

What Makes Exegesis Theological?

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ON THE BASIS of my experience as the editor of *Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible* series, I can report that there is no danger of a theological method emerging to spar with the historical-critical method. The approaches, techniques, resources, and interpretive strategies of the commentators have been very diverse, almost maddeningly so. Yet, for all its diversity, readers and reviewers of the Brazos series sense an interpretive unity, and rightly so. As I tried to explain in my general introduction to the series, the basic premise of our approach in the *Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible* series is that the Nicene tradition—the raggedy-edged and intrinsically controversial body of orthodox Christian dogma—plays an indispensable role in good biblical interpretation. Just what counts as part of the Nicene tradition is very much a matter of debate, and the precise role dogma plays in exegesis resists definition. But the larger claim is, I think, accessible to our understanding. Knowing and bringing the classical Christian body of dogma to bear in the reflective processes of textual analysis and exposition will conduce to saying something true and helpful about the text, and “theological interpretation” has emerged as an *ersatz* but nonetheless useful term to designate this approach.

Even this admittedly vague description tends to evoke pressing questions from biblical scholars, some of which are suggested by the concluding queries in Markus Bockmuehl’s ambivalent reflections on the notion of theological exegesis.¹ Why would one be so scandalous as to imagine Christian dogma crucial for biblical interpretation? Won’t the interposition of dogma into the exegetical project turn biblical studies into a parochial

¹ See “Bible versus Theology: Is ‘Theological Interpretation’ the Answer?” in this issue.

enterprise teetering on the edges of a stultifying fundamentalism? Why give up on the confessional neutrality that presently secures a place for biblical studies in the secular university? And in any event, don't we need an objective approach to the Bible precisely so that we can find a reliable scriptural basis for doctrine and theology, thus protecting the Bible from being turned into a wax nose easily bent to serve confessional agendas?

It is with these questions in mind that I want to state and explain the rationale for theological exegesis. There are formal and material dimensions to this rationale. The formal dimension rests on the principle of accordance, and the material dimension is best understood as a claim about the scripturally saturated substance of the classical Christian tradition. A discussion of both the formal and material rationales will help illuminate the practice of theological exegesis, and if we can be somewhat clearer about the basis for a theological approach to the Bible, then perhaps we can formulate more precise reflections on the kinds of objections and concerns expressed by often friendly but anxious critics.

The Formal Rationale for Theological Exegesis

Let's begin with the simple and rather obvious claim that the true Church of Christ teaches the gospel, along with the parallel claim that the Bible is the sacred and canonical witness to the gospel. These two claims in conjunction lead directly to a conclusion that bears immediately on questions of theological exegesis. If the Bible teaches something we judge integral to the gospel, then the Church's teaching must be substantially the same. The reverse holds true as well. If Church teaching proclaims something as a saving truth, then we assume that the Bible does so as well. In other words, what the Bible says is, we presume, in accord with what the Church proclaims. Or more precisely, how we interpret what the Bible says should line up nicely with what we take to be orthodox doctrine, and if it does not then we must conclude either that our interpretations are wrongheaded, or that what we imagine to be orthodox doctrine is not, in fact, orthodox.

Of course, our churches often put forward teachings not found in the Bible. The Catholic Church, for example, elaborates principles for just war, declares life to begin at conception, and prohibits the use of artificial methods of birth control. None of these teachings are found in the Bible, as the Catholic Church recognizes, describing them as results of reason properly applied to moral issues rather than as revealed truths. Furthermore, the dogmatic affirmations of the Immaculate Conception and Bodily Assumption of Mary, as well as other dogmas, are not biblical in a strict sense. Once again the Catholic Church recognizes this to be

the case, relying on theories of the development of doctrine to justify their apostolic authenticity.

Yet even here a negative exegetical constraint obtains. At a minimum, the Church cannot teach anything that contradicts the essential truths taught in Scripture, and more broadly, these and other teachings of the Church are presumed to be in accord with the larger sweep and general trend of scriptural truth. This presumption should not surprise us, for no matter how we conceptualize or articulate the authority of Scripture, no matter what sort of ecclesiology we adopt to describe the apostolic character of the Church, nearly all Christians presume that the supreme trustworthiness of Scripture as the Word of God dovetails with the doctrinal teaching, liturgical formation, and moral exhortation that emanate from the Church.

