

The Letter  
*and* Spirit  
of Biblical  
Interpretation

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From the Early Church to Modern Practice

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KEITH D. STANGLIN

  
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for Amanda,  
two wonderful decades in

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## Preface

When people have asked me what I am reading about, or which course I am teaching, or what the subject of this book is, and my answer is the “history of interpretation,” I have noticed a facial expression that, as a historical theologian, I have become accustomed to seeing. Their look, or sometimes their accompanying explanation of it, conveys the message that both history and interpretation are sufficiently boring on their own, and the combination of the two must be dreadful. To ask about the history of biblical interpretation, however, is to ponder very important questions for our own day. How has the church viewed the Bible? How have the perspectives of the past influenced the way we read the Bible? And, in light of the different ways that Christians have read the Bible, what is the proper method of interpreting the Bible, of “rightly handling the word of truth” (2 Tim. 2:15)? What are our goals in biblical interpretation? What questions do we—or should we—bring to Scripture?

In some respects, the present study is something like an extension of David Steinmetz’s celebrated and often anthologized article “The Superiority of Pre-critical Exegesis,” which I first read way back in graduate school and to which I owe a great debt for articulating plainly what I was already thinking at the time. It is, I believe, a model of accurate historical description of premodern exegesis coupled with a keen interest in what the past can teach us today. Such are the aims of my book.

This book, lying at the intersection of church history and biblical interpretation, is directed primarily to readers who are specialists in neither discipline but have some interest in both. At the risk of being too specific, perhaps the ideal reader is a student who has had about one course in each area. But the

goal is to reach anyone interested in either one of these topics, including students, ministers, and scholars.

I have had the pleasure of lecturing on the history of biblical interpretation not only to my own students but also in a variety of settings in the classroom and beyond, including at Harding University and Pepperdine University. After I delivered one of those guest lectures to Danny Mathews's class at Pepperdine in 2011, he, never lacking for ideas, suggested to me that I should write a brief book surveying the topic. I had too many other projects going at the time and obviously did not get around to it immediately, but he deserves the credit (or the blame) for proposing it, though the final product is longer than either of us intended. Short little books about big ideas always seem to grow, but I have tried to keep it under control.

My writing became more serious (temporarily) in the summer of 2015, during a brief fellowship at the Wesleyan Center at Point Loma Nazarene University, San Diego. My thanks go to Mark Mann, director of the Wesleyan Center, for inviting me for that second stay and making arrangements for my summer scholar lecture, "How to Read the Bible: Then and Now." He also ensured that my family was accommodated once again with an unbeatable ocean view. Closer to the end of the project, my research and writing were aided by a sabbatical granted by the administration and faculty of Austin Graduate School of Theology in the spring of 2017, for which and to whom I am grateful.

In addition to informal conversations about this book with friends, family, and colleagues over the last few years, several people have interacted directly with earlier drafts of this manuscript. My colleagues at Austin Grad listened (mostly) patiently as I read through a couple of chapters and bounced different outlines off them. Others have likewise given generously of their time and effort by reading through drafts of chapters at various stages and offering valuable feedback: Mark Elliott, Michael Legaspi, Peter Leithart, David Wilhite, Robert Louis Wilken, John Wright, and Mike Young. I am in their debt.

Throughout the entire process, it has been a genuine privilege to work with Dave Nelson at Baker Academic. His recommendations (never demands), along with his patience, sincerity, encouragement, support, and humor—at a distance and in person—always struck the right chord at the right time. Providence must have known that I needed to work with an editor who would understand and appreciate my obscure references to classic rock. Dave, Brian Bolger, and all the editorial staff at Baker Academic have helped this book to be better than it otherwise would have been.

In this month of historically significant and recognizable anniversaries, I cannot help mentioning that Amanda has (been) stuck with me officially

for twenty years this month. She, together with Paul, Isaac, and Rachel, as they all well know, are my joy and love. I am so proud of them, and they are a constant blessing from the Father above. They deserve the utmost thanks simply for putting up with me on a daily basis. As usual, they bore the brunt of the book storm and could always be trusted in the last weeks to ask me whether the book was finished. I needed that.

Keith Stanglin  
Austin, Texas  
October 2017

# Abbreviations

|             |                                                                                                                                                                                                                           |
|-------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| ACCS        | Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture. Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity, 1998–2010                                                                                                                                    |
| ACW         | Ancient Christian Writers. New York: Newman Press/Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1946–                                                                                                                                        |
| ad          | replies (by Thomas Aquinas) to objections                                                                                                                                                                                 |
| AD          | anno Domini, in the year of our Lord                                                                                                                                                                                      |
| ANF         | <i>Ante-Nicene Fathers</i>                                                                                                                                                                                                |
| BC          | before Christ                                                                                                                                                                                                             |
| BDAG        | Danker, Frederick W., Walter Bauer, William F. Arndt, and F. Wilbur Gingrich. <i>Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature</i> . 3rd ed. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000 |
| ca.         | circa                                                                                                                                                                                                                     |
| CC          | Calvin's Commentaries. Reprint, Grand Rapids: Baker, 1979                                                                                                                                                                 |
| cf.         | <i>confer</i> , compare                                                                                                                                                                                                   |
| <i>Civ.</i> | <i>De civitate Dei (The City of God)</i> , by Augustine                                                                                                                                                                   |
| co.         | company                                                                                                                                                                                                                   |
| col.        | column                                                                                                                                                                                                                    |
| CWE         | <i>Collected Works of Erasmus</i> . Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1974–                                                                                                                                           |
| CWS         | Classics of Western Spirituality. Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1978–                                                                                                                                                        |
| d.          | died                                                                                                                                                                                                                      |
| ed(s).      | edition, editor(s)                                                                                                                                                                                                        |
| e.g.        | <i>exempli gratia</i> , for example                                                                                                                                                                                       |
| ET          | English translation                                                                                                                                                                                                       |
| et al.      | <i>et alii</i> , and others                                                                                                                                                                                               |
| FC          | Fathers of the Church. Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1947–                                                                                                                                        |

