

REBUILDING THE BRIDGE BETWEEN THEOLOGY AND EXEGESIS: Scripture, Doctrine, and Apostolic Legitimacy

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When the core group that would become the Scripture Project gathered for the first time, Ellen Davis reports they came to a consensus. “The most fundamental need,” the group quickly agreed, is “to learn again to read and teach the Bible confessionally within mainstream North American and European Christianity.”¹ It is a judgment I think that is widespread.

Theology—understood as the knowledge of and skill in analyzing, defending, and applying the doctrines of the Church—is not in adequate contact with modern knowledge of and skill in interpreting the Bible.² This bifurcation affects all aspects of Christian experience. The way in which we read and teach the Bible is removed from and does not inform the way in which we talk about our faith and organize our lives. It is hard to imagine a more fundamental crisis.³

1 “Teaching the Bible Confessionally in the Church,” in *The Art of Reading Scripture*, eds. Ellen F. Davis and Richard B. Hays, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 9. The Scripture Project was an initiative of the Center for Theological Inquiry at Princeton University. The project’s scholarly concerns and findings are well represented in *The Art of Reading Scripture*.

2 Modern biblical study has created a “curious situation,” according to Walter Moberly. “To be Christian means, at least in part, the acceptance and appropriation of certain theological doctrines and patterns of living. Yet the task of reading the Bible ‘critically’ has regularly been defined precisely in terms of the exclusion of these doctrines and patterns of living from the interpretive process.” *The Bible, Theology, and Faith: A Study in Abraham and Jesus*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 2000), 5. The confessionally committed are not the only people to notice this disjunction. Many modern biblical scholars bemoan the persistent Christian disregard for advanced results of biblical scholarship. Thus, Van Harvey observes, “Anyone teaching the origins of Christianity to college undergraduates or divinity students cannot help but be struck by the enormous gap between what the average layperson believes to be historically true about Jesus of Nazareth and what a great majority of New Testament scholars have concluded.” See his “New Testament Scholarship and Christian Belief,” in *Jesus in History and Myth*, eds. R. Joseph Hoffman and Gerald A. Larue (Buffalo, NY: Prometheus, 1986), 193.

3 One of the most important twentieth century Protestant theological moves has been to interpret this crisis as a positive development. By this account, the genius of the Reformation was the shattering of all works of the law by the doctrine of justification. The modern application of historical-critical principles to doctrine and Scripture completes the reformers’ project. The critical historical method undermines these forms of authority, and this clears the way for a true and pure Protestant atmosphere of faith entirely free from the temptation to rest in external forms of assurance, including the literal sense of the Bible itself. For a classic statement of this argument, see Gerhard Ebeling, “The Significance of the Critical Historical Method for Church and Theology in Protestantism,” first published in 1950 and reprinted in revised form in *Word*

"Theological exegesis" seems to describe the mode of reading that we hope can overcome the alienation of theology from biblical study. The series I am editing, the *Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible*,⁴ certainly uses the term in this sense. But I must confess that I find the concept of theological exegesis opaque and even problematic. Too often we think of theological interpretation as something distinct from textually grounded analysis. For example, in the general introduction to the *Interpretation*⁵ series the editors tell us that exegesis involves a double task involving seemingly two different mental operations: "to deal with what the texts say and to discern their meaning for faith and life." Krister Stendahl's old distinction between "what it meant for them" and "what it means for us" continues to echo.⁶

The problem is that the Church has acknowledged no such distinction, or at least never allowed the distinction to move to the center of the exegetical project. Christian readers recognized that certain texts required grammatical clarification. They saw that in some instances exposition demanded observations about historical context. At times, doctrine is explicitly brought to bear. At other times, moral conclusions are drawn and contemporary applications are made. Yet all this diversity of focus and concern functioned within a single interpretive enterprise. Pre-critical readers did not seek a "theological meaning" as something over and against another "historical meaning." They distinguished between good and bad exegesis, not between theological exegesis and some other possible and equally legitimate mode of interpretation.

With the sobering witness of the tradition in mind, I want to take a stab at describing the mode of interpretation we all seem to want, and I want to do so without relying upon methodological or hermeneutical contrasts between theological and historical-critical methods. I want to give an account of biblical exegesis that does not suggest that reading the Bible ("deal with what the text says") is somehow different from thinking about God's gracious love. I will try to do so in three ways. First, as befits a systematic theologian, I want to describe the relationship between doctrine (by which I mean not only official teachings but also the larger public form of the Church, which includes liturgical practice, moral formation, and spiritual discipline) and Scripture. It is a linkage that we

and Faith, (London: SCM, 1963), 17–61. For a broader statement of the same argument, see Paul Tillich's characterizations of the Protestant principle in *The Protestant Era* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1948). For an illustration of consequent mentality, see John Shelby Spong, *Rescuing the Bible from Fundamentalism* (San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 1992).

4 Among the titles published to date in this series, see Stanley Hauerwas, *Matthew* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos, 2006) and Jaroslav Pelikan, *Acts* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos, 2005).

5 This series includes such titles as: Joseph Blenkinsopp, *Ezekiel* (Louisville, KY: John Knox, 1990) and Richard B. Hays, *1 Corinthians* (Louisville, KY: John Knox, 1997).