This presumption of accordance is fundamental, so much so that it can easily be found in the underlying logic of the confessional traditions of the churches in the West. The Council of Trent, for example, juxtaposes the evils of personal judgment to the proper path of reading guided by the Church. For the Fathers at Trent, it was intolerable that private persons should set about to produce interpretations contrary to those established by the traditions of the Church. Therefore, to prevent the possibility of any disjunction between biblical interpretation and Church teaching, the Council 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.”²

The first and second Vatican councils reiterate this affirmation of magisterial authority in different ways. As we read in Vatican I’s *Dogmatic Constitution on the Catholic Faith (De Fide)*:

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.³

² Council of Trent, Session 4, Second Decree.

³ *De Fide*, Chapter 2. 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*

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, and one can argue that Vatican II refines Tridentine teaching in an important way by emphasizing the unique authority of the Word of God.⁴ Nonetheless, the underlying unity of the teaching office and exegetical authority remains intact: "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."⁵

One can mount endless objections to the Tridentine approach to biblical interpretation, judging it to be authoritarian, anti-historical, unscriptural, and so forth. Yet we need to see the formal principle at work. By very clearly stipulating that the Church and only the Church rightly judges the meaning of Scripture, the Catholic Church ensures by dogmatic definition precisely what nearly all Christians presume: the principle of accordance between what the Church teaches and what the Bible says.

For all the differences between Protestant and Catholic, on this point they are as one. The Lutheran Formula of Concord 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 the New Testament."⁶ In the Reformed tradition, the Westminster Confession emphasizes 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."⁷ Thus we find that the Reformation documents settle on the same formal principle

théologiques sur les constitutions du Concile de Vatican, Tome 1, Jean-Michel-Alfred Vacant (Paris: Delhomme et Brigue, 1895), 520–21.

⁴ 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).

⁵ *Dei Verbum*, §10.

⁶ Formula of Concord, Epitome, I.

⁷ Westminster Confession, Chapter 1.

as Trent and the two modern Vatican councils. What the Church teaches must be substantially in accord with what the Bible says, with the two sides of the great Reformation debate about Church and Scripture differing only in how that accordance is to be described and ensured.

So fundamental is the principle of accordance that even aggressively non-confessional Protestants bear witness to it. They reject the instrumentalities of written confessions precisely because they think that these man-made documents stand in the way of the complete correspondence between scriptural interpretation and Church teaching. The two should be one and the same ecclesial act, not two different aspects of Church life that need to be brought into harmony. Thus, however bitter the debates may be about Church authority, confessional documents, theories of inerrancy, or methods of interpretation, the principle of accordance between Church and Scripture is not itself controversial. It is instead the great point of agreement around which ecumenical controversies swirl.

Therefore, it seems to me that theological exegesis does nothing more than presume what nearly all Christians presume: the accordance of Church teaching with scriptural interpretation. Something like an agenda for exegesis becomes clear when we add a further and one would think non-controversial principle of reason, which is that we should use what is clear in order to understand what is obscure. At times, what Scripture says is opaque but doctrine is clear. At other times, what the Church teaches is either puzzling or undeveloped, but the plain sense of Scripture would seem perspicuous. And at still other times, the Bible seems to blatantly contradict dogmatic claims or to strike at oblique angles, or even to hover with perplexing irrelevance. All these circumstances provide excellent opportunities for the mind to engage in analysis that is both theological and exegetical.

Consider the case of contradiction. In my reading of the first chapter of Genesis, I make the forthright observation that readers face a striking contrast between what the Bible says and what the Church teaches. In Genesis 1:2 we read: "The earth was without form and void, and darkness was upon the face of the deep; and the Spirit of God was moving over the face of the waters." Modern biblical scholars have given detailed accounts of the connections between this verse and the Babylonian creation myth, the *Enuma Elish*, connections that biblical scholars believe strongly suggest that in its original context Genesis was read as teaching that God tamed or formed a preexisting chaos. In contrast, both Jews and Christians have long agreed that God creates out of nothing. Given the presumption of accordance, the theological interpreter faces an obvious problem: what the Bible seems to say and what the Church teaches are discordant rather than harmonious.