|                    |                                                                                                                                                                                              |
|--------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| fl.                | flourished                                                                                                                                                                                   |
| fol(s).            | folios                                                                                                                                                                                       |
| <i>Haer.</i>       | <i>Adversus haereses (Elenchos) (Against Heresies)</i> , by Irenaeus                                                                                                                         |
| <i>Hist. eccl.</i> | <i>Historia ecclesiastica (Ecclesiastical History)</i> , by Eusebius                                                                                                                         |
| <i>Inst.</i>       | <i>Institutes of the Christian Religion</i> , by John Calvin                                                                                                                                 |
| LCL                | Loeb Classical Library                                                                                                                                                                       |
| <i>LW</i>          | <i>Luther's Works. American Edition.</i> St. Louis: Concordia/Minneapolis: Fortress, 1955–86                                                                                                 |
| LXX                | Septuagint                                                                                                                                                                                   |
| n(n).              | note(s)                                                                                                                                                                                      |
| NETS               | <i>A New English Translation of the Septuagint</i> (see bibliography at Pietersma and Wright). <a href="http://ccat.sas.upenn.edu/nets/edition/">http://ccat.sas.upenn.edu/nets/edition/</a> |
| NIV                | New International Version                                                                                                                                                                    |
| no(s).             | number(s)                                                                                                                                                                                    |
| NPNF <sup>1</sup>  | <i>Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, Series 1.</i> Edited by P. Schaff. 14 vols. 1886–1889. Reprint, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979–                                                             |
| NPNF <sup>2</sup>  | <i>Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, Series 2.</i> Edited by P. Schaff and H. Wace. 14 vols. 1890–1900. Reprint, Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1994                                                |
| PG                 | Patrologia Graeca. Edited by J.-P. Migne. 161 vols. Paris, 1857–86                                                                                                                           |
| PL                 | Patrologia Latina. Edited by J.-P. Migne. 217 vols. Paris, 1844–55                                                                                                                           |
| <i>Princ.</i>      | <i>De principiis (Peri archōn) (On First Principles)</i> , by Origen                                                                                                                         |
| resp.              | response (by Thomas Aquinas)                                                                                                                                                                 |
| <i>ST</i>          | <i>Summa theologiae</i> , by Thomas Aquinas                                                                                                                                                  |
| trans.             | translated by                                                                                                                                                                                |
| vol(s).            | volume(s)                                                                                                                                                                                    |
| WSA                | <i>Works of Saint Augustine.</i> Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 1990–                                                                                                                        |

# 1

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## Introduction to the History of Biblical Interpretation

If you prefer to be strong spiritually rather than clever in debate, if you seek sustenance for the soul rather than mere titillation of the intellect, read and reread the ancient commentators in preference to all others, since their piety is more proven, their learning more profuse and more experienced, their style neither jejune nor impoverished, and their interpretation more fitted to the sacred mysteries.

—Desiderius Erasmus of Rotterdam<sup>1</sup>

Church history as the history of the interpretation of Holy Scripture is thus the history of the continued living presence of that same Jesus Christ who was crucified under Pontius Pilate and rose again.

—Gerhard Ebeling<sup>2</sup>

For many educated Christians interested in the study of Scripture, including preachers and many professional scholars, it may never have occurred to them to ask how ancient or medieval Christians interpreted the Bible. If it has, then it may mean nothing more than mere historical interest in seeing how people long ago interpreted Scripture before they discovered a better,

1. Erasmus, *Handbook of the Christian Soldier* (CWE 66:35).

2. Ebeling, *The Word of God and Tradition*, 30.

more scientific way of approaching the text. But of what practical use to us is an ancient method of interpretation? Why should the church today look to the distant past for models of biblical interpretation? Why should we care?

