

***Dei Verbum* and the Twentieth-Century Drama of Scripture's Literal Sense**

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THE RECEIVED NARRATIVE for Catholic Scripture exegesis since Pope Leo XIII has focused on the permission and encouragement directed toward Catholic exegetes to use modern methods of Scripture study. The narrative begins with the 1893 encyclical *Providentissimus Deus*, in which Leo XIII called for Catholic exegetes to learn the languages in which Scripture was originally written and apply scientific methods of biblical studies to the text of Scripture in order to identify the modernists' errors and show the truth of Scripture. The suspense in this narrative's plot first comes with Pope Pius X, whose 1907 encyclical *Pascendi Dominici Gregis* is viewed as an attempt to halt or dampen the Catholic use of modern methods of Scripture study because of his suspicions about those methods. Fifty years after *Providentissimus Deus* and thirty-six years after *Pascendi Dominici Gregis*, Pope Pius XII issued his encyclical *Divino Afflante Spiritu*, which renewed the Church's call for Scripture scholars to use scientific methods for their exegesis.

In the decades that have followed, the Church's exegetes have tested and functionally appropriated modern, scientific methods, such as the historical-critical method, form criticism, redaction criticism, source criticism, and feminist criticism when studying Scripture and passed on the fruits of their studies to the Church. While there has been a renewal of patristic studies in some quarters and a growing respect for patristic readings of Scripture, the dominant threads in this narrative remain the use, perceived benefits, and ongoing negotiation necessary to bring modern, scientific methods to the Church's

engagement with her Scriptures.¹ This narrative is one that can still be told, since it is a useful description of the surface phenomena in Catholic scholars' exegesis of Scripture in the twentieth century. But this narrative is not connected—in neither its beginning nor its ending—to any longer or broader narrative of Scripture exegesis.

In this article, I ask fellow students of Scripture and the history of its exegesis to consider an alternative narrative, a narrative that traces developments in the last 120 years of Catholic Scripture study in light of the ongoing narrative regarding the literal sense in the Christian interpretation of Scripture. This longer narrative begins at least with Origen's reflections on the literal and spiritual senses of Scripture.² A segment of the broader narrative that will serve as a useful comparison, for our purposes, is the renewed emphasis on the literal sense that arose with Andrew of St. Victor (ca. 1110–1175), who was influenced by Jewish interpretation to follow the literal sense, an interpretive disposition continued by Nicholas of Lyra (1270–1349).³

Nicholas of Lyra's preoccupation with the literal sense of Scripture is well known. Its influence on Scripture reading in the West is caricatured in the following couplet: "Si Lyra non lyrasset, Lutherus non saltasset" ("If Lyra had not played the lyre, Luther would not have danced"). The point of this couplet is that the distinctive reading of Scripture promulgated by Luther, which eschewed the figurative exegesis open to multiple senses of Scripture found in the Church fathers, would not have gained a critical mass of exegetes in the sixteenth and following centuries if it had not been for the popularity of Lyra's *Postillae*. Beryl Smalley's rejection of this couplet seems based on emphases on the literal sense that antedated Nicholas, not on the connection between exegetes' emphasis on the literal sense and Luther's eventual quest for a singular sense of Scripture.⁴ And

¹ See, e.g., Robert Bruce Robinson, *Roman Catholic Exegesis Since Divino Afflante Spiritu: Hermeneutical Implications*, Society of Biblical Literature Dissertation Series 111 (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1988), and the preface of *Greco-Roman Culture and the New Testament: Studies Commemorating the Centennial of the Pontifical Biblical Institute*, ed. David E. Aune and Frederick E. Brenk, *Novum Testamentum Supplement* 143 (Leiden: Brill, 2012), ix–xii.

² See, e.g., in *De principiis* 4.2.2. Origen traces the cause of heretical beliefs to reading Scripture according to "the bare letter" and not to its spiritual sense.

³ Beryl Smalley, *The Study of the Bible in the Middle Ages*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Blackwell, 1952), 120–95.

⁴ *Ibid.*, xvi–xvii: "This *diction absurde*, as a French scholar called it as long ago as 1893, has been finally disproved. Or else we must put the beginning of the

to support Smalley's hesitation with the couplet, Franciscan focus on the literal sense in the thirteenth century, based on the works of the Hebraist scholar Robert Grosseteste and Franciscans Adam Marsh, William de la Mare, Roger Bacon, and Gerard de Huy, can be well documented.⁵ So I must admit that more people than Nicholas of Lyra caused the groundswell of medieval interest in the literal sense.

One also needs to be aware that Nicholas of Lyra's literal sense is not always what we might expect the literal sense to be. For example, in his *Postilla on the Song of Songs*, he writes that the literal sense is "not that which is signified by the word, but that which is signified by the things signified by the words. . . . So then, in this book, it seems that the groom should be understood as God. The bride, then, is the Church, embracing the circumstances of both Testaments."⁶ Another Franciscan contemporary of Nicholas wrote a commentary on the Song that finds its literal sense in a history of the Jewish people from the Exodus until the fall of Jerusalem to the Romans.⁷ Perhaps a motive for what appears to be the derivative or secondary dimension of these literal senses is that the thirteenth-century exegetes could not admit that the relationship between lover and beloved in the Song was its literal sense. Nicholas of Lyra explains:

Some have said that the groom is literally Solomon, and the bride is the daughter of Pharaoh whom he desired for his wife. But this does not seem to be the correct explanation, because, though such a love between a groom and a bride would be proper, since it is within the bonds of matrimony (as I explained more fully in connection with 3 Kings 3), nevertheless it would be fleshly and often such a love has a certain dishonorable and improper quality about it. Because of that, the description of such a love does not seem to belong in the canonical books of

Reformation in the school of St. Victor and the circle of scholars surrounding St. Thomas of Canterbury."

⁵ Deanna Copeland Klepper, "Nicholas of Lyra and Franciscan Interest in Hebrew Scholarship," in *Nicholas of Lyra: The Senses of Scripture*, ed. Philip D.W. Krey and Lesley Smith (Leiden: Brill, 2000), 292–99.

⁶ Nicholas of Lyra, *Postilla on the Song of Songs* 1, in *The Postilla of Nicholas of Lyra on the Song of Songs*, trans. and ed. James George Kiecker (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 1998), 31, 33.

⁷ Klepper briefly describes this anonymous Franciscan commentary, dated either to the middle or end of the thirteenth century, in "Nicholas of Lyra and Franciscan Interest," 299–300.

Sacred Scripture, especially since these books were dictated by the Holy Spirit. Besides this, Solomon loved his wife and she loved him, and he learned the delights of this love by experience, not by the revelation of the Holy Spirit. Therefore, this book, which has always been included among the canonical books by the Hebrews and the Latin [translators]—as is clear from Jerome’s defense in his Prologue—does not seem to be about such a human love.⁸

The medieval emphasis on the literal sense is not the only cause of the narrowing focus on a purportedly single, literal sense of Scripture that arose among learned and well-meaning Protestant exegetes in the sixteenth century. This narrowing focus was influenced by other factors as well, such as the rise of nominalism. Another significant factor was the changing view of history, from one that views the Trinity as deeply involved in the unfolding of human experience, to a linear-historical model in which human experience is viewed as completely separate from the life of the Trinity. For the purposes of this article, I accept that two things combined to direct exegetes’ sights toward only a single, literal sense on the stage of human experience, not toward the biblical authors’ and Church fathers’ worlds in which the Trinitarian God is intimately participating in history: the focus on the literal sense that began in the school of St. Victor and spread through the Western Church by Franciscan exegesis (especially by the repeated printings of Nicholas of Lyra’s best-selling *Postillae*) and the change in the understanding of history from a Trinitarian, participatory model to a linear-historical model.⁹ The drama in this article’s narrative therefore revolves around the possibility that the explicit calls for attention to the literal sense in the encyclicals *Providentissimus Deus* and *Divino Afflante Spiritu*, in combination with advances in knowledge and the attractions of scientific methods of studying Scripture, as a siren call to the literal sense, might have finally pulled Catholic exegetes into the fold of Scripture exegesis that sees only one meaning in the text of Scripture, a meaning based

⁸ Nicholas of Lyra, *Postilla on the Song of Songs* 1 (Kiecker, 29, 31).

⁹ My debt to Matthew Levering, *Participatory Biblical Exegesis: A Theology of Biblical Interpretation* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2008), in the last two sentences is great. For an introduction to the shift in historical understanding that affected exegesis, see *ibid.*, 3–7. I shall return to Levering when covering Pope Benedict XVI’s apostolic exhortation *Verbum Domini* (2010).

on a literal interpretation of what the human authors of Scripture wrote.

The drama's suspense is also intensified by the ways in which changes in biblical research in the twentieth century recast the boundaries of the literal sense. This drama's suspense begins to reach resolution by the balanced approach to the literal sense that is evident in *Dei Verbum*. *Dei Verbum* comes closest to working with easily forgotten ideas regarding the literal sense inherited from Church tradition: the possibility that a text has more than one literal sense and the advantages of reading both literal and figurative senses in the text. The ripple effects of *Dei Verbum* in the Pontifical Biblical Commission's documents of 1993 and 2001, and in the in the post-synodal apostolic exhortation *Verbum Domini*, are also useful to examine in order to understand the lasting influence of *Dei Verbum*.

One could object that I am comparing apples with oranges, since the documents and exegetical works my article examines are not on the same level of canonical authority. I accept this as a legitimate limitation of the article, but reading these different genres of Church writings is necessary in order to track the diachronic trends in exegetical orientation. I shall identify the differing contexts in which these documents emerged when I examine their respective accounts of the literal sense.

