

Reading the Bible Through Stained Glass: Postliberal Resistance to the Historical-Critical Method

by Alan Bernard McGill

Although the Pontifical Biblical Commission (PBC) in 1964 envisaged that modern biblical scholarship could contribute to the continuing development of doctrine, it is not apparent that this actually has occurred to any significant extent.¹ In 1993, the PBC specifically deemed the historical-critical method indispensable for the interpretation of scripture. However, insights derived through its application, even when they represent broad scholarly consensus, appear to have had little impact on the magisterium's presentation of doctrine as exemplified by the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*.²

This situation may be compounded by a postliberal hermeneutics that seeks to subordinate historical-critical concerns to a doctrinally conditioned interpretation of the Bible. Robert Barron, for example, while arguing for the epistemic priority of Christ, extends his argument to assert the epistemic priority of images, doctrines, and narratives regarding Christ as derived from the tradition. Barron argues that these doctrinally conditioned lenses should trump historical-critical considerations—as if they themselves transcend the need for historical-critical interpretation.

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This paper argues that a postliberal interpretation of scripture through the lens of traditional images and doctrines, invariably granting these facets of the tradition an epistemological priority over historical-critical considerations, would impede the development of doctrine. When the biblical text is read through the hermeneutical lens of traditional interpretations and imagery, that is, through stained glass, as it were, these components of the tradition are regarded as normative. Hence, the biblical text under consideration is not given an opportunity to speak on its own terms, standing in creative tension with the canon and the broader tradition of which it constitutes a part.

An Ecclesial Mandate for Historical-Critical Exegesis to Contribute to the Progress of Doctrine

Since Pope Pius XII promulgated his 1943 encyclical *Divino afflante Spiritu*, the Catholic Church has mandated its exegetes to use the best available methods to interpret scripture so as to determine “to what extent the manner

1 Pontifical Biblical Commission, *Sancta Mater Ecclesia* [Instruction Concerning the Historical Truth of the Gospels] (1964), English translation by Joseph Fitzmyer, SJ in *Theological Studies* 25 (1964): 402-408, http://catholic-resources.org/ChurchDocs/PBC_HistTruthFitzmyer.htm.

2 Congregation of the Doctrine of the Faith, *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1992), http://www.vatican.va/archive/ENG0015/_INDEX.HTM.

of expression or the literary mode adopted by the sacred writer may lead to a correct and genuine interpretation.”³ Pius XII presents this exhortation as a mandate rather than as merely extending permission or suggesting an option, exhorting the exegete, “Let him be convinced that this part of his office *cannot be neglected* without serious detriment to Catholic exegesis.”⁴

In 1964, the PBC reiterated the mandate for exegetes to deploy their expertise, this time explicitly recognizing their potential to contribute to the development of doctrine. “There are still many things, and of the greatest importance, in the discussion and explanation of which the Catholic exegete can and must freely exercise his skill and genius, so that each may contribute his part to the advantage of all, to the continued progress of sacred doctrine. . . .”⁵

Vatican II’s *Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation (Dei Verbum)* further reinforces the mandate for exegetes to work “toward a better understanding and explanation of the meaning of Sacred scripture, so that through preparatory study the judgment of the Church may mature.”⁶ The reference to a “better understanding” and to maturation in the Church’s judgment cannot simply amount to a deferential affirmation of the doctrinal status quo.

The Council majority had voiced resounding support for openness to the possibility of doctrinal development in light of exegetical insights, resisting the attempts of the Curia’s Preparatory Theological Commission to subjugate biblical interpretation to the prevailing interpretation of tradition. On November 14, 1962, the majority of Council Fathers rejected *De fontibus*, the draft schema on the sources of revelation as presented by Cardinal Ottaviani, head of the Preparatory Commission. The dispute was in large part concerned with the relationship between magisterial authority and the freedom of exegetes to utilize the best interpretive methods at their disposal in open, intellectual inquiry.⁷

. . . during the morning no fewer than twelve of the fifteen Council Fathers who spoke were against the draft. While Cardinal Ruffini of Palermo and Cardinal Siri of Genoa approved it and emphasised the need to draw up rules for Catholic biblical scholars, such opinions were not shared by Cardinals Frings of Cologne, Alfrink of Utrecht, Suenens of Malines-Brussels, and Cardinal Bea, head of the newly formed Secretariat for Christian Unity.⁸

Cardinal Bea had served as rector of the Pontifical Biblical Institute for nineteen years and assisted in the preparation of *Divino afflante Spiritu* which, as noted above, sought to empower exegetes to use the best methods at their disposal.

The Preparatory Commission insisted that Scripture and Tradition were two sources of divine revelation (rather than two expressions of one deposit of divine revelation) and argued for the primacy of tradition over scripture. The draft schema stated that “Tradition and it alone is the way in which some revealed truths, particularly those

3 Pius XII, *Divino afflante Spiritu* (1943), no. 37, http://w2.vatican.va/content/pius-xii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-xii_enc_30091943_divino-afflante-spiritu.html.