### *Ressourcement* and Exegesis

Let us begin an answer to this question with a psalm. The Psalter was the worship book of Israel and of the early church. For millennia, God's people have turned to its pages for inspiration and comfort. This collection contains some of the most affective texts in all of Scripture. Psalm 137, composed during the time of Judah's exile, is a poignant example of the emotion of the Psalter:

<sup>1</sup>By the rivers of Babylon we sat and wept  
when we remembered Zion.  
<sup>2</sup>There on the poplars  
we hung our harps,  
<sup>3</sup>for there our captors asked us for songs,  
our tormentors demanded songs of joy;  
they said, "Sing us one of the songs of Zion!"  
<sup>4</sup>How can we sing the songs of the LORD  
while in a foreign land?  
<sup>5</sup>If I forget you, Jerusalem,  
may my right hand forget its skill.  
<sup>6</sup>May my tongue cling to the roof of my mouth  
if I do not remember you,  
if I do not consider Jerusalem  
my highest joy.  
<sup>7</sup>Remember, LORD, what the Edomites did  
on the day Jerusalem fell.  
"Tear it down," they cried,  
"tear it down to its foundations!"  
<sup>8</sup>Daughter Babylon, doomed to destruction,  
happy is the one who repays you  
according to what you have done to us.  
<sup>9</sup>Happy is the one who seizes your infants  
and dashes them against the rocks. (NIV)

Imprecatory psalms, so named for their imprecations or curse language, are common in the Psalter. Psalm 137 is an imprecatory psalm at its best, or its worst.

Imagine that you are a student interested in studying Scripture, interpreting it, and applying it to your life. You are also a Christian, who considers

Scripture to be more than simply a historical document, but also your primary rule of faith and practice. What do you make of this passage? Yes, it tells us something about the conditions and emotions of exiled Israel, but how can we as Christians sing this? David Steinmetz imagines a medieval priest trying to relate to this difficult psalm.<sup>3</sup> It is no less difficult for us today. I don't know about you, but I have not been wronged by Babylon (Ps. 137:3). I would like to visit Jerusalem someday, but it is not "my highest joy" (137:6). I don't have a particular beef against the Edomites (137:7). And I have never expressed a desire, or even entertained the thought, of dashing babies against the rocks (137:9).

Imagine that you have just run across this or an equally challenging text in your personal study of Scripture. What do you do? Do you say, "Here's what *I* think it means. Here's how *I* will apply it." What is wrong with that picture?

The problem is the individualism, the presumed authority of the individual. One cannot plumb the depths of God's Word or of theology without discussing it with others in community. Christ called his disciples to be in community. Indeed, the very meaning of "church" (ἐκκλησία, *ekklēsia*) is gathering, or assembly. An old adage states that one Christian is no Christian (*unus Christianus, nullus Christianus*). An isolated, solitary Christian is not practicing the Christian faith as it was intended. Bible reading and study, like prayer, can be done individually, but not exclusively so. When you encounter a difficult passage, do you have peers who might have an insight? Do you consult teachers? Commentaries? What about a church community? Biblical interpretation was never meant to be done in isolation. It is a communal task. As iron sharpens iron, we challenge each other's interpretations and applications. I have perspective that you do not have, and vice versa. I have blinders that you do not have, and vice versa.

So biblical interpretation ought to be done in community. But there is a part of this community of interpretation that has not yet been mentioned. We usually neglect these members of the community because they are the easiest to ignore. They are easy to ignore because they are dead. And the longer they have been dead, the more we tend to ignore them. The longer they have been dead, the more out of touch they are with our language and our culture and our problems and our addictions and our needs. And I would argue that this is exactly why we need to hear them. We must listen precisely *because* their perspective and their blinders are so different from ours. When we listen to them, sometimes we see why we interpret some Scriptures the way we do, or

3. This paragraph is inspired by Steinmetz, "Superiority of Pre-critical Exegesis," 29, who imagines a medieval priest trying to read and apply Ps. 137.

sometimes we see a new and fresh path that is really quite old. More often than not, these are the people whose knowledge of Scripture, devotion, and piety, whose wisdom and trust in God, would put us all to shame. Why wouldn't we want to hear such people? Why would we have a preference only for the latest commentaries or for the opinions of the people "who happen to be walking around"? To study the history of exegesis is to give a voice to the most marginalized of all; it is, to borrow the famous words of G. K. Chesterton, "the democracy of the dead."<sup>4</sup>

The point here is that the community of interpretation extends to those who are not us and who are not like us. Believers throughout history make up an important part of our interpretive community and, through the study of what Everett Ferguson calls "historical foreground," they can provide helpful perspective on the interpretation of Scripture.<sup>5</sup> The discipline is similar to Hans-Georg Gadamer's concept of the history of effects (*Wirkungsgeschichte*), which asks, What effects has the text had on subsequent generations? There is much to commend the study of reception history, or the history of biblical interpretation, inasmuch as Christian history is full of people who have labored hard to understand Scripture. What did they say? How did they interpret and apply the hard texts of Scripture?

In recent decades, Roman Catholics and Protestants alike have shown increasing appreciation for the communion of the saints past and have witnessed a marked rise of interest in the history of the church for the sake of understanding theology in general. This *ressourcement* is a returning to the sources of the early church for the sake of renewal today.<sup>6</sup> Through increased ecumenical contact and attention to tradition, many churches have begun to rediscover and recover ancient liturgical forms and theological norms. This renewed interest in the Christian past has also included increased engagement with premodern—that is, patristic, medieval, and Reformation—methods of biblical interpretation. The interaction is unavoidable for anyone who reads older theology, for, with few exceptions, premodern theology is a constant interaction with Scripture.

