



THE

END

OF

# INTERPRETATION

*Reclaiming the  
Priority of Ecclesial  
Exegesis*

R. R. RENO

# THE END OF INTERPRETATION

*Reclaiming the Priority  
of Ecclesial Exegesis*

**R. R. RENO**

  
**Baker Academic**  
*a division of Baker Publishing Group*  
Grand Rapids, Michigan

R. R. Reno, *The End of Interpretation*  
Baker Academic, a division of Baker Publishing Group © 2022  
Used by permission.

# CONTENTS

Introduction xi

1. What Makes Exegesis Theological? 1
2. Theology and Interpretation 31
3. Origen and Spiritual Reading 51
4. Reformation Controversy and Biblical Interpretation 77
5. In the Beginning 91
6. That They All May Be One 113
7. Law, Loyalty, and Love 131
8. An Exegetical Postmortem 153

Acknowledgments 169

Index 171

# INTRODUCTION

In 1988, then Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger delivered a lecture in New York: “Biblical Interpretation in Crisis.” He observed that, after two hundred years of historical-critical study of the Bible, we need “a better synthesis between the historical and theological methods.”<sup>1</sup> Achieving this goal requires careful critical thinking about historical criticism, which often claims far greater certainty for its results than closer inspection shows appropriate. And the future Pope Benedict XVI observed that any text—especially sacred Scripture—will give up the full treasure of its meaning only to those who approach with sympathetic hearts open to hearing what is being said rather than with an eagerness to pigeonhole the text in accord with pet ideas and prearranged schemes.

As befits an address by a former theology professor, “Biblical Interpretation in Crisis” was a closely argued lecture. The themes Ratzinger raised remain salient to anyone who wishes to think clearly about the limits (and achievements) of historical criticism and other modern methods of biblical interpretation. Yet the turmoil surrounding his lecture suggests that long-standing

1. Joseph Ratzinger, “Biblical Interpretation in Crisis” (Erasmus Lecture, sponsored by the Institute on Religion and Public Life, New York, NY, 1988), <https://www.firstthings.com/web-exclusives/2008/04/biblical-interpretation-in-crisis>.

questions concerning hermeneutics, philosophy, and textual methods are secondary in our time, not primary. Ratzinger was then head of the Vatican's Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, the office in Rome charged with the task of articulating and enforcing doctrinal standards. Among those standards are moral teachings condemning homosexual acts. As a consequence, his presence in New York attracted gay-rights protesters who disrupted the lecture and, once expelled, banged on the windows. When the lecture was finished, New York police officers had to hustle the cardinal into a nearby police van in order to escape the raucous scene.

Since 1988, the moral hostility toward Christianity has only increased, eclipsing what are now old-fashioned objections that belief in the miraculous and supernatural is not rational or that Christians rely on scriptural testimony that does not stand up to critical scrutiny. In these circumstances, any sort of rapprochement between the standards of academic study and Christian theological commitments, however well argued, gains little traction. A generation ago, it might have been the case that modern historical scholarship could enter into fruitful dialogue with theology. When he became Pope Benedict XVI in 2005, Ratzinger suggested as much. At that time, he returned to the University of Regensburg, where he had served as a professor in the 1970s, and delivered an address to the faculty. He recalled his years there as a professor and expressed his admiration for the seriousness with which both secular and religious scholars discussed matters of consequence from their respective disciplines. Their outlooks were not the same, and disagreements were common. But these learned scholars trusted in their shared commitment to reason, however differently they interpreted its demands.

Today, we sadly hear little of reason. "Wokeness" takes its marching orders from moral certitudes, not from rational inquiry. Appeals to a common commitment to reason do not command assent. As a result, while Ratzinger's call for a better synthesis

of faith's understanding and reason's methods remains valid, it makes sense only as an explicitly theological project.

This book presumes that we ought to take great care to honor the truth of our faith, and it is the job of reason, including its modern methods, to purify and deepen that truth. But we must seek this purifying and deepening as Christians.

In my early years of theological study, I was inspired by Karl Barth. His boldness encouraged me to engage other disciplines on theological terms. My teachers were less bombastic than the great Swiss theologian, but in their more measured way they pointed in the same direction. Operating in a Barthian mode (or, as my teachers might say, in a postliberal mode) does not mean theologizing everything. One should read Plato and learn from him. The same can be said for Kant and Hegel, and for Shakespeare and Milton. Hans Urs von Balthasar relished the image of a symphony as a fitting way to picture truth's impress upon our minds. Each instrument must speak in its own voice if it is to be heard in accord with the composer's synthetic genius. The same is true for philosophy, history, science, literature, and every other endeavor. The truth of God in Christ sets the score; theologians do not play each and every instrument.

In the chapters that follow, I discuss historical criticism and on occasion draw upon the insights of modern biblical scholarship. That instrument must be heard. I discuss an ancient Christian figure (Origen), and I do so within the canons of historical scholarship. My aim is to understand him on his own terms, to hear him as he was heard by his contemporaries. Readers may be surprised to discover that in another chapter I give sustained attention to a long Middle English poem. But varied though the instruments may be, the score is unfailingly theological. For these chapters are not organized around the sorts of questions asked by philosophers, historians, or literary critics. Instead, I press theological questions and then turn to many sources as I try to reason my way to satisfactory answers.

Speaking of theological *questions* is not quite right. In truth, this book circles back again and again to a single question: How do we square doctrine with Scripture? This is not a question that university training in biblical studies encourages you to ask. Indeed, as I'll note on a number of occasions in what follows, academic formation actively discourages you from trying to resolve the problem of the Bible's relation to church teaching, deeming it a dangerous temptation, an invitation to impose pious concerns on what should be a purely intellectual investigation.

I do not gainsay a secular scholar's disinterest in the problem of doctrine's relation to Scripture. But let us not be deceived by talk of "purely intellectual enterprises," for it gives the false impression that faith places no demands on reason. As I will show in the pages that follow, squaring doctrine with Scripture is a daunting enterprise, one requiring a wide range of intellectual efforts. In the case of Origen, it motivated an extraordinary and inventive recasting of Neoplatonism. Other early Christian figures drew upon and redeployed ancient theories of rhetoric. And, of course, the church fathers advanced exegetical arguments that are complex and multifaceted. I add my voice to this tradition of reason in service of scriptural interpretation, albeit in a much more limited way, given my lack of scriptural proficiency in comparison to the great figures of the Christian tradition.

Some readers may be disappointed that I forswear preliminary discussions of method and hermeneutics. I do not dig into philosophical material in order to find resources for a theology of interpretation, one that lays out criteria by which we can be assured that our readings and interpretations are reliable, objective, and trustworthy. Nor can one find in these pages a disciplined account of the doctrine of inspiration or any other fully developed theological reflection on Scripture as God's revelation.

