

## NOTES



### BIBLICAL INTERPRETATION AND THEOLOGY: Irenaeus, Modernity, and Vatican II

~: Robert Barron ~:

*Mundelein Seminary*

There is a growing consensus that a one-sidedly historical-critical approach to the interpretation of Sacred Scriptures is inadequate. Figures as diverse as Brevard Childs, Walter Brueggemann, Jon Levenson, Gary Anderson, Francis Martin, Robert Louis Wilken, and Joseph Ratzinger have indicated how, in various ways, the dominance of historical criticism in the post-conciliar period has led to a diminishment of the Bible in the life of the Church.<sup>1</sup>

Indeed, much of recent biblical scholarship involves a severing of the ties between exegesis and dogmatic theology. For many historical critics, *exegesis* is the domain of technically trained experts in ancient languages, philology, and culture while theology is characterized as, at best, a spiritual reflection only vaguely related to the intentions of the Bible's authors, or at worst, a later overlay that effectively obscures those intentions. As a result of this division of exegesis and theology, the richly typological and theologically integrated understanding of the Bible that held sway among the Fathers of the Church and the medieval doctors has been almost completely eclipsed by modern biblical study.

What I want to do in this article is to argue for the reintegration of exegesis and theology in the spirit of the Fathers and the medieval masters of the *sacra pagina* ("the sacred page"), fully acknowledging as I do so the legitimate gains of the modern historical-critical approach. In his influential 1988 Erasmus Lecture, "Biblical Interpretation in Crisis," then-Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger held that this sort of reintegrating work would be the task of an entire generation of theological scholarship.<sup>2</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> See generally, Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, "Biblical Interpretation in Crisis: On the Question of the Foundations and Approaches of Exegesis Today," in *The Essential Pope Benedict XVI: His Central Writings and Speeches*, eds. John F. Thornton and Susan B. Varenne (San Francisco: HarperSan Francisco, 2007), 243–258.

<sup>2</sup> Ratzinger, "Biblical Interpretation," 253.

I will proceed in three steps. First, I will explore the groundbreaking and massively influential work of St. Irenaeus of Lyons, the second century genius who set the tone for the distinctively patristic style of biblical exegesis that remained more or less in place until the beginning of the modern era. Second, I will analyze the metaphysical and epistemological shifts that occurred in the early modern period and that opened the door to a mode of biblical interpretation strikingly at odds with the classical method. Third, against this backdrop, I will look at the Second Vatican Council's dogmatic constitution on divine revelation, *Dei Verbum* ("The Word of God") in the hopes of finding the path forward, the means of incorporating the historical-critical method into the context of a patristic-ecclesial method of interpretation. My hope is that a careful reading of *Dei Verbum* discloses not a blandly both/and approach nor a facile "beyondism," but rather a creatively integrated reading together of the ancient and the modern.

### *The Biblical Theology of St. Irenaeus of Lyons*

It is entirely appropriate to refer to the theological project of St. Irenaeus as biblical. Unlike Origen who wrote a generation later or even Augustine, Irenaeus was not endeavoring to fit Christian revelation into a pre-existing philosophical framework or even to establish a correlation with it. Rather, his theology is nothing but a sustained and reasoned reflection on the ideas, assumptions, images, history, and metaphor that constitute the biblical world.<sup>3</sup>

The typically modern dilemma of relating theology or doctrine to biblical exegesis would have struck Irenaeus as anomalous, for Irenaeus' theology is not an alien system of thought imposed on the Bible but rather the making plain of the inner logic of the Bible itself. For him, the Bible is indeed the "soul" of theology (to use the Second Vatican Council's expression), and theology is the proper interpretive lens of the Bible, the two existing in a kind of mutual intercommunion. Irenaeus pithily expresses this relationship with the phrase—found frequently throughout his writings—*regula fidei* (rule of faith). The *regula*, a primitive form of the creeds that would emerge out of the later Church councils, is a set of convictions, assumptions, and narrative content that grow organically out of the biblical witness itself. A kind of canon within the canon, the *regula fidei* allows the prospective interpreter to find his way through the often confusing thicket of the scriptural world. It has, accordingly, a sort of mystagogic function, indicating the structuring architecture of divine revelation.

For the sake of simplicity and clarity, I shall examine one form of the *regula fidei* found in the first book of Irenaeus' *Adversus Haereses* ("Against the Heresies"). It begins as follows: "The Church, although scattered over the face of the earth, received from the apostles and their disciples the faith in One God, the Father

3 See Eric Obsorn, *Irenaeus of Lyons* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 2001), 162–163.

Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth, the seas and all that in them is.”<sup>4</sup> The affirmation of God as creator of the entire universe—the totality of all that is not God—is, of course, the ground for Irenaeus’ fierce opposition to the Gnostics, who held the existence of a high God, beyond speech and knowledge, from whom had come forth, through a long series of emanations, a fallen and compromised divinity who was responsible for the material realm. This lesser god they identified with the Yahweh of the Old Testament.

It was the signal merit of Irenaeus to have perceived that the Gnostic notion of God remains fundamentally irreconcilable with the narrative logic of the Bible. Now two important consequences follow from this assertion of God’s creativity. First, since God is creator and unique (the one God), it follows that all of finite reality must come from him. In a word, he creates *ex nihilo* (“out of nothing”) and not in the manner of the Platonic demi-urgos or the Aristotelian prime mover, effecting some pre-existing matter or energy that is ontologically co-basic with him.