To track exegetical trends involves not merely summarizing Church documents; it also requires some consideration of how exegesis has actually been carried out. A complete chronicle of trends in exegesis is beyond the scope of this essay, but I hope to highlight some points in which Church teaching and Catholic exegesis indicate varying regard for the literal sense in order that I might show how the trajectory of Catholic exegesis that begins with *Providentissimus Deus* has come, with the help of *Dei Verbum*, to a more favorable position than has the trajectory that begins with Andrew in the school of St. Victor, continues through Nicholas of Lyra, and bears the fruit of exclusive preoccupation with a single literal sense in Protestant exegesis.

We may first of all offer a working definition of the literal sense as "the meaning conveyed by the words of Scripture and discovered by exegesis, following the rules of sound interpretation."¹⁰ We will have

¹⁰ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, §116, as found in *The Scripture Documents: An Anthology of Official Catholic Teachings*, ed. Dean P. Béchard (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press 2002), 239. In the remainder of this article, "Béchard" indicates this volume. Please note: For papal documents, the section numbering

occasion to see that *Divino Afflante Spiritu* extends the literal sense to the mind of the text's human author, but in the past centuries' debates over the interpretation of Scripture, identification of the human author's intentions had not been a necessary part of the definition of Scripture's literal sense.

Also, a qualification is here in order. Despite some differences in understanding the literal sense, all agree that reading the Bible for its literal sense is different from reading the text literally or being a literalist in reading the Bible. This qualification is clearly seen in the 1993 document *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church* issued by the Pontifical Biblical Commission. In its description of a "fundamentalist" approach to Scripture, this document says, "But by 'literal interpretation' it understands a naïvely literalist interpretation, one, that is to say, which excludes every effort at understanding the Bible that takes account of its historical origins and development. It is opposed, therefore, to the use of the historical-critical method, as indeed to the use of any other scientific method for the interpretation of Scripture."¹¹

Before we begin to survey *Providentissimus Deus* and later Catholic documents that weighed in on the literal sense, perhaps an analogous survey from Judaism's engagement with the literal sense would be helpful. The present article begins to chart for a little over one century some key points in Catholic teaching and practice of the literal sense in exegesis in a way somewhat analogous to what David Halivni does for almost two millennia of rabbinic commentators. I shall summarize Halivni's findings so that one can see how the literal sense can be regarded and valued differently at different time periods.

From the most recently composed biblical books through to the end of the second century or end of the Tannaitic period, Halivni sees the rabbis as "reading in." In this period, the literal or plain sense was displaced by a figurative or alternate reading. The second stage, which begins with the Amoraic period (beginning of the third century)

found in Béchard often differs from that in the original texts. When citing Béchard in such cases, I give the original text's section numbering before the parenthetical citation of Béchard's page numbers, but I then also give the section numbering found in his volume, placed after the page numbers. If no additional section numbers appear in this manner, there is obviously no such discrepancy between Béchard and original texts (e.g., the present note's citation of the *Catechism*).

¹¹ Pontifical Biblical Commission, *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church*, I.F (Béchard, 273).

and continues to the end of the age of the Stammim (beginning of sixth century), was the “period of textual implication” in which the variety of options were retained regarding the meaning of the text. The literal meaning was retained, rather than displaced, while other meanings were added to the possibilities for what the text could mean. The third stage, beginning with the time after the Talmud was composed and extending to the eighteenth century, though with special force and precision in the tenth through thirteenth centuries, was what Halivni calls “the period of the awareness of the value of peshat.” In this period, with such interpreters as Rashi, there was a strong preference for the literal sense over any other sense of the text. The fourth period, beginning with the eighteenth-century Gaon of Vilna and extending into the twentieth century, Halivni’s own time, is “the period of the uncompromisability of peshat.” In this period, peshat is all that matters, so that, even if one reads the text in a figurative or non-literal way, one must anchor such a reading in the literal sense—one must prove that the literal sense signals that a figurative reading is to be preferred.¹²

In general, one can say that Halivni’s survey of the literal sense in Jewish exegesis shows how there has been a movement toward prioritizing the literal sense. This exclusive emphasis on the literal sense is not the ending point for our survey of Catholic exegesis spanning the twentieth century. But Halivni has ably shown how exegetes’ quests for the literal sense and appeal to its value can vary over time. We will see in what follows that, though the twentieth century began with the hopeful regard for the literal sense as the answer to the attacks on Scripture, we have now come, due especially to *Dei Verbum* and the work of Joseph Ratzinger/Benedict XVI, to a more chastened and balanced appreciation for the literal sense as useful but not sufficient for the interpretation of Scripture.

And we will also see that the definition of the literal sense changed within the twentieth century. In exegesis of the Old Testament, the literal sense changed from Andrew of St. Victor’s historically oriented reading to Nicholas of Lyra’s literal sense that included Christologically oriented readings. While both these exegetes’ literal readings were indebted to Jewish exegesis, Andrew of St. Victor found Christ in the spiritual sense of the Old Testament text while Nicholas of Lyra’s desire to prove Jesus as messiah motivated him to find Christ in

¹² David Weiss Halivni, *Peshat and Derash: Plain and Applied Meaning in Rabbinic Exegesis* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 33–35.

the literal sense.¹³ While not writing of the literal sense as explicitly as patristic or medieval exegetes, twentieth-century Bible scholars exegeted with an appeal to the literal sense, since they, like Nicholas of Lyra centuries before, used all the scientific methods at their disposal to ascertain the plain meaning of the text, a meaning they thought could be proven and universally accepted.

Providentissimus Deus

On November 18, 1893, Pope Leo XIII issued *Providentissimus Deus*. The encouragement to seek the literal sense that Leo provided in this encyclical does seem to be a genuine innovation or novelty in its day. It is not anticipated in the First Vatican Council's constitution *Dei Filius*, which simply says, "In matters of faith and morals pertaining to the building up of Christian doctrine, what must be held as the true sense of Sacred Scripture is that which Holy Mother the Church has held and now holds, to whom it belongs to judge the true sense and interpretation of Sacred Scripture; and that it is illicit for anyone to interpret Sacred Scripture contrary to this sense or, likewise, contrary to the unanimous consent of the Fathers."¹⁴ Leo encouraged people to seek the literal sense because he sensed the danger that higher criticism posed to the Church's reading of Scripture. If higher criticism, which purported to deliver the literal sense in sharper focus, was a threat to the link between the literal sense of the text and the world behind the text, *Providentissimus Deus* sought to encourage the Church's scholars to out-hustle critical scholars at their own game.

We turn first to §14 of *Providentissimus Deus*:

The first and dearest object of the Catholic commentator should be to interpret those passages that have received an authentic interpretation either from the sacred writers themselves, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit (as in many places of the New Testament), or from the Church, under the assistance of the same Holy Spirit, "whether by her solemn judgment or her ordinary and universal magisterium"¹⁵—to interpret these passages in that identical sense, and to prove,

¹³ Frans van Liere, "The Literal Sense of the Books of Samuel and Kings: from Andrew of St. Victor to Nicholas of Lyra," in *Nicholas of Lyra: The Senses of Scripture*, ed. Philip D. W. Krey and Lesley Smith, *Studies in the History of Christian Thought* 90 (Leiden: Brill, 2000), 79–81.

¹⁴ First Vatican Council, *Dei Filius*, ch. 2 ("On Revelation") (Béchar, 17).

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, ch. 3 ("On Faith"); not available in Béchar.

by all the resources of science, that sound hermeneutical laws admit of no other interpretation. In the other passages, the analogy of faith should be followed, and Catholic doctrine, as authoritatively proposed by the Church, should be held as the supreme law, for seeing that the same God is the author both of the Sacred Books and of the doctrine committed to the Church, it is clearly impossible that any teaching can by legitimate means be extracted from the former, which shall in any respect be at variance with the latter. Hence it follows that all interpretation is foolish and false which either makes the sacred writers disagree one with another, or is opposed to the doctrine of the Church.¹⁶

There may well be cases, of course, where the counsel to support the one legitimate interpretation could motivate readers toward figurative or non-literal interpretations, since Leo insists that one's interpretation cannot contradict other parts of the Bible and that it cannot contradict the Magisterium.

Let us next consider the following section of *Providentissimus Deus*, which says that the expositor of Scripture must not:

consider that it is forbidden, when just cause exists, to push inquiry and exposition beyond what the Fathers have done; provided he carefully observes the rule so wisely laid down by St. Augustine—not to depart from the literal and obvious sense, except only where reason makes it untenable or necessity requires—a rule to which it is the more necessary to adhere strictly in these times, when the thirst for novelty and unrestrained freedom of thought makes the danger of error most real and proximate.¹⁷ Neither should those passages be neglected that the Fathers have understood in an allegorical or figurative sense, more especially when such interpretation is justified by the literal, and it rests on the authority of many. For this method of interpretation has been received by the Church from the Apostles and has been approved by her own practice, as the holy liturgy attests, although it is true that the holy Fathers did not thereby pretend directly to demonstrate

¹⁶ Pope Leo XII, *Providentissimus Deus*, §14 (Béchar, 48, §28).

¹⁷ Augustine, *On the Literal Interpretation of Genesis* 8.7; see *Corpus Scriptorum Ecclesiasticorum Latinorum* (hereafter, CSEL), 28/1:241–42.

dogmas of faith but used it as a means of promoting virtue and piety, such as, by their own experience, they knew to be most valuable.¹⁸

This paragraph is useful to consider because it shows that Leo agrees with Augustine that interpretation should begin with the literal sense and that a certain hermeneutical inertia should be assigned to the literal sense such that the reader of Scripture should move beyond it only when necessity requires it. Also the paragraph serves as a useful reminder that the literal sense can “justify” or anchor figurative readings. This could simply mean that when the literal sense is untenable, this sense justifies the reader’s appeal to a figurative sense of the text. For example, when Scripture identifies Nebuchadnezzar as king of the Assyrians who reigned in Nineveh shortly after the people of Judah returned from their exile, the literal sense seems to be signaling that the narrative is meant as an instructive novella rather than historical reportage (Jdt 1:1; 4:3).