As I have gotten older, I've found it best to speak directly about the problems and puzzles that animate our minds rather than first framing these difficulties in rigorous ways. (There is nothing wrong

with the writing of prolegomena, other than the danger of failing to get to the matter at hand because one's energies are spent on preliminaries.) After all, the most basic purpose of biblical hermeneutics and relevant methods is to provide satisfactory answers to what is, at bottom, a simple question: How should I interpret so that I remain true to what Scripture says? Across these pages, I repeat on many occasions what I take to be the clearest and most basic answer: proper interpretation proves itself to be such when our reading of Scripture accords with what the church teaches. I detail below how I arrived at this conclusion. But for now, let me simply state it clearly. The imperative of accordance is the first principle of Christian hermeneutics. I strongly encourage readers who are interested in biblical interpretation to read Hans-Georg Gadamer, Paul Ricoeur, and other twentieth-century figures who have subtle and wise things to say about texts, history, and interpretation. I have learned a great deal from them. But I am convinced it is best to get the imperative of accordance clear in our minds before searching for resources and insights useful in elaborating, explaining, and defending our approaches to interpretation.

Ratzinger seems to have come to a similar conclusion. At a session of the 2008 Synod of Bishops, Pope Benedict addressed the participants. It was twenty years after his famous lecture on the crisis of biblical interpretation. He no longer spoke of historical and theological methods. Instead, he framed the challenge of reading the Bible directly: "For the life and mission of the Church, for the future of faith, it is absolutely necessary to overcome the dualism between exegesis and theology."<sup>2</sup> If the truth of our faith is to grow in our hearts and shine brightly into a world in dire need of conversion, we must bring our reading of the Bible into accord with the doctrines that provide an apostolic foundation for our theologies.

2. "Address of His Holiness Benedict XVI during the 14th General Congregation of the Synod of Bishops," October 14, 2008, [https://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/speeches/2008/october/documents/hf\\_ben-xvi\\_spe\\_20081014\\_sinodo.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/speeches/2008/october/documents/hf_ben-xvi_spe_20081014_sinodo.html).



As I shall argue, “overcom[ing] the dualism between exegesis and theology” has been the central Christian project from the beginning. It is manifest every time the New Testament says, “. . . that the Scriptures might be fulfilled.” The need to overcome the dualism between a then-conventional reading of the Old Testament and the revelation of God’s love in Christ’s death and resurrection drives Saint Paul’s thinking, giving rise to the many minitreatises of theology in his epistles. “Overcoming” animates the patristic era, and the imperative Pope Benedict identifies is carried forward through the centuries. In this book, I examine a small episode arising from sixteenth-century debates about the doctrine of justification. My own efforts to read the Bible answer to the same task.



The outline of the book is straightforward. The first two chapters lay out the fundamental challenge we face as Christian readers of the Bible, which is to discern the accordance of Scripture with doctrine. I argue that this discerning is what makes interpretation “theological.” The problem is easy to see, often painfully so, because Scripture can often seem discordant with church teaching. But we should not be deterred by difficulty. The labor we invest in puzzling our way toward accordance pays rich dividends. Theological exegesis is ambitious and exciting. The imperative of “overcoming” drives us toward insights into the richness of Scripture and the nuances of doctrine, both of which prepare us to receive illuminations from above.

Chapters 3 and 4 provide historical examples of theological interpretation. In Origen we encounter one of the greatest readers in our tradition. He “scripturalized” metaphysics and conceived of a doctrine of inspiration that illuminates the way in which the Bible draws us down the narrow path of sanctification, turning the work of interpretation into a sublime imitation of Christ in his humility and suffering. Reformation-era theologians knew

that they were caught in a vice. On crucial matters of justification, faith, and works, Paul seems to war against James. Scripture speaks against Scripture. These theologians faced rather than avoided this daunting problem, producing speculative accounts of the origins and purposes of the Pauline Epistles and the Epistle of James that foreshadow modern historical insights. The need to overcome the divide between exegesis and theology not only drives us closer to God; it also sends us back to a deeper engagement with our predecessors and stimulates our intellects to probe more deeply—not just into the inner workings of doctrine but into the meaning of history.

Chapters 5, 6, and 7 present my own exegetical efforts. When illustrating the nature of theological exegesis in the early chapters, I make heavy use of my investigations into the first chapter of Genesis, which I present in more detail in chapter 5. In chapter 6, I meditate on the theme of Christ's departure in the Gospel of John, which is paradoxically a way of remaining "at-one" with his disciples. Chapter 7 illuminates Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians by way of a close reading of *Piers Plowman*, a scripturally shaped poem written in the late fourteenth century. One often sees best what a task entails by doing it rather than by falling back on theory. These are my attempts.

The book ends with reflections on an ambitious project of performing theological exegesis rather than talking about it: the Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible (BTCB). I served as general editor of this series, contributing my own volume on Genesis (thus explaining my ready recourse to that text in these pages). My work over the years spent reading and reviewing commentaries before publication, and working on my own, disabused me of any notion that putting the word "theological" in front of interpretation implies a distinct method. The remarkable—nay, extreme—heterogeneity of the series forced me to think more clearly about church-oriented, theologically informed exegesis. This ultimately led me to the first principle of Christian hermeneutics: the best

reading of Scripture discerns its concordance with doctrine. From that principle this book arises.

---

As I note in my discussion of the first verse of Genesis, “beginning” has a variety of meanings. Fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, we are told. That use of beginning signifies the foundation or basis of wisdom rather than its origin in time. The same meaning of beginning holds for the role that the imperative of accordance between Scripture and doctrine—the “overcoming” that Pope Benedict urges—plays in this volume. It serves as this book’s basis, rationale, and purpose. Temporality is another matter. Most of the following chapters are based on essays and lectures written in the first decade of this century, during my tenure as a professor of theology. (See the acknowledgments at the end of the book.) Over the past decade, my day job has taken me out of my former vocation as an academic theologian. A great deal of my attention is now spent thinking and writing about the ephemeral affairs of men and women struggling in the political and cultural battles of our time. But throughout the 2010s, Dave Nelson at Baker Academic, my editorial coworker on the Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible series, kept prodding me to publish this material. Fearing that I would be like the dogs of the Bible that return to their vomit, I resisted. In the end, Dave prevailed.

When I reread what I had written about theological interpretation, I was dissatisfied. Every element had to be substantially revised. I set to work, at first with grim determination, but over time with greater and greater pleasure. It is a blessing to work in the vineyard of God’s ever-fruitful Word. I hope that you, dear reader, will sip from the same cup of gladness.