In making this claim, Irenaeus departed from practically the whole of the philosophical and religious tradition that preceded and surrounded him.<sup>5</sup> Even the Jewish philosopher Philo, who was deeply grounded in biblical revelation, held back from speaking of *creatio ex nihilo*, insisting that Yahweh fashioned the world out of some sort of prime matter. Now if God is, in the proper and radical sense, creator, then God is simultaneously, completely other than the world *and* present to the world in the most intimate way possible. The one who made the universe *ex nihilo* could never be identified as a reality within the universe. He is neither one being among many nor the totality of existing things; by the same token, the creator *ex nihilo* must stand in the most ontologically intimate relationship with anything that exists outside of himself, since quite literally nothing stands between him and that which he makes. Augustine would express this paradox as follows: God is both *intimior intimo meo et superior summo meo* (“closer to me than I am to myself and higher than what is highest in me”). One could sum up the situation by speaking, with Robert Sokolowski, of God’s non-competitive transcendence, or with Catherine Tanner, of God’s “otherly” otherness, an echo of Nicholas of Cusa’s claim that God, the *totaliter aliter* (“totally other”), remains the *non-Aliud* (“not-Other”).<sup>6</sup>

The second great implication of the doctrine of creation is that all of finite reality—spiritual as well as physical—is good and marked by a participation in the reasonability of the *Logos*. This too tells against the Gnostics, who held that mat-

4 St. Irenaeus of Lyons, *Adversus Haereses*, Bk. 1, Chap. 10, 1. Text in *Against the Heresies Book 1*, trans. and annot. Dominic J. Unger, rev. John J. Dillon, Ancient Christian Writers 55 (New York: Paulist, 1992), 48–51.

5 See Gerhard May, *Creatio Ex Nihilo: The Doctrine of ‘Creation out of Nothing’ in Early Christian Thought* (New York: T & T Clark International, 1994), 168–169.

6 Robert Sokolowski, *The God of Faith and Reason* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame, 1982), 36.

ter is ontologically compromised; but it also expresses the biblical conviction that all of created reality is, in some sense, a bearer of God's presence and implicated in the story that God wants to tell. If all of finite being comes forth here and now from the creative ground of God, then all things are necessarily connected to one another through God and are woven together according to God's intelligent purpose. The Book of Wisdom states this truth as follows: "Indeed, she [God's wisdom] reaches from end to end mightily and governs all things well" (Wisd. 8:1). On the modern telling, space is simply the empty arena in which extended things situate themselves haphazardly and time is simply the linear unfolding of event after event. But on Irenaeus' biblical reading, space and time participate in the eternal reasonability of God and hence take on a narrative density and luminosity.<sup>7</sup>

After affirming the unity and creativity of God, the *regula fidei* goes on to assert the truth of the incarnation, the enfleshment of the Son of God: "and in one Christ Jesus the Son of God, who became incarnate for our salvation."<sup>8</sup> There is a tight logical connection between the doctrines of creation and incarnation, for it is only the creator God who can possibly enter into a personal union with a finite nature in such a way that the finite nature is not compromised or overwhelmed. The incarnation becomes thereby the fullest manifestation of Sokolowski's non-competitive divine transcendence. For Irenaeus' purposes, the incarnation displays the fundamental logic of God's relationship to his creation: non-violent, alluring rather than imposing, enhancing rather than domineering. It is this dynamic that most basically distinguishes the biblical story from the Greek and Roman narratives of divine-human relationships, a point emphatically made by Augustine in the *City of God*.<sup>9</sup> The doctrine of the incarnation also implies that the true God does not despise matter but rather desires to transfigure it under the influence of spirit. The *regula* states the purpose of the Incarnation explicitly: "to gather up all things in himself and to raise the flesh of all mankind to life." It will belong to the structuring logic of the biblical story that matter is not to be escaped from but rather transformed and raised to a higher ontological pitch through more intense participation in the divine manner of being.

Next, the *regula* affirms the existence of the Holy Spirit and specifies that God the Father, through the Son and the Spirit—that is to say, needing no help from creatures—"makes, disposes, governs, and gives being to all things." The principal actor in the biblical narrative is this tri-personal God who shapes the whole of his creation purposefully and lovingly, according to the manner of an artist or storyteller. Since he is non-competitive, his action is utterly compatible

7 Matthew Levering, *Participatory Biblical Exegesis: A Theology of Biblical Interpretation* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame, 2008), 6–10.

8 Irenaeus, *Adversus Haereses*, Bk. 1, Chap. 10, 1.

9 St. Augustine, *City of God Against the Pagans*, Bk. 3, ed. R. W. Dyson, Cambridge Texts in the History of Political Thought (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1998), 94–142.

with the free and purposeful action of his rational creatures. Again, the Irenaean God accomplishes his end sweetly, through allurements.

Now this *regula veritatis*, Irenaeus insists, was not so much his work but that of the apostle John, the mentor to Polycarp who in turn taught Irenaeus himself. “For John, the disciple of the Lord ... wishing to put an end to all such ideas (Gnosticism) ... and to establish the Church in the rule of truth” handed on this formula.<sup>10</sup> Time and again, Irenaeus characterizes his work as the handing on of the apostolic teaching; in fact, his short summary of the *Adversus Haereses* bears the straightforward title *Demonstration of the Apostolic Preaching*. In a word, the *regula* does not represent a philosophical consensus or an externally imposed matrix of interpretation, but rather the apostolically ratified distillation of the essential biblical worldview, the fundamental metaphysics that St. John and his companions insisted must undergird the biblical story. This is why, for Irenaeus, these “doctrinal” claims are not the least bit distorting but clarifying. Indeed, apart from them, the biblical witness would remain opaque and the essential story murky and open to misinterpretation. To suggest that the *regula fidei* should be set aside in order to allow the authentic intention of the biblical authors to emerge would have struck Irenaeus as so much nonsense.

We might sum up the sense of the *regula* with the word “participation.” The universe in its entirety—both its spiritual and material elements—participates in the “to-be” of God, and through this common participation, all created things are related to one another. God’s providence and governance conduce toward an even richer creaturely share in the divine life. In an oft-repeated formula, Irenaeus says that God is unmade but the creature made, that is to say, continually molded and shaped so as to participate ever more fully in God’s life.<sup>11</sup> And since the Bible is the story of God’s dealings with creation, the Scriptures themselves participate in the divine *Logos* (“Word”) and particular parts of Scripture participate in one another, contributing to the whole of divine revelation.

