977), Joseph A. Fitzmyer (1979), Roland E. Murphy (1984), Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza (1987), Harry Attridge (2001), and John J. Collins (2002). Roman Catholic biblical scholarship is founded on the rich tradition of patristic and medieval exegesis, yet also embraces historical criticism. One sometimes sees histories of biblical interpretation that give minimal attention, if any, to patristic and medieval traditions in a meager introduction, then go on to develop the "real stuff" in the sixteenth, seventeenth, or even eighteenth centuries, as if nothing happened between the writing of the biblical texts and the rise of modern biblical criticism, or at least between Augustine and Luther.

It is certainly true that institutional Roman Catholicism was not the first to embrace "higher criticism," and in fact condemned it in the otherwise progressive encyclical of Leo XIII in 1893, *Providentissimus Deus*, on biblical interpretation. The Catholic Church, however, was soon dragged into it kicking and screaming by the persuasive arguments of German Protestant scholarship in the nineteenth century on such questions as the authorship of the Pentateuch and the interrelationships of the Synoptic Gospels. But once the church accepted the new criticism, it grabbed on with a bulldog grip, so much so that the 1993 document of the Pontifical Biblical Commission, *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church*, declared historical criticism to be "the indispensable method for the scientific study of the meaning of ancient texts," to the chagrin both of those who think the whole enterprise of historical criticism was a terrible mistake in the first place and would return to patristic exegesis as the norm, and of the postmodernists, who would declare historical criticism passé. The document goes on to say that Scripture, being the Word of God in human language, "has been composed by human authors in all its various parts and in all the sources that lie behind them. Because of this, its proper understanding not only admits the use of this method but actually requires it" (I.A, p. 35).

How did we get from there to here? The interest of Catholic theologians in modern biblical study began earlier than one might have thought. Already the Council of Trent in 1546 stated that its purpose was “that in the Church errors be removed and the purity of the gospel be preserved.” It underlined the importance of proper training of Scripture teachers and specified Jerome’s Latin Vulgate as the standard text, but never required that all translations be made from it.¹

Contrary to some popular images, the Roman Catholic Church from the time of the Reformation was never against biblical research or the reading of the Bible by the faithful. What it opposed was *private* interpretation contrary to the common understanding of the church. Both Catholics and Protestants often interpreted the prohibition of private interpretation as a prohibition of Bible reading, but such was not the case. For instance, some of the first American Catholic bishops were eager to get an approved translation into the hands of their people.

The standard Catholic translation at that time was the Douay Bible, which had been done by a group of Oxford-trained exiled English Catholics at the English College in Flanders, then at Rheims, France, from 1568 to 1582. It was finally published as a whole in 1609–10, just before the first publication of the King James Bible in 1611.

The Douay Rheims translation had undergone five revisions by 1728. The most extensive revision was done by Bishop Challoner of London in 1749–52, so that it came to be called the Douay-Rheims-Challoner Bible.

In 1757, Rome decreed that all Bible translations should include “notes drawn from the holy fathers of the Church, or from learned Catholics,” in other words, an annotated Bible.² In 1789, Bishop John Carroll of Baltimore urged a Catholic publisher in Philadelphia, Matthew Carey, to publish the Douay-Rheims-Challoner Bible, so that it could be placed “in the hands of our people, instead of those translations, which they purchase in stores & from Booksellers in the Country.” The competition, of course, was the King James Version, generally recognized as an excellent translation by all who studied it. Carey published editions of this Douay-Rheims-Challoner Bible in 1790 and again in 1805.³

Meanwhile, in Brussels and Paris, the Catholic physician Jean Astruc (1684–1766) wrote a number of medical treatises, especially on midwifery, but is remembered for none of them. Rather, he is remembered for one anonymous publication of 1753, “Conjectures on the original Memoirs which it appears that Moses used to write the book of Genesis.”⁴ Because of it, he is considered by many

¹ Dean P. Béchar, ed. and trans., *The Scripture Documents: An Anthology of Official Catholic Teachings* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2002), 3, 6–10.

² Gerald P. Fogarty, S.J., *American Catholic Biblical Scholarship: A History from the Early Republic to Vatican II* (New York: Harper & Row, 1989), 6.

³ *Ibid.*, 3.

⁴ *Conjectures sur les Mémoires originaux dont il paroît que Moïse s’est servi pour composer le*

to be the father of modern biblical criticism. His method was simple: he divided those texts in Genesis that call God Elohim from those that call God Yahweh and reasoned to two sources upon which Moses had drawn. A predecessor, the Oratorian priest Richard Simon (1638–1712), had published in several editions in the 1680s critical histories of Old and New Testaments, arguing that Moses could not be the author of the Pentateuch. Astruc, on the other hand, was conservative in both his medical and his religious views and did not mean to suggest that Moses was not the author of Genesis, but his work would later be picked up in German Protestant scholarship as the documentary hypothesis.