6 See for instance, his *The School of St. Matthew and its Use of the Old Testament*, Acta Seminarii Neotestamentici Upsaliensis 20 (Uppsala: C. W. K. Gleerup, Lund, 1954).

must seek if we are to be both consistent and alive in our beliefs. Second, I plan to give an example of my own effort to read “theologically.” Finally, I will conclude by offering some programmatic remarks that return to the question of modern historical-critical study and its relation to theological interpretation.

The Bible and Doctrine After the Reformation

In the aftermath of the Reformation, the interpretation of the Bible became a point of contest, and the relation between doctrine and Scripture was variously defined. But in every case a profound conformity of doctrine with Scripture was asserted. For most of the post-Reformation period, the Catholic Church insisted upon an almost complete correspondence, allowing only for the possibility that biblical exegesis, like doctrine, can develop toward fuller and fuller exposition of already recognized truths.⁷ The Protestant interest in ongoing reform of the Church made the relationship between doctrine and Scripture less static, but the underlying logic was similar. What the Bible says and what the Church teaches may not be in full accord at present, but they should be, and the goal of both exegesis and theology is to maximize this correspondence.

The principle of apostolic legitimacy motivates this close correspondence between doctrine and Scripture. The logic is transparent. If the Bible teaches “x” and the Church teaches “not x,” then either the Bible teaches the truth or the Church teaches the truth. But since the true Church of Christ teaches the gospel, and since the Bible is the sacred and canonical witness to the gospel, such a disjunction is intolerable.

I think it is worthwhile to see this logic in action in confessional documents. For the presumption of apostolic legitimacy helps explain why “theological exegesis”—that is to say, exegesis in accordance with Church teaching—must be the best, most compelling reading.

At the Council of Trent we find juxtaposition between scriptural interpretation based upon “personal judgment” and reading guided by “holy mother Church.” It is improper, Trent teaches, that private persons should set about to produce interpretations contrary to those established by the tradition of the Church. To prevent the possibility of any disjunction between biblical interpretation and Church teaching, Trent provides a crucial post-Reformation definition of magisterial authority. It is the function of the Church, we read, “to judge the true sense and interpretation of the sacred Scriptures.”⁸

7 This was in some measure modified by the Second Vatican Council. See *Dei Verbum*, Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation, (November 18, 1965), 22, in *The Scripture Documents: An Anthology of Official Catholic Teachings*, ed. Dean P. Béchar, S.J. (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2002).

8 Council of Trent, *Decree Concerning the Edition and the Use of the Sacred Books* (April 8, 1546). Text in: *The Canons and Decrees of the Council of Trent* (Rockford, IL: Tan, 1978).

The First and Second Vatican Councils reiterate this affirmation of magisterial authority. As we read in *De Fide*, Vatican I's dogmatic constitution on the Catholic faith:

Now since the decree on the interpretation of holy Scripture, profitably made by the Council of Trent, with the intention of constraining rash speculation, has been wrongly interpreted by some, we renew that decree and declare its meaning to be as follows: that in matters of faith and morals, belonging as they do to the establishing of Christian doctrine, that the meaning of holy Scripture must be held to be the true one, which holy mother Church held and holds, since it is her right to judge the true meaning and interpretation of holy Scripture.⁹

The Second Vatican Council's dogmatic constitution on divine revelation, *Dei Verbum*, provides a much more extensive, plastic, and complex account of the role and interpretation of Scripture in the life of the Church.¹⁰ But the underlying logic remains intact. As we read: "The task of authentically interpreting the Word of God . . . has been entrusted only to those charged with the Church's ongoing teaching function, whose authority is exercised in the name of Jesus Christ."¹¹

For all the differences between Protestant and Catholic, on the principle of apostolic legitimacy the two traditions are as one. The Lutheran Formula of Concord (1577) opens with the Protestant principle of *sola scriptura*. "We believe, confess, and teach," the formula states, "that the only rule and norm according to which all dogmas and all doctors ought to be assessed and judged, is no other thing than the prophetic and apostolic writings of both the Old and of the New Testament."¹²

9 *De Fide* (April 24, 1870), Chapter 2, no. 8. Text in *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils*, ed. Norman P. Tanner. (Washington, DC: Georgetown University, 1990). The restatement and clarification of Trent was motivated by concern about two nineteenth century opinions, both of which sought to loosen the bond between Church teaching and scriptural interpretation. One argued that Trent's decree was purely disciplinary and not dogmatic in consequence. The second argued that Trent required assent to dogmas officially derived from Scripture, but not assent to the particular interpretations. For background, see *Études théologiques sur les constitutions du Concile de Vatican* [Theological Studies on the Constitutions of the Vatican Council], vol. 1, ed. Jean-Michel-Alfred Vacant, (Paris: Delhomme et Brigueat, 1895), 520–521.

10 In an important contrast to the seemingly one-sided ascription of authority to the *magisterium* in earlier statements, Vatican II states, "This teaching function is not above the Word of God but stands at its service, teaching nothing but what is handed down, accordingly as it devotedly listens, reverently preserves and faithfully transmits the Word of God, by divine command and with the help of the Holy Spirit." *Dei Verbum*, 10.

11 *Dei Verbum*, 10.

12 Epitome of the Comprehensive Rule and Norm, 1. Text in *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, eds. Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000).