The Bible, consequently, ought never to be read simply as a congeries of unrelated tales, prophecies, histories, and words of wisdom, drawn from a variety of sources and in response to differing historical situations. Though it might seem that way “from the ground,” it takes on coherence and consistency when read from the standpoint of the divine author. Thus, the Bible is a *symphonos*, a sounding together of tones and melodies, under the direction of the supreme artist. And, since we the readers of the Bible also participate in the divine being and are subject to the divine governance, we should expect the Scriptural narrative to be illuminating for us. Finally, given that God is the author of both the Bible and

10 Irenaeus, *Adversus Haereses*, Bk. 3, Chap. 11, 1. Text in *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 1: The Apostolic Fathers, Justin Martyr, Irenaeus, eds. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2004), 426.

11 *Adversus Haereses*, Bk. 2, Chap. 10, 4; *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, 370.

history itself, we should not be surprised to find a whole set of figural or typological correspondences throughout the Scriptural witness. We should expect that God will speak in a distinctive accent and according to certain characteristic patterns and rhythms. These hermeneutical assumptions bring Irenaeus quite close to the rabbis of the inter-testamental period who, as James Kugel argues, operated out of four fundamental convictions—namely, that God in a very real sense is the author of the whole Scripture, that the Bible is consistent with itself, that its meaning is often cryptic, and that it has relevance for us today.<sup>12</sup>

With this entire interpretive apparatus in place, Irenaeus reads the Scripture. He interprets Adam and Eve as children or perhaps better teen-agers, good but inexperienced and hence easily deceived. God allowed them to fall so that through the pain of their sin they might come to deeper life.<sup>13</sup> This approach, so different from the mainstream of the tradition, which followed Augustine, was picked up by Georg W. F. Hegel, Søren Kierkegaard, Paul Tillich, and Teilhard de Chardin in the modern period. But it was perfectly in accord with Irenaeus' own instincts concerning the goodness and all-powerfulness of God who makes and the malleability and educability of the creature who is made. The rest of the biblical story is the account of the process by which the Father, using his two hands, the Son and the Spirit, shaped the descendants of Adam and Eve back into friendship with God.

This shaping is delineated by Irenaeus according to a number of covenants and elections throughout salvation history. God made a covenant with the whole world at the time of the flood, and then with Abraham as he formed a people after his own heart, and then with Moses as he drew Israel from slavery to freedom, and finally with David as he established a kingdom that would last for all ages. These various figures, on Irenaeus' reading, were approached by the Word who was, as it were, gradually accustoming the human race to the divine presence. And hence the various covenants with the Old Testament figures were anticipations of the incarnation, the full accommodation of divinity to humanity and humanity to divinity.<sup>14</sup>

As the divine *Logos* incarnate, as the culmination of the process of the shaping of Israel to God's friendship, Jesus is, in person, the "recapitulation" of time and history. The notion of *anakephalaiosis*, rendered in Latin as *recapitulatio* is the master idea of Irenaeus' biblical theology. Jesus draws all of the strands of history and revelation together in himself, preserving and repeating them even as he brings them to fulfillment.<sup>15</sup> Thus, he is the new Adam, the one who participates fully

12 James Kugel, *How To Read the Bible: A Guide to Scripture, Then and Now* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2007), 14–17.

13 Irenaeus, *Adversus Haereses*, Bk. 4, Chap. 39, 1. *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, 523.

14 Irenaeus, *Adversus Haereses*, Bk. 4, Chap. 25, 3. *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, 496.

15 See among many other references, Irenaeus, *Adversus Haereses*, Bk. 3, Chap. 19, 3. *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, 449.

in the reality of Adam, including physicality and alienation from God, even as he draws all that was implicit and potential in Adam to completion. And Mary the mother of Jesus is the new Eve, sharing in the reality of the first Eve even as she redirects the momentum of forebear's sin. Jesus too is the recapitulation of creation. In his resurrection from the dead, he heals, renews, and elevates the fallen world. The recapitulating Christ is himself the interpretive key of the whole Scripture, since he is the *Logos* made flesh, the very embodiment of the *regula fidei* in all of its dimensions. When this key is lost the various pieces of the biblical revelation remain disconnected, or as was the case with the Gnostics, they are assembled erroneously. According to Irenaeus' famous trope, the Gnostics, lacking the proper pattern, turned what should have been the beautiful picture of a king into a depiction of a fox.<sup>16</sup>

Irenaeus bequeathed this extraordinarily integrated manner of biblical interpretation to the great tradition. It was repeated and enhanced by Origen and St. John Chrysostom in the east and St. Jerome and Augustine in the west, to name just the most prominent figures. And it continued its vigorous development through the high Middle Ages to the work of St. Thomas Aquinas, arguably the most important of the medieval *magistri sacrae paginae* ("master of the sacred page").

Within the context of the very first question of the *Summa theologiae* ("Summary of Theology"), Thomas wonders whether it is appropriate that the Scripture have a variety of senses.<sup>17</sup> In his response, Thomas clarifies, in line with Irenaeus' approach, that the author of the Bible is God and that God can use words to designate things, as any human author could do, but that he can also use things to designate things.<sup>18</sup> When this latter correspondence takes place, we speak of the spiritual sense of the Bible, which is subdivided into the moral, the allegorical, and the anagogical. For our purposes, what is interesting here is the implicit affirmation of a "participation metaphysic" undergirding the biblical hermeneutics. One "thing," which is to say a person, place, or event can speak allegorically, morally, or anagogically of another thing precisely because all created reality is interdependent and co-inherent, drawn together by their common implication in divine causality and governance. Were God not, in this strong sense, creator and governor of the cosmos, the integrity and coherence of the biblical witness would collapse. Also, Thomas's concentration on the intentionality of the divine author shows him to be a disciple of Irenaeus. Like his patristic forebear, Thomas does not deny for a moment that fully engaged human authors have written the various texts of the Bible,

16 *Adversus Haereses*, Bk. I, Chap. 8, 1. *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, 326.

17 Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, Part 1a, Question 1, article 10. Text in *Summa Theologica*, 3 vols. (New York Benzinger Brothers 1947).