Francis P. Kenrick, priest and theologian, later to become successively archbishop of Philadelphia (1842–51) and Baltimore (1851–63), published the first edition of his *Theologia Dogmatica* in 1839. It is clear that he had been reading the biblical scholarship of the day, for he wrote that the Scriptures “cannot be referred to the age of Christ, nor to the beginning of the apostolic preaching: for it is evident that many years elapsed before anything was consigned to writing. The apostolic writings are not known to have been collected together until the second century; and some were not recognized by some churches for another four centuries.”⁵

Between 1849 and 1860, Kenrick did a complete revision of the Douay-Rheims-Challoner Bible, comparing the translation to the King James, and comparing the Latin Vulgate to the Greek and Hebrew. He acknowledged the many advances made by Protestant scholarship and cited Protestant as well as Catholic authors in the notes, considering that more unity of thinking could only serve the common cause of Christianity. He took conservative positions on questions of authorship while noting the reasons behind contrary arguments; for example, since Moses did not know science, he can be excused for speaking of creation in six days, which not all the patristic authors understood literally, and thus a diversity of views was legitimate.⁶ How timely for today!

Kenrick’s version enjoyed wide popularity, but was not without its critics. For instance, Martin Spalding, bishop of Louisville, objected in 1858 to the critical note explaining the Greek word βαπτίζω as immersion, complaining that “the Baptists out there have been exulting over it too much.” Orestes Brownson, philosopher and Catholic convert, championed Kenrick’s cause, noting that St. Jerome studied Hebrew with Jewish scholars and Cicero was a master of Latin. So

livre de la Génèse (Brussels: Fricx, 1753); critical edition with introduction and notes, Pierre Gibert, *Conjectures sur la Génèse* (Paris: Noesis, 1999). For context, see Ana M. Acosta, “Conjectures and Speculations: Jean Astruc, Obstetrics, and Biblical Criticism in Eighteenth-Century France,” *Eighteenth Century Studies* 35, no. 2 (2002): 256–66.

⁵ *Theologia Dogmatica*, 292–83; quoted in Fogarty, *Catholic Biblical Scholarship*, 8.

⁶ Fogarty, *Catholic Biblical Scholarship*, 8, 15, 23–25.

too, Protestants could be just as good as Catholics at grammar, philology, geography, history, or “the natural productions of the Holy Land.”⁷

The Second Plenary Council of American Catholic bishops in 1866, three years after Kenrick’s death, came close to endorsing his translation as the official one of the American Catholic Church. A committee appointed to study the question made this recommendation, but Kenrick’s own brother Peter, bishop of St. Louis, strenuously objected. Ultimately, they fell back on the Douay-Rheims-Challoner version without making any new recommendation.

Meanwhile, in Palestine Marie-Joseph Lagrange (1855–1938) had been sent from France by his Dominican superiors to found the *École Pratique d’Études Bibliques* in Jerusalem, which would emphasize study of the Bible in the physical and cultural context in which it had been written. In 1920, it became the national archaeological school of France, changing its name to *École Biblique et Archéologique Française*. The faculty that Lagrange assembled there included such names as the Arabic ethnographer Antonin Janssen (1871–1962), the preeminent Palestinian archaeologist Louis-Hugues Vincent (1872–1960), and Semitic epigrapher Antoine Raphael Savignac (1874–1951). Later eminent faculty included Felix-Marie Abel (1878–1953), Bernard Couroyer (1900–1992), Roland de Vaux (1903–1971), Pierre Benoit (1906–1987), Marie-Émile Boismard (1916–2004), and Jerome Murphy-O’Connor. In the first fifty years of its existence, the *École Biblique* produced forty-two major books, 682 scientific articles, and over 6,200 book reviews. Its flagship journal, *Revue biblique*, founded in 1892, continues to be a leader in scientific biblical research. The school’s major translation project was the *Jerusalem Bible*, first published in French in 1956, and subsequently in most major languages.⁸

In 1892, the progressive Archbishop John Ireland of St. Paul, Minnesota, wrote to the first rector of the newly founded Catholic University of America that he should educate his professors and hang onto them, “making bishops only of those who are not worth keeping as professors.”⁹

In 1893, the encyclical *Providentissimus Deus* of Pope Leo XIII on the study of Sacred Scripture reaffirmed that professors of Scripture must use the Latin Vulgate, sanctioned by the Council of Trent, but it also encouraged the learning and use of the original languages and the use of methods of scientific criticism. It declared, on the authority of Augustine (*De Genesi ad litteram* 1.21), a foundational principle that is still affirmed today, and importantly so in light of recent issues of Creationism and Intelligent Design: that there cannot be any real discrepancy between theology and the natural sciences, as long as each remains true to its own language and discipline (39). If an apparent contradiction arises, every effort

⁷ *Ibid.*, 28, 26.

⁸ [Http://www.op.org/ebaf/index-eng.htm](http://www.op.org/ebaf/index-eng.htm).

⁹ Fogarty, *Catholic Biblical Scholarship*, 38–39.

must be put to its solution. “Even if the difficulty is after all not cleared up and the discrepancy seems to remain, the contest must not be abandoned. Truth cannot contradict truth, and we may be sure that some mistake has been made either in the interpretation of the sacred words or in the polemical discussion itself. If no such mistake can be detected, we must then suspend judgment for the time being” (45).¹⁰ What is most interesting in the previous statement is that mistakes may be attributed to biblical interpretation and discussion but not to science.