4 Pius XII, *Divino afflante Spiritu*, no. 37, emphasis added.

5 PBC, *Sancta Mater Ecclesia*.

6 Second Vatican Council, *Dei Verbum* (Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation) (1965), no. 3, http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19651118_dei-verbum_en.html.

7 Adrian Graffy, “The Story of *Dei Verbum* Part Two: Drama in the Council,” *The Pastoral Review* (March/April 2013), http://thepastoralreview.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=116:the-story-of-dei-verbum-part-two-drama-in-the-council&catid=42:marchapril-2013&Itemid=66.

8 Graffy, “Story of *Dei Verbum*.”

concerned with the inspiration, canonization and integrity of each and every sacred book, are clarified and become known to the Church.”⁹

Joseph Ratzinger, a *peritus* at the Council, rejected the Preparatory Commission’s argument for the primacy of tradition over scripture, recognizing that it would place a stranglehold on biblical scholarship.¹⁰ Tradition, notoriously difficult to pry apart from the magisterial pronouncements that mediate it, could then have been invoked to veto any new exegetical insight or clarification with regard to the significance of the biblical text. Ratzinger has subsequently, upon occasion, pointed to the limitations of the historical-critical method and to the importance of supplementing its use with recourse to other methods; this cautionary tone persists in some statements made in his papal role as Benedict XVI.¹¹ Nonetheless, he has continued to acknowledge the value of historical criticism and related methods in ecclesial life, insisting, “Before all else, we need to acknowledge the benefits that historical-critical exegesis and other recently-developed methods of textual analysis have brought to the life of the Church.”¹² Indeed Benedict proposes a Christological rather than simply pragmatic defense of the historical-critical method, relating it to the role of history in mediating the divine, as epitomized in the Incarnation.¹³

Concurring with Ratzinger’s misgivings regarding the Curia’s draft constitution on revelation, Cardinal Joseph Ritter also urged the Council Fathers to reject it.¹⁴ Cardinal Bea, for his part, suggested that the document represented a particular theological agenda—and one not associated with good theology—contending that “the schema represents the work of a theological school, and not what the better theologians think.”¹⁵ Greg Tobin notes that Cardinals Maximus IV Saïgh and Joseph De Smelt of the Secretariat for Promoting Christian Unity and Cardinal Lineart of France called for a more pastoral and less dogmatic tone.¹⁶ The bitter disappointment of the Curia and a minority of Council Fathers with regard to the majority position on revelation and scripture would continue to haunt the Church, arguably contributing to a disconnect between the insights of biblical scholarship and the presentation of doctrine.

While the Second Vatican Council does not explicitly name the historical-critical method, it mandates interpretive criteria that clearly correspond to its concerns. For instance, *Dei Verbum* recognizes the importance of ascertaining the intent of the human authors:

However, since God speaks in Sacred Scripture through men in human fashion, the interpreter of Sacred Scripture, in order to see clearly what God wanted to communicate to us, should carefully investigate what meaning the sacred writers really intended, and what God wanted to manifest by means of their words.¹⁷

9 The Preparatory Theological Commission, Draft of a Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation (*De fontibus*), (Vatican, 1962), 5, translation by Joseph Komonchak available at <https://jakomonchak.files.wordpress.com/2012/09/de-fontibus-1-5.pdf>.

10 Jared Wicks, “Six Texts by Prof. Joseph Ratzinger as *Peritus* before and during Vatican Council II,” *Gregorianum* 89 (2008): 233-311.

11 See, for example, Ratzinger’s remarks in “Relativism: The Central Problem for Faith Today,” an address given during the meeting of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith with the presidents of the Doctrinal Commissions of the Bishops’ Conferences of Latin America, held in Guadalajara, Mexico, in May 1996, <https://www.ewtn.com/library/CURIA/RATZRELA.HTM>.

12 Benedict XVI, *Verbum Domini* (2010), no. 32, http://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_ben-xvi_exh_20100930_verbum-domini.html.

13 Benedict XVI, *Verbum Domini*, no. 32.

14 Graffy, “Story of *Dei Verbum* Part Two.”

15 Graffy, “Story of *Dei Verbum* Part Two.”

16 Greg Tobin, *The Good Pope: The Making of a Saint and the Remaking of the Church—The Story of John XXIII and Vatican II* (New York: HarperOne, 2012), 191.

17 Second Vatican Council, *Dei Verbum*, no. 12.

Dei Verbum insists that “the interpreter must” seek out the meaning intended by the human authors of scripture by investigating the matters of literary genre, historical context, and the cultural mores of the author’s milieu.¹⁸ These historical-critical considerations are not presented merely as an option but as essential to correct interpretation.

While *Dei Verbum* thus implicitly endorsed the historical-critical method, the PBC in a 1993 report entitled *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church* explicitly mandated recourse to the historical-critical method. The report affirms that the historical-critical method is “the indispensable method for the scientific study of the meaning of ancient texts.”¹⁹ Despite this, there may be little evidence that historical-critical exegesis has been allowed to contribute significantly to the development of doctrine. Granted, this is a broad claim and an example may be in order.