The inference that Leo is seeking to motivate the Church’s exegetes to pursue the literal sense more directly is confirmed by his favorable reference in the paragraph just quoted to Augustine’s dictum that one should begin with and try to stay with the literal sense.¹⁹ We may note here that Jewish interpretation of Scripture has a close analogue to Augustine’s statement. Saadia ben-Joseph taught that one should translate according to peshat except in those cases: when experience, empirical evidence, or reason points against the plain sense; when two verses cannot both be read according to plain sense; when the plain sense of the text goes against rabbinic tradition; or when anthropomorphisms are used to describe God.²⁰

Leo desires for Scripture readers to interpret the text according to the authentic interpretation provided in Scripture or in a way consistent with how the Holy Spirit inspired the text, and thus, *Providentissimus Deus* enjoins Scripture scholars to “prove, by all the resources of science, that sound hermeneutical laws admit of no other interpretation.”²¹ This is a very defensive posture that is responding to the Protestant tendency to flatten Scripture to one sense. Under the threat of losing Scripture’s connection to the world behind the

¹⁸ *Providentissimus Deus*, §15 (Béchar, 49, §31).

¹⁹ Augustine, *Literal Interpretation of Genesis* 8.7 (CSEL, 28/1:241–42).

²⁰ Michael Signer, “How the Bible Has Been Interpreted in Jewish Tradition,” *New Interpreter’s Bible*, vol.1 (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1994), 72.

²¹ *Providentissimus Deus*, §14 (Béchar, 48, §28).

text (the historical basis or kernel of what is narrated in the text), Leo comes close to adopting his opponents' strategy by saying that the Church can prove what is the one interpretation, the only possible interpretation, of Scripture. Of the four senses of Scripture, the literal sense is the one that, on initial consideration, seems most easily derived from shared preconceptions or expectations regarding how a text's meaning can be proven. Because Leo envisions "all the resources of science" to show that hermeneutical principles will allow no other interpretation, it is possible in this regard that Leo considers a quest for the literal sense to be a dependable and useful approach to confirming authentic interpretations of Scripture that are given in the New Testament or by the Church. "All the resources of science" seem to indicate that *Providentissimus Deus* has an open, positive appraisal of the historical-critical method, provided that the method is used in responsible ways to prove the truth of Scripture. Thus, for *Providentissimus Deus*, the literal sense can be expressed in terms consistent with modern science, although the Church's Scripture scholars must defend the Bible from the higher critics who would label the purportedly historical sections in the Bible as fiction. Here is what §§19–20 says:

The unshrinking defense of the Holy Scripture, however, does not require that we should equally uphold all the opinions that each of the Fathers or the more recent interpreters have put forth in explaining it. For it may be that, in commenting on passages where physical matters occur, they may have sometimes expressed the ideas of their own times, and thus make statements that in these days have been abandoned as incorrect. . . . The Catholic interpreter, although he should show that those facts of natural science that investigators affirm to be now quite certain are not contrary to the Scripture rightly explained, must nevertheless always bear in mind that much which has been held and proved as certain has afterwards been called in question and rejected. . . . The principles here laid down will apply to cognate sciences and especially to History. It is a lamentable fact that there are many who with great labor carry out and publish investigations on the monuments of antiquity, the manners and institutions of nations and other illustrative subjects, and whose chief purpose in all this is too often to find mistakes in the sacred writings and so to shake and weaken their authority. Some of these writers display not

only extreme hostility, but the greatest unfairness; in their eyes a profane book or ancient document is accepted without hesitation, while the Scripture, if they only find in it a suspicion of error, is set down with the slightest possible discussion as quite untrustworthy.²²

So, *Providentissimus Deus* is quite open to the historical-critical method, provided that scholars use it responsibly, and not in order to excoriate Scripture.

The encyclical also encourages the study of ancillary disciplines that contribute to the understanding of the literal sense for a strongly apologetically motivated focus.²³ According to Leo, if the original languages and archaeology were studied enough, then the Church's Scripture scholars would be able to defend Scripture against the higher critics.

M.-J. Lagrange (1855–1938) argued in 1895, on the basis of the encyclical, that Catholic scholars need to study the original text of Scripture with all the tools of ancillary disciplines in order to understand the style of the author. He argued that this is legitimate and sought to quell others' fears that exegesis of this sort would lead to mistakes made by Protestant scholars.²⁴ Because he advocated for philological and historical work in commentaries it is clear that he considered the encyclical to be moving exegetes to examine the literal sense of the text carefully.

The move toward the literal sense near the beginning of the twentieth century was not motivated by the same concerns as the move toward the literal sense among the Victorine and Franciscan exegetes of the twelfth through fourteenth centuries, for the move prompted by Leo and enthusiastically pursued by Lagrange was significantly stimulated by the development of historical and higher critical methods of study. In this respect, while I continue to argue here that the dominant narrative for twentieth-century exegesis should be the waxing and waning of the literal sense, I readily concede that the attraction toward and subsequent negotiations with critical methods of Scripture study contributed to the rising and falling of interest in the literal sense among Catholic exegetes within the longer narrative advocated here.

²² Ibid., §§19–20 (Béchar, 54–55, §40).

²³ Ibid., §22 (Béchar, 56–57, §42–43).

²⁴ M.-J. Lagrange, O.P., “À propos de l’encyclique *Providentissimus Deus*,” *Revue biblique* 4 (1895): 60–61.

Thus, for instance, in Lagrange's Mark commentary, we see references to the material evidence that archaeology recovers. Where Mark describes the death of John the Baptist, Lagrange notes the precise place designated as John the Baptist's grave in Samaria and states that some remnants of a church that the Crusaders built there can still be seen.²⁵ When describing Jesus in Gethsemane, he notes that a fourth-century church was built on the site and discovered and restored by the Franciscans.²⁶

More significant than the archaeological references, however, is Lagrange's willingness to read the Gospel of Mark as a literary creation that at times uses sources differently than the other Gospels do. For example, when commenting on Jesus's parables in chapter 4, Lagrange readily says that Mark has juxtaposed two parables that were taught at different times, noting how the parables do not easily cohere.²⁷ Likewise, when he comments on the anointing of Jesus at Bethany narrated in Mark 14:3–9, he seems perfectly comfortable in suggesting that this event did not take place on the Wednesday of the week of Jesus's Passion, as Mark seems to indicate, but rather on the preceding Sabbath, since John 12:1 dates the anointing more precisely. He explains by saying that Mark did not want any breaks in his narrative of Jesus's journey from Jericho to Jerusalem and so narrated this anointing as happening later.²⁸

Lagrange is known for pursuing the critical questions while always being willing to let the Magisterium have the final say. We can see this clearly in his exegesis of the longer ending in Mark. He writes that it is definitely part of the canon and divinely inspired, since it was known by most of the early fathers and was probably included in what the Council of Trent considered to be Scripture.²⁹

William F. Albright (1891–1971), a younger, Protestant contemporary of Lagrange, also responded to the threats of higher criticism in a way that was analogous to *Providentissimus Deus*, though not motivated by it. *Providentissimus Deus* called scholars to work in the world behind the text and in the world of the text. Both the archaeologist Albright and the implied scholars envisioned by *Providentissimus Deus* were working to bridge a dreaded gap between the world behind the

²⁵ M.-J. Lagrange, O.P., *Évangile selon Saint Marc*, 4th ed. (Paris: J. Gabalda, 1935), 59 (on Mark 6:29).

²⁶ Ibid., 148 (on Mark 14:32–42).

²⁷ Ibid., 37 (on Mark 4:21–25).

²⁸ Ibid., 141 (on Mark 14:3–9).

²⁹ Ibid., 169 (on Mark 16:9–11).

text and the world of the text. For Albright, this sometimes meant that, if the evidence or the names available in epigraphic finds of the Ancient Near East did not match the world of the text, the evidence would be reconfigured or new locations would be offered for biblical sites in order, by almost any means necessary, to find a connection between the world behind the text, which he so confidently thought he could recover, and the world of the text.³⁰

Providentissimus Deus assumes that the literal sense when properly ascertained will answer the critique of higher criticism on the truth of Scripture and that the literal sense will check allegorical or other figurative excesses. The encyclical seems to assume that the way to find the literal sense is to use the scientific methods of secular biblical studies. Also, it assumes that the literal sense of the text is a constant. For a definition of “reading the literal sense” it seems that Leo XIII in *Providentissimus Deus* would offer: “interpretations of a text that privilege the historical aspects of the text—in the case of narrative, that means the family of interpretations that seek the closest possible correlation between the world of the text and the world behind the text.”

Leo seems eager to fight modernity with its own weapons and perhaps willing to fight higher criticism’s attacks on certain texts within Scripture by assuming its Protestant-inspired principle that the text has only one meaning. For him, the domain of the literal sense is to prove that the world behind the text, when properly investigated, will show that the narratives of Scripture describe events that really happened.