At the same time, the encyclical condemned the so-called higher criticism as tainted with “false philosophy and rationalism” for its attempt to alter traditional understandings of the authorship and origins of biblical books. The pope’s letter was sufficiently ambiguous for both sides of the controversy, progressives and conservatives, to find something that would bolster their cause. Father Lagrange and his companions in Jerusalem took it as confirmation for what they were doing. Others took a different view.

The openness and optimism of the mid-nineteenth century were giving way to an oppressive reaction. The opponents of change were gathering force. In 1890, Alfred Loisy at the Institut Catholique in Paris was recognized by Denis J. O’Connell, rector of American College in Rome as the best biblical scholar in the church.¹¹ Three years later, he had been forced out of his academic position and was to become embroiled in the controversy over modernism. The enemies of Father Lagrange succeeded in having him removed from Jerusalem for one year, 1912, but he was never formally condemned.¹²

The uncertainties of the times and the condemnation in 1899 of “Americanism,” a vague heresy never quite defined, led to the establishment of the Pontifical Biblical Commission in 1902 to ride herd on error in biblical study. Some of the responses of the Pontifical Biblical Commission in its early years seriously impeded progress in scholarship. In the words of Roland Murphy, the commission “has had a topsy-turvy career in the century of its existence, but it can safely be said that it is now constituted by a broad band of international scholars . . . [who] have displayed a reasonable openness to various approaches to the biblical text that have emerged in modern times.”¹³

¹⁰ Béchard, *Scripture Documents*, 57. All translations of church documents are taken from this book. In general, see also Gerald P. Fogarty, “Scriptural Authority (Roman Catholicism),” *ABD* 5:1023–26.

¹¹ Fogarty, *Catholic Biblical Scholarship*, 39.

¹² Restored to Jerusalem, he continued there until ill health forced his return to France, where he died in 1938, at the age of eighty-three. In 1967 his body was brought back to Jerusalem to be interred in the center of the choir of the Basilica of St. Stephen, where it rests today (www.op.org/op/ebaf/index-eng.htm).

¹³ Roland E. Murphy, “What Is Catholic about Catholic Biblical Scholarship—Revisited,” *BTB* 28 (1998): 112–19, here 117. On July 3, 1907, came a list of condemned modernist propositions in a decree aptly titled *Lamentabili*, published by the Holy Office (known today as the Congregation for

The Pontifical Biblical Institute was established by Pope Pius X in 1909 as a Roman center for higher studies in Scripture and entrusted to the Jesuits. Originally it was an organ of the Pontifical Biblical Commission; its purpose was to exercise control over biblical studies and prepare students for its examinations. But by 1916, the Pontifical Biblical Institute granted the licentiate degree, and by 1930 it was independent of the PBC and was granting doctoral degrees. Today, with its added house of study in Jerusalem, it is a respected center for biblical studies and educates students from some sixty countries.¹⁴

By 1936, there was full realization of the limits of the standard Catholic English translation, the Douay-Rheims-Challoner, and of the use of the Vulgate as the foundational text. Bishop Edwin O'Hara of Great Falls, Montana, episcopal chair of the Confraternity of Christian Doctrine,¹⁵ called a meeting in Washington of prominent Catholic biblical scholars. This meeting would give rise not only to a new translation of the NT but also to the founding of the Catholic Biblical Association of America in 1937 and the *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* in 1939. The *CBQ* was to be "both technical and practical" to appeal to scholar, priest, and educated laity, a stretch that was eventually to prove impossible, so that in 1962 *The Bible Today* was founded to fulfill the pastoral function, allowing the *CBQ* to become the respected scholarly journal that it is today.

The Catholic Biblical Association was in the early years totally composed of priests, and before the outbreak of World War II, all Catholic professors of Scripture were supposed to have degrees from the pontifical faculties in Rome. The war made this impossible and was the occasion for the first Catholic priests to begin their studies at Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore with the renowned William Foxwell Albright.

At the 1944 meeting of the Catholic Biblical Association, Albright was invited to deliver a paper, accompanied by his Catholic wife, who, it was rumored, would make up for his reticence with her vivacity. At that meeting, Albright (without his wife) was elected to honorary lifetime membership, the first non-Catholic member.¹⁶ In 1947, Sister Kathryn Sullivan, R.S.C.J., professor of history at Manhattanville College, tutored and self-taught in Scripture because no Catholic faculty at

the Doctrine of the Faith), and on September 8 of the same year, the encyclical *Pascendi Dominici Gregis*, condemning modernism as heresy. Neither so-called Americanism nor modernism directly concerned biblical study but, more generally, the philosophical preunderstanding with which one approaches the texts. They were more directly involved with political questions of separation of church and state. The waves of rationalism and empiricism had washed over the Bible as well as the rest of theology and Christian life.

¹⁴ www.pib.urbe.it.

¹⁵ An organization founded in Rome in 1562 for the purpose of coordinating religious instruction.