---

# WHAT MAKES EXEGESIS THEOLOGICAL?

**I SERVED AS THE EDITOR** of the Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible series for more than a decade. On the basis of that experience I can confidently report that there is no danger of a precisely formulated, rigorously implemented “theological method” emerging. The approaches, techniques, and interpretive strategies employed by the commentators in the Brazos series have been extraordinarily diverse, almost maddeningly so. In the first published commentary, Jaroslav Pelikan worked his way through the Acts of the Apostles, often highlighting verses that invite extended theological reflection.<sup>1</sup> For example, Pelikan uses Acts 12:7 (“Suddenly an angel of the Lord appeared [to Peter]”) as the occasion to discuss angels in the canon as a whole. (I adopted a somewhat similar approach in my commentary on Genesis.)<sup>2</sup> In a volume published soon thereafter, Telford Work commented on a much larger number of individual verses in Deuteronomy, using

1. Jaroslav Pelikan, *Acts*, BTCB (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2005). The series went on to publish more than 20 volumes.

2. R. R. Reno, *Genesis*, BTCB (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2010).

an inventive format that organized his largely anagogical commentary in accord with the theological virtues of faith, hope, and love.<sup>3</sup> Peter Leithart and others commented chapter by chapter.<sup>4</sup> Others parsed biblical books in different ways.

Nevertheless, readers and reviewers of the Brazos series sense a unity of purpose, if not execution. As I sought to explain in my general introduction to the series, the basic premise of the Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible is that the Nicene tradition plays an indispensable role in good biblical interpretation. Just what counts as the Nicene tradition is very much a matter of debate, and the precise role dogma plays in exegesis resists definition. But the larger claim is, I think, accessible to our understanding. Bringing classical Christian teaching to bear in scriptural analysis and exposition will conduce to saying something helpful and true about the biblical text. “Theological interpretation” has emerged as the imprecise but nonetheless useful term to designate a doctrinally informed approach.

This admittedly vague description tends to evoke pressing questions from anxious biblical scholars. Won’t employing dogma in the exegetical process turn biblical exposition into a parochial enterprise at best, or a stultifying fundamentalism at worst? Why give up on the confessional neutrality that secures a place for biblical studies in the secular university? And don’t we need an objective approach to the Bible precisely so that we can find a reliable scriptural basis for doctrine and theology, protecting the Bible from being turned into a wax nose easily molded to serve confessional agendas?

These are important questions. But I want to set them aside for the moment in order to address a more fundamental concern. Why do we feel a need to have something called “theological” exegesis in the first place? Isn’t well-informed and thoughtful biblical

3. Telford Work, *Deuteronomy*, BTCB (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2009).

4. Peter J. Leithart, *1 & 2 Kings*, BTCB (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2006).

interpretation what we want, whatever its stated methods? What work does the adjective “theological” do, aside from picking unnecessary fights with modern biblical scholars?

Calling an approach to Scripture “theological” is a novelty, and a quite recent one at that. In *The Life of Moses*, Gregory of Nyssa identifies two exegetical tasks. The first involves laying out for the reader what he calls the history (*historia*). The interpreter needs to establish the order and sequence of events recounted in the biblical text. The second and more important task requires discerning the spiritual meaning that draws the mind toward contemplation of divine things. Gregory calls this meaning *theōria*. During the Middle Ages, a fourfold scheme was established, and the Bible was read in accord with its literal, allegorical, moral, and anagogical senses. The first is akin to Gregory’s notion of *historia*. The interpreter clarifies grammatical ambiguities and resolves tensions in the chronology of events, as well as other difficulties. The latter three are modes of spiritual interpretation. The moral sense edifies, and the anagogical sense addresses our final destiny. The allegorical sense is more open ended. It concerns symbols, patterns, and figures in Scripture that point elsewhere. (*Allegory* is a compound of Greek words that joins “other” with “speaking,” and so the literal meaning of *allegory* is “other speaking.”) Within this medieval tradition many disputes erupted, especially concerning the possibility and limits of allegorical interpretation, which is sometimes restricted to Old Testament typologies that point toward fulfillment in Christ. But whatever our judgments about the old tradition of the fourfold sense of Scripture, we must be honest: the term “theological” is not used.

Nor was the locution “theological exegesis” or its analogues employed by early modern figures such as George Horne (1730–1792), whose popular commentary on the Psalms self-consciously opposed the historical-critical methods that were already being

developed in the eighteenth century.<sup>5</sup> William Temple did not use the term “theological” to describe his extraordinary commentary on the Gospel of John, which he published in the late 1930s. He allows that elements of his *Readings in St. John’s Gospel* might be called “a series of devotional meditations,” but he insists that his approach “has no distinctive and consistent character.” The most Temple was willing to say is that he followed the text where it led him, “and I hope that this is not totally different from saying that I am concerned with what the Holy Spirit says to me through the Gospel.”<sup>6</sup>

Although I have not done extensive research, I have the distinct impression that the term “theological exegesis” emerged during the final decades of the twentieth century. George Lindbeck framed the notion in “The Story-Shaped Church: Critical Exegesis and Theological Interpretation,” his contribution to a 1987 volume honoring his Yale colleague Hans Frei.<sup>7</sup> In that dense essay, Lindbeck argues that our theology of the church, while expressed in terms drawn from Scripture, is not always evidently “scriptural” in the strict sense of resting on close analysis of particular biblical passages with obvious relevance to church life. Rather, the church’s self-understanding turns on efforts to be faithful to the canon within the canon, which (as Lindbeck notes) Hans Frei identified as the composite story that emerges from the four Gospel accounts of the person and work of Jesus of Nazareth.

Lindbeck develops his argument within carefully circumscribed parameters. He limits his remarks to the doctrine of the church, especially insofar as it draws upon the Old Testament account of the people of Israel. But I can state his conclusion more generally.

5. *A Commentary on the Book of the Psalms* was first published in 1776. It has been republished many times and remains in print to this day.

6. *Readings in St. John’s Gospel* was published in two phases, the First Series (1939) and the Second Series (1940). My volume combined both and was published by Macmillan, 1955. Temple’s characterization of his approach can be found on page ix.

7. Garrett Green, ed., *Scriptural Authority and Narrative Interpretation* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987), 161–78.

Close attention to the history of the church shows that the church's teaching, preaching, and practice are not "derived" from Scripture. They arise from an always-ongoing act of scriptural interpretation that seeks to correlate specific biblical passages with present concerns and imperatives. One sees this process at work in *Four Discourses against the Arians*, the extended polemic against Arianism penned by Athanasius. The bulk of this defense of the divinity of Christ involves detailed exegesis. Like so many others in the early centuries of Christian history, the treatise features page after page of biblical interpretation guided by a powerful although rarely theorized "christological" sense of what Scripture as a whole reveals.

