

(MIS)READING THE FACE OF GOD: *THE INTERPRETATION OF THE BIBLE IN THE CHURCH*

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[In a recent document the Pontifical Biblical Commission reasoned that, based on Scripture's two natures—divine and human—the historical-critical method of interpretation is indispensable. This argument is confused. Asserting that Scripture, like the person of Jesus Christ, has two natures does not necessarily require a priority of any one kind of reading. The authors argue that several theologians in Christian history have drawn more appropriate analogies between Christ's nature and Scripture that show how a wide variety of styles of scriptural interpretation is appropriate.]

FROM THE VERY beginning of the Church, Christians have been engaged in discussion, argument, and debate about how they ought to read Scripture.¹ Appropriate attention to Scripture has always been at the heart of Christian existence. In this life, Augustine tells us, we should treat Scripture as “the face of God.”² In the past 200 years, however, the rise of modern biblical criticism has shaped Christians’ engagement with their Scripture in very particular ways. The different schools of modern biblical criticism have encouraged Christians to read the Bible primarily, if not solely, with those tools of historical, literary, and sociological or ideological critique that may be deployed in reading any text. Some modern theorists, wanting to argue that these modern reading practices must be determinative for Christians reading their Scripture, have argued for a very particular

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¹ An earlier version of this article was delivered in the department of theology at Marquette University. We are grateful for the kind reception of the argument on that occasion and thank especially Gerald O’Collins, S.J., for his response.

² Augustine, *Sermon 22, 7: Ergo pro facie Dei, tibi pone interim Scripturam Dei*, which in context may be loosely translated as “therefore, in this life, place yourself before the Scripture of God as if it were the face of God.” The whole sermon is translated in *The Works of St. Augustine 3: Sermons*, 2 vols., trans. Edmund Hill (New York: New City 1990) 1.41–48.

parallel between the two natures of Christ and the “two natures” of Scripture which is both the words of human beings and the Word of God.³

This argument usually follows a fairly simple form: Just as an orthodox Christology demands an assertion of Christ’s full humanity, so too we must assert the full humanity and historicity of the biblical text, and hence the necessity of historical-critical methods. Sometimes those who argue for the necessary use of these reading practices characterize a failure to assert this necessity as a lapse into “docetism.” In Protestant writing this strategy seems to have begun with Ernst Käsemann, but it is now apparent in a range of Protestant and Catholic thinkers.⁴ In the case of Roman Catholic exegetical theory this argument has not yet been deployed in any document that forms part of the ordinary magisterium, but it has appeared in the 1993 Pontifical Biblical Commission document entitled *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church*.⁵ This document has no intrinsic authority, and so cannot be treated as representing an official shift in teaching. Nevertheless, it is an important indication of the current thinking of some prominent Roman Catholic biblical scholars. The document was published to mark the 100th anniversary of *Providentissimus Deus*⁶ and the 50th anniversary of *Divino afflante Spiritu*,⁷ the two major encyclicals on biblical interpre-

³ We are not attempting here to make claims about any set of readers other than Christians reading the Scriptures in the context of developing and enhancing their lives as Christians.

⁴ See Andrew K. M. Adam, “Docetism, Käsemann and Christology: Why Historical Criticism Can’t Protect Christological Orthodoxy,” *Scottish Journal of Theology* 49 (1996) 391–410. While there are several obvious parallels between Adam’s argument and our own, and while we are convinced by Adam’s argument, we are arguing a different case. Adam decisively shows how the way in which historical criticism is structured would make it systematically unable to generate or support an orthodox Christology. Hence, no matter how one defines “docetism,” historical criticism cannot offer any protection from claims that Christ was not fully human. Claims about the indispensability of historical criticism for those who take Scripture as a human and divine document presume an orthodox Christology. In short, whereas Adam’s claim is that historical criticism cannot protect christological orthodoxy, our argument is that christological orthodoxy cannot protect historical criticism.

⁵ Hereafter referred to as *Interpretation*. The English text cited here is found in *Origins* 23 (January 6, 1994) 497–524.

⁶ DS 3280–94. Leo XIII’s encyclical *Providentissimus Deus* (1893) makes no use of the particular christological parallel with which we are concerned here. While it does assert the humanity of authors and the importance of teaching appropriate languages and historical and cultural material in the training of interpreters of Scripture, *Providentissimus Deus* is mostly concerned to show how reading practices must be developed which enable attention to discerning the significance of the text in accord with the will of the Spirit, the true author of the text. Such readings discern that which may have been unknown to the human authors of the text.

⁷ DS 3825–3831. *Divino afflante Spiritu* offers no christological parallel similar to

tation produced in the modern period. However, we want to argue that *Interpretation* represents a departure both from the concerns and assumptions of these earlier two texts and from relevant arguments of Vatican II's Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation, *Dei Verbum*.⁸ In general, it is fair to say that *Interpretation* as a whole represents the most developed and prominent apology for the *necessary* priority of historical-critical exegetical methods yet offered by Roman Catholic scholars.