¹⁶ Fogarty, *Catholic Biblical Scholarship*, 241.

the time would have admitted a woman, became the first woman elected to membership. She was elected vice-president in 1958, an office from which she would normally have succeeded to the presidency, had they dared at the time to elect a woman as president. The first woman president of the CBA was not to come until 1986, Pheme Perkins, predating by a year the first woman president of SBL. Today the CBA counts more than fifteen hundred members, including a number of Protestants and Jews.

The watershed moment came with the publication of the encyclical *Divino Afflante Spiritu* by Pius XII in 1943. It seemed to reverse all the hesitations that had plagued Catholic biblical scholarship in the years since the modernist crisis. It called for use of the original biblical languages, saying that the special “authenticity” granted the Vulgate was not for its critical quality but because of its venerable history of use through the centuries. It called for the use of historical methods and every scientific means at the disposal of exegetes. It declared that apparent contradictions and historical inaccuracies were due to ancient ways of speaking, written by authors who could not have known anything about science. The key to interpretation, it said, was to go back to the extent possible to the original context, using history, archaeology, ethnology, and whatever other tools were available. The fear of modernism was over and historical criticism was in.

The encyclical was dated September 30, 1943; however, because of the war, it did not reach the United States until February 1944. It was at the next meeting of the CBA that Albright gave his aforementioned address and was elected an honorary lifetime member.

Just when Catholic biblical scholars thought it was safe to go back in the water, however, came another encyclical by the same Pope Pius XII in 1950, *Humani Generis*, aimed not at biblical studies but at the so-called New Theology coming out of France that tended to gloss over ecumenical differences and blur the distinction between nature and grace. But it also warned against polygenism, the evolutionary theory of multiple human origins, as being incompatible with revelation as given in Genesis. Once again, an authoritative document was open to the kind of ambiguity in which ideological opponents can take potshots at each other. This situation was to last until the promulgation of the Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation (*Dei Verbum*) at the fourth session of Vatican Council II in September 1965.

Dei Verbum confirmed the progressive movement of *Divino Afflante Spiritu* in 1943, setting the theological context and the tone for further development. At issue here especially was the role of Tradition with regard to the Bible. In Catholic theology, Tradition has always been considered a privileged source of theological reflection alongside Scripture. But how are the two related? Rejecting the idea of two sources of revelation, the Vatican document declared: “Sacred Tradition and sacred Scripture make up a single sacred deposit of the Word of God, which is entrusted to the Church” (10) to be authentically interpreted by the Magisterium.

“Yet this Magisterium is not superior to the Word of God, but is its servant.” Thus according to the plan of God, “sacred Tradition, sacred Scripture and the Magisterium of the Church are so connected and associated that one of them cannot stand without the others” (10). Scripture teaches authoritatively only those things necessary for salvation. “Since, therefore, all that the inspired authors . . . affirm should be regarded as affirmed by the Holy Spirit, we must acknowledge that the books of Scripture, firmly, faithfully and without error, teach that truth which God, for the sake of our salvation, wished to see confided to the sacred Scriptures” (11). Since God speaks through human means in the Bible, all helpful methods must be used for ascertaining the meaning intended by God (12).¹⁷

These statements, taken together, constitute something of a recognition of the scope and limits of biblical research. It is fully recognized that the Word of God is delivered in human language, and thus all helpful human methods of interpretation must be brought into play, both scientific and literary. At the same time, interpretation is grounded in Tradition and thus is rooted in the ongoing history of interpretation and stands on its shoulders. It affirms the application to biblical interpretation of the profound theological reality already begun in 1943 with *Divino Afflante Spiritu* and present throughout many documents of Vatican II: the incarnational principle, that because the Word became flesh in a particular and specific time and place, in a specific human person, faith is inevitably incarnated in historical process; and therefore all possible human tools are to be used to attempt to understand its full meaning.

That position was reiterated in 1993 in *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church*. As stated earlier, that document reaffirmed in the face of biblical fundamentalism that the historical sciences and ascertaining of historical levels of meaning remain basic and necessary to the enterprise of biblical interpretation, while other literary, linguistic, and analytical methods are also valuable and to be encouraged. This document has become widely recognized as a modern manifesto of the significant contributions of the historical-critical method and the ways in which other newer methods can be seen as complements to it rather than threats.

All of this positive thinking is not to say that there have not been victims along the way, victims of authoritarianism, of fear of change, of enemies in high places, of in-house politics, of reactionism, and of the historical process itself. Names like Alfred Loisy, George Tyrell, Henry A. Poels, and Edward Siegman come to mind, scholars whose reputations and teaching positions were sacrificed to institutional fear of new ways of thinking. Many others are known, and many remain nameless.

The function of religious teaching authority is to say what has been, not what

¹⁷ Béchard, *Scripture Documents*, 23–25. On the understanding of tradition in biblical interpretation, see Sandra Schneiders, *The Revelatory Text: Interpreting the New Testament as Sacred Scripture* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1999), 64–90, *passim*.

will be. It has been said that being Catholic means learning to think in centuries.¹⁸ It also means thinking universally as well as in the local particular. The burning issues of one part of the world are not those of another. Each generation in each specific cultural context must resist the temptation to make of itself the center of the universe or of the historical process. That is why appropriation of apocalyptic symbolism with reference to ourselves—that the end times are happening now—has always struck me as not so much naïve as arrogant. History moves slowly, and the principle that truth will prevail offers no promises that there will not be victims along the way. Every generation builds on the breakthroughs, the mistakes, and the tragedies of those who went before.