In the Reformed tradition, the Westminster Confession provides a more detailed discussion of the necessity of the illumination of the Holy Spirit in right reading, as well as the proper scope for natural reason in practical considerations of Church order, but the basic principle remains the same. "The Supreme Judge, by which all controversies of religion are to be determined, and all decrees of councils, opinions of ancient writers, doctrines of men, and private spirits, are to be examined, and in whose sentence we are to rest, can be no other than the Holy Spirit speaking in the Scripture."¹³

This is not a paper in ecumenical theology, so I cannot address the real differences between Catholic and Lutheran and Reformed views on the link between doctrine and biblical interpretation. There are clear disagreements about the role of the Church in establishing and sustaining this relationship, with the Catholic side thinking a magisterium indispensable and the Protestant side tending to think it fatal. However, I hope that it is clear how closely these confessional traditions agree. And how could it be otherwise? For the principle of apostolic legitimacy requires the following conclusion. What is taught by the Church must be substantially in accord with what the Bible says, or, to put the issue in a more cautious double negative, the Church cannot teach that which is substantially discordant with what the Bible says.

Even aggressively non-confessional Protestants adopt this assumption. They reject the instrumentalities of written confessions precisely because they think such man-made documents stand in the way of the complete correspondence between Church teaching and biblical preaching. The two should be one and the same ecclesial act, not two different aspects of Church life that need to be brought into accordance. So, however bitter are debates about Church authority, confessional documents, theories of inerrancy, or methods of interpretation, the principle of apostolic legitimacy is not itself controversial. It is instead the great point of agreement around which ecumenical controversies swirl.

Exegesis and the Content of Doctrine

With this close relationship between Church doctrine and the content of the Bible in mind, I think we can make an initial approach to providing a more precise definition of theological interpretation. The problem is not that something labeled "theology" has not adequately engaged something else called "biblical studies." We do not want for interdisciplinary study. Instead, we are facing a collective crisis.

We are told that the doctrine of the Trinity is the great, foundational ecumenical doctrine of Christianity—and we are told that it is not to be found in the Bible. We are told that Jesus Christ is the Messiah who fulfills the law and the prophets—and we are told that such a reading of the Old Testament is an abuse

13 Chapter 1, no. 10. Text in *Creeds of the Churches*, 3rd. ed., ed. John Leith (Atlanta: John Knox, 1982).

of the text. I could go on with more examples, but we all know the phenomenon. What the Churches teach and what biblical scholars tell us is in the Bible seem at odds. I submit, therefore, that theological exegesis is, at minimum, any reading that moves in the opposite direction. An interpretation is theological insofar as it shows the ways in which Church teaching accords with what the Bible says.

At this point I can imagine a certain discomfort. Is the purpose of exegesis to prove doctrine, as if doctrine were the great vehicle of divine truth and not the Scriptures themselves? I think the discomfort is justified, for in both Protestant and Catholic traditions there has been a tendency to see doctrine as the purified, reasoned and reconciled "content" of Scripture.¹⁴ If we would but learn our Baltimore Catechism, then we would be fully formed in God's truth. But this cannot be true, for it is precisely a doctrine of the Church that, while doctrines may teach truths about God, they do not reveal God. As the First Vatican Council observes, revelation is contained in Scripture and what are called the "unwritten traditions," both of which "were received by the apostles from the lips of Christ himself." God's living Word is to be found in this apostolic memory, and not in the subsequent doctrinal tradition. One could not claim to participate in the saving truth of Christ if one memorizes all of Church doctrine but does not attend Mass or fails to read the Bible.

Here we see the other side of theological exegesis. The principle of apostolic legitimacy drives exegesis toward a way of reading that links doctrine to Scripture, but the link is not probative, or not merely probative. Theological exegesis also serves the principle of apostolic vitality. Under the influence of the sustained criticisms of doctrinalized and deracinated modes of Christian formation, the Second Vatican Council gave urgent and eloquent voice to the need for a re-scripturalized faith. It is not the case that the Church draws truths out of Scripture, encodes them into doctrines, and then moves on.¹⁵ As the Council teaches, the Church

14 See, for example, a late nineteenth century dogmatic handbook, *A Manual of Catholic Theology*, Joseph Wilhelm and Thomas Scannell, (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner, 1890). Doctrine is described as "materially complete," "formally perfect," and capable of universal application. In contrast, Scripture lacks "systematic arrangement," is "often obscure," and is "exposed to many false interpretations." Furthermore, the historical nature of Scripture means that its great truths are "expressed in the metaphorical language of the East." As a result, Scripture is largely "unfit for the general use of people" (59). There is nothing uniquely Roman about this supersession of Scripture by doctrine. For example, see Friedrich Schleiermacher's reasoning in *The Christian Faith*, §27. The conclusion is arresting: "The confessional documents of the evangelical Church, collectively, are, as it were, given prior place to the New Testament Scriptures themselves." See *The Christian Faith* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1928).