St. Thomas Aquinas based his pedagogy on the method of objection and response, because he recognized that puzzling difficulties and impediments tend to create the intellectual effort necessary for discovery and insight. Such was my situation as an interpreter. When I worked on this verse and read some modern historical-critical analysis, I was forced to ask a question. If Genesis 1 doesn't provide support for the doctrine of creation out of nothing, then why did ancient Jews and Christians formulate the doctrine in the first place? I had unthinkingly assumed that the creation account in Genesis was the source of the classical doctrine of creation, but an actual encounter with the text suggested otherwise. Yet, the presumption of accordance blocked the easy conclusion that Church teaching is unscriptural. Instead of sliding along with my unexamined views, I turned to apply myself to the problem with redoubled effort.

The first step was to make sure I actually understood the doctrine of creation out of nothing. This led me to Robert Sokolowski's book *The God of Faith and Reason*.⁸ There I discovered that the main thrust of the doctrine is metaphysical: there is *nothing* other than the one true God and all the things he has made. Put somewhat differently, the doctrine of creation out of nothing entails an ontological parsimony, where parsimony signals the stingy way in which Christians and Jews limit reality to God and the single and metaphysically homogeneous finite sphere of creation, rather than the rococo Neoplatonic view that allows for all sort of layers and degrees of reality emanating from the singular divine source.

With this ontological parsimony in mind, I returned to the Bible and discovered that the extensive Old Testament polemic against idolatry was the true source of the doctrine of creation out of nothing. Idols are not weak, ineffective, or inadequate; they are empty and lifeless. "Idols are like scarecrows," we read in Jeremiah, and "they cannot do evil, neither is it in them to do good" (Jer 10:5). The New Testament carries forward the same view. St. Paul explains the futility of idols by appealing to God's creative uniqueness (Acts 14:15; 17:24). Idols are futile and vacant, as they must be, for the ontological parsimony of the doctrine of creation out of nothing denies the existence of any intermediary, semi-divine reality to infuse them with power. This is why he can be nonplussed about the fact that some of the faithful are eating meat sacrificed to idols, for idols have no malignant potency (1 Cor 8:4–6). Given this larger biblical consensus, it's therefore natural that idolatry should be the issue at stake when creation out of nothing is explicitly affirmed in 2 Maccabees 7:8.

⁸ Robert Sokolowski, *The God of Faith and Reason* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1982).

But the central role of the biblical campaign against idolatry is not the only thing I discovered. The ontological parsimony entailed by the doctrine of creation out of nothing bears on a surprisingly wide array of issues. For example, the cogency of the literalism of biblical accounts of divine action in history seems to require the metaphysical assumptions we find in the doctrine of creation out of nothing. The same holds for the unexpected unity of God's universal purposes with the particularity of human history that begins with the calling of Abraham and reaches a crescendo in John 1:14 ("And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us").⁹ Moreover, the fresh insight I had gained into the ontological parsimony entailed in the doctrine of creation out of nothing allowed me to return to Genesis 1:2 with a more vivid sense of what is at stake in the creation account, seeing for the first time a possible connection to the Augustinian understanding of the dissolving, destroying, negating, and evacuating power of evil. With this metaphysical view of evil as *nihil*, we can hear the divine pronouncement, "Let there be light" (Gn 1:3) echoed in Deuteronomy, where Moses repeatedly exhorts the Israelites to choose life instead of death. The echo in Deuteronomy allows us to turn to the first chapter of John, the New Testament verses most obviously relevant to Genesis 1, and encourages us to think more deeply about the constant conjunction of light and life that invades the realm of darkness and the nothingness of death. The covenant—the divine initiative that secures the triumph of light and life—is already in the deepest foundations of creation.