The interest in ancient approaches to theology and exegesis also comes at a time when the historical-critical method of exegesis has come under fire. The limitations of the historical-critical method as a tool for the church (which never was its purpose anyway), along with its weaknesses as a means for providing

4. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy*, 207.

5. See Ferguson, "Using Historical Foreground in New Testament Interpretation," 254–63.

6. *Ressourcement* refers specifically to a movement in Roman Catholicism to retrieve the thought of the church fathers for theological enrichment today. The term is applied more broadly to any retrieval of older (usually premodern) theology and its sources.

objective textual meaning (which was its sole purpose), are now widely recognized. As a reactionary alternative that takes such limitations seriously, subjective methods of interpretation, including the variety of so-called postmodern perspectives, have been introduced but also have been met with widespread discontent. The inability of any one of these methods to “do it all” or to attract a majority of adherents in the church and academy has further strengthened the turn toward the theological, as opposed to narrowly historical, interpretation of Scripture as a viable option.<sup>7</sup> There exists now a plethora of literature on the theological interpretation of Scripture and a growing mound of commentaries that explicitly employ such an approach. Along with the growing popularity of theological interpretation comes the recognition that premodern interpreters are excellent models for theological interpretation.

In short, these two pursuits—*ressourcement* and theological interpretation of Scripture—are fueling interest in older, premodern approaches to Scripture. This interest implies a rejection of the individualistic approach to the Bible that has characterized much of evangelical Protestantism. It also implies a growing consensus that the history of interpretation can be a means to better exegesis today.

### The Challenge of Premodern Exegesis

The first point, then, is to admit learned Christians of all times and places into the community of faith. This admission, however, raises a problem. As with other beliefs and practices of the ancient church, there is an initial strangeness also when we encounter the exegetical techniques of early Christians. When we compare the basic exegetical techniques of professional interpreters today to those of Christian antiquity, there seems to be a fairly wide chasm. What they did with the Bible is not what I was taught to do with the Bible. As a friend of mine puts it, “I’m a big enthusiast for patristic exegesis in theory, and I want to find their exegesis illuminating. But when I turn to actual examples of patristic interpretation, what am I to do with some of their allegorical interpretations?” I doubt that he is alone. The initial excitement for the endeavor is lost, as it appears from our modern perspective, in so many decontextualized and metaphysical discourses. The reason for the disenchantment may be summed up in one word: allegory.

7. Although it is generally recognized when it is seen, defining “theological interpretation” of Scripture is notoriously difficult. Stephen Fowl’s description is useful: “In brief, I take the theological interpretation of scripture to be that practice whereby theological concerns and interests inform and are informed by a reading of scripture.” Fowl, introduction to *Theological Interpretation of Scripture*, xiii.

Contempt for allegory as a biblical hermeneutic runs deep in Protestant blood. Beginning with Martin Luther and continuing through other sixteenth-century Reformers, the Protestant and humanist polemic against the Roman Church was frequently connected with the rejection of certain allegorical readings of Scripture. The popular conception that the Protestant Reformers totally abandoned allegory in favor of a historical-critical approach to the Bible is overly simplistic. Yet the gradual triumph of this putatively more objective method is due primarily to early modern Protestant efforts. The rejection of allegorical interpretation became one of the unquestioned doctrines that united the majority of late modern Protestants, from the self-described “fundamentalists,” through evangelical and mainline groups, to the self-described “liberals.”

To give merely one example of the common Protestant bias against premodern exegetical methods, one may note the comments made about allegory in a popular evangelical survey of church history by Earle Cairns. Speaking of the ancient Alexandrian school of interpretation, the author writes, “Instead of emphasizing a grammatico-historical interpretation of the Bible, they developed an allegorical system of interpretation that has plagued Christianity since that time. This type of interpretation is based on the supposition that Scripture has more than one meaning.”<sup>8</sup> Although there was no “grammatico-historical” method, as he imagines it, that was followed in the ancient church, for Cairns, “allegory”—and the concomitant assumption of multiple senses in Scripture—is the bogeyman. He faults Origen and Ambrose for their allegorical method.<sup>9</sup> Cairns later contrasts Jacques Lefèvre d’Étaples’s “literal and spiritual interpretation of the Bible” with “the study of the text of the Bible,” as if they are mutually exclusive enterprises.<sup>10</sup> Cairns’s confusion is further evident in his denigration of some Radical Reformers whose “*literal* interpretation . . . often led to mystical or chiliastic excesses.”<sup>11</sup> His readers are not treated to the right way to interpret the Bible, but they are left with the distinct impression that few premodern interpreters did it well. Protestants (the theologically conservative and otherwise) have thus predominantly rejected allegory and advocated a grammatico-historical, or historical-critical, method of biblical exegesis.