15 As Joseph Ratzinger observes in his commentary on *Dei Verbum*, the history of discussion at the Council suggests that "there was a gradual reduction of the idea of progress," and he registers his own view that "from an ecumenical point of view, the only sensible thing is to give up the idea of progress." The primary dynamic is one of return and renewal. Doctrine does not advance beyond Scripture; instead, doctrine brings the Church back to Scripture. See *Commentary on the Documents of Vatican II*, Vol. 3, ed. Herbert Vorgrimler, (New York: Herder & Herder, 1969), 266.

never ceases to receive “the bread of life from the one table of God’s Word and Christ’s body,” and “accordingly all the Church’s preaching, no less than the whole Christian religion, ought to be nourished and ruled by holy Scripture.”¹⁶ No matter how correct doctrine might be in some formal sense, the project of bringing the biblical word to bear upon the life of the Church is an ongoing, perpetual task. “There is such force and power in the word of God,” teaches the Council, “that it stands as the Church’s support and strength, affording her children sturdiness in faith, food for the soul and a pure and unfailing fount of spiritual life.”¹⁷ The apostolic legitimacy of Church teaching must be infused by the apostolic vitality of Scripture.

On the imperative of apostolic vitality the Protestant tradition has always insisted, and therefore, I think we can enlarge our definition of theological exegesis without controversy.¹⁸ Not only does a properly theological interpretation seek to show the conformity of Church teaching with what the Bible says, theological exegesis also reads Scripture as the living language of faith. Or perhaps more accurately, precisely insofar as it shows the conformity of Scripture and teaching, theological exegesis saturates the life of the Church with what the Bible says. To put the matter in a formula, the more readily a reading of the Bible enters into the life and practice of the Church, the more fully theological is the interpretation.

With this brief outline of the principle of apostolic legitimacy and imperative of apostolic vitality, I have defined theological exegesis without recourse to contrasts between historical-critical and other modes of reading. Interpretation should draw upon whatever intellectual methods seem appropriate. It is a conceit of modernity that method is foundational, a conceit long shown false by the actual practice of modern science. What matters are the ends sought. We want commerce between scientific theory and data that allows us to enter more fully into the world as it is. In the same way, we seek exegesis that links doctrine with Scripture in such a way that we can better inhabit the gospel. Therefore, interpretation is theological insofar as it shows the concord of doctrine with Scripture and maximizes the penetration of Scripture into the life and teaching of the Church.

We are so accustomed to thinking in terms of methods and techniques rather than ends and goals that my definition of theological exegesis may seem an illusion of logic rather than a real possibility for Christian readers of the Bible. The old Stendhal distinction between what it meant and what it means, between

16 *Dei Verbum*, 21.

17 *Dei Verbum*, 21.

18 In the shadow of centuries of Protestant and Catholic polemics, we tend to turn questions of vitality back to legitimacy. If we are Protestant, we tend to think of the living Word of Scripture as a challenge to the authority of doctrine. If we are Catholic, we tend to think of any challenge to doctrine as an impermissible challenge to the legitimacy of the Church. In some cases, questions of legitimacy are rightly placed front and center, but it is also important to see the way in which Scripture judges our teaching superficial and lifeless rather than erroneous or invalid.

reading the text “responsibly” and reading it “piously,” has a powerful grip on us. We worry that without a distinct and prior role for critical historical reading, our exegesis will lack credibility and discipline. For these reasons, I want to flesh out just how these ends might shape exegetical practice, and I will do so by offering an instance of my own adventure in scriptural interpretation.

Reading Genesis as Scripture and Doctrine

Consider the first verses of Genesis. Here we find biblical material both ambiguous and fraught. The Hebrew admits of different senses. Should we read the first verse as “In the beginning God created,” conveying the sense that we are at the absolute beginning? Or should we read this opening verse as “In the beginning, when God created,” now suggesting the more modest idea that we are being told about the first stage in a process that might be otherwise part of a larger whole? And furthermore, what are we to make about the next verse and its mention of the unformed earth and the darkness and the face of the waters. Did God make the heavens and earth out of a pre-existing primal substance? Does the divine beginning operate over and against a counter-beginning, an unformed earth, a darkness and chaos that somehow preexists the beginning?

In his *Unfinished Literal Commentary on Genesis*, Augustine raises these questions and offers a variety of interpretive suggestions. Augustine notes that the Bible does not provide every detail, so we can justly suppose that in the first moment God creates all the elements, the formless earth and the darkness and the water, and this can be conceived of in many different ways. But it is clear that loyalty to Church doctrine is guiding Augustine on this point. As he says, “Whichever of these opinions is true, we must believe that God is the maker and creator of all things.”¹⁹ To recall our definition of theological exegesis, Augustine reads so as to affirm the principle of apostolic legitimacy. *Creatio ex nihilo*, creation out of nothing, is normative doctrine, and Augustine brings his reading into conformity with Church teaching.

As modern men and women we are likely to step back and say, “Yes, of course, Augustine accepted the authority of doctrine, and look what happens. He is indifferent to what the Bible really says.” The plain sense of the first verses suggests that there was *something* upon which God acted in creation. Furthermore, adopting the historicist mode of analysis, we can adduce the many combat myths from ancient literature, and we can show how the Old Testament often pictures the origins of the world in the same fashion. Aside from 2 Maccabees 7:28, the many declarations of God’s creative sovereignty and power throughout the Bible do not specify creation out of nothing.²⁰ It would seem, then, the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo*

19 *Unfinished Literal Interpretation of Genesis*, 4. Text in *The Works of Saint Augustine I/13: On Genesis*, Edmund Hill, O.P., trans., (Hyde Park, New York: New City Press, 2002).