18 "auctor sacrae Scripturae est Deus, in cuius potestate est ut non solum voces ad significandum accomodet (quod etiam homo facere potest) sed etiam res ipsas." Aquinas, *Summa*, pt. 1a, q. 1, art. 1.

but he sees their efforts as a participation in the non-competitive and intelligent direction of the divine mind.

### *Duns Scotus and the Origins of Modern Biblical Scholarship*

Many have told the story of the emergence of a new, typically modern, approach to Biblical interpretation in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, but insufficient attention has been paid to the shifts in the metaphysical base that made this transition possible. In recent years, many scholars of the origins of modernity have indicated the figure of Blessed John Duns Scotus as decisive.<sup>19</sup> Writing just a generation after Thomas Aquinas, Scotus consciously departed from Thomas and opted for a univocal rather than an analogical conception of being. On this reading, God was construed as one being among many, the supreme instance of the genus “existence.”

In accord with his analogical conception, Thomas had denied that God could be situated in any genus, including that of being, since God is not *a* being, but rather that in whom essence and existence coincide, *ipsum esse* (“existence itself”) rather than *ens summum* (“the highest being”). But in the context of Scotus’ conception, God is indeed *ens summum*—the highest being among beings—and hence the essential ontological link between God and creatures is compromised. Scotus’ successor William of Occam would present his fundamental ontology as follows: *praeter illas partes absolutas nulla res* (“outside of these absolute parts, there is no real thing”).<sup>20</sup> In other words, the connection that obtained, on Thomas’s interpretation, between God and those finite things that participate in him had been eliminated and only absolute things—both divine and non-divine—remained. This univocal conception of being had massive implications for the way that one viewed, not only individual existing things, but also time itself. History, which had been seen as participating in the intelligent providence of God, came to be seen as purely linear, a series of isolated and essentially disconnected events. If God were to involve himself in history, it would be in an interruptive and occasional manner.

The metaphysical view that we have been sketching was inherited by the Protestant reformers, who were largely formed in schools dominated by some version of Occam’s nominalism. It is on clear display in Martin Luther’s and John Calvin’s one-sided emphasis on the divine transcendence, in their suspicion of mysticism, and in their stress on the isolated individual in his interiority confronting the grace and freedom of God. But it is in the philosophers of the modern period that the breakdown of a participation view is most obvious. When they speak of God—and they do it often—modern thinkers tend to construe God as a supreme being only distantly related to the concerns of the world. Think of the

19 Robert Barron, *The Priority of Christ: Toward a Postliberal Catholicism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos, 2007), 12–16.

20 Umberto Eco, *Art and Beauty in the Middle Ages* (New Haven: Yale University, 1986), 88.



cosmic designer proposed by the Deists or of René Descartes' perfect being or Immanuel Kant's metaphysically inaccessible moral postulate. Now the dissolution of the participation metaphysics can break in the opposite direction as well, God becoming, not so much a distant supreme being but nature or finite reality considered as a totality. We see this kind of pantheist mysticism clearly in Baruch Spinoza who said, "*Deus sive natura*," God or nature, as though the terms were simply interchangeable. On this Spinozan reading, there is no longer a tensive participatory relationship between the God who is *ipsum esse* and the world that he continually makes. Rather, "God" is simply another way of talking about the world. And there is accordingly no dramatic play of infinite and finite freedoms, but rather all is determined as the outflowing of God: *natura naturans*, "nature naturing" or "nature doing what nature is wont to do."

I believe that it is massively important that the founder of modern biblical criticism was this same Spinoza. I do not think for a moment that all of historical criticism is reducible to the Spinoza system, but I do indeed think that insufficient attention has been paid to the Spinozan assumptions that often inform, consciously or not, the work of historical biblical critics across the centuries and up to the present day.<sup>21</sup> What precisely is that system? In his hugely influential *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* ("Theological-Political Treatise") of 1670, Spinoza laid out a series of hermeneutical principles that, as James Kugel comments, "became the marching orders of biblical scholars for the next three centuries."<sup>22</sup> First, he determined that "all knowledge of Scripture must be sought from Scripture alone." In making this recommendation, he was trying to get rid of Jewish midrash and Christian allegory and typology, all of which led to "absurdities." The Bible ought to be read straightforwardly and literally on its own terms. Second, he advised that the biblical interpreter should attend carefully to the language and conceptual world of the biblical authors themselves, careful not to project his own thinking and presumptions on to the text. Third, Spinoza counseled that the biblical interpreter must seek to understand the mind and historical context of authors of the Scriptures and of the communities that they were addressing. Finally, he urged that the sane interpreter of the Bible must rid himself of the assumption that the Scriptures are consistent with themselves and admit that they are, in fact, filled with anomalies, inconsistencies, and inaccuracies.

As Kugel remarks, "it is not difficult to see that the program outlined by Spinoza calls for the systematic dismantling of the four assumptions mentioned earlier," assumptions basic to Irenaeus' manner of exegesis.<sup>23</sup> Is the Scripture cryptic and allusive? Not at all: Scripture should be taken to mean what it says

21 David Laird Dungan, *A History of the Synoptic Problem* (New York: Doubleday, 1999), esp. 198–260.

22 James Kugel, *How To Read the Bible*, 31.

23 Kugel, *How To Read the Bible*, 32.

uncomplicatedly. Is Scripture applicable to us today? Not at all: the Bible can be understood properly only in the context of its own time. Is Scripture unified and harmonious? By no means: one should assume that the Bible is a collection of disparate texts, written by a wide variety of authors to a wide variety of audiences for a wide variety of purposes. Is Scripture authored by God? One would never guess it from Spinoza's exclusive stress on the human authorship of the biblical books.