David Yeago was a student of George Lindbeck. Yeago's 1993 essay "The New Testament and the Nicene Dogma: A Contribution to the Recovery of Theological Exegesis" provides another instance of the use of "theological" as the fitting adjective for a churchly approach to the Bible.<sup>8</sup> Yeago observes that premodern theologians may not have agreed with one another about doctrine, but they universally presumed that orthodox dogma expresses the teaching of Scripture. In the modern era this presumption was overturned. Classical doctrines were taken to be ersatz philosophical speculation imposed upon the biblical text—the Greek mind at work, not the Hebraic logic of Scripture, as German scholars liked to say in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Protestant pietism reinforced this tendency. It encouraged an experiential approach rather than one guided by doctrine, which was thought to promote a dry religious rationalism. According to the pietist, the Bible's true sense sparks warm feelings of an intimate relation to God. The great German theologian of the modern era Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768–1834) theorized this approach in terms congenial to the intellectual currents of Romanticism. Soon thereafter, Protestant faculties (especially in

8. David Yeago, "The New Testament and the Nicene Dogma: A Contribution to the Recovery of Theological Exegesis," *Pro Ecclesia* 3, no. 2 (1993): 152–64.



Germany) adopted the new methods of historical criticism, which were championed as the only reliable way to determine what the Bible “really means.” All these factors contributed to the modern Christian predicament. The close connection between doctrine and Scripture was undone.

It’s wrong to imagine that historical criticism alone bears the blame. Even as the authority of that method recedes, the notion remains widespread that theology is best understood as religiously inspired philosophy rather than the distillation of the church’s exegetical tradition. One can easily imagine a theology graduate student reading Emmanuel Levinas and writing a dissertation about the Trinity as the incorporation of “the other” into the eternal life of God. The experiential emphasis remains strong as well, although these days it is often given a moralizing twist. Jesus encourages an empathic affirmation of the stranger, we are told. Or he inculcates in us revolutionary ardor and stokes a commitment to overturning unjust structures. It was against these trends that Lindbeck and Yeago brandished the term “theological exegesis.” They were seeking to recover an earlier consensus, one that saw the church’s doctrines and liturgies as arising out of sound exegesis and that therefore trusted that those doctrines and liturgies train us to read the Bible well.

There is also a historical claim about “theological exegesis” in Lindbeck’s and Yeago’s arguments. It holds that premodern churchmen engaged in a vast, never-ending project of using doctrine to interpret Scripture and Scripture to illuminate doctrine. Out of this project emerges a biblically saturated worldview, an extraordinary web of philosophical speculation, historical assessment, and moral exhortation through which run golden threads of biblical language. However defective in this detail or that specific respect, the exegetically spun web was sound. “Theological interpretation” is not, therefore, a method. It marks a decision by today’s readers to trust in the scriptural genesis and biblical genius of the church’s traditions.

So we return to the questions many biblical scholars have raised about theological interpretation. Are we to renounce the insights of historical understanding and descend into fundamentalism? Will we end up reading our theologies into Scripture rather than allowing Scripture to inform and govern our theologies? To answer these questions, I need to make the case for a striking claim: Christians have no choice but to embrace an approach of the sort suggested by Lindbeck and Yeago. By making this case I hope to illuminate the concept of theological exegesis more fully. With this deeper understanding, we can return to the objections and concerns expressed by often friendly but anxious critics and provide some responses.



Let's begin with the simple and rather obvious claim that the true church of Jesus Christ teaches the gospel of Jesus Christ. This affirmation leads to what I call "the presumption of accordance." If the Bible teaches something we judge integral to the gospel, then we hold that the church's teaching must be substantially the same. The reverse holds as well. If the church teaches something as a saving truth, then we assume that the Bible does so. It's that simple: what the Bible says accords with what the church proclaims.

This presumption seems hard to swallow. Let me therefore state the case for accordance more precisely. Given our assumption that the true church of Christ teaches the gospel of Christ as witnessed to by Scripture, we presume that our exegesis of the Bible ought to line up nicely with what we take to be orthodox doctrine. And if this turns out not to be the case (and discordance certainly happens), we conclude either that our interpretations are wrongheaded or that what we imagine to be orthodox doctrine is not, in fact, orthodox. I see no third possibility for the faithful Christian. One way or another, true doctrine and sound exegesis must be in accord.

But what about church teachings that are not found in the Bible? The Catholic Church, for example, elaborates principles for

just war, declares life to begin at conception, and prohibits the use of artificial methods of birth control. None of these teachings are found in the Bible, at least not directly so. The Catholic Church recognizes the lack of direct scriptural foundations, describing these doctrines as the results of reason properly applied to moral issues rather than as revealed truths. Or take the dogmatic affirmations of the Immaculate Conception and the Bodily Assumption of Mary. Church documents that define these dogmas appeal to passages in Scripture, but the dogmas are not biblical in a strict sense, at least not in ways that satisfy most Protestants. Again, the Catholic Church recognizes this to be the case. Treatises defending the doctrines of the Immaculate Conception and the Bodily Assumption usually rely on theories of magisterial authority and the development of doctrine to justify their apostolic authenticity.

Nevertheless, a well-catechized Catholic holds that these and other teachings of the Church accord with the larger sweep of biblical revelation. As I'll demonstrate at length as we go along, the first chapter of Genesis and the prologue to the Gospel of John indicate that God creates with his Word, which means creation has a *logos*, an order. The Catholic tradition (and other Christian traditions as well) holds that reason can know this order in the form of natural law. This presumption finds scriptural support. The book of Proverbs testifies to the existence of natural law, as do other portions of the Bible. The same appeal to the larger witness of Scripture holds for the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception of Mary, which draws upon Old Testament accounts of the tabernacle in which the divine presence dwells. The doctrine of the Bodily Assumption of Mary fulfills Jesus's promise, "There are some standing here who will not taste death" (Matt. 16:28), and Job's testimony, "In my flesh I shall see God" (Job 19:26).

These brief suggestions do not do justice to the arguments in favor of these Catholic doctrines. Making the full case would require long treatises. But I do not aim to convince readers. I wish

only to point out that Catholic affirmations of these doctrines and teachings presume that they accord with Scripture. Even the Catholic affirmations of magisterial authority—the claim that Marian doctrines are apostolic because declared to be so by the church—reflect an appeal to Scripture, for the Catholic case for the church’s authority is buttressed by many exegetical arguments showing the primacy of Peter.

This persistent recourse to Scripture should not surprise us. No matter how we conceptualize or articulate the authority of biblical revelation, no matter what sort of ecclesiology we employ to describe the apostolic character of the church, nearly all Christians adopt the presumption of accordance. We take it for granted that the supreme trustworthiness of Scripture as the Word of God dovetails with the church’s doctrine and teaching, liturgical practice, and moral exhortation. Revelation and proclamation need to be on the same page, as it were.

The presumption of accordance operates openly in the confessional traditions of the churches in the West. The Council of Trent, for example, juxtaposes the evils of personal judgment (which they accused Protestants of employing) to the proper path of interpretation guided by “holy mother Church.” For the bishops at Trent, it was intolerable that private persons should set about to produce readings of the Bible contrary to those established by the traditions of the church. Therefore, to prevent the possibility of disjunctions between biblical interpretation and church teaching, the council formulated a crucial post-Reformation definition of magisterial authority. It is the prerogative of the church, we read, “to judge of the true sense and interpretation of the holy Scriptures.”<sup>9</sup> This assertion of ecclesiastical authority over our interpretations of the Bible has a clear purpose—it secures accordance.