Now that many Protestants have seen the value of, in Steinmetz’s words, “taking the long view,”<sup>12</sup> perhaps Cairns’s blunt dismissal of premodern exegesis is passé. To be sure, traditional Protestant and evangelical prejudice

8. Cairns, *Christianity through the Centuries*, 108.

9. Cairns, *Christianity through the Centuries*, 110, 138.

10. Cairns, *Christianity through the Centuries*, 256.

11. Cairns, *Christianity through the Centuries*, 299–300, emphasis added.

12. Steinmetz, *Taking the Long View*.

against premodern and allegorical exegetical methods is not as widespread or as strong as it once was. But the reason behind it still lingers. To chase another metaphor, we have made room at the table for these others and acknowledged the value of their input. The remaining problem, though, is that we don't quite understand that input. Once we have given these older saints a place at the table, how are we to understand them? What is it that they contribute? How are we to bridge the cultural gaps? Because of our own cultural predilections and training, we are not fluently bilingual. Interest alone has failed to provide a fair account and evaluation of these methods.

Publishers and translators have made tremendous progress in the initial step of bringing these voices to the table. A greater number of primary sources and of examples of premodern exegesis are available now than ever before. In addition to new translations of older commentaries, there are series of anthologies on each book of the Bible.<sup>13</sup> Like a standard commentary, these volumes go through each book of the Bible, but instead of offering the new comments of a living scholar, they collect remarks from premodern Christian theologians on those same biblical texts. They make the sources available, yet aside from introductory statements, they don't usually clarify what readers are to do with the material. Many important points frequently go unmentioned in the use and promotion of such books. What exactly were the interpretive methods of the early church that are being modeled? How do these approaches differ from modern methods of exegesis? What are today's readers to make of these differences, and how can premodern methods be appropriated with benefit today? Even when the prefatory material addresses such questions, most readers will inevitably do what consumers of commentaries typically do: turn to the passage in question, not the editorial introduction, to find help.

To offer one example from the popular *Ancient Christian Commentary*, the comment at Genesis 14:14 includes the following excerpt from Ambrose of Milan: "When Abraham learned of this, he counted his servants born in the house and with 318 men won a victory and liberated his nephew. . . . He chose, in fact, those whom he judged worthy to belong to the number of the faithful who were to believe in the passion of our Lord Jesus Christ. Indeed, the letter *T* in Greek means 'three hundred,' and the sum *IΗ*—ten plus eight—expresses the name of Jesus. So Abraham conquered in virtue of faith, not through the strength of a numerous army."<sup>14</sup>

13. See, e.g., *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture (ACCS)* (InterVarsity), *Reformation Commentary on Scripture* (IVP Academic), and *The Church's Bible* (Eerdmans).

14. Ambrose, *On Abraham* 1.3.15, quoted in Sheridan, *Genesis 12–50*, 23. For further discussion of a similar interpretation of this text, see below, in chap. 2 under the heading "*Epistle of Barnabas* and the New Testament."

What is a modern biblical interpreter, student, or preacher supposed to do with these early Christian comments, which in some ways are very different from what one would find in a modern commentary? Ambrose's remarks can be downright disorienting. The section's introduction is not entirely helpful in figuring out how Ambrose gets there. A concise footnote adds information about Greek numerals and explains that there is a tradition behind Ambrose's comments. But excerpts like these could very easily leave modern readers puzzled. It should be clear that I am not criticizing the commentary or its editor. A full explanation at every turn would expand each volume into a dozen. The first step has been accomplished: Ambrose has been brought to the table, but he is not speaking our language. More is needed by way of translation.

What is true of Ambrose's approach in particular is also true of premodern exegesis in general. In comparison with the notes in our most recent study Bibles, our ancient predecessors in the faith often have very different things to say about Scripture, and it is not always clear to the modern reader why they say such things. It is necessary, therefore, to learn their language and idiom in order to understand and engage their reading and application of Scripture. Only then can we move on to discover what it could mean for our own reading, interpretation, and preaching.

### **This Book**

This book is a short history of biblical interpretation that describes the shift from premodern to modern exegesis and then assesses the implications of this shift for reading, interpreting, and applying Scripture. In other words, historically, this study is concerned not simply with premodern interpretation but also with the shift to modern exegesis and how and why it happened. The chief motivating question behind this study may be summarized thus: "How, then, do we learn from modern historical interpretations of Scripture while also drawing on the church's premodern traditions of biblical interpretation?"<sup>15</sup> In other words, what can we learn from both premodern and modern approaches to Scripture? In order to address this question, an entire set of preliminary questions must be asked and answered: What are the premodern and modern approaches? How and why do they differ from one another? How can we understand and appropriate some of the more foreign aspects of the premodern approaches? When and how did the transition from premodern to modern exegesis take place? What was at stake? Are the two approaches compatible? Only after these issues have been handled

15. Davis and Hays, "Nine Theses on the Interpretation of Scripture," 3.

can we return to the initial concern about employing aspects of premodern and modern interpretation.

To tell this story, it is necessary to describe both the premodern and the modern methods of exegesis and to provide analysis along the way. For readers who may be unfamiliar with the broad contours of the history of biblical interpretation, it may be helpful to briefly consider how the Bible has been interpreted throughout the majority of church history and contrast it with modern, historical-critical exegesis. It is good to have a general idea of where the story is headed.