A case in point is the welcoming of newer players and newer forms of biblical interpretation. Continuing fear of liberation and feminist hermeneutics remains in many academic and ecclesiastical minds. In the 1993 document of the Pontifical Biblical Commission, *Interpretation of the Bible in the Church*, besides fundamentalism, only these two approaches receive warnings about possible dangers involved, and only feminist interpretation receives a slap on the wrist about confusing power with service, a paragraph that received a very divided vote in the commission (par. I E.2).¹⁹ Postcolonial interpretation is not yet mentioned.

At the annual meeting of the Catholic Biblical Association of America in 1997, Luke Timothy Johnson caused a stir with his paper, “What’s Catholic about Catholic Biblical Scholarship?” presented in revised form in 2002 as the lead chapter in his book co-authored with William S. Kurz, *The Future of Catholic Biblical Scholarship: A Constructive Conversation*. Johnson argues that “what is distinctively ‘catholic’ about Catholic biblical interpretation (scholarship) is to be found in its instinct for the both/and, and in its conviction that critical scholarship is not merely a matter of separating and opposing, but also of testing and reconnecting.”²⁰ I think Johnson has said here in other words what was said in 1993 in *Interpretation of the Bible in the Church*, in its chapter entitled “The Characteristics of Catholic Interpretation,” largely based on *Dei Verbum* and on the earlier papal encyclical *Divino Afflante Spiritu*.²¹ One passage from that document is worth quoting at length:

¹⁸ Otto Maduro, in discussion after the Borderlands lecture, Brite Divinity School, October 11, 2005.

¹⁹ This is the only paragraph in the entire document in which the vote was recorded in the notes: eleven in favor, four opposed, and four abstentions. Those opposed asked that the result be noted in the text (Béchar, *Scripture Documents*, 273).

²⁰ Luke Timothy Johnson and William S. Kurz, S.J., *The Future of Catholic Biblical Scholarship: A Constructive Conversation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 19.

²¹ Helpful background on the document is provided by Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *The Biblical Commission’s Document: “The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church” Text and Commentary* (Subsidia Biblica 18; Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 1995), and by Peter S. Williamson, “Catholic Principles for Interpreting Scripture,” *CBQ* 65 (2003): 327–49. Implications of biblical research

Catholic exegesis actively contributes to the development of new methods and to the progress of research.

What characterizes Catholic exegesis is that it deliberately places itself within the living tradition of the Church, whose first concern is fidelity to the revelation attested by the Bible. Modern hermeneutics has made clear . . . the impossibility of interpreting a text without starting from a “pre-understanding” of one type or another. Catholic exegetes approach the biblical text with a pre-understanding which holds closely together modern scientific culture and the religious tradition emanating from Israel and from the early Christian community. Their interpretation stands thereby in continuity with a dynamic pattern of interpretation that is found within the Bible itself and continues in the life of the Church. This dynamic pattern corresponds to the requirement that there be a lived affinity between the interpreter and the object, an affinity which constitutes, in fact, one of the conditions that makes the entire exegetical enterprise possible. (*Interpretation of the Bible in the Church*, introduction)²²

Johnson makes some valid points about the spirit of Protestantism as characterized by “either/or” and embedded as preunderstanding in some historical-critical exegesis, forcing an either/or interpretation (e.g., interpretation of the parables either historically or allegorically, with one judged to be superior to the other).²³

Another way of answering the question, “What’s Catholic about Catholic biblical interpretation?” was taken up by Roland E. Murphy in 1998, the year following Johnson’s first presentation. He tackled the assumption on the part of many opponents of historical criticism that it cannot yield results of theological value or have anything important to say to present life. Murphy claims that it is unfair to blame the method

for not delivering what it has never promised. . . . Many subjective and hypothetical studies often overshadow the reasonable insights of historical criticism, but the method itself is not to be identified with abuses. A very important role of the method is to recognize what *cannot* be answered, to admit to what is insoluble, at

for interreligious dialogue as presented in the document are discussed in Jean l’Hour, “Pour une lecture ‘Catholique’ de la Bible,” *BibInt* 5 (1997): 113–32.

²² Béchar, *Scripture Documents*, 284. A good introduction for the general reader is Daniel J. Harrington, *How Do Catholics Read the Bible?* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2005).