9. “General Council of Trent: Fourth Session,” ed. and trans. J. Waterworth, *Papal Encyclicals Online*, “Decree concerning the Edition, and the Use, of the Sacred Books,” <https://www.papalencyclicals.net/councils/trent/fourth-session.htm>.

The First and Second Vatican Councils reiterate the same concept of magisterial authority. Vatican I's "Dogmatic Constitution on the Catholic Faith" (*Dei Filius*) makes this declaration:

Now since the decree on the interpretation of holy scripture, profitably made by the council of Trent, with the intention of constraining rash speculation, has been wrongly interpreted by some, we renew that decree and declare its meaning to be as follows: that in matters of faith and morals, belonging as they do to the establishing of christian doctrine, that the meaning of holy scripture must be held to be the true one, which holy mother church held and holds, since it is her right to judge the true meaning and interpretation of holy scripture.<sup>10</sup>

The Second Vatican Council's "Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation" (*Dei Verbum*) provides a more extensive, plastic, and complex account of the role and interpretation of Scripture in the life of the church. In an important correction to earlier formulations, which give the impression that the magisterium has an authority higher than Scripture, Vatican II states, "This teaching office is not above the word of God, but serves it, teaching only what has been handed on, listening to it devoutly, guarding it scrupulously and explaining it faithfully in accord with a divine commission and with the help of the Holy Spirit."<sup>11</sup> Nevertheless,

10. "Decrees of the First Vatican Council," Papal Encyclicals Online, Session 3, "Dogmatic Constitution on the Catholic Faith," *Dei Filius*, chapter 2, <https://www.papalencyclicals.net/councils/ecum20.htm>. The restatement and clarification of Trent was motivated by concerns about two nineteenth-century opinions, both of which sought to loosen the bond between church teaching and scriptural interpretation. One argued that Trent's decree was purely disciplinary and not dogmatic in consequence. The second argued that Trent required assent to dogmas officially derived from Scripture but not assent to the particular interpretations. For background, see Jean-Michel-Alfred Vacant, *Études théologiques sur les constitutions du Concile de Vatican*, Tome 1 (Paris: Delhomme et Briguet, 1895), 520–21.

11. Vatican II, "Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation," *Dei Verbum* (The Holy See: Web Archive), sec. 10, [https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist\\_councils/ii\\_vatican\\_council/documents/vat-ii\\_const\\_19651118\\_dei-verbum\\_en.html](https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19651118_dei-verbum_en.html).

the assertion of exegetical authority remains intact: “The task of authentically interpreting the word of God . . . has been entrusted exclusively to the living teaching office of the Church, whose authority is exercised in the name of Jesus Christ.”<sup>12</sup>

One can mount endless objections to the Catholic approach to biblical interpretation, judging it to be authoritarian, anti-historical, unscriptural, and so forth. Yet we must acknowledge that Catholicism presumes accordance. By clearly stipulating that the church and only the church rightly judges the meaning of Scripture, the Catholic Church seeks to ensure what nearly all Christians assume to be the case: a tight fit between what the church teaches and what the Bible says.

Protestant confessional documents reject many Catholic doctrines, but not the presumption of accordance. The Lutheran Formula of Concord opens with the Protestant principle of *sola scriptura*. “We believe, teach, and confess,” the formula states, “that the only rule and guiding principle according to which all teachings and teachers are to be evaluated and judged are the prophetic and apostolic writings of the Old and New Testaments alone.”<sup>13</sup> In the Reformed tradition, the Westminster Confession emphasizes the necessity of the illumination of the Holy Spirit, as well as a place for natural reason in practical considerations of church order. But the basic principle remains the same: “The Supreme Judge, by which all controversies of religion are to be determined, and all decrees of councils, opinions of ancient writers, doctrines of men, and private spirits, are to be examined, and in whose sentence we are to rest, can be no other but the Holy Spirit speaking in the Scripture.”<sup>14</sup>

12. Vatican II, “Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation,” *Dei Verbum*, sec. 10.

13. Formula of Concord, Epitome 1, in *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, ed. Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000).

14. Westminster Confession of Faith 1.10, in *The Constitution of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.): Part 1, Book of Confessions*, 145–202 (Louisville: Office of

Reformation documents start on the opposite side, emphasizing the authority of Scripture rather than that of the church. But these foundational Protestant confessional statements end up affirming the presumption of accordance of doctrine and Scripture, as does the Council of Trent and the two modern Vatican Councils. Lutherans and Calvinists insist that what the church teaches must line up with what the Bible says, while Catholics say that what we take the Bible to be saying must be in line with what the church teaches. The two sides of the great Reformation debates about church authority and *sola scriptura* differ greatly on the question of whether to start with biblical interpretation or church authority (although that difference may not be as great as advertised, as the Missouri Synod Lutheran tradition of discouraging Bible reading unsupervised by the pastor indicates). But let's set aside that important difference so that we can see an even more important agreement: Protestants and Catholics agree that the true meaning of the Bible and the church's proclamation testify to the self-same truth.

The presumption of accordance is so primitive to Christian identity that even aggressively nonconfessional, "Bible only" Protestants endorse it. Nondenominational Bible churches reject the instrumentalities of written confessions, insisting that Scripture alone must be the criterion of truth. They regard creeds to be man-made documents that stand in the way of the complete correspondence between scriptural interpretation and church teaching. We should not embark on two different enterprises, they argue, one that interprets the Bible and another that formulates doctrines. The two should be one and the same in godly "Bible preaching." And so we see that, yes, there are bitter debates about church authority, confessional documents, theories of inerrancy, or methods of interpretation. But from the most ultramontane Catholics to the most anticonfessional Protestants,

---

the General Assembly, 2016), [https://www.pcusa.org/site\\_media/media/uploads/oga/pdf/boc2016.pdf](https://www.pcusa.org/site_media/media/uploads/oga/pdf/boc2016.pdf).

the presumption of accordance is not itself controversial. It is instead the great point of agreement around which theological controversies swirl.

Which brings us back to the notion of theological exegesis as outlined by Lindbeck and Yeago. It is an approach to Scripture that does nothing more than presume what nearly all Christians presume: what the church teaches accords with what the Bible says. This presumption does not rule out historical questions any more than it rules out philosophical ones. But it does establish a criterion for biblical interpretation. Put simply, if we think that what our churches teach is correct, then no matter how wide ranging our research and diverse our methods, we must conduct our interpretive work under the assumption that a correct reading of the Bible, while it may not confirm every detail, accords with doctrine. And if we can't discern at least a modicum of accordance, then we know we have a problem to solve. Either we need to return to our exegesis and puzzle again about the meaning of the passage we are interpreting, or we need to read up on theology and church history so that we can be sure we understand aright the church's doctrines.