In the document the particular christological parallel with which we are here concerned is not developed or defended at length, but it is of great importance for the direction of the argument as a whole. Our contention is that this christological parallel is logically incoherent. Asserting that Scripture has "two natures" on analogy with Christ's person does not necessarily demand of us that any one particular reading practice is always foundational. Thus *Interpretation* is deeply confused about how to understand the dual natures of Scripture. Further, many figures in the Christian tradition have drawn a different analogy between some broader classical christological themes and the text of Scripture, an analogy that indicates that a *variety* of styles of scriptural interpretation is appropriate for Christians. This second christological analogy is one that should still be drawn by Christians. This positive suggestion occupies the last sections of this article; we begin by offering a critique of *Interpretation*.

THE ARGUMENT OF INTERPRETATION

Our aim is not to offer a comprehensive discussion of the Pontifical Biblical Commission's report. Rather, we wish primarily to look at the way the report speaks of Scripture as "two-natured," that is, as the word of God and the words of humans. Nevertheless, showing the importance of this christological strategy and showing the tenacity with which the document wishes to defend the necessary priority of historical-critical methods involves exploring something of its wider structure and argumentation. Apart

that used by *Interpretation*. *Divino afflante Spiritu* is indeed concerned to assert that the authors of Scriptural texts were real authors, and that human knowledge possesses its own "proper dignity and excellence" (no. 41). Further, it uses this conception of the reality of the human authorial processes involved in the construction of scriptural texts to open the door to a variety of techniques of investigation. Nevertheless, *Divino afflante Spiritu* is also clear that theological exegesis involves the discernment of the "spiritual senses" as intended by God, not by the human authors (nos. 24–27). From the point of view of this note, one might ask how well *Divino afflante Spiritu* manages to distinguish between legitimate and illegitimate figural readings (no. 27), and on what grounds it seems to limit the "literal sense" to the "mind" of the human authors (nos. 26, 34).

⁸ *Dei Verbum* also offers no similar christological parallel.

from a brief introduction and conclusion the bulk of *Interpretation* is divided into four main sections that discuss “methods and approaches for interpretation,” “hermeneutical questions,” “characteristics of Catholic interpretation,” and “the interpretation of the Bible in the life of the Church.” The third of those sections works toward a general synthesis, and the fourth attempts to show the relevance of the synthesis for the life of all Christians. Our contention is that the mistakes of the document are rooted in certain fundamental moves made in its first two main sections. While we focus on the argumentation of those first two sections, it is important to note that the christological parallel we have identified is asserted both at the beginning and at the end of the document.

Interpretation claims in its introduction that its purpose is to “indicate the paths most appropriate for arriving at an interpretation of the Bible as faithful as possible to its character both human and divine.”⁹ Further, at the beginning of Part 1, the report makes clear that this demands the practice of the historical-critical method.¹⁰ “The historical-critical method is the *indispensable* method for the scientific study of the meaning of ancient texts. Holy Scripture, inasmuch as it is the ‘Word of God in human language,’ has been composed by human authors in all its various parts and in all the sources that lie behind them. Because of this, its proper understanding not only admits the use of this method *but actually requires it.*”¹¹ This claim is repeated again in its conclusion: “the very nature of the biblical texts means that interpreting them will require continued use of the historical-critical method.”¹²

After the assertion of the christological parallel in the introduction, Part 1 of the document contains a highly contestable account of the rise of the historical-critical method. The claim is even made that the historical-critical method is one “which, when used in an objective manner, implies of itself *no a priori.*”¹³ This claim is of course something of a hostage to fortune, given the accuracy with which the document itself goes on to tie the necessity of historical-critical method to assumptions about the character of

⁹ *Interpretation* 500.

¹⁰ One of the deeply misleading aspects of the report is its consistent reference to “the historical-critical method” as if this were a single entity that developed in a more or less coherent and self-conscious way. While *Interpretation* is not the only document to speak in this way, it is still either conceptually careless or simply incorrect to speak as if there were a single thing called “the historical-critical method” whose practices all cohere and whose practitioners all share a vision of a common project.

¹¹ *Interpretation* 500 (italics added).

¹² *Ibid.* 524.

¹³ *Ibid.* 502. See Luke T. Johnson’s comment that “[the historical critical approach] was not neutral but carried with it the specific theological presuppositions—which get spelled out in terms of certain mental reflexes—of the Protestant-

ancient texts, to assumptions about the need to treat the Scriptures as ancient texts, and to assumptions about what is possible in light of the direction of modern hermeneutical philosophy.¹⁴ Part 1's account of different reading practices is divided into five sections, dealing respectively with "new methods of literary analysis," "approaches based on tradition," "approaches that use the human sciences," "contextual approaches," and "fundamentalist approaches."