20 For a contemporary rejection of *creatio ex nihilo* that highlights the lack of support in the Old

presents a classic case of preconceived theological ideas subverting the text. A rigid system of doctrine is being imposed upon Scripture and silencing its own voice. "It is one thing to accept responsibility for showing the concordance of Scripture and doctrine," we say, "but we must be sure not to lose the text in the process."

The reaction is common, and one of the great dogmas of modern biblical study has been to exclude doctrine from exegesis. As Benjamin Jowett wrote more than one hundred years ago, the role of the interpreter is to recover "the simple words" of Scripture. This requires the reader to "clear away the remains of dogmas, systems, controversies," which our ecclesiastical imaginations have perversely imposed upon the text. By returning to the text in its purity, Jowett promises, we will commune with the minds of the original authors, and Scriptures once smothered by doctrine will return to life.²¹

Unfortunately, the effect has been otherwise. Insofar as actual churches continue to recite the Nicene Creed, any reading of Genesis 1 that fails to conclude that the text does not contradict the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* effectively removes these verses from functional piety of believers, generally weakening the role of the Bible in the life of the Church. How can one affirm the doctrine that God creates out of nothing, a doctrine embedded in the creeds and liturgy, and agree that the Bible teaches otherwise, without relaxing the relationship between doctrine, worship and Scripture? This is not an isolated instance. It occurs whenever a biblical interpreter concludes that the Bible says something other than what the Church teaches. Instead of coming to life, the voice of Scripture is muffled, even silenced.

Must we then choose between loyalty to doctrine and attentiveness to the textual reality of Scripture? Must we engage in exegetical finger-crossing in order to keep the Bible as the Scripture of the Church? To say "yes" involves a massive misunderstanding of the nature and role of doctrine in scriptural interpretation. Classical doctrine is not *sui generis*. Doctrines such as *creatio ex nihilo* guide an overall reading of Scripture that claims to be the most satisfactory, and because most satisfactory, most capable of bringing Scripture to life. Furthermore, there is nothing complacent about accepting the authority of doctrine in the work of exegesis. It is precisely the *difficulty* of bringing Scripture and doctrine into some kind of intellectually and spiritually satisfactory relationship that infuses exegesis with urgency, energy, and creativity. This difficulty may tempt us to escape by way of conventional dogmatic solutions or superficial exegesis. The Christian tradition provides us with many examples. But at least we will be protected from the anodyne and vague theological gestures that characterize so much modern biblical interpretation.²²

Testament and advances a theological critique of the doctrine, see Jon D. Levenson, *Creation and the Persistence of Evil* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1988).

21 See his "On the Interpretation of Scripture," in *Essays and Reviews* (London: Parker, 1860), 338–39.

22 For a survey of examples, see my essay, "Biblical Theology and Theological Exegesis," in *Out of*

In order to illustrate how doctrine is scriptural in substance and energizing in effect, I need to show how *creatio ex nihilo* arises from a complex array of exegetical judgments that operate across the entire biblical text. This set of interpretive judgments maximizes the plain sense of the Scriptures, supports a metaphysical framework for coherent affirmations of that plain sense, and encourages a christological focus for biblical interpretation as a whole. For these reasons, allowing the doctrine of creation out of nothing to guide a reading of Genesis 1 amounts to a decision to allow the larger witness of Scripture to guide interpretation.

Idolatry

The Old Testament campaign against idolatry has a recurring structure. Idols are not weak, ineffective, or inadequate; they are empty and lifeless. Those who set themselves up against the Lord's commands "are nothing; their molten images are empty wind" (Isa. 41:29). "The makers of idols go into confusion" (Isa. 45:16). For idols are not evil powers, nor can they represent a primal potency or reality upon which God might have operated in creation. Instead, idols are "like scarecrows," and "they cannot do evil, neither is it in them to do good" (Jer. 10:5).

The New Testament carries forward the same view of idols. They are lifeless and powerless. Paul consistently explains the futility of idols by appeal to God's creative uniqueness (see Acts 14:15, 17:24). For this reason, Paul is indifferent to any thought that meat sacrificed to idols might be infected by a hidden, shameful potency (see 1 Cor. 8). Idols are not malign; they are empty and vacant. The danger is not that idols will bewitch by some internal, semi-divine power. They transfix because we fill their vacancy with the noisy gongs and clanging symbols of empty prophesy and pseudo-mystery (1 Cor. 13:1).

Throughout Scripture claims about lifeless idols and their dangerous nullity are made against the background of larger affirmations of God's creative sovereignty. In each instance, we find an implicit ontological parsimony. Because God creates out of nothing, there is nothing (*nihil*) other than the one true God and the set of all things he has made. Thus, idolatry is not a simple mistake or miscalculation. It is not a loyalty to a semi-divine or primeval power that cannot measure up to the power and glory of the Lord. Idolatry is loyalty to *nihil*, a devotion to lifelessness, and for this reason, the Old Testament often portrays idolatry as the paradigm of sin.

Idolatry encourages and reflects a desire for nothingness, a choice of death. St. Paul's account of sin begins with primordial turn from the living God whose creative glory is readily "perceived in the things that have been made" (Rom. 1:20) toward "images" (Rom. 1:20–23). The baleful genealogy simply reiterates the judgments of the Old Testament. There is no place to stand between God and creation—and to try to do so only results in a crazy, self-defeating loyalty to nothingness.