Modern biblical scholarship’s prevalent *lack* of influence upon the development of doctrine is particularly clear in the Catechism’s interpretation of the Adamic narrative of Gn 2 and 3.²⁰ In 1950, Pope Pius XII, while interpreting the Adamic narrative as a form of ancient history rather than as myth, admitted that the matter should be explored further by the exegetes.

This letter, in fact, clearly points out that the first eleven chapters of Genesis, although properly speaking not conforming to the historical method used by the best Greek and Latin writers or by competent authors of our time, do nevertheless pertain to history in a true sense, which however must be further studied and determined by exegetes . . .²¹

However, the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* published in 1992 shows little evidence that the magisterium had benefited from insights derived through modern exegesis. Despite a broad consensus to the contrary on the part of leading exegetes, the Catechism insists that the Adamic narrative recounts, albeit in figurative terms, a particular, historical “event” and “deed.”²² This stands in stark contrast with the findings of exegetes Eugene Maly, Richard Clifford, Roland Murphy, Pauline Viviano, and Michael Guinan as published in Catholic commentaries bearing the imprimatur and *nihil obstat*. These exegetes regard the Adamic narrative as bearing the literary hallmarks of myth that figuratively expresses ubiquitous truths concerning the human condition, free will, and humanity’s relationship with its Creator.²³

The Catechism’s account further contradicts widely held exegetical opinion by implying the agency of Satan within the narrative world of the Adamic myth, implicitly identifying the talking snake with Satan and offering no distinction between the intentions of the biblical authors and later reception history, in this case apparently relying (without further attribution) on an interpretation by St. Justin Martyr in the second century CE.²⁴

18 Second Vatican Council, *Dei Verbum*, no. 12.

19 PBC, *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church*, no. 1, http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/pcb_documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_19930415_interpretazione_it.html; English translation by Felix Just available at http://catholic-resources.org/ChurchDocs/PBC_Interp.htm.

20 Congregation of the Doctrine of the Faith, *Catechism of the Catholic Church with Modifications from the Editio Typica*, English 2nd ed. (New York: Doubleday, 1997), no. 390.

21 Pius XII, *Humani Generis* (1950), no. 38, http://w2.vatican.va/content/pius-xii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-xii_enc_12081950_humani-generis.html.

22 CCC, no. 390.

23 Eugene Maly, “Genesis,” in *The Jerome Biblical Commentary*, eds. Joseph Fitzmyer, Roland Murphy, and Raymond Brown (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1968), 40; Richard Clifford and Roland Murphy, “Genesis,” in *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary*, eds. Joseph Fitzmyer, Roland Murphy, and Raymond Brown (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1990), 8-43, here at 12; Pauline Viviano, “Genesis,” in *The Collegeville Bible Commentary*, ed. Dianne Bergant (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1988), 43; Michael Guinan, “Adam, Eve and Original Sin,” *Catholic Update*, St. Anthony Messenger Press, <https://www.catholicfidelity.com/adam-eve-and-original-sin-by-michael-guinan/> See also Monika Hellwig, *What Are the Theologians Saying Now?* (Westminster: Christian Classics, 1992), 101; James Connor, “Original Sin: Contemporary Approaches,” *Theological Studies* 29 (1968): 215.

24 CCC no. 391. See Henry Ansgar Kelly, *Satan: A Biography* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 3 and Jeffrey Burton Russell, *Satan: The Early Christian Tradition* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1981), 27, 47, 227.

The disconnect between the Catechism's interpretation of the Adamic myth and the broad thrust of contemporary exegesis, including the work of Catholic scholars published in ecclesiastically approved commentaries, suggests that such historical-critical exegesis, which has been conducted in accordance with the magisterium's own teachings, has not, in this case, been allowed to significantly influence the progress of doctrine.²⁵ Granted, the historical-critical method is applied by a wide range of scholars with diverse emphases and agendas and has no central spokesperson. It is therefore worth considering the extent to which disputes concerning the method may reflect definitional issues.

Difficulties in Characterizing the Historical-Critical Method

As Luke Timothy Johnson observes, the term "historical-critical method" can carry a degree of ambiguity.²⁶ In particular, the prominence of the term "historical" in the name of the method may overshadow the "critical" dimension in the sense of literary criticism so that there appears to be divergence of opinion as to what extent the method takes literary considerations into account. Johnson laments, "In biblical scholarship, critical has come to be associated with historical."²⁷ At points, Johnson refers unfavorably to the "historical" method, perhaps intending to identify a skewed application of the historical-critical method.²⁸

In addition to its historical concerns, a concern for the implications of literary genre constitutes an integral dimension of the historical-critical method as described by the PBC. The Commission notes the importance of literary and linguistic as well as historical considerations, asserting that the historical-critical method "studies the biblical text in the same fashion as it would study any other ancient text and comments upon it as an expression of human discourse."²⁹ Joseph Fitzmyer affirms the integral role of literary analysis in the historical method, arguing that a biblical author writes in a given form so as to impart a corresponding form of truth, that is, form follows function. "Since the truth he has enshrined in his text is analogous to the form used, historical criticism teaches us that we cannot read an ancient text without the sophistication that the form calls for."³⁰