The discussion of fundamentalism is significant. If, in many ways, *Interpretation* is an apologetic for the historical-critical method, its main enemy is something called fundamentalism.¹⁵ For this document one of the primary faults of fundamentalism is that it fails to recognize that rather than being dictated by God, Scripture is the word of God, "formulated in language and expression conditioned by various periods. [Fundamentalism] pays no attention to the literary forms and to the human ways of thinking to be found in the biblical texts." Interestingly, by refusing the primacy of historical-critical method, fundamentalism is described as becoming "incapable of accepting the full truth of the incarnation itself."¹⁶ The way in which fundamentalism is set up as the enemy serves to reveal even more clearly the strength with which this document holds to the primacy of the historical-critical method and to the christological parallel offered as a theological apology for that method.

Moving to Part 2 of the document, entitled "Hermeneutical Issues," we note that *Interpretation* fails to engage in an accurate way with alternative methods of reading, both modern and premodern. This part of the document surveys a number of assumptions about exegesis, but its main concern is to bolster its own account of the primacy of "the" historical-critical method in the face of potential challenges. To make this clear we discuss just two aspects of the argument.

First, Gadamer appears as an important character in this section, but it

ism from which it had derived." ("So What's Catholic About It? The State of Catholic Biblical Scholarship," *Commonweal* 125 (January 16, 1998).

¹⁴ This claim seems also to be contradicted by the assertion that "historical-critical exegesis adopted, more or less overtly, the thesis of the one single meaning: a text cannot have at the same time more than one meaning. All the effort of historical-critical exegesis goes into defining 'the' precise sense of this or that biblical text seen within the circumstances within which it was produced" (*Interpretation* 511). The adoption of this "thesis" constitutes an a priori. *Interpretation* ultimately goes on to modify this thesis (not always clearly or coherently), but their modification involves the assumption of a different a priori.

¹⁵ We would also want to add that the definition of "fundamentalism" is inaccurate and somewhat patronizing. Nevertheless, for our purposes it is of great interest how, and for what reasons "fundamentalism," as *Interpretation* defines it, is criticized.

¹⁶ *Ibid.* 510.

is never made clear how Gadamer's strong antimethodological stance is compatible with *Interpretation's* unrelenting commitment to the search for a necessary method. The discussion of Gadamer is brief: and yet his place in the argument of this section is revealing. Gadamer is presented as teaching the importance of a dynamic between self-understanding and understanding of the text in its historical context. His work is situated between Bultmann's attempt to balance preunderstanding and the "reality of the text"¹⁷ and Ricoeur's account of distanciation. Indeed, using Ricoeur to supplement Gadamer follows a procedure found in a number of textbooks in which Gadamer's contribution is viewed as an overenthusiastic rejection of the hegemony of scientific method in favor of a conversational hermeneutic.¹⁸

In such a reading, Gadamer's polemical context is seen as the source for his expressed hostility to determinative methods, and hence his work is presented as needing a Ricoeurian methodological and scientific supplement. Ricoeur's reading of Gadamer thus becomes normative, and Gadamer is coopted into a defense of the need to attend to the reality of the text. In fact, such a portrayal serves only to misapprehend the direction of Gadamer's thought. It is far more accurate to understand Gadamer as promoting both the importance of phronesis within a tradition-constituted process of inquiry and a philosophy that is opposed to the adoption of any general hermeneutical method for "decoding" texts.¹⁹ Thus *Interpretation* acknowledges Gadamer's thought only to the extent that it anticipates Ricoeur.

Second, the document relates its own understanding of the literal sense of Scripture to premodern conceptions of the threefold or fourfold sense of Scripture. In relation to premodern accounts of the literal sense *Interpretation's* account is idiosyncratic and overly restrictive. Premodern interpreters relied on the literal sense to order relationships between the various senses of Scripture. Alternatively, *Interpretation's* overly restrictive account renders the relationships between the senses of Scripture incoherent.

The document admits that modern hermeneutical theory makes it difficult to assert that a text has a single stable meaning. Thus it argues that Scripture has more than one sense, allowing an adaptation of premodern "spiritual" senses. But, the document then offers a definition of the literal sense as "the precise meaning of texts as produced by their authors" or as

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ See Werner Jeanrond, *Theological Hermeneutics* (London: Macmillan, 1993).

¹⁹ For a recent good presentation of Gadamer's work on phronesis, see Joseph P. Dunne, *Back to the Rough Ground: 'Phronesis' and 'Techne' in Modern Philosophy and in Aristotle* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame, 1993) 104–67.