Those on the other side of the post-participation divide, for instance the deists, ran rather gleefully with Spinoza's recommendations. Thomas Jefferson, David Hume, Voltaire, and many other deists, took apart the classical sense of the Bible with a certain relish. Hume's meditations on the Pentateuch are typical: "a book presented to us by a barbarous and ignorant people written in an age when they were still more barbarous, and in all probability long after the facts which it relates ... resembling those fabulous accounts which every nation gives of its origin."<sup>24</sup> From Hume, it is a very short step to Hermann Reimarus and David Strauss and their unambiguously debunking program. Perhaps no modern more pithily summarized the Spinozan revolution than Benjamin Jewett who in 1860 opined, "Scripture has one meaning—the meaning which it had in the mind of the prophet or evangelist who first uttered or wrote, to the hearers or readers who first received it."<sup>25</sup> As Jon Levenson has pointed out, this hyperconcentration on the intention of the historical author within his historical period, and in abstraction from the wider literary, theological, and metaphysical context, has led effectively to the relegation of the Bible to the past. And this was, in the minds of many, precisely Spinoza's purpose.

What I should like to stress is how the Spinozan program for biblical interpretation is grounded in the post-participation metaphysical program, embraced by Spinoza and most of his modern philosophical colleagues. If God is no longer a person (or at least not a person with much of an interest in the world) and if he is no longer the Lord of history, exercising a providential governance over things that are distinct from him even as they participate in him, then the Spinozan assumptions are valid. And since there is no ongoing work of the Holy Spirit, doctrinal or dogmatic rules such as Irenaeus' *regula* are distorting.

I would like to draw attention to another strain of modern biblical interpretation which has had a rather massive impact on much theologizing—both Catholic and Protestant—over the last two centuries. It runs from Friedrich Schleiermacher, the founder of liberal Protestantism, through Adolf Harnack and Rudolf Bultmann, and its chief characteristic is neo-Marcionism, or a radical "de-Judaizing" of the Scripture. It is by no means accidental that the principal

<sup>24</sup> Quoted in Kugel, *How To Read the Bible*, 34.

<sup>25</sup> Jewett's 1860 essay, "On the Interpretation of Scripture," can be found in Josephine M. Guy, ed., *The Victorian Age: An Anthology of Sources and Documents* (New York: Routledge, 1998).

philosophical influence on Schleiermacher was none other than Spinoza who had, to say the least, an ambiguous relationship with his own native Jewish religion. Even the most casual survey of Schleiermacher's major works shows that he was surprisingly neglectful of the Old Testament. What he wanted to establish, of course, was a ground for religion outside of what he took to be the ambiguous historical claims of positive revelation. Certainly Gotthold Lessing and Kant influenced him in this regard, but he was shaped above all by the devastation caused by the wars of religion that ravaged Europe in the wake of the Reformation. It appeared as though neither Protestants nor Catholics were able to adjudicate their disputes through reasonable appeal to their Sacred Scriptures, and therefore in the interest of peace, Schleiermacher wanted to find a new interpretive context for the claims of religion. He discovered it in the universally shared feeling of absolute dependency, an intuition described in the Bible but by no means essentially tied to it. This allowed him to declare independence from what his contemporaries held to be increasingly incredible and suspect Scriptures.

Here is Schleiermacher's own assessment of the believability of classical biblical hermeneutics: "Do you hope that the traditional views of the messianic prophecies and indeed of types will be found credible by those who have come to a sound and lively view of historical matters? I cannot believe it."<sup>26</sup> But finally this is of no matter because, "of all that I praise and feel at its [religion's] work, hardly anything can be found in the Holy Books."<sup>27</sup> Furthermore, Schleiermacher dismisses the patristic and medieval method of interpretation with the back of his hand: "To those who would seek to restore the fallen walls of their Jewish Zion and its Gothic pillars, I say that we must discover the essence of religion in personal experience."<sup>28</sup> Indeed, so dispensable is the Old Testament that Schleiermacher can say, "Christianity does indeed stand in a special historical connection with Judaism; but as far as concerns its historical existence and aim, its relations to Judaism and heathenism are the same."<sup>29</sup>

It would be hard to imagine any of the first Christians finding that last statement anything but breathtakingly wrongheaded. What this signals is the keynote for most of the theological liberalism of the past two centuries, that is to say, the disassociation of Christianity from its Old Testament roots. N. T. Wright has commented that most of the christology of the modern period has been essentially Marcionite in form, and we can see the truth of this assertion borne out in the

26 Friedrich D. E. Schleiermacher, *On the Glaubenslehre: Two Letters to Dr. Lücke*, trans. and annot. James Duke and Francis Fiorenza (Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1981), 65.

27 Quoted in Francis Watson, *Text and Truth: Redefining Biblical Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1997), 130.

28 Watson, *Text and Truth*, 130.

29 Schleiermacher, *Glaubenslehre*, 12, Quoted in Watson, *Text and Truth*, 138.

remarkably unbiblical christologies of Tillich, Karl Rahner, and David Tracy to name just a few representative cases.<sup>30</sup>

A century after Schleiermacher, Adolf von Harnack made explicit the implicit Marcionism of his predecessor. Harnack said that Marcion was his “first love,” and he gleefully embraced the heresiarch’s program of de-Judaizing, commenting that Marcion saw “the religion of Jesus Christ corrupted by the addition of the Old Testament ... resulting in a syncretistic catholicism that differed sharply from its founder’s view that all traditions, doctrines, and forms were essentially indifferent.” Thus, for Harnack, Marcion was “the first Protestant,” who rightly perceived that “the Pauline antithesis of righteousness by faith and not by works leads logically to the rejection of the Old Testament.” Like his master, Harnack proposed that the god of the Old Testament was uncouth, angry, and lacking in refinement.

Something very similar is on display in the exegetical and theological work of Rudolf Bultmann. Like most moderns, Bultmann rejected the classical apologetic argument that miracles and prophecies grounded Christian truth claims. These have been eliminated by serious historical criticism, but their disappearance poses no problem to authentic Christianity, which is based, in Bultmann’s reading, upon God’s eschatological act of salvation proposed in Christ. In point of fact, the vitiating of the Old Testament is something of a liberation for Christianity, for it allows us to appreciate the soteriologically significant Jesus: “As the eschatological deed of God, Jesus makes an end of all ethnic history as the sphere of God’s dealing with man.” This reading compels Bultmann to deny explicitly Paul’s contention that the Church is grafted on to the tree of Israel: “For the history of Israel is a closed chapter; it is not our history and the events which meant something for Israel mean nothing more to us.”