For premodern Christians, the reading of Scripture was primarily a liturgical act done in a liturgical context. Readers felt guided by the Holy Spirit to acquire true meaning, but not necessarily the sole meaning. The most important thing to understand from Scripture is its spiritual or mystical meaning. They believed that Scripture is inspired and is the word of God to the church in every age. Historical context was important, and the narratives were usually taken at face value, but if God is also the author of Scripture, then the meaning of Scripture is not necessarily restricted to the intent of the human author. And above all, as a word to the church, Scripture must be edifying to the church. It must speak to us. In the historic church, when the plain sense of Scripture did not edify or nurture or instruct in the way expected, then Christians sought a deeper sense of Scripture. Patristic and medieval exegesis is often associated with allegory, but it is also much more than simple allegory. Church tradition and the teaching office of the church were often authoritative for interpretation.

In contrast, the primary context of modern exegesis—by which I mean what is often called the historical-critical method—was and is academic and scientific. With modern readings of Scripture, interpretation came to mean accessing the one true meaning. The modern, historical-critical method sought only the truth of authorial intent. Whatever the original human author meant is the only thing a text can mean. Historical and cultural contextualization of the text is of utmost importance. Authorial intent entails reconstructing the psychology of the author and, because of increased skepticism about the text, the full history and previous authors behind the text. Although it is an impossible, conjectural task, it became the only criterion of meaning in the text. As a result of the Enlightenment, objectivity and detachment became prerequisites for interpreting a text. But the more the Protestant church focused its attention on Scripture as not only the primary—but the sole—source of truth and the deposit of the faith (explicitly excluding the voice of tradition), the more it focused on the literal reading. Both liberals and fundamentalists were united in their rejection of a fuller, spiritual sense. Authority for

interpretation was decentralized, leading to a proliferation of individualistic, diverse, and contradictory interpretations.

Throughout the book, more shape will be given to these broad strokes. The descriptions of the exegetical principles and approaches at work in each age will be illustrated in certain figures. The book's structure is roughly chronological. It first describes the primary features and ends of premodern interpretation, focusing on the aspects that contrast with those of modern interpretation. That is, how did early Christians read the Bible, and how is it so different from the way we tend to read it? Then the book summarizes how and why the shift occurred that led to a different way of interpreting the Bible.

The central idea that these episodes will reflect is that the modern emphasis on the literal sense of the Bible and its focus on human authorial intention supplanted the premodern emphasis on spiritual senses and the ongoing significance of Scripture to the faith and practice of the church. In other words, rather than a balance in what may be dubbed "literal-spiritual" interpretation, modern exegesis devalued the spiritual dimension of Scripture.

One of my primary goals as a teacher of church history is to help students develop a historical perspective of the faith. One implication of such a perspective is that, as a historian, one must be open to differences. Depending on the object of study, this often means openness to a different time period, a different language, a different culture, a different worldview, and a different set of beliefs and motivations than our own. If there is going to be any degree of understanding on the part of the historian, there must be a corresponding degree of sympathy or at least desire to walk a mile in another's moccasins. The historian must be, as it were, bilingual. This, of course, is not meant literally, although being literally bilingual certainly helps. As students of history, it is our task to get as close to that "other" context as possible, in order then to understand and communicate the similarities and differences relative to our own context. We must be good tourists, letting the others speak for themselves and trying to understand before dismissing.

A disposition of historical hermeneutical charity will be needed when confronting premodern interpreters who speak a different language, literally and figuratively. It means beginning with the assumption that the writers themselves were rational and seeking truth. As such, some attention will be devoted to examples of premodern interpretations that appear to be outlandish at first glance but, on closer investigation, make better sense in their context. In this way, this book is intended to be an aid to *ressourcement*, a manual for how and why one should use premodern commentaries and anthologies. Much progress has been made with the first step of bringing the voices of the past to the table. More remains to be done in making those voices comprehensible

to nonspecialists. By introducing readers to premodern exegesis, this study is intended to help fill that gap.

This book will offer reflections on how contemporary readers can learn from both premodern and modern ways of reading Scripture. It is an exercise in retrieval theology—that is, not simply replicating or repristinating older theology, but taking the best of theology and, in this case, the best of biblical interpretation from the past and allowing it to inform our own theology and biblical interpretation today. At the same time, there is a caution to be observed. As we come to find out why we read the Bible the way we do, sometimes we find that we are mistaken. Seeing some mistaken interpretations from the past should give us humility about some of our own treasured interpretations that may be influenced too much by surrounding culture. The goal here is to provide critical understanding of and appreciation for both premodern and modern exegesis. The book will suggest a way forward that tries to take the best from both methods, seeking a balanced and fruitful interaction between the letter and the spirit.

It is appropriate to add some precautionary notes about the method pursued in this study. All writing of history is selective. Some monographs attempt to tell only a small part of the history of biblical interpretation, focusing on one figure or one period. Others attempt the more encyclopedic task of introducing every significant figure in the history. The more comprehensive they are in scope and detail, however, the less accessible and manageable they become to the nonspecialist.<sup>16</sup> Even these works do not cover every important exegete or exegetical work.