“that which has been expressed directly by the inspired human authors.”²⁰ Attention to this meaning then determines scriptural interpretation even if hermeneutical theory prevents us from believing that texts have only one meaning. As the text later states, “one must reject as unauthentic every interpretation alien to the meaning expressed by the human authors in their written text.” *Interpretation* also strongly claims that this notion of the literal sense is to be considered as part of the inspired nature of Scripture, “since it is the fruit of inspiration, this sense is also intended by God, as principal author.”

In defense of this notion of the literal sense the document alludes to Thomas Aquinas’s discussion in the *Summa theologiae*. Unfortunately, Aquinas cannot be held up as support for this sense. In the paragraph before the sentence used by *Interpretation*, Aquinas states: “Now because the literal sense is that which the author intends, and the author of Holy Scripture is God who comprehends everything all at once in his understanding, it comes not amiss, as St. Augustine observes, if many meanings [*plures sensus*] are present even in the literal sense of one passage of Scripture.”²¹

For Aquinas, as Eugene Rogers has persuasively argued, the literal sense is methodologically underdetermined. No one method will necessarily be best at uncovering the significance of the literal sense, which supports an ordered diversity of interpretations. Thus the spiritual senses are in some ways contained within the literal sense.²² Further, Aquinas does not identify the literal sense of Scripture with the intention of its human authors. Indeed, many scholars of the history of biblical interpretation have, in the past two or three decades, increasingly reached the opinion that for the vast majority of Christian interpreters the “literal sense” has not been defined by sole reference to the intentions of the human authors.²³ Even in authors

²⁰ *Interpretation* 512.

²¹ *Summa theologiae* 1, q. 1, a. 10.

²² Eugene F. Rogers, “How the Virtues of an Interpreter Presuppose and Perfect Hermeneutics: The Case of Thomas Aquinas,” *Journal of Religion* 76 (1996) 64–81, esp. 66–67. A crucial point of Roger’s argument is that Aquinas does not conceive of God as primarily inspiring individual authors. Instead, God orders states of affairs resulting in the writing of Scripture. On the plurality of literal senses in Aquinas, see the excellent discussion (with extremely useful bibliographical notes) by Mark Johnson, “Another Look at the Plurality of the Literal Sense,” *Medieval Philosophy and Theology* 2 (1992) 118–42.

²³ On the question of the “literal sense” and its meaning, see Brevard Childs, “The Sensus Literalis of Scripture: An Ancient and Modern Problem,” in H. Donner, ed., *Beiträge zur alttestamentlichen Theologie: Festschrift für Walter Zimmerli* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 1977) 80–94; Hans Frei, “The ‘Literal Reading’ of Biblical Narrative in the Christian Tradition: Does It Stretch or Will It Break,” *Theology and Narrative: Selected Essays*, ed. George Hunsinger and

such as Augustine who think that the first duty of a good interpreter is to attempt to ascertain the thoughts (*cogitationes*) of a writer, it is usual to find further discussion that indicates that the literal sense of the text contains much more than the human authors intended and certainly cannot be identified with those intentions.²⁴ We do not need here to attempt a definition of the literal sense that would cover these various positions. We only note that to identify it with the human authors' intentions represents a modern departure from previous tradition.

However, not only is the identification of the literal sense with the intentions of the human authors a departure from the very sources that the document hopes to cite in support, but it also leads to a great deal of confusion at other points. As we have seen, *Interpretation* often equates discovering the meaning of texts and discovering the intentions of authors. The meaning discovered by historical-critical investigation is to be counted as true because of its direct link with the intentions of authors. This presupposition about texts and authors is not only philosophically problematic, it is often historically problematic in that many scriptural texts cannot be treated as the product of one human author or one human intention. More significantly, this presupposition undermines what *Interpretation* says at the end of this section, namely, that "the Holy Spirit, principal author of the Bible, can guide human authors . . . [so that their choice of expression] will express a truth the fullest depths of which the authors themselves do not perceive."²⁵ Having already tied textual meaning to the intention of the human author, *Interpretation* now asserts that a text's fullest truth might have nothing to do with that text's meaning.

The best that can be said is that *Interpretation* allows traditional methods of reading according to the multiple sense of Scripture to supplement interpretation that discovers the intentions of the human authors. But again, this position cannot be squared with its earlier insistence that no reading that is not the meaning expressed by the human authors in their written text is to be accepted. For example, *Interpretation* allows that Matthew 1:23 provides the fuller sense to Isaiah 7:14, so that the latter text should be interpreted to mean "a virgin shall conceive."²⁶ Allowing such a reading is incoherent with *Interpretation*'s own account of the primacy of

William Placher (New York: Oxford University, 1993) 117–52; Kathryn Tanner, "Theology and the Plain Sense," in Garrett Green, ed., *Scriptural Authority and Narrative Interpretation* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987) 59–78.