Not surprisingly, therefore, the themes of idolatry and loyalty set the stage for the explicit affirmation of *creatio ex nihilo* in 2 Maccabees 7:28.²³

Divine Transcendence

The second reason for submitting our reading of Genesis 1 to the control of the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* concerns the apparent conflict between two biblical claims about God. On the one hand, we read, "Behold, the heaven and the heaven of the heavens cannot contain thee" (1 Kings 8:27). God is wholly other and cannot be framed within the finite world. On the other hand, God is a character within the biblical story. He commands and speaks, and, in places such as Genesis 17:1, "appears." In the New Testament, classical doctrine teaches that God is present as the incarnate second person of the Trinity. So, which shall it be? Is God without or within? Is God wholly other or part of the unfolding drama of finite creation? These questions concern more than intra-scriptural tension. They also have to do with contemporary intuitions about the universality of truth and the particularity of cultures. The bumper sticker declaration, "My God is too big for any one religion," reflects the conviction that one must be loyal to 1 Kings 8:27 to the exclusion of Genesis 17:1. One must affirm the universal deity in contradiction to the Lord who elects a particular nation. The contrastive choice between universality and particularity is all the more dramatic in classical christology. Divine transcendence would seem utterly inconsistent with incarnation.

The ontological parsimony of *creatio ex nihilo* helps us resolve the apparent contradiction between the transcendence and presence of God. The doctrine of creation out of nothing teaches that God is in relation to absolutely nothing other than himself prior to creation, because there is nothing prior to creation for God not to be. As Exodus 3:14 teaches, God is who he is simply because he is who he is, and not because he is not something else.

Because *creatio ex nihilo* formulates God's transcendence in terms of uniqueness rather than as a supremacy or priority over some sort of primal matter, the transcendence of God is consistent with his immediacy and presence to finite reality. God leaves nothing behind; he betrays or contradicts nothing "divine" by drawing near. For there is no divine "stuff" other than the singular "I am."

Thus, a biblical reader need not choose between the universal God and the Lord who acts in space and time.²⁴ Nor need the reader parse divinity and

23 For a patristic analysis of idolatry that presumes *creatio ex nihilo*, see St. Athanasius, *Contra Gentes* [Against the Heathen], 8, in *The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, Second Series, vol. 4, eds. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1997), 8. For a contemporary study of idolatry that emphasizes the importance of the ontological parsimony (though cast in modern, phenomenological terms), see Jean-Luc Marion, *The Idol and Distance* (New York: Fordham University, 2001). For my own analysis of the perversely inflating role of the vacuum of nothingness in idolatry, see "Pride and Idolatry," *Interpretation* 60:2 (April 2006): 166–80.

24 On this point and with the same argument, see St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*

humanity in the unified person of Jesus Christ.²⁵ In contrast, a reading of Genesis 1:2 that contradicts *creatio ex nihilo* and its implied ontological parsimony will undermine the capacity of scriptural readers to interpret the God of Israel as the universal deity and will tend to make all New Testament talk of God incarnate seem incoherent.²⁶

Here I must pause to express my exasperation with modernist sensibilities. The classical doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* guides us toward a reading of some ambiguous words and phrases in Genesis so that we can give very straightforward and plain sense readings of countless other biblical verses. How, then, could a rejection of this doctrine, supposedly for the sake of preserving the integrity of the biblical text, succeed on its own terms? If we set aside *creatio ex nihilo*, then I suppose we can become more intimate with a scholarly construct called ancient Israelite religion, but we cannot read Genesis 1 without crossing our fingers on a huge number of biblical verses that suggest any form of divine presence. Of course, the very concept of ancient Israelite religion was invented to shift the focus of interpretation away from what the Scriptures say about God and toward something more occult and inconsequential, and therefore more easily believed, which is why we never seem to notice that our approach to the Bible and its talk about God has become incoherent. It is precisely to avoid both this blindness and this incoherence that classical doctrine was developed.

Third and finally, a reading of Genesis 1 governed by the doctrine of creation *ex nihilo* helps motivate the christological maximalism that characterizes classical Christian interpretation of Scripture.²⁷ Irenaeus based his rejection of gnostic accounts of Jesus upon a complex refutation of the gnostic doctrine of creation.²⁸ The gnostic doctrine presumed that the world in which we live is the final fruit of a cosmic evolution characterized by many layers of spiritual or supernatural reality emanating from the one transcendent and eternal deity. With a graduated ontological scheme at their disposal, gnostic teachers were able to avoid the evident

[Summary of Theology], Part 1, Question 13, Article 7, Reply. (New York: Benzinger Brothers, 1947).

25 See Origen, *Against Celsus*, Book 4, Chapter 5. Text in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 4, ed. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson (Buffalo: Christian Literature Publishing, 1885–1887), 499. For a helpful discussion of the way in which *creatio ex nihilo* provides crucial background for Christological doctrine, see Robert Sokolowski, *The God of Faith and Reason: Foundations of Christian Theology* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America, 1982), 31–40.

26 For a discussion of the theologically paralyzing consequences of placing God within a well-furnished metaphysical system, see William Placher, *The Domestication of Transcendence: How Modern Thinking about God went Wrong* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox, 1996).

