

The Quest for the *Vera et Sincera de Jesu:* *Dei Verbum* §19 and the Historicity of the Gospels

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Introduction

THE TWENTY-FIFTH ANNIVERSARY of the opening of Vatican II saw René Latourelle produce a major conciliar Festschrift: *Vatican II: Assessment and Perspectives*. For the first volume of this project, José Caba contributed an essay treating the “Genesis and Fruits” of *Dei Verbum* §19.¹ In Caba’s view the council’s teaching on the Gospels essentially offered “a new way of formulating the historicity problem,” no longer moored to “the knowledge and truthfulness of those who were eyewitnesses.” Instead, in the document’s “New Framework,” criteriology and redaction criticism point the way forward.

Twenty-five years later, we stand in a different historiographical place, from which both our *assessments* and *perspectives* are likely changed. If there is little to dispute in Caba’s straightforward account of the succession of drafts in the article’s genesis, one may be less satisfied with his interpretation of its fruits. What promptly followed the council is not necessarily what the council envisioned. In any event, Gospel scholarship today looks considerably different than it did just twen-

¹ José Caba, “Historicity of the Gospels (*Dei Verbum* 19): Genesis and Fruits of the Conciliar Text,” in *Vatican II: Assessments and Perspectives*, vol. 1, ed. René Latourelle (New York: Paulist, 1988), 299–320.

ty-five years ago; while resistance is growing to overstated notions of the council's newness.² It is opportune, therefore, now a full half century later, to evaluate again *Dei Verbum*'s important teaching on the Gospels' historicity.

In this essay, I will offer a revised estimate and propose that the doctrine of *Dei Verbum* §19 is a classic instance of conciliar *ressourcement*. Rather than elaborating a wholly "New Framework," configured by *Formgeschichte* (and its offspring, redaction criticism) and specially calibrated to a critical quest for the historical Jesus, Vatican II recovers a fresh view of the definitive paradigm of sacred Scripture. The Church's teaching on the Gospels is thus best understood as adumbrating a Lukan Framework, and *Dei Verbum* §19 represents an exegesis of the preface of Luke's Gospel. It is no accident (though not noted by Caba) that the council frames its doctrine in article 19 with two programmatic scriptural texts: Acts 1:1–2 and Luke 1:2–4. While this appeal to inspired Scripture remains open (and even invites) professional historical inquiry, the *asphaleia* of the Gospels is part of the preached message itself.

The study will be structured around several interlocking themes. First, I will contextualize the teaching of *Dei Verbum* §19 historically and hermeneutically, supplying a broad background indicating the unlikelihood of any substantially "New Framework." I will also provide a description of two major responses to the issue of historicity. Finally, I will consider some trends in Gospel scholarship, positioning them in relation to the council doctrine.

Opiniones Novae or the Renouveau?

On June 26, 1961, while the preconciliar committees were already busily meeting, Jean Steinmann's *La Vie de Jésus* became the last title ever placed on the Index.³ Although the Pontifical Biblical Commission (PBC) was known as a vigilant watchdog and had aggressively censured several books in the past, this solemn condemnation through the Holy

² For a comprehensive statement of opposition to the entrenched perspective represented by the Bologna School of council scholarship and reception, see Agostino Marchetto, *Il Concilio Ecumenico Vaticano II: Contrappunto per la sua storia* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2005).

³ *In generali consessu*, AAS 53 (1961): 507–8. See Jean Steinmann, *La Vie de Jésus* (Paris: Editions de Noël, 1959).

Office was the only such action ever initiated by the PBC.⁴ The unexplained decree came just days after a *monitum* had been promulgated, the circumstances of which help explain the severe decision.⁵

Steinmann was incidental to a larger controversy ignited the summer before, later nicknamed “The Battle of the Biblicum.” At its heart lay a suggestive exchange: a trial run, in some regards, of those perspectives we now recognize as the two great competing conciliar hermeneutics: rupture and continuity.⁶ Louis Alonso Schökel, a young professor

⁴ In 1912, the PBC forbade several commentaries from being used in seminaries, including “several works by P. Lagrange.” At different points the PBC also aggressively censured several other publications. See AAS 26 (1934): 130 and AAS 45 (1953): 432. These condemnations were more restricted in scope, however, and were not executed through the Holy Office and its Sacred Congregation of the Index.

⁵ See AAS 53 (1961): 507. Contrast Steinmann’s unexplained condemnation with Cardinal Merry del Val’s ample explanation of the condemnation of Vigouroux and Brassac’s *Manuel biblique* (AAS 15 [1923]: 616–19) and the reasoning provided for the PBC censure of Schmidtke’s *Die Einwanderung Israels in Kanaan* (AAS 26 [1934]: 130). A letter from Cardinal Ruffini, a member of the PBC, informed Ottaviani about the problematic nature of Steinmann’s book. See F. Michele Stabile, “Il cardinal Ruffini e il Vaticano II: Le lettere di un intransigente,” *Cristianismo nella Storia* 11 (1990): 115. Ruffini later published a headlining article in *L’Osservatore Romano* (August 24, 1961) in which he found fault with Steinmann for omitting the infancy narratives, reducing the public ministry to a minimum and treating the resurrection lightly, declaring in sum: “A rationalist Protestant could not have been more rash or radical.”

⁶ Benedict XVI’s famous December 22, 2005, address to the Roman Curia technically speaks of “the hermeneutic of discontinuity and rupture” and “the hermeneutic of reform,’ of renewal in the continuity of the one subject-Church.” For an important study of the issue, see Agostino Marchetto, *Il Concilio Ecumenico Vaticano II: Per la sua corretta ermeneutica* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2012). These two hermeneutical perspectives had long been competing for control of Catholic exegesis; as elsewhere, the Biblical Movement is here profoundly representative of the ferment that gave rise to conciliar theology. See Karim Schelkens, “From *Providentissimus Deus* to *Dei Verbum*: The Catholic Biblical Movement and the Council Reconsidered,” in *La Théologie catholique entre intransigence et renouveau: La réception des mouvements préconciliaires à Vatican II*, ed. G. Routhier, P. J. Roy, and K. Schelkens (Leuven: Leuven Universiteitsbibliotheek, 2011), 49–68. The undisguised value judgment implied in Schelkens’s dichotomy of “intransigence” and “renewal” (not equally kind descriptions) indicates the basic prejudice of his study. Still, the continuous interaction of two differently oriented forces is well documented in the history of the council—even if one has trouble seeing how Schelkens’s proposal of a “hermeneutic of shifting balances” does more than rephrase and dialectically attenuate the “paradigm shift” model he critiques. If Schelkens’s reading prefers simply to chart the ebb and flow of opposing parties (like shifting seats in Congress),

at the *Biblicum*, had written a progressive piece for a popular magazine arguing that Pius XII had endorsed a broadminded shift in the direction of biblical studies, a *cambiamento nell'esegesi*.⁷ Antonino Romeo, a well-placed curial official and Scripture scholar at the Lateranum, let loose in response an intemperate seventy-page rebuttal, insisting on the continuity of Pacelli's program with the earlier culture of Catholic exegesis and ironically accusing Alonso Schökel (and others at the PIB and elsewhere) of the very *opinioniones novae* and "new exegesis" (*nova exegesis*) Pope Pius condemned directly in *Humani Generis* (§22–24).⁸ As the debate rapidly escalated, drawing in additional voices, attention focused especially on historicity, and soon the last spasm of anti-modernist panic was engulfing Rome. The pope himself expressed great impatience with this "nonsense," and an intervention quickly became inevitable.⁹

In this connection, the terse *monitum* had been engineered around the obstructions of those whom the architects called the "modernists" (though John XXIII remained confident about the *Biblicum*).¹⁰ The text itself, however, was open to diverse interpretations, with forward looking young exegetes like Joseph Fitzmyer insisting that the warning "should not be regarded as a condemnation of the so-called 'new direction.'"¹¹ The document did briefly commend the fervent study of sacred

theologically, the proper hermeneutic must be derived from Newman's notion of *development*. Historians of the council would thus do well to attend again to the seven notes of a "true development": (1) preservation of type, (2) continuity of principles, (3) power of assimilation, (4) logical sequence, (5) anticipation of its future, (6) conservation of action upon its past, and (7) chronic vigor.

⁷ Louis Alonso Schökel, "Dove va l'esegesi cattolica?" *La Civiltà Cattolica* 111, no. 2645 (1960): 449–60. The title ironically evokes the famous essay of Reginald Garrigou-Lagrange on the *nouvelle théologie*, "La nouvelle théologie, où va-t-elle?" *Angelicum* 23 (1946): 126–45. Garrigou-Lagrange had warned that the new trend was a repackaged revival of modernism.

⁸ Antonino Romeo, "L'Enciclica *Divino afflante Spiritu* e le *opinioniones novae*," *Divinitas* 4 (1960): 387–456.

⁹ See Peter Hebblethwaite, *John XXIII: Pope of the Century* (New York: Continuum, 2000), 211.

¹⁰ See Karim Schelkens, *Catholic Theology of Revelation on the Eve of Vatican II: A Redaction History of the Schema De fontibus revelationis* (1960–62) (Leiden: Brill, 2011), 157n2.

¹¹ Joseph Fitzmyer, "A Recent Roman Scriptural Controversy," *Theological Studies* 22 (1961): 443–44. See also the contrasting views on the *monitum* expressed by Peter Duncker, "Biblical Criticism, Instructions of the Church and Excesses of Form Crit-

Scripture (an obvious nod to scientific methods), but expressed concern over certain circulating opinions that questioned the “genuine historical and objective truth” (*germanam veritatem historicam et obiectivam*) not only of the Old Testament—an issue, it noted, already decried in *Humani Generis*—but also of the New Testament, even doubting the words and deeds (*dicta et facta*) of Jesus. It is hard to mistake the commission’s concern (shared with Romeo) that the solemn corrections Pius offered in 1950 were failing to stem a mounting tide of biblical skepticism. If Steinmann’s book was made an example in this context, it neatly sidestepped the whole business with the Biblicum, Steinmann being far away in Paris. The choice likewise—and more importantly—deftly averted speculation over the use of historical-critical methods per se, for the book deployed no scientific criticism. It postured, instead, as a kind of updated Renan: a peculiarly French biographical romance, popular yet pensive—and watery at best on basic articles of the faith.¹²

Of course, if the legacy of the “liberal lives of Jesus” thus lived on in Steinmann’s work, the real beachhead of critical skepticism lay elsewhere—as it also had in the time of Renan’s popularized *Vie de Jésus*. The more aggressive curial reaction accordingly targeted certain exegetical technicians, and two established Biblicum professors (but not Alonso Schökel) were soon deposed. These suspensions, leveled against Stanislaus Lyonnet and Maximilian Zerwick, were the climax of the brief intrigue. No formal explanation was ever given—it was accomplished with silent efficiency—but the suspicion was mercilessly clear. Lyonnet had treaded into the sensitive waters of Adam and original sin; while Zerwick misstepped on Gospel historicity.¹³

icism,” *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 25 (1963): 22–23, and Francesco Spadafora, “Un document notevole per l’esegesi cattolica,” *Palestra del clero* 40 (1961): 969–81.

¹² Steinmann evokes Renan with the title and structure of the work and directly engages him in the conclusion: “Renan n’a pas vu que cette mort [*de Jésus*] était un signe . . . Cette vie est-elle absurdité ou mystère? Quel est le sens de la mort? Quel est l’ultime destin de l’homme: Dieu ou le néant? Suivant leur réponse, les homes sur terre sont à jamais divisés sous le signe de la croix.” The popular audience of the book, along with this less than robust conclusion, likely contributed to the condemnation. The final section of *Sancta Mater Ecclesia* strongly insists upon the need for writers to avoid “spreading makeshift solutions” that “upset the faith of many.”