In the years following the promulgation of *Providentissimus Deus*, other steps were taken to ensure that the Catholic Church would continue to be deeply engaged in Scripture study against the threats of modernism. Nine years later, Leo’s apostolic letter *Vigilantiae Studii* launched the Pontifical Biblical Commission. He envisioned that its members would “devote themselves with the greatest effort to the study of philology and kindred sciences and keep themselves abreast of the progress in these fields.” The same paragraph goes on to specify that the members of the commission were to concentrate on gaining “knowledge of the ancient Oriental languages, and above all

³⁰ William F. Albright, *The Archaeology of Palestine and the Bible*, Richards Lectures in the University of Virginia (New York: F. H. Revell, 1933); Albright, *Archaeology Confronts Biblical Criticism* (New York: Phi Beta Kappa, 1938); Albright, *Archaeology, Historical Analogy and Early Biblical Texts* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1966).

on the art of deciphering the ancient texts.”³¹ In keeping with what we saw in *Providentissimus Deus*, this apostolic letter issued almost a decade later continues to call the Church's scholars to beat the higher critics at their own game: “Catholic exegetes, with our full approval, should cultivate the science of criticism, since it is very useful for a thorough understanding of the meaning of the sacred writers.” He goes on in the same paragraph to allow them to consult non-Catholic authors, while cautioning those on the commission not to come to “an independence of judgment, to which the system of what is known as ‘higher criticism’ can so often lead.”³² All these provisions or guidelines for the commission indicate that the literal sense of Scripture is still highly valued. If Catholic exegetes could show that the literal sense was not what the higher critics outside the Church said it was, then Scripture and the Church's reading of Scripture would be vindicated.

Pascendi Dominici Gregis

Active use of modern methods of research in order to prove the Bible's truth in a way that seems focused on the literal sense timed out in 1907 with Pope Pius X's encyclical *Pascendi Dominici Gregis*. Here, Pius states that the work of the historical critics leads to a “dismembering” of Scripture's books that finds them to have developed or grown as various compositions that were melded together over time (§106). The tone of the encyclical, sent out less than fourteen years after *Providentissimus Deus*, is much more negative toward the modern methods of biblical study. This is seen especially where Pius writes sarcastically that the doctors of the Church were at a disadvantage in their study of the Scriptures: “Unfortunately, these great Doctors did not enjoy the same aids to study that are possessed by the Modernists for their guide and rule: a philosophy borrowed from the negation of God, and a criterion that consists only of themselves.”³³ We can see that, in less than fourteen years, the historical critical method is viewed as an inherently deficient approach with a vacuous core of human pretense. But *Pascendi Dominici Gregis* is not simply a case in which the brakeman is trying to stop the train that is moving into modernity. In the light of the millennia-long negotiations between literal and spiritual senses, this letter of Pius X seems like a caution against using the wrong methods to ascertain the

³¹ *Vigilantiae Studii*, §3 (Béchar, 63, §5).

³² *Ibid.*, §4 (Béchar, 64, §7).

³³ *Pascendi Dominici Gregis*, §34 (Béchar, 74, §110).

literal sense. We shall see near the end of this article that it is not that far removed from a post-Vatican II document on the use of Scripture.

Divino Afflante Spiritu

Thirty-six years after Pius X promulgated *Pascendi Dominici Gregis*, Pius XII issued *Divino Afflante Spiritu* in the fiftieth anniversary year of *Providentissimus Deus*, on the feast day of St. Jerome, September 30, 1943. *Divino Afflante Spiritu* directly encourages exegetes to seek the literal sense:

Being thoroughly prepared by the knowledge of the ancient languages and by the aids afforded by the art of criticism, let the Catholic exegete undertake the task, of all those imposed on him the greatest, that namely of discovering and expounding the genuine meaning of the sacred Books. In the performance of this task let the interpreters bear in mind that their foremost and greatest endeavor should be to discern and define clearly that sense of the biblical words that is called 'literal.' Aided by the context and by comparison with similar passages, let them therefore by means of their knowledge of languages search out with all diligence the literal meaning of the words. All these helps indeed are wont to be pressed into service in the explanation also of profane writers so that the mind of the author may be made abundantly clear.³⁴

The encyclical goes on to recommend that exegetes keep in mind the analogy of faith and how the text can be expounded for growth in faith and morals, but the emphasis on the literal sense is confirmed by its caution in the next section (§27): "Let Catholic exegetes then disclose and expound this spiritual significance, intended and ordained by God, with that care which the dignity of the Divine Word demands. However, let them scrupulously refrain from proposing as the genuine meaning of Sacred Scripture other figurative senses."

Divino Afflante Spiritu advocates the literal sense of the text for a different reason than *Providentissimus Deus* did half a century earlier. Pius XII was responding to a booklet that had circulated around 1940 that linked higher criticism with the literal sense and advocated the abandonment of the literal sense for a spiritual reading of the text. The forty-eight-page booklet, entitled "A most grave danger for the Church and for souls: The critical-scientific system of studying and

³⁴ *Divino Afflante Spiritu*, §23 (Béchar, 125, §15).

interpreting Holy Scripture, its evil misconceptions and aberrations,” was written by Fr. Dolindo Ruotolo, who recanted of this writing near the end of the year 1940. It is directly addressed in a letter that the Pontifical Biblical Commission issued on August 20, 1941.³⁵ The booklet is also directly referenced by Pope John Paul II in his description of the context of *Divino Afflante Spiritu*.³⁶

But beyond simply responding to the immediate challenge from Fr. Ruotolo, *Divino Afflante Spiritu* also helped to disseminate Lagrange's approach to the Bible. Robert Robinson notes the way in which the encyclical incorporates Lagrange's acceptance of the human element in Scripture. *Providentissimus Deus* begins with God giving humanity Scripture as a “gift and safeguard,” while *Divino Afflante Spiritu* begins with a description of how the human authors, inspired by the Holy Spirit, composed the books of Scripture. The human element can also be seen in *Divino Afflante Spiritu*, §34, where, according to Robinson, we see the literal sense of Scripture defined so as to signify the intention of the human authors. While for Aquinas the plain sense of the text includes the divine author's intention, for Lagrange and then according to *Divino Afflante Spiritu*, one must determine the human author's intention by the tools of scientific criticism (*Divino Afflante Spiritu*, §35) and then arrive at the literal meaning of the text.³⁷ Unlike Aquinas's allowance for more than one literal sense of Scripture, the twentieth-century shift to viewing the literal sense as the intention of the human author constricted the literal sense to a singular meaning. The shift may have been partially caused by a force that later in the twentieth century led some exegetes to ignore any testimony to divine activity within Scripture or to move mountains in order to supplant such testimony with human, earth-bound explanations.³⁸

³⁵ This letter is dated August 20, 1941 and is published in Béchard, 212–20.

³⁶ “Address on the Interpretation of the Bible in the Church,” §3 and §5 (Béchard, 171 and 173, respectively).

³⁷ Robinson, *Roman Catholic Exegesis*, 23–24. Cf. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* (hereafter, *ST*) I, q.1, a.10: “Since the literal sense is that which the author intends, and since the author of Holy Writ is God, Who by one act comprehends all things by His intellect, it is not unfitting, as Augustine says (*Confess.* xii), if, even according to the literal sense, one word in Holy Writ should have several senses”; see Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province (New York: Benziger Brothers, 1947) (Dominican Fathers translation of I, q.1, a.10 available also at <http://dhspriority.org/thomas/summa/FP/FP001.html#FPQ1A10THEP1>).

³⁸ See the criticism of this tendency by Ratzinger in “Biblical Interpretation in Crisis: On the Question of the Foundations and Approaches of Exegesis

For *Divino Afflante Spiritu*, the working definition of the literal sense seems to be what the words of the text are saying, in light of their frameworks accessible by “history, archaeology, ethnology, and other sciences,” as well as the genre-specific characteristics of the text (20).³⁹ The domain of the literal sense is no longer simply the relationship between the text and the world behind the text. It is now extended to concern the relationship between the text and the world in front of the text. According to this document, the literal sense should be employed to rein in outlandish and uncontrolled figurative excess. For example, priests are enjoined to teach while “avoiding with the greatest care those purely arbitrary and far-fetched adaptations, which are not a use but rather an abuse of the Divine Word.” Soon thereafter, probably as a way for preparing priests for this care in their preaching, seminary professors are instructed to focus on the literal and theological senses of the text with “definiteness . . . skill . . . ardor” so as to effect in students what was experienced by the disciples on the road to Emmaus, whose hearts burned when Jesus opened the Scriptures to them.⁴⁰

Here, a long term perspective on the literal sense helps us realize that *Divino Afflante Spiritu* is not simply a victory for modern methods of Scripture study, which regained ground lost in the pontificate of Pius X. In the millennia-long process of reading Scripture, *Divino Afflante Spiritu* as a response to Fr. Ruotolo’s booklet represents a return to past regard for the literal sense as a guard against uncontrolled figurative readings.⁴¹ At the same time, it represents an attempt at expanding the literal sense to reach the intentions of the human author. This attempt is at least partially due to the perceived effectiveness of new methods of study that Lagrange and others had been employing in the five decades since Leo promulgated *Providentissimus Deus*.

We must note here that departures from the literal sense of Scripture were not excluded by *Divino Afflante Spiritu*. In this time period,

Today,” in *Biblical Interpretation in Crisis: The Ratzinger Conference on Bible and Church*, ed. Richard John Neuhaus (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1989), 17–18.

³⁹ *Divino Afflante Spiritu*, §35 (Béchar, 128, §20).

⁴⁰ Ibid., §§50 (on priests) and 53–54 (on seminary instructors) (Béchar, 133 and 134, §§26 and 27).

⁴¹ For example Origen, in interpreting the vision of the eagles in Ezekiel 17:1–7, first gives the literal meaning—the first eagle is Nebuchadnezzar and the second is Pharaoh (*Homilae in Ezechielem* 11.2.5–11.5.1)—before applying the vision to the threats of the devil against the Church (ibid. 11.5.2–3).