²⁴ See Augustine, *De doctrina Christiana* 2, 5,6,9; *Confessiones* 12, 18.

²⁵ *Interpretation* 513.

²⁶ It is important to realize that the modern concept of the *sensus plenior* is not equivalent to traditional spiritual senses. On the modern evolution of the *sensus plenior*, see Robert Robinson, *Roman Catholic Exegesis since Divino Afflante Spiritu* (Atlanta: Scholars, 1988) chap. 2.

the literal sense as expressed meaning of the human authors. Thus, the strength with which *Interpretation* asserts its particular understanding of the literal sense leads to incoherence when it tries to permit other reading practices.

Further incoherence of the same kind is apparent when *Interpretation* appears to allow for a range of readings of the "spiritual sense," saying that "the spiritual sense . . . [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 that flows from it."²⁷ We have no problem with this statement. However, this sentence is governed by a later insistence that true interpretive value (a concept that remains undefined) could not be accorded readings making use of rabbinical or Hellenistic methods: readings evident, for example, in allegorical readings of such texts as Deuteronomy or Leviticus. If, however, reading texts in the light of the paschal mystery demonstrates their spiritual sense, and if that sense is apparent when the history of Israel is seen in the light of the paschal event, then it is fair to say that *Interpretation* has no reason for ruling out just such an allegorical reading of the Jewish ritual law. More concretely, *Interpretation* would also have to admit that the interpretations of the Old Testament found in the New Testament do not have "true interpretive value."²⁸ The document wishes to allow some sort of engagement with traditional methods of reading Scripture. But this cannot be squared with its prior assumptions about the nature of the literal sense as equivalent to the human authors' intentions. Moreover, *Interpretation* offers no coherent principles for the selection among the readings of the spiritual senses that it wishes to make.

READING THE FACE OF GOD

At various points *Interpretation* attempts to underwrite its claims about the indispensability of the historical-critical method by drawing analogies from Christ's two natures, divine and human. In short, it assumes that the full humanity of Christ necessitates the historical-critical method. *Interpre-*

²⁷ Roland Murphy makes the extraordinary claim that the paschal mystery "does not seem to be meant as an hermeneutical principle: rather it designates the ultimate truth and goal, against which Christian are to measure their total understanding of the biblical message" ("What Is Catholic about Catholic Biblical Scholarship? Revisited," *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 28 [1998] 114). As we will argue later, such an understanding of the paschal mystery is actually the *primary* hermeneutical principle for the Christian reading of Scripture.

²⁸ On the importance both of Paul's patterns of reading the Old Testament and of Christians reading like Paul, see Richard Hays, *Echoes of Scripture in the Letters of Paul* (New Haven: Yale University, 1989).

tation bases this assumption on what we judge to be a misunderstanding of *Dei Verbum*. While several analogies can be drawn from Christ's two natures to various claims about scriptural interpretation, they are not the analogies that *Interpretation* draws.

Dei Verbum, Vatican II's Constitution on Divine Revelation, uses christological analogies to assert two particular claims about scriptural interpretation. First, asserting two natures of Scripture shows that Christians think that Scripture makes the Word of God intelligible. Because the human authors are real human authors their words are comprehensible to us. As *Dei Verbum* rightly contends, "the words of God, expressed in human language, are in every way like human speech, just as the Word of the eternal Father, when he took on himself the weak flesh of human beings, became like them."²⁹ God's words are now intelligible; one need not ascend to heaven to bring them down, nor descend to the abyss to bring them up, they are near to us that we might do them (Deuteronomy 30:11–14; Romans 10:5–8). Second, asserting that Scripture has two natures implies that it is the result of fully human authorial processes as well as being the work of God. Thus this assertion enables us to see that God's provision of Scripture does not involve the overriding of human agency in the production of the text.³⁰ More importantly, however, by setting Scripture within the larger context of God's economy of salvation *Dei Verbum* provides a means for ordering Christians' interpretive practices.³¹

Although *Interpretation's* assertion of Christ's two natures looks like an admirable display of christological orthodoxy, the particular deployment of

²⁹ *Dei Verbum* no. 13, in *Vatican Council II*, ed. Austin Flannery (Northport, N.Y.: Costello, 1996).

³⁰ This claim is initially made in *Divino afflante Spiritu* nos. 24–27, but the force of this claim is misunderstood and the analogy is overextended in *Interpretation*.