¹³ Lucien Cerfaux (a member of the Theological Commission) noted in a letter to Cardinal Van Roey: “le P. Zerwick avait une phrase malheureuse: Il nostro scopo è di investigare, condotti dal testo sacro stesso, fin dove giunga la libertà che la tradizione

If the “modernists” were thus soundly chastened, once the conciliar winds began to blow, the imposing front of hierarchical resistance collapsed in disarray, and any clear doctrinal lesson was soon subverted. Indeed, the confusing epilogue to this whole debacle was a sudden volte-face that saw the new pontiff, Paul VI, on the counsel of Cardinal Bea, reinstating both disciplined Jesuits in the spring of 1964.¹⁴

Although this reversal has been regarded as a full vindication, such an interpretation cannot be sustained. The decision instead appears to have been a change in ecclesiastical policy—the fall from favor of a hawkish curial party—in no way implying a *nihil obstat* on the scholars’ deviant exegesis. Indeed, the issuance at the same time (April 1964) of *Sancta Mater Ecclesia*, the landmark Instruction on Historical Truth of the Gospels, a document approved by Paul VI but commissioned two years earlier by Pope John, expressly bolstered the Church’s firm commitment to historicity—albeit with nuance and considerable good will toward modern methods. This coordinated double maneuver, loosening the reins on free debate while rearticulating the Church’s perennial teaching, is critical to appreciate, for the strategy of both Roncalli and Montini, even as cardinals, was always “to speak loudly and carry a small stick,” ever confident in the supremacy of dialogue. John XXIII had, in line with this, never ordered the hit on Lyonnet and Zerwick (which, in fact, he resented); while Paul VI’s doggedly traditional stance on historicity was repeatedly proven both during and after the council.¹⁵ Regardless, the Church was not accustomed to this indulgent mode of governance; and at every level the conflicting signals were too disorienting. It is small wonder that a culture of exegetical impunity came to

e gli Evangelisti si prendono con la realtà storica dei fatti e dei dotti di Gesù.” See Schelkens, *Theology of Revelation*, 130, cf. 115, 125. Zerwick evidently undermined the historicity of Mt 16. See the gossipy account of a former *Time* magazine correspondent at the council, Robert Blair Kaiser, *Clerical Error: A True Story* (New York: Continuum, 2002), 130.

¹⁴ Roderick MacKenzie, S.J., rector of the PIB, requested a reexamination of the case during his audience with Paul VI in March 1964. The pope agreed and charged Cardinal Bea with the investigation. The personal displeasure of Paul VI with the Lateran was evident, as he scolded the institution for “vexatious polemics” on his first visit there (October 31, 1961), shortly after removing the rector, Msgr. Piolanti. See Brian Harrison, *The Teaching of Pope Paul VI on Sacred Scripture* (Rome: Pontificium Athenaeum Sanctae Crucis, 1997), 60–61.

¹⁵ Ibid.

reign—so much that the disgraced Steinmann would soon be rehabilitated as Yves Congar's symbol of the *Renouveau*.¹⁶

Such provocation should not be taken at face value, of course. The Church had not so utterly abandoned the seriousness of her past commitments. Thus, if for many the instruction on historicity quickly came to represent much more than a charitable change of tone, the document's positive teaching cannot be read in isolation from the *monitum*—itself a call to attend again to *Humani Generis*. At root, the events of 1961 and the redress of 1964 were two distinct magisterial efforts addressing the same exegetical disruption. The pontificate of Paul VI signaled that a long era of iron-fisted discipline was at an end—not that the advance of modernist skepticism posed no further danger.

Historica Veritas

It was, fatefully, within this turbulent and uncertain air that the great Dogmatic Constitution *Dei Verbum* was drafted. Among the many sensitive points debated during the work of composition—a laborious gestation that lasted the full duration of the council—the controversy just recounted confirms the peculiarly high stakes attached to the question of historicity. While the precursor text, *De fontibus revelationis*, was sufficiently unpopular that a complete redrafting was ultimately undertaken,¹⁷ chapter IV of that schema, *De Novo Testamento*, reveals the absolute preoccupation on the eve of the council with affirming the Gospels' historical truth.¹⁸ Despite wide concern over the adversarial tone of the draft (which cited and even sharpened the wording of the *monitum*), the main points and structure, and in several places even the wording of this chapter survived intact—a significant point, considering the wider fate

¹⁶ No sooner had Paul VI finally abolished the Index in 1966 than the catechetical conferences of Jean Steinmann, *Une foi chrétienne pour aujourd'hui* (Paris: B. Grasset, 1967)—a dubious exercise in *aggiornamento*—were promptly posthumously published. Endorsed in a preface by Yves Congar, flush with his triumph at the council, the work was (brazenly) celebrated as the exact “renouveau” required in the Church.

¹⁷ See the nuanced reappraisal of *De fontibus* in Schelkens, *Theology of Revelation*, 265–80.

¹⁸ For the text of Schema I, Chapter IV, see Francisco Gil Hellín, *Concilii Vaticani II Synopsis in Ordinem Redigens Schemata cum Relationibus necnon Patrum Orationes atque Animadversiones Constitutio Dogmatica De Divina Revelatione Dei Verbum* (Rome: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1993), 186–87.

of the infamous schema. The decisive development in reformulating the material in a more positive fashion was, of course, the well-timed appearance of *Sancta Mater Ecclesia*. Indeed, nowhere else in the long textual history of *Dei Verbum* is there such a major moment of magisterial intervention. Whole sentences, in fact, are lifted from the Instruction, and this document supplies the essential substance of *Dei Verbum* §19.

The PBC Instruction was, as just related, drafted as the Church's cautious answer to a crisis of historical skepticism, brewing at least since *Humani Generis* in 1950. As an event of direct conciliar import, however, the document also served another role. More than a few churchmen at the council, bewildered by the rumored German monster, *Formgeschichte*, required real guidance in addressing the questions on the floor.¹⁹ To this end the PBC offered the council fathers a kind of "voter's guide" on the latest trends in exegesis, refining a private manuscript prepared by Cardinal Bea and already circulating for this purpose. While the magisterial text can hardly be read as delivering marching orders from theological hardliners, the weighty criticisms leveled against Form Criticism made clear the Church's profound reservations.²⁰ Still, a tone of ready engagement is unmistakable. Overall, the PBC's succinct critique incisively sifted out the errant principles of Bultmannian exegesis (with a prescience quite remarkable in retrospect), yet it left a door open for a legitimate (if selective) Catholic appropriation (*sana elementa*).

Unsurprisingly, the gesture of openness became the takeaway teaching of the document. Many specialists in biblical studies, whose theological culture was not yet so divorced from the heritage of dogmatic theology, eagerly embraced the forward looking methodology, confi-

¹⁹ See the account offered in the foreword to Augustine Bea, *The Study of the Synoptic Gospels: New Approaches and Outlooks* (New York: Harper & Row, 1965), 9–12.

²⁰ The six principles (as enumerated by Fitzmyer) are: (1) denial of a supernatural order, (2) denial of God's intervention in the world in strict revelation, (3) denial of the existence and possibility of miracles, (4) incompatibility of faith with historical truth, (5) an almost a priori rejection of the historical nature and value of scriptural texts, and (6) diminishment of apostolic authority as witnesses to Christ and exaggeration of the creative power of the community. Through such theses the Church understood the Form Critics to be profoundly misled by the errors of rationalism (*praeiudicatis opinionibus rationalismi abducti*). A famous article by Pierre Benoit, "Réflexions sur la 'formgeschichtliche Methode,'" *Revue Biblique* (1946): 481–512, which remains one of the best treatments of Form Criticism and well worth reading, helped shaped the magisterial view—in both openness and critique.

dent that the extremes of German Protestantism lacked viability in the Catholic context.²¹ Thus in influential quarters all attention was turned to the differentiation of Gospel strata, and the Instruction's fundamental concern to secure historicity was quickly obscured in its reception. The move in this direction was immediate. Fitzmyer, for instance, an eager Rome watcher in those days, in an early review of the document just months before the promulgation of *Dei Verbum* (with an eye no doubt to helping nudge the council fathers' thinking), managed to spin the text as strangely uninterested in historical truth—an idea one might be forgiven for gathering from the official title, *De historica evangeliorum veritate*. His insistence on the point is quite remarkable.

The most important word in the title is not the word *historica*—which might have been one's initial impression . . . in none of the positive directives does the phrase *historica veritas* reappear. It is evident, therefore, that the Biblical Commission is far more interested in sketching with broad lines, the character of the Gospel truth, than in just reasserting that the Gospels are historical.²²

The Commission speaks [in §9] of “truth” only, and does not specify it as “historical truth.” One might wonder what it would mean if the word “historical” were understood here, after such an admission of the redactional work of the evangelists. But if one were to ask, “Well, then, if it is not a question of historical truth, of what kind is it?” the answer would have to be, “of the Gospel truth.”²³

²¹ Fitzmyer, “Recent Roman Scriptural Controversy,” 390, expresses the untroubled conviction that the six errant philosophical and theological premises “are rejected by Catholic exegetes.” Whether the same confidence is possible today, it is evident that a *notional* rejection of the problematic principles is insufficient to recalibrate a method that inherently presumes such things as “scientific naturalism.” On the treatment of miracles in historical method, see Brad Gregory, “No Room for God? History, Science, Metaphysics, and the Study of Religion,” *History and Theory* 47 (2008): 495–519.

²² Joseph Fitzmyer, “The Biblical Commission’s Instruction on the Historical Truth of the Gospels,” *Theological Studies* (1964): 387.

²³ *Ibid.*, 395.

Neither the Church in her official pronouncements on the nature of inspiration, nor the theologians in their speculative treatments of it, have taught that the necessary formal effect of inspiration is historicity. The consequence of inspiration is inerrancy, i.e., immunity from formal error in what is affirmed. The opposite of inerrancy is not simply historicity, but truth. But there is poetical truth as well as historical truth, rhetorical truth as well as legal truth, mythical truth as well as the Gospel truth.²⁴

And “Gospel truth,” Fitzmyer finally assures, “is not something which is tied up with any fundamentalistic literalness.”²⁵

Fitzmyer raises some genuine issues, and the animating fear of fundamentalist literalism—the guild’s familiar *tic doloureux*—must be addressed. It is astonishing, nonetheless, to witness this total subversion of the text’s express concern. The very notion of “historical truth” is summarily displaced by a tautology entirely of Fitzmyer’s making: “Gospel truth”—a nebulous notion he finds for various reasons more commodious. Whatever valid concerns merit attention in articulating the precise modality of Gospel inerrancy, when confronted with the massive solemnity of the opening sentence of *Dei Verbum* §19—unique of its kind in the whole Dogmatic Constitution—an evasion of *historica veritas* cannot be maintained: “*Holy Mother Church* has held and still holds (*tenuit ac tenet*) firmly and with absolute constancy (*firmiter et constantissime*) that the four Gospels, whose historicity (*historicitatem*) she unhesitatingly affirms (*incunctanter affirmat*), faithfully hand on (*fideliter tradere*) those things that Jesus the Son of God, while he lived among men, truly (*reapse*) did and taught for their eternal salvation, until the day on which he was taken up (Acts 1:1–2).”²⁶

²⁴ Ibid., 401.

²⁵ Ibid., 396.