This line of reasoning brings Bultmann quite close to the most radical teaching of Schleiermacher: “It is true that, in a certain sense, the history of Israel has become part of our Western heritage, but the same is also true of Greek history, so that it might be said that the Spartans fell at Thermopylae for us and that Socrates drank the hemlock for us. Jerusalem is not a holier city for us than Athens or Rome.” Because the Jewish background is dispensable to the presentation of Christianity, it can be replaced “by other illustrative material, drawn perhaps from Greek tragedy or modern philosophy.” And this, of course, is just what Bultmann did, substituting the anthropology of Martin Heidegger for the Bible. One would be hard pressed to find a more thoroughgoing embrace of Marcionism—or a more complete rejection of the patristic-medieval manner of biblical interpretation.

### ***Raymond Brown and the Assumptions of the Moderns***

Having surveyed the development of some strains of modern biblical interpretation, I should like to consider the work of the man generally regarded as the dean

30 See N. T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1996), 26.

of contemporary Catholic biblical exegesis, Raymond E. Brown. I would like to be eminently clear from the outset of this analysis that I do not think that Brown is Schleiermacher, Harnack, or Bultmann. He had benefited from the numerous and vociferous critiques of those players and had been formed in the broad Catholic tradition of biblical reading. Nevertheless, I am convinced that Brown shares certain assumptions and basic moves with his modern forebears, and that these have rendered his approach problematic.

In his programmatic essay on hermeneutics in the *Jerome Biblical Commentary*, and in any number of books and articles, Brown laid out and defended his vision of modern historical criticism. He construed it as, basically, the attempt to discover, through the use of philology, literary analysis, historical investigation, redaction criticism, and other tools, what precisely was the communicative intention of the author or redactor of a biblical text as he addressed his particular audience. This intention Brown identified with the literal sense of the Scriptural text. He spoke readily enough of the *sensus plenior*, the fuller sense, corresponding to what God intended to communicate through a text, even beyond the explicit intention of the author, but he never developed this in his own exegetical writings, leaving its explication to theologians and spiritual writers. Proper biblical scholarship, he felt, is limited to the determination of "what a given text meant," while theology or spirituality can sort out what a text might mean in the present situation: "The meaning of the Bible ... goes beyond what the authors *meant* in a particular book. Not only scholarship but also Church teaching and tradition enters into the complex issue of what the Bible *means* to Christians."<sup>31</sup>

What concerns us is, first, the exaggerated bifurcation between biblical exegesis and theology, as though the latter is in an, at best, tenuous relationship to the former. If one had asked Thomas Aquinas to distinguish between his systematic theology and his biblical analysis, I am quite sure he would have been puzzled. As we have seen, he was known precisely as a *magister sacrae paginae*, and his theology is best characterized as an elaborate and sustained study of the Bible; his more formal biblical commentaries are shot through on every page with theology. Though Brown phrases his position here carefully, one cannot help but sense in his sharp division of exegesis from theology the Spinozan desire to interpret the Bible purely on its own terms and from within the context of its own history. And this gets to a second and deeper objection.

When Thomas and the Fathers before him were endeavoring to exegete the Scripture, they were not going after, primarily, what the historical authors intended, but rather what the divine author intended. They realized, of course, that God worked through the secondary causality of intelligently engaged human beings, but their real focus was on the God in whom both history as such and the

---

31 Raymond Brown, ed., *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Simon and Schuster, 1968).

biblical authors participated. In light of their creation metaphysics, they realized that history cannot be construed simply in a flat, linear manner but rather as an iconic manifestation of the eternal purposes of God. And this is precisely why they chose not to focus exclusively or even primarily on the intention of historical author but rather on the divine author working transhistorically through him.

Here is Matthew Levering's formulation of this position: "The problem with this view [Brown's account of historical-critical exegesis] is that 'what it meant' is inscribed with the triune God's creative and redemptive presence so profoundly as to defeat any strict version of the past tense: the past, as history ... is participatory."<sup>32</sup> Nicholas Lash commented on contemporary Catholic biblical scholarship in a very similar vein: "There is ... a sense in which the articulation of what the text might 'mean' today is a necessary condition of hearing what the text 'originally meant.'"<sup>33</sup> This is true because, in a participation framework of understanding, the Holy Spirit, who stands outside of time, is the author, simultaneously, of history, text, and interpretation.

In light of these clarifications, it is instructive to consult the section of Brown's article on hermeneutics where he discusses the characteristically patristic mode of biblical interpretation. In regard to Origen and the Alexandrian school in general, Brown says, "a good part of his allegorical exegesis was based on the theory that the Old Testament was christological in many passages ... this writer does not share the view that Origen's exegesis can really be revived for our time."<sup>34</sup> There is, of course, something breathtaking, and typically modern, about this blithe dismissal of 1,500 years of biblical interpretation. For Irenaeus, his patristic colleagues, and the doctors of the Middle Ages, such a denial of christological density to the Old Testament would be tantamount to Marcionism and would result in a seriously skewed reading of the Bible as a whole. From the standpoint of a participatory exegesis, which places a stress on the divine authorship of both the Bible and of the history of salvation itself, the christological character of the Old Testament is taken for granted as the indispensable propaedeutic to the appearance of the Word made flesh.