Henri de Lubac (1896–1991), Yves Congar (1904–1995), and Jean Daniélou (1905–1974) were strenuously working to recover figural readings of Scripture.⁴² In his book *Essai sur le mystère de l'histoire* (1953), Daniélou writes of an inward meaning to what the Scriptures describe: “The Scriptures tell us of a mystery, a hidden content of the historical process. The prophets learnt it from the Spirit who is at once the maker and interpreter of history. It is the mystery of the works of God, creation, judgment, and redemption: these are the reality, the inwardness of temporal events, concealed behind the outward seeming. Here, then, is the source of all Christian theology of history.” He is calling exegetes back to a construct of history that is bound up within God’s Trinitarian life and relations with creation.⁴³

On the Protestant side, some of Karl Barth’s exegetical moves were definitely figural, such as his emphasis in his second Romans commentary that “Israel” in Romans 9–11 means the Church and his fiat that, although Paul describes Christ as the second Adam in Romans 5, Christ is really the first Adam.⁴⁴

In 1963, as Vatican II was beginning, Old Testament scholar Roland Murphy, O.Carm., observed that *Divino Afflante Spiritu* influenced Catholic exegetes in Europe more immediately than it did those in the United States. Regarding the slow, American response to the encyclical, Murphy writes, “The real problem was that its significance was not at first grasped by an older generation of biblical

⁴² Henri de Lubac, S.J., *Exégèse médiévale: les quatre sens de l'Écriture* (Paris: Aubier, 1959–1964); English translation in *Medieval Exegesis: The Four Senses of Scripture*, 4 vols., trans. Mark Sebanc and E. M. Macierowski (Grand Rapids, MI / Edinburgh: Eerdmans/T. & T. Clark, 1998–2000); De Lubac *Histoire et esprit: l'intelligence de l'écriture après Origène* (Paris: Aubier, 1950); English translation in *History and Spirit: The Understanding of Scripture According to Origen*, trans. Anne Englund Nash and Juvenal Merriell (San Francisco: Ignatius, 2007); Yves M.-J. Congar, O.P., *A History of Theology*, trans. Hunter Guthrie (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1968); Jean Daniélou, S.J., *Bible et liturgie: la théologie biblique des sacraments et des fêtes d'après les Pères de l'Eglise* (Paris: Editions du Cerf, 1951); English translation in *The Bible and the Liturgy* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1956).

⁴³ Jean Daniélou, S.J., *Essai sur le mystère de l'histoire* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1953), quoted from Daniélou, *The Lord of History: Reflections on the Inner Meaning of History*, trans. Nigel Abercrombie (London: Longmans, 1958), 166. On the underlying view of history presupposed here, see Levering, *Participatory Exegesis*, 143.

⁴⁴ Karl Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, trans. Edwyn C. Hoskyns (London: Oxford University Press, 1933; repr. 1980), 332–42; Karl Barth, *Christ and Adam: Man and Humanity in Romans 5* (New York: Collier, 1956), 74–75.

teachers. These men had been trained in the dominant conservative, scholastic tradition; their failure to perceive its implications was quite understandable. The present writer has experienced a similar cleavage himself, as far as training in exegesis is concerned. His post-graduate studies (1945–47) were in the groove of the pre-1943 period. As the war ended and normal scholarly activity and intercourse resumed, the new direction was immediately apparent—and with it, a new sensitivity to literary and historical perspective.”⁴⁵

In his evaluation first of *Divino Afflante Spiritu*, and then also of *Providentissimus Deus*, John Paul II notes how Pius’ encyclical “was careful to avoid any hint of a dichotomy between ‘scientific exegesis’ for use in apologetics and ‘spiritual interpretation meant for internal use’; rather it affirmed both the ‘theological significance of the literal sense, methodically defined’ and the fact that ‘determining the spiritual sense . . . belongs itself to the realm of exegetical science.’ In this way, both documents rejected ‘a split between the human and the divine, between scientific research and respect for the faith, between the literal sense and the spiritual sense.’”⁴⁶ John Paul II thus observes that the distinct emphases *Divino Afflante Spiritu* gives to the “theological significance of the literal sense” and the “spiritual sense” serve to counterweigh this document’s new limitation of the literal sense to the human author’s intention.

As Vatican II convened, Roland Murphy seemed to anticipate an increasing loosening of restraint and increasing openness to modern methods of biblical studies. He writes, “We may see in the *Divino Afflante Spiritu* an anticipation of the *aggiornamento* called for by Pope John XXIII in the Second Vatican Council. And there is another echo of the encyclical in the expressive words of Pope John at the end of the first part of the Council, in which he spoke of the *sancta libertas*, the holy liberty, enjoyed by the fathers in expressing their differences of opinion.” He goes on to quote from *Divino Afflante Spiritu* on the nature of this liberty: “This true liberty of the children of God, which adheres faithfully to the teaching of the Church and accepts and uses gratefully the contributions of profane science, this liberty, upheld and sustained in every way by the confidence of all,

⁴⁵ Roland Murphy, O.Carm., “*Divino Afflante Spiritu*—Twenty Years Later,” *Chicago Studies* 2 (1963): 23.

⁴⁶ The quotations are found in *Verbum Domini*, §33, and come from John Paul II, “Address for the Celebration of the Centenary of the Encyclical *Providentissimus Deus* and the Fiftieth Anniversary of the Encyclical *Divino Afflante Spiritu*” (1993), §5.

is the condition and source of all lasting fruit and of all solid progress in Catholic doctrine."⁴⁷

Dei Verbum

But it is not clear that Murphy's hopes for Vatican II were realized. For its dogmatic constitution on revelation, *Dei Verbum*, reins in the endorsements of the literal sense in *Providentissimus Deus* and *Divino Afflante Spiritu*, which could have prompted some exegetes to proceed as if a single, literal sense was their goal in exegesis. The suspense in the plot of the discourse examined in this paper is that, from 1893, Catholic exegetes were focusing on the literal sense more than they had in the preceding century. This trend in focus could have become analogous to the way in which medieval exegetes also moved toward the literal sense, in the progression that can be traced from Andrew of St. Victor through Nicholas of Lyra, which contributed to the exclusive quest for a singular, literal sense of Scripture among some Protestant exegetes. It must be admitted that twentieth-century Catholic exegetes who were writing under the inspiration of *Providentissimus Deus* and *Divino Afflante Spiritu* were not focusing exclusively on the literal sense. Still, given the explicit promptings toward the literal sense in these two encyclicals, and in light of Roland Murphy's matter-of-fact observation twenty years after *Divino Afflante Spiritu* that the literal sense amounted to the human author's intention, it is clear that Catholic exegesis had definitely moved toward the literal sense by the middle of the twentieth century.⁴⁸

Near the beginning of its section on the inspiration of Scripture, *Dei Verbum* seems to emphasize the literal sense:

Truth is differently presented and expressed in various types of historical writings, in prophetic or poetic texts, or in other modes of speech. Furthermore, the interpreter must search for what meaning the sacred writer, in his own historical situation and in accordance with the condition of his time and culture, intended to express and did in fact express with the help of literary forms that were in use during that time. Thus, to understand correctly what the sacred author wanted to assert,

⁴⁷ Murphy, "Divino Afflante Spiritu—Twenty Years Later," 28; encyclical quotation from *Divino Afflante Spiritu*, §48 (Béchar, 132, §25).

⁴⁸ *Divino Afflante Spiritu*, §§ 26, 35–36; Murphy, "Divino Afflante Spiritu—Twenty Years Later," 20.

one must pay suitable attention both to the customary and characteristic modes of perception, speech, and narrative that prevailed at the time of the sacred writer, and to the customs that people of that time generally followed in their dealings with one another.⁴⁹

So far, this paragraph seems to accept and repeat the calls of *Providentissimus Deus* and *Divino Afflante Spiritu* to pursue the literal sense with special attention to the cultural, historical, and genre-specific features of the text. We also see that *Dei Verbum* seems to accept the equation that *Divino Afflante Spiritu* makes between the intention of the human author and literal sense. We read what amounts to a prescription for exegetes to seek the literal sense by ascertaining “what the sacred writer, in his own historical situation and in accordance with the condition of his time and culture, intended to express . . .” and in the next sentence, “. . . what the sacred author wanted to assert.”

But the next paragraph balances emphasis on the literal sense with various forms of non-literal interpretation that flourished when exegetes more readily spoke of the text’s divine author:⁵⁰

But, since Sacred Scripture must also be read and interpreted in the light of the same Spirit by whom it was written, in order to determine correctly the meaning of the sacred texts, no less serious attention must be devoted to the content and unity of the whole of Scripture, taking into account the entire living tradition of the Church and the analogy of faith. It is the task of exegetes to work according to these rules toward a more profound understanding and explanation of the meaning of Sacred Scripture, in order that their, as it were, preparatory research may help the Church to form a firmer judgment. For all that has been said about the manner of interpreting Scripture is ultimately subject to the judgment of the Church, which carries out the divinely conferred commission and ministry of guarding and interpreting the Word of God.

This paragraph is useful because it recalls exegetes to the traditional and ecclesiastical frameworks in which the Church reads Scripture, reminding them that the Church trumps the ascendant sciences that

⁴⁹ This is the penultimate paragraph of *Dei Verbum*, §12 (Béchar, 25).

⁵⁰ This is the final paragraph of *Dei Verbum*, §12 (Béchar, 25).

were presented in *Providentissimus Deus* and *Divino Afflante Spiritu* as so helpful in finding the literal sense. Here we see a more balanced and even chastened view of the literal sense. The optimism of *Providentissimus Deus* and *Divino Afflante Spiritu* that a more thorough knowledge of the languages, archaeology, and other sciences would certainly lead to an understanding of the literal sense that vindicated the traditionally held truthfulness of Scripture and would guard the text from the dangers of unchecked historical criticism and unregulated figurative readings is now replaced by a regard for the Church's judgment, which traditionally includes plenty of figurative readings of Scripture. *Dei Verbum's* promotion of the study of Scripture calls for balanced uses of literal and figurative readings based on the "literary forms" of the text and on considerations arising from the unity of Scripture and the Church's traditions.