²⁶ The phrase *quorum historicitatem incunctanter affirmat* was added between the last draft (III) and the final text (IV) with the following remark: “Necessario inducendum est vocabulum *historicum*, quod a Magistro saepius adhibitum est, ut refrenetur audacia exegetica.” The proposal of 174 fathers was: “iuxta veritatem fidemque historicam tradere omnia facta et dicta quae in ipsis continentur.” The editorial note on this proposal observes that “historia” is an equivocal term, ranging in meaning from *rebus supramundanis* apprehended by faith, to *Geschichte* and *Historie*. Preference was thus given to the sense “realitatem factorem seu eventum modo concreto affirmare,” and

The council's language here actually strengthens the earlier wording of *De fontibus*, preferring *tenuit ac tenet* for *credidit ac credit*. The official *relatio* on this change makes clear the desire to propose a mode of truth open to rational affirmation: *fide et ratione, non tantum fide*.²⁷ If this transposes the speculative vision of Vatican I's *Dei Filius* into a distinctively historical and scriptural idiom and deftly decouples the council's doctrine from the fideism of a Bultmannian-Barthian dialectical dogmatics, it naturally also faces the ultimate question posed by Fitzmyer: What precisely do I assent to when I affirm the historicity of the Gospels?²⁸

If "fundamentalistic literalness" poses a real problem, Form Criticism was not the Church's introduction to literary genre, nor was the Church as critically naïve as some would pretend. The Biblical Commission, in fact, had long before officially acknowledged the possibility of merely "apparent history" (*species historiae*) in Scripture. Indeed, even in the worst days of the Modernist crisis, Rome allowed that in well-demonstrated cases (*non facile nec temere admittendo!*) one might hold that "the sacred author did not intend to recount true history properly so called (*veram et proprie dictam historiam*), but with the outward appearance and form of history (*sub specie et forma historiae*), intended to propose a parable or allegory or some other meaning from the properly literal or historical meaning of the words."²⁹ Texts like Jonah and Job are obviously in view, but the measured principle has impressive scope. All in all, when viewed against this magisterial precursor, the most pertinent doctrinal antecedent, the simplest and most ready interpretation of *Dei Verbum*'s teaching (following *Sancta Mater Ecclesia*) is that the Gospels are not to be reckoned as "specious" but *vera historia*. In other words, the "properly literal or historical meaning of the words" is indeed

the less ambiguous language of *historicitas* was employed. See *Relatio Ad num.* 19 c in Gil Hellín, *Synopsis*, 133.

²⁷ Ibid., 132.

²⁸ The *Time* correspondent reporting on this debate at the council put his finger on the issue at the end of his article: "The problem: what precisely is meant by historicity?" *Time* (November 5, 1965): 5.

²⁹ ASS 38 (1905–6): 124–25.

the meaning intended by the sacred author. This seems to capture the intent of the council's phrase, *vera et sincera de Iesu*.³⁰

Fundamentum Intelligentiae Spiritualis

Exegetes will alternately trivialize or balk at the jejune affirmation that the Gospels must be taken literally. The "literal or historical meaning" is more profound and complex than reigning exegetical methods comprehend, however, and it invites more patient consideration.³¹ Indeed, once one appreciates that the literal sense holds foundational significance for any theology of revelation and grounds the possibility of all disciplined theological argument, the importance of getting it right will be urgently clear.³² While this applies to all the Scriptures, the status of the Gospels must be singled out, even within the New Testament, "because they are the principal testimony for the life and teaching of the Incarnate Word."³³

As a question of the first principles of theology and revelation, then, it is a matter of peculiar interest in understanding the literal and historical level of the Gospels that the robust Protestant theology of revelation at the time of the council was divided into two opposing camps, with the schools of Bultmann and Cullmann fiercely split over the fundamental relation of word and deed.³⁴ From Cullmann's *salvation history* perspec-

³⁰ On the contested history of this formula, see Béda Rigaux's commentary on Chapter V of *Dei Verbum* in *Commentary on the Documents of Vatican II*, vol. 3, edited by Herbert Vorgrimler (New York: Herder and Herder, 1969), 258–60. Considered too weak by many council fathers, Paul VI intervened and proposed *vera seu historica fide digna*, which, despite the advocacy of Cardinal Bea, was considered open to a new (Bultmannian) ambiguity and rejected. The Theological Commission then clarified its intention with the original formula. It means to encompass and coordinate both the objective facts (*vera*) and the subjective activity/intentionality of the Evangelists (*sincera*).

³¹ For a fuller treatment of magisterial perspectives on the literal sense, see Mark Reasoner's helpful contribution in this volume.

³² "Nulla confusio sequitur in sacra Scriptura: cum omnes sensus fundentur super unum, scilicet litteralem: ex quo solo potest trahi argumentum," *Summa theologiae* I, q. 1, a. 10, ad 1. See Augustine, *Epist.* 93.8.24.

³³ "Neminem fugit inter omnes, etiam Novi Testamenti Scripturas, Evangelia merito excellere, quippe quae praecipuum testimonium sint de Verbi Incarnati, Salvatoris nostri, vita atque doctrina" (*Dei Verbum* §18).

³⁴ For the significance of these debates on the council's doctrine, see the commentary of Joseph Ratzinger on chapters 1 and 2 of *Dei Verbum* in Vorgrimler, *Commentary*, 170–98.

tive, which generally (but not in every way) had the greater affinity with and influence on the council's ultimate doctrine, the critical danger is clear: "The Bultmannites neglect events."³⁵ The divine Word (*dabar*), however, is indivisibly "speech" and "history."³⁶ In harmony with this, the classic doctrine of Catholic hermeneutics sees words and deeds to be interpretatively inseparable: *littera gesta docet*. In this paradigm, "history" is thus at once the *prima significatio*, the scriptural "letter" having its own grammatico-literary *ratio*,³⁷ and the locus of the mystery of our redemption: *profundissima vallis historiae*³⁸—man's deep valley into which Christ has kenotically descended.³⁹ The historical sense is thus the rhetorical *synkatabasis* of the divine Word.⁴⁰ In the splendid formulation of *Dei Verbum*, the two dimensions of this living speech of God are inextricably intertwined, mutually manifesting and confirming

³⁵ See the essay "Foundations: The Theology of Salvation History and the Ecumenical Dialogue," delivered during the Third Session of Vatican II, in Oscar Cullmann, *Vatican II: The New Direction* (New York: Harper and Row, 1968), 25. Cullmann's active participation in the ecumenical aspects of the council both presupposed a certain theological propinquity with Catholic doctrine ("as soon as we began to use salvation history in our discussions . . . we were speaking the same language") and made his greater influence on the council's outcome inevitable.

³⁶ Precisely because "the author of sacred scripture is God, in whose power it is to signify not only by words (as man can also do), but also by the things themselves (*res ipsas*)" (ST I, q. 1, a. 10), the coordinated disclosure of these two registers of revealed encounter—saving deeds and scriptural text—refracts the unified action of the one divine *auctor*. This entails a firm congruence between *littera* and *gesta* and calls forth a single act of assent in faith.

³⁷ Hugh: "Historia est rerum gestarum narratio, quae in prima significatio litterare continetur" (PL 176, 185 A). Origen: "historia propriam rationem habet—*tou echein tēn historian ton idion logon*" (Sel. In Ez. c. xxviii; PG 821–22 C). Aquinas: "Cum in omnibus scientiis voces significant, hoc habet proprium ista scientia, quod ipsae res significatae per voces, etiam significant aliquid. Illa ergo prima significatio, qua voces significant res, pertinent ad primum sensum, qui est sensus historicus vel literalis" (ST I, q. 1, a. 10).

³⁸ John Scotus, *H. in Prol. Jo.* (PL 123, 291 B). Theodramatically, one might speak here with Balthasar of history as the space of the "Action."

³⁹ The *admirabile condescensio* of *Dei Verbum* §12–13 belongs here. On this theme, see the excellent and suggestive study by John Betz, "Glory(ing) in the Humility of the Word: The Kenotic Form of Revelation in J. G. Hamann," *Letter and Spirit* 6 (2010): 141–80.

⁴⁰ The rhetorical background of the Christological category of *synkatabasis* is not often recognized; cf. Philodemus, *Rhetoric* 2.25. See K. Duchatelez, "La 'condescendance' divine et l'histoire du salut," *Nouvelle Revue Théologique* 95 (1973): 594–98.

one another: *gestis verbisque intrinsece inter se connexis*.⁴¹ From such a perspective, the Gospels' bivalent "literal or historical meaning" is the privileged *fundamentum*, the deepest stuff of divine revelation.⁴² *Jesus* is the Gospel's literal sense.

Plainly something of great moment is at stake here for the full doctrine of *Dei Verbum*. To this extent, *Dei Verbum* §19 is not a stray plank of anti-Modernism in a sea of *nouvelle théologie*. Rather, operating within the relational model of revelation propounded by the council,⁴³ the fathers were burdened to preserve the *ephapax* character of God's climatic action in Christ, while yet affirming a living *colloquium inter Deum et hominum* (*Dei Verbum* §25). The Gospels exercise a unique mediation; they somehow communicate Jesus of Nazareth.⁴⁴ But as a medium of encounter, scriptural *metaxy* is stretched toward the past. Hence the happy recovery of the God *who* reveals from a shrunken focus on *what* he reveals only bears the subjective stamp of Bultmann unless some objective, referential (here historical, Christological) meaning is upheld.⁴⁵

⁴¹ On this important phrase, see Francis Martin, "Some Aspects of Biblical Studies since Vatican II: The Contribution and Challenge of *Dei Verbum*," in *Sacred Scripture: Disclosure of the Word* (Ave Maria, FL: Sapientia, 2006), 227–48.

⁴² Everywhere in the tradition, "history" is recognized as the *fundamentum*: "Historiae veritas, fundamentum intelligentiae spiritalis" (Jerome, Ep. 129, no. 6); "Omnes sensus fundentur super unum, scilicet litteralem" (ST I, q. 1, a. 10, ad. 1). See Henri De Lubac, *Medieval Exegesis: The Four Senses of Scripture*, vol. 2 (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2000), 47–50.

⁴³ On the advent of this model, see René Latourelle, *Theology of Revelation* (New York: Alba House, 1987), 207–48.

⁴⁴ The fullness of this mediation vitally depends on upholding the proper hermeneutic. Albert Schweitzer memorably captured the experience of theological loss suffered by those who resurrected the historical Jesus and "loosed the bands by which for centuries he had been riveted to the stony rocks of ecclesiastic doctrine." They rejoiced to see him "advancing, as it seemed, to meet them. But he did not stay; he passed by our time and returned to his own. What surprised and dismayed the theology of the last forty years was that, despite all forced and arbitrary interpretations, it could not keep him in our time, but had to let him go." *The Quest of the Historical Jesus* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000), 478.

⁴⁵ A plea must be made for the balanced retention of some "propositional" aspect of revelation. For Bultmann, objective content is incompatible with the idea of genuine revelation: "It turns out in the end that *Jesus as the Revealer of God reveals nothing but that he is the Revealer*" (emphasis original). Rudolph Bultmann, *Theology of the New Testament II* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1955), 66. See the insightful analysis of Michael Waldstein, "The Foundations of Bultmann's Work," *Communio* 14 (1987): 115–45.

A genuine grasp of the scriptural letter, therefore, *cannot* methodologically neglect the text's "centrifugal" perspective, but must, as a matter of theological principle, perceive some irremediable textual resonance with the extratextual events of the Incarnation.⁴⁶ Just as Christ the Word made flesh is the vision of the Father (cf. John 14:9), so the enscriptured Word presents a verbal image of the Image. The Gospels preserve an *adequatio ad rem*: a proper analogy to Christ by the congruence, the revelatory isomorphism of *littera* and *gesta*.