I can feel the reader's unhappiness. I have explained the presumption of accordance in a number of academic and church settings. Invariably I meet resistance. Shouldn't our interpretation be objective, not under dogmatic control? Don't we want exegetes to operate freely, following the biblical text where it leads rather than working with "presumptions"? Isn't this agenda regressive, taking us back to premodern times when church authorities tried to exercise a stultifying control over academic inquiry into history? And so on, and so on, sometimes late into the night.

It's worth pondering the urgency we feel when it comes to questions of biblical interpretation, an urgency that gives rise to great anxiety about methods of interpretation. People don't raise their voices in debates about how to interpret Shakespeare. Intense



conflicts over exegesis of the *Iliad* do not implicate the faith of millions of people, as did the great contest over scriptural authority in the Southern Baptist Convention in the 1980s. There is no Bart Ehrman who writes books designed to show Jane Austen fans that they have been brought up to misinterpret the great novelist. We should not be surprised by these differences, for the Bible is not just any book. It has authority, not just for the over two billion Christians worldwide but for the culture of the West, for which it was the book of books until only recently. With so much at stake, it is difficult to think clearly.

But we must try.

Let me stipulate a noncontroversial principle of reason: we should use what is clear in order to understand what is obscure. We don't exercise ourselves to interpret easy texts. Their meaning seems evident; they speak for themselves. But when we're not sure about something, we must bring our uncertainties into the light of our certainties. To be less dogmatic, we frame what we're not sure about in terms of what we're more confident about. For example, if we're quite sure that God does not exist, we'll naturally interpret the Bible in purely historical terms, reading the Old Testament as the cultural-political project of ancient Israelite religion, a project that seeks to legitimate priestly and royal power. Or if we think patriarchy defines history, then a certain kind of feminist interpretation of the Bible makes sense. The same holds for postcolonial and other readings. With these approaches, interpreters are using what to their minds is self-evident in order to interpret a very old, often confusing text—the Bible. Say what you want about secularist, feminist, or postcolonialist assumptions, but you need to acknowledge that using the clear to illuminate the obscure is normal procedure.

The self-same procedure guides theological interpretation, but with an important difference. Unlike historical-critical, feminist, and other approaches, a theologically informed reading has no “method.” Church doctrine is not a collection of Cartesian ideas

that enjoy adamant clarity. On the contrary, the church teaches many things in many different ways. Some doctrines are defined in creeds; some are adumbrated in liturgies; still other doctrines find expression in the ongoing stream of preaching and instruction. Like Scripture, the church's teaching is old and often confusing as well. For this reason, the presumption of accordance does not encourage a wooden, formulaic approach. The opposite is the case. It requires extraordinary mobility of mind. There are times when doctrine is far from clear, while the Bible speaks with remarkable directness. Compare, for example, the chiseled clarity of Jesus's statements about his relation to the Father in the Gospel of John with the subtle and difficult concepts used to expound the doctrine of the Trinity. In this instance, we are invited to use Scripture to illuminate doctrine, not doctrine to interpret Scripture.

At other times, doctrine seems to contradict Scripture. In these cases, unlike with modern methods, the presumption of accordance prevents the theological interpreter from jumping to the conclusion that either Scripture or doctrine must be wrong. We are called to a deeper engagement. I felt this demand when I wrote my commentary on Genesis. (I'll have much more to say on this topic in chapter 5, "In the Beginning.") At the very outset there appears to be a striking contrast between what the Bible says and what the church teaches. In Genesis 1:2 we read: "The earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters." Some modern biblical scholars give detailed accounts of the connections between this verse and the Babylonian creation myth, Enuma Elish. On the strength of these connections, scholars conclude that in its original context Genesis was read as teaching that God tamed or formed a preexisting chaos. But doctrine says otherwise. Both Jews and Christians have long agreed that God creates out of nothing, *creatio ex nihilo*. Given the presumption of accordance, the problem is obvious. What the Bible seems to say in

Genesis 1:2 and what the church teaches are discordant rather than harmonious.

Sometimes contradictions really are contradictions. But sometimes further research and reflection show otherwise. In my own work, I was driven to question my assumptions. I had unthinkingly assumed that the creation account in Genesis was the source of the classical doctrine of creation, but modern historical-critical interpretation suggests that this is not the case. But if the first verses of Genesis do not provide support for the doctrine of creation out of nothing, how is it that ancient Jews and Christians came to teach it? The presumption of accordance blocks the easy conclusion, so common among modern readers, that the church's teaching is unscriptural. I had to apply myself to the exegetical task with redoubled effort.

My first step was to make sure I actually understood the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo*. For help I turned to Robert Sokolowski's book *The God of Faith and Reason*.<sup>15</sup> This led to the discovery that the main thrust of the doctrine is metaphysical: there is *nothing* other than the one true God and all the things he has made. Put somewhat differently, the doctrine of creation out of nothing promotes what might be called "ontological parsimony." When it comes to reality, Christians and Jews are stingy. They limit divine reality to God while according a strict finitude to created reality. This parsimony stands in contrast to the rococo Neoplatonic view that allows for many layers and degrees of reality emanating from the singular divine source.

With the notion of ontological parsimony in mind, I returned to the Bible and discovered that the extensive Old Testament polemic against idolatry was the true scriptural basis for the doctrine of creation out of nothing. Idols are not weak, ineffective, or inadequate; they are empty and lifeless. "Idols are like scarecrows,"

15. Robert Sokolowski, *The God of Faith and Reason: Foundations of Christian Theology* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1995).

we read in Jeremiah; “they cannot do evil, nor is it in them to do good” (Jer. 10:5). The New Testament carries forward the same view. Saint Paul explains the futility of idols by appealing to God’s creative uniqueness (Acts 14:15; 17:24). Idols are futile and vacant, as they must be, for the ontological parsimony of the doctrine of creation out of nothing denies the existence of intermediary, semi-divine realities that might infuse them with power. This is why Paul remains undisturbed by the fact that some of the faithful are eating meat sacrificed to idols; they have no malignant potency (1 Cor. 8:4–6). Given the larger biblical witness, it’s therefore natural that idolatry should be the issue at stake in 2 Maccabees 7:28, the only Old Testament passage (in the Catholic Bible) in which creation out of nothing is explicitly affirmed.

And in the development of the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* I discovered more than the central role of the biblical campaign against idolatry. Ontological parsimony bears on a wide array of issues. The cogency of the Bible’s accounts of divine action in history seems to require the metaphysical assumptions we find in the doctrine of creation out of nothing. The same holds for the unexpected unity of God’s universal purposes with the particularity of human history that begins with the calling of Abraham and reaches a crescendo in John 1:14 (“And the Word became flesh and lived among us”).<sup>16</sup>

With the fresh insight I had gained into the sources and implications of *creatio ex nihilo*, I was able to return to Genesis 1:2 with a more vivid sense of what is at stake. I saw for the first time a connection between this verse and an Augustinian understanding of the dissolving, destroying, negating, and evacuating power of evil. This view of evil as nothingness allows us to hear the divine pronouncement “Let there be light” (Gen. 1:3) as a word of redemption that echoes in Deuteronomy, where again and again

16. See Sokolowski, *God of Faith and Reason*, 31–40. See also book 1 of *Against Heresies*, where Irenaeus makes the doctrine of creation the focus of his refutation of Gnostic views of salvation.