In this regard, the domain of the literal sense in *Dei Verbum* is the world of the text itself. It is first of all concerned with the *res* or *Sache* of the text itself. What is this text saying? A secondary domain of the literal sense would be the world in front of the text, since the document does seem to be concerned with the relevance of Scripture. In general, however, the domain of the literal sense in *Dei Verbum* is smaller than it was in *Providentissimus Deus*. The properly pursued literal sense is not invoked as the defender against higher criticism and the bridge between the world of the text and the world behind the text, as it was in *Providentissimus Deus*. Nor is it championed as the dependable, reliable check against excessive applications of the text in the world in front of the text, as it is in *Divino Afflante Spiritu*.

With its emphasis on reading with methods appropriate to each literary genre found within the canon of Scripture and restrained appreciation for the literal sense, *Dei Verbum* seems most able to handle the elusiveness and multivalence of the literal sense when compared with the preceding documents and the exegetical approaches that they spawned. Though not considering *Dei Verbum* directly, Jon Levenson's approach to the "plain" or literal sense seems à propos here: "The 'plain sense' is, of course, anything but plain in the sense of self-evident. On the contrary, exegetes have argued over it with reference to almost every verse from the time they began questing after it about a thousand years ago and into our days. Still, it does have a certain interreligious character to it, and scholars do not depend on the divergent theological structures of Judaism and Christianity to identify it. In this, it differs to a very large degree from the

‘midrashic’ senses on which both Judaism and Christianity are, each in its own way, based.”⁵¹

One might object to my inclusion of *Dei Verbum* within the long dialectic on the literal sense. After all, Joseph Ratzinger considers one of the three formative forces in *Dei Verbum* to be the Church’s unresolved response to scientific methods of biblical criticism, as if *Dei Verbum* fits better in the narrative of the Church’s negotiations with modern methods of biblical criticism.⁵² But careful reading of *Dei Verbum* and Ratzinger’s account of its origin and background reveals that this objection is not completely to the point. Yes, more is going on in *Dei Verbum* than the questions of the definition and priority of the literal sense of Scripture, and the objection is useful in calling attention to this. For *Dei Verbum* concerns how Scripture and tradition relate,⁵³ and this is a larger, more all-encompassing concern than the contours and relative value of the literal sense. But the literal sense questions remain in play in order that the meaning and contribution of Scripture can be clarified. As to this objection’s alternative model, that *Dei Verbum* arose out of unresolved questions regarding what to do with scientific criticism, Ratzinger himself notes that Church councils are not the Church’s instruments for deciding on academic questions.⁵⁴ He thus implies that the revisers of *Dei Verbum* chose not to weigh in on the methods of study so pointedly referenced in *Providentissimus Deus* and *Divino Afflante Spiritu*.

We may summarize by saying that: in *Providentissimus Deus*, the literal sense is advocated in order to protect the text from being marginalized by scholars’ reconstructions of the world behind the text; in *Divino Afflante Spiritu*, the literal sense is advocated to protect the text from the spiritualizing exegesis in a world in front of the text; and in *Dei Verbum*, there are no direct references to the literal sense. The last is wisely modest in calling attention to the literary forms in the context of their composition, as well as the unity of all of Scripture and the Church’s role as final arbiter of Scripture’s meaning. No mention is made of new research or new methods as necessary for increasing our understanding of Scripture. In that

⁵¹ Jon D. Levenson, “Can Roman Catholicism Validate Jewish Biblical Interpretation?” *Studies in Christian-Jewish Relations* 1 (2005–2006): 173n6.

⁵² Joseph Ratzinger, “Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation: Origin and Background,” in *Commentary on the Documents of Vatican II*, vol. 3, ed. Herbert Vorgrimler (London/New York: Herder and Herder, 1969), 157–58.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 161, 190–196.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 160.

sense, *Dei Verbum* is conspicuous in what it does not say. Yes, Church councils do not weigh in on academic questions, as noted above. But perhaps Ratzinger's definite sense of the limits of modern criticisms was already operative while he worked as *peritus* for those drafting *Dei Verbum*. In any event, the relative silence of *Dei Verbum* on modern methods of study opens a window for exegetes once again to locate their task on the horizon of the literal and figurative senses.

But an openness to the literal sense, with special attention to the literary genre of each biblical text, prevailed in the years after the promulgation of *Dei Verbum*. Despite the balanced approach that *Dei Verbum* takes between literal and figurative readings of Scripture, it is rather *Divino Afflante Spiritu* that seems to have continued to keep Catholic scholars occupied with reading Scripture for its literal sense defined in reference to the genre of the text. Thus we read in Roland Murphy's commentary on the Song of Songs: "Among Roman Catholic scholars, particularly, the traditional lines of interpretation predominated well into the present century, buttressed by sophisticated arguments regarding the Song's 'parabolic' character, 'prophetic' spirit, and 'anthological' style. But it seems clear that the tide has also turned in Catholic exegesis toward a fuller appreciation of the Song's literal sense."⁵⁵

And the literal sense that Murphy finds in the Song is different from the literal sense that Nicholas of Lyra found (presented near the beginning of this essay) and his argument for why the Song could not refer in its literal sense to Solomon's love for his bride. The following comment by Murphy helps to complete our comparison of possible literal senses for the Song: "What distinguishes the Song most sharply from other works of biblical literature is not the fact that it takes human sexuality seriously but rather the exuberant, thoroughly erotic, and nonjudgmental manner in which it depicts the love between a man and woman."⁵⁶ Thus we see that, through the centuries, because of how the world in front of the text conditions the reader, vastly different constructions of the literal sense are possible.

⁵⁵ Roland Murphy, O. Carm., *The Song of Songs: A Commentary on the Book of Canticles or The Song of Songs*, Hermeneia (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1990), 41, citing André-Marie Dubarle, "L'amour humain dans le Cantique des cantiques," *Revue biblique* 61 (1954):67–86; Oswald Loretz, "Zum Problem des Eros im Hohenlied," *Biblische Zeitschrift* 8 (1964): 191–216; Leo Krinetzki, "'Retractationes' zu früheren Arbeiten über das Hohe Lied," *Biblica* 52 (1971): 176–89.

⁵⁶ Murphy, *Song of Songs*, 97.

The question of the literal sense of the gospels is connected to questions of historicity in ways not operative for those exegeting the Song of Songs. Because the gospels represent a different genre of literature than the Song of Songs, Fitzmyer seems to have taken the encouragement of *Divino Afflante Spiritu* in a way that looks superficially different from Murphy on the Song of Songs but, in principle, is quite similar. Fitzmyer takes reading according to the genre of the passage to heart, for he seems to indicate that the genre of gospel leads one away from an historical reading. In a long, parenthetical aside that admits what he perceived to be weaknesses in historicity in Luke's account, Fitzmyer writes:

For the sake of Roman Catholic readers, I should like to add a further remark, for it is often asked how one can square such a skeptical attitude about the historical value of the Lucan writings with teachings about biblical inspiration. To answer this question in detail is out of place here; but this much at least should be said. None of the ecclesiastical dogmatic documents which treat of biblical inspiration or the discussions of theologians who have sought to explicate this teaching have ever maintained that a necessary formal effect of inspiration is historicity. Biblical inspiration does not make history out of what was not such or intended to be such. The guarantee that is implied in biblical inspiration concerns truth, but the truth that is involved is often not literal but analogous and differs with the literary form being used: poetic truth, rhetorical truth, parabolic truth, epistolary truth, even "gospel truth"—apart from historical truth itself. Nor is every affirmation in the past tense, even in a narrative, necessarily meant to be "historical." The extent to which it is metaphorical or symbolic would still have to be assessed [and excluded] before one comes down on the side of historical truth. If it is historical, there will be ways of assessing it apart from inspiration.⁵⁷

Fitzmyer's qualification, still influenced by *Divino Afflante Spiritu*, might represent a minority position on the literal sense, heard before in

⁵⁷ Joseph A. Fitzmyer, S.J., *The Gospel According to Luke I-IX*, Anchor Bible 28 (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1981), 17–18. This paragraph is parenthetical and the remainder of it includes a reference to the document "On the Historical Truth of the Gospels" published by the Pontifical Biblical Commission in 1964.

Origen's exegesis of the gospels but only infrequently registered in the Church's gospel exegesis.

And to complete our examples, one may note that in Raymond Brown's "The Literal Sense of Scripture" section within the "Hermeneutics" article that he wrote with Sandra Schneiders, Brown defines the literal sense as it is used by his contemporaries, still under the spell of *Divino Afflante Spiritu*: "The sense which the human author directly intended and which the written words conveyed."⁵⁸

Changes in the definition and significance of the literal sense, made possible by the balanced and disciplined language of *Dei Verbum*, become most evident in the post-synodal exhortation of Benedict XVI, to which we next turn.

Verbum Domini

Even in the agenda published before the Apostolic Synod on the Word of God, a possible shift in the appreciation of the literal sense can be discerned. Consider the following lines from the preface of its *Instrumentum Laboris* (2008): "Reading the Scriptures from a christological and pneumatological perspective leads from the letter to the spirit and from the words to the Word of God. Indeed, the words often conceal their true meaning, especially when considered from the literary and cultural point of view of the inspired authors and their way of understanding the world and its laws. Doing so leads to rediscovering the unity [of] the Word of God in the many words of Scripture. After this necessary and ardent process, the Word of God shines with a surprising splendour, more than making up for the labour expended."⁵⁹ This synod was convened by Benedict on October 5–26, 2008, but it would be two more years until the Church received its formal exhortation.

In the post-synodal apostolic exhortation *Verbum Domini*, which was issued on September 30, 2010, on the memorial of St. Jerome, the literal sense is again placed in balanced perspective, but there is a tone of warning regarding the limits of the literal sense. Benedict

⁵⁸ Raymond E. Brown, S.S., and Sandra M. Schneiders, I.H.M., "Hermeneutics," no. 9, in *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary*, ed. Raymond E. Brown, S.S., Joseph A. Fitzmyer, S.J., and Roland E. Murphy, O.Carm. (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1990), 1148. Since Schneiders wrote nos. 55–70 of the "Hermeneutics" article, Brown is responsible for all of the material within "The Literal Sense of Scripture" section ("Hermeneutics," nos. 9–29).