The Gospels' profound identification with the mystery of the Incarnation means that Origen's language of the literal as "body" must not be laid aside.⁴⁷ Indeed, it secures a double hermeneutical point, for it invites the key Pauline distinction between *soma* and *sarx*. There is, in other words, an inadequate sense of Scripture understood *kata sarka*. This "literalist" mishearing of the Word is always naïve, but simple mindedness can be cloaked in the high sophistication of science—like an endocrinologist digging for the soul in the pineal gland. To the pitied and feared fundamentalist must then be added the (more subtle) "literalist" who wields his critical scalpel on the Gospel text as though he were studying a cadaver. Both types are *sarkic* dullards. If the "flesh" of Scripture thus supplies a public corpus that doctors of philological science may inspect with simple-minded intelligence, the deepest *fundamentum* remains imperceptible apart from faith. For, in the end, it is in the Gospels that the literal and spiritual senses meet.⁴⁸ In this re-

⁴⁶ On the "centrifugal" and "centripetal" dimensions of a text, see Northrup Frye, *The Great Code: The Bible and Literature* (New York: Harcourt, 1982), 61. "The primary or literal meaning of the Bible, then, is its centripetal or poetic meaning . . . this primary meaning, which arises simply from the interconnection of the words, is the metaphorical meaning. There are various secondary meanings, derived from the centrifugal perspective, that may take the form of concepts, predication, propositions, or a sequence of historical or biographical events, and that are always subordinate to the metaphorical meaning." One need not doubt Frye's intelligence (or rare insight into allegorical meaning) to suspect that he has not succeeded as neatly as he imagines in marginalizing the Bible's historical claims. A basic problem is his decision to make the entire Bible into poetry. This vast conflation ensures his failure to distinguish between Old Testament and New Testament modes of *kerygma* (his term).

⁴⁷ *De Principiis* IV, 2.4–5. See the collection of citations in Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Origen: Spirit and Fire: A Thematic Anthology of His Writings* (Washington, DC: Catholic University Press of America, 1984), 86–88, 100–107.

⁴⁸ De Lubac propounded the patristic idea that the spiritual sense of the Old Testament is the literal sense of the New. This notion has come under criticism from the per-

gard (and in distinction to other canonical *corpora*), the Gospel's *prima significatio* comprehends the whole incarnate Christ—body, soul, and divinity—for here we understand “body” (*soma*) in its Hebrew sense of living totality (*basar*). From this perspective, a composite body-soul (letter-spirit) dynamic also structures the Gospels' privileged first level revelation. The work of the evangelists gives worded shape to the literal *body*, while the *res tantum* of Christ infuses their words with life-giving *spirit*. The Gospels are in this way a sacrament of the sacrament of God.⁴⁹

“Big Picture” and Plenary Perspectives

If the Reformation deeply compromised the strength of a sacramental vision, a univocal “plain sense” of Scripture was the hermeneutical fall-out. The mystery of the *body* was reduced to the superficial *species*, while the juncture of letter and spirit (hence the possibility of a grounded spiritual sense) was lost to view. In the increasingly secularized exegesis that followed, the surface itself soon disintegrated—the inevitable fate of a soulless body—so that naïveté today means thinking, “Jesus said and did everything that the Gospels have him say and do.”⁵⁰ The task of anchoring a revelation worthy of faith and recovering a viable literal sense is thus the trick of somehow putting Humpty Dumpty together again—finding some theological soul for the Gospels' dissected body.

Form Criticism, let it be said, supplied the real impetus toward the Gospels' analytic breakdown.⁵¹ Already with Conzelmann, though, the need to reassemble a coherent textual whole had become clear.⁵² *Redaktionsgeschichte*, however, and the narrative criticism that it has spawned, struggle to treat literary unity in a *nonfiction* framework. To

spective of Jewish-Christian dialogue. See Donald McKim, ed., *Dictionary of Major Biblical Interpreters* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2007), 685.

⁴⁹ See Denis Farkasfalvy, *Inspiration and Interpretation* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2010), 219–21.

⁵⁰ Dale Allison, *The Historical Christ and the Theological Jesus* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2009), 1.

⁵¹ This notion may be most evident in the least famous of the three cofounders of Form Criticism. K. L. Schmidt, *Der Rahmen der Geschichte Jesu* (Berlin: Trowitzsch, 1919). Schmidt argued that Mark is a collection of preexisting units held together imperfectly by a secondary structure.

⁵² See the introductory remarks of Hans Conzelmann, *The Theology of St. Luke* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1961), 9–17.

this extent, the history question has remained in the custody of Form Criticism—bound, that is, to “the wrong tool.”⁵³

It is tempting to make an end run around the issue. We might ask: How does the judgment that the Gospels are *vera historia* apply to individual units of tradition? Might not the Church’s doctrine have only the complete genre in view—concerned at root to fend off the extreme challenge of “mythicisim”?⁵⁴ *Vera historia*, after all, cannot be pushed too far. If errors of fact (e.g., the Lukan census) are alleged, but elusively unverifiable,⁵⁵ some “apparent history” is surely hosted in the Gospels. The unhistorical “letter” of the parables, for instance, is perfectly uncontroversial.⁵⁶

Such an admission offers little traction, though, since the concern

⁵³ See the landmark essay of Morna Hooker, “On Using the Wrong Tool,” *Theology* 75 (1972): 570–81. N. T. Wright correctly observes, “Form-criticism, despite often being treated simply as a tool for discovering about Jesus, is designed primarily to shed light on the early church.” *The New Testament and the People of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992), 418.

⁵⁴ Both the extremity and persistence of the position that the Gospels are *absolute fiction* can be seen in its opposition by as strong a skeptic as Bart Ehrman, *Did Jesus Exist? The Historical Argument for Jesus of Nazareth* (New York: HarperCollins, 2012). Conventionally, beginning with the work of D. F. Strauss, a more euhemeristic position is taken, and the mythic texture out of which the Jesus of the Gospels has supposedly been woven is found in the Old Testament (OT). Michael Goulder’s high estimate of the creative haggadic content of the Gospels (conceived of as midrash on the Jewish lectionary) represents a contemporary variation on the theme. See, e.g., *Midrash and Lection in Matthew* (London: SPCK, 1974). Some (self-published) authors search for Gospel motifs well beyond the OT, e.g., D. M. Murdock, *Christ in Egypt: The Jesus-Horus Connection* (Seattle: Stellar House, 2008). The recent studies linking the Gospels to Homer represent a less eccentric (but still unlikely) literary thesis, e.g., Dennis MacDonald, *The Homeric Epics and the Gospel of Mark* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2000). The likeness of the Gospels to Greco-Roman romance has also been promoted. See G. W. Bowersock, *Fiction as History: Nero to Julian* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994). The *Religionsgeschichtliche* School, of course, located the fictive setting in the Hellenistic cult. The PBC Instruction certainly leaves this view no space: “Nec propter cultum quo discipuli exinde Iesum ut Dominum et Filium Dei venerabantur, hic in «mythicam» personam mutatus est Eiusque doctrina deformata.” Perhaps Fitzmyer has all this in view when he poses “mythic truth” as the specific opposite of his “Gospel truth.”

⁵⁵ The long-running dispute over Lk 2:1–4 typifies a common problem in assessing much of biblical history: lack of independent evidence—either contradictory or confirmatory. This, naturally, is not unique to events recorded in scripture. Reason must here be content with converging probabilities.

⁵⁶ “Sub sensu litterali includitur parabolicus seu metaphoricus,” Aquinas, *Super Galatians*, ch. 4, lectio 7.

is obviously with the things predicated of *Jesus* (not the characters of his preaching). In this regard, an important narrative claim clearly separates the Synoptic presentation of Jesus's parables (ἐλάλησεν αὐτοῖς πολλὰ ἐν παραβολαῖς) from the purely ahistorical *peje Iesous* found in Thomas.⁵⁷ Jesus is said to have really said things. Deeds always envelop words in the Church's Gospels. But this only makes a judgment on the literary pattern of *chriai* (and other like forms) inescapable.

The interest to know whether such and such a deed really happened (or whether Jesus really spoke such and such a thing) leads to a variety of possibilities. The formidable approach to this question derived from Form Criticism is to address it at the atomic level. Each concrete pericope comes under its own unique historical judgment. The patient labor of John Meier must stand as the definitive monument to this method (which Caba finds most consonant with *Dei Verbum* §19).⁵⁸

Meier's conceit of finding consensus in an "unpapal conclave" is (for those uncharmed by postmodern agnosticism) a refreshing blast of old-fashioned Enlightenment optimism—and, in truth, not so distant from the council's intention in choosing *tenere* rather than *credere*.⁵⁹ Of course, confidence in *reason* nowhere implies an equal trust in *crite-riology*. Indeed, for many today such mechanistic ratiocination is the dangerous shadow side of the "Enlightenment."⁶⁰ Moreover, when the exegetical machine starts to spit out returns of *non liquet* and "not historical," not everyone is always ready to swallow the tonic of Bernanos's Doctor Delbende: "Face up to it!" The objections here go deep, and it is no longer enough to deflect the protest as "uncritical."⁶¹

⁵⁷ For a discussion of the present tense translation of *peje Iesous* ("Jesus says"), see Uwe-Karsten Plisch, *The Gospel of Thomas: Original Text with Commentary* (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 2008), 24–25. "Even in dialogues, the *Gospel of Thomas* is not interested in the historical background of a reported issue; the focus is exclusively on the Lord's sayings."

⁵⁸ See John Meier, *A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus*, *Anchor Bible Reference Library*, 4 vols. (New York: Doubleday, 1991, 1994, 2001, 2009).

⁵⁹ Meier, *Marginal Jew*, vol. 1, 1.

⁶⁰ See the diversified challenge of Chris Keith and Anthony Le Donne, eds., *Jesus and the Demise of Authenticity* (New York: T&T Clark, 2012). The provocative collection of essays in this volume comes from another conference hosted (in part) by the University of Dayton in October 2012.

⁶¹ If strong nominalist strains of thought lurk here, "participatory exegesis" will have a contribution to make. See Matthew Levering, *Participatory Biblical Exegesis: A The-*

Plenty might be said about this manner of panning for historical gold, but one result is of special interest. In spite of negative judgments in individual cases, larger patterns of “historicity” have emerged. Meier, for instance, can accept the global assertion of Jesus’s identity as a miracle worker—though five hundred pages of minute case studies leave one less sure.⁶² If such dissonance undermines the atomistic effort, Dale Allison’s decision to abandon the “criteria of authenticity” for big, broad “gist” arguments has clear appeal.⁶³ The result for Allison is a curious construal of the literal sense as a kind of agnostic allegory of historical abstractions. The accounts of the Temptation, for instance, present “a narrative about events that probably never happened . . . [but] nonetheless rightly catches Jesus in several respects.”⁶⁴

Doctrinally, the “big picture” position taken here might be put like this. The Gospels reliably “hand on” (*fideliter tradere*) the whole living mystery of the Christ event in the same way that Tradition communicates the full substance of the faith—but little “t” traditions, or Gospel pericopes, can come or go. Somehow the discernment of what is majestic is made, and this or that can be pared away, but the essential integrity of revelation remains unimpaired.

Is one, then, merely accepting that the Gospels are reliable *grosso modo*: affirming a creedal skeleton or historian’s précis (*Testimonium Flavianum*)?⁶⁵ This flexible commitment would offer insulation against a whole series of tangled textual details. A few nonnegotiable facts can

ology of Biblical Interpretation (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame, 2008).

⁶² Meier, *Marginal Jew*, vol. 2, 617–1138. For a critique of Meier’s global criterion, see Eric Eve, “Meier, Miracle, and Multiple Attestation,” *Journal for the Study of the Historical Jesus* 3 (2005): 23–45.

⁶³ See Allison’s (typically) autobiographical essay, “It Don’t Come Easy: A History of Disillusionment,” in *Jesus and the Demise of Authenticity*, 186–99. See also his fourth and (he says he hopes) final book on Jesus, *Constructing Jesus: Memory, Imagination, and History* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2010): “We should trust first, if we are to trust at all, what is most likely to be trustworthy. This requires that we begin, although we need not end, by asking, ‘What are our general impressions?’” (16). The “fact-based” approach of E. P. Sanders can also be mentioned here.

⁶⁴ “The story . . . preserves a series of likely truths about Jesus—that he was a miracle worker, that he refused to give self-authenticating signs, that he thought himself victorious over demonic forces, that he could quote the Bible, and that he had great faith in God.” Allison, “It Don’t Come Easy,” 191.