I could give many more examples from my exegetical efforts, as well as from other commentaries in the Brazos series. When Genesis 17:7 stipulates that the covenant of circumcision will be everlasting, a Christian reader immediately thinks of Galatians 5:2, where Paul says, "If you receive circumcision, Christ will be no advantage to you." Here we find two relatively clear scriptural passages against a background of opaque and fluid Church teaching about covenant, law, and grace that makes it difficult to see them in harmony. This conjunction of clarity and obscurity motivated me to try to explain how a Pauline rejection of circumcision can be consistent with an affirmation of its everlasting role in God's plan of salvation.¹⁰ Or take an example from Robert Jenson's commentary on Ezekiel. At the end of chapter 22 of Ezekiel, we read that God is at once attacking Jerusalem and at the same time searching for a righteous man to stand in the breach and defend the city. It seems a hopeless confusion: God is outside the wall of the city pressing his attack, and he is at the same time

⁹ See Sokolowski, *The God of Faith and Reason*, 31–40.

¹⁰ R. R. Reno, *Genesis*, Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2010), 173–80.

inside, seeking to save his beloved people. This double role is not so much resolved as made clear and explicit, Jenson suggests, in the crucifixion and Resurrection of Christ.¹¹

My point is not to argue for the cogency of these interpretations, or any others. Perhaps they are wrongheaded, or they stretch too far, or don't stretch far enough. This is for others to judge. Instead, I have been trying to illustrate some of the ways in which the presumption of accordance between doctrine and Scripture frames and motivates interpretive questions and thus guides exegesis. This framing and motivating strikes me as one of the most promising features of theological exegesis, for the kinds of questions we ask are among the most important dimensions of intellectual work, including the work of interpretation. As soon as one allows Church teaching and biblical proclamation to share in a common claim to truth, the obvious differences, the puzzling divergences, as well as the unexpected harmonies will naturally compel our minds and draw us into elaborate arguments that interweave theological and biblical analysis.

The Material Rationale for Theological Exegesis

All efforts of interpretation try to say something true about the material under examination, whether these truths are philological, text-critical, form-critical, historical, moral, political, or theological. In other words, we undertake our interpretations against the background of presumed economies of truth, some of which are very limited and particular in scope, others of which are quite wide and universal. For example, one can pursue philological analysis only under guiding presumptions about how grammar works and languages evolve. It turns out, however, that these presumptions fit nicely with a wide array of different and perhaps even contradictory metaphysical schemes. I doubt, for example, that the arguments in the area of Hebrew philology change much if one is an ancient Platonist, medieval Aristotelian, or modern day logical positivist.

This metaphysical agnosticism diminishes as we develop larger-scale interpretative arguments, all of which draw upon often unspoken, even unconscious assumptions about the ways in which human history and culture unfold. The J and P hypothesis, for example, enjoys a great deal of important and compelling support in the textual details of the Pentateuch, most famously in the different locutions used to refer to God. Yet, when scholars turn from the obvious existence of J and P to a theory of redaction that promises to help us understand the significance of the intermingled strands of the canonical text, they draw upon a tacit theory

¹¹ Robert Jenson, *Ezekiel*, Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2009), 188.

of tradition and historical development, and behind that theory lies an implicit metaphysics. The role of metaphysical horizon in interpretation becomes explicit when, for example, a New Testament scholar presupposes that miracles and prophecies cannot happen and therefore concludes that the prophecies of the destruction of the Temple provide decisive evidence for authorship after 70 A.D. After all, claims about what *can* or *cannot* happen are, by definition, metaphysical statements.

It is intellectually stultifying to try to read ancient texts—indeed, any texts—without drawing upon an implied metaphysical horizon. To interpret without recourse to presumptions about reality is like trying to walk without legs or see without eyes. In any event, the role of an implied metaphysical horizon presents no problem for texts we do not affirm as privileged sources of truth. A seminar on *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, for example, might undertake to discern the reasons for and methods of its composition, as well as an assessment of its influence, and these approaches promise interesting insights into cultural patterns of modern anti-Semitism, to say nothing of the larger perversions of the human heart. A good professor knows how to maximize these insights by framing questions and interpretations in light of an economy of truth. Perhaps the professor presumes certain truths about human motivations, fears, and fantasies, or perhaps he appeals to truths about the larger sweep of modern history, or perhaps still other dimensions of our common humanity. Students appreciate this sort of class, and books written in this way attract grateful readers, because the larger horizon helps us see how a book such as *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, which is full of falsehoods, can nonetheless illuminate and refine our insights into what is true.