Moses exhorts the Israelites to choose life instead of death. And the link between light and life is made explicit in the Gospel of John. Christ is light and life, and he is with God “in the beginning,” laying the deepest foundations of creation.

I could give many more examples from my exegetical efforts, as well as from those undertaken by others as they wrote their commentaries in the Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible series. When Genesis 17:7 stipulates that the covenant of circumcision will be everlasting, a Christian reader immediately thinks of Galatians 5:2, where Paul says, “If you let yourselves be circumcised, Christ will be of no benefit to you.” Here we find two relatively clear scriptural passages that are difficult to harmonize. This motivated me to try to explain how the Pauline rejection of circumcision is consistent with an affirmation of its everlasting role in God’s plan of salvation. It is an explanation that involves a fair amount of theologizing.<sup>17</sup> Or take an example from Robert Jenson’s commentary on Ezekiel, also in the Brazos series. At the end of Ezekiel 22, we read that God is attacking Jerusalem and at the same time searching for a righteous man to stand in the breach and defend the city against the divinely orchestrated assault. It seems hopelessly confusing. Is God outside the walls of the city pressing his attack? Or is he inside, seeking to save his beloved people? This double role is not so much resolved as made clear and explicit, Jenson suggests, in the crucifixion and resurrection of Christ, in which God is both judge and judged.<sup>18</sup>

My point is not to argue for the cogency of these interpretations. Perhaps they are wrongheaded. Or they perhaps stretch too far—or don’t stretch far enough. The adequacy of these readings is for others to judge. Rather, my purpose is to illustrate some of the ways in which the presumption of accordance motivates a mobile and plastic exegesis rather than imposing prepackaged

17. Reno, *Genesis*, 173–80.

18. Robert W. Jenson, *Ezekiel*, BTCB (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2009), 188.

interpretations onto Scripture. Apparent clashes between doctrine and Scripture frame exciting interpretive questions. The clarity of Scripture can illuminate the mysteries of the faith as defined by doctrine, while at other times classical dogma can point the way toward resolution of what seem like intractable intra-scriptural contradictions.

Again, my goal right now is not to defend any particular exegetical arguments. My point is that the central affirmation of theological exegesis—the presumption of accordance—is fruitful, not stultifying. As we allow church teaching and biblical proclamation to share in a common claim to truth, the obvious differences and puzzling divergences will naturally compel our minds and draw us to construct arguments that interweave theological and biblical analysis. This weaving is exactly the enterprise that Lindbeck and Yeago argue has shaped the Christian tradition from the outset.



All efforts of interpretation try to say something true about the text under examination, which is the reason why our traditions adopt the presumption of accordance. Of course, those truths need not be theological. They can be philological, text-critical, form-critical, historical, moral, or political. But one way or another, we undertake our interpretations against the background of an economy of truth. That economy can be limited and particular in scope. We pursue philological analysis under guiding assumptions about how grammar works and languages evolve—an economy of linguistic truth, as it were. These assumptions are decisive for a philologist. But they are not all-encompassing. For example, I doubt that the arguments in the area of Hebrew philology change much whether one is an ancient Platonist, medieval Aristotelian, or modern-day empiricist.

Metaphysical agnosticism diminishes as we develop larger-scale interpretive arguments. The ambitious speculations of modern historical criticism draw upon often unspoken assumptions about

the ways in which human history and culture unfold. For example, the J and P hypothesis in modern interpretation of the Old Testament enjoys a great deal of important and compelling support in the textual details of the Pentateuch, especially in the different locutions used to refer to God (Yahweh versus Elohim). By my reckoning, the existence of J (Yahweh) and P (Elohim) and other textual strands in the first five books of the Bible cannot be denied. But modern scholars do more than that. They use redaction criticism (speculation about the conditions under which the texts were composed and combined in an editing process) to speculate about the significance of the intermingled J and P strands. This approach depends upon theories of tradition and historical development, and these theories depend upon an implicit metaphysics. The role of a metaphysical horizon in interpretation is even more explicit when New Testament scholars stipulate that they must presume that miracles and prophecies cannot happen. This presumption is blatantly metaphysical, for it stipulates what *can* and *cannot* happen. And it leads them to conclude that reports in the Gospels of Jesus's prophecies of the destruction of the temple were composed after the fact, providing decisive evidence for authorship after AD 70.

Trying to interpret any text without recourse to a metaphysical horizon is like trying to walk without legs or see without eyes. For the most part, we are untroubled by the necessity of background assumption. For example, a seminar on *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion* might attempt to discern the reasons for and methods of that text's composition, and to assess its influence. These approaches promise interesting insights into anti-Semitism and the machinations of a modern police state, to say nothing of the perversions of the human heart. A good professor knows how to bring out these insights by framing questions and interpretations in light of an economy of truth. Perhaps the professor presumes certain things about human motivations, fears, and fantasies. Or perhaps he appeals to truths about the larger sweep of modern

history or to truths about our common humanity. Students appreciate this sort of class, and books written in this way attract grateful readers. We want a larger horizon that helps us see how a book such as *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, which is full of falsehoods, can nonetheless illuminate and refine our insights into what *is* true.

With texts we hold dear, we become more anxious about the role of our assumptions. Although we may want to understand and interpret *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, we don't want to adopt its worldview. We want to understand the text, but we don't want to be influenced by it. As a consequence, we worry very little about whether our assumptions about truth control our reading. The situation changes somewhat when we read Shakespeare. Because we think his plays rich with insights into the human condition, we want our minds to be influenced by his work. We don't just want to know about Shakespeare or to understand him in light of our assumptions about culture, history, and the human condition. We also want to think with Shakespeare when we interpret *Macbeth* or *King Lear*. We want our horizon of truth to be open to challenge and perhaps modification.

I call this approach one of interpretive submission, even obedience. We are happy to place *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion* within our economy of truth. But we want Shakespeare's plays to influence our assumptions about truth. The importance of submission becomes acute when a reader approaches the Bible as the Word of God. The doctrines of inspiration and inerrancy affirm that the Bible offers a supreme, comprehensive, and transcendent wisdom. Scripture provides the master code for all reality, and faithful interpreters rightly want their economy of truth to be biblical. Put simply, as faithful Christians we would like to have some confidence that the metaphysical horizon we use to frame our interpretations of the Bible is itself biblical in substance.