³¹ *Dei Verbum* first places Scripture in the context of a theology of revelation: "It pleased God . . . that people can draw near to the Father, through Christ, the Word made flesh, in the holy spirit, and thus become sharers in the divine nature. . . . The pattern of this revelation unfolds through deeds and works which are intrinsically connected: the works performed by God in the history of salvation show forth and confirm the doctrine and realities signified by the words; the words, for their part, proclaim the works, and bring to light the mystery they contain" (no. 2). After discussing the interwoven nature of Scripture and tradition as the work of God in the world, *Dei Verbum* describes the function of Scripture and Tradition through reference back to the overall function of God's redemptive activity: "For both of them [Scripture and Tradition], flowing out from the same divine well-spring, both of them merge, in a sense, and move towards the same goal. Sacred Scripture is the utterance of God put down as it is in writing under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. And tradition transmits in its entirety the word of God which has been entrusted to the apostles by Christ the Lord and the Holy Spirit" (no. 9). This context then enables *Dei Verbum* to argue for a *variety* of appropriate reading practices (nos. 11–12).

the assertion actually demonstrates a rather manualistic and shallow attention to the dynamics of classical Christology. The classical formula that Christ had two natures in one person is not made in isolation, but within a complex theological matrix. The theology of Christ's two natures is intimately interwoven with assertions about God's educative economy in and through the person of Christ and with assertions about God's economy of restoration and redemption in Christ. On the one hand, the two-natured person serves as the medium by which humanity is educated about the divine life, being drawn to appreciate the love shown by Christ for his fellow human beings and for his Father as truly being the love of the three divine persons for each other. On the other hand, Christ functions as the central site for God's redemptive action. Through union with Christ we approach the vision of his unity with the Father. Through Christ we gain a share in the triune life.

The educative and redemptive aspects are inseparable. In both aspects of God's work through Christ, the union of human and divine in one person is the theologoumenon that enables Christ's humanity to be viewed as the starting point for an ascent of the purely human toward the beatific vision. Through the Word's assumption of our nature we may begin to receive and respond to the gift of God's own life. If parallels are drawn between the way that God teaches in and through the full humanity of Christ, and the way that God teaches in and through the words of the fully human authors of Scripture, then we will be able to see how Christians are called to cultivate a variety of reading practices. In order to explain and illustrate this view we will briefly consider the examples of two theologians who draw such parallels. That will enable us to state in conclusion what sort of current trends in exegetical thinking are most compatible with the approach we have identified.

Gregory of Nyssa

We turn first to the fourth-century theologian Gregory of Nyssa, in particular the prologue and first homily from his commentary on the Song of Songs.³² In this text we find a series of parallels between the way that God reveals and restores through Christ and the way that God reveals and restores through Scripture and through Christian reading of Scripture. Gregory is clear that Christ was fully human and that Christ was also the consubstantial Word of God, the second person of the Trinity. His central concern however is to show how God taught through Christ in a way that

³² On the structure of Gregory's exegesis, see M. Canevet, *Grégoire de Nysse et l'herméneutique biblique: Etude des rapports entre le langage et la connaissance de Dieu* (Paris: Etudes Augustiniennes, 1983).

was comprehensible to fallen humanity. Thus Gregory presents God as teaching through Christ in ways that will begin the process of purifying human minds to prepare them for contemplation of God. At the beginning of his prologue Gregory writes:

By an appropriate contemplation of the text, the philosophy hidden in its words [may] become manifest, once the literal meaning has been purified by a correct understanding Paul somewhere calls the shift from the corporeal to the spiritual “a turning to the Lord and the removal of a veil.” In all these different expressions and names of contemplation Paul is teaching us an important lesson: we must pass to a spiritual and intelligent investigation of Scripture so that considerations of the merely human element might be changed into something perceived by the mind. . . . We know that even the Word himself, who is adored by all creation, passed on the divine mysteries when he had assumed the likeness of a man. He reveals to us the meaning of the law . . . Christ trained his disciples’ minds through sayings veiled and hidden in parables, images, obscure words, and terse sayings in riddles.³³

The Song of Songs may be read as a human love story. And yet, Gregory argues, the text may also be read as revelatory of something more. It illustrates how our imaginations can be caught up into a new christological and salvific project. This occurs through our developing patterns of reading that treat the text as a providentially ordered resource for the shaping of virtuous lives in the light of Christ and for the development of faith in Christ. In this way, we may move to a spiritual level of interpretation where all of the text is read in the light of the life to which Christ calls us.

The archetype for the sort of attention we should pay to the text is the shift necessary for faith in Christ as a human being of the first century to become also faith in Christ as the presence of the Word. Gregory makes only one christological allusion in this passage, but it is fundamental. Just as the Word assumed flesh to teach us the mysteries, so too we should read Scripture as a continuation of the same project. Thus understanding the two-natured person of Christ within the context of wider classical christological themes provides an account of how God makes use of the Incarnate Word to teach fallen humanity and a model for how we should attend to the text of Scripture. Thus Gregory’s christological analogy is taken to demonstrate the necessity of certain reading practices. These include, but are not limited to, attention to the literal sense and to possible spiritual senses. Strikingly, Gregory shows a lack of interest in accepting only one account of the approaches included in the spiritual sense. For our argument there is no need to explore in detail the sorts of methods Gregory deploys, but only to note how a variety of practices becomes necessary. This variety

³³ Gregory of Nyssa, *In Canticum Cantorum, Pro.* (*Gregorii Nyssai Opera* 6.6–8); English version from *Song of Songs*, trans. Casimir McCambley, O.C.S.O. (Brookline, Mass.: Hellenic College, 1987) 36–37.

of methods is focused on the need to find practices that will help us to read Scripture as forming faith and life in the light of the paschal mystery.