With texts we hold dear, the dynamic begins to change, and we become more anxious about the role of the implied metaphysical horizon. Although we may want to understand and interpret *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, by and large we don't want to adopt its worldview. We want to understand it, perhaps, but not be influenced by it. Therefore, we worry very little about whether or not our modes of interpretation subsume or control our reading. However, in a limited but real sense we might justly worry about our interpretations of Shakespeare. Because we think his plays rich with insights into the human condition, we often want our minds to be influenced by his work in a deep way. We don't just want to know about Shakespeare or to understand him in light of our assumptions about culture, history, and the human condition. We also want to think about *Macbeth* or *King Lear* in a Shakespearean way. To the degree that there are profound truths in a text, we want these truths to influence our metaphysical horizon rather than simply be interpreted by it.

This disposition of interpretive submission and obedience becomes acute when a reader approaches the Bible as the Word of God. Shakespeare may have been wise, but he was not omni-competent. In contrast, one basic supposition at work in the doctrines of inspiration and inerrancy involves an affirmation of the supreme and comprehensive wisdom latent in the biblical text. The Bible provides the master code for all reality, and faithful interpreters want their presumed economy of truth to be biblical; we would like to have some confidence that the metaphysical horizon we use to frame our more ambitious and large-scale interpretations of the Bible is itself biblical in substance. In a very broad sense, therefore, all self-conscious Christian interpreters operate with a desire expressed in the principle of *sola scriptura*. For example, many modern biblical scholars appeal to the doctrine of the Incarnation as a warrant for historical analysis. They stake a claim to a biblical basis for the metaphysical horizon that usually provides the background assumptions for modern historical-critical study of the Bible.¹²

By and large this use of the doctrine of the Incarnation fails to persuade, because it does not engage the full import of the union of God's purposes with the particularity of human history. Jesus teaches us what it means to be human, and therefore we cannot simply assume that our usual notions of "humanness" can determine or define his humanity. The same is true of history. From the election of Abraham to the Incarnation of the Eternal Word, the commerce of God with his people teaches us the truth about human history, and this invariably alters our ordinary assumptions. Defective as the usual appeals to the Incarnation may be, however, the impulse that leads biblical scholars to turn to doctrine as a source for explaining and justifying their interpretive approach is nevertheless sound. As I have shown, the ecumenical principle of accordance encourages us to have a great deal of confidence in the biblical substance of orthodox doctrine. This confidence, moreover, is not merely formal. There is a material rationale for turning to doctrine when trying to interpret the Bible in a way that respects its textual integrity. The Nicene tradition represents a remarkable intellectual effort to rethink all aspects of reality on Old Testament and New Testament principles. Church doctrine, therefore, is biblically saturated through and through.

Consider, for example, *On First Principles*, the first sustained Christian effort of speculative, systematic theology. At the outset Origen states that his approach has "no other source but the very words and teachings of Christ."¹³ If we allow ourselves to become bewitched by narrow and

¹² See, for example, Peter Enns, *Inspiration and Incarnation: Evangelicals and the Problem of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2005), 17–21.

¹³ Origen, *On First Principles*, trans. G. W. Butterworth (Gloucester, MA: Peter Smith, 1973), Book I, pref., ¶1.

untenable assumptions about how beliefs and ideas develop and interlock, then we can wrongly presume that “source” means directly found in or deduced from Scripture, and as a result Origen’s assertion will seem absurd. If we drop these assumptions, however, and instead see his grand theology of creation, time, and embodiment, as well as evil, redemption, and consummation, as a way of shaping a metaphysical horizon that allows us to read the Bible biblically, then we can grasp the true meaning of Origen’s claim. “Think of reality this way,” Origen should be read as saying, “and you will be able to enter more fully into the wisdom of the Scriptures, because you will be thinking scripturally, you will approach the Bible with a biblical view of reality.” This ambition, it seems to me, characterizes the bulk of the Nicene tradition.¹⁴