### *Dei Verbum and the Telling of God's Story*

Having analyzed the classical patristic mode of biblical hermeneutics and the modern approach that in so many fundamental ways departed from it, I should like to turn now to a consideration of the Vatican II document on divine revelation, *Dei Verbum*. When scholars survey the recent history of official ecclesial statements on biblical hermeneutics, they customarily cite *Dei Verbum* and Pius XII's encyclical *Divino Afflante Spiritu* ("Inspired by the Holy Spirit") as relatively

32 Levering, *Participatory Biblical Exegesis*, 198.

33 Nicholas Lash, *Theology on the Way To Emmaus* (London: SCM, 1986), 81.

34 Raymond Brown, ed., *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Simon and Schuster, 1968), 1154.

“liberal” documents in the measure that they allow for an openness to the historical critical method. They often cite, by way of contrast, *Dei Filius* (“The Son of God”) of the First Vatican Council and the encyclical *Providentissimus Deus* (“The God of All Providence”) of Leo XIII as relatively “conservative” statements.<sup>35</sup> Without denying for a moment *Dei Verbum’s* embrace of certain aspects of the modern approach, I would like to suggest that the document’s overall thrust is much more in the direction of a patristic, participation mode of interpretation. It is precisely the bringing together of the two styles in a non-competitive but still asymmetrical manner that constitutes the chief virtue of *Dei Verbum*.

The first chapter of *Dei Verbum* which deals directly with the question of revelation, brings us promptly into an Irenaean perspective, for it speaks of God’s gradual self-manifestation through his Word, culminating in the enfleshment of that Word in Jesus Christ. The document specifies that the purpose of this manifestation is none other than the drawing of human beings into friendship with God and participation in the divine life.

Then comes that distinctively Irenaean word *oeconomia* (“economy”), which is repeated like a refrain throughout *Dei Verbum*.<sup>36</sup> One could not speak coherently of an economy unless there were an *economus*, some great mind and personality responsible for the rational arrangement of nature and history. The very term therefore sums up a participative view of time and space. Next, *Dei Verbum* specifies that this pattern or economy of salvation (*revelationis oeconomiai*) unfolds *gestis verbisque*, both by gestures (acts) and words. It thereby implies that revelation is never simply a verbal or intellectual matter but an affair of factual history. In Thomas Aquinas’s language, God has authority over both words and “things” and can use both for his communicative purposes. Now this means that history cannot be construed in a purely linear way but must be interpreted as a coherent and artistically driven narrative, filled with allusions, anticipations, rhymes, echoes, meanings which double back upon themselves, typologies and prophecies.

On *Dei Verbum’s* reading, this participatory view of history and nature is rooted in the creative power of the Word. God witnesses to himself through the orderliness and beauty of the created world, and in a more pointed way, through salvation history. *Dei Verbum* mimics Irenaeus in laying out the contours of sacred history, commencing with the call of Abraham and the other patriarchs, the giving of the law through Moses, the summoning of the prophets and finally the arrival of the Messiah. And like the second century master, the Vatican II document characterizes this *oeconomia* as a succession of covenants made between God and

35 The encyclicals of Pius and Leo and Vatican I’s *Dei Filius* can be found in Dean P. Bécard, ed., *The Scripture Documents: An Anthology of Official Catholic Teachings* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2002).

36 Second Vatican Council, *Dei Verbum* (“The Word of God”), Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation, (November 18, 1965), 2, in *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils*, 2 vols., ed. Norman P. Tanner (Washington: Georgetown University, 1990), 972.

his people. This summation is *Dei Verbum's* version of Irenaeus' *regula fidei*.<sup>37</sup> The participatory metaphysics is further emphasized in the second chapter's discussion of the relationship between Scripture and Tradition.

In one of the most celebrated of its passages, *Dei Verbum* affirms that Bible and Tradition form together one great source of revelation, since both flow from the Holy Spirit, which is to say, from a power who properly transcends time and hence can effectively unite them. The pivotal third chapter, which treats explicitly of biblical inspiration and interpretation, situates itself thoroughly within a patristic framework. We hear that the sacred books were written under the influence of the Holy Spirit and hence *Deum habent auctorem* ("have God as their author").<sup>38</sup> That this does not amount to a naïve literalism is made clear in the immediately subsequent observation that "God chose and employed human agents, using their own powers and faculties in such a way that they wrote as authors in the true sense, and yet God acted in and through them."<sup>39</sup> The ground for this paradoxical assertion is in the consistently biblical teaching that God relates to his creation non-competitively, allowing it to flourish on its own even as he works through it. Perhaps the clearest Old Testament statement of this principle is in Isaiah 26:12 when the prophet states: "It is you, O Lord, who have accomplished all that we have done."<sup>40</sup> But, as we have seen, the idea comes to richest and most dramatic expression in the New Testament claim that God became human, without ceasing to be God and without compromising the integrity of the creature he became.

The fifth-century Council of Chalcedon honored this biblical logic when it spoke of the two natures in Jesus coming together without mixing, mingling, or confusion. It thereby held off the triple threat of monophysitism (a one-sided stress on divinity), Nestorianism (a one-sided stress on humanity), and Arianism (a compromise of the two). The negation of all three positions was made possible by the distinctively biblical belief in God as creator. Extrapolating from this discussion, we can say, with *Dei Verbum*, that the true God is capable of working decisively through intelligent created causes but in such a way that the full integrity and purposefulness of those causes is not compromised. On a more Nestorian reading of inspiration—prominent in much of modernity—one might speak of an independent human author speculating according to his lights, with perhaps a vague relationship to a distant God. On a monophysite reading, one might speak—as fundamentalists and literalists do—of a God who uses human agents in a domineering manner, essentially eliminating their own intelligence. Both fall short of the participative view on display in *Dei Verbum*.

37 *Dei Verbum*, 4, in Tanner, *Decrees*, 973; compare *Dei Verbum*, 15, in Tanner, *Decrees*, 977.

38 *Dei Verbum*, 11, in Tanner, *Decrees*, 975.

39 *Dei Verbum*, 11, in Tanner, *Decrees*, 975–976.

40 The translation here is from the New American Bible (NAB).



We must be exceptionally careful here, since Chalcedon, even as it insisted on the separation of the natures, did not simply lay them out side-by-side. Rather, it affirmed a certain asymmetricality in their rapport, since both natures are actualized precisely by the divine personhood of Jesus. In Christ, God uses a human nature in an instrumental way, but it would never be appropriate to reverse the logic and speak of a human Christ using his divine nature instrumentally. The divinity of Jesus does not suppress his humanity, but it does control and transcend it. And this relationship most fully expresses the biblical logic of divine-human relationality, including that which obtains between divine inspiration and human authorship.