Two more aspects of Gregory's analogy deserve note. First, this parallel between Christology and Scripture is not purely extrinsic. God provides for the existence of the scriptural text to continue the formation begun through the Word's assumption of a human body and soul. Scripture plays a key role in the continuing mission of the Word in revealing and restoring, and thus the habits of attention that we must learn if we are to attend to Christ are also to be deployed in attending to the Scriptures. In fact, because Scripture is itself part of God's economy of salvation, and because the form of life that provides the context for appropriate attention to the Scriptures is a life in Christ, the christological parallel that Gregory offers is an intrinsic one. The Scriptures are part of the way in which the Word teaches and redeems fallen humanity.

Gregory's christological parallel for understanding the nature of Scripture and Christian attention to it focuses on an intrinsic analogy between the way that God teaches through Christ and the way that God teaches through Scripture. Secondly, however, we need also to note that this parallel depends on Gregory's assumption that Christ's humanity is taken up by the consubstantial Word into the life of God. Christ is no purely intermediary figure. He is able to be the point of union between humanity and the triune life. On the basis of orthodox christological assumptions Gregory is able to show how it is possible for us to take the Scriptures and God's work in the world to be revelatory of God's own direct activity *and* how we can conceive of God directly working in humanity to achieve salvation. Thus, although Gregory's parallel is not directly between Christ's two natures and Scripture's "two natures," it does depend on an assumption that Christ was both fully human and fully divine.

John Scotus Eriugena

For a second example we can consider the discussion by John Scotus Eriugena in the ninth century of the interconnections between the structure of reality, the nature of the Word, and the nature of Scripture.³⁴ In the footnotes to his *Medieval Exegesis* Henri de Lubac draws attention to two passages from Eriugena's commentaries on the Pseudo-Dionysian corpus that serve as a focus for our brief discussion.³⁵ First, de Lubac quotes the statement that "all the appearance of visible and invisible creation, and all

³⁴ On the structure of Eriugena's exegesis, see Gerd Van Riel, Carlos Steel, James MacEvoy, eds., *Iohannes Scottus Eriugena: The Bible and Hermeneutics* (Leuven: Leuven University, 1996).

³⁵ Henri de Lubac, *Medieval Exegesis*, vol. 1, trans. Marc Sebanc (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998) 327. On de Lubac's understanding of the significance of medieval

allegories, either in word or deed, throughout both Testaments of Sacred Scripture, are the garments that cover the Father's radiance, and his own radiance in the flesh is the best covering garment for his deity and is connatural to us." Eriugena sees a direct parallel between the function of created reality and the function of Scripture in appropriately hiding as well as revealing the nature of God. Just as the creation acts as a revelation of God and of God's distinction from creation, so too Scripture functions to hide and to reveal. Scripture manifests to fallen humanity that very hiding and revealing inherent in creation to which we can no longer attend appropriately because of our fallenness.

Eriugena also alludes to the central place occupied by the Incarnate Word in this scheme. This theme may be apparent by noting the second passage to which De Lubac draws our attention: "The Word has two feet, one of which is the natural rationality of the visible creation and the other of which is the spiritual understanding of Divine Scripture. One of them is covered by the sensible forms of the sensible world. The other is covered by the highest heights of the divine, that is to say the Scriptures." The links made in this short passage depend on two christological assumptions. The first concerns the relationship between the Word and the creation. The second concerns the function of the Incarnate Word. Eriugena sees all things as existing in the Word and yet as being distinct from the Word. For Eriugena, as for so many Christians who accept some broadly Platonic ontological themes, a theological ontology is possible in which the being of things is a gift of participation in God's own Being. And yet, at the same time, God's Being is unique and cannot be compared with created being through any formal analogical procedure (Being is not univocal). Thus, for Eriugena, the concept of the Word and of creation's participation in the Word serves as the focus both for explaining God's natural generative nature and for explaining how the beauty, structure, and ordering inherent in the creation's substantiality follows an archetype that is the Word.