⁵⁹ http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/synod/documents/rc_synod_doc_20080511_instrlabor-xii-assembly_en.html (word in brackets is my suggested addition).

registers the synod's concern that too exclusive a focus on the literal sense will lead to a loss of coherence in reading the text. Though §32 acknowledges the emphasis on the literal sense in *Providentissimus Deus*, Leo's former optimism for the proper use of the literal sense is not found in *Verbum Domini*.

Verbum Domini seems intent on clarifying *Dei Verbum*. And this is to be expected, for council documents are not always transparent in themselves. As John Henry Newman wrote just three weeks after the second vote on papal infallibility during Vatican I, "We must recollect, there has seldom been a council without great confusion after it—so it was even with the first—so it was with the third, fourth and fifth—and [the] sixth which condemned Pope Honorius."⁶⁰ If Cardinal Newman could comment on Vatican II, he would surely tell us to keep discerning the meaning and enduring significance of this council.

In *Verbum Domini*, Benedict summarized *Dei Verbum*'s vision for exegesis by identifying "three fundamental criteria for an appreciation of the divine dimension of the Bible: 1) the text must be interpreted with attention to *the unity of the whole of Scripture*; nowadays this is called canonical exegesis; 2) account is to be taken of the *living Tradition of the whole Church*; and, finally, 3) respect must be shown for *the analogy of faith*. 'Only where both methodological levels, the historical-critical and the theological, are respected, can one speak of a theological exegesis, an exegesis worthy of this book.'"⁶¹

Criteria two and three seek to resituate the interpretation of Scripture within tradition and the analogy of faith. The downsizing of the literal sense's significance in the whole activity of reading Scripture that is evident in *Verbum Domini* seems due in no small part to the document's prior respect for the tradition—including patristic interpretations—and the analogy of faith. This seems analogous to what David Halivni observes in regard to Jewish interpreters' regard for *peshat*, the literal sense, as secondary to the interpretation of traditional *halakha*, ethical rulings often made by employing *derash* (the

⁶⁰ John Henry Newman, *The Letters and Diaries*, vol. 25, *The Vatican Council: January 1870 – December 1871*, ed. Charles Stephen Dessain and Thomas Gornall, S.J. (London: Oxford University Press, 1973), 175 (letter to O'Neill Daunt of August 7, 1870).

⁶¹ *Verbum Domini*, §34 (italics original); the quotation at the end of the material is from Benedict XVI, "Intervention at the Fourteenth General Congregation of the Synod" (October 14, 2008), in *Insegnamenti* 4.2 (2008), 493.

more figurative exegesis that seeks to make application of the text for observant Jews). Here is Halivni:

As we have continually stressed, our modern exegetical preference for peshat need not impinge upon the realm of practical halakha. A religious Jew may critically study the text of the Bible even with its occasionally disfigured *peshat*, yet his halakhic allegiance must be to rabbinic derash. In cases of his recognition of the radical discrepancy between peshat and derash, he must employ the theory of *chate'u Yisrael*—contingent upon a process of halakhic instability during the First Temple period followed by Ezra's remedial and restorative halakhic efforts—and rest assured that the canonization of rabbinic midrash has guaranteed the authenticity and veracity of halakha. For the religious Jew, the observance of *mitzvot* stimulates and promotes a closeness with God that is intimate and immediate. Therefore, this assurance that his halakhic behavior accords with, and is sanctioned by, the divine will is indispensable. Even the doctrinal certainty that the text of the Torah is pristine can be dispensed with, indeed, *must* be, if such assurance can be earned.⁶²

This sort of prioritization of an interpretive method that goes beyond the literal sense in a religious body that values a traditional set of readings and adaptation of its scriptures seems analogous to this final stage of my narrative of twentieth-century Catholic exegetes' engagement with the literal sense. Attracted to the literal sense by the results promised by Protestant-driven criticism and research, Catholic exegetes turned in the first half of the twentieth century to the literal sense to answer higher criticism, as *Providentissimus Deus* prompted, or simply to recover the human authors' intentions in all their culturally embedded fullness as a guard against undisciplined application of the text, as *Divino Afflante Spiritu* encouraged. But the foundational commitment to tradition, reaffirmed both in *Dei Verbum*, §10 and in *Verbum Domini*, §§17–18 eventually balanced the temporary, twentieth-century Catholic fixation on the literal sense with more figural interpretations offered by Church fathers and with interpretations conducive to aligning discrete passages of Scripture with the analogy of faith.

⁶² Halivni, *Peshat and Derash*, 154.

From the identification of the three criteria that are necessary for an exegesis that respects the text, *Verbum Domini* goes on to acknowledge the value of the literal sense and the emphasis placed on it in *Providentissimus Deus* and *Divino Afflante Spiritu* (§§32–33), but it then highlights the need for theological exegesis to balance exegetes' now scientifically-advanced investigations into the literal sense: "While today's academic exegesis, including that of Catholic scholars, is highly competent in the field of historical-critical methodology and its latest developments, it must be said that comparable attention needs to be paid to the theological dimension of the biblical texts, so that they can be more deeply understood in accordance with the three elements indicated by the Dogmatic Constitution *Dei Verbum*."⁶³

Verbum Domini thus reins in any unqualified appeals to the literal sense, especially as sought by those who view the literal sense as simply a quest for the sense in which history is reconstructed only in the linear-historical sense that slowly came to dominate exegesis from the sixteenth to the twentieth centuries.⁶⁴ After quoting St. Thomas Aquinas on the grounding of all senses of Scripture on the literal sense, *Verbum Domini* immediately goes on to explain: "It is necessary, however, to remember that in patristic and medieval times every form of exegesis, including the literal form, was carried out on the basis of faith, without there necessarily being any distinction between the literal sense and the spiritual sense."⁶⁵ We can see that *Verbum Domini* values the literal sense when it is sought within the Christian cosmos.⁶⁶ The paragraph ends by a favorable quotation of the Pontifical Biblical Commission's *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church*, which endorses a christological reading of Scripture that many who have paid their dues in the worlds of ancient Near Eastern backgrounds and historical criticism would not consider to be the literal sense: "The Pontifical Biblical Commission's definition of the spiritual sense, as understood by Christian faith, remains fully valid: it is 'the meaning expressed by the biblical texts when read, under the influence of the Holy Spirit, in the context of the paschal mystery of Christ and of the new life which flows from it. This context truly exists. In it the New Testament recognizes the fulfillment of the

⁶³ *Verbum Domini*, §34.

⁶⁴ See the chapter entitled "From Aquinas to Raymond Brown" in Levering, *Participatory Biblical Exegesis*, 36–62.

⁶⁵ *Verbum Domini*, §37. The reference to St. Thomas Aquinas is *ST* I, q. 1, a. 10, ad 1.

⁶⁶ Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2007), 57–61.

Scriptures. It is therefore quite acceptable to re-read the Scriptures in the light of this new context, which is that of life in the Spirit.”⁶⁷

Unlike *Divino Afflante Spiritu*, *Verbum Domini* is more concerned to guard against an emphasis on the literal sense as understood only within the secular universe than to caution about an emphasis on the spiritual sense, as §38 of *Verbum Domini* shows. The Christian cosmos, with its orientation points of *kairotic* time, clearly allows for a different literal sense than that engendered by those operating only within the undifferentiated time of the secular universe.⁶⁸ The concern in *Verbum Domini* is coherence, as Benedict goes on to say in the same section regarding the progression from the letter to the Spirit: “The criteria set forth in Number 12 of the Dogmatic Constitution *Dei Verbum* thus become clearer: this progression cannot take place with regard to an individual literary fragment unless it is seen in relation to the whole of Scripture. Indeed, the goal to which we are necessarily progressing is the one Word.” The unity of Scripture is in full view in §39 of *Verbum Domini*, where the Bible’s composite nature of texts composed over a very long time period means that “its individual books are not easily seen to possess an interior unity; instead, we see clear inconsistencies between them.” The paragraph goes on to say that Christ is the one who gives unity to the Scriptures.

Benedict is concerned with coherence not only in one’s reading of Scripture, but also in the hermeneutics one employs to get there. As we might expect from the rest of *Verbum Domini*, he selects a statement from John Paul II on interpreting both *Providentissimus Deus* and *Divino Afflante Spiritu* as rejecting “a split between the human and the divine, between scientific research and respect for the faith, between the literal sense and the spiritual sense.”⁶⁹

The call to go beyond the literal sense in *Verbum Domini* is also seen later in §38, where Augustine’s experience under Ambrose’s typological exegesis is cited as exemplary: “For Saint Augustine, transcending the literal sense made the letter itself credible, and enabled him to find at least the answer to his deep inner restlessness and his thirst for truth.” This is a noteworthy way to frame Augustine’s experience. Usually Augustine is cited in discussions on the

⁶⁷ *Verbum Domini*, §37, quoting Pontifical Biblical Commission, *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church*, II.A. 2.

⁶⁸ See Taylor, *Secular Age*, 54 (concerning “kairotic” moments).