27 For the use of the term “christological maximalism” and suggestions about its importance in the early Christian project of forming a coherent overall interpretation of the data of Scripture and tradition, see George A. Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1984), pp. 92–96.

28 *Against the Heresies*, Book 1. Text in *Against the Heresies Book 1*, Ancient Christian Writers 55 (New York: Newman, 1992).

absurdity of saying that Jesus was God incarnate. They could assign to Jesus an intermediate redemptive significance. He is above us in ontological significance, and he offers a hand to pull us up to the next higher link in the great chain of being.

Irenaeus' arguments against the gnostics amount to a case on behalf of the doctrine of creation out of nothing. The ontological parsimony implicit in *creatio ex nihilo* means that Jesus is either simply a man, or he is God incarnate. There are no other ontological alternatives. This disjunctive situation is not a narrowly christological matter. It has to do with the larger, *sola gratia* structure of so much of the Bible. St. Paul's analysis of Abraham's justification, and by extension, the logic of the larger project of divine blessing, emphasizes the lack of mediating realities between God and finite reality. Upon what might Abraham rely other than God, "who gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist" (Rom. 4:17)? All other things are "as good as dead" (4:18), and thus "no one might boast in the presence of God" (1 Cor. 1:28).

The ontological parsimony entailed by *creatio ex nihilo* eliminates half-measures, and as Paul reasons, this presses us toward God alone as the power of salvation. In this way, the christology outlined by Irenaeus and developed by the later tradition simply follows from the logic of Paul's rigorous arguments for a *sola gratia* account of salvation, arguments that are themselves dependent upon a reading of Genesis 1 as teaching a creation out of nothing.

There are surely further warrants for the classical doctrine of creation out of nothing, but my goal has not been to provide an exhaustive account. Instead, I have tried to illustrate a simple point about theological exegesis. Exercising ourselves to see the concord between Scripture and doctrine does not silence Scripture. Christian doctrine is a nearly two-thousand-year-long research project into the inner cogency of the Bible. Precisely because the Church has long accepted the principles of apostolic legitimacy and vitality, her teachings have been formed in order to maximize our ability to bring Scripture alive in our minds. Therefore, if we read Scripture theologically, that is to say, if we read to discern the concord between doctrine and Scripture, then we will find our exegetical judgments energized and extended across the biblical text as a whole in an integrated, continuous intellectual practice of reading and reasoning about Scripture.

The Historical-Critical Method and Theology

Nothing I have said about the nature of theological interpretation contradicts the conviction that modern historical-critical study of the Bible remains a sophisticated and helpful mode of reading. Applying techniques of textual analysis such as form and redaction criticism dramatizes the diversity and complexity of the biblical text. The same holds for efforts to discern social contexts for composition and reception. I remember reading Gerd Thiessen's study of the social setting of Paul's letters to

the Corinthians.²⁹ Having a vivid sense of the social context liberated me from my unconscious and stultifying assumption that Paul (and all of Scripture) uttered timeless truths into the great void of eternity. To hear Paul speak to real people in an actual community did not make him seem distant and diminished. On the contrary, it made Paul's voice living and present.

For all that I have gained from historical-critical study of the Bible, however, I reject efforts to build bridges between theology and biblical studies. If the principles of apostolic legitimacy and vitality are sound, then it cannot be the case that theology can be an intellectual practice fundamentally distinct from biblical interpretation. But I want to do more than press home the conclusion to a syllogism. An analogy to scientific inquiry can help us understand the absurdity of imagining that theology and biblical study can function independently.

It may be the case that historical study of ancient myths of creation and redaction criticism helps us see how Genesis 1 is part of a priestly, legal, and Temple-oriented strand running through the Pentateuch. There are many other tools of modern analysis—literary and anthropological, as well as historical and sociological—that may enrich and deepen our reading. Being modern intellectuals means inheriting modern techniques of analysis, and this may magnify and clarify our vision as readers. But the crucial point is that none of these techniques of analysis can tell us what the Bible says. Scientists have experimental techniques that they use to identify and clarify data. They can add precipitants to separate compounds into their constituent elements. They can carbon date fossils to place them into an accurate timeline. But a redoubled application of these techniques will not produce a scientific theory. An electron microscope refines our sense of what the data are—it does not interpret that data by way of its improved accuracy. The same holds for historical-critical techniques. It is simply comical to imagine that the intellectual techniques that help us bring the Bible into focus as a diverse and historical document can also double as synthetic tools for interpretation.

At this point I could go on to point out how far-fetched and allegorical are modern attempts to perform an alchemical transformation of sophisticated data analysis into some larger interpretive account. Reading Marcus Borg involves entering into occult theories of religious consciousness where Paul Tillich is wedded to Norman O. Brown in the seventh epoch of the liberated ego as it bursts the bonds of social finitude. Even the sober Gerhard von Rad can sound positively vatic when he pronounces upon rather than reasons about theological topics in his commentary on Genesis. These unsatisfactory results are inevitable. Insofar as modern biblical studies self-consciously reject classical Christian doctrines and take up modern doctrines about religion and human consciousness (or the now popular postmodern doctrines about society and power and difference) as the organizing principles for exegesis, we will get exegesis that links Scripture to

29 *The Social Setting of Pauline Christianity: Essays on Corinth* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1982).

sociological or sociological doctrines (or the doctrines of French literary theory). Or we will get desperate theological gestures that, however true in themselves, fail to bring Scripture into a living relationship with Church teaching.