In Eriugena's case this style of theology is given a particular quality because of the Pseudo-Dionysian influence on his thought. That influence gives Eriugena a strong interest in showing how the material (and immaterial) reality of creation both has real existence and yet has that existence through participation in God's true Being. This ontology is also of significance because it provides key background for Eriugena's soteriology. Christ as fully human veils and reveals the Word in a way that will enable our apprehension of the revelatory and participatory structure of the creation as a whole. Revelation through Christ restores our participation in

traditions of exegesis, see Susan K. Wood, *Spiritual Exegesis and the Church in the Theology of Henri de Lubac* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998).

the revelatory creation of God, and that creation is itself a participation in the Word. Thus Eriugena does not simply draw a close link between God's use of the person of Christ to reveal and to restore, he also locates the significance of Scripture more densely within his theology and ontology as a whole. Christ reveals God when, through grace, we come to see that his human life reveals and hides the radiance of God's glory. In this way we may also come to see the Scriptures as revealing and hiding that glory.

On the basis of this theology Eriugena assumes that the interpretation of the Bible in the Church should involve a variety of reading practices. In ways that nicely parallel his ontology and Christology, reading the text involves a "downward" movement, making the text comprehensible to all, breaking down its complexity and revealing its cultural allusions and references. It involves an "upward" movement, showing how the text can be read as a key guide on the spiritual progress toward contemplation of God that is the heart of what the incarnate Word teaches. Thus, in ways parallel to those we saw in Gregory of Nyssa, Eriugena offers a christological analogy for the function of Scripture, and it is one that points toward a combination of reading practices as being most appropriate for Christians.

In both our brief examples we found a significant analogy drawn between the two natures of Christ and the two natures of Scripture. The parallel is founded, in both cases, on an assumption that the Scriptures are providentially ordained to teach *as* God taught through Christ. In both cases the parallel is an intrinsic one because the provision of the Word as written and as preached is an integral part of the mission of the Word Incarnate. Both of these theologians assume that Christ is fully human and fully divine. They do not, however, attempt to offer a parallel on the basis of that theological statement alone. We have not examined in any detail the practices that these two theologians think follow from this parallel, only noting the general direction of their practical assumptions. However, in our concluding section we state briefly what current discussions of scriptural reading seem most consonant with the sort of christological analogies we have seen in Gregory and Eriugena.

CONCLUSION

We argued earlier that the simple parallel between Christ having two natures and Scripture having divine and human natures does not lead to the conclusion that any particular reading practices are necessary. The argument that the "full humanity" of scriptural texts can only be defended by asserting the primacy of the historical-critical method is a simple category mistake. However, we do not wish to deny that there is an important point to the Christian assertion that Scripture does have two natures. This assertion has implications for questions of intelligibility and for questions of agency, as we saw earlier in discussing *Dei Verbum*.

Thus we do want to assert that Scripture has two natures, and we think that this position has important theological consequences. Nevertheless, we argue that this assertion does not establish the necessity of any particular reading practice. For a christological parallel to result in particular reading practices one must turn to the analogy between the way that Christ functions within God's salvific economy and the way that Scripture functions in the same economy. When such parallels are drawn as we have seen in the case of Gregory and Eriugena, then those readings will be appropriate that fulfill any or all of the following two criteria. First, appropriate readings should assist the purification of the human mind intrinsic to Christian living. Second, appropriate readings should assist the Christian's gradual growth toward contemplation of God. This will probably involve reading individual texts in a plurality of ways.

Theologians attempting to explore questions of theological exegesis will want to attend to those methods for the reading of Scripture that are most helpful for building up the Christian community in faith and appropriate practice.³⁶ Complex theories about texts, their "meaning" and the work involved in extracting that "meaning" should not decide questions of appropriate practice in biblical reading. Rather, we should determine appropriate practice by means of methodologically underdetermined reading strategies that will serve the overall goal of Christian catechesis and community formation.³⁷

We do not deny that historical-critical concerns have a place in the Christian reading of Scripture. But we argue that such concerns are not foundational or determinative for Christians reading their Scripture. In some cases, Christians may argue that attention to the forms of expression used within particular cultures and attention to the styles of composition used by Scripture's human authors should be at the center of the reading practices that Christians use. The aim of reading Scripture, to build up Christian faith and practice, should always order decisions about which methods and approaches to adopt.

Within such a perspective, attention to the christological analogy we have articulated will be one of the best guides for directing discussions of appropriate reading practices. That is to say that attention to the ways in which we take God to be teaching us through Christ will be determinative for discussions about the appropriateness of particular reading practices. If Scripture is to be read as the face of God, our first task will be to learn the place of God among us, to learn the economy of the Incarnate Word.

³⁶ See Stephen E. Fowl, *Engaging Scripture* (Cambridge, Mass.: Blackwells, 1998); Lewis Ayres, "On the Practice and Teaching of Christian Doctrine," *Gregorianum* 80 (1999) 33–94.

³⁷ For a discussion of undetermined interpretation, see Fowl, *Engaging Scripture* chap. 2.