⁶⁹ *Verbum Domini*, §33, quoting John Paul II, “Address for the Celebration of the Centenary of the Encyclical *Providentissimus Deus* and the Fiftieth Anniversary of the Encyclical *Divino Afflante Spiritu*,” §5.

literal sense to provide support for prioritizing it in exegesis, as is done in *Providentissimus Deus*, §31, but here Augustine's experience is offered as a strong testimony for a figurative sense that actually validates the Old Testament text, whose literal sense Augustine and others had found problematic.⁷⁰

A conspicuous omission in *Verbum Domini* is any reference to the intention of the human author. The human author's intention had come to be closely linked to the literal sense in *Divino Afflante Spiritu* and in Brown's "Literal Sense" section within the "Hermeneutics" article in *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary* (cited above), but now that emphasis—which began with Lagrange, received official support from Pius XII, and continued even after *Dei Verbum* in exegetes such as Murphy, Fitzmyer, and Brown—has waned due to patristic and literary considerations. For Benedict, the patristic respect for the literal sense, which sees it as more than simply the intention of the human author, is to inform our understanding and appeals to the literal sense today. Thus, for the apostolic synod on Scripture, or at least for *Verbum Domini*, a working definition for the literal sense might be reading with the tools of higher criticism in order to learn as much as possible about what each distinct unit of text is communicating as a preliminary task to reading Scripture within its canonical and ecclesiastical contexts.

For Benedict XVI, the domain of the literal sense is no longer a defense against higher criticism. Higher criticism has, one could say, infected the literal sense and given its devotees a myopia that does not provide coherence. The domain of the literal sense is now simply a necessary but limited starting point for an exegesis that must transcend it. The supposed neutrality of an academic quest to understand Scripture, presumably to offer a singular literal sense of its meaning, is rejected in *Verbum Domini*, since the whole purpose of Scripture is to help its readers and hearers encounter the word of God.⁷¹

We can observe Benedict beginning with and transcending the literal sense when he exegetes the prayer of Jesus in the garden of Gethsemane. He writes of Jesus's call to watchfulness: "While it refers specifically to Gethsemane, it also points ahead to the later history of Christianity. Across the centuries, it is the drowsiness of the disciples that opens up possibilities for the power of the Evil

⁷⁰ Augustine, *Confessions* 5.14.24, 6.4.6.

⁷¹ *Verbum Domini*, §47.

One.”⁷² When he comes to the posture of Jesus’s prayer, Benedict seems disinterested in deciding between the literal sense of Matthew and Mark, in which Jesus falls prostrate in prayer, and Luke, in which Jesus kneels. In the former case, he notes that it is the posture that signifies absolute submission and describes the occasions when this posture is used in the Western Church. Then, in regard to Luke’s account of Jesus kneeling, he notes cases where others kneel in the New Testament and quotes Alois Stöger’s statement that Jesus is an exemplary martyr.⁷³

I have already noted how *Verbum Domini* does not define the literal sense as the human author’s intention. Catholic exegetes influenced by late-twentieth-century literary theory also no longer limit the literal sense to the human author’s intention. As Luke Timothy Johnson writes, “By the very nature of composition, narratives possess meaning beyond the ‘original intention’ of their authors, and open themselves to the interpretation of readers beyond the ones originally envisaged by the authors.”⁷⁴ Johnson thus questions the previous two generations’ focus on the intentions of Scripture’s human authors—which, in twentieth-century hermeneutical discourse, filled the role that the literal sense occupied in the discourse of previous centuries. It is beyond the scope of this essay to prove inductively that more scholars exegete in light of figurative senses now than they did fifty years ago. But as an example of the openness to figurative senses that literary sensitivity engenders, note this sentence from the penultimate paragraph of an article that uses lexicography and social-historical criticism to situate the description of the young man who ran away naked when someone grabbed his cloak in Mark 14:51–52: “The shedding of the cloak in the situation of violence of Jesus’s arrest is quite understandable on a sociohistorical level, without resorting to symbolic interpretations. Yet this is not a dichotomous situation: the cloak can still be read as having symbolic or representative meaning in terms of the literary artistry of the Gospel writer. Mark 14:51–52

⁷² Pope Benedict XVI, *Jesus of Nazareth, Part Two: Holy Week*, trans. Philip J. Whitmore (San Francisco: Ignatius, 2011), 152–53.

⁷³ Benedict XVI, *Jesus of Nazareth, Part Two*, 153–54. The reference to Alois Stöger is to his *Gospel According to St. Luke*, vol. 2 (New York: Herder & Herder, 1969), 199.

⁷⁴ Luke Timothy Johnson and William S. Kurz, S.J., *The Future of Catholic Biblical Scholarship: A Constructive Conversation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2002), 250.

remains highly significant in discussions of discipleship in Mark.”⁷⁵ As Catholic exegetes drop the human author’s intention from their understanding of the literal sense, aided by the balanced and disciplined diction of *Dei Verbum*, the literal sense returns more closely to Aquinas’s definition: the plain sense of the words themselves. And scholars are more ready to balance a literal sense reading with figurative senses than when they were mostly influenced by *Providentissimus Deus* and *Divino Afflante Spiritu*.

But still it does not seem that exegetes work with the consciousness that there can be more than one literal sense, as both Nicholas of Lyra and Thomas Aquinas affirmed.⁷⁶ That consciousness may return as the millennia-long conversation over the literal sense continues, now that we are past the drama of the twentieth century. Once the consciousness that a text might have more than one literal sense grows stronger, it will result in a more ready transition between literal and figurative senses, since the major impediment for exegetes’ use of figurative senses is an a priori, working conviction that a text only has one meaning, which is by definition for them a singular, literal sense.

Catholic exegetes continue to use historical criticism and other critical methods that the science of biblical studies offers.⁷⁷ But they are not focusing on these methods exclusively, and when they use them, they do not employ them with the optimism of Fr. Lagrange. In the end, they actively—even if not consciously—participate in the millennia-long narrative of the complementary relationships between literal and figurative senses, a narrative that continues to hold underrated potential for understanding ecclesiastical and academic exegesis in sixteenth through twenty-first centuries. This narrative is a better narrative for understanding Scripture exegesis in the twentieth century than simply tracking the negotiations with methods of higher criticism for 120 years, since the narrative of the literal and figurative senses offers more productive contact with exegetes of earlier centuries and provides more potential for understanding how

⁷⁵ Erin Vearncombe, “Cloaks, Conflict, and Mark 14:51–52,” *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 75 (October 2013): 703.

⁷⁶ A notable exception is Jason Byassee, *Praise Seeking Understanding: Reading the Psalms with Augustine* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2007).

⁷⁷ On the rise of biblical studies as a science whose practitioners work differently from the manner in which the Church’s Scripture scholars did formerly, see Michael C. Legaspi, *The Death of Scripture and the Rise of Biblical Studies* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010).

twentieth-century exegetes' encounters with higher critical methods have reached resolution.

Catholic exegetes' preoccupation with the literal sense in the late-nineteenth and mid-twentieth centuries, fueled as it was by historical and other higher critical methods, continued to influence Catholic exegetes even after *Dei Verbum* began to pull them away from an exclusive focus on the literal sense and back to a balanced focus on both the literal and the figurative. Since Benedict issued *Verbum Domini*, these exegetes, also disillusioned with exegesis that is limited to historical criticism and drawn by extensions of the text's meaning beyond the author's intention, have begun to balance their quest for the literal sense with an appreciation for its figurative senses.

It is also possible, though it cannot be conclusively argued, that the separation Leo tried to hold between secular modernity's higher criticism and the pursuit of the literal sense is a line that Benedict is not as committed to maintain. By the time we come to the Ratzinger/Benedict XVI writings on Scripture, historical-critical methods and the literal sense to which they lead are not viewed as positively as they are viewed in *Providentissimus Deus*.

Conclusion

When we compare Pope Leo XIII's optimistic call for seeking the literal sense with all the tools of scientific exegesis in *Providentissimus Deus* against the cautions about the limitations of the literal sense in Pope Benedict XVI's *Verbum Domini*, it becomes clear that the Church has not always agreed on the place of the literal sense in exegesis. The reason for the difference in regard for the literal sense in these two documents is the drama that ensued in the period between them.

We may note the following developments (or acts in the drama) from Leo XIII until Benedict XVI. The literal sense was emphasized when undue emphasis was placed on the world behind the text, as the attacks from higher criticism were understood to have done at the end of the nineteenth century. Similarly, the literal sense was emphasized when undue or first order emphasis was placed on the world in front of the text, as was done by the booklet to which *Divino Afflante Spiritu* responded. Finally, a balance between the literal and spiritual senses of the text is seen in *Dei Verbum* and *Verbum Domini*. The latter, most recent document almost marginalizes the literal sense, treating it only as a starting point for a reading of Scripture that must inevitably take the rule of faith and a salvation-historical perspective into mind.

We can summarize these developments by saying that, in the documents *Dei Verbum* and *Verbum Domini*, the domain of the literal sense is shrinking. With these developments of the literal sense in mind, we may note the following two lessons regarding it, which others have already learned but which were perhaps ignored in the century or so surveyed here: 1) the literal sense is not transparently obvious to all readers, and it is possible to speak of more than one literal sense; and 2) the literal senses of the text form a necessary starting point but should not be regarded as the final goal of exegesis, since the final goal might be a sense that transcends the literal by providing a reading that integrates a given text more suitably into the framework of Scripture.

Several forces converged to renew Catholic exegetes' drive to find the literal sense, last evident in Franciscan exegesis of the middle ages, from the time of Leo XIII through the tenure of Benedict XVI. Yet, in the Church documents and papal writings of the twentieth century, appeals to the literal sense of the Scriptures seem based on differing definitions of it and advocated for different goals. The dramatic suspense of the extent to which the drive toward the literal sense would lead begins to be resolved with the promulgation of *Dei Verbum*, which captures the significance, starting point, and limits of the literal sense in a way that is more balanced than earlier hermeneutical guidelines and exegetical practices during the twentieth century. This document, along with literarily-sensitive exegetes' turn away from the human author's intention as the goal in exegesis and the work of Benedict XVI in *Verbum Domini*, have begun to check the twentieth century's siren call toward a single literal sense in Scripture and bring exegetes back to a balanced quest for its literal and figurative senses.