⁶⁵ See, e.g., Gregory Tatum, “The Limits of Reliability,” *Nova et Vetera* 6 (2008): 523–28.

be historically affirmed, while the risk of rude fundamentalism is held at bay. Pope Benedict himself (albeit as a private theologian) seems to point in this minimalist direction, even while underscoring historicity in the second volume of *Jesus of Nazareth*: “Many details may remain open. Yet the ‘*factum est*’ of John’s Prologue (1:14) is a basic Christian category, and it applies not only to the Incarnation: it must also be invoked for the Last Supper, the Cross, and the Resurrection.”⁶⁶

Caution is necessary, though, on the “open details” Benedict has in mind.⁶⁷ His comment is made in preface to a discussion of the difficult dating of the Lord’s Last Supper; and, as the PBC Instruction makes plain, *chronology* does not compromise the truth at hand. It is hardly clear, in fact—as more than a few troubled exegetes have complained—that Benedict concedes the evangelists’ fabrication of *any* concrete “deeds and words” reported in the Gospels.⁶⁸ Indeed, volume three on the Infancy Narratives now offers the strongest conceivable demonstration of the pope’s critically informed, yet calmly courageous “fundamentalism.”⁶⁹

⁶⁶ Joseph Ratzinger, *Jesus of Nazareth. Holy Week: From the Entrance into Jerusalem to the Resurrection* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 2011), 105.

⁶⁷ See Benedict’s programmatic remarks on faith and historicity at the beginning of *Jesus of Nazareth: From the Baptism in the Jordan to the Transfiguration* (New York: Doubleday, 2007), xv–xvi.

⁶⁸ Maurice Casey, e.g., maintains that Benedict is trapped in circular reasoning, defending the historicity of Jn 19:35 on the presumption that John’s Gospel is “literally true from beginning to end,” being eyewitness testimony. *Jesus of Nazareth: An Independent Historian’s Account of His Life and Teaching* (New York: Clark, 2010), 28–29.

⁶⁹ The best expression of the pope’s overall position is articulated in connection with Mt 1–2: “At the end of this lengthy chapter, the question arises: how are we to understand all this? Are we dealing with history that took place, or is it merely a theological meditation, presented under the guise of stories? In this regard, Jean Daniélou rightly observes: ‘The adoration of the Magi, unlike the story of the annunciation [to Mary], does not touch upon any essential aspect of our faith. No foundations would be shaken if it were simply an invention of Matthew’s based on a theological idea’ (*Infancy Narratives*, p. 95). Daniélou himself, though, comes to the conclusion that we are dealing here with historical events, whose theological significance was worked out by the Jewish Christian community and by Matthew. To put it simply, I share this view. In any case, it should be noted that over the last fifty years there has been an about-turn in thinking on this question of historicity, based not on new historical knowledge, but rather on a changed attitude to sacred Scripture and to the Christian message in general. While Gerhard Delling in the fourth volume of the *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* (1942) was still convinced of the historicity of the Magi story on the basis of historical research (cf. p. 358, n. 11), since that time, even exegetes as ecclesially minded as Ernst Nellesen and Rudolf Pesch

Truly, had the religion reporter for *Time* any real nose for theological scandal, the Holy Father's recalcitrant belief in fairy tales like the magi and the star would have certainly made the better headline—not a pseudo-story about the imprecision of the Julian calendar ("Pope Benedict Disputes Date of Jesus' Birth").⁷⁰

Benedict, then, conjures a different vision from the "big picture" theory, a vision (unsurprisingly) of patristic pedigree. The dispensable "details" touch the placement and expression, while the *factum est* and the meaning are affirmed.⁷¹ In this line, one could speak of a plenary view of historicity, in which problems are admitted on the level of textual arrangement, with full freedom allotted for whatever ingenious solutions one might find. But no separation into piles of "authentic" and "inauthentic" is involved. In distinction from Allison, then, this is not a surrender of concrete deeds for dynamic abstractions (e.g., "apocalyptic Judaism"). Meier is right to care about more than vague global assertions. But, dared by the legacy of D. F. Strauss to demonstrate, point by point, that real events lie behind the Gospels, Benedict appears humbly content to dare right back the impossible task of proving

have rejected historicity, or at least they have let the question open. An interesting comment, in the light of this situation, is the carefully argued position presented by Klaus Berger . . . 'Even when there is only a single attestation . . . one must suppose, until the contrary is proven, that the evangelists did not intend to deceive their readers, but rather to inform them concerning historical events . . . to contest the historicity of this account on mere suspicion exceeds every imaginable competence of historians' (*Kommentar zum Neuen Testament*, p. 20). With this view I can only agree. The two chapters of Matthew's Gospel devoted to the infancy narratives are not a meditation presented under the guise of stories, but the converse: Matthew is recounting real history, theologically thought through and interpreted, and thus he helps us to understand the mystery of Jesus more deeply." *Jesus of Nazareth: The Infancy Narratives* (New York: Image, 2012), 118.

⁷⁰ Sorcha Pollack, "Pope Benedict Disputes Date of Jesus' Birth," *Time*, November 22, 2012, <http://newsfeed.time.com/2012/11/22/pope-benedict-disputes-jesus-date-of-birth/>.

⁷¹ This is the position of the PBC Instruction, which simply follows the patristic doctrine (citing Chrysostom, and Augustine) in allowing differences in placement and wording. See Origen, *Commentary on John*, 10.2–4: The Evangelists "sometimes altered things which, from the eye of history, occurred otherwise . . . [they] speak of something that happened in one place as if it happened in another, or of what happened at a certain time as if it happened at another time . . . [they introduced] into what was spoken in a certain way some changes of their own."

a negative (*non factum est*)—reminding proud history of its limits.⁷² If the pope rests here and stops short of offering an ambitious *apologia*, perhaps the doctrine of *vera historia* means retying Schweitzer's first of the Gordian knots.⁷³

In highlighting only the cardinal points of Christian confession, then, Benedict chastens history.⁷⁴ But this must be carefully understood. He never suggests that faith has been penned up in some creedal Alamo, ready to die in one last stand against the destructive reach of reason. Quite the contrary! The core witness of the Gospels is in a real sense the *most* verifiable material (if not thereby the most likely to sway all historians)—not only the matter dearest to faith.⁷⁵ Even so, Benedict warns, the probative power of human science must not be exaggerated: "We may not expect . . . to find absolutely certain proof of every detail."⁷⁶ If metaphysical knowledge of necessary truth is vexed by the wounds of original sin, historical reason by its own contingent formal object deals

⁷² Benedict is at ease with the inconclusive nature of much historical controversy, but he is not thereby afraid to make a final judgment. On the Lukan census, e.g., he says: "The discussion could continue indefinitely . . . yet the essential content of Luke's narrative remains historically credible all the same" (Ratzinger, *Infancy Narratives*, 63).

⁷³ Albert Schweitzer related the history of Jesus research as the negotiation of three distinct scholarly dilemmas: supernaturalist or rationalist, Synoptic or Johannine, eschatological or noneschatological. While the latter two forks were resolved in favor of Synoptic (via Markan priority) and *konsequente Eschatologie*, respectively, Strauss exploded the first as a false dichotomy. Naturalist (rationalist) explanations of "miracles" were as dubious as supernatural claims; both falsely assumed the occurrence of a real event. See Dennis Nineham's foreword to the complete edition of *Quest of the Historical Jesus*, xiii–xxxii.

⁷⁴ See Ratzinger, *Baptism in the Jordan to the Transfiguration*, xv–xvi.

⁷⁵ The Last Supper and Crucifixion are naturally less controversial as historical events than is the Resurrection, which poses a unique set of problems. If Catholic thinkers like Schillebeeckx and Gerald O'Collins (and John Meier) have ruled the Resurrection to be an eschatological event and consequently out of bounds in the study of history, Benedict, at least, concludes otherwise (with nuance). "The Resurrection does not simply stand outside or above history. As something that breaks out of history and transcends it, the Resurrection nevertheless has its origin within history and up to a certain point still belongs there. Perhaps we could put it this way: Jesus' Resurrection points beyond history but has left a footprint within history" (*Holy Week*, 275). For a powerful attempt at verifying this "footprint," see N. T. Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2003); and Michael Licona, *The Resurrection of Jesus: A New Historiographical Approach* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2010).

⁷⁶ Ratzinger, *Holy Week*, 105.

always and only in probabilities. Much of history simply lies forever beyond our science's grasp.

The pope is not, then, promoting a theory of *obiter dicta*. It is, instead, a matter of faith and reason mutually tempering one another. Historical criticism, to begin, cannot insist on always playing judge, haughtily eschewing the servant's role of illumining the *background*.⁷⁷ In this sense, the reach of faith is in no way limited in its positive assent to the modest "proofs" of science. The ample use of the *non liquet* card is an open invitation to faith.⁷⁸ At the same time, the serene confidence essential to faith never tempts it to act as a superhuman surrogate for plodding, mental labor, which retains its proper scope of judgment entirely unimpaired. Human *ratio* deepens (rather than "purifies") faith's delicate conviction, gives it new dimension, by drawing it ever more into the light of understanding from the dark seat of *memoria* where God touches the mind. Properly ordered theological faith, therefore, informed as it is by the *analogia fidei* and composed by the hierarchy of truths, never swells with ill-proportioned insight or dissipates itself through undue interest in things not *revelata a Deo*. It understands that the Incarnation weighs more than the visit of the magi. Yet, thus balanced in judgment, it also knows that no "jot or tittle" is incidental. God's revelation is the ultimate measure of what man must believe. If mystical gifts would disclose the sorts of details historians might long to know—say, that the flight into Egypt "took place in February, six days after the purification"⁷⁹—it is enough to remark that one does not find here *veritatem, quam Deus nostrae salutis causa Litteris Sacris consignari voluit*.

⁷⁷ One might consider here the works of Martin Hengel, whose erudite and dignified humanism represents a different model of history in New Testament (NT) scholarship than the narrow "authenticity" arbitrations of so many historical Jesus scholars: an estimable model at once more and less subservient to the interests of faith.

⁷⁸ The objection is inevitably raised that this is a feeble-minded "God of the gaps" posture; but the charge here is a rhetorical show of force. The identification of historiographical "gaps" generously recognizes the expanding conquests of historical science. The issue is more fundamental, addressing both the methodological atheism presumed by modern historians and the inherent limits of the discipline. See the suggestive (but not unproblematic) essay by Ross McCullough, "God and the Gaps," *First Things* 232 (April 2013): 19–20.

⁷⁹ Mary of Agreda, *Mystical City of God*, bk 4, ch. 8.

Memory, Faith, and Genre

If the guild can detect in Benedict anything other than a fundamentalist, he will appear unsatisfying, inscrutable, or like the curious sighting of some “pre-modern” animal presumed extinct.⁸⁰ In any case, where the issue has any interest, the respectable “big picture” view controls the day. A trend to note in connection with this theory is the recent rise of interest in “memory.”⁸¹ Generally accurate in the main points, but fuzzy on the details, memory has emerged in Gospel studies as a great theological hope for many, an overdue correction of Form Criticism, and a way to pull together the evangelists’ scrambled witness.

In view of this, it is of interest what attention *Sancta Mater Ecclesia* gives to the notion. The key idea has unfortunately been distorted: “The life and teaching of Jesus were not simply related so as to be remembered (*eo solo fine ut memoria tenerentur*): they were ‘preached’ to provide the basis of faith and morals for the Church.”⁸² As translated here (wrongly), the statement would warn against overly rigid models of mnemonic transmission and put too disjunctive a stress on kerygmatic creativity.⁸³

⁸⁰ See, e.g., the critiques and complaints of Luke Timothy Johnson, *Modern Theology* (2008): 318–20, and Richard Hays, *First Things* 175 (2007): 49–53. N. T. Wright allows that “many . . . will inevitably see [Benedict’s work] as a step backwards, to a pre-modern, pre-critical reading.” *Times Literary Supplement*, December 14, 2011.