In this regard, whether or not they do so explicitly, most Christians affirm the principle of *sola scriptura*. For example, many



modern biblical scholars who wish to function as Christian exegetes appeal to the doctrine of the incarnation as a warrant for their historical analysis. They are staking a claim to a biblical basis for the modern, historicist horizon of truth that usually provides the background assumptions for historical-critical study of the Bible.<sup>19</sup> In my estimation, this use of the doctrine of the incarnation to justify the historicist assumptions of modern historical criticism fails to persuade. But the impulse is sound. As I have shown in this chapter, the presumption of accordance encourages us to have a great deal of confidence in the biblical substance of orthodox doctrine. And rightly so. As Lindbeck and Yeago point out, the Nicene tradition arose from an extended exegetical engagement with the Old and New Testaments. This means that church doctrine and its metaphysical assumptions may not be perfect and beyond reform, but they are always already biblically saturated.

Consider, for example, *On First Principles*, which was the first sustained Christian effort of speculative, systematic theology. (I will have a great deal more to say about Origen in chapter 3.) At the outset of this work, Origen states that his approach has “no other source but the very words and teachings of Christ.”<sup>20</sup> If we allow ourselves to become bewitched by narrow, untenable, and uniquely modern assumptions about how beliefs and ideas develop and interlock, then we can wrongly presume that “source” means directly found in or deduced from Scripture. This assumption makes Origen’s claim seem absurd, for *On First Principles* is a speculative treatise that is deeply indebted to Neoplatonism. Yet if we drop these modern assumptions and instead see Origen’s grand theology of creation, time, embodiment, evil, redemption, and consummation as a way of shaping a metaphysical horizon that allows us to read the Bible biblically, then we can grasp the

19. See, for example, Peter Enns, *Inspiration and Incarnation: Evangelicals and the Problem of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005), 17–21.

20. Origen, *On First Principles* 1.preface.1. Translation by G. W. Butterworth, reprinted as Origen, *On First Principles* (Gloucester, MA: Peter Smith, 1973).

true meaning of his claim. “Think of reality this way,” Origen should be read as saying, “and you will be able to enter more fully into the wisdom of the Scriptures, because you will be thinking scripturally.” Origen’s system is unique, and in many respects defective. But in my estimation, his ambitious effort to “scripturalize” metaphysics characterizes the Nicene tradition as a whole.<sup>21</sup>

The Nicene tradition is complex and unruly. I am a theological traditionalist, which means I presume this tradition to be sound. When it seems wrong, I’m probably guilty of misunderstanding what it teaches. But it is quite possible to have a less trusting disposition. The presumption of accordance allows one to regard the Nicene tradition as in need of correction by the interpretation of Scripture. This corrective impulse was not unique to the Reformers of the sixteenth century. The Nicene tradition as a whole should be understood as an argument (often heated) about how best to account for the truth of *everything* in light of scriptural teaching, church practice, and proclamation—an argument that extends across many generations. Like all large-scale, ongoing, and communally conducted arguments, it features constant re-statements, reconsiderations, and revisions. But even for those who emphasize ongoing reformation, there are many steady and constant points of consensus in the Nicene tradition. And as a scripturally informed economy of truth, it remains peerless. I defy anyone to identify a way of thinking about God, history, and human destiny that is at once more metaphysically self-conscious than the Nicene tradition and more thoroughly and constantly invested with exegetical substance.<sup>22</sup>

21. For a winsome and sympathetic description of Origen’s systematic project, see Rowan Williams, “Origen,” in *The First Theologians*, ed. G. R. Evans (Oxford: Blackwell, 2003). For an effort to show the exegetical genius of Origen’s theology, see chapter 3 below.

22. On the close connection between doctrine and exegesis in the early development of the Nicene tradition, see R. R. Reno and John J. O’Keefe, *Sanctified Vision: An Introduction to Early Christian Interpretation of the Bible* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2005).

My own efforts to write biblical commentary have made me acutely aware of the conceptual rigor and interpretive power found in the Nicene tradition. When I grappled with the puzzle of the traditional view of God and creation in relation to the first verses of Genesis, I came to be impressed by the exegetical roots of the doctrine of creation out of nothing. As a metaphysical claim about God and reality, the classical doctrine has no basis in common sense or ancient science. (One problem with Origen's *On First Principles* is that he tried to preserve the cosmology of Neoplatonism, which he believed was the best science of his day.) *Creatio ex nihilo* emerges instead out of sustained attempts to formulate the ontological parsimony implied in the Old Testament polemic against idolatry. In the history of theology, the doctrine of creation out of nothing provided an important background assumption for discussions of divine presence and action within history, most importantly in the person of Jesus Christ.<sup>23</sup> Without a metaphysical horizon informed by *creatio ex nihilo*, reading the Bible as a coherent narrative about the God of Israel who raised Jesus from the dead is very difficult.

If we keep in mind the exegetical sources and pressures that spurred the development of Nicene doctrine, we can grasp the historical rationale for theological exegesis. When we use doctrine to orient ourselves, to frame our exegetical questions, and to draw out the significance of a biblical passage—when we are engaging in the multifaceted enterprise that I have been calling theological exegesis—we draw on intellectual resources that have been developed and refined for the specific purpose of thinking biblically about the Bible. The presumption of accordance between how we read the Bible and how we understand church teaching is primitive to the Christian tradition. There never has been a moment in the history of Christianity when exegesis and doctrine have not

23. See especially Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 1. The doctrine of creation provides the main backdrop for Irenaeus's criticisms of the cogency of Gnostic soteriology, as well as the basis for his own theology of the incarnation.

been intertwined in a complex but integrated intellectual practice. Never, that is, until the modern era.

---

For all sorts of complex reasons, contemporary biblical scholars are troubled by theological exegesis. Needless to say, scholars without Christian commitments do not entertain the notion that church doctrines state important truths about God, or anything else for that matter. For them, the arguments I have presented for theological exegesis can seem like only pseudo-sophisticated expressions of religious fundamentalism. Yet even biblical scholars who are believers remain uneasy about theological exegesis. They fear that more will be lost than gained by the introduction of doctrinal concerns into the practice of interpretation. And what do they fear will be lost? Having listened to and read the concerns of men and women of faith who are committed to modern historical-critical study, I find myself identifying two kinds of worries. The first is institutional and political; the second is textual and theological.

In *The Bible after Babel: Historical Criticism in a Postmodern Age*, John Collins defines modern biblical study in a new way. Our present postmodern skepticism has undermined confidence that historical-critical procedures can deliver conclusive answers to questions about what various biblical texts once meant for their original writers, editors, and readers. Nevertheless, as Collins notes, the rules for historical study remain normative, for they are academic rather than confessional, based on modern canons of historical analysis, not classical principles of faith. The shift away from doctrine has allowed for free and open discussion. Collins observes that historical criticism “has created an arena where people of different faith commitments can work together and have meaningful conversations.”<sup>24</sup> A Jew, a Christian, and

24. John J. Collins, *The Bible after Babel: Historical Criticism in a Postmodern Age* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 10. For an excellent discussion of Collins and the shift toward a political justification for historical-critical method, see Michael C.