In *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church*, the PBC goes some way toward defining the method, albeit in broad terms. It posits that the approach is a historical method, both because it studies the significance of ancient texts "from a historical point of view" and also because "it seeks to shed light upon the historical processes which gave rise to biblical texts."³¹ The PBC asserts that it is a critical method because "it operates with the help of scientific criteria that seek to be as objective as possible."³² Hence, the historical-critical method may be defined as an approach to the interpretation of scripture that is informed by historical research, literary criticism, and the human sciences, so as to discover the theological, social, economic, political, and cultural context(s) and intention(s) of the author(s).

25 Viviano, "Genesis," 43; Clifford and Murphy, "Genesis," 12; Maly, "Genesis," 40.

26 Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Real Jesus: The Misguided Quest for the Historical Jesus and the Truth of the Traditional Gospels* (New York: HarperCollins, 1996), 81-82; Richard Bauckham, "Jews and Jewish Christians in the Land of Israel at the Time of the Bar Kochba War, with Special Reference to the Apocalypse of Peter," in *Tolerance and Intolerance in Early Judaism and Christianity*, eds. G. N. Stanton and G. G. Stroumsa (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 228-38.

27 Johnson, *Real Jesus*, 82.

28 Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Writings of the New Testament: An Interpretation* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986), 8-11.

29 PBC, *Interpretation of the Bible in the Church*, 1.A.2.

30 PBC, *Interpretation of the Bible in the Church*, 1.A.2. Cf. Joseph Fitzmyer, *The Interpretation of Scripture: In Defense of the Historical-Critical Method* (New York: Paulist Press, 2008), 66.

31 PBC, *Interpretation of the Bible in the Church*, 1.A.2.

32 PBC, *Interpretation of the Bible in the Church*, 1.A.2.

Robert Barron's Critique of the Historical-Critical Method

Robert Barron recognizes a contemporary disconnect between Catholic theology and exegesis—though one might argue that the real disconnect exists in relation to the magisterium's presentation of doctrine rather than in the work of academic theologians. Barron calls for a reintegration of exegesis and theology, arguing that “theology is the proper interpretive lens of the bible.”³³ The author detects in Catholic biblical interpretation since the Council an inadequate, one-sided historical-critical approach, a strategy where historical considerations have been allowed to eclipse the full theological significance of the scriptures.³⁴

Barron remarks that “the early writings of Joseph Fitzmyer, Raymond E. Brown, Roland Murphy, John Kselman and others convinced Catholics that historical-critical analysis did not pose a threat to the integrity of the scripture as a revealed text.”³⁵ However, Barron raises reservations about uncritical reception of insights gained through the application of historical-critical techniques when he asserts “there remain, in my judgment, serious problems with the historical-critical method itself.”³⁶ Barron suggests that the historical-critical method frontloads the interpretative process with the assumptions of Enlightenment thought, focuses excessively upon the intentions of the human authors at the risk of neglecting God's intention, and can give the impression that the significance of the text is trapped in the past as opposed to a living Word of God applicable in the present.³⁷

Barron's first set of objections to the historical-critical method reflects his conviction that it is a product of Enlightenment thought, infused with the assumptions of rational skepticism. Barron cautions that “Christians ought to be, at the very least, wary of an approach with such questionable provenance.”³⁸ Granted, it might be argued that interpreters of scripture should exercise critical reflexivity regarding any interpretive method, always considering its potential biases and limitations. Barron's critique, however, is specific to the historical-critical method that has been clearly endorsed by the magisterium as an indispensable component of biblical interpretation.

Barron points to the hermeneutics of Raymond Brown, considering Brown to be broadly representative of the thrust of historical-critical biblical exegesis in the Catholic context. Barron offers a fair assessment of Brown's historical-critical agenda as “the attempt to discover, through the use of philology, literary analysis, historical investigation, redaction criticism, and so on, what precisely was the communicative intention of the author or redactor of a biblical text as he addressed his particular audience.”³⁹ Barron further acknowledges that Brown's seminal essay on hermeneutics in the *Jerome Biblical Commentary*, an ecclesiastically approved volume, does not regard the historical-critical method as the only valid method of interpretation or the final word on the text so much as an essential, initial step in the interpretive process, setting an accurate trajectory for subsequent literary analysis and theological reflection.⁴⁰ Barron rightly characterizes Brown as viewing the historical-critical method as a means to discover the literal sense of the text, serving as a reference point for further exegesis that might uncover the fuller sense, or “*sensus plenior*.”

33 Robert Barron, *Exploring Catholic Theology: Essays on God, Liturgy and Evangelization* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2015), 109.

34 Barron, *Exploring Catholic Theology*, 109.

35 Barron, *The Priority of Christ: Toward a Postliberal Catholicism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2007), 42.