²³ Johnson and Kurz, *Future of Catholic Biblical Scholarship*, 3–19. I am not persuaded, however, that the alternatives are quite as pronounced as Johnson puts them. I am even less persuaded by his assessment of his (and my) third generation of Catholic biblical scholars who find ourselves graduates of the best schools, teaching in them, and now wondering if it was all worth it (p. 13). It would seem that Johnson has set up his own “either/or” alternatives in such a way as to force a wedge between what is characteristically Catholic and characteristically Protestant, a problem that he himself acknowledges (p. 5).

least for the present. Whatever happened to that expressive Latin phrase, *non liquet* (no clear answer)?²⁴

Murphy goes on to show that sometimes the literal meaning of a text is directly theological, as in the case of some of the prayers of the Psalms, for example, or recitation of the Shema (Deut 6:4).²⁵

Recent critics of historical criticism and of historical critics have not been kind. Murphy quotes Christopher Seitz, who claims that “historical criticism plays no positive theological role whatsoever. Its only proper role is negative. It establishes the genre, form, possible setting, and historical and intellectual background of the individual text.”²⁶ Another notes: “Instead of being based on God’s Word, it (historical-critical theology) had its foundations in philosophies which made bold to define truth so that God’s Word was excluded as the source of truth.”²⁷ For another: “The sheer amount of scholarship is part of the crisis. . . . There is much product, indeed much admirable product, but is there any point to the production? The present generation approaches the state of *idiot savants*, people who know everything about some small aspect of the Bible, but nothing about the Bible as a whole, or its good and destructive uses.”²⁸ Yet another:

. . . there is no innocent reading of the Bible, no reading that is not already ideological. But to read the Bible in the traditional scholarly manner has all too often meant reading it, whether deliberately or not, in ways that reify and ratify the status quo—providing warrant for the subjugation of women (whether in the church, the academy, or society at large), justifying colonialism and enslavement, rationalizing homophobia, or otherwise legitimizing the power of hegemonic classes of people.²⁹

Much of the rejection of historical criticism as voiced today, in what I will call the ahistorical paradigm, parallels the phenomenon of Creationism and Intelligent Design, two related theories that have become surprisingly accepted today. It is astounding that a recent poll conducted by a respected research center indicates that 42 percent of Americans believe that “[l]ife has existed in its present form since the beginning of time.”³⁰ Both Creationism/Intelligent Design and

²⁴ Murphy, “What Is Catholic,” 113.

²⁵ Also recognized in *Interpretation of the Bible in the Church* II.B.2 (Béchar, *Scripture Documents*, 282).

²⁶ Christopher Seitz, *Word without End: The Old Testament as Abiding Theological Witness* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 97, as quoted in Murphy, “What Is Catholic,” 112.

²⁷ Eta Linnemann, *Historical Criticism of the Bible: Methodology or Ideology?* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1990), 17–18.

²⁸ Johnson and Kurz, *Future of Catholic Biblical Scholarship*, 37–38.

²⁹ George Aichele et al., *The Postmodern Bible* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), 4.

³⁰ Pew Research Center, Forum on Religion and Public Life. Poll conducted on two thousand participants July 7–17, 2005. Forty-eight percent said that life evolved over time; of that 48 percent, 18 percent chose the further option, “guided by a supreme being,” 26 percent through natural

rejection of historical criticism are reactions, in the first order, against the mindset of scientism, which makes inappropriate totalitarian claims, as replacement for theology and philosophy, and the failure to retain an appropriate distinction between science and theology. The parallel in the case of historical criticism is the inappropriate claim to have a method that will yield convincing results that can be verified by independent researchers, *and* that these results are the only ones that matter.

In both cases, *inappropriate* use of a scientific tool leads to claims to be able to answer all questions, scientific, historical, philosophical, or theological, and imposes its paradigm as the only viable way of thinking. Scientism limits the questions worth asking to those that can be answered by scientific methods, and overemphasis on historical criticism limits the questions worth asking to those that can be answered with the methods of historical criticism. In the physical sciences, an empirical and materialist worldview is imposed, while philosophical and spiritual interpretations of physical reality are excluded. When this happens, science does not respect its own proper limits. In biblical interpretation, historical criticism was incorrectly presented as the foolproof method (which we now know not to be fool-proof) for reaching the literal level of the text.

Sometimes historical-critical interpreters have been too naïve about the implications of their methods. As noted by Wayne Meeks in his presidential address to the Society for New Testament Studies in 2004, “the science of history was a weapon of liberation . . . from lazy credulity, from dogmatic abstractions, from venomous prejudices, from authoritarian structures . . . (but) our practice of writing history was never innocent. It was a means of power. . . . Those failings demonstrated that interest does not have to be conscious in order to serve privilege.”³¹

I have already called attention to the description of Catholic biblical scholarship given by the 1993 document of the Pontifical Biblical Commission, with which I am in agreement:

What characterizes Catholic exegesis is that it deliberately places itself within the living tradition of the Church, whose first concern is fidelity to the revelation attested by the Bible. . . . Catholic exegetes approach the biblical text with a pre-understanding which holds closely together modern scientific culture and the religious tradition emanating from Israel and from the early Christian community. Their interpretation stands thereby in continuity with a dynamic pattern of interpretation that is found within the Bible itself and continues in the life of the Church. This dynamic pattern corresponds to the requirement that there be a lived affinity between the interpreter and the object, an affinity which constitutes, in fact, one of

selection, and 4 percent did not know how. The remaining 10 percent of the poll indicated “Don’t know.” See <http://pewforum.org/docs/index.php?DocID=115> (accessed October 20, 2005).