Unlike those books, the descriptive history in this book does survey the whole, but it is more episodic than exhaustive: by no means does it intend to treat every influential exegete in the history of the church. Any book that attempts to cover the whole of Christian history via a few names will be dogged by the problem of selection. This study offers a bird's-eye view of the region, zooming in on a few specific targets that epitomize the landscape. The narrow selection of targets reflects the intent to keep the history manageable. Some figures are simply indispensable for any examination of the history of interpretation. Such writers as Origen, Augustine, and Calvin were indisputably influential on subsequent generations. The treatment of others may come as more of a surprise. Such figures as Dionysius, Perkins, and Campbell, now

16. Perhaps the best one-volume chronological, encyclopedic treatment with analysis is Bray, *Biblical Interpretation*. See also the dictionary-entry format in McKim, *Historical Handbook of Major Biblical Interpreters*. Multivolume histories worth consulting that cover the whole history include Hauser and Watson, *A History of Biblical Interpretation*; Reventlow, *History of Biblical Interpretation*; Saebo, *Hebrew Bible/Old Testament*.

sometimes forgotten, were influential in their day and in their circles: they appear here because they are representative of the period in review in the sense that scores of their own contemporaries were saying similar things. They, instead of others among the many scores, were chosen because they deserve a hearing by scholars today and, frankly, because they pique my interest. In every case, the individuals are not the main focus but are manifestations of the principles of the particular period in view. Neither is the book an attempt to explain all the reasons why particular figures interpreted the way they did, an impossible task for the bird's-eye approach intended here. As may be expected, there is also a vast literature that deals with the topics and figures treated in this book. It would be easy to fill the pages with footnotes only. But this is not a bibliographical essay that summarizes every important statement ever made about these topics. The focus is not on secondary sources but is on primary sources as examples of exegetical principles; secondary sources are cited mainly to point to further reading or when it is especially important to engage them in conversation. The final bibliography also suggests additional reading.

The selection of targets is based also on the fact that a very specific story is being told—namely, about the shift from premodern to modern exegesis. For the most part, modern, historical-critical exegesis is a Western phenomenon in which other Western phenomena—scholasticism and especially the Renaissance and Reformations—were prominent factors. Thus, for instance, no Syriac theologians and no Eastern theologians after about the fifth century are examined here. To the degree that modern exegesis was heavily shaped by Protestant opposition to ecclesiastical models of interpretation, no Roman Catholic writers are featured after the early modern period. Such omissions are not unintentional lacunae. The focus is both on the figures who influenced or reflected the trajectory that leads to the modern, historical-critical method and on the ancient theologians whom they read and appreciated most. For better or worse, it is the history of Western Christian (and later, Protestant) exegesis that most people in the West (and in other places now shaped by the West) are influenced by and react against.

Related to the problem of selection is the concern about what is sometimes called teleological history. In short, a teleological approach researches and writes history with a goal in mind, thus skewing the past for the sake of the thesis in the present. This method abridges or truncates the past in such a way that it ineluctably leads to a conclusion supported by the historian. Herbert Butterfield famously censured the “Whig interpretation of history,” in which the past is abridged and its complexities omitted.<sup>17</sup> Often, as in the case of

17. Butterfield, *Whig Interpretation*, 9–33.

Butterfield's Whigs, history is presented as progress toward the present; in other cases, it may be a story of decline toward the present. Either way, the lens of the present—its concerns, prejudices, heroes, and villains—distorts the whole picture.

This is a legitimate concern for any attempt to write history. Although the present study is selective, the goal is to let the past speak for itself. As Butterfield wrote, "Real historical understanding is not achieved by the subordination of the past to the present, but rather by our making the past our present and attempting to see life with the eyes of another century than our own."<sup>18</sup> As we engage anything in the past, it expands our present horizon. At the same time, as I have said, all history writing is selective, and one's selections are usually based on something deeper than randomness. Personal and ecclesiastical interest and even empathy may motivate the research. In this regard, Henri de Lubac wrote about the inadequacy of "a certain pretension to pure objectivity." In speaking of Origen's exegesis in particular, he said, "For we are not at all concerned with the work of one solitary thinker or with a problem that in no way affects us. This work fits into a tradition that touches us ourselves."<sup>19</sup> Interest or empathy need not impede correct understanding or the goal of objectivity in description.<sup>20</sup>

History tells the story of pendulum swings. One benefit of gaining historical perspective is that we can see where we are and, perhaps, the pendulum's present position. My assumption is that most (though not all) readers of this book will have a basic familiarity with and appreciation for the tools and techniques of modern, historical-critical exegesis, but that most (though not all) will be less acquainted with and sympathetic to premodern exegetical methods. Therefore, if I have a bias, it is toward highlighting the positive aspects of the less familiar methods of a more remote time and place. Although I will note the potential pitfalls of premodern exegesis and the advantages of the modern methods, those aspects will not occupy the lion's share of the book's content. The goal may be somewhat analogous to writing a short history of communications technology with a prescriptive end in mind. That is to say, there is no need to extol the glories of modern communications to a modern audience, but it may indeed be beneficial to recall how people used to communicate, to describe what has been lost in the progress, and then to exhort toward a balanced, healthy use of the technology. If I were writing primarily to people who have no knowledge

18. Butterfield, *Whig Interpretation*, 16.

19. Lubac, *History and Spirit*, 12–13.

20. For a succinct and reasonable statement on the issue of objectivity in historical study, see Bradley and Muller, *Church History*, 48–52.

of or interest in modern historical criticism (or cellular phones), then the emphasis may have been different, though I believe that the conclusion would have been the same.