⁸¹ See Allison, *Constructing Jesus*, 1–30, 387–462. See also, e.g., James Dunn, *Jesus Remembered* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2003), 881–94; Richard Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses: The Gospels as Eyewitness Testimony* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2006), 319–57; Anthony Le Donne, *The Historiographical Jesus: Memory, Typology, and the Son of David* (Waco, TX: Baylor University, 2009); Chris Keith, “Memory and Authenticity: Jesus Tradition and What Really Happened,” *Zeitschrift für die neutestamentliche Wissenschaft und die Kunder der älteren Kirche* 102 (2011): 155–77; and especially the significant work of Robert McIver, *Memory, Jesus, and the Synoptic Gospels*, Society of Biblical Literature Resources for Biblical Studies 59 (Atlanta: SBL, 2011).

⁸² This is the misleading translation found in Murphy’s compendium, *The Church and the Bible: Official Documents of the Catholic Church* (New Delhi: St. Pauls/Alba House, 2007). The document actually stresses that the purpose was not *only for the sole purpose* of being remembered. “Cum ex eis quae novae inquisitiones contulerunt appareat doctrinam et vitam Iesu non simpliciter relatas fuisse, eo solo fine ut memoria tenerentur, sed «praedicatas» fuisse ita ut Ecclesiae fundamentum fidei et morum praeberent.”

⁸³ The work of Birger Gerhardsson should be mentioned. See *Memory and Manuscript: Oral Tradition and Written Transmission in Rabbinic Judaism and Early Christianity* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998); *The Origins of the Gospel Traditions* (Philadel-

It is clear from the document, however, that “faith by no means obliterated the memory of the events which had taken place. On the contrary, it reinforced these memories, because it rested on the things which Jesus had taught and done.”⁸⁴ If this is true, and if *kerygma* and recollection are not operative in inverse proportion, the move to memory must be welcomed as a real advance—or, rather, recovery. The great merit of this paradigm is that it personalizes the process of transmission.⁸⁵

If Fitzmyer hesitates about historicity with his murky proposal of “Gospel truth,” like many he hesitates precisely at this point, hardening the disjunction between memory and *kerygma*. As a hedge against the difficulties of positive (asseverative) inerrancy, of course, this systematic deference to the preaching of “faith and morals” cannot entail a limiting of the formal object of inerrant revelation.⁸⁶ If by “Gospel truth,” then, Fitzmyer means that the four Gospels comprise a unique literary form, possessing its own hermeneutical canons, the premise is *in principle* perfectly sound. Attention to literary conventions has been the Church’s preferred response in this sensitive apologetic area in every relevant document since *Providentissimus Deus*.

The difficulty is in practice, not in theory.⁸⁷ Bultmann had pushed

phia: Fortress, 1979); and *The Reliability of the Gospel Tradition* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2001). See also McIver (*Memory*, 167, 187), who speaks of mnemotechniques and “near verbatim accuracy.” The PBC leaves the disciples’ memory very much intact and even suggests a pedagogy reminiscent of Gerhardsson’s rabbinic model (i.e., “firmly impressed . . . and easily remembered”): “Dominus, cum doctrinam ore exponebat, modos ratiocinandi et exponendi tunc temporis vulgatos sequebatur, ita ad mentem auditorum se accommodans et efficiens ut ea quae doceret firmiter menti imprimerentur et commode a discipulis memoria tenerentur.”

⁸⁴ *Dei Verbum* §19 also endorsed such language, speaking plainly of Evangelists working *ex sua propria memoria et recordatio*.

⁸⁵ Martin Hengel has vigorously critiqued the anonymous tradition model, an issue singled out by the PBC, rightly insisting on “the personal link of the Jesus tradition with particular tradents.” *The Four Gospels and the One Gospel of Jesus Christ* (London: SCM, 2000), 146.

⁸⁶ On the systematic question, see Peter Paul Zarafa, “The Limits of Biblical Inerrancy,” *Angelicum* 39 (1962): 92–119. One may legitimately wonder whether Fitzmyer’s reading simply anticipates the widely received distortion of *Dei Verbum* §11. On the correct interpretation of this important text, see Marchetto, *Contrappunto*, 453–58 (chap. 30); and Brant Pitre, “The Mystery of God’s Word: Inspiration, Inerrancy, and the Interpretation of Scripture,” *Letter and Spirit* 6 (2010): 47–66.

⁸⁷ See Judith Diehl, “What Is a Gospel? Recent Studies in the Gospel Genre,” *Currents in Biblical Research* 9 (2011): 171–99. Diehl distinguishes between an analogical and

the claim that the Gospels were not biographies but *sui generis* faith productions.⁸⁸ His folkloric contention, however, assumed an anachronistic concept of biography (among other faulty assumptions); and since the work of Richard Burridge on ancient *bioi*, Bultmann's credibility on this point has unraveled.⁸⁹ A growing edge of Gospel research now sees the Gospels as far less determined by the needs of local communities than once assumed; while the evangelists' interest in recounting real events has become increasingly hard to deny.⁹⁰ A range of mimetic modes is indeed discernible in the Gospels, yet their literary originality is bound to historical seriousness.⁹¹

The Lukan preface merits a central place in this discussion, for it has become quite clear that his formal style and appeal to autopsy have their cultural and literary context in Greco-Roman historiography.⁹² Though

derivational approach to the question of genre, allowing analogical affinities to the canonical Gospels but upholding their derivational originality.

⁸⁸ The original influence of this thesis owes much to K. L. Schmidt, "Die Stellung der Evangelien in der allgemeinen Literaturgeschichte," in *Eucharisterion: Studien zur Religion und Literatur des Alten und Neues Testaments: Hermann Gunkel 60. Geburtstag, Teil 2* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1923), 50–134.

⁸⁹ Richard Burridge, *What Are the Gospels? A Comparison with Graeco-Roman Biography*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2004). In the foreword to the second edition, Graham Stanton remarks, "Over the last decade or so, very few books on the Gospels have been discussed more widely or have influenced scholarly opinion more strongly."

⁹⁰ See Richard Bauckham, ed., *The Gospels for All Christians: Rethinking the Gospel Audiences* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998); and now also Edward Klink III, ed., *The Audience of the Gospels: The Origin and Function of the Gospels in Earliest Christianity*, Library of New Testament Studies 353 (London: T&T Clark, 2010). See also Martin Hengel, "The Sources of Earliest Christianity," in *Acts and the History of Early Christianity* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979), 3–34—an essay on some first principles of NT historiography that should be mandatory reading.

⁹¹ See the innovative study of Justin Taylor exploring Auerbach's claim that the Gospels transgress the ancient "separation of styles." *The Treatment of Reality in the Gospels: Five Studies, Cahiers de la Revue Biblique* 78 (Paris: Gabalda, 2011).

⁹² For a summary of research, see Clarke Rothschild, *Luke-Acts and the Rhetoric of History*, Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament 175 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2004), 32–59. See also David Aune, "Luke 1:1–4: Historical or Scientific Prooimion?" in *Paul, Luke, and the Greco-Roman World: Essays in Honour of Alexander J. M. Wedderburn*, ed. A Christopherson et al., Journal for the Study of the New Testament Supplement Series 217 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 2002), 142. Aune wishes to indicate that Luke's preface likely resembles "the hundreds of lost mediocre histories," and that it is misleading to gauge it only against the stan-

Luke alone of the Evangelists postures as an historian, it is enough that he does.⁹³ The formal congruence of the synoptic Gospels implies a kind of transitive *asphaleia*. As a dutiful historian, Luke's assurance assures his readers of the material they might find in Matthew and Mark.⁹⁴ Luke himself plainly recognizes his special role among the "many" who have undertaken the task of telling this story, and he sees his particular purpose in drawing up a "careful ordering" (ἀκριβῶς καθεξῆς γράψαι) of the events.

The irony of this purpose is that, at ground level, Luke's order is considered primitive and unclear.⁹⁵ While grand geographic and temporal patterns do give an intelligible, architectonic shape to the Lukan message, the way smaller units are collated can seem almost haphazard. Here Bultmann's hand becomes much stronger. Plainly, the micro-units of tradition were not hammered out in the same school as the learned Lukan prologue.

The most helpful thing to be said here concerns the "Eucharistic provenance" of the Gospels.⁹⁶ Specifically, "The consistent portrayal of Jesus as the one *coming and being encountered* [in Gospel pericopes] originates in the way memories about him were recalled, told, and retold

dard of the best Hellenistic exemplars. That the preface may be a work of "mediocre" quality, though, should not obscure its classification as *haute littérature* (at least in pretension). For the classical mind, it was the theme that determined stylistic elevation, and of Luke's theme there can be little doubt. The Evangelist consciously presents his work as a thing serious and significant in the manner of a history, for history alone could bear the magnitude of "the events fulfilled among us" (Lk 1:1). On the Greco-Roman background, see Giuseppe Nenci, "Il motivo dell'autopsia nella storagraphia greca," *Studi Classici e Orientali* 3 (1955): 14–29; and especially Guido Schepens, *L'autopsie' dans la méthode des historiens grec du Ve siècle avant J.-C.* (Brussels: Paleis der Academiën, 1980).

⁹³ This is not to deny the important historical concerns (and methods) of the other Evangelists. See, e.g., Richard Bauckham, "Historiographical Aspects of the Gospel of John," *New Testament Studies* 53 (2007): 17–36.

⁹⁴ Commentators have at times detected a note of criticism in Luke's mention of his predecessors, and such judgments were a trope in Greco-Roman historiography. In other authors' work, however, the polemic is much more open and unmistakable, e.g., Josephus, *B.J.* 1.1. See John Marincola, *Authority and Tradition in Ancient Historiography* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 218–25.

⁹⁵ Lukan order is commonly accepted as more nearly approximating the order of Q than is Matthean order.

⁹⁶ See Farkasfalvy, *Inspiration and Interpretation*, 65–79; also Benoit, "Réflexions," 487.

in the presence of cultic (Eucharistic) congregations, gatherings held for the purpose of reliving the past encounters.”⁹⁷ Accordingly, though one does not find in Luke (or any of the Gospels) a disciplined effort to grasp the inner connections of discrete events, such chronological inattention preserves the elemental structure of the Jesus tradition as sacramental *anamnesis*.⁹⁸ To this degree, the *cultivated* memory undergirding the Gospels responds directly to the Lord’s command (*hoc facite in meum commemorationem*). It is not free fabrication.⁹⁹

If the cultic molding of the primitive tradition indeed preserved the “*hypomnemata* of the apostles,”¹⁰⁰ other portions of the Gospels do not betray the same origin. The infancy narratives, in particular, stand apart. While the expressions of Christology are pronounced in these cherished episodes, actors other than the sacramental Lord (*ho erchomenos*) enjoy prominence, and the stories are widely seen as mere “vehicles for the evangelist’s theology.”¹⁰¹ Yet, notice has long been made that “Luke indicates from time to time that Mary, the Mother of Jesus, is herself one of his sources.”¹⁰² This “uncritical” position has, of course, (less) long been ridiculed as a pious (Catholic) fantasy. The model of Mary’s deepening memory (Lk 2:51) is viable, however—as credible, at least, as any “Baptist source”—and more than piety is at stake.¹⁰³ Ultimately, a decision

⁹⁷ Farkasfalvy, *Inspiration and Interpretation*, 74 (cf. 72n21).

⁹⁸ Discrete anecdotal ordering is characteristic of much ancient biography and represents the literary crystallization of the basic impact of the documented personality. See Hengel, “Sources of Earliest Christianity,” 15–18.

⁹⁹ For a wide-ranging rebuttal of the Form Critical canard that nameless Christian prophets were a factory of dominical *logia*, see David Aune, *Prophecy in Early Christianity and the Ancient Mediterranean World* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2003).

¹⁰⁰ Justin, *First Apology* 66.3; also 33.5; cf. *Dialogue with Trypho* 100.4, 101.3, 102.5, etc. See also Papias’s description of Mark’s Gospel (*H.E.* 3.39.15) and the language employed by Clement of Alexandria (*H.E.* 2.15.1).