³¹ Wayne A. Meeks, “Why Study the New Testament?” *NTS* 51 (2005): 155-70, here 157, 160.

the conditions that makes the entire exegetical enterprise possible. (*Interpretation of the Bible in the Church*, introduction)³²

Now I wish to focus from the above statement on the “pre-understanding which holds closely together modern scientific culture and the religious tradition” of Israel and the early church. This is the “both/and” rather than the “either/or.” This is the center point from which Catholic biblical scholarship can especially contribute to our common enterprise of interpretation, to the catholic endeavor, with small *c*. This is the principle that enables biblical scholarship to be open to a variety of levels of meaning, beginning always from the historical level but ongoing from there.

Many will be familiar with the thirteenth-century formula of Augustine of Denmark:

*Littera gesta docet, quid credas allegoria,
moralis quid agas, quid speras anagogia.*

For those whose Latin is a little rusty, I give Roland Murphy’s translation: “The letter (or literal sense) teaches facts; the allegorical, what we are to believe; the moral, what we are to do; the anagogical, what we are to hope for.”³³ As Murphy goes on to note, it does not always work this way. Sometimes the literal sense teaches what we are to believe or even hope for, and spiritual meaning cannot be limited to allegory. While Jewish and Christian interpreters might agree on the literal sense of a text, the Jewish interpreter might have a different understanding from that of the Christian on other levels. It is doubtful that an adequate moral or spiritual sense could be retrieved today, for example, from prescriptions that slaves obey their masters, as found in the household codes of the NT. Allegory was the patristic and medieval way of avoiding literalism and fundamentalism. Today, historical criticism plays that role in part. If today we are uncomfortable with some of the ways in which previous generations used allegory, perhaps we need to come to a new understanding of how metaphor, imagery, and even allegory continue to inform the very heart of biblical interpretation in its arena of greatest use, the worshiping community.

The mistake of some misuses of historical criticism was an assumption that a text can have only one meaning, but contemporary language theory recalls us to the reality that in fact all human communication is open to many possible levels of meaning. Biblical texts, too, have the potential for multiple levels of meaning, however complex the interplay among them and however complex the process of sorting them out and evaluating what is to be retained and what discarded.

³² Béchard, *Scripture Documents*, 284.

³³ Murphy, “What Is Catholic,” 116; see also *Interpretation of the Bible in the Church*, II.B (Béchard, *Scripture Documents*, 279; Joseph A. Fitzmyer, “The Sense of Scripture Today,” *ITQ* 62 (1996–97): 101–16.

There are simpler ways than that of Augustine of Denmark to characterize levels of meaning as used by Christians. One traditional and helpful one is suggested in *Interpretation of the Bible in the Church*. It is threefold: literal, spiritual, and the so-called fuller sense. For Christians, the “spiritual sense” according to this understanding, is “the meaning expressed by the biblical texts when read, under the influence of the Holy Spirit, in the context of the paschal mystery of Christ, and of the new life that flows from it.”³⁴ “And of the new life that flows from it”; this new life did not cease at the end of the biblical period, but continues to flow through the patristic, medieval, and modern eras, into our own age. Institutional documents are rarely prophetic; for the most part, they summarize what has been up to the time of writing, but rarely point beyond.

In light of this, I would expand on the understanding of the “spiritual sense” to include many newer methods and perspectives that are informed by the desire to have us live more authentically the new life that flows from the paschal mystery. I am speaking of those methods born out of the hermeneutic of suspicion, for example, liberation, feminist/womanist/mujerista, and postcolonial interpretation, which probe the implications of the paschal mystery in ways not envisioned in previous centuries. Even if they challenge established power bases—or precisely because they do—they are new manifestations of the same inspiration that led earlier interpreters to ask of the biblical text the question: But what does this have to do with life today? Earlier answers included various forms of metaphor and allegory arising from contemporary preunderstanding. Today’s preunderstanding requires analysis of how power is used. If the paschal mystery is about deliverance from death to life, then without the hermeneutic of suspicion, we risk being diminished, not by the text but by earlier preunderstandings that are not yet open to a wider and more inclusive way of living and loving. Just as historical criticism asked the hard analytical questions a century ago and was suspect by many for that reason, so too does the hermeneutic of suspicion today ask the critical questions of our time, and is suspect on the part of many for the same reasons.

The 1993 *Interpretation of the Bible in the Church* stresses that spiritual interpretation is not to be confused with subjective imagination. “Spiritual interpretation, whether in community or in private, will discover the authentic spiritual sense only to the extent that it is kept within these perspectives. One then holds together three levels of reality: the biblical text, the paschal mystery, and the present circumstances of life in the Spirit.”³⁵ I believe that this is where these newer methods fit into the common endeavor, as part of the expanded spiritual sense in which we bring our own new understandings to the task, out of our own new questions, and discover new levels of meaning as participants in the ongoing flow of interpretive tradition.

³⁴ *Interpretation of the Bible in the Church*, II.B.2 (Béchar, *Scripture Documents*, 281-82).