Along with selection, another problem of historiography is periodization. The distinctions between epochs in history are constructs that are seldom valid below the surface: lines of demarcation that hold true for one dimension of culture are irrelevant to another. Change over time is marked by continuities and discontinuities. With these conventional caveats aside, this book is predicated on the indisputable fact that the style of biblical interpretation typically practiced before about 1500 is in many ways different from that typically practiced after about 1800. This study examines what exegesis looked like in the so-called premodern period and in the modern period, and it gives an account of the centuries-long transition from one to the other. Otherwise, divisions of chapters are based partly (and artificially) on the amount of manageable content, but also on shifts of disposition and approach that, admittedly, can be seen best, or perhaps only, in hindsight. As such, some chapters (4 and 6) begin earlier than where their preceding chapters ended.

The main part of the book (chaps. 2–6) is devoted primarily to historical understanding. Chapters 2 through 4 focus on premodern interpretation, which, though it was practiced by a wide variety of Christian believers and was by no means uniform, was united by one common conviction: the Bible is directly relevant to the faith and morals of the contemporary church, and it should be read and applied with these spiritual meanings in mind. These chapters summarize the methods of premodern exegesis, examining select figures or movements that illustrate those methods. Chapter 2 concentrates on the first century and a half of Christian biblical interpretation, from the New Testament through the end of the second century. Chapter 3 begins with Origen, whose writings on Scripture ushered in a new era of running commentaries and homilies on Scripture, as well as second-order thinking about its interpretation. It focuses on Greek-speaking theologians whose engagement with Scripture was influential in both the Eastern church and the Western church. Chapter 4 focuses on Latin-speaking theology and exegesis, first backing up a bit chronologically to examine Augustine's impact on later medieval biblical interpretation. It proceeds to describe the Western development of the medieval *quadrige* (fourfold sense of Scripture), based especially on Augustine's hermeneutical method, and later features that shaped exegesis in subsequent centuries. As noted above, these chapters on premodern exegesis will include some cases of interpretation that, by today's standards, would seem far-fetched. The purpose is to plunge directly into

the difficulties and see if even these examples can be read with sympathy and understanding. Some biblical passages—chief among them, the parable of the good Samaritan—will serve as a touchstone and illustration of evolving exegetical approaches.

The next two chapters document some signposts on the gradual road from premodern to modern methods of interpretation. The increasing marginalization of the spiritual senses of Scripture, along with the search for human authorial intention, came to distinguish modern historical-critical exegesis from its predecessors. Chapter 5 shows how the Renaissance and the Protestant Reformation contributed to this shift. The impulse of the Renaissance to return to the original sources and to question venerable traditions expressed itself theologically in Reformation and post-Reformation exegesis. To the Reformers, rejecting the autonomy of the pope's biblical interpretation meant that unbridled allegory was to be reined in by the literal sense of the Scripture and the sole intention of its human authors, which could allegedly be understood apart from the Roman Church's interpretations. This was a period of transition in exegesis, marked by traditional dogmatic interpretations alongside increasingly historical and even skeptical methods. Figures such as Martin Luther and John Calvin illustrate these developments and tensions. Chapter 6 summarizes the development and goals of the so-called historical-critical method and its repercussions for the life of the church. The dominance of philology and the interminable search for the history behind the biblical text resulted in doubts about Scripture and undermined its ability to address matters of doctrine and morals.

The second main part of the book is more overtly prescriptive. The motivating question is, What can we retrieve from the premoderns in our approach to Scripture without ignoring the advances of historical criticism? It argues that extreme forms of premodern ("spiritual") and modern ("literal") interpretation are irreconcilable, but that a balanced, dual emphasis on letter and spirit overcomes the impasse. To this end, chapter 7 explores what can be done to ease the tension often felt between doctrinal and historical approaches to Scripture, and it identifies some of the advantages and disadvantages of each method. This chapter shows how each emphasis provides a check and balance to the other. Any given interpretation must be taught somewhere in the literal sense, it must adhere to the rule of faith, and it must be informed by other Scriptures. The final chapter suggests how Christians might proceed with responsible and faithful biblical interpretation, advocating and illustrating the use of premodern exegetical principles within a set of prescribed limits. Interpretations are "spiritual" in the sense that they are circumscribed by the Spirit-guided oral and written tradition of the early

church.<sup>21</sup> At the same time, spiritual readings must take into account and benefit from the modest and most assured results of historical criticism. The church's Scripture and the academy's Bible need not be separated by perceived irreconcilable differences.

21. English standards of capitalization tend to remove the ambiguity of the word "spirit." Unless the reference is clearly to the Third Person of the Trinity, I will keep "spirit" and "spiritual" lowercased. This does not mean to exclude, however, the Holy Spirit's role in inspiration and in biblical interpretation. Instead, the possibility of Spirit-guided exegesis is assumed throughout the discussions of the spiritual sense. As de Lubac wrote about spirit, "Even the very imprecision of the word is, in certain respects, valuable." Lubac, *History and Spirit*, 445.