We can judge Origen mistaken at certain points, as did many in the centuries after his death. Moreover, we can engage the very complex and unruly body of teaching that I have been calling the Nicene tradition, and after analysis determine it confused, ill-developed, and in need of correction by a more thorough interpretation of Scripture. This corrective impulse was not unique to the Reformers of the sixteenth century. To a great extent, the Nicene tradition as a whole should be understood as an argument made across many generations about how best to account for the truth of scriptural teaching, Church practice, and apostolic proclamation, and as is the case with all large-scale, ongoing, and communally conducted arguments, it involves constant restatements, reconsiderations, and revisions. Although these reconsiderations are ongoing, and although many dimensions of Church doctrine remain points of intense dispute (not least, the ecclesiological question of what counts as Church doctrine), as an intellectual resource for exegesis, the relatively steady and constant points of consensus within the Nicene tradition remain peerless. I defy anyone to identify a way of thinking about God, history, and human destiny that is at once more metaphysically self-conscious and more thoroughly and constantly invested with exegetical substance.¹⁵

My own interpretive efforts have made me acutely aware of the remarkable combination of conceptual rigor and interpretive power in

¹⁴ For a winsome and sympathetic description of Origen’s systematic project, see Rowan Williams, “Origen,” in *The First Theologians*, ed. G. R. Evans (Oxford: Blackwell, 2003). For an effort to show the exegetical genius of Origen’s theology, see R. R. Reno, “Origen and Spiritual Interpretation,” *Pro Ecclesia* 15 (2006): 108–26.

¹⁵ On the close connection between doctrine and exegesis in the early development of the Nicene tradition, see R. R. Reno and John J. O’Keefe, *Sanctified Vision: An Introduction to Early Christian Interpretation of the Bible* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2005).

the Nicene tradition. When I grappled with the traditional view of God and creation in relation to the beginning verse of Genesis, I came to be impressed by the exegetical roots of the doctrine of creation out of nothing. As a metaphysical claim about God and reality the doctrine has no basis in common sense or ancient science, emerging instead out of sustained attempt to formulate the ontological parsimony implied in the Old Testament polemics against idolatry. The doctrine of creation out of nothing also has served historically as an important background assumption for subsequent discussions of divine presence and action within history, most importantly in the person of Jesus Christ.¹⁶ I have come to see that, without this metaphysical horizon, reading the Bible as a coherent narrative about the God of Israel who raised Jesus from the dead becomes very difficult. The same holds for the doctrine of the Trinity, which is metaphysically even more improbable and was even more important for the crucial theological project of developing a conceptually disciplined account of a supremely transcendent God who remains nonetheless capable of full identification with created particularity.

If we keep in mind the exegetical sources and pressures that spurred the development of Nicene doctrine, then we can see more clearly the material rationale for theological exegesis. When commentators in the *Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible* series use doctrine to orient themselves, to frame their exegetical questions and draw out the significance of a biblical passage—when they are engaging in the multi-faceted enterprise that I have been calling theological exegesis—they are relying on intellectual resources that have been developed and refined for the specific purpose of thinking biblically about the Bible. The formal principle of accordance between how we read the Bible and how we understand Church teaching is so primitive that there never has been a moment in the history of Christianity when exegesis and doctrine have not been intertwined in a single, complex intellectual practice—never, that is, until the modern era.

The Present Situation

For many different and complex reasons, contemporary biblical scholars have a difficult time accepting theological exegesis. Needless to say, secular scholars do not entertain the notion that the doctrines of the Church state important truths about God, or about anything else for that matter, and as a result the formal and material rationales for theological exegesis

¹⁶ See especially Irenaeus, *Against the Heresies*, Book One. The doctrine of creation provides the main backdrop for Irenaeus's criticisms of the cogency of gnostic soteriology, as well as for his own theology of the Incarnation.

can seem only unpersuasive at best and a dangerous intrusion of religious fundamentalism at worst. Yet even biblical scholars who believe in and trust the main lines of the Nicene tradition are uneasy about theological exegesis, because they fear that more will be lost than gained by the introduction of doctrinal concerns into the practice of interpretation. And what do they fear will be lost? As I have listened to and read the concerns of men and women of faith who are committed to modern historical-critical study, I find myself identifying two kinds of worries: the first is political or institutional, the second textual and theological.