36 Barron, *Priority of Christ*, 42.

37 Robert Barron, “Pope Benedict and How to Read the Bible,” Word on Fire, <https://www.wordonfire.org/resources/article/pope-benedict-and-how-to-read-the-bible/406/>. Cf. Ratzinger, “Relativism: The Central Problem for Faith Today” and Joseph Ratzinger, *Jesus of Nazareth: From the Baptism in the Jordan to the Transfiguration* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2008), xvi.

38 Barron, *Priority of Christ*, 46.

39 Barron, *Exploring Catholic Theology*, 120; Brown, “Hermeneutics,” *Jerome Biblical Commentary*, 616.

40 Barron, *Exploring Catholic Theology*, 121.

Through the application of canonical exegesis, interpreting a text in the context of the full canon of scripture and tradition, and in the context of the matrix of doctrines, the “fuller” sense or *sensus plenior* of the text may be discerned. Raymond Brown defines the *sensus plenior* or “fuller” sense of Scripture as “...the deeper meaning intended by God but not clearly intended by the human author, that is seen to exist in the words of scripture when they are studied in the light of further revelation or of development in the understanding of revelation.”⁴¹ In time, Brown began to speak of the “more than literal” sense of the text so as to denote its interpretation in the context of the wider canon and tradition.⁴² The more than literal sense of the text relies upon and builds upon the literal sense, as canonical exegesis builds upon historical-critical exegesis. The more than literal sense cannot contradict the literal sense. Rather, it exceeds the scope of the literal sense as canonical exegesis exceeds the scope of historical-critical exegesis.

Brown notes the objection of J.M. Robinson that the *sensus plenior* could be abused to justify doctrines that have no basis in scripture. Brown responds that the magisterium is the medium, not the originator of divine revelation.⁴³ The author proposes that the *sensus plenior* is not a license by which the Church can justify claims that have no basis in the literal sense of the biblical text.⁴⁴ Rather, the *sensus plenior* must be “a development of what the human author wanted to say.”⁴⁵ Therefore, as taught in *Dei Verbum*, one cannot circumvent the task of ascertaining the intentions of the human authors and skip to the question of what God sought to reveal.

Barron frowns upon Brown’s functional separation of an initial historical-critical exegesis from subsequent canonical exegesis focused on discovering the *sensus plenior* and theological reflection.⁴⁶ Barron laments, “What concerns us in this program is, first, the exaggerated bifurcation between biblical exegesis and theology.”⁴⁷ While admitting that Brown acknowledged the importance of the *sensus plenior*, Barron complains that, unlike St. Thomas Aquinas, Brown largely left its pursuit to others, devoting himself to historical-critical exegesis so as to discover the intentions of the inspired human authors.⁴⁸

Barron regards Brown’s methodological separation of historical-critical exegesis and theological reflection as indicative of a rational-skeptical, that is, “Spinozan” perspective.⁴⁹ In Barron’s view, the attempt to interpret the text on its own terms leads ineluctably to an overemphasis on the intention of the human authors and an underemphasis on that which God wanted to reveal.

Barron turns to the work of Edward Schillebeeckx as an example of theology excessively influenced by a historical-critical hermeneutics and, in effect, by rational skepticism. “In Schillebeeckx (and to a lesser extent in [Hans] Küng), we find a skeptical rereading of most of the miracle stories and a largely subjectivistic interpretation of the resurrection of Jesus.”⁵⁰ The question arises, however, as to why Küng and Schillebeeckx’s readings of the miracle stories constitute “rereadings,” a term suggestive of revisionism.

41 Brown, “Hermeneutics,” *Jerome Biblical Commentary*, 616.

42 See Raymond Brown and Sandra Schneiders, “Hermeneutics,” *New Jerome Biblical Commentary* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1990), 1146-65, especially 1153.

43 Brown, “Hermeneutics,” 616.

44 Brown, “Hermeneutics,” 616.

45 Brown, “Hermeneutics,” 617.

46 Barron, *Exploring Catholic Theology*, 121.

47 Barron, *Exploring Catholic Theology*, 121.

48 Barron, *Exploring Catholic Theology*, 121.

49 Barron, *Exploring Catholic Theology*, 121.

50 Barron, *Priority of Christ*, 46.

Daniel J. Harrington challenges the assumption that it is a revisionist move to interpret the miracle accounts as something other than a reconstruction of supernatural events, arguing that the sacred authors were not necessarily asserting the occurrence of what today's readers may regard as supernatural phenomena. (In contrast, Barron regards "the world opened up by the scriptural narratives" as characterized by "supernatural density."⁵¹) Harrington suggests that it is a largely modern assumption that the miracle narratives recount a suspension of the laws of nature and are hence supernatural. Barron, on the other hand, presents Küng and Schillebeeckx as influenced by "Spinozan assumptions and prejudices" when they resist such an interpretation.⁵² This gives rise to the question as to whether it would be fair to characterize Harrington's insight as imposing an Enlightenment position or whether it recovers an insight integral to ancient, biblical worldviews. It might be argued that the historical-critical method is a *necessary* tool to enable moderns to excavate, as it were, insights derived from a biblical worldview so that they may then be placed in dialogue with contemporary positions—including contemporary formulations of doctrine.