¹⁰¹ Raymond Brown, *The Birth of the Messiah: A Commentary on the Infancy Narratives in Matthew and Luke* (New York: Doubleday, 1977), 37.

¹⁰² Ratzinger, *Infancy Narratives*, 16.

¹⁰³ See most recently Richard Dillon, who speaks of “members of the Baptist diaspora” as the source of the Baptist nativity material, but never considers pre-Lukan sources that might inform the Jesus strand. *The Hymns of Saint Luke: Lyricism and Narrative Strategy in Luke 1–2*, Catholic Biblical Quarterly Monograph Series 50 (Washington, DC: CBA, 2013), 5–14, 50.

between the “big picture” and plenary views is closely bound to one’s decision about *personal* Gospel sources.

The Third Gospel sets the parameters in which *historica veritas* must be conceived, but it is the Fourth Gospel where the issue is decided. In John, the unmistakable claim to eyewitness knowledge is melded with the most robust expression of introspective memory: the Marian model rigorously extended.¹⁰⁴ Such a conjunction of *witness* and *interpretation* has proven too hard to swallow. As its first step in the classic “Quest for the Historical Jesus,” scholarship accordingly decided not to go down the Johannine road.¹⁰⁵ A new generation of scholars, however, has begun to question this fundamental axiom.¹⁰⁶

In any case, the council’s perspective is clear from the final sentence of *Dei Verbum* §19. There a distinction is drawn between those Evangelists “who relied on their own memory and recollection” (making room here beside John for the traditional identity of Matthew as an apostle) and those who depended on “the eyewitnesses from the beginning” (meaning Mark and Luke).¹⁰⁷ Evangelists without some access to direct witness are not envisioned.

¹⁰⁴ See the remarks of Ratzinger (*Baptism in the Jordan to the Transfiguration*, 233–34): “What John says in his Gospel about how remembering becomes understanding and the path ‘into all truth’ comes very close to what Luke recounts about remembering on the part of Jesus’ mother.”

¹⁰⁵ The decisive impetus again came from D. F. Strauss, who managed to overmaster the influence of Schleiermacher’s predilection for John. See Schweitzer, *Quest of the Historical Jesus*, 80–83.

¹⁰⁶ See, e.g., Craig L. Blomberg, *The Historical Reliability of John’s Gospel: Issues and Commentary* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2001). A variety of factors have turned scholars in this direction, not least of which is the growing fund of hard-boiled, archaeological evidence. See James Charlesworth, “The Historical Jesus in the Fourth Gospel: A Paradigm Shift?” *Journal of the Study of the Historical Jesus* 8 (2010): 3–46.

¹⁰⁷ A distinction in status was implicit in this distinction of credentials: “Cur quatuor evangelistae non per quatuor apostolos scribuntur, nisi per duos discipulos et duos apostolos? Quia filii Jacob de duabus liberis et duabus ancillis nati sunt” (Ps. Jerome, *Expositio quattuor evangeliorum* PL 30, 567–77). The particular popularity of the Gospels of Matthew and John in the early Church no doubt owes much to their apostolic credentials. See Édouard Massaux, *Influence de l’Évangile de Saint Matthieu sur la littérature chrétienne avant saint Irénée* (Louvain: Louvain, 1950).

“Eyewitnesses from the Beginning”

The PBC Instruction posited three stages of Gospel tradition: the preaching of Jesus, the preaching of his apostles, and the literary activity of the four evangelists. If the innovation of this arrangement was the careful (some would say “arbitrary”) distinction between periods two and three,¹⁰⁸ this schema is not, contrary to common opinion, ever attributed to the insights of the Form Critical method. All three are found explicitly in the Lukan framework: (1) all that Jesus did and taught (Acts 1:1); (2) the things handed down (*paradosis*) by the *autoptoi* and ministers of the word (Lk 1:2); and (3) the undertaking to draw up a *diegesis* (Lk 1:1, 3).

If all three *tempora* reappear (without special flagging) in *Dei Verbum*, in the full doctrine of the council Stage Two (*paradosis*) attains an unmistakable prominence. This is a key point that Caba and others miss at a great cost. The clear affirmation in §18 of the Gospel’s “apostolic origin” (*origine apostolica*) is only part of the council’s interest in this theme, which has its more important exposition in Chapter II on the Transmission of Divine Revelation. Apostolic preaching thus represents the crucial point of intersection linking the two poorly integrated blocks of *Dei Verbum* §1–2 and §3–5.¹⁰⁹ The affirmation itself, along with the direct identification of the sacred authors as apostles and *apostolici viri* (meaning Mark and Luke as the respective associates of the apostles Peter and Paul) represents, of course, an obvious element in the claim to historical truth.¹¹⁰ It is no surprise, then, that the doctrinal precursors to this article were originally forged during the heat of the (first) Modernist crisis, in the notorious PBC *responsa*.

Much might be said about this embarrassing magisterial corpus, but only one point is necessary here. The Biblical Commission—followed implicitly by the council’s preparatory Theological Commission

¹⁰⁸ See the analysis of Bernard Orchard, “*Dei Verbum* and the Synoptic Gospels,” *This Rock* 7 (May 1996). The conflating of these stages took hold before 1964. See the revealing piece of David Michael Stanley, “New Understanding of the Gospels,” in *The Bible in Current Catholic Thought* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1962), 169–83.

¹⁰⁹ On this tension in the document, see Farkasfalvy, *Inspiration and Interpretation*, 168–202.

¹¹⁰ The wording of *Dei Verbum* §18 resumes the precise formulation of the discarded schema but significantly alters the final portion.

and then the full body of council fathers—reckoned the writing of the Gospels by “the authors whose names they bear,” as a revealed truth to be firmly accepted *de fide*.¹¹¹ If *de facto* the question of authorship has long since fallen into the scientific jurisdiction of the *Einleitungen*, in the mind of the PBC, “the universal and unwavering agreement,” indeed “the continual, universal and solemn tradition of the Church” authoritatively settles the point. It is noteworthy in judging the rare force of this language that, by way of contrast, the PBC never made such a confident, or rather “obliging, certain affirmation” (*certo affirmare cogat*) of the “clear judgment of tradition” (*luculentum traditionis suffragium*) when addressing, for instance, the issue of Mosaic authorship of the Pentateuch. (We must note here the ignorant but persistent habit of lampooning the *responsum* genre as an instrument lacking all nuance.) In 1962, in fact, the debate of the drafting committee made explicit that Mosaic authorship had status as *sententia communis*, but was not to be regarded (like Gospel authorship) as *traditio*.¹¹² Accordingly and significantly, the PBC’s much more cautiously circumscribed 1906 pronouncements on the Pentateuch never surfaced in the pre-conciliar schema’s chapter *De Vetere Testamento*—quite in contrast to

<i>De fontibus revelationis</i> §19	<i>Dei Verbum</i> §18
Quattuor Evangelia apostolicam originem habere Ecclesia Dei semper et ubique sine dubitatione credidit et credit, constanterque tenuit ac tenet auctores humanos habere illos quorum nomina in Sacrorum Librorum canone gerunt: Mattheaum nempe, Marcum, Lucam et Ioannem, quem diligebat Iesus.	Quattuor Evangelia originem apostolicam habere Ecclesia semper et ubique tenuit ac tenet. Quae enim Apostoli ex mandato Christi praedicaverunt, postea divino afflante Spiritu, in scriptis, ipsi et apostolici viri nobis tradiderunt, fidei fundamentum, quadriforme nempe Evangelium, secundum Mattheaum, Marcum, Lucam et Ioannem.

¹¹¹ Augustine Bea’s commentary on *Dei Verbum* provides privileged insight into the council fathers’ thinking. He distinguishes between the “authenticity” of the Gospels (“that is, that they were written by the authors whose names they bear”) and their “apostolic origin,” and, without suggesting any doubt about the former (which is clearly articulated as doctrine in *De fontibus* 19), allows that *Dei Verbum* deals only with the “essential points”: apostolic origin and historical truth. *The Word of God and Mankind* (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1967), 240.

¹¹² See Schelkens, *Theology of Revelation*, 152–53.

the *responsa* on the Gospels.¹¹³ Moreover, the claim about the Gospels' origin was never *probatur ex traditione* in the errant sense undermined by the council, that is, by an incidental catena of proof texts or appeal to some "secret" stream of knowledge. It is presented, rather, as a robust expression of the Church's full living commitment, integrally and implicitly transmitted by liturgy, councils, popes, canons, the fathers, ecclesiastics, and so on. Vincent of Lérins and Congar might equally agree. The Biblical Commission's vigorous avowal of the Gospels' origin, then, was not the mere bluster of reactionary intransigence, but a forceful, self-conscious, and mature doctrinal proposition. So it was both proffered and received.¹¹⁴ This, I think, helps us evaluate the variegated magisterial weight of the PBC *responsa*.¹¹⁵

The question then becomes what to make of this. Plainly, it is a teaching the academy has not received. Indeed, after 1965, in the blink of an eye, the Two Source Hypothesis—which has no place for Matthean eyewitness—came to prevail in Catholic scholarship.¹¹⁶ Regardless

¹¹³ A growing recognition of the limited relevance of the *responsa* began to emerge in the years prior to the council. In 1955 a quiet policy announced by the secretary of the PBC encouraged exegetes to proceed in *aller Freiheit*, treating earlier pronouncements as the quaint relics of a difficult crisis now passed. See Athanasius Miller, "Das neue biblische Handbuch," *Benediktinische Monatschrift* 31 (1955): 49–50. Although this perspective was never openly authorized (preserving curial *bella figura*), the Theological Commission, which drafted the preparatory chapter in 1962 (and certainly knew the mind of the Magisterium), studiously mined the PBC documents in preparing chapter IV on the NT, yet conspicuously neglected the same corpus in preparing chapter III on the OT. Such an embrace of the full discretionary liberty to disregard the *responsa* makes the free endorsement in the case of the Gospels enormously suggestive. On the status of Miller's "clarification," see the personal account of J. E. Steinmueller, who reports that Miller's action was condemned by the voting Cardinals of the PBC who sought to bring him before the Holy Office. *Sword of the Spirit* (Waco, TX: Stella Maris, 1982), 7.

¹¹⁴ The language of universal Tradition in *Dei Verbum* §18 is emphatic and overt: *semper et ubique tenuit ac tenet*.

¹¹⁵ The *responsa* represent a provisional magisterial act of "pastoral prudence," but they are not set aside tout court. See then-Cardinal Ratzinger's authoritative explanation of *The Ecclesial Vocation of the Theologian*: "Their core remains valid, but the individual details influenced by the circumstances at the time may need further rectification."

¹¹⁶ The movement in this direction began before the council, of course, and the last significant Catholic defense of Matthean apostolic authorship was Bishop Butler's book in 1951—now, interestingly, just reissued: *The Originality of St. Matthew: A Critique of the Two Document Hypothesis* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 2011). Less than five years after the council (1968), Frederick Gast's article in the original *Je-*

of whether this hasty development was precipitous or overdue, it simply borrowed the results of Protestant scholarship. No distinct Catholic debate ever transpired. The remarkable legacy of figures like Lagrange and Vaganay was casually laid aside like some obtuse Ptolemaic astronomy, an embarrassing and overburdened exegesis contorted by extraneous ecclesial commitments.¹¹⁷ The irony, of course, is that 1964 (the year of the PBC Instruction) saw William Farmer, the great (Protestant) champion of the Neo-Griesbach Hypothesis, first question Holtzmann's long-held dogma of Markan priority.¹¹⁸ If today the Q hypothesis is thus facing a growing wave of scrutiny and skepticism, this has not been a Catholic crusade.¹¹⁹

It is difficult to say what is emerging here. There are zealots on both sides; yet even dogmatic adherents of Q are quietly softening their positions.¹²⁰ Pierre Benoit predicted early on that Form Criticism would ulti-

rome *Biblical Commentary* calmly pronounced Markan priority the uncontroversial majority view. Lagrange had already described the Two Document Hypothesis as *généralement admise* in 1903, but this estimate clearly indicates a continental—i.e., German Protestant—consensus. *La méthode historique* (Paris: Lecoffre, 1903, 249), Streeter's important monograph, would not convince the Anglophone world until 1924. On Catholic interest in Markan priority, see John Kloppenborg Verbin, *Excavating Q* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000), 321–25.