In *The Bible after Babel: Historical Criticism in a Postmodern Age*, John Collins shifts the focus of modern biblical study. Our present postmodern skepticism has undermined our confidence that historical-critical procedures can deliver conclusive answers to questions about what various biblical texts once meant for their original writers, editors, and readers. Nonetheless, because the rules for historical study are academic rather than confessional, based on modern canons of historical analysis rather than on classical principles of faith, Collins observes that historical criticism “has created an arena where people of different faith commitments can work together and have meaningful conversations.”¹⁷ A Jew, a Christian, and an atheist can agree about what counts as a good argument for determining the sources for the J writer, for example, or the *Sitz im Leben* of imprecatory psalms. This agreement creates a neutral institutional space for biblical study, allowing for conversation across confessional divides.

The range of conversations about the Bible made possible by modern critical methods has been of great value. Not only has this method built a culture of cooperation and mutual learning among scholars from different backgrounds and with different beliefs, it has also injected fresh insights into old theological debates. For example, the new consensus about Paul that developed in recent decades played a decisive role in overcoming confessional divides in the Lutheran and Roman Catholic *Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification*. I can imagine a different but equally significant consensus about covenant and Christian supersessionism emerging out of the new participation of Jewish scholars in New Testament study.

Contemporary biblical scholars are right to cherish the shared discourse of historical-critical inquiry, and they are right to persevere in

¹⁷ John Collins, *The Bible after Babel: Historical Criticism in a Postmodern Age* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2005), 10. For an excellent discussion of Collins and the shift toward a political justification for historical-critical method, see Michael C. Legaspi, “What Ever Happened to Historical Criticism?” *Journal of Religion and Society* 9 (2007).

their inquiries, just as Christian scholars in other fields should carry forward the work of their disciplines, some of which also play an important role in Christian self-understanding. The virtue of faith invites a range of intellectual projects and conversations, allowing modern historical study to play an ongoing role in theologically motivated biblical interpretation. However, John Collins makes the unwarranted assumption that modern biblical study is intrinsically antithetical to theological exegesis, whereas, in fact, only the historical-critical claim to final interpretive authority contradicts a theological approach. Reviews of some of the early volumes of the Brazos series exemplify this false assumption. In many cases, reviewers trained as modern biblical scholars have objected to what they take to be spurious typologies, unwarranted intrusions of Christological claims, and a general tendency to move from the biblical text to theological analysis. Rather than entering into these modes of analysis to offer criticisms of their cogency, biblical scholars, when faced with theological exegesis, have tended to assert interpretive authority, making the inference that, if the historical-critical method would not lead one to say *x* about the book of Jonah or the Gospel of Matthew, then *x* should not be said.

There can be no doubt that the rationales I have given for theological exegesis directly challenge the presumed interpretive authority of modern historical criticism. Unless one rejects nearly all forms of classical ecclesiology, any effort by a Christian to explain what the Bible fully and finally says will require accounting for the germane teachings of the Church. Moreover, given the exegetical saturation of the Nicene tradition, anyone who seeks a biblical horizon for biblical interpretation will need to reckon with classical doctrine. In this instance, as in others, theology remains the queen of the sciences. Historical study of the Bible is certainly legitimate and perhaps necessary in the contemporary context, but as a mode of interpretation it cannot be sufficient and satisfactory for Christian readers, because its methods operate at a studied distance from what men and women of faith implicitly (Protestant) or explicitly (Catholic) regard as the most reliable guide to the truths of Scripture—Church doctrine.

The second worry concerns attention to the Bible in its particularity. Modern historical study cherishes a tradition of close attention to textual detail, and this tradition rebels against the way in which the metaphysical horizon of the Nicene tradition often encourages theological readers to import exegetical observations and lines of analysis that run toward conceptual questions rather than textual ones. For example, my own reading of the first verses of Genesis moves very quickly from what the

text says to an analysis of what is entailed in the doctrine of creation out of nothing, and I would not be surprised if contemporary biblical scholars note this shift with dismay. The same holds for Christological readings of the Old Testament. Biblical scholars worry that this approach bounces from the Old to the New Testament and back again without regard for the vast differences of cultural and historical context. Even a decision to use the final form of the canonical text can rankle, because it seems to ignore the multi-layered reality of tradition and redaction.