Contra Barron's appraisal of the historical-critical method as infused with the assumptions of liberal modernity, Fitzmyer asserts that the historical-critical method is theologically neutral.⁵³ When Barron associates the method both with the Jesus scholar John P. Meier and the sacramental and systematic theologian Schillebeeckx, the considerable contrast between these scholars' approaches illustrates the diversity of projects that can benefit from insights derived through the historical-critical method.⁵⁴ Nevertheless, Fitzmyer acknowledges that the historical-critical method, like other methods, has at times been conscripted to further particular theological agendas such as those of Rudolf Bultmann and of some historical Jesus scholars who frontload the method with theological presuppositions.⁵⁵ Brown makes a helpful distinction in this regard between, on the one hand, the "philosophy of the method" and, on the other, "the philosophy of the practitioner of the method."⁵⁶ While Barron is suspicious of the historical-critical method for its Enlightenment provenance, Fitzmyer traces its roots among the scholiasts of ancient Alexandria.⁵⁷ Fitzmyer cites the example of Zenodotus of Ephesus who compiled a Homeric Glossary, exegeting difficult terms in Homer's work.⁵⁸

Barron's second set of objections to the historical-critical method reflect his diagnosis that "the historical-critical spirit is deeply Protestant in the measure that it seeks to uncover the 'real' and authentic Jesus who lies beneath a veil of theological and ecclesial distortions."⁵⁹ Here Barron associates the method with what amounts to primitivism, that is, an assumption that the most ancient manifestation of a tradition is inherently more authentic than later ones, and that development inevitably entails corruption and distortion. Primitivism, understood in this sense, is hostile to dynamic, evolving traditions.

While the present paper laments a lack of doctrinal development in light of the insights derived through the historical-critical method, Barron regards the historical-critical spirit as itself opposed to development beyond the intentions of the ancient authors. Barron rightly asserts that "The Catholic instinct is not so much to assess the development by the origin but to assess the development as the full flowering of the origin."⁶⁰ Barron's criticism would seem valid in response to a hermeneutic that is inherently opposed to the theological development, dismissing

51 Barron, *Priority of Christ*, 46; cf. Daniel J. Harrington, *The Gospel of Matthew* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1991), 187.

52 Barron, *Priority of Christ*, 46.

53 Fitzmyer, *In Defense of the Historical-Critical Method*, 69.

54 Barron, *Priority of Christ*, 43.

55 Fitzmyer, *In Defense of the Historical-Critical Method*, 68.

56 Brown and Schneiders, "Hermeneutics," 1149.

57 Fitzmyer, *In Defense of the Historical-Critical Method*, 61.

58 Fitzmyer, *In Defense of the Historical-Critical Method*, 61.

59 Barron, *Priority of Christ*, 42.

60 Barron, *Priority of Christ*, 42.

the reception-histories of biblical texts. The historical-critical method, however, appeals to the historical situation within which the text was authored so as ascertain the literal sense of the text that, through canonical exegesis, can be held in constructive dialogue with later developments in the tradition. As such, it is not necessarily opposed to such development.

When Barron describes the historical-critical spirit as “deeply Protestant,” it is difficult to see how this applies to Schillebeeckx’s use of the historical-critical method as a Catholic sacramental theologian. The sacramental vision of Catholicism, epitomized in Schillebeeckx, far from obsessed with peeling back the layers of tradition to uncover an original authenticity, is deeply attuned to the presence of grace in and through all things. Simply by its emphasis on the enduring sacramental presence of the Risen Christ, Schillebeeckx’s project could hardly be more removed from primitivism.

Barron characterizes Schillebeeckx’s Christology as a form of “historical Jesus Christology,” a remark that may have the insidious albeit unintended effect of associating Schillebeeckx’s position with those of historical Jesus scholars of a very different timbre whom Barron also critiques, including John Dominic Crossan, Marcus Borg, and Burton Mac.⁶¹

Barron characterizes Schillebeeckx’s account of Jesus as claiming that he is “but the human with a particularly rich experience of childlike dependence upon God.”⁶² Schillebeeckx, however, writes, “The man Jesus is the presence of the redeeming God among us, though in the mode of a human presence, bodying that presence to us.”⁶³ Indeed, Schillebeeckx’s emphasis on the sacramental presence of the Risen Christ exceeds the scope of historical Jesus scholarship or even the historical-critical method, though it is by no means inherently opposed to the latter. This is evident when Schillebeeckx proposes, “Just as Christ in his risen body acts invisibly in the world, he acts visibly in and through his earthly body, the Church.”⁶⁴ Schillebeeckx’s acknowledgement of the Risen Christ active in history could hardly be further removed from what Barron regards as a Protestant suspicion of the evolving tradition.