All of this is meant to call into question Brown's insistence that one can and should do biblical exegesis with an exclusive focus on the intentionality of the human authors. The one-sidedness of this approach amounts to a violation of both the non-competitiveness and the asymmetricality of the Chalcedonian theo-logic. In light of this clarification, it is interesting to note the ideological bias in Norman Tanner's translation of a line from paragraph 12 of *Dei Verbum*. He renders *quid hagiographi reapse significare intenderint et eorum verbis manifestare Deo placuerit* as "what meaning the biblical writers actually had in mind; that will also be what God chose to manifest through their words."<sup>41</sup> In point of fact, the *et* by no means entails an equivalency between divine and human intention. A much fairer rendering would be "what the sacred authors really intended to signify and what it pleased God to manifest through their words." In authentic scriptural exegesis, the primary focus is on the manner in which God has used a human instrument to communicate *his* meaning.

Nodding vigorously in the direction of modern criticism, *Dei Verbum* emphasizes the crucial importance of attending to authorial intention and literary genre in biblical interpretation. One should never approach a more straightforwardly historical text such as 1 Samuel with the same hermeneutical assumptions that one might employ to survey a text such as the prophetic Book of Jonah. But then the Council document immediately affirms what would come to be called "canonical criticism," insisting that the Bible as a whole must be used as the interpretive matrix for any part of Scripture. Over and against Spinoza (and Brown), *Dei Verbum* maintains "Holy Scripture requires to be read and interpreted in the light of the same Spirit through whom it was written."<sup>42</sup> This principle is clearly violated in the measure that the recovery of the mind of the historical authors is the exclusive preoccupation of biblical hermeneutics.

Chapter Four of *Dei Verbum*, which treats of the Old Testament, is deeply Irenaean in spirit. It speaks of God's intention to save the world through the preparation of a "plan or *dispensatio*," and then specifies, once more, that the plan

41 *Dei Verbum*, 12, in Tanner, *Decrees*, 976.

42 *Dei Verbum*, 12, in Tanner, *Decrees*, 976; compare *Dei Verbum*, 15.

unfolds according to a series of covenants and elections. Furthermore, it employs the explicitly Irenaean notion of God's "accommodation" to man in order to explicate the different modalities of Old Testament revelation. *Dei Verbum* uses the Irenaean term *oconomia* to describe the structuring logic of both salvation history and the Bible itself, and it states clearly, again in a distinctly Irenaean manner, that this *oconomia* is directed to Christ. To be sure, the Old Testament texts have their own spiritual integrity, but they are particularly revered by Christians in the measure that "in them our salvation in Christ is hinted at under signs and symbols." Echoing Augustine's famous formula, *Dei Verbum* says that because God is the *inspirator et auctor* ("inspirer and author") of both Testaments, he brings it about that "the New Testament should be hidden in the Old and the Old Testament should be made manifest in the New."<sup>43</sup>

In the sixth and final chapter of *Dei Verbum* we find a discussion of the role of Scripture in the life of the Church today. The Council fathers call for helpful translations of the Bible so that all believers can have easy access to the Word of God, and then they explicitly recommend the study of the Church Fathers, both east and west, as a privileged way of coming to know the meaning of Scripture. How at odds this is with Raymond Brown's blithe dismissal of patristic analysis. And they call for a sort of mutual co-penetration of biblical exegesis and theology, each one conditioning and informing the other. When they speak of the Bible as the "soul of theology," they imply that Scripture animates theology and that theology instantiates and gives concrete expression to the meaning of Scripture. The Spinozan and modern separation of exegesis and dogmatics is thereby implicitly called into question.

Like so many of the other texts of Vatican II, *Dei Verbum* is best read under the rubric of *ressourcement*, the recovery of the Biblical and patristic roots of the Christian faith. The great *ressourcement* theologians of the twentieth century, many of whom were *periti* ("experts") at the Council, tended to engage modernity in an oblique manner. Unlike their liberal colleagues who endeavored to present Christian theology in a straightforwardly modern form, the *ressourcement* masters—Henri De Lubac, Hans Urs von Balthasar, Ratzinger, Jean Daniélou—attempted to assimilate the best of modernity to the patristic form of the faith. They took modernity in, but they adapted it and corralled, making it ancillary to classical Christianity. This is just the method followed by the authors of *Dei Verbum* in regard to characteristically modern modes of biblical analysis.

And it is precisely this vibrant, patristically-flavored participatory exegesis that is meant to bear great fruit in the liturgy. In *Sacrasanctum Concilium* ("This Sacred Council"), Vatican II's constitution on the liturgy, we find the frank assertion that "the importance of Scripture in the celebration of the liturgy is

43 *Dei Verbum*, 16, in Tanner, *Decrees*, 977.

paramount."<sup>44</sup> The conciliar fathers remind us that the readings at Mass are derived from Scripture, as are the psalms and, more indirectly, the prayers that are recited and the hymns that are sung. The Bible is the soul of the Mass as it is of theology. When the fathers call for a "fuller, more varied, and more appropriate approach to the reading of the Scripture,"<sup>45</sup> they are not asking simply for more of the Bible but for the integral, organic, richly typological reading advocated in *Dei Verbum*. The proof of this is in the practical norms that followed the Council, according to which a patristically-flavored typological relationship is meant typically to obtain between the Old Testament reading and the Gospel at Mass.

The liturgy is, in a very real sense, the proper home of the Bible, the place where the Scriptures are most effectively presented and understood. This is in no sense to gainsay the importance of more technical exegesis, even of a modern sort, but it is to insist, in the spirit of Irenaeus and the other Fathers, that the Bible is, above all, God's Word, God's story, told according to his intention and for his purpose.

---

44 Second Vatican Council, *Sacrosanctum Concilium* ("This Sacred Council"), Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, 24, in Tanner, *Decrees*, 826.

45 *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, 35, in Tanner, *Decrees*, 827.