¹¹⁷ For diagrams of the complex solutions proposed by Lagrange and Vaganay, see Lagrange, 45, 318.

¹¹⁸ See William Farmer, *The Synoptic Problem*, 2nd ed. (Dillsboro: Western North Carolina, 1974). Farmer suggests that the triumph of Holtzmann's thesis of Markan priority had much to do with the Catholic-Protestant polemics of the *Kulturkampf*. See Kloppenborg Verbin, *Excavating Q*, 312–21.

¹¹⁹ See, e.g., Mark Goodacre, *The Case against Q: Studies in Markan Priority and the Synoptic Problem* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity, 2002); David Peabody, Lamar Colpe, and Allan McNicol, eds., *One Gospel from Two: Mark's Use of Matthew and Luke* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity, 2002); and James Dunn, *Jesus Remembered*, 147–60; and Dunn, "Q1 as Oral Tradition," in *The Written Gospel*, ed. Marcus Bockmuehl and Donald Hagner (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 45–69.

¹²⁰ Even Helmut Koester is ready to concede that "the name Matthew may have been connected" with the Synoptic Sayings Source. *Ancient Christian Gospels: Their History and Development* (Philadelphia: Trinity, 1990), 318. In this line Benedict Viviano has now proposed regarding Q as the notebook (*pinax*) of the apostle Matthew—a conservative theory startlingly close to Robert Gundry's defense of the traditional authorship of the First Gospel, a conservative *tour de force* that (predictably) fell stillborn from the press. "Who Wrote Q? The Sayings Document (Q) as the Apostle Matthew's Private Notebook as a Bilingual Village Scribe (Mk 2:13–17; Mt 9:9–13)," in *Mark and Matthew II*, Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament

mately undo the Two Source Theory.¹²¹ The key challenge, in any event, is articulating a firm doctrine of apostolic origin that manages to avoid meddling too much in the mechanics of the Synoptic Problem—and, at the same time, addressing the Synoptic Problem with honest attention to the Gospels' apostolic origin.¹²² Standing in the dock, of course, are many highly attenuated interpretations of "apostolicity." *Sancta Mater Ecclesia* had warned of minimizing the *munus* of the apostles, and it is pure illusion to pretend this has not happened—at great cost. The stakes are high, and it is no coincidence that Matthean scholarship specifically has gone the way of the Fourth Gospel, with the tax collector dissolving into the reconstructed fog of a community in contest with the synagogue.¹²³

As an individual, Luke, of course, is easier than Matthew to spot. Luke speaks directly in the first person. An older Fitzmyer, in his two-volume commentary, thus mounts a substantial case that the author of the Third Gospel is indeed none other than "the traditional Luke, a sometime companion of Paul."¹²⁴ Then, in the next breath, the exegete volunteers that this "makes little difference to the interpretation of the Lucan Gospel." The simple question is: *Why not?* Why do an Introduction's theses on audience have such profound interpretative value, while the *veri auctores* themselves are of so little concern? It is true the evangelists hide themselves to a considerable degree—though this posture may be deceptively unassuming.¹²⁵ Their sheer proximity to "the things fulfilled among us" (Lk 1:1), however, demands more thoughtful attention.

271, ed. A. Runesson and E.-M. Becker (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2013).

¹²¹ Benoit, "Réflexions," 483.

¹²² The PBC's 1912 pronouncement on the Synoptic Problem (AAS 4 [1912]: 465) articulates the range of issues to be considered before exegetes "discuss freely" various possible solutions.

¹²³ The "Johannine Question" is, therefore, as critical here as the Synoptic Problem. See Raymond Brown, *The Community of the Beloved Disciple: The Life, Loves, and Hates of an Individual Church in New Testament Times* (New York: Paulist, 1979); and especially Martin Hengel, *Die johanneische Frage, Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament 67* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1993). See also Ratzinger, *Baptism in the Jordan to the Transfiguration*, 218–37.

¹²⁴ Joseph Fitzmyer, *The Gospel According to Luke I–XII, Anchor Bible 28* (Garden City, NJ: Doubleday, 1979), 35–52.

¹²⁵ The demographics of the "audience" are not announced either, but that has not deterred ingenious exegetes. On "hidden" authors, see Armin Baum, "The Anonymity of the New Testament History Books: A Stylistic Device in the Context of Greco-Ro-

Richard Bauckham has amply shown how provocative serious consideration of the claim to eyewitness sources might be.¹²⁶ If Bauckham's work has met a mixed reception, with Catholics not always eager to embrace his vision, I would argue that, though there are plenty of places for legitimate disagreement, he represents quite well the occluded teaching of Vatican II. Most importantly, perhaps, his attempt to find in *testimony* the place where history and theology meet recognizes the space defined by facticity (*factum est*) and meaning as the substantial locus of Gospel *asphaleia*. Of course, he only pursues what the PBC claimed belonged to be "the sound principles of the historical method." It is incidental that it conforms also to Catholic doctrine. It is no surprise for those guided by Catholic sensibilities, though, when Bauckham both rehabilitates in the testimony of Papias, a once-prized resource in Catholic exegesis, and erects with his body of eyewitnesses what one scholar dubs "a Protestant form of apostolic succession"—a quasi magisterial agency faithfully guarding and transmitting the deposit.¹²⁷

The special interest this idea holds is in surmounting the paradigm of the *duplex fons* and exposing the point where the divine impulse behind tradition and Scripture coheres. If this structure approximates the basic Catholic view and ably cuts the legs from under rationalistic *Formgeschichte*, one could lament that it took fifty years and an Anglican to materialize the Church's vision. As with the ongoing liturgical reform,

man and Ancient Near Eastern Literature," *Novum Testamentum* 50 (2008): 120–42.

¹²⁶ Richard Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses: The Gospels as Eyewitness Testimony* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2006). Reaction to Bauckham's controversial thesis has been predictably lively and sharp. See, e.g., Peter Rodgers, "Jesus and the Eyewitnesses: The Gospels as Eyewitness Testimony," *Novum Testamentum* 52 (2010): 88–100; Judith Redman, "How Accurate Are Eyewitnesses? Bauckham and the Eyewitnesses in the Light of Psychological Research," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 129 (2010): 177–97; Dean Philip Bechard, "Jesus and the Eyewitnesses: The Gospels as Eyewitness Testimony," *Biblica* 90 (2009): 126–29; Jens Schröder, "The Gospels as Eyewitness Testimony? A Critical Examination of Bauckham's *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses*," *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 31 (2008): 195–209; Craig Evans, "The Implications of Eyewitness Tradition," *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 31 (2008): 211–19. See especially the entire volume *Journal for the Study of the Historical Jesus* 6 (2008), including Bauckham, "In Response to My Respondents: *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses* in Review," 225–53. Also Bauckham, "Eyewitnesses and Critical History: A Response to Jens Schröder and Craig Evans," *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 31 (2008): 221–35.

¹²⁷ Tatum, "Limits of Reliability," 524.

however, or the still broadly untested norms of exegesis urged in *Dei Verbum* §12, implementation of the council's vision requires patience.

Conclusion

The doctrine of *Dei Verbum* §19 reaffirms traditional teaching. (People at times forget that this is what ecumenical councils do.) This implies substantial continuity with the magisterial pronouncements of the PBC, a point that has not been acknowledged—understandably, perhaps, given the uneven value of this highly contextualized material. The council's vision, nonetheless, offers more than repetition without reform, for it also goes *ad fontes*, offering the Church the (re)sources of divine revelation to renew itself root and stock. In this way, specifically Lukan parameters are found for addressing the issue of historical truth. The three *tempora* are an important component of this, but of greatest significance is the matter of apostolic eyewitness. In this regard, it is critical not to overstate the Church's investment in Form Criticism (and its methodological descendants), simply because this school helped the Church recognize the special importance of the threefold layering of tradition. The magisterium made a gesture of goodwill toward German exegesis, but never irrevocably linked arms. In the postconciliar experiment, however, there has been little diversity in the matter of exegetical method, and some less acceptable assumptions of the Form Critics have become deeply entrenched. As part of this, the issue of apostolicity was allowed to vanish from practical consideration: a circumstance that has strongly promoted a soupy view of the Gospels' historicity.

The present direction of Gospel scholarship suggests the wisdom of more clearly disentangling the Church's exegesis from the rationalistic principles still inherent in redaction criticism and criteriology. *Historica veritas*, in the end, cannot be so easily siphoned off as a scientifically controllable problem. The temptation in this direction is multifaceted, and it was a fateful rendering of the vulgate to intellectualize *asphaleia* (not *aleitheia*!) as *veritas*. For Luke, though, this "reliability" is first of all confirmatory and fiducial. Faith and reason must, then, collaborate here more than they have done. The council fathers envisioned a *both/and* approach to the problem (*fide et ratione*), despite the particular need to accent reason (*non tantum fide*). This means recovering a nonrational-

ist (pre-Enlightenment? postmodern?) historical sensibility, above all, I suggest, by more closely studying and understanding the patristic tolerance (and limits) of Gospel *disharmony*: reverse engineering in some way projects like Augustine's *De Consensu*. Moderating the illusory claims of positivistic history (*wie es eigentlich gewesen ist*) is, of course, indispensable too.

If the "Quest for the Historical Jesus" has advanced by always "taking one or other of two alternatives,"¹²⁸ the Church sees this as a record of dangerous neglect. To reverse the course is hard, surely, but on one front there are promising signs. Perhaps the way forward will rejoin a road not taken, for some in the academy are now turning again toward John. This must challenge our whole manner of imagining history and seeking the *vera et sincera de Iesu*.¹²⁹

The teaching of Vatican II on the historical truth of the Gospels belongs to the significant portion of *Dei Verbum* that "still awaits completion."¹³⁰ *Sancta Mater Ecclesia* spoke truly: "There will never be an end to [biblical] problems," but "the Catholic exegete should never lose heart." With this in mind, we may express a glad hope that, even after fifty years, the council's sacred work still requires *periti*. For, in the abundance of the Holy Spirit's gift to the Church, a special joy belongs also to those who never knew the first thrill of *aggiornamento*. The call to renewal also touches our hearts, a generation grateful to be the living first fruits of the Second Vatican Council. 

¹²⁸ Schweitzer, *Quest of the Historical Jesus*, xvii.

¹²⁹ I would like to mention here the exegetical work of Marie-Joseph Lagrange, whose prescience, piety, and erudition can still shine as a guiding star as we continue to navigate the long wake of the storm he courageously weathered. (Another anniversary was quietly marked in 2012: the centenary of what Lagrange simply called *L'année terrible*.) It is unfortunate, perhaps, that Pope Benedict missed the chance to commend Lagrange's example in his *Jesus of Nazareth* series; the evocation of figures like Guardini and Daniel-Rops indicates that his ultimate inspiration lay outside professional exegesis. On the other hand, Ratzinger disavows any attempt to write a "Life of Christ" and points us instead to Thomas's *Tertia Pars* (*Holy Week*, xvi). In thus offering a kind of "theological treatise on the mysteries of the life of Christ," the emeritus pontiff approaches in some ways the rare vision of Lagrange, who had the profound wisdom to understand *why* "the Gospels themselves are the only lives of Jesus that can be written." *L'Évangile de Jesus Christ* (Paris: Gabalda, 1928).

¹³⁰ Farkasfalvy, *Inspiration and Interpretation*, 168.