I read this worry about the loss of textual particularity as a concern about the role of the Bible as the real authority and living source for Christian faith. The Bible does not speak to us in pithy doctrines. It is not a catechism thrown into narrative, poetic, and legal form. On the contrary, the Bible is thickly forested with history and culture, as well as endless nuances of language and expression, and biblical scholars like to view their own training as sustained immersion in the endlessly multifaceted and plural worlds of the Bible. We fail to read fully and deeply, argues the modern biblical scholar, if we fail to enter into the almost trackless but beautiful wilderness of the Bible.

Here I find myself in full sympathy, but I must make some cautionary remarks. To begin, it is not the case that modern biblical study refrains from abstractions and remains intimately engaged with the biblical text. Efforts to reconstruct the original context for the book of Exodus or the Gospel of John turn out to be elaborate speculative enterprises that rely on countless sociological, psychological, and theological assumptions. Redaction criticism can be used to dismember books of the Bible, and one often finds modern scholars using this technique to explain away rather than interpret passages.¹⁸ The modern genre of historical-critical commentary has become an ossified template, and the vast majority of these commentaries read like summaries of recent scholarship rather than fresh engagements with the biblical text. Troublesome as these tendencies may be for those who cherish biblical particularity, there is a still greater danger. Modern historical study provides no intellectual justification for the intensive focus on the canonical text that has long characterized modern biblical scholarship. On the contrary, as the evolution of graduate programs indicates, the natural subject matter for those who cleave to historical methods will not be the Old and New Testaments but rather ancient Near Eastern culture and Greco-Roman culture. I do not object to this evolution, for it strikes me as proper if one wishes to pursue a purely historical approach to ancient

¹⁸ For a particularly striking example, see Gerhard von Rad's explanation of why one can ignore Genesis 38, in *Genesis: A Commentary*, trans. John H. Marks (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1972) 356–57.

texts. But we need to refrain from illusions. This trend will not encourage the development of the Bible-focused mental habits that many wrongly imagine are intrinsic to the modern historical-critical tradition.

Theological exegesis, at least as I have defined it, gives us an intellectual justification for the development of an ever richer, ever deeper understanding of the Bible. It does not approach the Bible with pre-determined interpretations that glide smoothly over the surfaces of the Bible. Rather, because theological exegesis presumes that Church and Bible are on the same page, so to speak, it interweaves rather than short-circuits a proper concern for nuance, detail, and historical particularity. Given the principle of accordance, judgments about how to read the Bible must invariably influence the ways in which we interpret doctrine. And conversely, our always-ongoing efforts to understand the Nicene tradition should leaven our necessarily incomplete interpretations of the Bible. The overall effect, it seems to me, will be neither wooden applications of doctrine to exegesis nor a systematic neglect of the organic diversity of the Bible. The formal and material rationales for theological exegesis challenge our complacency. As I have discovered in my own work, recognizing that Church teaching bears upon exegesis has thrown a spotlight on my own ignorance of the doctrines I imagined were familiar, as well as my ignorance of the unfathomable richness the Bible. One must enter more deeply into both in order to find one's way toward the truth of Christ they share.

In the end, the goal of exegesis should be the truth that the text allows us to see. All but the most virulent intellectual ideologues hope to produce good interpretations of the Bible rather than to write commentaries devoted to the advancement of various labels and methodological formulae. This is why nineteenth-century pioneers of historical-critical method such as David Friedrich Strauss and Julius Wellhausen produced exegesis with so many interesting theological, moral, and political dimensions. Like Origen and Bernard and Luther and Karl Barth and Adrienne von Speyr, the great figures of the modern tradition of biblical interpretation wanted to bring out the truth in the Bible, suggested by the Bible, pointed to and derived from the Bible—take your pick of prepositions and their implied epistemological metaphors. This should neither surprise nor disturb. Truth is what we seek when we engage our minds. To be a Christian is to believe that the truth found in the Bible is the very same truth we enter into by way of baptism, the same truth we confess in our creeds, the same truth we receive in the bread and wine of the Eucharist. Theological exegesis, therefore, is not a method. It is simply an approach that does not ignore the truth of Church teaching when embarking on the difficult task of trying to discern the truth that the Bible teaches. N V