But I do not want to focus on the speck in the eyes of modern biblical scholars. What concerns me is the beam in my own theological eye. During the Second World War, Henri de Lubac wrote a series of lectures and essays. He wanted to understand why the Christian culture of Europe was failing—why, to use his words, “the whole edifice of European civilization seems to be collapsing.” De Lubac had no illusions about the barbaric paganism of modern European ideologies, but he did not focus his attention on the enemy without. He was concerned about the enemy within. For, as he observed then, “At the root of everything, it must be said, there is a failure among Christians.”³⁰

According to de Lubac, his failure—our failure—has a number of sources, but the most important was and remains a loss of spiritual contact with the prime substance of Christian truth, the holy Scriptures. The deep source of Christian impotence in the present age, he writes, is “the renunciation of knowing and using the Bible.” This is especially true of the Old Testament. “Many theologians,” he observed, and this has remained all too true, “forego acquiring a deeper knowledge of it, considering it an obscure domain, reserved for the exploration of a few, rare specialists.”³¹ To return to the analysis I put forward in the first section of this paper, theologians have lost sight of the principles of apostolic legitimacy and vitality. They—again, we—neither see nor seek a living relationship between doctrine and Scripture.³²

De Lubac provides a close analysis of how and why theology has become alienated from Scripture. The details are complex, but the overall assessment is straightforward. Modern theology has for too long functioned as a perverse Christian scientism. “It is,” writes John Webster, “fatally easy to prefer the relatively clean lines of doctrine to the much less manageable, untheorized material of the

30 *Theology in History*, trans. Anne Englund Nash, (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1996), 441.

31 De Lubac, *Theology in History*, 226.

32 Any Catholic theologian serious about the recovery of Scripture as the soul of theology must come to terms with the pervasive supersession of Scripture by doctrine in so much of post-Reformation Catholic theology. It is a legacy still very much alive in the influential work of Karl Rahner. In his *Foundations of Christian Faith*, (New York: Seabury, 1978), Rahner warns against “mere biblicism.” According to Rahner, the old Protestant method of theology was organized along the lines of a detailed biblical theology, but now such an approach is “basically obsolete.” Instead, he believes, modern historical-critical study has sole authority to determine the content of the Bible, and an intellectually respectable dogmatic theology “can make use of only as much scriptural data as is sufficiently certain from an honest exegesis.” (All quotes from p. 14.) It turns out that very little scriptural data is useful for dogmatic theology, and the vast majority of Rahner’s work runs on the cognitive energy of his transcendental theology in concert with appeals to official Church doctrine. The problem of doctrinal supersession of Scripture is not a solely Catholic problem. For my own attempt to diagnose the migration of theology from Scripture to doctrine, see “Theology in the Ruins of the Church,” *Pro Ecclesia* 12:1 (Winter 2003): 15–36.

Bible.”³³ It is easier still to dwell among the concepts of election and incarnation and perichoresis, as if they have a substantial, superluminous truth resident within themselves. This scientism, this failure to see that the purpose of doctrine and theology is to maximize the penetration of the mind into the world of Scripture, is what we must overcome.³⁴

The great doctrines of the Church are exegetical judgments given communally authoritative form, and they are living truths for us only insofar as we enter into them through an ongoing practice of biblical interpretation. Theology is not something other than interpretation. Theology can digress into metaphysics and moral theory, into anthropology and any number of other topics. Theology is the queen of the sciences, and she has all things under her dominion. But the fundamental role of the queen is to discern the truth about God by way of interpreting his holy Word, and all the different avenues of theological inquiry are for the sake of sustaining and extending the core theological project of interpretation. For this reason, we must firmly reject the self-satisfied notion that there could ever be something called theology from which or to which bridges to biblical study need to be built.

But there is a bridge that we do need to build. What the churches teach and what the Bible says are not obviously concordant—nor is it even clear that they are not discordant. It has never been entirely clear, as the history of theological controversy and exegetical diversity demonstrate. But here *we* need to be clear-minded. The ecumenical presumption that doctrine must be linked to Scripture no more settles questions or decides arguments than the scientific conviction that theory must be related to data ends investigation or weakens reason. Knowing the ends or goals of inquiry energizes and sharpens rather than enervates and dulls. We need to see and explain how Scripture testifies to the gospel of Jesus Christ. The principle of apostolic legitimacy must hold sway. We also must have a vivid sense of how Scripture gives life to the Church that springs from the very same gospel. The imperative of apostolic vitality must work upon our theological imaginations.

There is neither complacency nor any sort of ecclesial triumphalism in the principle of apostolic legitimacy and imperative of apostolic vitality. On the contrary, to believe that what the Church teaches and what the Bible says should be linked drives us away from complacent doctrinalism and sterile historicism that we have tolerated for far too long. Thus, the bridge we now need is from where we are now—from our current awakening to the complacency and sterility of many of our inherited theological and interpretive practices—to the intellectually vibrant project of interpretation that restores a living relationship between doctrine and Scripture.

33 *Holy Scripture: A Dogmatic Sketch*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 2003), 130.

34 On this imperative, see John Webster's exposition of the theological pedagogy of Zacharius Ursinus, with pointed contrasts to modern theological sensibilities, *Holy Scripture*, 107–135.