Barron’s Postliberal Proposal for the Epistemic Priority of Narratives and Icons of Christ

Given his profound suspicion of the historical-critical method as deeply Protestant and infused with a Spinozan agenda, Barron proposes a postliberal hermeneutics. The author contends that “Jesus cannot be measured by a criterion outside of himself or viewed from a perspective higher than himself.”⁶⁵ While it follows that the divine reality of Christ cannot in itself be understood as one object among many, a phenomenon to be interpreted like any other, texts and narratives, on the other hand, *can* be regarded in such a manner.

Faith in the person of Christ constitutes a religious worldview rather than an exegetical method, and hence it cannot be a working substitute for historical-critical exegesis. Exegetes interpret the texts that mediate revelation rather than directly interrogating the person of Christ. Hence, in practice, Barron extends the epistemic priority of Christ to the epistemic priority of narratives, icons, and theological insights that seek to represent Christ through human imagery and the words of human authors.⁶⁶ Barron asserts, “I will argue that Christians know and seek knowledge in a distinctive way, precisely because they take the narratives concerning Christ as epistemically basic.”⁶⁷ Barron’s use of the phrase “epistemically basic” implies that the narratives in question instill a pre-critical

61 Barron, *Priority of Christ*, 46.

62 Barron, *Priority of Christ*, 47.

63 Edward Schillebeeckx, *Christ the Sacrament of the Encounter with God* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1963), 59.

64 Schillebeeckx, *Christ the Sacrament of the Encounter with God*, 59.

65 Barron, *Priority of Christ*, 135.

66 Barron, *Priority of Christ*, 19.

67 Barron, *Priority of Christ*, 134.

mode of knowing and transcend the need for historical-critical exegesis. Barron posits further, “It is my conviction that we don’t read Jesus through the lens of a predetermined epistemology, but rather that we come to understand the nature of knowledge in general through those narratives.”⁶⁸ Barron’s position in this regard is reminiscent of George Lindbeck’s intratextual approach to biblical narrative as a lens through which to interpret the world rather than as text to be interpreted in light of historical-critical exegesis.⁶⁹

Barron detects in St. Irenaeus a far older precedent for his interpretation of scripture through the lens of doctrinal commitments.⁷⁰ Barron remarks that, for Irenaeus, the Bible was the soul of theology, but also, one might say, the tradition was the lens through which to read the Bible. Irenaeus adopted as an interpretive lens a *regula* consisting of “a set of convictions, assumptions, and narrative content that grows out of the biblical witness itself.”⁷¹ Hence there is a circular situation whereby Irenaeus interprets the Bible through the lens of assumptions derived from traditional interpretation of the Bible. The act of interpretation is thus doctrinally conditioned from the outset. As Daniel Treier observes, Barron argues for “the epistemic primacy of believing, doctrinally traditioned engagement with the Jesus Christ of biblical narrative.”⁷² If, however, engagement with the narrative is from the start doctrinally conditioned, thus avoiding the bifurcation of historical-critical exegesis and theological reflection that Barron detects in Raymond Brown’s approach, then it is difficult to see how exegesis can contribute to the development of doctrine, challenging the very assumptions that for Barron may constitute the interpretive lens.

Barron adopts his own “regula,” as it were, as a doctrinal lens through which to interpret Scripture.⁷³ The author identifies four “doctrinal guides:” first, “the ‘two-natures’ doctrine of the Council of Chalcedon,” second, the Thomistic interpretation of Incarnation as the coinherence of divinity and humanity, third, “Jesus as ‘the icon of the Invisible God,’”⁷⁴ and, fourth, the particularity of Jesus of Nazareth.⁷⁵ These doctrinal guides seem more appropriate as theological hermeneutics than as exegetical devices that could help to determine the literal sense of a biblical text as the historical-critical method can do.

Having attributed the epistemic priority of Christ to doctrinal positions and narratives, Barron posits an oppositional relationship between these narratives and insights derived from the sciences. Paraphrasing Bruce Marshall, Barron argues, “...the narratives concerning Jesus must, for Christians, be an epistemic trump, that is to say, an articulation of reality that holds sway over and against all rival articulations, be they scientific, psychological, sociological, philosophical or religious.”⁷⁶

Barron proposes that “a mind conditioned radically by the narratives concerning Jesus Christ—gatherer, warrior, and Lord—actually grasps reality most richly and thus, paradoxically enough, makes possible the most creative conversation with the non-Christian culture.”⁷⁷ Here, Barron adopts the tone of the Radical Orthodoxy School, implying that a form of Christianity that has not accommodated itself to modernity possesses a more distinctive voice with which to address the modern world, making for a more constructive conversation.⁷⁸

68 Barron, *Priority of Christ*, 133.

69 George Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1984), 118.

70 Barron, *Exploring Catholic Theology*, 110.

71 Barron, *Exploring Catholic Theology*, 111.

72 Daniel Treier, review of Robert Barron’s *The Priority of Christ*, <https://www.amazon.com/Priority-Christ-Toward-Postliberal-Catholicism/dp/0801098203>.

73 Barron, *Priority of Christ*, 54.

74 Derived from Jean-Luc Marion, *God Without Being: Hors-Texte*, trans. Thomas A. Carlson (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991).