³⁵ *Ibid.*

The Bible belongs to the church. It does not belong to theologians, denominational committees, bishops, or biblical scholars. Therefore, biblical scholarship and interpretation must be in some way oriented to the nourishment and growth of the community. This is not in any way to impede the necessary freedom, integrity, and autonomy that scholars must have to engage in research for its own sake. Scholars have the responsibility to seek truth even if it seems to contradict consensus, popular ideas, or ecclesiastical politics. But one eye of the Roman Catholic biblical scholar must be kept on the good of the community. Sometimes upholding that good upholds and underpins consensus; sometimes it must dissent from the consensus in the interest of that new life that flows from the paschal mystery.

There is a third, rather obscure and debated level of meaning discussed in *Interpretation of the Bible in the Church*, the “fuller sense,” or *sensus plenior*.³⁶ The term was first used in 1925 and was extensively discussed until about 1970. *Interpretation of the Bible in the Church* revives it but without a great deal of enthusiasm. It defines the “fuller sense” as “a deeper meaning of the text, intended by God but not clearly expressed by the human author. Its existence in the biblical text comes to be known when one studies the text in the light of other biblical texts which utilize it or in its relationship with the internal development of revelation.”³⁷ This “fuller sense” “brings out fresh possibilities of meaning that had lain hidden in the original context.”³⁸

Hidden indeed. It is not clear, even in *Interpretation of the Bible in the Church* or commentaries on it, how this differs from the spiritual sense.³⁹ Indeed, it may be another form of the spiritual sense. The definition, remember, is a meaning “intended by God, but not clearly expressed by the human author.” What is intended by God, I cannot say. If there is a difference between the spiritual and the “fuller” sense, I propose that it lies in this: not only that the meaning is “not clearly expressed by the human author” but that it is not at all in the mind of the human author, both “distinct from the internal thought of the writer and capable of an increment in meaning which transcends his conscious intent.”⁴⁰ It is a meaning that is theologically comprehensible at a later point in the unfolding of tradition.

³⁶ For a history of understanding of the term, see Raymond E. Brown, “The History and Development of the Theory of a *Sensus Plenior*,” *CBQ* 15 (1953): 141–62; idem, *The Sensus Plenior of Sacred Scripture* (Baltimore: St. Mary’s University, 1955); idem, “The *Sensus Plenior* in the Last Ten Years,” *CBQ* 25 (1963): 262–85; idem, *JBC* 71:56–70; *NJBC* 71:49–51. Brown noted in 1963: “Fortunately, the misconception that the theory of a SP is an attempt to circumvent scientific exegesis or to let piety run riot is gradually disappearing” (“*Sensus Plenior* in the Last Ten Years,” 262).

³⁷ The first part of the definition appears as well in *NJBC* (71:49) and probably originates with Raymond Brown.

³⁸ *Interpretation of the Bible in the Church*, II.B.3 (Béchar, *Scripture Documents*, 283).

³⁹ See, e.g., Fitzmyer, *Biblical Commission’s Document*, 130–31.

⁴⁰ Brown, “*Sensus Plenior* in the Last Ten Years,” 269; Brown preferred to say that the consciousness of this meaning on the part of the human author is not necessary (pp. 267–69).

I suggest further that two very different hermeneutical methods might be illustrative of this: canonical and psychological interpretation.

While some biblical authors were certainly aware of the biblical tradition in which they were writing (e.g., the author of Daniel or the author of Revelation), it is unlikely that any of them intended to write in the context of the whole biblical canon, be it Hebrew or Greek, as we have it today. Yet when their writings are read today in light of the canonical process and context, new theological insights emerge and new and richer meanings are acquired by the text.

Likewise, biblical writers were psychological beings, but psychology is intensely influenced by social factors. They wrote with conscious intent to portray not psychological dynamics and relationships but rather social and theological ones. Yet in light of modern understandings of the dynamics of unconscious forces, the symbols and relationships in the biblical text can be reread to give expanded meanings to profound human experiences.

Our understandings of the spiritual senses of Scripture should lead us not only backwards to a new appreciation of what has enriched our tradition but also forward to a fuller and richer appreciation of how the Bible speaks to our own world with its proper questions and exigencies. In the Society of Biblical Literature, no one particular confessional stance or methodological stance can be imposed, and some would prefer none at all. I am suggesting ways in which the heritage of Roman Catholic biblical scholarship can continue to contribute to and enrich our common effort. I suggest that it is precisely the challenge of holding together ancient text, ongoing history of interpretation, modern science, and postmodern insights, within a conscious participation in a living tradition, that has enabled and can continue to enable Roman Catholic biblical scholarship to make its contribution, so that it can take an important part in the common catholic (small *c*) tradition of biblical interpretation. In this way, catholic can truly mean universal, open to all.

Recently I read something in the area of religious conflicts that argued that religious tolerance is not the goal, but a bare minimum of “live and let live”; rather, the goal is inter-understanding, a lively appreciation of the other for what the other is, all the while affirming one’s adherence to one’s own religious tradition. Analogously, can we not at this point in the biblical guild produce not a cacophony but a symphony of our various methods and not only *tolerate* a diversity of methods, but begin to see how they complement each other, can be integrated with each other, and can together form a rich network of interpretations?

In the words of someone familiar to all of us: “I do not consider that I have made it my own; but this one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal” (Phil 3:13–14 NRSV).