75 Derived from James William McClendon, *Doctrine*, vol. 2 of *Systematic Theology* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994).

76 Barron, *Priority of Christ*, 133, 135; cf. Bruce Marshall, *Trinity and Truth* (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 40-47.

77 Barron, *Priority of Christ*, 134.

78 David Cheetham, *Ways of Meeting and the Theology of Religions* (Farnham, UK: Ashgate, 2013), 45-47.

The Christian mind is, in Barron's view, formed by the biblical narrative, not through approaching Scripture from an extra-biblical perspective. In effect, this can amount to an interpretation of Scripture in light of a reception history vested in tradition. If, as Barron advocates, the biblical text is to be interpreted through the lens of traditional icons and narratives, privileged over historical-critical considerations, the question arises as to why these icons and narratives themselves transcend the need for historical-critical interpretation. As Raymond Brown and Sandra Schneiders suggest, in the interpretation of ancient narratives and motifs, "attempts to minimize or avoid the necessary steps involved will produce fundamentalist confusion."⁷⁹ In a case in point, while not entirely invalid in its own right, the icon of Jesus as warrior is laden with potential for theological difficulties that could be alleviated through historical consciousness and attention to the significance of form in relation to the narratives that suggest this militaristic motif.

Supersessionism, anti-Semitism, an excessive focus on Jesus's maleness, apocalypticism, and a host of other assumptions embedded in traditional receptions of biblical texts can be constructively engaged and modified through historical-critical exegesis. Without a historical-critical phase in exegesis, seeking out the literal sense of the text on its own terms can perpetuate erroneous accounts of the literal sense of the text and even magnify them in subsequent canonical exegesis and theological reflection.

Instances in Which Historical-Critical Exegesis Has Informed the Tradition

For the most part, the documents of the Second Vatican Council reflect the findings of modern biblical scholarship to a far greater extent than postconciliar magisterial pronouncements tend to do. A case in point is the Council's stance in relation to Judaism. In its *Declaration on the Church's Relation with the Non-Christian Religions*, the Second Vatican Council recognizes the danger of interpreting the Passion Narratives as a basis for the historical assertion that Jesus's co-religionists gathered en masse to demand his execution.⁸⁰ In this matter, the Council reflects historical-critical insight regarding tensions between the gospel writers and those factions of Judaism that sought to exclude Jewish followers of Jesus from the synagogues.⁸¹ Though not an instance of doctrinal exposition per se, another area of ecclesial life in which insights derived from the application of historical-critical New Testament scholarship may be said to have had impact is the movement for greater collegiality in church governance.⁸²

Conclusion

While the magisterium exhorts exegetes to explore the Scriptures to yield insights that might contribute towards the development of doctrine, there is little evidence of any significant postconciliar doctrinal development in light of the explosion in modern biblical scholarship in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Although the magisterium teaches that the historical-critical method is indispensable for the interpretation of Scripture, its presentation of doctrine, as evidenced at points in the Catechism, seems impervious to compelling insights derived through the application of the method.

Dei Verbum insists that the interpreter of Scripture cannot circumvent the intentions of the human authors and skip directly to God's intended message. In keeping with this principle, exegetes such as Raymond Brown sought

79 Brown and Schneiders, "Hermeneutics," 1149.

80 Second Vatican Council, *Nostra Aetate* (Declaration on the Church's Relations with the Non-Christian Religions) (1965), no. 4, http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decl_19651028_nostra-aetate_en.html.

81 See, e.g., Raymond E. Brown, *A Crucified Christ in Holy Week: Essays on the Four Gospel Passion Narratives* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1986), 15-16, and Marianne Dacy, *The Separation of Early Christianity from Judaism* (New York: Cambria, 2010), 20-50.

82 See, e.g., John Wilkins, "Bishops or Branch Managers? Collegiality after the Council," *America* (October 12, 2012): 18; David Michael Stanley, "The New Testament Basis for the Concept of Collegiality," *Theological Studies* 25 (1964): 197-216.

to establish the literal sense of the text to set a trajectory for further theological reflection upon the significance of the text within the canon of Scripture and the broader tradition.

Robert Barron criticizes the historical-critical method, regarding it as too influenced by rational skepticism and as deeply Protestant, for attempting to seek out the intentions of the human authors through an investigation of their literary forms, historical contexts, theological agendas, and cultural mores, regarding this process as focusing excessive attention on human authorship as opposed to what God seeks to reveal through the text.

Barron appeals to the epistemological priority of Christ. While initially undertaking to adopt the reality of Christ as an interpretive lens, Barron by extension adopts doctrinally conditioned narratives, images, and theological insights as lenses through which to interpret Scripture. The doctrinal assumptions implicit in the lens are then in effect regarded as normative, forgone conclusions rather than as potential objects of scrutiny. When the Bible is read through a lens of stained glass, pious assumptions are superimposed upon the text. This impedes the emergence of exegetical insights that might challenge current doctrinal formulations and lead to a development of doctrine.